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The stories in this collection take place in North Carolina. They address issues of gender identity, sexuality, and loss.

FOR A SECOND TIME NOW

by
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ELEANOR CLARK

Some nights I can still catch a glimpse of her acting out a supporting role in my sleep. She'll be playing piano in a dilapidated warehouse, or feeding me a sandwich under cold fluorescent lights while Mom operates on my belly, or sliding against the wall of my childhood bedroom dressed only in that canary colored bathing suit. Good people know when to leave well enough alone. Tyler never saw dignity as a primary virtue, but I doubt he has much disturbed sleep either, or dreams about our old babysitter. I sometimes wonder if I'd have these dreams, if I'd stayed through that morning with them. If it's only my own lonesomeness that disturbs my dreams, and not Tyler, or even what happened with Eleanor Clark.

It's been years since I've spoken to Tyler, though he's the only one that can understand the despair we felt in those echoing, light-filled caverns that were our houses as children. Like the other cheaply built but invariably large mansions in Pine Valley Plantation, the place was palatial enough that there were rooms we didn't enter for weeks at a time. Pine Valley was a subdivision placed just outside of Charlotte's city limits when it was created, and it served the ranks of the city's doomed Clinton-era nouveau riche. Several of our professional football players lived out there when I was in high school, and also a famous

rapper who had a recording studio in his basement. You could get work done in Pine Valley – banking, rapping, what have you. Your other options were sex, booze, or golf, and with the Presbyterian blood that coursed through the neighborhood, the former two were hard to come by. Still, I think it was the way our parents always dreamed for their children to be raised, on those dry, quiet streets.

It was 1992 when I met her. Eleanor Clark, a music student at Queens College and my new babysitter, had taken an interest in me. On weekdays, she stayed with me from when I got out of school in the afternoon until 8 o'clock at night. Sometimes she would play classical composers: Chopin, Rachmaninoff, and occasionally, when my mother was out of the house, a dissonant but provocative Shostakovich.

The living room of our house was a strange space that my parents had spent thousands of dollars filling with faux empire furniture whose legs had been spray painted gold. They rarely entered it. In this room rested the black baby grand my father was given when he attained the rank of vice president at the bank by his eccentric uncle. None of us played the piano. It remained untouched for a year or two until Eleanor Clark.

One of my first memories of her is in the living room, with that piano. I was in second grade. It was a boring, glowing September afternoon in the North Carolina Piedmont. The brigade of lawn mowers hummed outside, eternal,

officious. Like many afternoons in Pine Valley that were temperate and timeless, I had this feeling that there should be something beautiful or at least beatific happening that was not. That I should be out with the other boys writing curse words in sidewalk chalk, breezing away at the front of a bike gang, stopping to get a kiss from a girl neighbor behind her parents' landscaped bushes, accruing a golden childhood. But I got easily dehydrated, and I was slight. My parents were stricter than most; I wasn't allowed to play after school until I was done with my homework and, given the academic rigor of the private Christian school where they sent me, I rarely went out after school on week days at all.

"What should I do while you play?" I asked her.

"What should you do?" She looked confused, then bemused, most of the alternating binary of emotion she displayed to me. "Lounge, Justin. Just lounge." I continued to sit erect and cross-legged on the floor, staring straight at her, my small, pale hands folded in my lap, staring. She wore her dark brown hair down and curled her bangs into a perfect 'C.' Her jeans were tapered, folded tight and cuffed at the bottoms, just like on MTV, another pleasure my parents proscribed that I tried to sneak when I could at Tyler's house. Around her neck she wore a tiny gold coin. Her shirts hung on her loosely, as if they obscured some soft solid truth I would have to wait years to reach, the delicious secret of girls who were grownups but not yet mothers.

"Don't you know how to lounge?" she asked me, revealing teeth so white they were blue. I asked her what it meant to lounge. "Like this," she said. And she walked over to the overstuffed sofa and draped herself on it, one arm hanging down, one leg hanging off. I could see up her loose shirt to two half-spheres of white lace. I chewed on the bleeding crescents where my cuticles had been. She swatted my hand from my face.

"Here, you try." She helped me up and pushed me back down onto the sofa. Then she pulled one of my legs over the edge. I let my arm flop over. I put the back of my hand to my forehead. "Now," she said, "Say, 'Oh my lordy!'"

"Oh my lordy!" I swooned. "I just want to lounge!" I cried again in an airy voice.

"Do you know what, Justin?" she said, opening the hood of the piano and tapping it against the wood of its body.

"What?" I asked, anxious, one eye peeking out from the back of my swooning hand.

"That's just about perfect." And then her hands were pale doves over the white keys.

Saturdays in elementary school, our fathers played golf at the Pine Valley course and our mothers went out to lunch and shopping at Four Points, the bourgie shopping center near the Plantation. Eleanor Clark was off on Saturdays and so I went over to Tyler's house where we had Deborah.

We were not in love with Deborah. Not even close. She was not pretty, and she wasn't young, and she put mayonnaise on our grilled cheese sandwiches. She smoked cigarettes outside the sliding glass doors of the playroom window on the porch while we built towers out of blocks in which we would imagine we could capture the clothesless Eleanor Clark.

Sometimes she would come into Tyler's playroom and watch us. "Y'all got a whole little neighborhood down there, don't you," she said one afternoon as we ran cars around the blocks. When she talked you could see the silver loops holding her teeth together. She would sit in the corner while we played reading *The Enquirer* or the *Left Behind* series. "Where's the church?"

We stared back at her.

"No church," Tyler said matter-of-factly, returning to his car.
"No church," Deborah clucked and whistled. "Then I guess that girl you're saving will be in trouble after all."

When she would leave on Saturday in the late-afternoon, she would say to us in her gravelly voice, Tyler's mother looking on, "Come give me sugar, boys." We continued to play blocks or legos or Nintendo until we were told again, in a threatening tone, by Tyler's mother, to kiss Deborah. She pulled us close, insistently, and I realize now, kindly, one to each cheek. She smelled of hairspray and ash and her skin was oily. We did kiss her. We knew the punishment that lorded pendulously over our heads for misbehavior. We knew the horror of

being alone on Saturday. We knew the capacious embrace of our parents' large stucco houses was not nearly enough to ease what had begun to rattle through us.

The summer after fifth grade was the summer of the yellow bathing suit and of fire. My mother informed me that I'd be on the summer swim team at the Pine Valley club with Tyler. Though I hated physical activity, especially of the organized kind, I felt excited to be able to spend extra time with anyone my own age. Practice started a little before school ended. Tyler and I would stand in my parents' driveway playing our Gameboys, our boxes connected by a cord so we could race each other with pixilated black and green hot rods. I'd constantly look up to see if I saw the nose of Eleanor Clark's green Accord pushing up over the hill toward the drive.

She wore these silver-rimmed aviator sunglasses that looked comically macho perched on her small, pointed nose. The radio was always on 96.1 The Crush, which was strongly looked down upon in my mother's car, but which Eleanor Clark invariably had on. We would jerk back down the driveway with the windows open to "Life is a Highway" or the Real McCoy's "Another Night," wind rushing in to cool our sweaty bodies, a welcome relief. The Carolina air was already getting hot and dense though it was only late spring. She drove us the ten minutes to Pine Valley's pool, and there we would part: Tyler and I to the

boy's room to pull on our identical swim team Speedos that featured a humiliating burst of neon green and blue at the crotch, and Eleanor Clark to the secret world of the girls' room.

Tyler and I did our mindless laps to the monotonous shouts and whistles while trying to catch glimpses of Eleanor Clark studying her music theory or her biology textbooks. The colorful shark's tooth flags bounced in the May wind above her. She kept on the silver framed sunglasses, but she'd changed into this yellow bathing suit that tied at the middle of the C-shape of the sides of her breasts, like long, thick sunflower petals. Her navel had a little tan knot in it, the first of its kind I'd seen.

May passed with its first broken promises of summer intrigue and June came in with thunderstorms and the near murderous humidity. It was already hot when I got up for the 8:30 swim practice. After practice, Tyler and I parted to change and eat lunch. Then we met up again later in the day to set fire to things. Little things at first: rotten pinecones; paper towels; action figures we'd recently outgrown. We found a cement block left over from Tyler's parents' renovation and dragged it back behind some bromeliads in my backyard. We'd place one of our victims inside it and Tyler would release the Anti-Squeak spray onto it, the kind you'd use to silence a door hinge. For a while, I was too afraid to drop the match, but Tyler did it with such joyful ease and carelessness that I soon overcame my fear.

We switched out matches in favor of a lighter. Perhaps because of this new energy Tyler had stashed in his backpack, the burning became personal. It started while Eleanor Clark was draped across the sofa in the living room studying, unaware she would become our next target. She'd left her purse on the marble countertop in the kitchen. We'd been sitting at the kitchen table playing Battleship. I was looking at my grey configuration of cruisers, and I heard Tyler get up and start shaking something around in the kitchen. Shuffling through Eleanor Clark's purse. He pulled out a tampon. He jerked his long dark hair out of his eyes. I admired his outfit—JNCO jeans his mother allowed him to show his boxers over the top of and a necklace made of chain links. I was too embarrassed to ask for anything but the same white briefs. Going to public school had given him a lead on adulthood, and I could tell even by then that I'd never catch up. Then he pulled out what looked to me like vitamin packets my mother took.

"Sick," Tyler said. "Birth control pills." I screwed up my face dramatically. "Jerk." He rolled his eyes.

"What?" I asked, my voice practically bleeding.

"You don't even know what that is."

"Vitamins?"

He snorted, then motioned me outside. He let me give everything a good spray with the Anti-Squeak. The tampon blossomed into flame. Though I knew it

could blow off my arm, as indicated by the picture on the side of the bottle, I sprayed harder until the flame crept up the stream of vapor.

"Let that slut have it," said Tyler, pumping his fist at his side.

From behind the hedge, we heard the sliding glass door open.

"Boys?"

Tyler blew at the fire but it persisted. A look of fear shot through his eyes.

Finally he stuck his foot into the cement block and stomped. The fire dwindled, but his foot was lodged in the small ashy square. I walked out of the bushes.

"We're coming."

She extended her arms wide, unworried. "There you are." She yawned. "I fell asleep. I had a dream you were eaten. Eaten by these birds. These giant birds that just plucked you off the ground and flew you away." She looked at her watch. "Well, I'll be inside. I'll order pizza soon."

She squinted into the waning light. "Where is Tyler?"

She did not lecture us, or punish us, or threaten to tell our parents. We maybe wished for some release at that point, some opportunity to atone, but none came. There was no sin and release with her. She told us how you had to take the pills every day when you are— her eyes looked up beyond the bushes— when you're sexually active. She explained to us what each thing was, how women bled, which I refused to believe on a conscious level until well into high school.

"Do you know how I feel right now?" She looked at us, deadpan, with eyes that were always moon grey but glowed as darkness came on like reflecting pools. We shook our heads. She said, "I feel like my closest friends have betrayed me."

And that was all. That's the last memory I have aside from Eleanor Clark's going away dinner. That was when Eleanor Clark got engaged and stopped being a babysitter. We were at this chain restaurant and she cried. And mom kept saying, "How exciting," to everything Eleanor Clark said to us about her plans, my mother's eyes glazed over, in Eleanor Clark's spell as we all were. Then we brought her home back to her car and I sat at my desk. Unable to watch, I listened to the rain tap against the window and to the sound of her green Accord purring away on the dark wet asphalt.

The next and last time I saw her, I was home for Christmas during my junior year at Chapel Hill. It was my habit to finger through the Christmas cards that my mother placed in the silver dish in the front hall. Looking at the pictures every year was a kind of perverted ritual I had of imagining my life as if I'd been born more like Tyler and the other Pine Valley boys my age—rebellious and a little misanthropic, a little flippant and seldom worried. His family's card came early, as it always did. They were dressed in their bathing suits on the beach,

Tyler's hair short now and spiked up in the middle, his new muscles proud and present as soldiers, his parents sunglassed and bookending him.

As for me, I seemed to be making it at least. I was a medium-level student at a decent state university. Of middling attractiveness, with narrow shoulders and a small pudge in my stomach but with a classic looking face. Classic in the friendly but not the handsome sense, like someone you'd cast as a townsperson. Still technically a virgin but not entirely lacking in experience. My parents were having financial problems by that point. The first bank layoffs were coming on in Charlotte, and my father had been one of the first. I got a good scholarship to go to Chapel Hill and I took it. Tyler's father, a plastic surgeon with his own practice, had escaped the layoff panic entirely. They sent Tyler to Vassar, which had a 40/60 ratio of men to women. I could barely stand it when we were home for holidays and we'd go out, and he'd tell me about his exploits. It just didn't seem fair, didn't seem that things had yet started to happen for me, like I wasn't even real yet.

While I was sifting through the last of the Christmas cards I came across a tacky winter wonderland scene with silver foil snow and a small thatch hut with smoke coming out of the top. This signaled to me that it was not the stiff cream cardstock of a Pine Valley Christmas, that it was not a neighbor's card. Inside, there was no picture, and I nearly threw it back into the pile until I saw her familiar handwriting, the perfect circles she drew above her I's like the degree

symbol for temperature. My hands got clammy as I pored over the writing. At the bottom, an email address.

We corresponded for a few days; she was kind in her tone but hard to read. She asked me how college was treating me, if I had a girlfriend. She was not married, she taught music at a public school in downtown Charlotte.

"Well aren't you boys nice," my mother said in a worried tone when we told her that afternoon where we were going. We were in the kitchen. Tyler was wolfing down some banana bread she'd offered him. He'd started weight training four times a week and was eating the remainder of the time.

"She quit her PhD program, you know," my mother added, flipping a page of Veranda, with something like joy or schadenfreude or simple boredom or pity, I could never tell. She came toward me and placed a hand on my shoulder. "I just don't want you to be upset if she's different from your memories of her."

I pulled away. "We have it under control."

"The way she used to play that piano," she said. But she was wandering out of the room and the rest of what she only perhaps intended us to hear sailed off into the empty hemisphere of the house.

At the grocery store, we heavily disputed the gifts we would bring our precious Eleanor Clark. We finally agreed on an eleven dollar bottle of

chardonnay and another two four-dollar bottles of cheap stuff to keep in the car in case we needed it. It was only the very silver edge of my thoughts that allowed me to believe that we would. It's funny; I don't remember wishing that Tyler wasn't there. It seemed only natural that our reunion would happen together. Without Tyler, the magic never seemed to come around. And, with Tyler, I was a full, colored-in version of myself.

"Boys!" her eyes were dull orbs, and when she opened the door further the smell of cats and old cans of soup hit us in waves. "Men, I guess I should say!" Her hair was drawn back in a pony tail and she wore old, ripped jeans, which gave me a nostalgic, burning feel of the early 90's Eleanor Clark zipping us down the driveway in her Accord, the car humming under me, Eleanor mouthing "Life is a Highway" between pink Carmexed lips. The sofa was piled with books and papers, and on the side table sat a fish tank slowly burbling, too choked with algae to reveal much but the darting orange and black and white blobs inside. There was a midi keyboard on the floor that had several of the black keys missing, a lazy, gap-toothed smile.

As far as Eleanor Clark was concerned, she was physically similar, even if the lines in her face were new. She was thin enough, but her face and hips were fuller; she was not as svelte as I remembered. This was a fact about which I, with some guilt, felt disappointed. She wasn't 20 anymore, after all—we were. But I let myself see, also with some guilt, that she wasn't wearing a bra.

She hugged us, and she smelled of pot and some kind of rank lavender incense mixed in with the old soup smell. “So good to see you two,” she said, but it was like she was using her body as a puppet to tell us. “So good to see you.” I glanced sideways at Tyler, who already had his eyes all over her body, licking his chapped December lips and lightly pinching his bicep with his thumb and forefinger, an annoying tic he’d picked up when he started going to the gym.

“Mom says hello.”

She laughed, and there was a serrated edge about it.

From the other room something chirped, then coughed, then erupted into a baby’s high wail. She walked to a back room. I looked at Tyler and grimaced in shock. He motioned his hand down, for me to relax. She reappeared with what looked to be an 8 month old baby in a onesie with dinosaurs on it, all covered in apricot colored food stains. He had grey eyes and blond thin hair on his head.

“Sorry, I was going to have Mom watch him,” she said. “But something came up. Sebastian will have to party with us.”

I tapped my fingers against my thigh, Tyler squeezed his upper arms.

“Hello there,” Tyler finally cooed. I hated him for pretending. “Can I?” He took the baby from her and jostled it in his arms. Sebastian stopped crying and he pressed his nose to the baby’s. The baby grabbed at the little silver loops in his ears. Tyler hated kids; I was both impressed and ashamed by his brazen manipulation.

Sebastian went down around 8. We ordered pizza and drank wine and coke, and we ate stale tortilla chips she fished out of the cabinet. Tyler asked Eleanor Clark to play the keyboard for us. "I'm out of practice," she shook her head. "I don't have time for that anymore." She waved it off.

"Come on," Tyler needled, smiling his largest smile.

"I'm out of practice," she said, more firmly. She glanced over at me for support.

I took another sip of wine, which tasted less sharp than the one before it. We were on to the extra bottles from the car. I held her eyes. And something turned in me, hardened. "You should really play us something while we're here."

Tyler sat back. "See? Tyler will cry like the old days if you don't. Play us something."

It took her a minute to find a place on the power strip behind her TV to plug in the keyboard. She stroked arpeggios up and down it as if no time had passed at all. And then she chose a 20th century piece, probably Russian. I could tell by its imperiousness, its dissonance. There were the occasional wrong notes, but the finesse, the insouciance was the same. It filled us like dark water. She decrescendoed and the apartment fell quiet again.

We heard someone upstairs walk out to the balcony, presumably to smoke. It was Saturday night; a man and two women talked in a fluxing, excited

blur of tones, the way light filters into your eyes when you wake up, or when you are just falling asleep. She looked up at us, unsmiling. And then she got up and fell back into her chair at the table, took a swig of wine.

This is where my memory fades. I do remember Tyler insisting that we hadn't gotten a tour of the place. Then we were in her room, Tyler and I. Tyler was trying to get her jeans off, and she half-heartedly wriggled while he pulled. I remember I threw something toward the wall and it hit a yellowing Kandinsky print that was nailed up without a frame. One corner drooped. Eleanor cackled.

Tyler grabbed my jaw and turned my head toward him. "Get it together man," he hissed. Sebastian began to cry again in the other room.

"Leave him," she waved in the air, the lamp shining in the corner of her eye. "It was just the noise." And we did leave him.

In the morning, I woke up around 6. I had stumbled out to the sofa. Sebastian had begun to chirp and cry again. I went into his room. "Shh, shh," I rubbed his belly, but he didn't settle. I left the room. In a panic, I grabbed the car keys and closed the front door quietly behind me.

That afternoon, my mother walked in to the kitchen. I was sipping coffee, my eyelids heavy with fatigue and shame.

"You look tired," she probed, but there was also a kind of fear at the edges of her voice. She tucked a piece of grey blonde hair behind a large silver earring, the way she did when she was nervous.

"Eleanor Clark isn't really the same Eleanor Clark anymore," I said.

"I told you she quit her PhD program," she sat down beside me at the dining room table.

"Did you know she had a kid?"

"No," my mother said, as if she'd tasted something bitter. She reached for the flowers on the table and plucked off a wilted petal. "Is she married?"

I glared at her. "She isn't *right*, Mom. She isn't how she used to be."

"Well don't talk to me like *I'm* the enemy." The sides of her mouth tensed up at the edges, drawing shut like a velvet jewelry bag. She got up, walked briskly to the kitchen, began to clash dishes together in the sink.

Through my head, a bubbling of air, the flicking black and orange and white inside a thick murk of green. That fish tank. That poor kid. The anger I felt that Tyler had stayed and would probably fuck her again that morning, think nothing of it. I wished I could stop asking things of Eleanor Clark, of Tyler, and of myself. But it was that I had seen her play that made me leave, that made me not return, and not that I felt pity for her. I knew what she would always be capable of; I saw it in her face that night, heard it in her hands. I knew then that she would not always be in that dirty apartment. That she would be just fine

without me or Tyler in her life at all; that she would get up that morning and wash Sebastian in the kitchen sink.

And this is how I want to remember Eleanor Clark. It was the fifteenth of December, my eighth birthday. My parents and Tyler's parents had left the day before for a trip to a ritzy hotel high in the Appalachians, since my birthday falls the weekend of my parents' anniversary and Tyler's parents often traveled with mine. Eleanor Clark agreed to stay overnight with us that weekend, though since it was near her end of semester exams, I suspect she must have felt some amount of stress about the situation, though she didn't show it. Tyler came to stay with us; Deborah was dead by then. She'd always said she could never wear watches because the electricity in her body was wrong. Our parents secretly laughed over this. It stopped analogue watches cold, she said, and she insisted she couldn't wear them. Her son found her the afternoon after her heart attack, the TV on and a cigarette burned down between her fingers.

I've always liked that I was born in December. I've always preferred to be indoors. Maybe it is my fair skin, perhaps my lack of interest or aptitude in outdoor games, my love of the black, icy sonatas of the Russian greats, a love Eleanor Clark bestowed upon me.

That day, a slow brumal drizzle persisted outside. The clouds were a low grey blanket.

"Let's pretend we're in a 17th century castle," she said. Eleanor Clark threw open the drawers of the fake antique chest in the living room one at a time, a chest we were forbidden to touch. The top drawer came out with a high squeak from swollen wood and disuse, but the room suddenly filled with the scent of cinnamon and orange.

"An entire drawer for potpourri," Eleanor Clark stared down at it. She shook her head. She took a bag of red wood chips, dried orange wheels, and cinnamon sticks out and handed it to me. She accepted my parents' lavishness as an amusement or matter of course, where she could have been spiteful, I see now, putting herself through college with music lessons and babysitting creepy rich children. I diligently fetched the silver scallop shell ashtray my parents had for decoration on the coffee table. I pressed the silver seaweed clasp at the back of the scallop shell to open it and sprinkled potpourri inside.

"Alright. Prince Tyler. And Justin, would you like to be a prince or an angel this time," she said with intentional nonchalance as she pulled out the second drawer. I cut a glance at Tyler and he shrugged.

"Angel," I said.

In the lower drawer Eleanor Clark found a kind of silver candelabra as well as a package of long taper candles. She placed the candelabra on the same table as the potpourri and found a lighter in the drawer. She dimmed the lights. Her sheet music crackled softly as she spread it against the piano.

We found Christmas tinsel and she hooked it around my head like a gaudy silver halo. On Tyler's head, she placed a Burger Palace crown we kept in the room for our games.

"Take your places, boys," she said. "We are now holding court."

"Play, servant!" Tyler pointed at her with a stiff, crooked finger.

"With the archangel's permission," Eleanor Clark said in a haunting, sing-song voice and nodded to me.

I placed my hands together in the prayer position and walked over to the piano bench, where I sat beside her. I opened my small hands and blessed the length of the keyboard as she'd taught me. The room was composed of the perfect hues for something called a "court," deep Moorish red and dim off-white and gold touches in the wallpaper and the empire legs of the furniture. Eleanor Clark's skin was the cream color of the background of the wallpaper and her hair was blacker than the blackest flat or sharp. Then I nodded and Eleanor Clark's hands flew to the keys with the insistence of any ill-timed romance.

PERSIMMONS

Jim found Roy out under the persimmon tree in their front yard. For the past two years it hadn't borne any fruit, but this year Roy found it one day with a thousand little greenish-orange globes pulling at its branches, not quite tender to the touch so he knew they weren't ripe. Roy was up to his six or seventh one, forcing each one open between his thumbs so he could pluck out the pit. Roy felt his spit spill to meet the bitter tartness of each new one. Jim was close enough for Roy to hear his feet scuffing the grass. When Roy felt Jim draw close, he shifted his back to him.

"You know what those things do to you when they aren't ripe yet," Jim said, continuing to come forward. "You're going to have an evil case of the shits." Roy felt the other man's hand on his shoulder, probing his thumb into the gnarled muscle of his upper back. It felt good. Roy craned his neck back to see the spider webs showing around Jim's eyes. Jim was smiling. Roy thought, what do you care if I give myself the shits. But Roy had his mouth too full to even mumble. He felt his eyes bugging. It was true that his stomach was starting to turn.

"Why don't you come on in and have some dinner," said Jim. "I'm almost done grilling."

Howard the beagle trotted up to the men. Roy had turned back around and was trying to wipe his face off on his shirtsleeve. He saw Howard eyeing him from the grass. "Here, boy." He knelt and picked up the remainder of a persimmon he'd dropped. The dog sniffed and turned his head sharply, his ears flopping. "Howard hasn't been eating much the past few days," said Roy. Some dim animal moved at the back of his mind, a dark shifting and a dark guilt about Howard and a fear of Jim that he couldn't place.

"It's probably something he ate outside he's got to pass," said Jim. "Now come and have some dinner."

Roy was walking back with Jim toward the house, Howard the beagle walking slower than usual along behind them. Roy figured he didn't want to get too sick after all, and he was getting thirsty. Roy looked up at Hawksbill Mountain looking over them with its old grey face, the grey face of Jim. He thought how much he loved that mountain but how even seeing it every day reminded him of all the work he had to do and still all the more work Jim wanted him to do but didn't ask and how Jim was starting to be different. Also, how Roy was still trying to fit into this old Roy to whom Jim had given the leather hunting bag for Christmas a year ago with his initials "RD" stamped on the side.

It had been a Sunday afternoon when they met at the gun club, just after a fall rain. Roy had a nothing-interesting-is-ever-going-to-happen Sunday afternoon feeling. Jim had just parted with his wife for good a month before and was trying to shoot to take his mind off of things. The mist rose off the fields in cool waves. They shot well, each pigeon exploding with razor clarity into its parts, raining down through the blackbirds in the distance.

"Sharpshooter," Jim said to Roy, and smiled. To Roy's shock, Jim winked. They were both good-looking men in their 30's; Jim's premature salt-and-pepper hair and General Store attire made him look like he could have been the populist state senator from Watauga County. Roy still had a full head of thick, almost-black hair and smooth, dark, Cherokee skin his single red-haired mother had never accounted for to Roy or to his estranged blond father. Jim and Roy talked about their guns, their small farms, their jobs—Jim at a construction company, building rich people's eyesore mansions on the ridge line, and Roy at a lumber yard. All run of the mill shit-shooting except for the absence, Roy noted, of the quiet, chuckling, grunting discussion of women and women's parts that pervaded the gun club. And there was also the wink Jim had given him, Roy thought, so quick and sly he thought he thought he must have wished it so.

But when Roy asked Jim to dinner at The Hightop Lodge a few nights later, Jim said yes, and the white cloth napkins and candles had almost embarrassed Roy to the point of tears. It had been so long since he'd been on a

date, and he'd only been on one date with a man, ever, a man he met at a bar a year ago who turned out to be married to a woman in South Carolina and also turned out to be wearing her underwear. He'd been afraid to try again. Still, conversation was awkward and halting with Jim. He didn't want Jim to think he was a pansy for taking him to this fancy place. Roy worked through one glass of whiskey, then through another, and halfway through a third. He was starting to have the feeling he'd gotten the wrong idea about Jim after all. Jim kept talking about his new beagle, Howard, and his high school sweetheart, Helen, with whom he was friends and had recently connected with since his divorce. Maybe Jim just wanted a friend, Roy realized. Roy was in a polo shirt that said "Shooters" on the breast that he'd gotten at the gun club a day before and a pair of stained khakis that he wore to church, when he went, and he prayed right then and there, "I pray I never run into Jim Custer again in town."

On the drive north from the restaurant to Jim's farm, Roy was drunk and sullen. It had started to rain again and the wipers didn't seem to be working fast enough, smearing water across the windshield and making it even harder to see. After winding silently down the wet roads for half an hour, Roy pulled onto the gravel of Jim's driveway.

"Well," said Roy. "I'll be seeing you." He tilted his head away from Jim to hide that he was on the verge of tears. Roy saw two roads ahead of him. He heard himself grunt miserably, "I think I got the wrong idea."

Jim laughed, a deep, leathery smoker's laugh.

"Why don't you come inside for one more drink, Roy Davis." He touched Roy's upper arm with his hand, then gently pressed his strong thumb into Roy's knotty shoulder muscle, giving Roy immediate release, just as he was touching Roy out in the front yard that day two years later, under the persimmon tree.

But a man can change. Roy was trying to take stock that day of whether during their years together, whether it was him or Jim that had changed more. He'd cheated on Jim only once with one of his co-workers, when Jim was sick with pneumonia a few months back and had to be in the hospital. Roy told Jim about it. But then Jim admitted that he wanted to sleep with Helen, the high school sweetheart he talked about who owned a flower shop on 421, when he got better, which wasn't something Roy expected, and although he said fair was fair, Roy still smarted at the thought and was beginning to do strange things like purposefully make himself sick on unripe fruit and shoot up old stumps with his .22 and drink and hide money away in his sock drawer. Jim said he hadn't slept with Helen yet, but they'd been talking every night lately, and Jim was acting strange, and Howard the beagle wasn't eating, and Roy knew he'd be dealing with some formidable self-induced diarrhea in a matter of minutes and that they should probably get back to the house.

"You set the table inside," Jim said, pausing before he rounded the side of the house to the grill on the back patio. "I'll finish up with the steaks and bring them on in." Roy went in and opened the bottle of Elijah Craig Aged 12 years he was saving for his and Jim's birthdays, which were two days apart in November. He took the glass back to the toilet and perched there for a while. The liquor soothed Roy's middle and also muted the strange feelings he was having in the field with the persimmon tree. But it did not take away the ache of Jim's feelings for Helen, or what they might do, since fair was fair.

He polished off the glass, finished up in the bathroom, then refilled his glass in the kitchen that opened onto the little breakfast room where they ate. Roy could see through the picture window in the breakfast room that Jim was outside talking on his cell phone with a greasy spatula in his hand, the fall mountain sunset behind him coming through the gaps between Jim's arms and glinting off the side of the phone and through the little holes in the spatula as he gestured. Howard slept contentedly on the remaining warmth of the gray patio slate beside Jim. Jim had turned his Shell hat backwards and he was laughing sometimes and other times talking quietly. He was sweating and the sweat was coming through his after-work t-shirt and Roy could see the muscles in his forearms shadow and unshadow as he flipped the large steaks. Roy took some more gulps of bourbon.

The bourbon had Roy's whole head after a short while. His eyes bounced around the breakfast room as he watched Jim outside and watched the smoke rising off the steaks and the way that Jim tucked the phone close to his mouth when he was speaking. Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Jim's grandfather's cuckoo clock he'd gotten from Austria when he was in World War II started its chime, seven p.m. Jim's grandfather had died two years ago and he'd left that clock to Jim. Roy walked over and stared at it going, Cuckoo. Cuckoo. Cuck — that clock had really started to bother Roy.

Last week, Roy had snapped the little blue bird right off its metal lever and the lever slipped back empty into the door. Cuckoo cuckoo. Cuckoo cuckoo, the empty lever had said, shooting in and back out again. He didn't know why he'd done it, but that warm immediate relief he felt had hardened into something cold that had expanded in his veins until they felt cracked and aching. He panicked.

He had rushed to the kitchen, found the Gorilla glue in the hardware drawer. He'd heard Jim's car wheels crackling against the gravel driveway, signaling Jim's return from work. Roy had put Gorilla glue on the lever and on the bird — it wasn't a complete fix but it would have to work until he had time to go back with his tools. The instructions said to hold the item to the glue for at least a minute. 35, 34, 33, Roy counted down the seconds while he was holding the cuckoo to the lever. 29, 28, he'd heard Jim's boots on the steps to the front

door, then the front door knob turning, then and he released. The bird popped back into the house, and Roy peeked in the tiny doors; to his relief, the bird still stood mounted in its tiny dark room.

The whole Helen thing was boring through Roy like that giant white larva the size of a finger they'd found in a dead tree they cut down last fall. He looked into his own eyes in one of the framed mirrors beside the cuckoo clock. His Short Stopp hat sat lower on his head. His eyes glowed light grey, like lake ice at sunset after an incomplete thaw. The whole effect was that of someone who was very much like Roy, but someone different, too, someone Jim no longer doted on. This was cuckoo killing Roy. The Roy who had sex with a boy who was barely 20 years old in a shed by the lumber yard while his lover was sick with pneumonia. Roy touched his chest briefly, and pressed to make sure it was still the solid him standing there. Then Roy peeked into the doors of the cuckoo clock again, just to make sure the bird was still mounted.

Jim walked in. "Why you messing with that again," said Jim. "I saw you looking in there a few days ago too."

"Just wanted to see what the bird did in there between jobs."

Jim looked at the cuckoo clock, at Roy. He held up the plate of steaks. "Let's eat, weirdo." Roy walked up to Jim and kissed his dry, cracked mouth, then tried to look at those handsome crow's feet around Jim's eyes and get Jim to

recognize him, too, the real Roy, not the other one. Jim slipped out from in front of him and put the piled plate of steaks on the table with a heavy thud.

They ate reheated peas and potatoes and most of the steaks, and then some cookies a neighbor had brought over. They were settling into their evening mode, Roy stretched out on the sofa reading a car magazine, Jim spreading open the paper in his chair, when Jim asked, "Y'feed Howard like I told you to?"

"Not yet," said Roy.

They looked around at once, realizing that Howard had not been bothering either of them for table scraps at dinner, not one lick on any of their hands or legs, though he must have smelled the steaming slabs of meat.

"Wasn't Howard out with you?" said Roy.

"I let him in here with *you*," said Jim.

"Howard!" They called together, bolting upright.

They found the dog in the bedroom, by the double bed they shared, on his side. Howard showed his fear in the dodging whites of his eyes, and his brindled stomach heaved. A sudden thought flashed in Roy's mind that he'd stashed the glue on one of the breakfast room chairs when Jim had walked in last week.

"How did he get ahold of this glue, Roy?" Jim yelled so loudly he caused both Howard and Roy to jerk. Jim was holding up a chewed, empty bottle of the Gorilla glue he'd found behind the sofa in the den after they had found Howard,

confirming Roy's fear and guilt, the dark feelings he'd had in the front yard. Jim narrowed his eyes at Roy. They shone like hot ash in the light of the lamp on the bedside table. "You know dogs like the taste of this stuff," he hissed. "That was *stupid*. Stupid stupid stupid."

"I don't know," said Roy tentatively. Then he heard himself say, more confidently, "I don't know how he could've got it." He took the tube out of Jim's hand.

"How much did he eat?" Roy glanced at the tube and squeezed it—it had puncture marks in it but he could feel about half of the liquid remaining. Howard licked his dry jowls with his tongue.

"Let's get him in the truck," said Jim, shaking his head and pressing his lips together hard.

Jim cradled Howard in the passenger seat while they wound through the dark roads to the 24 hour vet clinic 20 miles away in Boone. "Hold on boy, hold on." Jim stroked the dog and Howard made a high whining noise in the back of his throat. Roy left one hand on the wheel and reached to touch Howard's graying muzzle, felt Howard's rough, forgiving tongue against his hand.

The white mass on the x-ray showed to be a little bigger than one of the persimmons. The vet, a young man with premature grey hair, said that, because it was still wet, the glue would continue expanding to the size of a grapefruit if

they did not remove it. They would have to operate immediately. Jim touched the inside corners of his eyes with his index finger, and Roy tried to catch his eyes but Jim wouldn't look at him. Howard wriggled and moved his legs on the vet table on his side, awake, but as if he was being chased by a bear in a dream.

The next morning, Roy went to work in the lumberyard sleepless and dazed. By the third cup of burnt work coffee, things felt sharp and angled – the sun against the grinding machinery, the hum of the water cooler in the trailer, Jim's eyes still gleaming knives in the lamplight. Howard's surgery had gone well but he would have to stay at the vet's for the day with a little dog IV shunted just above one of his white paws. Jim had called out of his construction job to stay at the vet and to rest. His foreman had six dachshunds and no children, and so Jim's excuse flew. Roy had a boss with six kids and twice as many dogs; he knew asking would only cause more trouble.

Helen worked Monday afternoons until 6 in her flower shop, Roy knew this. At 4:57, Roy picked up his jacket on the hook inside the trailer office at the lumber yard and headed out. He'd called Jim's phone that day six times from work, just to check up on him and on Howard, but Jim didn't pick up. Roy was starting to feel like something was going terribly, that what had been set off by Howard's accident did not have to do with the dog at all.

When he pulled into Helen's shop off of 421, he noticed the vacancy of all four spaces in front, and he felt it like he was seeing a toothless mouth – Helen's

gold Acura sickly absent. He looked at his watch, but he already knew by the light that it was still well before 6. Where else could she be? His chest was a muffled drum. Was she sitting in her little shack of a house by the highway, feeding her cat brown slop from a can? For a minute, Roy tried to imagine Helen where she should have been. The dimming light coming through the dirty windows in her house, the wind whistling through its cracked boards. Making herself a pimento cheese sandwich for dinner with *Jeopardy* dinging softly in the background. Roy wanted that lonely life for Helen. Roy wanted Helen to be lonely, lonely as he had been in Boone before he went through the trouble to get Jim to fall in love with him.

Roy pressed his nose under the gold cursive High Country Florist lettering hand painted to the glass. His breath steamed against the cold surface, but the shop was dark, abandoned. He could see Helen's beloved carnations in the waning light. Most of what she sold at her shop was just carnations — there were clots of them everywhere, tinged with the colors of dye she mixed in the back for every holiday. Since it was nearing Halloween there were clumps of white flowers tinged with purples and oranges, bunched together with wooden pumpkin and goblin discs hanging off. Roy hit the glass with one of his fists, then harder. He hit the glass until he popped a small crack in one of his knuckles and warm blood trickled down into his jacket sleeve.

Roy thought of how sweet Howard had wriggled around on the table while the vet assistant tried to hold him still. He tried to feel how the story would end, and he knew, he knew he would arrive home that night and find the house different. He knew Howard would still be curled in his dog bed, cold Howard, and, he was convinced, no Jim.

In order to put off the consumption of himself into that cold dark house, Roy did the groceries as usual, his usual Monday night task. Jim worked farther from town so he had asked Roy, or, at some point, Roy had begun to do the groceries. He used to drive all the way into town to meet Roy after work to do the groceries together, but he had stopped doing that. He said he didn't have as much energy since the pneumonia, which Roy had to accept, even if he didn't have to believe it.

Roy felt his sweat turn cold under his jacket; he put on the radio for comfort. He hummed nervously along to a young woman singing about did-she-shave-her-legs-for-this as he wound down the roads, taking turns that only could have been memorized and never quite explained on the phone. As he approached the house he stopped the humming and gritted his teeth together, flexing his clean left hand and his bloody right hand together on either side of the 12 o'clock mark on the wheel.

But when he pulled in to the driveway he saw that the house was lit yellow orange like the warm inside of a squash, and there was Jim's truck in the

driveway, Jim's shape moving past white curtained windows. Roy leapt out of his truck.

He heard Howard's low croon from in front of the door even before Jim let him out. Roy, laden with groceries, pushed past Jim as Jim held the door for him. Jim said, "well hello to you too," and he was smiling but his eyes were darting back and forth and he wouldn't look straight at Roy, and the smile was only a kind of half-hidden half-smile. Roy saw the other half hidden toward the other side of the den.

"Hello boy." Roy let the groceries fall to the floor on the front landing and sank to the linoleum by Howard's dog bed. "Hello Howie." Howard turned on his back and Roy rubbed the bristly white hairs of his dog chest. Howard kicked. Roy saw the four inches of sutures down Howard's middle. Roy took Howard's little paw in his hand that had been shaven for the IV at the vet. "How is that little shaven hoof?" Roy asked, and Howard yowled his language of fulfillment until Jim came in. Howard turned his head and awaited Jim's command, and Jim said, "Roy, come and put away those groceries right now so I can have some of them to make dinner."

That night Roy and Jim got in bed together, under the old quilt that had cotton coming up in patches. Jim turned over and pulled the lamp cord. Roy felt Jim shift toward him, felt Jim's hand against his back spread open. Roy pulled away.

"You don't want to touch me when we sleep anymore," Jim said plainly into the dark. He seemed neither upset nor sad. The wind picked up around the house and it drummed acorns onto the tin roof.

"You seem different," Roy said.

"That's in your head," said Jim.

Some time passed. Roy turned over in bed, onto his stomach, then, feeling like he would suffocate in the pillow, turned onto his back and let the cold and dark press against his face. He heard Howard shift softly in his dog crate in the kitchen through the open door.

"I don't know if I can let it go," said Roy. "Knowing you're gonna do it."

He heard Jim let out a tired, hard breath. Jim turned over away from Roy and before long Roy could hear his soft snore. If he really cared, thought Roy, he wouldn't be able to sleep now.

But Roy slept hard, too, when he got to sleep. That morning, the routine was no different from the routine they'd always done, though there was a certain wave-like quality to every part of it for Roy, like ringing a large bronze bell. The alarm went off to the AM radio, and Jim hit it three times. The door to Howard's crate began to make a shaking sound, and they heard his pleading whine. Jim got up, put a jacket on over his bare chest, and walked into the kitchen in his long pajama pants. Roy heard him release Howard from his crate. Howard trotted back to the bedroom, a little slower than usual, and Jim lifted him on to Roy's

feet. The dog crawled up toward Roy's face and gave a tentative lick on Roy's ear.

"Hello boy," Roy said. "Hello Gorilla Dog."

Jim stroked the side of Howard's body while Roy stroked just between Howard's eyes with one finger. The dog settled on his stomach, his head in his paws. Roy looked at Jim and Jim smiled and Roy looked back at the dog. Jim's hand stopped on the dog's side. Roy put his hand beside Jim's on the dog. Jim placed his hand heavily on top of Roy's, and Roy tried to let Jim's hand be there, to let the weight of his hand feel like it was a promise of a tender weight that would come constantly, like the rise and fall of Howard's breath raising and lowering both of their hands.

Something grave came over Roy. Something like the bell sound, but the lower, emptier silence, the empty space in a clapperless bell.

"I'll take the dog out," said Roy. He never said "the dog" and always said "Howie" or "Howard" but now he'd said "the dog." The bell sound was receding into the air, harder to hear, the bell that had been rung for the last morning the dog would lay between them on the bed, his warm body frantically trying to swell into the growing expanse between the men.

The foreman let Jim take Howard to work, so he put Howard's bed in his truck and Roy lifted Howard in, and Howard was heavy and compliant.

As the day passed, Roy became increasingly anxious. He kept checking the messages on the work phone to see if Jim had called. At lunch time, he gave in to his anxious feelings drove the few minutes into town straight to Helen's flower shop.

The jingle bells on the door rang and Helen looked up from her newspaper.

"Hello?" She looked confused, but also had a pitying look in her eyes. A gray strand of her hair had fallen out of the clip she wore and she tucked it behind her ear.

"Hey there, Roy." She smiled a tight smile.

"Nice day out there," said Roy.

"If you like the cold." She poured extra change from her penny bowl out. Then she started turning each penny over, heads side up, lining them up side by side. "Can I help you with something?" She wasn't big or soft or anything – Roy thought it would be easier if she looked like most of the other women her age in town looked. But she looked tight and shapely like a coil of brown rope.

"Like to get some flowers," said Roy. He found a coin inside his pocket, and turned it over and over between his thumb and forefinger. "My dog got sick."

"Roy, I know." In her eyes was something that wanted to say, here, come here, I don't want us to be animals passing by in the dark, fearful, lonely. Then

she stiffened behind the pitiful look. And Roy sensed that and stiffened himself. Here was the fact: they were animals, autumn was moving toward winter, Jim was only one man. "I know," Helen repeated. "Jim told me."

Roy walked out with a fistful of blue-tinged carnations. On his way back to work he threw them out the car window, and they scattered onto a wet black embankment.

That night, when Roy pulled up the gravel driveway to the house, there was one light lit in the kitchen, but the living room was dim. The driveway bore the absence of Jim's navy blue truck. He walked up the yard. The persimmons had lost their green glow and were fleshy orange now. Just right, but he didn't pick any. He walked in the front door and it was chilly in the house. Roy was surprised to hear Howard cooing. Roy walked up and the dog stood up in his bed. Roy gave Howard a treat and Howard ate it, to Roy's relief; the vet said Howard needed to start eating again.

There was no Jim, no note. Roy picked up his phone to call Jim again, but closed it before it rang.

He walked over to the thermostat and turned up the heat.
"You going to be okay here on your own for a few hours?" Roy looked at Howard.

Howard settled back into his bed. Roy went to the bedroom and blindly grabbed into the drawers for his underwear, a spare shirt, and the sock full of money he'd hidden, which he stuffed into the leather hunting bag Jim had given him for Christmas that had "RD" stamped onto the outside. Roy turned on the living room light for Howard, gave him another treat. He walked across the room to the door and Howard's eyes followed him.

He opened the door, pivoted on his heel. "Goodbye Howard," he said. The dog watched Roy with steady eyes. He took another step away toward the open door. "Goodbye dog," he said. Then he shut the door and turned the key. He steered the truck down the driveway then turned onto the road, away from town this time, gliding into the coming night.

FOR A SECOND TIME NOW

1

It was the fact that she could become a hunchback that convinced Maren to have the surgery and not because the treble clef shape of her spine was threatening to press against her organs. This was the beginning of the hard little obsidian thought that would become something better, something more productive and regal than vanity. She had a pretty face, little button nose and blue eyes that shone like hopeful puddles against her olive skin, but her awkward body had prevented her from exercising without pain and so she was big, nearly 180 pounds, and also ungainly. Her walk was a jouncing waddle, like a child trying to mimic drunkenness.

When she'd sat in Dr. Greenbaum's conference room at the clinic, looking at the limpid images of her bones on the x-rays, she'd been embarrassed at the ghostly form of her flesh that had shown up too. A grey area surrounded her bright bluish bones, rolls of flesh. To her horror, she could also see the outline of her vagina just under the little loops of her pelvic bone and the last flesh roll. Neither her parents nor Dr. Greenbaum seemed to notice. No one seems to notice that I have a vagina, Maren thought, and for the first time, the first time she felt conscious of, this made her angry.

"You can have the procedure done now or you can take a gamble that the curve won't get any worse," Dr. Greenbaum said, as if he were offering the options for rental car insurance at an airport. Maren's dad was a construction contractor and her mother was a librarian. She knew they knew nothing about what Dr. Greenbaum was suggesting. Later that night, in their typical useless, noncommittal hippie fashion, Maren's father looked over, teary-eyed, and said, "Well Mare, you're 21 now." He sighed. "Your mother and I will pay for what insurance doesn't cover, but I think this is for you to take some time to reflect on."

Several facts contributed to Maren's thinking about having the surgery that year rather than at some later time, such as the soreness that pervaded her torso when she had to sit in class, but it was Matt Buchanan that finally pushed her into it. *Fact*, she listed in her journal with the Japanese cranes on the cover in the fading October light that came through her dorm blinds: *I am 21 and I am a virgin. I don't have an adult life. There's very little of my life that couldn't be shared with children.* She switched on the brighter light of her dorm room lamp, and the bare black fact in ink on that page, the only writing on it, disappointed her. She was too young to be disappointed by her own life, she reasoned. There was still time to do something. There must be. Short of having the surgery, which Dr. Greenbaum explained she'd have to take a semester off from school for, she decided to try another way first.

When Maren looked up from her journal, it was already close to 7. She shifted herself off of her lavender comforter and smelled her pits. She'd forgone a shower that morning since she didn't have class on Thursdays. She decided her shirt smelled passable, and so she lumbered out of the heavy oak door of her dorm, up the half mile of grassy hill to the cafeteria, *The Blithedale Romance* tucked under her elbow. Though she was only an English minor, she'd stumbled upon the fact that 19th century American literature, when taken in combination with soft serve vanilla ice cream sandwiched between two large chocolate chip cookies from the dessert line, provided a pleasant opiate effect against the glaring fact her roommate wouldn't even eat with her.

Maren passed Cynthia in the common room of the dorm on the way out. Cynthia was chatting with two of the football players, one named Marcus and one Maren didn't know the name of. That one was adjusting himself in his mesh shorts like he was digging for potatoes. She smiled at Cynthia and Marcus, who went back to their flirtation, and then grimaced at the other boy when they weren't looking. His eyes went wide.

"I'm going to dinner." Maren waved, beaming again. Cynthia screamed as Marcus lunged over and tickled her, and Cynthia waved in the air at Maren. Marcus hadn't acknowledged her, though he'd hung out in her and Cynthia's room more than once. She knew better than to ask Cynthia to dinner; Cynthia was going later with the baseball team, earlier with the tennis team, had a huge

lunch at 2 o'clock and didn't want to eat anymore, threw up her lunch because she had a dress she had to fit into for a party. Whatever the excuse was, Maren had gotten the idea by the second or third week of school. Maren had other friends, the Naruto kids, but she found meals with them childish and tedious, someone always arguing over a graphic novel or catapulting peas with a spoon. Maren was caught in an in-between place. She felt like she was a coma patient who was just awake enough to hear voices but couldn't seem to move toward them.

The sharp cool air augured frost that night, the street lights that lead up to the brick path to the cafeteria had just flickered on. There was a rainbow of mist haloing each one. She saw the yellow rectangular lamps of the cafeteria hanging low over the baseball team as they ate and laughed behind the two story windows. Their large bodies supported the plates and plates of food they consumed, while her own body merely slabbed it on what she already hefted around. But she felt some kind of under-happiness coursing beneath this empty fall night. She felt her mind like fingers trying to pull at the sides of the horizon, pulling to reveal the life that lay underneath. Fall in North Carolina was always such a full time for her, because it didn't exactly come before a real winter. It was simply a fire-colored, melancholy, dense gift without much of a price to pay in the winter months. It never snowed more than once in Raleigh. The baseball player's lives, the lives of the pretty girls they used for entertainment: their lives

were like this North Carolina fall—a purity of pleasure coming easily and achingly beautifully, always forthcoming, always free for the taking without a price to pay later.

As she wobbled toward the cafeteria on the brick patio, Matt Buchanan held the door open. He even took one ear bud out of his left ear to say hi to her, and her pulse quickened. Sometimes she pretended to read a book out on the quad on Sunday afternoons when, if she was lucky, Matt would go out and play Frisbee with his hall mates. He was perfect for her, she reasoned, hair thick and dark but styled, big black nerd glasses, a leather messenger bag that flapped against his tight butt to which his perfectly sized jeans clung tightly but not too tightly. His face was acne pocked and he had a prominent nose and upper lip, like a camel's. She'd once fished around for Cynthia's opinion on him, since he hung out with some of the frat guys she messed around with. Cynthia had called him a "Buttisface," an Everything But His Face.

"Don't get me wrong, he's got a rockin' bod," Cynthia had said while biting off a Twizzler and cruising a website for a preteen clothing company she was too old to be shopping from. "But there's something very rough in this area." She waved her hand, palm facing nose, all over her face. If Cynthia wouldn't hook up with him, Maren reasoned, then Matt wasn't totally out of her league. And here he was, holding the door for *her*.

"You done that reading for Bergman?" Matt asked, his smile a fete of neglected orthodontia, like little shifting tectonic plates.

"Oh, not yet." Maren smiled. She looked down at the red brick walkway.

"You doing it at dinner?"

"Oh, no. This is just for fun." She held up *Blithedale*, blushed with immediate regret.

"Nathaniel Hawthorne," Matt laughed. "For fun?"

"I like it," she said, running her hands through her slightly greasy hair. She'd hoped this would come out sounding sarcastic and sexy but it came out sounding jejune, and well, like one of the Naruto kids, and she was immediately embarrassed again.

"Well enjoy," Matt said uncomfortably. He smiled again to punctuate the conversation, and began letting the door close before Maren was all the way through it.

Maren forwent the a la carte line and went straight to the dessert line, treating herself to a square of vanilla cake with purple sprinkles and then heading for the soft serve machine. The plates on her tray shook as she jerked toward it, and she hoped she wouldn't drop any before the synchronized anodyne of processed sugar and the gentle narration of Miles Coverdale would hit her bloodstream at once.

But Maren's secret combination of self-soothing failed to work. When she returned from the cafeteria, Cynthia had already begun drinking in the room with some of the members of the fraternity who had awarded her the title of official Sophomore Frat Bag. There were several boys in purposefully tattered white hats whose color had faded to grey with sweat and dirt that looked dirtier under the fluorescent overhead light. They were drinking beer and flipping cups. Maren usually avoided these little circles in favor of studying or playing games on the computer, and when she drank it was usually with her friends, and usually accompanied by a mystical card game.

"Can I join in?" Maren asked, and the smooth bronze in her own voice astounded her. She was well on her way to her new life. She could just feel it in the air tonight.

Cynthia looked up, face flushed, the spaghetti strap of her tank top having already fallen and the pink crest of her areola showing. Cynthia was embarrassed of Maren, but Maren could tell Cynthia liked her. Cynthia put up with Maren's unattractive geekiness and Maren put up with Cynthia's sluttiness and the plates of half-eaten food she left to mummify all over the dorm room. At the end of the day, they respected one another's fatal social flaws. Cynthia nodded, wide-eyed, and patted the sofa for Maren to sit beside her and join in. Maren pulled up Cynthia's strap back onto her shoulder and whispered in the blond girl's ear "Your boob was showing."

The first try, Maren slid the cup over the side of the table, gave it just the right pop on its head, and it landed upright. This gave her a rush, and she swilled half of a cup of beer despite the fact that she'd had a perfect flip. A boy caught her eye and smiled, one who wasn't wearing a cap. He had big full lips and thick blond hair like wool. She could tell he was already pretty drunk. Though not as fetching as Matt Buchanan, even, he was something. "Party Eric," they kept calling him.

Maren hurt between her legs in the morning but felt exhilarated too. Party Eric asked for a ride back to his dorm.

"Wait," he said, as they drew near the ABC store near campus. "Could you stop here and get me some things?" Maren playfully asked why, rubbing Eric's thigh, thinking he was alluding to another drunken tryst in the future.

"Well, you're 21," Party Eric snarled, and rubbed his forehead and shifted his leg away. "I'm having a party at my place this weekend and I need some things."

Maren stiffened. "Sure, I can go in for you."

Maren waited that week but received no email to Eric's party. Cynthia wouldn't give and only changed the subject when Maren hinted at it. One day when Cynthia was in class, Maren felt driven to look at Cynthia's email which she'd left up on her computer. She'd heard from Cynthia about the awful emails

the frat sent to each other. What she found was worse than Adam Stoltz calling her a pile of mashed potatoes in 8th grade when she was wearing her cream colored spring dress, or when she'd heard from a friend that Ed Cook had been imitating her uneven walk on the bus. It was worse than the vacant loll of the eyes men gave her at the grocery store, the snippy answers women gave her at the mall when she went to try on clothes, the way her father wouldn't let her order French fries, the disappointment in his eyes, which was only another, more paternal version of the vacant loll.

She knew the boys in the frat had set up a message board that they gossiped on, and she clicked on a link to it in one of Cynthia's emails. PARTY E FUCKED QUASIMODO said a subject line halfway down the page; one post was accompanied by a crude digital rendering of her body made with flesh-colored circles, and Eric's eyes drunken X's while he moved toward her with a tiny 90 degree line of flesh. What was there left to do? She felt shocked and not shocked.

Maren made it a point to collect herself before she called her mother. The hard little black thing was beginning to form inside of her. She didn't want to sound like she'd been sobbing. Over Christmas break, she told her mother. I'll have the procedure done at Duke over Christmas break. They'd let her pick whether to do it in the middle of the year or wait until summer, but the day's events had precipitated a desire for Maren to carve from her old body a new one.

She went into surgery early on a January morning, and Dr. Greenbaum put in the final suture by the time the light was already starting steel up in the trees outside the hospital. She woke up to the feeling of her body being pulled off of the surgery slab and onto a gurney like the dead weight of a filet on white butcher's paper. Her arms and legs and head felt popped cleanly off of her middle like a doll's parts, and there was just an empty, heavy space on the sheet where her torso should be. In reality she was still feeling the effects of the anesthesia and her body was giving her a reprieve before it sent its signal. The signal was: an 8 inch slit had been cut and pried open in her side; a rib bone-sawed out; her vitals pushed aside like throw pillows; a three inch metal scaffold drilled into her vertebrae; and all this pushed back and stapled up. A routine but medieval procedure to correct severe scoliosis. It had been a long eight hours for her body, the longest of her body's life since it had been pushed out of the womb twenty-one years before. When she woke up in the recovery room, her first thought had been, good God—she wasn't proud that this had been her first thought—I'll never be able to have sex for a second time now. And how long would it be before she'd be able to look at a man at eye-level and not from the height of a wheel chair?

For these first few days she had Nurse Huckleberry. Maren started her period the morning of her surgery; it must be some punishment, she reasoned,

from her former body, for trying to escape its humiliations and leave it entirely. It was Nurse Huckleberry that had finally seen this indicated on Maren's chart the night after her surgery, changed Maren's bloody sheets, wiped her down. "Oops," was all Nurse Huckleberry said. She was wearing powder blue scrubs that looked clean and sharp against her even brown skin. Maren appreciated Huckleberry's casual tone, which spared her dignity, a thing she clung to, though only vaguely, with some newly forming dexterity.

Nurse Huckleberry checked her sheets the second night, too. Only the light over the sink was on and it gave the whole room a nauseating orange sherbet glow. Maren was staring at the blank TV screen, laboring to breathe. When she inhaled, her right lung pressed against the extensive wounded tissue and staples, causing a sharp stabbing pain. Fluid had filled her lungs and she was trying to cough it into a bedpan, but the coughing was killing her too.

"You'll be pretty again when you heal up," Huckleberry said as she helped Maren to sit up and then held the bedpan for her.

"Pretty, oh so pretty," Maren sung in a croak between hacks. It could have been the drugs, but somehow Huckleberry's assurance seemed prescient, and a spark traveled up Maren and eased the pain for an instant. It eased the pain enough for Maren to feel very, very calm, and very pointed. As if all the hard feelings in her had hardened to iron filings, and they were cleaving toward something she hadn't yet been able to name. It had to do with Cynthia and it had

to do with Matt Buchanan, and also other men, and how she simply wanted men near her all of the time, all of them.

They pushed her out of the hospital in a wheel chair that squeaked and she squinted at the first direct sunlight she'd seen in 5 days. Her father brought the minivan to pick her up. The light felt nauseating on her skin, and she choked back vomit as her father and a hospital attendant lifted her into the van. At home, they laid her in bed, and she felt sicker than the first day she'd come out of surgery.

She passed the next few weeks watching soap operas and drinking vegetable soup, then throwing up most of the soup she'd eaten in red spurts. After the first week, when Maren felt capable of getting herself to the bathroom and back to bed, her mother returned to work. But most days her mother would come and sit with her on her lunch break from the library and watch *Days of Our Lives*. Maren watched the romances flicker past, wondering if she would ever have a life more complex than begging for health, begging for a sex, begging for things that Cynthia and Matt had for the taking every day, for which they paid no price. Sammy had three men vying for her on *Days*, for Chrissake, and two of them were related to her by marriage.

To Maren's surprise, Cynthia came to visit one grey afternoon. When she walked in the bedroom, the smell of her perfumed body blossomed all over the place edged with the sexy lingering scent of a just-smoked Camel Light. Maren

realized that she'd only smelled vomit and betadine and bandages and other stale smells of sickness for weeks. Cynthia was in her casual clothes — black yoga pants that were so tight they gave her a camel toe and a pink tank top that had rhinestones dotted all along its top.

"Hi, babe," she said, walking toward Maren slowly. Maren propped herself up on an elbow.

"Hi Cynth."

Maren's mother walked in behind Cynthia.

"Would you like me to help you sit up sweetheart?" Maren let out a pained stream of air as her mother propped her up against the headboard of the bed.

"Jesus," Cynthia said.

"I know," said Maren. "I'm a wreck."

"No, I was going to say you look good." Cynthia plopped down her absurdly large alligator bag and sat in Maren's desk chair. "You look great, actually. You've lost so much weight."

"Three weeks of eating one meal a day you can keep down will do that to you. It's the painkillers, they don't agree with my stomach," said Maren.

"Oh my god, save me some of those." Surprising herself, Maren laughed with Cynthia. It was good to joke about the whole thing, somehow comforting to know that Cynthia was still blissfully unaware of what it was like to have

someone swab period blood off of your thighs because you couldn't move enough to do it for yourself. There was a soft interest that had come about in the corners of Cynthia's eyes, and Maren no longer felt that Cynthia was trying to dodge their conversation, getting antsy for the lack of a Y chromosome in the room.

Cynthia caught Maren up on all of the gossip that didn't concern her but that she'd heard Cynthia narrate enough that she felt like she was part of the stories themselves, like a movie whose characters she saw in the flesh almost daily, like a living version of *Days*. At the end of a long monologue, Cynthia said casually, "Oh, and I saw Matt the other day."

Maren feigned an even tone. "Matt Buchanan? Oh yeah?"
"He said he hopes you get better soon. He said tell her I miss her in English this semester."

Maren merely nodded and made a sound to show she'd heard. She knew she should be thankful that Matt was thinking about her, but that he'd only mentioned missing her in a classroom paradigm struck her as patronizing.

"I'm glad you came, Cynth," Maren said as Cynthia got up to leave. Then Cynthia did something she'd never done before. She walked up to Maren's bed and hooked one arm around Maren's neck, squeezed. It was awkward for a first hug but Maren guessed it counted.

"I'll be in touch," said Cynthia.

Maren was in a state of bliss to find herself dropping even more weight in the spring. When she felt well enough to look at herself in the mirror, Maren thanked god for the nights throwing up a golden combination of Ginger Ale and bile into a bedpan every hour, and after that the streams of vegetable soup, and for the pain that felt like a metal protractor was rotating at the bottom of her spine around and around and cutting through all of the organs it met with. She was thankful for these things. When she stood naked in the mirror for the first time, she saw little indentations at the bottom of her stomach where her lower abdominal muscles had been hiding all of this time. Her breasts looked bigger now that her stomach was flat. Her ass, it turned out, was small and shapely, and only improved with the slow uphill walks she began to take around her parents' neighborhood that were encouraged by her physical therapist. She'd gained a few inches from having her spine straightened and was now almost 5' 9". Nearly model height.

Though she'd had to miss a semester of school, by the summer she was well enough to walk for long distances, and to her surprise she found that the walking did not cause the usual throbbing ache in her lower back as before the procedure. In July, Cynthia asked Maren to move into her new apartment. She signed up for some courses at State to make up her lost time.

The summer nights in Raleigh were hot and turgid, gave her a new craving for something outside of reading Hawthorne and Irving on her tiny balcony in their cookie cutter 2-bedroom. The week after Maren moved in, Cynthia invited Maren to a house party off campus. It was at a lake house near Raleigh, she said, so they'd have to drive together. Maren suspected Cynthia wanted a sure ride there and back, since she didn't have a car. But when Cynthia said it was at Matt Buchanan's parents' lake house, Maren agreed.

They rolled onto the gravel driveway of the lake house around sunset in Maren's silver VW bug. It was a massive two story blue house set back in the woods, but around the sides of the house they could see Jordan Lake extending all around, the light flecking pinkish gold its early evening undulations. They walked up the wooden stairs to the door, Maren knocked, and Cynthia rang the doorbell. Maren held a handle of vodka they'd picked up on the way, and her hands were shaking a little so she was glad for the weight of it. Cynthia held a bottle of cranberry raspberry juice. They waited for a few seconds, listening to the music and steady hum of people inside. Then they let themselves in.

The house was open on the first floor, and they could see from the front walkway through the kitchen and all the way back to the backside of the house, which was made entirely of sliding glass doors. Out on the deck, dozens of people were holding red and blue plastic cups. Some lay in lawn chairs and some

were swimming in the water at the end of the pier, holding their cups up and treading water feverishly with the other hand.

Matt had a wonk tooth and his lip sometimes caught on it when he was relaxing from a smile, an involuntary and unintended sneer, and a sneer was so unlike Matt the fact that he didn't notice it fit him. He wasn't perfect, but the imperfections made Maren feel voracious for him. He wore a golfer's cap and his longish hair stuck out in under it, and he wore a t-shirt from a Dave Matthews concert.

After he smiled his crooked smile at Cynthia, he looked twice at Maren. "Hey stranger." His eyes lit up further and then Maren saw him do something men had only begun to do, which was to take in the full length of her with their eyes. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Actually, we brought our own," Maren said, and held up the vodka. Maren remembered being clever with Matt, and the alcohol and the new attention he was paying her and the sunset over the water was making her feel euphoric, like the pain killers she used to take. This boy with a hard body paying attention to her, even if he looked vaguely like a dromedary, wanting to get her up in the master bedroom of his parents' lake house. And he asked, and she went.

I will never be able to teach this boy anything more than what I just taught him, Maren thought. Which is good, since I certainly don't want to tutor him any more now. Too weird. She was staring at a lick of blonde hair coming out of the top of her aqua comforter. The lump underneath the comforter was sizeable, and began to stir. She'd caught this one on the off-season from the college wrestling team, but he was still a big chunk of muscle with a square jaw and buggy eyes like a little French Bulldog's. She'd begun to prefer shorter men anyway. She liked to wrap around them like they were low, warm boulders, springing one to the next.

The lump began to move out of the blankets and Maren gently lowered herself back onto her pillow from her elbow and pretended to sleep. He got out of bed and she heard him slide his blue boxer briefs up and pop the elastic against his skin. Then, gently—how irritatingly gently!—she heard the plastic wand of the blinds turning and the shuffle of the blinds themselves opening and then there were stabs, just stabs of light all over her face. She groaned and put her arms over her eyes. She wished he would go.

"Hey," he said, ruffling her hair.

She peeked out of the comforter with one eye and gave a forced smile. "I have a lot of work to do."

"Still want lox and bagels?"

Her promises to him came back to her like nips in her dry, hungover brain. Breakfast. She'd been out at a party with Cynthia, one of those awful frat parties she now attended regularly. They'd invited the new pledges, and she and Cynthia had been excited for the new material.

"A Yankee boy," she'd said last night, rubbing her hands against his cheeks and squishing them together like a fish, just to see if he'd let her get away with it. They'd been sitting on the sofa in the living room, making out. Cynthia had left with another freshman, a tall, lanky boy with circular Benjamin Franklin glasses, not Cynthia's usual type. Maren knew she'd have the apartment to herself when she took this boy back.

"A Jewish Yankee boy," he'd corrected in labored speech through his compressed mouth and cheeks.

She could get away with much more than squishing a boy's face together to make a fish face these days. She'd had boys from all four classes now. A soccer player, a math major who happened not to realize he looked like a kind of Lord Byron if you got his plaid grandpa sweater and pleated khakis off and drunkenly wrapped his head in a pillowcase, a poly sci major (a decided mistake), and now this little wrestler with hair and body like a dwarfed lion and a face like a French Bulldog.

They'd done it quickly and industriously, and after that he snuggled in, nuzzling her neck. "Can I sleep here?" he'd asked. She'd debated, but waited too

long to answer. "I'll get you some good lox and bagels tomorrow. I know a great place in the Fernwood Shopping place, couple from New Jersey runs it." It was tempting to have him dote on her for a couple of hours in the morning, depending on her hangover. And now he was trying to make good on the breakfast thing, and all she wanted was for him to leave and to take six ibuprofens and drink diet ginger ale and watch *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* with Cynthia, the TV show they could agree upon and had bought all seasons of on DVD between the two of them.

"Why don't you leave me your number?" she asked. He happily scrawled it on one of her pink sticky notes, then handed the pad and pen to her. She narrowed her eyes.

"I'll call *you*," she said.

Cynthia came home half an hour after the wrestler left. *Ely* the pink piece of paper said.

"Buffy?" Maren groaned from the sofa from under the tiger print fleece blanket they'd picked out together on a Target run.

"Please," Cynthia agreed. She went to the refrigerator and poured herself some water from the pitcher.

"I saw you go home with Ely last night," Cynthia said.

"Yep," Maren turned on the TV. Her phone buzzed against the wooden coffee table, and she saw Matt Buchanan in blue digital letters on the screen.

"He's cute," said Cynthia.

"So fucking annoying," Maren said.

"Ely already?"

"Matt."

Cynthia walked over from the kitchen and sat on the couch, pulling Maren's blanketed legs on top of her. "He's really being kind of a pussy about this."

Maren grunted in agreement as she took a sip of Cynthia's water.

"I know if I got fat again, at least Ely wouldn't pity me. He wouldn't give me the time of day. But Matt, who knows. Besides, it's like, we did it a couple of times, I don't want to marry you right?"

Cynthia flicked on the TV.

"I know the type."

"Wait," Maren said, squinting. Cynthia turned the TV back off. The light from the window in the living room was streaming across them and Maren stood up and walked over to the window. She drew the curtains and darkness filled the room, then sat back down, folding Cynthia's legs back over her.

"I'm just glad we've got each other," Cynthia said. She patted Maren's thigh. "I'm glad you're better from your surgery. I feel like it changed you. Really opened you up."

Maren thought about those days of struggling to breath in the hospital room, staring up at the unending moonscape of the white ceiling. She thought about trying to turn herself over those first few days, of Nurse Huckleberry having to wipe her when she bled all over the sheets. The streams of red vegetable soup shooting out of her mouth and nose. She thought about the times she'd tentatively asked Cynthia to eat with her in the cafeteria before her surgery, she thought of Matt's pitying grey eyes, eyes that became little grabby grey claws. And they were grabbing at that little black gleaming thing inside her. And she wouldn't let him, Matt, or anyone—man or woman—touch it, ever. She'd earned this thing, staring up at that hospital ceiling, for that crude Microsoft Paint drawing, for all the pitying door-holding exchanges. She knew that there had been a shift to protect this growing thing, in her mind, but it was just that she couldn't really *feel* the shift or even the thing itself, like the part of her side at the bottom of her stomach where all the nerves hadn't quite come back. She knew it was there, knew it protected her organs, the metal bracket in her spine, but it was numb to the touch. She shook her head, barely a twitch, and her mind went dark again, dark as the TV screen she and Cynthia faced.

"I'm just glad I did it sooner rather than later," Maren said to Cynthia. "The surgery." Cynthia fingered the edge of the blanket, a silence coming between them. "I'm glad we're closer now too," Maren finished. She smiled at Cynthia and squeezed the lacquered toenails that were painted the same red

color as her own. She pressed play on the remote control and tried to forget just how hard it had seemed to change everything, when all she'd had to do was agree to the knife.

BILLY

I was the last one who saw our grandmother alive. She took me to my yellow bus in the church parking lot before she drowned. She was dressed in a full leather outfit, which she wore without irony, fringed on the legs and arms like Daniel Boone. She always stayed with my father and not Billy's when she came to Durham. When I kissed her cheek goodbye it felt oily and thin against my own skin; she had never used sunscreen and scoffed at seat belts and she always swam alone in the pool in back of her house, though it was cold in the late afternoon in the mountains for most of the year. She had a stroke. She'd lived in the house alone for nine years, and she swam alone that day, too, after she got back to the house. She was the end of what Billy and I could share.

Six hours after our grandmother dropped me off at the bus, my cousin Billy must have been in school, like me, in the first grade, cutting green circles and blue squares from grainy construction paper, with the multi-colored scissors that made edges rough and feathery, sounding out phonics, the green frog going guh guh guh. The man who came by to fix the heater found her. The police called my father, whose number was first by her phone. My father called his brother, Billy's father. I can see Billy's father's stern face hovering in the thin vertical glass window of the classroom doorway, hand poised on the door knob and eyes as

wide and vacant as my own father's had been when he and my mother came for me, but fatter, less handsome, with a bald crescent gleam on the top of his father's head. Our fathers were born three years apart in the early 50's, and now worked for the same law firm in Durham; Billy and I were born less than a week apart in June of 1980. We were often mistaken for twins when we were young, but never just for brothers.

The objects I saw the weekend of our grandmother's death stuck more in my mind than any one person. The edges of the babysitter's fingernails, white as baby teeth, that she filed while she watched MTV, Billy's brother George and my twin baby sisters corralled like rabbits in a playpen in front of her while our parents were at the cemetery. My grandmother had left a shirt on the floor of her closet. I remember the shirt well: it was white and had colorful beads sewn on to the front in the shape of a thunderbird. Billy's eyes caught mine when he found me there, on the floor, pressing the wet, rough front of it to my face. Instead of running, he gazed at me, mouth parted, as if it were his right to watch me like this. "Why are you watching me?" I screamed, mucous and tears falling into my mouth. I reached for the first heavy thing I could curl my hand around, a smooth wooden shoe tree. He wouldn't even move then. I remember the slow swelling of the goose egg on his hairline by the dark widow's peak we shared, yellow in the middle and green around the edges, then tinged with plum.

In one picture my mother has of us, framed, our widow's peaks are like two matching chevrons, his pointing to a slender, wan face with bright blue eyes, mine to a handsome, ruddy face with a proud gaze and eyes the color of cola. I do miss that blessing of boyish boyhood, of being a beautiful, strong boy without a trace of effeminacy when everyone, including Billy, worshipped my freedom and my mistakes equally, saying, like the time I threw the shoe tree at Billy's head, almost with pride at my selfish violence, that it was just *what boys do*. Even the arm I have draped around Billy in the picture is placed with indifference, thrown about him as if around a little sister or a brittle great uncle.

That weekend, when the adults were gone to attend to the burial, we were turned loose in the house as usual. Our late grandmother's house was long and sprawling and set atop a hill overlooking the town of West Jefferson. It had all the modern, fashionable conventions of the 70's, when the grandfather we'd never known made his money buying up real estate at the birth of the Appalachian tourist boom. There were three long vertical windows in front of the front staircase, to the right of the front door. They were covered in two story strands of beads, translucent azure and amber, impossibly long and fantastical. Billy sat on the stairs and covered himself in them, making his own jeweled world, pressing his face against the window while I climbed the crab apple tree in the front yard, his eyes tracking me.

We stayed in the flag room, our fathers' old room, as we would continue to do throughout our childhoods. It felt confusing and almost menacing, the chaos of the signal flags. Billy always fell asleep long before me, breathing loudly and asthmatically on his back through his open mouth, and I would pore over the flags in the glow of the orange night light. The wallpaper had hundreds printed on it. There was the blue plus sign on white background, the yellow and red checkered one, the red X, and the black dot on the chartreuse square that was like an open cirrhotic eye. We begged our fathers to decode it for us. One time they sat down at the old Formica dining table, the same dining table that overlooked the kidney-shaped pool, and we hovered around them as they wrote out the letters, a flag legend in front of them. A-F-J-Y-U, we hadn't believed them that it had meant nothing. Try it on the diagonal, we asked. The same meaningless letters. I remember the dissonant ring of the ice in my father's glass of bourbon as he fingered through the dusty encyclopedia from the 60's with his other hand looking for the flag legend, and Billy's father beside, staring off at something in the corner of the room I could not see. They could make sense of it for us. We only had each other to make sense of that empty house, reliving the shock of our grandmother's death more than we could ever remember her life.

There were stacks and stacks of library books my grandmother had left on the silver-flecked Formica dining room table. I remember my father's flat tone as we entered the house—we were the first ones because Billy's family was always

late – “I guess she was planning on taking these back to the library.” Why had he said that? I wondered. As if she had simply forgotten to take them. It was the same way I would later wonder why they hadn’t filled in the pool in the back yard, how Billy and I were encouraged to swim in it throughout the rest of those nervous childhood weekends at the now-vacant house. How winter came as a relief because the pool coated over with a lid of ice and we were allowed to play mostly inside. Billy loved the winter because he loved the downstairs game room, which was set up with a pinball machine, a pool table, and a jukebox full of records. He loved to sing to Anita Bell and Elvis, and I was content to be his drummer, pounding on empty fruit crates.

I was interested in Billy, intrigued by his weakness as I was caught in my own brutish vitality, and in my own way I must have loved him. We grew apart, but saw each other for holidays enough that we were never too far from each other’s consciousnesses. On that snowy night in our dead grandmother’s house 16 years later, with his girlfriend, Lana, there seemed to be nothing left to push us together but the snow piling up against the side of the cream colored brick house and the coconut smell of my grandmother’s tanning oil still lingering in the puce shag carpets. Our fathers never talked about our grandmother’s death, but the money they spent keeping up with a three-story vacation house on priceless real estate said enough of their incomplete bereavement in itself. Since the beginning of that year, we’d heard murmurs of them selling it. Our families

rarely went up there anymore. Billy and I were nearing our tenure at our colleges and our fathers were moving toward retirement in their law firm in Durham. They wanted us to have one last set of memories of that house, I knew. And I used that unsaid desire as leverage to buy us that last weekend there.

My own hesitant entrance into medical school hovered in the near-future. We were 22 by then; I was a semester away from graduating from Duke and Billy from Washington and Lee. Dad permitted Billy and me and our girlfriends go up to the house, though he made me promise to tell Billy's father we'd sleep in separate rooms from the girls. Really what I wanted was a break from school and a weekend of drinking and sex and fresh air, away from the Gothic stone of Duke with its pulsing florescent innards; it felt like living inside a toothache. But the girl I was seeing broke up with me several days before we were going to leave. She said she didn't want to date someone who said so little about how they felt but did so much about it. She'd found out that I'd had a fling with a girl on her hall the month before. It was true that I hadn't said a thing to her. I tried to contest, weakly, but quickly lost interest in the fight.

Earlier on the night we arrived, when we were cleaning up from the frozen pizzas we'd cooked for dinner, and Lana and Billy were in the kitchen washing the dishes, I remember wiping off the kitchen table, staring out the back window of the dining room onto the pool. The lip of the ring cast by the security light shone onto it. Its water was murky and covered in a thin layer of brown ice.

Our grandmother's open eyeballs pressed against the thin skin of ice. When I turned around to the lit empty dining room, I felt no relief. Then Lana came in and put her hand on the back of my neck.

It's always this moment I come back to, and not my disembodied fingers on the pool table downstairs. Over and over, the pressure of the back of Lana's hand, still warm and damp from the dishes, on the razor-buzzed hairs of my upper neck. Maybe it's me, there's something the matter with a person who only remembers the good parts preceding the black things that happen and not the consequences to be paid later, not the stitches and wires, the fingers of my dominant left hand that both move together whenever I wave, or grasp at something, stuck together forever in fearful unison.

It started with Lana a year before that in a lower part of the Appalachians, farther north, during an ice storm. The house Billy shared for his last two years at college was an old Victorian painted mint-green with brown and peach gingerbread accents around the windows. It wasn't uncommon in Lexington, VA, for the students to rent some of the more rickety old houses on Main Street. It looked haunted from the outside; inside, that charm was lost on its pocked hardwood floors and sagging light fixtures. It was my habit to stay on Billy's floor instead of in the extra room downstairs where the boys stored their bikes. It was warmer up in Billy's room, and I was used to sleeping near him.

It was rare to have an ice storm in Durham, where we grew up, but Billy and I had gotten used to getting iced in at our grandmother's house in West Jefferson. One winter, we were about 10, it was so bad our fathers had once had to call out of work on a Sunday night, and our mothers called our schools the next morning. It was like we'd been given new, more exciting lives, like the lost boys, and we brought out the old aircraft carrier model our fathers had built in their boyhood and positioned the thousands of tiny army men on it, peering out from minuscule binoculars, tiny plastic stomachs against the kitchen table around the ship with feet in tiny flippers. Our parents got drunk on Singapore Slings and played poker, eating goldfish and drinking sweet pink liquid around the aircraft carrier center piece. The tiny soldiers remained at their stations, spying on insatiable gods. We sat under the table, playing with plastic dinosaurs and pulling wads of pink and grey gum off the bottom of the table our fathers had stuck under it when they were boys.

The time I got iced in at Billy's college house in Virginia was when Billy had first gotten together with Lana and I could no longer stay in Billy's room, so I swept away the leaves on the hardwood floor and put my sleeping bag downstairs in the room where Billy and his roommates kept their bikes. Then I went back up to where they were drinking Jim Beam in Billy's room. He had these huge white pillar candles on the mantle of the old white bricked-up fireplace facing his bed, things I would have been called a fag and worse for in

my fraternity house at Duke. For the first time, I felt a sour twang of jealousy for the way Billy had carved a place in the world for himself by gentle attrition rather than with the tectonics I always employed. This gentleness had carved out an originality and verve that I would always lack. It also attracted gentle girls.

Lana changed the records on the turn table while we drank. She had two thin braids in her hair that hooked together in the back, and the rest of her hair hung down like the even surface of a black lake. Her face was pretty but plain; she never wore makeup, and this lent a kind of unbroken frontier feeling for me, honest and flat as the Midwest, where she'd come to college from. I asked her what music she was putting on. She was always trying to guess the music that Billy wanted, but he was fickle about music just like everything else, like a girl. When the record hit a series of songs he didn't want, he'd pull at his earlobe and grin sheepishly, and she'd get up and change it. He had long eyelashes, the shadows of which splayed on the tops of his high cheekbones in the candlelight. He'd shot up thin and tall, but with these little hips. He would buckle his belts so tight like he was proud of his tiny waist and the remainder of his belt he'd let just flop around by his crotch. But I noticed the hips under that tightly belted waist, and they repulsed me. The idea constantly nagged me that I could use my long, bunched, crew-rowing shoulders to wrap his frame into a ball and throw him out onto the ice-splintered wind of the night and he'd be blown right away, leaving me and Lana in the room alone.

My father always said to me that what begins in chaos ends in chaos, but what I began to want with Lana was not right before the fight at our dead grandmother's house, it was that night they made me stay in the bike room in Virginia. I suppose that was doomed just as our grandmother's death had doomed Billy and me from the start. We'd listened to records and sipped on the whiskey the whole night until we could barely stand how good and young we felt. Then I was shifting in my sleeping bag, alone, shivering on the hardwood floor, thinking of Lana.

I got up to go to the bathroom. I made a conscious decision to go to the one upstairs. The door to Billy's room was cracked and the candles were still flickering, and I heard the light sounds of Billy's open-mouthed sleep, that sleep I knew so well while I stared at the signal flag walls. The hall was peaceful, like a passageway from wakefulness into dream. She slipped out of the room just as I was slipping in, in only cotton underwear and one of Billy's t-shirts that her breasts keened through in the drafty hallway. She crossed her arms over them quickly.

"Go ahead," I motioned.

"It's fine," she said. "I heard you coming."

"I'm too cold down there."

She offered to get the space heater. I said I would be okay, but she was persistent. When she came back down she had the whiskey bottle, and she was bundled up.

"Did Billy show you the roof?" She motioned toward the bedroom, and in a voice with more than a hint of frustration, she said, "He's passed out." I could see, then, that Billy's weakness in some ways also sickened her, and that in some ways, like me, she must have loved how it fed her.

"I don't see how getting on the roof would make me any warmer." I said this in spite of myself. I was immediately filled by paralyzing regret, followed up about wanting to see Main Street from up there. There's something that always felt like betraying myself when I passed up an opportunity to spend time with Lana alone, and this one felt especially important, to underscore, somehow, the differences between Billy and me where our parents and the rest of the world had failed to do so. We went out one of the dormer windows in the attic. Main Street was lit in slushy puddles of greenish white from the florescent street lamps. She sidled close to me, out of innocent need of warmth.

Under her down vest, she felt small in my hands. I could hold her back and my thumb reached around to just under her breast. I could feel the flannel of her shirt move softly and loosely against her skin. It was bitter cold and I held her to my own unzipped body for warmth.

This was a year before Billy and I had the fight. Unattached, digits like fingers and toes survive for a remarkably long time, especially when cleanly cut as mine were. You don't want to put them in water, though, as they will shrivel up and the tissue will become unmatchable quickly. Ideally, you want to reattach the fingers before six hours, but they may be viable for up to twelve. It depends how much damage was done to the muscle, since it is the first to die.

A year after the rooftop night in Virginia, we were down in the basement game room at our grandmother's house, shooting pool on the antique pool table, the one with all the old cigarette burns in the wood on the sides. I said I was going to go outside for a smoke and Lana said she'd like one too. Billy had quit months before in anticipation; he had decided, after a lackluster academic career, to apply to dental school. I could see him in a dentist's office, putting on the cartoons for the kids with the giant talking molars, punning on "two thirty" and "tooth hurty."

Something had happened that night on the roof of Billy's rented Victorian house, the night Lana and I stayed up. It was that I allowed the final brute turn in me, holding her against me in the cold, the same turn that came from throwing that shoe horn at Billy's head. It was that I could not help myself. It was that I had been told "take" was to be a boy and to not take meant not that you were a girl, but that you were not even there, really, and it only got worse as you got older. It was that night I realized it would only get worse without our

grandmother there to save us from each other; our fathers couldn't help us any more than when we were two boys trying to understand our first death, and they were pushing us into that swimming pool only a few months later. But there was Lana.

Billy was inside playing pinball on the old machine. The muted dinging pulsed against the door. We were outside the basement game room, two burnt out stubs between our fingers. We could see the ice on the pool glinting in the security light. The gin from the bottle was gone, and I dropped the empty bottle into the gathering drift of snow against the house.

Some time passed, and Lana and I tangled. She tasted sweet but kissed shallowly, and her mouth was cold from the air. I touched her just a little roughly, but she eased in my hands.

There was the sound of the door opening. Billy pulled me inside; I let myself be pulled. We were grappling, and I was surprised at the strength in his hands. He gripped at my t-shirt and threw me against the pool table. I stood up, pushed him off, and he stumbled back.

Billy walked to the wall and took down one of the Civil War swords that had been there since we were boys. He walked back over, I was trying to stand up from the pool table, pressing back against it. He let the sword fall on my hand as I pushed myself up. Billy saw my hand missing fingers when I stood up. My hand was a mass of pulsing blood, the severed fingers in blackening pools on the

green felt. Before Lana came in and started yelling, he looked at me. And then, with those long eyelashes pointed down, he smiled a little as he gasped. That was when I saw that Billy too was like me, but that he did not fear his own weakness. He used it.

I went down to the small hospital in Boone to have them sewn back on, but they didn't heal quite right, even with the wires you can see on the x-ray. The more refined dreams, the possibility of cardiac or neurosurgery, bled out while I held the fingers wrapped in Saran wrap in the car.

In the first memory I have of Billy after our grandmother's death, I am sitting in the front hall of her house, and I am playing with plastic dinosaurs my parents gave me. When she died earlier that day, and we all had to drive up to West Jefferson, they stopped at a drug store and said I could have any toy I wanted while we were at the house, while they were tending to her burial. We waited for Billy's family in the front hall, and when they came through the door I held up the dinosaur and made a guttural sound, beckoning him over. Though I remember being guided strongly to prefer plastic army men by my father, I had chosen these for Billy at the drug store. Billy was permitted to play with all kinds of toys; plastic ponies and dinosaurs included. His face was red like a tomato and he could not get enough air from his crying, not stopping to lick the mucus from his upper lip. There was something that sickened me about seeing him act like that so publicly, so much so that it overtook my small body. His parents fawned

over him, rubbing his small back on either side. I lowered the dinosaur back to the cold floor, confused by this new disgust. Billy had sustained his tears for hours longer than I had, practically a whole day. I fingered the pointed nose of the brontosaurus. Even at the age of seven, Billy and I and many other boys could tell you how a brontosaurus was not a real great lizard, only parts of what was later discovered to be two separate dinosaurs with other names, just a confusion of bones.