

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: AFTER HOURS

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After hours follows Thea, a Cleveland suburbanite, as she contends with childhood trauma from her estranged alcoholic father. Thea thought she left this all behind as she has made a life with her wife Maxine. But when she learns her father has had a stroke and is in a coma, she and Maxine return to her childhood home in rural Wisconsin. Twelve years have passed since Thea has seen Jerry, a dairy farmer who runs a family farm with the help of his AA sponsor—and best friend—Dale Booker. Booker and Maxine help Thea navigate through doubt as her narrative weaves through painful childhood memories and unforeseen twists of fate. As discovery intersects with memory, Thea is forced to reconcile with difficult news about the farm and her father's past. *After hours* explores whether reconciliation is possible, and if so, how it takes shape between a once-inseparable father and daughter.

AFTER HOURS

by

Zach Hess

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THE first call comes when it's still dark out and no one is there when I answer. There is a lull until the second, some time later, stalks of light coming through the blinds, when the ringing returns but I ignore it. People don't call us on the landline anymore, not even telemarketers. This thought settles in my mind as I half fall asleep, trying to hold onto a dream:

—the brow of a hill, its slope flattening into a long valley of farmland;

—running through endless pine plantation, my face rushing against a stiff wind;

—an old bloodhound looking over his shoulder, a patch of sunlight on his coat.

Here is my childhood dog Hudson racing through a field towards a narrow road that tails off into woods. Here are train tracks and a line of smoke in the distance. I am running after the dog, falling behind as he accelerates and disappears into the woods behind a bend of maple trees. I try to whistle but can't make a sound, only a small hum of air through my lips. I go in after him, no paths in sight, and the wind howls as I move deeper into the fold, fighting through thorns and stinging nettle. I stop to catch my breath and the trees are suddenly colorless; the limbs are bare, the branches curled together like string. I pick up a dead leaf from the ground. The leaf collapses to dust and falls through my fingers.

These are the images that linger on the fringe of my consciousness. Such dreams take precedence over answering the phone; and at this point, picking up would be enabling the caller. As I try to fall back asleep an echo settles in my ears, which I ignore until it grows louder and I'm aware of my body shuddering as it becomes conscious of a ringing. I tear off my eye mask and look at the clock, half past six in the morning. In

walks Maxine, straight out of the shower, the half-open shades casting a glow on her stomach. She answers the phone, waiting for a moment before she repeats herself.

“Who’s there?” she says, glaring at me. She taps the phone against her head, waiting, until it is clear no one is on the line and she slams it on the receiver. Here she is soaking up the carpet, oblivious to the bone, a foamy glob of shampoo on the top of her head. “Really?”

“It’s still in your hair,” I say.

She feels her head and doesn’t react. “You could’ve picked up.”

“You could’ve ignored it.”

“Don’t,” she says, shivering.

“We should get rid of it.”

“I don’t care. Just pick up.”

I reach across the bed to feel the end of the duvet. The corner is damp and I let her hear it as I hurry to the bathroom for towels. She scoffs when I toss her one, then takes a deep breath, feigning composure: “If it rings—”

“Answer. Got it.”

As I watch her begrudgingly return to the bathroom to finish her shower, I consider disconnecting the line. One quick tug and it will be settled, an official purging of all devices pre-mobile. Its shelf-life expired a long time ago, we wouldn’t even know it was gone— a tempting idea, brilliant even, in the way irrational impulses sometimes feel necessary. The first call was obnoxious for the ring itself, not least its reminder that we still have a landline. Why not pull the plug? How can waiting for a hypothetical

phone call, already having twice ignored the others, be reason enough to not go through with this?

And I might have actually done it if not for the wet carpet, a subject decidedly more pressing than getting rid of the landline. I put a towel on the floor and another on the duvet, remembering not to be frustrated despite my constant reminders that her neglect of the carpet is intolerable; and of course it doesn't register because this sort of thing happens over and over, apropos of her early-morning theatrics.

She claims her brain only reaches optimal capacity when she is in the shower, that she can't maintain a to-do list unless she writes down her ideas as they come. Mornings like this make me numb to the sound of scribbling, Maxine standing over the dresser on the nightstand, dripping wet, filling her notebook with reminders. In a way I have come to think of it as an alarm I sleep through until my body wakes itself up. Accepting the madness of living with a compulsive list-keeper is one thing but what really gets me is her aversion to towels, that she actually gets out of the shower and puts pen to paper before drying off.

"Get used to it," she told me when we first started living together, our old tiny downtown Cleveland apartment a stomping ground for wet floors, countertops, carpets. By this I am fairly certain, considering our last eight years living together, that she was referring to the nameless apparatus in her brain that compels her to act on her whims, to devote every fiber of her being on crossing the T's, dotting the I's.

Maxine, who vacuums the house top to bottom twice a week but leaves her dirty socks on the floor next to last night's jeans and a pile of runoff from her purse: makeup, loose coins, tampon wrappers, etc. Maxine, who buys two loaves of bread from the store,

insisting on sandwiches, and then doesn't eat the bread because of a no-carb diet she's taking a crack at for a thirty-day trial period. Since we met in college I have learned to take her literally, but to take her too literally is to start rationalizing the behaviors, which I know better not to try.

In Shaker Heights, summer mornings feel like fall: the coolness in the air, the quiet breeze, birds starting the day in choral address. Having the morning to myself is the best part of summer, the part I miss most during the school year. Over the years I have found teaching high school students requires a sort of mental decompression, to take advantage of summers off, which in my approximation translates to getting in shape, at least trying.

As I pull up the blinds and look down at the diagonal hillside roads in our neighborhood, I consider going on a run but can't bring myself to do it, not with the phone on my mind. Running can wait. Instead I have a cigarette and struggle through a few yoga poses. Here I am taking a stab at a handstand, trying to calibrate my inverted frame, when the phone rings and I'm scared out of my skin but this time I'm ready. I push myself up from the floor and lift the receiver — a man's voice is asking for me.

“She's not in,” I say without thinking. “Can I take a message?”

“It's important,” the man says.

“Who is this?”

He clears his throat. “Dale Booker.” The name doesn't ring a bell but his midwestern accent is familiar. “Jerry's friend.”

The sound of my dad's name unsettles me.

“I’ll let her know you called,” I say, feeling my hand start to tremble. An uncomfortable silence drags on and all I am hearing is a small static noise.

“Thea?” he says, carving right through my lie. I want to hang up but it’s too late now.

“You got me,” I say, humiliated.

“We met a long time ago. You probably don’t remember.”

“I don’t.”

“My service’s lousy. Can you hear me?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s about your dad... he had a stroke.” He exhales as if he had been holding his breath. “I’m at the hospital. They got him in the ICU.” Another silence. “You there?”

“Yeah.”

He clears his throat. “He’s unconscious. I wish there was more to tell... still waiting on an update. We were fishing. Weren’t far out. Medics got there right away, took him straight from the boat.”

I picture them in a canoe, one anxiously paddling to shore, the other collapsed on the keel.

“Thought you oughtta know,” he says. “In case you wanna come out here.”

My fear of losing ground blocks the simple gesture of expressing gratitude. He has to know I have nothing to do with my dad, that I haven’t spoken to him in twelve years. “You *are* aware of our situation?” I say carefully. “My dad and I.”

“I got the gist of it.”

“I still don’t want to see him.”

“Wasn’t sure how you’d take it.”

Hearing this irritates me but I try to be civil. “Listen. I’m glad I know. But I’m not coming.”

“Lemme give you my number.”

“I don’t think so.”

“You don’t have to call. Just to have, if you wanna see how he’s doing.”

I clear my throat, considering his case. My silence amounts to a concession. I find a pen on the nightstand and take down his number on my hand.

“You’re pushy,” I tell him.

“Calls for it,” he says.

Standing at the kitchen sink in Maxine’s bathrobe, I scrub the back of my hand, watching the number fade in the cold water. Before it disappears I pull my hand from the faucet and one of the numbers is gone but I remember what it was. Why write it down to begin with? I have no intention of calling the guy. This was the first thought that crossed my mind when I hung up the phone. The second thought feels equally resolved—nothing changes if my dad dies. My life wouldn’t look different in any sort of way. If he dies I wouldn’t think about him more or less than I normally do.

The thought of breakfast makes me nauseous, except not eating would be too obvious. As I crack three eggs into a bowl, it occurs to me I learned how to make omelets from watching my dad. I let the yolk drip down until all of it is gone. I watch the shells disappear down the disposal. I pour a drop of milk in the bowl and begin to beat the eggs until a buoyant foam emerges. I empty the contents into a pan and fix on

the calm crackle of the stove, letting it sit for a minute before I top the slowly darkening yellow with spinach and cheese. The omelet is just right. I eat it quickly and don't leave a morsel behind.

I imagine myself as a girl watching my dad cook eggs. It's hard to project yourself into a memory that doesn't exist, but rather a moment that might have happened over the course of various formative mornings. Had his hair started graying? What songs were playing on his kitchen cassette player? Did he ever actually show me how to make an omelet? It occurs to me the exercise is useless, a game that makes the idea of nostalgia feel silly. Out of reach. Once, I was a little girl who idolized her dad: nothing more or less than a tiny wedge of history buried beneath years of silence.

How can I forget going to bed by eight, waking up at sunrise the following morning to go fishing with Dad. If this once important tradition still mattered I would feel something— fear of the uncertain? A pulse of obligation?— or a simple desire to check in on him. He is *family*, as they say. The reasonable response would be buying a plane ticket.

The truth is I don't feel anything.

Thinking about childhood is sort of like looking through glass. Making sense of the little you see is futile. Your memories are someone else's memories: shadows of the truth, projections of your adult self.

Of course this is how I would like to see it. If there is one thing of which I am certain, it's that your history follows you in time. If life is calibrated by what happens to you, what sense is there in trying to cleanse yourself of the past? You can pretend bits and pieces have been phased out, selectively erased, or forgotten; you can keep the

damage at a distance, tell yourself it doesn't define you, or affect your relationships; you can question your memories, pretend they don't hold up anymore; but whether you like it or not, your past reminds you that it's here to stay; that you are always connected to where you grew up, where you were raised, even if it seems like all you have to sort through is loose ends.

I wish I didn't think about him but he has his ways of turning up. This is how they come, when you're in the middle of something else; your visitors in passing, the ones you can't ignore. My visitor, as it were, isn't provoked by anything in particular, not that I can tell. My instinct used to be to look for a reason, a connection, something that explains my thinking of him. But I've realized from my failure to do so that there isn't any point; that I'm too often guilty of craving depths that don't exist. He comes and goes and that is all there is to it— nothing more than a wave running its course.

Maxine hasn't looked up from the kitchen table. I draw hot water to the sink, glancing at her as I wash the dishes, wishing she would pay more attention to me than the daily crossword. "De Niro movie, 1985," she says, chewing on the cap of a pen. "Six letters."

"Brazil," I say in monotone.

"Haven't seen it."

"You'd hate it."

She looks at me quizzically. "Nice robe." I apply pressure to the sponge and don't react to her gaze. "What're you doing?"

“Trying to get this spot.” I scrub at a plate, noticing her arms are crossed on the table in a sort of waiting posture. Once the plate is spotless I squeeze the sponge into a fist.

“Did you get it?”

“My dad had a stroke. They were fishing earlier this morning. Him and a friend.” As I look out the window it strikes me that saying this out loud takes the edge off. It’s easiest to relay the facts all at once.

“He’s in the ICU,” I say, watching a robin settle into our next-door neighbor’s roof gutter. I fix on the corrugated gutter, waiting for the robin to reappear, considering Maxine from the corner of my eye, her hand over her mouth the way she always responds to the unexpected. As I feel her gaze going limp, I wonder, grimly, if avoiding the first call was the work of my unconscious foretelling bad news; the old reliable unconscious deflecting my attention to a dream, telling me not to pick up, and what can a phone call in the middle of the night mean if *not* a dire emergency.

Then again: of what use is the unconscious if it can’t be a safeguard against phone calls from Wisconsin?

“He mentioned me coming out there,” I say. “Says we’ve met. I have no clue who he is.”

“Your dad knows a lot of people,” she says.

“Who knows.”

She gets up from the table and puts her hands on my shoulders. I yield to their strength, her firm grip against my neck.

“I’m sure he talks about you.”

I scoff.

“Seriously.”

“So what if he does?”

“It just happened,” she says. “And you know about it. This friend of his, you could’ve been the first one he called. How would he know to call you?”

I turn hard under her arms. “The guy knows I exist. My dad talks about me, tells his friends about me. It doesn’t matter.”

She brings her fingers to her temples, takes a deep breath and sits on the kitchen counter, gesturing for me to do the same.

“I’m just thinking,” she says, “what if we went out there?”

This comes out of nowhere, this idea of hers the last thing I expect and her steady gaze confirms she means it. Is she mad?

“Not a chance,” I say.

“I said I’m just thinking.”

“I have to say... I don’t feel a thing and I’m okay with it.”

She holds my hand. “You don’t have to know this second. Let it settle.”

I stare at the copper green wallpaper and count the faded metallic squares. A year has passed since Maxine put it up. I didn’t like the prints— or maybe I was happy with the wallpaper we always had— but once it was up, the new wallpaper, I knew it looked good and couldn’t pretend otherwise.

“I’m just thinking,” she says. “If you don’t go you might regret it.”

“Please stop thinking.”

She nods. Time to settle, just like new wallpaper. Funny how such little time had passed between Maxine presenting the wallpaper initiative and tearing down what we used to have. I tell myself she's right, that I should think it over before writing it off. From the window I watch the robin hovering above the roof gutter, assessing its next spot, before it flies away.

Running is the best I can do. Not that it clears my head, but things are a little easier to see when I'm moving. I am thinking of him in his brown cowhide jacket holding my hand at the bottom of our driveway. This man I called dad leading the pace up the street towards my school on Marble Road. I remember watching the back of his work boots, dried clumps of dirt rimming the heels, the loud clunking sound they made, how he looked like a giant in my ten-year-old view.

I am thinking of the cider mill, one of our favorite spots to go after work on Saturdays. The slice of angel food cake we split, the jug of hot apple cider warming my hands, how he burned his tongue because he was too impatient to wait for his to cool. How could I forget sitting at our corner table next to the fireplace, a window-view of the parking lot, watching him slip a little something into his cider? He was a creature of habit, ever so careful to cover his flask and dispense the whiskey without drawing attention to himself. In the blink of an eye, several helpings over the course of a glass.

His was a well-practiced act of discretion. An addiction that went entirely over my head until one morning, I started to notice. I don't remember when, only that we were in the cider mill when it hit me, a vague cognizance in the back of my mind that something might have been wrong.

There were signs, the first visible detections that my dad was different, at least from my friends' parents. People talked. They tried not to stare. When I was in middle school the parents of one of my softball teammates threw an end-of-the-year barbeque. All of the girls on the team and their parents attended. I remember pulling in and begging him to stay in the truck, to sober up before he joined me in the backyard. I didn't want to walk in together, to be associated with him much less seen side-by-side.

He agreed to stay behind but the moment he appeared in the backyard, I knew he was worse than before, that he had been drinking in his truck. His bloodshot eyes were one thing but his balance was gone to hell and there was no way of hiding it. The girls and the parents were sitting at opposite sides of the deck. I couldn't stop watching his table, the wandering eyes, the way people nervously looked at him and turned away when he looked back. As the party dragged on, something bound to happen did. Two of the couples— *how can you blame them?* — left my dad's table and sat at another for the rest of the night. What kind of parent comes wasted to his kid's party? What kind of parent tells dirty jokes loud enough for everyone to hear? By nature he was always the kind of person who said whatever he wanted no matter who was around— and the whiskey had a way of turning it up a few notches.

Watching him sit at his table, smoking a cigar and shuffling a deck of cards, I might have understood why those couples left, but I couldn't admit it to myself. What I see now that I couldn't then was how guilt got the better of me; that I should have known better than to bring him to the party, that I was the cause of these peoples' objections and his public humiliation. There is only the memory of it happening, of me sitting next to

him at the end of the night, watching him talk a big game while he beat my friend's dad in several games of rummy.

After that night I remember thinking about what he might have said to the other parents. Time in its perfect wisdom has its way of telling you things only to make you realize you already knew them to begin with. What he said that night stopped mattering because I stopped wondering. I didn't have to know, because in a way, I already did.

Instead of my usual stretching in the driveway, I go to the bank of grass at the cul-de-sac. I lie on the grass, not minding the morning dew, and extend my arms and legs back and forth as if making snow angels until an idea strikes me: why not meditate? It feels vaguely like the right thing to do, even if I've only ever done it sparingly. The last time I tried was a few years ago in the mammogram office downtown. Maxine's mother's ultrasound, the lumps in her breasts staring at us on the screen. I remember sitting in the corner of the room, trying to clear my head, praying even, before we got the word. Cysts, all clear, gone in less than a year.

I focus on my breath and listen to the hum of the wind. The breeze flows steadily, cooling out of the sun. Several minutes pass and I can't tell if it's working, but not knowing doesn't bother me because I don't expect anything. Just when my thoughts begin to stop I hear footsteps approaching. I crack open an eye and spot an old woman walking with a wise squint along her driveway, bending over where it ends to pick up a newspaper. Another unfamiliar neighbor. Her white hair is tied back in a bun, and the skin on her small forehead is shining. Her face is tense as she scans me above the dark

glasses on the bridge of her nose. Gone is the mood of poise I have been building up. My attention has slipped entirely onto this woman.

Doesn't she see I'm in the middle of something? That I can see her too? She looks at me levelly, her mouth dropping into an appraising scowl. I feel her narrow eyes feeding on me, aware of my uncertainty, wondering why I am sitting on the grass. A gust of guilt sweeps over me as she shakes her head and turns up the driveway. She is around the same age as him, and probably just as disapproving. Watching her small certain stride, a streak of light on the curve of her back, my head is clear for the first time all morning. Seeing him again feels suddenly possible. After all, I'm his only family.

LOOKING out the window, an aerial view of the water next to columns of tiny homes and slow-motion cars, our final descent into Wisconsin feels like a bad dream. Dale Booker calls a little after eight while we're taxiing on the runway. He is waiting outside the airport and wants to know if we checked our bags or carried on. He tells me they aren't letting cars sit by the curb and a cop is giving him a hard time. "I'm looping around," he says and I tell him we checked, that we'll try to be quick.

Two years since I've been on a plane. I had sort of forgotten the feeling, namely the meager legroom and horrible pressure in my sinuses. Maxine and I had managed two movies from the same pair of headphones; after hours of leaning against each other, the pain in my neck had sent strict orders to the brain to have a cocktail, which vaguely helped the stiffness but not as much as Maxine's fingers massaging my neck muscles, easing my thoughts.

"Howdy," Booker says, shaking our hands and loading our bags in his truck. Here is the messenger himself, the man who convinced us to stay at my dad's house: far from a compelling proposal but it seemed silly to resist when we learned the closest hotel was an hour from the hospital, and so it was decided. We would stay at the farmhouse I grew up in, a place I have never intended to return.

"Don't mind the mess," he says as we get in the truck. His eyes make his meaning by nodding towards Maxine and the clutter in the back seat: crinkled paper bags, a t-shirt, scattered newspapers, baseball caps, boots covered in dried mud.

She isn't the least phased, and in a way I feel her comfort slipping onto me. Meeting people comes easy to her, this is the difference between us— for me it takes work. Her receptiveness to the unfamiliar has its way of easing the pressure.

“Thanks again for getting us,” I say.

“Sure thing,” he says, cracking his knuckles against the wheel. “It's a straight shot on the highway. Hospital's not far. They're still running tests on him, that's just a guess.”

His hoarse voice comes from underneath a full silver moustache that covers his mouth, such that you can't see his lips, just the moustache moving up and down as he talks. His dirty hands— thick grainy fingers, an unhealed scab, lines of dirt caked underneath the nails— suggest he came from work.

“We can drop off the bags or go straight there,” he says. “Your call.” He glances at me but I pretend not to notice; instead I look into the rear-view mirror and lock eyes with Maxine, who shrugs stiffly.

“Let's just go,” I say.

“Might as well,” Booker nods. “It's on the way.”

After a long silence, he offers us a half eaten bag of popcorn from the cubbyhole. Maxine takes a handful and I go to do the same until my thoughts return to his hands and I'm not hungry at all. I feel an overwhelming desire to turn around, an anxiety bordering on something worse. I've never been in an ICU; not knowing what to expect makes me nervous, at the same time assured by the sense that hospital dramas on tv don't do justice to the real thing.

As we take the ramp onto 39, Madison's urban façade quickly gives way to cornfields and farmland.

"Why don't I remember you?" I say, looking straight ahead. "You said we met."

"Blunt," Booker says. "Just like your dad."

"We're nothing alike."

He laughs, sure of himself. "Ain't what he says."

"I was seventeen when I left. I'd remember you."

"Been a long time.

"You'd be surprised."

"Rarely am."

"It's not always a good thing. Memory."

His eyes twitch and something fades in his expression.

"Depends," he says. "I always forget what I think I remember. Things are always changing anyway.

"Not as much as they stay the same."

He rubs his moustache. "If someone told me thirty years ago your dad and me would end up friends, I'd a told him never in a million years."

"Why not?" Maxine says.

"I used to be the competition. Worked for the top producer in town."

"I thought you worked together."

"Hundred hours a week, give or take a few. Ten years this fall since I took up with Jerry. He's a good man, your father. You get to know him better than he knows himself."

“I bet,” I say.

He takes a handkerchief from his breast pocket and blows his nose.

“He brought me on after I left. Alcott. Remember the name?” The name is familiar but I can’t place from where. “Harold Alcott? Little short guy with a temper?”

And then it rings a bell: the owner of the biggest dairy farm in Reedsburg.

“On Overland,” I say. “Near the fire station.”

He nods. “Used to be my in-law... worked for him twenty-three years. When my wife passed he lost it. Sold the farm. Skipped town. Few weeks later I started over. Jerry brought me in.”

“Sorry about your wife,” Maxine says.

“It happens.” He fiddles with the air conditioning, turns it up a smidge. We drive past a silent row of houses and a billboard with the words CATHOLIC RADIO: 720 AM. Another silence lingers and I almost regret pressing the issue until Booker puts an end to it. “Hospital’s near that water tower.” The tower is far out but everything else is flat and we can see it plainly in the distance: a desolate white dome.

The waiting room is packed. Closest to the entrance a man with a Packers hat pushed back on his head is reading a book and tapping his foot. In the corner of the room, a muscular kid in a wet biker’s shirt is talking on the phone; in the opposite corner, an old woman with an eye-mask is fast asleep, covered head to toe by a suede jacket. Next to her an obese woman in a brown suit glances guardedly at us; her cheeks are lined with eye shadow, her lap littered with empty bags of chips. Two little boys sitting at her feet are lost in coloring books. Booker checks in with the receptionist and we sit next to

the woman, who is coughing loudly, a dry hacking spell. As we stare at our phones, trying to ignore her, the cough escalates and people are looking. For a while she is quiet but the coughing returns just when you think it ran its course. I make a nodding gesture to Maxine, pointing with my eyes to the other side of the room, but she shakes her head in confirmation that switching seats would be too obvious. When she tells me I'm wrong, I listen.

Here is a tv on the wall, reception gone to hell, too static to watch. *I Love Lucy*? It's one of those old kitchen tv's that probably hasn't been replaced since the 90's. My feeling on this place is: Why don't they have a fish tank? There isn't a better place in the world to have a fish tank. It wouldn't kill them to add a little color to the room. I want to look at fish, just for a few minutes. Fish would be a welcome distraction— something to pass the time, to get myself out of my head. They have a stack of magazines but who's to say reading a magazine calms the nerves; maybe the waiting itself is sufficient distraction.

But the thought isn't encouraging as I glance at Maxine playing solitaire on her phone, Booker reading the paper.

A short bald nurse in oversized scrubs comes through the door holding a clipboard, and I can feel my heart pounding as I watch him survey the room. He has squinty eyes and loose ripples of skin on the back of his neck that look like an accordion. The others watch him closely, ready for their names to be called. He draws a folder from the clipboard and hands it to the receptionist, then after a quick glance at us, disappears behind the door. I nudge Maxine. "Did you see that?"

She pulls her head into her shoulders, puts her finger to her lips. Her obliviousness is maddening.

“Misleading son of a bitch,” I say under my breath. “That nurse just walked all over us.”

“Volume,” Maxine whispers.

People are looking. She draws two sticks of gum from her pocket and pops one in my mouth, a sharp peppermint taste, and the matter seems ended that simply. She is convinced chewing gum tempers my anxiety but I’m pretty sure it sets me off a little deeper.

“He shouldn’t be throwing people off like that.”

She clears her throat before launching into what I think will be a consolatory response but doesn’t say a thing.

“This is stupid,” I whisper. “I haven’t seen him since college. What’s the point?”

Booker lowers his paper and leans across Maxine, inches from my face. “You’re embarrassing yourself,” he says. “Pull it together.” With that he goes back to reading the paper and I feel like a scolded child, half-deserving of the shame, almost relieved Booker had saved Maxine the trouble of shutting me up. I hold Maxine’s hand, swallowing my pride, trying to picture my dad. Those bushy eyebrows he refused to trim; the salt and pepper goatee that perfectly suited the square of his face; those hazel eyes that never stayed the same color.

I think of us playing catch, the way we used to before dinner, after he’d already had a few drinks in him. He always made me practice short-hops in the backyard. The agreement was I could play high school softball if I worked all summer and proved to

him I was good enough. The last catch we had was in the middle of my freshman year, a few games remaining in my short-lived athletic career. It was a cool bright day.

Sunshine fell in pockets on the wet grass. I remember him throwing the ball at my feet and consistently failing to come up with it.

“You’re swinging your arm too much,” he said. “All’s it takes is the wrist.”

He demonstrated with his glove, sideswiping it against the grass as if to catch an imaginary ball off the bounce. Then he threw the ball a little harder and I mishandled it on the tip of my glove.

“How many players on the team?” I lowered the brim of my hat and told him fourteen. “That coach has you on a long leash. Can’t take it for granted.”

I fired the ball back at him. “I know.”

“You’re lucky to be starting.”

“I earned it.”

“We’ll see.”

“It’s not luck,” I said. “You haven’t been to any games.”

My resistance grated against him. “Be complacent. That’ll do you wonders.”

“Dad...”

“Don’t *dad* me. Know what your problem is? You don’t like hearing the truth.”

I took off my glove and started up the deck.

“Who said we were done?”

I fought back tears and looked at him firmly but only a small guttural noise came out when I tried to tell him no, so obviously feeble that it amounted to a concession.

Holding his gaze, I returned to the grass.

“Thatta girl.”

“You’re not my coach.”

My meager attempt at defiance hung in silence, settling onto his face like he had just been insulted. He wiped his hair back and his face was strange the way it was set: a lopsided grin, his bottom lip hanging at the mouth.

“Gimme a target,” he said. “Let’s see it, *first*. You’re so clever, might as well get rid of the glove. Play with your bare hands.”

He tossed the ball straight up and caught it in his palm. I locked my pivot foot into the grass, expecting a short-hop but instead he gunned it right at me, a sharp cracking sound as it struck the leather and a rushing sting settled in my hand. The pain was nothing next to watching him toss his glove, stumble up the deck, and with a loud smack of the sliding door, disappear into the house. This is the way it often ended: when the only thing to count on was licking your own wounds. Trying to protect your guard against a father too far gone to sustain a thing as simple as playing catch.

As I picked up his glove I noticed our next-door neighbor watching me from her garden. A plump woman in overalls and a white visor on her head. We had never spoken but it felt like I knew her from stopping to acknowledge each other in the yard. She lowered her hose, tipped her face up towards me and waved. I returned the wave and sat on the deck until dusk.

The light is bright and prominent. The nurse walks us down a dark-tiled hallway with large frames on the walls, mostly pictures of hospital staff. In one of the pictures a group of doctors is awkwardly hovering over a boy in a johnny gown. As I linger behind

Booker and Maxine, scanning each of the pictures, voices breeze by, two nurses in a hurry.

“...Tomorrow at the latest.”

“If that’s what he said,” the other voice says.

“We weren’t far off.”

At the end of the hallway I attach my reticence to an oil painting of a blue-uniformed man, and a woman in a pea coat surrounded by a vast garden of lilies and a small rainbow in the sky. They are playing cards, sitting across from each other at a table under a gazebo. The scene has a funny power over me. Only after I leave the painting and catch up to the others does the memory surface— going to the park with my dad and playing checkers on the red picnic table next to the playground, one of many childhood traditions.

“You’re treading water,” he would say, stacks of black checkers in his hands.

“Gotta take risks. It’s the only way.”

I liked that he never went on easy on me. I wanted to win on my own.

As I catch up with the others I hear the nurse talking over his shoulder, a stern nasal voice. He moves with a withdrawn stiffness.

“He’s exhausted,” the nurse says. “Still doesn’t know what happened. He’s picking up a few words but he isn’t quite receptive. Not yet.” I can’t tell whether I am bothered by the detachment in his voice or the news itself.

“Can he talk okay?” Booker says.

“For now just babble. Small noises here and there. He’s a ways away from meaningful speech.”

Booker rubs his moustache and nods. The nurse stops next to wide swing doors with double-glazed windows. “Here we are.” Maxine glances at me, and I follow her through the doors.

The stillness is alarming. Where I expected chaos, there is none. No sign of crossing into new terrain, only an intensity of heat and glow, quiet voices buzzing, small beeping sounds, a full house of ventilation machines and wires and large monitors. Here is a small flashing light from the telephones on the wall, nurses sitting next to beds and scribbling on charts, a soft piano melody, somehow audible over all of the noise. The drawn curtains cast a strange alchemy of light— slots of white glaze reflecting from the aluminum tea trolleys beside the beds. I feel my stomach start to tremble as we approach a heavily bruised patient wearing sunglasses: a flaccid-faced old man hooked up to a respirator machine, vaguely fidgeting under the bed sheets. I am relieved to see he isn’t my dad. The man’s doctor is sitting at his bedside with a silver-haired woman. The woman is twirling her thumbs, talking under her breath. Her eyes are desperate.

“...I know what that means,” she mutters. “You think I’m stupid?”

The doctor regards us, forces a smile. “Not at all,” he says, folding his hands together.

“...Right where he should be. Passed with flying colors. That’s what you said.”

As the doctor placates the woman, I can’t stop looking at the old man. He doesn’t look comfortable, and worse yet, he is ignorant to the world around him. I tell Maxine to give me a minute, that I’ll be right behind her. It feels important that I walk through the unit alone until I’m ready to see him.

Near the entrance I am drawn to a cheap-looking bulletin board on the wall. Not much to behold: a few fliers, scattered manila folders stacked with papers, a Chinese food carryout menu. A group of nurses pass by, one reading something off a list while the other turns up a fan between the beds behind me. An alarm goes off at the end of the hall and another nurse, on cue, comes from around the bend and shuts it off, then disappears behind the wall.

And then out of nowhere: a hand on my shoulder. “Can I help you?” a voice says. I turn to face a middle-aged woman in a white coat and tall doctor cap that covers most of her forehead. She has beautiful caramel skin, overwhelmingly big green eyes, a deep scar on her chin.

“I’m visiting my dad,” I say. “He had a stroke.”

“Holcomb right? Jerry?”

I nod.

“I’m his doctor. Joanne Laurel. We’re taking care of him.” She smiles and shakes my hand, a disarmingly friendly woman. “You sort of look alike.”

“I know,” I say. “What’s his status?”

“How much do you know?”

“Just that he woke up from a coma.”

“A few hours ago,” she says. “The stroke was on the left side of his brain. That affects the right side of his body. We’re working on his movement. Right now it’s minimal. He’s disoriented. You’ll see his face won’t have any expression. That’s expected. Did the nurse brief you on his speech?”

“He can’t really talk but he can understand a little?”

She nods. “He’s comprehending phrases between one and three words. Use short sentences when you talk to him. He has what’s called aphasia. When he tries to speak he’s limited to noises, but he isn’t aware of it. Meaning he thinks he’s speaking intelligibly.”

“Good to know.”

She smiles. “I know this is a lot to take in. He’s around the corner, whenever you’re ready.”

“Thanks,” I say.

She leans in, reaching past my shoulder, and sticks a tiny piece of paper to the bulletin board.

“Fortune cookie,” she says. “It’s a good one.”

I’ve never cared for fortunes but reading hers seems like the right thing to do: IT TAKES MORE THAN GOOD MEMORY TO HAVE GOOD MEMORIES. I wonder if the same holds true for bad memories. She sees my uncertainty.

“One of my patients. He likes fortunes.”

I nod politely, trying not to look at her scar. I read the fortune again, considering other ways to defer seeing him, but I’m out of ideas. Just get it over with.

“You don’t want to be here,” she says. “No one does. I saw you when you walked in. It’s okay to be nervous.”

Her forwardness makes me feel a little too vulnerable.

“Whatever this is. I don’t need it.”

She blinks, unfazed by my resistance. “There’s a garden across the street. Your dad has a nice view. I’m happy to show you.”

I consider her offer, realizing she is probably used to distrusting people like me.

“Sorry I just snapped,” I say. “I’m not crazy. For what it’s worth.”

“Honey you don’t have to convince me. I don’t know you. All I know is now’s as good a time as ever.”

I push myself to a nod and follow her towards the back of the unit.

The first thing I see is a tube hooked up on one end to an IV, on the other to a man I don’t recognize lying on a bed surrounded by guardrails. Keeping back at a distance, I look closely at a face I have never seen but know very well. My dad’s eyes shift towards me and I tell myself not to look away as the silence of his gaze paralyzes me. The right side of his mouth hangs open slightly so that his lips appear numb. It seems he isn’t blinking, or he is only blinking in one eye, while the other part of his face, the limp side, stares blankly. His face is like a rotten egg: where there once was color is now a cold toneless shape, strangely small in relation to his body. He is still a large person by any stretch of the word, but this face, drained from decades of working around the clock, is a lifetime apart from what I remember.

Here is a washed up man with a pink hospital wristband and a black tattoo on his forearm that makes me wonder if I am looking at someone else. He must have gotten the tattoo after I left. I move a little closer to make out the image: a flying crow holding a rosary cross from its beak. My dad, who never believed in God, always quick to question faith and anyone who claimed to have it.

Booker breaks the silence. “See?” he said, looking at Jerry. “She came to see you.”

From her bedside chair next to Booker, Maxine gestures for me to come closer. I reluctantly approach the foot of the bed as Doctor Laurel lifts his head and adds a throw pillow underneath, atop a stack of two other pillows. He tries to lift his hand but is shaking badly and can't quite hold it up. Then, with a sliver of triumph, his tongue peeks out and he keeps it on his lip for a moment before a low-pitched sound comes through his mouth. A muscle under his jaw moves and then he makes the same sound, as if trying to reiterate something.

From her pocket Doctor Laurel draws a piece of chalk and a small wooden plank board. She puts the board on my dad's lap and slowly guides his hand to the chalk. He wraps his trembling fingers around it, making sure he has control before she lets go. The shaking grows worse when he presses the chalk to the board, a very faint line, and then another fainter yet. He holds it here awhile, waiting for it to come, but he can't keep it steady and again she wraps her hand around his. They move slowly, guiding each other to meaning. When he stops, the chalk comes loose from his fingers and she holds up the board for us to see his message in barely legible letters: COFFEE.

ALL morning we've been sitting by the garden across the street from the hospital, the sun baking us like clams, when a strange new thought arrests me. I could be of use here— a serviceable daughter for old time's sake. It doesn't feel unreasonable. I have the time, the luxury of summers off staring me in the face.

When summer comes I'm used to a sort of sustained hibernation, a generally happy three months designated for reading, maintaining our vegetable garden, biking in the park, and helping Maxine build decks. Such is the latitude of being a schoolteacher— having the space to catch up on life, the time to contend with sudden shifts in your universe, like your dad waking up from a coma post-stroke; your dad who you haven't seen in twelve years sitting here in his wheelchair, absently gazing at the bushes.

This morning I told myself I would stay as long as I'm needed. I even believed it until I got to the hospital and saw right through myself; a dubious attempt at daughterly devotion; a little white lie to curb the guilt of wanting to leave. Here is my window— a chance to skip out before I've made any investments in staying. *Take the next flight out. Forget about him.* Except something tells me leaving is out of the question.

My dad's law: "Knuckle down, eyes on the prize." This was what he used to tell me when the going got tough those last few hours of a long day on the farm. His tired expressions had a way of perfectly capturing how he saw the world, how he wanted me to see it. But at seventeen I was good at appropriating his words to suit my agenda; they nourished my thoughts of going to college and never coming back. *When do I leave? Where do I live?* These questions sustained me through the months, through all of the

times I thought about running away. My singular purpose was saving enough money to leave.

Being the only kid of an irritable alcoholic business owner who everyone answered to, I intuitively knew what was expected of me. It came as no surprise when my dad forced me to give up sports for afterschool farm-work. “You’re a grown up,” he would say. “Time you start acting like it.” And despite my objections, I believed him. I believed everything took a back seat to the farm, that giving up sports was for the best.

Time has a way of clarifying things, filtering through your choices and showing you where you missed the boat, where you went wrong; how you could pull the plug on something that makes you happy and turn back reaching for it. I go back to softball: the hidden field off Colman Road, my gold jersey number six, the one year I played in high school a blur in my memory. Sometimes I pull out my old glove from the garage and break it in with a hammer, the way I used to before the season started. I smell the leather and try to imagine myself bent over the dirt, covering my old ground at first base. I think of the last games I played, a doubleheader against our sister high school, my team playing under the lights and winning in the last inning on a wild pitch.

Who was I but a teenage farm-girl with hopeless acne and split ends. Who was I but a ragdoll that obliged her father’s every demand, pounding through sixty hours a week in the summers; who milked her quota without a word, the sticky heat eating at her skin and collapsing the senses until all that lingered was a mirage of dinner and a cool pillow. When your self-worth starts depending on how many hours you put in, the physical toll is numbing. You don’t have a threshold for pain because everyone around you is doing the same thing and they’re not hurting so why should you be?

By end of the summer of my seventeenth birthday I had carpal tunnel in both hands and an overnight trip to the hospital for corrective surgery. Sometimes I try to think about the surgery specifically. I look at the scars on my wrists and palms and try to remember the tingling in my fingers, the weakness of my grip. Gone is the stiffness from holding my hands in fists. Gone are the splints on my wrists, the nagging soreness that made it hard to eat, write, brush my teeth.

Above all was the uneasy feeling that I was bred for a life I didn't want, a future my dad had already written; eventually filling his shoes felt like a foregone conclusion. And in his own elliptical way he would talk about it, using me as a sounding board for far-off plans, even the particulars of his future death. He wasn't a morbid man but he liked to plan. Those who knew him well were aware of his wish to die at work, the only send-off he saw fit. "Wouldn't be the worst way to go," he used to say; or "I'm lucky if I make it to seventy."

His talk of death didn't need context because I was used to it. When I was eleven or twelve, old enough to know what he was saying, we had just walked out of a movie and he turned to me in the parking lot and said, "I won't always be around kiddo. Figure I got twenty years in the tank... that's awhile yet but sooner than you think. You'll be fine calling the shots is what I'm saying. When the time comes. You're strong, just like your old man. You won't need me anymore."

When he spoke of me eventually taking over the farm, I was nothing less than agreeable and nothing more: a seasoned professional at nodding and smiling. There wasn't room for my opinions, ambitions. I was afraid to have any. He called it humility; his humble daughter bought every word.

Who remembers when things click? When the blindfold comes off and you realize everything you have ever known is through someone else's eyes and the only thing that matters is seeing things differently. Such inflections come to surface over time; little by little the switch goes off and the universe feels brand new. Clear.

The stupor of my childhood came to an end later than it should have: senior year of high school, my last year in Wisconsin, a point of view emerging in long overdue frames of consciousness. We were together around the clock, two stubborn spirits drifting slowly apart. It wasn't just occupying the same space that created problems; time had caught up to us. I had all but checked out and he ignored my talk of college. I had been accepted to schools in Chicago and Cleveland, three of which had offered me academic scholarships that would pay for most of my tuition. I had more than enough saved to cover the rest along with cost of living, but he wouldn't hear a word—I was making a big mistake, I was setting myself up for debt down the road, I wasn't thinking straight. There was next to nothing in the way of dialogue, mostly my dad speaking in aphorisms I had heard a thousand times: *A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush* or *A pint of sweat saves a gallon of blood*. My resentment for him accounted for far greater pain than my failing seventeen-year-old hands.

Once in awhile he tried. He would drop in on me at the kitchen table and read the paper while I did homework. He would sit back and glance at me as he turned the pages, and the silence would linger until enough time passed and he was satisfied. He would take a stab, open the line of questioning. It was late at night the last time we talked about college. I was writing in my journal, pretending to do homework.

“What's in Oberlin Ohio that isn't here?” he said.

“We both know where this conversation’s going,” I said.

“It’s a reasonable question.”

“I’m afraid to answer it.”

He lowered his paper. “Thought you want to talk about it.”

“I did.”

“O.K. Let’s talk.”

“You shut off whenever I bring it up. I know where you stand... why beat a dead horse?”

He sighed and rubbed his hands against his face.

“Maybe you think you’re going someplace different,” he said. “I got news for you. The midwest, it’s all the same. Same sorta folks. Same values. Ohio’s just as flat. You wouldn’t be any closer to the city if that’s what you’re thinking.”

This was his favorite card to play, that I was privately plotting to become an urbanite. A friend of his had a daughter who moved to Chicago and rarely came back to visit. My dad called the daughter *city slicker*. That he sensed I was tempted to live in a city didn’t make sense since Oberlin is its own little town, very much disparate from downtown Cleveland.

“Thanks for the heads up,” I said insipidly.

“You’ll thank me later,” he said.

I left on the third day of August, 2003. Eight hours on the road straight through to Ohio, two weeks earlier than I had planned. It was Saturday morning, one of the warmest days of the summer. Blue sky. Birds. A pitcher of lemonade. I had just finished

breakfast with my friend Kate. We were on the front porch painting our nails, which always brought me comfort since my hands were beaten up from working so much and I liked to think taking care of my nails made up for it. Here we were letting our nails dry when my dad's pickup truck came pulling into the driveway and rocked to a stop in front of the garage. Through the tinted windshield we watched him tap his head against the steering wheel. He was drunk and I knew it the moment I saw him.

He stumbled out of the truck and dropped his keys, struggling to pick them up from the ground. Without a word he breezed past us into the garage, and we could hear him shouting for a split second before the door slammed. Here was our chance to up and leave, to take Kate's car and disappear, but we didn't move; instead we let the moment pass, or waited for something to happen, or lied to ourselves that things would smooth over, that he would leave us be. Before we knew it he came back out through the front door and was sitting next to us, sipping on a glass of bourbon. His face was flush.

"Second flat in a month," he said, glancing at me. "You'd be sick if you knew what I spent on tires."

I looked at the deflated front tire and tried to project an even manner. He cracked his knuckles one by one.

"Hit a pothole," he said. "Passed five or six on the drive. They been there since the winter. Still waiting on this town to patch 'em up." I looked at Kate and stood, but he put his foot on the table next to our arsenal of nail supplies. "Where we going?"

"We were drying our nails before we went in." I showed him my hands. "They're dry now."

He took a swig and wiped his mouth with his arm. A wedge of tension settled over us.

“You should stay,” he said. “No reason we can’t all share. Is there?”

“No,” I said, forcing a smile. I returned to my chair without taking my eyes off of him.

“Glad to hear. You never know. I just need to sit here a minute. Catch my breath.”

The silence was uncomfortable. I wondered if he started drinking before the flat tire, or if the tire provoked the drinking.

“Problem?” he said, catching my gaze.

“I thought you were working,” I said, measuring my words. “It’s eleven a.m.”

He rubbed his tongue around his teeth and took his foot off the table. “See that tire?” he said, pointing to the driveway. “I ain’t stopping you from going to the store. Picking me up a new one. I might get the spare outta the trunk. Show you and your friend how it’s done.”

“No thanks.”

“She’s a little smartass, ain’t she Katie.” Kate set her jaw.

“That’s not her name,” I said.

“Shut your mouth,” he said.

For a moment we left it at that, testing each other, scolding each other silently, and I couldn’t look anywhere but my hands. Finally I sprung to my feet and collected my things from the table.

“You win,” I said, but before I got to the front door he was standing in front of it, looking at me sidelong.

“Go home Katie.” She glanced at him. “Go on.” I reached for her hand but she shoved her supplies in her bag and hurried down the stairs without looking back. I was desperate, half-convinced she would turn around and tell me to come with her.

The truth settled in like a raincloud— she was gone the minute he pulled in. “I’ll call you,” she said meekly before getting in her car. She never called. That was the last time we saw each other. Dad and I watched her pull away, waiting on the porch with nothing to settle but the promise of a fight. I could smell the whiskey on his breath.

“In the house,” he muttered, his voice tight.

“I’m good here,” I said. Holding ground was all that mattered.

“The hell you are.”

“You’re drunk.”

“I’m fine.”

“I’m going for a walk.”

“Get your ass in the house.”

“So you can take it out on me?” I said. “You can’t hide from the neighbors.”

He regarded me.

“They know what you do,” I added before I could stop myself, and he raised the back of his hand but didn’t strike me; instead he held it above his shoulder for a moment before staggering down the driveway, consciously trying to straighten his footsteps. His back was tight, his gait a perfect straight line. Here was the perfect paradox, watching him masquerade down the driveway, mocking me in his arrogant spectacle of make-

believe. A lush pretending to be sober. He only ever hit me a few times, but when he did, the proof was in the pudding.

Those who knew him sometimes tossed around terms like *functional alcoholic*, but such labels inevitably fall short of hitting the mark. We assign names to people not to understand them, but to satisfy our own selfish need for closure, for the feeling of control in thinking you have someone pegged down.

I never understood my father, drunk or sober.

“I know what you’re doing,” I called to him. He was leaning against the mailbox, looking out to the road and whistling a tune I couldn’t place in the moment but later recognized during my drive to Oberlin. He spat from the bottom of his throat and started back up the driveway, downing the last of his drink. It was depressing to watch him like this, drunk off his ass and still going at it.

What came next I remember like a picture I’ve seen a thousand times. I was at the front door trying to slip inside the house when I heard a loud crack and turned to see him standing over infinite shards of glass. He was breathing heavily and staring at the flat tire, not acknowledging the shattered glass on the pavement, and for the first time that morning I was scared. Leaving him alone in his rage felt near impossible. The truth is I was more scared for him than I was myself.

A sparrow watched from the mailbox across the street. My dad was as still as the bird, and suddenly I was aware of a blistering heat on my forehead. I closed my eyes and focused on the flash of sun against my lids. When I was scared I thought of my dog for comfort. I thought of Hudson running with a stick in his mouth, his ears flopping through the air, or slobbering on a rawhide bone, biting it for hours without losing interest, the

way he used to chase a flock of geese and watch them one by one as they scattered in the air.

When I opened my eyes I knew I had to do something. I grabbed the dustpan and broom from the garage and brought them to him. He gave me a look that said thanks, but also, don't say a goddamn thing. He swept up the glass, carefully bending over to examine the ground. He put the glass in a grocery bag and disposed of it in the garbage can at the bottom of the driveway. He dug out a wrench from his truck and loosened the nuts on the tire, running through the whole thing expertly: jack up the truck, strip the flat, replace it with the spare. When he was finished he pulled himself into the truck and rolled down the window.

"I won't be long," he said. He started to say something else but then he stopped as if deciding it was best to not say what he intended.

"Don't," I said.

"Shop's down the street. I gotta fix it."

"Something to eat first. A little rest, like you said. Please."

He considered for a moment before he was backing down the driveway and all I could see was an accident waiting to happen. He already had a DUI to his name, not to mention two accidents in the last year, both of which were his fault, both of which he had managed to pay for the damage out of pocket. The first accident, I was in the car. I watched him bully a man into taking care of things on the spot.

"Why complicate it?" he said to the man. I'll never forget the way he pressured the man to leave insurance out of it, how he pulled out several hundred-dollar bills and closed the man's hand over the money as if to seal his cooperation.

Most recently he had fallen asleep at the wheel driving home from his friend's Thanksgiving dinner at two in the morning. There we were on 94 splitting off head first towards a guardrail. I was in the passenger seat screaming while he was spinning us back into the lane just in time: the difference between a little scare and probable death, or a *little hiccup* as my dad put it. He blamed the whole thing on being overtired from a bad night's sleep— chalk it up to Jerry being Jerry, never one to call a spade a spade.

Of course he was loaded when I got in the truck with him that night— his breath alone gave him away but I couldn't admit it. I told myself he wouldn't drink and drive with me in the passenger's seat, except he would and he did and there was nothing to show for it: father and daughter safe and sound, truck unscathed.

I rushed around the shattered glass, smacking the side of his truck as I hurried past to the bottom of the driveway. I planted my feet but he didn't slow down and I was ready for whatever came of it. I don't remember the moment of impact, only being sent to the pavement and the feeling of a shove and jerk-back all at once. There was blood on my hand, a small cut that looked worse than it really was.

And then his shadow was standing over me, a white haze of light. I took his hand and felt like a feather as he pulled me up into his arms and his face came into focus. His eyes were glassy bulbs of grey; the veins on his pink forehead rippled through the skin. It was a wrath unlike any I had ever seen. I was on his shoulder and in the same moment sitting at the kitchen counter pressing a cold towel against my hand until the bleeding slowed. He was talking but I didn't listen. I focused on the mantel clock above the fireplace and counted the seconds, simultaneously trying to listen to my heartbeat. When

he finally stopped laying into me, he moved to the sink and aggressively washed his hands. After looking out the window for what felt like an entire afternoon, he went into his pocket and drew his keys. He looked panicked, almost dangerous.

“It’s a block away,” he said. “We’ll have lunch when I’m back.”

There was a knot in my throat but I wouldn’t let myself cry; instead I threw the towel at him and he didn’t try to catch it.

“You’re unbelievable,” I said, swallowing. “I could be dead right now.”

“What the hell were you thinking?”

Trying to save you dumbass is what probably came to mind but I didn’t say it. I lay my head on the cold granite countertop, smooth against my cheek.

“That was the dumbest thing I ever seen. Throwing yourself in front of a truck.”

“*Dumb?* Says the one who gets behind the wheel shitfaced.”

“Watch your mouth,” he said.

“What if you didn’t stop? You’d never forgive yourself.”

He put the keys on the counter and drew in a deep breath. He didn’t have an answer.

“I know you’re not going anywhere,” I said, trying to project confidence. “You would’ve already left.”

With that I brushed past him and locked myself in the bathroom. A shadow of doubt settled in as I rubbed my face with water and looked into the mirror. My eyes were filmy slits, my head covered in sweat, strands of hair stuck to my cheeks. Seeing my hand in the reflection made the stinging worse. I sat on the toilet and listened: no sound of a door, no footsteps, only a fly buzzing at the window.

I picked up a magazine on top of the toilet, an issue of *Trophy Buck Nation*, his favorite. I flipped through images of archery gear, camouflage, a shot of a dead buck and two men smiling, one flashing a thumbs up, the other holding the antlers so that the animal's lifeless face was front and center. I folded the magazine and turned around to the window, waiting for the fly to stop crawling; and just when it was still long enough to strike, I saw my dad's truck speeding down the driveway and disappearing from my screened-in view.

It didn't take long to load the car and leave a note. My bags were already packed, everything I needed ready to go for a quick exit: bedding, clothes, and towels all crammed tightly in two suitcases. My car had already been stocked with granola bars and cash, CD's and maps. I had even stashed handwritten directions to Oberlin's campus in the glove compartment.

I had rehearsed this moment in my head. *It has to be now* I thought as I looked at a picture on the refrigerator. In the picture I am smiling. We are in the backyard next to the grill—I am holding Hudson the puppy and my dad is shucking corn, grinning at me from the corner of his eye.

It has to be now. I walked out the front door and didn't look back.

IT starts with an owl's stare from the mantel above the living room fireplace. The moment we walk in the door I find the bird in proper place, accompanied by a fox, an antelope, and three beavers. Maxine calls them angry beavers and laughs at herself. That she isn't put off by full-blown taxidermy is a little surprising, though of course she knew what to expect from my detailed account of the house, which not surprisingly is exactly how I remember it— barbaric décor, low ceilings, an old wooden stairwell, a long bank of windows that runs across the whitewashed walls.

Just when I think we're done for the night Booker wrestles off his boots and sets them on the mat next to Maxine's sneakers. A wedge of anxiety settles over me— *Why isn't he leaving? Enough is enough.* Nights like this don't revel in their awfulness until they are fully over.

"Who needs a drink?" he says, pulling a large bottle of tonic water from the fridge. "He's got soda and orange juice. Slim pickings." He dangles the bottle of tonic water. "Less you want some of this."

We stare at him but the silence speaks a language he doesn't understand. He tells us to help ourselves as he pours himself a glass and squeezes two limes into the fizzy tonic.

"Where is it?" I say. Booker glances up from the limes with a confused expression. "You're hiding it."

"What am I hiding?"

"Jack... Everclear... Wild Turkey."

He taps his fingers on the counter and pulls his head back, scanning us closely until something dims in his expression.

“Jerry’s been sober eight years,” he says. “I thought you knew.”

I feel my throat thicken. Suddenly I’m aware of a horrible dryness in my mouth.

“Can I get a glass of water?” He pours me one and I drink the whole thing.

“He’d never stop,” I say, out of breath.

“Believe what you want,” he says. “He ain’t what you remember. A.A. meetings twice a week for years. Might of saved his life. They saved mine.”

“You’re his sponsor,” Maxine says, and he nods.

This truth is too much, and probably too soon. Without another word I leave them in the kitchen and end up in the bathroom. If there is any hope of accepting Booker’s admission, let alone his unexpected stopover, I need space to mentally prepare— there isn’t enough energy in my brain to manage flying, a night in the ICU, on top of trying to digest a major revelation from the mouth of a guy I barely know.

On the bathroom wall is a picture of my dad and an unfamiliar woman holding a four-foot long smallmouth bass. A toothpick hangs from his mouth. He looks pleased with himself, a faint smile that curls at the corner of his lips. If not on the farm he was always in his boat, tucked away in his little corner of the earth with his closest companions: whiskey and a fishing rod. I can overhear Maxine asking for a tour of the house, Booker telling her there is a pool table in the basement and she wants to play. It throws me how friendly she can be to someone around whom I’m so clearly guarded. Let them play a round of pool, see if I care. Let them get away from the heavier things

awhile. Let them prattle on about Jerry's journey to sobriety and I know Jerry better than anyone and let's have ourselves a little fun despite the day we've been through.

Maybe it isn't fair to be irritated but schmoozing doesn't feel like the right thing to be doing. This thought lingers as I join them in the basement, where the pool table sits untouched, the balls set in a wooden rack. I hear Maxine's voice and follow it to the back wall above my dad's bench press. They are looking at a cavalcade of deer heads: bucks with massive antlers that come close to touching each other, and on the far right, a lone moose. The moose's head is bigger than the rest. The group has expanded across the length of the wall—a dozen more heads than I remember.

"Four hundred pound head you're looking at," Booker says, gazing at the moose. I can tell he likes having an audience because he lights up when he notices me.

"The prodigal collector," I say. Aware of my disgust, Maxine mouths the word *stop* before I can say anything else—to her credit, a smart move.

"A lotta these are gifts," Booker says as if I should know better. "The moose was all your dad. Was with him up in Canada I wanna say *five* years ago?" He touches his fingers to his head. "You lose track. Happens when you get old. Things get what's the word... muddled."

He shifts his eyes across the line-up, searching through his memory. "Eight-pointer third from the left? That was October. Arrowed him from the stand at sixty."

"What a shot," I say thinly, sarcasm apparent only to Maxine.

"Right in his woods," he says. "Called me that night. Hard to believe the way it went."

Recounting the story excites him. Let's hear it before I pop a xanax. I'm peeing in my pants.

"What happened?" Maxine says, on cue.

Booker rubs his moustache. "So Jerry's up in the trees with them night vision goggles and doesn't he see a pair a bucks paying him a visit. Two of 'em, side by side. He's up there like it's Christmas... these are nice size whitetails. Bigger one's a couple hundred pounds at least. He has him lined up broadside, couldn't be a better spot. But doesn't that doggone buck up and leave outta nowhere." He makes a dramatic shaking gesture with his hands. "Now the other one, the smaller of the two, he doesn't budge. Doesn't notice his buddy's gone... he's too busy with his head in the bushes like a dummy.

"Jerry's up there baffled over what he's seen, the one splitting off for no good reason, the other staying put. Lemme tell you, two bucks separating... doesn't happen. Not when you see 'em together." He downs the last of his drink and sighs. "Anywho. The lone buck's munching, the other one's who knows where. Jerry's got a clean look but guess who shows up again?"

"No..." Maxine says.

"Right hand to God," Booker says, his outstretched palm next to his head.

"Dummy number one. This point in the game Jerry's had enough a watching these two pick at the bushes. Next thing he knows the smaller one runs off, leaves the bigger one behind like they're playing tag. Long story short, this here's the bigger one."

"Aren't you a hero?" Maxine says, looking into the buck's face. "It's a good story." That she really means it feels like a betrayal.

Booker grins. “Jerry tells it better.”

To be fair her dad is a hunting fanatic— as in someone who constantly talks up his hunting trips and has a circle of hunting friends and eats the meat and donates to food banks and has his own living room collection of deer heads. She is close with him and always has been. This has to count for something— why else would she be so generous an audience? On this small conclusion it makes sense that she can relate: strong relationship with dad, consistent presence in each others’ lives, affection substantial enough to enjoy things that remind her of him.

In other words the polar opposite of: what to call it? *Rupture* is the first word that comes to mind, but somehow that doesn’t scratch the surface. What my father and I have is a broken shell of memories that have scattered over time, too much of which has passed to account for whatever is left between us.

The stars are perfect from the deck. Sitting in the backyard in a fancy reclining chair with a little cushion at the bottom for my feet, I think of my dad priding himself on being a minimalist, how he always sounded silly saying it. The man was an impulsive spender, someone who bought what he wanted without blinking an eye, like these chairs. For a month in middle school I remember he picked me up on his brand new Buell motorcycle, and that was pretty much the extent of his new toy’s mileage. The bike sat in the garage for a few years before he traded it in for my first car, a beat up three-door hatchback, two hundred thousand miles, carburetor on its last breath.

Puffing at the last of his cigar, Booker plays capricious notes on his guitar. Curlicues of smoke vanish into the cool air.

“Sundays we’ll sit out here all night,” he says. “We stuff our faces. Steak kabobs.” He tosses the butt of his cigar to the ground, crushes it with his foot. “Music helps to unwind. We’d all be depressed without it.”

“Play something for us,” Maxine says.

“I can do that. I’m gonna have a sandwich first. Either a you want one? Figure you’re probably getting hungry.”

“I’d have a sandwich,” Maxine says. He starts to get up but she beats him to it. “Let me get it.” She puts her hand on his forearm and he considers for a moment before leaning back in his chair.

“Should be ham in the fridge,” Booker says.

“That’ll do.”

“A little mustard on mine.” He points at me. “Sandwich?”

“I’m not hungry,” I lie. The truth is I don’t want him to know I’m vegetarian; he would probably have something to say about it. The easiest thing to do is tell him as little as possible. We’ve known each other for three hours and he insists on having a pow-wow on the deck when all I want is to shut off and get some sleep.

As Maxine goes into the house I try to get her attention but the screen door shuts before she hears me and her absence quickly sinks in, along with a reaffirming token of truth that I wouldn’t have made it here without her. Booker and I sit quietly. The empty chair between us justifies the silence. I start going through my phone to appear occupied, thinking of something to say, maybe how much I like the chairs, or a simple thank you for what he has done for my dad.

When I glance over he is asleep, or so it seems in the quiet of his breath, but then his lips come apart. “Jerry’ll figure it out,” he says quietly. “Always does.”

“How so?” I say.

He scratches his face, sniffs his fingers. “Couldn’t tell you. It’s just the way he is. He’ll know what he’s there for. How to get back to being himself.”

“We don’t know that.”

His brow furrows. “Doesn’t hurt to hope.”

“They’re still running tests.”

“Yeah,” he says, gazing into the woods. “Ain’t easy coming all at once. Sometimes you focus on something else so you don’t have to look at what scares you. I’m just trying to keep at it. Don’t know any different.”

He taps his thumbs together and nods as if to confirm what he has said. And I feel myself, despite the strongest doubts, relaxing for the first time all day. He cradles his guitar and starts to play an old Merle Haggard song. His husky voice is soothing, the lyrics familiar, and I can’t help but tap my foot. Country music was all I listened to growing up, mostly on account of my dad having the kitchen cassette player on every night. As the song circles into chorus I feel the walls between us dissolving. Maxine appears with two plates, her lamplit shadow completely still next to the screen door as Booker settles the dust.

DOCTOR Laurel calls on our way to the hospital and suggests we let him rest, that we wait a few hours to visit. There has been an incident, she tells us, but he's okay, not to worry. Earlier this morning she found him crawling on the floor in his room, a pool of dry blood on his face and gown. He had managed to roll over the bedrail and break his nose on the fall. Overconfidence in ability is how she explains that this isn't uncommon in stroke patients, that they've put him on Vicodin and lowered his bed to the floor since he's a fall risk.

Apart from not knowing the course of his health, the thought of having more time to kill is alarming. Booker insists we stop by the farm to see about one of the cows and a bad case of mastitis, which sounds somehow more morose than being at the hospital.

"Never seen a bag this swollen," he says. "Had us a bloodbath the last we milked her out." Maxine cringes and he notices. "Ain't pretty," he nods at me. "This one knows."

I doze off as Booker talks our ears off about fertilizer. Maxine nudges me just when sleep starts settling in. "Look," she whispers, staring out the window to the side of the road.

Here is a slender girl holding a pygmy goat. She is in a hurry no doubt to beat the weather. She wears loose overalls and an orange bandana around the neck; her hair is slicked tight to her head in a pony, the way I used to hold mine. Her eyes follow us as we pass, and I have a ridiculous but discomfoting notion that the girl is provoking me.

"Used to be you," Maxine says, dead on with my thinking.

Maxine is aware of the effect this child has on me, how seeing her alone on the side of the road is a mirror to the past. But whoever I was as a child, I don't remember what it felt like. What I wanted. Didn't want.

The truck bed rattles as gravel road crunches beneath us. From the grey horizon I can make out a towering steel silo and barns spread out in a semi-circle. There used to be three but now there are five, the largest of which has an extension that juts along the red exterior surface. The rain hisses down all at once, pounding on the windshield by the time we roll and scramble up the hill. Maxine gathers newspapers from the back seat.

"Coming?" she says, handing me one for cover.

"Straight ahead," Booker says, pointing towards an older man in a flat brimmed straw hat smoking a cigarette in front of the middle barn.

Maxine and I run for it while Booker lags behind, braving the elements, apparently unaffected by getting soaked. The man nods at us as we pass. The barn looks exactly how I remember apart from its volume— more stalls, more people, plywood stalls and metal siding, and the same timber frame construction lining the walls. Booker leads us around to the back corner and gives pause to the sight of a man holding a rifle in front of one of the stalls. The man is sitting on a pile of hay, spinning the stock in his hands.

"Gimme a minute," Booker says.

He goes ahead of us and stands over the man, extending his hand as if to seize the weapon. They exchange a few words but we're too far away to hear what they're saying.

"Is this what I think?" Maxine says and my silence is confirmation. "Where do they do it?"

“Behind the barn,” I say.

She nods. “He should’ve dropped us at the house.”

“You don’t have to stay.”

“Neither do you.”

I keep my eyes on Booker. Watching them confer is strangely thrilling— is it the feeling of my father’s absence, the thought of his crew making decisions without him?

“I’ll tell him we’re leaving,” Maxine says.

“It’s raining pretty hard,” I say.

“The house is next door.”

“I’d rather be here.”

She mops her brow and nods. Booker is laying into the man, standing over him and counting with didactic fingers as he speaks. I imagine my dad doing the same but then he isn’t here to govern. The man looks to be several years younger but still closer in age to Booker than he is to us. After a long standstill he hands over the rifle. Booker looks it over, appraising, before he clears the round from the chamber and calls us over. We follow his gaze on a feeble-looking cow with an enormous udder that nearly stretches to the ground. Most of the tissue has peeled away and now it is purple and hard, an ice-cold body of its own that reeks beyond belief, such that breathing through your mouth doesn’t help because you can taste the smell. As Maxine floats behind me covering her nose, Booker rubs the cow below the neck and along the side of her chest.

“Hang in there Doris,” he mutters.

The younger man passive aggressively sighs from the pile of hay. Booker regards him.

“Something else to say?”

“Vet’s been here three days in a row,” the man says. “She ain’t fit for the food chain.”

“His words?”

“Yessir.” The man looks at me. “Who’re these?”

“Friends.” He stands and brushes hay off his shirt as we introduce ourselves. His name is Roy. He has a deep dimply grin, several missing teeth, a sad little blonde moustache. My name doesn’t mean anything to him and the relief is immense; the last thing I need is everyone knowing I’m the boss’s long-lost daughter.

Booker taps the barrel of the rifle against the ground. “You were saying?”

“She’s outta business,” Roy says. “Doctor’s order.”

“He’s in a tizzy over them shipping regulations.”

Roy rubs his eyes. “You’re the only one suspicious. Jerry don’t mind him.”

“Tolerates him.”

“Costing us more to keep her alive than we’d get from the plant.”

“Who crunched the numbers?”

“Really?”

“I need to see it in the system.”

“You got no cause to fight it. Too much drugs in her anyway. Penicillin every day for six weeks. She’s on all the antibiotics we got. We keep her alive it’s more suffering, not to mention wasted product. It’d be a kindness.”

Putting her down is what he means, the last resort for a dairy farmer. If there is anything I remember from growing up on a farm it’s selling cows for slaughter. The *non-*

producers we had gorging on corn the last few months of their lives to put on weight before we shipped them off to the plant to become processed meat. Sometimes we inseminated them with beef breed cattle and put the offspring on wholesale. In our herd the cows shipped for slaughter accounted for ten percent of our business— this is what my dad reminded me of the first time I watched him separate one of the old mothers from her calf. Him dragging her in the truck, me and the dog running after him as he drove away.

“She’s a downer,” Roy says. “One less apple to worry about.”

“I ain’t worried.”

“She wasn’t approved Dale. You know the score.”

Booker rubs his moustache and forces a nod as the grim truth sinks in. I can see why he put his blinders on, how resisting the vet was his way of holding out on the hope my dad would see for himself. Have the final say. But we all know he wouldn’t be coming back any time soon.

At the end of the row of stalls, the little girl from the road appears and it is clear from the bounce in her step that she’s excited about something. Her hair is wet and she isn’t wearing shoes. When she sees us, she makes a beeline for Roy and wraps her arms around his waist.

“There she is,” he says with a dissembling smile.

“Me and Frank went on a walk,” she says. “He don’t like the rain. Got him home before it came.” She has a thin, rasping voice that doesn’t fit her tomboyish demeanor. She looks nothing like her father.

“Feed him?”

“Fed ‘em all.”

“Thatta girl.”

She pulls away from him and scans us. “Who’re they?”

“Dale’s friends,” he says. I smile at her, and she looks away.

Roy clears his throat, a blatant cue. “I’m Rose,” she says quickly.

“Pretty name,” Maxine says.

When she gives Rose our names, one glance tells me the girl knows who I am.

The way her lips come apart and she is still, her head tilted like a puppy hopelessly failing to comprehend. There is something refreshing in a child’s transparency.

“Go on,” Roy says, but the girl is transfixed on me like no one else is there. “Quit staring.”

“I’ve heard a you,” she says. “Jerry says you gone away for good.”

Roy tries out a laugh but it falls flat. When he looks into my face, he knows.

“It’s true,” Booker says. “You knew he had a daughter.”

Roy touches his head and shifts his gaze onto Maxine. His eyes are steady. “So that makes you...” He nods. “Got it.”

“My partner,” I say.

He clears his throat and looks away. “Ain’t that perfect.”

Maxine narrows her eyes. “Excuse me?”

“I knowed you was queer when I first saw you.”

“Takes one to know one,” she says.

“Forget it,” I say. “He isn’t worth it.” He smiles in the corners of his mouth.

“How come you’re here?” the child says.

“Rose,” he snaps. “Leave us.”

She shakes her head. Roy grabs her hand but she pulls away. Booker taps the rifle against his boot.

“Girl asked a question,” he says. “She deserves an answer.”

“She don’t need to know,” Roy says.

“Can’t hide the truth. Less you wanna pretend things are different than they are.”

Booker glances at the cow and looks back at Roy, the question hanging thick in the air. With a sobering nod an agreement is set. Roy lets go of the girl and it is sealed: Doris the cow isn’t long for this world. One concession for another. A truth for a truth.

“Jerry’s in the hospital,” I tell her. “He might be awhile.”

“Why?”

“His brain got sick. He forgot how to talk. He’s weaker than usual... sometimes happens when you get older. But he’s resting now. It’ll help him get back to normal.”

“How’d it get sick? His brain.”

“I don’t know. The doctor’s trying to figure it out.”

The girl glances at Roy. “Jerry promised he’d take me on a hay ride tomorrow.”

“Maybe when he’s back,” he says. “Why don’t you show these folks where Frank lives.”

Her lip quivers. “They don’t want to see a stupid goat.”

“Sure we do,” Maxine says, glancing at me.

I offer my hand and the child takes it.

“You could’ve told her,” Booker says. “She can take it.”

“She don’t understand,” Roy says.

I look Roy in the face and say, “Do what you came here to do.”

Rose leads us to the goat pen and fills up a large bucket of water, which she tries to carry by herself before Maxine assumes the bucket from the child’s struggling arms. We surround the pen and watch the goats. Some of them stop to drink; others walk past the bucket, briefly appraising it before they move along.

As one of the kids paces in circles, pausing to look at us from his periphery, Rose starts to make beckoning clicks but the goat ignores her; each time he stops, she makes the noises and he stares for a time before returning to his step. And all at once, the crack of a gunshot echoes into the air like a stick being split in two. And the goats lift their heads for a moment before they return to the comfort of their ignorance.

TELLING him about my period was a conversation I thought we would never have. But despite all the muck of my childhood there was always light to be found in the truth, the most private of which would likely never have surfaced if not for the river.

It was the beginning of June around dawn when we filled the tackle box with ice and packed his canoe in the Chevy. Not a word was spoken until we pulled out of the driveway and he said, “Perfect,” glancing happily at his watch. “How many alarms you got?”

“Two,” I said, watching his face for a reaction. “You didn’t think I’d make it.”

“What makes you say that?” he said, looking out the window, his fishing tags pinned to the back of his hat.

“It’s earlier than normal.”

“You’re right. But that ain’t the reason.”

“You sure?” I said.

“I think you know.”

“If I knew I’d say.”

“*I quit*,” he said. “Ring any bells?”

I ran my fingers through my hair. “That was a month ago. At least.”

“Seemed like you meant it.”

It wasn’t the first time I had called it quits. He was used to me complaining about the cold or coming home empty-handed; he was used to my defeatist attitude after letting a fish get away. I treated it like a contest in which the only way I could save face was

catching something. A couple months had gone by since we last fished. I'd lost to a plus-size trout, which would have been easier to swallow had my line not snapped. Dad was adamant I didn't have enough drag.

"I didn't mean it," I said.

"I know." He glanced at me. "Remember, it ain't all about how many fish you get."

"Haven't heard that before."

He shook his head. "Glad you changed your mind."

There hadn't been a plan, only him telling me the night before that he was leaving at five thirty if I wanted to come. I was used to spending summers on the boat, two or three mornings a week—a ritual that mattered to me more than he ever knew.

We started from our favorite spot at the south bank, close to a small waterfall. The sun hung low in the sky such that the morning looked warmer than it felt. The regulars were already out when we got there, mostly in canoes, a few kayaks. It was the familiar season of herons hovering above the carry-in, a murmur of wind against the water, a distant hum of cars on 33. Baraboo was best known among Wisconsinites as the place to go trout fishing. The river ran parallel to the highway and under a rail bridge that went from Chicago to Minneapolis. She flowed southeast through three counties and into the Wisconsin from the west, not far from Reedsburg. Here was endless woodland and bike trails, a vast wall of sandstone rock bluffs, birds resting on boughs that slant to the water.

As I helped him unload the boat, he drank from his flask and whistled a Dwight Yoakam song. He had been at it all morning, tone-deaf as ever.

“That’s not it,” I told him. “It’s like this...”

I couldn’t quite whistle so I hummed the tune as we walked the boat to the carry-in and he eyed me carefully. Before we pushed off he touched the outside of his pocket to confirm the flask was still there.

“Zip up,” he said.

I did as he said, squeezing into my blue polka dotted pea coat. The coat was a thrift-store jewel; it might have been my favorite childhood possession.

“Perfect day for fishing,” he said as we paddled through backwater. This was his go-to platitude, even on mornings it rained. He was usually the paddler but today it was both of us; I had gone out of my way to bring two, which meant of course that he had to work a little harder to stabilize the boat. He went at it slow and deliberate, working intuitively to calibrate my erratic rows with a quality of rhythm. He wasn’t a good teacher and I wasn’t the best listener either; especially when he said I liked making things hard on myself, that I was all brute force, not enough body rotation. He was right but I didn’t care enough to understand.

We passed a man leaning over his boat, a cigar hanging from his mouth. The man glanced at me and chuckled.

“I’ll take it from here,” Dad said. “Bring it in kiddo.”

“I hate when you call me that,” I said.

“Since when?” I put down my paddle and looked back at him, glaring. “I don’t care for that look.”

“You don’t care for a lot of things.”

“Grab the worms. Make yourself useful.”

As he paced us further out I closed my eyes and felt the breeze rush against my skin, considering for a moment to jump in the water and swim to shore, but the thought passed as soon as it came. We settled in to a spot far enough from the other boats, and within a short few minutes, he caught his biggest fish of the day. I covered my face as he unhooked it, watching from between my fingers as he slapped it stone dead against the tackle box, the fish stiff and glassy against his hand. He tossed the fish in a cooler and padded it with a bag of ice, which in some way felt assuring since I had prepared the ice before we left.

“This one’s a male,” he said, wiping his hands on his vest, plasma and slime soiling the fabric. “They’re not as big. That’s how you can tell.”

“I didn’t know,” I said.

“Now you know.” He glanced into the cooler. “Landed me a fat little dauber.”

“Smallmouth, right?” He nodded. “I still don’t get why they’re called that.”

“Which part?”

“There’s nothing small about him.”

“Except his mouth. Name’s got nothing to do with the body. Where you been?”

He pulled a metal case from his pocket and took a wad of tobacco into his mouth. He stuck another worm to his hook and re-cast. He was happy.

“When we’re done,” he said, “maybe you’ll clean a few.”

I stayed quiet. I had always been a little nauseous watching him slice them open.

“You gotta try sooner or later. It’s quick. You take him belly up, cut to his mouth between the fins.” He made an upward incision with his fingers and I couldn’t handle it anymore.

“Stop,” I said, reeling in my line. “I don’t want to.”

He gave me a quizzical glance. “Some other time.”

“I’m gonna be sick.”

“Try not to think about it.” He spat into the water.

“It’s not that,” I said. “You’re just making it harder.”

He looked at me sidelong. I wanted to tell him but I didn’t know how, or maybe it wasn’t the right moment.

“My stomach’s been funny.”

“Something you ate?” he said.

“No.”

“You shouldn’t fish on an empty stomach.”

My face was getting warm. “It’s not what you think. I didn’t wanna tell Mrs. G. She barely knows me.” He took a water bottle from the tackle box and passed it to me. I drank half the bottle, stopping briefly for air before I took another sip. The lump in the pouch of his cheek was still. He had stopped chewing.

“What’s this about?” he said.

“I’m trying to tell you.”

“Best if you just say it. However it comes.” He gazed at me blankly, exactly how I expected, and the thought of confessing panicked me.

“It happened,” I said quickly. “The thing that happens.” I waited but all he did was shake his head, not comprehending. “Forget it.”

“No,” he said. “Come out with it. I promise not to be mad.”

“This would be so much easier if I had a mom.” He narrowed his eyes, considering, and all at once he understood. With a nod he turned back to the water and I was grateful.

“Drug store’s down the road if you need to make a pit stop,” he said. “Gimme the word.”

I told him I would. And for the first time that morning, sitting in silence was okay.

ON the morning he says his name, I'm thinking maybe things are okay. Doctor Laurel says his brain is still rebuilding connections, that he hasn't accepted his deficits in speech or movement. Hardwiring is the term she used to explain the process— like a broken computer fixing itself, trying to remember its database.

A cloud of doubt settles over us as she asks him to say his name. It is anyone's guess if he knows what she is saying, if he is hearing more than his vacant gaze lets on, whether repeating the question makes any difference. A hopeless diversion, watching her fish for a response, trying to prompt a person who stares back without the slightest hint of meaning. So when he wraps his fingers around the bedpost and says his name I think my mind is playing tricks; then he says it again, his lips opening slightly, a small penetrating voice, and it dawns on me that the others are mesmerized too. Maxine cups a hand at my side. Booker's mouth is open, front teeth flashing happily, his breath held in mid-beat. "I'll be damned," he says.

The storm isn't slowing down. The trees sway gently, their branches overhanging part of the window, sneaking closer before they draw back and repeat their wind-blown shuffle. I feel like I'm in a movie sitting at his bedside, feeding him applesauce and pureed strawberries, trying to connect apropos the nurse's suggestion. A *helpful* way to communicate, she said, putting a plate on the over-bed table before she disappeared. Isn't that breaking precedent? Leaving before I have the chance to object?

If she had any sense of our history, she might have known better to do the spoon-feeding herself, that I'm not that kind of family. I might have said as much, but how can you tell someone that you've come to visit solely out of obligation? Maybe it's better to

let people fill in the dots. To see for themselves what's on the table apart from what has been shared or concealed; that way they are more inclined to tread lightly, reserve the impulse to give you a push on the back, to propose something that wouldn't happen on its own.

Only the right side of his mouth moves when he eats. As I bring a spoonful of applesauce to his lips I try to place my thought, but there isn't a thought to begin with and silence feels more suitable anyway. A drop of applesauce lingers on his lip and rolls down to his chin, settling here without him knowing it. He moves his lower lip over the other and makes a small puckering sound. He flinches when I wipe his chin with a tissue.

On the way to the house Maxine has the wipers on full blast and threatens to pull over. When I offer to drive, I hear her answer before it comes.

"We're almost there," she says, tightening her jaw.

Driving in storms puts her on edge but not as much as my driving. She thinks I don't keep up with traffic but really, I don't keep up with people going twenty over the limit, so the mutual preference is having her do the driving— it keeps her happy and avoids the endless nagging she projects from the passenger's seat on those rare occasions I'm behind the wheel.

The relief of being away from the hospital is clear the minute we leave. Booker had insisted on staying behind, that we take his truck back to the house and get some rest. A thoughtful move, offering us his truck, but if he wanted to get rid of us he didn't have to be so oblique about it. Maxine rolls her eyes when I raise the issue; of course there is no contending with her on the subject of Booker.

“Not his style,” she says as if they are old friends, as if explaining the intentions of this friend to someone who doesn’t get it. “The guy’s an open book. If he wanted space he’d say.”

When I know she is right I try to pull away from my paranoia, approach things from her perspective. This is the closest it gets to sanity, which more often than not feels impossible. Here I am jumping to conclusions, thinking just be grateful; the guy let us borrow his truck to go have a nap, and yet I’m still picking a bone.

We use the rest of the newspapers to cover our heads as we rush into the house. I leave the damp paper on the kitchen table, glancing at an image of a short bald man under the headline DEAL IN CONCESSION SUIT IS NCAA VICTORY. It is nine months old. The lights are on. An empty can of jam and a spoiled-looking bag of bread sit on the counter. The patter of rain against the deck sounds like the pellet gun my dad liked using to scare animals away from the backyard; one of his favorite early-morning hobbies was sidling up at his bedroom window, unleashing on rabbits, squirrels, opossum.

“I won’t have my yard torn apart,” he would say when I pleaded with him to stop.

Maxine drags her hand across the counter and looks into her palm. She holds it up for me to see, a dark shade of dust.

“Not now,” I say.

“Place needs a spit shine.”

She opens the cabinet above the sink. Here are dust-line shelves, two unopened bags of tortilla chips, a sack of potatoes, maple syrup, a plastic bag with stale-looking nuts.

“It isn’t our place to clean.”

She itches her eyes and blows a trail of dust off of the bottom shelf. “It is if we’re staying here,” she says. “They’re acting up.”

The allergies she means. I sit on the counter and let my feet hang against a cabinet. It occurs to me that two days have gone by and I haven’t so much as moved—or used—a thing in this house, apart from the bathroom.

“I had a feeling,” I say, but she can tell I’m distracted.

“We don’t have to do it this second.”

“No,” I say over a yawn. “We should. I’m just out of it.”

“You didn’t get any sleep.”

“Not since we’ve been here.”

“I’m all for getting a hotel,” she says.

“We shouldn’t have to. I shouldn’t be this rattled.”

“It’s okay to be.”

Her point is reassuring. That she knows all that there is to know makes me feel a little better, even if I can’t get my mind off of the past. She knows about the weekends my dad left me alone in this house, the women he brought back in the middle of the night; the way they tiptoed up the stairs and I would lie still, feigning sleep, as he closed my door and their whispers turned to moans.

She knows about Eve, his secret lover who I saw for the first time from behind the living room couch. I was ten. I had fallen asleep watching tv, a late night in the summer, when a sudden pounding woke me. At first I thought I was dreaming, that I had startled myself awake, until it hit me that I wasn’t alone; that the slapping sound in my sleep was

coming from the kitchen and it wasn't a dream. He still has the same black leather couch and I can't stop seeing myself on it, hidden underneath a blanket, a pillow against my face. I can't get past the image of a tiny blonde pinned to the kitchen table, my dad covering her mouth and thrusting against her as she pushed against his chest.

They never knew I was there.

I was alone when I met Eve for the first time, not long after I saw them together. My dad and I were on the deck, him blacked out in his chair, me watching the sun go down, waiting for him to wake up. There was a loud knocking at the door but he didn't budge so I went to answer; and somehow, I already knew it was her.

"Surprise!" she said in a tight sundress that barely covered her breasts. Her long blonde hair, sitting neatly over her shoulder, leapt back like a cat as she crossed her arms over her chest and I abruptly cracked the door, waiting for an explanation that didn't come. I felt sorry for her as she figured out who I was, her face deflating, an intense glaze in her eyes.

"He didn't say," she murmured. She had a leathery smoker's voice.

Daddy's little secret out of the bag. I remember at that moment feeling a strange connection to this woman— in her sadness, I saw my own. Maybe it was the feeling that we both deserved better. I almost invited her in, or took her around the back to let her have it out with him, but that didn't feel right. He was too vulnerable.

"Is he awake?" she said.

I looked down at her blue heels and shook my head.

"Look at me." In the light it was clear how much younger she was than my dad.

"You let him know," she said, swallowing, "tell him I was here."

And that was it. She shuffled down the stairs and got in her car across the street, glancing up at me through the window before she drove away. I promised myself to never tell. A couple weeks later he took me to a diner across the street from a strip club in Sauk City. We sat at the front next to the window and his eyes kept drifting over my shoulder. I didn't bother asking.

This memory haunts me still: my run-in with Eve, the subsequent trip to the diner. This is what I'm thinking about as I watch Maxine wipe down the counter.

"Can't hurt to look," she says, but I don't know what that means until it occurs to me that she's talking about the assisted living sign we passed on the way here.

"Yeah," I say. "Crossed my mind."

She looks into my face and seems to read in its shade an expression of falseness. She shakes her head and continues wiping the counter, her hair falling into her face as she applies pressure to the rag.

"What?"

"I didn't say anything."

"God forbid you're the only one who thought it."

She stops scrubbing and draws a long jagged breath. She looks at me squarely, the look that tells me I'm out of line.

"You're so defensive is what gets me," she says.

"And what are you?" I say.

"I'm trying to get you through it. You're making it hard." I look at the birdfeeder out the window. It dangles violently in the wind.

“What if we’re here for a reason?” she says. “Not just because it’s the right thing to do. I know how you feel about him. But I also know you care. Think how much better you’d feel if you tried hating him a little less.”

I meet her at the counter and take the rag from her hand. She smiles.

“It’ll be okay,” I say, believing it too.

With a straight on view of the living room, I wipe down the rest of the counter.

Maxine is fast asleep, drained no doubt from trying to keep my spirits up: a talent she has refined since we met. Here we are in June, plenty of sunshine to be had, and I still wonder about my hormone levels, whether my neurotransmitters are up to speed. Seasonal affective disorder is the easiest name for people who ask. I’m used to it kicking in before the winter— this is how it goes in Ohio, where the seasons turn ahead of schedule. Maybe Wisconsin is messing with my chemistry, rejecting the natural energy sources that keep me leveled out in the summer.

Sometimes I wonder where I would be without her, at least in the sense of self-worth. Until I met Maxine, I didn’t think I was good enough. Until I met Maxine, I lived inside my head, and though I’m still a little nuts, I know how much happier I am. Sometimes I lie awake at night wondering if I make her happy, asking myself what I bring out in her. I try not to dwell on it but when the thought lingers, so do other questions: What if she deserves more? Someone stronger, more secure. She once told me love is a sort of balancing act and I liked the way it sounded until playing it back in my mind started to hurt and all I could see was an immovable sea-saw, me in the air on one end, her stuck to the ground on the other.

My dad's old room is empty. A bitter smell breathes from the brown walls. The carpeting is darkly glazed, hardened by neglected coffee stains and a quality of never being vacuumed. Where there used to be his bed are boxes and scattered books: Bradbury, O'Brien, Stevenson, Tolstoy, Swift. They used to be in the den on his wooden bookshelf, which for aesthetic alone he made a point to fill. He used to say books are a waste of time, not as practical as reading the paper, though I always had a sneaking suspicion he put them there for someone to read, just not us.

As I look through boxes of his junk I feel my eyes getting heavy, but I'm too restless to nap. The boxes aren't sealed, that's what gets me. All of this stuff packed together but still out in the open. One of the boxes, the biggest, is covered with barcode stickers and the letters E.L. In the box, there are old records, a cracked picture frame, two broken watches, a bowling trophy, mounds of old receipts held together in rubber bands, moldy tupperware, a stack of wooden bowls, an unopened box of condoms, pencils, a container of old spoiled licorice.

At the very bottom is a hardback book with a navy blue dust jacket that reads ELMORE HILL ELEMENTARY, 1987-1988. My first grade yearbook: a relic at the bottom of a cardboard box. I pick it up and out falls a crooked stack of photographs paper-clipped together at both corners. I flip through pictures from Disney World, a trip we went on when I was still a baby; of course he took me when I was far too young to remember any of it. Years later he showed me the pictures. How strange it was looking through his album— my entire childhood wanting to go to Disney World and finding out I'd already been.

In one of the pictures I am crying. He's holding me, pointing at something out of the shot, but I'm looking straight ahead, reaching for something. It makes perfect sense that he keeps these pictures tucked in an old book at the bottom of a box. He can't bear to face the truth, the reminder that cuts into his deepest of instincts— he was never cut out to be a father.