THESIS

THE DISCIPLE OF BECAUSE AND OTHER STORIES

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY NICOLE BACKENS ENTITLED THE DISCIPLE OF BECAUSE AND OTHER STORIES BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

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ABSTRACT
THE DISCIPLE OF BECAUSE AND OTHER STORIES

These six stories explore common notions of polite behavior, particularly social expectations in the Midwest. Here, women (and one man) of various ages feel pigeonholed into a set of anticipated actions that feel, ultimately, false. When faced with the crisis of choice, many of these characters sense a distinct tension between their own emotions and impulses and the decisions that are expected of them by their families and peers. These people—from an adolescent girl to an old woman to a teenaged boy—handle these crises in different ways, sometimes by defying convention, and at other times by approaching traditional roles with an almost frenzied, panicked enthusiasm, thereby reinventing such roles in often surprising ways.

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Introduction

Eventually, every writer must articulate—whether privately or publicly—a vision, exploring those recurring themes, characters, and situations that, for one reason or another, will not easily expire. Compiling a collection of short stories has proven to be a revealing act, in this case, as I have been asked to examine the thematic threads that run throughout these six pieces of short fiction, and to better understand and give voice to the forces that most compel me as a writer.

To put it simply, the characters in my stories have become unmoored from the social conventions that have guided them in the past. Often set in the Midwest, a place sometimes fraught with expectations of cordiality and non-confrontation (though perhaps no more than any other U.S. region), these stories examine how codes of conduct do serve a purpose at times but are, ultimately, too restrictive to apply to every human experience. My characters, though varying in concerns and personalities, must negotiate their instincts with social mores that have come, somehow, to feel artificial.

Most of the time, these characters are people who may know but have not internalized the saying, “Do what you want.” Either due to an overactive sense of guilt or a nagging impulse toward obligation and duty, the main characters in The Disciple of Because and Other Stories rarely allow themselves to be bad. These are women (and one man) who want to please others, who want, above all, not to stand out as unreasonable or,
even worse, as rebels to convention. However, at some level they seem to understand that these seemingly noble desires can become unhealthy, and that self-repression can serve as a slow poison.

I believe that the hub of these stories lies within my characters’ realizations that they are no longer content in their own self-assigned roles, and within the resulting actions that stem from such catharses. External changes in situation, many of them relatively minor, serve as catalysts for these people to decide whether or not they wish to continue living within the confines that have been dictated to them by their families, by their communities, and even by themselves. When, in “The Disciple of Because,” her family embarks on a quest to learn sign language, a wife and mother comes up against the family culture she herself has helped to create, where explanation is almost entirely absent and communication is superficial at best. She must, ultimately, make a choice: continue with the status quo, or partake in new and more authentic ways of connecting with those she loves.

Other characters in this collection have been in conflict between convention and instinct for many years leading up to the story’s beginning, as in “Radio Waves,” where a woman tries to suppress a time when grief allowed her to give in to impulse, only to be faced with these same impulses years later, once she has become firmly entrenched in what most would consider to be “proper” behavior. In “Carnivores,” a recently retired woman named Helen cannot seem to outrun her shameful past and current insecurities, as evidenced by the near-constant mockery she endures at the hands of her stepchildren. Though she tries each year to satiate her stepfamily’s tendency to ridicule her, it is never
quite enough, and upon retiring Helen adopts new and even bizarre tactics for dealing with her antagonists, eventually tapping into the power of self-caricature.

One of the stories in this collection, “Makeup,” concerns an elderly woman who must reconcile the fact that her mother’s death is devoid of redemption. Here, Beatrice reflects on the breadth of her relationship to a difficult parent, and her resulting frustrations allow her to confront what has, until now, been an almost unquestioning willingness to be a “good” daughter, mother, and grandmother. In contrast to this story, where a character looks backward in order to impact the present, two of the pieces included here focus on young people who are at the brink of developing their own patterns, their own codes of conduct that may or may not match up with greater societal expectations. In “Shy Girl,” Gina must decide on how she will control the building emotions and sense of isolation that arise from being clinically shy. She has reached a point in her life where she needs an outlet, and her reactions to this rising need inform the emotions she is trying to, in her own distinct way, express.

Similarly, Jay, the narrator in “The Titanic of Lake George,” is in the midst of a physical and emotional crisis after learning that his teenaged girlfriend is pregnant. At the crux of becoming a man, he must choose whether or not to immerse himself in behaviors that, to his thinking, embody a man’s traditional role at a time when the length of childhood is increasing, and staving off adulthood has become almost par for the course.

Though a great many things concern me in my fiction, I would have to say that my current vision centers on exploring the appeal—and even the necessity—of doing the “wrong” thing from time to time. My characters are often faced with somewhat straightforward right-or-wrong dilemmas, yet my role as author is, as I see it, to muddy
the playing field, to distort the reader’s own perceptions of what should be done so that, if I am successful, I can illuminate those points in life where we may choose to do the wrong thing, but for all the right reasons.
The Disciple of Because

While rinsing dinner plates Thursday evening Laura Westcott told her two children that once they became adults the Mayor of Language would float to them from a great oak tree in Ohio and grant them unlimited use of the word because. They would be free to use the word like a wand, without shame or explanation, and they would be encouraged to use it as an answer to questions, especially when the asker was a child and the question was “Wwhhyyyyy?”

“It happens to everybody,” Laura said, turning away from the sink and looking down at their baffled faces. She shrugged.

“It doesn’t! There is no Mayor of Language! That doesn’t happen!” the children yelled at once, tugging the edge of her shirt with their damp hands, laughing because they were together in their accusation and shrieking because they were frustrated. Laura was familiar with the argument: she had never, not once, not ever, provided them a practical explanation for anything at all. Their father was the same way, and Laura reasoned that adults had their own questions, millions of them. How could she fill a canvas for her children as well, provide a picture of the world they could be happy with? They should feel lucky their questions were so small.

“Mom, tell us really why the nurse checked our heads today at school,” Guy pleaded.
“Because.”

“You never tell.”

The children didn’t know why they had to take baths every night, why their hair kept growing no matter how many times it was cut, how the garage door knew to open right as the car was pulling into the driveway. Because. Laura imagined that, to the children, Because had become a malignant deity, a word distasteful to hear yet commanding of a strange respect. It was probably right up there with Beelzebub and Shit.

She turned off the faucet, squatted down so she was eye level with the children, and winked. “You’ll see. In this life you find things out for yourself.”

With that the children grunted their resignation and fled out of the house and into the spring evening, and a moment later Laura heard the blunt sounds of tetherball in the backyard.

She and Sam had not planned for their children, and there were still times when Laura was surprised at how direct the path leading her here seemed in retrospect, as if it had been inevitable, predestined, that she should have this life as a married mother. Guy and Rita were fraternal twins and finishing up the second grade at Goodson Elementary. Laura worked at the school as a math teacher for the fourth and fifth grades. They lived in New Paris, a small Iowa town known more for the diner that served enormous tenderloins and for its beef packing plant than for anything else.

Through time she had learned to summarize her children. Guy was smart and Rita had poor reading ability. Guy could kick a soccer ball that flew half a block; Rita had a way of falling out of trees. Guy’s red hair fell in straight curtains down each side of his
face; Rita’s was a wiry and uncombable mess of curls. Their sameness in age allowed Laura to divide them into polarities, gauging each child by what he or she lacked in terms of the other.

Sam worked as a postal carrier and was slowly going deaf in both ears. Though he would never explain the whole story, Laura did know that he had fallen through lake ice one winter night when he was seventeen. He’d been with friends who had managed— through new and piercing sobriety—to pull him out, saving his life, but they had been too late to prevent the icy water from seeping deep into Sam’s head, forever freezing the tiny mechanisms that turn vibrations into sound. Instead of healing over time, his inner ears were growing more solid in their dysfunction, and his audiologist predicted that within a year he would be completely deaf.

Each Christmas Day when the family watched *It’s a Wonderful Life* at Sam’s parents’ house, his mother Harriet made comments like, “I never thought someone could really lose their hearing that way,” or “Guess I’d be wise to believe what I see in the movies from now on.” Then she’d become teary—partially because she pitied Sam but mostly because it was Christmas—and rush into the kitchen to make a pot of coffee.

On Monday afternoon Laura drove Sam to the audiologist and flipped through old issues of *People* magazine in the chilly waiting room while Sam followed the nurse to a mysterious back room and underwent what she imagined were the usual metal probing and aural tests (Do you hear the beep now? How about now? Anything?). He didn’t speak until they were back in the car.
“Three things,” he began once they’d passed the Dairy Queen. “They say it’s time to start the three things. Sign language, lip reading, and enunciation exercises so that when I can’t hear myself talk I won’t sound like I have two tongues.” He was silent for a moment. “The lip reading doesn’t work. Just a bunch of wa-wa-waaaas, that’s all I see. Like Charlie Brown.”

Laura reached over and patted his thigh but didn’t speak. Already it was impossible for him to understand car conversations, and he refused to wear his hearing aid, claiming that it was uncomfortable and unhelpful. He wouldn’t drive unless absolutely necessary, and even then he avoided the interstate. Once, in a rare bout of explanation, he had told Laura how much listening has to do with driving. “If you can’t hear what’s going on, you start to think that all the other cars are honking at you.”

It was time to learn a new language, a different way of communicating with a man who had never communicated much anyway. Laura wondered if such a venture would have any foreseeable benefit, if it was really worth all the effort. But then she frowned and thought, Don’t be selfish, and looked over at poor Sam next to her in the car, Sam who had no way of knowing that George Harrison was singing “Something” on the radio at that very moment.

Before they picked the children up from the sitter’s, they did what they had long ago agreed to do once it became time: they went to the public library and checked out a set of six videotapes titled What’s That You Say? Sign Language and You.

Laura had met Sam fourteen years ago, during a dismal New Paris Fourth of July fireworks display when they were both twenty.
“Will you take a picture of my friends and me?” she had asked him, singling him out because he was tall and the only person standing in the beer line who didn’t seem lost in a sea of misery, cursing this park that had become all mediocre explosion and slow lines and no Miller Lite.

“What?” he responded softly.

“A picture?”

“What? I don’t hear well.”

“WILL YOU TAKE A PICTURE OF US?”

“Oh,” he had said, reaching out as she thrust her camera toward him. “Of course.”

It hadn’t taken her long to fall in love with his ailment. Sam was a real-life cowboy, a prudent monk, refusing the effort it took to banter meaningless words. Though Laura was ashamed to think it, she was sometimes jealous that she hadn’t met Sam before the accident, missed the possibility of seeing him on a gurney, his plastered hair wet and stiff, calling for her through bluish lips. Still, she imagined that her voice might be the thing that sang in his mind once his hearing had gone, that it would be what he chose to save once the world went silent forever.

Later, in the months before the wedding, Sam and Laura had thrown frequent dinner parties for friends at her apartment, all attempts at formality ruined by youth, the wine poured into coffee mugs and the Blue Bunny ice cream served still in the carton with scuffed spoons. Sam would sit in his recliner watching the other couples mingle and Laura would stare at him with wonder. “Are you thinking?” she would whisper before she went into the kitchen to blend another round of margaritas or replenish the vegetable tray. At that time she still believed his role as observer made him clever, hyper-aware of
surrounding frivolity. She knew even then not to ask what he was thinking, knew the answer would be elusive.

“Yes,” he would answer, always seeming surprised by the question. “Yes. I guess I am.”

Now, she wasn’t sure if he had every really been quietly contemplative, so enigmatic, or if she just had a big imagination. Once the children were born, or perhaps before that, talk became money, laundry detergent, measles shots, another thing to iron in careless sweeps, a thing no more mysterious than her own parents’ marriage. There was no evidence that Sam, behind the quiet façade, was thinking about anything but the usual busy, chattery thoughts. It was only hypothetical: her wait for the big word, the elevated comment, continued to go unfulfilled. It probably wasn’t fair, she reasoned, that she should place so many expectations on Sam just because he was different from any other man she’d met, but there it was.

Sometimes he pretended he couldn’t hear what she and the children were saying at all. Laura could tell when he did this, when he was lying, because his head turned slightly down and away from her, as if he was trying to hide his own ears. Sam was a person for whom deafness had benefits, and Laura hated him a little for it. For some reason it reminded her of movies where people wore sunglasses on street corners, pretending to be blind and asking for money, the total exploitation of a tragedy that wasn’t even theirs.

“He’s always been like this, even before the accident,” Sam’s mother, Harriet, had crooned over iced tea during one of Laura’s early visits, back when she was still awed by most things Sam. As would happen during each subsequent visit, Sam’s father and
brothers congregated in the basement to play pool, leaving Harriet and Laura to talk in the living room while muted soap operas droned on the television. All of Harriet’s sons looked like their mother, towering and thin, just shy of frail. They shared her thick and lusterless hair, her high forehead and rich brown eyes.

“All my other sons, they’re so loud, you know. But not this one. Not my Sam. He’s my quiet boy.” As if to prove her point, one of Sam’s brothers had bellowed “WHOA!” from the basement at something—an unlikely pool sot?—that same moment.

Harriet had shaken her head and smiled. “Probably Tim—he’s the loudest of them all. Did Sam ever tell you the story of our vacation to Hollywood? Tim was shushed by Burt Lancaster while we were eating in a restaurant! It’s true! I’ll tell you about it.” And, because Harriet’s talkative boys had learned it from their mother, she did tell Laura about it in marvelous, tight detail.

The mother’s quiet boy had become Laura’s quiet husband two years later, during a small ceremony in which he had whispered, “I do.”

Laura called a family meeting once they were home with the instructional videos, aware that such formality was a Westcott first. Guy and Rita sat cross-legged on the floor, looking up at their somber parents. Laura sat on the couch with Sam, clasping his hand both to support him and to make sure he didn’t slip out of the room while she was speaking.

“Kids,” she began loudly, “you know your dad doesn’t hear so well.” Of course they knew; they nearly had to shout at him just to say goodnight every evening.

The children nodded in unison.
“And his hearing is getting worse.”

More nods. Was this how they acted in school? Laura wondered.

“So we, as a family, to help support your father, are going to learn American Sign Language. You can call it ASL for short, if you like.”

“Is that the thing where you use your hands to talk?” Guy asked, and Rita looked at him as if he’d just announced his discovery of quantum theory. “Like this,” he explained, waving his hands into a butterfly.

“Ohhhhhhh,” she said.

“That’s the one,” Sam piped in.

Rita asked, “Can we still talk like normal people?”

“People that use sign language are normal people,” Laura corrected. “But yes, you can still talk out loud sometimes. And so can your father. He can read your lips when you say little words like ‘no’ and ‘please,’ but we’ve already decided that the whole family is going to use sign language. To help him out.”

Laura wondered if the kids really thought this was a big deal, since Sam spoke so rarely anyway.

Guy shrugged. “Let’s do it,” he said.

Sam slipped Tape I into the VCR and set the television to maximum volume while Laura went to find cotton balls for herself and the children. Once everything was in order they sat before the TV and waited, hands poised carefully in their laps, ready. After a moment a woman appeared on the screen and announced in a bright voice, “Welcome to the world of American Sign Language!”
Guy laughed. "Hey, look. Poof-ball hair," he said, pointing at the television. It was true: their instructor was a petite lady with heavily coifed hair and a pastel blouse/skirt ensemble. She looked like the type of woman who kept the breeders and groomers of poodles in business.

"Shh," Laura scolded. "Listen."

After a brief introduction the woman on the television began instructing and the children did listen then, their hands forming tentative gestures and their faces in deep concentration. Laura glanced at Sam every few minutes to see how he was progressing, afraid he might find humiliation in all this attention. Instead, he seemed earnest, waving his arms about with the confidence of a conductor or puppet master. Looking down at her own bumbling and timid hands, those reluctant blocks of woods that swiped at the air in unnatural ways, a thought slipped before she could suppress it. This isn't what hands are for.

They dedicated the after-dinner hour each day to learning sign language, and soon Sam and the children could sign "I love you" and "Hi, Dad."

Though she suspected it was due to some kind of mental atrophy, Laura started to feel like she knew the woman on the sign language videos after watching her wear the same pleated skirts and say the same things night after night. After they had watched all six videotapes they started again. It wasn’t until their fifth time through, however, that Laura realized she wasn’t learning anything. A part of her was allowing nothing to be absorbed, like wax closing all pores against rain. She would concentrate on the woman’s penciled-in eyebrows, not considering the word or phrase she was absently signing.
Instead of repeating in her mind, *I go to the store I go to the store I go to the store*, she thought, *How does that woman take off all that makeup each night?*

She didn’t know why it was happening. Because. What would she say to him, anyway, once he was completely deaf? *Please put the kids to bed,* perhaps, or *I already did the dishes.* When shouting no longer worked she could just point to the kids’ bedrooms and nod. *Everything has been taken care of.* Her only phrase. A slow nod, a pointed finger, a stupid smile. The only tools she’d need.

Still, it made her nervous to sit there, watching her family engaged in their synchronized finger ballet, knowing her hands were lying, only mimicking what she saw, not comprehending a thing. After a week she tried to comfort herself by pretending she was a foreigner watching a family speak silent Mandarin. Only their laughs were audible, but laughs were universal, like coughs.

If her family asked why she never signed to them, she would shrug, exploit their shared family trait to avoid explanation. *Not confident just yet.* She would smile, pat their heads, give a conspiratorial wink, and they still wouldn’t know.

Guy was far ahead of Sam and Rita in his learning. One evening, when she was passing by with unfolded laundry, Laura caught him sitting on the floor like a forty-pound Buddha, giving remedial lessons in Rita’s room. Neither child saw her watching from the doorway.

*“Cook-ie,”* Guy said, pronouncing the word slowly while performing the accompanying hand motions. *“Cook-ie.”* And then, *“Piz-za. Piz-za.”*

*“Why do we have to do all this, again?”* Rita asked, frustrated, her fingers tripping over one another.
“Because Dad is going deaf,” Guy replied.

“Why is Dad going deaf?”

“Because.”

“Oh.”

The next night at dinner Guy demanded that Rita give him a french fry, though he had plenty on his own plate. The four of them were at the kitchen table eating pork chops with fries and canned peas, and when Rita threw a strip of potato at Guy he caught it in his mouth and said, “I’m frenching the french fry. Get it?”

Rita wiped the corner of her mouth with the prim delicacy of someone dining on duck à l’Orange in an upscale restaurant. “Yeah, and you french your grandma, too,” she replied.

“What?” Laura squawked with more drama than she intended, lowering her glass of milk so fast that some splashed on the tablecloth.

Rita sank down into her chair, confused and looking around. Guy was tight-lipped, stifling a laugh.

“Where does a seven-year-old hear something like that?” No answer. “You don’t even know what that means, do you?” Nothing: Rita was only sinking further in her chair and nudging her lower lip forward. “Can either of you at least tell me why kids say such stupid things sometimes?” Laura’s face was starting to feel hot, as if she was standing above an open radiator.
Sam had been half listening to, half watching the conversation, still the transitory deaf man. Pointing to Laura, her strawberry face, he said, “That’s why they say it,” in his soft voice. He was grinning.

“The whole thing, what you said just now, Rita, that’s not even . . .” she was sputtering for words, “. . . feasible.” She let that hang for a moment before adding to Sam, “and please don’t point out the kids’ motivations in the presence of the kids, thanks.” She didn’t know if he’d heard her, as his only reaction was to shovel a forkful of mashed peas into his mouth.

“What does ‘feasible’ mean?” Guy asked, now holding his fry like it was a soggy cigarette.

“It means ‘okay,’” Laura said. Her shock deflating, she was now cutting into her pork chop. “As in it’s not okay for either of you to ever say a thing like that again. Understand?”

“That’s feasible by me,” said Rita, and she and Guy giggled together before they started fighting over the bottle of ketchup in the middle of the table. Their helium voices could be so loud, so gratingly shrill, especially when they were fighting. The sounds of their anger bounced and ricocheted off the kitchen walls, though all of the windows were open to let in the early summer breeze.

“Mom, make her stop it!” Guy shrieked, metal scraping metal, as Rita gave him a swift kick on the shins under the table.

The math teacher in her sensed a brutal formula, an unbalanced equation. Sam didn’t need to hear her, she didn’t want to hear the kids most of the time, the kids never heard enough, persistent with their questions. *What a cycle,* she thought.
Although Laura didn’t believe in physical ideals for men, she sometimes entertained one romantic fantasy. In it, she is at the mall’s movieplex with a friend. Sam is absent. She and her friend decide, after the movie has ended, to talk over mochas in the mall’s coffee shop. After they are seated and stirring their foamy drinks with little red straws, Laura says, “The director’s fascination with intricacy is apparent: just look at all those ivory sculptures he uses throughout the film to depict complexity of feeling.”

She feels a tap on her shoulder but doesn’t turn around, as this is her fantasy and she already knows that appearances are not what it is about, at least not here. His voice does for Laura what well-fitting jeans and cologne do for other women, a deep tone that reminds her of her favorite deejay, the one on the oldies station. The Faceless Man speaks. “I don’t mean to interrupt, but I just finished watching *The Movie* as well and couldn’t help but overhear. I like your observation about the ivory sculptures. I thought something similar, though I also wonder why the fire in the last scene engulfs all these intricate symbols. Doesn’t this seem important? Would you care to elaborate? Another round of mochas on me.”

“I don’t care to, but thanks,” Laura says, and then she and her friend laugh warmly.

“You have a nice laugh,” the Faceless Man says. “Good day to you both.”

That was her fantasy. That was the scene that caught her when Sam didn’t hear her questions or when Guy slept all night with olives pocketed in his mouth no matter how many times she told him not to.

* * *
In late June, once school had let out and Laura was home most days with the children, she and Sam celebrated their thirteenth wedding anniversary. Laura didn’t mention the date in the half-serious hope that he would forget about it altogether. It was a game she played every year. He never did forget, however, and usually stuck with the traditional suggestions: paper and clocks the first year, cotton and china the next. This year it was lace and textiles.

The day of their anniversary, Sam arrived home from work with a box of Whitman chocolates. “They didn’t have the good stuff at the store,” he apologized. “The Godiva stuff.” His words were starting to run into one another, as if he were drunk or trying to converse while listening to music through headphones.

For dinner they went to a local steak house. Laura wore the string of pearls he had given her the anniversary before and a low-cut black dress. She felt sexy in the dimmed light, liked the way the dark rayon clung to her breasts and hips. Sam looked good, too, in his only suit.

Their menus provided small occupation. She guessed that Sam wasn’t comfortable enough to try sign language in the crowded restaurant, and Laura knew she would have to shout to make herself understood. To maintain appearances, Sam would have to do all the talking while she nodded demurely and smiled at appropriate points. Sam, however, never did the talking, and so they sat and read their menus a third and then a fourth time before the waiter came to take their orders and whisk the menus away. Laura still had words swimming in her head after the waiter had left, a savory bouillabaisse, light lemon dill, delicate sauce.

She smiled at Sam across the table. He reached for her hand.
They stayed that way for a moment, holding hands on the tabletop and smiling as if they were two people who had transcended the need for words, content in each other’s gaze. The waiter returned with two glasses of red wine just as Laura began to feel awkward, and she could see Sam reaching for his glass with the speed of relief. They swiveled the wine, sniffed at it, took tiny sips, held the glasses to the light of the candle at their table. It seemed to Laura that wine had never received so much attention before this night.

Things went quickly after that with one course arriving immediately after the last was swept away by attentive busboys. Bread, salad, entrée, dessert—each dish was savored and inspected down to the plates and silverware to substitute for conversation. We are the ideal restaurant critics, Laura would have told Sam if she trusted him to hear her.

After dinner she let Sam unwrap the pocketknife she’d bought him and he presented his gift to her; a stiff lace panty and bra set in licorice red. Once she collected the balled-up wrapping paper around them she mouthed “Thank you,” across the table. Really, thank you.

That night they made love and it was the quietest act in the world, their hastened breathing making no sound at all.

Harriet called the next afternoon to say she and her husband were having a Fourth of July party. “Who will be there?” Laura asked.

There was a pause. “It’s just the family, just the boys, but because it’s a holiday we’ve decided to call it a party.” Her mother-in-law’s embarrassment leaked through the
phone line—Laura knew they didn’t have any friends aside from their sons. Suddenly, Harriet’s voice perked. “Did you know that the parade is going right down our street this year? Isn’t that something? We can watch from the front yard! It’ll be fun! The kids will love it.”

She told Harriet she would be there, promised to bring her mustardless potato salad, and hung up the phone.

Sam and the children were starting to incorporate sign language into everyday conversation. At the dinner table each night, Laura kept her hands busy sawing at chicken breasts and stirring casseroles to avoid suspicion. She kept her mind occupied by making mental observations about her family’s behavior. It was strange: they always finished chewing before signing to one another, as if talking with their mouths full still applied as taboo. Guy and Rita had protested the combination of verbal talk and sign language—“It’s cheating,” they said—and so the family chose silence. Laura guessed that their signed conversations were largely rudimentary, novice words and sentences. Often she thought she recognized a letter or two, which meant they were spelling things out.

One night it occurred to Laura over goulash that Sam was signing more than Rita or even Guy. She had been watching the children, waiting for their enthusiastic gestures and concentrating faces as they formed their limber words. They weren’t moving, however, and after a few seconds she realized they were both staring at Sam. There he was at the end of the table, fingers waving in a way that hinted at grace. The movement was not yet fluid—he had to pause twice—but there was beauty in watching Sam, this tall
and quiet man, channel thought down his limbs and allow it to escape through his
fingertips.

Laura took a bit of slippery noodle and tried not to look surprised. Did an
affirmative grunt really translate into a five-second dance of hands or was he just starting
to say more?

He stopped signing and set his hands on the table, poised and ready for more
dialogue. His plate of goulash had hardly been touched. Sam nodded as Guy began to
speak, smiling and generally looking more like a considerate party host than Laura would
have thought possible. She smiled as well—she did a lot of unexplained smiling these
days, faking it and hoping that the members of her family weren’t talking about anything
unpleasant, failed tests or broken bones.

“Mom, see how I signed without talking once?” Guy beamed once he was
finished, the sound of his voice jarring Laura. It was amazing how quickly a person
became accustomed to silence.

When she didn’t answer him, Guy repeated the question. “Mom? Wasn’t I good?”
Her mind moved in a quick panic. What if he’d been signing nonsense words? She would
never be able to tell. Was he trying to trick her? Did seven-year-olds do things like that?

“That was great, Guy. Really first-class.”

“Now you say something.”

“I . . .” Why hadn’t she prepared more for these moments? “I don’t have much to
say. You guys are so much better at this than I am.”

That must have satisfied him, as he turned back to Sam and signed something
new. Even Rita seemed to understand what was going on. Laura concentrated on the
sounds around her. A clock ticked. A dog barked. Forks scraped against dinner plates. Her family continued, no longer turning toward her as they signed. Sam uttered a quick cough, low and guttural. She looked over at him, expecting more, expecting him to speak, but there was only the hum of the refrigerator in the background.

Laura swallowed another bite of what now tasted like a pasty and thick mash of tomatoes and flour. *This is what you've become,* she thought. The silent observer, the scientist.

It had been raining hard and cool all morning long and there was some question as to whether or not the parade would still occur. Laura was dismayed to discover that they were the first to arrive at Sam’s parents’ house. What if no one else came? She could hear the crack of pool balls before they reached the front door; Sam’s father stayed in the basement even when there was no one else around.

Harriet answered the door exclaiming, “Happy Holiday!”

“Fourth of July, you mean?” Laura asked, confused for a second over which holiday they were there to celebrate.

“Yes, of course. That just doesn’t seem to roll off the tongue so much, though, don’t you think?”

“It has another name, Grandma. It’s called Independence Day,” Rita said and smiled at Guy, a sibling gloat at having been the one to correct their grandmother first.

“So it does. Happy Independence Day! Glad that’s settled. Come on in. You’re the first ones here. It’s a little chilly out, don’t you think? I’ve just made some coffee, the fancy kind you have to grind yourself at the store.” Harriet then looked at Sam and her
brow furrowed. Laura knew she was realizing for the first time that he might not have heard a thing she’d said, though she’d spoken loudly. The audiologist had been correct: Sam’s final descent into deafness was occurring with impossible speed. “Come on in!” Harriet said again, shouting this time.

Once they were inside, Laura went to the kitchen to put the potato salad in the refrigerator and pour a cup of coffee. While she was searching the cupboard for a mug, she felt a light tug on her arm and turned around to find Sam standing in front of her. He began signing, the mystery of his fluttered words reminding her of elaborate shadow puppets. When he finished, she stared at him for a second and then laughed, praying she’d stumbled upon an appropriate response. He looked puzzled and signed again the same jumbled pattern as before. This time she just stared.

After giving her another confused look, Sam grabbed the notepad and pen that sat next to the kitchen wall-phone. Laura turned away from him and poured two cups of coffee while he scribbled, feeling like she’d been caught in some ridiculous and unnecessary lie, the kind only children tell. The tips of her ears were hot. Where were Guy and Rita? When she heard that he was done writing she turned back around to read, *I said leave kids here tonight. I miss you. Why don’t you know this?*

It wasn’t something he would have spoken out loud. Was this a new Sam after all, an open Sam, a Sam she didn’t yet know, a Sam who confused her with his messages? Miss her? What for? Why didn’t she know what? Had anything changed, really, when you got right down to it? She handed him a coffee mug and wrote on the notepad, *Still learning.*
He put his mug on the counter, glaring at her. *That so?* he jotted back, and she could see the hard lines of his written words, the pen's pressure imitating anger.

Laura began to write a return message, unable to resist. She had to know if he was indeed changing somehow. *Why do you miss me?* The old answer flared in her mind—because—but she needed an explanation this time.

There was a pause while Sam read, but then, without warning, the anger was gone. In its place came something worse, something devastating for one brief second. Those saddened eyes, that hanging frown. Disappointment. Confusion. A lack of recognition. She was a stranger to him now and she knew it. With hesitance he took the pen from her hand and wrote while Laura examined magnets on the refrigerator.

*You don't know ASL,* she read when he was finished. On the counter warm tendrils of steam traveled upward from his coffee and little swirls of heat played on its surface. She shook her head, knowing her guilt and wanting it to show. You owe it to everyone you wound. *You have wounded,* she thought.

“What are you two doing in there?” Harriet called from the living room, but they ignored her as Sam continued to write. Laura picked up her own coffee mug, set it down, picked it up again. And then, suddenly, Sam stopped writing, turned around, and began walking out of the kitchen. His words seemed to speak up at her from the page. *I miss you as in I wanted to talk with you. Joke's on me.*

Laura swallowed before she spoke. “I can explain,” she said to his retreating back. Nothing: he hadn’t heard. She repeated, louder this time, “Sam. Wait. I need to know what you want to say. Let me explain.” By then he was gone.
She stood alone in the kitchen holding her coffee mug. The insulation was poor and her palms started to burn. She set the mug down on the counter and examined her hands, the hands that had been so stubborn in their refusal to learn. Guy and Rita were giggling in the living room, and Laura thought of the time she found Guy teaching Rita to sign, and of these children whom she defined only in polarities, compensating for one another, evening things out as a joined and two-pronged force. It wasn’t that simple. Nothing was simple. Sam might not have changed. This might be merely a new canvas on which to paint the same portrait, tell the same story, but still, she had to find out.

“I think I can explain,” she said again, now to an empty room.

Remembering the sign language lady and all the things she’d tried to teach her, Laura returned to the earliest lessons, Tape I, and her fingers started working, shyly at first but then more confidently. There was something to recall, she had to have absorbed something. Her hands did their rough ballet in the air and she could hear the rain begin again outdoors, a soft and windy sound against the house. In the kitchen, she practiced saying small things. Sorry. Thank you. Hello.
Aunt May pulls the oxygen tubes from her nostrils and nods at me to roll her tank into the next room so she can light a cigarette. The oxygen tank is her new best friend, the only thing keeping her from drowning in all the muck she’s inhaled over the past forty years. I sit on the couch and watch the smoke trail upward, where it gets chopped up by the ceiling fan.

“I hope you know how stupid that looks,” Mom says as she brings in a tray of cheese and crackers. “And I’ve told you about smoking in the house.”

May narrows her eyes like a cat weighing a fight. “When I’m dead you’ll miss the smoke,” she says, then draws on her cigarette and exhales in Mom’s direction. May’s fat legs hang over the edge of her wheelchair like useless stovepipes.

Mom rolls her eyes and sets the tray on the coffee table. “Jesus, do we have to have this conversation every single day? Because I feel like we’re rehearsing a play here.” With that she walks back into the kitchen without waiting for a response.

“She’s been like that all her life, I swear,” May says to me. I’m piling cracker on top of cheese on top of cracker. I’m always hungry these days. “Uptight. Like she’s got not a stick but a whole freakin’ telephone pole up her ass.”

I do what I usually do, which is ignore Aunt May. It’s been seven months since she first called from the hospital, telling Mom that she’d have to sell her house in order to
buy all the medications and monitors and oxygen tanks she’d need if she expected to make it through the year. It was only after Aunt May had moved in that I started noticing a smoky smell on the curtains, on the carpet, and soon May was her old self, puffing away while telling Mom that it was time to pick up more pills.

Though Aunt May is ten years older than Mom and looks twenty years older, Mom still has the beaten-up hunker and the slow blink of the old. My dad lives in Denver and I’m in Omaha, so I haven’t seen him for almost a year. Even though I’m not fifteen yet, I’m not stupid, and I don’t wait by the mailbox for birthday cards and care packages. Mom and I do okay, or we did until Aunt May showed up. Now, it feels like she’s everywhere, her and smoke.

“You have got to stop eating those crackers, Gina Marie. Do you want to get fat like me?” May asks from her wheelchair perch. I look down at my stomach, still flat but just because I’m lucky, not because I eat well or anything. I have a boy’s body, no hips and a small chest, which suits me fine.

I want to tell her that she has got to stop smoking before she gets a lung disease—oops, too late—but instead I agree with her. “No,” I mutter, shuffling off to my bedroom. “I don’t want to be a cow like you,” I say very quietly as I slam the door.

Despite the fact that I have zero control over the television now and that her hacking wakes me up most nights, I don’t mess with Aunt May whenever she’s bossy or a pain to Mom. Instead, I remind myself of how May’s strong arms used to wrap around me when I was little, how she laughed so deep that I used to feel like I was floating on water when I sat on her stomach. I tell myself that, in a way, my aunt is dead already. Nobody, not even May, thinks that she’s going to do anything but die in that wheelchair

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in the corner, and this somehow makes her innocent again. It makes her pure so that every bitter thing she says is written in chalk, erased in the rain.

I tell myself these things, and I think I must believe all that, but I also don’t mess with Aunt May because I feel like we, my mom and I, mess with her enough already. We scoop out lasagna onto her plate. We scrape food crust off her forks. We rub her shoulders while she coughs and coughs and coughs. We help her into the bathtub, and I always squint so I can’t really see just how low her boobs sag. To give her anything more, even if it was back talk, even if it was a fight, would be just too much. Besides, I know that Mom would have to side with May. After all, she’s the one who’s dying.

I’m a shy girl, so shy that, when I was younger, I had to talk to psychologists about it. To them, being too shy is the same as being too angry: you can’t be trusted, you could snap any minute. As weird as it sounds, I think they might be onto something there. There are times when I feel all the words I never say building behind my eyeballs, and when things get crazy around the house I can almost imagine that my eyes could leap out my skull, and that a long stream of words would pour out from my eye sockets—fuck shit goddamn it I hate you get the fuck out my house—and bounce around the room like those cartoon word balloons. I never minded that the psychologists were onto me with that one—it feels kind of good to have people think you could explode. It feels like some kind of power.

To help me “get out and about,” as Mom says, she signs me up for after-school classes. I’ve taken everything from ceramics to swimming to bowling, and each day that I have a class my mom waits at the kitchen table with a snack and looks over my shoulder
when I walk in because she’s always hoping that I’ll have a friend with me. This would probably annoy a lot of other people, but Mom understands me. She knows I’ll never tell anything unless she asks, unless she loves and worries a conversation out of me.

Last summer, when I was taking Spanish, I brought home a girl named Andie, and Mom nearly flipped over in her chair when we walked in. That, I will admit, was humiliating, Mom asking Andie every question on earth and me not getting the chance to tell her that Andie was only there to pick up some language cassettes we were supposed to pass around outside of class.

“Gina doesn’t talk much, but she’s the funniest girl once you get to know her!” Mom had said to Andie. I heard Aunt May turn up the TV in the living room.

“Oh, I’ll bet,” said Andie, loudly, over the sounds of clapping and Bob Barker coming from the TV. I’d heard that Andie was a slut, that she was just taking Spanish because Will Henderson was, and I’d watched them making out during break, he pushing her up against the hard brick of the school wall, she snapping at him not to mess up her mascara.

I’d seen all that, and yet I was the exposed one when Andie came over to pick up cassettes that day. This is why I don’t bring people home with me. This is why I don’t make friends.

Now that it’s winter and the holiday break is coming, Mom signs me up for creative writing at the Community Center, which I think is funny considering the only things I’ve ever written were a few poems for dead pets when I was ten. Still, I go because Mom’s having a hard time. My dad is eight months behind on child support and May’s treatment is more expensive than the money she got for selling the house. Plus, the
medication she’s on now makes her pretty out of it, so Mom has to help May brush her teeth and everything. Between her job as housekeeping superintendent at the hospital and her Weight Watchers group, Mom has no time to argue with me about anything. I feel like she signs me up for the class more out of habit than anything else.

“You’re the one thing I don’t have to worry about right now,” she tells me on her way to the store one morning, and she kisses my cheek. I want to tell her she’s dead wrong there, that all these classes make me want to do is shut myself in my room forever, especially since most of my classmates are either retired or being punished for something, and that I feel like Aunt May might be sucking our souls while we sleep. I want to tell her that I’m the one with lung disease, what with May’s smoking whenever she’s not gulping down air, but I know Mom. I know that she’d sit there while I argued, staring at me like I’m just one more test God’s thrown at her.

So I don’t say anything when Mom hands me a schedule for class. “Tuesdays at five,” she says brightly. “Only four bus stops away.”

It’s cold the first day of class. I have to put on pretty much every piece of winter clothing and I end up looking like a patchwork person. Blue coat, bright red hat, tan gloves, white scarf, things I’ve gotten on separate Christmases.

May stops me before I walk out the door. “Gina,” she calls from the living room, “where are you going?” Mom’s not home from work yet, and I’m not supposed to leave May alone. Afternoons are a tricky time for May; she needs to take an army of pills, and sometimes they make her puke. Something must be keeping Mom, traffic or her boss.
“Class,” I say, walking into the living room, clutching the tips of my gloves in my palms and squeezing. Today, May’s watching an old episode of The Cosby Show. The Cosbys are all gathered around the table eating dinner, and I stare for a second, thinking about how much I’ve always loved their home, even if their clothes and hair are outdated.

Without asking me if I mind, May changes the channel to Maury Povich, where two girls dressed like strippers are pushing each other while a man with the dumbest mullet I’ve ever seen just stands there and smiles. I think about sitting here and waiting for Mom to come home. She’d still want me to go to class, and I’d show up late, and everyone would see and wonder and maybe even think I’m rude. Or, even if Mom didn’t get home until it was too late for class, I’d be here with May, and there’s a good chance I’d have to do something gross, like reinsert May’s nose tubes for her or pick up a bloodied tissue after she coughs into it.

“Do you have to leave now?” May asks, not like she’s helpless but like she’s annoyed. “Can’t you wait for your mother to get home?”

“No,” I say. “I definitely have to leave now. You get detention if you’re late.”

May must know I’m lying, since it’s not like this is real school or anything, but I don’t wait for her to call me out.

Outside the air makes all my smaller hairs freeze, but it feels clean compared to the stuffy smoke of the living room, so I take a deep breath and let the cold burn my throat. My footsteps crunch in the snow-crusted grass, and I have to run to make it to the bus in time.

It takes me a while to figure out where I’m going in the Community Center. On the wall are flyers for all kinds of classes and events, and I wonder if this is how Mom
has signed me up for so much over the years. It’s confusing, all those scraps of paper pegged to the wall, and my eyes won’t focus on anything in particular, so I leave to go find my class.

Once I find my way to the room I look around and see that, as usual, I don’t know anybody. There’s an older woman balancing a checkbook in the corner, so I make sure to steer clear. In my experience, older women are talkers. They interrupt and they speak loudly and they usually act like they secretly wish they were the ones who were up there teaching the rest of us dumber students. Across the room from the woman is a boy sitting and staring straight ahead. I decide to sit down closer to him, since he’s the least likely to want to talk. All the stereotypes are true: teenaged boys who are taking night classes are almost always doing it because they’ve broken the law and the judge says they have to show evidence that they’re trying to “better themselves.” These boys, they don’t care. They don’t talk or try to make friends. Still, I decide to try to be late from now on, so I don’t have to pretend to be busy or say hi or anything before class gets going.

The teacher is the last to arrive. There are seven of us all together, mostly adults who are probably trying to get in touch with their inner novelists. Mr. Jarvis, the teacher, is a toady man, short and fleshy, but cool. He tells us that we’re going to start by keeping daily journals of our thoughts to stimulate creativity. Right away the checkbook-balancing woman raises her hand.

“Hi. Name’s Wanda. I was wondering . . . are these journals for all our thoughts? Because—no offense—it doesn’t really encourage honesty if you want us to turn these in. I’d like to write about some very personal things, like my father who has Alzheimer’s and
my divorce last year, but I won’t want to do that if I feel like there’s going to be somebody reading over my shoulder.”

Mr. Jarvis says something about confidentiality and not having to write anything you don’t want to, but I’m not listening because somehow, at that moment, I notice that Wanda reminds me of May. It’s not so much that they look alike—they’re both heavy, but Wanda wears too much makeup and doesn’t, as far as I can tell, look like a smoker. Still, there’s something bossy about her, something that makes me picture her in May’s wheelchair shouting for pills without any problem. She needs all eyes on her, just like May does, and the rest of us, we’re now a little paler, our coats a little less bright, less noticeable altogether. I feel trapped listening to Wanda as she talks about what she does and doesn’t plan to put in her journal—“What if I keep two? One for class and another for more personal thoughts?” she asks—like we’re all being sucked into her gravity, and I think that Mr. Jarvis must feel the same way. He must feel like Mom does, worn down and beaten by demands.

Mom tells me over cereal the next morning that she’s dealing with the anger surrounding a preventable illness. May’s fallen asleep in her wheelchair while watching the Early Show, doped up on some kind of heavy-duty pain pills that knock her out completely, though she still snores, an uneven “ggggaaauuuuhhh” noise deep in her throat that makes her sound like she could choke any second. Mom has a stack of books on the table, the usual stuff about losing a loved one. “I have to believe that May hasn’t pissed her whole life away,” Mom says as she pours another glass of orange juice.
I grab a fudge bar from the freezer—Mom hasn’t scolded me about what I eat since May moved in—and sit down next to her. I like mornings; they’re quiet, first off, and even though May ruins the quiet with her snores, at least she can’t tell us about how her chest constricted in the night or how she has to up her oxygen levels again.

“Oh—how was class?” Mom says suddenly, looking up from her book as if she’s just remembered to do something.

My mouth full of fudge, I nod. “Fine,” I say. Usually, Mom knows not to expect more than that from me, so she has an arsenal of questions to draw me out—What’s the teacher like? Who’s in the class? What’s your first assignment?—but today she just looks back down at her book, stupidly called Grief: The Necessary Truth.

“There’s a boy in there around my age. He’s hot,” I say all of a sudden, and once it’s out there, I wonder if I’m just trying to rattle my mother, or if there’s more to it, if I’m wishing that I might leave this class with more than a Xeroxed certificate of completion.

But Mom doesn’t react the way she used to, with a big smile and a thousand questions. Instead, she glances at me and says, “Good news. Bring him by. I’ll make a party pizza.” And then she’s gone, back to that book she’s reading, and my fudge pop, I see, has turned into a messy, brown nub. I let the fudge run over my fingers right in front of my mom, let the chocolate drip down onto the table, but there’s nothing, no response, so I leave.

On my way to my room I glance out to where May is planted in her wheelchair, tubes up her nose, like some kind of new-age centaur, half woman, half machine.

* * *

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I start to do bad things to Wanda in my writing class. She never once suspects me of anything, and she sits her notebook on her desk each day without calling anyone out, without pulling me aside and asking me why. She thinks, probably because she’s older and more mature or whatever, that all the weird things happening to her are accidents.

It starts off small. We’re sitting in class and Mr. Jarvis gives us a handout with some poetry exercises. The last two copies come my way and I’m supposed to give one to Wanda, but instead I stick both handouts in my folder and shrug when Wanda holds out her hand.

“Sorry. All out,” I say, not yet sure what I’m doing.

Wanda doesn’t raise her hand but just calls out to Mr. Jarvis. “I don’t think you made enough copies for everyone,” she says, like she doesn’t think Mr. Jarvis can do basic math.

I watch Mr. Jarvis look around the room and mutter, “I could have sworn I did,” and I start feeling bad that he’s the one who has to suffer and not Wanda, but then he smiles and tells her he’ll get her a copy after class. I sit in my chair and feel pretty good as Wanda sighs and tries to scoot her desk closer to another student’s so she can still follow along, her arms jiggling with the effort and her face a nice shade of pink.

“Why’d you take that extra handout and piss off Wanda?” someone asks from behind as I leave the Community Center after class. I suppose it’s obvious to say that I’m terrified. I turn, wanting really to just run, and see that it’s Harris, the boy I’ve been sitting next to because he never talks. He stares right at me so I can’t get away, and I don’t understand why he’s smiling. It’s a good smile, though, wicked and sweet at the same time. He’s a little older than I am, driving age, and his hair is spiked. He’s what my
mom would call a dangerous boy. I figure I can’t deny what I’ve done, since he’s clearly seen me, but I do my best to get rid of him.

“I’m late for the bus,” I say, now walking down the hall, but even that small phrase is too much for me to say, and my head is instantly filled with *stupid stupid stupid.* This is one reason I’m so shy.

He catches up to me near the bus stop. “I have a car,” he says. “I can give you a ride.”

All I can think about is the two of us riding in silence, me picking at my hangnails while he fiddles with the radio. Cars are horrible that way.

“No,” I say dumbly, not even able to come up with a reason. “No.”

“If you don’t come with me I’ll tell Wanda that you’ve got a weird grudge against her.” He says it like it’s a joke, but my stomach hits the floor all the same. I try to gather up some courage with lightning speed, and I tell him okay, I’ll do it.

In the car he does most of the talking. “That was great watching her scoot her fat ass over while everyone watched,” he says. “She looked like she was about to pop a blood vessel. Did you see it? If I had a picture of her in that second, I’d blow it up into a poster and hang it in my room, it was that good.”

I’m counting houses as we drive past, keeping my face turned toward the window. They go by in a blur, but every now and then I can see a TV or a person dusting off some bookshelves alone. I envy them all. “I don’t know why I did it,” I say finally, huddling in my winter coat. It’s really the truest thing I can say.

Harris sighs. “She’s a crusty old bat, huh. That’s what I thought since the first day of class.”
“Um,” I say. I don’t what know what to say. I never do. “Why are you in this class?” I say at last.

Harris doesn’t even pause, knowing right away how to answer a question. “I hit a kid. This guy, Ken, he’s beat on me since the fifth grade, he’s such a fucking bully. So one day I decide to do some chin-ups and lift some weights, and after a couple of months I’m feeling confident, you know, so I just walk up to him and punch him in the face.” He stops for a minute to swerve around a dog in the road. “This class, it’s part of a new punishment they’re trying out. Not quite community service, but close. It’s all right. A helluva lot better than ceramics would’ve been. Or line dancing. Christ.”

I chuckle without thinking about it. I don’t even criticize my chuckle, slam myself for sounding too loud or girlish or squirrelly.

“So I’m thinking you must know the feeling, though, right? You’re always looking mad in class, and you never say anything, and you’ve got a thing against Wanda. You have anger issues, right?”

I can tell that Harris is looking at me now but all I can say is, “You’ll want to turn right at the next intersection.”

He doesn’t know it, he can’t know, but Harris makes me feel better. I’ve been spotted, my actions witnessed. It’s a feeling I’ve never really had, different from having a mom sit at the kitchen table hoping you’ll make a friend. Better than that. I decide that I need to say something more before I get out of the car, so that he doesn’t drive away and just think I’m a snob forever.

“I’m shy,” I say. Duh. “It’s hard for me to explain myself.” I pause, looking out the window, as far away from Harris as I can get. I blurt out, “I hate her.”
The car stops in front of my house. "If you hate her, we should mess with her some," Harris says, and I finally get the guts to turn toward him. He looks serious, but not in that you're a crazy person way. "That asswipe I punched, he ended up in the hospital. Hitting him was good." He stops to toss a paper cup he's been drinking out of to the backseat. His car's a real mess. "In school and in therapy they're always telling you to be a nice person, to smile and take your vitamins. Me, I say that's why so many people are fucked up. I say if you're angry, you do something about it. Be bad, because it's better than being nothing, just sitting there and being quiet."

I don't know why he's doing this. It's probably just some natural instinct to be bad, to get in on the plans to harm the annoying Wanda, but I don't really care. It's still the first real connection I've made with anyone, the first time anyone's known that or guessed at why I do these stupid things.

When I come home I see that May's left a crusty bowl of half-eaten tomato soup on the coffee table and that Mom is working out to an aerobics video.

"Hi. Honey. How. Was. Your. Day," Mom pants as she kicks into the air. May's reading Gone with the Wind and getting ready to light a smoke. Normally it would annoy me that May doesn't even consider the idea of my mom taking fast, deep breaths right next to a lit cigarette, but today is different. I pick up the soup bowl.

"Good," I say.

Mom stops her leg kicks when May flicks her lighter. "Don't you dare, May!" she says. "Don't you dare smoke right now. I'm exercising, for Chrissakes."
May looks like she just got caught cheating on a test. “I didn’t know it was such a big deal,” she says.

Before my mom can respond, I offer to take May to the back porch so she can smoke without bothering Mom. I load her up with an afghan and I even help put a stocking cap on her head, since it’s pretty cold on the porch. After I roll her out there I stay for a minute, looking at the back of May’s head while she smokes, and I remember Mom telling me that May ended up being the black sheep in their family even though she started out okay. She’s the one who got married three times and got fired from every job she ever had. At some point in her life, May decided not to follow the rules, and I think of where it’s gotten her; pretty far, in my opinion, since we’re all bending backwards to take care of her now. She might have the right idea after all.

“Why don’t you make a sketch if my head’s that interesting,” May says out of the blue. I thought she couldn’t see me, but now that she knows I’m watching I let out a little gasp and run back into the living room, where my mom is doing stomach crunches.

After that first time stealing a handout, I do something I’ve never done before, which is grow bold. Harris helps me out, which is a big part of it. Taking Wanda’s handout only gets me so far, and soon enough she’s annoying me again. She asks Mr. Jarvis where he got his information on poems as if she’s accusing him of making up rules as he goes along. Later in the same class, she hums while we’re doing a writing exercise in our journals, and after a second Harris nudges me in the arm. He’s smiling like usual and pointing to the chair on the other side of mine. Wanda’s mittens are lying there, and Harris whispers, “Steal one,” and, before I know it, I do take a mitten while everyone is
looking down and writing. I’m giddy with anticipation as people scribble in their notebooks and I’m too nervous to look at Harris, and so I start writing myself, nonsense for the most part, but I’m just trying to pass time. *Mitten, mitten, where are you?* I write. I think of Wanda walking to her car with one warm hand, one cold one. I think of her trying to steer her car while her unmittened hand flinches at the freezing wheel, and I have to try very hard not to laugh. I feel Harris’s eyes on me and I’m not nervous anymore but I know that if I turn to him I’ll lose it completely. For some reason, doing this makes me feel better about Wanda. She’s not just bossy and a huge energy suck anymore. She’s funny and sad, someone you can feel sorry for in a simple, unguilty kind of way.

The class ends with Wanda asking everyone to look around the room, please, as she could have *sworn* her mittens were together on the chair. “How am I going to look with only one mitten?” she asks as she digs in her coat pockets for the third time. “It’s cold outside.”

I don’t even try to come up with an excuse to say no when Harris offers me a ride home again. “That was cool,” he says once we’re in the car. “You didn’t even stop to think. You just did it. Where’s the mitten? Do you have it? We should find out where she lives and do something creepy, like put it in her mailbox or the hood of her car.”

“No,” I say. “Then she’d have it back. I want to throw it away.” My voice sounds like someone else’s, and I realize it’s because I hardly ever hear myself speak.

We’re bad together now, bad kids doing bad things. I feel like people know us when we drive by their houses, that they stop their dusting or their TV watching or whatever and think, *There they go*. Harris doesn’t know anything about me, he doesn’t
know about my dad and he doesn’t even know about May, but it doesn’t matter. He
knows what helps me, what makes me feel like I’m not just wallpaper or an extra in some
low-budget movie.

When I get home I throw the mitten in the garbage and bury it under a cereal box
so Mom doesn’t notice, and I make a batch of pistachio pudding all for May.

“You should help out around the house more,” May says to me one Saturday afternoon
while we watch some show about home decorating. I happen to know that reruns of The
Gong Show are playing on another channel, but I don’t ever have control of the remote
anymore. Mom’s in the kitchen making out her weekly To Do list. These days, it seems
Mom’s always in the kitchen making lists.

I can’t ignore May because she’s looking straight at me and not at the TV. “I
vacuum,” I say. “I load the dishwasher.”

May huffs. She should have that gesture patented, she uses it so much. She lights
a cigarette. “Adults say this shit all the time, but when I was your age I was responsible
for cooking every meal. It’s the truth. Ask your mother.”

Was that before or after you got arrested for shoplifting? I want to say, but I
don’t. I study all the delicate fibers of the couch to keep May from looking at me. I’ve
been trying hard lately to keep her happy, to keep her quiet. I want to help so that Mom
has something left over at the end of the day, so she can remember to ask me about class
and school and if I’ll ever bring that boy home with me for party pizza. I thought I was
doing okay. “Your mother is under immense pressure,” May is saying, and I do admit
that she’s right about that, although I wish I knew how to tell May that she’s ninety-nine
percent of the problem here, that every cough and hack and demand for pills is equal to ten pounds on my mother’s shoulders.

As if she can read my mind, May says, “I’d do more for myself but I feel like I’m underwater all the time. You, you’re young. You don’t know what this is like. Not having enough air makes everything slow.”

I hold my breath while she talks, trying to see if what she says is true. I don’t get very far and the only thing that seems slow to me is May’s lecture. I can’t feel sorry for her even when I try.

May keeps going. “And forget activity. Walking to the bathroom is like climbing a mountain. That’s how it feels. Like I climb a mountain four times a day. Every single day.”

It’s too far away from me, what’s happening to May. I have no idea what she’s talking about. “I’ve never climbed a mountain,” I say.

In class, we escalate. There’s one thing I’ve been wanting to try, but until this one Tuesday, I haven’t had the guts. When I tell Harris about it on the way home one day, he gets excited and says, “We have to do that. Now that you’ve told me, you can’t back out. If you do the prep work, I’ll take care of the rest.”

We’re on the essay unit now, and every class period Mr. Jarvis asks for volunteers to read from their journals. I never volunteer, of course, but still, I can tell that even Mr. Jarvis is sick of seeing Wanda raise her hand every single time. He looks around the room for someone else to raise their hand, and every time no one does, since Wanda is already on it, hand high in the air and snug in her desk like some sort of weird creative
writing class queen. This comes at the same time that May starts ordering me around—
“to help your mother out,” she says—and so now I feel like, if I’m not washing dingy
nightgowns for my aunt, I’m here in class, watching Wanda swallow the rest of us whole.
It hardly even matters which one I’m around anymore. This is where the new idea comes
from.

Our basement has mice, and now that it’s really cold out Mom’s finding three or
four in the traps each morning. On Tuesday, the day of class, I wake up earlier than usual
and sneak downstairs, closing my ears so that I don’t have to listen if any of the mice are
still dying, squeaking in that sad way that doesn’t prevent anything. There are two mice
trapped, both dead, both with a little bit of blood drool coming out of their mouths. It
looks like a movie, like someone painted tiny red lines on their cheeks.

I’ve never touched a dead thing before, so I have to stand there for a minute
before bending down and unhooking one of the traps. The mouse moves a little bit when
I do it, as if it’s relieved, and I half expect it to go scurrying away, one of the few lucky
rodents in the world.

Instead, it just lies there as if to remind me just what being dead means, and when
I pick it up its head flops back like a doll I used to have. Broken neck. I race upstairs with
the mouse in my hand. I can’t get it into a plastic baggie fast enough.

Harris agrees to meet me in the Community Center parking lot before class.

“Give me the mouse,” he says. “I’ll do it.”

I think of the dead mouse lying, unwrapped, in my coat pocket. I reach into the
pocket and my fingers lightly brush its tail. “You get it,” I say sticking my hip out toward
him. “I don’t want to touch it.”
Harris takes the mouse and holds it in front of his face. He shakes it a little and its head just rolls from side to side. "Cool," he says, but I’m feeling like we should do something better, something respectful, bury it in the ground or something.

"Maybe this is too mean," I say quickly, looking at the ground as I talk. "Maybe we could just spill some pop on her and pretend it’s an accident."

It takes a lot of me to say these things, and I’m scared that Harris is going to make fun of me, but instead I feel his hand on my forearm.

"People like Wanda, they run the world," he says and holds the mouse up close to my face. "This is how people like us take it back." That’s all he says, and though I don’t completely understand what he means by "people like us," it’s enough to keep me from backing out. He’s older, and he always talks like he knows exactly what he’s saying.

Mr. Jarvis calls a bathroom break halfway through class and everyone but Harris and me filters out to smoke or pee or whatever. Harris and I are sitting on either side of Wanda’s desk on purpose today, and in a quick moment in which I all but blank out from nervousness I see Harris slip the mouse into Wanda’s bag, which looks like something between a backpack and a giant purse.

The hardest part about doing things like this is waiting for a reaction. I feel that we’re for sure going to be found out this time, so I go outside for a drink of water without saying anything to Harris to prove that I’ve been up and about.

It’s while we’re taking turns reading our sonnet homeworks to the rest of the class that Wanda screams. Actually, it’s more of a loud groan, something you’d expect a man to do. Mr. Jarvis looks like heart attack material and drops the piece of chalk he was
holding. Right away, before anyone even says anything, I know Harris and I have done something awful.

"There is a mouse in this room!" Wanda shrieks, and then there’s the general chaos that happens after someone says something like that. Once the mood calms down a bit, students start to wander over to peer into Wanda’s bag. I do it, too, so I don’t look suspicious, and the mouse looks almost cute in there, stretched out like it’s napping, except for the trickle of blood. That cuteness almost makes me sick; here was a thing that had died a bad enough death already, and it couldn’t even decompose in peace. We had to put it in a woman’s purse. I wonder what would happen if I saw my little cousins poking May at her funeral, if I would feel like I do now.

Mr. Jarvis comes over with a Kleenex and picks up the mouse by its tail. No one comments that it’s dead, that its neck is broken, and class gets out early that day. I can’t even look at Wanda as she leaves, and only after she’s gone do I notice that she’s taken out all the credit cards and her driver’s license and things like that and has thrown her purse away. Instead of feeling better about Wanda, instead of feeling sorry for her, I want to run after her and throw that purse in her face. “It was just a stupid mouse!” I want to scream.

This time, when Harris takes me home, we stop at McDonald’s for burgers and fries, and as I stuff my mouth as he talks about what we’ll do to Wanda next. “We could spray paint her car during break,” he says. “Or, we could steal her journal, the one she doesn’t turn in to Jarvis.”
I nod and dip my fries in mayo, but I don’t tell him that I’m moving on from Wanda. There’s only three more weeks of class left, and soon she’ll be gone, back to whatever life she lives, and Harris will be gone as well, and I’ll still be stuck with May.

That night Mom works late at the hospital and I’m responsible for giving May her pills, setting them all up on a little tray like they’re game pieces. She doesn’t thank me, but I can’t say I mind. I’m still thinking about Harris, about what he says about taking back the world. Somehow, this puts me in a good mood.

We watch some TV and I even offer to make May some tea.

“Tea is anemic coffee,” she says, and I actually laugh. For once, I’m feeling kind.

May has some trouble with her cough before she finally falls asleep on the couch, and I pat her back while she hacks up her bloody phlegm, thinking that, if I’m not the kind of girl to ever tell her that I’m sorry she has emphysema, that I can see why she complains all the time, considering the life she has, at least I can do this. She’s still a drag to have around, and Mom’s still sucked into a busy life caring for us both, but I give May attention tonight. I don’t mind fading back.

Later, once May is asleep, I sneak back into the living room and sit down on the floor next to her. Her breathing is fast and shallow, and her lip kind of quivers each time she exhales. I see her cigarettes on the coffee table, and I take one from the pack and hold it in my hand like I’ve never seen a smoke before. It’s light, almost delicate, and I can’t help but admire how neatly it’s rolled, a little bit of extra paper sticking out of the end, a tight cylinder. I pick up May’s matches and light the cigarette as she sleeps. I don’t like how the smoke catches in my throat but I do get the buzz, all my nerve endings smiling,
and I can see how one cigarette could lead to another. May always flicks her ashes like she’s angry, and I try to do that, too. I blow out thick and toxic clouds from the bottom of my lungs, and before I know it I’ve filled the room, the house, and the world with my smoke.
The Titanic of Lake George

I took a swallow from my PBR, drinking it fast so I couldn’t really tell how warm it was, how flat. Since it was lunchtime, I fished around for a ham sandwich in the cooler and dumped the rest of my beer down the ice hole we’d made.

“Dickhead!” said Dale. “You’ll scare the fish off.”

“What fish?” I asked, while I opened a fresh one. “There are no fucking fish in this lake.”

Roonie, looking even fatter than he usually did in his tiny fishing chair, reeled in his line. “Might as well keep drinking, then,” he said.

Ice fishing wasn’t my idea. I didn’t even have my own fishing pole, and my dad’s was so old it looked like it could crack in half any minute. Roonie and Dale, though, were always wanting to do the things they thought all men did, stuff like hunting and fiddling around with car engines. Hastings is one of Minnesota’s smaller towns, and there aren’t a lot of options. Me, I like poker and watching old Rage videos and the shitty movies that always play on Cinemax. Maybe it’s because I don’t look like my friends do. I’m small, pale. I have seven tattoos. I’ve only been camping once and I hated it. But Roonie, Dale, and I had been our own gang since grade school, and if your friends are that excited to go ice fishing on a Saturday afternoon, you do it, especially when your girlfriend tells you the day before that she’s going to have an abortion at the very same time she tells you
she’s pregnant. Drinking in my bedroom listening to depressing music, or drinking here with my best friends. It was an easy choice.

We put in fifty-hour weeks at the factory installing doorknobs, inspecting angles, and running the sander for kitchen and bathroom cabinets. It was an okay job, nothing as bad as the beef packing plant, but still, a factory. Our boss pocketed cabinet screws and sold them to his brother’s hardware store, which tells you something about company loyalty. We graduated eight months before, and at the time I just couldn’t picture myself going off to college and buying a bunch of books with titles like *Perfunctory Chemistry for the Vehicular Sciences* for $80 a pop. The factory paycheck was still too good, and besides, there was Wendy to think about, especially now, with the whole mess about the baby.

“Jay,” Dale said now. “Where’s the car?”

I knew what he meant, and I looked down at our icy floor on Lake George, as if I could see down, down to where my dad’s rusty Chevy sat, greenish and dead. “He can’t remember what part of the lake he drove into,” I said.

Since Hastings is so small, you have a lot of stories floating around. The story of my dad’s car was one of those. When he was nineteen, not long after he married my mom and she got pregnant, he’d driven his car into Lake George on purpose, just to see what would happen. I doubt he’d thought about how he couldn’t get his car back again once it’d settled at the bottom of the lake, and so he’d had to borrow money from everyone he knew to get another car. His work friends, who were the same friends he’d had back then, still teased him about it, calling the old Chevy the Titanic of Lake George.
My dad had liked telling that story, whether because it made him seem cool or
daring or manly, I didn’t know. We didn’t talk much anymore.

“I’m done fishing,” I said, all of a sudden. I finished my sandwich and held my
hand in front of the heater’s vent and waved it around.

“Share the air, dick,” said Dale.

“Where do you suppose Keaton and Miller are?” asked Roonie. “Aren’t they out
here?”

Keaton and Miller worked at the cabinet factory. Everyone worked at the cabinet
factory. Earlier, before we’d entered the ice fishing tent, I’d looked around at the day,
clear but cold enough to freeze your nose hairs. Lake George, we’d heard, had about
fourteen inches of ice—what Minnesota lake didn’t in January?—and I’d stomped on the
hard surface that felt so sturdy but that would, in a few months, be only water. I stood
there, seeing my breath, looking at all the colorful dots on the lake that marked the other
tents. Keaton and Miller were there somewhere, but they were doing their thing, and we
were doing ours.

“We’ll see them on Monday anyway,” I said. I was bored talking about work and
about people at work. Instead, I was thinking about my dad’s car and wondering if there
were still warm spots in iced-over lakes, places where you could get a break from the
chill. And I was thinking about Wendy.

She hadn’t cried at all when told me she was pregnant, but she did go to the
bathroom once, and though I could tell she was trying to be quiet I still heard her
gagging. When Wendy came back, she sat cross-legged across from me on her bed, and I
kept staring at how the afternoon sun melted frost from the window.
I remember how she brushed back that silky black hair of hers and said, “I know what you want me to do. You don’t want to get married. You don’t have to worry about anything. I’ll take care of it.” There was none of the Wendy I’d known sitting before me then. Everything she said was flat, a bad speech.

Even then, I knew she’d decided not to trust me. It was only later, after I’d left her house, that I realized I would have been a man if she’d let me. I would have offered her money, told her I’d support whatever decision she made, told her I’d stand by her forever if she asked—but that afternoon she kept looking at me like I was just some guy.

I didn’t say anything while she talked. I stared at her fingernails, painted a glittery blue, and I could tell she was one of those girls who had to be strong in a crisis, who’d been told that men run away, and I had to admit that even though I loved her a part of me was glad she wanted to make all the decisions herself. We’d been together for a year, and I could say that I was in love with all of her, her dark shine, the fine hair on her arms, those crazy green eyes and ever-tan skin. I could say I loved it all and be telling you the truth, but I’m a cabinet-maker. I’m not nineteen yet. Being a man, a good man, doesn’t come easy. Maybe Wendy was right to stop trusting so soon.

She’d hugged me one last time, the kind of hug you’d give an aunt you didn’t know well, and she told me she’d call later. I hadn’t heard from her since.

“It’s hot in this tent,” I said. I felt sweaty, locked in. Even though Dale and Roonie were my friends, for some reason thinking about Wendy made me feel trapped, fishing and talking only about stupid shit. “The heater’s on too high.”

Then, before I did any thinking at all, I dunked my head into the ice hole, down into the water. I couldn’t tell if I was drunk or angry or what, but it felt like a good thing.
to do, like diving in the summertime. I laid my hands on the icy floor, and after a second I couldn’t feel the tips of my fingers. The water was biting, of course. My head ached like there was pressure on it, and at first I wondered what was scraping my cheekbones. Ice. My skin was no cushion for that hardness. I felt it against my very bone.

I opened my eyes and tried not to let the shock of it all force me to inhale. The walls of our ice hole looked made of pearl, and the water was murky with algae. Roonie’s lantern gave off a little light, but not much, and even that seemed to make the lake darker somehow, as if some light just proved you couldn’t possibly tap into all that darkness. I opened my mouth and let a gulp’s worth of water rush in. My teeth hurt and I tried not to taste the grit, the smooth slime of the water. There was a car down here, somewhere, maybe there were lots of cars, and who knew what else. Everything dissolved in lake water, dead things, live things, tall tales and lies. Everything was swallowed. Last summer Wendy and I had gone swimming in this lake, and I’d told her that I would marry her someday, that I loved her, loved her through all of life. Now, the lake water was cold all the way down to my stomach.

When I came up I threw my head back, letting water splatter the tent’s walls.

“What the fuck?” Dale said. Roonie stayed quiet. “What was that for?”

“It was hot,” I said. “I told you.”

“That’s a lame excuse,” Dale said. “It’s hot, you go outside. You don’t stick your head down the ice hole.”

I wanted to tell him something about being lame, wasting the day acting like pretend men drinking beer and fishing while none of us had yet to sprout a single chest hair—I knew that about us. And on Monday we’d all go back to the cabinet factory, and
we’d do the kinds of jobs that people went to college just to avoid. Instead, though, my teeth started chattering like a seizure, like those chomping teeth toys or a Halloween skeleton. “Shirt,” was all I could say. “I need a shirt.”

“This is your problem,” Dale said, zipping up his coat and tugging at his pole in the water. Roonie let his line rest on the floor and took off first his coat and then his flannel button-down before putting the coat back on. He handed me the shirt.

My teeth were still all over the place, so I just I wrapped the shirt turban-like around my head and put my face down by the heater. I couldn’t hear well through the shirt, but I could still make out most of what Roonie and Dale were saying.

“Should we do something?”

“I’m no shrink. He’s fine. Maybe drunk.”

I hadn’t told them about Wendy, and I was trying to figure out why. I’d played the conversation out in my head, what I would say and what they would say back, but every time I got to the part where my friends were supposed to give me advice or something, I just imagined one of them saying, “That’s so fucked up,” or “We need to get you hammered.” No talk of maybe going to Hastings Tech to try to be something that would get me the kind of job that could help raise a kid, like an aviation mechanic or a plumber. Sure, those were jobs that your regular college asshole might look down on, but they do pay well, better than most people think. When I tried to imagine talking to Roonie and Dale, there was no talk of the options, of whether I should propose to Wendy or wait and see or ask her to let me help make the big decisions, something. I couldn’t picture us talking about any of that, so I sat there, the heat blowing against my numb face, Roonie’s shirt making me look like a retard.
“I’m thinking my dad’s car is somewhere on this side of the lake,” I said, lying just to start up conversation. Between the beer and the ice water the pounding in my soaked head was getting worse.

Roonie talked through the loud crunch of the potato chip he was chewing. “Why the hell did he do that? Crash a car on purpose?”

I sighed. It used to be my favorite part of the story, but it was the part that now I was starting to hate. If he’d been drunk, I’d understand. Same if he’d been racing some other guys, driving recklessly through the night. But it was true; he had done it just to see what would happen, just to see how it felt to sit in a car while the water rose around you and the pressure got deep. Even when I was young I knew he was lucky he didn’t die that night. He’d rolled down a window at the last possible second, before the car sunk too far and the pressure was too much. But just before.

“For the thrill, probably,” I said.

Roonie and Dale both nodded, and I could tell they were impressed. Now that’s cool is what they were thinking. I used to feel that way.

“But don’t you think,” I said, deciding to see what they’d say about something not as serious as Wendy, but that had something in common. “Don’t you think that’d be dumb, to crash your first car? Doesn’t that sound like something only a kid would do?”

Dale nodded. “Well, yeah. Yeah, something a kid would do. You ever hear of a business man crashing his Volvo into a lake just because? You ever see a suit get blitzed on a weekday?”

“There’s time later for being stuck in what everyone says you should do,” Roonie said. “A whole lifetime of that crap.”
“Your dad screwed the system. That’s a hero.”

“And now he’s living in an apartment on the East Side, eating frozen dinners,” I said.

“Sounds good,” said Dale. “Sounds fine.”

“He’s over forty,” I said.

“So what. So the hell what.”

I’d seen pictures of my dad from back then. There was one in the hall at home, the one picture of him that my mom still hadn’t taken down. He didn’t look like me, exactly, though we were both skinny and didn’t smile with our teeth. I thought of the car, imagining that I could have seen clear to the bottom of the lake, to the car that had probably rusted over every crack, grown slimy with lake weeds.

There was a picnic once, some stupid company thing for my dad’s work, and my dad had been bragging about the car to his friend Ron, and Ron had said, “Oh, yes, the Titanic of Lake George. Life was better then.”

“Yes, it was,” my dad had said, even though me and my mom were standing right there. “It certainly was.”

My mom raised her plastic cup, a margarita or something like that, and her pearl bracelet rattled against the cup’s side. Her hair was still permed then, and she was wearing a sleeveless dress. “Some men,” she had told me even then, when I was just twelve, “they never want to grow up.”

They’d divorced not long after that, and for awhile my dad and I got together on holidays and some weekends to go goofy golfing and watch a bunch of movies, but over time neither of us put much effort into it. He went to sleep earlier and earlier, and by the
time I was fourteen I felt like I was going to Dad’s just to have a hamburger and watch him snore on the couch. “How’s your mom?” he’d always ask and once, when I told him she wasn’t doing all that great, that there were some problems with money and layoffs at her job, he’d just said, “Yeah, well. Welcome to the world. I saw a fucking cockroach in the bathtub last week” before asking me what I wanted on my pizza.

My skull was throbbing worse than ever, and I closed my eyes. “My head hurts. Someone get me a beer,” I said, taking off my turban head and laying it on the ground to use as a pillow. I moved to the floor, the cold against my back, and stared up at the top of the tent, the place where all the poles met.

Suddenly, my view was blocked by Dale’s big head. “Dude, here you go.”

I took the can. “Is there a bruise on my cheek? I hit some ice.”

Dale laughed. “No bruise yet, but if you get one, tell Keaton and Miller it’s because we got in this big fight and I kicked the shit out of you, okay? C’mon.”

“No. Fuck off.” I pressed the cold can to my cheek. Wendy. She came to my mind huddled in a bathtub, covered by hot, hot water, hand on her flat stomach, trying to breathe in steam to keep her calm. I pictured that she’d been there for hours, her outline cloudy in all the steam and her fingers nothing but shriveled skin.

The summer before, we’d gone swimming in Lake George. We’d raced to the shore and Wendy had won by a landslide, outswimming me easily. She had laughed at me and laid on the beach while I paddled toward her, looking like a mutt.

“If you want me you’ll have to swim a lot faster than that,” she’d shouted, laughing. It was a joke and I knew it, but I’d still kicked harder after she said that, closing my fingers and toes so that they swept away more water.
Roonie and Dale were talking about some stupid shit, and I tuned them out as I lay in the tent. I wanted to take a bath with Wendy, send a big fuck you to the lake. I wanted to rub a washcloth down her back, pour water over her head and use a full handful of shampoo on her hair. I wanted to dry her off when she was ready to get out, help keep her skin from getting too pruny. I wanted to trust her like last summer. I wanted her to trust me, too, to ask me just once if I would stay with her, and to let me answer.

“Hey,” Roonie said now. “Jay, you listening? We’re going driving tonight. Keaton and Miller have the night off.”

“I’m resting,” I said. The sound of the space heater made me tired. “I need to close my eyes.”

“Come with,” Dale said. “Quit acting like you’re fucking forty. You in?”

I was losing my picture of Wendy in the bathtub, though I fought hard to keep it as my friends talked, trying to rescue the image from my sinking thoughts. “I’m in,” I said at last, worn-out, letting Wendy, letting myself, letting all of us slip under a heavy surface, the waterlogged weight of who we were.
They sat in the car outside of Beatrice’s mother’s house on Oak Street, going over the rules.

“You can’t touch anything,” Beatrice said. “And that includes your great-grandmother, who you can call Oma. Did you know that Oma is German?”

Hanna and Joe fidgeted in the backseat and stared out at the old house.

“And no shouting. She still has her hearing.” Beatrice turned to study the kids’ faces; they had to understand that running around or fighting wasn’t an option here. “If she doesn’t know who you are, it’s okay. She’s almost one hundred, you know, and she doesn’t remember well.”

Hanna nodded, her hand on the car door, ready to see what the fuss was about, while Joe rubbed his nose and stared back at Beatrice. They were ten and eight, and this was their first visit to Elsa’s home, though they lived on the other side of town.

“She hates kids,” their father, Tom, had said a few days ago when Beatrice called to ask him if she could take his children to the house on Oak Street.

“Just a few visits until she’s gone,” Beatrice had said, the emptiness of her own home echoing as she spoke out loud. Her husband, Harold, was fourteen years dead, and now Elsa was dying (for sure this time, her doctor had revealed, as a kind of promise), and the only person who knew her as an old, old woman, one of the few people who still
visited or remembered her at all, was Beatrice, who was herself seventy-five. She was one of the few people who knew that the house on Oak Street even existed, with its plain exterior and odd embellishments, the lime borders on the windows and the overly large metal wind chime.

“It’s been a long time since Oma’s had anyone but old ladies visiting her,” Beatrice said to the children, trying to make them laugh, but instead she thought she saw Joe yawn out of the corner of her eye.

When she’s talked to Tom, Beatrice had done her best to justify a visit. “The children could learn from her and it would mean, something, I think, for them to meet her.”

“I don’t know what you think they could learn.”

Now, as they sat in the car, she took a breath. The July heat pressed against the windows, its humidity seeping up through unseen crevices, shards of sun beating down, and she held a hand in front of the air conditioner’s vent for a moment before turning off the car. Beatrice had lived in Reinbeck all her life but had never learned to love an Iowa summer. “It could be worse,” Elsa used to say. “You could be in Florida, in the swamps.”

Had she really told her son that the children could learn something from Elsa? She hadn’t been sure how to tell Tom what she’d meant, that now that it was near she was afraid of Elsa’s death, afraid that she would be left with remorse for not loving her mother more. She wanted to share the burden of remembering Elsa—the weight of all those memories—with someone else, children, people who could be more forgiving of who Elsa had always been. But these were things she couldn’t say. “She could tell them
about the Depression, life before cars,” she’d said on the phone, resorting to the worst reason, talking about Elsa like she was an antiquated newspaper.

Tom had sighed. “If she’s nasty to those kids . . .”

“I know,” Beatrice had replied. “I know.”

Now, as they walked up to the house, Beatrice felt her dry palms grow heated with nervousness. If she were younger and if her body still worked the way it was supposed to, she imagined she’d be sweating. “Shall we go in?” she asked the children.

“It’s so big,” Hanna breathed as she surveyed the girdled, narrow building. This was the oldest neighborhood in Reinbeck, built at a time when individual rooms were small but plentiful, meant to provide a home for at least four children with parents, and often older generations as well, grandparents and great uncles. Beatrice had been born here, and it had very little in common with the house where Hanna and Joe now lived, a broad split-level with thin walls and a few spacious rooms. Elsa’s house was a true museum, the old windows mismatched, no sense of symmetry, rambling additions in the back that had once, long ago, belonged to servants. Elsa lived in a house that no one could begin to blueprint without studying it from the inside and rounding every corner.

Though she visited three times a week to give Elsa a bath, run a dust cloth over the furniture, and read mystery novels aloud, Beatrice knew her ministrations weren’t enough. What was death after years of so little life? Elsa did have a hired companion, but the young woman was useless, more focused on the TV than on anything else.

There’d been years when Beatrice and her mother hadn’t spoken at all, each of them too much of a burden for the other, their chilly silence ever-present in Beatrice’s life. There’d been fights, she’d been renounced as a daughter how many times—Elsa had
always been the one to declare their relationship over, as if you could break up with family like that—and each time Beatrice had said goodbye, the relief and regret swelling together in a massive headache. The silences only ended when Elsa grew lonely, and Beatrice would get a call at any hour, her mother’s voice steely and unapologetic, asking her if she’d read about some minor story in the Reinbeck Gazette.

Now her mother was—all the clichés were true—a child, needing to be wiped and fed pureed carrots. Beatrice had heard too many stories about men and women who were dropped off at nursing homes by their children and left there, readily forgotten, and while Elsa didn’t deserve much, Beatrice couldn’t bear that kind of guilt now, after all this time.

As they approached the dark front door, Joe took her hand, clutching it tightly with his little fingers. “Can I stay in the car? Dad says Oma’s mean.” He tried to peer in through a heavily draped window at the same time he seemed to shrink back, away from the front porch.

“Hush,” Beatrice said, and opened the door.

No matter how often she visited, she always felt the ghost of prior lives when she first entered Elsa’s home. It was the faintest image of herself, sixty, seventy years ago, running down those narrow stairs or sprawled with a catalog in front of the fireplace. This house had collected so much memory that the entire structure had, Beatrice imagined, reached a saturation point.

Because Elsa hadn’t been able to climb stairs for years, the upper two levels of the house were unused. Instead, she resided on the ground floor, and these were the rooms Beatrice herself knew best. There was the kitchen with its gas stove and black piping, the faded wallpaper freckled with tiny wheelbarrows. There was the small bedroom and
bathroom off the parlor, where Elsa slept and washed. Most of her days were spent in the parlor itself, a high-ceilinged room with ornately carved window frames and drapes that, when closed, erased the sun. The entire place was founded on dark wood: the stair banister, the front door, the baseboards. On each step of the staircase there rested a small and colored beaded basket containing a dusty bar of soap. These were the trinkets that Elsa had made years ago, a hobby to occupy her mind before it had turned on itself.

Hanna and Joe shuffled over to the parlor sofa, where Elsa lay twisted, as if she had been tossed there by a careless giant. She looked less like a woman every day that her osteoporosis made her shorter and her grimace more pronounced.

The old woman shifted on the sofa without looking up to see who was standing there, and her thin nightgown wrapped more tightly around her. “Oh, shit, I’m twisted,” she gasped.

Beatrice glanced at the children. Joe covered his mouth to suppress a giggle and Hanna whispered, “Did she just swear?”

Kneeling down next to the sofa, Beatrice said, “Mother, this is Hanna, and this is Joe. Your great-grandchildren.”

Elsa looked up bleakly and searched the children’s faces. They stared back with uncertain smiles. “Hi, Oma,” Hanna offered.

“Which one are you?” Elsa barked. The girl took a step backward and put a hand up to her short hair.

“I’m Hanna. This is Joe.” Hanna grabbed her brother’s arm and gave him a push toward Elsa, who, Beatrice noticed, flinched.

“I don’t know you. I don’t want to buy anything.”
“They aren’t salespeople, Mother. They’re children,” Beatrice said.

“I don’t owe them anything.”

Joe looked up at Beatrice. “You said Oma wasn’t ever feeling good enough for visits.”

“And you listened to her,” Elsa huffed.

“Mother, would you like some coffee?” Beatrice asked loudly, as if volume could erase whatever damage Elsa could do. She’d read books about dealing with aging parents, about the odd shift in power that happened when mothers could no long look after themselves. She knew about the urgency to resolve old problems before the parent died, about how anger could resurface after so many years of dormancy. Still, she’d refused to believe one thing, the part about how people, once they’d enter the final phase of life, didn’t become better, couldn’t muster the grace to set things right. She thought that children should expect more when a parent died.

Now, Hanna and Joe, used to Beatrice’s grandmotherly offers of ice cream and five-dollar bills, looked puzzled by this new breed of old woman.

Elsa continued in her clipped, angry voice. “You are handsome children, anyway. You look like Koehlers, like your great-grandfather. Although the girl is plump. Everyone is these days. No one says ‘no’ to dessert. Take a soap basket home with you,” she said and nodded toward the staircase, toward all the beaded baskets. “Go. Choose.” She waved her hand at them.

Once they were at the other end of the room, picking up baskets and putting them down again, gently, as if everything an old person owned was an antique, Beatrice said,
“You’re right. They do look like Dad.” He had been tall and fair-skinned, a gentle, soft-spoken man who, when alive, had cushioned some of Elsa’s hardness.

“Who are their parents?” Elsa asked.

Beatrice stood, placing her hands on her thighs to hoist herself up. “Tom and Jane. Tom is my son. I know you remember.”

Her mother’s lips tightened. “The criminal?”

It was amazing what a person could choose to remember about another, how quickly one could summarize the best or worst in a life. “That’s the one,” Beatrice sighed. Despite her efforts to be a kind parent, warm and unlike her own mother, Tom had spent most of his twenties in prison for auto theft before meeting Jane and getting a job as a lumberyard supervisor. He had been trying these past fifteen years to move on from his time in prison, ashamed of what he’d once been, but there were still the monthly calls to Beatrice for money and the occasional gambling loss.

Elsa spoke loudly now, loud enough for Hanna and Joe to hear. “I hope the children have a better respect for the law.”

Beatrice could see Hanna lose her grasp on the blue basket she was holding, allowing the handle to dangle from the tips of her fingers. Joe was looking away from all of them, toward the miniscule television set that Elsa hadn’t used in years. They knew about their father, but still.

Beatrice lowered herself and spoke in Elsa’s ear. “They’ll remember you as wicked. Is that who you are?”
The old woman turned her face to the wall, away from Beatrice and the children, and moaned, “I told you I wasn’t well for visitors. I told you all along. And I only told them the truth.”

“They don’t even know you. They don’t know your kind of truth.”

Elsa gestured toward the staircase, where Hanna and Joe still stood, holding their forgotten relics. “The children may not take soap baskets with them,” she added.

“Put your baskets down, Hanna, Joe, and come over here,” Beatrice said, and the children obeyed. “Your oma is tired,” she said before turning to Elsa and whispering, “None of us wanted to be here today.”

“What a selfish girl you are. Nobody hears my side. You never saw things as I did,” Elsa said, still facing the wall.

Beatrice tried to keep her words civil, for the children’s sake, tried not to levy a rapid-fire insult on her mother now, of all times. She said, almost politely, “I saw how you were. That was enough.”

“I’ve only ever told the truth.” Elsa kept her face hidden from them, and all they could do was look at the back of her head, at the bald spot surrounded by hair that had been flattened by the sofa pillow. Her tiny frame trembled underneath the nightgown. Beatrice watched her mother, helpless and humiliated, too far and small to reach them. “Help me to the bathroom,” Elsa said at last. “Tell the children not to touch anything.”

Once Beatrice was back in the car with the children they began to laugh in the backseat, attacking Elsa with their little jokes.

“Oma looks like Yoda. I mean, she really looks like Yoda,” Hanna said.
“Yeah,” Joe agreed, “only she isn’t green.”

“She smells like the furnace room.”

“I’m taller than she is.”

“She has a humpback.”

They giggled for a moment before Joe asked abruptly, “Grandma? Do we have to go back there?”

“Yeah,” Hanna said. “I don’t think Oma likes people.”

Beatrice turned onto the street where Tom’s family lived and slowed the car down. “You don’t want to visit your own great grandmother anymore? Your own family?”

Silence in the backseat. She pulled into the driveway and put the car in park, but no one opened a door. Beatrice relaxed her grip on the steering wheel and turned around to face the children.

“Your oma will be dead in a year,” she announced, “and when that happens you won’t ever get to see her again. Your father and I have agreed that it’s important that you visit your relatives. Who will remember her once she’s gone except for us, her family?”

She turned back toward the front of car, swallowing to steady her voice. It shook so easily these days. “Please just do this. You don’t have to like my mother. But you do need to know her.”

Without looking behind her Beatrice heard the children pause, the only sounds their heavy breathing and the air conditioner’s constant exhale. She was more vulnerable each day, she thought, now so affected by the opinions of children. Then the back doors
were open and Joe gave a feeble “Bye, Grandma,” before shutting the door and running into the house.

Beatrice had one memory of Elsa that had come, through the years, to supercede all others. It had become a full story, something Beatrice told herself like a myth, and it was a memory that got in the way every time she tried to love her mother. It was a blustery afternoon in December, and Beatrice was fourteen years old, preparing for her first school dance. Cosmetics were forbidden, as Beatrice went to Catholic school, and the chaperones were always strict about their rules. She sat in front of her vanity mirror, trying to find a way to make herself look different, to move beyond the plain, everyday Beatrice with the wispy chin-length hair and the small features.

Elsa had already sewed Beatrice a satiny pink dress for the dance, but now there was the face and the hair. It was just Beatrice, an unadorned and simple girl, wearing too fancy a dress. Even worse, she had tried to curl her hair the night before but it didn’t take, and now it was too late to try again, thin strands sticking out at the sides, shaped by static electricity in the dry winter air.

While Beatrice sat at her vanity, Elsa entered the room with the efficient flourish she’d maintained through middle age, purpose in every move. She was still taller than Beatrice then, and her steely hair fell to her waist in a thick, ropy braid.

“Why are you idle?” she asked as she gathered the sheets off Beatrice’s bed for laundry. She still spoke with a faint German accent.

Once Beatrice explained, Elsa’s expression didn’t change, and she left the bedroom without a word. A moment later she returned, carrying a large glass jar of
preserved beets. Beatrice didn’t say anything as Elsa set the jar on the vanity, opened it, and dipped her finger in the burgundy juice. “Hold still,” she instructed, and smeared the juice over her daughter’s lips. “This is what we did in Hamburg, when I was a girl.”

Alarmed, Beatrice stared at her reflection in the mirror. “But they said I couldn’t wear makeup,” she began.

“You saw me. This isn’t makeup. This is only beet juice. If they ask, that’s what you say. Now turn around.”

Beatrice did as she was told and flinched when Elsa took her cheeks and gave them each a hard pinch. “That’s your rouge, a healthy pink, but again, it isn’t makeup. See? My daughter will be the prettiest girl at the dance. Just don’t lick your lips and be sure to pinch your cheeks once every half hour. Stay here while I fetch a barrette for your hair.” And with that, Elsa was gone once more.

Beatrice studied herself in the mirror. She looked like her mother, like an adult, colorful, and for a long time she just stared, not knowing what to think. Though she knew her mother had meant to be generous, to share a part of herself, Beatrice felt ugly, her smile already morphing into the tight frown that her mother wore like a talisman. She felt that to laugh or even smile would be grotesque, that her rouge would turn into clown makeup if she didn’t look properly stern.

As she sat there, Beatrice began to wonder if this is what her mother really wanted, this freakish version of herself, a painted girl-woman, a badly made doll. Is this who Beatrice was, who she’d grow to be, someone who covered her lips in sticky juice to look like her mother?
Later, when no one had asked her to dance, Beatrice had sat against a wall for most of the night, believing herself to be a stupid child, Bea only pretending to be an adult. As she watched the fresh-faced girls spin and twirl around her, Beatrice’s pinched cheeks felt hot and splotchy, her lips garish, and she grew angry with her mother then, a mother whose Old World habits had made Beatrice stand out in all the wrong ways. She was a mannequin gone bad, a negative version of herself.

There were times when Elsa had said and done horrible things in the name of discipline, called Beatrice a cow when she accidentally knocked over stack of books at the library, spanked her in the middle of Sears and Robuck, but those times had been different. The roles were clear and choice removed: Elsa was the power and Beatrice the supplicant. It was almost easy. But the night of the dance had been different. Elsa had offered herself for the first time as a role model, and Beatrice rejected the thought with a fury that was new. She didn’t want to share that, the makeup, the new similarities. After the dance, once she was home, Beatrice washed her face so hard that her cheeks swelled and burned.

The night of the visit Tom called, immediately shouting into the phone. “She can’t treat people that way. I don’t care how goddamned old she is!” he said in lieu of a greeting.

“Calm down,” Beatrice said, trying to will Tom into composure by talking in a low tone, the kind of tone she’d learned from book and television mothers, June Cleaver and Mrs. Ingalls. “I can explain.”

“It doesn’t matter. My kids don’t have to listen to that shit. This whole thing, it was a bad idea. That’s all I had to say.”
Beatrice paced in her living room and took a moment to respond, listening to the heavy tick of the wall clock. “But she’s family. She’s dying.” She tried to think of more, to come up with a better reason for why Elsa deserved another chance, but couldn’t.

“Same old song. What you’re not getting, Mom, is that I don’t care.”

She could only do what she’d always done and back down from his anger, though for a moment she wanted to lash out at her son, explain that though she’d tried all her life not to be like Elsa, here he was, pushing her to shove back. “Okay,” she said. No more.”

The next day Beatrice brought her mother an afghan blanket that she had picked up at the Reinbeck flea market. Though the temperature hadn’t dipped below eighty in weeks, Elsa had been complaining that she couldn’t keep warm.

“You don’t have the children today,” Elsa said, once again laid out on the sofa.

“Of course I don’t,” said Beatrice. “Why would they want to come back here?”

She watched now as Elsa shifted on the sofa and tried to prop herself into a sitting position. “You want to keep them from me,” she muttered.

“I wanted them to know you,” Beatrice replied. “So I don’t have to be the only one. I’m not your legacy.”

“You make me a villain,” Elsa said. “After all I’ve done.”

“Can’t you just be kind?” Beatrice pleaded. “Can’t you leave me with something better than this?” These were feeble questions, she knew, but she didn’t know how to ask in the right way, ask her mother to give her the kind of goodbye a daughter needed. She reached over to spread the afghan across Elsa. The old woman winced when Beatrice’s fingers grazed her open palm.
“You’ve never made sense. In Germany, you would have learned not to ask stupid questions. I’m tired of talking,” Elsa barked, and closed her eyes. “Read to me from that book you brought last week.”

She watched her mother lie on the sofa, her face distorted, her eyes closed. Elsa never wore makeup anymore, but she still looked off somehow, a near-woman, a gnome. Her forehead was overly large, her cheekbones too prominent. “You need some color,” Beatrice said. “You look like death.”

“What would I care about that,” Elsa replied, not opening her eyes. “Start the book over again. I’ve forgotten what it’s about.”

On her way out of the house at the close of the visit, while Elsa slept on the sofa, Beatrice took two soap baskets to give to the children.

Eight weeks later Elsa was dead. She died alone while her companion was making beef stew in the kitchen, and Beatrice assumed that her mother had gone peacefully during one of her early afternoon naps. It was late September, and Beatrice hoped that a part of Elsa had been pushed out from that house, the vault that had kept her for more than eighty years, for now that her mother was gone Beatrice realized how dark the house had always been, how cramped and old.

The arrangements were easy to make, but the funeral director requested that Beatrice visit the house and choose an appropriate dress for her burial. She had died, unsurprisingly, in her nightgown. Though it was so new to plan a visit without bringing her mother something—a candle, a tube of hand lotion—Beatrice wanted to see this
house once more while Elsa still resided there, her last meal in the wastebasket, her hairs on the sofa pillow. She had already decided to sell the house come spring.

After opening Elsa’s bedroom closet, Beatrice spent a good five minutes fingering through her mother’s gowns and dresses, unfashionable for decades, a time capsule of style. She needed to find something recent, something that would accommodate Elsa’s hunched back and her diminutive stature. It had been so long since Elsa had gone anywhere, Beatrice wondered for a moment if her mother would have to be buried in her tattered nightgown after all. Finally, she found a powdered blue polyester suit that Beatrice remembered from Harold’s funeral fourteen years ago. It would have to do.

On one last survey of the house, Beatrice grabbed Elsa’s makeup kit, last used sometime in the early eighties, she guessed, but that wasn’t a problem. She reasoned that Elsa would look more natural if she wore colors she herself had picked out, her own rouge and eye shadow and lipstick. Beatrice wondered what the cosmeticians would do, how they would do her mother up, if they could improve her using what Beatrice gave them.

As she shut the front door, Beatrice knew this was the last time she would visit this home as a daughter, the last time she would, in fact, be a daughter at all. From now on she would be something different, more official, executor of the will.

During the wake two days later, Beatrice stood before her mother, the first to arrive. The makeup, it turned out, was gaudy, bold streaks of pink on her cheekbones and orangish lips. Elsa seemed shrunken in the blue suit, lost amongst the empty folds she had filled in a more robust time. Beatrice now understood that it was unnatural—freakish, even—that
Elsa should look made up now, at the very end. Either way was wrong; her mother couldn’t have looked right. Elsa’s features were frozen in neutral sleep, and Beatrice wondered what that papery skin would feel like now, if each separate crease had hardened or if her face would be malleable. She thought of her mother’s skin as it had been in life, when Beatrice held Elsa’s hand as she flailed, naked and scared, in the bathtub, or when she had applied beet juice to Beatrice’s lips and rouged her cheeks.

Beatrice checked her watch and waited for others to arrive, but no one came, not even the handful of old cousins who still lived in Iowa. Still, she practiced the look she would give if anyone did arrive, dry-faced but properly somber, the perfect combination of relief (but not too much) and regret, the I-will-miss-her-but-she-has-gone-to-a-better-place look reserved for the children of those who have been ill for many years. It was standard, yes, but it was also composed, her own invented expressions and gestures. She practiced while the funeral director hovered in the side office, walking around in a large circle, putting on that sad smile.

Twenty minutes later, Beatrice watched as the door to the funeral home finally opened, bringing with it a cool gust and sun and Tom. She approached as he was signing the guest book, followed by Hanna and Joe, all of them wearing their funeral best.

“Thank you for coming,” Beatrice said, saying it like it was the least of all kindnesses they could have performed for Elsa, like there had been others before them to greet.

“Of course,” Tom said as he embraced her. “I’m sorry Jane couldn’t be here. She’s in bed with one of her headaches.”
Beatrice nodded. Jane had never met Elsa, not once. Beatrice walked to a table and brought over the soap baskets she’d taken from Elsa’s home. When she returned, she looked down at the children and saw that they were hitting at each other and laughing, calm and unafraid of the dead woman only a few feet away, the woman who had once been so formidable in Beatrice’s childhood. “Your oma wanted you to have these,” she said.

Hanna and Joe stopped laughing and stood still, not reaching for the baskets. “That’s okay,” Hanna said. “We didn’t really want them, anyway.”

“Take them.”

“Mom,” Tom said, “they have enough junk already.”

“Okay.” Beatrice set the baskets back on the table. “But it would be nice if they at least said goodbye to their great-grandmother,” she said.

Tom shifted and his voice lowered to whisper. “The thing is, they’ve never seen a ... you know.”

“Everyone has to eventually,” Beatrice replied. She knelt down in front of Hanna and Joe. “You can say goodbye. It’s the proper thing to do at a wake.”

After looking up at their father, who shrugged with a resignation Beatrice couldn’t help but notice, the children shuffled off toward Elsa’s casket at the front of the room.

“I should go with,” Tom muttered.

“They’re okay,” Beatrice said. “You get something to drink.” She left Tom standing next to the guest book and approached the children from behind. As she grew closer she realized that they were talking in their hushed, conspiratorial tones.
“I’ll bet she’s cold,” Hanna said.

“Ooooooo! Do you see that? Her eyes are sewed shut!” Joe exclaimed.

“That’s so her eyes don’t pop open.”

“Gross!”

“I think maybe they did it to her lips, too. Sewed them shut.”

Beatrice stayed a few steps behind them. Her mother was nothing to them now, without any of her former impact. The children ogled Elsa as if she was a wax figure, a cheap sculpture.

“They sew mouths shut?” Joe asked.

Hanna continued. “It’s just so her mouth won’t hang open. Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh.”

“Quit it. You’re lying.”

“And I’ll bet if you touched her she’d be hard as a rock.”

When Beatrice cleared her throat both children jumped. “Have you said your goodbyes?” she asked.

Though she could tell they were trying not to, both children giggled. “Yes, we did.”

“Hanna, come closer with me for a moment. I’d like to show you something,” Beatrice said.

Once they were standing directly in front of the casket Beatrice took one of her granddaughter’s hands and guided it toward Elsa’s granite face.

“Hey, what are you doing?” Hanna asked, alarmed.
“It’s okay,” Beatrice replied as she pressed the girl’s hand against Elsa’s cheek. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Joe take a step back, stop, and then shuffle forward, transfixed. Hanna squirmed and repeated her question.

“Let go. What are you doing?”

All the books had been right; there were no revelations, no apologies, no way to leave behind thoughts of a better woman. While Beatrice felt Hanna’s warm hand and, under it, Elsa’s painted face, she imagined that her granddaughter’s touch brought, for a moment, some vigor to her mother’s cheeks.
The stepchildren were coming over for Christmas Eve again this year. They were Gary’s kids from before, back when he was still a drinker and she, Helen Hammond, was what people called a “woman of loose morals,” not that Helen had ever figured out exactly what that meant. They were coming over with their kids, all four of them now grown, and they would do what they’d done for a long and weary string of Christmas Eves: they would laugh at Helen’s two hundred and thirty-six photo albums, the shell pieces that always crept into her devilled eggs, her life-sized stuffed Santa. Helen pretended not to hear them. She would stare over at the tree, adorned with chaotic strips of tinsel, and over the years she’d become both impressed and appalled at how comfortable the stepchildren were talking right in front her, as if she was completely dumb to her surroundings.

“Did you see photo album number eighty-six?” one of them would say, giggling.

“The one she stuffed with a bunch of napkins from their cruise?”

“How classy is that?” And then, always, laughter. Helen would concentrate on the Christmas tree, on the picture ornament she and Gary had gotten at Walgreen’s three years before, and she would try to ignore the feeling that she was being served up to them, just another part of a holiday feast.
Now, less than two weeks before they would return to exchange presents and load of massive plates of sloppy joes and shrimp cocktail, Helen admitted to Gary, “Your children make me nervous.”

Gary shrugged. “You’re nervous all the time now that you’ve retired.”

“They make fun of me. You, too,” Helen said, clutching her pen. She was trying to make out a grocery list for the following week but couldn’t seem to concentrate. Bread crumbs, she wrote. Sour cream. She’d never done anything but compliment the stepchildren before this, convinced that, even though they were grown, they were still off-limits, sacred. Their mother had succumbed to cancer years ago; to criticize the stepchildren would be akin to insulting the dead.

“What kids don’t make fun of their parents? They love you,” Gary said.

“They love me like I used to love Howdy Doody.”

“You’re restless,” Gary said, reaching over from the couch to pat her knee. “You should volunteer. You should take up swimming.”

“I can’t do that,” Helen replied. “I’m gooey. I’m made of marshmallow.”

“Then what? What can we do?” She could tell that Gary was getting impatient, speaking out to the living room in general as if he were addressing a studio audience. Do you see, folks? See how my wife is? “This is the golden age. Do you want me to talk to the kids?”

Helen wrote down Buttermilk on her list and sighed. “I’m going to the store,” she said.

* * *
When she was young, back in the sixties, people would ask Helen what she wanted to be when she grew up and she would always say “retired.” Retired women, they could do anything. They could get fat. They could take cooking or creative writing classes at the Y. They could sit around and watch television all day long if they wanted to, and there wouldn’t be anyone to judge. They could make crappy devilled eggs and hang their Christmas lights up with duct tape (it was stronger than regular tape!), and if their stepchildren laughed, well, then, what was the loss there?

But the past six months, starting from her very last day as a courthouse clerk, hadn’t been that way. Retirement wasn’t a fantasy; it was dull work, like a job without direction. If she’d dreaded Christmas Eve before, the hours of preparation for people she didn’t like, who weren’t even her real family, she only had more time to focus on the unpleasant now that she was retired.

Helen was so lost in her thoughts that she drove right past the Hy-Vee on Byron Avenue. “Damn,” she said out loud to no one, but then she had an idea. What about that new organic foods store on 1st? She’d driven past at least a dozen times and thought the warm, yellowish building looked oddly comforting, with the parking lot filled with Volvos and the small, tidy-looking cart corrals. She’d heard stories: crisp produce, the freshest seafood, but expensive, too. Helen was feeling expensive today.

As she pushed her cart up and down the long rows Helen admired colorful, handmade signs that advertised sales on Brie cheese and granola. She liked this place, and shopping early here was just as good as it was at the Hy-Vee, before most jobs let out and the aisles flooded with men and women steering their grocery carts with the same hurried zeal they drove their cars, pulling items off the shelves without slowing down.
Perhaps retirement had made Helen restless, but it made her slow, too. She didn’t like those panicked crowds.

As she rounded the soup aisle, Helen noticed a food tasting table set up near the frozen cases. Behind the table stood a youngish woman—probably no older than thirty—passing out samples of what the sign explained was Delicious Nutritious Soy Ice Cream. Helen stopped in front of the woman. She liked her look, the dark French braid that hung to her waist, the thick maroon turtleneck she wore, the thin bones and small face. She reminded Helen of the type of child she might have had, not at all like the stepchildren, with their robust faces and short, trendy haircuts.

“Hi,” Helen said as she rolled her cart up to the woman. “This is my first time here.” Drat, she thought. She was always doing that, giving out information before anyone asked.

The woman looked up from the magazine she was reading and smiled. It wasn’t the kind of smile you got at the Hy-Vee, the Hi how are you is my shift over yet? smile. “Chocolate or vanilla?” she asked, pulling out an old-fashioned ice cream scoop from behind the table.

“Ummm . . . vanilla. What’s soy ice cream?” She was embarrassed to ask.

The woman smiled and extended a small scoop of vanilla to Helen. “My name’s Nadia,” she said. “Soy is a non-dairy alternative to regular ice cream.” She passed over a little plastic spoon.

Helen thought of their fridge at home, stocked with milk, three kinds of cheeses, and a pint of vanilla yogurt. Here, in Waterloo, Iowa, eating dairy products was a good thing, a healthy thing. Meat and potatoes and all that, plenty of iron and calcium. Mothers
talked of strong bones, of the dangers of anemia. “I know what tofu is,” Helen said, to try to make herself seem less naïve, her thick green coat and yellow scarf seeming so Midwestern now, too quaint. “But I didn’t know they’d tackled ice cream, too. I like this,” she added, swallowing. “It’s good.”

“Soy products keep getting better,” Nadia said.

“I’ll buy some,” Helen said before she even thought about it, and as Nadia reached over into the freezer to grab a carton of vanilla, she began to grow alarmed. What would Gary say about this? Would he laugh? How in the world would the two of them eat an entire carton of soy ice cream before it became freezer-burned? They never ate dessert.

“If you put strawberries on it, this makes a great treat for holiday entertaining,” Nadia said as if she’d read Helen’s thoughts.

They talked for a few minutes more, and Helen copied down a recipe from Nadia’s magazine for Tofu and Broccoli in Peanut Sauce. Nadia told Helen that she was a vegan, that she didn’t eat meat, or dairy, or eggs.

“Or seafood?” Helen asked, thinking of the shrimp cocktail she set out every year for Christmas Eve.

“Or seafood, though I do miss it sometimes. Meat, that’s what I don’t miss. Best move I ever made.”

Helen laughed. “Tell that to my husband,” she said. “Gary puts Bac’n Bits on his toast and thinks hot dogs count as a side dish.”

Nadia smiled vaguely. “We are in Iowa. He’s not the only who feels that way.”
“No, he’s not.” She now thought of the stacked platter of sloppy joes she made every year, the sounds of the stepchildren and their children chomping away at their squishy sandwiches, licking sauce from their fingers and their lips, stacking their empty paper plates in a tower of soggy hamburger buns and shrimp tails. At least once a year, Helen scraped dried beef off of the carpet or the couch. Once, she even scraped it off the television.

“I don’t mean to sound dramatic,” Helen said, after thinking for a moment, “but if someone wanted to, I don’t know, consider some life changes, just consider them, how might they go about starting that?”

Nadia smiled. “You’d be surprised how many people don’t even want to explore a change like this. It’s a big move. But, if you’re interested, there’s a group of us here in town who would love to help you out. Have you ever heard of PETA?”

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. The stories Helen had heard weren’t flattering. They concerned women running naked down streets “rather than wear fur” (couldn’t you wear cotton?) and soy cream pies being tossed at politicians (that was just mean). Still, Nadia seemed sincere, definitely worth hearing out.

Before Helen rolled her cart away to find the tofu aisle, Nadia got out a piece of paper and wrote down her phone number. “If you’re interested,” she said, “we meet on Thursdays in my basement. It’s very low-key.”

Helen left the organic foods store with nervous resolutions tumbling around in her mind. She wasn’t a boring woman—she’d been to Spain twice, she played piano, she’d been mugged in Manhattan—but this was a new endeavor entirely. It was noble, too, the kind of thing even the stepchildren might admire. Instead of reminding one another about
the kind of person she’d been, less then discretionary and dirt poor when Gary came along, instead of laughing even more at who she’d become, this was something almost anyone could respect. At worst, they would hate the new holiday menu and would cease to consume, consume, consume, until Helen herself felt like a shred of dried beef. They would have to be dainty, pick at their plates and talk about what tofurkey was made of. They would have to admit that this wasn’t something wacky, predictable Helen would do.

Her cart, usually stocked with cans of soup, corn, and peas, was now an exotic vessel, the carrier of concepts as odd as tangelo or tripe.

By the time Gary came home Helen had made the Thai peanut sauce and was stirring in the broccoli florets and cubes of tofu. The rice was just beginning to soften.

“What smells good?” he asked her as he sorted through the mail and tossed his keys on the counter.

Helen had already imagined what Gary might think of this—that she’d gone on some odd and ill-fated self-improvement kick, that this was some frustrated, newly retired housewife thing. That was the stuff of sitcoms. As Gary approached the skillet to inspect its contents, Helen grabbed her oven mitt with one hand and stirred the Thai mixture with the other. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t get the sauce to completely cover the large tofu cubes.

“Is that peanut butter? What’s that whitish stuff?”

“I’m just trying something new. You might like it.”

Gary squinted at the skillet. “It looks like dice. Is it chicken?”

“Dice? How can a food look like dice? This is healthy.”
“Healthy means vegetable,” Gary said in his knowing voice, the one that made him sound like a See ‘N Say recording. The cow says moo. The dog says woof. In another life he might have been a tour guide instead of a realtor. If so, then he wouldn’t have had to wear a toupee to work, the one his daughters told him looked like a dead shrew—he could have been the grandfatherly trolley operator, and not a man who tried to look sharp. Now, it was gray suits, endless blue ties, a sandy and meticulous wig, shoes with thick soles to make him 5’6” instead of 5’5”. It would have been nice to see her husband wear candy-cane shirts on the job.

“I have a new client,” Gary said as he took two plates from the cupboard and set them at their small, two-chair kitchen table, speaking loudly over the hum of the stove fan and sizzle of dinner. “Get this, he used to play a cop on that one show, the one with the woman sidekick and that actor you like.”

“TJ Hooker.” Dinner was almost ready. What would have been wrong with serving goulash? Helen thought. Wasn’t this as ridiculous as anything else she did these days?

“Yeah. TJ Hooker.” Gary laughed and got out the forks. “Hollywood’s a tough place, I guess. Hey, thanks for dinner. Looks fancy. I don’t thank you enough for these things.”

Goulash. She turned about and kissed his cheek.

Once Helen had ladled out the rice and stir-fry, she sat at the table and waited for Gary to take the first bite. While she hadn’t exactly dressed up for dinner, Helen had put on her favorite blue jumper and the striped red shirt Gary had gotten her for her birthday last year.

“And the tofu?”

“Is that what it is? Is it supposed to taste like anything?”

Helen chewed a cube slowly before answering, trying to discern flavor. “I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“Oh. Then that’s perfect, too.”

Now was the time. “I’ve been thinking, Gary, that maybe I’ll do something different for Christmas Eve.” She took a quick drink of water. “I’m wondering how you’d feel if I made a meal without so much meat in it. As in no meat. A meatless Christmas.”

Gary kept chewing and then set his fork down. “No sloppy joes?”

“No.”

“Is this about the kids? About what you told me earlier?”

Helen tried to put it into words. Yes, of course it was about the stepchildren, at least in part. She wanted something classy, something they’d have to look up to. Vegetarianism wasn’t tacky. It was chic. It was where East Coast and West Coast agreed. It wasn’t something you’d expect from a retired, post-alcoholic woman of previously loose morals in Waterloo, Iowa.

But that was a lot to say over dinner. “The old routine, it’s boring now. I think you’re right. I’m restless.”

“I don’t know. The kids . . . well, you try it if you want. They don’t like it, maybe we could have some cold cuts on hand.”

Helen frowned. She didn’t want a standby. She wanted to be dangerous.

“We’ll see,” she told Gary. “Maybe.”
PET A meetings consisted of drinking hot chai and sitting in a circle on the floor of Nadia’s basement, which was furnished with a plush section of carpet and a folding card table. There was Helen, Nadia, and five others, most of them in their late twenties, none as old as Helen. They seemed to wear a lot of corduroy and earth tones, but they weren’t at all anemic-looking as she’d feared. They must be getting their iron somehow, Helen thought. Maybe through spinach or supplements.

“I’d like to introduce you to Helen,” Nadia announced to the group as she took her place in the sitting circle. “She is trying to incorporate some vegetarian elements into her life. And, while we have respect for her current lifestyle, I told her we’d be happy to give her some pointers and help convince her why it’s so important to be educated about the meat and dairy industries, for her family’s sake and, of course, for the sake of our animal friends.”

“Hi,” everyone said. Helen nodded and smiled back, feeling a little guilty for never thinking of steak as an “animal friend” before this.

“Now, are you the primary food preparer?” Nadia asked.

She wasn’t sure how much this had to do with vegetarianism, but Helen answered that yes, she did cook most of the meals, especially now that she was retired. The other members looked almost sympathetic, as if being in charge of food preparation was tantamount to spousal abuse. That’s the way it was these days, especially in the eyes of younger people. Helen had seen this before: if you were a married woman who still did the typical chores, your home suddenly became a cage.
Nadia leaned down to where Helen was sitting. "Just so you know, we're not radicals here. PETA, well, PETA as a national organization has this thing where we, you know, talk about the scary stuff involved in meat and dairy production. This is supposed to help us understand what these animals endure. We have pictures, but I should warn you. They're graphic."

"I've seen graphic. I know all about graphic. I'm sixty years old."

With that, Nadia began her lecture, and by the time she was done Helen's wrists tingled with repulsion. It seemed that every animal had a terrible fate. There was so much to stir a person up: calves kept from sunlight to promote anemia and better veal, chickens so cancerous that their legs fell off when they were picked up, pigs gone crazy from immobility, egg-laying hens that had their beaks cut off to keep them from pecking at one another. Fish had nerve endings after all, a capacity for pain. Nadia told them of the rescue ranches that PETA had funded, each a happy and green oasis filled with three-legged goats and eyeless kittens stolen from local laboratories. She passed out a stack of photographs; in each, there was a maimed animal staring at the camera from a grassy, spacious pen.

When she was finished, Nadia looked almost embarrassed. "I've never given that speech before," she admitted, and a couple of the other PETA members looked slightly disgusted, as if they were sucking on aspirin. Nadia turned to Helen. "Since most of us grew up in the Midwest, we're usually not quite as . . . um . . . forceful as all that."

But Helen wasn't thinking about Nadia's scare tactics or PETA's penchant for showing pictures of bloodied cows to potential converts. She was thinking of the stepchildren again, and about how fitting it was that they should be okay with labeling
other creatures without thinking about it. You are filet mignon. You are a chicken nugget.
You are silly. You are a woman of loose morals.

“Excuse me,” Helen said, putting her chai down and addressing the group. “Do you protest? Is there something we can do?”

Nadia and the others looked at one another with a certain degree of fear in their eyes. One the men said, “Here? In Waterloo?”

“Yes. This is a strong message you have here! We should get the word out, don’t you think?”

“It’s just that, Helen, this has never really seemed like the kind of place that would appreciate our message,” Nadia said, her voice barely above a whisper. “We feel very strongly about PETA, but we’re a small group, and living here prevents us from being very . . . PETAish, if you know what I mean.”

Jed, one of the other members, raised his hand. “I hate to go against what you just said, Nadia, because of course I totally agree, but, I don’t know, maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to try something out. Cara and I, we have a chicken suit left over from a protest we organized back in Seattle.”

“That’s perfect,” Helen announced.

“Jed and Cara have just moved here from Seattle,” Nadia said, and Helen thought she heard a trace of envy in the way she said Seattle. “They’re used to a more, um, receptive environment.”

Helen stood up. “All the more reason to organize something here, right in the middle of Iowa,” she said, and, after awhile, the rest of the Waterloo PETA chapter agreed to support Helen in their very first protest.
Jed and Cara had made the costume, and whichever of them had been responsible for the blood had gone overboard. There were large splotches of red everywhere, even on the felt and cardboard beak. This didn’t look like a slaughtered hen, Helen observed when first presented with her new attire: it looked like a chicken that had rolled around in ketchup, every bit as laughable as a collection of cruise ship napkins.

It was cold, now only three days before Christmas Eve, with a breeze that seeped through the skin, but Helen was sweating anyway as they stood in front of Hardee’s fast-food restaurant. The chicken suit, it turned out, was made of thick polyester, and her felt feathers blocked anything external, even sound, from entering her warm environment. Helen considered the fact that she was incubating in her costume. Only her eyes were exposed, and they kept watering at each sting of cold air.

Around her, the other six PETA members walked around sheepishly, their shoulders hunched, carrying signs that said things like Burgers Don’t Grow on Trees! and Would You Eat Fido? Helen could hardly hear their chanting, and suspected that they might not be chanting at all, though they’d all agreed that they would. Some of the Hardee’s customers yelled things back at the protestors, but most of them just slinked off into the restaurant.

The afternoon had not gone as dramatically as she’d both hoped and feared it would, but now Helen felt a nudge at her side. She turned, careful not to hit anyone with her wings, and saw a police officer before her. Since she had no periphery vision in her suit, she hadn’t even seen him approach, and was now mortified to see that she knew the
police officer, thought his name was Ted or Tim or something, but only because she used to see him down at the courthouse sometimes.

His muffled words were impossible to decipher. Helen looked around wildly as the officer addressed her, hoping that someone would step in. “What can I do for you?” she asked dumbly, reverting to her clerking self, direct and professional.

The officer tapped her left wing and shouted into her costume, “I can’t hear you, ma’am! You need to take off your hood!”

Slowly, trying her best not to meet anyone’s eye, Helen removed her chicken head. Would she spend the night in jail because of this? Would Gary have to come and pick her up from county while she had a chicken body and a Helen head, some beastly hybrid of two comedies? Helen tried to focus on Jed, who was the only protestor who seemed unafraid of Ted or Tim. Thankfully, she hadn’t been recognized.

“You folks have to move along,” Ted/Tim said, but without real force, as if he’d heard about PETA members who were capable of great feats of violence of disruption.

“We got a call from the management that you’re disturbing the customers at this establishment.”

Nadia cleared her throat. “We’re not hurting anyone, though. I mean, we’re just, you know. Freedom of speech.”

For a moment Helen thought that Ted/Tim might laugh. For her part, Nadia looked humiliated, as if she knew her rhetoric for what Helen guessed it was—typical, a rehashing of university demonstrations the world over.

“Ma’am, I understand. I do. But the thing is, I was just inside and everyone in there is eating hamburgers and chicken sticks and all kinds of things like that. Today
there’s a kid manager working, he’s just trying to do his job, and he’s getting a lot of complaints from customers. That chicken lady,” he pointed toward Helen, “has made a few of the younger kids cry.” Here he paused and seemed to be working out a compromise in his head. “If you cut your losses now and call it a day, I won’t write you up. Otherwise, I’ll get you on loitering charges.”

“We’ll go across the street,” Helen declared. She looked across the street at a rough jumble of rusted Hondas and old minivans.

“Then you’d be loitering on Cooley’s Used Cars lot.”

“We’ll stay on the sidewalk.”

“Look, lady,” Ted/Tim said, finally turning toward Helen. Her hair, damp from sweat, stuck to her moist cheek.

She looked down at her head, at the chicken’s empty eye sockets and limp beak. No wonder children had cried. It was clearly a hen defeated, not a brave animal struggling to avoid a certain fate.


Helen thought of Gary, whom she had lied to, telling him she was driving to Des Moines for the day to shop for a rug.

“No,” she said, looking not at his eyes but somewhere vaguely to the left of him. “I’m sure you don’t.”

Nadia and the others were carrying their signs off to Jed’s van. Now it was just Helen and the police officer. A group of Hardee’s customers walked past slowly, not bothering to hide their gawking, clearly waiting for the moment when Ted/Tim would
decide to cuff Helen’s giant felt wings and push her into the police car, like they did on
cops.

“Better go join your friends, ma’am,” Ted/Tim said at last. “Party’s over.”

In a last show of defiance, Helen placed her chicken head squarely back on her
head and shouted at the gawking patrons, “Meat is murder! Ba-baaawwk!” It wasn’t the
same now, though. They’d seen her without her full costume; they’d caught a glimpse of
Helen. One of the customers laughed. Another shouted back, “Vegetarians kill millions
of innocent turnips each year!” Helen stood there, feeling almost like a real chicken,
feeling almost like they could come after her any moment with a hatchet and deep fryer,
and then she ran off to join the others in the van.

The first of the stepchildren arrived with a plateful of butter-brickle, even though Helen
was sure they knew that Gary was allergic to peanuts. The second came with beer, and
soon the whole housed buzzed with family, or near-family, in Helen’s case.

She had given up on being a PETA member the same day as the protest. In the
van, Nadia had tried to revitalize their effort by asking, “What about posters at the local
high school? Maybe a spoof of the Got Milk? campaign, only Got Cholesterol? or
something like that?”

“Do kids care about cholesterol?” Helen had asked. She liked the PETA group.
She didn’t want them to look as dumb as she had felt. When they’d parted ways at
Nadia’s house, everyone had said goodbye to Helen as if they knew already that she’d
never be back.
For Christmas Eve she’d laid out the usual fare: the sandwiches, of course, and the shrimp cocktail. She’d added on, cooking a ham that had turned out a little dry but still looked nice on the serving table, a warm and pinkish mound, comforting. She’d made eggnog from scratch (not an easy task!) and wrapped thick pieces of bacon around water chestnuts. There was a cold cut tray and a giant cheese ball, a cream pie and a monster chocolate cake.

“This is quite a feast!” the stepchildren said, and when they looked at one another Helen could tell they were frightened.

“I hope you’re hungry!” Helen told them, handing each a plastic plate. “Don’t be rude, eat up. Eat up.”

They did. They loaded their plates so full that the ham sat on top of the marshmallow salad and the French onion dip ran into the turkey gravy. They ate so much that there was almost no conversation, no talk of all the stupid things Helen had done over the past year. She kept them busy eating, satiated them by becoming uber-Helen, giving and giving and giving of herself until they almost choked. That was the power a retired woman had, not to change but to exaggerate what was already there: she had time to grow plump enough for them all.

“Have another Smoky Joe,” she’d say, plopping a sausage down on somebody’s plate. “Have another chicken wing.” Gary, for his part, sat in his recliner and watched Helen race about. “I’ve never seen you move so fast,” he whispered to her at one point as she carried in another tray of shrimp.
Later, as the stepchildren were walking out the door, carrying their loads of presents and looking greenish from all the food, they looked at her almost like they were sorry. “You outdid yourself,” they said. “We shouldn’t have eaten so much.”

“Nonsense,” Helen told them all. “You didn’t eat enough.” They hadn’t even come close, she thought, and she knew, finally, after so many years of this, that they could carve her out forever and never hit a bone.
Radio Waves

Monica first heard the song when she and her husband, Pete, were shopping for mangoes at the Hy-Vee grocery. They were on their way to a luau, something one of Pete’s coworkers had cooked up just so he could point out the irony of throwing a luau for high school teachers, in March, in Plymouth, Minnesota.

“Are mangoes Hawaiian?” Monica asked as she pressed her fingertips into the fruit. A good mango, she knew, had an almost spoiled feel to it, the flesh giving way under pressure with the conviction of decay. “I thought they were more of a Southeast Asian thing.”

Pete tore off a produce bag from the dispenser and shook it out. “No one will care,” he said.

Though he had a point, Monica fought the urge to toss the mangoes aside and go for a more accurate food, maybe a pineapple. She had a natural impulse to get things right, but the world was full of near misses. She’d felt the same since she was a child, growing up in Des Moines: a close proximity to the authentic was what she settled for; it was almost always close enough.

A moment later, after the last mango had been squeezed and prodded and plopped into the produce bag, a ballad, the kind that lulls shoppers into not stressing over the price of frozen pizza, forced Monica to stop in front of the tabloids. It was a little song with a
simple melody and lone piano, but the lyrics caught her as she stood near the checkout.

Even the tabloid headlines—with their screeching claims of alien babies and apocalyptic disasters—seemed to disappear.

_We snuck out the night before he died_, the voice sang out over the store’s meek sound system. _You washed his shirts after he’d gone._ She thought she knew that voice. _That’s when I saw he had your eyes._ Monica tilted her head upward, sniffing for sound. _You said you weren’t bothered._ The lyrics embarrassed her somehow, as if she’d overheard two people gossiping in the cereal aisle, and she had the confused feeling that everyone was looking at her.

_You smoked your first cigarette at the funeral._ Monica could see it in flashes: the greedy reach, the sharp inhale, the throaty cough. It was a sunny day, and the smoke had stung her eyes.

“What is this?” Monica muttered as the cashier weighed out the mangoes, her voice seeming to come from the same place as the singer’s, a tinny, conscious piping from a distant speaker.

“Yeah, they’re a little pricey,” said the cashier, glancing nervously from the fruit to Monica.

“What’s wrong?” Pete asked.

“The song,” Monica whispered emphatically. She turned to the cashier. “Who sings this song?”

The girl smiled. “That’s Jeremy Steffen. I have this CD. He’s terrific.”
Suddenly it all came together for Monica: why the lyrics had sounded so familiar, why she’d felt so exposed once the song had started. Jeremy’s name shot like a quick blast of Novocain to her mind, and her ears felt full of cotton, everything muffled.

Pete squinted as if trying to see the music waft about the store. Jeremy was deep into the chorus, singing, _After, you know how much you changed after_. . . “Oh, no,” he said. Pete hated Jeremy Steffen’s music. He called him the Next Barry Manilow.

“It’s more than that.” Monica shook her head and gave a little sarcastic smile.

“It’s about Nathan.”

At first Pete looked confused, his dark brow furrowed and his mouth agape before the full weight of the song registered. He clamped his mouth shut with a quick snap and then said, “That bastard.”

Nathan had been seventeen, a year older than Monica, when he stole their parents’ Buick and aimed it at an oak tree at eighty miles an hour outside of Des Moines. He died, and anyone who cared to guess had whispered suicide over cake and Swedish meatballs at his funeral, as if there were different brands of death when you got right down to it. Murder, illness, suicide, accident, each deserving of a separate grief.

Monica never had the guilt she knew the families of suicides were supposed to have. Some nights, especially during the summer after Nathan died, Monica would lie awake and wait for the guilt to hit her with tsunami force, for the regret over every time she had called him a punk loser, a druggie freak, a schizoid. She tried to picture Nathan walking away, dejected, her words a dull blade whittling away at his nerve, his courage to do anything but what he’d done.
But that never worked. Nathan had been a druggie freak, she'd reasoned. He had dropped out of high school his sophomore year. On top of that, her jabs had only been met with shrugs and the occasional “fuck off” on his end. Whatever Nathan’s reasons were for dying, her disapproval hadn’t been one of them. Her parents, she knew, had lain awake asking those torture questions, the whys and the what-could-we-have-done-differentlys. But not Monica.

It was during that first summer after the suicide that Jeremy Steffen would come over almost every day and do whatever Monica asked him to do. All of Iowa had been in the middle of a drought-producing heat wave, so Monica would lead Jeremy into her parents’ bedroom while they were at work, where the only air conditioner hummed and clinked with the icy water inside. Jeremy would stroke Monica’s hair and bring all her records onto the bed in a giant stack, arranging them in alphabetical order. He’d go to the kitchen and make her buttered toast and lemonade.

One day, when he’d played a ballad written just for her she’d said “That’s so sweet,” when she’d meant, secretly, that it was too sweet. Still, anything she wanted from Jeremy, she got, and now, after all that giving he’d done, he’d taken something back, and it wasn’t fair somehow.

Now he was an overnight success, a talented pianist with a decent voice and the kind of humble background recording companies love. Though he’d been Monica’s boyfriend for three years in high school, it was a fact she assumed he’d forgotten in favor of more exotic, urbanized women.

By the time Monica heard the song about Nathan, Jeremy’s first album had sold nearly a half million copies and the deejays had already overplayed one song, something
about a kid quitting his construction job. Monica had heard it at least a dozen times—in her dentist’s waiting room, at the flower shop she owned, in her kitchen while she poured out cornflakes—and while Jeremy’s exposure didn’t bother her, exactly, she had spent some time wondering about his life now. Back when she’d known him, Jeremy had had a smattering of pimples across his forehead and a tendency to blush at anything sexual. The first time she’d shown him her breasts, in her parents’ basement when they were both fourteen, he’d looked away, hiding his grin behind a shirt sleeve.

She shouldn’t have been surprised that something like this would happen, that Jeremy would turn out to be the type who could steal a song out of someone else. After the suicide, Jeremy had asked so many questions, had taken such an interest. Do you think about him a lot? She thought of Jeremy the way he was then, propped up on one elbow, lying on her parents’ bed in that sensitive way, his longish hair almost covering his eyes, all his bony angles jutting through his clothes. Do you ever go through his pictures? What about his birthday? What will your family do then, do you think? What about Christmas?

All those questions, and she’d never guessed that Jeremy was doing anything but being the good boyfriend, her own teenaged therapist. She hadn’t seen how a person like that could will himself into a sponge, absorbing the full weight of someone else’s tragedy, digesting it, letting the information irritate him like a patient oyster embracing a grain of sand.

At the luau, Monica and Pete congregated with other teachers over a single punch bowl in the kitchen and talked about where they’d go for next year’s vacation. Outside, a cold
spring wind kept pushing a branch toward the window, so that there was a maddening tap tap while they talked.

“A lot of people tell me that Cody, Wyoming is a good place to take the family. Very educational,” said one of the math teachers, a bookish woman with a thick cardigan.

“As long as you mind the dust,” said Pete.

“They have a great museum there,” another teacher said. “Is it named after Buffalo Bill or Wild Bill Hickok, I wonder? I can never remember.”

Monica shrugged, which probably seemed like a non-answer to everyone else, but was a way to shake off her urge to snap, Do you really care about this? These conversations cut to the chase of nothing, ever. The teachers in their little circle were probably thinking of other things, pregnant daughters and ailing parents, but were, like she was, too polite to bring up anything but the safe subjects. If Jeremy were here he’d shatter their conversation with questions, asking about anorexic students or pressing the home ec teacher about her son in rehab. Monica adjusted her pink plastic lei and took a drink of punch.

“It seems to me that Wild Bill lived somewhere in South Dakota, but I could be wrong,” the math teacher was saying now. “But this is probably boring all of you.”

“Oh, no,” said Pete. “You’re not boring us at all.” The others in the group nodded except for Monica, who yawned, staring at the twig tapping its rhythm at the window.

On the way home from the luau, Monica asked Pete to stop by Sam’s Music. There, she did the thing she’d avoided ever since Jeremy Steffen’s music hit the airwaves. She bought his CD with the shame of a teenager buying condoms, so much of her summed up in a purchase.
“You’ll just end up mad that you spent seventeen bucks on that sappy crap,” Pete muttered as she got back into the car.

*At least it’s honest,* Monica almost said, but instead she muttered, “I’m sure you’re right.”

The album was called *Back to School* and had a headshot of Jeremy on the cover. For the most part he still carried the residue of his teenaged self, with his round eyes and half smile. The only real differences were that his hair was longer—all the way to his shoulders—and there were faint grooves around his mouth and eyes, the imposition of age. He was still angular and thin, his high cheekbones lending him a sort of artistic credibility. How could a face like this veil such a calculating mind? Monica wanted to see his entire bag of tricks, find out how he did it, how he wrote about other, real people without once saying he was sorry.

“Hey, is there something I can do to help?” Pete asked suddenly as he pulled the car into the garage. His hand inched over and onto her thigh. “Lady’s choice?”

“If you want sex, just say so,” Monica snapped. For the most part they had a missionary sex life, neither here nor there. She’d assumed long ago that such was the course of any standard marriage. She stared at the CD cover, Jeremy’s face close but just a picture. She remembered how eager she’d been in bed with him, every act an impulse.

“No!” Pete said. “I mean, that wouldn’t be bad, of course, seeing as it’s been a while, but I want whatever you want. I’m just trying to help you—I don’t know—relax. I didn’t have anything specific in mind. I mean that.”
It was the same kind of agreeable submission that Jeremy used to suggest, and back then she’d taken charge without ever thinking about what he really wanted from her. “Your generosity is suspect,” Monica said.

“Well, whatever you want,” Pete mumbled again, pulling his hand away and opening the car door.

“We’ll sue,” Monica’s mother said on the phone later that night. Pete flipped through the channels, keeping the television at an impossibly low volume, probably trying to mute his own presence in the process. “He can’t do that,” her mother cried. “He can’t write something like that without asking permission first.”

Monica twirled the phone cord around her pinkie. She’d told her mom about the song so that her parents could brace themselves for the first time Jeremy’s voice was piped in at the flower shop they owned.

Now, as usual, she regretted telling her mother anything.

“Actually,” Monica said, sitting down next to Pete on the living room couch. “He didn’t need permission.”

“Are you sure it’s about Nathan? Are you sure, Monica? Because this is a serious thing you’re talking about here. It’s going to upset your father greatly.”

“I’ve listened to it three times. I’m sure.” Monica paused before she said, “I just want you and Dad to be ready. Now you can ignore it.”

Her mother gave the edgy, disdainful laugh she saved for her more righteous moments and sputtered before saying, “But it’s libel!”

“It’s not, Mom. He doesn’t even use our names.”
“Monica,” her mother sighed. “Don’t you know that doesn’t matter? We’ll know. The neighbors will know.”

“Everyone already knows.”

“Can we call him? Threaten legal action? At least let him know what a . . . what an irresponsible thing he’s done?” And now, as she knew she would, Monica heard her mother begin to unravel, her words clumsy, near-hiccups.

Monica imagined what it would be like, trying to get a hold of a widely recognized musician to tell him that a family in Des Moines, Iowa, was disappointed in him. How Midwestern. “No way,” she told her mother. “There’s just no way.”

In bed that night, after they’d had sex, Pete gave her a nudge. “You okay?” he asked.

Monica flipped off her bedside light. “This has been behind me for years.” Which was true.

Still, there was something nagging, a little hangnail of concern in the recesses of her mind. How did Jeremy Steffen know that, as the song said, washing Nathan’s dirty jeans and T-shirts had meant something to Monica, that it hadn’t just been menial prep for a Goodwill drop-off? How did he know that?

While Monica would never admit it to her mother, she did wish that Jeremy had called them before his song made it all the way to Minnesota grocery stores, if not to ask permission then to at least show a bit of deference. She’d always believed people should defer to the relatives of a suicide. They were a fragile people, liable to splinter at any mention of birthdays, of brothers, of car crashes. That wasn’t true, of course, at least for Monica. Other people’s words weren’t magic chants that unveiled Nathan. For a while—
for years—it had been everything but words: the smell of pepperoni, the sight of an oak
tree, the feel of wet paper. Other people’s blunders were almost always painless, a
mosquito’s tender sting, but Monica believed in deference anyway. It made people
fumble for the right thing to say, and she had liked that. They should fumble. Everyone
should after a suicide. Monica had believed in deference so strongly and for so long that
she’d built a life of it, chose a husband who said “whatever you want” in the smallest of
crises, a husband who knew the rules of courtesy and non-confrontation even better than
she did. Pete was a white knight of control.

But now here was Jeremy Steffen, an old flame, tossing his lyrics about like they
were a juggler’s balls, easy and obedient. His eloquence made her angry; why should he,
of all the people in the world, be the one to say it well, to show that grief was never about
drama and beating breasts, that it was a composite of unrelated details and actions? When
she’d told Pete about Nathan it had been a clinical affair, an exercise in blurting, nothing
but the facts, which in its own way seemed to be the sappiest way to talk about Nathan at
all.

Monica had met Pete shortly after opening her own flower shop in Plymouth. Though she
hadn’t been on many official dates, she knew that eventually he would have to hear
certain facts about her life. On their fourth date she’d finally told him.

They were sitting in the Valley Mall food court eating cheese fries, passing time
before a matinee. Her nerves pulled their usual churning trick on her clenched stomach,
and she felt seasick as she announced, “I had a brother who killed himself. When he was
a teenager.”
Pete had chewed on that for a moment before saying, “Man, that’s horrible. That really sucks. I’m sorry. Man.” Then, “Your poor family. Your poor parents. Do they—maybe this is a really bad question but—did your parents keep his room the same? Like a shrine? Because it’s understandable if they did.”

“They didn’t. They just like to talk about him a lot. Still.”

“And you don’t.”

“No.”

“And it’s not because you’re repressing and haven’t allowed yourself to cry.”

“No.” For years that’s what people had told her, that she was bottling her anger, all those feelings. Monica thought people who said things like that were a bunch of fruit loops, Psych 101 groupies. She’d done what she needed to do to move on, she’d skipped from one stage of grief to the next in her own way but with the assurance of a schoolgirl playing hopscotch, and if it didn’t look like a Lifetime movie to the general public, well, that didn’t mean she wasn’t healthy.

Pete had stared at her for a long moment before nodding and saying, “I believe you.”

Monica had wanted to marry him right there in the middle of the mall.

Two days after the luau, Monica was still thinking about Jeremy. He surely had no idea that she, Monica Teller, his high school sweetheart, sat across from her husband, a science teacher, each night at their discount dining room table and tried to forget that somewhere, in some suburb, a pimply teenager was drooling through her braces while her local radio station played the story of Nathan’s suicide.
Still, there was a surprising dose of relief as well. Jeremy knew a lot about those times, and his song could have taken a dozen turns, all of them leaving Monica apologetic for pretty much an entire two years after Nathan died. He could have mentioned that after the funeral she had become shamefully promiscuous, asking Jeremy to pull his car over so she could suck him off while he gently held her head on an almost daily basis—after dates, during lunch hour, on the way to a football game. What she later confessed, what Jeremy later learned, was that he wasn’t the only one she’d been so aggressively willing toward. Her tally of sex partners rose from one to six in less than a year, she became known as the Get It On Girl, and her relationship with Jeremy had fizzled with such resignation that it was easy for her to forget they’d ever dated at all. She’d never told Pete about her conquests, never described the dingy backseats of cars and secret trysts on the school tennis court, but at the time she’d felt powerful, liberated, free from having to look sad all the time. Better to be the Get It On Girl than the Suicide Sister.

Those were different days and Monica, upon entering Drake University as just another anonymous student, had adopted a staunch diet of chastity that she still retained in part, substituting the blow jobs for confused looks when her roommates told dirty jokes, and she developed a deft hand at turning boys away. By then Jeremy had moved to Seattle, no doubt stocked with flannel shirts and a full ream of sheet music, ready to translate the world, ready to turn others’ hard times into his own.

A week after the luau Monica was arranging one of the regular “Congratulations on Your Baby Boy” bouquets at the front counter, cursing at a tiny plastic racecar that kept
dropping down into the flower vase despite her efforts to make it visible. Few things about this business required a whiff of creativity. It was all standard fare, almost pre-packaged, her own role less florist than assembler. She was thinking of how stupid her business cards looked when the song on the radio stopped and the deejay’s voice drifted through the store.

“We’re taking a quick break from our Billy Joel superset to remind you that we’re going to start giving away tickets to see Jeremy Steffen, April 19, in Minneapolis,” the deejay boomed. “Remember, when you hear us play ‘Summer Job’ off of Back to School, call in and, if you’re the eighth caller, we’ll set you up with two free tickets. Keep listening for more details, and stay tuned to KARF, home of Plymouth’s finest soft rock.”

Monica stood holding the plastic racecar until a man came to the counter.

“What’s a good thing to get for someone who’s mad at you?” he asked.

“An apology,” Monica said.

The man shifted his gaze so that he was no longer looking right at Monica, as if she’d just pointed a flashlight at his face. It felt good to have him avoid her like that. It meant, somehow, that she’d wielded a power, that she’d stomped where she usually tiptoed. “I’m afraid I’ll need more than that,” he said, staring at the tiny To/From cards lined up along the edge of the counter. “I’ll need some flowers.”

After she’d sent the man away with half a dozen roses and a strawberry-shaped balloon that said I’m Berry Sorry, Monica finished her bouquet and stood behind the counter, straining her ears and waiting for “Summer Job.”

* * * *
In the end she wasn’t the eighth caller, but by then the seed of an idea had been planted and Monica bought two tickets through the Internet anyway. At first she did it because it felt stupid not to, and by the time she’d committed to going Monica was willing to do anything, stand outside the night of the show and buy from a scalper if she had to. There he’d be, just a couple of hours south of where she lived, where she assembled her bouquets, where she’d married Pete. It had been years since she’d been to a concert, and she wondered how it worked. Jeremy wasn’t playing at a large venue, thankfully. The crowds. Instead, she’d see him at a smaller place called the Red Robin Theatre. She wondered if he’d be able to see her, if she could slip backstage or catch him while he signed autographs.

“Why would you do that? He screwed you over,” Pete said that night over dinner, after she’d told him about the concert.

Monica scooped a forkful of rice and said, “I want to tell Jeremy Steffen a few things.”

Pete set his knife down and stared at her. Monica kept eating, waiting for him to pick his knife back up, but he just sat there, challenging her with stillness.

“That’s right,” she said finally. “I want him to apologize for writing that damned song.”

“I guess you’ll be taking your mom, then, since this is her type of idea.”

“No,” Monica said as she chewed, “I was hoping you’d go with me.”

Pete didn’t take any time to answer. “I hate soft rock.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I threw away all my Elton John. I think Michael Bolton looks like a porn star.”
“Just go,” Monica pleaded. “Please just go.”

Pete grunted. “Only if you buy me a T-shirt.” Almost a full minute passed before he said, “Fine, I’ll go, but I’ll hate it, just so you know.”

“Thank you.” Monica smiled. She’d won, but he’d put up a fight. Monica had almost forgotten how good it felt to spar. As she watched Pete eat, his face sullen, she made a mental note to make this up to him, somehow.

The Red Robin was crowded with girls, all of them around sixteen. Monica and Pete ordered beers from a tired-looking bartender and wove their way to one of the side walls. Once the opening band had left the stage, the lights dimmed and the entire theatre seemed to hum in eagerness for Jeremy’s entrance. Pete was quiet, his hands twisting around his plastic cup, and Monica dug her glasses out of her purse. They didn’t fit the image she was going for, but it was important that she see him up there, that she get a look at his face.

Pete shifted next to Monica as they leaned against the wall, clearly uncomfortable in his button-down shirt and khakis. Monica, for her part, was wearing a low-cut top and a slinky skirt that was a size too small. There was even some cleavage, a part of her usually hidden under thick cable sweaters.

“Remind me why you wanted me here,” Pete muttered through clenched teeth.

“Because it’s the supportive spouse thing to do,” Monica said, though she knew that was a shoddy excuse. She didn’t fully know why Pete was here, but it had something to do with bringing along a witness, someone to see how Monica could make Jeremy defer. Her mother, with her flower shop virtue and sense of shame about all things
Nathan, would have been a poor choice. Though she was both nervous and embarrassed about how he might react, at least Pete wouldn’t say, “What would your father think.”

They stood there, quietly sipping their beers, and just when it seemed like the concert’s organizer was going to announce that Jeremy Steffen would not be appearing that evening, he was there in front of them all.

Monica clapped because that’s what a person did at a concert, but her entire mind focused on studying Jeremy’s movements. He was wearing a satiny black shirt and tight leather pants, and his hair fell over his right eye, just as she’d seen in the CD cover.

Monica noticed that he still had the humble slouch, the shy grin. As he approached the piano in the middle of the stage, Jeremy gave a little bow and the girls in the audience roared. He sat at the piano and they roared again.

The first few songs were familiar to Monica from the CD, though each time he started something she sat up, her buttocks and jaw clenched, thinking, Is this the one? She would then wait, scanning the crowd, watching Jeremy’s hands writhe across the piano keyboard, frowning at the fine saliva mist he sprayed on his microphone during the loud, soulful parts. Now that she was here, giving Jeremy her full attention, his songs all sounded alike to her, all sounded like Nathan’s song, as if Jeremy had been composing based on a template or formula rather than unchecked feeling.

For a moment Monica didn’t recognize it when he did start playing the song, but then she heard the first line, We snuck out the night before, and tried to forget that her husband was sitting next to her. She wasn’t sure if it was because she’d heard the song so many times or if it was because she was now outside of her living room, her flower shop—even her grocery store—but Monica felt distant from the lyrics, choosing to listen
to it for what it was, a song about a dead boy, indistinct, and a girl who let that loss change her. It was sad, yes, but simple. It felt like public domain, the stuff of a thousand other songs, accurate yet only an approximation of who she'd been during that long ago time. This wasn't her song.

Her mind drifted to memory, and Monica thought of the time she and Nathan rode their bikes to a local card shop four minutes before it closed on Mother’s Day. Even at fourteen he’d been a threat to respectable business. The woman behind the counter asked them again and again if they needed help with anything, and while Monica guessed that the woman was trying to keep a close eye on them, Nathan didn’t seem to notice. He just ran his fingers through his spiky hair and scowled at his options.

“What kind of card does Mom like?” he had asked, picking up a silly one, the kind of card Monica thought nobody actually ever bought. It had a cartoon turtle on the front and said, in kid writing, *To Mom, from Her Little Turtle.*

“Are you serious?” Monica had said. “She wouldn’t like that one, I’ll tell you that right now.”

There was something, then, a minute where Monica felt a sliver of sympathy for her older brother as he bumbled his way through the cards. While other kids had done much better things for Mother’s Day, had made their moms pancake dinners and rearranged their closets without being asked, the way Nathan flipped through card after card in this fluffy place—a place he clearly hated—seemed brave and even generous in its way.

The checkout woman asked if she could help them again, and Monica had turned to face her head-on. She’d said, “We don’t need help! Quit bugging us, you witch.”
They were kicked out of the shop and their mother had had a fit about not getting a single thing from her children on Mother’s Day, but it was the standoff with the cashier that Monica remembered best, before Nathan had shrugged and said, “Fuck it. Cards are phony, anyway,” as they left the shop.

Nathan was someone Jeremy had never known. While she listened to him sing now, Monica realized that Jeremy had simply studied her actions, watched for her grief, but ultimately, he didn’t know what the hell he was talking about. This song had all the heart of a research project, and somehow she’d fooled herself into thinking it was honest. The fact that he sounded so sincere up there on stage, so confessional, only made Monica angrier. She looked over at two girls swaying nearby, one of them staring mistily at Jeremy while the other mouthed lyrics and clutched her friend’s arm. For a moment, Monica considered throwing her empty cup at them.

Once he was finished playing, she took her opportunity, now more resolved than ever to force him into an apology. This sea of girls was not going to part for her. If Jeremy was going to hear her, it would have to be during one of these fleeting, in-between-songs-and-cheers moments. In the lull, she shouted, “YOU AND YOUR MUSIC ARE SHIT!”

Some of the girls in the crowd laughed, others gasped, Pete grabbed her arm as if to hold her back or to protect her from the mass of teens—Monica couldn’t tell which—but Jeremy just squinted out into the audience, trying to identify the source through the glare of stage lights. Finally, he leaned toward the microphone and said, “I’m sorry you paid money to come here and tell me that, ma’am.”
The mass of teenagers cheered then, probably loving Jeremy all the more for his swift deflection of adversity. One of the girls who had been standing near Monica walked up to her and shouted through the noise of the crowd, “You’re fucking rude! That song was about a suicide.”

“What just happened?” Pete asked as they walked across the parking lot, wet from a recent rain. “You told your old boyfriend off.” He seemed to mull over it. “I’ve never seen you do anything like that before.”

“Like what?”

“Mortify people.”

Mortify. It sounded like an okay thing to do when you just had to do something. It was loud, at least, and direct. It wasn’t polite. It was feeling before it could be ruined by convention.

“Did you like the concert?” Monica asked.

Pete shook his head. “What a question to ask. That prick’s as phony as they come. But I loved your shouting. It was . . . I don’t know. New. And kind of hot.”

“I really did smoke my first cigarette at the funeral.”

He took her hand in his. “Worse things have been done in a crisis, I imagine.”

The lyrics of Jeremy’s song still swam in her head. “I did other things. I slept with boys whose names I hardly knew and have completely forgotten now. Always protected, of course,” she added as an afterthought and waited, bracing herself against what Pete might say, knowing she couldn’t predict.
“And that made you feel better?” His voice wasn’t judgmental. He seemed, instead, to be studying her before making a diagnosis.

It was a question she’d never considered. “Kind of,” she said at last. “It was a rush, but I didn’t like any of them. Not even Jeremy.” Now that she’d said it, she realized it was true.

When they got to the car Monica watched as Pete rifled through his pockets for the keys, and before she thought about what she was doing she grabbed his shoulders, pushed him against the car, and locked him in a hard kiss. Pete blinked, surprised, but he only said, “I never knew any of that.” By his face she could tell he was turned on, and it was one of the few reactions she never would have predicted. It was funny how you could know someone perfectly well and still not know them at all. Now that she’d started, Monica wanted to see how far her husband would go, this man whom she’d married, in part, because he was so good at never breaking the rules.

Monica regarded him with a calculating eye at first, and then she said, “Let’s fuck.”

“Here? Outside? Why not in the car, at least?” Pete laughed uncertainly, as if this was a trick. But she didn’t answer, just stood there smiling, refusing to take back her words. “You really want this.”

“Yes.”

They snuck back to the Red Robin, choosing the wall farthest from the entrance. As Pete put his hands on her waist Monica heard a cluster of adolescent girls walking nearby, giggling and talking about their favorite Jeremy Steffen lyrics, their shoes slapping against the wet pavement.
Pete hoisted her up against the wall, and instinctively she wrapped her legs around him. Taking over, she lifted her own skirt and took his hand, guiding it up her thigh. Pete responded, squeezing her buttock and tugging at her underwear, the one good pair she owned. With his other hand he pushed up her shirt gruffly, now a new and rougher version of her husband, his stubbled cheek pressed against her nose in an awkward, almost hurtful way, and she marveled at how shocking and sincere it all was.

As they began, the feeling deeper than it had been in years, Monica listened as the girls’ chatter faded, all the concertgoers leaving, already forgetting what songs had been played. Their laughter gave way to the whirr of cars starting up and driving away, and soon the only thing Monica could hear at all was Pete’s breath, heavy and wild, filling her with sound.