

## ABSTRACT

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PROBLEMS

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The verb *to cultivate* identifies the act of preparing and using land for crops and gardening. Another sense of the verb identifies the act of acquiring, growing, and maintaining—as in scientific cultures or amicable relationships. *Cultivated*, the adjective, describes an individual who has dedicated herself to improving her mind, her emotional and intellectual depth and breadth—traits that cannot be readily observed. The total senses of the word, then, encompass not only exterior but also interior vitality.

The stories within bear witness to a markedly American approach to cultivation: enhancing exteriority in order to understand and repair interiority. In an effort to forge happiness and overcome trauma, whether major or minor, each character in this collection focuses on the surface of his or her life, polishing it in order to stimulate its deeper counterpart, the inner life, where true reality lies.

COMMON LAWN AND GARDEN PROBLEMS  
AND OTHER STORIES

By

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## Like Shuffling Cards

Sticky, South Carolina summer had arrived, and ants were everywhere in the apartment. Gary had woken up before sunrise again, and, peering into the fridge, he watched one crawl out of a carton of soymilk and walk across its narrow, cardboard top. Last night's eggplant puree sat in a clear Tupperware container. It looked like mud, like a child's science experiment. Except for the soymilk, the puree and the ant, the fridge was empty. After trailing the ant for a moment, Gary pushed his thumb down, pressing the ant into the cardboard. Only a tiny black smear remained.

The ants first turned up in the bathroom but had migrated within the past week to the kitchen. They were in the blender, on the onions, under the coffee pot, and now, in the refrigerator. Hidden behind a tall box of sweet cereal, a kind Lois probably wouldn't eat, stood a cylinder of insect killer. Although Gary's medical training wasn't in toxicology—it was in laboratory technology—he was certain he shouldn't spray the ants with all the food around. Besides, Lois might scold him, or worse, stop talking to him.

Last night she had said, "If those are Pharaoh Ants, they can carry disease." They were both in the kitchen, Gary's dinner twirling in the illuminated microwave. Lois wore a gritty, milk-colored mask, and it had settled into the creases above her upper lip. According to Lois, the ants were a common problem at Garden Terrace, the Alzheimer's home where she worked before she was laid off in April. She had once found one inside a sterile IV bag. "But if they aren't," she continued, "they're harmless." The mask paralyzed her eyebrows.

"Do you want me to kill them, or not?" Gary said.

“Not with that.” Lois nodded to cabinet above the stove and stalked out of the kitchen. Maybe she had eaten the cereal after all.

When they settled into bed later, she turned away from him and said, “Did you think I wouldn’t notice? There has to be a nicer way.”

“Alright. Tomorrow I’ll look for the nicer way,” he said. He reached for her under the covers and shook her hips playfully. “But what if I don’t find it?”

“Do you want poison in our kitchen?”

“I’d like more food in our kitchen.”

“Then go grocery shopping,” she said.

“You could do the shopping, too,” he said.

“You know I hate riding the bus with groceries.”

Gary rolled onto one elbow and looked down on his wife. He saw a daub of mask stuck to her skin. He licked his thumb, rubbed her neck, and said, “You missed a spot.”

Lois let out a small sigh and moved closer to the end of the bed. “You’re always joking around,” she said.

Gary made a fuss rolling back over. “You know, we can’t all sit at the pool all day,” he said, adjusting the comforter in quick jerks.

Since being laid off, Lois hadn’t begun to look for another job. And she had started smoking, a habit she quit when she went off her birth control pills. Gary didn’t know how she expected to raise a family on his salary alone. He was already working overtime, as much as the lab allowed. Staying late, waking early. The sleeplessness

had been taking a toll on his concentration and his memory, skills he needed to perform.

But then again, Lois didn't seem to expect a family anymore. Just after the New Year, they had tried to get pregnant, always talking excitedly after lovemaking, wondering if this time was *the* time. Gary couldn't wait to teach his child things like shuffling cards or juggling. Lois talked of a girl, wanting to name her Hazel. They tried for months, always stopping during Lois's period. So many mornings, Gary would wake to find Lois, stone still in bed, with a special glass thermometer perched in her lips. But last month, after her period ended, they didn't start again. One day, while watching television, Gary dragged his fingertips up and down Lois's bare leg. When he moved under her sarong, she stopped his hand. "Not yet," she said.

She had been spending her days at the apartment complex's pool. In the mornings, when Gary dressed for the oncology lab where he worked as a technician, Lois tied a stringy, two-piece bathing suit behind her neck and above her hips, and then wrapped a floral scarf around her waist. Before the morning air turned to afternoon mugginess, she'd stand on the square balcony, smoking a cigarette. Silently, Gary would apply silky white lotion to her shoulders and back. For the first few days, he loved this part of the morning: Lois's warm flesh underneath his palms, the familiar scent of coconut sunscreen. Afterwards, he would rub the remaining lotion into his forearms, knowing his sweat would activate the smell later in the day, reminding him of Lois's body when he didn't expect it.

Lately, though, the ritual had grown stale. He had three, maybe four, minutes with his wife's body—and for what? For her to sunbathe all day? Their apartment

complex's brochure had made the pool seem like some kind of popular oasis. The caption actually used the words *sparkling* and *resort-style*, and although Gary was rarely inside the pool's peeling, painted fence—he usually saw it from above, from the balcony—he was pretty sure the photo wasn't even taken in Ladson. His town never had cloudless skies, and as far as he could tell, the real pool only reflected a frothy, greenish sky, the only kind possible in the humid seasons. The brochure's picture showed the pool deck occupied by fit men and women in bright swim trunks and bikinis, as if the apartment complex housed only the young and attractive. Gary would nod to the occasional neighbor he'd cross in the parking lot, but not many of them were young or fit. His next-door neighbor was an old man with a long beard and a beer belly. Lois nicknamed him Birdman, because he would bring his parakeets in the cage onto the porch, smoke cigars and stand around, never uttering a word to Lois or Gary. Gary would glare down at the dingy pool, and say to Lois, "Be careful," when what he really meant was, "Don't go in the water."

In the afternoons, Lois returned to their apartment to snack on whatever remained in the cabinets. Not that Gary ever witnessed Lois's snacking. Like the forensic detectives he saw on crime television, he'd return home from the lab to piece together evidence, follow crumbs. She'd leave an empty tuna can on the coffee table or an unscrewed jelly jar in the pantry. Saltine grains around the sink. A peanut butter smudged knife resting on an ashtray. She'd come home smelling of chlorine and tell stories about other people. As the weeks went on, Gary tried not to blame his wife, but lately he couldn't help thinking it was her carelessness that caused the ants to metastasize.

Last night, he had slept fitfully at best, dozing in and out of the same strange dream. The one where he walked the apartment, looking for Lois, his feet feeling like cement, and every step tiring him. He finally finds her sleeping shape under a heavy comforter. When he pulls back the cover to climb in and rest next to her, he discovers a skeleton lying in Lois's place. Its jaw slightly open, and its pelvis wide and round, the shape of a big, empty bowl. The bones are so white, Gary squints. When he awoke, the muscles in his face felt sore, like he had been grimacing all night.

The morning after the dream, Gary dozed in the lab, mesmerized by the whirr of the spinning centrifuge. The oncology office was quiet this morning; the overhead lights remained dim, and Gary worked by the glow of the lone desk lamp. He'd been awake for hours, but his body felt groggy and slow, like he had heavy liquid coursing his veins. He pulled his eyes from the blood samples and picked up a chart. Burnes, Hugh. Pancreatic Cancer. Based on the TNM, Hugh might not live to see his next chemotherapy appointment. For the sake of the patient, Gary tried to concentrate, but all the counts ran together. WBC. Seg. RBC. Lymphs. Mono. Eos. Baso. The lines separating the columns and rows looked misaligned. Had he mixed up the Hgb and Hct? The centrifuge clicked and began to decelerate. As the spinning slowed, the black rubber stoppers on the blood samples trembled. To Gary, it looked like an army of ants scurrying over the machine. A familiar pain burned at his temples; he had been grimacing again. He shook his head and bent to take a closer look. The machine stopped. There were no ants. Without the sound of the centrifuge, the lab became eerily quiet. Gary took a deep breath and heard only the air whistling out of his nose.

He had been spending so much time worrying about Lois, he hadn't been thinking about himself. Maybe there was something wrong with him. If he could get more sleep, he could figure it out.

He sent the centrifuge back in motion and found his way to the tall bookcase in the conference room. A long, wooden table, one that mostly supported free lunch from the drug reps, overwhelmed the room. Leftover crinkled aluminum trays from the Chinese place winked as Gary inched his way around the table's edges to reach the dusty DSM from the shelves, a hulking text wedged between all the slender oncology journals. When he tugged the text loose from its niche, he noticed a small green piece of paper about the size of a button clinging to the cover. It was a lunch sticker. *NO PICKLE*, it read.

Back under the chrome lamp in the lab, he turned to the index. While picking at the sticker with his stubby fingernail, he grazed over the entries under Sleep Disorders: *insomnia, hypersomnia, narcolepsy, circadian-rhythm sleep disorder, nightmare disorder (formally Dream Anxiety Disorder)*. Did Gary have dream anxiety? Was the skeleton dream a nightmare? He couldn't be sure. He closed the book and slumped back on his stool. He had never done well in his Psychology classes. Blood was easier to read.

The sticker had now come completely off and was rolling between Gary's fingers. Suddenly, all the overhead lights flickered to life; Gary could almost feel his pupils narrow to adjust to the burst of fluorescence. No doubt the receptionist had finally arrived. Gary tucked the balled up sticker into his pocket. The white page of Hugh Burnes' blood blazed back at him. The sight of the crunched numbers stirred

him alert. Those numbers, written in his own hand, coded an uncontrollable division of poisoned cells. If he didn't get it right—he couldn't finish his thought. Instead, he imagined all the cells in the body of Hugh Burnes, in himself, in Lois. Crowded, swimming sacks twitching harmoniously like a school of fish. In his mind's eye, Hugh Burnes' cells barreled greedily through the body while Lois's cells skated along. Maybe Gary had gone too far last night. Maybe he should have cut Lois some slack, let her take the truck, instead of snapping at her. She had stopped shopping and cleaning, but she had lost her job. Her sense of purpose. The whole affair might have weakened her.

When he first met Lois, he thought she must have had a lot of antioxidants in her system, more than other women. They had been in the same Clinical Radiology class at the College of Technology. Nearly every class, she strolled in late and recounted to the instructor the story of her tardiness. She couldn't get her chakras aligned, or she was waiting for a large flock of geese to cross Rivers Avenue. Gary felt privileged to sit near her. Back then, she wasn't a smoker. Her dark hair she wore cropped short, and Gary would eye the spiked strands, wondering how often she washed it. He'd spend the rest of the class trying to shake images of Lois in the shower, her hair wet, suds slipping down her back. He smiled now, remembering not knowing her, remembering Lois as a mystery. So much of her mystery had dissolved; it was as if Lois from the past was an entirely different person. But she was the same person. The Lois from Clinical Radiology was *his* Lois. Gary hoped she had the same healthy cells now as she did then. Thinking of cells again, he turned back to the chart.

He slid his index finger along as he read, checking the numbers one more time. He had recorded correctly; Burnes' counts were dangerously low.

In Ladson, the Lowe's stayed open until nine-o'clock. Gary clicked off his desk lamp at precisely 7:30pm and made his way to the employee parking area. The walk wasn't far but the stifling heat sent beads of sweat down his sideburns. He took a crumbled napkin from his glove compartment and swabbed his face with it. He wondered if Lois was still at the pool. How could she stand the heat? The evening forecast had predicted scattered thunderstorms. Maybe they would break the temperature. He scanned the sky for dark clouds and spotted a few in the distance. He drove with the air conditioning at full blast, one vent pointed directly at his face, drying up the sweat.

When at Lowe's, instead of heading straight to the necessary aisle, Gary took a lap around Home Décor and Lighting, imaging one of the chandeliers bolted to his own dining room ceiling. He liked the modern models best, the light bulbs screwed into what looked like upside down wine glasses, but a flip of the laminated price tag dissuaded any more fantasizing. One chandelier, uninstalled, was an entire paycheck. Gary quickened his pace and found Pest Control located in the Safety aisle. Cans, boxes, and bottles created colorful stripes across the shelves, but most of the bright containers resembled the same insect spray he already had. He picked up a red can and turned it over. *Ant and Roach Killer Twelve kills roaches fast and on contact.*

*Residual Action keeps on killing after you spray. Results last up to three weeks.*

Residual action? Is that like residual abscess?

“I know what you need,” said a voice behind him.

Gary spun around. The voice came from a young woman with stringy blonde hair. She was younger than Gary—maybe twenty or twenty-one—and had wide hips, wider than Lois’s. A blue apron cinched her narrow waist. Her nametag read *Gina*.

“Ants, right?” she said.

Gary nodded. “You bet.”

“We’ve got ants too right now.”

“Is there anything more humane than—?” Gary gripped the red can tighter and shook it back and forth.

“More humane.” Gina reached for a yellow box on a shelf just below Gary’s chin. He noticed a round, silver hoop pierced through her eyebrow and an arabesque design tattooed just below her ear. She slapped the yellow box into the palm of her hand while she spoke. “This should do it. The ants are attracted to the sweet juice inside the domes in here. But it’s poisonous juice, so when the ants drink it, they carry it back to their nest. The poison spreads, and—bam—kills the nest.”

Gary took the box and examined it.

Gina continued, “It’s great. You have to let the ants crawl around for a while because they have to drink the juice, but eventually they’ll stop. They die somewhere else, so you don’t have the dead bodies like you do with the sprays.”

No dead bodies, Gary thought. Sounded like something Lois would approve of. When he looked up, Gina was still there, tugging on a strand of her hair.

“It’s a dirty job, but somebody’s gotta do it,” he said.

Gina laughed. Her two front teeth pointed inwards, towards each other.

“Are you a doctor or something?” she said.

Gary glanced down at his blue scrubs. “I just play one on TV,” he said. Gina let out another laugh. “No, I’m a lab technician. I study blood and stuff.”

“Ew.” Gina scrunched her face.

High above their heads, a low rumble erupted. The lights in the store dimmed and then, just as quickly, brightened again.

“Uh oh,” Gina said. “Another thunderstorm.”

“I better get going. Thanks a lot. My wife—” Gary stopped himself. He fingered the corners of the yellow box. “She’ll be real happy about this.”

After Gary paid the cashier, he watched as rain splattered against the glass doors. He hesitated, and then made a run for it.

From behind the wash of the windshield wipers, Gary could tell all the lights in the apartment were off. The storm may have knocked out the power, but Birdman’s porch lanterns still burned. Gary turned off the ignition and jogged to his front door. He peeked through the long window. Was Lois at home? Was she at home in the dark? He relied on the light next door to slide the key in the lock.

“Lois, I’m home!” Gary dragged out the vowels and put on his best Cuban accent. It was an old joke he hadn’t tried in a while. There was no answer. Lois used to love that show. She had even named her old dog Desi. Gary flipped a switch and the living room floor lamp beamed. “Power’s back,” he called. He went around the

room and clicked on more light. He passed Lois's favorite piece of furniture—a large, bowl-shaped chair that he called “the turtle.” The chair was one of the only pieces they bought after they got married. Lois's cousin gave them a gift certificate to Pier One in downtown Charleston. Right there in the store, Gary had flipped it upside down on top of himself and stuck his arms and legs out.

“Did you know you married an amphibian?” He had said when he popped his head out from under the overturned cushion.

“Are we going to need a cage, too?” Lois said, laughing. Since that day, Gary had tried the turtle joke a few more times. The last time, though, Lois hadn't laughed. “Turtles are reptiles,” was all she said.

A newspaper page folded into fourths had been stuffed in the seat of the cushion. Gary smiled. Lois had finally begun to look for work. He expected to see want ads, but what he saw was Lois's handwriting curled between the columns of the obituaries. He could barely make out the words. He squinted. Under *Phyllis Ashe*, Lois had written, *knit scarves*. With the newspaper still in his hands, he called for Lois again.

“In here.” He found Lois, still in a bright blue bikini, lying across the bed on her stomach, her chin in her hands, and her dangling feet crossed at the ankles. She had set her gaze on the sliding glass door, still streaked with rainwater. An ashtray, cigarettes and a lighter rested on the floor next to the bed.

“Power's back,” he said again.

Lois didn't move. Gary crawled into bed next to her. He tapped her on the inside of the forearm with the paper.

“Someone you know?” he said.

“Phyllis,” Lois said. She curled her bottom lip into a pout.

Gary nodded. “One of my patients is going to die soon, too,” he said. “I’m sure Phyllis had a great life.” He scanned the obituary and whistled. “Ninety-two. Lots of great memories to be had in ninety-two years.”

“Not if you don’t remember them.”

Gary hesitated. He looked at Lois’s profile. She no longer pouted. He tugged gently at the dangling strings of her bikini top. “You and I have another fifty, sixty years before our parts break down.” He moved his hand up her waist and onto her arms. “I have something for you,” he said. First he traced circles on her forearms and then tucked a thumb under the string of her top. “I’ll give you a hint.”

“I don’t want it,” she said.

“You didn’t even hear the hint.”

“Fine.”

“It’s from Lowe’s.”

“I don’t want to work at a hardware store, Gary,” she said.

“What?”

Lois pulled a cigarette from the box. She flicked the flint and it sparked to a flame. With the end of the cigarette in her mouth, she said, “I don’t need you to get me job applications.”

“I didn’t,” Gary said.

“I just can’t do this anymore.” Lois got up from the bed. Gary didn’t follow or even turn his head.

“It’s not even a job application,” he said. But he could already hear the rush of the shower from behind the bathroom’s half-shut door.

While Lois showered, Gary placed the white domes in appropriate places around the kitchen. He had one on the windowsill, and now he was trying to force one in the narrow space between the stove and the pantry. Holding the dome between his finger and thumb, he realized it was more delicate than the image on the box made it appear to be. If he squeezed his finger and thumb together, it would crack like an egg.

“What are you doing?”

With one arm stretched into the space and his face pressed against the side of the pantry, he felt the airy fabric of Lois’s sarong brush past his shoulder.

“I told you it wasn’t a job application,” he said. He watched her open the freezer and pull out a fresh container of ice cream. “The woman at Lowe’s said this was humane.” The overhead light combined with escaped waves of water vapor made Lois’s skin look blue, almost translucent. If Lois spent all her time at the pool, how could she remain so pale? She unwrapped the plastic seal, opened the lid and then jammed the head of a spoon into the block of ice cream.

“Where do you think all these ants live anyway?” she asked.

“Hard to say,” Gary said. “Where they live is where they’ll die. Apparently.” He rose from the floor, slid his hands in his pants’ pockets, and watched as a few ants stumbled into the dome on the windowsill. He toyed again with the sticker living in the fuzz on his pocket.

“Did you know that a snake can live in a freezer for six months?” Lois said.

“What?”

“James told me.”

“Who’s James?” Gary said.

“He goes to the pool,” Lois said. “I was just lying in the sun, and he comes up to me and says, ‘Did you know a snake can live in a freezer for six months.’ And I said, ‘No.’ And James says, ‘My dad takes dead animals and makes them into decoration.’ ‘A taxidermist?’ I asked. ‘No, that’s not it,’ he tells me. Anyway, he says his dad kept a live snake in the freezer for six months, and when he took it out, he thought it was dead. So, he left it in the kitchen for a little while, but when he came back, the snake was gone.”

“Is James a lifeguard or something? He sounds a little young to be a lifeguard,” Gary said. He saw one ant reroute its course and more began to follow it. “Look. I think they like it.”

“I asked James how long ago that was, and he just shrugged. He didn’t even know.”

“Gina was right,” Gary mumbled. He turned to say more, to tell Lois about Gina, the chandeliers, the funny *NO PICKLE* sticker, but he stopped. Lois was already deep into the tub of ice cream. She was eating straight from the carton, using a soup spoon to shove bites into her mouth. Gary saw the head of the spoon disappear past her lips. He could hear the metal on her teeth. It looked like she wanted to swallow the whole thing. Gary pictured the cold, round spoon sliding down her throat like thick, metallic mercury.

“Easy, honey,” he said.

“They never found the snake. It’s still in their house.” Lois turned and left the kitchen, the spoon still in her grips.

Before going to sleep, Gary lay in bed and watched as Lois changed into her pajamas. Under the slanted light from the nightstand lamp, her skin looked smooth and tight, even around her hips where Gary knew to be a few, sallow dimples. For just a moment, before pulling on an oversized t-shirt and a pair of checkered, drawstring shorts, she stood naked, her complexion not as pale as he had thought. He could see just the hints of a tan, the whiteness of her breasts outlined by sun-tinted shoulders, chest, and stomach; just under her belly button, a faint line separated her bronzed belly from the pale skin below. It was like she wore an invisible, perpetual swimsuit, her breasts and lower abdomen in relief, like a paper doll’s. He wanted to say something, to hold her, but the taught string on the shorts was signal enough. They shared a dry kiss and rolled over to fall asleep.

Gary’s dream that night was a variation on the old dream. When he finally reached Lois in the bed, all her skin was intact. She was propped up, naked, drinking mercury from a long vial. The mercury swelled inside her stomach and silver light burst through her pores. Her body glowed like a healthy dose of Barium Swallow. Gary awoke hard. He thought it was a sign. Lois was no longer a skeleton. He felt for her, but she was already up and on the balcony in her swimsuit. The sun through the blinds cast striped shadows on the bed.

“What time is it?” he said.

Lois flicked her lighter and put one hand on her hip. “It’s supposed to rain again today,” she said. “I want to get an early start.”

Gary looked over at the alarm clock. “It’s six-thirty,” he said.

“James is going to teach me to swim butterfly.”

Gary climbed out of bed in his boxer shorts and stood behind his wife. “Do you need lotion?” He leaned into her, moving his hands up her waist, tracing circles on her forearm. He wrapped his hand around her wrist, positioning two fingers on her pulse.

Lois exhaled. “No.”

Gary dropped her arm and crawled back into bed.

An hour later, his alarm buzzed, beckoning him awake. The apartment smelled faintly of smoke and another substance, something that reminded Gary of the alcohol the lab used to clean its equipment.

“Lois,” he said. He rose from the bed and traced the smell to the bathroom, where he found an ashtray on the sink, bloated with crippled cigarette butts. Around the ashtray, the ceramic bathroom gleamed, spotless. Even the watery toothpaste specks low around the mirror had vanished. Gary lifted the lid of toilet and began to relieve himself. Over his stream striking the toilet bowl, he thought he heard footsteps inside the apartment; he held his breath and listened, only to realize the intermittent thrummings were the deep grates of his own joints. As he reached forward to flush, he caught a flash of red just under the lid. Gary bent, squinting to look closely. Where the tank met the bowl was one red splatter, the size of dime or a button. Is that—? Blood? It wasn’t a dark red, not like the blood samples in the rubber-topped tubes. It was a bright, vibrant red, a color from a child’s paint set or one found in a summery

flower. A sliver of light curved across its runny surface. It was wet, still fresh. Gary pulled at the end of the toilet paper roll; the cardboard tube bounced clumsily around the dispenser, making an arrhythmic bumping sound, like a heart murmur. After wadding the paper and wiping the spot, he turned the stained clump to his eyes. It was most definitely blood. Had Lois begun her period again? Gary couldn't remember. He called for his wife again.

For as long as he could remember, Lois always told him when her periods began and ended. At first, it was always a relief. They hadn't wanted a pregnancy early on. But now, it was a burden, a failure. Maybe she hadn't wanted to tell him. Maybe something had gone wrong. Maybe this was a different kind of blood. Gary shook his head and tossed the toilet paper into the trashcan. Blood surrounded him each day, and every cell could be accounted for and analyzed, the test results displayed in large, easy numbers. A diagnosis from one drop. He and science had advanced, had come this far. He remembered being a child, trying to read a thermometer when he needed his temperature checked. He could never hold it the right way, the mercury reflecting in an awkward balance of light and dark. What about Lois's little thermometer? He thought suddenly. Mercury. It could leak out of a thermometer and into someone's mouth. If ingested, the poison could cause significant brain damage, affecting a person's ability to see, to taste, to feel. It could even change someone's personality. It was especially bad for women to ingest mercury, he knew. Lois might be slowly losing her eyesight, her voice, her personality.

Gary rushed back into the bedroom and grabbed yesterday's scrubs, pulling them on as he made his way through the apartment. In the kitchen, carcasses crowded around the can of aerosol spray. By the windowsill, a trail of ants still climbed eagerly in and out of the dome. With his arm through one sleeve, Gary picked up the aerosol can and rattled it. Empty.

On the balcony, he pulled on the rest of the shirt and leaned over to look past the wooden fence into the Planters Retreat pool. He could hear Birdman's parakeet piping and whistling. The sun beat down from the empty, cloudless sky, and the wrought iron railing burned Gary's palms. Through the shimmering, humid air, he thought he could make out a lithe female figure lounging face down on a long chair, but a gust of wind seemed to unfurl the shape. It was just a towel tangled atop the chair. Or, was it?

As Gary raced down the exterior steps, tying the drawstring on the scrubs' pants, he wondered if even he could have accidentally swallowed mercury all those years ago. It could have significantly affected his cognitive or affective development. Maybe he wasn't developing a psychological problem. Maybe he had been defective for a while. Was there anything he could do for mercury poisoning? Would it show up after all these years? When he reached the wooden fence, he stopped rushing. It was Lois. There she was, sitting on a lounge chair, beneath a wide, faded umbrella, the shade silhouetting her body. Dark mirrored sunglasses concealed her eyes.

"You're here now," Gary said. "Where were you?"

"It started raining," Lois said.

“It did?” Gary cupped his hand over his eyes and looked into the sky. A few clouds the color of ash drifted in the distance.

“A little,” Lois said. “I was out here but then I went to James’s apartment. You wouldn’t believe the taxidermy going on over there. They have an entire family of deer heads mounted right above the television. Looks like some kind of weird puppet show.”

“Oh,” Gary said. “I didn’t know where you were.” He moved next to her on the lounge chair.

“Just at the pool. Then at James’s. By the way, I think they’ve all died.”

“Who?”

“Our ants,” she said.

“Looks like you killed a lot this morning,” he said.

“I’m pretty sure they were pharaoh ants,” she said.

Gary looked at his wife’s face. He could see a tiny, distorted version of himself reflected in her lenses. “Is everything alright?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Is everything alright?” Lois said.

“I’m thinking about that thermometer you used to use.” He wanted to add, “And I found blood in the bathroom. But he didn’t.”

“That’s what you’re thinking about,” Lois said. She sighed.

“Did you have an accident?” Gary said.

“Are you calling this an accident?”

“No, I’m not—I’m not calling anything anything.”

“Shh. Let’s talk about it later. Look,” Lois said. “Here comes James.” She rose from the chair and started off past Gary, to the pool’s gate. From across the parking lot, a shirtless black boy made his way towards them. He had a towel slung over his neck and a pair of swimming goggles strapped around the top of his forehead. As he came closer, Gary could hear the boy’s oversized flipflops as they slapped the bottoms of his feet.

“Oh, honey, don’t run,” Lois called.

High in the sky, a thick cloud floated across the sun, casting a wide shadow over the pool and the surrounding deck. Lois stood just on the cusp of sun and shade. All Gary could see was her dark back, but he knew the sunlight struck her face. He knew what he couldn’t see was glowing.

## Impossible Kingdom

Paula lingered on Barb and Dan's new threshold, the cardboard handle from the case of beer digging into her fingers as Glenn sped away to find the Safeway. Paula could see Barb and Dan sitting in the bare living room, on the carpet, Indian-style, with beers in the crooks of their legs. After six months of marriage, they had finally bought a place together—a two-bedroom condo complete with ground floor porch—and Barb had invited Paula to celebrate and help unpack once the movers arrived. On the television screen, Paula could see the rosy-cheeked reporter holding her microphone like a weapon, pointing it at the mouth of an albino homeless man, the sole witness of an eleven-car pileup off the exit ramp on Interstate 270. The volume blared, and Paula could hear the reporter calling the accident “a devastating scene.” The albino blinked his lightning-blue eyes into the camera. In his hands, he held a tattered cardboard sign. In shaky black marker, the words *Give to the Poor* were scrawled across the sign, except the message barely fit, and the end of the word *Poor* looped off the edge. Paula announced herself by cracking open a beer. She padded over the carpet and greeted Barb with a quick pat on the head. Barb turned around. “Give to the Poo!” she said. She couldn't stop laughing. Dan cast her a pretend disapproving look and laughed along.

Paula had met Barb and Dan while bartending at Pelican Pete's where they had worked together for years. When Paula asked if she could bring Glenn to the housewarming and unpacking, Barb had winked and said, “You know it. We don't judge around here. I'll keep Dan in line.” Barb would even let the two of them crash for the night, even if Dan didn't approve.

“Hi, Dan,” she said. As she crossed the living room, wet leaves came unstuck from the soles of her shoes. “Look what I’ve done.”

Barb unfolded her legs and propped herself up on her knees. Holding a beer in one hand, she pressed a finger to the screen and pointed at the sign.

“Look! Poo!” she said.

“Hey, where’s Glenn?” Dan said. “He get stuck with the old ball and chain?”

“He’s parking the car at the Safeway. He dropped me off.”

“Oh, so he told her he’d be shopping for a few hours,” Dan said, curling his fingers into quotation marks over the word *shopping*. He had made his way into the kitchen, where he opened and closed cabinets.

Paula ignored him and kept her eyes on the television. The image on the screen cut back to the footage of the accident, and Barb’s finger was now pressed against a four-door sedan, which was smashed into the back of a crumpled truck, which was smashed into the back of a rusted minivan. All eleven cars smashed like one colorful train. In the background, a firefighter stood askance.

“What a concept. A man doing the grocery shopping,” Barb said.

“The point is, darling,” Dan said, “he’s not really shopping.”

“Give it a rest,” Barb said to Dan. She turned to Paula, “You should be alright here.”

“She took the kids out of town, but you never know,” Paula replied. “We’ll run in before we leave and buy some bread or Mountain Dew or something.”

“Let’s not scheme tonight,” Dan said from the kitchen. “Check it out. Lazy susan.” He spun the empty rotating tray.

Glenn’s unshaven face appeared in the side-door window. He had a Yankees baseball cap snug over his shaggy hair, and the black edges of a tattoo crawled just below his collar. Paula spied him first, but he tapped on the glass with a curled fist.

“Here he is,” Paula said. She opened the door to let him enter.

“I made it,” Glenn said.

“In stealth mode,” Paula said. She grabbed the rim of the cap, jostled it, and then lifted it off his head, replacing it on her own. It smelled like his sweat and a woman’s shampoo. “Ew. Sweaty,” Paula said. She threw the cap at his chest, and Glenn pretended to be hurt.

“You see this?” Barb pointed at the television, but the news had switched to a commercial. “Nevermind. It’s gone.”

Paula and Glenn settled down on the floor. She tilted her beer can to his lips, and he took a sip.

“This is the new place? I like it,” Glenn said.

“Home sweet home. Home is where my heart is,” Dan said.

“To our new home!” Barb raised her can, and they tapped beers together.

“We’re all here. You want the self-tour or the guided tour?”

“Self-tour,” Paula replied. She hopped up from her seat on the carpet and beckoned Glenn to join her. Paula skipped down the hallway with Glenn in one hand and the beer in the other. Both bedrooms were empty except for a pile of blankets and pillows. Scratches and dents from previous owners speckled the walls. A long

telephone cord dangled from its jack. In the master bathroom, Paula opened the sliding shower door and stepped inside.

“Wanna christen the shower real quick?” she asked.

Glenn frowned and shook his head. “What was that supposed to mean?” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder, gesturing back to the living room.

“What was *what* supposed to mean?” Paula said. She flipped the bathroom lights on and off, on and off, watching her reflection in the vanity mirror illuminate and darken. As she spoke she sped up the flashing lights, creating a strobe effect. “What was what supposed to mean,” she repeated more slowly, trying to make her lips look like they were moving out of sync with the words.

“Home is where *my heart* is? What’s he trying to say?”

Paula kept the lights off. “Oh, it’s nothing. He’s joking.”

When she and Glenn returned, Barb had Milton Bradely’s *The Game of Life* poised on her palms. She balanced the beer can atop the box. “Dan came up with a drinking version.”

“Let’s play,” Paula said.

“I think Randy has this game,” Glenn said.

“Is he the eight-year-old?” Barb asked. She put the last stack of square cards on the board.

“Randy’s from her first marriage,” Paula said.

The coiffured news anchor reintroduced the reporter at the scene of the crash. She now stood just inside the door of a jack-knifed tractor-trailer. As the camera

zoomed out from her body, the albino appeared next to her. Again, the woman began asking the albino for answers. “Look, Glenn,” Barb said.

Dan called from the kitchen. “Did you see that guy? Good thing it’s cloudy. Who wants nachos?” He returned with an open bag of corn chips. “Sorry, no cheese. So, you’re a stepdad too, Glenn?”

Paula dipped her hand into the bag. “Remember last time we played? I forgot to get married. I still had, like, eight kids,” Paula said.

“I hate when I forget to get married,” Glenn said.

Paula playfully slapped him on the arm. “I wish,” she said.

Barb made a motor sound with her lips and moved her car-shaped game piece around the board. “Look, I’m drunk driving.”

“Don’t hit any animals, Barb,” Dan said.

“It was a fox,” Barb said.

Paula blinked and wrinkled their nose. She didn’t know if Barb really hit a fox or was playing a new version the game. She rubbed her hand in circles on Glenn’s back. Glenn spun the numbered dial, and it tick-tick-ticked in circles.

“Is it your turn? Is road kill part of the game?” Paula asked.

“I’m saying Barb hit a real fox.” Dan punched his fist into his open hand.

“She lost her hubcap. It flew like a frisbee.” He whistled to imitate the sound of the flying hubcap. “It was a few weeks ago. Fucked up her car pretty good.”

“I didn’t hear. What happened to the fox?” Paula asked.

“Vehicular Fox-Slaughter,” Barb said. “Guilty as charged.”

Glenn had landed on an orange space on the game board. “What does orange mean?” he asked.

“It means you take a shot of tequila,” Dan said. “Yours truly stopped by Pete’s and swiped some Patron from your girlfriend.”

Glenn leaned away from Paula’s circling palm and curled his fingers around the thick square bottle. When he drank from it, a little dropped out of his mouth and splashed onto the carpet. He pursed his lips together, trying to keep the rest in.

“Hey, watch it,” Dan said.

“Let it go. It’s like a christening,” Paula said. She winked at Glenn, but his face was still screwed up from the tequila, his eyes squinted. Paula squeezed his arm once, twice and felt Glenn hold a flex in his bicep.

“It’s serious stuff,” Dan said. “It burns, it burns.”

Glenn shook off Paula’s grip and took another, longer gulp. He coughed as he plugged the cork.

“Fine,” Paula said. “I won’t hold your hand.”

“Sorry, babe,” Glenn said. “Had to man up.” He rolled up his sleeve and flexed again, revealing more tattooed tendrils trailing down his shoulder. Then he threw his arm around Paula and began kissing her neck. Paula turned her head and let Glenn kiss her lips. She slid her palm up the other sleeve, knowing beneath her fingers the spidery image inked there. On the television, a pretty news anchor teased a story for the ten-o’clock news—the verdict from last month’s mall stabbing.

“Did Barb tell you she sleeps with a knife under her pillow?” Dan said. Glenn pulled away from Paula’s lips and glared. “She uses it on me when I’ve been bad.

After we've had a fight, she pulls it out from underneath her pillow and holds it up to my neck. Just so she can feel in control again, right? Right, Barb?" Dan poked Barb in the hips.

"Come on, Dan. That guy stabbed a kid in the mall," Paula said. She slammed down a shot and sucked extra salt off her wrist.

Barb tackled Dan and held her forearm against his throat. "Like this, like this," she said.

"Don't let Barb give your girl any tips," Dan said. He rolled out from under Barb's arm, laughing. His elbow knocked over a near-full beer. Paula grabbed for it but missed, her coordination slowed by the tequila shot.

"That's not true. Barb doesn't do that," Paula said.

"Look, Paula. You don't have the most kids this time. Glenn does!" Barb smacked her hand on the floor, into the puddle of beer slowly sinking into the carpet. "Beer is everywhere," she said.

"This is the new carpet," Dan said. He jumped to his feet towards the kitchen but darted back through the living room to the hallway. "No paper towels, damnit," he said.

"You can put the couch over it or something," Paula called after him.

Dan rushed back by her with a floral pillowcase. He pressed it into the carpet, trying to absorb the stain.

"Not the new carpet," Dan said.

Glenn took a swig of his beer. "Yeah," he said. "You can put the couch over it."

“What was that?” Paula asked. A doorbell rang through the empty rooms.

“Movers!” Barb exclaimed.

“Movers!” Paula repeated. She leapt to race Barb to the door, and Glenn grabbed her arm.

“Is that true? About the knife. That’s not funny,” Glenn said. He stole a glance at Dan.

“Like Barb would really stab anybody,” Paula said. She bared her teeth and gestured like she was stabbing into his hand to escape his grip. He let go, and Paula poured two more shots before rushing to the door. She tried to stop suddenly, but her socks slipped on the linoleum. Tequila from each shot glass splashed out and dribbled down her fingers. She used her tongue to lick the drops in between her fingers. Barb swung open the door. For a moment, the waning sunlight struck her face. She used her palm as a visor. On the doorstep stood a middle-aged black couple. The woman sported a plain purple t-shirt over large breasts, black pants, and cheap-looking gold bangles hung on her wrist. She had coke-bottle glasses that cast dark shadows beneath her eyes. Her balding companion wore a white shirt and tie with equally thick glasses. Above his lip, stray dark hairs from a missed razor blade caught the light.

“Good evening,” said the man. “I’m glad to have found you at home. We’re just sharing with our neighbors an important message about good government.”

Paula glanced at the filled shot glasses in her hands. “We thought you were the movers,” she said.

“We don’t even have our furniture yet,” Barb said. “Sorry.”

“Ah, you’ve just moved in. Welcome. You’re fortunate to have good housing. In fact, our message is about good housing for everyone. Wouldn’t it be nice if we could all have good housing—and a good government?” the man said.

“Sure would,” Barb said. “But I’m an atheist, and I already have a house. Thanks for coming by.” She started to close the door again, but Paula stopped her. She remembered how Glenn would always curse the Sunday morning traffic caused by a church near her apartment called Christ the Teacher. “I hate that Christ the Teacher,” he’d say, always in a hurry to leave, unable to wait because he had to beat his wife home, or catch the end of his stepson’s baseball game. They were people, too, Paula had to remind him. Those church-goers.

“Just go,” Paula said. Before Barb could slink back into the living room, Paula pushed the shot glasses into her hands.

Barb crept away, whispering, “Glenn—hide! It’s God!”

“Do you live here, too?” the woman asked.

Paula shook her head.

“Do you have a good house somewhere?” the man asked.

“It’s alright,” Paula said.

“Well, most people would want a house that’s better than just alright. They’d also want a government that provides those homes. A government that isn’t corrupt. What do you think about a government like that?”

Paula rubbed her palms down her pants to dry off the extra tequila. From the living room, she could hear Dan. “We were just joking around,” he was saying. “Your wife sleeps with a knife,” Glenn replied. “Well, at least I sleep *with* my wife,” Dan

replied. Paula stole a glance. Barb had turned the salt shaker upside down over her wet wrist.

“I don’t really know a lot about politics,” she said. She stepped forward and eased the door closer behind her.

The man and woman chuckled together. The woman’s eyes narrowed to slits behind the thick lenses.

“You are not alone. Jesus also did not join in politics,” she said.

“In God’s Kingdom, there aren’t any politics, any corruptions,” the man said with a lingering laugh. “We’d live in a paradise where everyone can raise a family, be employed, live in places without crime or pollution. What do you think about that? Does that sound good to you?”

“It does,” Paula said. She raised her shoulders in a shrug. “And I hate to sound rude, but it doesn’t sound possible.”

“Oh, but it is. The Bible tells us God’s Kingdom is possible. Do you read the Bible? Take a look here,” the woman said. She passed Paula a Bible with another pamphlet tucked inside while the man asked, “What’s your name?”

Paula took the pamphlet from inside the Bible and flipped through it.

“Paula,” she said. Her fingers landed on an illustrated page, an image of Adam and Eve faded into a picture of soldiers in gas masks ducking behind sniper rifles. The caption read, *History proves man cannot live peacefully without God. (1) Adam and Eve with Forbidden Fruit. (2) Soldiers at War.* Camouflage covered the soldiers from head to toe. The masks created the look of insect heads atop human bodies. Eve had long, curly brown hair and wispy bangs. In Adam’s arms, she gazed up at him,

one hand on his bare chest, the other holding the apple. Her chest was bare too, but covered with plants and ferns. Adam had a thick beard and clean, unmarked skin.

Above in the branches, the snake coiled.

“Ah, from the apostle Paul,” the man said. “Do you know Paul the apostle?”

Paula shook her head.

“He who warned us about the love of money,” the man said.

“The root of all sorts of injurious things. Some have been led astray from the faith and have stabbed themselves all over with many pains,” the woman chimed in.

“The Watchtower has issues on money, as well.”

In the living room, the volume of the television rose. Again, the news anchor with the pretty face advertised the late news stories. From the corner of Paula’s eye she could see Barb toying with the board game dial. She had her head down, her hair falling across her face. Dan sat next to her, balling up the pillow case. Glenn was standing up, glaring down at both of them. It was an expression Paula recognized.

“Maybe you should come back when the homeowners are available,” Paula said. She should have known Barb couldn’t keep her promise. Couldn’t keep Dan in line.

The man pointed to the pamphlet in Paula’s hands. “God has a plan for the government,” the man said. “According to God’s plan, we will have one government. Not a lot of diverse governments like there are now. See?” He tapped on the photograph of Adam and Eve. Paula noticed his impeccable fingernails. On the adjacent page, a sketched man and woman rode on white horses in the sand while, on

a nearby bank, a young girl and her mother stroked an enormous striped tiger. *Under God's Kingdom, the world will be a wonderful place.*

The woman raised her jeweled wrist and held up three fingers. "God's plan," she said. "Has three steps."

Paula quickly mulled it over. "Three is less than twelve," she said.

The woman began to count on her fingers. "First, all the individual governments will be abolished, and God will create one universal government."

"Second," the woman continued, "all the wicked people will be abolished. And lastly, God will abolish the devil."

The man held up his own three fingers, his thick wedding band snug around the ring finger. "Three steps, Paula," he said.

"I see," Paula said.

"We encourage you to read the Bible, and we appreciate your time. We hope to see you again soon." His wife wiggled her fingers in a slow wave. Paula waved the Watchtower and closed the door. Behind her, she heard the pop and hiss of a fresh beer. It was Barb.

"Shit's going down in there," Barb said after swallowing a big swig.

"Beer me," Paula said, coming back into the living room. "They want to kill the wicked people, and *then* kill the devil. I mean, why not kill the devil first?"

"I'm all for killing the wicked people," Dan said, turning his eyes on Glenn.

"Jesus, can we turn this down?" Paula said. The television began to replay scenes from the afternoon news. Shots of the albino reappeared on the screen. Dan found the remote and started hitting buttons.

“I’m pulling the car up to the back. Come around and meet me,” Glenn said to Paula.

“Peace, brother,” Dan muttered.

“You guys can still stay,” Barb said.

“They don’t mind. Really,” Paula added.

“I mind,” Glenn said. He pushed open the sliding glass door and pulled Paula out with him. Just before the door shut again, Barb rolled her eyes and mouthed, “Sorry.”

On the porch, Paula leaned her palms into Glenn’s chest. “Baby,” she said. “What’d you do that for? We had a place to stay tonight.”

Glenn pulled her away. “I thought you said he would be cool this time. I can’t have it like this. Stay here,” he said. “I’m getting the truck.” Glenn hopped the fence and disappeared into the neighbor’s yard. When Paula tried the door again, it didn’t budge. The flickering television lit up the room in dozens of colors. Paula watched as Barb laid her head in Dan’s lap and looked up at the colors flashing on his face. Dan bent down and kissed her lips.

Paula tilted her head back and exhaled into the air above her. Glenn had blown right by the stop sign at the end of Barb’s street, then turned the wrong way on the Pike. Paula prayed he wouldn’t get pulled over. He would have to turn around and pass Barb’s street again. He was probably cursing in his truck, making his way around the gas pumps at the Exxon station one block north. The mistake would give him time to reconsider. He’d be back, Paula knew.

She watched her breath materialize in the cold. It made her want a cigarette. She cupped her hands over the temples and peered inside the condo. Through the glass she could see Barb cuddled in Dan's lap on the floor. Paula tapped once on the door with the toe of her tennis shoe. When they didn't respond, she kicked harder, over and over again. Dan turned around first, then shook Barb's shoulder. She got up and slid the door open. Paula could feel the heat flood outside.

"We don't want any," Barb said. She tugged at the glass door, leaving it open only so much.

"Get me one," Paula said through the gap. She put two fingers to her mouth as if smoking an invisible cigarette.

Barb shut the door a little more.

"Not in here," she said.

"I know," Paula replied.

Barb's eyes darted to the street.

"How far away did he park?" she asked.

"He'll be back. He had to buy something at the store. Hurry."

The door slid closed. If Paula stood outside long enough, the cool air would shrink the smell of smoke. Barb opened the door just enough to pass one skinny cigarette to Paula. Then she beckoned with the lighter. Paula leaned her face into the doorframe, and a tiny flame ignited inches from her lips. She sucked on the cigarette.

"Thanks," Paula said.

"You want this?" Barb asked. An outside lamp turned on above Paula's head.

"Sure."

“I’ll leave it open,” Barb said. “There are blankets in the other room, but don’t keep us up, alright?” She pointed an accusing finger.

“Yeah, yeah.” Paula exhaled and nodded. Again she tilted her head back and watched as real smoke escaped into the night. It floated up and out for what seemed like a long time, disappearing into the stars. She waited until she could no longer see the exhaled smoke, then brought her gaze back to the living room. Barb and Dan had turned off the television, and the outdoor lamp made the door a dark mirror. Paula eyed her reflection in the glass. She watched as she folded her arms across her chest and let the cigarette dangle. Her skin took on the same color of the night around her, and staticky strands of hair floated away from her scalp. She pulled another breath from the cigarette, pursed her lips, and batted her eyelashes. She kept her face in the squinty-eyed pout, but her eyes disappeared, blending into the monochrome pallor of the rest of her face. She thought of the busty religious woman at the door, the way her eyes narrowed to slits when she laughed. With another torrid puff in her lungs, Paula imagined the impossible Kingdom. Glenn would return without grocery bags. He’d find the cold on her cheeks charming. He wouldn’t even mind the smell in her hair. He would apologize and wrap his arms around her, warming her. They’d go inside and cuddle on Barb and Dan’s guest floor, content to be warm and near each other. He wouldn’t have to rush home in the morning to another family. He wouldn’t have another family in the first place. They’d leave together, unhurried, to their good home in a place without crime or pollution.

Paula exhaled, blowing the smoke at her reflection. Then she held the burning cigarette to the glass and stabbed it out.

## Reunion

Outside Hunan Palace, Alice Winter hid behind a brick pillar, rubbing the last nub of lipstick onto her lips. It was just past five-o'clock, but the December sky was already dark. Clouds overhead blotted out the stars and threatened snow. Sirens wailed from somewhere in the distance, and the smoke of fried foods floated by on a gust of icy wind. Farther down the block, taxis crowded the intersection below the Chinatown arch as play-by-play blared from Verizon Center's street speakers.

Alice poked her head out from behind the pillar and peered past the decal painted on the front window. *Fresh Noodles Made On Spot*, it read. Inside the window, an Asian chef in a tall white hat spun a cord of dough, roping the ends together, creating a loop at the end like a noose. Over and over, he wound the dough, without seeming to notice the activity on the street. Behind him in the dining room, votive center candles emitted a soft, orange glow, illuminating features as the patrons' faces bobbed in conversation.

Hal Collins sat alone at a table next to the lobster tank. He had his hands curled around the outside of the menu, which, propped, was so tall it reached his temples. His cheeks were fuller, making his features less avian. But even without his lips and nose, Alice recognized him—his dyed white-blond strands and the childhood scar that cut through his right eyebrow. The vodka in his dirty martini looked alight next to the flickering candle casting watery shadows on the back of the menu. Behind him, the lobsters stirred. Even from the street, Alice could see the too blue water and the white bands cinched around the lobsters' pinchers. Hal's wedding band stuck around his ring finger shined in the candlelight.

Alice couldn't believe she had been entranced and then discarded by a man who reminded her of the country's national bird. She had rather liked the eagle as the symbol of America. At a small university in the South, she had majored in history and could remember from a professor's lecture that Ben Franklin had opposed the bird, preferring the modest turkey. An obese bird with a red, bulbous neck didn't seem right soaring across the one-dollar bill. Could turkeys even fly? Alice hadn't been sure. She had agreed with the Founding Fathers' justifications for the bald eagle—its beauty, its independent nature.

When Hal called to invite her to dinner, she had suggested Hunan Palace because she had never been there with him. It was a place where she'd always meet her mother when she was visiting. The décor seemed impressive to out-of-towners and comfortable to locals. With friends, Alice always ordered the crab Rangoon, liking how the cream cheese squished around her gums and teeth. She'd make obvious jokes about the Puu Puu platter but never ordered it. Mama Winter was partial to the veggie egg rolls, but every time, when they arrived on the bed of lettuce, Alice couldn't help but think of penises, how they'd look without a body. When her mother took her slow, rabbit bites, testing each swallow for potential nausea, Alice had to turn her eyes away. During Mama's last visit, she had worn the red wig, the one she bought because she said it made her look like Shirley Maclaine.

“Like the hair,” Alice had said. “Looks real,” she added in a lower whisper.

“Yeah, like a real wig,” Mama replied.

“What about Shirley?”

“I don’t look a damn thing like Shirley, and you know it.” She had torn the menu open and buried her face in it.

It was the prednisone. Even though the cancer was almost gone, she still needed all the medications. And the wigs. Years ago, after college, Alice had dated a guy with an old dachshund on prednisone. She was lethargic, moody, and picky about eating. Sometimes, she went to the bathroom on the rug.

Alice craned to see if Hal had ordered an appetizer. His reading glasses rested at the tip of his nose, and a spiral bound manual lay flat on the tablecloth. He licked his middle finger, gathered the top corner of the page and slowly pulled the paper over the spiral rings. The Robison file. Had to be. Hal had called her to discuss it, but at the time of the phone call, Alice was wary about meeting, even for business.

Since her departure with The Logistics Company, she had learned a few things about Hal. One was that the shipping industry, particularly ground transportation, was struggling. The other was that Hal’s business practices might have made a scandal like Robison’s inevitable. The company was cutting employees left and right. Back in October, Hal had placed his seven-figure, Georgian-style mansion on the market and moved back into that old townhouse in Chinatown he had kept after the first separation from his wife Pamela.

Hal hadn’t been Alice’s first affair. After college, she worked as a summer camp counselor at a history-themed sleep away camp in Southern Virginia. The thirty-something Head Counselor Billy Donovan had married just out of high school and spent the summers away from his wife. Alice played the fourth graders in checkers and lost regularly, made dioramas in arts and crafts, carefully constructing

monuments out of popped popcorn and busts out of jawbreakers and licorice. She snatched Elmer's glue from beneath their noses, thinking only briefly about sniffing it herself. After weeks of deet repellent and scavenger hunts, Alice and Billy gravitated towards one another, sneaking out past lights out, meeting in the woods. All summer, Alice never even found out Billy's wife's name. It was easy to imagine he didn't have a wife at all. Billy was secretive, more secretive than Hal. Hal made Pamela exist. Alice never knew what she looked like, or how old she was, but she was there. All around.

From Alice's vantage point on the street, she watched as Hal, fumbling for a moment, suddenly dropped the manual's page and reached into his pocket, pulling out a cell phone. He squinted at the caller ID before raising the small antenna. His face brightened as he spoke to the person on the other line.

On Alice's first day at The Logistics Company, after a quick tour of the office and detailed instructions for the photocopier, she had been ushered into a spacious office with a bulky, chocolate-colored couch and two cushioned, wheeled chairs, their seats sticking out like tongues from their tall backs. As she waited by the door, a potted plant tickled the backs of her bare knees. On the coffee table in front of her sat a large bowl full of green and black avocados. They looked empty, made of plastic. While alone, Alice reached out and squeezed one. Just then, the Head of Operations, Mr. Hal Collins, a tall man with a pointed, hooked nose, beady eyes, and a mass of slick white hair came through the door. His hairline was thin and receding, as if something had startled his hair, and now it was sprinting slowly away from his forehead.

The first thing he said was, “If you want some real ones, I can get you some.” He extended his hand. “Call me Hal.” He smiled without revealing his teeth, and when his lips stretched taut across his face, one blue eye narrowed lazily while the other remained as round and as bright as a marble. He was a tall man, thin with broad shoulders, and a sharp belt cinched at his narrow waist. He looked like a news anchor, the handsome ones who did national, not local, news. The ones you’d want an autograph from. When Alice shook his hand, she let his fingers linger on the inside of her wrist.

Her desk was positioned just outside his office, where a wall of windows separated him from the rest of the company. Sometimes, the blinds were up. Sometimes, down. Certain mornings, Alice could peek at him through the slats, spy his tall figure looming at the desk. When Hal asked her into his office, he’d hold the door open for her and wheel her seat close to his own. The way he looked at her during those private moments began to make her wonder. His one-sided smile created a slow—but deliberate, Alice came to realize—wink. When he asked for files or explained a procedure (“We’re more than just shipping, Alice. We’re logistics—the part of the process that efficiently and effectively plans, controls, and effectuates the movement and storage of cargo and commodities”), she’d often stare at the scar cut through one eyebrow. She’d imagine—just for fun—that their faces were close on her white pillowcases. She would smooth those tiny eyebrow hairs with the tip of her thumb and watch him sleep, content and dutiful, in her arms.

The other men in the office, she noticed, were younger but still not as handsome as Hal. They were too young in fact, and a bit over anxious, drinking cups

and cups of the company's complimentary coffee, looking clearly tired, Alice thought, from their extended happy hour the previous night. It turned out, their anxiety was truly warranted. Alice discovered the company had been involved with Daniel Robison, a freight broker who had shipped illegal ammunition across U.S. borders. The domestic scandal excited Homeland Security, sent them scurrying into the building. Even Alice, who only shuffled paperwork, had to answer questions. Her mother followed the few articles in the Washington Post and wouldn't stop asking her about "the terrorists." The one picture in the paper cast Hal in an unflattering light, and Mama Winter didn't even like the *idea* of him.

Alice glanced down at her wristwatch and caught a glimpse of her sheer slip swinging an inch below the hem of her grey, wool dress. She tugged at the bottom of the dress with one hand but kept her eyes on the tiny second hand of her watch. She was already a bit late. All around her she heard the keen staccato sounds of high heels on the sidewalk, Washingtonians rushing to meet their friends, husbands, or trains. The chef in the window paused to wipe his brow on his forearm sleeve.

As Alice approached the hostess stand, she pulled off her mittens and met Hal's eyes. He nodded and talked more quickly into the cell phone. "My party," Alice said pointing. The young Asian girl smiled and waved her past. Alice kept Hal's gaze and watched as he closed his phone and eased it into a pocket inside his jacket. His features immediately relaxed, his lips curling into that lopsided smile, accentuating his pointed nose. She could see the fine print in his charcoal suit jacket. It wasn't one she remembered. It looked new, pressed.

Before she reached the table, she said, "I saw you from outside."

Hal stood, balling his napkin in his fist. “Yes, yes. Fine,” he said and sat down as Alice took the vacant chair. She could see now that the manual on the table was not, in fact, the Robison file but a decorating manual, pages thick with fabric samples.

“You cut your hair,” Hal said. He quickly closed the book and removed it from the table.

“Yes, I did. Thank you,” Alice said, smoothing a few strands behind her ear. Mama had told her it was too short, but she took Hal’s observation as a compliment.

Hal tapped his breast pocket. “That was my daughter. Ballet recital next weekend. She has to remind me.”

Alice nodded. “It’s no trouble.”

“I hope you don’t mind but I ordered a beverage.” Hal raised his martini and plucked the olive from the mini sword with his teeth. He ran his tongue along the front of his gums and made a brief, sucking sound. Alice remembered the gesture from a while ago, from a trip they took to Dallas for the annual logistics convention. Unable to stomach another martini with Hal, she asked the waiter for a glass of merlot.

“How is your daughter?” Alice asked.

“Well, she’s eleven. So, she thinks she knows everything. And for whatever reason, she wants braces even though the orthodontist says she doesn’t need them.”

Alice smiled, her eyes scanning the menu. She had heard the braces story before. Hal and his wife sent Traci to a private school in Bethesda, Maryland, and Alice was certain she was nothing short of spoiled. Hal had asked Alice on occasion to help him pick out gifts—little pearl earrings, a new pink laptop, something called a

Build-A-Bear. In one day, Hal bought Traci a flat-screen television and a Tempur-Pedic mattress. “You know,” Hal would tell her, “Traci loves her history classes.” As if she and the girl had something more in common. When Alice called Hal, she could always tell when Traci was near. Hal would put on a work voice and spout logistics acronyms. A.O.V. Any One Vessel. A.O.A. Any One Accident. A.O.R. Any One Risk.

Once, when Pamela had their daughter at the house in Potomac for an all-girls birthday slumber party, Alice had teased Hal. “But I’m a girl,” she said. “I want to slumber at the big house.” It was then when Hal hatched the plan to smuggle Alice into the annual Logistics conference in Dallas. Technically, administrative assistants weren’t permitted to attend on the company’s dollar. But Hal said he would pay her way with the company’s petty cash. “Or,” he had said, “I could ship you with the avocados.” Then, as she had lain in his bed—a four-poster, way too large for the allotted bedroom space—Alice had laughed, imagining herself crouched among the cargo in the back of a truck, breathing in the smell of cut cardboard and unripe fruit. The possibility of being shipped alone across the country didn’t at the time contain any irony.

“Eleven is a tough age,” Alice said.

“I’m thinking the vegetable egg rolls as an appetizer,” Hal said.

“They make a tasty crab Rangoon. But my mom likes to order egg rolls.”

Alice immediately regretted mentioning her mother. She was trying to be natural, say what she would say to anyone else.

Alice hadn't initially told her mother about Hal. She merely said she had been dating someone she met at work. But after some time, Mama caught on. She'd remembered Hal from the newspaper articles.

"I thought he was married," Mama had said in a downtown CVS. Alice wheeled a shopping cart down the aisles, her mother's list in hand. A half-dozen prescriptions in orange bottles rolled about in the cart, the pills inside rattling.

"He's not," Alice lied. Her mother only glared, her dark brown eyes appearing almost black. Hal and his wife had been living in separate houses at the time, so Alice hadn't mentioned her. Traci came up in conversations but always as the daughter from a *previous* marriage.

"Mama Winter," Hal said. "How is she?"

Before Alice could answer, the waiter appeared to take their order. "We'll take the eggrolls," Hal said. The waiter scratched his pen to the paper, bowed and retreated to the kitchen.

"She's good," Alice said.

A funny expression came over Hal's face. "Good? So, that's good, right?" He asked.

"They were able to get all of it. But it's still going to be a long recovery," Alice said.

"You know, I heard she was doing well."

"You heard?"

"Sandy, at the office. You haven't been gone that long. People still talk."

Hal was right. It hadn't been that long. After the fiasco at the conference and the Robison scandal, Alice had made arrangements with a temp agency for a new placement but another month passed before she could leave. Everyday she hoped for snow and ice and all the terrible slickness of winter. If it snowed or hailed and all the roads on the east coast became impassable, then she wouldn't have to go to work. She wouldn't have to agonize over her hair and outfits. She wouldn't have to be bothered by lingering Homeland Security, and her mother would certainly be happy to see her leave. Most importantly, though, she wouldn't have to sit at her desk, just outside Hal's office, and catch him out of the corner of her eye, through the slats in the blinds, talking on his cordless phone and pacing in his office, incessant yet graceful, like a tiger.

On her last day, he requested to see her. Instead of walking out to her desk, he sent his voice through the office intercom system, relaying an overly formal page. "Alice Winter, please come to the office of Hal Collins." He sounded like a parrot.

In his office, Hal was standing up against the far wall, his back to her. In his outstretched arms he held a large mahogany frame flush against the wall. Trapped inside the frame was a photograph of a mountain. It looked like a reproduction.

"Oh, good," he said turning his head just slightly. "Is this level?" When Alice hesitated, Hal kept talking. "Pamela and I visited over the weekend." So, that was it. They were taking vacations together.

"Is it level?" he asked again.

"Close enough," Alice said.

“Fine,” he said. “Grab that pencil, there, and mark the wall. Not too dark.” Alice quickly made the line and retreated to the front of the office. “That’s fine.” Still facing the wall, Hal had put the frame down and was struggling for something in his pocket. When he turned to face her, he had two nails in his mouth, the sharp ends sticking out.

“Thanks,” he said through the metal.

As she had turned to leave, she took one last look at the potted plant and the bowl of avocados. Everything had remained the same. When she left Logistics for good at the end of the day, Hal’s blinds were folded shut, and she saw only his fleeting shadow moving behind the window.

The waiter quickly returned with the vegetable egg rolls. This time they hadn’t come on a bed of lettuce but atop a red splash of sweet and sour sauce. They were cut smaller, into bite-sized pieces.

“Careful,” the waiter said. “Hot plate.”

“Okay, son,” Hal said. “The duck here is good?”

The waiter nodded.

“I’ll take it,” said Hal.

“Crispy?” the waiter asked.

“Of course. Thank you.”

As Alice ordered the scallops in garlic sauce, Hal picked an egg roll from the plate and bit it in half. Struggling with the remaining piece in his fingers, the strings of cabbage dangling from his lips, Hal pushed the second half into his mouth. Alice thanked the waiter and looked away, at the lobsters behind Hal. She took a heavy

swallow of wine. One of the lobsters was particularly close to the glass, perched with its six legs curled around a cratered rock buried at the bottom of the tank. Its black pearl eyes stared straight ahead, as if it were unabashedly eavesdropping through the glass. Alice suddenly thought of her mother. What she'd think if she knew Alice were here with Hal, eating her favorite appetizer. Hal followed Alice's eyes and, still chewing the last of the egg roll, turned toward the tank.

"Careful," he said. "Don't get too attached. That's somebody's dinner." He turned back and pointed across the restaurant, whispering, "Probably that lady over there."

Alice batted at his pointed finger. "Oh, don't point," she said. But she turned quickly anyway, catching an obese woman in a floppy denim hat chatting candidly with the young hostess at the front of the restaurant. As she spoke, a flap of skin beneath her chin trembled and bounced. "Really, Hal?" Alice continued. "That's just awful." The woman had bright red hair, a bad dye job, but it made Alice think of Mama nonetheless.

"It's just a joke," Hal said.

"And not a funny one. Maybe she has some kind of health problem—thyroid problems or something. You don't know."

"Health problems. Everyone is using that excuse."

"Sometimes it is health problems. Besides," Alice said. "We're in the same restaurant she is."

"Ah," Hal said, wagging a finger. "But we don't eat here often. I've never even been here, and I *live* in Chinatown now."

Alice sensed a knowing expression forming on her face. She picked up her wine glass and let its wide mouth temporarily hide her.

“Yeah,” she said into her glass. Her voice sounded small and hollow as if it were trapped inside a shell. Seeing the waiter balancing a tray of steaming entrees, Alice returned the glass to the table. “It doesn’t even matter,” she said. “We made fine menu choices.”

“Speak of the devil,” Hal said.

The waiter placed Hal’s dish between his resting hands. It was an entire duck with its neck and head and beak still attached. Even its eye sockets were visible. Its neck had been bent backwards and flattened on its back as if it had been removed and put back together using fry oil as adhesive. Alice watched her own meal descend from the waiter’s nimble hands. Round, shiny scallops bathing in a watery dollop the color of ginger. Before the waiter could get away, Hal asked for another round. Alice watched the muscles in the waiter’s forearm tense as the maroon wine fell from the bottle’s lips. Hal picked up the paper-sleeved chopsticks and waved them in the air.

“I could never use these things,” he said. “My hands are too big or something.” He sunk his fork into the duck’s backside, right next to its preserved beak, and pulled away the fried skin, revealing wet meat underneath. He held open the flap of skin and said, “Look at that. So tender. I’m already looking forward to leftovers.”

Alice snapped open her chopsticks and straddled a slippery scallop, but it fell from her weak grip and splattered back into the pool of sauce. She crossed her legs beneath the table and tried again. She said, “Should we get down to business?”

“Certainly,” Hal said. “I’m sorry to have asked you here.” He paused and tried to drink from his already empty martini glass. Remembering its emptiness, he stopped. “Things have gotten a little complicated.”

“It had to be something,” Alice said. “Or else I wouldn’t be here.”

“Well, you’re right. Part of the sanction from DHS was to install new software—RNS Direct. You remember, we had the trial software.”

Alice nodded. “It was a pain,” she said. “It crashed my laptop.”

“And I’m sorry about that, but—and this is where it gets complicated.” He paused to fork a lump of duck into his mouth. “Boy, this is really delicious.” As he sawed another bite, the neck of the duck broke away from the body, its head sliding down into its own body. “Technically, that laptop still belongs to Logistics.”

Alice frowned. She found her gaze sliding to the lobster tank. The nosy one had moved on, lost in the bodies of the others.

Hal continued, “They need the laptop, Alice. Their tech people can restore the trial software.”

“That software was way before Robison.”

“Well, that’s kind of the point. We have to show them that we had procedures before Robison showed up. We can’t be liable. I don’t want to be dragged through this anymore—and I know you don’t either.”

Alice sat back in her chair and tapped the ends of the chopsticks on her plate. The truth was that Hal had given her the laptop, a freebie he had won in a Logistics contest for selling the most avocados. She had used it to work from home, or from Hal’s townhouse on those days he left her to go into the office. After nights with Hal,

in the early morning hours, Alice often woke alone, her toes stretching in search of him, finding only cool, empty sheet. On the street, truck horns blared from somewhere below. A man would shout, and another man cursed loudly in response. The truck's loud engine would rumble out of earshot only to be replaced by more horns and human shouts. With Hal gone, Alice wandered his apartment with the bedspread gathered around her shoulders, the corners tucked into her fists. While the coffee maker gargled and steamed, she'd open his crooked kitchen cabinets, noting the matching plates and mugs. She'd inspect the pictures of Traci lined up on a shelf above the television. As a baby the girl had wisps of white-blond hair, like Hal's now aging strands. In the later photos, Traci's hair had darkened to a medium-blonde and her lips shined no doubt from some preteen, tinted lip balm. One photo in particular showed the girl in a group with other towheaded children, each holding a box with indecipherable writing on it. In the background, Alice thought she could make out Christmas decorations—the edge of a stocking here, a reindeer nose there. The other children were probably the girl's cousins, but there was no way to tell if they were Hal's nieces and nephews or the wife's. She never saw any pictures of Pamela. With the free laptop, she'd lounge in his bathrobe and send him suggestive emails full of shipping double entendres. After the new software had crashed it, Alice had the hard drive rebuilt and then gave the laptop to her mother. And Hal knew.

“I don't have it to give it back,” Alice said.

“I know, I know. See, it's complicated like I said.” Hal was silent for a moment. “Couldn't you just ask her?” he added.

“No, I can’t just ask her. I’d never hear the end of it. Every other word out of her mouth is *terrorist*—when it isn’t *cancer*.”

“Maybe she would understand if you explained.”

“Would you take back a computer you gave to Traci? Just like that?”

“Well, not without replacing it,” Hal said.

“I’m not buying my mother a new computer. There’s nothing on that computer now anyway. RNS Direct crashed it. It has a new hard drive with nothing related to Logistics.”

“They said their techs can restore it.”

“I don’t believe this. They need this laptop for the investigation,” Alice said.

“It could exonerate us all.”

Alice eyed him while he chewed with his lips closed. When his jaw turned the bite in his teeth, his right eyebrow twitched.

The last night of the conference in Dallas, Alice had stared at that scar in his eyebrow while he slept, their faces inches apart. When he was four, Hal had told her, he had been spinning in his parent’s dining room, making himself dizzy just for kicks. When he stopped he lost his balance and crashed into the china cabinet, the sharp corner slicing into his eye. He had almost lost it. Sixteen stitches—or was it seventeen? She used to feel unique, knowing its origins.

Alice tapped her chopsticks louder and louder against the plate. After Hal swallowed, he cleared his throat and reached his hand across the table toward her. She had the sudden urge to leave the table, to get away from the wrestling lobsters, and the decapitated duck. She balled her napkin in her hand and dropped it on the table.

“Excuse me,” she said. “I’ll be right back.”

On her way to the restroom, she felt the elastic from her panty hose cutting into the side of her hip. Putting on lipstick and this ridiculous control-top panty hose in the snow. The forecast had called for snow, she was sure of it.

In the ladies’ room, the soap dispenser squirted too much into her hand. She rubbed the slippery soap over her palms and kept them under the water for a long time. Hal Collins. Her mother was right about him. He wasn’t exciting or even funny. He was a man with a wife named Pamela and a daughter named Traci. Alice blinked at her reflection in the mirror. The lighting in the bathroom made her look different, showing the bags under her eyes, and the overly rouged cheeks. A spot of the ginger-colored sauce was visible between two of the buttons across her breasts. She couldn’t ask Mama for the laptop back. As Alice shook drops of water from her fingertips, the door suddenly swung open and the young hostess shuffled in with a fresh stack of paper towels. She handed one to Alice and looked her up and down.

“You’re going to catch cold in that little dress out there,” she said. “It just started snowing.”

“I’ll be fine,” Alice said. She quickly dried her hands and returned to the dining room.

When she made it back to the table, her remaining scallops had been tucked in a Styrofoam container, the rest of the plates cleared. Hal drummed his fingers against the tablecloth, the tendons down the back of his hand quivered in a regular rhythm. For the second time, Alice noticed his wedding band.

“I really hoped it wouldn’t come to this. I promise,” he said. With his right hand, Hal reached into his coat pocket and produced a slim envelope. “Now, this is just business, alright?” He held the envelope between his fingers and presented it to Alice. “It’s enough for a new laptop.”

Alice shook her head. Just business? Had this always been just business?

“Take it,” Hal said. He let the envelope dangle in his fingers in the space between them.

“Absolutely not,” she said. She stood and began to put on her coat and mittens. It will be me, she thought, walking out on him this time. With her purse slung over her shoulder, she asked, “Is that all you wanted?”

Hal frowned and tucked the money back into his pocket. “Okay, okay,” he said. He raised his hands in surrender.

When they left the restaurant, a gust of wind slammed the door shut behind them. Feathery snowflakes fell from the sky. The winter air circled her legs and slid into her calf-high boots. As she and Hal faced each other outside the restaurant, pedestrians bundled in hats and scarves passed them on either side. “You want to take a cab,” Hal asked, pointing to an empty taxi stopped in the packed street. He reached out to warm her arms with his gloved hands, but Alice shrank away.

“No,” she said.

“I really hope you change your mind,” Hal said. With that, he folded his tall frame into the cab and the door sealed tight behind him. The crowded street opened up a space just wide enough for the driver to ease his way in.

Alice turned and jogged down the block to the closest metro entrance. The bottoms of her soles slipped on the damp sidewalk but she remained upright. Just around the corner, a dreadlocked street musician blew into a shiny silver flute, sending crystal, lyric notes into the air. Passing a garbage can, Alice tossed the Styrofoam leftovers inside. The box erupted as it struck, sending orange sauce splattering. Alice found her footing on a descending escalator stair, and watched as the street-level scene disappeared above her. Just before she hit bottom, she thought she caught a glimpse of the red-haired, floppy-hat lady from inside Hunan Palace, lumbering down the slippery metal, one step at a time.

## Library Sundays

The summer Grace turned eight, she discovered Grimm's fairytales, and like a clever thief, one of Nanny's friends robbed Grace of her Library Sundays. That summer, Grace and her foster sister Emily would finish their dinner, gulp their milk, and in the guise of girlish games, try to spy on Nanny and her friends. Giggling through the front foyer, on their way to another hiding spot, Grace would say hello to the tall crossing guard from their elementary school reading the paper with his legs propped up. Without his uniform, he was almost unrecognizable, just another grown-up man coming to spend time with their foster mother. The crossing guard was replaced by the tall man in a tailored suit, grey hair creeping under a cap of dark hair. "Girls. This," Nanny would call up the stairs, "is Michael." They'd stand at the top of the stairs and shyly say hello. Emily curtsied and burst into laughter, running back to the bedroom. Grace stayed, looking at the giant, wondering how tall he would grow between this visit and the next. A man named Eric laughed so loud, it echoed through the wooden, cavernous staircase. Another one of Nanny's friends had hair so long and shiny blond, Grace thought he could have been enchanted by golden water.

Nanny's best friend, Edward, a stocky man with permed black hair, always untied his tanned shoes, which smelled both of sweet leather and damp feet, and left them in the foyer. He usually arrived on Sunday afternoons, the day Emily, Nanny, and Grace used to walk the short cut to the public library, each girl allowed to check out as many books she wanted. On Library Sundays, Grace always visited her favorite librarian. Her name was Hope. She was skinnier than all the other librarians

and wore bright lipstick and nail polish. Her husband's name was Frank Dunlap, which meant Hope's last name was Dunlap too, and Grace liked that because she, Emily, and Nanny all had different last names. It was Hope who let Grace take out the Grimm's book, the green one displayed in a case with other old books. They were called non circulating, which meant they couldn't leave the walls of the library. The book was filled with fairy tales belonging to someone named Grimm. Grace couldn't remember if Grimm was a boy or a girl, but it sounded like a boy's name because of the other grim, the little g grim, which described something unhappy. Hope said fairy tales were like myth or legend, which were words that meant an old, untrue story. A myth, Grace knew, was not the same thing as a lie. The book's cover felt rough, and it was green, like a dragon's scales. Nanny said it looked like an antique. Antique, Hope had explained, meant something old and valuable. A lot of the other antiques Grace had seen, like Nanny's jewelry box, had rust on them. Although the book was not rusted, Grace imagined her fairy tale book had traveled to the library on a ship from somewhere far away. The illustration on the front showed a handsome prince in chain mail and a fur-lined robe, reaching into an apple tree. Grace knew he was a prince because he had a crown on, and he was more handsome than any of Nanny's friends. Even through the nicks where the cover had been tarnished, Grace could see the prince's wide blue eyes, his untouched pink cheeks.

When Grace had to share the book, Emily would only flip through and look at the pictures, reading just the captions underneath and laughing at the funny old-fashioned words, like *nosegay* and *fiendishly*, a word that looked like *friendly* but just a little different. Although Grace read each story, her favorite was Little Red-Cap, the

story of the girl who was loved by all, especially her ill grandmother. One day, on her way to visit her grandmother, Little Red Cap meets the Wolf. Not yet knowing that he was wicked, she listens to his advice and wanders into the wood, collecting flowers for her grandmother, while the Wolf tricks the grandmother and gobbles her up. When Little Red-Cap arrives at her grandmother's, the Wolf tricks her too, and she's eaten. They both escape, though, when a hunter passing by cuts the Wolf open with scissors and releases Red-Cap and her grandmother. The hunter fills the Wolf with stones, kills him, and takes his fur.

The story was Grace's favorite because the next page told the alternate tale. In the true story, the grandmother and Little Red-Cap defeat the Wolf from the start, and Little Red-Cap runs home, never again to see harm. It was the only story in the book with the true story following the fake story.

When Nanny's friend Edward showed up, Grace knew Library Sunday would move to Library Monday. He bicycled with one pant rolled up, his two dogs Betsy and Winnie barreling beside him. The dogs always jumped and howled, their wet noses pressing against Grace's cheeks. Sweat beads like dew drops spotted Edward's hairline, his cheeks pinked from wind and exertion. Nanny would hush Edward and ease a glass into his hands, saying, "Come in, Come in." The bicycle ride must have been long, Grace always thought, because he couldn't say anything without speaking out of breath.

When Grace and Emily rode bikes, they followed one long route, and it wasn't so hard. She could do it all the way around, fast, without getting tired. If she

pedaled extra on the downhill parts, she could even speed ahead of Emily, who was always slow because she tried to ride with no hands. Edward must have come from a long way away. He panted, like the dogs.

Nanny let the girls pet the dogs' petal-soft ears, before she'd rush them upstairs to their second-story bedroom, a loft just under the roof where sharply slanted ceilings created a wedge-shaped room. They would race up the dusty staircase, little girl legs flailing to be first, to win. Emily almost never lost. On those losing days, she became sullen and mischievous, taunting Grace, refusing to play unless she went along with her games or her stupid dares. After Grace wouldn't smell Edward's shoes or lick a dog biscuit, Emily would hide, folding herself into the bedroom's long curtain, pretending now and then to be a ghost, haunting the room, making low groans to drown out Grace's complaints of boredom.

"Come out," Grace would say. "You've been forever in there."

"If you don't lick the shoe, you're an orphan," Emily taunted in the deep, ghost voice.

"You're an orphan, too! *And* a witch," Grace challenged.

"No," Emily moaned. "I'm a ghost. If you don't take it back, I'll haunt you forever."

Outside, a gaggle of geese passed overhead, their hollow calls echoing and eventually dissipating, and Grace thought of Grimm's goose girl, the princess who was tricked into subservience. From an overdue library book on collections of nouns Grace had checked out way back in first grade when they were studying the parts of speech, she recalled the groups of animals: flock of turkeys, school of sharks, bed of

snakes. What were so many witches? A coven. Even though the book was overdue, and she owed a fine, Hope said she could keep checking out books, as long as she kept reading it, practicing the nouns inside. Hope always spoke in a nice way, not mean like the way sometimes Nanny had to speak to Emily.

To be called a witch was worse than being called an orphan. The insult originated from the smooth, illustrated pages of Grimm's library book. The witch's picture was found deep in the book's pages. In front of a fiery, smoky sky, the witch squatted in a long, hooded robe, her arms poised, as if about to cast a spell. She had short white hair like a grandma's, but her shriveled face looked more animal than human. Beside her stood the captured princess, looking askance, off the page, one palm against her pale breast. Grace knew the princess must have been scanning the horizon for the blue-eyed prince and his horse. None of the pictures showed the horse, but Grace knew he had to have one.

"Fine," Grace would say. "You're not a witch. Now come out. I'll do the stupid dare."

Emily stuck her arms out stiff and teetered like a monster. The long drape rose up and over her body as she moved forward. Her blonde hair stood on end from the constant rubbing. With the curtain back in place, there was only a dim, saffron glow around the window.

"New dare," Emily said. She pointed to the bed. "Get in."

"But that's an old dare," Grace whined.

"Grace is an orphan, Grace is an orphan," Emily said, making her voice come out her nose.

Grace would threaten to tell, but it never worked. Emily knew she wouldn't really do it. Tattling was against the rules, and it was especially against the rules when Nanny's friends came over. Grace crawled into the twin bed, the cool sheets sending goosebumps over her body. Emily climbed in behind her, raking her fingers through Grace's blonde hair and quickly wrapping both legs around Grace's narrow, boyish waist. Grace could feel her breath trapped against Emily's smooth chest. Emily squeezed her legs tighter around Grace and began rocking the two together in a regular rhythm. Suddenly, Emily would swing herself on top of Grace, her full weight bouncing against her sister's abdomen. Grace opened her eyes to see Emily's arms loose by her sides, hands balled up into perfect fists, her face pulled tight into a grimace, red and wrinkled. Almost all the light from the evening sky had drained into a shallow pool by the window. Shadows from a tree's skinny branch quivered through the blinds. One branch curled closest, appearing almost inside the room, like a crooked, fairy tale finger. Grace suddenly flinched, aware of something swinging towards her face. It was Emily. She had flicked an open palm at Grace's face.

"Keep your eyes closed." She spoke through clenched teeth and raised her body higher on Grace's body, now forcing herself down on Grace's chest. An itch began tingling in Grace's lungs, intensifying with each fall. With her eyes shut again, meaningless shapes and lines traced neon through the dark matter.

"Stop," Grace tried to say. She writhed and wriggled to get out from underneath, but her movements only made Emily more forceful.

"This is how you do it," Emily said. "And we're not done."

“No,” Grace kept at her voice, trying to push it out, stop it all before the black itch came, when all the remaining color behind her eyelids seemed to breath inside her, her lungs no longer in control, her heart hammering with the pulse of the Emily’s bouncing, the blood through her veins massaging her. The itch grew in intensity, deep in her chest. It licked like a flame down her stomach and into the place between her legs. Her whole body soon felt alight; she called again at Emily, “No.” But it was that finger-branch between her legs. The trees had entered her; bare, amputated branches split from one stem like her own, tiny nerve endings. Her body divided at the apex of Emily’s. A blooming, crystalline sharpness rose from below. It was the itch coming out of her, shaking out of her thighs, tossing Emily from the perch above her, sending her backwards, crashing into the pointed bedpost, crying out in a short, desperate breath.

For a few days after each old dare, Grace and Emily would stop playing together. While Emily played make believe in the forested backyard, Grace stuck close to Nanny, helping her with daily chores, imaging herself to be like Snow-White while Emily Rose-Red taunted butterflies in the bushes. Grace would fold the laundry off the line, steadying herself on the rickety dining room chair, reaching up to snap the wooden clothespins from the billowing sheets and shriveled denim. Later, she’d rub a woolly dishtowel over mugs and slender plates, carefully returning them to Nanny for placement in a tall, unreachable cabinet. At night, the girls slept in silence, not whispering before bed, not jumping from one bed to the next. Grace would turn away from Emily’s side of the bed and prop up Grimm’s book, reading Cinderella

with horror when, at the very end, the pigeons from the hazel tree pecked out the eyes of the treacherous stepdaughters. Days passed, and Grace never tattled. She followed the rules. Soon, all had been forgotten. Once again, the girls skittered across the floor in socked races; puzzle pieces littered the stairs after the box flew from their hands; in a pretend talent show, Grace's favorite bear lost its top hat. When Grace won the races, she got to borrow Emily's stopwatch watch. She would ride her bike alone, timing herself. Once, she did the whole route—up Creek Chase, their road with the ditch, through the parking lot at the library, then the last left on the sidewalk street—in only four minutes and thirty-six seconds.

Then Edward started to arrive on days that weren't Sunday, which meant Library Sunday had moved yet again. Soon the other friends stopped coming altogether. Grace wouldn't ever see how tall the giant grew, or if the man with the shiny hair could make more gold.

It was a cool, windy day when Grace was sure they'd finally have Library Sunday back again, because Edward hadn't come over yet, and they had already eaten lunch and a lunch dessert. But she turned out to be wrong. Just inside the coat closet door, she struggled into Nanny's old stiff leather blazer that had accidentally slipped from its hanger into the dress-up box. The coat was sort of like the prince's chain mail but without all the holes. When Grace couldn't stretch one arm through the sleeve, she backed up out of the doorway and stopped in the foyer, next to the vertical windows that surrounded the front door. Outside, the wind bucked the tree branches. The sun remained bright and coppery, a giant coin suspended in a sky the color of a robin's egg. Just as Grace felt the silky lining of the coat against her naked arm, she

caught sight of Edward pedaling his bicycle with the two spotted dogs running free beside him. Their pink, shiny tongues rolled around the corners of their jaws. They followed Edward right up to the doorway, right up to the panes of glass where, inside, Grace stood swallowed by the enormous coat. The sound of the doorbell interrupted the house, and Edward bent down to peer into the window at Grace's eyelevel. His hair stood on end from the windy ride, and his face looked longer, distorted by the slowly melting glass. With all his limbs bent, he reminded Grace of an elf or a tall dwarf. The dogs pushed their way in front of Edward, noses pressed against the glass. One of them licked Edward's cheek. He made a face. Behind her, Grace could hear Emily's feet smack against the linoleum.

“No library today,” Grace said.

“So?” Emily said.

Nanny's heavier step came towards the front door. The wind groaned, rattling the dead bolt in its slot.

“Well, shoo,” Nanny said. “Let him in.”

The dogs squeezed through the barely-opened door, their flanks touching so close they looked like Siamese twins.

“Hi, Nanette,” Edward said. He kissed her cheek. The dogs threw their noses into the air and howled.

Nanny winced and said, “Oh, the tinnitus pups.”

Edward said, “Winnie, no. Betsy.”

Grace tried to push the dogs away as wet heat from their tongue smothered her hands and face. Nanny led Edward into the kitchen. Prepared on the counter were two short glasses filled with ice.

“What’s tin titus?” Grace asked.

As Nanny overturned a tall, glass bottle, she said, “It’s when your ears ring.” Edward nodded, keeping his attention on the dogs, who paced around the adjoining living room, sniffing all corners, occasionally pausing before Emily to peer up at her. Grace watched from beside Nanny, her eyes just level with the countertop. The liquid splashed into the glass, sending the cubes of ice swirling.

“What is that?” Grace asked. “Is that alcohol?” She stuck the end of the sleeve into her mouth and chewed on the seam, where the leather met the silk. If they were drinking alcohol, there was no way it’d be a Library Day. Grace knew the bottle would be empty just before dinner.

“What are you doing in my coat?” Nanny asked, as if noticing for the first time. Then she said, “Yes. It’s alcohol. Would you stop that.” She pulled the sleeve from Grace’s mouth and tugged the coat from her shoulders. Without the coat, the cool air flooded over her bare arms. Edward offered to put it away.

“In the closet,” Nanny said.

“But it was in the box,” Grace said. Her body shook in a sudden chill.

“You can wear your own coats. The wind made it a little cool today.” Nanny smoothed her fingers over Grace’s fair hair and brought the drink to her lips. “When you come back, we’ll all pop popcorn or something.”

Emily hopped into the kitchen, springing up and down on pointed toes.

“Where are we going? Where are we going?” she asked. Excited by her jumping, the dogs barked and howled.

“The library!” Grace chimed.

From his pocket, Edward retrieved two collars with leashes attached.

“No. Something better,” he said. “Here, Emily. Grace.” He rung the collars around the dogs’ necks and anchored each leash to Emily’s and Grace’s hands. Grace rubbed her small hand down the dog’s thin ears. Her tail had a white tip, like a magician’s wand.

“Which one do I have?” Emily asked. Nanny helped her into a green windbreaker.

“You have Winnie,” Edward said. “And this one is Betsty. If they pull you, say heel,” Edward said. He tugged at their collars. “Heel. Heel. Like that.” To Grace, Winnie and Betsy sounded like grown-up names, and adults always named their pets like they were adults too, even if they are puppies or kittens or baby hamsters.

The screen door slammed shut behind them, and the wind pulled at the trees’ branches, twisting the leaves to reveal their light green underbellies. Hand in hand, Grace and Emily were to follow their bicycle route. The last thing Nanny had said before they left the house was, “Come straight home.” Edward had added, “Don’t blow away.”

Emily held Grace’s hand until just after the end of the driveway, where then she squeezed it so hard, Grace felt tears in her eyes.

“Ow,” Grace said. “Let go.” Emily pulled her in one direction, Betsy pulled her in the other.

“Okay,” Emily said. She released her hand but not without jerking Grace’s arm first. “You have hairy arms. And legs.”

“I don’t care,” Grace said, glancing at her legs. Nearly invisible blonde hairs shined in the sun.

“Nanny shaves all her hair off. All older girls do. Even down there when the hair comes in.”

“No, they don’t,” Grace said. At every tree and bush, Grace’s dog would stop to sniff and mark its territory. Then, it’d pull ahead, eager for the next shrub. Despite the dog’s small size, it pulled the leash taut, rubbing Grace’s young fingers raw.

“Yes, they do,” Emily said. “You have to shave your legs soon because you’re so hairy.”

“What about your hairy legs? Hairy monster,” Grace said.

Fighting Winnie, Emily raced to Grace and struck in the shoulder. Grace cried out and tried to hit her back, but Emily had already pulled ahead, letting Winnie run far ahead of her. She could hear Emily’s voice urging the dog in a mature tone. She was doing it on purpose, Grace thought. Always trying to win, like everything is a contest.

“Wait up,” Grace called. “Heel, heel.”

She tried to stay close to the edge of the road, keeping to the dusty strip of grass above the ditch. She thought she saw a frog leaping across the street, but when she looked more closely, it was only a leaf, scuttled by the wind. Up ahead, Emily’s

beagle made figure eights in and out of the dug-out trench, disappearing and reappearing at one end of the leash, Emily's fingers gripping the other end.

In the distance, the sound of a car's tires grating the gravel road grew louder.

"Don't get hit by that car," Emily called. She hopped into the ditch with the dog, only her blond, bouncing ponytail visible.

"*You* don't get hit by a car," Grace yelled back. She wished Emily had jumped into that ditch and fallen right into a dangerous pit, or a dry well where no one would hear or see her. Grace would befriend a toad to make that deal, to make Emily trapped in a well with an old-lady beagle for the rest of the life. Grace tugged the dog up the road, the hood on her jacket kept flipping up over her head, and she had to stop to fix it. With Emily far ahead of her, Grace imagined she traveled the road alone, on her way to her kind grandmother, her hood like the red velvet hat of Little Red-Cap.

A clunking station wagon rolled slowly by, its engine rattling. The driver, a woman, kept her eyes on the road, her jaw set. Her red hair was twisted up in an old-fashioned style, but she looked young otherwise. Her cheeks glowed like fresh apples. As the car slowed, sunlight reflected off the curved windshield and blinded Grace. She cupped her free hand to her brow to dull the glare. In Grace's other hand, the leash went limp as Betsy relieved herself nearby. The man in the passenger seat eased down the window. Grace could now see the woman had a big pregnant belly, just like her second-grade teacher Mrs. Huber. For a lady to be pregnant, Grace knew, she did not have to swallow anything. It was not the same as the Wolf who had eaten Little Red-Cap and her grandmother. When a doctor cut into a pregnant lady, a baby came out, and that was what was supposed to happen.

“Is this Creek Chase?” The man asked. He had a turned up mustache and tinted sun glasses. His eyes looked red behind the lenses.

Grace only nodded.

Then the man said, “Cute dog.”

Grace said, “Thanks,” but when she looked at Betsy, the dog was still peeing, which was not very cute. Grace checked again for Emily but couldn’t see her. She had probably made it all the way to the end of the ditch road, about to turn the corner at the library. When Grace turned back, the man had raised the window again and the car quickly sped off, swirling bits of gravel and dust through the air like a tiny tornado.

“Come on, Betsy,” she said.

When they came closer to the library, the dog picked up her pace, sniffing along the edge of one long brick wall, which blocked the sun and cast a boxy shadow on the ground. Grace followed the wall for a long time. She held one hand out, her fingertips grazing the sandpaper surface of the bricks. The wall ended abruptly and opened up into the small parking lot. The sun once again struck Grace’s face. For a summer day, the library wasn’t too crowded. One man in a baseball cap climbed out of his minivan with books under his arm. He jogged through the gusts of wind towards the library’s door. At the sight of the running man, Betsy lurched forward. But the man vanished through the revolving door. The dog panted loudly, stretched her jaws open and coughed. She finally stopped to slurp water from a pothole in the sidewalk. While Betsy flicked her tongue in the puddle, Grace brought her face to one of the library’s windowpanes, folding her palms over her temples to see inside. Only

three kids stood in line at the information desk, no doubt waiting for another summer reading sticker. At the circulation desk Hope spoke with the man in the baseball cap. Her usually curly hair had been straightened and smoothed back with a jeweled headband. It looked like a tiara. Even though her lips kept shifting as she spoke, her face smiled. Grace knocked on the glass to say hello, but Hope must not have heard her. Instead, an old man with a long beard sitting at one of the internet computers turned around and shook his finger at her.

From not too far away, Grace heard a hacking bark, then a long howl. The sound bounced off the brick library and echoed into the air. Grace arched her neck to look over the few cars in the parking lot but couldn't see Emily. Not even her bouncing ponytail. Grace heard another howl, closer this time. Maybe Emily wasn't that far ahead. Betsy pressed her nose to the ground and headed towards a green dumpster at the rear of the parking lot.

"Heel, heel," Grace said, yanking the leash. Trash and cigarette butts were strewn about, and Grace frowned at the foul smell. The leash tightened its grip on her fingers. Betsy stuck her nose inside a dirt-rimmed styrofoam cup then moved on to nip at a discarded, baby sock.

"No, no," Grace said. "Gross." The dog jerked her snout from the sock and howled, straining to circle around the other side of the dumpster where a trail of smashed strawberries, red like blood, enticed her. Grace's hood flipped up again and covered her forehead and eyes. When she forced it away from her face, she found Winnie sniffing in the lot, the leash dragging behind her on the ground.

“Winnie!” Grace called. “Come.” At the sound of her name, the dog took off behind the dumpster. Betsy pulled and tried to follow. “Emily. Where are you? Your dog.”

Both dogs barked and howled in unison. Winnie’s bark turned to a growl and then a quick yelp.

Grace heard someone say, “Jesus. What the hell?”

Winnie yelped again. Grace rushed to catch up with Winnie, but stopped short. Behind the dumpster was a man. He wore a dusty leather jacket, and a hat pulled low over his face. It was not the same man whom Hope had helped. He couldn’t have made it out that fast. This man looked strange, like a stranger. He had Winnie by the collar, holding her down on the ground. In his other hand, he had a square, silver lighter. He flicked the cap open and closed, open and closed. It made a clipped creaking sound, like hinges on an old door.

“I’m sorry,” Grace said. “That’s my dog.”

The man pulled off his hat, revealing thin, dark hair cut close to his scalp. His eyes darted around quickly. He was the wolf, Grace knew. If she followed the alternate story, the true story, she would not see harm. “This your dog?” he said.

Grace nodded.

“Looks like that’s your dog.” He pointed.

“I have two dogs. I’ll take her,” Grace said. “I’m sorry,” she added.

“Two little puppy dogs. One little girl.” He pinched the sounds in word *little*, making it sound like *leetle*. Winnie turned her face toward Grace, her eyes rolled to one side, showing the whites in the corners. The man extended his free hand to Betsy,

but her attention was split; she trotted back and forth, sniffing the man's shoes and a wrinkled food wrapper, licking its shiny exterior. The rough fabric of the leash grinded across Grace's fingers. "Are you looking for another little girl?"

Grace didn't answer. "I'll take my dog," she repeated. She wound the slack from the leash around her knuckles and tugged.

"Another little girl with blond hair like yours. She had a pretty ponytail. Her mommy must have made her wear that jacket," the man said. He flipped open the lighter and his thumb worked to strike the flame. Grace thought of the Wolf again. She wasn't in the right story, she knew. The man brought the blazing lighter close to the dog's snout. Winnie's lip curled open, and she bared her teeth. Betsy erupted in barking and howling. She jumped at the man and yanked the leash violently. In an instant, Winnie had snapped at the man and broken free. She tore off down the street. Betsy scrambled at Grace's feet, retching against the leash now tightly wound around her small fingers.

Suddenly, the man was on Grace. His hairy, pale legs tangled with her. She was on the ground. Gravel shimmered inches from her eyelashes. Fingers around her bare legs. She shrieked; the dog howled. Winnie wailed from somewhere. Betsy took off, her sharp toenails snapping against the gravel. It was a sound like metal, like knives. It cut Grace's ears. She shrieked again. Something wet slipped down her leg. The ground scraped her legs, rubbed them raw. Her hands raw too. The blood drained her pale, white fingers. The leash digging and digging. In. The ground flew beneath her. Or was it above her? A heavy, darkness impaled her. Her hood smothered her eyes and balled in her throat; she retched and gagged. Heavy sour came through her

lips. Tears flooded again, and she blinked. Looked down. She was running. Her white knees rose and fell; they were her knees, but they were like doll's knees, coated in porcelain, fragile. She was a puppet, dangling at the end of the leash.

By the time Grace arrived home, the bottle on the counter had been emptied. All she could remember about the way home was the white tip of Betsy's wagging tail. Grace hadn't seen Winnie again. Muffled voices filled her head, but she also heard the ringing like Nanny's tin titus.

“What's this—”

“Nanette—”

“They should be along—”

“—never again.”

Grace followed the dog's tail to the living room. Her heart was a hummingbird in her chest. Nanny and Edward sat in the living room. Winnie laid at Edward's feet, her collar and leash missing. Edward held a bloody paper towel to Winnie's ear. His black hair stood on end, wiry black against the soft cushions of the sofa. Nanny stood by the window, one arm crossed in front, the other at her lips. Sunlight triangulated shapes on her face and collarbone. Her skin looked like a puzzle, all the pieces flush together.

“Where's Emily?” Grace asked. She heard her own voice echo inside her.

Nanny didn't look away from the window.

“Nan. Tell her,” Edward whispered, but it sounded loud in Grace's head, like the wind against her ears. Grace didn't know why he whispered so loudly.

Nanny turned, her face twitched as if controlled by tugs of tiny strings. Her eyes and chin crinkled.

“Where have you been?” she said.

Grace didn't answer. She thought, The library. But that man was at the library, and she had stopped when she shouldn't have, and she made a bad wish, and that's where Emily was eaten. She looked at Edward. Now both dogs had settled at his feet, Edward rubbing his hand over Betsy's neck. But Grace saw his weird hair and the bloody napkin again, and looked away.

“What happened to Emily?” Nanny asked.

Grace shrugged her shoulders and started to cry. Nanny was so perfect in the sunlight. If only she were smiling. Grace's palms felt burned. She started to get sweaty, like when the bath water was too hot. Nanny eyed Grace's hair and then her clothes and legs. She must have been covered with dirt and scrapes, like Cinderella. Grace tugged at the sleeves of her shirt, trying to smooth them. “My hands hurt,” was all she could sob.

Her clothes had holes in them, like a real orphan.

Nanny had her arms around Grace and was apologizing but Grace didn't know what for. She rested her head on her foster mother's shoulder and closed her eyes. Tears fell down her cheeks and onto her lips. She tongued one, and it tasted like nothing. After what seemed like a long time, Nanny said, “Let's take you up to your room.”

Grace felt her body being lifted and carried through the house and up the creaking stairs. She kept her eyes squeezed shut until the cool sheets touched her. She let Nanny tuck her in tight and waited until she left the room.

Grace opened her eyes and looked at the speckled ceiling. Downstairs, she heard the front door open and close, the heavy dead bolt sliding into place. Nanny's muffled voice grew loud, and then soft again. Grace turned and picked up the dragon-scaled book from the side of her bed. She ran her fingers over the cover, but it reminded her of the library's prickly wall. She opened the book instead and flipped past the picture of the witch and the princess. Her fingers landed on the glossy illustration of Little Red-Cap. *She went up to the bed, and drew back the curtains.* Little Red-Cap with her bouquet of wild flowers was staring at the Wolf in her grandmother's clothing. Grace looked over at Emily's bed. She strained to hear Nanny again, to make out the stifled sounds, but all she could hear was the approaching calls of geese, more than she had ever heard, thousands of flapping wings and dying cries, on their way to some other place.

## Common Lawn and Garden Problems

The morning of September 11, 2001, Liza Wheeler washed out her Walt Whitman High coffee mug in the faculty lounge, trying to ignore the come ons of Dr. Russel Crewdson—Sonny, the math teacher who constantly wandered to the English department during the change of classes. English 9 had just ended, and Liza had ten minutes before Honors English 10 would begin. On the muted television chained to a wheeled cart, an action movie played explosions and billowing smoke.

As soapy water splashed inside the mug, Sonny asked her questions about the sod his brother-in-law—his sister’s husband—had installed for her. Two months ago, Liza and her son Charlie had moved across town to a new house in North Potomac, a euphemism for plain old Rockville, Maryland. The house wasn’t big—or even really new. It needed a lot of work. Liza decided she would start with the exterior and work her way in. Sonny had gotten her a good deal on sod for the back, to replace the damage done by the previous owner’s removed swimming pool. It was laid for half the price in half the time. Charlie was thrilled. Her son didn’t care about big bedroom closets or state-of-the-art kitchen appliances. He wanted the outdoors.

Liza was thinking she should have never agreed to the gift, it only kept Sonny lingering for more, when the creative writing teacher Kate Renehan burst through the door and said something about an airplane and the twin towers in New York. It wasn’t until the television was unmuted that Liza realized the program had not been a movie but a news broadcast. The three huddled around the television for a few moments before the bell rang.

In the middle of *The Odyssey* reading quiz, the principal announced the news, asked everyone to stay calm, and reassured that school would continue. Liza urged her students back to the Phaeacians and Odysseus but kept CNN's homepage open on her desktop computer. She received a cryptic email from her sister Marcie who worked at the makeup counter in Hecht's at Pentagon City. *Being evacuated. A DR customer let me borrow their blackberrie. Safe and leaving the city.*

When the D.C. smoke plume hit the airwaves, Liza shuffled her class across the hall to watch the television in the library, the one used for Mr. Wong's media and productions class. Rumors sailed: a missile had struck the Pentagon, a tanker on I-395 exploded, the smoke was just a distraction, a diversion from another target. The principal made another announcement: the school would close ninety minutes early. In the hallways, crying students lined up to use the pay phones. Wanda, the secretary from Charlie's school finally got through on the English office phone, asking Liza if she wanted to pick up her son.

It took Liza twenty minutes to leave Whitman's parking lot and another forty to drive to Charlie's middle school, only two miles away. Never-ending sirens howled, and noisy helicopter blades cut the air above. At a red traffic light, Liza pulled up next to a woman in a convertible, sobbing hysterically into a cell phone. Liza had no way to get in touch with anyone. She pushed her palms into her ears, fearing she would go deaf from all the screaming sounds. As she waited behind a line of security guards checking parents' cars for driver's licenses, Pentagon smoke hovered like a rain cloud.

That night, she peeled carrots in her still-new home while Charlie sat glued to the television's compulsive images of fire, smoke, and American Airlines planes. Street lamp poles along route 27 had snapped in half like toothpicks. An eyewitness claimed to have seen all the shades drawn on flight 77. Liza concentrated on the knife in her grip, the blade against the slick, bright carrot. By this day in her life, she thought she had reckoned with the universe, come to terms with the despicable nature of the world. She knew bad things happened. The year she turned nine years old, she learned what a serial killer was—that his crimes had nothing to do with *cereal*—and how tornado winds could thrust straws into tree trunks. A few days before her ninth birthday, she could remember forking wet scrambled eggs into her mouth, hearing her father blurt headlines from the Post. Her mother, rubbing her pregnant belly, sister Marcie swimming inside, hushed him and poured more coffee. The tornados, the serial killer saga, had seemed the worst fate the country had seen. Then, at twenty-seven she went through a divorce, the worst personal fate Liza thought she had seen. Piling the sliced carrots atop salad greens, she felt both wronged and lucky. The universe had tricked her, but she, at least, could have the pleasure of being alive, to know the news in the first place.

Schools closed the next day, leaving Liza and Charlie alone in their empty neighborhood. No one jogged or walked their golden retrievers. Liza and Charlie's new blades of sod grass shone in the sunlight, so green, they looked edible. But Charlie stayed inside, watching movies, wandering from one room to another, snacking on potato chips and chocolate-covered raisins. Liza spent the day on the telephone, with her sister Marcie, her mother, her father. Yesterday, it took Marcie

seven hours to make it back to her apartment. One of her coworkers was stopped by a firefighter and drove him closer to the scene. Marcie's friend Vikki Wade was visiting her sister in Manhattan, and Marcie couldn't get through. The cell phone signals still dead. Vikki had planned the trip around a bridal fitting at a posh Manhattan bridal shop, the wedding in early December.

On Thursday, Liza and Charlie returned to school. Empty desks punctuated each period. Liza tried to keep focused on the lessons, but the air inside the school felt constricted, like the whole building was out of breath. The air outside wasn't any better. Wind-caught leaves, airborne bits of garbage, or fluttering insects reminded Liza of the New York debris cascading from the wreckage.

The days stretched out in all directions, one blue sky, one mowed lawn of rippling American flags. The number of the unaccounted piled up. The Operation names were announced, adjusted, retracted, replaced. Even Liza's students ran into one another. Girls from separate periods who looked nothing alike, not even similar last names, melded into one another. The boys were worse. She couldn't tell Adam from Adam, even when both the boys were actually Adam. She stopped seeing Sonny Crewdson altogether. The Teresa Show played reruns while the daily news seemed to play reruns, too. Eyewitnesses narrated in the present tense. A bystander thinks bombs are exploding, but the fiery scraps are burning leaves from the magnolia trees outside the Pentagon. The Pentagon is a doughnut with a bite taken out of it, a plastic motherboard with a few circuits blown out. Stories of someone who knew someone who knew something echoed across all lips. Journalists spoke of the remains of the

dead. Conspiracy theorists spoke of the remains of the plane. All of a sudden, the whole world had one evil villain. Instead of fear of drugs and rapists, everyone feared terrorists, terrorism, and acts of the like. Anti-Muslim graffiti horrified the Mosque members. Recurrent bomb threats evacuated the Rockville district courts. Traffic crept slower than ever. A toy hand grenade sent a local elementary school into panic. A forgotten lunch bag aroused suspicion. Faltering overheard lights seemed to stop heartbeats. The nation braced for an impact that would never come.

For Liza, the weeks unfolded like one, looped, comma-spliced sentence. She found herself in a fog she could not sift. Everyone else seemed to have been struck by the attacks as if they were one, poignant projectile that cracked open heads, spilling decisions and declarations and doctrines. But Liza couldn't decide, declare, or even indoctrinate. She couldn't even get her own grammar to stay in order. Sitting on a tall stool in the kitchen, what Charlie used to call the Thinking Chair, she'd grade her students' essays with the window open a crack, letting the autumn air breathe inside, trying to appreciate the fresh lawn, the symmetry of the rectangled cultivation. As Liza linked neat letters in cursive handwriting, she'd stop mid-swirl, forgetting what she had set out to write in the first place. *Careful. When you have one plural noun, you want to also be careful to have one plural--*. She forgot the difference between *affect* and *effect*, scratching out the *a* to replace the *e*, only to scratch out the *a* and return the *e*. She'd think, Are special effects a person, place, or thing? Her tricky rules became only tricks.

Eventually Charlie started playing outside again, tearing around in the sodded backyard, leaving cleat marks and matted paths from various wheeled toys and sports

balls. His soccer practices after school resumed as normal. Charlie would come home, curious and grass-stained. He would open and close the refrigerator, still wearing cleats and shin guards, ignoring Liza's insistence that dinner would be ready soon.

"Just as soon as these sophomores learn to use a semicolon," she'd say.

"You know *that's* never gonna happen."

"Aren't you lucky to have me as a Mom, to have learned it all already?"

The longer he had to wait, the more questions he'd ask.

"Do you have a twenty dollar bill?"

Liza had just closed the lid on the Foreman grill. The burger patties popped and sent gooey fat dripping down the grooves. Realizing she forgot the tray to catch the juices, Liza rummaged through the tupperware cabinet.

"I'm a little busy cooking your dinner," she said. She found the tray and stuck it under the grill just in time for the fat goo to fall in.

"I just want to borrow it. I'll give it back," he said. He slung himself into a chair around the kitchen table and tapped his cleats against the low rungs. Puzzle-shaped chunks of mud dropped to the floor. His right hand rubbed his left shoulder, the one that displayed his practice jersey number in black and gold. Number 6.

"What did you do? Hurt yourself?" Liza said. A white moth trapped between the window and curtain fluttered against the two surfaces. "Oh, look at this, it's gotten inside. And you, you're tracking mud through the house." She shooed him from the seat and went to the closet for a broom. She performed the motherly duties she knew to perform, shooing him, always following close behind with a broom, a mop, or a laundry basket.

“Drew Pettinger said you can fold a twenty dollar bill into the burning towers.”

Somehow the moth had escaped from the window and began hovering towards the overhead light.

“That Drew,” Liza said, shaking away the bug. “He told you that?”

“Yeah. I want to try it.”

“Well. Not with my twenty.” She kept her eyes on the floor, watched the bristles carry the dirt. “Why do you want to do that anyway? Somebody probably made that up.” Really, she’d seen it with her kids at Whitman. Apparently the bill could also take the shape of a pentagon. Any piece of paper can be bent into anything, Liza thought. Isn’t that what geometry is?

“I don’t know. It’s cool.”

“Just because Drew Pettinger said it does not make it *cool*. None of it is cool. You know that,” Liza said. She propped the broom up against the refrigerator and checked on the burgers. A billow of steam swelled off the grill. “Take those cleats off and wash your hands. Burgers are ready.”

Charlie nodded, then slipped his socked feet out of the cleats and left them. He began rubbing his shoulder again and reached for the milk from the fridge.

“That idiot defender slide tackled me into the ground,” he said. “And Coach Irwin didn’t even call it.” As the door swung open, the broom clattered to the floor, just missing Liza’s bare feet. Startled, she jumped out of the way.

“Charlie,” she said. “Don’t say idiot.”

The next day, it seemed the moth had followed her to work. It had flown inside the car or maybe clung for dear life to the bumper as the car sped along empty, early streets. Or, maybe it was a different moth altogether. At her computer in the classroom, Liza eyed the grounded insect as it teetered on the keyboard. It crawled over the Num Lock key to the Scroll Lock key. With its wings folded closed, the moth shrank to the size of a toothpick, or a tiny branch. Liza had never used the Scroll Lock key. Of course she now had an urge to push it. She waved the moth away and punched the button. Nothing happened. She struck it again then tried to scroll on the mouse. Still nothing. As her first period students slept walked from the hallway to their assigned seats, Liza thought of a real scroll on papyrus, the Egyptian Book of the Dead, a text that had been listed for Literature and Philosophy but that was saved for English 12 teachers. Today, she and the class were stuck with Franny and Zooey, Salinger's ambiguously named characters whom the students kept mixing up. It became obvious who had read and who hadn't. In the middle of a discussion on the symbolism of the Glass family name, someone mumbled from the back, "God. Which one is the boy again?"

During her students' lunch period, Liza crunched on potato chips and slugged a Diet Coke alone at her desk. She had parent calls to make and emails to return, but for a few minutes she allowed herself to sit and stare and do absolutely nothing. She had packed herself the same bagged lunch as Charlie's, minus the Diet Coke. The trip to the grocery store for her adult salad supplies—dark spinach and romaine as opposed to Charlie's preferred iceberg—was postponed last night due to necessary catapult building for sixth grade physics. When they had found some mysterious

angular pieces of plastic in the garage, Liza shuddered, reassuring herself they were probably leftover from the swimming pool destruction. She and Charlie glued them together to build the catapult. Liza made certain Charlie did more than fifty percent of the work. She didn't want to be one of those parents.

As she licked the chip salt from her fingertips, running her tongue underneath her fingernails, she thought about the garage again—how much needed to be done inside. It was probably time to repair that automatic garage door opener. Another helpful gift from Sonny that hadn't actually helped. It worked for two days before jamming. She knew now, of course, that nothing from him was really a gift. Three hollow thuds sounded on her closed door before Sonny himself turned the knob and poked in his head.

“Speak of the devil,” Liza said.

Sonny raised his eyebrows. “With who are you speaking?” he asked.

“With *whom*,” Liza said.

“Damn,” he said. “I knew the one about not ending in a preposition.”

“True. A good one.” Liza took a sip of the Diet Coke and screwed the lid back on. “No, I was just thinking about the garage door opener.”

“I would offer to help you, but—”

“I know, I know,” Liza said. “I bet even Charlie could do it. We've got tools and hammers and whatever. Last night, we built a catapult.”

Sonny had come into the room and closed the door behind him. He had his hands stuck in his pocket, where his fingers toyed with an invisible object.

“How's the grass?”

“It’s great. Just great.” Liza squinted but tried to look like she wasn’t. She couldn’t recall how the sod was doing. It seemed a long time since she’d paid any attention.

“Well, that’s great. Glad to hear it.” Sonny scraped a desk across the floor about a foot, just enough to get it out of alignment with the others, but he didn’t sit down. He stood next to it, clapping his palm against the back of the seat. Liza loudly crumbled the potato chip bag and tossed it into the trashcan.

“Did Charlie go to school today?” Sonny asked.

Liza nodded. “With catapult in tow.”

“He wouldn’t skip class or something, would he?”

“Ha,” Liza said. “And do what?” She shook her head. Sonny hadn’t laughed. From her vantage point at the computer desk, she could see the dimples in his left cheek, deepening from his way of speaking from one side of his mouth. “Why? You think he’s cutting class?”

Sonny shrugged. “I doubt it. It’s probably nothing, but you know Wanda? She called during third period, and said Barry Irwin said that Charlie didn’t come in from playing out on the fields in PE. He lined everyone up for roll after soccer or whatever, and Charlie didn’t line up. He left his school clothes, bookbag, everything in the locker.”

“Damnit,” Liza said. She put her head into the heels of her hands. “Did anyone find Drew Pettinger? Because I can almost guarantee that he had something to do with this. You know what he did?” She looked up. “He told Charlie about the

folding twenty dollar bill trick. Isn't that just—I know our kids do it, but in middle school?"

Sonny only shook his head. "I don't know how you do it. I can't imagine having a kid through all this. The hundred sixty I have here? At least they leave at the end of the day."

"Well, I'll call Wanda. Thanks," Liza said.

"I'm sorry, Liza," Sonny said.

Liza picked up the telephone receiver and let Sonny see himself out.

All Wanda had to say was, Barry Irwin, whose daughter was Sarah Irwin, Charlie's reading buddy from the library's summer reading program, made the initial report. Charlie was last seen by Anshul Malhotra walking across the soccer fields, still wearing a bright yellow penny, his cleats tied at the laces and swung over his shoulder. Drew Pettinger had been marked present in third, four, and fifth periods.

"Things are different now," Wanda had said. "Rules don't apply for missing children."

When Liza returned the receiver, a misplaced curl from her ponytail tickled behind her ear. Using her fingernails, she raked the strands back into place. Charlie must have gone home, she thought. He'd never done it alone, but he knew the way. She would have to get Kate to cover her last period, so she could drive home and check. At this hour, she wouldn't hit any traffic. Just as she wrapped the last elastic loop, her fingertips brushed an unidentifiable papery bulb tangled in her hair. What in god's name—a spitball? And how long had that been there? She pinched the clump

between two fingers and dragged it out. Without her glasses, she had to bring it close to her face. A spitball it was not. Stuck between her thumb and finger was the skinny moth, one of its legs still twitching.

At home, Liza searched from room to room, but Charlie was nowhere. Liza picked up the cordless phone in the living room and carried it to the kitchen. His cereal bowl sat undisturbed in the sink, a puddle of milk and floating flakes. Leftover coffee had grown cold and dark in the carafe. Liza rinsed the coffee pot and the bowl with soapy water and slid them in the dishwasher. What was it Wanda had said? Something about a twenty-four hour rule. Gripping the cordless phone, Liza unlocked the back door and stepped into the backyard. A few small birds hopped around while one larger bird pecked at an insect in a round hole. Liza could see the sod had deteriorated around the gap. After a moment, the large bird pulled up its head, a short worm dangling from its beak.

“Hey,” Liza called. She rushed towards the birds and startled them. They flapped their wings and lifted off, becoming only black specks in the sky. At her feet, it seemed the sod had dried out and turned brown. Every other step revealed more bored holes. Just outside of one, she could see the dying grass teeming with tiny caterpillars. Their slimy bodies twisted this way and that, leaving a shiny trail on the grass. She shuddered and tightened her grip on the cordless phone. A sour taste rose to her mouth, and she gagged. Her fingers pressed the keys. 9-1-1.

“Nine-one-one, what is the nature of your emergency?”

Spying him first through the fish-lens peep hole, Liza thought the officer from the Bethesda police station looked like a man stuffed into a teddy bear's skin, the brown uniform wrinkled with just the right amount of care. Charlie's backpack dangled from his fingertips. When Liza opened the door, she glimpsed the police cruiser in the driveway. It was one of the new ones. Compact, sleek, and shaped like a bullet, the white gleaming through the stripes and lights.

"Liza Wheeler?" the officer said.

"Yes," she said. The afternoon had suddenly become very sunny, too sunny. The car glowed in the driveway, a fatal carriage, like something from Dickinson. A bead of sweat trickled down Liza's neck and into the space between her breasts. "Come inside," she said, palming her chest, trapping the sweat.

Once in, the officer dropped the backpack onto the couch and retrieved a small pad of paper from his shirt pocket. The rustling disturbed his gold glinted nametag. Hoffman, it read.

"I'm Officer Hoffman," he said. "My partner Officer Blake is just outside, doing a preliminary." As he spoke, he gestured a lot with his hands. When does Charlie usually arrive home from school? Where else might he have gone? Does Charlie know any other adults in the area? Question after question, Liza watched Hoffman's hands make small circles in the air. The right palm looked swollen, bigger than the left. Sometimes, the big hand rested in front of him, palm up like something large and invisible could land there. Like something large and invisible could crash a hole through it. As he continued the inquisition, his eyes swept the house. Might

Charlie have hidden somewhere? Hoffman wandered into the kitchen. Liza kept her hand at her chest and followed him.

“You’re certain he’s not home?” Hoffman said. He pointed to the refrigerator.

“Do you have any other freezers?”

Liza shook her head.

“Nowhere he might hide?”

“No. Nowhere,” Liza said. “We used to have a swimming pool. Well, the previous owners did, but we covered it with sod. There’s nowhere.” More beads of sweat huddled around her temples and in her hairline. Hoffman consulted his note pad.

“What about his father?”

“Lenny? I mean, Leonard Webber. He lives on the west coast now. He’s not involved. Charlie would never.”

Since the divorce eight years ago, the child support check would come every month, Liza trying not to think about Lenny’s slippery tongue wetting the back of the envelope. She had always wielded a heavy letter opener. For years, the return address still showed his parent’s street in Vienna, Virginia. 22027. When it finally changed, Liza was in the middle of the move herself. Lugging Charlie’s bean bag chair to the moving van, she had met the mailman at the end of the driveway. He was just reaching out to stuff a new stack into the mailbox. He waved and smiled under his bushy mustache, handing her the envelopes and catalogues, a change-of-address form folded in the back. Lenny’s check was right on top, a crooked millennium stamp affixed, the year 2000 swirled in ribbon across a rainbowed background. The address

was in San Diego. A street called Beardsley. From then on, Liza imagined Lenny with a beard, trolling around San Diego, probably on a used bicycle.

“I’m going to need an exact address. Any way to reach him.” Hoffman scribbled on the paper, his hand swelling around the tiny pen.

She knew the address by heart, but she shuffled through a stack of old mail to find an envelope. The checks had been consistently arriving from the Beardsley Street.

“Any other adults? Neighbors, friends, relatives.”

“Maybe he went to Marcie’s. She’s my sister, much younger sister. She lives downtown. He’s taken the metro before, but not alone. He would never go there now. Not alone.”

“Did anyone call her?” Hoffman asked.

Liza squinted and focused her attention on the cordless phone. It sat propped in its holder, silent.

Hoffman peered at the display of photos stuck up by mismatched magnets on the refrigerator door. Pinned under an old plastic *L* was a picture from a summer visit to Ocean City. Charlie had insisted his mother bury him in the sand. Just before the shutter released, a seagull flapped down next to Charlie’s submerged body. The image caught Charlie in profile, his mouth open in amused laughter. He wore large sunglasses with neon green temples. Gold sand flecked his dirty-blond hair.

“This the boy?” Hoffman asked. His radio at his hip crackled for a moment before a voice came through. Liza couldn’t make out even the intelligible remarks, the police code. She thought she heard the name of a location.

“What was that? Was that something?” Liza asked. Suddenly, her body felt drenched in sweat, its musty stickiness bleeding through her clothes and wafting into the air. Hoffman uttered into the radio. More codes.

“No, Ma’am. Blake will be in in just a minute. I’m going to need to take a look around, but you might want to start gathering some photos.” Before disappearing up the stairs, he tapped the picture on the fridge with the tip of his pen. “We’re going to need one with his body in it.”

With Hoffman gone, Liza rushed to open the kitchen window, to let out the sick smell of herself. She gripped the edges of the sink and tried to take a deep breath. Outside in the back yard, Blake used the toe of his boot to lift up a loose flank of sod. For the second time, Liza noticed its patchiness and discoloration. The blades were no longer green and lush. Suddenly, it seemed, they had turned white and brown, shrunken down to nearly nothing. From under Blake’s shoe emerged a moth. He flapped his hands and let the sod fall.

After the police turned over Charlie’s room, Liza didn’t leave the house for days and days. She survived off Charlie’s junk food in the pantry, Cheetos, Handisnacks, Spaghettios, as the perishables spoiled and, inevitably, perished. She chewed handfuls of his gummy worm multivitamins. She woke up only to take long naps a few hours later, passing out in the middle of coverage of the marines trotting through Kabul, the orange vested workers trotting through Ground Zero. The Teresa Show changed its theme music, sad and slow, Liza’s lullaby. She checked her email to make sure the sub had been emailing her, which he had. *Quiz results October 12.*

*Quiz results October 16. Daniel Spagnelli's Mom called. FWD: Staff Devel. Day Postponed. Test results October 30. Marcie called. Her mother and father called. Sonny called. Marcie called again and again, always wanting to do some voodoo yoga or meditation. That girl, Liza thought, will never grow up. After a few days, the police stopped calling. Charlie never called. All anyone could do was apologize. The mailman started to bring the mail to her door, jogging from his truck to tuck the stack between the screen door and the front door. Sometimes, it piled up for days. When Liza finally remembered to bring it in, she'd open the front door only to find endless moths circling the outdoor lamp.*

On Halloween, she clicked off all the lights and sat in front of the window in the dark, watching the parade of costumed children receive candy at her neighbors' homes. A disproportionate number of the kids dressed as firefighters. She watched the patches of sod slowly deteriorate. Every day one more rectangle had shriveled up, turned brown, and curled in its corners. Liza thought of *The Wizard of Oz*, the movie. The Wicked Witch of the East who had been crushed by Dorothy's house landing in Oz. Liza rummaged through Charlie's VHS collection and found the tape. She stuck it in the VCR and fast forwarded to when Dorothy arrived in Oz, all aglow in Technicolor. The Wicked Witch of the East's feet curled under, like the sod did, leaving the glittering ruby slippers. Except when the sod curled, nothing was left for Liza.

On Charlie's shelf she also found an old Victoria Secret catalog, a pack of matches, and a red, white, and blue ribbon from the school's ribbon campaign.

The days grew shorter and shorter, darker and darker.

Somehow, Liza had made it to November 17, her thirty-seventh birthday. On The Teresa Show, women in pastel cardigans confessed their postpartum depression. The phone had rung during the whole episode, but Liza turned the TV volume way up to drown it out. She didn't want to talk to Marcie. Or her parents. Or anyone else who was going to wish her a happy birthday—and then apologize. With a bowl of Movie Theater Buttered Popcorn in her lap, Liza silently challenged, What if, after your child left the womb, he *evaporated*? The women on the screen sat stiff and stared bleary-eyed into the audience.

During her own pregnancy, Liza remembered feeling numb. She thought a change would hit her the moment the at-home test revealed her fate. The ecstasy would be immediate and unmistakable. Even her mother had told her, “It will never be the same.” Her hair would look thicker, her skin healthier. She would get that glow about her. But when the doctor confirmed her pregnancy, Liza didn't feel any different. Sitting in the waiting room, Charlie's father Lenny had rubbed his hands down the front of his jeans. “Oh, God,” he kept saying. After leaving the office, Liza drew the seatbelt across her lap and thought, Under the plastic, under her pants, under her skin, was a baby. She had a microscopic person *inside* of her. How could she not feel different? She felt bloated and tender, but still herself. She practiced the words in her mouth. “There's a baby,” she had said aloud. “Where?” Lenny asked. His foot tapped the breaks. Outside the car window, the months sped by.

Eventually, a change did come, but it wasn't the physical, emotional euphoria that she thought would burst through her pores, visible to all. It was a thick wave of

paranoia. Baby Charlie wasn't even in the room when it happened. And Lenny had been in the hallway with Marcie who sported an oversized scrunchie and tight leggings. She went on and on about her beauty school applications while Lenny banged his palm against a snack machine, trying to shake loose another Snickers bar. Two for the price of one.

In the room, Liza changed out of hospital gown and into the clothes she would wear to return home. With both feet through her pant legs and her arms bent down to retrieve the elastic waistband, Liza noticed her now massive breasts dangling away from her body, her hard nipples pointing towards the ground. She would have to remember to breast feed equally from both. Both nipples would see her son's mouth. Her eyes moved down her body. The stitches between her legs itched, as if the elastic from her wide bottomed underwear had unraveled and chafed. Her belly button was still popped out, her stomach still extended and swollen, as if still full. But that microscopic person was no longer microscopic. He was out. He was seven pounds, six ounces. As she slid her pants up her unshaven legs, she realized that her body was no longer her body, even now. It remained possessed by that pink roll of skin down the hall. The feeling grew. Her car was no longer her car. Her house was no longer her house. Previously innocuous items were suddenly dangerous. Sharp edges, hardwood floors, the staircase. Should Charlie be in the kitchen while Liza chopped vegetables? What if the knife slipped?

During a commercial break, at the kitchen sink, she squeezed sugary juice from one of Charlie's juice boxes into her mouth. She remembered a time from before Charlie's birth, when she reached for the refrigerator door, she'd stare at the

inky sonogram image. At twenty-four weeks, his head had taken the shape of a real head, but the grainy bubble floating in black space looked more like an olive without a pimento.

Outside, the moths had gravitated to the back porch light. They looked like endless, swirling snowflakes. Leaving the crumbled box in the sink, Liza checked the front window. More swirling moths flooded the porch light. She flicked the light off and on, off and on. Still the moths stayed. When she opened the storm door to retrieve scraps of mail that had fallen onto the porch, a few moths flew inside, immediately attracted to the foyer light bulb. They circled the lamp like vultures, periodically smacking into its glass exterior. A commercial for Lysol blared from the television, the actress's voice overly enthusiastic. More and more moths flew to the surface of the storm door, as if begging to come inside. Like it's a real party in here, Liza thought. She could see all their undersides, their segmented bodies and long snouts. She swung the door open again, just as an experiment. More flapped inside, doubling the amount from before. The never-ending storm of moths, like the cicadas, the locusts, Penelope's suitors. Liza propped open the door with her bare foot to see how long it'd be until they ran out. One of the Hartrant's kids from across the street rolled down the sloped street on a scooter with a flashlight in her hand. Liza watched the bouncing light grow smaller and smaller, until it winked out around the turn. The moths hadn't stopped. Liza finally closed the door and walked under the haze of wings fluttering above. They brushed her neck, her forehead, the tops of her shoulders. She swatted and shook them away, growing angry.

“God,” she cried aloud. She raced to the kitchen and returned wielding the broom, swinging it over her head. The disturbance only made the moths more erratic, fleeing to other rooms with lights on. A few gathered on the television screen. With her bathrobe trailing behind her like a cape, Liza rushed around turning off all the lights, yelling, “Ah-ha! There!” with every flick of a switch. She pushed the power button on the television remote and the house descended into darkness.

“Now where will you go?”

She collapsed onto the couch and buried her head into the pillow. She could still hear the clicks and snaps of their bodies smacking into objects. She covered her head with more pillows. I’ll get you my pretties, she thought.

Liza dreamt she was at the bottom of a drained swimming pool. Above her, fully-clothed children stood in line for the diving board. The line weaved on forever. As each child jumped, Liza tried to scream, to tell them that the pool was empty, but no one could hear her. As they fell to the ground, they sprouted wings and grew into giant moths, then giant planes, soaring over Liza’s head and into the sky. Liza kept screaming and when she tried to wave her hands, she realized she wasn’t at the bottom of the pool but below it, buried under rubble, debris, and concrete, invisible. The children kept leaping and transforming. The last two, in mid-air, stretched open their lips and emitted a pitched note.

It was the doorbell. Liza’s eyes snapped open, dispelling away the nightmare. Around her, the house was dark and quiet. She listened for the sound of moths but

heard nothing. The doorbell. Liza dragged herself off the couch but tripped over the discarded broom on her way to the door. With broom in hand, she peered through the peephole. It was Marcie, her face close to the hole, eyes wide and smile big. Liza could see her green eyes enclosed by thick liner and shadow. Liza opened the front door but turned the lock on the storm door.

“Happy Birthday!” Marcie said. She grabbed the door handle and pulled.

“I can’t let you in,” Liza said. Birthday, she thought. No happy.

“What? Yes, you can. Let me in.”

“Did Mom call you?” Liza asked.

“Of course Mom called me. Let me in.”

“I can’t.” All these moths, she thought.

“Christ,” Marcie said. She tugged on the handle of the door. “Unlock it.”

Liza shook her head.

“Look,” Marcie continued. “I’m sorry. Maybe I surprised you, but Jesus, Liza, I’ve been calling all day.”

“I was out,” Liza lied. She blinked and looked at the space around the light. She couldn’t see any moths. Where had they all gone?

“I brought you a gift, if that makes any difference,” Marcie said. She turned to show Liza the small backpack strapped across her shoulders. Even with the made up face, her sister suddenly looked young. She was twenty-seven but really just a child, playing dress up after school. Reluctantly, Liza turned the lock. Marcie snuck through the open door and raked her shoes on the doormat.

“Thank you,” Marcie said, craning her neck to see the inside of the house.

“How are you holding up? Mom said you haven’t been back to school yet.”

“The sub is doing a good job,” Liza said. Maybe the school will hire him, she thought. Marcie walked past her and turned on the living room lamp. Then she went to the kitchen and turned on those lights, too.

“When was the last time you showered?” Marcie asked.

Liza blinked. “This morning,” she lied.

“Bull,” she said. “I’m sorry,” she quickly added.

“Please don’t apologize,” Liza interrupted. She propped the broom against the edge of the table and sank into a chair. “I’m so sick of apologies.”

“Okay.” Marcie said. “Fine.” She unzipped the book bag and pulled out the contents. “I didn’t wrap them. Waste of paper.” A hairdryer. A toiletry bag. Two granola bars. A bottle of red wine. A six-pack of French Cut panties from Target. She handed the underwear to Liza. “These are from Mom. She said you probably haven’t done laundry either.”

“Gee, thanks,” Liza said. What a Mom gift, she thought. Then she remembered, I’m a Mom, too.

With the wine bottle in one hand, Marcie began opening and slamming drawers.

“Where’s the thingamajig?” she asked. She stopped suddenly at the fake drawer below the sink, below the kitchen window. She leaned over the edge of the counter and squinted outside. “I thought you had repaired the swimming pool damage.”

“We did,” Liza said.

“Is it supposed to look like that? I was picturing a golf course back here.”

Liza stood and joined her sister at the window. Even in the dim light from the outdoor bulb, the devastation was visible. The entire yard brown, a blanket of dirt and dead grass. Too smooth to have been a site of destruction but desolate enough to prove extermination. The grass lived no longer. The blades had been decimated. What had been there was there no more.

“I think it used to be grass,” Liza said. She turned away from the window and leaned her hips against the counter. She remembered when there were birds, then caterpillars, their wriggling bodies, the slime strings shrouded across the blades’ tips. Only this, and nothing more. Quoth the raven, Nevermore.

“What happened?”

“Caterpillars. Slugs. Something,” she said. “I found them.” After Charlie—she had found the tiniest of beings. They probably had been there all along, dormant below the surface, unseen now except for their consuming wake.

“Ew. Really? You should call an exterminator.” Marcie returned to her hunt through the kitchen’s cavities. “You remember Hank Blevins. He and his wife bought a new house. She’s pregnant, so they needed more room. Apparently it was a steal, but now they know why. Mold. Termites. You name it.” On her tippy-toes, she looked into a high cabinet, reached in, and drew out a winged corkscrew. It looked like a small, mechanical person. Two arms and one head. Only half a body. As Marcie drilled it in the cork, the arms wearily raised.

“By the way,” she said, pouring the wine into a tall-stemmed glass. “You have Thanksgiving plans. You’re coming with me to Hank’s.”

“The house with the termites?”

“Not anymore. The exterminator zapped them. They need help painting, and I said we’d help them. They’ll feed us in exchange, but they’re on this new vegan diet.” She thrust the glass at Liza. “Now, go,” she said. “Drink. Bathe.”

Liza had to admit. The shower had felt good. The best shower ever. Best birthday shower ever. Sitting on the edge of her bed in a towel, she had given in. She let Marcie do the voodoo.

“They can make anything into a powder these days. It’s just chemicals,” Marcie said, brushing a long sweep across Liza’s forehead. “This is mineral sunscreen. SPF 15.”

“Does it work?”

Marcie stopped mid-sweep and withdrew the brush. “Look at my skin. I use it.” She turned her face side to side and blinked.

“You’re twenty-seven.”

“Wrinkles begin to show at twenty years old, Liza. It’s a proven fact.” Marcie returned the brush to Liza’s cheekbones. Liza closed her eyes and let the bristles tickle across her eyelashes as Marcie worked. Charlie’s room had been full of powder. It was something white and grainy, more like sugar than flour, but Hoffman had called it a “powder.” Blake had had his fingers all in it.

“Is it anthrax? Is it anthrax?” Liza had screamed, covering her mouth with her hand. “Do I need one of those masks?”

Blake had pointed towards the boy’s closet. “From in there. No need to worry, ma’am.” An old chemistry kit had tipped over and spilled its contents. Charlie must have walked all through it, spreading it around the room, the sole of his shoe imprinted in it. “Probably just baking soda.” He scooped piles of it into little plastic baggies.

“Mascara means open your eyes.” Marcie was coming at her with the inky, black wand. Liza jerked her head back and held on to the arms of the chair. Marcie pushed forward. “It’s a triple-lash formula. You’ll see a difference, and you’ll love it.”

What else is just a chemical? Liza thought. She thought about all the chemicals that could be turned into powder. Ajax, Mr. Clean, Clorox. She thought about the gritty white bleach she used to scrub the bathroom walls. She thought about Charlie’s room—his video game magazines piled up in the bottom drawer of his dresser, the airplane models atop his bookcase, the old teddy bear that had its face chewed off by their old neighbor’s old golden retriever. Old, old, old. She thought of all Charlie’s stuff, axed up, filed down, and shaved into tiny pieces, as fine as ash. She thought about moths, ground into dust. Moth powder. She could keep it all in a coffee can, wedged between the nails and the screws, on a shelf in the garage. Sprinkle it on the sod occasionally. Use it as fertilizer. See if the grass reappeared.

“You’re squinting too hard. Open,” Marcie said, her face inches from the tip of Liza’s nose. Marcie placed her hands on either side of Liza’s temples. Then she

used her thumbs to smooth the skin just under Liza's eyebrows. "What I'm doing now is called blending. I have a brush that I use for my customers, but since we're related and all." Marcie wet her thumb with her tongue and rubbed Liza's brow bone. Marcie's plump and glossed lips, inches from the tip of Liza's nose, cleaved together in the center of her face. Liza had her mother's looks, high cheek bones but plain features that only grew plainer with age. Charlie had looked like Lenny. Charlie *looked* like Lenny. It was a damn shame.

The next day, Marcie dragged Liza to Pentagon City. Her idea of therapy. On the way there, as Liza navigated her car through the city, Marci pointed out landmarks.

"I was over there on that corner," she said. "And on *that* corner, people were running out of Bed, Bath, and Beyond with their huge bags. And all this smoke was everywhere. People were ducking and taking cover. I followed some people from men's wear under that overpass near Army Navy Drive—and, isn't it funny that Army and Navy compete, but there's this one street with both their names on it?"

In the dressing room at Hecht's, Liza stood barefoot in front of the three-sided mirror. As she waited for Marcie to come out of the dressing room, she spied her tripled self from every angle. The police couldn't find so many people. They couldn't find her one son. Yet here I am, she thought. And there's three of me. Her grey roots poked out from her scalp; the dark sunspot on her neck looked darker. All of sudden, it seemed, she was thirty-seven. In another few months, Charlie would be twelve. She felt like she was trapped in an episode of *The Teresa Show*. She could narrate her

whole experience in neat sentences for the camera. After the terrorists came another terrorist, an invisible one who took my son far, far away. Then my sister came to do her part, to make me eat, drink, consume, to make me a consumer, just what America needed.

Marcie came out in a coral, knee-length dress. The heavy beading around the hem made a quiet, clinking sound as she walked. Next to Marcie's slim figure in the mirror, Liza felt exposed, unsheathed, unfolded—the mocked subject of a three-sided brochure on bad hygiene, divorce, single-motherhood, missing child syndrome. She was looking at herself, looking at herself, looking at herself. Grey roots, grey roots, grey roots. Would Marcie ever know motherhood? Liza touched the dark spot on her neck. It reminded her of pregnancy, how her nipples turned swollen and dark, peaking at a purple-maroon color.

Marcie spun. “Does my butt look big?”

It didn't. Next to Liza's mature hips, it looked incredibly small. It looked almost invisible, as if under the swinging fabric may not have been a body at all.

At home, Liza tossed her Hecht's bag onto her bed and flopped down on top of it. Underneath her, it felt like a slippery tumor, a flimsy, synthetic extension of her hip bone. She curled her legs into her chest and closed her eyes tight, wanting to shut off, make everything black as pitch, empty. But the afternoon light created magenta and lime green shapes behind her eyelids. She squeezed her eyes tighter and flexed her abdominal muscles. Then she clenched her whole body, making it tight, round, and compact. As hard as a kidney bean or a stone. She tried constructive thoughts.

What do I need? she thought. What does this home need? What would Charlie if he were home?

Liza dreamt she was in her old house, pregnant again, her stomach as round and as full as the moon. She could feel the baby pushing from the inside, eager to come out. Wetness soaked her legs, and she knew her water had broken. She tried to call for help, but when she reached for the telephone, the number pads were only blank squares. She thought Charlie would help her but Charlie was inside her, not yet alive. The wetness kept coming, saturating her clothes. Dream pain split up her spine, and she knew the baby was near. When he came out, he cried, spewing worms from his mouth.

Liza woke with a start, ripped from sleep. Her breath shallow, the sheets sweaty. She slowly opened her eyes to the now dark room. Night had arrived. She turned towards the bathroom and concentrated on the visible items on the vanity. Marcie's bulky hairdryer, a large, pump bottle of lotion, a toothbrush, toothpaste tube, one hoop earring, one hair clip, one dark hair. All arranged around the sink like offerings around a shrine. She thought about buying Charlie a new toothbrush—the mechanical kind with a timer, and a charging station. The kind with a nightlight built in. She thought about buying one for herself.

The clock read 9:08pm. The grocery store would close in less than an hour. It's time, she thought. She rose from the bed, went into the bathroom, and peed with the door open.

The Giant parking lot was nearly empty. Liza slid out of her car and shivered as a strong gust of November wind forced her backwards. A shopping cart in the middle of the space next to her rolled into the bumper of her car, the cart's back left wheel spinning relentlessly. Liza gripped the steel bar tighter and rocked the cart back and forth, trying to jostle it back into order. What was it Hoffman had said? Try to go on with your life. Let the police take care of it. It. What is *it*, anyway? Liza should be taking care of a *him*, not an *it*. After a few tries with the wheel, she gave up, and the cart rattled noisily forward, through the wide double doors.

A young, female employee knelt just on the other side of the doors, twisting a key into the lock. A skinny white stick stuck out from her lips, and her left cheek bulged from the round bulb of a lollipop.

"You just made it," the girl said.

Liza stopped her cart. "What?"

The girl pulled the melon-colored candy from her lips. "We lock the doors at 9:30. We're closing in twenty minutes." The girl's words revealed orange tinted teeth.

"I don't have much," Liza said.

The girl shrugged. "Sorry."

"Sorry for what?" Everyone is sorry, she thought. Sorry, sorry, sorry.

"It'll be close. You'll have to come to the front before ten."

Liza opened her mouth to object, but the girl had already turned away, headed towards the cash registers. Under her Giant apron, she had on a black miniskirt, barely long enough to cover what it needed to cover. How did her mother let her out

of the house? Where is her supervisor? She could have been a Whitman student, one of the snobby cheerleaders. The girl called something to another cashier—a young black boy slumped over his register—and pointed her thumb behind her, gesturing at Liza. The second cashier tossed his hands up and shook his head.

Liza wanted to follow the girl, rip the lollipop out of her ridiculous stained mouth. As she piled apples onto a scale, she silently raged. My son is going to need food when he gets home. He's gone. He may have anthrax, and I don't know where he is. A rush of heat rose to Liza's neck. And *you* are an ungrateful brat. She shoved her cart towards the produce, letting it shake and clatter into a display of limes. It struck the display with a shallow thud and sent a shiver through the fruit. A limp American flag stuck into the display remained inert. She wondered if this time next year there would be fireworks.

The rain started as only spittle, here and there on the windshield. Not even enough for the wiper blades. By the time Liza steered the nose of the car into the driveway, it fell in noisy torrents, striking the ground like shattered glass. She pressed the remote for the automatic garage door opener only to remember that it hadn't worked in months. That it hadn't ever really worked. With the car's engine turned off and her seat belt still buckled, Liza sat in the car and listened to the water pound the roof. She stared through the blur at her home's façade. It seemed to be melting. Goddamnit, Sonny, she thought. This was all his fault.

Her arms weighed down with groceries and shoes slicked with mud, Liza trotted through the house and to the kitchen. As soon as she had untangled the slippery plastic bags from her fingers, she picked up the telephone and dialed the number she, regrettably, still knew by heart.

“Hello?” Sonny answered on the umpteenth ring.

“I had almost expected an answering machine,” Liza said. She heard him exhale loudly into the phone.

“Liza? My God. How are you?”

“Fine. Listen, that garage door opener you gave me? Well, it never worked,” Liza said.

“What? What’s wrong?”

“And the sod is infected or something, and there are all these moths and worms. Marcie says I should call an exterminator, but you know what? I don’t want to. I want you to call what’s-his-name—your sister’s *husband*—and take it away. Just take all of it. Away.”

“I’m sorry, Liza. Is everything okay? It’s so late, and you haven’t been at school.”

“Just get what’s-his-name over here to get rid of it,” she said and hung up.

Sonny did not call back.

The rain kept up for two days, soaking all the American flags everywhere. Weighing them down lower and lower. The heavy drops churned Liza’s ruined sod, turning her back yard into a field of slushy mud. Might as well be a swimming pool,

she thought. For pigs. Liza spent most of the days cleaning this room and that, starting with the kitchen and working her way up the stairs. She did as much laundry as she could find—her clothes, her towels, the curtains, the door mats. For now, she ignored Charlie’s bedroom, keeping the door closed, treating it like an old closet filled with forgettable things.

When the phone rang on the second day, Liza was in her room, wrapping the fitted sheet around her mattress corner. An episode of The Teresa Show played on her bedroom television: Today on Teresa: Five Steps to Becoming Fearless. Step One, Let Yourself Be Afraid.

Liza picked up the receiver next to her bed.

“Liza Wheeler?”

Liza felt her stomach drop, her pulse quicken. Charlie? She used the remote to turn off the television.

“This is she,” she said.

“This is Cliff Naylor calling about the sod. Sonny left me a message. Something about an infestation?”

Liza relaxed. She held the phone away from her mouth and coughed. She took a deep breath.

“Yes,” she said. “Excuse me.”

“What’s the problem you’re having there?”

“Well,” Liza said. “Where to start. First it was turning all brown, and then there were all these moths—”

“Moths, you say?”

“Yes, and then I saw a few caterpillars.”

“In the sod?”

“Yes,” Liza said.

“Could you describe the caterpillars?”

“I don’t know. They looked like—caterpillars, I guess.”

“What about the moths? Skinny, white? Long noses?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Yeah, sounds like you’ve got webworms. I thought as much. But let me have you run one test. Can you get out to the sod now?”

Liza’s eyes darted to her bedroom window. Outside, everything looked gray.

“Well, sure,” she said. “You called me at home.”

“Okay. Here’s what you do. Take some dish soap, the liquid kind, like Dawn? And mix about two tablespoons in a gallon jug of water.”

Liza fished a pen from her nightstand and scribbled inside an old Whitman copy of *Catcher in the Rye* she found wedged inside the drawer. *Dawn. 2tbls. 1 Gal H2O.*

“Okay,” she said.

“Then go out back, and pour it around an area in the yard.”

“Does it matter if it’s raining?”

“No, shouldn’t matter. If you’ve got webworms, they’ll come up. The soap’ll drive them out. See what you see, then give me a call back, and we’ll see what to do.”

To her notes she added *Pour. Worms? Call.* Cliff Naylor rattled off his telephone number.

“Oh, and give me a count, if you can. When you call me back,” he said.

“Okay. And count them. Got it.”

“Alright, now. Don’t worry. Whatever it is, we can take care of it. Byebye.”

Liza clicked off the cordless phone.

*Dawn. 2tbls. 1 Gal H2O. Pour. Worms? Call. Count first.*

With the soapy-water bucket in one hand, and an umbrella in the other, Liza waded through the mud that had become her back yard. At random, she picked a spot and dumped the bucket. For a minute or so, nothing happened. The soapy water mixed with the rain water, making only a bubbly puddle. And then, Liza thought she could see the puddle tremble with just the tiniest of force. One by one, the bodies writhed out. Suddenly, there they were. At first Liza counted five, but more and more slid out of the ground. Six, seven, eight, nine, ten. All this time they had been hidden below. They had been there all along. But now they were out.

Eleven, twelve, thirteen.

*Call.*

Cliff Naylor was surprised at the number.

“It’s unlucky,” he joked. “And it’s a lot. At six or seven, I’d call it a major pest problem. Thirteen in one patch is, whew, astronomical. Did the moth count peak too?”

“Yes, but I didn’t keep track. Where do we go from here?” Liza asked.

“Well, you’ve got two options. Pesticides, which may take some time, or total removal, which we can do in an afternoon.”

“I don’t want to wait.”

“Well, it looks like we’ll have to amputate.”

“How soon?” Liza asked.

Cliff could come the following day. The last thing he said was, “Consider it done.”

The next morning, the downpour finally ceased. The sun shone through thin clouds, drying up the puddles on the streets. The flags could fly high again.

While Liza scrubbed the downstairs bathroom with bleach, she could feel the rumble of a large fleet approaching. She tensed and checked the tiny curtained window above the toilet. It was Cliff and his vehicles. The largest truck, shaped like a moving van, pulled into the driveway first. Behind it, a smaller truck with equipment visible in the back—bags of soil, shovels, rakes. *Naylor’s Landscaping: “Preserving Your Lawn”* was printed in bright green across the trucks’ sides. Those quotation marks, Liza thought, aren’t necessary. From the bathroom window, she watched as a stocky older man in a green jacket climbed down from the biggest truck and made his way up to Liza’s door. A visor fit snug around his head, and tufts of white hair poked out from the top of his scalp. Behind him, four more men wearing the matching green jackets jumped down from the tall trucks. Even from some distance away, Liza could tell Cliff and his team had strong upper bodies and tanned faces. She quickly washed her hands of the bleach and met the landscaper at the front door.

“Cliff Naylor,” Cliff said, his hand stuck out for a shake.

“Liza Wheeler. Thanks for coming on such short notice,” she said, returning the handshake. Cliff couldn’t have been older than fifty, but he had deep lines around his eyes and mouth. His thinning white hair waved in the mild breeze.

“Let’s see what we’ve got,” he said. “Around back?”

Liza nodded. “I’ll show you.”

As soon as they turned the corner into the back yard, Cliff said, “Oh yeah. Pretty classic case.” He bent to his knees and stuck his thick fingers into the dirt and grass carcasses. With a layer of dirt spread across his fingertips, he stood and held up his palm for Liza to see. “See those little green dots?”

Liza nodded. Embedded in the dirt were spheres of green, the shape of a pea but half the size.

“That’s called frass. A nice word for excrement,” Cliff said. “Larvae excrement.” He pulled a dirty rag from his pocket and wiped his hands on it. When Liza wrinkled her nose, he chuckled. “Don’t worry,” he said. “It’s a common lawn and garden problem. We’ll take care of it.” Then he whistled to his men and gestured for them to follow. “The cutter,” he called.

Despite its infestation, the sod’s roots had grown deep into the soil, grubbing in the earth to escape the webworms, the moths. The sod was cut with a machine, the wheeled sod cutter, with its blades severing the diseased sod’s roots, while the wheels rolled harmlessly, like those of a grocery cart or a stroller. The machine cut the sod in long chunks, piece by piece until all the pieces were laid in the back of a pickup truck, rolled up neatly and precisely, like sleeping bags. Without the sod, Liza could see the belly of the yard. Its fine hair, its skin, gone, cut open scalpel-like in thick,

long sections. Its raw tissue startled her. She suddenly noticed the sound of her own breathing, and for no apparent reason, she brought her right hand to her left shoulder.

On Thanksgiving Day, the sky opened up and fed the city unseasonably warm rays. When Marcie's car pulled into the driveway, Liza could see she wore a hood lined with faux fur but kept the windows down.

Inside the car, it looked like Marcie had been renting it out to a homeless person. One of the really raggedy ones who always dragged around plastic bags, empty water bottles, and scraped out yogurt containers.

"It wouldn't be renting if it was a homeless person," Marcie said.

"*Were* a homeless person," Liza said.

"First of all, they don't have any money."

"They've paid you in garbage," Liza said. From under her thighs, she pulled out a twisted plastic fork and tossed it into the back seat. Go join your friends, she thought.

The car slowed as they passed through an intersection. Marcie clutched the steering wheel in both hands and pulled herself forward. Her skinny stuck out elbows looked like picked chicken bones, and the tiny blond hairs on her arms caught the sunlight. She had little boy arms—like Charlie's not too long ago. Marcie stretched her neck forward and squinted at something over her head. Suddenly thrust into the sunlight, her tinted sunglasses flickered from red to amber.

"Is this Devonshire?" she asked.

"You've passed it already. Just make a—"

“Yes! Devonshire!”

The car squealed around the turn, and the green bean casserole in Liza’s lap slid towards the center console. She tightened her hands around the glass container and her thumb ripped right through the foil. As Marcie straightened the car, Liza felt the aspic heat splash under her thumbnail. She jerked her thumb out of the dish.

“I told you to make a u-turn,” Liza said. “My thumb was just in the casserole.”

Marcie eyed the casserole dish.

“They’re vegans you know,” Marcie said. “Supposed to be good for the fetus.” She stuffed a piece of gum into her mouth and shifted into second. “709. 709. 709.” The car crept along the street.

Liza held up her thumb as a dollop of the snot-colored casserole rolled down onto the back of her hand. Marcie popped her gum and looked over.

“There should be some napkins around here somewhere,” she said. She dug her hand into the space between the seat and the armrest. “Told you.”

“So kind of your tenant to leave you his napkins,” Liza said.

“Who said it was a he? Don’t be so sexist. Bingo. 709.”

The car stopped in front of a pale yellow one-story rambler with wide blue shutters. Liza quickly took inventory of the exterior—rusted railing on the porch, a dying azalea bush in the garden, a crumbling concrete slab adjacent to the faded garage door. The arrangement of the door and windows made the façade look like a giant face. A giant, sick, yellow face. Liza imagined a thick septic vein coursing below the painted pallor of the house. A home for Frankenstein’s monster. Something in Liza’s stomach flipped. As she climbed out of the car, she held the casserole dish

with care, like she was holding a baby made of glass. She thought about the chunk that had lodged itself under her fingernail. The blue sky stretched taut in all directions. A plane sailed so high it looked more like a charm, a cross, than an actual plane. For a moment, Liza imaged tiny passengers inside, spreading open the mouths of miniature bags of peanuts, peering out tiny windows.

Marcie blew one last gum bubble before pulling the wad out of her mouth. She held it between her thumb and finger for a moment, looking around. Instinctively, Liza held out her palm.

“Here,” she said.

Marcie shook her head, and pushed the piece of gum underneath the black railing on the porch.

“Voila,” she said and rang the doorbell.

“Marcie,” Liza scolded. “They just bought the place.”

Hank and Erica Blevins weren’t even her friends. She had never even met Erica. And the last time she saw Hank was at Marcie’s high school graduation ceremony, but that was nearly ten years ago. Marcie’s “good times” from BCC high. Back in the day when Liza was five years out of college, sticking it out with Lenny and chasing after Charlie who had just learned to walk. Naturally, learning to run followed quickly after. At the graduation, a missed rehearsal tuba note startled him, and he took off, darting in and out of clumps of family members. When Liza caught him, he cried himself into a sweaty nap in her arms and left her with a drool spot below her collarbone. At least she had caught him that time.

Marcie fingered the doorbell again, but before the echoed tone could finish, the door swung open. A young man with long blond hair stood on the other side of the threshold. It was Hank Blevins. Had to be. His right hand, covered by a red-striped oven mitt, held the neck of an uncorked bottle of wine. He wore oversized grey sweatpants and a Redskins hooded sweatshirt, already stained with paint splatters.

“Happy Thanksgiving,” he announced. “I haven’t seen you in ages.”

“Hank, Liza. Liza, Hank,” Marcie said.

Switching the wine bottle to his other hand, he gestured with the oven mitt. “Charmed. I’ll take that.”

“It’s a side. Green bean casserole,” Liza said.

Inside, the house was quiet except for low television noises radiating from some undetermined room. Liza followed Marcie and Hank through the foyer into a dining room adjacent the kitchen. Stacks of cardboard boxes lined the room. A low chandelier hung in the center of the room, its twisted arms erect, just above Liza’s belly button, about the height of a child. Three of the six bulbs had burnt out. A sad paper turkey clung to wall.

“Where’s Erica and everyone?” Marcie asked.

“She’s still taking care of one of the guest bathrooms. Turns out there’s still mold in the drywall. She cleaned it last week but it grew back. Already. Can you believe it?” Hank shrugged. “We’ve got a lot to do. You’ll see.”

“And what about Baker and Dee?”

“Harley’s game is in overtime,” Hank said.

He disappeared around the corner, carrying the casserole dish in his palm like a waiter. Yelling over the clamor of cabinet doors opening, he called for Erica.

“Is Dee the one with the baby?” Liza asked Marcie.

“That kid is not a baby anymore,” Marcie said. “Harley’s eleven.”

“You know that I mean. The one with the baby back then.”

“Then, yes. Dee’s the one. She married Baker, Harley’s dad. He went to Linganore,” Marcie said.

Hank returned with two tumblers filled to the brim with white wine.

“Sorry. God knows where the wine glasses are,” he said.

Liza nodded and sipped just enough off the top. Marcie took a large gulp.

“Good stuff,” Marcie said.

“Time for the grand tour?” Hank said.

The tour took them through the construction. Only the master bathroom was near finished, marble countertops and porcelain fixtures shined to a gloss. The unhinged door rested against the wall outside. In the open door frame, Marcie oohed and ahhed. She toasted everyone’s glass. Liza tried to avoid examining herself in the mirror. She had done her hair and makeup even though they were just going to be painting. The old t-shirt and baggy jeans hid the saggy skin around her neck and knees. Her body had never been the same after Charlie. Then, after the divorce, more skin started to fall. It was as if the divorce had triggered some kind of skin disease. Like it hadn’t ruined enough. What’s going to happen to it now? she thought. Now that it’s all been undone. Her skin will just keep melting.

As they made their way back down to the dining room, they passed by a tall blonde in one of the narrow, upstairs hallways. Just inside the bathroom door, she was bent over a bucket of grey, sudsy water. With her back arched and her head turned up, Liza could see straight through the girl's v-neck, the curve of the tops of her small breasts and the round, black bra that held them in place. Liza quickly looked away. Erica pulled her gloved hands out of the bucket and began to scrub a coarse-bristled brush over the wall. The mold was visible and black. It stained the water in the bucket. Cleaning dirt with dirt, Liza thought. Finding worms with soap.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Hank said. "My wife."

"Oh, no," Erica said when she saw them. "Don't come in here. I should be wearing a mask, but I'm not. I cannot make another trip to Home Depot." She slid one glove off her hand, turning it inside out and tossing it on the back of the toilet. "You know what? Just forget it." She came out of the bathroom and shut the door behind her. "Hey, Marcie." To Liza, she said, "I'm Erica. Don't shake my hand."

As Hank led the group down the stairs, Liza felt Erica tug on the sleeve of her t-shirt.

"I know we haven't met, and you're here to paint my crappy walls—thank you, by the way," she whispered. "But I want to say how sorry I am." She brought one hand to her chest.

"It's fine," Liza said to interrupt. But Erica continued. At some point, she had intertwined her fingers on the other hand with Liza's.

"I just can't imagine how scary that would be. I'm not big yet, but we're expecting, and it would just be awful." she said. "My god." She gave Liza's hand a

tight squeeze before she released it. “One of my coworker’s friends, Veronica Small, worked at the World Trade Center. It’s just horrible.”

“It is,” Liza said.

“I really want you to know how concerned we are,” Erica said.

“Alright,” Liza said. “Thank you.”

Erica sighed. They had reached the landing on the staircase. “Well,” she said. “Who needs a refill? Not me of course.”

Erica went off to retrieve the bottle while Hank led Marcie and Liza into the family living room, where a square television atop a pile of boxes showed a staticky rerun of *The Teresa Show*.

“We can probably get started. Food won’t be ready for another thirty minutes. Someone wants to tape up the windows?” Hank said. He cracked open one paint can using the flat end of a screwdriver and then poured the creamy fluid into a roller pan. Erica reappeared and unfolded a TV tray table, setting the bottle of wine on top.

“Nope,” Marcie said. “I want to paint.” She picked up one of the plastic-covered rollers and used her teeth to rip it open. “You tape,” she said to Liza, spitting tortured bits from her lips.

The volume was low, but Liza could make out the program on the TV. Today on *Teresa: Survival Stories: My Most Tragic Day*. Liza had seen the episode before. It was the one about women who had been terrorized by their spouses. One woman survived a knife wound to the heart. Her boyfriend had stabbed her during an argument about who was to buy the toilet paper. Turns out the argument was really about a supposed affair, the wife accused of using too much toilet paper after sleeping

with another man. The second guest almost committed suicide the day her children were killed by her own husband, their father. Liza recalled the family picture when it was shown the first time. Mom and Dad in full smiles, twin girls on each flank, same bobbed haircuts, and a young boy's face peering out over Mom's shoulders, his arms thrown around her neck. He's the only one looking in the wrong direction, his gaze just to the viewer's left, as if from behind the photographer, something else had caught his eye. The photo flashed on the screen again in black and white. Liza couldn't remember if the picture was originally shown that way or had been altered by the faltering reception.

Harley, Dee, and Baker showed up just as the buzzer sounded. Just as Liza had scrubbed the dried paint from her hands.

"Sorry we're late," Baker said, coming into the kitchen. An overweight woman with thick bangs and a boy in a shiny soccer uniform followed close behind.

"And you must be Liza." Baker said. He shook her hand. "Nice to finally meet you."

"You too," Liza said.

With the smell of fresh paint wafting, they ate something called a nut roast at the oak table in the kitchen. Everyone helped themselves to Liza's casserole, but their servings sat on the sides of their plates, untouched. Dee grilled her on the ingredients. Her long bangs covered her eyebrows, leaving her round face expressionless.

"What about chicken stock?"

"I'm not sure. I did have to use some soup," Liza replied.

“It doesn’t agree with Harley’s stomach.”

“I’m sorry, too,” Erica said to Liza. “I’m eating vegan for the pregnancy, and if I have to do it, so does Hank. It looks really yummy though.”

“It’s really fine,” Liza said. She watched as Harley used his fingertips to push a pile of the casserole onto his fork. Before he took the bite, his eyes met his mother’s. She flashed him a disapproving frown. He pretended not to see and shoveled it into his mouth.

“I have a son about your age,” Liza struggled over her words. Have. Son. The boy simply crossed his arms.

“He’s twelve. Short for his age,” Dee offered.

“Mom,” he groaned, uncrossing his arms.

Dee ruffled her child’s blond hair. “You should have brought him,” she said to Liza.

“Who?”

“Your son.”

Liza could only sit and stare.

“I think,” Marcie said quickly. “We should go around the table and say what we’re thankful for. We used to do that when I was a kid, remember Liza? I’ll start. I’m thankful for great friends and family, like you all.”

Erica cooed. “That’s so sweet,” she said. “I’m thankful for that too. And for all of you for helping us. We’ve got nine months to whip this house into shape, right Hank?” She loudly patted her husband’s thigh.

“Ditto on the help,” Hank said. He raised his glass to his guests. “I’m also thankful for my wife.”

Sitting to Hank’s right, Dee was next. “I’m thankful for this delicious meal.” In a solemn tone, she added, “And our country’s freedom. Now, Harley, say what you’re thankful for,” Dee prompted.

He pushed the green beans around on his plate. “Our goalie,” Harley said.

“Your goalie? Harley, what else?” Dee said.

“What?” Harley said. “That’s what I’m thankful for. He saved us in the shoot out.”

“Alright, alright,” Baker said. “He did save the game. You saw him, Dee. My turn. I’m thankful for my family, of course.” He paused and cleared his throat. “And the firefighters and policemen in New York City and Washington, D.C. We really can’t forget them this year.”

All around the table, heads nodded. Everyone but Harley focused on Liza. Harley kept his attention on his meal, twisting his fork around and around in the puddle of casserole.

“Um,” Liza said. “I pass.”

“Oh, you can’t *pass*,” Marcie said. “Where’s your Thanksgiving spirit?”

With the room quiet, Liza could hear the buzzing television voices from the other room and Harley’s fork scraping against the plate. Spirit, she thought. The other spirit, the ghost spirit, Hamlet’s father, who came to avenge, to guide his son. The five pairs of eyes remained fixed on her. Each person’s face was dressed in a thin smile and turned towards her, as if she held a camera, poised to document the scene.

She imagined, when the film developed, the image would show the four earnest adults, one young boy looking in another direction, one tiny, growing human inside another human.

The photograph would reveal no evidence of Liza. Without her body captured, she'd be an apparition. As if she had never been there at all.