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A collection of stories set in locales both realistic and fantastical, earthbound and virtual. They explore such themes as fatherhood, isolation, and friendship.

THE VALE OF NEW BEGINNINGS

by

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Before our twenty-fifth battle with the Lord of Fog, Kimchi, my daughter's avatar, starts our good luck ritual. First she rubs her hands together. When she opens them a purple flower blooms from her fingers. She gives it to me, and I stick it behind my ear, underneath my pointed hat. Then I tap my staff against the stone floor. She giggles as her fingernails begin to blink in pastel shades: baby blue, yellow, pink, like Easter eggs. In my headphones I hear a ding, a private message in the chat log: *good luck, Dad.*

Good luck, baby.

Then Cubscout, our guild leader, speaks on the voice line. "Starburst Knights," he says. "We ready?"

"Ready," my daughter says. Her microphone catches a man's booming laughter.

Out loud I say, "Ready," but I type a message to Kimchi. *Who was that laughing?*

mom's friend. tell u later.

"Let's fucking *roll*," says Baldrick, our plate-armored paladin. Heavy rock music blares behind his voice.

"Baldrick," I say. "Watch the language, dude."

He titters. "Sorry daddy."

"Don't call me that."

lol, Kimchi types privately.

We'll talk after the raid, okay?

But I get no response, because at that moment, Cubscout moves us along. "Alright people," he says. "We're all here. I'm starting the countdown."

On my screen appears a fifteen-second timer. As it ticks down, I glare at our enemy here on the tallest tower of his black castle, at his crystal ball head and the silver clouds tumbling inside it. The clouds flash as he cackles at us, like he remembers who we are, like he knows this battle will be no different from the twenty-five before it.

The Lord of Fog. Lord of Broken Keyboards, of Smashed Screens and Disbanded Guilds. Two months ago, when they added him to the game, he became the most powerful enemy the Realm has ever known. The official forums are crammed with guild leaders and seasoned warriors from across the world clamoring that he has no weakness. That he cannot be killed. But if this game has taught me anything, it's that success is only a matter of time, of persistence. I refuse to believe the Lord of Fog is any exception.

The timer reaches zero. Baldrick blows his minotaur horn and charges with his lion-faced shield. I mute my microphone and roar across my studio apartment as I run in behind him.

From the tip of my staff I launch a flurry of Ice Bolts. Kimchi clenches her fists and they transform into beehives, out of which a swarm of hornets, big as hummingbirds, drones and harries the Fog Lord's glass face. Cubscout hollers on the voice line: "Cumulus ogres. Incoming."

I turn around. One of the clouds floating close to the tower edge sprouts an eye, then arms and legs, before it descends. The newly formed cumulus ogre blinks and stretches, as if waking from a nap, then its eye snaps to me.

As a Wizard Librarian, I prefer to hit things from afar while a beefier character soaks the punches. But this particular fight requires a little flexibility in that way. Baldrick, by far the beefiest of the Knights, would still be hard pressed to survive the simultaneous attention of the LoF and his giant ogre minions. So while Baldrick dodges and taunts the Fog Lord and his mighty flail—*What's the matter, Mr. Fog? Need a rag for that windshield?*—the rest of us handle the ogres.

Two appear in total. I take the one in front of me, Kimchi the other. On the tower's opposite side, she transforms into a hulking bear and wrestles with an ogre that has three arms instead of two. Cubscout stands fifty paces away and peppers the beast with ice-barbed arrows.

For me, there's no choice but hand-to-hand combat here. I knock the butt of my staff against the ground and start to grow in size, until I stand eye-level with the ogre. In my headphones it bellows deep, like a large drowning animal, before it charges right at me.

I actually like this part. When all my spells, all the complicated keystrokes and button combinations get thrown out the window. All I have to do is smash the space bar over and over. But as the ogre and I grip hands and push against each other, like sumo wrestlers, Kimchi speaks on the voice line. "Hang on, Baldrick," she says. "Almost done here. Then I'll have a Winds of Redemption ready for you." Behind her I hear the man again, but also my ex-wife, the both of them hysteric with laughter.

My finger stops on the space bar. The ogre overtakes me and slams the back of my head against the ground. Then he grabs my ankles and drags me toward the edge.

My screen blears in a simulated daze. For the moment I can't cast any spells, but I mash my keyboard and mouse anyway. In the ogre's grip my Wizard Librarian flails his arms and legs, which start to shrink back to their normal size.

"Shit," I say, wincing. "I might need a little help."

The ogre begins to float in the air. My feet hang off the tower, followed by my rump, my lower back. But then my captor howls, and hands with pastel-painted fingernails pull me back to safety.

"I got you, Lolofax," my daughter says to me, and then my screen clears. Tiny flowers bloom along my sleeves: one of her signature healing spells. The ogre lies impaled on a pointy tower rampart, an arrow through his eye.

"Thanks," I say. "Sorry."

"Fight's not over, people," Cubscout says, and he's right. Baldrick rolls just in time to dodge a swing from the Fog Lord's flail. Black stone explodes where it strikes the floor.

I get back on my feet and sling an Ice Bolt, then another, and another. Cubscout shoots arrow after arrow like a machine, while Kimchi looses a beam of Lunar Light.

At all this the Lord of Fog cackles, like it tickles him. But as we fight, his life points drop from forty percent to thirty-five, thirty, twenty-five. When he turns to launch a Fog Bomb at us, we all jump out of the way, and there Baldrick finds an opening: he drives his sword through the Fog Lord's stomach, and his voice roars in anguish and rage, the clouds in the crystal ball flashing like madness.

His life points sit at twenty percent, our best effort yet. But then he takes flight, his voice no longer anguished but laughing, and a dark storm begins to swirl around the tower.

We gather at the center. A ferocious wind cuts and jabs at us. I cast Stone Feet on our boots so we don't blow away.

"The hell's going on," Baldrick says.

"Lolofax," Cubscout says. "Know anything about this?"

"No," I say. "To my knowledge, nobody's ever gotten this far. So congratulations, guys. We're leading the race for World's First Kill."

"Now that's the shit I like," Baldrick says.

From somewhere unseen the Fog Lord screams with laughter, his voice dissipated, bodiless, flying back and forth between my headphones. I tense my fingers on my mouse and keyboard as two gigantic black hands begin to grow out of the clouds.

"What the," says Baldrick.

The hands detach from the storm, clenching, flexing, while the laughter of the Fog Lord rings around us. Then the hands lunge: one grabs Baldrick, the other Cubscout. They squeeze and start to choke the life points out of my fellow Knights by ten percent at a time.

"Yo," Baldrick says. "Whoa whoa whoa."

"I can't do anything," says Cubscout. Beneath his voice I hear the clattering of keys.

"Casting Winds of Redemption," Kimchi says. Her most powerful healing spell. It flies from her outstretched fingers in a flurry of leaves and flowers, but to no effect. Cubscout and Baldrick's life points sink from fifty to forty percent.

I start to charge an Ice Bolt, but something interrupts me: another hand. It swoops in from behind and clutches my torso, while still another does the same to Kimchi. The voice line fills with our fingers dancing crazy on our keyboards. The Lord of Fog laughs harder and harder until he wheezes and coughs.

Cubscout and Baldrick both die, the hands dropping them and twiddling goodbye, like lovers on the leave. As they disappear, as my daughter and I drop to fifty percent life, Baldrick says, "Now what in the hell are we supposed to do about that."

Kimchi whines, soft, as if actually pressed for breath, but then behind her my ex-wife begins to speak—*Amanda, come say goodbye to Peter. He really enjoyed*—and there she mutes her microphone.

I cease my button-mashing, and when Kimchi stops struggling, but simply goes slack in the Fog Lord's grip, I figure my daughter's taken her hands off the keyboard, too. That maybe she's even left the desk.

As the last of our life points choke to zero, I type a message to her: *Peter?*

The hands heap our corpses with the others. They high-five before flying off into the storm, which slows and lightens to the same ghostly fog that always greets us when we arrive. Out of it steps our enemy, his robes and crystal ball unblemished, his life points restored to full. Like we never fought at all, but simply showed up and died.

"I'm sorry, Lolo," Baldrick says. "But fuck this guy."

"Nah," I say, "definitely. Fuck this guy."

"I just checked the forums," Cubscout says. "We are, in fact, leading the race. And by a wide margin. Some German guild got him down to thirty-five percent, but no better than that."

"Any mention of giant, killer fists?" I say.

"None."

"Well shit," Baldrick says. "Man oh man are we smoking them."

Next to my keyboard sits a cork coaster and a can of diet Coke. I finished it before we started fighting, but I pick it up, wiggle it, as if my memory might be wrong. "Lonely place to be," I say.

He sips something close to his microphone, belches. "What's that mean?"

Cubscout cuts in. "No strategies we can look up for this one. No YouTube videos. We have only ourselves to rely on."

I say nothing. Before the dead body of my Wizard Librarian, I become aware of my own: my achey back, my sour bulging belly. My hands dangle off the armrests of my chair like wilted flower heads.

"You sound excited, Cub-daddy," Baldrick says.

"I appreciate a good challenge."

"Cub-daddy with the big Marine Corps balls. Love it."

A ding announces Kimchi's return. I sit up, rigid.

"Sorry, guys," she says. "I'm back."

Baldrick belches again. "Welcome to the corpse party!"

She titters. "I see defeat's done nothing to dampen our spirits."

"Not with you around, Kimmy."

"Baldrick," I say, sharp. He and Cubscout know she's my daughter, but in the game we make a point of calling each other by our avatar names.

"Lord, Lolo, I'm just fooling," he says. "She's like my niece. My sweet-healing druid elf niece."

My daughter giggles. "Uncle Baldrick."

I smother my face in my hands. "Oh my god."

"That's enough, people," Cubscout says. "Let's respawn and call it a night. Tomorrow I'll be MIA. Taking the family to the lake. But Monday I'd like to reconvene for a strategy session."

"Yessir," Baldrick says. "Later, folks. Next week we're dropping this sucker, no doubt."

Their corpses disappear, regaining life far away from here, on the familiar grounds of Starburst Keep. Then they both disconnect.

My daughter sighs heavy in her microphone, hard enough so the sound comes crinkled, blistered. "I know you want to talk," she says. "But can't it wait until the Yeti Room? I'm tired, Dad."

My mind flashes with an image of her at eight years old, when she started wearing bifocals, like me. She cried for two weeks straight and refused to clean the lenses, so every night, while she slept, I took the special wipe and spray and did it for her, then left

them on her bedside table. My wife bristled at this: if she wants to see, she said, then let her do it herself.

I imagine my daughter, right now, at my wife's house, over a thousand miles away in Ann Arbor, rubbing her eyes behind the big round lenses. My stomach flutters. "Yes," I say. "Of course, baby. In the morning. We'll talk then."

"Okay," she says, grateful. "Goodnight, Dad."

"Goodnight, baby."

Her body disappears as she disconnects. The Lord of Fog chortles to himself, as if remembering a funny accident.

I don't sleep that night, so I log on about an hour before our regular meeting time. It's our Sunday ritual, the Yeti Room. In my kitchenette I'll fix a bowl of cereal and pot of coffee while she throws a pair of poptarts in the toaster. Then in the game we meet and sit the morning on our favorite chairs by the window, eating, chatting, planning the day's adventures across the Realm.

But this morning I forego the cereal and coffee. There's a sour, swampy feeling in my stomach as I log into the game. I walk the quiet halls of Starburst Keep to the Yeti Room, where I snap my fingers at the fireplace. Big flames rush out from the logs. Below my boots, the long hide of the Yeti King stretches between the feet of parallel couches. When I first told my daughter how we got the hide, how it was the magical might of her own father that slew the Yeti King, she gasped, actually gasped, and said *ohmygodthat'ssocool*.

This was eight months ago, when I sent her a copy of the game for her twelfth birthday, when her avatar first appeared in the Vale of New Beginnings. A big window in the Yeti Room looks over the Vale. Before the Lord of Fog descended, you could sometimes see low-level players gathering Princeroot, mining for copper, or fighting the fledgling bandits known to roam the area. The sight used to make me smile, shake my head, as I remembered that not long ago Kimchi adventured among them, that she ranged the Vale wearing tattered robes and a gnarled staff, typing cute questions in our private chat log: *dad, what's this weird plant do? dad, loan me your spellbook? I want to see the way you cast Inner Warmth.*

But now Kimchi stands among the most powerful healers in the Realm, and a thick fog smothers the Vale, along with every other region designed for new players. In the Yeti Room I keep the curtains drawn.

For the next hour I sit on my usual chair and flip through my spellbook, my mind on the Fog Lord's disembodied hands, on the magic that might loosen their grip. I get all the way back to my very first entries—Crackling Ember, Water Balloon, Summon Stepladder—but even the strongest powers I've collected over the past two years seem so feeble, even irrelevant, as if last night the Lord of Fog changed the very rules of the game.

My headphones ding, and in the chat log a message appears: *Kimchi has come online.* Her avatar enters the Yeti Room behind me and sits in the other armchair.

"Morning, Dad," she says.

"Good morning, baby. What flavor this morning?"

"S'mores," she says, her mouth full. She swallows. "How about you? Frosted Flakes?"

"No, not today," I say. "Not so hungry."

"Are you okay?"

"Nothing to worry about," I say.

A pause. In my headphones the fire crackles. My daughter chews, swallows again.

"We did so well last night," she says. "Twenty percent! Holy cow."

"Mm," I say. "Only after you saved my butt, though."

"Well. Cubscout's the one who bullseyed the ogre."

"Still. You guys carried me last night."

"Oh, c'mon," she says. "No counting how many nights you've bailed us out. Like I'll never forget when you tripped the Black Prince's horse with a Summon Stepladder. Genius!"

I can't help but curl half a smile. "The easy spells are often the most useful."

"That's what you said! I'll never forget that, either."

I nod, remembering along with her, but then my lips level. "Don't see a stepladder being much help now, though."

"No," she says, quiet. "But we'll figure something out. I'm sure of it."

For a moment we both go silent, but then I take a deep breath. "Amanda," I say. "Who is Peter?"

"Nobody," she says, too quickly. "I mean, no, not nobody. A new friend of Mom's. We met him at Aunt Tracy's a few weeks ago." She hesitates, then whispers. "He's kinda weird."

"What's his problem?"

"No, I mean, I don't mean that. He's perfectly nice. But he's just. I don't know, kinda funny."

I look at the Yeti King sprawled on the floor, at the life-ending scowl on his face. "Tell me."

"Well," she says. "Like, at Aunt Tracy's he was wearing these huge sunglasses, even though it was nighttime and we were sitting inside. He said he has some condition where he's really sensitive to light. He looked like one of the X-Men, or something."

"So your mother likes an X-Man. A mutant."

"Dad," she says. "He's not a *mutant*."

"The X-Men are all mutants."

"That's not what I'm saying. Not at all. He's nice. He teaches at the college with Mom."

"So you like him, too."

"Dad," she says. Just before Carla and I divorced, when she and I drank and fought nearly every night, my daughter started doing this thing where she'd sit at the table nearby and frown and run her fingers down a lock of her own hair, over and over like a silk loom. I imagine her doing this now.

"I don't even know who he is," she says. "And neither do you."

I take my glasses off and push my hands against my face, hard, as if to crush my own head. But then I take a sharp breath and press my eyes into my palms. Beneath my eyelids, colors turn and shift like a kaleidoscope, and when I lift my head back to the screen, I blink away a dense bleariness.

"You're a good person, Amanda," I say. "How did you get so good?"

"Hold on a second," she says, and mutes her microphone. In the game I step over to the window, peer behind the curtains. Fog spools around the treetops of the Vale like cobwebs. Beneath it, at this very moment, new players bump into each other like the blind, plastering bulletin boards with reports of lost swords, trinkets, even pets.

I close the curtains again as my headphones ding and my daughter comes back. "Dad," she says. "I have to go."

"Where? It's Sunday."

"I know," she says. "But Mom wants me to run errands with her. Then I've gotta do my homework before we go out to dinner."

"With Peter."

An excruciating pause. "Yeah," she says.

"Right."

"But I might be able to play a little before bed?"

"Yeah. Okay. Just let me know."

"Good. Okay."

"Okay."

"Bye, Dad."

"Bye, Amanda."

Kimchi has gone offline. I watch her avatar become see-through, like a ghost, before it disappears.

I ride out of Starburst Keep in a culling mood. I head for the Werewolf Village, out in the Ebon Forest. According to the Official Lore Guide, a long time ago an evil sorcerer cursed the Forest so that it's always night, so that all the farmers and lumberjacks and townspeople living there would spend the rest of eternity as raging feral beasts. On my Arcane Steed I gallop beneath a full moon like a big silver coin and dismount at the center of the village. The sound of hooves on stone draws a few werewolves out of the abandoned Heartfire Tavern, and as they come charging, I've already got a Frigid Storm flying out to meet them. From the tip of my staff, the spell swirls with ice and snow, and so the werewolves, barreling toward me on all fours, slow and then stop completely as their bodies become frozen solid.

I walk closer to them. In their faces I see faint traces of their former humanity: jawbones that smile wide and wild now for bloodthirst instead of bread. Muscular arms and legs once used for labor and love.

I take a deep breath, a single step back. I key the combination for Gravity Pulse. With a satisfying *foom* a shockwave shoots out of my staff. The werewolves shatter into tiny shards of ice, like smashed display cases.

But as I look at the glittery fragments at my feet, Peter, this mystery man, comes barging into my mind, like the thought only needed an idle moment before it could take

over. This man with his big glasses—whom, for some reason, I can't help but picture like the *Terminator*—sitting there around the coffee table with my ex-wife and daughter while they sip wine and soda and listen to his stories about the time he toured an old castle in England and sat at the same desk as Lord Potpourri or whoever the hell, and how there, at the desk, he wrote in his own diary what would turn out to be the first lines of his first immaculate and wildly successful book. And I see my daughter and ex-wife, see them smile and flush with admiration until Amanda realizes the time and announces, with a reluctance you can hear, that she has to go and help her real father and his virtual friends kill a virtual Fog Lord, one whom she wonders deep down if he can really be killed, and whether she even cares.

With sweat slicking my forehead I go from house to house killing werewolves, in the same fashion I killed the first two: Frigid Storm, Gravity Pulse. Every ten minutes their bodies vanish and new werewolves appear in their place, so over and over again I purge the Tavern, then the lumber mill, the bakery, then the collapsing houses that used to hold modest, happy families. All buildings black and rotted by the sorcerer's curse.

Around the fiftieth kill or so, I slip into a hypnosis that only the game can give me, one that I sought in coming here to the village, where I'm conscious of little else but my fingers on the keys, of the frozen werewolf bodies exploding and clattering on the ground. But then my headphones ding, and I receive a private message in the chat log.

hey.

I turn and find a dwarf wearing a miner's cap with a headlamp. Brown-red rust blisters his pickaxe, while dirt and mud and sand of many different colors soil his boots, as if he had just crossed the entire Realm on foot.

im like lost as shit can you help me.

Where have you come from? Where do you need to go?

lol I dont know I just wanna lvl up im a dwarf minor

Miner.

lol yeah

We stand next to an empty well. The never-waning moon stares at us through shrouds of gray clouds.

Did you get lost in the fog?

yeah!!! omg so annoying.

I sigh. *Would you like me to teleport you back to the Vale of New Beginnings?*

But the dwarf doesn't answer. A look of terror takes his face.

I follow his eyes. Werewolves, attracted by the scent of low-level blood, emerge from the doorways and windows surrounding us. They snarl, snap at the air. Maybe fifteen in total. All of them grinning.

omg

They leap and charge. With a quick combination of keys I cast Levitate on the dwarf, so he floats above me and the werewolves, out of reach. Then as they close in on me I fire off another Gravity Pulse, which sends them all hurtling back and crashing into windows and walls.

yesssssss gettem!!!

I see the dwarf's message and in an instant remember my own power: the fact that I stand second-highest out of all Wizard Librarians on the Official Player Power Index, that where this vicious herd of men-to-monsters might give real trouble to even high level players, I could dispatch them with just a few spells. And so I do. Like a human storm I spin and unleash beams of wind and ice, until the entire village and werewolf herd stand frozen solid, coated in a frosty glaze. I ease the dwarf back to the ground.

omg yesssssssssssss!!!!!!! ty ty ty ty!!!!

I nod to the werewolf closest to us. *Your pickaxe.*

The dwarf considers it in his hand, like I had just given it to him. Then his eyes rise to the werewolf.

thats ok. I just wanna go back to the beginning place. can you teleport me still?

Right. Of course.

I open a portal to the Vale of New Beginnings. He bows.

ty again. ur character is so cool!!

And he steps through. I have an urge to follow him, but don't. Instead I summon my Arcane Steed and decide to start on what, deep down, I knew I'd been putting off this whole time: the second part of my Sunday routine with Kimchi, our weekly herb gathering. I gallop off and leave behind a cast of frozen werewolves, their claws dripping, dripping, dripping.

That evening I microwave a box of instant PF Chang's and bring it to my desk. As I eat, my avatar stands by a self-stirring cauldron in his private study. Fumes rise from a vat of bubbling Never-Rust for Baldrick's plate armor. He comes online, then knocks on the door.

"Lolo-daddy," he says on the voice line. "How we doing tonight?"

I swallow a spool of noodles and peanut sauce. "Hey, Baldrick."

He peers into the cauldron, rubs his hands together. "That's what I'm talking about," he says. "My man Lolo comes *prepared.*"

I step around Baldrick to pull a fresh jar of Silverseed off the shelf. I sprinkle in a handful.

He clears his throat. "You and Kimchi go out herbing today?"

"No," I say. "We did not."

"Oh. She sick or something?"

"No. She had homework. But I managed to get the herbing done myself."

"Man. Must've taken a while."

"It did," I say, but sharper than I mean to, so I add, "But that's alright. Just as long as it gets done."

"Right on," he says. We stand side-by-side, silent. In the cauldron a huge, viscous bubble rises and pops.

Baldrick clears his throat again. "I know we're not supposed to ask each other about personal stuff, but. Hell. Everything cool with you, Lolo?"

He's right: the Guild Rules state that personal information can be given, but not asked for. He and Cubscout know that I'm Kimchi's father, and that we don't live with each other. But they don't know about the distance between us, about the thousand miles between Tampa and Ann Arbor. I try to forget it myself. The game helps a lot, most of the time. But not now. Not while my daughter shares a dinner table with some stranger in black glasses.

I had just reached for my food on the desk, but I put it back down. My face flushes, and a hot itch flares at the bottom of my neck. It embarrasses me that he felt the need to ask, but at the same time, I appreciate it. So I tell him the truth, but only one face of it. Steam rises from the cauldron and I say, "Yeah, Baldrick. All good. I just really, really want to kill the goddamn Lord of Fog. Sick of getting our asses kicked every week."

He claps my avatar on the back. "Mr. Fog ain't kicking our ass," he says. "He's only teaching us, slowly but surely, how to kick *his* ass. Every time we lose to him, that's learning, my man."

"After last night," I say, "I'm not feeling very educated. In fact I feel downright clueless."

"Fair enough," he says. "All that business with the killer hands, that'll be a doozy, no doubt about it. But we put our heads together, we'll pull something out. I'm sure of it."

I cut the fire beneath the cauldron and dip a large vial into the Never-Rust. After corking it, I hand the vial to Baldrick.

"Thanks, Lolo-daddy," he says, and packs away the vial in a pouch on his belt. "Kimchi'll be there tomorrow, right? For the strategy session?"

"Yes." The word escapes from my mouth, but then I think on it and realize that, although last week and the week before that and the week before that, I could always count on her being here—for strategy sessions, herb gathering, fighting the Lord of Fog—now I feel less certain. Like today's departure from her game habits is just a sign of things to come. So then I say, "I think so. I don't know."

And I think he hears the doubt in my voice. "Well, I hope so. We'll need all hands on deck for this one, sure as shit."

I rub my eyes, say nothing. He makes to leave my study. "Thanks again, Lolo-daddy. I'm gonna go shine my shield and watch some football. You gonna be on for a while?"

I look at the clock beside my monitor, the one Amanda sent me for Christmas last year. *THE REALM NEEDS YOU,* it says in bright white letters, while beneath them a slideshow scrolls through some of the Realm's most pleasant landscapes: the Loch of Endless Sapphire, Honeybreeze Valley, the Vale of New Beginnings. But above all this is the time, nearly eight o'clock. On Sundays, Amanda goes to sleep at nine.

"No," I say. "Maybe another hour."

"Right on," he says. "I'll catch you tomorrow then."

He steps out of the study, closing the door behind him, and then disconnects from the voice line. I tear my headset off and bring the mostly full box of PF Chang's to the kitchenette trashcan. From the kitchenette you can see the whole of my apartment—my

bed, my desk, the curtained glass door that appears to open on a balcony, but actually opens on a set of floor-to-ceiling suicide bars, like the metal screen in an old-fashioned elevator.

Amanda has never been here. And I wouldn't want her here, if I'm being honest. My ex-wife makes good money. I work customer service for a firm that builds customized fish tanks. I do not make good money. But my ex-wife, she owns the house where she and my daughter live together. They have more space than they need. Once, when Carla was not at home, Amanda gave me a video tour of the house. There was a living room with a coffee table and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and a fireplace. A full-sized kitchen with steel appliances. And three bedrooms. Amanda poked the phone into Carla's room—everything new, orderly, the bed and side tables and dresser all made from a polished dark wood, almost black—but in seconds I told my daughter I'd seen enough. So she took me to her own room and showed me her brand-new desk and laptop, where on the screen I noticed her wallpaper: a snapshot of Lolofax and Kimchi, flexing and smiling atop the Great Knuckle, the Realm's tallest mountain. I beamed at this, and continued beaming as she turned the phone to her bed, to the plush dragon doll and Official Lore Guide I sent on her birthday. Then she backed up to the door for a panoramic view. "It's wonderful, baby," I told her, but with a sinking heart. Her room alone was about as big as my entire apartment.

I imagine her coming to stay with me. Except where the headboard meets the wall, there's maybe two feet of free space on every side of the bed. My desk crams the corner on the right, next to the fake balcony door. On the desk I could maybe slide my

monitor and the *REALM NEEDS YOU* clock closer to the wall and make room for her laptop. But there wouldn't be room to sit next to each other. She'd have to pull a chair (after I bought a second one) up to the side, where her knees would butt against the paneling. And the way the desk is built, she'd have to put her laptop on one level and place her mouse on the one below it. So she'd have to play the game with her hands in odd positions, and this wouldn't do. And as far as sleeping goes, there might be room for a twin-sized blowup bed in the kitchenette. Otherwise, we'd have to share mine. Somehow I don't think either of us would be comfortable with that. Not anymore.

When we all lived together here in Tampa, she went through a phase where she came to sleep with Carla and me almost every night. We had a big bed, with plenty of room for her in the middle. So Amanda would wedge herself between us and almost always it woke me up first. I'd whisper to her, what's the matter? But she'd go still and wouldn't say a thing, like she thought she were invisible. Though of course she wasn't, and after a few weeks, Carla started to take issue. This isn't normal, she'd say, I mean every single night? And while I agreed with my wife, I have to admit, I felt a sweetness with all three of us in the bed together, a warmth we shared beneath the blankets like there was only so much of it, like when Amanda was a baby and Carla was still in graduate school and still in love with me.

Around 9:30, I quit waiting for Kimchi to come online. In the eight months since I bought her the game, this is the longest stretch of hours she's gone without playing. I power my PC down. Crawl into bed. My sleep is shallow, sweat-soaked. I dream of werewolves. Myself, one of them.

The next day, Monday, I call in sick at the fish tank firm. I have never done this before, and our schedule supervisor, Louise, talks to me with real concern. Feel better, Guthrey, she says. And don't come back until you do.

No, I'm not actually sick, but I certainly don't feel well, either. When I woke up I knew I could not go to work today. The whole Peter situation has got me in a kind of tight-limbed paralysis. Like I can't go anywhere or do anything until I know exactly what is going on. As in, will this man soon become my daughter's step-father? As in, will she like him better than me, her real father?

I google Peter and Ann Arbor and the name of the college where he and my ex-wife teach. Right away I find him. Peter Matthews. On the college's website I discover that he directs the Program of Medieval and Early Modern Studies. That he holds a PhD in Medieval Weaponry. I cringe at how cool that sounds.

And I see his photo. The glasses. They're not as big or menacing or strange as I imagined. In fact above his angular jaw, his confident smile, they look deliberate, like he wears them only because he wants to. His hair is short and neat, black with faint strokes of silver. And for an academic in Ann Arbor, his skin is surprisingly tan. He is handsome as all hell.

So now I worry even more. To try and divert my mind, I log into the game, where I walk from my private study to Kimchi's room, on the other side of the hall, as if being there will bring me closer to her.

Kimchi's room is less a room than it is an indoor forest. As you cross the threshold, the wood floor ends in soft grass. A small pond filled with angelfish trickles at

the center, and along the room's round boundaries, miniature fir trees grow to a see-through ceiling. I look up and see the fog swarming over it, but then bring my eyes back down, to the moon-painted table across from the pond, where potted flowers and herbs and salves surround her open spellbook—the place where Kimchi creates her healing magic.

I go and sit on the stool at the table. On the spellbook's open page, I read an entry titled Inner Warmth. But it's different from the version I taught her, eight months ago when she started playing the game. This version of the spell lasts much longer, and requires no reagent but air to breathe—and, it says, a positive thought.

I run my fingers down the page, proud of her, but also lonely for this reason. My fingers on the page are still my fingers on a mouse and keyboard.

I look up at the see-through ceiling again. When she started playing the game and had only limited powers of her own, I made this roof for her, this entire room. With my magic I extended this wing of the keep—my wing—and I conjured the trees and grass and pond and moon-shaped table. But all of it was only what she asked for, including the invisible roof. So she could see the stars, she said.

Now fog rolls over the roof, as it always does. As I watch I remember our last fight against the Lord of Fog, and I imagine the hands waving at me here in Kimchi's room, just before they bust through and crush me.

My hands clench and my breath goes shallow. My heart flutters. And in my head I suddenly see the aquarium at the Children's Museum, my company's last major project. After we finished it, my boss threw a party in the Museum lobby, where the aquarium

sits. It rises out of the floor, dome-shaped, in the center of the room, like an overturned bowl. A few of my coworkers brought their kids, who draped themselves against the aquarium, their foreheads pasted to the glass. One of them, at most three or four years-old, started slapping the tank, banging with his fist, and shouting at it. Then the rest of the kids, maybe five in total, joined in, laughing, until their mothers and fathers came and scolded them, or pulled them away from the aquarium altogether.

I went to this party only because it happened during work hours, and then I left early, as the kids were being peeled off the glass. That same night we started our fight against the Fog Lord, and until just now, I hadn't thought of the aquarium or the kids at all. They give me an idea. In Kimchi's spellbook I flip to the first open page and begin to write.

I am still there, at her table, when she logs on around 4:30 PM, her usual time.

"Dad?"

I write the last word of the spell, then I put the quill down. She sits beside me at the table. "Hi, baby. How was school?"

"What are you doing online? Shouldn't you be at work?"

"I should, yes," I say, thinking. "But our boss gave everyone the day off."

"That's random," she says.

"Won't hear me complain." I force a chuckle.

There's a brief silence, but then she says, "Okay, next question. What are you doing in my room? Writing in my spellbook?"

"I know, I'm sorry," I say. "I decided to use my extra time for research, to get ready for the strategy session tonight. I came in here thinking I might borrow some of your powdered Sunmetal, but then I got distracted by your spellbook. Which turned out to be a good thing."

"Yeah? Let me see." She drags the spellbook closer to herself. After a while she says, "a barrier."

"Yes," I say. "Not so unlike the magic that made your roof. But also quite different."

She looks up, a faint smile on her face, as if remembering when she requested the roof. I smile, too, because this moment resembles so much of our time in the Realm—puzzling over boss fights and spells and potion recipes together—but behind my face there's a withered feeling. My daughter is here now, and I have questions.

"I'll explain everything tonight," I say, and take the book back. "But for now, I want to talk to you."

She sighs. "I figured you would. I'm sorry I never got on last night. But, Dad, there's really nothing to talk about."

"Yes there is."

"Tell me then," she says.

And here I hesitate, because, I realize, she might be right. What had I hoped for her to tell me? That Peter, turns out, is actually a registered sex offender? That Amanda and my ex-wife both decided over dinner that he's a pretentious prick? That they both

miss me terribly and that every day since moving to Ann Arbor has been a terrible mistake?

All I can think to say is, "Peter."

She sighs again, heavier this time, and in my head I see her rubbing her eyes. "What about him? I've already told you, Dad. He's a nice guy. He and Mom do a lot of smiling together."

"But what about you. You like having him around?"

"Sure I do," I say. "But it's got less to do with him than Mom. Like, you should hear the way she's been laughing lately. I don't think I've ever heard her laugh so much." Her avatar touches a potted plant on the table, a wide green leaf between delicate fingers. Then she says, "You're not the only one who's been hurt in all this, Dad."

I have an urge to jump headfirst through the screen, to hoist Amanda in my arms and hold her hard against my chest so that I can feel her heart beating against mine, so I can feel the rhythm of her pumping blood as real pulses through my own blood and muscles and bones. But all I can actually do is grab the edges of my monitor and rest my forehead against it, like the kids at the aquarium, and watch fog bloom and fade around my nose.

"Dad," my daughter says. "Are you crying?"

"No, baby," I say, though this is a lie. "I'm sorry. From now on, you tell me only what you think I should know."

"I tell you everything, Dad," she says. "That's always been true. If I've been quiet about all this, I guess it's because I don't know what to say about it. It's weird for me, too,

you know." Her avatar rubs her hands together, and out of them blooms the same purple flower. She picks it off, hands it to me. I peel my face from the screen so I can accept the flower with a keystroke. "I miss you," she says.

And I believe her. I feel foolish for ever doubting it. "I miss you, too," I say.

We sit in silence awhile. Above us the fog rides over the roof like a silent, endless cavalry of ghosts.

The barrier doesn't work. Well, it does, and it doesn't. Like last week, we sling arrows and Ice Bolts, we dodge Fog Bombs and parry the blows of ambushing Cumulus Ogres until the Fog Lord's life sinks to twenty percent. He takes flight and disappears as a dark storm begins to swirl around the tower: the prelude to the fists.

Sweat slicks my forehead, the cups of my headset, as I tell my fellow Knights to gather, gather, to group in the dome-shaped barrier. From every direction the storm clouds creep closer, like the constricting eye of a hurricane, while the Fog Lord shrieks with laughter.

Above our heads I conjure a floating battle standard with the guild colors and crest: orange and pink, a Starburst candy shining above its open wrapper. The flag flaps in the ferocious wind as Baldrick says *shit yeah* and blows his minotaur horn.

And then the storm touches the barrier. The clouds whirl around us, faster now, and out of them swoop the Fog Lord's disembodied hands. They wave at us, wiggle their fingers, as if they mean to caress instead of choke. Without meaning to I snarl *fuckers* and

Cubscout says, "Kimchi, toss a Rejuvenating Blossom to Baldrick. Stay frosty, people, stay frosty."

The hands rise and clench into bulging fists, then they divebomb right for us. On the chat line Kimchi murmurs *please please please*, and just before the fists reach the battle standard, I close my eyes. In my headset I hear a gasp, followed by a chiming sound, so high it almost hurts.

Cubscout says, "*Yes*." I open my eyes.

Over the Starburst standard, over the heads of my friends, the barrier ripples like liquid glass, but remains intact, impassible. The fists punch and knock and slap, then poke at it, confounded.

"It worked," I say. My face feels too small for my grin. "Holy shit it worked."

"Atta boy Lolofax," says Baldrick.

"Easy now," Cubscout says. "Fight's not over."

And he's right. The Fog Lord laughs without pause now, very much alive, while his hands begin a game of rock-paper-scissors. I sling an Ice Bolt their way, but as it passes through the bubble, it vanishes. So does my grin.

"Fuck," I say.

"What?" says Cubscout.

"The barrier," I say. "I think it nullifies our magic, too."

Baldrick sticks the tip of his sword past the chalk line. He yelps.

"My sword," he says. Half the blade has disappeared. "Goddamn it Lolofax you're paying my blacksmith bill."

"Baldrick, shut the hell up," says Cubscout. "Lolo. What now?"

Lightning crashes, thunder booms. Within the barrier, the wind no longer bothers us; the battle flag levitates quiet and still. Outside, one of the hands plays paper into rock.

I scowl and loose another Ice Bolt. Then a Fireball, a Shock Blast.

"Lolofax," says Cubscout.

I mute my microphone and mash the keyboard and yell *fuck, fuck fuck fuck,* as I begin to cast each and every spell in my tome. From my staff flies fire and ice and a cluster of huge diamond missiles, a Lunar Boomerang that doesn't come back, then a flock of spectral birds with soul-stealing beaks. One of the birds breaks loose from the others and circles the air above our heads. Everything else vanishes beyond the barrier: this invention of mine.

Spit speckles my monitor. My shoulders heave with my heavy breath. Kimchi whispers a spell that lures the bird close, right into her open hands, where it perches and grows white feathers, no longer a ghost, but a dove. Across my screen flashes a message: WARNING! SPELL ENERGY DEPLETED.

"A draw," Kimchi says. The dove coos in her hands.

I unmute my microphone. "Defeat," I say, and I sign out of the game.

"Dad."

Then I disconnect from the voice line, too. Inside my PC the powered fans whir, the liquid cooling engine hisses. My monitor shows the desktop wallpaper: Kimchi and Lolofax, smiling atop the Knuckle. The same one as hers.

I look over at the *REALM NEEDS YOU* clock as the picture switches to the Vale of New Beginnings. I pick it up and I stare. I remember the game's introduction, the cutscene I first saw two years ago explaining that you, whether knight or botanist or wizard, whether gnome or elf or man, are fated to go forth and someday save the Realm from ever changing, ever strengthening evil. The camera shows you speaking to a low-ranking Peacekeeper, who entreats your aid against a band of fearsome Pigmen. He promises a reward: that staff, he says, or that sword, we could replace it with real steel, with a something from the Peacekeeper armory. All around you soft grass rolls across the Vale. Trees sway and whisper, a sound of premonition. Then the cutscene ends, and for the first time, the game gives you control.

I put the clock back down, reach behind the desk. I feel for the surge protector plug and I pull. With a sigh from the fan and cooling engine, the screenshot and the Vale of New Beginnings disappear. It is late, and the blinds are drawn. Everything is dark

SLEEPWALKER

It's me and Sally on the sun deck, Fourth of July. We're expecting company, some college friends we haven't seen in a while. Tonight's a reunion of sorts for Sally and me too. Two months ago I quit my job and came here, to New York, so I could work on myself. That's what I told her. What happened was I left our home in Los Angeles with the cacti in the pots Sally painted, with the ten year-old coffee machine we named Fido, the coatrack wearing the thrift store top hat, and I came here, where I learned any friends I'd made were actually Sally's, or somewhere else entirely. She's here to spend the weekend with me, like we agreed, to see how things feel. She says, "We'll have fun tonight." I nod, looking at the avenue sixteen floors below us. She rubs my back, my neck, with a hand like silk, and goes inside.

On a few neighboring rooftops I see parties in full swing. I'm watching one a few blocks away, where a group of men and women who look about our age gather close around a table, yelling and laughing. Up the avenue taxis course steady like yellow blood cells, while pedestrians, some wearing red, white, and blue, pass along the sidewalks. My head's a little foggy because I recently took up running, whereas before I hardly ever exercised. This morning I ran three miles. When I told Sally she was surprised, and she said that, after a good look at me, I really *do* look thinner. I've not noticed, as I've always been on the lean side, but I do feel foggy—I *feel*, I guess, a little thinner.

I turn and look through the door, into the kitchen, where Sally sets a platter of pita and hummus. We're at the two-story penthouse of my father's best friend, Jonathan, and his wife, Marissa, who range the world as famous parasitologists. I've been staying in one of the five bedrooms—jobless, planless, the place to myself—while they host a conference in Ghana on recent ebola outbreaks. So far I've found no work because I haven't looked. I've eaten takeout every night from one of two places within a few blocks from here. During the day I walk, or read, or watch pedestrians from the balcony, like now. Sometimes Sally calls. We'll speak for maybe fifteen minutes, in which time the talk stays stilted and small until, inevitably, she'll ask me if I'm feeling any better, and reiterate how little she understands all this--how she can't see anything wrong with the way we've always lived. And I'll tell her that I know, I know, I don't understand it either, but that I also know I need this time. Time to get away and to think, to figure out what I want.

And to this she'll say, I want *you.*

And eventually I'll say, You know what I mean, and then lie and tell her I have to get going, that I have to meet someone, a work connection she's never met.

In LA we really did have a good life. I had a well-paying job at a marketing firm, and Sally made good money as a session violinist, so we could afford a townhouse in an up-and-coming neighborhood. We went out with friends every now and then, got drunk sometimes, and made love often. But mostly we stayed in. We watched a lot of movies and ate Swedish Fish, which, after a party almost ten years ago, we'd eaten together on a park bench edging the East River, laughing as a pigeon pecked up the fish I kept

drunkenly dropping. To this day Sally needs no occasion to recount stories like this. We don't have to be eating Swedish Fish for her to ask, Do you remember that night, the one on the East River, with the Swedish Fish? I can be scraping butter on toast, I can be doing anything, and she might say, looking up from her laptop: Remember when we visited your family in Connecticut, when your grandma kept calling me Susan? And always, at each and every story, I say, Yes, I remember, because I do, but at this point that's all: like facts read from an almanac.

I step into the living room. Sally's put on a song we used to call a favorite, and she's pouring a white wine from New Zealand that I've always loved. She did all the shopping for tonight's get-together, which I only found out about when I picked her up this morning. As soon as we got on the highway, she told me two friends of ours—whose names, admittedly, recalled no faces—were coming over, and that the night would have two simple rules:

Rule Number One: Much Drinking.

Rule Number Two: No Thinking.

Easing back into things, was the way she put it. She holds a glass out to me now, which I take as we walk to the kitchen island with the pita and the hummus.

"While I was out shopping," she says, "I decided to go by the Courier for coffee."

She looks at me, green eyes wide and shiny.

"Have you gone back there yet?"

I hesitate. In college we met at the Courier almost every day, but I haven't been there--or anywhere near campus—since I came back. Though that's not to say I've been

avoiding the place. The truth is that I hadn't thought of it—since coming here, in fact, I feel as if I've hardly thought of anything at all.

I shake my head at this more than Sally's question.

She nods. "Somehow that doesn't surprise me. But I understand. Maybe too much memory there, though the neighborhood looks totally different now. They replaced the flower shop next door with a tanning spa, and all the apartments above it have been totally remodeled."

With two fingers she twists the wineglass by the stem.

"I thought it was gone for a second," she says. "Which scared me. I couldn't even order. When they asked me what I wanted, I turned and ran for it."

I look at her, thinking there might be tears. But she laughs.

"Anyway," she says. "Yes. I'm breaking my own rule." She holds her glass up. "To a much deserved night off."

Behind us the stereo plays. She mouths along, looking me right in the eye—*like walking in the rain*—and I clink my glass against hers. As we drink her eyes don't change. The intercom buzzes.

Though this morning their names recalled no faces, the faces of our friends bring back sparse memories: there's the freckly brunette who I know lived in Sally's building one year, and a short blonde with a sharp nose who went to a lot of the same parties. But somehow I feel fine with this unfamiliarity—I realize, in fact, that I might even prefer it—so as soon as I see our guests, I feel myself lifted. Besides the tense calls with Sally and a few drinks with fringe acquaintances, I've hardly spoken to anyone since coming

here. Not that socializing's ever been a big need of mine, especially with two people from college whom even then I barely knew. Tonight, though, after two months of aimless walking, pretending to look for a job, and hardly opening my mouth, I feel ready for a night of fun, for a night of simple, fine feelings--with anyone who happens to be around.

Our guests come in, we pour more wine, snack on the pita and hummus, and soon the fogginess I felt on the balcony dissipates into a prickling clarity, an ecstatic, carefree aliveness. When the blonde one—whose name I ask, out of formality, but immediately lose because I don't think I'll need it—talks to me about the ad campaign she's working on for an upcoming sitcom, I ask for more, and not because I care, but because the wine's fine and I'm only letting in feelings that are fine. I even talk to her about my own experience as a marketer, how I recently quit in the middle of a big campaign for an NFL player's protein bar, and as I do, I don't feel the same worry and creeping remorse that I've spent two months trying to ignore. Instead my job seems to me merely a thing that came and went, a nice enough thing while it lasted, and one I'm free now to replace with something even better.

She asks me, "So you just left?"

"Yep," I say.

"Wow," she says. "Everybody at work eats those things."

"But not you."

"No," she says. "I refuse to even try them. I'll stick to real food."

"Well," I say, "Until recently, it was my job to convince you they're *better* than real food."

"I know how it works." She takes a drink and her eyes sparkle. "So let's see it. Convince me."

I smile at my own drink and realize the handmade coaster sitting next to it. It's made of a raw looking wood, and in the center there's a little clay-colored man playing a drum.

I tell her, "It *was* my job," then cover the coaster with my drink. "But now I can say whatever I want."

"And what would that be?"

I have a joke in mind, about how the bars look like moon mud and don't taste much better. But then I think of the last ad I had to approve before I quit, one in which a space cadet swirls green stuff in a beaker, runs on a treadmill, and, after flipping through papers on a clipboard, finally sits to a video call with his earthbound wife. The wife asks, What's for dinner?, and then, like a dagger, he pulls out a protein bar. Same as always, the space cadet says, before taking a huge bite. Then he winks at the camera and it's over.

Words drift from my mouth now: "They taste," I say, "like anything." But I shake my head, because this is wrong. "I mean they don't taste like anything."

"Hm." She frowns. "Yeah. I'll stick to real food."

I nod, drink, and try to steer us elsewhere. "Anyway," I say, "What about you? Sounds like you've got a good deal."

"It's good," she says. "Frustrating sometimes, but good."

"Frustrating."

"It's not like what you had," she says. "Where you were the boss and everything had your name on it. I'm actually on the ground, writing up pitches and TV ads—actually *making* this stuff. But then my bosses are the only ones who know that."

"I've been there," I say. "Started at the same place as an intern, right out of college."

"So you already know," she says.

"Yeah," I say. "I know both sides. And I know that I was bored to begin with. But then things can explode and you go along with it, mostly because you're already there, and there's all this momentum."

"You mean money," she says, smiling.

I finish my glass, smile back. "And money. Intern kryptonite."

She laughs and I smile bigger. Sally and the brunette, who've been talking on their own, stop and look over at us from the other side of the kitchen. They make inquiring faces, and in Sally's I detect a twitch of something like worry. I realize this should make me feel bad, even if I haven't really done anything wrong. But right then feelings like guilt and sadness seem somewhere high above me, like balloons I've let go of. In their place I've got a feeling of independence, a feeling like nothing and no one here could do me any harm. Maybe it's the wine, or the fact I haven't really eaten today, other than the pita and hummus just now. Whatever it is, my whole world seems at such a distance that I can look at it, enjoy it, without it needing anything back.

From outside we hear fireworks. It's still not quite dark, and out the southern floor-to-ceiling windows there's a view of downtown. The buildings have dolled

themselves up in pricks of nightlight sequins, a scarf of delicious pink clouds. I suggest we all go out to the sun deck, and everyone agrees. But, as if she's only just noticed where we are, the brunette asks if we could tour the apartment first. So I show them around the living room, which is littered with artifacts of Jonathan and Marissa's enormous life together: photographs of an Australian safari, a fishing trip to a remote ravine, the couple's young kissing faces before a foggy Big Ben. Like they were mine I point out handwoven baskets with inscriptions of thanks, a waist-high vase of wide pink flowers (*J + M* stenciled at the top in sweet cursive), and a slew of scientific awards cast in gold, platinum, and crystal, small as my pinkie or big as a basketball.

"Incredible," the brunette says.

"Amazing," says the blonde.

"And what a view."

"The sad thing," I say, "is that I'm used to it."

The brunette, inspecting an antique Japanese parasol, says, "How is that possible?"

Sally comes over to us from across the room. "We've known them a long time," she says.

"My dad's best friend," I say. "I've known them all my life. Kind of a second home in college."

"We've slept under those stairs like, a million times," Sally says. She smiles at me.

"They have a lot of guests," I say, nodding. "It's actually lucky I've had the place to myself."

"Must get lonely," the blonde one says. "This place is *huge*."

I shrug: things I already know.

There's a silence as they scan the room. Sally has a blank look now. She's tapping her wineglass against a ring I gave her years ago, a crane game prize that's turned a rusty orange. She walks for the bathroom with small hurried steps. The blonde watches her go.

"Is she okay?"

Her friend looks over from a painting of red bird legs and comes over to us.

"Yeah," I say, kind of hushed, because, according to the Rules, this is something I'm supposed to ignore.

"She's okay. Show you upstairs?"

I take them up to the second floor, where all the bedrooms are. Even the guest rooms are packed with history and life. In the one where I'm staying, I show them the authentic 10th century viking shield hanging on the wall. In another they laugh at the life-size Ronald McDonald (sharpie inscription on the hair: *J&M - Ask and you shall receive. Love, TR*). I demonstrate the guest bathroom's waterfall shower, the pad of waterproof sticky notes, where hundreds of guests have written poems, jokes, and messages of heartfelt thanks. And I take them to the master bedroom.

Compared to the others, the master bedroom, where these collectors of seemingly infinite wealth and friendship sleep, is surprisingly modest. There's a handsome, dark chest of drawers chiseled with bounding antelope and Saharan landscapes. More photos--a black-and-white of Marissa's parents, Jonathan's bashful high school smile—are scattered across a modern, angular dressing table. But the most important thing here, the

reason for showing the room at all, is the wide shawl hanging on the wall across from the bed. Marissa, as I tell our guests, made it herself, a years-long project where she collected scraps and swatches of any fabric, any color or texture—so long as they were donated by one of her or Jonathan's friends—and patched them into this shimmering, impossible dance of light and dark, of soft and coarse.

"I'd love to meet these people," the brunette says.

"Magic," says the blonde.

With a delicate thumb she brushes the strange rainbow shimmer, like fish scales or sunlit soap, and I decide that maybe there's no reason to doubt it. Magic. But then I touch it myself--a square of brown burlap, rough, stitched to a silk neighbor—and realize that the blanket spans two eastern windows, that without it the room would be much lighter.

I take the girls back to the living room. Sally's at the counter, beaming over three vodka sodas. She's put on an old soul record I used to obsess about.

"I ordered pizza," she says. "Hope that's okay!"

She brings the vodkas to her friends so I'm the only drinkless one. "And for you," she says to me, pulling a brown bottle from a fancy bag. It's a bourbon she knows I've wanted to try for a while. "I know you don't like vodka. Open it!"

I uncork it and pour a glass. "Thank you," I say, and hold it out in cheers. As we clink I keep my eyes on the drinks. We go out to the balcony.

It's dark enough now for early stars and more frequent fireworks. Distant rooftops and hidden parks cough skyward flecks of gold, red, blue. The night sky hangs low and

hugs the city around us in sweet cloudless plum. Occasionally a helicopter blares by, along with the intermittent roar of happy gatherings. The wind is persistent and big, but friendly, playing tricks with our hair, my shirt, the girls' summery dresses. And the bourbon: the bourbon is damn good.

I lean over the rightmost part of the balcony, facing south. Our guests take up the other side. Sally comes to stand next to me and I look at her, really look at her, because, I realize, I haven't once all night.

Sally is beautiful. I've never thought otherwise. She wears black a lot but tonight she's got on this flighty thing in a color like sand. She's pale and thin and bony, like me, which has always been a joke of ours: that we've got the same body, only mine's male, a little taller, and even bonier than hers. But she's got a softness that I don't.

I try to look at her now as if for the first time. For a second it maybe works, but then she asks me if I like the bourbon, if I'm having fun. She asks me right in my ear, soft, and I find it nice, it reminds me that I've got this friend here, a forever friend who loves me and who once spent a night with me in the tub, where I puked on her and on myself and everywhere, because I'd had too much to drink with my older brother. I look at her and know she'd do the very same tonight: she'd get puked on, help me clean myself up, because we've known each other that long and that deeply.

All of this I'm aware of. I'm aware it's a special thing to be kids and to meet and grow up together, through all the disjointedness, the anxiety of learning who you are, of learning the same of another--how to live with them, how it is to fall in love for the first and only time. I'm aware of these things and I am thankful for them, for Sally, but in the

same way as anything taken for granted. When things are easy enough, smooth enough, they become routine, they become what is ordinary and therefore easy to ignore. Why it's only me, not Sally, who's become aware of this, I don't know. And why I'm only aware of it *now*, I don't know, because our life in Los Angeles had always been easy. From the very *beginning*—at school, when we met—we've been nothing but easy. Not that anyone's completely safe. In college she had eating struggles that coincided with a dear aunt's death. I had a thing for study drugs, which swung me on a pendulum between boundless glee and gloom. But none of our trouble came from *us.* It all came from the outside—any trouble we had was an opportunity, merely, to remember how we could depend on each other, how when life made us afraid we could wrap tighter in bed or play crane games for fake rings. How we could huddle under the same umbrella because I was always forgetting mine.

Here are my memories, and here is Sally, the central player in so, so many of them. It's not a matter of wanting someone else. That's not why I came here. Sex, dating—even when I met Sally, I hardly thought of those things. We met on accident, fell in love on accident. If I cared about sex it was only because it was something she and I shared, like a secret.

So why did I come here. Because I'm afraid we're all born with only so much love and goodness and compassion. That we possess these things in limited quantities. That at age 33 I've already used mine up.

Now I know it’s me who’s breaking the rules, but unlike Sally, I’ve always been a good actor—I lean my face closer to hers and murmur, yes, I love the bourbon, and yes,

I'm having fun. But I also tell her, because it feels fair, because I *should* be able to say it after all she's given, after all the care she's taken, that I'm glad she's here.

She smiles at me like she could cry. "Hard to tell."

"I know," I say. "I'm sorry."

For a moment we lean over the balcony. I sip. She sips. Then she says, "You're my best friend," and I send my drink burning down the wrong pipe. I nod and swallow and force the bourbon down my throat until I can manage a word.

"Yes," I say. "Of course. For so long now."

"Okay," she says. "Okay." She lays a hand on my cheek; I can only keep her eyes for a second. My feet balance on loose ankles, as if the deck is now unmoored, as if it could now rise slowly into the night, could bring us into arm's reach of the heat dispensed by fireworks.

The intercom rings again. Our guests go in to get the pizza.

I grip the deck rail. Sally's hand slips away.

Inside the brunette's husband arrives. He and the girls all eat like they haven't in days. I take two bites from a slice and stick the rest in the trash. As I pour another drink Sally asks the husband what he does. Her voice is glad—heartened, I think, by the playful sight of him and the brunette, who's stealing olives off his pizza.

"Finance," the husband says.

"He's taught himself piano," says the brunette. "Only three months. He's brilliant."

"I might like to keep an olive. *An* olive."

She smacks and smiles.

"Cute," Sally says. "How long have you been together?"

"Five months and twenty-one days," he says.

"Can I get you a drink," I say.

"Cute," Sally says.

"Yes," the husband says.

I pour him a glass of the nearest wine in reach and slide it to him. The brunette's rubbing a hand on the back of his neck.

"Piano," I say. "Tell me more."

"I play music too," Sally says. "Violin."

The brunette perks. "Sally plays beautifully."

The husband nods, chewing. He asks the kinds of things Sally likes to play, which I know the answers to, so for a moment my head floats around the room. On the other side of the kitchen island I notice the blonde's empty glass, which seems improper to me. I sidle around Sally and point to it.

"Thought I should have some water," the blonde says.

"Water," I say. I reach for a bottle of white and pour. "Into wine."

"Magic." She smiles.

We clink glasses and I hear the husband say, "I've been sight-reading Chopin."

The brunette's head lolls onto his shoulder. "Brilliant," she says. "Only a few months."

But Sally's not listening to them. I'm standing next to her friend and she sees it. But as she looks at us, the big show, the show put on by the city, begins with a deep

boom. The blonde one, made uncomfortable, maybe, by the way Sally's staring at me, skirts off to the deck. Husband and wife follow, which leaves Sally and me standing at the island.

"Give me that," she says, pointing to the wine.

I grab it by the neck. "Empty."

She reaches for the bourbon instead, pours her glass halfway.

"You'll get sick," I say, but then she takes a long drink. As she swallows she plants a hand on the counter, her insides writhing. To keep it from her I pour myself the rest.

She coughs. I put a hand on her back. I say her name, because I don't know what else to do. If things felt fine and far away before, they feel merely far away now. So I say her name again. I keep my hand on her bent back, on the surface of Sally.

The surface. What, I think, might be both the beginning and the end.

The noise draws blonde one to the door. Sally sees her.

"We're having fun," she says. "We're coming."

And then it's just me at the island. I walk about the room to cut the lights. Through the dark windows the city can be seen in all directions: rolling trails of taillights, rockets like popped suns. I stand in the doorway to the deck, behind everybody, and watch them watch the show. Husband and wife huddle close, their ears pressed together like a tunnel of thought. They don't speak because they don't need to. Sally sways and says a quiet thing to the blonde one, who laughs sweetly. They are splitting Sally's drink.

The finale approaches. It can be sensed in the show's sudden impatience, its rapid-fire cadence. The shells fire so fast that smoke gathers and floats above the deck. Stars go missing, cloaked in the dark drift. I watch the smoke more than I watch the rockets, I watch the horizon from which they rise--I watch, I think, the things you're not supposed to. I am missing the point.

Applause from the rooftops. Sally says, Beautiful. Blonde one agrees. Husband and wife kiss. All of them turn, see me standing in the doorway.

"Gorgeous," Sally says.

And I say, "Yes."

TIME FOR DANCING

When Mom and Dad start up fighting me and Wes hit the movie house down the street. Dad'll get home straight from the butcher shop and most days he and Mom go right at it, soon as he steps in the door. He doesn't even get his apron off. They'll be screaming at each other and the whole time he'll have this apron still wet with brown and red hanging from his neck.

They never notice Wes and me leaving. We don't sneak, just walk out the door and onto the street, like we weren't there to begin with.

In the alley behind the movie house we climb the tree and jump from the branches to the fire escape. The rest is easy. We get up on the roof and crawl through the maintenance shaft onto the metal beams that stretch over the theater and the giant silver screen.

From above we see men in turbans swallow swords shaped like snakes. We see saloon shootouts and horsemen hightailing through the desert. On Halloween we see a man whose skin falls off.

Below us the theater will gasp, even scream. Wes and I snicker: buncha poor saps. No matter what we see, it's like we've seen it before.

Then one day we find Dad's apron still on the hook, and later he doesn't come home at the usual time. All night Mom paces around muttering and sucking on her bottle of gin. Over and over she says to herself that she *knew it, knew it,* but what it is she

knows is a mystery to me and my brother. The way she says it, it's like she's mad as all hell but happy at the same time. Every now and then she laughs and slaps herself on the head, pulls her own hair. At one point she throttles the lamp in the living room like a throat and screams at it before throwing it to the floor. The lamp breaks and the room gets that much darker.

When Dad does finally get home it's almost midnight and he's stumbling around with a grin like piano keys. By then Mom's stumbling around too and when she sees our dad and his grin she screeches and lunges at him, but he just catches her in his arms and starts dancing her around the room the way a prince and princess might dance in a movie.

Wes and I watch with slack jaws from the hall. Mom is snarling, writhing, trying to free herself while Dad hangs onto her and keeps dancing to no music, and as they go, they knock into walls, into the black fire poker hanging on the rack and the chest of our old wooden circus toys, the seal and the elephant and the great Bengal tiger, who feels the shock in there and thinks maybe it's time to play, but no, it is time for dancing, for our mom and dad to sway and spin and bound off the walls like a pinball. They knock the telephone off the table, they topple the grandfather clock and the empty flower vase and they careen toward Wes and me, closer and closer until they pass through the hall where there's not enough room and so they trip on our legs. They hit the floor and that's where Mom begins to tear and claw into Dad's face with her long red nails.

All of a sudden Wes and me are bolting for the movie house. We climb the tree and the fire escape in the dark, descend into the maintenance shaft with moonlight on our backs.

We have never been here so late before. High above the screen we watch wordless while men and women who wear no clothes mouth and bite like they mean to eat each other. They grab and grapple, they pin each other to walls and say moan for me, moan.

I cut a look at Wes. He's got tears in his eyes, pale and shiny in the silver light. When I see it, it starts me up crying too, because my brother and I—we don't know a thing. Not a damned thing.

SINISTER SPACE

It starts in a sixth-grade science classroom, two boys sitting in the back, their mouths slack, rapt as they spool and wrap what they see on the TV around and around their minds like silver silk. The movie shows the surface of Jupiter, black holes, solar flares. It shows a rocket, built on earth, hurdling toward these things. One of the two boys, Yasuo, who this year has moved with his mother from Osaka, knows little of what is being said—*the circumference of the earth, compared to the sun, to, indeed, each and every star in the galaxy, is quite small*—but to see lunar landings, the stars sailing by at the helm of big-barreled rockets, sends electricity through his skin in prickling currents. The other boy—Brady, curly-haired, beady brown eyes behind thick glasses—he yearns for the serenity of space stations, a safe window from which to watch the cosmos move.

As the movie ends—*there is much, so much, that we still don't know*—the bell rings. Both boys stay seated, but the teacher turns the lights on. They blink, as if rudely awoken, and the teacher tells them: "Don't worry. There will be more." The boys exchange glum smiles. They step out of the classroom on slow, uncertain feet, as if the floor had been unmoored.

After school, Brady follows a gravel path from his bus stop to the trailer lot, to his own sheetmetal shoebox stilted on weathered wood. On the kitchenette counter he finds a five-dollar bill. Dinner. He cuts across the creek to the gas station. Through the trees the sign beams neon blue, the shape obscured by dark tree trunks. Today, for the first time,

the sight makes him smile. A space station, he thinks. The dark woods, the black paths underfoot—like space, what you must cross to reach anything bright and shining.

With the five dollars he buys two hotdogs, peanuts, frozen pizza in a box, and, at the back of the store, he sneaks a little soda the same color as the station sign. Both hotdogs are gone by the time he gets back home. The pizza he saves for breakfast, the peanuts for a school snack. He does his homework on a table that folds from the wall, and then he gets into bed, a cot lodged in a space little bigger than a closet—his room. With the lights off, he lies on his back, looks at the stars out the window. Waits for the sound of the door: the sound of his mother.

She murmurs to herself, a private kind of singsong, while a portable radio crackles in her hand—an ad for life insurance, forecasts of coming storms. When the closet slides open, Brady senses her silhouette, a burst of backlit shadow. He detects scents of smoke, biting liquor, sharp and strong enough to taste on his tongue. He faces the wall, waits for the door to close again. Slowly he falls asleep, his mother's footsteps traveling through the thin floor, the coils of the cot, the soft tremor of her strange orbit reaching through the pillow to his eardrum.

In science class the teacher brings incredible news: a contest calling for spaceship designs, the most spectacular and inventive of which will win a subscription to *Sinister Space*—a series of sci-fi cassettes, mysteries from the farthest reaches. Group submissions, the teacher says, are allowed. In fact they are encouraged.

Brady and Yasuo, seated next to one another, hear this like a task from the heavens. Neither boy listens to the lessons that day—the composition of moon rocks, the *Voyager* time capsule—because both, as if by silent agreement, begin to draw on the margins of class handouts, to cross lines of notebook paper with the curving hulls of spacecrafts, the sleek bend of flying dorsal fins. Only when the bell rings do they notice what the other has done.

Yasuo thinks: He draws so well. Much better than me.

And Brady: A telescope turret—wish I had thought of that.

The teacher sees the sketches as they pack them away.

"I figured," he says, "It wasn't notes you two were scribbling."

They look at each other. Yasuo scrunches his face, wrings his brain for the right English words.

"My house," he says. "After school?"

And Brady, who has never gotten such an invitation, feels the quick hammers of his heart. For a moment he forgets how to speak, but then he nods, spastically, and hoists his haggard backpack. In the hall they wave and separate into opposite streams of chattering student traffic.

Yasuo's bus takes them through the nicest neighborhood Brady has ever seen. It winds past houses painted in stately gray, past white columns joining wide porches and broad wooden awnings. It is like passing through a world where life is quadruple in scale. Kids get off in this neighborhood across three different stops, but Yasuo never motions to

follow them. At the last bend before they leave it, Brady sees a woman sitting in a cul-de-sac, her children driving little electric cars around her in slow circles. He watches them until the bus turns away, until they disappear behind a copse of pine.

Soon they pull into a tight cluster of condominiums, and here Yasuo gives the signal. They climb three sets of stairs and land by a door marked 4C. As Yasuo turns the key, he says, “Shoes.” In the hallway Brady obeys, light-stepping the carpeted halls like they were fragile as lilies.

Yasuo has his own room. He has a bed, and he has a desk, at which they sit side-by-side and get to scribbling. With scotch tape they hang the most promising concepts on the wall. They speak little—one-word encouragements, gentle criticisms—*cool, yes, maybe*. And sometimes they laugh: when Yasuo draws a ship in the shape of a chicken, when Brady imagines a chamber filled with floating popcorn. They take one break for snacks, during which Yasuo shares a box of cookie balls filled with chocolate, a roll of fruit flavored chews—treats with Japanese labels, and perhaps the best things Brady has ever tasted.

In this way time hums and buzzes by, their heads bent, their brows furrowed. After a certain point—when they have scalloped the wall with paper plans, when the sun has sunk low enough to light the lamps—they hear the door down the hall. Yasuo’s mother appears behind them.

“Oh,” she says. “Hello.” For Yasuo she has a few stern words in Japanese, and in her son’s pleading response, Brady thinks he hears his name. It dawns on him how dark it’s gotten—how he has never seen this hour outside the trailer lot, the blue glow of the

gas station, and with this his mind turns to his mother. Rarely, only rarely, had she gotten home before he went to bed, but it had happened, and the realization, for reasons he cannot name, fills him with dread.

Yasuo's mother bends her back in a shallow bow. She says, in impeccable English: "It's nice to meet you, Brady. My name is Noriko."

Brady shuffles out of his seat, bows back. "Hello, ma'am."

Her eyes scan the ship designs hanging on the wall. "I see you've been hard at work. We'd be pleased if you'd join us for dinner."

Yasuo smiles at him, but Brady sinks.

"I can't," he says. "I have to go."

"Oh," she says. "Where do you live?"

"Not far. I can walk."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Just down the street." His cheeks flush with his lie. "But thank you. Really."

Noriko frowns. "If you're certain. Next time, perhaps."

"Next time." In Brady's mind it seems a distant, uncertain concept. "Yes. Yes."

At the door Brady ties his shoes and faces Yasuo.

"Tomorrow," Yasuo says, bowing like his mother.

Brady does the same. "Tomorrow."

He tramps down the stairs, darts across the parking lot, and steps onto a street he has never seen.

After half an hour he emerges from a road choked by dark trees onto a strip of streetlights and signage. Hunger gnaws at him—he recalls with painful fondness the cookies and fruit chews. But he walks on, encouraged by the vague familiarity of his surroundings. His own bus, he thinks, passes that motel, and the pool hall just ahead, on its way to the trailer lot.

As he nears the entrance of the pool hall, he feels more certain—from here he only has to follow his bus route. If he hurries, he figures he should still be able to stop by the gas station and get home before he normally goes to bed—before his mother comes back to an empty trailer.

Of such an event he cannot imagine the consequences. Sometimes she'd come home while his pizza heated, or while he worked on his homework at the table, and she'd wrap her arms around his neck, her breath heavy and wet in his ear, and she'd say: *You're the only man mama needs; draw me a picture, honey, draw me up like a dream.* She'd kiss him on the temple, the cheek, a scatter of pecks on the neck, and she'd switch on her radio, dance and sing her way to the bathroom, from which she'd soon emerge with a fresh coat of lipstick, a tight jacket, electric purple eyeliner. In moments a pair of headlights would beam through the front windows—a sudden visitor from the dark roads—and at this his mother would give him one more kiss, maybe a little more money, and then she and the headlights would vanish.

But Brady also knows that she can sometimes flare with anger, knows the nights she'd stick herself to the phone, would yell and slur and cry through a cycle of frenzied dialing and slamming hangups—*but you owe me, he owes me, can you help me out just*

this once. At such times Brady would remain wherever he'd been when she walked in the door—at the table, the stove—and remain as still as he could, as if in such a state his mother saw not by sight but a frantic sonar. In his tenseness he'd be grateful that someone other than himself had given rise to his mother's rage, which, to him, she'd translate in other ways: by asking him to draw her face, to kiss her cheek, by holding him with a ferocious kind of tenderness, a surprising strength that sometimes left him breathless.

What suddenly strikes him, though, is that his being away from home might be cause enough to change this translation—that the ferocity he knows she's capable of might touch him not by way of tenderness, but something far more terrifying, something he wishes desperately not to know.

The thought begets another, a lesson his teacher gave the other day: the power of a dying star, a supernova, the colossal force of this rare and far-away phenomenon. He becomes acutely aware of the dark, of how exposed he is walking, rather than driving safely through it in back of the bus, and with this his skin flushes from head to toe, itchy hives rise and nibble at his neck, and his lungs, as if punctured, labor to bring in more air than that seeping away from them.

He breathes and walks faster, almost runs as he follows the turns taken by his bus. At an intersection he has to hold himself up by the traffic light, trembling, while he waits for it to change. Behind him he hears laughter and shouting from the pool hall. As he pushes off from the light and crosses the street he sees a shadow emerge from the door—a lithe outline trailing behind a heavyset man, both of them giggling, stumbling toward

the parking lot. They pass beneath a streetlamp, and at once Brady knows what he sees. Now—now he runs, and he doesn't stop until he gets home.

Hours later he wakes to the sound of the screen door. Out his window a cluster of stubborn stars prick the violet predawn. Like so many times before he hears his mother's footsteps approach the closet, hears the divider slide open. But this time she enters. She enters and crawls into the cot, wraps herself around his stocky body. Her jacket squeaks and smells of smoke, and her face, as she buries it in Brady's bushy hair, is smeared with teary pastels, strokes of dark mascara.

Brady keeps still, keeps his eyes shut tight. He tries to think of ship designs and remembers one of his favorite ideas from Yasuo's house, one of the pinups on the wall: a forest inside a spacecraft, a gigantic chamber where fir trees and flowers grow, where those dedicated to a life in space, to probing the black mysteries between the known planets, might go to remember the familiar touch of grass on bare feet, the sweet patter of a flowing stream.

He tries to imagines his mother there—her toes in the water, picking flowers with blue and purple petals—but when he does, he can't see her face. He cannot imagine her standing with him on an observation deck, a galaxy of glittering mysteries open before them, nor can he imagine her floating beside him in a room with no gravity.

Beneath her trembling breath, she murmurs something that he can't make out—something mournful, something afraid. Brady, wide awake now, waits for his mother to fall asleep, waits for the sky to turn from violet to soft blue. As carefully as he can, he untangles himself, and as he does, he sees his mother's face in the morning light. The

sight makes him start: around his mother's right eye rings a bruise like a smashed plum. A dark storm centered on her swollen eyelid.

In science class they learn about the weather on Saturn: whirling, heavy clouds that shoot lightning ten thousand times more powerful than that of earth, howling winds over a thousand miles an hour. In his mind Yasuo surfs this wind, rides its awesome force on a hang glider. He bobs and weaves between the bolts of lightning. He is grinning.

But Brady grimaces. What he sees on the projector—a swirl of red and purple clouds which, for perspective, fits around a scale image of earth—amazes, but also unnerves him. When class ends he tells Yasuo that, despite what he said yesterday, he won't be able to work on the ship after school.

"But we can work at lunch," he says.

"Okay," Yasuo says, but his lips pucker, like they wish to say more than he knows how to.

At lunch they find a table in the corner. Brady gets food from the cafeteria—chicken fingers, a tough roll of bread—while Yasuo brings lunch from home. From the sections of a smooth plastic box he eats sliced celery, a boiled egg, white rice. He offers Brady one of his two fruit chews: orange.

Like the day before they bend their heads and scratch their pens in quiet concentration. After a few moments they compare ideas: on Yasuo's paper are the plans for detachable one-man shuttles, which are drawn in atmospheres of extreme heat, cold, and wind—they are meant for dire, firsthand exploration. In his own notebook, Brady has

busied himself with safeguards, with backup batteries and fuel cells, retractable blast shields and blinders on the cockpit.

Brady leaves his work with Yasuo, who will combine it with the plans in his room. At the end of the day, they meet outside and wait for their buses to arrive. Yasuo's comes first. The boys depart with a wave, and Brady, standing on the curb, watches the bus boom off for the big houses, towards the spacious room where a spaceship hangs in paper pieces.

Moments later his own bus arrives, aboard which he passes the pool hall and stops at the crossing where he saw his mother. Behind the thick plastic windows of the bus, mounted on tall wheels, it looks like an entirely different place: not unlike the trailer, in its own way, a small, unthreatening place that shows only quiet signs of life, a head passing in a window, just lit, before the evening turns dark. The bus swings past it through the intersection and in minutes pulls up to the gravel paths of the trailer lot.

Brady walks and wishes himself into Yasuo's room, at the desk with their pens, the exquisite sound of their scratching. As he approaches the trailer, though, he halts: lights in the windows, through the screen door. He foots the front steps as lightly as he can and peeks inside.

His mother. She stands at the stove, working something in a pan. On the counter, next to an open bag of flower, a dirty measuring cup, the radio delivers the local news. The foldout table is set with two plates, napkins, water glasses. Brady stands at the screen door, stunned. His mother puts the pan down and turns his way.

“Brady,” she says. The purple, puffy splotches around her eye seem to have gotten darker, expanding now to the bridge of her nose. As if seeing it for the first time, Brady tenses, clenches his fingernails into his palms.

“You’re home.” She ushers him in, then returns to the stove. “How was school? I hope you’re hungry—I’m making pancakes.”

Brady pads to the table—the plates they never use, the plastic glasses painted with sunflowers. His mother lays two cakes in each place, and he is speechless.

“Have a seat,” his mother says, and he does. She places a bottle of maple syrup, unopened, at the center of the table.

“Breakfast for dinner,” she says. “Nothing better.”

He stares at the pancakes, feels the intent beam of his mother’s black eye.

“Please,” she says, nudging the syrup to the rim of his plate. “You first.”

He does what she asks—grabs the bottle, peels the seal, and pours syrup over the cakes’ moist skin. She pours a little on her own, and, gingerly, they take up their plastic forks and knives.

But Brady waits to take a bite. “Why?” he says.

His mother leans over the table, laces a hand in his hair. “It’s my way of saying thank you.”

He looks down at his food. “For what?”

She withdraws her hand. “For being mama’s man. The mannest one I know.”

To this Brady doesn't know what to say. He responds by cutting into the pancakes and beginning to eat. The taste is like the color: gold and caramel brown, savory and sweet. For a moment his mother watches him, smiling, then begins to eat as well.

After they finish, Brady returns to the table to work on the ship. His mother joins him with a set of nail polish. She peeks at his pen strokes: a rocket ship with a giant magnet attached to the nose.

"School project?" she says, uncapping a bottle of dark blue polish.

Without looking up Brady says, "It's a contest."

"Contest, huh? What kind?"

"Have to design a spaceship."

"A spaceship. Trying to fly away from me?"

He pauses, but keeps his head down. "If we win, we get a *Sinister Space* cassette."

"Wow," she says. "Who's we?"

"Me and a boy from class. He's Japanese."

With a serene face she strokes polish across the nail of her pinkie. "Well. If you're heading off to space, don't leave without me."

Brady makes no reply to this, but after a moment he says, "Do you want to know what the magnet's for?"

His mother's brush stops, waiting on her thumbnail. "Absolutely."

"It's for collecting debris from other spacecrafts. The ones that don't make it."

"What happened to them?"

"No telling." He clears his throat, like an expert. "Meteorites. Alien pirates. Planetary storms. All sorts of danger out there—lots we don't even know of."

She puts the brush down, leaves the thumbnail with a pink, unpainted sickle at the end of the blue. She looks over Brady's shoulder, toward the kitchen where the phone hangs on the wall, but then their eyes meet: a relay of signals, mostly messy, scrambled.

They smile meekly at each othera, but as they do, an engine roars and headlights pour into the windows of the trailer. Brady drops his pen. His mother jerks and knocks over the bottle of polish as she stands and commands him to go to his room—*get in bed get in bed right now.* Without a word he obeys. He sprints to his room and cocoons himself on the cot, listens to his mother step out the screen door. She and another voice, a man's, begin to yell and argue, but Brady can't make out any exact words. He huddles against the wall of the closet and hears a struggle—a thump against the trailer, a shockwave through the sheetmetal. Gravel scrapes under fast footsteps, followed by a grunt, a tumble to the ground. A car door slams, then another, and the engine, which has idled this whole time, blares back to life as tires slash the gravel, announcing the departure of this visitor from the dark.

For some time Brady remains motionless. Out his window no lights can be seen other than the faint and distant stars. In the trailer all is silent—the radio's absence strikes him starkly.

In time he rises from the cot, peers out the closet door. He creeps over to the kitchenette. Dishes from their pancake dinner clutter the sink. The pan, still sitting on the stove, holds a constellation of spotty grease. He turns to the table: to where, impossibly,

he and his mother sat only moments ago, eating and talking together in a way they never had.

From a tipped bottle of polish, a dark and lustrous blue pools over Brady's scattered paper. Small spaceships drawn in pen circle the spillage, which catches the light from the ceiling: a star, bleary and bursting, at the center of its own tiny universe.

NOMADS

After eighteen years Tuck could walk the campus of Holden School blind: the student houses, the great hall, the inn where the cooks lived. Along the path black tupelos shivered in the wind; Tuck tramped leaves the color of rust. He smiled: seasons meant agreeable change. From summer dew to frosted panes, houses disguised in snow like swan costumes. The mower, the rake, the plow. Whatever the tool, whatever the weather, his time at Holden had convinced him of its permanence. Not even the trouble in Europe could shake him of this conviction: Holden would always be Holden. Home would always be home.

In those eighteen years he'd seen two historic blizzards. He'd seen an old radiator set fire to the refectory, a flood that kissed the top of the tennis net. Each disaster met spirited resistance from the school. Snowstorms found students and teachers swapping ghost stories in the great hall. When Tuck had to repair a flooded classroom floor, students met instead at the faculty houses, where teachers taught by fireside, or on rocking chairs beneath a covered porch. He'd seen whole gardens dried in drought. Buildings blackened by fire. In every case the skyline of Holden School kept the same twilight outlines he looked at now.

At this hour it was so quiet, so still that it often seemed to Tuck he was the only person on the grounds, that the buildings and the tennis courts, the great lawns stretching to an end of sweetgums and pine, belonged only to him, that he, not the students, the

teachers, the cooks, had gone and lit the lamps in all the cottages, just for the sweet sight of soft glowing windows against the dusk. He sighed and thought of morning's coming commotion, of sleepy students trudging to breakfast in the great hall, and of passing through their ranks to reach the gardens. A breeze brought to his nose the mingled scents of cut grass and woodsmoke, both of which he wished he could swallow like food, and as he walked on, his lips curved gently to a smile.

He was headed for his own corner of Holden, a cottage that hugged the southwestern border. By this hour students were confined to the residence halls, where soon the housemasters would call lights-out. The quiet was wide and sharp and bothered only by two sounds: Tuck's brittle bootsteps, and, behind him, a distant humming.

Tuck knew what it was, and grimaced to hear it getting closer. Over the summer an airbase had opened beyond the eastern hills, from which warplanes flew fake sorties, imaginary dogfights that sometimes shook the skies of Holden. As Tuck walked the hum followed. It bloomed into a buzz, a thrumming rumble.

He looked up. A single fighter plane, drilling through the dusk. It strafed a screaming loop then barreled to the west, where it disappeared behind pointy shadow pines. Tuck watched the horizon, the trembling sawtooth trees. While he did so he jerked his bottom jaw back and forth, felt his tongue along dentures made of steel: a nervous habit. Over time his tongue had gotten more accustomed to the feel of steel teeth than that of the spoken word.

As he watched the plane's vanishing point his vision fogged. Blink: he had forgotten to blink. He rubbed his eyes.

That sound. At distance the planes might have the size of hummingbirds, yet they could bellow like storms.

He hurried to the friendlier sounds of home. The whistling kettle, his workbench and tinker tools. The backyard, where after a day of trimming the mums and dahlias, polishing placards, and distributing mail from mothers and fathers, Tuck could come to work on something of his own: statues made from scrap, sculptures that hung from trees and sang in the wind.

Tonight, tired from mulching the great hall gardens, he wanted nothing more than a cup of tea. With a hot mug he stepped out onto the porch. The moon announced the end of dusk in silver. Stars freckled the sky's clean cheek, while beneath them crickets chirped across bushes of ninebark.

Tuck could not help but watch the sky. Beneath the night's natural din he couldn't hear that troubling hum, but soon, he figured, the fighter would have to make its way home. He eyed the moonlit treetops, imagined the plane bursting from the branches like a bird of prey.

He would not say it scared him. Only that something in the rumble reminded him of the orphanage. Namely of Cousin Jack, who was not his cousin, but the matron's son, and who lost a leg in the last war. When he came back he clomped around on crutches. He wore his uniform to dinner, sang dirges at the table. He drank, raged at his mother. He took an interest in Tuck, whom he called Crowbar, Rooster, or nothing at all. It depended on Jack's mood: sometimes he wanted Crowbar to break milk crates with his teeth. Other

times he wanted to hear the Rooster caw, caw, to see his red hair wet with whiskey. The night Tuck fled he meant to crutch his bones to nameless dust.

Wind sifted through the statues. As they waved in the grass and swung from trees they sang their different songs. Tuck looked from the sky to the yard.

He saw a boy.

The porch light prompted no response. The boy studied the statue before him, serious, intent, as if it were an ancient text.

It happened to be the largest one: four upright shovels bound together by taut knuckles of twine; two halves of a cut shower rod tied crisscross at the top; different lampshades like exotic hats hung from each end of the rod; clusters of teaspoons, jars, glasses suspended beneath the shades, waving and making tinny kissing songs in the wind.

The boy arched his eyebrows, took swigs from a dark bottle.

Tuck approached. He hoped the sound of boots would start him off.

It didn't. The boy stared. Instead of student clothes he wore khaki shorts, leather shoes, a shirt dappled with palm trees and pineapples. He was pale and round and greasy, like a boiled egg.

The boy swigged, held the bottle out to Tuck.

"Like some scotch?"

Tuck cleared his throat. "No."

Shift of shower rods in the wind. Clinking glass, silver, tin.

The boy nodded at the statue.

"I like your, uh. Whatever it is. What do you call it?"

Tuck took another step.

"Go," he said, pointing. "Now."

On the boy's face bloomed an impish, sleepy grin. "That's not much of a name."

Tuck swiveled his jaw.

The boy went on. "I call it. Hm." He squinted, rocked like a hammock in the wind. *"*I call it—*One Man's Junk."*

Tuck's mug of tea trembled in his hand. His face burned.

Once more the boy offered the bottle. "You sure? It's *very* good." He glanced at the label. "Probably rare, even."

"Housemaster," Tuck said. "I will call him."

The boy looked at him, interested, as if at a rare instrument.

"How's that?"

"Housemaster."

The boy bore his tall teeth, tapped a finger to a canine. "Silver?"

Tuck grunted. "Steel."

"Whoa."

Tuck scowled, pointed again to the east, toward the heart of Holden.

"Alright, mister," the boy said. "I was only having a look around." He knocked his head back, sucked from the bottle like an utter. When finished he jetted a big breath and let a shiver.

"I'm new here, you see," he said. He made a motion to stand, but stopped short, looking at the sky. As he sat back down he smiled, cupped a hand to his ear.

He put a finger to his lips: *shush.*

Tuck heard it. The fighter, coming near.

The boy jabbed his finger toward the porch. "The light! *Hit the light!"*

Tuck obeyed, uncertain of why. They watched the sky in a swarm of blue and black shadow.

He heard a sound that, from far away, could belong to a kind of music: a horn, a note mouthing wide and low, continuous, meant to predict the rest of an orchestra. But as it neared this music was lost to a violent machinery, to the loud muscles of combustion, which demanded silence from all things but the fighter's dragging howl. Tuck watched, slack-jaw, as the fighter flew lower than any he had seen: he saw the headlights lancing through the night, red and green signals winking on the wingtips. He saw the dark trunk tearing stark against the moon.

Tuck dropped his cup. The statues worried in the fighter's aftermath: a discordant mixture of bells and bottles, the tossed teeth of a xylophone. He wanted to be alone with them. To be alone at the workbench, to sleep and dream of singing scrap.

He watched the sky a while longer. His jaw was working furiously.

When he looked down the boy was lying flat on his back, arms outstretched like wings. A funny smile tilted his lips. In the moonlight he seemed to glow from beneath the skin, pale and meek like a fluorescent bulb.

A titter escaped his teeth. He hiccuped.

"That was my brother," he said. "Well half-brother, I guess."

Tuck frowned. "The pilot."

A chuckle, louder. "No, no." Hiccup. "The *plane."* He stood on wobbly legs, noticed Tuck's face. "I'm serious. Same father, different mother. That makes half-brothers."

"Fool," Tuck said. "Go."

"No argument there," the boy said. "Just look. My brothers can *fly.* They're made of steel and have nicknames like *Terror of the Sky."* He sucked his bottle to about half-empty. "But who's to say, who's to say, mister, that I couldn't fly myself?"

He shot his arms out. The bottle flung from his hand and knocked against a shovel. A shattering sound.

"Oh." With his arms outstretched he began to cackle. Tuck growled, stepped toward him, and the boy ran off sputtering like a plane. Tuck watched him trail a few clumsy circles around the lawn before bounding into darkness.

Alone now, Tuck stood and listened to the night. At the edge of the yard the pines trees touched wispy fingers. From the branches of one marbles hung and swayed against mason jars. By another weathervane blades swung against a crier bell, cracked and muffled with rust.

Where the shovels lipped the earth they were soaked in scotch, ensnared by broken glass. Tuck turned on the porch light. He grabbed a handbroom, a dustpan. Swept up the fragments.

Set them aside.

Overcast morning. Gray and white clouds like torn sheets of tinfoil.

On the way to breakfast Tuck sifted through bits of fitful dreaming: a rooster with a golden crown. A parachute without its pilot, stuck and punctured by bare branches.

He decided he wouldn't mind a storm, wouldn't mind if the clouds grew dark and mad with lightning. A downpour. He could stay inside. He could frame and hang art projects and bulletins for the Winter Exhibition. Otherwise he'd be mending deer fences, chewed through for the morning glories within.

At the refectory he ate a bowl of beans and half a biscuit. Through the window the clouds lobed gray and low, but no rain.

Fences. So be it.

He peered into his empty bowl as if it were a deep and mysterious well. Around him cooks and teachers finished family meal. Scraping spoons. Dirty dishes hurried to soap and sponges, the rush before student breakfast.

As he stared a hand gripped the rim of his dish.

"All finished?"

Nova, the art teacher. Shock of blonde hair, almost white, wide glasses tipped by upturned wings. Around her neck strung a silver locket, inside of which she kept a photo of her husband's face.

Before the term began he had gone to her classroom to clean windows. He found her crying at her desk, the locket open in her hands. From Nova Tuck knew names like Nazi, Moscow, Roosevelt, which she would gather daily from her faculty house radio.

But he knew the name Peter Lott from that day, from the locket: her husband, the navy, safe in a place called Hawaii.

The waves of war news had since kept her on her feet: she helped the kitchen with the dishes, ate little, moved quickly.

She nodded at his half biscuit.

"C'mon," she said. "It'll go to waste."

"Oh." He snatched the biscuit, gnashed it in the steel mill of his mouth. He had not finished because something was off: a graininess, a sandlike friction from his teeth to his jawbones.

She took Tuck's bowl with a wink. Tuck tipped his hat. Armfuls of plates and bowls scurried to the kitchen. She slipped in among them, and Tuck left for the toolshed.

When he got there he saw students filing into the refectory. They marched in sluggish step, as if infected by the dreary weather, talking in groups of two or more. As he unlatched the padlock he saw the boy. At first he was unsure—the uniform—but Tuck remembered the short pouchy figure, the pallid face and greasy black hair. He trailed another step behind the procession: he looked sick, sullen.

With the padlock in his hands, Tuck watched the boy trudge into breakfast. He opened the shed. Gray light bladed through the door, revealing dust. Tool shelves dwelled along the dark walls. From one of them Tuck took a hammer, then realized what he needed was tools for mending. He put the hammer back. In a box he piled pliers, a fence stretcher, clips and coiled wire. When he reached the morning glories it began to rain.

Mist for most of the day. Tuck replaced the broken deer fences, his back draped lightly with water. One corner of the metal mesh snagged stubbornly to something in the soil, and he tore it out with his teeth. After the fences he cleared pine straw from faculty gutters, then went to prune a trumpet vine growing on a senior house lattice. The vines mingled orange bells with pink lilac chutes, a dense cloak of green leaves. As he sized his shears to an overgrown stem he noticed the broken lattice beneath.

The lattice led right to an offshoot of roofing, above which was a bedroom window. Tuck climbed the lattice with his eyes: joints of the wood were snapped or missing in a haphazard path. A few fragments lay in the grass. These he put in his coat pocket.

The boy, he thought. He looked at the clouds. No planes that day. No storming fighters, no bellowing bombers. Only the flaking sounds of mist against brick buildings, the bathing song of trees.

He would fix the lattice later. The day's remaining duties were all indoors, starting with the art projects. In the hallway outside Nova's classroom he hung an oil painted valley, a disjointed portrait of President Roosevelt.

When he got to the last project he paused. Instead of a landscape or face, the student drew a crude map of some continent, in which black pen scrabbled out the borders of strangely named regions: *Forrestia, Volcania, Desertia.* Below the continent another name was written in large capital letters. *NOMADICA.*

These he read with his mouth, the syllables parsed out silent and slow against his tongue. After years of scattered lessons—teachers before Nova's four-year tenure—he could read well enough, but slowly.

As Tuck hoisted the map to the wall, her class began to wander out. He made eye contact with the boy, who skirted off down the hall as soon as he saw Tuck's face. Nova came to the door after him, noticed the map in Tuck's hands.

She smiled. "New student. An idea for a board game."

Waves around the continent indicated oceans. *The Pacific*. He whispered it.

Nova drew near, chuckled. "He made it up. A land suddenly appearing in the ocean west of Hawaii. Hunters, castles. That sort of thing."

"War," Tuck said. The first word that came to mind.

"Yes," she said. "A whole nother war is starting in my art class. Just what we need." She sighed. "Oh—I have something for you."

She disappeared in the classroom, reemerged with something small in her hands.

"Here." A wooden bear: black fur grooving down the body, teeth borne in a bright white growl. "Found him hibernating in a desk."

She strode high heels down the hall, brisk, as if trying to catch up with someone. Tuck pocketed the bear with the lattice fragments. He hung the map, pictured the animal roaming across the continent, through the pointed pencil trees of *Forrestia*, a train of hunters stalking to his cave.

When he got home he got his storm. A crush of thunder nuzzled at his window, rattling the pane as if it wanted in. Tuck unlaced soggy boots, set water to boil, and sat down to his workbench.

On the table he arrayed the lattice fragments and the bear, next to which sat the remains of the scotch bottle. The pieces were pretty on their own: gilded runners like stiff ribbons, the distillery's plastic sigil, a gold crown attached to the cork. These he could use. He only had to separate them from the shards.

He seeped them in heating water to weaken the glue between glass and token. As the steam rose to his face he thought of how to bring them and the bear, and perhaps the lattice, together in statue. A bear king, dancing atop a dangling spine of lattice wood. Or waiting in his white cave.

As he stood and thought, he heard a knock. In his time at Holden this had only happened in emergency: a basement flood, a broken furnace. He wagged his jaw, went to the door. Undid the chain, the key, the knob.

The boy. Soaked.

"I'm not drunk," he said.

Tuck frowned. "So."

Cold storm wafted into cottage warmth. The boy shivered in another colorful shirt, a pair of khaki pants.

"So don't shut the door."

"What do you want?"

"To say sorry. And to ask you something."

Tuck stood in wool socks, his hand on the doorknob. In a flash of lightning the forest beyond the house blinked white. They both looked skyward as the bolt summoned thunder.

Water slipped from the boy's hair to the curve of his cheek. It was a feeling Tuck knew: soaked hair, soaked feet, soaked bones.

He looked at him, at his shivering figure. He jerked his dentures. "Ask," he said.

A smile, almost a smirk. "Help me make my game."

"Why."

"You saw my map. I can hardly draw a straight line, let alone make stuff like you."

The bear and the crown, barbarians and caves—new places to put his pieces. For a flash Tuck's imagination raced.

"See, with your help, we could make it aces. Make it like the things you've got back there—only this you could *play*."

To show the boy the statues had been an accident. They were a habit from the orphanage, where instead of charter school hand-me-downs Tuck worked with dead leaves, wire hooks, torn bits of burlap sack. Distraction wrested from the leftover world: not for show or tell, but for itself alone.

"I don't make games," he said.

"I'll take care of that," the boy said. "I'll tell you how it works, while you just help with the board, the pieces."

"But you. Not supposed to be here."

The smirk stretched. “A risk I’m willing to take.”

“No.” Tuck shook his head. “Trouble. Both of us.” He made a motion to shut the door, but the boy braced it with his hands.

“Please,” he said. He spoke through a sliver of open space. “This game is all I got. If I don’t make it great, like I know it can be, I’ll go completely bats. And you know what that looks like.”

Tuck worked his jaw like pistons. He felt the boy slacken his force on the door. For a moment Tuck’s hand stuck to the knob, trembling.

A boom of thunder, bigger this time, recalled the fighter from last night. Suddenly Tuck shut the door, turned the key, slid the chain.

After a second he pressed his ear to the wood: a squeaky sound. Dragging hands. Tuck turned and slumped against the barrier.

The stove. Water frothed from the pot, pestered the fire below. He rushed to cut the gas.

From the stove it was only a step to the center of his home. Around him the walls of his cottage described their modest circle: a shelf of bowls and cutlery above the sink, his blue striped bedsheets. A short wardrobe beside his workbench.

In the hearth the fire dwindled. His two lamps, secondhand like the rest of it, cast weak light through heavy shades. Steam from the stove crept to his cheeks, to the crown of his head. He ripped off his socks. Unbound a button of his shirt. To keep his hands moving he gripped the pot, stopped the drain in the sink, and poured everything in.

Through clouds of heat he reached for the cold faucet, and from the basin he heard a cracking like bone.

When the fog cleared he found pieces in pieces, remainders of the bottle turned to untraceable chips. Among them the runners, the sigil, and the crown sat as tokens newly free.

He looked at it all. That night, the night he fled, Cousin Jack could've broken Tuck's leg, but he woke just in time to dodge the first blow. He got away with a passing crutch to the mouth, a bottle pitched at the wall, howls of laughter chasing him down the hallway. While Tuck ran he wriggled his tongue between loose and rotten teeth, spat his own trail on the grass, the stones, the pine straw. He slept in empty silos, behind barns on bales of hay. From one nameless place to the next he walked with naked gums and soiled clothes, until he collapsed in the forest north of the cottage. The groundskeeper found him—gave him work, made him teeth of steel.

He went from the sink to the door. The chain, the key, the knob.

Rain sifted careful through the trees, like fingers to fragile things. The statues plinked and rang faintly from the backyard.

And there was the boy. Sleeping at his feet.

His name was Lawrence Griffin. His dad was also named Lawrence Griffin, as were the planes he made, only they had names like Griffin Mark II, Mark III, and Griffin Shadow. Lawrence Senior had never heard of *Nomads,* Lawrence's board game—nor, he

wagered, had his father heard about any of the decent games like *Sorry!, Conflict,* or even *Buccaneer,* which, to Lawrence's mind, was by far the best game in the world.

The problem with a game like *Conflict* was that no matter what, you knew what you were getting into. After a while it got stale. The pieces were neat enough, sure—plastic planes and battleships, artillery cannons—but all you could do with them was fight: invade the enemy base, or blow all the pieces off the map. In the end war was the only way to win.

Nomads, he promised, would be different. More like *Buccaneers,* a game where combat was one—*but not the only*—path to victory. You could sail to different ports across the sea, trading for diamonds and doubloons, or even to Treasure Island, where players could cast their fortunes against the cards of fate: for a shot at the Golden Chalice—outright victory—or else the Black Spot, which brought immediate defeat. To be an ace pirate meant doing it all: fighting, trading, exploring. Otherwise you'd find yourself sunk.

All this he told Tuck as they walked back to the broken lattice. They cut off the path, through the muddy lawns, gentle curtains of mist. It was enough to make Tuck squint. He walked with chilled, prickling skin, while the chatter pecked at his temple.

The boy went on. "See with *Nomads,"* he said, "there doesn't even have to be *one* winner, necessarily. Picture this: two tribes, one from *Forrestia,* the other, say, *Dessertia,* encounter each other in unclaimed territory. Now, in a game like *Conflict,* they'd be obligated to make mincemeat of each other."

While he talked Lawrence flicked his finger like a wand.

"Your voice," Tuck said. "Down."

"Good point." The boy continued in a fervent hush: "In *Nomads,* mincemeat will most often be something to *avoid,* because out of all possible actions in the game, combat will take the heaviest toll—even if you beat the other guy. So what else? What else does a guy do? Easy: you barter. Trade. Set up *treaties,* build *roads.* Heck, build entire *cities.* Govern them together, split the spoils—you see, mister, why we're gonna need a big board and *a lot* of pieces."

When they got to the lattice he kept on talking, as if unaware of time and place. Tuck shushed him, pointed to his window.

"Done it before," he said. "Do it again."

Lawrence looked from Tuck to his point.

"Right," he said. "I am sorry about breaking the house. Let's find a ladder for next time. No doubt you've got one, yeah?"

Next time.

"I do," Tuck said.

A smile. "Aces." Lawrence went to the lattice, hooked his hands in the holes. Tuck watched him climb: his feet, he realized, were quite small. At the roofing below his window he dismounted. Without the lattice he would have to jump from leg-breaking height.

Before climbing into his bedroom, Lawrence waved. Tuck nodded and waited for the window to shut. Only then did he go home, where at once he hid the runners, the sigil, and the crown below a loose floorboard.

The next morning Tuck skipped breakfast and went instead to the headmaster's office. He told her of a sick trumpet vine, black lilacs, a lattice gone rotten. He got permission to remove them: eighteen years had given him authority in the gardens, in the realms of wood and brick.

He waited until classes began. From the toolshed he took a mallet and shears. He carted them across slick lawns to Lawrence's dormitory, and in a stretching tongue of yellow sunrise Tuck beat the lattice down.

It caved like a stomach punch. He kept beating and the wood snapped jagged at the center. He pummeled the top until it fell, pried the bottom half with his hands. White bits like crisscross teeth stuck out from the wall: these met the mallet's head. Meanwhile many of the plants had clung and followed the fallen wood, but some hung by the framework in stubborn braids. He snipped them with the shears, tugged them like bell ropes.

When it was done he panted: he could see his breath. He had forgotten his coat and gloves, because until now he had not noticed the cold. The brick wall that had hid beneath the lattice glared in the sun, as if redeeming its time in darkness. It hurt his eyes, his head.

At Tuck's feet lay tangles of white wood and winding vines. He crushed and snapped the lattice to smaller pieces, then loaded everything by the armful. He trundled off toward the dump by the toolshed, leaving stray chutes of lilac and sunburst trumpet in the grass treads behind him.

For the rest of the day he made up work to do on the outskirts. He painted random sections of the farthest fence, bagged fallen leaves with his fingers. He checked gutters cleared the day before. As dinner hour came and went he hid supine in the shed: smells of sawdust, earth, a fatigue like his blood had gotten heavy. Shortly after curfew he roused himself and went to the refectory, hunting for leftovers.

In the kitchen he found Nova. She was helping with the biscuits for next morning, and when she saw him she brought a tray of fresh ones.

"Wondered if I'd see you here," she said. "Working through breakfast, lunch, *and* dinner?"

Tuck took a biscuit. "Today. Yes."

Nova watched him wolf it down: concern in her eyes. Like yesterday the biscuit brought a sandy bite, but Tuck was too hungry, too tired to care. Behind them a cook rolled dough while another cut circles with a stencil. At the stoves the back of a frock stirred something in a giant pot. Noisy, Tuck thought. At all hours: noisy.

"Take another," Nova said. "I'll get you something else. Then you can walk me home."

He ate a second biscuit, a can of beans, and a bowl of chicken soup from supper service. While she cleaned his dirty dishes he sat and rubbed his forehead. He nearly nodded off waiting for her.

They walked beneath a blue and biting night. As they went Tuck worked his jaw to stop his teeth from chattering. Nova set the pace: a brisk rhythm of heels on stone. He shivered a step behind her.

"Something happened today," she said. "A first. One of my students asked about you."

Tuck looked at her.

"The new boy." She smiled. "With the magic island."

He watched his feet, clenched cold hands in his pockets.

"He asked if it was you who made the bell in the bell tower," Nova said. "And that statue of the school founder. Now where would he get such a notion?"

He coughed. "Fool."

She stopped, surprise on her face. "Excuse me?"

He trudged on, but she caught up in two strides, a hand on his shoulder.

"What happened? Tuck?"

"Not a worry. Not now."

"Tuck."

"Tired," he said. "Please."

They went in silence to her house, where they said goodnight. Walking alone the shivers worsened. When he got to the cottage he lit a fire, wrapped himself in his coat and bedclothes, and strained to still himself. Above the mad chatter of his teeth he could hear jar notes from a nearby statue. He sealed his eyelids tight: sleep. He needed sleep. But in his quaking bed sleep seemed far, far, far.

He had a fever. He knew this now. He knew the name for this feeling, for the cold sweat slicking his skin, just as he now knew the name of that troubling sound. As he

shook and shivered it emerged from the east: the foul flaring horn of the boy's flying brothers.

He woke in the infirmary. After he missed every meal for two straight days, Nova went to the cottage. There she found him shaking in drenched bedsheets. For three more weeks he tossed between dreams of Cousin Jack: King of Forrestia, and another where Nova's class drew his own dentures in pencil. In that time a rash of similar flus came and went through the infirmary, while in the window the tupelos could be seen losing their leaves in the wind: November.

A doctor visited from the nearest town. Tuck had beat his fever, but at significant tolls of strength. It'd be weeks before he could safely return to work.

Save for a few bad colds the other beds kept empty, so Tuck mostly had the infirmary to himself. At first this suited him, but as he found the strength to stay awake past sundown, to watch twilight play slow tricks across the windowpanes, the fact of his inert hands and feet began to weigh on him. The infirmary, where in eighteen years he had seldom gone, might've been the quietest place in all of Holden School.

In the evenings Nova brought welcome noise. Gifts from the cooks and faculty: a basket of dusted doughnut muffins, petunias potted in clay. Another night she left a stack of cards painted by her class. While he ate his dinner he flipped through them. Above bright pictures of the bell tower, above the great hall gardens, nameless students wished him well: *Mr. Tuck, May Your Health Soon Bloom Again.*

Mr. Tuck. A name they learned from Nova. He continued through the cards—*Wishing You Sunny Days Ahead!*—until he came across one thicker than the rest. On the cover he saw a familiar shape, a familiar set of letters: *NOMADICA.*

Unlike the other single-sheet cards, this one folded open. Inside he found a booklet taped to the paper and a paragraph in pen. He clicked his bedside light and worked slow through the scrawl:

Dear Mr. Tuck,

I was awful sorry to hear you got sick. In the meantime I've worked a whole lot on the game beneath the board, and I'm happy to report it's finished. In your hands you hold none other than the official Nomads Rulebook, 1st Edition, complete with a glossary of important terms and the finalized map of Nomadica. I figured it'd be a nice way to pass the time while you get your strength back. Let's talk plans as soon as you're up to it.

Best wishes for a speedy recovery. Your fellow nomad,

Lawrence

As he finished a nurse came for his dishes. He covered the card, thanked the nurse, watched her go. Alone again he stared at the signature. *Your fellow nomad.*

He laid the other cards aside and untaped the rulebook. He read all 63 pages from cover to cover: every chapter and the glossary. By the time he finished the sun had broken dawn in a stack of orange and yellow skirts.

The next day was Saturday. In the late afternoon Lawrence poked his head through the door. Tuck waved him in.

Beneath a corduroy blazer he wore a beige sweater: the most muted colors Tuck had seen. His sleeves hung to the knuckle, the sweater clung tight to his belly. He approached Tuck with cautious eyes and feet, as if toward a sleeping bear.

Across Tuck's chest lay the open rulebook. He had been rereading the chapter on alliances: how pooling regional resources, swearing defense against aggressors, and embarking on joint research missions could open just some of the several paths to victory.

Lawrence saw the book, swallowed. His face looked whiter than usual.

"What do you think," he said. "Honest."

Tuck closed the book, looked at the cover.

"You were right," he said. "Can't draw a lick."

A familiar smirk. "Luckily we've got ways around it."

Tuck shook his head. "Don't know. Can hardly think to stand."

"That's only now. Soon you'll be flying all over campus, just like before."

"No doubt it's in rough shape. Been out so long."

Lawrence scratched his head, looked down the aisle of empty beds.

"You don't need to worry about that. A group of senior boys got permission to help out between classes, and even after curfew some."

Tuck frowned. "You?"

He cleared his throat. "Yep," he said. "Including yours truly."

Tuck looked him up and down: a greasy egg mowing lawns, carting trash.

"Honest they were pretty excited for it," Lawrence said. "Guess it's nice to get out from under all those math and chemistry books."

"And you," Tuck said.

"Me?" A grin. "Well, I just wanted to help you out some. And really I can kind of see why you like it. Some of my best ideas came while I was laying your smelly mulch, or raking leaves."

Tuck laid his head back, closed his eyes. The leaves. He would miss them: when he next set foot outside the infirmary, he'd see bare trees waving their winter fingers.

"I should thank you," he said.

"No need," Lawrence said. "Mrs. Lott told me you've been here almost twenty years. About time you got a break, yeah?"

He looked down, strung his fingers.

"And really it works out," he said, "because now I've got permission to be out after hours. So as soon as they let you home, we can get to work without worrying about curfew or anything." A smile. "I can use the front door, instead of jumping off the roof."

Tuck held the rulebook. Even when they released him, there'd still be time before he could range the grounds of Holden School, before he could perform his normal duties. While bound to his house he couldn't wield the mower, the rake, or the plow. He could not cut timber or tend fires in the great hall. But he could sit before their warmth. He could help this boy craft a continent.

"Yes," Tuck said. "Soon as I get home."

They got started the next week.

At suppertime Lawrence fetched dinner for two from the refectory, then brought it to the cottage, along with any supplies Tuck requested. In this regard Nova proved instrumental: she brought paint brushes large and small, jars of thick color, and stacks of different stocks, board, and paper. Soon she began to accompany Lawrence nearly every night, after she helped in the kitchen. She told them they made much better company than the radio.

Side-by-side Tuck and the boy sat at the workbench: the boy doling out instructions, dimensions, bits of Nomadic history, while together they bent metal, polished wood, and framed the map's foundation. Behind them Nova sat propped on Tuck's bed, intermittently reading, knitting, or getting up to fix tea and coco for the men, or to poke the fire. She and Tuck would switch places when he needed rest: Tuck had no table or chairs but the workbench and bed.

They worked nightly until Thanksgiving holiday, for which Nova visited her husband's family in Kentucky. Lawrence stayed at school.

"I'd rather be here than go home," he said. They were painting a section of the Pacific: mottled blues, green, white. Because of the holiday recess they were able to start early that day. Scents of coffee and woodsmoke trailed gentle through the cottage, while the morning sun whited a circle window, as if itself in miniature.

"Every year the cooks at home make this gigantic feast," Lawrence said, "But the only people there to eat it are me and my dad. So what happens is he sits for maybe thirty minutes, eats a leg of turkey, then rushes back to his drawing table. Then I end up eating

much more than I want to, because I guess I feel guilty." Stroking, dotting brushes. "They went through all that trouble."

Tuck nodded. He had his first Thanksgiving at Holden: it was tradition for the groundskeeper to carve the turkey, to offer forkfuls to the students and staff who had not gone away. The groundskeeper before Tuck let him play the role that year. He offered him a seat next to his own, a glass of mulled wine—steam that smelled of raisins, cinnamon, paprika. Tuck had first tasted liquor as it dripped from his hair, his eyes, his mouth—caw, caw—little droplets down his throat like burning dew. But the wine, that first sip: perhaps the sweetest thing to touch his tongue.

"Besides," Lawrence said, "This way we get to keep working."

And they were making progress. With the Pacific properly colored, all they had left was to cut the continent from tin, impress it with mountains, hills, and glaciers, then mount land to ocean. They planned to finish the continent before the feast tomorrow.

That night they made it as far as the cutting: after the boy left, a sheet of two-ply tin sat atop the Pacific, the island's flat and shining silhouette. Tuck sat before it and saw his murky face reflected. The illness had taken the bulk beneath his chin, had left a face wrapped tighter to the bone, but in the tin he saw firelight filling the room behind him, a handsome vitality in the old cottage walls, the shelves built by the last groundskeeper, and there in his own cheeks he saw the blushing embers of contentment, the stubborn colors of life.

He stood, turned off the two lamps, and shuffled to bed. From his pillow he watched the fire flutter and pop. He slept without dreaming, woke with roaring blood.

They barely made their target. That morning began a frenzy of bending, hammering, sculpting: the longest Tuck had been on his feet. They broke briefly for lunch and coffee, but beyond this they worked without pause. As the day progressed the hills of Forrestia, the sharp crags of Dessertia, and Volcania's great namesake all emerged in meticulous dents and folds. An hour before suppertime they stepped back from the bench and beheld a topography of tin.

"It's perfect," Lawrence said, turning a smile to Tuck. But he frowned.

"No," he said. "Not yet."

Suddenly Tuck took the land in both hands and set to gnawing at the hills, the valleys, the glaciers, gnawing even at the grass and oceans. He rolled steel teeth across tin like knuckles in dough, chipped stark chinks in the tall volcano. For an hour Lawrence watched in horror, but when Tuck replaced the island he understood. Before they'd only given Nomadica a body, the smooth underlying muscle, but no face: Tuck's teeth imparted the rough and riffling texture of grass and sea and mountain, the textures of a tiny world.

On their way to the refectory it began to snow: the first of the year. Neither of them spoke a word. They each watched their own feet, hands in coat pockets, as if their commutes aligned by accident. Both faces smiled privately, and they continued to do so as Tuck cut the turkey, as they ate potatoes and gravy and charred Brussels sprouts, as they clinked glasses of mulled wine across the refectory bench.

When Nova returned they did the rest of the painting. For the names of regions and rivers she offered her pretty penmanship. She smiled when they told her the name of a certain lake, in which she simply wrote her signature.

They finished the board on the 6th of December. At the center of the cottage they all three gathered around the white and glittering glaciers, the proud mountains, the trees of toothpick and broomstraw. Nova brought biscuits: a recipe by then perfected. Tuck drank tea, Nova coffee, and Lawrence coco, while each pair of eyes roamed across the little continent.

"Aces," Lawrence said. "Absolutely aces. Even better than I imagined."

Nova sipped, smiled. "All it needs is people."

"And mammoths. Castles. Pirate ships!" His vision ping-ponged, mad with future. He looked at Tuck. "Tomorrow. Let's get some footprints on the ground."

Tuck nodded. "Maybe," he said. "Tomorrow I work."

Nova looked. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Lawrence peered into his cup, then back at him. "So, after?"

"I don't know," Tuck said. "The timber. It can be tiring."

The boy nodded, placed his mug on the floor.

For hours more they sat around the board, speaking little. At intervals Nova refreshed their drinks. Tuck threw logs in the fire. Lawrence would bring his face close to the board, as if to smell, then pull back to his place on the pillow. Though they couldn't see it from their places on the carpet, dark clouds had begun to gather in the sky. Inside

the cottage all was gold and warmly scented, and above the breath of burning log Tuck could hear the jars and spoons swinging from the four shovels, a thinner song in the cold, but one in which he found no notes of worry.