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The five stories in this collection examine spaces and boundaries, both physical and not, that shape our shifting dynamics of power, memory, and loss at key moments. Presented in a range of points of view, the stories move from the West Coast of the United States to West Africa, sometimes spanning decades through flashback and retrospection. The characters in *Another Coast* are haunted by the unsaid and an obsessive rehashing of the irretrievable. Their experiences are often constructed around conversation or the failure to communicate—all leading to an exploration of emptiness, or the anticipation of it. Although the absence and shortcomings of language are central, the pieces nonetheless attempt to play on how expression, naming, and our groping efforts to connect may provide a chance for some form of renewal.

ANOTHER COAST

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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LADIES' LUNCH

“Bye, D!” Terri calls from the hall, not waiting for his reply.

She's trying to get out the door, running late again. The staticky hum of the breathing machine that follows her from their bedroom could almost be mistaken for one of the ocean noise machines she wanted but never got back in the '80s. She gives her hair a quick rub with the kitchen towel to put it on the more socially acceptable side of dryness, looks for a lint roller to take care of the cat's hair on her lap. She told Dale a little about the woman she's meeting for lunch, said it's someone from their son's work, but left it at that. She's sorry to leave Dale by himself, and vows again to work up a visiting schedule with his friends. Always such a creature of habit before—his unshakable routines of biking to work no matter the weather, growing heirloom tomatoes and walking to the wine shop on weekends—he's at loose ends now.

When Terri walks into the café, the other woman is already there. She knows her from the rough description her son, Nick, sent. The woman's hair is a bright bob, between platinum and white, and she is tastefully put-together: sheer gray scarf, cornflower blue handbag that almost matches her eyes.

“I'm Terri Garner,” Terri says, suddenly shy, when she reaches the bar.

“Sue.” The other woman half steps down from her high stool. They shake hands.

“Have you been waiting long?” Terri asks. She pulls out a stool and it scrapes on the flagstones.

“No, no. My gym is just down the block, so I got here a couple minutes early.”

Sue punches a button on her cell phone and tucks it away. Terri and Sue sit shoulder-to-shoulder at the counter. Terri still feels rumpled and damp around the edges from her shower and the car ride here. The September heat—another California Indian Summer—has worked its usual wonders on her hair, frizzy in the best conditions. Her embroidered Guatemalan purse, which looked so good a couple years ago in the morning light of the farmers’ market, hangs sad and limp from the back of her chair. She forgot the lint roller in the kitchen after all, and her leggings still have the cat’s white hairs stuck to them.

It’s not quite noon. The booths behind them are beginning to fill with the usual weekday crowd: working lunches from the tech complex down the street, mothers with children who have promised to behave and give Mommy a few minutes to enjoy her meal—Terry remembers those days with Nick, almost misses them now. The restaurant is high-ceilinged, all wood and glass, so every noise bounces and ripples. There’s one man sitting down the L of the bar, eating a burger and staring into his Old Fashioned. Terri thinks about ordering a cocktail, but sees that Sue has iced tea, and asks for the same. Both women order the squash soup. A waiter’s dream, Terri thinks: two fifty-something ladies ordering tea and soup. She’ll have to overtip. Maybe Sue will let her pay. After all, Sue is doing her a favor with this lunch.

“Nick tells me you manage designer accounts at *Sunset Magazine*,” Terri says once the waiter leaves. Nick, who de-bugs the publisher’s mobile apps, met Sue at the last company holiday party.

She nods. “I had to cut back in the past couple years, hand off a lot of clients to my assistant, but I need the distraction. You might find the same as your husband gets more dependent on you. Something outside of that to hold onto. Or go back to.”

The waiter brings Terri’s drink and a basket of bread. She tears into the baguette, nervous enough that she uses more butter than she should and doesn’t care. She’s still thinking of Dale back home. It’s usually this way when she first leaves. Nick hasn’t been over as much; that’s part of the problem. He was supposed to come for football and an early dinner the last two Sundays, but he cancelled both times. Dale watched the games alone on mute even though he barely cares about football and does it only to have some small part in Nick’s fantasy team. On those afternoons, Terri has kept herself occupied in the quiet house, folded laundry and thawed the lasagna a helpful friend dropped off. Dale by himself, watching those athletically perfect, coordinated bodies on the flat screen, was just too damn sad. She’ll have to find out what’s kept Nick so busy. Odds are it’s some new app feature she won’t understand.

“So, what do you want to know?” Sue asks after Terri puts the bread down, has her first sips of watery tea. Even though she’s been looking ahead to this lunch for days, the question leaves Terri dumb. What does she want to know, exactly? Is it the final months of the disease she wants to hear about, how the body shrivels and leaks and the lungs fail? She’s been trying to think about grief as clay—an occupational hazard for a ceramics teacher—and sees the end product as something glazed, fired. Hard-edged. It could be she needs to hear out loud about the inner reserves she knows must be inside each of them, somewhere. How does one find that peace, hold onto it?

Sue finally takes pity on her and talks, though up close, past the glamour, her exhaustion is so plain it's like someone has wrung the light out of her.

"Look, I can tell you all the support group bullshit if you want," Sue says. "'Ask for help. Care for yourself. Every experience with degenerative illness is unique.' And it's not all bullshit. The groups can be great, they're just not for me at this point. Have you gone to one yet?"

"No," Terri says, wondering if she's already missed some milestone. "But I've never been much of a group person, either. Book clubs, knitting groups, softball teams—not really my thing."

Sue hitches up one side of her mouth at that. It's her most dramatic expression yet, the closest to a full smile she's gotten. No wonder her face is still so smooth. She takes the lemon wedge from the side of her glass, runs it around the rim, squeezes its juice into the tea and drops it in, seeds and all.

Their waiter brings the startlingly orange soup. The whole presentation looks like a glaze Terri'd love to use for an autumn table setting, something to show her ceramics students at Foothill Community College. Terri resists an urge to dip her pinkie in and make swirls with the cream and oil on top, play with the contrasting hues.

She's surprised that the soup is cold—can it be a gazpacho if it's not tomato? Sue seems pleased, at least.

Terri is glad they're at the bar. It reminds her of riding in the front of a car, the way you can carry on a conversation in such a close space without the need for constant eye contact. She's always found it easier to talk to people this way. It's how she and Dale

had some of the biggest conversations of their marriage, usually him in the driver's seat with his hands loosely at eleven and three, tilted slightly toward Terri, the passenger at his side: whether to have a child, and later if they should move from Santa Fe to Silicon Valley, with that child in tow, for Dale's programming career; deciding that one kid was enough—"Look at us now," she'd said on the way to a friend's gallery opening when Nick was two, though before she'd always imagined at least three children, "We're barely hanging on as it is!" Some of the worst fights, too: when she was bored with Dale, bored with their life, but instead of saying that, threatened to take twelve-year-old Nick with her to Santa Fe for a summer. Maybe more. Or the more tiresome arguments about retirement and money and savings, which no matter how they stretched and economized, never seemed enough.

And six months ago, making numb plans on the way back from the doctor's office after Dale's diagnosis. She drove that time. "Where do we go now?" he'd asked her on the freeway, voice stretched thin as taffy as they passed the usual exits, and though she knew it wasn't what he meant, she thought about ignoring the University Ave turnoff that would take them home and just driving south, south until the road narrowed at the coast and finally ended in a gulf or a border.

The man down the bar is on his second Old Fashioned now. Terri pokes at her tea with a straw and imagines what a little whiskey would do for it.

"Do you have children?" she asks Sue. "Were they a help?"

“A son and a daughter in their twenties. And yes, they tried. My daughter especially, who came home from DC and lived with us. But if your experience is like mine—well, I think you’ll find, in the ways that matter most, it’s really just you.”

Terri waits for her to elaborate.

“Nick seems very worried about you and Dale,” Sue adds instead, as though feeling she’s been too harsh.

“Yes,” Terri says. But even when Nick’s around, he’s a fixer, a *doer*, not a listener or a comforter. She’s not sure how much of this to tell Sue. Sue seems nonsense in a similar way.

“Have you been sleeping?” Sue asks Terri.

“Dale sleeps in our bed, and I start out there, but I move to Nick’s old room a lot of nights. Dale’s new BiPAP machine keeps me up, but he needs it more and more for his breathing.” The bed has taken on a futuristic, mechanical quality, just as Dale’s body becomes strange to her; she is an intruder charting its stiffnesses, spasms, and pains. “Yeah, not getting a whole lot of action these days. So much for rediscovering our passion as fancy-free retirees.”

Sue glances away at her feeble attempt at levity in the same way Terri’s students do when they’re embarrassed by her ceramics puns but don’t want to hurt her feelings. “That’s normal,” she says. “We switched to separate rooms altogether eventually, what with the hospital bed and nighttime help and then the hospice schedule. It just gets easier at some point.”

Easier. What a word.

“And you’re in the middle stages, so his swallowing is still mostly there, at least,” Sue goes on. “When he can’t eat or drink by himself anymore, or really *speak*—well. Things can change so fast. No matter how much you try to plan ahead and prepare.”

Nick has shared more about Dale than Terri would’ve expected; he always seems locked down around her. Maybe Nick feels he can be open at work in ways he can’t be with his own parents. She wonders if the bitterness she feels at this realization is justified. Her edges are so raw lately.

The café is nearly full now. The sound of children laughing comes from a booth behind them. No grandchildren for her yet. Nick is only twenty-nine, but he told her last month he doesn’t think he wants children. She hopes that’ll change when he meets a girl he’s serious about. He still lives with roommates—two of his college Phi Delt brothers—in a condo with a view of the Bay Bridge. Lately he’s taken to wearing pastel button-downs and narrow pants, his hair cut to almost nothing on the sides, thick-framed glasses even though his vision is perfect. He’s so intensely Silicon Valley it alarms her. Sometimes she doesn’t recognize the boy who fingerpainted their walls back in Santa Fe, who once wanted to be an artist like his mom.

Sue taps at her phone, pulls out a pair of leopard-spotted reading glasses, and apologizes for needing to respond to something from work. Terri checks her own phone, but there’s nothing new. She rips another piece of bread in half and uses it to soak up the soup at the bottom of her bowl. While she chews, dips, chews, she thinks about why she pestered Nick to arrange this meeting. When Nick had mentioned Sue, and how her husband died of ALS eleven months before, Terri had asked for an introduction. She’d

surprised herself with the request. Nick had dragged his feet for a while—not wanting to mix work and family, she guessed—then had finally given in. He’d set up the lunch but said no when she asked if he wanted to join them.

She’d expected to feel some wordless camaraderie with Sue, like the bond of veterans trading old war stories in their own code. That they could become fast friends. And more, really: she’d hoped for a guru, as ridiculous as that word sounded.

No matter what, at least it’s an escape, a treat being out of the house. Being seen. She should’ve dressed up more. Worn the new skirt she bought online which is still in its box on her closet floor. Maybe she’ll order another course, take her time.

She asks for more bread instead; this time, it’s stale. The crust scrapes the roof of her mouth, but she keeps eating it.

Sue sighs, puts her phone down on her napkin. “Sorry about that. Mini crisis at work.” She waves the waiter over for refills of tea and water.

“No problem.”

Maybe Terri wants Sue’s competence, though she knows it comes at a cost—battle-worn, hardened out of necessity—or at least it would for her. She’s what Dale calls “dreamy,” teased for stopping the car in the middle of the road to make Nick and Dale look at the way the branches twine overhead like fingers. But she wanted them to *see* things: fog on the foothills, salt flats like hard-packed snow by the bay. Things most people overlooked, but that was no way to live.

They’re onto long-term care policies when the waiter brings dessert menus. Sue says, “Just the check, please.”

“I’ve heard the lemon tart is good here,” Terri tries, but she’s too tentative, and Sue doesn’t glance at the list or seem to hear. Sue looks like the kind of person who avoids sweets and day drinking. She grabs for the check from the waiter’s hand and won’t listen as Terri holds out her credit card, tries to insist.

“Anything else you wanted to talk about?” Sue says as she snaps shut the faux leather holder.

And Terri talks. With the end closing in, she aches to stretch these last minutes.

“Did you ever just get away?” she asks. “Even for a little? The first night we got the BiPAP for Dale, I wanted to get out. Go. I actually packed a bag, called a friend about a last-minute spa weekend. Thought of calling Nick to stay over, knew he’d grumble but I didn’t care. Dale saw the bag and choked up. Cried. I haven’t thought about going away since.”

An espresso machine whines from the end of the bar. She raises her voice.

“No, that’s a lie, I think about it all the time, I just can’t bring myself to *do* anything—”

Terri’s no longer so aware of the man down the bar with the Old Fashioned, the children in the booth behind them, but instead the unwinding of something inside her, faster and faster. Sue listens, inscrutable.

“I had this terrible thought, when I was up in the middle of the night, that I don’t know if we’ll ever have sex again, and then I wasn’t sure if I would care that much, you know? I can’t talk to my friends, not that I’ve got a lot here anyway, and God do I miss Nick—”

When she stops mid-sentence, confused and not sure what to do next, Sue takes her hand in a firm, dry grip. It's the first time she's been touched like this by another person in weeks, months maybe, rather than the one doing the tending, the touching. She's flooded with gratitude and closes her eyes. Whimpers a little. So desperate. The back of her throat is slick, salty.

With a last squeeze of her hand, Sue releases her. She excuses herself and heads to the restroom. Terri blots her eyes with her napkin.

Sue's phone is still on the bar. It shimmies toward Terri as it vibrates, lights up with a text, and she looks over without thinking.

still at lunch? everything ok?

A name at the top: Nick Garner. Terri grabs Sue's reading glasses off the placemat. They're her same magnification. Yes, it's her Nick. The text disappears, screen dark again. For a weightless second, she thinks the text must be meant for her. Sweet of him to finally check in.

Another buzz:

call me as soon as ur done with mom, k? made dinner reservs for us

The sounds of the café fade out, white noise, then rush back to twang and rattle her core.

Sue must be about her age, but looks so young, fit. Chic in her career-girl way. Nick's sudden announcement he doesn't want children makes a little more sense now. And he'd been so hesitant to set up this meeting. She'd actually gotten weepy on the phone, hiccupped *Please, Nick*; he'd clammed up and finally agreed.

Silly of her. Her neck and ears are hot. She fans herself. What will Sue tell Nick?
“*My god, you won’t believe your mother...*” Will he defend her, or will they laugh together at the flighty, out-of-touch community college teacher who just so happens to be his flesh and blood?

But for Sue to leave the phone out like that? Is she that rattled by their lunch, to make such an obvious slip? No. Terri can’t understand it. She returns the reading glasses to their corner. In the process, she touches Sue’s screen with her pinkie, knowing she’ll be back any minute. The phone is password protected.

On her own phone, her last text from Nick was over a week ago, when he confirmed this lunch: *11:30 @ mayfield cafe, sue will meet you at the bar. she's blonde, short hair*. She scrolls up to earlier messages. His texts are all perfunctory, coordinating signatures on advance health care directives, hammering out arrangements for visits, cancelling those plans at the last minute.

The constant lowercase of Nick’s texts grates on her. She used to sign all her texts to him *Love, Mama*, on two lines like a letter, until he told her to stop: “I know they’re from you, Mom.” Her students tease her about being bad with technology, but still, she’s no Luddite. Though Dale still sometimes has to help her with her email.

Terri does the reasonable thing. She orders two martinis, up, with potato vodka. Extra olives.

Where did she go wrong with Nick? He’d dated plenty before, girls Terri had liked, polite and quick to smile. She’d driven him on his first date, before he had his license, with a quiet redhead for miniature golf and then milkshakes at the Creamery. She

always tried to talk to him openly about his body, sex, natural urges, no matter how embarrassed he was, how he blushed and ducked his head and looked like he might leap out of the moving car to avoid such a horrifying conversation. She wonders if she should be flattered that a woman her age finds Nick mature enough, worthy of the time. Maybe he becomes a whole different man, one who doesn't go cold when Sue cries or when she utters that vulgar word: "widow."

The drinks come almost immediately. Sue's taking her time, and Terri doesn't wait for her first sip. And second and third. She lets out an involuntary sigh of pleasure. Their waiter gives her his first genuine smile of the meal.

Then Sue is back, ready for the road, scarf retied and lipstick fresh. Terri feels worlds better than two minutes before, the steadying effect of the glass in her hand. Sue hesitates at the sight of the drinks; she sees her phone sitting out and slips it back into her blue bag.

"I couldn't let you pay for everything," Terri says and stares ahead, knowing somehow that Sue will join her no matter what. Drink her overpriced martini.

And she does, starting with an olive. Terri prefers whiskey or wine, really, but loves the austerity of a martini. It seems more appropriate for this moment.

"Smooth," Sue says. "What kind of vodka—"

"Chopin." Sue may know her designers and chilled soup, but Terri knows her liquors.

She orders a second round when they're barely halfway through the first. The waiter is her accomplice; he reads her nod and starts shaking the next batch.

“Have another one, on me,” she says as the drinks appear. Almost hoping for Sue to put up a fight, those texts hanging between them now. Sue’s phone buzzes from her purse, again and again, but she doesn’t check it. She is too polite—or cowardly—to come right out and ask what Terri might have seen.

In the lull, Terri tries and fails to avoid the consuming, singsong thought. Nick and Sue. Sue and Nick. Jesus. It even sounds like a couple from some brainless children’s book, the future bright and full ahead of them.

Sue fidgets with her napkin. Her hands are sun-splotched, the secret to her true age. Her cuticles sloppy. And such tiny thighs in those skinny jeans: chicken legs. At least Terri has enough hips to fill her yoga pants. She got whistled at in the Safeway parking garage not too long ago. The lighting in the garage was terrible, all flat yellow, but still. She’s feeding herself for the wasting, she tells Dale. (It was funnier before he actually was wasting.)

With her new drink nearly full, Terri puts it down on the folded edge of her placemat, where it tilts a little to the left, toward Sue. Teeters once. Twice.

Terri watches the slow, preventable fall, fascinated. The glass bounces on its rim but doesn’t break. Clear liquid spreads over the bar and drips onto the napkins on their laps. Sue yanks her silk scarf out of the way. Terri plucks her one remaining olive from the flood and eats it, toying with the naked toothpick in her palm. The waiter hurries over with a bar rag. She apologizes, just once, to the waiter.

“Accidents happen,” he says. He’s about Nick’s age, but bearded, scruffy in a nice way. He looks a little like one of her best students, one who was in class the

afternoon after the terrible appointment with Dale's doctor and who nodded along with her demonstration of Raku glazes, asked questions about kiln temperatures and made her feel like something might still make sense. She imagines staying at the bar after Sue leaves, having another drink. Could she get the waiter talking? Laugh with someone without that weight behind her eyes.

Drunk together, accidentally, a few weeks after his diagnosis, she and Dale had made a list of their single male friends. "So you'll be ready," Dale said, opening another bottle of the good vinho verde. He swore at his twitchy hand. It had been his last day at the office; he had some coding projects to do from home if he wanted, but no more hours spent in that windowless cubicle, gray on all sides. The Mamas and the Papas played low on the turntable, which she kept coming back to over their stereo with its automatic CD changer. Takeout boxes of curry and rice covered the coffee table since neither of them felt much like cooking these days.

She'd gone along with Dale, but made sure to come up with reasons none of the men were quite right. "Adrian?" "He hates cats. What would happen to Georgia?" "Gary?" "Too conservative. We could never talk politics."

He went down the list on his legal pad. She sat on the floor in front of his legs, played with the Oriental rug tassels and thought of the horrendous brown shag carpet they'd pulled up together when they moved here in the '90s. "How about Justin?" Dale asked. "He's separated now."

Justin. At a Fourth of July party two summers ago, swaying together in an empty backyard, no music, just the patter of fireworks. The smell of wet petals, his face hot

against her neck. She pressed close to him when he ran his hands from her hips up her sides, like he would lift her, sticky under the arms in her sundress. He'd been married too, then, his wife in the kitchen with Dale and the rest of the party. They could see them all inside, lit through the windows. When she thought about the night later, she'd blame the festive mood, the champagne and oysters, for the thrill of his hands. The ache low in her.

"Not Justin," she'd said, leaning her head back and tickling the top of Dale's weak hand. "God, have you seen his posture?"

The scruffy waiter brings her a fresh drink, filled to the brim. "On me," he says. She gives him her brightest, head-tilted-earrings-swinging-teeth-glinting smile and hopes she penciled in her eyebrows this morning, which, alarmingly, have begun to go gray. Sue is watching, but Terri has used up her embarrassment for this lunch.

"So, how's the office culture at the magazine?" she asks Sue. Easy breezy. "Must be interesting working with so many twenty-somethings."

"Oh," Sue says, wiping lipstick from the edge of her glass, "I hardly notice. My department is much more settled. The younger ones in mobile and sales all live in the city, go to happy hour and take the train together. There's not that much mixing."

"Surprising."

"Why do you say that?"

Terri swishes the martini around her mouth for the antiseptic tingle.

"Oh," she says, "just a theory I'm working on about the dot-com age. How it's changing the way we old Baby Boomers fuck." She is bold now, all splintered toothpicks and glass edges. "How we view our options. Our own delusions about what we can get

away with.” She leans in; she wants to be close for this next part. “All about self-control, if you ask me.”

“Well.” Is that a flinch from Sue, the start of a blush?

“Well,” Terri echoes.

Terri watches Sue’s hands, their movements on the martini glass a mirror of her own. She waits to see if Sue will restart the conversation, who will outlast the other. Sue twists the watch on her wrist. The man down the bar has finished his drinks and left. A toddler shrieks a long, teary “*Noooooo!*” from a booth by the windows. Sue glances toward the exit.

Terri wonders where Nick has made dinner reservations for the two of them. What they look like in public together: if it’s easy, the way she and Dale once were, waiters not wanting to wipe down the table and disturb their linked hands. Sending them free desserts like they were still honeymooners. She has to admit: Nick has seemed happier lately, even with his father’s illness.

Terri’s cheeks are warm, tight, and she feels like she’s blinking slower than usual. Beyond the sneaking around, should she let it bother her this much? Maybe she should be relieved. Here could be her future! Designer handbags and younger men! Poor Dale, who worked years in humdrum software development, dealt almost daily with her disappointment that California wasn’t more glamorous, a life among artists, but instead the white-bread tech community that turned her favorite Tibetan shops and used bookstores into bistros selling \$14 sandwiches. Dale: too steady and accommodating to get the recognition he deserved. To be replaced so easily by a newer model.

Not for her, no thank you. She hopes she's not that desperate, or cruel. She's never been steady, exactly, but she's *been* there, the one who hid notes in Nick's school lunchbox and in Dale's briefcase before he left for work in the mornings, who bought the toilet paper and held the household together. The one they've got.

She sits a little taller on her stool, observes Sue from this new height.

Sue stays for four more sips of her martini (seven for Terri), three cuticle picks, and one adjustment of her scarf knot, then begs off for an afternoon meeting Terri knows is fake. Terri takes one last sip and puts cash on the bar. She won't stay. There's Dale's Rilutek and her Xanax to pick up at the pharmacy, calls to make to the insurance company about leg braces and shower chairs for the not-too-distant future, the cat to feed. Her head swims pleasantly from that martini and a half. She'd better get home before it really hits.

On the sidewalk, Sue presses Terri's hand again. She is ready to be gone, and Terri, at last, is ready to let her leave.

"Goodbye, Terri. Take care of yourself."

"Thanks for lunch. Be seeing you." It's the only thing Terri can think to say that feels true. She turns away before Sue can answer.

They both get in their cars, parked a few spaces apart. The traffic is awful, as it is at all hours here, and Terri gets stuck at a light right behind Sue.

Someone honks in the intersection and they both look around to make sure it isn't directed at them. Terri inhales, exhales, inhales in the quiet of the car. Sue's turn signal clicks in front of her, roughly matched to her pulse. For once, she's not in a hurry.

Up ahead, Sue's head turns and her lips move like she's talking to someone beside her. Terri suspects she's already dialed Nick to fill him in. The light changes and Sue goes right, toward *Sunset*. Terri turns left, heading home.

Her phone buzzes now, the persistent summons back, but Terri leaves it sitting in the empty passenger seat. She realizes that she never asked the late husband's name, and Sue never offered it. Too late, again: really, she'd meant to ask Sue the impossible. About the time after, when it's all done. The first night alone in a cold house. How to become an expert in something no one wants to learn.

ANOTHER COAST

On our family's last trip together to the coast, my mother undressed for all the beachgoers to see. It was late morning, the Lagos Bar Beach already crowded with families and couples on vacation. The Atlantic was so turquoise it made my eyes run to look at it for long. Lifeguard stands, most of them empty, dotted the shore. Groups of kids tried to follow their creeping shade.

I'd turned ten the week before. We'd been in Nigeria for almost a year then—my father was one of the first doctors to volunteer for the Peace Corps during the summer of '63—and we'd spread our towels on our usual end of the beach, not far from a fishing boat turned on its belly. I sat facing my parents, my back to the ocean. My brother Davey, who was six, was next to me, burying his skinny legs. Every now and then his fingers brushed mine as he scooped more sand into his lap.

My mother rose from her folding chair and stretched. Lazily, curving her body to one side then the other, a lean comma. I thought she might sit at my father's feet as she often did at the beach, at least before this summer. Rest against his shins. Instead she stood in front of him, blocking his view of the surf. The local blend of West African highlife drifted from an open window nearby, guitars and horns beating out a well-known chorus. The air smelled like fried cassava mixed with sewage from open trenches.

She started to strip down to her yellow bathing suit. From where I sat, my father's face appeared in flashes behind her hips and arms. She took her time removing each piece

of clothing: the shirt, button by button from the collar down, arms peeled out as though shedding an unwanted pelt; the knee-length blue skirt my father said he hated because it looked like something for a middle-aged school teacher, pulled down with a loose sway. She kicked off her sandals with a twist of each foot.

In one instant—partway through the skirt—her eyes slid toward mine, accidentally, but lingered for a moment. Searching. Her face was pink and shiny at the hairline, feverish. I turned away, embarrassed. A man walking by stopped to watch her as well with a goofy grin on his face. I wanted to wave him along on his way, yell something rude. I felt protective and also greedily curious, thinking of the way girls in my class ducked behind screens to change for gym and the older boys tried to jump high enough to glimpse them. I'd seen my mother undress before, at the beach or the pool, but not lately, and never like this. I wasn't sure what was different; it wasn't just the taunting quality—that, as a school-aged boy, I could begin to grasp. I knew one thing: I wished all the strangers on the beach would get up and leave us alone.

Next to me, Davey was in a world of his own, singing songs under his breath. I heard a few words of “keep them doggies rollin’,” from our parents’ favorite TV show. I wanted to join his carefree absorption in the sand and the songs in his head, but I was four years older; it gave me a heavy, weary feeling, like reaching double digits had tied me down to the real world.

As I glanced up, my mother arched her back and slowly shook out her long black hair, left and right. When I was much older and began sleeping with women, I breathed in the intoxicating smell in the hollow of a neck, understood its gut-punch force on a

discarded T-shirt after one woman left for good—an all-too-familiar dread again these days, only this time it’s Janie, it’s my wife. Only then did I realize my mother had been making sure the scent of her lavender shampoo would reach my father.

His expression didn’t change, but he waved a hand in front of his face. He stared past her at the ocean. His blond hair shone, sunburn visible where it was beginning to thin on top. The distinct golden glow attracted attention and giggles from a group of women walking by in bikinis. My father had operated on enough cleft lips and burn patients over the last year that going places with him in Lagos sometimes felt like being in the company of a movie star, and often my mother just smiled at the attention, held onto his arm. Now, she turned that frightening eye contact on me again, this time including Davey in it too. “Kevin,” she said, serene. “Davey.” He froze in his digging. “I want you to know it is never polite to stare at women, whatever you might see other men doing, *unrepentantly*.”

My father made a sound deep in his throat. My mother looked ready to pounce on the strolling swimmers, her posture stiff and knees bent.

Instead she sighed, ran her nails down the sides of her waist—once, twice—and flicked them out as though scattering drops of water. With a final roll of her neck, she slid back into her seat and crossed her legs, pointing her toes in a way that brought out a rope of muscle in her calf.

*

Davey and I wore matching red swim trunks that day—I still remember the cherry fabric and white waistband. School had let out for the summer, and my father was home at last from a trip to Yenagoa, in southern Nigeria; while he was gone, my brother and I had taken to shouting “Yenagoaaa!” and “Hey, *You-No-Go-A!*” at each other from across the yard of the Peace Corps house, our own version of olly olly oxen free.

At the beach, a man with a camera around his neck paused to take a Polaroid of us. His smile was visible behind the lens as the camera clicked, and we grinned back. He limped to the ocean and plunged our image into the shallows, a salty fixative. My father broke his stony pose for long enough to pay a shilling for the picture. I still have it. I found it the other night, when I was up looking through an old album and avoiding bed. My arm is around Davey’s neck, pulling him toward me in a hug that looks more like a chokehold. In the photo, I can see the raised scar tissue on his narrow chest. He never seemed to mind, but I always noticed it, especially how the scars seemed to grow and stretch with him—to tell the truth, they frightened me, the way they had a life of their own. Born with a heart chamber that wouldn’t close, he’d had surgery when he was a baby. White lines marked the treasure beneath. My heart was a well-trained soldier: springy, steady. No one gave it a second thought.

Thirty years later, the corners of that Polaroid from the beach are peeling back, but the colors are still vivid, unreal. The red of our swim trunks like a warning.

At home in California, I take the picture out of its album again and again. I play highlife on the turntable, volume low, songs I haven’t listened to for years: Fatai Rolling Dollar and his rhythm band, a Prince Nico Mbarga LP brought home from the record

store I run, where I started working to help put Janie through law school, and never left (as I hold the Polaroid between my fingers, Prince Nico Mbarga sings “Sweet mother, I no go forget you, for this suffer wey you suffer for me”). That store where we spent so many afternoons during those first years, when Janie would pull me into one of the listening booths as a study break from endless torts and contracts and civ pro.

A new voice, and I’m sure it’s Janie calling me back to bed, to the conversation I know is coming. But I’ve imagined it; just a scratch, an echo on the vinyl. Talking won’t save us, anyway: we waited so long to get married, to have a kid, talked out decisions from each possible angle. We used up the words until everything lost its shine. Or didn’t I mention? Excavated every space, talked ourselves in circles, worn ourselves out; now nowhere to go and nothing to say.

Most nights, I think about that last day at the beach. I’ve told our son stories about Nigerian day school and the grandparents he never met, about Godwill, our steward, and the scorpions Davey and I found in our bathroom and the geckos in the toilet, but not this. He’s only six, after all.

*

A group of local kids started up a game just down the beach from us, body surfing and dunking each other in the waves. Columns of heat made them slightly blurry. “Can we go in the water now?” Davey asked my father. Davey’s new trunks were too big—room to grow into, Ma always said—and almost fell down when he rocked up and back on his toes.

On earlier days at the beach, before all my father's summer trips started, he would help us build a sandcastle or jury-rig a seesaw out of driftwood while my mother splashed with us in the shallows; she'd never learned to swim, but loved to feel the waves sucking at her ankles. When the ocean was calm, my father would grab Davey and me, each of us latched to one of his shoulders, and breaststroke us out toward the horizon until my mother would call us in, waving her arms in mock worry.

"Yes, why don't you take them out?" It was the first thing I'd heard my mother say to him since we'd gotten to the beach. Her voice held a dangerous challenge, but my father just shook his head.

"Tide's too strong today," he said. "See those waves?" They were bigger than usual, it was true, almost as tall as the local boys trying to hop the crests.

Davey took the news with only a small droop of his shoulders. His straight eyebrows looked painted on above his gray eyes—the same color as my mother's—as though his whole face might break if handled too roughly. The fragility I see in my own son now, the dreaminess. I was never that kind of child.

Davey stood by himself along the wet strip of shore, looking out. His legs were bowed and his shoulder blades made shadows like wings on his back. He stayed still enough that the gulls began to land around him, some almost up to his waist; where I would've delighted in startling them and watching their frantic flapping, Davey tiptoed backward, murmuring something soothing. But then one of the boys in the water lurched out among the gulls, hollering, and in the swirl of wings, Davey's face split wide open with a surprised grin.

At noon, I took Davey to get lunch from a cart selling fried yams and fish wrapped in leaves—my father handed me money without a word, but it wasn't quite enough. The man with three chins slipped an extra bean cake into Davey's palm with a slow wink.

Davey and I had taken to Nigeria like *tsetse* flies to warm blood. Our house smelled of spices that had become as familiar to me as the smell of fried potatoes and snow at home, back when Dad was a Resident at Mayo and we lived above a burger place in Rochester. We wore our uniforms home from school, and by last daylight, the white was streaked with browns and reds and greens from crawling through mangroves and bottle palms. Sometimes Davey rode on my back, monkey-like, and I held his feet as rudders to steer us. We used our secret whistle to find each other; he could hide in tiny crevices, and he had the patience of our grandma's cat at a gopher hole.

Life took on new rhythms: loud Peace Corps parties that kept us up past bedtime, our father's weeks-long trips to clinics in the Nigerian countryside, our mother's increasingly frequent drives to town while he was away. New silences at dinner, as though one or the other of them had left the table or never sat down at all. But nothing felt like it could touch us in our other life, the one before the Peace Corps that we would have to return to in the far-off future. Two years is an eternity for a ten-year-old.

By the time Davey and I got back to our towels, the grease of our lunch had turned its newspaper wrappings translucent as fish scales. We licked our fingers clean and wiped oil onto our thighs, where sand stuck to it.

My mother had put on a sunhat, which hid the top half of her face. Her arms were up behind her head now, revealing tufts of dark armpit fur. Another doctor from the local clinic walked in front of our piece of beach, someone I recognized from parties at our house, and my father nodded to the man; he paused, about to come closer, then seemed to change his mind and kept walking. The air was charged like the static before a Midwest thunderstorm, when hairs stood straight on our arms. It took the other doctor's reaction, the harshness of the afternoon light and complete absence of clouds, the only noise from the sky the cries of gulls, for me to realize the thickness wasn't coming from any storm.

The energy made me twitchy. I flicked an ant from my ankle. I almost longed for my mother to get up again, for a second act to her show. We needed something to break the day open.

"Can Dad swim us out now?" Davey, legs fully buried again, whispered the question so our parents couldn't hear. He looked over at them like the strangers they'd apparently become.

I felt a quick anger at them for acting so strange this summer. For their indifference to each other. To our beach excursion today. I shook my head and handed Davey a straw and a bottle of malta from our little cooler.

We went together to examine the nearby aluminum boat, which really wasn't much to look at. Its side read *Belle of the Benué* in wobbly, hand-painted cursive. It struck me as sad that someone would give such a fancy name to a rusting dinghy. I knew from Geography that the Benué River never even reached our port. Had this rickety dinghy ever sailed in its namesake?

I drank a malta and a half before the second one got warm and flat. I lay on my full stomach and pretended to sleep. My back prickled with sweat. The light blazed in spots under my eyelids.

The sun had reached its high of the day and begun to drop, a glaring dot above. My father held a bottle of suntan lotion out to my mother, giving it a little shake. I remembered another trip to the beach, months ago, when we'd first gotten to Nigeria; that day, once the sun got to this level, he'd spread coconut oil down her back, giving her a light swat on the rear when he thought no one was looking. She'd grinned at him over her shoulder, sunglasses like Jackie O.'s slipping down her nose. Never lately, though; now she ignored him.

He shook the bottle again, then tossed it at her feet, where it sent up a spray of sand. Her head whipped around. The whites of her eyes were bright in her flushed face.

"You think you can do that?" The words hissed from the side of her mouth. I rested my cheek on my hand. I tried to watch their lips to catch the broken words.

My father's mouth twitched. He rubbed his knuckles along his jaw as though in pain. "Stop. Just stop it."

"Stop what?"

"That's rich, dear." The last word turned me cold in the African sun. "Get all high and mighty on me—" His voice dropped.

"Please, that's enough—" my mother's voice overlapping.

"—you say it's too late for that?"

“I can’t begin to think what you saw in her.” Her tone switched: conversational, familiar. Her Sunday church voice. “Or should I say *them*—”

“That’s enough now, Ellen.”

“*Now* you want me to stop—”

I couldn’t hear the rest of what she said because just then someone turned up the highlife. But she lifted the brim of her hat, and her eyes cut toward me: “Where’s Davey?”

“Don’t change the—”

“Davey!” she called over my father.

No response.

“Wasn’t he just here?”

Leaning forward in her chair: “Davey, honey?”

My father was on his feet now.

“Kevin, where’s your brother?”

I pushed up onto my elbows and shrugged.

My mother pulled up the swimsuit strap that had slipped down her shoulder and half-turned to my father. “Maybe if you’d been paying attention to us for once—” She broke off when she didn’t see Davey’s pale form at the water or by his abandoned sandcastles. “Have you seen my little boy?” she asked the couple next to us. “He’s blond, red trunks, about this tall?” She waved a hand around her hip. They both blinked up at her and shook their heads.

My father surveyed the shoreline, hand shading his face.

“He can’t have gone far—”

“To the popsicle cart?”

“He would’ve asked us first, wouldn’t he?”

“Davey? Baby?”

I waited.

“Do you see him over there?”

“No—”

“You don’t think someone *took* him—”

“We would’ve noticed, wouldn’t we?”

Finally, from behind them, I let out our secret whistle, high and broken. The signal to come out. I watched for Davey. I whistled again, trying for louder this time. My parents seemed to have forgotten I was standing there, and didn’t turn at the sound. I counted out slow Mississippis in my head, waiting to try a third time.

“*Daveeeyy!*” My mother, urgent now.

“Yenagoaaa!” I felt the syllables burst out.

This time, my mother and father turned to stare at me. I shoved my hands into the tight pockets of my trunks, trying not to look away or behind me.

A second later, we all heard the lifeguard’s whistle—three long, sharp blasts. Down the beach, past the lunch cart, he vaulted off his perch. The waves had turned a muddy brown from battering the shore. The lifeguard fought his way out, arms windmilling. My parents’ eyes locked, their faces drawn down in a terrible mask.

“Tom, is it—”

“Ellen, don’t—”

“In the water.”

“Oh lord.”

*

For the last week I’ve thought about calling Davey, halfway across the country in Chicago, thought about it until it’s late here and even later there. He’s left messages for me, sounds worried.

I finally call back tonight. When I hear him answer, I can’t bring myself to tell him just how bad things are at home, when Janie makes coffee and packs brown bag lunches in the kitchen like one of us is already gone. I imagine saying it out loud to Davey now: “Did I tell you I’m getting divorced?” or “Did I tell you Janie left?” as if it’s any piece of neighborhood gossip. Instead, I ask him what he remembers of that day at the Lagos Bar Beach.

“Which day at the beach?” I can hear water running. He’s probably washing dishes. He goes by Dave now, but I refuse to call him that.

“The one right before Ma took you back to the States and I stayed with Dad in Lagos,” I say. “The one with that fishing boat.”

“A boat?”

“The dinghy.”

“Whose dinghy?”

“The abandoned one on the beach that you hid under.”

“I hid under a fishing boat? Wasn’t it you who did the hiding? You were always doing that to me in the yard—”

“No, Davey.”

“Well, are you sure that was the last time we went to the beach?”

“Yes.” I have the Polaroid right here, I want to say, though really the picture doesn’t prove anything. My eyes ache and make its borders jump white in the lamplight.

“Maybe I remember hiding under a boat once while you were off swimming or something. I probably thought it would be funny. But you never found me. Eventually I gave up and came out.” He sounds like he’s guessing.

“I told you to hide there, Davey. That was my idea. I said it would be a game, like sardines at school. I told you to wait for my whistle, and then come out. Some messed up magic trick. Remember? It was the summer when Dad and Ma were fighting all the time.” I’m getting worked up now. “We’ve talked about this before.”

“Maybe we’re talking about different things.” The water is louder, splashing. Drowning me out.

“The day you’re thinking of, was it high tide?” I lean out of my comfortable pocket in the couch cushions. “Do you remember the lifeguard, at least?”

Janie walks by on her way to the bathroom. She’s wrapped in a sweatshirt, torn at the sleeves, from the music festival in Golden Gate Park where we first met. I think she’s going to snap at me for being too loud, for waking her up—she has court in the morning—but she doesn’t even look over as I raise my voice, as if nothing I say or how I

say it can penetrate at all. I want to start shouting at her, too. (“*Listen* to what I’m telling you. Don’t you remember the afternoons at the store, when that was our private world? You’ve got it all wrong now. Where have you gone?”)

“Okay Kevin, you’re probably right,” Davey says. Giving in again.

“No, tell me what exactly you remember.” In Janie’s lawyer-speak, I need corroboration. This seems like the best way.

“Why does it matter now? We took a lot of trips to the beach.”

Not like this one. I want to get this right. I slap the Polaroid down and pick at the label on my empty beer. I feel tricked without a way to prove it.

On her way back to the bedroom, Janie runs her fingers over the back of the armchair across from me, something she’s done so many times the leather is darker there, and I ache.

Then she’s in our room again, door shut against any chance of conversation. I say, “There’s such a sadness in some things, isn’t there?”

A pause. “Kevin, what’s this about?” Davey asks. “Janie called here. She talked to Sarah. Says you’re obsessed with the Nigeria stuff. Practically living on the couch.”

“She’s overreacting.” I don’t mention the same pair of basketball shorts I’ve been wearing for the last week straight. “What else did she say?”

“That’s it. They talked about Pilates and breathing exercises, I think.” Davey’s wife is some sort of fitness instructor.

I ask what he tells his two girls about Nigeria.

“About the divorce?”

“No, about that day at the beach,” I say. Why can’t he follow? Though really, I want to know the answer to both.

“Nothing.” He laughs. “I haven’t thought about it in years. You were four years older. The Peace Corp time’s a blur for me, like a long dream. I mostly remember the trip back and then being home in Rochester without you. When Ma lost it a little that winter.”

Davey’s finally done with the dishes. A murmur as the water stops: I imagine Sarah with her arms around Davey from behind, pressed into him, urging him to wrap this up and come to bed.

But for me, Nigeria is more like an audio track that’s out of sync. Fragments I try to match up and fit together. I hear our voices back then: Davey’s cartoonish and squeaky—now reedy on the phone—my mother’s smoke-roughened, my father’s slow, with the hint of Midwest farms. I don’t want to be the only one to hear them. Too many whispers of *the last, if only*.

So I try to tell Davey what I remember.

*

Down the Lagos Bar Beach, the lifeguard struggled back to shore. He paddled with one arm. My mother ran toward the water, holding a hand behind her, and my father, with only the tiniest hesitation, grasped it and followed. I was left to race behind.

They helped each other over the hot sand; she stumbled, crying something, and he caught her and held her up.

“What?” my father asked, wild-eyed, and for a moment they both looked so young. Tender.

“Look.”

Down the beach, the lifeguard emerged inch by inch. All eyes turned in unison. My mother searched for me behind her, pulled me against her. Hard. My father held her other side. Her fingers dug into my shoulder.

Panic clawed up past the grease of my lunch. I wanted to yell again at the top of my lungs, run back to the boat and overturn it to reveal Davey like the great reveal of the show (*my fault, not my fault*), but I choked on the bubbling in my throat. My mother’s grip tightened. No one else on shore moved.

The beach was silent. Even the highlife had disappeared.

The lifeguard seemed to be taking his time. Drops of water stuck to his head and torso like gems. His arms, which cradled the weight, sparkled with them.

A keening, inhuman wail came from that end of the beach, rising with the wind. I barely had time to register the missing twin trunks, or the dark pecan of the limp legs—that it couldn’t possibly be my brother—when Davey trotted toward us, grinning like he’d won some prize. I tugged on the ruffle of my mother’s swimsuit. Turning, she swallowed a wet hiccup.

Seeing our faces, Davey stopped. “I fell asleep,” he said, rubbing at the sand stuck to his cheek. My father released a long breath through his teeth, hands falling to his sides. He lifted Davey and tossed him over one shoulder, where out of habit Davey went slack, joyous for the ride.

At the water, older siblings lifted little ones from the shallows and carried them back to dry land. Mothers clutched children close and pressed faces against stomachs and breasts. My father's colleague from the clinic had reached the group around the lifeguard, and gently pushed his way to the middle. The wailing rose again, shriller and longer.

"Shouldn't you go help, Tom?"

He shook his head at my mother, what I know now as the doctors' universal sign of "Probably too late." But he just said, "Tunde's down there. He'll be of more use to them than I could be."

I gathered our sand toys. We all kept our eyes away from that end of the beach, or at least pretended to. The shield of bodies blocked my gaze, anyway.

"Come on." My mother grabbed my elbow and tugged me toward the car. I thought I saw tears leaking from under her sunglasses, but it just as easily could've been sweat.

I risked one last glance. People kneeled in the sand. My feet burned on the way to the car, raw.

In our Chevy, my father angled the rearview mirror and didn't look back. Gulls circled behind us. White vultures.

Davey was asleep within minutes. I thought of the cry at the beach, and touched the skin over my throat. I wondered if I too was capable of such a sound. What would it take for me to make something so foreign to my own ears?

After the hours in the sun, the rumble of the engine took over my body in spite of my churning mind. I watched my parents through half-closed lids. Between the seats, she

placed her hand over his on the gearshift. Hovering lightly, just touching. Each bump in the road narrowed the space between their skin and closed out the light.

When the car pulled into our long driveway, my mouth was dry and stale. Inside, Godwill had a cold supper waiting for us. We ate quickly, subdued. I asked to be excused early. Godwill rubbed my head as I passed. I wondered how much he already knew about our trip to the beach.

*

“Goodnight, Davey-Dave,” I said. He wiggled under his sheets while I stayed on top of mine, still feeling the heat of the day.

“G’night Kevin.”

Davey’s breath deepened, wheezing on every exhalation. He always had some sort of allergies or cold.

I couldn’t sleep. Out of bed, I stood over him, watching the rise and fall of his ribcage, his mouth open. I kissed his forehead where the skin met his buzz cut. The pulse jumped in his temple.

Back in my bed, I turned to the wall we shared with our parents’ bedroom. My pillowcase smelled of fresh air from drying on the line. Outside, a bird that sounded like a car revving called over and over, waiting for a response.

Finally, I heard the door to our parents’ room. At first all was still except for the bird, and I imagined them sitting side-by-side in bed as they had in their beach chairs,

staring ahead. Maybe they would separate their bodies with a wall of pillows, or one would use the guestroom down the hall.

I pressed my forehead against the plaster, felt its coolness on my sunburn. Familiar tones rose behind the wall, alternating high and low like I was hearing them from underwater. A reminder of the three of us, holding together at the beach, Davey blissfully asleep, our trunks in a damp pile on the floor—woozy relief rooted in me, deep and sweet enough to seep through to this far-off night now with its screech of cable cars, the bass from some apartment party, the foghorn off a different coast, the click of Janie's typing in bed, my son quiet in the next room, all waiting for the words that could carry us, our voices unrecognizable, out and away again.

I thought the trouble was over then. I was soothed by the hum well into the night.

THREE RINGS

When the girl was twenty-five, her husband lost his first wedding ring. It was a beautiful gold band, with leaping dolphins on it. A family heirloom from his side. They'd been married less than a year. He told her the whole story: how he was rowing on the lake, and the cat's paw wind picked up, and the rain started. The rare June storm. (On shore, she'd watched the clouds darken and open over their cottage next to the water.) How he battled back to the beach, made it in over shoulder-high waves. But his fingers were so, so cold—runs in the family, Mother had that terrible circulation from Raynaud's, you know—and the ring slipped off.

After the storm, he spent days snorkeling back and forth, looking for the glint of the ring in the sand. Stop, the girl said finally. She knew it wasn't a sign that he didn't love her enough. Who believed in those omens, anyway. They bought a new, cheaper ring at a pawnshop in Reno.

When he lost his second wedding ring, their friends laughed, called him a rake, a word from a different time—that's the way these friends were. And you had to admit: two seemed harder to ignore. The girl tried to laugh along, weakly. She hadn't been feeling well since the first ring. She'd gotten too familiar with the ugly avocado tile of their bathroom floor.

She'd had two abortions before she got married. One was in college, and the other was with a man she spent time with right before her husband. The first one seemed like

bad luck, but the second had made her worry. What did it say about her as a person? Her husband knew only about the first one. She'd meant to tell him, once, until she no longer meant to. She didn't think about either often, except to wonder if she should be thinking about them more. But she tried to reject that kind of thinking. And she had other things to keep her up.

The girl was pregnant again, it turned out, and sick all the time. She stayed at their little lake house while her husband drove his old pickup to work. He kissed her every morning, his hand over her ear, *See you, sweet pea*, and the coffee breath moving from his mouth to hers almost made her heave again. She spent a lot of time on the loveseat by the front windows. Their nubby lawn met the lake after a slim stripe of black sand. No fences in this neighborhood. Birds picked at the feeder and spit seed onto the ground. Every so often, one flew into the glass with a bump she could hear from anywhere in the house. She always left it there on the ground, crumpled, and about half the time, the bird got up and flew away an hour later. Sometimes they left a little smear of feathers on the glass.

When a whole nest fell once with the baby birds still in it, displaced and wailing, she went into the bedroom and lay down with a pillow over her ears until they stopped. Nature was resilient, wasn't it? Shouldn't these things resolve themselves? She hoped so.

Her husband lost his second ring on a job. A vacation home being built for a rare couple who'd timed things right in the dot-com bubble. A mansion, he said from beside her in bed while she tried to read a baby names book left by a past renter. You wouldn't believe: home theater, bar in the basement, outdoor speakers, eleven bathrooms. Though

a couple are half-baths, he said. Eleven bathrooms! The girl tried to imagine what one would possibly do with eleven bathrooms, half or not.

She was between temp jobs—no point looking now with the baby so close. Her husband was gone until late, even on weekends, and always so tired when he came home. In their rental, the furniture was oppressive: two mismatched floral couches in the space for one, a chandelier over patio furniture in the kitchen, peeling fake brick on the fireplace. When she lost things and looked for them, the girl instead found other people's old bobby pins and receipts and earring backs between cushions and under the bed. They all went into a Christmas cookie tin rather than the trash, as if she or someone else might make use of them one day.

There was too much wind to walk by the lake. She felt exposed, and the whorls of rock with many names—pyrite, brazzle, fool's gold—gave her some weary false hope. She hated the feeling almost as much as the clutter inside. Instead she walked around the neighborhood, breathing deeply against the nausea. Her throat always felt raw. During her walks, she picked out the perfect house for each month of the year. That white colonial for December. That Italianate villa for August. That cozy craftsman for October—why not? She wanted a life of clean lines, she saw now. The equivalent of the drying barn they'd passed once on a road trip when she was young, all gray wood slats and open air. She wanted to find that feeling in a house. It seemed to her the most important work.

The girl saw signs for the building company where her husband worked as a foreman. She watched for him in his pickup near those sites, but never timed it right. Oh,

well. She saw open house signs in the afternoons. Sometimes she followed the cheerful notices in. A few were almost foreclosures, families desperate to sell. Some homes were sweet, with gables and working shutters. One had blue hopscotch squares painted on the back terrace. Another had steak carpaccio and artichoke toast out on trays in the foyer. She didn't trust the steak, but ate three of the toasts and kept them down.

People looked at the girl differently now. The hard-soft lump gave her an appearance of vulnerability and kindness. She started wearing short, stretchy dresses over leggings, her long dark hair drawn up. She wore soft, flat slippers like a dancer might. She'd never been made to feel gentle before. Now, she was given first go at the bathroom, gladly, touched by strangers, trusted with other people's children.

At one open house, a woman needed to take a call outside and left her little boy with the girl. He wore a tiny backpack in the shape of a watermelon slice and his left shoe was untied. While they waited together, he scratched his ear. Can I touch the baby? he asked.

Of course not, she said, horrified. She raised her hands to her belly like a fence. The boy looked crestfallen, as though this was the answer he'd expected.

At another open house, one with a stone façade and wood beams, she told the nosy realtor she was a single mother-to-be. She'd been widowed. It was a tragic boating accident. You're looking to start over? the woman said. This is just the place! Or at the next one, the father became a sperm donor. Very well educated. Great teeth and DNA.

Sometimes she astonished herself. A former boss, unseen in the next room of an airy rancher, overheard the latest one, about her husband stationed in the Pacific on a

stealth submarine. This boss had tried to come on to her at a company Mardi Gras party when she worked at that design firm in Carson City, she remembered. The job hadn't lasted long. Now, she laughed off the man's confusion. After, she put an end to those stories.

As she walked, she wondered which job site was the one where her husband lost his second ring. If it was now buried in rubble or lodged in someone's foundation. Was it really gone for good, or just missing, temporarily?

He left his third ring out on the kitchen counter. He must've taken it off to do the dishes. The girl took this ring and put it in her cookie tin with the other shiny bits. She waited for him to ask her about it. To come to her, rueful and shamefaced. If he did, she decided she would come clean, tell him about the second abortion. Only fair.

He went to work the next morning. He came home for a late dinner. They had chicken piccata with noodles, and he kept his left hand in his lap while he ate.

Where's your ring? the girl asked. He was drinking black coffee now. They hadn't cleared their plates yet.

What do you mean?

Your new ring.

I put it in my bedside drawer when I went out on the lake, he said.

No you didn't.

What?

I took it, she said.

Why would you do a thing like that? He pushed his chair back from the table.

I think we should move, she said.

This is all the hormones talking, isn't it.

I've been looking at houses. It's a good time to buy. Property values are going to go up. Business should be good for you with all the remodels and teardowns. We shouldn't keep renting. She took a sip of her seltzer. Besides, she said, what if the baby crawls out into the lake?

Do you hear yourself? he asked the girl.

Or chokes on your wedding ring. We won't always be able to keep an eye on it. And the way you leave them lying around. Careless, Noah.

Yes, you're absolutely right, he said. The baby will crawl into the lake and find my first ring and choke on it. Doubly dead.

It was horrible, but the girl laughed. She got the ring from her tin and he put it back on, twisting it over his scarred knuckle. This third one was copper. It had squared ridges and worn initials on the inside, what looked like an *R* and a *W*. He hadn't told the girl the story before, but now he did: He'd found it on one job site after he'd lost his second ring at another. A sign, he said, and splayed his fingers over her stomach and kept them there.

No one claimed it, sweet pea, he said, as if she'd accused him of something awful. Probably a dead man's ring. I didn't want to upset you.

She nodded, as though it all made perfect sense.

THE ASSIGNMENT

The walls of Warren's room trembled with the first blast. He gripped his mattress as the bed and breakfast bucked around him. It made him wonder, absurdly, if he'd wound up at sea. Adrift. His pillow was damp from a mixture of spit and sweat. Head hot with traces of the fever that had laid him up for two days. But still. The stucco powder that rained down on his bed couldn't be wholly in his mind. He tried to reassure himself it must be a demolition site down the block—as with most North African cities, this one was in a constant state of tearing down and rebuilding, slums in the shadows of glittering office towers and hotels.

He'd rather think about the mangos. The rank but sweet taste in his throat had started this yearning, a welcome distraction from his body's uneven heaviness. Like something foul pooled in unlucky joints. Warren hadn't fixated on the mangos like this for years, but being on this continent again had brought back all kinds of banished thoughts. Nothing he could do to fight them now. The yellow, thumb-length fruit: all tied to the curved belly of Africa. And to Victoria.

The mangos were an easier prospect for his soggy mind. Those freckled orbs, their contours like a worry stone. The craving was almost enough to send him out to the souk stalls—though he was likely too far north to find that variety anyway. Probably for the best. He'd only left bed for the toilet these past two days, and now he felt shriveled, skin loose and mouth crusted like a wound.

It was early evening; he'd slept through most of the day. Bottled water, Coke, and plain oat biscuits had appeared on the bedside table. The innkeeper, Paulien, must have checked on him. He was touched by the gesture, even if she might just think of it as part of her job.

His undershirt was glued to the stream of sweat down his spine. He swung his legs from the bed and peeled it off. His kidneys, or what he imagined were his kidneys, felt pummeled. He flung the shirt to his left, where it stuck to the wall with a satisfying *thwump*. Like spaghetti that's done cooking.

One of his legs had wiggled free of the sheets and was dotted with welts from the mosquitoes. A couple bled where he'd picked at them. The blast had set most of the mosquitos swirling around the room, their Doppler whines mimicking the sirens outside.

Godforsaken. That's the first word that had come to mind as the car drove him away from the airport a week before, through hours of roads lined with sheet metal homes. Rain streamed down the car windows so that everything outside looked to be melting. Rivers along either side of the road threatened to overtake the single lane that rose like a fresh scar. Every now and then, dark faces peered at him from doorways, and he knew he wasn't just imagining the hostility in those eyes.

He'd traveled to many places during the last decades—at sixty-two, he was easily the most seasoned correspondent at *Helio*, a small leftist magazine—and thought of his worldliness with pride. But as soon as the car left the confines of the bright capital, he couldn't help but wonder if this wasn't the most blighted piece of country he'd ever seen.

That word—godforsaken—was an itchy spot on his tongue. He couldn't get away from it. It lodged in his brain like some childhood song.

Out of bed, Warren spit dark phlegm into the sink and gargled mouthwash. He was splashing his face with lukewarm water when the second blast hit. This one was stronger than the first, accompanied by a feral metal-on-metal growl that reverberated inside his empty gut. More plaster fell on the bed. A baby screamed outside, soon joined by another. He scrubbed his armpits with a washcloth and put on a less dank shirt.

It was the rainy, low tourist season. He was the only guest at La Maison Jaune; one honeymooning couple had left the morning before, and the other five guestrooms were vacant now. His main interaction over the past three days had been with middle-aged Paulien, who owned the bed and breakfast. He grimaced when he thought the words “middle aged,” which he could never get used to. She was about the same age as he was. Christ, probably younger. An expat: she'd told him she moved from Belgium as a young woman. Something about her English, with its polish of British education, soothed and also haunted him when he was in her presence. But the feeling flitted out of reach as soon as she left the room, and he didn't pursue it.

He made his way down to the courtyard, shakily at first, to find Paulien. He was supposed to be out of the country already, really, had planned to spend just one night at this inn his driver and translator, Nur, had insisted would be better than the brand-name hotel the magazine had booked for him. (His own mother owned the bed and breakfast, Nur told Warren, adding that her cooking and English were both excellent.) But a bad case of Montezuma's revenge had made him miss his first flight. And then his second.

His system wasn't as tough as it once had been. He was grateful to be back in the capital, at least.

The decorative pool on the ground floor still rippled from the blast. As he reached the chemically blue water, voices came from the kitchen.

The small countertop television was on. Al Jazeera, he saw, as text flashed across the screen: BREAKING NEWS, COUP, MILITARY DIVIDED, PRESIDENT REFUSES TO STEP DOWN. Shaky video clips showed demonstrators swarming the square outside the presidential palace. Broken, static chants captured on someone's cell phone held over the crowd. Flags waving above homemade rocket launchers. Rubble where part of the compound wall had been hit. Smoke over lines of police in black riot gear. A thin-faced teenager with his hands in the air yelled prayers in Arabic.

Paulien stood in front of the TV. The way her yellowish hair was tucked behind her ears made her look like a schoolgirl from behind—too young to be watching the scene.

She turned and saw him hovering halfway into the kitchen. Her pleasantly wide face looked lost in the instant before it switched back to the businesslike hostess's expression. "You've been sleeping through a revolution, apparently," she said, the slant of her syllables almost wry. She wore a canvas house smock with pockets all over. Her hands were thrust into two of the larger pockets. "Do you need to call anyone back home?"

It would be about noon in DC. He called his editor-in-chief at the magazine, Roger, since he was the only person Warren thought could be concerned.

“Warren,” Roger nearly gushed as soon as he answered. “Good to hear your voice, man. We’ve all been so worried here. The news makes it look batshit over there. Are you safe?”

“I’m fine, just—”

“I wish you would’ve taken one of those satellite phones so you could reach us more easily.” (He didn’t pause long enough for Warren to remind him that it had never even been offered.)

Roger was a bit of twit. One of those “new journalists” who used all the latest buzzwords like “tags” and “multi-platform delivery,” never noticing that his content was cut-rate, the reporting hard to distinguish from gossip. He expected Warren to do all his notes and proofs on a smartphone with a screen not much bigger than his thumbs. Still in his late twenties, Roger considered *Helio* a start-up, called himself an entrepreneur rather than a newsman, and came up with ridiculous tag lines like “Everything is new in 2010.” Warren suspected he, the one old fogey amongst the fresh-faced staff, was kept on mostly so Roger’s flashy website could tout a team whose work included “award-winning, on-the-ground reporting of the world’s most pressing conflicts, from South America to Africa to Eastern Europe.”

On the phone, Roger was still talking. “Just stay where you are, understand? The US is talking about flying citizens out to places in Europe, but that means getting to the airport, which doesn’t seem wise right now, and I know you’ve been sick—” Roger sounded like a scared kid pretending to be grown-up, and Warren almost laughed. The new breed of journalists? If this was it, the news business was certainly doomed. The fact

that Roger wasn't seeing this moment as a golden opportunity for *Helio* just confirmed his incompetence. Warren wished he could chalk it up to Roger's genuine concern for him.

"Roger. Calm down." Warren's tone was heavy with bravado. "This is nothing compared to Somalia. I'm not even near the middle of the action here. I'll make contact with some of my in-country associates and see what they can do."

"Oh. Who are they?"

"You just leave that to me, Rog." He didn't have any contacts here, but it wasn't as though *Helio* did, either. The disorganization of the small office was legendary; they'd once missed an interview with the First Lady due to Daylight Savings.

"Right." Roger sounded relieved to have the responsibility taken from his shoulders. "I'll have our office look at options to get you back. We'll try to be in touch, but sounds like the government might start blocking phones and Internet soon."

Paulien didn't say anything when he hung up. She poured him a teacup of Turkish coffee from the stovetop, and they sat together at the kitchen table, taking small sips. They shared a single spoon to stir in sugar.

Warren was supposed to be doing a story on environmental runoff and the water table in rural areas six hours outside the capital—something Roger had dreamed up as a gambit to attract a new type of eco-conscious investor. After he'd toured one of the phosphate mines without much success a few days before, he talked to off-duty miners at a depressing local café. Warren set up his recorder on a covered deck; Nur brought the

men in. They all sat at a table with a plastic flowered cloth on it. Rain slid off gutters on three sides of the deck.

The government was corrupt, man after man told him, a bitter twist to their faces. They spat on the ground as soon as they said the president's name. "The opposition party is just as bad." Nur tugged his earlobe while he translated. His index finger was missing a nail, so smooth, as though it had been attached backwards. "We are treated like dogs," he relayed, and paused to listen again. "Nothing makes its way out here. No help."

"What about the water quality in the villages? How is your livestock?" Warren fumbled through a list of generic questions Roger wanted answered: about their health, the health of the land, any budding "eco-activism." He tried to follow Nur's answers. Make eye contact with the subjects. But his notes were a mess. Warren was uneasy around these desperate miners, the story they wanted to tell more than his preconceived nonsense. When he stood to wrap up the interview early, shake hands, Nur jumped in and spoke to the men in a fast, intense stream, his head lowered toward them, nodding and nodding. He was impassioned in a way that exhausted Warren. Warren started to interrupt, ready to leave, and Nur held up a hand to shush him while the miners finished. "I asked them about the wage cuts, how the government won't intervene with any protections," Nur said—something Warren had missed from his scribbled notes. The miners looked between the two of them, doubtful now, and Warren bristled. "Look, son, why don't you just leave the questions to me?" He could almost feel his chest puffing, comically, where his press badge lay. Nur turned without a word and went to get the car.

Nur was so young, and new to this business. No distance. But he'd learn. Or find another line of work.

Warren hoped he'd be able to put something together once he was back in his air-conditioned DC apartment. After all, *Helio* was a second-rate magazine at best. How he missed his days as a war correspondent in Kuwait and Somalia. He'd even been nominated for a Pulitzer once. Now he had one bad knee and his mustache had gone entirely white. His forehead was growing in an upside-down horseshoe where his hair kept receding. He lived alone in an eighth-floor studio with windows on one side, a murphy bed he rarely pulled down (he usually woke on the couch with one aching shoulder), and a diet of Frito Pies eaten out of the bag, tailgate style. No family or pets. Nothing to distract him from the unremarkable stories he'd been assigned lately. He'd hoped this trip would change all that.

When he drained his teacup, the coffee grounds stuck in his molars and he sucked them out, enjoying the sensation. He wondered if Paulien should be doing something, preparing somehow. It felt like daily life couldn't go on like this much longer, but he wouldn't be the one to say anything. The hush of the kitchen, the TV now on mute, made him feel a deceptive normality. Maybe it was the effects of the fever, but a sort of lethargy had set in, and Warren felt no urgency to get out of the country.

It was an easy quiet sitting beside Paulien. He tried to remember the last time he had sat with a woman in comfortable silence, in the intimacy of her home, and came up empty-handed. His only marriage, to a lobbyist when he was in his forties, had ended quickly and, to his mind, cordially enough; since then, he'd rarely spent more than a few

nights with the same woman. He was good at cutting ties, cleanly. It's what had made him a great journalist.

Paulien sat across from him, running her fingers up and down the handle of her teacup. Before he was laid up in his room, she'd seemed to like his gruff humor; he was used to relying on it to relax interview subjects, to put them at ease despite his imposing size. The way he looked more than a little like a cowboy with his mustache and Levis; in his twenties, his news desk had even nicknamed him "Pardner." He'd joked with Paulien about how embarrassingly useless Americans are with languages ("You probably speak, what, at least three languages?" She'd smiled, almost bashful: "About four. French, of course. English. Arabic. Some German and Italian."). He wanted to make her smile again, hear her surprised laughter when he said something off the rails.

"Well, it's just fitting that this would happen when I'm too old and lame to rush to the square at a moment's notice," he joked at last, feebly. "This damn knee." He swatted it. "Back in the day I probably would've sacrificed my firstborn for this kind of timing."

She finished her coffee first. "My son is out there." She said it without rancor, like it was her own punch line to add to his. She smoothed her eyebrow with one hand. "Nur left early this morning. I couldn't stop him."

Warren felt the emptiness of the kitchen and the inn beyond them shift. Grow gloomier, more threatening. Could she think this had anything to do with Nur's trip to the mines with him? She didn't sound accusatory. And that was ridiculous, of course, but she might be looking for someone to blame. Or to help. For a sick moment, Warren thought she would ask him to go find her son in the chaos of the square.

But Paulien didn't seem to expect a response, or want one. Instead she unmuted the TV, and they watched together for a few more minutes. All hundreds—thousands—of people in the square seemed to be young men. He thought back to the interviews, the way Nur had grasped the miners' arms and looked into their tired faces, searching.

Eventually he went upstairs to pack; he still had some of the journalist's instinct for mobility, thankfully, to be able to up and leave a place at any moment. Burnout was always something to watch for. Most of the top journalists from his day now had cushy jobs with cable news or media consulting firms. When he met up with old friends for weekly poker games at the Post Pub, he was forced to listen to more talk of Nielson ratings and mobile news apps. They were as bad as Roger. He'd stayed in the reporting game, though, doing beats in DC when needed, and was proud he'd stuck with it so much longer than the rest. But more and more he woke in a strange place like this, sat at the side of his bed, and barely had the energy to go through the motions of questions and follow-up and source gathering.

Packing took five minutes, and he stretched out on the bed again, shaking plaster dust off the sheets. He thought of Paulien, sitting downstairs at the table. The white smock, her voice—all of it dredged up swaths of Africa from decades before, condensing into one sharp reel:

Their last trip to the bungalow, Victoria in the driver's seat. He waved his plane ticket and passport in front of her as some sort of sick proof that it was out of his control, counting on the fact that she'd need to keep her eyes on the road, that she wouldn't want to stop the Chevy to make a scene.

She barely avoided a monstrous pothole, and he spoke over the wind once she righted the steering wheel. “I’ll be back after this assignment in Nicaragua.”

“You can’t tell me that. The work is all you think about now.”

“What else do you want me to say? Can’t we enjoy the last afternoon together?”

“So that’s all we have to look forward to? Let’s call it a day, Warren.” She veered toward the side of the lane and an oil palm almost hit him in the face. A streak of her red-blond hair caught in her mouth and she didn’t bother to brush it away. “I don’t want empty promises from the new boy wonder of Nigerian corruption stories. Don’t forget I was the one who got you most of those sources—you’re just a vulture. Does that make you proud?”

“Jesus, what do you expect from me?” He swore as she skidded around a turn.

“Something more than your word you’ll be back when it’s *convenient* for you or if you can’t find a better story to chase—”

“Can I get anything for you?” Paulien asked from the doorway, jolting him back. He’d left the door open; he no longer felt like much of a guest. “I brought the breakfast you missed,” she said, setting down a towel-covered tray. “Turkish coffee on an empty stomach isn’t so wise.” He was feeling hungry for the first time in days. Perhaps she also wanted the company. The streets around the bed and breakfast were mostly quiet, but in the distance, the explosions were becoming more regular. Pops a novice could’ve mistaken for post-game fireworks like the ones he heard routinely in DC.

Her breakfast food was like she was—palatable, slightly dry. The pastries were wholesome and no-nonsense, better dabbed with some jam. The orange juice, though,

tasted wonderfully fresh, more than any juice back home. She sat on the corner of his bed while he took large bites.

She smiled when he polished off the last croissant with a gulp of juice, and he noticed how her lips were slightly lopsided with that smile. He pushed the tray aside. His stomach gurgled with the food. The sheets bunched in his hand and he felt ceiling grit on them as he leaned toward her, feeling emboldened by the emptiness of the inn, the chaos on TV. Their refusal to admit what it could mean. Her lips were on his before he thought he'd moved much at all. It felt like they'd reached an agreement years before. Nothing left to figure out. He wanted to laugh at the easiness of it. Wondered if the fever had damaged his brain, or fixed something that made this more difficult for most people—but then that too dissolved with her fingers, so delicate and purposeful. She stripped his clothes off first, as practiced as stripping the beds before each new guest. He let her remove her own layers, watched her careful unbuttoning, the formality of the process. Her head tilted down while she undressed, leaving her mouth and chin in shadow as she stepped out of the old-fashioned slip and battled for a few seconds with a clasp behind her back.

They were both patient, in no hurry, their steady movement punctuated by blasts and sirens and moments of stillness outside. It was mostly dark now. Occasional flares lit the room red. The curtains moved with a breath of their own. When the silence on the streets lasted for whole minutes, he held a small but growing fear of its breaking. When she leaned down and her cheek brushed his temple, skin surprisingly dry in the heat, he was dislocated to the bungalow in the Nigerian night, the deepest quiet he'd ever heard.

Nothing moved but the two of them. It was as though any critters listened among the other bungalows, cooperating with the stillness so that they alone could rip it open.

Victoria screaming at him that last night, glass breaking in the sink. Wrenched back with a groan, he found Paulien watching him, knowingly, in the sudden flare light. He watched her face. Was she far away too, thinking about the square and her own ghosts? But no. Her eyes barely strayed from his. He felt the mutual need as she moved above him, as he pulled her closer. He was shaken by his own gratitude, and even more by hers, so equal and obvious.

He was glad to sit with her against the headboard and pretend they were in a different place and time. She lit a cigarette from a pack hidden in one of her smock pockets, ignoring the red *No Smoking / Defense de Fumer* sign he imagined she had mounted on the wall herself.

“I keep thinking Nur will walk in any moment, tell me it was a mistake.” She exhaled smoke, careful to aim it away from his face. There was a line on her lower lip where her lipstick had dried and stuck. “Reckless. That reckless boy. I knew he was going to rallies, some meetings, talking about journalism school, but this?”

Warren had last seen Nur in the kitchen with his mother, chopping onions the night they got back from the villages. On the drive back to the capital after the interviews, he’d felt disappointment coming from Nur. After an hour of strained silence in the car, Warren had told him a few of his favorite stories to smooth things over, like the one where he found his whistleblower source by chance in a Buenos Aires brothel in the company of a woman Warren already knew a little too well. How he tracked down a

rebel general in the Amazon for an exclusive interview, let himself be blindfolded and tossed into the back of a Jeep to get there, and how that front-page story singlehandedly—he liked to pause on that word—brought millions in humanitarian aid from around the world.

Paulien sighed. “He’s only nineteen. Thinks he’s immortal. Too much like his father.”

There were no TVs in the guestrooms, but Paulien tuned the clock radio to an Arabic news station. She translated for him. The branch of the military that remained loyal to the president had held its ground so far, a reporter said, but the crowd was building. Homemade and military-grade weapons streamed in from outside the city. There were rumors that the president might try to flee to Europe; another reporter mentioned foreign bank accounts. Warren thought of Somalia’s civil war and the RPGs on shoulders of boys who looked too young to shave. His taxi had passed the presidential square just days before, where he’d admired the sandstone and sprawling outdoor markets. Now he wondered where they’d set up the field hospitals. Conflicts like this never stayed small.

While they listened, Paulien pointed to spots on a foldout map of the city. He tried to make sense of the network of streets. “This is where the soldiers are holding strong. Demonstrators are filling up these roads now. Some of the police have joined them.” She ran her finger over a wider boulevard a little over a mile from the Maison. “Here’s where my sister-in-law lives. She’s a widow too. Her flat is just a few blocks from the palace. Prime real estate. At least it was before.”

He remembered seeing an apartment building collapse after an air raid in Mogadishu, a dozen families on each floor. No survivors. He'd watched the way children walked past the rubble like it was nothing.

Paulien shifted the pillow behind her neck, propped it up higher. She ate one of the oat biscuits left on his bedside. Her lips slapped together and apart when she chewed, and crumbs fell on her naked, soft stomach. Warren looked away. He wanted to keep pretending.

"Thanks for checking on me and making sure I didn't kick the bucket," he said into the silence. He gestured to the drinks and biscuit wrappers. "I know I wasn't in the best form for visitors."

"You were talking a lot, babbling, and when I came in sometimes you yelled out. Fever nightmares," she said, still chewing.

He wondered if that was all there was to it. What she wasn't saying.

"You called me Victoria once. Who is Victoria?"

He paused, confused by that name coming from her lips. But he couldn't blame her for wanting a change of topic from the square and Nur. "It was a long time ago—" he faltered, and her apparent disinterest, the way she didn't even move on the bed, pushed him forward.

"It was Nigeria in the '70s. I wasn't even thirty. There was a woman—she was British, married. The wife of the Peace Corps director there. I was doing a series on rigged elections. She used to drive past my hotel in Ibadan every morning."

The first time he saw her, she was driving south down Laditi Street, going too fast. She held one hand to her head to keep a sunhat in place. Her faded chambray shirt looked soft enough to rub his cheek against, and exposed the top of a chest freckled and flushed pink. She was not a woman made for the heat.

All that he saw in the flash of her car. Later, he learned she always wore white linen or chambray: wide trousers, long skirts with slits up the sides, tunics, sheath dresses.

“And that was Victoria?” The question surprised him. He hadn’t noticed Paulien turn onto her side, put out the cigarette in his old water glass beside the bed.

“Yes.”

“Ah. Named like the queen.” Paulien seemed to approve of this. She patted the loose skin under her chin with the back of her hand, an unconscious gesture.

He tried to think of what to tell her next: how Victoria loved the country more than her American husband, who was just putting in his time before a more desirable posting; he’d turn on his colleagues after one Scotch and give Warren three stories worth of dirt before he finished his second drink. Victoria had thought Warren shared her love of West Africa, when really what captured him was her—her radioactive glow against that backdrop. She would drive her open-top Chevy with a mango in her lap, yellow cradled on her white skirt.

When their affair turned serious, she rented a bungalow in a deserted expat community thirty minutes outside the city. They would sit on the porch drinking gimlets, then go inside to make love with the windows open. In the morning, she’d slice mangos

in their skin—"You don't want mango-mouth, darling," she'd say—and feed them to him. *Voila*.

He was reassigned to a better post—rewarded for his hard-hitting pieces on government corruption, most of which came through her husband. It was too good of an opportunity to pass up. That's what he told her until he believed it. He made promises, to himself and to Victoria, more than he could count. He almost missed his flight out on purpose, but ran into another journalist who must've sensed his hesitation, loaded him up with drinks at the airport bar and then nearly carried him onto the plane.

Warren rewound and replayed their last hours together at the bungalow from the moment he left Ibadan. But when he was away from the habitual motion of Nigeria's days, she lost whatever sheen that landscape had imparted. As much as he tried to hold onto her, the feverish heat faded from his muscle fibers, left his body like the antimalarials left his system. Once, when he got back from an assignment in Yugoslavia, there'd been a note about a certified letter from Nigeria, something from Victoria, but he was on his way out of the country first thing in the morning and couldn't get to the post office to pick it up. When he'd tried later, there was no record of anything. He'd lost track of her. Never made it back in all these years.

He'd stopped talking at some point. Paulien was asleep, mouth slightly open. He leaned over her and switched off the lamp, which was attracting bugs, then burrowed into his pillow, his face inches from hers. It was too hot even for a sheet. He drifted pleasantly, the swooshing fan blades almost drowning out Paulien's snores.

He woke in the dark to hear the door close, the sound confused with the stamp of a peck on his forehead, like a mother's goodnight kiss. Her clothes and smock were gone from the chair.

In the morning, as he made his way downstairs, he whistled half a verse of "Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head" before he felt too sheepish to continue.

A note from Paulien said she'd gone out for supplies. The kitchen TV showed the standoff moving beyond the square, though Al Jazeera's headlines were almost identical to the night before. He checked the fridge and decided to cook up two omelets. Turn the tables on her with a dose of the "bachelor's breakfast" he made every morning back home, always with extra sausage and bacon despite what his doctor said about high cholesterol and blood pressure.

While the potatoes browned and the omelets stayed warm in the oven, he climbed to the Maison's rooftop garden, where guests ate breakfast in the drier months. He picked a marigold from Paulien's flowerbeds. The garden wasn't high enough to get a real view, but he could tell where the square was from the snaking lines of smoke and crackle of speakers. In the daylight, he could see how close they were. He remembered the young men shown in flashes on TV: howling, bloodthirsty, scarves tied around their heads. He imagined Nur wounded, carried away swinging by the arms and legs. Paulien's anguish; he was ashamed at the callous way he'd joked, and ashamed of himself for sitting around, not making a move earlier. Being so close to the real action, doing nothing, would confirm he'd lost something more than any sloppy story *Helio* posted under his byline.

In the kitchen, he opened one of the maps from the front desk and traced routes to the square. He used the TV news footage to try to mark where the worst roadblocks were. This could be his chance to report on a breaking story, be in the thick of history. Pulitzer Prizes to brighten his dreary apartment. But what if he could trade that for Nur's safety? Maybe this was his real assignment—to bring the boy back to the Maison. Play the hero, be that guns-blazing "Pardner" again. He had his press badge; he could get close, work his way through the crowds. What he'd do when he was there, how he'd even find Nur in that mess—no, he couldn't get ahead of himself. What was important was making sure Paulien was here, with her son. She'd be able to help him iron out more details. He knew it would work, as things had once worked out for him in the past, all falling into place. The best journalistic luck.

Warren had breakfast waiting when Paulien came in. He realized with belated shame that she could read it as an intrusion into her domain, bumbling around and using up precious rations. And that silly flower! But he'd make up for it with the announcement. His plan was what mattered.

When she saw the food, she clapped her hands once, said the first French he'd heard her speak: "C'est pas vrai." She poured them both coffee and put the smock back over her slacks and blouse before joining him at the table.

She cut a triangle of pale egg. He took a bite and chewed so fast he bit his lip. He wiped his mustache for debris, ready to launch in, but Paulien lifted her teacup, said, "To your last morning in the Maison." She gave him a sly, sideways look.

“What?”

“Your state department is starting flights for citizens. My neighbor came and told me this morning. To London, Zurich, Frankfurt. Safe havens, they say. They won’t just leave you here.”

He put his fork down. The hot adrenaline that had surged in him since the roof fizzled. He felt queasy again.

“I went to my friend who works at the embassy,” she said. “I took your passport with me from check-in. You’re on one of the first flights.” She handed back his passport and showed him a printout with an official-looking barcode on it. “It goes to London. Then you can get a flight home to Washington, DC, no problem, yes?”

She’d arranged it all, had used the contacts he’d claimed to Roger. She had another friend who drove a taxi, she said, who would take the alleys and side streets, which were still clear, to the airport. Everything was worked out.

“It is good, yes?” she asked.

He touched the frayed edge of his passport. With his omelet turning rubbery, he considered refusing the ticket. The map was still in his lap. But there it was: relief. And with it, exhaustion; the heaviness sank down in his joints again, like he might leak out onto her kitchen floor. All that useless scheming, his and hers; he wanted to forget it all. He wanted them to keep eating their eggs like any old morning.

“Yes,” he said. Her efficiency was impressive, even touching—but also a blow that felt too close to heartbreak.

“Très bien.” She sounded so proud of her work. “Nur will be sorry he missed you.” She picked up the marigold as if to bring it to her nose, then thought better of it and left it on her plate with a bit of egg. “You can get back to your real life. To your big stories.”

Warren nearly cringed at all she couldn’t know.

“I’ll get my bags together,” he said—an escape, that man of action who’d once moved on before stories turned stale—and she nodded.

He thought he should call Roger at *Helio*, but somehow couldn’t summon the energy to talk with him again on the off chance he was awake. He typed a two-sentence email on his infuriating phone, which he had to plug into the wall just to get to turn on (“Flying out US govnmnt flight to London 1330 today. Will call wehn I land”), ignored the typos, and hoped it actually sent.

In the courtyard, loading the taxi, he realized he could be back alone in his DC studio in less than twenty-four hours. He asked Paulien to come with him. “We can get you on the plane, too, or find another flight we can take together. It would be safer. Even just for a little while. Please. This country—” He stopped at her stern, pitying look.

“I have my son. He’ll come back and I’ll be waiting for him here.” Much later, he would feel the kindness of those words, of all the things she could have said in response. She raised her chin in the direction of the square, and he could see her worry-scrubbed will, knew she felt something for her adopted country that he’d never felt for any place. “It always was going to come to this.” She smiled in her lopsided way.

She produced a foil-wrapped package from one of her pockets. “Bastilla,” she said. “Meat pie. For the trip.” In his hands, it was still warm. A live, beating thing. The gesture was sparse and tender. Exactly what he should have expected.

But something in the soft line of her neck when she turned away, her tidy smock, made him reach for her hand, bring it to his lips. The skin smelled of coffee and lemon rind. The courtyard went bleary. He blinked furiously. She freed her hand and didn’t glance back until she was at the door of the Maison. She waved just once as the taxi pulled away. He liked to think the final, fleeting gesture he saw through the rearview as she tucked her hair behind her ear was to cover her own tears, coming at last.

Taking off in the plane to London, he would see the veins of the capital from above. He’d imagine writing an opening line about “innocent blood in the streets,” picturing Paulien and Nur. He’d spend the hours of the flight thinking of how he’d return to La Maison Jaune, unexpected, be there when she walked out to the sound of the front bell. By the time he’s in a London pub, drinking warm ale, he’d think instead of finding a way to call her when the lines are back up, since the government has indeed cut off all communications. Home in DC, memories of Paulien and the scent of her skin, thoughts that wound around his throat and chest in the taxi and then on the plane, would sometimes trickle through the sounds of his corner deli, the Nationals game on TV, the water-cooler talk over his new puff piece on the *Helio* homepage, its absurd number of hits, Roger’s glee during staff meetings. He’d hesitate for a moment, tempted, then bat them away, gently.

INCENDIARIES

Fire report July 12: 90,860 acres, 18 structures lost, 57% contained

While Lara was out on the paddleboard at the lake, the smoke rolled over the west side of the mountains, metal-blue and venomous. By the time she got back to the cabin, her arms sore from carrying the board, Vic had the local news on the kitchen TV. Wildfires were red meteors on a neon map of the West Coast.

“Is she awake?” Lara asked her stepfather.

Vic turned, an unopened beer in his hands, and didn’t say anything about the sand she’d tracked in again. Her ponytail still dripped lake water down her back. The TV newscaster said, “Mandatory evacuation orders now in effect for Nevada and Placer counties”—just 30 miles across the lake.

“Still napping upstairs. She hasn’t seen this.”

“Did they say if Mark’s team is out there in the blowup?” Lara asked. Her brother’s old firefighting crew, the Rio Bravo Hotshots.

“No word yet, but I’d guess all of them will be soon. The fires are big enough now. One jumped Highway 80 this morning,” Vic said.

“I know. There’s smoke at the beach.” The animated map zoomed out, turning Lara light-headed: spots down the coast to Napa, Fresno, Ventura, Los Angeles. Hazy footage of homes burning and crews in the smoke, again.

Vic had married Lara's mother six months after Mark died in the worst California fire in decades. That was two summers ago. When her mother had started dating Vic, Lara had thought he was too smooth to be trusted—had even called him “Slick Vic” to Mark. She'd been sure he'd cut and run when Mark died. But Vic had surprised her. He and her mother had had a city hall wedding before Lara left for college. Vic had held her mother's hand the whole time, beaming at her, steady in his gray suit. Lara still hadn't quite figured out a way to thank him.

Vic went outside to start the grill for turkey burgers. The air smelled of smoke even before he lit the briquettes.

Jude and Dylan, Vic's two sons, were already hogging the bathroom upstairs, which meant no hot water for her. Lara had gotten used to sharing space in her freshman dorm at Pomona, but staying in the bunk bed room with two boys under twelve still felt like a slight. Most nights she went downstairs to sleep in the hammock on the deck.

“J-Buddy! D-Man! Come set the table,” Lara called. The boys took their nicknames as a sign of her affection, which was partially true, but she also couldn't stand their real names grouped together: Lara and Dylan and Jude. It sounded awfully like a traveling family band. The kind that would play acoustic late-era Beatles or Peter, Paul and Mary covers at outdoor festivals and never cut their blond hair. And even worse: the asymmetry of the three without a fourth.

The last time she'd heard from her brother, Mark, had been on her seventeenth birthday, when he'd sent a video of his hotshot crew, all shirtless and with biceps like

polished melons, lip syncing to the Beatles “Birthday” song. She’d laughed at how idiotic they all looked.

That was just a week before the LA fire jumped hills, the wind changed, communications broke down, and Mark’s last-ditch fire shelter failed. When Mark’s effects were returned, his pocketknife was melted and the corners of his wallet were charred and stank, but somehow the inside was preserved, including his receipt from lunch at Wahoo’s the day before.

He was twenty-one when he died, the second youngest member of his team. On move-in day at Pomona, her roommate Jill saw the picture Lara kept of him in his standard-issue T-shirt and fatigues, said “Who’s the hottie?” Lara couldn’t tell her he’d been dead for eleven months, start off on that foot, so she said, “Just my macho asshole brother.” Jill laughed and went back to hanging a James Dean poster over her bed.

“Dinner’s up!” That was Vic to the boys. Her cue to get her mother.

“Mom?” Lara called up the stairs, hesitant to wake her.

“Coming,” she heard from above, then the creak of floorboards.

Her mother joined them, opening a light beer. None of them said anything about the unnatural clouds out the windows. Vic had burned the burgers and used cheese to try to hide the worst of it. The boys drank sparkling cider from wine flutes and insisted on clinking glasses with each person before anyone could eat. They ran through all the toasts they knew.

“Cheers.” Clink.

“Prost.” Clink.

“Salute!” Clink. Clink.

July 13-16: 145,013 acres, 32% contained, air pollution 10x recommended maximum

Renee woke to a world that was gray and smelled of damp campfire. Fine particles from the smoke, terrible on the lungs. Like smoking a pack a day. Bad for all of them. Even inside the cabin, her head felt fogged, as though smoke had stuck in the crevices.

Instead of hiking to the lake, they played their own version of Pictionary in front of the cold fireplace. Without fail, anything from the boys involved guts, pus, flying turds. The grosser the better. Renee got one of theirs and drew a monkey in a top hat picking its nose and eating it. It looked pretty realistic, actually. She noticed Lara watching her. Renee was playful with the boys in a way she couldn't remember being when Mark and Lara were little. But she'd been a single mom then, working reception at an orthodontist's office, worn out, stressed about money. She knew what her psychiatrist would say: maybe that was one benefit of very part-time parenting; Jude and Dylan spent the school year with their mom, Prisca, in Tucson. So far, California was a summer-only arrangement.

Between rounds, Vic caught her looking at the wall sconces—each a bronze goose in flight—and asked, “How do you like it here?” Somehow in the time she and Vic had been together, she'd never made it up to the lake before. Renee wasn't comfortable in the cabin, but he was so eager for her to be pleased with everything. Vic's parents had built it in the '50s. Even though they'd moved to a retirement community down south years ago, she could still feel their presence everywhere—in the creaky wicker chair in

the corner, the hunting rifle hung upstairs (over the bed, of all places!). Other than a few faded pinecone wreaths, the interior of the cabin was all goose-themed: dark Vs against sunsets, beaks and webbed feet everywhere. The Canada Honker in all its glory, including a stuffed goose in the bunkroom missing both its button eyes.

“It’s growing on me,” she said. She decided not to tell him her favorite thing so far was the window in the shower, the way the screen smelled of pine sap—almost like vanilla.

The back of Renee’s knee twinged as she stood to draw the next clue. A remnant of her marathon last winter. She’d never been a runner before, but after Mark died, she’d started working out every day, even tried Crossfit. She’d watched her body change, shrinking and tightening. Especially her neck, with its new ribbons of tendons.

After the race, Renee had started to train for an ultramarathon in Santa Barbara, but her knee flared up again and again. Her doctor said she needed to give her body a break, stop training for anything major. Running lost its appeal without that goal in sight. Now she was on to barre and spin classes. This trip was supposed to be a respite from her strict regimen.

Lara got up from the game to check the fire report. Her face betrayed so little—even as a child, she’d played her cards close to the chest. Mark had been a worried big brother and had read Lara’s reserve as frailty. He’d felt it his duty to protect her. But Renee had seen it as a strength. Her daughter wasn’t eager to please; she could take care of herself. Renee envied that.

Another pile of poop and puddle of blood in the drawings, and Vic had Dylan and Jude in a dog-pile on the floor. The boys were red-faced with laughter and held onto Pictionary drawings like priceless trading cards. “This is the best game,” Jude said, rolling onto his stomach on the carpet. “When we’re in California this year, the four of us can play every night, right?”

Dylan shot him a look. Vic softened around the eyes and cleared his throat. He reached for Renee’s hand, but her chest was tight. She pulled her arm away. She went back to shading in the monkey’s tail as though she hadn’t heard anything.

“We could go back tomorrow,” Vic said once they were alone in the bedroom. Renee was putting on her nightgown, one of the few leftovers from her pre-exercise wardrobe; she’d gotten rid of everything else that fit her like a tent. “We can always find somewhere to stay,” he said. They’d rented out their condo in Emeryville for their two weeks at the cabin.

“Let’s stay, at least for a little while more,” she insisted. “The fires should be under control soon. You saw the predictions on the news. Let’s not ruin the vacation for everyone.”

They played Yahtzee, Clue, Guesstures, Life. Renee tried to read the yellowed paperbacks left in the game chest, but the plots of the mysteries and romances bled into one another. She’d end up dozing in a chair instead; she was always tired these days. Vic spent a lot of time on the phone with Prisca, his ex, back in Tucson; he’d carry the old rotary onto the deck, the curling cord wedged in the crack of the door. He’d wave to her from out there, and she’d stand next to him as he repeated in a whisper what Prisca was

saying on the other end, his hand over the mouthpiece. Eventually, she stopped going when he signaled to her.

Lara sometimes left in the afternoon while the rest of them watched sitcom reruns and came up with new variations of games (Team Crazy Eights! Silent Scrabble!). Once, in the middle of a Speed Monopoly game with the boys, she forgot about Lara—even if just for a few seconds—then immediately felt awful.

When the fires spread, moved closer, Vic offered again to take them home.

“One more day, at least,” Renee said. He’d found her standing in the dry shower, fully clothed, staring out the little window. Through the aspen, there it was: the glint of lake.

He stepped into the shower too and looked at her for a long time.

“What?” she said.

“I don’t get it. Are you punishing yourself for something?”

“Christ, Vic!” When he tried to hold her, she shoved him away, happy to see her nail marks on his absurd golf polo. Good. She needed to be brutal. “You sound just like Dr. Zappert. Next are you going to ask if it’s really just the grief talking?”

He apologized. She went downstairs to make banana floats for the boys.

It didn’t feel right to run home to the safety of the city. At least with the smoke leaching everyone’s will, there was an excuse for her lethargy: she got up late, played cards and board games, napped, drank wine, went to bed. Then it started over, an invalid’s days, with the sky static gray. And Vic still treated her with such care she began to wonder how broken she really was, or when anything was going to get better. It’s been

two years! she sometimes wanted to yell, to see how he'd react. But she wasn't sure what her point was, since the number was meaningless.

July 17: 145,825 acres, 164 structures lost, 68% contained

Lara paddled out until she reached the glassy area in the middle of the bay. Her feet ached from clenching the foam board. Smoke obscured the mountains on the opposite shore. The lake was empty, the usual jet skis and parasailers docked, everyone inside or on their way home. Lara had thought Vic and her mother would give up and leave any day, too. Instead they stayed, which felt inevitable as days slid by; a suspended state held them at the cabin.

She lay on the board, let herself drift back in toward boulders with rusty lines showing years of higher water. She took off her bathing suit top; her back started to burn, so she turned face-up. Her hands traced her hipbones, waist, ribs, wetting the contours with lake water.

When she pushed up onto her elbows, her board was barely 50 yards from a long pontoon boat docked near a private pier. A man sat in a folding chair at the back of the boat, watching her. Her body tightened—a jolt of anticipation at his appearance, like she'd summoned him from the smoky depths. He wore sunglasses and a baseball cap. His shins were hairy, and he had the barrel chest of an athlete.

She took her time slipping the top over her head and retying the strings. He leaned forward, resting his arms on his thighs. His nostrils flared like he was smelling her on the air. The beer can in his cup holder had a straw sticking out of it.

“Want a beer?” he called.

“Sure.”

“Climb aboard.”

She rolled up to her knees and paddled over. She tied her board next to his kayak. The pontoon boat’s platform was steady, only about a foot off the water, and she sat on the edge, dangling her feet in the lake. He pulled his chair closer to her and shuffled a cooler along with it, leaving a pyramid of empties behind.

The can he passed her was huge and blue. Foster’s. Moisture dripped down her arm into her lap.

“Would you like a straw?” His was striped red and white like a candy cane. When he drank from it, his lips puckered. He was larger, thicker than he’d looked from the water. She couldn’t see his eyes behind wrap-around sunglasses, but he was probably in his thirties. His nose had one burst of red spider veins along its crease.

“I’m okay, thanks.”

“All right. I’m Jake.”

“Mary,” she said with only the slightest pause. She could be a Mary.

“Mary? You don’t meet many Marys these days. Hey, I could take you waterskiing sometime if you want.”

“Really?” She’d never waterskied before.

“Really. Big yellow one out there is mine.” He pointed to the cluster of speedboats and buoys. “Got an extra wetsuit in just about your size.”

He got up, stiff-legged, and took the lid off the grill. He started toward the front of the boat. “Be right back, Mary.” She heard retching from behind her, but didn’t look back. She decided nothing could shatter the glamour of this moment, the warmth on her face, drying her damp suit. The thrill of their seclusion.

Her beer tasted like licking an icy metal pole, the kind you could get your tongue stuck to in winter. Back on shore, only some geese on the brown lawn. It made her feel like the last of her kind. Until Jake.

Even before the smoke, Lara had spotted no one her age. Most of the beachgoers had been families with kids or retirees with golf carts. But she still found herself fantasizing a mindless summer affair. She’d made love—though she hated to think of it in those words—her first semester of college; it was tender and awkward, his breath ragged in her ear as he planted wet kisses along her hairline. The relationship lasted until the boy confessed his interest in her perky roommate, Jill. Lara had put on a show of feeling betrayed, but mostly she was relieved. It was a little too sweet. Too comfortable. It made her want to scratch through her skin from the inside. Shed layers like a sick animal.

Coming to Vic’s family cabin had sounded like such a good idea. Somewhere with no Internet and spotty cell service. Somewhere Mark had never been.

“Bet you get a lot of Virgin Mary jokes.” Jake was back with a pronged BBQ fork. “Must be tough.”

“Not really.” She flashed a smile and fluttered her feet. “I can take care of myself.”

Jake opened another can with a wet hiss. Meat sizzled on the grill. The back of Lara's neck was sweating, and she pulled her hair into a ponytail.

He was eager to touch her, she could tell. Touch the navy stars on her shoulder—the matching tattoo she'd gotten with Jill before the whole boy incident. A nasty reminder like an insect had burrowed under her skin and croaked.

"Biggest meteor shower of the year starts tonight," Jake said. He squatted beside her. "The Perseus shower. One of the blackjack dealers in South Shore told me all about it."

He was set back enough that she had to turn her head to see him. When he rocked closer on his heels, she smelled the wintery whiff of Old Spice, and below it, something like cream gone sour.

"Supposed to look like it's raining fire," he said. He put his free hand on her leg as if he needed to steady himself, and she let it stay there, even gave a ridiculous giggle. She crossed her right leg over her left, momentarily trapping his hand in the pocket. He laughed.

"What's your dad think of you out here alone?" he asked.

"Oh, he's gone." She took a long gulp of her Foster's and set the can on the deck.

"That's a shame." He moved his hand to her shoulder, gave it an awkward squeeze but then left it there, kneading her flesh. The grill fork was still in his other hand, dripping juice. "Sounds like you need someone to watch over you."

It was Mark he should've asked about. It started in the trees behind her childhood home in the Oakland hills, the day Mark found her, at thirteen, navigating her first French

kiss with a boy from astronomy club. Mark told the boy to get on home and stay away from his little sister. Four years older, already so large, he'd fingered his pocket where she knew he kept his fold-up knife, and the boy, as though knowing it too, went pale. He ran. Her cheeks were slimy with tears as Mark steered her back to the house.

Growing up, she'd felt it again and again: that streak of his that made her feel protected but caged. Or worse: ashamed. Dirty.

Before she could think up a response to Jake, there was movement on the beach. The geese flapped into the water, driven from their spot on the lawn. Probably ghosts in her head. Jake's fingers on her were hot and sweaty. Her swimsuit seemed horribly flimsy; she resisted the urge to tug it down, up, anywhere.

A shiver rattled her from the feet up. Two sets of eyes stared from the beach. The boys. Matching little brothers, like one reflected the other.

She picked up Jake's hand from her shoulder and stood too fast. He grunted and lost his balance. "I've got to get back." She struggled with the rope.

"You just got here. Relax. Have another beer. Plenty more where that came from."

"My brother's waiting on me." She regretted the half-lie as soon as she said it and caught herself believing for the quickest flash.

"You'll come back tonight for the meteors?" he said as she pushed the paddleboard off the side of the boat. "Hey, come on, Mary!"

The water grew between them. She was cold now; her limbs felt so hollowed out she figured she could bob away on the water without the help of the board.

In the shallows, she flipped the board up and closed numb fingers around the handhold.

“Who’s that guy, Lara?” Dylan called. She reached dry sand and kept walking. “Look at us!” The boys jumped onto a fallen log and curled pinecones like dumbbells. “See? We’re real hot shots.” He drew out the Os.

Little Jude copied him, crowing: “Hot shots hot shot brothers!”

“Shut your mouths and get back to the house.” It came out sharp, high. Her throat stung.

Their faces blank and stricken, the boys turned and ran into the trees.

She almost called them back. But they were coddled enough as it was—though she sometimes forgot they’d never met Mark, knew only Lara and her mother, their family of two. To them, Mark was just a name, one of the tanned faces from the Hotshot calendar that used to hang in Vic’s condo, and how much could that mean to them, really? How much did it mean to anyone else two years down the road?

July 17 p.m. report: 149,314 acres, 192 structures lost, 81% contained, 1 casualty

Renee found Lara in the hammock before bed. “The Perseids start tonight,” she said. Lara was bundled in a blanket, her head the only thing visible.

“I heard.” Lara looked so young in her cocoon.

The pines stood darker against the sky, the cabin in a clearing that would’ve made for perfect stargazing. Renee appreciated that Lara didn’t remind her that the sky was still so choked there didn’t seem like a chance of spotting anything.

“The boys want to come live with Vic and me next year,” she said, finally.

“There’s enough flexibility in the custody arrangements that if their mom agrees to it, it’ll happen.”

“It’s your life, Mom, not mine.” Lara said this simply, without anger. Renee wished she could dig below that calm exterior. Crickets swelled and faded in drawn out breaths. A stick snapped in the trees.

Renee wanted to tell her, the two of us are still a family, even without your brother. A family doesn’t need to be whole to still *be*. Someday we’ll move again without groping and stumbling. Talk to me, she wanted to say. Believe me.

Instead, they both watched for a flash of light, color to break through the gray.

“See anything?”

“No.”

They waited. Vic came to the deck door. Renee sighed. “Goodnight, baby.” She kissed the top of Lara’s head, which smelled of ozone and sunscreen.

While Renee dabbed night cream under her eyes, Vic joined her in the bathroom.

“I talked to Prisca again. I think we’ve got a new arrangement worked out for this year,” Vic said. “I’m asking for this, Renee.” She knew he was too gracious to bring up the way he’d molded his life around her in so many ways, but the words were still dense with it.

“Not now, Vic.” She got into bed, as close to the edge as she could, and pulled the quilt up to her ear.

The coyotes woke her. She could see the outline of Vic’s hair against the dark window. The pack was still far off, starting their night. A word from Mark: *crepuscular*.

He'd loved to lecture to her and Lara, loved to be right, to be the one who knew more. She'd encouraged it, hell, downright praised it. And then those words in the final fire report: Departure from standard practice. Impaired decision-making and situational awareness. She could read between the lines. Cocky, oblivious, bullheaded. God, what had she done?

Her regret bubbled up in a plea: "Vic." He didn't move. The desperation was smothering, gagging her now. She ran to the bathroom and sat on the toilet in the nightlight's glow. She wondered if she'd actually be sick, or if it was all in her head. Her terror drilling down, infecting the body she'd worked so hard on. Her means of escape had only made her feel more imprisoned, if she was honest: unfamiliar to herself in her new and improved package of skin.

When she finally went back to bed, the sheets on her side were cold. The coyotes' yapping moved closer, and she hummed along to soothe herself to sleep. She could almost pretend the pain in her throat was those feral vibrations, nothing more.

Her morning started with a sinus headache and the smell of maple syrup. She'd slept late and was alone in bed. She was sure Vic was making pancakes with Dylan and Jude, and even from upstairs, she could tell that the kitchen would be a disaster.

The sounds moved to the upstairs hall—a small posse bringing her breakfast in bed. She turned over, away from the door. She knew if she saw their faces, she wouldn't be able to stop them from delivering the tray of gummy pancakes. Maybe even jumping onto the bed with her.

The door cracked with a whispered "Is she awake?" from one of the boys.

“We’ll save it for when she gets up.” She was grateful to Vic for that, at least.

Enough. She needed to get out of the cabin, escape the circular conversations with Vic and the worn furniture that made her want to nap constantly. All the geese with their glass-eyed gentleness made her want to curse, pull at her hair.

Lara would be at school again soon, gone for months with nothing to remember of the trip but dull days in the musty cabin. This might be her last summer back—Renee remembered what happened with boyfriends and campus jobs and study abroad, all loosening that connective tissue to home, likely anchoring Lara down south for longer and longer stretches. And what would her own life look like in a year?

They both deserved a little excitement now. Lara was so steady. She needed to let loose.

“I’m taking Lara to South Shore,” Renee said over reheated pancakes. Dylan and Jude started jabbering about the Hard Rock Café they’d passed on the drive in, but Renee shook her head and pulled the syrup jug out of the way of their bouncing elbows. “Girls’ night out. Maybe next time, okay?”

Vic offered to drive them there and pick them up. Lara started to thank him, but Renee broke in. “No need. We’ll call a cab and probably get one home, too.”

July 18: 151,255 acres, 210 structures lost, 86% contained

Lara kicked the boys out of the bathroom to get ready. Her chest peeled with sunburn. She scrubbed at the skin, thinking of Jake’s shaded eyes on her. The burns pulsed.

Her mother knocked. “Lar, can I borrow something? All I’ve got are my mountain clothes.” This meant swimsuits, spandex, hiking gear. In some desperate, hopeful moment, Lara had actually packed a few of her clubbing outfits—the slinky things that all cost under \$10 at the mall near campus.

Lara loaned her a tight skirt and a sequined halter she’d borrowed from Jill and never returned. It was strange that they were the same size now. She gave her mother cat eyes with gooey eyeliner. It was just like getting ready to go to a party on frat row—but this time her mother, not Jill or her hallmates, was in the mirror beside her.

Their cab driver talked about the wildfires for the twenty-minute drive to South Shore. The sky smoldered purple with the end of the sunset. A rumble like thunder from the far side—could that be rain coming? It seemed too soon to hope for relief.

They spilled out of the cab in front of the casinos. They picked the Montbleu for its neon sign advertising 99¢ tacos and margaritas.

Lara had never been inside a casino before. It was dingier and emptier than she’d imagined, with the mingled smells of old grease, spilled tacos, and ammonia. Black-clad waitresses balanced trays of glasses. The blended margaritas were as blue as the sign outside. Along with the waitresses, two lavender-haired ladies at the slot machines, and a few others at the bar, she and her mother brought the total number of women to a dozen. Something shifted when they walked in, like each man had caught their scent and adjusted his hopes for the night.

Her mother grabbed their drinks, but no one bothered to ask Lara's age. A Frank Sinatra cover band played on a small stage. It was a Saturday—she'd lost track of days at the cabin.

The margaritas were thick and coated her teeth with a frosty film. She stood behind her mother at a roulette table, noticed how sculpted her calf muscles were now above her borrowed stilettos—Lara's favorite pair. Lara pulled her mother away when she started leaning against the shoulder of stout man who looked ready to taste her mother's hair as it fell near his face.

They tried the slot machines, all of them touchscreens instead of the hand cranks Lara had imagined. The pictures flipped and shuffled. "What's going to happen?" she asked the first time, giddy. Hadn't she always heard about beginner's luck? She'd win it all!

But the images missed, sucked up their dollars. They tried again. Cherry, star, coin, pail. And again.

"Now? Now?" Her mother laughed each time, as though determined to make it all fun.

Their slot machine showed a howling coyote with yellow eyes in front of a pocked moon. Lara could feel the men behind them, watching.

The band picked up after a break. At the far bar, in a corner she hadn't noticed before, she saw him: Jake. His hand on a woman's thigh, occasionally disappearing up her gold skirt. A button-down shirt with palm fronds on it instead of the board shorts and T-shirt from the pontoon boat. A straw in his pint glass. Even though he didn't glance her

way, she was sure it was him. The new margarita in front of her suddenly looked as appealing as a glass of Windex.

But her mother had already clapped her hands and sashayed to the deserted space in front of the Sinatra impersonator. Lara followed. They took off their heels and danced barefoot. Her mother waved her arms overhead, akimbo. She looked ready to enfold the empty dance floor and hold it against her in a flower-child embrace. Lara hopped from foot to foot, spun on her toes.

She smelled the man's breath a second before his hand fell on her bare shoulder. It rasped like a scab she wanted to rip off.

"Mary?"

She shrugged her shoulder down, but Jake's hand stayed glued to it. He stood in the disco ball glimmer, and behind him a few steps was another man from the bar, stinking and sweating through his shirt.

Her mother slid between Lara and Jake, forcing his arm away with a smooth smile.

"I think you've got us confused with some other ladies," she said. Jake blinked into her face, took in the halter and miniskirt.

"Sisters?" Jake said. "I know this one." He gestured to Lara. "Seen a lot of her already." He grinned back at the other man, who guffawed stupidly. Lara tried to keep her face politely blank—could she be so convincing he'd doubt himself?—but could tell she'd flinched. Given something away.

“She’s my girl.” Her mother put both hands on Lara’s shoulders; the feather-light touch said, *relax*. “I’ve got boys, but just one daughter.” Pride in her voice. And something fierce that made Lara’s skin ripple, like a high note hit perfectly.

“Where were you the other day?” Jake stood to his full height, legs apart. His friend inched closer behind him. “We could’ve had ourselves a real party.”

“Fly Me to the Moon” started up, a beat faster than the original. Renee began to sway her hips. Jake took this as an invitation to insert himself between them again. Lara’s mother did a sly swing step and grasped Lara’s hand as Jake loomed above. Her sharp glance said she understood more than Lara had thought, more than she knew of the world. That she didn’t need or want to hear whatever Jake said next.

Her mother pivoted to sprint them free. She whoop-yelped over Sinatra’s croon, ready to dash. In the instant before Lara was tugged away, she plucked the dripping straw from Jake’s glass. She tossed it over her head as she ran, quick with delight.

They raced for the exit, toes digging into carpet that disguised all manner of stains. Its soggy cushion made Lara miss the sand. She hoped the sliding doors would open in time—a game of chicken, *open, open!*—and they gasped apart at the last moment. Together they burst outside, where her mother finally released her. She laughed long and loud, until Lara laughed, and once they’d both started neither could stop.

They wound up teary and weak-limbed, supporting themselves on the casino’s fake stone wall. “Geez,” her mother gasped at last, fluffing her bangs at the roots. “Guess that’s how we out-crazy the crazies, as Vic would say.” Her eyeliner streaked toward her

temple, and Lara wiped it off for her. The smoke outside felt fresh after the air on the Montbleu floor.

“What now?” her mother asked. She looked wilted under the blue glow.

“We go home,” Lara said. “Let’s go, Mommy.”

Lara called Vic. “Could you come get us?”

His voice was even, hopeful. “On my way.”

The heat had gone out of the mountain air. They sat on a bench and watched for the blaze and trail of the Perseids.

The California state line was one block away. Lara couldn’t see past the row of hotels to where the lake was, where she should’ve been able to make out lights from the west shore and Sunnyside. The thick sky trapped the neon of signs above empty parking lots.

“Is that one?” Her mother pointed up. Probably just a trick of the street lights, a moth caught for a moment, but Lara had seen a flash of something.

“I think so, yes,” she said—why not?—imagining the fireball racing toward earth only to burn out, extinguished before it could reach them.