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## Through the Woods

They had been driving for six hours now, and the farm was close. Jess' palms were sweaty on the wheel. It looked like an oil painting outside, like a damned postcard of an oil painting, the fields cast golden in the light of late afternoon. Stone walls ran through the fields, tracing the rises and hollows, and to either side of the highway there was a shadow that suggested the woods in the distance.

"You want me to take the wheel?" Tim said for the third time.

"I'm not tired," she said.

"I didn't say you were tired."

"I'm *not*," she repeated. They passed the first building they'd seen in the last half hour: a shuttered farm stand, stranded in a swath of white gravel by the roadside.

Tim started playing with the radio dial. They liked to make fun of *A Prairie Home Companion* together, but right now Jess' mind was elsewhere. She was the one who had insisted on going to meet Tim's mother in the first place. She couldn't decide if she was too nervous or not nervous enough.

"It's not as important as you're making it out to be," Tim had said. "I don't need her approval on everything that goes on in my life."

"That's not what I meant," she told him. "Just—your *mother*, Tim. I want to know her too." She didn't say more than that in case it counted as ill-wishing herself. It felt like bad luck to say the things you wanted out loud. She wasn't going to say so yet, but she had decided that Tim was worth marrying someday.

Not now, but someday.

His mother was named Geraldine, and she lived on a farm in the wilds of Western Pennsylvania, of all places—what kind of family had an ancestral farm, what kind of person was named *Geraldine*? To calm herself Jess started planning in her head how the first meeting would go.

Jess would smile, say Hello, I have heard so much about you, laugh when the old woman said, "All good things, I hope?" Or cut the laugh, in fact, keep smiling. Smile wider. Continue: Yes, as a matter of fact I am the Other Woman. I don't know how it happened either. But isn't this better, after all? I know you never liked his fiancée, tell me I'm not the only one who never liked his fiancée. Tell me we're going to get along.

Her imagined Geraldine lived in a grand old house at the top of the fields, a dowager in state, attended by flocks of servants. Or maybe all alone, like a witch, the kind of woman who

needed nothing but herself. She was quaint, funny, sharp. Wise in the ways of the world. She'd affirm to Jess that you could only follow the heart.

Like Tim and unlike the fiancée, Jess was in medical school. She had no illusions about the heart. It was a tyrant, and you had to live a certain way if you wanted to be able to run and breathe. Geraldine would understand.

"Well, let me know if you do get tired," Tim said finally. Voices broke through the radio static and then vanished again. He gave up, shifting in his seat and wrestling with the lever until he could lean back. His reflection in the windshield frowned. "Do you feel something shaking?" he said.

Jess gripped the wheel. "No," she said. "Go ahead and take a nap. I'll wake you up when we stop to eat."

He closed his eyes and turned his head toward the window. The road rose and fell smoothly like a massive spine, heading straight through the fields toward the lowering sun.

She had met Tim two years ago, as a lab assistant in his first anatomy course at Tufts. Maybe she was lying when she said she didn't know how she had become the Other Woman. She remembered seeing him lay out the scalpels on the shining tray. The room was quiet like a church was quiet, full of people who were about to either be affirmed in their faith or get the shakes and go vomit in the trash can. Tim had looked on the verge of either fleeing or cutting in with entirely too much enthusiasm, and she'd thought, That is the face of a man who needs to hear a bad joke about a dead body.

"You don't have it as bad as her yet," she'd said, nodding at the woman on the slab. "But if you're going to donate your body to science, most people like to do it after they get their first evaluations."

He'd laughed, and they'd shared that look that meant they felt bad about it but not too bad. When the class ended it was easy to ask when she could see him again, and not feel bad about that in the least.

Jess heard plenty about the fiancée before they ever met. Tim's friends adored her, it was agreed that she was a delightful creature in all respects. Her name was Linda. She was studying public policy and she didn't look delightful, not like a Disney blonde with tiny facial features and big wet eyes. She was white as snow, red as blood. Hair as black as jet.

The memory of their first meeting changed shape about every third time Jess replayed it in her head. On good days, when she knew she and Tim were a perfect team, the two of them against the world, it wasn't so bad. It seemed a long way off, and the subway platform wasn't so dark or wet—when Tim waved to an unfamiliar woman in the crowd, it was an impersonal ballpark wave with no hidden meaning.

When she was in the grip of guilt, Linda stood out in her memory like a shining brand. She shed light onto the shadowed subway platform. It glinted from the red drops in her ears and from her dark eyes. She walked an inch above the ground. She smiled like a sphinx and laughed like Cleopatra. She and Tim had gone to high school together, and they were in confidence the way two people rarely were. She kissed Tim's cheek and shook Jess' hand—red nails, too, and long.

No matter how the memory changed, Jess wasted no time getting her two cents in after Linda's train came.

"She seems *nice*," she said. It had to come out or else she'd say something even worse. Tim turned to her with a stricken look, eyes bugged out, exaggerating to make her laugh.

"She reminds me of it every day," he said.

Jess didn't think he was a delightful creature, and saw no reason he should be stuck with one for as long as they both should live. When she kissed him that night, gripping his face too hard, he let her. As far as she was concerned, it was good to be proven right.

Now he woke up but didn't open his eyes right away. She saw him shift and swallow and settle back in his seat. In stories the person you loved was supposed to look like a child when they slept, like someone who knew nothing of anything bad. But Tim just looked like himself, curly-headed and tired, his mouth partly open and his eyes moving beneath his eyelids. He shifted again, trying to get comfortable; he was always a little too tall for car seats.

"Hungry?" she said. "I know I am." She wondered what there was of Geraldine in his face: maybe the heavy eyelids, the downturned nose. Something about the way he looked out at the world, amused and a little wary but game, always game for the next thing.

"Starving," he said. "God, that came on suddenly. I could eat a horse."

"Careful what you say," she said. "Next farm we pass, I'm holding you to that." There were a hundred questions she had to ask Geraldine, but in that moment, looking at him, thinking of how he'd left Linda, she could only come up with one. Would he do it again?

Jess passed him her phone. "Find a restaurant or something," she said. "I leave it in your capable hands."

The cell service kept cutting out. At last he dropped the phone into the cup holder and told her to take the next ramp off the highway and look for a town.

"At this point I'd eat anything," he said.

They stopped for dinner at a roadside station that advertised hot dogs, government tire inspections, and thirty-six flavors of soft serve. It was one of four buildings in sight at a four-way intersection surrounded by fields. It was almost dusk. The sun was going down on the far

side of the fields, flaming and blazing and sinking low, flooding the farmlands with orange light. Jess stood by the car, stretching.

Tim paced around the car, bent over with his hands in his pockets, but didn't find anything out of the ordinary. The only other car in the overlarge lot belonged to an older white couple of the kind who came to resemble one another after however many years. They had thin pale hair, matching soft stomachs and matching smiles.

"You kids headed to Lancaster?" the woman said as they approached the order window. She said it differently than Jess expected: *Lan*-kuh-ster.

"Strasburg," Tim said. "Family visit. I'm from the area." His eagerness embarrassed Jess.

"How sweet," the woman said. "It's a sweet little town. Local boys always come back, I say."

"She does say it," the husband cut in. "So far she's right. All ours did."

"Really?" Jess said. It was not the right response, their looks told her that much. "I mean, I'm not surprised," she said. "It's nice. Really nice."

She sat with Tim sat on a stone wall facing the fields, and ate hot dogs with sauerkraut. Jess felt sure that the reason there were so few buildings, so structures at all, was that the farmlands knew exactly what belonged and what didn't. There was a place for everything that was needed. The concerns of generations never really changed.

In their Cambridge apartment Tim sometimes woke up at odd times of night. Jess would find him standing at the kitchen counter eating dry cereal straight from the box with a blank expression. He'd tell her about the pain in his neck, cancer or meningitis or something, he was

sure. If she asked him what was wrong he'd complain that everything in the city was too close together.

"It's wind tunnel after fucking wind tunnel," he'd say. "There's no horizon. Light pollution everywhere, you know the sky's not supposed to be red after the sun goes down, right?"

She could usually say the right thing to get him to go back to bed. She knew, too, when it was better to just come close and stick her hand in the cereal box. She'd lean against him and crunch down a handful of store brand corn puffs, leaving crumbs on the floor and counter to sweep up in the morning.

Looking out at the featureless farmland Jess figured she was well on her way to having a mysterious neck pain of her own. Something exciting and fast-acting: she would wither away in a matter of weeks. There was room for what belonged here, and Tim, by his blood, had a right to it. She did not.

She'd grown up in Lowell, Massachusetts, where there was no way to be except close together, a tangle of derelict textile mills and brightly lit bodegas. It was all leftovers there, flyers papered over flyers and futons slumped on curbs and the telephone poles scaled with rusting staples and bits of string. The buildings kept you from seeing too far into the distance. You were protected from the world of possibilities at the horizon, unless you forgot what was good for you and went looking for it.

Jess had thought she was too smart to go looking for it.

"I think about another hour and a half," Tim said. He looked at her very carefully and then looked away. "We could get a hotel outside Lancaster," he said. "Take an early night. She'd understand."



“Understand what?” Jess said, because the sauerkraut was awakening a kind of primal aggression. She stared him down until he relented.

“I’m just afraid you’re rushing into this, that’s all,” he said.

“I’m not afraid of your mother,” Jess said.

“I didn’t ask you to prove it.”

She busied herself wiping drippings off her wrist with a rough, nearly transparent paper napkin. The lot smelled like exhaust and cooking meat. The sun was going down faster than she expected.

“We have to get there tonight,” she said. “We said we would. It’s polite.”

“My mother,” Tim said, “is not big on polite. Especially not from me.”

“Still,” Jess said. “I want to make a good impression.” She finished the rest of her hot dog to avoid returning his glance. “Does that surprise you so much?” she said.

He leaned into her for a moment, and she leaned back, until they were balanced like a pair of playing cards. They’d stay upright as long as nobody moved. He put a hand in her hair.

“Not really,” he said.

When night began to fall there was very little to get in the way. The lights of barns and houses appeared dimly if at all, and there were few other cars on the road. Jess insisted on driving even though her eyes felt sandy. Tim sat up straight, his chin pushed forward toward the windshield; he looked like a man who’d never had a mysterious neck pain in his life.

Jess had the sense that they were driving ever closer to the oil painting, to the scenic postcard, but instead of punching through the back they just kept going. The buildings petered out, and the line of the forest began to come closer. It was shadowed blue by the oncoming dusk, and Jess’ eyes kept drifting to it, trying to separate the trunks from the spaces between. It

shifted, patterned like an Escher drawing, boundary and boundary and form repeating. They drove in among the trees.

She pointed to the white barn looming out of the trees on the passenger side. High up under the eaves there was a painted rosette, a bloom stuffed with silhouettes of stars and birds.

“What’s that?” she said.

“Hex sign,” he told her. “It’s supposed to protect from evil spirits.”

“Does it work?” she said.

“You see any evil spirits around here?” He shrugged. “It’s a Pennsylvania Dutch thing, they like decorations. You can buy one for your house.”

“Let’s get one,” she said, not sure why she wanted it. It wasn’t pretty except in a hokey Old World kind of way.

“What for?” he said. “You want to get matching I Heart Philly shirts too?”

“That’s not what I mean,” she said. “I don’t know. I want one. Maybe we should get one for your mother.”

He turned in his seat and looked at her now, steady, steady like always. He always seemed to have himself under control now, especially when Jess didn’t.

“What’s gotten into you?” he said.

I’m not afraid of your mother, she almost said. It’s you I can’t predict. Did you know Linda comes back in my dreams sometimes? Women like that, women red as blood and white as snow, always get their comebacks. You left her—how can I know you won’t do it to me too?

The hex sign suggested that there was a sacred geometry, a shape of things that was protection against evil. If that shape hadn’t been Linda-and-Tim, was there any assurance that it was Jess-and-Tim, or Jess-and-anyone?

“We’ll ask her when we get there,” Jess said. “She might want one. We should have brought her something.” The car seemed to be humming, like they were driving too fast over unfinished pavement.

“She doesn’t care about things like that,” Tim said. “God. I keep telling you.”

The car gave a low vibrating groan and lurched toward the yellow line.

Tim did that thing where he braced his palms against the dash when he didn’t like her driving. Jess dragged the steering wheel over, bringing them to a grinding halt—half on the road and half on the carpet of pine needles. She squeezed the wheel and then let go as if it were too hot to touch. Tim was getting out already. She put the hazards on, got the flashlight out of the glove compartment, and followed.

The night air was cool and it smelled of pines and earth. She joined Tim, flicking the flashlight over the silvery cold flanks of the station wagon. She caught Tim in the beam—the nervous lick of the lips, goosebumps on his skin.

“There,” he said, pointing. “There, look.”

Three of the five lug nuts on the back left tire were gone. Anxiety uncoiled in her stomach. They should have been there by now. She wanted all this—the wondering, the arguing, the remembering—to be over with.

They were three, four miles from the farmhouse. Not far. The night was still and muffled. There ought to be sounds in the woods, mice or owls, but she heard nothing. She’d been working her way up to anger before, but the silence around them brought her the rest of the way—this place was trying to get the better of her. She would not let it.

“It’s straight down this road, right?” she said. The sharpness in her voice made Tim look up from his phone. “You’re not going to be able to call for help out here. I’m walking.”

“What?” he said. “Jess, what? What’s wrong with you tonight?” He spread his hands out to her, like he thought she would talk differently if she just came into his arms. He should know better by now. “Don’t be unreasonable.”

She didn’t want to listen to him anymore. She would walk, it wasn’t such a long way really, and she would get there, and Geraldine would be waiting. She would have someone to answer her questions. She was tired of not coming at things straight on. It was time to change that.

“Come with me or don’t,” she said, zipping her jacket up and wrapping the cord of the flashlight around her wrist. “Seems pretty damn reasonable to me.” She walked out to the center of the road and followed the yellow line with her eyes until she couldn’t see it any more.

“Jess,” he said. “For God’s sake.” He sounded almost pleading now, irritating, like a child. Was that new? She began walking. As she walked she went over what she would say. Hello, so sorry to surprise you like this, I made it after all. Please let me in. I’ve heard so much about you.

*I’ve heard a lot about you too, Geraldine would say. I’ve wanted to meet you for so long. It was brave of you to come all this way. It gets lonely out here, you know?*

Yes, Jess would say. Yes, I know.

END

## Wildings

The key was to suggest, in a gentle tone, that Casey had made a huge mistake she was going to regret. Kathryn wanted to help her. She really did. She had a duty to make Casey think critically about her life choices, insofar as a seventeen-year-old could think critically about anything.

“Casey, honey,” she said, stretching her nonsmile as far as it would go. She met Casey’s eyes in the rearview mirror. “Lip piercings? That’s new. Drastic, even.” It was uncreative, was what it was.

“You like them, Aunt Kathryn?” Casey said. “You should get some too. It’d be hot.”

“What did your dad have to say about those, hmm?” Kathryn asked. Gentle tone. Gentle. “I’ll bet he wasn’t very pleased.”

“You’ve met him, right? It was ages before he even noticed,” Casey said. She made a scornful noise and Kathryn’s four-year-old son, Hunter, turned his goggle-eyed gaze on her from the neighboring seat.

“I’m sure you’re exaggerating,” Kathryn said.

“I’m really not,” Casey said. They shared a lingering, uncomfortable look in the mirror. Kathryn tore her eyes away to focus on the road.

In the booster seat next to Casey, Hunter stuffed a hand into the door pocket and felt around. Kathryn sat up taller in her seat, trying to see what he was doing while she slowed down to exit the highway.

“Is he eating something? Casey, whatever he’s eating—” She saw Casey reach over and pry his fingers apart.

“He’s fine, Aunt Kathryn,” Casey sighed, stretching *fine* to at least three times its length. That was attitude. That was genuine attitude. What had she done to deserve that?

“We’re almost there,” she said. She sounded like a broken record and she knew it. “*Try* to show some enthusiasm.”

She was still looking for her own enthusiasm in regards to the Casey situation. She wouldn’t have put herself in this position, given the choice, but her brother had been persistent.

“Kath, she needs to spend some time with a female influence,” he’d said, leaning around her as she walked in front of the TV. She watched him watch Ice Road Truckers.

“A female influence,” she said. After a moment she turned off the TV.

“Sure, yeah,” he said. “She’s acting out because she needs a, a—”

“Brian, if you say ‘mother figure’ I’m leaving,” she said. He reached for the remote. She held it away from him.

“Sure, sure, fine,” he said. “Just think about it. It’d be great if you could take her for the week.”

“You’re still not going to take her to meet Jen?” Kathryn said. “How long do you think you can keep that up for?” He rolled his eyes. She’d already told him what she thought of his girlfriend.

“We’re working up to it,” he said. “It’s not something we want to rush into. Anyway, Casey’s at a difficult time.”

“A difficult time,” Kathryn said. “Do you mean that she’s seventeen or that her mother decided she wasn’t going to be your nursemaid anymore?” Finally he sat up and looked at her, but his surprise didn’t last long.

“Low blow, Kath,” he said. “I thought you were so set on being the better person.”

That was what she’d always disliked about him, that childlike slyness. He would do what he thought was clever and congratulate himself for it, but always fell short of actually trying to be better. Inevitably someone else had to take charge where he fell short—the loans she’d given him, the excuses his ex-wife had made. There was never a return.

“I’ll take her,” Kathryn said. “One week, that’s it. We’re not talking about this anymore.”

After that she’d gone home to make her arrangements. The guest room, the extra bedding and groceries—in the ensuing rush some bleeding heart (she suspected herself) had decided a family bonding activity would be a good idea. Maybe having Hunter had made her

sentimental. But whatever the cause, she'd picked Casey up from Brian's, and now they were headed for a genuine pastoral experience. It was apple-picking time.

Fall brushed the Berkshires with ruddy color, a brown-gold patchwork that rolled inland and was lost in the haze of distance. The trees on either side of the highway were bursting red and yellow and covering the steep embankments in fallen leaves. The sky was clear, but even with the windows closed Kathryn could hear wind buffeting her Forester and see swirls of dust kicked up on the road ahead.

Casey was pretending to be asleep when they arrived. Kathryn got out, unbuckled Hunter from his booster seat, and settled him on her hip.

"Casey!" he said. To her dismay it was one of his new favorite words.

"Casey," she said. "I know you're not asleep. I'm not just going to leave you in the car."

Casey's eyes moved underneath liner-smudged lids. "Casey," Kathryn said again.

"Save you the price of a ticket," Casey said without opening her eyes.

"Get out of the car," Kathryn said.

"Casey come on," Hunter said, staring at her with adoring eyes. "You gonna come out?" Casey cracked an eye and stared back, uncomfortable. Finally she undid her seatbelt and got out, slamming the door.

The farmhouse-slash-visitor-center beckoned. The sign in front had been stenciled to look like a blackboard marked up with chalk—THE O'DELL FARM EXPERIENCE! Kathryn gave Casey a benevolent smile, of the sort Female Influences were supposed to bestow on their influence-ees. Two parts Holy Mary to one part Meg March. Casey looked away.

Behind the farmhouse, rows of apple trees stretched back towards the woods. Voices carried from the orchard, muffled talk and the squeals of kids let off the leash to climb the trees



and throw rotten apples at each other. Kathryn realized that eventually she'd have to put Hunter down, even if that meant letting him do gross and inevitable Hunter things, like picking up fruit full of worms. He would touch anything full of worms, he loved bugs so much he regularly tried to put them in his mouth. Maybe that was a parenting failure on her part.

She didn't like to think about parenting failures, about her one and only son growing up to be a talk show host or a serial killer or something. But it was hard not to, when Casey was around. She glanced at Casey and saw nothing but the crooked part in her hair as she bent over her phone.

They went in among the trees.

The O'Dell Farm Experience smelled like cider and cow barns, and sounded like the entire population of an elementary school set free to revert to their feral ways. Hunter alternately trotted and stumbled, falling into suspiciously organic messes and then lifting whatever he could reach up to his face for further examination. Kathryn watched him, swabbed his face and hands with tissues, and thought about every online article she'd ever read about the child immune system. Casey kept her eyes on her phone and left Kathryn to do the heavy lifting.

"Engage," Kathryn hissed, after the latest chipper encouragement failed to have an impact. "I paid for this." It was just like Brian, really, this carelessness about what other people were doing on your behalf. Frustrating, and so terribly familiar. Her apple basket was digging into her arm. She shifted and slid it back into the crook of her elbow without letting go of Hunter's hand. Macouns, Empires, Galas. They came in all colors and sizes, some of them lopsided, others russeted, tiny and tart or heavy and purple as plums.

Domestic apples were genetically identical—they had to be bred that way, it was the only way you got something worth eating. Trees that sprouted naturally were unpredictable.

Wildings, they called them, when they escaped cultivation and reverted to the genetic chaos of their ancestors.

Casey was still looking at her phone, a private little smile in the corner of her mouth as she polished off an apple the size of Hunter's fist. She took tiny, fierce bites, unfazed by the sourness. She dropped the core on the grass and pretended she hadn't heard Kathryn speak.

"Mommy are you gonna make *pie*," Hunter said. She bent down and wiped apple juice from the corner of his mouth with her thumb.

"Hunter, honey," she said, disentangling his fingers from the hem of her down vest. "Go wait with Casey for a minute." Casey's gaze shot back up. She looked out of place among the squat, gnarled trees, her purple windbreaker a splash of unnatural color against the leaves. Hunter went to her with rare obedience. Now, *he* looked like he belonged here, like the kind of sweet towheaded kid that toddled across the pages of a sustainable lifestyle-guide-slash-cookbook. He had an artful smear of dirt on one cheek. Kathryn took a picture, trying to keep Casey out of the frame.

"Do you bake?" Casey said. Kathryn couldn't read her look. At a guess she'd say it was Attitude again. "I didn't think you were the type."

"I do what I can," Kathryn said, trying to sound humble. Here, finally, a way in. "If you want something worthwhile to do while you're around, you can help."

Casey's lip curled.

"I'm busy," she said.

Kathryn firmly believed that adult life ought to be more civilized than that. She'd planned her own life on the conviction, mastered herself; smiled, and smiled. She'd bitten back so many of the things she meant to say. It had been hard.

“Kathy, I worry about you,” her mother had said once, when she was a girl. “You can’t keep on flying off the handle like this.” A lie, she’d said it more than once. Kathryn didn’t remember what her usual reply had been, but it definitely hadn’t been in an indoor voice.

“Well,” Kathryn said, trying to sound pleasant. “Maybe later you’ll change your mind.” Casey did not change her mind. Instead, she vanished while Kathryn was trying to get the best of the Honeycrisps down from her chosen tree without letting Hunter out of sight. They found her at the end of the row, sitting on the fence and smoking. Kathryn pushed past a gaggle of Girl Scouts, spurred on by the fake-innocent expression Casey had put on just for her.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Kathryn said as she approached. “Where do you think you are? This is a family venue, put it out. You’re going to start a fire.”

Casey turned to gaze at the cigarette in her hand with a look of genteel surprise. “Gosh,” she said. “That’s terrible. I had no idea.”

“Please,” Kathryn said—she tried to throw up her hand and then remembered she was holding Hunter. “Is this what you think is funny?” Casey shook her head mutely, her mouth quirked up like she was trying not to laugh. She was trying to get a rise. Somehow that knowledge made it easier for Kathryn to keep her voice level. “You need to grow up,” she said.

Casey regarded her for a moment, squinting as if Kathryn was a particularly bad math problem. “My dad was right about you,” she said.

“Mommy,” Hunter said, pulling on her shirt collar. “I gotta pee.”

Casey took a drag on her cigarette. “He’s gotta pee,” she said.

That did for apple-picking. Kathryn lugged Hunter back to the farmhouse-slash-visitors-center, where he splashed in the ladies’ room sink. Casey bought an apple cider donut, which he zeroed in on immediately. He stretched his damp hands toward it and made a wordless begging

noise. She looked down at him for a moment, glanced at Kathryn, and then broke off a piece for him.

Kathryn brandished the brochure she'd gotten from the plastic rack near the door. It was time to be the bigger person. She could still set an example.

"Is there anything else you want to see?" she said. "Corn maze? Cider press? They even make their own maple syrup here."

"Or we could go." Casey said. "You could bring me back to my place and leave me there. I promise not to burn the house down." She pushed the last of the donut into her mouth and chewed slowly, staring at Kathryn. She brushed the powdered sugar off on her jeans. Kathryn kept her smile in place until the white noise fizzing in her head subsided. She bent down and patted Hunter's curly blond head, not really looking at him, just reaching for something to touch. She took her time responding. It seemed to make Casey nervous, and that was fine by her.

"I, personally, am really interested in that maple syrup," Kathryn said. "Who wants to go to the sugar shack?"

They went to the sugar shack. Casey dragged every step, as though she could not be in more anguish if Kathryn had brought her there on a string attached to her lip piercing. Hunter got too close to the evaporator and was told off by the person operating it, who explained that forty gallons of sap were needed to create just one gallon of syrup. Kathryn breathed in the warm, sweet air and nodded along. This was edifying. It was good for kids to know where their food came from.

Casey fed Hunter a maple toffee she had stolen from the dime-candy bucket outside. He chewed on it with the philosophic focus of a dairy cow, and ended up with his jaws glued

together for a good ten minutes. In revenge, Kathryn took them to see the genuine replica colonial era cider press, and took her time reading the informational plaque. Hunter sat down and began pulling up fistfuls of grass. Casey found a fence to lean against with pretended indifference.

She had Brian's habit of acting as though she was above it all, a kind of show-off dignity that, in truth, didn't hold up to anything more than a stiff breeze. It reminded Kathryn of when they were kids. Brian and his friends would chase her in a pack from school, hollering and making what they figured were sex noises. She'd walk on, head high, and when they were home alone she found the spot under his wrist and dug her nails in until he yelped. There were dents in her bedroom door from where he'd harassed her and her friends during sleepovers—on one side a pack of girls leaning against the door and giggling in delighted outrage, on the other side a small boy with a plastic hammer and a bad attitude.

Simpler days, when you felt that a good fight could solve most problems. The memory left a sweet-sour taste in her mouth.

There had to be a better way of doing things. She still told herself that sometimes when she was on the verge of escalating a spat with her husband into something loud and angry that she didn't want but would not be able to back down from. Maybe that was why she went up to Casey.

"You know, you'd be enjoying yourself if you just give it a chance," she said. And no, no, that was wrong. Casey stiffened and glanced at Kathryn from the corner of her eye. She had one arm wrapped around herself, clutching at the belt loop on her jeans. She'd been picking at a spot on her chin with her other hand but now she stuffed it in her pocket. Kathryn saw a bright, frayed string bracelet tied around her wrist.

“Did you make that?” she said. “With your friends or something?”

“You mean, is it a friendship bracelet?” Casey said, singsong and mocking. She slid her thumb under the bracelet and rubbed her wrist. “It’s—I was at science camp last year and we all got them. I’m not like, a Girl Scout.”

“I figured,” Kathryn said.

“I bet you were,” Casey said, giving her a measuring look. Kathryn thought of what she was seeing: her spotless jeans, her name-brand down vest and high blond ponytail. “I bet you were making lanyards by the fucking yard.”

“Language,” she said automatically. Then, “I was, for a little bit. I hated it.”

“What?” Casey said. “You? The second coming of Martha Stewart?”

“Ha *ha*,” Kathryn said. “My mom made me join. She thought it would do me good.”

“The way Dad tells it you didn’t need any more good,” Casey said, and then shut her mouth, looking furtive.

“Trust him to twist things around,” Kathryn said. “His problems are always somebody else’s fault.”

“Easy for you to say,” Casey shot back. “You weren’t there. You’ve never been there, you don’t know what it’s like for him. Your life is *fine*.”

“If it looks that way, it’s because I worked at it,” Kathryn snapped. “You can’t always get whatever you want—do you even understand that?”

Casey pushed off the fence, giving her a look of disgust.

“Can we go back now,” she said, her voice flat.

“Sure. All right. Fine,” Kathryn said. It came out stilted as she bit down on everything she wanted to say that wasn’t appropriate with a four-year-old around. Just one last thing. She *had* paid for this. “After the corn maze,” she said.

It was late afternoon, and the heat of midday had stolen away over the fields. The orchard was on the near side of the setting sun. Orange light burned through the crowns of the stunted trees, cutting out leaves and branches in dark relief, and the corn maze cast a peculiarly shaped shadow across the stubbly grass.

“You folks are going to be the last ones in,” the ticket seller told them. “We close it up around sundown.”

“There’s a guide if we need help, right?” Kathryn asked. She pointed to the wooden lookout tower at the center of the maze, which resembled an oversized lifeguard tower. The ticket seller gave them a tight smile.

“Sorry, no,” she said. “We had to cut back, so that tower’s been out of use for a couple years. Would you know, we hardly ever needed it to begin with? It’s nothing to worry about.” The maze entrance was a narrow break in the thick-grown corn—inside was all green shade and the smell of dry earth, and the dwindling sunlight was even fainter than before. Hunter dashed in and tried to push his way between the stalks, stopping only when Kathryn hauled him back by the hood of his fleece.

Casey hung back at the edge. When Kathryn gestured to her she sloped in after them. Kathryn figured corn was an effective smoking deterrent if nothing else. Casey made a noise of frustration and shoved her phone into her jacket pocket.

“No signal?” Kathryn said. Casey’s scowl was eloquent. “It’s better that way, you know,” she said. “I mean, *what’s* wrong with apple picking?”

“I get why you want to do this,” Casey said. “It’s,” she made a vague sweeping gesture. “It’s your whole thing. This DIY super-mom shit. But you didn’t have to drag me into it.”

“This is family,” Kathryn said. “I wasn’t going to leave you in the car like a dog, even if you’re making me think it was a good idea.”

“You’d love that, wouldn’t you,” Casey said, with unexpected ferocity. She stabbed a finger in Hunter’s direction. Kathryn almost smacked it away. “That what you’re going to do with him, when he grows up like me?”

“You don’t know what you’re saying,” Kathryn told her. It took an effort of will to keep her voice level. “I’m going to give you a minute to calm down and think about what’s coming out of your mouth.”

“I’m not a toddler,” Casey hissed. “What, you think you can count to ten and make me better?”

“It would help,” Kathryn snapped, “If you ever actually tried to *be* better.” Casey flinched, and it was the sudden raw expression on her face that made Kathryn realize she was not Brian.

She was more shocked by that than she ought to be, and it shamed her. Was that the kind of person she’d made herself? Someone who forgot that children were children?

Casey didn’t give her time to think about it. She turned away, choosing a route at random, and stalked off into the maze with downhanging leaves slapping her shoulders and face.

“Casey, for Christ’s sake!” Kathryn shouted. Casey gave her the finger and kept walking.

Kathryn breathed in through her nose and did the count that the yoga teacher had taught her. In class they called it *cleansing breaths*. *Sniper breathing*, her husband called it. She



supposed it wouldn't do Casey any harm to stew for a while. She shouldn't have been surprised that ungratefulness ran in the family. The apple didn't fall far from the tree. The tree didn't fall far from the forest—people made excuses, said that boys would be boys and that Kathryn should cut Brian some slack, he was her only brother—but the tree fell anyway. He had never really grown up. Down came baby, cradle and all.

The problem was wildness. Some people didn't understand the importance of control.

She stood with her eyes shut for a moment, waiting for the anger to ebb a little. Coming back to herself, she noticed a distinct lack of noise or movement at knee height. A quick look around confirmed it: Hunter was gone.

The white noise came creeping up on her again. It was the worry that lingered at the edges of every outing to the grocery store or approved play date: *what if, what if, what if*. She went to the nearest turn and peered down the green corridor—empty.

"Hunter?" she called. "Hunter, honey, where are you?"

The soft rustle of corn stalks. No answer.

Kathryn started down the next turn, listening. Logic said he couldn't have gone far. The louder part of her brain supplied a list of ways in which he could have gone very far indeed: plane, train, automobile. For all she knew, kidnappers and rabid dogs made it a habit to lurk in corn mazes. She went around yet another corner, almost jogging now.

She had taken an odd turn somewhere. The next corridor was narrower than the rest, almost obscured by towering stalks, and it led her to the tiny clearing at the foot of the guide tower.

"You're kidding me," Casey said. Kathryn looked up.

Casey was leaning out the top of the guide tower, elbows on the orange DANGER DO NOT ENTER sign. She was small enough to have slipped through the gate that blocked the rickety ladder, and of course she had taken her opportunity.

“Oh my God, did you follow me all the way here?” she called down, no longer bothering to hold back her anger. “Can’t you give it a rest?”

“At some point,” Kathryn said, leaning back to look Casey in the eye, “You’re going to have to realize not everything’s about you. Don’t be such a damn brat, and help me look for Hunter.”

“What?” Casey said. “What? Where is he?”

“I don’t know,” Kathryn said. “It was—I just looked away for a minute.” Up above, Casey put her hands on the ledge of the tower and leaned out. In the shadows under the wooden platform Kathryn could see a mosaic of carved and painted marks, names and tags and hearts and so-and-so-was-here. The ground beneath it was littered with foil and tiny liquor bottles. She didn’t realize anyone else was nearby until the corn across the little clearing swayed, and a middle-aged man in an O’Dell Farm polo shirt emerged from the maze.

“You kids are taking it too far,” he shouted at Casey. “You think it’s all right to go up there in broad daylight now, huh? We have that sign for a reason!” Casey glanced down, quick, worrying at the silver stud in her lip. The man reached for the walkie-talkie on his belt.

“She’s helping me,” Kathryn said. “I made her go up there. It’s all right.”

“Ma’am?” The man hesitated.

“Casey, keep looking,” she called.

“Did you read the sign?” the man said. “It’s a dangerous structure. We can’t be liable for what happens.”

“Oh, of course,” Kathryn said, hating her automatic politeness. He was wasting her time.

“Of course, but you see—”

“I see him,” Casey said. “Hey. Over there.” She pointed, leaning precariously far, a silhouette against the blaze of the oncoming sunset. Then she swung herself onto the ladder that ran down the side of the tower.

“You saw him? Is he far?” Kathryn said. Casey jumped down and squeezed back through the gap in the gate.

“Miss, you’re going to have to come with me,” the man said—this time Kathryn moved to cut him off. Her anger and worry had gone somewhere out of reach, and she felt pleasantly empty. Only one thing mattered now.

“It’s under control,” she said. “She’s with me.” Casey shot her a wide-eyed look.

Kathryn shoved past the man and began heading in the direction Casey had pointed. She felt a little flare of satisfaction when Casey stared dumbly and then moved to follow.

“There’s a fine for trespassing on this property!” the man said, trotting to catch up. Kathryn lengthened her stride. She didn’t have to look back to know Casey was behind her, speechless for once, trying to match her pace. Relief made her want to laugh. Someone had to take responsibility for things. She plunged into the corn.

END

## What Fear Was

My brother Ivan was, unfortunately, as dumb as a bag of fucking bricks. I say this not to be cruel, but in the spirit of brotherly love and therefore acceptance of all his faults. He was fatally confident—that was one of the things I knew just like the sky was up and the earth was down and that I had to be the one to look out for him, because our dad sure wasn't going to. I lived in fear that it'd all catch up with him someday. And more to the point, after that happened, someone would come along and point to the mess he'd made, and say, "Now how do you explain this, Will?"

Let me start on the afternoon of October twenty-ninth. Ivan was fifteen, I was twenty-two. Six years since our mom had died and we'd stumbled into that new world, not brave, where

our dad tried his damndest to forget he had sons. That left Ivan free to come up with new and exciting ways to break his collarbone or otherwise endanger life, limb, and sanity. I was sitting in the parking lot of the high school with the car idling and the autumn sun slanting hot and orange through the windshield, waiting for him to get out of in-school suspension.

There he was now, crossing the asphalt loop where the buses arrived and departed. It was a relief to see him. Last month he had walked out of a friend's driveway and then vanished for two days, only to reappear at the library trying to check out their one battered copy of *Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader?* Just like nothing was wrong. I kept asking him why. Our dad kept telling him to explain himself. He had yet to give either of us a satisfactory answer.

Now he jogged up alongside the car, slinging his bag into the back, dropping himself into the passenger seat.

"Seatbelt," I said.

"*Will*," he said. I stared at him until he buckled up.

He looked pretty much like I had when I was fifteen, and like our dad had looked in the rare picture that survived. But Ivan laughed like our mother, squeezing his eyes shut, throwing his head back.

"How'd it go?" I asked. "You feeling disciplined? Improved? How's the moral fiber?" Ivan had in-school suspension for a week and was grounded for as long. Today was the first day.

"They're making me write an essay," he said, the picture of wounded innocence. "On why selling stuff out of your locker is part of the slip'n slide to moral breakdown in the institution or—something. I forget."

I didn't say that he probably would have escaped being caught if he hadn't started on the Costco bulk boxes of fruit snacks, which high schoolers were attracted to like mosquitoes to bare

ankles. Extorting fifty cents from your friends for your leftover food was one of the sustainable microtransactions that powered the high school ecosystem-slash-economy. I'd done it.

Everyone did it. But Ivan was possessed of a number of outstanding traits that set him apart from other people.

"Can we stop off at 7-Eleven?" he said, scooting down in his seat so he could put his feet on the dash. "I'm starving."

"You forget you're grounded?" I said. "We're supposed to go straight home."

"It's fine," he said. "Who's going to find out?"

"Responsible adult, here," I said.

He grinned at me, the same look as always. It said that whatever we were arguing about was a foregone conclusion, but he'd forgive me for being slow on the uptake because, after all, we were brothers.

"You get ten minutes in there," I said. "Then we're going straight home."

He'd used the cash from his snack-selling operation to buy a used BMX bike off Craigslist before anybody found out. It was possible I envied him a little.

"By the way," I told him as I took the exit for the 7-Eleven, "There's another letter from the library for you. You got late fines."

"Wow, already?" he said, doing some complex origami to get his legs back in the seat well. "I lost track of time."

"No kidding," I said.

While he hunted through the ice cream freezer inside the convenience store, I stared at the candy rack and drafted an opening statement to our dad in my head. With him there was never a showdown—I could have done with a showdown. Instead, in times of extremity, he

would sit you down in his office and talk at you about “disappointment” and “wanting better things for you” while staring into the wall three feet above your head.

This was one of his patented post-Mom parenting methods; outlined, I assumed, on good quality paper with bullet points and neat headings about Strategies for Communicating Paternal Disapproval. He never actually said “this hurts me as much as it hurts you,” but I could tell it was a close thing.

There were times when I wanted a fight. For someone to get a nosebleed, lose a tooth. Instead it was more like a dental appointment. You had to lie very still with a small drill buzzing against your molars and think about something other than the urge to scream.

After Ivan had picked up enough food to supply a nuclear bunker in his bedroom, we took the highway back into the sprawl. Our house was like all the other houses within a twenty-minute drive: beige-sided, pinned in the center of a square green lawn like a bug on a board. It had all the amenities. A driveway that was too big, a flower patch that was too small, a sign stabbed into the lawn that said we were ADT PROTECTED! FOR A SAFER WORLD. We’d lived in the city once, where the smell of cut grass and gasoline didn’t turn your stomach. We’d moved after Mom died.

Possibly our dad had thought that it would get him away from the memories that confronted him at every turn—possibly he’d been fool enough to think those memories lived in places, and not in sons.

Ivan jiggled in his seat, unbuckling and opening the door before we’d come to a stop. He was halfway across the lawn before he remembered his bag and turned back—I held it out, two steps behind him.

“I have to get to work,” I said. “See you later. Don’t burn the place down.” He galloped up to the house, skidded over the threshold, and was gone.

From the time he could walk, Ivan seemed to have an understanding of his own life as a kind of insanely resilient toy—a superball that slingshotted free of gravity, ricocheted off embankments, walls, the hoods of cars, and always dropped safely back into his hands. He crashed his bike seven times in the month after he learned to ride it; two of those accidents sent him to the ER for stitches.

“Will, look at this!” he had said after that first surgery. He was ten years old. I hadn’t seen him since we’d gotten to the hospital, on account of having spent most of the time throwing up in the bathroom. He was sitting on a plastic seat, attended by a nurse while our dad filled out forms.

“Don’t *talk*,” the nurse said. Ivan tipped his head back to show me the puffy pink suture above his chin. We’d been biking home. He’d overtaken me at the corner and done a nosedive, and the top row of his teeth had gone clean through his bottom lip. It wasn’t a sight I was going to forget for a while.

“Jesus,” I said. “That’s gonna get infected.”

“Not Jesus,” he grinned and then his face scrunched in confusion as the stitches told him he was in pain and the anesthetic told him he wasn’t. In any other situation his expression would have made me laugh. I wondered if I had anything left to throw up.

“Shh,” the nurse said. “Young man, you’re really very lucky.”



With Ivan deposited at home, I left for my shift at the twenty-four-hour Dunkin’ Donuts by the interstate. While I was ringing up interstate travelers for weak coffee and assorted donut



holes, our dad would be arriving home. The downstairs of the house would have darkened with nightfall—Ivan holed up in his room, and rarely remembered to come down and turn the lights on.

I imagined our dad pulling up in the driveway, taking that moment in the car to run his finger around the inside of his shirt collar and loosen his tie. He'd have takeout in Styrofoam boxes, or he'd pull out another frozen pizza out and sling it in the oven. The house was flat-packed and mass-built, and from the tremors you could feel if another person was moving around in there. Ivan might flop onto his bed, dump his bag out on the floor. A little rattle of dishes on the shelves, a little movement our father could feel but never see.

I got back in just after one in the morning, smelling of stale sugar and sweat. There was a light on in the dining room, and I sat in the car just watching. Dad looked small, framed by the window, with his head held low between his shoulders.

"There's Thai," he said when I came in. I rummaged in the fridge, spilling light into the darkened kitchen. I heard him folding up the newspaper. While I was hunting for a fork and trying to figure out whether I could escape to my room, he said, "Come in here where I can see you."

I went. The bright light made me squint, and I stopped just inside the doorway. He sat with his hands flat on the table with the folded newspaper underneath.

"How was work?" he said.

"What?" I had a forkful of noodles halfway to my mouth. "Fine. It was fine. Listen, I picked up Ivan like you asked."

“I can’t believe it’s almost Halloween again,” he said. He was still looking somewhere off to my left. “Another year’s almost gone again, huh? I remember you boys used to love getting dressed up.”

“Excuse me?” I said. He glanced at me and then away, like what he was seeing just got in the way of his memory.

“There was that one year Ivan wanted to be you for Halloween, do you remember?” he said. “I never understood why you were so angry about that.”

“He was *four*,” I said. “That was a long time ago. Are you even going to ask me how he’s doing?”

He glanced at me again with a little shake of his head, looking annoyed. You would think I’d woken him from a nap for no reason. “You’re getting worked up over nothing,” he said. “You’re already keeping an eye on him. He’ll be all right.”

I stabbed at my congealed pad thai and felt the fork go through the bottom of the box. “Yeah?” I said. “That’s what you think?” I was so angry I couldn’t say anything else. I didn’t know where to start, it would be like trying to explain snow to someone from Mars. I’d always been proud of looking out for Ivan, and I didn’t want to admit that I didn’t know how to set him straight this time.

*It’s not my job*, is what I should have said. I realized that later. At the time it didn’t occur to me at all.



When I pulled into the school parking lot on Thursday afternoon, Ivan was close in conversation with a couple of friends. He glanced up when he heard the car, looked away again, and finally broke off from the group. He was a kind of vector for friendship: he attracted people

who liked him, and people who hated him stuck around too, just to see what he'd do next. He knew how to work the same tendencies in me. The eyes-shut laugh, the eager guileless voice. I didn't like to wonder if he knew what he was doing.

By this time Halloween decorations had cropped up from here to the horizon, and we killed time by rating them on the drive home.

"Eight points for shittiness," Ivan said, pointing at a tattered stuffed owl hanging upside down in a tree. It was fixed to the branch, but it had tipped over and you could see the price tag fluttering alongside the grimy under-feathers. And then, "Hey, Will. I need—can you do me a favor?"

I took my time checking out the owl. Shittiness was definitely its defining quality.

"What kind of favor?"

He moved restlessly, the seat creaking. "On Friday. You that new place Sean's parents bought, can you drop me off there? Instead of at home?"

I took the turn towards our cul-de-sac. "It's a party?"

"Not like a huge thing," he said. "Just some people from school."

"You're still really bad at lying," I said. "And at remembering you're grounded."

He let his head thunk back against the window. "Will," he said. "Come on. Please?"

He had no compunction about saying things like that. *I need a favor. Help me out. Please.* I couldn't imagine thinking like that. Like I said—he didn't know what it was to be afraid.

I took us into the driveway. Our own house was definitely somewhere in the bottom tier when it came to decoration—I'd scrounged up a string of yellow Christmas lights somewhere. Ivan was still giving me the pleading look.

“Give it a rest,” I said. “Halloween? Your friends are going to get you into trouble and this whole thing is going to start all over again. You know they suspended you so you’d learn something, right?” I turned the engine off. Ivan slammed his foot down in the seat well, startling me.

“You know how you sound when you talk like that?” he said. “Grounded? You think it makes a difference to me? I don’t understand why—” I ducked to avoid his hands when he flung them out.

“You’d have an easier time if you’d just do what I tell you,” I said. “Can you do that? Can you get it through your head?”

He fumbled for the door and gripped the roof to pull himself out, so fast he nearly fell. I lost a few seconds escaping my seatbelt and then I went after him, leaving the driver’s side door hanging. I called him, he ignored me. He was walking toward the house in long, angry strides. He tried to slam the door but I caught it as it bounced back.

We stopped in the living room. The house didn’t have enough space inside for him to get away from me. There was too much everyday life in the way.

“I do listen to you, Will,” he said. His tone was one I’d never heard before. “You just sound like Dad.”



At around four in the afternoon on Friday I pulled into the high school lot with a feeling of premonition. The only people in sight were the lacrosse players in the far field. They were shouting to each other, something with a rhythm that carried though I couldn’t make out the words.

I let the car idle, tried Ivan's phone but didn't leave a voicemail. After about fifteen minutes I left.

I figured that if I went home before work I'd find an automated message on the answering machine, to the effect of, your student LACEY, IVAN failed to complete the mandatory check-in for in-school suspension today. I called my dad at the office and got a busy signal. I could tell him anything I wanted: *Ivan got the flu and went to bed. Ivan went to a friend's house for tutoring. Ivan heard a message from on high and went to follow it.*

As I drove, I considered three different detours that would take me to the development where Sean lived. I took none of them. There was a part of my brain, never quite silent, that said *he's not you he doesn't know anything*—but if I went looking for him he'd never forgive me.

And I thought maybe this would get Dad to pay attention.

The upside-down owl stared at me from its tree as I passed. A cat, a real one, wove around the tree trunk and bounded away into the bushes.

I went to work. It sounds strange, but it was the smell of the place that always put me on autopilot: the odors of sugar and burnt coffee sank into my hair and clothes. Time dribbled away without my consciously noticing. When I went to clock out I found a missed call and a twenty-second voicemail from Ivan.

The message was just a slurry of uncoordinated sound at first, and I dialed the volume down until the laughter and music and shouting resolved into something coherent.

“—guess you're not going to pick up,” Ivan said, tinny, sounding like he was talking out of the wrong side of his mouth. “Okay. Okay I guess I just wanted, I don't know, I feel like I have to ask you before I do anything and I hate that.” I rewound the message to see if it made

any more sense the second time, but he still sounded just as drunk. “Will,” he said. “Sorry. I think maybe it got a little out of control.”

I squeezed past the manager and out of the break room, trying to undo my apron with one hand while I played the message again. I still couldn’t find the thread of a full sentence in there, much less a coherent message. Listening for something that wasn’t there just made me more and more angry.

The night air raised goosebumps along my arms and neck as I crossed the parking lot to my car. It was just before two in the morning. Sean’s family owned one of the first completed houses in a new development at the edge of town. It was called Castle Heath and it was so new, in fact, that half the owners hadn’t moved in yet. Some of the houses were still being built.

When I got there somebody had already called the police. There was a cruiser across the street, its lights bouncing off the curtained windows of the vacant house there. Only Sean’s place was lit up, light and noise spilling across the unfinished lawn. Things I couldn’t see slid underfoot—candy wrappers, puddles. I stumbled over a patch of disturbed earth.

I entered the side door into a narrow bare hallway that smelled like paint and weed and, oddly, fresh-cut wood. There were strips of painter’s tape along the baseboards and a neat but grimy quality to the walls and floor. In the kitchen beyond, Sean was trying to convince someone dressed as a samurai to take the rest of the beer with them. He had a black tailcoat on with a long smear of something wet and glittery down the front. I stared and then gave up trying to figure out what he was supposed to be. There was a muffled shriek from the next room, maybe laughter.

“No I *can*’t put it in the fucking fridge, we already—” He broke off when he saw me.

“If that’s a costume, it sucks,” he said, pointing to my Dunkin’ Donuts polo shirt.

“Where’s Ivan?” I said.

Sean’s face went still with something I thought might be fear. He smoothed his coat and grimaced when he touched the sticky stuff. “Around,” he said. “I don’t know, maybe he left when the cop got here.”

“Who would he leave with?” I said. The kitchen was cramped. I wanted to grab him and shake him.

“I saw him out back,” said the samurai. “Check the pool.”

I squeezed past a pack of girls dressed as cats and into the next room. I thought it was a living room of some kind; the whole place had low ceilings and narrow halls. It was shoulder to shoulder in some places, and the wave of bodies was moving slowly towards the front door as people got the word that it was time to make themselves scarce. The music was still pounding away, a joyless electronic beat that cut off every half-minute for a disembodied voice that asked to recharge the speaker battery.

There was a glass sliding door at the back of the room that led out onto the porch. The party had moved inward from here, leaving a tideline of scattered drinks and debris from people’s costumes. Mardi Gras beads and beer cans, glow sticks and cigarette butts. The porch dropped down a few steep steps to a patio that overlooked the pool. Ivan was standing there in the darkness.

He turned when I called his name, oddly slow-moving. I stared at the skull painted on his face. It moved when he spoke, stark, brittle, already flaking to reveal crackle-lines of skin underneath.

“If you wanted an invite all you had to do was ask,” he said. He was drunk, listing, his gaze wandering around the yard. There was a bruise on his forearm that hadn’t been there before, and a long streak of the glittery stuff on his neck and shoulder.

“Having fun?” I said. “God, you really don’t learn, do you?”

He didn’t say anything. I went over to him—up close, he didn’t look hurt, but it was hard to read his expression under the white paint. He looked curiously blank.

“Ivan?” Sean said. We both turned. He was just inside the sliding door, leaning out. “Where is he? Where’s Nick?”

Ivan looked like he was thinking about it for a moment. Then he motioned with his head, jerky, to the pool behind him. I looked. It was an unfilled concrete pit, deepening to shadow outside the reach of the patio lights. There was someone lying at the bottom of it.

“Ivan,” I said. “Ivan, what the hell?”

“Where’s Nick?” Sean said. He stepped half out of the house but wouldn’t come any further. “Ivan?”

“He bet me I couldn’t jump across,” Ivan said, nonsensically. “I did. I did, I won. He talked all big but he wasn’t going to go unless I pushed—” He started laughing quietly to himself, like he’d just remembered a joke. In the white painted-on face his eyes looked wild. There was nothing I could do about that and when he looked at me I could tell that he knew it.

“What’s going on?” Sean said. “Ivan?”

“What the hell happened?” I said. I grabbed him and gave him a little shake to get him to shut up. It didn’t work. “Just tell me, Ivan, or you know it’s going to be a lot worse.” This was the part in the movie where I would have done something different. Covered for him, maybe,



taken whatever fall was coming because we both knew I didn't have anything better to do with my future. I thought I'd been waiting all his life for a chance like that.

But right then I couldn't think about anything but myself, and how scared I was of whatever he had done.

"What do I know?" Ivan said. "What are you going to do? Are you going to tell *Dad*?" That made him laugh harder, and he began to gasp for breath like a runner on the brink. "Should I be afraid?" he asked. He kept repeating it. "What's he going to do? Should I be afraid?"

END

## In the Right Season

Seth pried the Bt spray away from a small girl in a Wonder Woman t-shirt.

“Don’t, don’t touch that,” he said. “That’s a pesticide. A bug poison.”

“Cool,” she said. “What’s it made of? Acid?”

“Bacteria,” he said.

The teacher, Miss Duan, seemed to appear out of nowhere at the mention of the word “poison.” She steered the kid away from Seth, shooting him a for-the-love-of-God look over her shoulder.

“It’s time to go wash hands,” she said. “Where...?”

Seth pointed to the rusty spigot near the garden gate. “Sorry,” he said. “Should have put those away. Tell her don’t touch her face.”

“Am I gonna get sick?” the girl said. As Miss Duan led her to the spigot, Seth thought about all the things you could have in a garden that were more useful than fourth graders.

Hedgehogs. Compost. Soldier beetles. He had a headache coming on.

The Holt Street Community Garden was a tight for a field trip of more than twenty children. After the death of his wife, Laura, he’d gotten used to working the place alone. The nice people from the neighborhood committee had promised to try to scrounge up more funding, but only if he could prove that the garden was still a “productive shared resource conducive to fostering stakeholder engagement.”

“Desperate measures,” Laura would have said. The difference between them was that she would have been joking.

Years ago Seth and Laura had helped direct the planting of the first crops. They’d been part of a stream of bodies going in and out, everyone with something in mind to build. Now: desperate times. He understood the reasoning. A few charming field trip photos in the local paper, and Holt Street would be well on its way to productively fostering stakeholder engagement once again. He imagined the whole place bursting, the fences twanging, buckets and berries and small children tumbling out into the street.

He ought to have slammed the door on the committee people when he had the chance.

He stooped to pick up a crumpled Name That Plant! worksheet that had been trodden into the mulch path. His back complained, a thin spike of pain crawling up his spine. For a moment he regretted getting up early to work on the fence, which was in fact in danger of breaking. His body’s limits still seemed like abstracts to him, and each time he ran up against them it was with the same offended surprise.

When he straightened up it was to see a boy pulling on the unripe tomatoes. They were going through his worst fears about this field trip in an itemized list: noise, littering, kids getting into the pesticides. Next someone was going to try to eat fertilizer.

He strode over and stood between the boy and the tomato plant. It was looking like he felt most days, withered and in need of a drink.

“Don’t touch that,” he said. “Don’t touch anything. Please.” The “please” came from the part of his mind that talked in Laura’s voice. It said you ought to be gentle with children.

Then for God’s sake let them be gentle with me, said the rest of Seth. Let them have some damn respect for my garden.

The kid stuck his hands in his pockets as if he hadn’t just been harassing Seth’s tomatoes.

“Why not?” he said. “Aren’t they for picking? This is boring.”

“Don’t worry,” Seth said. “You’ll be leaving soon.”



When Seth and Laura had moved to this neighborhood twenty-five years ago, the Holt Street lot had stood empty. They were both in their forties by then, one another’s lucky second tries. They delineated their lives mostly in terms of Before Things: the pottery Laura had painted with her ex-husband, the one mixtape Seth and his ex-wife had played on every summer drive up to the Finger Lakes. They both felt the necessity of something new. Some After Things that would prove that this time, they had got it right.

Neither of them were used to the city. Seth remembered Laura running her hands over the sill of the kitchen window like she was looking for something she was sure she’d just put down.

“Get me a window box,” she said.

“Let’s skip it and go straight to planting in the bathtub,” Seth said.

She rolled her eyes. “I want rosemary,” she said. “Some mint. Come on. Couldn’t you see us growing something?” He saw her measuring the width and length of the sill with her eyes. It was small.

“I ever tell you about how bees stung the hell out of me when I was ten?” he said.

“Never. I can’t imagine why.”

“We had,” he paused, remembering. “In my backyard. We had this plant, Joe-Pye weed, this damn great floppy thing with ten-foot stalks. Bees loved it and I didn’t know to stay away. Just one of the dumb things I did, but you should have seen it in summer. Not just bees, monarch butterflies all over it, and the shape of the big frothy flowers with the sun behind—” He broke off, feeling that his words were not up to the task. Laura leaned against the window and looked down at the Holt Street lot.

“Let’s buy some seeds,” she said.

Stupidly, he expected daisies, but Laura didn’t do things by halves. He should have known: thyme, tomatoes, long beans, morning glories. He enlisted the help of a few neighbors to build raised beds, and a woman in 3B started a weekly compost collection. The four Romanian graduate students in the apartment below theirs sketched plans and scavenged wood for a toolshed. In those days Seth’s joints let him spend a lot more time on his knees, with his hands in the dirt.

One of Laura’s organic living magazines said that this was what made gardening an act of prayer in the vast cathedral of nature, or something. She’d brought the page to him so they could laugh at it. Laura cut up an old plastic tablecloth and stuffed it so that he’d have a cushion for his knees. He remembered that, how proud she’d been. It looked like the enthusiastic work

of someone who had only vague memories of when she'd been a Girl Scout. He told her it was ugly enough to kneel on and she'd laughed, and he'd knelt all the longer.

Twenty-four years of this. Laura's funeral had been good, some old tenants had even come back to pay their respects. That was two months ago. Seth had not prayed.

He found things to do in the garden, where it seemed she was still somewhere nearby and talking to him. Heirloom tomatoes: Laura's idea. Mung beans: Laura. Morning glories: Laura. Her name was everywhere and never written. The garden needed him more than he had ever realized before. Weeds sprang up with vicious strength, slugs and flies swarmed, fences sagged under the weight of rampant shrubs and vines.

He went through a couple of days he referred to later as "a rough time." The weather had turned abruptly warm and bright. He was checking the squash beds for snails when the point of his actions suddenly escaped him. He stood, stiffly, and got a shovel and brought it to the bed, where he smashed the ripening squash back into the earth, breaking them open and trampling the vines black. He was filled with something that was either self-loathing or the eruption of a bad ulcer. Feelings were starting to be indistinguishable from one another. He went inside, washed his hands, and went to bed for two days.

After that it got a little easier. A *rough time* meant you just had to get something out of your system, and wasn't it nice to have these words conveniently on hand for everything that happened? His workdays got longer. He knelt and straightened and knelt in the quiet inside the fence and was careful not to say anything to himself that he wouldn't want to be left alone with. He caught more sun, answered phone calls from people who wanted to know how he was doing.

He had work to do, the fence needed fixing. He was doing just fine.



Seth retreated to the north corner of the garden to escape the field trippers. He found his stuffed pad and went out to the street to finish the section of fence he'd been re-wiring that morning. When he crouched he held his head low, so the cover crop in the nearest bed blocked the kids from sight.

The fence had been a welcome distraction this morning. He was good at distractions, at putting things to the back of his mind, the occasional escapee from memory notwithstanding. Usually Laura. She liked to force him to remember, and in the way of the dead, didn't much care if he wanted to or not.

That morning he'd secured the fence almost all the way around. At seven-thirty the air was cool, the pavement still damp with last night's rain. The sun didn't quite show through a film of cloud. The city hadn't woken up, at least not the parts of the city that Seth disliked: business-suited nine-to-fivers, college students, tourists who stopped to tell him that the garden was "charming."

The garden was not charming. It was a mess. It had started out that way and continued with vigor, different plantings and people all working at cross-purposes. Its compost enclosure was too close to the street and stank on hot days. From the outside it looked like a small, grubby jungle. Seth was more proud of it than of almost anything else.

Now he was confronted with the real problem of a community garden: you couldn't keep people out, through prayer or otherwise. Miss Duan found him before long, and stood watching him fix the new wires in place. He turned around when he realized she wasn't going to go away.

"You don't look like you're enjoying this," she said. "The neighborhood committee was sure a field trip would be a great idea."

"I'm not on the neighborhood committee," he said, standing.

“Clearly,” she said. She had to tilt her head back to look him in the eye

“Listen,” he said. “Nothing against kids. It’s just,” he waved a hand, not sure what he was indicating, “I got a job to do.”

“Aren’t you a volunteer?”

“That’s what I meant,” he said. “Christ.”

“The district isn’t exactly in a hurry to be handing out field trip money,” Miss Duan said. “Look. These kids spend every day on concrete, so if I get to take them out for once, they’re going to learn from it.”

Seth leaned back, realized he had flinched from an elementary school teacher, and tried to hide it. Miss Duan was talking in an adult-to-adult voice now, a flat mutter that suggested she had career options in the military or delivering terminal diagnoses if she decided to move on from K-12 education. But he wasn’t fooled.

“I see,” he said. “You’re an idealist.”

“Says the volunteer,” she said. “There’s no one else here, is there?”

“There’s some other folks,” he said, uncomfortable. “People from the block over, you know. It’s not just me.”

She shrugged. He didn’t like being taken pity on by someone who had to roll up her jacket sleeves to keep them from covering her hands. He cast around looking for a way out of the conversation, and saw her rolling a sliver of green between her thumb and fingertip.

“Found the lemongrass, did you?” he said.

“Oh—yes,” she said, looking at the bruised stalk in her hand. She dropped it with a self-conscious little laugh. “That’s what it was, right? I wasn’t sure. But it looked so familiar.”



He broke off a stalk from the pot nearby and rolled it between his fingers, crushing it until it released its light clean smell.

“My mom would grow it on the kitchen counter,” Miss Duan said. “In a little pot next to mint and basil. For cooking, you know. The house always smelled like that, like vegetables I never knew the English names of and she swore never grew the same in this country.”

She was about to say something else when they heard shrieking from the sweet potato beds. Seth saw Miss Duan put on her settle-down-now smile, pasted on a little crooked, and march off toward the chorus of voices. He gathered that somebody had put a caterpillar on someone, and the victim demanded satisfaction. He saw Miss Duan bending down, half hidden by a trellis full of climbing vines, until she vanished altogether into the green.



By the time he finished repairing the fence, Seth's headache had spread to become a tension in his neck and shoulders, and a general feeling of ill-will towards any moving creature less than five feet tall. The wire of the fence stood fine and taut, but it had stopped being comforting.

He didn't speak to Miss Duan again until she came to ask him for the first aid kit. The boy beside her held his bloodied index finger up with a solemn look, like he was asking for silence before he made a speech.

“Did you get that on a nail?” Seth said, unable to stop himself. “You should wash it. Otherwise your jaw stiffens up and you can never open your mouth again.” In the back of his head the Laura voice shared some pointed observations. From the look on Miss Duan's face she was thinking more or less the same. He felt a very small pulse of shame, but not enough to say anything else.

“We’ll be leaving soon,” Miss Duan said once she’d affixed a bandage and sent the kid on his way. “They had a good time, I think.” She didn’t have to say that it was no thanks to him.

“Are they edified?” he said. “Improved by working outdoors in the fresh air, and all that?”

“Are you?” she said. That startled a laugh out of him.

“That’s not why I’m out here,” he said.

She turned to face out over the garden. She wasn’t looking at him when she asked, “Why are you out here, then?”

“Someone has to be,” he said. That was the easy answer.

“What, you’re going to keep this whole place up by yourself?” Miss Duan said. “Thoreau in the middle of the city? Are you kidding me?”

Since Laura died Seth had not been able to imagine a perfect world. His next best thing was the garden, an island with a fence around.

Suddenly he felt all the exhaustion of the last two months, and more. “Will you just give it a rest,” he said. “For a moment.” In that not-quite-perfect place he was alone with the green things, where it was quiet.

She narrowed her eyes and watched him, like she was reading something written on his forehead—probably *Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted*.

“I know you helped build this place,” she said. “I was going to ask you to maybe say something to the kids before we leave. I can—you know, I can give them worksheets and make them write down what makes a tomato a fruit. But I can’t tell them what it’s like to be out here

every day. What it's worth. If you don't want to give them that, fine. Just don't get in the way of me trying to teach them something."

Don't get in the way. The fence strung, the gate locked. Seth did not have to listen for a guiding voice to know why he felt so tired. If you wanted to avoid truth you had to spend all of your strength doing it.

"No," he said. "No, no. I know that's not how it's supposed to work."

She said nothing for a long moment. Behind her the kids were moving about the garden. He'd had a hundred reasons to keep coming out here, once, and he'd believed in all of them. It was the place where he'd learned dirty jokes from a Haitian matriarch who grew sweet peppers, drank with the Romanian students on the night before they left the country, attended the baby shower of the girl from across the street. There, despite all sadness, the plants grew tall and fine. But it was not the work of any one person's hands.

"That's not how it works," he said again. This was a building-place, and before you built anything you had to talk it into being. "I'll talk to them," he said.

For a woman her size, Miss Duan had a voice that carried. Still, the kids took a while to assemble when she called. Seth felt uneasy again when they were all assembled, and looking down at them was a weird distortion of perspective.

"All right," he said. He groped around in his mind for something worth saying, and landed on a speech about the civic value of cooperative gardening. It was completely unsuitable. He listened to himself say the words "sustainable compact" to a bunch of listless elementary schoolers, and fantasized about breaking off in midsentence, climbing into the tall grass, and disappearing.

The words were Laura's words, assembled from magazines and lectures and the protests she had still gone to, even when Seth thought they were too old to be doing "that kind of thing." Twenty-five years ago she had lied to him lovingly, valiantly, that she didn't mind that they could not have children. She'd told him they had another charge.

Seth remembered her kneeling at the foot of the trellis where the morning glories climbed. He thought about the words she would have used to make kids understand, and he said, "If you know how to take care of a garden, you will know how to take care of yourself and other people."

As he said it he knew himself for a liar. He thought, I have no idea how to do that anymore. No idea. He waited for the Laura voice to disagree. It didn't. The kids were watching, and he realized he was the only one who was going to speak.

"There's a job for everyone here," he said. "That's the whole point of this place. If you're bored I'm going to give you a job to do." He took the clippers from the wheelbarrow and pointed to the beds by the north fence, which towered with overgrown sudangrass. "That tall grass is what we call a cover crop," he said. "We put it there so even when we're not growing anything in that earth, the ground stays healthy, and it's ready for a new crop in the right season. Take some gloves. We're going to pull it out."

The kids clustered around the wheelbarrow. "We can really pull it out?" someone asked. "Like weeds?" Their interest was coming back. Seth supposed that if he'd learned anything today, it was that kids liked yanking on things.

Seth took a deep breath. Multiple dentists had advised him against grinding his teeth. "Go to town," he said. "Just pull it right out."

The sudangrass was almost six feet in places. The class swarmed into the first overgrown bed, yanking at the stalks in fistfuls. Seth watched them with a feeling of vertigo. The Laura voice told him it was good that he felt that way, that he finally felt something other than the long slow quiet he had become familiar with. He told it that he already knew.

“That was a good idea,” Miss Duan told him. She sounded surprised. Seth offered her the clippers.

“Help me out here,” he said. “My back’s not what it used to be. I’ll hold them up so you can cut.” She regarded him with suspicion for a second, then reached for the clippers. He watched her open and shut the big blades.

“What are you going to plant here, when we’re done?” she said.

“I don’t know,” Seth said, feeling dazed. “Cabbage, beans, I don’t know. Maybe let the kids decide.”

“They’re ten. You really think any of them like cabbage?” she said.

“Good point,” he said. “Well. I’ll set them straight.” He gathered the first bundle of stalks and held it taut. Miss Duan knelt and cut them from the base. He tossed them into the nearest wheelbarrow, the only straight bundle of the lot—the kids were piling them on in every direction. Seth reached for the next bundle of grass and lifted as Miss Duan cut it away, and they kept on like that in a steady rhythm, clearing the earth.

END

## River House

The path that ran by River House was made of crushed white shells that shone in the moonlight. Travis got off his bike and walked it the last few feet down the road, where sand from the dunes had blown in drifts across the yellow line. He kept his phone clamped between his chin and shoulder and stood there looking at the beach house, but he didn't cross into the yard.

"I left you the spare key to my place," he said. "It's under the mat. Sorry, I thought I had time to get back before you." A car sped by on the waterfront road in a rush of dry wind.

"What was that?" Grace said, using her Big Sister Voice. "Are you in traffic? Don't talk on the phone while you're biking."

“Cross my heart I’m not,” he said, making an easy-now gesture to thin air. “I’m on Frontage Road, there’s no one up here anyway.”

She was silent, and through the sound of the surf he couldn’t even hear her breathing.

“You’re at River House?” she said finally.

“You have to sound like that?” he said. “The realtor told me it was all set for tomorrow. I just thought I’d check in on my way back from work.” To do that, though, he’d have to go inside, and he’d already lost his nerve for it. River House sat behind the shell path amid a tangle of saltspray rose, almost ready to flower. Its windows were white-curtained, facing blindly out to sea. The place looked the same as always from outside. It was inside that was the problem.

Inside—where Travis and Grace had tracked sand across the shining floors, dumped wet beach towels in corners, fought each other for the tallest stool at the kitchen island. And later, where their father had shacked up with its owner and stopped answering his wife’s calls. Until that time Travis and Grace had been encouraged to think of the Other Woman as an honorary aunt.

It had been convenient for their father, looking back. But the Other Woman had been dead these last few years, and at the beginning of the year their father had followed. He’d left River House to Grace and Travis.

“Well?” Grace said now. “How does it look?”

“You’re asking now?” he said. “I figured you were hoping it was struck by lightning, or something. Save you a trip up from the city.”

“We agreed we were going to sell it together,” she said slowly. “I came, didn’t I? Now how does it look? Lucrative?”

“They’re going to be all over it,” he said, and he could grin because she wasn’t there. Her sense of humor was like their dad’s had been; it came with a stropped edge but no warning label. “Listen, you won’t regret coming up. You get home cooking, a family welcome, and decent water pressure. It’s the dream.”

If he didn’t have a sense of self-preservation, he would have said she was welcome at his place any time. She was, but damned if the words were going to make it past his lips.

“Are we thinking of the same apartment?” she said. “Actually, are we thinking of the same Travis?”

“Same Travis as always,” he said.

He gave River House one last glance and pulled his bike back onto clear pavement. He didn’t think he could be like Grace if he tried—after their dad left she seemed to have decided she was the product of a virgin birth. She didn’t talk about him, watched over their mother’s health solicitously until the end. She had written a curt, polite note when the Other Woman died. He had the uneasy sense that their father’s funeral, two months ago to the day, had been for her just the reburial of something long dead.

He told her he would see her soon. After he hung up he leaned into the cold spring wind that sheeted off the sea, pedaling hard. He rounded the point and turned inland. In a couple of weeks, it would be Memorial Day and the tourist season would be in full swing, beachfront packed to bursting. People would linger through the long evening, waiting for the light to fade. But for now it was strictly slow mornings and empty nights. The sea was still too cold to swim.

He worked at the hardware store across from Uptown Dog Pet Boutique: For The Dog That Digs Cape Cod! He had to cut back through town to make up the time he’d lost at River House, and he whirled down Main Street with a foot outstretched to push off from the curb. In



the off-season there wasn't much of a market for beach kitsch, expensive preppy clothing, and organic dog biscuits. The hardware store was one of the few places that catered to locals and tourists alike. Everybody had a leaky pipe at some point, and the only thing more universal than that was the idea that you could fix it yourself.

It might be almost tourist season, but there was only one set of out-of-state plates he was interested in. New York state, shiny new, on a blue hybrid coupe parked neatly along the left side of his driveway. He locked his bike up under the landing and took the stairs two at a time, remembering all of a sudden that it had been a long time since he'd cleaned up.

Grace had found the spare key. She stood in the kitchen, close enough to lean on the counter but pulled self-consciously upright by the slam of the door. She looked more or less like he remembered from the funeral, a sober professional poised to stomp all over the opposing legal team in sensible shoes.

"You going to offer me a drink?" she said.

She was seven years older than him, the right age to be either his life guru or sworn enemy depending on the day. He'd often been told that they looked alike. But if he'd ever seen anyone else in her eyes it was their father: closemouthed, decisive, self-sufficient.

She accepted a beer and perched on the edge of one of his kitchen-slash-dining chairs, the one from the dump swap shop. It had an orange metal frame and clashed proudly with everything else in the house, including her.

"Traffic was hell on the turnpike," she said, taking a long sip. "Turns out it might just be better to never leave this state. It's not worth it."

"You're telling me," he said. They were both silent for a while.

He fidgeted. “You okay?” he said, which was one of those things he both did and did not want to know the answer to. “This isn’t—weird, for you?”

“What?” she said. “I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“It’s only been two months,” he said. The last time he’d seen her was right after the funeral. “You’re sure? It’s not weird?”

“Travis,” she tipped her bottle toward him like she was offering a microphone. “Guess what. You’re making it weird.”

“My specialty,” he said, but his delivery must have been off. She raised her eyebrows, looking like she was about to press him.

“You could stick around a while after the open house,” he said hurriedly. “I mean, it’s been a while. We could take a day on the island.”

“Martha’s Vineyard?” she said. “You’re serious?”

“Hell, I don’t know,” he said. “Whale watching. The colonial history tour. Whatever you want to do.”

“As soon as we get that house sold I’m back over the canal to civilization,” she said. She took a long drink. “Actually, Travis—” Her look this time was sidelong, calculating, and he remembered again why it was so long since they’d talked for real. She was always trying to arrange things. When they were kids she’d actually be taking him by the ear or wrist or shoulder to stop him moving around. “I should be the one asking you to come with me,” she said.

“What?” Travis said. “You need a housekeeper?”

“Don’t be funny,” she said. “You know what I mean. We talked about this. Honestly, I thought you would have given notice at the hardware store by now.”

He froze. Last Christmas he dimly remembered nodding along to a speech about how the time had come to go back to school, to Turn His Life Around. The worst part was that at the time he thought he'd meant it. Grace had a way of talking that made you see her side of things. More than that, you saw the same kind of world she did, a long road unfolding, marked with signposts to success.

"So where did you apply?" she said. "UMass? Bunker Hill?"

"I reconsidered," he said, which was a polite way of saying he had stared the college proposition in the face and then taken a running leap in the other direction. It was easy to draw back from big decisions, he'd had a lot of practice. "I'm up for floor manager here, that's a good prospect. I don't want to rush into anything."

Grace put her beer down. She looked at it, reconsidered, and took another sip. "Travis, no," she said.

"What now?" he said.

"After two years it doesn't count as rushing," she told him. "It's time to get back on the horse." He could feel it, she was about to start saying things like "failure to launch" and "major life milestones" again. Maybe it came with the skirt suit. Surely she hadn't always been this way.

He walked around the other side of the kitchen island and gripped the peeling counter. Last time around the horse had done its best to trample him. Their dad's health had gone downhill and there wasn't time or money enough for school when they had to move him into the outpatient center, and then into an apartment near the end, where he'd have in-home care and the luxury of not dying in a place with linoleum floors.

"I'm doing fine," he said. "Cut me some fucking slack, will you?"

“That’s all I ever do,” she said.

From over the road he could hear peepers calling in the marsh. After a while he roused himself and went hunting through the cabinets. He turned up half a box of spaghetti and some frozen dinners. He glanced over to where Grace sat watching TV in her wrinkled suit. Right then she didn’t look so much like his sister as like a tired adult he sort of knew.

“Get your keys,” he said, leaning over the kitchen counter. “I’m taking you out to dinner.”

“You’re inviting me to drive you to dinner?” she said.

“I’m paying, you’re driving,” he said. “Betsey’s Diner. Breakfast for dinner, come on, we’re doing it.”

“All right,” she said, getting up. She still had her shoes on. “Don’t forget your wallet.”

At Betsey’s he drizzled blueberry syrup into the holes in his waffle while Grace went through her mental file of non-controversial conversation topics. He almost asked if she was going in alphabetical order: *Aunt Jean’s knee pins—Beautiful weather isn’t it—How about the Red Sox, now.*

“Stop bouncing your leg,” she said. “You’re shaking the table.”

“Calm down,” he said.

“I’m calm.” To prove it she reached over and sliced a big lopsided piece out of his waffle.

“You remember the shell collection we kept at River House?” he said. She coughed and narrowed her eyes at him while she finished chewing.

“Travis, really?” she said. “I guess I do. But that was ages ago.”

The Other Woman had called it sunken treasure. That was back when she'd been Aunt Kathy, of course. Each day's beachcombing spoils had been left to dry outside River House, and then Travis and Grace would add them to the jar in the entry hall. A three-year collection of polished stones and jingle shells, driftwood and sea glass and nickels that wind and waves had reduced to something weathered and mysterious.

"I guess it's just been on my mind," he said. "I've been thinking about River House a lot lately. Those were—those were good summers. For a while."

"Because you were a little kid," she said. "Katherine, she was always nice to you."

"She was nice to both of us," Travis said. "She liked us."

"You know what she liked," Grace said.

He gave her what he thought was a disapproving look, but she didn't seem swayed. "You really don't miss this place?" he asked. "Any of it?"

"I don't," she said, too fast—she tucked her chin in and made a show of reading the advertisements on the paper place mat. He let her, until it became clear she was not going to say anything of her own accord.

"Grace," he ventured. "It's okay. It'd be weirder if you didn't."

"Tell me what I *said*, Travis."

"You said you don't," he told her.

She stabbed mercilessly down into her stack of pancakes. "That's right," she said.

They stayed until all but the stragglers had cleared out, eating slowly and talking about nothing. Surely there'd been a time when they had gotten along without having to work at it. eight, ten years ago? It seemed just out of his reach.

Grace didn't try to talk much in the car on the way back, but she kept looking at him as they drove down along the sea in the thickly fallen night. Travis rolled down the window and leaned out to see the tall hedges that shielded the vacation houses from view.

As kids he and Grace and all their friends had known the best byways to their favorite places—if sometimes those routes had a rich out-of-towner's house in the way, that just meant you had to be a little more careful. There were places to slip through the hedges if you sucked your gut in.

He remembered the twigs swiping across his face as he followed Grace and the others through the hedge in the chilly air. They dashed across pristine chemical lawns, climbed fences, walked heel-to-toe along the edges of covered swimming pools. When they heard a car coming they froze behind a three-quarter Cape that gleamed with new money. Grace had grabbed his arm and dragged him under a shrouded patio table. They waited underneath, trying to hold back nervous laughter.

This was the best way to get anywhere, because the danger of getting caught was sweet but harmless, and anyway they would never be caught, would they? They knew this town better than anyone. This might be some vacationers' paradise, but it was their home.

Grace was staring straight ahead down the ocean road. Grace and her lawyer outfit and her New York plates—he was struck by the keen sense of having lost her already.

“Wait up,” he said. “Take the left up there.”

She faced him finally. “Travis, that's—”

“Yeah,” he said. “Please.”

“Are you getting cold feet or something?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “I just, can we stop off for a bit? I want to check up on it again.”

“It’s late,” she said, but she took the turn.

She parked just beyond the private beach that stood between River House and the sea. She strode on ahead of him, through the lot and down the shell path, moving like she wanted to get things over with. They followed the white-gleaming path towards the ocean, the shells picked out in moonlight. Grace kept stumbling in her sensible shoes; he put out a hand to steady her and she swatted it away. She kicked out of them, winced, and kept walking, gripping them hard enough to crimp the patent leather.

“Don’t say a word,” she told him. He mimed sealing his lips and got another shove for his trouble.

When they got to the beach they plunged across sand, into the darkness under a stilt house and out again. He heard the hum of a generator and the creak of wooden pilings. The waves rolled and foamed up on the sand. Grace slowed as if she was sleepwalking, and paused to look out at the water. Then she glanced back at him and started running. They went up the access stairs to the road.

At the corner stood River House. They went inside the gate and stood beside the realtor’s sign. The smell of the roses lay heavy on the air.

Keys clinked. Grace moved past him and unlocked the door, not meeting his eyes—she hid her keychain in her fist and motioned for him to get inside.

“You still have your key?” he said.

“I was going to get rid of it,” she said.

He shut the door behind them. The square of moonlight on the hallway floor narrowed and vanished. Sand crunched underfoot as Travis went down the hall, not bothering to turn the lights on.

The bare floors and the pale walls shone. The realtor had done the place up with what she called “finishing touches”: on the sideboard was an arrangement of dried plants and shells coated in glitter glue. There were throw blankets with nautical motifs, and scented candles on the windowsills: Bayberry Beach Breeze. Travis saw a framed print on the living room wall that said home was where the heart was and he elbowed Grace and pointed. All of a sudden he had to struggle not to laugh.

“The open house is gonna be a hit,” he said, wiping his eyes. “They’re going to eat it up. Is there an embroidered pillow that says ‘Life’s a beach and then you move to one?’ It’s like no one ever even lived here.”

“That’s the point,” Grace said. “What were you expecting?”

“I forgot, you don’t do sentimental,” he said. “God forbid.”

“I’m happy with the life I have,” she said. “I have what I wanted. Why does that bother you so much?”

“It doesn’t bother me,” he said. “Are you that insecure? I’m happy for you. Of course I am.”

She didn’t flinch, but her silence was worse. Travis drew in a breath; to say what, he didn’t know.

“Swimming in the ocean,” she said abruptly. “If you want to know so badly, that’s what I miss. I complained like hell about the sand and I always came out with a sunburn, but, God, I do miss it.” She talked fast, like the words might get away before she was finished.

“Really?” he said. All of a sudden it seemed as though she might say anything. Anyone you met could lie about their childhood, and who would know?



“Of course, *really*,” she said. “You think I’m, what, making that up? You’re not the only one who remembers being a kid, Travis.”

He didn’t know what to say. He remembered it more than he wanted to. He couldn’t help it, the past just kept lapping at the ground where he stood, and dragging new debris up on shore.

She hunched her shoulders and turned away to examine a wall hanging of a clipper ship. Travis backed up against the bar, and a bowl of decorative knickknacks fell onto the floor. He crouched to start picking up the contents of the bowl, and heard Grace give a resigned sigh. After a moment she joined him.

He glanced at her and saw that she was all business now, briskly gathering shells and beach stones and bits of artificial sea glass. If she had told him anything that was true, that moment was gone. He found two thumb-sized pieces of quartz in the mess. They clicked together in his hand, milky white in the moonlight. It was impossible to pull her back to some earlier time, when they felt the same things or at least understood where they differed, but he wanted to anyway.

She caught him looking. “It’s late,” she said, soft, apologetic. “We both have to sleep if we want to make a good impression at the open house tomorrow. We should go.”

“In a bit,” he said. “Watch this.”

He gripped the bigger rock and dragged the small one across it like striking a match. When the green light burst Grace laughed in delighted surprise, and he did it again, striking a fizz of sparks that cast brief shadows on the shiny floor.

“What?” she said. “What was that? Do it again.” He did. The sparks popped around his fingers.

“Where’d you learn that?” she said. “That’s a new trick.”

“Not a trick,” he said, and just to show off he did it again, slower this time.

“You’ve been holding out on me,” she said.

“It’s better in the dark,” he said, turning his back to the window, wanting to delay the moment when she looked up and they both had to remember where they were. He let her take the rocks from his hands and try it herself. Crouched barefoot on her heels, she made him think of when they were kids. That time when the future was of no importance because it would never get here—it would always be today.

But it must be past midnight by now.

END

## Presence

Ruth's mother Sylvia had always claimed, with perfect and awful confidence, that she was a witch. Despite everything that had passed between them, Ruth never doubted her on that particular point. When Sylvia told you something she made it sound truer than true. Such was her authority that Ruth had half believed she was immortal. It came as a shock when she died.

Now she wasn't around to tell anyone anything, and time collapsed into a series of days—maybe the same day over and over again—in which Ruth slept too much and rarely left the house. Right now she was doing the most exciting thing she'd done in a while: standing on a chair, wrestling the window open so she could drop her inheritance into the dumpster out back of her apartment.

Her inheritance was sitting on top of the microwave: a misshapen clay jar whose glazes had run together in the kiln, into a green-brown blur. It was so ugly it couldn't have been considered anything other than an item of sentimental value. She had put it out with the trash for the last two weeks. The problem was that it kept coming back.

The jar was about the size of her hand, shaped like a fat cone and stoppered with an old wine cork. Sylvia had made it in an art class for single women who wanted to get in touch with their feelings. She had taken it halfway across the country, to the deathbed of the father Ruth had never met, and used it to capture his dying breath. Ruth knew this because Sylvia had liked to tell her about it when she got into the wine before dinner. It wasn't superstition to say that the jar had a Presence. It was just a fact.

The window latch popped. Ruth pushed and it creaked out, shedding grime from the hinges. She got down off the chair, snatched the jar off the top of the microwave, and climbed back up, trying not to think about what she was doing. She dropped the jar out and heard it clank into the dumpster. Collection was that morning.

The other thing that was happening that morning was that real life was starting again, whether Ruth liked it or not. When she'd taken her leave from the lab at UC Santa Barbara, she had said she'd come back today. She wondered what her past self had been thinking. Today was no good. She couldn't go back to work, she was all booked up, a full schedule of naps, aimless housekeeping and at least twenty minutes budgeted for staring into a cup of coffee that she wasn't going to drink.

She got down off the chair and wandered back to her futon, where she sat with her chin on her knees and pretended she could go back to sleep whenever she wanted. It wouldn't be so hard. She could lie down, pull the blanket over her head and sink back into the warm hazy place

that seemed to be where she'd spent most of the month since the funeral. When she was aware again it was because the steps on the side of the building were swaying and creaking: someone was coming up.

When she got to the door, she saw a dark silhouette on the other side of the curtained glass. The Tanaka siblings were jammed together on the stair landing: Marie, who didn't use her birth name and respected no earthly law, and Issei, who did, and had anxieties about jaywalking. Marie was peering around the curtain.

"Ruthie, I know you're in there," she said. "You ready to go?"

"She did say today, right?" Issei asked. It was a thin door. "Wasn't it today?"

"Don't wake the neighbors," Ruth said, opening it. It was the same thing she said every time Marie jumped on the couch, slammed her plate on the table, or knocked something off one of her shelves. Marie froze for a moment, then surged forward into the kitchen.

"You haven't called," she said, wrapping both arms around Ruth's neck in a brief strangling hug. She bounced back a few steps, got Ruth's bag off the hook, and presented her with the strap.

"I was going to."

"We're already running late," Marie said. "Your squid are pining. Your dissertation missed you."

"They're fine," Issei put in. "I've been feeding them."

Ruth's dissertation was on the color-change mechanisms of cuttlefish. She liked cuttlefish. After two years at the lab most of her friends were cuttlefish. Marie and Issei were two of the only people she'd managed to hang on to as the tide of marriages and teaching positions and fellowships in far-off lands rose around their ears. They were second-generation

Japanese, born and raised on the California coast, and though Issei sometimes talked of going back to the family place in Chiba, Ruth didn't think either of them was going anywhere.

Though sometimes she wondered if that was wishful thinking on her part. She didn't have siblings. She didn't know if you were allowed to acquire them in adulthood.

She followed as they squeezed out onto the rickety wooden landing, and for a moment all three of them were too close together, looking sidelong at each other's faces.

Marie squeezed Ruth's arm, a little too hard.

"Good to have you back," she said.

At the bottom of the stairs Issei executed his own version of his sister's gesture: hand out, hand in, hand out again to land lightly on her shoulder. Squeeze, retreat. Ruth sympathized: she didn't know what to say to herself either.

It was a quiet drive. They came up through Isla Vista among roads lined with stucco houses that shone pinkly in the morning light. The rush hour had left this part of town, and the buildings stood as though stranded at low tide. In the back seat, Ruth leaned her head against the window, ignored the rattle of potholes, and imagined the sea.

They weren't quite close enough to see the water. It was just out of reach behind the rows of buildings—she hadn't seen it in a month or more, she realized. She used to go to Goleta Beach with her mother during their good times. They'd bring lunch and sit at the picnic benches near the lot, overlooking the water. The last time had been a few months ago. Sylvia had kept her complaints about sand to a tolerable minimum. Ruth had willed herself not to remember the many harsh words that had passed between them, on subjects that meant little then and meant even less now. A flock of petrels had lifted and scattered over the dunes like a veil disturbed by wind, fragmenting, heading out to sea.

“I learned to tell fortunes in the flights of birds when I was just your age,” Sylvia had said. “Learned it from a girl in Rome. She chewed tobacco, spat like a camel, and she could recite poetry for hours. That was the first time I fell in love.”

“Ashy storm petrels,” Ruth said, feeling tolerant for once. “*Oceanodroma*, um, *homochroa*. What are they saying?”

“Fair weather,” Sylvia said. “And smooth sailing, in most areas that don’t matter and a few that do. Let’s get a scratch card on the way back.”

That was the kind of thing Ruth wanted to remember. But there was no remembering Sylvia as just a person—she liked to be thought of as larger than life. Before she was even old enough to realize it, Ruth had been fighting to sort out the tangle of who her mother might have been, who people said she’d been, and what she’d made herself out to be.

What she’d made herself out to be was a lot of things. A Judith, a Cleopatra, a Dolly Parton. It was said that as a girl she had removed the hearts of young men, causing them hardly any pain at all, and swallowed them whole. She’d offered to teach Ruth the little tricks: She could tell a baby’s sex after a few minutes of conversation with the pregnant mother. Her houseplants never died. She was a master in the sorcerous art of getting people to pay absurd prices for crystals that would have beneficial, celestial, money-back-guaranteed effects on their energies.

“You think I want to learn that stuff?” Ruth had said. She was fifteen at the time, and thought that taking advanced classes gave her license to talk back to her mother. “It’s creepy.”

“Oh, don’t be a coward,” Sylvia had said, with the jolly scorn that seemed to be her default setting. “I’ve never met a woman who didn’t want it, somewhere in her little heart. To learn the mysteries.”

“I’d rather be normal, if it’s all the same to you,” Ruth said, ducking her head over her biology homework, which she considered to be mystery enough. “And can you quit talking like a fortune cookie?”

Memories like this intruded too easily. The arguments, the chilly not-arguments that were somehow even worse, that one incident with the projectile pan of Bolognese that eventually resulted in Sylvia’s redoing the kitchen to hide the stain. As if you could paper over memory.

“—Ruth? Ruth, are you listening?” Marie twisted in her seat. “You want to? Or no?”

“Sorry, what?” Ruth said.

“Are you coming out with us tonight,” Issei supplied. “Us and probably Linda and the tidal survey team? It’s all people you know. You don’t have to if you don’t feel ready for it.”

“But you should,” Marie said. Her expression said she was prepared to argue this point from here to the Mexican border if necessary.

“Sure,” Ruth said. “If it’ll prove to you that I don’t need to go out, I will go out.”

At work, the only ones who weren’t sorry for her loss were the cuttlefish. She’d been dreading coming back, but it was almost too familiar. There was something comfortably numbing about the fluorescent lights and the smell of the salt tanks. Marie was teaching that day, and Issei had vanished into a pile of grant proposals. The day slid through her hands like water.

“You guys weren’t going to invite anyone else at all, were you?” she said to them that night, over a basket of spicy wings. There was no sign of Linda or the tidal survey guys.

“Probably not,” Marie admitted, unbothered. “Don’t make that face at Issei, it’s not his fault. We just wanted to talk to you. It’s been a while.”

“Well, you’re talking to me now,” Ruth said.



At that point in the evening she was confident in her ability to stand up to both of them. After her third drink she told them about the jar.

It had been handed to her by a lawyer with a slightly ill expression, three days after the funeral. Sylvia had only let Ruth hold it once, when she was a child. All it took was one look at the lawyer's queasy face and she remembered the slight warmth it had, the damp feeling. Your fingers fitted, almost against your will, into the amateurish finger marks Sylvia had left behind. Ruth had left the lawyer's office and sat on a bench outside, staring at the jar in her hands. She remembered thinking that it might help if she cried, just to get it over with and assure herself that everything inside her was still working. She might even have an epiphany. It would be nice to have an epiphany.

After half an hour she stood up and dropped the jar into the trash can on the street corner. She only realized that it was going to be a problem when she found it in her bag again that night. "I don't believe in hauntings," she said. "But my mom. You met her. She's just, something fucking else. Was."

"It's kind of—can I say it's creepy?" Marie said. "Sorry."

"It's not just creepy," Ruth said. "It's tacky. Collecting breath? Who does that?"

"I heard they did it during the war," Issei said. "When they started drafting for Vietnam. The breath collectors would come to your house with little bottles. So, when you got blown up in the jungle, there would still be something left. I don't know. I think it's profound."

"'Breath is alive,'" Ruth said, quoting Sylvia post a generous serving of Trader Joe's red. She added the expansive hand-wave for good measure. "'It's our essence. We're always looking for ways to make ourselves last.' Deep shit." Marie snorted.

Issei played with his watch band, glanced up at her and then down again. “Did it occur to you that maybe it comes back because you want it to come back?”

“No,” Ruth said. “No, that did not occur to me, because I don’t. Why would I want that? Why would I want a thing like that?” There was a silence. She realized she was leaning forward across the table, as if about to press them for an answer. She sat back.

“So, does it make things move?” Marie said, too brightly for it to be anything but a distraction. It didn’t move. It didn’t do anything, Ruth reported, except fill her apartment with a pervasive sense of unfinished business and yawning loss.

“Ruth,” Issei said. “Your mom just passed. That’s how it *is*.”

“I need chilaquiles,” Ruth said. “You guys still hungry? You want anything?”

When she came back to the table they were regarding her with matched expressions of gentle forbearance. She felt patronized.

“I forgot,” she said. “You’re hungry too. I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Ruthie,” Marie said. “Sit down.”

“A *minute*,” Ruth said.

“Ruth,” Issei said, for once looking as determined as his sister. Ruth sat down. Her foot knocked against her bag, and she heard a familiar hollow thud.

Marie put a hand on her wrist.

“Christ,” Ruth said. She nudged her bag with her foot again, just to be sure. “You’re kidding me.”

“Ruth?” Marie said. She waited until it became clear that an explanation wasn’t forthcoming. “We don’t want to push you,” she went on. “You have a lot of—just, a lot to work through. Of course. We’re here for you if there’s anything you need.”

“You don’t have to go through this by yourself,” Issei said. “I mean, not *by yourself* by yourself.”

“You guys rehearsed that ahead of time,” Ruth said. “Saving Private Ruth. A team effort.” How long had the jar been in her bag? All day? Before the garbage truck came, or after?

“Don’t you worry about me,” she said. “I’m fine. All I fucking want is the simple things in life. A mom who made photo albums or quilts or something, if we’re dead set on having something to remember my dad by. Can you imagine that? A haunted quilt?” She stood. Her chair screeched against the floor.

“Maybe that’s your last drink,” Marie said.

Ruth upended her bag when she walked through the door of her apartment. She put the Styrofoam box with the chilaquiles down on the counter and kicked the jar across the room—it spun and skidded on the linoleum and collided with something in the dark.

“Serves you right,” she said. She wasn’t sure if she was talking to her mother, her father, or herself. She went to bed.

She found the jar resting against the baseboard when she plugged in the kettle the next morning. It was lying where she had kicked it, overturned. She registered surprise that it hadn’t moved, and then felt stupid for being surprised. It wasn’t alive. This magical thinking seemed to her to be Sylvia’s lingering bad influence. As a teenager she’d been certain that if her mother just left her the hell alone she could make something of herself. A researcher, a teacher, an assembler of photo albums and pasta dinners, one of those nice women who went to PTA meetings and jogged on the weekends.

“Conventional,” Sylvia would scoff. “You’re thinking too small. We’ve got extraordinary women in our family, all the way back to the old country.” The old country changed depending on what Sylvia had been drinking: chianti, vodka sours. Their family history generally had room for whatever moral Sylvia liked the sound of. “You want to be like them? Aim higher.”

Ruth had gone in the opposite direction. Marine biology was the study of life so deep that you were mostly looking for what you didn’t know that you didn’t know. Stories were told only in numbers: carbon dioxide levels, sediment samples, depth measures. The ocean rolled over on the sand and erased what had come before.

The kettle flashed its red light. Not quite willingly, Ruth retrieved the jar and put it back on top of the microwave.

The week passed in a blur. Ruth had dreams of her father being swallowed by a giant fish and woke up unimpressed by the workings of her subconscious. No one asked her to go out again, which was a relief. She had been judged unready, and that was fine with her. It was fine. “That’s it, isn’t it?” Marie said at lunch on Friday. She pointed at Ruth’s bag, which sat on the picnic table bench next to Issei’s. “That jar.”

Ruth looked down. The cork poked out from between two plastic folders.

“I put it in the trash can at the bus stop this morning,” she said. By now it was almost routine. She unwrapped her BLT and flipped the top of her bag shut, hoping Marie would take the hint. Marie snapped her fingers. Ruth took the top bun off and dropped some of the bacon onto Marie’s salad.

“Did your mom ever say why?” Marie asked. “If she wanted you to hang on to that jar so badly, wouldn’t she explain?”

“You met her a couple times,” Ruth said. “She wasn’t the explaining type.”

“It’s like ashes,” Issei said. “She must have wanted you to keep him. To remember.”

“That would be just like her,” Ruth said, and bit into her sandwich with a vengeance.

Issei paused over his soup. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, she had all kinds of ideas about what I should be doing. What do *you* mean?”

“I just meant—isn’t that natural?” Issei said. “Remembering them? Trying to keep them around somehow? That’s what people do.”

“I never even met my dad,” Ruth said. “I don’t see why I should have to keep him. It’s not—” the tomato fell out of her sandwich and slopped onto the table. She realized she was squeezing too hard. “It’s not my responsibility.”

Marie stabbed at her salad. “Like hell it is,” she said. “I think if you just let your parents keep on handing you things, and you hang on to them, you’re screwing yourself. Or you’re letting them screw you. Same thing.” Issei seemed about to say something, but Marie gave him a flat look. She put a bite that was eighty percent bacon and dressing into her mouth and went on chewing as if she considered the matter closed.

Ruth dimly remembered introduction day two years ago, the way Marie had said *Miyako-but-I-go-by-Marie* like she was reading off a card. Papering over your old name with a new one—it wasn’t unheard of. Maybe it was better for some people.

“You got any more bacon?” Marie said.

Marie and Issei were leaving that afternoon for a weekend conference in Marina, where Marie would be on a panel and Issei would be suffering sympathetic stage fright while his team presented their latest paper. Ruth put her work on hold to see them off—a friendly gesture, she

told herself, though they gave her odd looks when they found that she'd gotten to Issei's car before they had.

"Look," she said, without preamble. "I need you guys to do me a favor." She took the jar out of her bag. Despite the warmth of the day it felt like she'd just taken it from somewhere underground. Like a stone, cool and damp and weighty. "Just—dump it somewhere, I don't care where."

"Ruth," Issei started.

"No, shut up, please just do it," she said. "I've tried everything."

Marie stepped forward and took the jar from her. She made a face when she touched its slick surface.

"You weren't kidding about this thing," she said. "Look. We'll take care of it, okay?"

"That's your family," Issei said. "Don't do something you might regret later."

"It's not my family," Ruth said, but she didn't even convince herself.

"It's what she wants," Marie said. She gave Issei a quelling look. For the first time Ruth wondered if it was something that had lingered between them, Marie not keeping her name and never talking about the place where their parents had been born.

"Ruth, what she said at lunch—don't listen to her," Issei said. "She thinks you can only rise if you shed everything else."

"I didn't say that."

"I'm serious," he said. "Principles of buoyancy—you just have to be lighter than what's around you. I'm not saying it's easy. But you rise."

"At this point, I can't really tell the difference," Ruth said. "Have a nice trip."

When she was a girl Ruth had asked Sylvia why she'd used the jar for such a purpose. At that time it was up on the mantelpiece in pride of place, looking down over the room.

"You'll understand when you fall in love," Sylvia had said.

"In love? But you said he was a, a *fly-by-night Jack*," Ruth objected.

"We're having pancakes for dinner," Sylvia said. "Or maybe we're going out. What do you think of that?"

And that was it, really. Sylvia didn't make promises she failed to deliver, she just made weighty suggestions that nonetheless failed to anchor you.

At the bus stop that evening, Ruth stood with her thumb tucked into the strap of her bag, holding it shut. Humid air moved across her face and the back of her neck. In the pool of light under the street lamp she was suddenly filled with that pointless conviction that someone was standing nearby. Her skin prickled. It was both important and absolutely impossible that she turn around and see what was there. She knew, on some level, that it was just her brain throwing up impressions to see if it could—one of those symptoms of living alone.

Since the jar, she wasn't quite sure she was living alone.

She put her bag down and spun around to face the backlit bus shelter. When her bag met the pavement there was a hollow noise. She stared for a moment at the back of the shelter, which was plastered with faded flyers and old bits of tape. Then she turned, and knelt, and felt in her bag until her fingers met the smooth surface of the jar.

When a bus came to the stop she got on without bothering to check the number. The bus moved through the dark, catching momentary reflections of buildings and street signs. They hung in the window, superimposed over her own reflection, and then flashed away and vanished. She held her bag on her lap, tight against her stomach, as the bus headed towards the water.

She got off at Goleta Beach Park. The air was still and the sky layered with clouds. The sea lay flat. It was slate-colored and silent under the faint sheen of moonlight, surface unbroken except for a few rocks jutting from the water near shore. Ruth went down the beach, stumbling a little on the sand.

She scrambled up the jetty, muck and algae soaking into the knees of her jeans. It extended out past the curve of the coast, so when she came to the end, all she saw was open water.

When she took the jar out of her bag it was warm as usual, still damp. She drew in her own breath and pulled out the cork.

A wind swept up around her, flooding from the mouth of the bottle and tossing her hair into her face. It whitened the surface of the sea, and it rose and ran through the grass and stirred the palms on either side of the beach. As it moved over the dunes, a flock of birds lifted and reeled away over the water. Ruth flung the jar into the sea.

It landed far out where she couldn't distinguish it from the color of the waves. Water would fill the place where the breath had been, and it would sink, and keep sinking. This would take it further than the garbage truck, but was that far enough to let her free, or even just to forget?

It was almost too dark to see. If she didn't turn around it would be as though there was no land behind her, nowhere she could point to and say that was where she had come from.

She stood out there for a long time, waiting for it to come back.

END