

## ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: JUMPING SEASON

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*Jumping Season* is a novel set in Devon Lake Village, a fictional Adirondack vacation town where the rural town folk must serve the wealthy vacationers who provide their local economy. The protagonist is Louie King, a quiet but violent teenager who works full-time as a dishwasher in an expensive restaurant. Louie is stuck in his dead-end life, and everyone in his life is unhappy. Louie longs for his boyhood when he did not have to work, when those around him seemed happy in their world. In this portion of the novel, Louie struggles with his reluctance to drop out of school to move away with his best friend Rusty, his lack of family, his resentment of the wealthy vacationers, and his ambivalence in developing a friendship with Frankie, the new kid in town and perhaps the only person who can find happiness in Devon Lake Village.

JUMPING SEASON

by

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## PROLOGUE

Nine- and ten- and eleven-years old, we sat one behind the other, three boys in line, Rusty and me and Donnie, buckled in orange life vests, gripping wooden oars, our bare feet in shallow puddles of stagnant brown rainwater at the bottom of the boat. Our mothers were barefoot with their jeans rolled at the ankles. They dug their heels into the sand and pushed the boat to the water. A million grains of sand scraped the steel bottom.

*Careful with Donnie*, my mother said. It was our first rowboat trip alone. We were almost brothers – I was almost their brother.

We dipped the wooden oars into the cold lake of early summer. Tiny black whirlpools swirled in their wake. I leaned over and stuck my finger into them until they filled and vanished. We twisted our necks to look back. My mother was still there, one hand shading her eyes, the other hand on her hip. She waved, only Donnie waved back. We unbuckled the life vests as soon as we rounded a bend of trees, out of her sight. Nineteen miles of lake perimeter, our plan was to circle it all the way around. Did we even go a mile? I don't remember. We were about to turn around when we heard voices, laughter, from a crevice in the shore we'd never seen. We rowed faster, glided into the outlet of the lake.

Summer vacationers – we knew by the boat – a group of boys and girls, older than us, assembled on a cliff ledge, ten feet up. Boys cannoning off into the water, the ten-foot drop, girls spectating and giggling, their legs dangling over edge. The boys saw us, three skinny kids in shorts rowing madly towards them. Our boat thunked against the cliffs edging the shore, and we tethered it to a stump. Uninvited, unwelcome. They thought we were there to gape at the girls' bikinis and bare tummies, but girls were nonsense to us then, Trish the only one we talked to, and only to tease and trigger tears. It was the boys we were eyeing. They watched as we climbed the simple, uncomplicated footholds to their ledge. We did what would bother them the most – ignored them completely, and instead kept right on upward, past the ten-foot ledge, up more precarious footing to a height double theirs, and then without hesitation or panic, we leapt from the rock, one right after another, Rusty then me then Donnie, our hierarchy, oldest to youngest, leader to follower to tag-along, all three of us in the air at once, dropped like a handful of jacks. Eyes shut, breath stopped, the thrill of wind and flight, bird-boy, molecule, element of sky.

The cold shock of early-season water caught my fall. I opened my eyes beneath the surface. A tangle of skinny white legs in the filter of murky lake water. I brought my arms and legs into my body, rocketed to the

surface through a wake of bubbles from my mouth. Donnie and Rusty had already bobbed up, hollering their pride, fountaining streams of water from their mouths.

*Townies*, they older boys yelled from their inferior ledge, *monkeys*. But we had won, claimed the hole as ours, claimed everything as ours, the lake and the land and adventure of it all. We *were* the townies, and we reminded them that this was ours for the keeping, theirs only to sample and borrow.

The boys swam to their boat, helped the girls aboard. We climbed again to the lowest ledge, took their places, marked our triumph, watched as they motored away. Surely they had left simply to find a more secluded cove, free of pesty little boys, where they could smoke what they want and try to get the girls to take off their swimsuits, but what we saw was a defeated army surrendering land now ours to inhabit.

We marveled at our luck of happening upon the hole, our courage in seizing it for ourselves. We surveyed our territory, a rounded cove, a lakeside cliff reaching fifty feet high, its crest curving over like an open cave, crowned by soggy, rotted trees tapering down to bare rock walls.

We eyed the summit from below, an uneven peak, barely visible from the water, shrouded in the sagging branches of peripheral trees. A boy's

fondness for height – we set immediately to conquer it. This was no simple feat. Tree limbs not sturdy enough to climb, concave walls impossible to ascend. Several paths failed us. We slipped from the cracking branches and rocky underhang, unsuccessful, clumsy Donnie nearly splashing down one time. The only promising path was through the thicket of the surrounding woods. We survived its steep incline by holding tight to the healthy trees and shrubs rooted deep in earth. Rock shards cut my feet, Rusty and Donnie’s palms. We finally emerged from the underbrush, wounded and fatigued, our little boy chests heaving.

Kings! The peak was a bald plane of rock, barely broad enough for all of us to fit. The ascent had taken us higher than we’d expected, and the view offered more than we’d imagined. Adirondack expanse at our feet, miles of glittering lake, hundreds of thousands of trees, people simple specks in their canoes and motor boats and lakeside docks, only the rare bird at our level, and we as rulers of it all, kings at the throne, proud of the blood of our boyish injuries. We were dizzy with capability, ownership.

Silent wind survived there above the treeline, and it shook our sense of grounding. We could not even stand, had to crouch to palm the earth, to still the vertigo. *Look down* – the bravest jump was before us, too high, too dangerous, impossible. Jagged rocks and spiny branches blocked the drop.

The takeoff would need a swift running start, but the peak offered no runway. We did not jump.

Back down the way we came, back to the twenty-foot ledge of the first jump. We formed a triangle, slung our arms around each other, shivered despite the warmth of the huddle. We spit on the rock beneath us, promised in low voices to never tell anyone what we'd found. *You promise?*  
*Yes, I promise.*

Second jump, *one, two, three*, like a round of choruses. But I followed too closely behind, my foot grazing Rusty's shoulder all the way down the vertical, all the way to the submerge. My foot pressed hard upon something solid, the roundness of a little boy's head. Contact like a hammer to nail, heel square on skull with a power that translated from air to water without deceleration or softening. I broke to the surface and drew in breath. Rusty was not above water. I was certain I had staved in his head, flooded his lungs, pooled blood in his brain, snapped his spine.

But he surfaced, coughing and spitting, the boy who called me his best friend. He found my eyes, looked fiercely into me with surprise and hate and love, like seeing me for the first time, like being born. He wiped back the dark hair matting his forehead, lipped a mouthful of water, swallowed, tranced in my eyes until Donnie called for us to hurry up.

We joined him wordlessly, scaled the cuts and angles of the face, found more ledges and footings on the semi-circle of rock. We each claimed our own take-off for the third jump, waited for Rusty to trigger the sequence, one, two, three – what had changed? I saw it in Rusty’s stance, I felt it in my gut. Distrust of the hole had infected us. The miracle of flight replaced by the trap of fear. I looked below. Black curtains of rolling lake cloaked the unknown beneath, a shallow bed, spiking rocks, tangles of nets or chains, heaps of dead fish, the tender skull of a small boy. On the count of three, all together, *one, two, three, jump.*

A miniscule slip of bare soles on algaed rock, mistrust in the legs’ ability to muscle the slimed jump-off, threat of urination, taste of copper pennies in my mouth – *it would happen every time* – the fear of death. I landed in the give of the lake. Only water broke my fall.

I lingered, doggy-paddling, plunging beneath the opaque shell of the water, hands and legs groping like a blind man, determined to know the hole was endlessly deep, free of protruding rocks, a bottomless Wonderland hole, empty, hollow, infinite. I braved jump after jump, trying to regain the pleasure of the first, but it was irreversibly gone, the way innocence goes.

Rusty and Donnie tired in the way boys do, a sudden spell of exhaustion, passing as abruptly as it takes hold. They stretched on their

backs, brothers side by side, hands behind their heads like men after a day's work, shivering on a flat plane of hot rock, warming in the windless air, a glorious afternoon spent exploring our new, private world. Me, I stayed in the hole, incapable of rest, bobbing underwater, treading the cold until Rusty announced his hunger. We rowed home.

We learned, that summer, that the hole was no secret, that it was hardly ours at all, that vacation folk, rich townies, and poor townies all flocked there in the peak of lake temperature, that our own fathers – our own fathers! – had jumped there, that guidebooks listed it, that it had a place on the maps, that it had a name. Bad Allie's Cliff Falls. No one seemed to know who Allie was, but we resented him, imagined him to be a red-headed bully with pimples on his neck and foul breath and uncut fingernails. We hated that this was his, that he'd named it for himself, that we were forced to share.

So we pretended it was ours, ignored the other people there. We rowed out nearly every day, even when it rained, for diving contests, and sharks and minnows, and daredevil games, and for a thousand climbs to the summit, as there are a thousand days in a boy's summer.

By August our path to the throne was worn and bare. We returned in June, a few inches taller, a few shades paler, to find the path overgrown by

spring's foliage. Barefoot, shirtless, we snapped through the bright new green. Grasses and weeds swayed tall and lush as though three little boys had never been there at all.

## PART I

### Chapter 1

The black night lake is a shattered mirror, a thousand ripples reflecting the orange bonfire on the sand. I sit on the fat trunk of a fallen tree. Billie sits beside me, legs straddling the log, fingers twirling curls in my hair. Tingles at the back of my neck, between my legs. We pass a flask back and forth between us, Billie only touching it to her lips, never swallowing. We're too close to the fire. My shins burn from the heat, they feel hairless and shiny. Billie gazes at me, waits for me to gaze back. But this is her punishment. I won't look back.

People are still coming. Engines key off, car doors slam, footsteps whisper through the tall grass then mute when they reach the sand. There is no music – only the sounds of lakeside night, lapping lake, snapping fire, hum of crickets. Warm, windless night. Mosquitoes not yet hatched.

Today was our last day of school. This used to be the start of freedom, but now that I'm sixteen, ever since I turned fourteen, it means the start of summer jobs. Working age came before we knew to dread it, the New York State laws of employment deeming us eligible for work at fourteen. One by one, Rusty then me then Donnie, we traded our school-free summer days for laborer's shifts. Once-a-week tasks of mowing lawns

or wiping down boats had offered us smugness, a duty to complain about solemnly, dollar bills to count and fold, but this was all replaced by the servitude and weariness of the full-time, over-time jobs we would endure, townies in a vacation town, earning our buck from families with boys our own ages who would not work for years, who'd never work their backs and hands.

Tomorrow the vacation boys come, tall, healthy boys with clean hands and straight teeth and bright white shirts, boys who golf with their fathers and sail with their mothers. These are the boys Billie and the other girls dream about all year. These are the boys they believe will save them, and tomorrow they will wait to be saved. Tonight is the last night Billie will bother with me. She puts her hands under my shirt, presses her fingers into my muscles. I could have her one last time, take her to the gazebo or the back of Rusty's truck.

"Louie." Rusty walks over, a crushed can between his palms. "You wanna go for a beer run?" I stand up, too fast, the rush of liquor unsettling my balance. I leave Billie alone on the log. I feel her watching me go. I follow Rusty to the Chevy, the only vehicle among us all. The Chevy is laced with rust. This is funny to Donnie. *Rusty's rusty rust*, he says. Rusty says he'll fix it soon.

The engine turns easily, and the truck jogs over the rocky dirt road path. It's about a mile to the main road, then another mile to the town. Devon Lake is shaped like a U, and Devon Lake Village sits inside the hollow. Levels of wealth circle rings around the Village. Lakeside property is almost all owned by city folk, big wooden houses, cold and vacant except for summertime. Owners of the hotels and the restaurants and the golf courses live right in town, some right on the lake. Further out are the police officers and the teachers and the bartenders. Most of us, families of woodcutters and housecleaners and painters, we live back in the woods on the west side of the lake. During the off-season it's all baseball diamonds and one-room libraries and local fish fries, but as soon as the school year ends, the summer folk come and triple the daily population. New York City businessmen, Long Island doctors, Albany politicians. The wealthy Canadians, Europeans. Tomorrow the streets will swell with crowds, kids in swimsuits, mothers in sunglasses, fathers in golf hats.

Rusty parks outside the gas station, leaves the engine running.

“Casey working?” I ask.

“I think so. If not we'll go take my dad's booze,” he says. “Gimme some money.” I take a ten from my wallet.

Tonight is the last night we will buy cases with ten dollar bills. *Beer is so damn cheap here*, the vacationers tell us. *In the city we pay three, four times this*, they say. *Don't even tell us what your rent is*, they say, *we don't want to know*. What we don't tell them is that there is no renting, only owning what was passed down. What we don't say is that our beer is even cheaper when you're not here, dollar bottles in the winter, two bucks-and-two quarters in the summer, that lunch meat and milk and boat fuel and even lemonade stands are jacked up, that sales change from half-off to ten-percent-discount, that free parking signs are replaced by parking attendants with orange traffic jackets and wads of change for twenties. Every expense leveled between what they can waste and what we can afford.

We don't want them to know this. We complain about the prices, of course, but it's all for show. We know damn well that having people to raise the prices for is the only reason our homes will be heated this winter. That's how it is - almost everyone who lives here works in a hotel, restaurant, marina, or souvenir shop. Provide our jobs. Buy our necessities. *Stay, eat, spend*. Our livelihood from your luxury.

Rusty comes out with a case on each shoulder. He sets them in the bed of the truck, two metallic slams, rips one box open, takes two cans out.

“Asshole made me give him fifteen bucks extra.”

“Asshole.” We pop our cans open for the ride. On the way back we pass a van tugging a speedboat, two beams of light on the night road, driving slowly, breaking at each signpost, searching for some turn.

Rusty finishes his beer. “Reach back and grab another?” he asks. Rusty moves too fast – drives too fast, drinks too fast. I slide the window open, shoulder my way out. A shock of wind rips into my hair, knocks a cigarette from behind my ear. I take another can. “You been thinking about what I said?” Rusty asks.

“Yeah.”

“And what’d you come up with?” Rusty slams on the breaks, waits for a blindstruck deer to recover itself and dash away.

“I guess I’m done with school.” This is what Rusty wants to hear, what I am considering but can’t quite fit my head around. I hate school, I hate working. I can’t choose which one to give myself over to, which one eats away at me less. I want another choice.

“Atta boy, Louie! This’ll be good, Louie. You figure every day we’re in school for eight hours, it’s eight hours we could be getting paid.”

“Yeah, it’ll be good,” I say. “I’ll sure miss playing ball, though.”  
Sixteen-year-old dropout, sixteen-year-old working man.

“Fuck baseball,” he says.

“What about Donnie?” I ask.

“What about him?” he returns. “He’ll come. I wouldn’t leave him here alone.”

“Rita won’t let him go.”

“You think Donnie’ll listen to her over me?” Rusty’s right, he would win out over their mother. Rita and Trish baby him. Only Rusty lets him have any fun, lets him think he’s like the rest of us. I try to picture the Davies house without them, just Terry and Rita and Trish. Trish will beg to come, will hide a packed suitcase in her room in case Rusty changes his mind. He never will.

“So you’re in? Right?”

“I just said I was.”

“Don’t get cocky, asshole. I have a plan but I’m not gonna tell you unless you’re really in.” He waits for me to answer, but he’s too impatient.

“Come September the pool and the club and all have almost no business.

They cut three-quarters of the staff. We’ll get laid off and collect unemployment, then do some undertable work. Two paychecks. Till the unemployment runs out.”

“That’ll work?”

“Yeah,” he says. “Alls you have to do is just sign some paperwork saying you officially drop out. Then you’re entitled to whatever any regular adult would get.” Rusty reaches over, gently slaps my cheeks. “Couple months of that then we’ll have enough saved up to get the hell out of here.”

Cape Cod. This is the next part of Rusty’s plan – take our savings to move to the coast, never look back. He thinks we’ll make it. He thinks it will be different for us than it is here, that we’ll make enough money to stop serving the people who give it to us. But we were born townies and that will never change. Townies make their money off *vacation*. Lake or ocean, New Yorkers or Boston folk, it’s the same dead-end. The only difference is that in Cape Cod we will be townies without history, without family, nothing to earn us the land as *our town*. We were set to become men in this world, our world, Devon Lake, to work and build houses and hunt deer, to become permanent to the Adirondacks, like its pine trees with hundred-ringed trunks. But I’m going to let Rusty take me away, anchor me to nothing but service.

Fire from the beach comes into sight. More cars have lined up since we left. Rusty parks far away, turns the Chevy off, engine ticking. We heave the cases out of the bed.

“Is that Billie?” I ask. Two black silhouettes before the fire. Yes, one is Billie, her curves, her long hair. The other figure is new, unrecognizable.

It moves closer to her, puts an arm around her, fuses their shadowy shapes into one. A summer boy, already here, come too early. Everyone else would know better.

Every year when autumn breaks, the early winter comes like a forgotten acquaintance – *of course I remember you, I just forgot how cold you really are*. The resentment of summer, it is the same as the cold of winter. This boy with Billie summons that familiar, unwelcome feeling, that thick cloud of jealousy that will hover over me and stifle me for months. It taps open the belligerence that hides in my gut, releases it to my bones and muscles, and propels me forward into their shadow. I tackle the stranger at his waist, knock him violently to the ground, too close to the firepit.

Yellow light reveals my mistake – this is not Billie and a summer boy. This is Trish, and a boy like one of us, a kid in a black t-shirt and jean shorts, high tops, baseball hat, cigarettes in his pocket.

The stranger staggers back up, recovers his balance, looks at me with boyishly hurt feelings. But his face unclenches when our eyes align - *we look like each other*. Long-limbed posture, clean unspotted skin, skin that will tan, and small, bright eyes like the iridescent scales of fish. I try to recognize my face in his, like looking at an out-of-focus photograph, *is that really me?*

“Who are you?” I ask. But before my words can shape the air between us, power coils into his muscles, graceful, and I can see it coming, fist at face, no time to explain, no time for apology. Here is the difference between us – this ease in his height, the same height that makes me lanky, clumsy. *I can see it coming* – knuckles sink swift into my cheekbone, pain behind my eyes, a hot throb of aching bone. A quick second fist explodes at my jaw.

A ring of boys around us, a ring of girls around them. I am dazed, suddenly sleepy. I gape out the crowd, looking for Billie and a vacation boy. My chest catches the pounding of a third punch, and I fall to my knees, palms on the sand. Liqueured vomit lurches up from my stomach, tricks me into thinking I am suddenly sober, stronger.

I make my way up, plant my hands on his chest, push him back towards the licking fire. He jabs at my throat, but I dodge and swing a hit directly to his face. He returns a poorly aimed punch, only clipping my shoulder, but it’s enough to wind me again, and we fall into the boxer’s hug, the sweat from his cheek pressed against my neck, dampening my collar, seeping under my shirt.

I release a punch square at his brow, bone on bone, knocking him down to the sand. I mount him at the waist, deliver a cycle of fists to his

face, hammering his head into the sand, unfair game, dirty play. He musters strength enough to send a blow deep into my belly, the winning strike. My body folds over his fist, and I roll to the ground beside him. The fight is over.

I look at the stranger, like looking in a mirror, our bruised brows pressed deep into the cool, damp sand, blood on our lips, eyes coloring as quickly as sliced apple browns, panting, heaving chests, *who are you?* Someone lifts him at the armpits to heave him somewhere else, to keep the fight broken, the mirror drawn away from me. His cheek has left a impression in the sand, hardly recognizable as a boy's face.

"You jackass, Louie," Rusty says, kicks me gently at the hip. "Going and ruining your good time." Trish kneels beside me, scoops a handful of melting ice chips from a cooler, presses them gently to my forehead. Rank, watery beer smell.

"Somebody better go help that kid," Trish says. "He ain't got no one to get him up."

"Don't help him," I say. "He hit me."

"Fool," she says. "You don't even know what you were fighting for."

"Cause I got beat up, is why." Vomit reeling again. I push Trish hard at the knees, throw up into the depression she leaves behind.

Magic of the night spoiled, party dispersed, Billie long gone. I wash my mouth out with beer. Rusty drives me to their house. Trish sits between us in the truck. Campfire smell in her long brown hair. Donnie has been lucky enough to catch an away game with Billie's pimpled little sister. Rusty pushes me into Donnie's empty bedroom, leaves the door open.

## Chapter 2

White, cool morning. Narrow, unpaved road. The screen door springs shut behind me as I leave the Davies'. I start home, just four houses away. Our houses are tucked between trees, summer foliage thickening the space between them, the illusion of privacy. Come winter the bare gray limbs open like blinds.

I hate my house. Brown paint peels like curling slugs. Gutters hang at sharp angles from the roof. Our rowboat sits outside the front door, filling with rainwater and dead beetles and leaves.

Last summer, before my mother left, it used to be that me and Senior would wake early together, quietly move around the house, gather vests and poles and tackle, careful not to wake her up. Snap shut the aluminum summer door, drive the miles to the lake. My father liked to be there by five-thirty with the serious fishermen, the rest of the vacation folk holding out till seven or eight. We owned two square feet on the Devon Lake dockside, just enough room for a fat stump of pine wound with rope. Five-thirty, undock the boat, first to the morning sun, first to cut the lake. We would sit opposite sides of the boat, keep the lines uncrossed, Senior facing the sunny side because he had a good pair of sunglasses. Always real night crawlers, never rubber worms. Tear the worms in half, press it through the

hook a few times, nice and secure, don't waste the bait. He tore his in halves, but I took mine to thirds so he'd never realize how many worms I lost to fish that got away. Sunnies – I caught so many – Senior would pull out the baited hook from its mouth, fingers quick, quick enough to keep it from dying in the air, to toss it back to lake, to leave it for some other unlucky fisherman, all the while telling me some story about some sunny he'd caught, though I was sure he never did. Sunnies and perch tossed back to the water, trout and bass saved in a red bucket. We'd leave in time for his morning shift, drag the rowboat ashore and wedge it in sanded waters, head in as other fathers were setting out, as mothers and babies were waking along the shore in unfamiliar, rented vacation space.

Clean, scale, salt, butter the fish. My mother made lunch and sometimes dinner of our spoils, Senior home late for leftovers, my mother fitting in her odd jobs between meals. Summers she sold needlepoints to the souvenir shops, winters she had a road stand of maple syrup and maple candies for the swell of skiers driving through. Year round she did tailoring out of her bedroom. We were busy, we worked, but we had time to ourselves, lunch once or twice a week when my father came home between shifts, the three of us eating freshly caught fish. Extra chairs always sat at our table, my parents priding themselves on being generous and hospitable,

Rita and Terry Davies down the road, my mother's high school friends Jeannie and Cookie always welcome. Fish and barbeque, corn on the cob, potato chips, lemonade.

My first summer of work, two years ago, I ate my mother's lunches quickly, eager to go and punch in. *Easy*, my mother would say, *take it easy*. Senior and me would work on starting up the truck while my mother washed the dishes. That was the last way we saw her, in the rearview mirror, through the open window, my mother with her back to us in a blue dress, drying white plates, as though she planned to stay, as though she would still be there the next day, needing clean dry plates.

Her best needlepoint hangs on our front door. I came home once and found it soaking wet in the kitchen sink, red letters bleeding pink into the white background. *Happy Hunters Welcome Home!* It hasn't been moved since I put it back up. The words form silent in my mouth every time I open the door, *happy hunters, welcome home, welcome home*.

Senior is sitting at the kitchen table. A cigarette lipped in his mouth, hidden in his gray beard, gray mustache. He shakes his head when he sees me, butts his cigarette out in a glass ashtray.

"Black and blue on your first day of work," he says. "And you wonder why they don't put you in wait staff."

“I don’t wonder that.”

“Don’t be a wise ass,” he says. “Three, four, five times as much money if you get your act together. They ain’t gonna let some beat up kid serve food.”

“You never waited,” I said.

“Ain’t the same as it was. They just wanted pretty girls. Now their wives and daughters come along, and they want pretty boys. And you ain’t so pretty today, all smelling like booze with a purple ass shiner.”

Bathroom mirror shows black and blue and purple blooming like a dog violet at my left eye. Tender to touch. Round, distinct edges.

“C’mere.” Senior comes into the bathroom, angles my face towards him. He presses gently on the bridge of my nose. “This hurt?”

“No.”

“Good. Nose ain’t broke,” he says. “You okay then?”

“Yeah.”

“Almost ready to go?”

“One minute,” I say. No time for a shower. I spit into the sink.

My uniform is folded in a black plastic bag under my bed, where it’s been since last summer. We wear the same uniform, Senior and me, straight slacks and short-sleeved shirts without pockets or a collar, both the color of

burnt toast, mud puddles. The only difference is the emblem, mine reading *North Country Kitchen Staff*, his reading *North Country Golf Grounds*. His has an extra insignia in small embroidery, green on brown, difficult to read, *Louis King* and five pointed stars. One star for every five years of service. In three years I will earn my own first star, my own name, *Louis King Jr.* of five years' service.

Truck starts quickly in the humid air, smooth on the drive to town. I lean my head against the door frame, warm wind most of the way, hot stagnant air at both stoplights. Closer we get to work, nicer the houses are. Tall white gates welcome us to North Country property. The resort sprawls the waterside. Rows of suites with balconies and bay windows. Spa, terrace, chapel, tennis courts, golf course.

“You going out with the boys again tonight?” he asks.

“Don't know.” Senior nods, keeps his eyes on the road. “You?” I ask.

“What do you mean, Louie?”

“I mean are you going out?” It's an unkind question. He hasn't gone out since she left. He's stopped dropping by Terry's with a sixer, stopped sitting at the bars, thumbing quarters into the jukebox. He comes home after work, sometimes reads the Sunday paper, free if you wait till Monday. The beginning

of summer means nothing to him now. Not fishing season or picnic season. Just another day to work.

“No, Louie, I’m not going out.” The truck breaks before the employee entrance to the golf course club house. Senior began like I did, washing dishes, then he moved to grounds crew, and now he’s a grounds manager. Half his time hard labor, half his time paperwork. Grounds crew, my next step, some version of Senior, what I’ll become if I don’t *get out now* like Rusty wants.

“I don’t feel like walking in those doors,” I say. He looks out the window, lights his next cigarette.

“You got yourself a good job. Don’t mess it up.”

In the employee room is a small, stained rug, fluorescent lights, silver folding chairs. Smell of soap and baking bread. Metallic chime of the timeclock measuring the minutes. Dingy white aprons are folded and stacked on the shelf beside a pile of timecards marked with tiny empty boxes, days to be worked. I loop on an apron, write my name on a card, *Louis King Jr.*, slide it into the clock, the first punch of the season.

“Hey, Louie, welcome home.” Moe, the lanky line cook who accidentally cut off one pinky, already in the kitchen, mopping the floors. Nods from the line cooks. “Ha! Look at that eye. Two weeks, that’ll last.” This will be the only fanfare.

Pans and trays aren't piled in the sink yet. Nothing to do, a dishwasher without dirty dishes. The giant boxy dishwasher that opens and closes like an animal cage is cool and steamless, the sink empty and shiny and dry. Waiters, waitresses, laughing, flirting. Boys and girls with cleaner haircuts, better grammar, the ones chosen to appear before the guests. Becky from the private school, Dennis who stays all summer in his parents' vacation house.

"Hot pan!" Moe shouts. I stand and stare at my distorted reflection in the curves of the deep sink, patiently waiting.

Double shift on the first day, daughters and wives for lingering brunch, husbands and sons for quick golf lunch breaks, families and couples for long dinners. Mimosas, draughts, carafes. Omelettes, clubs, steaks. Hours of my shifts measured by which remnants of food remain on the plates. Yellow rubber gloves up to my elbows, *don't look at the clock*. Stay at the station, dish after dish, rinse in hot water, open the robot dishwasher, push the big fat red button. Lipstick on the rims of stemware – soft cloth, gentle shine. Burnt cheese on pans – steel wool, pull it off like a scab on a knee. Big oval trays of dirty dishes dumped by the sink, clear them right away, more meals to be served.

The kitchen is a machine, and we are its gears, slowing only at the four o'clock hour, too late for lunch, too early for dinner. Calm hour. This is when

we get our meal. Moe and the other cooks make what's cheap, hotdogs and macaroni salad, or on good days, what's leftover or over-ordered, thick turkey sandwiches, burgers, cuts of bass.

Dinner's rush, always a hold-up on steak knives and shrimp forks, *don't look at the clock*. Run the dishwasher for the twentieth time? Thirtieth time? When the wine buckets are carried in and the plates are streaked with chocolate instead of gravy, it is time, *go ahead, look*, shift over.

Cooks come the earliest, dishwashers stay the latest, our hours bookending the shifts of the wait staff. They leave one by one, some thanking us, some tipping us out, some never knowing our names.

Benny, the big boss, he hasn't said a thing to me all night. He's an all right guy, short, balding, the skin beneath his eyes puffed and droopy, but he wears tuxedos and he isn't fat and he has a wide smile with straight teeth, so he appears respectable to the guests. A high-class prick, but better to us, part of his front that he commiserates with kids like us. Really he just has to be nice to us so we don't mention how often he leaves early. I ball up my apron, toss it lay-up to the laundry bin, but Benny intercepts it, quick stumpy hands, tosses it right back at me.

"You ain't done. You gotta help the new kid," he says.

“What new kid?”

“New janitor,” he says. “He knows dining room and bathrooms, but you gotta show him kitchen take down.” He twirls a ring of keys around his fingers, untucks his clean white shirt. “What the hell happened to you?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing messed you up good. You kids are all a fucking mess.”

Benny takes his time examining the swell. “Shit. I’ll be back in a little while. I gotta run down to the main office quick.” This is Benny’s lie, threatening to come back, actually returning on the rare occasion, his way of ensuring I stay. “Lock up.” He pitches me keys I am not supposed to have, shuts off the radio on his way out.

“Prick,” I say. I turn the radio back on.

“Yeah, he’s a prick.” A boy in the brown North Country uniform, stained apron, bucket in one hand, mop in the other, standing tall and straight, cocked chin, half-smile, low voice. And two bruise-red eyes, two round red pansies circling wide blue eyes of recognition.

The stranger and I regard each other, staring shamelessly. We appraise the injuries we’d inflicted, the blood our fists brought to the surface of an enemy’s skin.

A grin from the stranger. “Louie,” he says. I throw my apron at the laundry bin again, miss, turn swiftly to leave. Benny can eat shit. “Hey,” he says. “You gotta help me.”

Almost at the door, I say, “No fucking way.”

“You kicked the shit out of me. You fucked me up good.” Another fight, here in the kitchen? “I look a hell of a lot worse than you. Hey, wait up,” he says, follows me outside to the employee entrance, the ugliest part of the grounds, the hidden concrete corner with garbage and flies and broken glass. “I’m sorry.”

He hurries ahead, pivots to face me, obstructs the path out. A pack of smokes from his pocket, two cigarettes tucked between his lips, avoiding the corner that is split open and trying to heal. He lights them both, offers me one. I take it, drop it to the ground, shoulder around him. Unflinching, he hands me the other one between his lips, holds it out, pinched like a joint. “I said I was sorry. Don’t be sore, bro.”

“I’m not your brother.”

“You’re a goddamn hero of a fighter.” Grey ash on the cigarette he holds growing and growing, about to drop. He gestures it towards me again. Flies swarm and flit between the sweet rot of the garbage cans and the smoke of his cigarettes. “I predicted your next move every time, and

prepared every time, but never once was I right. You tricked me every time. Louie.” I take the cigarette, flick it to the ground without taking a single drag.

“Why do you know my name?”

“Trish told me.”

*You look like me.* The stench of us the only difference, his the pungent shock of bleach and fainter odors of artificial pine and lemon, mine of sour food. Several flies land on our bare arms, favoring me over the stranger, the smell of garbage to the smell of poison.

He swats at a fly, smashes it to a black and green pulp on his palm, swats at another, misses. I make my way around him, leave him alone in the concrete corner.

## Chapter 3

Three pretty girls sit cross-legged in jean shorts under the shade of a tree, sweat beading under their pony-tails, cans of soda and cards in their hands, playing spit while their parents golf.

Summer triples daily population, vacationers, renters, campers, second-home-owners, and, glory of all glories, their daughters. When our local girls abandon us for the summer boys, we discover the summer girls. Memorial Day to Labor Day, they come with trunks of yellow bikinis and white shorts, with sunscreen and pink lip gloss, and with a desperate ache for escapades and transformation. We love them, and amazingly, they love us back. Mountain men, boatboys, whatever they wanted us to be, we provide them with their adventure, we are their novelty. With us they try their first grass and their first handjobs, and when we're lucky, their most precious first. The only thing we have to do is never let them know how little money we have, how rundown our houses are.

Three, the magic number. I can already see how these three would play out. Plump freckled blond with Donnie, her slimmer look-alike with Rusty, and for me, the dark blond who has noticed me and is standing up to introduce herself.

“What is there to do for fun around here?”

Lucky for me I decided not to put my uniform on until I got to work. I am almost there, almost late for the lunch shift, walking near three miles, my father gone in early before I woke up. My brown uniform – the telltale sign of a boy they’ve been taught to ignore – hidden in a plastic grocery bag.

They brush their cards to the side, ruining the game before it is played out. They look older, less innocent, smiling unnaturally now that they’ve noticed me notice them. Debbie, my girl, introduces herself and her cousins. Debbie, sweet sixteen, liking me right away, toying with her necklace, tucking her hair back, nervous laughter bubbling out the entire time. Her cousins, much shyer. Wendy, the pretty blond, Lila the plump one. *All summer I’m here*, Debbie tells me, *my cousins just for the weekend*. *Yes, of course* they are allowed out by ourselves after dark, *sure*, they’ll meet us at the gazebo at eleven.

Before I punch in I ring Rusty at work from the employee phone. The Davies all work at the half-outdoor half-indoor pool, the best summer jobs to have, no dishes or toilets, better pay, sun when they’re outside. Trish lifeguards, Rusty grills burgers. Donnie, he isn’t quick enough to *guard lives* in the water, isn’t smart enough to count money at the snack shop, but he has a mind for how things work. Donnie fixes things, cleans the filters, operates the vacuum, repairs the lawn chairs. When there isn’t anything for

him to do, he wheels around a laundry bin, collects wet towels from parents and kids. Runner told me once that they only got those jobs because Rita, their mother, gave a blowjob to one of the owners who was married, and he had to do something to keep her quiet. Horseshit to me. Rita was friends with my mother. She still wears lipstick, and I'd bet she could give some nice mouth candy but certainly not to anybody but Terry. He'd have none of it, punch her in the mouth if she was sideling.

“Can I talk to Rusty Davies.”

“Hello Louie King. You having a good day?” Trish's voice, wanting to talk, like I'm calling for her.

“Put on Rusty.”

“One sec,” she says. Timeclock punches twice while I wait.

“Louie,” Rusty comes on.

“Hey man. Got some girls rounded up for tonight.”

“Atta boy,” he says. “Gazebo at eleven?”

This is always the plan, all we know to do with girls. Another punch.

“Gazebo at eleven. I gotta go.”

The stranger isn't there. Kitchen is clean enough, he must have figured out what to do. I tie a clean apron on and feel the jangle of keys in my pants pocket, realize I never locked up, just left a new kid with a fist and

a habit of sharing cigarettes all alone with the restaurant to himself. I'm nervous as hell I'll be chewed out, but the night passes without Benny saying a thing, no scolding, no hello, no asking how the training went. Maybe the kid got fired. Maybe he just didn't show up.

After work Moe gives me a lift, stops outside his place to sell me a bottle of gin, asks me for more money than it's worth, defends himself, reminds me prices are up. He drops me off a way's from the gazebo. Rusty isn't there yet. Moe's tires peel through the gravel.

Giggles from the gazebo, girls already waiting. I try to make out the girls' words, but I can only hear female sounds, chatter, whispers. Moonlight is bright tonight. I move into the night shadow of a pine.

When Rusty and Donnie come, we stand behind the Chevy to change from our uniforms into jeans and t-shirts. Smells of chlorine and dishwater cling to us. We do what we can do cover it up, roll on deodorant, smoke a few cigarettes. We're just a few guys out for some fun. *We're just like you.*

Gazebo, lakeside, gin. We form our triangle, go meet the girls. But when we step into the wooden cave of the gazebo, only Debbie and Lila are there. Debbie smiles sweet when she sees me, probably wondered if I'd show, and again I know that she likes me, until I introduced my gang and I

see her see Rusty, and in an instant I know. And Rusty he knows too. It's always Rusty they love best, his longish hair, his tanned skin.

I don't have Rusty's pretty face, but I get my fair share of pretty girls. Rusty calls it my game, playing obscure, but there's no calculation behind it. I'm shy, I don't look girls in the eye, I don't make any moves. Some girls, they love it, calling me deep and shadowy and romantic, certain that in my silent moments I am fumbling for the courage to say something like *you're a girl I could fall in love with*. The ones I get are the bold, overconfident ones who kiss me first. I take the tail when I can get it – it takes me over, melts me into these anonymous girls – but I couldn't trick a girl for it the way Rusty does. Rusty holding her hands and brushing strands of hair from her pretty faces and saying he'll call her and miss her all year. His charm gives him the edge over me, a better choice of the choicest, a better chance of being chosen, because the girls do what we do, size us up, stake their claims. We understand the basics of attraction, the line-up, the pairing-off, Rusty with the prettiest girls, me with the boldest girls, and Donnie with the homely girls or chubby girls, matched up like leftover bread ends. Donnie accepts his lot, as we accept ours.

“Where's the other one?” I ask Debbie. There's no point for a cockfight with Rusty. It's better to cede it to him, better not to waste time

waiting. He'd tell some dumb story, embarrass me, if he saw me going after his tail. Besides, Debbie is no longer after me. Rusty sits beside her on the bench.

Debbie answers quickly, "Tired. Out too late last night." A fat lie. Wendy must not have been allowed out, must have been younger than I thought, twelve or thirteen – her parents would be shocked to know how a townie like me had been imagining their sweet daughter.

Lila is still undecided about it all, uneasy by our presence in the dark, aware that she is expected to perform, to accept one of us other guys. First swigs of gin, pass the bottle around, give a chase of orange soda to the girls – Rusty thinks of everything – light them cigarettes, ask them questions about their hometown and summer cabin, then as the gin takes hold, about their bra sizes and kissing styles – *tongue or lips?* Donnie along for the ride, maybe thinking he's in the running. But Lila doesn't want either one of us. Girls I get always like Billie, like Amy and Gina last summer, Amy reaching for my zipper while I tipped back a flask, and Gina pulling me into the bathroom. Lila and I would get nowhere, her with no interest in my zipper, me with no balls to try and make her interested.

Lila and Debbie want to walk home. They only ask Rusty to take them. I bail, issue no smiles or good-byes, a quiet punishment to Debbie for

trading teams so quickly. Donnie and I take the rest of the bottle, walk to the dock.

“How was work,” he asks.

“Same shit,” I say.

“Yeah, me, too.” Gin tasting softer and softer.

We go home to crash. Home to the Davies’, that is, where I’ve slept nearly every night for the past year. I hate coming home to my father asleep on the couch, hate waking up to the sound of him roaming around the house in the middle of the night. He used to call me an orphan for sleeping out so much, but he’s given up on that.

I fix myself one more drink from Terry’s stash after Donnie passes out in his room. Terry drinks the same shit we do, but it tastes worse, knowing it’s his, cheap gin pilfered off my best friends’ father.

“Louie.” Trish, standing in the living room, wearing grey sweatpants and white t-shirt, no bra, her dark nipples soft and round behind the fabric. Rusty’s baby sister, Donnie’s twin. Not slow like Donnie. First girl I ever kissed, a game of hide-and-seek, counting one-Mississippi-two with eyes closed tight, blindsighted, her lips on mine, a trick, and when my hands uncovered my face she was running away, the bob of a long brown ponytail, quick footsteps on dry autumn leaves. Rusty and Donnie waited in their

hiding spots, annoyed, the seeker never coming for them. After the kiss, I left immediately, spoiled the game, sulked home, avoided the Davies for days.

Trish and Donnie, both dark-haired and short and chubby, him in all the wrong ways, her in all the right ways, round all over, round in the face, big round boobs, big round butt, a soft circle of flesh at her tummy, one of those girls who makes thin girls wonder *how does that fat girl look so much better than me?* Trish, with crooked teeth like her brothers, ashamed of it, never smiling, a tough scowl instead. Trish, maybe the only one I knew who didn't smoke anything – what did she do with her hands? – who tagged along with our tag-along, who never gave up on trying to break into a place she could not belong. Trish, who had no lifelong friends to hang to, each one lost to girlish fights, to boyfriends, one already to marriage, two to motherhood. Why her friendships never lasted, we weren't sure, but I think it was that she had too much boy in her, had grown up with dirt and sticks and attitude, until we realized we hated girls, and abandoned her, Trish left trying to build forts with clean pig-tailed girls. She found girls the way we did, predictable, identical, boring after a while. Lonely Trish, wishing she'd been born a boy, been born Donnie, yes, even Donnie.

“What are you doing awake?” I ask.

“Nothing. Just not tired yet.” She sits beside me on the couch, my bed for the night, tucks one foot beneath her thigh. Bottoms of her feet dirty, grimy.

“Hey,” I say, remembering. “Why’d you tell that kid my name?”

“Who?”

“The kid who suckered me at the bonfire.”

“Because he asked what it was.”

“Why? When?”

“Before we brought you home. He didn’t have anybody to help him. I just brought him back to his car. Somebody had to help him.”

“And he asked my name?”

“Yeah. A couple times.” Trish circles her fingers around my glass, takes it from me, swallows a tiny sip. Condensation on the glass drips down her lip. “He just moved here, down from Canada.”

“No shit. A canuck, ha.”

“Said he was trying to find a job.”

“He found one, alright. He’s cleaning bathrooms at North Country.”

“He’s working there? You’ve seen him?”

“I don’t know if he’s still there or not.”

“I thought he was really nice, you know. In a way guys usually aren’t nice.”

“He wasn’t too nice to me,” I say, turn my black eye towards her so she can get a good look. She’s been looking anyways.

“Louie, I’m sorry I called you a fool over the fight.”

“What was I supposed to do?” I ask.

A pause. Trish thinks before she speaks, something Rusty never learned. She ties and unties her long hair in a fat knot. The focus of her eyes goes absent for a minute, the memory of the fight replaying in her mind like the memory of a dream.

“I think you’re always supposed to fight back.”

I finish the swallow of gin at the bottom of the glass. “Go to bed,” I say.

“You wanna sleep in Rusty’s bed?” she asks.

“No.”

“Okay. Night Louie,” she says, and moves into the shadow of her doorway. I settle into the couch. Rusty will be back soon enough. Never stay longer than necessary with a summer girl. Always sneak away as soon as they fall asleep. These are the rules. These are the cruel endings to our

nights with summer girls. Girls don't save boys, and these girls can't save us, so we dismiss them before they can dismiss us.

What they want is us to fall for them. What they want is us to wake up beside them, smitten, swooning boys who reassure them of all the precious charms their daddies tell them they have. What they want is us to ask for their phone numbers and to actually call. What they want is to be able to tell their friends, *remember that guy I told you about from last summer? He's crazy for me! He never stops calling!* What they want is to be forgiven for slumming, slutting.

So we don't give it to them. We leave abruptly, no forehead kisses, no exchange of addresses. This is our small revenge.

## Chapter 4

*Frankie*, Trish says his name is.

“Clean the bar. The two of yous.” Benny tosses keys my way, hands me his empty blood mary glass. “Don’t think I don’t know exactly how much booze is in every damn bottle.” His bowtie is unclipped. A fat notebook spilling receipts is tucked under his arm. Benny leaves, mumbles something, a thank you or a threat.

We are left alone again.

“I don’t need your help,” I say. “You can go.”

“No, it’s okay. Besides, I need the hours,” he says. I put Benny’s glass on a half full dishwasher rack that will run in the morning. Frankie finishes sweeping the kitchen, fills dustpans with lemon wedges, crumpled orders, stained coffee filters, uncooked pasta shells that never made their way to the boil. I wring out my sponges and he dumps the dustbin, the final acts of kitchen duty. I kick through the double swinging doors that hide the kitchen from the dining room, the rooms so different it’s hard to believe they’re side by side, the kitchen all angles and narrow corners, silver, linoleum, tiled, dingy, the dining room plush and handsome and spacious, dark wooden tables, clean wine-colored rugs, red and green plaids, an A-shaped ceiling angling high above the room, mounted deer heads, twin

antlers, portraits of famous golfers. Frankie follows after me, then slips behind the bar like he's tending and pours a Jack and Coke, no ice.

"What do you want?" he says. Gutsy, persistent boy. I don't show my unease.

"Whatever."

He slides me the drink he just mixed, and it spills over the lip of the tumblers. It's strong. He mixes another for himself from behind the bar, mirrors and glass and mahogany, then switches roles, sits on a barstool, leans on the bar like he's used to drinking at joints like this. I take his place behind the bar, start to wipe down the bottles.

"This shit probably cost ten bucks," he says. He lifts his glass to clink a cheers, like we are business men making an agreement, like we are old friends, like we are friends at all. "You ever been in the storeroom here?"

"No."

"Well shoot," he says. "Gimme those keys." I toss them on the bar, he takes them back to the kitchen. His drink left on the bar, the liquor leveling out from the motion of his last sip, a reminder of his energy. It's my turn to follow. Our stockroom is in the basement below the kitchen. The stairway down is dank and cold, lit by a few bare hanging bulbs. Frankie is at the door jangling the keys. I'm nervous as hell Benny's going

to come back. Frankie fumbles a tiny key into the lock, turns it, looks at me with an open-mouthed smile. The door is heavy, wide, swings open on its own. Giant cans and jars of food, boxes of produce, bottled beer and liquor. Stacks of boxed cigars tucked behind the liquor, scattered around and spilling open.

“Hot damn,” I say. We laugh madly, giddy. Unlocked storeroom, like a house without parents, a substitute teacher. Frankie opens the walk-in fridge. We take pickles and olives and cheeses and breads, whatever we can scoop or tear with our hands. I’m not even hungry, really, I just want to take advantage of the windfall. We tuck good whiskey under our arms, fist five or six cigars. Frankie locks up and we take our loot back to the dining room, sit at one of the plaid tables, already set for tomorrow’s brunch. We use the plates for the cheese and the wine glasses for the pickles, put our feet up on the table, light the cigars, ash right on the rug, because it is Frankie who will have to vacuum it tomorrow, and me who will have to wash the dishes tomorrow.

First round of drinks downed. Frankie pours two more, even stronger.

“Imagine doing this all the time,” I say.

“Lifting booze?” Frankie says.

“No. Drinking in a goddamned room like this.”

“Isn’t this what we do anyways?” he says. “It’s not any better.”

Frankie exhales as he speaks, a smoky curtain slowly billowing out his mouth. “They go to work, and they probably hate it, and then they have their fun. They just do it with better liquor, is all.” I haven’t forgotten this liquor isn’t ours to have fun with.

“Where you from?” I ask.

“Hood. Hick town outside Ottawa.”

“Why’d you come here?”

“Better jobs here. We’re Americans, my mom and me. We’d been living in some guy’s house. She got sick of it. She’s got a cousin here.”

“Who’s that?” I ask.

“Dina Jackson.”

“No shit.”

“You know her?”

“My mom went to high school with her. She runs the Marina.”

“Right. My mom’s cleaning there now,” he says.

“Smart girl, Dina is. She made some money,” I say.

“You know Dina, no shit,” he says.

“You like it here?”

“It’s fucking beautiful. Wish I knew more people. Guess I should have been better about introducing myself the right way.” He looks at me, kind of apologetic. I’m reminded again of the fight. The muscles in my gut and thighs tighten. This is a boy who injured me. “Trish, she’s your friend?” he asks.

“No,” I say. “She’s my friends’ little sister.” I stack the plates and the glasses to carry them into the kitchen.

“Hey you want to go to some party? Some guy I met?”

“No,” I say. “I got plans.”

“With who? You can bring them. They’re drinking by the south docks, I guess. You know where that is?”

“Yeah I know, but I got plans. We’re going somewhere.” We rub the cigar ashes into the red rug with the soles of our shoes, and then our fists, and we reset the table with clean glasses. In the kitchen I fit my hands into the rubber yellow gloves to wash our dishes, hide the evidence.

“You want a ride somewhere?” he asks.

“No. Someone’s coming,” I say.

Frankie lingers for a minute, finally says goodbye. After he’s gone I call Rusty and ask if he’ll pick me up. I wash down the back of the bar like

we were supposed to, return my bottle of whiskey to the storeroom, go outside the employee entrance to wait.

It's raining, mist, weightless raindrops in the air. Overturned red buckets that held broken glass during the day, these are the only seats. I sit down on a bucket, light up, wait.

Whirr of an engine, wheels on gravel. But it's not Rusty's Chevy, it's the laundry truck. A girl with dark eyeliner comes out wearing the brown North Country uniform. I feel like she's invading my territory, but this is clearly hers as well.

"Here to pick up the linens," she says. "No one's usually here this late."

"Late night," I say. I pull the last cigarette in my pack, angle it to her. "You want one?"

"No," she says. "I'm pregnant, you know."

"Oh." I go to butt my cigarette out, but she grabs my wrist to stop me, nails dug lightly into my skin.

"I've got my own," she says, shows me the pack in her pocket. She takes one out, drags a bucket next to mine, sits down, careful. She looks too young to be pregnant, but then again, she doesn't look too young for me to

want to have sex with her. Funny how those two don't line up in my head.

"I know I shouldn't, but sometimes I just need one."

"You need one now?" I ask.

"Yeah," she says. She takes only a few drags, then tosses it into the bulk sized coffee can full of ash and tawny white filters. The coffee can is nearly full, and it makes me sad to think that we have smoked enough cigarettes to fill and dump and fill and dump all over again this giant can.

She heaves the sack of dirty linens on her shoulder, gives me a weak wave good-bye.

Rusty's Chevy comes in the laundry truck's wake. But when the door opens it's Trish who gets out, not Rusty. Trish in her green lifeguard suit, a white towel wrapped around her waist.

"Where's Rusty?"

"Too drunk to drive," she says. "Home drinking with Doyle and Runner."

"Let's go," I say. "Move over." She opens the driver's door for me, scoots over to shotgun.

"Where you going?" she asks when I drive past our turn.

"Quick stop to Johnny Two's."

Johnny Two's place always smells like grass and sex, all he and his ex-wife Sugar do. Johnny is a huge guy, half muscles half fat, and Sugar is so tiny she gets drunk off two beers. She isn't there when Trish and I show up, unless she's asleep in the bedroom, blocked off by a tapestry over the doorway. Johnny gets up from the couch, his video game, greets me fist to fist.

"Will you go buy for us?" I ask.

"Naw, bro, I'm kicking ass right now," he says. "How about some weed?"

"Yeah that's good." He pauses the game, bags me twenty dollars, throws in a half-gone bottle of Senator's vodka for free. Johnny's a great guy like that. We light a joint from his ear, pass it back and forth, bullshit for a while, Trish sitting on the floor with her legs tucked under her, tracing cigarette burns in the rug with her fingers.

"I'm driving back," she says when we leave, after Johnny fives me good-bye. The high settles into my vision, and I don't bother to argue. She drives fast, aggressive on the gears, the towel falling further from her waist each time she hits the clutch.

No one awake at the Davies' house, Rusty and Donnie gone, Terry and Rita sleeping together in some way behind a shut door. I wait a little

while, taking tugs from the Senator's, Trish shotting capfuls of Terry's gin. The boys don't come back. Trish asks if I want to go out, try and find them, says she heard people are going to the docks. Frankie's party.

I smoke another joint on the ride over, thinking we'll be in for a long night. We park, walk towards the dock bridge. But it's hardly a party at all, just a dozen or so guys, sitting barefoot on the dock, low fog hanging over them, fire-red buds of joints glowing stronger each time someone inhales, the lake behind them invisibly black. Frankie isn't there. It's all guys younger than me, Donnie's age, Trish's age. I'm not in the mood to bullshit and act tough, like I'm older and cooler and I have better places to be.

"C'mon," she says.

"I'll come when I'm done with this."

"I'll wait for you," she says.

"Trish, just go. I'll come in a little bit."

"You promise you won't go home?"

"I might. Jesus, Trish, just go. They're your friends," I say. I hit the joint, watch as she shyly edges her way to the circle. I wander back towards the parking lot, out of their sight, smoke my last cigarette. The parking lot is unlit, black. I leave without saying good-bye to her, like she knew I would.

I start the walk home, a long walk, not bad if you're high. I hug tight against the treeline when cars come speeding by. Mist sogs the grass wet, soaks my sneakers through. I stop when I come to the ice cream joint on the corner of the road, dark and vacant in the middle of the night, looking like it's been closed down for years. I piss on a big green trash barrel, tinny echoes, salty smell. A car pulls up, a Pontiac, comes to a quick break, headlighting right where I'm pissing, a damn spotlight between my legs. I can't quit the stream, so I turn away from light, try to hurry it on. I hear the door slam, someone get out. I zip up fast as I can.

"Louie?" Frankie, his voice already familiar enough for me to recognize. He looks like he's showered since work, washed his hair, changed his shirt. He leans back on the car, between the headlights, the two straight beams of light, making him hard to see, his hands in his pockets, his tall, strong height easing into an untroubled slouch.

"What are you doing here?" I ask. I move into a shadow, away from the light. If he wants any revenge, here is his chance – two near-enemies alone in a dark lot.

"I'm stopping to see if you need a ride," he asks. "I saw you from the road."

I don't want another apology or compliment or explanation. I just want to make sure this isn't a trick. "How come you didn't try to fight me again?"

He shrugs, jingles his car keys, spins them on his finger. "I knew I couldn't win," he says. "Besides. It's lonely here. I wanted you to be my friend." I look to see if he's kidding, if he's going to laugh and punch my shoulder. But he's serious, dismal, the way Trish looks when we go out without her, the way my mother looked when she brushed the silvery lottery ticket scratchings off the kitchen table. This is the way women look. "So we're past it, right? We can be friends?"

I have never been asked for friendship. My first memory of Rusty is the two of us crouched naked at the shallow shore of the lake, pinching spotted salamanders by the tail, dropping them into a sandcastle bucket. There was no entrance into friendship, no threshold crossed. Our mothers napped us in the same crib, Rusty living only one year without me, his first, dumb year of infancy. We never knew life without each other. We never chose our friendship.

Frankie from Canada, a boy who hit me good, a boy who tells me I hit better, a boy without friends. And it's this handicap that makes me trust him. When you have no friends, you have no one to back you up.

“I went to that party,” I say, my way of saying *maybe, maybe we can be friends*.

“Is that where you’re coming from?” he asks. “I drove by, but I figured not to go in the end.”

“Yeah. It wasn’t any fun. I just went to keep Trish company.”

“She’s there?”

“Yeah,” I say.

“You want a ride home?”

“It’s just around the road,” I say.

“I don’t mind,” he offers. “Radio’s busted,” he explains when I get in. He thumbs the power button a few times, to prove it.

I direct him where to go, nearly have him drive past my house to the Davies, out of habit, but I tell him to stop outside my house. I want him to see the house that’s really mine, ugly and empty as it is. “See you at work tomorrow?” he asks.

“I’m off,” I say. “Next day.” He turns the Pontiac around in the drive, opens his hand once to wave goodnight.

The porchlight hasn’t been left on. A week’s worth of mail is still in the box. I see her handwriting first, neat and boxy like her needlepoints, words misspelled, green ink smudged. A postcard, addressed to *King*

*Junior.* A letter from a ghost. The sun-washed photo shows a mountainscape, *Woodstock!* scrawled across it in angled letters, sickening to read – it came just fifty miles away. Fifty miles away for three hundred days. The message offers no explanation, no return address, just a *happy birthday* and *I miss you* and some bullshit about her cousin in the Catskills helping her bunions heal. It's a month after my sixteenth birthday, almost a year after we came home to find her and her suitcase gone. Bunions can heal in three hundred days. *You still exist. You stood outside a store spinning a metal postcard rack fifty miles away.*

Under my bed is an old tin cigar box. It began as a place to hide what I thought were crucial secrets, a treasure map we drew of the hole, hunting bullets, torn-out magazine nudes, cigarette butts. Now it's mostly cash and weed. I fold the postcard along the center line and tuck it into the box.

Soundless, without stirring the air, without waking Senior asleep on the couch, I find clean underwear in my bedroom, take two cigarettes from Senior's pack on the counter, then leave my house to walk to the Davies.

## Chapter 5

Terry sits on me to wake me up, his funny joke, his full weight threatening to snap my shins like twigs over a knee.

“What the fuck, Terry?” The near-memory of my dream lingers with me for a moment, but this ugly way to enter a day steals every trace of it, turns it out of focus.

“Ha ha! Louie-boy, good morning fella.” He lays his huge body on top of mine, fits his arms around my torso, squeezes my ribs into one another, a lumbering, oppressive hug. Then all at once, bored with the game, he shifts his weight off my legs, sits down on the couch. “Get off my damned sofa,” he says. He nudges me, thumps my back twice, big, fat fists.

“You’re so loud,” I say. Terry ignores me, turns on the TV, kicks his feet out after I stand up. I check my eye in the bathroom mirror. The purple petals have faded, leaving only wispy lines of bruise. Eight waking hours never allow as much change as eight sleeping hours. I finger the sand from my eyes, gentle near the bruise.

The only other black eye I ever had lasted two full weeks. I was fourteen, and I had to lie about it. I told my mom Rusty hit me with a baseball, but really she was right there when it happened, before the blood sprang to my skin. We were in the grocery store. I was waiting for her,

shuffling down the aisles of the market, fingers trailing along cans of soup. Bright lights, wordless music. A vacation boy, smaller than me, younger than me, turned the corner before me. He was wandering around bored the same way. We looked at each other curiously, wondered if we were enemies or friends. He told me I smelled like fish and swatted at my head with an open palm. I rushed at him, arms locked, palms out. His face and shoulders tightened, like a dog bracing itself for punishment. I pushed his chest down to the ground, heard his head smack the hard floor. His shiny, newly cut hair fanned out on the dirty tiled floor. His cry pierced the air, one long, moaning note. I backed away, stunned at the execution of my own power, afraid of grave injury, afraid of punishment. *I'm sorry*, I said. He groped for a weapon, a heavy can from the bottom shelf, all he could reach, and he hurled it square at my eye. I ran away, sneakers sliding on the greasy tiles. Between the orange sale posters on the window I saw my mother outside, already checked out, wiping sweat from her underarms with the back of her hands, putting brown paper bags into the bed of the truck. Getaway car. We were gone from the parking lot before the boy or his mother came looking for us. I cupped my aching brow on the way home, focused on my mother's humming to keep from crying.

I unzip my jeans and piss, then I let myself into Rusty's bedroom. He's cocooned himself in his blankets, tight against the wall.

"Here, asshole." Rusty's voice is muffled beneath the covers. He throws his extra pillow onto the floor for me. We shared his single bed for thirteen years of slumber parties, until one night when he told me I was never allowed in his bed again. I begged him to tell me why, and finally he held my wrist and ran my fingers along the crusted islands on his flannel sheets. Then we sat back to back on the closet floor with our pants off, our t-shirts on, and he taught me how to jack off, gentle grip, quick wrist, patience.

I lie down on the rug, tug the sheet off Rusty's bed, ready to return to sleep. But now Rusty is awake and as loud and overbearing as his father. He opens the blinds, the windows, lets the thick humid air push its way into the room.

"Johnny Two said you stopped by. Bought all his weed," he says.

"You saw him last night?" I ask.

"We stopped by. Right after you left, he said." Rusty lights two cigarettes for us. My stomach turns. Morning smokes make me nauseous.

"Guess who else I saw there."

"That girl?" I ask.

“What girl?”

“Debbie.”

“Oh, no, hell no. Duke.”

“The pitcher from Oldtown?”

“Not anymore. He dropped out,” he says.

“No shit.” Duke was the best pitcher we ever hit against. He threw curve balls since we were little leaguers. He was the first guy our age to get a tattoo, script on his forearm, *Yankees*, half-covered under his uniform sleeve.

“So now guess what he’s gonna do.” He waits. I shrug. “Guess, asshole.”

“Try out for minors?” I guess.

“He’s not that good. Jesus, he’s not that good at all.”

“You never hit off him,” I say. Rusty laughs, throws his empty pack at the baseball jersey still tacked on the wall, *Devon Lake Village, 9*.

Rusty’s a good player, but not nearly as good as Duke.

“Don’t you want to know what he’s doing then? He’s coming with us. To Cape Cod.” Rusty flicks his cigarette out the window. We clear these away every few weeks, when Rita complains. “We should look for a place like Johnny’s.”

“Johnny had to deal for like five years to afford that on his own,” I say.

“We’ll have money. It’ll probably go further in Mass anyways. Least that’s what Duke hears.”

Terry yells from the living room for us to come eat.

“Listen, we’re gonna meet up with him tomorrow after work. To make it sure and all,” Rusty says.

“Okay,” I say.

“You do the paperwork yet?” he asks.

“I will when I get to it.” I want to go eat, but Rusty shuts the door to his room, keeping me there. “Whatever happened with you and that girl?” I ask.

“Stop changing the subject. Do the paperwork. Tomorrow,” he says, then adds, “What girl?”

“Debbie, you asshole.”

“Oh. It sucked. She was a tight little prude.”

“Bet you I could have had her,” I say.

“Ha. Yeah right. Really, stop changing the subject. You tell Senior yet?”

“No. I will. I’ll get to it.”

“Don’t be a pussy.”

“You’re the pussy who couldn’t get with Debbie,” I say. Rusty kidney punches me. “I said I’ll get to it.”

Rita serves us eggs and pancakes. Terry stays on the sofa and the rest of us sit around the kitchen table. Trish comes in brushing her hair, tries to run the brush through Donnie’s mangled curls till he swats her away, everyone in sweatpants or shorts but me. I wear the jeans and shirt I wore last night. After I first made the living room my bedroom, after the couch sunk in the shape where I slept, I brought my own gray sweatpants to leave in Rusty’s room, but Terry saw me, said *you don’t live here, asshole*. I brought them back home.

“Louie, give me five bucks,” Terry says over the TV.

“Jesus, Terry, shut the hell up,” Rita says. One year I’ve been crashing here. Terry asks for money every time Rita feeds me, and every time she yells back like she’s outraged, like she’s never heard him before. My plan has always been to give them money, but I never can save up a respectable amount to hand them. All my cash, pissed away on cigarettes and booze and grass. Rusty says it’s no problem, they have to heat the house anyway, but there are always showers and breakfast and TV. Plus all that we pilfer off Terry.

“Baby, let me see this eye,” Rita says. She holds my chin in her hand, angles me towards her. Her hand is soft. My mother’s hands were always dry and coarse at the fingertips and nailbeds, from sewing, from scrubbing.

“Louie got beat up,” Rusty says. “His own damn fault.”

“Louie won,” Donnie says.

“No he didn’t. Look at him. He got beat up,” Rusty says.

“Shut the hell up, Rusty,” she says. “Louie, you want me to rub something on it?”

Soft fingers dabbing some cool oil or gel on my sore brow, thirty seconds of touch, *yes, something* – but this is for the scraped knees of boyhood, not teenage fighting injuries. I shrug my face from her hand.

Terry comes into the kitchen in his noisy way, heavy footsteps, heavy breathing. He slaps Rusty’s fork out of his hand, bits of yellow egg flung across the table, then he slaps Rusty at the back of his head, seizes a fistful of his dark hair. This is his way, forceful, gruff, no real harm.

“What’d I tell you about taking my gin?”

“Ow! I didn’t take it!”

“You idiot kids are gonna get yourself in trouble drinking booze. You stay away from it, and you stay the hell out of my stuff.”

“It wasn’t me. Jesus, let go,” Rusty says, and he looks sideways at me. Our loyalty has always been to each other, friends before parents, but this vague denial is the admission of my own guilt.

Terry gives a hard eye to Trish, then Donnie, then me. He’d never hit his pretty daughter, or his already brain-damaged son, but me, he should hit me, I deserve to be hit. I stare back at Terry, challenge him, *grab my face, black my other eye*. But you can’t hit someone else’s son. My chair is crowding this table, extra, separate. Five familiar faces suddenly unrecognizable.

“What are you doing checking your gin at ten in the morning anyways,” Rita says, quiet, as a means of closing the discussion.

Rusty and I are both off for the day and he wants to sit around watching TV. But the sudden impulse to go to my house overwhelms me, not a longing for home, just an urgency to leave the Davies’.

Senior is sitting on the couch at home, not watching TV, not reading, not sleeping. He looks surprised.

“Eye looks better,” he says.

“You working today?” I ask.

“No,” he says. I want to sit next to him on the couch, join him in doing nothing.

“I gotta tell you something,” I say.

“What, Louie.”

What I want to say is that she’s still alive. What I want is to hand him the postcard, let him hold what had been in her hand, let him see that she remembers this life, this house. I want him to read it, I want to take the chance that he won’t hit me or cry or tear it in half. But she didn’t write it for him, didn’t write *Louie Senior*, just took the chance that I would find it myself, maybe guessed that he’d long since given up on checking the mail, rushing to the phone.

“*What, Louie.*”

“Rusty wants me to drop out of school and move somewhere else to find work.”

Senior frowns, nods, looks straight at the black television screen. “All right,” he says. “Where do you plan on going?”

“Massachusetts, Rusty says. Cape Cod.”

“There’s work, here, you know,” Senior says. “Pipe dreams can kill you.”

*There’s nothing here for me.* This is what I’m supposed to say, what Rusty feels, what anybody should feel in order to run away, start again. Maybe it’s true. My mother left. My father’s here, but really he left when

she did. And when Rusty and Donnie leave, there will be nothing left for me. So instead I'm going to let Rusty's dream kill me too, because I can't figure out what it is that I want to want.

“You need me to sign something?” he says, stoic, calm, like he's been waiting for this, expecting me to leave any day. She's ruined him, taken away his trust in everything that's supposed to be permanent, wife, son, family. He could wake up one day, find his job gone, his house gone, and he'd just sit there nodding, like he knew it all along.

Another postcard will come. Another postcard has to come, and I don't want to press chance again, I don't want to let him see her handwriting, his name but not his name, his wife but not his wife.

And just like that, I decide to start sleeping home, home for my last summer in Devon Lake. There is no packing, no change of address, just the resolve in my head.

## Chapter 6

Inky wet night. Frankie and I lean against the concrete wall, shelter ourselves under the two feet of roofing, watch the waitresses run through the rain to their cars, faces down, purses held overhead like broken umbrellas.

Frankie holds out his left hand, his smoking hand, to examine the sharp line of smoke rising from the tip of his cigarette. He draws it closer to his squinting eyes, blinking, tearing, ash-gray. He sucks a final drag and butts the cigarette on the wall, but instead of flicking it into the coffee can, he keeps it in his hand, rolls it in his fingers, like a lucky charm, like a rabbit's foot.

Dennis, one of the servers, comes out to join us, whistling, pretending to love this crappy, rainy night. Dennis Leary is the kind of guy I want to hate, but he bums smokes and tips me out, so I can't help but like him. His parents are in real estate, and every summer they move up here to work the summer business, show cabins, sell property. Dennis thinks he's one of us, probably tells his friends back in the city that he truly grew up in the Adirondacks. This is what I can't bear – a kid who spends the two warmest months of the year here, serving club sandwiches to parents' friends, and calls it home.

“What do you guys wanna do tonight?” Frankie says, like we’re old friends, just the three of us, Louie, Dennis, Frankie.

“Hell. I’m up for hanging out. Something fun,” Dennis says.

“Louie? What do you say?” Frankie looks at me.

Rain beats down on the roof, pools at our feet. I put my hand out to catch it, fat warm drops in my palm. Rusty is waiting for my call. *Can you pick me up? Where are we meeting Duke?*

“Let me use the phone first,” I say. I go into the employee room. Receiver in my hand, fingers on the numbers. I’m sick the gazebo. I’m sick of the docks. I don’t want to sit around talking about Cape Cod or unemployment schemes. I dial slowly, five, one, eight. I don’t want to explain to Rusty why I didn’t sign the papers today. Five. Eight. Five. I don’t ever want to see baseball star Mitch Duke without his mitt and his jersey. I slam the receiver down.

Dennis and Frankie are dumping the coffee can into the garbage bin, damp cigarettes scattering to the ground. “I got something fun we can do,” I say. They look at me like I’m someone whose voice they haven’t heard enough to recognize. “Is there any way we can get some girls together? And a kickball or something?”

Dennis makes some calls, leaves to go pick up the girls. Frankie goes downstairs to swipe some bottles from the storeroom, then we walk to the car, slow, letting the rain get at us.

“Strip kickball! Louie, you’re a fucking genius,” Frankie says as he starts the engine. A truck passes us as we drive out of the parking lot. I look back, scared it’s the Chevy, scared it’s Rusty come to get me. But it’s a new Ford, lost, returning in the other direction.

“Turn here,” I direct Frankie. We puddle through the uneven school entrance and park right next to the baseball diamond. Bright new moon, like a distant spotlight on the small field. Dennis’s car is already there waiting.

My pride nearly collapses when I realize Dennis’s car is full of guys, but then he tells us he has to make two more trips to fit all the girls who want to come. It’s like every kid in Devon Lake is restless and mischievous and waiting for me to provide the scene.

The girls know the plan, and some of them come with extra layers, sweatshirts and jackets, but most of them wear just t-shirts and jean shorts, already soaked through before we even start. The rules start out simple – we put a bottle at every base, and every time you get on base, you have to stop to take a swig. That takes care of the drinking, and as for the undressing, we declare that every time a run is scored, the team in outfield has to strip.

Dennis calls boys versus girls after hearing that rule, and the girls are dumb enough not to argue. The girls' runs will count double, we say, because girls are such crummy athletes, because it's not the score that will matter to us anyways. We let them kick first.

The girls line up, nervous and eager, jumping around, catching raindrops with their tongues.

"You know any of these girls?" Frankie asks.

"No, you?"

"No."

Seven nameless girls. I don't recognize any of them. Summer girls, here for a week, a month, the whole season, come and gone like quick rain showers. Seven summer girls, and I don't give a damn about anything else in the world besides seeing all seven of them naked and soaking wet. I have to bend over and hold my breath, will myself to keep a boner from rising.

Frankie calls the guys over, Dennis and four of his buddies. Craig, John, Marcus, Zachary. Dennis introduces us, *my buddies from work*, and we group together in a team huddle.

"You're the man of the hour, kid. You pitch first." One of them, Craig or Marcus, he tosses me the ball, a partly deflated red kickball, dug up in the basement of his cabin. It will do.

I take the mound, pitch an easy roll to the plate. A tall girl with long, thin legs kicks first, a girly, awkward kick, a grounder to left field, right between two of Dennis's friends. The next girl runs past first base and skips the first bottle of liquor, causing the guys to call out penalties and extra shots. New rules are named with every play, always in our favor, always feeding more liquor to the girls. They protest every time, and give in every time.

Dennis kicks the first home run, and we award him with a new rule that he gets to pick one girl to take off an extra item. With fake reluctance, all the girls strip something stupid – a hat, a jacket, socks. But one of the girls who came in just a t-shirt, she whisks it right off. Mother-sized breasts white behind a dark purple bra. She stands there with her hands on her hips, not even turning away, just letting us gape at her.

This girl is, of course, Dennis's choice. And she doesn't hesitate, unhooks her bra, releases her breasts in a double bounce that sends half of us crouching down. Ripe plum nipples like magazine girls.

The topless girl-woman makes us fumble our kicks, and we surrender our turn with three quick outs.

Second inning. The next girl up to kick moves to homeplate, and when she tucks a wet strand of hair behind her ears, I realize that I do know her – Debbie, my girl, Rusty’s girl, Rusty’s prude.

“Debbie?” I say.

“Louie,” she says. “I thought you didn’t recognize me.”

“I didn’t.” She puts her hands over her mouth, maybe flirting, maybe embarrassed, thinking I know some private detail about her and Rusty. She still has a black tank top on, clinging wet to her body. She smiles at me, like when I first saw her at the golf course, shy, sweet.

“I didn’t think I’d see you again,” she says.

“Here I am,” I say. “All summer long.”

“All summer,” she says. “Me too.”

I want to be the one to make Debbie take her shirt off, but it’s Frankie who catches her kick, earns her out.

She crosses her arms at her waist, peels it off, reveals her white bra. She’s slim, with tiny breasts, narrow shoulders, boy-hips. It comes to me that Rusty has probably not even seen her this way.

Despite the erection threatening to press out of my jeans, I play a beautiful game. I run swiftly and catch every ball and never miss an out, then kick the winning run. The ball flies high over our heads, like a red

comet in the black sky. I run a victory lap around the bases, holding up a near-empty bottle of liquor like a trophy. Frankie and Dennis and the others tackle me down, the weight of six boys on my back, arms pressing into my shoulders, my thighs. We boys have only lost a shirt each, and every girl is down to colored underwear and white bras, see-through in the relentless rain. No other girl dares to take her bra off, and the girl-woman puts her purple bra back on, sensing – incorrectly – that we have had enough of her breasts. We are tired and drunk, with mud at our ankles and cold filling the hollows of our bones. And we are horny like hell.

The organization of the game gives in to random chasing and tackling, guys pinning girls down, snapping the elastics of their underclothes.

Headlights bobbing from the road. The Chevy. Rusty, come to give me shit.

But the night has been too sexy and surreal, and I don't feel apologetic. *I tried to call you, I'll say. I've got other friends, too. Don't be a girl about this.*

But Rusty doesn't come out, just Trish and Donnie, twin sister and brother. They linger by the truck, taking in the scene. Donnie stares in wonder at the girls in their bras. Trish turns into herself, shy, maybe jealous of these girls. She waits by the car while her brother comes my way, joins

me behind the fence, looking in on a dozen near-naked kids running barefoot around the diamond, like it's a movie we're watching, or a dream we're remembering.

“What are you doing here, Donnie?” I ask. Donnie just stands, gaping, one of those looks on his face that exposes his slow mind, a dumb happy open-mouth grin.

Quick, wet footsteps in the grass. Frankie jogs around the cage to meet us. His bare chest is smooth and white in the moonlight, flecked with spots of gritty mud, like a black and white photograph.

“Welcome to heaven. I'm Frankie.” He swings an arm around my bare neck, like a hook, like he's reeling me in. Animation, affection – is this Canadian?

“Frankie, hi, Frankie. I'm Donnie,” he says, and explodes the pouch of giddy laughter filling inside his belly. “How did you get all these girls naked?”

Frankie swings his other arm around Donnie's soft shoulders. “Louie's a goddamned genius, is how.”

Trish waits on the periphery, away from the diamond, away from me and Frankie and Donnie, but all of a sudden she comes running, decided, wanting to be a part of us, of this.

“Hi Louie. Hi Frankie,” she says.

“Hey Trish. You should’ve come sooner,” Frankie says.

“No, Trish, you shouldn’t’ve come at all. How’d you know we were here?” I ask.

“This ain’t no big city, Louie,” she says. “I wanna play.”

“It’s too late, Trish. The game’s over. Just go home.”

“I don’t care, I’ll stay anyways,” she says. She smiles her closed-mouth smile, removes her shirt, her belly soft at the waistband of her jeans, her breasts soft behind a laced black bra. She uses her thumbs to wipe at the mud on Frankie’s belly.

“Christakes, Trish, Rusty’s gonna kill you,” I say.

“Rusty ain’t here,” she says.

“Where is he?”

“I don’t know,” she says.

“He’ll find out,” I say.

“Put your shirt back on.” I pick it up from the ground, try to hold it in front of her like a curtain, try to cover any view of her stomach, her bra.

Frankie backs away.

“Stop telling me what to do,” she says.

“Fuck, Trisha, put your fucking shirt on.” I press the shirt hard against her chest, a dull punch, harmless, like Terry’s. She fists it out of my hands, gives me her hard, sad look, sulks back to the truck.

“Go on home, Donnie,” I finally say. He hesitates, looks back and forth between me and the diamond. “Go.” He stumbles away, curious, disappointed, looking back at the girls every few paces.

“We’re all going back to my house. My parents are gone.” A voice from the field calls to us. Debbie. She leans her elbows on the fence, wrings the water from her hair, adjusts her white bra. “You coming?”

“Maybe I should go,” I say to Frankie.

“Maybe they should’ve stayed,” he says.

“No, Frankie.” I say. “It’s Rusty’s little sister.” I turn back to the road, watch the Chevy’s headlights fade behind the roadside trees. “Let’s go.”

Frankie claims he is best capable of driving. The girls take the back seats in Dennis’s car, the guys sit in the bed of Frankie’s truck. Debbie pretends to challenge me for shotgun, says she has to sit on my lap to navigate our two-car caravan to her cabin. She hasn’t bothered with the discomfort of putting on her wet tank top, her bare back cold on my bare

chest. A chill sets into us, keeps my erection down, passes shivers down her spine, into mine.

“You okay?” Frankie asks on the ride.

“It’s no big deal,” I say.

Ordinary reality returns when we park the cars under the bright floodlights of the driveway. Debbie tells us to walk very quietly into the house, not to disturb the neighbors. Artificial light, adults nearby – this is not the dreamlike freedom of our ball game. We trail into the cool, gray garage, entirely clean and empty, like a concrete box. The girls become suddenly shy in this bright, dry setting. They cover up, pull their wet shirts away from their skin, fold their arms over their chests, as if we haven’t already seen their bare skin, their bras. The ones who live near make their way home, some of the guys trailing after them. The rest ask Dennis for a ride.

“Who knew what we were in for tonight, eh?” Dennis laughs, fives us good-night.

Only me and Frankie and Debbie are left standing in the garage.

“We should go,” I say to Frankie.

“You can stay to hang out,” Debbie says, to me, not Frankie. Wet hair, arms folded over the white bra.

“Stay,” Frankie says. “I’ll see you later.” Debbie, alone, what I’ve wanted all night, what I wanted since I saw her at the golf course. But I feel like I should end this night the way it started, me and Frankie, this new friendship, this new loyalty. But he eyes me good-night, good luck, and disappears into the lightless driveway.

I follow Debbie into the house. She tells me her parents are at the Jersey shore, cleaning out the condo they just sold in order to buy this more rustic Adirondack cabin. *Rustic* meaning warm, wooden, spacious. The main room is the size of my house, with tall ceilings, with a curve of green couches before five panels of glass walls overlooking the night lake. They aren’t fully moved in yet. Stacks of neatly labeled cardboard boxes rest in the corner, *Kitchen, Porch, Boat*.

Car doors slam outside. Sounds from the garage. I panic, a fear of parents, a fear of being where I don’t belong. But it’s a guy that comes in, tall, slim, blonde, like Debbie. She introduces him as her brother Rick. He says he’s just come back from the bar. He’s not twenty-one, that’s easy enough to tell, but he’s older than me. Right away I put my damp shirt back on, thinking this is my call to leave, but Rick shakes my hand and asks my name and offers me a swig from his flask.

“Why are you soaking wet?” he asks.

“We just had fun running around in the rain,” she says, then laughs and adds, “without clothes on.” This version much more innocent than mine. Rick does not react the way I expect, only joins her in laughing. This is not the siblinghood I’ve witnessed. These are not the people I’ve known.

I want Debbie to take me to some room, some corner, anywhere, but she goes upstairs to change her clothes, Rick following behind. They return in pajamas, Debbie in pink shorts, Rick in sweatpants. He tosses striped pajamas on my lap, points out the bathroom. The bathroom smells like pine and candles. I take off my wet clothes, stand naked before the oval mirror, shivering in my core. Rick didn’t give me shorts to put underneath. I pull his clothes on, feeling a pang of disgust with desire, the soft lining of his pants against my bareness. I look hard into the mirror – this is not where I belong. Spots of mud on my ears, liquor on my breath, the yellow of a fading black eye. When someone sees me, someone like Rick, they know everything about me, everything I’ll become.

I return to the main room, feeling ridiculous, this matching top and bottom, this pajama party.

“Looks like it fits all right,” he says.

“Yeah,” I say. “Thanks.”

Rick and Debbie have gathered around a table, dealt cards, brought pretzels and red licorice to the table. A game of poker, pretzels worth five, licorice worth ten. As wholesome as the kickball was immoral, equally surreal.

Debbie pats a spot on the couch beside her.

“Can I have something to drink?” I ask, wanting to stave off the sobriety that’s quickly catching up to me.

“Some water, Louie?” Debbie asks, concerned, like she knows my habits.

“Some liquor,” I say. She laughs, but Rick somehow sees that I’m serious, and offers me another swig. I lip as much as I can without seeming shady.

“You live here year round?” he asks me. He already knows the answer to this question. He can tell just by looking, the same way I can tell about him.

“Yeah,” I say.

“My parents are looking to get settled into the town, here. Meet people and all. I’m sure we’ll meet your family.” He smiles at me. I didn’t expect any of this kindness. I think of Billie, telling me that summer was a time she needed to be free. This is who Billie wants, Rick, a handsome

blonde in a big lakeside house, evenings spent playing cards on the couch, parents who come on weekends, a family to welcome into town. I imagine her meeting him, asking his name, coy, hopeful. He would like the way she swings her long black hair over one shoulder. She would like his clean haircut and polite manners. But it only makes me feel bad for her, how hopeless it is in the end, how he'd ask her number and kiss her and let her know how good it could be, only to leave her heartbroken at the end of summer.

The game lasts longer than I expect, longer than I can handle. Debbie wins a big pot with two queens, and rewards herself by tasting a strand of the licorice. Red candy, pale pink lips. She announces her loss of interest in the game.

"I'll cook breakfast tomorrow," Rick says. "Don't forget Mom and Dad come back early tomorrow, to take the boat out."

"I know," Debbie says.

"Make sure – "

"I know," she says again.

Rick goes sleepily upstairs, issues me no looks or threats, leaves me alone in his pajamas, with his sister.

There are moments when I doubt myself, when I'm shy, when I can't even imagine being someone that someone else would want to kiss, someone else's lips on my dirty mouth, someone else letting me into the privacy of the flesh cave of the mouth, someone who is willing to put the borders of our skin against each other, two cheeks, four lips. There are moments when I'm sure my skin is dirty in a way that soap and water can't clean. There are moments I can picture the rest of my life without ever being touched again – my body fitting in the maze of space between other people. And it's not that Debbie's fingertips at the veins of my wrist changes this, it's not that Debbie's tongue pushing its way on mine makes these doubts go away, but that I feel undressed, like her fingers and her mouth are taking this part of me away, saving it in a waiting place for me to put it back on when it's all over.

Debbie stands, leads me backwards to a doorway, doesn't stop this terrible, aching kissing. She struggles with the doorknob – it's still unfamiliar, what should be home but isn't just yet – and goes into the bedroom, a space that's strange to both of us, like we're in someone else's house, a dark spot, shadows keeping the dimensions of the room vague, but there is, of course, the bed in the middle of the room, right where we expect it. What matters in this moment is the bed. Debbie, on the bed, eager kiss,

bitten lips. She takes her shirt off all on her own, a different pink bra underneath. I pry my knees between hers, my fingers under the pink lace, but she stops all at once, like the sudden end of a storm. She pulls herself away from me.

“There’s no need to rush, Louie,” she says. “I’m here all summer. And next summer, too.” The promise of courtship, this is what she wants.

“Summer’s already started,” I say. This is not what she wants to hear, not what she’ll understand. Summer is already started, summer is only six more weeks, maybe my last summer in Devon Lake, no more summers will come. Kickball, liquor, wet white bras, wet blond hair. I put my thumbs beneath the pink of her strap, gentler, behind her shoulder, a final attempt, I just want this *off*.

She kisses me, a goodnight kiss, plain, like a mother, quick tight lips on mine. She knots herself away from me, whispers good-night.

It feels like a trick, a childish letdown to the stripping, the flirting. *Faker. Tease.* All the momentum reversed, the way girls can turn it on and off in an instant.

I maneuver out of the bed, return to the piney bathroom, tug down Rick’s pants. Faucet on, door locked, and I go at it with my other hand

pressed hard on the mirror. My face looks gray and pale in the florescent reflection. I imagine ripping bras off faceless girls. Purple, black, white.

When I'm done I wash my hands in the sink, white soap, clean scent. I know the next step – change my clothes, sneak away, leave this girl alone in her bed.

I walk to the double doors that open onto the porch. I open them, the suction of air tricking me into thinking it's windy. But the air is still, the rain falls straight down like long, sharp needles. I can stand at the very edge of the doorsill and not feel the rain. I cross my face into the pane of water needles, let them prick my skin, colder than the game hours ago. I can't remember the last time I was in a place I'd never been before. *Leave this girl.*

I return to Debbie's bed, curl myself around her knot. My cheek is cold from the rain, I press it into the back of her neck. I don't want to leave. I want to wake up here, clean, a soft bed beneath me, a rich girl beside me. I try to picture the color of her nipples beneath her bra, their shape under my thumbs.

## Chapter 7

I open my eyes, find an unfamiliar porthole window. A round glimpse of blue lighted sky.

“It stopped raining,” I say, but Debbie is gone. The open space beside me is clean, cool, white. The air is fresh after the rain.

My stomach feels flat, not unsettled or queasy or hungry. The sex is out of me. I’m calm, empty, suddenly wide awake, sober.

The bedroom is different in the light, more innocent and specific, a bay window, the sharp angle of a slanted ceiling, braided rugs, beige walls. The bed seems unfinished with all its white – there must be matched pillows and bed things on the way. There must be framings for the wall and curtains, and more furniture, a desk, a chair, a dresser. But I like the room like this, bare and open. Better for summer, for temporary spaces. The room is what I imagine for myself in Cape Cod – empty of anything that recalls the past.

But there is a cardboard box in the corner. Boxes are caves of the past – this one is full of papers, corners sticking out of the folded flaps, her name written in big stupid letters on the box, *My stuff, Debbie M.*, handwriting like a little girl’s. This one is full of what she needs to remember to be in this room.

*Where is Debbie?* Am I supposed to go on my own? I leave the bed, silent, listen at the door. No sounds, no tremors of movement. Am I alone in this house? I don't know what time it is. I have to work lunch. My underwear and jeans are still damp. I should have laid them out flat, but they were crumpled in a pile all night.

Did she turn my own trick back on me? *Leave before he wakes up.* Now the room is like a prison, like I don't have a choice to open that door or not, like its not even a door at all but unhinged wall.

I upset her too much last night, trying like I was to get at her. She told me to slow down, said summer was all before us. She wants me to fall in love with her. But then she would have stayed this morning, waited for me to wake up, fished for promises, held out for sober kisses. And then I understand it – she doesn't want me at all. She woke up this morning, saw me beside her in the porthole light, scrawny, ugly, cigarette breath, cigarette teeth. She felt sick like little stones in her stomach. She couldn't bear me in her clean sheets. She went to the bathroom and washed her hands and then her face and then her hands again.

I need her to come back here and make me stop wishing I'd left last night. I need her to come back here and keep me from making my way out from her covers, over to the box, into her past. Maybe its something dumb,

like schoolwork or stickers or dumb posters of movie stars. But maybe it will give me real secrets, what she doesn't realize I need to know about her, how to get her to take her bra off, how to get her to come back into this room *right now*, how to make sure I wake up here again soon.

We read Trish's diary once. Stupid girl keeping a book of secrets in that house. Donnie was the one that found it, looking for baseball we lost in the woods behind the house. A shoebox inside the hollow of a tree - Trish had to make another home of her own, away from the small home claustrophobia of three men, Rita, too, probably needed a box in a tree hollow. Donnie can't hide emotions the way the rest of us were taught to do. He looked so guilty when he realized what he'd done, when he opened the lid and gave the book in a plastic bag over to Rusty the way children report all discoveries to a parent. We brought it to the hole and read it. The book was black and gold and the first page had a letter to Rusty: *If you find this, be good and give it back, or bad bad things will happen to you.* I read the rest of it like a letter, too. I couldn't get that out of my head, the way she'd written it with the fear of Rusty reading it all along, like she could only record some of her girlish secrets, like the worst secrets she couldn't bring herself to write down, knowing Rusty could read them at any time. Girlish secrets, crushes on teachers and candy bars stolen from the Go-Mart and

peeing in the car once when Terry wouldn't stop for her to go. But it was enough for us to torment her for the rest of the summer. I never read beyond one particular entry, though, when Trish wrote that she wished I could kill Rusty and become her new brother. Rusty closed the book then, hid it in his own place, somewhere more clever.

I unflap the lids of Debbie's box. *Diary* in gold letters, the very first thing, right on top. Can you trust a diary that isn't hidden, in plastic and boxes and tree hollows? In the end we had decided that looking at Trish's wasn't wrong – that she should have known better than to record her life for Rusty to witness, and that we more or less already knew everything she'd written. But this time, I know it is wrong, to sit in Debbie M.'s room without even knowing what the M is for, to take her diary on my lap and bring it to my face to smell it and feel it on my lips, to stare at the still brass doorknob, ready to slam the diary back in the box, in case she returns, in case she catches me, though it seems less and less possible that she's coming to let me out of this clean prison, *where is Debbie?* I lift the cover from the pages. But there is no message to Rick, no urgent threat. No words at all. *Diary of* without a name in the long blank, without Debbie's loopy letters, the diary of no one. And this is the disappointment – a new, blank diary, waiting to accept secrets in its lines. I fan the thick pages with my thumb,

like shuffling a deck of cards, and the book falls opens to its first page. No words anywhere, but here there is a photo glued to the page. Debbie, Rick, mother, father. A family of blondes, daughter like mother, son like father, a white and red house behind them, green tree branches over them. This was a photo made to share. Smiles, satisfaction, gloating. I'm no fool, I know what photos can hide, what families can hide. But I let the photo trick me – maybe this father gambles, but not in this photo. Maybe this mother cheats, maybe this son cries, maybe this daughter slums. But here they are perfect, what people center their lives around finding, why Billie left, why my mother left, what they went searching for.

I understand them in this moment, Billie and my mother, maybe even forgive them, their wanting to lose themselves into this escape, these big houses, these faraway lives. I close the lid to the box. I need to find Debbie.

I take my damp clothes under my arm. I enter the hall, hesitant, like she'll see me and wonder why I am there in her house, in her brother's plaid pants. Shiny wooden floors. White walls, no frames.

Silent into the bathroom. I remove the plaid pants, put on my own, zipper, belt, the discomfort of stiff wet denim fitting between my legs. I

stuff my underwear into my pocket. I smell the crotch of Rick's pajamas, expecting something foul I should cover up, but it's scentless, harmless.

Warm air breezes into the house, flutters the magazines on the table. The double doors to the back porch are wide open, bright sky, the sparkle of the lake, the legs of a white wicker chair, *there she is*, her legs, Debbie's legs crossed at the knees, her foot bouncing up and down, leg shadows crossing wildly on the sunny wooden porch. Her toenails are painted red. I hadn't noticed this last night.

I cross the divide from shade into sun at the doorsill. It's instantly warm, like the sun will dry the thick folds of my jeans at once.

"Morning, Louie," Debbie says. Rick sits on a white wicker chair beside her, facing into the lake breeze. I hadn't seen him from inside. They're both in red swimsuits, his shorts too short, her swimsuit a stupid one-piece. They look happy and stupid.

She nudges a third chair with her foot, little red toenails, like shiny candy. I think she means for me to sit, but she kicks the chair away. They both stand, sudden, Rick offering me a five, Debbie thumbing her hands around the hem of the swimsuit, pursing her lips.

"I'll walk you out," she says.

"I left your pants in the bathroom," I say to Rick. "Thanks for that."

“See you man,” he says. He kicks his feet onto the porch banister, pulls his shorts even higher so the sun can color him. He doesn’t turn my way, doesn’t even look one more time at my face.

I follow Debbie down the wooden porch stairs. She takes delicate, unbalanced steps in the driveway, avoiding the sharp pebbles and gravel. She stops, tugs gently on my shirt. There will be some ordeal of a good-bye, how she’ll send me away.

“Rusty didn’t like you, you know,” I say. It comes too quick, it sounds mean. She bites her lips and looks down, not sure what to make of me. I’ve seen this look before, girls wanting to say *I don’t get you*, wanting to ask *what is it you want with me?* “Not like that,” I say. I just mean to tell her that he’s not an option, that I’m the only one who would come back here again, that if she can’t get kids like us all the time, maybe she can’t get kids like Rick, either.

“I didn’t do anything with Rusty, you know,” she says. “I didn’t like him.”

“I have to go to work,” I say, by way of telling her why I’m leaving, even though I wasn’t asked to stay.

“Where do you work again?” she asks.

“With Dennis. The restaurant in North Country.” I say.

“Right, I remember,” she says. What she pictures, I don’t know. I don’t say how our jobs are different.

Some type of kiss must happen, her cheek, her lips. Her hand? But she smiles and squeezes my side, her thumb at my hip bone, then hurries back into the house, her feet jumping quickly on the gravel, the soft give of her bottom bounce in the red suit.

It’s a long walk from her house to mine, up the narrow dirt road that widens as it leaves the lakeshore behind, down the main drag, really just a street, over the sudden highway connecting our small, distant villages, and then our hidden wooded neighborhoods, camper communities, the invisible worker’s homes, concealed by the crowded trunks of tall green pines.

At home I’m exhausted, a raw chafe inside my thighs from the damp jeans. Senior’s truck is in the drive, already started. I’m relieved at having a ride back into town, so I won’t be late to work, so I won’t have to walk another three miles with chafed legs.

I hear a car coming around the bend, probably Rusty stopping by to offer me a ride, to rile me up for not meeting him and Duke last night. But it’s Ona in her white mail truck, Ona who never plays music, who turns off the engine every time she stops at a house. She sees me, beckons me over.

She's got no eyebrows, and her chin sags like an old dog. She hands me a rubberbanded pack of mail. A letter on a top. And a postcard underneath. It's the identical in

"Ona, wait," I say. I jog to catch up with the truck. "I don't want my dad to see these," I say. "Can you keep them somewhere else for me to get them?"

"What're you talking about," she says. I hold up the postcard, the white envelope.

"I don't want him to know she's writing," I say.

Ona smacks her hand on the wheel, in defeat, like I've already asked her this. "I don't read your mail, boy," she says, and waits for me to back up so she can drive away. I watch her go, feeling foolish, like I let her in on a secret she couldn't have known.

"Louie," Senior calls from inside the house. I slip the mail under my shirt, tuck it into my waistband. "Time to leave," he says, "Go on and get dressed."

"Go on without me. I need to shower and all," I yell back. I do need a ride, badly, but not as much as I need to read this mail, right now, two, *why are there two?*

Senior comes out in his brown uniform. He fits two black trashbags in the garbage cans.

“Don’t be late,” he says, and he pats me on the side, the same place where Debbie squeezed me, his touch much briefer, his fingers tapping the cardboard edge of the postcard beneath my shirt, what I don’t want him to find. I wait until the orange of the truck disappears into the maze of trees, then I go inside.

*Vera and her damn dog is driving me up the wall. I’m going to New York city to find a job in an office. Once I am in a place all my own you can come visit. Where that will be I don’t know yet. Maybe youll even want to live here. Meantime please take care of each other. Love.*

Take care of each other. She slipped. She meant this postcard for me – please take care of him. But the letter, the thin white envelope, it’s addressed to him, *Senior King*. The words are sure and sharp – this is no mistake. A miserable loneliness takes me, that I’m excluded from the privacy of the seal, that I was wrong in thinking she wanted me to protect him from her. But what she doesn’t understand is that he still sets the table for three by accident, that he wakes in the middle of the night to every sound he hears, just in case it’s her trying to come home. What she doesn’t understand is that he can’t handle her casually sending him a letter, one year later. For the second time that day I open what doesn’t belong to me. The sharp lip papercuts my thumb, punishment for the trespass of private paper.

No letter. Only the thin slip of a gray check, *pay to the order of Louis King Sr. two hundred dollars*, the memo reading *for Linda*. The address on the check is for a Mr. Robert Poovey of Albany, New York. She didn't go to New York. She went north. Both the postcard and the letter are postmarked the same day, from Montpelier, Vermont. She went right past us, Woodstock to Albany to Montpelier, probably looked out the dirty window of some bus at the exit, maybe turned to the woman beside her, said *I used to live there*.

In the year she's been gone, our house has become disorganized. Senior says he likes clutter. The drawers in our kitchen are all the same jumble, not one drawer for silverware and another for receipts and another for dishrags. Every drawer has some of each along with things we don't need at all, a fork, paperclips, beer bottle caps. I look through all the drawers, four of them on top of each other, another under the sink. I find a roll of American flag stamps and unsharpened pencils, but no envelopes, no papers. I want something stern, a long rectangled envelope like the kind for bills, and a sharp, black inked pen. In the hollow under the television stand I find what will have to do. It was a gift from Rita on some birthday of mine. I don't remember any party or what age I was turning or any other detail besides the unwrapping of this shape, thinking it would be a G.I. Joe, hating

Rita when I saw that it was a stationary set. A thin tablet of paper in the shape of a baseball mitt, two shades of blue, a red-laced baseball in the center of the blue mitt. The envelopes don't match, white squares wide enough to fit the mitt shape. The set is still new, unopened, shrinkwrapped against a dusted cardboard backing.

*Dear Mr. Robert Poovey.* Who are you? What did she do for you to get your money? Where is she going? Is her hair still long and is it still bleached blonde? Are you her new boyfriend? Do you care that she wears bathrobes outdoors sometimes? Have you counted the freckled sunspots on her forehead and her shoulders?

*Dear Mr. Robert Poovey.* If you know where Linda King is will you please write me back in a letter not a postcard. I want to know her new address where I can write her. Sincerely, Louis King Jr.

I forgot to bring my uniform to the laundry. It smells like the oil of fried food, and it's hardly dryer than the jeans I just took off. I put it on anyways, no other choice, and I use Senior's spray deodorant like a cologne, like a cleaning product, all over me. I seal the envelope around the baseball paper, and I tuck it into my waistband. I put the postcard and the check and the opened envelope from Albany into my cigar tin.

I phone Rusty, just in case, but Terry answers, tells me he's due back soon, just went out for something. Terry says he'll have him call me at work, then he belches into the phone, bellows his laugh, calls me a prick.

All the way back to town, this long walk, late for work. I glance over my shoulder every now and then, hoping Rusty or Trish will come by with a ride. The calm of my morning is gone entirely, this hovering medicine smell, this damp wrinkled uniform, this burning chafe, this longing for a girl with the last name Moore or Martin or Manson, this nagging suspicion that disregarding the night with Duke might have been a bigger mistake that I'd thought.

I thumb for a ride, but no one stops, me probably looking like a prisoner in this uniform, cutting through the high grass alongside the highway. I give up the thumb once I'm in town, too embarrassed to take a ride for half a mile. Even though I'm late I go to the post office, out of my way a quarter mile. The big blue mailbox at the corner opens smoothly, sucks my letter into its gut. A letter for Mr. Robert Poovey from Devon Lake, New York. I wonder if he'll recognize the name, if he's ever heard of this invisible town, if he's ever even heard of Linda King.

## Chapter 8

Finally I get to work, and I see Dennis ahead of me at the employee entrance in his sharp white collar, his black pants. I'm late, by nearly an hour, carelessly turning into work when the servers do. This is our last chance for a cigarette, as soon as the servers get there, a quick twenty minute break before the rush, but Benny'll smack the back of my head, make me work instead, push me at the pile of pans in the sink, silver hollows stacked inside each other, filling with greasy, iridescent water. I apron up and punch in, duck into the kitchen as discreet as I can. I head to my station to try and catch up, but there is Frankie, in elbow length rubber gloves, rinsing the last of a stack of trays. Like watching myself.

"Don't worry, Benny's at a meeting," he says when he sees me. "You owe me."

Last summer and the summer before, when it was time for a smoke I would shy away from the group of servers around the coffee can. I would kick gravel in the parking lot or sometimes go behind the fence with Moe to smoke a joint. I didn't like it there during the day, with all the pretty waitresses who didn't really smoke, and all the line cooks trying to get their attention. I liked it better there at the end of the night, when no one was around, when it was dark and empty. Everyone else, they thought I was

stupid because I don't talk much. This year, though, once Frankie came and got so damn talkative, I've taken to sitting with the rest of them. Only on days mine and Frankie's shifts overlap though, days like today. He bums me a smoke, I follow him out back. Dennis sees us at the door. He grins wildly, holds the door open for me in a way he's never done before.

"Louie," he says, "Good fucking night, eh?"

"Ha. Yeah it was a good night," I say. The others are listening in. I look down.

"Heard you went back with Debbie," Dennis says. He gives me five and noogies my head, and Frankie knocks my back – it's all too much, too many hands on my body, too many eyes curious about what the quiet dishwasher has gone and done. I'm squirming under all this attention, but then I look up and see how goddamn happy they both look. And suddenly it's understood – we are friends. We have passed some experience and instantly turned from co-workers to friends, the townie dishwasher and the Canadian janitor and the city server. They go and recount the entire night, a small performance for Moe and the rest of them, embellishing about Debbie at the end, saying she threw herself on me in the dugout. That we have some secret, that we have something to talk about, something we actually care

about, not table twelve or eighty-six soup, it's enough to make us sudden, ordinary friends.

Benny appears from the kitchen. We go to butt out and head in, but it's my name he calls, *Louis*. Whenever anybody does that, my real name, closing out the easy sound of my nickname with a sharp S, it drops a weight into my gut, makes me feel like a nervous dog about to piss itself from guilt. It's not being late that I think of, it's the storeroom the other week. Losing a job now would be hell. No place would hire this late in the season.

"Relax. Jesus," Benny says. I must look as guilty as a dog, too.

"Phone call." Phone call. Only three people have called me at work. Rusty now and then to say he can't pick me up. Trish once to ask for help when Rusty was too drunk to drive. And my mother, last summer, calling to see if I would bring home two takeout meals, steak and sauce and everything. I said I would, but at the end of the night I was too embarrassed to ask. I told her they had already turned the burners off. She just nodded, then put water on to boil.

"It's probably Debbie," Dennis says. "Calling to say she misses you."

"Funny, asshole. It's Rusty," I say, and go inside. Benny's left the phone dangling on its cord, swinging slightly back and forth.

"Hello?"

“Louie,” a voice says.

“Who’s this.”

“Me, Debbie. It’s okay that I’m calling you at work?” I picture her back on the porch, red swimsuit, red toenails, a phone cord around her fingers, sun making shadows under her legs.

“Yeah. What do you need?”

“Do you want to have dinner with my family tonight at six?”

“I work till seven.”

“All day?” she asks. No, this is only a half day, in this world working all day means all day, a double shift, not getting off until near midnight.

“Just dessert then,” she says like an answer instead of a question, but I agree, and she tells me to meet at a restaurant, the Wayward Ship. She gives me her number, and I write it down on the back of my hand. I press too hard, and my hand aches, like the black ink is seeping into the fat green veins under my skin.

My family ate at the Wayward Ship once a year, on my mother’s birthday. It’s a restaurant-marina east of the country club, smack in the center of town. This year on her birthday we ignored the date entirely. Senior never mentioned it the week before, and when it finally came I made sure to stay away from the house, not wanting to see if he was going to

behave differently, some way of either celebrating or dishonoring the day, or even if he was going to dress in clean clothes and go to the Wayward Ship alone.

Dennis and the waiters ready themselves for the service, tuck in their shirts, check their teeth in the dingy mirror next to the punchclock. This is never what I'll worry about. My uniform can be stained and my eye can be bruised and I can smell like booze or smoke or garbage, and it won't matter.

"Did Debbie say she misses you?" Dennis asks.

"She wanted me to go to dinner," I say.

"No shit, it really was her?" he asks. He thumbs through his order pad to a clean page.

"How is it that you know her?" I say.

"I can't believe she really called you. Her dad worked with my dad. We spent summers together when we were younger, and she just moved here to Devon." This isn't exactly right. She just moved her summer house here. People who move to Devon move nearby me, not into the big lakeside cabins that are never heated over winter.

"What are they like? Her parents are gonna be there, I guess," I say.

"Damn kid. I don't know. They're just regular parents," he says.

"What's her last name?" I ask.

“Mahoney.” He gives me a kidney punch, takes a final pat to his neatly combed hair, and then disappears into the double doors, the gate between the kitchen and the dining room.

I run the first load of glasses. The steam from the dishwasher mixes with the sweat, beads on my forehead and behind my neck. By the end of lunch Debbie’s phone number is a faded blur of blue on my hand.

After work I go to the phone to call Rusty. I remember the rainy night before like it was a million years ago, standing here in this same spot at the same time, about to call Rusty for a ride, but changing my mind, trading it all for something else. Before the ride from Frankie, before the kickball game, before the rich girls in their bras, Rick’s pants, Debbie’s tongue, Debbie’s swimsuit. Before the moment at work when I sat with friends for a cigarette, when I almost forget, nearly entirely forgot the postcard in the mail today. Before all that I stood right here, slick from the rain, about to call Rusty.

Terry answers again, hollers for Rusty. I understand why Rusty didn’t come by today. I understand why he didn’t call work today. I blew off Duke, and Rusty will think I blew off Cape Cod, because that’s what I think about doing all the time. When I picture going through with it, this getaway, I see it like I’m another person watching it, seeing myself shotgun in Rusty’s

truck, looking back one last time at the house, at my father, at the rowboat, before Rusty takes me away. And it's like a punishment instead of a freedom. I try and conjure up what that freedom would be, what a real escape would be, but it doesn't come, it sits at the edge of my vision like a dream I've forgotten, like a word at the tip of my tongue. And this is why I can't go and sign the papers – the feeling that there is some other choice I haven't been able to see.

“He won't come to the phone,” Terry says and hangs up before I can ask why. Maybe it's Debbie he's angry about. Girls are something you share, something you don't turn down no matter what – but it was me she brought home, and him that she sent away. Maybe Rusty is jealous, not over her, but over me, that I could get what he couldn't. But could he already know these things? Word travels in Devon Lake. Trish, Donnie, maybe they told him something, maybe that saw her there, if Donnie could recognize her face and remember her.

Dennis is already gone. Frankie has to work dinner. Rusty won't answer the phone. I can't bear the idea of another long walk home, so I call my father.

Senior is testy today. He has his good days, his bad days. He hates when the weather shifts during the day. The humidity is returned, another

swell of rain holding in the clouds, making the night sticky and still. The wind rips into the car, our only relief, and it knocks the cigarette from behind Senior's ear. He swears, quiet, the sounds barely coming out so that I can't even be sure of what he said, just that it was some curse. He opens a new pack of cigarettes, lets the wind suck the plastic wrapping out the window. He waits an extra second at the stop sign to strike a match, and when we get back to the house, he throws the blackened match on the floor of the cab.

## Chapter 9

I put on my nicest outfit, slacks and a collared shirt bought in a mall, but I don't even get all the buttons done up before I take it off again, put it back on wire hangers in the closet. I stand in my underwear. A round fan drones at the window. I take my underwear off, kick them into the corner, put on beige-colored jean shorts and a blue t-shirt. My mother never would have let me go like this with her to that restaurant. In the bathroom I scoop a wad of petroleum jelly in my palm and spread in on the chafe between my legs.

I have somewhere else to go before I begin my third walk for the day.

Rusty is sitting on a law chair on the slab out back, his feet up on a plastic white table. He's smoking a cigarette and shuffling a deck of cards. My father helped pay for the slab back when we were little kids. The Davies' dog, a rotweiler pup, bit Rusty in the face, toothed a hole right through his lip. Rusty wanted to hate the dog, but he couldn't bring himself to. Terry had the slab poured and a fence put up around it, but Rita made him put the dog down in the end. Rusty had stitches for a few weeks, and his scar healed nicely and faded away. Now they just use the slab like a patio.

I don't waste any time. "I never came last night. Sorry."

Rusty looks my way over his shoulder, looks at me square in the chest, not in the eyes. He turns back away, returns to shuffling. “Get the fuck out of here,” he says quietly.

“Jesus, Rusty, it’s not that big of a deal.” But my reasons go away, and it feels like a big deal, his back at me, the hum and snap of the shuffling cards all he’ll give me. “It’s not like Duke needed me to convince him of anything.”

“Duke? Fuck Duke,” he says. “Duke doesn’t give a fuck about you.”

I step onto the slab, hook one of the empty chairs around to sit next to him.

“Don’t sit down. I told you to leave,” he says.

“Are you completely serious Rusty? You’re acting like a girl,” I say, and finally I get a good look at his face. But it’s not the furrow of anger that he gets when Terry hits him or when someone makes fun of the way Donnie talks. It’s the sting of exclusion, something I wouldn’t even have recognized if I hadn’t seen it on Trish’s face so many times before.

“No, asshole, you’re acting like a girl, following goddamn rich kids around and doing whatever you can to make them like you,” he says. “That fucking guy? Dennis Leary? And the new kid that Trish sweats? He

doesn't like you. He just wants you to bring Trish around." Hum, snap.

Hum, snap. "You shouldn't have brought them there."

The baseball diamond. This is what Donnie and Trish reported – me and the summer kids at our baseball diamond, Devon Lake Village High School, where Donnie hit his only grand slam, where Rusty led our win against Knoxville. This was part of our kingdom, a hidden fortress, a tiny four-corned gem where the *they* could not get at *us*.

"It wasn't a big deal," but I say it with the opposite of conviction. I picture Dennis and his handshakes and his smiles and his big clean knuckles in my dirty hair. I picture Debbie in the bed, her need for my attention, the pleasure she took in making me want her, in denying me what she pretends to be too proper to give. Frankie with Trish's hands on his skin. What I took for friendship in Frankie, in Dennis, what I took for a girlfriend in Debbie. But it was just temporary, like the summer people themselves, coming here for a breath-long season, making their homes out of our town, making it seem like it's out of something moral and good. Dennis never noticed me until I gave him something, something he didn't know about before, something from this town that hadn't belonged to him. Debbie wouldn't have wasted her time with me until she'd sampled my friend, until she knew I could only be a part of her life for just two months. And Frankie,

who isn't rich, isn't them, but isn't us. This *is* a big deal, our only deal – loyalty and integrity against the parasites of our town. Parasites that I let in.

“You too good for us now?” Rusty says, without really wanting an answer. “All your new friends.” What I want now is to sit down with Rusty and tell him what I'm discovering, to hate these people together. What I should have done is called Rusty like I was supposed, and gone to Duke's sleazy apartment and made halfhearted plans while smoking a joint. Rusty Davies, Mitch Duke, Louis King. This is where I belong. Not with Dennis Leary, not with Debbie Mahoney. A poison has unsettles my gut, the distinct guilt of a traitor.

I cut through the woods, back to my house, gone without saying anything more, feeling light-headed and unbalanced, like the earth beneath me is soft and shifty.

I arrive at the restaurant dizzy and sweaty. Debbie is waiting outside on the wooded porch that snakes around the whole of the restaurant. She wears a white cotton dress, slim wet moons of sweat on the white under her arms. She leans over the rail to where I stand, takes my hand and kisses my cheek, the roundness of her lips, the wetness at the center.

“We have a table by the water,” she tells me.

They all stand when they see me, the Mahoney family, father, mother, brother. The wrinkled surface of the lake behind them is gray under the clouding sky. A neat dinner table under a white linen table cloth, lake blue napkins, tall silver candlesticks.

“This is Louie King,” Debbie says. Mr. Mahoney reaches across the table to shake my hand, and Rick pats my back. My back is hot. Rick nods for me take the seat beside him, between him and Debbie. Their parents don’t look the way I remember their photo. Mr. Mahoney is gray, not blond, and he has weight around the cheeks. Mrs. Mahoney is like a catalogue model, attractive and happy without being sexy in any way, but she’s plumper, too, their portrait like a monument to who they used to be. They take me in.

“You’re just in time for dessert,” Mrs. Mahoney says. This is a polite lie. The dinner plates are gone, and their glasses are empty, and they’ve already decided what it is they want, blue square menus closed and pushed aside. Debbie pushes a menu at me. Almond cake, white chocolate mousse, candied pear. I don’t like desserts. They ache the cavities in the back of my mouth.

“You live here year round, then?” Mrs. Mahoney asks.

“Yes,” I say, then add, “My whole life here.”

“Oh what paradise. What luck to live in this paradise,” she says.

“It goes away some in the winter,” Rick says.

A waiter comes to take the order. I recognize him, a summer kid who used to serve at the Club, Sam or Stan, but when he asks what I want, I can tell he doesn't remember me, or maybe doesn't recognize me this way, not wearing brown slacks and yellow gloves, at a clean white table with the Mahoney family.

I fumble to order. I don't want anything, but it seems like the wrong thing to do, to not order dessert the Mahoney family has offered you.

Debbie leans close to me, the points of her elbows on her knees, her palms cupping her face. She asks if I just want to split with her.

“I'm too full anyways,” she says. “I couldn't eat all that alone.” This will do.

I unfold a linen napkin on my lap, and I notice the petroleum between my legs has soaked through the cloth of my shorts, two identical circles of oil.

“Why we moved here, Louie,” Mr. Mahoney begins. Everything is directed at me, or performed for me. “Is because we wanted to find a place with a little more community. The Jersey shore is a little busy for us.”

“Have you ever been to Cape Cod?” I ask.

Mrs. Mahoney is delighted. “I spent my summers there. Martha’s Vineyard. My parents sold their house not too long before Rick was born, to go down to Florida.”

“What’s it like?” I ask.

She breathes deeply, the smile gone, the seriousness of this matter. “Perhaps somewhere in between Jersey and Devon. There is a community, but when I got older I saw the stuffiness of it. That darn dog.”

The waiter returns with four wedges of cake, simple chocolate. Debbie dabs at the frosting with her fingers, pushes the little plate at me. The cake is mild and sweet. The humidity warms it and thickens it.

“Louie, do you want to go for a boat ride with us after dinner?”

Debbie asks.

“What kind of boat have you got?” I ask.

Debbie shrugs a little, looks at her brother. “It’s an eighteen footer Stingray,” he says. “Not too big but fast as all hell. My dad won’t take it as fast as it can go though. We can go for a ride another day without them sometime.”

Another day, sometime, tomorrow – I have been brought in to these plans. Debbie has told her family, *I like him, please be nice to him.*

“So do you want to go?” Debbie asks. “On the boat?” Mr. Mahoney awaits my answer, proud that he can be someone who takes his daughter’s crushes out for a ride. Mrs. Mahoney smiles her catalogue smile at me. Rick and Debbie looking younger than they are, like little children begging for attention. I am the star of this show.

They wait for me to answer, and the busgirl comes. She’s invisible to them, to the Mahoney family, just two quick forearms reaching around them to clear our dirty dessert plates. But I see her. Billie’s pimpled little sister, Annie. Annie who looks like Billie except ugly, Annie who has scabs on her elbows, who had sex with Donnie when she was thirteen, the only girl in town who’ll let a retarded boy put his hands inside her. We are invisible to her, too, until she moves between Mr. Mahoney and his pretty wife, until she stands in the space between them and looks up across the table and sees me, Louie King, Billie’s discarded boyfriend who she’ll try to recollect come September, Louie King the dishwasher son of the dishwasher father, here at the Wayward Ship with a rich, clean family. She looks at me, hard, and here is her choice – she can call me out, say *hello Louie, why aren’t you working tonight? are you working for the Mahoneys?*, make any comment she wants to embarrass me or punish me or expose me. But instead she uses her hand

to wipe the chocolate crumbs from the table cloth, gives me a quick, knowing look, *I know what you're up to.*

I watch as she leaves the table, wipes her hands on the back of her apron. I hate that this is the best Donnie will ever get, the best any of us will ever get.

A sudden fantasy takes me over. I want to rip my oily shorts off, stand nude on the Mahoney's dinner table, and masturbate in front of them, explode myself onto their fucking napkins and silverware and Debbie's white cotton dress.

They look at me with their innocent, expectant faces, waiting for me to say *yes, please take me on your boat.* What I hate most is how much I want to say yes, how much I want the wind, how much I want to borrow Rick's sweatshirt and show Mr. Mahoney the best bay to anchor. I hate that I almost fell for it all over again, this trick, imagining myself in this family, like Debbie's boyfriend, like Rick's brother. I hate that I thought they could save me, like Billie, like my mother.

*Please take me on your boat.* What have I traded away? The Davies for the Mahoneys. My loyalties for chocolate dessert with a girl who wouldn't let me take her clothes off. My best friend for a girl that will surely leave me at the end of summer.

“No. Thanks, though,” I say.

Mr. Mahoney is surprised. “Okay then. Some other time,” he says.

Then to Debbie I say, quietly, “I just want to spend some time alone with you.” *Okay*, she mouths, flattered with this, a pink blush at her cheeks.

“Well thank you for joining us, Louie. I hope you didn’t have to cut your workshift too short to come meet us,” Mr. Mahoney says.

“No sir.”

“Where is it you work exactly?” he asks.

Here is the moment when they will give in to their suspicions, when they will figure me out, when they will shift in their seats and wonder what they need to do to teach their pretty blond daughter the way the world works. Here is the moment when Mr. Mahoney will nod at Sam for the bill. It should be my cue to cover up, to white lie, to mention only that I’m a part of the dining staff at the first-rate golf course – a part of something, a member of something, important to something important.

“I wash dirty dishes in a restaurant for rich people,” I say, and I look direct at Mr. Mahoney like I look at Terry when he asks me how long my shower was *Ten whole minutes, a long hot shower. Dishwasher, bottom of the barrel. What are you gonna do now?*

Mr. Mahoney releases a note of laughter, like he understand, like isn't a part of *rich people*, like he isn't here in this fancy ass restaurant with his pretty wife and their pretty children. "I was a dish dog all through college, but it was at a bar, so it wasn't all that bad. I got to hang around the bar on slow nights. Of course the drinking age was younger then." Mr. Mahoney looks at Rick. "How bout it Rick? You ready to get yourself a summer job yet?"

Don't try to take this away from me – this is my burden, not what you can be a part of, not what you can understand. There is no college, there is no free drinks at the bar. This is my life, all that I can see ahead of me, no matter where I go.

"Louie you think you could find a job for Rick there?" Mr. Mahoney asks.

"You can have my job when I leave," I say. "That's why I asked about Cape Cod. I'm moving there with some buddies of mine. Just to see a new place and all."

"Spend next summer there. You'd make a fine time of it. Sure," Mr. Mahoney says.

"Sooner than that. I dropped out of school so I could go," I say. Admit you hate me. Admit you want me gone. Shift in your seat. Glance at

your wife. Try and change my mind. Show me the promise of education.  
“Thank you for the cake,” I say. I’m going to sign the papers, free myself from school days, and move to Cape Cod with Rusty Davies, my best friend, my only friend.

Mr. Mahoney calls for the check. Debbie takes my hand and we leave the restaurant to go back to her house.

*Your family was so nice to me, I’m so lucky I met you, it’s just that you’re cute when you get shy, your eyes are like the lake, let’s have a quick drink of something, you don’t have to be shy with me, your father must keep something somewhere, yes use nice glasses, it will be romantic, I want to be romantic for you, what should we do tomorrow, what should we do the next day, every time you kiss me I like you more, this summer will be the best of my life, more more give me more, that feels so good, I won’t move away, I’ll stay as long as you are here, give me more give me more of you give me all of you.*

I hate Debbie, and I want to fuck her. I hate her for leaving me to jack off in her bathroom, in her brother’s pants, pathetic and nervous and quiet. But she is one of the good girls, of course, and she will only use her hands, but I beg for her mouth, and when I finally win I hold her head and cram it into her, pump myself into her head, pump myself into her face. *Tell me*

*when*, she says, but I don't, and it comes like pain so strong you think its pleasure, like when Frankie punched me in the face, the instant before I realized the pain, when all I could feel was pressure circling out from a center.

She reels back, spits onto the floor.

"Louie," she says, shaken. "You didn't tell me."

"Tell you what?" I ask.

"You know," she says. "You didn't tell me."

The calm returns like a high, like the suddenness of drugs taking hold.

Debbie uses her thumb to wipe the corners of my mouth. I kiss her on the mouth, hold her hand like a handshake, and lay back on the couch.

"Slut," I say, calm, calm.

"What?" she says.

"You're a slut," I say. "You're a dirty mouthfucker." Calm, calm.

A car at the cabin. Father, mother, brother. Debbie motionless on the couch, like a statue, stunned, not yet crying, and I arrange my pants and zipper and my belt, and I go out the wide double doors, down the wooden stairs, away into the dark, humid night, away from the Mahoney house forever.

When I reach the ice cream stand where Frankie asked me to be his friend, I trip. Into gravel, into dust. I am exhausted, these long walks on my skinny legs. I don't pick myself up right away. I just allow myself to enjoy the pause in stepping, like taking a breath above water before going down for another long, underwater swim. And it happens all at once, a sudden, brilliant idea comes to me, and I say it out loud, *I'm going to buy a bike*, and the letters spell themselves out in my mind, over and over again, *b-i-k-e-b-i-k-e-b-i-k-e-b-i-k-e*, and I am sitting and resting and sucking in the relief of above-water breath and spelling out b-i-k and then there is a force heaving me backwards, like suction, two fistfuls of my hot, damp shirt. Then a blow to the back of my head like an underhand boxer. I bend my neck to see who the phantom fists belong to, and it's not until I see Rick Mahoney that I can release myself from this inert deadlock. It's not until I see tears in his eyes, tears like a little girl, that I can laugh like wild and take my own fistfuls of his shirt collar and ram my own weight into his chest.

"You ungrateful low-life," Rick says, and he has more to say, but my fist closes his mouth and brings him to the ground. The thump of his back on the earth, the thump of his head on the gravel, over and over, the wet of his tears under my fists, the red of his blood at his nose and his lips, over and over, the whimper, whimper, over and over.

I stop when he begs me to. I lift him by the arm, slump him into the open door to his car. I lick my knuckles, blood and snot, and then I spit on his face.

I walk home in the dark-blue humidity. The next rain still a day away.

Powerfighter, mouthfucker, I am what no one expects, I am invincible, I am unbeatable, I am the brute king of this town.