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**Luck, and Other Disasters**

A Thesis Presented

by

**Genevieve Crane**

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

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for the Degree of

**Master of Fine Arts**

in

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Abstract of the Thesis

**Luck, and Other Disasters**

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This is a collection of stories loosely centered around loss of control. Some of the narrators suffer psychological breakdowns, such as eating disorders and schizophrenia, while others suffer from external forces. The loose theme is intentional, for the sake of experimentation with a variety of voices and circumstances. Some of these characters scrape against the edge of the revelation that there is logic in their chaos. Others miss the epiphany entirely.

All of the characters in these stories speak in dash format and there are no quotation marks used to indicate when someone is speaking. This decision was made because of my conviction that literature is a reflection of the subconscious rather than spoken reality.

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## Chapter 1

### Thirst

Even as children, I knew that I loved Shannon enough to fail myself. I loved her liar's chin, tilted downward with the sharpness of a spade when she spoke. I loved her tiny, fluid fingers that stole gum and Tic Tacs so easily when cashiers rummaged under the counter. And I feared that seed deep within that I could see in her pupils if I disappointed her, if I showed her my own unease.

I see it so perfectly in our photographs now: we were little girls, with potbellies under spandex suits and eyes we hadn't grown into yet, but my apprehension was there, wavering in my face, undulating with the heat waves behind us on the beach.

She scared me.

She ate raw cookie dough.

She let Corey Welsh touch between her legs the summer before first grade.

She stole tampons out of her mother's bathroom cabinet and together we poured water on them until they bloomed into swollen white petals under the backyard hose, then threw them on the windshield of her next door neighbor's car.

She picked up the dead seagull on the beach, its wingspan zagging, and held it at arm's length, her mouth shut against the horseflies, while she plucked the best feathers and stuck them in her hair.

-I'm a Shinnecock princess.

-You're going to get a disease, I said.

And she took a feather out of her hair and licked the quill, her eyes on me the whole time, her nine-year-old knees jutting at me, her tongue dragging over the point till I turned away.

-Come and get me, bird flu.

She put the feather in my hair, and I shook it out in the walk back up the beach to my mother's towel but even when I lay in bed that night, I could feel it. The prickle or the curse, I wasn't sure.

When we were ten, my mother heard her say fuck.

I wasn't permitted to see her again until I turned twelve. I saw her anyway. We lived half a mile apart from one another, a three-and-a-half-minute scurry if panic propelled me. Late on clear summer nights I would run to her, the hedges lining our town quivering in the breeze, my eyes averted from the cemetery and its glowing headstones in the moonlight. When I reached the light of her driveway I would stop, hands on my knees, wheezing out my run, so that when I saw her she wouldn't know that I had been hurrying, that I had been afraid.

From May to September she could be found sleeping on the back porch. How many times did I try to scare her? Dragging the screen with my nails, chucking driveway pebbles, making the classic ghost baritone?

-Quit being a bitch, she'd whisper.

But if I dropped my voice to the right octave, my ghost moan could make her laugh.

I could only stay an hour, maybe two. In the dark, curled together on her futon, we would whisper:

-What's a placenta?

And,



-It's because she's so pretty. She gets everything.

And,

-Did you see his thing when you snuck in the locker room?

And,

-I smoked a cigarette, you know.

All of it speculation and lies. How is it different from the exchanges I have with other women today?

Too soon, we turned thirteen. I stayed squat, but her impish body lengthened into something sinuous and wanted. Men watched her. I watched them watch her. She gave me the bras she outgrew, and I would try them on at home, in awe of how much space I had to fill. Her pelvis widened, a plane of skin stretched over hipbone like a calfskin canvas.

We both began to dress with precision.

The landscapers at her house would stop their pruning when we went outside and mounted our bikes.

-They want you, I said once. She glowered.

-They can't want me. I hate my chin.

She never realized the two statements were unrelated.

-Your chin is cool, I said. It gives you character.

She snorted.

-Character is just another word for something nobody wants.

-I'm all character, I said.

She didn't disagree.

Was it that summer, or later when we started smoking pot? The chronology skews here. But when she met Finn, he brought it with him. The three of us would go behind the garden shed and toke up, two bowls packed in his tiny glass pipe, and up until the first hit I would resent his very existence. He probably felt the same way about me. Then the fuzzy ooze of the stuff would sink in, as gradual as an egg cracking and running over my skull, and I would suddenly see how transient he would be in our life. And he was. After Finn came Bruce, with his ingrown chest hairs and the possessive gesture he would make with his fingers curled around her wrist like kudzu vine. Then Si, with his dark skin and stringy calves, then Trent with his lisp and his tin of salvia, and then Glen, who stayed for years, large-eyed and small-scale cruel.

He put a June bug under a jam jar with the end of a burning blunt and watched it suffocate.

When his mother got drunk at Christmas dinner, he filmed it with his phone and uploaded it to YouTube.

And then there was the night when we were all tripping and he drew his hand back and slapped her, slow motion, and together they laughed until I had to leave the room and steady the ringing in my ears by lying in the yard and letting the grass tickle my palms, my cheeks, the wobbling core of my stomach.

They were perfect for each other.

Our sophomore year of high school, I stood on her mother's bathroom scale while she sat on the toilet seat, her hair wrapped in tinfoil. The smell of dye seeping through the air.

-I can't get rid of my thighs, I said.

I waited for her to say, So what, they give you character.

-Well, if you didn't eat so much cereal...she said.

I cut out cereal altogether. Her face, her thinness, the watching landscapers, the parade of boyfriends: all of them leered at me when I stared at the pantry door. I leered back. My body wanted. But something within me sustained itself on pride alone. The satisfaction of resistance was intoxicating. So I became a vegan.

-Why a vegan? my mother asked, suspicious. She must have remembered, though it's so hard for me to fathom this, she must have remembered being young and female and measured, always measured. She must have remembered the want.

-It's an ethical decision, I said.

-Jesus, she said. If it's ethical does this mean you won't wear those hideous lambs wool boots anymore?

I cut my eyes at her. All I saw was her age, her weight. I saw her wrinkles, and the fat on her arms that swung when she hit a golf ball or put away a dinner plate. I didn't see the story her body told.

The first three, five, eight pounds are hard. Then, there is a plummet.

In a season's time, my knees began to bruise against one another when I slept. There was an inlet of nothing between my ribs. My belly button deflated until I could feel my pulse thrum behind it when I lay flat on the bed. The hairs on my arms thickened into a mannish downiness. I could see the tendons criss-cross on my forearms.

Nobody said,

-Wow, this is moving a little fast.

Instead I heard,

-You look fabulous!

And,

-What's your secret?

And,

-I see you've lost that baby fat!

And Shannon, skinny Shannon, wanted Shannon, said,

-Eat a fucking bagel already.

So I knew she was jealous, and it thrilled me. It wasn't long before we were dieting together.

Only when we were high, really high, would we binge on whatever we could find in her parent's refrigerator. Pizza rolls. Leftover vichyssoise. Goat cheese and saltines. Buttered popcorn. Raw hot dogs. Our first binge was an ice-cream raid. Mouthful after mouthful of Cherry Garcia until I could feel my frontal lobe crushed into a deep freeze, so high it was hard for me to focus on the nutrition facts, and when I did, something deep within me wretched. I told her that I left my purse somewhere, then wandered down the hall to the bathroom farthest from the locus of her kitchen.

When I finished, I rinsed my mouth under the tap and leaned against the sink and shook. Something hideous stared back at me in the mirror. But I felt victory flood my stomach. I had ridded myself of the ice cream, but it lingered in her, clung to her thighs. Ugly, cloying gluttony.

Until, of course, I returned to kitchen and found that she had locked herself in her parent's bathroom as well.

She emerged smirking.

I wanted to hate her.

Instead, we watched MTV together sprawled out on her living room floor, and I fell asleep with my head on her heel.

My mother was getting anxious.

She took the laxatives out of my bathroom.

She started cooking me omelets at breakfast and leaving a multivitamin on top of the napkin, next to the fork.

She would say things, infuriating, insincere things, such as, You know you're perfect just the way you are, right?

Or sometimes she would flail about searching for a mother-daughter bonding experience.

-I know how much Shannon means to you but how about you and I order sushi and see a movie tonight?

Her anxiety skirted the line of bearable until I found the self-help book on raising difficult teenage daughters in her bedroom when I was looking for hidden wine. The subtitle: *How to reach the young and aching heart*. I was revolted. By the time she got home from work, I was so dizzyingly livid that every eloquent argument about my betrayal had spun away from me.

I had planned to say, I am not a self-help book, and, I find your neuroticism rather destructive, mother. But my young and aching heart got the best of me, I suppose. When she walked through the door with her hair in a windswept swirl, her face lined and appallingly vulnerable, I felt myself surge, and all I could say was Fuck you. The shock in her face deep enough to split into her womb.

-Fuck you, I said again, and ran, and in the driveway I yelled it one more time – Fuck you! – and the neighbor's dog started braying.

It took me five minutes to get to Shannon's now. Any faster and I'd get dizzy. She wasn't on the back porch, and the light was out in her bedroom. In other circumstances I would have left to avoid interacting with her parents, but the situation was desperate.

Her father answered the door. He had the look of a retired news anchor. Always wore loafers. Always smelled like Altoids.

-I thought Shannie was with you, he said.

-I was supposed to meet her somewhere but I forgot where, I said. Lame.

-Well, she said you were going to the beach, he said. Don't stay out too late.

He shut the door before I turned away.

By the time I got to the beach it was dark and I had to fumble my way up the steps. I found her on the sand with Glen. Under Glen. Everything tinted in lunar blue: her legs stretched out in the sand, her torso pinned and shadowed under his, his absurdly exposed ass. I froze. Then stumbled away to a deck, sat with my back to them, waiting. The milky way cut a stripe above me. The sky had a summer vault to it and the air was warm, but occasionally a billow of cool air would drop upon me, like snow. Glen grunted in the distance and then I heard her laugh carry over the dunes. I stood up so they could find me.

She grabbed my hand as if we were still children. Her palm was sandy and warm.

-Hey, Glen said, I got something for us to try.

He took a baggie of leaves out of his pocket.

-I'm not in the mood for pot tonight, I said.

-Good. This isn't pot.

Shannon giggled. I wanted to hit her.

-This, he said, Is a little something called Datura.

-Never heard of it, I said.

-Glen says it's like the herb, only with more hallucinations.

-I don't feel like tripping tonight, I said.

The whites of her eyes flicked to Glen in the dark. I told you, she said. I told you she wouldn't be into it.

I plunged my hand into the baggie.

-Do we smoke it or do we eat it? I said.

We ate. It wasn't like pot at all.

Glen's face was crawling with ants, tiny winged ants, all of them traveling through the tunnels of his nose, his ears, his tear ducts, searching for food. I went to brush them off and they disappeared.

-Stop it, they're just ants, man, he said. And when he laughed more of them poured out of the corners of his mouth.

-You've got them too, he said.

The waves broke in the hazy dark and I was suddenly aware of their potential. The enormity of them unspooled me until I was too tangled to slow my heart. Surges were breaking over me, again and again, and every time I came out of one I pulled in my breath just in time to go under once more. And then they were gone.

-Where's Shannon? I asked.

He shrugged. Even in the dark, I could see the endless expansion of his pupils. I ran from him. I could feel every individual grain of sand clinging to my feet.

And then it was daylight and I'd found her. She was at the water's edge, building a drizzle castle. I watched her. She was a child again, all rayon and eyes, plunging her fat arm into the bucket and pulling up doughy wet sand, letting it drip out of her fingers into turrets and mortared walls.

When she turned to face me, I was a child too. The straps of my one-piece cut into my chubby shoulders, and my bangs sprang over my eyes.

-I'm so thirsty, she said. Her voice plaintive. I felt her thirst until it became my own.

-I'll get us water, I said.

I took the bucket from her. The ocean dragged up my shins, then my knees. I walked farther, was struck by a wave, and the bucket filled with water on its own accord, but it wasn't enough, could never be enough, and I couldn't tolerate another minute of this unbearable thirst, and I plunged my face into the water, tasting the salt, the winged ants leaping from my skin, and she was waving at me from a bright spot on the shore to come back but I refused her and I drank and I drank and I drank.



## Chapter 2

Mu

Daisy's big brother Nathan drives her most of the way up the mountain. He kills the engine when the road narrows.

-We walk from here, he says. And she nods at him, pulls her overstuffed duffel from the truck bed and slings it over her shoulder. He knows better than to offer to carry it for her. Instead, he eyes it. Nathan has a face made for squinting.

-How much did you pack? he asks. He takes the shotgun from the back.

-It's all I have now, she says.

His mouth flat-lines.

Even with her left eye swollen shut, she can see how clear the day is. It's not fully fall yet, but the trees feel it coming and have dropped premature leaves. Technicolor mushrooms sprout out of the earth. Paper birches are everywhere, dotting the woods with their ghostly whiteness.

They walk half a mile in silence.

-I'm getting the rest of your stuff from him the second I get off this mountain, Nathan says.

-The hell you will, she says. I don't want you within thirty miles of each other.

-You should just be glad I'm not going after him with the Smith & Wesson.

The Smith & Wesson is his special occasion gun, stowed away in the lockbox at his house. He saves it for the apocalypse, taking it out every six months for a buffing. He won't even let Daisy touch it.

-Go after him all you want with the Wesson, then. You're a fucking awful shot.

They walk through a spider web. Nathan swats it off in one smooth motion, but Daisy feels it pin in her hair, and even after three swipes she still suspects that it's on her. An invisible veil.

Another quarter mile before they reach the clearing. Nathan's cabin sits in the middle, next to a covered woodshed. The outhouse is two-hundred yards further.

-And all this time I thought you were making this place up, Daisy says.

-I wanted you to think that. There are no visitors at Mu Cabin.

-Moo?

-Mu. Jesus. Somebody hasn't been reading the Zen Buddhism book I gave them, have they?

-Forgive me, Nathan. I am so sorry I'm not a goddamn hippie.

-Mu means 'nothing'. Well, sort of nothing. It's hard to explain. It's there, but it isn't.

-Enlightening, she says.

He elbows her in the ribs, and for a moment she feels like they are teenagers again. She follows him up the steps to a narrow screened porch. He's lovingly patched the holes in the screens, and there's a fresh coat of yellow paint around the sills and the front door. A burner and propane tank sit in the corner. He gestures to it.

-Your kitchen, he says.

-Divine.

She follows him inside. There isn't a lock on the door, just an eyehook catch. This worries her, but not enough to say something aloud. He'll just tease her: *Trent couldn't find the Taco Bell on Route 9, and you think he'll find you here?* She quiets herself by poking around the cabin. Everything she touches, Nathan comments on, explaining it as if she were a child. In any other circumstance it would irritate her.

He shows her where the flint is, and how to turn the vents open on the woodstove, and where he keeps the washbasin, the extra bedding, the newspaper and kindling. He hangs the shotgun for her over the woodstove and leaves a box of bullets by the drainage sink. Then he takes her outside to show her the water pump.

-Water, Helen, water! she says.

-You're just so damn funny, he says. Really. You're barrel of laughs.

Then, his face shifts.

-Take off your sunglasses, he says.

-No.

-I want to see it in the light, he says.

-Why?

-Just take them off.

She does. He whistles low.

-That's quite a shiner, he says.

-I bruise easy.

And then, as if he were discussing the upcoming purchase of a new pair of hiking boots, he says:

-I am going to fucking kill him, you know.

-I won't stay here unless you promise me you won't go near him, Daisy says. Raise your right hand. Swear on Helen's water pump.

-I don't know why you're acting so lighthearted about all this.

-Really? What's the etiquette? Daisy says.

Nathan takes the sunglasses from her and slips them back over her eyes. They catch on her ear, but she doesn't mind. They aren't an affectionate family. This almost feels like a hug.

-All I want to know is, what took you so long to leave him?

But she doesn't have an answer that he will understand.

When Nathan leaves, he tells Daisy to keep the woodstove burning overnight, and to listen for fisher cats and coyotes after dark, and she can get cell phone reception about two miles west, and his fishing rod is tucked in the back corner next to the kindling box, and don't worry about the reddish tint in the water – the mountain is full of manganese and iron. Good for your hair. He'll be back in five days. And is she sure she wants him to go?

-Get out. You're cramping my style.

She watches the back of his dark head bob out of the clearing, his hands in his pockets. As soon as he leaves, silence floods. It drowns her ears with an endless ring. Tinnitus, she realizes, is an affliction that can't be ignored in these woods. She had expected to hear sparrows, cicadas, squirrels. Things fucking and dying. It's warm still, but she lights a fire in the woodstove, hoping that the crackle will override the ring. It doesn't. She opens every window in the cabin and strips down to her underwear. Nathan has a round wooden table and a kerosene lamp next to the sink. The wooden chair is hard on her bony ass. It's difficult for her to imagine him sitting there. He's smart, but never lets on. He carries his intelligence around like an

awkward purse, stashing it on the backs of chairs and forgetting it under bar stools. Now, she sits at his table in her underwear with a pencil hovering over a piece of stationary.

Dear Trent,

She stares at his name until it doesn't make sense to her anymore. She erases Dear.

-I want you to know that I hold both of us accountable for our actions.

She doesn't. Some logical nook in her knows that he is wrong. But the rest of her holds only herself accountable. Accountable for staying, or for provoking him, or both, she can't decide.

-I have so many regrets about the last year of our relationship, but I have no regrets about knowing you or letting you into my heart.

Jesus, she thinks. Letting him into my heart?

She throws the letter in the woodstove.

All Daisy can think of is the night she met him. They were at a costume party, surrounded by zombie doctors and slutty kittens and even a walking banana. He was Indiana Jones. He sidled up to her with his bullwhip tucked under one arm, took off his hat when he introduced himself.

-I'm guessing you're not a Red Sox fan in real life? he asked.

-Mets, all the way, she said. Why, what's your team?

-Baseball is for pussies, he said.

He'd just moved to town and was renting an apartment on top of a church.

-Want to defile it? he'd asked.

She said yes.

She puts on a shirt – why does she put on a shirt? Who will see her but the deer ticks? – and gathers bundles of wood for the night. When she bends down, she can feel the blood surge in her black eye. A chipmunk regards her suspiciously from the other end of the woodpile.

She pumps a pitcher of reddish water, pours it over the roots of her hair, pumps another pitcher, soaks her face. Later, as her hair dries, she will absorb the smell of smoke and grit from the cabin and feel officially purified.

Night comes. Mu Cabin isn't large, but it takes nine tapers and the kerosene lantern to keep from feeling the dark. Cold air slinks in from the crack under the door. She adds a log to the fire and curls herself into Nathan's bed. Her deep breathing exercise – four seconds in, six seconds out – fails her.

She remembers the lack of symmetry to Trent's mouth when he grins, like an askew picture frame. He has a coltish face, angular and wild-eyed. There is a drawl in his voice that appears at strange moments: 'wheel' is 'whill,' 'wolves' are 'wuhvs,' 'roof' is 'ruhf.' He says he has Choctaw blood in him, which is probably a lie, but a lie she loves and swallows easily. He rolls his own cigarettes with Bugler tobacco. Reads Vonnegut and Heller. He handwrites letters to his grandpappy in Dallas every Sunday in a cramped scrawl that hovers above the notebook paper lines.

And he once hit her so hard she vomited.

When Daisy wakes, the fire has gone out. She's left the vents too far open on the woodstove and now the cabin is dark and freezing. Outside, something is screaming, puncturing the ring in her ears. It sounds like an injured woman.

-It's a fisher cat, she says to the dark. But every nerve in her flares each time the fisher keens. Its pitch is measured, so measured she can count to three between each scream. It circles the cabin like sonar. Even with her ears covered, she can hear it through the pillow. The fisher wails until dawn. She doesn't get out of bed to relight the stove until daybreak. She is childishly afraid of her body, naked in the dark, while something circles the cabin and screams. With a sound like that, she thinks, it must be afraid of itself.

Trent could make her scream like that, where she wasn't sure if it was ecstasy or pain. They'd never had a safe word. She'd wanted to be afraid, but she hadn't known that about herself until she met him.

For the first year, he'd only been dangerous in bed.

She eats nuts and a power bar for breakfast, drinks the red water and aches for caffeine. How could she have forgotten coffee? Apples are wrapped in layers of clothing in her duffel to prevent bruising. They taste mealy but she eats anyway. Outside, in a pool of sun, she tries to meditate again. Nathan says the trick to meditating is to acknowledge and disown yourself at the same time. It reminds her of an anecdote a philosophy professor had shared in college: the secret to producing gold in alchemy is easy. All you have to do is not think about a white panther while mixing the ingredients.

The secret to her wellbeing, she thinks, is to not think about Trent.

He'd left his email open, and the third subject line, from Stacygurl82@aol, read: You have No idea...

It was true. Daisy did have no idea. But she quickly got the idea. A search of his archives revealed that Stacygurl82 was a cat lover, a third grade teacher, an avid participant in spin classes at Trent's gym, and an even bigger fan of having her ass squeezed in bed while being referred to as 'little girl.' Stacygurl82 had been fucking him for months.

Daisy printed each email and spread them out chronologically on the kitchen table. She stared at them for hours. When Trent's headlights poured through the window, she rose. He hadn't changed out of his gym clothes, and his hair had a damp sheen to it. She waited for him to approach her and absorb the papers before him on the kitchen table.

-I don't know what you want me to say, he said.

So she slapped him.

He hit her back before her stinging hand had settled at her side, a hard punch in her sternum that sent her staggering backwards into the counter.

The two of them stared at one another, stunned.

But she hit him first.

Later that night, he made her chicken fajitas and teared up when he told her how sorry he was, how very sorry, he'd been an ass, and did she want him to run to Stop & Shop and pick up a box of her favorite orange creamsicles? And when he got back from the store he held her close, pressing her nose hard against his collarbone, and his lips in her hair mouthed,

-Don't ever forget, though, that you started it.

Meditation is a crock, she decides. She abandons her pursuit of nirvana. The only time she's ever been close is when she slammed a finger in the car door and the reverberation of her pain rattled



through her, like a gong. Every atom in her body drew its attention to her ring finger, and she felt marrow, nails, veins, with a clarity she would never know again.

It's time for a walk. She brings a compass and hangs her camera from a strap around her neck, which she knows she will not use. The land near the cabin is flat, but a twenty minute amble northeast reveals the crest of the mountain with a drop of rock face. Exposed quartz descends into the woods far below, with the occasional sturdy pine pushing out of a crevice. Moss hangs off the rock like a bad toupee. She can see for eons.

Not a single living creature is visible. Only the trees move in the breeze.

In the beginning, she fought back. Clawed at his face. Forced an elbow hard into the soft stretch of his stomach. She doesn't remember a specific incident of defeat, where she had started to lie there and just endure what he would throw at her. But eventually it happened, a switch had turned, and even as he hit her, she thought, I love you, stop it, I love you.

Until the last time.

She'd forgotten to pay the cable bill. He found her in the bathroom curling her hair, and he'd shoved the bill in her face, too close for her to even read the due date, and when he punched her she watched the swing of his fist in the bathroom mirror before her eye went dark. And then he picked up the hot curling iron and she thought, this man could kill me. This man could kill me and I would deserve it, because I didn't run.

What scares her most is that she still loves him.

When she gets back to Mu Cabin, it is well past noon. Her legs are sore when she reaches the clearing and she is so thirsty she drinks directly from the pump, water splashing over her face, making her splutter like an animal.

The door is open slightly. The eyehook is unlatched. Holy God. The eyehook. Did she forget to lock it? No, she's sure, she can picture her fingers slipping the hook in its metal noose. She's sure.

She yells Nathan's name, then Trent's. Nothing stirs.

-Quit dicking around in there! she shouts at the cabin.

-I know you're here!

She kicks at the door so hard it bounces off its hinges and drifts back to her.

Nobody is inside. Not under the bed, or on the porch, or under Nathan's table, or in the outhouse. Her paranoia embarrasses her, but she can't shake it. It follows her inside like a stray. Did somebody move the duffel one centimeter to the left? And where is her comb? Her other apple? Did she pack her Xanax? Where the fuck is her Xanax?

She eats beef jerky, gnawing on it until it thickens into wet gristle in her mouth. Lights every taper in the cabin, then the woodstove, shuts every window and door. It isn't even sunset. Sweat curls the hair on the back of her neck. The soreness in her legs amplifies. Her ears ring, and ring, and when she pulls the quilt over her head she believes she can smell her own exhausted fear.

The fisher wakes her. Three hours asleep, or ten, she doesn't know. All the tapers have extinguished in mottled stubs. Only embers are in the woodstove.

Its wail is closer tonight, she decides. Everything about its pitch is loathsome. Three seconds and then the shriek. Two seconds and then the shriek. Closer, like lightening on an approach. The fisher is mocking her, its keen imitating a woman in pain, and the way it circles has to be planned. It has to know she's there. There is only one way to make it stop.

Moonlight sluices over the floorboards in luminous patches. She is careful not to step on them, as if they could be disturbed. It is not hard for her to see the outline of the shotgun on the wall. A twelve gauge isn't as heavy as she remembers. She nudges open the door, tiptoes through the porch, and steps quietly onto the front steps of Mu Cabin.

How strange she must look: a thin young woman, dirty, barefoot, holding a shotgun in her underwear. Wild-eyed. But does it matter, does it really matter, if no living creature can see her? The chill of the air thrills every goose bump on her skin. She raises the gun, rests her cheek against the smooth wooden stock, and stares down the barrel into darkness. It's like riding a bike. Nathan would be proud.

She waits for the glow of the fisher's eyes.

### Chapter 3

#### Luck, and Other Disasters

*Dr. Neilson --*

*These are the interviews I collected in my journal in the weeks after Matilda died, starting with those who knew her the least. I'm not her sister in these pages. I'm her biographer. Let's get that straight. Look over this, if you find the time, and I'll see you next week.*

The Rite-Aid Clerk.

He saw my sister only once a month, when she picked up a dry-eye prescription and the pill. At first he tried to avoid knowing her name because he liked remembering her simply as Cute Girl With The Slanted Smile. Yes, she was one among others. Hot Girl With Snotty Kid. Mexican Girl With Mickey Mouse Tattoo. But still. Once he asked her all slow and sultry if she had any questions about her new heartburn medication, and she looked him square in the eye and said all throaty back, Listen, friend, I know you gotta follow company policy or whatever and ask me these questions and jump through hoops and shit but would you please just give me the damn bag? My throat is on fire here.

On a visit not long after, he inadvertently read her prescription label before handing the little parcel over the counter. Matilda T. Snell. He'd imagined a Roxy, or an Electra. Never again did she have such an outburst.

Bio-Daddy.

My sister's biological father saw her only once, in the delivery room, when she emerged from his young girlfriend's womb with blue-tint skin and an alien howl.

He has children of his own now with a wife in Atlanta. After a few pints at an airport bar in JFK, he admitted to me that he often forgets to include her in his mental tally of kin. It is different with men, he thinks. It is easier to feel adrift from an infant when it didn't suck at your breast for life, didn't identify your scent the way it could its mother. He didn't give her a name, so I made certain that he knew it before I left him. Names are so much weightier once people no longer occupy them. My older sister, Matilda, Matilda, Matilda.

Dr. McGovern.

Her dentist said she hated him but he didn't resent her for that. She hated drills, and drillers of drills. He was a surprisingly forgivable dentist, the sort of man who had slipped into the trade by happenstance. Posit: on his way to Gynecology 101, he accidentally walked into a lecture on root canals. He could tell that she was a nice gal, though. That's how he put it. Said she wore a necklace with a shamrock on it. He was Irish, so he recalled that clearly about her when the coroner contacted him for her dental records.

It wasn't a shamrock. It was a four-leaf clover. She had always been superstitious.

Mrs. Cai.

Her fourth grade teacher remembered her as a toothy, friendly neurotic. She was always nervous, always quivering with the tremor a Jack Russell terrier. She worshipped at the foot of little girl-dom: Fad-obsessed. Pinkophile. Worried over friendships. Was angst-ridden but funny.

Matilda wore sweater sets back then, and slacks that still had department store creases on their first wear in September. Perhaps this was why she looked so guarded, as if she were a waif soccer mom who had been strong-armed into providing the team with snacks one too many times.

Mr. Herter.

Her boss was a stocky man with blunt fingertips and hair plugs who wouldn't talk to me until I showed him my driver's license to verify, at least, our shared last name. It is harder to persuade strangers that we are sisters, especially when we're both adopted and have no features in common, no similar jaw lines or eye shapes to lead the biology ruse. Once he was convinced, he treated me gingerly, like a child with poison ivy. In the beginning of our interview he veered away from any comments that would taint what people collectively refer to as *the memory of the dead*, a stupid term that would be better suited for a heavy metal band. I sat on the visiting side of his desk and we sipped lukewarm coffee from Styrofoam cups while he recounted her boring office sweetness: she held elevators for people, she watered the ferns on coworker's desks when they were on vacation, she brought candy on Valentine's day. Saintly. But after thirty minutes of my wheedling, he admitted,

-She could be mouthy. On her good days she was mouthy, but funny. But on her bad days, she was quick and wired, like a kicked dog.

He asked me, at the end of my visit, if she had an abusive beau. *A Beau!* I said no. She did that to herself; she could scare herself into alienation from her own life if she let her nerves get the better of her.

Before I forget.

In high school, she was sharp and fun and appropriately tight-lipped in a circle of bitchy friends. At home, she fretted. She was a hypochondriac. Once, Mom took her to the emergency room because she thought she had appendicitis. It was gas.

Druggie Darla.

It took a week to track down her best friend from high school for an interview, but I finally found her online and hassled her into meeting me at a coffee shop in Staten Island. It was strange to see Darla again. She had sores pulsing around her chin and she was so thin I could see her kneecaps through her sweatpants. I used to spy on her in high school, when she and Mattie were mysterious creatures with long, healthy legs and sneaky faces. She showed up late and didn't take off her coat when she sat down. Every so often, she would arrange two packets of sugar into a teepee on the table, where they inevitably collapsed onto one another.

Darla said she knew very little about Mattie since they graduated. She'd gone to a college in Rhode Island before she dropped out and Mattie chose a little private school over four hundred miles away where cattle outnumbered students in the local census. She said they wrote postcards to each other sometimes, stupid little messages or vulgar drawings or funny headlines taped to the back and nothing more. They were infrequent, half-assed nods to an old friendship. Looking at her, I could see why Mattie had lost touch. She was disinterested, she was aloof, she was doped. She could barely keep her eyes open. I wanted to grab her by the hair and shake a memory out of her. When she stood up to pay the tab, I told her that my sister kept a diary in high school. She grabbed the tabletop for support, and her legs jerked under her like a rookie

roller skater. For a moment her face was open, panicky. But then her mouth leveled and she lowered her head near mine and breathed a sweet, smoky breath in my face and said, gently,

-You know, even the dead deserve their privacy.

I wish that my sister really had kept a diary, so I could know what had happened between them. I don't think I ever will.

Stetson.

I interviewed her college boyfriend in a Starbucks on the Lower East side. I had met him once before when he came to my parent's house in Staten Island for Christmas and Mattie walked around with a dopey, swooning smile on her face like maybe she was going to marry this idiot. Then he fought with our father over Christmas dinner about the war in Iraq, an argument that wound around the table endlessly until my grandfather leapt out of his chair in a drunken fury, overturning a gravy boat and pronouncing Stetson a cocksucker communist. That night, the entire house lay awake in silent horror while Stetson noisily screwed my big sister. I lay awake, equal parts naïve, disgusted, and fascinated, and thought, *Aha! College men*. He took a bus home before stockings were opened the next morning, and Mattie walked around the house with eyes so red that Mom made her use drops before we went to Christmas Day services.

Now, Stetson wore khakis and a wine colored sweater. A pair of wire-rimmed glasses quivered on his cheekbones. He was full of jittery intellectual assertions, and dying to share them. He believed, after meeting Matilda, that there were two kinds of atheists: those that embraced their nothingness and celebrated it, and those that were unalterably afraid of the cataclysmic expanse that comes with nothingness and have to do something to soften the blow. Matilda was the latter. He said that her superstitions were her religion, that her knocks on wood



and salt over the shoulder were icons of her faith in the fates. He linked fate with God. I'm not so sure that was wise. But I let him, because it seemed like he needed to make that mistake.

Mom.

Our father is a contractor and not a great communicator unless it comes to drywall or the Mets, but our mother is a professional when it comes to emoting. I interviewed her in bed, in between one of her deep hibernations. She hadn't left her bed in two weeks, not since the funeral. The blankets were piled in strange whorls around her body. She spoke as if she were just recovering from laryngitis, and her lids hung heavy over her eyes. It felt a bit like visiting a psychic. I had never, in all of my insubstantial years, felt so distant from my mother. I thought it would be hard to ask her so soon about Matilda. Instead, I think she reveled in it.

Our mother said they spent the first night with her in a dusty motel near the airport, and whenever a plane took off Matilda wouldn't cry, but she would shut her eyes and frown deeply, like a nun interrupted from her prayers. She saved her tears for our father, whom she feared until she was nearly five months old. I suppose it's lucky that she shrank from him and not our mother, or else I'm sure they would have returned her. Now that I have even these tiny details, I try to climb into the night: my parents look like pale, sore thumbs in Phoenix. My mother is sweating and nervous, mixing formula over the bathroom sink, treating it as if it were alchemy. My father is lying on one of the double beds, watching the little body wriggle in the detachable car seat, patiently waiting for a sense of kinship, like a bear ready to swipe at the first glimpse of trout.

The problem with grief is that it works inside of me like twine. Sometimes it holds, and I can go about my day without its intrusion. But often, it takes nothing to make it unravel, and I

am too distracted by the fray of it to do anything but chase down my sister before I mythologize her into what she wasn't.

Dad.

I interviewed my father for two squirming hours but I got only ninety seconds of meaning out of our talk. He isn't ready yet, and I am cruel to try to make him. I do anyway.

-You know the Perseid Showers at Jones Beach? he said. He took a hand-rolled cigarette out of his pocket and lit it, then passed it to me. He never uses enough tobacco to mask the hash. When Mattie was alive, she worried that the neighbors would catch him. For the last two weeks he's been careless.

-What about them? I said, lungs full, and then I let out the smoke.

-She always wanted to know more about space when she was little. Can you see a black hole? And what is Jupiter made of? Can anything live on the sun? That sort of thing. And when the Perseid's came she would ask me about meteors. I tried to explain to her, you know, that meteors hit the atmosphere and just sort of burn up, and that's what we're seeing when they streak over the sky. And she hated that. So that's it? she'd say, we're just watching them die? And one year, she asked me why *those* meteors were the ones that had to burn up in our atmosphere, why were *those* meteors so unlucky?

-What did you say? I asked.

-I said it was because of gravity or something. Christ. I'm not a science guy, I don't know if that was right.

Facts.

So she was just this iota in the galaxy, right, who happened to be in the wrong part of the intersection on 98<sup>th</sup> and Broadway on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2006, at 7:49:17AM eastern time, when an air conditioner owned by Wilson and Chelsea Wu of apartment 14C sagged a half-ounce too heavily on the wooden, rotting, ten-year-old plank of wood that served as a sloppy mounting bracket on the exterior of the building. They had been lazy that winter and neglected to take the unit out of the window, electing instead to put duct tape over the vents and crank up the thermostat. It was a solid fall. The edge of it made contact with her skull and then the weight followed, pressing a barbaric, messy dent into the top of her head that killed her instantly, done as easily and irrevocably as a footprint in wet cement.

She was wearing headphones when it happened. I scan her miraculously unmarred iPod for hours, never altering the contents, wondering which song was playing when she was hit. I worried, at first, that there was a cartoonish whistling when it fell, and I was comforted that if there had been a sound she wouldn't have heard it.

When we were little we would watch Wile E. Coyote flatten himself over and over again under the weight of a botched scheme. He would stand in a puddle of deepening shadow and then look up at the last minute, eyes as big as sunflowers, but he never managed to move in time. Then he would appear in a new scene, completely resurrected, looking grumpy but in tact all the same.

An Iranian woman leaving the dry cleaners across the street saw it happen, stepped out and looked in the right direction as if on cue. Her statement contained the line, *She was there, and then she was not.* A magician's trick. A rabbit forever lost in the recesses of a very deep and suffocating hat. In a clip that aired on the eleven o' clock news, the Iranian woman said they hosed down the sidewalk after they took her away. An image of the sidewalk and gutters filled

the screen, zooming into the wet spot, a damp target that I see even when I close my eyes. At the deli, at the gym, on the subway watching the dark rush by peppered with the tints of blue emergency lights, I consider the implications of hosing off the sidewalk. Then, to make things quieter, I ask people new questions about Mattie.

I called Chelsea and Wilson Wu. I've called them twice, actually. Both times I've gotten their answering machine. A woman's voice – Chelsea's? It's a lilting voice, a musical, cocktail hour voice. I hang up after the beep.

I used to believe that vengeance was barbaric. Since Mattie was killed, I imagine a firing squad of air-conditioning units catapulted at the pair of them.

My sister had been dead for 18 days, not to say that I had been counting. Not to say that counting is useful, or necessary. Not to say that I have already turned the date of her death into my own holiday of mourning, and now I'm pretty certain that my circadian rhythm will work with that calendar for the rest of my life. As I was saying: my sister had been dead for 18 days, and I looked up from my hands in my lap and found myself sitting across from a pair of sisters on the 6 train. They were identical twins in their sixties, and they wore matching denim jumpers and little white tennis shoes with wool overcoats held close in their laps. People always ask old married couples, What's your secret? Which really means, How do you tolerate someone for decades? How desperately I wanted to ask them! And how desperately I suddenly wished that Matilda and I had been biological sisters, so I could have children and relatives that looked like her, and spoke like her, and had tendrils of her personality creeping out of them in ways that even they wouldn't recognize.

The Landlady.

Nobody went to her apartment in the beginning. Nobody told the landlady. For the first two weeks, I slept at my parent's house and whenever I went to work in the city I felt winded under a gale of fatigue over the continuity of the outside world. The hipsters were still slouching up and down Christopher street, and the skinny-jean mothers were still taking their children to Tai Chi in Chelsea, and the taxis still wound up and down Broadway, passing 98<sup>th</sup> every second, glinting in the sun like yellow barracudas. And suddenly, one afternoon I left work and knew that it was time to go to Brooklyn, it was time to inspect.

The landlady saw me coming from her lawn chair on the balcony. Bundled in an olive parka. Face turned toward the straining January sun. She shielded her eyes when I came near, surveying me carefully from above. I wondered if I should have brought some sort of offering to lay at her feet. Frankincense? A ram with tangled horns?

And the modern seraph said unto me,

-Ain't you a Snell girl? Where the fuck's the rent?

-She's out of town, I said, and for a moment, she was.

The landlady blinked slowly in the sun, soaked in as much of it as she could before she came back to earth and said,

-You leave town, you still gotta pay. This ain't a pay per night place. You tell her that.

-What if I pay? I said. She shrugged, but I could tell it would do. She settled in her parka and waved at me, practically regal, and purred,

-It's all the same to me, baby.

I wrote her a check and carried it up to her. Cataracts fogged her irises. A halo of fuzz had escaped her bun and framed her face, making her look wild and ethereal all at once.

-You got a key? I asked. I want to water her houseplants.

Alarming, how easy it was to break into my sister's apartment.

For a long time, I stood at Matilda's front door underneath the balcony. When I was still in elementary school, the two of us would occasionally get in kicking, hair-pulling fights and if I kicked her too hard or tried to finagle an Indian burn out of my position she would sit flat on my chest and force all of her older-sister weight on my ribcage until I stopped flailing and was clearly and stupidly defeated, pinned under her like a rat in a glue trap. The feeling met me again. Then the landlady said from above,

-You gonna shit around all day on the doorstep? Or are you gonna go inside?

When I turned the handle, I could feel the imprint of my sister's palm on my skin.

The lights were out, the place was absolutely silent. All of the houseplants were dead. A spider had threaded itself between the kitchen cabinets; it retreated to a corner when I flipped on the light. Her lucky horseshoes still hung over the doorways. Her umbrella still leaned in the corner. The bed was unmade, the sheets were cold. Balled up Kleenex on the nightstand. A coffee mug on the kitchen counter, stained on the inside with a half-drunk brew. Her dirty clothes from a run the day before she died, maybe, in a stale pile on the bathroom floor.

What things were hidden behind her dresser drawers, or stored on her laptop, or tucked inside the books on her shelves, encapsulating what she was? Are such things even possible? Is there ever one item, one account, which can summarize a person? For a long time, I stood in front of her closed closet door in the bedroom and thought about the possibility of its contents.

What could be there.

What never would.

I went into the living room and took a final look at the place. The best horseshoe hung over the front door. It was spectacularly heavy, mottled and cool in my hand. It was ponderous, it was leaden. But it held nothing for me. I nearly took it with me, but when I stepped into the sunlight it became clear that it was a thing too dark and useless to carry. I doubled back and left it on the coffee table.

I walked into the light.

-I lied earlier. Your tenant is dead, I said.

-The fuck she is, said the landlady from above. You ain't getting your check back. Why would you lie about that shit? Think I'm stupid?

-I'm not lying, I said. She'd dead. She's been dead for two weeks.

But even as I said it, it felt like a lie.

-Bullshit.

I thought, Matilda could turn the corner at any minute, could saunter by the statue of the virgin on the front lawn and slip her key in the lock and invite me inside, and I could ask her what she was, anything about herself, anything I wanted, all the things that had never occurred to me when she was alive. And she would answer truthfully.

-I couldn't bring myself to say it earlier, I said.

The landlady closed lids over her cataract irises, then opened them again. She looked away from me and sighed.

-Are there stains on the rugs? You stain the rugs, you ain't getting a deposit back.

-Probably, I said.

-How did she die? she asked.

-Wrong place, wrong time, I said.

-Shit, I've been there all my life and I'm still not dead, she said.

Above us, thousands of meteors we couldn't see burned up in our atmosphere.

-Get her stuff out by next week, she said to my retreating back.

I felt her eyes on me, trying to map the location of my grief, but I didn't turn back. I kept walking.



## Chapter 4

### The Manicure

Thomas has been letting the nurses and interns clip his wife's nails these last few months. He wishes they would have more time for her, some extra minutes to file the edges and maybe paint them a color she used when she was awake, but he knows he's asking too much already. The intern with too much eye makeup is good at it – she files after she clips without being asked. Her hands are steady, and when she really focuses she gnaws on her top lip and forgets to bother him with small talk.

When Thomas got the call about Adele, he couldn't help himself: he'd pictured Snow White, the Disney version. Adele in a glass box, her skin as smooth as a new bar of soap, surrounded by fond woodland animals. He'd known that wouldn't be the case. But still. He hadn't been prepared for the respirator, the catheter bag peeking under the bed, the central line dipping into her heart, the saliva-filled breaths that guttered under her ribs. To him, aesthetics mattered. When she'd been awake they mattered to her too.

At four o' clock, just when the stillness on the fourth floor reached a skull-crushing pressure, a doctor appeared. Arm hairs so thick and curly they could have been calligraphy, fingers too broad to fish a short straw out of a soda bottle. He lifted her eyelids and drummed at the soles of her feet before he sat Thomas across from him on a folding chair and talked odds.

After that first visit, speckled with statistics and outcomes and flitting references to the Glasgow scale, he'd gone home.

Where else was there to go? The cat had to be fed. The geraniums were wilting. The cilantro was in a battle against mealy bugs. He plucked them off one by one, crushing each between his fingers, feeling – not satisfied, but competent. And then, after all had been smoothed and killed and fed and watered, he sat in Adele's armchair in the bedroom for hours, the chair where she would crochet long stretches of holey blankets, even in the deepest summer months. Every year during Christmas she gave his mother an afghan until nine of them bulged over her closet shelf in Des Moines, and she asked her son to Please, tell your wife I want a cheese grater this year.

But he hadn't had the nerve to tell her. And now he might never have to.

Adele's hands are smooth now, always dry. When she'd been awake she'd always picked at the cuticle on her left thumb, flicking at it until a flap of skin would unfurl in the corner. And cooking injuries, there were always cooking injuries speckling her hands. Now her hands are pristine. The intern has the clippers out, and when Thomas shuts his eyes he can hear the tick of them.

-She has a nice wedding ring, the intern says.

And Thomas has to catch himself on the response because what he wants to say is that it's a horrible ring, that Adele had guilted him into buying it, even though they were broke when they got engaged and he'd been watching those documentaries about exploited diamond mine workers, that when he'd purchased it for her, after all the fuss, it had felt like a pronouncement of what she really was: just as vain as he. Maybe worse.

-I'm going to tell you a secret, Thomas says.

The intern stops clipping Adele's nails and her back straightens, each muscle cinching up her spine. He can only imagine what horrible thing she thinks he'll tell her.

-The ring isn't real, he says. It's a cubic zirconium.

-Oh, the intern says, relieved. Oh, well, it's still pretty. I'm sure your wife loved it. Loves it.

-She didn't know it was a fake, Thomas says.

And the intern resumes clipping, this time faster, a little sloppier. When she finishes, she straightens Adele's hair and adjusts her hands and wipes drool from the corner of her mouth. In the beginning, it had bothered him to think of them shifting her limbs around, disturbing her as she rolled inside her own body like a ship undulating on rough water. But now, as the weeks go by and he develops a distant awe over her simultaneous absence and presence, he lets them touch her completely.

The intern starts talking again as she changes the catheter. She always does this, and Thomas suspects it's a way to distract him from the humiliation of what she's doing to his wife.

-You're a good husband to keep her company like this all the time, she says cheerfully.

But he's made her uncomfortable with the ring comment, he can tell. Her voice is higher, faster than usual.

-Yes, Thomas agrees. He watches her unhook the yellow baggie and feels a spike of shame.

-You tried talking to her yet?

-We never had much to say, even when she was awake.

The intern blinks at him. Eyelashes curled and individually painted, practically touching her eyebrows.

-I talk to them, she says. All of them. I tell the sleepers everything.

The sleepers. He likes the elegance of the phrase.

-Do the nurses keep any nail polish at the hospital? Thomas asks.

-No, the intern says. I could bring some next week, I guess.

-Would you—

-I don't have time to give her a manicure, the intern says. I'm sorry. I'll lend you a bottle. I just don't have time to do it myself.

It took only a few days after her accident for him to start wondering: what did the other patients look like? Did they have bedside sentinels too? Or were they alone, wrapped in a chrysalis of sheets, living out the decades in a hollow body? And, most importantly, was their seclusion tragic or placid? The results were disappointing.

All of them looked like Adele. Just paler, with skin that glowed from underneath, the translucent ooze of a body on autopilot for years on end. He took to naming them, knowing that it was both debasing and necessary to do so. It wasn't until after he'd finished that he realized they were the first living beings he'd ever named in his life. Erwin lay in 1402, a young man with a terrible scar that started over his right eye and crawled into his hairline. He had restraints looped over his wrists in case he seized in his sleep. Lydia in 1407 was ancient, a constant drooler, but he could tell she had once been beautiful and could be again if someone lifted the skin on her face a centimeter. And Peggy was his immediate favorite, a black woman at the end

of the hall with a countenance that rivaled the Buddha. Closed lips, eyebrows cut like hieroglyphics, eyelids like the backs of mussel shells.

She opened her eyes and looked at him.

Possibly.

Two paces into her room, and just before he opened his throat and uttered a hello over the gust of the shock, she shut them again. He practically ran back to Adele's room, shutting the door behind him as if Peggy would follow with the draft.

Sometimes he wonders with a scientific precision: what is going on in there, under hair and skin and skull? Is it like sleeping inside a walnut? Is she dreaming the moments of her life before the accident? Or are synapses firing, traveling between webby neurons, creating memories without a platform?

She could be bounding through a fictionalized, Technicolor meadow. She could be making a casserole. Clipping her toenails onto the bathroom floor and leaving them in a corner. Graduating from a liberal arts college with a theatre tech degree, barefoot and with only one wrinkle in the middle seam of her forehead. She could be at work, ignoring the blisters spurred by her high heels, her ass crammed into a pencil skirt. She could be reliving the day they married in a public park, and how by the reception her shoulders were the same tint of pink as the seared salmon. She could be folding the laundry while drinking a martini. Crocheting another passive-aggressive afghan. She could be remembering the muggy morning, age seven, where she stepped on a bloated dead mouse in her grandmother's basement and felt the spur of a miniscule revelation edging up her heel.

Or is she ricocheting around the halls of her own body, trying to find an out?

A woman Thomas didn't recognize was in Peggy's room at the end of the hall one afternoon – one month after the accident? Two? – buffing gently at the nails on her limp hand. The doorway framed the two of them perfectly: caretaker and sleeper, devotee and shrine. The smell of acetone flooded his nostrils as he approached. One look at the woman's face, and he knew it was Peggy's daughter. She felt his eyes on her work and stared at him until he was ashamed to be near such an idyllic pair. He did an awkward flapping half-wave before he lurched away from them.

-Wait, the woman said. Aren't you the guy from 1404?

He turned, nodded. She kept buffing Peggy's nails as she spoke.

-You the husband or the brother?

-The husband.

She tilted her head, her face as Zen as her mother's, her complacent smile hinting that she knew already what the outcome would be between the pair of them.

-How long has she been like this? he asked. The daughter squinted as if she couldn't quite remember the details.

-Six years? Give or take a season.

-I'm sorry, he said. He wondered, did he sound sorry enough?

-Don't be. I think she likes it here.

She shuffled around in her bag until she extracted a tube of cuticle cream and started rubbing it in circles over her mother's fingertips.

-She used to have ugly hands, the daughter said. She was a nail-biter. Had knuckles like elephant skin. And now -she held up the hand roughly, proudly- Now look at her! Skin like a baby's.

Is this all we have to talk about now? Thomas wonders. Their hands? Their faces? How well-rested they are?

-They look nice, he said.

-How long you been married?

-Would've been ten years in October, he said, and before he could stop himself the words spilled out of his mouth, harpooning the air and settling into her consciousness before he could even consider taking them back:

-But we should've stopped at five.

Nobody – not Thomas, not the daughter, and certainly not Peggy – spoke. If social pride had permitted him, he would have left the room then. But the daughter broke the silence.

-You know, my mom and I had a lousy relationship before all of this.

Thomas could have sworn he saw a muscle thrum near Peggy's eyebrow.

-What was she like? he asked.

-When I was little, she wouldn't let me to go to sleepovers in case I wet the bed there and embarrassed myself. But I never wet the bed, not once, not even at home.

-I better be getting back, he said. Again, he saw her complacent smile, as if she knew his embarrassment more fluently than he could ever verbalize.

-Come by anytime, she said. I'm usually here Thursday and Sunday afternoons.

She dipped her head, reaching deep in her bag for a nail polish. He knew then that he should have asked for Peggy's real name. He never would.

-Nice meeting you, he said. She nodded without looking up.

But Peggy opened her eyes and winked at him.

So tonight, after the intern leaves, after the night-shifts nurses come by, he drives to Rite-Aid. For hours, he stands in an obscenely fluorescent aisle dotted with endless rows of nail polish. They scream,

*Viva diva!*

*Awesome azure!*

*Prom night!*

*Miami sunrise!*

A pearly white bottle costs six dollars. Appalling. The cashier handles his merchandise carefully and doesn't make eye contact with him as if he's purchased something private and obscene.

Back at the hospital, he tries to paint even strokes over the whitish half-moons of Adele's nails, all the way up to the curved edge. On some fingers he runs out of polish halfway through the brush stroke. On others he uses too much and it globs onto her cuticles. Wads of tissue only exacerbate the mess, and at one point when he thinks they are dry he touches a thumbnail and his fingerprint sticks in the paint.

It isn't until he gives up and admits his failure as a manicurist, exhausted with his messy effort, that he glimpses the shade title on the bottom of the bottle. Why had he looked at every innocuous name, every ridiculous and meaningless hue, except for the one he had chosen? Although he doesn't believe in symbols, he throws the bottle in the trash as a precaution.



But he can still see the title, even when he closes his eyes and tries to doze with the rest of the sleepers, even when he thinks of running into the parking lot and driving in the heady dark to anywhere but there, even when he considers bursting into Peggy's room and shaking her until she spouts a useless prophesy, he hears the refrain,

*Wedded Bliss!*

*Wedded Bliss!*

*Wedded Bliss!*

And Adele twitches slightly, the wires tethered to her tightening and then slacking, while she climbs the mulberry tree in the backyard of her childhood home, her fingers sticky with purple juice, her legs scraping against the bark.

## Chapter 5

### Erosion

Nobody knew how the fire started, but it didn't particularly matter because everybody blamed Carl.

Carl said he'd been asleep in front of the television when it happened. Mouth agape, one hand slipped under the waistband of his sweatpants. A Neanderthal furrow in his brow, his jaw working hard as he slept, dreaming of – what? Egging mailboxes? Screwing Kristie Starr from Algebra 2? He woke up in a coughing jag, he says. Tried to go upstairs to save his kid brother Ward, but too was overwhelmed by smoke, he says. He hollered upstairs for Ward to wake up, then bolted.

But Ward does not remember waking to Carl's summons. Instead, the shatter of glass in the kitchen alerts him. Even before he sees it, he knows that the fire is skirting the landing and eating away at the wallpaper. Patterned roses bubble and curl under the heat. The rubber grips on the bottom of his footie pajamas begin to melt on the steps. He smells the singeing of his own hair as it flares in the path of a stray ember on the side of his head, but he flattens it quickly, instinctively. Tiny blisters bloom upon the palms of his hands. He scrambles over the banister and falls in a clumsy roll to the foyer floor.

Then he runs. Away from the landing, gaining speed in the living room where the television still blares, seemingly unstoppable by the time he reaches the back porch to rescue his pet parakeet, Herman. He collides with the sliding glass door, bursting onto the porch in a hail of

slippery shrapnel. The parakeet screeches and bobs in its cage, moving with the agility of a boxer until Ward corners the bird against its toy cuttlebone. He is surprised to see his own hand slick with blood, even more surprised to see some glass lodged in his forearm. He doesn't let go of the bird. He leaves through the sun porch, staggers around to the front of the house. Curious neighbors are assembling, standing close together on the lawn like Christmas carolers. A fire truck wails in the distance. Herman's heart pings furiously against the palm of Ward's hand. He listens to the snap of wicker, the crash of stairs, the twanging death knell of the family's beautiful upright piano. The living room windows simultaneously shatter under the pressure of heat. Fire glows in them like a pair of eyes. The house is alive, keening and burning. Herman the parakeet senses distraction, a slackening, and wriggles out of Ward's grasp, leaving behind a few molted feathers. By the time their mother Wendy arrives, the remains are smoldering in the middle of the cul-de-sac, looking like the gap of a lost tooth.

Wendy and her boys moved into a shag-carpeted, two-bedroom apartment for the next year while the house was rebuilt from the ground up. The Baptist church provided their furnishings: a tattered plaid couch; a recliner with a broken handle; three dining chairs out of an original four chair set, with a folding brown metal chair to complete the look; an old walnut dining room table that reeked of estate sale; a twin bed for Wendy. Even as a child, Ward could sense the wrongness of a twin bed for his mother. Twin beds were for kids, for monks, for hospitals. Not for mothers.

They dressed in hand-me-downs until Wendy could muster the energy to buy new wardrobes. The process was slow, hampered by the fact that she was frequently inconsolable. In the first days after the fire, Wendy would mull endlessly over the loss of her matching living

room furniture, her great aunt's china set, the boys' baby photos, the family piano. Carl rarely hung around, slinking in just before curfew and slinking out just after breakfast. He hated the doleful looks from his mother. He also had to bunk with Wart, which he assumed was part of his punishment for accused but unverified arson.

Initially, it seemed Ward was the least devastated by the fire. He was a hero in his second grade class for escaping on his own—with a disgusting scar to prove it—and he was elated to discover that he would be sharing a room with his older brother, whether or not Carl was an arsonist. The apartment had been presented to Ward as a temporary adventure and Wendy had promised that all of his possessions would be replaced as soon as the house was rebuilt exactly as it had been before. It wasn't long before he began to equate the identical new house to his old life, and he looked forward to returning to it as if the fire had never happened. Imagine his distress, then, when he came home from school one day to discover his mother in a meeting with an architect. Ward halted in the doorway, wary of the blueprints draped over the table.

-I thought I had to pick you up from chess club today, his mother said.

-I rode the bus.

He had been proud that he'd made his own decision, proud that he'd taken the bus by himself and was going to surprise his mother at the apartment. It suddenly seemed like a stupid victory.

-Say hello to Mr. Keaton, his mother said.

Ward looked at the architect, studied the thick wave of blonde hair crashing into his left temple, his askew glasses, his ridiculous tweed coat. He did not say hello.

-What are you doing?

She rose, guilty, and approached him the way one would approach a wild animal. He knew.

-We're making a few improvements to our house while they rebuild it, she said. She worked the corners of her mouth upward, forcing a lilt into her voice.

-Wardy, how would you like to have a bigger bedroom?"

-I don't want a bigger bedroom, he said. I want the same bedroom. Exactly the same, remember?

-Yes, but remember how small your old bedroom was? There was no room for your Legos and your collections. And if we get this larger bedroom built for you, you can keep your new parakeet in the room with you. Wouldn't that be fun?

-I don't. Want. A bigger. Bedroom, he said again.

But Ward was not the sort of child who threw tantrums. Carl's demonstrations had shown him it was too much energy to expend, and too much embarrassment for the performer when all was done. Instead, he picked up his Spiderman backpack shut the door carefully to show his mother that he wasn't a door slammer like Carl. She did not follow him. He sat in a hunch with his ear pressed against the bedroom wall, trying to decipher their plans.

He couldn't be coaxed out for dinner. Carl came home late, scaled the top bunk, and switched on his Walkman.

Soon after, Wendy entered. She was wearing pajamas that Ward didn't recognize. It gave him a pang to realize once again that her well-worn terrycloth bathrobe had been lost in the fire. Her narrow eyes shining from the light in the hall. From the top bunk, Carl switched off his Walkman and listened.

-Hey bud, she said. Tell me the things you miss most about the old house and I will try to keep those things the same in the new one, okay? No promises. But it's a family house and you should have some say.

She took a notepad out of her bathrobe and clicked a ballpoint pen, waiting like an eager reporter. She meant to be funny, but Ward didn't laugh.

-I want to feel like bad stuff can't happen again, he said.

She dropped the pen in her lap and sighed.

-Me too.

Carl snorted at them from his bunk.

-Carl, do you have something to say?

-No, he said.

-You sure? Anything? Anything you want to tell me?

-I didn't fucking do it, Carl said.

-I didn't say you--

-Might as well. You walk around just as smug and knowing as the rest of them.

Ward curled his toes in anguish.

*Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home.*

-Your little brother could have died in that fire, Wendy said, her voice thin.

-He didn't, Carl said. Everyone thinks they'll be a hero. No one ever is.

*Your house is on fire, your children will burn.*

-He was your responsibility, Wendy said. All I want is for you to admit that he was your responsibility.

-I took care of myself, Ward whispered. I'm okay.

-Shut up, Carl said. Both of you shut up.

And Wendy pressed her palms hard against her eyes, still, her body rigid on Ward's bed, so frozen Ward wondered if she'd stay the night that way.

-I don't know what to do anymore, she said. Somebody tell me what to do.

Nobody spoke. After she left, Carl threw his pillow in a fury at the door, then sheepishly got out of bed and retrieved it.

-I really was okay by myself, Ward said.

-Shut up, Carl said again, exhausted.

Carl ran away the next day, taking his Walkman and a little under \$80 out of his mother's wallet before he left. An hour after he disappeared, the school called to say that he had been suspended that morning for punching his Spanish teacher in the stomach when asked to conjugate a verb.

Carl's face was printed in every newspaper in Oklahoma and he was mentioned for weeks on the evening news. Ward and Wendy sat at an epicenter of prayer circles and nosy neighbors bearing lasagnas, but nobody called the runaway hotline with useful information.

Whenever Wendy stood still, she could feel herself untethering. The fire had been a bearable catastrophe. Her children were healthy and the prospect of a new house had excited her enough to begin recovering from her losses. But now Carl was gone. When he didn't return after a month, she decided that he was dead, or in a gang.

-What else could happen in the world to a 15-year-old with no money? she reasoned, and friends would hem and haw, saying surely he wasn't dead or tattooed, surely not, though it was impossible to consider other possibilities once she had cast the remark.

Ward's dreams started changing. Before they'd always been fun clips about flying, or school, or television shows that he loved. Now his dreamscapes had a heft to them. They were hulking and unfamiliar. A fleet of blue and white parakeets hurtled toward the naked frame of an unfinished barn. He would watch them roost on the gables and before he knew it he'd be scrambling up the cedar boards to make one his own, sweating and sliding downward the harder he tried.

On move-in day the neighbors gathered in a herd on the front lawn again and congratulated Wendy and Ward on their return, although Carl's absence completely changed the hue of the morning. The new house looked swollen next to its smaller neighbors and the other homeowners seemed irritated by the growth, but not irritated enough to say so. They stood on the grass as if they were observing a golf tournament and watched as Mrs. Skyeagle handed Wendy a gift. She unwrapped it warily.

-A camera, she said.

-I thought y'all would want to document your fresh start, Mrs. Skyeagle explained.

She was a large woman, with deep folds of tanned Creek skin that settled around her neck like a collar. She scared Ward; he skipped her house every Halloween, which he was sure she noticed. Wendy and Ward were forced into an arrangement around the front door. Ward noticed that the doormat was different and started to seethe. Wendy stood tall, protectively draping an



arm around her son's shoulder. She nearly did the gesture with both arms, then realized her mistake and was photographed looking utterly bereft.

That night, Ward lay awake in a room that was not his room. It was a space where his old room had existed, a pocket of air 15 feet above the ground on a property that had disappeared. But this room had a larger closet, more floor space, emptier windows. The shadows fell differently in this room, casting striated patterns on possessions that only imitated what he once had. It was clear now that his mother was a liar. She had neglected to replace his old throw rug, his collection of painted rubber zoo animals, his dream catcher. He didn't feel as if he lived in a real place and suspected that really what had been built was something like the stage for a puppet show: an imitation of what his life had been, but a bad one at that.

The next morning he began collecting again. Wendy took him to Pet Junction, a slimy little store wedged into a South Tulsa strip mall. Ward made a beeline for the back aisle where the parakeets milled, cheerfully nudging into one another as they hopped from tier to tier in a plexiglass box. Wendy saw the one-legged parakeet in the corner before her son did, but it was too late. He noticed it seconds after, and she knew before he even turned to face her that they would be taking home two parakeets—one with no health risks and one pogo-stick avian that her son would worry over till the end of its sickly little life. Still, she felt she needed this small bribe to set things right with Ward. On a whim she let him choose an even larger birdcage and felt a little thrill when she handed the cashier her credit card.

But they had a dilemma when they got home. The old birdcage, Herman's birdcage, stood sentinel in the corner by Ward's bed. Mother and son remained very still in The Room

That Wasn't Ward's Room, wondering what to do. The cage was one of the few things that had survived the fire, although the black paint covering the metal had been replaced with a layer of char that Wendy had lovingly buffed off with a wet rag.

They couldn't just throw it out, not when they had so little rattling around in the bizarre version of their old home. They set up the new cage next to the old one, and that is how it remained.

Later that afternoon, Wendy went to Furniture Frontier and purchased the most expensive living room set in the store, complete with overstuffed ottomans she knew she would never use. She had intended to move the old church hand-me-downs upstairs into Carl's room but couldn't even bring herself to carry up the coffee table. Instead, she pushed the old furniture against the living room walls. Then she returned to Furniture Frontier and bought a dining room table and six chairs, along with a collection of twelve hideous lamps of varying heights, their shades the color of jaundiced skin.

By Friday Wendy had purchased new mattresses, dressers, bedding, and desks for everyone in the family, including Carl, but nobody delivered on weekends and by Saturday she felt antsy again. Ward was in the backyard, adding to his rock collection. He had a variety of specimens lining the windowsills in The Room That Wasn't His Room, but found his dresser drawers were lacking and wanted to fill them with something besides air. Occasionally, he would find a charred piece of debris from the real house and had begun hiding these pieces in a shoebox under a sweater in his closet to keep the burnt smell from giving him away. He looked up to see his mother emerging from the sun porch and hastily tucked a piece of melted siding into his shorts.

-Let's go exploring, she said.

They drove around nearby neighborhoods eerily resembling their own, following neon hand-written signs indicating yard sales. They went to one after another as if it were a wine tasting, savoring each piece of worthless junk before they threw it in the back of the minivan. Their spoils included a baby carriage, a terrarium, a record player, a taxidermy stag's head with one broken antler, two jewelry boxes, four throw rugs, and a warped mirror with garish flowers on the frame. They moved all of their acquisitions into the house, triumphant. Awash in the glow of having.

These forays continued for about two months. Wendy would binge shop in the morning and set up deliveries for the middle of the day. An archeologist stumbling upon the two rooms could easily have followed the warped evolution of her values. Initially, she focused on what she jokingly referred to as understudy furniture: box springs, mattresses, end tables, and lamp shades flanked the far walls of the two rooms, as if she were preparing to open a Bed and Breakfast. But then she'd started branching out, impulsively purchasing things that spoke to her from yard sales and thrift stores: maps depicting the Soviet Union, chipped sets of glassware, roll upon roll of moldy clearance fabrics.

Ward began to notice that air and space unnerved him at school. Only twenty-six desks in a room? No neon Lotto sign? No magic set? No box of yo-yos missing string? Open floor space? Children were not enough to fill an empty space.

But at home, he felt as though he were staring at the dots in an impressionist painting. A little dizzy. But nestled in the chaos, insignificant and safe all at once.

The neighbors were getting nosier. Wendy knew the intention behind the phone calls, the lasagnas, the I-just-came-by-to-see-how-you're-holding-up visits. Ward was too young to realize the insidiousness of their new guilty pleasure, but Wendy always feared a visit from Mrs. Skyeagle, or a girl scout, or a Jehovah's Witness. She knew what she looked like to them: The single mother with a missing arsonist son. The woman burrowed in a mountain of accumulated nothings. She hired a pair of workers to erect a six-foot privacy fence around the property, making the tiny pickets on either side look Lilliputian in comparison.

The other rooms in the house began to fill with debris; they were flooding compartments on a sinking ship. Before she drained their savings, Wendy managed to finagle enough money to buy a used pickup. She realized, while driving home with an alien grin on her face, that she got higher doses of pleasure when she bought specific kinds of comfort-inducing objects. Baby clothes, china sets, plants, children's books, high chairs, men's sweaters, roller skates, strollers, bathrobes, and old country records started to take precedence. She began dedicating most of her hunts to flea markets, enthralled by the originality of junk, the meaning held in a past that she would never know, but felt linked to nonetheless. Ward never questioned her purchases. He watched her comb the racks of the Salvation Army and he understood. Soon, there were only aisles of bare floor in the house sluicing through her collection.

She let Ward do whatever he wanted to his room and it also swelled into an emporium of birds, rocks, comic books, and miscellaneous backyard litter from the old house that he no longer felt the need to hide. One of the parakeets laid eggs on the cage floor. Within weeks there were four chirrupy infants that quickly developed into sickly birds. Ward spent most of his time after school maintaining and hand-feeding them, and when one died, he went into an uncharacteristic fit of rage that propelled Wendy back to Pet Junction to buy him more apology birds. Eventually

they ran rampant on the second floor. Ward's room, in particular, developed an unusual smell—a cross between melted plastic and bird shit.

Wendy took a second job at a department store to cover the cost of her accumulating life. Often, after work, she would shop the clearance racks and feel a cathartic loss of responsibility the longer she scoured the aisles. Most of her paycheck went toward her binges.

One evening, after six months of fencing to block the view, a recently retired and incredibly bored Mrs. Skyeagle grew desperate for news and hefted herself onto a ladder to get a better look inside the Russell house. Many of the windows had impromptu curtains tacked up. Wendy had been too distracted with acquiring to actually hang any of the curtains that she'd purchased, and they now lay inaccessible under a pile of rubble in the dining room. Mrs. Skyeagle fumbled around for some time, edging along the fence until she discovered a window covered with a bath towel that had come un-tacked in a corner. She could not identify which room she was viewing. There was no walking space except for a sliver of floor leading to the bathroom. Corners of the room were stacked to the ceiling with junk—everything from box springs to broken televisions to racks of clothing. The debris lessened near the aisles, sloping toward the open floor with the incline of a mountain range. She quivered precariously on the ladder, debating whether or not she should call the police, but felt a little absurd about making the call: Hello, officer, my neighbor is disorganized. That, and she must have known a call to the police would end the problem, but ruin her entertainment. She had a primal, rubbernecking need to see what would happen next. It turned out Mrs. Skyeagle only had to wait a season.

When Carl came back, it was a Saturday in April. A battered white van with rusted double doors pulled up in front of the Russell house. He'd been gone for more than a year and had grown nearly four inches, but Ward knew it was his brother even before he went outside to see who was banging on the fence. All morning, he'd felt something in the undertow of the house. He realized he wasn't especially surprised to see him.

Carl examined the yard, overgrown with spiky Bermuda grass and pockmarked with lawn ornaments. Then he looked at his brother's expectant face and couldn't help smiling at the little shrimp.

-Hey Wart, he said. I see Mom's taste has changed some since I left.

He stood back and surveyed the new house for a few minutes, then whistled, long and low.

-You got really tall, Ward said.

Carl noticed that his brother had feathers in his hair. His skin was the color of aged rice paper.

-Where's Mom?

-Asleep on the couch.

Carl gave him a strange, pulsing squeeze on the shoulder.

-You're looking good, Wart, he said. But I can already tell that you need to get out more, man.

Ward's face flushed at being referred to, even in passing, by his older brother as *man*. An enormous, beefy kid who looked to be in his late teens got out of the driver's side of the van, nodded at Ward, and waited for Carl's signal.

-Is he in your gang? Ward whispered to Carl, and his older brother smiled devilishly and said, Yeah, Wart, we're total gang lords. That's why we're riding around in this sweet ride. Now shut up, I got something to show you.

He led Ward to the back of the van and centered him in front of the doors, opening them with a flourish.

An enormous upright piano, an aged version of the one that had been lost in the fire, was inside. The keys were yellowed and one of the pedals was missing; gouges of wood showed through the worn, black paint.

-It's a little ratty, Carl said sheepishly. I rescued it from a church nursery. It was being abused. But I wanted to get it for you.

-Why?

-Because I'm sorry, Carl said. I'm sorry. I should have gone upstairs for you.

-I didn't need—

-But I should have. You might be a little shit, but you're my brother.

Ward ignored him. He clambered into the van and hit a key, pressed his ear hard against the soundboard and felt the badly tuned strum of it rattle through his skull.

-I think it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, Ward whispered.

His older brother laughed and something like relief broke over them, then Carl said, You're kind of a weird kid, huh?

The beefy kid started laying ramps. He climbed into the truck and rolled the piano on a flat dolly toward the house. Carl joined him, got behind the piano and steered it down the ramp while the beefy kid stood in front, leaning against the weight of the incline. The piano hummed slightly as it moved.

Ward watches them from the lawn, careful to stay out of their way. They lurch slowly up the sidewalk, locking their muscles on ramps and trying not to groan under the weight. But he can't help being overcome with a sense of dread when they get to the steps. He has an unshakable and stupid notion that the house will not handle the weight of the piano, can not handle another iota of new thing. He imagines Carl disappearing into the house. The piano plunges through a weak patch in the foyer floor, forming a sinkhole under the weight of the collection. Everything rolls in a slow, agonizing slant toward the sinkhole, emptying into the farthest abyss of the Earth.

His fleet of parakeets jumble out of the chimney and second floor windows when the foundation first jolts under the red, clayish sand, but they foolishly roost on the gables when they see that the house isn't immediately collapsing. They don't notice the gradual descent. They are blinking slowly in the sunlight, ruffling their feathers in the breeze, preening themselves as the house slowly sinks.



## Chapter 6

### The Provider

He looks for Hondas. Accords or Civics, it doesn't matter. Even a Toyota will do. Anything made after '06 is too hard to pry into. Circa 2000 is ideal – the weather stripping can peel off of an '01 in his hands like an old band aid.

It is stupid of him to hit the same spot over and over, but he always lucks out in the Briarwood neighborhood. The families in the row houses are flush enough to have cars and air conditioners, but they can't afford alarm systems and gates and parking garage fees. Added bonus - the kids living in the area must have slingshots and an amateur gang, because the streetlights are always shot out and they made their mark in the wet cement last summer:

B-Wood Fam

No OUTsiderz

The houses are all dark at this hour except for the occasional yellow ooze of a bathroom light, or the strobing blue glow from a bedroom television. Stray cats skitter out from the underbellies of cars as he passes, their strange tabby patches visible even in the dark. He finds the perfect Honda halfway down 139th. It's a Civic, a coppery red civic, the color of his sister Lexi's hair when she still had the energy to dye it. There's a dent in the back left bumper and a Hunter College window decal. He hates college stickers, thinks they're so fucking smug. He peers in the back windows. No car seats, no baby toys. All clear. He can't bring himself to lift from a family car, not yet.

In the driver's side window he spots what he's been looking for: a GPS cord is snaking out of the center console, and there's the suction mark like a bull's eye in the center of the windshield to prove it, and there it is – the holy grail – an installed stereo, a Panasonic, thank-you-Jesus. Enough money for Lexi and Nana and, most importantly, plenty to spare for the stash he hides in an algebra textbook he never returned to the school once he dropped out. A bus ticket to Miami costs around one-sixty, and he wants to bring an extra three hundred with him when he runs. So far he has shy of two hundred saved. Lexi's stuff is expensive, and once she found his savings when he still hid it behind the microwave and he had to start over from nothing. But tonight - he does optimistic math - tonight could add up to three hundred if the EZ Pawn doesn't rip him off again. He slaps the car on the hood like he's slapping the ass of a pretty girl.

All it takes is three pushes between the weather stripping and the window with a slotted screwdriver before the thing gives. Then, there's the lean and wriggle maneuver, forcing his arm into the gap he's made until his fingers can touch the lock. That moment, that tiny tug and click and give of the door, releases a high that starts in his fingertips and works its way up his scalp. He thinks this must be a pulse of what Lexi feels after she uncinches the belt from her arm and sinks into the couch cushions and smiles with her eyes half-closed, so radiantly blissful she could be a monk or a five-year-old. And his Nana watches from the kitchenette, always watches, her fingers rubbing over a laminated icon she keeps in her pocket of the Savior, her mouth twitching Hail Mary after Hail Mary. This is their ritual. They execute it daily, like a mass. Lexi says she'll die without what he can get for her, and he believes in that, at least. He's not so sure about Nana's Savior.

He slides into the driver's seat. The interior smells like Red Bull and a wet bathing suit. The GPS goes into his backpack along with the charger and an FM transmitter. Stupid college

puta, he thinks. It isn't unusual for him to hate the driver at this point, especially when the hardest part is yet to come. After he pops off the faceplate he can see how deeply the stereo is sunk into the car. Hulk Hogan himself couldn't yank it out. He'll have to go through the air conditioner panels. He pries them out methodically, chucking them in the passenger seat as he goes. Fine. But now is the worst moment, the moment where he has to inch his fingers into the dark maw he's created and fish around for the screws that anchor the stereo without hurting himself. And he always fumbles here, always nicks himself on an exposed screw or catches a finger in a loop of wiring. This time it's something metal that slices him. He pulls back, thrusts his index finger in his mouth and tastes the metallic drip of his clumsiness. With his unhurt hand, he pops the glove compartment in search of tissue, or a road map, maybe a receipt – anything to sop up the mess. Ritz crackers. A driver's manual. And, thankfully, a Wendy's napkin. He wraps it around his finger like a tiny turban, then studies the glove compartment. When he first started lifting from cars he was too afraid to linger, but he's cocky now. He riffles through the stack of miscellaneous papers and ketchup packets and cd cases and that's when he finds the rosary. He feels it before he sees it: the knots, the smoothed beads, the somber Savior on the cross, just like the one Nana keeps on her bedside table. Gingerly, he tugs it out and hangs it on the rearview mirror. Christ sways at him while he takes out the final screw, then yanks the Panasonic in one smooth motion, as if he were pulling a tooth. It goes into his backpack, wires and all. The weight of it thrills him. Boys his age are asleep in nearby row houses. They work as busboys at family restaurants, they deliver newspapers, they sweep hair clippings off the floors of their uncle's barbershops. But he is an entrepreneur.

He's a block away from the civic when Nana calls.

-You done yet? she asks.

-Halfway. Still gotta go to EZ Pawn.

-Sometimes I think you take your time on purpose, just to get out, she says.

She's right. Her accuracy pisses him off.

-You think it's easy? You do it.

-OK Mr. Drama, OK. I'm sorry. But Lexi's antsy.

She never says strung out. He can hear the tap tap tap of her fake nails on the Formica in the kitchenette.

-I'll be less than an hour, he says. Text me the grocery list and I'll pick it up on the way home.

-You're my good boy, Emmanuel, you know th-

He hangs up before she finishes.

He takes his time down 139<sup>th</sup>, dawdling down other residential streets before hitting Queens Boulevard. The hard part looms at him. When he lifts from a car, he's a success and a provider. A man. But the EZ Pawn belittles him, reminds him of his age. Even worse, the Boulevard is a conspicuous place to be late at night. He sees what he is there: a mutt kid with a heavy backpack just begging for a cop with nothing better to do than check him out. At the intersection he gets jumpy, feels eyes on him that he can never pinpoint. Tinted cars idle, their bases thrumming no matter the hour, while Chinese delivery guys on mopeds lean one foot on the asphalt and wait for the green light. He wonders how hard it would be to lift a moped. Probably not very, but he can't pawn something that big and he's not ready to risk selling on Craig's List.

The inside of EZ Pawn looks like a jewelry store gone to shit. The oriental floor rugs are worn to thread in patches and the display cases are always smudged with nervous fingerprints. Mr. Malhotra looks up from his Sudoku puzzle and scoots his glasses up the bridge of his nose with one finger. He is lipless, with breath like an old newspaper and large, fleshy earlobes that fan away from his skull. Today he is wearing a shirt that reads *What Would Obama Do?*

-You have been catching a lot of fish this week, Malhotra says. He enunciates every word, every syllable, giving each one an alien amount of space. He probably mastered English as a boy, but was afraid to deviate from the grammar.

Emmanuel doesn't speak. He takes the small items out for appraisal first. He wants to save the Panasonic for the grand finale. He gets twenty for the FM cable, as expected. The GPS cleans up for eighty. Mr. Malhotra nods at him, then opens the till and counts out twenties, laying each bill on the counter so that Andrew Jackson peers at him with ruminative eyebrows, over and over. The effect is hypnotizing. It's enough money to get Lexi three days of what she needs, if he rations it right, along with the essentials at the bodega on Manton street: beans, and cup-a-soup, and bologna, and that awful smelling tea that Nana loves, the one that has a picture of a bear in goddamn pajamas on the front. And the rest – he starts bouncing nervously on the balls of his feet as this occurs to him – the rest can top off his cash stash for Miami. Miami, where he can sleep outside no matter the season and keep every dollar he earns for himself. Pick up a piece of Miami ass. Invent a fake name that he'll come to own as reality.

-Wait, Emmanuel says. I got one more fish.

He pulls the Panasonic out of his backpack with a flourish and lays it on the counter. Mr. Malhotra picks it up, turning it carefully in his hands as if it were an artifact. He drops it on the counter. Shakes his head.

-I can not take it, he says.

-Bullshit. It's worth two-fifty, at least.

-No, Malhotra says. It is worthless. Look.

He runs his finger over the serial number embossed on the side of the faceplate.

-File it off, Emmanuel says.

-All it would take is one cop coming in here and finding it and shitting all over my business.

Emmanuel opens his mouth to speak but Malhotra stops him with an upheld finger.

-You obviously do not read the papers, my friend. Wait here. He lumbers through the beaded doorway behind the register, returns before the beads stop swaying with the neighborhood paper in hand. He flips to the fourth page and taps at the headline:

*Police Suspect Amateur in Briarwood Larcenies*

-They called me an amateur, the boy whispers.

Mr. Malhotra nods sagely.

-They came in two days ago sniffing around. Reva was here. She moved the other stereos around in the back while I talked to them. And they cannot do a damn thing about GPS. No serial number, could belong to Elvis for all they know.

-All I need, Emmanuel says slowly, trying to keep the choke out of his voice, All I need is another two hundred. Will you take it for two hundred?

-This is my business, Mr. Malhotra says. I can not have hanky-panky in my business.

-One hundred, then.

-I said no.

-Seventy?

-You are embarrassing yourself.

-Fifty?

-I would not take it if you paid me, Malhotra says.

Something deep in the boy unlatches. He takes the money for the GPS and the FM tuner and jams it in his pocket. With shaking hands, he returns the Panasonic to his backpack.

-You should find a real job, Malhotra says. Something appropriate for a boy your age. They have a help wanted sign at the pet store on 78<sup>th</sup>. Stock boy. You should apply.

Emmanuel inhales deep from the back of his throat, pulling up whatever churns inside of him, and when he can't yank in another breath, he spits. It lands squarely on Mr. Malhotra's neck, a translucent globule that splats and glides onto the collar of his t-shirt. Malhotra extracts a tissue from his pocket and wipes it away. He's a careful man, always moves with measure, so Emmanuel is surprised when he puts the tissue back in his pocket and lunges across the counter and snatches at his ear, twisting the cartilage until his head has to follow, and his cheek is suddenly flush with the counter, and before he can stop himself he utters a sound that immediately shames him, a whimper.

-This is a classy establishment, Malhotra growls in his upturned ear, So get the fuck out.

He does. He bursts out of the EZ Pawn and onto Queens Boulevard, picking up speed until everything is a gritty blur. A tinted car window rolls down, unveiling a pair of kids not more than two years older than him. They shout something, a slur that catches in the sound of the engine and he flips them off over his shoulder but he keeps running, barreling down the sidewalk, turning a corner and passing the bodega where he's supposed to buy groceries, passing the row houses and stray cats and sidewalk graffiti.

He barely understands why he's come back to the red Honda, but there he is. The Panasonic is in his hands, a heft of wire-ridden worthlessness. He hurls it at the windshield. The shatter of the safety glass is dazzling. Pearls of it spatter the seats and bounce off the dash. Lights turn on in nearby windows. And Nana's Savior swings on His beaded chain from the rearview mirror, slowly, with less arc each time, as if He were judging the quick and the dead from the vantage point of a swing.



## Chapter 7

### The Putting Green

Mr. Wyatt was the last on the course; he sauntered in from the ninth hole with twilight on his heels. I had to wait for him, but I got a hefty tip out of the deal and after I put his clubs away I locked up the pro-shop for the night. I've always liked that strange hour, that in-between moment where the course was empty, and no one sat at the bar yet, and the music hadn't started in the ballroom.

I took off my golf cleats and took my loafers from the porch steps, then walked over to the front deck of the clubhouse. The grass dewy on my feet, my toes breathing. I lit a cigarette and tried not to drop ash on the floorboards.. The sprinklers burst and ticked over the putting green. Mosquitoes hovered but never landed.

Mr. Wyatt came out from the men's dressing room, smelling like the cologne on the sink. His jowls shadowed, as if he had aged since he'd left the ninth hole.

-You can go home now, he said. And then he added, to make it sound better: I'm sure a guy like you has big plans on a Friday night.

-My plans are here, I told him. Ms. Dixon asked me to be her guest at the dance.

-Did she? Wyatt said. He slid a hand in his golf shorts and pulled out a tee, rubbing it between his fingers.

-Am I dressed okay, sir? I asked.

I'd worn my best polo that morning.

-Fine, fine, Wyatt said. Where's Mr. Dixon, do you know?

-She said he's out of town, I said. I couldn't stub out the cigarette on the deck as long as Mr. Wyatt stood there. I let it burn between my fingers past the filter.

-Is there anything else I can help you with, sir?

-No. I'll leave you to it, then.

He left just as the DJ and bartenders showed up in their separate cars and the sprinklers retreated into the ground.

The families with children came first. Young mothers in floral sundresses with scoops of cleavage, fathers in salmon-colored shorts. Offspring all varying shades of blonde. I watched the younger children scatter onto the putting green, their saddle shoes pressing indents into the wet grass, their soft hands grabbing up the metal flagsticks and brandishing them like swords. None of the adults seemed to care. Off hours, I didn't either. Most of the members ignored me. Some cast funny looks in my direction. Only a couple of families said hello and asked me why I was still there.

Jeanine Wilder sidled up to me and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

-Rumor has it you're Diane's date tonight. She's a lucky woman.

She was always flattering and slightly insane. A tiny woman with a mushroom haircut and a face like a walnut. Hard to tell if she was perpetually sunburned, or just Irish. When I first started this job, the other guys in the pro shop told me that one year she'd gone crazy in the middle of the member-guest tournament. Taken off her shirt and walked into a water hazard in her bra, humming. Polite members said it was sunstroke. Others said it was the summer she hadn't taken her meds. This year, the club had been trying to enforce the footwear policy on the

golf course after Jeanine decided it wasn't important to wear shoes at all. She walked barefoot from one hole to the next with her clubs slung over her shoulder, and when I had to tell her about the policy enforcement in June, she'd said,

-Honey, a fairway this nice was made for bare feet.

She was right.

Now, she gave a wink that shivered me before flitting off to the bar. I stood on the steps, waiting for Ms. Dixon, feeling the minutes slow in the gravitational pull of my awkwardness.

Ms. Dixon showed up fifteen minutes after the dance officially began. Music – something jazzy and forgettable – poured over the ballroom and out of the open doors. She deposited her six-year-old son, Sebastian, on the putting green with the other children and walked up the clubhouse steps with rolling hips. She was so wealthy that it was hard for me to tell her age. Forty-five with a face-lift? Or thirty-something without? Her sundress pleated close around her waist, and the hairs on her arms were almost white against her tan. Her hands were dry when she took mine and said, sincerely,

-I am so glad that you decided to come.

-You look lovely, I said, and stopped there, pleased with how mature I sounded. How unlike the guy I am at home, smoking pot with my roommate and playing ping-pong late into the night, my serves punctuated with What the fuck? And, Look at that shit, bro, I'm a goddamned pong king!

Ms. Dixon waved the compliment away as if she were swatting at a mosquito.

-It's all smoke and mirrors, she said. I went to the hairdresser this morning with a high school photo of myself and asked her to make me look like the girl in the picture. This was the best they could do.

I didn't know what to say, and instead I imagined her sitting in the chair, her hair styled, the picture of herself tacked in the corner of the mirror, staring. For a long time staring.

-What would you like to drink? I asked.

-Vodka tonic with lime, she said, and while I rushed over to the bar in the corner of the ballroom I could hear her voice carry over the putting green, Sebastian, don't you dare touch those hydrangeas or I *will* take you home!

Couples were dancing now, repeating the same cha-cha step over and over. Hands on waists, hands on shoulders. The women's hairs already curling on the backs of their necks, the men wiping their upper lips. The ceiling fans at full-speed, high above, useless. I brought the vodka tonic onto the deck, worrying that she would want to dance. I found her on the edge of the putting green, watching her son.

-Cute kid, I said.

-He's a cute pain in the ass, you mean. Thanks for the drink, dear.

-Why'd you name him Sebastian?

She snorted.

-That was Alan's idea, not mine. He thought it sounded accomplished. I ask you, how can one name be more accomplished than another?

-I don't know, I said. Syllable count?

When she laughed her drink undulated in its glass and an ice cube slipped onto the green.

-I wanted to name him Ian, she said. Maybe if I'd named him Ian he'd have been more mellow.

Sebastian, oblivious to our conversation, had found a stray golf ball hidden under the hydrangea bushes bordering the green and was now lobbing it at a little girl in a sundress.

-He's a good kid, Ms. Dixon. Just hyper.

And she put a hand on my shoulder and said, Please, call me Diane.

It turned out that Diane did want to dance. It wasn't that I didn't know how – a monkey could do the cha-cha – but I was worried about how it would look. A guest was one thing. A dance partner was another. But Diane had her hand on the small of my back now, practically pushing me into the ballroom. She stopped at the bar for her second vodka tonic. I wished she would take the hand away. Eyes seared at us from every direction. How could she not see? She downed half of the drink and led me to the dance floor.

-Is it rude of me to tell you that I'm surprised you're a good dancer? she said.

-Yes.

-Forgive me. How did you learn?

-My mom takes ballroom classes on weekends out in Patchogue, I said. Sometimes she needs a partner to brush up on her moves.

-I knew the moment I saw you that you were a good boy, Diane said.

Off in the corner, I spotted Mr. Wyatt, freshly dressed and showered, speaking close with the stooping figure of Mr. Cline. It shouldn't matter, I decided, that Mr. Cline was the president of the Field Club. It shouldn't matter that he's my boss. It shouldn't matter that he and Wyatt were speaking in such low voices in the corner, possibly watching me.

I turned his attention back to Diane, who was halfway through a sentence that he'd missed about how hot the ballroom was.

—really get better fans, she was saying.

-Sure, I said.

-Are you alright? You seem a little flushed.

-Just focusing, I said.

The song ended. Diane ricocheted off the dance floor, swigged the other half of her drink, and returned just in time to step into the next dance.

-Do people just do the cha-cha all night? I asked.

-Oh, no dear. Only until everyone's limbered up, so to speak.

Beads of sweat were forming in her cleavage. I directed his eyes to her left earlobe. The earlobe was safe staring territory, I decided.

-Is there something on my ear? she asked.

And then, of course, Mr. Cline appeared in my line of vision, frighteningly close, so close that each individual wild hair of his graying eyebrows was visible, and he said in a voice so unctuous it could have oiled a squeaky wheelbarrow,

-Worley, do you mind if I cut in and dance with this lovely lady?

-Not at all, I said. I felt my voice pitch and verge on cracking, but I caught it. I passed Diane off to Mr. Cline and walked slowly off the floor, dodging couples in their rocking little cha-cha steps.

Jeanine Wilder intercepted.

-You don't get off that easy, she said, and before I knew it I was leading her, shortening my steps to keep pace with her tiny gait.

-A kid like you shouldn't look so worried, she told me.

Since I'd taken this job, I realized that I had no ability at disguising my expression. Was that a rich people thing? Did they take etiquette courses on how to arrange their faces into constant pleasant amusement?

-I don't think Mr. Cline likes that I'm here, I said.

-Who? Oswald? Screw Oswald. He's an impotent old codger.

-Codger or not, he signs my checks, I said.

-Technically, he doesn't. He has his secretary do it. He's too busy picking his nose to sign your checks. Ah, there's the smile I wanted to see.

-Mrs. Wilder? Can I ask you something without offending you?

-Shoot.

-What's a nice lady like you doing at a club like this?

-Oh, I love the club, Worley. It's just the people I can't stand.

The Van der Wooten couple, who'd been dancing within earshot, shot nasty looks in our direction.

-Besides, Jeanine added, I'm sentimental. My father went here. My grandparents went here. I was a child here. I could do pretty much anything and they wouldn't kick me out. One of these days I'll give Oswald over there an aneurism.

I wondered what she'd looked like in her bra, sopping wet, emerging from the water hazard.

The song ended, and Diane left Oswald Cline's arms and minced off the dance floor, her face expressionless. I excused myself and drifted after her. She didn't acknowledge me at the bar while she picked up another vodka tonic. I followed her outside. Why did I follow her outside?

She was stressful, she was possibly compromising my job. And it wasn't a great job, but it was easy. Good pay. Nice course. I hate to think now that I was willing to let go of that for a married bitchy woman with a mid-life crisis. But I followed her anyway.

The night was almost full-mooned and shimmering; the putting green was still overrun with children. Some lay flat on their backs, looking up at the stars. Others still were pin wheeling around the green, chasing one another, shrieking and tripping over their own shoes.

-You smoke? she asked, and I shook two cigarettes from my pack and lit hers first, like they do in the black and white movies my mom watches when she irons. Diane stood on one foot, then lost her balance, tried standing on the other, lost her balance. Finished her drink. Took off her sandals. I could see the nape of her neck, the swoop of her freckled shoulders.

She walked outside the pool of light framing the clubhouse and up the fairway of the first hole. I trailed a few feet behind until she stopped and let me take her arm.

-I think I may have gotten you in trouble and I'm truly sorry for that, she said.

-Why? Did Mr. Cline say something?

-He said I was behaving inappropriately. And that I was jeopardizing the boundary between members and staff. But you know what I say?

-What?

-Fuck him.

-He may have a point, I said.

We were in the full dark of the fairway now. Trees in indistinct blots of darkness on either side, and moonlit grass before us, and thin skeins of clouds stretched over the sky. Diane lay down.

-What are you doing?



-It feels nice, she said.

-Ms. Dixon, if you knew how many pesticides we put on that grass, you wouldn't be lying in it. Charlie in the pro shop can't have kids because of it.

-I told you to call me Diane, she said. She had an arm flung over her eyes, as if she had just fainted in a Victorian novel and the fairway was now her chaise lounge. It occurred to me, as it occasionally does with some women, that I practically hated her even though I was drawn to her. She was too dramatic, too selfish. She acted like she'd never left high school. I kept standing, scanning the fairway. What would people think if they saw this?

-Lie down, Worley, she whispered.

I did.

And she took her arm from her face and traced a thin finger over my mouth, and I lay still, watching her, waiting to see what she would do next, watching her like I would a character in a soap opera. Everything after that: thoughtless, simple.

When we walked back toward the clubhouse, I put an arm around her waist. It seemed the right thing to do. I wondered if I should feel guilty. Diane had sobered somewhat; she walked in a straighter line.

-I lost my shoes, she said, placidly.

-Should we go back and look for them?

-No, she said. I want another drink.

The lights were on in the clubhouse, but the music had stopped. It looked as if the dance had ended. But no, it was only ten. People were standing on the front lawn, on the deck, and a huge group circled the putting green, crowding something. The deck lights framed their

silhouettes. Their bodies cast long stretches of shadow on the illuminated grass. Nobody was laughing.

-Oh my god, Diane said. And then she broke into a run, her dress flapping and catching around her knees, her wild hair ruffling behind her.

-Sebastian! she screamed.

Everyone turned to watch her. The crowd parted and closed around her, but for an instant I saw her son, sitting up on the putting green, picking at a scab on his ankle, his face expressionless, with a metal flagstick impaled in his right eye. He wasn't crying. Was he too shocked to cry? Dr. Cardelous sat next to the boy, gingerly holding the other end of the flagstick.

I elbowed my way into the crowd. I could smell the member's perfume and sweat, and then a tang of vomit overcame me. Somebody had thrown up on the putting green.

-Hi mommy, Sebastian said cheerfully.

Diane started screaming, a frequency so high and surreal that it echoed down to the third hold and back. Mr. Cline led her away. I noticed that her back had striated patterns of the fairway grass etched in it as she passed me.

-Why won't somebody pull it out? she wailed.

-We can't do that, Diane, Mr. Cline said. He settled her in a wicker chair away from the scene.

-Did somebody call an ambulance? I asked.

The members all stared at me blankly, as if I'd asked for directions in Mandarin.

-They're coming, Jeanine Wilder said.

Nobody seemed capable of looking at Sebastian with the exception of Dr. Cardelous, yet all gathered around him like some sort of bizarre wagon train barrier between the boy and the elements.

-Remarkable, the doctor muttered. Truly remarkable. Tell me again how it happened?

And Sebastian recounted how he had been running with the flag as if it were a spear, had caught his foot in a hole, and had fallen on it, with part of the flag jamming itself into his eye before his free elbow hit the green and stopped the rest from entering.

-Am I going to have to get a shot at the hospital? Sebastian asked.

His blonde hair was shining. There were grass stains on his knees.

Dr. Cardelous was not one to sugarcoat, and certainly not one to lie to a kid.

-I'm sure you'll get several, he told the boy.

Only then did Sebastian start to cry out of his good eye.

-Keep both eyes closed, sonny, the doctor said. When you move one, the other goes with it.

And so Sebastian wept with his good eye closed, still picking at the scab on his ankle.

We heard the ambulance before we saw it. Soon, the red and white lights strobed over the hedges, and the paramedics sprang out before the brakes had been completely thrown. I thought, stupidly, of how the tires would destroy the putting green, and then was immediately ashamed that this had occurred to me at all.

Diane, still hysterical, was led back over to Sebastian.

-My son is going to be deformed! she blubbered.

It seemed a bad idea at this point to put her in the ambulance alone with her child, so Dr. Cardelous volunteered to join them. The paramedics carefully negotiated the sitting little boy

onto a stretcher while the doctor maneuvered with him, still holding the other end of the metal flag. They moved at a nauseatingly slow pace. Finally, the doors shut on the strange diorama of the three of them: barefoot mother, cycloptic son, and doctor in a sport coat. Everyone watched the ambulance leave.

There were mutterings. Nobody looked at me. The bartenders were dismissed; the DJ packed up his supplies. Questioning children were hushed. Fathers somberly finished their drinks. The crowd ebbed off into the parking lot. Engines turned over one by one, and soon only a few members remained. Lights began flicking off in the ballroom.

Mr. Wyatt found me, unmoving, on the putting green where Sebastian had been.

-I hate to request this, but would you mind hosing off the vomit before you go? he asked.

And I said, Not at all sir, Not at all.

I found a dustpan under the counter of the pro shop.

I scooped what I could into a garbage bag. Then, with the hose on full blast, I sprayed the green until it was completely saturated.

I was probably drowning it.

I couldn't help myself.

As soon as I finished, the sprinklers came on.

## Chapter 8

### Sisterhood

A sleeting night in the heart of February, two weeks before the fall pledge class is initiated, and our house mother Nicole is burning white sage in her apartment. The sisters on the first floor can smell it when they walk the hallway. Ice pings against windows. The trees shimmy and rattle in the woods behind the house. Next door but far away, the brothers of Sigma Xi whoop and holler, leading a hazing ritual with barefoot pledges in the wet snow.

#### Room Alpha

Marcia is attuned to all of this. Lying in bed, the window open, cold air skimming every pore of her naked arms and legs, she dangles her head off the edge of the mattress and listens. A tablet of E sings through her veins. She is malleable and giddy and completely overwhelmed by the whooshing world.

She is already failing every class. This is her last semester.

But right now that doesn't matter, and she drinks up the euphoria while she can, knowing that when she moves back home she won't feel it again for a long time, not when her grandmother calls her a dumb cunt; not when she goes to the video store she worked at in high school to beg for her part-time job back; not when her father won't look at her because she wasted his money on tuition. A brother at Sigma Xi shouts through the woods, something that sounds like "Chug, Fag!" Silence, then a rush of cheers. Good boy, she thinks.

### Room Beta

Most nights Kyra is gone, never here to wake up to the clanging radiator at 12:22, or again at 1:37, again at 2:52, 4:07, 5:22. Her beta fish swims vicious laps in its scummy bowl, its large black eyes staring into the dark.

We know that Kyra has slept with twenty-nine boys since she started college. Tonight she is sharing a narrow twin mattress with a boy in the dorms, a freshman with stale breath and clumsy hands. They are all different and all the same. Earnest. Fumbling. Forgettable.

### Room Gamma

Amanda is a virgin. We can see clues of it in her mincing gait, her sloping posture, her arms folded carefully over her chest as she waits for the bus to class. Her sweet, sibilant lisp. It is hard for her to identify the moment when her chastity became a burden. Every night she shares a bed with her stuffed lion, Maurice, whom she pulls from a corner of her closet after she locks the bedroom door. She lies fetal, with her eyes on the crack of light splicing under the bedroom door, until she is sucked into the vacuous space of sleep. Always guarded to the last moment of consciousness. The bottom row of teeth in her small mouth eroded from bruxism while she dreams.

She's the only sister in the house who is genuinely sympathetic toward the pledges.

-You can talk to me anytime, she tells them, often with a squeeze on the arm or a sweet, doleful expression, and the pledges say yes, of course, they'll stop by her room sometime. But they never do. Pledges don't want pity. They just want to endure.

### Room Delta

Tracy is writing a French lit essay now, entitled *La Guerre de Troie: Fact or Farce?* In her pauses between the lines, she yanks out her eyelashes with her right hand, one by one, and places them on the edge of her desk. The whitish bulb of each lash must line up, arranged by size. She loves the order of them, these little parenthetical curves. By the final paragraph she will have moved on to eyebrows. Even in her deepest, most introspective moments, she calls this a habit and nothing more. Tomorrow morning she will spend upwards of thirty minutes surveying the naked terrain of her face, the exposed orbital bone where brow hair should be, the rabbit pinkness of her lids. Then, with her mouth slightly agape and her right hand clutching a tube of glue, she'll lay a sticky track of fake lashes over the rawness. She'll pencil in her brows. She'll hand in her essay, call her mother in Boston, and tell her she's aced another exam.

### Room Epsilon

Epsilon was Margot's room.

Nobody lives in Epsilon.

### Room Zeta

Lucy is a straightedge. She did the perfunctory drinking during pledging, but after she was initiated she came clean with how boring she is. Even weed scares her.

-I had a bad trip on something once, she says.

She's so vague that we don't believe her. Instead, we've constructed our own theories. Dad's a cop? Brother's a crack addict? Or maybe she's just a wimpy, inexperienced girl, so

firmly ensconced in reality that she won't even do a bump with us on the Pledge Room coffee table.

### Room Eta

Janelle sleeps with the window open, even if it means sleeping in a sweatshirt and wool hat and turning on the heated mattress pad and burrowing under two quilts. She does this because if she strains hard enough, if she demands her ears to pick up the sound waves through the woods and next door, sometimes she thinks she can hear Wes. He's a brother at Sigma Xi, a senior on the executive board with curly hair and a profile suited for a Roman coin.

At the last mixer, we all watched as Wes approached her in the Sigma Xi basement and handed her a solo cup of Chardonnay. Not jungle juice. Not keg dregs. Chardonnay!

-How've you been? she asked. It was an A.B.C. themed mixer and she felt her ribcage slick with sweat under the black Hefty bag she'd wrapped around herself, using duct tape as a makeshift belt, cinched so tight it was hard for her to laugh.

-Sometimes I miss you, he said. Parts of you, anyway.

She wondered, why is it so hard to discern if someone is naturally stupid, or just cruel?

-How's Kelly? she asked. And internally she begged, please Jesus give her herpes. Knock her up. Make her fat.

-She's good, I guess, he said, adjusting the newspaper poncho he'd fashioned for himself.

-Tell her hi for me, Janelle said, and hoped that the malice surging in her didn't speckle her inflection.

-Your ass looks great in that trash bag, he muttered into his solo cup.



The brothers at Sigma Xi bellow and drink, bellow and drink, and Janelle listens hard for the pitch of his voice, but more importantly she searches for the absence of Kelly's. He used to hover over her in this bed, his shoulders eclipsing her vision, his eyes glistening in a way that could have been mistaken for kindness. And instead of enjoying him, she'd fixated: was the skin on her heels too rough when she wrapped her legs around him? How flat was her stomach? Could he see up her nose? Strange, how the gratification of faking it for him had almost equated an orgasm.

#### Room Theta

Two pledges called Twinkle and RichBitch moved in here in January. Their real names aren't important until they're initiated; for now, they're just pledges.

#### Room Iota

Two more pledges. One is squat, loud-mouthed, and dresses with cleavage in mind at all times, so we call her Prostitot. The other is too bland to remember.

#### Room Kappa

Elina is the oldest, blondest, palest sister in the house. She's also from Norway – Don't you forget it, pledge rats, don't you dare forget it. She finished her term as president last semester and now she's exempt from all duties. No house-cleaning, no sober driver obligations, no volunteer hours. Nothing. She has the biggest room, a room with a king-size bed and the radiator that hisses the least. She had some pledges paint the walls creamsicle orange and

immediately regretted the decision. Orange is not a good color for rest. Maybe for sex, maybe for summer, but in February it's a riotous color that bleats at her when she tries to sleep. Nights, she either goes to the bars in the center of town and drives back drunk on the wrong side of the road, or she sits at her window seat, barefoot and wearing a Beatles t-shirt overstretched at the neck, (no bra! we notice) chain-smoking and ashing onto the sill, watching the trees shiver in the woods, wondering why she feels a looming dread about graduation in May.

### Room Lambda

Nobody talks about Margot anymore. Half the sisters are too new to have known her anyway. But Deirdre remembers, always remembers.

In bed, the landscape of her memory broadens and Deirdre thinks of the time she and Margot were hazed out in the woods, blindfolded and giggling between shots until the pledge mistress slapped at the backs of their necks with a birch switch and called them lezzies; the time she and Margot were initiated into the sisterhood together, naked under white robes; the time she and Margot did a little blow and went dancing with those two nerdy assistant professors from the Anthropology department; the way Margot would sleep with her hands crushed between her thighs; the way Margot drove with one foot curled under her butt; how she would apply perfume by spraying the air and walking through a cloud of it before it settled; the way she smacked her gum in class; the way she looked when Deirdre found her on the floor of room Epsilon on a sunny Friday morning, a streak of vomit smeared across the right side of her face, eyes half-open, whites showing. Glassy.

Everything Deirdre has ever known has had a formulaic ending. Algebra problems have answers. Jokes have punch lines. Meg Ryan falls in love with Tom Hanks. What does she do, then, with a life cut off in mid-sentence?

Earlier today, Amanda was in the bathroom when Deirdre was, both brushing their teeth and staring somberly at one another in the reflection of the mirror, and Amanda took the brush out of her mouth and said,

-I still think of her sometimes too, you know.

And Deirdre spit a bitter gob of foam into the sink and stared hard at Amanda's reflection, hating her sympathy, her goddamn simpering lisp, and said,

-I don't think of her. I live her.

-No need for the melodrama, Amanda said, I was just –

-Well stop, Deirdre said. And then she said to the sink, so quietly Amanda almost didn't hear:

-We are such children. Such pathetic spoiled children.

### Room Mu

Shannon is the thinnest girl in our house. We hate her for it, but we know the sacrifice. We know why she only uses the bathroom by the laundry room. The dryers, the washer, the buzz and hum: all of it hides what she's doing.

We don't talk to her about it. If we approached her, it would be easy for her to deny. And a lot of us do it, have done it, will do it again. Just with less frequency. Who are we, then, to cast that stone?

Shannon has a coolness to her, a sleekness that coats her body like a varnish. Maybe this is why we put her in charge of writing the house superlatives this semester, which she will read aloud in front of the whole chapter and our dates at Spring Fling. Superlatives are never flattering. Shannon will uphold this tradition easily. Her sleekness comes with sharp edges.

Tracy peeked in her room one afternoon and saw part of the list on her desk:

Sister Smokes-A-Lot.....Eva Bausch

Sister Frat Rat.....Stella Tilden

Sister Walk-of-Shame.....Kyra Clark

Sister Sloppy.....Elina Jensen

But we're giving her a superlative, too. Lucy came up with it at dinner one night when Shannon had already left the table.

-What about Sister Binge-and-Purge? Lucy said. And someone started laughing, and soon we all were, an infection of humor that couldn't be explained and wasn't really funny, and it was decided, yes, Binge-and-Purge, that is just hysterical.

#### Room Nu

Stella rolls off of Wes and stretches catlike, curling her toes, body extended so taut her breasts nearly disappear. Wes switches on her desk lamp and gets out of bed with sea legs. He saunters over to the window and listens to his brothers whoop outside. Three text messages pulse on his cell. Two from Kelly. One from Janelle. He ignores them and crawls back under the duvet.

Stella curls into him, buries her face in his chest so that he can feel her hot breath on his sternum. She is suffocating him. He counts the tiny filaments of blonde hair on the back of her neck; when he gets to forty he will leave.

But for a minute they pretend that this is love, this is nice, this is something that the two of them are willing to hurt other people for and feel justified in doing so.

### Room Xi

Eva is the pledge mistress. She has an impish face, expressive, capable of flexing between a grimace and a grin faster than the pledges can comprehend. It is her job to shuttle them from one mixer to another, shepherd them to safety when frat brothers trick them into their filthy bedrooms, put them in a car and send them home when they're too drunk, clean up their vomit when they're really too drunk. It is also her job to haze them. After all, she reasons, the best things in life are painful to acquire: Beauty. Her mother's love. And sisterhood.

She locks them in the pledge study and has them memorize long texts about the meaning of sorority support and won't let them out until they all get it right, even if it takes the full night and they're too delirious come morning to know the words bubbling out of their mouths:

*In 1884, founders Ginny Wheeler, Lucinda May, and Joanna Howard bonded together to form a private society of womanly compassion and support...*

She makes them take shots if they recite the Greek alphabet wrong. She tells them they're despicable if they don't mop the foyer correctly and has them get on their hands and knees and lick the floor. But when they pass the tests, memorize the handshakes, the sacred numbers, the Greek phrases and passwords and oaths, she rewards them. She tells them they're ready to be her

sisters. Her face buckles into weepiness but no tears are actually visible when she informs us that the pledges are ready for initiation.

Cult analysts call this love-bombing. Eva knows this from a Dateline episode she caught at the gym once. She slowed her pace on the treadmill and thought, yes, love-bombing, I hate them because I love them. I berate them and make them drink and tell them they're worthless because I love them so fucking much.

### Room Omicron

This is the pledge study. Nobody uses the study to study. The carpet is mottled with a history of our debauchery: bong stains, burn marks, candle wax, and something resembling the acidic erosion of vomit in one corner, disguised by a judiciously placed armchair. On Thursday nights before mixers, we use this room to do bumps on the coffee table and smoke hookah. It's the farthest room from the house mother, not like she would really care. Tracy in Delta lives directly below this room, and sometimes late at night she hears the creak of the guest bed springs in the corner. She usually bangs on the ceiling with a pledge paddle to shut up whoever is above her, but to no avail.

### Room Pi

Twyla had an accent when she first pledged, so we called her Twang. Eventually her accent whittled down to nothing and now it's easy to forget that she's from Oklahoma, with the exception of the state flag she has hanging in her room – blue, with a thing that looks like a dream catcher in the center. She used to play Gretchen Wilson songs her guitar until her neighbor Ruby complained about the noise. Now, the guitar sits in the corner by her desk. She

never plays it anymore, but once a week she lovingly buffs the dust off of it with a piece of flannel.

Rumor has it that Twyla never goes home between semesters, choosing instead to stay in the empty house, getting paid under the table by our house mother to set mouse traps and steam clean the carpets. She works two jobs to pay her out-of-state tuition. One is at the DB Mart down the road. The other is a night shift as a campus security guard. She looks like a punch line in her uniform – drowning in khaki, the weight of her industrial flashlight practically dragging her belt to her knees.

No matter the weather, she always wears long sleeves.

-I'll never get used to Massachusetts winters, she says.

But even in May she's covered from wrist to calf.

### Room Rho

At the start of the school year, Ruby painted this room Tiffany blue and plastered posters of Audrey Hepburn on every wall. In case visitors don't get the theme. But why Audrey Hepburn in the first place?

-Because Audrey Hepburn was fucking classy, she says.

So was Margaret Thatcher, we could argue.

Ruby is the fattest girl in the house. She worships at the alter of Weight Watchers and measures her food in points. A piece of whole grain bread is two points. A pint of cappuccino ice cream is forty-nine. Tonight, she faces the wall in bed and stares at the poster of Audrey, eyes roving over the territory of her knobby shoulders, her long fingers, her doe eyes staring back at her in the dark.

## Room Sigma

Jennifer was a Psych major. Then she was an Econ major. Then she tried Linguistics. Now she's in Animal Science.

-I'm just good at everything, she says.

Except committing.

Father: she never met him.

Mother: only sixteen years older than she. Wears leopard print. Is the secretary to a divorce attorney. Reminds her daughter that she could have been a showgirl, damn it, if she didn't have the C-section scar.

## Room Tau

Lisa spent three hours today at the barre, thirty minutes re-stuffing her toe shoes, forty scrutinizing herself in front of her full-length mirror, and an hour at the gym. But now it's late, she needs a full night of rest for tomorrow's finals she hasn't prepared for, and the only way to halt her compulsive self-analysis is with a bubbler. Five hits exhaled before she settles. The tendons in her legs slacken, time slows, she repacks the bowl, three more hits and she forgets that sleep was her objective. She trundles downstairs and makes a scalding cup of tea. The brothers can be heard through the flimsy glass of the kitchen window, and she wavers there for an eternal minute, listening. Something profound is in their whooping, but she's too foggy to fathom it. She often feels this way high, like she has a scratch ticket but no coin to scrape down to the answer.

Emergency Exit Only. Alarm Will Sound.



This is the Chapter Room; the sign is a ruse for visiting parents and curious frat brothers.

Only initiated sisters are permitted in the Chapter Room, and even they can't enter without the password and the handshake and appropriate attire. This means: pantyhose. No open-toed shoes after October 7<sup>th</sup>. Shoulders covered. Mascara mandatory. The dress code in the sisterhood manual is longer than the two paragraph page on how to report hazing.

Notice the executive board table, the chairs arranged in a horseshoe, the wood paneled walls, the composites of sisters from years past – 60's bobs, 70's waves, 80's bangs, then perms of the 90's. Candles everywhere. Persian rugs. Fake flowers.

This is where we all met after Margot was found last spring.

The girls who knew her least wept pretty tears, dabbing under their eyes so their make up wouldn't run. Nobody loves an ugly crier.

And Deirdre sat in the back row, expressionless, her fingers numb, staring hard at a hole in her tights.

Elina lifted the gavel and let it fall on the table and we all quieted, waiting for some heartfelt delivery of insight from our president.

-I spoke with the Provost, and for now the university will not shut the house down because of Margot's poor decision, she said.

-Thank God! Janelle said. Heads around the room bobbed in the current of relief. Tracy yanked out four eyebrow hairs in one grab, then discreetly dropped them on the carpet underneath her chair.

-This is an opportunity for unity, Elina intoned. She had written this part of her speech on an index card and glanced at the table before her between pauses.

-Although one of us is now enrolled in the Omega chapter, let us take solace in our sisterhood. Let us seek comfort in our family. Let us mourn with dignity and grace.

-Does this mean Spring Fling is cancelled? Stella asked.

-No, Elina said, momentarily thrown from the formal voice she'd conjured for the occasion. We can't get our deposit back. And anyway – she resumed the voice again – Margot would have wanted us to continue with our sisterhood in her absence.

Sighs of relief gusted through the room. Deirdre's fingers tingled.

-Let us close with a prayer, Elina said. Our eyes shimmered wet in the candlelight, seeking comfort from her in a bona fide tragedy, and Elina's face lit with a flash of pride before she sombered.

When the prayer ended we filed out of the room in pairs, but even in the hush Deirdre caught frayed edges of whispers.

--are they going to do with all of her clothes?

--parents coming for her things?

--she did it on purpose?

The door swung shut, and Deirdre remained. She hooked a thumb through the hole in her tights and pulled. The composite photographs of alumni peered down at her from the walls, and she stared back at each one, absorbing every single countenance and name, waiting for one to blot out the face she saw whenever she closed her eyes.

### Room Upsilon

Corinne was third runner up for Miss Massachusetts last year and this is her year, her year, her year, damn it! She suspects she suffered in the talent portion, when she played "Hey

Jude” on the flute and at the end she lost her breath on the E sharp. Or maybe it was the moment in swimsuit when she felt the edge of her bikini bottom crawl over her right ass cheek as she walked off stage. Or maybe it was the interview portion, when she stuttered on the word “Amendment” while discussing her feelings on gun control. The memory of flaw – the mere sight of the red bikini in the back corner of her closet, for instance – is enough to make her cringe.

She is the new president of the sisterhood now, her term fresh from January, but she doesn’t have time to be apt at it and simultaneously win the title this year. Written on an index card and taped over her desk is the word “Prioritize.” She delegates her presidential obligations to the rest of the executive board, and they tolerate it – because, let’s be honest, how great would the sisterhood look if our president won Miss Massachusetts?

Corinne has a magnified mirror encircled by light bulbs that sits on her desk, and most evenings she can be found there, bathed in the blinding wattage, pupils contracted to pinpoints, studying the pores on her face. What if the thing that kept her from winning last year had nothing to do with bathing suit wedgies or missed notes? What if, in fact, she had lost because of the tiny hook at the end of her nose? Or the lack of symmetry between her left and right eye? A fissure of a wrinkle is developing on her forehead and she can see it with perfect clarity even when she isn’t in front of the mirror. There is a limited window of opportunity for her to be beautiful. In many ways, this is her last chance to be validated.

### Room Phi

Our Pledge Mistress Eva is walking down the hall with a pack of Parliaments in hand when a pledge that we call Brownie summons her into this room.

-I'm sorry to bother you, Pledge Mistress, Brownie says. Eva reduces her eyes to slits and waits, body humming for nicotine.

-There's a rumor I think you should know about, Brownie says. She is so nervous she leaves a sweaty palm print on her desk when she stands up and shuts the door.

-Spit it out then, Eva says.

-Is it true that a girl named Margot died here last spring because she couldn't take the pressure of being a pledge?

-Who told you that? Eva asks.

-It's a rumor, just a rumor, Brownie stammers. Some pledges were talking.

-It's a lie, Eva says. Margot was a sister when she died, not a pledge.

-But did she die from the pressure?

-It wasn't a suicide if that's what you mean, Eva says. She overdosed. It happens.

Both girls are silent. The radiator clangs into action. Footsteps tread up and down the hall.

-I'm not sure I want to go through with initiation, Brownie says.

-Everyone feels that way sometimes. Sleep on it. It's only two weeks away.

-I've been thinking about this for a while, though.

Eva, impatient and jittery now, shakes a cigarette out of the pack.

-Is your smoke detector on? she asks. Brownie shakes her head no. Eva lights up.

-I like you, Brownie. I'd hate to see you go. But if you want to throw away your whole pledge period, if you want to reject an entire house of women that are willing to accept you as their sister, I can't stop you.

-It's not like that, Brownie says. I think you all are great. I just-

-I don't need your excuses. You get the love that you think you deserve. And if you think you deserve no love from us at all, that's not my fucking problem.

Eva finishes the cigarette in silence, taking in the surroundings. She knows so little about this pledge, this Brownie girl, but the room divulges details: pictures of what must be her parents are on the bedside table, there's a U2 poster over the bed, and her comforter is floral and ragged. She wishes she didn't see these things. It's much easier to haze her pledges when she doesn't know the miscellanea that makes them into full-blown people. She gets up to leave.

-Thank you for speaking with me, Brownie says.

Eva lingers at the door.

-What's your real name? she asks.

- It's Maureen.

-Sleep on it, Maureen. Tell me what you choose in the morning.

Outside, Eva immediately regrets that she didn't bring a scarf. She stands under the overhang of the roof and puffs slowly on two more cigarettes, one after the other, and listens to the Sigma Xi brothers finish their ritual and congratulate and shout and spit and slap each other. Somebody wretches. Then they are gone – a door slams, only sleet can be heard, and Eva tries to recall in the stillness what it was like to live with the conviction that she was doing the right thing.

## Chapter 9

### Hush

My neighbor Jason found me. He'd come through the back door of my half of the duplex to complain about how it was my turn to mow the lawn –Was I ever going to mow the lawn, damn it? Did I even know how? I heard him hollering in my kitchen, and I scrambled in the bathroom to cover the cuts on my arms and legs but it was too much, too fast, and then he was in the doorframe, staring.

He was the one who called the ambulance.

-No need to be so dramatic, I said. But when I went to stand from my perch on the edge of the bathtub, the color blached out of the room and I staggered into the wall, drunk with blood loss. I left a swatch of red by the light switch.

-Jesus. Jason said. Jesus Jesus Jesus what is wrong with you?

And my father, who's been dead for fourteen years, materialized behind Jason in the doorframe and squinted at me, the whites of his eyes webbed in a net of bloodshot.

-Everything's wrong with her, my father said.

But Jason didn't hear him. Nobody hears him but me.

I didn't have an answer for either of them. Jason stayed until we heard the ambulance crush the gravel drive out front and then he retreated to his place next door. He probably didn't want the paramedics to think he was dating a lunatic like me. My father shuffled off too. I heard him rattling through my refrigerator, looking for a beer. Even dead, he's still a drinker.

I was too weak to fight the EMTs when they found me in the bathroom. I let them handle me like a child.

-Where are we going? I asked.

And the squat EMT, the one with the Burt Reynolds mustache, shucked a sunflower seed from between his teeth and said, Laureate Hospital, sweetheart.

So I knew then they all thought I was crazy.

-What about St. Agatha's? Or Greendale? I asked.

But they both shook their heads no.

-We think you'd get better help at Laureate, the squat EMT said. He said it gently, like I was going to snap on them. Maybe if I'd had enough blood in me, I would have.

He rode with me in the back of the ambulance, watching me the whole time.

-I just don't get why a pretty girl like you would do this to herself, he said.

I wanted to ask, What does pretty have to do with it? But I didn't have the energy to correct him. I closed my eyes and felt my head bob from side to side on the gurney while the ambulance plowed through South Tulsa.

The lacerations on my wrists were clean, well spaced, lined one after the other like the frets on a guitar. A frowning intern stitched me and I stared hard at a perfect dot of blood on the toe of her left sneaker. It took twenty-four stitches to close them all. And then, on my thighs, another seventeen.

-You're required by law to stay on Ward D for twenty-four hours, she said between sutures.

-I'm not suicidal, I said.

-Doesn't matter. If you did this to yourself we have to monitor you before you go.

I melted into a wheelchair and she rolled me into the elevator. Doors shut. Floors rose in monitoring beeps. Too much light, and not enough air.

-I'm not suicidal, I said again. Desperate now.

-I know, she said. But the spun sugar in her voice gave her away.

They took my wallet and my keys and gave me loose pajamas that resembled scrubs. I filled out paperwork, endless paperwork. Acknowledging certain rights. Forfeiting others. Then, they gave me the list of rules. They were the sort of policies applicable to an ashram. Or a daycare:

No electronics of any kind.

No scissors, nail files, unapproved pens, letter openers.

No outside food. No drink. No drugs.

No tolerance for violent behavior.

No sex with other patients.

Prescribed medication is mandatory. All other medication is forbidden.

The admissions chick – a young girl, maybe even my age, gave me a Visitor Clearance form.

-Fill out all the people you would permit visitation from at the appropriate hours, she said.

Who was I going to put? Certainly not my mother. And who did I need desperately enough that they would come see me in a nuthouse?



So instead I wrote: Cher. Mike Huckabee. Jesus. At the end of it all I put Jason's information. I needed him to bring up some clean underwear.

The admissions chick didn't blink.

-You forgot to write Mike Huckabee's email, she said.

Only later did I realize that she thought I was crazy enough to actually think those people would visit me.

They gave me a sedative I couldn't pronounce. Put me in a single room with over-starched sheets and a nurse that would peer at me through a window in the door every thirty minutes. I slept soundly, so soundly that when I woke up I felt as if I'd missed a part of my life, shot forward through the glass window of my present self and into the future without even noticing.

But then the doctor came in and I remembered. I didn't want to like her, but I did the second she opened the door. She had more gum line in her mouth than teeth and wild eyebrows, mad scientist eyebrows.

-Twyla White? she asked.

-Present, I said.

-Good to hear, she said. I'm Dr. Mercer but you can call me Sadie.

I decided immediately that I would always call her Dr. Mercer. No need to start up a buddy thing with a woman who could have me permanently committed.

-Let's go over the basics, shall we? Is this your first time at a psychiatric facility?

-Yeah, and my last, I said.

-How old are you?

-Twenty-two.

-Hm. And where are your parents, Twyla White?

-Father's dead. Mother's on her way to it.

Dr. Mercer scribbled something on a notepad.

-What are you writing? I asked.

-Just information. I can show you my notes when I'm done. I don't believe in keeping things from my patients. Now, what brings you here today?

-I cut myself, I said.

-Yes, I understand that part, Dr. Mercer said. What I mean is, what emotionally brings you here today?

-Listen, I've seen shrinks before, I said. How about I condense all of this into one session and save us both the time? My father hanged himself in our garage when I was eight. I was the one who found him. Yes, he was abusive. Yes, he was an alcoholic. No, I don't lie awake nights thinking about it. Yes, I'm an only child. My sex life is fine. I'm skinny because I'm a shit cook. I'm afraid of bees and heights. No, I don't need exposure therapy to fix either phobia. And no, I don't hear voices. Is that enough, Doctor? Am I free to go now?

I expected her to say, Let's explore this anger you're directing at me, that sort of thing. She studied her hands on the clipboard for a while. Mannish hands. I liked that too. I didn't really want to blow up at her the way I did.

-I'm going to get a coffee, she said. You want one?

-No, I said. But can you ask the bitchy nurse with the constant wedgie if I can get my phone back?

She didn't respond, but I saw the twitch of a smile around her horse gums when she walked out of the room. I studied the watermarks on the tiled ceiling for a while and picked at the edges of the tape on my arms.

My father watched me from the corner, idly scuffing his shoes against the floor, a Marlboro tarring his fingers.

-You're a stupid bitch, he said. Win her over, or you're stuck here forever.

When Dr. Mercer came back she sat at the foot of my bed.

-Don't sit there, I said. I need some space.

She nodded, got up and moved to the chair in the corner. My father, bored and sullen and probably uninterested in my ugly doctor, vanished.

-You say you don't want to be here, she said. And legally, we can't make you stay much longer. I don't think you're suicidal, you're not a danger to other people. But I think you should stay.

-Sorry, I said. I have to pick up my dry-cleaning.

-Can your dry-cleaning wait another night? She asked. Just one more night. Then, if you feel like it, you can go.

I don't know why I said yes. But before I knew it Jason was leaving my stuff with the nurses at the front desk, and every time I speak to Dr. Mercer, she convinces me to stay on a little longer.

After the first day they took me out of surveillance and put me in Ward C. Some religious nut must have donated money to our floor, because the 23rd Psalm is painted in giant

calligraphic script all over the hallways. Outside my room is the line, *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life*. My eyes buzz with the words.

The anorexics are on the floor below. The suicidals and the self-harming are above, where they kept me the first night. We call them the acutes. If you fuck up on Ward C, if you start banging your head against the sink or telling people that the angels want you to kill the janitor, or you get caught stabbing at your hands with a mechanical pencil tip, then they put you with the acutes. I am a lot of things. But I'm not the top tier of crazy bitches.

The girls on my floor are a catchall. Madness varied, but madness contained. Some of them shuffle the hallways like their veins are filled with cold honey. Some of them fall asleep leaning in doorframes. Some of them are afraid to leave their rooms. One of them tries to eat the toilet paper in her bathroom. One of them tries to fuck all the others. Another girl is an eraser. She rubs at her skin with pencil erasers or old gum or even a rough sock if she can get her hands on it, rubs at her skin until she gets a raw red burn. I can tell when it's time for her meds because she starts quivering with nervous energy like a plucked cello string that never settles. Ten minutes after she swallows, the muscles in her face slacken. Her chin drops onto her chest and I can see the greasy part of her hair. I hate that she's like me.

My roommate is a schizo, an overweight chick named Wu Chin with shiny teeth and a tattoo of the Libra scales on her shoulder. She laughs like a dolphin – *eeee! eeee!* – even when I'm not trying to be funny. Especially when I'm not trying to be funny.

-I bet you feel like hot shit knowing that you're staying with a famous person, she told me when they moved me into her room.

-I'm sorry, I haven't read an issue of *People* in a while, I said. What are you famous for?

-Oh, she said. Obama held me prisoner. He released me when the people protested. But he's keeping me here to make everyone think I'm crazy.

-Makes sense, I said. What'd he hold you prisoner for?

Her eyes widened and darted around the room, irises pinballing in every direction.

-I can't say much more than this, but, I'll give you four words: Nine eleven, and Kennedy.

-Ah, I said.

When she wasn't looking, I took the nail clippers out of her cubby and hid them inside the Kleenex box by my bed.

That night when I met with Dr. Mercer I told her I wanted out. Told her I had no interest in whack job conspiracy theorist roommates.

-Has it ever occurred to that we all make our own conspiracies? she said.

-That sounds like hippie shit.

-I stand by it, she said. We all trick ourselves. We all scheme. It's just that some of us live in the delusion enough to be hospitalized.

I didn't feel like answering her. I could have. I just didn't feel like it.

-I think you should reframe your idea of whack job. Crazy isn't such a simple term, she said.

My stitches itched, but I didn't dare touch them in front of her. I looked out the window behind her desk. A brick wall in the distance, at the edge of the grounds. I could just picture the evening traffic on Yale Street on the other side. Dogwoods dropping petals on the hoods of cars at stoplights. People with their windows down, listening to the radio, scratching their balls and

smoking. The sunset flushed orange sherbet through the trees. When I tuned in again, Dr. Mercer was talking about my mother.

-You said in our first session that she's dying, she said. What is she dying of?

-Breast cancer, stage four, I said.

-Want to talk about it?

I didn't know what she wanted me to say, but I guessed. I thought of all of the Hallmark cards I used to stock when I still had my job at the DB Mart in Massachusetts.

-I've made my peace with it, I said. It's for the best. Her spirit will live on when she's gone.

-Mm-hmm, Dr. Mercer said. So I see we're playing the bullshit game this evening.

-Thanks for playing! I said.

But that night I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking of the last time I saw Mom.

I went to her house to make sure she paid the hospice nurse and weed the front yard flowerbed. She had put on her wig for me. Her left arm was swollen, wrapped in a bandage from shoulder to wrist to keep the pressure going.

-I've been sleeping in your room since you left, she said.

-Wanna watch *Wheel of Fortune*?

-I know you won't move back in with me, but what if you just stayed a night or two? It's lonely at night.

-Sure. I'll do that. Next week I'll do that.

She nodded, but we both knew I was lying. It had been so much easier when I'd been at college, thousands of miles away from her, away from her need. But since I had moved back to Tulsa I felt her yoked to me again and my body ached under the weight of her burden.

-You were always so independent, she said.

Could she know what I was thinking? I tilted my face away from her.

-So were you, I lied.

When I looked at her again, I found her eyes shut tight, the corners of her mouth drooping downward. She leaned her head back on the couch and her wig shifted out of place. The skin on her face was so translucent it couldn't have been thicker than a moth's wing. I thought she had fallen asleep. I got up to leave, and she spoke.

-Twy. Remember what I asked you after Grandma Gwen died?

-No, I said.

But I did. I just didn't want to say it.

-Yes you do. You remember.

I could hear the mantel clock tick. My dead father cleared his throat and lit a cigarette from the gas burner in the kitchen. He gave me the finger when I looked at him.

-Soon it'll be time, she said. Soon I'll be in too much pain. I'm already in pain now.

-Why does it have to be me? I said. Why can't you just do it yourself?

And she opened her eyes and stared at me as if she'd never seen me before, the way a child surveys a stranger on a train.

-I've never asked you to do anything, Twy. And I want it to be your face I see when it's time. My baby's face, and no one else's.

-You're sick. How could you ask me that? You're really sick.

-Yes, that's the point, she said.

I couldn't sleep in Ward C. So I got out of bed, took the nail clippers with me, sat on our bathroom floor with my back blocking the door. I decided on the skin above my pubic bone, where they wouldn't look. If they tried I could call them perverts, yell about lawsuits. I dug the clippers in and pinched and yanked. Tracks of skin came up in little strips. It was bloody, it was superficial, but it worked. My hands buzzed with adrenaline. I felt every molecule of myself surge with focus. True Zen meditation, true presence and awareness and clarity.

When I finished, I flushed the skin and the bloody tissues. I stuck a wad of toilet paper against the gouges. The waistband of my underwear held it in place, the blood pasted it close like glue.

And when I got in bed, whenever I saw my mother's face, I would press hard at the new lines until the sting blotted out the memory. I fell asleep high on the ether of my own pain.

After four days, Dr. Mercer noticed I was still avoiding the other patients.

-I'm not asking you to go to group therapy, or even make friends. I'm just asking you to eat lunch with them. A little socializing would be extremely beneficial for you, she said.

-I'd love to socialize. With normal people, I said.

She was getting annoyed with me, I could tell.

-I'm not sure I understand your disconnect, she said. You can leave here at any time. But something prevents you.

I opened my mouth to protest, but she hushed me. She's good at hushing. One finger extended, thumb pointed out. The sort of gesture Jesus would make in a painting.



-As long as you're here, I suggest you take advantage of your treatment. Meet the others, just have lunch with them. What's the worst that could happen? she said.

-I could like someone, I said.

And that's how I found myself at the cafeteria during Ward C's lunch hour, sitting between Wu Chin and an agoraphobic named Lisa who looked ready to throw herself under the table at the slightest provocation.

-Obama called me this morning, Wu Chin said.

-That's a delusion, Lisa whispered. In group we said that's a delusion. You need to accept that if you want to get out of here.

Wu Chin's face plummeted so fast from satisfaction to rage that I felt my stomach lurch with the change.

-You're a delusion! she shouted. And you have sheep's eyes!

-Sheep's eyes? I said.

Lisa put her head in her hands and moaned.

-Look at her, Wu Chin said. She's all glassy and flat. Obeys everyone. LISTEN TO ME, LISA, YOU SHEEPY CUNT!

At the other table, the girl with the eraser burns started laughing at us, the kind of laugh that could shrivel a grape into a raisin.

I left my jell-o half-eaten, my meatloaf untouched. I stabbed my spork into the top of it, like a flag. I waited by the door for lunch period to end. As soon as it did, I shot up to Dr. Mercer's office and pounded on the door. Rustling papers inside. A woman's voice halted in the middle of the pitch and fall of a sentence. I pounded again.

She only opened the door a crack.

-Yes?

-I'm not eating another meal with those fuck-ups, I said.

-I'm with another patient right now, Twyla. We'll have to discuss this later.

She closed the door, and I stared at the jamb for a while, trying to figure out why I felt so jealous of the fact that Dr. Mercer had other patients besides me.

-She doesn't like you, my dead father said. She knows you're a liar. You waste her time.

I could hear him following me down the hall. His deep wheeze. The swish of his jeans.

On my way back to my room, the stuck-up nurse with the wedgie found me.

-You have a voicemail from a Jason DeAngelo, she said.

-Did you listen to it?

She nodded.

-It's protocol.

They love that word here. Protocol.

I waited for her to tell me what he said. Instead, she handed me the phone from behind her desk and punched in the voicemail code.

Hi, uh, it's uh, me.

Christ. I could have made a drinking game out of his pauses.

I uh, wanted you to uh, know, uh, that your mom's been looking for you. She had a nurse drive her over here and poke around and then she banged on my door and I met her. She looks sick or something. So I, uh, told her where you were. You should call her. Sorry.

The nurse was watching me. I moved carefully. Swallowed.

-Nobody can visit me here unless I give them permission, right?

-Right. Would you like to add your mother to the Visitor Clearance form?

-No, I said. I want you to make sure she can never get in here.

This morning I could feel the conspiracy, I could feel the nurses collaborating in the hallways and quieting when I opened the door. I'm so sick of fluorescent lights and off-white walls and whispers. I'm not paranoid. But I'm not stupid, either. Then Dr. Mercer calls me into her office earlier than usual, and my suspicions are confirmed.

I don't like the expression on her face when she opens the door. Lips covering gums. Her hands steadier than usual. I sit in my usual spot and feel as if I should check under my seat for a snare.

-I'm starting to suspect something, she says.

Goddamn wedgie nurse. Are there no secrets in this hospital?

-I'm starting to suspect that you're here in order to hide from your mother. But the question is, why?

-She's dying, I say.

Dr. Mercer nods.

-Yes, I remember, she says.

Impatient. She's impatient with me. She doesn't like me.

-Does her death frighten you? she asks.

-No.

I say no too fast.

Dr. Mercer sits back in her chair and stretches.

-Let's talk about your father, she says.

-Now we're cooking, my father says from the corner.

-I think we should get to heart of things.

-I want you to come to grips with the truth.

-Out with it! –Let's have a breakthrough, for Christ's sake –Don't you know what a pain in the ass you are when you hide things –Your denial is toxic, is toxic, is toxic.

Who's talking? Him or her? Mouths are moving and phrases are jumbling in and I can't keep up, I'm behind on the quota, the assembly line is jamming.

-I'm ready to check out of here, I say.

But I trip when I get out of the chair, wobble and knock into the door and I leave so clumsy I'm afraid parts of my body have been abandoned on the way out. But there they are, arms and legs, all moving down the hall for me, blundering, but moving, down to my room and Wu Chin looks up from her bed and asks what the Fuck is wrong with me and I ignore her and go to the bathroom and lean against the door – why don't they put locks on the door? They don't even trust us enough to shit? – and I rip off the tape and start pulling the sutures out of my wrists and my legs, one after another, yanking, skin tearing, and people are pounding on the door, I can hear Dr. Mercer calling my name, but I don't answer and then the door is pushed in, I slide with it, and a pair of hands grips me by the arms, pinning me flat, the bathroom light shines in my eyes until they water and I kick and scream and kick until something cold runs through me, suddenly I'm very tired, so thick and tired, and I drop off the edge into a black corner of sleep in a burly nurse's arms.

I'm in a new room now, back with the acutes, I'm guessing, tongue fat and swollen in my mouth. I go to scratch my nose and can't. My wrists are looped to the bed railings, bandaged and sore. And my father has his back to me – I can see the bald spot of his thinning red hair, and his ugly plaid shirt half-tucked – he's looking out the window, and when he turns around I spot the rope loose around his neck as if he's wearing a bad tie.

I press the buzzer on my railing. Over and over I press the buzzer. A nurse peers in the window at me and then she's gone. My father smirks and I can see his incisors, like yellow grains of rice. He gets so close I can see the thread cross-hatching the buttons on his shirt.

-Nobody wants to take care of an ungrateful little shit like you, he says. He raises his arm to smack me, just a warning smack the way he used to when I forgot to water the tomato plants or take down my laundry, but then Dr. Mercer comes in and he retreats to his chair to watch the show.

She takes my hand. It feels warm and sweaty and I love it. I'm surprised she wants to touch me at all. She sits on the edge of the bed, still holding the hand. I watch it as if it is an appendage that doesn't belong to me.

-If the door of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is: infinite, she says.

We're quiet.

-Before you give me credit for such a wonderful line, I should tell you it's by Blake, she says.

I want to ask, How can you cleanse the door to perception? It sounds so easy. Metaphysical Windex. But my tongue is too unruly in my mouth and I can't seem to remember how to speak yet.

-Let's talk about the truth now, she says.

I nod at her. I would do anything for her, to make her stay. To make him leave.

-My father—

My voice comes out with rocks in it. She holds up a finger, –so good at hushing – and takes a pitcher of water from the table at the foot of my bed. She cradles my head and helps me drink. I can't help it. I think: *She leadeth me beside the still waters.*

-My father hanged himself when I was eight, I say.

-I know that. I know, she says.

-I was the one who found him.

-I don't forget the things you tell me, Twyla.

I nod again.

-But nobody knows that when I found him, he was still alive.

Her face is expressionless. I want her to tell me I've done a good job. In the corner, my father howls.

-What did you do? she asks.

-I watched him, I say. I didn't run for help until he was still.

My father is writhing now, his legs are curling and kicking at the floor, his face purples, the rope tightens around his neck.

-That's a big confession, Dr. Mercer says. That's very brave. Thank you for sharing that with me.

She squeezes my hand. *She restoreth my soul.*

-How do you feel? she asks.

-Old.

-Good girl. Good girl.

She's watching my eyes. I wonder where she keeps her rod and staff.

-If it's alright with you, before we go any further, I would like you to tell me one other thing.

-Anything, I say. And I mean it.

-Tell me what it is that you're looking at in the corner, she says.

And I tell her, Nothing.

Just a trick of the light.