

BRIGHT WORLD

Stories

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### The Nothing State

School closed for snow for one day in January. That morning, Dani showed up at the back door while my mom and I were still sipping our coffee and staring out at the gloom. She was wearing a gray fuzzy trooper hat that belonged to her new boyfriend Zeke, with her red hair hanging down over her shoulders. She was smiling as she rapped on the glass. She didn't talk to me at school anymore, but I guess this meant that within the neighborhood we could still be friends.

I went over to the door and paused with my hand on the lock. I didn't know why she was here, and I was not all that eager to find out. Dani was what might be called a problem child. Ever since we were little kids she had brought on trouble, blaming me for broken toys, scraped knees, trampled gardens, which evolved into imbroglios concerning filthy novels, cigarettes, condoms, identical homework, phantom sleepovers at my house. And now she had as good as disappeared at school, sucked up into the realm of impenetrable cloud people who did not so much talk to you as rinse over you, leaving you soggy and shivering. And yet. Here she was, coming to hang out with me when I thought I'd lost her for good. I was lonely and gullible-

hopeful, and she could be charming as the devil when she wanted to be. On the back stoop, she clasped her hands together like a prayer and made a pleading face. I opened the door without smiling.

‘Good morning, friends,’ she said, bringing in a blast of cold.

‘Hello, Danielle,’ my mother said, sounding froggy-throated and sedate. It was the first time I had heard her speak that morning.

‘Would you be terribly distressed if I stole Lucy away from you for snow day fun?’

‘Not at all,’ my mom said, staring at nothing. ‘I’ll just be here if you need me.’

‘Thank you thank you,’ Dani said, and she wrapped me in an icy hug. Her hair was cold and smelled like wet woods and cigarettes.

I took my coffee cup from the table and Dani led the way into my bedroom.

‘Behold,’ she said, pulling down the cord on the blinds so that they shot up and I could see the gray sky between the trees and the white world outside. My room looked shamefully messy when there was light to see it by. ‘Freedom is the natural state of man,’ Dani said, her arms outstretched. ‘They want us at those little desks with our little pencil sharpeners and eraser caps. But the forces of nature want us to be free.’

Somehow she could say stuff like that without sounding idiotic. I sat down on my bed to finish my coffee while she went into my closet to get out my winter clothes.

‘Can you believe we’re graduating?’ I said. ‘Talk about freedom. We’ll be free forever.’

‘I’ve been free all along,’ she said. She pulled out my winter coat, a long navy blue overcoat with brass buttons and a fur collar. It belonged to my grandmother. ‘You still have this?’

‘What’s wrong with it?’

‘Nothing, if you’re ninety.’

‘Maybe I’m mature for my age.’

She threw it into my lap. ‘Start layering,’ she said.

She took my seat on the bed when I stood up to get my clothes from the dresser.

‘What do you think it’s like out there?’ I asked, pulling on my jeans.

‘Out in the snow, or out in the world?’

‘Both.’

‘Well I can tell you from experience that snow is cold,’ she said.

‘Yeah, I think I read that somewhere.’

‘And I don’t know what the world is like, but I assume it’s better than school.’ She picked up a picture of us from my bedside table. ‘I guess I’ll know for sure soon. Sooner than you, at any rate.’

‘As if.’ I got out a sweatshirt. ‘I don’t think bumming around town lifeguarding at the municipal pool counts as real-world experience.’

‘Zeke and I are moving to California after we graduate,’ she said while my head was inside the sweatshirt. I paused in the darkness before I pulled it the rest of the way down. She was sitting on the bed behind me, and I looked at her in the mirror. She put the picture back on the bedside table, smiling at it like it was something cute and pitiable, a little kid with a snotty nose or a three-legged dog. Then she found a loose patch on my quilt and started picking at the fluff inside.

‘Stop that,’ I said. She looked startled.

‘Sorry,’ she said, putting her hand behind her back and smiling her get-out-of-trouble smile.

‘I thought Zeke was going to college,’ I said.

‘He is. In California.’

‘What are you going to do there?’

‘Live,’ she said. ‘There’s a world outside of school. Maybe nobody told you.’

I looked at my reflection. It was dissatisfactory, but I did not know what to do about it, so I put my hat on and turned toward Dani.

‘Let’s trade hats,’ she said, and she jumped up to pull off my toboggan and replace it with the trooper hat. Then she took my coat from the top of the dresser and helped me put it on. She held me at arm’s length and laughed. ‘Now you look like a Russian bag lady.’

I flipped up the fur collar and held it to cover my mouth and nose. ‘Excoose me, vere is your cat food aisle?’ I said.

Dani laughed. ‘This way, madam,’ she said, and she grabbed my hand to lead me out.

They weren’t kidding about the snow. Usually they cancelled school at the first whisper of frozen precip, and we would spend the morning trying to pinch up enough to build a mini snowman out of what looked like just a heavy frost. Today it was enough to cover up the sticks and leaves, at least. It crunched under our feet and made our sneakers soggy as we made our way through the trees toward the railroad tracks that led from my patch of woods to hers.

‘Misery,’ she said.

‘That is what we are experiencing,’ I said.

There was a stick shooting up from the snow at a wonky angle, and Dani stepped out of her way to snap it with her foot. ‘I can’t wait to get out of this place,’ she said.

‘Doesn’t it snow in California?’ I asked.

‘Probably not,’ she said. ‘I’m pretty sure it’s like mostly beaches.’

‘The Golden State.’

‘I’ll be one of the shining people.’

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘I think I’d miss the snow every once in a while. And the fall.’

‘You would,’ she said. ‘You’re an indoorsy type. If it weren’t for me you’d have probably spent about half of high school in hibernation.’

We crunched a few steps without talking, letting the sudden harshness dissipate. She glanced over her shoulder at me, checking to see if I was upset.

‘And if it weren’t for you I’d probably be in the clink,’ she said. We laughed.

‘The clink,’ I said. ‘The fuzz woulda gotcha and thrown ya in the clink.’

‘I’d be beggin’ for a drink a water,’ she said.

We walked in silence, smiling at the ground.

‘California,’ I said. ‘Does it even exist?’

‘No one knows,’ Dani said. ‘The government is sending me to investigate.’

‘What if there’s nothing out there?’

‘I think you’ve got it backwards,’ she said. ‘The something is out there. This is the nothing state. They should put it on our welcome sign. Welcome to North Carolina: The Nothing State.’

‘That seems a little extreme.’

‘Because it’s too nice you mean?’

‘Come on. You know you don’t have to say that. You can move away without burning everything behind you.’

‘Maybe everything behind me deserves to be burned.’

I didn't say anything in response to this, for fear that she would feel the need to one-up me on principle with something even worse. I was ready for this line of conversation to be done. I was going to be here for four more years, and I was not interested in thinking of my whole youth with Dani as a waste, like I was now just going to disappear in a puff of forgotten things, along with the rest of the Nothing State. Although thinking back on the past few years it seemed like that process had been underway for a while.

Then something caught my eye. It was next to a fallen tree trunk, a deer's antler like a smooth yellow branch sticking out of the snow.

'Hey,' I said. I went over and kicked it with my sneaker, unearthing the rest of the skull and a clump of dirt that scattered onto the white snow.

Dani was behind me. 'Dang, look at the size of those antlers,' she said.

'It must have been enormous,' I said.

'And popular with the ladies.'

I bent down to pick it up.

'Ew, don't touch it,' Dani said. My hand was already on it, so I pulled it out of the snow. The antlers were yellow and the bones of the face were turning brown, stained by the dirt. The bottom part of its jaw had eroded away, and hanging down where there might have been teeth was a clump of roots that had grown up into the hollow head and were clinging to the skull through the empty eye sockets.

Next to me, Dani was covering her face with her hands and peeping between her fingers. I waved the skull toward her.

'Ew ew ew,' she said, laughing and running a few steps in the other direction. 'I can't believe you touched it.'



‘It’s just bone,’ I said. ‘There’s nothing on it anymore.’

‘It’s still gross,’ she said. ‘I wouldn’t have touched it.’

‘Well we’re lucky I’m here then,’ I said. ‘Or we might never have been face to face with a real live former deer.’

‘A dream fulfilled.’

I held it with both antlers and looked into the craters that had held its eyes. ‘You call this nothing?’ I said.

‘That is the definition of nothing,’ she said.

‘Look at it,’ I said. ‘It’s awesome.’

‘Yeah, it’s awesome if you’re a fifth-grade boy. Put it down.’

I looked at her. She had turned away and was lighting up a cigarette. A cloud of smoke expanded around her head like a halo. She really knew how to make a person feel like an idiot. I thought how I must have looked in my stupid Russian bag lady outfit, acting like some goober from the Nothing State, treating a found animal skull like a treasure.

I looked back at it. It was pretty heavy for nothing. It looked like some horrible mask Dani would have wanted to wear on Halloween back in middle school when she was in her goth phase, with its imposing antlers perfectly intact, maze-like nasal cavities and the sides of its nose like long pointed claws, jagged mossy front teeth with plant roots hanging down like feelers or the hairy teeth of a baleen whale. I could see us having this exact same scene back then, but with the roles reversed, and me pretending I thought it was cool to try to please her. But that Dani was not this Dani. She was always changing, in ways and for reasons that I could not quite follow, and it never failed to trip me up.

I tried to communicate with the deer skull telepathically. *I don't think you're nothing, deer head. I think you're pretty cool.* Then I put it back down next to the log. I knew my hands weren't really dirty, but I wiped them on my jeans anyway.

Dani was walking away. She had only taken one or two drags, but already she was stubbing out the cigarette on a tree and tossing it into the snow. I marched up behind her.

'Why did you come to my house this morning?' I asked.

Dani kept walking.

'Why don't you talk to me at school anymore?'

She didn't answer.

I pushed on her shoulder blade, but she didn't turn.

'Stop,' she said.

I knew I was provoking her, but I didn't care. I wanted to get to the bottom of all of this. 'Why should I stop?'

'You're embarrassing yourself.'

'What does that mean?'

Dani turned back towards me and stopped me in my tracks. For a moment we were face to face. She had gotten pretty as we had known she would, but she still had freckles, and her hair had stayed thin and baby soft. Her nose and cheeks were pink from the cold, but she was frowning and her lips were tight together. Maybe this is the problem with growing up side by side with someone, that it almost doesn't matter what they turn out to be. It could be disappointing or even loathsome, but when you look at their face you forget all of that stuff. It's just the same old face, and you feel the same as when you were a little kid just taking what you got, because you didn't know any better.

‘You’re confusing me,’ I said.

‘It’s not hard to understand, if you’re not slow,’ she said.

‘I’m not slow. Why, because I picked up a deer skull? Because I’m happy here and I don’t want to disappear out into nowhere?’

‘Because you dwell on the past too much,’ she said. ‘I try to be nice to you, but sometimes it’s just too pathetic.’

I could feel my face turning red. I guess I was glad to hear her say something honest, even if the truth was shitty and sad and made me feel heavy and dumb. It made me feel strong, though, in the indiscriminating way that a big stupid hulk is strong. I could have punched her right then, or strangled her, but instead I said, ‘Well, if you’re trying to be nice to me, you suck at it.’

She smiled. She took my face in her hands and said, ‘Listen. You’ll be fine. Get a boyfriend, make some plans. Keep doing your thing in school. You’ll grow up, you’ll say nasty things about me to your college friends, you’ll feel better. You won’t miss me.’

I couldn’t look into her eyes. Between the trees behind her I could see the clearing and the railroad tracks.

‘Look,’ she said, ‘this isn’t how I wanted today to go. I wanted us to have fun or something.’ She sighed. ‘But I think I’m going over to Zeke’s house instead of going home and playing Pretty Pretty Princess with you, or whatever. Anyway you can still tag along if you want to. Do you want to?’

There were a lot of things to say to that. I said, ‘No.’

She switched our hats back and walked away. I stood watching her go. When she had disappeared along the curve of the tracks I went down into the snow to lie out and wait for the carrion birds.

For a while I lay contemplating an actual nothing state, a thing that was by definition impossible to think about. My hair was wet from the snow and sticking to my neck, and I wondered how long it would take to freeze to death if I stayed there until nightfall. I stared at the motionless white of the sky and watched the moisture escape my body in clouds of breath that hung over my face and then dissipated out into the atmosphere. I was in some kind of paralysis. I was not even shivering. I thought of my breaths floating upward like incense offerings, the way people burn stuff up to tell the world that resistance is futile, we are all going to lose our most favorite things, up to and including our lives, so we might as well try to make something useful out of the burning, out of the smoke.

Soon the snow was soaking through my jeans and the cold was burning my skin. Lying in stillness became very unpleasant. I turned onto my side, but that way my face was in the snow, which was even worse. Suddenly, out of instinct, I stood up. Everything looked the same as before, except that Dani's footprints had unearthed some mud into the snow.

I didn't feel like going home. Our main street was a short way down the tracks in the opposite direction from Dani's house, so I started walking.

Down in the ditch that ran alongside the road to town, I assessed the damage and determined that nothing too terrible had happened. My legs and vital organs were functioning. She had not extracted any of my skills or talents. Maybe things would look stupid and useless for a while, but life was long. The snow would melt. Spring would come, then summer, then school.

I reached the main street and went into the coffee shop where we usually hung out when we had nothing to do. Bill with the skinny neck and big hands was behind the counter. I asked for a coffee.

‘It’s okay it’s okay,’ he said loudly, to himself, as he got the coffee and put it on the counter. Sometimes Bill got stressed out for no reason.

I handed him the money and a penny fell between his fingers.

‘It’s okay it’s okay it’s okay,’ he said. He was having a hard time grasping the penny from the counter.

‘Sorry, Bill,’ I said, picking it up and handing it to him. I hadn’t meant to stress him out even more.

He pushed the bills into their slots in the cash register and threw in the change like it was something nasty, then he went back to sit on his stool.

I sat in the tall-backed chair in the corner and pulled my knees up to my chest, warming my hands on the coffee mug. The man in the long glamorous fur coat was there, the one who came by every other week or so when it got cold. He was wearing sunglasses and sitting at one of the little round tables with his legs crossed, sipping a latte and glancing at me and Bill and over his shoulder like he was on the most wanted list. Dani and I had never spoken to him, but we figured he was from a more happening part of the state and came here because it was quaint. Or maybe he was permanently displaced, a hapless wanderer looking for anonymity. Maybe we were alone together, me and Bill and this fashionable gentleman.

Outside the snow was starting up again, but this time it was hard pellets that left little gray pockmarks on the fluffy white layer on the ground. The walk home would be wet and miserable. I sipped my coffee and thought of a day next week, or tomorrow, with the sun

shining, people carrying their unnecessary layers under their arms, melted snow running down the sidewalks, water drying up from boots and car tires leaving them crusted white with salt. The future held more days than I could comprehend, and all of them different, all of them strange.

### Pioneer

For a few days, they lived like pioneers.

Lee was home from Korea and had come to the altar in his dress blues to marry Daisy in the chapel where they'd first met as teenagers, at a mountain revival led by an itinerant preacher. Waiting outside the chapel, Daisy looked down the mountain toward the tangle of brush in the valley, closed her eyes and breathed in the fresh, thin air. She was calling back that night at the revival when they sat outside her tent and whispered until morning, talking of God and the mysterious movement of the spirit, watching the mourners that lay out in the clearing like the fallen on a battlefield, moaning with the pain of sin. Daisy had been shivering with excitement, and Lee put his arm around her to keep her warm and still.

'You sure this isn't too late for you?' he'd said. 'I hear that pretty girls like their sleep.'

'I could talk to you all night,' she said.

'I wouldn't mind it,' he said.

'All night and for the rest of my life,' she said.

'Listen to you,' he said. 'That's the spirit talking.'

Daisy opened her eyes to see the sun going down over the treetops. She straightened her white lacy gloves and smoothed the skirt on her yellow Sunday dress before she turned to pull back the big wooden door of the chapel. All alone, she walked up the aisle toward Lee and the minister and Lee's brother and sister to witness. She felt herself to be gliding, dazed by the resplendence of Lee's uniform and the painted glory of the risen Christ behind him. It was like being on the promontory of a ship, her face to the wind, closing in on the end of a two-year voyage.

The minister led her through the ritual motions, whispered words that she echoed to Lee, and suddenly, magically, she was a wife. Lee's face drew near. She kissed his familiar lips and touched the new and unfamiliar hardness of his jaw. The muscle there felt tight like a soldier's; it did not belong to the quiet, red-faced boy she'd met on the mountain. Then he pulled her close, and with her face against his chest, breathing in the warmth of him, she forgot her mother and father, her father's fist rattling the silverware on the kitchen table when she had announced her intentions to marry Lee. She forgot her old twin bed and the mobile that still hung over it, dangling daisies her father had carved when she was a baby. She forgot her job at the shop, following her father down rows of leather shoes, filling in where his polish brush had missed. She thought of her new home and family, the hog farm down east, feed and excrement and Lee's body beside her in bed forever.

That night they parked his truck at the foot of the mountain behind her old high school and walked hand in hand into the shadowy pines on the mountainside. She carried the quilt she had begun the day he shipped out. He carried a bottle of whiskey.

'Where'd that come from?' she asked.

'The ABC,' he said.



‘Oh, you’re smart,’ she said, slapping his arm.

He grinned. ‘And you’re pretty,’ he said.

It had gotten dark. They stopped to lie down when they heard the sound of a stream.

In the warmth and prickle of pine needles, Daisy felt the roughness of Lee’s cheek on her neck, breathed the scent of aftershave and whiskey and sweat. Then she shut her eyes, ready for him teach her how to navigate the only body she would ever know.

From above her, Lee radiated warmth. His sweat dripped down and stuck her skin to his. At times they broke apart and the cool air seemed to slip between them like a ghost. Daisy was quick to pull him back close, for warmth.

Afterwards, Daisy gathered up her quilt and wrapped them up in it. Lee was very nearly asleep. She tried to get warm under the blanket, but the breeze seemed to be coming down strong from the top of the mountain. It slipped in every place it could, and soon she was clinging to Lee like something desperate and wild. In a way, that seemed right. She felt almost like a wild thing now. She had done something great, something that was all her own, and it had made her wild and new. She felt she had crossed a threshold nobody had ever crossed before, into an unknown world, and it had given her a freedom so complete that it demanded right living, nothing lazy or imperfect would do. It felt possible to live as she had always intended, in the spirit of the pioneers, who left everything they had to build a new life worthy of a new world.

She woke in the morning with a fearsome thirst.

The sun was up, and hot even as it shone in patches through the treetops. She sat up. She was naked.

Lee was a little ways up the slope, lying on his front with his face half-buried in the soft pine brush. They must have gotten too hot in the night and separated, and also kicked away her quilt, which lay in a bunch at Lee's feet.

She admired the shine of sweat on his back, and how gentle he looked with his muscles soft, not so knotty tight like they'd been when he was awake. She wished she was one to sleep so deep. Maybe if she'd tried some of the whiskey.

She stumbled to her feet. The nakedness made her feel enormously tall, like her body was a long weed growing between her feet and her head. Her yellow dress hung over a tree branch, and she brushed it with her fingertips. It looked foreign and out-of-place in this wilderness. She had never much enjoyed being naked, not even by herself in the bath, but she could not imagine draping herself in layers of fussy yellow fabric, sweating as she was and wild as she felt here. Perhaps in this new world of hers one could walk naked and feel no shame.

The water sounded farther off than it had in the night. Likely they had rolled downhill, or perhaps she'd been more aware of the sounds of the woods when her vision was stripped by the dark. Either way, she was thirsty and her skin was beaded up with sweat. She wanted to taste something cool and clean, and lie in it until she was cool and clean too.

She knew where she wanted to end up, but she did not know the first step to get there. The woods looked just about the same on all sides. She closed her eyes and dug her toes into the damp pine needles, pretending she was an Indian guide who knew all the signs of water nearby. She sniffed the air. Mud and pine. And human, or perhaps that was still in her nose from the night before. She turned around twice with her eyes still closed, to pick a direction to walk in. She opened them and found that she was facing up the mountainside. With one last look at Lee

still lying on the forest floor, he and the blanket both looking a little crumpled and sad, she set out into the trees in search of the stream.

Daisy moved from tree to tree, thinking the word *stealth*. She examined each trunk, frowning and touching its scaly bark, then nodding as if it had told her where to go. She felt the ground with her bare feet and imagined that each patch she stepped on was a little wetter than the last. Every now and then she crouched and listened.

She thought of how Lee's face would light up when she came back with news of water, the warmth in his eyes when he smiled at her, that shy tight-lipped smile. She had not seen that smile since he'd come home, and she'd been trying to bring it back by clowning around, or with kisses and flirty looks. But he only grinned now, with his teeth bared, like somebody up to mischief, up to something mean and devilish. She wondered what navy friend he'd gotten that from, and why he thought it was the right way to look at her when she was trying to be silly or sweet.

The sound of the water was growing louder as she moved, which made the game exciting, as if she really had divining power and had not just made a lucky guess.

Daisy had never met Lee's mother and father, but she imagined that they were in tune with the land in a way that only farmers could be, in a way that she was not. She imagined Lee's mother in a knit shawl, teaching Daisy how to harvest the lush vegetable garden that grew behind the farm house. From the garden, Daisy could look toward the pens and watch Lee tending the hogs with his father, who was stoop-backed with wrinkled skin, all wiry muscle and bone. She imagined nights inside by a fire, Daisy and her mother-in-law sipping coffee with milk and working on the mending, while Lee and his father smoked a pipe and discussed the approaching season of hog reaping, calling it the 'harvest.' She would learn to love the land like they did, live

by it and from it, and not simply balanced on top of it on two flat feet, or kicking up clumps of it with four rubber tires.

The brush grew thick and tangled, and the space between the trees shrank, filled in with bushes and shrubs. She was getting close.

She dropped to her belly and crawled, trying to move like she pictured Lee powering through a forest in Korea, never minding the scratches on her shoulders and legs. Sometimes while Lee had been away, Daisy had imagined that she was fighting just as hard as Lee was in the small daily things she did—keeping away sickness, adding patches of color to her quilt, putting away dollars for savings. He was fighting for the future of their country, and she was fighting for their future together, so everything would be ready on that bright day when he came home again.

She crawled along the forest floor, nearing the stream, staking out the bright world that she and Lee would build and live in together. The sound of the water filled her ears, and the muddiness that she tasted with every breath was not her imagination.

She paused, her face low in the brush. It was just through the bushes.

She pictured bursting through them onto the muddy bank of a rushing river, storming the water, collapsing into icy cold and scattering a shoal of minnows. She would cover herself in the cold, fill her mouth and stomach with it. When Lee came to find her she would pull him into it, push him under until he fought his way out. His skin would glisten when he stood, and he would feel how cool the water was, and good, and pure. Maybe there were calmer waters further up the mountain, with bigger fish that they could stab with sharpened sticks and cook over the fires it was their human birthright to make. They could build a house and live in this place the rest of

their lives, a man and a woman and the dream of the frontier, Eden intact and there for the taking.

She leapt between the bushes and landed in a slick of mud. It slipped her, and she fell hard on her back. The fall was dizzying, and when she sat up the stream seemed far away, until she realized that was the size of it. At least at this bend, it was just a trickle between the rocks and a falls fit for Thumbelina's raft. She crawled toward it and cupped her hands under the drip, holding them there until there was enough for a decent swallow. The water was warm and tasted of sediment. It was scratchy going down, but its warmth fanned out and filled her stomach nicely. Her thirst was quenched.

Walking back to Lee, Daisy thought of her father for the first time since she had left home. She wondered what he was doing at that moment. It was Sunday, and midmorning. He no longer went to church with her mother. He was likely sitting on the front steps in his undershirt and suspenders, his gray hair uncombed, drinking a bottle of Coke. She wondered if he cared that she was gone, if he missed her, or if he'd gone ahead and said good riddance. She wondered if her mother was praying for her in church.

While she walked, she became aware of some shift inside her body that she could not place. She felt it in the chest and stomach mostly, but sometimes it would flash across her skin and remind her that she was every inch exposed. It made her blush, though she had thought that shame did not exist in these parts, in this new life she had entered.

She spotted Lee still sleeping, a pale patch on the brown floor of the woods, with her blanket a jumble of colors at his feet. She crept closer and peeked out from behind a tree, looking on like a trapper observing an animal he hoped to catch. She watched until Lee stirred, watched

his muscles flex and stretch. His skin rippled beautifully when he sat up, coughing. He was the rarest breed, and would make a fine catch. He rubbed his eyes, a noise rumbling in his throat. The noise grew louder and took on the shape of a word. He was saying her name. It was alarming, that this creature knew her name. It was amazing to think that they were husband and wife, that bodies so clearly separate could in fact be one.

She stepped from behind the tree and he turned his head to look. His eyes were red and puffy, and after he saw that it was her, he closed them and reached out his hand for her to come and lie beside him. She had no choice but to go to him, but she felt brave for taking the first step, approaching this stranger and showing no fear. It occurred to her that she did not yet know all the changes war had wrought in him, and as she walked, she knew for the first time the loneliness that was ahead of her, the lonely life of the pioneer. Solitary, on the edge of the world, with a man she could never know, with only the memory of home and no path to take her back.

## Joy

Rob slept until noon, even when the rain picked up and pounded on the windows. I'd been up since 7, when my mom had called in tears to tell me that a hurricane named Joy had materialized out of nowhere in the middle of the Atlantic and was now headed unflinchingly toward the Outer Banks like it knew something. Rob's parents' beach house was right on the water at Topsail Island, and based on what she had been envisioning back in Raleigh we had already been sucked up into swirling hundred-mile-an-hour winds or trampled in a riot at the grocery store. I assured her it was just a little rain so far and that Rob would know the protocol. His parents were Topsail natives. The children of islanders were born with innate knowledge of island customs, or something.

After we hung up I made a pot of coffee and pulled a chair over to the sliding glass door. I sat feeling a rotten feeling, mad at my mom for saying in front of Rob that I could come to the beach house this week. Granted, she was under the impression that Rob's sisters would be here, and Molly Abbot, but still, parents were supposed to know intuitively when one of their offspring was unhappy. It was supposed to fill them with a furious protective instinct that made

them do crazy things like snarl and try to strangle offenders with their bare hands. I stared out at the choppy water, trying to assess whether or not I would be dying later that day. I searched the sky for clues, but it was just gray everywhere. The ocean was big and writhing and impossible to look at all at once. The living room was just standard beach house stuff, white furniture, blue striped wall paper, seashell artwork. Everything was coated in gray light, and no answers anywhere.

By noon, the coffee pot was empty and my teeth were raw and chattering. I gripped the mug like my hands had rigor mortised. Surely I had been awake for days and days.

Rob stumbled out of the room in his basketball shorts and no shirt.

‘Good morning,’ I said. ‘We are going to die today.’

‘Huh?’ He turned over the coffee pot and frowned at the single brown drop that trickled down the glass.

‘There’s a hurricane coming,’ I said. ‘Hurricane Joy.’

‘Joy?’ He rubbed sleep from his eyes. ‘Sounds nice.’

‘Yeah, unless you put ‘hurricane’ in front of it.’

He went over and turned on the TV. Every channel was static. He flipped it a few times then gave up and flopped onto the couch, leaving the grating squeaking noise blaring out from the speakers. On the couch he closed his eyes. The corners of his mouth were crusty and his hair fell in greasy chunks over his eyes. I was usually displeased by how skinny Rob was, when I actually made the effort to look. Seventeen sounded old enough to be hot by now, but in my opinion even the purportedly hot boys in our class were a little silly-looking. I turned back to the glass door and pictured him instead in our school uniform, shirt tucked and tie knotted to



perfection, or on the free throw line deep in concentration, a bead of sweat shining on his forehead as the ball rolled off his fingertips into a perfect arc.

Outside a gull was flying along the shoreline. Its flight path had a slaloming shape, because of the wind jerking it this way and that.

‘Did your parents call?’ I asked.

‘I don’t think so,’ he said. ‘Why would they?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘Maybe to talk to you one last time?’

‘Come on. We’re inside, it can’t hurt us. Unless it picks up the house or something.’

‘Do you know what a hurricane is?’

Rob gave an exasperated sigh then took his phone out to look up some hurricane facts.

‘Just call your dad,’ I said. ‘He’ll know what to do.’

‘Maybe I’m an independent person,’ he said. ‘Maybe I don’t need to consult my parents on every little thing.’

‘I don’t consult them on every little thing,’ I said. ‘I’m here, aren’t I?’

He kept scrolling. The light from his phone screen gave a bluish glow to his sulk. It was a marvel to me that my parents had actively approved of Rob. They had met in high school and took the dating thing at face value. Rob was comparatively attractive, and he had grown on me due to Molly Abbot’s persuasion, plus some of the little things that make a person seem special in an otherwise regimented environment. For instance, he was left-handed, and he exclusively wore the red and blue plaid tie option, which was my favorite too. Things like that made a person workable in a high school setting. But I didn’t see anything about him that would make a parent shout for joy.

I looked back outside. The gull had disappeared. It probably got wherever it was going, in spite of the extra wind and spray. Gulls had that kind of stuff figured out. I wished I knew enough about hurricanes to take charge of the situation, or at least to be able to definitively tell Rob that he was wrong. I knew he was, but as usual I could not voice why. I was in need of a responsible adult.

‘We should go to the grocery store, at least,’ I said.

‘Why? We have like eight boxes of cereal.’

‘There’ll be people there. They might know something.’

‘I’ll know something in a second,’ he said. ‘Just hang on. Bad service.’

‘I wonder why.’

Rob’s phone clattered on the coffee table. He closed his eyes. ‘Can we just go back to bed? It’s dark.’

I jumped up from my chair and grabbed his ankles, yanking him a little harder than expected and making him slide off the couch along with both of the cushions.

‘Jesus, Laney’ he said. ‘I didn’t know I was dating She-Hulk.’

‘Well, now that you know, will you get your butt up and into some jeans please?’

It wasn’t that I was afraid of dying. I was sixteen years old. Death as a future possibility had not fully dawned on me yet. I was feeling something, but it wasn’t fear. It was more like, interest. It was like, finally, something is happening.

Cars were swarming the Food Lion parking lot. We inched along behind a line of them, staking out the prey, feeling icky and stupid for being so late to the game. Some people had gone

so far as to park on the grassy medians, which filled me with the first bit of actual dread I had felt all day. Were times as desperate as that?

Rob and I stood just inside the doorway under the fluorescent lights, soaked and shivering in the air conditioning. The general public thronged before us, whole families surrounding their carts, bald hairy-chested men in swim trunks, dehydrated old ladies and their wailing grandchildren. I think we were the only motionless thing in the store, except for the products, and even they were being knocked around and misplaced.

I saw out of the corner of my eye that Rob was picking up a basket. Were we going to buy something?

We weaved between carts and families travelling in clusters. The sheer density of people made me feel grimy and lightheaded. Under the white light everyone looked to be in a perpetual camera flash, and each face I saw stayed arrested like a mug shot, pale and tired and shaded with worry. I wondered how all of them had heard about the hurricane. I wondered if Rob and I would ever have found out about it if my mother hadn't called, or if we would still be lying under the fish-pattern comforter, lulled by the sound of the rain and the darkness outside until we drowned in it, or woke up unscathed and clueless in tomorrow's sunshine. I took some comfort in knowing that all of these people were in the same location as me, meaning that I had at least one correct instinctual reaction. It was the thought of leaving without them that scared me. I wanted to look into each face and say, *Excuse me, can you tell me what I am doing here? Can you tell me what is going on and what I should be feeling about it? I'm here with that kid in the Coldplay shirt standing over there by the Pringles. Yeah. Can I just come home with you instead?*

In the bright white I was dizzy, and everything seemed to be moving around me in fast motion while I had slowed down to the speed of lumbering giant. I looked down at the white tiles

as I walked, and it felt like wandering in an ice desert, like in Alaska where it stayed light all night. The thought scared me, of an endless day. I remembered walking in a grocery store like this one the time Rob thought I was pregnant after I was late two days and he made me go in alone to buy the test. It felt as if time had expanded. The minutes felt like hours and the days felt infinite, and there was no telling when things would return to normal, if they ever would. I thought how it was not pain itself, or sleeplessness, or worry, that was frightening, it was the thought that it might never end that made it unbearable. I wanted an answer, even if the answer was terrible. A terrible thing was better than nothing at all. That feeling was coming over me again, waiting for Joy. As I walked I imagined wandering sleepless for days in white bright Alaska, on a rocky plain with ice and pebbles crunching under my boots, the sun washing out color and bringing no warmth, my footfalls slowing to nothing as the day stretched on and on.

In a daze, I wandered into the snacks aisle. I could smell sunscreen and sediment still clinging to skin and hair from the day before. My hair was still curly with salt, and I wondered if they could taste it when they breathed. I was kind of bumping up against people, kind of leaning on them on purpose, feeling their warmth or hairiness or flaky sunburn or whatever they had going on. Usually beach crowds gave me an oogy claustrophobic feeling, but at that moment I admired all of them deeply, and believed without doubt that they were smarter and better off than I was. I hoped if I bumped hard enough one of them would look down and ask me if I was okay, or maybe the skin-to-skin contact would somehow transfer all of my questions to them, and their answers to me.

I felt someone grab my hand and turned to see Rob looking confused. He pulled me out of the fray and steered me into the bath needs aisle.

‘What was that about?’ he asked.

I looked over his shoulder. The aisle was empty except for a woman patting a crying toddler on the back and checking out the different brands of toothpaste. I watched her, wondering what she knew. What sort of otherworldly being thought about oral hygiene in a genuine panic situation?

‘What are we here for again?’ Rob said.

The woman was humming to the toddler. He had stopped crying and had a piece of her hair in his mouth. I wondered if it tasted salty.

‘Was there something you needed?’ Rob said.

The woman whispered into the toddler’s ear and he let go of her hair. She bounced him a little, trying to coax out a giggle. He shook his head and buried his face in her shoulder. The woman put her hand on the toddler’s smooth white-blond hair. She looked at it sadly, like she wanted it to be brown instead. She sighed. Then she turned toward us. I felt caught. Then she smiled.

‘This is Noah,’ she said.

‘Hi, Noah,’ I said. He peeked out. His face was pink and cranky. I was not all that interested in meeting Noah. I felt certain he would turn out to be an even bigger brat than Rob or me, maybe bigger even than Molly Abbot.

‘Sorry if I’m bothering you,’ I said, ‘but is there a shelter we’re supposed to go to or something?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘From the hurricane.’

‘Oh, it’s well past us by now,’ she said. ‘Just get ready for a lot of rain.’ She looked at me with exaggerated concern. ‘Be safe, kids. Rough water looks fun, but you are mortal.’

Rob scoffed.

‘Thank you,’ I said.

I turned away. Rob’s chest was right in my face, so I leaned limply against it.

‘See?’ he said. ‘I told you everything would be fine.’

‘No you didn’t,’ I said, and I hated him so much that I started crying.

It was pitch dark by 5. We put on a scary movie that both of us had seen and watched it lying on the sofa, turning up the sound to drown out the pounding rain. He had his arms sort of wrapped around me, but the top one was actually just draped heavily across me, a position that was neither exciting nor restful.

I wondered if I would even tell Molly Abbot about this day when we got back to school. Since it hadn’t killed or injured us, it was ultimately just a crappy gray day at the beach. We would be here for three more days. Molly would want to hear about the sexy bikini times and handjobs under the pier with my tangled beachy waves hanging down like a gritty mermaid. She would want to gush about how tan I was and whine that she couldn’t get tan, she would just freckle or burst into flames or something. She would not want to hear that I was beginning to suspect that nothing I feared or hoped for would ever happen, and that the rest of my life would be like after Rob and I slept together for the first time, on the floor of the rec room at Molly’s house, and the timing was such that he left for basketball camp the next day, and she left for a family cruise, and for the three weeks while they were gone I put on black eyeliner top and bottom and wandered around our neighborhood in denim cutoffs and a tank top without a bra, feeling edgy, scaring kids away from the swing set. She would not understand that today had been like those interminable three weeks when there was nobody to talk to or touch, and all I had

it in me to do was walk. What was the point in doing anything else, when the infinity of moments that existed between myself and a happy, peaceful old age seemed to prove with mathematical certainty that I would never die? After Joy, I was certain that times like this would stretch out forever. I was certain that I would pass through life forever unscathed, wishing for the irreversible, which would never come.

School would start in a week, my last year of high school.

## Turning

That weekend Charles and I drove out to the shack his father had built among the ancient baldcypress trees that bent over the sound. The week before, some hikers had found his body floating on the frothy stagnant water. Until then nobody in Charles's family had known where he'd gone to, and the park rangers hadn't known about the shack. Charles had been told to 'collect the estate' before they razed it.

I had seen Charles at the memorial service looking impossibly solemn in his black mourning clothes and blond crew cut. I hadn't seen him since the summer he dropped out of high school just before our junior year. It was after his parents' divorce hearing where my dad had been brought to testify, telling the judge about nights Charles had spent at our house when his father had been drinking, or angry, or just around. Afterwards, we'd gone behind the courthouse and I'd watched him smoke a cigarette, his hair hanging limp and tangled down to his shoulders, thinking how old he looked, older than I could ever imagine myself being.

'I quit smoking,' he'd said at the memorial service. 'I got work as a carpenter. Do you like that?'



‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I went to college. I’m studying math. Do you like that?’

He nodded. ‘Got any summer plans?’ he asked. On the bus ride in I’d seen boards on the window of the video store where I’d worked every summer since my first year of high school. The coffee shop had closed too, and in the early heat the pond was already a slick of red mud.

‘Nope,’ I said.

‘Want to come loot my father’s house with me?’

I thought of my days off during previous summers, lurking around the house barefoot with the lights off, peeking between the blinds like a shut-in, watching kids whack each other with sticks and whiffle bats in the neighboring yard. I tried to imagine a whole summer of days off, slinking around our town in my cut-offs and high school softball jersey.

‘Sure,’ I said.

It was June, and there was a heat spell up and down the shoreline. When we got onto the highway Charles rolled the windows down and took his shirt off.

‘Hey there,’ I said, flirty, but the sound of the wind drowned it out, and mercifully so. Charles and I had been close, but we could never be too close. We knew instinctively that there was something terminal about it, and we kept a cousinly distance.

Once on the highway we commenced to two hours of bumps and potholes which Charles did not slow down for.

Somewhere between the Tar and the Roanoke he said, ‘I have a theory.’ His voice was deep enough to reach me below the timbre of the wind.

‘What’s your theory?’

‘I think he had this place a long time.’

‘The shack?’

‘I think it’s where he went whenever he was gone so much.’

‘Makes sense,’ I said.

‘Because we were happy some,’ he said. ‘I remember it.’

‘Me too.’

‘It’s like we were the real life, then this other place became the real life, bit by bit.’

‘Bit by bit,’ I said.

I knew what he meant, real lives and dream lives. Already the memory of school had disappeared into the dream realm, quicker than it had the past two summers. Being back was always a disappointment, but it felt different this time, a little scarier. Maybe all the there-and-backs were turning me a little funny, like I didn’t know which way was forward. Turning my head, as my father would say, sitting in his green plastic lawn chair on the front stoop with the tops of his grease-stained overalls turned down, sipping his whiskey and looking down our gravel driveway as the daylight disappeared. Turning my head, or the whole of me turning, like old milk, turning strange. Home was not home anymore, but with Charles here and campus so far away, I was having a hard time believing in the concrete reality of calculus classrooms and their expectorating foreign professors, or the off-campus apartments where I was somehow magically endowed with the ability to drink bourbon without choking and make boys laugh without anyone telling me to shush up and stop being a flirt.

‘What did he have in a shack on the edge of the sound,’ Charles said, ‘that was realer than me and Mom and a house and a job?’ I felt he was looking at me out of the corner of his eye, wanting an answer.

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘Fresh fish?’

He seemed to really consider this.

‘Joke,’ I said.

‘Huh,’ he said. ‘Fish.’

‘I was joking.’

‘I guess it doesn’t matter,’ he said. ‘I barely even knew the man.’

He paused. A black snake sheeted across the road up ahead.

‘I want to see this shack, though,’ he said. ‘I want to see some of those fish.’

A gravel road cut into the thick of trees around the sound. The shade under the trees felt nice, but soon the gravel dissipated out and we were inching along the forest floor.

‘This can’t be legal,’ I said.

Charles parked the truck and we stepped out onto the spongy floor of the woods. As we moved in toward the edge of the sound the bases of the trees grew squat and rippled, sloping up into trunks, like melting cakes. Charles went ahead of me with his tee shirt hanging from his back belt loop. His Timberlands left impressions in the ground that I tried to hop into before the earth expanded to fill them in again.

Soon the bases of the trees grew so thick they seemed to close in around us. It was hard to tell which direction we’d come from and whether we were still moving toward the sound, we kept stepping left and right around the tree trunks.

‘He picked a nice spot,’ Charles said. ‘Private, with all these trees.’

‘Like a gated neighborhood,’ I said.

Then we reached a neat row of trees, and on the other side was sunlight and a clearing, and beyond that glimpses of gleaming water.

Charles stopped, and I stopped. He crouched next to a tree and put his face against the bark.

‘I see it,’ he said.

I stepped behind him and saw the shack. It was across the water, where the shore curved back out to make an inlet. The wood looked rotten and mossy, and the structure seemed to grow out of the water like the stump of a monstrous baldcypress.

Charles stood. He got out a cigarette and put it in his mouth, unlit.

‘Guess he should have stuck to finishing tables.’

We slipped between the trees and walked as lightly as we could along the muddy bank leading to the opposite shore. We stepped close to the edge and peeked over to see where it dropped off into the cloudy green water. In the center of the inlet, an amorphous layer of white froth, looking something like a giant had spat there, hovered on the water’s surface.

‘Spawning,’ Charles said, with a hint of disgust.

‘Glad I’m not a mosquito,’ I said.

As the shack grew closer, Charles slowed up. He seemed to be walking stiffer, and the muscles in his back tensed up like knotty wires.

When we reached the back corner of the shack, Charles rested his hand on a plank and looked down to where it descended onto stilts that stuck out of the water. He was chewing the end of the unlit cigarette, and it was moving a muscle in his jaw out and in.

‘Sturdy,’ he said. ‘Maybe he had more in him than tables.’ He ran his fingers along the back wall and disappeared into the house.

I followed behind and found that Charles had not moved beyond the bottom of the steps that went from the doorway down into the single room of the shack. From the threshold, I could

see the walls papered with magazine cutouts and newspapers, slashed haphazardly, nothing readable. Empty bottles neatly lined the perimeter of the floor, and in the back corner was a stained mattress, nearly flattened, more like a mat.

Charles stepped onto the floor, and the room swayed. He went over to the mattress and kicked at the white clay pipe that lay beside it. Flakes of burnt tobacco spilled from the bowl. I stepped down into the room and pressed myself flush against the back wall.

Charles sat on the mattress and balanced his cigarette on the opening of a nearby whiskey bottle. Then he wiped his face with his tee shirt and slung it over his shoulder.

‘Here’s my estate,’ he said, picking up the clay pipe. He clenched his teeth on the bit, and there was that old man I’d seen on the bench behind the courthouse, fifteen years old and already wise and weary as an ancient.

Then he frowned, looking at the floor. ‘Hm,’ he said, and with the pipe between his teeth he looked to be ‘onto something,’ like a French detective inspector. He got down on all fours and slipped his fingers into a crack between two floorboards. Then he pulled away a kind of jagged trapdoor, cut out from the floor like a manhole, and held it up, marveling.

‘Well done, Dad,’ he said.

He put it aside and peered down into the hole. Curiosity overcame my fear of the structure’s soundness, and I went over to kneel next to Charles. Through the hole we could see the water lap, rocking a raft made of planks bound together with twine.

‘I see,’ Charles said. ‘I see I see.’

Gripping the edges of the hole, he lowered himself feet first onto the raft and sat down. Then he looked at me, just a head rising out of the floor, and we both laughed.

‘Join me?’ he said.

‘No way,’ I said.

‘Suit yourself.’ He grabbed the empty whiskey bottle and disappeared under the house. I put my face against the floor and watched him sideways, pulling the craft toward daylight using the floorboards above him.

Out on the bank, the sun had reached full up. I ran past the corner of the shack just as Charles floated out from under it. The sun shone on his white chest, and when he sat up it caught his hair and lit it up white bright. He used the bottle to row the raft slowly into the center of the inlet, breaking up the froth into bits that floated away like drifting continents.

I crouched on the bank and watched him float, and everything seemed to be dissolving around him—the trees melting, the shack decomposing, the afternoon fading. He looked beautiful and incorruptible, and I wished I had not forgotten him for so long. I hoped I would miss him when I returned to school, but I feared I would not. Already he was drifting away. I wondered how anybody could make this place their real life, or go back to a real life once they’d been here, or if the question of real life and dream life could be avoided altogether if we could only keep our heads down and stay put.

Then Charles looked back to where I was standing on the bank and waved both his arms like I was far away. I waved back.

‘You look nice from here,’ I called.

‘So do you,’ he answered, and he lay back on the raft, one leg crossed over the other, sucking on the empty pipe and balancing the empty bottle on his chest.

## Dearly Beloved

The first year we were married, while you were still a clerk and I was still figuring out exactly what I was, I wrote a letter nearly every day to a person I called Thomas. I thought of him as maybe our son, or you in the future after I died, or maybe he was nobody, but still I loved him very much.

*Beloved Thomas*, I would begin, and sometimes those words alone would be enough to make me so happy that I would hop up from the breakfast table and glide around the apartment for half an hour, touching the cracks in the plaster walls, feeling powerful, expecting my touch to heal them. I told Thomas everything. I told him how long you had spent brushing your teeth that morning and if you had shaved thoroughly, whether you seemed sluggish or optimistic, whether your lips had felt chapped or moisturized when you had kissed me, what tie you were wearing and whether I or your mother had given it to you. I reported on how the tomatoes in our window box were doing, with both qualitative descriptions and numerical measurements, and if I ate one I filled the page with adjectives like a wine taster—*lively, taut, mischievous*. I told him why I had picked the outfit I was wearing that day, and whether you had noticed it (usually you hadn't),

and if I had slipped leftover eggplant into your omelet, and whether you had noticed that (usually you had).

When I had errands to run, I took pen and paper and made notes to Thomas—*muggy day, mosquitoes make me miss home; talked to an au pair from Bogota wearing yellow platform sandals, safe for carrying small children?; baby in stroller frowned at me, was scary; homeless man liked my orange floppy hat, bought him a hamburger at McDonald's*. I explained the grid system and drew a map of all my favorite destinations: the alleys between the backsides of two rows of townhouses where the balconies and clotheslines and dumpsters aligned so neatly I could cry, the fenced-in vacant lot that had an aluminum bench in the middle of it that I always wanted to sit in but couldn't work up the courage to climb over the fence.

I told him how I liked to put nice things in my shopping basket and carry them around for a while before putting them back, and how I wished we lived closer to Eastern Market so I could walk there every day like the European ladies with their bread bags and lipstick and big round sunglasses. Some wore wedding bands that had become too tight for their fingers, and I wondered if mine would ever look like that, or if I would ever know the mysterious standards by which they selected vegetables, which all looked so perfect to me grouped by color and coated in droplets from the vendor's spray bottle. I loved it all very much, and still there were worlds and worlds I did not know.

One night I changed Thomas's name to yours and gave you the letter when you came home from work. You read it frowning, without looking up, scratching your chin like you were perusing a legal document. Then you looked up at me and smiled, motioning for me to come over from the kitchen table where I was sitting.



‘You are so unbearably interesting,’ you said.

I climbed into your lap and you put your fingers in my hair, holding the base of my skull.  
I felt your jawbone and behind your ears where they connected to your head.

‘You’re so solid,’ I said. ‘You remind me of an axe.’

You made a face like you were going to cry happy tears, but your eyes were dry.

‘I love you so much it’s scary,’ you said.

‘I’m not scared,’ I said. ‘Let’s have a baby.’

‘Alright,’ you said. ‘But let’s just take care of each other for a while first.’

Other mornings I sat in the apartment with my back to the window and wrote bearing down on the tip of the pen until I choked it dry. Sometimes it got to be past noon and I’d have to rush out to do my errands in a hurry, feeling guilty and spent. Maybe we’d had an argument that morning, maybe I’d neglected to pay a bill or left the oven on one too many times. Or maybe you had whispered something funny to me in the night, something I couldn’t laugh at in front of you but had to tell about, it was just so ridiculous.

I told Thomas what I couldn’t tell you. I explained the subtleties of everything I had said in our arguments, and all the minor terrible truths I had realized but couldn’t mention for fear of making you madder, or cracking things irrevocably. Most of all I told him the things you had said that struck me as strange, things I somehow knew I needed to remember because I would understand them better later, pieces of the puzzle that I would not know how to place until the fuller picture had begun to come into focus. Thomas would hold onto them for now, until later on when I needed them, when he and I would look back and add it all up, all the things I couldn’t make sense of just yet.

Sometimes my memories slipped into the letters, when I saw our wilting window box and longed for lush dirt and full ripe tomatoes in my mother's garden, or we were out of milk and I used your half and half, and the smell brought back some winter morning with my grandfather in his house in Ashe County, sitting by the electric heater on the kitchen counter and warming my hands on the coffee pot. Sometimes I woke up already full of them, as if I was waking up in my old bed at my father's house from a funny dream about something else entirely, but when I told you about it I would pretend the old-house feeling was a part of the dream too.

'I dreamed about my father,' I would say.

'I dream about him all the time,' you would say, and we would both laugh, and keep on laughing at nothing for the rest of breakfast.

Then you would leave, and I would write slowly, choosing each word like I was saying it with a dying breath.

### Gray Ghost

Elizabeth disliked sleeping through the morning. Lately her husband Jacob, the pastor, had gone to great lengths to keep her in bed with him on Saturday mornings, attempting to woo her with a kind of boxing combination of whispering, caressing, snuggling. In twenty-seven years of marriage Jacob had never been troubled by Elizabeth's sleep habits, or really anything that Elizabeth did or said or thought, for she was far wiser than him and he knew it, but in the past few weeks she had given him cause to worry. They had been four months living in the parsonage at Roanoke, a double-wide trailer in the field behind the renovated meeting house, and Elizabeth had become convinced that a nameless gray ghost lived in the aluminum underpinning of the parsonage. Jacob was not a doctor, but his instinctual diagnosis was that Elizabeth spent too many hours awake, reading the psalter into the wee hours and rising before the sun was up. But in his fruitless efforts to convince her to come to bed or stay there, he found he had been keeping her hours himself, and he was growing tired. He was helping less and less. He was simply watching, waiting for a change, an explanation, a sign.

On Saturday morning they woke before the sky was light. Elizabeth slipped out of Jacob's arms and into her bathrobe and slippers. As if pulled by an invisible string, he followed her into the kitchenette.

Sitting at the table, he watched Elizabeth make her breakfast. She set a pot on to boil and placed handfuls of cereal in a bowl as silently as a thief.

'How can a brand new trailer be haunted?' he asked. 'Nobody's touched it, it was built by machine.'

'Maybe it seeped up from the garden,' she answered. 'It's a ghost. I can't explain it.'

'My darling,' he said, leaving the table to put an arm around her shoulders. He had begun to call her *darling* soon after her first gray hairs appeared, as if this was the only appropriate way for a man of God to address his aging, honorable wife.

'It doesn't scare me,' she said, slipping away from him to take the milk out of the fridge.

'Well, it scares me,' he said.

'It shouldn't,' she said. 'If you could feel it you would know.'

Holding the milk jug with both hands, she paused to look through the window over the kitchen sink. The sky had grown white. Jacob could see the tendons in her neck, and he thought how thin and sharp she had become. He was growing stout and ruddy with age, and she was growing brittle, austere, like a Massachusetts Puritan.

'It's actually lovely,' she said. 'I wish everything we owned had a ghost.'

The water began to rumble in the pot. Jacob watched as she set to making tea.

He thought how, though older, Elizabeth was not much different than she'd been at their meeting. She'd been a schoolteacher at the time, still living in her father's household in Wilkes County, and she called the Saturday night line dances where Jacob often went with his Bible

College friends. She only called, she did not dance, and Jacob admired her for that. Nevertheless, she was a pretty girl, and he'd wished she would put a silky bow in her hair and let him spin her around like all the others. But she preferred to talk. In their talks he learned that she was lawful and sensible, attracted to God's rock-like stability more than his love, unable to bear children but aware of her responsibility to care for them as Christ who lives in the most loathsome of creatures. Moreover, she believed herself to be deeply suited to the cleanliness and solidity of the married state. In due time she proved her own predictions, moving seamlessly into a new life with Jacob, and into the series of new homes, new parishes, new routines that followed.

Between the two of them, Jacob was the one who struggled with the constant moving. He had chronic bouts of unbelief, which Elizabeth could usually assuage simply by her unfailing presence, like the comfort of lying on the ground when one has been too long looking at the sky. But the last time had been different. In the previous town, the crisis of faith had found its way into his sermons, and there had been one Sunday when he simply sat behind the pulpit and refused to speak. The bishop had paid a visit and suggested a few months of sabbatical, working to restore the historic meeting house at Roanoke and prepare it, and himself, for a congregation.

Elizabeth sat at the table with her cereal and tea, her back turned to Jacob.

'I don't like to worry about you, Elizabeth,' Jacob said. 'You've always been such a help to me, and I fear I'm no help to you.'

'No help necessary,' she said, stirring her cereal so that no kernel would be left untouched by the milk.

'Have I disappointed you terribly?' he asked.

'You're my husband I love you,' she answered, continuing to stir well beyond what was necessary.

‘I keep feeling that I’ve let you down.’

‘That’s impossible.’

‘You say that,’ he said. ‘I’ve just got to wonder where this ghost business is coming from.’

Elizabeth put the spoon down on the napkin and placed her hands in her lap.

‘Have I ever been one to invent *business*?’ she said. ‘There’s a gray ghost, and it lives under the trailer, and I’m glad it’s there. I couldn’t tell you any more than that.’

Jacob leaned over the kitchen sink. He looked through the window at the meeting house across the field. The bricks were grimy and moss grew up the chinking like a burrowing worm.

‘There are no ghosts, Elizabeth,’ he said. ‘You know that.’

‘I thought I did, but I was wrong,’ she said. ‘Now I know. There’s one ghost in the world, at least.’

Elizabeth turned. She smiled at Jacob. Her smile had always been a comfort, but now he did not know what it meant.

‘Cheer up,’ she said. ‘Come have some breakfast.’

It stayed cloudy all day. The workmen would not be in on a Saturday, and Jacob spent the afternoon digging through boxes in the back of the meeting house. The room was small, about ten rows of pews, the right size for the congregation Jacob would attract. Even after the refinishing, the room smelled of damp wood and mildew, and with the outside and inside gray the stained glass windows had no color, only dark figures with dark halos outlined in white. In the back corner by Jacob, Elizabeth sat at the organ bench polishing the tarnished offertory plates. Through the cloud of dust under the skylight she looked as slender and dim as a shadow,

and Jacob watched her slow, meticulous movements as if through a screen, or a crystal ball. It was like looking into the past, but somehow the past seemed closer than the moment. His memories were not so colorless.

‘Do you like this place?’ Jacob asked. Elizabeth did not answer, and for a moment he wondered if there really was a screen, or an invisible divide. ‘Elizabeth?’

She looked up. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I was just lost in my thinking.’

‘I asked if you think you’ll be happy here.’

‘I have always been happy with you, in every place we’ve lived,’ she said. ‘Nothing could change that.’

‘Not even a ghost?’

Elizabeth smiled and her polishing slowed. ‘Not even that,’ she said. She looked at the plate like it was a kitten she was stroking to sleep.

‘Would you like to go out tonight?’ Jacob asked.

Elizabeth gave him a look.

‘Just a thought,’ he said. ‘It’s Saturday.’

‘Up to you,’ she said. ‘I wouldn’t mind a movie. What else is ‘out’?’

‘We could go dancing,’ he said.

‘Oh, you’re teasing me,’ she said.

Jacob laughed. ‘I would never.’ He pushed one of the boxes against the back wall and stood, brushing the dust from his clothes. ‘It just gets a little tired,’ he said. ‘Looking at all this junk.’

Elizabeth smiled. ‘Holy junk.’

He looked down into the box of moth-eaten vestments and at the stacks of rotting hymnals that lined the back wall.

‘No, just junk,’ he said. ‘There’s no holy in a pile of garbage.’

‘God can make anything holy.’

‘I wish he wouldn’t,’ Jacob said. ‘I wish I could tell him not to bother.’

‘You don’t mean that, Jacob,’ she said. ‘Just be quiet a minute.’

‘But I do mean it.’

‘Be quiet a minute.’

Jacob toed the side of the box. His sneaker had a hole in it and he could see the gray sock inside.

‘You’re wiser than I am,’ he said. ‘I’ve got a weak mind, and I’m getting old besides.’

‘Everybody’s weak. That’s what we’re born with.’

‘And get old with.’

‘Oh, quit it with the *old* stuff,’ Elizabeth said. She laid the offertory plate on the organ keys and walked over to Jacob, breaking up the film of dust that had hovered in the skylight. She put a hand on his cheek, and Jacob clasped it. ‘We just need to stop moping and get this place cleaned up so you can get back to your preaching.’

‘How can I preach what I don’t believe?’

‘You’ll believe again. God will provide.’

‘Do you believe in God, Elizabeth?’

‘Lately, more than ever.’

‘And you believe in ghosts too.’

She smiled. ‘Yes. Lately I believe in those too.’



Jacob took her hand from his cheek and kissed it. 'I wish I could help you,' he said. 'Or understand you.'

'We'll help each other,' she said. 'Getting old won't be so scary.' She kissed his forehead and wiped where she had kissed with her thumb. Then she disappeared back into the dust.

Jacob emerged from his nap with a mission to see the gray ghost.

He and Elizabeth took their green plastic lawn chairs from the stoop to sit out in the grass facing the parsonage. The siding of the trailer was shiny enough for them to see their blurry reflections, but the underpinning, where the ghost lived, was dappled and bent into waves.

'What does it look like?' he asked.

'It doesn't look like anything,' she said. 'Sometimes there's just the metal, and sometimes the metal has a ghost.'

'Now make sure you tell me as soon as it shows up, Elizabeth,' he said. 'I don't want to miss it.'

Elizabeth smiled. 'Alright, Jacob,' she said. 'I'll holler.'

The sky grew dusky while they sat. Jacob's eyelids began to droop. He glanced over at Elizabeth and caught her looking at him. She reached out and touched his beard.

'This needs a trim,' she said.

'Tomorrow,' he said. 'We need to concentrate.' He turned away to squint at the gray aluminum.

Elizabeth giggled. Jacob looked at her and smiled, embarrassed.

'What?'

'You'll be a cute old man,' she said.

‘You’ll be an elegant old lady,’ he said. Then he scratched his beard. ‘No ghost?’

‘It’s always there,’ she said. ‘But no, I can’t feel it right now.’

Jacob sighed. ‘I want to believe you.’

‘You have no reason to,’ she said. ‘I understand.’

He left his chair and knelt in front of the aluminum. He touched it. It was cool and slippery from the moisture in the air. It was a fine product of human industry, but it could not be so human as to contain a ghost.

In her chair, Elizabeth had her eyes closed and her knees drawn up to her chest. There was something youthful about this to Jacob, and something youthful about the way she had been talking about God and ghosts, as if she was growing more innocent with time, hardening outside but on the inside filling up with warmth and sentiment. He wondered if he was doing just the opposite, emptying out whatever spirit he’d had, leaving just a useless decaying husk of flesh for Elizabeth to take care of. For her sake, he wished he could reverse it. He wished he knew how to care for her like he ought to. He wished he could will God into the world and believe, and find a gray ghost in a silent piece of metal.

After supper, Jacob sat at the table by the kitchenette, trying to write words for a sermon under the fluorescent overhead light. The page felt very blank.

He wrote, *God’s law*. Underneath it, he wrote, *God’s love*. Then he wrote, *God-with-us*.

The ink was blue and came out of the pen too quickly. The lines of the letters were splotchy no matter how smoothly he wrote.

Jacob drew a sad face. Then he sketched the face of Jesus looking very stern. Then he scratched out everything and wrote the word *ghost*.

He put down the pen and wondered where his wife Elizabeth was.

‘Elizabeth?’ he called.

She did not answer. He went to the door of the bedroom and flipped on the light. The blanket on their bed was spread smooth and the edges were neatly tucked. He flipped off the light.

The front door was open, and he looked through the screen door to the yard. It was dark out, and he could not see the meeting house, only the section of grass in front of the parsonage where the light reached through the open door.

‘Out here,’ Elizabeth said from the yard. He could not see even her shadow. He stepped out onto the stoop and pulled the door shut behind him.

She was sitting like before, hugging her knees to her chest, and in the dim light he could see the glimmer of a tear in her eye. Never before had he known Elizabeth to cry for nothing. But she was getting older, and so was he.

He went and sat in the chair beside her.

‘Has it gone away?’ he asked. ‘Your ghost?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘It’s here.’

‘Then why the tears?’

She wiped her eyes.

‘Just a feeling,’ she said. ‘They come over me powerfully these days.’

Jacob’s eyes had adjusted and he could make out the shadowy curvature of the aluminum. He did not see the ghost, but the shape was familiar somehow, sad somehow, and beautiful, when he really looked at it.

He put his hand out, palm up, and Elizabeth rested her hand on top. He slipped his fingers between hers. Their hands clasped together made a lovely shape too. It felt correct and safe and real. Elizabeth's skin was soft, and against it he could feel the roughness of his palm. He closed his eyes and imagined that there really was a ghost where she said it was. He imagined that flesh was not solid but permeable, that their intertwining fingers were truly meshed together, knit into one by some spirit that swam back and forth across the membrane of their skin. He imagined that their love was a physical thing, amorphous and damp gray like a raincloud, a thing that surrounded them when they touched and continued to hang in the air between them when they separated. He imagined that everything in the world had a ghost, and that the ghost was what made it beautiful even when it was useless, lifeless, old. He opened his eyes. He was not sure that he believed what he had imagined, but he thought it was a world he might like.

They sat together until they could not stay awake any longer. Then without a word they stood and went inside, made ready for bed and turned out the lights. Jacob held his wife until he was sure she was asleep, then he turned onto his back and stared up into the darkness, waiting for sleep to take him over too.

### Bed and Table

Nick wakes up wishing he hadn't. He keeps his eyes closed, preferring darkness to what he will see when he opens his eyes. The side of the bed where Rossie used to sleep will be empty, striped with late morning light through the blinds. On the floor next to his bed will be the nest of crumpled paper plates and crushed beer cans that has been accumulating for the past month, since Rossie left. It will remind him of that night when he came home from a day of crop-dusting, his wages in cash stuffed in his back pocket. Rossie had already put the note out but had not finished packing her things, so he read her scribbled, tear-stained goodbye and then sat down on the sleeper-sofa to discuss it with her. She cried in his arms until she fell asleep, and in the morning he woke alone.

It is Monday, his day off. Days off have become a danger. Too much sleep, too long to lie and think. There was a storm in the night, and at some point the power went out. He drifted off in the premature darkness and slept like a dead man until the sun was full up.

Rossie turned twenty during their year together. They met when she was working the night shift at the 24-hour Dairy Queen where Nick went every morning at 4 a.m. for a Coke to

wake him up, to see with bright eyes for a minute or two before his head was lulled by the low hum of the cockpit and the curling clouds of yellow dust. She looked as young as she was, with her stringy hair up in a ponytail with a pink ribbon, wearing more makeup than she needed, smiling only with her lips, and only for him. Her face was pale and acned. She was not alluring, but she was beautiful in flashes, for reasons he couldn't explain. When he could coax it out of her it filled him with a mixture of pride and confusion, like he had skimmed his hand in the water and pulled out a fish. He wanted to understand. He kept at it like a gambler.

Within two months she had moved into his house, a rotting bungalow toward the middle of the island, spent two weeks of her pay on potting soil and turned his plot of sand and clay into a wild jungle of a garden, haphazardly planted with morning glories and roselles, mint, carrots, tomatoes, pansies and impatiens. They played house for a year, and then she left, right when Nick had started to believe that things between them might become more than a game. Rossie was not wonderful, she was not dream-like, but still he thinks he could have gone on living his life with her forever, waking in the dark to eat a hard-boiled egg then go to work and sit in a vibrating seat until his hands and feet were numb, sweating the ugliest of sweats, coming home each night to a room that smelled of stale seawater and sleeping on a mattress as thin as a tabletop, with wet rasping breath on his neck from a girl who still clung to him, who was still young enough to be afraid of the dark.

The room has gotten hot and the air feels heavy and damp. The AC must still be out. Nick opens his eyes and looks at the clock. It is black. A power outage.

Nick rolls onto his side and reaches out to grasp the cord of the blinds. They go up with a zip, and the sunshine flows in. The sky is pure blue after raining itself out in the night. He puts his feet on the floor and sits staring out at the front yard. The garden has grown tangled and

wilted over the month, and the storm has left devastation in its wake. The roots of impatiens stick up into the air like the legs of upturned beetles, and the stakes that held creeping vines are slanted or flattened entirely. Morning glory and roselle heads lie sprawled open into their two-toned webs, their faces half-pressed into the dirt, some knocked off of their stems entirely and wilting on the battlefield.

Across the street he sees old Ron Buckley standing on the front stoop of his trailer, smoking a cigar and looking out at his yard cluttered with car parts that the storm did not move. Ron takes off his cap and smooths the thin gray hair underneath.

Nick reaches up and touches his own hair. It needs a trim.

He is suddenly hungry. It has been a long time since he has felt this hungry, maybe since before Rossie left. He stands and goes into the kitchen.

He pauses in the kitchen doorway and stands there for a long time, a minute, maybe two or three, staring at the kitchen table. It is small and square with an empty bowl in the center. When Rossie was here, the bowl usually contained one piece of fruit. She would buy a fruit—a banana, a blood orange, sometimes something exotic like a kiwi or a pomegranate—and leave it in the bowl for a week before she had it for breakfast on Sunday morning. She did not like him to talk to her while she ate the fruit. The fruit required her full attention. She did this, he believed, to put intentional distance between them, to remind him that as close as they became, they would never be the same. They did not feel the same sensations, taste the same taste. They could share the same bed, wake and sleep the same hours, breathe the same air, but some things could not be shared. They could not eat the same food.

He opens the fridge and finds some expired milk and half a lemon with its flesh exposed. The freezer holds a pint of ice cream and some frozen hot dogs, already beginning to thaw and drip.

He closes the door of the refrigerator and looks through the kitchen window to the back deck. The deck is territory he has not touched since she moved out. Two green plastic chairs sit side by side, facing the dark woods behind the house.

He is standing at the glass door with his hand on the doorknob. A flash of red through the railing catches his eye. He steps outside into the warm wet air, then he goes down the steps into the yard.

Clinging to the corner post of the deck is a tomato vine. He remembers Rossie's frustration trying to grow anything in the back yard, with so much shade from the trees. But somehow this one persisted and grew up without her care, surrounded by a little patch of light, while Nick slept the month away. Bursting tomatoes with their skins cracked open are rotting on the ground at the foot of the vine, and some whole ones are there too, knocked down by the rain. One remains on the plant, hanging low and weighing down the vine, pulling tendrils loose from the wooden post. The stem is so overburdened that the tomato practically falls off into Nick's hand when he touches it.

He brushes away raindrops and dirt and turns the tomato around and around, amazed by its squat shape and the infinite red smoothness of its circumference. Carrying it cupped in both hands, as if it could roll off unexpectedly like a water balloon, Nick takes the tomato into the kitchen. He places it carefully onto a paper plate and slices it into four perfectly equal parts, which fall away from the center like synchronized swimmers.



He takes his breakfast out onto the deck and sits watching the woods drip, enjoying the cold juice and warm flavor.

### Leather Boots

I wore my work boots to my Aunt Celia's wake, which stirred up such an outcry with my mother and her sisters that I was exiled to the kitchen before any of the neighbors arrived. My great aunt Fiona with the long white braid was sitting at the kitchen table humming with her eyes closed, mournfully, like she was at a different wake for someone else, in Ireland. I leaned against the counter heavy with casseroles and pies and watched her moan and sway, thinking how easy life would be if I was content in my imagination.

Then I noticed the face in the window behind her. It was dark out, but I knew it was Marina. Since I'd arrived three days before, I had been half expecting her face to appear in front of me at any moment, wherever I was. Something about stepping off the bus and being back on that old narrow sidewalk, with every crack and crater the same since three years before, the summer after my high school graduation, which I seem to remember as one interminable walk. Leaving the bus stop and wandering deeper into the neighborhood, trying and failing to get lost, curtains shifting in the windows as neighbors peeked out at me, approaching my mother's low-slung ranch house with its yellow painted bricks, the cats stretched out in the yard, the aunts in

the living room nursing cups of tea. I felt like a ghost come back with unfinished business that I couldn't remember, and Marina's face at the window was the natural answer to what it was. She smiled. I went out onto the back steps, wishing I had stayed on the farm in Kentucky and sent flowers instead of coming home. This trip would lose me a week's pay, and set me back about a year's worth of peace-making.

It was chilly out. Marina was standing in the bushes with her back against the wall and her arms behind her, like she was some sweet fresh-faced teenager in a Norman Rockwell painting.

'Boo,' she said.

'I thought you were one of the cats,' I said. 'I was coming to shoo you off the windowsill.'

'A cat!' she said. 'I will not be shooed.'

'I know.'

She smiled. 'I like those boots,' she said.

'Thank you.'

'Are you planning to kick somebody?'

'We'll see.'

She turned toward the window and stood on her tiptoes to look in.

'Is the body in there?' she said.

'Yes.'

'I should pay my respects.' She gave me an accusatory look. 'I do have respects to pay.'

'I believe you,' I said. 'That would be nice of you.'

'I can be nice.'

‘You are nice.’

She looked back into the window.

In the light from the kitchen her skin looked full and smooth, and her blonde curls were swept back from her face by a pink headband. She had always been pretty in that round, innocent kind of way. It was confusing. It had made the end confusing especially, in our senior year when our default fear occurred, and we both knew what we would do about it, but it felt strange to talk in terms so ugly about something that was growing under the layers of tissue of her belly under skin that was still so soft and white and clean, to think that pain and blood had an existence inside of her body that still seemed new and perfect to me. And afterwards, the things she could say to me, words that poured out and did not stop, texts and voicemails and notes in my locker and on the front stoop of my mother’s house, through to the end of summer when I left town to go where I did not know. I wished she would have told me what she wanted, but she just lashed out at me. I wished I could have given her what she needed, but I was just a kid. I was scared, and all I knew to do with fear was to close off and escape. I tried to feel that old fear again, but looking at her face, it was not so easy. When you are feeling low and sorry and want to hate someone over it, you want them to be hideous, or have that hard nasty-looking beauty that you just know is trouble from the start.

‘What are you doing here?’ I said.

‘I told you I was paying my respects. I’m her neighbor, if you remember.’

‘Are you still in the neighborhood?’

‘No.’ She did not look at me and kept staring into the window. ‘I wonder how much morticians make,’ she said. ‘I’d like to do that. It’d be like playing beauty parlor with a life-size doll.’

‘Aunt Celia didn’t wear makeup.’

‘She does now. I bet she looks more alive than she did when she was alive.’

Marina looked up at me to see if I was getting annoyed. Then she sighed and rested her head against the bricks. The pose was pretty. I took note of what she was wearing, a white blouse and a brown pleated skirt. Nice clothes, clean and pure enough. I wondered if she had dressed up for the wake, or if this was how she dressed now, as a ‘young woman.’

‘You look nice,’ I said.

She frowned at me. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Nothing,’ I said. I held my hands up. ‘Nothing.’

‘I work in a bank,’ she said. ‘There’s a dress code.’

‘Okay.’

‘I wasn’t trying to make you say that.’

‘I wish I hadn’t.’

She kept looking at me. Her cheeks were still flushed.

‘I make good money there,’ she said.

‘I’m very glad.’

‘What are you doing these days anyway?’ she said. ‘Are you a hobo? You’re dressed like one in that enormous coat.’

‘I hire myself out as a farmhand. These past few months I’ve been tending sheep.’

‘Ha! Physical labor? You?’

I hoped I looked unamused.

‘Do you have muscles now? Let me see you flex.’

‘No.’

‘What kind of money do you make?’

‘Enough.’

‘Do you dress up like a cowboy? I bet you do.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I wear a baseball cap. And these.’ I held out a leg and we both looked at my boot. It had used to be a lighter shade of brown, but the mud had seeped in along the sides like dye that looked almost purple in the darkness.

The gray cat with the shabby coat had sauntered over to Marina and was rubbing against her legs. She stepped over it and climbed onto the steps to sit. I sat beside her.

‘They’re nice,’ she said.

‘Yep.’ I had used my first week’s paycheck to buy them, the first money I had earned for myself and not through allowances or Christmas money from my father in St. Augustine and my doting maiden aunts. Because I had bought them myself I invested in them the talismanic power to stay fine and strong and do their job forever. I cleaned them every night, like praying, or having a hobby. I still had my bright blue sneakers from high school, but they were hidden under my bed. I no longer had use for anything flimsy or flashy. I lived in a room that held a cot, a sink, and a toilet in the room like a prison cell. My hands had callused, and although I did not have the chance to look much into a mirror, I knew I was stronger and abler than ever before, and that was better than looking good.

‘Maybe I should get a pair of boots,’ she said. ‘That way everybody would think I was a hard worker.’

‘I like the clothes you have on.’

‘I’ll burn them.’

‘Don’t do that.’

The shabby gray cat jumped into Marina's lap. It had bald patches and the end of its tail was crooked. She scratched its head with one finger, afraid to touch anywhere else. Its purr box sounded like it had not recently been used.

'So you like sheep?' Marina said.

'They're alright. Sometimes they surround you and you think they're trying to take you down.'

She laughed, and the movement disturbed the cat in Marina's lap. It said 'Mer!' and batted toward her with its clawless toes outstretched.

'Hush, you,' she said. The fur on its back bristled, then it curled up and closed its eyes.

I really did get nervous sometimes out in the fields, when it was getting toward dusk, looking into sheep's eyes that were like a person's eyes but deader, listening to their voices that sounded like human voices imitating sheep. It was scary to think that I might actually be surrounded by people in disguise, and even scarier to realize, as darkness fell, that I was all alone.

'Are sheep the dumbest animals?' she asked. Then she said, 'No. We are.'

'Probably so,' I said. 'At least you can shear a sheep.'

'That's true,' she said. 'At least they make something we can use.'

This was something I had often thought about while I sheared, feeling the thickness and tangle of wool that was by turns scratchy and soft, watching as the fleece practically poured off of the sheep's skin and after a while, out of numbness, started to feel like down feathers in my hand. I knew I was ignorant, but I wanted to be ignorant in the way of a sheep. Sheep were as dumb and ungrateful as any animal, but they were not a burden. They gave off infinite substance,

stuff you could use to make unquantifiable amounts of warmth, spreading everywhere, without ever knowing it.

‘I’d like to be like that someday,’ I said.

‘Yeah,’ Marina said. ‘You’d like that.’

‘Wouldn’t you like it too?’

‘Be what you please. Be a sheep, be a goat. I’ll never find out about it. You missed your chance with me. You never gave me one useful thing, and you never will.’

‘I’m sorry. I meant to say, wouldn’t you like to be like that?’

Marina picked up the cat and held it face-to-face. It nuzzled her cheek and purred like a lawnmower.

‘I’m not thinking like that yet,’ she said. ‘I’d just like to get by for now, if that’s alright.’

‘It is.’

She put the cat down on a step and it held its tail in the air to show her that it was indifferent and still had its dignity whether she held it or not.

‘You useless thing,’ Marina said. I got the sense that she was not talking in particular to the cat.

‘Not anymore,’ I said.

‘Always,’ she said.

I scratched the cat behind the ear. The fur there was short and felt silky, like plush. The cat seemed to be sleeping with its head extended to meet my finger.

‘I’m trying,’ I said.

‘So am I,’ she said. I looked at her, and she glanced at me out of the corner of her eye.

‘But not hard enough.’



‘Trying is trying,’ I said.

‘Maybe,’ she said. She looked up at me. ‘But don’t you just feel hollow sometimes? Don’t you just feel like a liar?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘It’s like that body in there,’ she said. ‘It looks alive, but it’s not.’

I nodded. I wished for a moment that I was a better talker, that I could say in words what I had come to know in my heart, that we just had to feel like liars for a while, until we didn’t anymore. And in the meantime we could wear nice clothes. We could cover ourselves up in sheep’s clothing, put Marina in a nice wool sweater and wrap me in a clean wool blanket, disguises we could live behind until they stuck, until we became them, warm and useful and real. But I couldn’t say those things out loud. And tell the truth I was still afraid of her, of what might still be in her to say to me, that there was still hurt she felt she had not repaid. So I told myself I did not have to tell her those things, because she already knew them somewhere, now or sometime down the road, without my speaking them.

‘Would you like to go inside?’

‘Yes,’ she said.

In the living room they had lit the fireplace and turned off the lamps. The room was crowded with shadowy faces that I did not recognize. A few voices had joined in a hymn, women’s voices. In the center of the room was the open casket, and we all surrounded it in a circle like guards. I wondered how many of us were looking at the body and seeing how cold it was, and fearing it, and how many were seeing how peaceful it was, and envying it.

For the moment I was unconcerned with the question of death. I did not care to know what life was like after death. I wanted to know what life was like now, whether Marina and I would ever forgive each other, and what our lives would be like when we did. I wanted time to contract and put us in a future when things had been made right.

I looked at my hands. The skin was yellow and hard with a web of pink cracks. I swore I could feel them losing strength as I stood there, so wrapped up in all this mourning. I wanted to leave this place and get back to work, and for Marina to do the same, at the bank, to save her money until she had enough to build something good and happy for herself. I wanted us to quit mourning and start repairing, so that the day when we were strong and fine and useful as a pair of leather boots would come sooner rather than later.

I saw the shadow of her curls spread large on the wall, and I hoped that she was not crying. I hoped she knew she did not have to cry. I watched for movement, but the flicker of the fireplace put every shadow in constant motion, independent of the bodies casting them. I closed my eyes and listened for the familiar sound of her crying. I listened for her voice in the hymn. I waited for the courage to turn my head and see her face.

### All Scattered

This morning I am helping Brother Thomas gather the bed sheets from the hospice for washing. Father Abbot was found dead on the workbench in his hermitage last night before compline, and at lauds his body had been laid out on the altar, still wearing his white habit stained with dirt from the garden. We prayed as usual, lit the candles, retreated to our daytime duties.

I am twenty-four years old and I have lived here for three years. No one has stayed in the hospice as long as I have been here, but it is our duty as novices to keep it clean and orderly. Brother Thomas pulls the sheets from the bed, and I hold the sack where he places them. Before he puts them in he shakes them in the air, and we watch the dust spread out in the light. It is a small, permissible pleasure.

I have come to view dust as a holy thing. I watch it floating and imagine what it will be like when all the scattered particles recombine. When I helped Father Abbot in his garden I would dig my fingers in that dear old dirt and imagine the bits of skin that I was leaving behind,

imagine them rising up out of the dirt in the end of time when they are called to reunite from the places where they scattered.

Some days, like today, work does not feel quite so grand. Today, the dust looks like dust. Today, Father Abbot is dead. I will no longer find him in the garden. I will not find him on his workbench carving, or watching the night sky through his telescope. I will not hear his voice when he reads to us at mealtime or feel his grip on my wrist when he loses his balance on our evening walks. My God says, 'Behold, I make all things new.' My faith says that Father Abbot will live again, in the bright world ahead. A time will come. The broken will mend. The scattered will reunite. In the fullness of time. But for now, a loss feels like a loss. It feels like pain. For now I do not think I want anything new, I want the old to come back again. I wish it had never gotten old and gone away.

In the afternoon we read, as a rest from our labor. I am tired and cannot think enough even to read, but I spend the time turning pages and watching the lines and paragraphs and pages drift past my vision. The meanings of the words seem to matter less than their shapes, than the beauty of ink on paper, the softness of the thin leaves, how they bend just the way I tell them to.

I am turning pages too quickly. I stop and close my eyes. Then I open them to look at the book, to take in the whole of it. It is beautiful, held together with worn leather binding, its fore edge soft like cloth. I know that in the end it will rot away, but holding it in my hands that feels impossible. It looks like a thing that should live forever and never fade. I press my hand onto the page, wishing that my care could be enough to save it from death. I am afraid to part from it when the hour of rest is over.

No one has yet taken Father Abbot's job of reading aloud at supper. I listen to the scraping of wooden spoons on wooden bowls and smacking lips as we eat our boiled potatoes and sip our cups of milk. I have vowed to live this way for four more years, and after that I may choose to go on in it until my death, learning until I die to content myself with what is placed in my bowl, what is poured into my cup. Some men around me have already learned, but from the outside it is impossible to tell which. Though we all look the same with our pink bald heads, gray habits, ruddy cheeks and beards and glasses, I know that in some hearts there is joy and thankfulness, in some there is no feeling at all, no taste in the food, and in some there is bitterness, a wish that there was more and life was rich and full. As for myself, I can say that I have not yet learned. As in love as I am with all of it, with each of the seven men that sit at my table, I am not content. I do not know if I can get rid of this dissatisfaction, this sadness that with all the love we know and believe in and give to each other all the time, it is not enough for us to find some peace. In fact nothing is enough, and nothing ever will be, never until that beautiful end, the bright world that I cannot imagine, that I cannot dare to hope for while I am still licking my spoon clean and gnawing on my potato skins. We can talk about love and God and mercy all day long and at supper we are still earthbound and selfish, all hungry, all lonely, all scattered.

At night I lie in my cell half-awake, and a dream comes to me, one that I have not dreamed since my first year here. I am in a small, warm kitchen. My sister, now a woman with her hair cut short, stands by the stove, stirring a steaming pot of soup. She never turns to me. I never see her face. All night I sit at the kitchen table, smelling the soup as it cooks and listening to its bubbling. I wait for my supper until morning when I wake to a cold white sky through my window. I leave my cell for morning prayer, followed by porridge and coffee.

### Breakfast

Every Friday morning sometime around 5, this girl comes in and orders black coffee and a pumpernickel bagel and sits by the window reading a red pocket bible with flaky gold leaf edges. She chews her bagel slow and bored-looking, flipping pages of the bible like it's People magazine. It's getting on winter now, so she keeps her hood up and leans over the table hugging herself, dirty blond curls hanging down over the bible like a curtain hiding the grail. If she eats slow enough, I get to see the dawn happen behind her, which is one of the top sights of my life these days. The asphalt is cracked, but it looks better when there's orange light spreading across it, and the chain-link fence and the empty lot across the street. Every now and then a car goes by headed to campus for work. She has razor-sharp focus. She doesn't look up for anything.

Sometimes I stare too long and Gunther grabs my hair and rattles my head. 'You like those Jesus girls?' he says. His breath smells like wet leather. His moustache hasn't changed since I started working here when I was fourteen. 'Well customers are off limits,' he says. 'Try Christian Mingle.'

Maybe the bible is a part of it, but I mostly like her clothes. Today she's in that green parka with a sergeant's patch on the sleeve and these long brown riding boots that I don't think I've seen before. They're not sexy or anything. They're just so well-made and clean.

I am twenty-one years old. I have lived here my whole life. I just used up half my savings to buy the sky blue pickup truck out of that junky yard on Church Street, the one I walked past on my way to school every day until I was sixteen. I don't have anywhere to drive, but I could spend the rest of my life joyriding. I try to keep it on back roads so the noise of the engine doesn't bother anybody, but sometimes I end up on campus without knowing how I got there. The middle of the day is a bad time to be wandering around. You see a lot of people that don't look much older or smarter than you, acting like they've got places to be. I guess this girl is a student too, but she doesn't act like one. She doesn't pretend to be doing anything except what she's doing.

But something is not right today. She keeps looking out the window, and in the growing light I see bags under her eyes. With two fingers she presses her forehead. Maybe she has a cold. I never thought of her as someone who could get sick.

At some point I realize that she is crying. I know that I should look away, but the sight is kind of glorious. Her face is lit up orange and shines with the tears.

For months I have been wondering if something like this would ever happen. I'm not sure I wanted it to. She was so dependable, I didn't want to see her change. But I needed a push if I was going to talk to her, and that I wanted to do. I wanted to tell her how solid she is, and real, and that it's better to be pure and fine and well-built than anything else she might think she wants to be. Things like that you can't say unless somebody needs them.

But now that it's happening, I'm sure I don't know what anybody needs, especially not her. She comes here so early in the morning, under cover of darkness, thinks her private thoughts with just me and Gunther and the bitter taste of rye and coffee. She's not letting us in on her secret. We are just enablers, giving her a place to hide. She can cry in front of us because she is anonymous, because we are invisible.

Sometimes you want to break out of all these rules, like who you're allowed to talk to and what's a nice or an appropriate thing to say to them. You want to trust what you know. You want to touch people, give counsel, make them friends instead of strangers. But you can't. You can only give people what they ask for, and she never asked me for anything but breakfast.



Talk to Me

Come in. There's a chair. Would you like something to drink? Nothing stronger than cranberry juice in the room. But you know all about that.

I knew you'd come if I agreed to an interview. Well, I hoped you would come. No, I guess I knew. You seem like the type to go out of your way for a story, even if you know nobody will read it. You're young. You still think it's important to be dedicated.

No, I don't mean that. You've made it a tough road, you reporters, but I'm still dedicated. Jazz is my life. It's the only thing that can constantly change and still be trusted.

Tonight's show? It went alright. I wish they'd turned the lights down a little more. It's harder when you can see the empty seats.

Oh yes, it's been magnificent, being on stage again. That's where you've got to be if you want people to really listen to you. But nobody's wanted to cover the tour but you. They'll print the downfall but they won't print the comeback. Who cares about that?

Don't get me wrong, I'm thrilled to be back. San Francisco is a home to me. This is where I started out. They listened to me here like they never did in New York.

It was my voice. Like a muddy river, Honeybear says. New Yorkers have very particular tastes. From a woman, they want warmth. I don't have a lot of warmth.

No, I've never stayed in this part of town before. Not exactly what I'm used to.

A little cramped. But there's a view. I sat out on the balcony for so long last night looking down the alley to the harbor, so far away and serene, it looked like a tub full of toy boats, almost glittering under that big yellow moon—I'm sure you saw it—I fell asleep out there, in just my underwear! And these buildings are so close together, I woke up this morning and saw that there were open windows just a few feet away from where I was sleeping. I'm sure someone saw me out there. Oh, well. They've seen so much of me in those trashy magazines, they might as well see that, too.

It's a struggle, yes, to get them to take me seriously. I feel like I'm drawing circus crowds rather than audiences these days. But it's been worse. I worked my way up from the bottom, you know.

Of course, I had some help. A lot of help, really. I've always felt younger than I am, though I'm mistaken for older. Sometimes the simplest things feel new to me, do you know what I mean? I'd be nowhere without Honeybear.

I guess you'd call him my manager.

Yes, that's his real name.

I really don't know. It rings true, though. Partly. He's big, but I wouldn't call him sweet.

Since I was fifteen, I guess. So a long time. A very long time.

On Coney Island. I was there with my friend, Joanna, but she'd disappeared on the back of some older boy's motorcycle and left me there alone. She was always leaving me places. I spent the rest of the day eating funnel cakes and riding the Tilt-A-Whirl by myself, and when it got dark I was feeling queasy and I had to sit down on the curb. I sat there moaning until it turned into this kind of song, and that's when he appeared and dropped a ten-dollar bill with the coins at my feet.

Joanna? No, we lost touch soon after that. I'd already had about enough of other girls. And boys my age.

Their bodies, teenage boy bodies. I didn't like them. They looked unfinished, but still they expected your body to be finished. I felt alright with Honeybear. He liked what I had to give and didn't ask for more.

No. Yes. I don't know. Who can tell with those things? We are more than professional, but that's all I could say.

I can't explain it. He was old. He had wrinkles around his eyes, and scars, pockmarks on his face. He wore suits, always. He smelled like whiskey and those long cigarettes he smoked with the dusty green paper. But he was there.

I mean he was just there. Whenever I felt it was time to move on from a place, he was there. When I walked out from that first filthy nightclub into the rain, and in New York when it rains the smell rises from the sewers—how I hate that place. Nobody pays attention. Faces flash by you and there's no time for a good look. But there he was with that dark purple topcoat I always thought made him look goofy, like the board game professor, and he used it to cover up my bare shoulders. And when I came out into the street after a show from those grander nightclubs, here and there around California, drained but restless, and we would walk together and he'd show me the city. He seemed to have maps in his head wherever we went. And of course he was there when I walked off my label, out of rehab, out of the hospital with a band on my wrist, out of interview after interview, when I just kept giving them—I'm sure you remember—I just kept trying to fix it and I kept making it worse for myself, or better for them, for people like you. And

it was only him. He was always there. Even if he did just want to take from me. What could I keep from him? How does anyone tell anyone goodbye forever? I'd take anybody over nobody.

What are you writing in that little notebook of yours?

Well, why don't you read it back to me?

Did I say that?

Goodness. I love interviews.

Of course. Some people get famous and then they act like they don't want to talk about it, like it's not something they were always wishing for, like everything we do isn't so that somebody else will listen to us. When somebody wants to know something about me, I have to tell them, and when I've told them I don't feel finished, I want to give them more and more.

It's just when they twist what I say that drives me crazy. If people could only see me exactly as I am, if they could hear my words exactly as I say them, I really think they would understand. But it seems like the more I say the more it's twisted. I'm letting it happen right now. Someone like you comes in and asks me a question or two and I spill it all and think you're here to help me out, like you can save me just by tapping away on that keyboard, but tomorrow it'll be the same old story. I just wish one of you vultures actually cared.

Thank you. I believe you. I always believe everyone. I'm such a dupe.

Thank you.

No, I'm alright. You know, you're not bad-looking. How old are you?

I don't believe it. You look about nineteen. How old do you think I am?

You're generous. I will tell you I'm a full seven years older than that, and I feel about twenty years older. But still unfinished. Do you know what I mean?

I suppose you wouldn't. Men don't think about those things.

Well, I don't have a lot of women friends to talk with. I can't deal with women.

They're afraid of themselves, for one thing. They're afraid to have appetites. They sip things and chew slowly and graciously decline. They're not ashamed to leave you hanging out there like an idiot. They can pick out the dupes, the ones that really need it, and then they know the perfect moment to stop giving it, and it doesn't even bother them to cut you off cold. I could never do that. I just want to give it all. Men are fine to stare at you like they're drinking you in with their eyes. They make me feel like I'm really doing something. I want people to devour me.

Me, the thing in itself, not what you reporters want to make out of me. Reading about me isn't enough. I want them to have me, for real. I want to push myself out and fill up all the empty spaces, so people can breathe me and swallow me and feel me all around them, realer than blood. But nobody wants that. They want your version of me. And what do you do when you have told it all, when you've bared yourself and somebody wants you to take off more, to peel the skin, or to cover yourself back up, to be something different than what you are, to feel ashamed that you offered in the first place? What do you do when you've bared all and you are naked to them and all they do is look away, like they don't want it, like you're not good enough to make them want it?

Honeybear is different. He's more like a scab that keeps coming back no matter how many times you flick it away.

Please. You're no different from the rest of them.

Are you?

Show me.

What was I thinking, inviting you here? What good are you? How can you write the truth about another person? All you can do is guess.

What I say is no help. You have to really know me.

No, my words are not the best you have. I'm right here.

So do it.

Yes, you should be.

I'm sorry too. Well, good luck with your article. Good luck getting anyone to read it.

That's not necessary. In fact, don't write anything I said. Tell those greedy readers that if they want to know me they can come here and sleep next to me and see my wrinkles up close and smell the stolen shots on my breath. Find out what you couldn't.

I mean it. They can go through my life with me. They can come out onto the balcony with me and spend the morning looking into other people's windows and getting smog in their lungs.

That's what I did this morning, still half-naked, hoping just one of those people pantomiming his morning routine would look out and see me, maybe wave to me and smile, and not just see me but remember what he saw, carry it special in his mind. Don't you want that? Don't you want somebody to really look?

Why aren't you scribbling in your notebook?

No, no more questions. I believe we have hopelessly derailed.



What more can I give you? Do you want to stay the night or something?

Go ahead. There's the door.

Sure, I'll answer one more.

If I could tell them anything? I suppose I would say, Don't read this. Talk to me.

### What the Angel Did

On the last day of our trip to Mount Tabor, a town in the mountains of West Virginia, Bobby and I drove down to the general store to pick up some groceries. We had stayed the week with his grandfather, Clado, and we wanted the fridge and cabinets to be stocked when we left the next morning. In a week I would be going back for my last year of college, and Bobby would be leaving for medical school in a different state.

At that time of year there was a thunderstorm nearly every afternoon, and we kept the windows closed against the rain. The air in the truck was hot and still. Bobby drove slowly on the slick mountain road, and I barely felt a bump whenever we hit a pothole. We didn't talk during the drive.

Things had gotten quiet between us that week. Clado was getting ready to move into a nursing home, and Bobby and I had spent the visit clearing out boxes from the cellar. At first we'd emptied everything out onto the floor, laughing at the old photos we turned up, the little league trophies that belonged to Bobby's uncles, dog-eared fishing catalogs, Readers Digest condensed novels usually with a bookmark on page three or four. But the end of the week was

getting closer. We knew were in some of our last moments together. Our time together would very soon become the past, and then the distant past, and then a single token, unrecognizable, in a cellar full of garbage. I was afraid to speak, for fear I might say something to flatten whatever delicate thing had built up between us over our summer together. I didn't want to add anymore memories, anything else to look back on fondly. Eventually we didn't even open the boxes, we just put them in the truck bed and drove them to the dump.

At the store we filled two paper bags with groceries and old man treats: soda crackers and cans of Vienna sausage, lemon candies, three bags of coffee grounds. We hugged the bags to protect them from the rain and ran through puddles in the gravel parking lot, splashing our ankles with mud.

'I'm glad you finally got to meet him,' Bobby said in the truck. 'He's not much of a talker anymore, but I hope it was worth the trip.'

Since we'd first met, Bobby had loved to tell me stories about his family history, and Clado was the definite hero of his version of the family saga. The ambitious son of an Italian coal miner from the sleepy town of Mount Tabor, Clado had worked his way up from nothing, moved to New York City and become a medical doctor, made a sum of money that Bobby spoke in a voice full of awe, married and divorced, and in an all-too-shocking twist, grew tired of lonesome, cutthroat city life and gave it all up to go home to Mount Tabor to settle, set up a practice and heal the decrepit, the decaying and vitamin-deficient. The admiration seemed overzealous to me. The kind of life that Bobby wanted I did not entirely understand. He was brought up on virtues of hard work and self-reliance. I was fed things like togetherness and hope. His guiding principle instructed him to spare no one, to go forth and make his fortune for himself, to push away the me types, the ones whose guiding principle taught them to get down as

low as possible and stretch things out indefinitely, to see them last into eternity. Still, Bobby and I were in love, and all summer I had listened to his waxing and daydreamed with him about a trip to the fabled Mount Tabor. Along the way I had convinced myself that daydreams were as good as promises, that a daydream was a plan and a plan assured a future. Now it was August. Summer was ending, Bobby was leaving. Time passes, dreams disappear. We were here in Mount Tabor, and the legendary Clado was a brittle old man, smiling and sad, padding around the house in his stocking feet, sucking noisily on a lemon drop.

‘Definitely worth the trip,’ I said to Bobby. He looked at me. ‘Really,’ I said. ‘He’s wonderful.’

It had stopped raining when we got to the house. We left our muddy sneakers on the stoop and went inside. Through the back window we could see Clado on the screened-in patio, sitting in his green plastic foldout chair and looking out at the trees behind the house.

‘I’ll put these in the kitchen,’ Bobby said, taking my bag in the crook of his arm. ‘It’s almost dinnertime. Should I put on some soup?’

‘Sure,’ I said. He went into the kitchen.

I walked over to the glass door that led out onto the patio. I stood for a moment looking at the back of Clado’s head, with his tufts of white hair sprouting out on either side. We had left a box of pictures out on the kitchen table for Clado to find, and he had taken it out onto the patio. It lay open at his feet. There was a bottle of Wild Turkey and a glass of melting ice on the table next to him. His head was down. He had dozed off.

I knew I would remember this image for a long time, and that was angering. I had grown fond of Clado over the week, as he was and not in the way that Bobby had described him. I wished there was more time to get to know him like this, or that I had been smart and never

come on the trip, never gotten close to Bobby and allowed myself to hope. Hope was unnatural, and time was a natural process. It pulled things apart by necessity, and I knew that, but still it felt unjust. I was alright with things ending, I just wished they didn't seem so wonderful while they were happening, that they didn't stay so fresh in my memory after they were gone.

I slid the door open and stepped out onto the patio. Clado's head stayed down. His breathing was raspy and slow.

'Nonno,' I said quietly, trying not to startle him.

He raised his head and I went to sit on the floor at his feet, next to the box of pictures. I looked up into his face, and he smiled, looking surprised to see me. He held up his fist. He was clutching a photograph. He looked at it, confused, then he smiled and held it out to me. I took it.

'Doesn't she look like you?' he said. The picture was sepia-colored, and it showed a teenaged girl standing on the porch of a bungalow. I laughed and nodded, but she did not look at all like me. She had two long braids, and she was wearing a dress with ribbons woven down the front. She looked mournful, or displeased at having her picture taken, or just tired. It was hard to tell. The picture was faded, and old-fashioned faces are hard to read.

'Who is she?'

'That's a cousin of mine. She lived with us one summer when I was a kid.'

'What was her name?'

'Serafina,' he said.

'Serafina,' I repeated.

'It means angel.'

'Oh,' I said. I looked at her face, pale and tired, only a bit of a smile. 'Angel.'

He nodded. 'I thought she really was an angel, she was so beautiful,' he said. He smiled. 'It ruined my life. You're a kid, you think you're happy, and then you find out there's an angel in the world. When she left, it broke my heart.'

'Where is she now?'

He shook his head. 'I never saw her again. She had a baby, not long after that picture.' Looking closer I could see a shadowy curve in the loose fabric of her dress. 'I must have been ten years old. They kept me in the dark.'

He closed his eyes. 'That was a long time ago. I don't know how I haven't forgotten it. Some things just stick with you, I guess. Even if you wish they wouldn't.' When he wasn't smiling, his crow's feet turned into pale streaks. He opened his eyes. 'I'm lucky to have you kids around,' he said. 'I don't know if I could stand going through all of these things myself. Too many memories.'

I looked back at the picture, at Serafina the angel. She looked mean now, and shift. I didn't like anybody that had broken Clado's heart, even if it wasn't her fault. I wished we hadn't brought the pictures up to remind him of it. I was in the process of learning about these angel characters and what they could do to you. I knew how they fell into your life without warning and then disappeared as soon as they had come, leaving you doubtful and confused, touched in the head, and worse off than you'd been before you knew about them. And how there was always an urge, when you found an angel, to want to catch it and pin it down, trap it, skin it, build a tent out of it and live in it forever. But once it left—and it always left—you wished you'd never touched the thing. You wished it would just get gone without a trace.

I handed the picture back. He tossed it into the box.

'I'll be glad to be rid of it all,' he said. 'When you're old, it's time to forget.'

Bobby poked his head through the doorway.

‘Nonno, I made some dinner,’ he said.

‘Bobby,’ Clado said. ‘You’re right, it’s getting late.’ He tried to stand. I jumped up and held out a hand, and Bobby hurried over to hold him up under his arm. Clado’s skin felt like paper, and his grip was tight on my wrist. ‘I’m fine, I’m fine,’ he said, getting his balance. He picked up the bottle and glass from the table. ‘I’ll just go in and clean up, and then we’ll eat.’

When he had left, Bobby put his arms around me. We stepped backwards, slowly, like dancing, and he pressed me against the frame of the screen door. Outside the rain had started up again, and the air was damp. We were sticky with sweat. I closed my eyes and turned my face away. I could smell the wet screen and the muddy yard outside. I breathed in the warmth of it, let it fill my mind, though I knew it was dangerous. I did not need another keepsake from a time I would soon wish I could forget.

### Thrush House

Two heads of tangled curls, two pairs of cheeks red raw from the wind. Chapped lips, hair sticking to the temples with sweat. The girls run through the woods to the thrush house.

The older one plunges ahead, crashing through thickets of branches, smashing rotted logs with her pink rubber boots. That's Maggie. That's you. The little one, still caught somewhere in the brush, stopping to sulk over the scratches, that's Sophie. That's me.

The trees in this part of the woods grew up too close together. They stand tall, as dying trees do, while their bark falls away and the roots strangle each other under the ground. Between two trunks there is a gap just big enough for us to slip, one at a time. A metal post sticks out of the spongy earth in the clearing, and the green thrush house sits on top.

In our memory, a tiny wood thrush pops out of the hole and chirps at us angrily before it flaps away. We are left breathless, staring at the patch of blue sky where it disappeared.

'Stop that,' you say.



I have been tapping my foot on the railing and it's shaking the whole back deck, which seems to sway a little even when we're sitting still. Aunt Linda's new husband built it just for this Thanksgiving. He is supposedly a handyman.

'Sorry,' I say.

I try in my head to make this into the beginning of a conversation. In the time it takes to piece together the next sentence, the moment has passed. You've sunk into your thoughts.

Whenever you come back to North Carolina I try to spot the new parts you accumulated while you were away. The nose ring is an obvious one. It is star-shaped and gold with ruby red, and it adds some mystique to your natural elegance factor. You look like you enjoy reading books in French. Maybe you have made a friend from India.

I like having a smart older sister, I really do. It was good for me, I think, seeing you toughen up against the bullies, not get stupid about it but come home every day and head straight for the kitchen table to work on your applications to boarding schools. I liked walking home with you from the post office after you mailed them, dreaming of their paths through the magic chutes of the U.S. Postal Service to the dewy green pastures of Tennessee, the snowy Christmastowns of New Hampshire and Vermont. I liked seeing Mom and Dad look at you with shining eyes when the scholarships flowed back. We probably could have driven you there, but we put you on the train so we could wave goodbye to you from the platform. Mom even brought a handkerchief. That part I liked. It's just that now I have to admire you. I have to wonder if I can say anything interesting to you. I don't know what you think about anymore.

We glance at each other and then look behind us through the open door, pretending it was just a chance meeting on the path of turning our heads. Mom sits at the table with Aunt Linda,

leaning in close to hear something in confidence. She is shaking her head and making an empathy face. When she sees us looking, she winks. Our heads snap back toward the yard.

‘Come on, Mom,’ you say.

We watch Uncle Max’s kids trample the one patch of grass in the yard. They come from the mountains and are giddy with oxygen. The older boy stomps in circles leaving pockmarks in the mud, and the younger boy hops behind him from footprint to footprint. The girl is playing at barking like a dog. Someone laughed at this earlier, and now she thinks it is an amusing trick. When she bounds over to us with a manic look in her eyes, we both look away and pretend to drink from our empty coffee cups. She gives a few half-hearted yips and then gives up.

‘Why don’t they have to wear coats?’ you say after she leaves. ‘They always made us wear coats.’

‘Well, Dad did.’

‘Oh, yeah. It’s Mom’s family.’

We do not visit Mom’s family all that much. We are here as bait. Aunt Linda wanted to use us to lure her daughters home from their colleges up north, but neither of them fell for it. Uncle Max lives a few hours away, in the mountains, but we live close enough to Aunt Linda that we could visit more often. We used to all the time when we were small, sleeping with all the kids piled on the pull-out couch, always coming home with fevers and bloody mosquito bites on our legs. At some point our visits were curtailed without our noticing, and suddenly it had been years since we’d seen any of the cousins. We could only assume that they had also become teenagers. Honestly, it occurred to me pretty recently that those times were over, that I could officially stop looking forward to the next sleepover. I guess that only goes to show that I had not actively thought about it.

‘It makes me anxious having all these cousins around,’ you say. ‘I feel like there should have been an injury by now.’

‘Yeah. Or at least a major stain.’

‘I guess everybody here’s basically a grown-up.’

We think about this, then look at each other and shake our heads. It’s good to see you smile.

‘Is seventeen the best age to be?’ I ask.

‘Probably. It’s a fun number to say when people ask me how old I am.’

‘That’s a good way to think about it. I guess fifteen’s not a bad age, if you’re just thinking about the number.’

‘No, fifteen is definitely bad no matter how you look at it,’ you say. ‘But it gets better. Trust me.’ I can feel you looking at me out of the corner of your eye.

‘That’s what they tell me,’ I say.

A breeze blows, that nasty one that comes around every now and then in fall to say, school on Monday. The food sits heavy in my stomach, with foreboding of a feeling much heavier.

I probably shouldn’t say this, but whenever I get that way, when I get the dreads, it almost always makes me think about you. Usually I leave class and wander the halls of my high school, your old school, the one you transcended. The halls are still blank and white as an insane asylum. I lean against the wall, feeling brittle and wondering what you would think if you saw me. I picture you at a roundtable of attractive young people in a cozy classroom lined with shelves of leather-bound books. I picture you kissing a long-haired boy under the stone archway of the academy, nose pink from the cold, snowflakes landing in your soft brown curls. I wonder

if you would ever come home to a place that is so backward, if you will ever again set foot on the infertile clay or swim in the narrow murky rivers that flow out to unnavigable shoals.

More often than not, I end up outside a senior classroom right as the bell rings, and your old buddies from freshman year spot me as they leave class. Ellie Phillips brushes against me and my skin bristles where she touched. Then Josianne knocks me to the ground and I feel the embarrassment in every bone and tooth.

Those times more than any other, I feel close to you. I understand with every inch of me what it was that took you away from here. But in the same moment I know what will keep me here. I know that I will soon remember that fear of being cut loose, the fear of unknown territory, that the geography there might be different and unpredictable, that it might just shift under my feet. And not only fear, there is also a fondness of this place, unreasonable but real. You may be fearless, but the fondness I think you can understand. I wish you would say so.

The dusk has come down on Aunt Linda's backyard. Mom and Aunt Linda tiptoe out onto the porch.

'Are we interrupting?' Aunt Linda says in a reverent hush.

'Not at all,' you say.

'Oh.' They glance at each other, disappointed.

Aunt Linda puts her hand on the top your head and smiles at the feel of your hair. I consider trying to catch your eye but decide that it is unsafe.

'We've just been talking,' she says. 'It's so nice to see you girls together.'

'It's nice to be here, Aunt Linda,' you say.

‘Really?’ Her eyes well with tears and she turns to me, looking for a co-witness to whatever miracle she feels has happened. ‘What do you think of this house? Tell me the truth.’

‘I like it,’ I say.

‘Do you?’ Now my hair has become the source of contact comfort. ‘Do you remember playing here when you were little? Do you ever think back on it? Do you love this house? Do you love it? I think we ought to trash it.’

‘Trash it?’ Mom says, frowning at the sudden turn for the negative. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Oh, I never know what I mean,’ Aunt Linda says, a tear escaping down her cheek. ‘It’s just getting so full with all my junk. When I wake up, it’s like I have to wade through years of it just to get to the coffee maker.’

There’s a certain quaver in the voice that every female in a given family will recognize as her own. It’s the most heartbreaking sound, probably because it activates some residual instinct to protect your own, and yourself. We all look away into the yard when we hear it, as a mercy to Aunt Linda.

In the yard, the mountain cousins are still hard at play. Our girl cousin is standing on her brothers’ shoulders, investigating something in one of the trees on the back edge of the property. There’s a spot of red sun still shining between the trunks, and it makes a silhouette out of her bowed legs. A little patch of mud behind them shines like a beach where the light hits. Maybe this is not a nice scene, but it is a familiar one.

‘I don’t see any junk,’ you say.

‘Maybe not,’ Aunt Linda says. She smooths her own hair, which is still youthfully long, the same as she’s had it since high school or before. She looks surprised to find it dry and thin

and gray as a mouse. She sighs. 'I don't know what those girls are so afraid of. I've always thought this would be a fine place to come back to.'

We do not, after all, make it through the evening without an injury. A branch breaks, a knee is scraped, there is a small wound and a surprising amount of blood. This acts as our cue to end the official gathering. Uncle Max loads his kids and a sedate Grandma Flowers into the truck, and we stand on the porch waving until the taillights have disappeared.

Aunt Linda's husband goes into the front yard to smoke a cigarette, and Mom goes inside to keep on talking with Aunt Linda. Some rebellious spirit has stirred in her lately. Neither of us has asked about it, but we guess it's why we're here instead of with Dad and his family in suburban Charlotte. We guess it's why she's talking late with her sister instead of hitting the road hours ago, like we would have if he was here. It's still in a stage that is unnoticeable to the outsider. It's our unspoken decision not to stress about it.

We sit on the porch railing and dangle our legs toward the yard. Aunt Linda's husband is invisible in the darkness, but we can tell he is pacing by the moving glow of his cigarette, which lights up intermittently when he takes a drag. We watch for it like we would a lightning bug if it was summer.

'Poor Aunt Linda,' you say, keeping your voice low.

'Yeah.'

We listen to the murmur of her voice through the crack of the front door, and the rasping exhale of her husband lurking in the yard.

‘I think I get what she was saying, though,’ I say. You look at me. I can see you assessing, trying to calculate my thoughts. ‘Just the idea of having everybody back in the same room. It’s a nice dream, at least.’

You look away, puzzling over something. You touch your nose ring, tapping it like you are checking if a pan is hot. Then you swing your legs over the railing and hop down onto the porch. I follow, copying your movements exactly.

We pause at the window. Mom is nodding absently while Aunt Linda talks. She looks tired. She is thinking about Dad and the drive home. She is remembering what it was that kept her away from her family. Maybe in the grand scheme of things a disconnected conversation between sisters is of least importance, but the scene is still tragic in a small way.

You turn to me and take my face in your hands, looking at me with mock intensity.

‘Let’s not be like that,’ you say.

I clap my hands on your shoulders. ‘Okay,’ I say.

I follow you down the steps and into the driveway. We twist our feet as we walk, to make the gravel crunch and squeak, and then we shuffle our feet to kick the rocks as far as they will go along the asphalt. All the houses on this road are hidden deep in the trees, with only the occasional twinkle of a porch light as evidence that we are in a neighborhood. I fall into step behind you, and we make our way up the hill.

The sky is not quite dark and not quite starlit. It’s sort of a dusty red, or brown even, with no moon that we can find. As night skies go, it is a disappointing one. I am embarrassed for it, when I think of what you could say about it. But I like that it tells us where we are. We are in between city and country, in between mountains and coast. The color is accurate, and the accuracy is somehow comforting, regardless of whether it is beautiful or nice.

We can see ahead of us the outline of a construction site as we approach the top of the hill. We tiptoe into it, creeping between the tractors with their long necks lowered like sleeping dinosaurs.

‘Careful,’ you whisper.

‘Don’t wake them,’ I whisper back.

We pass through as noiselessly as possible, with only the faint slush sound of dirt sinking under our footsteps. At the edge of the woods, you stop. You reach out to touch the rough bark, running a finger down one of the cracks.

‘I’ve been reading about trees,’ you say.

‘Why on earth would you do that?’

‘Because I miss them,’ you say. ‘There’s one decent tree on the whole campus, and it’s named after the founding headmaster, like it’s some big shot. People do their homework under it and think they’re getting back to nature.’

‘That sounds annoying,’ I say. I kick at some of the acorns scattered on the ground. ‘You should ambush them with acorns.’

‘It’s an elm tree.’ You look up the trunk of the tree to the tangle of leaves and branches above us. ‘Oaks drop acorns.’

‘The more you know,’ I say. ‘You always were the smart one, Miss Maggie Jo.’

You pat the oak like it’s done good and slip past me into the woods.

It’s too dark in here, even though the night outside is hardly dark enough. You try taking out your phone, but the glow makes everything scary. The trees cast shadows that shouldn’t be there, creating more blind spots for our imaginations to fill in. Instead we let our eyes adjust, feeling from tree to tree and stepping lightly between roots and pools of darkness. Our



momentum slows the deeper in we get, and soon I am so close behind you that I can feel the brush of your hair on my outstretched hands. I grab onto your shirt, and you grasp both my hands in one of yours, guiding us with the other.

The trees seem to close in around us as we move, slowing us to a stop. You look upward, your lips tight with worry.

‘It’s too dark,’ you say.

‘We can go back,’ I say.

You lower your head. The shape of your profile is more familiar to me than anything.

‘I was looking for that old thrush house,’ you say. ‘Remember that?’

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘I do. Let’s go back. It’s dark.’

We return as quietly as we came, thinking the same thought in two parts, on a walk we know so well that blindness could not stop us, only make us surer of our feet on the ground.