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The six stories in this collection represent the best of my work as a student of creative writing. They explore the transition from adolescence to adulthood, the attempt to navigate the emotional space between oneself and the outside world, and the nature of love and of grief.

CHILDREN AT PLAY

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
I. CHILDREN AT PLAY.....	1
II. LIBER SUM.....	14
III. DEVIL'S PLAYGROUND.....	26
IV. FLASH.....	41
V. THRESHOLD.....	53
VI. HERE I AM.....	68

CHAPTER I
CHILDREN AT PLAY

“Read the cards for me,” said Liam one day, when Melanie had looked up from her book at the homemade poster on the wall and then gotten stuck staring at it.

She turned slowly. Liam had been reading a big orange hardback-- *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates*-- and she hadn't noticed him looking up, watching her not read *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*.

“What?” she said.

“Do a tarot reading for me,” he said. “Tell my fortune.”

“That's not really how they work,” she said. “I mean, maybe they do for some people, if the reader is psychic, but I'm not psychic. I don't know what's going to happen.”

“Well, do whatever they do, then.”

The poster was recent. Melanie had made it after, wandering the public library, she had found a new section.

Melanie and Liam both loved the library, its hush and plenitude, and both laughed at the two public-warning-yellow signs outside: *Children at Play* and *Caution: Alligators*.

“Only in Florida,” said Melanie, although she didn't know if this was true. Liam was reading Kerouac, H.L. Mencken, the Narnia books (he'd missed them as a child), and Camus in translation. Melanie brought reusable grocery bags to pack with books to

check out. Liam couldn't help her carry them. She had never had anybody else carry her books for her, at first because she didn't trust anybody else with her books, and then because she was stronger, with better lungs. She read about men who picked up the heavy things, opened the stuck jars, swooped you up in strong arms and carried you to the bedroom; it seemed a strange and unreliable luxury, like having a trust fund, or-- for that matter-- being psychic.

It was while looking for good science fiction-- it wasn't kept in the same section as regular fiction-- that Melanie found the part of the Dewey Decimal system that dealt with magic.

Who knew there were books about this sort of thing? Not Melanie, who'd been raised evangelical, in the holy fear of anything more occult than the daily horoscopes in the newspaper. Here were books on astrology with charts and diagrams in them; here were books, too, on the interpretation of the tarot, on the theory and practice of magic, the elements and the humors, meditation and manipulation. Here was an encyclopedia of theoretically summonable demons and instructions on how to summon (and dismiss) them. Here was a section of the library separate both from fiction, with its comforts and problems-- its forward march through the tangled machinations of plot towards an inevitable last page-- and nonfiction, with its helpful or unhelpful information. Here was a new thing: a helpful and exhaustive catalogue of the obviously incorrect and untrustworthy. Maps made by the skilled and meticulous insane.

Melanie went online and ordered a pack of tarot cards, then another, with different symbology; she bought posterboard and made a map of the Tree of Life on it,

ruling straight pathways with the edges of library books, tracing the bottoms of hotel-provided tumblers for the circular nodes that represented spiritual locations, states and cities of the soul: Malkuth, Yesod, Netzach, Da'ath. The Real, the Dreaming, Love, the Void. She glued the major arcana of a third, travel-sized tarot pack to the nodes and pathways, following Aleister Crowley's explanations from the teal-blue, out-of-print *Book of Thoth*, and taped it to the wall, and sat staring at it.

"That's cool," said Liam doubtfully, when she first made it. He had gone through a Wiccan phase-- Melanie had teased him mercilessly about the copy of *To Ride a Silver Broomstick* she'd pulled off his bookshelf on their third date, until he'd seen her copy ("My parents gave it to me!") of *Lady in Waiting: Becoming God's Best While Waiting For Mr. Right* on their fourth.

"It makes sense," said Melanie. "I mean, it makes as much sense as anything else."

Before they'd actually gotten on the transplant waiting list, on one of Liam's previous hospitalizations for this or that infection, Melanie's grandmother had sent her a package containing a hand-knitted shawl and a card that explained it was a prayer shawl. Her grandmother's church circle had knitted while praying for Liam's healing. Melanie felt that prayers for Liam's healing showed a basic lack of understanding of his condition, but she appreciated the thought. She understood the need to do something with your hands while you prayed. Magic seemed to be based on the same principle, although the early exercises had a lot to do with sitting very still for long periods of time and not thinking about anything. After that, though, you got some good equipment. And the

tarot cards were so beautiful-- half-abstract, half-Art Deco watercolors, suffused with a murky, underwater light.

She tried to limit the practice of magic to the times when Liam was asleep. She picked a yoga pose that wouldn't limit circulation and tried to sit completely still. It seemed easy at first, and then, suddenly, impossible; there would be a fierce itch, a sudden muscle spasm, a horrible thought. It occurred to her that she should be doing more cardio, that she needed to go to the grocery store, that there was probably something good on TV. She thought she heard the phone ringing, and leaped up, heart clenching. They were expecting The Call, the hospital call, the cadaver lungs call, any minute. Any day. Any week. Months were panic-tinged, so Melanie tried to reduce and subdivide them back into weeks and days, the way she sometimes tried to justify a large purchase by counting the number of days she expected to enjoy it and figuring out how much she'd then be paying per day. If it was less than the price of a Starbucks latte, she reasoned, she was essentially paying for the large purchase in advance by never going to Starbucks.

(Liam had tried to explain that it was possible to be able to afford neither a daily latte nor a pair of Frye boots, but money had an unreal, theoretical quality to Melanie. Especially now that such vast quantities of it were being expended on Liam's medical care by, of all corporate entities, Walmart. His health insurance, which had failed to cover his co-workers' flu bugs and dental crises, covered the entire cost of a lung transplant and living expenses adjacent to the hospital where they were on the waiting

list. Liam and Melanie fully expected to be approached to do a commercial for Walmart if the transplant was a success.)

After the meditation got easier, the sitting-still, she started with visualization. Conceptualization. There were four elements. Liam's body was made of all of them. The blood in his veins contained water, that made it flow, and earth, that made it thick, and air, that made it oxygenated, and fire, that made it hot. And so on. The fluid in his lungs wasn't fluid enough; there wasn't enough water in it, there was too much earth, so that it was thick and sticky, and blocked the entrance of the air that belonged there. His lungs were stiffening and deliquescing at once, losing elasticity, so that they could not expand and contract as they were meant to.

Melanie's own body worked perfectly so far. She was younger than Liam, but they were both young, and his body should have been working perfectly still; his lungs should have filled and emptied, processing scrambled air into usable oxygen and useless carbon dioxide, with the same unthinking ease as Melanie's. His muscles worked fine; so did his other organs, his heart and liver and kidneys, although the liver and kidneys were taking hits from the frequent strong medications needed to kill the infection in his faulty lungs. His hair was thick and abundant; he had a touch of dandruff that Melanie sometimes scratched gently from his scalp as they watched TV, but nothing out of the ordinary. When he gained weight, he gained it only to his stomach, his legs and arms remaining long and spindly, lanky, gangly, and his skin was fair. When he was deficient in vitamin D, the fairness shaded into pallor, and the doctor prescribed heavy-duty vitamin pills, because Liam's body sometimes had trouble separating nutrients from

waste in food, in the same way that his lungs had trouble separating oxygen from carbon dioxide. A problem with sorting. A hangup on the disassembly line.

Sitting in her obviously foolishly chosen yoga pose-- but the book had warned her that any pose she chose would begin to seem ridiculous and that she must not change it or she would just fidget for the entire hour-- Melanie wondered if doctors ever did this. Med students famously didn't even have time to sleep; how could they have time to sit and think about the bodies that harbored the illnesses they studied? Being a doctor was really the only good job she could think of-- the only one where you could tell yourself at the end of the day that you'd definitely spent it doing something good and necessary-- but she couldn't ever do it. She'd successfully overcome her horror of needles, blood, gore, the chemical smell of illness, because at the center of it was Liam's body, but most sick bodies weren't Liam's, and she couldn't love them enough to touch.

She got the deck and sat down beside him on the slick beige couch, in front of the coffee table. The hotel room Walmart was paying for was technically a "long-stay suite," with a little kitchen alcove (stove but no oven, fridge and microwave, one pot, two tumblers, no cutlery) and a nominal division between the bedroom and the living area. There were two elderly televisions, one for each area. The wi-fi was weakish, and the password changed at two a.m. on Sundays, when there wasn't always someone at the front desk to tell you the new one.

It was the kind of summer-- with thick, hot, wet-white-laundry air-- that discourages you from going out anyway, even if you aren't on oxygen at all, let alone as

much as Liam was on. He was on so much that the kind of tall, green-painted metal oxygen tanks that home health care services drop off once a week wouldn't have been practical; they would have had to bring ten or twenty of them, and the empty ones would have littered the hotel room where Liam and Melanie lived, while they waited for the hospital to call with news of cadaver lungs. Of all the people in the hospital support group, Liam was on the most oxygen: fifteen liters a minute, when the mother of two with lung cancer was horrified to be on as much as seven. There was a respectful hush in hospital circles when you said *fifteen liters a minute*. It was like *ten percent lung function*; everybody shut up, giving the numbers room.

So, instead, Liam got the two little refillable tanks that you clamped onto the big tank in the corner and allowed to fill, although if you overfilled them they froze and you had to wait for them to defrost before trying again, which made it difficult if Liam and Melanie were trying to get to the hospital for support group or physical therapy or bloodwork or anything else where you had an appointed time and were supposed to be there a half-hour earlier than it. Each little tank lasted about forty-five minutes, meaning that if Melanie filled both-- she was getting good at it-- and carried the extra one along in its little backpack, they had an hour and a half to get somewhere, do something, and get back home. It wasn't enough time to see a movie in the theater, of course, and they hadn't done that for awhile anyway, because Liam was so self-conscious or considerate about the coughing, not wanting to be the person in the theater seized with the kind of uncontrollable, thick, wet, gasping cough that made everyone feel a little sick and defensive. Cystic fibrosis wasn't contagious, but still.

So they stayed in, mostly, staying up sometimes until dawn, when they fell asleep at the end of an anime marathon on Cartoon Network and awakened in late afternoon, squinting at the crack of gratuitously bright sunlight between the heavy motel curtains. Melanie was trying to teach herself yoga, and falling down a lot; sometimes she just lay on the bed with her head hanging over the edge, hoping this might confer some of the same benefits as the upside-down yoga poses. Blood flow to the brain. She took long baths, the water mauve or aquamarine with colored gels and salts, and then put Liam's hand on her soft and scented skin, telling him to feel. They made love often, as entertainment and exercise and stress relief, and because everything strange that was happening in their lives had to do with Liam's body and Melanie didn't want to become resentful of it. She embraced it determinedly, as if diving headfirst into a swimming pool that you knew would feel good once you were all the way in. It had almost stopped being strange, encountering the bump in his chest where the port had been surgically installed under his skin, allowing a nurse or Melanie to insert a needle for intravenous antibiotics without further damaging the shredded veins in his arm. The first time Melanie's caressing fingers had encountered one of the patches where EKG wires had been attached with adhesive pads, she'd said, "Hey, you're all sticky right here" and Liam had answered, pulling her hands elsewhere, "You leave that alone, that's where I keep my marshmallows" and they'd both giggled insanely before moving on.

It was easier, touching him all the time, now that she didn't have to worry about infecting him. When she'd been teaching, she'd too frequently picked up minor bugs from the children and brought them home to Liam, who then got horribly sick and had to

go on courses of intravenous antibiotics. Melanie had grown accustomed to hooking them up for him, flushing the dangling catheter sewn to his arm with three separate prepackaged syringes: one clear saline syringe before hooking up the bag of antibiotic that hung from the rolling rack, another saline after it had deflated, and a yellow heparin to finish. SASH: saline, antibiotic, saline, heparin. When they went to the hospital, she watched the nurses to make sure they were doing it right. She wasn't aware of the expression on her face at these times until one especially young, conscientious nurse, going off shift, confided beamingly, "Everybody said you were so scary, but I thought you were really nice!"

They did go out sometimes-- to the library, of course, and to the grocery store, and the occasional restaurant, and to the pharmacy to fill his many prescriptions, and to the hospital, of course. The nurses could refill his oxygen tanks at the hospital, or hook him up to their own, if it took too long, which it frequently did; radiology in particular sometimes took five or six hours just to call his name. Liam and Melanie had grown to share a visceral revulsion for the radiology waiting room, with its too-tall ceiling, too-long-and-narrow floor, and ludicrous magazines-- elderly *Soap Opera Digests* and *Ranger Ricks*, which made them worry about the hypothetical kids being planned for.

Melanie got asked a lot-- especially in hospital waiting rooms, or when Liam was unconscious for one reason or another-- if they had any kids, which seemed like a ridiculous question to her-- why not ask if they made it out to Paris much, or whether they owned any racehorses? *Kids?* Really? Here? Now?

She handed Liam the deck of cards and told him to shuffle, which he did quickly and deftly; Melanie had small but somehow still unwieldy hands, and shuffled by throwing the deck face down onto a table and then kind of splashing the cards around with her palms, as if playing in water. Liam shuffled properly, flipping the edges of the deck against each other and integrating them with a professional-sounding *shoof*. He did it three times, and then handed the deck back to Melanie, who laid out the cards in the shape of the Tree of Life.

“No Death,” said Liam, scanning. “That’s good.”

“It doesn’t really mean death anyway,” said Melanie. “Like I said. It doesn’t predict the future. It’s just like a Rorschach test, sort of. This one is Malkuth, the-- the waking world. The things you can see.”

“She looks like a Viking,” said Liam, examining the picture of the woman with horns on her head, a shield in one hand and a spear in the other, standing in a forest whose branches reached down to touch and frame her. “Is that you?”

“I guess it must be,” said Melanie.

“Needle in one hand, sterile alcohol swab in the other,” said Liam. “You’re right, this is just like a Rorschach test. This next one is about our sex life, right?”

Melanie giggled; the card showed a naked woman entwined with an enormous snake. “Yes. This is the sex life card. Next is the ‘what’s for dinner’ card.”

“We’re making a floppy flower fountain for dinner?”

“Wilty lotus salad,” said Melanie. “Speaking of dinner, we need to go to the grocery store. You want to go now?” She stood up. “I’ll fill the tank while you get

dressed.” As usual when they were just hanging around in the room, Liam had no pants on, just underwear. Melanie thought this must be a guy thing, the disinclination to wear pants if you didn’t have to. Melanie herself liked to have shoes on at all time, even when lying on the bed watching TV, which bothered Liam, so sometimes she took them off for his sake.

“You don’t want to keep doing this?” Liam asked, not getting up. “I thought you were into this stuff.”

“I am,” said Melanie. “I just--”

She hesitated. She wanted to say something defensive, something almost angry, about how not everything had to be shared, about how a person could have a hobby of their own. How there wasn’t even a door between the bedroom and the living room, just a doorway. You couldn’t close it.

But so what; if there was a door would either of them ever actually close it, when there was so little time left, when there might be only this one second left before the phone rang? Or there might be months; it had been months already. People waited years. You couldn’t push someone away, hold them at arm’s length, pace yourself, ration your affection and closeness, when there might be so little time left. But you couldn’t hold each other the whole time, either, looking into each other’s eyes, saying the last-minute things, when the minutes kept coming, and the days and the months. You couldn’t get irritated about dumb little things at a time like this, Melanie thought, and yet getting irritated about dumb little things was like peeing; you could hold it in for a while, if it

was important, but you couldn't hold it in indefinitely. And when you didn't know how long a time like this might last, it just got more and more indefinite.

Because of her new practices, she felt the individual physical symptoms before she consciously understood what was happening: the clench at her soft palate, the prickly swell across her nose and cheeks, the flush of heat building in her eyelids and lips. Inflammation, the rush of blood, fire and water. She started to cry.

"Hey," said Liam, putting out his arm, putting a hand on the small of her back.

"Hey, sweetie. What's up? C'mere."

She let his hand, cupping her hip, tug her down next to him, and put her head on his shoulder.

"I'm fine," she said, in the squeaky, mucousy, little-girl voice she always got when she was crying. "I just don't like thinking about-- fortune. Telling."

"Yours or mine?"

"They're both the same now," she said, the choking in her voice making it sound more dramatic than she'd entirely intended. "I mean, it doesn't just happen to you, you know?"

He was quiet for awhile, rubbing her back, and then he said, "I'd want you to get married again, you know. After a while. If you met somebody cool."

The tears had stopped quickly; she sat up and wiped at them with the back of her hand. "It wouldn't bother you?"

"Well, I won't be watching," he said. "You told me not to hang around and haunt you, remember?"

“Right,” she said, and a bubble of air-- a giggle-- tickled the back of her throat and twitched her mouth. “Because you’re going to have better places to be.”

“I sure hope so,” he said, still rubbing her back. “How much do we need at the store? Two tanks or one?”

“One,” said Melanie. “I have a list. But we don’t have to go now. I can finish the reading.”

She touched the card in the middle of the spread. It showed a naked man hanging upside down by one nailed ankle, in an underwater-looking green light.

“This is the ‘yoga pose you need to learn’ card,” she said. “According to the cards, I need to nail your leg to the wall so you can improve the blood circulation to your brain. Come stand on your head while I find a hammer.”

“We don’t have a hammer,” he said, grinning back at her. “You’re going to have to ask at the front desk.”

“I’ll wait until the wi-fi password changes,” she said. “And then this next card...”

CHAPTER II

LIBER SUM

The Can of Hate was an old coffee can, covered with contact paper, and containing index cards with especially bad Latin translations written on them. Not especially stupid ones, but translations that were *poetically* terrible, that transformed a sentimental or dramatic passage into a hilarious one.

You needed context for the lines to understand why the mistranslations were funny, so Doc always gave us one. He was a good storyteller anyway-- he did the voices, set the scenes, gestured illustratively and sometimes drew pictures on the chalkboard for further illustration.

“So after many trials and tribulations, the little slave boy was finally freed by his kindly master. And as he clasped his hands and looked up at the sky--” Doc clasped his hands and looked up at the water-stained ceiling-- “he exclaimed, ‘Liber sum!’

“Which is here translated, ‘I am a book.’”

We knew “liber” could mean either “book” or “free,” depending on context, and so we laughed, more uproariously than we might otherwise have, because it was Doc, and he was the man.

Latin was hard work-- memorizing verb endings, noun endings, the endless irregular forms of the tenses and moods of the verb *to be* and the pronoun *hic*-- and Doc

expected you to work hard. The penalty for slacking off was being laughed at, and, in the worst cases, immortalized in the Can of Hate. Doc encouraged you to buy an English translation of whatever we were translating-- this year it was the *Aeneid*-- to help you if you got stuck, but if you clearly hadn't understood the syntax of the Latin sentence and had instead tried to re-phrase the translation, he accused you of "riding the pony" and named the translation you'd been using.

"When Agrippina's son drew his blade to kill her, she ripped open her garments, baring her stomach, and exclaimed, 'Belly of iron!'"

Ferrum meant iron, but also the verb "to bear"; she'd really exclaimed, "Strike that which bore thee." Both versions were immortalized in our minds.

Doc's classroom walls were covered with murals, which a previous year of eleventh graders had painted as a final class project. One wall showed the moonlit cove where Aeneas and his men landed and where we learned the terms *chiaroscuro* and *chiasmus*; another showed the scene of what Doc described as the first historically recorded pizza party, where Aeneas and his men laid out their rations of meat on top of their rations of bread and devoured both together, thus fulfilling a harpy's prophecy that they would be so hungry they would eat their dining tables; a third showed the apparition of Venus, uncharacteristically decently clothed, to her half-divine son; and stenciled in gold on black above the chalkboard, below the mottled plaster of the ceiling, was the line Doc told us to memorize, if we memorized no other, from the *Aeneid*: "Forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit." *Perhaps even these things, someday, will please us to remember.*

It was a phrase we probably wouldn't have noticed if Doc hadn't pointed it out specifically, but it had a cadence that made it easy to remember-- the Aeneid was written in dactylic hexameter, which was a lot harder to grasp than the *ta-tum ta-tum ta-tum* of the Shakespeare we were reading in English class, but had a way of sticking with you, especially the way Doc read it. Was it an ominous phrase or an encouraging one? Aeneas delivered it to his shipwrecked, shivering men at the crescendo of what seemed like it was supposed to be a pep talk, but he didn't elaborate on that particular line-- didn't specifically evoke the *olim*, the *someday* when his men would enjoy remembering today's hardships. Did *olim* mean beside a cozy hearth, regaling awestruck grandchildren with tales of the hardships they'd once endured (Doc pointed out to us that one acceptable translation of *olim* is "once upon a time") or did it mean that worse hardships, truly unendurable trials and perils, would eventually make their current situation look nostalgically lovely? Doc listened to us argue, some on one side and some on the other, and then said, "Maybe it's both."

"What?" we said.

"Maybe it's both," he repeated, and then called on someone to translate the next line.

The kids who wanted to be valedictorian-- there were two locked in a dead heat, and we were all a little bit worried about what would happen to the sanity of the one who lost the race, whichever one it turned out to be-- took Spanish, because it was almost impossible not to get an A in Spanish, and because the kids who wanted to be

valedictorian were also practical-minded and Spanish was the practical language choice. People actually spoke Spanish around here. You could also take French-- French Club often involved crepes and Nutella-- or, if you were particularly weird or had a very specific career in mind, you could commute to the campus where German was taught three times a week. You couldn't exactly say that all the cool kids took Latin, because there were plenty of people who were definitely cool and were taking other languages for reasons of their own, but the AP Latin kids were a subtype of our own, a patriotic nation of fourteen. We didn't want to be valedictorian. We knew-- Doc had taught us-- that *valedictorian* meant *farewell-sayer*, that *vale* was both the Romans' form of "goodbye" and the imperative form of the verb "to be brave," the root of the English word "valor." We were already brave, and we didn't want to say goodbye.

We were all smart, of course-- you had to be smart to keep up-- but it would have been hard to define what else we all had in common. We didn't necessarily hang out outside of class. Paul and Wes were both on the football team-- Wes was in ROTC as well, and sometimes showed up wearing some kind of uniform-- and Bethany was a cheerleader, the smallest one, the one who got tossed to the top of the human pyramid. Ethan spent lunch periods doing some kind of Bible study; Jessica brought in notes excusing her from school on the high holy days; Elizabeth wrote poems for the literary magazine about the Goddess. Julie was going to prom with another girl, and wearing a suit that she'd bought at a thrift store. She wasn't a lesbian, to any of our knowledge; she'd just decided that was how she was going to do prom, and those of us who were going with corsages and rented tuxes, or who were skipping prom altogether

because who cared, didn't see why not. When Julie wore a slightly tattered and water-stained green velvet gown to class, with a carnation tucked into her brown curls, Doc laughed.

"Julie," he said, "you are a genuine Pre-Raphaelite. You are a walking anachronism. It is amazing. What a privilege to have you in my class."

Even when he laughed at us, we felt that Doc loved us all that way: specifically, unreservedly, and to the full extent of his vocabulary. We loved each other, too, that way, learning new vocabulary words all the time.

Doc rode a motorcycle to work. He never turned in his attendance cards on time, and sometimes didn't do it at all. He knew who was there and who wasn't, and he'd follow up with you if you weren't, but he didn't consider it any business of the attendance office's; if they wanted to count us for their records they could do it themselves. We had the impression that he got in trouble for this on a fairly regular basis, although we didn't exactly know what "trouble" looked like for an adult, a teacher, who had the authority to have the walls of his classroom transfigured, so that it was unlike any other classroom in the school. Other teachers had cool posters on their walls-- the American history teacher had posters of Jeff Gordon, the stock car driver, and the tenth grade honors English teacher had one of Uma Thurman as Mia Wallace in *Pulp Fiction*-- but nobody else had murals. Doc had promised us a senior project as cool as the mural one, but we couldn't imagine.

We didn't worry too much about grades. We all had to pass the AP exam at the end of the year, preferably with a four or a five out of five, for the honor of the school

and of Doc, but we weren't worried about that either. The test was on the *Aeneid*. What did we know from, if not the *Aeneid*? We could scan a line of dactylic hexameter in our sleep. We sidetracked Doc in class whenever we could, making a sport of it; he had so many stories, all true, all even better than the *Aeneid*. He did the voices for those too, and we saw the characters: the pregnant hippie hitchhiker he'd picked up once in the sixties, with ironed hair and ragged bellbottoms ("I told my old man, this kid is going to be, like, fucking *radical*, man"); the Venetian chalk-pavement-artist who'd broken down and wept when an Irishman with hairy knuckles whipped out his dick and pissed on a freshly completed drawing of the head of Christ; the tourist on the walls of Troy asking if it would really have been possible to ride a horse over these walls.

"That goes in the Can of Hate," said Paul.

"The Can of Hate isn't a vigilante thing, Paul," said Doc. "That lady was not under my jurisdiction. You guys go in the Can. She just goes in the story."

I sort of wanted to get in the Can, but I never did. It would have been cheating to try, and my mistakes weren't naturally all that funny.

I was the youngest person in the class; everybody else was a junior or a senior, but I was just a freshman. I'd taken Latin in middle school—taken *to* it, too, like a nerdy duckling to water, reveling in the grammar of it all, the way you could rearrange the words in a sentence in any order, and the words themselves would tell you—by their inflected endings—what they were doing here. Subject, verb, direct object, and more esoteric things that we didn't have in English, like the *ablative absolute*: two words, in the ablative case, one noun and one adjective or adjectival verb, set off from the rest of

the sentence grammatically, and yet modifying it, telling you *how* the rest of it was happening. *Mouths open. Sails set. Weapons drawn. Bridges burned.*

The school hadn't been sure where to put me, and so they'd set up a meeting with Doc, who'd given me a passage of the *Aeneid* to translate, sight unseen, and a dictionary, and graded papers while I worked, sitting in his empty classroom, surrounded by murals of cloudy skies, moonlit water, harpies and feasts and the soles of a goddess' feet as she disappeared from view.

When I was finished, I brought it to him, and he read it, silently, and then looked up at me, shaking his head. I didn't know what that meant, until he said, his mouth half covered with his hand, "It's perfect."

Then he pointed to the one word I hadn't known how to translate—had guessed at, based on the footnotes in the text and the sense of the passage—and said, "Tell me about this word."

"It's a verb," I said. "Second conjugation. Third person singular. Present tense."

"Mood?"

I didn't know.

"Subjunctive," he said, and I shook my head. "Uncertainty, counterfactual, possibility. OK. We'll get to that."

Latin was the last period of the day, and sometimes he asked one of us to stay after class for a bit, if he thought we were getting behind or lost. Our unit on scansion--dactylic hexameter, the rhythm of the *Aeneid*, which made the iambic pentameter of

English class sound like a little kid's jump-rope rhyme—bewildered me, and he kept me late for it, reading aloud in the offbeat rhythm, teaching me to count backwards from the last foot of the line, to see where the rhythm ended up. He kept me after to talk about the subjunctive, once, too, and because I had an extra hour that day—the friend I was getting a ride home with had swim practice—we somehow ended up talking about opera, and then my best friend Jennifer, who'd just gotten her heart broken by a boy she'd met at summer camp and was now vowing never to love again, and then Doc said, "Can I ask you something?"

I said, "Sure."

"You always seem to have it together," he said. "Like nothing really gets to you. Like you know something nobody else knows. Like you're barely even really here. What's your secret?"

I didn't know what he meant. It was true I was barely even really here, but I'd never thought of it as a good thing, which was what he seemed to be saying. Plus, it was Latin class where I was closest to really here, where things were funniest and most interesting and most delightfully difficult.

I read a lot, I thought of saying, or You should see me in geometry class, or I don't know what anyone else knows.

"I used to make up stories about the planet I was really from," I said finally, and he laughed with delight, and asked if I would write some down for him, and I said I would, but I didn't.

Doc arrived at school on his fifty-fifth birthday with a new, raw, pink-edged tattoo on his right bicep, shining with vaseline. There was a heart, with wings, enlaced and framed by a pair of broken manacles.

“Liber sum,” Ethan suggested.

Doc half grinned. “You’re a book?”

“No, I mean, you should have got *Liber Sum* on there. Broken chains and all.”

Denise Gainsley, who spent her unassigned period running errands for the attendance office, poked her head in the door. “Doc, do you have your attendance cards?”

“Uh, yeah,” he said. “Just a second. Everybody who’s not here, raise your hand.”

It was a pretty weak joke for Doc, but we smiled politely. It was his birthday, after all. He marked something on the attendance forms and handed them to Denise. When she was gone, he didn’t look back up at us right away.

“Fucking attendance policy,” he said. “*Forsan et haec...*”

“Fifty-five, huh?” said Wes. “Double nickels.”

After a second, Doc smiled. “Yeah.”

Only a few of us were surprised when, a couple of weeks later, Doc announced that he wouldn’t be coming back next year, for our senior year. Some of us froze; some of us started to cry; some of us nodded, jaws set grimly. Julie screamed, “I hate you!” and ran out of the classroom. Ethan went after her. Doc didn’t move. His shoulders were lowered; he looked tired, and older than usual, the way older people do when

they're tired. We waited, in silence, until Julie and Ethan came back in, and took their seats, Julie crying silently, Ethan avoiding everyone's eyes.

"I'm sorry," Doc said. "I thought about waiting until after the AP exam to tell you--"

Several people laughed, either angrily or with a ragged edge of hysteria.

"Well, I did. I didn't want to upset you guys before the test. I mean, not that I'm worried about how you'll do, you're obviously all going to get fives, unless you completely check out and just write the lyrics to the *Star-Spangled Banner* over and over for every question." He looked around at us. "But I couldn't come in here every day, and be hiding something like that from you. You know I wouldn't be leaving if I-- I just--"

"What are you going to do?" Jessica demanded. "Are you going to teach somewhere else? Some snotty little private school?"

He shook his head. "God, no. No, I don't-- I mean, I usually do some landscaping work over the summer anyway, so I'll finish out the year here, and then I'll do that for the summer at least, and then-- I don't know. I'll see what happens. I just can't-- I can't do the attendance policy any more. I know it sounds foolish. But all the paperwork. And the staff meetings, and the assemblies-- sitting there listening to-- *trivia*." He pronounced it the Latin way-- *tree wee a*. The word for a crossroads. Trivia was the sort of thing you might say to someone you met at a crossroads, passing the time of day in the short time before the two of you passed one another, going different directions. "*Nugae. Inconsequentia*. You guys are only here for one more year-- and I

could stay one more year-- but then there's the next class, and the next, and I can't stay forever."

I wasn't one of the ones who cried in class, but I cried when I told my parents, later, at home. My mother, who loved me-- which I was beginning to believe, based on my friends' anecdotal evidence, wasn't the normal state of affairs with teenagers and their mothers-- suggested that we invite Doc, and any of my classmates who wanted to come, over to my parents' house for a farewell party, after the AP exam.

I didn't want a party, but I did ask Doc, and, on consideration, Wes, who'd taken me to the homecoming dance and out for dinner and movies a few times. We hadn't kissed, or touched much, except once, when we were watching *The Princess Bride* on his parents' couch and he'd put his arm, lightly, around my shoulders. We didn't talk about what we were doing-- whether we were dating, or what-- but he was funny and kind, and he could actually dance, swing dance, not just sway awkwardly like most guys.

We had dinner, Doc and Wes and my parents and I, and then we sat on the front porch and talked. My father asked Doc about his motorcycle, and Doc told him about it. I didn't really listen. I was thinking about senior year, whether I'd take AP Latin 5 with the new Latin teacher, or not bother. You didn't need more than three years of a language to graduate. AP Latin 5 was Catullus and Horace, shorter poems than the *Aeneid*; I'd heard there was one about a dead bird, and a lot about how faithless women were.

"Do you want to?" Doc asked me. "Give it a try?"

I blinked. "Sorry. What?"

“Just around the block,” he said. “Just to be able to say you’ve been on a motorcycle.”

He had a spare helmet I could use, and said I had to, even just around the block; my dad agreed. I had to put my arms around his waist, holding on tight, my front pressed up against his back; he warned me not to brush against the hot tailpipe with any exposed skin. He told me to lean into the turns, lean with him, and the engine revved, and we started to move. I leaned with him into the turns; the motorcycle tilted, like a ride at Disney World, where I’d been once, when I was eight. I’d spent the whole time complaining about the heat, trying to figure out why this was supposed to be fun, why we were here at all.

We didn’t go that fast, and I was too much smaller than Doc to feel the air’s motion against me; I just felt his warmth and solidity, his thereness as we moved. *Res corporea*: he was here with me now, and soon he’d be gone. He was right, though; if he hadn’t left, I would have, at the end of next year. I’d be moving out of my parents’ house then, too, and going to college. I didn’t want to-- I was going to miss my parents-- but it was what you did.

When the motorcycle glided to a stop, back in front of my parents’ house, and I climbed off, a little unsteadily, Doc put down the kickstand and smiled.

“What did you think?” he asked.

I considered what to say.

“*Forsan et haec olim*,” I said finally, and he laughed.

“*Olim*,” he said. “*Forsan*.” Maybe.

CHAPTER III
DEVIL'S PLAYGROUND

The Ghost Pimps arrived in Prospect Hill, NC, wearing jumpsuits, and on the lookout for the Devil's Playground.

Crim, firmly convinced of the objective and verifiable reality of all manner of spooky shit, and Leif, open-minded and leaning towards sure why not, stepped out together at the gas station on the outskirts of the township. Leif needed cigarettes, and Crim needed to stretch his legs and maybe snag a pack of gum. People turned to look at their jumpsuits as the open door jingled a tinny greeting-- a greeting that did not sound particularly welcoming. Maybe less a greeting, in fact, than a remark: *Hey, two asshole kids in jumpsuits are currently entering this here gas station. Just so y'all know.*

The Ghost Pimps exchanged a look, a look that said, *Hey man, if we wanted to be inconspicuous would we have come here actually wearing the jumpsuits*, and walked forward, heads held reasonably high. Cigarettes and gum, that was all they needed here. A brief pit stop, before the first of many great adventures. Let the rednecks stare.

The aisles were narrow, the shelves crowded with a hodgepodge of items organized, if at all, by some arcane system-- candy bars nudged askew by squeeze-bottles of ketchup, cans of lighter fluid, and bundles of unlit sparklers. The Fourth of July picnic section, maybe?

“Idle hands are the Devil’s playground,” said a woman’s voice, so distinctly that Crim turned, thinking she was talking to him, but there was no one particularly near him. As a matter of fact, there was only one woman in the store proper, and she was way over by the cold drinks, staring listlessly in at the beer, as if calculating how long it would take her to get fucked up on nothing but this. Another woman sat at the counter, behind a bulging shield of plexiglass, with a gap under it wide enough for smokes and money.

Suddenly exhilarated, Crim grabbed a pack of Bubblicious-- the old-fashioned kind, giant hunks of fluorescent pink putty wrapped in wax paper, on sale for twenty-five cents-- and they threaded their way through the aisles, elbows tucked in to avoid knocking anything over, and up to the register. The woman who waited there had two-toned hair-- you couldn’t call them roots when they were as long as the dyed part-- and the kind of makeup that made you wonder when was the last time she’d actively removed the old stuff before applying new. When Leif asked, she reached up and behind her without looking, grabbing a pack of Marlboro Reds, a bored magician performing the same trick for the millionth time. She scanned them, and Crim’s gum, and said, “That’s six sixty-six.”

Leif didn’t take his eyes off her, or off the total displayed in dot-matrix green on the register; he he produced seven dollar bills from his military-issue wallet and slid it across the counter, under the plexiglass barrier. A quarter, a nickel, and four pennies slid back at him with such speed that the nickel and one of the pennies overshot the edge of

the counter and spangled onto the concrete floor. Neither Leif nor Crim felt the need to try to retrieve them.

“It’s a pretty common expression,” said Leif, turning the key in the ignition. He was the skeptic of the two-- both, faithful fans of the *X-Files*, figured that every paranormal investigation unit needed at least one member who could be relied on to call bullshit at all times. Including, of course, the time Crim hoped for and Leif half expected, when Leif would call bullshit and bullshit would not answer. There would be, instead, something real, something undeniably, gloriously unnatural and impossible and yet real, staring the Ghost Pimps in their dazzled faces, and the jumpsuits would be justified at last.

“Idle hands are the *Devil’s playground?*” Crim demanded, in his best Agent Mulder shocked-and-disappointed Scully-come-on manner. “Have you *ever* heard anybody say that before? In *real life?*” He unwrapped a piece of Bubblicious, and then, when the chalky sweet smell of it hit his nostrils, changed his mind abruptly and wrapped it back up. “And anyway, who said it? It sounded like she was right next to me, but--”

“It’s called acoustics, Criminal,” said Leif, with the condescension that in anyone but Leif would have caused Crim to take deep breaths and invoke anger-management mantras. It was different with a bro, though. What biological family had confused and twisted in you, your chosen family could heal and straighten. “And this can’t be the first time you’ve ever had six sixty-six be your total. We haven’t even found the spot yet-- we’re at a *gas station*, for Christ’s sake, and you’ve already got your panties in a wad about some lady said something totally mysterious and then the cash machine looked at

you funny. Can we save some of the high-pitched shrieking in case of actual phenomena?”

“There’s such a thing as a slow build,” said Crim, watching the road ahead rather than keep studying Leif’s tensed jaw. “At first it’s just little things, little silly things that it’s easy to brush off. Just a little bit weird, not quite enough to-- and then things get a little weirder, and a little spookier, and it’s getting harder and harder to explain them away, and then, bam!”

“‘Bam’?” Leif repeated. “What was that, a bomb going off? The gas station blows up? Satan shows up at the Playground in full dress horns, with cocktails and hors d’oeuvres? In *stories*, there’s a slow build. This is *real life*. Doesn’t it seem more likely that you’re reading too much into everyday coincidences because you know we’re on this trip to find the Devil’s Triangle--”

“Playground,” Crim corrected. “It’s in the *shape* of a triangle, in the intersection of three streams, but they *call* it the Devil’s Playground. At least the eight people who have ever heard of it do.”

That was one reason why the Ghost Pimps had decided to investigate. Unlike other, more popular haunting sites-- the not-to-be-confused-with-the Devil’s Stomping Ground outside of Siler City, the Brown Mountain Lights-- featured in glossy little compendiums like *North Carolina Ghosts and Legends*, nobody had jack on the Devil’s Playground. A scant handful of Google hits, five-year-old queries on obscure message boards, asking questions-- where is it? is it really haunted?-- that mostly went unanswered, except for one poster on a message board called theshadowlandsmessagelboard.yuku.com, who replied,

“The exact coordinates for the Devil’s Playground is 36.304197,-79.166493. I’ve lived in Prospect Hill all of my life and I know for a fact some strange things happen back there. My cousin and I tried to camp out there and we did not last very long. We kept hearing old fashion music, people talking and in the middle of the night there was a sound like a truck getting stuck in the mud but when we checked it out one was there.”

Good enough for two aspiring Ghost Pimps, even if the typo in the last sentence suggested that, anticlimactically, the writer and his or her cousin *had* found a perfectly prosaic truck getting stuck in the mud.

“Whatever the fuckin’ thing is called,” said Leif. “We’re here to investigate. Horror movies have foreshadowing. Investigations don’t. Investigations have observations, and quantifiable data. Which ladies saying proverbs and cigarette sales tax math is not.”

“My new alt-mumblecore band name,” said Crim, “is Cigarette Sales Tax Math. First hit single, Ladies Saying Proverbs.”

“Album name Twenty-Five-Cent Bubblicious,” Leif suggested amiably, and peace was restored for the drive into Prospect Hill.

This was the Pimps’ first real outing, the first one they’d deemed jumpsuit-worthy, the first one for which they’d located coordinates and planned to question locals. They’d been doing research for a long time now, making plans in between listening to each other have sex with weekend Air Force semi-girlfriends, skating off work parties and idly plotting the elaborate deaths of their respective high school recruiters.

“High school,” said Crim. “How is that even legal. We were *kids*.”

“We’re still kids,” said Leif. “But now we have weapons training.”

Crim grimaced. “Don’t get all political on me, dude. We’re not kids anymore. We’re pimps.”

“We’re sad-ass pimp-wannabes, is what we are,” said Leif. “Gotta get us some hoes. *Ghost* hoes.”

The long weekend off-- for MLK Day-- and the relative proximity of the Devil’s Playground meant it was time for the Ghost Pimps to swing into action. The Devil’s Playground looked interesting enough, though maybe not as interesting as the haunting they’d initially planned to investigate, which had inspired their name: a haunted brothel, with ghost ladies who would attempt to take you up to their bedrooms. Still, the name seemed appropriate. They would be ghost hunters with verve, with style, hunters and gatherers of the eldritch and inexplicable; they would come, they would see, and they would fucking own that shit. Crim had been surprised at how quickly Leif had caught the idea and run with it; Leif was the one who had actually gone out and gotten the jumpsuits, each with an embroidered nametag. Crim’s said “Alejandro,” only due to the curlicues of the embroidery it looked like it said “Alejandra,” which was suboptimally pimpin’, but whatever. The jumpsuits were a joke anyway, Leif’s way maybe of acting like the whole thing was for laughs, but three years of the Marine Corps had rendered Crim more or less immune to feeling stupid for being dressed stupid. At least these monkey suits were for a team he felt good about being on.

Prospect Hill turned out to be a really apt town name, if what you were prospecting for was dead bodies. As far as the Ghost Pimps could tell, the town consisted of one main building-- combination gas station, general store, and bar-slash-restaurant-- at the center of a smattering of homes and, for the rest of the part where you'd expect a town to be, cemeteries.

"More like Reaper's Playground, right?" said Crim, as they pulled up with a crunching of gravel to the front of the one large building, and the Pimps unbuckled their seatbelts.

"This is some Silent Hill shit right here," said Leif, although North Carolina's weather didn't seem particularly foggy. It was a really pretty day, in fact; blue sky, hint of crisp breeze, and the leaves down here were already turning. "So we both go in, or--"

"No, gang, let's split up," said Crim, rolling his eyes. "Of fucking course we both go in."

When the Ghost Pimps entered the building, there was a pool game in progress; it halted more or less immediately, the player with the cue straightening up slowly, shifting the cue's weight in his hand like a quarterstaff master adjusting his stance, the other players gathered around the table turning just as slowly to look at the jumpsuited boys in the doorway. Nobody said anything. It was like a horror movie, or an episode of a horror TV show spoofing a horror movie. It was like two dumbass kids who had seen too many episodes of horror TV shows spoofing horror movies that they'd also seen, walking into a building in a town that had been here since before the horror movies that the horror movies the kids had seen were doing a take on.

Something like this crossed Crim's mind briefly, making him straighten up, making him think, consciously, *We're not kids. We're pimps.*

Crim led the way to the counter of the store, where a gray-haired woman (with, if possible, more and worse makeup than the lady from the gas station) blinked slowly at them, her face as expressionless and deeply creased as an iguana's. Jessica, Crim's high school girlfriend, the love of his life, more than whom he never planned to love any woman again, had had an iguana. It had blinked at Crim like that.

"Hey," said Crim, who thought of himself as the charismatic one of the pair. He aimed his best baby-of-the-family smile-beam at the old lady, who didn't respond with so much as an extra blink. "Have you ever heard of a place called the Devil's Playground?"

Silence in the hall, so profound that a sound from behind the Pimps announced itself distinctly-- rustle of dry, callused palm on polished, ridged wood. The pool cue, shifted from hand to hand. Crim didn't turn away from the the iguana lady. The jumpsuits were starting to seem like a bad idea.

"Or," he said, a little too loudly, "maybe a map? To help us find it? Would you have something like that around here?"

"I don't think so," said the woman, dispassionately. She reached for the handle of a drawer in a cabinet to her right, pulled it slowly open, and then then closed it, all without even glancing in the direction of her own hand. "I can look, but--" She opened another drawer and closed it, her gaze never wavering from Crim's face. "I don't think we have what you're looking for here."

“Um,” said Crim, eyeing her hand as it opened and closed more drawers with the methodical, unvarying, uninterested rhythm of a well-established ritual. In this case, a ritual to banish unwanted visitors by invoking the total absence of maps in your drawers. “Hey. Thanks for looking, anyway.”

“Sure,” she said, and smiled, for the first time. “Y’all drive safe, now.”

Crim nodded, turned towards Leif, and discovered that Leif was not there.

He scanned the pool hall automatically, the blood suddenly whooshing in his ears; there were the pool players, all of them still there, standing still and watching him; there were a few other people scattered around the aisles of the store, all of them now watching him, too. There was a door behind the iguana lady, probably to some back room, but it had been in their line of sight the whole time; there was also a stainless steel swinging door, the kind that led to a kitchen, with a round window in it at eye level. Was it swinging slightly, or was it Crim’s imagination? There weren’t any other obvious exits, no boys-and-girls signs indicating public restrooms, no corridor Leif might have wandered down in the spirit of curiosity, investigation, or map-seeking. What were they cooking back there? Where was Leif?

Leif was, in fact, in the car, ready to peel out as soon as Crim flung himself in and slammed the passenger-side door.

“You just *left* me in there?” Crim snapped, flooded with the same bewildering mixture of relief and fury that his mother must have felt when, after hours of frantic search, she’d found him playing happily in the last place she’d ever expected. Chosen family; chosen worries. “Without saying anything?”

“I thought you would have noticed me leave,” Leif said, as the engine came to life, and began carefully backing out of the barely-a-parking-lot. “I was freaking out in there, dude. Did you see the way they were looking at us? I was expecting the dueling banjos any second.”

“Uh, don’t look now,” said Crim, looking now, as two of the pool players and one of the random staring shoppers emerged from the pool hall at a leisurely pace. One of the pool players hopped the side of a rusted-out pickup’s bed and settled himself there as the other two opened the pickup’s two doors and got in. The truck’s engine choked, sputtered, turned over.

“Go go go,” said Crim quietly, and Leif, startled, yanked the wheel and accelerated in a spray of gravel.

“What?” he said, evening out, but he was already looking in the rearview mirror. “Are they following us?”

Crim was watching, not in the mirror but turned all the way around, one knee tucked up on the seat beside him for better leverage, feeling like a little kid on the kindergarten bus watching home disappear behind him. The men were behind them, not falling behind, not disappearing.

“They have rifles in that truck,” he said, just making an observation, and Leif made the noise that closed captions on Netflix usually described as [scoffs].

“They’re rednecks,” he said. “Of course they have rifles. They hunt.”

“Hunt what?” Crim cleared his throat to make sure the next part came out joking and baritone instead of panicky and castrated: “The Most Dangerous Game?”

“Damn right we are,” said Leif. “From the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Buttfuck Enn Cee. Come on, dude. We came here looking for the Devil. Are we going to let a bunch of trailer trash in a pickup truck psych us out?”

Trailer trash. Crim hadn’t ever heard that term before coming south of the Mason-Dixon, just like he’d never tasted biscuits and gravy-- still the most amazing thing he’d ever eaten, a culinary revelation, although the real Southerners at Camp Lejeune laughed at him, promising him the mess-hall version was shit compared to the real thing. The trailer Crim had been raised in wasn’t a bit trashy: a Navy park trailer’s paint stayed fresh, the grass clipped and green, the windows bright and smudgeless. Crim and his brother and sister made their beds with hospital corners, tight enough that their dad could bounce a quarter off the sheet, or else they made them again.

The men in the truck currently cruising along behind the Pimps’ boat of a Crown Vic didn’t look like they made their beds with hospital corners. One of them made eye contact with Crim through the windshield, and with a shock he turned away and faced front.

“They’re following us,” he said.

“I do not want to drive out into the woods with these people on our ass,” said Leif, a few minutes later, after a few random turns had failed to disprove the following-us hypothesis, and Crim said, “Uh yeah, agreed.”

“So where do we go?” Leif asked. “We’re not going to let them run us out of town, are we?”

“Motel?” suggested Crim, and Leif made the [scoff] sound again.

“I have like six bucks total for the weekend,” he said. “We budgeted for camping, not motels. Plus, one of these dudes’ uncle-daddy probably owns the motel.”

Enough with the Deliverance references, Crim wanted to scream. Or say, very quietly and authoritatively. Whichever would carry more weight; whichever would cut more effectively into whatever this scene sounded like, in Leif’s head. Crim couldn’t hear a soundtrack, didn’t know what the background music would be; he heard the engine humming, crunching gravel, the whoosh of his own heartbeat in his ears. *This isn’t a goddamn movie.*

“So just drive around, I guess,” he said instead. “Drive around the cemeteries. Act like we’re looking for something.”

Leif said, “And at what point are we forced to dig our own graves at gunpoint? I mean, isn’t this the part where the entire audience is going, “JESUS CHRIST, YOU MORONS, JUST LEAVE! GO HOME!”

“We’re not leaving,” said Crim. “There’s something here. If we find it--”

He knew what he meant, but it didn’t feel, anymore, like Leif was the one to say it to. To try to explain what suddenly seemed blindingly clear: that if they found something here, if there was something *real* here, realer than Camp Lejeune, realer than the constant bullshit of the Marine Corps, realer than the lies about duty and honor and strength and manhood they’d both bought from the recruiters, realer than Crim’s dad, who’d always turned *Full Metal Jacket* off right at the end of boot camp, claiming the rest of the movie was bullshit—

There was something *here*, he wanted to tell Leif, but they were both wearing their stupid fucking jumpsuits, like this was a comedy, like the ghosts were going to be bad effects, and right now he didn't even understand how he and Leif had joined forces in the first place.

“So we follow the streams,” Leif said, once they'd taken a sharp left into the parking lot of a small post office, and then another left to just behind the building—they could see the road, but the road couldn't see them— and the pickup had passed by, at a cruising shark's pace, the men in it looking from side to side with narrowed eyes. “The Devil's Playground is at the intersection of three streams. If the road crosses a stream, we can just get out and follow it until we find the place where they meet, and then we can set up camp and see what happens.”

They did get out, and followed a stream to a rusting barbed-wire fence and a huge, bullet-pocked NO TRESPASSING sign.

“Welp,” said Leif.

“Come on,” said Crim, excitement washing over him again, the same exhilaration he'd felt when he realized the voice in the gas station had come from nowhere. “You're gonna let a sign stop us?”

“Yeah,” said Leif. “Come on, Crim, if we get arrested we not only get thrown in redneck jail, but we get in trouble with the Corps. I'm not getting dishonorably discharged just to prove the woods of North Carolina are super goddamn spooky.”

“Shh,” said Crim, on the edge of hearing something, Leif’s voice a maddening jackhammer in his ears as he strained for something both incredibly important and easily missable. Something that was *there*.

“Oh, was it the Dev--“

“Leif,” said Crim, “shut up a second. Listen.”

Once they were both quiet, it was unmistakable: music. Gritchy, instrumental music, like from one of the gramophone players you saw in creepy cutscenes from video games. The ones you wound up, and they played something plot-appropriate or terrifyingly ironic, something that sounded innocent until you heard it in context. It was coming from the woods, inside the fence, past the sign.

“You hear that, right?” he asked Leif.

“Yeah,” said Leif quietly.

Crim stood very still, listening: the music, and then, over the music, the low-pitched, unintelligible murmur of a voice, and then a cry, lonely and miserable, in a woman’s voice, or a child’s.

“Jesus,” said Leif, gray-faced. “Someone’s—somebody’s in there.”

Crim called out, abruptly, taking a step forward, “Hey! Hey, is somebody there?”

The voices and music both stopped.

“Oh, fuck me,” said Leif, and did a perfect about-face, back towards the car.

Crim lingered, listening for more music, for voices, for a call. An answer. Something to take him past the No Trespassing sign, that would override

all protests, bring Leif back, the two of them shoulder to shoulder again, the Ghost Pimps with a *cause*.

“Hey,” he called again. “Can anybody hear me?”

CHAPTER IV

FLASH

So there were four of us-- me, Dave, Jake, and Justin-- in my living room-slash-bedroom, where the bed faced the TV and doubled as the couch. I'd turned a dresser from the Salvation Army on its face and was using its back for a table, so we didn't need chairs, which I didn't have anyway; just us on the floor with our books and character sheets and a nice flat surface for dice rolling and the sheet of graph paper with our miniatures in the middle, and Holly on the bed-couch, curled up watching.

Right, four of us not counting Holly. Holly was Justin's wife, and he'd brought her along without asking. She didn't game, so he'd sat her down on the bed, like slinging down your backpack or your coat when you arrive somewhere, tossing it wherever, and she curled herself up like a cat, blinking slow like a cat. It made me miss my cat, Thunder, who came running when I got home from work and purred like a truck engine when I scritch'd his chin and slept on my feet at night, but technically he'd been a gift from me to my bitch of an ex, and she'd taken him with her when she left. Fair enough, I guess.

I'd bought some beer and chips for everybody with a depressingly big chunk of my shitty paycheck, and I got some beers out, handed them around. I offered Holly one, but she just shook her head. Which I hate, I hate that, when somebody doesn't really answer you, just shakes their head or holds out their hand or whatever. Maybe it's the

way I was raised-- if I'd shaken my head or held out my hand instead of saying no thank you sir or yes please sir, my dad would have knocked me down the fucking stairs-- but it just bothers me. Like I'm not even worth the trouble of opening your mouth. When I offer you a beer. When you weren't even invited, and you're just all curled up on my bed-couch staring, like a cat that doesn't even like me.

This was going to be our first real session for this game, not counting character building. Dave was running the game, and he's a good storyteller, so I'd really been looking forward to tonight. I didn't even like Justin, to tell you the truth-- none of us did, he was a j weirdo, on multiple levels-- but gaming is more fun with more people, and at this particular time in my life I probably would have invited Jeffrey Dahmer over and handed him a beer if he'd been willing to roll some dice with me. Gaming was where I got to live an alternate life, thick with meaning, bright with promise, realer than anything I got to do or be in the grainy grayish bad-cable fuzz of what passed for my real life.

"Okay, Crim," said Dave-- Crim is me, by the way. Not my real name. Short for Criminal. Long story. "You're at home in your living room, about where we are right now, cleaning and polishing your weapons. It's a Monday evening, and you're having a quiet night in. Jake, you're still at the office, putting in some late hours. Justin, you're out at a strip club."

Jake and I traded a look, but I couldn't catch Dave's eye. Because the thing is, see, Holly works at a strip club. As her job. Under the nom de nips of Holiday. Justin's *wife*. Can you imagine being okay with that? I don't want to sound patriarchal or whatever, but there's just no fucking way I'd let my wife strip. I'd work two jobs, three

jobs, whatever, but over my dead fucking body would any woman I loved enough to marry be shaking her tits for strangers in a club.

But Justin got this weird little smirk on his face when Dave said that-- “Justin, you’re at a strip club--” because, and this is the thing, he not only lets Holly strip, not only is he okay with it, he actually seems to think of it as something cool. Like he’s bragging when he says “my wife’s a stripper,” like it means she’s something special, this sexy thing we’re all itching to get our hands on. Not us in particular, I mean, but all other guys. Like he’s snagged this big old prize, and it makes him special too, that she picked him. He actually tried to offer us free tickets, or whatever it is, to her club. Vouchers, or coupons, or whatever. Discount lap dances. We were like, “Uh, no thanks, dude, we’re good.”

So he had this little grin on his face, this expression that just made me want to hammer him every time it happened, which was way too often by the way, for somebody who-- trust me when I say-- did not have a whole lot to be smug about, in his life. And resettled himself, this little wiggle-shift, like he was relaxing in his chair at this strip club instead of sitting on the linty no-color carpet of my living room (slash bedroom). And shot a look at Holly. She looked back at him, and she blinked-- not a signal type of blink, not one of those things where you love somebody and before you go somewhere you’re like “if I look over at you and blink it means I love you” (yeah, I was a romantic little douche in high school, shut up)-- but it wasn’t one of those blinks, just a blank slow cat-blink, no expression on her face at all. The smirk still on his face.

Dave said, “Crim, you hear a knock on your door.”

I cleared my throat. “Who is it?”

“No answer,” said Dave. “They keep knocking. Harder. It’s more of a banging now.”

“I get up and grab my rifle, which is of course leaning against the wall, loaded, as always--”

“Sure--”

“And yell, Who the fuck is it?”

“The banging stops. Roll your wits plus investigation.”

I picked up five ten-sided dice, shook them, rolled. “Three.”

“It occurs to you that you left your phone on vibrate earlier, so you glance at it and see that the notification light is blinking.”

“I pick it up and look.”

“There’s a text from a number you don’t know. It says, Don’t answer the door.”

As I was considering this-- picturing myself alone in this same room, but surrounded by weapons, the blinds closed, trying to imagine what might be outside the door-- all of a sudden, out of nowhere, Justin turned around and pointed to Holly. Not just a regular indicative point, like what you’re not supposed to do at a person because it’s rude, like what you do to objects-- but a finger-gun point, thumb up.

“Flash,” he said.

She shifted, sat up straight, grabbed the bottom edge of her little tank top, and pulled it up to her chin. She wasn’t wearing a bra.

I mean, I've seen tits before, okay. I like tits just fine, in the proper context. And hers were fine. It wasn't that. And I was on the first half of my first beer, so it wasn't that either, that made my guts drop and my head go light and spots pop up in front of my eyes, like I hadn't eaten in days, or had just done three hundred crunches, or there really was a banging at my door and a mysterious text on my phone and I didn't know what I might be fighting in a second.

Partly I think it was the look on her face. Or lack thereof. It still would have been weird, if she'd have had a big goofy grin on her face, or even a big hostile scowl. But she didn't. She didn't even look *at* us. Or at Justin. She just pulled up her shirt, and sat there, that same blank-eyed bored-kitty look, holding her shirt up, above her tits.

"Dude," said Dave, after a second during which nobody knew what the fuck to say, "what the fuck?"

Justin-- and this was the other thing-- Justin had this *look* on his face. This...

So okay, you know in grade school when you go to a birthday party that everybody in the class is invited to, because the birthday kid is really popular and has a lot of friends and his parents are those kind of parents, where on Christmas he gets everything he asked for and a bunch of surprises too, and in the summer they take him to the beach and teach him how to fish, and on his birthday they give him a nice big party and invite everybody he wants to invite? But that's most of the class, enough of the class that it becomes awkward to not invite the whole class, because if he didn't then it would be, like, three kids who weren't invited. So everyone in the class is invited. And there's

this one kid nobody likes. The awkward kid in the class. Nobody likes him, and he knows it. He doesn't know why, or he'd fix it, but he knows nobody likes him. But he's invited to this party. It's the first thing he's ever been invited to. So he's excited. And he wants to bring a really great gift, a gift that will make the birthday kid go, wow, I'm so glad I invited the awkward kid to my party, even though I only did it because my mom made me, but now it turns out he's really a great kid and now I want him to be my best friend. The awkward kid totally thinks this is going to happen if he can only pick out the right gift, the perfect gift, the coolest gift at the party. Except the awkward kid is so awkward that he thinks the coolest possible gift is, like, a china figurine of a tiger. He sees this figurine at the dollar store, right, and he gets so excited because it looks so cool, the colors so bright and the tiger so badass, and he spends all his allowance money he has saved up on this figurine and gets his mom to help him wrap it up all nice even though his mom is secretly making this face behind his back all, Wow, my kid is the most awkward kid ever, but he doesn't see and he marches off to the party all proud holding the present and imagining how much the birthday kid is going to like it. The look on the awkward kid's face as he watches the birthday kid unwrap his present, and watches the birthday kid's face, and waits, and keeps waiting, and slowly realizes it isn't going to happen, that it was a stupid present, it was the worst present ever, and everybody hates him and always will?

That was the look on Justin's face. I thought I was going to puke. I don't know.

After a minute Holly pulled her shirt back down and curled back up like nothing happened, and Justin was acting like nothing happened too, except for that curled-up

corpse of a grin that he didn't know what to do with, and finally Dave looked back at me and I said, "I, uh, I text back, 'Who is this?'"

"You get a text back almost immediately. 'A friend.' Roll perception plus investigation again."

I rolled the ten-sided dice, one for perception, one for investigation, and checked my modifiers on my character sheet to see how much I was going to get to add. Not much. I should've sunk more into both of them at character creation, considering how often Dave made us make that roll. Perception plus investigation always means there's something you either notice or you don't, depending on how well you roll, so if you scratch, you just know there's something there you should have seen but didn't. It's kind of a GM dick move, and Dave loved it, always smirked a little bit when he said, "You don't notice anything."

And I mean, I didn't have that many friends and he wasn't a bad gamer, and-- what was I going to do, tell him I couldn't be his friend any more because his wife flashed us her tits? Or-- because it wasn't even that-- because of the look on his face when he made his wife flash her tits? The look on *her* face? Their fucked-up relationship? My girlfriend of the moment and I weren't exactly Romeo and Juliet. She was hot enough, but she had a stupid laugh, and she laughed at stupid things. So she'd come over, we'd watch some crappy chick flick or some decent horror film-- we traded off picking movies-- and eventually we'd get naked, or half-naked, and she'd bounce on my dick awhile, and then I'd start waiting for her to leave. I liked it better when I went

over to her place, so I could leave any time I wanted, plus she had a cat that she didn't even pay any attention to. I'd scritch the cat under the chin and talk to it all goopy, and she'd roll her eyes.

So we weren't the stuff of romance novels-- I would never describe my loins as on fire for her-- but, A, she wasn't my wife, and, B, I also didn't take her to gatherings of my guy friends that she wasn't invited to and tell her to flash them her tits. Not that she would have if I had. I don't think. Not that I would have expected Holly to, either. That was the thing. There are things a person never needs to know about, and that was one of them. And I couldn't un-know it, you know? It was like seeing a giant cockroach on your bedroom wall right before you fall asleep. Just because you shut your eyes real fast, that doesn't mean you didn't see it. You either have to get up and deal with it, or lie there knowing it's there.

I did ask Lacey, when we were lying on the bed-couch, the milky condom still clinging to my limpening dick, like some parasitic sea-creature. I hate condoms so much. Lacey kept saying she was going to get on the pill, but then she kept not bothering.

"Hey," I said, and she looked up, her hair all in a mess, her cheeks all pink, but not happy. She was never that happy except, you know, during. Never let it be said that I don't satisfy during. But afterwards, we just never had that much to say. Except right now, I did have something I wanted to ask. "If you were married, and your husband wanted you to flash a bunch of his friends, would you do it?"

She frowned at me. "What kind of a question is that?"

“Just asking.”

She rolled off the bed and started looking for her panties.

Whatever. It wasn't like I really would have cared what she said.

But this one evening, it was just going to be me and Dave and Justin, at Dave's place. I got there first-- me and Dave were tight enough that it wasn't weird if I showed up early, just to hang out and shoot the shit-- and Dave was working on something, some DIY thing he had going at the time, with a tarp all spread out on his living room floor. He was putting everything away while we talked, until just the tarp was there, and he started to roll it up, and all of a sudden I said, “Wait, don't-- don't put it up yet. Let's play a prank on Justin.”

“Sweet,” said Dave.

So we left the tarp spread out on the floor, and I went out the back door and grabbed this little axe he used for splitting firewood-- he had a functioning fireplace-- and brought it in, swung it around a little bit, me and Dave laughing, you know, in that junior high sleepover way, “This is going to be great, this is going to be so great--” waiting for Justin to show up.

Which he did, knocked on the door and Dave yelled “Come in” and he opened the door-- nothing in his hands, this was not the kind of guy who would ever think to bring over a six-pack or a bag of chips, just his stripper wife's tits for a lovely hostess gift-- and he saw the tarp, saw me standing there with the axe in my hands, and Dave standing there watching. I was waiting for Dave to crack up because he has no deadpan, but he had a

pretty good stone-faced glare going right then. Justin laughed, this stupid little nervous giggle, and said, “What’s going on?”

“Get on the tarp, Justin,” I said, and I saw him flinch. I saw it. I could feel the axe in my hands, one hand up near the head and one further down. I had a good grip.

He came further inside, still laughing, or trying to laugh; he stepped onto the tarp, like maybe it was a *nice* joke, a surprise party or something.

“Get on your knees, Justin,” I said, hefting the axe, and he looked at me. I don’t think he’d ever looked right at me before, right into my eyes, or maybe he had and I’d just never looked back at the same time. You know how it is when you don’t like somebody-- you don’t want to look right at them, when they’re looking right at you, too. I couldn’t have even told you the color of Justin’s eyes, up until right that minute. Turned out they were brown, puppy-dog brown, and shiny.

He looked at me for a good few seconds, and whatever he saw in my face, I saw his change, go pale and blank, like the blood was already draining out of him. He didn’t even turn to look at the front door-- which was still open, by the way, and there was nothing between him and it. He got down on his knees.

That was when Dave lost it, and Justin looked up at him, slowly, still white-faced, as Dave laughed so hard I thought he was going to choke. I let the axe drop, started laughing too, while Justin’s face twisted, like he was trying to remember how you make a smile.

“Dude!” Dave could barely talk. “Dude, you thought we were going to kill you and you were just going to *let* us? What the fuck is wrong with you, man? The door is still open!”

“I knew you were kidding,” said Justin, trying to get back up, not quite making it the first time; his legs must have been shaking. Neither of us offered him a hand. “You assholes. I was just-- I was just playing along.”

That was a lie, by the way. I’d just looked straight into the eyes of a man who’d looked straight back into mine, and I had seen him accept that he was about to be murdered, and kneel in acceptance, kneel to me and my axe. A familiar lightheaded sensation was pumping through my laughter, exaggerating how funny this was-- was this really funny at all?-- making me laugh so hard I felt insane, like a hyena in a cartoon, tears beginning to leak from my eyes. (Had those been tears shining in Justin’s eyes?)

He made it up, onto his feet, feinted like he was going to punch me playfully in the arm, but pulled back before he connected.

“Very funny, guys,” he said, some of the color starting to come back to his face, and sat down on the couch-- Dave had a couch, facing his fireplace. Living the high life. “I’m going to have to get you guys back for that.”

“Oh yeah,” Dave said, hoarse with laughing, sitting down too, on the other end of the couch from Justin, so I couldn’t sit down without sitting in the middle, next to them both. I kept standing. I was still laughing. I couldn’t stop. I kind of wanted to, but I couldn’t. “Yeah, we’ll have to watch out for that, Justin. Jesus fuck, dude. You should

have seen your face. And you, Crim! I thought for a second you were really going to do it.”

I'd managed to stop laughing, mostly; enough that they could understand me when I said, “Me too,” but not so much that it couldn't pass for a joke.

“You were all ready to leave poor Holiday a widow,” said Dave, smacking Justin on the back, and Justin flinched again. I saw it again. “Come on, man, your life can't be that bad, that you're just like, Okay then, kill me, why not.”

And-- it scared me half to death, I wasn't laughing at all anymore-- Justin turned right around and looked straight at me. Straight into my eyes again. I wanted to look away, but I didn't. I knew what he meant, looking at me like that. He meant, sure it could. Sure it can. Right, Crim?

“Fuck you,” I said, and Dave said, “Hey, little harsh there, Crim, you almost murder a guy and then you tell him to go fuck himself,” and fuck you too with your fancy fireplace, I thought. Who needs a fireplace? I didn't even want a fireplace. I wanted a girlfriend who'd let me fuck her without a condom, so I could actually feel something. I wanted an outdoor shower, like the one at the place we used to rent at the beach when I was a kid, where you could just stand there, butt naked under the sky, and feel yourself getting cleaner.

CHAPTER V

THRESHOLD

A month into her junior year in high school, Christabel began to eat lunch with the normal girls. She thought of them as the normal girls because they were neither the Bible studiers, the spellcasters, the pot smokers, the cheerleaders, the Latin translators, nor the editors of the literary magazine. She had eaten lunch with each of these groups in turn for a few weeks or a few months during her freshman and sophomore years, and although none of them had ever rejected her (“Not that you noticed, anyway,” a friend remarked ten years later, which Christabel had to acknowledge was a fair disclaimer), she had left each group in turn out of the kind of bone-crushing, eyeball-itching boredom that had constituted the major motivation for most of her life decisions up until this point.

She had assumed the normal girls would be the most boring of all, but they turned out to be great. They made her laugh, they e-mailed each other lengthy and purposeless surveys (“65. Favorite movie? 66. Favorite ice cream topping?”), they made each other mixed tapes, and the ones who could drive already drove the ones who couldn’t to the movies and the skating rink and the mall. They copied each other’s homework, which Christabel didn’t consider cheating; it was just efficiency. She and Sarah had usually done their homework; Dinah, Ginny, and Taylor had usually had other things to do, but

Taylor always had tapes of bands no one had ever heard of, Ginny had her driver’s license and a house to herself on the frequent nights her mother spent gambling

on Cherokee land, and Dinah, an aspiring actress, always had free tickets to something. It seemed like a fair exchange. The amount of time Christabel was not bored with these girls seemed miraculous, a measure of grace meted from Heaven above. Even watching *Titanic* with them on the two VHS tapes required to encompass its ridiculous length wasn't awful; she couldn't quite muster the requisite crush on Leonardo diCaprio, but that didn't seem to matter, because they all watched in a sprawl on Ginny's living room floor, laughing and eating popcorn and wondering why Leo and Kate hadn't taken turns on the floating shard of wood. Even going to the girls' room with all the other girls in a companionable straggle wasn't boring. The skating rink wasn't boring; she skated beside Taylor, who told her all about tae kwon do ("Somebody ever puts his hand on my shoulder from behind in a dark alley and I go KASCHPAH! I mean and then it's probably some little old man asking for the time and he's all Oh oh oh why! and I'm like I'm sorry I'm sorry!") and laughed until her ankles bent inward.

She still didn't quite fit in, and they all knew it, but they either didn't mind or pretended not to.

"Who wants to go out tonight?" Dinah asked. "I've got tickets to *Falsettos* at Temple Emmanuel."

Christabel knew nothing about *Falsettos*, but she agreed to go. Everyone else had plans. Dinah, who could drive already, picked her up at her house. Christabel was as nervous beforehand as if it were a date. Maybe nervouser. She had never been on a real date.

“Are you okay?” Dinah asked Christabel at intermission, eyeing the finely tattered edges of Christabel’s program, which she’d been systematically shredding throughout the first act.

“I just--” Christabel folded the program rapidly into sevenths. “Sorry, I just--”

“I know you don’t, um, agree with--” Dinah gestured towards the now-empty stage.

“No, no,” said Christabel, although she wasn’t sure what she was denying. The play was a musical about homosexuality, and it was true Christabel didn’t agree with homosexuality. The other normal girls all did, matter-of-factly, just as they agreed with legal abortion and premarital heterosexual sex (in theory; Christabel didn’t think any of them had put any of these things into practice). They supported the right to choose; they felt they had rights over their own bodies, to subject them to what they chose. Christabel did not. It was just one of the ways in which she was not normal. But she had tried to eat with the Bible studiers already, and it had been unbearable.

“It’s okay,” she said. “I liked the part where he fell and he caught him.”

Dinah eyed her with interest and concern. “Yeah?”

Christabel looked away; dismayingly, her eyes were welling with tears, at the memory of the scene, the young AIDS-infected man, swooning with sudden pain and fever, clasped in the arms of his older male lover, all tender adoration, though they had been bickering a moment before.

“Yeah,” she said, unable to look Dinah in the bluish eye, unable to say anything more until the house lights dimmed again.

Everything else had been wonderful with the girls, and so when they started talking about dances-- proms and homecomings-- Christabel decided to go with them. She had none of the necessary accessories-- makeup, a dress, a hairstyle, a date-- but she could surely acquire each by the deadline if she tried.

“There must be some boy you like,” said skinny, freckled Ginny, between celery sticks. She had recently become a vegetarian, and had already had a gluten allergy, so she was getting skinnier, not that she seemed to mind. There were several boys Ginny liked. They fluctuated week to week, and constituted a topic of conversation for Ginny.

There was not any boy Christabel liked. She didn't know many boys well, and of the ones she did know, none of them were particularly interesting. Some of them were stoners, and some of them took French with Christabel, or wrote poetry for the literary magazine. One was seventeen but had been turned away by the blood drive that came to the high school, for reasons he refused to elucidate; that was the most interesting thing she knew about any of them, but it didn't seem like a reason to ask someone to a dance.

Everyone else had a date, though, even Dinah, who wasn't all that interested in boys either, who sometimes wore scarlet lipstick and dramatic eyeliner and little hats to school, and sometimes wore faded denim overalls and no makeup at all, when she was in what she described as a fuck-everything mood. Hearing Dinah say *fuck* felt like being poked hard in the stomach, to Christabel: uncomfortable and ticklish and unexpected. She didn't approve of swearing, but Dinah's husky voice made everything she said sound like a line of poetry, or a line from a play. Going to see Dinah in a school play, or one of the community theater ones where she sometimes had a small role, was disorienting: the

way the stage seemed to light up wherever Dinah moved, whether she even had any lines in the scene or not. Dinah had asked a theater boy to the dance, one Christabel thought might be gay; if he was, Dinah certainly knew it, and didn't care. So you could do that, too, you could just ask a boy. You didn't have to care. It was a dance.

For homecoming, she asked the one who sat in front of her in English class, with curly dark hair and humorous essay titles. He said yes. She would try, in later years, to remember more about it-- his facial expression, the follow-up practicalities-- but her memory didn't pick back up until lunch, when she said, "I asked Matt Sandbank to the dance and he said yes!" and the other girls squealed and they started talking about dresses.

She bought a dress and a lipstick and a tube of mascara, and they all met at Dinah's house beforehand to zip each other up and touch up each other's hair with hairspray and extra bobby pins and be picked up by their corsage-bearing dates. At that dance, she danced with Matt Sandbank-- her hands on his shoulders, his on her waist, and room for a slender person to stand between them. Then, exhausted, she sat down at a table with her friends, while Matt talked quietly with a golden-skinned, tawny-haired girl named Jessica. After the dance, Christabel and Matt did not kiss. They smiled shyly at each other, said thanks for a lovely time. He said thanks for inviting me.

Days later, at lunch, Christabel watched the way the tawny hair shaded into gold at the edges of the wood-shaving-shaped curls down Jessica's back as she walked by hand in hand with Matt.

“Does that bother you, Bel?” Sarah asked. Sarah had blue eyes and pink cheeks and brown hair scraped back into a ballerina bun; she had a backpack with her name embroidered on it, left over from grade school. She studied five hours every night and still managed to practice flute and soccer. “That he met her at the dance you took him to?”

Christabel shook her head. She wasn’t sure whether she ought to admit that, in fact, it pleased her greatly. She had recently read *Emma*, and a hope had shyly, inarticulately blossomed in her that each boy she took to a dance might meet a girl there who would kiss him, walk with him to class, leave notes in his locker and talk with him on the phone after school. Or, if not, then that he would meet a good friend, or hear a song that would become a lifelong favorite. Each boy would be glad Christabel had asked him to the dance, and yet she wouldn’t have to talk to any of them ever again, except to ask if they were done yet with the essay or the science project.

For the Valentine’s dance, she asked another one, a sweet, chubby boy who hung out with the male Bible studiers (the Bible studiers were segregated by gender, like the normal people). At that dance, Ginny’s date, who went to another school, sat across from Christabel at a pre-dance dinner and ignored their respective dates to talk exclusively to her, and then, at the end of the night, asked Ginny for Christabel’s number. Christabel’s first intimation of this was when Ginny ceremoniously and a little tearfully presented Christabel with the boy’s phone number.

“I just want you to know,” she said, “that *our friendship* is more important to me than *any boy*, and I don’t want this to come between us. I want you to know that I do *not*

mind if you call him, or go out with him, and I think he wants you to go to his prom with him and I do not mind at all if you go. Because he told me that he liked you a lot, and if you like him too then I think it is *great* if you two go out together.”

Later in life, telling this story, it suddenly became clear to Christabel that she was supposed to say no. She was supposed to hug Ginny and say their friendship was important to her too and she didn't want to go out with anybody who was such a jerk as to prefer Christabel to Ginny. But she didn't. She took the phone number, called the boy, and agreed to go to prom with him at his school. She had no interest in going, but she thought that, after Ginny had made such a production out of giving her the number, it would be rude to dismiss the matter. She hadn't yet gotten to *Northanger Abbey*; when she did, years later, she penciled a smiley face in the margin next to “...why he should say one thing so positively, and mean another all the while, was most unaccountable! How were people, at that rate, to be understood?”

Her lack of interest in boys, in dates, in phone numbers written in loopy purple ballpoint, was a worry to her, often forgotten but then suddenly alarming, like the tiny pimples that kept popping up along her hairline. You were supposed to go out with boys more often than the three times a year that dances were held. It was like doing only enough homework to pass the class. It made her nervous. Going to a second prom, at another school, would be like extra credit.

She wore the same dress to the other school's prom that she planned to wear to her own prom. The boy had dyed his hair with lime Kool-Aid that had stained the skin around his ears as well. He held her tightly against him on the dance floor, his pelvis

pressed against her pelvis. She could feel something hard and alive pushing at her down there, at the level of her belly, pressing on her like an extra hand.

When her mother had first explained to her what a penis was, she had walked around wild-eyed for a week, trying not to stare at boys' crotches, but she had eventually passed from the first flush of horror into a constant low-grade thankfulness that she wasn't a boy. Like thankfulness that she wasn't starving or terminally ill, it existed permanently but only occasionally forced itself on her notice. Now, like one of those commercials asking you to send money to a sad-eyed child in Bosnia, here was this thing, pushing at her needfully through layers of fabric, pleading without words. It made her want to change the channel.

Whatever she was supposed to do or say in response to his pelvis, she must not have done it, because he didn't try to kiss her after the dance. He took her home. She told Ginny, truthfully, that she'd found him pretty boring. She didn't add that boredom seemed to be driving her headlong through life, away from things other people could have, because they were not bored by them.

The bookstore-- a large chain with a miniature chain coffee shop embedded in it, on a dais two steps up from the rest of the store-- was the easiest place to meet, to hang, together or separately. You could drink coffee and study together, you could browse and bring stacks of books back to the two-top tables on the dais, you could roll conspiratorial teenage eyes at the creepy adult men who tried to chat you up on the strength of your

Christian fiction or your *Atlas Shrugged*, or your already-flourishing adolescent cleavage.

“This is one of my favorite movies,” said Dinah, holding up a book. Christabel had seen the movie, and hadn’t liked it. All the women in it were confusing and inscrutable, in a way that made it apparent that their lines had been written by men who found women confusing and inscrutable. Christabel was annoyed by this. If you were bewildered by women, you shouldn’t write movies about them. You should mind your own business. You should make movies about Middle Earth, or pirates.

“Really?” she said, trying to remember what Dinah might have liked about the movie. “It’s about…”

Dinah’s eyes were small, really, in her broad face. Broad cheekbones, broad nose, broad mouth, and those narrow little eyes, slate-blue or were they gray, peeking out from the planed expanses in amused bewilderment. The light caught in her faded-looking lashes, in her brown hair with its unexpected filaments of gold.

“Music,” she said. Her voice wasn’t bell-like, or throaty, or fluting, or notable in any objective way. When she said “music,” it wasn’t actually melodious. It just made Christabel think of every song she’d ever heard or been moved by, and feel simultaneously moved all over again and curious whether Dinah had ever heard or been moved by any of those songs, and what her favorite song was, and how it made her feel, and how it would make Christabel feel, to listen to Dinah’s favorite song and know it was her favorite and try to imagine why.

“Right,” said Christabel, taking the book from Dinah. “Let’s go sit down, okay? How are you, anyway?”

Dinah shrugged.

It wasn’t a shrug situation, though. Dinah wasn’t well. She was depressed-- clinically, with a diagnosis and a prescription. Christabel didn’t know what to do about it.

“Hey, Deenie,” she said, once they were sitting down.

Dinah’s eyes were friendly, but not all that focused. She was having a lot of headaches lately, and her skin, always pale, had shaded over into pasty. Her clothes didn’t sit right any more, and she had begun to wear sweatpants or overalls instead of taking the trouble to shimmy into form-fitting jeans. Her hair looked as if she didn’t wash it every day. There were dark circles under her eyes, and sometimes as Christabel watched, her eyes would flicker and fall closed, then open again with a shocked look.

“What’s up, Baby Bel?” she asked sweetly, vaguely, examining her fingernails, which were dirty.

“Well,” said Christabel. “You know how you’ve been been-- you know, depressed.”

“Yeah,” said Dinah, looking up. She looked so tired. “I know.”

“I wanted to tell you--” Christabel felt a horrible pressure on her heart, as if it were being shrink-wrapped. “Well, every human being is born with-- a need. A desire, deep inside them. It’s like a hole in you that nothing can satisfy except the one thing--

the one person-- that we're designed for. And we're never going to be completely happy or fulfilled until we-- find a way to--"

Dinah was listening, puzzled and maybe a little worried. Christabel could feel her cheeks burning. Why was this always so hard? *Brio*, Focus on the Family's magazine for teenage girls, made it sound so simple.

"Accept him," she managed. "J-Jesus, I mean. Into your heart. Because that's the only way you-- anybody, I mean-- can find real true happiness. Because that's what we're meant for. If you-- if you feel-- empty, or-- if it hurts just to be alive sometimes-- and it does, it does me too, but it's easier because I feel like I know why. Because we live in a fallen world. And I don't know what I'd do, either, if I didn't believe-- if I didn't have Jesus-- I'm sorry, Deenie, I know you think it's dumb--"

"No I don't," said Dinah gently, and put her hand on Christabel's knee. "I'm glad you have something that-- makes you feel all right."

"It's not just me," said Christabel, feeling desperate, the shrinkwrap squeezing her stomach as well as her heart now. Tears were welling up, humiliatingly, in her eyes. "I want you to be all right too. I hate that you're so sad. I love you, and Jesus loves you--"

"I love you too, sweetie," said Dinah. "Oh, don't cry. I'll be okay."

The fact that she was never bored with Dinah had seemed at first like the same blessed relief as her non-boredom with the rest of the girls, her ability to pay attention to them and enjoy them without wishing she could stab herself in the hand with a fork to

relieve the tedium of social interaction. When had it gone beyond simply not being bored? When had it started making her cry?

She had once read an article in the *New Yorker* about the scientific phenomenon of itching, which had mentioned a man whose head had itched for ten years; he had scratched until he wore away the skull beneath his skin and started leaking brain matter. She thought she could understand how it had felt, before the bone actually gave way, the bleeding mostly hidden by hair, the voluptuous dig of the nail, just a little deeper every time.

Later in the spring, when petals and stamens were falling from the trees and getting caught in everyone's hair, Dinah started being absent from school, a day or two days at a time. When Christabel called her house after school, her mother, sounding tired too, said she was lying down and couldn't come to the phone. When she did come to school, she was evasive about why she hadn't before. Headaches. She was tired.

On one of the better days, one of the days Dinah wore jeans again and an oversized Godspell T-shirt, Christabel gave her a bracelet of a type popular that year, an elastic band on which were strung a tight circle of perfectly round and uniform beads, in various colors. Karma bracelets, they were called, and the different colors stood for different things: strength, friendship, happiness, loyalty, passion, kindness, hope. Christabel had one in a color called sunstone and another in carnelian, but the one she'd bought for Dinah was a color she'd never seen before, the color the sun sometimes

streaked Dinah's brown hair, a warm gold that seemed to glow from within even under the ugly white lights of the department store.

Honey jade, said the oblong white tag. Joy.

Dinah put it on, wore it, fiddled gently with it sometimes while Christabel watched.

One day after Dinah had been absent for four days straight, the principal called Taylor and Sarah and Ginny and Christabel into his office, asked them to sit down (crowded in the small inner sanctum), spoke gently. Dinah was in the hospital. An overdose of the antidepressants she'd been on. They couldn't visit her, but she was going to be all right. This turned out to be true; Dinah was back at school after only a couple of weeks.

Something had been happening to Christabel while Dinah was gone. It had started with the falling shock she felt when she heard what the principal was saying, the lurch like missing a step on a staircase. It had continued in her prayers, which were more like furious fights located just under her solar plexus. She was one of the fighters, but it wasn't clear to her who the other was. It couldn't be Jesus, because she knew she was right, and Jesus was right by definition, and someone was wrong here. It was, maybe, someone or something she had thought was Jesus. Something that had loved Dinah the same way she did, but had the power to make everything all right, to wrap Dinah up in heavenly light and protect her from herself. The fights ended when she decided that whatever she was angry at didn't exist in any way she needed to worry about. She was going to have to find a new way to love and trust God. It was a lot to think about, and

didn't leave her a lot of time to think about what she was going to say to Dinah when she saw her again.

When Dinah came back, paler and thinner, she was wearing the bracelet, and when Christabel walked wordlessly up to her she held out her arms, enfolded Christabel, held her tight. Christabel had never been so close to her, had never even imagined it; she could barely breathe.

"You're shaking," said Dinah, almost laughing, and stepped back to peer with baffled, affectionate concern into Christabel's face. "Are you okay?"

"Me?" Christabel laughed, too, clutching at Dinah's arms.

"Yes, you. I'm fine. But you—"

"I'm fine."

"I kept thinking about you," said Dinah. "They took—" She nodded to her wrist, with the bracelet on it. "They took all my things, you know, in the hospital, in case I tried to hurt myself with them. My earrings, because of the sharp backs, and—I guess I could try to swallow this and choke on it or something, I don't know. But I kept thinking about you, and how you gave it to me, and said it was for joy? And I thought—"

Suddenly she pulled Christabel in again, squeezing her tight, her arms stronger than Christabel would have imagined, and Christabel leaned her head down on Dinah's shoulder. She wasn't crying. She wanted to tell Dinah she had been thinking, too, and that she was sorry she had acted as though she knew more about how the world worked than Dinah, tried to lead her anywhere, when it had become clear now that nobody knew anything. She wanted to tell Dinah that she had always loved Jesus more than anything,

trusted him to make sense of the world for her, but now it was clear no one was going to make sense of the world in that way, and if the world wasn't going to make sense, Christabel wasn't going to be embarrassed to love Dinah beyond all reason.

Instead of saying any of this, she groped with her fingers till she touched the warm-cool beads that she couldn't see. With her eyes closed, her head heavy on Dinah's shoulder, she saw another Dinah, with no dark circles under her eyes, aglow in a ring of golden light. It wasn't the light of heaven; it was the light of Christabel's love, fitting nowhere in any world Christabel understood, but beautiful. Something to make a new world around, maybe. Something to keep hold of. From now on, Christabel would go nowhere where anyone would think this was dangerous and take it away.

CHAPTER VI

HERE I AM

When the time came to buy a ring, they were poor-- Nick was in what was officially and somewhat euphemistically called “asset protection” at the nearly defunct Kmart, chasing down the city’s saddest shoplifters, and Hannah was a waitress at a downtown taco restaurant, counting out grocery money in what Nick called, teasing gently, “stripper singles,”-- but they also didn’t have a lot of expenses. They were both introverts-- she read obsessively, he listened to music in the same hungry, grasping way-- and shopped at Aldi for food and at Goodwill for clothes so perfunctory that her younger sister threatened to nominate them for a couples’ episode of *What Not To Wear*. With the discovery of each other, each seemed to have lost the need for much more from the outside world than food, shelter, books and music, fantasy baseball (for him) and a tiny herb garden (for her). They went out to movies occasionally, but preferred DVDs at home, nestled on their sixty-dollar Salvation Army couch with a bowl of homemade popcorn topped with garlic salt and nutritional yeast, and a cup of chamomile tea apiece. In public, they held hands, shyly, like best friends on a first-grade field trip.

They had talked about marriage, glancingly, but filling the silences and hesitations in the conversation with such radiant smiles that they both understood a proposal was a formality. On a rare trip to the mall, she saw a pretty, lacy, cream-colored sundress and, smiling sideways at him, bought it. There was a jewelry store in the mall, too, but the

metal detectors at the door and the way the salespeople seemed to look at them (Nick's scruffy beard, their Goodwill clothes, their air of apologetic hesitation) made them skitter back out almost as soon as they had entered. But later, over tuna noodle casserole studded with broccoli, Nick mentioned that his stepmother knew the owner of a jewelry store, only about forty minutes' drive away. Would Hannah like to--?

She would.

But she didn't want anything she described as "sticking up, with prongs." She lived clumsily in the physical world, expecting objects to conform to the laws of narrative, not expecting anything to be there unless it *meant* something, so she bumped into things and tripped over things, got her jacket caught on doorknobs and left trails of coffee on the beige carpet from overfilled cups she couldn't keep her attention on sufficiently to hold level. Sticking-up things with prongs, she reasoned, were an unnecessary hazard to have on your hand at all times.

The store owner smiled at this. He had a ponytail and slightly crooked teeth, and didn't seem as alarming as the other jewelry store employees they had encountered. They found a ring with small diamond chips set in an alternating, vinelike pattern with tiny leaf-shaped rubies. Hannah loved it immediately; it looked like something that might magically sprout up overnight in her garden, a tiny, shiny miracle of the earth. Nick wondered if-- since the setting of the stones conformed in shape to the stones themselves, sticking up along the line of the ring rather than into the air above it-- a wedding ring would fit next to it on the same finger. The store owner assured them that a wedding ring could be cut to fit. Since Nick's stepmother was a friend, they were given a discount.

Nick proposed two weeks later, more or less casually, in their beige bedroom with the multicolored spread Hannah had crocheted herself, and although Hannah cried easily and often at that time in her life-- over books, movies, music, especially fulfilling sex-- she didn't cry over this. She slid the ring on-- it was very slightly too big, and they expressed the intention to get it resized-- and held her hand out, loving the sparkle, the dark and light stones both gleaming.

She twisted it around and around when they went out to hear live music, one of their few passions that couldn't be indulged in the house or the garden, and the air filled with cigarette smoke and screams. She caressed it with the pad of her thumb when they watched movies side by side on the couch, when he laughed so hard at *The Music Man* that he fell off the couch. When they danced in the living room to the White Stripes, her hair falling around her face and sticking to her sweaty, smile-stretched cheeks, it was just there, on her finger.

She woke up one morning with Nick holding her hand, singing quietly to her fingers, the nursery-school rhyme: "Where is Ring Man? Where is Ring Man? Here I am! Here I am!" and laughed and laughed, dragging him closer, her hand on his hair, the ring on her hand.

She didn't like cut flowers, they didn't need fancy china, and she had a dress. They were married from the Quaker church they sometimes attended, where the minister had formerly been Nick's eighth grade Social Studies teacher. His parents and

her parents came, and her younger sister, who brought her a pair of earrings from the Renaissance Fair. Hannah put them on immediately, touched.

They didn't have a reception, but they shared a bottle of champagne later, at home, toasting each other. Nothing seemed to have changed, except the ring on his finger and the newly double ring on hers finger: the custom-cut wedding band fitted neatly over the leafy scrollwork of her other ring, the first ring. They were married.

Both of them dreaded the doctor-- the ugliness of waiting rooms, the humiliation of undressing in public, the antiseptic smells and the small violations of needle and rubber-gloved finger-- so they had continued to use condoms for birth control. When they got tired of condoms, they stopped using them. Months passed, though, and then a year, and Hannah's period continued to arrive regularly. They still didn't want to go to the doctor, and so they didn't. Besides, they still didn't have much money. Nick made more as a police officer than he had as K-mart security, but not that much more, and Hannah's tips were better at the upscale vegetarian eatery where she worked now, but not that much better. They were both vague on how much babies cost-- maybe not too much at first, with cloth diapers and breastfeeding, but then there would be school supplies, and college educations. Adolescence would arrive, with its tears and recriminations, its revelations, too late, of all they had done wrong. A baby might have been nice, they agreed one evening when her period arrived again, but it was nice, too, just the two of them.

Hannah was asleep in bed, alone, Nick on nights again, when the phone rang, and it took her a few rings to wake up, and then she said into the receiver, “What?” and, correcting herself, “Hello?”

She listened for a few moments, and the fog of sleepiness, the adrenaline spike of being suddenly awakened, the comfort of her familiar bed in the familiar darkness, fell away in a black and salted wave of something else. It was not like anything that had ever happened inside her, and Hannah was slow to understand, slow to taste; whenever someone offered her a bite or a sip of something, it took her a minute longer than they expected to decide whether she liked it or not. By the time she would have started to scream, the time seemed to have passed. Instead she said, eventually, into the phone, “Okay.” It was something she would return to in thought, wonderingly, for the rest of her life: the moment when her husband’s partner called to tell her he was dead, and she assented. She reached out and turned on the bedside lamp, and the ring on her finger caught fire, shining with silver metal and with white and blood-colored light.

The funeral home washed Nick’s floppy hair so that it was silky and shining, and did something to make his dead skin look pink and healthy. (She had googled the embalming process, begun to read the information provided, and stopped very quickly, quickly enough that she didn’t learn very much, but the information that they pumped veins and capillaries with red enamel-- *red enamel!*-- created a permanent impression in her mind. The hardness of it, enamel. The brightness. The redness.) Maybe they’d been the ones to take off his wedding ring and give it to her, before boxing him up for

cremation, or maybe it had been Nick's partner. She couldn't remember; it was a blank space in her mind, how she came to have his ring, but she did. For a while she wore it on a black silk cord around her neck, along with her own wedding ring, the one cut to accommodate the first ring, with its tiny diamonds and rubies. When the cord broke one day, she put the wedding bands away in the topmost drawer of her jewelry box, with the broken cord, but she did not put the first ring away; she wore it.

She looked at other women's rings often. She had gone back to her waitressing job, stayed at it for another year, but she had begun to drop things-- she was drinking much too much, at home alone in the long mornings and the late nights, she had taken up smoking, she was losing weight, once or twice the electricity had been shut off because she had forgotten to pay her bill-- and eventually she got a job at a coffee shop counter instead, not walking more than a mile a shift, accepting money from hands that frequently had rings on them. She looked at the rings with interest. Many of them had sticking-up stones with prongs; others sat lower in their settings; most of them were diamonds, sparkling brilliantly with whatever cut they'd had bestowed on them, some accented with extra diamonds, white on white. She wore her own ring, which was still very slightly too large for her wedding finger, sometimes on her wedding finger, sometimes on her thumb or her middle finger. She twisted it around sometimes, sometimes caressed it with the pads of her other fingers. Sometimes she took it off and put it in her mouth, sucking pensively, daring herself to try to swallow it. Imagining the sensation of choking, of feeling it lodged unendurably, immovably, refusing to be anything other than what it was, where it did not belong. Not leaves, after all; nothing so soft and swallowable.

One afternoon she went to get a massage-- she had tried dating websites for awhile, and then decided that the combination of a good vibrator at home and occasional professional massages served her purposes without unnecessary complication-- and took her ring off, along with her watch and the hair elastic she kept around her right wrist. The place she went employed twenty or thirty massage therapists, and she never asked for anyone in particular, although sometimes she requested, hesitantly, *not* to be scheduled with someone who had talked too much or seemed less than expert with her vulnerable, passive neck, legs, and fingers. Today it was a girl she'd never seen before, who said, with her finger in Hannah's hair, massaging her scalp, "You like that, don't you?" Hannah made a sound that agreed without, she hoped, sounding orgasmic. No one else touched her any more, except accidentally, handing her money or taking something from her hand. She dodged friendly hugs; they lodged something in her throat that took days to dissolve.

After her massage, she went to the grocery store, finding herself inordinately pleased that a brand of canned soup she remembered from her childhood was newly on the shelf there, and then home. It was not until the next morning, when she rose at four to open the coffee shop at five, that she realized her ring was missing.

She searched her bag, her wallet, the watch pocket of her jeans, her fingers beginning to tremble. She got into her car and drove to the grocery store-- it was open twenty-four hours-- ran inside, walked up and down the aisles-- the soup! She had stopped in front of the soup, but her thumb hadn't checked her ring, then or for the rest of

the afternoon and evening-- what had she been thinking? Who cared about the fucking soup?

She asked at the customer service desk; the tired woman working there took her phone number without interest. She got down on her hands and knees by the self-checkout, seeing new worlds of grime and dust and pennies and colorful garbage, and then went outside and crawled on her hands and knees in the parking lot. It had just rained, and the asphalt shone under the streetlights-- everything shone and glittered, as if the ring had dissolved and diffused itself over the entire parking lot. She could not remember where she had parked. The massage place was closed. Tears were spurting from her eyes; her lungs weren't sobbing, but her face was drenched. When she ran out of time, she drove to work still pouring tears, but like any heavy downpour they stopped of their own accord fairly quickly, and the only person who saw them-- a fiftyish barista who hummed to himself a lot-- didn't say anything to her about them.

After work she went to the massage place and asked; the two young women at the desk gave her sorrowing looks and offers to call her if anything turned up. The carpet, the cleaning service, their vacuum cleaners. The push brooms of the grocery store. Whoever swept the garbage from the parking lot. She went home and searched her house, crawled on her knees from her car to the front door in the grass and back again. She made flyers with a picture of the ring and the offer of a reward, and gave them to the massage place and to the grocery store. She rented a metal detector and walked the yard again. She walked everywhere with her head down, looking. Eventually there were intervals when she was not looking, which grew longer as the years passed.

And yet: there were gleams everywhere, sudden points of light. The world sparkled. The gravel on the strip where she parked-- how had she never noticed?-- was brilliant, the asphalt silvery, filled with pinpricks that dazzled. She found coins on the ground, an old spoon in her car, the remote control to Nick's stereo between the couch cushions. It would have seemed like some sort of lesson-- you never know how much is out there to be found, until you lose something you already had-- except that almost everything she found was worthless. The shining things (trash, something broken, a trick of the light) kept shining, meaninglessly, and she could not stop looking, jerking her head towards every sudden spark, stopping dead in her tracks, even in places where she'd never been with the ring. It was as if someone was constantly calling her name (Hannah, Hannah, Hannah), and she had to stop herself from answering (*Here I am*), remember that no one meant her, that no one was calling, that the world had always made that noise, and it had only now become her name.