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Open Water: A Collection

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Open Water: A Collection

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelors of Arts / Science in **English** from
The College of William and Mary

by

Emily Breton Newhook

Accepted for _____
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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Williamsburg, VA
April 22, 2010

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Miri Wheelan, 63. Married to Jack Wheelan, mother of Eli, Richie, Malcolm and Amy

Jack Wheelan, 63

Lester Boyle, 60. Unmarried brother of Miri

Eli Wheelan, deceased. Fraternal twin of Richie and the oldest child.

Richie Wheelan, 37. Married to Hannah, father of Olive and Anna

Malcolm Wheelan, 36. Jack and Miri's second youngest. Unmarried.

Amy Wheelan, 33. Jack and Miri's youngest child and only daughter

Olive Wheelan, 14. Richie and Hannah's oldest daughter.

ONE

Richie and I were born three minutes apart in 1960, the same year the Lockheed-Electra crashed into Winthrop Bay. People blamed the starlings. A flock of ten- or twenty-thousand, *Time* and the city declared, halted the plane's propellers. They found starling remains and bits of crab in the engines, a detail that unsatisfied me from the beginning. Birds have many homes. I didn't know what business they had in East Boston, this strange, timeless pocket of factories and religion.

They were introduced to me on a sunny Friday afternoon, four years after the plane went down. It had rained hard the night before. Grey, gleaming puddles dotted our square backyard.

"Eli, come here," Ma whispered from the back steps. Her voice was soft and clear. The corners of her paisley-print apron shivered in the breeze.

Two of them played in a puddle near my red wagon. Their small splashes looked like crystals falling into the crabgrass.

"What kind are they?" I whispered back.

"Starlings," she said and hoisted me onto her knee. It was the first time I felt so aware of my own weight. I repeated the word. It clung to my tongue like honey. We watched their game until a dog barked and scared them into the wet trees.

After that, I seemed to see them everywhere. They perched on the omnipresent rows of limp clothing lines that hung in the small spaces between houses. I saw their nests on the roofs of the stoic Catholic schools, the wire-fenced patches of lawn, the perennial Madonna herself. When I learned about the Electra, I wondered: had the culprits lived among us?

As it turns out, they had. But it wasn't the starlings at all. It was the neighborhood men, men who elected Papa to Commodore of our shoddy boat club, who rallied at the Suffolk Downs racetrack, who made their living prying clams from the muck. And the clams, unearthed from their muddy quiet at the bottom of Winthrop Bay, drew the starlings. None of us could have anticipated that pulling on a pair of grungy hip waders would leave blood on their hands as well.

People living in Boston proper at the time will still say that it happened in their backyard. I never understood the distance between here and there until I found out about that. They wanted proximity, but none of the credit. They didn't know how to name this place or the people who live here, people just trying to fill in the gaps. In all fairness, I'm not sure we could have named it either: too many Italians to be an Irish neighborhood; too many Protestants to be Catholic; too many Catholics for anyone's good. But then they built the airport atop the park where my mother and father first laid eyes on one another. So we became infrastructure, labor, the airport itself. How do you name a place that manufactures and manages and transports and yet builds nothing for itself?

People pretended that the question did not apply to them. Secretly, they survived on the belief that they were separate from the whole, that it was a dream or a limbo from which they waited to extricate themselves at the opportune moment. Most of them had no idea what the moment looked like, would not know if it knocked on their door in the middle of the night.

We all pursued it, though, in our ways. Some were content to find themselves in stillness. Others had no choice but to wander.

EXCURSION

Just after one AM, Amy jolts from sleep. It might be the cool, October wind rattling the loose screen of her bedroom window, or perhaps the steady glow of her bedside lamp that she forgot to extinguish before drifting into a nap. Either way, she should know better by now.

Her battered copy of Kafka's *The Trial* lies open beside her, the text floating in a sea of warm light. She marks her page, sets it on her rickety nightstand and climbs from bed. She shuffles into a pair of Stop& Shop terrycloth slippers and wraps herself in a gossamer sea-foam-green robe, the one from the thrift store in Back Bay.

She should know better by now. She should have known two apartments ago: the first night in a new place is always a restless one. Not the restlessness that envelops a person in the middle of summer—wilting their limbs and their motivation to do much besides sip from a straw—but a nagging reminder of something unfinished. She had fought the impulse in her first apartment at UMass— spent the night rolling in sweaty sheets and got sick from drinking too much hot milk. It was easy to chalk it up to nerves back then.

Amy adjusts the outfit hanging from the back of her bedroom door, the one she has planned for the staff meeting tomorrow morning: a black skirt, a prim, teal cardigan and black boots. Dr. Moxley, the unpopular new principal, has instituted a strict dress-code demanding that teachers wear business attire at school and all related functions. The code itself does not bother Amy, but rather the sneer with which Dr. Moxley—herself always clad in a suit—greeted any near-outliers, including Amy's mid-calf, leather boots. For that reason, Amy wears them as often as possible.

Masking-taped boxes litter the small, dark living room. Reaching for her glasses on the mantle, she bumps a heap of them, stacked as high as her waist. One topples. Something inside breaks. She unpeels the masking tape to reveal a cracked, framed photograph of herself and two of her older brothers, Richie and Malcolm. Richie gave it to her as a gag when she graduated from college.

It was supposed to be all four kids in the backyard, but her eldest brother Eli had stepped out of the frame at the last minute. Richie has his pudgy, sunburned arm slung around a bug-bitten Malcolm. An eight-year-old Amy squats in front of them like a small statue, her chin propped on her palm, her eyes locked on the camera. Bits of bark and dirt sully her yellow dress, leftovers from a recent climb up one of the backyard trees. Behind them, pollen sheaths the white slats of her parents' triple-decker. Beside the wrought-iron steps leading to the back door, a green plastic hose lies limp in a puddle of water. Ma gave them a hard time for leaving that hose out. She complained that mosquitoes bit her when she went out for cigarettes.

Amy squints at Malcolm's image. Traces of a fading bruise mar his eye socket. It must have been the summer when Dexter Riley beat him up—after which, of course, she had beat up Dexter Riley. She looks at her watch. Malcolm would be coming home tomorrow for Ma's birthday. She can count on one hand the number of times they have spoken since he moved to California a few years ago. But it's funny with Malcolm. She has always recognized that he is her brother, but the idea seems like a historical fact written on a page rather than something either one of them believes. Sometimes she thinks of a joke to tell him, but more often than not she places the phone back in its cradle

seconds after picking it up. There is the time difference to consider, as well as the fact that he never seems too interested in their conversations.

Amy frowns at the photograph's margins. Where had Eli gone that day? She couldn't remember. Frustrated by the absence, by Malcolm and by her unsmiling young self, she crams the photo back in the box.

Excepting the boxes that hold necessities—a Kafka lesson plan for her eleventh graders, the squid clock from her cockroach-ridden Cambridge apartment, the set of glasses she bought while living in the North End—she expects that, as usual, many of them will remain unpacked. She used to unpack more, before she understood herself to be a fickle renter. Her apartments feel more like hotel rooms, where the drawers and storage spaces remain empty aside from a Bible and a complimentary notepad. Little things had sparked her impatience with the last five apartments: a discolored swatch of carpet, a leaky faucet, a stubborn scrap of unbecoming wallpaper, tap water that smelled of eggs. Sometimes it took three weeks; sometimes a year. At the last place, a tidy room in South Boston with low ceilings, she found the moldings distasteful.

Richie groaned when she called for help with moving out. “What’s wrong with this one?”

She had twisted the phone cord around her index finger. “The moldings.”

“What do you mean ‘the moldings’? That means nothing to me.”

“They’re all wrong.”

“You have to stop nitpicking. You’ll never find a place.”

“I find places all the time.”

“You never stay.”

“I find places. They make me happy. Then they don’t. And then it’s time to leave.”

He asked about Grady then, the journalist she’d been seeing who stayed up nights like her. “Get him to help you, if it wouldn’t break his pale little back.”

They had broken up.

“Why?”

“He liked the moldings,” she joked. “What’s a girl to do?”

The moldings here look fine—cream against slate grey walls—but she knows it’s only a matter of time until the next problem crops up. Richie and her parents joke plenty about her transience. Often enough, she joins them. It’s easier than explaining that compulsion, not pickiness, keeps her boxes packed. She sighs, wondering what flaw will drive her from this place. The idea of *staying*—the word clings to her like a tick—makes her sweaty and nervous.

From the fridge, Amy pulls a Tupperware container of macaroni and cheese—one of Ma’s few culinary pillars. She finds the box labeled “kitchen”. Too impatient to unpeel the tape, she pries a single bowl from inside and dumps the casserole in it. The microwave hums.

She hops onto the counter, knocking her heels against the cherry wood cupboards, and wondering what the restlessness will ask of her tonight. Like a ghost brought back for unfinished business, she spends these evenings in anticipation. She had tried to explain it to another English teacher at the school once.

“I don’t understand,” he’d said, crossing his arms. “Are you hearing voices?”

No, Amy shook her head, no voices.

“I don’t understand,” he repeated, as if Amy might provide the real answer given a second opportunity.

“So what do you *do*?”

“Well,” Amy had responded, tapping her index finger on her cheek. “One time I bought about fifty scratch-off tickets. Won seven dollars back. Then there was the time I drove to the Cape—”

“But *why*?”

“I never really know, when I start. I figure it out afterwards.”

“Wow,” he said. He gestured to Amy’s neat attire. “I just never would expect that sort of thing with you. You seem so together.”

That word—*together*—confuses her. Had she been apart all this time?

The untenable ideas enter her mind first: impromptu trips to Scotland, running a marathon, buying a boat. These she writes down and files in the drawer beside her desk in case, in case one of these first nights, the means exist. Sometimes the ideas come from magazines. Sometimes they’re dangerous, or stupid. But she always retrieves something. She wonders if Clinton, the school counselor she’s been sleeping with during lunch, would think she’s crazy.

One time, she watched all of the Orson Welles films she owned, in sequence of when they were made and wrote down a codifying system for his facial expressions. Another time, she made a four-course meal. At the last apartment, she went to a bar and met a former mayoral advisor who, during the course of their ensuing three-month relationship, asked her to pee on him before sex. She did it once and broke up with him. It wasn’t the peeing that bothered her, but his lack of enthusiasm when it was finally done.

“You just didn’t seem that excited,” he had complained.

“I’m secreting water and bacteria,” she quipped, pulling up her jeans. “It’s not exactly the fourth of July.”

She smirks, remembering the retort and rinses the last remnants of macaroni from the bowl. She checks the drawer next to her bed and skims the standing list. Eli would tell her to go to Scotland. As much as he loved Kafka, he would tell her to go to Scotland. Only Eli would keep arguing after he was dead.

She skips to the next item: a boat ride. She considers the yacht club. She doesn’t have the keys to the family’s ancient motorboat, but she and Eli figured out how to hotwire it years ago. She opens the window. Chips of cheap peach paint float into the space between glass and screen. A chilly draft rushes into the apartment. Too cold, maybe, but these nights were built for adventure, not comfort. In some ways, the idea is more shocking than Scotland. She visits her family plenty, but Eastie has never worked its way into her nighttime ritual. She’s never seen it like this.

The Levis she bought in tenth grade fit snug against her upper thighs. She knots a flannel button down at the waist and pulls on an ancient pair of Doc Marten boots. She closes the essentials—cash, keys, ID—into a silver cigarette case with a phoenix engraved on the front.

In the car, Amy tries to picture the boat wiring. She’ll have to jump the starter straight from the battery. And she’ll need paddles to get her back to shore if the boat stalls out. As she emerges from the Callahan Tunnel, Eastie appears in front of her like a reclining giant. “She’s a deep sleeper,” Eli would say when they stayed out late. She had to agree. Every pocket of the city produces a particular breed of noise, one to which its

inhabitants are equally inured and irritated. People come to know the noise in Eastie after a day or two—the near-constant stream of jet engines from Logan, the low rumble of the MBTA traveling from Wood Island to Wonderland, the gulls from Revere—and the same goes for any part of town. But anyone can suss out the sound of a place. The real difference between places lies in silence. Noise blends. Silence sits.

She parks on Rice Street, wary of leaving her car in the club parking lot. She walks the remaining distance. The road winds right, into the boat yard and past the row of narrow storage buildings that crouch like little old men against the embankment. It curves around the front of the main building, mimicking the edge of the stubby peninsula on which the club sits. Defunct motorboats and skiffs line the semi-circle, resting between the path and the beach. Long, skinny docks, and the boats tied to them, extend parallel to the right shore, bobbing together in the dark water. They look as though they're carrying on a quiet conversation, rising and falling like that.

On the far side, a concrete launching platform feeds into the water. Farther down, Constitution Beach curves inland across from the airport. The main club house, like most from Amy's childhood, seems smaller and wearier. Hannah and Richie held their wedding reception here, three months after Eli died. Ma and Papa drank highballs all night. They fought. He stalked off. His silhouette meandered in the glow cast by white lights strung above the docks.

"He acts so little sometimes," Ma spat, her small, upturned mouth rigid with frustration. She set her drink on the table and propped one elbow on the back of her chair, turning to watch him. The coral cotton dress she wore to every occasion like this hugged her shoulders. Even when she was angry, she carried herself with a statuesque grace. The

tension seemed to bubble in her, to lengthen her limbs and sculpt the lines of her collarbone. She exhaled. Her up-do slouched and trembled in the night breeze. Her small bosom collapsed beneath the coral.

“He’s upset.”

“You’re not like that. I’m not either. We don’t run away.”

Amy hated it when Ma talked that way, trying to wrap the world or a person into a few dramatic sentences, like a very wise character in a play. She swapped Ma’s drink for water and, a little tipsy herself, danced with one of the groomsmen until sweat soaked her petal pink dress. Staying put seemed too difficult a task.

Tonight, Amy thinks about trying to get inside the club house. Maybe a scrap of a streamer or a drop of spilt alcohol survived the interim between then and now. She heads towards the docks instead. Papa’s boat floats about halfway down the closer of the two, a non-descript, white motorboat that he bought when she was still a teenager. She climbs aboard. The front edge bobs with her weight. At a real yacht club it would hardly qualify as a maintenance vessel; even that would require a fresh coat of paint. Her pant leg catches on one of the cleats. She frees it and tumbles into the boat. The family had always seemed most at peace together on this dingy thing. Ma stopped bossing everyone around. Richie and Eli confined their bickering to the inconsequential—turkey sandwiches and the distance to Nahant—content to throw Amy off the side when they grew bored with one another. And Papa—well, Amy always assumed that he could have spent his life on that boat from the way he stood up straight at the steering wheel, the joyful flip of wrist with which he started the engine. Only Malcolm, the youngest of Amy’s elder brothers, found the days unpleasant. Richie called him the family barnacle on account of the fact

that he clung to the side, half-sick, half-bored. Amy tried to hold his hand sometimes or offer him part of her sandwich. He always pushed her away.

She shakes her head at the memory and pries the cowl off the motor. The wires look dusty but familiar. She reaches inside, pulling at a blue, then a red. She remembers now.

From the other side of the club house, a metal trash lid clatters against the cement. Amy jumps. She ducks into the boat. The fine for trespassing here after-hours is a couple hundred dollars. Amy peers over the metal rim of the boat. She cringes, anticipating the static of a police radio, the clanging of keys against the officer's belt buckle, a glaring flashlight.

A ragged dog bounds out from behind a row of metal trashcans, knocking off more lids. It startles at the noise and bolts into the familiar glow of a streetlamp, where its coat flashes yellow and its ribs show. She—he?—looks like one of the dogs that frequented the house growing up. They were not house dogs, not the kind who sit with their heads in their owner's laps, and cry when their people leave. No, their dogs never stuck around much, except for meatloaf nights or when Papa put out food in the morning. Afterwards, they trailed Papa to work and slept on the tops of neighborhood cars in the afternoon. He said you could always tell the weather by the feel of their fur. "Just reach out in the morning and touch 'em," he said. "Wet? You got rain. Hot? You got sun. That's your weather report." Amy never paid them much mind or vice versa, but their presence alone seemed to satisfy that longing for animals that most kids develop at one point or another.

Amy exhales. Of course it was a dog. Officers don't waste their time on this sad little pack of skiffs anyway. She turns for another look at the dog. It sees her and escapes behind the trashcans again. The scrawny thing must be hungry. She'll throw it one of the granola bars stowed in the car before leaving.

She returns to the wiring. The boat stalls a few times. It whirrs against the water but fails to churn it. She lies beneath the throttle for a better angle. Her shirt sticks to the rubber. Something thumps against the dock, but sound barely registers. She pauses. It comes again. It sounds too deep for a dog, too quiet for an officer. She lifts her head.

A silhouetted figure squats by the dock entrance. A canister sits in front of him. He rises, pressing on his knees as if the movement hurts him. She can see the outline of a baseball cap, but little else. He lifts the canister, resting it against his chest and stiffening under the weight. He walks a few feet and sets it down. The baseball cap comes off. He wipes the top of his head and stuffs the cap into the back of his pants. He shuffles backwards, pulling the canister behind him. When he reaches the first boat on the second dock, he unscrews the cap and lifts it. Liquid slops onto the dock and the boat. It slips for a second, but he grips the bottom until the thing becomes light enough for him to control. He taps the side until it sounds hollow.

"A boat burning," Amy whispers. Boat burnings happened plenty when she was growing up. Papa shook his head whenever it happened and said things like "what a shame". Ma rolled her eyes and called it men's drama. She was right. A boat could burn over any little thing—not cleaning up your maintenance gear, giving another member too much grief, acting tyrannical at board meetings. No reason was too big or too small. Amy had seen a few charred boats, but never the act itself. She curls against the inside of hull.

The man lights a match. She can barely see the flame under the streetlamp. He flings his wrist. Before the fire catches, he turns and disappears into the dark without so much as a glance. Aside from the obvious legal ramifications, Amy doesn't understand how he can depart with such ease. How could he leave such a blaze, this tumbling mosaic of heat and color? It pulses upwards, licking the navy sky like a perfect, restless war.

The day before he overdosed, Eli sat with her on one of the cement benches at the Wood Island T station. Devon—the family's most recent tenant and a master's candidate at Boston University—paced at the edge of the platform, a ragged copy of *Dubliners* folded into his back pocket. They planned to take the train into Cambridge for a movie. Most times, Eli left the movie choice to her or Devon, but that day he insisted on the "Coal Miner's Daughter" at the Brattle Street Theater.

"You hate country music," she had said, picking at her nails.

"But I sure do like Sissy."

Though she knew from an early age to expect inconsistency from her older brother—it was, as her mother would say, the only thing to expect—that often meant varieties of manic depression. That day, though, he seemed energized, even cheerful, after spending a day with Papa at the horse track.

"How were the horse races at the Downs?" she'd inquired.

"I won," he said, and smiled. "What did you do today?"

"I finished *The Trial*. I didn't like it."

"What?" the boys crowed in unison.

"So you didn't get it?" Eli inquired.

"I mean, I *understand* it. I just didn't like it."

“She didn’t get it,” Eli scoffed. “It’s okay.”

Before she could answer, the train pulled in. The rushing air flung her hair over her face and mouth like a delicate muzzle. By the time she re-slung her bag over her shoulder and climbed aboard, the conversation had shifted.

Amy pulls her hair into a ponytail, closes the compartment and climbs from the boat. If she stays too long, she’ll have to watch the flame go out. The crackling grows quieter with each step.

When she reaches the car, she resists the urge to turn. Unlocking the door, she hears a skittering from the other side, like plastic scratching against the pavement. She leans over the hood. The scrawny dog peers back. Its fur looks like cocoa and smoke now, without a collar to break up the color. She rounds the car. It growls and straightens its tail.

“Get out of here,” she mutters.

He leaps at her. She spins from his path. Shaking and praying he won’t jump again, she opens the door. He bolts past her and lands in the driver’s seat. She pats her thighs to call him out.

“I have to go home, dog.”

She picks a stick from the brush and thrusts it into the car. He bites the end. Pieces of bark fly beneath the steering wheel. She shakes. He shakes. She bangs on the roof of the car, pulls the stick from his grip and slams the door.

“You like it in there?” she hollers at the glass. “Good.”

He scratches at the window. Saliva dots the glass. She pounds on the roof again. Then, as if prompted, he leaps to the passenger seat. She frowns at him, and slowly opens

the door. He dives from the car. She kicks him from her and gets in. Before she can close the door, he's boomeranged into the passenger seat.

"Get out!" she yells. She's not getting out of his way again.

He keeps barking. Between this and the smoking boat, she could be in jail the next morning. She pulls the box of granola bars from the glove compartment, unwraps one and throws it out of the car. He sniffs the air through which it flew, but doesn't move. He's stopped trying to bite her, though.

"Come on," she snaps, and gestures towards the open door. "Come on!"

He growls again.

"I'm not scared of you," she snaps. "You're just an asshole."

He scratches the glove compartment. She reaches for the latch, but he nips at her again.

"Goddamn dog! Get out!"

She puts her head against the steering wheel. She can't call the police. How could she explain the feral dog in her car and a burning boat in her rearview? She shuts the door.

"If you try anything, I'll brake fast and you'll go through the windshield."

He lies down and starts chewing the seat. She considers another scolding, a final stand, but then it occurs to her that the mutt might be restless, too. Reprimands were as useless as warm milk. She starts the ignition, still wary. The restless could be dangerous.

The yacht club drifts away in the rearview. Sirens echo in the distance, coming for her fire. She rounds the corner on to Bennington as the police cars barrel down the way from which she came. She exhales and her body relaxes into the seat. The smoke and the

war fade. She rolls the window down, a chill rippling through her clothes. She'd almost forgotten what it was like to get caught.

TWO

The four of us earned our first unaccompanied trip to Constitution Beach on a Sunday. We pressed Ma on the way home from St. Mary's, our fingers sticky from the hot-crossed buns and cherry danishes we earned for being good during the service.

"It's not even far," Richie griped. "Besides, Eli and I are great swimmers. You've seen us."

"It's not about great swimming," Ma said, crumpling the wax paper from her pastry and stuffing it into her pocketbook. Her navy suit—a wedding gift from her mother and the only one she owned—pulled taut at the curve of her waist, also unwilling to budge.

Richie skipped to match her quick, certain steps. "Ma!"

"For God's sake," she sighed. She stopped and lit a cigarette. The smoke disappeared in the white sunlight. Amy tugged at Ma's suit and leaned her head against her hip. Ma stopped and set her hand on Amy's head. She must have been surprised by the gesture, by the rare moment of closeness.

Ma put out the rest of the cigarette. "You all want to go?"

We nodded solemnly. She raised an eyebrow. "We'll talk about it at home."

Once she consented the next morning, our solemnity exploded into unbridled excitement— tripping over each other like blind animals, pulling on mismatched shoes and barely-dry swim trunks, whining for more mustard or less mayonnaise. Even Amy flew through the house—silent and light like a bird—wearing a small, certain smile.

"Come get your sandwiches!" Ma hollered. "And stop running around! Come here, all of you!"

Richie and I threw towels over our shoulders and thundered downstairs. Malcolm jumped from the third step to the bottom and raced us to the kitchen. Amy crouched on the back steps, buckling her white sandals, her massive hair woven into a loose French braid. She rose, small and flushed in a yellow cotton shift dress. We stood four abreast, shuffling and giggling and shushing each other. Mom crouched opposite us, a strand of cream-colored plastic beads swinging beneath her neck.

“Don’t lose your towels. Don’t lose your sandals. Don’t lose each other. Got it?”

“Yes, ma’am,” we said, and burst into more giggles. She thrust the bag of sandwiches at us, her other hand pressed against her hip. Amy took it, thanked her with a kiss on the cheek, and skipped to the front door. Malcolm and Richie waved from beneath their baseball caps and followed. I lifted my own cap from the back of a kitchen chair.

“Eli,” Ma said, setting a warm hand on my shoulder like some transference of her power. “I’m counting on you.”

“Sure,” I shrugged. Her hand slid from my shoulder. “I will.”

When we reached the beach, Amy, Richie and I threw our limp, blue towels—bought on sale at Filene’s the week before—on the dunes of Constitution Beach, undisturbed by the prospect finding sand in the folds when we emerged from the water. Malcolm, taller than the rest of us already and topped with black, tuft-like hair, unrolled his with a gentle flick of his wrists. It snapped, billowed with the breeze and floated to the flat, damp sand. He removed only his shoes and sat Indian-style in the center of his towel, where no part of his creamy skin would touch the sand. Amy shimmied from her

dress, her hair catching on the buttons that she had not bothered to undo and tossed it on the pile of terrycloth. Richie and I added our white t-shirts.

Amy drew a bologna sandwich from the brown bag. I extended my hand.

“I’m hungry, too.”

She tossed one each to me and Malcolm, and half to Richie, who had eaten part of his during the walk. The early June sun filtered through a thin cloud cover, the beams of light like arms reaching for the water. We chewed in satisfied silence, a departure from the chaotic dinners at our house. Even Richie remained silent, mustard dribbling over his chin.

I brushed the crumbs from mine against my trunks, unsure of how to navigate beyond sandwich. Everything looked the same. The beach curved inwards like a crescent. The airport bustled and roared across the bay. The Heights rose behind us. No, something imperceptible had changed. On prior trips, the beach always felt like a place to enjoy and then leave, Ma’s admonitions sailing over the sand and water when we swam too fast or too far. Today it lay like a hand outstretched. Today it belonged to us.

Richie stood, a dab of mustard drying beneath his bottom lip. “Come on, jokers. Let’s go swimming.”

Malcolm, still finishing his first half, shook his head. “You’re not supposed to go in yet. Ma says to wait thirty minutes.”

“She’s yanking your chain,” Richie said. He gestured to the water. “You coming, Eli?”

Malcolm squinted and pulled his legs to his chest, already resigned.

“Ten minutes,” I told Richie, remembering Ma’s hand. “Bet I can take you in crazy eights.”

He readjusted his hat and crouched on the pile of towels. “Now you’re dreaming.”

When he’d won, he slapped his cards on Malcolm’s towel and stood.

“Easy-peasy,” he snorted. “Can we go swimming yet? It’s too friggin’ hot for anything else.”

He sauntered towards the water, hips swerving as his feet sunk into the sand and threw him off-balance. I lifted a flat palm to my forehead to block the sun and turned to the others.

“Malcolm? Amy?”

Amy shook her head, more interested in adding a piece of green sea glass to the pile of shells she collected while the boys played cards.

Malcolm retrieved a book from the back of his swim trunks. “You go ahead. I’ll watch her.”

I caught up with Richie, who waded in the low, frothy tide.

He turned. “Race you across!”

Before I could answer, he sloshed further in and dove, the bottoms of his feet catching the white sunlight before disappearing into the green water. The thick, briny breeze combed my hair as I sprinted after him. I accelerated, like something dropped from a height, still tasting the mustard and waiting for the slap of the water. It was cooler than I imagined, soft and hard all at once. I went in head-first, the way Papa taught us. “Never go in halfway,” he warned. “Bay water is icy. You have to hit it before it hits you. Okay?” He did not wait for our answer. He had simply picked me up in one arm, Richie

in the other, and threw us into the water. We were mad at first. But by the end of the day, we were begging him for one more toss, screeching like little devils when he agreed in spite of his bad back.

Beneath the water, the bubbles settled. Richie's legs floated in front of me like flesh-colored fish. When the water temperature no longer chilled me, I rose to the surface. The heat and dry salt rinsed from my hair. Richie's red-brown hair, normally thick and unkempt, was slicked down as if he'd greased it. He grinned. He loved going in. Without a word, he submerged again. It was as good as a foghorn. The race had begun.

It never did me any good to keep tabs on a competitor. If they're ahead, you get tired. If not, you get cocky. Ignorance served me better. My head down, I stretched for new water with a precise, slicing stroke. I glimpsed the airport with each labored breath, water sloshing against my back and legs. I was beating him. I knew it. Heat crept into my arms the harder I swam. My quick, sharp kicks devolved into lazy chops. But the airport drifted from my view and the opposite shore grew clearer; when I kicked sand, I dog-paddled to the beach and collapsed. Sand clumped in my hair. Salt replaced the mustard taste. I exhaled, somehow convinced of my victory.

Richie appeared above me, blocking the sun. I frowned. He laughed.

"What? Did you think you won?"

"Shut up," I said and struggled off the beach. I hated the way his lip curled when he laughed, as if he knew a joke or a secret and refused to tell me for the hell of it. I stalked off to the dunes that were bordered by small, boxy houses. On the front steps of one, a woman in espadrilles and a white peasant top held a little girl in one arm, a cigarette in the other. She wore a kerchief knotted tight atop her blonde hair, but a few

strands of golden, sweaty hair framed her slightly-burned face. The sleeping toddler sat like a stone on her thigh, her white-blond head flush against mother's shoulder, arms tucked beneath her mother's breast. The strings of her espadrilles crisscrossed like vines around her calves. Her skirt covered the top of them; I could not see where they ended. Only her neck seemed unrestrained, long and white like a petal. She sucked the cigarette and tossed it to the sand. Trying not to wake the girl, she edged her shoe to press it out.

Richie hung his arm around my shoulder. I tossed it off.

He smirked. "Still sore?"

"No," I lied. My breath came in short, wheezing bursts. I paced, determined not to be the one who sat first. Another kind of heat crept into me, a thick, blinding anger at Richie's arrogance. It was worse to be a sore winner than a sore loser, didn't he know that? He would figure it out someday, no matter how long or hard he beat his chest. Then he would feel small and weak, too. And when someone made him feel small, I would be there to watch the stupid smirk melt off his ruddy face.

I walked ahead of him. "Let's go. They're probably waiting for us."

"Okay," he said. His voice quieted. He stayed a couple steps behind me for most of the walk back.

As we rounded the crescent, I squinted at the spot where we had laid our towels. A small group had gathered, jeering and pumping their fists. I turned to Richie, who wrinkled his nose and shrugged. We took off at a slow jog. As we got closer, we could see a group of four boys from school. Beyond them, Dexter Riley, the motherless bully at our middle school had straddled Malcolm. As he lifted his hand to strike him, Amy lunged and knocked him from his perch. The other boys stood back. Richie and I began

to sprint. Dexter Riley wasn't afraid to hit a girl. We'd learned that last year, when Beatrix Murphy stuck her gum on his desk.

When we reached them, Malcolm had crawled from the raucous group, cupping his bloodied nose. Amy pushed Dexter again. Hair slipped from her braid, flying around her like a lion's mane. He reached for her shoulders, but she dropped to her knees and knocked his legs out from under him. When he had fallen, she climbed on his chest, her pale, skinny legs draped on either side. She lifted her arm and, without hesitation, backhanded him so hard we could hear the crack from ten feet away. The other boys backed away, leaving Malcolm to his injuries, Amy to her conquest. Even Dexter seemed stunned, and stopped struggling.

"What the hell is going on here?" Richie crowed. He pulled Amy off Dexter.

Dexter wiped a little blood from his bottom lip and scowled. He ignored Richie and turned to Malcolm instead.

"You feel good now?"

Malcolm glanced over the hand that shielded his nose. Blood trickled through his fingers. He said nothing.

Dexter scowled at him. "Do you? Getting your little sister to beat me up?"

I pulled him up by the neck of his t-shirt. "You've lost," I growled. "Go home."

Dexter struggled from the ground and, with a quick, sour glance, sauntered away. Amy crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow. I'd never seen her look so focused, the rage packed into her like stuffing. I knew Dexter had started it. No one had to tell me that. But she looked satisfied and unsurprised, as if she'd been waiting for the opportunity.

The sun slipped lower in the sky, the heat of midday melting into the languid humidity of afternoon. On the way home, she and I walked together, a few paces behind Malcolm and Richie. Before that day, we had rarely spoken. She seemed quiet and strange and funny to me; I must have seemed as arrogant as Richie.

“Hell of a slap back there,” I told her.

“He started it.”

“I know,” I chuckled. “I know that.”

“Malcolm tried,” she said. She shook her small head. The remainder of her braid swung against her back. “Dexter was making fun of my shell collection, kicking sand on me. Said it was stupid. Malcolm went after him.”

“I think you did the right thing.”

“Yeah?”

“I mean, don’t go beating up the whole school.”

She pursed her lips, ruminating over the unexpected support. “Is Malcolm okay?”

“I’m fine!” he barked, his voice nasal and wet.

When we arrived home, we silently retreated to the backyard. Boo, the German Shepherd that Papa brought home a couple weeks ago, followed us through the gate and licked our salty hands. Richie shooed him away and turned on the hose so we could rinse the thin veils of dry sand that still coated our feet and legs. Malcolm went first, his back to the door. His left eye had begun to bruise.

Ma stepped into the yard. “How was it?” she exclaimed.

“Good,” Richie and I said in nervous unison.

She peered at us. The absence of the morning’s excitement was too noticeable.

“What happened?”

Amy sighed. “We got in a fight with some boys.”

“Shut up,” Richie whispered.

“Well, we did,” Amy countered. “We got in a fight and we’re sorry.”

“All of you?”

Malcolm turned. Ma gasped. She thundered down the back steps and knelt to look at him. When she had inspected the damage, she turned to the rest of us. “Get inside.”

We shuffled more sand from our feet.

She pointed to the backdoor. “Now!”

Richie and Amy leapt up the stairs as if someone lit their feet on fire. Malcolm began to cry—his long, pale back rose and fell with deep, heaving gasps. Ma stroked his damp hair. “Go inside. Get some ice from the freezer and wrap it in plastic. I’ll be there in a second.”

I followed him to the steps. Ma took my shoulder. “Not you.”

I turned. I knew already.

“What happened?” she asked, crossing her freckled arms and pressing the beads to her chest.

“This guy Dexter—he goes to my school. He’s trouble. He went after them.”

“You were there when it started?”

“Richie and I were racing. We were coming back around the beach when we saw it.”

“So you weren’t there. You weren’t even there.”

“No, but—”

“How could you let this happen?”

“Richie wasn’t watching out, either,” I countered, throwing an arm up. “You’re not laying into him.”

“You watch your tone,” she snapped. “I put you in charge. Richie’s a loose cannon. You know that.”

She retreated to the bottom of the steps, her stocking feet damp from the hosed grass. “I’m real disappointed in you, Eli.” Her face wilted into something sad, impenetrable. “Wash up and come inside.”

She sighed, uncrossed her arms, and, as if ashamed of something, bounded into the house. Amy pulled back the curtains from the kitchen window. A patch of dirty sand marked the neckline of her dress. She shrugged as if to say, “It happens.” Then she waved me inside, and quietly disappeared from the frame.

WITH KINGS AND COUNSELORS

Lester shows no interest in the coupon the first two weeks it sits on his kitchen table. His front door stuck the day he retrieved it from the crimson letterbox and for his trouble, he cut his finger on the postcard-thick edge. On his way out in the morning, he scoffs at the attractive man and woman on the glossy front: their tan, pristine mugs tilted up like the subjects of a patriotic campaign. “Gyms send these free trials all the time,” his niece, Amy, informs him when she drops off the *Time* magazine her father borrowed from Lester. “You could try an elliptical.”

Some of the guys at the station use them, but the name sounds like a think tank or a type of computer and Lester has no interest in it.

He gets more exercise now than he ever did on the beat. He rises early and walks from his home near Piers Park to the top of Orient Heights every morning. When he retired, he didn’t think he would miss the uniform.

“I could wear a damn skirt if I wanted,” he told Jack the day he tendered his resignation. “And no one can say a thing about it.”

Jack gave him the once-over. “Oh, they could say a thing or two.”

These days, he finds the options more daunting than liberating. Instead, Lester tends to wash the same small load of laundry each week: two pairs of grey slacks, three sweaters, six pairs of identical socks. The rest of his options—no skirts, though—hang undisturbed in his closet. In the morning, he dresses at the foot of his bed and rolls the lint from his shoulders. He parts his hair, grey but full, on the side with a wet comb. A hat-check girl once told Lester that his face had a dog-like quality to it. Though he considered it insulting at first, the comment became a source of strange pride for him as

the years passed. He found something pleasing about his square-shaped, shiny nose and a strong, though not sharp, jaw. His limbs and torso—though padded with more fat than years ago—are short but muscular, with a tenseness about them that makes him seem younger than his age.

After he has dressed and reached the top of the Heights, he stretches in front of the Don Orione nursing home that squats across the street from the looming Madonna statue, and from where a porcelain cat stares at him from one of the third floor windows. Some mornings, a large, unhappy looking woman with a small face sits next to it. As she strokes the cat and watches him, Lester is glad that he and Miri paid to move their mother out to the place in Braintree with a fountain in the backyard and a raffle each Christmas.

Then he crosses the street and leans on the railing of the shrine across the street that overlooks the neighborhood and, beyond that, a separate city. The neighborhood looks like a sprawling junk box from this height, something through which a giant might rummage—when he had crushed the swaths of pastel triple-deckers that lined each street, he would splash across the harbor. He would capsize the carefree Day Sailors and silence the guttural drone of motorboats embarking from the yacht club on Rice Street. After that, he would move on to Logan, and finally the kingdom proper.

Planes arriving in Logan pass overhead the 35-foot virgin, stripped to Lady Liberty green by decades of Northeast winters that settle on Boston like a heavy blanket. The Prudential Tower lords over its silver neighbors, an absent parent, indifferent to dysfunction or shameless voyeurism. Lester turns and resumes his post. He presses his lower back against the rusting handrail, a simple messenger called to the city limits to keep watch: always vigilant, never quite inside.

Exactly two weeks after the coupon arrives, Lester falls down at the top of the Heights. Steady rain had not deterred him from his morning walk, nor the overripe orange that he peeled in transit. He fed it to the thin bulldog that traipsed behind him for three blocks. His foot catches in a grate and his left knee, weakened by the sudden weight shift, crumples. He face-plants in front of the nursing home that squats across the street from the Madonna. The pavement cuts his lip and soaks his powder blue button-down from collar to belt buckle. He sits up fast, hoping no one has seen—but the unhappy woman remains at her post. She pats her porcelain beast and sticks out her tongue at him.

The rain washes grit from his face and soaks his cable-knit. Orange peel slips out of his pocket. As the water seeps into his socks, he wonders if the Don Orione monks ever anticipated this spectacle, if people ever fall this way off of elliptical machines and their mouths taste like grit all day. The last time he took such a big fall, he landed on a roast beef sandwich. He was on his lunch break at Kelly's with a couple of other off-duty detectives and they howled like someone lit them on fire. He stood, livid, and hurled the sandwich at a trashcan. He missed. The men howled louder. They told the story for years.

He turns on his back and crosses his arms over his chest. The fall had been more infuriating than anything else, embellishing Lester's already sour mood that day, but it became something better than an embarrassing moment. It linked him to his friends and colleagues, implicated all of them in an expansive, abiding narrative, one from which he would not have disentangled himself if such a thing was even possible. If being tied to them and that narrative meant embarrassing himself, he would happily fall into a sandwich every day. Today would yield no stories, though; the only witness to his clumsiness was a woman who would not remember.

He taught his last training class on Wednesday, but the department held his retirement party almost a year before. The guys were happy because there were cold cuts, cake and beer—the three most important ingredients for any Eastie get-together. They held the party at Piers Park on a Saturday, a touching departure from the soggy box of Dunkin Donuts they provided for birthdays and minor holidays. Lester was happy because he wasn't really retiring, not yet. He had volunteered to lecture the rooks about this-and-that protocol and tell bawdy jokes between PowerPoint slides with which he always fumbles. New cops like it when smart men tell dumb jokes, or when they act like they don't care very much about technology. His tenure lasted for six months, before the Chief Dougherty hired a professional trainer for that job.

His last night—the real one—he returned to the office for his things. He shuffled his few belongings into a banker's box and leaned against his scratchy, swiveling office chair. They renovated the station about ten years ago, laid the back rooms and the floor beneath officers' desks with carpet or linoleum. At the behest of Lester, Dougherty and a few others, they retained the wooden desks and the walkway leading to the front desk. Every honorable place should be built with a little wood—rich, old, splinter-in-your-foot wood.

When Lester had gathered his things, a cop who earned his badge three months before held the door for him. Lester hoisted the box to his shoulder and took a last look; at the sweet, caramel wood, the sea of desks and stacks of scattered papers. The omnipresent radio static crackled in the background, repeating codes and voices that cut in and out abruptly like peaking, cresting waves. Lester nodded to the portrait of the station's first squad that hung behind the front desk, men who had their own stories.

It was all over now. He had driven home, walked inside and sat down, because it was all over now. Except this time, there hadn't been a slice of leftover cake, sitting sloppy on a yellowed teacup saucer between the lactose-free milk and the bananas.

The coupon greets him when he finally gets down from the Heights, a walk so long that the damp clothes start to feel natural, like a shroud. It never left the wobbling kitchen table, like most of the junk mail Lester receives. Beneath the stacks of AARP membership letters and the regular salvo of flyers from Jeveli's and other restaurants Lester already frequents, the same rude block lettering challenges him to Break the Mold: Be Your Best Self. The models both play bad cop, their arms clenched across their spandex-clad chests. He imagines them staring him down across a table in a dim interrogation room, drinking Gatorade instead of black coffee. They've got all the time in the world.

He drops a few ice cubes into a plastic baggie, which Amy brought for him and Mother always refused to purchase. "What a waste," she lamented when the commercials for the first Ziplocs came on. "We've got three million plastic grocery bags everywhere in the house. What a waste."

He sets the bag against his swollen jaw and raises the coupon to eye-level, but the print below the bellowing headline still blurs. From a pen holder next to the mail stack, he selects a magnifying glass with a fuzzy sticker on the handle, courtesy of Richie's youngest daughter last Christmas. The back displays two pictures: one of the stern, geometric building exterior and one of the inside. He recognizes the treadmill and the free-weights, but he hasn't seen most of the other machines before. Amy works in

Cambridge. If he trains in, maybe she'll pick him up. The only thing worse than driving on the Mass Pike is parking in Cambridge. People drive with their heads cut off out there.

—

Lester stopped needing the alarm clock decades ago, but he still sets one. Waking up to silence on vacation or holiday is one thing—a preemptive respite. But when the days promise nothing in particular, Lester welcomes the discordant buzzer.

He fumbles into the hallway closet and pulls his tennis shoes, never worn, from beneath a pile of blankets. Miri and Jack bought them on their trip to the Outer Banks and encouraged him to wear them on his walks. “They’re good for your feet,” she said, thumping the sole against her thigh. She set them on the palm of her hand like Vanna White, pointed to the stitching along the lace holes—“Kelly green” she called it—and raised her eyebrows as if to say “And stylish, too.”

He pulls them on and walks around. The laces drag on the floor. An accident waiting to happen, Mother would have said. He double-knots them. He struggles into an ancient pair of tennis shorts. They pinch his pallid gut, the kind baseball players traded about ten years ago for suspiciously-taut physiques. He sighs and pulls on a Bruins t-shirt from their '72 championship run. The lettering stretches across his chest and the fabric barely covers his belly. He sets his feet shoulder-width apart and bends to one foot; his shirt rises up his back. Could you wear such a snug, faded Bruins shirt on an elliptical? Or would it catch on some knob, some bar and kill you and they'd find your body splayed across a whirring deathtrap? Maybe it spun you around, or maybe it looked like one of those ridiculous swinging fitness machines that they advertise on infomercials after pay-per-view boxing matches—the zebra or mongoose or something equally bestial.

He recovers an old water bottle from an otherwise abandoned shelf of the pantry. The bottle is yellow and scuffed, but Lester recognizes the remaining text. It came from Richie's wedding at the boat club ten years ago. Jack and Miri got piss drunk out of their gourds; she broke a centerpiece and he nearly fell into the bay before Lester finally packed them into the backseat of his Chevy. He stuffs the bottle into a plastic Stop-n-Shop bag along with an extra pair of athletic socks. So used to leaving it behind, he almost forgets the coupon. Upon remembering, he pockets it, secures his Department baseball cap and proceeds in the direction of the Wood Island station.

—

Lester makes a couple wrong turns once he disembarks from the Cambridge station. By the time he arrives at the gym, his feet ache in the new shoes. They feel sticky and plastic—not like the supple leather boat shoes to which Lester has grown accustomed. When he finally arrives at the gym, he squints at the picture on the back of the postcard to be certain. The yellow lettering on the door confirms it. He goes inside.

A curved, black desk greets Lester. The gym is a deep, high-ceilinged room. Tidy metal benches line the grey walls and picture windows overlook glistening squash courts. Some patrons wear sleek, chromatic spandex attire and pristine, sculptural shoes that look aerodynamic enough to take flight. Others don unflattering, faded shirts and paunches that rival Lester's. Sweaty bodies squeak against long blue mats at the end of the room. Water bottles pop. People grunt and exhale. Whirring treadmills and clinking barbells echo against the boxy, metal interior. Sit-up benches and racks of weights sit in front of wide mirrors. Across from the mirrors, a line of treadmills and sleek stationary bikes watch mounted televisions that blare soap operas, MSNBC and the Home Shopping

Network. The busyness of the place reminds Lester of the Suffolk Downs racetrack in Eastie, except that no one seems aware of anyone else. The treadmill runners clog their ears with headphones and bury their attention in gossip magazines. The weightlifters watch their own reflections clench and expand. Even at the water fountain, they shuffle forward without a word.

The man at the front desk of the gym looks like a stockier version of the one on the coupon. His hair is sweaty and cropped very short, like a marine without the mandate; the kind of haircuts men liked when Lester worked at the barber shop on Bennington as a kid. He wears a polo that borders on neon yellow and a black nametag that introduces him as “Paulie.” He scribbles something on a clipboard and, without blinking, types furiously at the silver laptop on the other side of the desk. He purses his small, downturned mouth and exhales the anxious diligence of a former shy kid who never worked it all out.

Lester sets his plastic bag on the counter. He clears his throat and removes his Department baseball cap, still scummy with sand and salt from yesterday’s fall. Paulie raises a finger to pause him and sticks a post-it note to the computer.

“Sorry about that.”

“Treadmill emergency?”

“Excuse me?”

Definitely a shy kid, Lester decides. “Never mind.”

“Can I help you?”

“I have a coupon.” Lester places the wrinkled slip of paper on the counter.

“You’ll need to fill out these forms.” Paulie slides a clipboard across the counter.
“We also strongly advise that you consult your healthcare provider before beginning a new exercise regime.”

“Existing medical conditions.’ Do I need to list my triple bypass?”

Paulie turns pale. “Sorry?”

“Do you have ‘ellipticals’?” he says, air-quoting.

“Sir—”

“Lighten up, Paulie.”

Paulie scowls.

“What are they doing?” Lester points to a man in black and yellow spandex demonstrating a push-up for a chubby woman.

“That’s a personal trainer.”

“Does the coupon cover that?”

“One session.”

“I want to do that.” Lester hands the clipboard back. “Should I come back?”

“We had a cancellation this morning. Let me check.”

The man disappears behind a slow-closing grey door. Before it shuts, he reappears. He walks in a stiff way, his head propped on his shoulders like a bowling ball. A big guy with a touch of gut follows him—he must be at least 6’4”, maybe taller (at a certain point, only the other tall people can tell). For all his giant qualities, he looks real young, as if someone pasted his head on to his body. He reaches for Lester’s hand.

“Brian.”

“Lester Boyle. Good to meet you.”

“Should we get started?”

Paulie coughs at Brian.

“Sorry,” Brian says. He straightens. “What can we help you achieve today?”

“I want to be Larry Bird.”

“That should take about a week.”

Paulie scoffs and shakes his head. “I think you two will be very happy together.”

Lester sniggers.

The two men retreat to one of the mats near a series of weight machines, the likes of which Lester has never seen.

“We usually start out with an evaluation. A few different weight machines, some time on the treadmill, stretching—just to see where you are.”

“I’m not a real member.”

“That’s fine,” Brian nods. He sits and motions for Lester to do the same. He spreads each leg to one side and leans towards one. “This will stretch your hamstrings. It’s also good for your back.”

Lester imitates him, but only gets to his knee.

“It’s okay if you can’t get to your toes.”

“Like this?”

“Good. Switch.”

A hotness spreads beneath his knees, where the muscles strain as they have not before. His walks ask only that he set one foot ahead of the other, drawing him up the winding streets to the Madonna, past rows of triple-deckers painted the color of after dinner mints and back down, the very same way he came.

The walks began with Miri and Mother, after Father died. “A little crowded,” Mother had remarked the first day they moved from the apartment in Back Bay. She slipped into her plum pumps, the last thing Papa bought for her, and gave the front door a delicate push. It opened as if by its own volition, and she extended her hands to him and Miri. “Just a look around,” she sighed, as if a stroll might fill her bed again. She wore those pumps down to the gravel that first summer. Lester thought at the time that it meant that she liked them; now he knew she had been trying to destroy them.

She and Miri were so close then, before Miri fell sick and Mother grew sad. The summer Lester turned ten, she took Miri to Bette’s while he worked down the street. They came out looking like twins, Ma’s thick, straw-colored mane and Miri’s white blonde both tensed into identical perms. “Early birthday present,” his mother explained. He was the third wheel, he knew that much, but he took pleasure in the distance. He liked watching them erupt into laughter over splashed water or penny games. They had so many secrets, then, that he would never know. But he liked that about them. They needed their secrets.

“How does that feel?”

“Like pulling a stuck lever.”

“That’s about normal.”

“What’s after this?”

“We’ll start on the treadmill. See what you can do. Did you—“

“Sign the waiver that says I won’t blame you if I keel over? I signed it.”

“I have to check.”

The men stand. Lester climbs atop the rubber track. He frowns at the hodgepodge of buttons on the bulky panel in front of him.

“What is this, a space shuttle?”

“Close.”

“Do the Russians have all these gadgets? What about China?”

Brian laughs. “You’re pretty chipper.”

“Everything else is a waste.”

Brian presses a blue “up” arrow and little green lights flash on the panel. He presses another button, and another.

“I’m entering your height and weight. This next one will start it, officer.”

The machine whirs and Lester puts one foot in front of the other.

Lester frowns. “Retired. How’d you know?”

“Your hat. Besides, you got that alert swagger. All of you do.”

“Sounds right.”

“Which station?”

“Eastie. Paris Street.”

“Pretty good trek out here, huh?”

“You’re telling me,” Lester chuckles. “My niece— Amy—she’s picking me up because my sorry ass hates driving out here.”

“Amy Wheelan?”

Lester frowns. “You know her?”

“Sure, we went to UMass together. Nice girl. Sharp and tough as nails.”

“You’re not kidding,” Lester chuckles. “Small world.”

“How’s she doing?”

“She’s great. Teaches secondary here in Cambridge. Beyond that, it’s hard to know with her.”

“Still a closed book, eh?”

“Still a closed book.”

Lester checks either side of him. A petite woman with a soft back and a long torso passes on his left. She wears a pair of tissue-thin athletic shorts. Her nipples punctuate her orange sports bra. She’s fit, though not in an unattractive way. He imagines them together, her lithe body curving into him, unfolding and pushing in spite of itself. Her fingers tremble, grasping his shoulders, his jaw, pressing into his hair and suddenly release.

She turns, her rounded nose dotted with sweat, loose hairs wetted against her neck. She is young enough to be his daughter, but how can he feel bad for wanting her if he’s never even had a daughter? It was unfair, this grimy feeling. A gatekeeper has no feelings. He crucified the bums who looked at girls this way; he takes walks and peels oranges. But she needed no protection and she probably had a father of her own, his number programmed into her cell phone. She might go home tonight and drink a beer because, hell, she went to spin class today and got spun. And maybe her boyfriend will come over and they’ll fuck and so on and so forth, but at some point, she’ll call her father and tell him about her life. And her father will laugh with her but in the back of his mind, he’ll sit and fear that someone like Lester is out there thinking dirty things about his daughter. And he’ll be right.

Lester turns to the wall. Sweat stings his eyes.

“Are you okay?”

Lester sits and puts his head in his hands. “No.”

“Let’s take a break.”

They sit on the metal bench beyond the blue mats. Brian offers a towel.

“I’m out of shape.”

“Everyone’s out of shape.”

Lester laughs. “Smart man.”

“That guy over there—you see how his knees buckle when he hoists that weight?”

Lester nods.

“Plastic surgery. Some kind of liposuction.”

“You’re jumping. That could be any number of things: gallbladder, kidney, whatever.”

“Just watch.”

The man presses up. The veins in his neck swell. His knuckles whiten. The man turns to the mirror to his left. “Focus,” his trainer barks, but the man lingers on his reflection. His knees crumple. He drops the weight, and frowns at his reflection, but his brow only furrows so much.

“Now, that’s an addiction.”

“Brow lift last January, rhinoplasty sometime last spring. He was gone for most of September. My kid calls it a hippoplasty.” Brian chuckles and shakes his head. So young to have a kid, Lester thinks.

Lester used to think everyone had a mind like his and Brian’s, rotating around these details until they clicked together like a puzzle. The academy taught Lester the

method— investigative procedures, interviewing techniques, bureaucratic busywork—but he learned the madness on Saratoga Street. There, he pushed a broom larger than himself, the bristles of which were matted together by unattended clumps of pomade, to rid the salon of hair snippets, dandruff and whatever else lived on the scalps of factory workers and neighborhood entrepreneurs. He preferred the barber shop to the place where his mother had her hair cut. Bette's Best—her one indulgence, even before fresh nylons—reeked of stale perfume and hot plastic. The women there talked without pause for breath or smiles, which made Lester feel as though he was at a party which people attended out of obligation or boredom. “Nevertheless,” his mother would remind Miri and Lester, “they make a straight cut.”

The barber shop smelled like citrus in the winter; the owner, Pietro (though he insisted on Pete, now that he “bled and pissed American”) had emigrated from Sicily a few years prior and left blood orange peels all over the shop. “Vitamin C,” he would grunt, tossing Lester a piece. In the summer, it smelled of the cane sugar that lingered on the clothing of the gumball factory foremen who came for a trim after their shifts.

When it came right down to it, the men weren't much different from the women: they all liked to talk. A person's mood just informed the content, not the quantity. Sometimes, Pete retreated to the backroom for a smoke or a call and the client waited out front, crossing and uncrossing his legs beneath the plastic shawl. Aside from the rare 10-cent piece or an observation made in his general direction, customers tended to clam up and, when they considered themselves alone enough, relax. They sunk into the chair a little more and let their stomachs out; grunting, sniffing, coughing, ticking, ticking, ticking. At these moments, the person spilled out.

Years ago, he would have recommended this kid to the Department, but what once seemed like a favor now feels like a sick blow.

“How are you feeling?”

“Well enough.”

“Should we keep going?”

“Sure.”

“Great. And if you need some inspiration—” Brian glances at the petite girl. He winks at Lester.

“That’s very unprofessional,” Lester grunts. “Very unprofessional.”

Brian jolts back. “I’m sorry.”

“You think she’s a piece of meat?”

“Of course not.”

“She’s a young lady. She deserves respect. You ever look at my niece that way?”

“I meant no offense.”

“Say what you mean, then.”

The hulking man looks greener than ever. He knits his brow, his ruddy features falling into the future sites of wrinkles.

“I really am sorry.” Brian’s wedding band glints in the fluorescent lights. Lester almost married once, many years ago; tall Aileen with dull blue eyes, a sweet touch and a knack for fast conversation. A few weeks before the wedding, he took a bullet in the abdomen during a bust up near Marblehead. A quarter-inch farther left and it would have ripped into his lung. He thought about the kids he and Aileen didn’t have yet, about the fabric imprints on his and Miri’s cheeks from falling asleep on a neighbor’s couch,

waiting for Ma to finish work, about whether next time he would have a quarter inch to spare. He called the wedding off. She married a tailor two years later and Lester heard from others that they were very content.

“I know.” Lester shakes his head. “Don’t listen to me. I’m not myself.”

They finish the evaluation in near silence, excepting the necessary instructions and rote encouragement. At the end, the men shake hands and Brian tells him to return. “We’ll see,” Lester says to his shoes. He wants to apologize, for lecturing this kid who meant no harm at all and for making a scene like a verifiable, crazy old man. As he leaves, no apology offered, he knows he can’t come back, even if he manages to get a hold of a better shirt. From a payphone outside, he dials Amy.

“Hello?” Her voice sounds cold.

“Amy, it’s Uncle Les.”

She softens. “I’m a block away. I’ll see you in two.”

He swings the Stop-n-Shop bag against the brick wall of the gym’s front until her green Volvo pulls up to the curb. She leans over to unlock the passenger side door, her mousy brown locks pulled into a messy bun. The fourth of July after she turned seven, she had Eli cut it all off with Miri’s sewing scissors. Miri laughed louder than Lester had ever heard her when they emerged from the bathroom, covered in hair. Miri threw Amy over her shoulder, sprinted down the back steps and doused them both in the sprinkler.

He gets in. She wears a cardigan that bunches at the shoulders. A few faint red marks dot her neck where the wool has irritated it.

“Sorry about before,” she says. She pulls the sweater away from her neck for some cool air. “I thought you were someone else when you called.”

“Who else would I be?” he guffaws.

“This guy.”

“Is he trouble?”

She shrugs. “I just don’t want to talk to him.”

“There’s always a suitor, huh?”

“Not always,” she says. Her tone is defensive. She frowns. “I don’t know.”

“You seem upset.”

“I’m not,” she assures him. She smiles. It’s taken a long time to decode her tight-lipped smiles, the ones that she uses to deflect any especially probing questions. He’s seen her cry once, after Richie’s wedding. She had just helped him load Jack and Miri into Lester’s Lincoln—Jack into the backseat, Miri to the passenger side. Jack had asked her for a drink for the road. She had propped his leg on to the backseat and slammed the door. After Lester had shut Miri into the front seat, he found Amy sitting on the curb. It was a cool night, but her dress seemed to hang like metal from her slight frame. She traced an infinity sign into the dirt by the parking lot.

“I’ll get them home,” Lester told her. He had wanted to pat her shoulder, but she looked frail. For once, she could not accommodate any more weight.

She had lifted her head, her eyes rimmed red. Her voice trembled. “Everyone’s gone. Eli. Devon. Malcolm. Now them.”

He sat next to her. Her hair blew around her face. She pinned it. “What am I supposed to do?”

Lester sighed. How could he advise someone who never asked for a lick of help from anyone? She wouldn't tolerate a lecture, he knew that much. He crossed his arms over his knees. "Push."

She nodded and wiped her face. "Take them home. I'm going to dance a little more."

At the time, he worried the exchange had only cemented whatever pain she felt and that she would remain closed. Now, as she leans on the horn in the middle of Mass Pike traffic, cussing at the UHaul in front of her, he's still not sure. But she brings him magazines a couple times a week and drives him home from the gym at rush hour. That has to be something.

She brakes. "How was the gym?"

"It was alright."

She adjusts the rearview. "You going back?"

"I don't think so," Lester says. "I felt a little silly in there."

"I think I know a guy who works there."

"Brian."

"How'd you know?"

"He was my trainer."

"God," she says. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?"

"He's such an ass. I think he was behind the herpes outbreak junior year."

Lester laughs.

"What?" Amy asks.

“Nothing,” Lester says, still smiling. “I just feel a little less silly now.”

“Not to worry,” she pats his shoulder. “We’ll find you a different gym.”

At the next red light, she unbuckles her seatbelt. She struggles with the buttons of the teal cardigan and tosses it to the backseat like a piece of trash. Beneath it, she wears a shabby Sex Pistols t-shirt. “Sorry, Uncle Les,” she says. “I was burning up in that thing.”

“It didn’t seem like your style.”

She rolls her eyes. “It’s not.”

She drops him at the corner beyond his house. The car coughs and starts again. Amy’s outline sinks into the horizon as the car departs. Inside, he sets the plastic bag on a coat hook in the hall closet and opens the front door so the breeze can roll through the screen.

A DIFFERENT WAY

At night, Olive forgets about the little wooden table in the hallway. She knocks into it every time she drags herself down the short hallway to the bathroom. At the old house, the table sat beneath a single picture window in the guestroom. The crystal knob fastened to its single drawer reflected light onto the surrounding walls in the morning. A glass dish filled with hard candy—the kind people never eat—sat on top. Inside the single drawer lay a Cuban cigar box full of the stuff that families accumulate over time, an unintentional scrapbook: polaroids deemed too unflattering for an album, spare buttons, old bobby pins, dinner mints and matches acquired at rare dinners out. Olive and Anna reminded their mother when they moved in that the table belonged in the guest room. Mom set the cigar box and candy dish in a Bloomingdales bag and said, her voice rife with irritation, that the whole point of moving was to live in a different way.

Mom knocks into the table this morning, while Olive eats rice krispies in the kitchen down the hallway. The cordless phone tumbles to the floor. Mom reaches for it, and the bobby pins holding her bangs slip out.

“Fuck,” she mutters.

Anna leans out of the bathroom in the middle of the hallway, toothbrush hanging from her mouth.

“I told you it lives in the guest room,” she says. Pink Sesame Street toothpaste dribbles down her chin on to the neck of her footie pajamas. “Right, Olive?”

Olive rises from the kitchen table to help pick up the mess. She pauses at the fridge while Mom squats over the scattered pins.

Mom raises her eyebrows. “What?”

“Nothing,” Olive says. She returns to the table. The swear word itself caused Olive little concern. She’d never seen her mother smoke a cigarette or drink more than a single beer in one sitting, but Mom used those kinds of words like butter on toast. She blamed it on Washington, DC: if a journalist never developed a taste for that language after drilling coffee-stained copy at 3AM, they weren’t doing it right. No, it was the way she swore now that made Olive retreat. The words no longer wove into sentences but stood alone, tainted and bitter. They seemed directed at someone—probably dad, but maybe Olive or Anna, too.

Mom’s suit just came from the dry cleaners yesterday, but it wilts on her, as though she’s been wearing the pieces for weeks, too tired or disinterested to remove them. She reminds Olive of the old women who sweep the sidewalks outside of their houses. From a distance, some offer silent, closed-mouth smiles, but they purse their wrinkled lips and yammer in Greek or Ukranian at those who track dirt near their portion of the walk. They adjust the flower-print aprons that seem pinned to their waist by someone else and mutter to their terriers. Anna calls them stones. They must have families, but maybe the kind who all sit in different rooms and don’t really look at one another when they talk.

Mom sits across from Olive at the foldable card table, the one they bought before moving in. The large oak table from their old house did not fit in their new kitchen. She re-pins her stray bangs, replete with new, blond highlights. She pulls her blush compact from her purse and gestures to Olive’s near empty bowl.

“You eat like it’s going to jump off the table.”

“I eat the way I eat,” Olive replies, a wad of cereal sitting in her mouth.

“Slow down,” Mom mutters to the mirror.

Olive washes her plate in the sink. Dad eats fast, too. He and Aunt Amy always finish before everyone else, the survivors of countless six-person family dinners. If you wanted to get your fill at one of those, he once told Olive, you needed two things: a good boarding house reach and speed. She asked if things were different at holidays. “Are you kidding?” he laughed. “Thanksgiving was a Battle Royale, even if your grandmother never got the mashed potatoes right.”

When they all lived together, Dad made them breakfast and Mom left early for work. Olive complained then that she had grown past the point of scrambled egg faces and dinosaur plates. “None of your friends are here,” he would say. “Eat.”

“Why are you wearing make up?” Olive asks.

“It looks nice. And it makes me feel good.”

“You never wore it before.”

“Well, fresh—”

“I know, fresh start.”

Anna pounces into the kitchen, Mom’s old handbag hanging from her shoulder. She asks for coffee.

“When did you start drinking coffee?” Mom mutters into a compact mirror.

“Today,” Anna shrugs. She sets her rabbit-themed cocoa mug on the table and puts two pieces of bread in the toaster. Olive waits for Mom to respond, but she says nothing and sweeps powder on her cheeks.

“No,” Olive says. “It’s bad for you.”

“Mom drinks it.”

“It’s not bad for adults. Right, Mom?”

Mom straightens, but remains focused on her compact. “Your sister is right.”

“That seems illogical,” Anna says, lifting her chin on the last syllable.

“Illogical?” Olive says, frowning. “Where did you learn that word?”

“On T.V.”

“The point is,” Olive says. “You don’t need to drink coffee.”

Anna smiles at Mom and starts moving her school notebooks from her backpack into the purse. “I do now. Fresh start.”

Olive snatches the purse. “That’s not yours.”

“Oh, let her have it,” Mom says, waving away the issue.

Olive keeps forgetting about Mom’s new purse, the ugly purple one with gold metal all over it. It looks like a big, shiny grape.

Sometimes Anna still asks about Dad. She asks Mom and Olive, occasionally at the same time. The halting, sad-eyed explanations Mom offers only confuse her, and she asks again. Adults use a lot of ridiculous language sometimes. They claim that they are trying to protect her and Anna, but Olive knows better: they have no idea what they’re talking about.

“So you live here,” she had said to Dad. “And we live somewhere else?”

“You’ll still see your Dad. We just won’t all live together,” Mom had answered for him.

“It’s complicated,” Dad had nodded.

Anna leaned forward, play with the Velcro straps of her shoes. “But you’re not living in the same house?”

Mom shook her head. “No.”

“Why?” Anna asked.

“They don’t like each other anymore,” Olive said.

Mom pursed her lips. “It’s not so simple.”

Olive had shrugged. “But it is.”

They had seemed more confused than her. Maybe they were. Nonetheless, she felt fooled: her parents never seemed in *love*, not in the same way as movie couples. But they watched TV together and made dinner together and went to bed together at night. Over time, Olive developed a quiet confidence in that togetherness. She assumed that they saved the rest for private places, or for when she and Anna went over to Aunt Amy’s house on Sunday nights for ice cream and old movies. Their love, the kind that needed no pesky, public embellishments, lived outside of movies.

Mom rises and sets her empty coffee mug in the sink. She slides an energy bar into her purse like a loaded gun. “Let’s go, girls.”

“Are you picking me up?” Anna asks.

“Yes, and then we have to go get a new table. That’s exciting.”

“A new table?”

“I thought we’d sell this one.”

“It’s Dad’s.”

“Richie—I mean, your father— didn’t want it and, well, it’s just very old.”

“We’ve had it since I was a baby.”

“We can keep it in storage if you want.”

“It’s a table, not a box of knickknacks,” Olive mutters. She slings her backpack over her shoulder. “I’m going to Piers Park with Michelle and Louis after school.”

“I can pick you up there at six.”

“Fine.”

They’re a funny thing, Olive thinks, terse send-offs like this: sometimes they roll away, as aberrational and meaningless as spoiled milk, but sometimes they sink, symptomatic of a deeply unforgivable lapse in feeling. And it tastes bad all day.

—

Olive came into this world on a Boeing 737 traveling from Montreal to Logan. The way Mom tells it, she was a low-maintenance fetus until that point, two and a half weeks before her expected delivery date: a little on the small side, the obstetrician said, but the owner of a good heartbeat and otherwise healthy as healthy can be. Many times she seemed too quiet, days passing between single kicks. But they always came. Around the fourth month, Mom said, Olive went a week without kicking. On their way to Mass General, she and dad sat in traffic in the Callahan Tunnel for an hour, in a mustard-yellow Volvo with an air conditioner that emitted a low, grumbling sound more often than cold air. As they turned on to Cambridge Street, Olive awoke and gave a small but characteristic kick that seemed to say, “Oh, were you looking for me?” They turned around, resigning themselves to their second hour of traffic and to the air conditioner which, unlike Olive, refused to kick.

—

Olive, Michelle and Louis cut Biology at the end of the day and shuffle along Decatur Street in down parkas. When they pass a store window, Olive pretends to look inside but instead watches her reflection stretch and skim across the glass before disappearing into bricks. Each time she expects to look different—cheekbones a little

higher, hair a little shinier—but at each window she just looks more and more the same. Louis pauses to tie his shoelace, his stomach bulging even beneath his jacket. His mother calls him big-boned. The other eighth graders call him blubber. He tried to kiss Olive at a school dance once. She liked the way his breath smelled, but worried about the steak and cheese she'd eaten an hour before. She had turned her cheek.

Michelle skips ahead. Her espresso curls flash red in the heavy, sinking sun, her tattered backpack flapping against her parka. The thick-soled Adidas she decorates with a purple marker at lunch look like grapes at the end of toothpicks. She's thin, not skinny like Olive—lanky and confident, anticipating the promise of curves. Olive wears a more permanent scrawniness, the kind of wiry physique that will someday either invite or deflect attention.

She pushes her coarse, blonde hair beneath her red knit cap. Before her hair appointment last week, it hung halfway down her back. Every time the family ate dinner together, Aunt Amy ran her fingers through it and called it a lion's mane. Olive did not like for most people to touch her hair—a boy told her once that it looked like uncooked spaghetti—but she didn't mind that since Amy had the same type of hair.

Haircuts were part of Mom's new start. Over breakfast last week, she told Olive and Anna that they were all looking a little shaggy and insisted that they go together. It was Olive who decided to cut it so short, seduced for a moment by the idea of starting again. But the second she heard the icy snip, she felt ashamed, as if she'd abandoned some integral part of herself. The chatty Russian hair dresser used a blow drier and a straightening iron to smooth it. The locks looked like glass after that, not unlike her mother's thick, fine bob. Olive refused to shower for three days. When she washed her

hair again, it returned to looking like spaghetti and feeling like an amputation. She wondered if Amy would be disappointed.

Olive has forgotten to wear socks today and the high tops she inherited from Mom have seen better days. She drags Michelle and Louis into the scummy dollar-store on the outskirts of Meridian Square. Inside, fluorescent light floods the shelves of plastic-wrapped novelties and boxes of clip-on earrings. The cashier, a snooty, busty girl who goes to girls high on the other side of Eastie, always wears her hair slicked into a tight, glossy pony tail. Michelle and Olive saw her *Quinceanera* last August at Piers Park.

“Do you get one of these?” Olive had asked as the line of peach ballgowns drifted down the sidewalk that wound towards the sailboat docks.

“In a year. If I want one,” Michelle shrugged. “I don’t know if could handle my family through it all, though.”

“I don’t know,” Olive says over the roar of a departing plane. “It might be nice.”

Olive slaps a cheap pair of knee-highs, embroidered with a Latino version of Hello Kitty on the counter. She pulls them on in the store, unimpeded by the dirty floor or the cashier, who drills her plum fingernails on the counter in disapproval. Across the street, Michelle and Louis’s Uncle, Angel, owns a restaurant that *Boston Magazine* lists in its list of top city cheap eats every year. Sometimes college kids juice up their Charlie cards for the T trip in the direction of Wonderland. Between bites, they applaud themselves on their sense of adventure and spill the contents of little meat pies on their letter sweatshirts. They talk about how one of them knows a place in Inman Square that sells these pastries, but the people there are kind of nasty and they overcharge.

Angel charges them for the coffee but not the muffins and tells them to stay out of trouble. Michelle reminds him that they never get into trouble and, when he goes to the back to check on the meat shipment, filches a few cigarettes from his coat pocket.

Outside they argue about the route to Piers; Louis says you take Meridian and Michelle insists on London. Mom says that Michelle and Louis are trouble, because Louis got left back and because Michelle never asks for food at their house, just takes. Their dad left a long time ago. The last time they heard from him, he had traded the Charles for the Potomac and was living in Virginia with a new family. Michelle asks Louis about him a lot, sometimes as a joke and sometimes not. Every time he tells her to find a phonebook. How funny, Olive thinks, that she ever felt superior to them and their bickering, still so confident that her family was different.

“You take London to Maverick Square.” Michelle picks up a stick and traces the route on the white paneling of a nearby house. “Bang a left at Bremen, which puts you at Marginal. It’s easy.”

“My way is shorter,” Louis gripes.

“We always go that way,” Michelle protests. “Let’s do something different.”

Olive takes the stick from Michelle. “I know a place we could go.”

Michelle crosses her arms. “Where?”

“Just this house,” Olive walks ahead. The exact location betrays her, even as she dares her friends to counter with a better suggestion. She remembers a red front door and a sagging dogwood in the patchy front yard. At the end of the long, gravel driveway—a rare luxury in East Boston—sat a squat carport that housed a yellow Volkswagen. The

last time Olive visited this house, she had pointed to the car and told her parents she would own one like it when she turned 16.

Olive wonders what kind of car sits in the driveway now. She drags the stick behind her and taps it twice on the pavement. “Are you coming?”

Louis and Michelle exchange glances.

Olive pulls up the socks, the cheap elastic of which has already started to stretch. A bank clock next to the restaurant reads 4:30 PM and the growing shadows wrap around buses and curbs like untethered fabric. Olive zips her coat and rounds the corner. Two pairs of sneakers clomp behind her, until the three walk abreast again.

Michelle lights a cigarette and offers it to Olive. “You’ll feel warmer.”

“No, thanks.” Olive hates the look of cigarettes, the way people smoke them like they’re giving you the finger. Michelle extends the smoke to Louis. He shakes his head.

“What time do you have to go home?” he asks Olive.

“Seven.”

“We can walk you, we go right past it,” he says.

“I don’t live there anymore. My parents are getting a divorce.”

“Shit,” Michelle says, smoke spilling from her nostrils.

Amy scuffs the sidewalk. “Shit is right.”

—

Until the seatbelt sign turned off, Olive seemed unaware of her impending delivery date. The captain announced their ascent to 30,000 feet, as well as a striking view of the Maine coastline and Mom hunched in her seat. “Figures,” she had grunted when her water broke all over the aisle. Up there, in the Boeing, an otherwise rootless

baby belonged here because they had. They had cradled her and brought her to earth, a product of their life together. When the landscape changed, she returned to the air, grasping for the string that bound her to any place at all.

Olive shivers and rubs her hands together, missing the gloves that she bypassed on the way out this morning. Louis hands her one of his. “You dress like a goddamn tourist.”

Michelle pauses at the next turn.

“I don’t remember which way is right.”

Olive recognizes the weathered sign for Grady Court, the Lincolns and Chevys lining both sides of the block. “Let’s go this way.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

The street is narrow, like many of the streets off of Meridian Square. The triple-deckers almost seemed to bend against one another, like too many paperbacks compressed between bookends. Dad says that they used to cram two or three families into them, before health code regulations or CD players. His own family housed a tenant for a couple of years to bring in money, a weird, bookish kid who owned too many sweater vests and looked at aunt Amy the wrong way.

Olive stops in front of the third house from the corner. The paint along the window ledges, the color of an after dinner mint, peels away from the frame, a victim of snow patches that refuse to melt for weeks during the relentless northeast winters. The last time she stood in front of the house, a wreath of brambles and wildflowers hung on

the door, arranged by the woman who owned it then. Thick, navy curtains veil most of the darkened front window, beyond which lies bathroom with an ocean liner window in the shower, the living room with a window seat. The narrow driveway still empties into the squat garage, but the Volkswagen has been replaced by a blue Honda without its back tires.

Olive enters the driveway. "I don't think anyone's home."

Michelle makes a face. "So?"

Olive gestures to the backyard. "Let's go inside."

"You're pretty soft," Michelle sneers.

"You wanted to do something different," Olive says, tightening the straps on her backpack. "Come on."

A chain link fence separates the gravel driveway from the backyard. Olive secures her foot in one of the holes and swings the other over top, an easy jump for the lithe and fearless. Michelle's pants snag on a fence pole when she straddles the top. She unsteadies when she frees the leg and plunks on to a frosted mound of mulch below.

"Very friggin' soft," she grunts, dusting dirt from her knees.

Louis, made pudgier by the parka, wedges his foot into the link and tries to haul his leg up, but loses momentum and slips back. He selects an empty paint can next to the garage and heaves himself over.

"Are we all still living?" Olive raises her eyebrows. She treks deeper into the backyard, the overgrowth of which obscures a lopsided metal swing set. A doghouse in the back left corner looks unsuitable for a family of rodents, much less a dog. The backyard adopts the deep hue of early night and the shadow cast by the house. It looks as

though someone designed the place years ago with great care and abandoned it on a whim.

A white screen door veils a heavier, rust-colored door behind it. The metal knob of the screen door screeches when Olive twists. She pushes the next door. It opens.

“Olive, don’t be a retard,” Michelle crows.

“If you want to go, go,” Olive shrugs.

She goes inside. Louis follows, then Michelle.

“I just want to see the living room. I want to see if it looks the same.”

Michelle brushes a cobweb from the door off her arm. “The same as what?”

Two sets of stairs, one ascending to the main floor of the house and one leading to the basement, greet Olive inside. She goes up. At the top, she encounters the kitchen at the back of the house, the same layout as the one at Nana and Papa’s house: a table beneath the single window on the back wall and a counter that runs the length of the room. The room possesses the uncomfortable contradiction of an orderly person living in an irrevocably dingy setting: two coffee cakes stacked on top of the microwave, a line of dishes drying on a bedraggled dishcloth.

“We almost moved here when Anna was born. We all liked it.”

Louis stops at the doorway leading to the hallway. “What happened?”

“We kept getting outbid.” She picks up a stray copy of *The Trial* lying on the kitchen table. “Aldridge” is printed on the inside of the front cover. She sets the book down. “We couldn’t afford it. I guess the other people—” she traces the single plate and silverware set on the dishcloth. “—person—wanted it more. We didn’t end up moving, anyway.”

“Your house is really nice,” Louis says.

Olive replaces the book and opens the fridge. “Ham, whiskey, cheese,” she mutters. “And don’t forget your Orange Julius.”

“We should leave soon,” Michelle says, opening the Julius.

“I want to see one more thing.”

“Fine,” Michelle sits at the table and props her feet on an adjacent chair. “Let me know when you’re done exploring.”

Olive traipses down the hallway, narrow enough so that she can skim each wall with her fingers at the same time. The new owner retained the wall paper, a wilting shade of periwinkle, but replaced the carpet. The wooden table could never fit here without taking up half the hallway. The corridor needs nothing, wants nothing other than to carry voices and the pattering of feet from one room to another; to witness those momentary, superficial exchanges between people that could have filled the house like water.

Olive stops at the bigger bedroom of the two. To the left of the window on the far wall, Dad had stretched the tape measure and declared it large enough for Anna’s crib. Mom, bulging at seven months, lowered herself on to the bed then, tracing the yellow cotton pillowcases, the worn patchwork quilt. She leaned back on her hands and sighed like a person who had not sat in a very long time.

Olive sits on the floor, beneath the window, where she asked if they would live here now.

Louis sits next to her.

“They liked a lot of things,” she says. “The floors—they didn’t have this ugly carpet when we looked at it. There’s a window in the attic where you can see part of the

skyline. Not like at Piers, but you can see it. They liked that.” She pulls her knees into her chest. “I know it’s not the house.”

He takes his scarf off and crosses his arms, as if settling in for a long rest. “Isn’t it just the pits?”

Olive sets her head against the window sill. “What?”

“The end of two people.”

She’d never thought of it that way. A parting, maybe. Her mother called it another beginning. But an end seemed to preclude all of those things. Kill them, even.

Louis pats her on the shoulder and stands. His aquiline nose, which she admires in Spanish, looks sharp and ugly in the dark. He turns. “Let’s bolt, huh?”

She refuses, bothered by the bleak quantification to which he already subscribes, the unwarranted strike against a dying thing.

Gravel crunches. A light from outside reflects in a flash against the window. The rumbling of an old transmission peters out, and a car door shuts. Louis stops in the doorway. Cans clatter on the floor of the kitchen.

“Fuck!” Michelle grunts.

Louis gestures for Olive to come. She refuses.

Michelle appears in the doorway, her parka stained with Orange Julius. “Fucking A, Olive,” she whispers. “Come on.”

“What did you do?” Olive frowns.

“I wanted another soda. They went everywhere.”

The backdoor creaks. Foot steps ascend the stairs to the kitchen. Keys clatter on the kitchen table and then, nothing. He’s surely seen the mess by now. Olive tries to

picture him, but she feels cold and sweaty, as if she has forgotten her own name.

Michelle and Louis run from the room, coats bustling against the doorframe and the wall paper. They clamber down the stairs. A kitchen drawer opens with an acute jangling noise, like a machine malfunctioning. He pulls something from it, and other things fall out, clanging against the yellow linoleum. A knife, maybe, or a rolling pin.

His footsteps grow louder. He reaches the doorway, where she can hear him breathing, loud and anxious. She imagines him as a big man, bulky like her father, but his steps sound swift, not heavy. She expects, any moment, some guttural castigation, some vehement threat, but it never comes. The front door slams and he does not open it. Olive hears the stairs creak as he sits. She twists to relieve the cramp in her leg that formed while she held her breath, crumpled beneath the sill. The window blind catches on her ponytail. The blinds drop. The stairs creak again.

She wants to stay right here, but not look at him. She wants to sit here more than any other place. No one could jail her for sitting. Who could call that a crime?

He climbs the stairs, slow this time. He bangs his weapon against the wall. A rolling pin, for sure, because it makes the same hollow thump as Nana's when she drops it whenever she makes a tart. He pauses in the doorway. Though the light from the hallway silhouettes him, his clothing looks tailored and slim fitting and he resembles villain in a comic book whose dialog bubble ends in an ellipses.

"I know you're in here." His voice sounds high, but not effeminate, and deliberate like a news anchor reading from a teleprompter.

She thinks about the open window in summer and about the white creases of the photograph.

“This is not your house. Do you understand?”

Enshrouded in the shadow of the dark room, she slides down the wall behind her and pulls her knees into her chest. The wood floors feel cool and smooth: the kind of floor she and Anna would have slid across in socks at Christmas.

“No, I don’t.”

He sets his hand on the light switch. She stands.

“Go ahead,” she whispers. He didn’t deserve this place. It wasn’t supposed to be his.

He shakes his head and puts his hand in his pocket.

“I’m going to go into the kitchen for two minutes. I’ll be checking my watch. If you have not left by then, I will come back.”

He sets Olive’s backpack on the threshold and retreats. The legs of a chair skid against the floor as he pulls it out; they groan as he sits. Olive leaves the room and looks into the kitchen. He sits with his back to her, hunched, over his watch and a newspaper. She wonders if he saw something end, too, and tried to begin again. But maybe some endings were just too—too something. She wants to push him off his chair to prove him wrong. He was wrong, wasn’t he?

She slides her backpack over her shoulders. With every step towards the door she waits for him to turn or strike, to admit his mistake or explain himself. But does he does not budge. As she shuts the front door, it occurs to her that he may not move from that place for a long time.

—

News outlets loved the story, especially the *Globe*, which did a follow-up interview five years later. The metro section republished the first picture of their family, taken as mom disembarked with a sweaty, red bundle in her arms. The attendants look happy and bushed. One has his hand on the back of Olive's head; another plays with her toe. Dad leans over her, thinner then, with an empty peanut bag stuck in his hair and an arm wrapped around Mom's shoulder, the two of them triumphant together in a marathon. Olive keeps a photocopy in her backpack, the creases of which have turned white from years of unfolding.

THREE

Richie frowned at me from the top step, the April sun dipping behind him. He picked a thick, fallen branch from a puddle and set it upright as a walking stick. Soggy bark dotted his tennis shoes. He grinned, unashamed of his missing front tooth. He'd lost it the week before during algebra.

“They took the bears out, you know.”

The Bear Dens at Franklin Park closed about ten years before we were born. Long Crouch Woods fell into disrepair and the city deemed the whole exhibit too expensive to preserve. When we visited in 1968, weeds had overrun the area. They snaked from cracks in the sprawling concrete courtyard between the wrought-iron cages. Moss and mold tinged the cement pits. Everything required a fence here: rust-covered bars encircled a single, skinny tree in the middle of one larger habitat.

“Come on, Eli,” Richie snapped. “Are you scared?”

I leaned against the large statue at the entrance—two bears divided by the city crest—and rocked on my heels. I knew that the bears were gone: dead or shipped into their new, cushier habitat at the zoo. I wasn't scared of them. It was the mustiness of this place, its potential for darkness. More than that, it was the prospect of being alone too long in an abandoned place, my only company weeds and specters. Was it worse to be eaten or forgotten?

“I don't like it here,” I said. “That's all.”

“You're scared.”

“Dad and Uncle Lester told us to meet them at the entrance after we saw the tiger exhibit.”

Richie climbed down and tossed his stick to the ground. “I don’t get you,” he said.

He said nothing on the walk through the park. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and greeted Papa and Uncle Lester with little more than a grunt. We crowded into the back of Dad’s coffee-colored Chevy, the sweat from our thighs sticking to the black leather seats. I was angry then, at Richie for being angry with me. Dad worked baggage claim at Logan most weekends, and an excursion like this was rare.

Dad took Blue Hill Avenue instead of Columbia. Uncle Lester wanted to hear the radio. Dad insisted that the night deserved open windows and conversation. He smiled at me in the rearview as he said this, his chunky frames slipping down his thin Roman nose as they so often did. We missed the news from Memphis, the death report resounding from transistors and car radios all over the city.

We heard clamoring by the time we reached West Cottage Street. Papa grunted, something about since the Italians and the Greeks all have their festivals, the Negroes must have them, too. But as we wound into lower Roxbury, the ambient, ambiguous noise became sirens and the sound of breaking glass. Blazes dotted storefronts and houses. Some people ran in gangs. The mobs pressed against each other like fire or broke off like sparks. One man shattered a car window with a tire-iron; I thought he looked like a man at the time, but in retrospect he could not have been older than sixteen or seventeen. Three shops down, a woman with light brown skin in a yellow cardigan dragged two cardboard boxes from inside. A group of three or four teenagers—their wife-beaters wet against their torsos with sweat and soot—hurled a chair through the window. She dropped the boxes and fell, her sandals too unwieldy for the chaos. She faced us, her dress bunching around her scraped knees, the still center of a violent symphony. My

scrapes came at my own volition, the result of confidence and overzealous jumps. I had nothing for her.

The police, clad in shields and helmets, told us to leave.

“Have you been living in a cave?” they castigated. “Somebody killed King. Don’t you know that?”

We wouldn’t be safe here, they said. As if we were the only ones. No one would. Uncle Lester told us to get down. Crouching in the backseat, the shatters and bellows grew quieter. When we reached Jamaica Way, Richie’s wet, sniffling sighs punctuated the chaste whirring of traffic. I did not rise until the car rolled into our gravel driveway. Papa pulled us both to him when we emerged from the backseat, the first and last time I remember receiving such a purposeful embrace from him.

“Why was that happening?” I asked Papa’s shoulder. Richie shook beside me in silence.

Papa shook his head. The color had drained from him. “A lot of reasons.”

Most nights, Richie lay still in the twin across from mine, talking steady and quiet about the Celtics or anything else. He talked into his sleep, I was sure. I imagined his lips moving all night, even after the sound died out. But tonight he was silent.

“Hey,” I said. “Are you okay?”

Nothing.

“I was scared. Really scared,” I said, hoping to jump-start him. “I feel bad for them.”

His sheets rustled as he turned over.

“Why?” Richie’s voice bit the air.

“I don’t know. Everyone looked so upset.”

“They would have killed us,” he said flatly. “No wonder they want to keep ‘em out of our schools.”

“Come on.”

He rolled back over and didn’t say anything else. From downstairs, I could hear Mayor White’s calm, steady voice and later James Brown’s concert emanating from the downstairs television. I pulled my covers to my shoulders, drifting in and out of slumber. Mr. Brown stayed up over at the Boston Garden, trying to extinguish a city of fires.

PUSH-PULL

Amy climbs from her evergreen Volvo, brushing crumbs and dog saliva from her skirt on to the school parking lot. Neither she nor the mutt has slept. She had tried to leave it on the street outside her apartment when they arrived home last night. It chased the granola bar she threw at the nearest stop sign and she took the opportunity to slip inside. When she reached her floor, the dog stood beneath her window and howled like a banshee. Between howls it barked: quick, staccato, to the point. At five AM, the neighbor beneath her tossed a pot of water on the dog. It bolted into the street, afraid but energized, and continued its tirade, like a crazy person with nothing better on the agenda. She let it in. It repaid her by tearing into one of her unpacked boxes—the dishcloths from Brookline—and nipping her wrist when she tried to stop it. “What?” it seemed to tease, crouching over her carpet. “You wanted a fire.” In the morning, it followed her out and tried again to climb into her car. This time, she pressed its chest with her leg and shut the door. After a couple protests, it trotted in the opposite direction. But she had a feeling that the victory was temporary.

Her boots click against the gum-ridden pavement of the fenced schoolyard. She twists and clips her unruly, espresso-brown mane. People have lower expectations for hair like hers. Shiny and sleek don’t apply to her, not without a few hours of careful pruning. She enters the stern brick school, a relic from the 1920s and a magnet, all-boys school until the seventies. The school boards and the administrators have tried to bury those origins— filling the health textbooks with pictures of multicultural groups of kids, plastering the hallways with blue and gold Meet the Staff bulletin boards. But the kids still throw wet wads of toilet paper at the bathroom ceilings because they can, without

realizing that all the lavatories once serviced the white, the Protestant, the male. Even in the classroom, she sees the collision of old and new, the ways in which political correctness have been glued to a cement heritage. It all seems proactive, the way the colors pop from the foil bulletin borders, the animal-themed inspirational posters. The pamphlet about the school's history—available from a plastic dispenser in the main office—talks about the mission of the 1940s school board to create a fine public institution. The desegregation of the school in 1967 earns a single line, something about how they “entered the 1970s with a commitment to equal opportunity education”—as if Garrity's ruling was a welcome reminder or a redundant little pat on the head instead of a last resort.

Eli would have corrected the whole stack of pamphlets with a ballpoint pen and handed them out to the office staff; but then, Eli once put a dead fish in Pixie Palladino's mailbox after one of her Anti-Busing demonstrations near Maverick Square. He was seventeen, himself busing to Roxbury when Amy and the others went to East Boston High. Ma slapped him for the prank.

“She's a racist, Ma,” he complained, cupping his cheek.

“She's a mother. If she doesn't want her kids shipped halfway across the city,” Ma said, scrubbing the oil from that evening's pan into the sink. “That's her business.”

“I guess I don't understand,” Eli shrugged, affecting the distant, resilient tone of someone who considers themselves familiar enough with the world.

Ma let the pan clatter in the sink. “Well, take it up with the government. And next time you want to put some dirty slop in someone's mailbox, make it mine.”

She had inhaled, like a person punched, and took up the pan again. Amy had set her fork of pound cake on the imitation-walnut table, still too young to be acquainted with the full extent of her mother's fallibility. She felt, for the first time, the discomfort of being inextricably bound to two people moving slowly away from one another. Eli stopped talking then. He had tugged, however gently, a loose string that threatened to unravel some larger pocket of shame, some gap in the leftist, Kennedy doctrine with which Ma would have sympathized outside of her backyard. He would never apologize to Pixie, even if he had the chance, but he left her mailbox alone after that day. Still, Amy smirks at the prospect of Eli tearing through those pamphlets, marring neat text with his chicken scratch writing.

She has taught here for five years now, but her classroom remains unadorned, except for the paraphernalia tacked up by past teachers and office staff. It's like the apartments, in that way. Though she stays, she's never found it necessary to unpack beyond a coffee mug and a couple photos of her nieces. They punctuate the standardized feeling of the room, half-hearted little snubs at the décor.

She flips the lights and sits. She likes the silence of an empty classroom, the way it anticipates interweaving strains of voices, but not impatiently. An empty classroom is content to sit and listen to itself. She sets a cruller and a hazelnut coffee from Dunkin' Donuts next to the stack of papers. Amy's watch reads eleven, two hours before her juniors arrive for their last discussion of *The Trial*. She assigns the book and the essay every year: an angle of their choosing as long as it has a thesis and three supporting points. It pushes them, but in a sexier way than Shakespeare. Most students like the

departure from the required curriculum, the eroticism and the strangeness of K's journey through an impenetrable web of courts.

Amy sets their essays on the corner of the desk and pulls her copy of the book from her messenger bag. Notes, bulleted lists and pictures crowd the margins of her edition, scribed in multiple colors of ink and different types of pencils. She imagines it as a sketchbook or some meandering, informal paper that needs only to be written. How many times she's read it, she can't be sure. She finds something new every time, and on occasion it feels as though the homely insurance worker from Austria never stopped writing it.

People mistake her attachment for love. She loves many texts, but not this one. She wonders how she could live with a thing so long and not love it, but something about it resists love, begging for explanation instead. So she retraces her footsteps. She pursues K through the courts again, one stranger trying to help another. Sometimes during her readings she thinks she's hit upon something new and scratches her excitement into the margins, but by the time she closes the back flap, she finds herself at square one again.

She finishes the coffee and pulls today's lesson plan on the computer. She had not been idealistic in the same way as her fellow education students, hair pinned neatly, sitting up straight in the UMass lecture halls like deer. The neighborhood gave her more credence, more street-smarts than these Brookline girls. She knew the ways that education failed places like Eastie or Dorchester and she considered it her advantage, an experience incapable of transmitting through lectures or term papers. She thought, with Eli-esque confidence, that the system could not confuse her the way it would them. She looked forward to meeting them on their level and anticipating their tricks. But however

street smart, her title aligned her with the other side. Convincing kids and parents otherwise would have required something more subversive than Kafka. On her first day, a fist fight broke out in her class.

The printer jams, her lesson plan wedged somewhere between screen and ink. She stuffs her messenger bag in the lowest drawer, locks it and heads to central printer in the main office, outside of which two fake plants border its double doors. The carpet lying between them features a marigold-yellow falcon—the school mascot—on a navy blue background. Two kids slouch on the armless, mauve bench just outside. The girl took Amy’s class last year. A senior cheerleader with a penchant for literary analysis and eyeliner, she holds her backpack on her lap, her Vans crossed beneath the bench. The boy, Amy does not know; he wears thick glasses and slacks that rise to reveal his bright white socks when he sits. On the other side of the hallway, Clinton leans against the wall, arms crossed over a white procedural binder. Dr. Louisa Moxley, the school principal, stands opposite him, her back to Amy. Dr. Moxley speaks with her hands, a series of shuffles and motions to accompany the conversation, and Clinton nods solemnly every few seconds in response. Everyone likes Clinton, the modest, attentive transplant from Montreal and with whom Amy trades dirty jokes at lunch. His eyes lift. He waves. She approaches.

“Louisa, Clinton,” she greets them. “How are you?”

“Fine,” Dr. Moxley nods, her neck crinkling against her starched shirt collar. The woman looks as though she was born in a suit, with her hair coiffed into thin pillows by Aquanet hairspray. Her face is plump and fair—Ma, voice thick with envy, would call it an English complexion—and her frame petite but round. She took the post last year, an

unpopular outside hire from Watertown. When the old principal retired, the school board had passed on candidates within the school, a snub that tasted extra bitter when Dr. Moxley arrived. Acid whispers flowed among faculty like rivers on her first day as principal. They scorned her box hair color and her mandate that staff and students alike refer to her as “Doctor”. From their initial, awkward handshake, Dr. Moxley seemed to have developed a distaste for Amy—calling on her in meetings and then criticizing her contributions, “dropping in” on classes a few times a week—and Amy, in turn, developed her own latent, sneering dislike for Dr. Moxley. Sometimes she reminds Amy of Ma’s friend, Snookie Cooper—the kind of person who imposed rules for the hell of it and spoke close to your face after a well-seasoned meal.

Dr. Moxley turns to face Amy. “May I speak with you in private?” The small, gold eagle pin she wears on her lapel every day catches the light.

“Of course,” Amy says. “Let me just get this paper, first.”

“I’ll be in my office.”

Dr. Moxley strides into the main office and around the corner to her own— long, brisk steps with no patience for traffic.

Clinton raises his eyebrows. “Someone’s in trouble.”

Amy sighs. “I thought after you graduated you didn’t get called to the principal’s office anymore.”

He lowers his voice. “Will I see you for lunch today?”

“If I’m not being executed.”

“She’s not that bad.”

“Easy for you to say. She loves you.”

“That’s true,” he says. He looks at his watch. “I’m late for a student.”

“See you.”

Amy passes the three older women who run the office and sit at their desks like vultures, the only people who seem to appreciate Dr. Moxley’s sternness. She nods at Hilda, the eldest of the three, who scowls at Amy’s knee-high boots.

Dr. Moxley’s office might feel smaller if it wasn’t so organized: no loose paper clutters the desk or the three bookcases (two tall on the left side of the room and a smaller one behind the doctor’s desk), no tacky photos or unopened mail. A mascot-themed foam finger mounts the wall at a carefully-plotted angle. Manila folders form a neat stack in the shallow, plastic bin on the edge of the desk marked “outbox”. The inbox sits empty on the opposite side. The imitation-leather seats squeak as Amy sits.

“I guess I’m in trouble,” Amy says.

Louisa smiles—the quick, cheap, let’s-get-on-with-it kind. “Amy, you missed the Junior class faculty meeting this morning.”

“Oh,” she says. The realization hits her like cold water. “Oh, no. I’m so sorry. It completely slipped my mind.”

Amy sinks in her chair. This woman had been looking for a way to nail her, to find a mistake at which she could point and say, “a-ha!” Well, she had it now.

“This can’t happen again.”

“I know. I apologize.”

Dr. Moxley leans on her desk, her suit collar crinkling around her fat neck. “Why did you miss it?”

“I got a dog,” Amy stammers. The half-life slips from her mouth before she can stop it. “Last night. It kept me up. It had nowhere to go.”

“A dog?”

“Yes.”

“Amy,” she leans back in her chair, clasping her hands. “I want you to do well here. I want us to work well together. But I can’t do that if you keep this sort of thing up.”

“All due respect, Dr. Moxley, but this is only the second meeting I’ve missed in five years.”

“I’m not a demon. I understand that mistakes happen—‘life happens’,” she air quotes. “But it’s not just about the meeting. It’s your conduct.”

Amy furrows her brow.

“There are types of relationships that we discourage here, types of fraternization that we deem inappropriate. Do you understand?”

Amy swallows hard. It must have been the day in the janitor’s closet that outed them. They knocked over a whole pail of brooms and mops, one of which left a giant bruise on Clinton’s thigh. Still, Amy feels insulted. She gets the distinct feeling that Dr. Moxley had said nothing to Clinton. As if the rendezvous was entirely Amy’s doing. But that was neither here nor there.

“Of course,” Amy smiles.

“Okay, then,” she pulls a short stack of papers from her desk drawer. “Have a good day.”

Amy stands and heads to the door. “You too.”

“Amy,” Dr. Moxley looks up, over her rimless spectacles. “If this kind of thing gets out, I can’t protect you.”

Her voice sounds softer, somehow, and a little sadder. Amy nods and leaves.

Protect her? As if Amy needs protection. As if she needs some suit condescending to her about protocol or relationships. On her way back to the classroom, she detours down the side hallway that leads to the gymnasium and Clinton’s office. She raps on his door, soft.

“Come in,” he says. He squats in front of the filing cabinet beside his desk and pulls out a manila folder. He stands, not much taller than Amy, and pushes his feathery blonde hair to the side. He smiles. “You’re early.”

“Sorry.” She shakes her head. “Moxley knows about us.”

“Oh,” he sits on the edge of his desk, like a kid let down, and rubs his temples. “Damn.” Even when he worries, he wears his uniform of a button-down and belted khakis with ease. Amy suspects he could sleep in it and not miss regular pajamas. She tries to imagine sleeping in her own stiff skirt. She wrinkles her nose and tugs the neck of her scratchy cardigan.

“I know.”

“She was talking to me for twenty minutes. She didn’t say a word.”

“She hates me, remember?” Amy grits her teeth and turns to leave. “I guess it doesn’t matter.”

“Hey, stay a second.”

His voice has taken that tone, the one that men use when they want to get to know her, a concept that always seems useless to Amy. If she wanted them to know her, they would—there was no “get” about it. “Why?”

“I mean, stay and have lunch. We’ve never actually had lunch.”

His insistence makes her nervous and the idea of sitting down to a polite meal with him seems tedious at best. “Did you hear what I just said? We’re blacklisted.”

“We’ll leave the door open.”

“I don’t know.”

“One lunch.”

She leans against the grey filing cabinet next to his door. She’s felt the cool metal against the skin of her back many times, but never seen the Canada-themed magnets that adorn the side. She thinks about walking back to her sterile classroom and Kafka—but his voice has a humble, calm quality to it, something unadorned and pleasant.

“This sounds like a date,” she says, raising an eyebrow. “And I’m not dating right now.”

“Me neither,” he says. He pulls a brown bag from his desk drawer and unwraps the tuna sandwich inside. He extends half.

She accepts. “This doesn’t mean we’re dating.”

“It’s just a sandwich.”

She plunks on the plush orange chair in front of his desk.

She finishes her half fast, out of habit and anxiety. She expects him to comment on her speedy consumption, but he silently offers her an apple instead. He takes big, slow bites of his sandwich half. He eats like a dad. Not her dad—Papa ate as fast as the rest of

them—but older, erudite types of fathers who have studies and history books. Cheryl, the freshman social studies teacher who encourages Amy to “put on a little make up” or “straighten that hair” at the ends of faculty meetings, would call him marriage material. In fact, she probably has.

Amy tried being married once, about five years ago. She was 27 and the man did not know, because there was no ring or cake or ceremony and because she did not tell him. They had been dating for five months at that point. She liked the way he said the word *problematic* and the way he checked his watch incessantly when he was drinking, as if imbibing would accelerate or slow time. Also, they had reached a contented laziness around one another: he put his shoes up on her coffee table and she left a toothbrush in the cabinet behind his bathroom mirror.

One Saturday morning, his body still rising and falling in sleep, she decided that she would try being married for a day. She heated up the stove and made four eggs instead of two. She ate hers while reading the *New York Times*, tried to imagine whether a married person would read it in a different way. By the time he woke, his plate had grown cold. They went out for coffee and then to a movie, not a club. The time she felt most married, however, came when they climbed out of the car, those moments when they said nothing to one another. She heard him check for his wallet, the wind snapping her scarf, the car doors shut in near-unison.

That night she'd stayed up to watch Cartoon Network and climbed into bed an hour after him, because when you're married you don't always go to sleep at the same time. But you don't slip out the backdoor in the morning, with your bra strap hanging out

of your purse, either. At the end of the day, she concluded that marriage is a little like a panoptic magic trick. You go and you stay at the same time.

She wants to want him—him, a person, not a ghost. Not a torn name in a book. People like Clinton built families and homes and, in this instance, wanted someone like her. She felt like she was forever circling but not approaching him and the others.

“How’s the apple?” he asks, still working on the sandwich.

“Good,” she says. She reminds herself to slow down, and sets the half-eaten fruit on his desk.

“Seen any good movies lately?” He smirks, aware of the cliché. She can’t help but return the smile. All right. She can play along.

“I watched ‘Touch of Evil’ last weekend with my nieces.”

She crosses and re-crosses her legs. Sleeping with him is so much easier than this. Wanting him in that scenario is so much easier. She should want him now, shouldn’t she? He is handsome and, in spite of the khakis, good in bed. He is probably marriage material—whatever that means—and she likes the piece of hair near his ear that always sticks out, too stubborn to be combed in line with the rest. Is that enough?

He nods. “I love Orson Welles.”

“Me too,” she responds.

They fall into silence. She takes the apple again, more eager to eat than continue down this road. No one who loves Orson Welles says they love him in that dry, oh-you-don’t-say manner and then finishes a sandwich. You put down a sandwich for Orson Welles.

As if he’s read her mind, he does.

“I saw that for the first time when I was twelve. I had nightmares about Detective Quinlan for a week.”

The anecdote amuses her. She leans forward. “What did you dream?”

“Well, most of the time he was chasing me. I was Charlton Heston’s character, under that bridge with the transistor radio, only it kept going off and he knew I was there. But the worst one,” he says, nodding his head. “Was the one where he was going to eat me.”

Amy bursts out laughing. The memory seems to roll from his mouth unedited, as though the fear still plagues him. He tries to push the stray hair over his ear, embarrassed, but it refuses. There’s something funny—likable, even—about the shameless admission. He’d never been funny before.

“I’ve never told anyone about that,” he says. “Not even my ex-wife.”

“You were married?”

“Right out of high school. It’s common, where I’m from.”

She holds up the maple leaf flag on his desk. “Canada?”

“A small town in Quebec, yes,” he says. He tosses the brown bag into his wastebasket and pulls out a Butterfinger. He offers her half. She dislikes Butterfingers but she accepts it, too amused by the conversation to quibble over it.

“Who was she?”

“Sorry?”

“Your ex-wife,” she says. Flecks of candy float to her lap. After the words leave her mouth, she wonders if they were intrusive. She backtracks. “Sorry. That was rude, or weird. Both.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he says. He hands her a napkin. “She was Carolyn and she was the first girl I slept with. It was a bad idea.”

He shrugs, unembarrassed by the history. His voice sounds soft and confident, like honey spreading over a smooth surface. She wants to tell him something, to repay him for the directness and for letting her eat fast.

“I was sixteen,” she says. “He was Devon Aldridge. He was a tenant who lived with our family when I was a teenager.”

Devon had come from New York, replacing the family’s previous tenant the summer she turned fifteen. She fell in love with him instantly, with his books and the bent glasses that fell down his nose, with his unattractive olive green luggage. The son of a Tuscan and a Brit, he found the family’s listing in the *Globe* two weeks before arriving. Some nights, swinging her legs beneath the stool next to his desk, she puzzled at the prospect that they could just as easily not meet, their union the result of a newspaper ad entirely bereft of fanfare or expectation.

Eli had started in with harder stuff then, irrevocably depressed by what he called the “Eastie ignoramus complex”, his phrase for the anti-busing movement. “People are born with blinders here,” he complained, strung out and draped over the mattress in his room, an Iggy and the Stooges t-shirt hanging off his pale chest. “And they don’t even know it.”

Clinton leans forward on his palm. “That sounds complicated.”

“It was, kind of. He thought I was too young. We did it anyway.”

“Were you?”

“No.”

“You’re not uncertain about things, are you?”

“Not very often, no.”

“What happened?”

“A lot of things. My older brother died that year—we were kind of a trio. I think Devon felt worse about me after that.”

The last time she saw Devon, she had been skinny and uncharming, prodding him in hopes that he would finally develop that Eastie temper and grow angry enough to stay. Eli was already gone, and the prospect of Devon’s departure as well had been too unspectacular for her to bear at sixteen, his olive green suitcases stacked neatly at the lower apartment door, lesson plans safe inside the messenger bag his mother sent upon completion of his thesis. Amy talked little, yelled even less, but she had plenty of words stored up. When she tried to castigate him for leaving, she had felt devoid of language. It was the first time she felt incapable of producing rhetoric seductive enough to gain what she wanted. His silence seemed to indicate, alternatively, that he possessed plenty of words, ones that he did not intend to share with her.

They all seemed to leave at once, like trains with schedules to maintain. Eli left first, bound by a closed casket, cited as a death without a cause because Papa refused an autopsy. Stating the obvious only benefited bureaucracies, he said. The rest of us need no reminders. Devon went next, to an education, to places he would never tell. Ma was different. She didn’t go anywhere. She just checked out for a long time.

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“I felt so bad about it all after it happened. I kept trying to figure it out.”

Without her challengers—the people in her life who didn't marvel at her certainty— Amy found her world soft and accommodating. They were, among many things, proof that the world could withstand her. They constituted a steel niche, within which the blind girl makes her marks across the topography she chooses to navigate. And so she came to understand life as a series of stations and excursions, a filmstrip of moments to encounter and then depart.

“I'm sorry,” she laughs. “This isn't lunch, this is my memoirs.”

“It's still lunch,” he says. “We could try a dinner.”

Men have asked her out like this before, slipping the suggestion into conversation like a shrug, as if she might miss the implication and say yes by accident. But his proposal sounds uncalculating. And they've already done it, anyway. She can't help but think: why not?

She nods. “Normally, I would say no,” she says. “But I like you, Devon.”

The name slips easily. Clinton looks as if he's been slapped. She covers her mouth. He says nothing. She backs away from the desk. The word stings like juice on a chapped lip and now she can think of nothing to replace it.

Clinton crosses his arms and laughs, nervous. “Let's try that again. How about dinner?”

She thinks about saying yes, about dressing up on three or four consecutive Friday nights. They'll do it on a bed instead of against a filing cabinet. Someday he'll put his feet on her coffee table and she'll scribble more notes in the margins, trying to determine where it leads her. The name—the hard D, the soft N—remains in her throat.

“I don't think so,” she shakes her head. “But thanks.”

“Amy.”

“I’m not in a good way,” she tells him. “Trust me.”

On the way back, she stops at water fountain for a long time, trying to wash out the name. She feels weak, an old weight slung over her shoulders. She reaches her classroom and checks her watch. Sweat soaks the nape of her neck. It had followed her all this time, cast over the restless nights and the blurry string of lovers like a shawl. Had she ever left the Wood Island station that day? Would she?

Ten minutes until her class starts. As students begin to shuffle in from lunch, asking for their papers and to have class outside, she cracks the cover of *The Trial*. A tear marks the front cover, courtesy of one of Papa’s German Shepherds, and mars the delicate, blue inscription on the inside: “I couldn’t put this down. I know you won’t either. Your friend, Devon.”

FOUR

Papa had ripped into me for staying out. I told him I was home plenty. I didn't mention Shelley, the girl from Roxbury with whom I'd been hanging around. She had lingered at the backdoor when I came home the night before to swipe a few beers the other night, my salvation army jacket slung over her cocoa shoulders, her yellow sundress peeking out the bottom. Wired and self-righteous from a string of late nights, I slammed the backdoor and lit a cigarette.

"You better put that out," Ma said. She was dangling her bare feet over the edge of the cement steps and smoking one herself. Her hair was pinned into a loose French twist that threatened to unravel with any sudden movement. "Not 'til you're 18."

"Seems pretty fucking arbitrary."

She narrowed her eyes. Ma was lax about many things, but language was not one of them.

"Sorry."

She took a long drag. "Put it out."

I extinguished the butt in the coral glass tray beside her. "What are you doing out here?"

"Sitting," she remarked. "Sometimes a person just needs to sit. Even you."

I leaned against the house, rolling from the balls of my feet to my heels. "Why did you marry Dad?"

She leaned back on her hands and smiled. "Because I wanted to."

"That's all?"

"That's all."

She stood and handed me the ashtray, her way of telling me to wash it.

“Oh,” she said, opening the back door. “Next time you bring a girl home, I’d like to meet her.”

Amy wandered out as Mom went in. She bypassed her forest green tricycle, left on its side in the overgrowth, and hoisted herself on to the lowest branch of the single oak tree in the backyard. She scuffed her white cotton dress and, seeing no use for them, kicked her saddle shoes to the ground.

“How does she know?” I asked.

Amy shrugged, too young and somehow too old for the conversation. She wrapped her arms around the next branch, and continued up the tree.

OUTERWEAR

He's only got ten minutes before he goes on stage, but Richie can't get his mind off the sweatshirt, the one that comes down to the top of Hannah's knees, the one she took with her a few days ago.

Inside the back office, he pulls a grungy post-it from his back jeans pocket and dials the number for her new apartment. How stupid, the idea that the post-it facilitates all of their conversations now; but he would forget entirely if not for that pathetic slip of paper. Before now, there existed two ways to reach her—her office and their home—numbers he learned without difficulty. This third, interloping number refuses to stay with him.

He plays with the yellow cord of the blocky desk phone. She changed her outgoing message to something cold, where she leaves only her first name. He pauses at the beep, thrown by her sternness and her absence. He leaves a short voicemail anyway; after all, she took the sweatshirt.

The club manager, Aaron, slaps him on the back, an unspoken reminder of the time.

Aaron gestures to the collar of his company polo. "Cream cheese."

Richie leaves the stain and ignores the sawdust on his jeans, leftover from his visit to the new construction site today—no time for those things or the sweatshirt, because Wednesday night brings in the most locals and they don't wait like the tourists, who come for the weekend shows. They have no cameras to shuffle into bags, no desire to mull over the beer list and try something new because We're On Vacation For Goshsakes.

This crowd had their beers fifteen minutes ago and they're already done talking about Cousin Riley's new flat screen TV. Besides, the first two open mics have blown it.

The cheap spotlight, the low rumble of the patrons, the clinking of glasses—none of these things stir his nerves. It's the first word that scares him, that matters. For the next five minutes, he needs to talk to the cool kids on their level. Too clever or dumb and they laugh at you, not with you, like a dog doing a stupid trick. Audiences prefer the chase, so stay three steps ahead. Never let them catch up.

"Being funny is an interesting thing, you know," he says, pacing from one side of the stage to the other. "I'm from Eastie. Anyone from Eastie here tonight?"

A wiry man with no hair on his head—and plenty on his arms—hollers in response.

"You? Yeah, you're pretty ugly, I'll buy that."

A few chuckles punctuate the silence.

"How many cousins do you have?" He holds the microphone out to the man. "3,000, you say? I have 17,520, but only if you count my uncle's retarded Pomeranians."

In truth, he had six cousins, all on his father's side. And no one owned any Pomeranians. But they're with him now.

"But seriously, my parents don't know I spend Wednesdays and Saturdays talking to you people. Wife doesn't know, but she gives me the silent treatment Tuesday through Sunday. And the rest of the time, I'm sleeping. Maybe when we coordinate schedules she'll come see the show," he paces to the other side of the stage, one hand in his pocket and the other on the microphone. "But then I think she'd stop talking to me altogether. So

if anyone sees a tall, beautiful, blonde woman walk on in here...send her my way, because that's not my wife."

The laughter swells.

"I'm kidding, I'm kidding. For the record, she's a beautiful woman. Guess she finally figured it out because she left me last week."

They think that's a joke, too. A good one.

"My father, I tell you, he'd have a few words to say to me about this if he knew." He puffs out his chest and thickens his accent. "'Being funny is not a hobby' he'd say. 'Your mother is good at yelling. Do they have clubs for that?'"

Richie's life is stupid, not funny. In his family, comedic timing is a party trick, not a career. But he has a career. He started coming here about six months ago, when Hannah secretly suspended their marriage. He could pinpoint the day—the minute—it had begun to unravel. They'd gone to bed angry the night before, something his mother told him never to do and though he generally abided by that rule, he'd given pride the benefit of the doubt in this instance. Maybe if the next morning hadn't been the first for that young reporter from Portland, Richie's singular indulgence might have been just that.

He had offered to drive her to work that morning, a groggy, half-hearted attempt to settle things, or better yet, let the conflict sweep past them like a wave. She had caught his gaze in the mirror while she applied lipstick and, after a slight pause, accepted. She started wearing make up and blow drying her hair after the paper promoted her to an editorship, the only evidence of her scrappier reporting days was evident in the way her lashes clumped together with heavy coats of drugstore brand mascara. She never did have a steady hand for make up, she used to say.

She had shut the car door—the loose ends from the prior evening’s fight still limp and swaying—and walked towards the building entrance as if the ground was poised to crumble at any moment. He seemed to appear out of nowhere, the pleasantly disheveled younger man. He clutched his stack of papers to his chest, as if his mother had slapped him on the ass and sent him out into the world that very morning. He gestured towards the building and cocked his head. She nodded, shook his hand and motioned for him to follow her. He held the door for her and the two disappeared inside.

He vowed to say something if and when the evidence began to mount, but she never adopted the radiance or the spiteful guilt of someone who has done something incontrovertibly illicit: there came no late nights at the office, no prolonged deadlines, no unreturned phone calls. She still arrived home an hour earlier on Tuesdays and Thursdays, her nights to make dinner for the girls. Her wedding band never budged, a depressing testament to some non-truth—or maybe a non-lie; he couldn’t estimate the ratio of one to the other. To the untrained eye their life together remained unchanged, and sometimes, watching her scoop Hamburger Helper on to the girls’ plastic dinosaur plates, even Richie forgot what he was waiting for, just that he was waiting.

He encountered it in flashes—that inconspicuous, unforgettable smile that spread across her face as she readied in the morning or while they watched Letterman in separate chairs after the girls had gone to bed—the vague, uncomfortable feeling of being alone with someone whose private happiness has nothing to do with you. She may have been in love, but she had not slept with him, and Richie was stuck, unable to prosecute a guilty person on account of too much circumstantial evidence.

His last joke hits it out of the park. Perfect for a Wednesday. His knees shake as the rough guffaws turn to clapping. He feels like a baby bird departing the stage. The thick, sought-after nausea that accompanies a successful set radiates to his knees. He wants to curl up, or shout, or take a drink, or run somewhere to keep the adrenaline moving through him. Where he grew up, people learned to keep these moments hidden. The year Richie turned twelve, Snookie Cooper's husband shot himself and Ma dutifully dragged the kids to the Coopers' dark, unbecoming rambler at the end of the street. Amy always grumbled that the house looked like someone tried to dress up the inside of a coffin with plastic fruit and shag carpet and Snookie always scolded Amy for one thing or another, be it taking one too many ancient hard candies from the cut-glass bowl next to the stereo, tracking dust, general unpleasantness ("little girls should save sour faces for lemonade, Amy"). It was a quieter wake than the one for a little boy who died in a car accident a few weeks prior, a general feeling of "how sad, but"; a sense that marrying someone unable to carry on marked Snookie with that same flaw. Anyone too happy or too sad drew—ultimately—too much attention, the kind that stained a person and a family. So amidst the jell-o molds and turkey casseroles, the families in attendance continued to dig their holes and pray that this kind of thing only happened to people like Snookie.

Aaron, the club manager, is short and looks like a bear, partially because he has a lot of hair all over his body and partially because his face has a squashed quality to it. "Better without the coveralls."

He wore the overalls and hard hat as a gimmick last week. He thought they could be a good gimmick for the circuit, ironic enough for the twenty-somethings who like

those popular gauche stand-ups (the ones who play songs about things like cereal and feeling awkward around women), blue collar enough for natives. It hadn't been a bad set—even the most notorious resident hecklers only gave him grief on truly off-nights, of which there were thankfully few—but he'd gotten used to the transition of chuckles to guffaws to full-blown laughter that usually occurred. He had flown through his list of similarities between fanatic Yankee fans and Catholic mothers and introduced his impression of people from out of town trying to do Boston accents, but it had been a steady stream rather than a gradual intensification and that bothered him. He suspected it was the crowd, or maybe the night of the week—a Wednesday—but the tepid response was enough to discourage him from ever wearing them again. It was a difference discernable only to the performers and the most loyal patrons.

“I think they missed the gut.” He pats the most rotund part of his stomach.

“Listen,” Aaron pulls him aside. “You know the owner of this place, don't you?”

“Dale?”

“He owns another club in Manhattan. He holds something called the Laugh Stop Festival every year. Sometimes I send him a couple openers.”

“No kidding.”

“Are you interested?”

“I don't know.”

“It'd be a in a couple weekends, just a weekend. I know you've got time off saved up.”

“I don't know, man. Now's not a great time for me.”

“They’ve got more funding now. One of their alumni got his own radio show in Long Island. If it goes well, they might take it on tour.”

“Tour?”

“Not a big deal, just a dozen or so universities on the east coast. Anyway, that’s not even a sure thing. But it’s possible.”

Richie occasionally indulges in the fantasy that begins at this moment: a slow, uncomplicated ascent in the local comedy scene that bears no resemblance to the desperate, frenetic trauma of a mid-life crisis. Calling it a dream is inaccurate and embarrassing at best. It plays out, instead, in fragments: a glossy stage somewhere else in the country, beers with managers after a late, heavily attended set, the sound a quarter makes falling out of his pocket in a quiet dressing room. Only on Wednesdays and Sundays does he view the full scope of his non-dream, imbibing the spotlight like an intoxicated person who believes in nothing if not his complete invincibility.

Tenley, a skinny black girl from Jamaica Plain, is up there killing it now, because she acts like she gives less than a shit and people really appreciate that. If he stops thinking about how young she is, it’s not depressing at all.

“And her?”

“What about her?”

“Is she opening?”

“Of course she is.”

It’s her cadence that reminds him of Eli, the way she tenses the more she talks, sucking on the peculiarities of her accent. She wears her thinness like a shield, as Eli did—as if her body works too fast to soak up any nourishment. As if there’s only just

enough time and energy to expel things, never consume. Richie used to call his brother the Atomic Scholar, ever on the verge of brilliance or destruction. They had been close as children, dunking each other in the grey-green water off Constitution Beach. Eli, unruffled and intimidating, balanced Richie's boisterousness and made them a powerful duo through middle school. After Eli started going to school in Roxbury and Richie remained at East Boston High, something changed.

"Let's go to Constitution," Richie hollered at him, the summer after their freshman year. "I'll race you across the bay."

Eli lowered his paperback. He did not lift his head, only his eyes. "Can't."

"Yeah, you can. It's summer."

"I'm reading."

"So what?"

"So, I'm reading."

He thought little of the interaction at the time—a blip, some sour, boyish mood—unaware of the impending regularity of conversations like it. The blip grew into legitimate betrayal; more and more, Eli slanted his irritable coolness towards Richie, all the while growing calm, even attentive towards silent Amy. Towards Malcolm, of course, he remained indifferent. Richie had no choice but to behave as if the rift was his doing, as well.

Sometimes Richie thought that God thought about making him and Eli identical, not fraternal—giving Eli the same fleshy Irish nose or Richie the same jet black hair—and changed his mind at the last minute. Over time, those differences coalesced, feeding and bouncing off one another until Eli's features became loathsome to Richie. He hated

Eli's sloping, calm nose, the way his skinny, sunken torso shaped itself the walls and chairs on which it leaned; his glass-blue eyes that seemed to see more than Richie's dull brown ones. The year before Eli died, the two never talked unless they were drunk. It couldn't be one; it had to be both. It was the only time they could handle one another; when Richie wasn't a bigot and Eli wasn't a goddamn radical. They would toast to stupid things: their shoes, to Guinness and to anyone drunker than themselves. Sometimes, when they'd both reached that mellow hour of the night after it seemed that everyone in the world had gone to sleep, they'd retreat outside for a cigarette or three, clinging to conversation until they both bordered on sober, when they could no longer excuse their fraternization. In the morning they each returned to quiet tolerance, passing one another in the kitchen like ghosts. The last time they spoke, he told a joke and Eli had laughed.

Richie puts on his Celtics cap, trying to remember the joke. He shakes the nagging memory and turns to Aaron. "I don't know."

"Quit acting famous," Aaron says. "You either bite or you don't. No skin off my back."

A few days ago, the question would have been answered at the moment it had been posed. But a few days ago, he still thought the sweatshirt was in the bottom drawer of her dresser, along with the rest of the clothes that she had borrowed from him in the past twelve years. When she moved out she left most of the things of his that she had adopted over the course of their marriage. But he had never found the sweatshirt. There's an ink stain on the left shoulder from when she fell asleep atop a leaky ballpoint pen, working late from the kitchen table the first week she was hired as a junior associate with the firm. They had chuckled sleepily when he came to get her. She reached up, and he

had peeled it off her. While it soaked in the sink, they made love in the living room and fell asleep on the couch, unaware that the water they'd drawn had been hot.

“Look,” Aaron pats him on the shoulder “Sleep on it before you say no, huh?”

“I will.”

Tenley struts from the door leading to the stage. She hops on to a stool at the end of the bar and nods at him, her hot pink high tops bumping against the legs of the stool.

“Nice set.”

“Thanks.”

“That was a good idea, losing the overalls.”

He sits a couple stools down from her and eats a peanut from the communal bowl.

“Why?”

“Are you a construction worker?”

“I'm in construction, yeah.”

“No, man, I know that. Talking about ferrule and building scale and whatever else—”

“Right—”

“—I didn't ask you that, I asked you ‘Are you a worker?’”

“Once upon a time. I'm a supervisor now.”

“So that's why you sucked.”

“I didn't suck.”

“No, you're right. In the big scheme of things, you didn't suck. You sucked for you,” she eats a handful of peanuts from the bar. “But you were funny tonight.”

The words make him feel pathetic and enlightened. He dislikes her attitude, that swarthy, irritating confidence typical of all the black kids now, but right is right and anyway even on his best days—sans gimmick—he only just matches her on stage. She’s got twenty years on him and the quickest tongue he’s heard in this place. Hecklers don’t stand a chance against her. The best comedians get people to come—not for the show, for some blurry, abstract “night of laughs”— for them. And people were starting to show up for Tenley.

“Thanks.”

“Are you going to New York?”

“I don’t think so,” he says to his beer. He wishes she would stop asking questions. Sometimes the blacks just don’t know when to shut up. Eli would tell him, “Well, neither do you. No one in the neighborhood knows when to shut up. It’s part of their charm.” No, Richie responds in his head. In Eastie, you only riled someone if you knew them. Prodding a stranger—while he’s enjoying a beer, no less—constituted disrespect.

“You should.”

“It’s complicated.”

“With your wife?”

“Yeah,” he frowns at her. “With my wife.”

“Don’t act all surprised,” Tenley says, finishing off the peanuts. “Your routines don’t come out of thin air.”

Aaron gestures to Richie from the back office. “Phone for you.”

Inside the back office, the receiver feels uncomfortably warm against his ear, like too many people have touched it before him.

“Hi, Hannah.”

“Hi,” she says, as if repeating him is easier than launching the rest of the conversation. The reception’s not good. “What are you doing at a comedy club?”

“I went to see a show with some friends.”

“A show?”

“A comedy thing,” he says. “It’s all right.”

She has that tone, that anxious one she uses when she would rather be doing anything else. It sounds like someone else.

“You called me.”

“I did,” he scratches his head. “I did. I just wanted to say hi.”

“Oh.”

“We don’t have to talk long,” he traces the edge of the desk. “Just a hello.”

“Well, thanks for calling.”

“You took the sweatshirt.” He says it before he can stop himself.

“I’m sorry?”

“My sweatshirt, the one you sleep in. You have it, right?”

“I don’t.”

“I thought you might have taken it.”

“You know what, it’s in the laundry room,” she responds. “I’m sorry. I forgot to bring it upstairs.”

“I could bring it over.”

“No, no— it’s yours. You should keep it.”

“Okay,” he says. It’s a compliant, weak-kneed response, but no other words come. He coughs. He has to keep her on the phone. “Listen, it’s Ma’s birthday tomorrow. We’re getting take out at the house.”

“I remembered.”

“They don’t know about us yet.”

“Oh.”

“I know it’s a lot to ask,” he says, the actual invitation lodged in his throat. “I just don’t want to tell her on her birthday.”

Hannah breathes, quiet and tired, into the receiver.

“Hannah?”

“I’ll go. We’ll go. What time?”

“Seven.”

“I’ll see you then,” she says. “Good night, Rich.”

He sets the receiver in its cradle. He slumps in the creaky wooden chair, transformed into a verifiable charity case by a single phone call. If she had kept the sweatshirt, her compliance might have constituted a tentative olive branch, a signal to incorporate some element of romance into the birthday night. A green light for him to make his case. He might have grabbed her hand under the dinner table to see if she squeezed back.

The last time he saw Eli, the kid looked pallid and thin, someone who spent too much time hanging out on frosted street corners in the winter. Without a word, Richie knocked on the wooden dresser next to the door of Eli’s room and left half of his Italian hero on top. A second of bewilderment or anxiety passed between them; the act had

surprised them both. Eli drew a plate from the cabinet for his half and sat, gently, as if things in the house belonged to him less now.

Richie told a knock-knock. Eli looked even thinner when he chuckled at it, the creases of his smile too deep for a young person.

“You’re funny,” Eli said. “You tell a good gag.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t get a big head about it or anything.”

“I won’t.”

They talked after that night in brief, bickering interludes, a step down from the typical fever pitch of their arguments, but their last exchange took place in the kitchen. The atomic scholar finally burned out a month later. How strange, how despairing, Richie felt, to know a last conversation when you encounter it.

Tenley remains at her perch, working on her second or third bowl of peanuts.

He takes a sip of Bud Light. “Burger has a lot more protein.”

“Peanuts are free.”

“Better things to spend your money on, huh?”

“Yeah. Heat and electricity.”

“I figured.”

“No, you didn’t,” she says. “By the way, it’s bullshit that you’re not coming to New York.”

“I think it’s bullshit that you’re eating peanuts.”

She laughs. “Just a matter of time, buddy.”

Richie stands and pulls his sweater over his hips. Hannah bought it for him two years ago. It's warm but scratchy around the neck.

"Aaron," Richie calls across the bar. "I'm in."

"Good man."

"Where's my personal tour bus?"

"It's out back, your majesty. Look in the dumpster."

"I'll see you Wednesday."

Tenley smirks at him. "You think you'd get a bus before me?"

He gathers his wallet and drapes his scarf around his neck, ready for the numbing walk home.

"I'm planning on a fleet."

She laughs, looking like a child who can't keep something hid. She means no disrespect. She just wants to prove her fearlessness. He can't argue with anyone who clings to that, who refuses to let things end. He sets a few bucks down for the Bud. The cold stings his cheeks when he steps out. As he unlocks his car, he remembers the joke he told Eli. It had come from the prize in box of Cracker Jacks.

Richie had pulled a hot pepper stem from his mouth and set it on a napkin. "What did the tie say to the neck?"

Eli had swigged his beer and wrinkled his ashen nose. "This is gonna be bad."

"He said, 'I think I'll just hang around'."

"Jesus, Richie," Eli had sniggered. "Even you could write a better joke than that."

FIVE

Dear Ma and Papa

I'm sorry about Thanksgiving. I didn't mean to fall down the stairs. I hope you know that I would never fall down the stairs on purpose. I feel like a jerk ruining your Thanksgiving like that. Truly. I extend to you my greatest apologies, even if you were both being a little stern about it and not laughing. I was laughing. We could have all been having a big laugh. You've seen slapstick before, haven't you? I was like the Three Stooges all rolled into one. Poking out my own eyes. Moe, Curly and the other one. No, Chaplin. I was Chaplin. Why couldn't you laugh at Chaplin? I thought the t-shirt might do it, but Dad just looked at me over his glasses like I was beetle scrambling against a wall.

I changed my mind. You ruined Thanksgiving, not me. The mashed potatoes didn't help. Did you put lead in them? Thank God for the squash pie.

Your son, Eli

Dear Richie,

Hannah's pretty, but not as pretty as Shelley and still too good for you. That looks pretty mean on paper. Didn't look so mean in my head, but there it is. Anyway, she's quick and funny so consider your union blessed. As if I could give you a blessing.

You're mad at me. I know that. Get in line.

Sincerely, Eli

Dear Amy,

Thanks for laughing when I fell down the stairs. You might have just been smirking because Ma was already so upset. I saw you when I was clinging to the coat rack, right before I broke that and fell into the closet. I wish Richie and Dad would leave their oyster pails outside because it smells like shit in there. Like someone tossed fish and salt together and microwaved them.

Love, Eli

Dear Shelley,

I'm not coming by just yet because you're getting ready to leave me and, well, Shelley, I'm not looking forward to leaning against your doorframe while you stand there in something beautiful, maybe that purple robe, and scowl at me like I've got a stain on my face. I do have a stain on my face, but not the invisible kind, the bruise kind. I got it on Thanksgiving from a vengeful coat rack. It's a long story that I would tell you if you weren't so intent on leaving me and I don't think you'll tolerate me bringing Amy around again just so we won't have to talk about it.

I'll be listening a little but not that much because I know what you'll say, so instead I'll probably look at those stupid Bolivian plates you've got hanging by the window at the back of your place, the one with the fucking rooster on it that looks like he's got a mustache, the one you bought at a flea market near the Commons. I gave you a nickel for tax and you didn't pay me back for that so maybe I'll break off a nickel's worth. And I don't need to listen to the words because I know what you'll say.

Love, Eli

Dear Amy again,

Sorry for leaving you all alone with Shelley that time. I know she liked you, though. How could she not? And anyway, now you can both be mad at me. You both looked happy when I got back but I think you were just happy at each other, not me. And then you didn't say anything on the ride home and shot me a look at dinner like you wanted to bean me with one of the serving spoons. And it reminds me of those years when you were little when you didn't talk for a long time even though you could.

Your brother, Eli

Dear Amy,

I'm glad you're going with Devon. You didn't think I knew. It doesn't matter. I won't tell anyone, not even the dogs. Anyway, it's good for him—I like him as much as anyone, but his sweater vests are a little too tight. I don't know if it's good for you. I know you better than anyone and I still can't always tell what's good for you. As your older brother, I should. Tell me sometime, won't you?

Love, Eli

Dear Amy,

I sat outside the airport today for a long time. I thought about cashing in the money I won at the racetrack with Papa, but then I worried about running into one of his old buddies and getting lost in small talk. So I have no plans to leave, Amy, but I feel as though I am. Every day, I leave a little more. Not like you. You're better than me.

You said you were going to be a teacher and I didn't know what to think, but now I do. I've thought about it. You'll be great. I know Ma and Papa are just glad that you're sticking around, that you're doing what girls should do, but that's not all. I know you wouldn't do anything without a purpose. Just don't stick around too much. Don't get lost in small talk. Don't stick around too much. Keep moving. It's who you are.

Eli

SKINNY WRISTS

As the plane touches down in Chicago, the city still dark, Malcolm can't remember whether or not he packed the picture frame. He might have left it in California, next to the paycheck from Cal Arts.

Blue removes her headphones and puts her hand on his shoulder. "You did."

They disembark and push through the meandering, sleepy passengers for whom Chicago is the final destination, and sit in the polite rows of tilted chairs lining the terminal. Malcolm rummages through the laptop case holding his shitty Dell, the messenger bag containing thick stacks of rubber-banded index cards about nucleic acids, proteins, carbohydrates, his perpetual companions until the biochemistry final in two months. He finds his EMS beeper, useless to him now and rife with scratches from numerous run-ins with pavement and the sides of ambulances. He checks the corners twice, a vain attempt to produce a thing that exists firmly elsewhere. He bought it in a department store for too much money after a shift where he revived a thirteen year-old suicide attempt. A silver-plated frame had never looked so inane, he thought, trudging through the home furnishings department, still clad in his navy uniform. He bought it anyway.

Blue sits Indian-style on the floor, the only way he's seen her sit in the two months since they met. She looks even more petite than usual as she combs through the contents of her orange tote bag but her blonde hair keeps falling into her face. She ties a hasty bun and, unsatisfied with the confines of the bag, dumps the stuff onto the floor of the terminal. The frame remains sight unseen.

"It's not there, Blue."

“Well, just hold on a second.”

“You were only at my apartment for a minute.”

“Always check the last possible place.”

“Is it there?”

“I guess not.”

“Thanks, anyway.”

She starts re-stuffing the tote with the objects of her life: a sketchbook, one old, one new (“Always start a sketchbook at an inconvenient time”), pencils, a few proofs of a small woodblock she started printing yesterday, ink-stained t-shirts, a half-consumed bottle of cherry cola, a drawing of him from his model session yesterday.

The passengers from their flight have dispersed. International flags line the cavernous airport hallways. The plastic wheels of suitcases rumble over the hard floors and quiet when they reach the carpeted areas near the gates. Franchise owners slide open the metal gates that guard their doorless stores. The smell of cinnamon buns and fast food breakfast meats filter into the terminals. Cash registers jingle and clack shut. Dull-voiced intercom announcements call lost passengers to their planes. Televisions broadcast the news from Washington and the Middle East.

Malcolm sinks to the floor with her and sets his head on her shoulder. “What time is it?”

She checks her orange, plastic watch. “Five-thirty.”

“My flight leaves in two hours.”

“I’ve got thirty minutes,” she sighs. “I can’t believe we couldn’t get the same flight.”

“Maybe they want to keep the neighborhood people away from you fine Harvard-bred folks.”

She’d gone to Harvard, once upon a time, where her mother teaches economics; her father, history. She calls them on Sunday evenings, curled against the plush armchair in her living room, thumbing through *Vogue* and murmuring “mhm” if the conversation bores her. She has refused their money since moving to California, but there remains a luxuriousness about her, a sense of confidence—or is it entitlement?—in the way she navigates the world; combing her hair with long, sweeping strokes, opening doors as if their building belonged to her. He used to hate that attitude in Harvard kids who wore it in defense or competition. She wears hers like a loosely-tied scarf, seemingly aware that anything else would be a lie.

Sometimes Malcolm wonders if they’d ever passed one another on the street as teenagers, why they never met until they’d both moved in parallel paths cross the country. But few people from other parts of the city ever came to Eastie unless they were getting on a plane, and he had no reason to visit Cambridge unless he tagged along for a movie with Eli and Amy. It seemed unlikely.

She jabs him with her elbow. “Shut up. You got your suit?”

“Yes,” he says, thinking about the pristine suit in his checked bag, the one that makes him feel naked and suffocated at the same time. “But it makes a bad impression if you don’t show up.”

“Have you told your parents about it?”

“I’ll tell them when I get there.”

“Don’t worry about the frame.”

“It was a stupid gift.”

She frowns and crosses her arms, a cue for him to elaborate.

“I mean, not stupid as an objective gift for any old anyone. But my parents think anything more than ninety-nine cents for half-a-dozen donuts qualifies as overpriced.”

“If that’s the watermark, you can find something here.” She kisses his cheek.

“Also, I’m hungry.”

She stands, dusting her grey cotton dress, the one that hugs her hips as if it’s wet. Her short legs are fair and soft, the color of white nectarines. She helps him up. They go to McDonald’s, where they eat on stools. He watches a woman with a neck brace shepherd three kids to a gate.

She leans on her palm, watching him. “You eat so slowly.”

“I’m savoring,” he responds. “My family eats like wolves. This is my last chance to savor anything for the next few days.”

She shrugs and shakes her plastic-wrapped spoon at his sundae. “If you don’t finish that, I will.”

“Get your own,” he says, pulling it to his chest.

“You’ve got five minutes.”

Malcolm knows the meaning of a minute. At the worst trauma sites, you have ten; often less, never more. If a patient stays calm, those moments stretch like silly putty, but those minutes shrink for those unable to stave off the panic. One afternoon in July—the summer he and Amy spent throwing pieces of potato bread across the backyard fence to Mrs. Jefferies’ grouchy spaniel—Amy snatched the last piece of bread and refused him any piece of it. He had been angry that she was stronger, that she had the ability to keep

something—anything— from him with such ease. He shoved her. She stumbled and yelped. By the time he turned, she had plopped herself on the concrete steps leading to the back door, one leg crossed over the other to give her a better view of the glass protruding from the arch. The injury, the swiftness with which it had occurred and the silence that followed as she peered at the damage with a near scientific focus struck him as extraordinary. Even as a child, he understood scrapes and bruises of most kinds to warrant, if not tears, fits of retaliation or at least a few choice swear words that you might get slapped for using anywhere but the backyard. But she pulled the shard with her thumb and forefinger, like an eggshell. By the time his father started hollering at him to get the band-aids, Amy had set it on the step beside her as if it were a coke bottle or a coloring book.

Some people react like her. Others—most— worry that the blood belongs to them, or worse, someone else; they worry that whatever higher power they believe or do not believe in has finally decided, without warning, to reveal their shelf life to a crowd of strangers; but most of all, they worry about the dog they left out, about the curt send-off they gave their husband twelve hours ago, about the fact that they only cut their daughter's sandwich in halves, not fours, today. They worry that their lives have forever shifted, plagued by uncertainty about the ways in which they will or will not carry on. These moments are the worst time to ponder the big questions, the time at which a person realizes his or her most bleak internal dialog. The best way to stretch a minute for a panicking victim? Vie for their attention like a puppy with no one to play with, like a desperate kid.

“My name is Malcolm,” he tells the conscious ones. He used to find his name irksome, the way it sounded like chalk coming from his mouth: *mahl-lll-come*. But in those scenarios, the C becomes a hard K, book-ended by sturdy, confident Ms. He feels as though he’s being introduced to himself then, full of the volume and cleverness and focus of which he felt devoid at home.

Malcolm finishes the sundae. He tosses it into the trash bin to his right.

“Never give me a time limit.”

“Lesson learned,” she says. “Does this cut look infected?”

“Where?”

“This one.” She displays her forearm.

“It looks fine.”

“But it’s like a bump. And the sides are purplish. See?”

“You have to apply pressure to the skin to cut it. When you do that, capillaries—which are these little blood vessels under the skin—burst and fill that area with blood.”

“How do I know if it’s infected?”

“Look for pus.”

She cringes. “I don’t know how you do it.”

Malcolm stomachs open wounds better than most EMTs, the kind that result from high-speed crashes, the falls-from-a-height, gunshot injuries and whatever other grisly ways people have found to hurt themselves. His first day on the job, as an observer, he and his supervisor got a call for immediate assistance for a three-car crash on the interstate.

“I just want to prepare you,” he’d said, double-checking the batteries on the heart rate monitor. “This sounds very grisly.”

One man died before they arrived on the scene; two more within the first three minutes. Of the eight people they pulled from the wreck, five incurred fatal injuries. One of the little girls had brown hair like Amy, a mane that other little girls must have coveted, that looked too long for her small stature; another technician, a burly, bearded man with two little girls, puked by the side of the ambulance after they arrived at the hospital. Malcolm wished he could, too, but the bile never rose in him.

Blue flips to a blank page her sketchbook. Malcolm turns the page back.

“Drawing me asleep again.”

“You’re a good model.”

“Thanks.”

“How did the last session go?”

“I crouched for a ten-minute pose; knees up for the long one.”

The university pays him to model for its Tuesday and Thursday morning drawing classes. He’s on-call Monday and Wednesday nights and getting up for 9 AM sessions proves near impossible some days, but he goes. The first time resulted from a bet he lost against Blue the first time they met. He worried rather than slept the night before, and when the time came to disrobe, he started shaking. One of the students mistook his anxiety for cold. She plugged in a space heater next to him and asked “Any warmer?” When he found the pose, the teacher told him to pause. Malcolm worried about his gut and his small calves, about the acne scars on his back. He worried they could see, somehow, traces of the black eye he earned when he was 13. Most of all, he worried

about his pale, delicate hands. Papa called him “skinny wrists” whenever Malcolm got emotional about things, chortling at the poetic quality of the phrase.

Malcolm covered them for the first few poses. But when he snuck a glance at the industrious, silent voyeurs, he realized that they weren’t looking at him. They all seemed to look at him as a bundle of body parts in need of resolution and representation, a mysterious, infuriating puzzle that hid itself in different ways at any given moment. No, he realized, amidst the scribbling and erasing, they weren’t looking at *him*. He was not there at all.

“Why do you like being naked so much?” Blue asks. She cocks her head, as if she’s requesting the time or the weather.

He shrugs. “I just like it.”

“But why?”

“Can’t I just like something?”

She laughs.

He shifts, uncomfortable with the response. “What?”

“You just, you have a real accent when you get defensive.”

“Yeah.”

“There it is again. Say ‘car’.”

“No.”

“Then tell me why you like being naked.”

“I don’t know.”

She frowns.

He sighs. “I watch bodies fall apart every day. I try to put them back together the best I can, but sometimes they break anyway.” He points to the drawing. “This is a perfect thing.”

“Yes.”

“I like you,” he says, emboldened by their agreement.

She smiles but says nothing, an enigmatic tic typical of Blue. She likes to tell the story of how she came to California. The summer after her first year into an engineering degree at Harvard, she and her parents visited a town in the Napa region and rented a car to see the coast. When the time came to return home, she left them at the gate and told them that if she didn’t have a job in one week, they could send the feds after her. Her father curtly reminded her that he could do no such thing, given her age and she said, “Well, I guess my word will have to do.” She had a job in three days; a place to live within the week. As she put it, she never wanted to be anywhere else so badly. She says she likes to make last-minute decisions, but Malcolm suspects she makes them in advance and reveals them at a time she deems fitting. Had she made up her mind about him?

“Let’s go find something for your parents.” She pins her bangs back with a cobalt butterfly clip, the kind you see in dollar stores, the kind children use.

They wander into a small store. The Asian woman at the register greets them between sips of coffee, a raspberry Danish sitting on the table behind her.

“How do you parents feel about sweatshirts? And the Eighties?” Blue picks up a black one with a neon Chicago skyline across the front. She sets it down in favor of a snow globe. “This looks festive.”

“Boston doesn’t need any more precipitation.”

“But this is Chicago snow.”

“I’ll consider it.”

“What do they like?”

“They never buy much. And I haven’t seen them in a long time. What do your parents like?”

“Sweatshirts like that.” She points to the neon skyline.

Blue pulls the neon sweatshirt over her head and puts on a pair of huge sunglasses from a rotating column nearby.

“Are you excited?”

“About the interview.”

“I meant your parents.”

“Nervous. Everyone has weird family stuff. Are you excited to see your family?”

“Yes. Why aren’t you?”

“I’m different from them.”

“*All of them? All the time?*”

“No, just most of them. Most of the time.”

“I thought you worked for your brother for a while.”

Malcolm scoffs, as if he’d forgotten. “I did. He had just gotten his first construction and he was on this perpetual power trip. I should never have taken the job.”

From the time Eli started hanging out with Amy, Malcolm had been a replacement, a salve for Richie’s ego. He knew that. But Malcolm was aimless—a

barely-earned GED his sole academic achievement at the time—and Richie remained bitter.

Blue has never told him why she goes by that name. He knows her last and middle names, how she dots her Is, the way her back curves when she sleeps, but not that. He asks almost daily now, a trend that belies the intimacy it might otherwise suggest, and she tells him to figure it out. He thought he had it once. She wears a bracelet with a blue bead that latches the ends, a bracelet she made herself at camp as a kid. He suspected out loud a camp nickname or maybe a first kiss, and she had shaken her head. “Try again,” she had said. “Good thought, though.”

He slept poorly that night, irked by the bad hypothesis and her smugness. Some days he enjoys the silly, private joke. Other times, he imagines that her refusal to answer is not a joke, but a barrier designed to keep people like him out. Even so, he asks. He fears she might flinch if he stops asking, that ending such a silly ritual might seem calculating, or worse, passive aggressive.

“What time is the first interview?”

“Tufts is nine tomorrow morning. Boston University is the next day, at two.”

“Wow. Fuck.”

“I know.”

“You seem like a doctor,” she says. “I mean, the thought isn’t a stretch. You just seem together. You have it together.”

“I used to get really bad grades. God’s honest. I hated school. Remedial everything.”

“I hope you’re not my doctor.”

“I’m good at it now. I just had a short bus phase.”

“That’s offensive.”

“If you think that’s offensive, you should never meet my family.”

He picks up a small model of a 747. Whoever painted it missed one of the windows on the cockpit. It goes for less than four dollars. He picks another one. His father might ask if a Chinaman painted the first one.

Papa’s small sitting room, off the kitchen, houses framed photographs of planes: a Porterfield 35-70 flyabout above the television set; a Luscombe 8A Silvaire that he photographed at an air show that came to Salem one year. Uncle Lenny drove the three of them up the coast in his convertible. Richie talked about walloping a kid who talked down to him about grammar at school that week. Papa laughed. Uncle Lenny rolled his eyes at Malcolm in the rearview, the kind of subtle recognition that Malcolm enjoyed like a good secret. A few weeks after Eli died, when Malcolm was still working for Richie, he beat the shit out of a kid from Southie, a kid who didn’t know any better. When he returned home, marked only by a scratch on his cheek and a tear in his white t-shirt, his father glanced up from the boxing match on TV, his arms crossed over his yellowed undershirt, and asked whether the punk deserved it. Malcolm didn’t know. “It doesn’t matter,” his father said to the television. “Everyone should take a beating at one time or another.”

He had hoped to feel gratified: Richie couldn’t make fun of him and Amy hadn’t needed to protect him. Instead he felt hollow. He hadn’t proved a thing—not to the dead or the living.

He buys the plane. The cashier hands it to him in a little plastic bag. If Papa likes it, he will ask how they got a 747 into such a small bag.

Blue stands.

“My plane is here.”

“Okay,” he crosses his arms. “Have a safe trip.”

“Call me?”

He nods. She slings the big tote over her shoulder and looks back at him, without shields or obligation; just a person waiting for realization.

“I figured it out,” he lies. “I’ve got it this time.”

She bites her lip. “Tell me.”

“Later. The wait is the best part,” he says. Her confused smile melts into a softer one. He sits cross-legged on the floor as her figure disappears inside the grey walkway, certain that she will someday introduce herself.

THE STRANGER VISIT

A homecoming of this magnitude, Miri decides, calls for a fresh pot of coffee. How her youngest son, Malcolm, takes his coffee—whether he takes it at all, anymore—she doesn't remember. Those peculiarities of daily life are meant to be observed and quietly understood; to relay, to *state* them in infrequent, transcontinental phone conversations would seem arbitrary at best. They talk instead about his job and her parties. In any case, someone's taste in coffee can change a lot in two years.

She drops three scoops of Folgers into the machine. Coffee grounds from earlier, more hastily-prepared pots, sully the yellow countertop. Aside from that, the kitchen looks as tidy as it can. Miriam sits in one of the caramel-brown Windsor chairs surrounding the three sides of the table not against the wall. When the kids were younger, they set a card table and fold-out chairs against this one to accommodate everyone. For holiday dinners, they moved both into the living room and used the kitchen as a staging area. A single counter stretches along the left side of the kitchen, punctuated by the dishwasher and gas stove and sink. Above and below, wooden cabinets with black handles stretch the length of the wall. The wallpaper—a pattern of marigold bouquets—would have reminded Miri of a Victorian novel were it not shaded by the encompassing fluorescent overhead light. The fridge sits against the opposite wall next to the trashcan. Plastic alphabet letter magnets—a gift from Olive and Anna last year—pin pictures of relatives' children looking unhappy on Christmas cards. White boxes of cheap pastries stack on the counter beside the stove, branded with neon price stickers, a testament to Jack's enduring, uncritical sweet tooth.

She clears the table of mail and hangs Jack's baseball cap in the hall closet. He

usually hangs it himself, but he arrived home late last night with some stupid lie about a wrestling match and left early this morning. She thinks about trying to call him at the track, but decides against that. It doesn't matter. Jack is a poor keeper of secrets, especially around her. She'll press him later.

Miri unpacks a new coffee cake and sets two plates, two saucers and two cups on the table. She sets the bird-shaped salt and pepper shakers on the window sill above the table. He might be hungry when he arrives and she's never been someone who could "whip something up". At one point in her life, Miri felt ashamed about the fact that she never really learned to cook. She did cook, of course, because Jack could not tell an egg from an orange when it came to combining ingredients and because mother invested so much time in teaching her.

"Make a good pound cake, and he'll stay the night. Make a full breakfast and he'll stay forever," she used to hum, handing Miri sugary, egg-white laden beaters to lick. "And never undercook meat."

Mother claimed that a marriage hinged on cooking, but Miri knew it had nothing to do with that. Mother was in love with food, simple as that. She cracked eggs as if she felt sorry about it: a firm, quick tap against the edge of her metal mixing bowl that rang with a hollow sweetness. Meat, however rare, was thick, living muscle in her hands. On Sunday nights, she made butterscotch pudding that sat in bowls like viscous silk. The only thing such a deft cook could teach Miri was how to eat. For Miri, cooking was a means, not an end in itself, a tedious process of checking and re-checking recipes she should have memorized after all this time.

The Thanksgiving after Malcolm was born, Eli and Richie both got sick. She and

Jack spent the afternoon trading jobs, tending to the food and the boys, quarreling over who had done what and when. When they finally sat down to dinner, the boys wriggling in their respective chairs, Jack plopped a mound of mashed potatoes on to his plate, scratching the floral design around the edge.

“These taste terrible,” he said, spitting some into his napkin.

“I made those.”

“I know, and they taste terrible.”

Malcolm spit up. Jack crossed his arms. “See?”

She stood and flipped a spoonful of potatoes at her smug husband. As the watery lumps slipped down his cheek, she stopped worrying about the recipes. With a swift, defiant turn, she retreated to the bedroom and slammed the door. It was a very successful Thanksgiving.

She checks her watch. Malcolm’s flight arrived mid-morning. The time read almost one now. Perhaps the hotel prohibited check-in until the afternoon. But in that case, why not come here? He could unload his bags and Jack could drive him to the hotel after dinner, or she could, or he might call a cab. He called last night, but not this morning. She left a voicemail an hour ago. She checks her watch again. If the plane had crashed, the news would say as much. But suppose his cab had an accident? If she thought about all the possible catastrophes, however mundane or freakish—if she worried enough—he would be fine. Worrying proved easy for Miri during the kids’ youth, but the day Eli died, she had not worried at all. It was before cell phones, when the interval of time between a casualty and “bad news” could stretch to hours or longer. She had spent the day with Jack, eating salami sandwiches with hot peppers and burning the skin her

sundress did not protect out on the boat. Jack told her about Eli's triumph at the Downs the day before. She had dangled her feet over the edge of the boat like a girl and thought about the cool mud at the bottom of the bay.

The worrying works like a charm. The doorbell rings. Miri sighs with relief. She stands and straightens her skirt. She tries to imagine Malcolm now, whether he still marks his sneakers with black marker on the back heel and whether he can still peel an orange in one piece. She straightens the sugar bowl that sits equidistant from two small plates on the kitchen table, a small detail that means infinitely more to her than any company that comes into her home. How did someone change after they moved across an entire country? Miri knew very few people from the west coast, and the one she knew best was that young woman from Palo Alto who moved here with her fiancé shortly after Miri and Jack got married. She was very tan and wore tissue-thin, Kelly-green scarves. She claimed that they brought out her eyes, even though those were sort of a musty blue, as if fooling herself was as chic as the scarves themselves. Really they covered a scar that ran along one side of her collarbone, which Miri theorized came from her husband. Snookie used to say, sucking on peppermints, that he "beat the California out of her."

She half-expects him to wear flip-flops, or the EMT uniform he wears in the one picture he's sent to them since he moved to California five years ago. She opens the door.

"Hi, Ma."

The words plop on the doorstep between them, reluctant to move or inspire more like them. As silence passes between them, she wishes he would begin in the middle so the words might not feel like those exchanged at chance meetings between acquaintances who promise but never plan coffee dates. Richie always begins in the in middle, talking

fast and clear and loud. He always comes with so many things—bags and boxes and dry cleaning, like Santa Claus running errands—and it seems as if he and his words and his *things* are all carrying on some lengthy conversation that others just happen to encounter.

As he struggles to grip the twelve-pack in one hand the dry cleaning bag in the other, though, she realizes that they are both waiting, she for a seamless, bustling transition from greeting to conversation and he for an invitation. There had been no goodbye when he left; just a phone call after the fact informing Miri and Jack that he was waiting for a connection in Ohio. He hadn't explained Berkeley. Had it been Richie, she would have wheedled the reasoning from him in one or two noisy phone calls. But that was neither here nor there: Richie would never leave and Malcolm didn't respond to nagging.

"Come on in."

He steps inside and gestures for her to go upstairs first.

"I'm sorry I'm late. Richie called me at the last minute and asked if I could pick up your suit. I—you won't believe it—I made a wrong turn on the way."

"Let me look at you."

He stands back. His grey cable-knit stretches over a slight gut and his eyes look smaller with age. He's gained weight and his blonde hair is clipped short. He looks healthy. She hugs him.

"It's been too long, Malcolm." She squeezes.

"I know."

His voice is flat, the kind of deferential tone that Jack's rowdy Irish-Catholic family from Southie did not understand. At family gatherings, where insubordination was

more fun than stickball, they felt uncomfortable putting anyone to work who didn't immediately complain.

"Kids are supposed to be a pain in the ass," Jack's cousin Joseph said once.

"What's wrong with him?"

"Nothing," she retorted. She had no doubt, then. Now she senses something unfamiliar, the pang that her child has grown into himself without her, that she has been witness to his development in the most peripheral, tangential way. In a single motion, she retreats, pulls the suit from the bag and shakes her head. "What is this? They can't get mustard out anymore? Armand's used to be able to lift ink from a white shirt. I told him a million times to go to Quick-Dri instead."

"He said Quick-Dri smells like chemicals."

She raises her eyebrows. "Oh, yeah, I'll bet he said that."

"He better get with the times. Latinos aren't going anywhere." He puts the beer in the fridge and shakes his head. "Anyway, he and Hannah and the kids are bringing food in a bit. He just said we have to pick up the cake."

"Fine, that'll be good."

"I'm surprised you don't want to go to Jeveli's."

"Not this year," she shakes her head. "You know me. Keep it simple."

"You've never kept it simple, Ma."

She laughs. "If you want to go, we'll go."

"No, just cracking wise."

"Oh, God, you should see the waiters there with Anna. You know she's that age, a little chubby, nothing to lose your head over, but the kids at school are making fun of her

sometimes. Kid stuff. We went the other night and the poor kid just asks for a salad. No soup, no bread. And Jerry, that waiter with the white hair, launches into this whole thing, 'What's such a pretty girl doing eating rabbit food?' and gets her to order a chicken parm. Good people there." She sets out two coffee cups. "Do they have good Italian food in Berkeley?"

"Some. It's different, though. More expensive. No Jeveli's. Definitely no Spinelli's."

"Well. It's nice to miss things sometimes." She gestures to the set table. "Are you and Richie talking at all these days?"

"I get a card at Christmas."

She pulls out a chair. "Sit, sit. I've got coffee cake and not much else. Do you want a coffee? Maybe you want a beer. It's early for that, but we've got it."

"Coffee's fine."

"How do you take it?"

"Black."

"That doesn't sound very California."

"I guess not."

She sets a piece of coffee cake in front of him. He sips his coffee.

"How's dad?"

In trouble, she wants to say. She holds her tongue. "Fine. Ran off quick this morning."

"Sounds like him."

She sits and picks the nuts off her piece of cake. “It was nice of you to come home for this.”

“It’s not the only reason I came home.”

She supposes, given the curt way he sips his coffee, that it was not the best one either.

He sets his cup down. “I’m interviewing at Boston University, to go to medical school. The interview is in a couple of days. I bought a suit. The color is nice, but I’m worried it’s a little short in the arms.”

“Medical school takes a long time.”

“I know.”

“If you need money, your father and I don’t have very much.”

“I don’t need money.”

He sounds insulted, already worn by the conversation.

“I just didn’t know you were thinking about medical school.”

“I thought I mentioned it,” he says. He had not. And here she thought only small things like coffee taste went missing from those conversations.

“Anyway,” he says, wringing his hands. “I wanted to see what you thought.”

“I think,” she sighs. “I think it’s good news.”

“Do you?”

“You seem like you’re looking for a certain type of answer.”

“I thought you’d be more excited.”

He slouches, his head tilted like a child. She tugs at her skirt, the band of which digs into her waist, and swipes at crumbs resting on the table cloth. All the nervousness,

the excitement from before has grown stale. She wants to comfort him, to enfold him and wish aloud that their separation had been a silly accident, for which neither person could claim responsibility. But the silence slips between them again, the kind that develops between two people who are very disappointed in one another. She pours both of them more coffee, adjusts the napkin dispenser and wonders if he had been excited, too.

SIX

I showed up at Shelley's apartment without flowers. She would have found them disingenuous.

"It's me," I called through the heavy wooden door.

She pulled the door open a couple inches, the chain still fastened. Her citrus perfume drifted through the opening. "Whatever you want to say you can say right here."

"Please let me in."

She crossed her arms, weight shifted to one hip. "What are you doing here, Eli?"

"I wanted to see you."

"See me?" She raised her thick, sharp brow. "What a novel idea."

"I couldn't come before."

She tried to shut the door. I wedged my converse between it and the frame.

"Don't do that."

"This is my house," she spat. "I'll do what I want."

"Give me ten minutes."

She frowned, her curly, black hair piled into a loose bun atop her head. Her umber cheeks tinted cranberry and her chin hardened.

"Five," she said, and let go of the doorknob. I followed her inside, where she selected a tangerine headscarf from a green glass bowl of knickknacks on her kitchen table and tied it snug behind the bun. She always wore color on the days she got angry—chaotic, batik-print skirts, red espadrilles, tangerine frocks—the drab ones wouldn't satisfy.

Her apartment was small and tastefully decorated with the salary she made as a receptionist for a Jewish dentist in Coolidge Corner. Shelley had moved to Brookline the week after we graduated from high school, as disenchanted with Roxbury as I was with East Boston. She and her older sister were dark, like their mother, but their father—who left before she could talk—was a second-generation Bolivian immigrant about whom she knew or said very little. She felt like a fraud, she told me, whenever she passed the kempt, easy-eyed activists at Freedom House on Crawford Street who solicited her support. Neither they nor her school acquaintances seemed to welcome her. But they were unaware of her father’s heritage and she always remained uncertain of whether they could, on some level, sense such impurities.

Now, she was saving most of her money for an apartment with more than two rooms and a door between the bedroom and the living room rather than a long curtain of red fabric. What she didn’t save she spent on food and antiques—above all else she loved things with history and things that were South American, which explained the three blue and white porcelain plates that hung in a line above her shaggy couch. She carried with her a flea-market silver ID case from Bogota that held her pocket money and driver’s license. She liked to carry history with her, she told me once, so as to never forget about it.

The mauve couch sat opposite a rickety television set and a glass coffee table. A single, small window on the adjacent wall overlooked the local YMCA and a small community garden. On the kitchen table sat the bowl and a humble pitcher of water.

She poured a glass of orange juice—she did not offer me any—and plopped on one of the wicker kitchen chairs. I sat across from her. She drummed her fingernails on one of the cheap plastic placemats.

“I’m surprised you bothered to come back,” she scoffed. “Especially after last time.”

“I brought Amy because I knew you were going to try to break up with me.”

She tapped her head. “You always were quick.”

“For the record, I wanted you to meet her. She’s not like the rest of my family.”

She crossed her arms like a businessman. “You’re right. She’s lovely. And leaving two lovely women alone while you go out to buy poison doesn’t make you any less of a coward.”

“Shelley—”

“And then I don’t hear word one from you for weeks.”

I inhaled. On the way over, I had practiced what I would say. Shelley could throw me off like no one else. “I didn’t want to come here until I had something good to tell you. I didn’t want you leaving that bad part of me.”

“So, what do you have that’s good?”

“I ruined Thanksgiving,” I said. “Did I tell you that?”

She shook her head, confused.

“I got there late, first of all. Ma hates lateness. Something about how being late means you think your time is better than anyone else’s. Besides that, I was higher than a kite and not sorry about it. She and Richie tried to kick me out. Papa wanted to give me a chance. He said I needed a meal. Well, I took the meal and said something mean about

the potatoes and threw some squash pie at Amy. Richie tried to pull me out of my chair and then—I don't remember. I was at the bottom of the front stairs. I was in a hole. And for the first time, I could see it.”

She played with the edge of the porcelain pitcher. “I'm happy for you.” Her voice was flat, hard.

“The point is, I'm done,” I gulped. The words felt dangerous and weak. “I've quit.”

She stopped drumming her nails and leaned forward. “You been to a place? A place where they take care of that?”

“No.”

She leaned back again and held the glass on her lap. “Then what are you doing?”

I adjusted my faded denim jacket, the one she patched when I ripped it sneaking out of my house to see her. “I haven't touched the stuff in two weeks. Two whole weeks. And it's been hell, but I'm doing it.”

She slouched, already weary from the conversation. The first time I saw her, she'd been slouching. It was my third day of my senior year Roxbury high and she was disinterested in our third period health class. Even then, she looked supple and healthy, her legs crossed easily over one another like a clean, dark braid. She wore a peach shirtdress that tied at the waist and set off the caramel in her skin. Her sister didn't like white people, Shelley said, and would kill me if she knew were going out. “Not if my brother gets me first,” I'd respond. We laughed about it when we were alone and felt easy together, wrapped in sheets or pressed together in a dark theater, but we avoided the

matter beyond that. We started up the summer after we graduated, free to roam outside of the neighborhoods outside of the gaze of her friends or mine.

She rested her head against her hand. I reached for her arm, for the cool silver bracelets that clinked when she walked. She pulled away.

“Kick me out if you want,” I dared her. “But I’m fixing this.”

She murmured something into her juice.

“What?” I asked.

“I said you’re fooling yourself,” she said quietly. “And you’re trying to fool me. And I got no time for that.”

“How do you know?”

“A few lines have ruined plenty of people. I’ve seen it happen and I know you have, too.”

I reached for her hand again. She let me. “I’m not people.”

“Normally, no,” she murmured. She pulled her hand from mine and stood. “But in this case, you are.”

“I haven’t asked you for a lot of chances, Shelley.”

She set her glass on the table. She inhaled like the air was heavy, like it hurt. She lifted her emerald eyes. “Eli, we’ve loved each other a little while now. And I am certain there’s plenty I could bear with you—my family, yours—if we were strong together. But we aren’t, not anymore. I just feel like I’m reaching over this space to get to you, this space that just keeps getting wider and taller, and my arms are too short. Now, what am I supposed to do about that?”

I dug my hands into my knees. It was my turn to feel weary. She tapped her watch.

“Your time is up.”

“Give me more. Please.”

Her soft, sad mouth quivered. “If I don’t ask you to leave now, I won’t be able to do it for a long time. And I don’t have that much time.”

My chest tightened. I had anticipated an argument, not a rejection. We’d cry and yell and arrive, eventually, at some affirmation of us. Afterwards, she’d push my greasy hair behind my ear, the tinny sound of her bracelets blending with the citrus and say something like, “We’ll figure it out.” Then we’d be weak together until we were strong. But she had already untied herself.

She held the door open. “I’m going out tonight. I need to get ready.”

“I’ll figure this out. I’ll do it.”

“I hope you do.”

I stood and walked out. The door clicked shut. The color and smells of the apartment faded. I wanted something quick, the sharp burn of a hasty suture, a tainted reward. I wanted *it*. She was right, and she was smart, too smart for me. But if she could untie herself, I could do the same. And I would.

CHANGELING

“I’m surprised you wanted to come,” Jack says to Lester. The two men lean over the chain-link fence separating them from the dusty track. The horses running the first heat warm up.

“I need to get out more.”

“That’s what Miri’s always saying.”

Lester chuckles. “God help us if she’s wrong.”

“No shit.” Jack rubs his temples. “You coming to her birthday tomorrow?”

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

Jack has washed his hands four times today, but the smell of gasoline remains. He wonders if Miri could smell it on him last night when he came home. She woke when he climbed into bed and asked where he had been. He lied about the end of a match on pay-per-view. She raised an eyebrow, put on her slippers and retreated to the kitchen for a glass of water. She always left a room like an actress, mood and scent trailing behind her. They said nothing about the altercation in the morning. Of course she knew. She always knew, even when she didn’t know exactly what. The “what” was only a matter of time.

Lester shoves him. “Who’s good today?”

“The Philly from Maryland,” Jack coughs. “Still in the paddock.”

Heavenly Hell is her name. She’s a maiden—no wins yet— but she’s a stalker, too. Even the shrewd betters will lower their wagers, if they bet on her at all. Jack has different ideas. The planes from Logan spooked her last time, one of the more charming sound effects particular to the Downs, but the morning line odds favored her to place at the very least. She had delighted for a moment, a bullet from the post with the potential to

bounce Primary Source, the recent champion in Las Vegas. She led for the first three furlongs, but anxiety, not confidence propelled her. Kings Man and Primary Source pulled ahead of her into a dead heat. She lost her stride, until her lead seemed as if it had been a dream, one that grew sillier as the hours passed. There's enough logic to justify Jack's bet card today. She's vigilant but composed; her coat shiny, not sweaty. Not even the 747s— screaming overhead in anticipation of the world beyond—bother her.

A breeze skims the bleachers and weaves through the sparse, parka-clad crowd. Jack's back aches from lugging the petroleum from the Chevy to the dock adjacent to Chase Meyers' skiff, a strain too difficult for someone who spent most of his life heaving luggage on and off carts at Logan. By the time the airport promoted him to an administrator position, the damage had been done. Still, the difficulty of the task took him by surprise. Boat burnings were a fact of life at the East Boston Yacht club, common retribution for petty and perceived slights. The boats warranted little fanfare in the first place. Miri referred to the harbor as "a bunch of glorified two-by-fours," and she wasn't far off. A boat burning up at the Orient Heights club would be a different story, of course. They'd call the stadies in for a stolen oar up there. The members up there thought they were fine stuff.

Jack used to find the whole business questionable, the retaliatory language of heavy drinkers. Questionable, yes, but not always bereft of logic. When he decided to do it, he figured he'd simply found a reason. No one could blame him for that. By the time Jack lit the match, he forgot to take one last look at the boat.

Lester tugs his cable-knit sweater over his hips, his slate grey windbreaker over his back.

Jack's father called days like these changelings. The autumn wind mingles with the remaining strains of summer like a last dance. Champions and wildcards alike breathe or flounder on changeling days. Jack isn't enough of a moron or a romantic to make a bet based on the wind, but any good gambler knows that the best bets are equal parts logic and intuition.

“When is your gal running?”

“Fourth heat.”

“Chilly for September.”

Jack nods.

“Hell, Jack.”

“What?”

“You're practically a mute today.”

“Oh,” he shrugs and shakes his head. “Chevy's acting up again.”

Lester sets his chin on his palm, the sides of which are flecked with knife scars from punks. He likes to show off this one lengthy burn scar on his arm at parties, says the Russians got him during the Cold War when in fact it's the memoir of a rogue Roman candle from July fourth about twenty years ago. He was showing the kids how to light them—Amy got up real close, as usual— but one of the dogs ran through the yard and knocked over a potato salad, and well, don't turn your back on a Roman candle. There's a bigger one across his gut, one Jack has only seen once at the swimming pool, that Lester never talks about. The story is the kind people tell in pieces: they shake their heads, sigh and call it a shame, these momentary lapses in conversation the best homage one can make to a bad memory without autopsying the details.

“It’s cold. Let’s go inside,” Lester remarks. “Maybe I’ll even place a bet today.”

Lester may have cracked some of the worst perpetrators around Dorchester during the seventies cocaine rush, but the guy can’t predict a horse race to save his life. “When horses start committing crimes,” he used to say, “My career is over.” Maybe he knew too much about people to know much about horses, or maybe horses were a different animal in more ways than one.

The men ascend the cement steps, past the rows of green benches where families, tourists and loners sit. A woman with pink cheeks wears a windbreaker that swallows her small frame. She holds up her baby and points to the horses. Her husband frowns at the brochures that explain how to bet. The brochures are useless—the best way to figure it all is to sit with the men in the Pit—but the families have more fun making mistakes than they do winning. Better story.

The inside of the Downs always reminds Jack of a hollow, iron barrel. Banners from older, more magnificent races hang one in front of the other from the metal ceiling beams. Visitors idle by the room-length line of teller booths, flipping through their Daily Racing Form booklets and adjusting their faded Sox hats. Others line up at the snack stands. Some traverse the length of the building, wandering in and out until a race begins. About midway down the terminal sits a throng of plastic chairs, occupied by avid local gamblers and race aficionados. Sixteen televisions, stacked atop of one another to form a large square, project races happening all over the country.

He and Lester buy hotdogs. They select seats on the outskirts of the Pit. Walter, a wiry, small-faced man who runs a dry-cleaning business on Saratoga, grins from beneath his newsboy cap. The grin no longer fools Jack; Walter hides his temper well. The

summer after Amy arrived, Walter's wife brought him a Tupperware container of spaghetti and meatballs at the club. She hollered to him from the docks and he hollered back that she ought to set it on the side of the boat. She shook her head, set the container down and brushed her hands on her dress. Walter had no sooner turned back to his card game when laughter came from outside. One of Jack's dogs, Moby (named for the whale) had trotted to the boat and took the meal for himself, sauce and meatballs rolling over the damp dock. Walter chased that dog to the edge, shrieking about his "goddamn spaghetti." Moby leapt into the water, and Walter earned his place in Eastie folklore: the pasta banshee.

Today, though, he tips his rolled-up program towards them and turns back to the wall of TV screens, in front of which the old men huddle and moan about any old heat. They wear different variations of the same clothing: striped polos and blue collar button-downs with stitched name tags above the breast pocket, scuffed loafers, bellies pinned into trousers that rise to mid-shin when they sit. To an outsider it would look like a machine with a bunch of moving cogs, all accomplishing the same task in similar but not identical fashion. Like a bunch of kids, Jack thinks, kids watching Saturday morning cartoons.

Walter sidles over to Lester and Jack. His little features almost disappear when he smiles.

"Heavenly Hell again?"

"That's right."

"Never even out to sea and already washed up."

"Oh, have a heart attack, Walter."

“Been there, done that.” He pats his pacemaker.

The men laugh at their crudeness, the kind they think their wives would find offensive. The kind at which Miri would chuckle.

Jack only knows a few of them well, the ones whose wives Miri has had over for dinner in the past. The last time Walter and Bethany came over she made something with scallops that tasted a little wrong but no one really cared about taste when Miri hosted a party. She laughed at the lopsided cakes she slapped together for birthdays, an unrestrained guffaw that made him nervous when he first knew her. In heels, she surpassed him by one, maybe two inches. He hadn't liked that either. She worked as a hatcheck girl at the Yacht club the year they met, but the first time he saw her, she was scolding a fourteen year-old Lester at the park. Her mother, born in Newfoundland, was engaged to a fishing tycoon from St. John's, a stout, reliable man with a preexisting family. He moved her, Miri and Lester to a plush apartment in the middle of Boston—Beacon Street—and planned for them the privileges of a Back Bay family. Lester would have gone to Fesseden with Ted Kennedy and Miri would've spent her summer holidays in Europe. Before the divorce was finalized, he died of heart failure on a business venture in Cuba and his wife demonstrated little sympathy for the fledgling family. The money left was enough for a move across the Bay and an apartment in the Heights.

“I hear Malcolm is coming home,” Walter remarks. “Weird son-of-a-bitch, but a good boy. Tricia says to bring him by if he has a spare moment. What's the occasion, anyway?”

Jack sighs. He'd forgotten about Malcolm entirely. As if he needed another thing to worry about.

“No occasion.”

“All the same.”

“Who do you have, Walter?”

“For the fourth? Stand and Deliver.”

“Not a bad horse.”

The third field of the day receives their call to the post. The jockey on number seven is a little too tall, but he knows how to shift his weight. The big ones always fuck it up, though.

“I forgot that Malcolm was coming home,” Lester says, washing the last of his dog with Budweiser.

“He’s not. He’s visiting.”

Seven falls behind at the third corner. They always fuck it up.

“It’s okay,” Lester says. “I know.”

How? What had he seen? How? Lester went to bed at 10 pm. Maybe it had been one of his old buddies at the department. For a guy with no family of his own, he knew a lot of people. Was the guy toying with him? Figured. Miri’s brother always had too much time on his hands, especially now that he’d left the department entirely. People with too much time always thought a little too hard, thought themselves in circles and then confused other people—

“I mean, it’s Malcolm,” Lester raises his eyebrows. “He’s coming home.”

“He’s not. He’s visiting.”

“How long?”

“Two years,” Jack says.

“When does he get in?”

“Tomorrow, I think. Miri knows better than me.”

“She’s excited.”

“Been running around that house for days.”

“You sound real thrilled.”

“He’s not a bad kid.”

“Are you telling me that?”

Jack pauses. “After Eli died, he stepped out. As if it was the most natural thing in the world. Never wanted to get his hands dirty.”

“He was just a kid, Jack.”

“And he never grew up. I knew he wouldn’t.”

“How do you mean?”

“When Amy was seven, she stepped on a piece of glass the length of my thumb. Bleeding all over the linoleum. I say to him, ‘Go call the doctor’ and he stands there stammering like a goddamn retard.”

“I remember that.”

“Right before Miri quit working.”

“Pulled that shard out herself, didn’t she?”

“Like butter.”

“You’re too hard on him.”

Jack grits his teeth. His voice sinks. “When you raise four kids, you come back and tell me about too hard. I’ll even put out the nice china for you. Until then, mind your business.”

The Pit almost always raises more hell than the outside stands, the regulars leaning halfway out of their wheelchairs, white-knuckled against their walkers. Except for the Masscap and temperate weekends in summer, the outside bleachers, a series of long green benches atop concrete steps that descend to the level of the field, remain under-attended for the most part, a limbo between the high-ceilings of the vestibule and the manicured silence of the track. He prefers to watch the races outside, in the second row of benches, not too close to the winner's circle inlet on the right. On any other day, Jack loves the fleeting anarchy of a race, that unrepentant violence that seeks out lazy afternoons, dormant tracks and the most unsuspecting observers. Horses could care less about the difference between a Las Vegas palace and the track down the street from the houses crammed into the corners of Jefferies Point near Constitution Beach. But it seems too much today, and he can't remember why he came.

Jack almost dropped the canister of gasoline more than once. The handle became slippery with his perspiration and stray drops of the liquid. Gasoline splattered on the benches and pooled beneath them. He set the canister on the dock and sat beside it. He could have gone home, but he couldn't stop thinking about Chase Meyers' smile when the club board approved his application. Keeping him out never presented a problem in the past, back when he'd pissed off most of the then-reigning officials in some capacity or another. The new board protested that he'd cleaned up, but leeches never stop being leeches. If Jack hadn't done it, someone else would have. And Jack wanted to be the one.

Chase moved to Eastie in the 1970s, newlywed and devoid of purpose. The neighborhood boys tolerated him to catch a glimpse of his wife, a statuesque girl from Nova Scotia with an unnatural flair for car repairs. Her name was Belinda, but they called

her Katherine, because she looked liked the actress and because she was too good for any of them, especially Chase. When she wised up and moved home, Chase settled into a cycle of petty crime and handy work with an obstinate pride.

“You know the thing I love about East Boston?” he once told Jack, a wry smile creeping over his leather-tan face. “Everybody wants something. And they make no bones about it.”

The comment chilled Jack, even then. Much as he hated to admit it, though, Chase fixed a wiring problem in half the time as anyone else. Between his prowess for electrical repairs, dealing, and his ability to put back a reputable amount of Bushmills, he found an unlikely, sturdy niche in the neighborhood. He was in his early sixties now, not much younger than Jack, but his lush blonde hair made him appear more youthful. The younger members of the boat club—former clients of Chase’s, often enough— liked his social disregard and the fact that their parents found him vile.

Jack lit the match, remembering the smile, that obstinate pride. He couldn’t wait for the blaze. But when the flame snaked upwards like a terrifying vine, some animal let loose, Jack realized that he had never seen fire before this. Reflected in the water, it looked like a gaping wound into which Jack would fall if he stuck around and about which he would dream when he finally fell asleep that night.

Heavenly Hell enters the track, a hot pink blanket draped over her back to keep her muscles from cramping. Her coat is the color of burnt coffee, her gait somewhere between a slog and a trot. She kicks up the dirt with each step as if she hardly requires the ground at all, her black eyes hard enough to nail down the wind.

“12-1,” Lester gestures to the polite scoreboard, so immobile it could be pinned to some invisible wall. “How much are you pinning on her?”

“A hundred.”

“Jesus, buddy.”

“I don’t know she’ll win, I’m not that naive.”

Eli came with him, that last July day he was alive. He’d been coming out more, off the shit for a month at that point. Eli had picked a rookie horse from Delaware. As she trampled the finish line, two lengths beyond any other horse, Eli leaned against the bench, wan and content. Easy, even.

“Fucking A,” Jack had said. “Good work.”

“I guess so.”

“Not easy.”

“It’s just a race.”

“Don’t say that to any of the other guys here. Go ahead. Enjoy it.”

“All right,” Eli said. “I will.”

The content young man set one ankle atop the opposite knee and stretched, like someone relieved to find himself awake and unharmed after a nightmare. He had paid Chase with the winnings later that day.

Heavenly Hell lines up with the other horses at the post. The polite scoreboard, so immobile it could be pinned to some invisible wall, displays her odds. Only seven choose her to win, and some of those might be the two little girls with their parents, clad almost entirely in shades of pink. The Vegas champion earns the inside lane. That one has never

stalked; he's Ivy League. But Ivy fails to notice that a horse like Heavenly Hell is a little crazy, the perfect portion of an addictive drug. Jack feels a little crazy himself, these days.

In the third furlong, she advances, ready to open up her gallop. The middle of the pack does not frighten her. They might need to replace that jockey after she kills this distance, because he does nothing for her, the kind of kid who drinks diet soda to meet his weight requirement instead of water. He's poised well, but not tensed, not hungry like Heavenly Hell. She navigates without him, like an ice pick through the dense pack.

Walter returns. He sits and shakes his head. The starling feather in his hat catches the light from outside.

"Sounds like someone lit up Michael's boat last night."

"What?" Lester says.

"A fire."

Jack sits up. "Michael's boat?"

"Almost ignited Chase's boat, too," Walter replies.

"What a shame," Lester says.

Jack clears his throat.

"I'm going to get some air."

Lester stands.

"Me too."

They sit on one of the first row benches, about fifty yards left of the starting gate. The alert sounds. Heavenly Hell leaves last, no bullet or fanfare to jog the crowd's faith in her. King's Men hugs the inside and pulls in front, but he's pulling and the jockey is

growing anxious. He realizes that Heavenly Hell stopped stalking sometime between the last race and today. Today she waits, ready to do her own dirty work.

“When did you do it?”

“Around 2 AM,” he gulps. “It wasn’t supposed to be Michael.”

“Why anyone?”

Jack always considered them on the same par, but Lester knew how to be honorable. Too well, maybe, but he knew. How had he done it? How had Amy? He considers telling Lester the intended target, but even that makes no sense to him anymore. The retaliation felt as foolish. A burned boat meant nothing to people like Chase, just ashes in the water. Another thing to replace.

“I had this stupid idea,” Jack says. “That I could put someone in his place.”

The dead heat between Heavenly Hell and King’s Men lasts a second, maybe less. She pulls past him.

“Doesn’t seem like you.”

“I didn’t think so either.”

“Have you told Miri?”

“I will.”

Heavenly Hell’s finish is clean, almost a length faster than Native Player, the runner-up, and King’s Men, who falls to show. Even in the winner’s circle, adorned with a thick wreath of yellow roses, she seems unrestrained. The starting gun released her from more than the gate. It’s over now. She won’t go back.

“Well, look at that,” Lester says. “You won.”

THE BEAUTIFUL LIFE

Miri leans decides in front of the pastry case that, by and large, the quality of buttercream in East Boston has gone downhill. Thirty years ago, everyone had opinions about which bakery was the best-- neighborhood kids didn't know their times tables but they could write speeches for the president on why Spinelli's made a better buttercream than Antonia's--a bakery that couldn't produce good buttercream didn't stand a chance back then. But at some point the Italian population dwindled and the owners aged, handing the businesses to younger generations who didn't understand the methods, or businessmen who balked at the cost of quality ingredients. Spinelli's and a few other good places in Orient Heights survived. Maybe the others stayed afloat by virtue of their novelty, weary testimonials to an earlier generation of immigrants. Richie's friend Patrick inherited his grandmother's shop and, though the man couldn't bake a cake to save his life, he couldn't bear the thought of another fucking taco joint.

"Put that away." She pushes Malcolm's credit card away from the cashier's outstretched hand. "Use mine, please, miss."

"You can't buy your own birthday cake." Malcolm turns to the thin girl behind the counter. "Take mine."

"It's already been paid for," the girl says flatly.

"Richie," Miri shakes her head. "Figures."

Malcolm smiles. "Someone had to beat you to the punch. I'll go get the car. Can you handle the cake?"

"Come on."

"Sorry." He pauses at the door and smiles for the first time. "Stupid question."

The girl retrieves a large white box from the metal racks in front of the kitchen doors.

"Twelve inch sheet, devil's food with raspberry buttercream?"

"That's the one."

Outside, Miri sets the cake on an adjacent newspaper dispenser. The streetlights come on. In the bustling Ecuadorean restaurant across the street, a stocky bus boy heaves a bin of dishes from one table to the next, collecting half-eaten plates of empanadas and fried plantains. The few trees underneath the lifted freeway between Spinelli's and Miri's street have lost their leaves. Soon the dry winter will chip away, never destroy, the curbs and foundations of Maverick Square, as if the buildings were destined for a comfortable stage of disrepair. The 1A overpass—looming above the Wood Island T station and flowing into the Boston— will shake under the weight of rush-hour commuters, left brittle by December's below-freezing wind chills. She'll have to unpack the heavy coats next week.

But this time of day has been her favorite since she moved here with Lester and mother. She likes the way the sky and ground press against each other, until everything melts into the blue. Shadowed storefronts slice into the still-blushing clouds, the ground cools and the city lingers in a doorway.

It was the time of day she used to arrive home from work, a secretarial job at a law firm in Cambridge. She first conceived of it after the kids had entered middle school, bored by the prospect of churning through recipes for pineapple molds and smoking Camels on the back steps. When Jack's promotion at the airport failed to come through, she jumped at the newspaper listing. It was a small operation and she was hired to work

for the only woman on staff. Joanna Beals was the daughter of an appeals court judge out in Braintree and held a J.D. from Boston College. She was a wry, sharp woman who began at the firm serving tea and shortbread to the partners and finally—after threatening to quit—was provided the opportunity to practice. “They’d never seen a woman look so cool,” she told Miri on a cigarette break once, describing the day she tendered her immediate resignation.

Under different circumstances, she and Joanna might have been better friends. But they understood that most talk amongst women looked like gossip, an impression that would keep Joanna out of the courtroom longer than the tedious memos the partners still placed on her desk. It didn’t matter. Miri thrilled at the sense of responsibility for words and meanings, the morning walk through throngs of university students on their way to class, the clack of her shoes against the wood floors of the office. At dusk, the T carried Miri home, barreling along the tracks like a zealous animal. She felt always in the doorway then, a peripheral, easy occupant of both rooms.

She leans against the brick exterior of the building. At the corner, a couple men sulk just outside of a streetlight’s glare. She moves into the dull glow emanating from the bakery. The girl slides ownerless white boxes from the metal racks and into the large, silver fridges for the night. She takes the cake from the dispenser and rounds the corner to wait for Malcolm. As she passes into the shadow, something warm brushes against her elbow. Her purse pulls, as if snagged. She stumbles. The cake slips from her grasp and lands flat. She turns. The bulky, denim-clad man she encounters pulls at the purse. She grasps the leather strap. He grips her shoulder, his large fingers digging into her shoulder blade and collarbone. He pushes her against the jagged brick corner of the bakery.

Miri worried about plenty of things growing up in East Boston—getting a hook stuck in her hand when she and Lester went fishing, Jack and the kids—but not this. She thinks of Mary Collins, the wife Jack’s favorite co-worker, who got mugged a few years back. Her credits cards, pictures of her grandchildren, a bracelet belonging to her mother had all been taken with such force, such ease-- as if those things had never belonged to her in the first place. Over coffee Mary recalled, stoically, the sensation of blood sinking to her heels, anchoring her to the cement. When they caught the man, she learned that he was a neighborhood boy who grew up two streets over. His mother frequented the same hair salon as Mary. Miriam offered her more tea and a sympathetic tilt of the head. True, ferocious empathy was harder to summon. Muggings happened everywhere. She always imagined that in her case it would look different and that her assailant wouldn’t seem so ridiculous. She felt incapable of steeping in fear, the way Mary had, until her purse or dignity or life entered the offender’s grasp. More than anything else, though, she imagined her own triumph over him, a precise defense. But that confident dream holds no sway here.

Her knees shake. The leather of her purse grows slippery with sweat. He seems larger with each pull, not like a person but a mass that grows and consumes without feeling. How could she counter a mass? How could she transform him into a human again?

“Go away,” she grunts.

He says nothing.

“Go away!”

She loops the purse string around her forearm and tries to push him away. He slaps her. She stumbles back, catches her balances and kicks between his legs. He

sputters and hunches. She kicks him again, straining a muscle in her hip. Waiters and patrons emerge from the restaurants. The violator peers out from beneath his stringy hair. She serves him a final, solid kick that pushes him to the ground. The bus boy across the street sprints to them and pins the man to the ground.

She brushes off her skirt, breathless, and straightens.

"Oh my God, are you okay?" the thin girl from the bakery runs outside. "I just called the police, ma'am. Are you okay?"

"Ma?" Malcolm parks hastily, running half the car on to the curb. "Jesus. What happened?"

Miri takes a deep breath and sets her hand atop the undisturbed white box. "Don't worry. Cake's fine."

—

"Are you sure you don't want to go to the hospital?" Malcolm asks as they go upstairs to the kitchen. Miri and Jack own the entire house, which breaks down into two distinct apartments, one atop the other. When the kids were little and money was tight, they rented out the bottom apartment to make a little extra on the side. Miri welcomed the break from the other neighborhood women, often taking mid-morning breaks from her errands to invite the current tenant up for a cup of coffee and a stelladora biscuit.

"For this?" she points to the miniature Snoopy band-aid that covers the small cut across her cheek, given to her by the paramedic team. "This is a papercut."

"It really is." Malcolm peers at her cheek. "That's embarrassing, Ma, for an assault."

A joke. In all the speedy, formal phone conversations over the past four years,

he'd offered plenty of half-chuckles in response to her jokes, but never made any of his own.

"I'm more formidable than you give me credit for."

"Formidable." He laughs.

"How about that coffee? We don't have to be at Jeveli's for another forty-five minutes."

"I'll get it."

"Don't be silly. Have a seat. I'll bring it to you."

He places his hands on her shoulders. She flinches, the weight of the other man's fingers still fresh. He backs away.

"Would you just let me make you a cup of coffee?"

Between bites of a Stelladora biscuit, Miri realizes that it could be Jack towering over the ancient coffee pot. Malcolm has the same sloping, heavy shoulders and he stands with his weight distributed equally between both legs. One hand looks like a club, concealing the entire sugar spoon handle; the other, though, darts across the countertop like a well-skipped rock, picking up napkins and sugar cubes with a confidence that Miriam seems to have acquired in halting, awkward jolts over the years. It took at least three Christmases for her to live down what Jack long referred to as the "Crunch Surprise", a bundt cake into which Miri cooked two separate egg shells. When the kids were still young, clamoring through the house like free-swinging anchors, Miriam made huge sheet cakes two, three times a week from the store-bought boxes. For special occasions, they indulged in spongy store cakes. When there was some extra money, she bought a small decorating kit from Dennis Reid's dollar store, struggling for more than an

hour with the cheap plastic frosting tips before she could craft something resembling the rose on the back of the mustard yellow box. The kids joked that she had designed them with a pair of hedge clippers-- "if they are, in fact, flowers, Ma." But everyone knew that all frosting flowers tasted the same.

Malcolm sets one mug in front of Miri as she combs through her wallet, pulling out old receipts and pictures. "I just want to make sure it's all here."

He holds up a picture of three teenagers crowded on to a yellow beach blanket. "Is this you?"

"Yes."

"How old are you here?"

"Nineteen."

"You were still sick."

"I was."

"Did you ever wear a wig?"

"For your grandmother, sometimes. She hated seeing me like that." She laughs.

"But the wigs back then were terrible. They smelled like gasoline and they were made for stage actors, not bald people. I had this awful red helmet-hair one that was stiff as wood. I refused to wear it half the time we were out in public."

"So, Nana didn't take this picture."

"God, no. Now that I think about it, she told me not to go that day. I think it was your Uncle Lester who took this. It must have been, because there's your godmother, Linda next to me on the towel. Linda's brother, Patrick, next to her. God, he loved that surfboard." She laughs. "They called me Eight Ball all summer."

"You must have felt awful."

"Not that afternoon, no. The day before. The day after. The day after that. Etcetera. But this was a good day. I think they all thought it might be the last time I'd make it to Revere." She had been tired and content that day, surrounded by the coral stripes of her suit, the crunch of ginger candy wrappers in her pocket, the warm, briny Atlantic wrapping over her scalp when she submerged.

"You look pretty, Ma."

"I felt pretty." She stirs a cube of sugar into her tea. "I felt very beautiful."

"It really was clear." Malcolm squints. "I can see some of the houses on Nahant."

"They're big enough. Your father heard that one was going for two million."

"I bet it's that big one on the tip."

"This?" She points at a white house with walls surrounding the sides of it.

"Yeah?"

"You've been there."

"No, I haven't."

"You were two, maybe three. The owner's dog had a litter of puppies and advertised it in one of the locals. Well, Katherine and her daughter, Agnes-- you remember Agnes, sweet girl, hangs out on the street corners too much now-- were going to pick out a puppy and invited us to come along."

"I spilled grape juice on the carpet."

"You remember."

"Not the house. Just the carpet. It was slate blue, until the grape juice. Then all the dogs started barking."

"That's right."

She sips her coffee. "So. You might move back to Boston."

"BU is my first choice."

"Medical school. Unbelievable."

"Trust me, I'm more surprised than you."

"What made you decide?"

He sighs and traces the mouth of his mug. "It's not enough, being an EMT. I can't do enough. I want to see them put back together."

She nods. What a heady task, putting a person back together.

"It's almost time to go." He slides the picture back into the wallet.

"I need to wash up."

"I can pick up Richie and come back."

"That sounds fine."

She collects her purse and pauses at the door to the hallway. "I'm glad you're here."

"Me too," he says. "Are you okay?"

"Sure," she says. "I'm alive."

In the bathroom down the hallway, Miriam rinses her face. Water splashes on once-fashionable mint tile and gauzy, yellowing curtains, unobtrusive and tedious as if their failure to offend is enough to impress.

She runs her fingers through her hair, thin and downy and the color of smoke now. Like stunt-hair standing in for the real thing. A red bruise forms on her shoulder, another around the cut on her cheek. Her body has recorded the violence, the electricity of an

instant that sees departure and return. A pink, rubber eraser comes to mind, the kind her children used for school. They hunched over the kitchen table, scrubbing at misspelled words until the table shook and the paper peeled. It's tempting, the prospect of pressing so hard. She dabs the scratch with a wet wash cloth—just a miswritten letter, a pale mistake. She worries she will dream of him, the speechless mass. That she will jolt from sleep, sweaty and unanswered. The prospect sits in her stomach like a stone. She has to get it out.

That day, before they left for the beach, mother had shoved the wig into Miri's hands. "You'll upset people," she whispered, eyes narrowed. Mother hadn't understood the freedom that came with baldness, with shedding the broken parts of herself. She hadn't understood that Miri felt sicker in hospitals, surrounded by people who didn't see a difference between the tireless delay of death and the preservation of life, than she did curled on the bottom of the family's tiny bathroom, heaving over the toilet or curled against the soft terrycloth bathmat that squeaked when she moved, or leaning into the cool compresses her mother held. She imagined, with every strand that fell and every heave, that the cancer was leaving her body, that purity brought strength.

From the first wooden drawer below the sink, Miri pulls Jack's electric razor. So often she hears it from the hallway or the bedroom, when doors and distance soften its hum. Up close it seems to whirr with a sharp readiness. Miri starts with a small piece of hair on the left side. It trembles and falls. She guides it over the feathery top until she feels the cool razor against her scalp. She shaves the tucked patches behind her ears. Grey tufts descend on to her shoulders like snow. Before the cancer, her mother used to sweep Miri's hair up into a bow and proclaim it "roasted chestnut", the color she forever sought

but never seemed to find in box hair dye.

Miri directs the razor from the top of her forehead to the back of her head, until only a few clumps remain at the nape of her neck. Bending chin to chest, she guides the razor over them until she can feel a draft. When it is done, she flushes the hair. She slides down the wall, rubbing her head against the towels, listening to the squeak of the bathroom mat. She smiles.

“They’ll think I’m crazy,” she murmurs to herself. “Totally and completely crazy.”

When Jack arrives home, she is in the bedroom, changing into her dress. The door creaks. She spins and slips a button into place. In the doorway, he stops. He seems smaller, greyer, like the cold stretched him too thin. She sits on the bed.

He looks the same as he did the day the Lockheed-Electra went down in the harbor. She had heard the blast after the boys went down for the night. From the front stoop, she could only see smoke. Others emerged from their houses, still holding the props of a sleepy Tuesday evening—a wooden spoon, a dripping mop, an issue of Life Magazine. At first, she thought a bomb had detonated, that the USSR had finally bitten down. After she called Lester to look after the babies, it took her two hours to find him. She combed through rescue crews and emergency personnel. She knew, of course, that he had not been on the plane. But the whole neighborhood had tumbled into a sprawling nightmare, the aftershocks of which she could not know. Blisters covered her heels when she spotted him. They fucked that night without rhythm, the best suture they could manage. Malcolm was born nine months later.

“What do you think?” she asks, the top half of her dress still hanging around her

waist.

He leans against the frame. “You shaved your head.”

She nods.

“Why?”

“It’s a long story,” she sighs. “Do you like it?”

“Do you?”

She straightens and runs her hands over the smooth surface. “Yeah.”

Jack sits next to her on the bed and leans back on his elbows. His fine features melt into shadow. “It’s going to be a hell of a dinner.”

Miri gives an honest, quiet laugh. “That’s true.”

“You know,” Miri says. “I thought you’d be a little more surprised.”

“Surprises are all I know to expect from you.”

She lies on her side facing him, head propped. “It’s not like you’ve never seen it before.”

He follows suit. “I remember you then.”

“How do you remember me?”

“You looked like a lit candle. I was afraid to touch you.”

“But you did.”

He touches her cheek. “I did.”

“Do you regret it?”

“Once or twice,” he jokes. She slaps his arm.

She turns and curls against his chest. “When are you going to tell me where you went last night?”

His breathe catches. He swallows. "I set a boat on fire."

She flips to face him again. "You what?"

"I thought I did it for a good reason."

She stands without answering and goes to the dresser. She finishes buttoning her dress and fastens a thin, silver bracelet. Jack had never done anything like that before. She unwraps a new band-aid.

"Maybe we've outgrown this place."

"Eastie?"

She nods. "Maybe we're done here," she says, and seals the cut.

SEVEN

A half-smoked pack of cigarettes peeked from Papa's shirt pocket as he bent to adjust the Nikon. A few slid out. He didn't notice. The camera still refused to do anything but whirr pitifully atop its wobbly tripod. The four of us, posed on the skinny cement walkway that ran the width of the yard, shuffled against another.

Ma leaned out the kitchen window holding a perspiring Arnold Palmer. "Why are you setting it up out there? I don't want a picture of that stupid hose, Jack."

"They've been in the mud all day," he quipped. "They're practically wearing camouflage."

She gave us all the once-over. "Good point."

Though we had been promised a trip to Salem that day, we spent the last afternoon of summer lounging in the backyard. Papa insisted that the trip wait until he had figured out the Nikon he bought on sale the week before. He presented the black and silver camera to us over lunch, too excited to finish his chicken salad.

"Just one picture," he had promised. "I'll have it working in no time."

An hour later, we had grown restless. Popsicle residue left our fingers sticky and our tongues stained. Each time we sat or griped, Papa assured us that he had it figured this time. He would puff his cigarette, adjust a dial and summon us to a standing position. The fourth time around, I refused to stand. I felt weak and irritable, as if I'd stayed in a hot bath too long.

Ma came outside, her Sunday flats clicking against the back steps. "Let me try."

Papa raised his hand. "I've got it."

She glowered. Hand to her hip, she slipped between him and the camera like a stiff breeze. He retreated, too startled to stop her. She adjusted a dial on top, pointed the camera at him—an unlit cigarette dangling from his lips—and clicked. The camera clicked and purred. She would later display that photograph at dinner parties, telling the story of how she learned to use Papa’s camera before he knew the lens from the strap.

“Alright,” she said to me. “Up.”

Amy and Richie squished together in the middle. Malcolm and I, the two tallest, stood on the outsides.

I nudged Richie with my elbow. “Move over.”

He nudged back. “I’ll be out of the picture.”

“Someone get down in front,” Ma ordered. Richie, Malcolm and I all looked at our shoes, unwilling to budge. “And act as though you like each other.”

Amy picked a twig from her hair and squatted in front of us. She sighed. “Boys.”

As Ma reset the camera, I saw him. He was grey and pudgier than most starlings. Maybe the other neighborhood kids had been feeding him too much bread. I knew better. They couldn’t get off the ground if they ate too much.

He was caught in two of the lower branches. He thrashed, frantic and unabashed, against the bark. His legs would break if he kept flailing like that.

I flew towards the tree. The camera clicked. I pulled myself to his branch so fast the bark scraped my knees. I slipped, and pulled up again. As I reached to loosen his trap, he wriggled free. Without hesitation, he careened into the hazy sky like an arrowhead seeking a target. I remained in the tree, clutching my scraped, sticky knees and waiting to be called down.

OPEN WATER

Amy arrives at Ma and Papa's at the same time as Richie and Hannah. She's late. After work, she had gone home to leave another bar for the dog. She slides into the parking space behind their Ford SUV, a parallel parking aficionado at this point. Hannah emerges from the passenger seat of the other car and the girls from the back. Amy has always liked Hannah— her straight-forwardness, her ability to check Richie's crudeness with a single, easy look. When she gives him that look at family events, Papa laughs, pats her on the back and says, "Stern but fair. Stern but fair."

The house looks lived in, even from the outside—tall, narrow and weathered. Scuff marks from shoes and canes and scooters mar the foundation. Dried paint specks from hasty home improvement endeavors spatter the concrete steps and external window sills. Amy looks at line of sleepy houses that seem to extend outward from this point. They have their own scrapes and bruises. For the longest time, Amy thought their scuffed, speckled house was the only one in the world.

She locks her car and goes to meet the others. Olive looks taller, her neck more graceful without long hair. She has reached that physical limbo, where singular features unfold at different paces, without regard for the others. But her soft, childish face has melted into smooth planes. Her angular nose cuts down to her small lips and chin—more English like her mother than Irish like her father. Amy hugs her first.

"Your hair," she says, touching the ends. "Looks beautiful."

"I don't like it."

"It really suits you," Amy says. "You gotta take off this red cap, though. Stop hiding it!"

Olive smiles and pulls off the cap. Anna burrows between them and presses herself against Amy's stomach.

"Papa said you moved again."

"I did." Amy sets her hands on her hips. "What about it?"

Olive looks up. "I liked your old apartment."

When the girls come over on Sundays, they lie stomach-down on the carpet, singing with the Von Trapps or hollering at John Wayne.

"Well, I didn't. Not enough, anyway."

Anna makes a face. Amy makes one back. Olive frowns. "So you just left?"

"It wasn't right for me."

Olive crosses her arms. Her new, pale features grow pale. "Can we still come over?"

"You can always come over," Amy reassures her. "The apartment changes. The ice cream doesn't."

Hannah swings her purse over her shoulder and gives Amy a hug. "They're sassy, aren't they?"

Amy shrugs. "Can't fight genetics."

Richie comes for his hug last, a long one. He looks drawn, his eyes sunken beneath his thick, dark brows. He catapults from the embrace, seemingly rejuvenated and puts his hands on his hips.

"How's the new place?" he asks. "What's wrong with this one?"

"I don't know yet," Amy says, snickering. "You have to give me some credit."

“I’ll bring the truck over this weekend, all right? I’ll sleep in it and whenever you’re ready, you just start tossing boxes out the window.”

“I’m surprised you want to wear that shirt in public,” Amy counters, noting the yellow and black plaid button-down. “Is it bumblebee day?”

The front door of the house creaks. Hannah turns, but instead of a smile, her face melts to a frown.

Ma crows from the front step. “Hello!”

Amy turns, but a stranger stands in the doorway. A crazy, bald stranger.

“Ma?”

“Come in,” Ma says. “Malcolm just brought the food. We don’t want it to get cold.”

The group ascends the steps slowly, little glossy packages in hand.

Miri sets her hands on Olive’s shoulders. “Well, look at that. We both got our hair cut.”

—

Inside, Amy finds her father in the bedroom. His favorite Sox t-shirt sits neatly folded on the lounge beside the window, beneath the lilac curtains. He sits on the edge of the old, marshmallow-soft bed, the one Amy used to climb into when no one else was home. His wet hair falls across his forehead as he slides deodorant beneath the sleeves of his blue, short-sleeve button-down. The room smells of Old Spice. Above the bed’s headboard hangs a single, gold-plated cross, a wedding gift for her parents from the father Reynolds at St. Mary’s. When Amy moved out for college, her parents had all but stopped going to church. Ma excised that from the Sunday morning ritual—9 AM service

and one hot-crossed bun for everyone from Betty Ann's bakeshop after that—when Eli died.

Papa gestures to the cross. "She still goes, sometimes. Not a lot. Just sometimes."

"Not very Catholic," Amy says. She pauses. "But Papa, what did she do to her hair?"

He reaches into the dresser for a pair of navy socks. "I don't know. I came home and she'd done it."

"Is she losing it or something?"

"I thought that, too," he says, and overturns his palms. "But she's clear as ever. Clearer."

He goes to the closet and pulls a suitcase from the top shelf.

"What's that?" Amy asks.

"Just airing it out," he says. "We're trying to clean up the house a little."

As he hunches to drag it across the floor, she notices a familiar curve to his back. His wrist bends against the edge of the suitcase, tense and strong. His hair falls into his focused, ruddy face. The fire had been his.

She leans against the doorframe. "Papa?"

"Yeah?"

He looks up, cheeks red from the pulling. His body looks stiff and harried, like a locomotive in hot weather with no choice but to keep pressing against the heat. She wants to ask why, but the words lodge in her throat. And what end would questions serve?

"Never mind," Amy says. "Come get some food soon, huh?"

—

After dinner, Lester and Papa take their Budweisers to the living room to watch the rest of the Celtics game. Ma rises, cake still in her mouth. Her green dress swishes against her knees and her scalp reflects light like glass. The years of fighting seem sapped from her body, leaving only skin and light. Maybe Papa was right. She erects her index finger to pause the conversation and scurries into the sitting room next to the kitchen. She pulls a dusty Polaroid camera from the table next to the cushy lounger, where Papa watches TV and fixes small things like watches and remotes.

“Let’s get a picture of the four of you,” Ma says, gesturing to Richie and Hannah and the girls. “The last one I have is that Christmas picture.” She points to Malcolm, who looks up from the shoebox of photographs that he’s been combing through. “You’re next. Don’t even get me started on how few photos we’ve got of *you*.”

Anna climbs like a monkey to Richie’s lap. He kisses her hair. Hannah stiffens in her chair. Olive slumps on the floor against Hannah’s legs, her mouth smiling, her eyes un-creased. The Polaroid flashes, whirs and ejects. Ma sets the picture on the window sill, waiting for the family to develop.

Hannah stands. “I’m going to have a cigarette.”

Amy follows. “I’ll join you.”

They sit in the rusty lawn chairs that languish just beyond the concrete back steps. Hannah trembles as she pulls the pack of Marlboros from her bag.

Amy reaches for the bag; purple suede with gold riveting and zippers. “Is this new?”

“Yep,” Hannah takes a drag. “I miss reporting, but the editor salary never gets old.”

“I’m just surprised. You had the red one for so long.”

“You don’t have to beat around the bush, Amy.”

Hannah looks up. Her eyes seem bigger, deeper. She wears the same downcast mouth that Eli’s old girlfriend, Shelley, did the first and only time Amy met her. That day, when they had knocked, Amy could hear Shelley’s heels clap loud against the floorboards inside. She opened the door with that same, stiff mouth, as if she had something to say. When she saw Amy, she raised her eyebrows.

“This your sister?”

“Yeah,” Eli leaned in to kiss her. She did not move. “Amy, Shelley. Shelley, Amy.”

Shelley’s mouth softened. “Come on in.”

Later, after Shelley had poured Amy a Coke, Eli stood. He stretched, his hip bones protruding like knives from beneath his black jeans.

“Where’re you going?” Shelley asked.

“Cigarettes,” Eli replied. “Back in a jiffy.”

Amy felt she should apologize—for being left alone with someone who had clearly not expected her, for imposing on the beautiful apartment with dandelion yellow curtains and porcelain plates hanging on the wall. Instead, she complimented Shelley’s nail polish.

“It’s called Peach Dream,” Shelley smiled. “I’m good at manicures. You want to try it?”

Shelley had cool, dark hands; not cold, though. Maybe a coat or two of Peach Dream would grow Amy’s nails, make her that cool and beautiful.

As she applied the white-orange liquid, Shelley looked up at Amy. “Your brother’s been gone a while.”

“That’s his way, I guess.”

“His way,” she chuckled. She stopped painting. “You know what he’s doing out there?”

Amy met her gaze. “Yes.”

Shelley took up the painting again. “Smart girl.”

She had not seen Shelley again after that.

Amy leans on her knees. The night breeze hisses at her bare calves.

“Sorry,” she says. “But what the hell is going on?”

Hannah sighs, the deep uncomfortable kind. “I moved out. I took the girls.”

Amy says nothing.

“He thinks there was someone else,” Hannah continues. “And there was someone, sort of. I went out to dinner with him once. But he was just an excuse.”

“When are you going to tell my parents?”

“I don’t know,” she says, frowning. “I’m trying to get Olive and Anna on track first.”

“They seem okay. Anna, in particular.”

“What if they never forgive me?”

“For what?”

“Breaking their family.”

“It’s not like you did it for kicks.”

“Right,” she picks up the bag and lifts a few strands of her hair. “But new stuff doesn’t help them.”

“It’s change. That’s good.”

“Changing things, though— doesn’t mean a thing unless you know why. It’s just changing for the hell of it. We need better than that. Better is what I wanted when I left.”

Hannah removes her patent leather shoes and runs her feet through the grass, halting at the ant hills and weeds. “I’m sorry to put this on you,” Hannah says. “I’ve been a little selfish, lately.”

Amy shrugs. “My mother just shaved her head. My father’s okay with it. It’s been a weird night.”

“Fair enough,” Hannah laughs. “I’m going inside. Get the girls rounded up.”

She slips into her shoes. The rivets of her purse gleam like eyes beneath the porch lamp and she disappears inside. Amy leans back. The rubber slats of the lawn chair bend to accommodate the curve of her back. She stretches like a cat and, her head tilted against the metal bar at the top of the chair, imagines a fire that engulfs the entire backyard.

When Richie and Hannah have left, she goes inside. Her mother and Malcolm file through old pictures at the table. Half an hour ago, dirty plates and boxes littered the table and the counter space. But what her mother lacks in cooking skills, she makes up for in cleaning abilities—the only reminder of the messy, loud dinner is the overturned salt and pepper shakers next to the napkin dispenser.

“So, medical school, huh?” Amy pats her brother’s shoulders.

“We’ll see. I still have the interview,” he sighs.

“I hope you move back,” Amy says. “I think Richie’s getting pretty sick of helping me move, anyway.”

Malcolm turns. His face lifts. “Have you seen this picture?”

He hands Amy grayish-green Polaroid of her and him in the backyard. Malcolm’s hands disappear behind his back. Amy’s hang by her sides, clenched.

“What do you have there?” Ma squints.

“Potato bread,” Amy says, as she realizes. “For that stupid terrier.”

Malcolm laughs. “What a grouchy little son-of-a-bitch.”

Ma crosses her arms, mouth agape. “I knew we didn’t go through a loaf that fast. I knew it. I just thought it was Richie, sneaking slices after dinner.”

The three sit in silence. Malcolm breaks it.

“I bought Papa a plane,” Malcolm says.

Ma’s eyes widen. “You did not.”

Amy raises an eyebrow. Malcolm pulls a small, plastic plane from his pocket and sets it between the salt and pepper. They laugh.

“Let me see that,” Amy says. She smiles at the toy, at its simplicity and its size. It could take off from her hands. She hands it to him. “Go give it to him.”

“No, it’s stupid. I had a real gift. I’ll mail that.”

She sets her hand on his forearm. “Give him the plane,” she urges. “He’ll want it.”

Malcolm frowns at the thing, still dissatisfied. Ma nods and shoos him to the living room. Halfway down the hallway, he turns and shakes the thing at Amy as if to say, “This was your idea.” He disappears into the sitting room for the first time in years.

Ma collects the last mugs of half-drunk coffee and rinses them in the sink.

Without turning, she says, “You’ve gotten older.”

Amy props her chin on her palm. “You think so?”

“I can tell you don’t know it yet. But you have.”

She wants to ask Ma where she and Papa are going, and why he set the fire. She wants to run up and hug her, apologize about the apartments, cry about Eli, tell her about Hannah and Richie, wonder together about Malcolm and Dad. It all bubbles to the surface like a pot of hot water. But she remains at the table, chin propped, tracing circles in spilt pepper. The feeling is enough.

—

After she arrives home, Amy goes to the bedroom and pulls *The Trial* from her messenger bag. From the box in the kitchen, she pulls another granola bar and slides it into her back pocket.

She takes the stairs instead of the elevator to the lobby, lingering with the book like a departing lover. The thing has grown soft and pliable, the edges feathery. Scratches and the tear tarnish its cover illustration— an abstract, white and coffee-brown woodcut print of the courts. Despite the wear, it feels heavy as a stone.

The creak of the front door opening echoes in the small lobby. She peers into the dark. The granola bar is gone, but the dog is nowhere to be seen. She whistles, but the high pitch only carries so far, sinking into the blue shadows cast by streetlamps and bushes. Perhaps the pup went back to East Boston—would it take the tunnel or the 1A?— and settled behind the trashcans again. She whistles a second time, but the scratch of its paws remains a memory, a faint echo. Never mind. She still has business here. She turns

the corner to the alley where the dumpsters sit. Devon and Eli clamor inside the soft text, begging to remain by her bedside, in her messenger bag, at the blustery Wood Island station. But she shuts the cover and with a grunt, hurls the stone into one of the deep, metal mouths.

When she opens the door to her apartment, only the fluorescent light in the kitchen illuminates that room and the living area. She flicks the main switch, but the cheap overhead sparks out. The stacks of boxes and bags, tinged thin chartreuse by the kitchen light, squat and wait—for Amy to tear into them in search of the odd pan or book and, after some time, shuffled back into Richie’s flatbed truck, destined for a new place to squat and wait. Another night, Amy would bypass the piles. But she has no more macaroni to eat and no more margins to fill.

She selects a mid-sized cardboard box, the one she knocked over the other night. Scraps of U.S. Postal Service tape cover its sides. She peels the stale, clear masking tape from its top and lifts the flaps. Inside, dusty records and small pieces of art lean against one another.

Combing through the contents, she recovers the framed photograph of her and Richie and Malcolm. She searches the grainy picture for some trace of Eli. There had to be some gesture—some look that would reveal where Eli went that humid summer day, what pulled him away from them. But the answer was not there. Dead or alive, there were things he would never tell.

She focuses instead on the unattractive blue and orange striped shirt that Malcolm wore that day. It looked terrible on him. They all looked terrible: sweaty and red and mischievous, their whole lives stretched in front of them. Nothing seemed right about it,

besides its ability to be mocked. The longer Amy stares at the thing, the funnier it becomes. She smirks.

From another box labeled “tools”, she extricates her red, plastic Sherwin-Williams caddy. She taps a nail, slanted, into the wall between the windows that overlook the street and hangs the picture. She straightens it, but no amount of that changes the content. She laughs out loud at her dirty dress, Richie’s paunch, Malcolm’s eye, and the way the frame clashes with the unsightly blue wallpaper behind it—a full, belly-rocking laugh. But it seems confident in its place, obstinate almost. She leaves it.

From her window, she drops another granola bar to the sidewalk. She pulls a pile of blankets from a large refrigerator box. She cuts the top off that, sets it upside-down against the wall and lines it with blankets. Then she sets a Tupperware container of water next to it.

Despite the cold, she leaves the window up. She sits cross-legged on the floor and pulls the box on her lap to sort through the rest of the records and paintings—a scrapbook of places that she has forgotten or never knew in the first place. The box is heavy, though. She places it on the ground and listens for the scratch of paws against the sidewalk outside.