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Cascade Lake: A Novel

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CASCADE LAKE

a novel

by

Camille Marian Pack

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

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ABSTRACT

Cascade Lake

by

Camille Marian Pack, Master of Arts

Utah State University, 2009

Major Professor: Dr. Jennifer Sinor
Department: English

Twenty-two-year-old Macy Oman narrates the book in retrospect from Cascade, Oregon, where she is visiting her mother. Macy's father moved with her to Portland shortly after the accidental death of her brother, Nick, seven years before the narration begins. Macy's mother stayed behind in Cascade. Thematically the work centers on the emotional repercussions of these losses. Macy's, and her older lover Jason's, involvement with Nick's death is unknown to everyone. Her guilt and her mother's perceived betrayal are disabling. Taking her longing for closeness to nature and to her reclusive friend Celia, Macy discovers folklore that inspires a vision quest to seek her own personal healer, a shaman inside. When Macy accepts and reveals her part in Nick's death, it opens the way to further revelations about the real root of her parents' separation, the divisive nature of assumptions, and the healing power of acceptance.

This story attempts to loosely rewrite, subvert or reclaim the early life of the mythological Medea, who betrayed her father and her brother by aiding her lover, Jason the Argonaut, in his quest to obtain the golden fleece that hung on an oak tree, guarded by a dragon. In this story, the golden fleece is represented by an Apollo scarf that Macy's father Richard, an eccentric art-history buff, bought for her mother. Mythologically, the fleece was a powerful artifact, heavily guarded, worthy of war. In this rendition, the value of the scarf, rather than being material, is emotional. In comparison with the golden fleece, the Apollo scarf, an expensive item that is only appreciated for the relationships it represents, is meant to signal the superiority of the emotional over the material.

Ultimately Macy does not betray her family; it is Mari who stays behind and Macy who instigates a reconciliation when she reveals the truth about her somewhat inadvertent participation in Nick's death.

(352 pages)

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I give special thanks to my marvelous husband, Simon Blundell, for his love, patience, inspiring pep talks, and soothing company while I worked my way from the initial proposal to this current (still quite nascent) document.

Camille Marian Pack

PREFACE

Nick drops anchor near the peninsula and rocks in the heavy fog. The outline of the shore is backlit now with orange glow. He overestimated the distance, but doesn't restart the boat. Better to be too far away than too close, he thinks, even if it takes more air.

The neoprene pulls against his skin, and he jerks the wetsuit up his waist, impulsively wishing for company. The feeling fades when he remembers the options: Macy, Jason, some random person from his open water class. Not really options, and they wouldn't come anyway, so the anger returns.

Nick puts on his weight jacket, wipes his face, and checks the air in his tank: 3,000psi, about an hour's worth. Holding the mask and regulator, he rolls backward into the bluish-green water. It ripples out around him, disappearing in the fog.

After emptying his lungs, to go further below the surface, Nick lets the air out of the buoyancy compensator. It's eerily blue. Respiration replaces all sound, whooshing in and out slowly, like some giant machine erasing thought. Every five feet until thirty, he stops, holds his nose through the flexi-plastic and blows, equalizing the mounting pressure in his ears, startling some fish.

The peninsula's underside stands out, rising questionably: jagged volcanic rock, braids of lava tubes, other eruption leftovers. His thoughts return to Macy. Maybe it is *none of his business*, like she said. Maybe he should just *butt out of her life*. But she's

fifteen—what does she know about life? Fat disjointed bubbles trail out behind him, and the water's colors drip into their darkly hued counterparts.

Below the rock like a ram's head, Nick grabs a shelf and hurls himself through the black hole he found two weeks ago. As far as he knows, nobody else has found this place; they're all busy on the other side of the lake, exploring those tunnels. Cool cave water hits his face, his chest, sweeps back his hair like wind. If his mouth weren't filled with plastic, he would grin at the heady rush. Divilight bounces around the tube drowning the sunlight, and he turns left wondering if Macy would feel the same claustrophobia that bites at the edges of his mind but still sucks him in.

When Macy was little, she used to spread their parents' big burgundy blanket on the floor, lay on one corner, and he would roll her up tight like a burrito. Cheap thrills until she couldn't breathe; then she'd scream, pathetically airless and he'd stop sitting on her so she could unroll. But sometimes he stayed, or stuffed her under the coffee table, pretending not to hear until she went over the edge: pushing, kicking, crying. Something about her terror thrilled him. It made him powerful. Why did she like it? Keep asking? Macy rolled him once—he panicked, couldn't get out fast enough: didn't go in for that kind of torture. Anyway, he told her, he was too old for stupid children's games.

Following the white nylon guideline he anchored on the last dive, Nick ignores alternate tunnels—some are windows, others passages. He tries to remember the last several times he saw Macy with Jason. Their talking seemed so innocent at the time. He wished he'd paid better attention. Light ricochets down the tunnel, blue on its edges, shadowy in its recesses. The floor is ropy, bulbous, dirty. Under an arching ceiling,

twisted hair-like structures hang mysteriously. Every kick billows sediment behind him, indefinitely suspended, hiding the distance back and concealing the entrance.

Maybe the pictures he found in the truck weren't even Jason's. It didn't make sense, for a man that age. He had reached for *Diving World*, in front of the gear-shift, and found himself picking up a few photos instead. Snooping wasn't his style, but it was funny until he noticed their ages. He had almost called out to Jason, to say something snide or dirty about his whore collection. But at the same time he saw realized they were children, he noticed the hand, and that stopped him. In every photo it reached in to caress the girl, covering some part, owning it—a developing breast, a mouth, a neck. Was it Jason's? He put the pictures back and fumbled to grab *Diving World* before Jason got there—now he isn't sure. It left him with a strange sensation, as though he'd done something bad himself: participated.

It takes almost fifteen minutes of wobbling turns through the tunnel to reach the cavern. All the years he played at Celia's he never dreamed this wound under his feet, masked, complex, beautiful. His divelight barely breaks the cavern's edges. And it takes almost a full minute to cross to the other side, swim up the remnants of a hardened thirty foot lavafall, the claustrophobia leaves. Great lumps of congealed and darkened rock stick to the ceiling and lay broken on the floor. He turns to survey the room like he did last time. Even though he's ready for it, his arms prickle.

Layers of dust and mud and silt cling to grotesquely distended rock; they look like bones: a foot, a femur, a swollen face without eyes: interment sculptures cut from the

water's relentless flow. Nick revels in this, in being the first one here, in owning it. In only three dives he's charted two caverns and an alternate exit on his writing slate. The darkness fascinates him. With his back turned, the grim facsimiles are almost company, almost breathing in the blackness, flesh-like, a taste of the edge between excitement and panic.

Nick's light catches a structure, and he returns gently to the pounded out pool at the foot of the falls, the last part of the floor to solidify. Gray lava roses boil in cadences around each other, crumpled like membranes, thick and swelling from heat-induced elephantitis. It was a mistake to stick his finger in the dust, to run it up the crease of the fat petal thinking of the space between Kristy's legs. Clouds of silt well up and the roses disappear. Kristy would call it *a sign*; he thinks wryly, noting their location on his writing slate; she'd use it as an excuse to push him off at the last minute, tease him with pious claims. There's something reverent about trapped lava, he'll reply; she should let him reverence her.

Contraction cracks, blades pierce through the west corner. It looks like an old in-feeding conduit now sealed from three, maybe four lava flows. The vents are still active at the bottom of the lake, creating gentle currents even in these tunnels. Sometimes he thinks there is a glint of movement at the edge of his periphery, though when he turns: no fish, no life, not even moss. Chimeric. Things only live in the lake. Here there is nothing: a hallucination-inducing waste-land.

Glancing at his pressure, Nick's finds it halfway gone: 1,500psi. He snaps back to the rope and kicks up the falls into the passage as planned. Nitrogen is no worry at this

depth, but there's one other cavern, just past the end of the guideline, leading to an alternate exit at 60 feet, an incredible find. Wait until he shares this with the diving community. Depending on how much time he spends there, he may need a safety stop on the way to the surface: decompress.

The tunnel is narrow and pressing, like a snake skin graveyard. It's too much rock, too much water. His chest rises and falls faster like it did last time, and he shuts his eyes: it won't collapse, he tells himself; it's been stable thousands of years. But he understands how a buddy could be useful, someone to help him keep his wits, preserve his sanity. Because the passage is smaller silt forms light-reflecting clouds: blinding him, making the air heavier. He holds his right arm in front of his face, over his head to protect it. Like last time, he considers turning back, but the cave draws him in further, an irrational compulsion.

Jason mentioned a kick. Nick moves his legs awkwardly, frog-like, sending the force of the water behind him, instead of down into the silt and mud. It's slower, but helps the passage clear. The walls are smooth and dimpled. Except where diverging tunnels bend off. There's a spring on the peninsula above him, bubbling up from the ground—he's sure there's a vertical tube down here that leads to it; he saw one in the small cavern before, but didn't have time to follow. Nobody needed a caving course if they could stick to their line, he thought, proud of himself. It was just one more way to make money off divers. Silt fogs the tunnel and Nick passes beneath three windows, watching the rope curve out a body length ahead, disappearing.

Time contracts, warps, molts in deep water, and the tunnel stretches. Nick checks his pressure and taps the gage to make sure: 900psi. Sensing company he glances back, wondering if there's a fish or something trailing him, then chides himself for his paranoia, debating still if he should return. The tank is a little low, he spent too much time in the lava fall cavern, but it would take longer to go back than forward, and it isn't far to the smaller cavern. Nick shakes his head to clear his thoughts, kicks a little more urgently.

When the guideline turns up, leads through the window, he shakes his fist in triumph. Or is it relief? At last! When he laid this guideline, it didn't seem to take nearly so long, but then, he didn't sleep much after he took Kristy home and maybe that's impaired his judgment. Silt wraps around his fins, moves up his legs, and engulfs his head while he holds the window opening. Of course memory distorts under pressure, but the opening looks much smaller, even hard to fit through. Ridiculous. Nick breathes a little heavier and looks back the way he came, at the wall of solid particles. The idea of swimming back through a silt-out isn't attractive. He'd have to turn off his divelight. That thought nearly makes him panic. Get out fast, he decides, the small cavern is closer. Trust the guideline. Squeezing through the window, clouding it, he follows the guideline away from the dust, noticing that the tunnel also seems smaller. But of course that's not true.

Around the third corner, the line ends, anchored neatly to the wall. Did he tie it off here? It doesn't feel right. Nick puts his face next to the wall, the anchored end, and shuts his eyes, trying to concentrate, then focuses on the rope. It's exactly like he left it, in a square knot, and he distinctly remembers tying a square knot. This reassures him

momentarily. He's diving tired; it's messing with his mind. In a few minutes he'll feel the spacious water in the second cavern and follow the sunlight out, even take a safety stop.

But he's not sure, so he returns to the window he came through: a pointless activity; he can't see into the room below. Nick fingers his gage then follows the line back to the anchor and past it, in the direction of the cavern. It's better not to change plans mid-dive. Jason always warned of that. In the clouds of dust that follow him—bubbles hover, lodge, and pop on the ceiling.

With his empty left hand Nick traces the wall and tries to breathe more slowly, less like Frankenstein. Last time he was in this tunnel the silt was almost transparent, thin enough to see through, but he must be kicking too hard, or maybe the silt dislodged a few days ago never settled. He can sense the darkness wanting him, running its hands over his heart, squeezing. He keeps forgetting the frog kick, probably the real reason there's too much silt—he keeps rushing, thinking it shouldn't be so narrow. Even with the frog kick, there's too much silt, and he's got to stop looking behind him. It's only making him paranoid--there's nothing there. But Nick throws a glance behind his shoulder again, and his hand, which had been traveling along the wall, brushes nothing.

One hard thud from his heart. He reaches for it again, but it's not there, points his dive light where the wall should be: silt-out, nothing. He turns around, but everything is identical, blurry, formless. Reaches for it again, kicking. Nothing. Kicks. Nothing. Kicks. Nick hits a wall on the right. His breathing is way too fast. It's getting to him. Calm down, he thinks, but he repeats it, over and over, not at all calmly: calm down, calm down, and it's hard to stay under control. Breathe. What happened? He's not in the

cavern; there would be light from the exit into the lake. He also wouldn't be drowning in silt, not in a cavern. Under his glove the wall is smooth and concave. He follows it . . . steady: one hand over his head, just in case, kicking slowly: he hits another blockade.

Trapped, his mind yells, panicked. No, not trapped the ceiling has caved-out. It must have caved out last week. It's the only thing that makes sense. But this thought only alarms him further. What if it collapses again? Comes smashing down? Nick wheezes air desperately. Dribbles of sweat gather inside his mask. He could take the mask off, clear it, but what if he made it worse? He tries to look around. What about the guideline?

Turn back? What an idiot. What has he done? His pressure reads 500psi. Impossible: taps it—no movement. He grabs his hair and pulls his head down: it's too much air; he's breathing way too fast, killing himself. Idiot! How did he let it get so low? Didn't Jason warn about this? He's got to focus. Be smart.

Nick turns, keeps his hand planted on the wall, swims, not too fast, but his fingertips graze heavily. Find the guideline—it's just a white nylon cord. He keeps his right hand above his head. He's got to get somewhere he can see, but he hits another wall, a cave-out. It looks the same. It must be the same. He turned in a circle. Must have gone around the ceiling. Stop.

His fingers glow in the divelight, crowded by bright particles that blur with the black rock. With his hand back on the wall, he turns, a half turn and moves forward. It's all right. Nothing is in front of him. Nothing changes. Nothing wrong, except blindness. He's not on the ceiling anymore. The guideline will appear any second; any second. He

scans for a glint of white and counts to keep his mind sane, to fill up the space: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.

In the forest they used to play hide-and-go-seek. Nick would sometimes call it hide-and-go-leak, to piss her off: 21, 22, 23, 24. *Don't drain the lizard in my game grodo*, Macy said once when she found him in the middle of a leak before stalking off, but he did anyway, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, even waiting until after 100 to heighten the suspense. His mother didn't want him turning into a hillbilly—if Macy told it was guaranteed grounding. So stupid. And she'd love nothing more than to get him in trouble, 69, 70, 71. She only caught him that once, and he felt exhilarated each time it ran down the trees into the ferns and mossy pads, like he was getting away with something, though he wasn't sure what.

582, 583, 584. Macy would have found him by now, unless he'd doubled back, followed her while she looked for him. 760, 761, 762. A blast: jumping out at her while she looked for him. 1294, 1295. Gotcha. Stop crying, cry baby, cry baby.

Nick watches the floor of the tunnel curve down now, 1600, 1601, 1602, widening. The silt has cleared. It's now obvious that he's not going toward the guideline; he missed it. Missed it a long time ago, but the floor articulates that reality. His stomach heaves into his diaphragm, panicked until he remembers the floor sloped like this before the small cavern. His heart thuds: still on track? It looks right, maybe. He scans ahead to convince himself, checks his pressure: 400psi. How in the hell?

Nick abandons the frog kick, kicks straight, hurtles downward, veering. Around the next turn, it's still not there. His depth is 65 feet now, increasing. Did the tunnel go

down this far before turning up? No. Maybe. Definitely, maybe. It gets wider. There is no outside connection, glimmer of sunlight, familiarity: just dislocation.

Benches develop on the sides, marking the edge of a second lava flow through the tunnel. He ignores them. After a few minutes the passageway forks into two tunnels. “Shit,” he breathes adrenaline into his exhale. It’s the wrong tunnel: 350psi. Nausea wells in his stomach, garners up his throat like lava; he pushes at it, clenching his mouthpiece, trying to stop his thoughts. He’s ten feet below the other exit—even if he could get to the guideline, he doesn't have enough air to go back. He's got to find the cavern. Nick stalls in his kick for one second, so close to choosing the left fork, then jerks to the right, toward where he thinks the cavern should be.

His kicking disrupts centuries of silt, making it billow again, filling the blackness with effervescent refraction. Sweat runs around, burns his eyes: there’s a good size puddle in his mask now, running back and forth when he turns his head. The tunnel levels off at 70 feet: flat, widening more. He passes above a window, but can’t go deeper. This isn’t right. His divelight is alive, sweeping the walls, glancing off cracks, surging forward, forcing the next turn, looking. It’s too deep, he keeps thinking, as though the depth were his problem: too deep, too deep.

Nick drags against the wall, slows down, uses it to pull himself around. His arms flail, plowing the water while he flees through the suspended particle trail. At the fork, he turns into the tunnel he should have taken minutes ago. The water clears again. He can see a darker hole. His mind processes too fast. He starts hyperventilating. Don’t, he tells himself. It will work. But his legs quiver and spasm as he kicks.

Entering the hole, light-headed, he curves to the left, descends straight down to a collapsed wall: 85 feet. He's going to need a safety stop when he gets out of here. He's still pretending he'll get out. But there's no time. He'll get the bends for sure. The bends are okay. Someone can take him to a decompression chamber, fly him to one. Only needs to make it to the surface. His mechanical breathing is so loud and heavy it scares him. The reverberations hemorrhage through his ears. He turns back, swims up, re-enters the last tunnel, it's okay, it's okay, following curve after curve, it's okay. He'll make it. The tunnel narrows worm-like, contracts, descends, rises, turns another twenty minutes around to disjointed images of his fight with Macy. Serious accusations. *He's using you*, he yelled. But now he's too tired to stay ahead of the silt. 150psi: his kicking slows, it's okay.

Nick turns over to look at the ceiling, at the rock—he forgets its foggy and overcast outside, above the peninsula, instead imagines blue sky piercing so lovely, so bright. His lips are numb from hyperventilating; his breathing pulses, eyes burn. The last dregs. He doesn't even check his pressure. Instead, he brings his slate in front of his face. Stares at it. What is he looking for? A message. His hand jerks while he writes slowly across the slate: “lost. I'm sorry. love you mom.” Nick's eyes go wild, bulging. Breathing is so difficult, so tight. One more rush of adrenaline pours: he rams himself into the ceiling, claws the rocks. Silt rains. But he kicks hard, ripping his gloves, digging for the sky.

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CHAPTER 1

For the past hour, the sky has been darkening. Under the tree's shadows I am following the road to a place I haven't been in six years, one I avoided after the longing stopped.

I am next to a small field of cattle: holsteins, their lazy black and white bodies, and a road curling off to the left that I'm determined not to look at. It quickens my heart rate, that road, leading down to the lake, our boathouse, the peninsula. I can't let my mind go there, so I take in a breath and grip the steering wheel, watch the cows and the road ahead.

They named it Cascade Lake, I suppose because of the cascade mountain range—but the lake has never fallen, cascaded, descended to a lower point, only filled, engorged, swelled with trapped rainwater in a six-square-mile volcano head, which happens to still be active, though nothing seismically exciting has happened for hundreds of years.

It's so deep, nearly two-thousand feet in some places, that divers from everywhere come to try their fins in the crystalline ocean. Most don't make repeat visits—you've seen one empty volcano cauldron with only two fish species, you've seen them all—but it isn't only the lake's depth that pulls them here. After all, most divers don't sink lower than a hundred feet on a dive, which barely scrapes the surface of Cascade Lake. But there is a select group of people, adventurers they might call themselves, who are into the lake's extremes.

When I worked at Cascade Dive, I remember they all wanted the same thing: air, maps, backup parts, and sometimes new suits. If they wanted to go deeper, they brought their own gas, as the shop couldn't afford nitrox. But most of the extreme divers dove on regular air and came into the shop for maps showing the lava tunnels.

When Anthony, a squat friendly man, opened up the shop in 1984, nobody knew about the tunnels. Well, they knew about the ones twisting underneath Wizard Island, but they never dreamed there were huge caverns on the northwest shore. Cascade was a semi-popular diving place, but before the dive shop opened, people had to pack all their gear in, and after a few days of no bottom in sight, hardly any wildlife, and a million pounds of volcanic rock, divers got bored.

Anthony used to encourage people to look for tunnels. It helped business. "Don't go in them," he'd say, "but look, the island has lava tubes, so it stands to reason there's more." He told me this himself, and word spread in the diving community. By the time three years passed several small systems were found, most collapsed, and the Craig's, a father and son team, were mapping the northwest tunnel, over a mile long already, with multiple off-shoots.

"Be careful," Anthony warned them when they brought in their maps, having spent the day diving. The Craig's came for two weeks the first summer, and they planned to stay three weeks the summer the kid got sick and died. "He wasn't a kid," Anthony said, "but he seemed like one. Young squirt, full of himself, twenty or so. He convinced his dad that a cold was no reason to change plans they'd had for a year. They could go slow; they were always careful."

It happened before I was born, but it became legend in our town.

Against his better judgment, the dad agreed because he couldn't go in alone. It was suicide to dive a cave without a buddy, and he figured his kid was an adult, or that's what Anthony said. The kid could make his own choices. Besides, they were doing exciting dives, dives you might only do once in a lifetime: an unexplored system. It was thrilling. They came back with stories of lava formations, drained out lava-falls, rock flowers budding from the floors, curved ceilings, junctures between lava flows. They were looking for a tunnel to lead above ground, spit the water out in a natural spring.

I used to stare at the black and gold plaque on the wall of Cascade Dive that read: "In memory of Lewis and Nathan Craig, August 10, 1988." It looked like an award for valor. Anthony said their bodies were found wrapped in white nylon guideline, completely entangled. More cord was wrapped around Nathan, the younger man. Most likely, his judgment impaired by the cold, Nathan tangled himself in the line at the bottom of the cavern and panicked. When his father came to help, Nathan caught him in the cord accidentally. Anthony said their struggle to get free pinned their arms and legs and pulled the regulator from Nathan's mouth. When he was found, his tank had more than enough air left in it to surface, but the father's tank was completely drained; he'd watched his son die, unable to help.

The memory makes me sick, and I look forward, ignore the road curving off in periphery. It didn't bother me at the time Anthony told me, not in my gut. He wanted me to caution enthusiastic customers, and I was horrified, but in a delighted way; it was the

kind of horror that drove me to find out details, to tell the story with dramatic flourish and wide eyes to my best-friend, Francis.

The gravel thins out, and I grip the steering wheel, black leather, and sit up. Such posture reassures me. Under the tires, the rocks respond, protest, burp a haze of trailing dust, while up ahead and to the left, I see my house, or what used to be my house. It has two roofs: one above the garage, one above the main section. They veer into each other at modern angles that used to be popular in my father Richard's circle but seem cold in these trees.

After all these years it surprises me how well I know this place, how little it has changed, how small the house is nestled in this forest. Its sameness tugs at my stomach sickly. At night the trees used to frighten me—the tangled black branches turned virulent, aggressive, silent, always hiding something dangerous. But by daylight, the pines blue shadows soothed me like a secret respite, meditative. The trees were sentinels, guards around my castle, their very nature so dichotomous that they almost seemed human. A place I could run to, and then turn at night to run from.

I enter the driveway, go around the side of the house to the garage, turning my wheel, edging off the driveway, out of the way. A balcony juts from the house; I'd forgotten, off Richard's old studio. It's in disrepair, the paint weathered, peeling, exposing bleached cedar.

Despite the gravel, my mother hasn't heard me, or maybe isn't home. Perhaps she is pretending not to know I am here. The last time I saw her, she was in her old Datsun. My father had wanted to leave her the truck to bring all our things, but she refused, there

was plenty of room in the Datsun, and she didn't want to bring much. A shelter could use our extra belongings—she said we should start over. I wasn't in the mood to object. We all needed a new start.

At the back of the house I step up onto the covered deck and peer through the circular kitchen window: doubled. Circular, like a conduit into past time, dead time. The room is empty, the floor half-covered in homemade tiles and cradled on its other half by an old rag rug, a testament to Mari's former domesticity, made from our jeans, leftover scraps. Under the rug, Mari hides the floor's plain plywood. She never finished the project, I realize, which both frightens and reassures me.

I could use the back door, I doubt it's locked. But I step off the porch and walk toward the front. I am not expected, and this is not my home. The grass has overtaken the stepping stones. I put a foot on each one, let them lead me toward the formal entry. They are odd sizes: built from concrete and lake rock. My parents never cared much about yard care, at least Richard didn't. It was the natural look. Rain takes care of life--trimming is up to your father, Mari used to say.

Anything she didn't feel like doing, she left to him, passed the buck to the buck, her strong handsome provider. Sometimes she called him this, when things were good. Anyway, she didn't have time for yard work. To be fair, my father would make Nick mow the lawn occasionally, but it never seemed very important to anyone.

But the grass is more overgrown than ever. It ventures into the damp forest mat in patches, over the wells of detritus: poking up among pinecones, ferns, mounds of needles. And at the street, where the gravel thins periodically, grass sprouts wild there too. Probably no neighbors complain, I think, because there are no neighbors to complain. To reach another living soul, you'd have to venture out to the peninsula. And at that, there's only one: Celia, the one person I'm looking forward to seeing. Celia would never complain about something so petty as overgrown grass.

My stomach is tense, knotted. I ring the doorbell, and before there's time to retreat, footsteps jumble down the stairs. Tread time. Strange to hear that noise from this side of the door. I swallow air. What will she think when she opens it and sees me standing here? She asked for me, I said I would come, but she must wonder. Wonder if I'll pull something like her, back down, back out, forget.

She might open the door and be speechless, throw her arms around me, pull my head close, pet me, sprout apologies. I imagine these apologies of her's growing out of her mouth like vines, virulent and winding, they reach toward me, entangle. But I don't deserve them and she, I've decided, is worse than me for not knowing and still abandoning. Not everything is my fault. It's a resolve I must repeat.

I prickle, stand straighter while she walks toward me. Only the door between us now. She might throw her hands in the air and say Thank God. Giant tears will drip down her cheeks, and I'll be struck by how graceful they are yet again. She was always beautiful when she cried. Never go away, she'll plea, caressing me, telling me how she

couldn't bear it if it happened again, and she didn't mean the things she'd done. I want you, she'll say. And after the appropriate amount of time, enough for her to prove it, I might start believing. This believing is a dangerous sickness. Eventually the past will erase, turn blank, gray, empty as an old farm silo hit with a stick: the hollow tin roars, a barn owl bounds out, screaming shrilly.

Worse than this, she might raise her eyebrows and say, hello icily. Her arms locked around her waist: distant and defiant. She's been known to take this approach. But that might be easier for me to handle: no forced touching, no pretenses. Then at least, I'd know what I was dealing with.

The door swings open, a man stands there, smiles.

"Can I help you?" His chin stubbled. He fills up the opening, blocks the view beyond. I stare rudely because there's nothing else to do. What is he doing here? Though he seems familiar. Has Mari moved? Am I at the wrong house? Am I too late? Has she died? It never occurred to me that I might run out of time, but I feel strangely relieved at the thought that the sickness took her before we had to face each other.

"Are you alright?" he asks.

It probably seems odd how I'm trying to look around him, discern what's in this house. I couldn't have mistaken the house—there is no other. "I used to live here."

He must recognize my confusion. He studies my face, and then I hear her close: voice like a bell. "Love, who is it?" It takes a second but it dawns on me, what's happened. This man is her lover.

“I think it’s Macy,” he says stepping back from the door and Mari appears, capri’s the color of sky, leather sandals, a baby blue scarf looped several times around her neck. It’s her. The woman who used to be mother, who taught me to swim, to sing, took me shopping for school. She trips toward me like a robin, lightly, almost on her toes, almost like an angel. A sheen from the light bounces off of her face, radiating around her, glimmering. How does she manage this? Manage to look so guiltless?

When she stops, I spot the sickness. Dozens of lines enfold her eyes. Her hair is darker, almost black, pixie cut. Set off by the hair, her eyes pierce. I remember the first time she went darker. She let me run dye through her hair with a small pick. It was sandy-colored then and longer: dishwater blonde we called it. When we were done, strands laid limply on her shoulders, setting off her skin like translucent gauze: ephemeral, pale. It was the first time I noticed how bright her eyes could be.

I smile—my chest feels tight. And she pauses in front of the door, amazement spreading over her face, enlarging her features. So she didn’t expect me, wasn’t sure I’d really come. In a pit somewhere inside my stomach, this makes me glad. Glad she can’t read me; that she suspects I am as unreliable as herself, that she can’t determine my life. And then she’s holding my hands in hers.

“Macy, Macy, Macy,” she whispers, like she’s waited eons. A lump grows in my throat. sharp and dry. I swallow, suppress it, think about her grip, how it hurts, her rings press into me, cut at my skin. She has no right to glow with such kindness.

“Mari,” I say, using her first name for the first time, in front of her.

She blinks a look of confusion, head jerks momentarily, but she says nothing, only squeezes me again. I stand stiffly, letting her hold my hands while her love bounds around me like a wave, engulfing. My friends used to love the way she could concentrate on a person. They wished she were theirs'; they could tell her anything, which used to make me proud, but I break the look, focus instead on paint peeling around the doorframe, exposing hardwood, weathered and rotting.

“How did you get here?”

I point toward the back. “I have a car. I drove.” My voice splinters.

“I’ve wanted to see you for years,” and I can tell she means it because her eyes glisten, and her hands return to their squeezing, digging rings in my flesh. This is how much she means it: the squeezing. It’s her secret signal. I love you *this much*, she means, choking the blood, so much I’ll hurt you. I pull my arms away. I want to return the phrase but I can’t—she could have come to us. It is not my fault, or it wasn’t initially.

Mari is an older version of herself. Glowing yes, but deteriorating, thinner, her eyes more sunken, her cheekbones more pronounced, her clothes a little big. I don’t know her anymore; I pretend that this is what bothers me. “Are you okay?” I ask. “Richard said I should come.”

This isn’t strictly true.

Richard called while I was studying for my chemistry final. The plastic colored models were sprawled across the table. In one hand I held trimethoprim hydrogen phthalate and in the other an almost matching adipate: anti-cancer drugs, ironically; Dr. Milton preferred real examples.

I was double checking their non-covalent bonding patterns, flipping the adipate over, halfway listening, when Richard said, “I’m not trying to push you, Macy, but I think you should know that your mother called. She needs someone to stay with her for a few weeks this summer.” I could picture the way he was sitting, leaning to the side and slightly forward on a chair, entreating me with his head down, showing off his distinguished-graying hair.

I looked at the phone then stuck it back on my ear. It wasn’t like him to push me, and I felt the familiar tightening that came when she called me herself, back when she still had my number.

“She might die Macy.” He paused to let it sink in, his voice loud in my ear, but I could hardly hear him, register what he meant. “She’s going for treatments at the institute in Burney. Her odds are tough, and she’ll be alone; I thought you would want to know, maybe be able to help.”

It didn’t matter, I tried to tell myself while something twisted inside my stomach, threatened to stop my breathing.

“How can you still talk to her?” I asked instead of answering. He fell silent. Probably because there wasn’t an answer, not under these circumstances. Answers ceased to exist. Or maybe the answers were too full of her charm, her extenuating circumstances, her sincere reformations: topics that made me sick because they were lies I once fell for. More likely, the answer was too full of his own pain.

For days I tried not to think about it, but I kept remembering the way she hugged me in the hallway the night I laid on her lap crying while she brushed back my hair, the

summer she taught me to swim in the lake; it was bone chilly and we laughed splashing each other. I kept thinking about how I withered, died when she left us. And the memories betrayed me. Maybe this time would be different—maybe her sickness was why she didn't try, didn't even send a card on my birthday.

I'd be lying if I didn't admit guilt was part of my decision to come. How could you abandon your mother? How can you grow up and equal her? Maybe you'll change things, reverse them, maybe things can be right before she dies, I convinced myself. Talked myself into packing my car, gunning down the road to Cascade. How could it not work between us if I tried this hard?

I dialed up Richard. "Tell her I'm coming," I said, closing my eyes, welcoming the darkness.

"Are you sure?"

Mari reaches for my arm, pulls me inside with a softer squeeze. I follow, taking in the house. The piano, the rug, hangings that seem untouched, even the sharp smell of furniture polish. It's like stepping into a mausoleum, a spook house. The man, whoever he is, shuts the door and my eyes adjust to the entryway, the sitting room. I haven't thought of that painting in years. And Nick, everywhere. Breath tears at my lungs, burns. I shouldn't look now—now is not the time, so I turn away, direct my attention toward them while voices from my past echo out of the walls and the pictures.

“William, you remember Macy, my daughter,” she says with pride, no doubt thrilled I came through for her.

The man steps forward. I try to think where I’ve seen him before. He’s average height, the flannel carhartt type, like most back country men, only less meaty, skinnier. It’s his eyebrows that are familiar, huge, lifelike, feathering thickly, threatening to seal above his nose. But I can’t place him.

“We’re so glad you’re here,” he says kindly.

I hold out my hand. It’s the appropriate thing to do. And Mari smiles, her teeth shiny white.

The room is partially lit by moonlight. Mari and William are asleep. At least I think they are. I lay in my old room, staring at the window and twilling a long piece of hair around my finger, curling and curling. If she knew, what would she think of me? She’d probably never speak to me again. Once, in her laboratory at the research station, my arm slid, knocking petri dishes off the counter, lids flying, contaminating the results. I thought I’d cap them—she’d never know. But instead, I gathered them up, and told her. A mistake that probably would have never made a difference in the world, but she didn’t talk to me for hours. Of course, that was right after they lost their explorer in residence; she felt strained. But the hours seemed to morph into months of ambivalent nonchalance. Probably the time has expanded, filled up more memory cells than the initial incident. I swallow, push it away, pull Aunt Celia’s blanket up to my chin: a patchwork of purple, sage, and pearl-gray velvet. Mari pulled it out of the closet for me; I’d forgotten I’d left it.

They were finishing dinner when I arrived. Disorientation hit me like a wall of water, when I stepped down into the dining room, that long rectangle table, like being young again. I even remembered what the table looked like on the underneath. Yes, my spot was right here, Nick's next to mine, our parents shared the corner. Richard at the head. The other half of the table stayed empty unless we had guests, but now that side is taken, occupied. Mari and William have set up camp.

Around the dining room's three walls, a shelf still hangs, a few feet from the ceiling, Richard's handiwork. On it collections from my parent's travels: clay pots, vases, baskets, masks. These travels happened before we were born, and I wonder if Mari ever packed the items as she promised to, meticulously placed each pot in bubble wrap and boxed it, stacking the table with remnants, a residue of what was left over, what we'd become, what all of this had become: vestigial. That's why she stayed. To pack up the house. Richard's job offer came suddenly. He told them he was available. I wanted to get out, too. We couldn't go anywhere in the house after Nick went missing: the living room, the kitchen, the hallway, even the bathroom had memories percolating from floor tiles, seeping from faucets. And the silence. Like we'd gone deaf.

So Mari stayed to pack, and Richard and I went to Portland to start over, begin again, escape the sadness, or so we planned, at least secretly. Mari may have packed the house, but I doubt it. Everything was too perfect tonight; it echoed with too much sameness. I even recognized things I'd forgotten, like how the black welt kissing the Moroccan fire pot faced the window. And under the window, a stack of dusty wicker

baskets. They had always been dusty. And next to them the plant, though it had morphed into a small tree, a ficcus I think. At least things keep growing.

But there were changes, too. At the new head of the table, on the wall behind the spot William has taken, a grainy black and white photograph hangs. I went closer. The picture was enormous. Gangly legs dangled from a white mass, a bird, enormous, but it's head was missing from the photograph, chopped, sliced. Only wings, and even one of those escaped through the top, starting some downward push of air—its neck, swooped and curled.

“Great Egret,” said William, coming up behind me. “From a wetland photographer.”

I glance at him, but he's staring at the picture.

“She did the piece on infra-red film, spent weeks by herself, following the birds, slept in her canoe.”

“It's amazing,” I said because that's all that came to mind watching the bird perpetually escape the photograph: captured, but gone, frozen but flying.

“Mari gave it to me.” How long ago, I wondered? And when did it earn its spot on this wall? And why did she pick the headless bird? Surely there were others, birds with their beaks still intact, birds that could still see.

Mari came into the room then with a plate and some silverware, set them near the others. “Are you hungry?”

William ate his first potato while I answered their questions about school. Yes, it was Oregon State. No, I didn't go home every week, but I tried to see Richard every few months, and we talked on the phone. I wondered if that would bother Mari; I certainly felt awkward admitting it, though I don't know why, the comparison was obvious before this detail. If she noticed she didn't let on.

"That's wonderful," she said. "I'm so glad you two have stayed close." She found William's hand and gave it a squeeze.

"So tell us what you're studying," he said. I forked at my salad, piercing a cherry tomato and almost upended my plate when a cat jumped in my lap.

"Stella!" William said sharply, but she didn't respond; instead she nuzzled me, soft, purring.

"That's okay. I love cats." Under my hand she purred, dramatically.

"Just push her off," he said. "She likes attention, but she knows to leave us alone when we're eating." I wanted to let her stay, a companion, an ally, but William seemed embarrassed so I set her on the ground.

"Is she yours?" I asked him. I thought Mari hated cats; she'd never let us have pets growing up.

"Both of ours," Mari answered happily. "We picked her out from four kittens at the corner of Main and Highland."

"Only five dollars," William added grinning, "and the friendliest creature you could hope to meet. As evidenced." He gestured toward me. "So what did you say you were studying?"

“Biology, actually.” I took a drink of milk and didn’t look at them.

“A scientist, like your mother. That’s excellent.” I pushed at my food, regretting the comparison.

“Sophomore?” he asked.

“Junior,” Mari answered, which meant she’d kept track. Again, awkward, like I’d withheld from her. Maybe Richard had talked to her, filled her in. Then again, how hard was it to remember?

“Well we’re certainly grateful that you’ve come,” William said. “Your mother could handle things herself, she says, but it makes me feel better to have you here while I’m away.” He looked at me closely, and I nodded, trying to look pleased to be here, but wishing all the same I wasn’t. “The trip has been planned for months. We didn’t realize she’d get sick.” Sick, I thought, as little disgusted, was that his euphemism for dying?

“Anyone want dessert?” Mari pushed her chair back from the table, obviously uncomfortable. William changed the subject, but while she was gone, I interrupted.

“How long have you been here?” The question sounded abrupt, prying, but I didn’t know any other way to ask .

“In Cascade? Ages.”

I started to clarify, but he knew what I meant.

“But I’ve been living with your mother for five years now.” He smiled. “Best five years of my life.”

“Are you kidding?” It blurted out, an acidic pit frothing in my stomach that had been percolating since I’d arrived. Five years? Five. Did Richard know? Back then he’d

still hoped Mari would make her way to Portland, say her peace with Cascade. She wasn't recovering from Nick's death. She was shacking up with this bird man. Mari hadn't even said anything to Richard about divorce papers, as far as I knew. Had she? Anger: it was one thing to abandon us, but I was blown away that she'd moved on so long ago. Five years. It had only been six since Nick. I couldn't help but show dismay. William looked thoughtfully at Mari as she entered the room carrying a silver tray of dessert, and again I could swear I knew his profile. Mari had heard.

"William helped me through a tough time," she said. I nodded. So that's how it was. Richard and I were barely getting by in Portland without her, still reeling, and she was being helped through her tough time, in bed. If she weren't about to die, I would have said something, but I pushed it back, stuck it in that mental hate-mail slot belonging to my mother.

Mari passed around cream pots, nestled in shiny blue ramekins. When did she start cooking? Miniscule vanilla beans dotted the cream like pepper bits, the custard sweet and milky. Trying to act normal, I tipped my spoon in and out slowly, going for whatever version of normal they might have expected: nodding, answering, offering a smile when required.

After he'd finished, William said he was pleased to have met me, but he needed to finish a report: *Nesting Peregrine's of Cascade Lake*. Where had I seen him? I'm certain I know a younger version of him, but something is off, the objects around his face are hazy, out of time, misplaced.

The light has moved from the wall to the carpet, and it's getting harder to stay awake, to track the shadowy movements cast by the moon.

I spent most of the night on the lake once in this moonlight; strange that I didn't think of Jason when I packed. I don't even know what he would be like now. Maybe he's been overtaken by gravity. Some cruel fate has turned his perfect man-body into middle age. He hides his stomach with sport coats, loose jeans, hair receded, belly bulging. Does he have gray hairs at the edge of his temples? Or a family? Not possible: he could never be trusted with children—he would never want a wife who didn't look like one.

That's what he always told me. Not in those words of course. But he said my body was perfect, pure, not riddled with all the fat of older women, something to be cherished. He wanted to cherish me.

I haven't planned on seeing Jason again, but now that I'm back, it's possible he's still here, and that he would want to see me. Perhaps he still teaches diving. From my stomach an ache like fear, a kind of longing, a remembering spreads across my body. I can't think of Jason without remembering his body backlight by a billion stars, but I relegate his warm skin back to that invisible part of my mind: the darkness, the blank spot that exits even when I push it away.

Jason. Now that I'm an adult, grown, I wonder how that would change things. Would he still be attracted to me? And if I were to meet Jason again, what would I tell him about myself? What if he asked about what happened after I left. What if he said he was sorry about Nick, that I had imagined it all? Could I forgive him? No. Never. Maybe. Maybe if he changed. But these are areas I shouldn't go; they've become traps before.

Would he be glad that at twenty-one I haven't filled out, become curvy, that I never did reach womanhood—I'm almost the girl he used to love, I muse. This is another illusion: pretending he loved me. It's the sickest, the most dangerous, and I can't allow it without also making Nick alive and well, perhaps in some other state, climbing the corporate ladder, barking orders to subordinates, but at least alive. I must allow this to think of Jason.

Even though I know it's wrong, I'd enjoy Jason's eyes on my body, his attention. Would that make it right? After six years it's hard to remember I'm glad he's gone: delusion. I am deluded, deceived, duped. At the same time, another part of me knows his absence is a gift. *It wasn't his fault*, I whisper because in the darkness, truth isn't required. Here in my old room, I can almost absolve him. My fingers lace tightly, holding in what wants out.

When people at school made fun: *carpenter's dream, flat as a board*—I close my eyes, picture their wry looks, sarcastic jeers—Jason made me whole. Maybe he's still diving, pushing the depth of his tanks, finding new air mixtures that let him go deeper and deeper, exploring caves, the caves in the lake.

An image of Nick, trapped in the caves, enters my mind, mouth exuding panicked bubbles. I shake my head to rid it, think instead of Jason lifting weights, pumping iron to turn back time. I examine the lines of muscles across his arms, his chest, as though in a mirror. I notice his stubble, his jaw. He turns to squat and shakily rise, exhaling the upbeat, erasing weakness, ripping muscular micro-fractures. The image is so vivid, has

erased Nick so completely, that I can almost smell his sweat, like an undertone of heat and garlic.

He slings a white towel around his neck, sits on a bench. A girl walks by wearing soccer shorts, her legs sticking out like stilts, and I'm struck by irrational jealousy, imagined. Perhaps he faces the mirror, watches her behind him while she runs an elliptical in dizzy circles. He hits the weights harder, perhaps offers her a ride home, it's on his way. I've been on his way before.

But the truth is I wouldn't want to know any of these things if it weren't night, if I weren't playing a sick, twisted game. In real life I'd run if I saw Jason; I'd hide, try to save myself, shriek and scream if, when, he found me. I barely made it away before: *three strikes, you're out*, his voice whispers in my mind.

I think of him coming up behind me without warning, putting his arm around my shoulders the way he used to, making me feel so small, delicate under his weight—his musky smell surrounds me while I drop off, paralyzed. *It was an accident*, he says, his voice licking my ear. *An accident*.

Gusts vibrate my window pane, the room feels like a trap, a cave, an underwater lava tube: dark and full of currents. I scream, try to escape, push back against the walls. I don't want to see the bodies. There are too many bodies. I move ghost-like. Aunt Celia is remembering him, her hair in a long braid; she sprinkles tear-shaped droplets of water over statues, their hands held out, they welcome her cries with large listening ears, but her tears are blown, her braid whips.

I wake to the wind against the window, a branch, an old sycamore scraping the house creaking back and forth. I wish Celia didn't live on the peninsula. But these things fade.

CHAPTER 2

Light comes through the window and I sit up, looking at my surroundings. My old bookcases, empty now. Nail holes pierce the walls and the after-image of old posters, whiter than the yellowing paint, my suitcases, next to the door where William put them, and beside that a faded grape juice stain from childhood.

Nick had burst into the room in his pink floyd graphic T, hair cropped short, shouting, “Guess What!” I jumped, propped against the wall doing homework, and knocked over the grape juice. He’d seen a moose from the close fort, so I threw a towel on the puddle and ran after him; his skinny body disappearing in the trees. When we got there, the moose had vanished, but we found its tracks—fat evidence in the mud; they looked like upside down hearts, sliced through the middle. I hadn’t learned to be afraid of big animals yet, and we followed until the tracks disappeared, and then we pretended we could see bends in nearby branches, it’s path marked in our mind all the way to the great oak. Nick shushed me the whole time.

I raise the blinds and light pinches my eyes. Outside the backyard is standard Oregon: grass, dandelions, and the forest, almost idealic. Five minutes through the trees there’s a small stream, surrounded by ferns, the close fort is a pine with dropping branches; we used sheers from the garage to cut the smaller twigs, the space sheltered by cascading pine needles and dripping cones. And five minutes from there is the great oak by Aunt Celia’s, it’s perfectly placed branches, large laterals, thick and reaching.

Remembering still tinges a sad pit in my stomach. We made a living room in that oak, a kitchen, a studio, a lookout over the jewel-toned lake. We could see everything from that tree, and we climbed it to look for that moose, fantasizing a lurching brown movement in the distance. “If you hadn’t been so loud,” Nick said stepping onto another branch and pulling himself higher, “we would have found it by now.”

“Whatever, you probably scared it running back to get me,” I had said.

It looks cool outside. Chickadees pick at the feeder, dancing around the orange madrone in the corner of the yard, its bark peeling in thin grey strips, showcasing a smooth red underbelly.

The clock on the nightstand says 6:18am, but I step onto the carpet oddly remembering a harris hawk at our school assembly. The hawk was tethered, and suddenly it comes to me, how I know William, where I’ve seen him before. The broken wing, her perfect dark feathers, red, a perch heavy on my fist. She picked at the beaded strings I held tight in my leather glove, looking perfectly healthy, like she could fly at any moment, except for the strap leading from my fist to her linked leg. Billy the Bird Man, that was his name, or what we called him when he visited the school. He helped me hold my arm up, worked at the research facility, he’d been part of Nick’s search party. This image is more vague.

People crowded our house. Maps of the forest squared-out, hachured on the dining room table, search party routes. All night people walked, spaced appropriately, flashlights in hand, volunteers. I locked myself in my room, wondering how Jason had managed to screw both of us. Maybe Nick was the lucky one. I was full of self-pity then

and Jason requisitioned my thoughts. He was all I could think of when our home became a search party. All I let myself think of.

The volunteers figured that if Nick had made it to the shore, bent and confused, he might have tried for home, so they covered the swath of forest between our house and the lake with bodies and lights. The screen door slamming, people in and out, marking spots on the map, large x's, punctuated by the sharp smell of permanent marker.

At four o'clock in the morning, I followed the stairs down to the living room, didn't bother to look at the bodies spread, muttering, gesturing, their creased faces turned toward me. Warm milk was what I wanted, maybe I could sleep. In the kitchen a man poured coffee in a mug and turned. I opened the fridge and pulled out the milk.

"This must be quite the shock," he said softly, stirring his coffee, and I realized I knew him, knew those eyebrows.

"Billy?" So many people were helping, people I hardly knew. Billy looked normal without his beige uniform. The response, if that's what you call a missing-person's nightmare, was mind-boggling, macabre. Flood the crisis, siege the drama, a mixture of compassion and rubber-necking, not that I wasn't grateful.

"Most of the people from the research station came," Billy said. "We'll do whatever we can to help you and your family."

"You work with my mother?" I hadn't realized, but of course; it made sense. I put my milk in the microwave, hardly caring. "Where is she?"

"Your father's in zone twenty-two—I think Mari's gone to bed."

I nodded, relieved that I could blame this on Nick—ignore everyone, wrap myself in my covers, disappear in mental noise. Nick deserved whatever had happened, I tried to tell myself.

Billy the Bird Man moved in with my mother, I realize, shocked, treading the stairs, his memory wet and percolating. It's such a surprise—Billy sleeping down the hall, feet from Nick's old room! So he never left after the search, made himself at home with that cup of coffee, found more than Nick, took something that wasn't his: Mari.

Under my feet the red and gold brocade rug; it's winding fern border that trapped me during time-outs, Mari's favorite form of punishment. And the wall, where we kept family pictures. Everything as it was before: my young ageless face, long dishwater hair, a black cardigan I used to love, Aunt Celia with her arm around me at my sixth-grade graduation; I look so young, wearing that thick-strapped dress, black velvet at the top, white draping empire body. Aunt Celia's hair is gray, pulled back in a knot; a head taller than me, I lean my forehead into her cheek. And there is Nick shooting a bow and arrow, wearing the shark-tooth necklace he didn't take off the whole summer, and in another, Richard in a bucket hat, helping Nick hold up a fish, their faces sunburned. Nick and I smile in the next photograph, my gingham dress before first grade, Nick's slicked back hair and blue eyes.

But the lighter spot on the wall has my attention. A missing photograph. There they leaned together, near a sign, "Rue de Fort." A stranger took the shot nine months before Nick burst into the world, three years before me. Mari's hair is blowing; she looks

like a catalog-model with Richard behind her, his face pressed in the Apollo scarf at her neck: natural, confident. The scarf was her wedding present because they were, as Richard explained, “into things, not symbols.” Considering that, it was a surprise they’d married after living together all through college. Mari didn’t want a ring until years later. I heard Richard dismissing her request once, asking curtly what had happened to her. I can almost feel the scarf on my neck, remember the rams that pranced around the borders, their horns curling thickly.

“Prance because they haven’t been castrated yet,” Richard joked more than once, talking about his gift. “Otherwise they’d be sheep, he said, and that’s too much group-think, not enough carnal pleasure.” He raised his eyebrows suggestively.

This used to make Mari laugh, like she did in the missing photograph, their bodies casting warm glows around each other while behind them birds fly in silhouette, V-shapes fleeing an unseen catastrophe.

The picture is gone, but in the living room, the walls still carry Richard’s paintings. Eclectic: a taste of modern, a taste of chaos. What does Billy think of this? The life that surrounds him, belongs to another man? Belongs to the past?

A baby grand piano secures space between the living and dining room. On the steps nearby, earthy shades of tile spread across the floor, fill the dining room, proceed halfway into the kitchen. A summer family project. Richard hadn’t been angry since before we started diving. Once a week we gathered, cut clay squares, carved, carted them to Richard’s work to fire and glaze. I step on one of the tiles, a chainsaw, red and gold, *Stahl 82* it reads, the model Nick used at the Forest Service. His last months are charted

underfoot in breakable ceramic, and the gaping plywood space, unfinished, masked by rag-rug.

“It must be pretty strange to be back in this house after so long.”

William is rummaging through papers on the table, glasses perched on his nose, his eyebrows overseeing the process. He had things to organize, take care of before the trip. From my perspective it looks like bills.

I am playing with my cereal. One of those knock-off brands that comes in a giant bag: extra colors, extra crunch. With my spoon I separate colors, purple, pink, yellow, a bright cereal; frankly I’m surprised it’s here. No doubt another William addition.

Mari used to be all about whole grains and oatmeal. No sugar. Absolutely no sweetener on any cereal. You need a good start to the day, she said, and a good start is healthy. I didn’t mind but Nick hated it. He usually skipped breakfast, but I liked the way the oatmeal mushed warm around my mouth. With milk it was almost sweet. Despite this, I did my fair share of complaining if I went along to the grocery store.

“When you’re an adult you can pick,” she said. Which is ironic, because after all my whining in the cereal-isle, pulling boxes from shelves, sneaking them into carts, now that I’m grown I go straight to oatmeal: the blue and white cylindrical old man with white hair and the wide brimmed hat. It’s one of the only pieces of Mari I’ve kept, and now there’s no oatmeal in the cupboard.

“It’s been a long time,” I agree.

We sit in silence. I like William, despite how he has usurped this life. He moves slowly, stays in the background, seems to always have a thought he's not sharing. He's easy to overlook, to discount: simple, not exciting. In another time I might have called him boring. But it's Mari that left us, not him, and in this house his presence calms, distracts me from the real reason I'm here.

"What are you looking for?" I ask because I only know a few birds: robins, magpies, the basics, and he is leaving on a count, traveling to the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in the high desert, a wetland he loves: full of fields, cattails, marsh smells, colony-nesters.

"A count," he explained last night, "is something bird watchers do to track species' numbers, and Malheur, a Pacific Flyway stop-over, lures migrating birds: herons, egrets, cormorants by thousands. From the air," he said, "it looked like a green haven to the weary birds, a refuge so irresistible that hundreds of them, sometimes thousands, simultaneously fell: fell from the sky."

"Fell?"

"They're grounding," he said, "so weak, so exhausted, they see Malheur and drop like rocks from the air. It's called a fall-out."

Fall out, like a nuclear fallout, a fall-out of thousands. Birds turned to rocks. I would like to see this.

"A bit like gassing-up the car," I said last night, which amused him.

"Only much more dramatic."

“I’m on the look-out for a clark’s grebe, or even a horned,” he names birds I didn’t know existed. “They’ve come to the refuge before, but their numbers are erratic. It’d be a thrill to find one.” A thrill, I think, curious that a random bird can evoke such a response, but I envy this trip he is taking. Envy the time on the road, the empty space, watching fall-outs. “Even more, I’d love to see the peregrines back on the Refuge. Maybe I’ll get lucky at Fish Springs.”

“Fish Springs?”

“Didn’t Mari tell you? After the census, I’m headed to Utah. I do it every year, pick an extra destination after Malheur. Last year it was Nevada, the Ruby Marshes. I had a hard time leaving.”

I realize now that this trip is optional. He is choosing to leave.

He seems to hear my thoughts.

“At first I wasn’t going to go, but after the lumpectomy, Mari talked me into putting the trip back on. I told her I’d come right back this year. Finish Malheur and be done with it, but she said it was too important, and by then she’d be better anyway--it wasn’t advanced enough to turn our lives upside-down.”

Not advanced enough? That’s not what Richard said. Is William in the dark? I make a small whirlpool in my cereal, digesting this, that he believes her, believes the illness is trivial. How could he leave? How could he even consider it when she was so desperate she telephoned Richard to ask for me, all so she wouldn’t be alone?

“Secretly,” he says, “I think she wanted more time with you. She was so adamant.”

This is unexpected.

“Her golden opportunity. I head off to the birds, trip of a lifetime, and you’re out of school for summer, so someone can keep her company during radiation.” He grins and trails off, like he’s letting me in on a fun piece of news, then looks at a paper, moving it further from his face.

Baffled, I’m stunned. Mari must have convinced him to leave, but she had to have lied. She didn’t want me—she had no other alternative. I can’t believe he fell for it. Mari must have known William wanted to leave: she released him.

“Lucky me,” I say, sliding from the chair to take my soggy cereal to the kitchen. Green milk, melted pebble, they spill over the bowl’s edge, collect in the drain until a rush of water forces them into the disposal.

I flip the switch. Blades roar.

If it’s true, it’s not fair. How dare she drag me to her bedside when William could be here? Either way I’m upset, mad at her, mad at him. Someone is using me. That much is clear. This sickness could be her latest ploy. The rag-rug is soft under my feet, outside the circular window, nothing is moving. Stop, I think.

Stop making it something it’s not. If she’d wanted to see me, she would have driven up. Hell, she could have driven up anytime in the last six years. It was a line. A line she fed William to release him, let him go where he obviously wanted to be, apparently far far from her.

Nick died a week and six years ago. Mari starts radiation in two days, and William is leaving, accompanied by Steve, a birder from the university, who burst into our driveway honking, the sun high, beating.

“You ready for birds?” Steve hollered, sliding his sunglasses back over a bald head and striding up to the porch where William had bags packed and all three of us had gathered on white plastic chairs.

“Am I ever,” William stands and tosses a black duffel Steve’s way, and Mari bends for the spotting scope and Sibley’s bird guide. “Sibley’s is the only guide,” William told me this morning. “If you start birding, it’s worth the price.”

“Okay,” I nodded, no intention of beginning a geriatric sport.

Mari hands over the scope and the guide, and William takes it to the car. I can’t help but remember her standing in the same place when Richard and I left, her arms caught around herself. We couldn’t wait to get away, and it was abrupt. His new gallery job came through on a Tuesday, and by Friday he’d taken me to Portland to house-hunt.

Between the three of us, it was understood that Mari couldn’t leave work yet. Some prestigious academic conference had accepted her team’s proposal on underwater moss systems of the lake. They were presenting the next month.

I wonder what happened at that conference, how it went, if it was worth it. William takes out a light-weight pair of binoculars, miniature, and tucks them in his front pocket.

“I am the lead researcher,” Mari had yelled at my father the night before we left, loud enough that I heard from my bedroom. I didn’t know she was home; she’d been

staying later and later at work, so I threw back my covers, softly opened my door, and crept halfway down the stairs. There was something about their fighting that enthralled and terrified me, like a sick disease. If they were broken, I needed to know. If they were broken, who would fix us?

Talking echoed out of the kitchen, loud enough that I probably could have listened from my room; still I couldn't move. "Dammit, Mari. If you're quitting, why the hell can't you get away from work?"

I sat on the step, picked at the carpet, brown synthetic fiber.

"I told you, Rich," she said furiously, voice high pitched. "I have to finish this research, so I can write the paper. We're in the middle, Richard. The middle. I can't leave them hanging." A pause. "I won't."

This made sense to me. My mother loved the moss; it grew three hundred feet underwater and could be thousands of years old, pure, ancient. She spent every waking moment studying it, or helping the station prep for activities that would allow her to study it, collect more samples with an underwater robot. The day she came home with news about the conference, she kissed me on the cheek and high-fived Nick; I hadn't seen her so jubilant since before Alex died. Alex was the explorer in residence at her work; he'd been gone almost a year.

"You leave everyone else hanging," my father said. "What about me? What about Macy? For God's sake, Mari! She's like a tomb. When is the last time you talked to her? She turning into," he paused, searching for words or censoring himself. "I was afraid this would happen to her."

Afraid what would happen? This terrified me more than their fighting. What was he afraid of? What was I turning into? What did he think I was becoming?

Silence.

“We’re all tombs, Richard.”

Tombs. Vaults. Crypts. The words reminded me of Nick’s burial. Probably reminded them too, because they weren’t speaking anymore. Words were more dangerous now than they had ever been; we always found ourselves saying terrible things.

Before it was a graveyard, there used to be a forest on the hillside; someone paid to clear it, plant neat rows of maples—a graveyard is no place for wild things. Pass row seven, turn left, count the headstones. Nick’s grave was the sixth one down: a patch of short beaten grass, its edges torn where they peeled it up to dig the hole. And a plaque, a little gold one staked into the ground with his name: Nick Eugene Oman. My mother ordered a bench with the stone, a marble one. I suppose so we could go sit there and remember how everything when wrong.

“You can’t leave moss alone long enough to pick a new house?” He said moss like it was a dirty word, incredulous.

“Rich, you’re running away from him.”

I knew what she meant—but Richard started applying for jobs months before the accident—and even if it was true, who cared? We all should run away. How could we live here?

“I’m running away? You can’t even move on!” And then the sound of a chair scraping tile. I stood up, ready to creep up the stairs when I heard her voice, so soft it was barely audible. I strained to hear.

“Leave, leave, please. Macy can help you.” Breath caught my throat. What was she saying?

“I’ll leave you alone,” heavy footsteps. And why was he agreeing with her? I darted up the stairs, but he didn’t follow, instead the front door opened, slammed, the screen ricocheting. I turned the knob slowly to shut my door and tiptoed to the window, my ghost-white face filled the glass. A few moments later, his truck roared away, kicking dust and gravel that turned his tail-lights pink.

I must have been asleep when he came home. They acted normal the next day; like nothing had transpired. “Come on Button,” my father yelled while I finished putting clothes in my bag: a cantaloupe hoodie, a couple pair of baggy jeans. She wasn’t coming.

It occurs to me that the same thing could be happening again. Nick’s anniversary just last week, and now another figurative death. I finger the thin plastic arm of the chair while they rush around loading. William may never come back. What if Mari doesn’t want him to return, just like she didn’t want Richard and me? Only this time I’m staying behind, maybe because she thinks she won’t survive. She might be seeing William for the last time, sending him away, and he doesn’t even have a clue. It’s not fair; I try to signal to him with my eyes: don’t go—but he doesn’t even look my way.

Steve is arranging the car, and under the glare everything absorbs heat, the unruly grass has taken on a sheen of undulating yellow, kissing its deep green. We need a breeze, something to counteract this baking. And Mari, in a clay cotton blazer has stepped to the edge of the porch, where William meets her, one step lower, looking so informal next to her in orange carharts, and still taller, despite the step. Nobody would have matched them.

“You’re going to be great,” he whispers, holding her hands, speaking into her neck.

“Better than great,” she closes here eyes. “I don’t want you to worry.”

William shakes his head, “If I didn’t worry, I wouldn’t love you,” bends to kiss her, and I look away. “If you change your mind, call. I’ll come right back, take the greyhound if I have to.”

“Ooh, the greyhound,” she teases. “That is love.”

William is clueless. He grins, bounces down the steps, throws me a wave, “It was so good to see you, Macy! I’m off!”

Off to what, I don’t know: four uninterrupted weeks of road, birds, hitting the brakes when some marvelous winged creature gets spotted on a power line.

Steve pulls out like a maniac, a cloud of dust. “Good thing it rains around here,” he yells out the window. They both wave again and a smattering of dust hangs in the air long after the car has disappeared through the trees.

“Five weeks, what should we do first?” There’s a twinkle in Mari’s eye, a piece of magic—cancer is the last concern in her world.

“Take it easy.”

Mari scrunches her nose, leaves me on the porch, the screen door bouncing. “Would you like a cool beverage?” she calls from inside, as though nothing in the world has happened. I can hear the fridge opening.

“No, thanks.” I watch the spot between the trees where the car vanished, struck by how little I know Mari, or understand what kind of person could always be waving goodbye to the people who love her.

I used to blow her kisses at night. Before I’d given up on her; before Richard explained to me that she wasn’t coming of her own free will. That’s what he said, “of her own free will,” like it was written in the constitution or some official document. Before that, I’d blown her kisses. Two at first, then five, then it occurred to me that real love couldn’t be proven by so few, and occasionally, I blew out one hundred kisses. And occasionally one to Nick, though it was easier to pretend he didn’t exist, and I never blew anything to Jason, just pictured his body swallowing mine, when I couldn’t push the image away.

I felt unworthy of Mari’s love when I forgot or fell asleep; I was bad, an ungrateful daughter. But when I sent them, I knew they’d find her. “I love you,” I whispered, turning over in my bed, pulling the covers over my shoulder, believing she would come, turn up some night on the edge of my bed, rest her hand on my shoulder.

But the truth is, I didn’t stop blowing the kisses when Richard told me.

At first I hated him for pushing her away—for taking the job and moving us. It was his fault she couldn't come. Because she would come if she could. That I knew. So it had to be Richard.

I couldn't bear the fact that my mother simply chose between her children, and Nick beat me. Hands down. No fight. He was the oldest, the most important, the clear favorite. I wouldn't believe it, not at first, so for awhile I kept pressing my fingers to my lips in the darkness, sending gentle puffs toward Cascade, imagining her still at work, face lit blue by the computer screen, her stylish brown-flecked reading glasses reflecting text. At any moment, she would raise her head, remember me.

Whatever Richard had done, he'd ruined our lives. *It's your fault*, said a voice in my head, *not Richards. Everything is your fault.*

It startles me when she pushes the screen open and stands in the doorway. "Do you want to come to the back porch? It's cooler back there with the awning." I nod, follow her over the brocade rug, into the dining room, out onto the back porch, which is more like an open-aired room; tin topped; it resounds in the rain.

She eases into the cedar porch swing, hanging on chains from a large beam overhead, balances her orange juice carefully, and pats the seat next to her, inviting me to sit.

"That's okay." I choose one of the plastic chairs, identical to the one I just came from, but less weather-worn.

Mari settles back, hardly moving the swing, and looks toward the red madrone. No birds are at the feeder.

“You know it happened a week ago today,” Mari said, her eyes solemn, brightly set off by her hair.

“What was a week ago,” I ask, though I know. I marked the day like she did. Most terrible day of my life.

“June 7th,” she said, as though this was enough, and it was. “It fell on a Saturday again. I can’t believe how fast it’s gone. Close your eyes and it whips right by. Of course, I didn’t know six years ago. Not an idea in the world until June 8th.” She seemed calm, but didn’t take her eyes from the tree.

“You couldn’t have known,” I said. “Nobody could.” But this is a lie. I knew—knew and tried to ignore it, knew and went to bed. Knew and. I have to stop.

“Some mother I am,” she takes a drink, and the yard is still. A breeze sweeps in gently, disappears again. The trees are bright, inviting, shadowy next to our yard, bathed in overhead sun. “Only son, oldest child, and I don’t even bother to notice where he is all day.”

I look at the grain in the porch—horizontal stripes, dyed, stained. She has to finish it. Finish the story, and then we’ll go on. I have heard this before. Heard it when she called.

Anything. That’s what I would do to forget all of this.

“What did he think about?”

I don't answer her. Who could know? I imagine he thought about being trapped, of suffocating. They say your life passes before your eyes. I wonder what that's like. A continuous memory? Or a hallucination? Maybe he'd remember what an asshole he was, I think—trying to distance myself.

"Now I might join him," she says watching the forest and then turning to me. "You never know."

"It's all going to work out," I say, but they're only words.

"That's the only comforting thing. Death would give me Nick back. Everybody keeps leaving." Her words swell toward me, break. As though death had a respite, as though Nick were a harbor. And who is everybody? Me? Richard? William? My stomach sinks.

"I'm going for a walk," I say. "Do you want to come?" This I add as an afterthought, but I hope she'll refuse. It's her words I'm fleeing.

"I think I need some time," she says, and I notice how the glass of her orange juice is perspiring, wet and lucent. "You go. But don't be gone too long."

CHAPTER 3

The forest floor squishes under my tennis shoes: contracts, releases, spongy, fragrant, cooler. I bound on it like it's a trampoline, pretend it will swallow me if I don't move fast enough. Each step away from the house is welcoming. I know these woods—they're familiar like home, a real home. Birds I can't see sing and call shrilly between the trees.

I stop, sink back against a vanilla-scented ponderosa, slide to its feet in the needles, and look at the light overhead, piercing through the canopy, so bright I can't stare long.

What did she mean everybody left her? Didn't she know it was her fault? I lean over my knees and pick up a dried pine needle, long and forked. How can someone as put-together as Mari be dying? I use the needle like a knife, use it to pull at the ground, other needles, and a patch of moss. In two days we'll start the cancer treatments.

Clearing a space on the edge of my leg, I move everything until there's only a patch of dirt: emptiness. It's over, I remind myself. It's over, and it would only make things more painful for her if she knew. Some memories belong to the past—they'd kill again if we let them. And then there'd be no survivors.

A small chirp sounds nearby.

I could continue on, go to Aunt Celia's. Nick and I tripped through this forest a hundred times on our way to the peninsula, sometimes to get away from the house. She

wasn't really our aunt; only I called her that. And it wasn't Mari we were scared of, but I can't blame Richard, not entirely; he had a reason for being upset, even if he went too far a few times. He'd lost his job, been set to working odd jobs: construction, road work. That's why he was drinking—an understandable panic, a temporary aberration.

How far is too far? I wonder. What slippery edge was crossed when he peeled into the driveway late? I stick the pine needle in the ground facing up so it's two pieces fan like a "V," and pick up another.

Around the time I was nine, Mari worked half-time, so she could be home with us after school. "Children need their mother," she used to say staring at the television before she changed her mind and went back to work.

Not that we were ever home to be mothered; we spent all our time in the forest, or over at friends. But at the time, Mari wanted family dinners. She'd been pushing hard. Every night, seven o'clock, like other families—she craved the routine. But it was always Nick and me, kicking each other under the table, pinching, keeping ourselves occupied while we waited for Richard.

"He's late again," we whined one night. "Why do we have to wait?"

"I talked to him—he's coming." She sat up straight in the chair across from us.

But he never came, never on time, we knew this. Or if he did, those dinners weren't as memorable, and filed as unimportant, they disintegrated in my mind.

"Go ahead," she said, giving up, and we grabbed the rolls, and corn, still hot in their foil. Mari watched the clock, watched us, went to the front window to watch the road, her face turning inside itself, features rigid.

Eating fast was a ploy, self-defense. It was never a good idea to be around when she was mad and Richard walked through the door. We had to finish, and finish before he showed, before she flipped.

“Can we go to Aunt Celia’s?” We carried our plates into the kitchen. Celia had called earlier to tell us she had a new rehab bird, so we both wanted to go, and it was the only place Mari always agreed to: close to home, she didn’t have to take us. We were putting our plates in the dishwasher when Richard’s truck roared into the driveway.

“Kids! How are my kids?” he slurred, walking into the house.

“Mom said we could go to Aunt Celia’s.” I chimed, making for the door.

“You’re not going anywhere. I haven’t seen you all day.” It was the same thing every time, and we slunk into the living room, slouched on the couch.

Mari confronted him, like she always did. It was a wonder he came home at all. “You stopped at the bar?” She couldn’t even look at him—just cleared the table. She’d purposefully waited to clear the table until he walked in. “You promised, Richard. Pile of shit, your promises,” she carried his plate into the kitchen and threw it in the sink, then walked back to the table for more.

Nick made a monster face at me; probably to make me laugh, but I was glued to my parents.

Richard stood stalk-still, like a beam of wood, unreadable, unyielding, certainly not apologetic.

“Hope you’ve had your fill of beer because we’re fresh out of food,” Mari called over her shoulder, taking a plate of corn into the kitchen, where she threw it in the trash.

“Asshole,” she muttered. She couldn’t resist the urge to jab him, couldn’t resist even though she knew what would happen, how things would escalate.

“What did you call me?” It always got him. He followed her out to the table, jerked her around to face him, but she looked him dead in the eye. “What did you call me?” he bellowed.

“Asshole. And not only that, you’re a drunk asshole.” She pulled her arm away from him and gathered some glasses.

“You would need a drink too if you were going through what I have to deal with every fucking day,” he yelled after her.

Did it happen a dozen times, more? I can’t remember all their fights, but they mesmerized me, froze my stomach, tight and scared.

“Let’s go,” said Nick. “They won’t even notice.”

It was all I needed, Nick to persuade me, and we were out of the door, closing the screen behind us softly, so they wouldn’t notice. They never said anything to us later, and my father didn’t follow, despite his claim to want our company. Probably he knew he couldn’t have caught us once we were in the woods—we knew the trails, the trees, the quickest way to cut through the forest, and then he was occupied, not to mention drunk, another fail-safe.

Nick pounded ahead of me through the trees; the forest slanted down, and the ferns caught at my shoes while we ran, ran jubilant, like a scream through the meadow, slowing sometimes, pushing off logs, but we ran all the way to the edge of the woods

where we crossed the road that lead to the peninsula and ran toward the great oak, finally collapsing in the wild grass around it.

Running was invigorating; there was the thrill we might be followed, the adrenaline; it distanced us from their fight.

“What a joke,” Nick said looking up at the branches when he caught his breath.

“I could have sworn he was going to follow us that time.” My breathing came loud, and I propped my hand under my head to look out over the lake. The sky boiled with puffy gray clouds, threatening, and the water had turned ashen blue, choppy and troubled; it seemed to go on forever, collecting the granite tones from the cliffs opposite and reflecting them back at the sky.

Nick got up, walked to the base of the oak, and jumped, locking his arms securely around the long lateral branch and using his feet to climb up. He pushed himself out a little, swung his foot over, and pulled himself to his stomach before settling in the crook of the tree.

An ant ran over my arm, and I brushed it away, thinking about my parents, how ever since Richard lost his job they’d been fighting.

“Nick,” I asked, “are you ever going to drink?” I didn’t think I would, at least not like my father, and I wanted Nick to say no. If Richard didn’t drink, then he would be home on time, and Mari wouldn’t pick fights.

“Maybe,” he said, noncommittally.

I guessed there were good ways to drink. “Aunt Celia drinks,” I offered. Nick didn’t say anything. Of course he knew this, but I kept talking anyway. “For her heart.

One half-cup of red wine every night when she takes her vitamins.” But I didn’t think that counted as drinking. She kept the wine bottle on her kitchen table, all glistening and green with its deep red fluid half gone, right next to a folded paper towel where there were always two pills: fish oil and vitamin C. I’d never seen her pour the wine, though.

For awhile we stayed there, looking out at the lake. The currents, sweeping gray into blue, and turquoise edges, patchy reflections. And way out, a boat, almost too far to see.

Nick jumped to the ground, caught himself with his hands. “Let’s go see the bird,” he said, walking away.

Celia owns the whole peninsula, and we own the property adjacent, including our own marina and boathouse. Aunt Celia’s home is blue, ancient looking, and surrounded by growing things. It’s also full of windows, with four white pillars on the front porch. The pillars were my favorite part; when I grew up, I wanted to have a house just like it, only white with green shutters. The back of Celia’s house looks out over the lake, to the side is her arboretum.

We knocked on the front door and waited for her to open it. Maybe she was in the garden. Nick ran off the porch and headed around the house when the door opened. Aunt Celia’s hair was gray, but she had the kindest, bluest eyes, and perfect teeth. Mari said Celia looked “very British,” but Richard didn’t agree because her teeth were too good.

She gave me a hug, and I called around the side of the house, “Nick, she’s here!”

“Where’s the bird?” he asked, running up, taking all the stairs in two leaps.

“In the sewing room,” she said, gesturing inside toward the circular stairs. All right! I followed Nick up, he pulled on the banister while it rounded the corner.

The bird squawked harsh and loud when we burst into his room: big, blue and gray and wonderful. His wing was wrapped up in a white bandage, and he had a thick black bill.

I was captivated and Nick had fallen quiet, too. It was like looking at the lake, only the bird was so close.

“What happened to him?”

“I don’t know,” Celia said. “But his wing’s broken.”

“What’s his name?”

“Ody,” Celia said. She’d brought up a little tupperware with some treats. “Do you want to feed him?”

I poked a carrot through the wires, careful to keep my fingers back, and Ody grabbed at the food, startling me.

“Will he eat anything?” Nick asked.

“Just about.” Aunt Celia laughed.

“How about bread?” he asked. She nodded. “You should get him worms. I bet he’d like that better than carrots.”

“What kind of bird is he?” I asked Celia.

She looked at him, squinting as though trying to figure it out. “Will you like him more if I tell you?” We both shook our heads, of course not. We loved Ody. “We’ll then, let’s not worry about it,” she said, passing a bit of celery to Nick that he poked through

the bars, and we were content. At school everything was memorized; at Celia's names were irrelevant.

"Celia," Nick said, "if you'll give me a shovel, I'll get Ody some worms." I was tempted to join him, but I didn't want to leave the bird.

"There's one in the garage."

"All right!" he said, making Ody jump, and then his footsteps were a jumble down the stairs.

"When will you let him go?" I touched my finger on the iron bar, feeling its coolness, wishing I could hold him, touch him.

"In awhile," she said, "after the wing heals and we take the bandage off, he'll start spreading his wings. We'll let him test it out in the backyard on the tether while it gets stronger. You're welcome to come and keep him company."

I smiled at Ody and he tipped his head at me, like he wanted me to come, and I felt a surge of warmth.

Late afternoon. I leave my little stash of upturned ponderosa pine needles and the little square of crafted dirt. Back at the house, I step into the yard like an ambush, a plan in mind. So much sun—the bright smells, my skin sweats.

Mari is in her bedroom, door closed, and just beyond, so is Nick's. Off-limits, sacred. But it pulls me forward, my feet tread down the hall, pass Mari's room. What would she do if she found me? What would it unearth?

It feels like a secret standing here. Surreal, unreal. I've remembered it so many times, dreaded being here, but the room seems smaller, the piles of clothes are missing. I go to the dresser, open a drawer: folded socks next to sterile jockey shorts. She hasn't given anything away, but it's all so neat.

I don't know why this surprises me.

Only the desk is the same, the same array of papers. On the corner, the dive journal. When I see it my heart kicks in, a jolt. How many times has she opened it, sat here in this chair and looked at the last place he lived? I pull out the chair, sit staring at the journal, but I can't touch it, won't open it. I lick my lips, try to steady myself. I don't need to open it because I remember exactly what is drawn, diagrammed, written.

It's reproduced over and over in my dreams: the tumbling pen lines, inky, morphing into real tunnels, tunnels I'm forced to swim through gagging. Sometimes I wake up, and the blankets are over my head; right at the moment I'm drawing my last breath, as though I were Nick, I wake, and I've twisted them around my face, hardly breathing, stifled. It isn't a dream.

Once, when we were smaller, Nick asked Aunt Celia if she had nightmares of her husband dying.

"Nick," she said, "I had terrible nightmares. Nightmares that woke me, my heart pounding, and they were so real that sometimes I threw up."

Nick's eyes were wide, and for that matter, so were mine. We were working out in the garden. Celia and I were pulling weeds, and Nick was pulling the hose around,

watering everything in sight, even the trees. I'd had terrible nightmares before, but none so bad I threw up.

“What did you do?” he asked, putting his thumb over the tip of the hose and squirting out a rainbow toward the house. “Did they go away?”

“Dreams are only thoughts. They're not real,” she said, “So I stopped believing them.”

The water arched lustrous, mist blew out underneath, pink and blue and sparkly.

“How do you do that?” I wanted to know. “You can't control dreams.”

Nick walked over to the arboretum, pulling the hose after him and started beating the fiberglass sides with a wall of water, which cascaded, surged, racketed.

“I'm cleaning it for you,” he shouted, pummeling the water at its gothic top.

Celia lowered her voice. “I made a deal with my mind,” she pointed. “Whenever I start into a nightmare, I've told my mind to wake up—it can't continue. And it works. Sometimes my heart's still pounding, but I never wake panicked anymore.”

I scrunched my nose. How could you tell your mind to wake you up?

“The mind's a powerful thing,” she said. “It will create whatever you let it.”

The dive book looks so harmless in front of me, innocuous. But I can't touch it. Somehow I hadn't been able to put Celia's advice into effect. Nothing happened when I told my brain to wake; the tunnels still rushed at me, Nick's diagrams periodically hurling into my head, overtaking every synapse, superseding every juncture, drowning me on repeat like something broken, refuse released. And then they morphed, tossed me

with strong hands, paralyzed. I am often still in the tunnels, but there is something else, a body suffocating me, heavy. I don't want it, and the shadowy man can't hear underwater: pain sears between my legs. I can never trick my brain into meadows and flowers like Celia—it refuses to wake, and I'm afraid he'll come back.

Sometimes I think I could have dealt with Nick's death if only there wasn't the other part. But now they're attached, residing side-by-side in my memory while Nick dies, while he floats there, fighting for his last breath.

Jason was gone so long, with that black journal in his hands. And if Nick really wasn't in the cove like he said, then why did the coroners think his body had been there so long? How did Jason miss him?

Sometimes I think that Jason did it. That he did see his truck parked in the cove, his boat anchored near the peninsula, visible from the boathouse. If he drove up, he would have seen it. But he said Nick wasn't there. If he saw Nick's truck, did he let him die? Did he think it was too late to check?

Sometimes I think he killed him. That he did go down; that's why it took so long. But it doesn't make sense, either. How could Jason have been there without Nick knowing? If he waited underwater, Nick would have seen the other boat. And Jason wouldn't know when Nick would be coming: he couldn't wait indefinitely, unless they went down together. But I can't believe it.

Jason was so tired, too tired to drive. He was so worried. What if Nick spoke the truth and the photographs existed? I remember, remember being on the other side of the lens, viewed. It looked the way he said, but how many were there?

I can't trust Nick. That's the problem. But maybe instead of searching Nick's room, I should have been validating Jason's identity. "Prove to me you are who you say you are," I whisper. And show me the photograph. The one you took when I spread out for you in the office. Show it to me. I hate myself for my suspicions.

I stand. Turn my back to the desk, slide the closet's bi-fold doors open. Inside are Nick's shoes, stacked along the bottom, their toes perfectly aligned: tennis shoes, hiking boots that he used for the Forest Service—these have stains, sap it looks like, and a few pairs of flip-flops: black and brown.

There are a few light blue dress shirts, and a multitude of graphic t's, organized by color: black and gray, mostly, but also red, blue, and orange. Nick wasn't one to dress up. I pull through the shirts, some are smaller, too small. Mari has added old clothes, probably ones saved in the garage for some project, perhaps a rag-rug, or maybe they were forgotten, never taken to the consignment store. And then a pink one, a smaller t-shirt emblazoned with a white design. I study it, Kristy's. This is Kristy's shirt. Nick's tall skinny girlfriend. He bought it for her at the carnival, or was it the fair? The two of them walking around the halls in school, hoodies pulled up over their heads, sometimes they looked like the same person. I push the shirt down the rack, push her away, when I notice black draping legs at the end of the closet. At first I think its only Nick's, but then I see they're both there: two wet suits. My heart jogs.

My suit, a little smaller, just behind his. Would it still fit? And why here? Why has Mari placed it here to hang by its brother? I shouldn't be here. This part of my life

doesn't exist; didn't exist. I was fine. I was past this place: its shadows, its screams. The feet, the hood hanging distended like a neck.

His is black lycra—old now, like it could crack if he tried to pull it on. I wonder where she keeps his tank, his mask. Those things are not here. Personal effects the police called them. Confiscated. When the biopsy was done, when they tried to determine cause of death.

“Asphyxiation,” Richard said. It seemed ridiculous to him that it wasn't obvious. “Give us his damn body back!” But they only kept it for a day, so in the end it didn't delay anything—the body. That's how I think of Nick now, even in my memories where he lives, laughs, jokes, says rude ass comments, speeds the truck over washboard roads, always in the background lurks this body that is his now and the shadow of another man behind it. Nick, the talking corpse, so disconnected from life that I can no longer remember reality without his skin deteriorating, pulling off in patches from his cheeks, a fish.

I have to stop this—shouldn't be here. I should push the shirts back, cover the suits. If I could change it, could just go back, stop it. If only we hadn't taken the dive class, none of this would have happened.

“None,” I whisper; the word is sweet on my tongue. “None of this exits.” I savor the thought, but my mind can't hold it, can't make it solid. I did meet Jason; Nick started diving; there were stars, the boat, and my immobile hands.

It was an accident. An unlucky accident, says a voice in my mind.

“Or fate,” I whisper, insistent. There’s nothing I could have possibly done. I push the shirts back, hide the wetsuits. None of it’s my fault. While I laid there. Let him cajole me, caress me. While I laid there convincing myself that I loved him. It was just a twist of the stars—some predetermined, predestined, irrational, unavoidable course.

Like Celia’s husband. Aunt Celia’s husband committed suicide. He did it in the garage, in the very same house she still lives in. I don’t know how she does it. She even heard the gun go off. Mark had been home from the war for five years.

“Why don’t you have a husband,” I remember asking her on one of our walks. I was probably eight-years-old.

Nick and I had just begun running down to the peninsula everyday. Sometimes she saw us and invited us in, sometimes we just played in her trees. She had a giant plum tree. It wasn’t very good for climbing, the lowest branches were too high to reach, but the tree was next to a berm of dirt, a hill, and if we stood on the edge of it, Nick could jump and catch a branch in his hands and pull it down. Then I would pluck off as many plums as I could reach before he jumped for another branch. If we ate here, we wouldn’t have to go all the way home for food.

We got as many plums as we could and then we pushed our way underneath a subalpine fir with long weeping branches. It had a hollow, a needle-lined fort, an enormous cavern. Everything was a fort back then.

Under the tree, I’d open my shirt and pull out a tough plum, matte purple, like the last moments of sunset. And if I rubbed it with my thumb, the silver burnish came off slowly; the longer I rubbed, the darker the plum became, smooth and shiny like a

treasure. If it wasn't ripe, which was the case more often than not, green came through underneath the foggy silver. Not forest green, green the color of moss and frogs. Nick popped the plums in his mouth without cleaning them.

"You're going to make yourself sick," Celia often called out to us. She'd watch us from her rocker on the porch. "They're not ripe."

The plums tasted tart and tangy, saliva rushed to them and we screwed up our faces. Eating them felt like self-medicating; anything this bad must be medicinal. And that we chose to do it, made it thrilling.

"They're still good," we'd yell back, rolling our shirts up to hold the extras and running down the hill.

She liked to go on walks and often invited us, but Nick usually waved his hand dismissively, "No thanks," and didn't come. Aunt Celia wasn't our aunt. But I felt a need to be connected to her, connected to someone. Next to the lake, along the peninsula and toward our boathouse, I got up my nerve.

"Do you want to be our grandma?"

Aunt Celia had one daughter that lived in Eugene, Kat. I'd never seen her, and she'd never married. I figured Aunt Celia spent time with us because she wanted grandchildren, but Kat was determined to be a spinster and would never have babies.

"Your grandmother?" she threw her head back and laughed, swinging her arms, "I think I've just aged ten years. How about aunt?"

That was fine by me. I nodded, and feeling shy, kicked a rock several feet. It bounced out ahead. I stepped a few paces, lined myself up with the rock and kicked again, nailing it dead.

“Aunt Celia?” The words sugared like honey, “How did your husband die?”

I knew he died after he came home from the war, but I’d never found out anything other than his death was sudden, as though a storm had come up, or the power had gone out, it was unexpected, an act of nature.

“Mark,” she said, then looked at me, evaluating with her eyes, determining whether or not I was old enough to hear. I looked at her hands, buttery brown skin and knotted knuckles. She must have deemed me ready or old enough, I don’t know which.

“Mark was never the same after the war. He was unhappy.” She looked at the lake. The colors were beautiful: burnt orange, royal purple, splotted with gray clouds lit up by the falling globe. We walked, watching the lake unfurl its colors. Clouds moved across its surface, echoes from overhead.

“One day he went out to the garage and shot himself.” She seemed resigned, as though it were natural. We both stepped up some boulders and found our way down the other side.

“Were you home?” Her location seemed important, relevant to her pain.

“I was reading, in the house. I heard the shot, and I just knew.” She made a knowing look at the lake.

“I ran to Walter’s, to your house. He lived in your house before your parents moved in. Walter and Emma came over and cleaned up everything.”

“Was he hurt badly?” I knew I shouldn’t ask, but it came out.

“Oh yes. He died instantly.” Instantly. There, gone. A blink.

“How do you know?”

“He shot himself in the head.” I broke off a queen anne’s lace growing next to the trail and spun its stem between my fingers. The white and green crown looked like a pinwheel. We walked on, Aunt Celia watching the lake.

“Did you see him?”

“Mark? No. I couldn’t go in the garage.”

I looked at her strangely. How could she not have gone in? What if he was still alive while she was running to Walter’s?

“I didn’t want to remember him that way,” she said, picking off her own queen anne’s lace which hung at her side while she walked. “Walter and Emma cleaned him and cleaned the walls. Then they went to pick up Kat; she was at a friend’s.”

“Where were you?”

“I stayed in my bedroom.”

I imagined Aunt Celia after the gunshot, her bony hands on the garage door before she decided not to go in, postponing the truth. It seemed like a long way to run for help. Why hadn’t she called the police?

“I’m sorry,” I said, feeling closer to her, grateful.

“We pulled through.” She stopped and watched the lake. The sky was darker now, the air cooler, mist was rising from the lake edges..

“You better get home now,” she said, but I didn’t want to leave.

“Will you be okay?” It was a strange thing for a child to ask an adult, but Aunt Celia was different to me than she had been before.

“Of course, Petal,” she said. “Just look at that sky.”

The sky. As though that could solve things. I go to Nick’s window, twist the blinds until the slates flatten. It’s overcast outside, getting ready to rain. And there’s no sky in this bedroom, nothing left but limp, lifeless clothing. Clothing that used to hold a form that used to be my brother.

“I hate you,” I whisper, but he can’t hear me.

CHAPTER 4

“Mari?” I knock on her bedroom door, open it a crack. “Are you okay?” The blinds are drawn, and in a heap of covers I see her turn over. “Do you want me to make you some dinner?”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” she says. So I enter, sit on her bedspread; the light from the hallway hits her face. “Since you’ve been here; it feels more real.”

I don’t know if she means her sickness feels more real, or I’ve brought Nick back with me. “I know,” I nod. Maybe she can’t stop thinking about what she’s done to our family, but it’s probably the sickness; the cancer spreading throughout her blood stream, requisitioning her energy, inundating new organs, liver, lymph nodes, her brain. It terrifies me.

Her hands are tucked up on her chest, almost underneath her chin. “Dr. Bradshaw said I needed to slow down, take naps, give my body time to adjust, gather strength for the radiation.” This makes me think of Mrs. Oakley in first grade, chiming, “Dot your I’s, and cross your T’s, children.” Every order must be followed or something could go wrong. I used to look through those big papers, their enormous rows, two inches wide, and dotted lines down their middles. Where were the Ts; did I leave out a dot? I was afraid I’d overlook them. There was always the danger of leaving something out. And who knew what would happen then?

“I can make you dinner,” I offer. “Then you can keep resting.” I feel torn between wanting to take care of her, and wanting to stay as far away as possible, but the doctors’ advice means everything, every hope that she won’t die.

“It’s starts on Monday,” she says.

“I know.”

“Will you take me?” she asks. “I shouldn’t drive right afterwards.”

“That’s what I’m here for.”

“You’re such a good daughter.” Her voice is soft, and I stand, won’t be sucked in.

“Did you say you wanted dinner?”

She searches my face. “William bought some of my favorites. There are recipes on the counter for the next few days. Foods in the fridge.”

“Okay,” I stand at the door.

“Macy?”

I wait.

“I don’t think I’ll be hungry for another hour or so.” I nod, pull the door closed. If she doesn’t make it, I close my eyes, trying to shut out the image of her coffin, identical to Nick’s, gold inlay around the casing. At least I’m here. Here whether she deserves it or not. *You shouldn’t be here; she doesn’t love you*, says a reasonable voice in my mind, authoritative. But she needs me. *You needed her*, it chants.

The kitchen is tiny and quaint. Quaint because of the homemade tiles, the circular rag-rug, the circular window, little wood table. Charming, I think, which is the euphemism they use in housing advertisements that actually mean miniscule.

On the counter, a small stack of papers, recipe print-outs. The first one a salad that calls for gorgonzola. I open the fridge: it's packed, colorful laid: stacks of cheese laid out and waiting, yogurt, ready-to-heat noodles, organic carrots, organic vegetables of every variety.

This is a luxury liner salad: gorgonzola, spinach, baby greens, fuji apples, balsamic dressing. What ever happened to tomatoes and ranch? I pull out the knife drawer and select a small serated edge.

The apple leaks juices all over the cutting board. Two salads. The blue glass bowls. It's another forty minutes before I should wake her, so I take my greens into the living room, sit in Richard's old leather chair by the piano, click on the lamp, and stab at the salad. The flavor is sweet and harsh, super slick. And the cheese, so strong it almost tastes bad, turned, but with the sugary apple bit, I crunch slowly, savor it's medley.

Across from me, next to the front door, hangs Richard's still-life. Such a strange word. As though something still could live without heart and respiration, and yet be labeled "life." And why aren't paintings of people considered still life?

In the middle three tomatoes cluster, surrounded by bottles. Richard was doing a study of light. When I was ten or eleven, I saw the models for this painting: blue and green glass bottles reflecting against red near the picture window in Richard's study. I went too close, reached out my hand, over the green bottles, past the tomatoes, toward a

red rectangular bottle with a long tubular neck. The kind of neck you see on tribal Africans, stretched, distorted.

I didn't mean to pick it up; I only wanted to touch the pooling light, to see if it would gather around my skin, change its color, make it look like death, the way Nick said death looked. He knew first-hand; he'd been to a viewing, an examination, a corpse-watching, guarding, called a wake. Was it called wake because they wished the person was awake, or was it to make sure they wouldn't wake? A woman had died, the mother of one of Nick's friends. I wanted to see her, but my parents wouldn't let me go.

So the brightly lit bottles drew me, maybe I could touch death. But my father stopped me as my finger reached out, looked up from painting and yelled: "Dammit Macy." And it had been so quiet in the room, that his sudden shout frightened me. I think I'd forgotten he was there, painting what I reached toward. And my hand hit the fluted green bottle, full of water. It teetered, poured across the table before I could catch it. The stream didn't stop in the time it took Richard to reach me, seize the bottle and right it. I stepped back to the window, when he turned to me, "What the hell were you thinking?" he said waving his arm, and the water dripped dangerously on the floor. "You could have broken that bottle, and I can't find another." I felt the wall hard on my back, heard the water, still pattering softly, drip, drip, drip, below his voice. "Get out," he said.

"I can clean it."

"No. Get out, you've done enough."

Later, he found me, said he wasn't himself, hadn't felt like himself for, "well never mind, the point is it ended up working out; it was okay. Look," he said, and took

my hand, swallowing it in his. His fingers reminded me of branches, sprouting all spindly and smooth.

Up the stairs I followed to the banished study. The painting glistened, the bottles clustered above tomatoes on the canvas, perched in a pool of water, and light like grace ran through the paint, refracting off the pool, drowning the edges in black. The red looked like blood, the blue an ice, and all this he said, because of the way the water changed the colors, darkened the shadows, and threw the green in relief. He took a tool and scratched my name in the bottom corner, leaving chasms in the paint: “Macy.”

The salad bowl is empty. I barely remember finishing it, and the gold burnished clock says seven. In the kitchen, I grab Mari’s salad and head for her room, stumbling over the brocade rug, catching myself feeling sorry for her. Richard wasn’t always the easiest person to live with, but what she’s done far outweighs his faults. What kind of a mother leaves her daughter? Chooses a dead child over a living one? She can’t erase what she’s done, not even close, the lines are still visible, chalky after-images. And I shouldn’t even be here. Where is William? He’s the one who should take care of her now.

I knock, and push open her door. Both nightstand lamps brighten the room, which is plain, except for her large bed and a giant rectangular painting above the bed, another of Richard’s paintings: irises in a vase, lavenders and whites.

“Come in,” she smiles, closes a book, and puts it on the table.

I hand her the salad. “It’s good, I tried some,” I say, giving her a tight-lipped smile.

“Oh it looks wonderful.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Well it should, it’s your recipe.”

“William’s,” she corrects me.

I stand, waiting. William should be here, not me, and I want to tell her this.

She pulls herself more up right, takes a bite, and closes her eyes to chew, absorbing the gorgonzola, its balsamic contrast, not a pause. She stabs a piece of apple, rubs it around the bowl, lathering it in balsamic. Next to her *1984* lays open, spine down. I remember reading that book; but Mari never used to have time for fiction. She always had too many studies to read.

“Do you miss William?” I ask, deciding to go forward with it.

“William needs to be where is.” Her answer dismisses me. “And this dressing is perfect.” She stabs another piece of cheese, adds apple, and twirls it in dressing residue.

“But you’re sick.” I point out the obvious, so she knows where I’m going with this. I shouldn’t be here; she is his responsibility.

“Just resting.” She fills her fork, but doesn’t put it back in her mouth, instead she smiles at me, the picture of benevolence. “And so grateful that you came. It’s so good to finally have you back in this house where you belong.” Her eyes twinkle in the light, misting.

But I won’t be pulled into her emotions. This is not where I belong, I want to tell her, my stomach knotting. She shouldn’t even be here; this is Nick’s house. I know that now. Nobody else can exist in this place without being overtaken by him. I want to tell her this, but I chicken out. Ask something irrelevant.

“Did you ever call him Billy?”

“Who? William?”

“We called him Billy the Bird man. He brought a hawk to my school.” I don’t know why I’m going on about this. But in a minute it may lead into the reason he’s gone, and why I am here.

“I hated that name,” she said. “He never really liked it either.”

“William is more dignified, I suppose.”

She seems relaxed, tilts her head toward *1984*. “I found your book in the bookcase next to the piano—I haven’t looked at it for ages. Fascinating.” She means the book, not the bookcase, which is ironic because every time Richard brought home a book, she clicked her tongue, complained about how he didn’t even read what he bought. But I did, which is why I suspect he kept adding books. He didn’t say he wanted me to read them, but looking back, I bet his motive was to educate me.

How like Mari, to criticize something and then want it, to throw something away and then demand it; it disgusts me. The intensity of this feeling surprises me, and I don’t try to push it away. She was always selfish; we were probably better off without her.

“It’s Richard’s. He’d probably like it back,” I say.

“You read it for school. Don’t you remember?”

“It’s Richard’s, but whatever.” I stand up. She’s impossible. Mrs. Ruth talked about *1984* when we read *The Handmaid’s Tale*. I’d mentioned it to Richard, and then he brought it home. I remember this because Mrs. Ruth said in her sing-songy voice that the English had nothing on the Canadians, absolutely nothing, so when it came to dystopias,

it was time to move past Orwell. He was old-school, she said, dropping a term she'd just learned, and looking at us with fervor.

“Could you die,” my best-friend Francis said after class, rolling her eyes. “Old school, as though Ruth can talk about old-school! She is old school!”

Dystopias weren't really my thing, so I didn't care either way.

“I could have sworn you brought this home,” Mari says, “that's why I wanted to read it.”

“Sorry.” I can't take it anymore, and I'm not going to talk to her about William. “If you don't need anything else.” I pause, waiting for her to say she doesn't, to release me.

“We could watch a movie together. Wouldn't that be fun?” Her tone is light, breezy, as though nothing serious has happened, and she doesn't realize I'm standing by the door. “I'm getting tired of sleeping. It'd give you a chance to get out of the house, choose something fun for us.”

“Perfect,” I say, matching the light quality in her voice, holding the doorknob. But I don't want to go to town, I don't even want to be here. “If I were you,” I say, “I'd be worried William won't come back.” It's my voice, but I can't help what I'm saying, it just comes out. “People do that you know.”

The creases on her face remind me of age, sickness—her eyes an ache. I shut the door.

Who cares? She should feel bad, says a voice in my head. It's started raining outside; I go onto the back deck, sit in her porch swing, and feel the wooden curve beneath me, the straight back. The rain is light, a sprinkle, like baptism. While I creak back and forth, it titters on the tin roof; a misty wet smell rising from the ground, wafting, almost hard to catch—I breathe deeply, my favorite smell, the wetness.

Why is she reading my books? Maybe what William said was true; I'm here so she can make amends, absolve herself. He left to get out of the way, bring me here. But he had no right to leave her like this, to force me to come. I suppose she thinks we'll have quality time together. She'd say that on the phone. "Maybe we don't get enough time together, but it's quality when we do Mace," and I agreed; moments with her were golden, precious.

But she didn't call on my birthdays. Not one, after we left. Sometimes I'd get a card later. Something childlike printed on the front: a kitten, a bunny rabbit. "Hope your birthday is hopping." And when I asked her why she couldn't come visit, she said, "Your father doesn't approve of me anymore," she said.

"Why?" I desperately needed to know. But she wouldn't explain.

"He doesn't want me to come."

That explained it. I never thought to doubt her. It made so much sense. No wonder she wasn't coming; it was his fault. I hated him for keeping her from me. That was why she didn't call as often, too. "Your father doesn't like it when I call."

“That’s ridiculous,” Richard said. “Simply not true. Why would I keep your mother from you? You saw her. She came and didn’t want to stay. It had nothing to do with me.”

But I didn’t believe him. He was conspiring against her. Later she told me she couldn’t get a job like her’s anywhere else, and she’d come up and visit in a few months. But almost every time we made plans, they fell through. It was always a legitimate excuse: someone at work was sick, she was sick, they had a special children’s group coming through the research station. I would sit in the living room of our new house on the blocky gray furniture, watching out the window until the time for pick up had come, gone, and gone—an hour, two hours, three. Still I didn’t give up. Sometime’s she’d call. A few times she showed up, all breezy and full of hugs. “Thanks for being understanding about my schedule, honey.”

“It’s no big deal,” I said.

Richard was never around when she came to the house, and I didn’t give up on her until the day I graduated.

“I’ll be there,” she promised. “I could never miss your special day.”

And I knew it. Knew she would come. Richard would be there, too, but the most important person was my mother, and she’d come all the way from Cascade. Nothing would come up at work. We would eat at Divine’s—a café a few miles from our house with paninis to die for. She would get a hotel, then we’d go shopping for the perfect dress in the best department stores.

“And we’re getting whatever one you want,” she said. “Cost doesn’t matter. This is your day”.

I smiled shyly at the floor, holding the phone to my ear. I couldn’t wait.

She’d explained how sorry she was that our weekend last month hadn’t worked out. Something at work, contaminated petri dishes, and the entire experiment had to be started over. Months of data lost. She was devastated. I tried to understand, and I thought I did. It didn’t matter; she’d make it up to me. Even told me to get a head start on finding the dress I wanted.

So after school I went with Jenny Bean to the Bridgeport Village. Jenny had been my friend since we moved to Portland, like Francis but more green, an environmental chic with flair. Jenny proved you could be ecofriendly without going granola.

We spent the whole day trying on dresses and pantsuits, even flirted with the idea of jeans and a fancy shirt with layers of necklaces; we could bring back a fad, we giggled.

I found my dress in peasantry—an artistic carambola shift, solid red, with the sweetest neckline ruffle. When I twirled in the sleeveless dress, my arms held out, Jenny gasped. “It’s perfect she said.” And it was. Almost to my knees, I could buy the red healed-sandals we’d been looking at next door. It would go perfectly with my black graduation gown, and I’d sweep my hair to the top of my head, leave a few girls dangling out.

“Very mode,” Jenny said. She went for a black classic halter dress, hair down. Black was her color, it made her blonde hair look almost white.

“What if someone buys it,” Jenny protested when I put the dress back on the rack.

“Nobody’s going to buy it between now and tomorrow.”

“They might!”

“I don’t want to have it on hold when we walk in,” I said.

“Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you.” Jenny adopted this phrase from her father who almost grunted the words when he said yes to something he thought she shouldn’t do, but didn’t care enough to cancel.

“Thanks, Mr. Bean,” I intoned and she slapped me. She hated her last name, couldn’t wait to get rid of it.

“As soon as I’m eighteen,” she said. “I’ll pick an exotic last name: Roman, or France, maybe Willow.” At the time, she’d been leaning toward the later. It suggested grace and fragility while acknowledging the environment. “Have you ever seen anything more exotic than a draping willow?” she asked. The question was meant to be rhetorical.

In the end, I put the dress on hold. My mother wouldn’t mind; hadn’t she asked me to look?

The rain has pattered out, and now it’s just the sound of the swing: metallic creaking, and a chill. There’s no horizon from here. Only forest, so the sunset is more like a melting into gray, a darkening of trunks and branches.

The new day has brought another storm. I know as soon as I wake, late, the room darker than normal. Outside the clouds are an indistinct mass, crepuscular, a blur of gray, miserable wetness, and the potholes in the road brimming, seeping throughout the gravel.

It must have rained all night, such an isolating phenomena, this concentrated pattering and swelling.

I pull on my jeans, a tight-fitted grey cotton shirt, and thick wool socks, then follow the stairs onto the brocade rug. Mari's door is closed. In the kitchen my socks slide on the tile, so I skate to the fridge, pull out the orange juice. The house is so quiet, all I can hear is the pounding of the rain, amplified by the tin roofed porch on the other side of this wall.

I choose a short purple paisley cup, fill it with the juice, and turn to the globular window. The house has turned into a ship, rocking in the waves, and this window a port into a chilly sea. Tomorrow, when radiation begins, I'm afraid something terrible will happen. They'll say there's no point to continue treatments; she's too far gone. Or while I wait for her to come out, Jason may walk in. Who knows why? It's completely illogical, but even when I was in Portland, sometimes I thought I spotted him over my shoulder, and now that I'm here, where he lives, where I presume he lives, I'm doubly afraid we'll run into each other.

The grass, the madrone tree, they glisten, catching and holding a faint lustrous light, though in this cloud-cover, I can't imagine how. Maybe they generate it themselves, and it's only visible when the sun is covered, the competition blotted out. A movement to the left catches my eye. The swing. Almost out-of-sight, Mari is awake, barely moving, not even rocking.

Should she be out there? It may be too wet; she may make herself sick. Probably she knows this. I step back from the window, enough that she couldn't see me should she

try. Not that she would try. Held breath. That's how we're living, on stale air, waiting for treatment to begin. Why is it that as the event comes closer, it's harder to keep waiting, feels even further away than before? Insurmountable.

A small peace offering. I open the side-door in the dining room to a damp chill, she looks up, all radiance, tucked and bound in the patch-work comforter off her bed, reading glasses on and hair affray.

"Morning, sleepy-head," she fairly sings.

"Do you need anything? Are you cold?"

She holds up her book. "I'm reading what it's like to be under constant surveillance. Terrifying. And I had some cereal a couple hours ago, so I'm all set."

"Okay, well then. I just wanted to make sure."

Since William left, waiting sunk into my bones like disease. Anticipation, dread, like I'm plunging into a black hole. One mistake after another, and none can be corrected. Most of the day passes like this.

I choose a tome from the bookcase near the piano, curl in the leather arm chair, and flip between its earmarked pages. My father's doing I imagine, and his penciled marks. The first part is in old-speak: *ye say ye will not lie... would ye suffer my head to be smit off or suffer me to meddle with you again?* Why is that underlined? It feels like spying. The page is also turned down at *Everyman*, and *Utopia*, but I skip them. *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* sounds like a rainy day story.

An underlined passage at the beginning: *couldst thou make men to live eternally, or being dead, raise them to life again?* (Marlowe). And penciled into the margin: “Icarus.”

Icarus. The boy who flew too close to the sun. His father had made wings, feathered and sealed in wax. And Icarus fell into the sea, a wax boiling fireball, and drowned. When we talked about it in Ms. Ruth’s class she said, “that just goes to show you that the Greeks thought drowning was worse than burning, forget the fire, forget the thousand-foot fall, death doesn’t come until you stop breathing.” I shiver, wondering if Richard thought he was like Icarus’s father, responsible.

The story takes deciphering, so I read slowly, settle each line in my head: *Now that the gloomy shadow of the earth, longing to view Orion’s drizzling look, leaps from the antarctic world unto the sky, and dims the welkin with her pitchy breath, Faustus, begin thine incantations.* Witchery. Old-fashioned problem-solving, sortilege. (Marlowe)

Around noon, Mari walks through the living room, blanket caught up in her arm.

“Thick book,” she says raising her eyebrows, her finger stuck in the middle of *1984*; she grins, “and I thought I was impressive with my classic.”

I offer to make tuna fish and bring a sandwich to her room, which is how we navigate the hours, civilly, divided by walls, in our separate stories. Mari’s more civil, but she always had a knack for ignoring the elephant in the room, any large animal in fact, maybe a tiger would be more appropriate. I can’t say the same, though shame licks my ego when I turn the page, remembering she’s the sick one.

Still. Only three days and it has become too clear to me that if she weren't desperate, if she weren't at the end of her rope, if she hadn't exhausted every option, she would never have asked for me.

I flip the page: Faustus traded his soul for wonders, but now he's out of time, used up, awaiting midnight when Mephistopheles has promised to creep in, all devilish, scoop him up, drag him to hell. He cries as the clock hits twelve: *Oh it strikes, Now body, turn to air, or Lucifer will bear thee quick to hell.* Lightning crashes. *Oh soul, be changed into little water drops, and fall into the ocean, ne'er be found. My God, my God, look not so fierce on me!* But the devils alight on his body. (Marlowe)

Monday. Mari's car is all white, smooth lines, except along the bottom, where dirt thrown from the wheels lies caked. Normally she'd be off to work, but her part-time leave begins today, and she's quiet in the passenger seat, decked out in a peplum jacket and matching skirt, the color of millstones. A red and olive damask scarf, looped just once, hangs into her lap over a brown shirt. She has leave from work, but who grants leave from life?

I'm feeling subdued. Sorry for my outburst yesterday. Not sorry enough to apologize. I want her to know—she should know what she's done, how it felt. I want another apology—I'll probably need apologies the rest of my life, I think wryly, although if they were sincere, if they effected real change, but fat chance of that. I haven't dressed for the occasion, just a simple scoop necked floral over jeans. Neither of us have much to say.

Push the gear up, reverse out of the driveway. It's the first I've left the house since coming to Cascade. The sky is cornflower blue, smattered with dabs of white, altocumulus. I should see Celia, I think driving through the trees, coming up to the pasture where a right turn would take me toward our boathouse, toward Celia's, onto the peninsula where Nick died. The lake. How does Mari drive by it everyday?

Stop. My mind goes too quickly to uncontrolled places. The car zips through the trees, the shadows, bouncing in yesterdays puddles, not all drained. This area used to be fields, but developments have sprung up, burst from the ground, infested. Cookie-cutter houses: green, brown, maroon earth-tones, and matching siding, matching driveways, all of them yardless. Wooden painted signs advertise their unique qualities: *Spring Haven, Quail Run, Oak Vista*. A gas station. I hardly registered them driving in.

It's unlike Cascade, as I knew it.

In town I can hardly turn the wheel without catching sight of Jason walking away from me, stooping to tie his shoe, answering his phone. Of course these pieces of him, these fragments—a muscular shoulder, long fingers, the back of a head—belong to other men who, seen whole, are not Jason. Soon the familiar areas fade.

Mari is strangely quiet. I flip on the radio—*The Dow Jones Industrial has gone down 30 points since opening an hour ago*. It's normal to care about these things. Events wholly unrelated to us, except that they made us feel connected. *Another outbreak of ebola: officials claim containment*. News makes things distant, manageable. I keep to the speed-limit: we can't afford risks. *A small plane crash in Boston killed three people this*

morning. “How terrible,” we chorus. How awful, what a tragedy, as though we are driving somewhere normal.

Sterile, surreal—we walk into the waiting room—its manicured fish tank, red and yellow rocks, finding nemo fish, salmon-colored seats, flat teal carpet. Mari, who still hasn’t spoken a word besides directions, squeezes my hand, hard, and lets go quickly.

“It will be okay,” I say, hoping it’s not a lie. Don’t let it be a lie.

She walks to the counter, checks-in, but there’s not any wait-time, dead time, time to prepare. She’s barely seated next to me when a radiation therapist calls, “Marian Oman.”

The woman doesn’t look old enough for this job: cropped, messy blonde hair, the air of friendly fatigue. Mari jumps from her chair, eager, anxious, or that’s how it seems, like she’s won a drawing: first prize, one cuddly beam of radiation.

I dread seeing her come out. Worry about the pain she’s experiencing. Realize I should have put a bowl in the car in case she throws up on the drive home. Once again, I curse William for not being here. It’s an illusion; we’re pretending that I have earned this spot, this supportive role.

She walks out, ten minutes later, her face pale—I panic. “What went wrong? They didn’t see you? Are you okay?” A flurry, a deluge.

“That was it,” she tries to look brave. “It doesn’t take long to flood a body with life-saving radiation.”

I lean on the glass doors, hold them open for her.

“How are you feeling? What was it like?”

“Scary,” she said. “She helped me onto the treatment table, arranged me. The machine is enormous. Then she tattooed little freckles into my skin,” Mari gestures at the area around her breast, “I can’t wash them off, and she did an x-ray to check I was in the right spot before they hit me with the radiation.”

I imagine Mari’s exposed, tattoo-freckled breast, the gapping piece stolen from it, the weeks-old scar. “It looked like a kitchen aid on growth hormone, only imagine the bowl is a bed, and the machine above you is enormous,” she positions her hands, shaping the machine, and I shiver. “The therapist left, her name is Julie. ‘Remain very still,’ she told me, and left the room. “It seems like everyone is doing jobs they’re too young for.”

“She did look young,”

“Julie came back in a few times to reposition the machine. I felt so helpless, but she’s a nice enough girl.”

“What did you think about?” We’ve arrived at the car, and I open the door for her to climb into the passenger seat.

“Oh, my breast turning red; the radiation causing cancer somewhere else. The doctors say it doesn’t happen, but I’ve heard stories. Then I wondered if William was sunburned yet from looking at the sky.” She laughed. “He probably has owl eye burns, from holding his binoculars up.”

“Then what?”

“Then it was over.” It confused me how it could happen so quickly; I shut her door, settle in and buckle my own seatbelt.

“How did they do it so fast? Did it hurt?”

She looks at me, puts her hand on my leg while I start the car. “Imagine Macy, imagine if they did all five weeks of radiation in one sitting. I’d come out fried like toast.”

Toast: all crisp and burnt. The opposite of Nick: waterlogged.

“How do you feel?”

“It hasn’t set in yet.”

“Well that’s good,” I say, “but I don’t think you should go into work.”

“Don’t be silly,” she brushes me off, doesn’t meet my glance at her.

It seemed too easily, counter-intuitive. Radiation: such a dramatic word, daily treatments, death raging around the corner, relapse, reoccurrence. But she’s ready to go to work. It’s insane. “Should we get a bowl?” I ask. “In case you throw up?”

She leans her head back against the seat cushion. “That’s a good idea.”

Tupperware—I run into the store, jog out, and she trades me the clear plastic bowl for a diagram she’s been reading: the food pyramid, a whole-food description. “I’m supposed to eat well,” she said. “It betters the chances of survival.”

“I can keep making your food,” I say, hating the word she’s just thrown out.

“What about the farmer’s market? Do they still do that?”

“Every Saturday,” Mari smiles, holds her bowl tight, like a life-preserver. “All the fresh food you can take.” She leans her head back on the chair and watches the window.

Silence. I consider the radio, change my mind. Trees, burm, old telephone poles, winding pavement; what is it be like to Mari, knowing she might never see this place again? This sky, the car's fake leather odor? Everything is precious.

“You'll make it,” I say, breaking our silence.

She turns her head, smiles at me, then closes her eyes, exhausted. Emotionally, physically, I don't know. There are too many ways to die. “What would I do without you?” she whispers, then adds “without Nick?”

Nick. I can't help but feel trapped, trapped by my brother who will not disappear. Nick's dead end, now hers, now mine, like dominoes we've tipped.

“Ody, Ody,” I said, lying on my stomach in Aunt Celia's yard watching the tethered bird, hands under my chin. For a second he looked at me, looked right through me, saw everything, knew exactly who I was. “Ody,” I breathed, but he turned his back to me, hazes of grey interrupting blue more vivid than the lake, and his tail fanned almost as long as his body while he picked at the ground, disinterested.

“Don't worry,” I told him. “Reality is an illusion, you'll be flying soon.” It was something I'd heard Celia say. Just optimistic thinking, but maybe he would buy it.

“He's not tethered,” she had told me, kneeling in her flowerbed, pink floral gloves, pulling out weedy shoots and white star-shaped blooms, a pile of them at her side. I didn't understand; did she think the tether had come off?

Ody hopped, picked at the ground, dug in his beak like a pig, thrashing his head from side to side.

“He is,” I had protested. “Look.” The cord draped between his stand, the leg.

“A minor irritation,” she said.

“Minor?”

“But all he’s aware of is the dirt, those bugs, you.”

I knew he was aware of me, knew who I was. Ody tossed his head, pulled at something in the ground, oblivious to the tether. I watched him until he reached the end of his rope, tried to flutter, picked at the chain, the leather, momentarily, then he forgot it, and went back to digging in the dirt, every bit as satisfied now as he had been restless a moment before.

“Reality is an illusion, Macy.” She stretched for a weed, rested her weight on one hand. “It only bothers you when you believe it.”

We were in a dip next to the house, surrounded by trees; the lake wasn’t visible except from the second-story in her house. I told him again, not sure how it could be true, or whether Aunt Celia was teasing me, but maybe it would make him happier.

“Ody, Ody, I whispered, and the wind blew hair in my face, “don’t believe in the tether.” I pushed the hair behind my ear, but it came right out with the next gust. “It’s an illusion, Ody.”

CHAPTER 5

If there was one point I could go back to, one point to change, a timeline to alter, a new universe to spin off, April wouldn't exist. A black hole in the calendar, and life could have gone on, imperfect, but livable, Nick would be alive; I would never have met Jason, my father and I would have never moved to Portland. If I could only turn back time, tell Francis to wait, not to drop me off at the house when I am fifteen. I could have called, stayed at her place instead. And Nick too, one call. One call to say, don't go home. Stay with Kristy and you can stay with Kristy forever, lay in her arms forever, in the arms of any girl you want or that matter.

But we finished our homework early. Went over the design for our eco-column in Biology, and because she was a year older than me and could drive, Francis took me home around 8:30. She was one of those friends you could tell anything to, so aloof, above it all. She'd take a drag on her cigarette and say something profound: "reality is an illusion, a projection—the sooner you face it, the better you'll feel."

"That's why you'll be the only person in the world who doesn't die from lung cancer," I said once. "You're the only one who knows it's not real."

"Oh, I'll die from it," she says putting her top lip over her bottom and blowing down, "I'm not that immune to collective think."

Francis told me belief held the universe together. Only thoughts made it real. For example, she said, if a majority of people stopped believing planes could fly, they'd fall

out of the air like shot birds. She clapped her hands together to emphasize the impact. I raised my eyebrows.

She couldn't sell me on that, I'd seen airflow schematics.

Francis was in my grade because she had an eccentric mother, Mrs. Pritchett, everyone called her, even though she'd never been married. Mrs. Pritchett refused to put Francis in kindergarten and couldn't stand to send her to first grade. I'd known who she was since grade school, but we weren't friends. I thought she was a little funky—long bangs, blunt brown hair to her shoulders, and clothes my father would never have let me get away with: berates, tank-top dresses, boisterous earrings. Even her sandals were sexy: gold, leather straps, twisty and thonged.

First semester my sophomore year, we found ourselves in the same biology, english, and figure sculpting. When it came time for second semester, the hard classes carried over, and we replaced our figure sculpting with computers, taught by Mrs. Edwards, who, if we were ahead, let us go to the library while everyone else surfed the web. Sometimes we claimed to be going to the library, but walked instead across the field to the gas station for a soda.

An hour later, and everything would have been different. I'd begun to think Mari called it upon herself when Richard was moody and aggressive. She hadn't been able to control her mouth, stop those bitchy comments, and little digs.

“Stop provoking me,” I heard him say more than once.

“I wouldn't have to provoke you if you'd do what you promised.” She lingered over the word “provoke like he was a child.”

“I said I’d do it, and I will. But if you don’t get off my back, you can forget it.”

“You said that three weeks ago. Weeks, Richard!”

“It” could refer to any number of cyclic items: wiping his shoes before coming in the house, spending more time with the family, stopping the toilet from running, so she didn’t have to turn the water on and off every time she used it.

“How hard could it be? It would take an hour.”

Usually he tuned her out: looked at the ceiling, waited silently for her to give up the tirade, rubbed the bridge of his nose. But sometimes he snapped, instantly. I suppose all the nagging built up; he couldn’t take it anymore, and if he yelled, Nick and I beat feet, got out of the house, out of the way.

“You are a nagging bitch. Do you know that?” he yelled. “I want you to shut up. I’m sick of hearing it. Sick of watching your mouth move.”

“I don’t care if you’re sick of it. Don’t you walk out on me. I expect you to treat me with respect,” she took a tone, beat her finger in the air.

“Respect,” he hollered, snapping out of his chair while she backed away. “You selfish, manipulating, whore. You expect me to respect you.”

It usually happened at the end of the month, when money was tight. My father would have a few drinks to release the pressure, and forget some job he’d promised Mari he’d do. I’d heard them fight over everything from fixing the silverware drawer so it rolled properly shut, helping clean up the dishes, or even showing up on time for dinner. He got caught up in his work at the gallery, involved, and the hours slipped away.

It worked the other way around too. If Mari hadn't done something for dinner, he might flip, especially if he'd made an effort to be on time. But usually it was a combination of things, and it wouldn't happen for months. Life seemed good until he started rubbing the bridge of his nose; then Nick and I knew to disappear, to avoid the house, or turn the ear buds up loud and stay in our rooms the rest of the night.

Par for the course, right? Everyone's parents fought, if they were still together, provided they were even speaking. Some people said their parents had a great relationship, but you could almost bet they were covering something up. "If it looks perfect, it probably smells bad," said Francis, who had picked up the saying from her mother.

Occasionally I came home to my mother bent into her hands, crying on the back porch; my father either missing, or in his studio, taking his anger out on the canvas. But whatever terrible things he'd called her were clearly still echoing in her head.

If she would just leave him alone, I thought, she could avoid the crying sessions. Still they pulled at me. Who was really at fault? And how could I tell? Usually I sided with my father; I knew what it was like to be on the wrong side of Mari's humor.

Not that it was okay, the way he lost his temper, but since he had little control over it, and she knew about it, she shouldn't have pushed him; she wasn't even considerate enough to pussy foot around him when he was having a hard time. It was like she was addicted to being yelled at. Of everyone in the family, my father was the most predictable, the least complicated.

When Francis turned right and rolled onto the gravel road, a blue mini-van passed us going the opposite way. Unusual, as we were the only home on the road for miles, but I wasn't concerned. She dropped me off. "See you tomorrow," she said, spinning gravel on her way out.

I slung my backpack over my shoulder, debating whether we should get a fish or a snail for our eco-column. Ms. Larsen said we could have either. A snail seemed like a safer bet—it could hide in its shell if the water turned stale and murky, which was more impervious than a fish, but definitely less interesting.

I walked into the house, not even listening. I think I heard the yelling before I walked in, but my mind was on the project, and the noise was in the background. I can't be sure of this. It's possible the yelling has been added to my memory, superimposed on past events, drowning reality. In my imagination, the yelling actually started when we turned onto the gravel road, but that too has been altered.

Pieced together, I know a man crossed my father's path when he came home. Richard wasn't early; it wasn't like she was hiding anything. She and the man, a colleague, talked at the door, innocently, I suppose, I pretend, imagining her goodbye wave, her "thank you for coming."

All this while my father parked the truck, pulled it out of gear, and set the emergency break. Something should have flashed white and blue, a beacon, a warning, a lighthouse troll over the water: rocks, cross currents. But there was nothing. The colleague walked to his mini-van, vehicle of utility, not style, half-a-man, but man nonetheless and my father stepped out of the truck and slammed the door behind him.

The colleague was oblivious, he smiled, inclined his head while my father stood next to the door determining whether he'd follow, and Francis and I chatted in her car, nearing the gravel road, my parents voices already echoing in our conversation, things I thought of later, but I can't remember them apart from the original moment; the real moment is lost, all I have is a reconstruction.

Already in my father's stance, if I had seen it, I would have known to run, to leave, to disappear. But we were laughing in Francis's camery. Her first car, a gift from her mother: black exterior, dramatic, a sunroof; we had this open. Francis said to shoot her if she ever got as fat as Ms. Larsen or waddled everywhere she walked. And I had laughed, picturing her duck-like stride, rotating from one side to the other, like a tripping weight, a pendulum passing.

In reality, I barely registered the mini-van passing us in the opposite direction. It was afterwards that I remembered the lights, a vague sense of the color blue. I had not yet entered the immediacy of this timeline.

Macy dropped me off at the house. The porch blared brightly, the night was warm, silken. In the woods were the subtle noises of birds settling down, wind whispering, night entering our yard, seeping across the lawn toward the front door. The night didn't alarm me, the yelling hadn't entered my consciousness.

I opened the screen door, backpack heavy on my right shoulder, pushed inside the house, dropped my bag next to the door. By then they were so loud, I can't believe I shut the door behind myself, can't believe I dropped my backpack, a habitual motion, actions undeterred by crisis until too late.

The screams, who were they coming from?

“Bitch! You Bitch!” My father’s figure imposed, leaned forward, almost in her face, filling the living room, but she held her head up, defiance in her eyes. They were so absorbed in each other that neither seemed to care that I had just entered the house. They didn’t even look at me.

“I can’t believe you have the nerve to let that cock-sucker into my house. My house!”

“It’s my house too, Richard. Don’t be such a bastard.”

My mind froze. What was happening? I stared open-mouthed at my mother. Faced toward me, I could tell you forever how she looked: head set, shoulders back, wearing a low-necked coral bubble-top and fitted dress pants. Not an unusual outfit, except she was barefoot.

“You bitch,” said Richard, walking over to his leather chair, fishing out a purple rayon scarf, one of the short ones she usually tied like a choker, ends flaring. “You didn’t even finish dressing.”

“You are making something out of nothing, Rich. We’re friends.”

“The hell you’re friends! You fucking whore!”

What was he saying? He’d made a mistake. He must have.

“Rich, stop it. I always take my scarfs off when I come home from work.”

“And stay late at work. I can’t believe I bought all your shit! You manipulating selfish whore!” He strode toward her like he might hit her, threw the scarf at her feet, and turned around, holding his nose, strode into the hallway. “Dammit, you bitch!”

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“I am not being ridiculous!” He raged, and then the crash, the tumbling noise of glass and falling. It seemed to go on forever. At first I didn’t know what was happening. I’d glued myself to the door, watching my mother, terrified. But they were our photographs falling, our family pictures, hitting the ground smashing, like they’d all come off the wall at once. I still hadn’t moved from the door, and that’s when Mari looked at me, or looked through me, her face red. I waited for her to walk into the hallway, tell him off like she usually did, or run like I wanted to. He’d gone mad. What was he doing? What had she done?

“Richard, you are ruining our family!” she screamed. “Your daughter’s here! Think about what you’re saying.” She stepped forward, palms up, watching him, but I couldn’t see around the corner.

His voice came hard and split. The sound had stopped. “She deserves to know.”

“Rich, there is nothing to know!” He didn’t reply. She stood watching him for a minute, waiting, then flung her hand. “Fuck you, you bastard,” looked once toward me and walked into the dining room. “I’m going for a walk. Maybe by the time I get back you’ll be ready to apologize. Asshole.” The door slammed, bounced heavily against its frame and stayed open.

I walked to the hallway. Richard stood looking down at the brocade rug, frames, and glass fragments littered between us. On the wall, the higher pictures still hung, and two of the lower ones: Nick and Richard with the fish, me and Nick on my first day of school. But the middle of the wall was bare, a great empty swath where he had swept

them from the wall. I bent, picked up the frame closest to me: a black and white of my grandparents in Maine; we hardly saw them. I placed a large chip of glass into the frame, and another. Richard didn't move, so I got on my knees, reached for another photograph.

“God, stop it,” he said. “It’s not your mess.”

I picked up another piece of glass.

“I said stop it. Leave.” He shook his head, squeezed the bridge of his nose. I’d always thought it was a migraine coming on, but this time it seemed like he was trying to stop himself from crying. “I said get out!”

I backed onto my feet, not sure if I should leave, and a vehicle pulled into the driveway. Nick. Nick would be home. “Get out!” he kicked sideways, sending frames into the wall, and I bounced to my feet. Ran to the front door, pulled it open.

“Nick.” He was still in his truck, headlights still blaring over the grass. I ran across the yard, crunched in the gravel, and pulled his door open, filling the cab with light. Nick was on the phone; he looked at me strange, furrowed his eyebrows. “Dad thinks Mom’s cheating. She’s gone, and he’s thrown all the pictures off the wall,” I burst, pulling his arm.

“What?”

“There was a man here when he got home.”

“Listen, Kristy, I gotta go,” he said, not waiting for a reply. He pulled his keys from the ignition, and jumped out of the truck.

“Stop pulling on me. What the hell is going on?”

I explained again. “I don’t know what he’s going to do next. He’s going crazy. I’m afraid to go in there. When I tried to help he kicked the wall.”

We were on the porch. Nick was still in his Forest Service green button-up, with the yellow patch, and dark green pants. He towered over me, tall but skinny. “You stay here,” he pointed at me. “Or find Mom. I’ll take care of Dad.”

“Okay,” I nodded. He walked in the house, and I ran around back. It was dark away from the porch light, and I slowed, listening to the forest noise, the syncopation of crickets, the sound of my own steps smashing grass. At the deck, I tried to see if she was up there, sitting on her swing, but the swing was in deep shadow. Someone had shut the back door.

“Mom?”

I walk up the steps, the glint of our port window made it difficult to see. I touched the edge of the frame. “Mom?” When my eyes adjusted, the swing was empty. The forest loomed black. Had she gone in there? I cupped my hands around my mouth, “Mom?” But there was no answering cry.

The swing creaked with my weight. I don’t think I’d ever felt so confused, afraid. And underneath that, an anger I could feel in my gut, directed toward my mother for being so stupid, and toward my father for not believing her. the air felt slightly cool, and there was a cricket, right beneath the porch, sawing his wing in concert with the others, but louder, more distinct.

Whore. Bitch. They are my mother’s words

Inside I heard the vacuum start up.

I remembered my father sitting in the leather arm-chair, his chair—light brown, purchased a few years ago. He placed it next to the piano so he could hear Mari play.

“Nothing makes me feel so peaceful as listening to you play,” he had told her. But I can’t remember the last time she did. The music books, the solo pieces, are put away, stacked on the bottom shelf of the bookcase, under my father’s collection. He seemed to have a new book every week; one to stash on the shelf unread, or carry around in his hand. “Literacy opens the world,” he said. “I can travel anywhere in my head.” Travel anywhere.

The yard lightened, blades of grass becoming distinct, the moon rising, or the earth turning, which was it? I want my mother to come home, to fix this mess.

I opened the backdoor slowly. She hadn’t come back. Nobody was in sight, not a noise, but on the dining table, a stack of frames, the glass broken out. The hallway light was off, but I could see that most of the pictures still hung, our smiling faces, our picture perfect family, and the rug had been vacuumed.

Our parents’ door was shut; I turned the corner, a light gleamed beneath Nick’s door, by the garage, a plastic bag sat—trash from the pictures. I knocked, opened his door. The room was a mess, and Nick in the middle, cross-legged on his bed, boots kicked off, forest-service shirt untucked. When he started working for the forest-service, the summer before, he buzzed his hair. It was that way for awhile, but it had grown out, poked out, short but rather unruly. I closed the door behind me. “What are you doing”

“Homework.”

“Mom still hasn’t come home.”

“I know.” He looked at me, not much to say.

“Do you think it’s true?”

“I don’t know,” he said, “but Dad cut his hand.”

“Was it bad?”

“Not that bad. But he was pretty worked up. I made him wash it, and then he went up to his studio.”

I stood there in his room, arms crossed, the sleeves of my hoodie pulled over my hands. He returned to what he was looking at, read a few lines, his eyes following the page.

“Do you think they’re going to get a divorce?” I asked.

Was this how it all started? What had happened to my other friends’ parents? Some big fight, and then someone leaves and doesn’t come back?

“Nah,” he said. “You know them, they’re always on each other. Dad got worked up and Mom didn’t help it.”

I nodded. But didn’t feel all that reassured.

“They’ll make up,” he said, looking back at his textbook.

I took the stairs to the bathroom. Richard’s study was closed. With the door shut behind me, I felt alone. Everybody in separate rooms, my mother not even in the house. I flipped up the faucet handle and white stream burst out, loud, filled with air bubbles I had learned; that’s what made it white. I pulled up the stopper so the cool water filled, then

turned off the faucet, put my hands in the water, filling them, splashed my face. Water fell back into the bowl. I squeezed soap on a washcloth, rubbed it around my face. *Rich, there is nothing to know*, my mother's voice said inside my head. *Nothing*. She walked into the night, the door ricocheting in its frame, and I squeezed the washcloth, rubbing under my eyes, around my cheeks, rewetting, squeezing, and over and over, the soft sound of water dripping into the basin, a lovely sound, a sound like crying.

I stood on Celia's porch and couldn't smile when she opened her door.

She seemed to get it right away.

"Ody flew," she said, putting her hand on my cheek. "Do you remember?"

I nod. Ody flew years ago, but she says this to me whenever I look sad. Ody flew and came back—he often hopped around the garden screeching, swooping between trees, utterly obnoxious. I hadn't been to Celia's in months, which made me feel guilty. She was all by herself, and I hardly ever went out.

"I'm sorry it's been so long," I said.

"It's enough," she answers. "I love when you're here."

It was enough; I knew she told me the truth, and I relaxed, forgave myself for forgetting her. I was shell-shocked, my mother hadn't come home since the night before, and I was sure she would have. Celia didn't ask me anything, not why I was there, or why I was upset. Perhaps she knew, or suspected, but she was always more patient than curious.

“Have you started the garden?” I asked, knowing that she had. The earth stood freshly turned outside the front door.

“Not only that, Kat’s been here,” she answered patting my arm, “so, I am surrounded by family this week.” Celia’s face was bright, calm, inclusive. There was nowhere I felt safer, I thought, following her around the porch into the backyard, down into the garden, and into her gothic arboretum, surrounded by shrubs and tree shoots in black plastic planters. The arboretum was fiberglass, rounded on the sides and coming to a point at the top, and inside two card tables were placed opposite each other with several bonsai on both, folding chairs, trimming clippers, and on the floor around the edges, junipers in black planters. In the corner a shelf held a watering can, gloves, gardening tools, insecticide, extra planters.

She pulled back the folding chair at one of the tables and gestured for me to sit, disappeared outside and came back with a red earthen pot, an inch tall.

“My ficcus grows faster than I can keep up,” she said smiling at the miniature banyan, a ficcus that has been through several plantings. “Will you trim it?”

I nodded, touched—Celia had asked for my help before, but this tree was part of her personal collection, not for sale, so it was a privilege.

She set the plant in front of me, and I turned it, admiring its shape, the fresh green shoots extending out the top that Celia had allowed to grow, and my favorite feature, its meshed side roots springing from the branches down the trunk, plummeting and twisting into the soil: it seemed to have a dozen trunks, one big, the rest miniature and wonderful.

On the left side the branches bent away from the trunk, helped by thick copper shaping wire.

I pulled back a wire to check the skin—fresh, smooth—it hadn't bit the bark or outgrown its molding. Of course not, I thought. Celia was careful, but with the new growth, the ficcus has a bad case of bed-head. Celia watched over my shoulder while I slipped my fingers through the old-fashioned shears: big handles, short blades. They seemed ancient.

“She brought junipers today,” Celia said, pointing toward the bushy green pots lining the floor, and gesturing to include the plants we walked through on our way in.

She meant Kat, her daughter. Kat brought young plants from the nursery to help supplement Celia's retirement. She shaped, cut, and potted them in small ceramic dishes, creating bonsai that covered four planks outside in miniature forests. The more sensitive plants were kept in the arboretum. Then, once-a-month, Kat returned to load her pickup and sell Celia's creations to Outdoor World in Burneye. From there, the trees were distributed throughout the state and further.

“Nature as art”, Celia called it once, “for people who can't leave the office but need to unwind. Position, proportion, trunk attitude”—she winked—“each part of a tree's unique radiance.”

Behind me, Celia pulled a juniper from its pot and laid it on its side, flipping it until the side with the most branches faced up. I knew from there she would remove the branches on the underside. From those wounds, roots would later appear, as the entire trunk was covered in dirt laying on its side. Each individual branch shooting skyward,

Celia would wire vertically, like part of a forest, those twenty trees from one bush, all magical and secretive.

Radiance, the ficcus glowed at me, earthy and full of life. The smell of fresh soil filled my lungs. I left the middle and lower branches alone and trimmed back some of the vigorous upper shoots so they wouldn't thicken: get tough skin, become so hard later that pruning would scar and disfigure the tree. Did it hurt the tree? I wondered, cutting it, forcing a shape.

I kept thinking about the sounds of glass breaking, the falling pictures, my mother watching him the hallway. Who would reframe them? Mend the glass? Would they want to? Surely my mother would do it. They had to work it out. I tried to distance myself from the memory: it was only a fight, just a fight. But more than ever before, I felt fear, the damaged wall, my mother home from the house all night.

I pinched a bud of leaflet ovals with my fingernails, so soft I hardly had to pull, only scoop them from the limb. A white milky droplet seeped from the twig, and water gathered in my eyes; I blinked it away, found another bud to pinch, another droplet emerged.

Celia said behind me, "Petal, you're like the tree."

That was it.

We sat in silence while her voice repeated in my head, and I pinched leaf-buds, trying to figure out what she meant. Are we the same? I wondered, while tiny white wounds percolated from my touch.

“Button?” he whispered, shaking my shoulder, waking me. “Button?” I turned toward my father; he hadn’t been out of his study much since the fight; I hadn’t even spoken to him since he told me to “get out,” but my mother had come home. Light from the hallway spread into the room, his face was in shadow. I opened my eyes, looked at him without speaking.

“Button?” His breath was laced with alcohol. “I’ll never forgive myself for what I did.” His voice cracked, cracked a space inside of me. “I’m going to get help, Button. Your mother didn’t do anything.” He said it like a plea. “I’m so sorry.”

When he said that, it was like breathing a chemical relaxant. I didn’t even know I had been so tense. So he knew. He knew she hadn’t done anything.

My father turned his back to me, shifting on the bed, and put his hand to the bridge of his nose, but it didn’t work. He sniffed, then ran his hand through his hair, wiped at his face.

I watched drowsily relieved, the red soft flash of the clock, blinked the time.

“I’ve been drinking,” he said. “I know what you’re thinking.”

But that was impossible because I wasn’t thinking anything bad, only relief, and maybe a little tense that he was this upset. And also, I kept noticing the gentle flash of red from the corner of my eye.

“But it’s over,” he continued. “I’ll never do that again. It was uncalled for.”

He was bent away from me, in pain, but I didn’t answer. I didn’t know what to say.

“Never make your wife hate you—I promised myself after my father.” He cried, wiped his nose. “I couldn’t stop myself, Button. I don’t know what happened. But I’ll never do it again.”

The space, the silence sank into me, his bent body on the edge of my bed, the promise. He was going to love my mother. They wouldn’t fight anymore. But it seemed unbelievable. And what if he was just drunk?

“Why were you upset? I asked. The minivan came to mind, flashed.

He shook his head, refused to answer. “It was a misunderstanding, and I’ve talked to your mother about it and agreed to make an appointment tomorrow. I will.” His voice was pitchy, pitiful, aching. “Maybe I’ll get into an anger-management group, something, Button?” His question was directed at the other wall, bounced back towards me. What did he want?

I placed my hand on his back, to tell him I understood, that it was okay, and he wiped at his eyes again.

“I’m sorry I woke you up,” he said standing, pausing to look at me, his face in shadow. Then my father turned, left the room, shutting the door, slicing the light.

The next day my father walked in the kitchen grinning like a boy. I was ripping cilantro, and my mother was halfway through shaving a stack of carrots.

“Where’s Nick?” he asked, exuberant. It was the tone in his voice that made Mari raise her head. The silent treatment. I’d only heard her talk to him the last few days when she had to: in answer to direct questions.

“The Forest Service called. He went in.” She continued peeling long orange stripes.

He ignored her, pointed his finger at me. “You are going to die when you find out what I’ve done,” he said. I smiled, unsure what was going on. “If he’s not here, there’s no point in waiting.” He ran out of the kitchen and returned with two blue envelopes. That got Mari’s attention, and she turned curiously.

One of the envelopes he placed delicately in front of me, straightening the edge.

“I owe you an apology,” he said, standing straight, his body full of energy. I glanced toward my mother, her face was unreadable. It seemed to me that it was her he owed the apology to, but maybe he’d done something for her already.

“I hope this will make your summer more exciting, and,” he faced Mari, “give your mother some much deserved free time.”

That was curious. Wiping her hands on a towel, my mother pulled out another chair and sat next to me. Neither of them were big about gifts or birthdays. We usually didn’t even have cake, and for Christmas they liked to do dumb things like buy goats and cows for third-world families. That was my stocking last year, a certificate that said, “Congratulations, a goat has been donated to Florence Dominica in your name!” Not that I wasn’t grateful, but when Francis was getting iPod accessories, and a blackberry, I got a goat—and not even that; Florence Dominica got a goat. Congratulations Dominica, my parents are the most thoughtful people on the planet.

I flipped the envelope over a few times, wondering if there was another farm animal in it. It was heavy, metallic paper, industrial strength, and the flap tucked into the

back. I felt a surge of excitement, an anticipatory tingle in my stomach, my hands poised. My father was never this excited.

“Go on,” my mother said, curious. I picked at the flap, pulled out the paper inside, only one, unfolded it.

“Macy Oman,” I read, “This certificate entitles you to Level 1 Dive Training and Complete Scuba Outfitting from Cascade Dive. Please see the classes listed below, and call to schedule your training at anytime.” It was signed in block letters: “Jason Taylor.”

My mouth dropped open—I laughed. A present for me! A real present. I couldn’t believe it. I hadn’t even known I wanted it, but it was such a big gift. I jumped up from the table to hug my father. He squeezed me tight, laughing.

I’m so glad, he said, and I knew he meant he was glad about the hug first, that things were okay between us.

“This is great!” I looked at Mari; her face was a mixture of amazement and worry. But I didn’t care. Suddenly it dawned on me. I had joined a prestigious club, an elite group. I am a diver, I thought. I am one who dives. Mari kissed the side of my head. It set me apart.

“I almost got them for us too,” he said looking at my mother. “But I know how busy you are getting ready for the conference. I thought I could support you by giving it to the kids.”

From her face, I could see he had made the right decision. She looked at him, acknowledged her appreciation with a tilt of her head and a small smile. It meant things were going to be okay.

Nick punched his green uniformed arm in the air and whooped when he got home.

“Dad, you rock,” he said. “Give me some bones.” They made fists and hit knuckles against each other grinning in the kitchen.

Nick turned to me. “I’m going to kick your skinny little ass,” he said. “Before you know it, I’ll be down in Egret’s Marina showing everyone how it’s done!” He put his hands on his hips, struck a macho pose.

“You do that,” I said

“Damn right I’ll do that!”

“You will not do that,” Mari called from the living room. “No cave diving, not while you’re living in this house.”

“But Mom.” He stuck his head into the living room.

She must have given him the eyebrows because he didn’t fight it, just made a fake disappointed face. “All right!” He turned to my father, “Man, you are the best!”

My father grinned liked he’d won the Heisman, beyond pleased.

We decided to start scuba training the following Thursday after school: 8 weeks of bliss, and we’d be certified right before summer vacation. Nick said he’d work out a new schedule with the Forest Service.

CHAPTER 6

Ms. Larsen was one of those rare people who looked shockingly scary. Morbidly obese had nothing to do with it. Up close it was her least apparent feature. Her neck, her large loping neck was covered with hundreds of moles. Not the big solid fat ones, little ones that squeezed out of her body like extra skin flaps. Small, connected only by a thin string of flesh, they stuck out, practically begging students to pinch them off.

I figured skin-flapping-moles were as good a reason as any to be mad at the world, and when she wasn't mad, she oozed strange. "I'm so excited I could hemorrhage," she said once during Biology, grunting and winking like it was an inside joke, and I suppose it was.

"Hemorrhage?" I whispered to Francis. "Did she say hemorrhage?"

"Oh, she said it all right," Francis confirmed, waving her pen in circles near her temple and the enormous sunglasses perched on her head. She called them her "celebrity frames."

Because of Ms. Larsen I'd grown to hate Biology, and Francis couldn't be relied on to show up, which didn't make it any easier, but Ms. Larsen was ready to start us on the eco-columns, our final project, and we had to come everyday to monitor them.

Francis pinky-swore she'd come to class everyday, so I didn't have to suffer through it by myself. "I will not carry the project for you," I warned, referring to the workload.

“Don’t you worry. I could never violate this finger,” she pointed her pinky straight up in the air and kissed it.

“Today we’re going to talk about methods of fertilization,” Ms. Larsen chimed, “and what makes a species unique from another species.”

Francis drew a finger across the print on her low-necked lilac top. It had the word “LOVE” printed in bold pink, except the “O” was a huge white heart. “Fertilization,” she whispered.

I laughed and pulled out my note paper, scrawled across it grinning, and passed it to Francis. She read the note and turned, “I thought you were afraid of diving,” she mouthed.

“That was before,” I hissed. But she was right; I’d been ignoring the pit in my stomach since I’d opened the blue envelope. Despite loving the water, my skin used to prickle whenever I thought of scuba diving in Cascade.

Nick’s always wanted to try it, but what I’d thought about, what I was trying not to think about, was how the body reacted to pressure, the pressure of hundreds of cubic feet. One little piece of equipment could snap, crack, malfunctions, and thousands of pounds of water would rush my body, flood its systems.

I’d heard the stories about people coming up too fast, nitrogen bubbles in their blood. People had died in our lake, their organs exploded. Sometimes, I’d heard, nitrogen bubbles appeared for no reason at all, even if you were careful. I had mentioned this to Nick on the way to school, but he said, “Cut the drama. That’s for people who don’t

know what they're doing." I had to give him that. They were idiots, right? I was focused on the wrong things; I needed to let it go.

"He gave you scuba lessons? Both of you?" Francis had turned back to me, still impressed. "But I thought your parents didn't go in for the whole gift thing," she whispered.

Ms. Larsen wrote "Isolating mechanisms," on the board: "Prezygotic and Postzygotic." I copied the terms in my notebook, then wrote her a new note, and gave her a knowing look, lips pursed.

I'd downplayed it, but her eyes still went wide, and her mouth cringed.

"Your dad's fault?" she mouthed. I nodded, glad to return to my notes, "barriers between two species that cause unsuccessful mating or fertilization: ecological, temporal, behavioral, mechanical, gametic."

Francis poked at my shoulder. "Did he freak out or something?"

I nodded.

"Did he hurt anyone?"

"Only some pictures."

"Why didn't you call me?"

I shrugged. It seemed okay to tell her here, but at the time I couldn't talk. Besides, it was so distant, so far back it hardly mattered. "Hey, it doesn't matter," I whispered.

"Don't worry about it. He said he was sorry."

"Wow," Francis said, obviously too concerned.

I waved her off—Ms. Larsen was eyeing us.

Francis took my cue to back off but didn't notice Ms. Larsen.

“You could plan it out,” she whispers. “Get him to throw another tantrum, go for an iPhone next time.” She grinned, going for black humor. But I hardly heard her, aware of the mass headed in our direction. I sunk into my seat.

“Oman, Pritchett!” She bellowed in front of us. “Would you like to share what you're talking about with the class?”

It was a directive, not a request. I shook my head, looked down at my notepaper.

“Did you just roll your eyes at me, Francis?” Ms. Larsen's voice pitched.

Francis was slumped in her desk, doodling a spiral on her paper. She looked at me, rolled her eyes again, slowly, obvious. I looked away, quickly. What was she thinking?

“That's it!” Ms. Larsen yelled. “Get out!” She pointed at the door, waiting while Francis gathered her things.

“See you at lunch,” Francis said happily, but I knew it was staged for Ms. Larsen's benefit. She was pissed.

“I said get out!” Ms. Larsen shouted louder.

Silence throughout the classroom, the sound of Francis walking. The door opened, slammed, and Ms. Larsen turned back to me. I quickly studied my paper.

“Right,” Ms. Larsen continued, her voice instantly back to normal. “If they get past the prezygotic problems, individuals from separate species can still mate and have issues. Write it down.”

I copied the list dutifully: hybrid inviability, sterility, breakdown.

“In the first case, the hybrid aborts or is too weak to live. In the second, the hybrid is healthy, but unable to reproduce. Give me some examples.”

Jimmy raised his hand. “A mule is sterile,” he said.

“Exactly!” Ms. Larsen beamed, wrinkling her chins benevolently.

“A mule is a reproductive dud!” she called to the room, excited. “Jimmy is exactly right! It has sixty-three chromosomes! Now why would sixty-three be a bad number for reproducing?”

Jimmy was on fire. “Because it’s an odd number?”

“Brilliant. Thank you, Jimmy. Yes, any attempts to create gametes make the eggs and sperm go awry. Remember meiosis? Cells divide their chromosome number in half to create the little swimmers, but in this case things can’t work out! Very good!”

“What about a liger,” asked a girl, not bothering to raise her hand. Ms. Larsen didn’t mind; she was on fire with their attention. Everyone had forgotten Francis.

“A liger is a cross between a tiger and a lion.” Ms. Larsen wrote it on the board. I rested my head in my hand, fingering a strand of hair.

Jostling in the crowd, I held my backpack tight and moved with the swarm out of class. Francis was waiting for me; her arm tucked through mine, and she pulled me in the opposite direction.

“Aren’t we going to lunch?”

“Yes, but somewhere quiet,” she said. “I’m sick of school.”

Padding down the stairs, my feet followed her out the back door. Just keep walking and nobody will notice—it was a trick Francis taught me: act like you belong, hold your head up, nobody asks you anything. Adults leave you alone. We'd proved it over and over.

We walked across the football field, watching a class running laps around the track. The teacher blew a whistle every time someone crossed over the finish line; then they doubled over in half, and ran in place, or walked it off, hands on their hips in small circles. Halfway across the field, I hung my hands on my backpack straps, and she brought it up.

“So he really hit a wall?”

“Look, Francis,” I said, stopping. “I shouldn't have said anything. It wasn't even a big deal in the end. He apologized.”

“Why was he so upset?”

“I don't know,” I lied, not ready to tell her, and walking a pace ahead, a little faster.

“That's really scary, Francis. Maybe you shouldn't live there anymore. Who knows what he'll hit next.”

How like Francis to blow something out of proportion, I thought. I knew I shouldn't have told her. “Fran, you can't say anything! It wasn't that bad, I promise. You have to promise me you won't tell anyone.”

She studied my face. “Okay. It's yours to tell this time, but if he gets crazy again,” she faded off, threatening.

“He won’t. It was the first time. Besides, he’s going to therapy. He’s even sick of their arguing.”

“Really? That’s a big deal.”

“Yeah. He said he’d get into an anger-management group.” I shrugged. “He felt really bad, Fran. I’ve never seen him so guilty about anything.” I tried to decide if I should tell her all of it. “He even cried,” I said.

“Really? Your dad?”

I nodded, remembering his back, the way he said “Button,” his thank you. It was special.

“Well maybe things are really going to get better then,” she said, hooking her arm back through mine again, looking out at the horizon, the tree line above the city. “Things like this,” she said, holding her arms up, “make me glad I don’t have a dad.”

Francis never talked about her father. “Was he mean?”

We stepped onto the sidewalk and turned right, walking along the traffic, headed for the gas station at the corner. Across the street was a soup and sandwich place, Picking’s Parlor, but the drinks were cheaper at the gas station, so we always went there.

“Don’t know. Only know he left right before I was born. Probably waited around to see if my mom was having a girl or boy, found out it was me and moved on.”

“That’s not true,” I said. “It can’t be. Stuff like that only happens in China.”

“Well, anyway,” she said. “It’s not so bad not having him. I’m usually glad. Then I don’t have to deal with any of that man crap. We have emotions in our house,” she

yelled emotions, drug it out. And we laughed, walking past the gas pumps. “Estrogen power!”

“Hey,” she said while she pulled at the door and the bell jangled, “call me next time your dad freaks, okay?”

“Okay,” I smile.

“Promise?”

“Cross my heart, and hope to die.”

Ms. Larsen ignored Francis the next few days of Biology, but as usual I couldn't keep my eyes off her neck. Francis had started a pool, a competition of sorts. She said she'd discovered a mathematical formula: multiplying surface area by average moles per square inch had given her precisely the number of skin flaps on Ms. Larsen's neck. Conducting a lottery, she was offering a reward to whomever could guess the right number. An envelope entitled, “25-cent POOL” had already made its way around the room.

“You're insane,” I said, laughing. “That's so rude.”

“What else is there to do in Biology?” The pot was up to \$6.00; some people had even entered more than one guess. But Francis figured it could go much higher if she opened it to the general student population.

“What if she starts noticing how everyone's staring at her neck?”

We were sitting on stools at our lab station in the back of the room cutting 2-Liter Mountain Dew bottles in half. The general idea was to stack up the bottoms and add a

whole bottle to the top. We'd put things in each layer: fish in the bottom, compost, plants, and then poke holes between the layers. The goal was a self-sustaining system that kept the fish alive.

"Before I started the poll," Francis said, "answer me honestly: did you ever take your eyes off Ms. Larsen's neck?"

She had a point. "No," I admitted, laughing. "I can't help myself. But it's worse now," I moaned.

"Neither can anyone else. Might as well make a profit on it."

Francis was taking 10% of the proceeds.

"What if they track it to you?"

"Is it a federal crime to notice blemishes? I'm simply conducting research, determining the overall intelligence of our student body. If the principal asks, I'll tell him it's a math project, and he's welcome to enter his own calculation."

"You would not say that!"

"Would. And he'll say no," she stresses, "but he'll really tell the vice-principals. From there it will spread to the faculty; they might even start their own pool. But if they do, I'll tell them I have intellectual property rights. It's only fair."

"You're truly awful," I said, holding out my hand for a high-five.

Nick and I had our first dive class after school, but first I needed to buy our fish for the eco-column. A fat, fancy goldfish. The weasely-looking guy at the store was

furious about the project; at first he refused to sell me anything but a feeder fish, demanding Ms. Larsen's name.

"Figured it was her," he said. "There hasn't been one animal that's survived her. We've sold all types of fish, frogs, snails to her every year. It's disgusting."

We stood along a wall of fish tanks stacked at least six levels high, with fish of every variety, color, stripe, size. I held my fresh-water plant securely in a bag of water. I wanted to get one of the zebra striped fish, but they weren't fresh-water, and probably wouldn't make it. Best to stay practical.

"Hey, you sell feeders," I pointed out his double standard. "What makes these ones so special?" I tapped the fancy goldfish tank.

"The feeders die fast," he said petulantly. "Their brain capacity is smaller."

"Fine. Well I want this one." I pointed at the fish zipping in the corner, his fins billowing.

"This is your lucky day," I whispered at the bag, holding it up to my face when I left the store. "You're about to make biological history." The fish hung in the corner, then darted to the side. "No worries," I said, trying to keep the bag steady.

I hauled the fish with me to Cascade Dive; it was only a few blocks away, and although class wouldn't start for another hour, I wanted to poke around, see the suits, maybe even get "outfitted." Nick was going to meet me there. Driving by, we'd see the shop plenty of times, but I'd never been in.

I was surprised by how small it was when I pushed open the glass door. Looking around, I had to smile. Front and center, two fully-suited mannequins gazed out the windows standing amid rocks, and an ancient looking copper diving helmet: “Authentic Replica,” it read. “U.S. Navy Helmet.” It had to be eighty pounds.

To my immediate left, a tall pole had wooden signs pointing every direction: Key Largo, Panama City, Cascade Lake, Bimini, Cape Hatteras, Nags Head, and next to that a circular glass table surrounded by bar stools, a comfortable location, no doubt, for reading the postures and brochures hung on a nearby wall: *So You Want To Snorkel?* *Scuba The World!*

Above it, a rack tacked to the wall held a dive suit stretched on an angle, blue shoulder stripes, and other accessories were tacked around: a bright yellow mask, a blue dive log, huge fins with yellow triangles across the rubber. Racks lined the walls all around the store.

Just past the brochures, above the fins all hung up by color: neon green, orange, and two shades of blue, was a beautiful suit, facing diagonal in the opposite direction. It was black with royal blue body accents on the chest, stripping across the top of the shoulder, and slicing across the thighs. That was the suit I wanted. And it was staged with matching fins and a clear plastic mask. It was perfect.

“Can I help you?” I turned around smiling at a man in a green polo. He was taller than me by a few inches, definitely the scruffy athletic type.

“I’m here for the dive class.”

“Great. I’m your instructor, Jason Taylor,” he said, holding out his hand. I noted his white and gray bead-necklace, amused.

“Macy Oman.” I put my hand in his, and he gave it a squeeze.

“Wonderful to meet you.”

I pulled my hand away, gestured at the suit.

“It’s beautiful.”

“It is a nice one. I’ll give you a chance to look around. Class is just down that hallway,” he pointed to the other side of the store. “I’ll be back there setting up if you have any questions.”

Jason disappeared, and I continued exploring the store.

High along the back wall, behind a glass counter, t-shirts were splayed at every angle: Down Under, EatDrinkDive, Diving Girl, written in cute cursive, then there were shirts with sharks, coral, and silhouettes of secret hand signals. All the t-shirts were available on the clothing racks. In the glass counter, on a bed of rocks were fancy looking black electronics: dive computers, diving watches, and behind that, along the floor, a shelf stacked with boxes of goggles.

The store was packed. I walked toward the hallway; it was lined with a dozen diving tanks: white, gold, blue, yellow. They looked used. The door was ajar to my left; I pushed it open.

Jason looked up, organizing papers at the front of the room.

“Come on in,” he said. “Take a desk.” It was a miniature classroom, ten desks, posters of diving rules along the walls, hand signals, a scull and crossbones, and a whiteboard. “Do you want a bowl for your fish?”

I’d forgotten I was still carrying the fish around, and I blushed. “That would be great. I had to buy it for a school project.”

Jason stepped out into the hallway and came back with a small plastic bucket. “This should do. If you want some more water, there’s more down the hall.”

I felt like he was watching me while I undid the rubber band, pouring the fish into the bucket, but when I looked up, he was either writing in a binder, or working on other things. I liked his scruff and his broad shoulders.

“Wait until you see him,” I said to Francis in biology, handing her the fish. “He’s perfect.” I tipped my head back closing my eyes. “Built, a diver, he was totally cool when he was teaching us the basics. We’ve got all this study material, and we’re starting in the pool next week.”

“But he wears a necklace?” She held the bag up, inspecting the lethargic fish.

“It’s very manly.”

Francis grinned, gestured at the bag, and raised her eyebrows.

“I know,” I said. “I thought about a feeder fish, but half of those fish were floating dead at the top of the tank.” I shuddered. “And the guy almost wouldn’t let me take this one when he heard it was for an eco-column. They all die,” I whispered.

“How would he know that?” She rolled her eyes. “Do you think he shows up in this classroom every year to tally the results? Besides, this one can live off his fat stores if our project fails.”

“Exactly!” We were putting everything in the column today. Ms. Larsen poked around the lab stations, huddling in the groups, checking everyone’s progress.

“Don’t stack them,” she said above the din, “until I’ve passed each level off.”

It was misery when she talked to us personally, hovering old coffee breath in our faces.

Francis and I joined the line of students at the front of the classroom, right next to Ms. Larsen’s huge fancy fish tank, to pick provisions off the black lab table: gravel, grass seeds, soil, de-chlorinated water.

“Don’t take more than you need,” Ms. Larsen shouted for the twentieth time in our direction. We glanced at her then resumed talking.

“Who won the contest?” asked Jimmy, directing a gleeful look toward Francis while he grabbed a handful of grass seed and picked up a pixie cup.

“You know,” he eyed Ms. Larsen and tilted his head up, exposing his pristine neck.

“Still open,” Francis smiled. “Would you like to take another guess? I’d say your last one was quite low.”

“Low!” his eyes widened, then he grinned. “You’re just trying to up the pot.”

Francis raised her eyebrows, gave him her most serious look. “Oh no, Jimmy. I’m afraid not,” she whispered. “There are over forty entries now. Brian is passing the

envelope in Larsen's 5th period today. After that we only have 7th and 8th. You sure you don't want to better your odds?"

Jimmy glanced back at Ms. Larsen; her back was towards us but her voice carried to the front of the room: "I told you apples would ruin your mulch! Who put them in here?"

Nobody stepped forward.

"Who? Tell me! I'm taking you off the project!"

Still nobody.

"They didn't materialize out of thin air."

By now the rest of the classroom had quieted to hear better.

"Fine," she yelled, throwing her arm up, jiggling her underarms. "Everyone in your group is docked 5%, and you can all pick every bit of apple out of there if it takes you all period! You got it?"

"Dragon rears again," Francis whispered.

"You didn't put apples in the mulch did you?" Suddenly I was worried.

"Course not. She only told us a hundred times. It's only the purest garbage for us darlin: bananas, potatoes, eggshells, leaves, and two extra succulent earth worms, ripe from my backyard," she pretended to dust her hands off, still watching the Dragon.

"You're an angel for putting that together," I said, "especially the worms."

"Nothing to it, and your aquatic plant was expensive."

"Hornwort," I said. "Terrible name, but the elodea sold out. I went too late."

“Don’t worry. It sounds heartier,” she said, seeming distracted, but it was our turn at the counter and I couldn’t ask what was wrong. Francis put our materials in a tub while I counted forty-six grass seeds.

“Any word on the competition?” a short girl named Lacy asked.

“We’ll know by the end of next week.” Francis hardly looked at her while we finished gathering our supplies.

“If I’d known,” she said walking back to the lab table, “that I’d have half the school down my throat about this thing, I would have charged a dollar an entry. You know Joanne? In your scuba class? She was waiting for me at my locker this morning, had the Dragon two years ago and, get this, she bought eight guesses!” Francis smiled, amazed. “Clearly I have to think bigger, charge more.”

By the end of the period we’d secured our ecosystem in meters of clear tape. Inside, Lotto, swam happily around his plant, oblivious to the bottles piled over his head in varying states of growth and decay. In the top, a layer of fresh dirt mixed with the Dragon’s soil, incubated the grass seeds, and rising from the strange luminescent green column, one straw stuck out the top:

“Sweet terrestrial aeration,” said Francis.

It was Thursday, dive day; we would meet at the Wymont Club pool until Jason grew more comfortable with our skills. Only three of us were high school students: Nick, me, and Joanne; there were four other adults I didn’t know. Jason spoke into the large echoing room, his hair shaggy around his ears, beard trimmed:

“Scuba diving is a mind game. Of course it’s strange to breathe underwater. All your life every experience you’ve ever had has taught you it’s not possible. But it is,” he said.

I felt a thrill listening.

“When you feel nervous,” he continued, “and everybody does, trust your equipment, convince yourself it’s really possible.”

We walked into the shallow end of the pool arms length apart and knelt in the water, like robots bowing before a God, all suited up in gear. I was wearing the sexy suit. Over the weekend, my father took Nick and me into the shop to get our equipment. The tank was heavier than I expected and anxiety tightened my stomach muscles while I tried to breathe, my head above water. The regulator resisted my sucking breath, and when I put my face under water, the sound of the open valve and the noise of my exhaled bubbles turned everything mechanical, artificial, on the verge of breaking down. What if there was a leak?

“Is it different than breathing on land?” Jason asked.

We nodded, pulled off the masks, eyes wide, our mouths pasty.

“All these differences can seem stressful: it’s harder to draw breath,” he made a wild choking sign—there was some laughter—“everything makes noise, and worst of all, you end up with a nasty case of dry mouth,” he winked at me, and I blushed. “But some gum will fix you up after class, and you’ll get used to it.”

Jason had a way of diffusing tension. Of making scary things funny.

“Inhale slowly, deeply for three counts, then exhale counting to three. Okay?” He turned us loose.

Joanne, the blonde senior who’d bought Francis’s tickets, fidgeted with her mask. Her eyes were red, ready to quit.

“Are you okay?” I pushed my way over to her.

“I can’t slow down my breathing; I can’t relax. I haven’t even been able to hold my head under the water,” she answered in a flurry, close to tears.

“It’s okay.” I put my hand on her shoulder, her wetsuit. “I’m bad at it too. Let’s just think about what Jason said: we’re not going to run out of air. We have all the air we need, right?”

She nodded.

The world seemed different driving home, illuminated somehow. Nick made fun of Joanne. “Did you see how long she stayed in the kiddie-pool trying to put her head underwater?” He laughed, slapping his leg. “The high and mighty cheerleader crashes to the dust.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” I said, “and can you blame her? It’s hard. It took all my concentration.”

“It would take all your concentration to breathe,” he smirked. “Loser.”

“Shut up, Nick. You’re just mad because Jason said you were doing it wrong.”

“You shut up, bitch,” he spat. “I read the manual didn’t I? Just because Jason knows some trick doesn’t mean it’s the right way to do it.”

“Whatever.” I rolled my eyes.

We didn’t speak the rest of the ride home. The sun was low enough, the clouds so heavy, that the trees looked darker, larger. We passed patches of forest leaving town; then the fields were interrupted by towering, encroaching green sentinels. I looked out the window and wondered if it would last. I didn’t know if my father had started therapy yet, but my parents hadn’t been fighting.

In the west the horizon colored cherry pink, diffusing through the clouds, turning their undersides florescent orange. How could they be so beautiful? If my mother could keep her mouth shut, maybe they could make it, avoid turning into a statistic.

We hit the gravel unpaved route that led up around the hill, and Nick didn’t slow down; he was driving too fast, swerving around corners, skidding.

“Slow down, Nick. It’s not a race.”

The truck spend up, sending the back into a mini-fishtail, a small slide.

“Nick!”

He returned to his earlier speed but cut the corners, spraying gravel, a half-smile on his face. “Trust me, Macy.” He looked over and I met his eyes. “ I know how to drive.” His voice was coated with contempt.

I returned to the window, our encasement in trees. There wouldn’t be an open patch until the fork in the road. The shadows swallowed us, and Nick turned on the lights. At the fork I looked out over the pasture, a dozen cows; their smell wafted through the air-conditioning.

If we turned left, the road led past our boathouse, continued to Aunt Celia's, then looped around the south east corner of the lake meeting up with SR81, the northern paved road, which eventually circled its way into Egret Bay, the most popular diving spot.

But we headed to the right, past the cows, their old dilapidated barn and its withering wood planks, the crooked fence with moss and lichens.

I blamed my father for Nick's bad-ass attitude, but Nick could be worse, unpredictable. If he was like my father, if he was only drunk when he did it, I could have taken it. It practically wasn't real if someone was drunk, and my father could be kind, warm. I couldn't wait for Nick to move out. One more year, and by Christmas I'd have my driving permit—my parents would have to drive with me, but at least I could get some space from Nick.

I went to sleep that night thinking of dive class, my mouth filled with regulator, Jason's polo shirt and scruffy face. *It's a mind game*, he whispered in my head while I dropped off. I could beat any mind game. But plans do little good sometimes. It's impossible to alter course in mid-air when you're directionless, catapulted.

CHAPTER 7

Mist, fine droplets of vapor tap at the car, and I turn the wipers to their lowest setting. Still too fast, the blades scrape the glass squealing, so I turn them off while the water collects slowly, reflects the road at our eyes, radiates the sunlight, also breaking through.

Mari's next to me, face covered by a broad-brimmed grey hat that pulls together her outfit, a draping black shirt and white pants.

"Nick used to swim in weather like this," Mari says. That's right. He was so headstrong, impulsive, stupid. She announces it like his behavior was charming.

"You know, they give people Darwin Awards for swimming in the rain," I reply, silencing her. "Usually in a tin rowboat on top of it," I add to try and disconnect it from Nick, "which he would never do," but it's too late. I sigh. She's picturing a lightning strike. I turn the wipers back on, only two runs across the glass and it's clear, the forest at our side is a soggy brown and green.

"Have you thought about going out to the lake? I bet it's beautiful right now." She twirls a long beady necklace through her fingers. Is she kidding? Of course not. The lake is the last place I want to go.

"You would never go down there."

"I think you've forgotten I research the lake."

“That’s not what I meant.” What I meant was she doesn’t go out recreationally, probably avoids it. From the look of his room, I doubt she could handle being there, and I don’t think I could stand it, either. I’m sick of talking about Nick.

“I saved your wetsuit. What about diving?” she continues, as though she hasn’t noticed how uncomfortable I am. What kind of mother would want her last kid to go diving when the other already died that way? I think of my wetsuit hanging in Nick’s closet, trapped behind his, and look at her sharply. “You used to love that,” she protests. But she couldn’t possibly be encouraging me to dive after what happened, unless she really doesn’t love me.

“Are you serious?” My voice comes out harsher than I meant it to, condemning. I have no other words. She of all people should understand. Nick’s room is untouched, tidied, but the gray bedspread, the old diver poster curling at the edges, Chiquibul on the other wall in faded gloss, the diving log. It’s all still there. She’s hardly moved on, hardly one to talk.

“I know, but maybe the water would be therapeutic.”

“Therapeutic? How could you even suggest that?” How dare she push me into such a horrible place? I’m so angry. Angry that I still want her to care about me, angry that she doesn’t show up, angry that when she shows interest, it’s to make me do impossible things.

“I’m your mother.” She looks at me tenderly from under her hat. “I only have your best interests in mind. Maybe you’re holding on to things that are holding you back. Maybe that’s why you haven’t left the house, except for these appointments.”

“I just got here. And you’re preaching to me about holding on?” I focus on driving, navigating through the trees; we’re almost to the main road. I’m too angry to look at her, but I feel her watching me, waiting, and I can’t keep my mouth shut. “You abandoned us,” I say quietly, “All because you couldn’t leave Nick, couldn’t leave the house. You’re sick, you know?” She didn’t answer. “How dare you push me into the water when you can’t even leave this place. I’ve seen his bedroom.” I tap the steering wheel.

“Slow down Macy.”

I comply, taking my foot off the gas; we’re passing Quail Run Condominiums, but I can’t look at her, and she doesn’t say anything, the rigid hat woman.

We’re into town by the time she speaks again.

“No,” her voice is bitter. “You’re right. I don’t want you to dive. I don’t know why I thought it might be a good idea. I certainly should have never saved your suit.” She looks out the window, wide brim blocking her head.

Relief. That’s what I feel at her words, and guilt edging along the surface. We settle in the mist, almost to the Burneye Clinic. I try not to think about Nick, the black dive log, either of them. Any of them. If she knew how undeserving I was, she wouldn’t even be in the car with me, but she doesn’t know, and it’s not important; some facts can’t exist side-by-side.

The second visit isn't as hard as the first. The car pulled into the same spot, we get out together. I can hardly feel the rain; it's so light. Mari's the first one to break the silence.

"I've stopped wearing a bra," she confesses while we walk across the pavement.

"I don't want to know that," a smile creeps across on my face, and I step around a puddle. It's generous of her to leave our conversation in the car.

"Oh it's true. I'm just lucky that I never really needed one in the first place." This makes me laugh out loud. I've inherited my chest from my mother, and I know exactly what she's talking about.

"But it's Doctor's orders," she holds up her hand, "I swear!"

Minutes later we're back in the car. The clear tupperware transferred from the back seat and now held lightly in her lap.

"It's strange," she said. "Being so close to death. Sometimes I feel like nothing is different, but then I look over and you're here." Her face is sad, implying that if she weren't dying, I would still be ignoring her calls, periodic as they are. And it's true. Nothing but this could have brought me back here. So I don't answer, just look at the ornamental pears while we pull out of the parking lot, their glossy dark leaves, blunt ovals.

We could have been together every weekend—Cascade's not so far. But Mari thinks it's my fault, for not coming here, for not calling her. I was the child, I remind myself. She was the parent.

“I really need some help cleaning the house,” she says, changing the subject. “Do you mind?”

I shake my head. “Of course.”

“After this,” she gestures at her breast, “and working at the research station, I just don’t think I could do it.”

“What do you want for dinner?”

“There’s a recipe on the counter.” She smiles. “But you’ll have to go to the store. It’s salmon in pinot noir,” she says thoughtfully, remembering. “You like salmon, right?”

I nod. “But I’m not a good cook.”

“It’s straight-forward, not hard at all.”

Alright then, I sigh. The new slave girl.

“Macy,” she reaches over and because my hand’s not available, squeezes my arm, “I figured it would be easier for you this way. I have to eat well, the doctor said.”

“It’s okay,” I say, “salmon sounds great.”

“Perfect. Maybe while you’re in town you could look up some old friends. You don’t have to spend the whole day cleaning while I’m at work.” She smiles, generously.

William wouldn’t like that she’d insisted on working right after treatments. “Are you sure you should even be going in? Dr. Bradshaw said to conserve your strength. I mean, I’m driving,” I pointed out. “You’re not even well enough to do that.”

“Only right after the appointment, until the wooziness passes,” she answers simply, looking at the bowl in her lap. And I would miss it too much. I have to go in.”

It’s her decision; I try to respect it. Mari did always put work first.

“Didn’t you used to play with that Pritchett girl?”

Francis. That was hardly playing. More like sitting around gossiping, talking about men that were too old. “Please,” impatience creeps back into my voice. I don’t know what my problem is, but ever since I got here everything seems off. “I don’t want to go to the lake; there’s really nobody I want to see. I’m fine.” I turn off at our exit, take the turn slow, 30 miles per hour. This is not the time to mention Celia.

“Well, she’s probably not still in Cascade, but there’s no need for you to isolate yourself.”

“God. Five days. That’s all I’ve been here! Hardly time enough to be isolated.” She’s so pushy, and now I’ve suddenly got a social disorder.

“You’re young,” she intones, the chain of her necklace tapping up against the plastic bowl. “You should be out enjoying people. I want you to have a good time.”

I’d taken up eavesdropping since the funeral. It was the only way to put my finger on their pulse, something alive. We all walked around like zombies. I didn’t want to talk, but I still wanted to know what was going on. I only learned things when I listened in. My parents weren’t talking much, or if they did, it was in their bedroom at night, and I could hear their voices below my room, a gentle murmur. I had always loved going to sleep to that, but after the funeral, it made me lonely.

From a distance, I tried to be close to my mother. She rested on the porch, in the bench swing late at night after she got home from work. She kept the porch light off, so the bugs stayed away and creaked back and forth gently swinging in the night; sometimes

she talked on the phone. If it weren't for the creak of the swing, nobody would know she existed; she was that silent.

The first time I listened to a phone call she'd taken outside, it was an accident. She'd left the door open, so I stood next to the screen, not wanting to talk but to be near someone. I wasn't really paying attention to what she was saying, something about taking more samples and planning it over lunch, but she had walked back in the house mid-sentence from the porch and caught me. I had jumped, recoiled, given myself away.

“What are you doing?”

I looked away.

“I can't even trust you? Is that what you're telling me?”

I kept my head down, and she walked into the kitchen, telling the person on the phone how she'd just caught her fifteen-year-old daughter eavesdropping. My face flushed with humiliation.

The next night, I was up in my bedroom when I heard her phone ring. It was late, 10:30PM. I heard her murmur and then open and shut the outside door. Who was she talking to? If it hadn't been the way it was with us, which is to say, if Nick hadn't died, and if my family was still normal, I never would have listened to her phone calls. But she never talked, not to me, so the calls seemed important. I kept waiting for someone to tell her what I'd done.

There was no way I could follow her this time, but the next morning I was peeling an orange after school, looking out the pier-glass window at the contorted world beyond. The forest seemed darker than usual, and it occurred to me that if I opened the dining

room window, I might figure out who she was talking to, make sure she wasn't talking about me.

Even though I was the only one home, my stomach knotted while I pulled open the window. Two inches, no more. I couldn't imagine what she'd do if she saw it. I knew she'd be furious. *You know better*, she would yell. *Were you raised in a barn?* That was another of her favorite sayings. *Get your elbows off the table! Were you raised in a barn?* A shaming tactic to enforce behavior. It worked.

That night I poked my head in my father's studio and said goodnight.

"Night button," he said, like he used to. It was the first time he'd said it since Nick died. "Night button." I curled the words around me, laid on my side and sank into them. "Button."

The clock on the nightstand said 11:42. I had fallen asleep. But I heard the garage closing. My mother was home, and my mind felt fuzzy. Would she go out on the porch? I pulled my comforter closer and shut my eyes. She came into the house.

Where was my father? Would she tell him she was back? Another door, the fridge this time, the gentle whir. I had made macaroni and cheese for dinner. She often ate the leftovers, and I wondered if she was pulling them off the shelf now. The door shut. I heard a drawer, the clink of silverware, and then a pause before the back door opened.

I slipped out of my covers and stepped lightly down the stairs. Illumination from the moon cast shadows on the wall, and I followed the carpet into the living room, then the dining room. Every step sounded noticeable; the floorboards creaked and I paused,

waiting. In the corner a clock ticked, keeping time, rhythmically contracting through space.

One foot in front of another, near the window, I dropped to all fours, crawled. There was a plan to negotiate, move around, and silence. All I could hear was my breathing, the pressure of my body on the wood floor. I considered that my mother could be watching me, standing on the other side of the window, her face furious. On the other side of the plant, I turned myself carefully and leaned back against the wall under the window.

At first there was only me. Then the outside seeped in: crickets in the distance, their discordant harsh noises sounded like soft sawing; leaves rustled, and under all of it I caught the soft metallic click of the swing pushed back: click, it moved forward. Pushed back: click, then forward. I knew because I'd done this many times. There was nothing rushed about her movement; it was deliberately paced, slow like a pendulum, like grief. Back and forth she moved rhythmically.

The noises calmed me, the cool pine smell under the window, the feeling of being almost invisible, but still close to her. Click. Click. It was almost as though we were sharing the swing, sharing the moment: mother and daughter. With my back to the wall, I pictured her ten feet away, rocking gently, looking toward the forest. I hadn't felt so close to her since, since when? Well, since the night on the stair, but I didn't think about that. Instead I thought about the year before, when she took me to church with her, and it was just the two of us, sitting without talking, sharing the smell of incense.

Another sound was added to the medley, a quiet sound, so I didn't realize at first what it was. It was soft but erratic, coming between the click of the back porch swing. Was she crying? The thought broke my heart. I turned and peeked up over the sill. Half of the yard was lit with moonlight, but my mother was in shadow. I could almost see the swing, almost see her body, upright, a hand over her mouth.

The sounds that came from her were fading, growing further between, like the night on the shore. But she stayed on the swing, clicking back and forth, back and forth.

I couldn't stand it any longer, so I crept up to my bedroom and shut the door without a sound. Moonlight had washed through the open window, filling the room with white ephemeral gauze; but no swing, no swinging click, no mother. My father could have been listening for her, too. More likely he'd fallen asleep. Sleep. It came in minor waves, fingering moonlight.

Another day for radiation. Mari told me on our way home that her breast has begun to burn, swell, regular side-effects from the treatment, so we'd decided a movie was in order. I pulled the car into the driveway and saw something fluttering on the porch. It was a beautiful day.

"Damn Stella," Mari spotted it too. "She's always doing that."

I follow the clack of her short heels across the stepping stones to the front of the house. Disfigured, a bird lays sideways, neck twisted, obviously dead, but another is fluttering nearby, hopping away from us down the stairs—it falls off the end, its black

head bobbing. “Why are cats so much like people?” she asked, and I had no idea what she meant.

“Maybe that’s why we like them,” I offered, trying to normalize things between us. I’m not exactly sorry for how things are between us, but I feel guilty because she’s sick.

“And she’s so generous,” Mari steps over the bird to collect her things for work, “always showing and telling.”

Paper bag, plastic baggy, gloves: I am getting ready to dispose of the bodies. I expect to find both birds dead, but when I get outside, the second bird has made it into the grass.

“Stella,” I call, thinking it will be better for her to finish it off. The least she could do is put it out of its misery.

“Stella! Kitty, kitty, kitty.”

Nothing.

She could me miles away. I couldn’t kill it myself.

“Stella!”

But Stella doesn’t come. You can’t count on a cat like you can a dog.

I’m thinking about leaving it when I remember Aunt Celia’s bird Ody, another animal that outlived a cat. When he healed, he wasn’t the best flyer and wouldn’t leave the property. “He feels safe here,” Aunt Celia had said. “And it suits him to be nearby.”

It could be a good afternoon diversion, I think, before I have to come back and make dinner: Pierogi this time; the dough is already rising. Does Mari's food really need to be this complex? I wonder. But Aunt Celia would be nice to see. It's just where she lives. I can't go there.

I watch the bird hiding in the grass, looking for all the world like he thinks I'm a cat.

Stop it, I tell myself out loud. Mari's right, I'm pathetic—can't even drive to a friend's house to help a bird? I definitely have a social disorder.

It's hard catching it. He keeps flapping his good wing and hopping away, tripping across the grass which is clearly too long for him to walk comfortably in. I don't want to hurt him, and I don't want to get pecked. Finally I go inside the house, find a shoebox in Mari's closet, and jump toward the bird, coming down with the orange box over his head. He chirps once and flaps inside panicked, while I edge a piece of cardboard underneath the box, trapping him.

"Things will be better soon. Celia will know what to do." I'm counting on it.

I can't remember having driven to Aunt Celia's before. Nick and I had always found our way on foot. But it's ridiculous to carry him so far. The bird flaps in the box until I put it on the front seat; when the box stops moving, so does he.

"Better already," I say, taking it as a sign.

One deep breath—I back out, flattening gravel, hearing the crunch of the wheels.

The road leads to the pasture. When my hands round the wheel to turn right onto boathouse road, they start to sweat; my stomach tightens by two degrees.

“It’s okay,” I say, directing my voice toward the bird. “She’s not far from here. Only a few more minutes.” But it wasn’t him I was reassuring.

The speedometer holds itself at ten—not so much jostling in potholes, I reason, trying to make the ride smoother. But I haven’t been back to the boat house since the day he died. I haven’t seen the peninsula where she lives except in dreams, dead end tunnels beneath it.

Sometimes when I walk over the surface in dreams, the ground sinks out beneath me; sink holes pull me into the water. So I drive slow, even though I know it’s ridiculous. The road feels like death, all overgrown and draping.

I almost miss it, the turnoff to the boathouse, so concentrated am I on ignoring my nightmares. My eyes skipped over the road before I realized what it was: covered in weeds, a seedling had taken root. Pushing the brake, I look at the small tree, just off the center. So Mari hasn’t been back either, I realize—almost surprised after her performance in the car the other day.

“You were stupid, Nick,” I whisper at the tree, chestnut brown, compound leaves, a chinese sumac; tree of heaven, some people call it, which is ironic because it’s invasive, popcorn-odored, undesirable.

My eyes tear, so I lift the lid off the bird, only a crack. He’s huddled in the corner, not moving, staring up at me. “Don’t worry,” I say. His beak opens like a chick’s, and I replace the lid, drive forward.

Stop. Please just stop, I think. But it's hard to control myself on this road, too many memories, too many burials.

Like a castle. That's how I used to see Aunt Celia's, its old fashioned white columns, wrap-around-deck, the circular staircase, the arboretum. Even her garden had a mystical air. But driving up, my memories seem overblown. It's just an old house, surrounded by big trees and water. I try not to think what I'm driving over, what looping tunnels.

"Petal," she claps her hands together, amazed, hair pulled back in a long grey braid. "Oh my God!"

"I wasn't sure you'd remember that name," I laugh. She looks exactly the same: no make up, beautiful crinkles around her eyes, strong nose.

"How could I forget my best girl?" She kisses my cheek, positively jubilant. "Come in."

I pause, wiping my feet. "Do you have room for another bird in the house?"

"A bird?"

"It's in the car. Stella, got it, our cat—I remembered Ody and thought he might have a shot with you."

"Well, let's have a look." She tucks a gray wisp behind her ear and follows me out to the car. "Ody, that silly bird. I've got his great-grandchildren living in the garden now."

The thought delights me, and I'm careful picking up the orange shoebox.

Inside, the house is warm—it smells old: like moth-bags and rosewater. I close my eyes and remember smelling this as a child. It takes the outside away, and I notice how clean the room is, even bare. The circular staircase, the hardwood floors, even the upright furniture seems minimal, beautiful.

“I haven’t see you since,” she trails off, trying to place it. “Since the funeral. What was that now? Five years ago?”

“Six.”

“And you and your father disappeared to Portland.” I followed her through the living room, up the stairs, holding the box with the strangely quiet bird. “Life has never been the same since.” She summed it up: statement, question, gentle observation.

“Mari’s boyfriend is nice. He had a business trip, of sorts, and she needed someone to look after her.” It feels safe being in this house, peaceful. Mari leads me to Ody’s old room, olive wallpaper with small pink roses, a table, sewing machine in the corner, pillows stacked near the wall, chimes, and right by the window, where I remember it, the large iron bird cage, empty now.

She walks over to the table. “Let’s see who you’ve got.”

I set the box down gently, and she lifts the lid. “A little one, and scared.” She peers at him a moment, and he holds one wing lower than the other. “Let’s keep him in here for awhile, so he can calm down. You can cut some holes,” she gestures toward the sewing machine, the scissors next to it, “ and I’ll get some newspaper.”

Celia lets her tea bag sit, but I dip mine in and out, apple-flavored like old-times. The sac collects with water, drains red and drips into the pink solution. Over and over I dip, drain, enjoy the sound of tinkling water, the warm fresh smell from the bag.

We are sitting at her kitchen table, which is tucked into the corner of the room: two sides, two chairs, and in the corner of the table, a bottle of wine. There are several more vitamins on her plate than I remember. The kitchen is clean, and plant starts line the window, stuck in vases, looking out over the arboretum.

“I’ve thought about you a lot,” she says, her eyes full of compassion. “And him.” I look up from my tea, not sure who she means. And then it dawns on me: Nick, of course. Into the water my bag dips again.

“Does it ever bother you?” I ask, wondering what it would be like to live right above what killed him. I hardly made it to the house; she must feel it, too.

She’s thoughtful, pulls her tea bag to the top of the cup and presses her spoon against it to drain the water, sets it on her plate.

“I can see why you would think that,” she says, not answering. “Was it hard to come?”

I nod, the tightening spreading back into my stomach, my chest.

“I couldn’t think of it that way,” she takes a sip.

“What do you mean?”

“I had to be glad for it. Not that he had died, but that it happened near a place he’d been all his life and a person who loved him. I hoped it would comfort you, to think of him so near to me. It comforted me.”

What a wonderful way to think of it, but I don't know if I believe her completely. All these years and it hasn't bothered her, hasn't made her want to run, to leave? She wouldn't feel this way if she knew what had happened, what I'd done. She probably wouldn't even want to talk to me I realize, shame coloring my face. Celia doesn't seem to notice.

In some ways she's like Mari, though not many. They both like to be close to Nick, but not in the same ways: Celia stays close without letting the memory bite; she has such a different way of looking at the world.

"Tell me about yourself," she says. "I've often wondered. And your father, how is he?"

"Richard's great," I say, blowing at my tea, ignoring the first question. "He manages the Clay Gallery, a twenty minute commute from his house, and he spends most of his time on his work, his art. They let him work at the studio and sell, so he has a table where he sets up his jugs, vases, and pitchers. It's been good for him."

"What about for you?"

"Oh great. I'm in school, so I don't live there anyway. And he's seeing someone, sorta." The woman is Lena, a single-mother with three kids, who works as a secretary. They're off and on. Thinking of Lena seems like a good segue into my mother.

"Do you know about William?" I ask, watching her face, to see if I'll catch anything. Asking quiets me a little, but I'm uneasy about the answer.

"Is that your mother's boyfriend?"

I nod, take a sip of tea; it's still hot, burns the tip of my tongue.

“I know he helped her after you left.” She smiles, like we should be grateful, doesn’t offer any more, but I have to know what happened. Is he the reason she didn’t join us? Is it possible they were having an affair? It seems urgent to know, to understand.

“Do you know why she didn’t come to Portland?” I stir my tea with the spoon and don’t look at her. “Did anybody talk about it?” I try to ask it casually, but how can such a question wear disguise?

“Yes,” she said. “But there’s only one reason.”

So she does know. I look at her anxiously—she’s watching me sad, but I don’t need sympathy; I only need to know, know why my mother left us.

“It’s not what you want to hear.”

What’s not? What does she think I want to hear? I brace myself, grip the spoon tightly.

“She thought she couldn’t face it.”

I wait for her to say more, but she doesn’t. That’s all? That’s all she’s going to say, all she knows? “Face what?”

“You and your father, without your brother. A new home. Leaving.”

“I knew that already,” I say, disappointed. “She already told us it was too hard.” I look at Celia, pleading. “I hoped you knew if there was something else, another reason.”

“It’s the only important answer,” she says softly, and lifts the cup to her lips.

I nod. Boiled down, what she says is true, but it’s also not. I need to know. When Richard and I thought we were getting away, was she pushing us out? It matters, matters for everything. But Celia is done answering. How like her to simplify.

How discouraging.

The bird skitters, the lid opening, and Celia tosses a cloth over his head, reaches in, and closes her hand over his body: legs and tail. He looks around the room, rotating his head to angles that seem impossible, trembling, tiny. He seems much smaller encased in her hand, like a little bouquet, his black head and throat, feathered white cheeks.

“He looks pretty good,” she says, turning him upside down.

“A bite.” There’s blood on his chest.

“In the closet,” she says, “pull out some iodine and the gauze tape. I’ll meet you in the bathroom.

Her closet is filled with things: tubes of antibiotic cream, extra toothbrushes, shampoo, anti-histamine. I find the tape. In the bathroom I wet a washcloth and lace it with iodine droplets. She holds the bird over the sink while I clean his tiny sore as softly as I can, his little heart thudding. Celia lets me take his feet, and I hold his good wing out while she wraps the other next to his body. His heart beats like electronica—a thousand times per minute.

“What will you name him?” she asks.

I look up smiling, and it comes to me, “Rutherford,” a name I heard somewhere. It’s perfect.

Celia nods.

When I set him into the cage, he hops from us, falling, to the far wall, using his other wing for balance. “Do you think he’ll be okay?”

“If he’ll eat and drink and his wing heals. After that he’ll have to relearn flying, assuming the wing’s healed properly.” I look at her troubled. It’s a long list. She laughs.

“But with a caretaker like you,” she smiles, pausing, “would you like to be in charge?”

I put my fingers through the top of the cage and hold on, remembering Ody.

“I’d love to.”

“Well then, he’s a lucky bird.”

I stare at him a little longer; he’s not moving, just watching us. But I’m sure he’ll be okay. “I need to get into town for some things.” I meet Celia’s eye, and she smiles.

“I’ll walk you to your car.”

A bell rings, dongs, vibrates as I push through the door. On my way here, I passed two newer stores, but Clark’s Video is the one I remember. The counter is old chipped formica, and two clerks talk between themselves—one waves absently while I walk through the electronic sensor, a new addition.

It’s a smaller video store, shelves around the walls and then three others, horizontal with the walls. Right in front of me is a display of candy and big popcorn buckets, on the right another table is filled with five dollar movies. They’ve changed the layout, painted. Each wall is a different color, red, purple, yellow, with large stars sponged in some lighter color, and smack in the middle of the stars, a movie poster.

Around the edges are recently released films, television, and video games. I walk it, hardly knowing what to get, what Mari will like. Jason used to stick his nose up at films; they weren't real enough experiences, he said, but I don't buy into that anymore, and I want to hurry; he could still be in Cascade and completely have changed his mind about movies.

On the cover of one a scantily clad whore in black runs her finger down an indifferent man's chest: *Midnight Dreams*. On another a mother, hands on her hips, shakes her head at two defiant boys, running away from an elaborate-looking house: *Charlie's Adventure*. A high crime movie catches my eye—a woman holding a gun behind her back, kissing a man who may, or may not be, oblivious to her weapon: *Wicked Business*. You never know these days what kind of drama will get a man off, I think. Jason, his easy gait.

I should hurry, get out quickly, but I don't know if she'd like any of these, and without her here, I feel vulnerable being in town. If Jason came into the store, there would be nowhere to run. I walk through the drama and science fiction shelves. "Comedy," boasts a black tag at the end of the next shelf. Perfect.

The bell rings, a man walks into the store—I duck behind the shelf. But it is not Jason. This man is too young, hardly a man at all now that I have a closer view, more boy than anything, though he is in a polo shirt. Jason hated films, I remind myself. There's no reason to suppose that things would be different now.

Most of the sleeves look dumb, and then I spot it, an old Audrey Hepburn film; Mari will love it, ancient, but we watched it a long time ago, all four of us, with blankets and popcorn in the living room. I take it up to the register, feeling a pang of regret.

Something constricts inside me. Most mothers will do anything for their children, I think, starting the car. Mine just manages to be glad if I come when she's dying. *At least she wants you*, says a voice in my head. Wants me? Is this what you call wanting? Stop.

"What did you get?" Mari has beaten me home, nestled herself in the couch with *1984* and a purple afghan. Her hat is on the seat beside her. I flip the deadbolt behind me and slide into Richard's old leather armchair. It connects me to him.

"Funny Face." I toss it at her, a little nervous. "Because you're supposed to keep your humor up," I smile; it's good to be out of town and back in the house.

She throws back her head, laughs deliciously. "I haven't seen that since," she thinks back. "We saw it together didn't we?"

"All four of us." I'm already afraid to see the movie, afraid it will wake memories. Driving back here, I almost turned the car around, went for something else, something safer, but every time I put my foot on the gas, I managed to change my mind. What if I ran into Jason going back? Besides, it was one of the last films we saw together—she would love it, we had loved it.

"Fred Astaire, best singer and dancer of all time," she sighs luxuriously, apparently not phased by our last memory of the movie, and I'm relieved I made a good choice.

Out-of-the-blue, Mari picks up her hat, points her stocking-toes and throws her arms out romantically singing, “We’re strictly tourists,” it’s a song from the movie, “Bonjour Parieeee,” she holds the note out and we break in laughter. “S’Wonderful! S’Marvelous,” she trills, waving the hat over head, eyes sparkling, “you could fall for me,” she pulls the hat to her chest, flutters her eyes.

“Are you okay?” I tease. It’s hysterical watching her like this.

“Never better. Let’s set it up, baby.” I laugh despite myself, her enthusiasm contagious.

The old orchestration starts; it used to be on all the old movies, and I sink further into Richard’s leather chair, captivated. Paris fashions, breath taking colors, birds of paradise, balloons along the *Champs-Élysées*. Napoleon’s gate. Was I born in the wrong era?

“Now your lover has just kissed you goodbye,” he says to Audrey, holding a camera in his hand and sweeping her lips with his mouth brashly. The violins start. “You may never know that kiss again,” he says. “You may never know love again!” He leaves her next to the train, strides away. The platform is filled with people. “Marcel, make her look sad; put some tears in her eyes.” The train whistles.

“There are tears in her eyes,” Marcel says.

“Good,” he adjusts his camera, “you’re not only a model, you’re an actress.” The train whistles again. The violins soar. “Heartbreak, longing, tragedy,” he directs loudly. “Wet your lips.”

Audrey wets them, looks at him like he’s the world.

“Great, now steam.” Steam issues out from the train, surrounds her on the platform, shawl draped over her shoulder, suitcase in her hand. She poses, turns from side to side while he clicks the camera (Funny Face).

Hunger, like a sadness, a longing. A love like that, I think. This is how relationships should be: simple, clear—or if a little muddled, easily fixed, only two people involved, nobody using each other. Mari’s head is tipped back on the couch, her mouth hanging open.

“Mari,” I call her name. She won’t want to miss the end. “Mari.”

She raises her head, looks up at me. On the screen Audrey bashes a man’s head with a vase. “It’s good to have you home, honey,” she says, leaning her head back.

I offer a close-lipped smile, and she shuts her eyes.

CHAPTER 8

The first day Jason and I talked after dive class, really talked, I wore the Apollo scarf. It was an accidental coincidence. A convergence of possibilities that, at the time, seemed like fate. I wrapped the gold silk twice around my neck to present a book analysis in Ms. Ruth's class, and dive class was the same day, right after school.

The title of my report was, "*The Handmaid's Tale: Fundamentalism Runs Awry.*" Ms. Ruth said the best way to sound like an enlightened academic was by using colons. She loved my title. Eight to ten minutes, power point, and we got extra credit for dressing up.

I hadn't planned my outfit. I only had two dresses. The pink floral print I hated; the black sleeveless one looked more professional anyway. My mother bought it for me when we were attending church service the year before. We only went for a few weeks. It was after Alex, the explorer in residence at her work, died unexpectedly. He was on the job, collecting shale samples off the east slope for the new education exhibit when he fell eighty-four feet. Most likely he died before he hit the bottom.

His tennis shoes were old, the soles worn and slippery, so at first there was a lot of talk about whether it had been an accident or suicide. Alex was pleasant, but quiet. When he died, nobody knew he was depressed. That came out later, in the journals. He was just Alex to us. I think people forgot he had a real life, and my mother didn't talk for days. When I asked about it, Richard said they worked together on the Ancient Lake

Discovery Tour, a virtual exhibit, and, “my God, of course she’s upset Macy. Alex is four years younger than your mother.” From that I understood that she was afraid of her own death; it was sobering.

The week after the closed-casket funeral, my mother came home especially late carrying two dresses wrapped in plastic and tied at the bottom.

“I think we need to go back to church,” she said.

I took the dress and thanked her. But it was too big, four inches of extra fabric around my waist. She probably didn’t even look at the size. Later I overheard my parents talking in the kitchen.

“Why won’t you come?” she asked. “It’s important to me.”

“You’re not going to die Mari. Get over it. It was an accident.”

It sounded harsh; I shut my bedroom door, put on my headphones. Then, when Sunday rolled around, Nick was at work, so he and Richard both got out of it, but it wasn’t that bad having just the two of us.

On our way out the door, my mother stopped to scrutinize me.

“You’re wearing a ponytail with that dress?”

I tugged at the sides. “It’s baggie,” I said.

“Listen Macy,” she adjusted my shoulders. “It’s not meant to be tight. This is a classy dress.” She picked up her purse and rummaged for the keys. Then she stopped, walked deliberately back to her bedroom and came out with a flat, shiny peach box: the Apollo scarf.

I sucked in my breath.

She'd let me touch it before when I was little, but I hadn't seen it for years, except in the Paris picture. She almost laughed at my expression.

"So, it's expensive," she said. "What does that matter anymore?"

She slid the top of the box off, and I bit my lip. We moved to the hallway mirror while she folded the gold and purple fabric in half.

"Made from the silk of 200 mulberry moth cocoons," she whispered, putting the gauze around my neck and pulling both ends through the fold. The fabric shimmered, catching the light like a crown of rubies.

"Look," she said, smiling at my reflection, "now the ponytail doesn't matter."

She was right. I felt regal, changed, taller.

At church the low lights and high ceilings were like a mystical cave, full of whispers, echoes, wisps of incense. The scarf made everything magical. We both lit candles, white stubs that made the outside come in. I felt bigger than myself, connected to something.

When we came home, I went into the kitchen and peeled the top off a banana, facing the forest through the round picture window. I was thinking about how the light spilled into pools on some of the leaves and not others.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing," my father snapped, walking into the room, his face angry.

"Eating a banana," I said confused.

He got in my face. “That scarf is expensive,” he said, obviously trying to control himself. “And it’s not yours. I want you to get it off.” His face had turned a little pink, and a vein by his sinus pulsed.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Mom told me I could wear it for church.” I set the banana down on the table and backed away from him toward the living room.

“She had no right to do that,” he said harshly. Then he turned, gripping his fists, shaking his head. “Get it off!”

I had no idea why he was so upset.

“I’ll get it off,” I said, backing up a few steps, then running through the living room and up the stairs, shutting the door fast, and breathing against the back of it.

Whatever his problem was, I wasn’t going to risk that. I folded the scarf and softly placed it in its box in my sock drawer. My mother never asked for it back.

Sometimes I took it out and felt the fabric slide and fold between my hands, sparkling. It was like holding a waterfall, something precious. There was a tree in the center, a beautiful oak tree with ribbons of gold hanging from its branches. And surrounding the tree, sixteen dragons, four on each side. They were pieced over a thick swath of murex-purple, embedded with gold flecks that were scattered throughout the square like stars. It was amazing how they glowed when the fabric moved. Rams danced around the outer edge, light as feathers. But I didn’t take it out often. Most of the time I forgot it was in that drawer.

My mother and I stopped going to church when Alex’s autopsy came back as a heart-attack. “He didn’t slip or commit suicide,” she said. “His depression was a side-

effect of living, and it was the worst place to seize up, but only a fluke, an act of God: high cholesterol, bad genes.”

For awhile there were more apples in our house, and other cholesterol-reducing foods. Then Alex became a statistic, a person turned to number, old news; she disassociated, and things went entirely back to normal.

I hadn't worn the scarf again until the presentation for Ms. Ruth's class. My father had already left for the gallery, and I knew my mother wouldn't mind. A school presentation is important, I reasoned. Maybe not this important, but I wanted to wear it; it made me feel special, protected, and like everyone was watching me. Besides, it made the size of the dress irrelevant; all you could see was scarf, and the dress was huge.

“Very nice,” said Ms. Ruth, nodding her head when I smiled nervously at Francis and stood to present. Butterflies welled in my stomach, and I walked to the front.

“The books' appendix proves that misogyny hadn't disappeared by the time Offred's, or June's, tapes were found,” I said stumbling. The book was about a fanatic, biblically-based society that repressed women, even naming handmaids after the men they were paired with. A woman paired with “Jack” would be named “Ofjack” until she was moved on, paired with a new man. Ms. Ruth had pointed out to us that the name of every woman in the book was accounted for except for June, the narrator. “June must be Offred, Fred's handmaid,” Ms. Ruth said, “and she deserves to be remembered by her own name, even though she's only a fictional woman.”

“It’s not like she’s real,” I said, complaining to Francis after I found out I’d been docked ten points for calling her Offred during my presentation. “I don’t know why she cares so much about dumb June.”

We were outside our lockers, switching books to go to Biology.

“June’s every woman,” Francis said sagely. “Of course she cares. Ms. Ruth is June.”

“Right,” I rolled my eyes. “June Ruth. She probably lays on her back and spreads her legs like Offred for whatever man needs her,” I grumbled.

Francis didn’t laugh.

“Lots of women are June.”

I ignored the comment.

I found the book utterly depressing. It reminded me of how my father yelled commands when he was drunk. “Get me another drink, Macy. You’re asking to be raped wearing those shorts. Come home immediately.”

Once, when I was whining about not getting to wear my new cut-offs to school, I said, “Francis wears clothes like this,” and he had yelled after me,

“I don’t give a damn. I’m the head of this house, and don’t you forget it.”

Who could?

In scuba class Joanne felt much better; her face pink, lively. She confessed to reading the entire manual since last class. The pool smelled heavy chlorinated; I loved that smell, the humidity of indoor pools. All of us were lined up along the deep end.

“Regulators in? Have you filled the BC?”

I nodded. Next to me Joanne put her regulator in her mouth.

“Remember,” Jason continued, “the BC keeps you afloat. I don’t want to scare you. No,” he paused, “I do want to scare you. Think for a minute about what would happen if you jumped overboard without the regulator in your mouth, *or* the BC filled,” he made a painful face.

I imagined myself, heavy, riddled with gear, my tank, my weight belt, tubes everywhere, stepping off the side of the boat into the lake, my fins slapping the water. But instead of floating, I plummeted in an uncontrolled descent. It was like dropping a rock off the edge, a fall-out, two-thousand feet to the bottom of Cascade Lake, my regulator dragging behind like a ribbon, my body morphing into the blackness. I gulped the water, felt it swarm my lungs. The thought chilled me.

“Never,” Jason said, “get in the water before you’ve checked those two things.”

Point taken.

It wouldn’t matter here—the pool couldn’t be more than twelve feet deep, but everything about the class challenged me. The air tank was heavy. The mask I wore blocked my peripheral vision; combined with the weight, I felt claustrophobic. It wasn’t the same as breathing in the kiddie-pool. We hadn’t even entered the deep water, and already I understood why things went wrong down there, why people become unraveled, unstrung. *Panic is the quickest avenue to disaster*, said a voice in my head.

I took my breathes slowly, like we practiced.

“Once you’re in the pool, look down for your bearings, then let the air out of your BC and your lungs. Not too fast.” He paused. “I know this is repetitive,” he looked over at Nick who looked bored out of his mind and was shifting from foot to foot, “But it’s important, Nick.”

Nick stood straight, and smirked.

“To stop descending,” Jason said, “take a breath and add air back into the BC until your descent stops. At this point you should be motionless: neutral, not floating, not sinking. You got it?”

Got it, I thought. I’m ready.

“Show me the distress signal again,” Jason said. We each rotated our wrists side-to-side, fingers spread. Nick flopped his around quickly, returning his hand to his side.

“Jump when you’re ready.”

I stepped into the water awkwardly, feeling it slow down my body surround me, wet my hand and face. I let the air out of my BC and pushed the breath from my mouth, until my lungs felt empty. Sinking, I forgot what to do.

Jason had just told us, but I panicked, kicked up to gulp air. When I broke through the surface, everyone else had done the same thing, except a student at the end, and I didn’t see Nick.

Relax, I told myself.

The next time I sunk deeper, letting the air out more slowly, focused; when I added air with the BC, my body gradually slowed, became stationary in the water.

“You’re a natural,” Jason said warmly while we took off our gear next to the pool. He squatted beside me, while I pulled at my fins.

“You’ve done this before haven’t you?”

Are you kidding? I wondered. Did he mix me up with Nick? I hadn’t done bad considering, but if he’d heard my Darth Vader breathing he wouldn’t be so kind. My face must have betrayed skepticism because Jason laughed aloud before moving on, spending a moment with Joanne. His shoulders were thick under his shirt, his hair loose with natural curl in the humidity.

Nick and I walked out of the pool together and put all our gear in the car. It took two trips, and the wind blew at my skirt, the sky an indistinct, hazy off-white. The sun wasn’t visible.

“Hey, Nick!” a girl waved from a little red car.

“Kristy,” he raised his arm.

“Hey,” he looked over at me. “I promised to help Kristy with a couple math problems,” he trailed off, waiting.

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll just wait for you to get back.”

“You could come with us. We’re just going over to Picking’s Parlor.” He made a face, obviously hoping I’d say no. “But it will be boring.”

“That’s okay. I’ll just walk over to the dive shop. I wanted to look at one of those dive computers, anyway.”

He grinned. “I owe you one.”

I turned, slogged away. “Pick me up there,” I said. “And don’t be long.”

“You got it,” he called over his shoulder, jumping into her car.

It stunk walking in heels. I should have had Nick drop me off at the shop, and I regretted not bringing something to change into. I was ridiculously overdressed: big black dress, scarf fluttering, hair still soaked and knarly.

I had just crossed the street when Jason pulled up next to me in a big silver ford.

“Need a lift home?”

I was bedraggled. “No thanks. I’m actually going to look around at the dive shop. I’m waiting for Nick to finish something.”

“Hop in,” he said.

Hopping in wasn’t exactly easy in a skirt, but I stepped up and managed to keep myself covered sliding onto the seat. The truck was immaculate—the air of brand new.

“What are you looking for at the shop?” he asked, turning the corner. “Thinking of applying for the position?”

“What? No. There’s a position? I’m looking at the dive computers.” It came out awkward. “Not to buy one. Just looking. Right now.”

He didn’t laugh at me, just nodded. “Well I’d be happy to help you look. And in answer to your question, yes. There’s a part-time position, only ten or so hours a week. We need someone to help us get the store ready for summer.” I was noticing how the hair at the back of his neck curled when he looked over pleasantly. “You interested?”

“What? Well. Maybe, but I don’t know anything.” Why did I sound like such an idiot?

“I’ve seen you in the water,” he said. “You’re a fast learner—you should apply.” I looked at my hands, embarrassed but pleased.

I noticed the help wanted sign in the window, and Jason took me right over to the dive computers when we got to the store. Maybe I should apply, I thought.

“Which ones are you interested in? You want to see them all?”

I nodded, and he looked at me, squinting like he was trying to figure something out. “Why don’t you sit at that table,” he pointed toward the front. “I’ll go get the keys for the case, and bring some over. We can wait for your brother together.”

My stomach flipped over, and my heart sped up while I pulled out my stool. We were in the only ones in the store. I tried to arrange myself in a lady-like way while he stepped into the back. The store was more familiar now, but I loved it just the same, mannequins and dive suits posed everywhere like an above-water adventure.

That’s how we ended up having our first real conversation. Jason came to town only months before we met. He’d been to Cascade Lake as a boy, camping with his dad, an astronomy professor, on the north rim overlooking a 600 foot drop-off and stars they could identify by their reflections in the crystalline waters. The moment stuck with him, and when he had the opportunity, he came back.

“But how could you leave everything?” I wanted to know, feeling much more comfortable, my legs tucked up underneath the stool. We’d long since stopped looking at the dive computers, and I’d almost forgotten Nick was supposed to pick me up.

“Leaving is the easy part,” he said. “It’s much harder to stay some places.”

Which places? I wanted to know, and why? But I didn’t ask. Instead, I gathered he was an “intellectual transient,” a Francis word, and probably wouldn’t be here long before he’d grown tired of it and left us, too. How thrilling to have lived so many places, to be able to pick up and go at whims. He’d done everything: car repair, insurance sales, a local baseball league. He tried college, but got sick of General Education.

“You can learn more, if you’re willing to experience life,” he whispered to me, his hands out in front of him on the table. “If you’re too afraid to get out of the system, all you know is what they tell you.”

The system. It amazed me how above it all he was. How passionate he was about living, really living. Jason wanted to learn for learning’s sake, not to have a paper he could wave under people’s noses. I’d never considered a degree as meaningless. Since I was little, it was understood that Nick and I would be going to college, and we’d earn grades that would get us there. “Once you’re there, you can choose what you want to do,” my father had told us matter-of-factly. “Anything you want: be an artist, a scientist, a teacher, an engineer.” I had never realized before how stuck people got in education. Of course all those things *could* be learned outside of school, but it sounded more difficult.

“Can’t you still buy the books?” said Jason, challenging me when I told him what my father said. “Can’t you still put your heart into something? Can’t you still be specialized?”

I nodded, still dubious.

“The only difference is, you’re not paying money into a system that’s telling you to learn twenty other subjects when you want to get to the heart of one you really care about.” He tapped his finger on the table.

“But what about your dad?” I wanted to know. “Is he disappointed you didn’t finish college, since he’s a teacher?”

“Let me tell you something, Macy,” he put a hand up on my shoulder. I thought about how anybody from the street could have looked in, seen us there through the front window. “Disappointment can be your best friend. It teaches you about who you are and what’s important to you.”

“So he was disappointed?” I persisted. I wanted to know Jason.

“He’s still offering to pay my way if I’ll go,” Jason looked out at the parking lot. “But after I left school, we actually got closer. He stopped trying to make me into him.”

“He respected you,” I said, appreciating how thoughtful Jason was.

“He understood me,” Jason added, or amended; I’m not sure. “The system is the fastest way to put your life on hold.”

What would I do if I didn’t go to college, I wondered. I didn’t even know what I wanted to study, but college had been my ultimate goal, the projected be all end all.

“Don’t get me wrong,” he said. “It works for some people. Some people aren’t disciplined enough to pursue education on their own. Some people need structure, deadlines; they need to be told their priorities.”

I wondered if I was one of those people. There was an english essay on our own book choice, due anytime last semester. Procrastinate, put it off, I couldn’t bring myself

to write it until the end. I kept changing my book, using it as an excuse to peruse the bookstore, read one, get excited about another. I could have done it any time; I wasn't busy. I'd read *Rebecca*, and thrilled at its horror; *Enduring Love*, which also horrified me, but in an entirely different way; *Gilead*, the world's slowest book, but I went back to it every night for one chapter, and when it was done, I was crying. In reading it, I had changed, been more profoundly moved by its quiet grace than any of the others. It made me feel older, like I understood things most people my age didn't.

At ten o'clock, the night before it was due, I started a response paper about forgiveness and how letting go opens your heart to love. But it wasn't long enough. I got a B, an average grade on the one paper I could choose for myself. "This isn't up to your usual standards," Ms. Ruth wrote, and I wanted to kick myself. I'd been afraid she'd think that, but I was still crushed to hear it. I folded the graded paper in half, hiding all the red circles, the "incomplete thoughts," and put it inside the book. That's where it belonged. In a place that could understand my intentions.

Jason was right. It was easier being told what to do. Maybe I was one of those people he made fun of, a person in need of a deadline, a boss, a structure, college. I felt ashamed, like I didn't measure up. But maybe I could change, maybe I could move past what I was.

Nick showed up not long after that.

"Think about what I said," said Jason. "I think you'd fit in really well here."

"Thanks," I smiled at him, then ran out the door and jumped into Nick's truck; it was much easier to navigate, not as tall, and I was excited.

What do I want to study? I wondered to myself at home that night in bed, the patched quilt pulled up tight under my chin in complete darkness, not even a moon. Not math, I thought. I wouldn't use that, and if I needed to, I could get out a calculator. Maybe I could put math study time into study time of things I loved, classes I did want to learn about. I could forget about math, pass to graduate, but live with some integrity. Because the real question I kept thinking about was Jason's. What if time was as precious as he said? What if meeting other people's expectations only moved me further from myself?

The next week Jason's new mantra was, "Fight your nerves. Nerves lead to panic."

After hanging off the edge of the deep side, we made our first awkward lap around the pool, swimming underwater with our regulators jammed in our mouths, a whole class of bug-eyes.

"Breathe normally," Jason said when we resurfaced. "One more lap, and this time I don't want to see bubbles the size of peas, or elephants," he added, his eyes twinkling.

But it was hard. Cyclic. Nick plowed ahead, lapped everyone when we went around again, and I concentrated on the muffled underwater sounds, my own breathing more alive than I'd ever noticed, the curve of the pool as the side became the bottom, the smooth bulk of regulator in my mouth: in and out, in and out, calmer that time. Randy's fins flipped gently ahead of me, creating mini-swirling eddies.

“Better,” Jason yelled when we surfaced. The eight of us looked ridiculous, regulators stuck in our mouths, puffing up at Jason’s towering shape. Randy coughed and pulled off his mask.

“It keeps filling with water,” he complained. On my left, Joanne nodded.

“Perfect,” says Jason. “Imagine you’re forty feet underwater when the smallest trickle above your eye starts filling up your mask. What can you do?”

“Panic,” said Joanne, seriously.

“Resurface?” Randy suggested.

“That’s one option. But there’s an easier way, one that won’t waste so much air.” He explained the procedure. “I want you to make an insecure seal, and try it underwater. Let it leak on purpose.”

I was the first to respond. I wanted him to be proud of me, so I moved the mask slightly off the center of my face and submersed: water poured in steadily, and I blinked until I had to close my eyes at the chlorine. *Do it now*, I thought, pulling the mask from my face, letting it fill with water. *Don’t panic, don’t panic*, I thought, eyes squeezed tight. I forgot to breathe. *Breathe. Breathe*, I reminded myself trying to focus, tipping my head way back. I pressed the top of the mask tightly against my forehead, took a huge breath of air and exhaled as hard as I could through my nose, bubbles burst past my face while I pulled the mask into a snug place. It didn’t feel dry. I opened my eyes; only the top of the mask was clear, the water sloshing back and forth; and that’s when I noticed my heart beating a marathon.

Floating, I thought it through again. *Pull off the mask, tip back my head, press the top of the mask to my forehead, EXHALE.*

The second time was better, but there was still water. Was Jason watching, strolling above us? Next to me Joanne tread, holding the side, but Randy seemed to have gotten it; his mask looked pristine: clear, nice and airy. He gave me the okay sign, and I signaled back, adding a thumbs up to see if he'd meet me at the surface.

"Nice job," Randy said when we got to the side.

"Thanks, you too."

Jason waited for the other six to surface. It looked like most of the class hadn't gotten it yet, even Nick, which made me feel light and happy inside.

"I know this feels awkward, even scary, but if you panic when you're deep underwater, your situation has gone, in just *one step*," Jason emphasized, "from manageable to catastrophic. You must stay calm. I want you to keep trying, work with someone else if you like. We'll repeat it every day, so you can feel confident when we move into the lake."

Mention of the lake sent a quick thrill through me and a determination to make it work.

"Calm down and try to get more air in your exhale." Jason's voice echoed in the pool room.

Jason caught up with me outside. Nick and I had just loaded our gear, and he was grumpy because he hadn't gotten his mask to clear until the end of the class. "You can't always be the star," I told him smugly, as he started the truck.

That's when I saw Jason, running out of the rec center.

"Hey wait. Jason wants us." I unrolled my window.

"Have you thought about that job," he said? "We need someone to start tomorrow. I told Anthony about you, and he thinks you'll work great."

I bit my lip, smiling. "I'd really like that."

"Great," he slapped the side of the truck. "Come in after school tomorrow and we'll get your paperwork started."

Nick gunned it out of the parking while I leaned my head back against the seat, still smiling.

"That's ridiculous," Nick said, flipping onto Main.

"What are you talking about?" I sat up. "You have a job."

"Yeah, but you're not even that good."

"I figured out how to clear the mask before you, didn't I?" I raised my eyebrows challenging him.

"He probably just has a thing for skinny bitches."

"You're such an asshole," I said, unrolling my window. We didn't talk all the way home.

“Are you serious!” Francis broke into a huge grin. “You’re employed by a hot man in a diving agency!” She gave me a sweet high-five. “And you didn’t even have to do anything?” We were whispering behind our books in Ms. Ruth’s class. She loved to have silent reading time, so most people didn’t even bother reading outside of class. There was always enough time; and we’d just been passed our new books: *Brave New World*, because Ms. Ruth did make some British exceptions.

After school, I ran to the dive shop. Jason and I sat at the table again, and he explained to me that Anthony, the owner and operator, usually came in whenever we got a new shipment of inventory, but mostly it would only be the two of us in the store, excepting customers, of course.

Ten hours total, on Fridays and Saturdays, because the weekends were typically the busiest. That was my shift. We had the regulars, he said, the semi-regulars who came once a month, and the out-of-towners. They always wanted the same things: air, maps, and backup parts, sometimes suits.

Jason said he didn’t always do it, but Anthony wanted us to point out the Lewis plaque on the wall, to any of the cave divers, and mention that they ought to read the warning signs put up by the city council around the lake, after the accident. Some people had petitioned to install grates over the known lave-tube entrances, but in the end it was too expensive and deemed a harsh reaction against other divers, who had trained for such exploration.

I'd seen the sign at Egret's marina plenty of times, and behind the cash register, there was an identical handout that read: "WARNING! PEOPLE HAVE DIED IN THESE CAVES. SPECIAL TRAINING REQUIRED."

Jason told me the underwater sign, next to the tunnel entrance where the Craigs were last seen alive was more dramatic. It was copied from a similar sign at the Devil's Cave System in Florida, and there was a handout of this, as well.

STOP

PREVENT YOUR DEATH!

GO NO FURTHER

FACT: More than 300 divers, including open water scuba-instructors,
have died in caves just like this one.

FACT: You need *cave training* and *cave equipment* to *cave dive*.

FACT: Without cave training and cave equipment, divers can die here.

FACT: It CAN happen to YOU!

THERE'S NOTHING IN THIS CAVE WORTH

DYING FOR!

DO NOT GO BEYOND THIS POINT

The death of the Craigs put Cascade Lake in the public eye. Summer business increased for a few years, then leveled off. Another kid died in 1989. A local, he went in

the caves by himself without a guideline and got lost. By the time his body was found, he was so bloated that his suit ripped while they removed him from the caves.

That was when Anthony stopped advertising the caves. He moved the Craig's maps behind the counter, periodically updating it, as experienced cave divers explored the system. Everyone who entered the shop wanted to know where the caves were; if they hadn't known about them before they went diving, they were bursting with curiosity after reading the sign at Egret's marina. But we couldn't even show them the maps, lines of a snaking labyrinth through old lava fields, or sell the clear guideline, unless divers showed a card proving they were trained in cave diving. In general, most people wanted to have a look, but nobody was stupid enough to go in. Most of the divers stayed away from the caves.

"Do you have your cave diving certification?" I asked Jason the next week while we shared a sandwich in the back room: turkey on rye. I made them after Jason told me he loved rye bread. My mother thought it was strange when I requested a loaf, but she obliged. I had also bagged baby carrots and two cans of soda.

"Cavern," he said. "I'm certified to go as far into a cave as I can still see light filtering in from outside. After that, I have to turn back."

"Will you get the certification?" The idea of being locked in a small space didn't appeal to me. I'd read the Craig's plaque so many times I had it memorized. If experienced divers could die in caves, that was the last place I wanted to go.

Jason chewed and seemed to be thinking about it. “That was my plan,” he said. “But I can’t get away from the shop long enough this summer to go somewhere that offers a program.”

“You wouldn’t be frightened?”

“I think cave diving is as safe as you make it. It’s about keeping your wits. Not everyone can do that. You never know, until you’re in a crisis 100 feet underwater with rocks above your head, whether you’re one of those people. You can guess. You can hope that because you handled things well the day your tank malfunctioned that you could do it as calmly under a wall of rock or limestone, but it’s different being trapped. Your chemistry changes. In an open-water dive people can look up and see the sun. Even with threat of the bends, you look up during an emergency and think, all I have to do it kick my way to the surface, then they can med-vac me to a decompression chamber. But you can’t look up and see the sun when you’re in a cave. There’s only your divelight. And what if it goes out? Did you bring your backup? More things can go wrong when you’ve lost your freedom of movement, your connection with the surface, your orientation.”

“If you can’t know how you’ll respond, why do you want to certify?”

“Same reason all divers do, to test myself, go places most people only see in pictures, experience how it feels to look around places our bodies were never meant to be, feel a range of emotions. It’s fun.”

“It scares me,” I said. “But you make me want to try.” I smiled at him shyly and Jason did something he’d never done before. He lifted his hand and cupped it under my chin, looking at me tenderly. “Macy,” he said, shaking his head like he was proud of me.

We didn’t speak for awhile after he took his hand down. I glowed inside and concentrated on my sandwich, the curl of the leaf edge sticking out.

“When I was in that cavern,” he said, “time stopped, the passageways that led from it called me like,” he paused, “an ache; I had to find where they went. Does that make sense? You feel connected to the earth, to something tremendous, unique, more. I left my buddy, started going down a passageway. I didn’t even realize it at first; I had to make myself turn back. It felt safe, even though I knew it wasn’t. The others felt it too, Cave Sirens we called those passageways, power.”

I loved Jason like this. He was so open, opposite of my parents. Even Francis wouldn’t talk to me like this. Jason made me feel precious for being able to see things the way he did, able to feel what he described. I wanted to swallow all my nerves and push myself to do this, to let myself live, to trust my judgment, my equipment. I would cave dive. It became my goal.

College was a little more nebulous now; this was replacing it.

“You’re not like the others,” he said, resting his hand on my knee.

“Others?” I felt so close to him.

“Other girls your age.”

I could only glow, put my head down to absorb it and then look up at his kind, scruffy face and the eyes that knew exactly what I was thinking and how much I adored him.

I walked slower. Examined the trees, watched people, started soaking in everything that surrounded me, and all the while Jason's words played and paused and repeated, his hand under my chin, how I stood apart. I wanted to prove to Jason that I could be everything he saw in me.

At school, everyone noticed I was happier. I started turning in my geometry problems when I'd only done three-quarters of the proofs. And then I'd read. *Brave New World* was the first book. The hatcheries and conditioning centers chilled me, especially with the *soma* drug; it made me feel how precious living was, how influential society was on my beliefs. I couldn't imagine never being able to be alone without feeling guilty; I ached for John, banished as he was for being so different. How could a person sustain so much injury and go on living? It described him; it described me; it described Jason. We were survivors, resilient, impassioned. The ending threw me into another place. It was so brave, his suicide. It gave me courage to smile when Mr. Fairbanks handed back my half-completed math assignments with raised eyebrows.

I wasn't wasting so much time anymore. Jason made me see I could do things differently.

I walked in to visit work. The store was empty. Jason was in the back, but he came out when he heard the bell.

“Oh, it’s you,” he said smiling; he had shaved off his beard, “thought you’d show up and grace my life for awhile?”

“You couldn’t do without me,” I teased, looking at his smooth face, lighter on the new bare spot. I almost laughed, but it looked nice, aside from the color change.

He gestured toward the back. “Come look at this; I want to show you something.”

In the back room, there was a book, lying face-down on the desk. He’d obviously been reading it. *Ariel* by Sylvia Plath. I’d heard of her, but I didn’t know she was a poet.

“I read this when I’m depressed,” he said, flipping the book open to an ear-marked page and looking at it thoughtfully. “I thought you would be able to appreciate it.”

His voice was low and soft; he paused on each word, letting it gently escape.

“The moon is no door. It is a face in its own right, White as a knuckle and terribly upset.” He looked up at me and continued, “It drags the sea after it like a dark crime” (Plath).

White knuckles and a dark crime, I thought. A dark crime?

His voice undulated when he read, “How I would like to believe in tenderness” (Plath).

Me too, I thought. Me too, and you can believe in it.

“What would I do without you to listen to my antics?” he asked when he’d finished reading. “It’s one of my favorites, but I’ve never shared it with anyone.”

“Thank you,” I said. It felt like a gift, a precious gift that he would let me see this part of him. I wanted to know why he was depressed. What was troubling him? But I didn’t know if it was my place to ask. “It’s beautiful.” I started. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes. I guess I’ve been a little down, but I feel better when I read this. At least I have the moon for company.”

“Dragging after you like a dark crime.”

He laughed. “You could say that. What’s funny is how seriously we take ourselves. How little we believe in our own motives. I have to remind myself I did what was right; what other people think isn’t important.”

“I’m glad,” I said. “Is it your father?”

“My father, my father. I did talk to him recently. But no, something else, someone else to be precise.”

My heart sank. Of course I knew that he was probably involved with someone, but he never talked about it, and I’d started to hope, as foolish as it was, that even though I was young maybe he had feelings for me.

“Oh,” I said, like this explained it all. “Girls can be tricky.” I meant prone to whims, hard to understand, difficult to catch.

“Every now and then I let myself want someone so bad, need them so much, that I go too fast. Do you know what I mean?”

I nodded, but I didn’t know.

“It makes things awkward.”

Awkward I understood. “I hate awkward,” I said. “So are things over between you?”

He laughed. “Yes. Yes they are. And she might even cause problems.”

“Why would she do that?”

He sighed. “I think I hurt her feelings. I didn’t mean to, but I loved her, and her parents are the over-protective sort. You know, the father that keeps a gun around and interviews all prospective dates. That type. We were friends before I started to see Sam, but like I said, sometimes I can’t help myself, and now it’s awkward.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “She’s a fool to cut things off. You know that, right?”

He nodded, then put his hand up to my cheek, like he had the week before. “Did you know that you’re an inspiration to me?”

I shook my head. I couldn’t help it, my eyes teared up.

“See?” he said. “You care so much. That’s what I love about you.”

Close. So close I could smell cologne or aftershave on his chin, see the degrees of color changing where his beard used to be and where it melted into brown skin.

“Sometimes you make me wish you were older,” he said gruffly, his voice like a bear.

I didn’t move, but I took in a deep breath. “I think that, too.” It felt like the most important moment of my life.

His eyes were brown, but I’d never noticed the flecks in them before, golden, like the rain tree.

The door chime rang. A customer had come in. I looked away. He stood up.

“Thanks for visiting,” he said. “And for understanding.” He put his hand on my shoulder, and I followed him to the front of the store.

“That man just likes to hear himself talk. Man he’s annoying,” Nick said. We were driving through town on our way home after dive class, the windshield wipers squealed and slid. I was thinking about Jason’s thick shoulders in today’s white polo; I loved the way his shirt hung from them.

“If he didn’t repeat things, Cascade Dive would be liable,” I said annoyed. It was so like Nick to criticize anyone who told him to do something.

“I’m ready to quit this class already; it’s so easy.” Nick turned on the radio. It was an old song. *Look at the stars, look how they shine for you.*

“You wouldn’t get your certification,” I said, pointing out the obvious to annoy him.

“We’re not idiots. Well, not all of us,” he glanced toward me, suggesting I was the exception. “Jason acts like we’re in second grade, and he’s God.”

Better him than you, I thought. I wouldn’t mind a world where Jason was God—keeping us safe, flaunting those shoulders. But I don’t have the energy to argue with Nick today. I rolled down the window a crack to smell the rain. The air was cool, and some of it splashed down the inside of the window.

What would it be like, I wondered, to be suspended in rain? I remember Aunt Celia telling me how Cascade Lake filled after the eruption with real tears, people crying, and it all started over a woman. Typical.

In this case, the woman was Nafanua. Pulled between two tribes, her people prayed to the Gods to protect her. But the request was selfish, and the Gods reflected their complaints back at the earth on which they stood. The exploding volcano could be seen all over the land, and the woman, her tribe, and the earth around them disappeared.

A hole remained, with cliffs thousands of feet deep. The living tribe was ashamed. They drew black streaks down their faces in mourning. The streaks became pathways for their tears. “When you have filled the crater with these tears,” a shaman promised, “Nafanua and her people will return.”

“So for thousands of years,” Aunt Celia said, “the tribe and its descendants made long journeys to the crater and offered up their sorrows, weeping into the pit, calling back the old ones, building a great lake.”

“Did it work?” I asked her.

“At first Cascade Lake was an empty pit,” she said. “It’s taken this long to fill, and it’s close.”

“You mean the Goddess might come back in our lifetime?” I pictured a woman in a long gauzy white dress, walking across the water, dark hair to her feet, her eyes blue.

“Oh yes,” Aunt Celia nodded. “Yes, she will come to heal her people’s hearts, once the debt has been repaid.”

“That’s just a story, right?” I asked her. I was very young then. I was still learning the difference between fiction and truth.

“It’s a story, but it doesn’t make it any less true,” she said. This confused me. Was it true or wasn’t it? Would Nafanua heal everyone or not? “It’s true if you believe it,

Macy.” She said this to end the discussion, to end my questions. But her answer also confused me. Could I think Nafanua into existence? What if I doubted her? Would I kill her? It kept me awake for a few nights. *I know you’re there, Nafanua.* I said to her, to reassure us both that I wouldn’t be her undoing.

Later, when I learned about symbols, I realized that’s all she was. But the lake never stopped being tears: crystal clear.

“Tears are so pure, you can see into them further than water, ” said Aunt Celia smiling. I knew this must be fact. Everyone talked about the clarity of Cascade Lake. “It was,” Mrs. Nivens had said, “one of the clearest lakes in the entire world.” This astonished me. “Did you know,” said Mrs. Nivens’ voice in my head, “that you can float in the lake and see a trout 150 below you? That’s unheard of most places in the world.”

I wondered how the other places were created. Were they also filled with tears? “Did you know,” said Mrs. Nivens, “that Cascade Lake is so deep that no light can penetrate to the bottom? All the other colors fall out, refract, are filtered, except blue. Blue light is trapped, and so the surface is saturated with the color of sky and ice.”

Icy blue tears. I couldn’t wait to dive into them, see through them, breath them in. Would the Gods be bothered by my disruption of their sacred ground? And what would Aunt Celia think of Mrs. Nivens? “There are many explanations,” she might say, dismissing the science. I smiled while we pulled up next to the house.

CHAPTER 9

Rutherford is peaky. That's how Celia described him. When she leaves the room, he bursts out in song, whistling two or three notes, the first high pitched: *fee bee ee, fee bee ee*. She refills his sugar water twice-a-day, to keep it shallow enough that he can't fall and drown. He's better at getting around the cage but still off-balance.

To get out there, I play the music loud, try not to think, distract myself reciting anything I can remember: song lyrics, the periodic table up to element 47—it gets hazy after Silver, the stages of meiosis. This is how I drive past the boathouse and onto the peninsula and dash up to the door, knocking fast. Once I'm in the house—away from the lake view, I can pretend we're somewhere else.

“I couldn't figure out how Rutherford was eating so much,” Celia said while the clouds gathered outside. “Watch this.” She filled his bowl with fresh seeds: sunflower hearts, tree nuts, safflower mixed with soy vitamin oil, the most expensive brand at the pet store. I had bought them yesterday and driven them out. “Only the best for Rutherford,” I had grinned at Celia, producing the bag. Fresh nuts in the bowl, Rutherford waited for the door to shut and didn't move while we were in the room yesterday.

“Stand back a little,” Celia says, stepping backward.

He cocks his head then hops over to the bowl, takes a seed, checks that we aren't coming closer and hops to the edge of the cage. What is he doing?

“Wait,” she says, and Rutherford steps back to the bowl, picks a nut quickly, and pushes it under some shredded newspaper, facing us this time.

“He’s hiding it!” I say, laughing.

“It’s a good sign. I looked it up. Chickadees can remember thousands of hiding places. He likes your seeds.” She patted me on the arm, and I stayed to sit with him awhile.

“So you’re a chickadee,” I whisper.

By the time I leave, the rain has started falling, a light sprinkle. I switch the blades on the lowest setting and concentrate on the seeds he was picking, anxiety creeps back into my stomach. Which were his favorites? I remember all the way to the turn at the pasture, then decide to go right, toward town.

In Clark’s Video, I pick up a movie about two bank robbers when I feel a hand on my arm. *Oh my God*. It must be Jason, my heart skips, knocks about in my chest, and I turn.

“Mrs. Pritchett!” I gasp.

“Macy! Is that you? I thought so.” She sweeps red hair away from her face. It was black the last time I saw her. I don’t know if I’ve ever seen her natural color. “Macy, it’s so wonderful to see you.” We hug, stand back a little awkwardly. The clerks at the front counter are still talking together.

“I didn’t know that you were in town. How are you doing?” Her face looks so much like Francis’. And their jewelry tastes are so similar. She’s wearing a blue beaded choker, popular ten years ago in our age group. What an eccentric, wonderful woman.

“I’m great,” I say. “Super great. How’s Francis?” Francis used to email me, send me notes after we left to Portland—pretty regularly at first, sometimes we talked on the phone, but eventually we stopped sending messages.

“Francis is wonderful! She’s gone up to Eastern Washington University, studying Interior Design.”

“That’s wonderful—is she out of school for the summer?”

“She is, but she took a summer job out in Washington D.C.”

“Doing what?”

“Well, get this,” she waves manicured fingers, “Francis is trying to sell security systems.”

“Really!”

“Yes, *trying*, door-to-door. Apparently it pays quite a bit.” Her voice dances energetically. “That’s how they talked her into it. She went to one of those recruiting meetings. They set everything up fancy, made the job sound glamorous. It’s all about location,” she waves her nails again, setting the scene for me. “She says her apartment’s beautiful, high arched ceilings, the works, except unfurnished, so they all sit around on suitcases, and when she’s not working, meaning,” she lowers her voice, “when she ditches work,” her voice returns to normal, “she has a wonderful time in the city.”

“How close is she?”

“About thirty minutes away. She’s already been to the Mall half-a-dozen times.”

She waves off further questions. “Tell me, what brings you back to Cascade? I don’t think I’ve seen you since you left. I’ve seen your mother, but,” she trails off, not sure if she should continue.

“Well,” I stammer. “Did you hear that she’s sick?”

“No. No I didn’t, what happened?” Her face contorts, concerned.

“Well, she has breast cancer,” I say, “and she had to have it removed. I came back to help take her to the radiation treatments.” It’s nice to have someone to tell this.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “You must be frantic. How advanced is she? Did she take chemo, too?”

“No, just radiation. She finished her first week today; we only have four more. I drive her into Burneye.”

“That’s terrible, but I’m so glad it’s not bad enough for chemotherapy. That’s a good sign you know,” she nodded at me, eyes wide. “When my sister took her chemotherapy, she was so sick. The doctors must think your mother’s diagnosis is pretty good.” She means to be encouraging.

“Actually,” my stomach knots, “they warned she might not make it.”

“I understand,” she smiles, “but if it makes you feel any better, my sister’s cancer was so advanced she had to take chemo and radiation after her mastectomy. She’s been cancer-free for almost three years now.”

“I’m so glad.” I’m sincere saying this, but I also feel uncomfortable.

“Did your mother have a mastectomy?” she asks delicately.

“I think they just took a piece, but I really don’t know the details.”

“Macy,” she waved her hand emphatically, “that’s a lumpectomy. Take it from me, she’s going to be fine! Don’t you worry. I remember my sister telling me how envious she was of the women like your mother. ‘Rachel,’ she said to me, ‘why couldn’t I have found mine sooner? Can you imagine how wonderful it would be to have their odds? To not be sick?’ Of course, any cancer is scary,” she adds.

I step away.

“But I’m so glad that your mom found her’s so soon.”

I nod. “I guess we’re lucky.”

“It probably doesn’t feel that way to you right now, but what I gathered from my sister is that pretty much everyone who doesn’t need chemo makes it through their breast cancer. It’s a really good position to be in. I’m sure she’ll be okay.”

It’s strange to be talking so familiarly—I haven’t seen her for so long, and to be doing it in the video store. Plus, it doesn’t sound like what Mari has been saying: inconsistent. Everyone knows the dangers of breast cancer.

“But I’m telling you things you already know. Tell me about you. What are you doing? You’re such a nice girl to come home and take care of your mother.”

I take in a breath.

There's only two ways to look at this, and I'm inclined to believe in the latter. She may be sick with caveats, or dying. But what Mrs. Pritchett said made me feel uneasy. Could Mari have me here making her fancy nutritionally-superior meals, cleaning her house, driving her to and from treatments on a farce? It's not, I know, because cancer is serious. Whenever it's mentioned, people say it in capitalized letters: *italic, bold, red*. But Mrs. Pritchett denied it, waved it aside: *ohh radiation tee hee hee; she's lucky*. It eats at me.

I don't want to use Mari's computer, so on the way home I detour to the library. There's a risk of running into Jason here. I look over my shoulder constantly, scan the room when I enter. Jason's memory is like a physical haunting presence. It's not that I couldn't handle seeing him, I tell myself. I just don't want to be taken by surprise.

There are three computers in this tiny tribute to humanity's achievements, and it smells like paper and glue. The librarian, appearing irritated over having a customer, makes me renew my card, which I don't have on me. This isn't a service industry.

"How do I get onto the databases?" I ask. She gives me an impatient look. "I need to study cancer treatments." She points toward the machine.

"Use the search engine—it's self-explanatory."

"Well, I was hoping you could help me find a medical journal."

"Check the database," she tapped her fingers on the counter, annoyed. "If you can't figure it out, I'll come help you."

I concede, noting that librarians all seem to get their training at the same place. And extrapolating from their ‘poor me—I can’t believe I have to work for people as dumb as you,’ I imagine it’s a narcissistic hell hole.

I log onto the computer, which is slow—an archaic version of technology. At first I get a lot of individual stories.

Pink permeates the screen.

Then I add “treatment” to the search terms. Images flash across the screen: breasts, which are not real, diagrammed with tubules running through them, cross-sections, nerves, milk producing globules leading to nipples, tissues, arm-pit lymph nodes.

And above it a sign: 80% of women are cured forever. That makes me feel better: 80%. Eight out of ten! Mari has at least an 80% chance of being okay. I’d pinned her down at 30-35%. A statistic like this could change my life. It doesn’t matter to me who collected it, how many people were in the test group, the control group, the study. The statistic, for being needed, is immediately true. Oh my God. I can’t believe how relieved I am. I didn’t even realize how scared I was of her dying. But maybe she has a different kind.

Spirit, Mind, Body, says the screen—*are integral approaches to healing*. “How you feel, it claims, “is critical to how the cancer reacts to treatment. Your treatment is an intersection between science and your own judgment. So you can have CONFIDENCE, INVOLVEMENT, and CONTROL over your very individual disease.”

Is that what Mari’s doing?

“Some cancer cells divide, regenerate, spread every two-hundred days.” That would sound like a long time to me if death weren’t involved. The screen says the fastest cells divide in a month, tripling every three. Cancer like that is hard to slow.

I come across a term I remember William dropping: Local Breast Cancer. He said it as a joke, “At least it’s not regional, baby, because we can’t do that much traveling.” They didn’t know I could hear them.

My eyes light up when I see this section. Lumped cancer is ductal. This is Mari’s, found with her mammogram. It is fiction, blares the website, an old wives tale, superstition, that mammograms themselves cause cancer. Know your facts.

It seems like the big question is whether her membranes have been penetrated. If they have, it’s invasive—spreading through the bloodstream—but she’s LOCAL, so I doubt it. There are 4 Local treatments. She’s done two: lumpectomy, followed by radiation. The remaining are mastectomy and chemotherapy. If a patient has a lumpectomy, the website recommends six weeks of radiation, but Mari’s is five, and not only that, radiation doesn’t cause any sickness: women don’t even need to quit their jobs. They can drive themselves to and from their treatments!

“Did you know,” the website lowers its voice, “that up through 1950 mastectomies were the ONLY breast cancer treatment?”

Mari will experience scarring and no loss of sexual sensation. How great for Richard.

“Baby, I’m only leaving because your margins are clear.” Suddenly I know what William meant. Margins—those secret suggestive areas, the space between cancer and regular tissue—excised, knifed out.

It’s simple, like cutting off a piece of carrot, tomato, or nicking a piece of cheese. The margin is the dead space, the no man’s land between cancer and normalcy. And without radiation, there are demons in the woods. 30% of women relapse without it. But of those that do, only 5% reoccur.

I know the group Mari is in, and I sit back in my chair shocked: glad but upset. 5%--that’s her chance of dying. What in the hell? What am I doing here?

It says women in her situation have a 95% chance of surviving this without relapse. If she does relapse, they can treat her again. My stomach relaxes, contracts. It’s a relief, or is it?

I’d been so afraid to discover that she’d be on the dangerous end of the statistic. Isn’t there more than a 5% chance of getting in a car accident? I don’t know. But 5%, this is a number that can be dealt with, almost ignored.

I move to the treatment section. Tamoxifin, Neo-Adjuvant Chemotherapy, External Beam Radiation. I focus in. Possible Fatigue—check. Rest—check. Diet—check. Do not attempt to lose weight. No bra—check. *Congratulations on reaching the final part of your treatment!* These daily treatments are dangerous, centered around your breast and possibly your lymph nodes: three-dimensional, delivering precise beams that minimize exposure to surrounding tissue. You’ll experience mild skin irritation, a small sunburn. Perhaps breast swelling. And fatigue, after several weeks of treatment.

She shouldn't be feeling tired yet.

It's unsettling. For the last couple weeks, DEATH has been flashing in colored neon Las Vegas lights.

Death. A slot machine: cherry, cherry, apple. Do we have a winner? Is it possible to lie about death? To get more out of an illness? To have too much sympathy, to sacrifice too much? Is it possible that William left because there wasn't much cause for concern? It seems that radiation is a scary word, but a mild treatment. At this stage emotional needs far surpass physical inconvenience. It's a very lucky breast cancer diagnosis.

I leave the library. It's wonderful news, so why am I so stunned? Mari's going to be fine. Radiation doesn't even make her sick. Chemotherapy: that's what I'd confused it with. But then why am I here? *You're here*, says a voice in my head, *to make things right*.

But how can I do anything when she's been lying to me? But then, I'm not sure she did lie. Maybe I just misunderstood. Misunderstood the way she clutched the tupperware in the car. She gets sleepier than most—that's why she's been in bed so much. But now that I think about it, I'm not sure she ever told me her chances were low, just implied it. It was the way Richard told me. Dying: I know he said she was dying.

And Mari never denied it, but it makes everything make so much more sense. William leaving, for one.

People drive themselves to and from radiation therapy all the time. Does she really need me to cook her meals? All the cleaning she's had me do—I didn't even question the necessity. Not that I don't want to help, I just thought she might die.

How could she do this to me? I pull the car over to the side of the road and climb up the burm, shoes sinking into the soft soil. I have to get out, to leave, push my way through the tangled young growth. I can't take the way she does this to me. The trees thin out—I move away from the road, away from traffic, into the green glow. The ground is bare here, the stand surrounded by pine needles, harsh trunks, hands pressed to my head. She's okay; she's probably okay, I repeat. But it makes me feel worse.

What in the hell is my problem? I don't want her to be sick, but I'm so angry! I kick a tree. Kick it again. I'm so sick of being used, of being pulled into her stories, her drama her needs. What about my needs? What about school? I didn't have to come down here—I could have taken a summer job, lived at Richard's in Portland, gone to the beach every weekend, but I'm here. I hit the tree; it scrapes my hand. Here because I let her talk me into her tragedy, which isn't even a tragedy, not compared to most. Dammit.

I sit with my back against the tree calming down, scudding my heels back and forth, tracking gashes, making a wet dirt smell, forest warm, musty. I tip my head against the bark. Here I am, in Cascade. After I swore to never come back—spent years forgetting, and now finally when I thought things were going to change, to be different, she's not even sick.

Okay, she's sick, but she let me think she was dying!

“You’re not even taking any fucking chemo,” I yell at the trees, hating the sound of my voice, harsh and unnatural. How can I minimize her cancer? I don’t know how to be her daughter, how to stay and believe her, how to love her without trust. I hate her. Hate her pathetic stories.

“I hate you,” I whisper, digging my heel into the soil and pushing the trench deeper, staring at the upwell. An ant crawls around the dirt, heads right. More appear. I’ve interrupted a path, their trail, which some go around while others head in the opposite direction, their tiny black bodies. Where could they be going so purposefully?

Somewhere I heard that ants haul more soil to the surface than earthworms, even barter their lives with other insects: aphids, tiny plant lice, trading for honeydew, a sugary excrement.

Birds call low, piercing—I hadn’t even noticed. Closed eyes, I listen now, thinking about the ants running around me carrying aphids from plant to plant, protecting them from their predators for that little bit of honey, even sacrificing their lives to save the aphids. All around me the sound of movement, noise, nature’s chaotic assembly. I’m a part, an interfering part, but still I hear the birds calling, sharp, mottled trills

I’m going back to Portland. Mari can take care of herself. Run around without a bra, eat apples, drive herself to radiation until William returns. It will teach her to use people, to use me, to expect me to come like any daughter would to a real mother. But Mari’s role is assumed, for show, an act: fly to me daughter she called, as though she earned those privileges. And I, ever the idiot, came.

Set, determined, my chin lifts. Like the ants, another direction, another life to save, a way away from her madness, her lies, her self-obsessed love.

It feels right. Like I have to leave, but driving home, it builds inside me, a defense, a wall, something black: bile. She'll try to stop me. She won't understand; she'll defend herself—explain how important it was to her not be alone.

“You don't care about me—all you care about is you.” I have refused to make her dinner, and she's leans up against the wall, watching me. “Everything you do is selfish,” I add, disgusted.

“Everything? That sounds a little dramatic, even for you.”

“You can't even hold my hands like a normal person. You have to squeeze the hell out of them, and your rings dig. It hurts, and it's mean,” I spit the words.

“Look, Macy. I don't know what you're upset about, but I never meant to hurt you.”

“That's the point. You pretend to be nice, but you don't even notice the way you treat people.”

“What's this about?”

I toss the papers at her I printed in the library. She looks through them. “So?”

“So you're not dying, not even close, and this whole time you made me think you were,” I yell. “That's what. I just came back to tell you I'm leaving. You can take care of yourself, obviously.”

Up the stairs I run from her, find my bag in the closet. My room is bare, ugly. I don't belong here. Not in the place where Nick died, and it's not my fault. I throw clothes in my suitcase, my red t-shirt, three pairs of jeans, not even bothering to fold them.

"I don't want you to leave." She's standing in my doorway.

"I'm not going to let you jerk me around anymore." I'm crouched on the floor next to my purple duffle. The alarm clock, that goes in the bag, my shoes, the picture of Richard with his arm around me at graduation.

"William didn't want me to be alone. He only left because you promised to stay," her voice slaps me. She's worried about my broken promise?

"I don't care if you're alone," my voice is shrill. "I don't care if you're alone for the rest of your life. You deserve to be alone." I mean this, mostly. Didn't she leave us alone? She steps back, recovers; when she speak again, her last words don't exist.

"Macy," sweet, lilting, controlled. "You don't know what you're saying, what it was like being married to your father—you saw so little; it was the luckiest thing in my life that he left, that he didn't come back after me."

"I know exactly what I'm saying," my voice spits. "You were unhappy—Richard yelled, but you asked for it, and he changed. He went to therapy before Nick died, for God's sake, he was different." She looks at her hands.

"Macy, it wasn't the first time. He went to therapy before, too. It never worked." She stops herself. "That's not true. It worked for awhile, but things would come up; it was something he couldn't control, and he'd lose it. He was mean."

“I don’t give a shit. Maybe you made him lose it. I bet you deserved it.” I don’t know where the words have come from, but I can’t stop myself. “He hasn’t done anything since we left—he changed; he’s nicer than you are, and you didn’t even care. What kind of mother are you,” it disgusts me to look at her, “walking out on your family?”

“I didn’t walk out.” She sighs.

“Is that how you justify it? It was too hard to pack? Poor you. I bet it was awful breaking your promise. It just killed you, just like it was too hard to make a phone call once a week. Once a week, goddamn it! What is wrong with you?” I zip my bag.

Mari steps out of the door, disappears.

“I’m sure Nick appreciated your sacrifice,” I call sarcastically after her, following with my duffle.

She keeps walking down the stairs, doesn’t protest.

I follow her all the way into the kitchen, where she pours herself a glass of water. I think her hands are shaking, but I don’t care. I’m glad. The glass stays on the counter.

“I’m sorry you’re upset Macy,” she says, using the counter to steady herself. “But you don’t understand what I went through, and I’m not going to talk about it.”

I hate her. “Of course you’re not,” I say. “That would be too easy, and you’re a runner; run from anything that’s hard.” I’ve gone too far, but the edge is slick, razor sharp.

“That’s not fair, Macy. You don’t understand.”

She looks at me, pleading in her eyes, but I've seen those eyes before. "You couldn't know how hard it was for me to lose you," she says, "you couldn't know how I cried, how it wrecked me, how I'm still wrecked, how much it means to have you back." She reaches out her arm, as if I would let her touch me. "I've never been able to think of anything but you and Nick."

"That's a lie." I step back from her. "You could never think of anything *but* Nick. Nick and your own damn selfish self. I hate you. I'm ashamed that you're my mother."

I have to get out, the living room; my eyes catch the bird in the frame above the dining room table, headless, trying to escape. "Ashamed," I call over my shoulder, "bitch." This last part I say under my breath, but loud enough for her to hear, and tears, mini-rivulets—betray me. It's because I'm mad, not because I'm sad, because I'm mad.

She follows me into the living room, reaches for my arm, but I jerk it back. "Macy?" A pause, a space. "I know how hard it must be for you to feel like you've lost your mother."

"I didn't lose my mother. She abandoned me."

"I know." Her voice breaks, rips my heart. She sits in Richard's chair, not even remembering it's his, not even remembering it's not her place, sits there like she owns it, like she owns this house, owns our memories.

"I remember when you were a baby."

I want to stop her but I can't leave.

"Your sweet little fingers. You used to pull at my lips, put your fingers in my mouth, yank off my glasses." She looks up, a little laugh, "I had to get contacts."

I listen inspite of myself. Despite.

“Nick was so little. He left the backdoor open, and I didn’t even notice, ran to play outside. I could see him from the window, running through that plastic flexi-tunnel. You used to love that thing. Remember?”

It was orange. But I don’t tell her this.

“You went outside—half-crawled, half-walked. At first I thought you’d gone upstairs. You loved to climb stairs, always up, but you hated going down; oh you used to scream for us to save you.” She laughs. “But I couldn’t find you upstairs. God it scared me. I’d checked all around the main level, so when you weren’t upstairs a panic button went off inside me. I yelled your name. I knew you must be hiding somewhere, but everywhere I looked you weren’t. Finally I ran out to your brother. ‘Have you seen the baby? Listen to Mama,’ I held his shoulders. ‘Have you seen the baby?’ And he pointed, pointed out to the forest. Oh my God. I ran, ran right where he was pointing, half afraid I’d never find you again, that some animal would find you first, a hundred things, anything could have happened. But there you were, trying to climb up over a fallen tree that was too big for you. The ferns almost eclipsed your body. I clapped my hand on my mouth, so you wouldn’t hear me, almost screamed at you, screamed your name.” She looks up. “I thought I’d die with relief seeing you there—I wanted to rush to you, to hold you so tight, your little body forever.” She looks back at her hands, “But instead I watched. You were so brave, trying so hard. I almost laughed, partly relief, partly exhaustion. Then you sat down and started to cry. God you were so cute. But when I

moved toward you, you stopped, got on your hands and knees, and crawled all the way around the whole tree. It was enormous. I was so proud.”

This story pulls at my heart, cinches it so tightly it hurts. She doesn’t deserve to know this story, to use it against me. My duffle is full, overfull. I hold it with both hands, look at the old flight tag I never took off. This story doesn’t change anything.

“Macy, can you forgive me?” It sounds like she’s crying, but I can’t look. “Can you forgive me for wanting you so bad that I made my cancer sound worse? I didn’t lie about being sick, but I had to see you.”

She sounds so sincere, but it’s another act.

“I know it was wrong,” she says, “but I thought if there was anything left in you that didn’t hate me, maybe I could make you understand.” She stands up, walks to me, reaches out her hand and touches my arm. “And you did come.”

I don’t move, don’t look up. God I hate her. Hate that she can do this to me, that she has so much power over me. I consider believing her, collapsing in her arms, but it would be foolish.

I switch my duffle to my right hand and turn, walk to the door. No more apologies, no more baby stories. Let me tell you a story, I think, opening the door. Let me tell you a story about a little girl who blew her mother kisses every night, who believed her mother would come to her graduation. The screen slams behind me. I don’t look back.

“I understand if you need to leave.” Celia clips at the edge, prods it. I’m sitting at her side in the arboretum, watching, purple duffel on the ground. I found her here. “Sageretia branches are brittle,” she says absent-mindedly, as though speaking to herself, “and so dense—they can be hard to reach.”

“Are you going to wire it?” I ask half-heartedly, wishing she were more upset.

“Too harsh,” she says. “I’d lose half of the branches to breakage. No. They’re easily shaped by pruning, if the instrument is sharp. Here try.” She hands me the clippers and points to a spot halfway up its turbid trunk. I aim, grip, but the blades barely enter.

“It’s rock hard.”

“I know.”

Trying again, my hand vibrates from squeezing before the branch falls. It’s lovelier now. Not from the cut, but from its history, the obvious effort she’s spent crafting five thick branches, bursting outward, their tiny green leaves and orange tints; it’s the kind of place you might expect to find a sprite or a fairy after-hours.

“You did all this shaping? Or did it grow naturally?”

She laughs, a low sound. “It is beautiful, isn’t it?” and touches it tenderly. “I’ve spent many hours with this tree, but the magic is its own.”

We lay on the grass, tea in hand with straws, balanced on soils bumps while the sun goes down. Celia’s skirt is spread around her, dirtied. I love this about her, her complete apathy toward fabric, the sanctity of fabrics. My mother used to shake her head,

roll her eyes when I came in dirty, but Celia would rather lie in the dirt, smell it, feel it under her palms, dig it out of her fingernails.

She's watching the clouds, their ever-changing orange arc across the sky, and I swirl my tea. "What would your life be like if Nick had never died?" she asks. "What would have happened?"

Here on the ground, half-a-mile from the cave, perhaps moments before I'll leave, it seems like the most important question in the world—the only one that's relevant. What if Nick had never died? But it's hard to imagine my life any other way.

"If Nick had never died, we would still be in Portland," I say, "but Mari would be with us." Celia doesn't shift her gaze, clouds, gray at their centers, deep blue on their edges, are dissipating in chunks, disengaging. "Can I make other things disappear?"

"Anything."

"We would still be in Portland because Mari would have given Richard another chance, taken him seriously after he went to the therapist. Did you know he'd been going since April before Nick died?"

An acknowledging noise, a hum.

"It wouldn't have taken so much energy to believe him if Nick were alive." Wind stirs the hair on my arm, prickles gooseflesh. "But I think I would make Jason Taylor disappear, too." Moisture dampens my eyes—too much honesty.

"The diving instructor? Do you blame him?" She looks at me, alarmed.

I can't tell her; the secret might kill me if I spoke it, but I so wish someone knew. I follow clouds, can't dare to look. The space fills with rustling creaks, wind sweeping

the grass, a force behind the clouds. “What would you change?” I ask her, directing the attention away, expecting her husband’s death.

“I’ve had lots of experiences that could have been happier.”

“Mark?”

“Yes.” The cloud above has separated into pieces, wispy and distended. “But each experience, even painful or terrifying, is truthful.”

Truthful? My pain? The cup, the tea, feels cold to touch.

Distant but moving closer, a colony, the sound of chickadees, perhaps Rutherford’s colony. “Did you know chickadees mate for life?” she asks. I think of him upstairs, the iron cage, wrapped wing at the window. Then I think of Stella sneaking through the woods like a lion while he foraged to glean spider larvae from the bark, hung upside down from a branch to catch a moth, dug caterpillars and beetles from a snag. All the while Stella crouched, stole forward smoothly, patiently, the tip of her tail ticking back and forth. But now Rutherford flits in a cage, confined, reduced to hiding sunflower seeds beneath newsprint.

“There is no perfect,” Celia says. “Only now.”

I notice the grass, the wind, the sickness in my stomach.

“Don’t I know.”

“But you don’t.”

“Oh yes I do,” I return adamantly.

“If you weren’t expecting perfect, now wouldn’t be disappointing.”

“What’s so wrong with expectations?” I turn away from her, look down toward the arboretum, its opaque walls. “It’s not natural to die young. Mothers aren’t supposed to leave their kids. It’s not right. I’m disappointed because I should be.”

“Pain is natural, Macy, but hiding from it increases its duration.”

“That’s the most ridiculous thing I ever heard,” I say, eyes blurring again.

“Your life is not a statistic,” she tells me gently while her words blur into the clouds. “You can never be most people, have most people’s life. Nothing is permanent, and there are no ‘supposed to be’s’ or ‘shoulds’.” Above us puffs of moisture trail out, molten cloud tails, fiery as the sun sinks. “Everything is uncertain,” she says, “and that can be appreciated, too.”

“Sounds impossible,” I mumble.

“There is one thing you can be sure about.”

“What?” I hope she’ll say something wonderful, that she’ll always love me, but maybe it will be something trite, like my parents will always love me even though they don’t show it well. Or she’ll say, I can only count on myself. Myself is the only person I can control.

“This.”

“What do you mean?”

“Here. This moment is all that exists. In the next, something will happen. You might run away from here and never return to Cascade. Your mother could die from her breast cancer, enter the 5%; on the other hand, she could heal. I don’t know if you’re about to run into the lake, dive in, and let the tears wash you. But I believe you think it’s

the last thing you could do.” Her words dance across the grass, twine around the orange sunset and the birds continue their trill *fee bee ee, fee bee ee*. “The next moment will fracture, but you can count on the present.” Echoes, I hear them over.

The past has died. Tomorrow is irrelevant--all we have is now. *Now*, like some high school graduating mantra: seize the day, spread your wings, the purpose is purpose, pain is temporary. They shout hollowly: blank, meaningless, *hyperbole*.

“Why would I seize shit?” I ask softly.

“Hmm,” she says. I can hear the smile in her voice. “Shit is very real; we don’t give it enough credit.”

Her answer’s so unexpected I smile. She’s joking; or not.

“Think about it,” she says. “You hold it, this shit, and what do you notice?”

“Fucking awful smell. I would never hold it.” It’s unlike me to swear in front of Celia, but I don’t regret it, and she doesn’t flinch.

“Unless you had a dog, or a small child, or a grandmother.”

I think about these, how I would love them.

“Right. But it’s not the same thing.”

“So it’s in your hand, describe it.”

I close my eyes to imagine. “Steaming.”

“Ah, fresh,” she says, “excellent, you’ve chosen the worst kind.”

“The smell gives me the gag reflex. I want to puke.” My stomach does a mini-roll.

“More nastiness, even more interesting.”

“Mossy green, brown, warm, squeezing between my fingers, some of it is runny, dripping. And more than anything I want to wash it, get it off, never touch it again. There.” I open my eyes, smile my acquiescence tritely.

“Sounds like something you’d avoid as much as you’re avoiding your life.”

I look away.

“Something you never want to touch again,” she says. “It sounds familiar. You can disconnect every day. But do you want to run forever?”

“Oh, I could run forever,” I answer, not liking where this is going, trying to change the tone. “Please make it go away,” my voice is childlike, mock-begging, but turns determined. “Then I can move from Oregon. Get a job back east after I graduate. Maybe even move to Australia, study rabbit populations.” It’s the first thing that comes to mind. I have no intention of studying rabbits.

“I see, but would you really be leaving?”

“Maybe.” Though I know it’s a lie. If anything, leaving Cascade for Portland worsened my fear. In phases, it gripped me, built, replicating, made itself known. Celia sits up, brushes her skirt, holds her knees, braid swinging behind her.

“Or you could embrace your shit, it’s texture. It’s not worth less for being unexpected.”

She stands and goes inside the house, leaving me on the lawn.

Nick was missing. People congregated around the boat house, crying, pointing, whispering. It seemed like the whole town was there, cars, trucks everywhere, every

color brighter than the lake, on the gravel, parked into the trees. Some had brought their boats to lower in the bay, provide a closer view, a perspective, of what? Blankness?

Across the gravel I crunched, fingering the scarf at my neck—I hadn't changed yesterday's clothes: a bondage. People held out expressions, their faces like an offering of tea-light candles. And the light off the water, echoing, flashing with current, and a light fog like mist along the far edges. Where was she? I could hear Richard in the boat house.

"We have to confirm that Nick didn't make it to the surface," he said above the din of weeping chatter, curious alarm, faces memorizing what it meant to have a child missing, to be on the edge of no hope: the knife poised. He wanted to check the water first, to look for the body. The dive book held out like a treasure map, but nobody was certified.

"It's possible he's not still in the caves," Richard said, eyes emotionless. "Since nobody is trained, I can't let you go in there. We'll check the open water, the surface, the woods," his arm swept behind, around, down, intoning: there wasn't a place in the world Nick couldn't be found. Given so many options, what were the odds, really that he would still be down there?

"We'll find him Rich," someone called.

Where was my mother? I scanned the crowd, but she wasn't there, and I gave up, following the trail through the brush, away from the murmuring, along the lakeshore, curving in and out like one hundred women's bodies, sometimes under trees, sometimes across chewed rock, everywhere an islet. I felt numb.

I forgot I was looking for her. The trees were bent like covers, jagged rock edges beneath my feet, and the sky, like an ocean, a great swallowing gap, sunless, despite the twinkling ripples of water meeting edge, generating its luminescence, and the smell of the lake's rotting fish hidden in the rocks, dislodged bits of dead material. Out-of-sight.

Had Celia heard? Surely someone asked her if she'd seen the boat. When did he start the dive? Had she seen a second boat? Celia would know.

So it was mid-way down the trail that I walked forward with purpose, stepping over broken limbs, listening to the gentle lap of the water.

And that's where I saw her, rounding a corner, dipping in and out, walking along the shoreline toward the peninsula, hair pulled up in little clips. She looked out toward the water, walked carelessly, stumbled. "Mom," I called, running toward her, but the wind took my words, and when she moved to get up, she collapsed back on her knees, stretched out her hands toward the lake intoning words I couldn't hear.

I rushed, found myself behind her. She'd left the trail. The air, loud in the trees, the waves wish-washing, and above all of that I heard her voice.

"Son," —her throat made a sound I'd never heard, a sound that scared me. She called his name then curled her head into her arms, her body shaking, blurry. "You're not ready," she said, voice hysterical. "Come back."

They're words I hear in my dreams, from various vantage points. Sometimes I am in front of her, reaching out to stop the words, but my hands pass right through her lips, her yawning mouth, reach into a pit, the gate of hell.

Nick, she screams over the water. Don't go.

Or I'm staring at my palms, bloodied, dreaming—I've dug my nails in deep, but the wounds don't hurt. I feel nothing in these dreams, watching myself watching her, immobile, hidden behind the white pine. There are some things you know before accepting them.

If I knew how to dive, she cried, I swear I would come.

Me. I could have stopped this. It's the moment I most want to kill, spin in some celestial soup and resurrect whole, that moment of listening to my mother: afraid, ashamed, when she thought she was alone. Instead the voice replays over, every angle, every shade of gray dim light, hair in her face.

I still had the scarf on. Richard hadn't even noticed. When she left, I walked down to the rock where she was sitting, and put it beneath another rock. It's arms fluttered with the breeze. I suppose I left it for Nick. Maybe he would understand.

Duffle packed, Celia said I could stay at her house tonight. I'm in the attic under the eaves, near trunks and dusty boxes. It's spare bedroom heaven, or nightmare—the sweeping lake vista behind three-paned glass, the window seat nook, baby-blue cushioned, the spot where the boat spun circles, the other one, the one carrying me and Jason. Not far, the cave where it happened, or where I imagine it happened. And stars, plenty. All that emptiness: venus, the others, engaging in cold tangos with the lake. Lighting waves in tremors, bouncing reflections off the only thing that could mirror a

burnt-out life, and even that is a wispy convolution. How can something so bare be so beautiful?

Rutherford takes a seed from my hand. Tentative, quick, full of suspicion, the sunflower is his favorite. Of all the seeds in the world, it is the worthiest. I suspect he's hidden hundreds beneath the torn newsprint, buried covertly, and when he comes back to my hand again, I smile until my cheeks turn sore.

My bread is toasted, light brown, and buttered with sweet raspberry jam. "Before you go, stop at the great oak," Celia says. "I put something there. You should see it."

So close to the water, so close to the spot, my stomach clenches.

"Kat found the piece, brought it to me after you left." The oak tree is the one in Nick's dive log.

"Why there?"

"Have you ever been to a more beautiful spot?" A piece of butter softens on her toast.

"Why else?"

"For myself, I suppose. And for you, and Nick, of course."

"What is it?"

"You'll see. I think maybe he knows it's there. In some other life he's seen it, realized that even impermanence has granite edges." She smiles and bites her toast, crumbs fall to the table. "I know it's foolish. But I did it for Mark, too. I didn't even

realize until after I put it there that losing your brother brought Mark closer. I wanted to make his death holy, to accept it.”

“It’s good to feel,” I say sagely, using her own words. “Better than not feeling.”

Celia’s smile is soft, her hand warm on mine.

CHAPTER 10

“Let's move into the water one at a time,” said Jason.

We were rocking in a boat near the west shore, the shore furthest from our own lakefront property. It was the classes' first open-water dive. Jason had spent the previous three Thursdays instructing us on equipment and procedure at the indoor pool. The octopus was my alternate source of air. The vest, my buoyancy compensator, and my weight belt would hold me under.

The boat was small in the lake, the old volcano head. It felt incredible being on the verge of diving into six-square miles of suspended water molecules, over millions of pounds, reaching depths of 1200 feet. The crystalline colors and shadows on the water merged, and I shivered at the thought of what kinds of animals could live at 1200 feet. No animals live that deep, I corrected myself, only algae, crustaceans, small stuff.

Randy rolled off the edge of the boat next.

I took out the band in my hair, leaned over the boat, and dropped my head back in the water to reset my ponytail. The sun was setting later, and I loved how bright it still was.

Jason and I were the only ones left on the boat. It was the first time I remember feeling so conscious of my body, how small it was, how flat-chested I must look in my suit. The rest of the class was underwater.

Jason had assigned me to a threesome and made sure I was the last to go off the side.

“Macy, come up in fifteen. I want to show you something,” he said before I went over.

The regulator was already in my mouth. I blinked and dumped backward into the lake.

He wanted to meet me, alone. It was all I could think about. Francis and Mike were waiting for me twenty feet away. I adjusted my buoyancy and kicked towards them, amazed at the color, the light, the expanse of the lake. My heart beat like crazy, and the sound of my breathing filled my consciousness.

Like the other group, we had already decided our route and mapped it on the boat. Jason had anchored near one of the small islands. It was proof that the caldera was still active. Four-thousand years ago a burp of lava, a minor explosion, broke through the water in the form of a jagged, wind-wrought ship. Locals called it the Ghost Ship, and we’d made up spook stories about it as kids. A few times, Nick and I had even rowed out to explore it in daylight.

It was all rock and barely big enough to house two dozen scrawny pine trees. My diving friends wanted to see it’s underbelly.

“Maybe there’s a dungeon down there,” Joanne had whispered and raised her eyebrows.

“Or treasure,” Mike said.

“My mother said there’s ancient moss clinging to the pedestal 300 feet down,” I had answered. “Maybe we’ll get lucky and see some of it.”

“At fifty feet? Fat chance,” said Mike.

My mother loved the moss, but she also studied the life around the hydrothermal vents at the bottom. It was largely unexplored, but the moss, she said, grouped together like icicles and hung from the edges. It looked like colored snow or puffy tinsel and seemed to have migrated to the column and somehow stayed alive, sustained by the pristine water for at least six-thousand years.

I was looking forward to touching the belly of the ship, poking its crevices, maybe even bumping noses with a kokonee or a trout, until Jason asked me to come up early. Then he was all I could think about.

Maybe he wanted to talk about a problem. Joanne had seemed distant lately. Perhaps he wanted to talk about her, find out if I knew anything. Or maybe he wanted to see how he could reach my brother. Nick had a way of getting under Jason’s skin. But that wasn’t anything I could help him with; Nick got under my skin, too.

Francis had come around to thinking I was silly for talking about Jason all the time.

“Jason says age is irrelevant,” I said. Francis raised her eyebrows, as I knew she would.

“Whatever,” she says. I was wearing a purple t-shirt with a silver bird flying across my breasts. My hair was stuffed into a knit hat and my eyes were rimmed in black. The magazine called it “smokey,” and the key was lots of smudging and several coats of

volumizing mascara. It was the first I'd bothered with makeup, and even though I didn't have pouty lips like the women in the magazine, I felt ravishing, scintillating.

"He's practically old enough to be our dad," Francis said, shutting her locker before class.

"No he's not. He's twenty-seven. That's only ten years," I said grinning. "Isn't your dad older than your mom?"

"That's different. And it's not ten years, it's twelve. That's disgusting."

"Ten, twelve, same thing, Francis. It's a sign of my maturity," I rose my eyebrows.

"Whatever." She shut her locker and waited for me. "But I can't blame you; he does have nice arms."

"And hair," I said, slamming my locker and laughing. "I'd love to run my hands through it."

Mike was peering into some rocks when I gestured Joanne closer and pointed up so she would know I was returning to the boat. "Okay?" she signaled. "Okay," I returned.

At ten feet I stopped for five minutes, to be safe. The hum of my breath sounded heavy in my ears, in and out, in and out. I loved Jason's eyes, his skin crinkles at the edges, the way he seemed to know everything I was thinking only by looking at me. "I'm intuitive," he said once. And that's what I loved about him. He made me feel understood.

Jason helped me over the edge of the boat. I couldn't look at him. I pulled out my regulator, and he took my tanks and sat next to me while I peeled the black rubber fins from my ankles.

“Do you need help with your suit?”

I shook my head, unzipping my vest.

“I'm okay.” But the wet suit took longer, and he came over anyway, helped me peel it off, undressing. I'd done it a half-dozen times, and I hadn't thought anything about it. But with Jason helping it felt different, awkward, like I was trying to seduce him. I fixed the straps on my swim suit and looked at my legs. Little dark hairs poked up in every direction; I'd forgotten to shave. I crossed them, hoping to hide the hair.

“Don't worry,” he said. “It's so hard to talk to you with everyone around. I hope you don't mind that I asked you to come up early.”

“Of course not. I love talking to you.” Heat ran into my face and a sudden breeze felt cool against my body.

Jason handed me a towel.

“Here. Dry off and then come up front. I want to show you something.” He turned and went to his captain's seat.

I pulled my jeans and windbreaker over my suit and joined him at the front. He was looking at a blue plastic fold-out chart.

“See that star?” He pointed west, at the horizon.

There was a faint pin-prick above the cliffs. I nodded.

“Venus,” he said. “The evening star.”

I felt a chill, the good kind, wrapped in this bowl of water, warm in my windbreaker, so near to him. Venus looked effervescent, cradled in clear blue. Like we were reflecting back at each other from our different blue pools, seeing each other.

“Some people mistake her for a UFO.”

“Really?” I sat in the chair opposite him and gazed out at the star, wondering again why he’d had me come up.

“I’ve always felt close to her because she’s the Wandering Star, the Bringer of Dawn, the personification of womanhood.” He looked at me, and I felt awed at the things he cared about.

“Womanhood?”

“The Mayan culture used to worship her. She’s elusive, bright, always out of reach, like most women.” He grinned.

“What do you mean,” I teased, “like most women?” Jason had never spoken to me this way. It made me feel close to him.

“Even in the middle of the city you can see her,” he answered. “But it’s hard to get your hands on a star.”

I looked at his hands, clasped around the map. His fingernails were clean and chopped short, and he still wore the beaded necklace I’d never seen him without. Sound lapped around us, a gentle current pushing us together.

“If you like stars,” he said. “I was wondering if you wanted to meet me here tonight.”

He wanted to share it with me? I couldn't believe it. He wanted to be alone with me.

"I love stars," I said, thrilled.

"I can meet you at your boat dock at midnight," he said. "We can go out into the middle. The stars are the brightest there."

"Okay," I said, biting my lip and glancing up at his face. "I don't think I should tell my parents."

He looked at Venus, smiling. "They probably wouldn't understand."

Nick pulled up on the side of the house, and I hurtled out of the car clutching my phone. I had to tell Francis.

"I'm going on a walk," I yelled, heading into the trees.

Cell service was strong in town, but around the lake it was spotty. Some sides didn't get it at all.

"He asked you on a date?"

I could tell over the phone that her mouth had dropped open.

"I don't know," I leaned back against a tree. The light filtered around me, green and soothing. "He said he wanted to show me the stars."

"The stars?" she snorted and laughed. "Not unless it's the Big Dipper in his pants."

Francis had been with guys before, not just boys; one of her friends had an older brother that came home from college over Christmas. She'd called me crying the first

night; he hadn't even said anything, just pulled her around the back of the house. She got grass stains on her butt, and that wasn't all, but the next day she seemed over it, said it was about time she figured the whole mess out.

Then there was me. I loved Jason, but what if he tried to kiss me? The only boy I'd kissed was Rodney White, and that was during a spin the bottle game.

"He had a star chart," I said. "He knew I loved them."

"Macy, every girl loves the stars. That's the oldest line." Her voice sounded sultry like a perfume ad.

I hated it when she acted like she was so much older.

"At least he liked me enough to feed me a line."

Neither of us spoke. She knew what I was talking about.

"Look, I'm glad your excited," she said, "but be careful okay? Don't let him do anything you're not comfortable with. It's technically not legal for him to even kiss you."

I hung up the phone and sank into the dew damp ferns. They were tall, brushing my shoulders, whispering. On their undersides, little orange spots lined each leaf. I brushed the spots with my thumb and they came off, sticking to my skin like flecks of sand. I didn't think there was anything Jason could do that I wouldn't be comfortable with; I touched my fingers to my lips and closed my eyes. The spores came off on my lips, and the forest smelled earthy, like dirt mixed with wind and rain. My pants were cool and wet, but I didn't move.

Tonight I would wear my mother's scarf, for Jason. It was perfect; it had stars on it.

I stood in front of my full length mirror tying the fabric in a knot so the tree draped in the front. My hair was down, brushed straight to my shoulders instead of my usual ponytail. My mother was still at work, but she rarely checked on me when she came home, so I wasn't worried about getting caught. I had said goodnight to my father and Nick hours ago and gone upstairs to try on outfits. I quickly discovered the scarf looked best on black; so I chose an ebony tank top to wear with my jeans. A little bit of casual, a little bit of flair.

I twirled in the mirror and the gold and purple scarf flared out around me like a flag catching the air, then settled, covering my chest; I tried to rearrange the scarf to cover it more. Then I let Jason lean in to kiss me, pretending, my index finger against my lips, and my face flushed. How ridiculous. What would he see in a girl my age?

Although makeup wouldn't matter in the dark, I put on so many coats of mascara that I needed a pin to separate the clumped eyelashes. I pocketed the extra shimmer lip gloss in my windbreaker.

There was a flashlight tucked away in my pocket, one of the small LED kind you put on key chains, but I didn't use it. The trunks had a heavier shadow than the night; I could pick my way through them, through above-ground-roots and ferns, but barberries kept catching against my jeans. There was a road that led to our dock, cutting off the main road, but I didn't want my mother to catch me on her way home, and it was faster to cut through the forest anyway.

When my parents bought this house and the surrounding property, for pennies Richard said, they had planned to build a resort on the lake's edge. At first they didn't have enough money. Then Nick and I came along and my father grew disenchanted with the idea. He didn't want a loan that size when they were still paying off children. My mother had rarely mentioned it, unless she was pointing out how my father could never follow through.

An owl hooted far away, and a local one answered. I tried not to make any noise, but with every step I rustled. There was another reason I didn't want to use my flashlight, one I tried to keep at the back of my mind. It wasn't likely anyone would be out here, waiting or hiding, but I felt vulnerable in the trees at night, and snaps and brushing noises from the wind became men creeping toward me. I hurried on, trying to think about Jason.

When I stepped out of the trees it seemed almost bright in the clearing around the boat house. The moon, a waning crescent, lit up the dock and the bay, its light reflecting on the lake.

I followed the ramp out onto the dock. It creaked and groaned; water sloshed gently under my feet. From here I could see the white outline of Aunt Celia's house, stuck on the end of the peninsula like a lighthouse.

And then an engine, coming toward our dark inlet, lights blaring across the water. I smiled, clasped my hands.

"That's the big dipper," Jason pointed.

I couldn't see his eyes in the dark, and Francis's comments came directly to mind. "I thought you were going to teach me something." I teased, but my voice sounded nervous. We were sitting in the back of the boat, and he had given me the corner, the best spot. So my legs were up, and I was reclined against the plastic. He laughed and moved closer. And I held my breath momentarily promising myself I would remember this moment.

"I'm getting there. Follow the line of the last two stars in the cup." His face moved closer to my ear, and I tried to concentrate on the stars. "They point to the North Star." The stars were so bright. It was easy to follow. I turned toward him in the dark. He felt unbearably far away; my arms filled with goose bumps.

"I thought you were going to teach me something," I repeated, softer. A light chill blew at us from over the water.

"We'll get there. Be patient." I felt his hand on my leg, and my heart started beating louder. "I'm going to show you the constellation on that rare scarf of yours. It was easier to see a few months ago, so I'll have to guide you."

Jason moved his arm, placed it lightly around my shoulder. I was awash with anticipation, awash with good fortune and the feel of his body heat, radiating. That's what I remember the most about the beginning: goose bumps, my heartbeat, and how glad I was that I'd worn the scarf.

His finger tripped across the sky while water lapped against our boat: cassiopei, cepheus, lacerta, and we swayed with the currents while I pretended to see where he pointed. The sky was lit by millions of watts: pegasus, andromeda, the chained princess.

Everywhere I looked, I couldn't remember seeing them so bright, so alive: cetus, the sea-monster, lynx; it was the sound of his voice that mattered, not their names. Across from the moon and the stars, the lake glowed back.

“What's that,” I asked, pointing in the other direction.

“A kite,” he said, called bootes.

Jason was awakening me to myself: triangulum, perseus, taurus. I felt like I was dancing on the peak of the world, twirling on an ancient ocean closer to the stars than any other point on earth. I felt bewitched, euphoric. With a sky like this, I couldn't imagine why we were the only ones out here. How could anyone let themselves miss this night after night? How had I missed it? Jason's voice was musical, like we had shared the same thought.

“They could see it any night,” he said, “so it's rare that they remember to look. See this?” he asked.

I looked up. Where was he pointing?

“Down here.”

He flicked on a flashlight, dimmed and colored red, and picked up the end of my scarf.

The edge was littered with little dots, sequences of glittering gold flecks and lines drawing out a triangle head and tail, fat body, leaping legs.

“Aries,” he said. “It was named after a Ram who tried to carry a boy and a girl somewhere safe.” He squeezed me, cradling my body, and I leaned my head into his shoulder, pretending it was the most natural thing in the world.

“Really?” With one hand Jason worked at the knot of my scarf, pulling it loose. I held my breath, so my heartbeat wouldn’t be so loud. I was sure he could hear it.

“Typical fairytale: the step-mother beat the kids, the father didn’t care.” His voice was far away but his hand, still gripping the scarf, had dropped in my lap.

“How sad.” But I wasn’t thinking about the children. I was nervous, thinking about how fast it was coming, exactly what I wanted.

“Children are meant to be loved,” he said, his voice musky, his hand moving in my lap, twisting the scarf. I couldn’t hide my heartbeat. It was coming. I was sure he would kiss me. In the corner of my eye, the flashlight abandoned on the seat melted the air a dull red. Light caught the edge of the scarf. I hoped he didn’t think of me as a child.

“But the girl was too weak.”

He sounded sad. I wanted to comfort him, but I didn’t know what was happening.

“She lost her grip, fell into the sea, drowned. Nobody noticed, nobody could help.” He lingered over those words, nobody, nobody; they grew an edge while he watched the lake.

I wasn’t scared yet, not really. I wanted him to stop talking about a drowning girl. I wanted to feel safe again, to comfort him, to remind him we were under clusters of galaxies. In the sky I searched them out; the four little stars of Aries were almost invisible, a faint tiny swath. Maybe I was looking at the wrong spot. “Didn’t her brother notice?” I asked, wondering if there was any redemption to the story. “Why didn’t he try to save her?”

Jason was quiet, thinking. “He noticed, but he didn’t care enough to go looking.”

“Typical,” I said, trying to lighten the mood. “You’ve gotta love brothers.”

“He did kill the ram. It’s fleece was expensive, golden. He could have sold it, enjoyed it, but instead he had a dragon guard it. He revered her memory.”

“How very generous of him,” I said, annoyed that every story lately seemed to end this way.

“Men can be more generous than you know,” he whispered close to my ear. The hand in my lap moved up to my breast, engulfed it, and energy tingled out lightly across my body. I wanted this to be romantic, but it didn’t feel romantic anymore. My breath came quickly; the stars seemed far away.

“I need a drink,” I lied.

He considered it, then stood and went to the cooler. I sat up, wrapped my arms around my legs, tried to gather myself.

Snaps popped open the drinks, mine a root beer; I remember how icy sweet it was, gathering in my mouth and sliding down my throat.

“Will we get back okay if you drink that?” I asked, smelling the soft scent of beer and picturing the boat running into the dock or crashing into a sheer cliff.

His laugh bounced over the water.

“One won’t do anything, Macy. But I wouldn’t let anything happen to you.” He paused, picked up the flashlight and turned it off. “To be honest. I’d like being trapped here with you, too intoxicated to go anywhere. It might be nice. Don’t you think?” The words cascaded over me like the darkness, and a few minutes later when he bent to kiss

me, his breath washed against my face, but the kiss was soft, exactly like I'd imagined, the barest pressure.

"Macy," he said, scooping me up with both arms like I was a baby, positioning me in his lap, and kissing me again, "do you mind if I do this to you?"

"I don't mind," I said smiling, but nervous as hell. I wanted to feel his lips again. Feel the pressure of them. For a minute I wondered if he'd changed his mind. Maybe I wasn't kissing right; I would have to try harder, but I didn't move.

He bent his head down again, his face so close, then kissed me, pushing his tongue inside my mouth. I pulled back. What was he doing? He put his head down again, three light kisses and then his tongue. I tried not to move, to stay still. It was so big, wet, pushing. I responded, and he groaned. Tingles captured my body again. I couldn't stop kissing him. Our tongues pushing back and forth.

"Macy," he said, putting his hand under my shirt and reaching up around my breast, engulfing it in tiny tingles of energy. My heart pounded in my ears. I knew he shouldn't be touching me like that yet, but it seemed harmless. I wanted to keep kissing him.

He pulled back, and I laid there, breathing while he set me down on the seat. What was he doing? I saw him pull his white shirt over his head, heard him take off his belt, unzip his pants.

All the while, I laid there. Not even thinking, not even moving, just feeling my face so hot. He still had his pants on, straddling me, hands under my shirt on both breasts,

and I started to feel scared again. “Will you kiss me,” I asked. If he kissed me, I could put it out of my mind.

He laughed. “Kiss you?” He laid on me, eclipsed me, so heavy I could hardly breathe, and his tongue stuck deep in my mouth.

I shook my head, shook him away. “Wait.” I said, trying to push him off me.

He sat up and started fiddling with my pants.

“Wait,” I said, trying to wriggle away while he pulled them down over my butt. I pushed him.

“Shhh,” he said. “I’m not going to hurt you. Calm down.”

I laid back, waiting, breathing, hoping he only wanted to look, and then I felt his finger, sliding up my crotch. It stung.

“No, please don’t, Jason” I tried to push him, to sit up, but his weight was too much for me.

“Let’s play a little game” he said, tilting to pick something up off the floor. “Now you’ve got to stop moving or you’ll damage this,” he said, grabbing my hands, wrapping the scarf around my wrists.

“I don’t want to play.” A tear slid down my right cheek. I didn’t know why he was acting this way.

He stroked my face, felt my tears, “Macy, do you love me?”

“I think so,” I said, my breath coming in gasps. I was such a bawl baby. Francis had done this. What was the matter with me? I loved Jason.

“Then why are you hurting my feelings? You have to trust me not to hurt you. Shhh,” he said, wiping at my tears. “Do you trust me?”

His voice was benevolent, loving, the voice I loved. I nodded.

“Look at the stars,” he said. “Tell me which ones you can see, and I’ll make you feel the best you’ve ever felt in your life. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said, trying to wipe my face with my tied hands. I rested my cheek on them and looked up at the sky.

“Tell me what you see.”

“The big dipper.”

“Ah yes, the big dipper,” he said moving down my legs, stopping to take off my sandals, and then pulling my pants all the way off.

They crumpled on the bottom of the boat, folds of stacked denim. I didn’t look at him or protest. My eyes were on the stars, my legs tight and straight.

“Remember, you said you trusted me. I love you,” he said, pulling my legs apart. “It’s okay. Don’t be scared.”

I closed my eyes, my knuckles tight against my cheek, and let him pull them apart. He set one on the floor, and I curled my toes against the bottom of the boat, trying not to think about my body. *He said he loved me.* I’d dreamed he’d say that to me, but I couldn’t get my mind to wrap around it. *He loves me; he loves me,* I repeated in my head while his weight settled.

“Tell me all the stars you see.”

His hand was around his penis, between my legs, running up and down inside my crotch. I was embarrassed that he could see it, even though it was too dark to see properly.

“Tell me,” he said.

“The little dipper.”

“Yes.” He pushed against me, and I held my breath.

“The north star.”

He pushed again, and leaned over the top of me, his hands by my head. I could feel something burning, a slice. “It hurts,” I said. “Wait.” But he didn’t hear me. It felt like a knife, like being cut open, and I was such a cry-baby. Francis would have been ashamed of me.

I wore black to school the next day. Not because I was trying to be melodramatic, as my mother might say, but because I didn’t want to draw any attention, stand out, be obvious. I needed to blend in, melt, to have Francis hold me, anchor me to the earth, know exactly what had happened before I spoke, and then stand there and say nothing, fending everyone else off. I wouldn’t tell her how I cried.

But she didn’t show for Ms. Larsen’s class. I sat in a daze, thinking about how stupid I was to practically beg Jason to do what he did and then lose my mind while it happened. I probably owed him an apology.

The bruises surprised me. On the back of my right arm, and a few spots on the back of my thighs. I couldn’t look between my legs. It felt like pulp when I peed. Sore to

touch, I squeezed a washcloth over the area and let soapy water drain across my body stinging.

I wanted to shoot myself, to disappear. Everyone knew the first time was a little rough, and here, when he'd looked past my age, I'd proven he shouldn't have. I didn't deserve Jason. No wonder he turned his back on me.

"Macy."

I looked up, Ms. Larsen stood over me.

"Macy." Everyone had moved to the lab stations at the back of the room, but a quick glance and I knew they were watching me.

"Have you lost your mind? How many times do I have to call you?" Her face was full and pink.

"I'm sorry." Behind me there were snickers, whispers.

"I don't care if you're tired," she said. "When you're in my classroom, you pay attention."

"Yes ma'am." The words came out of my mouth dully.

"Well then," she pointed at the back of the room, and I understood she wanted me to measure our ecosystem. Friday again.

Some of the kids watched me walk to the window, but by the time I'd picked up my eco-column and walked back to my lab table, everyone had moved on to their own measurements.

Lotto didn't move. I looked closer. It was hard to see him clearly, a blur through the green plastic, and the water looked murky like the edge of the lake after its walked in, but his fins were moving, fluttering faintly.

Killing him. That's what we were doing. Anger welled in me. I wanted to smash something. Throw the column at Ms. Larsen and yell at her until she understood. Lotto had been beautiful, healthy; he didn't deserve it. Anger misted my eyes. It was my fault for believing her.

I walked to the front to get my notebook, furious. Maybe I should destroy the column. Forget Biology, forget this damn project. I could cut Lotto out of that column with scissors, put him back in fresh water, take him home.

I pulled my notebook out and noticed the fish tank near her desk, the flakes of food in a yellow bottle. And then it occurred to me. I would be sneaking past enemy lines, but for a worthy cause, a rescue. Ms. Larsen was bent over a group. She didn't see me take the flakes; she didn't notice me opening her lab drawers at the front, finding clear plastic packing tape, a scalpel. For once I was grateful for the crowd, the noise, the motion.

Francis was in the corner of the quad at our usual lunch spot, sporting a new haircut in a new color: black, bangs to her eyes. Her hair fell just below her chin, a severe straight edge, one length all the way around.

"Nice of you to show up," I said, throwing my backpack on the table and sitting across from her.

“Someone’s grumpy,” she said, tossing her hair and fluttering her eyelids.

“Well?”

“Well what?” I didn’t want to talk.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t notice.” She sighed and looked forlornly around the quad. “Go from red to black, lay down \$100 bucks, and nobody even notices. What do I have to do to get attention around here? Maybe a teacher would come over if I pulled out a cigarette. Lord knows I could use one.”

“It’s chic,” I said, slumping against the table. “Good for you.”

“What’s the deal, Mace?” She leaned across the table to get a better look. “Oh, your date! How was it?” She looked concerned.

Suddenly I didn’t want to tell her. “He didn’t show up.”

“Oh Mace, I’m so sorry.”

“You said you weren’t going to skip class anymore,” I answered, but it sounded like whining. I wouldn’t meet her eyes.

“Well, I had something more important come up than dragon-breath exposure. What can I say?” She grinned and blew a stream of air out of her mouth, practice smoking. “So what did I miss?”

“I staged a coup in Biology.”

“Really? No wonder you’re depressed. You know the firing squad’s going to catch up soon.”

“Good. At least the fish will live.”

“Lotto? What happened?”

I explained how I'd found him, barely able to swim, obviously starving or poisoned from leaking sulfury mulch, how I'd cut a square hole above his water line while Ms. Larsen worked in the background, slipped him some food. "He was too lethargic to swim up to the top to eat. But I put in dozens of flakes, maybe half the bottle. They waterlogged, and he slurped a few drifting by."

"Excellent!" She sounded excited.

I managed a smile back. "I taped the plastic over again. We can pull it back whenever we see him."

"Very smooth," Francis said. "I'm impressed.

"Thanks." We sat together for awhile not talking.

"Are you okay?"

"I told you. I'm pissed about Lotto."

"Lotto's going to be fine. You're really depressed about Jason, aren't you?"

"I'm fine. I'm just tired; I don't want to talk about it."

"Well if you don't want to tell me," she drifted off looking annoyed. "I'm going to go stand in line for fries. You coming?"

"I'll watch the bags."

"Suit yourself." She sauntered down the middle of the room and disappeared into the cafeteria.

It wasn't going the way I'd expected. Francis knew me; I thought she'd take one look at me and know what had happened, know how awful it was and how I'd ruined everything and maybe she would even have some magic solution to turn everything back

to yesterday. But I couldn't talk about it, and I had work after school with Jason. *Damn it.* My eyes filled with tears, and I leaned into my hand, letting my hair cover my face. What was wrong with me?

“Macy?” Someone asked, touching my shoulder. “Are you okay?”

I looked up at Joanne.

Nodded.

“Are you sure? What's the matter?”

I sniffed, wiped at my eyes. “I have a really bad headache.” I put my head back in my hand.

“If it hurts that bad, you should go to the office; call home, have someone come get you.”

I cried harder.

“Macy. You need to go to the office. Is this Francis's stuff? I'll watch it. I'll tell her where you went. Okay?”

I closed my eyes and nodded, thank God, picked up my backpack and left, tilting my head so the hair hid my face from the rest of the quad. I felt a brief surge of gratitude for Joanne. It was kind of her. Maybe Francis would come find me. She knew I wouldn't call my parents to come get me. Maybe then she would know what had happened; she'd know what to do.

I wasn't going to the office. I'd walk home; I needed to be by myself, and I couldn't go to work if I was sick. You're not supposed to be able to leave campus without a note, but nobody stopped me. I didn't even check to see if I was being watched; I

simply walked out the doors, my backpack hanging off one shoulder and turned toward home.

When I was little, I walked the seven miles to town to watch a parade after my father told me he wouldn't take me. I had to go because Mrs. Nibbens, my fourth grade teacher, told us all about the floats and the clowns that threw candy. I wanted to see the royalty, the princesses, but my father was in the middle of a painting. "Leave me alone," he said. "You know you're not allowed in the studio." So I went by myself. I knew the way, but my legs were tired.

When I got to Main street, it was deserted. Only a few people sat around on lawn chairs they'd brought for the show. I went up to an old couple sitting next to the road. They weren't talking. "Is it over," I asked. "Or is it about to start?"

The man pivoted around in his chair. "Honey. That parades been over an hour. It only lasted ten minutes."

I sat down on the curb not far from them and looked at the trash and broken candy around my feet: smarties, a crumpled cheeseburger wrapper, a purple ribbon. I had missed it. If my father would have driven me, I could have seen it, and it was only ten minutes. Ten minutes wasn't long. I kicked at the smarties.

"Honey, do you need a ride home?" It was the old man, leaning forward in his chair, hollering like I couldn't hear him only ten feet away.

When we pulled up to my house, the woman exclaimed, "My, but that is a long way to walk. You're a very brave little girl."

My father didn't notice I had left.

I kept my head down until I got out of town; instead of the sky I watched the sidewalk, instead of the shops I saw the boat, instead of the neighborhoods, the moment the stars went out. My excitement, remembered, seemed fanciful, deluded and dirty.

It was nice to get away, to move slow, to not worry about people watching. That's what I loved about nature, this strip of nature that I found myself on every day.

Yards morphed from manicured to wooded, and the properties were further between—soon I could only see mailboxes, driveways, but the homes were obscured, and I was finally alone in the one place that understood me. This is what I loved, the road leading away from Cascade, the way it wound back and forth so I could never see more than a few hundred feet in front of me. The rise and falling pitch, it's industrial cement, double yellow line, white edges almost disappearing in green, almost inconsequential.

Even the yellow signs, *Curves Ahead 35mph*, set in contrast the bank of earth and trees rising on my left, the bushy mixes of grass growing over grass that I could wander into from the right shoulder to kick. Only a ten foot wide swatch and then forest: spreading pines sharing ground with spruces and the broad branching madrones. The air smelled like cedar, and something else; maybe it was last night's rain mixing with the scents of fir, spruce, and pine. The woody smells made that temperate rainforest all encompassing. My shoes squished and slid in the damp grass, tangled momentarily in their masses.

I took to entering the strip of grass along sharp turns in the road, veers, to be clearly away from any vehicles. In a couple hours, Jason would be expecting me at the shop. But mostly the road was clear, and I stepped down the shoulder, one foot in front of the other, my hands wrapped around the top of my backpack straps.

There was a rhythm in the forest, birds calling continuously, chipping in the trees, a sound that grew more distinct the longer I walked. It slowed my thinking, stopped the noise in my head, induced listening. I spotted a banana slug in the grass, bright yellow, black spots, stretched and straining itself toward the road; it seemed 8 inches long. I had always felt a fondness for these surprising animals, so I stepped toward the trees and broke a stick off a pine.

Unsuspecting it undulated over my trap. When it had crossed halfway, I rose the stick and the slug contracted, draping on both sides. I started to walk into the forest, away from the road, before I realized the slug might not appreciate the setback. So instead, I walked it across the street, up the steep embankment, until I was close enough to the top of the artificial berm to leave the stick and its frightened passenger.

“I just saved you half a day’s walk,” I whispered to it. Probably the slug was oblivious to my perspective of its journey, oblivious even to its own progress.

I heard them, but didn’t see any birds until the fields. They were far away, dipping, darting, disappearing in the air like magicians. The land sloped down, sunken flat, scarred with fresh rows and symmetrical overturned dirt. The expanse opened up the sky. It was clear and unremarkable, more breathing space, and a fence to hold it all in: wire and barbed. I knew that in a matter of weeks, stalks would grow straight, and the

brown field would transform into a waving sea of grass, which in turn would be cut until it dried, then bound in enormous cylindrical shapes.

Jason wanted me. I'm sure of that; he wanted me to love him. And now that I did, if he really knew that, he wouldn't be mad. He wouldn't regret what we'd done and how I acted.

I kicked a pebble: straight out in front of me it bounced and careened to the left. I changed my approach, kicked it again. Next time, I thought, I'll tell him. I'll know what to expect. I won't scream—or be dumb. The pebble landed in the middle of the road twenty-feet ahead. But I was also angry. Angry that he didn't listen when I asked him to wait. Angry that it hurt. I kicked the pebble harder than I meant to—it jumped and sputtered ahead. It didn't have to be so awful, if he had been slower. If he hadn't been so obsessed. My foot met the rock again, sending it violently into the grass. I left it behind.

Obsessed and inconsiderate. I didn't deserve to be treated like that. Maybe he owed me an apology. Then it occurred to me that Jason could get in trouble for our relationship. He could be prosecuted, maybe even jailed. Age 27, twelve years older than me. The thought tasted bitter in my mouth. He really shouldn't treat me like that, I thought. People would misunderstand.

But then Jason was always above group-think. He knew I was older, an old soul. That's what he called me the day he hired me.

“Aren't I too young for the position,” I had asked.

“Too young?” He seemed surprised. “Well, technically, yes.” He inclined his head. “But you and I both know something about you.” His eyes were so brown, so kind.

“What’s that?” The edges of my mouth were already turning up, anticipating something wonderful.

“You, my Macy, are an old soul.”

“An old soul.” I tried out the words. They were liquid, rolling over me, elevating me.

“There aren’t very many of them,” he said. “But I can tell you where they’re most commonly found.”

“Where’s that?”

“In nature.” He said simply. “Or in poverty.”

“Why?”

“People with old souls understand things it takes most people a lifetime to grasp.” He waited for me to ask. But I was so involved, I couldn’t take my eyes from his, so he continued. “Their life is inner-connected with the world; they feel things deeply.”

“You mean everyone doesn’t feel like this?”

“They do at first. It fades. But not in the old souls. Do you know what I’m talking about; does it sound familiar?”

I nodded seriously, realizing I was more unique than I’d been a minute ago. Jason saw me, really saw me.

“Why nature and poverty?”

“Because those conditions take people outside of themselves. Until one or the other happens, their lives are dim replicas. They’re lines of dominoes, black and white, without dimension, just living what somebody else told them to do. It doesn’t have to

stay that way. Perhaps they spend a week in a tent; they wake up one morning and realize checking-off lists, living in cement, working under florescent lighting, and entertaining themselves with the internet hasn't made them happy. They only buy more and build more. But waking up after they've been away from that mind-numbing stress and chaos makes them realize they'll never be able to match the happiness when they leave. And that makes them depressed."

"If they're the happiest in nature," I interjected, "why wouldn't they stay? Switch their lives around?"

"Some do, but most can't. They're stuck, financially glued to the hell-hole they call life, and to their obligations."

"I would never do that."

"I know," he looks at me tenderly.

"Nature and poverty are the quickest ways to overcome humanities self-imposed madness."

"And the old souls?" .

"Recognize it before they've lost their life. They'd rather live than live miserably—they go where they feel alive."

I understood this. And I knew it was true of me.

"What about science," I said, "and art? There are other life generators." I know this because I've seen my father open an Avedon book and weep at a painting. And my mother is happiest when she's spent all day at the laboratory.

He grins. “Forgive me. It was a gross overgeneralization, but there are some patterns.” His eyes twinkled.

I delighted at having caught him.

“See?” he said. “Old soul.”

I tipped my head down and beamed. My whole body seemed filled with light. I’d never been so happy as with Jason.

Remembering this made me angry at myself for doubting him. Probably, I reasoned, a man couldn’t help himself once he started. He didn’t mean to hurt me.

I had turned onto the gravel drive leading to our house. I loved this lane of road, the gravel patches. There was no shoulder here, only one lane, and dirt showing through in large patches. The ponderosas towered. Walking in the road, I reached out and touched one that had grown a foot into the road. It’s bark was red-orange, broken, riddled with heavy cracks. My fingers brushed its roughness. The ponderosas and the white pines dimmed the sunlight in great swaths. I felt protected, sheltered, and yet their height also gave the illusion of open space. I tipped my head all the way back, dizzy, to see their lowest branches. The trees were easily over 150 feet, ancient, far taller than I could safely dive underwater. At my feet, last year’s cones were broken, embedded in the roadside, sheltered by ferns.

The front door was unlocked, as usual. More than two hours had passed since I left the school and even though I had planned to sit on the back porch, all I wanted now was to lie down.

In my dream a giant serpent prowled across my floor toward me: twenty feet long, his tongue flicked, tasting the air. I crawled up my bookshelf, pulling out books, they tumbled while he weaved patiently toward me. At last I crouched, frozen underneath the ceiling. I couldn't breathe. But it was too late to hide. In slow motion the snake wound up the bookcase, scales green like a tree, black and ochre spots, his stomach gripped the shelves and a wave of peristaltic constriction pushed his body past the gripping point. The snake was gathering himself, approaching, feet from my face. I opened my mouth to scream, to cry for help, but my yell was soft, soft like a whispered panic. His head, his body, was perfectly still, watching me, waiting for the right moment, zeroing in on my neck, a soft place to wrap. Like a flying squirrel, he leapt, throwing himself at my face.

I woke, sitting straight-up in my bed. There was a noise downstairs. The feeling of a presence trying to be quiet. A creak, like a slow step.

The clock said 5:30PM. My father was out-of-town, visiting another gallery. My mother wouldn't come home until 9:00PM or later. Nick was probably out with Kristy, or was this his night to work? I couldn't remember.

The hardwood creaked again. I'd heard that creak before, when I walked across the floor myself, trying not to wake my parents. I knew the nuances of the wood, the places to avoid. Someone was in the house.

My hands began trembling, sweating; my bedroom door was open. Where was my phone? I looked around the room—but it was in my backpack, next to the front door. I considered the window, but I wouldn't have time before—I pictured someone leaping at me while I pushed out the screen. There was the closet; there was the bed.

My hands and legs shook violently. Without a noise I slipped off my covers, lowered myself to the floor, and crawled under my bed, pushing through the dust ruffle. The gap was wide enough. I laid down, pushing with my toes, pulling carpet with my fingers, my whole body tensed, I entered the darker recess.

There was a quiet noise on the stair, a contraction on the stair, the sound of pressure.

I pulled again, closer to the wall, watched the slit under the dust ruffle, but I couldn't see beyond a foot of carpet. In my ears, my heartbeat; I tried to control my breath, pulled myself further under. From the door, the ruffle would block me from view. Still, still. Don't breath, I told myself, when there was another sound, a closer sound, the top of the landing.

Whoever it was had gone down the hall. A doorknob turning. My father's study.

Maybe it's only my father, I thought. Maybe it was my mother checking on my father's things. But they didn't move in this way.

My door was open. The person came back—a shoe brushed against my carpet.

I didn't blink. My breath was shallow, barely there. But I was sure whoever it was would hear my heart beating. The pressure hurt my chest: fight or flight, I thought. God, flight, please flight.

Why couldn't I hear anything? Had the person left? Was it a man?

A book moved on my shelf, another slid. He was looking at my books.

I blinked, closed my eyes. God, I thought, if you save me, I promise. I couldn't finish my promise because there was movement toward me. I stopped breathing. Then the sound passed me, muffled, left the room and treaded down the stairs. Not quietly.

I took in air quick and shallow, covered my mouth with my hand and my body wouldn't stop shaking.

Was he gone? I heard the front door open, the screen slam shut. But it occurred to me that the man might be waiting. Standing on the front porch, pressed close to the wall next to the door. When I went to check that he was gone, to lock the door, get my phone, he would hear me, step out.

The next thought chills me more, sends new tears down my face. He hasn't gone outside. When I think it, I know it's true. He saw my backpack; he found my phone while I was sleeping. He probably cut the land line before he came into the house. The leaving sounds were staged. I'm supposed to believe he's gone. I'm supposed to come out.

No, I thought. He left. He saw what he came for, and he left. I could get out of bed quietly, look out the window. Perhaps I would see him walking down the road to his vehicle. He must have parked it further down the road because I didn't hear the gravel. Oh God, I thought. What do I do?

I could push the dust-ruffle aside, not much, just a little, enough to see into the room, see if he had come back up here.

But the possibility that he was still here, the feeling of presence stopped me. Don't move, Macy, I told myself, like an adult begging a child. Don't move, don't move. He's in the room.

The one thing I really wanted to do was peek out from the bed, but the thought of him having crept back in stops me. The thought of his eye peering in at me while I scoot forward.

So I laid, trembling. Listening to house noises. An electronic whirring starts, the fridge turned on. How long until someone gets home? Please Nick, I thought. Please, Mom, Dad, Francis. Maybe Francis would check.

Wheels on gravel. The garage door opening. My body relaxed like a great weight. But I waited to make sure.

Casual walking through the house. The fridge door.

It was harder scooting out. It was dark under the bed. I didn't expect it to be dark in my room. There was no one there. I walked softly to my door, to the bottom of the stairs.

There was the sound of chopping in the kitchen.

"Hello?"

The chopping paused.

"Who's there?" I called more urgently, my muscles poised to run out the back door, run into the woods.

"Macy?"

I collapsed where I was, unable to answer. Moments later my mother was stroking my back.

“What’s wrong baby?” She squatted beside me, squeezed me with one arm, lifted my chin while my body trembled. She didn’t ask what was wrong or what happened. “Are you sick?” She set my head in her lap, and I nodded, tears coming out. Safe underneath her arm, I realized I might have imagined the whole thing; the footsteps felt so distant, dreamlike, a waking nightmare.

“I left school early. I couldn’t stay.” My voice sounded blurry, mumbled. Something was wrong with me. “I walked home, missed work.”

She murmured sympathetically, stroked my hair. “No wonder you feel bad,” she said. “Why didn’t you call me?”

Why didn’t I? I wondered. The answer seemed far away.

“I didn’t want to bother you.” The truth seeped out of me; it was a relief to say. My mother pushed hair around my ear, softly.

“Look at me,” she said, one hand on my face. I opened my eyes. “If you ever need me again, I want you to call. It doesn’t matter what time or what I’m doing. I’m never too busy for you.”

My eyes didn’t want to work; they were drifting, closing by themselves. “Do you understand?” she whispered, pushing my hair back. I tried to say yes, but my mouth wouldn’t work. “Poor thing,” she whispered, “walking six miles when you’re sick.” Her voice was soft. “Let me help you to your bed.”

I nearly slept walk up the stairs, bleary and warm. “I thought someone was in the house,” I muttered, not sure at all, but at least I have told her. She can take precautions.

“There, there,” she said like I was a very small girl. “We’re the only people in our house.” I believed her. It was an easier answer. The comforter is cool, inviting. I fade, slip away; her palm resting on my head like a blessing.

CHAPTER 11

Sunlight broke through my dream. It was the snake again, chasing me through attic. I climbed up there to be safe, but the snake followed, trailing me through the rafters. At the window, I was considering jumping. But all of this became obscured, fragmented by the light. I sat up rubbing my eyes, and then it hit me, the memory of Jason on top of me, Jason telling me to leave, and then, later, hiding under the bed trembling. I want the snake dream back. Then I remembered skipping work the day before. I slapped my head. What time was it?

The clock glowed red: 7:25AM. Then I wasn't late, but almost. I sighed, pulling back my covers. No time for a shower. I wasn't sure whether I was relieved to have made up my mind or nervous. What would he say when I walked into the shop? "Nice of you to show up," like I said to Francis yesterday, or "I think it would be best if you left," maybe, "You don't work here anymore." Yesterday's anger had drained, vanished. I understood what happened was my fault.

I pulled on jeans and a white t-shirt. My body was less sore, dull. In the kitchen, next to a gallon of milk and a box of cereal, there was a note in my mother's loping cursive. "Breakfast on the table. Nick's diving. Call me when you wake up." I put the milk back in the fridge; I couldn't eat.

When I called, her phone rang and rang. She must have been on an experiment. "Hi," I tried to say cheerfully, but my voice croaked. "I'm feeling better." It was true my

body didn't hurt in the same way, but it was also a lie. I'd never felt so sick in my stomach, so afraid to confront someone. "I think I can make it to work today." I paused, nervous about committing to going. "But could you pick me up?" I asked. It came out like a plea. "I get off at noon." Maybe she wouldn't even get her message, but when I hung up, I felt safer.

My bike was where I left it two days back, on its side in the gravel. The air smelled damp, like rain and dirt mixed, an earthy smell. I remembered what Jason said about nature, how it takes us out of ourselves, and wished I could leave my body. On the road light filtered through the trees, dappled the ground.

Next to the pasture, I startled two ground squirrels, who darted in different directions. One disappeared, the other climbed the fence chattering angrily, poised to dash again, his gray body freezing to watch me, the sun illuminating rusty orange highlights on his belly. I rode slowly.

The door chimed briskly when I pushed into the store and walked around the mannequin display. Jason came out from the back, wiping his hands on his pants. It looked as though he hadn't slept.

"Well look what the cat brought in." He wasn't smiling. "I was just trying to decide what to do if you didn't show up again." He studied my face.

"I'm sorry I didn't come," I said. "I was sick." It felt awkward standing there, but he hadn't asked me to leave. "I left school early. Migraine." The words tumbled out of

my mouth; they sound rehearsed. They were rehearsed. "I should have called." His eyes were tight, questioning.

"Then you weren't upset?" he asked.

My face colored. I didn't expect him to come right out and talk about what happened. I looked down. "I'm sorry I acted so," I paused, "so young." My voice cracked. Young: it was the only word that described me. My cheeks were wet; I hadn't even noticed I was crying.

"Come here, away from the window." I followed him to the back of the store. He tentatively put his hand on my shoulder. "I shouldn't have gone so fast," he said.

So he's sorry, too. I should feel better, why didn't I? The words were generous; I didn't deserve them. "It's okay," I mumbled. He hugged me, rubbed my back in great circles. There was the smell of sweat and dirt, but they barely registered.

"You're so tiny," he said. And I felt childlike again. "So tiny." I wished he would stop reminding me. "You know how important you are to me--don't you?" I was numb, helpless, and I shook my head. "You had me worried," he said tilting up my chin and brushing my mouth with his tongue, lightly. I held my lips open but couldn't respond. It tasted like my father's breath when he was drunk and yelling.

Jason smiled at me, like I'd done something charming, something he liked. "Why don't you come into the back with me?"

I'm so lucky, I repeated to myself, *so lucky*. Jason Taylor loves me. This is what it's like to need someone. We need each other.

“You look beautiful,” he said, one hand on my naked thigh, leaning away from me to take a picture, “just like that. Perfect.” I held my head down and looked into the camera nervously. *I love you*, I thought while he took the picture. He had promised we wouldn’t have sex again yet; he just wanted to take a picture.

“Okay, but you can’t show it to anyone.” It was exciting to be photographed naked; he wanted it, he said, so he could remember me in this moment, but I also felt a little alarmed, a little vulnerable. Something about being naked in a photograph exposed me, took away my control.

“I love these the most,” he said flicking the little nubs that were my breasts. They looked less like breasts and more like swollen bee stings.

“Can I see it?” I asked, reaching for the camera, but he pulled his hand away.

“Sorry. It’s perfect, and it’s mine. I’m afraid I won’t be sharing it with anyone. After all, I just made a promise.”

I hit him on the shoulder. “I didn’t mean for you to keep it from me.” I tried to reach for it again, but he shook his head, stood up, and placed the camera on the top shelf above the book-keeping materials. I’d have to get a chair. That wasn’t fair. I put my bra back on and started pulling on my other clothes. He was taking the fun out of it.

“Maybe I’ll show you after I print it,” he said. “How about an 11x14.” He gestured with his hands. “Or better yet, poster size.” He turned toward the door framing his hands. “I think it’d look excellent right over there.”

“Don’t you dare!” I thought he was teasing me, but Jason could be unpredictable. You never knew.

The bell chimed, and I hurried. Jason laughed, walked out into the front.

As the weather warmed, more people were coming into the store. Most of them were mothers looking for snorkeling gear for their children; often people came only looking for goggles. But there was a smattering of customers coming in for scuba gear.

“Macy,” he called, sounding urgent. “Your mother’s here.”

Oh my God. I looked at the clock. I forgot. She was five minutes early. I had just finished dressing when she hurried through the door in trendy layers: sage pea coat, vest, pink collared shirt. Watching her come toward me, I almost felt happy.

“Hi sweetie,” she kissed my cheek. “You ready? I’m on my lunch break.” I tried to tell her with my eyes how much this meant to me.

“I’ll get my bike and meet you in front,” I said, walking toward the back.

“Great.” She headed the other direction.

When she left, Jason grabbed my arm so tight it hurt.

“Macy, why is your mother here?” He seemed suspicious. Probably he was wondering if I had told her.

“She wants to take me to lunch, girls’ day out,” I tried to sound casual. “You know moms. They have to make a big deal about everything.” I don’t know if he’ll buy it, but I can’t tell him why she’s really here.

“I want to make things up to you, Macy.” He hugged me. “Will you let me do that?”

It was a fair question, a kind question. I’d be a fool not to agree, to put it behind me. I nodded.

“You’re amazing, you know that?” he said.

I tried to smile.

“Come here, baby.” He puts his face next to mine, kissed me softly. “That’s more like it.”

“I better go. I’ll see you Thursday?”

He seemed not to hear me. And his eyes were suddenly watery. “You deserve someone that loves you like I do,” he said. And I can tell he means it. Jason loves me; it fills me with a guilt I can’t understand.

“This is a golden rain tree,” Jason said when we were walking together at lunchtime, on our way to Picking’s Parlor for soup the next week. He pulled down a branch and showed me the lobes of the leaves and the green papery tear-shaped droplets. “Because of these,” he explained, plucking off the green rain and putting it in my hand. “They lose their green in the fall, turn golden. Hence the name. Beautiful, don’t you think?”

Beautiful couldn’t begin to describe it. I kept the droplet all through lunch near my plate, then on the shelf under the till at work. Finally in my bedroom I placed it on the windowsill, a present from Jason. I couldn’t believe that I had walked by those trees every week of my life. They lined the downtown; they were even around the school yard, and I had never noticed the rain.

Lying in my bed that night I wondered if unattached from the tree, the green would turn to gold in my room. And I thought about how only Jason could give such a

gift, and what a contrast between him and Ms. Larsen. She taught about life, but she hated it. Jason made me love it. And then I realized that if I really loved it, I could take Ms. Larsen out of the equation. I shouldn't let her kill things that were important to me.

“Why don't they buy the suits and the computers?” I asked Jason. “We can never move the expensive stock.”

“Two reasons,” he answered. “Number one, they probably already have that gear, and it lasts for years. Number two, Anthony marks them up too high, sometimes 200%. People can buy these suits for half that price online.” My father would have been pleased to hear that, I thought sarcastically, remembering all the money he must have spent outfitting Nick and me for this class.

Jason, to meet increasing demand, had opened another open water certification course on Saturday nights. “It's not good for my dating life,” he said, “but then I don't think I need to worry about that when I have you at work.” He pinched my cheek and winked. I smiled, but comments like that made me feel like he was using me.

“What I don't understand is why anyone bothers,” said Jason. “It's much more interesting above the lake than under the water.”

“You must be on drugs,” I said. I was feeling more comfortable with him now; I could tease him. And I'd found Cascade Lake thrilling: the expanse below me, the lake bottom out of reach to anything but a mechanical vehicle. The sheer volume of what surrounded me took my breath away. It was how I imagined the ocean.

“You say that,” he said, “because you’ve never dived beside a coral reef, or with a school of fish, or even dolphins or sharks. You’ve never seen what kind of wonders the underworld holds.”

I’d give him that. I couldn’t wait to do those things. But there was something mystical about Cascade Lake, something powerful. It had to do with its depth, its size, the fact that an active volcano still released gasses at the bottom creating currents. This last fact chilled me. And then there were the islands and the lava tubes. I understood why people came.

“We have fish,” I protested.

“Hardly; the water’s too pure. Granted,” he went on, “the tubes *are* unique. But most people can’t dive them, and if you’ve seen one sheer underwater cliff, you’ve seen them all. It’s an endless pit that gets darker the further you look: a blue well.”

He was exaggerating. Several locals were up for the lava tubes; they simply weren’t certified. I’d heard that some people from our dive class wanted to certify. And almost every week another group of divers came in to have a go at the underground formations. The lava-fall was a big hit. They didn’t think there wasn’t anything to see. Jason was just restless. He was in a perpetual bad mood these days.

I still hadn’t told Francis about us, or anyone for that matter. Partly, I didn’t know if we were together. Once a week or so, when we were locking up, he would start to touch me, but it seemed more like he was forgetting himself than enjoying me. Sometimes he wouldn’t touch me for two weeks. And whenever something happened, Jason wouldn’t talk to me the next day. He put me to work reorganizing shelves.

Looking back, I think he felt guilty. But at the time, I thought I'd disappointed him. I hadn't been willing enough, small enough. He told me I was getting fat, gripped my thighs, my butt. So I tried to eat less, but there was always a fault.

The other reason I didn't tell is because I'd never see him again. My father would probably file criminal charges, and Jason would go to jail. He'd told me this in no uncertain terms.

"You and I know what we have is right," he whispered once, while he laid on top of me in the beginning. "But nobody else would understand. If you ever tell, even Francis, they'll send me to prison."

"No," I said. "I'd tell them I wanted you."

"They wouldn't care," he said. "They don't know you like I do. They'd think I manipulated you, brainwashed you. What we have would be over."

"I won't tell. I'll protect you."

"That my girl." He patted my cheek. There were fewer kisses now. And he'd starting asking me to kiss his groin on his jeans before I left. For some reason this made me feel dirtier than I did when I laid underneath him and looked at the ceiling.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" he said, pointing to himself. I bent over to give him a kiss on his jeans. "Do it again," he says, "like you're enjoying it." I tried to hover a second longer. He scared me when he was like this. I hoped he didn't think I would do it when his pants were off.

Francis came into the store with me once, and while the three of us were talking, I'd set my hand on his arm, familiarly. I didn't even notice, but when she left, he yelled,

“Get back here, slut.” He’d seemed fine the moment before. I didn’t know what was going on so I followed him. “Do not,” he yelled, punching the wall next to my head, “ever,” he grabbed my hair and yanked my head down, “do that again.” It scared me to death; I’d started crying.

“Do what?”

“You don’t even know?” he snarled. “Look at me.” His face was red, a thick greenish vein showed in his forehead. “Do you want to see me behind bars?” He held a fist of my hair and forced me to look at him. “Because that’s where I’ll be if anyone finds out about us.” He flung me away from him.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to.”

“Play around with someone else’s life then,” he kicked the wall.

“Jason, I’m sorry. I won’t do it again.”

“Damn right you won’t, ugly bitch. Get out of my office.” I walked out to the cash register, dragging my fingers through my hair to smooth it and wiping my eyes. A customer came in, a ten-year-old boy.

“I need a kickboard,” he said, “for swimming lessons.” The boy didn’t notice, and I was glad for his company; I could hear Jason muttering in the back room.

“Right over here.” I led him to the front where we had stacks of green, blue, and yellow kickboards. “What kind do you want? I think this yellow one is nice.”

“I like blue,” he said. “And I only have ten dollars.”

“Well in that case,” I picked one out, “this is your board.” He beamed.

Jason came out from the back room as though nothing had happened.

That's the other reason I didn't tell.

CHAPTER 12

After we finish our toast, I follow Celia out to the arboretum, not ready yet to see the oak tree, not ready to go home to Mari, still unsure if I'm really leaving Cascade.

"Every time I drive Mari to radiation or go somewhere, my stomach knots," I confess. "I can't stop scanning faces, jumping whenever someone comes around a corner." The day is warm and sunny, and we've pulled one of the tables outside the arboretum and placed two plants between us for potting. "Silly, huh?"

She tips the plant into her palm, stems and fanned leaves spread between her fingers. She shakes and pulls at the plastic pot with her other hand. "He was arrested."

"Who?" I feel a prickling of fear.

The pot pops off. "There that's better." She places the maidenhair on the table upright. "Jason Taylor," she says, calmly.

I stare while she fusses with the tree. "When? Oh my God. How do you know?"

"I think this soil needs more grit. Ginkgos love this stuff." She bends to take a handful from the bag next to the table, sifts it through the soil in a rectangular brown ceramic while the sun beats on my shoulders. "Wonderful how flexible these branches are."

"Aunt Celia!"

She sighs, looks at me. “So that’s who you’re afraid of?” Her eyes scan mine, turn me empty, every recess, every thought. I can’t answer, but it doesn’t matter, she looks suddenly struck by grief, so compassionate. “I was afraid of that.”

“Afraid of what?” I try to pretend she doesn’t know what’s she’s projecting; she couldn’t know everything—she couldn’t know what we did. “Tell me what happened,” I say. “Why was he arrested?”

“Did you know the McKenzie girl?”

“Lanita or Tanya? I babysat them.” When I was twelve. It was my first job; they were another country family. Andy, their father, worked at the hospital in nursing. Rachel would leave for spa-days every couple months, so they’d have me come stay with the little girls.

“Jason molested Lanita, apparently on a number of occasions.”

What? I can’t believe what she’s telling me. Lanita was young, just a baby. They weren’t even divers.

“He volunteered at her afterschool program.”

“No. You’re wrong.” Jason loved me. I can’t process this.

“It wasn’t long after you left. She completely withdrew; when her mom pressed her, she said her body hurt.” Lanita with her missing tooth, messy red hair? Lanita who couldn’t get enough of the Rapunzel story and shivered whenever the witch popped up? I must have read it to her a dozen times. When the princess cut her hair, her eyes went so wide: *The princess is very brave, isn’t she Macy?*

I can't believe it; I can hardly breath—I rip a small leaf from my tree and roll it between my fingers, trying not to breakdown.

“They pressed charges, and another girl came forward, “Joanne West.”

God no. I wipe my nose, my mind tumbling through Jason's encouragement, his hand on Joanne's shoulder in dive class. I can't look at Celia. Sunlight beats the back of my head, turns my hair hot, a fire.

“I hoped you'd gotten away in time, was glad you'd moved, even if your mother couldn't follow.” Celia's voice like a wave, distinct, lapping, tracing invisible wrinkles in the sand. “But I see I was wrong.” A little breeze licks at the maidenhair in front of me: ginkgo biloba, tree of the cities, pollution resistant, ornamental, a show-girl; her fanned leaves rock like bells, but I can't feel the wind. I wonder if they found my picture during the investigation. But we never got a phone call. I can't believe it.

“I don't believe it. He wasn't like that.” My throat aches. Mercifully she doesn't counter, tell me I'm wrong, argue. She doesn't run for clippings in the house or bring up my fear of running into him. I don't need her proofs. Instead we sit, and the light rustle of wind spreads from the maidenhair tree up my arms, until I have to push hair out of my face. Celia waits, listens.

“He was passionate,” my eyes prickle. “You would have loved him—he loved nature. He loved learning.” I stumble over my words trying to explain, meet her eyes. “He made everything beautiful.” Her eyes are full of sympathy, “Once,” I laugh, “he gave me the seed of a golden rain tree, and told me it was a raindrop, that everything cried, even trees. He said I should experience life, that I shouldn't let others decide what was

right and what was wrong.” Celia doesn’t move. And as I speak, I realize how he justified it, that *no wrong* defined our relationship, made predation love.

But not even that is true. It wasn’t love; it wasn’t just us. I wasn’t one, special, his, or older than my age. Oh God. I can’t believe it. It can’t be true; there must be some mistake.

“He pled guilty, part of a plea deal.” Light glints off the top of my tree, melts away. “They gave him ten years, but you never know what that means.”

I tip my tree out of the plastic, hold the off-white trunk upside down. Branches hit my arm, rubbery, a diversion. “Did you say extra grit?” I ask, feeling sick in the gut, suddenly vulnerable in these trees, by the lake, by the memories.

Celia doesn’t recoil from me, doesn’t think I’m dirty. Sympathy, that’s what I see in her. And I didn’t know how much it meant to me, to be forgiven for Jason; my eyes well up. But she doesn’t even know half of it. I can’t take her pity. Stop, I think. Leave it.

Scissors sink into the roots, cut them like hair, easily.

“I thought he loved me.”

She reaches over the table with her voice, rocking. “It sounds like he did.”

“No.” I wipe tears off my cheeks. “No, he couldn’t have loved me and done all of that.”

“It doesn’t change the things you loved about him.”

“Of course it changes it.” I don’t mean to yell at her. “All of it, all of it’s my fault. If I hadn’t let it happen, if I’d told, maybe he wouldn’t have done it to the other girls. If I

hadn't left, he wouldn't have touched Lanita." I want her to deny what I've said, but she doesn't.

"Possibly."

Oh, God. Oh, God. I can't tell her, can't tell her about Nick, about anything. And she doesn't ask.

I leave Celia's subdued, drive a ways back on the peninsula and then pull the car over, park, to walk out to the oak tree.

It must be the oldest tree in the world, Nick said, when we ran beneath it, crunching old acorns scattered on the ground and fixed a rope to its lowest branch, the one that hung a hundred feet along the ground, low enough to jump and touch nearly all the way down the branch until the end burst into spirals of lobed leaves. We pulled ourselves inside its spreading branches, sat out rainstorms. In the springtime, I remember its leaves were fuzzy and light pink, before they grew tough and green. In the fall they deepened to red and purple. Then there was the mess of kicking and stomping. The oak was a passage between worlds, ours and Celia's—a midpoint: no-man's-land.

I expect it to be difficult approaching, like looking for a headstone in a graveyard, that solemn sickened searching. But its presence is like a curtain, separating me from all of this, melting my anxiety, even the lake a hundred feet off is a blur, the water soundless.

A bench under the tree; I see it at once. The stone seems old. Icicle moss has grown halfway up the sides, stringy masses, pale green, a place to sit.

I stay hours, or maybe it's minutes, feeling the air, my eyes closed, just breathing. I listen, my expiration is so quiet compared to when I used to have the regulator in my mouth: wooshing in, falling out, cool then warm when I exhale. And spacious, unanchored, like a life outside.

An image of Nick drowning beneath me jumps my heart, but my breath, the tree, and the stone make it fade. The boat, the water, the scuba tank, they come and disappear. For a moment, even Jason seems passing, one person among hundreds.

Mari holds the door open, wearing her reading glasses. "I'm so glad you came back."

I felt so sure leaving the oak, and now I don't. Her eyes, that smile, the knot returns to my stomach. "I'm sorry."

She holds out her hand. "Let's try again."

"I haven't played the film yet." She holds it up when I follow her into the house. "Such a thoughtful thing for you to choose." I'd totally forgotten. Mrs. Pritchett. The movie I'd grabbed.

Popcorn bursts, irregularly shaped, puffy without substance, and I divide it between our bowls, Mari a step behind.

"Baby steps into the living room," I say—goofily dragging my feet toward Richard's leather chair, bowl in hand. "Baby steps into the chair." I smile at Mari.

She shakes her head dramatically low, grins, then leans her neck way back, opens her arms, and hollers in fine operatic, “Your death therapy cured me you genius!”

We dissolve in laughter, put our hands to our mouths, create thundering explosions: *boom bshhhboom kapow*, great rumbling noises, the house, in our imagination, blows to rubble.

The sky is dark, but I can still see clouds outside my window. Some of them are white, some of them gray. They float between here and there, the empty space between star and ground. Where does the light end, I wonder? That dead light, passed from a star outshining its death?

On the drive to radiation today, we listen to music: electronica, my mother’s first dose of Sandra Collins. Ambient tempo on an upbeat, pulsing and urgent. She rolls down the window when the theme kicks it, double-time, rising. “Faster,” she yells, wind blowing, twisting her head into an unrecognizable mass, like a dandelion gone to seed. I rock the car back and forth gently in the lane, plunging rhythmically then slow: reckless behavior in small doses only.

But she keeps the window down, head back, hair flooding.

“When did you find out?” I ask, not sure if she’ll talk about it. We are drinking orange juice from red straws on the back porch. Rain drips off the awning. Mari swings in her old spot, and I sit on the lawn chair, watching rain hit the grass and the woods.

There's a chill in the air, and we have grilled cheese sandwiches in a pan over the burner, ready to flip at any moment. The madrone in the corner glistens.

“April 30th: routine mammogram picks up disturbing blob,” she quips. “Further x-rays ensue. Then the waiting. *Waiting!* Days for the results, five, or was it seven? Whatever,” she waves her hand, “it was forever.” I like watching her out here, near the rain. She's been in that swing as long as I can remember. Richard bought it for her when she decided to stay home part-time.

“May 14th: routine surgery expels rogue cells from one already withered breast. You know,” she says, eyeing me, “you'll have no chance at filling out your bra after you have children.” Her head shakes, “all that nursing sucks them dry!” Then she inclines toward me, acknowledging disaster. “Genetics. My apologies.”

“Maybe I'll never have children, to save my figure, of course.”

She smiles and continues. “June 7th: anniversary of my son's death. I wonder how I got so lucky—clear margins—when so many women don't have that news. And how is it that I get shot after shot at life when my child is gone?”

There is nothing I can say to this.

She moves on. “June 13th: Adored child number two, only girl, arrives in Cascade to care for her dear mum, and then one week later storms out the door. Profuse apologies bring her home.” She holds her hands toward the rain, like she did on the day I watched her cry. Nick's day. “My life in a nut-shell.” She looks at me, “Do you smell cheese burning?”

“The sandwiches,” I gasp, letting the blanket tumble to the deck, crumple.

It is a day meant for silence, hovering clouds; I spent the afternoon at Celia's, sheltered in the arboretum—the incessant ticking of rain like nails, cords falling from the sky. Hours later, I returned home and Mari pulled into the driveway right behind me, windshield wipers blazing, fatigued, exhausted. On the back porch, where we now sit, the air is wet, and we are huddled in our corners. Even the cat has joined us. I am under the quilt pulled from my bed, and Mari is drowning in a blue felt blanket I don't recognize.

“Things are different than they were before.”

“With us?”

“No. Here—Stella, cold cereal, new pictures.” Will she know what I mean? How they stand out in the sameness?

Her swing clicks, creaks, back and forth, like a clock, something you could keep time to. The rain feels ephemeral, like we're captured in an iridescent bubble, an opaque, translucent state. “I wasn't living,” she said. “There were other things to enjoy.” She looks at me seriously. “We didn't have a cat because I didn't like hair,” she returns her gaze to the rain. “But then I thought, hair can be vacuumed. How simple.” One drip drops louder than the others, calling attention to the awning overhead, pinging the metal tray beneath the drainage pipe. “Without children, I think I needed company, something to take care of, to take care of me.”

A gust blows rain toward us; micro drops splinter, mist.

“I didn't eat healthy cereal because I loved to,” she said. “William pointed out that I could love my body without denying it everything.” She holds up a finger with a

superior air. “I can take care of myself and have chocolate pebbles for breakfast. He was quite insistent. ‘Why don’t you enjoy a bowl of chocolate pebbles once a week? I think it would do you good—every sweet-tooth needs just a little hit,’” she intones a gruff imitation. “I told him it was a child’s cereal, for people under ten. You know what he said?” She raises her eyebrows. “‘Exactly!’” She laughs.

“It’s funny too, how much the house hasn’t changed.” I say it lightly, an act of concealment: Nick’s bedroom, walls with their various hangings, furniture, half-finished kitchen tiles.

“Nick’s room?” The one drip is isolated, noisy.

“Well, and other things.”

She pushes the swing with her feet, and it falls into a faster clicking rhythm. “I stayed up half the night waiting for Nick to get home. All that time I thought he was with Kristy Wells. You know, ‘that’s what boys do,’ I told myself. Sooner or later it was bound to happen. I was just worried he wasn’t using a contraceptive.”

I pull the quilt into my body, remembering my devastation, and I hadn’t even thought to use a contraceptive. She hadn’t even thought to worry about me. But it didn’t matter, Nick had ruined everything; it was Sunday morning. My father was rummaging in the fridge when the phone rang; I had already started in on a bowl of oatmeal with raisins. If I hadn’t answered the phone, would it have still happened?

“Hi, it’s Tom at the Forest Service. Is Nick there?”

“Just a minute.”

My father had pulled eggs out of the fridge and was searching for a frying pan. I left the phone, sure he wasn't, but walked to his room. The door was closed. "Nick," I knocked. There was no answer. I turned the knob, but his room looked exactly like it had when I went through it two days before. Maybe he'd already left for work.

But when I looked through the living room blinds the gravel patch was empty, winding out of sight into the trees. Nick's truck was gone. I tried to ignore the feeling in my stomach, not let it bother me. In the kitchen, my father was whipping milk into his eggs over the stove.

"Sorry," I told Tom, "he must have already left for work. His truck's gone."

"Okay," Tom said, and I got ready to put the receiver down. "Hey, has he been sick?" he asked.

"Not that I know of."

"The only reason I ask is because he missed work yesterday, too. And if he's not feeling well, then I could call in someone else."

I didn't know what to tell him.

"If he shows up there before I see him," Tom said, "will you have him call me?"

"Sure, no problem." I hung up the phone. Richard was scraping the pan with a spatula, pushing clumps of congealing eggs around the pan, and Mari was standing in the doorway, her hair back in clips that showed off the lines in her translucent skin. Without makeup, her skin seemed to drag, like it didn't fit anymore, barely covering her veins and underscoring her eyes with shadow.

“It was Tom at the Forest Service,” I said by way of explanation. “Nick hasn’t shown up for work yet, and he wasn’t there yesterday.”

Mari looked afraid, but how could she have known by then? When Richard saw the expression on her face, he was still pushing eggs around the pan.

“Don’t worry about it Mari. The kid’s been a dumb ass ever since he started dating that Wells girl.”

She nodded, but didn’t move from the doorway, and I sat back at my cereal thinking about Kristy’s pierced nose and liquid black eyeliner. My father had called her “a phase, a fantasy, the kind of girl a man goes through rather than with.”

“I didn’t want to bother him last night,” she said, almost to herself. “Maybe we should call him.” She picked up the phone and listened. It must have rung forever.

“Nick, it’s Mom,” she said. “Call me when you get this. It’s important.”

I was having a hard time swallowing my oatmeal. Instead I picked the raisins off with my spoon one-by-one, watched her dialing again.

“Kristy?” she said, “this is Nick’s mom.”

A pause.

“I’m just trying to find out where he is.” Mari looked at the floor, shook her head back and forth, eyes closed. “You didn’t see him yesterday?” Her eyes were stony when she raised her head, brows pushing the soft creases together. “Do you know if he was going diving?”

I tried to suppress the growing panic, close it down, not jump to conclusions, but I think even then I knew it had something to do with me by the way my nerves came alive.

“Are you absolutely sure?” she asked. “Do you think his phone’s just out of battery?”

So Kristy didn’t know where he was either. My gut dropped out of my stomach, and I forgot to swallow the raisin. Richard was plating his eggs and pouring some milk. He joined me at the table.

“He called you on his way to the lake? Your sure his battery was low?” She was looking out the round window, her face drawn, but Richard wasn’t at all worried; he’d started shoveling eggs into his mouth. “Thanks, Kristy. Sure. I’ll tell him to call you.” She hung up.

“Richard,” Mari said.

He grunted, mouth full of eggs.

“Nobody has heard of him since he went diving by himself yesterday.” Her eyes implied everything, and I felt a chill crawl down my back.

“You’re over-reacting, Mari,” he said standing up quickly. But they were only words, because he left his food on the table, “but to be safe, let’s drive out there.” I followed them, without talking, out the front door.

A mile had never felt so long. While I jostled between my parents on the washboard road, I kept thinking that it wasn’t real. Things would be fine. Nick couldn’t possibly be hurt, we were only pretending that he was; we’d look back on it, feel like we’d been in a movie, all united, focused.

My father didn't look at us; Mari kept her hand gripped around the handle on the other side of the cab. At the field, when he turned onto the boathouse road, the back end of the Chevy slid out.

"You're going to kill us," Mari said shrilly.

"Calm down," he answered, "Nobody's dead," but he drove a little slower, and when we came to our turn off, my stomach was one big knot. I wanted to look away, but a small part of me wanted his rusty orange truck to be there. It would prove we weren't worried for nothing, we weren't making anything up, but it was an evil thought, a response to stress; I'm sure I didn't mean it.

"He's probably not there," Mari said into silence. But the roof of the boathouse came into view, and the driveway and the boat dock. Still a light fog over the water, and all was empty. I started to relax, my stomach unclenched.

Richard drove into the clearing and stopped before I saw it: Nick's orange tailgate, jutting out behind the boathouse, dented from that time he backed into the telephone pole.

I was too stunned to move.

Beside me, I could hear Mari. "Shit," she said; they both opened their doors, ran to the truck. And then my father was at the door of the boathouse, sliding it open. And I didn't move. Maybe Nick was in there, casually putting away the gear, storing the boat. Through the fog, I could see a boat anchored by the peninsula. Everything slowed down.

My father hit the door of the boathouse, and aluminum reverberated while Mari held her hand up over her eyes, looking at the boat out by the peninsula, and then

Richard's metallic fist hit again, and she was running toward the water, yelling something, fumbling with her phone.

Richard's phone still glinted on the dash in front of me. She was disappearing into the trail that led by the lake when he grabbed it. I could only watch the boat, a blurry haze, not even bobbing, just frozen, a still life.

"I think my son's drowned," he was saying into the phone, pinching his nose, and striding by the car.

Jason had told Nick not to dive alone. In our first class he said, "Never make any exceptions. The death rate for greenies is unbelievable." I'd been considering diving solo at the time. It would have been so perfect to explore the lake by myself, I had thought, until he said that. It was months before, and Nick had been out solo more times than I could count. It seemed safe enough, maybe Jason was exaggerating, covering his butt. *Unbelievable*, says Jason's voice in my head on repeat. *Unbelievable*. I stayed, frozen in the cab.

The drip off the porch is incessant, pinging, hitting just off beat with the creak of Mari's swing. Years later, and some things have never changed, still smell fresh.

"And then you answered that phone call," she said. "And I knew it. Knew as soon as it rang that someone was calling to tell us about Nick. I'd known it the night before, but I hadn't called anyone." She says it rocking, resigned, the emotions worn down. Breeze hits our faces.

After Nick died, my father was all business; Mari wouldn't even come out of the bedroom. I didn't see her crying, although sometimes at night I could hear her from my room. Mostly she sat, comatose, like someone who had been plugged into life support without brain activity. I'd never thought she might feel responsible. That she'd known something wasn't right the night before. But I knew whose fault it was.

Richard arranged the funeral, picked the casket; it would be closed, a simple graveside service. Friday the thirteenth, a fitting coincidence. What about a wake, I wondered? Didn't we need a wake? And was his skin blue the way he'd described the dead man to me in childhood?

"And there's no sense in having it at the church when we haven't been going," my father had said. The graveyard was on the other side of town. I was glad we didn't have a church service. A blur of people, the whole high school, all our old teachers came by. Ironically it was a sunny day. All the rain that happens in Oregon, and it was strange to see things hot and blooming, totally oblivious to how our life had stopped.

Everyone wanted to shake my hand, hold it, tell me how much they loved Nick, what a good boy he was, how this one time he'd brought a BB gun over and said he'd take care of the neighbor's dog. And boy did he ever take care of it; he made it stop craping on the lawn by staking out a place on the back. For a solid week, every evening when the dog wandered into the yard, he popped it, just like that. And another one for good measure while it ran off. The couple, I vaguely recognized, wiped tears from their eyes.

I know what you're going through, some of them said. They'd lost people. But they didn't know what it was like to lose someone you hated. They didn't know what it was like to be responsible. Nobody could touch me except Francis. She walked up in a turquoise tunic, grey beret perched on her head, a white day lily in her hand.

"I miss you," she said, handing me the flower.

"Thanks."

"It's for you."

"What is?"

"The flower. It's for you, not for Nick. He was a dick."

I collapsed on her, laughing hysterically, hyperventilating.

"He was a dick," I repeated; finally someone said it.

The casket was closed because Nick's body was bloated like the Craig's, worse even. People knew the Craig's were diving, exactly what route they had planned; their search got underway faster.

Nobody was even in the water looking for Nick until he'd been dead 48 hours. When we got back from the boathouse, I went straight up to my room, took the dive log from my backpack, and handed it to Richard. That's when they found out about the tunnels. My mother started to cry and Richard got back on the phone, but they didn't find Nick until Monday afternoon. There didn't seem to be anyone in town certified for cave diving.

They couldn't attempt a rescue operation until the divers came.

And first the police wanted to exhaust the other options. If he was under, he was under, they reasoned; he wasn't going anywhere. But maybe he'd gone to the shore. Left the boat for some reason. They made human chains, lines, burrowing through the trees, pacing out ground looking for a man laying in the ferns. If Nick came up too fast, maybe he had the bends, maybe he'd pulled himself to the shore and wandered into the woods delirious, trying to get home.

But I knew he was in the cave.

I had known since Saturday night. Revision, I'd suspected.

So the casket remained closed, and my father identified his body. The police called, asked him to come to the morgue. We didn't know he'd gone until he came back.

"It was him," he said, collapsing in his chair. My mother and I were sharing the sofa, though we could have been in separate rooms until Richard came back in.

What did he look like? I wanted to know. How terrible was his death? How many awful things happened to him? What had the water done to his body?

"You could tell?" my mother asked. "You're sure?" Her voice had an earnest quality, like someone still hoping for a miracle. It wasn't Nick; it was some other man, bloated beyond recognition but not ours; it didn't touch us this time.

"His scar," my father said. "The one he got in the Safeway parking lot."

My mother put her hands over her face. "Is that all? That's the only way you could tell it was him?"

“No, honey,” he looked tired, crossed his legs slowly like an old man. “I could tell as soon as I saw him. They just wanted another feature, a birthmark, a tattoo. I don’t know what made me remember the scar.”

My mother nodded. She understood. It was a mercy that Nick still looked like himself.

But now, I don’t know if I believe my father. I think he may have spared her feelings, given her the biggest thing he could have in the moment, a grace he didn’t have access to.

“Safeway?” I asked, concentrating on an unimportant detail.

My mother almost smiled. “He was learning to ride his first two-wheeler. The bike was in the back of the truck, and when we went into the store, he pulled it out and rode it around the parking lot. He almost hit a car backing out and fell. It scraped up his hand, and one of his knees had gravel imbedded so deep that the doctor had to use tweezers.” She laughed. “He was so sneaky, asking to stay in the car while we shopped.” She stood suddenly and walked out of the room, shutting the bedroom door behind her.

My father studied his hands, rubbing them, seeming not to hear, to notice.

Where was I? I wondered. Where was I when you all were at Safeway?

“It was so long ago,” says Mari, still rocking in the swing. “All this time, and like you said, I haven’t even changed the pictures. William suggested we turn it into a guest room.” She throws that out at the backyard into the diminishing light like it’s something

she'd like to consider but can't bring herself to. "Sometimes I think it's easier to pretend the room doesn't exist. That I really haven't been such a terrible mother."

I should protest, stop her, tell her that it's not her fault, but I can't. Instead I huddle in my blanket, and we sit. The smell of rain fresh on the porch, wet.

CHAPTER 13

Because she knows half of it already, I want to tell Celia what happened; she may never forgive me, never speak to me again, but she was so sympathetic about Jason. If I told her the whole story, she could tell me what she thought. I've thought about it so long, for so many years, poured through all the details in my head without having anyone to share it with. I don't know if what I've come up with makes any sense. I don't know what's up anymore—directionless. What if it wasn't my fault. I want someone to tell me I couldn't have done anything different.

If she can see the good in Jason despite what he did to me, to Joanne and Lanita, and God knows who else, then maybe she can see the part of me that didn't know any better. Maybe she can forgive me for not seeing it coming. Or for seeing it, and refusing to believe it was in front of my face.

I heard somewhere about people who, having been blind all their lives, recovered their eyesight when a radical new surgery was found to correct cataracts. Band-Aid's fresh from their eyes, they opened their lids and looked at nothing, a confluence of color, of dreams, of blurred shapes without meaning. Without sight they had no concrete referents. That's how I saw Nick's death—like it was right in front of me: red, blue, bulging and swollen like his waterlogged body. But I couldn't see it in 3-D; it was flat, formless. His body looked more like a tree, an abstract painting by Jackson Pollock—

dripped, flung on the canvas, swept there purposefully, but in front of it, I can't make anything out.

Is that a body curled in the corner, that black shape? Are the red splotches a tank on his back, and what of the white string filling the canvas; might that be a guideline? I could never see it. It was right in front of me, but not until it happened did I look back, think *ah yes, I get it now*. How didn't I see it? It's so methodical, the placement of the arm next to the face, obvious to me now that he's holding his dive mask from his body—was it ripped off on purpose, in some struggle, or did Nick tear it off in those last moments of air, panic seizing his mind? Maybe he thought that he was above ground. It's possible.

Don't those kind of things happen in our last moments? We flash back through our life, our childhood, those pivotal moments: pats on the back, screams of anger, unresolved conflict, our purest most poignant relationships? Surely that's what happened. Surely that other, darker form in the corner isn't a person retreating. Isn't a person who ripped off his mask, caused the accident, and then stayed behind to suck out the rest of the helpless man's air, to make it look like he ran out.

I'm not witnessing a crime scene. It's an abstract painting. And what I choose to believe creates the truth. For example, I know that the man in the upper right corner is not clutching his stomach but a diving slate, one he wrote a message on that made his mother feel like all wasn't lost. Her boy, her rebellious growing boy hated her. But that was an illusion too, one she didn't unearth until the diving slate was recovered. And it created in her a sensation even more poignant than the normal loss of a child. Death alone, usually

enough to unanchor a family, send them drifting, casting about, helpless as flotsam, but this woman lost her child at the same time she found him. The man-child loved her; and the gifts countered each other, doubling the weight of the death, sinking her.

Those kind of losses can hardly be endured.

I also know that the light gray in the painting is not fog or clouds, but tunnel silt, showing where the man has just been. In the front right, an absence of paint—unfinished it seems, like a life undiscerned until it was too late. Or is it an alternate exit? Did the man almost make it? Could ten more minutes, twenty, have been the difference? They are questions not for the audience around the canvas, but for his family. Questions they will agonize over forever.

Twenty minutes, let's assume. What kinds of things happen in that amount of time: a sitcom reaches its climax, a woman is halfway through her commute to work, a student is only 1/3 of their way through an Anthropology Lecture. Congressional delegates have stopped paying attention to a briefing, a nap is extended. Twenty minutes is nothing, but for the family in front of the canvas, the knowing audience, twenty minutes could change the course of life, alter a timeline, leave a new generation of descendants. Who knows what possibilities were buried?

Therefore, the diving mask, held in the man's hand has not been pulled from his face. And the blur in the corner is not another diver sabotaging. I step back from the painting and it becomes blurry again. He simply removed his mask to clear the water, obviously meant to put it back on, but tangled himself in his guideline.

On the other hand, maybe he ran out of air, ran through the pivotal moments of his life: first step, first book, first soda can shot bull's-eye, first penis pleasure, first girlfriend, first election as vice-president of his freshman class, first orgasm inside his third girlfriend. He was on a walk in the woods outside his house, something he did countless times. So wouldn't it be normal for the man to remove the mask from his face, so fully encompassed by his delusion?

Perhaps, the action on the diving slate complete, the redemption of a relationship with his mother, he enacted a second, ran through the woods with his sister, chasing a moose, following the track of an animal too large to believe until it's seen at close range. It would be natural, walking through the woods, to take off the diving mask. After all he's not underwater, and he doesn't know that the blurry shape in the foreground of his flat-painted life is his sister's boyfriend. He doesn't know this, I know, because the boyfriend didn't exist. Wasn't there. It's just an illusion in the paint.

Hypothetical's, that's what I've been reduced to. If I told Celia—the story in my mind would transfer, belong to her; she could make sense of it. Stop the madness that turns me cold and analytical, or emotional and afraid. I operate in extremes. They were easier to control in Portland—distanced. A literal distance, a physical one, and then it turned from a game of hiding into a game I couldn't even discover. Without my mother, without his things, my brother became an imaginary figure. Did he call me *bitch* and make fun? Or was he kind, or was it both? I believe whatever I need to in order to stabilize.

But here in Cascade, the choices aren't so clear. I remember Nick in ways I forgot—I'm alarmed at the memories that have surged forward, suppressed: leaves tremble over my head and I remember Nick jumping to catch one for me. *For your collection*, he said. There are too many versions of him here, and I don't know which one is true.

All this I think before I open my eyes, lie with them shut, the sense of light through the window, the sense of movement outside, birds awakening, the trees alive, and someone downstairs, making eggs, spiced with pepper and salt, mounds of salt. When I open my eyes, I promise myself, I'll tell.

Three, two, one, my stomach ties in a knot, and my body lurches, a sound from below, a crying, a wet, sad sound, and knocking.

"Macy, Macy."

Who's crying? I can't understand them, but somebody is being hurt. They're screaming. I need to reach them, help them. She's shaking me.

"Macy, Macy, wake up."

I open my eyes. Mari is over me, holding my shoulders, a look in her eyes I've seen before, the night I laid in her lap on the stairs.

"Oh my God," I cry, "Oh my God!" She sits on my bed, holds my head, soothing, sweeping my hair back with her fingers, putting it behind my ear. "There, there," she says. "It was only a dream. Everything's okay. I'm here." I find one of her hands with

mine, clutch it, and she holds me tight, rings digging, but I don't mind this time. Instead I concentrate on how safe it feels to be held so tight. "Oh God," she would die if she knew.

It happened driving home, in the truck. We were leaving dive class, leaving the lake, Egret's Marina. I'd unrolled my window all the way. Nick had changed back into one of his black graphic t-shirts. He beat me to the truck, waited inside with his window down while I lugged out my tank, set it on the gravel; I saw him watching me through the side-view mirror, probably hoping I'd hurry.

My tank top stuck to my body; I'd been sure to shave my legs, so I could wear my cutoffs, but I trudged to the car in sneakers without socks. It had been a good dive; the water was almost second nature. There was a small leap in my chest, as soon as I submerged, mouth stuffed with plastic, but it soon passed. One look at the light streaming through the water, and it was like being in the forest, another world, separated from everything, and Jason floating above.

"Get in already," he said. I'd stooped to tie one of my shoes.

"Hold your horses."

"I said, get in." He turned on the truck. He was so aggravating, so bossy. I couldn't wait until I could drive myself around.

"Fine. I'm coming." I walked around the side, deliberately slower, opened the cab, and stepped up. "I was just tying my shoe; you don't have to be such an asshole."

He didn't retort, which wasn't like him. I expected him to peel out, drive like a maniac the way he liked to, but he pulled out slow, checking his rear-view mirror, and turning out of the parking lot onto the road that loops around the lake.

The vista was incredible from here. Creamy blues and whites, refracting cliffs in the water, an almost endless expanse, the size was incredible, better than oceanic because it still had that sense of grandeur, but also permanence. As big as it could be, while still being grasped, held in the mind's eye, all it's parts visible.

The speedometer inched up to 35mph and held steady. It was too strange.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Maybe you should tell me."

"What in the hell is that supposed to mean?"

He looked out at the road, and I noticed how his hair was coming in, the buzz cut grown out to that point where it sticks straight out: too short to fall next to his head, but long enough to look like a mini-afro. Something had probably gone down with Kristy, I thought, pulling my seatbelt around my lap.

"I found a picture of you in Jason's truck," he said.

"What?" At first I was confused, startled, and then my face colored, and I felt on the verge of terror. It couldn't be the picture, but what other picture could it be? "What are you talking about?" I slouched back against the seat, looked out the window, pretending indifference while my hair whipped around my face.

We passed a small granite hill, or was it shale, or slate? Flat rock pieces had calved off like paper, blunt sharp edges, variations on gray.

“And it wasn’t just you. There were other naked girls he was touching, too.”

“What are you talking about? I have no idea what you’re talking about. You think you can recognize me naked?” What did he mean it wasn’t just me? I felt a mix of paranoid fear, disbelief, astonishment. He couldn’t know what he was talking about.

“Do you realize that it’s illegal, what he’s doing?” His fingers were clenched around the steering wheel, so tight his knuckles were white, and I realized this great show of restraint was actually Nick more upset than normal.

“I haven’t done anything illegal.”

“Maybe you haven’t, Macy. But he’s almost thirty! I can’t believe, I don’t know what to do.” He shook his head. And that’s when it dawned on me that he thought this was his responsibility, his business, as though he had the right to say anything.

“What do you mean? It’s none of your business!” It was a confession, but I couldn’t help it.

“The hell it’s not!”

“We haven’t done anything,” I said. “It doesn’t prove anything.”

“Do you just take your clothes off for everyone that wants a picture?”

I looked back out the window, the heat in my face making me grateful for the wind.

“The thing I can’t figure out is how I didn’t see it.” He kept shaking his head, not even looking at me, like I didn’t exist. “No wonder he hired you,” he said, putting it together in his head, talking to himself. “You.” That time he looked at me. “Scrawniest

kid in the class.” He clenched his jaw, and it made a muscle next to his eye bulge. “He was suddenly so excited about hiring you, and you turn into his little slut.”

“That’s not true!” I turned my face into the wind, let it bite at my eyes.

“He’s a pedophile. I’m going to kill him.”

“I’m not a child!”

He glanced at me like I was crazy, turned off toward our house.

“Do you know if this gets out he’ll go to prison? That’s how serious it is Macy. Even if you didn’t do anything with him. It’s illegal to even have child pornography.”

“How would you know? And I’m not a child!” I flipped on the radio, *love if it’s swallowed for pity must ooze out*. He reached up and flipped it off.

“Have you slept with him,” he asked.

“It’s none of your business. And you’ve slept with Kristy; I know you have, so don’t even deny it.”

“That’s not the same thing. You have, haven’t you?”

My face flushed crimson. “Of course not.” I don’t know why I bothered lying; it was obvious he already knew, but I wasn’t about to talk to him about it.

“Fine,” he said. “If you won’t tell me, then maybe you can explain it to Mom and Dad.”

“Nick, you can’t tell them! I haven’t slept with him; I swear.”

He looked over at me, dark eyed, to see if I was telling the truth. Water brimmed in mine. “This is really serious.”

“I’m not lying to you Nick.” I turned my head to the window, but the air was slowing; he was getting ready to turn off onto our road. “Nick,” I plead, “I’ll tell you whatever you want to know, but you can’t tell anyone.”

His mouth was set, his jaw still clenching.

“Nick, you have to believe me.”

“Go on then.”

“About what?”

“Everything.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

Nick looked over, jaw still tight, and I knew it was over.

“It was just once. At work,” I fumbled, “we were joking about those calendars with the naked women that some men buy.” I didn’t know if he believe me. “And I said I’d always wanted to be in one.” I looked at my hands, still water-logged, shriveled. “It was a bet. I bet him he was too chicken to take my picture. I told him I wanted it for myself.”

Nick looked at me disgusted.

“And that’s why.”

“I wish I could believe you.” A little dust was filtering in the window, kicked up by the tires. I rolled my window up partway.

“I don’t care if you believe me,” I said, watching our house approach dead ahead, a architectural eye-sore in the trees. “It’s the truth and it’s none of your business anyway.”

When he pulled up to the house, I jumped out of the truck and ran inside and up the stairs. I didn't see either of my parents. Let him unload it himself, I thought bitterly, flipping on my stereo and throwing myself on my bed. I kept the lights off. What would I do?

The music amplified my pain, let me indulge in self-pity. *Dammit Nick*. What would I do? What would Jason do if my parents found out? Maybe he could take me away, I thought. Maybe we could disappear together. Not like that's likely, no job, people looking for us. I had to tell him, warn him. Maybe he'd know what to do; I'd screwed everything up. I knew I shouldn't have posed for that picture. And how did Nick find it anyway? What was he doing keeping it in his truck? I tried not to think about the other pictures. Nick didn't know what he was talking about. Or maybe it was his old girlfriend, and he'd just put them all together in a stack; there had to be some explanation.

When I moved my head, the pillow was wet. I needed to tell him. So we could figure it out before Nick did anything stupid. Jason would be compassionate, scared probably, but I imagined him wrapping his arms around me, reassuring me that he'd make it right. Maybe he could trade Nick for some diving gear, or explain to him what our relationship was. Maybe Nick wasn't going to tell.

When we drove to school the next day; neither of us spoke. I was too afraid to give something away if I asked him, and Nick turned the stereo up loud.

I left during lunch, hurried the few blocks to the dive shop. What a relief, that Nick hadn't said anything yet. If he had, I would have heard it from my parents, but Jason still needed to know; he could make sure it didn't get out. He could tell me what those

other pictures were and why he had them. I don't know why I thought it would be so easy once he knew. What about knowing things ever makes them better?

When I walked into the shop, a middle-aged woman was standing near Jason at the counter. He was showing her the catalogue of wetsuits, but I couldn't see his face because one of the mannequins was in the way.

"I want to get him something nice," she said. I imagined she was talking about her husband, but maybe it was a son.

"Neoprene or Lycra are your best options," said Jason, shifting, and then I saw him, just past the steel eyes of the plastic diver, in a red polo that showed off his shoulders. He grinned, and tingles ran down my arms. It would be okay; I knew it. All I needed to do was explain to him what had happened.

"I still don't know if I should do a full wet suit," she said, flipping pages slowly.

"Well, either of them are going to work around here," said Jason, "but he'll get more use out of a bodysuit when it gets cold."

I walked over to the rack of vests and started going through them. The hangers sounded loud, pulling against the metal rod, screeching, and I pulled them slower, trying to minimize the sound. There was a black vest with a green wave; I held it out in front of me, pretending to consider it, but really watching Jason, how he leaned next to her over the magazine. They were close, but it made me feel triumphant that I'd stood closer to him, felt his hands on my shoulders. There weren't any other girls, I told myself, impatient for the woman to leave. It seemed to go on forever, her ignorance, her indecision.

But now I wish she'd never gone; I wish I'd pulled vests back and forth and studied them until I had to go back to school. I wish Jason had never suggested that she take the magazine home, so she could take all the time she needed.

I'd moved into diving t-shirts when she left: *ScubaStyle*; *Eat, Sleep, Dive*; *DiveMonster* and sweatshirts with mult-colored imprints: waves, fins, sharks, everything came in blue, black, or red. When the chime sounded on the door, I kept studying one. It said *Evolution* in black-and-white and pictured the development of man: apes on the far side got more and more upright, and then, where the standard picture ends, a diver, rocketed through water, fins kicking, arms outstretched: the pinnacle of human achievement.

After she left, I felt uneasy. I didn't know how to tell him; maybe I shouldn't tell him. Jason came toward me. I could sense him standing behind me, so close I could almost feel his heat. I shut my eyes, leaned back, let my shoulders and head press into his chest. We stood there like that for a moment. I tried to memorize the feeling. Then his hands were on my shoulder, moving slowly down my arms; he stopped at my wrists, squeezing them, taunting me, then turned and pulled me by one arm behind him, through the back doors, into the back office.

Heavy music was playing on the radio, but quiet enough that it couldn't be heard up front, and my heart beat like it had last time, my hands sweaty. It felt wrong. I knew we were doing something we shouldn't, but that made me want it more. I loved him, I thought. I didn't care about his age. Nick didn't know what he was doing, but Jason would know what do.

He had his lips on my neck, and it tickled, so I was pushing back, squeezing my shoulder up, even though I loved it. “Nick said he found some pictures in your truck.”

His hands froze. “Macy,” he said slowly. “What are you talking about?”

“Nick. On Thursday after our diving class.” I tried to be casual. “He said you told him to borrow *Diveworld*. He saw the pictures.”

I couldn’t see his face, but he was holding so tightly, it started to scare me. What if it was a mistake to tell him. What if Nick had been right about it?

“What pictures?”

“The one of me, and he said there were other girls in them.” I didn’t mention the hand I imagined touching the girls, like he had me; it couldn’t all be true.

“What?” He flipped me around, holding my arm tight, shut the door and then pushed me up against it. He didn’t mean to be so rough; he didn’t know his own strength. My head slapped. But I didn’t notice any pain.

“So he thinks I’m a pervert?”

“No.” I was confused. Nick thought he was worse than a pervert, but Jason wouldn’t act this way if it were true. It was almost reassuring seeing him mad about it, but it was scary, too.

“He thinks I go around molesting girls and taking photos of them? Like some sick old bachelor?”

“No.” It was the only thing to say.

“I’m twenty-seven for Christ’s sake, Macy. I have a fucking life.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I don’t know why Nick would say that.” Nick must have been lying, I realized. He exaggerated the pictures because he didn’t like how Jason questioned his manhood. “He’s probably playing with me.”

“What do you think?” His breath was in my face. “Do you think I’m the type of person that would treat girls like that? Is that how you see me? How can you believe Nick? Did you ever stop to wonder if he was lying?”

“No. Yes. I mean, that’s why I came today.”

“I thought I cared about you. I thought we had something special. But Nick tells you a story and now your accusing me of this,” he took his hand off my arm and slapped the wall next to my head, “of being a child-molester? Is that what you’re saying Macy?”

“No. I’m sorry. I didn’t think you were.”

He put his hands around my head, loving, and then they tightened, his fists clenching in my hair. But I wouldn’t tell him to stop. I deserved it. How could I have believed Nick? I couldn’t look at him.

“I’m sorry, Jason. I’m sorry. I never should have,” I was crying, but I still couldn’t look at him, “believed him. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I know you.” I put my hands on his waist, and looked up at him, tried to hug him. “Please, Jason. I love you.”

He was looking over my shoulder, at the door, his face stony. There were prickles of sweat on his forehead.

“I love you,” I said. I needed him to believe me. I couldn’t lose him.

His hands started to relax and he met my eyes, pulled me close. I could feel his breath coming deep. He held the back of my neck, and I cried so hard I hyperventilated.

“Macy. Look, I’m sorry I scared you, but you shouldn’t trust Nick.”

“I know.” I looked up at his face. He was staring at me.

“I think Nick has been taking drugs.” Oh my God. That made so much sense, I thought. Jason’s eyes were hard, green. And I wanted to believe him. I did believe him, because we were so close. It felt right to be held like this.

“Do you know what would happen to me if that got around?” He shook his head, staring in my eyes. “I’d be sent to jail, or worse.” His face was softening. “That’s exactly what you’d like,” he whispered, “wouldn’t you?”

“No,” I managed. How could he think that?

“You need to find his drugs, find something,” he said. “Do you understand? Something he doesn’t want told because it’s the only way we can guarantee he’ll keep his mouth shut. Do you understand? You’re older than your age, Macy. But they wouldn’t care.”

“I’ll find the drugs,” I said, relieved he had a solution. “I promise.”

His hand moved to my face, cupped my chin. Tingles rushed into my stomach. He didn’t smile. I could feel my body relax, like air out of a sail, like an electric surrender. We were so close. His face almost touched mine. His breath smelled sweet, like licorice.

I wanted him to kiss me. I’m ashamed of that now. And when he did do it, kiss me, his scruff scratched at me lightly, tentative like sandpaper, the kiss a man gives a

young girl, not a lover. He pulled back. My eyes were still closed when he kissed my forehead. My heart fell.

“You better get back,” he said. His hands moved down over the back of my pants; his head sunk into my neck and then my chest, like he was resting, like he didn’t know he was on my breasts. A surge prickled through my body.

I kept my eyes closed, feeling his touch. I wanted more; I wanted him to prove he loved me, to forget what he had just said. Forget going back to school. I wanted him, needed to comfort him. Stupid Nick. He was trying to keep me from Jason; he was jealous, a liar. It would never work. I knew what I was doing, and it wasn’t Nick’s business.

When I got home, nobody else was there. In the kitchen, I poured myself some milk and put bread in the toaster. Jason had been furious, hurt by Nick’s accusation, and I felt so ashamed for letting him know that his name had been defiled by my idiot brother. I’d been confused before, and in retrospect, I was still confused; there was a whisper of truth in what Nick said, but I couldn’t believe it. Not now that I knew about the drugs. Nick was lying. And there was no evidence. How could he prove it? No. Nobody would find out

He probably started this whole thing because Jason told him not to solo dive, even though he was clearly the best in the class. Then when Nick talked about cavern diving,

Jason had laughed at him. “You’ll be ready for cavern diving when you’re a man, Nick. Not before then.” Nick’s jaw had clenched; he nodded and I laughed, punching his shoulder, “that’s right Nick, not until you’re a man,” I crooned; I hadn’t realized how personally he was taking it, how he’d try to get back at us.

“Shut up, Macy. You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he had said. But he left me alone after that. We both knew he’d been diving solo on Saturdays. And lately he’d been carrying around that book, *Lave Tube Caves*, so I knew he intended to certify eventually, probably even dive under Egret’s Marina, which probably made him feel almost more advanced than Jason, who was dictating his abilities.

Nick was going to have to do some serious apologizing when he got home, I thought, buttering the toast. What an asshole. What a complete asshole.

I followed the brocade rug down the hallway, carrying my toast and noticed the picture on the wall, one of dozens: a younger version of me, sitting on Aunt Celia’s lap, my arm around her neck and Nick standing next to us, his hand up to Ody’s cage. My mother had gone to a conference, and my father had left with his friend Scott for fishing. Aunt Celia made English muffins fresh, every morning—we thought we were in heaven. Things were so different then.

Nick’s door was closed, but I walked right in to the mess. If he was going to be an asshole, he would be treated like one. All I wanted was to find the drugs, prove Jason right, prove that Nick made this whole thing up, a lucky guess, he wanted to ruin Jason by telling lies about him.

The blinds were down so the room seemed dark even with the light on. I looked around, unsure of where to start. Posters littered the walls: one a distant shot of two divers in the Mediterranean. Like pinpricks they were surrounded by swooping shadows—fish puncturing the fore- and background. On another, a map of Chiquibul, the cave system buried under the Guatemalan rainforest.

It was the least I owed to Jason, I told myself. He'd never done anything but love me. I was young, but we were getting past that; how we felt for each other went beyond it; it was something that scared him, certainly not something he sought out.

But how did Nick know he kept his hand on my body? It's the part I couldn't get away from, looking at the mess of clothes and papers. How would he know that Jason had taken my picture? Maybe that part was true. He found my picture in the car. It was horrible to think he'd seen that, but it made more sense. He found the picture, realized Jason and I were dating, and came up with a way to stop us, to defame Jason.

Shame crept hot around my face. I'd betrayed Jason, led him to believe he could trust me, and failed to protect him from my own brother. If it got out, if Nick told, it scared me to think what my father would do, probably something hot-headed: hurt him, beat him up.

One turn deserves another, said a voice in my mind. One turn, I turned over a pile of clothes on the floor: crumpled white t-shirts and two pairs of jeans, belts still attached, obviously left where he was standing when he took them off. Finding the drugs wasn't the only way to force Nick to keep his mouth shut; I could tell him I'd found them. Scare him. Though that might not work long. Or I could let my parents know he was sleeping

with Kristy. They would throw a fit. Certainly Mari would call Kristy's parents. He'd never be able to see them again.

But what if my father pressed charges? Everything Jason was afraid of, everything he had avoided and risked for me, all would be lost if he were jailed, labeled a child-molester, and all because of Nick. I had to stop him.

Nick may have been telling the truth, I acknowledge, but only for an instant. Those other photographs, those other girls, couldn't really exist. They would mean I'd lived a lie, been used, trampled, whored-out just like my father would say. But if there were other girls, nagged a voice in my mind, then maybe Jason really is a predator, a child molester, all those things he beat the wall about. No. It's not possible. If it were true, continues the voice, maybe the other girls loved him too, maybe he didn't know it was wrong. Stop. I told myself. Stop it.

It was awful in here. How could he find anything? Where would he leave it? Not inside the pizza box—maybe near the half-finished soda. Rumpled, the bed looked like a good hiding place. I checked under the pillows, inside them, lifted the mattress to see if he'd slipped anything under there, pulled garbage and clothes out from under the bed. Any second, I kept betting on a white powdery sac, or even a bong. But nothing.

I was growing frantic, not covering my tracks. I had to find the drugs, find them and then I'd make a bargain with Nick: my secret for his. And he had to admit he'd lied. Not only admit he'd lied but apologize to Jason. Yes. And if he knew Jason and I had been together, he had to swear secrecy, or what? Or I'd turn him and his drugs over to the police.

I started to worry that someone would find me before I'd found anything. The closet. I pulled his clothes aside, rummaged through a laundry basket. Damp foot smells lingered on his clothes. A shelf of books, I pushed them aside, checking behind them.

There was nothing. Only the desk left. Probably he was carrying it with him, keeping it in his glove compartment. When he came home, I could check. The desk looked unlikely: white, a few sheets of paper, a black journal. I opened the drawers—they were full of candy wrappers, old assignments, a slingshot. Nice, I thought. Then I heard the garage door opening: one of my parents.

Nowhere else to look, I grabbed his journal. What if he could tell I'd been in his room? I glanced back before I shut the door: not likely. Three at a time, I took the stairs and slipped into my room while someone walked into the house. My heart was still beating hard.

Whoever it was had gone in the kitchen. I opened the journal; maybe he was the sentimental type, had chronicled his sexual forays with Kristy, said something I could use against him, but as soon as I opened the book, I realized it wasn't a journal. My heart plummeted. Maybe Nick was right about Jason. I felt hopeless—all that was left was the truck.

The black book was a diving log. It started with our first dive, April 24th. I didn't even know he'd gotten a book. "Wymont Club, Breathing Exercises 4-7pm." Every class was tracked. I flipped the page. The last entry: "Cascade Lake, Level 1 Scuba

Certification, 4-7pm.” On the next page there was a drawing, an underwater cliff, a house on the top. I flipped the page, another drawing: “tunnels,” it said at the top of the page.

I furrowed my brows. What was this? Flipped back to the entries, and realized there was more to them than class. “May 31st South Lava Caves, Cascade Lake 12-2pm.” But there was more. “Entered 45 feet, Alternate Exit 60 feet!” An exclamation mark. It took me a minute to put it together. I flipped back to the pictures. Cascade Lake? The lava tubes were in Egrets Marina. I felt a chill. If he’s diving in those without being certified, warned a voice in my head. My hands started to sweat. But the pictures didn’t match the marina. And then I got it; I was looking at our cove, at Celia’s peninsula.

On the cliff drawing he’d written, “X - 45’;” the landmarks were in blue ink. Celia’s house, the large oak tree near the water, the opening was between these, to the right, and he had also marked a large rock. In red ink another “X-60’,” this one came out on the other side of the oak. On the next page, I found a map. Like the maps of the caves under Egret’s Marina, but smaller. Only a few lines, a few scribbled-out lines. A circular cavern. Oh my God. He’s cave diving.

Was he doing it with anyone? Someone needed to stop him. My heart jumped. This could work to silence Nick, but it was too dangerous, too serious. How could I trade him for this secret? If he kept doing it, he’d kill himself.

The log said he’d been out every Saturday since we started diving. Every Saturday in the early afternoon before he went to the Forest Service. “South Lava Cave” first showed up May 24th; he had another visit May 25th.

I flipped off my light, tucked the book under my pillow, and laid on my bed looking out the window. The sky was hazy gray and orange; the sun was setting, but already I could see a few stars.

Jason, I whispered, afraid. I couldn't barter the secret. But Jason, might be able to persuade him. Tomorrow I'd take him the book when I went to work, show him what Nick had been doing. He'd know how to stop him, and how to keep his mouth shut.

Part of me was afraid Jason wouldn't try to stop Nick, and then Nick would still be in danger. Though maybe he could talk him into certifying, or give him some safety tips. I doubted he'd want to help Nick after the way he'd betrayed us, but at least I'd found something.

I pressed my fingers to my lips and blew Jason a kiss, hoped he could feel it.

CHAPTER 14

“How are things with Mari?” Celia asks, sitting above me at the table outside the arboretum; she’s making small snipping noises with her scissors. I’ve retired to the grass beside her, sitting cross-legged in front of a huge bush I have a hard time imagining can be a bonsai.

“Not bad, better than before,” I admit, taking a second to brush the sweat off my forehead. We’re boiling in muggy, overcast clouds. “But all she wants to talk about is Nick.”

“Which is all you don’t want to talk about, right?”

Exactly, I think, but I don’t answer aloud.

“Does it make you think of Jason?”

“Why would you say that?” It startles me that I’m so transparent.

“Because of the diving, how Nick died.”

“Well, yes, I suppose, but,” I take in a deep breath. It’s time to tell her, and when I don’t have to look up, meet her gaze, maybe it will be easier, but I wait until another branch falls. “It’s more than that.”

“Hmmm,” she patiently turns her plant.

“Celia?”

“Yes?”

“Have you ever done something you never told anyone about?” My eyes and throat prickle.

“Of course.” She didn’t even pause before answering.

I wipe my cheek.

“What you may not know yet, Macy, is that time takes care of impossible things, sands down your failures, takes off the sharp edges. Usually.”

“Usually?”

“Unless we’re determined to prevent it.”

“Are you saying I should just wait it out? No anti-depressants, no aerobics? Just waiting? The counselor told me I needed the endorphins.”

“Those are all good things, but sometimes we make things worse. Take me for example.”

I lean on my side in the grass, head under my hand.

“I did all the things your counselor probably told you not to do, including over-eating. God I must have bought every cheeto in the store, made a permanent orange mark around my mouth.” She laughs. “That’s what I was into then: cheetos, apples, and movies. I didn’t leave the house unless I had to, stayed in my room watching movies, left Kat to fend for herself, open her own bag of cheetos, run wild in the woods—sometimes I didn’t even brush my teeth, or shower. I lost myself, Petal. I couldn’t recommend any of that to you; I was a complete mess, an emotional disaster. And for a long time I couldn’t admit it to myself. I felt so abandoned. But coming out of that experience, I know what I would do differently next time.”

“What’s that?” It’s hard to imagine Celia pigging out on Cheetos.

“Grieve.”

“It sounds like plenty of grief.”

“But it wasn’t.” She’s still clipping, going on with the plant like we’re talking about the most normal subject. “I was avoiding everything, facing Mark’s death and why he did it. It was all I thought of, but I couldn’t let it actually be real because it would be too devastating—life didn’t move; I was on pause. I couldn’t face it; I couldn’t come out and see what the world looked like without Mark in it.

Fat, green blades of grass are all around my hand. I start pulling up little clumps.

“Crying is important Macy, but living has a funny way of starting without you. I had to step close to his death, accept it—accept that it was an important and natural part of his life, something that I didn’t like but that needed embracing, just as I thought I’d embraced our marriage. And then, to answer your question about the thing I was too ashamed to ever tell anyone, I had to face a part of myself I didn’t want to believe existed.”

I can’t imagine Celia ever being ashamed of anything—she seems so solid. I think of what she looked like then: young, beautiful, soft brown hair like the picture on her wall, the one where she holds little Kat in her lap, arms curled tight, blue background with fake shooting stars streaking behind them. It was the first family picture they took without Mark.

“I opened myself up to the shame I couldn’t face before, the fact that I wasn’t a good wife, or a good enough wife, not for Mark. I spent too much time with Kat and not

enough time with him.” She clips away at the bush, mini-strokes. “Things changed so much after she was born. It plagued me, that I was partially responsible. I tried to push that away, to make the memories stop, to not let them be true. I thought of all the things that Mark and I did together. All the ways I proved I loved him. The letters that I wrote to him while he was away—I was so consistent, not like one of those other wives. I tried not to let in the pain. But in the back of my mind, I remembered him walking out. I remembered him coming home from the war depressed. Then I admitted that he was depressed before he left for the war. That one was the hardest. I started to let all of the things just be. Maybe I was a bad wife. Maybe I wasn’t what he needed. Then I had to tell myself it was okay because I couldn’t change it, and if I came out the other side without having compassion for myself I would never get over his death.”

“Besides,” she continued, “I couldn’t change the past me. I had to be an older kinder version of myself, hold my own hand so to speak, the hand of the young bride, the hand of the tired mother, the hand of the widow. What, I thought, would an older, happier version of me say to a grieving woman who couldn’t even get out of bed in the morning?”

What a shocking revelation. It amazes me to hear it. “What did you say?” I feel privileged. She stops clipping; it takes me a second to notice, to stop pulling up grass. There are tears in her eyes.

“The older me said, ‘Let yourself be sad.’” Her voice chokes. “It’s okay you were a bad wife. It’s okay you’ve been a bad mother. It’s all okay.”

I stare at her, her profile, the long gray braid down her back, her plain clothes. She smiles to herself, doesn't wipe away the tears, and I'm amazed at her tenderness. What a gift: permission to cry for all the worst things, permission to love herself even though what she did might have contributed to Mark's suicide.

"The point is feeling, Macy. Fear tells us a lot about truth, and seeing things as they are is liberating. It's the most painful, the bravest, thing you could ever do."

I know she's just given me permission to speak, but my stomach still clenches, and I pull at another handful of grass, stacking up my clippings in a pile next to my abandoned almost-bonsai.

"All you have is the moment. Nothing ever goes the way you want it to. Why hold back from loving things just because they might go away? Everything goes away. That's how life is. Why are we so afraid?"

"I killed Nick," I blurt, turning away from her. I've never said it to anyone.

I had fallen asleep with my clothes on the night I found Nick's journal, the night I accused Jason of being a pedophile. Light through the window woke me, harsh and bright. For one second I felt happy, turned on my side to stretch, and a moment later I remember what Nick said about Jason and the other girls. It came with a jolt of sickness, an urge to throw up. If only I could have gone back to that dream, some other reality.

But the book, I thought. It's not over. Jason could still fix it. I felt it hard under my pillow, and the clock blinked 6:15am in steady red. Funny to wake up so early without an alarm. I ran lightly down the stairs, walked to Nick's room, and opened the

door enough to see in. He was lying in his bed, one leg out, bare and hairy. I shut the door again, turned the handle softly so the latch was silent, then run back up the stairs and stepped into the shower.

While I ran the bar of soap over my body, I thought through the options. Jason could call Nick, tell him to come to the dive shop. Together we'd confess to dating each other and explain how Nick had misunderstood. We were in fact mutual and consenting. Then we could pull out the diving log. He might not have missed it by then. We could tell him what he was doing was dangerous, make him read the Craig's plaque on the wall.

Then it occurred to me, dawned, the perfect idea. The price for our silence; he'd have to take cave diving lessons and let us keep our relationship to ourselves. In return we wouldn't publish the news to the diving community, so he could retain the credit of discovery and the initial exploration.

It was perfect. I rinsed the conditioner and stepped quickly out of the shower, wringing and twisting my hair, so the water fell on the rug. There was no time for drying—it could dry on the way to town. I pulled on my clothes, put the black dive log in my backpack next to an orange, and ran out the door.

It was only 6:45—almost an hour before I usually left for work, and the air was still waking. It smelled fresh, felt cool pedaling under the trees and through their shadows. The field lit when I rounded the corner, golden and green all at once, waving with the breeze. It was far more expansive than it looked coming home twelve hours before. I caught my breath.

All the way in I planned what I'd say to Jason, how relieved he'd be. I pictured him cupping my face.

"I knew you would make it right," he would say. "I knew I could count on you."

Three blocks through town, I pulled up behind the dive shop. Jason's truck was in the back where it was last night. I tried to open the door, but it was locked from the inside, so I ran around the front. The store had opened at 7am.

The door chimed, but I hardly noticed. There was no one in the shop.

"Jason!"

Maybe he was in the back room—I rushed toward it, and the door opened. There he was, rumped, eyes bloodshot.

"Did you sleep here? Are you okay?"

His shoulders sagged, but there was a raw energy about him. "Macy," he grabbed my arm with his big hand. "Didn't you do enough damage?" He pushed me back, retreated to the couch.

"I hurried," I said, my breath proving my words. "We can fix it; we can fix everything."

He looked at me like I was an idiot. "Your fucking brother," he pulled his hand down his polo, straightening it. "I'm going to beat the hell out of him."

I nodded, unzipping my backpack and pulling out the dive log. "I found this." He wouldn't take the book. "He's been cave diving. He found new caves!"

Jason didn't get it. He wasn't interested. He gestured at the door: leave, get out.

“Don’t you see? He could have all his gear taken away. He’d have to stop diving. He’s not certified!”

“That’s great, Macy. We’ll just go tattle to your parents, and that will solve everything.” He leaned back into the couch, and I thought I saw him roll his eyes.

“We don’t have to tell them.” I wanted him to understand. “All we have to do is tell Nick. If he thinks he’ll never be able to dive again, and he knows that we both love each other, he won’t say anything. I know it.” I set the book next to him.

“You know it? Now I’m reassured.” He tossed the book back at me. “If you don’t have anything better than that . . .”

“Jason, you don’t get it. He found new caves, off our cove, under the peninsula, on the south side of the lake. The *south* side.”

At first it didn’t register, but then he looked at me again.

“More lava tubes. He found them under the peninsula. I think he’s been there three times already. Look. There’s a map.” I opened the log, showed him the entrance, pointed out tunnels.

“Let’s try it,” I say, encouraged he’s looking. “Let’s call him, tell him to come into the store. You can talk some sense into him. Tell him to take a cave diving class; explain our relationship, and I know he won’t risk losing the caves. He won’t want anyone else to know about them, to get there before he does. Don’t you see? We make a deal. And you threaten to publish the news to the diving community if he’s not willing to keep his mouth shut.”

Jason's eyes meet mine, interested, then he looked back at the book, studying every page. It wasn't long.

"This is off your dock?"

"Right next to the peninsula, look." I pointed at the house, the large tree, the "X."

"He could kill himself," he said, studying the chart, talking to himself. "Does he know what an idiot he is?"

"I know! That's what I was trying to tell you. Let's call him, have him come over before he goes down to the lake. He's been going Saturday afternoons. Look," I said and flipped the page back, pointing out the dates. "He goes before work at the Forest Service. I don't know if he's going today, but let's call him. I know it will work."

"Macy," Jason said, "This is dangerous. We can't risk him going out again."

"I know, that's what I've been saying."

"But instead of having him come in, I think I should go stop him, in case he's not willing to come into the shop."

"Just call him, have him come down. He'll come, and we can both talk to him."

"We can't risk it. You have to stay here. Keep the store open." Jason stood up, holding the dive log, looking around the room to see if he needed anything more. When he determined he didn't, he opened the backdoor.

"Wait. Should we talk about what you're going to say? Don't you think it would be better to have him come down here, so my parents don't wonder why you're at my house?"

"Dammit Macy." He walked out the door. "Will you shut up already?"

I was stunned.

“I’m trying to figure this out,” he said, trying to get his voice under control. “And you’re not helping. Do you think I didn’t hear you?”

I shook my head.

“I want to make sure your brother’s okay. What he’s doing is dangerous. That’s more important than you and me; do you understand?”

I nodded.

“So I need you to keep the store open, and wait until I get back. Can you do that?”

“Of course. But you should talk to him, tell him about us”.

The muscle in his jaw clenched, and he shut his eyes briefly. When he opened them, I noticed again how bloodshot they were.

“I will.”

“You will?”

“You have my word.”

Roaring. I remembered the truck leaving, suddenly feeling alone and nervous. Was Nick still asleep, would Jason wake him up? What would my parents think seeing him on our doorstep? Maybe he’d tell them about the cave diving, settle it then and there, but where would that leave us? Maybe my parents would understand, be so grateful that they’d let us keep dating when Nick told them. Fat chance. They’d never allow it— regardless of how well they liked Jason. I clenched my fists, dug my nails into my palms.

At first I walked around the store straightening things while I waited, even pulled out the broom. Around 9:30am several customers came in, and I was busy for an hour pointing them toward masks and letting one kid leaf through the catalog. Where was he? I kept wondering. What was taking so long?

What if they'd started fighting? I imagined Nick laying in the trees where Jason dragged his body. But I was letting my imagination get away with me, run wild. Jason wasn't violent.

"You have a wicked imagination," my mother said once. But despite this, I knew it had been too long. What if Jason was in a car accident on the way to our house? The more I thought about it, the more I was convinced it had happened. Why else would it be taking so long? Or maybe he invited Nick to go to lunch. I felt calmer at that thought. Of course. They were going to lunch, working it all out, probably checking for cave training online.

Not knowing is the worst part; which of all these scenarios is true, or are none of them?

I returned to the shelves to help the time pass: organized the t-shirts by color and size, filled up a bucket with water, and started cleaning the shelves, taking off the supplies, even wiping out all of the rental goggles, then arranging them again. This took my mind off what was happening. Temporarily, I sank into a rhythm: wiping, replacing, straightening.

When the door chimed behind me, I didn't even look up until I felt him next to me.

"Jason! I was so worried."

He nodded, exhausted. His hair looked greasy; his eyes were still wild, but with an extra fatigued dullness.

"I need to sit down."

"Of course. The couch?"

I followed him. He walked slowly, like someone who didn't remember where he was going.

"What happened? Did you find him?" I waited to ask this until he was seated on the couch. He seemed so tired that I was afraid it had already happened; we'd been exposed.

"He told didn't he?"

"Told?" Jason looked at me confused.

"About us? My parents?" I searched out his eyes.

"No," he said, and relief greeted me like a river, a relaxing rush. "Then we're okay for now?"

"I don't know. I couldn't find him."

"What?" I waited for him to go on. "Then where have you been? What happened?"

"It took awhile," he said, "because I drove out to the cove first. I didn't want to chance anything happening to him, couldn't chance he'd already left the house."

Right. I nodded, grateful.

“And?”

“He wasn’t there.”

“I didn’t think he would be. So you went to the house?” It was a statement, not a question.

“I waited at the cove for awhile; I thought he’d show up. I didn’t want to disturb your parents.”

“Did he?”

“Nope,” he shook his head, he seemed drunk, probably from lack of sleep. “So I decided to see if they were home. When I drove up, Nick’s truck was in the driveway, but nobody answered the door.”

“He was probably still sleeping,” I said. “He stayed out late with Kristy.”

“That’s what I figured. So I came back to town, got some coffee. I was so tired. And I’m sorry, Macy. He looked at his hands, stony-eyed.”

“What?”

“I fell asleep. That’s why it took so long.”

Fell asleep. The realization hit me. I was worried for nothing, all this time, and he was sleeping! No wonder his eyes were so blurry. Freshly woken. “Where? Did you go back home?”

“What is this twenty-questions? I just fell asleep in the cab. Didn’t wake up for a few hours. Then I sped back, afraid I’d missed him. I went to the cove first, again, but he wasn’t there.”

“Still? How strange.”

“No, and he wasn’t at the house either.”

I sat back, surprised. “Maybe he went into work,” I offered.

“That’s what I figured. So you better put this back.” He handed me the dive log.

“Wait until we can talk to him in person. He’s not going to rat on us today.”

“How do you know that?”

“Doesn’t he work late? Then meet Kristy.”

“Yes.”

“Well then,” he gestured with his hands, “there you have it.”

“Okay,” I said taking the dive log to the back room. I had not intention of giving it back to Nick—it was our only insurance, our only leverage.

“Macy?” he said, when I returned.

“Yes?” I fiddled with a frayed piece of my jeans, the hole in my knee.

“I need you.”

“But we’re still open,” I said, confused.

“Lock it. Put up the lunch sign.”

He looked through me: zoned, torn, stressed.

I did what he wanted, then laid on the utility rug in the office, like the time before.

“I love you, Macy,” he said, but his voice sounded forced.

“I love you, too. I’m sorry you didn’t find him.”

I tried to move so he knew I wanted him, put my hands on his shoulders, tried not to show the pain on my face. But he dropped on me, heavy and threatening.

“Stay still,” he said. “I don’t want you to move.”

I put my hands at my side, closed my eyes, waited for it to be over. *I am so lucky*, I thought, pinching them shut.

It was raining when he took me home, thundering, pounding the hood of the truck. My bike in the back; the store locked. “Closed,” the sign said in the window. I’d stayed all day—manned the front while Jason slept.

“Last night was rough,” he said when I closed myself in his truck. Slick droplets hit the window and the blades pounded back and forth, thumped rhythm, ordered the chattering patter. We didn’t talk.

There was so much falling; water covered the road in low spots, puddled in the muddy gravel potholes. He cruised through, oblivious, the truck bouncing. I felt sick inside—so much tension, so much undefined, Nick’s dive book in my backpack.

When he pulled up in front of the house, I couldn’t tell if anyone was home. The garage was shut—Nick’s truck was gone. But that was typical for a Saturday night.

“This whole thing has me thinking,” Jason said, pushing his hair back.

Chilled from the rain, I rubbed my arms, feeling small goose bumps. I was glad he wanted to talk.

“I think it was a mistake to get involved.”

Involved? At first I didn't realize he meant us. I stopped rubbing my arms. "What do you mean?"

He sighed. "Macy," he said, "your fifteen."

"So?" I said, scared. What was he doing?

"You're fucking fifteen. Fifteen!" He hit the wheel, and I looked at my hands.

"I know."

"So what I'm saying," he said softly, "is I think it's gone too far."

That was it. I waited a minute, waited for him to change his mind, but he wouldn't look at me. The blades whipped back and forth, the outside blurred. I held my backpack, opened the door and jumped down, splashing my jeans. He got out, didn't even look at me when he passed my bike down. The metal felt cool. I walked it over toward the garage and turned around while he pulled out, sick inside. So Nick had won, after all. Did he realize that?

I leaned the bike against the house and walked under the canopy of forest. Wet earth, squishing soil, so soft and saturated. I wanted to kill Nick, but I was so confused. I sat under a tree, a knob at its base, a bulging root, leaned back and cried with the sky, glad it was cold, smaller than anything else around me.

"I killed him," I say again. Celia has turned fully in her chair and is looking at the pile of grass I've made next to the tree. I realize I'm destroying life again, ripping up her yard when I'm supposed to helping.

"No you didn't," she says, eyeing me strangely.

“Not directly,” I amend, “but close enough.”

“Is that your secret?”

I nod, scatter my pile of grass, smooth it out so the clippings fall among the rest, disguised.

“You know Jason and I were together?” I start. “Well, I found out,” my stomach clenches so tight, but I have to continue. “I found out he was diving in the caves.” I can’t say anything else. Terrifying. The thought scares me to death, to be so vulnerable again.

“And you didn’t tell anyone?”

“I told Jason, that’s all.”

Celia squints her eyes. “Maybe you better tell me the whole story.”

I take a deep breath, think of her a few minutes ago, baring her soul, admitting that she’d done terrible things to her marriage, to her family, and still found the capacity for self-forgiveness, found it from imagining an older, happier, wiser version of herself.

I can do this, I think. It’s time.

My parents had taken to their jobs like crazy people. Ashamed, confused—I couldn’t leave the house. That’s how I spent the summer. This was why, I explain to her, when she came over after the funeral and invited me to come work in her garden, that I couldn’t do it.

Francis had called, almost everyday the first month.

“You can’t keep hiding out,” she said.

“I’m not hiding.”

She had tennis camp for two weeks in July, and I was glad she'd be gone.

"Come with me," she said.

"I don't even play tennis."

"It doesn't matter," she tried to convince me, but I told her my mother needed help cooking dinner and to call me when she'd lost her crazy-brain. It was a lie. My mother wasn't home. She'd been working over-time all summer getting ready for her conference, continuing experiments, though it wasn't really over-time; it was volunteer-time. Grace time, freedom from this house, from me, from pictures of Nick, his bedroom door remained firmly shut.

I had started going through my father's bookshelf. I didn't care what I read, just picked some books and crawled in bed with apples, left-over pizza, microwave dinners. Someone was buying them and putting them in the freezer. We didn't eat together—we couldn't.

It was like being in the middle of a television crime scene, the after-math of a murder, only it was real, and I didn't know how to handle it because the murderer was me.

"I can imagine why you felt that way," Celia said.

Sometimes when I woke in the morning, the memory made me so sick I threw up. Jason may have tried to stop Nick, but it was my job. I was his sister. I should have found him, left the store, just called him for Christ's sake, stopped the dive. The thoughts

plagued me while I cowered over the toilet, my face sweaty, emptying my stomach into the porcelain.

I quit work, told Jason at the funeral, looked at his face. Everything seemed so wrong. He had deep circles under his eyes, a week's worth of stubble, his hair greasier than it was a week ago. A suit and black tennis shoes—that's what he wore to the funeral. Undone—he'd lost himself. Suddenly I couldn't see what I'd seen him; he looked old, disgusting, a coward. I couldn't believe I'd been so stupid. But mostly I was numb, didn't know what I wanted, what I was feeling. I wanted to turn back time.

"Macy," Jason put his hand on my arm, and I looked at him, looked into him, dead. "I'm sorry. I never thought he would be parked on the other side of the boat house." He squeezed my arm.

That was all. Then he moved on down the line, and just like that I stopped going to Cascade Dive—we really were over. I'd finished destroying us. But I couldn't be in the store, across from the Craig's plaque with access to a pull-out drawer of maps to Egret's Marina. How many divers drowned exploring those caves? And I'd been swimming in that lake. The same place they died, casually disconnected. It made me sick to my stomach.

"It's my fault," Jason said at the house right after they found his body. He'd helped in the search. "I should have found him—I never should have sold him guideline."

"You sold him guideline?" I was shocked.

"Only one reel. He wanted to use it for practice," Jason said rubbing his face. "I told him to be careful. I didn't know."

I didn't know if I could believe him. "You'll have to tell my parents," I said.

He nodded, said they needed to know, then put his hand under my chin, lifted it sweetly like he did only days ago, but it felt like pain, what we were doing. I blinked away tears. Nothing made sense.

"Mace," he said, "we don't need to tell them we were looking for him. We wanted to stop it, but we were too late. We can't go back. I wish we could, but it's impossible, and there's no sense exposing our relationship. Don't you agree?"

Tears spilled out over my cheeks, *our relationship*; I looked at his shoulders, wondering what had been so glorious about them before.

"We tried," he said. "And if it weren't for you, we would have never even had that chance."

More tears. I didn't know where they were coming from. I hadn't even liked Nick for years.

"It's not your fault," he said, but I read differently in his eyes: disgust. The rug at my feet, the twisting red brocade, its light gold lines. "He knew he was taking a big risk, but that was your brother."

I smiled. It was true. Nick was all about risks.

"So you can't blame yourself."

The rug blurred. Jason patted my arm with his hand; there was nothing in the touch, no suggestion of our former intimacy. Had I imagined it? But then, there were people everywhere.

Celia sits stunned. “Macy, that’s not your fault.”

“What do you mean?” Didn’t she just hear me?

“How could you have known Jason wouldn’t find him? You weren’t trying to get him killed.”

“But I knew, and I didn’t tell anyone.”

“I think you’re harder on yourself than anyone else.” She slipped from her chair, sat in the grass beside me, putting one hand on my back. It reminded me of the time I’d done the very same thing to my father, reassured him, and I turn, hug her.

CHAPTER 15

The clouds have burst, outdone themselves, fragmented, rounded into every shade of purple-blue while I sit on the bench under the oak. It used to be one of my favorite things to watch the currents slow and the surface crystallize, reflecting the sky. Despite the bank, the trees, volcanic rock looming between both, sometimes my mind twisted in a hundred directions—which clouds were real? Which way was up? Was the reflection as beautiful as the real thing? Or was the reflection the original? They seemed identical, equally important. Could both exist together, as double-walkers?

I'm shaded by the overhead branch, my skin warm, insects buzzing, birds above. How can it still be so beautiful?

What would an older version of myself look like? I make her cute, forget the shrunken boobs, our family's genetic mutation; they've grown out full, and my hair is longer. I look fun, self-assured, like a young Celia, I think, almost seeing the vision.

A gentle whirring I didn't notice before: insects, flies. A frog croaks twice, overlaying songbirds: finch, sparrow, chickadee. The frog again, looking for a mate, and the oaks leaves, lush and lobed.

I feel connected to the projected woman in my head, a kind of Nafanua.

"I think the key," Celia said, "is allowing pain its beauty, letting them together. Watch where you're walking," she said. "Think about your older self. What would she tell you?"

I don't know. I don't know what she would say.

I remember my mother swinging on the porch. We were both in the dark, barred by a wall, connected by a window, and she would kill me if she knew. Nick had just died, and I didn't understand what was happening. Jason had kicked me out of his truck. Everything was a blur, and I sat beneath the window listening to my mother's creak. Everything was lost. She cried, like she'd cried on the lake. She said she couldn't live without him. She never loved anyone more than she loved her first baby. Nothing mattered anymore. That's what she said. She begged for him to come back. Underneath the window, we were so distant; I couldn't reach her, and then she never came again, never fully returned to our family.

What would my older self say to the girl under the window?

God, I wish I'd told that girl to go out to the porch and hold her mom while she had her, that she wouldn't have her for much longer, that her mom would be so torn up by grief that she wouldn't be able to function, but it didn't have anything to do with her. It wasn't her fault. It wasn't. I would tell her it was okay, that she could tell her mom, tell her everything. Her mother would have loved her anyway.

What about you, do you love her anyway? I wonder.

It wasn't her fault, I sob into my empty folded arms, nature mingling with old events.

It's okay.

I'm so scared, so terrified of what will happen, of what's already happened.

But my older self enters the scene, walks to me, sits next to the window, and lets me put my head in her lap, "It's okay," she whispers, her hand on my head. Awful, hard, and still okay. A drowning, a death, "but you'll make it through," she says while I hold my face in her lap, cover my eyes. "I'll take care of you." I clutch my body, rock, sway like waves. "You didn't know, couldn't have known." Her words like the sun, a warm blanket, tucking. "It's not your fault. You didn't want the bad things to happen." My hands, my cheeks are soaking, like a dive. "You still have people who love you, and I'll take care of you," she says to the girl so little while I watch them both.

The sky is a rosy glow—dangerous purples, the air crisp and bitable, like the freshness of an apple combined with the after-smell of hours old rain. Songbirds dash; the moss under the old oak tree is wet, damp; the wild grasses, laced together, tall and thick. I place my hand on the tree, under the low hanging branch. I wouldn't need a rope now to swing up, but the lake is all I see. It's incredible vastness, the sense it gives of life and depth. It's the depth that terrifies me, wonderful and innocuous.

The sight reminds me of a John Barry theme, *Flying over Africa*—skyscape layered in clouds, the small hum of a plane dipping into savannas, the wonder of thousands of unknown birds, antelopes, gazelles, beasts: trundling, galloping, branching in veins like the arteries of the world, life and it's copious diversions.

And I am here. Looking at the mouth of an erupted volcano, so ancient that rain overwhelmed evaporation, startling landscape with its change over time: one of the deepest, clearest lakes in the world. Its pristine beauty never fails to catch me off-guard. It leaves me lonely, but touched. In these extreme landscapes, something must be felt: fear, loathing, love. It's all the same. Is that why Celia chose this place?

The last day I pulled on my wetsuit was the last day I dove. It washes over me, a sadness. That I haven't seen it since, swam its idle eddies. There's an old tree in the lake. Suspended, half in the water, half out. A snag, nothing but a trunk really, carried by the flow of water, the old man they call it. Supposedly it's lucky to spot him on patrol—one petrified three-hundred-year-old tree in the midst of water that could fill a thousand normal lakes. It would be a good place to die, this lake.

If our spirits connect to our environment, stay in the places they love, then I think Nick would be glad to be tied to Cascade. Glad his last rite was in a medium that eclipsed him. What are minutes of death, compared to life?

I wonder if we would have become friends again. I'm sure he would have liked to show me his cave—wouldn't have wanted to be the only one to see it.

Chasing him. I did it my whole life while he pointed. They say teenage angst disappears, but I have no reference. For Nick, I want to go back down, feel the splash of water over the boat, the air stiff through my regulator, the awe of looking at the sun underwater, so much blue refracting light, and maybe a fish, face-to-face. The lake is so tremendous that only 5% can be seen without a special submersion vehicle, and in that

small place Nick found something wonderful and terrifying. How like our planet to harbor such extravagances.

“I want to dive again,” I say to Mari as we walk out of the clinic. It’s her last week of radiation, and William has called to say he’ll be back tomorrow. It was hard for her to hear about Nick, about how I knew he’d been diving. At first her face flashed betrayal, or that’s what I thought, but then she was hugging me, putting it aside.

“You carried that all this time? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I ruined our family.”

“Mace, if there’s anyone that ruined our family, it’s me. I think I’ve been more of a mother to Nick, while he’s been dead, than to you.” Her body trembled. “If I kick this cancer,” she pulled back from our hug and winked, “I’m going to try to change that.” I squeezed her hands.

“You want to start diving again? I think that’s wonderful.” She pats my back like she’s proud, only a hint of fear in her face, and we stop outside the car, the lot full of pavement and painted lines.

“Here. I want to go down to the peninsula. To the cave.” There it is. Her eyes flash, a panic.

“Do you think that’s a good idea, Macy? Here? Wouldn’t it be better to do it somewhere else first?” Her hand has found mine, tightened uncomfortably.

“I need to apologize to him.”

“For what?” Her eyes cloud, confused.

In deep water time disappears and age is irrelevant. When you dive moments turn to hours, life warps; you can't even see in color. Minimalist. Only after experiencing life condensed like that, can you understand how unnecessary the rules are, how the rules simply cloud reality, take you further from yourself.

It was Jason who told me that, when he moved to Cascade and only wore white wrinkled t-shirts and his hair long, and spent a lot of time hoarding Plath's poetry and diving gear. I didn't know quite what he meant, except that it had something to do with us, and whatever it was, nobody else would understand, not my family, and certainly not Nick. who almost figured it out.

But the idea had changed me—I began to think of time and age as arbitrary, something that rushed others along ahead of me, making me seem younger than I actually was. Underwater, I thought, justifying everything, ten years might be a moment.

I'd thought the boathouse road was deserted, but William simply drives over the tree in the middle of the road; he's been meaning to remove it, and any year now it will be too big to snap over the top. He's been using the dock for years.

“Of course you can,” Mari said before we left. “If that's what you want, but swear to me,” her rings ripped against my fingers, “you'll be careful. That you won't go in. Swear, again. If I have to go to my last day of radiation without you, I will kill you. So help me.” She gave me a comical-serious look.

I have packed everything carefully, refreshed my air at the new dive shop built closer to the lake: “Egret’s Dive.”

I drop anchor near the peninsula and rock, waiting for the boat to settle, the anchor line to jerk to a stop. The outline of the shore is backlit now with orange glow. I may have overestimated the distance, but there’s no need to restart the boat. Better to be too far away than too close to a rock wall, even if it takes more air.

The neoprene sticks to my skin, and I pull the wetsuit up my waist, nervous even though I’ve reviewed the rules, taken a pool dive last night. I’ve watched this very scene so many times in dreams; always my brother was the protagonist, but now I’m alone in a vast blue.

Mari pushed coming, but Celia nodded when I explained that I had to be alone.

I pull on the weight jacket, wipe my face, secure my ponytail, and check the air in my tank: 3,000psi, about an hour's worth. Holding the mask and regulator, I sit on the edge of the boat, *I'll take care of you*, reminds a voice in my head as I roll backward into the bluish-green water, the color of molten sapphires.

Waves ripple, and I disappear under the surface, then give way to the weight of my suit when I blow the air out of my BC, all the air in my lungs, a quick plummet into darkness. I flip it back on, stabilize myself in the water—between space, not floating, not sinking, weightless in a blue light collector—everything dazzles.

My mind hitches between my breathing, mechanical, and the sights around me are almost other-earthly. Every five feet until thirty, I stop, holding my nose through the flexi-plastic and blowing, equalizing the mounting pressure in my ears. Only green divers stop so often, but the bubbles in my slow descent draw curious fish: kokanee salmon, and in the distance a rainbow trout.

The peninsula's underside stands out, rising questionably: jagged volcanic rock, braids of lava tubes, other eruption leftovers. My thoughts return to Jason—here I am on a dive for Nick, and still all I can think is Jason. *Nick said he found some pictures of young girls in your truck, girls you were touching. He knew it was you.* Jason pushed me against the door, my head hit, recoiled; under my hand a lump was growing, it felt knifed, hot and pulsing. *I'm twenty-seven for Christ's sake, Macy. I have a fucking life. You don't, you're a molester.*

He put his hands on my head, tight, clenching his fists in my hair, pulling at the knot. A burning pain, dizzy and then I am handing him a black book, a dive log, a map. *I'm just going to scare him, Macy. If he won't listen, I'll make him think twice.* I don't need you anymore, Jason. He tries to press himself into me, but in real time I stretch my hands over my head, then pull my arms back alongside my body, pushing pounds of water, kicking like hell toward the granite wall.

Fat disjointed bubbles trail out behind me, and the water's colors drip into their darkly-hued counterparts.

It takes awhile to find it, and I'm not using my air efficiently, breathing too hard, too conscious of my depth, my inexperience. And then I see it, the rock like a ram's head, a gaping black hole beneath. Oh my God.

I swim slowly, ease up on the hole thinking about the way I ease up on men, keep my distance. An event horizon: a miniature black hole, so powerful all the light rushes in, spirals flaring, drowns attempting escape, traps without reflection.

“Promise me you'll be careful,” Mari said.

And I only want to look, kick, float toward the hole, but I'm suddenly caught in a current: the cave is sucking in, my hair covers my eyes, and I'm pulled into the hole. Oh my God, oh my God; I reach up, catch the wall with an arm, one foot while the other tips inward with the current.

“Listen to the darkness, can you hear it breathe?” When I was young, we went on a road trip through South Dakota: the badlands, the black hills, the corn palace, Mount Rushmore, but I was astonished, captured by a thirty-second elevator descent into Jewel Caves, the second longest cave known to the world. When the doors opened, musty wet earth flooded my nose, like a gift, the gorgeous smell of mineral water dripping through clay. The woman outside, a college student, held her scarf over a small opening and it flew, fluttered, flapped out-of-control.

“Caves breathe,” she explained. In and out, slow, like a long breath, a waking up, a sigh. “Based on the air volume of its breath, we think we've found less than 10% of the cave.” My mother's jaw had dropped open, and the woman continued, “we don't have

time to explore it year-round, so we add to the map, seasonally spelunking.”

Uncontrollable, my heart bounds through this memory.

Cave breathing, I should have known, but I stop, feel the sweet current against my face. Let it wash me. It's only because I came head on, I realize, that it sucked me so forcefully. I should be able to pull myself out, kick myself loose. But I wait a moment more, sucking air into my lungs, the regulator rounding out my mouth, water's wind brushing my face.

Nick, I think, and the word 'asshole' accompanies it unwittingly, long-practiced, my eyes smile. Thanks for watching out for me. You were right. I thought you would want to know.

I hope my thoughts reach him, wherever he is, flow with the current toward the places he went.

I do love you, I think, surprised. For the first ten years, not the last, but I love you.

Along the wall, there are loose rocks, covered in algae. I pull a couple out, slick, let them drop one by one, disappearing into the fathoms below, until I find the right one, a sharp angle. Returning to the hole from the side, I scrap at the ram, dig white lines into the dimpled rock: a pattern, a person. Stick-person, but a person nonetheless, and another figure next to the first.

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

All sorrows can be borne if we put them in a story or tell a story about them.
-Isak Dinesen

To learn to do what I love, I went to a bookstore and gathered the stories that have pressed deeply on me. My search was limited to books of the last few years, so that I could leave out the teenage ones: *Anne of Green Gables* and *Where the Red Fern Grows* and a few that are simply too embarrassing to mention (those of the chic lit or pop genera, especially the heavy breathers with sweaty Jacket covers). Those books didn't belong in the mix with Sue Monk Kidd and Pulitzer-Prize winner Marilynne Robinson. They definitely couldn't be placed next to a Margaret Atwood, as few books can in my estimation. Furthermore, the neglected titles bore no relation to my beloved naturalists Jane Goodall and Rachel Carson. What I amassed was a stack of the elite, the few I could definitively point to and say *I want to do that*. And minus the heavy breathers, now that I have that stack, I'm not sure anymore about leaving out Montgomery and Rawls.

When I sat in that leather armchair to catalog my masterpieces by theme, I realized the books were essentially the same. I am obsessed with loss, pain, loneliness and aloneness, as though these states infuse beauty into existence, or maybe more to the point, demonstrate the beauty of resilience or the hope that such resilience is possible, as when Yann Martel wrote, "I had no idea a living being could sustain so much injury and go on living" (128). Some authors are better at grounding me in sorrow to draw out hope than others. Atwood leaves a character at risk of impending death on her last page, and I

sigh with relief: *he's still alive*. Rawls plants a red fern thick between the graves of two hounds to confirm they really were special, and I cry over the gift. Goodall flat out names her book *A Reason for Hope*, and I latch on to it.

Aside from pain, my paperback stack fairly glowed with one other similarity that crossed genres, and that, with little variance, was a connection between humanity and nature, a nature that nourished or destroyed my protagonists by its qualitative richness.

Little wonder then, that I want to write a novel set in the woods near a lake. Something full of familial strife, resilience, and a solipsistic character wrapped in interiority. A story suffused with the kind of hope that recognizes pain and wonder sitting alertly side-by-side.

Two very different protagonists model the introverted loneliness I plan to write into my character Macy. Jimmy in Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and John Ames in Robinson's *Gilead*. Ames is a pastor, an old man, worried about his death in the 1950s. Jimmy is a former womanizer, turned hermit. *Gilead* has the tone of a spiritual meditation. *Oryx and Crake* is a rowdy and irreverent dystopia. That I place them together, match them as two of the most meaningful models for my own work is ludicrous, except that both of these characters exhibit a marked despair, a similar confusion about their own unhappiness that they reflectively process in front of readers. While anchored in the present, most of the scenes, dialogue, and action happen in the past, in memory.

Both plots lead up to the characters' explanations about their inner tension. The men are afraid to recognize something about themselves, something possibly horrible and

ugly, at odds with their self-perceptions. The unspoken stymies them, fills them with anguish. When the men finally observe themselves with clarity, and more importantly acknowledge or accept what could never be admitted, the avoided knowledge loses its power. They change. They can move on.

Simple, yes. Though challenging. Jimmy admits that his apathy contributed to the apocalypse. He realizes that in his desire to please people, he buried his authentic self, and he begins to realize that his shallow relationships and loneliness come from this self-defeating protective barrier. In a highly symbolic move, at the close of the book Jimmy approaches a small group of some of the last people on earth. He is naked, defenseless. His change is revealed when the narrator reports, “he has nothing to trade with them, nor they with him. Nothing except themselves” (Atwood 373). The novel ends with Jimmy on the brink of risking the first real rejection of his life for the opportunity to be authentically, nakedly, known for the first time. He has become self-aware.

John Ames' process is similar. He acknowledges a blind prejudice that shamed him and filled him with anger for decades. When he recognizes the blindness of his assumptions, he is able to set them aside and accept his namesake and godson, young Boughton, a man he thought he could never love. Ames completes this change in the very moment that young Boughton is performing his most selfish act, abandoning his father, Ames' best friend, on his deathbed. Ames blesses the boy, offering him more than he thought he could ever give, “The Lord make his face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee . . . Lord, bless John Ames Boughton, this beloved son and brother and husband and father” (Robinson 241). Ames returns to his friend's bedside and says to the sleeping

form, “I love [Boughton] as much as you meant me to. So certain of your prayers are finally answered, old fellow. And mine too, mine too. We had to wait a long time, didn't we?” (244). A lifetime, in fact.

In these novels, readers are able to observe lonely characters accepting truths about themselves and using their recognition to move authentically toward inner peace and meaningful relationships. The effect in both is achieved nonlinearly. *Oryx and Crake* and *Gilead* use fragmented forms, jumping between presents and discontinuous pasts by way of memory.

I intend to create Macy's story similarly by letting her loneliness climax in a self-realization or self-acceptance that extends to accepting others and creates the opportunity for her to experience deeper, more fulfilling and authentic relationships. Like John Ames' and Jimmy's stories, most of her's will happen in front of readers in discontinuous memory flashbacks. The trauma in her past holds back her emotional development until she learns to see the pain and permit its reduction.

Like *Gilead*, with the exception of the preface, this novel is written in the first person. I intend the first-person voice to act as a vehicle for character accessibility. The drama of world cataclysm and satire will not be included in Macy's story, so the tone and style will resemble *Gilead* more than *Oryx and Crake*. While I do not intend to write with the same urgency and energy that Atwood's tension generates, I do hope to affect more suspense than the drifting quiet of Robinson's lovely novel. *Oryx and Crake* is plot driven. *Gilead* is character driven. I imagine my thesis fitting between these two works,

closer to *Gilead*, though propelled forward by minor conflicts in each chapter and building with moderate pacing to the major resolution, or character change.

Of all the novels collected, *The Secret Life of Bees* is closest to what I want to render. It is a coming-of-age story with rich connections to the natural world and vivid poetic prose. Lily Owen's healing is more palpable. A lonely character, though not as lonely as Jimmy or John Ames, she is trying to make peace with the death of her mother, whom she misses desperately. The story, shaped by her blurred mother memory, is set in South Carolina in 1964. Lily escapes an abusive father and is introduced by August Boatwright to bee keeping, colorless skin, and the Black Madonna. From August, a character whose role is similar to Celia's, Lily learns about the innate sacredness of herself. August tells her, "You have to find a mother inside yourself. We all do. Even if we already have a mother, we still have to find this part of ourselves inside" (Kidd 288). When she risks August's hatred by revealing to her that she killed her own mother, August tells her a different story—one difficult to bear because her mother abandoned her, but liberating to Lily, precisely because when she comes to believe in her own intrinsic worth, despite her mistakes, she is able to grant her mother the same worth and forgive her for not being what she needed. August mentors the process, as in the following dialogue:

"Every person on the face of the earth makes mistakes, Lily. Every last one. We're all so human. Your mother made a terrible mistake, but she tried to fix it."

"Goodnight," I said, and rolled on to my side.

"There is nothing perfect," August said from the doorway. "There is only life."
(256)

Lily's healing is additionally propelled by spiritual stories she internalizes about the Black Madonna. Ultimately, she learns to love the unlovable and accept that some things simply are.

Similar to Lily, Macy will be dealing with guilt for participating in someone's death, in this case, her brother's. Lily Owen's is thirteen, while Macy is remembering her fifteenth year. Both girls have poor parental support. As a mentor who teaches spirituality, Celia will function like August. However Celia will be teaching Macy an Eastern religion: Buddhism or Taoism. Not only thematically, but stylistically I want to write as Kidd has. Her prose is rich and lilting. When August first tells Lily the truth about her mother, Lily says,

“I wish you'd told me what you knew about my mother” . . .

“Oh Lily,” she said, and there was gentleness in her words, like they'd been rocked in a little hammock of tenderness down in her throat, “Why would I go and hurt you with something like that?”(264, 265)

Kidd takes time to weave her details vividly. Her prose is poetical, descriptive, anchored in place and environment. While a Southern bee farm bears little relation to the environment of Cascade, Kidd and Robinson have both written other novels set near water that are similar to the environment I plan.

Robinson's *Housekeeping* is a motherless girl's coming-of-age story, but it is the lake-as-character that struck me most powerfully. Ruth, the protagonist, is transfixed by the woods and the glacial lake near her home. She does most of her escaping to these spots, even in her dreams. Nature is a healing agent, an essential part of how she comes to understand herself. “And here we find our great affinity with water, for like reflections on

water our thoughts will suffer no changing shock, no permanent displacement” (163). In my own writing, I want to affect similar realizations with the lake at Cascade. It is an environment that is both beautiful and dangerous, powerful in its extremes, literally, symbolically, and mythically. I intend the trees and the water to take on a fundamental presence.

In Kidd's *The Mermaid Chair*, nature plays a similar mediating role for a protagonist awakening to her deepest self. Jessie reflects on the environment to understand herself. “Looking back at the wake, at the distance we'd covered, I realized how isolated I'd been growing up on an island without a bridge. I'd been thoroughly caged by water . . .” (35). Even when Jesse is away from the water, we get moments stylized by the theme: “Arching my neck, I looked up at the sky, at the milky smear of stars, feeling a momentary sensation of floating, of becoming unmoored from my life” (69). She says, “I felt like there had to be some other life beneath the one I had, like an underground river or something and that I would die if I didn't dig down to it” (309). Like the others, the resolution of this story happens through acceptance. Jesse says, “you come finally to the irreducible thing, and there's nothing left to do but pick it up and hold it. Then, at least, you can enter the severe mercy of acceptance (304). Her character acknowledges the fundamental reason why it works, the reason why healing can be present in pain. “There's release in knowing the truth no matter how anguishing it is” (304). *The Mermaid Chair*, in its crafting of place and resolution, is a model narrative for Macy's transition in her backwoods refuge.

It wouldn't work if Macy wasn't emotionally connected to her surroundings. Fifty years ago, Rachel Carson sat on a rocky wooded beach in Maine and asked, "What is the value of preserving and strengthening this sense of awe and wonder, this recognition of something beyond the boundaries of human existence?" (100). She answered with a conviction I share:

There is symbolic as well as actual beauty in the migration of the birds, the ebb and flow of the tides, the folded bud ready for the spring. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature . . . (Carson 100, 101)

As Macy experiences nature's companionship, I see her as a character Jane Goodall might call an old soul, someone attached to trees and ferns, who can sense and be bolstered by their inherent spirituality. In *Reason for Hope*, Goodall describes such a moment.

Lost in awe at the beauty around me, I must have slipped into a state of heightened awareness. It is hard—impossible, really—to put into words . . . It seemed to me, as I struggled afterward to recall the experience, that *self* was utterly absent: I and the chimpanzees, the earth and trees and air, seemed to merge, to become one with the spirit power of life itself. (173)

Goodall reports that when the chimpanzees left, she stayed in that sacred place trying to record what she could only label as mystical. Goodall's book helped me to connect nature and spirituality to self, or the absence of self, or perhaps the moment of acceptance that creates equality between self and nature.

Undergirding the themes I've discussed, nature and acceptance, the story will also include a diaphanous other, an alter-story that rewrites a myth. This component is inspired by the intertextuality of Margaret Atwood's work; she employs the technique in many stories, including: *The Penelopiad*, a mythical rewrite of the *Odyssey* from a

woman's point-of-view; *The Robber Bride*, with references to a rewritten relationship between Aphrodite, Athena, and Hera; and even short stories, such as *The Tent's* "Salome Was A Dancer."

Atwood prefaces "Salome was a Dancer" with an image she drew. Blood, stars, dots, and tulips fall from a morose head on a platter, identical to the head of the woman holding the platter. Atwood includes only the text as explanation: Salome's broken family "wanted her to perform," (51) which meant bringing home acceptable grades. Therefore Salome seduces the Religious Studies teacher. She was the type, having been into beauty pageants, makeup, and other performing arts since she was five. "What a display" (52); she was suspiciously sexual in everything she did. When she and the teacher were caught, he blamed her for being a slut. "But you always knew with Salome that if anyone's head was going to roll it wouldn't be hers" (53), which was true for that situation, but Salome is not accepted to ballet school, and she comes to a grisly stripper's end, clobbered over the head right before a show. Two uniformed men are seen running away, and the narrator ends the story blaming the mother.

The image and Salome's name reveal more about the story's deeper meaning than the text could alone. Atwood's Salome is irrefutably tied to the historical Salomé who was held responsible for the death of John the Baptist after requesting his head on a platter. However, Atwood's Salome ends up dead instead, holding her own head. Her story fails to follow historical conventions. Rather than being a man-killer, we may infer that Salome is ultimately responsible for her own demise. As her performances ring with fabrication, readers may infer she was not true to herself or her voice; perhaps she has

none. Rather than demonstrating true artistic expression, she performs for men in bars. Atwood's modification of this well-known story allows a complicated analysis of Salomé's death, artistic death, and human authenticity. It is Atwood's intertextuality that unlocks Salome from a one-dimensional narrative, making her altered message resonate historically.

Incorporating intertextual references is a technique that makes stories rich with implications, often more sinister and layered. Rewriting myths that are universal and timeless make the implications more recognizable, decipherable, and can even act as a reappropriation of something that has been taken away, as in feminist revisionist mythology.

The myth I am altering is Medea's. Her story and surroundings easily transfer to the naturalist themes I want to employ. They also match in grief. Medea is often criticized for killing her brother and blindly following a man who only cared about what she could offer him. By loosely rewriting a motif of her life, I want to provide a version of her story that doesn't end in tragedy, where identity is not permanently eclipsed by poor decisions, where reappropriation and recovery speak to divine female power, worth, and ability. When conversing with the myth, my story will suggest atonement.

Obviously my project is informed by other literature, research, and craft books. However the pieces discussed here by Robinson, Atwood, Kidd, Goodall, and Carson were the main books I saw impacting my work.

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