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Drift and Other Stories encompasses three short stories featuring working and middle class families from New England suburbs. In *Drift* a woman picks up her husband at the airport after he spends a week in the Caribbean with his brother, and her suspicions about his commitment to their marriage grow as she imagines the final day of his vacation. In *Labor*, an aging municipal laborer returns to work after spending two months recovering from an on-the-job car accident that disables a co-worker, a young seasonal worker on break from college. His shame at his lack of success in life and his lack of future prospects undercut his ability to feel remorse, until he realizes that remorse is his true everyday work. In *Once Removed* a single father plans to retire to the Philippines just as he learns that his young, single daughter has become pregnant. As his dream of a third-world paradise fades, his daughter decides to terminate the pregnancy, and he learns that true dreams, as well as the false or deluding ones, also fade.

DRIFT AND OTHER STORIES

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I

DRIFT

Tamara is rattled. It's a cool night, but Ben can't drive in the rain without the defrost on, so it's hot and stuffy in the car. With the blower moaning on high and the car tires seething loudly along the slick pavement, it is hard for them to talk, and they need to talk. Tamara feels drowsy. Her forehead rests upon the passenger window, absorbing its coolness. She can feel the artificial heat drying out her eyes, so she keeps them closed while Ben goes on. She can tell this flusters him enormously. He is trying to explain who that woman was at baggage claim. The one who wore all those bracelets. LaGuardia recedes in the car's mirrors.

Ben has just returned from ten days in St. Croix with his brother, Andrew. Andrew lives in Boulder, and the two hadn't seen each other since their mother's funeral almost a year ago. So even though Tamara is still awaiting her honeymoon, even though this was the first time in matrimony she and Ben had slept in separate beds, she gave the trip her blessing. She felt like she had to. Now, she's not so sure. When she found Ben in baggage claim, there he was, separating from a long embrace with that brunette with the bracelets. Ben hadn't even seen his wife arrive, Tamara thinks, until the brunette squeezed his cheeks together with one hand, planted a kiss on each of them and tramped away with her bags, her ass, beneath loose white pants, simultaneously on the rise and the fall with each loping step.

As Ben prepared for the trip, Tamara felt the summer had worn on long enough. Without her students, her lesson plans, or her neat schedule divided into forty-five-minute increments, she had looked for ways to break up her day. So the drive from Connecticut to LaGuardia, two hours each way, didn't seem so much like a chore as a distraction. Ben had tossed his suitcase into the trunk of the car and taken the keys from her. She had plans for the week: read by the pool, a visit to her parents' house, order a trellis for the back yard. There was a bat that she and Ben had trapped in the attic in April, and had let fly around for three days, clawing at the floorboards until it finally starved or had a heart attack in fell silent. If she thought of it, she would bring a rag and a bucket up there and clear the carcass.

Ben pulled up to the curb at the international terminal. They both got out and met for a kiss and a long embrace at the back of the car, where Ben hauled out his suitcase and returned Tamara's keys, the smell of exhaust surrounding them. Ben turned to look back at her and smile before entering the building, and when the door shut behind him, Tamara could only see her own reflection in the dark glass. She climbed into the driver's seat and crept out of the terminal. As she neared the interstate back home, watching the planes take off on the airstrip outside her window, she was pinched by a prickle of doubt and felt that by sending her husband off to the Caribbean, she had opened herself up to regret. It wasn't so much anxiety, as the dim ghost of anxiety, made all the more haunting by its lack of contour.

She knew Ben's travel itinerary, but little more than that. He would have a layover in Miami, and then fly to St. Croix, where Andrew would meet him at the airport and drive them—top-down was Andrew's style—to their hotel.

Her first night alone at home, she tried to ease her concerns by drinking two glasses of wine before bed and fantasizing about a sun-tanned Ben, hair sprayed across his chest like dark algae on rocks, delighting her with apelike lust upon his return home. But the fantasy only heightened her anxiety, contrasting so sharply with the reality of dry, perfunctory love making over the past few months. Or sometimes, just the reverberating void of any lovemaking whatsoever. She couldn't forget the frustration of it: trotting to the bathroom, wondering if Ben had actually finished inside her, returning to him asleep in bed, or at least feigning sleep. With Ben gone, with Tamara teetering on the imprint he'd left in the mattress, she slept little while her thoughts twisted, conjuring abject scenarios she was ashamed she even had the capacity invent.

Ben's first phone call, the second evening of his trip, didn't help matters. She could hear some kind of buoyant music in the background: bossa nova, merengue maybe. Ben shouted into the phone and sometimes gave answers to questions Tamara hadn't asked. She should have known something like this would happen. Should have sniffed it out. Whenever her husband got together with Andrew he started to act like a prisoner just released from jail. Drank more, laughed harder, adopted a looser, edgier vocabulary.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"Definitely," he said, his voice thin, as if parts of it had eroded in the phone line.

"No, *where* are you?"

“Hold on, let me see,” he said, followed by a long pause. “Lune Bleu. I’m at Lune Bleu.”

“How’s Andrew?” she said.

“Andrew? He’s ridiculous. But he’s really good.”

“Why is he ridiculous? What do you mean?”

“He ain’t ridiculous, he’s my brother,” Ben laughed. “No, he’s just enjoying his time here is all.”

“Well, try not to enjoy it too much,” she said, regretting the words as they fell from her lips.

Ben hurried her off the phone and promised to call the next day. He missed her, he said, he loved her. When Tamara hung up she could feel the coolness of her kitchen, shady except for the one yellow square of sunlight on the linoleum. She had been craving specifics: the view from the hotel, what they ate for dinner, the color of the sand and the water. Was there a boardwalk? How did Andrew seem? Had they talked about their mother at all? Ben’s vagaries only left her to invent the scene for herself, and her uncertain anxiety filled in the spaces between Ben’s descriptions like flood waters crashing through a city.

The car jolts forward as Ben pumps the breaks. Tamara lets her forehead drum against the window. She didn’t feel like driving, doesn’t feel like talking. The heat from the fan and the coolness from the window make her head throb. She feels her head throb in her stomach and she has the sensation of a fever about to unfurl inside her body like some primitive animal hatching through its shell.

“It’s like how we always meet people on vacation,” he says, “except you weren’t there this time. That’s all there is to it.”

She’s watching the streetlights blur past, dashing white light onto the glassy pavement, but his voice calls her back inside the car. She wasn’t there. That’s all there is to it. They pull onto the Whitestone Bridge, and Ben appears to become tense with the concentrated traffic. On the other end of the bridge, the glint of distant streetlamps and lighted buildings make a glassy constellation. The brake lights of the Jeep in front of them smear bright red stains across the windshield. The power lines’ tall wooden poles look like the mast of a great ship, sloshing out to sea.

“Remember when we met the Rosens in Montreal? It was just like that sort of thing,” he says. “Of course I was going to meet some people. I wasn’t going to let Andrew go out alone. I can’t see why you’re getting so upset about this.” His tone is off, and he seems to know it, so he stops. He is gripping the steering wheel with clenched fists. His sleeves are rolled past his wrists, as if he’s a magician about to perform a card trick.

“Imagine it was me,” Tamara says. “Imagine you hadn’t seen me in a week, and found me in the airport with a tan man on my arm. You’re telling me you’d just brush it off? ‘Oh, I just met him with my sister,’ and that’s the end of it?”

“I’m not brushing anything off. We can talk about this. I want to talk about this. I’m just trying to explain that there’s really nothing to talk about.” The windshield wipers shriek. “Really.”

“I had big plans for us tonight,” she says. “I had a few surprises for you. I thought tonight could be special.”

He finally takes his eyes off the highway to look at her. He meets her eyes and then breaks the gaze.

Tamara feels grim. She feels her face blanch. Her silence fills the car, steady as the rainfall. She has been more willing to try new things in the bedroom, and tonight was supposed to be opening night of the new show. Things Ben likes, as researched by his soft moans and his internet search history. She had been thinking about it for much of the week, curled into their large bed, entering the covers and seeping into a fantasy highlighted by her own extravagant provocations and her husband’s stamina, vigor, gratitude. But now she feels foolish, mocked. She thinks of the small bottle of strawberry-scented lubricant in the nightstand drawer, and the thin white piece of fabric sliced through her haunches, snapped to her loins. She’s stultified to think of the bristly heat she’d shaved above the hidden lips of her sex and the tiny red bumps that surround it from her crotch to her upper thighs.

The car veers up to a stoplight on the Hutchinson River Parkway and Tamara looks out the window. A woman shielded beneath an umbrella approaches the curb of a CVS, her car idling with someone in the driver’s seat who will wait for her to come out. The woman reaches the door and shuts her umbrella, and Tamara’s thoughts return to daiquiri parasols.

“Was it the two kisses?” Ben says. “That’s just their custom. *Dos besos?* Everything’s kisses with the Spanish, right? Hello, kisses. Goodbye, kisses. Kisses for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Kisses for dessert.”

Tamara’s head is still turned, but she refocuses her gaze away from the CVS and onto her own reflection.

“It’s the dessert I’m worried about,” she finally says, though the effort is depleting, and with a quip like that, she thinks she’s done talking for now. Let him flounder.

Ben pantomimes incredulity. She can see him in the runny glass. He shakes his head from side to side with a bewildered smirk.

“Andrew can have all of them,” he says. “I’ve got you.”

Nothing.

“I’m not even into European women! It’s a very different type of style over there, you know? Unconventional. It’s not for everybody.”

There’s Ben for you. Decorous as all hell. He talks to her about other women like they’re cilantro or licorice, just not for everybody. He’d never admit to an impure thought. He has lunch with female co-workers from the law office and tells Tamara all about it over dinner, boasting about the woman’s wit and charm, but concluding that she seems lonely, or sad, or disturbed, or pompous. Wide hips or bad breath. Dresses like a Republican; high collars, blouses buttoned at the wrist.

He tells people what they want to hear, lies to the dentist about flossing, spits blood into the sink and blames the brand of floss. He makes dinner plans with people

they're repelled by and has no intention of going, then he'll cancel without an excuse. Tonight's just not going to work for us, but maybe in a few weeks. Never calls back. He'd rather walk in the rain than ask for a ride. Agrees with everything. Last Christmas he agreed with Tamara's dad that teachers should carry guns in school, then changed his mind back on the ride home. She's never seen him lose his temper, not even when she crashed the car, but he smolders. He prefers his grief solitary and only reveals it to quash one of her gripes. She feels like he's growing distant? She's worried he doesn't appreciate the work she does to draw him out of his shell? Well, she wouldn't know what it's like to work the hours he does. They've talked about moving, taking up a set of new circumstances before starting a family.

But he's complaisant. Wears the vestiges of an older brother: the prematurely receding hairline, the forward canting posture, the pinch in the shoulder blades where he carries the stresses of the first-born. Mows the lawn every Saturday, alternating patterns so it looks sharp and manicured like a baseball diamond. Sets the table for a banquet and then uses his finger to stir the ice in his drink. Reads to her from Twitter when she's at the best part of her book. He pretends not to know the names of sex positions. He talks about porn like he talks about flash mobs—some sort of quizzical fad; something other people do—even though they share a laptop.

He loves her authority, takes direction from it, the way she acts like she's in front of her classroom even at home. What are we doing this weekend? What are we doing after dinner? Married her for her itinerary. When should we visit Mom's grave? When are you free?

He can't stand conflict, can't stand her silence.

The car is all silence. Airless and blower-hot.

"You can ask Andrew," he claims. "He'd just love to tell you all about that woman. He knows a lot more about her than I do. That's for sure."

Tamara's eyes are closed. Each time he talks she shrinks a little further inside herself. Her thoughts are smeared and muddled, like wet newspaper.

"Hell, Andrew would be glad to tell you about all the women we met. You know how he is. You can call him when we get home. He'll tell you whether or not they snore. He'll tell you about their belly buttons. Innie or outie."

She has made it clear she's done talking, and with that, she's done listening, too. They pass the state border into Connecticut, but all she sees is the blur of lights and a darkened mass of timber. She feels the car lunging her forward, and forward still.

"Tamara," he says. Can't stand the silence. "Tamara."

But, no, Tamara is off on her own now. With her eyes on the passing streetlights, she has drifted off beyond his reach. She's warm, in sunlight—encased in the memory—standing clear of the giant oak's shadow. With Ben in St. Croix, she'd grown bored at home and in the middle of the week and after lunch she drove to the cemetery in Bristol where Ben's mother was buried. To get to the grave, she passes through a small garden of low, leafy shrubs and stirs up a trace of mint as she strides through. She lays the flowers she had purchased before the headstone.

These visits, always with Ben by her side, never used to make her cry. Maybe it is the experience of solitude, the attention she is able to pay to the soft earth beneath her

feet and the man in the tank top sliding a weed whacker with sturdy arms between the stones at the back of the cemetery. But Tamara is choked with emotion.

She never knew Ben's mother on two feet. Could never measure herself against the older woman's height, could never offer more than a half-hug or a held hand. The illness was always in the room with them, except for the day when Tamara and Ben arrived at the hospital to show her engagement ring. Ben's mother had cried and said she knew her son was a charmer but she had never expected to have such a lovely daughter-in-law. The purple crescents beneath her eyes held her tears like puddles. Tamara didn't think it was possible, but this woman's joy actually made fall deeper into love with Ben, and she had sensed that he was falling deeper, too.

She doesn't think she could delight her own parents the way she cheered Ben's mom, perhaps because their decades of health and security had moderated their passions. She visits them once a month and feels proud to be home for them to look upon. But when she leaves, she always feels like she is abandoning them.

She wipes her eyes with a tissue from the pocket of her dress and lingers above the grave before turning to leave.

The house is dim when she returns and she walks in a ring to turn on the living room lamps she and Ben selected when they moved in. She saunters from room to room, taking stock of the open spaces where she needs to place an end table or a bookcase. The dining room is still unfurnished, and standing silently in the empty room as she stood before the headstone, Tamara is overcome by the time in this house that lays ahead and

that recedes beyond her plans for it. Tomorrow, she thinks, she'll remove the bat carcass from the attic, but what then?

She sleeps fretfully and in the morning, she's anxious. When she awakens to the long shadows of elm trees cast upon their front lawn, she puts on a pot of coffee and takes a moment to feel and smell the hush of this empty house. It's bright outside, the kind of bright only attained when everyone else is at work. Tamara finds their laptop, determined to book a honeymoon for herself and her husband to consummate the marriage they had expected a year ago.

There's been no honeymoon yet. They never even got around to booking one because they were so wrapped up with Ben's mom as the wedding approached. Her illness loomed over the whole event. The wedding was mostly Tamara's people. Many of Ben's relatives declined their invites, presumably because they knew they'd have to fly from their corners of the country like flushed out geese, and into Hartford for the funeral, and they didn't want to make the same trip twice in one month. In hindsight they'd have been better off choosing the wedding, because Ben's mom died the next morning when the after-party had ended and the champagne bottles had rolled to the corners of the their rooms and beneath the bedspreads at the Ramada. After that—after spending a weepy day at the hospital, after their guests had bitten into the green of cantaloupe rinds in the hotel reception room, after the stale and antiseptic smells, the shock and gloom and thank you for your gifts—after that, any talk of honeymoons seemed sordid.

So the honeymoon is still on hold, but even as Tamara sits in front of her computer, scrolling through pictures of Lisbon, Puerto Vallarta, Venice, and Chiang Mai,

Ben and Andrew are in St. Croix to reconnect. This reconnection, Ben says, is vital. It's been planned forever—his word, *forever*—and he couldn't back out. And so she is home, and Ben is not.

Tamara closes the laptop without deciding anything. It's still early and she wants to get something done so she can enjoy the rest of the day. She fetches a rag and a bucket, and drags her feet up the carpeted staircase. First the bat carcass, then the day is hers. She tugs on the string hanging from the ceiling and unfolds the heavy wooden steps that lead to the attic. Boxes of winter coats, her grandmother's church hats she'd always cherished, her childhood stuffed animals in wait of a baby to cuddle with are pushed into the far corner against the wall, and in the middle of the floor lies a dead oriole with tufted orange feathers sprouting from its chest. Her first impulse is to laugh as she recognizes the selfish fiction—Ben had been so damn sure it was a bat—but the instinct quickly fades, and she feels the dull and bitter loneliness of realizing the truth. She moves to pick up the rag, and the floorboards sigh under her solitary weight.

Ben is driving faster now, as if he can pique his wife by overtaking all these other cars. Or perhaps he just wants to get out of the car himself, cobble out some space between the two of them, retreat to the shower and scratch the sand from his scalp. He's wearing his poker face. Tamara closes her eyes again. He's so damn hard to read, but Lord, she's had practice.

She can picture the trip. She's seen Ben and Andrew greet each other before, and each time it reinforces her perplexity about the strange and challenging contract among

men. An upright handshake or perfunctory hug. She's not so naive as to believe that they act the same way alone as they do in front of her, the smiling wife snuggly perched on her man's arm, staking claim to the power of an intimate three years over a formless and meandering twenty-seven. But she can picture it, and she needs to picture it. She needs a placeholder for this jilted feeling, something less harmful to get hooked on; some methadone for this fixating gnaw of abandonment.

She imagines: the sliding glass door to the balcony has been open all night to let the sea breeze into the hotel room. The sun seeps under Ben's eyelids and wakens him. The salt air has bitten stains into the furniture and faded the wallpaper. Otherwise the room looks very much like Ben and Andrew's shared bedroom in their parents' home in Ellington. Twin beds run parallel down the walls, but close enough so that the boys could leap from one to the other and collapse into a pile of pillows or miss and bang their heads.

Andrew is face-down and snoring. His sandals have been kicked off at the foot of his bed. Or no, maybe not. Maybe he's not even there.

Andrew's bed is still made up and undisturbed.

Blinking in the sharp, early sunlight Ben needs a moment to remember the name of this woman sleeping beside him. Rosa? Rosana? Rosaria? He has slept with his arm around her waist, and she hasn't complained because it's the first night, the *only* night, and she hasn't grown exasperated by his muscle spasms, his mutterings, morning coughs right into her naked face. She's topless. She rolls over and stretches like a cat, then continues the roll onto her stomach. Still in that sleepy, embryonic state, Ben grabs for a

slice of flesh, and it's familiar but it's novel, like drinking wine, but in Paris. She admonishes him playfully for his grab, but opens a new half-roll into his body so that their legs are locked at the knees and her breasts rest against his upper arm.

But, no. That's not right. Tamara knows Ben better than that. There's no way he'd do it. A guy like Ben, a married man, a man married to Tamara, would crumble under the weight of infidelity. What about all those times with her, his own wife, when he'd been unable to make love? He'd just assumed, aloud, it was the angst of a new marriage, the death of a mother, a stressful job. Tamara had assured him that it happens to "all guys," but that only agitated him further. Who were all these guys? Had she taken a survey? Chris Nash, her college boyfriend? Victor Emmanuel, her last fling before meeting Ben? Who else? And how many? The thought of Tamara with another man, even in contact years before she and Ben had met, had always been a source of disquiet to her husband.

They hadn't given up in the bedroom and successes had returned, if not frequently, but the uncertainty of the marital act, the element of surprise, the gamble, had nibbled at his confidence and nourished Tamara's suspicion that Ben had stopped enjoying her. So, no. Even in a foreign country with his brother and a bar full of Spanish mermaids, Tamara doesn't think he couldn't bring himself to do it.

But maybe:

Andrew's bed is still made up and undisturbed.

Ben has stripped out of his clothes and fumbled the woman out of her top. He feels the hot weight of her breasts as she works on him. But it's not working. The woman turns around and lets her skirt fall so that the twin hills of her buttocks are pressed into

him. And it's not working. She drops to her knees, but before long, becomes discouraged and rises with a flimsy smile. She lies on the bed, legs spread to receive him, showing him with two hands where she wants him. She turns on her stomach and arcs her body. And it's not working. Ben kneels on the bed, naked, soft, rosy and distended, and the woman is gone from the room before the sun is up.

With a shudder, Tamara shakes herself free of the thought. For all her doubts, her nameless anxiety, this doesn't seem right either. She's pained by the thought of Ben's failings as something permanent or essential. Something that can't be fixed.

Ben stares out the windshield as though he's staring through a concrete wall, and Tamara wonders how much of her husband is locked behind those eyes and how much makes it through.

With queasy stomach, and all the empathy she can muster for her husband's clenched fists and her own wounded softness,

she revises:

Ben wakes up alone. Andrew's bed is still made up and undisturbed.

He steps out on the balcony, shuts the door behind him and squints hard. His and Andrew's swim suits are hung over the metal rail, stiff and dry in the steely morning sun. A man and a girl sell necklaces on the sandy street below. There is a plastic bag full of oranges and plump guavas resting beside the television. They are ripe, but Ben would rather wait for Andrew and get a bigger breakfast somewhere on the strip to carry them through the afternoon. If he doesn't have a big breakfast, he'll wind up grouchy on his flight home. He lights a cigarette. He's probably got a few left, and he might as well

smoke them all. Bought them just for this trip, though he'll deny it to Tamara later. He leans against the metal rail, and his head feels lighter with the tobacco. But, he notices, he does not feel good. His mood is somber. He's irked by something, but out in the sun, he can't exactly pinpoint the affront. He looks in at Andrew's empty bed, feels the rawness of rum squeezing and pooling in his empty stomach.

It's already nine. At ten, he'll go get breakfast with or without Andrew. He stamps out the cigarette and rolls the glass door open to reenter the room. He steps over sandals, boxer shorts, and t-shirts that litter the white tiled floor. He can feel individual grains of sand beneath his feet. In the bathroom he pours a glass of water, letting it run cold over his fingers before filling the cup, and returns to the balcony clutching the guidebook he'd purchased before the trip. The night before Ben's flight, he sat beside Tamara on the living room couch, flipping through the guidebook and mooning over the sights they'd have seen together if she were going with him. They both said they wished she was. Now, the soft cover is warped and frayed. He and Andrew have been using it as a coaster for their sweating drinks.

He flips through it idly, now, as he would a fashion magazine. There are suggestions for hiking, biking, snorkeling, camping. There are restaurants with tiny tables and chairs sprouting up from the sand. The moon is heavily featured, and so are attractive couples. Again, he glances in at Andrew's empty bed and he doesn't know exactly how to feel. Ben has large cheekbones and his lips are naturally turned downward. With his face in neutral, it's hard to distinguish impatience from politeness, discouragement from relaxation, anguish from fatigue. Tamara, from her car seat, in the heat of fever, can

imagine his face staring down at the guidebook, an eye on the street below waiting to catch his little brother striding up, but she can only begin to guess at what it conveys.

He sees Andrew before Andrew sees him. Andrew saunters up the street in last night's clothes that he picked out for Lune Bleu. When he spots Ben on the balcony, he gives a big wave and can't conceal a smile, and Ben feels his irritation grow at the bounce and spring of his little brother. Ben knows Andrew doesn't have a room key, but he waits until Andrew climbs the stairs and knocks before getting up from his chair to open the door. They greet but say little as Andrew tosses his sunglasses aside and fills up his own glass of water from the bathroom tap. He joins his older brother on the balcony.

"You should have stayed out," Andrew says.

"You had a good time?"

"They were asking why you went home so early."

"I wouldn't call it early."

The girl selling necklaces on the street chases a seagull away from her table. The man has dozed off. The girl sits back down and clinks together two silver coins.

"Where'd you sleep?"

"I didn't. But they're all staying at the Sherezada, if that's what you're asking. I walked back." Andrew downs the glass of water in one gulp. "Hey man, are you okay?"

"Yes. Fine," Ben says. His tone is artificially bright. Tamara knows the tone.

Andrew tells him everything about the bar and the beach at night, the cab ride. He impersonates their Spanish accents. His eyes are bloodshot and he's rambling. He tells of the view from her hotel room, and all the dresses in her closet, the purple thong she

showcased. His voice is louder than normal, and emphatic, but as the conversation wears on, his enthusiasm and pride are dampened by Ben's thorny mood, and before long they're both quiet.

Ben is looking at his watch. On second thought, there's no time for breakfast. He wants to arrive two hours early for an international flight. He can't miss it, or Tamara will be stuck by herself in all that LaGuardia traffic. He hasn't called in two days, and he knows she'll be irritated. But now that he's leaving, that his time with Andrew has run its course, he's lonely for Tamara again. He is thinking about her figure as he packs his bag, separates the dirty laundry from the clean clothes he never got around to wearing. He folds his boxer shorts and thinks about folding her underwear when he does the laundry. He's aroused and pleased by the arousal. He wants to show Tamara what he's capable of, under the right circumstances.

Watching Andrew lope around the hotel room, peeling his sweaty t-shirts from the white tiles, he wonders what the purpose of this trip was to begin with—they didn't talk about mom even once—and the vague sense dawns on him that brotherhood, like marriage, is permanent, but it's transitory.

He's got two cigarettes left, so he crawls out to the balcony again to take a final look at the strip of beach and ocean off to the east between the two squat concrete buildings. The smoke curls through his fingertips. He'll come home and tell Tamara this was exactly the break he needed, but he's been on edge the whole time. He can't keep up with Andrew, the happy little bachelor, and ten days have left him exhausted. He is

drained by the effort of appearing confident, but feeling anxious. It's been a chore to flirt with women he knows he can't sleep with.

Tamara indulges in this moment she has imagined. Her hands are pressed together and pressed to her abdomen. Her eyes are tightly closed as she drifts.

Ben is startled by Andrew's knock on the glass and realizes he has smoked the cigarette to its filter. It's time to leave. They empty the coins from their pockets and leave them on the nightstand for the maids. Ben's shuttle leaves from the hotel in a few minutes, but Andrew has an evening flight and is looking forward to a few more hours on the beach.

The farewell is quick. They embrace, slapping chests, slapping backs and explode apart. Good trip, they agree. Ben is saddled with bags and Andrew wears swim trunks with a towel over his shoulder. They are going to talk soon. Ben needs to visit Boulder. They're not going to let it go so long again, and then seconds later Ben is squeezed into a van full of tourists in fedoras, carving along the highway to the airport.

Tamara was riding in the back seat after the funeral, when Ben drove Andrew to the airport and gave him a handshake at the curb. "We'll need to get together soon," Andrew said. "Soon," Ben said.

The sun glints off the airplane windows as Ben takes his seat at the gate. He's got his ticket in his hand, and he's surveying the bronzed faces of his fellow passengers. The woman beside him wearing capris and sandals tinkers with her cell phone and seems drunk, or excitable, or both. A short, dark woman in a navy blue vest sweeps a candy wrapper from the carpet into her dustbin. Ben knows Andrew is back on the beach,

probably chatting up a woman in a bikini, and probably having a better go at it on his own. And then, he'll be back home to discuss the microbrews with the grad students at Boulder. In a month, he'll be skiing.

But it's not Andrew he's thinking about when gets up from his seat, strides over to the row of chairs in front of the dazzling glare of the windows, his 747 to New York gliding into gate A24. No, it's not Andrew he thinks of when he places his hand on a braceleted arm and says, "Hello. Remember me?" When they've switched seats to sit beside each other, and he's flirting with this woman on the airplane and she's clutching his arm in mock-fear during takeoff and they're lamenting that they hadn't spent more time together on the beach, he is not thinking about Andrew. He is thinking about a conversation with his mom. Her face is ashen. He can see her lips move, but barely hear her voice, and she's beseeching that he not make any decisions on account of her— beseeching so fervently that she must not mean it— to not make any decisions because of her health, but Tamara is such a perfect girl and she has always dreamed of seeing one of her sons get married.

If Ben has regrets, there isn't much he can do now. Tamara knows it too. But he can let her watch it. He can hang on to this divine brunette with the bracelets, and watch his bags lurch past him on the conveyer belt, and watch them pass again, and wait until his wife arrives. And when he sees her coming, he can whisper something in the woman's ear, look into her eyes and give a sad and gaudy farewell and let her kiss his face. *Dos besos*. He can pick up his bags and turn to his wife with a self-assured glow in his eyes and then, in the car, tell her, You weren't there. That's all there is to it.

He can drive her home in the rain. Tap her on the shoulder and whisper her name.

“Tamara? Tamara?”

Tamara hears him. She hears the garage door squeal open.

“We’re home.”

Her eyes are still willfully closed. She needs just one more moment to remember her girlhood house she used to dream was a castle, built to the reaches of the unknowable sky, before she can open her eyes and admit it to herself. Yes, we’re home.

CHAPTER II

LABOR

They all jumped out from behind the backhoe when they heard me walk in and Z had a 30-pack and Smitty had a couple of my Playboys that had been delivered, and they all had these big stupid grins. I almost swallowed my cigarette when it happened and so I was coughing and laughing and my crusty old heart felt like a stone rattling against my ribcage when they gathered around me to slap me on the back.

“Welcome back,” George said. “And just when we got your smell out of the bathroom, too.” A rotating fan in the corner spun from side to side, sending warm air through his earring.

I had decided to come out of hiding. There were cigarette butts all over the garage floor and the mechanics were set to start working on the broken pay loader. All of that was normal. But there were also two new guys I didn't recognize, probably replacements for me and the kid, and I guess we'd bought a new dump truck.

“Now, I want to let you know,” George said. “If you're not ready to come back you don't have to.” He grinned. “On the other hand, your wife called up and complained about some wrinkled growth she found on her ass each morning. We just figured she was talking about you, so we promised her we'd take you back.”

They all laughed like crazy.

“You son of a bitch,” I said. But I was still coughing and laughing and really, it was good to be back, so. And then Smitty, Z, John, Kurt, Dave, Al, Dom, Feeney and Butchy all hit me with pretty much the same joke they’d probably been saving for a couple of months, ever since I was out on leave. So I just laughed and said that all them were sons of bitches, too.

Z passed out the beer and a few of the guys took them and he cracked mine open for me. He had a new tattoo on the underside of his forearm: the symbol for the ladies bathroom with a set of devil horns. Z was the only one who had been working there as long as I had. The door of the main bay was wide was open. The boss, Cassarella, had parked his bright-red, town-issued pickup right in front of the cinderblock building. I wondered how long I could go without seeing him.

Outside the work yard was dusty, but low-sitting dust, and the morning sun hung high above the heap of rotten leaves and dirt and dog shit the guys had spent their summer sucking up from the drainage basins. A rogue possum crouched in the heap’s shadow and poked at its muddy tunnels.

Then one of the new guys took his elbows off the bumper of the dump truck and came over to me and Z. He was younger than most of us in there, short, even in his work boots, shaved head, tattoos running down the sleeves of two skinny arms that spun out from his body like stray threads off his wife beater.

“You must be Rich,” he said.

“Rich Perrault,” I said.

“I hear you’re the luckiest bastard in the world,” he said. His eyes were the lazy color of blue milk glass. He sort of barked like a seal more so than he spoke like a human.

“Who’s this schmuck?” I asked Z.

“This is Mike Willis. Cassarella hired him right after your thing happened,” Z said. The air in the garage mixed with a thin vapor of diesel fuel. The sun reached the possum on the heap outside, and the rodent scrambled down a hole with its teeth showing.

“And who’s the other guy?” I said.

“Other guy’s Mike Ross,” Z said. “He’s replacing Billy. Cassarella fired Billy.”

“Fired him,” I said. “What about the union?”

“Union couldn’t help him here,” Z said. “Billy came in stinking drunk one day, and everybody knew he was blowing lines in the bathroom, and then a lady called up and said that he ran over her cat with the patching truck.”

“It was some funny shit,” Mike Willis said.

“Shut the fuck up,” Z said. “Billy’s got no job now, you dumb piece of—but Rich, it was some funny shit. After he gets fired Billy goes home and brings a cooler back here and just parks at the end of the driveway so no one can get out. And he just sits there drinking on the tailgate.”

“You’re shitting me,” I said.

“Shit you not,” Z said. “And so Cassarella walks down to talk to him and you can see he wants nothing to do with Billy, I mean you can see his sphincter tightening as he walks down there. He’s starting to waddle a little bit.”

“Fucking Cass,” I said. Mike Willis started to giggle.

“Fucking Cass,” Z said. “So then Billy stands up, unzips his fly and takes his dick out. Says ‘You come any closer Cass, I’m gone take a drug test right on your boots,’ and he starts pissing!”

“Poor Billy,” I said.

“Forget Billy,” Z said. “How you doing? They got you on anything?”

“Painkillers,” I said. “I’ll be on painkillers the rest of my life.”

“Guess I know who to call,” Z said. “You clocking in today? Or just dropping by?”

“Clocking in,” I said. “You don’t get paid for dropping by.”

Z took a long gulp of his beer. He looked around the garage. “Rich, when they towed that truck back to the garage, and we all saw the damage, we thought you was both dead,” Z said.

“It’ll take more than a tree to take me out,” I said.

“What about the kid?” Mike Willis said. “Is it true about the kid?”

“Why’d they hire you?” I said.

“I heard he was only here for the summer. Heard he was going to college,” Mike Willis barked.

“Mike Willis already got his Class 3, that’s why they hired him,” Z said.

“I’m surprised you’d come back so soon,” Mike Willis said. “Think I’d be done if I was you—after a thing like that?” He let his hand sail over his smooth scalp. “Is it true about the kid?”

“You’ve only been here two months?” I said.

“Yeap,” Mike Willis said.

“Guess you don’t know shit, then,” I said.

George came over and lit a cigarette. “Is it good to be back?” George said.

“It was good to be away,” I said.

“Do you get workman’s comp when you do something like that?” Mike Willis said. He was looking at all of the older men like a baby looks around a room, demanding an explanation for everything. A couple of the men finished their coffee or their beers and punched the clock. I thought about heading back home, taking another week off.

Everyone looked at Mike Willis and then looked away.

“So Rich,” George said. “Guess we just can’t get rid of you. I’ll try cutting your brakes next time.”

“You son of a bitch,” I said. “You rotten son of a bitch.” I was laughing like crazy.

*

My truck was gone, so Cassarella made me ride along with Z in one of the old pick-ups. On the passenger seat was a plastic lunch pail, a set of baseball cards and two Snoop Doggy Dogg CDs.

“That’s all Mike Willis’ crap,” Z said. “He’s been riding with me while you were away.” He picked up one of the CDs. “Kid don’t know he ain’t black,” Z said.

We pulled up to the job on Northgate Lane. Butchy was already there with the wood-chipper fastened on the back of his truck. Al and Kurt pulled up behind me and Z in another pickup loaded up with ropes, a ladder, two chainsaws, rakes, brooms, grass shears, an axe, a box of loam and a small gas can.

The trucks were lined up on the right side of the empty road, parked just before it opened into the mouth of the cul-de-sac. I counted: the five houses on Northgate had thirteen garage doors combined. Even at the end of August, their lawns were as thick and green as a stack of twenties. Couldn’t believe the lawns. Beyond the cul-de-sac was a heavily wooded area that hadn’t yet been cleared to build more houses, and one of the trees had fallen into the dead end and another rotten tree leaned out over it and looked like it could come down any minute.

“Why the hell are we out here?” Z said. “Ain’t nobody drive out here.”

“One of these rich folks must have called it in. Like we got nothing better to do,” Al said. He leaned on his truck and made to spit on the ground, only it landed on the toe of his boot. A light breeze flirted with the back of his gray mullet. He limped over to the group on a twisted left leg he injured when he fell off a roof ten years before.

“Yuppies,” Z said.

“Yuppies,” Al said.

“The richest one percent own one hundred percent of three-car garages,” Z said.

“And seventy percent of all Rolexes,” Al said.

“And eighty percent of golden retrievers,” Z said.

“And ninety percent of hot bitches,” Al said.

“And ninety-five percent of blowjobs,” Z said. They all laughed like crazy.

Butchy, that bag of lard, wasn't going to get out of his truck and Z and Al were useless when it came to trees, so I went to the back of their truck and got the ladder, the rope, and the chainsaw myself and started out toward the rotten tree.

“Slow down, Rich,” Z said. “It's a Monday. Ain't no prizes for finishing first.”

“I've been back a half-hour and I'm already tired of listening to you all. Let's just do the damn thing,” I said, and I saw them laughing at me, but I wanted to show them I was back alright. Like I'd never been gone.

I set the ladder beside the tree. Then I started the saw and set the chain break on and put the saw on the ground and tied a loop of rope around the handle. I took the rope in my hand and climbed the ladder. I heard Al laugh when I stumbled up the third or fourth step, but I didn't turn around. Done this a million times.

When I climbed high enough to make a cut, I tied the rope in my hand around the tree, and then pulled the saw up. I looked down at the guys, all of them staring up at me in their shabby cluster, smoke rising from between their fingertips. Down the street, the houses towered on either side. I steadied my legs and cut a triangle about a third the way

through the tree. I lowered the saw, and started down the ladder. Sweat had already darkened the gray shirt that clung to my chest, right where my bruises were—where the steering wheel hit my chest when my truck hit the tree. Z and Al and Kurt were still smoking their cigarettes and watching me, so I showed them my middle finger and moved the ladder to the other side of the tree to finish my cut. I went back and picked up the saw, but when I started toward the ladder, the goddamn rope caught up my feet and I goddamn fell. I threw the saw forward and fell onto my stomach and my face hit the dirt. Al was laughing as he and Z ran over. Couldn't help himself.

"I'm fine!" I said before they could get to me. "Why didn't you tell me the rope was there?"

"You looked like you knew what you was doing," Z said.

"I do know what I'm doing!" I said from the ground. I rubbed the dirt off my face and my face was hot.

"Ain't no prizes for finishing first," Z said. "You've got to slow down, Rich."

I stood up, picked up the saw. I spiked it on the ground. It made a funny noise, then just lay there chugging, chugging, chugging. Then it died.

"Jesus, Rich!" Z said. "No one said you had to come back."

And I walked away from them to get a cigarette from my truck. Butchy was still in his truck and had his eyes shut, but he heard me coming up by his door.

"You guys done already?" Butchy said.

*

Mike Willis walked up to me outside the deli with his fresh coffee steaming in one hand and his work gloves waving out of his back pocket. I scratched a few lotto tickets on the hood of Z's truck and then unwrapped my sausage egg cheese. I knew it would destroy me, but what the hell.

Mike Willis had been off on a different job, but we all come to the Millburn Deli at ten-thirty or eleven to break up the morning. Our big orange trucks were the only vehicles in the parking lot. His boots scraped against the sand and loose stones on the pavement. He picked a spot on the hood and leaned in next to me, grinning. Z was still inside placing an order.

"You picked a hot day to come back," he said. "I would have taken this one off, if I were you."

I took a bite of my sandwich and looked the other way as I chewed.

"Everybody knows," he said. I turned my head back toward him. "Everybody knows you fell asleep."

"Bullshit," I said. Nobody had said anything to me about the crash. I'd told the police I had swerved to avoid hitting a cat and lost control of the truck.

"The kid told George. George told the union head. Whole union's been talking about it." I stopped eating and looked Mike Willis in the eye.

"I ain't heard anything about it," I said.

"How come you don't retire, after a thing like that?" he said. "Collect some severance and get out?"

“How come you don’t mind your own goddamned business?” I said. A squirrel leapt onto one of the black metal tables in front of the deli and picked up a crumpled wrapper someone had left. “Besides, you’d need me and about five other guys to retire before you’re in line for a raise.”

“I’m not looking for a raise,” he said. “I won’t be here long. Working on my HVAC, weekends. My cousin does HVAC. One time they sent him to Rhode Island. He fixed the AC in an hour, spent the rest of the day on the beach.”

“Does Casarella know?” I said.

“About the HVAC?” he said.

“Fuck the HVAC,” I said.

“About the accident?”

I took another bite from my sandwich and then put the rest in the wrapper and balled it up.

“Probably.”

“Shit,” I said.

“Not so bad, is it? You got workman’s comp, right?” he said.

I turned my head away from him again and felt my spine crimp as I turned.

“I got everything I need,” I said.

“What about the kid? Did he get comp?”

I could feel the sweat on the back of my neck. It was hard enough getting back to work, and there was no reason a little shit like Mike Willis should be making me feel worse about it.

“Wasn’t my kid,” I said. I got in the truck, closed the door and turned on the radio as I watched for Z in the rearview mirror.

Syl was on the front yard when I got home. She had the water hose in her hand, cigarette in the other, and she was screaming at two boys, probably about ten years old, who straddled their bicycles. It was almost four p.m. and she was in her nightgown still—or again, maybe. My dog, Alex Rodriguez, was tied up to the grill out on the side of the house and he was barking at the kids and then barking at me when he saw me coming.

“Here comes my husband!” Syl said. “He works for the government! You little shitheads is going to get it now!”

“He doesn’t work for the government,” one of the boys said. “He picks up garbage.”

I didn’t know what to say, because sometimes I did have to pick up garbage, so I said, “Shut your mouth.”

“They’ve been throwing rocks at our windows for the last twenty minutes,” Syl said. I glared at the boys. Me and Syl had a son, and he used to be a shithead too, but now he owns his own landscaping business and he’s a waiter part-time, so.

“What are your names?” I said, and they just looked at me. “What the hell are your names?”

“My name’s Josh, and his name is—Josh,” one of the boys said, and they both giggled. Their clothes and hands were smeared with dirt, but their sneakers were bright white, like a dentist’s office.

“Where are your parents?” I said.

“They’re at their jobs. They don’t work for the government, so they don’t have to pick up garbage,” the boy said.

“Shut up,” I said, and I wanted to go over there and grab him by the neck. I could feel my heart rattling against my ribs. I was out of breath. “Do you throw rocks at your parents’ house?” I said. I was panting now.

“Yes. We. Do,” the boy said, mocking my gasps.

I wanted to grab him by the neck, but more than that I wanted him gone, and I wanted to sit down somewhere. “I know that you’re just a couple of dick-idiots, so I’m not going to get mad this time, do you hear me? But the next time I see you around my house, I’m going to—I’m going to make sure—I’m going to make sure it’s the last time you can ride those bikes with two legs,” I said.

They started to ride off and Syl dropped the water hose and ran out into the street and yelled, “Next time I see you here I’m going to—” she trailed off. And then, “So, how was it?”

“It was fine,” I said and she followed me into our house. I wanted to lie down and take a nap on the couch now, because when Syl started cooking the whole trailer got so

damn hot it was hard to doze off. But she sat down on the couch with me and wanted to talk, so I lit a cigarette instead.

“I want to quit,” I said.

“You can’t quit!” Syl said. “Not yet! Wasn’t it good to be back?”

“You know I don’t like to be away from you,” I said.

“I know you’re full of it,” Syl said.

“I’ll show you what I’m full of,” I said.

“You’re gross” Syl said, like she hadn’t known me all these years.

“C’mon, babe. Let’s go be gross,” I said. She got up and got the TV remote. She flicked the screen on and sat back down.

“It’s too hot to be gross,” Syl said.

“But I need some loving,” I said. “It’s been a hard day.”

“We need some new windows,” Syl said.

“You’re still getting them checks,” I said.

The trailer fell silent. “Get up,” she said. “I was about to make hamburgers.”

“You know,” I said, “I just don’t think I can eat.”

“Oh, baby,” she cooed. “Don’t let those guys get on you. Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.”

“I think I’m all out of stones,” I said.

*

In the morning I went in early and joined the others for a cigarette and a cup of coffee in the mechanic's bay. The heap of dirt and rotten leaves outside was as high as I'd ever seen it. When I parked my truck and walked to the garage I could smell it all rotting. The humidity kept the smell low to the ground. I finished the cigarette and was about to finish off the coffee when Cassarella scurried around the corner like a little mouse, and said he wanted to see me in his office before I went off for the morning. Didn't even say hello to me, just that he wanted to talk before I went off.

"Be careful," George said. "Tell him you won't kiss on the lips unless you get an extra week off."

I punched in and then went to knock on Cassarella's door. Stenciled on the fogged glass: Neal Cassarella. Superintendent. Burlington Highway Department. He was seated behind his desk reading the newspaper, a few drops of coffee on the short bristles of his black moustache. The white walls were empty except for a NASCAR calendar with a picture Bobby LaBonte leaning on his car and grinning. It was still flipped to July.

"Cass," I said.

"Have a seat Rich." He folded the newspaper. "How's Syl doing?"

"She's wonderful," I said. "Very glad to be getting her allowance again."

"I bet. I bet," he said. "And your son? Did you get to see much of your son?"

"No," I said.

Cassarella straightened in his chair and smoothed his moustache with two index fingers. He was all eyebrows and moustache, with a tiny man attached.

“Well, the Yankees. At least you got to watch the Yankees for a while,” he said. “That new pitcher, Novak? Nova?—whew, he looks like the real deal,” he said, and I shifted in my chair, shooting daggers back at him. “So,” he said. “Is it good to be back?”

“It was good to be away,” I said. He nodded grimly, then smiled. He opened his mouth to talk so I interrupted. “Cass, you ever seen a live octopus?”

He squinted his eyes. “I’ve seen a live squid,” he said.

“Disgusting creatures,” I said.

“How’s that?” he said.

I took my time. Z had to drive me out on a job, and I knew he’d appreciate the few extra minutes for his coffee. “The thing about octopuses—I was watching something on Animal Planet—the thing about octopuses is that they’ll eat each other if they have to.”

“Humans have done that, too, haven’t they?” he said.

“Jesus, Cass, you seem to know a lot about that,” I said. He let out a high-pitched chuckle. “But the thing about octopuses is that when they get really stressed, they start to eat themselves. Isn’t that weird?”

“Huh,” he said. “I didn’t know any of that.”

“That’s what it feels like to be back,” I said. “I feel like a stressed fucking octopus.”

“Well, we’re glad to have you back, Rich,” he said.

“Is that right? Because for a while there it seemed like you didn’t want me back,” I said.

“Rich,” he said. “Of course we wanted you back, but you must know how hard that was going to be. You know, in a lot of ways, you’re lucky.”

“I’m lucky?” I said.

“You’re one lucky duck, Rich,” he said. “Have you gone to see the kid yet? If you ever wind up going, make sure to thank him for saving your job.”

“For saving my job?”

“If his parents had decided to litigate there’s no way in hell you’d be sitting here.” Inside the garage, the main door was hoisted and one by one you could hear the trucks turning over their engines and chugging out into the lot.

“Bullshit,” I said. “That’s what the union’s for.”

“Rich,” he said, his voice lowered. “We all know it was an accident.”

“Hell it was. I know what the hell I’m doing,” I said. “Damn truck didn’t have any seatbelts. Whose fault is that?”

“I really wish we had known that,” he said. “A lot of this could have been avoided.”

“It’s your goddamn job to know it,” I said.

He sat back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling. His shoulders rose with a deep breath and fell on the exhale. Someone was testing a weed whacker in the garage. We could hear it whirr and clip at the ground and then bang against the cement so it would feed out more string.

“Did the kid get comp?” I said.

“The union’s picking up his medical bills. Not his time off.”

I nodded, fingers pressed against my lips.

“Rich, maybe it’s time we talked about retirement,” he said.

“This wasn’t my fault, Cass! Damn truck didn’t have any seatbelts, and you want to fire *me*?” I said. “Jesus Christmas.”

“No one’s getting fired. Have you gone to see him, Rich?” he said. “You know he’s not going to be able to go back to school this year, right?”

“I was there Cass! So what if he talks a little funny? What about all the things I’m not going to be able to do this year?”

His eyebrows and moustache all dropped. “Have you gone to see him, Rich?” he asked again. “Because I think if I were you, I might have done that by now.”

“You’re not me, Cass,” I said.

“You’re right,” he said, chided. “I’m not.”

“*You* are not sixty-seven years old. *You* don’t have two bad knees and a bad heart. *You* don’t have a mortgage to pay off. *You* have never gone two months without a paycheck in ninety-five degree heat!”

“Well, I’ve never fallen asleep at the wheel and hit a tree either, Rich,” he said.

“And you’ve got the world’s tiniest dick,” I said. I stood up and tore Bobby

LaBonte off the wall, but I missed and so I swiped for it again and knocked it down. Then I went for the door and kicked it on the way out.

On Saturday morning, I woke up at seven and slipped out of bed without waking Syl. It'd be another few hours before she got up. I made a pot of coffee and watched a couple of birds float up to the white deck chairs we placed in our back yard. The sky was all gray like a concrete wall. I took the coffee into garden and walked between the two rows of sprouts Syl and I had planted in April. My knees were stiff, but I knelt down in the dirt and fell onto my hands. One of the plants bent forward with the weight of two fat tomatoes. I squeezed them with a soft hand and felt the flesh and pulpy mess moving around under the skin.

I drove down to the 7-11 to buy another coffee and four scratch tickets. One was a winner for a free ticket, so I bought four more. It was almost eight-thirty and I sat in my truck, scratching away the silver film with a nickel. I drove to the church on Dominic Street.

Church was exactly as I remembered it except for I sat by myself in the back. I didn't sing, but followed along with the words in the hymn book. I looked at the window at the stoplight during mass, and counted how long the red lights lasted. When I got to the front of the line I said "hello" to the woman with the wafer and she looked all confused at me, and when she said "the body of Christ," I nodded and took it and went back to my seat.

I knelt in the sunlight dampened by the building's colored glass. The organ music churned on as we all knelt, filling all the space above our heads and penetrating the gaps between my ribs. From the next aisle over and a few rows back some alto or soprano knew all the words, and *sang*. Just fucking *sang*, like maybe Jesus was handing out record contracts. And when the music stopped, her voice still hung in the air, and then faded.

When the mass was over, I got back in my truck and sat in the parking lot, scratching the rest of my lotto tickets. My coffee was cold, and when I swirled it, it was still cold. I adjusted my mirrors and sighed. I knew where the kid lived.

It was a handsome colonial. One day in June the kid and I were driving around paving potholes nearby, and he pointed out that this was his house. I recognized it. My son did the landscaping there a couple of years before, when he still lived in town. There were rows of azaleas on either side of the front stoop. They bloomed crimson to match the trim of the doorframe. On the side of the house, my son lay down a column of mulch and placed a cluster of blueberry shrubs, wild lilac and toadflax so that the bumblebees would be drawn over there from mid-spring until the end of summer. I'd never had the chance to look out back, but I knew there was a big deck that my son lined with columbine plants to try and attract an occasional hummingbird. I wondered if the hummingbirds had ever come.

"Yes?" the woman said. She was on the telephone as she answered the door, absently regarding me as she rested her thin white forearm on the doorframe. She wore a

floral print dress draped over her lean figure. She looked out at me through green eyes. I had to stop and take her in before answering, and I think she must have thought I was stupid for taking so long to answer. But I'd seen women more beautiful than her.

“You must be the plumber,” she said.

“Well, actually, no. I'm Rich Perrault, I'm here because—”

“Could you just wait a moment right here? My husband is just getting out of the shower, then it's all yours,” she said. “We need to step out for a while. I hope that's all right. But my son is just here upstairs.”

“Your son is here?” I said.

“Yes, my son is upstairs watching TV.” She lowered her voice. “He's in a wheelchair, but he'll be able to help you out if you need anything. Excuse me,” she said. She left me there in the foyer, splashed with sunlight from my shins down to my paint-splattered work boots, and went on talking on the phone.

I watched her climb the stairs and enter another room. Her voice became muffled, but still chimed like loose change clanging on the floor. The woman's heels knocked through the house, over hardwood floors, carrying her, I would guess, to table stands where she kept creams and bracelets, scarves, rings. When she appeared again she was with a tall man with wet hair, dressed in a tan suit. The lucky SOB who goes to bed with her each night. Her husband. He smiled.

“The hot water heater's in the basement. Through the kitchen, first door on your right,” she said. “You can leave the bill on the table? Or put it in the mail? Thank you so much!” And they were both out the door.

I'd never felt a silence before, but I felt this one.

The staircase was on my left. I walked right. I stopped to look at the ornaments in the living room. I flashed the chandelier on and off in the dining room. I tiptoed between the marble countertops in the kitchen. My route took me in a circle back to the front door. At the top of the stairs, the TV flickered blue light against the walls.

I knew the kid was sitting there, bent forward in his wheelchair. I knew where his forehead had hit the windshield. I knew where his legs had been wedged between the seat and the dashboard. I knew which ribs were broken, where the deepest wounds had been gouged. There are things you don't forget. The steaming hood, the truck still rocking, the feeling like I'd been cut in half. The heat. The queasy knowledge that there was nothing I could do to fix it, to put the blood back in. I couldn't go back in time to the night before and stay home with Syl instead of closing down the bar with Z. I couldn't go back further than that give my son a better life. Or even further and wear the condom, or jerk off in a magazine.

I wanted to climb the stairs and tell the kid that I was sorry. And was he going to be okay? And did he have brain damage? And I was sorry I didn't remember his name. And did he see the tree coming? And why didn't he wake me up? Did he know it was my fault? Did he think it was his fault? I wanted to say that I wished I was the one in the wheelchair, but that wasn't true. I was glad as hell that his side took the hit, not mine. I wanted to tell him I hadn't graduated college either.

Instead, I sat down at the kitchen table. There was a bowl of fruit, except it wasn't fruit. It was a bowl of tiny jewels meant to look like fruit. Syl was 19 when I got her

pregnant. She was at the community college across the border in Canaan, and I was in tech school. We didn't keep that one, but a year later it happened again, and that one took. We both dropped out and swore we'd go back when things had straightened out. I figure that was the last time I'd had a chance to be something else. That was probably the line between reversible and irreversible. Before the crash, I used to play golf at the Burlington Country Club. Over the summer it's half-price from 6 p.m. until dark. The day after Memorial Day, I punched out and changed into my sneakers, gym shorts and T-shirt, and they paired me with three other guys with creased pants and polo shirts. I hit a bogey and left after the first hole. Told them I had a meeting.

I went outside and sat on the front stoop beneath the shade of a giant elm rooted in the neighbor's yard and surveyed the lawn work my son had done. It made me feel like Syl and I had done something right, either raising him, or letting him go away. Sometimes the best skill to have as a father is knowing when you've got nothing else to offer. And knowing when to stop expecting something in return.

When the plumber came, I told him the hot water heater was in the basement, just through the kitchen. First door on his right.

It was mid-September and cool enough to at least bring a sweater. I guess school had started. Me and Z went out weed-whacking but came back to the garage early. We parked out back and sat in with the mechanics so Cassarella might not know we were there. But he came in and craned his neck, and then left. Then a minute later he came

back with a yellow slip of paper that had an address scribbled on it. “Grab a shovel,” he said.

We drove out to the address, Z behind the wheel. Usually it was just a squirrel, or maybe a rabbit or a possum. On the worst days it was a skunk. You’d just have to turn your head and scrape it up. But, no, not this time. We were out on Mount Vernon Street, near Calvin Farms, and heading toward the town border.

Z pulled the truck over and we both got out and sauntered up to it as we pulled on our work gloves. It was hard to see what it was, but it sure as hell wasn’t a squirrel. The mess stretched about fifteen feet, from snowy tail and shanks, up a trail of blue and red, flecks of yellow, pools of gray, two more hooves, stiff red fur and a cold gaze. No antlers. We didn’t say a word as we approached. The truck’s headlights cut clear through the dimming September daylight.

Then I saw the strangest thing. It was as if by seeing it, by seeing how strange it was, everything else made a little more sense by comparison. Beside the deer carcass there lay a second fat sack that gained definition as we got closer. Gained feet, gained a tail, a long neck, dismembered, a triangular beak, prehistoric eyes. A goddamn emu. It was as if the two were crossing the street together when the damn thing happened, and neither was fast enough to leap or fly, dash, bound or squawk away. And now they were both torn open, feathers and fur glued to the pavement where I’d been patching potholes for almost thirty years.

Z held our only shovel by the handle and looked over at me. Our two shadows spread out long and thin and overlapped. Dry leaves kicked at our feet, blown in from another season.

“Shit,” Z said. “What do you think? A murder-suicide?”

“Shut up, Z,” I said. “Just, please, shut the fuck up.”

CHAPTER III
ONCE REMOVED

When the bell fixed to the front door rings, I look up from my perch at the cashier's counter and greet my customers, smiling with my eyes. I've got Bob Marley playing through the surround sound. The woman coming in now, at ten-thirty, is Kamila Casale. She works down the street as sales manager at Verizon these days, hawking cell phones. I recognize her because she graduated from high school the same year as my daughter, Josie, who has just moved back in the house after six years in California.

Kamila has come in here the past three Mondays to buy treatments that are supposed to kill pubic lice. She started off with Nix, and then switched to RID. This week, she's back to Nix. You would never know it to look at her. Her company-issued polo shirt is crisp and neatly tucked, her belt is firmly cinched around her slender waist, her hair is cut short and cradles her oval face. She swings a set of keys by the key ring, lending a nice jingling soundtrack to her slinky canter over to the personal care aisle. A cool burst of October air follows her inside and reaches me on the other end of the counter.

Kamila usually buys a Coke or a tube of toothpaste with her lice shampoo. She likes to put on a gracious smile and tries to distract me from her purchase with a cheerful mood, as if with a smile like that, she must be buying for somebody else. She will say,

“Daylight savings is my favorite weekend of the year.” She’ll tell me why, as she waits for her receipt. “I think I’m going to save my hour this year. I’ll keep my same schedule and then only use that extra hour when I really need it.” I know this buoyancy of hers is probably a front, but I can’t help but admire it. There’s something enviable about grace under public lice, nimbly accepting the consequences of a vivid youth. Not everybody has that.

But today, she’s all business. I scan her bottle and sweep it into a plastic bag all in one motion, like a shortstop turning a double play. She pays with her debit card and looks at the floor. Her mouth is a horizontal line, pursed with the discomfort of this errand. Her mascara is thickly drawn beneath her eyes, making her look tough but girlish.

“Would you like a receipt?” I ask.

“No, thanks,” she says, gazing at the floor. She’s waiting for her twenty dollars, cash-back. There’s a delay before my register opens, and I can feel her discomfort grow in those couple of seconds.

I’ve just read in a book called the *Art of Happiness* by the Dali Lama that His Holiness makes it a point, whenever he stays at hotels and such, to make a personal connection with everyone he meets, even the maids who he shares an elevator with, who speak Spanish or Portuguese. It’s supposed to make you feel some interconnectivity. Like there’s something inside of everybody that we can recognize and cherish, no matter how different our lives may be, no matter whether we have public lice—I’m paraphrasing—or sell public lice shampoo.

When I look up from the cash register to hand her a twenty, she's looking back at me, her glossy lips parted, on the cusp of speaking. She stops twirling her keys and they fall silent in her palm. I tilt my head and crinkle the corners of my eyes. We are alone in the store.

"Do you have anything—*stronger* than this stuff?" she asks.

"Not over-the-counter, dear," I say. "But you can get a prescription from your doctor for something stronger. You might ask about Lindane Shampoo. That's the burn-it-right-off type of stuff."

She exaggerates a cringe. "Does it hurt?"

I half-chuckle. "It can cause some irritation, and there's a heightened chance of seizure if you apply it more than twice. But you'll need something that strong. Otherwise, those suckers can hang on for weeks against some of these weaker treatments."

Kamila sidles from foot to foot. She takes a deep breath and nods her head. She's a confident young woman, and would probably prefer that our conversation be more equally balanced. She looks down at the crimped twenty-dollar bill in her hand and assumes the managerial tone she must use in her job.

"Weeks?" she says. "That's some pretty good job security for a pharmacist, I guess."

She thinks she's being funny, but she's right. Crabs, body odors, itchy assholes: these are the secrets to my success. They've kept me and my daughter fed for decades.

But there's good news: I'm moving on. The pharmacy has a buyer, and I'm turning over the keys to the building in one month. I've had the house appraised, and it's

ready for market. As soon as one of those sales is complete, I'll have enough money for the condo I've been looking at in the Philippines—Cebu Island—that sits beside a church, less than a mile from where Ferdinand Magellan was stabbed to death under a barrage of bamboo spears. Marie still needs some convincing, and Josie needs to find a job, but the beach is so close I can taste the rum in my OJ. Scott Irwin, my agent at RetirementVillages LLP in Cebu—Australian guy, very friendly—told me rum is cheaper than water over there.

The way they do business, Scott needs an earnest payment of eighteen thousand dollars before he'll take the condo off the market, and I'd only get a third of that back if I pull out.

I've got the check made out. I've got the envelope stamped.

I'm exiting my pupa stage. I've been growing out my hair and I just bought an orange backpack from Eastern Mountain Sports for hiking Osmena's Peak. So, yes, every time the Kamila Casales of the world reach beneath their waistband for a good scratch, that's another Mai Tai paid for courtesy of Serafino's Pharmacy.

"You're right, good job security," I say to Kamila. "The body can be a bitch of a host. And worst of all, there's a cover charge."

She nods gravely, as if I've just read this from an ancient scroll.

I tear off the receipt, hand it to Kamila, and thank her for coming in. She nods cooperatively and goes back to swinging her keys around her index finger. She pivots and confidently wiggles through the door, and when the bell stops ringing, she's gone.

*

When I get home, Josie is in the kitchen wearing a white UCLA sweatshirt over black leggings and a pair of tube socks. Her hair is in a loose ponytail. It appears she has been waiting for me.

“I need to talk to you about something,” Josie says.

I tell her I’m up to my eyeballs in work. I’ve got to call Scott Irwin in an hour, and then call my local agent at six-thirty. I’ve got to see if Marie is cooking dinner tonight, or if I am, and I need to make sure I’ve got someone at the pharmacy tomorrow morning to sign for the shipments of PowerBars, scented candles and tampons.

“Let me take care of a few things,” I tell her. “And then I have all the time in the world for you.”

She is irritated by this dismissal, but she doesn’t press. She bites her lower lip and nods, and it reminds me of sweet little eight-year-old Josie being asked if she understands why she can’t come into the men’s room with me at the New Britain Red Sox game.

“When you have the time,” she says, speaking slowly and deliberately, like I’m a foreigner, “I need to talk to you.”

I nod my understanding and then say, “Kamila Casale came in the store today. You remember her?”

Josie nods.

“She’s got crabs,” I say.

I'm usually very good at keeping secrets, but a pharmacist has so many to keep track of. For example, no one knows I dropped the check to Scott Irwin in the mail on the way home. In my effort to keep quiet, Kamila is collateral damage.

Josie gives me a look of pure disgust. "Oh, my God," she says. "I can't believe some of the shit you're into. You must get some sort of pleasure out of it, right? That's the only explanation. I mean, you've been working there so long, you were probably around when Kamila's mom had crabs."

Josie has been giving me a hard time. Probably because she's depressed, and me talking about setting up shop in the Philippines isn't helping. She's been home for a month, and we've yet to have a real conversation about her life and her job prospects. Our talks are short, and she swears like a sailor, which I take as a good sign. It means she's comfortable with me. I imagine us growing closer with every *shit* and every *fuck* that comes out of her mouth.

Josie is twenty-four, and certainly didn't expect to be moving back in with her dad and stepmom after four years of college and then two more of living large on the West Coast. She's depressed because working in marketing wasn't everything she thought it would be. She's depressed because she thought fucking her boss would fast-track her up the corporate ladder, but instead it got her fired when the honcho's wife found out and threw a potted plant through a fifth-story office window. She's depressed because all her friends live in Boston, and she needs to lift twenties from my wallet to pay for gas. She's depressed that Marie and I are desperate to jump-start our sluggish libidos, and that the house is awfully small and acoustically superb.

“It’s a tough job,” I tell her. “But someone’s got to do it. You ever hear that before?”

Josie thinks it over and says, “I think I heard Marie say it when she rolled out of bed last night. ‘It’s a tough fucking job.’”

There are five bright bulbs above the bathroom mirror, and in my reflection, they make my eyes gleam. Of all the mirrors, this one gives me the most positive feedback. I’m wearing the orange backpack I bought to see how it looks on me. I switch a pair of sunglasses off and on, and then slide the lenses up so the frames hold my hair away from my face. I look good, but pale. When I hear Marie’s car pull into the driveway, I hide the sunglasses but keep the backpack and go downstairs to greet her in the kitchen.

“What do you think?” I ask, two thumbs raised behind my head, pointing down at the backpack. “Pretty slick, right?”

“You need me to drop you off at school?” she asks. She’s gone to the grocery store after work at her photography start-up. She removes a leafy head of lettuce from one of the paper bags.

She meets my eyes, then returns her gaze to the bag. “You look like a pedophile with your hair long like that. I doubt they’d even let you close to the front door.”

She’s teasing. This is her way of avoiding any talk about the Philippines, whatsoever. When we have discussed the move, she asks, “What about in ten years, Dale? What about in twenty?” She’s afraid of me dragging her halfway around the world and then dying on her. She says that’s just the type of inconsiderate thing I’d do.

Again, teasing.

Marie is no spring chicken herself. She just turned forty-two, twenty-two years younger than me. When we met six years ago, Josie was in high school and I hadn't had anything serious with a woman in ten years, since her mom ran off to Texas in my Honda with a radio DJ named Tillman. Motherfucker played country. Back then, I had only three other staff members at the pharmacy and was busy keeping Josie out of trouble during her senior year. Then one day I was in the living room of a house on the same street as my old grammar school buying a bag of weed from Marie's younger brother—friend of a friend—and there she was. Snapping pictures of her brother's dog with her cell phone, crashing with the little bro while job searching.

“You a cop?” I said.

“Excuse me?”

“Forget it. My name's Dale. No pictures, please.”

“Actually, I'm sending these to the FBI,” she said. “Any reward money out for you?”

“Honey, I am the reward. Save yourself some time.”

“Oh, I've got time,” she said. “It's the money I need.”

“I'll trade you,” I said.

The first year was a haze: Me sneaking Marie into the house on the gamble that Josie would be out late. Setting an extra spot for dinner while Josie bats her eyes in disbelief. Josie looking exclusively at West Coast colleges. Marie in her two-piece in Rhode Island, taking pictures of the coastal rocks. Me panicking about identity theft

when Josie uses my credit card to buy a futon in LA. Marie carrying her blouses on hangers into the house, the blouses dancing in the wind. Me moving my shirts to the hallway closet.

Back then we could read each other's minds. The communication breakdown didn't happen until much later, like when Marie told her parents we'd spend Thanksgiving at their house in upstate New York, even though I'd already told her Josie was flying home. Next thing you know, Marie's making the trip herself and Josie and I are making milkshakes for dinner and watching the Patriots in our living room.

I'm messing with the zippers on my backpack like I'm a DJ scratching records. She unpacks a carton of coconut water.

"In the Philippines you can climb a tree and get fresh coconut water anytime you'd like," I say.

"In the Philippines, you can get killed for the fillings in your teeth," she says.

The marriage books we've been reading say we should check in with one another every so often with a kind of marriage progress report. Right now, I'd say we're averaging a C-minus on Communication, C for Intimacy, A-plus for humor, B for Date Night, D for sex, B-plus in Sharing Responsibility, D-minus for Transparency. At least we're not failing. Now, some of this is my fault. One, I haven't told her about the payment on the condo. Two, I haven't been performing the same since they scraped my prostate, and Marie needs Physical Touch as much as I need Words of Praise, neither of which have been very common around here lately. The good news: we're keeping our Humor about it. Just the other night, Marie made a joke about being too old to give a

blowjob—she'd paid her dues, she said—and then I made a joke about parts of me retiring before I got to retire, and then we both cried a little (Transparency, Intimacy) and hugged (Physical Touch). There's hope yet.

At ten-thirty, Kamila Casale throws her cigarette at the sidewalk and enters the pharmacy, meeting my eyes with a downward smile. She's returning the bottle of Nix and she's got a prescription for Lindane.

“Nice day,” she says, as I study the scrip.

I leave her at the counter and walk the full length of the store to the back room, the whole time thinking about what it must feel like to spend all day talking about cell phones, text messaging, family plans while tiny mites gnaw away at the old frizzle.

By the time I return with her shampoo, Kamila has gathered together a few other purchases and is back up front, tapping her debit card against the counter. I give her store credit for the Nix, scan the new bottle and turn to her other items: a Coke, copy of *Cosmo*, and a package of three condoms. I raise my eyebrows as I scan the condoms, but Kamila just looks back at me like she's asked me for the time.

With my cell phone, I take a picture of the bottle of Nix Kamila has returned and send a Snapchat over to Josie. For the caption, I write: *Do you know who inherited the pubic fortune? The pubic heirs.*

I found out Josie has been using Snapchat to stay in touch with her friends in Boston, so I thought I'd give it a shot. When I leave for home, I check to see if she's replied, expecting a picture of a cup of tea, or maybe a job application. She hasn't.

When I get there, she is lying on the couch beneath the soft light of a reading lamp, absorbed with her laptop. She's wearing a long sweatshirt over her legs. When Josie was in seventh grade, she was sent home early one day after the assistant principal stopped her in the hall between classes and determined her shorts were too short for school—her fingertips reached past the hem when she was instructed to put her arms at her side, as specified in the dress code, which, I was reminded, was sent home to parents. The thinking was, seventh grade boys are too horny to do anything but tuck their dicks up under their belts and keep drooling, but the girls can be shamed into chastity. Josie came home with a note, and since Liz had run off by that point, I had to clean up after dinner and take her to T.J. Max for some longer shorts. I gave her seventy dollars and waited in the car so she could buy some bras, or whatever else.

She meets my eyes, closes the laptop, sits up, and curls a loose strand of hair around her ear. And then I remember.

“Josie, you said you had to talk to me about something?”

Through the living room window, the sun is setting over the house across the street, thinning its orange light into a horizontal beam at the roof line. Josie straightens her back and lightly clears her throat.

“Dad,” she sings. “Are you and Marie really going to move?”

By the look on her face, I can tell my daughter is anxious to bring this up, which surprises me.

“Not until you’re settled,” I say.

“Settled?”

“Until you’ve found another job. Have somewhere safe to stay.”

“So you’re definitely going.”

“It hasn’t been an easy decision.”

“But you’ve decided.”

Marie still doesn’t know that I’ve put down a payment on the condo, so I’m momentarily at a loss for words. The sun slips behind our neighbors’ house, and it is dark enough outside so that the headlights of passing cars trace our walls before disappearing down the road.

“Josie,” I say. “It’s my retirement. I’ve been waiting all these years for this.”

“Right,” she says, and nods grimly.

“Are you anxious about finding a job?” I ask.

“No,” she says, now shaking her head. She runs her hands through her hair, then looks up at my face. “I’m pregnant.”

The two of us are fixed in silence. It’s now completely dark outside, and with the reading lamp on and the blinds still drawn, anyone can see right into our home.

A pharmacist’s secrets:

Emily Werth wears a pubic wig. Samantha Jemes, whose mother I graduated with, picks up a pregnancy test and a bag of chips every few months. Her teenage son has started buying condoms. Mark Tirico's skin flakes off in huge wafers. Eric Bledsoe purchases prescription-strength medication to curb his noxious flatulence, though I presume that's not entirely a secret. Alex Henery, who I know from my ex-wife's job at Honda, buys a thirty-six-dollar pheromone cologne that promises, "Works Like Crazy." Sadie Myers, the widow who still goes to all the Little League baseball games, bleaches her anus. Last year, Elaine Gould stole her husband's prescription pad to keep herself stoned on oxycodone. It took me a few weeks to get wise to it. In the meantime, she drove into the high school's flagpole while picking up her son after soccer practice. It made *The Observer*. A couple months later her husband came in with a younger woman and bought an organic edible lubricant. When the bell rang as they left, I let out a little cheer.

When Liz got pregnant with Josie, we made love on and across and beneath the kitchen table. It was midday, a Saturday, the neighbor's lawnmower swirling outside the open windows. Liz had just mopped the floor. The pregnancy was an accident—we had assumed it was me; that my sperm was too old—but Liz seemed happy, and that's all I could have asked for at the time. There was no conversation about keeping her.

We moved our bed into the spare room and put a crib in our old room, because Liz wanted Josie to have the adjoining bathroom for when she'd become big enough to use it herself. We wallpapered it with a Noah's Arc design, the little shepherd smiling

gladly before pairs of giraffes, owls, penguins, alligators, monkeys, all utterly blissful at the thought of the grand and solemn task ahead. Liz got maternity from Honda and worked on the bedroom during the day. At night, I drank lite beer and sat on the couch, Liz between my knees, the fan dousing us with air from the doorway, four hands caressing the swelling dune of her belly, the crickets abuzz with the rumor of our coming child.

But when Josie was born, the flood waters came down. Liz got depressed and never went back to work. I'd come home tired and baby Josie would crying in her crib, each part of her body a different blush of pink, and a haggard Liz would have a million things for me to do. But the thing was, I looked around and it seemed like Liz had hardly lifted a finger all day.

I started spending a lot of time alone. First, it was the woodworking shed in the backyard, where I would just spin my power tools until the batteries died. Then it was the treadmill at the gym. If there was a machine available beside a nice-looking woman practicing her jaguar strides and stretches, I'd take that one, and dial the thing up to eight or nine for a few minutes so that every step made me nervous I'd be rocketed backwards. Finally, I started going for long walks after work around downtown and then into the neighborhoods surrounding it. I watched the teenagers on their skateboards outside the high school. I stopped in the gas station for a bottle of soda. I looked in the direction of our house, a five-minute drive away, and then looked at the sky stretched out above it, thinking, genuinely that I was doing the best I could.

Before long, it stopped feeling like home. It started feeling less and less like a refuge, and more like a gallery of our deficiencies: the pile of recyclables staining the kitchen tiles, the basement window I shattered trying to sneak in after Liz had locked me out, the burn mark above the stove from when I walked away from frying hot dogs to check baseball scores. Was family life like this for everybody? Was Liz right, that I was a piece of shit, or was this just the way husbands and wives tested one another? Diminished one another to the point where no one else would want them?

Josie was six the first time her mother stayed out all night, seven when Liz lied to her parents and told them I had hit her, and eight when she finally took off.

I'm not saying that Josie was anything short of a tiny sweetheart at that age. It's just that Liz and I had planned to be alone together. And then Liz and I had planned to be alone with Josie. And when it was just down to me and Josie, I just felt alone. And for all of the sweet and breathy things little Josie would say, it only made me feel more old and rotten, and inflexible. I'd send her to bed and smoke a pipe in the living room, receding further into my head. Making my small world even smaller.

For two years, Liz called on Josie's birthday and I wouldn't let them talk. When my daughter was twelve we walked down the street to the park to grill hamburgers and swim at the public pool. The park was crowded with families, and Josie finally asked why her mom had run off. I had just gotten out of the pool, my bathing suit sopping, droplets streaming off my saggy chest. "What matters," I told her, "is that if she knew what she was missing, she never would have left." I bent down to hug her dry and

suntanned skin, and when she felt the dampness of my body, she squirmed away from my outstretched arms.

“Who’s the father?” Marie asks after she has come home and I have led her over to the kitchen table.

My elbows are on the table and two fingers of each hand are pressing against my temples. Josie is upstairs, so our voices are hushed. “She won’t tell me.”

“She doesn’t have a boyfriend, does she?”

“Who the hell knows what she has.”

“How does she seem?”

“Who the hell knows?” I say. “Not very good. She feels like she’s all alone.”

Marie is looking out the dining room window to the patch of grass where Liz used to plant her garden when we first moved in. No one speaks for a long time.

“Why won’t she tell you?” Marie asks.

I shrug. “She says she hasn’t decided what she wants to do yet.”

“You mean?” She raises her eyebrows.

“Yes,” I say. “Exactly.”

Marie’s face becomes somber. She scratches behind her ear and looks at me across the table like a cat watching an ant.

“What did you tell her?” she asks.

“I didn’t know what to tell her. The pharmacy is sold,” I say. “I’m out of a job in three months.”

“She should know we’re here for her. Did you tell her that at least?”

I’ve done the math. I pull the house from the market and renege on the condo, and I lose twelve-thousand dollars, but have the pharmacy money and Marie’s income to support my daughter. If I keep the condo, I’d need to sell the house first to pay for it, and Josie has nowhere to stay. Or, I sell the house, keep the condo, rent an apartment for the three of us until Josie gets on her feet, and then fly out to the Philippines, rum in my OJ, hike Osmena’s peak, etc., etc.

“No,” I say. “All I said was, we’ve got a lot to figure out.”

Marie tilts her head, squints her eyes. “What is there to figure out?”

A heavy sigh escapes me. Marie has spent the day promoting new boudoir sessions in her studio by inviting customers in to drink mimosas and look at pictures of lingerie. She came home still high on this cheap cheer. My wife. Heavier around the middle than when I met her, not as lively. But still enjoying life, *her* life. Enjoying her career, her new clothes, her co-workers. Doing my laundry, cooking my meals, asking after my daughter. Sitting at the table, seeing how earnestly Marie cares about Josie, watching her cheer dissipate into anxiety and then concern, I get all choked up. So when she asks what needs to be figured out, I tell the truth.

I tell her the condo is a five-minute walk from the beach. It’s one of sixteen units in the building that share access to a swimming pool and weight room. It has high ceilings and a bamboo ceiling fan. The balcony has a palapa rooftop and ivory breeze door panels. I tell her I spent eighteen thousand dollars of our money to lock it up for us.

When I’m done talking the conversation isn’t about Josie anymore.

Marie asks questions that I can't answer: "What kind of father are you?" and "What if I refuse to go with you?" and "Is this your way of asking for a divorce?" And she starts to cry.

I sit at the table and watch Marie cry like I'm watching a character on TV. This was the same woman who, before we got married, used to call me at the pharmacy an hour before I got off work and describe all the things she'd do to me when I got home. I'd be tugging at myself through my slacks as I pulled into the driveway, and Marie would meet me at the door and start licking my earlobes, until we collapsed into one another, enchanted by each others' raw caresses, erasing the last lonely hours of the afternoon.

Josie must have heard our shouting because she comes down the stairs, sees Marie crying and starts to cry, too. Marie meets her at the bottom of the stairs and they hug. I stand from my seat at the table, but don't approach them.

At first I'm resentful that they're leaving me out. But then I wonder what these tears are about all about anyway. When Christopher Columbus was in search of the West Indies, how many times did his sailors cry out against him during those hopeless days on the water? How many times did they threaten to throw him overboard. But it was all because they couldn't see over the dark, blue horizon, where land was waiting, and had always been waiting since eons before any of them were born. If they could have only seen it.

But Josie and Marie stay locked together, their tears mixing on the floor beneath them. Women's tears can make you feel some strange things.

"I'm sorry," I say, and when I say it, I start to cry too. "I'm sorry," I say louder.

My next words come out in a whimper. “We’ve got a lot to figure out.”

On Saturday afternoon, the house is empty and chilling with the stillness of mid-autumn. Marie isn’t working, but she’s taken a suitcase and a space heater to her sister’s summer home on Cape Cod. My daughter is in Boston for the weekend to be around friends. For a refreshing change, I have nothing to do. I am done making decisions. I’m in a holding pattern until my daughter and my wife decide can decide what’s best for themselves, and just how I fit in.

I rise, make breakfast in the cold kitchen and return upstairs to put on a pair of moth-bitten work pants. I’ve decided to rake the yard, which is covered with red and gold leaves that make it look like water at sunset when they ripple in the morning breeze. I make one pile in the front yard and two in the back, scraping the whole yard from orange to green as if I’m biting into a cantaloupe rind. The work is pleasantly distracting, but when I’m finished, I still have half the morning and all the afternoon ahead of me.

I put the rake in the garage and go for a stroll around the neighborhood. The treetops are aflame with daylight. In a week or so, the leaves will reach that sublime glow that makes people want to wear vests and drink spiced coffee. I have driven past these houses many times, and don’t know most of the owners. The houses I do recognize belong to Josie’s old classmates or soccer teammates, people I used to say hello to at the grocery store. But the town has filled up with strangers, and much of the time the only people I know at the grocery store are the retarded cashiers and stock boys who have been working there for it seems like twenty years. Anthony—they don’t let him work the

register—sits on the hoods of cars in the Stop & Shop parking lot and wears a Santa Claus hat starting in September. He always asks me about the Patriots.

I walk the length of Woodruff, cross East and take a left on Andrews, where the orchard is studded with bare trees that have just been harvested. Several overripe apples hang from each tree, filling with their own brown juices until they're heavy enough to drop. They've started pruning the trees for next year's harvest and burning the brush, so a faint smell of wood smoke envelopes the neighborhood.

My house is in full sunlight when I return home and the windows gleam. I check the time on my cell phone, then fetch my keys and drive into town, to the tanning salon in the strip mall with the chiropractor and the tuxedo rentals. South Beach Tans. I park beneath an oak tree that has kept most of its leaves and dial up some classic rock while I pull a joint from my pocket and light it up. I keep checking over my shoulder for a police car, but I get through half the joint and materialize into the cool air beneath the storefront.

A spherical woman about my age with patiently carved wrinkles greets me as I enter and look around. I've never been in a place like this, and I can feel the heat flare beneath my undershirt. I wave off her pitches to wax or airbrush and wind up with a standard tan session for eleven dollars. I feel like I'm in fucking Area 51 when I get to my assigned room, lined by two tanning pods at either end, softly emitting in white light, but I strip to my underwear, tie my hair back in a ponytail and flop into one of the machines, where I drift off to sleep.

*

Josie returns home a week later on an unseasonably cold night in early November. Frost coats the grass on my yard and the blades crunch like glass beneath my daughter's football. I have left the front lights on for her and I can see her breath hang in the air and float away as she ferries her sleeping bag and air mattress from the driveway to the front door. I'm waiting for her in the foyer, and when she sees me she starts to cry.

"It's alright, Josie," I say. "It's alright. I'm going to take care of you."

"I've taken care of myself," she sobs.

"I know you have, darling. I know. But this time, I'm going to take care of you."

I have the heat blasting through the central air, and you can feel the temperature climb since Josie's entered the house. She shrugs out of her thin jacket and tries to run up the stairs, but I block her path.

"Listen," I say. "I'm not moving."

This is true—Scott Irwin has mailed me back my earnest payment, minus the twelve thousand I surrendered; my house is off the market—but Josie isn't consoled. She tries to push through me and up the stairs.

"I'm not going anywhere," I say.

"You don't want to stay," she says.

"I want what's best for you. It's my dream that you're happy."

Josie has stopped crying. She turns her head away from me. With just the outline of her pale cheek and nose visible to me she says, coldly and with certainty, "You don't get to decide which dreams come true."

"What's the matter?" I ask.

“I’ve already done it,” she says. “I’m not pregnant anymore. I’m not your problem.”

I let her sweep past me up the stairs, and she runs so quickly I can feel the gust of her departure waft past me on the back of my neck.

The second week of November comes and goes without Josie speaking a word to me. I tried Snapchatting her pictures of the foliage, me with my eyes crossed, a newspaper headline that reads *Man Accused of Killing Lawyer Receives New Attorney*. No response.

I go to work on Monday, six weeks to retirement, and restock the shelves with the morning’s shipments. I’ve got Bob Marley playing in the surround sound. At ten-thirty, right on cue, the bell clatters and Kamila Casale saunters in, though this time she’s not in her Verizon uniform. She’s wearing a hooded sweatshirt, faded blue jeans and flip flops.

“No work today?” I say.

“I quit,” she says. “Taking a few weeks off. Then going back to school in January.”

I nod approvingly as she takes out a prescription for another bottle of Lindane. She smiles as she hands it over.

“Oh no,” I say. “Still nothing, huh?”

“Still working on it.” She turns her eyes to the ground.

“Are you doing okay?” I ask.

She turns her clear blue eyes back on me and chuckles as she blushes.

“It’s been so fucking itchy for so long, I’ve forgotten what it’s supposed to feel like,” she says. “It’s like without the itch I would feel nothing at all.”

I take her cash and repeat her words to myself as she exits, and again on the ride home, and again in the tanning bed that smells like coconut oil and hums as I am lulled to sleep.