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For the most part, these fictional short stories are about romantic relationships.

THE OTHER PART
AND OTHER
STORIES

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
THE NEWCOMER	1
THE OTHER PART	23
THE WEAK END.....	33
THE DOG'S FAULT.....	53

THE NEWCOMER

My mother weighed over three hundred pounds until she died. Her fat didn't glob off of her body, though. Instead it seemed helium-filled, as if she was a larger-than-life-sized pink balloon animal. On the summer break after my sophomore year of high school, she would have the electric griddle heated when I woke up and went downstairs at ten-thirty, eleven. About a week in I pushed it to noon. She spun around in the kitchen and pointed a whisk at me, talked through her teeth. "Next time you sleep into the p.m., I'm going to come up there and pull you out of bed myself."

"Okay, Mom."

"I'm going to bring up a plate of hot biscuits, burned black and hard," she said, madness in her eyes. "And you'll be dreaming about skinny pixies with big breasts. But I'm going to throw the biscuits at your face, twelve of them, hitting your face like hot hail."

"It's summer."

"Not just the biscuits, neither. No, Lee Smithfield, not just the biscuits. There will be the bacon, too, and the bacon won't be cooked. The bacon I'll slap raw against your back, three slices at a time on your back, twelve lashes for every hour you slept, and though I don't want to I will let skin break if it happens. I will, boy, I will."

With her wrist she moved the whisk slowly in a figure eight and she told me to sit at the bar of the island in our kitchen. She wasn't a real lunatic. This was just her sense of

humor. She'd been dipping into it a lot since my dad left a few months before. He and a younger woman fell in love, or at least lust, as he wrapped the pasty gauze of a cast around her broken leg. Horseback riding accident. My mom had nursed at the same hospital, different wing, and I think she felt too embarrassed to keep working there, too worried she might run into him. The result was that she was at the house all the time, an annoying obstacle for me as a fifteen year old on vacation.

But she did make me breakfast, and I could eat as much as you put in front of me. This morning it was two slabs of country ham with a fried egg over the top of each one, fresh home fries and onions cooked on the griddle in butter and hot sauce, and also three pancakes on a separate plate with syrup and more butter, and my mom, all the while I was eating, topped off my glasses of orange juice and milk. She took my dishes to the sink when they were empty.

“Well it’s about lunch time,” she said. “How about a sandwich?”

“I’m going,” I said. I was already wearing my swimming trunks—as I had been all week—and I was walking out of the kitchen.

“Lee Smithfield,” my mom said. “Stay with me today. I’ll take you out, wherever you want to go. We can go bowling or we could go to the movies or I’ll stand the mall, even, and I’ll treat you to dinner.”

That whisk was back in her hands, dirty with dried pancake batter. She was twiddling it in her thumbs, and on her face there was a half smile that I knew, even then, held back so much loneliness, all the loneliness that could fit inside her great big body.

But also back then I was addicted to the independence you feel, as a teenager, that you can only score outside the doors to your own home, without your own family.

“No,” I said, just that one word, and I didn’t even take the five seconds to kiss her cheek.

Because God knew the only thing I wanted to do was go to the pool. It was still closed, but it had been cleaned and chlorinated for the season. Plus our neighborhood was wealthy, safe enough that there was never any lock on the gate. I strolled barefoot down the warmed sidewalks, and when I got there Lori Snavel and Alex Shepherd were in the water. Alex’s back was to me and from that angle he looked like a full-grown, well-built man. Lori was straddling him at his hips, her arms rested atop his shoulders, her wrists crossed below his neck, and Alex was walking around slow, slow, slow. The three of us had lived in the same neighborhood together our whole lives, gone to the same schools. But while they had been the couple since seventh grade that set the highest bar for popularity, I had always flown under everybody’s radar, a chubby no one. Finally I’d hit a growth spurt, one so rapid over the previous school year that when the eight months were done I was five inches taller. The excess of baby fat on my stomach and chest had stretched thin. Going into the break I was left with just little enough pudginess to look like muscle tone. This is what got me going to the pool in the first place. As far as I could tell, Lori and Alex had been there all day every day each summer before this one. Their foreheads were touching. Or they were until Alex turned some and noticed me standing outside the gate, staring.

“Dude,” he said. “You are weirding us the fuck out.”

I tried to laugh away the embarrassment as I unlatched the gate. They went back to their aquatic cuddling. I took off my shirt, kicked back on a lounge chair, looked straight up and forgot about Earth. The sky was so blue, that blue so deep it's buzzing and you can taste it and it's like something tart you get from the ICEE machine and just crush in three gulps. That's where my head went and that's where it stayed until the newcomer—a girl about our age—stepped through the gate and into my life. She had a bikini made out of that sky, and little white flip-flops she slid her feet out of then pushed with her toes under the chair next to mine.

“Still closed?” she said to me, said it as if she believed it was no big deal that we had trespassed, something I'd probably have bragged about to anyone who didn't know how easy it was to get in. Her breasts weren't very big but they were pushed up into cute pucks on her chest, and I had a hard time finding the right words to answer her question. Finally I just nodded. “Cool,” she said.

She headed across the cement to the diving board ladder, climbed and then walked the springy plank with her hands cupped onto her hipbones. I glanced quickly at Lori and Alex, but to my surprise they were still locked in eye contact, paying no attention to the newcomer. She sprang upwards at the end of the diving board. In the air she brought herself through a smooth flip backwards, her skin colored like butterscotch with comet tails of blue bikini orbiting her body snugly. I heard a noise, a loud smack, but didn't yet worry because before I could the newcomer was unraveling and straightening her body inch by inch as each inch of her pierced the pool water.

Her figure was blurred for a moment before she surfaced. Her pace as she swam towards the edge of the pool was very slow, her strokes choppy. She dragged herself all clunky out of the water onto the poolside cement. She sobbed once, rested her head on her elbow, and then I was running for her.

One stride later there was already wet red flooding down her neck, thinned-out from the pool water and running in a brook towards me when I stopped above her body. I crouched down and patted my palm once on the ground for balance, right into her blood, and then wiped my hand clean on dry cement. Her eyes were closed, clenched, and each time she exhaled it started with a bit of attack like her breath had to pop through a sticky valve. She smelled like chlorine. It was silent around us except for some lapping in the pool, then the sluice of Lori and Alex getting out.

“You’re hurt,” I said.

“You know, I think I must be,” the newcomer said. Her lips were smushed into her upper arm and she sounded just dozy, not scared. “But it stopped hurting a while ago and I wonder if all the fuss was for nothing.”

“A while ago?” I said. “It happened a minute ago.”

She laughed three heaves, quieter each time, and then went silent again except for that breath. The injury was on the back of her head. There weren’t any shadows around her, and her blood, its color, soaked the fire up out of the sun. Alex walked up from behind and stood next to me with my T-shirt, white, hanging from his hand. “I don’t need this,” I said.

“No duh, retard. She does,” Alex said.

When I dabbed the shirt onto the newcomer's shoulders, she winced, held her breath, and muscles flexed all over her back and arms. I dabbed it onto her again. She sighed out deeply and her body relaxed. "I'm out of practice," she said.

"Out of practice?" I said.

"Diving," she said.

Alex sat down with his legs stretched out on the cement. He was biting his fingernails. "Out of practice, my ass," he said. "Everybody's always told you your head gets too close to the board when you try that back flip shit." He turned his head away, spat, then bit his nails some more. "Look at you now," he said.

"You know her?" I said.

"She's my next door neighbor. She's lived here all our lives," Alex said. "You *don't* know her?"

We lived in different parts of the neighborhood, but Alex and I were hardly friends who would hang out at each other's houses. I used a bloodless part of my T-shirt to wipe more blood from the newcomer's neck. "Do you not go to Cameron?" I asked her. That was our high school.

"I go to Dock and Schaeffer," she said, sounding half asleep. She was a private-school kid.

Lori walked towards us from a row of lounge chairs, slapping her feet on the cement, and in her hand there was a big navel orange. Her bathing suit was red and white stripes, *Where's Waldo?* but a whole lot hotter. She scratched her thumbnail into the

orange peel and started tearing off little pieces, dropping them onto the ground by the newcomer. “Becky finally hit her head?” she said.

Alex spat another shred of his fingernail. “Yep,” he said, and he pushed himself up to his feet. He looked down at me. “You need to get her out of here before somebody drives by and thinks we’re, I don’t know, sacrificing her or some shit.”

“Get her out of here?” I said. “Shouldn’t we call an ambulance?”

“We call an ambulance and we get banned from the pool for the summer,” Alex said.

“Maybe forever,” Lori said. She tore the peeled orange in half at the seams, and meanwhile Alex slid his pinky down the side of her bikini bottom, pulled her close.

“All I’m saying is,” he said, “Lori and I have been coming here for years before the season. Never been a problem. You started rolling down here this summer, as far as I can tell just to watch us. Becky, she’s the one who scalped herself. It’s her fault and you’re annoying.”

“Becky’s pretty annoying, too,” Lori said.

“That’s true,” Alex said. “And if I get into any trouble because of this, I’m going to be pissed.”

The newcomer, Becky, was looking up at me from where she lay on her elbow, and how her face was smushed into her own skin gave her fish lips. I thought it was cute.

“Be a gentleman, Lee,” Lori said. Her tongue showed as she put a slice of orange in her mouth.

I looked down at Becky. “Can you get up?” I said.

“Be a gentleman, Lee,” she said, “and help me up.”

I did, and the T-shirt fell from my hand. It was cow’s print with blood instead of black. I picked it back up, rolled it tight and tied it around Becky’s head.

She and I were almost at the gate when loud sounds of splashing came from behind. Alex was back in the pool. He made waves by sweeping his arm over the surface, and the water was washing all the blood on the cement to a nearby drain. He stopped making the waves. Lori, standing above him at the edge of the pool, dropped the last slice of her orange over his head. Alex caught the fruit like a seal would a sardine, and when Lori then spun and fell sideways into the pool, he caught her, too, but in his arms.

I turned back around and put my hand on Becky’s waist. “Just in case you get woozy,” I said.

“Well okay,” she said.

Once when I was really young, I don’t know, four or five, a female cousin and I ended up unsupervised in the same room together. She was about my age but a tiny bit younger, and she asked me if I wanted to see her penis. Sure, I said, because I wanted to see a girl’s penis. Obviously her proposal had been a bit misinformed, and when she thumbed down the front of her sweatpants and underwear I was baffled. Outright baffled. However lame of me it was, as a kid who grew up shy and chunky, the only erotic moments I’d experienced after, well, that one, involved whacking off.

The moment Becky and I were out of the gate, she rested her head on my shoulder. Combined with my hand on her waist, the physical contact was, I guess, too hot for me. What I’m trying to say is that I got a boner.

All hasty, hoping to distract her, I sputtered, “Am I supposed to walk you home to your parents? Because my mom’s a nurse and she’d be able to help you heal, I bet.”

“My parents don’t come home until late,” Becky said. “And if we go to see your mom, you better lose that before we get there.” She pulled her arm out from where it was wedged between our sides. Then she backhanded my penis with her fingers, and she let out some more slow heaves of laughter.

I felt something like a flurry of snow forming a tornado in my neck, the tail of the feeling sinking down through my guts, and fast, and I bet I would have gone on and jizzed then and there. Would have, if Becky didn’t gag suddenly on her laughs, hiccup and puke all over the sidewalk. “I’m sorry,” she said. Another hiccup, another plop of vomit to the sidewalk, looked like scrambled eggs, too thick to splatter onto our bare feet. “Oh, God, I’m so sorry. I ate a late breakfast,” she said.

The boner in my shorts was gone. “It’s all good,” I said, and I asked her if she thought she’d gotten everything up. She nodded her head on my shoulder. “This way,” I said.

Her face was very clammy on my skin by the time we made it to my doorstep. “What an abode,” she said flatly. Inside the foyer, she grabbed a fake orange from the bowl of plastic fruit we kept on a key table. “I’m Lori,” she said, banging the orange against her lips when she talked, and then she dropped it to the floor. The orange bounced high, and as it came down Becky tried to Hacky Sack it back up. Instead she stumbled, fell laughing on her ass as the orange tumbled away. “I need to sit down,” she said, and she smiled at me like Dumbo when he’s drunk in the movie.

“I know you do but do it in here,” I said. I reached for her hands.

“Hug me up,” she said, so I did, and I led her to the den.

She sank into a sofa cushion and sighed loudly, vocally from a high note to one lower and deeper than I would have thought she could go, and when it seemed she might get quiet she swung her voice back up to the high register, wheezing with the corners of her lips stretched back.

“Stay there,” I said. Instead of saying anything back—or even just nodding—she rolled her head around and kept wheezing in a loop.

Calling out for my mom, I ran quickly through the house but couldn’t find her. She was outside on the back porch, lying on a lounge chair. I went out there and music was playing from a stereo system she must have brought out from the bonus room. It was set up sloppy, chords everywhere, against the wall behind her. That song “If It Makes You Happy” was coming from the speakers, Sheryl Crow screeching the chorus, and my mom bobbed her head as in time with the music as anyone in my family could have. She was wearing her purple one-piece bathing suit, an outfit I’d seen very rarely that was a little fuzzy from age.

I spun the volume down on the stereo. She looked back at me from the lounge chair with her neck craned sharply, the fat connecting her chin to her chest all stretched out. “This is my day, Lee Smithfield, and I was rocking to that, thank you,” she said.

“We have a situation in the living room,” I said.

“Guess we better deal with it, then,” my mom said, and she slid her feet off the chair then stood. The bathing suit was too tight on her body and her fat pushed out where

her skin met the purple fabric. “What’s the situation?” she said. By then, though, her hand was on the knob to the back door. She opened it and went inside, and then turned her head fast to the living room. The back of Becky’s head jutted above the top of the sofa, and my shirt, tied over the injury, had blossomed so red it looked brown, there.

“Turn my lemon curd,” my mom said. “What the hell happened?”

“She did a flip off the diving board but she bonked her head,” I said. “I think she’s kind of in shock.”

“No wonder she’s in shock. She’s bleeding her brains out,” my mom said, her head cocked towards me so Becky couldn’t hear as we walked through the kitchen.

We circled around the sofa. Becky looked up at my mom then at me. “She is large and in charge,” she said.

“What’s your name, honey?” my mom said. “Can you tell me your name?”

“It’s Becky,” I said.

My mom popped my mouth with her fingers, not hard. “I just need to see she’s still with us, Lee. Quiet. Tell me your last name, Becky.”

“Albright,” Becky said.

“Do you go to Lee’s school? Are you in high school?”

Becky nodded, slowly but surely. “I go to Dock and Schaeffer,” she said.

My mom turned to me and put her big hands on my face, squishing my cheeks a little. “Listen to me closely. Go to the med cabinet in your dad’s and my bathroom,” she said. I guess the way she saw it, the house was still part his. She listed off all of the stuff she wanted me to bring back down to her, listed it off again and then let my head go.

I ran upstairs and into the master room, past the California king bed that I'd slept in sometimes with my mom as a young kid when my dad worked overnight at the emergency room. Their bathroom had a tub with water jets that I liked to bathe in, and once, not too many years after that baffling incident with my cousin, I'd busted in without knocking. My dad was there in front of the mirror, peaks of shaving cream pointing out from his face, naked, no towel, and it smelled like he'd just taken a shit. What I really noticed, though, was his penis, how it looked not much like mine. I didn't know the word back then, but he was circumcised and I wasn't, and he must have noticed what I was staring at. "You can blame yours on your mother," he said, lifting a razor from the sink countertop. "She didn't want them to cut you." Mostly I was confused, but this didn't exactly help my confidence later, not in middle school when you start hearing about hand jobs, not now, when Becky was downstairs bleeding and, I hoped, pining for me to return.

I gathered some of the supplies my mom had demanded, tweezers and a disposable razor, cotton swabs, a roll of gauze and an Ace wrap, but that was all I could remember of what she'd said. So I just swept most everything in the medicine cabinet into a basket.

I shuffled back down to the first floor. They were in the guest bathroom, my mom washing her hands in the sink, and Becky was sitting backwards on the closed toilet. She was straddling the tank, her head on her elbow on the lid. She wrinkled her nose at me, smiled. "Join us," she said.

She was so, so small next to my mom. I stepped in the bathroom. It was cramped with all three of us in there. I stood pressed against the back wall with the basket of medical supplies close to my stomach. My mom was drying her hands. Becky's bikini bottom was pulled below the crack of her bony ass.

My mom turned, saw me staring and widened her eyes at me. I pushed the basket towards her. "Is this okay?" I said.

"Stand right here and keep that within my reach," she said, grabbing me by the shoulder. She forced me between the sink and the toilet tank. Becky's face was a foot from my crotch. My mom stood behind her. When she untied the shirt from Becky's head, the hair was too matted down and dark to see any trauma. "Give me the razor," my mom said.

"Are you shaving me?" Becky said.

My mom was rubbing her fingers around Becky's head in short strokes. "You won't even be able to see it, baby," she said. She took the razor from me, and she parted the wettest-looking clump of Becky's hair upwards.

When she finished shaving a strip bald, I saw that the cut wasn't completely as bad as I might have thought, half an inch long. It did look deep, though, and the skin surrounding the gash was puffed up, pink.

My mom held the razor in front of me. "Put it in the sink, please," she said. I did, and then she hovered her hand around all the supplies, took out a hypodermic needle in a plastic package. "Unwrap this," she said. I did it with my teeth like you tear off the top of a candy bar wrapper, and my mom sighed as she picked out a vial. She let go of Becky's

hair, slid the needle out of the opened package I was holding. She filled the syringe with medicine.

Becky sucked in a bunch of air through her teeth when the needle first hit her skin. “Fuck,” she said. Usually, *hell* was enough of a cussword to earn a reprimand from my mom, but now she didn’t even flinch, just moved the needle prick by prick on the swollen skin around Becky’s cut.

My face felt cool and I’m sure it was all white. “You okay?” my mom said. She was looking at me and I nodded. “Stay strong,” she said. She reached over my shoulder and placed the needle and vial in the sink.

“We’re done now?” Becky said.

“Real close, baby,” my mom said. She took tweezers from the basket, and the suture kit, a little hook of a needle with three inches of thread attached. “Talk to her,” she said to me.

“About what?” I said.

“About what isn’t the point, Lee. Just talk to her.”

I looked down at Becky, at her eyes and their lulling lids. “I’m waiting,” she said.

“What do you...” I said, but I trailed off as my mom brought the first stitch through skin. Her hand stopped moving and she cut her eyes at me, her lips pursed and pissed off. “What do you think of the wallpaper in here?” I said.

It was forest green with thin maroon stripes going up and down, gold-colored leaves coming off of the stripes. My mom’s decorating was something my dad had always teased her about. She’d picked the wallpaper. My dad hadn’t liked it.

“It’s a little bit tacky,” Becky said. “The whole house in fact is a little bit tacky.”

“Well,” my mom said between stitches, “how sweet of you to say.” She made another stitch. We were all silent and I felt awkward. “Do you have a boyfriend, Becky?” my mom said.

“Maybe after all this I will,” she said, going into her slow laugh. My mom hesitated with the needle above the cut until Becky stopped laughing and her head stopped heaving. Then the thread went through her skin again. And then once more, through one side of the cut to the other, my mom drawing the needle steadily. She clipped the thread with the tweezers, tied a knot close to the skin, and the gash was closed, striped with black but closed.

“Okay,” my mom said. She stepped back from her work. Her cheeks were red and beaded with sweat. “You’re much better already.”

Becky slid backwards on the toilet seat and her bikini bottom came down even further on her butt. She reached around, pulled it up, and swung around to face us. She looked at my mom as my mom wiped the sweat from her face with the back of her hand. “Can we go back out now?” Becky said.

My mom took the basket from my hands. “We can all go together when I drive you home,” she said. She was rummaging through the medical supplies.

“Are you going to leave the house in just that?” Becky said to my mom.

Forever I’ll wish I had said something then, but I didn’t. All I did was turn to the sink and gather the trash. When my mom spoke, her voice quivered some. “No,” she said. “Just let me throw on some clothes and we’ll leave.” Then she tapped something on my

arm, a pill bottle. I took it from her. We didn't make eye contact before she left the bathroom.

I shook the pill bottle and leaned against the wall, facing Becky. "These are for you," I said, and I started to read the instructions out loud to her but she cut me off.

"When we get to my house," she said, "my parents are home and you're coming in to tell them the story and stay for dinner. Something like that. Okay?"

"You said your parents don't get home until late."

"Which is exactly why you should lie to your mom," Becky said. She gave me a half smile, half sneer, her hair tousled, the sexiest thing I could have imagined.

My mom had put on a loose blue dress over her one piece. Becky sat up front with her in the car, me in the back, and in the rearview mirror my mom's eyes looked too blank to not be sad. Some nasty broth of sympathy for her but more horniness for Becky was bubbling in my skull as she gave my mom directions to her house. The silence that followed got to me before we were out of the driveway. I leaned forward over the center console and turned on the radio. The volume was high and the song "One Week" by Bare Naked Ladies was playing. My mom slapped the button to cut the music, but right away Becky whined, "Leave it. Leave it," and she turned the music back on. The whole way to her house she sang along with those fast rapping verse parts, swimming her hand through the air out the open window.

We pulled into her driveway as the song finished on that quick fading toot of a synthesized horn. This was where the real rich people lived. Through the windows of Becky's garage, you could see a tall SUV parked inside, fresh yellow. My mom turned

the volume way down, and she said, in a good-riddance tone, “Young lady, I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“I definitely am,” Becky said, nodding. She turned in her seat and looked over the headrest at me. “You’re coming in to meet my parents, right?”

In the rearview mirror, my mom looked at me, just a glance, and then she looked away.

“Yes,” I said to Becky. She undid her seatbelt and as the roller took up the slack I undid mine, too.

“Lee Smithfield,” my mom said. “You’ll be home for supper?”

“Maybe,” I said.

“He’ll probably eat here,” Becky said, stepping out of the car. She slammed her door shut then swung mine open.

“Walk home safe,” my mom said.

Becky dragged me out of the car—not that she had to try very hard—and when she pushed my door shut I realized she’d never even thanked my mom. This? I did nothing about this, either, and my mom pulled out of the driveway.

I pointed at the garage, the SUV inside. “Who’s here?” I said to Becky.

“That’s mine for when I can drive,” she said.

The Albright kitchen could have eaten the one at my house. Their appliances were all chrome, big, and shiny. The top of the range had six gas burners. One of them was on, a flame thrusting up on the bottom of a pan.

“Whoops,” Becky said. She turned the burner off and took the pan away, dried scales of scrambled eggs on the sides of it. She put it in the sink. “Do you want some wine?” she said to me.

“I could go for a glass,” I said. I’d never had a sip of alcohol in my life. The smell of it, when Becky handed me the glass, seemed no more appealing than dirty feet. But she took such a huge gulp from her own without any holdup that I swallowed some and tried hard to keep my lips from puckering. “Won’t your parents notice this is missing?” I said.

“If so, they’ll tell me not to do it again, and that’ll be that,” she said. She stepped close to me—the flooring was stone tile that felt real—and she wrapped her hand around my neck. “You need to relax. We’ve been through a lot together, today.” Then she dragged her fingers down my stomach. Her hand slipped into the pocket of my swim trunks. “Are my pills in here?” she said.

“Other side,” I said.

She kept the one hand in the one pocket, set her wine down, and filled my other pocket with her fingers. Her tongue slithered firm through my lips, quick and pointed at the tip as she raked it across the roof of my mouth. “Come to my room,” she said, pulling the pills out of my pocket. She popped off the top, shook two into her palm and swallowed them with another gulp of wine.

“Should you have done that?” I said. She shrugged.

I followed her down to a finished basement. Down there were a pool and foosball table, an arcade basketball game, another refrigerator, a popcorn maker, and a TV that was taller than me.

“This is ridiculous,” I said.

“What is?” Becky said. My fingers were in her hand. She dragged me past all the stuff and into her bedroom.

I saw the TV in the corner of her room and this one was no smaller than the one in our den at home. I saw that she had her own bathroom, too. Before I could look around anymore, she pushed me backwards, onto her bed, and my legs angled off the end. Then she pulled away. Then she pulled my trunks halfway down my thighs. I panted like a puppy and pressed my fingertips into her rumpled bedding, and I was staring at the swoop of green silk hung under her overhead light. I was bracing myself. Waiting.

“What the hell is up with your dick?” Becky said.

“What do you mean?” I said.

“It’s...” she said, but she paused, and during that pause my erection went down and it seemed like a final sort of thing. “It’s weird,” Becky said.

I pulled my trunks back to my waist and sat up at the edge of the bed, so stunned with embarrassment that I hadn’t started blushing. “I’m not cut,” I said. Becky was heaving her slow laughter. “Is that not good?” I said.

She rolled her head, not exactly an answer but she kept laughing—that was enough. Then she crawled into the center of her bed. She snuggled her head into her elbow and her eyelids started drooping. “That was so weird,” she said.

I had nothing at all to say back to her before she was out, asleep within a minute, next to me on her bed breathing heavy deep breaths through her nose, at first, but her mouth popped open and then she was huffing through it like a kid with a cold. I said her name a couple of times but she didn't react. "Lee," I said, still sitting at the foot of her bed, my knees over the side and my hands on my thighs, barefoot and shirtless and getting goosebumps.

Outside of Becky's room, I stopped at the arcade basketball game and took a shot with one of the half-sized balls. It barely nicked the bottom of the rim. I checked the fridge down there. Nothing but a bunch of beer. So I peaked back inside Becky's room to make sure she was still breathing. She was, and my mom had been right: you couldn't even notice the shaved strip on Becky's head, at least not from a few yards away where I stood just inside her door. That was as close as I ever wanted to get to that girl again.

Everything in her part of the neighborhood—and Alex's and Lori's—seemed blown up with air, three-story brick houses, super-wide driveways out front with cars of every color, the majority of them SUVs that were way too shiny and clean to have ever been driven how they do in commercials. All the hedges and bushes in people's lawns were so pruned, their leaves and limbs pared into smooth edges, like they were grown in giant Jell-O molds, and even clouds that had come into the sky looked shaped, patted, faked. Floats.

I came to the street that led to a three-way stop, where you could go left and get to a shopping plaza in a minute or right and be at the mall even quicker, but I was going deeper into the development, towards home.

Lori and Alex were stepping out of the pool gate when I got there. Alex had Becky's white flip-flops pinched by the straps between his fingers. The tops of the soles were brownish gray where Becky's feet had been.

"What happened with homegirl?" Lori said. She held a can of Coca-Cola, just an accessory to her red-and-white bikini.

"My mom cleaned up her cut then took her home," I said. "We hung out for a little while but I want to get back for supper."

"Smooth," Lori said. She popped the tab of her soda, sipped then went *Ahhh*. I didn't realize people actually did that.

Alex dangled the flip-flops in my direction. "You want these so you have some reason to creep back over to her house later?"

"No," I said. "I'm not crazy about her."

"Well I don't want to see her either so are you sure?" Alex said. I nodded. "All right," he said. "We'll see you tomorrow, I bet, or you'll see us, staring from the poolside and shit."

I started walking away before he'd finished talking.

The plastic orange Becky had dropped in our foyer was still on the floor. I picked it up, and as I'd done before I went around the house calling for my mom, walking this time instead of running but I wanted to find her more. She was on the back porch again with the blue dress still over her bathing suit, lying on the lounge chair, no music playing, now. There was another chair against the wall. I slid it around so that it faced my mom, and I sat in it, lay back. The orange was still in my hand.

“Why’d you bring that out here?” my mom said.

“I don’t know,” I said. I tossed her the orange and she caught it, one-handed.

“How were that girl’s parents?” she said. She tossed back the orange, sidearm at me. I caught it.

“They sucked,” I said, a white enough lie, I hoped, that my mom would forgive it if she’d known what had happened. I tossed her the orange, gave it some arc, and she caught it.

“I figured they would,” she said.

We played catch. It was nice.

THE OTHER PART

This is what I do with a whole lot of my time: I stand behind a flattop grill and wait for a server to stick an order into the ticket holder. If it's a weekday, the server is stressed out about school. If it's a weekend, the server is hungover. Either way, he or she doesn't give a damn about their job. You can read it in how they've scribbled down turkey Reuben slash potato salad.

I clamp my fingers around a balled-up portion of turkey in the deli case. As soon as it hits the grill the meat starts twitching. I slap down two slices of rye, buttered side down, butter then bubbling around the crust of the bread. I scrape a metal spatula under the turkey, flip it and smash it, and it's still processed-poultry pink but now with tan scabs. I pile sauerkraut over the meat, a square of Swiss over the kraut. Then I grab a squeeze bottle full of Russian dressing and I spiral some of that on one slice of rye. When the first beads of sweat press out of the Swiss, I stack all this on the cutting board that lines the front of the deli case, the cutting board that has more gashes stained orange with grease than it has smooth white surface. I stab the sandwich through two corners with club frills, and when I saw it in half, just for a second, the steaming insides keep set in their layers. But the Russian dressing starts dripping and the cheese starts sagging down the heap of turkey and kraut.

My guy working salads and side orders takes the sandwich from there, and if I'm lucky another server has slipped another order into the ticket holder so I can keep the

cycle going and not think too directly about how this is what I do with a whole lot of my time, and it has been now since almost a decade ago.

When I hired Heather as a server, I'd already been at the restaurant three years, half that time as the weekend manager, and before that as a regular line cook under Debbie and Russell Puckett, the original owners. They only worked weekends. It was common for them to offer me double wages under the table to cover their shifts. That's how sick they were of sandwiches.

I'd been getting sick of them, too, but then Heather and I got together, fell in love. Five days a week, we let all of the other employees go right after the lunch rush, and together we closed up in the early evenings. This went on for another long while, a good one.

I was in the office one of those evenings when she stepped in the doorway, down to her tank top and jeans frayed at the waistline and only socks on her feet. She got really upset if mop water sloshed into her shoes. She sat on my lap in the desk chair, and when she leaned her head into mine the uncolored fuzz I loved between her eyebrows tickled the bridge of my nose.

"I think we should get married," she said. "And I think we should buy this place."

We reeked like onions and grease and sweat. The bulb in the desktop lamp was buzzing, but I stood and lifted Heather with me, and as we fucked against the file cabinet I forgot how much of a lazy idiot kid I was.

Her parents dropped fifty-five thousand dollars in her bank account, however much we wanted for the wedding, however much we had left for the restaurant. We

married for cheap on the beach and found an apartment less than a mile away from work, signed papers with the Pucketts six months later.

I'm pretty sure what began after that was the thickest bliss of my life, another three years in which Heather and I worked open to close together but now seven days a week instead of five. She baked pumpkin bread sometimes in the mornings, and that smell filling the kitchen, warming away all the melted cheese and charred meat in the air, it was just one thing of everything that for me made the place as good as home. Better than home. All we did at the apartment was watch TV and sleep.

I still worked the grill during the lunch rush. Making food fly made the hours go by so fast and so easy, thousands of hours, and the sweet spot of each one of them was when Heather found a break from her tables to linger in the kitchen and scratch my stomach, dribble her fingers on my chest, or even just say, "Hey, Honey," and I knew the whole way across the Atlantic what she meant. Business was getting a little better all the while, so that when she stopped being as sweet at work, I maybe had too many orders in the ticket holder to notice.

The summer was our busiest season. It had become tradition for us to stay late one day in May to scour away the gunk that builds up gradually, which it does in every single corner of the building. Heather and I had been at it for a couple of hours and my dishtowel was tacky and black. I twirled it around and searched for another spot to polish. Heather had the hatch to the chest of the ice maker open. She was down on her knees, wiping sluggishly.

“You tired?” I said.

“We’ve been here since eight this morning, Skip. You’re tired, too.”

She kept scrubbing and the little bit of fat around the inside of her elbow sort of breathed. Sometimes I liked to nuzzle my mouth there.

“Feels fresh in here,” I said.

“I’m too dead to notice, or care,” Heather said. One final pass around the rubber seam of the ice maker hatch and she tapped it shut with her finger. She sighed when she stood. The dishtowel draped over the back of her wrist was splotted with dark green, and she held it towards me.

“We’re done?” I said.

“We are way done.” I hung my dishtowel on top of hers and she said, sarcastically, “Oh, thanks.” She walked towards the bathroom hallway. I followed her, and she spoke without turning her head. “The kids should’ve done this today when we were slow.”

“You can’t trust them to get real down and dirty,” I said.

“That’s what we pay them to do. If they don’t do it right then you make them do it again.”

We were in the back of the restaurant, now, outside the office, and Heather flung the dishtowels from her wrist into the hamper for dirty laundry.

“I kind of like doing the deep cleans,” I said.

She looked at me, straight-faced. “I don’t. At all. And to be honest with you, that’s crazy.”

Probably it showed that I was a little hurt. She came in close to me and hooked her underarms over my shoulders, leaned forward and would've fallen if I wasn't there. Her cheek and her ear were warm against my jawline. "I'm sorry," she said. "But I'm going to lose it if I don't start taking a day off."

Her idea seemed so obvious and right and good. "Well let's do it," I said, and I pushed my thumbs through the belt loops on her hips.

"I mean to myself," she said.

The light switches are back there, and when you're done closing up, if sunset has happened, you have to go through the bathroom hallway with just the red sign for emergency exit barely shining above your head. I crossed into the dining area, Heather behind me, neither of us saying a word. The smell of degreaser stung my nose, stung my eyes. All I could see outside the glass of the storefront were headlights glowing slowly up and down the street.

Some evening in mid-July I let the staff leave after close and got tired as I knocked out the cleaning myself. When you prompt the cash register for the daily reports, it makes a ratcheting sound, then a shush, printing then pushing out paper again and again, and it's pleasant—sometimes I think it's pleasant. If the numbers at the bottom of the report are high then the silence that follows is okay, too, but as I counted the cash in the office it hit me for the first time that money is really all I ever have to show for my work. The rest gets eaten. Maybe it'd be different if I'd had to struggle in the first place to buy the restaurant, and maybe not, but I don't know.

At home I sat on the floor by the sofa where Heather was sprawled out. The skin on her face looked smooth as it always does after she's had her day.

"I'm staying here tomorrow," I said. I tried to figure out what else looked different about her.

She didn't stop watching the TV, and while yawning she said, "God knows you need to."

She had plucked her eyebrows. That's what it was.

She was gone when I woke up the next morning. I lay in bed awake for a while, at first comfortable but soon crazy and embarrassed with myself for having no clue what to do throughout the day. I got up and showered, trying to enjoy it, and I let the water needle into the back of my neck until it went real cold real sudden.

The light coming into the apartment at that hour washed everything out. I put *Nashville Skyline* in the stereo and listened to the album, pacing, then sitting on the coffee table in nothing but a towel.

All my clothes might as well drip grease, the way they stink. Usually I don't even notice it. I did this day, and I could see why Heather hates that smell. She hates it. While I dressed, I started feeling a little bit weak and I told myself I needed to eat. I drove to the restaurant, a few minutes past noon.

Heather was out on the floor delivering food to a table when I came in and sat at the bar. She walked up to me, her plucked eyebrows already raised in arches. "What are you doing here?" she said.

“Can I see a menu?”

“You...” She paused and shook her head with her mouth hanging open. “You’ve got to be kidding,” she said.

“I’m not kidding. I just want to look at our menu. I haven’t actually read it in a while.”

“Read it tomorrow. Read it the next day. Right now, no.”

“Is there something wrong with me coming in here to eat?”

“We were having a nice day, Skip. We’ve had a nice, quiet morning.”

“Then I come in and shit all over it.”

“There are customers in here,” Heather said, and there were. It was filling up fast with the regulars: bankers, professors, rich kid students red-eyed and so stoned on weed they bought with their parents’ money they never think of anywhere else to go. “It’s getting busy. I don’t need this,” Heather said.

“Trust me, I don’t either,” I said. “But why is this going like it is?”

She gave me her straight face. “We were very young,” she said. She meant when we bought the restaurant. She meant when we married.

“Jesus, Heather, it’s been three years,” I said.

“Does it feel that way to you? Because I’m realizing that this already seems like it’s been forever.”

“What the hell can I do about that?”

“Go eat somewhere else. Go the beach. Go drink. Whatever. Go.”

Sometime while she was still talking I pushed myself back in my barstool and stood. I crossed paths with our other servers on the walk through the dining area, and there was the dread of being at work in their eyes but plenty of youth in their faces. Some of the customers looked at me. I could tell they had no idea who I was.

In our bedroom at home, I opened the closet and reached to the back corner, the place where I'd leaned my guitar in its case against the wall and left it the very day Heather and I moved in. A nice guitar, I mean a real nice one, that's something I'd wanted since I was twelve years old, even younger, whenever it was that I discovered rhythm and how rhythm sometimes when you're inside it bores straight through your problems with more force than lyrics and melody can dream of, but all I had back then was a used Epiphone, cheap in the first place, no guts to the tone. It wasn't until I was twenty-one, when Debbie and Russell Puckett made me a manager and gave me a decent raise, that I bought my Martin.

I put it on our bed in its case, popped the latches on the sides, and sat down. My guitar has a sunburst finish. The body top is spruce, stained to mahogany that dims to black around the edges, black up the fretboard with ivory inlays, more black on the headstock where the strings wrap around their pegs tight like bent steel pipes.

I can still hear if a guitar is in tune by the drone it makes when you pull it out of the plush in its case. Mine was. I quieted the strings with my fingers at the third inlay and started strumming, eighth notes in swing, low tempo, unsure of where I wanted my fret

hand to go. I brought it down to first position and kept strumming the muted strings. That sound is like thumping the bottom of a bucket.

Finally I bled open on an easy C, not the whole chord, though. It was a picking pattern I'd made up back when, C to F major, just C to F major. I drop my root notes twice a measure and on the other eighths I mostly just walk up and back down the chords, but I upstroke the high strings for some twang sometimes, and to me a flat third stabs a major progression in the chest. I hit one when it feels right.

This isn't a song. It was the closest I ever came to writing one, though, with some other chords that took my left hand up around a higher inlay and let my right hand free to strum wide over the sound hole. That's all I remember about it. At some point those chords sank into the wood grain of my fretboard and stayed there, but I kept walking between the C and the F, trying to remember, until Heather walked in the bedroom door. I let the body of my guitar slide flat on my lap.

"There's that other part," Heather said. "You used to play that other part."

"I don't remember the other part," I said.

"You used to play it."

"I know I did. I don't remember it."

She sat on the bed with me. "Keep playing," she said.

"You just *left*?" I said.

"No more of that," she said. "That's most of the problem. Or most of my problem, at least."

"Am I the rest?"

“Not really,” Heather said. She crashed backwards on the mattress and lay there, her face making sad spasms. “Not anymore than I am,” she said.

I started to take the guitar off my lap by the neck. “We could go eat somewhere. Do you want to do that?” I said.

“Don’t put that away,” Heather said. She sat back up and closed the top of the case on the bed. “I need to get back to the kids. I’m just sorry we talked how we did before.”

“I am too,” I said. She was leaning in to kiss me. She looked pretty, no matter that spot she’d made bald between her eyes. Pretty, but I’m not sure I’d say better.

She left. I went back into my riff, that pattern, trying to remember the other part. I took the swing out of the rhythm then I put it back in, went up tempo, down, dropped my pick and used my fingertips instead but none of it helped, so I just played those same two chords a ton of times on a real empty stomach.

THE WEAK END

A boy wearing a hooded sweatshirt entered a front door of the Regal 16 while Hampton was emptying cash from the register tills, right after the final showtimes of the nightshift began. The boy's sweatshirt was black, all black, and oversized so that inside the hood the only visible features were scythes of hair coming to points at the boy's cheeks. There was a pointedness to his face in general. He might have been close to the age of Bailey, Hampton's son. The boy turned and faced a poster on the wall, head tilted up, his hands in the pouch of his sweatshirt, and he sidestepped to the next poster on the wall after a moment of staring, then sidestepped again to the poster after that. He took a hand out of the sweatshirt pouch and tugged the front of his hood further down over his face, cloaking it completely. It was a Friday, and groups of people were scattered around the lobby. One of the high-school kids working concession said to Hampton, "That little fucker's trying to sneak into something."

"Don't even tell me if he does," Hampton said. "I don't want to deal with anything extra right now."

The boy was now by one of the two side halls of the theater, staring at another poster. In the lobby behind him stood tall—twenty feet tall—one of two giant replicas of the Oscar statuette, golden and streamlined like the statuette itself but spray-painted and plastic, hollow, flimsy for its great height. When Hampton took the cash from the last of the registers behind the concession stand, he walked back down the line, and the boy was

jostling his fists in the pouch of his sweatshirt. Hampton unbuttoned his top button, kept walking down the concession aisle, and the boy's head was jostling now, too. He took one of his hands back out of the sweatshirt pouch and tugged down his hood again. A couple of senior citizens in the lobby gestured nervously at the boy and whispered between themselves. A group of preteen girls stared at him, sipping large cups of soda as the boy's head and arms quaked. Hampton passed the concession clerk again, the one who'd spoken before. "That kid is tweaking out," the clerk said. "You need to go tell him to leave before he freaks out those old people and they die on us." The boy took one quick glance behind him, in the direction of the concession stand, then turned back to the wall. He tugged his hood forward again as he spun around and sprinted towards the Oscar statue. "Here comes something," the clerk said. In six paces the boy was at the statue, his hands still hidden in his pouch, and his head, still hooded, down like a ram's with the blond carved tips of his hair pointing out from the fabric. He lunged upwards and shoved his shoulders into the Oscar statue's shin. The statue tilted forward, stiffly and slowly, balanced on its base for a moment as the boy turned toward the front doors and started running. Hampton jumped the countertop of the concession stand and ran as the statue fell, slowly, then slammed into the cropped carpet of the lobby, blowing a gust of wind on Hampton just as he reached it. He jumped over it. Already the boy was back out the front door, still hooded, and Hampton exploded out after him. A truck with the tailgate down was idling forward in the parking lot. The boy clambered into the bed, and as soon as he was in, the truck started taking off, fast, the sound of more boys yelling boisterously

from the cab. Hampton yelled, making his throat burn with how loud, how hard he screamed, “Little faggot, I’ll kill you.” Then the truck was gone.

A hand smacked Hampton’s shoulder. It was Cliff, the other nightshift manager, Hampton’s boss. “What in the world are you thinking?” Cliff said—furious, quiet, but furious. “Look around you,” he said, and Hampton did. The moviegoers from the next-to-last showings were lined up all around the sidewalk outside of the box office. Dozens of people, and if they weren’t staring at Hampton, they were staring at the ground, shocked, offended, even scared themselves, it seemed. “Get out of here. Get the hell out of here, now,” Cliff said.

“We need to call the police,” Hampton said.

“You need to leave, is all you need to do,” Cliff said. “Go.” Hampton stood there for a moment. The people outside of the box office were silently dispersing into the parking lot. Cliff raised his voice. “Go,” he said.

Still wearing his maroon, button-down work shirt with the short sleeves and slick fabric, and still in the same shopping center of the movie theater, Hampton found an empty barstool at the franchised restaurant where he ate after work, two times a week, as a rule. He didn’t eat tonight, though, just drank two beers, preparing himself for the conversation he would have to have with Leah, at home.

The three-mile drive there went too fast.

He walked into the kitchen and flicked on the light. A plateful of muffins sat on a counter. Leah usually baked on Friday evenings while he was at work, breakfast pastries for the weekend, and the rule was—Hampton had long ago learned—he was not allowed

to eat them except at the table, in the mornings, with his wife and his son eating with him. But the buzz from the beer had made him hungry, and he found himself peeling the wrapper off of one of the muffins, telling himself it couldn't be helped. He ripped the muffin top off and ate the bottom, first. It was chocolate chips inside, and all the sweetness overcame the rank aftertaste of alcohol in the back of his throat. Crumbs fell each time he took a bite, scattered on the counter, and as he chewed his last mouthful of the top of the muffin, he pressed those crumbs to his thumb. He scraped them into his mouth with his teeth.

It was only half past twelve, an hour or so earlier than he would've come home on a normal Friday night, but still, already, as he walked down the hallway, there was no light coming from the bottom of Bailey's closed bedroom door. Hampton at that age, or even younger, had stayed up until two in the morning, watching television in the den of the apartment where he'd lived with his father, or going outside and just walking around after dark. Just to tell the kids at school that he'd done it. But Bailey? There was no streak of courage in the kid. His balls, Hampton worried, were never going to drop.

Leah was sitting up in their bed, reading a book with a brown cover. Her glasses over her eyes, her pajama top collared and white with blue stripes, she made it look like a night's rest was another job. She took off her glasses and put them under the lamp on the nightstand next to her.

"Why are you home early?" she said.

"Something insane happened at work."

“Fine,” Leah said. “What was it and why did you have to leave?” She slid a green ribbon out from the back of her book, kept her page, and placed it on the nightstand. Her nostrils flared then relaxed; she looked disgusted when she did that. Hampton was still at the threshold but now he stepped towards the bed. “Close the door,” Leah said, and Hampton kicked his foot backwards, into the door. It whooshed and then made a loud clunk. Leah’s eyes were closed. She was shaking her head.

“I need you to not be snippy right now,” Hampton said.

“Why?” Leah said, opening her eyes. “Explain to me what happened.”

“Some kid came into the lobby tonight. He had a hood on. He was a thug,” Hampton said. In recalling the incident anxiety started to tickle the inside of his chest. He kept talking about the crash of the Oscar statue and he was overwhelmed by his nerves, pacing as neared the end of the story. “I chased him out but he got away,” he said, his voice shaking.

“And what?” Leah said. She placed a hand on her cheek. “How did that get you out of the rest of your shift?”

“You’re not even giving me a chance,” Hampton said.

“I’m listening to every word you say.”

“But you’re doubting me. You already think that I fucked something up.”

“You are going to wake Bailey if you don’t settle down.”

“I’m not worried about that right now. It’s not even a school night. Who gives a shit?” Hampton said, and he slapped the back of his hand on the wall of their room shared with Bailey’s.

“Sit down,” Leah said, throwing the comforter off her legs. She pushed herself from bed and stood. “Sit down, Hampton.”

“I’m calm. I’m calm. I’ll relax,” Hampton said.

Leah stepped towards him, slowly. She stared at him. “I am afraid of you, right now,” she said. She came close. She smelled like lavender. “Please sit down.”

Hampton’s chest emptied some. He stopped trembling and sat, Indian-style on the floor, his hands to his sides, carpet bristling between his fingers.

“Were you fired?” Leah said.

“I don’t know,” Hampton said. “Cliff asked me to leave but I don’t know what all he meant by it.”

Leah sat on the foot of their bed, her hands wrapped over the edge of the mattress. “Why did Cliff,” she said, careful, quiet, “ask you to leave?”

“I yelled at the kid. I yelled something bad and a lot of people heard.”

“What was it?” Leah said. Hampton told her. She looked away, shook her head.

“I didn’t mean it,” Hampton said. “I wouldn’t hurt anyone. I just lost my temper.”

“Sounds like you lost the hell out of it,” Leah said, “and at work.”

“Okay, but that’s what happened and you treating it like the apocalypse isn’t going to change things. All we can do is wait till Monday and see—”

Leah broke in, “You. All you can do is wait. This isn’t my situation. Unfortunately it affects my life and my child’s, but it’s your problem to deal with.”

Hampton folded his hands, propped his chin atop his knuckles and sighed. “Can I just go to bed now,” he said.

“You can do whatever you want,” Leah said, her shoulders sagging. “But know that I don’t want you next to me tonight.”

“Fine, then,” Hampton said. He stood from where he sat on the floor and was getting excited again, angry, but before he could say anything else Leah spoke.

“Don’t start,” she said, leaning back on her arms. Her nostrils flared and they stayed that way for a moment, until Hampton took a deep breath and exhaled the chance of the argument going any further.

He went to the dresser and threw a pair of pajamas over his shoulder, and when he turned back around Leah was retrieving her book and her glasses from the nightstand.

“Are you going to your father’s?” she said.

“No. I’m getting a hooker and a hotel room for the night.”

Leah opened her book, looked into it with annoyed eyes. “Give him my best,” she said.

In the hallway outside Bailey’s room, Hampton paused and looked at the strip of dark between the door and the carpet. He had the sense that somebody, Bailey, was right on the other side. He’d be sitting with his legs stretched out straight on the carpet, his back to the wall and his ear close to the doorjamb, listening to make sure his mother was okay. And though the thought might have been completely off, though Bailey might have been asleep, Hampton felt even more how he felt very often when dealing with his family: unappreciated, feared for no reason, unwanted.

He took another muffin from the plate in the kitchen before leaving.

Since within a day after separating from Hampton's mother, his father had lived in an apartment complex just a mile or so from Leah's and Hampton's house. The drive seemed to take longer tonight, and the light at the one en route intersection stayed red so long, with no cars coming, that Hampton finally went through, fast, turning the car left, resisting centrifugal force from the driver's seat.

His father, forever, had worked as a hospital security guard, redeye nine to five. And his apartment, forever, had looked exactly the same: an empty teal ceramic bowl on the coffee table in the living room, a TV stand with doorless cabinets lined with VHS tapes, and a sofa-loveseat set of furniture with navy corduroy upholstery. Everything inside was tidied, dustless as it always was. There was so little to keep in order and, moreover, Hampton's father did so little with his time outside of work through the nights and sleep through the days that housework was not an obligation; it was an opiate, a distraction from the eventless repetition of his life.

He was away, of course, in the middle of his shift at the hospital, and when Hampton sat on the sofa, picked up the remote control and clicked the television on, when the electric pop sounded from the box and turned into a high, high siren, the only sound in the apartment—the only thing happening at all—and it faded as the sound of a program rose and the screen dissolved from black into moving color, a tamed spectacle, Hampton felt like a kid, for back then he'd done this so many nights, so many, many, many nights.

When he was eight years old, they had still lived in a house, his parents were still together, and one night in his bed he woke very late after a nightmare. He ran from his

room towards his parents', was still running when he heard a woman's voice groan behind their door—his mother's voice, drenched with pain. "Does that hurt?" another voice inside the room said, a man's, unfamiliar. "No. Keep going," his mother said, though it sounded like she must have been lying.

For two years, on weeknights, Hampton had lain in bed, keeping himself awake after his father had left for work and listening to a routine of noises: a car door shutting outside in the driveway, one slow set of footsteps coming up the front stoop, two plodding up the stairwell inside carefully—though never in perfect silence—then the hampered thud of his parents' bedroom door. The noises thereafter were careful, too, but not quite careful enough, and Hampton would press one ear to his pillow, throw his arm over the other, and try to sleep like that: deaf.

Then came the afternoon he was walking home from his bus stop, and when he turned the corner onto his street, on the sidewalk, there was a Canadian goose, hissing at him, a pale pink mouth in a black beak. The goose darted its head at Hampton, puffed out its wings so they arched over its body. Hampton ran around the goose, ran home.

In his living room, his mother was seated on the sofa. She had her nose and her mouth covered with one flat hand, and Hampton's father was jolting around the carpet, shooting his arms outwards and yelling. "Bitch," was the only word Hampton heard without question before his father noticed he was there, where he stood at the end of the hallway. "Did you know about this?" his father said. "Yes," Hampton said. "I'm sorry." His father's eyebrows arched like black wings as he rushed towards Hampton then smacked him once backhand to jaw. Hampton's mother jumped up from the sofa and

shouted, “Hey.” Her footsteps were pounding fast across the living room when Hampton looked from his father’s feet to his eyes. “Do it again,” Hampton said, and the three of them all stopped breathing for a moment. That evening, Hampton and his father stayed in a hotel.

They had moved into this apartment the next day. Hampton was dozing, now. He pointed the remote control at the television and clicked it off, walked to his room, slept on the unreclined futon with black and gray stripes that he’d had for a bed throughout his adolescence. No bedding, tonight, no pillow.

His father was pouring whole milk into a bowl of Cheerios at seven the next morning when Hampton came into the kitchen. Both men wore pajama bottoms and their work shirts, short-sleeved button-downs made of papery fabric.

“You stole my parking spot,” Hampton’s father said, digging a spoon through the cobbled surface of cereal. He lifted a mound of Cheerios to his mouth, chewed them slowly, swallowed and sighed. “I know this isn’t good. What’s it all about?”

“Leah made me leave for the night,” Hampton said. He felt his lips frown by their own will.

His father had leaned against the refrigerator and was holding the bowl below his chin. “How come?” he said.

“There’s a chance I’m getting fired from work. It’s not for sure but Leah and I got in a fight about it.”

“You must’ve had a weak defense.”

“You don’t even know what happened.”

“I don’t care to,” Hampton’s father said. He set his bowl on a counter, took a bear-shaped bottle of honey from a cupboard and drizzled some in a zigzag over his Cheerios. “Knowing you, though, you wouldn’t have slept here if you really thought you were in the right.”

“What’s that mean?”

“That you would’ve fought with Leah till she saw your point or gave up,” Hampton’s father said dully between smacks of cereal. “Then you would rub it in her face.” He swallowed and nodded, reaffirming what he’d said.

Hampton felt suddenly, entirely awake, all the grogginess after sleeping light on the futon gone. “I didn’t come over here to get scolded, you know.”

“Oh, I know,” his father said. “But I didn’t expect to come home from work and find my adult son in the middle of a crisis he brought on himself.”

“Where do you even get off?” Hampton said, his outspread fingers tensed and gripping a sphere of nothing.

“Okay, listen up. You lower your voice before you say anything more,” his father said. “I’m so scared for your family already I can’t even eat this.” He dumped his bowl mostly full into the drain of the kitchen sink. The milk sank away and the Cheerios remained, half-soggy and sand-colored. “Have you even thought about how this hurts Leah and Bailey?”

“How could I?” Hampton said. “Right now I’m just worried that I won’t have a job on Monday. I’m just worried about my life.”

“It’s them you need to be worried about, Hampton. It’s them you need to be praying and begging to before you lose them and end up like me,” Hampton’s father said. He traced his spoon through the air, displayed the living space where—as far as Hampton knew—nobody but the two of them had walked, not in years. And years.

Hampton slid himself sitting on the counter by the sink, and his heels banged lightly on the front of the dishwasher. “Maybe they don’t need me,” he said. “Maybe I don’t need them. My life, my life is a lot more boring than I’d planned.”

“Do you have any clue how great boring is, son? Boring is exactly what you want.”

“Well it’s turning me into an angry man.”

“Hampton,” his father said. He dragged his feet across the floor, came close and wrapped his hand on the socket of Hampton’s arm. “Your head is hotter than smoking coal. You need to work on that. You need to go home and make things right with Leah and Bailey. I love them, too, you know. I want them around as much as you should,” he said. He pulled on Hampton’s arm. “Now get your ass off my countertop.”

They grinned at each other. Hampton left.

But the chocolate chip muffin he’d taken the night before sat snug in the cup holder of his center console, and it turned the thought of going home, of facing Leah again and trying to win her approval, from a straightforward chore—as his father had made it seem—into what it actually was: a taking of blame, an apology. He drove down the first street outside of the apartment complex, past the Regal 16, and decided it was necessary to stop somewhere for breakfast.

He was struggling out of his pajamas in the driver's seat, parked outside the Bob Evans restaurant in the shopping center, when a man and a woman and two teenagers walked by his front windshield. The whole family laughed at him. He muttered, "Well fuck you, okay, fuck you," and was embarrassed and frustrated while he wriggled into his black work pants.

The restaurant was very busy inside and the bustle surrounding him, how hurried his server was whenever she stopped by his table, made him feel rushed. He drank two glasses of Sunkist before his food arrived, and when it did—a mushy plateful of corned-beef hash—he oversalted it and ate the whole order in five minutes. His server then walked almost past his table but she stopped, turned looking shocked.

"You could get a belly ache," she said.

"I already did," Hampton said.

All the food sat heavy, an unmoving lump on the inside of his stomach as he drove out of the shopping center. He neared his home, in fact came to the street where he lived but kept driving, his apprehension pulling him along and away like a tether harnessing forth his car, no turns, straight forward, and in a half an hour he drove directly into the parking lot of the junior college where he'd earned an associate's degree in hospitality.

There was a lake next to the school. Hampton's stomach was still upset. He parked and got out of his car to walk the blacktop path around the water as he'd done sometimes to kill time between classes.

He walked with the lake to his left, slowly and breathing long breaths, belching, stepping through mazelike patches of goose shit. A band of sweat greased his hairline and his stomach became not just heavy but cramped, sharp and blunt pains twisting around each other, blending, pulling apart. He sat on a wooden bench at the edge of the path, weathered gray and unsmooth and upheld on rusted metal legs, fastened together by rusted screws.

It wasn't this bench specifically—or Hampton couldn't say for sure if it was—where he'd been when he met Leah, but it had been here, on one such bench by this lake. She was student at the state university, then, running the blacktop for exercise in red cotton shorts and a white T-shirt, a ponytail, almond-shaped eyes. Hampton had been stringing blades of grass between his thumbs then blowing his breath over the grass to create sound like horns, trumpets through half-open mutes. Leah jogged almost past him and he made a blade squeal. He had meant to startle her, to call attention to himself. It worked. Leah paused and jogged in place for a moment, started talking about how when she was a girl...

Now a white swan trolled near the edge of the water, its orange bill and the black markings around its eyes like face paint, and the wake on the surface behind it spread wide in a silent V. Hampton wiped one wrist across his hairline and the other under his eyes, took the sweat off his face, felt less sick. The feathers on the swan's breast ruffled, the crystals of powdery snow at the edge of a drift as the swan craned its neck. It nuzzled its bill between the crevassed layers of feathers midway down its wing, shook its head, swiped its bill twice up the crevasse to the middle of its back. Hampton was sitting with

his elbows on his knees, the insides of his forearms together and his hands cupping his chin, his cheeks. His palms were gritty. He needed a shower, and when the swan then dove its head into the water he stood from the bench, undid his steps up the blacktop.

The sun was high and glaring hot through his windshield as he pulled into the driveway at home. Bailey was in the yard, watching, standing next to a tall brown paper bag for yard refuse. He wore mesh athletic shorts and a loose T-shirt. WOLFPACK, it read across his chest. He was stocky, heavysset in a way that Hampton had never been, round-faced with round eyes staring at Hampton as he stepped out of the car.

“Hey, buster,” Hampton said. “Where’s Leah?”

“She went to get seeds from the store,” Bailey said. A clump of weeds with dangling roots hung from his fist. His fingers were dirtied with soil. He dropped the weeds into the refuse bag and rubbed his hands together, clumsily. “I didn’t think you’d come back so soon,” he said.

“Why’d you think that?”

“I just thought you’d stay gone for the weekend.”

“Well I didn’t,” Hampton said. He walked to the edge of the grass. “And I’m not sure I like how you’re talking to me.” Bailey shrugged and looked into the bag, as if indifferent to what Hampton had said, but nervous. “Bailey,” Hampton said. “Tell me you’re sorry.”

“I don’t want you here. You only stress me out.”

“This is my house, bought with my money.”

“More of Mom’s money than yours,” Bailey said.

“Your mother and I have a partnership that you don’t understand, that you need to shut up about before you piss me off,” Hampton said, walking close to Bailey. The smells of Earth and sweat were in the hot air between them. “Look up at me.”

Bailey did. “It’s not nice when you’re around,” he said.

“Excuse me?”

“I’m not comfortable unless you’re at work. What does that mean for me now? Now that you lost your job,” Bailey said. He walked towards the one tree in the yard, a massive old oak with a gray trunk in an island of mulch with weeds sprouting amuck like stubble.

Hampton followed. “Where’d you hear that?”

“Where do you think?” Bailey said, turning around just outside the island. He threw a hand in the air, gestured tersely at Hampton. “Straight from your mouth when you came home screaming last night. You think I slept through that? Or after that? After every time you wig out on Mom?”

“If you heard me talking last night, little man,” Hampton said, “then you know I didn’t lose my job. We’re just waiting to see what happens.”

Bailey shook his head rapidly, dumbfounded. “Are you kidding? Are you stupid? You called a kid a bad name and threatened to kill him in front of a ton of people. You can’t even control yourself at work. You’re done. You’re crazy. I’m only twelve and I know you’re insane.” He started to kneel with his hand reaching down towards the weeds, flushed and panting.

Flushed and panting just like Hampton was as he grabbed a fistful of Bailey's shirt below the collar, pushed his knuckles into Bailey's chest, forced him across the island of mulch into the wide gray trunk of the oak. Bailey's pulse beat fast against Hampton's hand, so heavily it vibrated up to Hampton's wrist. They stared at each other. Bailey looked close to crying, and Hampton felt a runny droplet collect inside his nose. "What's gotten into you?" he said.

"You've always been nuts," Bailey said. "This has always been in me. I'm just afraid of you."

Leah's car turned the corner onto their street, coming slowly at first then fast. She pulled into the driveway next to Hampton's car, and her driver's side door flew open before she had braked completely. "Let go of him," she said. She screamed it, then, "Let go of him." Hampton had never heard her raise her voice. Never.

"He's fine," Hampton said. "I did nothing."

"Walk away. Get away from him," Leah said.

Bailey was crying, no sobs but choking up air through his lips. They were quivering. "Bailey," Hampton said. "I didn't hurt you. Stop crying."

"Get away from him, Hampton. Get away. Get away from him now," Leah yelled, her voice so unlike how Hampton had ever heard it, nasal and foghorn loud.

"Chill out," Hampton yelled back. "Nobody's hurt. There's no reason for you to go ape shit out here." He turned to Leah and stepped off the island of mulch, pressed his fingers to his temples, and the grease on his hairline slicked together with sweat that had seeped out of his hands. Now Bailey was sobbing, leaning against the tree trunk with his

chin tilted up when Hampton turned back to him. “What is your problem?” Hampton said. Leah shouted his name but he ignored her, stepped closer to Bailey. “We got in a fight because you gave me lip. Stop crying. This is no reason to cry.” He set his hands on Bailey’s shoulders, and then Leah’s footsteps were swooshing through the grass.

Hampton braced himself to get hit, to hold his temper as Leah came close to the island.

“We can’t stand you,” Bailey said, still crying, but he spoke clearly. “We talk about it almost every night you work. It isn’t just me. It’s Mom, too, she can’t stand you.”

“Bailey,” Leah said. “Stop it.”

“It’s true,” Bailey said. He tilted his chin further upwards, staring at the limbs of the tree while crying, and Hampton’s hands dropped to his sides. He stepped backwards, disoriented, woozy with anything, anything but anger in his blood. Bailey’s eyes stayed on the limbs of the tree. Leah, she stared across the lawn for a moment, then at Hampton, one side of her bangs stuck under one lens of her glasses.

“I don’t know what else to say other than I’m sorry,” she said.

“What do I do now?” Hampton said, looking down at his shoes where they mashed down the grass of the lawn. He took a first step forward. “I go,” he said, walking, briskly, past Bailey, past Leah, out of the grass to the concrete. When he got in his car it seemed too quiet inside to cry. He pulled out of the driveway, shifted out of reverse, and as he began to swing forward on the street where they’d lived for twelve years, a family, he watched them ignoring him, stopped watching, then. Went away.

In spite of his losses over the weekend, so far, he felt as numb and as calm and as relieved, in some way, as he had decades ago on the day when his father hit him in the

mouth. He drove steadily again up the road that led to the lake. The muffin he'd taken from the plate at home still sat in the cup holder of his center console. He parked in the lot of the junior college, took the muffin, and got out of his car.

His arms felt weightless as he walked the blacktop around the water. They swung freely at his sides with every step forward he made, and his neck and knees, too, felt loose, weakened yet not unpleasantly so, anesthetized. Pain, Hampton accepted, would come when it came. And it would.

For now, he sat back down on the grayed wooden bench, the same one where he'd sat before, the same swan floating on the water in front of him. He tore the top off of the muffin, then tore a chunk off the top and tossed in the lake. The swan turned to it quickly, floated close to it quickly, dipped its head down then straightened its neck upwards, gobbling the chunk of muffin, its chest heaving. Hampton tore and tossed another chunk in front of the swan. It ate this chunk, same as the first. Then it turned in the water, faced Hampton with the skin around its bill and its eyes stark black between orange and white, and Hampton threw in the rest of the muffin top. The swan bit at it and it broke into several pieces. The pieces spread on the surface of the water, just briefly, before the swan plucked them out with its bill one at a time. The swan looked at Hampton. It raised one of its wings and then the other, arching them above its body as Hampton rolled the bottom of the muffin back and forth between his palms. "It's coming," he said, and he had yet to finish unwrapping the muffin when the swan floated fast to the edge of the lake. Its wings went down and it stopped where the grass met the water. It hissed at Hampton with its

neck angled towards him, its mouth gaping and pink. It became quiet. Then it hissed at Hampton again.

THE DOG'S FAULT

Alone in the house, alone in the kitchen, Emily finished unloading the dishwasher, and she had to keep reminding herself to not mutter so much, it was strange, and if she didn't keep a check on her muttering she might start doing it public. But here on a weekday evening her husband was driving his tractor around a decent suburban neighborhood delivering bell peppers and tomatoes and whatever else he'd picked from his garden to decent families who probably just wanted some decent quiet time together before bed. Foolish and intrusive. Brian was foolish and intrusive. Emily kicked the dishwasher closed. She was swiping a rag over the counters when she heard the front door open. Coming into the kitchen when she turned was a tall German shepherd, dirty-tan and black. "Brian," she yelled. The dog trotted up to her, stinking, skinny and ratty, and placed a paw on her thigh. Brian came in wearing his full-brimmed straw hat. He smiled as if this was all so funny.

"Get it out of here," Emily said. "What is wrong with you?"

The dog placed its other paw on her other thigh, whined, black around the eyes, black muzzle. Emily stepped back and pressed herself against the counter. The dog stepped right with her, sniffing and licking all over her apron. Brian whistled so loudly it stung Emily's ears. The dog turned its head, just briefly, and then went back to sniffing and licking Emily's apron, her midriff. "It is molesting me," she said. She flushed. Brian stopped smiling, but he still *wanted* to smile, Emily could tell, and it maddened her all the

more. He grabbed the dog by the wiry hair on its neck. Emily smacked his shoulder while he was close. He looked at her and sighed, and she raised an eyebrow, daring him to say something. He pulled the dog away.

“Ole Brian done went and ruined your night again,” he said, in the fake, deep Southern accent he knew drove Emily crazy. He dragged the dog towards the door to the garage. Its nails scraped along the floor. It growled and nipped at Brian but he shushed it, jerked the fur on its neck.

“What have you done?” Emily said. There was hair and a warm spot of slobber on her apron. She untied it at the back of her waist, flung the neck loop over her head.

Brian pushed the dog into the garage. He closed the door behind it. “He was in the middle of the road,” he said. “I let him ride in the trailer.”

“I don’t care if it floated down from heaven,” Emily said. “Where is it going to go now? Who’s taking care of it tomorrow?” She pushed past him and walked to the laundry room, threw the apron into the washing machine, then went back to the kitchen.

“What if you end up liking him?” Brian said. He was filling a porcelain bowl with water from the faucet.

“One pet,” Emily said, in reference to Edward, Brian’s goat, “is enough.” She turned off the faucet and touched the bowl in Brian’s hands. “The dog is not drinking out of our dinnerware.” She took the bowl, dried it with a kitchen towel, and put it back in its cupboard.

“He has to drink somehow,” Brian said. The dog scratched the outside of the door to the garage, made a gouging sound. Brian smiled guiltily.

“Get it out of there,” Emily said.

“Where do you expect me to keep him?”

“Anywhere. Not in there. Not in the house.”

She stormed upstairs and undressed. In the shower she was ruminating again.

Brian could be so unruly, so unpredictable. Under normal circumstances a man like him would've never kept a good job so long, probably would've never gotten a good job in the first place. But just one man oversaw him at the power company: Percy Ford, an annoyingly vital bachelor in his sixties who had founded the company decades ago. He hired Brian right out of college and promoted him rapidly as the company grew. Sometime not far from the start of Brian's career, he and Emily had met each other. He was playful back then, with a sense of humor but one that he turned off much more frequently than now, bright-eyed and charming, serious when he needed to be, and they'd married. Over time, the liking Percy Ford took to Brian had been the source of countless blessings in a financial sense. His influence on Brian, however, sometimes seemed a high tax. The thick accent Brian used more after each year was in imitation of Percy Ford's natural bent way of speaking, twanged less like words than the notes of a jaw harp. The accent was only a tame example of Percy Ford's influence compared with some of Brian's other behavior. The accent, Emily could suffer. A German shepherd was less tolerable.

She wrapped her hair in a towel and her body in her robe. Through the bathroom window she watched the dog wallow in the grass. It was tied with a long rope to one of the goat pen's fence posts. Brian drove his tractor up towards the side of their house. It

was a loud, fully restored John Deere from the fifties, one that had cost plenty enough money. Five thousand dollars. Brian had told her how much he'd spent at her insistence. Frustrated, she had sobbed. This took place on a humid day in July. The sound of the tractor had drawn her outdoors from the cool, quiet house. "We could have invested, taken a vacation, anything, but you could've asked me about this is the point," Emily had said. Brian sat tall in the seat of the tractor. He reached in his shirt pocket and produced airline tickets to St. Lucia. "I reckon these might do the little lady all right," he had said. They left in mid-August and had a fine, two-week trip. In the end, she still disapproved of the tractor.

Now Brian looked up into the bathroom window. He brought the tractor to a halt, and smiled at Emily, two rows of big white teeth, and the moon shone behind him over the sparse neighborhood treetops. "Darlin'! Hey, darlin'!" he yelled. His voice came through the glass, over the rumble of the tractor. Emily threw open the window and stuck out her head. The air was still sticky from the day. "I called Percy," Brian said, laying the accent on thick. He sounded in high spirits. "He said he'll take that dog. Ole Percy!"

Sharply Emily whispered, "Shut up. You'll scare the whole neighborhood."

The dog began barking. "I'll do what?" Brian yelled, his hand cupping one ear, teasing her. The dog kept barking. "What'll we do?" Brian yelled. Emily shook her head, and the towel around her hair unraveled. It fell swiftly downwards. Brian slid from the tractor seat, leaped towards the house and caught the towel before it hit the ground. He howled in delight. "Did you see that?" he yelled. The dog barked. Brian waved the towel around his head. Edward, the goat, bayed. "Edward saw it. Did you?"

“Unbelievable,” she said, and she slammed the window shut. The dog kept barking but finally stopped as Emily changed into her nightgown in their bedroom.

She lay in bed and listened to Brian clunking around downstairs in the kitchen. Why now did he have to start goofing around more than ever, playing farmer? Why not before she committed to him forever, when she could’ve foreseen her life strained all too often by the embarrassment of his unseriousness? She had loved him, but she would’ve found somebody else if she’d known how he would turn out.

He stepped into the doorway of their bedroom. The towel that had fallen from Emily’s head was in his hands. She pouted. Brian placed the towel on their dresser. “Percy said he’ll pick the dog up tomorrow,” he said.

“Before you go to work,” Emily said.

“No, but right after,” he said. He sat on his side of the bed. “I’m sorry about this.” He looked down at her, and seemed to be trying to be sincere. But he reeked of gasoline and goat and, most of all, stray German shepherd.

“God, Brian, you smell,” Emily said. She pushed him away. He stood beside their bed. “Go. Go shower.”

“I will, darlin’,” he said.

“Stop *calling* me that.”

“I will, darlin’,” he said.

Emily raised her brow at him. He rubbed the back of his neck with his hand like he had something else to say. “Well?” Emily said.

“Is there something I can give him to eat?” he asked. He’d been scheming, not sorry. Emily shook her head. “Anything at all?” Brian said.

“That’s the only thing you came up here for,” she said.

“Of course not, Emily, but the dog’s hungry and there’s got to be—”

“Nothing,” Emily interrupted. She turned her back to him. “We have nothing for that dog.”

She fell asleep fast once Brian was in the shower. She slept heavily, as she did as a rule, until she was awoken by sound outside at five in the morning. She pulled herself from bed and looked out the window. The German shepherd stood barking, its head tilted upwards and turning alternately from the Applegates’ house next door to the Biddles’ on the other side. In sleep Emily had forgotten about the dog. She opened the window. “Shut up. Shut up,” she yelled. The dog barked once more at the Biddles’ house then turned and barked at Emily. She tried to whistle like Brian but failed, and the dog kept barking. Emily stuck her head further out the window. She banged her fist on the side of the house. “Shut up, damnit. Shut the hell up,” she yelled. It was raining, small yet steady drops. A window turned from black to yellow downstairs in the kitchen of the Applegates’ house, and Emily’s own voice echoed in her head. She had been extremely loud, she realized, and she shut the window and hid back in bed.

“Guess I’m up,” Brian said. He slid himself out from the covers and sheets, a whole yard of unruffled bedding between Emily and him. Earlier in their marriage they had woken up in each other’s arms, or hand loosely in hand, or in some sort of accidental contact that had occurred throughout the night and was a warm source of comfort in the

mornings. There had been the two-year phase when they attempted regularly to conceive a child. No success. It was Brian, completely infertile, and neither of them initiated sex with the other for a very long time. Emily could tell that Brian was embarrassed. He avoided her eyes often, and she found their abnormality as the sole childless couple in the neighborhood alienating. Not until Brian started gardening did he start approaching her in bed again, but by then he had picked up some of Percy Ford's irritating behavior, shoes in the house, the accent, wearing coveralls on the weekends, and Emily found herself less attracted to her husband as he became less of a man. She brushed him off more than she responded. It had been months since they'd made love, since the night after Emily had hosted per tradition an Easter dinner. Percy Ford was there. It was no miracle that he maintained his manners at the table, but rather, Emily assumed, the result of a thoughtful talk with Brian, who also acted gentlemanly throughout the evening. (The two men had ruined the event once before.) Emily had wanted to encourage such conduct, hence the sex later when the guests were gone.

She dozed heavily now as he shaved and dressed for work. She fell asleep, and when she woke again Brian was gone.

For the first hour of her morning she sat in the bathroom listening to the rain outside and filing her nails while a heavy paste—she hoped—helped preserve her face's youthfulness. Far too often she came across new wrinkles on the corners of her lips and eyes, and ashen hairs had burned out all the brown around her temples. Brian's lasting boyish robustness had changed from enchanting to curious to infuriating over the years.

He was doubtlessly the principle catalyst of Emily's aging looks, something she never brought up in fear that he'd tease her, wrinkle her skin all the more.

Downstairs, through the window above the kitchen sink, the German shepherd stood in the weather with its fur pressed wet to its thin body. It faced the goat pen with the rope tethering its neck to a fence post. Edward was hidden under the low-roofed lean-to inside his pen. The dog, skeletal and wholly exposed as it was, did stir sympathy in Emily, but she refused to start her day in the rain.

She had fixed a cup of tea for herself, steeped amber, and she spooned in a small amount of honey. So small an amount that Brian might not notice she'd dipped into the jar. And why, why did she have to conceal something she enjoyed? Percy Ford. In addition to a flock of pet goats, from which he had let Brian pick Edward for his own; alongside two spotty appaloosas, one of which had bucked Brian off and in effect broken his wrist; no matter the Holstein, whose udders Brian had milked and then drank from raw out of a dirty mason jar right in front of Emily's eyes; all of that wasn't enough for Percy Ford, who for a hobby kept bees and garnered his own honey. Brian always had a jar on hand. He spread it on anything, toast, chicken, ice cream, stirred it into coffee and raw milk. Emily had, some years ago, discovered in secrecy the sweetness and light silkiness the honey leant to her tea. Beekeeping, though, was exactly the sort of thing that interested Brian, the sort of thing Emily had to censure so long as she didn't want her husband walking around the front lawn with a mesh mask over his face.

Edward was still hidden under his lean-to. The German shepherd walked closer to the pen, barked, pressed its muzzle to the drenched wood. Emily tested the temperature of

her tea. It was scalding hot. She set down her cup and considered the day, laundry, sweeping and mopping the downstairs floors, no, the mopping she would save for a weatherless day when Brian wouldn't track in footprints of rain and slivers of lawn, but she could do the sweeping. How far would that get her, though, to eleven o'clock, twelve if she went very slow? The dog barked. Maybe she would bake an apricot racetrack or braid a marble rye, bake anything, two of anything, take one to the Applegates and one to the Biddles, apologies for all of the noise coming from her house and yard over the last night and day. Take them when? Take them when Tammy and Rebecca get home from work, with children and husbands to feed? That's good, Emily, good, good idea. Here, Tammy. Here, Rebecca. I'm sorry my husband brought home a loud dog. I'm sorry I lost my mind and screamed insanely before the sun was up. While you were away doing something with yourselves I found time in my wide-open schedule to bake.

The dog barked again. It paced frenetically, close along one side of the pen. There was slack in the rope worming away from its neck, and still no Edward in sight. Emily sipped her tea, carefully. That dog in this room, the unruliness, she thought. It stopped at the corner of the pen nearest the lean-to and stuck its head in the narrow space between the bottom fence rail and the ground, started digging. On short legs Edward scampered out into the open, under the rain. He cowered in the corner furthest from the lean-to. He was comely compared with the dog. His legs and body were an unbroken, oily black all the way up to his shoulder blades. With unnatural precision, china white came up from a sharp point midway down his chest, covered his head and upper neck. He appeared to be dressed in formalwear.

“Ain’t he the handsomest goat you ever saw?” Brian had said. It was the sound of Edward baying that had drawn Emily out of the house. The argument had been their most heated, and Brian produced no airline tickets to smooth things over.

The German shepherd was still digging as Emily neared the bottom of her cup of tea, where the honey had settled and concentrated, sweeter by the sip. Already she anticipated Brian’s reaction to the dug-up hole in his yard. She hoped he’d be happy. Edward must have been soaked by now, maybe sick with a cold, but that, too, was Brian’s problem. The goat had gone on to prove himself a source of repeated argument: Brian needed three days off work to build the pen, no, a whole week, the goat needed a lean-to; Brian didn’t know dozens of rats would find their way into the garage by the smell of a bag of goat feed; Brian thought the neighborhood kids would go bananas to see him drive the goat all around in the trailer behind his tractor like a mobile petting zoo, a fucking circus. Worst of all was when he’d humiliated Emily, instead just himself, on the evening she hosted her Easter dinner. Every couple she respected in their development was there. As was Percy Ford. The dining room light was dimmed over the glazed ham on the table, new potatoes and golden beets and a spring salad. When the guests were all seated, Brian walked into the room. “You all won’t ever believe what I found outside,” he said. Edward stepped up next to him, chewing his tongue and clopping his hooves with bunny ears fitted over his horns. Everyone smiled, but Percy Ford laughed like a maniac and pounded the table. The silverware shook as did everything else. Emily didn’t excuse herself before she ran upstairs. Surely the guests heard crying.

Now Edward was stepping restlessly in the corner of his pen, the dog still digging. Maybe Emily would treat herself to lunch today. Maybe that'd be nice. With her cup turned up the last drops of her tea slowly drizzled into her mouth, more honey than tea, too sweet to enjoy, and she put her cup down on the counter. The dog was wriggling madly between the bottom fence rail and the dug-up ground. Edward paced. He tried to climb his fence, scraped his hooves against the wood. The dog ran across the goat pen, a livid phantom. It jumped and latched its mouth on to Edward's face. Instantly the goat was on the ground. The dog stood above, sent short waves down the rope tied to its neck with each shake of its head. Emily ran outside, but the second she opened the door the dog looked up at her and growled over the sound of the rain. The air groaned a bit and the porch did the same as Emily went back inside to call Brian at work.

"The dog is attacking Edward," she said, heart racing, gritty sweetness in the back of her throat. Outside through the window, there was a splotch of pink in the middle of the scene, on the side of Edward's face, the only color filtered into the rainy afternoon.

"How'd he get into the pen?" Brian said. He spoke sternly, no accent.

"He was digging," Emily said.

"You didn't stop him?"

"No, I didn't stop him," Emily screamed. "*You* brought the dog home."

She slammed down the phone, but for all her anger she wished she had Brian there to help. The pink of Edward's face was deeper, pain, and the dog was still latched on.

At the side of the pen, Emily slapped on the fence with a pack of raw bacon. The dog wouldn't respond, just kept heaving its black muzzle slicked down and saturated with blood into Edward's face. "Hey! Hey! Hey, dog!" Emily yelled. Nothing. Edward lay there in the grass so still he seemed compliant. Another low sound came from the ground and the sky then a truer thunderous crack ripped through the groan. The dog lifted its head from Edward's face, and in the same moment Emily tossed the bacon to another corner in the pen. The dog watched the bacon fall. "Go on," Emily yelled. Her hair and clothes were wet. "Go," Emily yelled. Edward lolled in the grass. His legs were twisted. "Edward," Emily said. The dog finally walked towards the bacon. It nuzzled its way into the pack, and as it took its first bites of meat Emily unlatched the gate to the pen.

She ran to Edward. He lifted his head up a sorry distance, inches from the ground, but could not keep it still as if he was drunk, near death, no other reaction as Emily came his way. The dog was eating like a wild wolf. Emily stood over Edward. The whole left half of his face was maimed. Where there'd been clean white fur there was now diluted red. Chunks of small muscles with shredded ends. Veins like parasites infesting the ungodly mess, torn skin and tendons stretching and crossing it all. In the gaps there was darkness, bone, skull. He was breathing.

Emily hoisted him from the ground. He rested his head on her shoulder. Through the slickness of the rain she felt the tackiness of his flesh on her ear, smelled his breath, spring-like and grassy but metallic, too. She ran out of the pen towards the house, on the verge of collapse with each stride, and then it felt suddenly as if somebody pinched the skin on the back of her upper arm. It was the dog. It had jumped but was grounded again

at the end of its rope, not barking, just smacking its black muzzle and licking its own nose, almost licking its own eyes.

The floor of their foyer was hardwood. Emily was fatigued, trembling, but she laid Edward down gently. His head slid across her arm and her hand and fingertips, streaked her with red mucous. She arranged his limp body and bent his legs close to his middle how she hoped he would have bent them himself with more strength. All he did was breathe, and the horrible drapery of the side of his face moved fitfully with each breath. For some time she just watched him breathe until instead of just breathing he began shivering, too.

With an armful of towels, she sat down on the ground next to the goat. He resisted when she lifted his head to bundle a towel beneath it. She placed another towel over his body and tucked the edges under him. The pace of his breath quickened. The fits of his flesh quickened. Saliva sprayed out from his cheek, from where his lips had once been. With another towel, Emily wiped the debris from his face. His frayed muscles like fish gills flinched the first few times she touched them, then they went still, resigned. The throbbing in the back of her own arm swelled in intensity but Emily let it be. She dabbed the towel on an unnatural groove down Edward's left nostril. He flinched and so did she.

The house was warm. The clouded sky outdoors pushed in little light, gray light. Brian swung open the door and a roomful of rain-cooled air blew into the foyer. The door struck Emily's elbow and she brushed Edward's face with too much force. He pulled his front legs closer to his body. Emily helped him settle.

From behind her Brian said, "Let me see him." He stepped across the foyer. A blade of grass, clinging to the goat's cheekbone, had shifted upwards into his eye, and as Emily lifted the blade from his face he blinked spasmodically. "Please, Emily. Move," Brian said. She stood. Before facing Brian she took one more look at Edward. He was violently shivering. "God," Brian said. Emily looked at him, but he stared down at Edward.

"I did what I could," Emily said.

Brian raised his head and glared at her. He did not glare often. "You *could* have let me keep the dog in the garage. You *could* have let me give him something to eat. You *could* have taken your spoiled ass outside and tied him away from the pen."

"Excuse me," Emily said. "You, Brian Patterson, could have left the dog alone."

"To get hit by a car?"

"Better than this happening," Emily said. She gestured with a hand towards Edward on the ground. Then she turned her arm for Brian to see her own wound. There was blood on the back of her shirtsleeve, not much, but some. "He bit *me* as well. How dare you get upset at me over this?" She was furious and pushing Brian's chest with her finger. A gasp came from the ground, one last fit from Edward before his head went still and saliva dribbled out of his wounded mouth.

"Great," Emily said. Her arms sagged on her sides. "I'm getting in the shower." She stepped over Edward's body towards the stairway.

Brian looked as if he would cry. "Are you okay?" he said.

"Look at this all. I am not okay. Nothing between us is okay."

“Well you could have helped it, Emily. You could have.”

Her foot was on the bottom stair but she stopped. She turned. “If I come back down here, and this room is not cleaner than it was this morning, you will never see me again,” she said. With the tip of her big toe she nudged Edward’s spine. He was stiff already, felt like something stuffed.

Upstairs in their bathroom, Emily looked through the window. The German shepherd was chewing on the empty pack of bacon in the middle of their yard. The rain had stopped and the sky had cleared quickly and entirely. The grass glistened, striking green so brilliant it was harsh. Emily removed her blouse and dropped it into the waste bin. She wiped her face and her arm clean with three tissues folded together, red and yellow when she was done. Her wound, she saw in the mirror, was not so bad, one puncture no longer bleeding. As she undressed she heard the front door thud shut downstairs, and she looked back out the window.

Brian drove his tractor around. He parked it near the goat pen and untied the rope from the fence post. The dog watched him. Emily tapped on the window, shrugged when Brian glanced up at her. He looked back at the dog. Before Emily could tap the window again, Brian yanked the rope hard towards him. The dog came off the ground. It landed sideways in the grass and slid towards Brian’s feet, stunned motionless, and Brian yanked the rope again, upwards, lifted the dog off the ground again. He threw the end of the rope over a tree branch. The dog lay still in the grass, and Brian was tying the end of the rope to the back of the trailer on his tractor when Emily turned away from the window.

With a towel around her body she hurried out of the bathroom, but she stopped at the bottom of the stairway. There was Edward, just as he'd been, wrapped in towels, a towel for a pillow. From Emily's angle on the stairs, she saw the unscathed side of his face. The eye was blue, a hazy blue that would have been so soft and lovely if not for the eye on the other side, blue too but surrounded by wounded flesh.

Brian kicked open the door. It struck Edward's back hooves, bent his legs at the knees, and then Emily's eyes were watering. Outside the German shepherd hung from the tree branch by a straight line of rope to its neck. Now Emily was crying, really crying. Brian looked up at her. "I got it, all right?" he said. He ripped off the towel covering Edward's body. "What *else* do you want? Faster?" He picked up Edward, and from the goat's mouth liquid surged onto the floor. Emily cried harder, and as Brian turned he yelled, "Christ." He walked outside and dropped the corpse into the trailer. It landed, dead still, and Brian walked back inside. "I'm cleaning it up, okay? I'll clean all this up and you can get back to whatever the hell you want to do. Go shower," he said.

Emily sat on the steps, couldn't have spoken through her sobs if she knew what to say. Brian walked out onto the porch. He put one hand on the knob of the front door to the house. He was staring at Emily. He was shaking his head at her but he stopped. "Hey," he said. "I'm sorry you had to deal with this. Thank you so much for trying to help. I got it from here. I'm sorry, okay?"

She nodded and stood on the stairs, and when she did Brian walked towards her. She stepped to the floor of the foyer. They were close and they embraced each other,

Emily's head to Brian's chest, one of his hands on her shoulder and the other wrapped firm on her side.

"I could have stopped it," she said, still sobbing. "You have to just hate me."

"No I don't. God, no I don't," Brian said. He hugged her even closer. "Emily, I don't." He pulled away from her and held her by the elbows. She stopped crying. He tried to turn her but she resisted. "Let me see your arm," he said.

"I already looked. It's nothing," she said. To Brian's side, out the front door, the dog hung so still and straight, hardly a bend at the neck, and in the trailer below only the goat's black back showed, no blood.