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The following work contains narratives from characters who are experiencing isolation and loneliness in settings that are mysterious and, at times, terrifying.

ON THE CARE AND FEEDING OF ANIMALS

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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THIS WILL KEEP YOU WARM

While she is waiting at a stoplight in the village where she has lived for forty years, Eleanor forgets where her turn signal is. At first she's sure that it's on the left. But when she feels around behind the steering wheel, the wipers come on and scrape across the dry glass. She searches on the dashboard as the cars across the intersection slow to a stop. "Oh, shoot," She says. She just used her turn signal two miles back. She turned right on Route 9. The light changes to green. Eleanor waits for a break in the oncoming traffic to make a left. She rolls forward a few feet. The car behind her honks. But by now the dashboard reads like a plastic map of some unknown terrain, and Eleanor keeps brushing her fingers over the range of air control knobs. There is another honk. A car pulls into the road's shoulder and two teenage boys inside wave their middle fingers at her. Eleanor throws her hands up and realizes that her arms are shaking.

After a line of cars passes, she pulls into the lot at the corner of the public library. Eleanor leans her head on the window and closes her eyes for a moment. She reaches behind the right side of the steering wheel and pulls on the turn signal. It ticks at her. She nods and then kills the engine. The library building to her left is recognizably 90s, all low-slung cylinders and ellipses, walls circling back on themselves. Its squatty shape and brown-brick exterior seem at once exotic and outdated among the village's cluster of colonial white clapboard buildings.

Eleanor scrolls slowly through her phone and stops at her daughter Molly's number. She clears her throat and runs her thumb over the call button but then continues down the list of names to Wendy Kitson (Tennis).

"Hi, Wendy. It's Eleanor Abbott." She says. "Did I catch you and Frank during dinner? Okay, good."

She keeps her free hand on the steering wheel. "Anyway, I'm calling to let you know—I think you may want to find another doubles partner."

Eleanor winces at the eagerness in her voice. "Sorry it's such bad timing. Well I've just come from the doctor, actually. Uh huh, that damned tumor."

She laughs for a moment but it comes out like a cough, too hoarse and hollow. "Not even my backhand"

Eleanor squints at the library. Fifteen years ago, she had insisted that the local zoning committee consider a more classic silhouette for a public library. Less institutional. Maybe something with a hipped roof. Columns, even. A librarian comes to the front entrance to lock up for the night. She glances around the parking lot and stretches her arms overhead before disappearing back into the building.

"No, Wendy. Please don't," Eleanor says.

"I'm sure there's someone else at the club who can play for me."

"I feel fine, really. It's the same pain. Nothing new. Just—"

Eleanor nods to herself in the car. Her throat is getting hot but she keeps piling her words onto each other, stacking them like china.

"I just want to be alone. You'll tell the girls at the club, won't you?"

"All the commotion can come later. And it always does, you know."

“Molly, right. She lives in the city. Of course I called her.”

Eleanor’s cheeks feel hot. “Ok well the traffic in town is just a nightmare. I have to go now. I’m fine, really. Tell the girls.”

She is still nodding. “Good luck on Thursday.”

Outside, moths are swarming under the parking lot’s lamps. The same librarian now dressed in a light coat and carrying her purse emerges from one of the library’s several gray, industrial-looking side doors. Eleanor starts the engine. She rolls down the passenger side window halfway and taps the horn. The librarian stops a few yards away. At this distance, she looks younger than Eleanor had expected. Heavier, too—a girl, really. Eleanor sounds the horn again. The girl comes forward a few steps and bends at the waist.

“Can I help you?” She shields her eyes with her hand even though it is dark.

Eleanor props her elbows on the passenger seat and leans toward the window.

“This library is hideous.”

“Oh, the library? It just closed.”

“No. I said: this library is hideous.”

“Excuse me?”

“This library should have never been built.” Eleanor stabs a finger in the girl’s direction. “You should be embarrassed to work there.”

The girl’s mouth is hanging open. She straightens up and looks around the parking lot.

“Hey. Did you hear me?”

“Is this some kind of joke?”

“No. You should be embarrassed.”

The girl digs a hand in her purse and grasps around for something. She glances over her shoulders again. There are only two other cars left in the lot.

“Listen to me.” Eleanor shouts. But the girl has already turned around and is running to her car.

Eleanor pulls the car out of the parking lot and for miles replays the scene in her head, savoring the click-click of the girl’s shoes on the pavement. She makes the final turns toward her home and the silhouette of her empty farmhouse emerges against the cobalt sky. Maybe she should have gotten out of the car—said something even crueler. But she can’t think of any words in particular. So she says “bitch” aloud to herself. And she lets her voice hang in the car for just a moment before clenching a hand over her mouth.

She drives past the old hay fields. A decade ago, she sold the land of this defunct hay farm for almost nothing to a retired man from the city. He only mowed the fields once before dying. And his children, without ever seeing the land, sold it. Then, the acreage was cut up into four-bedroom-family-sized servings and quickly sold off again, like a carcass at the butcher. Now the half-dozen modular mansions sit back off road. Lit from every window, they dot the dark field like distant suns, pool toys and big cars their orbiting planets.

New construction has begun again, this time on the lot closest to the farmhouse. And as she pulls into the driveway, Eleanor can make out the shape of a cement mixer and a backhoe claw just beyond the sparse trees that border what’s left of her backyard. She thinks of the heavy, polished desk that sat between her and the doctor that afternoon; the way her soft belly conformed to the desk’s beveled edge when she leaned against it; the way the

doctor avoided her eyes and played with his pen as she asked again and again. *How long? I know, but when?*

Eleanor hesitates by the thermostat before starting a fire in the living room. The damp wood makes the house fill with smoke. She takes out some plain stationery and writes an apology note to the public library in neat cursive without a signature. She phones Molly from the landline in the kitchen while she folds the note into an envelope.

“How is work going?” Eleanor licks the envelope flap.

“You know, I’ve been waiting all day for your call,” Molly says.

“That’s silly. You knew I’d call.”

“So what happened, Moth?”

“Moth. Why are you calling me that?”

“Remember?”

Moth. Short for mother but with a soft *th*. Mo. Mom. Moth. Mother. Eleanor pauses with her pen touching the envelope. Molly had dirty hands. The crickets’ summer scream shook the grass. They looked under leaves for cocoons.

“Yes. I think so.”

“Listen, I’m going to drive up tomorrow,” Molly says.

“Oh, but you always hate coming here.”

“No, I don’t.”

Eleanor hesitates. And in the silence, the old phone murmurs like a third party on the line.

“Are you there?”

“I’m on the kitchen phone. It’s that buzz. I never told you, but they’re building a new house just past the backyard.”

“We can pull up the construction markers.”

“No. It’s too late for that. There’s already a backhoe.”

“So, what happened?”

“The last lot sold, I guess.”

“No, today.”

“Nothing new, really.”

“Are you telling me everything?”

The next morning Eleanor lies in bed. She traces a crack in the ceiling from the light fixture to the corner of the room, where she knows it descends behind the old, floral wallpaper and spawns colonies of more cracks.

She pulls her arms from under the covers and throws them wide. “How about now?” she says. She closes her eyes and pictures the ceiling collapsing—the first flakes of plaster dusting her eyelids, then an avalanche of mouse droppings and Christmas ornaments from the attic. Maybe neglecting the housework was a good idea. She opens her eyes and looks out the window to her garden. Choked by weeds, its boundary marked by a few distant moldering fence posts. She stretches her arms over her head. A pain uncoils in her side and nips at her ribs.

The day passes slowly, time only honored by the shifting shadows in her bedroom and the methodical grinding from the construction site next door. The phone rings once. And Eleanor rises to answer. But when the robotic caller ID announces the call from Kitson comma Wendy, she goes back to bed.

The sound of a car approaching suddenly embarrasses Eleanor. She doesn't want Molly to see her like this—resigned to the snarl of her bed sheets like a trapped animal. She sits up as the latch on the front door clicks. Molly comes upstairs carrying a pink synthetic sleeping bag and a tin of pistachios under her arms. She is wearing the same clothes that she must have worked in, a brown skirt and high heels.

“What are you still doing in bed?” Molly stands at the doorway, across the room from Eleanor. Her eyebrows are arched.

“I got up early.” Eleanor motions toward the window with her chin. “The construction is so noisy. I’ve been up all day. I just came back to take a nap.”

“It’s dinnertime.” Molly walks to the window. “God. What an ugly house.”

“I can’t believe you came all this way, Molly.”

“Of course I came.” She sits next to Eleanor. “Here. I know these are your favorite.” Molly puts the tin of pistachios in Eleanor’s lap.

“And what about that?” Eleanor points to the sleeping bag between them.

“Extra padding. You’re so thin.”

“No, you just haven’t seen me in months.”

“Well I thought we could use this.” Molly offers the rolled up pink sleeping bag to Eleanor. “When we sleep outside tonight.”

“Can you even fit inside of that old thing?”

Molly shrugs.

“Sorry. The old camping spot’s some brat’s swimming pool now.” Eleanor looks toward the window again.

“Who cares. We can sleep in the garden.”

“In what clothes?” Eleanor raises her eyebrows at Molly’s stockings and suede pumps. “Besides, the garden’s a mess. I haven’t gone out there once this year. Look how the fence is rotting.”

“It’s fine. I don’t care about that.”

After dinner Eleanor and Molly settle on a spot past the old asparagus bed, beyond the rotted fence, where the grass still grows waist-high in summer. There hasn’t been much rain and the ground is dry, cracked in places.

They sit facing a sparse line of trees, mostly Norway maples and a few old birches that separate the farmhouse from the new development. Eleanor’s legs are tucked into the pink sleeping bag and Molly is swaddled in blankets. There is a camping lantern on the ground between them that hums softly when lit. They listen to the slow scratching of crickets, drunk on the night’s chill.

Eleanor opens a bottle of wine and pours it into two paper cups.

“Sorry. it’s not very good.”

“No, it’s fine.” Molly raises her cup. “For warmth.”

Eleanor nods.

They are silent while they sip the wine. Molly runs her hands over the grass.

“In a few months the grass here will be tall again,” Eleanor says.

“I should come visit more often this summer.” Molly rests her chin on her bent knees.

“If you want.”

“To help you mow.”

“It’s better to leave it. The woolly bears nest in the milkweed. Some years there are hundreds.”

“I remember.”

“A few years ago I hired someone from the tennis club to do it. But the cocoons gummed up the mower. And later I found some tiger moth wings in the grass pile.”

“That’s sad.”

“No, not really.” Eleanor rocks back on her sits-bones and looks to the sky. It’s clear without a moon. “The moths don’t care,” she says. The stars are strangely invisible, choked out from the glow of the development. “No wild thing feels sorry for itself.”

Molly takes a swallow straight from the wine bottle. Eleanor hasn’t ever seen her like this. She looks away. The garden looks like a graveyard in this light.

“I’d like to fix up the fence,” Molly says. “And replant the garden.”

“Don’t be silly, Molly.”

“I can learn again.”

“You should sell this house. You’ll make a killing.”

“What about the development?” Molly’s chin is still on her knees.

“What about it?”

Sleep begins to tug Eleanor under. She gave up drinking a year ago. It scares her, that undertow. “I’m falling asleep,” Eleanor says.

“Take some blankets.”

“No. I’ll keep the sleeping bag.”

“It’s too small.”

“It’s not.” Eleanor pulls her knees toward her chest. She wraps her arms around her shins and wriggles into the bag until it reaches her collarbone. “Like this,” she says.

Molly turns off the lantern and the soft hum stops. The crickets. She lies down next to Eleanor.

“I wish we could see the stars.” Molly says.

Eleanor is drifting to sleep. If night is a blanket, she thinks, then the stars are holes for us to breathe through.

Sometime later, Eleanor wakes into darkness. There are no longer lights on at the neighbor’s homes. She has pulled her shoulders and head into the sleeping bag. Her legs are still tucked against her chest. She has crossed them at her ankles and lowered her head between her knees. She touches her palm to the warm spot where her breath strikes the bag’s lining. Her knees and hips ache.

Eleanor closes her eyes. She imagines her body stays in the sleeping bag while another part of her walks to the house, lights a fire in the fireplace, then drifts away through the chimney with the smoke, leaving only ashes, and the memory of warmth.

THE TANGLE

I had been dreaming about swimming in the shallow warm water of The Sound with my best friend, Sally, searching for some spoons that we dropped in the silty bottom, when the sirens woke me up. They sounded like they were a good five blocks away to the east. The wails rose and fell like breaths, and in the empty moments that stretched between them I could hear the water, too, as it slapped and licked the shore outside my window.

I tossed around in the bed that I was sharing with Sally, tugged the covers away from her tangled limbs and waited for my mother to come upstairs to my attic bedroom. I had been rubbing my eyes—they still felt dry and salty from the dream—when the door opened. I sat up in bed.

“Leo?”

“Hi, Mom.” Against the light of the stairwell, she was a lumpy silhouette with wild, wispy hair.

“Ready?”

I rubbed my eyes once more and nodded. I could smell her—the grapefruit shampoo on her hair and the sweet butterscotch candies she liked to crack between her molars when she was nervous. The sirens got closer.

“Let’s go. We don’t have time.” She motioned to the window near my bed. Through it, I could see a sliver of moon reflected on the surface of the dark water, glossy as cut black quartz. I rose and pulled a shirt from my dresser drawer.

Sally was still sleeping, her mouth open and cocked toward the window as if she was trying to taste the sky. She still had half a set of baby teeth, and her adult set had been growing around them crooked and wild as weeds. I loved Sally's teeth—the way the top ones umbrellaed beyond the fence of her lips, and the way they made her pronounce some words like she was holding marbles under her tongue. She was ugly in part because of her teeth, and knowing this made me love them even more. The next summer, when we were in middle school and no longer close, an orthodontist would break Sally's jaw in two places and reset it with wires just to straighten the mess of her mouth out.

Mom was standing at the doorway now waiting for me. In the light, I could make out her jeans and low-cut tee shirt. She had ropes of freckles on her chest that faded away in winter but always reappeared when summer came, the way some constellations do. Then the sirens muted—they must have turned north, away from the shore.

“Wups.” She held out her hand to me. I took it. Her palm was warm and rough. She squeezed my fingers and then let them go. We ran down two flights of stairs together. She took them quickly, on the balls of her bare feet and I struggled to keep up. Strands of silky hair fell loose from her bun and dropped around her shoulders. In the mudroom, she paused to step into a pair of clogs. I wriggled into my tee shirt.

She knelt on the step of our front porch and I climbed onto her back. “You’re getting too big for this,” she said. I rested my face against her spine. As she carried me to the car, I could feel her cervical vertebrae—Sally had taught me the names of bones—pressing into my jaw, only a cotton shirt and some flimsy skin separating us. “Can you reach?” Mom tilted me toward the car door. I pulled the handle and she dropped me into the passenger seat.

“Where do you think the fire is?” She knocked two metal trashcans off of the curb by our mailbox as she backed out of the driveway. A dog inside someone’s house started barking. “Oh damnit, hush,” she said.

“It sounds like it’s over by the hospital.”

This was the end of my tenth summer, and I had been escorting my mother to local fires all season. It wasn’t the destination she was after—she didn’t care much for the blazes that swallowed rooms whole or the false alarms, or anything in between—but the ride. She just wanted to be on the road, to be moving toward the sirens. In June, right before school let out, something that had lain dormant inside of her for three decades stirred and she started fetching me every week to accompany her. Now, it was less than a week to Labor Day. I had grown jumpy at the ring of sirens and I couldn’t help but wonder how much longer this would continue.

My mother had first made a habit of chasing the fire engines as a child, when her own father, a man whom she loved fiercely, was on the volunteer squad, “back when that actually meant something,” she would tell me. In the house where she grew up, there was a police radio on top of the refrigerator. It murmured emergencies all day and rattled off the coordinates of local disasters like they were lottery numbers. She used to set her sneakers at the foot of her bed on nights when her father was working. She once even fled her third grade classroom on foot after she saw the fire trucks speed past the window. “I had to make sure he was alright,” she would say. “What’s more important than that?”

But she couldn’t keep him safe, and her father drowned in The Sound after suffering a heart attack while swimming laps. (“You know, cardiac problems run in your family,” Sally would tell me when I took two desserts at school lunch.) The radio on the refrigerator

delivered the victim's description and state. My mother had her head in the pantry; she was looking for some peanut butter when she heard it. Of course, she stopped chasing the fire trucks right then. I don't think she ever wanted to eat a peanut butter sandwich again, either. She went through all the motions, though. She cauterized the wound with adolescence. She even married a man—my dad—who worked on the fire squad full time. He wore his uniform at the wedding. But it was too sunny on the beach, and in all the photos my mother's eyes are closed.

“Marriage is a straw man,” she once told me while we were alone together in the car. “A proposed salve for the inevitable heartbreak of growing up, invented by a cruel, hollow world.” She drifted onto the road's shoulder as she spoke. I reached over from the passenger seat and steered the car back into her lane. “Thanks, honey. The price of admission is too high, though. You pay up, it'll destroy you. That papers over the original heartbreak just fine, but now you have a host of all new hurts to deal with. Once you give yourself up, you'll never be whole again. You never will, Leo.”

“Are you talking about Dad?” I asked after she had been silent for a while. I had often heard my parents quarrelling in their bedroom with the door closed. In these fights, my mother would be crying and my dad would usually tell her to quit it and pull herself together or, on days when he was gentler, maybe just to relax a little.

“Marriage. I'm talking about marriage,” she said.

I touched her hair. Her eyes were glassy and her fingers wrapped around the wheel without quite gripping it.

“A straw man. It means a front, false reasoning, a goddamn sham.”

It wasn't that my mother couldn't be happy in marriage; she could. I remember how she once took a ballroom dancing class with my dad. Sally and I waited up late for them. When they came through the kitchen door, they were laughing about a man in a restaurant and Mom was hanging on Dad's shoulder. They moved around the house and emptied the dishwasher together like something small and private had been tucked between them while they were out. We begged them to dance for us. They agreed, and since they had drunk a little, were warm and forgetful. Sally and I pushed the coffee table into the dining room. We called the rug in front of the fireplace their stage and settled close to each other on the sofa.

My mother wore shoes with high heels and delicate straps that clasped around her ankles. Her hair was twisted into a knot behind one ear. Dad wore a tan blazer with jeans. They stood on the carpet facing us, their arms slightly outstretched, fingers brushing.

"It's called the tangle," Dad said, which made my mother laugh and break her position.

"the tang-o."

"That's what I said."

"What about the music?"

"It's just the kids."

"You don't care?"

We shook our heads.

They clasped hands. My mother counted, "five, six, seven, eight."

Dad pulled her close against his chest. She paused with one leg extended to a point, her low back hollow. She was almost Dad's height in the heels. He pressed his hand into her

spine, and stroked her back from shoulder blades to hips. Her shirt bunched under his palm. “You must be very serious when you dance this,” Dad said in a fake Argentine accent.

Mom’s lips fluttered on the counts. She looked down, swung her hips and circled him slowly. She was gossamer to his rugged, muscular frame and she slipped around him like the incoming tide over jagged rocks on the beach. I could feel my bottom sinking into the worn spot on the sofa, my side pressed into Sally’s, her ribs and mine expanding and collapsing in syncopation, but I was also aware of something else—a fragmentation inside of me. I imagined springing up from the couch to join my parents, breaking up their tenuous embrace and twirling in wild circles between them with only Sally as our audience.

My mother closed her eyes. Dad hooked his arm around the curve of her back.

“No, the other arm,” she whispered.

“What?”

“The other arm. You have to dip me, remember?”

“Oh.” Dad straightened up.

“Just switch arms, Eddie.”

“Whoops.” He fumbled for a moment but recovered. They managed to finish the short sequence beautifully with Dad holding her while she draped herself completely limp over the crux of his arm. Sally and I stood from the couch.

“How’d you get your back to bend like that, Mrs. A?” Sally asked when we finished our scattered applause. They were still in the dip. Mom’s eyes were closed and Dad’s arms had begun to quiver under her weight.

“I could die like this,” she said.

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic.” Dad hoisted her up. Her face was flushed.

“I’m not,” she said. “It’s the dance. I understand it: the *tangle*.”

Dad rolled his eyes, a show for us.

“Anyway, Miss Sal, I just bend. I’m flexible.” She leaned over and took the arch of her foot in both hands. She attempted to lift her leg but couldn’t quite stay balanced. “I think I was robbed of my career as a dancer, actually.”

“Is that right,” said Dad. “By who?”

When Sally and I retreated to the attic, my bedroom was stuffy. We opened a window. Waves lapped gently on the sand below. “Look how low the tide is,” I said.

We tried to dance the tango in front of my bed. I held one of Sally’s hands in mine and we stood facing each other.

“I want to be your mother.”

“In the dance?”

“Yes.” Sally’s hair was pulled back in a thin ponytail. She sucked on her bottom lip when she wasn’t speaking. And when she stopped, I could see a chapped, pink crescent was growing below it.

“Well you can’t.” I let go of her hand.

“Why not?”

“Because she’s my mother, not yours. I want to be her in the dance.”

Sally’s parents were divorced. Her father lived far away in a state with scorpions and bright blue skies—he sent postcards every year but never came to visit. Her mother had recently married a man named Saul Dworkin who owned a local car dealership and whose deep lined forehead made him look angry even when he slept. After Saul Dworkin moved

into the beach condo with Sally, we had to stop calling her Sal because it was too close to Saul. “Be gentle with Sally,” my mother always said to me. “She has a broken heart.”

This puzzled me. Not the broken heart bit—I had become accustomed to a throbbing, slow sadness that lingered under the surface of so many people, webbed out under their skin like veins—but I couldn’t quite grapple with the imperative, with my mother’s command: be gentle with Sally. I didn’t know how to *be* anything with Sally. At the time, Sally felt like a complicated extension of myself—a prosthetic limb with many moving parts, something annexed to me by a higher power to help me better survive in the world—a solution to my painful oneness, for better or worse. And I accepted this reality with entitlement and without consideration.

Before the end of the summer, we had been rooting around in Sally’s bedroom—it was always messy with clothes and blankets. Toy horses were strewn around in the clutter, some of their legs snapped off and discarded. Sally’s favorite possession was a small model skeleton, which she kept on a stand in the corner of her bedroom. I liked wrapping its limbs around my shoulders and joking with Sally about how I loved the skeleton more than I loved her. We had been in there looking for a library book that Sally wanted to show me, when I thought I heard her mother calling.

“Is that your mother?” I asked.

Sally paused. She was kneeling on her bed, reaching under the sheets. “Don’t know.”

“Sounds like your mother.”

“Here it is.” She held up the book. “It’s called Brains: Uncovered. Get it?”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s look at it at your house.”

We were getting ready to leave, zipping up the book in Sally’s backpack, when we heard her mother again.

“It sounds like she’s saying your name.” I started to climb the stairs toward her mother’s room. They lived in a beach condo with the two bedrooms stacked.

“I don’t think so.” Sally stayed back. She held the backpack in front of her like a shield.

Because of my own mother and her persistent fragility, I said, “maybe she’s hurt.”

“She’s in her room. Just leave her alone, Leo. Let’s go.”

“I want to make sure she’s ok.” I ran upstairs. Sally didn’t follow.

The stairs were carpeted and silent under my shoes. When I got to the bedroom door, I heard the whimper again. My throat was clotted with phlegm and I began to clear it with a small cough—to announce myself. I wasn’t sure if I should call Sally’s mother Mrs. Dworkin or Mrs. Everly or if I should call her anything at all. I also wasn’t what I would say as comfort, but I figured it would come to me when I saw her. I cracked open the door and peered inside.

There in her room was Sally’s mother bent over on the bed with her head bowed and naked Saul Dworkin behind her. He was sweating, his forehead creased and furious and his mouth drawn to a tense pucker. Sally’s mom’s face was hidden. I could only see her mess of thin blond hair swaying over the paisley bedspread and hear periodic soft groans coming from behind it. She was saying “Saul, Saul.” Saul Dworkin looked at me, his eyes the same deep color as the curls cascading down his shoulders across his belly and between his legs.

He didn't say anything. He just stared at me. He didn't stop moving, either. I shut the door quietly and ran downstairs.

Sally was waiting for me outside by her bicycle with her backpack on. "Are you happy now?" she asked. She squinted into the sun.

"She's fine. She's just—" I finished clearing my throat. "She's on the phone."

Sally sucked her bottom lip. "Yeah, okay. Ready to go?"

I nodded.

We rode our bikes down Trumble Avenue back to my house. To our right, The Sound stretched to the blurry horizon. The rising tide had already claimed the beach and was threatening the stacked boulders separating the road from the shore. The world, it seemed, had been split between what I knew and what I sensed but couldn't understand. And riding on the strip of pavement without anything but a few rocks separating me and Sally from the ocean made me feel lost somewhere in between.

Sally's hair, tangled and fine—the same straw-like mop as her mother's—was loose and it billowed behind her. I tried to catch up to her. I called for her to wait, but a breeze picked up my voice and carried over the water.

Then there was the time that Sally and I wanted to play circus in the pantry. We had been using an especially dark plank on the dining room floor as a tight rope when we got bored with our characters. Sally wanted to change to a lion and, after some reluctance, I said that I would be her tamer.

I marched Sally into the kitchen on her hands and knees. When she bowed her head to me in submission, her blond mane fell forward and brushed the gritty floor. I opened the

pantry, which we had designated as the lion cage, and found my mother, in profile, sitting inside.

She was wearing her gray bathing suit and a baggy tee shirt from a women's gardening club she had joined a few summers ago but ended up hating. Her back rested against the wall next to the broom and dustpan. Her hair was loose around her ears and a few wispy strands had fallen in front of her eyes.

"I thought you were swimming," I said.

She didn't look at us. She only stared ahead at a bag of chicken and rice flavored dog food on the shelf. We didn't even have a dog anymore.

Sally stood and brushed off her knees. "What's she doing?"

With her legs bent and pulled close to her body, my mother's flesh looked like melting ice cream. Her thighs were soft and rippled. Dark, straight hairs were poking through the nearly translucent skin of her calves and knees. I could smell her—remnants of her citrus shampoo mixed with something dark and salty, like the smell of The Sound the morning after a wild storm when the beach is littered with weeds and mangled sea trash. I closed the pantry door and walked away.

The book that Sally had wanted to show me on the day that I saw her mom and Saul Dworkin in bed was about brains. Inside, there were dozens of black and white photographs of corpses' heads sliced open at the crown, exposing their crumpled gray interiors. Most of the photos looked the same and, without color, I found them a little boring.

"Isn't that cool?" Sally said.

We were sitting on my bed looking through the different images in the book. “I guess.” I ran my fingers over one photos. I traced the brain’s folds. “It looks kind of like a maze.”

“Yeah, but without a solution. Like a maze you won’t ever get through.”

Sally turned the page to an illustrated map of a brain. “My favorite lobe is the temporal. It’s the boss of memory and understanding the meaning in words.”

I nodded. “Have you seen what your mother and Saul Dworkin do?”

“What do you mean?”

“How they fight?”

Sally paused with her finger on the illustrated brain’s temporal lobe. She narrowed her eyes. “They don’t fight, really.”

“How come you didn’t tell me?”

“What?”

Sally put the book down on the bed between us. She still had a chapped ring around her bottom lip, which made her lips look bigger than they really were. I got up and walked to the window. The moon was concealed by clouds.

“Nothing. Never mind.”

I had been right about the location of the fire on that night in late summer. It was just two doors down from the hospital at a group home for adults with mental handicaps. My mother and I caught up with the wailing engines on Brainard Street and we followed them through town. She was worried that my father would see us, or recognize our car, so

we hung back a bit once we had caught up to them. In the flashing red lights, her face looked flush and healthy, beautiful even—in a hollow, cinematic sort of way.

We parked the car in front of the hospital. Outside, there was commotion and some yelling but my mother looked away. There were no flames, but one corner of the house was black and smoky. I assumed the fire had been electrical, maybe the result of a dryer hose or frayed, unkempt wires. The adults with mental handicaps were huddled together on the front lawn, staring alternately at the house and the trucks. It was a mild night, but they looked cold. I recognized my dad as he jumped off the truck and walked inside.

My mother was staring into her open palms on her lap. Through the windshield I could see the moon thin as an eyelash suspended above the scene. I thought of Sally, lying in bed with her mouth open to the sky. The street lights from the hospital now made my mother appear gaunt and exhausted. I put my hand on her shoulder. “Come on. Let’s go.”

When we got home, the first light of the morning was starting to bleed over the horizon. I helped my mother get into bed and then woke up Sally.

We left the house and walked through the yard. We crossed Trumble Avenue and scooted down the boulders that separated the road from the beach. The tide wasn’t far off and on its way in. We dug two holes in the sand with sticks and sat in them. The sand was cold from the night and it numbed our legs and butts.

“Why didn’t you wake me up and take me with you?” Sally asked.

I shrugged.

A ghost crab ran across the sand in front of us. Sally threw a rock at it but missed.

“When you feel sad it injures your brain,” she said. “Did you know that?”

“No.”

The water was changing from deep slate to green.

“Everyone has that kind of injury. But no one knows when it will go too far.”

“Too far to where?”

“Well, some people are more sensitive to sadness. Something might happen that hurts them—you know, in their heart—but they’re ok. Years later they might see a sad movie or something or their cat dies and—bam—they lose it. Once your brain gets injured in some spots, it can’t heal or grow back. Not like an arm, not like other parts of you.”

I thought of the straw man my mother had told me about—about the supposed salve for heartbreak. I looked at Sally’s profile, her wild teeth protruding from her lips. I wanted to slice open her the crown of her skull to look inside, to see her furrowed, grayscale brain—it seemed the only thing that was truly hers now and I wanted to keep it.

“Let’s get in the water, Sally.”

“Too cold.”

“Come on.” I stood. She was in a big tee shirt with her knees tucked underneath. She was sitting back on her tailbone, the way my mother had been in the pantry. Her hair, too, was loose around her shoulders and moving a bit in the breeze.

“The air is colder than the water,” I said. “It’s warm. I promise.”

I lay down on the silty bottom. The water covered my legs and hips and my wet clothes clung to my body as the waves retreated.

Sally stood up and put her toes in. Then, she lay down next to me. Above, the sky was clear and light—almost blank. Three gulls swooped in and out of my field of vision.

“What about the tide?” she asked.

“It will cover us, I guess.” I didn’t look away from the gulls.

I imagined my mother in her bedroom, lying on her back as we were now. I wondered if, after my Dad got home from work that morning, they would argue.

The waves crept over my chest and licked at my ribs.

“It tickles,” Sally said.

I thought about reaching my out my arm to her, about taking my hand in hers but now I was aware of something private and awkward tucked between us. Sally and I hadn’t ever finished the tango in my bedroom. I didn’t think we ever would. The gulls in the milky, clear sky dipped around each other, dove in syncopation, and then caught the breeze at the same moment—rising and falling like some mysterious, choreographed dance.

MATERNITÉ

It had been a hard winter for Bruce. He had lost both parents in the span of three months, his father to cancer and then his mother to loneliness and pneumonia thereafter. He had no siblings or wife but was comfortable enough to pay for his parents to have more than adequate care. He was loyal to his work at a graphic design and printing firm and to his group of close friends from college and from the pick-up basketball league where he played. But in the midst of losing his parents, these one-time main dishes of his life had become little more than tacky, inedible garnishes.

He had been dating a woman casually during the whole thing, just something small and habitual to keep his mind off the family mess. Her name was Paula and they had met on the street outside a bar downtown. She had been standing there with her friend. Paula had been wearing thigh-high lace stockings under a wool coat with leather driving gloves, everything black. Bruce had been drawn to the contrast of textures on her. She had naturally dark hair with pale pinkish skin. Her bangs were cut short and choppy, right below her hair line. He would have liked her to have a slimmer face with less makeup smudged around her eyes and lips. But her legs were long and sexy and he wanted to see what else was under that coat.

When he walked by, Paula dropped some things from her ineffective, gloved hands—a tube of lipstick and a box of matches—and Bruce knelt on the sidewalk to pick them up. It was cliché really, the way he smiled and made small talk, asked her why she was

carrying around matches. “Who uses matches anymore, anyway?” And this became a sort of running joke between them, a little quip that they both used on and off for months when they needed to remember how they met. The whole thing on the sidewalk ended up being rather normal and rote—the way she accepted his offer and tugged on her coat. The way they saw each other three nights later, and then three nights after that.

He had meant to date other people the whole time but hadn’t quite gotten around to it with the stress of his parents dying. Paula was a terrific lover, and they soon began seeing each other three, sometimes four nights a week. Without the heavy makeup streaked across her lips and eyes, she was prettier. But the way her hair was cut with short blunt bangs made her face seem more plump than it ought to be. And her skin seemed unreasonably prone to hives and breakouts for a woman her age. But in his experience, Bruce had always found that women with flawed faces were the most grateful in bed, and with her hourglass figure and lean legs, Paula was no exception to this rule. She had a boring job, mostly doing office work at a nonprofit that helped low-income families find housing, and she never liked to talk about it.

After seven weeks of dating, Paula asked Bruce if he wanted to be exclusive. She was lying in his bed on her side, with her back to the window. The city lights glowed from behind his Venetian blinds and cast stripes of light across Paula’s butt and hips, making her look like an exotic antelope with antlers and a zebra’s ass that he had once seen stuffed whole and on all fours in his boss’s game room.

“I’m not so good at monogamy,” he said.

“Well are you seeing anyone else?”

“That’s not the point.”

“Oh, yeah?” Paula smiled. She turned onto her belly and put her hand on Bruce’s belly. “Sounds like you’re not.” Her underwear was rolled up in a ring and hanging off the arch of her right foot, and other than this decorative touch, she was naked.

“Actually, my parents are dying.”

“Oh.” Paula pulled some of the sheets from under her belly and wrapped them around her bare butt. “I’m sorry.”

“Well, dead. My dad just died. My mom is sick with pneumonia, on her way out.”

“I’m really sorry, Bruce. That sucks. I didn’t—”

“I think it’s fine, actually. They were really happy together. There’s no reason my mom should live without him.”

“Wow. That’s so—”

“Anyway, that’s why I haven’t been seeing anyone else. I’m just trying to focus on that right now.”

“Yeah, totally.” Paula sat up with the sheets still covering her. She unrolled her underwear and slid it around her hips. She stood in front of the bed facing him. “I hope it works out for you.”

Bruce felt like her breasts were staring at him, judging him. Paula picked up some of her clothes off the floor and began putting them on.

“Give me a call sometime if you want to do this. You know, like just you and me. I kind of need a commitment to go any further.”

Bruce didn’t say anything. He didn’t move, either. He just stared at Paula, watched her put on her skirt backwards and zip it up in the front before turning it around. He felt flimsy and cheap.

“I’m sorry about your parents,” Paula said, and then she left.

They didn’t speak for nine days. During that time, Bruce fucked Caitlin, the office manager at his work who was young and blond and in art school, he landed a big job working for the Rockwell Museum of Modern Art, and his mother died. He asked Paula if she would go to the funeral with him.

“You know, when my dad died, I had my mom to sit with,” he told Paula on the phone. “And I had to attend to her, sort of. It was a nice distraction.”

“Sure, of course.”

“I don’t even know who’s gonna be there this time. My asshole cousins probably think that coming to one funeral was enough.”

“I can understand that.”

“You can?”

“Sure. When your dad died, everyone probably felt like they had mourned the loss of your parents’ union along with him. You said it yourself the other week. You didn’t want you mom to have to live without him—without your dad and their marriage.”

“The funeral’s in Connecticut,” Bruce said. “I’m going to have to rent a car.”

The same day his mother died, Bruce met with the curators of the Rockwell Museum to consult about the promotional materials for upcoming exhibitions. On his way, he bumped into his boss, Stan—the man with the exotic taxidermy in his game room.

“Jesus,” Stan said after giving Bruce a few hard pats on the back. “You look like crap.”

“Oh?” Bruce nervously ran his hands through his hair.

“No, no. It’s not your hair. Have you been sleeping?”

“Well, you know,” Bruce fumbled before adding, “my parents just died.”

Stan frowned. “Both of them?”

“Sort of.”

“Oh that’s right. I remember now. I’m sorry.”

“Thanks”

“Listen, where are you off to?”

“The Rockwells.” Bruce motioned down the block with his briefcase.

“Ah, that’s right. Well, good luck.”

“Thanks.”

“And let’s have a drink when things ease up, eh? Talk shop?” Stan squeezed Bruce’s shoulder.

“Sure, sure.”

“And again, my condolences.”

On arriving at the museum, Bruce ducked into the bathroom. In the mirror he looked gaunt and sallow. He licked his lips. He gagged and spat in the toilet, lingering over the bowl in hopes that he might vomit, muttering something he remembered Coach Scarborough screaming at him in high school about bucking up or bowing out. “Bring it home, you fuck.” He said out loud to himself. But the only thing that his body managed to eject was a long string of yellow spit.

For the museum’s 75th anniversary, the museum’s owners had envisioned an exhibit titled “Infancy and Impressionism,” featuring images of children and mothers as depicted by

the great impressionist masters. The show's content would be congruous with a year-long celebration at the museum of births and rebirths.

They explained this to Bruce in an airy conference room after he had reluctantly emerged from the bathroom with a damp paper towel pressed to his forehead. The museum's head curator, a wiry woman in her late 70s named Mathilde, was at the meeting.

"For the promotional image, we would like to use this." She pushed a plate across the table to Bruce. "Marie Cassat's *Maternité*."

"Oh, wow." Bruce said.

But the image both terrified and excited him: a plump baby sporting an adult's head of hair, and almost grub-like in its bloated epidermal casing and parasitic suckling fervor. It sat as the focal point of the painting, maintaining a searching yet steady gaze on Bruce, while engulfing the better half of a mother's bare breast, which pushed out of a starched, red shirt. She, of course, was complicit, looking down at her charge adoringly, practically force-feeding the little one's glistening face. He felt repulsed but also aroused by the scene. And once he registered his feelings of arousal, he was only further repulsed.

"I love it!"

There was something about the infant's stuffed mouth—the way it seem a portal, like the precipice of two colliding worlds—that made Bruce especially anxious.

"We thought you would." Mathilde smiled.

The funeral was small, as Bruce had expected. Many of his cousins weren't there. Paula wore a long-sleeved black dress and a gray silk scarf tied around her head.

“I thought the scarf would be very Connecticut,” she said. He could tell she was joking to make him feel better about the situation.

Bruce agreed about the scarf.

Paula’s dress was conservative, to the knee, but tight in all the right places, highlighting the sexy bones of her wide-set hips and her full breasts. He felt comforted around her. The terror he had felt during the days before had subsided and was replaced by Paula—easy Paula with the round face and long, sexy legs.

At the cemetery, when Bruce threw the first handful of dirt atop the receding casket, Paula allowed a few lingering, salty tears to streak her face.

“It was a lovely service,” She told Bruce later, which is what he had wanted her to say.

She asked to see the places where he hung out during high school. They got dinner at an Italian restaurant where his parents had always liked to eat and they toasted Bruce’s parents at the table. They talked about Bruce’s account with the museum. He asked Paula if she was familiar with the promotional image, Cassat’s *Maternité*.

“Should I be?”

Bruce shrugged “I don’t know. I think I might have seen it before, maybe a while back in school. It’s not that famous or anything. It’s just, I don’t know—kind of horrifying.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s, like haunting me.”

Paula laughed.

“I’m serious, Paula.”

“Your mom had just died when you were at that meeting. It makes sense that you were sensitive, you know?”

“I don’t know.”

“Plus, it’s like about mothers and mothering, right? Maybe you were having some kind of flashback to your own breastfeeding days when you saw it. Regretting the loss of your mother, of the breast.” She reached across the table and touched his arm. Bruce saw a softness in Paula’s face. Her bangs had grown out a little and they were wispy and delicate.

“Oh, come on. You’re making it worse.” He smiled. “My breastfeeding days are long behind me and sufficiently buried in my subconscious.”

“I hope.”

After dinner, Bruce drove Paula to the parking lot of a Greek Orthodox church on the edge of town, where he used to fuck his high school girlfriend on weeknights. There, he and Paula made love in the back seat of the rental car.

“Your hips look amazing,” Bruce said when they were finished.

“Thanks.”

“Did you do something new?”

“I don’t think so.

He pulled up Paula’s dress and pressed his face into the soft flesh stretched between her protruding hip bones.

“I guess those nine days apart did us good.”

“I wish I could fit inside here.”

She looked down at him.

“Where?”

“Here.” He pressed his finger into Paula’s stomach, just below her belly button.

“You mean in my—my womb?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Is that weird?”

“Sort of.” She laughed a little.

“Is your pelvis big enough to fit my head?”

“Now that’s weird, Bruce. And no, I don’t think so.”

“I want to do more wholesome things.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?”

“My dad used to build a lot of things. I want to learn how to make.”

“You should. That would be nice.”

Two weeks later, Bruce took Caitlin, the office manager, home again. They had been at a bar, drinking and celebrating a colleague’s 40th birthday. Bruce had found himself drinking more often and with more abandon lately, but he felt entitled. At the bar, Caitlin had been wearing these tiny wool shorts with sheer stockings and boots. Her hair was cut short like a boy’s.

“Aren’t shorts against the dress code?” He asked and put a finger under her waistband.

“You won’t tell, will you?”

They were the first thing he pulled off of her when they got back to his apartment. Caitlin was young and loud. She squealed and shouted compliments at him between kisses. But when they stumbled into his bedroom, and Caitlin climbed on top of him in her bra and sheer stockings, Bruce suddenly lost interest.

“Whoa, wait.” He sat up.

“What’s wrong, Daddy?”

“First of all, don’t call me that.”

“Uh, okay.” Caitlin stood up. She crossed her arms over her chest.

“I’m sorry. I just—I think I’m seeing someone right now.”

“You think?”

“Yeah. I don’t want to fuck it up. I’m sorry.”

Caitlin ran her hands through her hair. “I knew you were a piece of shit, Bruce, but come on.” She snatched her shirt off the bed and walked out of the apartment.

Paula called Bruce an hour later. He was still coming off his buzz and he was happy to hear from her.

“Where have you been?” he asked. “I tried to call you.”

“I’ve been busy with my work and stuff. How is your work going? Have you been making the posters of the baby breastfeeding?”

“Actually, yes. It looks good. I’m going to cut the large banners tomorrow. Listen, before you say anything, I want to have a go at this. I want to try to be exclusive.”

Paula was silent. “Well before you say anything else, I think you should know that I’m pregnant—from when we—the rental car—in Connecticut. I wasn’t wearing my diaphragm. I’m sorry. I didn’t want to have sex with you again. I shouldn’t have done it.”

Bruce couldn’t believe it. He told himself that it wasn’t the alcohol, that this was really happening. “No, I think that’s great, Paula. Really. Remember when I told you that I wanted to build things? Become a maker?”

“Yeah.”

“Well this is it. This is the beginning. I *made* this.”

Paula had given up two pregnancies before and she was reluctant to let go of this one, the third. She came over and they made love again.

Bruce was mad with her breasts, grabbing them with both hands and kissing every slope and peak. He paused intermittently to look in Paula’s eyes before burying his face in her soft folds again of her stomach.

“Oh God.” Her belly muffled Bruce’s cry. He looked up. “Our kids are gonna love your tits, Paula!”

At work, Bruce announced the news during lunch. He stood apart from a cluster of round gray tables that comprised the office break room. Other people were there picking at plastic containers with plastic forks. Bruce cleared his throat

“Well,” he said. His coworkers looked up. Plastic forks suspended. “Paula and I are having a baby.”

And then he pulled out from his briefcase a bottle of champagne, not the real thing, but something he picked up on his way to work, something that would still fizz and pop. He made a gesture with the bottle, indicating that everyone should drink. And they did. The bottle popped and fizzed.

“Who is Paula?” someone asked.

“She’s my girlfriend.”

Stan gave him several hard pats on the back between the shoulder blades. “Real great news, old boy.”

“Yeah.”

“Hope it’s a boy.” Stan winked. His face was stretched into a grin. Then he opened his torso away from Bruce, as if announcing this next bit to the whole room. “Girls are nothing but trouble, am I right?”

There was laughter. In the corner of his eye, Bruce saw Caitlin storm out of the room.

“But seriously, my man.” Stan rocked back on his heels and whistled. “Your life is about to change.”

“Are you ready, Bruce?” someone called, but Bruce couldn’t make out the voice over the rising din. It sounded like Kip, the design intern. He was only a college kid.

Bruce’s mouth felt dry.

“Say, how far along is she?” Stan said over his shoulder from where he was pouring champagne. He passed a cup to Bruce.

“I don’t know, I guess.” Bruce held the champagne close to his face. He could feel the bubbles tickle his chin.

Stan raised his cup, ready to make a toast.

“A few weeks? A week?” Bruce shrugged. “She just took the home pregnancy test two nights ago.”

“Oh,” Stan said. The cluster of people before Bruce were also paused with their champagne in the air. “You mean she hasn’t even gone to the doctor yet?”

There was silence. Stan rested one hand, leaden, on Bruce’s shoulder. And the tenuousness of the moment grew in the room like a slowly expanding balloon. A balloon

that, when blown to completion, would surely be the size of something previously seen billowing down Fifth Avenue during a Macy's Thanksgiving Parade.

"Wait, isn't it bad luck to announce it so early?" Kip, again.

Bruce sucked in a barely audible breath. He imagined this moment crowding them all out of the break room, stealing their oxygen, pushing against and threatening to betray the very walls that defined their office building.

"Well, Paula's a great girl, I'm sure. Can't wait to meet her. You're a lucky guy," Stan said after a beat. And then: "To Bruce."

"To Bruce!" the others answered quickly, and bit too loudly, as if Stan's toast had been a question.

Bruce convinced Paula to move in together the following month. Bruce's apartment had two bedrooms, and he was eager to make one the nursery.

"I'm going to build something for the baby's nursery," he told Paula. "Maybe a crib or a little table."

"That's great, Bruce. How are you doing with all of this?" Paula looked tired and a bit scared. "This is so much change in one season. You're acting happy, but you don't look good."

"Great," he said. "I feel like this is what my parents would have wanted—I'm finally growing up."

"You know what the crazy thing is?"

"What?"

“Remember when you told me how the image of the baby in *Maternité*’ was haunting you? When we were in the restaurant?”

“Yeah.”

“Well I looked it up that same night when I got home, and now I’m pregnant. I kind of feel like it’s haunting me.” She laughed. “Is that crazy?”

Her eyes were sunken and her face more gaunt than before. Bruce remembered how he had once hated her plump face. He felt some pangs of regret.

“I’m almost done with the job,” he said.

“I know. It’s just—just a little weird, right?”

“Yeah. Are you happy?”

“I am.”

Later that week, Bruce worked on cutting the two large banners for the museum. The large printing room in the back of his office was windowless, ventilated by an industrial-grade exhaust fan and sealed off from the rest of the office by a small circular capsule that opened on either side. Bruce shut himself in the capsule, and took a breath before turning around and opening the other side. Two 20 x 20 foot prints of *Maternité* lay draped over drafting tables. The prints would soon hang from the vaulted ceiling on opposite walls of the museum’s lobby. He cut two large sheets from a roll of gray matting, savoring the way the Exacto knife sank slowly through the rubber. He was used to the fumes by now, found the way they pricked at his nasal canal strangely comforting. And the white noise of the fan, like an industrial lullaby, made Bruce grow weak and drowsy.

He had to crawl on top of the drafting table in order to mat such a large print. Bruce kicked off his shoes and maneuvered himself atop Cassat's blown-up brushstrokes, combing out the air bubbles below the print with a handheld rubber squeegee. When he got to the suckling infant's face at the center of the image, he shuddered. At this size, he had expected the child's one exposed eye—the other was hidden behind the mother's engorged breast—to be less threatening. But he could still feel it sneering at and searching him behind the mass of cracked, blue paint. And that wet, puckered mouth. Up close, it was unrecognizable.

The chattering ticks from the analogue clock on the wall brought him back to the moment. Bruce looked down to find the palm of his left hand bleeding. He must have cut it with the Exacto knife. Normally he was so careful. The blood was thin, watery. Maybe from the fumes.

When Bruce emerged from the printing room, Stan was waiting for him. He offered to take Bruce out to lunch down the block from their office.

“Let's have a beer—you want a beer, Bruce?”

Bruce rubbed his face and nodded. He still felt high on the fumes.

“Two beers, Jessica. I'll have the potpie special. You want the potpie special, too Bruce? Ok, and two potpies. Thanks.” He turned back to Bruce. “Listen, man I've gotta ask.”

Bruce looked up.

“What the hell is wrong with you? Look at you. You're a mess.”

Bruce straightened and patted down his hair.

“No, your hair is fine. I hate to tell you this, but people at the office are freaked out, Bruce. And not to mention the clients! What's gotten into you, man. You're having a baby?”

It doesn't look like you're even taking care of yourself!" Stan leaned forward over the table and lowered his voice.

But Bruce shook his head, composed. "No, no. I feel fine. I just—I cut my hand in the printing room." He held up his palm to Stan.

The beers arrived at the table.

"Ok. Good. Because people are worried, Bruce. And frankly, I haven't know what to say in your defense. I saw Vivian and Arthur Rockwell over the weekend at the chamber of commerce party. They said you hole up in the bathroom every time you're at the museum. Arthur said he heard you talking to yourself in a bathroom stall, damnit!" Stan paused to take a slow sip of his beer. "I know your parents died earlier this year. Do you need to take some time off of work? And what's with this twitch you've developed?"

"What twitch?"

"That one." Stan gestured to Bruce's face with his beer as if he were toasting him. "That lip-smacking thing you're always doing. As your friend and professional mentor, I gotta tell you, man. It's weird. People don't like it."

"Oh. I don't feel like I'm acting any different."

"I really need you to rally, Bruce. The Rockwells aren't sure if they can work with you again after this. We can't lose this account." Their two potpies arrived, bubbling bluish gravy that dribbled down the crusts and pooled around their side servings of fries. "The museum is our most lucrative account, Bruce." Stan inhaled. "Mmm. Smells delicious, Jessica." An then back to Bruce: "So tell me what's going on, old boy. I need to know."

"The account is fine. I finished matting the prints this morning.

Stan nodded. He punctured the crust of his potpie with a fork. Steam curled around his face.

“I’m just—just feeling so vulnerable.”

“What do you mean?”

“With Paula and the baby coming. And I think I’ve got some kind of flu. I have so much to lose it’s making me sick.”

“I hear that’s common now. That kind of stress.” Stan threw a handful of fries into his potpie and stirred it up with his fork. “Do you have a good doctor? I see a great guy downtown.”

Bruce shrugged.

“But listen, my man, about the change. You gotta relax. Let the change come later. You know, when you’ve got a screaming little thing in your arms and you’re covered in puke.” Stan picked up his spoon and ladled a heap of gravy into his mouth. Some spilled onto his chin. “Live it up with Paula. You know, get creative—”

Bruce wasn’t sure what Stan meant but he nodded. The beer was making his head buzz. He could feel his pulse like it wasn’t actually his, thrumming through his neck and making his chest tremble.

“—because once you see her give birth. You know actually *see* what goes on down there.” Stan paused to chew. “Let me tell you, my man, you will not want to be intimate. That’s when things really change.”

Bruce froze. He wasn’t sure how the conversation got to this juncture. He picked up a limp fry and tried to swallow it down.

“And my shrink says he sees it all the time. You know, great guys totally ruined by it. Not that birth isn’t amazing and all that stuff. It is.” Stan began to work on the pie’s shell, breaking it apart in bits and covering it with gravy. “But the fluids—the mix of fluids alone, man—it’s enough to make you...”

Bruce took several large gulps of beer and tried to smile but his mouth was too full.

“Anyway, all I’m saying is, relax. Live it up a little. Get that twitch straightened out. Here’s the name of my shrink.” Stan pushed a business card across the table to Bruce. “Give him a call. Great guy. He specializes in, you know, men.”

Bruce nodded slowly. He put the card in his pocket.

“You gonna eat those?” Stan motioned to Bruce’s fries with his fork.

When Bruce got home from work, Paula was waiting for him in the stairwell of the apartment. She looked like she had been crying. She was wearing the wool coat—the same one she had been wearing on the night they met.

“What are you doing here?” Bruce asked.

“I ended the pregnancy,” she said. “It was too much, and you hadn’t really changed. I know you’re not good at this kind of thing. You told me last month. You can stop pretending. We don’t even know each other.”

“I told everyone at work that I was having a baby!”

“Why?”

“Because I was excited.”

“See, that’s exactly what I’m talking about. Why would you do that? You’re too immature for this, Bruce. I can’t go through with it.”

She turned and began walking down the stairs.

“Paula, wait. You can’t just leave me like this. What am I supposed to do?”

Bruce stood by his apartment door and watched her. She stopped at the door and looked up at him through the stairwell.

“I’m glad I could be with you while your parents were dying. This has been a hard winter for us both. Let’s just leave it there.”

ME, FALLING

This is what I know about my birth: 11 years, two months, and 27 days ago, I was born in Fairview Memorial Hospital in room number fourteen. (Back when the maternity ward was on the first floor.) An hour after my birth, my mother—who was sweet but skittish and prone to bolting—leaped from her hospital bed like something had bit her, dropped me on the linoleum floor, and scooted feet-first in her hospital gown out the delivery room window, never to return again. Nobody stopped her because she moved so fast, having just shed the 20 pound belly that had previously slowed her down. Once she had one foot out that window, everyone in the room knew she was good as gone. And besides, they were preoccupied with me—me, falling; me, landing.

I only fell a few feet, which is far for a newborn, and I landed square on my right side, which I've been told is very lucky. My brain and vital organs were only saved by the delivery nurse's excellent swaddling job, which she had perfected on the 112 living newborns that came before me during her tenure at Fairview Memorial Hospital. The fall pushed a flat side into the side of my skull that hung around a few weeks before rounding out. And it broke some of the bones in my right hand and wrist, but those healed, too. Now and then, the joints in my wrist get sore and cranky—a leftover pain from landing on the hospital floor with eight pounds seven ounces of falling behind it, but I try not to think about this.

Instead, I think about the tight swaddle that saved me, about the 112 newborns who were swaddled before me, and about the hands—the nurses', my dad's, even my sister's—that were there to scoop my squished head off the floor while my mother was probably on the other side of the window untangling her gown ties from the hospital shrubbery. Now, because everyone knows this story and because everyone has told it to me in my moments of doubt, it feels bigger than me, like it's been decreed from a place larger than our neighborhood, larger than our town. You would think that such a fragile beginning would leave me sensitive to the tenuousness of life. But it doesn't. Everyone tells me to just be grateful, to look on the bright side. And most of all, not to think of my mother. At night Bellie rubs out the pain in my achy wrist.

Years ago, my sister Bellie and I found one picture of her that must have survived Dad's purge. It was caught between the back of our sofa and the wall, and might still be there now if we hadn't been searching for some Monopoly dice that Bellie threw off the coffee table. She fished out the photo with an uncoiled coat hanger.

"Look," she said when she had it in her hands. "It's Mom."

I moved next to Bellie on the couch. "How'd you know?" I tugged at the photo.

"I recognize her." She pulled it back.

"Give it to me."

"Wait."

I yanked the picture from Bellie's hands but was disappointed to see that Mom isn't even looking at the camera. Instead, her head is twisted over her right shoulder, lips parted, showing only a sliver of teeth. She's wearing a pink cotton dress and she's sitting on a park bench with baby Bellie on her lap. She isn't really even holding her. She's just sort of

propping her up for the camera. Her hands are wrapped around Bellie's chubby little middle, but I can tell she's not holding. You have to mean it to hold.

I set the photo on the monopoly board between us. We touched the image, our dirty fingers inching closer to her face with every breath. Then we didn't speak for a long while, just cleared our throats and sometimes sighed, sliding the picture between Saint Charles and jail.

"You have the same mark," I finally said.

Bellie rubbed the dark cluster of moles on her neck.

"Do you remember this?" I point to the image of her on Mom's lap.

"No."

"Do you remember anything?"

Bellie shrugged.

"Tell me," I said. "Tell me what you remember."

Bellie's cheeks and chest were getting red like she might start to cry.

"But the moles—you're alike." I reached my arm out to touch her neck, to put my hand over hers, but she pushed it away.

"Stop."

"No, I just mean—"

Then her face contorted into something wrinkled and ugly. She took her hand away from her neck, flashing the birth mark to me again for just a moment. Then she slapped me hard. Her hands were already strong, and they left three fingerprints in my left cheek for an hour.

Since then, this is the only way I can imagine my mother. After we found the photo, I would try to picture her living outside that park bench, outside that day. But I could only see her transplanted to other settings in the same pose: in profile, with her lips parted to show a sliver of teeth looking over her right shoulder to something interesting. Once, I imagined that she'd gone to live on one of those costal islands off of South Carolina where there are wild horses. But I could only see her standing knee deep in the marshes with her head turned away, looking off to the distance at her right, toward something that I couldn't quite make out in the mangroves. I would have to undress her from the flimsy pink dress in my mind and confront the flat, naked body that I imagined lay underneath before I could dress her in anything else. Then I would have to choose her new outfit to match my fantasy location, like a boring game.

But it's better not to think about all that. Now before I fall asleep, Bellie tells me how lucky I am while she rubs my sore wrist—the one that was broken by the fall—and this helps with the pain. In the beginning, when it was still healing, she just held my wrist in her hands. And then she started rubbing the sore joints once a day, which has made her fingers strong beyond her age. Now some people in our neighborhood know this about Bellie, and they come by our house with kinks in their neck or with jam jars stuck shut looking for her help. She's very giving.

Then one day, on my walk home from school, I see two kids from my neighborhood, brothers, I think, pouring salt on a pile of slugs. Their fists are full of these little packets from the school cafeteria and they're tearing them open one at a time and emptying the contents on the slugs, which are tangled around each other in a slimy knot on

the sidewalk. The younger boy is wearing a green plastic mask of a goblin. It's pushed to the top of his head and his brown hair is sticking up straight through the eye holes. There's a pile of torn salt packets by the older boy's knee and when the breeze picks up, they scatter into the street like dead leaves. They're not speaking to each other, just dumping the salt and tossing the empty packets and they don't even notice me when I walk by.

I turn the corner onto our block and I see a woman lying on the front stoop of the empty house next to ours. She's wearing pajama pants and a tee shirt that's rolled up on her big, soft belly and her chin is lifted toward the sun, eyes closed. There's a brown baby straddling her outstretched legs with a thumb in its mouth. As I walk closer, I can see her back arched over the lip of the step, barely scraping it. She's older than me and my sister but not as old as our dad. Seeing her lying outside with her shirt pulled up feels all wrong. It's too warm for October and I'm wearing fall clothes and boots. I want to take off my sweatshirt but I keep walking.

I'm already in front of my house when she calls out.

"Indian summer," she says.

I turn. Now she's propped up on the step. Her face is round but pretty.

"Weird, isn't it?" She asks.

I look up at the sky because that's what people do when they talk about the weather. I can't see anything but my eyelashes in the glare.

"The maples won't turn." She points to an old rotten oak that's in our yard. It doesn't have any leaves.

"Everyone's saying that," I say.

"Shit year for leaves."

“They’re cutting down that tree tomorrow,” I tell her.

“Still. Shame about the leaves.”

She’s quiet for a moment. Then she holds out her hand and says “Katie Jabutt.”

I tell her that my name is Angie.

“Say, do you want a banana?”

I do, so I walk back to her. I shake her hand. She gives me the brown baby and I prop it on my hip like I’ve seen some mothers do. I’ve never actually held a baby before and it makes me nervous.

“Hello,” I say to the baby. “Is he yours?” I ask Katie.

“No.”

I follow her inside.

“I just moved here a few days ago. Some of my clients live in this neighborhood.”

In her living room, there are boxes scattered around and a small TV in the corner playing a court show. More babies are sitting together in a playpen. Their features look harmless and cartoonish pressed against the mesh walls. Some of the them whimper and reach up their arms to us as we walk by.

“How do you choose which ones to take out?” I ask.

“I take turns.” And then she tells the babies to hush now.

We sit down across from each other at a table in the kitchen. It’s too small so our knees keep bumping underneath.

“Sorry,” I say.

“It’s fine,” she says. “I should get a bigger one.”

“No, I like it.”

“I used to live in an apartment that was smaller than this.” She looks around.

On the table are some bananas and a greeting card made for thanking babysitters.

Katie Jabutt rips a banana from the bunch and gives it to me.

Through the only window in the kitchen, I can see clear through the backyards of other houses to the street that runs behind Katie’s house. Bellie is out there jumping rope, partly hidden by a jungle gym in our neighbors’ yard. *Thwack, tha-wack.* The rope’s slap echoes between the houses on our block.

I struggle to peel the banana with both hands while balancing the baby on my lap.

Katie Jabutt has her elbows on the table. She cradles her chin with two fists and watches me but never offers to take the baby.

“You live next door?”

I nod.

“So what’s your story?”

I stop chewing and let the mashed banana just lie on my tongue.

“I was born at Fairview Memorial.”

“Yeah, wasn’t everyone?”

Then my wrist tenses up and begins to hurt. The slap of Bellie’s jump rope stops and starts again. I swallow hard.

Katie Jabutt narrows her eyes and smiles. “What’s your problem, peanut?”

I have to clear my throat before speaking.

“That’s my sister,” I say.

She peers out the window and nods.

“Too bad God didn’t give you those titties.”

I look again. Bellie's chest is bouncing up around her neck like it's trying to choke her. *Thwack, tha-wack.*

"I don't really care."

"Well it's not too late." She sticks her manicured nail into my chest. Its point is muffled by my sweatshirt.

I open my mouth to say that I'm only eleven but she cuts me off.

"You can always get new ones later." She smiles and stands up. Then she opens the pantry and moves around some things that I can't see. "You know, this isn't real." She puts a finger on the bridge of her nose and pauses. It makes her look like she's thinking hard. "A doctor made it."

"Really?" I picture Katie Jabutt's face in parts on a table, pulled apart like a doll and sorted in flesh-colored piles. Two pale ears, almost translucent at their tips. Lips curled like a ribbon. "When?"

"Oh, about a dozen years ago." She puts her head back in the pantry. "I bet you can't even tell." It's a little upturned and thin but it looks good on her round face.

"No, I can't," I say.

"Guess what I looked like before?"

I shrug. "I just met you today."

"Like one of those awful knobby root vegetables," she says. "You don't have to take whatever God gives you anymore." Then she comes over and squats in front of my chair. "That's why I'm a feminist. Go on." Her breath smells sweet. "Touch it."

I run two fingers down the slope of her nose. There aren't any seams or anything, just a few bumpy pimples on the sides.

“It feels real” I tell her.

“I know. The doctor was a genius.” Katie Jabutt stands up. “A total fox.”

The baby on my lap whimpers so I put my lips near his ear and hum softly.

“We had a thing, actually. He touched me through my jeans after the surgery.”

Then the baby starts wailing.

“Here.” Katie picks up the baby by his wrists. She dangles him above the floor. He kicks his legs and arches his back. Then he stops crying.

“How’d you do that?”

“Just happened.” She swings the baby from side to side. “I was young like you. A real piece of candy back then.”

After I leave Katie Jabutt’s house, I look for the boys on the sidewalk but they’re gone. I find the salt packets strewn around the street. The slugs are still there. I poke them with a twig. They’re dried out and crispy. It’s getting dark, so I have to crouch on my hands and knees to look at them up close. They’re dead, lying in a pool of something slimy, still wrapped around each other. I try to pull them apart but they crumble.

Then I sit on the curb next to the dried up slugs and watch the sun sink. Something about Katie Jabutt and her fake nose makes all the pieces of the neighborhood look like they don’t quite fit together the same way they did before.. The sun keeps dropping. It slices over pitched roofs splinters between the branches of trees. It stretches out the shadows of all the little ranch houses on our street. But everything else feels fragile and frozen for a moment. And then I feel something stir in my stomach and creep up my right arm. It makes me feel like I’m going to be sick. And then I realize that I’m scared. I’m scared that if I move quickly

or push too hard or even at all, the whole neighborhood might come apart in front of me. So instead I sit very still.

That night I lie in bed with Bellie while she rubs my sore wrist. I lie on my left side facing her. She dabs coconut oil on my right hand and massages it into my joints. But tonight, for the first time, I can't get comfortable. I keep sliding away from Bellie and she keeps telling me to stay still.

"Scoot over here," she says. She pulls me toward her chest. I can see her nipples through her night shirt.

I lay my head down and stretch out my right hand toward her.

"Here, hold on to me," she says. She lifts up her hip and I slide my left arm under the curve of her waist. "Hold on to my shirt." I grasp some of her flimsy cotton shirt between my fingers. She starts rubbing my wrist again.

Then we're both quiet for a few moments.

"Has it been hurting you lately?" She asks.

"Yeah, but I don't care anymore, Bellie."

"Of course you do," she says. "You're lucky that only your wrist hurts after what you've been through." And it feels like she's reading from a script.

My left arm starts to go numb underneath her. I let go of her shirt and begin to slip off the bed again.

"Hold still."

"Your titties are pushing me off the bed," I tell her.

She throws my hand down on the bed between us.

“Don’t call them that.”

“Why not?”

“It makes me feel like an animal.”

“When did you get those big boobs anyway?”

She tugs on her shirt so it’s closer to her neck.

“What’s gotten into you?” She asks.

“I don’t want you to rub my wrist anymore.”

A few tears begin pooling in the corner of Bellie’s eye. A soft yellow light seeps into our bedroom from the window behind me, and Bellie’s tears catch the glow.

“I think it’s better now, anyway.” I slide off the bed and stand up.

She nods.

“You’re so sensitive. I know you can’t even remember my birth. You were only three.”

She rolls over so her back is to me. I just stay there staring at the round, lumpy shape her back makes under her tee shirt.. She lets out a sob and I can see her shoulders shudder.

I walk to the window. The light is coming from inside Katie Jabutt’s house, where all the rooms are lit up. I open the window and lean outside. A breeze blows down my nightgown and gives me goose bumps but it’s not as cold as I expect. When I lean forward, I can see inside Katie Jabutt’s living room. I see the playpen, now empty. Some boxes are open and there’s a rug on the floor that wasn’t there this afternoon. I wait, hoping to see Katie moving around inside. I imagine that she dances through the tiny ranch house when she’s alone and the babies are gone. But she doesn’t appear and I begin to shiver, so I crawl into my own bed and fall asleep with my back to Bellie’s.

When I get home from school the next day, the rotting oak next to our house is gone. The only thing left is a stump and next to the stump is a chipper. Two men are feeding it logs while some boys stand on the sidewalk watching. I recognize a pair of them as the boys with the salt packets and the slugs. I walk over to them. I want to tell them to beat it but the sound of the chipper is too loud.

It feels strange to stare at the space between our house and Katie Jabutt's now. With the tree down, the street looks naked and a little lopsided.

The men take a break and I walk to the stump to count the rings. I ask one of them where the woodchips will go.

He wipes sweat from his forehead with his work glove which is covered in sawdust. "Hell if I know."

I run my fingers around the stump's rings. There are eleven.

"Hey kid," the man says.

I look up. He has a pair of orange ear protectors around his neck and he's wearing a blue tee shirt. Sweat darkens the front and sides.

"You wanna get your arm chewed off by this chipper?"

I touch my wrist and rub it with my left hand.

"Do you?"

I shake my head.

"Then beat it."

I walk to Katie Jabutt's house and knock. The men start up the chipper again. I have to knock a few times before she comes to the door. She's wearing a short bathrobe and

slippers. She holding a baby wearing nothing but a diaper under her arm and she invites me inside. Now there is a green couch and a coffee table in the living room and the playpen is pushed in the corner. There are only three babies inside the pen today. They blink their glassy eyes at me and suck on wooden blocks.

“It looks great in here,” I say.

“Thanks.” She looks around. “There’s still a lot I want to do with it.”

“Do you ever get dressed?”

“Not usually.” She walks to the window and looks through her new curtains. “I hate all this noise.”

“Me too,” I say.

Katie Jabutt brings me some iced tea and I sit down with her on the couch. It’s not as comfortable as it looks. I have to keep moving around to get the springs to calm down.

“I’ve been finding all this great stuff as I unpack.” Katie sits the baby down between us and pulls some things out of a box on the coffee table. “Like this.” She takes out a blue book with a golden sun on the cover. “What do you know about astrology?”

I tell her nothing and ask if I can use her bathroom. She points me to a room off the kitchen.

“Hey listen to this,” she calls to me. “When is your birthday, Angie?”

I tell her the end of June.

“You’re a cancer,” she says.

Katie Jabutt’s bathroom smells like Lilly of the Valley. There are some magazine clippings taped to the mirror above the sink, mostly of movie stars that I don’t know. She keeps talking to me while I’m peeing even though I shout to her to wait.

“Which means that at your best, you’re sensitive and compassionate.”

I wash my hands and I pause to stare at myself in the mirror. My nose is flat and I have freckles spread out below my eyes. But other than that, I like the way I look. Most of the women in the magazine clippings around my reflection are either laughing or making faces that are serious and angry. I bite my bottom lip to make it red. I think it looks better like that.

“At your worst, you’re hysterical and irrationally fearful,” Katie tells me as I walk back into the living room.

I sit back down next to her.

“That’s not so bad, right?”

I shrug.

“What if I’m not?”

“Well you probably are and you just don’t know it.”

She hands me a photo.

“You can’t control the stars.”

“What’s this?”

“That’s me with my old nose”

She doesn’t look too different in the photo. She’s a bit thinner. But the image is too washed out to even see the shape of her nose.

I tell her I like her red hair.

She laughs.

The baby between us crawls toward Katie.

“I also found this old ouija game.” She nudges the game box with her toe. “You ever use one of these?”

I tell her I haven’t.

“It’s connected to another plane of the universe.”

“It says it’s made by Milton Bradley.”

“So. You can use it to contact people who you can’t see.”

“Like ghosts?”

“Sure. Anyone whose not of this world.”

“What other worlds exist.”

Katie shrugs. “Plenty. In any case, I’m thinking of using this picture.” She takes the photo back and waves it in front of her face. “To contact the spirit of my younger, ugly self.”

“What’ll you tell yourself.”

“How much better it gets.” She picks up the baby and coos: “so much better!” Then she turns back to me. “You know, after the nose job.”

I lean over the coffee table and open the ouija box. I scratch my arm with the tip of the plastic pointer.

“All you need is a photo and you can contact anyone?” I ask.

“Sure thing,” Katie says.

“Can I use it?”

“If you want.”

“When?”

“Anytime,” she says. But she doesn’t mean now because the babies’ parents are coming soon and she needs to get dressed after all.

That night, Bellie and I sleep in separate beds again with our backs to each other. She doesn’t rub my wrist. I face the window and the light from Katie Jabutt’s house keeps me awake. When Bellie’s breath gets slow and rhythmic, I get out of bed and look through the shoes in our closet for the photo of our mother on the park bench. I clutch it in my left hand and walk back to the window. I open it and slide one leg over the sill.

Bellie rolls over. “Where are you going?” Her voice startles me.

“I thought you were sleeping.”

“Well, I’m not.”

“I need to try something,” I turn to her but my leg is still out the window.

“Where?” She sits up.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be back later.”

“Take me,” she says.

And for a moment I consider it.

“I can’t,” I say. “Leave this open so I can get back in.” I tap the window frame.

I slide my other leg side and push myself out the window. The ground is cold on my bare feet. I hug my arms around my middle to stay warm. There are some twigs and branches scattered around the yard that must have been too small for the chipper. I trip on a few of them. When I get to Katie’s door, I can hear music playing inside—a slow, snaky bass line. I was right about her dancing through the house at night. I knock a few times and I

then I hear voices and movement inside. I look back toward my bedroom window. The lights are still off. I bounce my knees to stay warm.

Katie comes to the door in Jeans and a turtleneck. She raises her eyebrows to me at first but then she smiles.

“Come in. Come in,” she says.

I step inside the living room. There are some candles lit and a few new lamps around the room. There’s a man in a blue tee shirt on her couch and I recognize him from the afternoon—from the tree crew.

“Bud, this is Angie,” Katie says. “My neighbor.”

“Hi,” I say.

“Oh, you two’ve met?”

I can hear my own pulse in my ears and I know I must look silly in my nightgown with no shoes. I close my hand around the photo and the edges dig into my palm.

“Yup.” Bud says. Her raises a hand and waves to me.

“What do you need?” Katie asks. She’s smiling now and I feel a little better. “You must be cold. Come, come.”

She motions to the couch. I sit next to Bud, who smells sweet and dusty. The springs poke at me. Katie goes into the kitchen and comes back with some beers. She sits on the other side.

“Bud and I were just talking about the tree they took down,” she says.

He nods.

“It’s dangerous work.”

“Yup. I seen a man fall from 30 feet before,” he says. “Broke every bone in his body and snapped a few limbs off the tree as he fell.”

Katie looks at him and her eyes are big. “Wow. What kind of tree was it?”

“Sugar pine.” Bud looks down. He’s picking at the label on the beer bottle.

“Angie’s got a sister,” Katie Jabutt says. She takes a swig of her beer and puts her hands in front of her chest. “Big tits.” Then she drops her chin a bit and laughs.

I laugh, too but it comes out sounding nervous and hoarse. “Yeah. Her name’s Bellie,” I say.

“And you live right over there?” Bud leans toward me and points at the exterior of my bedroom, which we can see through Katie’s window. He smells like sawdust.

“With your mom and dad and sister, right?” Katie says.

I shake my head. “Actually, that’s what I wanted to ask you.” I clear my throat a bit. “To ask about my mom.”

“Oh?” Katie raises her eyebrows again. “What would I know?” She glances to Bud and smiles, like there is something private between them.

“Ask that game, I mean.”

I unfurl my hand. I present the photo to Katie, and since she’s on the other side of Bud, to him, too. Its edges are curled from my fist. I try to flatten them out. Katie picks up the photo.

“So your mom’s dead,” She says as she examines it. “Sorry, I didn’t know.”

“I’m not sure,” I say. “She jumped—she jumped out a window.”

“Oh jeez, Angie.”

“Suicide’s some shit,” Bud says.

“It was only the first floor.”

Katie Jabutt turns to Bud. “We’ve been talking about the unseen.” She waves her fingers in the air. “Angie here’s never used a ouija board.”

“Don’t tell me you’re gonna get all teenage sleepover party on my ass.”

I’m not sure what Bud means but I don’t like him sitting between Katie and me. I wait for Katie to be stern with him, to ask him to leave because he’s making fun of our plans, but she doesn’t. She just keeps looking at the photo and smiling. Then she nudges Bud with her elbow and tells him to relax. “Well if she’s dead, we’ll definitely get her,” she says to me. “Let me find the box.”

Katie gets up and goes into her bedroom. It’s the only room in her house that I haven’t seen. I can hear cardboard boxes being opened and the sound of Katie humming a little as she moves things around.

I’m left with Bud on the couch. The song changes to something slow with only a woman singing. I sway back and forth a little and try to look natural. The photo of my mother on the park bench is face-up on the coffee table.

“Is that you as a baby?” Bud asks.

“No, my sister. The one—” I hold my hands out in front of my chest like Kate did but I feel bad doing it.

Bud nods.

“Here it is.” Kate emerges from her bedroom with ouija board in the Milton Bradley box. “Ok. You sit there, Angie.” She points to the floor opposite the couch. “And I’ll sit here.” She drops down next to Bud. I get up and sit cross-legged on the floor. The coffee

table is chest-high in front of me. Katie takes out the pieces of the game and lays them down.

Bud groans a little and asks how long this is going to take. Katie tells him to just wait a minute. She picks up the photo and looks at it again.

“This baby’s looking a little—well—ugly.”

“That’s her sister,” Bud says. His mouth is full of beer. He swallows it and then laughs a little.

“No offense, but I am a professional.”

I don’t know if she means a professional with babies or a professional judge of ugliness. I don’t ask either way. Katie sets the photo on the corner of the ouija board.

“What’s your mother’s first name?”

I can’t believe it, but I don’t know. I must look like I don’t know, too because Bud says, “Ain’t that some shit. She doesn’t know.”

I keep thinking of everything anyone has ever told me about my mother but there aren’t any names. Bellie’s name is Isabelle Magnolia and my name is Angela Iris, but we’re not named for anything but plants and a few pretty sounds that make up the image of a person when you put them together.

And I must look like I’m worried about this now, because then Katie says to me: “Well jeez. Don’t worry about it, Angie.”

My face feel hot. I pick up one of the beers—the one Katie brought for me—and press the damp bottle to my cheeks.

Your name begins with an ‘A’ so that’s where we’ll start.” She sets the pointer on the letter “A.”

“Will it still work?”

“Just make sure you think really hard about a memory you have of her. And really focus on it. You know, something that only you know about her.”

“Then what?”

“We wait.”

“Great,” says Bud. He rolls his eyes and Katie nudges him again with her elbow. She lays her long fingers on the pointer. Her nails are painted orange and chipping around the tips. I follow. When she takes a deep breath, I do too. She’s leaning forward on the edge of the couch and Bud is sitting right up close to her.

“Ready?” She asks.

I nod.

“Close your eyes.”

I do, and then everything else I feel becomes sharpened. I’m aware of a flickering candle on the side of the table. The cracker crumbs on the floor stab into my bare thighs. The room smells like Bud and Bud smells like sawdust, sap and beer. The same song is still playing, the one with the woman singing alone.

“Whatever you do, don’t open your eyes,” Katie says to me. “If you feel something move or anything in the room, it means it’s working. Okay?”

“Okay,” I say.

“Do you have a memory ready?”

I lie and tell her I do.

I command my brain to think of my mother. *Mother. Mother. Moth-er. Mother. Moth-er Mo-ther.* I repeat the word to myself until the syllables have turned to mush and they are as meaningless and bland as bread on my tongue.

The image of a man falling from a sugar pine keeps appearing in my mind. I want to see my mother. Some of the branches snap as the man falls and hits them. And they begin to fall alongside him. His shirt catches the breeze and flutters. He is looking straight at me. His mouth is moving. He is saying, “mother, mother, mother, mother.” I push the image away. I want to see my mother as she really is, not in the way that I have known her before, through everyone else’s memories.

The song in Katie’s living room changes. Now it’s something heavier with loud drums and bass. There aren’t any lyrics at first. The plastic ouija pointer twitches under my fingertips. I imagine Bellie and her beanbag body. I see her thick hands wrapped around my wrist, holding me. The music gets louder, which makes me nervous and then I hear Bud clearing his throat.

My legs are getting cold on the wood floor. I squint through my eyelashes at the game. Katie’s fingers aren’t on the pointer anymore and the pointer is still resting on the letter “A.” She’s facing me with her knees straight ahead, but her neck is twisted and Bud is holding her face in both of his hands, kissing her. Their noses are rubbing against each other and both of their eyes are closed.

To my right, I can see out Katie Jabutt’s window to my bedroom. Bellie has left the window open for me like I asked. I put my fingers back on the ouija pointer. Bud and Katie are really going at it now. I picture Bellie’s face. I want to take her face in both of my hands

and tell her I'm sorry. I want to rewrite our story, but I can't. So I sway to the music and move the ouija pointer around the board and spell out everything I wish I could say.

ON THE CARE AND FEEDING OF ANIMALS

Before she leaves, the mother stands at the kitchen counter and writes a list of important telephone numbers on cardboard with a magic marker. She murmurs a mix of love songs from Oldies 97, The Shirelles and The Ronnettes, all the old girl groups she likes but can't keep straight. *Will you still love me to-morr-ow?* She bends her knees low, sways her hips to the syllables and lets her floral skirt billow and wrap around her knees. The three girls stand in the doorway watching. They sway, too.

-Yeah, shake it girls.

Then the mother takes from the pantry two boxes of macaroni and cheese and a loaf of bread and sets them on the table. She bends over the table and writes another note. This one has a drawing of the microwave on it with little X's over the buttons for making macaroni. It's August and the windows are open. A breeze is pushing through the house, hot dogs, honeysuckle and soft tar. There's a sound of a car pulling into the driveway followed by three short honks. *That's when I knew, I'd lose my mind over you.*

The boyfriend comes into the kitchen quietly. He is wearing a tee shirt with a hole in the front. The girls recognize him. He puts a finger over his lips to show them to be quiet. The oldest waves. He walks behind the mother and tosses up her floral skirt. It flies up over her shoulders. He pulls her around. They kiss for a long time on the mouth. The skirt floats down slowly. The girls stand in the doorway watching. They toss up their skirts and then each

other's. They pull each other around and open their mouths wide. They pretend to laugh.

The mother takes her bag and sunglasses.

-Remember to lock the door. Can you reach the telephone?

They walk to the front door.

-Be nice to the cat.

She kneels down to kiss them goodbye. They slap the boyfriend's hands.

-Harder. Hey there. Ouch.

He smells like sweat and smoke.

-Where are my kisses?

The girls press their noses into the screen and wave goodbye. The baby cries a little.

-Be back soon.

The mother blows on her palms. The boyfriend wraps his arm around her floral waist. The engine is loud. Goodbye. *So tell me now and I won't ask again.* It blurs into the murmur of traffic. It's gone.

The girls stay at the door. The baby sits down. They press their noses into the screen. People walk quickly down the sidewalk, teenagers, two Indian women, a boy with a dog. Again and again until their faces are patterned. They run their fingers over the grooves in each other's skin. The people look blurred in the heat. The oldest recognizes the boy and the dog.

They play orphanage. The oldest lives under the coat rack. The younger lives at the screen with a baby who keeps walking away. An old man limps down the sidewalk with a cane. He stops to wipe his forehead with a cocktail napkin.

-Excuse me. Help us, sir.

The man waves. Traffic is loud. He keeps walking.

-Please! Help us.

The oldest goes over.

-What are you doing?

-Playing.

-Stop.

When they get hungry, they pour dry macaroni into three bowls and sprinkle cheese powder on top. The oldest puts the bowls on the floor next to the cat's dish. The younger shakes the kibble bag and sings a song that the cat likes. They girls crouch on their hands and knees and lick the orange powder out of the bowls. Their tongues stick to the tacky noodles. The cat never comes. The oldest feeds kibble to her sisters. They lick the floor and their arms and nudge each other's faces out of the cat's dish. The baby asks for more by meowing.

They go in the hall to play careers. The younger is a hairdresser. She uses sticks as scissors. Her specialty is styling babies' hair. She is rich. The older buys a sheep farm and lots of happiness. In the spring, the younger helps the oldest by cutting the sheep's wool with her sticks. The cat comes out of the bathroom and skulks against the wall.

-There he is.

-What's he got?

-Something.

They block him with their legs. The cat peers up at them, flashes a mouthful of fur. Then he bows his head between his front paws. The oldest bends over. She grabs the cat's

face and squeezes his jaw. The younger pins him against the bathroom door with her hair cutting sticks. The baby stands a few feet away and watches.

-Hey.

-Drop it.

A mouse falls from the cat's mouth to the floor. Its fur is matted and wet and there is some blood on its hind legs. It's breathing fast. The cat's mouth is still open, hovering above it. The younger slaps the cat on the behind with a stick.

-Don't. He's just playing with it.

-It's mean.

-Give me those.

The oldest scoops up the mouse with the sticks. She carries it to the kitchen table, sets it on their mother's drawing of the microwave. Some blood gets on the drawing. The three girls sit on stools. They're silent. They watch the mouse breathing. The baby has a bucket of plastic people on her lap. Inside, there is a family of six, with a grandpa and a tiny boy. They take out the people and circle them around the mouse. The people all have plastic smiles and plastic hair that hangs over their foreheads in shaggy triangular bangs.

-Will it die?

-Yes, soon.

-This is boring.

Later, they sleep together in the mother's bed. The younger doesn't want the cat in the room. The oldest reads from a guide to North American birds before they fall asleep. American Bittern. Mourning Dove. Mute Swan.

-Is it really mute?

-Yes.

-Why are the males so much prettier than the females?

- I don't know.

In the morning, the oldest makes the girls brush their teeth. They take turns from oldest to youngest. The baby cries again but not for very long. When they're done, they hear a squeaking sound coming from somewhere in the bathroom. It stops for a moment and starts again. They tell each other to shush and they stop moving. The younger puts her hand over the baby's mouth. The oldest gets on her hands and knees. The tiles are warm from the sunlight. She crawls toward the sound and moves aside a metal trashcan. There is a nest of paper scraps and string behind the toilet.

-Yuck.

-What.

-Baby mice, I think.

The oldest picks up three of the mice and cups them in her palms. They are red and downy with webs of blue veins running under the skin. They are shaking. She holds them out to the other girls. The baby strokes one of the mice with her pointer finger.

-Why aren't they cute?

-They are.

-Sort of.

-They look like cranberries.

-Let's give them to the cat.

-No, here.

The younger opens the drawers under the sink and takes out a blow dryer and some hair brushes. In the bottom drawer is a plastic bag with hair ties inside.

-Use this.

She dumps the ties in the sink. She sits down on the floor.

Across the hall, the mother's clock radio comes on. It's Oldies 97, Diana Ross. *And it burts so bad.* The younger holds open the bag. The oldest gives the mice in her palm to the baby, and she drops them into the plastic bag one at a time. They do the same with the rest of the mice. *I've got this yearning.*

When there are eight mice in the bag, the younger zips it nearly closed. Then the three girls stack their hands and squeeze the air out slowly. They push the mice into a corner of the bag. The two older girls are sitting down and the baby is standing. Outside, it's sunny and there cars honking on the street. They can hear an engine rev over Diana's voice. The bag quivers below their fists. They watch it. They wait for it to be still.