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Short Story Collection

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SHORT STORY COLLECTION

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By

Kevin Bond

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Andrew Milward, Professor of English

Lexington, Kentucky

2022

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Short Story Collection

This thesis consists of four pieces of short fiction workshopped as part of the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing program at the University of Kentucky. Themes and topics explored include familial dynamics, depictions of childhood and coming of age, solitude, adverse psychological effects of toxic masculinity, natural sphere as sanctuary and source of spiritual renewal, and sense of place.

KEYWORDS: Short Fiction, Coming of Age, Childhood, Shame in Literature, Masculinity

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INTRODUCTION

My passion for creating narratives began with my fascination with songwriting. I was drawn to the process of assembling words according to their sound, and the challenge of creating an original, emotive line while adhering to the parameters of the song. In this way, I learned early on about the discipline that a song demands from its author, this sense that much of the power of language depends on economy. Efficiency, no matter the genre, hinges on how well the writer operates within the limitations of a chosen form so that every word serves a particular purpose of the work as a whole, so that no space is wasted in achieving this effect. Studying the lyrics of songwriters like Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen became for me an exercise in analyzing the creative possibilities of language within the restrictions of the song form, then recognizing the aesthetic choices responsible for the song's resonance with listeners. Understanding the ways in which language structure enhances the subject matter of these songs provided me with tools for creating works of my own and allowed me to see the songs as being constituted by a series of decisions by the author. In this way, studying master songwriters—then attempting to emulate them in my own songs—taught me to assume that no craft element is accidental, that the melody, rhythm, rhyme scheme, and verse-chorus arrangements we see in the final version were chosen from a wide range of possibilities by the author. Ultimately, I learned to conceive of songwriting in terms of constant revision, as an ongoing process in which the author shifts between possibilities of narration, diction and tone in order to better serve the song's overall effect.

This interest in narrative-making across genres has been foundational to my approach to fiction writing. Songwriting continues to shape the way I conceive of plots

for my stories, the way I shift between flashback and main action, and the way I generate suspense and develop tension between characters. Finding the most effective means for dramatizing the central conflicts in my fiction often involves consulting the narrative strategies I learned by practicing songwriting, alongside ones I've gained by studying fiction. Songwriting has also shaped my fiction stylistically. As many of the songwriters who have influenced me most come out of the folk, country, and bluegrass traditions—particularly out of rural America in the South, Midwest, and Appalachia—I've developed an interest in the distinctive features of dialect according to place, to the different rhythms and sounds that govern the vernacular of these regions. In this way, I think that being guided by the inherent music of language when writing both dialogue and description of setting makes the world of the story come alive, the characters more real.

My fiction is also informed by authors who examine experiences involving shame, particularly in the context of familial dynamics. One such writer is Joy Williams, whose bleak vision of American family life has held a strong influence over the way I explore familial dysfunction. I'm particularly drawn to the way Williams employs a realist, clean prose style to depict physical and psychological discord in stories where parents abandon children, by leaving or by dying, and children wander in life without guidance. Although I've developed a more indulgent prose style that differs from Williams' understated language with staccato sentences, I continue to return to her fiction for the way she depicts the emotional crises of her characters. I'm interested especially in those that lack access to the knowledge or guidance that might free them from their unhappiness, leaving them desperate for an escape to some other state, physical or emotional. Even as Williams' subject matter and style creates a sense of hollowness and

futility as resolutions are replaced by tensions, violence, and disconnections, there's a transcendent and often humorous quality to her writing that transforms these storylines from the bleak to the sublime.

I strive for this tragicomic tonal mix in much of my fiction, and it's a quality that I admire also in the work of Flannery O'Connor. As with Williams, I'm drawn to O'Connor's child characters who wander in an adult world without supervision or love, and those that follow in the American tradition of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, in which characters become "grotesques." I continue to return to grotesques in my writing, these bizarre characters who are lost or losing or obsessive, and whom nothing, it seems, will save. Even with this bleak view of human nature, characters often being trapped and searching for some inexpressible transcendence, O'Connor's stories have been important for the way I conceive of the possibility of redemption for my characters. Specifically, I'm interested in creating characters that appear to be plunged deep into horror and despair, or else seem deplorable in a given context, and then are presented with the prospect for improvement, revitalization, or "grace." I'm especially drawn to this trajectory as explored in the context of the destruction of the familial unit and in narratives featuring "antiheroes," or anxiety riddled characters with little admirable strength. Ultimately, Williams and O'Connor have been important influences on the development of my vision by the ways in which they mitigate their bleak outlook by the sureness of their prose and the symbolic poetry of their language. Even though my stories deal with spiritual renewal more broadly do not incorporate Catholicism as overtly as O'Connor's, I learned from her work the power of metaphor for accentuating aspects of

the emotional arc of characters, especially those in seemingly helpless or hopeless situations.

Many of my stories feature protagonists between early childhood and adolescence in unstable home environments who struggle to either develop or maintain meaningful connections with other family members. Whether the domestic turmoil is due to addiction, death, or abandonment, I'm interested in how trauma tears families apart and how this complicates characters' coming of age. In this sense, these narratives capture sudden disruptions of the passing from childhood to adulthood, testing young characters' ability to mature or move past hardship. Underscoring these stories is an strong desire for the fractures in the familial unit to be mended or restored to a state of normalcy and communion before the fissures were introduced. When these characters are treated with contempt or sense that such connection is an impossibility, they feel intense shame, becoming convinced of their unlovability in the eyes of their family and people more generally. Overall, my stories juxtapose these two extremes—scenes of loving closeness against emotional distance—and this accounts for much of the tension as the characters navigate various confounding relationships.

A couple of authors who have influenced the way I depict this tension between childhood and adulthood, along with the strained dynamics of the domestic sphere, are J.D. Salinger and Toni Morrison. Although Salinger and Morrison depict different lived experiences in their fiction, both capture the essence or truth of childhood in ways that have inspired my creation of young characters and their conflicts. More specifically, in *The Catcher in the Rye* and the Glass family stories, Salinger illustrates the celebration of youth and the suspicion of the adult world, though he does so in a way that avoids

allegories of saintly innocence and fallen experience. Rather, Salinger creates an idealized version of youth in which innocent children possess the knowledge and ability of an experienced adult; they are autonomous and seem to operate with greater insight, ability, and enlightenment than the adults who surround them. Although my characters do not fall fully in line with this exaggerated idealization of childhood, my stories are informed by Salinger's fantasy of the child to the extent that it is a response to the alienations and disappointments of the adult world in general. Some of my stories feature narrators recounting traumatic and formative childhood events many years removed, and this informs their wistful yearning for an idealized past that distorts reality to serve the narrator's emotional needs from the distanced point of telling. Yet this nostalgia is always undercut by an unavoidable reckoning with the truth, no matter how much the narrator wants to suppress or replace it with fantasy.

Morrison's depiction of the fragility of childhood in novels like *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Beloved* has influenced the way I explore familial trauma in my work, particularly the effects of inter-generational violence and painful coming of age. I return to characters like Pecola Breedlove, Beloved, and Denver when I write characters whose experience of childhood is cut short by various forces convincing them that life is unrelenting and unaccepting. These characters are refused the nourishment they need, facing rejection and contempt from both within the familial unit and their community. Thus, I'm drawn to how Morrison captures the extent to which these characters are denied the opportunity to experience what it means to be a carefree child, to be able to grow without violent interruption, and to have the support to be fragile. I've learned especially from the way Morrison employs a challenging, fragmented style and cyclical

narrative structure to capture the layers of trauma faced by characters—those struggling with a fundamental disruption of their ego and collapse of their self-esteem, leading to internalized rejection. While my characters face different kinds of rejection and hardship from those depicted by Morrison—such as colorism and sexual violence in *The Bluest Eye*—I’ve drawn heavily from this attention to the pernicious workings of internalized shame and neglect on the psyche, especially when experienced by young characters who realize that the family home is not a place of safety or love. Beyond this poignant depiction of psychological effects of shame dynamics, I’ve also learned from Morrison’s portrayal of the power of childhood friendship—as with Sula and Nel’s relationship in *Sula*—before being introduced to the complications and fissures of adult living. This vision of childhood connection, both physical and emotional, between friends or siblings serves as a remedy to uncertainty and anxiety for my characters—a possible refuge from the pressures faced at home and elsewhere.

Another prominent theme in my work is the pressures gender expectations place on characters to perform in ways that contradict their desires or their sense of authentic identity. One reason I repeatedly return to a child’s point of view is because I’m interested in how so much is setting into place into people at this malleable age, a period of constant discovery that is exhilarating, daunting, and confusing. One important tension that characterizes these coming of age narratives is that between sexual discovery and acceptable forms of gender expression. In some cases the pressure to perform masculinity or femininity is learned from peers or an initiation into the greater community, but it also manifests itself in parent-child dynamics. Young male protagonists learn through their relationships to characters who are more experienced—observing their behavior,

engaging themselves, and absorbing the rules of gender expression. These characters are pressured to adopt toxic forms of masculinity, employing homophobic, misogynist rhetoric as they police each other's gender performance. I'm particularly interested in the father-son dynamic, the ways in which normative masculinity manifests as mechanical coldness, obscuring expressions of affection in the protagonist's eyes. In this case, sons understand masculinity in terms of controlling the familial unit and suppressing emotion. Such normative masculinity leaves little room for the loving dynamic young protagonists desire. This contributes to a conviction of their unlovability and learned self-contempt, along with a desire to earn the father's respect and approval by successfully completing tests of their manhood. Yet when performing masculinity according to these expectations doesn't lead to approval, these sons feel lost and alone.

The natural sphere takes on a dynamic presence like a character and becomes a vehicle for metaphor in my stories. Sometimes natural harmony counterbalances the discord within families and protagonists' inner conflicts; other times its violence or starkness alienates characters. In this sense, natural phenomena accentuate aspects of characters' emotional landscape or trajectory, and the natural setting often serves as a sanctuary for characters fleeing turmoil in the domestic sphere. I'm interested in how immersion in rural settings—or those that are in close proximity to wilderness areas—has this dual effect of enhancing characters' sense of isolation or alone-ness while offering a remedy to relational conflicts through its comforting abundance or sense of order. This is one reason I dedicate much description to the particularities of natural environment. By evoking details not only of setting but also specific plants and animals, I aim to situate the complexities of human problems within natural cycles and draw attention to the inter-

connectedness between components of ecosystems. This emphasis on the natural world also complicates the extent to which characters' solitude equates to loneliness. While the protagonists of these stories struggle with anxiety and feelings of self-contempt as the result of broken families and abandonment, the richness of the natural sphere eases the pain of isolation.

I see the excesses in descriptive language—not only of external world and action, but also of character interiority—as a way to protest the withholding or ambiguities of these stories. I'm interested in familial dynamics characterized by secrecy, erasure, miscommunication, where characters rarely say what they mean or are able to breach the silence between them to arrive at understanding. In this way, an emphasis on language serves to challenge the ambiguities in the plot, in addition to making the world and the characters' emotional landscapes immediate and accessible. This aspect of language is also where songwriting influences my fiction most, where I lean into the rhythm and musicality of the narrative voice to carry the emotional currents of the story forward. Structurally, I treat the repetition of images, details, and memories as refrains woven into the linear movement of plot. In this sense, these stories take shape like folk ballads, borrowing the way verses are broken up by a chorus to structure plot and weave description. Thus, I consider my stories to be in conversation with songwriters who emphasize narrative and lyricism while evoking a strong sense of place. When writing short stories I draw from contemporary singer-songwriters whose songs are deeply rooted in their homeplace—such as Townes Van Zandt from Texas, Greg Brown from Iowa, Josh Ritter from Idaho, Malcolm Holcombe from North Carolina—much in the same way place plays an essential role in the works of regional writers I admire like Alice Munro,

William Faulkner, and Flannery O'Connor. Ultimately, while my stories take place in a variety of locales, it is important to me to build a strong sense of place through not only descriptions of setting, but also character, voice, and descriptive language.

This interest in the narratives deriving from and concerned with aspects constituting rural places and small communities accounts for my interest in the Southern and American Gothic—genres that continue to influence my writing, both stylistically and thematically. I'm particularly drawn to the emphasis placed on descriptive language and voice, the variety of ways in which works by writers associated with the genre—like William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Toni Morrison, and Cormac McCarthy—feature inventive, place-informed language to establish setting, action, and character. As such, I've maintained a visceral and intellectual fascination with these writers, and this has developed into an appreciation for the subject matter and the types of problems addressed in these stories. Such was the case when working through Faulkner's works such as *The Bear*, *Light in August*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*. This introduction to Faulkner's laborious style was important for my development as a writer because it broadened my understanding of the linguistic possibilities of fiction. I'm attracted to how Faulkner presents language on the page—the rhythm propelling each phrase onward, sentences structured to contain a dizzying multitude of images and ideas.

One particular aspect of Faulkner's prose that engrosses me is the dialect. The Mississippian diction and syntax that define the voice of these novels illustrated to me how fiction may employ the nuances of English according to region and social groups, thereby making the world of the stories more real, the history and points of view more immediate. Thus, beyond its aesthetic appeal, the way Faulkner weaved colloquialisms of

Southern speech with formal, often religious language also served to introduce me to Southern culture, along with some of the central themes of the Southern Gothic genre—elements like deeply flawed, “grotesque” characters, decayed or derelict settings, and sinister events relating to alienation and crime. Beyond their potential for creating suspense, I think that these themes make the American and Southern Gothic an important genre for the way they focus on place-specific experiences and histories of people pushed to the margins of society, people often overlooked or represented through stereotypes in mainstream culture. Thus, Faulkner’s fiction taught me the importance of portraying characters and place truthfully, moving beyond types to capture the messiness of human beings with specificity.

I’m also drawn to the way Southern and American Gothic works contain compelling reflections on the relationship between people and the natural environment. I found such to be the case while reading Cormac McCarthy’s novels, particularly his early, Appalachian works like *The Orchard Keeper*, *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Suttree*. Much like Faulkner, I think that McCarthy’s subject matter is enhanced by his distinctive style, that his descriptive language makes the world of East Tennessee—especially the natural setting—come alive. Although McCarthy’s prose isn’t as mystifying as Faulkner’s, his use of archaic syntax, his wide vocabulary and his bending of grammar and punctuation rules—turning nouns into verbs and ignoring commas—draw attention to themselves in ways which make the landscapes and the characters’ actions seem otherworldly. More exactly, McCarthy’s blend of colloquial, often direct language with a formal, scriptural style in his writing brings out both the beauty and terror of the natural world, depicting humanity’s place within it in stark, mythic terms.

Ultimately, McCarthy's style—along with those of other masters of the Southern and American Gothic genres—have expanded my conception of the stylistic and formal possibilities of fiction while underscoring the responsibility to depict people's experiences truthfully and with an awareness of reductive and damaging stereotypes.

I expect my future stories to build off of the themes and prose style of the stories included in this thesis, portraying characters beyond the early formative years of these young protagonists and in conflicts beyond the domestic sphere. At this point of my development, early childhood and adolescence have been the lens through which I've explored the complex nature of shame dynamics and the lasting effects of various types of trauma, though this perspective will shift as I grow older and become more experienced. I'm beginning to expand the scope of my obsession with memory and the terror of time in my work, turning my gaze to young adulthood, middle and advanced age to explore how we relate to the past as a way to come to terms with our present reality. But first, these stories serve as a testament to the mysterious joys and heartbreaks of youth, to the sense of wonder and fear we feel when presented with momentous and inevitable change.

CHAPTER 1. ROOM SIXTEEN

Before checking into room sixteen “for good,” it was a place for Dad to stow us away. When our house became more a destination for Mom’s junkie friends than a place for us to live in, when their sleepy periods became almost nonexistent and someone always had to have another hit to cure their thirst, to “keep the party going.”

Mom had started bringing friends to our home and letting me and Mo see what they usually did at other people’s houses. Bags full of used and charred equipment on the coffee table, their weedy hair and ugly smiles which soon turned serious and thirsty-looking when someone, usually Mom, would start unloading the “goods” in orderly fashion across the table. That’s when she’d tell me and Mo in her used-to-be-funny ironic voice to work on our “manners and what have you” in our room while she and the adults “get to it.”

Now, Mo and I weren’t as stupid nor as young as Mom perhaps wished we were—I was twelve when the home recreation started happening on a regular basis, Mo thirteen—but we really didn’t mind or think twice about doing what she told us to do. I think it was because it took a while before she became not beautiful because she still teased us with heavy lidded eyes and cursive eyebrows that were in sync with her wide, almost always grinning mouth.

She’d get more slender, but it took a while for her to lose the slight curves that Mo and I couldn’t wait to fulfill ourselves; though, I was doomed to inherit Dad’s gangliness and not a trace of my mother’s beauty like Mo would.

When beauty wasn't enough, when a smile would be too much to swallow, she'd grab hold of our elbows and pull us into her soft, warm bosom. I felt her heartbeat somewhere beneath and what I could swear was Mo's pulsing through our mother and hitting my chest, creating an overlapping drum pattern like whippoorwills intersecting in the night with their steady, tireless song. But when I asked Mo one night if she could feel mine too, she scoffed and said, "Come on, Ann."

When Mom first started getting high at home, she made sure she and her friends were coming down by the time Dad got back from his shift at the lumber mill. So that when he opened the front door they'd be done with the erratic stuff—the sudden yelling, the strange, turned up music somebody brought, the intermittent crashing of glass onto the floor—and just be lounging around the living room. By that point, they'd be mostly asleep or humming to themselves so that they didn't really notice or care if Mo and I sat next to them or just did our usual business around the house.

As long as they were zombied-out, Dad could pretend that it wasn't a pressing issue. He'd open the front door and see Mo sweeping up shattered glass and me carefully sliding a pillow beneath Mom's sleeping head as she lay on the couch. I'd look up from my mother and see him watching us from the doorway, holding his hardhat in one hand and his gloves in the other. A tall, solemn man in blackened Dickie's coveralls. Hesitant to enter his own home, even after a long day at the lumber mill. When Mom began to stir, feeling the breeze from the open door, he closed it and set his things down on the floor gently, preferring to keep the house in a near-silent state. Stepping into the room, he'd give Mo and me each one nod. Then he'd scan the floor briefly for severe damage before

turning into the kitchen, grabbing a beer from the fridge, heading for the back screen door to go sit in the shade.

The day Dad decided something had to be done wasn't any less quiet. Mo and I were hanging clothes out on the line when he pulled onto the gravel driveway behind the truck belonging to Mom's new friends. They weren't out of the ordinary: a small woman with old-lady creases and her boyfriend, a worn down man who looked like he hadn't slept in a month. They seemed shy, didn't look anyone in the eyes when they spoke, not even between themselves.

Dad walked reluctantly past our visitors' truck. He slid his middle and pointer fingers along the dusty exterior, gazing inside the tinted glass as if to gauge what kind of trouble awaited him inside the house. When he turned his weary eyes to Mo's and then mine as we stood there frozen with wet clothes in hand, I felt guilty. I thought about the way Mo and I walked around Mom's unfeeling body. Stepped gingerly around it, as if she were a sleeping baby in the living room. Acquiescing to her gentle demands like two impotent parents would let an only child spoil itself.

We watched our father enter the house, could see through the back window as he made his way over to where she slouched in her easy chair. We knew he couldn't raise his voice when they were so sleepy like that, probably couldn't even if they weren't.

He started talking to her and she responded by reaching for his hand. When he wouldn't let her have it, she grabbed his leg and the effort made her fall out of the chair. She leaned her face into his thigh, turning it left and right and making a mess of her thick red hair. Just when I thought he was about to take her by the shoulders and help her to her

feet, he stepped backward. Her head jerked forward and she slumped against the side of the chair. He kept backing up until he was against the window.

Turning around, he hardly looked in our direction before sweeping the curtains shut in one motion.

*

Dad started bringing us to the motel just on the outskirts of town, right off the highway, called the Budget Host Inn. These nights and days spent away from home at first seemed like a getaway. It was, after all, a relatively bustling stopover for those heading further up into the Upper Peninsula, those heading back down south to the Mitten. It had that feel of temporariness unique to motels; people almost never stayed longer than a single night unless they were involved with construction or some obscure business which required multiple visits into town.

Room sixteen was so unclaimed and refreshingly empty that being there, we seemed to lose our identity and relation to one another. We became as unassuming as the drab, daisy patterned wallpaper, the stiff bedlinen, the green carpet. The anonymous painting of a stream running through a forest at sunset.

We were timid as strangers that first night. Setting our things by the door and breathing the sharp chemical air. Standing and looking out at the cars in the parking lot, at the man smoking in a lawn chair from the next room over, the passing cars and trucks just beyond the short front yard. Then, following Dad to the window facing the backyard, watching a few seagulls walk gingerly across as the sun fell behind the pines. And not even taking off our shoes as we claimed our beds, Mo and I laying side by side on the one

closest to the door. Dad just sitting on the edge of the other with his back to us, resting his chin on the palm of his hand. We hadn't switched on either lamp yet, so when the TV suddenly flashed on with a blaze of multi-colored light, we became uncannily transfixed, drawn into the animated shapes.

Beep Beep

It was the Roadrunner cartoon; Mo and I had seen it countless times before. When I sat up to look across Mo at my father, he was sitting upright against the back wood panel of the bed frame, propped up by two pillows, holding the remote in one hand and stroking his chin rapidly with the other. His face—along with the entire room—was flashing red, then orange, then blue, in such quick succession that the colors seemed to overlap.

Beep Beep

My father's eyes gleamed all of sudden. His upper teeth flashed all the different colors and his face quivered. Frightened, I sat up to look at him more directly.

But he was just laughing. It may have been silent, but it was laughter. He lowered his hand from his chin and looked at me. He said, "Aren't you watching, Annie?" and so I sat back and watched. Mo nudged me in my ribs. When I looked up at her she was smiling down softly with her eyelids hardly open and I thought, *She looks just like Mom right now.*

When the credits rolled and the theme song played, Dad started rustling with something on the floor and I felt that familiar pang of dread in my gut, thinking, *Please,*

no one move. Don't change the channel or turn on the light. Please, just don't move, no one. Please.

But he was only grabbing the burgers from the bag. Then, he tossed one into both of our laps, and set the cup of fries on the middle nightstand. We didn't care or check if it was the one we ordered. Another jingle and cartoon started and we sat passing our different sodas back and forth, from his bed to ours and back. Passed the fries and laughed with our mouths full, the cartoons seeming to never end.

*

Mom's friends apparently took a liking to this new arrangement; they gradually moved in as we all but moved out. We spent every night at the Budget Host Inn with only the occasional visit to appease Mom. Since the motel was now our permanent residence, Mo and I began to wonder how Dad was able to afford the room seven nights a week.

It turned out that the only reason we had this room to escape to was because Dad's sister, our Aunt Cass, being co-owner and head-operator of the motel, was allowing us to stay at a reduced rate out of the kindness of her heart. Staying there made it the cheapest option short of setting up camp in the woods somewhere or Dad doing something outrageous like asking a friend, let alone his own sister, to let us stay at their house.

Well, I don't know if my father had much of anybody he'd call a friend, but God knows Cass wasn't. He made it clear to us without having to say a thing. Ever since one night when, who Mo and I thought was only the rather unpleasant lady operating the

check-in desk knocked on our door. Upon being let in, she said, “Thought you three could use another set of bed linens.”

Handing them over while looking over her glasses at my father where he sat at the desk, she added, “I’m your girls’ aunt by the way.” She paused only to watch Dad shut his eyes and set his thumb and pointer finger on the ridge between them. “Just thought you should know.”

Mo and I didn’t know why Dad never told us about Cass, why he couldn’t look her in the eye, but we’d soon get to know her well enough. She put me and Mo to work at the motel almost immediately, even on the days when things were all right at home. Dad would give us updates on the home situation when he could, picking us up from school or catching us walking down main street. He’d explain that Mom was “feeling well today” and would “love to see everyone home together for dinner.”

But Cass wouldn’t allow it. She said it again and again: “Now, you girls listen here. Your daddy came to *me*. We made an agreement and that agreement was that I’d provide you a room at a reduced rate—because family’s family and all and you gotta make sacrifices, and more often than not one-sided sacrifices—so don’t you girls ask off because that pretty girl your father went and married all of sudden decided to be a mother today.”

That was when I started to hate Cass too. It soon became clear that she was getting far more out of our “agreement” than she was letting on. Not just that Mo and I were practically two workers she didn’t have to pay; Cass would never miss a chance to stop the maintenance workers as they rolled by with their cleaning carts. She’d say, “Ah,

ah, Maria—come here a minute and sit. One of your assistants here can take over for a while. What was it, number four? And then number ten? Twelve too? Yes, yes, they don't mind.”

That was part of it, yes, but above all I think that Cass found joy in the fact that Dad needed her, that things had “come to this.” She'd trot out to meet her little brother as he was dropping us off. Waving at him and out of breath, she'd say, “Well, how is she?”

My father, gripping the steering wheel, would just nod with that acquiescent look. It seemed to say: All right...let's play it through, if we're going to play it through, let's play it through.

She'd feign concern with scrunched eyebrows, asking, “I mean, how is she behaving? Any improvements?” Then, bringing her hands to her cheeks: “Don't feel like you have to humor me, I'm just worried—and *hopeful* is all.”

And of course my father couldn't lie nor exactly tell the truth. So it was often: “She's...well, we've all seen better days, it's just...” His hands busy in his coat pockets as he looked up and around and everywhere except where Mo and I stood watching. “It's just that sometimes it takes a while for her to come around—the real her, you know? It takes her long, and even then...”

And then the lie: “But she sure appreciates what you've done, taking us in, understanding, and—”

That's when my Aunt Cass would seize the opportunity to show us how humble and understanding she was. Raising her hand, shutting her eyes, and shaking her head—she'd effectively bring our little catch-up-and-chat to a close, generously saving us from

further embarrassment. Then, with her back already turned to us: “Come along now, girls. Expecting just about a full house tonight and rooms don’t clean themselves. And don’t you be going in and out of room sixteen while you work. People might get the wrong idea.”

*

One night, a few months later, Mo and I were in room sixteen. Dad had just dropped us off after a particularly dreadful visit with Mom. This is how we’d often find ourselves after returning from these inevitably loathsome reunions: Mo sitting on the edge of our bed, staring at me with hot, insistent eyes; me sitting cross-legged on the middle of Dad’s bed, looking ahead at the reflection of us on the black, turned-off TV screen, of the lamp’s muted glow behind her stretched head. Her thick red hair.

But that night felt different. Neither of us knew how much longer we’d be willing to go along with this routine: working and sleeping at a motel, waiting for things to change at home, coming over for brief visits, watching as Mom faded before our eyes, coming back to sit and vent.

“I found this place,” Mo began. “And, like, being there for maybe just a minute, just sitting there, I felt so far away, Annie. I felt like Dad and Mom were so far off and not a part of me or us or our world, you know?...I wished you were there. No, I mean I said it out loud. I said, ‘God, let Annie come here so I can really disappear, so I can be with her and nobody else.’ ”

I couldn’t look at Mo when she went all mystical on me.

“I’m gonna take you out there, Ann. I mean it’s only a mile from here, just through the woods. I’m kinda surprised I found it actually. Like I wasn’t even following a path or anything, I was just feeling my way through... ‘cause the woods are dense. But I marked the way with that orange tape just like Mom taught us that one time, remember?”

I saw her shake her head and run her hand through her hair on the TV screen. I looked at the real her. Her heavy lidded eyes. She smiled, “I mean, if *I* remember then you would too. We’re pretty much the same age. But you seem so much...younger sometimes.”

I tucked my bare feet deeper into the warmth under my thighs. “Why?”

She sighed and swung her legs up on the bed to lie down. “I don’t know, Ann. Maybe I’m just getting older faster. I do know I’m not waiting another three years until high school’s over to get out of this shithole town.”

I looked at her. She was wearing the new pin-striped sweater. The green one that hugged her perfectly and showed how beautifully she was growing into what Mom was. The Mom that Dad—and all the other boys—fell for in high school. For some reason, she just couldn’t tell me where the sweater was from—if she bought it, if someone gave it to her, if she stole it...

Somewhere along the line she’d stopped confiding in me about these things. Sneaking away at night—from the motel, from back home—and not telling me where she was or who she was with. Coming back smelling smoky and sometimes earthy, like she’d been in the woods or wading through a creek.

She shot up suddenly to her elbows and swept the hair from her eyes. “But don’t think I’m calling you stupid or whatever, Annie, ‘cause I’m not. I’m just trying to...well, you know.” She started picking bits of dirt and strands of hair from her sweater and flicking them onto the carpet. “I mean, do you want to hear about this place or not?”

I didn’t. I wanted her to talk about something real—about us, yes, but something real.

I wanted her to talk about what she was thinking when she wouldn’t let Mom hug her only an hour before, after dinner at the house. Wouldn’t look at her when we were at the dinner table and she asked about school and the new sweater. I was sitting at Mo’s left, across from Mom. Dad was at the end, to the right of Mo. It went on like that while we picked at the casserole Mom had made for us—a meal she couldn’t seem to take more than a couple bites of herself. So she tried me, but I was easy: “School’s okay...No, I got this shirt two years ago for Christmas...”

I had a difficult time looking at Mom too, but I looked and nodded nonetheless. Even if I couldn’t fake-smile. Because who could smile? What Mom did was scrunch her worn-down lips together and raise the ends slightly, trying hard not to show us her decayed teeth.

She also tried to keep her posture as upright as possible, but all her movements looked strained and indecisive. Like she’d rehearsed. And sitting there—trying to match Mo’s resistant demeanor—I didn’t allow myself to break down inside when Mom had to use both hands to raise her glass, often clanging it against her plate and mouthing to my father, *Sorry*. Or when she swiped away at the thin strands of hair, now only faintly red,

and coughed that weak cough which seemed to have no bottom. So, yes; I followed in Mo's example of distance and resistance. But at least I *tried* to play the part, to treat the thin, sickly woman across from me like she was (once) my mother.

Then, Dad said, "Your mother asked you a question, Maur," without any authority, just said it out loud like he was reading off the newspaper he'd laid out in front of his plate. This was something he'd do, I assumed, to pretend like we were one of those families that spent so much time together that we could therefore take each other's presence for granted, just do other things besides appreciate and be happy to see each other. Just *deal* with each other because there's always time—there will be so many opportunities to do that other stuff. But, really, the newspaper was just something to stare at so he wouldn't have to look at my mother.

Mo jumped on the chance to make her resistance clear: "Well, Dad, I was told by the school counselor to be careful about the kinds of things I share with typically unstable individuals in my life. Because, as she says, they can *use* that information against you one day when you're *least* expecting it, in ways that you never even thought were possible. So I'm just doing like she says and being careful. And I think it works, really."

She took a big sip from her water for emphasis. No one could say anything, but I wanted to tip the glass over and make it splash and ruin her precious green sweater for the way she made Mom have to just sit there, twisting at her thumb and smiling desperately at Dad. My father, who just sat there himself and didn't even try to play the role of the admonishing patriarch. But he did suggest that we girls spend the night at the motel and didn't give a reason. And I couldn't help but notice that my mother looked

slightly relieved at this proposal, so that's when I allowed myself to resent the crisscross wrinkles on her face. The bluish sacks beneath her eyes.

Mo refused to hug Mom on our way out, leaving her with only me in her bony arms, pressed weakly against her cushionless rib cage. Mom's arm extended to her oldest daughter, her face contorted in agonized pleading. So, I was once again firmly on Mom's side in the matter, and was eager to leave the house myself because I was getting so tired of all this side-switching.

This is what I wanted to talk about with my sister. What I wanted her to explain to me, looking so much older and more beautiful and self-possessed on our twin bed. How she could come out of something as miserable as that dinner, be so cruel to the person we'd agreed was once the most beautiful person in the world, who was a fool to marry an awkward dope like Dad, and come out invigorated. How she could come out inspired to talk through her newly enlightened perspective with me—whom she'd already given up on, whom she didn't trust except as an ignorant little girl to poke fantasies at.

She turned toward me with her head resting on her hand. "Well, I'm gonna tell you anyway. I mean I'm not making this up. I know you're probably thinking that I'm just trying to make you feel better about all this, or that I'm blowing steam or whatever. But what I felt in this place—" she lifted herself up and sat cross-legged the same way I was, not taking her eyes off me, "—the way I feel is that I—well, *we*—don't have to cling to these people anymore. I mean, I think we're at that age when things'll get real or they won't. Like—we started working and looking out for ourselves so much earlier than most other kids." She gripped her elbows and scowled. "I don't know about you, but I'm not going to do one more thing that bitch aunt of ours tells us to do. I'd like to see her try

and pull that whole ‘agreement’s an agreement’ and ‘not wise to cross me when I’ve got info I could give the Law’ shit! I wish they’d all just die!”

She shrieked and swung around, burying her face into one of our pillows. As angry as I was at everybody, just like her, I didn’t want her to stop talking, to just breathe like a lunatic like that. Almost immediately she shot back up, and I thought, *It’s good that she did—because if she didn’t I probably would’ve screamed at her.*

She swiped at her hair, but when she gathered herself up to sit on her knees, it just fell over her eyes again. She let it stay there. “Okay, so this place is in the woods, Annie. I marked the way with the orange tape—like I said. And I’m gonna take you there so you can feel the way I feel about all this. Because I don’t want you to be all alone here—that’s not what I want, I—”

“But that’s what you’ve been doing, Mo.” I had to avert my gaze when she gave me that look, as if she were surprised I could talk too. “All you do is for you anymore. I mean, I can’t even remember the last time you let me in on something—”

“I’m letting you in on something right now! Just because you’re too stuck up to—”

“But, I mean, like...where did you get that sweater?”

“What?” and she looked down, as if she could’ve possibly forgotten she was wearing it. She just shook her head and said, “God, Annie! This place that I found isn’t a joke, it’s—” and her lips began to quiver a little and I felt rotten again. She started punching the bed for emphasis: “It’s what I felt when I found it—it’s what I’m trying to get you to feel.”

At this point her lips were shaking so violently that I just had to jump up and fall into her. I wrapped my arms around her so selfishly, so tightly. But her elbow was pressed into my belly so maybe it hurt me more than it hurt her. When she lifted her elbow from between us, the pain there left. She let us fall into the bed and I don't know what her face looked like because mine was buried in her green sweater. It smelled so new and so good that I didn't care if she told me where it was from as long as it wasn't going anywhere. Finally, she gently tugged at my hair. So I took my face away from her, feeling ashamed when I saw the two wet splotches I'd made upon the sweater.

“If I can arrange it—or if, you know, I can somehow make it happen—will you leave here with me?”

I straightened myself out next to her and pressed my head onto the pillow.
“Yeah.”

“You promise, Annie?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

After a few seconds, Mo bent her face close to mine and kissed my cheek. Then she reached her arm over my head to turn off the lamp.

*

The next morning, I woke up to the sound of Aunt Cass' voice. It was uncharacteristically timid, and this sent a spark of fright through me: “Girls, wake up. You need to wake up now, girls.”

She was sitting at the end of the bed, staring at us. My instincts told me to sit up; I assumed we'd overslept and Cass was in here to prod us along until we began the rounds of morning cleaning. When I started to bring my legs to my chest, she stopped me by laying a gentle hand on my bare foot and squeezing it. She looked peeved, her brow furrowed and lips pursed, but her hold on my foot was impossibly tender. Her mouth was open as if she were about to speak, but every time she began, she shook her head and said, "Christ."

It was only after she began a third time that I noticed my father slouching at the end of his bed with his mouth open and gaze fixed to the blank TV screen. He was completely still. The early morning sun cast a reddish glare across the side of his face, making his whiskers and the spittle on his lower lip glisten. This did nothing to alter the impression that his soul had vacated his body.

"What's going on?" Mo said, sliding from the bed to stand and look at Cass dead-on. "Spit it out."

"Your mother," Cass said. She pursed her lips again as if that was all the explanation we needed.

"No *shit*," Mo hissed, "What about her? Are you going to tell us or not?"

Cass let go of my foot and bowed her head. She listed off the facts: Mom invited some people over to the house to shoot up sometime after we left; later, a man showed up with a gun; there was a disagreement; shots were fired, killing Mom and another woman; the man was tracked down at his house and arrested early that morning.

All Mo and I could do was stare at Cass. It was as though we couldn't register what she said because the tale was already in our minds. We'd all imagined something like this was going to happen; the scenario seemed to come straight from our thoughts. But now that it was spoken, was made an immutable fact of our lives, we felt gutted. Vacant.

Mo was the first to break the spell. She walked past Cass, ignoring her extended hand, and began to pace back and forth across the room, in and out of the morning light. Cass looked at me and tried to muster a reassuring expression as she reached once more for my foot, but I sat up and pulled my legs to my chest. Her sudden urge to comfort and touch us was unnerving; it seemed to rush the news into being, leaving us no room to hide. It made me quicken and sharpen my breathing. If I was going to be touched, I wanted Mo to do it. But she couldn't be stilled; she started waving her hands in the air like she was trying to get something off of them. Arching her back like when you suddenly get sprayed with cold water. She stopped pacing to stand before Dad, who still hadn't budged. She yelled, "*Where were you? Where did you go? You said you went back to—*"

"I was here." He said it like he was reading off the blank TV screen. So she stepped between him and it.

"You *weren't* here—it was just me and Annie! What, were you drunk again?"

"I was here." But he still sounded like he was reading even though he was only staring at Mo's sweater. So, she tried shoving him, but he hardly budged. She tried again,

but harder, so he had to lift up his hands. Her lip was quivering again as she continued to pace. She looked back at him and said, “*You* did this to her and you *know* it.”

I wanted so badly for her to clarify what she meant by that, but I couldn’t speak.

I tried to imagine my father pulling up the gravel driveway at home, cutting the lights, sitting there with a pistol firmly in his hand. Hearing the shouts and laughter and breaking of glass inside his house. Opening the front door to find the house trashed again after we’d had dinner there only a couple hours before. To find her strung out on the couch, wearing nothing but a tank top and panties that were too big for her, entwined with another sleepy woman.

Or maybe he walked in on a fight—the two women at each other’s throat over the last bit of goods, oblivious of my father even as he walked over to where they were laying on the carpet. As he took the pistol, forced it against the temple of the woman on top of Mom, and pulled the trigger. My mother—blood and brains sprayed across her bare, heaving chest, across half of her face and pasting her wispy hair to the floor—gazing up into my father’s eyes with that thirsty look. A look which begged my father to deliver her, too.

You did this to her and you *know* it.

No! I thought, watching Dad with his hands raised to his face, like he was begging for mercy. *He didn’t do it! He was here—he came in after Mo’d fallen asleep. I saw him open the door—I saw him! It was one of those evil men with crazy eyeballs and black teeth...*

I felt like someone had taken ahold of my lungs and wouldn’t let go.

Mom's dead. Now, when I go home, I can't say I'm sorry for being embarrassed by how not beautiful she'd become. Because she's dead. She's dead and the last time I saw her, the last time I touched her, I was trying to decide if I hated her or not. If I was going to be like Mo from now on and just ignore everything Mom said. Just act like Mom doesn't exist. Like she never did.

You did this to her and you *know* it.

I wished that he'd lower his hands and explain to us what had happened at the house, how Mom died, but he didn't.

So, all Mo could do was turn to Cass and say, "I hope you're enjoying this," but our aunt was just staring at the floor, shaking her head. Then my sister went to the door, grabbed her backpack, and looked back at me. She said, "Come on, Ann."

"What?" Dad said, finally looking Mo in the face. "What do you mean? Where are you going?"

She ignored him and kept her gaze on me, waiting for me to move. But the worry in Dad's eyes, the sudden jolt of life in his demeanor, immobilized me. He shifted his whole body to face us, switching his gaze from Mo to me. "What is she saying, Ann?"

"We're leaving you," Mo said, "and this *shitty* town so we don't wind up *fucked* like everyone else around here." She took a step towards me, "Get *up*, Ann. You don't want this place. If we go now, we can start all over, leave all this—"

“Hold on,” Dad said, swallowing hard. “Just hold it. We’re going to figure this out together. I know you’re angry—we all are, OK? But you can’t just run away, we need to sit and wait before—”

“No,” Mo said. “We’re not taking that shit from you anymore. We’re not waiting around and pretending it’s all going to be fine. Can’t you see where that’s gotten us? Didn’t it ever occur to you that if you weren’t trying to wait all this out, if you tried *talking* to Mom instead of hiding out here, she could’ve gotten help? We could’ve been sleeping in our own beds and living in our own house—She’d still be *alive!*”

“Don’t say that,” he said, grimacing. “That’s not...just sit down and we’ll—”

“There’s no *we* anymore. That’s all over. *We’re* done with you dragging us around.” She grabbed my backpack from the floor and started shoving what clothes I had lying about into it.

“Wait,” Dad said, hands held out as if to still everything, “Just—hold on! No one’s going anywhere. We’ll find a way for this to work, we can change. This isn’t the time to...*I said, wait, goddamnit!*” He stood up and lunged for the backpack. When she snatched it away from him, he took hold of her arms instead. He made her face him and said, “*I did everything I could to shield you from her, do you hear me? She’d get high no matter what—if not at home then somewhere else. I tried stopping her! Don’t tell me I didn’t try!*” He shook her as his voice croaked, “*What was I supposed to do? Tell me! What should I have done?*”

“*Let go of me!*” Mo shrieked, struggling under his grip.

“How could I have stopped this, Maur? What’s the answer? Should I have shook her around like this? Would it have been that easy?”

Mo continued to thrash out as Dad moved her this way and that. Horrified by his fiery outburst, I found myself wanting nothing more than to escape his presence. Even as I recognized the agony in his contorted face as being of the same kind as Mo’s and mine, the same outrage, seeing it spill out of him now—when it couldn’t do our family any good—was unbearable.

I knew I needed to spring loose from the death-grip of this place. I would follow Mo wherever she went.

I jumped from the bed and over to where Dad was shaking Mo, and I began to beat my fists into his arm, crying, *“Let her go! Let her go!”* And I was surprised and relieved at how quickly he recoiled from my touch and immediately took his hands away, letting them hang awkwardly at his sides. He stepped back with a stunned expression, as if he’d just been broken from a trance and was only now realizing what we were all doing here in this motel room, chests heaving, tears down on our cheeks. The way he looked at me with bloodshot and glistening eyes was all too familiar: it was Mom’s unreturned gaze at the dinner table, at the front step as she watched us drive away, always abandoning her.

“I did everything I could,” he said, shaking his head. “You two need to understand that some people are just beyond saving.”

I couldn’t accept that. I thought of Dad’s newspaper-reading voice. Not even looking up when Mo pretended not to hear Mom’s question. Him sitting at the farthest

end of the table from her, so repulsed by his wife that he couldn't stand to be within a few feet from her. *Your mother asked you a question, Maur.* I thought of how he pushed Mom's arm away as she tried to appeal to his former love for her. How he let her head slide off his thigh. Backing away from his high school sweetheart, whom he'd once praised as if she were the most beautiful person in the world. Whom he used to hold every chance he got, fearing she'd realize the mistake she made by choosing him.

I wanted to tell him so, to repeat everything that Mo just said, but his face made it impossible to speak. My throat was closing up in shame—for Dad, for Mo, for me. For us.

“That's bullshit,” Mo finally said through gritted teeth. “That might be good enough for you, but it's...it's no way to live.”

Dad coughed slightly. Then he sat back down on the bed with his head in his hands. Cass had stood up at some point during all the commotion, and was now between the beds. She gazed at her brother as if she might approach him, but she looked stunned. Disbelieving that Dad could have reached such an animated state, let loose so much pent up emotion.

When it became clear that he'd retreated back into himself and wouldn't respond, Mo took me by the hand and began leading me to the door. I didn't resist. I fought the urge to look back. I was afraid that seeing Dad might immobilize me once more, might allow me to fall back into his trap of denial and hiding away. Because I knew how easy it was to let that consume you, let it seem natural, the only means of escape. That was all this room was. *It's no way to live.* I let these words and my sister's firm grip guide me out

the door. All I wanted was to be carried away from here, from this room. To be at her side and never let go.

Outside, we were met with a white blaze of sunlight and early traffic on the two-lane highway just beyond the green area in front of the motel. I squinted as the light reflected off the layer of dew on cars, the wet blacktop. Water soaked through my shoes as we made our way across the lawn; the added volume made me feel taller, like I was changing shape. We passed through the small stand of hemlocks planted with the purpose of muffling highway noise. The sharp, sweet odor made my eyes water. Looking up, I saw two cardinals hopping from branch to branch, their feathers a brilliant red in the sunlight.

Mo immediately started to wave her hand at the passing cars. The traffic was still pretty light, and we weren't having any takers. I grew nervous, couldn't help but glance back at the motel. The hemlocks blocked my sight of the room. I tried to imagine Dad tearing through them, waving his hands to keep us from leaving. If he actually thought staying was the best thing for us, isn't that what he should have been doing? Shouldn't he have kept hold of Mo and told Cass to pin me down so we couldn't go anywhere?

But he didn't. He didn't because he knew Mo was right. The way he collapsed to the bed and retreated back into himself convinced me of this. He knew, despite his misery, that we couldn't be tethered to him anymore. I imagined Cass sitting with him then, caressing his shoulders for perhaps the first time since they were children, and telling him as much: *They can't stay here. Not after this. Let them find their own way.*

This image made me turn my gaze back to Mo. My only thoughts now were:
Don't leave me behind. Take me with you. Don't leave me.

I rushed to her side and did my best to match the wide sweeping motions of her arms, jumping up and down, and yelling, “*Here! Here!*”

A blue pick-up truck slowed down at the sight of us. It pulled off to the shoulder, blinked its headlights. We hurried down the road to meet it. The passenger-side window was rolled down. The driver was a thin gray-haired man wearing a tan jacket designed with brutal Michigan winters in mind. His brow was furrowed in concern as he looked at us. “What’s wrong, girls? Are you in some kind of trouble?”

“No,” Mo said confidently. “No trouble. We’re just leaving here is all. Starting over.”

“Well,” the man shifted in his seat. He seemed unsure about how to interpret her words. “All right. But you two are pretty young to be skipping town like this. I just have to be sure that your parents know—”

“No parents,” Mo said. “Not anymore.”

The man looked away with a pained expression.

After a moment, Mo stepped forward and continued, “*They left us. And now we’re making a life for ourselves. The first step is hitching a ride. Now, will you let us in and take us out of here, or won’t you?*”

“I mean, if you’re in trouble, if something has happened, I need to know. If—”

“I already told you there’s no trouble,” she bent closer with head in the car. “The only trouble is that we’re ready to start our lives and you’re not letting us.”

“Still—”

“*Listen*, we’re leaving here today whether you take us or not. Someone’s going to see that *we* know what we’re doing. If that someone isn’t you, then tell us and quit wasting our time.”

The man met her gaze. His eyebrows raised slightly and he pursed his lips. Mo’s lips were not quivering like they were back in the room. I was in awe: I’d never seen her look so sure of herself. She looked like what Mom could have looked like. If she’d hit the highway at high school age, had never gotten married or stranded in a small town where it is all too easy to get mixed up with the wrong crowd. If she’d left every temptation behind in the dust.

I stepped forward and took her hand. “She’s right,” I said. “We know what we’re doing.”

The man looked at me and then back at Mo. The sun was rising higher and the road traffic was picking up. The highway was calling. He shook his head, sighed, then reached across the seat to pull up the lock.

CHAPTER 2. WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

The night Mama's friend Lois kept me from entering my own home—blocking my view of the kitchen as she flew down the wood-paneled hallway, me outside with my hand on the screen door knob and her waving her arms to shoo me away, like I was some raccoon on its hind feet looking in and she the unvanquishable housewife with a broom, crying, *No! Wait, Billy! Don't you step in here—just keep there, baby, just—wait!* and me getting out of the way just in time, just before the screen door squealed open and the solid door shut with a thud—I remember thinking clearly that it's because Dad wasn't there that they didn't stop, that they could just go on and on and start using their hands when their screaming words failed them, that Lois was hiding what their hands had done—Mama's and Katie's, that is. She didn't even glance at me as she paced back and forth under the naked back door light. Just whimpered through the hand clasped over her mouth, something like: *Oh, Lord, what did you do, what did you do...*

She kept shaking her head, her braided hair swinging to and fro. As she shook and shook, a pang of embarrassment welled inside me. The way it did when I'd recently caught Mama by surprise in the bathroom—opening the door just as she was getting to her feet in the tub, the bathwater making her pale body all shiny and strange, tiny streams spilling from the dark hair between her legs, one arm across her breasts and the other gesturing for me to *Get out! Get out!* even though I was already well on my way on account of her gritted teeth, the wide, condemning eyes...

I watched the bare lightbulb above Miss Lois, thinking I might escape this poisonous feeling—which for an nine-year-old is still fresh enough to believe it a temporary setback, like stubbing your toe or catching a cold—by focusing all of my

attention on something simple, something unmoving. But seeing the moths bounce off it again and again only compounded my anxiety, the sense that something was happening here that I couldn't turn away from.

I looked back down to see Miss Lois thumbing away the wetness at the edge of her eyes—those wild horse eyes which had begun to dart around us for an answer; she was searching, I knew, for someone to lift me off her hands. But the woods gave back nothing but blackness, cricket racket and the timid cry of jar flies who'd forgotten to go to sleep. And even though Dad's rusted work shed, the short overgrown yard before the sugar trees, and the sigoggin palings that probably couldn't even keep a fat old cow from trespassing on our property offered no consolation, Miss Lois seemed to assess all that our surroundings had to offer before finally fixing her gaze up the ascending gravel driveway—to where her truck was still idling on the main road.

But what was Lois' deal?

Whatever it was, I knew it couldn't be *that* bad. After all, I'd just seen Katie and Lee ball-hooting (as per usual after jawing with Mama) on his ATV down the strip-mine trail, assumed they were heading towards town, or maybe the quarry swimming hole—wherever Lee's friends were prone to hang out. I'd been hiding in my self-designated spot in the woods (under some old tangle of exposed roots right near the trail) to wait out the jawing routine, watching for the ATV headlights to appear, listening for the sound of their laughter over the motor. And, sure enough, they *did* appear, and there *was* laughter—well, at least my sister's excited chatter into Lee's ear as she hugged him from behind. What's more, Mama (from what I saw before Lois came hollering and flailing her

arms at me) looked nice and calm sitting at the kitchen counter, cigarette between her fingers and ready to tell me all about my “spiteful whore” of a sister.

Just as I was about to squeeze on past Miss Lois, she stopped whimpering and snatched my wrist, hissing, “*Billy, Billy, you can’t go in there, your—*” but then she took away her hand with a yelp. When I glanced down I saw under the pale light a bright red smear on my wrist. Miss Lois began wringing her bloody hand into her loose flannel shirt. Her face twitched a bit, seemed to be on the verge of breaking down into tears. But she checked herself and looked back down at the gravel, avoiding my eyes.

“Ma’am,” I said. “Whose blood is this?”

“*Oh, Billy,*” it sounded like something was caught in her throat. She wouldn’t meet my gaze, but she said, “Well, Billy, I ain’t gonna *lie* to you—it’s your mama’s.”

I looked at her. She put her bloody hand behind her and brought her clean hand to her throat, stroking her throat between her thumb and forefinger. I stared at the blood on her gray shirt. I thought, *So that came from Mama.* I looked at my wrist, the red already looking blackish, then met Lois’ gaze.

“So,” I said, “it’s Mama’s. And Katie did it again. Shouldn’t I head in and help her clean up?”

Lois grimaced. When I made a move toward the door, she removed her hand from her throat and lunged for my wrist, twisting me back around and giving me a good shake. “Billy, you don’t—this ain’t the normal cat scratch and run, you understand? Your mama—she, well...”

She'd bent her face close to me now, but her wild eyes were glued to the door, ready—it seemed to me—for it to burst open. I'd never been so close to a crazy woman before (family doesn't count, of course) and I was surprised by my mama's friend's nice aroma—like what I imagined a pineapple cutting factory to smell like; it seemed to come from her nervous white teeth or maybe her neck. It's funny, whenever we used to drive past her little place just a piece up the hill from us—whether she was outside hanging clothes on the line, under the hood of her truck, or letting her weird daughter drag her by the hand around their sloping yard and off into the woods to do God knows what—I'd always been a little scared of her. Maybe it was because there was no man keeping order up there on top of the hill. Just Miss Lois and her little Miss Sylvie—all alone in their little cabin to do as they please. *Just look at what happened when Dad skipped town for one night*, I thought. *Just one night*.

I made another move for the door. But Miss Lois was way ahead of me, bringing the blood-stained hand to my arm to give me another shake. It felt rough and dry. “Listen, Billy,” she said, “I know you wanna see your mama, but you can't. You understand?” She swung her head to look at the door again and one of the braids whipped me across the cheek. It smelled like a spring forest, earthy. And because of the way she was bending down to me—the low cut circle of the shirt was hanging—I could see everything beneath, all the way past the hole of her belly-button to the beginning of her jean shorts.

This was a first also. I fought an urge to grin, to giggle. To enjoy being shook up and down and whipped across the face by this crazy-eyed woman whose smell made my heart feel sugar glazed and whose breasts made me want to slip out of my own t-shirt and jeans to dance around and around into the night.

Where had the embarrassment gone, the dread? At that age—not knowing the name for much of anything—I could only know that something bad fell out of me and something else took its place while under Miss Lois’ grip. What I did know was that this something else—although elusive as trying to grab ahold of a pleasant dream—had something to do with Miss Lois’ chest before me, my nearness to it. Unlike walking in on Mama in the bathroom, there was something magical—something staggering about being exposed to Miss Lois like this.

The only thing that came close was that one airish evening, seemingly so long before, when Dad burst through the front door all of sudden just plum *electrified*—sure, it was the end of his work week at the mill, but this was a man you couldn’t get worked up for *nothing*, much less get him to smile. He began telling all three of us sitting there on the couch and easy chair (Mama and Katie could still sit in the living room together like reasonable human beings back then) how we better get our summer clothes back out because he was driving us way down to Miami Beach and there was nothing we could do or say to change his mind. Then, plopping down between me and Katie on the couch (this was a highly irregular violation of living room protocol as well) he began ruffling my hair and wrapping his other arm around Katie and kissing her on the cheek at the same time. For some reason, he didn’t stop. And I was *glad* he didn’t because he was making us laugh and laugh like it was nobody’s business. When I managed to lift my head far enough from underneath Dad’s hand to look at Mama in the easy chair, I saw the biggest smile (I assumed) that had ever crossed her face with me in the world up to that point, her throat moving up and down because she was chuckling too, tears rushing to her eyes as she stared in amazement at Dad...

It turned out that Dad had a few beers with his work buddies back in town before coming home that night, that he hadn't the slightest clue what our deal was when we woke him up the following morning, talking about a road trip to Florida.

But still, when these things happen—things like Dad's proposal and now Miss Lois' nearness—you feel like you're being presented with some kind of *escape*: a gap in the thornbush, a secret entrance to some underground cave where you can wait all the madness out. That you can enter just as easily as stepping over some scald land and walking into the woods. Somewhere where you can leave behind the hollering and crying in your house and all is quiet—silent even. Where people care about you just because you walked through their door. Let you lay your head on their lap without having to ask...

When I met Miss Lois' eyes, she looked at me like she was perplexed. Then, as if waking up from a trance, I thought: *I must be smiling. I oughta stop that, if Mama's hurting, I oughta go in and get away. Stop smiling. Stop.*

“Well,” I said, “are you gonna let go, ma'am? If Mama's hurting pretty good then I best get in and check on her. She always likes to talk things over after Katie run off—cool down, I guess. I saw Katie and Lee—she done it, right?—I saw them hightailing it on the ATV, all excited and gabby like they won. They *always do*, you know. So I gotta go in and listen to Mama recap it all. She might've worried you just now but we're used to it—Dad and me and Katie, that is. But Dad's got this way of dealing—”

It was then that Miss Lois gave me the roughest shake yet—she was hissing again but I couldn't hear what she was saying and her shirt was flapping open and closed and I *knew* I was smiling then.

Seeing my grin, she tugged me forward. Away from Mama and up our steep gravel road.

“Come on, Billy. You’re coming home with me. Your Mama don’t wanna see you. She called and told me so.” She wasn’t talking to me so much as herself.

We were almost to her truck, and I wasn’t struggling in her grip. She was using the blood-crusty hand now and I kept accidentally brushing against her leg and feeling my heart gain new layers of glaze. I was quite relieved in fact, and this made me feel a little strange—maybe a little guilty on account of the blood. But you have to understand that these fights were as normal as spring rain or the clump of cream on your cherry pie. You’d raise an eyebrow if they *didn’t* come. Besides, these new feelings with Miss Lois were new—and much more exciting.

I looked back at my little house. All the lights were blazing inside, but the curtains were drawn. I didn’t see any movement in there...

Miss Lois gave me a strong tug as we went around to the passenger side. She opened it and waited for me to get in before gently shutting the door. I watched her walk around in front of the glow of the headlights, shaking her head and talking to herself. When she opened her door and scooted in, she said, “Now, don’t gawk, baby.”

I looked at her, and when I saw that she was looking at the backseat, I followed her gaze. I jumped a little. Not two inches from me was the round, questioning face of a little girl, about my age. *Little Miss Sylvie*. Her hair was braided in exactly the same way as her mama’s. She didn’t smell good though—she smelled earthy in a bad way. Like she’d been rolling around in dirt, digging something up. Her eyes and mouth were wide

like her mama's, but not nervous. She seemed fascinated—like she was waiting for me to unveil some big secret I was holding. If I had one I didn't know what it could've been. Not then, anyway.

Miss Lois got us rolling forward. As we turned around the bend, I began to hear sirens and before I knew it, an ambulance and two cop cars came roaring past us to our left. Miss Lois didn't slow down at all but she took her dried bloody hand from the wheel and snatched mine and squeezed it, whispering, "It's okay, honey, it's okay. We're gonna go sleep this one off. Pretty soon, it'll be a bad dream that you've woken up from and it'll all be over—okay, honey?"

She took her hand away and redirected her sad lips and eyes to the wide, ascending road. I'd never been squeezed like that. I felt guilty and warm and something else all at once. But then, from the backseat: "Weren't those pretty swirly colors, Mommy?"

"Hush, baby."

I turned around and glared. But Sylvie didn't budge. Her mouth and eyes were hungry for my secret.

I swiveled forward again, suddenly wishing that I'd been able to get a better look at Mama. But it had to be just some big deal over nothing. Katie and Mama got physical all the time. I looked out the window as we passed Leroy's place. I saw his lanky silhouette in the window as he was drawing aside the blind, and I immediately looked away, embarrassed. I shook my head. If only I'd just peeked in there before Miss Lois

came flailing her arms and kept me outside, before she made me feel these strange new emotions all at once.

*

Miss Lois laid down a sheet on the couch while Sylvie watched from a stool at the kitchen counter. There was no squeezing of hands for me, no *nighty night, honey*. Instead, she came over and took her daughter's hand, and they made their way down the hallway to their separate rooms. Walking hand in hand, they looked like past and future selves of the same girl; I mean, they were wearing the *same* jean shorts, the *same* flannel shirts and braided hairstyle. The only difference, really, was the blood-stained hand. This made me wonder about Sylvie: *When will she start to look like her real self, start hollering at her mama like Katie, smirking at her mama's tears, drawing blood?*

Before detaching from her mama and turning into her room, she shot me a glance. And in the time it took for me to look away and look back again, she'd disappeared.

I sat down onto the couch. Their house was smaller than ours, less gaumed up. They had a little TV across from the couch with a crooked antenna sticking out, a little table by the single window, a stack of old newspapers and firewood by an easy chair. The burning lamp on the table was the only light upon the wood-paneled walls.

Up on the fireboard were two small paintings of what appeared to be the sun rising over some green foothills—both done from the same vantage point—resting side by side against the limestone. One looked pretty good, like you might could think it was a picture if you squinted at it right. The other was way out of whack—the sun crooked as a flannel cake and the bottom half of it crossing through some green swirly lines.

Next to the paintings was a picture of Miss Lois and Sylvie on a sunny, green day. They were smiling with wide mouths, dandelions and sage petals and lilies in their hair, their palms extended to the camera lens and cupping all the leftover flowers that wouldn't fit.

I walked over to the window. The moon was bright, shedding pale light on the trees all around. There were a few lit-up houses in the valley below. I felt a sharp little turn in my stomach when I saw the lights of the ambulance and cop cars at my house. Obscured through the trees, the lights looked like so many firecrackers giving off their temporary, swirling glow.

Way down there. On the verge—I thought, before turning to go back to the couch—but never flickering out.

*

Here's how Dad kept Katie and Mama from killing each other: he'd start fiddling with stuff, just poking around the house.

Katie could get home from anywhere between nine at night and six in the morning; Mama would always be awake and waiting, sometimes smoking at the kitchen counter, sometimes staring out the window with heavy lidded eyes and her arms folded. If it wasn't too late, then Dad would be in his easy chair either watching TV with me or flipping through newspapers, even if he'd already read them. Early in the evening, Mama might even sit on the other end of the couch from me and ask me small stuff like, *What'd you learn at school?* or, *Did you venture through the woods? What'd you find?*

She never looked at me but just smoked and stared at the TV, probably making a list in her head of all the points she'd want to pin Katie with, anticipating every retort. I don't think she even listened to my answers either because one time I said, *Well, today I came upon a crazy bearded guy that hooted at me from up in the trees and when I looked he was munching on all my school books and such and all I could say was ah well.*

Mama just smoked, studied the Clorox ad as if it contained the secret to cleansing Katie's devilment once and for all; I looked to see if Dad heard but he just stared at the TV too. And if I looked at him for too long he'd shrug his shoulders and say—without lifting his eyes from the TV—*Why don't you go grab a Co'-cola and settle down a bit, Bill? Or go for 'nother 'venture up the woods. You're wearing ever'body out.*

The sun coming through the window would hit him where he sat those summer evenings. It would come out of nowhere—I mean, you could look away one minute and the next he'd be shining like a solemn, slouching saint. His gold hair springing from his head like a lion's, his pouting lips all contemplative-like, his bushy eyebrows dignified. It was when he glowed in the sunlight like that that I wished he loved me. That I knew what to do to get him to.

Anyway, Katie would usually get home in the dead of night. I'd be off in my room, Dad'd be snoring in his across the hall, and you'd know Katie was home when the front door squeaked open and yelped shut. Followed by some soft talking which through my shut door sounded no different than the muffled voices coming from the black and white detective shows that Dad liked. It was during this soft back and forth that my heart punched my chest like crazy—punched and punched because it knew what was going to happen next.

W-whap! (Mama's hands smacking the kitchen counter) then *sca-reeeeech* (Mama's stool scraping back on the floor) and, *You think I don't know what that smell is?* and then, *Aw, Mama* (Katie's condescending, smiley voice), and Mama's growling while Katie opened the fridge and clicked open a beer. And then the coyote yapping. That was Lee; he often came to watch from the doorway, to giggle and whoop and cheer Katie on. When *he* started making noise, I knew Mama was chasing Katie through the house—the latter holding her beer in the air and laughing like a happy baby when Mama tried to snatch it from her but couldn't reach. This is about the time that Dad's door would creak open. Hearing his heavy steps go past my door and down the hallway, I knew it was okay for me to slip out from beneath the covers and come watch.

That's when Dad's fiddling, his poking around, worked their magic. When I came out to the living room, the first thing I'd see is Mama pointing her finger and cussing at my sister (there wasn't much logic behind the hollering by this point) from behind the counter to where Katie would either be turning the knob on the TV and saying, *Aw, what's wrong, Mama? Can't you take a joke?* or—if Lee was there—sucking his mouth while making *mmmmm* sounds and groping him like crazy.

What did Dad do? He'd take a seat at his little work desk beside the TV, flick on the bendy light, slide on the funny magnifying glasses which made his eyes look three times bigger, and start tinkering with a watch or the door handle or Mama's broken necklace—whatever the hell he could find to poke his pliers into. Once—over multiple sittings—he even managed to *fix* something: a dinged-up violin he'd found lying in the middle of the road on his way home from the mill. He adjusted the strings, replaced the pegs, polished the wood—everything. All accomplished during these jawing matches.

Anyway, he didn't say *nothing*—he just worked. And even though Katie and Lee continued to suck at each other's faces while Mama called her names, you could tell that they felt Dad's presence. They reacted to it—the unwavering concentration of his poking/fiddling/tinkering was distracting; Mama would glance over at him when she had to take a breath; Katie would notice him when she changed sucking positions on Lee's face.

Suddenly—like someone unscrewed a cork on top of our house—the heat began to leave the room. Mama would take her seat at the kitchen counter and massage the top of her nose with her thumb and forefinger. Katie would release her tongue from Lee's and they'd whisper to each other, take a seat on the couch, or leave to go to his place. Sometimes, Lee would notice me watching from the hallway, smile that funny smile that Mama called a “jackass delinquent's” and say, *How's it hanging, little player?*

He'd come over to lower his fist for me to punch. When I saw Mama glaring at him, I was afraid to give him the punch, but I wanted to. Because even though he was a jackass for licking my sister and making her smelly, I still liked him. His buzzed head and hairy armpits that smelled like sweat. His baggy pants stuffed with things.

And of course I thought Katie was becoming pretty in the leather jacket Lee had bought her, the jean shorts riding up her waist. Her dark hair tucked behind her ears or hiding her big, black-rimmed eyes.

“Hey, shit-squirt,” Katie would say, smirking. “Didn't see you there.”

*

The night Miss Lois kept me from entering the house was different, of course. Because Dad was off in Knoxville. For a “job interview.” So when the hollering got to the point of counter slapping and beer chasing and coyote yapping and face sucking—there was no one there to tinker away everyone’s nerves, to poke out the heat.

I was in my room—heart punching my ribs like I was the one to blame—when I heard a glass shatter in the kitchen. Then, from Mama: *You ungrateful slut! Look at what you done!*

Instead of laughing like a happy baby, my sister yelled back: *You sad old withered cunt—look at you shaking in your granny bathrobe!*

Then, over the sound of broken glass under shoes: *You could use a drink, Mommy—don’t you think she could use a drink, Lee?*

Lee said, *Yeah she could use that—some dope and some D too.*

And Mama said: *You two oughta be locked up and made a lesson of. Good God—don’t look at me with those eyes! Don’t you grin at me, you monster!*

The sound of boots on broken glass.

Don’t look at me!

That’s when I thought, *Well, Dad ain’t about to walk out of his room, what are you waiting for?*

So, I got out from under the covers and opened the window to the cricket swollen blackness and pulled up the screen. I felt the prick of a mosquito on my neck right away but I didn’t squish it—I let it take my blood.

After I put my left leg out, my right followed, and once I was all the way out my heart quit punching me.

Even when I heard another glass break.

I just walked across our side yard and into the woods, my chest sore but feeling better. The moonlight was bright enough. I had no trouble seeing.

*

I woke to the sound of muffled arguing, like from behind a wall. I drew the blanket away and opened my eyes. I was met by an upside down face: wide jawline, big blue eyes, smiling lips, braided hair. A miniature Miss Lois.

I sat up with delayed shock, almost bonking heads with her. Then I crawled to the other end of the couch and felt hot in the face, trying to gather my bearings. I thought: *Why's this girl got me in her house? Why ain't I in mine?*

Then, it came to me—the murky accumulation of feelings and images from the night before, a sense of dread. But I knew Mama was prone to telling tall tales about what Katie's done to her. She must've stepped on some glass and bloodied herself a bit, called Miss Lois crying bloody murder so she'd get some sympathy and get Katie and Lee in trouble. That's what I told myself.

Sylvie backed away and sat on the edge of the easy chair, shooting her eyes from me to the door. On the other side, there was the familiar sound of a woman lecturing. I went to the window, looked to the right at the front step where two cops were standing with Miss Lois. One was the old sheriff that you'd see at Denny's if you happened to be

driving into town before noon just about any day of the week. If you went in to eat yourself, you'd surely make his acquaintance—if he didn't already know you and everybody in your family, that is—as he made his rounds from booth to booth, joking with everyone's kids, asking dads about the job, telling mamas to always be their *smart self*.

Everybody thought it was a hilarious thing to do to make fun of him, mimic him and such, but I thought that got old quick. I think that deep down some of these people were jealous, embarrassed, ashamed—whatever you want to call it—because they weren't capable of the kind of honest-to-God generosity that he carried with him when he went to work everyday. Or because he made it seem easy. Like it came naturally—like it wasn't even work at all.

I always liked him, for what it's worth, and seeing him here at Miss Lois' doorstep comforted me. Made me think that he was about to enter the house, smile at me, say, *Come over here and set with me on the couch for a spell, Bill. You ain't in trouble or nothing, don't be afraid*. Then he'd get down to telling me about how this was all *right smart nonsense*. How what *really* happened is that Mama had a little spill, but she's all right and ready for me to come home. Then he'd say I have something on my shirt, point at it, and then flick my chin as I looked down. He'd burst out laughing and wheezing like it was the first time anybody ever fell for that trick, and I'd look up to see Miss Lois chuckling and looking nice and relieved because she was wrong.

Well—for now, anyway—she was still waving her hands at him like she did at me the night before. But he wasn't smiling. He looked hot. He held one hand was palm

outward to Miss Lois and he said, *Miss, er, Miss—please, Miss*, but Mama’s friend just kept lecturing at him in a high pitched voice.

When I pressed my cheek to the glass I could see her face; it looked sad, scared and exasperated all at once. From this vantage point, I also got a better look at the other cop. Though he was much younger and must’ve been the sheriff’s underling, he appeared much more composed—tranquil even. Maybe it was because of his aviator sunglasses, but he didn’t appear to flinch whatsoever as Miss Lois thrust her finger inches away from his face; he just clenched his prominent jaw muscles. He was extremely slender, had a military haircut (completely buzzed on the sides but lengthy and combed over on top) which made his face appear strikingly long. But, seeing his large, bony hands resting on his police belt, his massive thumbs poking through the belt loops of his beige uniform pants—I suddenly realized that I’d *seen* this cop before. Not from afar, but from a point of view even closer than this.

Before I could make the connection, Miss Lois swung around and opened the door. She made her way across the room and squatted so she was eye to eye with Sylvie, who was still in the easy chair. Taking her daughter’s hands in her own, she said, “Listen to the policeman, baby. Don’t give him trouble. I’ll be right back.”

She kissed Sylvie on the cheek, and then got up to leave. She didn’t even glance at me as she crossed the room, just kept her eyes to the floor. Like she was ashamed or felt guilty.

She walked past the two men—one sweaty, the other looking unfazed by any of this—down to the cop cars parked on the road. The sheriff scratched his neck and looked

down at Miss Lois, who was waiting by the cars with her hands on her hips. He looked inside the house, but, much to my disappointment, avoided my gaze. Then he looked back down at Miss Lois. Like he wasn't quite sure what the protocol was. The other cop whispered something into his ear. In response, the sheriff waved his hands and said, "Alright, alright. Christ have mercy, alright."

He sighed and walked down toward the cars.

The other one stepped into the house and shut the door. Letting out a sighing whistle, he stamped his boots on the mat and shook his head. Then, turning to face us, he took off his sunglasses and slid them into his shirt pocket. I wish he would've kept them on because I didn't like the way his eyes shot back and forth between me and Sylvie. He reminded me of this rattlesnake that used to sit in the middle of the forest path and would just stare at you and not let you pass.

And with *this*—the unmasking of his face, the wily movement of his eyes—I realized why I recognized him: he used to be among the group of buddies that Lee brought to our doorstep, back when they were in high school. I never learned his name—and he was more unkempt then, his hair shaggy and clothes threadbare—but I remembered him now as the one (I watched the group from my bedroom window) who always managed to piss somebody off before they drove off again on their ATVs and dirtbikes. I mean, he just couldn't pass up a chance to start something—slapping Coke clean out of your hand, jumping up to put fullback types in a headlock (despite being the skinniest guy out there), whooping in their ear as he swung at their head and tried to tip them backwards. One time, he managed to throw one of our metal chairs so hard that it

shattered the light fixture on the front of our house, and dented the door so good that Dad had to put extra insulation around it because it never closed right afterward.

Another time—and this the reason I bothered to distinguish him from Lee's other buddies at all, why I felt the reassurance of the sheriff's presence, the security of my hateful thoughts and fantasies vanish as he stood there staring at us—he wouldn't stop touching Katie.

It started out like some kind of game. It was a late summer evening; Katie and Lee were leaning on his ATV with their backs to me as I watched from the window. They must've only recently started going out together because they were hardly touching, Lee's arm just resting lazily behind her back. Without warning, this skinny guy started doing a shuffling-twirling dance past them—moving back and forth across the front yard. He was shirtless, his ribs visible through pallid skin as he tripped continually over himself, his mud-caked jeans. Though his long hair concealed much of his face, I managed to catch glimpses of his eyes as he spun, the way they rolled around as if he'd slipped into a reverie. I could see his mouth clearly; his lips spread apart, the top and bottom rows of teeth clenched together, grinding as he danced.

The other guys that were standing around either drinking or leaning on their ATVs across the yard started to hush, to nudge each other and point at the one dancing. And this must've been the cue he was waiting for—this undivided attention. Because his next time across the yard, just as he was about to pass Katie and Lee, he took a long side-step towards them and—without interrupting the pace of his twirling even slightly—jabbed Katie in the ribs with both thumbs.

She jolted backwards and slid off the ATV a little, started shaking; whether from shock or laughter, I couldn't tell. Anyway, when she took her place again next to Lee, they both turned their heads to watch the one dancing, as did everyone else.

But he wasn't done yet; coming back across the yard, he poked her again. She must've anticipated it this time, for she hugged her arms and twisted away from him when he made contact. All of Lee's buddies were grinning—some began to chuckle and cat-call. This invigorated him; he crossed the yard again, his movements quickened. Now, he used his whole palms to grasp Katie's chest. She sat as still as she could, holding herself, sliding down and getting back up again as he pushed her harder, as he groped more of her. And all of this time she's shaking and I can't tell if it's from laughter, from fear, or from pain. Lee's head just followed the one dancing, not doing anything, his muscular arms resting all useless in his lap as his skinny friend pushed my sister farther and farther down into the ground.

Why don't she run away? I remember thinking. Why'd she bring them here? Why can't she come in here and promise me and Mama she won't talk to them or listen to them or look their way ever again?

Yet there was a part of me who wanted to laugh along with Lee's buddies, to cheer the dancing one on. And it turned out that this part of me was bigger than that which wanted to see Lee grab his skinny friend and wrestle him to the ground, to shut everybody up.

For I started to giggle. To imagine that I was one of the guys watching somebody else's girlfriend get teased and humiliated. That I was the dancing one—spinning around

and getting so dizzy that the house and trees and people's faces all blurred together, everyone hooting, no one stopping me as I grabbed this girl's chest and pulled her shirt down. Thinking about how I was going to be one of them one day, free to touch girls in whichever way I wanted, to fly away into the woods on my own ATV whenever an angry grownup came out to yell at us—I just cracked up.

Pretty soon, I was howling along with them from behind my window, smacking my knee and feeling tears come to my eyes because of laughter.

When I heard the floorboards creak under my bedroom doorway, I turned around. It was Mama. She was wearing a short-sleeve blouse, the jeans she'd soon stop wearing because of weight gain. She had curlers in her hair, fresh red nail-polish on, red lipstick which had stained the cigarette between her fingers. She must've been in the process of fixing herself up for some reason, like she was getting ready to go out, but I don't remember her ever leaving that night.

Right then, anyway, she was staring into my eyes with an expression of complete passivity. I wish she would have hollered in my face, twisted my ear, and struck my bare buttocks with her belt if she had to punish me—*anything* but look at me this way. Maybe she'd gotten dressed up, applied the makeup and cosmetics because she *herself* was frightened by her face, its stark desolation. By how it clashed horribly with her usual combative self, with the incessant jeering in our front yard.

Lee's skinny-dancing-friend-turned-police walked over to where I was standing at the window to watch the sheriff's car roll away. After they disappeared around the bend, he pulled the curtains shut—making the room dark. He sauntered over to the easy chair

and shooed Sylvie away like she was a cat, twisting the lamp on and collapsing into the cushioned chair in one easy movement.

We stared at him—me still at the window and Sylvie on the couch. He began unbuttoning his beige, short sleeve uniform, revealing a perfectly white wife beater. Then he took a cigarette and lighter from his pocket. He lit it, breathed it in and out. He looked at me and grinned.

“If your family ain’t the department’s biggest pain in the ass then I don’t know what is,” he let out smoke through his nostrils. “Well, Lee too, I guess.”

I had trouble looking him in the face. “Is my mama...all right?”

He raised his eyebrows. After a few seconds he took another drag. In a pre-exhale voice: “Is your mama all *right*? Did she *look* all right to you?”

“I don’t know,” I shrugged. “She was just setting there from what I could see. Miss Lois wouldn’t let me in.”

He exhaled. “She didn’t bother to let you in on your mama’s condition, huh?”

I shook my head. “I saw some blood.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Shoulda been a whole *lot* more blood by the way your Miss Lois was going on and on about it on the phone. You know—I been on the force for four years now and I ain’t seen *nothing* worth talking about. Domestic disputes? *Pleeese*. I mean—these parts used to attract some *real bad dudes*. I’m talking regular shoot outs. Bank robberies. Bodies in the river daily. Like you’d ‘spect to get massacred eating your fucking breakfast. A diner’s worth—*BOOM!*” he clapped his hands, “*splattered* on the

tables. *Large* scale slaughter—could be some nut passing through. But it might could be your next door neighbor, too. You were *always* in the line of fire. Today? Well...”

I waited for him to continue, but I didn't want him to. I looked over at Sylvie, was a little surprised to see her staring at the floor, breathing heavily through flared nostrils. I looked back at the cop. He was gazing at Sylvie with dim eyes, thin lips which weren't quite smiling, but looked amused somehow. Like he was watching a cat dream.

“So Mama's just a little not right?” I blurted. “I mean, what's going on? Where's Katie—she done it, right? Is Dad back? He wouldn't a called no one—he wouldn't a needed to. Is he home—can I go home?”

He sighed, flicked the cigarette into a coffee cup. Then, he looked up and pointed his finger at me. “Now, don't you go all apeshit on me, little man. You think I won't use *this*—or *these*?” He bent forward and rattled the night stick and cuffs on his belt. “If you want up-to-date answers you're just gonna have to wait for your Miss Lois to come back and fill you in. Shit. She sure is a bossy bitch, ain't she?”

He smiled at Sylvie, who'd begun wringing her hands.

“She sure is fine, though,” he continued, gesturing at the picture on the fireboard. “For a mother, that is. But hey, she's got nothing on your sister.” He sucked air through his teeth and shook his head at me. “*Wooo baby*, she's grown into a fine *woman!* I gotta tell you lil Bill, when Lee started taking her out with the gang to go drinking and do stupid shit in the quarry—she woulda been, what, like fourteen? And we just outta high school—I'd look at her setting all coy next to him. Hardly opened her mouth except to smoke our dope. Never looked at the fellas. Skinny as shit—no tits to speak of. I'd pull

Lee aside—I'd say, 'Bro, shouldn't we pick on pussy our own size?' and he'd grin that grin of his and say, 'Aw man, you just wait—just watch,' and *woooo mama* was he right! Seemed like overnight she showed up with her tongue a-swirling in her lips, filled in in all the right places. Ready to take us *all* on. But Lee'd keep his arm around her—he saw us running our eyes up and down her legs. Shit...*Smartest bastard of us all.*

“Well, until last night, at least. That wasn't so smart. Who knows, maybe he'll redeem hisself, get out of town, settle down someplace. But hey, if *I* could be the one to bring them into the station, hold Katie's arms behind her back—his too—have them bent over side by side on my car. Read them their rights... That makes me hot to think about.”

There was a poisonous feeling in my belly. I shifted a little where I was standing, getting dizzy. Part of me wanted to tell him to shut up, to say I knew who he really was. But that part remained silent.

He looked over at the kitchen. Then at Sylvie. “Your mama got any beer here, little sister?” When I looked over, I saw that she was staring at me. Breathing hard.

He leaned forward, whispered: “*Hey.*” She glared at him. “Is there beer in that fridge over there?”

She shook her head.

“Bullshit.” He sighed and stood up. Swung his legs over toward the kitchen, walking around the counter. Halting before the fridge against the wall to the right, he looked back at Sylvie. “If there's a single can in here, I'm gonna cuff you to lil Bill there and only let you go if you kiss him. I ain't playing.”

He opened it. I couldn't see inside the fridge, just the yellow glow on his face. After bending his head to check all the shelves, he bit his tongue between his teeth and raised his upper lip. He slammed the door shut, then walked over to the stool at the kitchen counter. "That's the problem with a manless household." He looked at me. "Well, one."

Sylvie started whispering to herself, pulling at her fingers one by one.

"Hey," the cop said, glaring at her, "stop that."

She picked up her legs and buried her face into them, rocking back and forth, whispering louder.

"*Hey!*" He slammed his fists on the counter. She ducked her head and scurried over next to me. He looked at us, making a snarling expression so we could see his top row of teeth.

After a moment, he let his lip fall and furrowed his eyebrows. He snorted, "You know, I wouldn't stand so close to him if I were you, little sister. Might catch his family's disease." He looked at me. "You still wanna know what Lee and Katie done to your Mama, lil Bill? What we walked into just a few hours ago?"

I didn't want to know anymore. It occurred to me that maybe I never did.

"When Sheriff and me stepped into your house—we went in through the back door because the front was locked, I was all for kicking down the door but Sheriff's boring as hell and never wanna offend anyone—well, when we walked all the way around and saw your Mama just setting at the counter, I said, '*Fuck* me—gory emergency

my ass.’ And Sheriff swiped his face and said, ‘pew,’ like the fat queasy bastard that he is. But when we took a few steps forward, crunching our boots ’cross the glass, I have to admit that I was taken off guard by what happened next, what I saw.”

Sylvie snatched my hand into her own. It was clammy and small. I turned my head to her and thought I ought to get angry and shove her away, but that’s not what I felt. It made me feel warmer, calmer. Like the harder she squeezed the slower my heart got. I looked back at the cop. He was grinning and tapping his finger on his chin.

“How do I tell you what happened next so you feel what I felt, lil Bill? You kinda had to be there, but—” he glanced down at the counter. “Ah! Look at this—this counter’s a lot like yours, ain’t it? And where you’re standing is about how far I was when we started crunching over the glass. Here!” he scooted away the stuff on the counter and pulled over the stool. He sat down and slouched just like Mama—his long spine shaped like a shepherd’s crook, head bent and buried in his left armpit, palms down on the counter. “When I say so, start walking towards me, alright? I’m gonna *show* you how it was. Exactly how it went down.”

I nodded. My hand was shaking. But then I thought, *Maybe it’s her hand that’s shaking*. Anyway, I felt ashamed. *Dad’s hands never shake for nothing*. I thought once more that I ought to slip my hand from her grip. *Crazy whispering girl, you’ve got nothing to do with me*. Then I thought about how she was the luckiest person alive to be a little girl and to have Miss Lois for her mama and no one else to share the house with. To be walked to her bed every night. To be able to open her mama’s door and find her sleeping in her bed. To slip under the covers with her and snuggle up to her legs—no big man to stop her. Watch her dream.

“Alright,” he said into his armpit. “Start walking, lil Bill. Walk slow, but not *too* slow—like you figure there’s nothing to worry about, but you gotta do your job. Remember—you’re a cop.”

I started to walk, and Sylvie followed close behind—her hands enclosing mine like a clammy cocoon. I wondered if he just wanted me to walk or her too. I figured that if I broke the rules of his game, we’d stop and I’d never find out what happened.

When we were past the couch, a few feet from him—I started to think about the night before. One leg inside my window, one leg out. Crunching glass. *You oughta be made an example of.* Did Katie and Lee come to the house with a plan? How were they looking at you, Mama? *Don’t look at me with those eyes!* But they were playing, Mama, they knew when to stop—they wouldn’t hurt you. *Don’t look at me!* We could just imagine Dad is here to calm us down, to draw your eyes away so pretty soon we can all go home, go back to bed. *Don’t you grin at me, you monster.* And me stepping into the swollen cricket blackness and the moon lighting my way. The second crash.

What if *I* would’ve walked into the room—would that have done the trick? Would they have left Mama fuming in the corner and come over to give me their fists to punch? Didn’t Lee promise he’d take me out for a ride with them one day? Would that have been the night—when Dad wasn’t there? Would I have listened to Mama if she said, *Don’t you go with them, Billy—if you go with them, I’ll stop being your mama forever. You’ll be dead to me...?*

Moving towards this cop, playing his game, I believed with all my heart that these questions would be answered. That if what happened next could startle him, it would

swallow me whole. His head was buried in his armpit and I waited for him to give further instructions, to prepare me, but nothing came. I thought, *It's still hiding. It could still be nothing.*

So when the cocoon tightened around my hand and tugged, I followed it. I let it pull me across the room and through the door and out into the blinding light, our legs like wheels down the grassy hill, the sharp turn right, a path visible through the woods—*away! away!*—to where there are no sounds but jar fly music, no colors but tree shades, where our heads knew how to dodge, barefeet to plant, heart happy to quicken, down the hill, away from our homes, hand trapped—led by this *weird whispering girl*—away into the woods—*away.*

*

After a while, it became hard to tell where the path was. Sylvie still hadn't let go of my hand, so I had to keep her pace—often running into her and almost toppling over—but she knew how to avoid falling. Once we slowed to a walk, I started thinking about the cop, looking behind and ahead. Waiting for him to appear.

I didn't recognize this part of the woods at all. I could hear a distant highway, but there was no sign of civilization about—no houses or anything. All my thoughts were catching up with me at once; just as we were about to walk over the rocks of a stream, I yanked my hand out of hers. She took a couple steps onto the rocks, holding her hand out like she didn't know what to do with it, then looked back at me with her wide, searching eyes.

“You know,” I said, “maybe I should’ve stayed back there. I dunno where we’re going right now.”

She brought her hands to her elbows and looked into the water running past her feet.

“I mean,” I said, “what if I wanna know about my mama? How am I supposed to go home now? *You* don’t gotta worry about this stuff like me. *Your* mama’s just fine and she’ll come home tonight to tuck you in and she might spank you for running off, but tomorrow you and her will be back to normal. I mean—I don’t even know where my mama is or what they’re all trying to tell me back there. Like Katie did *something*, right? But if she run off for good how will I know for sure she done anything at all?”

I let myself fall into the dirt, scratching my skin all over like it was covered in ants. I knew my eyes were welling up, but I didn’t care if she saw. The day before I would have, but not that day.

“I could’ve stayed and found out either way,” I cried. “I just don’t know *nothing!*”

That’s when we heard it. At first I thought it was a cat meowing—a kind of rising and falling siren call against a predator. But it was so, so loud—cutting through the trees from farther down the hill and above the trickle of the stream. And broken up by huffing sounds. So I thought of a baby.

Seeing Sylvie start to run along the stream, I scrambled to my feet and did my best to keep up. We followed the left side of the water, dropped farther and farther down the valley until the wail seemed to hit us from all directions at once. I tripped on a root,

tumbled to my hands and knees. Looking up, I saw Sylvie crouching behind a boulder in a little rise to the left.

She was gesturing for me to come over.

Climbing up the rise with my hands and feet, I noticed that Sylvie had a finger to her mouth, meaning for me to keep quiet. So I carefully made my way up to her. I slid up to her side, and we both looked down from the boulder's edge.

The river rolled below, snaking across the valley. It was loud with rushing water bouncing off rocks, alive with swirling white waves moving across. When Sylvie pointed down at the bank to our right, I saw them.

Katie and Lee. They were sitting not too far away beneath some shade with their backs to us, on a little sandy mound just before the water. She had her head buried in his armpit now, so the wail couldn't reach up the hill—just land muffled into his chest. He was on the right, his left arm wrapped around her narrow shoulders, the other under her head—like he was gently trying to lift it up. His low voice was murmuring down to her. I felt an urge to get closer, to hear, but then I thought that if I heard then I might know everything. And if *they* heard *me*, they just might take me away with them, away to wherever they were going to run off to next. Take me away, to make sure I never said anything to anyone about what I knew.

So I stayed up there with Sylvie safely hid behind our boulder. Watched my sister and Lee. I thought about how I loved them, or seeing them made me want to, made me want them to know. I never saw them this close to each other and *not* putting on a show

for Mama—not kissing and touching and laughing just so Mama would go crazy, making her stay up smoking well into the night with the thought of them barging into the house.

But here, they were just leaning into each other, surrendering to what was to come. I thought, *Why couldn't they be like this at home? Why'd they come home at all?*

“You ain't gonna tell on them,” Sylvie whispered, “are you?”

I looked at her, was about to say, *Of course I'm gonna tell.* But then I thought, *I don't even know what to tell about. What do I even know?*

I turned my back on the rock and let myself slide a little. Looked up at the tree branches above—green leaves against a cloudless sky, bugs and birds darting.

I thought: When I get home I'm gonna see Dad's car in the driveway, and I'm gonna open the front door and see Mama and Dad sitting on the couch. They're gonna turn and look at me and make their eyes bright and mouths wide for me because they thought that maybe I ran off from them like Katie done but I didn't and I'm not. I'm gonna run over to where Mama's sitting and holler ‘I'm here! I'm here!’ and Mama will say ‘O thank God! My Billy is here!’ and I'll jump up and bury my head in her neck and wrap my arms around her and hug her and she'll be alright by then because Dad will have already taken care of her, released the heat, stuffed the wound shut. And I'll look at Dad and he'll smile at me with the sun on his face and his hair like a lion's.

And later in the night we'll sit and talk, maybe watch some TV. We won't bring up Katie and Lee and Mama's face will be sleepy and content. She'll rouse from being sleepy and say, ‘I love you, Billy,’ smile and then let her face get sleepy again. And Dad won't have to tinker tonight. We'll all just sit around until we're ready for bed. And when

Mama says, ‘Okay,’ we’ll help her to her room—me holding her on one side and Dad on the other—and lay her onto the bed, spread the covers up to her chin. And before leaving to go to my room, Dad will pat me on the back and smile down on me and when I slip under the covers of my bed I’ll still feel where his hand touched my shoulder and it’ll bloom all through the night and into the morning when I wake with the sun...

I looked over at Sylvie. I couldn’t help but notice how pretty her wide eyes were as she returned my gaze. She was smiling like she knew what I was thinking, what I’d just seen in my mind. When she took my hand and led me back up the hill along the stream—leaving Katie and Lee behind—I followed.

CHAPTER 3. GUTS

Tom felt a wave of nausea as he watched his father kneel behind the deer, take its tail with his left hand, and with the other start cutting a coring ring around the anus. “You don’t want to puncture the colon. That can taint the meat.”

Tom nodded, twisting his thumb. His father groaned as he positioned the deer on the grassy slope, belly up with its head elevated. He looked at Tom and told him to come on. But Tom was unsure if he could handle what his father wanted him to do. His father waited, his orange vest glinting in the early morning light.

As they entered the trailhead the afternoon before, his father had warned Tom that he would have to assist in field dressing the deer. Tom said, “Yes, sir,” knowing that it was an order, that when the time came his father wouldn’t forget. So as his father walked ahead of him on the trail, Tom made silent prayer to the wind, to the trees, to the deer themselves, that they would just stay away. He kept saying it as they set up camp at the top of the ridge, as they sat at the small fire, ripping away bites of tough jerky. When night fell, his father told Tom to follow to him to the clearing, where he directed him to turn his gaze up to the sky, to the stars. He followed the tip of his father’s finger as he pointed out the North star, the Big and Little Dippers. He explained how to orient himself if he were to become lost on a clear night. It was strange for Tom to hear his father use fantastic sounding words like *constellations*, *Orion*, and *Pleiades*. Though his voice wasn’t wistful or inspired, for Tom knew he was merely imparting survival skills, he was taken off guard by the fact that his father had access to such an elaborate and hidden story. But with the mention that Orion had a belt, a sword, a shield, and that he was

fending off a giant bull, Tom was reminded of the earlier warning. The prayer once again took hold of him: Let the deer stay away, just stay away.

Now, after his father managed to shoot and kill a deer shortly after they woke up, Tom cursed the prayer for failing him. He slowly approached, joining his father where the deer lay on the slight incline. His father spread the hind legs, then told Tom to keep them apart to hold the body in place. He grabbed the skin where it formed a V between the rear legs, and cut a shallow 1-inch slit through the skin. He told Tom to switch spots with him, which he did, taking the knife from his father's hand. When he told him to cut open the belly, starting with the incision he'd made, then all the way up to the breastbone, Tom looked up at his father with wide eyes.

“Do it,” he said.

“I mean,” he said, trying to still his shaking legs, “what if I mess it up?”

His father just stared at him. His winter hat was pulled down to his eyes, leaving them in shadow.

After a few seconds of this, Tom looked down. He tried to ignore the deer's twisted neck. The black pools of the its eyes. The tongue bulging out of the side of its mouth just under where the man was squatting. He held the knife unsteadily, then decided on clutching it with both hands. He inserted it gently into the hole his father had made.

“Hold the knife so the blade is facing up. Or else you'll slice through her organs.”

Tom cut slowly upward, fighting the urge to shut his eyes. His father stood up and walked around the deer to stand behind him. He saw his father's tall shadow cover both

himself and the animal. He made slow progress, for he kept having to look away. He felt the knife come to a halt when it met the resistance in the deer's upper chest. He stopped, then turned around to look up at his father, blocking the sun from his eyes with his hand.

“You need to straddle her. Get through that ribcage.”

Tom shook his head, held the knife up to his father. “I can't do it. You take it.”

His father shook his head and pointed at the deer again. “Straddle her.”

Tom felt his chest tighten. He looked back down at the deer. He rose up and walked over it awkwardly with widely spaced legs. Being right above the contorted face and neck, and inhaling fresh stench of its insides, gave him another rush of nausea. He bent down and reinserted the knife, trying to keep his face averted as much as possible. Started rocking into it, feeling ridiculous as his father watched.

He felt his arm be grabbed from behind, a boot hit his lower back, making him fall to his knees. His father took hold of Tom's scalp and lowered his head to within an inch of the deer's protruding tongue. Held it there as he squirmed, pleading to be let go.

He took his hand away, making Tom fall into the animal. He pushed himself up and out of the still warm insides, let the knife fall from his hand. Took off running across the clearing, slipping in the dewy grass. He didn't dare look back until he was safely under the cover of the woods. Pushing his way through the brush, he felt thorns pierce and pull at his jacket and pants, scraping his neck and face. When the pain became too much he settled on a spot and crouched down, swiveling around to face the clearing.

Peeking through a gap in the honeysuckle, he looked across the glistening tall grass, saw that his father was deep inside the deer's chest to his bare forearm. Tom recalled the field dressing steps, figuring that if his father had his arm in there, then must have already cut the diaphragm and severed the windpipe. With these tasks done, he knew what was coming and he didn't want to see it. He dropped back down to a low squat, burying his face into his arms as he hugged his knees.

He waited for whatever sound might be made when his father removed the deer's heart, liver, lungs, intestines, stomachs, and bladder. His father told him it all comes out clean with one long, strong pull on the windpipe, though Tom had never witnessed it. He now imagined a constellation of innards, linked top to bottom, designed to be ripped away. To be uprooted and left in a stinking pile.

With his head in his arms, Tom realized that he was still inhaling the stench of the deer, and that his jacket was smeared with blood. He tried balling up his sleeve and rubbing it off the orange vest and plaid material, but the reek lingered. He took some wet leaves in his arms and patted them against his chest and face. Yet even the earth wasn't enough to squelch it, so he let the leaves fall and reassumed the squat.

"Tom," his father called. He wasn't pleading, and there wasn't regret in his voice. There was just the command to come out, to give him a hand. Which he would.

If he'd just stop shaking.

*

Tom wasn't sure who his dad wanted him to be, what kind of man he aimed to shape out of him. He figured that his father merely wanted to reproduce himself in his

son, the only other male in their family of three, which consisted of the two of them and his older sister, Kathleen. His mother left them when he was too young to remember; he was two, Kathleen, seven. This absence was total: he hadn't seen or heard from his mother since the day she left. There were times when he felt it so acutely that he couldn't help but ask his father about her—where she was, what she was like—even as he would tell him quietly, but sternly, not to do so. Yet there were also times when Tom would press his father a little too much, or ask when he was in an irritable mood. In those cases, he would snatch Tom's wrist, say, "Repeat to me what I told you about this." He'd squeeze harder as Tom struggled, only letting go once he received the answer he wanted: "She isn't here. There's only us."

He received similar treatment from Kathleen, save for the violence. She followed in their father's example of silence about their mother, though he felt her avoidance was tinged with sadness rather than anger. He couldn't remember his mother, and he wasn't allowed to. Her absence hung like a shroud over his life.

*

One day in midwinter, his father stepped into his room at four in the morning. He had fishing poles in one hand, cooler swinging in the other. The bare hallway bulb blazed behind his giant silhouette topped with a furry ear flap hat. He said, rather than asked, "Why aren't you dressed?"

Tom did as he was told, he never disobeyed. He shot out of bed, slipped into the coveralls he'd set out the evening before, moved across the room to take the pole and impossibly heavy cooler from his father's hands. He didn't dare look up until the boots

below slowly swiveled and made their way down the hallway, the floorboards creaking under his weight. As he passed Kathleen's shut door, Tom imagined her sleeping under two blankets, eyes twitching under her lids as she dreamed about faraway places that could last until the sun rose if she wanted. He silently wished, with a venomous longing that sprang into his gut from time to time, that he was her.

He followed his father outside into the biting mid-winter air, into the darkness. Nothing was up at that hour and the only sound was the scraping of their boots on the gravel. Then the clicking and whining of the truck's doors, the starting of the engine explosive in the otherwise silent woods. Tom watched the barely visible skeleton trees as they passed, holding onto the ceiling handle even though his father rarely failed to maneuver the truck so as to expertly avoid the bumps along the road.

Later on, his father walked ahead on the snow covered, solid ice of Wolf Lake, locating a spot according to rules mostly lost on Tom, before settling on one a little ways off from a shallow cove. Bare trees hugged the perimeter of the lake on all sides. He gave Tom the hand ice auger, the red paint glinting in the sun, and pointed where he wanted the boy to start cutting. He could feel his father watching as he moved quickly to the spot, and he tried to conceal his trepidation; the blades had gashed his inner thigh when he lost a handle on the tool the last time. This time, the fear kept him from applying enough steady pressure to penetrate the barrier, from doing much more than denting the ice as he twisted the auger.

He remembered the deer. Shook from the coldness of the wind, of his father's stare. He knew the thrusts were too weak, that he needed to hold it more firmly, but he was afraid it would slip. He bent down and brushed away the snow so he could get a

better look. The ice was thick, sure, but that shouldn't have been a problem. Were the blades dull? He didn't check or dare to ask, figuring the man would take it as an insult. He tried again, twisting and twisting, but it wouldn't budge. A gust of wind cut across the lake, hitting him in the face. He was sniffing now, and he started to strike the ice unevenly, knowing that was wrong, that his father had told him not to do that very thing, but he just wanted the moment to be over, damn it, to break the ice so they could catch a fish and go home, go—

“Stop that,” his father said. Tom stopped and stepped away. Simply left it wedged into the ice at an acute angle. The familiar sensation of his chest tightening, waiting for the man to take over. When he did, letting out a prolonged sigh as he approached, he made swift work of first twisting the auger through, pulling it out, then beginning again. He said, “Don't bang the blades or force it while cutting. Let it do the work.”

When a fish finally bit, a brook trout, there was no celebration. By that point Tom's hands and feet were numb, and he half-hoped nothing would be drawn to the line at his hole, figuring he would botch the catch. The father's reel started to spin, so he straightened up, took hold of the pole. Tom moved to retrieve the necessary materials from the backpack and cooler. His mind was in a panic as he tried to recall the steps after the catch. But the fish was already out of the water, flipping in the air before his father snatched it with his bare hand. Tom hurried over; he was eager to show he knew what to do. He first took the fillet knife from its sheath and handed it to his father, handle first. He looked away when his father lifted the fish's gills to slit the fish's arteries; catching the spurt of blood in his periphery made him look back involuntarily, so he saw the fish squirming in his father's grip as the blood just pooled out and out, mouth gaping. The boy

tried to conceal the shock this still caused him by bending over and heaping fresh piles of snow in the cooler. His father dropped the fish in another hole that had a net in it to let it bleed out in the water. After a few moments, he lifted the net, took the fish in his hand, and walked back to place it on the cooler, holding the blade out to him.

“Gut it,” he said. “Like I showed you.”

Tom nodded, took the blade from his hands. He matched his father’s stern gaze as well as he could—directed it at the fish itself. He tried to think of it as their shared enemy. He first rummaged through the bag to get the wash cloth, slid it up and down the fish’s scales, cleaning it of some blood that was still leaking from the gills. Its intricate peppered design shown brilliantly in the bright sunlight. Tom did his best to ignore that, to focus on the task at hand. He took its head and turned it belly up, looking for the anus. He inserted the blade right above it—not too deep, just an inch, enough to separate the flesh—and continued the cut along the belly and up to gill plate. Then, he took the blade and cut underneath the jawbone, severing the flesh near the base of the tongue. His hands felt slimy and cold, but he fought the urge to wipe them off and stick them into the warmth of his coveralls. He grew nervous; this is where he messed up last time. He gripped the fish’s tongue with his thumb firmly—sure to grip the *entire* gill plate—then pulled down hard enough to rip out the gills, the intestines staying attached to them as he continued pulling with downward momentum and removed the guts in one clean and easy motion. Relieved, he dared a glance up at his father to see if he felt anything similar. But he continued to squint at the fish, his jaw clenching slightly. After a moment, he pointed at it. Tom looked back down, remembered the blood against the spine. He ran his thumb underneath the membrane to break it open, scraped the bones clean of blood.

His father handed him first the cloth to clean the knife, then a sheet of plastic wrap which Tom wound around the fish, and finally he held a plastic storage bag open as Tom slid the wrapped corpse inside. His father watched him as he placed it in the cooler, as he grabbed a fresh cloth to clean his hands. Then his father slid his gloves back on and walked over to sit back down at his hole. Tom looked into his father's face, not really sure what he was expecting to see there, but expecting something, any recognition of a job well done. But the man just picked up his pole again, continued to squint as the glare from the sun hitting the snow.

To fend off the tightness in his chest, Tom looked away. Down into the open cooler, where he seemed to see the fish as if for the first time. The task of gutting done, outside his father's scrutiny, he saw that it was beautiful. Even through the layer of plastic wrap and the sealable bag, he could see that it had bright, clear eyes and firm scales. His father had told him to watch out for that: diseased fish may have 1) sunken eyes 2) discolored skin 3) loose scales and 4) white, bloody, or slimy gills. But this one had none of that. There was absolutely nothing wrong with it. It was perfectly healthy and beautiful before he and his father teamed up to destroy it. Tears rushed to his eyes as he looked at the pile of guts, as he thought more about what he'd just done, what his father had him do. When his father reached over to get more bait, he noticed that the boy was still standing there, staring into open cooler.

“Shut it,” he said.

*

Tom stopped believing that he could win the affection of his father through actions alone. Each excursion into the woods, each day trip, each demonstration of how to wield a weapon, an outdoorsman's tools, seemed to serve the sole purpose of training him to be something better, something more useful than he was naturally inclined to be. He often wondered if there was any affection to be won, if that was even a capability the man possessed.

Yet there was something like it between his father and Kathleen. The two of them had always been on good terms, holding a kind of quiet reverence for each other for as long the boy could remember. He'd never seen anything like a temper flare or even a hint of passive aggression between them. What he did know was that she didn't fear their father, or if she did, she learned early on how to conceal it in a way that Tom was starting to think he never would. She'd never been averse to chores around the house—offering to help him hand wash their filthy clothes, preparing their meals with the meat they brought home and vegetables from the garden she'd learned how to maintain herself. She'd gotten good at gardening, so good that they always had too many vegetables to eat by themselves. They froze and dried some, but she'd also take some of the extra tomatoes, corn, cucumbers, zucchini, basil, and either deliver them to grateful neighbors up and down the road, or else take them to Nashville farmer's market on summer Saturdays.

Tom would sometimes come along and watch her charm everyone she met; old folks, middle-aged, youngsters alike. Watch her contagious smile do its work. He'd wondered how she learned to be so good with people. She knew when to playfully jab, to play the role of attentive listener, to feed an old boy's ego bit by bit. After seeing all that, it was an honor just to walk alongside her to the ice cream stand. To sit in the passenger

seat as she drove them home with the windows rolled down, the smell of damp earth from a cornfield filling the air after a spring rain shower. Laughing, listening to her sing along to “Bad Bad Leroy Brown” on the radio.

At home, she did everything just as their father liked; he never had to explain how to do something twice to her. This frustrated Tom to no end, though he couldn't hold it against her. He understood it was his own fault, and that of his father, whose expectations were unforgiving and mysterious to him. If he had to make sense of the difference in the way in the way their father looked at them, he'd tell himself that Kathleen took ownership of all she was asked to do, going beyond the man's expectations with a determination not to please, but to get things right.

Their father approved of the friends she brought home—daughters of hardworking, respectable men he knew from the saw mill, of farmers and storeowners in the community. And she performed well in school; so well that she was college bound, a first for their family. This no doubt accounted for their father's pride when Kathleen would return home after a long day of putting her work in at school. She'd slide into her seat at the table for supper, slip her backpack to the floor, smiling as their father asked her the usual questions: “How is Ann? How is Margaret? How are their families? What are you studying?”

Tom would watch the man brighten up at the sight of her, wondering if he could ever do anything to create a similar response in him. He wondered at how someone could be so frightening one moment and loving the next.

*

By early April, multiple wildflowers had begun blooming in hidden spots along the Brown County hills. Rather than walk along the road to go retrieve the day's mail at the cluster of mail boxes at the bottom of the hill, Tom decided to take a less direct route through the woods. There was sweet pleasure in coming across a drooping trillium tucked in their creases, in distinguishing between male and female Jack-in-the-Pulpits, appreciating the bent blossoms of various crocuses that could die with the next morning's frost. He found that he could open himself to their beauty freely when his father wasn't around. Challenges became blessings.

It was a particularly warm day, the warmest they'd felt in a while; the earth was melting. Tom rejoiced in the way he could slide down the muddy hillside for stretches of ten feet or more without running into any real resistance. He let his coat and pants get mud-caked, felt water soak his socks, the pleasing squish between his toes.

When he made it to the mailboxes, he felt rejuvenated. He was free to get filthy; his father was out fishing with a couple friends from the mill for the day, and wouldn't be home to punish him. He also didn't really care what might be awaiting him in their box, if there was anything at all. Yet atop the electric bill and flyer for a town hall meeting for Lake Lemon, there was an envelope addressed to himself and his sister, from a place called Flagstaff in Arizona. From a woman with a different last name than his own, but the same first name as his mother's: Joanne.

*

He sat down at the kitchen table. Studied the envelope for a minute before tearing it open. Pulled out the small square photograph of a dark-haired woman bent towards the

lens, smiling, her arms wrapped around the chest of a boy who looked to be a few years younger than him. They were standing in a tan-colored field in the sun, scattered snow-coated pines all the way up to grand white-capped mountains in the background. Their smiles were wide and white, white as the snow. In the blank space below the image, someone—he assumed his mother—had written *San Francisco Peaks, 1973*. He wondered who was holding the camera.

He turned it over. Across the back, there were smudge marks, as if something had been written in pencil and erased. He checked inside the envelope, scraped his nails into it. Surely he was missing something. What was he supposed to make of the aborted message, the strangers in the photograph? The woman looking so happy, the boy taking it for granted. He stood up from the table, hesitated. It felt wrong to leave it laying there, out in the open in this house that had no traces of her, no proof she ever lived there. His father would come home and be confronted by it when he opened the front door.

Tom shuddered. The last time he asked the man about his mother, he was afraid he'd be torn in half. It was a few months ago. He was standing and watching from the gravel driveway as the man worked on their new walk-behind push mower, showing Tom how to work it before he was to cut the clearing by their house. He nodded as his father told him not to pour gasoline past white line. As his father was screwing the cap back on the tank, a fast-moving shape moved across the boy's peripheral vision. He looked at the top of the trees. Halfway up a poplar, a relatively large bird was hopping its way down the trunk. It passed through a section illuminated by the evening sun, elucidating its bright red head, the black and white checkered pattern of its back. When it stopped to bang its head into the bark, making that unmistakable rapid staccato sound of beak

against wood, Tom felt compelled to say something to his father. He knew it was a woodpecker, but he couldn't remember which kind. His father would name birds they came across on their hunting trips, names like flicker, downy, pileated. Tom didn't want to risk saying the wrong name, but still, he felt the need to say something. So as the man was gathering his tools, the boy asked: "Did my mom know the names of birds, too?"

He didn't know why he said "did" instead of "does." Or why he brought up his mother when he knew his father had told him before not to do so. He immediately wished he hadn't said anything. He started to think up an apology, but the way his father stared at him—frozen, his face itself wooden, though on the verge of wrath—kept the boy quiet, unmoving. A useless hunting hike fact hopped into his mind about how woodpecker skulls are built to absorb shock and minimize damage to their brains. He refrained from even watching the bird directly as it spread its wings and flew away with a short, muffled cry.

Now, the thought of making his father have to see his mother's face against his will gave Tom a certain amount of exhilaration, a strange thrill. These feelings surprised him. He couldn't recall ever feeling the desire to intentionally defy the man's authority; he was too afraid. But he had a sense, an instinct, that this minor rebellion might help push away the shame he felt seeing the image.

He left it there.

*

Tom listened from the safety of his room as his father entered the house that evening. He tried to imagine the man's response to the photograph and envelope by what

he heard; although he could tell his father stopped at the table, there was no tossing of his fishing gear on the floor, not even a whispered curse. He just quietly moved on down hallway, went past the boy's door, into his own room. Tom waited a few minutes before moving to his door. He turned the knob as quietly as he could, opened it just enough so he could see down the hall and towards the kitchen, where the photograph and envelope had been removed from the table.

His father continued to act as though nothing had changed, sitting down for supper with the same questions for Kathleen, the same listing of the tasks Tom needed to complete before the end of the week. Tom watched the man chew his food, only half-listening to what he was saying about gutters to be cleared, weeds to be uprooted, traps to be laid. His father drank some water, swooshed it around his mouth, swallowed. Burped. His actions didn't betray any sense of internal disturbance, any switch from the norm. When the man seemed to notice that Tom wasn't scraping his knife and fork against the plate like himself and Kathleen, his brow furrowed and he glanced at the boy. He said, "Eat your food."

Just like he always would. Tom looked across the table at Kathleen, saw her give him a concerned smile. She hadn't had a chance to see the picture since she returned home after their father the day it came. This fact made the boy boil inside; the fact that he'd essentially given the picture up to his father, that he'd unintentionally aided the man in his mission to erase the memory of their mother. He thought about how his father must have taken a match to the photograph, watched the blackness curl up first over the boy, then his mother. Or else rolled down his window and flicked the image into Bean Blossom Creek as he drove over the grated bridge. He thought of the empty frames of all

different shapes and sizes in the attic, the unused closet space in his father's room, how he didn't know enough about his mother to fill in those spaces.

He had a vision of his father, right after she left, driving over to the McElhannons' place while they were having one of their yard sales that drew people from all over the county. Backing the truck up into the grass. Taking heaps of his mother's clothes she'd left behind and letting them fall to the ground. Waved away Jim and Dale as they offered to give him a hand with a nightstand. Unloaded stacks of embroidery hoops she might have stitched while pregnant with Tom—threaded designs of dogwoods in bloom outside their living room window, red hot azaleas she might have smiled at while Kathleen worked on her hoop at the woman's feet.

And when he laid down the burden of this stuff, he would have turned away, raising his hands and shrugging to talk of payment. He would just get back into the truck, set off for home. He'd take the long way around the lake, letting the breeze rush through his windows, letting it blow away all the memories that were woven into that junk. Letting them scatter like flying maple seeds all at once. Rejoicing as they loosened their hold on him. And if he were to later come across a woman wearing his former wife's floral dress at the gas station, one of her embroidered hoops set upon a neighbor's mantle during a visit, he wouldn't recognize any of it. For the weight of her would be gone.

He would have decided then and there, driving past the lake, that the woman wasn't worth remembering. That Tom and Kathleen were his. If any traces of the woman were to surface in his children, he'd be sure stamp them out. Nip them in the bud.

The boy gripped the knife and fork as his father dragged a piece to wipe the remaining venison juices on his plate. Stuffed it into his mouth. Brought a napkin up to swipe away a drop on his chin.

*

On Saturday, Kathleen and their father planned a drive together to Bloomington for a college visit. They were to take off once he got back from a quick errand in town. It was his first chance to talk to her since the photograph came without their father around, without the possibility of him lurking about and overhearing. When he walked up to her doorway, she was braiding her hair at her vanity. He stood there for a moment, watching as she wove her hair into some intricate design that she hoped, he supposed, might impress whoever she might meet that day at the college campus. He tried to imagine the thrill she might feel as she walked between the neat rows of red and white geraniums, past those rough and smooth limestone buildings with their castle-like presence against the sky. Past people her age discovering who they are, what kinds of lives they'll create for themselves. Finally away from their homes, free from all the baggage of their families. Offered a clean slate.

He watched as she bent her head to better watch her progress in the mirror. In her new white sweater with IU written across the front in big red letters, humming some pop song they'd probably listened to together while riding in the truck. He looked at the record player by the bed, *Let It Be* resting on top. They'd gone to Nashville to buy the album when it came out a few years before. He remembered her and a couple of other teenagers giggling in line. The excitement of it all. She let him hold it all the way home, and he did so with a jubilation that she found ridiculous but hilarious nonetheless. He held

it up so the sun glinted off the glossy outer covering, making the light hover over the four long-haired hippies' faces one at a time, god-blessing them.

Now, he recalled the feeling of holding that unopened album, like holding something precious that hasn't been born yet, but possesses the promise of beauty. He was holding endless hours of listening to songs with his sister, a memory that could revolve and repeat itself forever. As long as it is taken care of, as long as it is protected.

He realized then, for perhaps the first time, that most of what was in this room—what was worth keeping, anyway—was going to go with her when she went away to college. Standing in this spot after she left, he'd be gazing into a space devoid of feeling, stripped of life. He realized how lonely he was going to be, alone here with his father. How much he was going to miss her.

He almost walked away then, overwhelmed with feeling and not wanting to ruin this moment for her. But when she adjusted her head, she saw him standing there. She jumped a little, laughed, "Woah, man. You scared me. Why are you sneaking around?"

He sheepishly accepted the invitation to step into the room.

"I dunno," he said. "Just wanted to see what you were doing, I guess. Before you leave."

She smiled, rolled her eyes. "Are you sure you don't want to come with us?"

He shook his head. The thought of walking a few paces behind Kathleen and their father as the two of them gaped at all the sights, as she speed-talked through all the amazing possibilities of college life, would make him sad and resentful. And seeing a

man like his stiff father stroll along on the brick walkway, past all those easygoing and open-minded students, would seem wrong to him. It would make him angry.

Kathleen looked at him in the mirror. “What’s wrong?”

He shrugged. He didn’t know if now was the right time. But when would be the right time? She’d be gone before long, wouldn’t she?

He lowered himself to the shaggy rug. Stared at his sneakers.

“Spill the beans,” she said.

Keeping his eyes on the floor, he told her about the photograph from Flagstaff. Their mother holding a boy in her arms. How he’d left it out and their father took it away, never mentioned it. Throughout all of this, his sister’s smile, her energy, just melted in front of him. The moment he said Mom her gaze lowered to the desktop and stayed there. Her brow slightly furrowed and lips tight. This happened every time he mentioned her name; it was as though she was being abruptly woken from a blissful dream in which their mother didn’t exist, in which she never did.

The predictability of this, along with her silence, irked him. Would they avoid talking about it forever? He couldn’t bear for it to continue. So he asked questions. Did their father tell her about the photo? No. Did she know that their mom had another son? No. Had she tried to contact them before?

“Only one other time. As far as I know. A phone call.”

She didn’t continue, so he stared at her. After a moment she said, “She just wanted to know how we were...and what we’re like, I guess...”

Tom swallowed, straightened up. He felt like he'd found a way in. She'd always been the only one he could turn to when it came to their mother, but she usually stonewalled him.

“What did she sound like? I mean, her voice?”

“Sad,” she said. “Like she had been crying.”

“But,” he scratched his head. He didn't want to miss anything. “What about her new family? Isn't she happy with them?”

“I told you, Tommy, I didn't know about that. She really didn't say much about herself.”

He blinked. “So what does that mean? For us? Like, knowing she has another family?”

“It doesn't have to mean anything. She can live her life and we can live ours.”

Tom looked down. He couldn't accept that. Not if it meant he had to be stuck with his father. And she sent the photo for a reason, right? At the very least, she wanted him and Kathleen to know that the boy existed. That she was still out there. She'd found happiness. But God knows what kind of news their father had kept from them. What letters he'd intercepted. Threats he'd sent.

He clenched his fists. “Why didn't she take us with her?”

She shook her head. Seemed to remember what she was doing before Tom had thrown this bomb at her, went back to her hair. Yet, compared to before, it looked like

she was just going through the motions. “I don’t know why you think your life would be better with her as a parent. Besides, that was her decision to make.”

“But she should’ve asked. Didn’t she have to ask to do something like that?”

She sighed and shifted in her chair so her legs were off to the right, the jean bell bottoms pushed together. Arms raised above her head as she continued to braid.

“No, she didn’t have to ask. You’re thinking about it all wrong.”

“Okay,” Tom said, taking his knees in his arms and hugging them. “How do you think about it, then?”

“I don’t think about it. There’s no point dwelling on stuff like that.”

“But,” he said, “she’s still our mom, right?”

He dug his nails into his thighs when she caught his gaze in the mirror. It seemed to him to be full of contempt, with an impatience not unlike their father’s. But it eased a bit. She turned her head and positioned her hands to start another braid. “It’s easier if you don’t think of her that way. And Dad wouldn’t appreciate that you’re bringing it up right now.”

Great. Even when he wasn’t around he could still keep them from talking about her. He felt as though he were being kept from seeing something that should’ve been plain as day. But what good did asking do? The only explanation he’d ever been given never amounted to more than: “Tommy, she went away to live a different life and that’s that; now, hush.”

He wasn't old enough to remember her much when she was around, but his sister was. When he'd gotten her to talk about it before, she described a woman who always appeared to be on the verge of laughter or tears. Who'd pick her up from school and might be overly touchy, kissing her on the forehead and asking her a million questions about her day. But she'd just as likely look dead ahead the whole way home, refuse to talk either her or their father for days. His sister told him how their mother had taken up smoking just so she'd have an excuse to go outside without having to explain where she was going to their father, who wouldn't stand for smoking in the house. Kathleen said she'd watch their mother from behind her bedroom window as she paced back and forth between two rows of the garden. Under the pale moonlight, the lit end of the cigarette appearing, disappearing. "She just didn't want to be here," was how she'd bring these conversations to a close.

Tom was hungry for more, for details to flesh out the image of the woman forming in his mind. He wanted to know the one who was here—who sat in these wicker chairs, drank from this cup, gazed into this mirror—not so much the woman with her son from Flagstaff.

He couldn't shake photograph's hold over him, with all its vague possibilities. The way that seeing the woman and that boy made him feel even more distant from who he thought his mother was. He felt betrayed that she looked so different from the only other photograph he'd seen of her—a copy of her senior picture in the Brown County High School archives, Class of '55. Kathleen had brought him to see it when she was a freshman, said she'd come across it by chance while assisting the school librarian. It was in a binder. When she retrieved it from one of the uniformly gray filing cabinets that

lined the walls of the dim backroom, she brought it to her chest. She looked him directly in the eyes and said, “I’m showing this to you because I think you deserve to know what she looked like,” she opened the binder, and flipped to the right page. “And how pretty she was. But we can’t keep it. And you can’t tell Dad.”

When she showed him the photo, he leaned into it. It was one of four portraits on the page, three young men in suits and her in a dark sweater over a white collared shirt. Her head tilted slightly, dimpled cheeks, broad smile. In her dark, curving eyebrows, he saw his own. He took the binder out of his sister’s hands, ignored her as she said, “Be careful!” He brought it more directly under the light so he could read the text beneath the portrait: *Joanne “Jo” McDonald is known for her dark and wavy hair. She is a cheerful person, but she can also be serious. May she have lots of success in the future.*

The mundanity, the laziness of the text infuriated him. He wished he could take the photo alone, remove it from this context; the thought of it being filed away in this dark room made his heart ache. As if reading his mind, Kathleen stepped up to him and said, “Tommy, I said you can’t keep it, now give it back.” She grabbed it from him just as he was about to tear the page, and they tugged back and forth on it a bit before the commotion drew the attention of the librarian, who demanded that they explain themselves and hand her the binder at once.

Kathleen said she regretted offering this generosity to Tom, that she should’ve known he would act so childish. But he didn’t understand how she could be so adamant about erasing the memory of their mother, how she could sit here now, avoiding his questions about the photograph, about someone who should have meant so much to them.

Though he never got ahold of the high school senior portrait, the image continued to haunt him; it visited him in dreams where he wandered and stumbled in the woods, appeared in the shadows of his room, rose out of the fragrance of crabapple tree in bloom. He clung to it like an amulet while sleeping out in the cold with his father. But the Flagstaff photo pushed the senior portrait aside. She looked much older now. Of course. There was, what, twenty years between the photos? But seeing her with some other boy made him feel helpless. The more Kathleen refused to give him anything she could offer to reclaim who their mother was, the more lost he felt.

Just then, from where he was sitting on floor, Tom heard the crunch and pop of gravel as his father pulled up the driveway. Stopped right before entering his line of vision. The cutting of the engine. When the man opened the truck door, the head of his shadow fell across the blinds, then moved away.

The fact that he would soon be inside, would cut the conversation to a close, made Tom panic. He had to gain something final, something definitive, from his sister before he lost his chance. So he stood up and asked her something he'd been afraid to ask even himself. Something he realized may have always been there, underlying everything else.

“Did he beat her up?”

She stopped applying her red lipstick mid-lip, looked down at her lap. Lowered and capped it. Tom might have added, Is that why she left us here with him? Because she was afraid? But the way her back had slightly slumped, the outline of her spine visible through her sweater, made it impossible to say more. What her silence, what her stillness

might mean. She just sat there, breathing. Her face turned to the left and downward so he couldn't see it.

The front door opened. He was about to say, Sorry, just forget it, but not before she turned to face him. She said, "You know, you shouldn't accuse people of things like that if you can't back it up with proof."

The contempt had returned to her face. Tom wanted to see through it to try to understand what she was telling him, but it was just too much. Her eyes were glistening, looked raw.

"Hello?" their father called from the kitchen. "Kathleen?"

She turned back around, swiped quickly at her eyes with the forearm of her sweater. Gathered her purse and backpack. The sound of their father's heavy steps creaking down the hall. When he entered the doorway, Tom stood still, kept his eyes on Kathleen. Kept them on her as she zipped up her backpack, swiveled the chair around. As she got up and moved past Tom, then slid by their father, ignoring his raised eyebrow.

Tom and his father stared at each other. Tom surprised himself by how long he was able to look into his father's eyes without blinking, without budging. By how it was the man who tore away first, slowly turning to follow his daughter back down the hall.

*

When school let out for the summer, Tom spent most his time alone, reading or dreaming up imaginary worlds in the safety of his room, if he could, if his father wasn't home. For some reason, the man stopped taking him out on hunting trips, stopped

demanding that he do strange new tasks. It seemed that he was no longer expected to prove himself to the man. And although Tom found his father's scheming all but impossible to read, he was thankful for the break, and didn't question it.

Kathleen and their father went on trips to visit universities throughout Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, leaving Tom behind. When Kathleen was home, she and Tom avoided each other. Whatever wound was opened between them before continued to stink and fester, refusing to heal right. They continued to sit through quiet suppers with their father at the kitchen table, and the distance between them was palpable.

Tom would walk down to the mail boxes with something like fear and open theirs with undeniable relief when finding nothing from his mother inside.

Tom took all his convoluted feelings to his notebook, a portable, wire-bound refuge he'd started keeping with his body, at school, at the creek, at home—always. He'd let his imagination run amok as he transferred the world onto paper though they invariably featured beings that he knew could fly: fairies, centaurs, griffins. He scribbled tales about praying mantises that land on a boy's shoulder, that jump onto his finger and allow him to examine them real close. That mistake wiggling pinkies for potential prey, sink their pinchers into fleshy part, ravenously chewing through the skin. A friend that he can fold up and tuck away into his pocket for safekeeping. He knew his father would pinch his face in embarrassment if he saw these pages, and Tom sometimes wished he'd find them, would bring it up at the kitchen table. That he'd punish him because of it.

He'd go up into the attic of their one-story house. Missing the chilling draft that would seep between wooden boards in winter, it was a hot, stuffy oven come June. He'd

make his way over to the small window that was surrounded with cardboard boxes on all sides: a makeshift compartment for him to sneak into. The window overlooked the small wooded rolling hills descending to Lake Lemon. When the trees grew lush in the summer, concealing the winding road and the houses of neighbors, he'd become filled with incredible longing that made him weep. Weep because he didn't understand what it was about the sudden onset of overcast skies, the winds rushing through shadowy green leaves, scattering seeds, that moved him so. The first rain drop sliding down the dusty pane, a honeybee tap-tapping to come in.

He tried to sketch these things as they appeared to him, to snatch these moments by their wings so he could transcribe them, dispel the mystery of their hold over him. But he lacked the skill; his pages were littered with bad sketches of the view outside the attic window, of insects he'd tried to commit to memory as he held them in his hand, before he dropped them into the rushing waters of Bean Blossom Creek and watched them get carried away. He'd turn over large rocks and waterlogged wood, watch centipedes that writhed when exposed to the air. He'd run his finger along their swarm of legs before they had a chance to escape.

He allowed a mama wolf spider—a hundred feasting babies strapped to her back—to run up his thigh while he lay naked in a meadow.

There were gaps between the floorboards in the attic through which he could watch Kathleen and their father at the kitchen table below. He waited for his father to do something that helped him understand the look in his sister's eyes as she reminded him about the importance of proof.

CHAPTER 4. GABE

I.

I could begin with the way we strutted out our middle school's gymnasium doors in suits, too tight in some spots, but mostly too loose for our aching fourteen-year-old bodies. We'd laughed at the girls' tears, mocked them along with those behind the whole well-meaning ceremony by giving each other sarcastic bear hugs, punching each other's shoulders, moaning hysterically. We did a solid job of ignoring the slideshow flashing highlights of our peers' eight years together upon the projector screen, lest we be tempted to shed a real tear of our own. We exited that shithole excuse of a school for what we swore for goddamn certain was the last time, chasing each other across the front lawn, across the football field, whipping each other's ankles with our ties, howling and not giving a damn about our cracking voices. Gabe kept taking hold of my shoulders and stopping me as if he were saying something important. I giggled with anticipation even though it was the same thing every time: *Do you understand, Ben, that this means freedom at fucking last?*

Yeah. I nodded. Yeah, I fucking do.

We'd been struck with visions of vague freedom for just about that whole school year. We'd jumped the gun by blowing off lame school functions to fish off the docks at the lake, taking his cousin's rowboat out, and spending the whole day out there. Sometimes, when we grew tired of floating, we'd row it to the tiny wooded island at the lake's center, fish from shore. Our friend group of seven boys rarely came along to the lake, and I was always thankful for that. Gabe acted and talked different around them; I

did too, for that matter. He'd turn into the king of roughhousing, of put-downs that would send everyone reeling. It wasn't just the boys, either; just about every kid in our school admired him, and our teachers—who were obviously annoyed when he disrupted class and when he pulled excuses for not doing homework out of his ass—were easy on him. It didn't hurt that he carried the football team on his shoulders, was likely going to be the starting running back for our county's high school varsity team as a freshman.

So, it wasn't like Gabe was in dire need of another friend when we'd started hanging out at the beginning of eighth grade. Before that, I'd watched him and the other boys from afar, spending most of my time alone, keeping to myself. You couldn't touch me with a ten-foot pole. I suppose part of me took that aloofness for granted, like being alone was who I was and that was that. It wasn't like I made good use of solitude. I wasn't bent over the Bible, wasn't teaching myself how to paint, or studying hard, or helping around the house—none of that. It's hard to even think about this time of my life. There's the shame of it, sure, but it also feels like I'm looking down a blank hole where my childhood should have been.

I hadn't even spent much time outside, let alone the lake, until Gabe turned me on to fishing that fall. I'd been taught the basics, sure—how to hold a pole and spin a reel—but Gabe had shown me that there was a whole other world out there. Bringing home a cooler full of fish was a plus, okay, but both of his cousins would tell you it wasn't really about the fish. That's not why we sat there with our skin baking under a mid-July sun, sticking around until dusk. We were there for the lily-pads brushing the bottom of the boat as we neared the shallows where the lake meets the creek, the lotus flowers perfect as cake-toppers from the town bakery. We were there for the humungous swans with

butt-ugly faces that looked at you sideways until you get close enough to see the black sponge-like thing between their eyes before they take off, beating their giant white wings against the water then making that weird wheezing sound as they glide by. We were there for the old boys that float on past you, so good with the oars that they hardly make a splash or make a noise, always tipping their fishing hat and sometimes imparting advice when the mood strikes them (or if you're doing it wrong). We were there for the bald eagle I saw—my first, ever—the first time Gabe took me out fishing with his cousins.

A juvy, Gabe said, grinning and gaping up at it with his hand over his eyes, but I could tell this was business as usual on the lake. I didn't even know the younger ones looked different: brown body, brown and white mottled wings and tail, heads not bald yet, but getting there. And it soared right over us, right over our heads! The morning sky was brilliant, the blaze of light illuminating the bird in all of its glory, and afterwards a light gust of wind carried the sweet fragrance of sycamores down to us like a blessing.

Ah, I'll never get sick a Moore, Gabe said, taking in a deep breath of fresh air as he rowed in a graceful sweeping motion that flexed his core exposed through his unbuttoned shirt. It flexed more and more as he laughed at how long it took for me to get it. He shook his head, still smiling, and said, *I'm gonna work on you, Ben*. The same thing he said to me the day before, after coming over and setting his food tray down across from me. He wanted to know who I was, really, what I liked to do, how many girls had I made out with. The answer I came up with after recovering from the shock of Gabe Hawkins sitting down to talk to me: *I dunno*. And, well, *None*. Then, his laugh: a sharp release of air—not unlike the swan's wheeze, I'd think later, when we came upon a couple of them on a brisk October afternoon—but vigorous sounding too, like he was squeezing real joy out

from somewhere deep within, offering it to you. And his smile making two, easy-to-miss dimples on his cheeks. His long dark curls falling into his eyes as he bent over his food almost bashfully. Then: *I'm gonna work on you.*

Like a challenge.

*

What had I done to deserve this? To be accepted apropos of nothing, suddenly allowed into his life, a place among his group of friends? It started with the invitation to head out to the lake with his cousins. When I sat beside Gabe in the backseat of their van that reeked of mold and lake water from the piles of life-jackets, fish nets, and rubber boots tumbling around in the back, not really knowing what to expect. All the windows were rolled down on account of the stink, bringing in the fresh air from the forest, but making it so we had to yell to hear what we were saying. The Gabe in that van was far different than the one who goofed off in class, who I'd come to basically worship along with the other roughhousers. This other Gabe yelled in fluent fish-talk to his older cousins as we rolled up and down slight hills, cussing at a minimum and accentuating his speech instead with slaps to against his knee and little phrases, pretty as ditties, like, *That beats all*. Gabe looked a lot like these twenty-somethings—same running back physique, freckled skin and thick, curly heads of hair, Blake's bright red, and Tim's dark brown. He did his best to sound like them too. It was this Gabe that hooked and reeled me in—one eager to please, to play by someone *else's* rules, to talk *their* talk. I sometimes like to tell myself that he knew this, of course; that's why he took me fishing first, then had me meet the boys—not the other way around.

He'd lured me in with this revelation of who he was behind the tough persona. That first day on the lake, he let me see his sheer enchantment with a bright blue damselfly perched on one oar handle as it rubbed its legs together. It hadn't occurred to me that someone could look at a bug like that, like its bulbous eyes, the webbed design of its transparent wings, the black-blue-black-blue pattern running down its skinny body, held the key to understanding the universe. It was the kind of thing that would get you called *faggot* if enough of his school buddies were around. Or maybe they'd ask, *Are you high? What are you smoking?* If he ever revealed this side of himself to them, I never saw it, and no one mentioned it.

For whatever reason, he felt he could show it to me in the boat that day. Did he think I wouldn't tell? That I understood, that I felt the same way? I didn't know how to react then, was almost embarrassed by how captivated he was. But maybe he was right, maybe this is what I needed. All I could do in the moment, sitting across from Gabe in the boat, was watch him watch the bug perched on that oar handle, his hazel eyes concentrated on taking in whatever it was that black-blue thing had to offer, then try to look at it myself in the same way. All was quiet except for the trees along the shore whispering under the breeze. Gabe and his cousins liked it that way; they made sure they came out early in the morning, before the pontoons, speed-boats, and jet-skis burst around the corner, blasting 97.1 HANK FM and Lynyrd Skynyrd, and flipped the lake into an amusement park. But the boat swayed only slightly in that moment, the waves lapping us into a kind of trance. The outside world ceased to matter, like Gabe could will it away for as long as the damselfly remained on the oar. When another fly—a bigger one, a dragon twice its size—buzzed past the oar, they both took off in a frenzy and the

spell was over. *Woah*, Gabe said, then continued the rowing motion he'd stopped mid-stroke, watching the two bugs zip away. *Like a damsel in distress, right?* He grinned, happy with himself. Then, lifting his face to the sky, he called, *May the fly with the biggest blue dick save and keep you!* To which Blake and Tim, floating in their kayaks under the shade of the trees, looked back and shook their heads at their little cousin. I myself laughed and shook my head when Gabe lowered his gaze to meet mine. And it was a real laugh, maybe the first since they picked me up that morning, nervous and quiet as I was. It felt strange—and it felt wonderful. My body relaxed a bit, released some chemicals to reward me that bloomed in my chest, like I was doing something that was good for my survival by being here in this boat, by sitting across from a boy whose knees brushed my own and laughing at his stupid joke. It wasn't so much the joke itself, but the way it butted up against the sincere appreciation of the little being just a moment before. Like he was making fun of himself, of everything that perplexed me, and was assuring me, *Don't worry, you've got a lot to learn, but there's time.*

There's so much time.

*

The promise of accessing Gabe like this come our next day of fishing was all the motivation I needed to become one of the rowdy boys, to count myself among the initiated. Though, as deathly shy as I was for so much of my life, I was sure that I'd screw everything up once it came time to prove myself to them, ending in hot, searing rejection.

Gabe threw me right into the fighting ring, like, *Let's see what you're made of*. Seeing his rough and tumble side wasn't a surprise, of course. I'd walked to Drew's house after school that Friday knowing that the Gabe from the lake would be concealed, that if push came to shove he'd put me in a headlock so fast I wouldn't have a chance to appeal to that side of him.

That's how the sleepover started. By the time I turned down Drew's street, already steeling myself against whatever torment awaited me that night, the whole gang was waiting for me in his front yard. They turned their heads as I was approaching from a couple of houses away, after Gabe saw me coming, furrowed his brow, and motioned for me to come over with a quick flick of his hand, like how a football coach tells a player to *get over here*. He was one of those sitting in the ring of plastic chairs, which were falling apart, snapped in their backs. Everyone was wearing the school uniform khakis and white t-shirts, having torn off the green polo with the *Christ the King Catholic School* emblem and shoved them into their backpacks before I got there. Colin and Harry, the scrawniest of the group and the only ones not on the football team, stood on the periphery with their arms folded across their chest, trying to make up for their size by standing upright as possible. I wasn't much bigger than them, maybe a little ahead in puberty, filled in in my upper body, but I imagined they were relieved that another manageable physique was being thrown into the rough-housing mix.

Well, at least one they stood a chance against. Jacques, Drew, Joe—who had stood up and turned to face my direction when Gabe acknowledged me—were the meatiest and those I'd least want to piss off. Drew was a fullback, had a similar physique to Gabe; his job was to run out in front of Gabe and smash into linebackers and safeties

looking to tackle him, make them think twice about how bad they want to add that tackle to the stat sheet come the next down when CKS would run the same play all over again. *Running it down their throats*, as their coach called it, so Gabe said. Jacques, the tallest and the one with the goofiest smile, was the team's quarterback and had the easiest job in the world: yelling—in a low voice that would sometimes crack and make him subject to jeers—*Ready, Set, Hut*, then handing the ball off to Gabe so he could do his thing. Joe, the biggest and roundest of them all by far, was the team's center. He squatted and held the ball before every play while Jacques held his hands just below Joe's crotch; when Jacques yelled *Hut!* Joe snapped the ball and this set the play in motion. For however many seconds Gabe hugged the ball to his chest before being brought down, before the play was blown dead, all of them were unified in the single goal of getting Gabe down the field. Every bit of their bodies and souls were dedicated towards this end.

But we weren't playing football. By the time I made it to the yard, Drew, Jacques, Joe, and Gabe were already picking up the four chairs and spreading them equidistant from each other on the flat surface of the grass, forming the "square circle" or fighting ring. Then the four of them dropped back and stood in front of the house, Colin and Harry joining them to form a line. I held the straps of my backpack, not sure where to look as everyone just stood there, staring. Gabe had warned me that things would get physical, competitive, but I didn't think everyone would look at me stone-faced, refusing to greet me like I was some outsider, a member of a visiting team on the opposite side of the line of scrimmage. For a moment I thought about walking back from where I came, just going all the way home, running up the stairs to my room, collapsing into my bed

and crying myself to sleep. I could've told myself to forget Gabe ever reached out to me, ever invited me to the lake, to Drew's, just forget it all.

I felt my weight shifting that direction but then—as though he was reading my thoughts—Gabe stepped forward into the ring and stood on the left side. He motioned for me to come up into the yard, coldly, like before.

Come on, he said. Me and you. Let's go.

I looked at him, bit my lip. I wanted to say, *What? Why? Why are you treating me like this?* But the look on his face was impenetrable, like there was nothing behind it I could reach, no matter what I said or did. Which is what I expected coming over here, right? *He's just testing you. You gotta be strong, goddamn it. You gotta go through with this.*

I stepped up and slipped my backpack from my shoulder, letting it fall next to the others along the driveway. Then I made my way over to the barrier of the chairs, hesitating for a second before entering the ring, on the side opposite from Gabe. I couldn't bear to glance again at the line of faces, but I felt their stares drilling into me, the weight of their silence. The grass was matted down and completely gone in some spots within the ring, and my mind ran wild for one terrible second with all the violent acts that could have made it that way. But I swiped that thought away and lifted my gaze up to Gabe's face, forcing myself to keep it there, to associate it with his smile. It looked back at me the way I imagined he looked directly into the eyes of a linebacker before the beginning of a play, before the ball is snapped and Gabe takes it and runs on pure rage directly for that linebacker. He pointed at my chest, said, *Lose the polo.* I looked down

and realized I was trembling, that I probably had been this whole time. I used slipping out of my shirt as an excuse to rattle the nerves out a bit, then tossed it outside the ring.

Gabe spread his legs so they were hip-distant apart, one foot in front of the other, bent at the knees. He was hinged at the waist, and kept his eyes looking forward as he started moved sideways, hands raised and ready. I did my best to mimic his stance, glancing back and forth between my legs and his. His sideways motions compelled me to move too, before I felt like I was ready. I just crouched over slightly and held my hands in front of me, knowing it was wrong and feeling ridiculous, but instinctively mirroring him as we moved around the ring. It occurred to me that I didn't know the rules, that no one had explained them to me, so as we kept moving around and around, I started to frame a question in my head, but just as I was about to say it out loud, I heard someone yell *Ding! Ding!* and when I looked over to find out who it was, I saw Joe with his hands around his mouth, and when I looked back towards Gabe, I saw the top of his head in front of me, then there was tremendous blow to my chest, all the air pushed out of me, then I felt myself lifted, so high my feet left the ground, and my face towards the big beautiful sky, I was flying, flying, and then I was falling, falling, then *oof!*

Ohhhhhhhh! (multiple voices) then, *Takedown, bitch! Gabey Baby: 1, Benny Penny: 0* (Joe's).

Don't call me that, fucker, Gabe said.

I rolled off my back to my hands and knees, my insides a mess of bad feelings. I was trying hard not to barf, to just catch my breath again, to hide the fact I was crying.

Come on, Gabe said, *get up.*

I raised my head to see him standing with legs apart, ready to get back into that damn wrestling stance. *I'll pass*, I managed. *I think you win*.

It's best two out of three.

I looked at him, sure he was joking. But his expression hadn't changed. I slowly got to my feet, still dizzy. I didn't have any fight in me. *Two out of three what? I mean, was that even...legal?*

A few chuckles from the line. Someone mimicked, *I mean, was that even...legal?* In a high-pitched voice. Gabe sighed, relaxed his stance. He pointed a thumb at Joe. *He's the ref, let's ask him.* He turned to him, *Hey, Slow-Mo-Joe.*

Yessir.

Was that move legal?

Um, let's see, let me check the rulebook here. He mimed turning pages in his hand. *Ah, yes, appendix A-6 states that while the brutal takedown by way of tackling one's opponent while said opponent is caught unawares might be embarrassing as hell, it is indeed legal and shall be henceforth tolerated.* He clapped his hands together and remained straight-faced as the others chuckled.

Gabe lifted his shoulders into a shrug. *There you have it*, he said, then assumed the wrestling pose once again.

I shook my head at him, at all of them. I felt the nausea return, the tears welling behind my eyes. I wanted nothing more than to hide away from these jerks, to be home,

to just be alone and will myself to forget all of this. I looked at Gabe, said, *You win, OK? I'm done.* I stepped out of the ring, heading in the direction of the backpacks.

Finish the fucking game, Ben, Gabe said, in a way that made me stop, feel hot with shame. I couldn't look at him, but I heard him continue: *What good does quitting do?*

That's what I told him that first day on the lake, as we were heading back to the boat ramp. It was my delayed, honest answer to that question he'd asked me in the cafeteria—*Who are you, really?* Being out on the water had inspired me to be open with him, more so than I ever had with myself. The word that came to mind to describe who I was, who I was afraid of being, was *quitter*. It was after the damselfly, the juvy eagle, the hours of sunshine and the boat rocking us to and fro. I had told him, on the verge of tears and apropos of nothing: *I feel like I quit life. I'm scared I'm gonna quit everything that comes my way and then there will just be nothing. No one... I'm scared I can't help but be a quitter, like, maybe that's just who I am.* Gabe hadn't said, *Hmm* or *Jesus, that's depressing*, like I was afraid he might. He didn't laugh to alleviate the awkwardness or avoid eye contact out of embarrassment for me. What he did is he reached across and placed his hand on my shoulder. And he kept it there and didn't say a word as I shook and shook, soundlessly weeping in spite of myself, staring into the water to steady my body, but wholly incapable of keeping the sorrow from pouring out of me.

And now he was using this against me, in front of his friends. Trying to—what? Trigger me? So I would go back and let him throw me to the ground again? When I looked back again at the others, I saw that the mirth was gone. They were waiting to see what I would do now, like *this* was the real test. How would I respond to Gabe's

challenge, his calling me a *quitter*, with the prospect of returning to the ring most likely being I'd end up on my ass again? I looked at Gabe, who was staring at me intently, waiting.

I sometimes wonder how my life would have turned out differently if I'd left at that moment. If I'd just refused to be egged on, followed my instinct, decided that this friendship just wasn't worth it after all. But I was angry. And stupid. And confused. I knew what they were doing, how they were playing me, but I wanted to get back at Gabe for using my own words against me. For what felt like his betrayal. So I returned to the ring, guided only by the vague goal of hurting Gabe in the way he hurt me. I had no clue what move I'd make, how I'd inflict harm. I just hoped I'd know what to do when the time came. I crouched into position, more easy and automatic this time around, and we restarted our sideways dance. I could tell Gabe sensed a change in me, that I meant business, because he looked at me with more focus, like he might need to use some defensive skills. We circled and circled the ring. The spectators seemed more invested as well; I heard a hoot, a whistle; someone said, *Kick his pasty ass, Ben*. I felt my step get lighter, my breathing slow down. I kept my gaze locked with Gabe's, not shrinking from it as I had before, so when I heard Joe yell *Ding! Ding!* I was ready to react to whatever move he had up his sleeve.

He didn't come at me right away. We continued to circle a bit, with Gabe moving slightly forward and backward a few times, testing the waters. I came close to tripping over myself with one of these fake out advances, but managed to keep my footing, to keep going. Then, like a striking snake, Gabe came at me for real. I saw him flash forward and felt his strong grip on my thigh and myself lifting all at once, all over again,

and I gasped and thrashed my arms out, just clawed and pushed beneath me, in front of me, hoping one blow would land and save me. And one did. I was back on the ground, steady on my feet, and Gabe was backing off, rubbing his arm. *Jesus*, he said, as we resumed the sideways dance. *Scratch much?* Someone said, *Meeeeooooow!* Someone else said, *Atta boy, Ben! Don't let him pull that easy shit.*

Gabe looked pissed now, like he was ready for this to be over already. No more fake outs or testing the waters—he was moving in for the kill. Just like that, he was coming towards me again, and I had no time to think out my next move and that's probably just as well, because I don't think I would have done what I did next if I had time to deliberate. What I did—what my instincts, my subconscious, my body or whatever did for me—was I backed up a little, letting Gabe get real close as he zipped towards me at a low stance, then spun as quick as I could, low to the ground myself, using one elbow to knock away the hand that tried to grab me as Gabe's momentum carried him forward, then I hooked my hands into waist-line of his khakis to keep myself on my feet, then once behind Gabe—his body facing outside the ring and mine to his backside—I yanked down with all my might. When I looked up, it was Gabe's pasty ass that I saw (apparently I'd taken not only his khakis down to his knees, but his boxers, too), and the shock of this made me recoil and let go immediately, and since he was already bent at the knees and tipping backwards, all that was left to do was roll out of the way.

Ohhhhhh! the others hollered. Then: *Ah, put it away! Put it away!* making a show of covering their eyes as Gabe wrenched his pants up his legs, still on his back on the ground beside me.

The wicked witch is dead! Colin yelled. *The wicked witch is dead!*

Jacques came over and grinned down at me, extended his hand. He said, *Wow, slick move, man. No one ever beats Gabe, like, know that this is a rare occurrence, OK?* After he helped me to my feet, Drew gave me a good slap in the back. *That finish was raunchy and unnecessary,* he said. *And I totally loved it, bro. Welcome.*

And so it went, everyone congratulating me for passing the test, for something I had no intention of doing. *Be proud,* they said. *That shit was legendary as fuck.* Harry came up and brushed a blade of grass off my shoulder. He shook his head and looked me and down like, *Who are you, badass, and what have you done with that limp dick that showed up here ten minutes ago?* I was outside the group one moment then inside the next. I was so astounded by the speed of this transition, the night and day of it, that I had no idea how to act, what to say. It occurred to me that my face must have been blank, that I hadn't said so much as *thanks* or *I appreciate it, bro.* So I gave everyone a jittery nod, raised my hand in a kind of royal wave. They laughed at my awkwardness, mimicked the nod and waved back to me—making fun of me, sure, but making this bearable for me, easier. I smiled and laughed with them, feeling better, letting myself bask in the spotlight, which wasn't so much intense anymore, but warm. God, it was warm.

Why are you fairies acting like the round is over? I heard Gabe say behind me. We all turned to look at him as stood in the corner of the ring, arms crossed in front of his chest. *Last I checked, it was best two out of three.*

I stepped into the ring tentatively. The act itself, the cruelty of it, returned to me. It had disappeared amid the rush of praise and acceptance but here it was, rearing its ugly

head again. Why did I do it? I wanted to explain to Gabe that I got lost in the heat of the moment, that it just happened, but maybe that would have just made it worse. Besides, he was kind of asking for it, right? Or he was asking for something, anyway. Even so, I couldn't help but step further into the ring, the prospect of bad blood between us chilling me, and say quietly, almost in a whisper: *I'm sorry.*

He snorted, though his brow was still furrowed, then waved the apology away like it was a fly buzzing around his head. *For what? There isn't a rule against pantsing your opponent.* He looked at Joe. *Hey, Slow-Mo. Is pantsing illegal in the ring?*

Sure isn't, Baby, Joe said, then grinned and shook his head at me. *Sure isn't.*

All right, then, Gabe said, moving toward me and cracking his knuckles. *But if you really wanted to see my dick, all you had to do was ask, Benny Penny.*

I didn't know what to do or say to that. Part of me wanted to shove him, to tell everyone to stop laughing, to explain or defend myself, but nothing came. I couldn't have explained even if I tried. I still can't, all these years gone by.

Instead, I grinned and shook my head just like we're supposed to grin and shake our heads when someone says something that awful to you, in front of an audience. I did my best *yeah-right-I'll-play-along-with-the-joke* expression, hating how false it felt on my face. So, yeah, I was relieved when Gabe crouched into his wrestling stance once again, meaning, *get ready for round three*, because I was ready. I wanted to give him a piece of my mind. I couldn't express what I was feeling by speaking, but maybe I could with my hands, through his new dance that already feels familiar, like we're stepping into a rhythm that can speak for us, set us free, set us loose, alone in this ring where anything

goes. I was angry, yeah, I was angry. But I was so many other things too, and I was going to fit all of it in my next grip, my next blow, my next yell, whenever Gabe cut it out with the fake outs and came at me for real and I could either catch him or scratch him and he would feel me then, yes, he'd feel me then.

Gabe smiled then. It seemed to tell me that I could be in the boat with him again and in this ring at the same time. Back-and-forth, to-and-fro, side-to-side. Two Gabes. One person. I smiled too. I did a few quick side-steps, then I lowered myself, then I charged right at him.

II.

Between that day in late August and the night of our graduation, I'd grown into both roles—myself when I was with the buddies and myself when I was with Gabe alone. I counted myself among this group of buddies, and they were quick to embrace me as one of their own. Eventually it was as though I'd been with them all along, my late initiation a distant memory. I think I loved them, in a way.

I started to talk like them with ease, the vulgarities like chewing gum sweetening my tongue. I could say, *go fuck your mother* and *what a cunt* and *suck my dick* as though I believed these words and they were sanctified. I adopted their mystification of girls, the way they filled in the gaps of our boyhood knowledge with a fixation on the strangeness of their bodies. When we spoke about them, it was always about their bodily progress—Sami's tits, Meredith's ass, Emma's legs—or else who among us they most wanted to fuck. These were topics of great debate and we disguised it as jokes and busting each other's balls but the truth was it aroused us to no end. Some of us would think back on

these debates as we took a box of tissues to our bed, shut our eyes, fantasized, gasped. Some of us did this together, in the same room, imagining the same girl. We saw no irony in this; exposing ourselves to each other seemed natural. There was nothing about *us* that was mysterious, corruptible. It was *them—their* bodies that were strange, transforming in odd ways beyond our wildest imagination.

When I was with Gabe, alone on the water, these mysteries were put on hold. They were replaced by the wonder of the bird migrations, the importance of letting trout bleed out in the water when it's cool, the configuration of freckles on Gabe's face. We'd take turns rowing. When I was at the oars, he'd critique my form—*Don't grip too hard, don't hunch your shoulders, drive straight back, don't let your ass go solo*. When he watched me struggle with the oars the first few times I was a nervous wreck. I'd start sweating like crazy with his eyes watching my arms, my hips, my legs. *Legs, hips, arms, arms, hips, legs*, he'd chant. I'd get sore in no time—worn out hands, achy forearms, torn up palms—then we'd have to switch spots. But I grew stronger, more disciplined over those nine months, eventually realizing that his reiterations about form were just another way for him to egg me on, something he never stopped doing since that day in the fighting ring in Drew's yard. He loved to tease me in this way—criticizing my handle of the fishing pole, my sloppy tying of the bait on the line, my mistaking a wren for a chickadee—knowing how I cared about getting things right, was always one screw-up away from whining like a crybaby. But he'd always let it go after a while, cracking up with self-satisfaction after I got flustered.

The best moments were when we soaked in the silence of the seasons making themselves known to us. Never had I been aware of these subtle changes than in those

nine months with Gabe. Lightning bugs dotting the meadowland sloping down to the water, swollen thunderheads above us in late summer. Tiny yellow leaves like petals from locust trees, shriveled dry sycamore leaves landing and spinning in the water come autumn. The contours of snow-covered hills on a sunny January day, stiff, bare-limbed skeleton trees hiding nothing. Waiting out March showers under budding brush at the water's edge, sheets of rain making millions of ripples before our eyes. The promise of wildflowers in April, flowering magnolias and dogwoods come May, the small gray, dome-like buds that were there all winter now swollen and bursting into white flowers in spring...It is impossible for me to think about the seasons now without these nine months of returning to the small world of the lake, in which everything was constantly changing, moving ever-forward whether we were ready for it to or not.

*

By the night of our graduation, all of us—me, Gabe, our buddies—felt ourselves riding this current of change. Our feeling compelled to call ourselves *free* was just our thrill at reminder that time was slipping away. It was pulling under our feet as we whipped at each other's legs with our ties, all the way from the school gym, across the football field, down Main Street, then turning off Greenbriar, at the corner where the Speedway is, following that straight road out for a mile or so, to where the houses give way to cornfields, stalks still well below the knees by late May, and leading us to Gabe's house—a one story tucked into a stand of trees, a break from the monotony, along with some other homes. The urgency of that night—after suffering through all that school-filtered sentimentality—quickened our step. Sure, we were all going to the same county high school come August, and nothing would change really as far as we were concerned.

But we were inspired. We, having never been blessed with an opportunity to formally celebrate ourselves, understood that this little graduation granted us permission, for one night at least, to act like we were invincible.

It didn't amount to much, all told. We really were pretty tame for fourteen-year-old boys, no matter how we tried to convince ourselves otherwise. To feel supreme we needed to, first, start an extra big bonfire at Gabe's house. It would be something to congregate around, that would light up our faces once it got dark so we could see each other as we spoke about our big plans for our lives now that middle school was behind us. It would be the sit-and-regroup place, where we knew we'd end up later on and where we'd stay late into the night.

Then we shot his BB gun at various targets he deemed expendable—the light fixture high above the far corner of the yard, unsuspecting squirrels, and half-full Sprite and A&W cans. Whenever Colin shot the gun, he'd shake his ridiculous helmet of hair back and forth and yell, *Fire up your mother's hole!* Some of us chuckled, mostly out of pity. But that was all Colin needed; he'd shoot and shoot, yelling, *Fire up your mother's hole! Fire up your mother's hole!* until someone finally took the gun from him.

Next was swim-wading naked across the nearby mucky pond, bank to bank, on a “dare.” The nude requirement was added to raise the stakes a bit. For one, the pond was shallow; you could walk it without ever lifting your feet from the bottom or totally submerging your head. And who was around to see us running around naked, in a pond tucked into woods on the edge of town? Who cared?

After Gabe stripped down and slid into the water, slick as a seal, we all followed suit, tearing out of our clothes and crashed into the water as one writhing and thrashing mass, a single being—one Loch Ness monster with wild naked boys for arms raising hell in this tiny body of water. Thrashing, kicking like it was life and death. I'd feel someone's foot brush up my thigh before I pushed it away just in time, shoved the nearest body out of confused revenge, then kept thrashing and thrashing because suddenly it was a race. An out and *back* race, I found out, upon seeing Gabe coming at me head-on, when I was only at the half-way mark. Rather than detouring around me, he took hold of my shoulders and brought his legs up frog-style, aiming to use me as jumping off board. Before his weight submerged me, I caught a glimpse of his junk heading right for my face. It was just a fraction of a second, only enough time register the watery, pubic blur, but still; when I felt his feet push off my shoulders, sinking me further into the mucky pond floor, I felt something sink inside of me, too, my guts tied into a weird knot of shock that seemed to momentarily anchor me into the muck. I felt immobilized, in fact, like I'd probably keep sinking into the mud if my nerves didn't start doing their job, which they did, of course, with the on-coming traffic coming my way—one soft belly to the face, *Jesus, Joe*, and I was up and gasping for air, bracing myself for more slimy body to body contact, damned if I was going to be anybody else's springing board. I screamed *fuck me!* to sum up the strange everything I was feeling, just wrote it off then and there. *You wish!* Joe hollered. *As you wish, darling!* someone crooned, and that made it better, of course, slipping back into dick-joke discourse like nothing had happened, nothing at all. I rejoined this middling section of the pack, smiling at myself, at how I'd used this to my advantage—because that's what mattered again: the race. If anyone noticed that I

hadn't reached the other end, that I'd cut corners—a serious breach of etiquette for us—they didn't say anything. And if I was thinking as I passed the unsuspecting swimmers ahead of me, as they shot me disbelieving looks, dumbfounded by my unexplainable store of energy, it wasn't about myself immobile at the bottom of the pond. Not even when I looked up to see Gabe already on the grassy slope, shirtless and zipping up his fly. When he grinned down at me as I approached, said, *Damn, Ben, you been working out?* He winked, *Killer second wind.*

All I could do was smile back up at him, accepting this token of his respect, the sweet secrecy of that wink and all that it implied. And letting that mystery be. All I knew, all I could process in that moment was the promise of his eyes, the guarantee of his smile. How can I explain that whatever happened in the pond ceased to matter then? Never mind the near collision of his junk to my face, the gut-shock, the brief but real conviction that I'd sink and sink, drown right then and there.

But Gabe only looked for a moment, because in the next everyone was crashing to the slope, some using their momentum to crawl right up it to retrieve their clothes. It wasn't full dark yet, still bluish without the aid of artificial light, yet I was sure that the palest among us took on luminescence: Drew's pasty ass cheeks rippled as he got to his feet; Joe's farmer's tan turned him into a glowing, headless figure with severed limbs. I shook these images away and moved to the side, waiting to burst out of the water with the last of us. I darted out of for my clothes with my legs squeezed together and turned at a weird angle, making sure my junk was out of view should anyone be looking.

It was a struggle getting the boxers up my legs, the fabric bunching up and catching on my wet skin, and this agitated me terribly until I realized everyone was

having the same problem. Some hopped around on one leg with their ankle fixed into an underwear sling; others pounced upon the opportunity to tip over those of us most unsteady on our feet. Gabe, fully dressed and full of mischief, led this effort. He even managed to coordinate a tabletop with Colin, who crouched behind Drew's legs as Gabe shoved, sending Drew with his feet up in the air, which in turn flung his boxers like a rubber band back near the water, much to everyone's delight. By rule, Drew now had *five seconds to commence beating the shit out of the person who pushed him (NOT the crouching person)*. But, upon realizing that that person was Gabe, standing there with his thumb pointed at himself and staring maniacally into Drew's eyes, challenging him, Drew's fierce gaze lost its bite and he let out a sheepish laugh in spite of himself. *Hell no, I do not want a piece of you*. Then he looked up and down himself in a panic, as though he'd suddenly become aware that he was naked, was ashamed to be the only one who still had it all hanging out there. We laughed at that, we had to, though somewhere inside of me I was cursing Drew, imploring him to get dressed and cover himself already.

Once he did—not even bothering with the boxers at this point, just opting to go commando in his dress-pants—a kind of calm came over us. We stole brief glances from one other as we fiddled with our dress-pants, picking at their thready clinginess. It was a *What's next?* look, though it wasn't antsy. It was more like taking stock: *Where are you at? Where do we go from here?* No one spoke. And the answer was: *Let's wait a minute. Let's stay right here*. So we forgot about ourselves and gazed out over the pond. It was darker now all around us, a deeper blue merged with the shadows of the woods, obscuring everything but the tree-line against the sky, still slightly pale above the horizon. It was early in the year for crickets, so the chirps coming from the few hiding

out in the tall grass before the woods sounded lonely, tentative even, like, *Where's everyone at?* A couple of robins bickered, jumping branch to branch, while another trilled, *cheerily, cheer up, cheer up, cheerily, cheer up.* And somewhere not too far away, more robins did the same, and it was easy to imagine that robins for miles and miles outside of town were echoing each other in these small patches of woods amid cornfields, not much blocking their bickering and trilling from reaching farther and farther across this flat, boring land. I was filled then with a secret pride, convinced that Gabe and I were the only ones among us who cared about identifying birds, their distinct songs. But, who knows? Weren't they taking in the scene just as much as I was? Maybe they were also meditating on how the pond was, to a degree that seemed impossible, almost completely still now, besides the jittery movement of a water skimmer, the bubbles surfacing from some fish munching whatever we kicked up from the mucky floor. Maybe we all saw the way it reflected the division between the tree-line and sky, the few stars already out and the utter blackness of the woods. Maybe this symmetry held us all still for a moment, refusing to let go.

It occurred to me that my shoulders were bunched up to my neck, that I was holding my elbows in my hands and shivering, goosebumps all over. The others must have been feeling it too—the cool night chilling our clothes and our still dripping hair—because they too were hugging themselves, shifting their weight from one leg to another, speaking in quavering voices that betrayed that they wouldn't mind wrapping themselves in a blanket and drinking some hot cocoa right about now. Returning back to ourselves, to our bodies, it was understood that we'd be leaving the pond now, that we'd head back and stir up the fire we'd started earlier in the evening, warm ourselves up, regroup.

Looking back on that moment—the way we slipped on our socks and shoes without a word, the way we waited until everyone was dressed and ready, the darkness making it hard to tell each other apart or to tell a tree from a person, some kind of herd-instinct making us stand close together, closer than we'd stand in daylight without making a joke of it—makes me want to cry. I wouldn't see or talk to these guys again, not after what would happen that night, who we became, but when I think of them, dredging up their faces as if from the bottom of a bucket, it's this bare silence among us at the pond that comes to me. Stripped of the horseplay, the relentless clowning and put-downs, that's who we were. There, in the darkness. Standing so close that we felt each other's heat, making the cool air was almost sufferable. If I could stand in one place and time again, it might be there. Just before Gabe circled around us and started down the path, before we followed one by one, still staying close and grabbing each other's shirts for guidance in the dark woods, but growing farther and farther apart as we approached the lights of Gabe's house, and back to our usual distance, finally, by the time we reached the still glowing embers in the firepit.

*

We'd been sitting around that fire, rekindled and going strong again, feeling radical in our soiled suit-pants and undershirts, a little sick to our stomachs on account of the soda, Ruffles, hot dogs and pond water. Is that why we fell so easily into the next part? Just the right amount of queasy? I don't remember anyone saying, *Nah, I'm tired. Can't we just sit and shoot the shit?* Whose idea was it, anyway? But that's beside the point; all we needed to fall into it like that, without question, was Gabe's nodding approval, a smirk that said, *Yeah, this could work, boys. Something can come from this.*

I mean, it might've been dumb, but it wasn't anything out of this world. It was something Gabe's next-door neighbor, old man Rawls, might've seen from his back deck from fifty yards over as he himself was chain smoking. He might've even grinned and shook his head at our innocence, a stray boyhood memory of his own blossoming before his eyes before he waved it away, put out his cigarette, and headed back inside to leave us to our adolescent dipshittery.

What we did was we took turns filling our lungs with smoke from the fire, holding it there, seeing who could endure it the longest and, alternatively, who was chickenshit. I was the most chickenshit, coughing like mad before my lungs were even half full, then Harry was slightly less chickenshit, then it was Colin, then Jacques, then Drew. We probably went in that sequence, too, like we knew in advance where we'd fall, felt compelled to verify the pecking order anyway.

It looked like it might be close race between Joe and Gabe, who went last. This wasn't up for debate; they'd been the best at similar competitions in which we held our breath underwater. Joe lowered himself cross-legged before the fire, the orange light turning him into a glistening statue. He made a big show of sitting as upright as possible: *Gotta maximize your carrying capacity, bitches. We said, Christ. We said, hurry the fuck up, Joe.* Someone made a fat joke for good measure, gazing into our faces to see how it was received. We snickered and *Oh*'ed mock-sympathetically, seeing no harm. To which Joe—a pro by then at taking it on the chin—held up a finger, shut his eyes and took a few deep practice breaths.

Thirty-two seconds. Fifteen better than Drew, and he might have lasted longer if it weren't for Jacques, who lowered himself face-to-face to Joe, twisted up his mouth and

puffed out his cheeks to imitate him, making Joe release his breath and laugh in spite of himself. A couple of us stopped laughing long enough to help him to his feet, to pat him on the back as he coughed and to congratulate him begrudgingly.

Gabe was up. He snorted and shook his head at Joe. *Noob*, he said. Joe smiled and flicked him off. *Let's see what you got, Gabey Baby*. Gabe stopped in his tracks and punched him in the shoulder, hard. He said, *Don't fucking call me that, you fat fuck*. A couple of us laughed nervously while Joe winced and rubbed his shoulder, looking a little betrayed. But we all grew silent once Gabe stepped to the fire and circled it until he was in the thick of the smoke. His heavy-lidded eyes glistened as he stared down into the pit, though he looked calm—bored even. As though he were annoyed that he had to demonstrate his excellence to the rest of us amateurs, the real babies. He didn't make a show of it like Joe. After bending over and breathing in the smoke he stood up straight enough that you could tell his lungs were full, and we started counting—*one, Mississippi, two, Mississippi*—just counted and counted until the word Mississippi felt weird on our tongues, like we were reciting a prayer in another language. It translated to: *Praise be to Gabe, praise be to Gabe*. The reverence rose in our voice as we approached thirty, then a little more as we passed it. Hitting forty, it was replaced by something like concern. All eyes were on his face. No one dared mess with him or mirror his expression back to him; there was nothing to reflect. His face was as blank and as still as a wooden mask. It occurred to me that if he were to pass out and fall forward he'd land face first into the fire-pit, and no one here would be ready to catch him. I stood up from the trunk I was sitting on, directly on the other side of the fire from Gabe, and said, *All right, you win. Beat us fair and square*, but he just raised his finger. Some of the others glared at me, as

if to say, *Why are you messing with greatness?* The chorus grew louder—*fifty-Mississippi! fifty-one-Mississippi!*—as though sheer volume could keep Gabe afloat, lift him up before his legs could give out. *Fifty-FIVE-Mississippi!* The s's blending into a vicious hiss, a spit-filled curse—*Fifty-SIX!*—But didn't we see the way Gabe had begun rocking on the balls of his feet? The way his eyes seemed way out of focus, suddenly far away? *Fifty-SEVEN!* I got up to my feet again, struggled past others who'd by then formed ring around Gabe. *Fifty—*

Gabe's eyes fluttered, and he dropped—silent and sure as a felled tree—straight for the pit. Joe, who was standing beside him, lips still shaped around a number, said, *Holy shit!* and grabbed enough of his shirt to halt his freefall. But his momentum carried him forward, tripping up his feet, and if it weren't for me diving like I did—hitting Gabe's side shoulder-first like a pro safety, I would reflect later, like someone capable of real harm—I was convinced, I'm *still* convinced, that Gabe would've been crisped into a spitting image of Freddy Kruger. Instead, Gabe and I somehow got tangled up and he landed into my arms, sending us into the dirt with an *oof!*

I didn't think about the weight of his body on me in that moment, his chest on my face, the way being under him had pushed the air out of my lungs. I was all instincts, my mind stuck on that fraction of a second in which I saw Gabe's eyes flutter, his body so close to burning. I pushed and let him fall to his back. I straddled him, and took his shoulders in my hands. His eyes were shut, his face blank. I gave him a good shake. Nothing. *Hey,* I said, *wake up, Gabe.* I considered for a moment that maybe he was teasing me, was about to burst out laughing, say, *Oh, my God—you should have seen the look on your face.* How I wished that he would. But his face betrayed nothing. *He should*

be up by now, I thought. *Why is the fuck isn't he up?* The prospect of losing him became real for me then and I felt a new, piercing urgency flood my body. I shoved down on his chest with all my might, vaguely recalling that this is something you're supposed to do. I glanced rapid-fire around the circle of faces above me, sputtering, *You're supposed to do something, right? What are you supposed to do?* But before I gave them a chance to answer, or registered the look they were giving me, I realized that I hadn't checked his breathing, so I placed my hands on his chest and lowered my ear to his mouth, desperate to feel and hear something. But I was such a trembling mess by this point that I seemed only to feel myself pulsating through Gabe's body, to hear only my own pulse throbbing in my ear drums.

God, I was such a fucking mess. What the hell was I thinking? Why didn't I just get out of the way and let someone else jump in, someone who might have a clue what to do? Instead I started to whimper and stroke his neck, running my thumbs over his Adam's apple, muttering to myself. I tried lifting his lids one at a time. The way his eyes stared past me absently, at nothing at all, made me cry harder. I let them shut. I shoved down on his chest again, watching his head jolt and return to stillness. Then, on the verge of giving up, just removing my legs from around Gabe's body and curling up beside him, disappearing into myself, I ran through what people do in this moment, what they showed us and we ignored in demonstrations at school, what they do on TV when there's an unresponsive body on the ground.

When it came to me what I hadn't tried, what I had to, I hesitated. I know now that it probably occurred to me before then, that my something inside of me ruled it out not only because there was an audience, but because it would feel so close to something

I'd never done with anyone, ever, something that terrified me and I had trouble even imagining.

But that didn't matter. I didn't have a choice.

I leaned over Gabe's face and decided I'd angle my face to the left. I even started to swipe at my lips to make sure there wasn't any snot or tears or spit on them, but then snapped out of it, reminding myself I had to just do it, just *go down, now, go*.

I plopped my lips down on his and I'll admit I immediately felt my nerves ease. It felt wrong to try and breathe in so I pushed my breath into him, and something somewhere inside of me just clicked: you're supposed to *alternate* between pushing the chest and breathing into the mouth. So that's what I did—*push, plop, breathe, push, plop, breathe*—and I heard the many voices of our friends yelling over each other, their words all jumbled and losing distinction as I moved back and forth, to and fro, my breathing quickened and making me dizzy, though I didn't have to look at them, because it was like I was in the ring again and whatever they were saying...they were cheering me on, they believed in me.

By the time I felt a hand grab my collar from behind, and I heard someone say, clearly, *Get off of him*—and I realized, too, that there was another hand already gripping my arm and another hooking into shoulder—my head was bent down, and my lips were on Gabe's, and I'd just opened my eyes to see Gabe's open as well, staring straight into mine. I was pulled backward and brought to my feet by whoever was gripping me, though I let out a gasp of pure jubilation, and I was trying to shrug away from them so I could go over and collapse into Gabe's arms, rejoice in fact that he's okay, that he's

alive. But when he rolled over to his hands and knees, a little unsteadily, like he was still dizzy, the first thing he did was make a horrible hocking sound from the back of his throat. Then he spat *once, twice, three* times on the ground. Then he grabbed at his mouth like he was removing a film of dirt, wiped whatever was on his hand off on his pants. Rising slowly to his feet, he clutched at the back of his head and chest, grimaced.

Then he looked directly at me. The fire to my left was still going strong, but he was standing far enough back from it that his face was a distorted mix of orange light and shadow. In effect, his furrowed brow and his scowl appeared especially severe, and his eyes reflected the flames. Still clutching his head, he looked me up and down, as if realizing something about me. Scanning the other shadowy faces, I saw that everyone else was looking at me the same way.

What the hell was that? Gabe asked me.

I was so taken off guard, so hurt, so confused by the poison directed at me...I didn't know if I'd be able to speak. A few seconds passed in which I just held my mouth open, making clicking sounds in my throat.

Joe, who was standing to Gabe's right, turned to him and said, *You were falling into the pit. And, I mean, you must've passed out man because you were really heading for it before I snagged your shirt—*

I saved you, I blurted, inadvertently, trying to piece it together myself, and to prove to everyone that whatever they were thinking wasn't right. I thought they'd be high-fiving me for Christ's sake. *Joe caught you, sure, but I also bumped you good and—*

And you knocked him out cold, Joe said, glaring at me. He turned back to Gabe. That's what's up with your head, man. All 'cause numbnuts over here just really wanted to be superman today.

Okay, Gabe said, clenching his fist and still staring at me, so I hit my fucking head. What I really wanna know, what I just fucking asked you, is what the hell your hard-on and mouth were doing on me just now.

I...I wasn't—

No, Gabe said, you fucking were.

I couldn't look at him. His eyes. I just wanted to sink into the ground.

I...I was trying to wake you up, you were gone, I just did whatever—

You thought you could touch me up while I was out, right?

No, I said, feeling my throat constrict, feeling everything fall apart. I just pressed down on your chest, did mouth-to-mouth like they showed us in school. I thought that's what you needed.

CPR? Drew said, from a little behind Gabe, incredulous. I don't know what the hell that was, but it sure as fuck wasn't CPR.

Even if it was kinda sorta, Joe said, squinting, it was damn unnecessary.

But, I cried, his face was, like, blank and his eyes—

No, shut the fuck up, Gabe yelled, his voice cracking. He removed his hand from his head and swayed slightly. You know what you were doing. Don't fuck with us. Joe

held out his hand to steady him but Gabe slapped it away. *And you all just watched and let this perv go down on me? Fuck you too!*

No one could look Gabe in the eyes as he spun around, challenging anyone to correct him. The shadows of their faces deepened as they turned their gaze to the ground. I fumbled for something to say to win everyone back. *It could still be a joke*, I hoped. It had to be. How could everything change so suddenly, without warning?

Gabe, I said, *I'm sorry. Please—*

What? Gabe turned back to face me, pursing his lips but failing to conceal the fact they were trembling. *You're sorry? For what? Can you even say it?*

Seeing those, his lips, made me want to breakdown. I could only shake my head.

Then he started to walk toward me. His features came into clearer focus as he neared the fire. His eyes were glistening now, though I wouldn't say he looked more calm, or less likely to knock me out and exact payback. I couldn't tell what his intentions were, but part of me hoped that it was a fight he was looking for, that we were about to enter the ring again, sort this out in a language we don't have to explain or deliberate on. A kind of silent language that will take us back to the wordless solitude of our boat, give each other a chance to hurt for our sins against each other, take all that's been said and done one strike, one blow, one tackle at a time. Let that determine where we are, how we move forward. I almost got down in a crouching stance when he was within a few feet of me.

Instead, he pointed behind me, jabbing his finger in the air like a punch, so I couldn't possibly read equivocation into his intent, couldn't see past the disgust in hopes

of appealing to someone within as he spat on the ground before my feet, implored me to *Get out of here* and said, *I don't want to have anything to do with you.*

*

Over that summer, and in the dreary years of high school and beyond, I'd turn over possibilities for making things right with Gabe. That night, walking in the darkness down the road and into town in a kind of stunned, meandering state, I thought of explaining to Gabe why he was wrong, how bad he hurt me, and how I couldn't conceive of living without our trips to the lake. Did he really want, I would ask, to throw that all away over one misunderstanding? I felt there had to be some way I could prove to him, to myself, that I was only trying to help him stay alive. That I loved him, yes, and it was because of who he was, not because of something I wanted to take from him. That I would continue to even if he refused to ever talk to me again. I would end it by asserting that he saved my life and maybe that's why I was so eager to save his.

But I was afraid of how he might respond, so I kept my distance. Not approaching him kept the fantasy alive that he hadn't meant what he said that night, that his vicious contempt was a result of the head injury, that we would come together someday. And I was willing to live a muted life with this fantasy intact.

Our high school was big enough that I could mostly avoid running into him and when I did, he pretended not to see me and I, him. And the shock of it lessened over time. I think that I might have been so far behind Gabe's memory by junior year, that he simply didn't realize I was present when we passed in the hallway, no pretense necessary. He'd acquired a new, expansive group of friends there, being the football star everyone

foresaw him becoming, so he had plenty to keep his mind occupied, to shove out the unfortunate memory of our brief friendship.

It was the same with our friend-group. What I'd done was so shameful, it seems, that it infected all of us. I thought about reaching out of my loneliness to rekindle those relationships but found this to be too daunting of a task. How could I explain to them that I must have done "it" that night because I loved Gabe and simply wanted him to be alive, because I loved all of us and all of us together like we were at the pond, silent and open, but that the honest truth is: *I didn't know?* That I might've very well been who Gabe said I was? That I wasn't certain that every minute spent at the lake wasn't just part of a scheme to get close enough to take advantage of him? That I wasn't sure I wouldn't have touched him, if not that night, then some other night while he lay in front of me, unconscious? That I didn't know whether or not I was deserving of Gabe's kindness, his cruelty, or both?

*

I hadn't gone back to the lake at all between the last time with Gabe and when I got my driver's license the summer after my sophomore year. On that day in June I borrowed the car and drove down the narrow two-lane roads across the small wooded hills outside town, the ones between us and the lake. I wasn't sure before setting out that I'd make it down to the lake but, going that familiar route after so long, I just had to. The sudden ups and downs that used to give me butterflies in my stomach while I was in the van with Gabe and his cousins. When Tim would notice me in the rearview mirror, grin, say, *What do you reckon, Ben?* And the sharp turn at railroad crossing, where you have to edge slowly forward, and once past that you get your first glimpse of the water,

shimmering down there in the sunlight. The bait and tackle shop, the general store, the log cabins, the Pizza King.

When I pulled into gravel the lot for the marina, I felt a pang of nostalgia for those old day-trips. I could see us jumping out of the van, me unfastening the front of the boat, Gabe disengaging the back, grabbing ends and making our way down across the gravel, down the ramp. All smiles, even on those days that were low forties, overcast skies, a chance of rain, meaning it would, and some. Early mornings, pink on the horizon, pale blue above. First ones there, first in the water. Hop in while moving and don't waste time, ease on out with the oar, float some, take us farther and farther out, further and further in. Out there, where the depths of love are waiting for you and your friend to glide over them.

I got out of the car, headed down to the dock where the bench was that we used to sit at when we could only stay for a while, could only sneak a short fishing session in. There were many people there that day—it being perfect weather, lushest and greenest as it probably would get all summer—and I had to dodge a couple of toddlers chasing each other with snail shells on the dock. A massive pontoon and a slim speed boat were being lowered into the water on the ramp to the left, with more in line to arrive and depart, motors chugging, someone's radio tuned in to some radio talk show where two men talked over each other and laughed the radio waves away. It was the kind of day at the lake that would've turned us off—too much noise, too much commotion, too much happening all at once. But I didn't mind it at all that day; I was soaking everyone in and their aliveness. Their drifting through this space comforted me as I neared the bench and sat down.

From there, you could see a good portion of the lake, the hills beyond it, sloping meadowlands, some houses situated among the pines and oaks across the way. There were strong gusts of wind coming across the surface, leaving jittery patterns in its wake that caught the sunlight and then let go. *Catch and release*, I thought, feeling myself smile and relax a bit. There was a sailing class in the middle, youngsters learning the handle of the tiller and boom as the wind sent them sideways almost ninety degrees before they corrected themselves and their instructor congratulated and critiqued them.

I closed my eyes breathed in the moisture on the wind. I felt a presence then, sure and true as the sun beating down on my skin. I could feel it making its way down the dock from behind me, spinning out of the way as the toddlers tore through once again, but coming my way sure enough, bracing itself against the wind, slowing down behind the bench, and stopping just short of placing its hand on my shoulder.

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