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Valhalla in Escrow

Deena Lilygren

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VALHALLA IN ESCROW

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of English and Philosophy
Murray State University
Murray, KY

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by Deena Lilygren
December 2017
To my Darling M,

the best reader and partner in life
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INTRODUCTION

If you don’t want to work your ass off, you have no business trying to write well—settle back into competency and be grateful you have even that much to fall back on. There is a muse, but he’s not going to come fluttering down into your writing room and scatter creative fairy-dust all over your typewriter or computer station. He lives in the ground. He’s a basement guy. You have to descend to his level, and once you get down there you have to furnish an apartment for him to live in. You have to do all the grunt labor.

- Stephen King

Craft books generally contain the same advice; the differences are in how the various authors articulate that advice, so when we talk about the books with the “best” writing advice, what we usually mean is that one author has managed to hold a piece of advice in the precise path of our narrow flashlight. Through various explanations, illustrations, and exercises, all writing instruction books offer the same essential basic rules for becoming a proficient writer: read a lot and write a lot. Work hard. The trick, however, is knowing where to work hard. Stephen King offers, in his craft book, On Writing, that writers are responsible for all the “grunt labor.” Producing good writing, then, depends on knowing—to further extend King’s metaphor—which areas we are equipped to furnish, and which areas we might want to keep in the back of the apartment.

Ten years ago, when I was beginning to see the development of my own creative writing as a natural extension of my love for literature, I was awarded a scholarship to the New York State Summer Writer’s Institute at Skidmore College. There, during a private conference, my mentor, Julia Slavin (The Woman Who Cut Off Her Leg at the Maidstone Club and Other Stories), told me that while my prose was well-written, my writing was empty. She insisted that as long as I refused to allow anything personal or authentic into my writing, it would never succeed. She asked me what I was hiding. I was shocked; I
was a reader—a literature major—but lacked the ability to see what other writers were
doing that I was not.

This ability requires a writer to have self-awareness about their own writing, but
this is often a blind spot. One of my mentors likes to say that MFA students don’t really
need a program—we just need to read and then do what the best writers have done. This
belief, no matter how logical, doesn’t account for the blind spot. Until I had someone
pointing at the first sentence of a story and explaining the effect it has on the next
sentence, and then the next, and the next, I was entirely unable to understand the function
of a first sentence. And so, for me, the MFA program at Murray State University has
been about finding and then uncovering these blind spots, one by one.

POINT OF VIEW AND COMFORTABLE DISTANCE

Determining the best point of view from which to tell a story is one of the first
decisions an author must make. Since the right point of view will seem effortless, readers
may forget that though a writer may have a preference for one particular point of view,
the decision is not the result of an author’s default writing style, but is frequently strategic
and can contribute to the meaning and interpretation of the story. Point of view is the
element of fiction I neglect the most in my own writing, basing my choice largely on
what will put the most distance between myself and the reader. Whether the cause is an
intimacy issue or some other inhibition pinpointed by Slavin so many years ago, I feel
most able to write freely in third person, no matter that the first person narrator is not
understood to be the writer, and I’ve never attempted second person because that seems
even closer.
Julia Elliott, author of *The Wilds*, seems to have a good understanding of the effect of second person point of view, which is probably the least universally utilized points of view. Second person has the effect of forcing an intimacy between the writer and reader from the start, by essentially telling the reader a story about themselves. The reader is forced to empathize with, if not experience, whatever the author describes.

Elliott employs second person in the story “Jaws,” with a claustrophobic effect that amplifies the claustrophobic tone of the story. The protagonist, you, is forced to deal with the aging of “your dad” and impending senility of “your mom.” The point of view is almost too close, in this situation, which is the point. The reader has the visceral experience of dizziness and overwhelming stimuli at the all-you-can-eat buffet (Elliott 118), and later, experiences a suffocating nightmare. In the nightmare,

> “you are on a vast, dilapidated spaceship that reeks of leaking gas. You move down endless corridors, trip over clusters of ripped-out wiring. You discover a medical area, dim yet stark with flickering fluorescent light. And among the rows of sick and dying, you find your mother, tucked into a corner, hooked up to a mess of dirty tubes. (Elliott 124).

Placing the reader in the situation amplifies the overall tone of the story.

Another use for the second person in “Jaws” is that it allows the writer to present a protagonist without much to commend her to the reader. Her flaws are largely vanity and selfishness, but second person point of view forces the reader to overlook her flaws the same way we overlook our own. However, it’s first-person point of view that seems to be Elliott’s comfort zone.
One of the best uses of first person is in the collection’s first story, “Rapture,” particularly since the narrator is a child. First person point of view is used to its full advantage in the scenes where the grandmother spins stories of angels and demons. Second person point of view is close, but wouldn’t be as authentic—adult readers are no longer titillated by biblical tales—but hearing the story from a child, about how they were “[d]runk on sweet terror, shivering in our sleeping bags” allows for a more visceral experience, since most people can recall the very real fancies of childhood (Elliott 32). As a result, it is a more thrilling experience to follow the narrator’s story when she describes how “we followed her every word, delighting as the tales grew stranger. She described filth, outsized lusts of the Beast, who had a member like an oak trunk and who copulated with his harem of stinking she-dragons” (33).

Two of the stories in my collection—“Everything’s Going to be All Right, Charlie Brown,” and “Teethings”—use first-person point of view, and as a result, both have the suggestion of being distinctly autobiographical, which could very well work during the writing process to serve as a trigger to change the writer’s general headspace and activate the sort of hypnosis that Madison Smartt Bell describes in Narrative Design and calls a “mild hypnotic trance” in an interview on this wild topic with New Yorker reviewer Jeannie Vanasco. This may be an overstatement, but I believe the same concepts are at work. To tell the story through the eyes of the narrator alters the writer’s state of mind, has a different, freeing effect. This is of particular interest to me because, as mentioned before, being freed from inhibitions and blind spots is a major task for me in my own quest to become a better writer.
SCOPE & STYLE

In writing about style, I must begin with Lydia Davis. Davis is one of my favorite writers—one of the few writers whose entire works I not only own, but read over and over, to the point of memorization. Her straightforward, stripped-down writing gives me a lot of pleasure, and while I would love to be able to write like her, it seems unlikely—slowing down and dwelling on details is a vice that sometimes mires me in insignificant points of my own stories. I have always leaned on prose to make up for my deficits in story-crafting. Davis’ writing helps me understand this particular weakness. Davis’ writing is so straightforward that some of her stories are just one paragraph or one sentence, and so spare of detail they could be newspaper articles. For example, “Murder in Bohemia:”

In the city of Frydlant in Bohemia where all the people are anyway pale as ghosts and dressed in dark winter clothes, an old woman was unable any longer to bear the inevitable falling of her life into destitution and disgrace, and went mad and murdered her husband, her two sons, and her daughter, out of anger her neighbors on one side and her neighbors across the street, who had scorned her family, out of revenge the grocer from whom she had had to beg for credit, and the pawnbroker, and two moneylenders, then a streetcar conductor whom she did not know, and finally—rushing with her long knife into the Town Hall—the young mayor and one of his councilmen as they sat puzzling over an amendment. (Davis 93)
The only extraneous details here are the “pale as ghosts” people in “dark winter clothes” and the “long knife” with which she murders the townspeople. But there’s a strong sense of setting, an understanding of the protagonist, a climax, and it is remarkably satisfying for a one-sentence story. The matter-of-fact tone is what makes writing like this work. Certain insights can punch the reader right in the chest when they’re delivered this way.

Of course, insight alone may not be enough for every reader, which is why I consider Aimee Bender’s work of the same ilk but with all the extra flavor I would want to read and write. This style works well for any writer who wants to work with elements that may not technically fit into “reality.” My students despise stories like the kind Bender and Davis write. They believe that straightforward writing reveals a lack of skill, and most importantly, that it isn’t “realistic.” Realism is what they admire and desire in writing. And while I admire and desire it, too, I enjoy many kinds of writing, and want to master a straightforward style that frees me up to use magical realism, humor, and my own voice. I believe that in my thesis stories, particularly “Teethings” and “Making Change,” I both found my voice and shook off extraneous prose. This is important for my writing because prose can function as “cover” for a writer like me who has trouble with inhibition. Susan Tepper’s “The Successful Writer is the Risk-Taking Writer” describes this with an anecdote about submissions that she finds “so well crafted I sit back in my chair floored by that writer’s skill. But often in all that gorgeous prose nothing is happening in the story. All those beautiful sentences but where is the risk factor? Where is the danger?” Prose cannot act as a stand-in for authentic content.

Bender’s “Death Wish” has similarities to Davis work that “Death Wish” is a broadly narrated story that describes the events that unfold after a doctor tells a group of
men they are dying, when some of them aren’t. The writing is straightforward and comes through with the insights that seem to be the payoff for such straightforward writing.

From “Death Wish”:

The two remaining crying men die. One with tubes, the other in his own bed. One of the raging men dies, roaring in his bathtub. Another, though not a mistake, still drums that field with his fists. The very energy it takes should drain him dry, but no. He is happily drumming. He drums for weeks and sits up and isn’t yet dead. It takes him six months, which he uses to make some angry paintings that are beloved by people in galleries who are unaware that they themselves are angry at all. (Bender 8)

The writing *seems* simple because it is a list of what happens, but the events provide insight into human nature, and the last sentence there is the payoff: wry and profound and absolutely perfect.

It was fortunate that I read Aimee Bender’s *Willful Creatures* during this program, an excellent jumping-off point for thinking about controlling the scope of narration in my own stories. I’ve gradually learned that writing comes easier to me and is sometimes more enjoyable when I pull back to a very broad lens, rather than describing each moment in excruciating sensory detail—what is each character feeling, seeing, hearing; what does their breath sound like, what is their body language, and so on—but still have trouble extricating myself from passages where I wallow to much in these details that may not have a real purpose. My evolution in this program seems to be a
gradual stripping away of details that don’t further the telling of a story and stylistically weigh me down.

There is also a kind of freedom to articulate things the way I like them articulated as a reader and am comfortable articulating them as a writer, with more stream-of-consciousness writing. For example, Bender writes,

[t]he woman he met. He met a woman. This woman was the woman he met. She was not the woman he expected to meet or planned to meet or had carved into his head in full dress with a particular nose and eyes and lips and a very particular brain. No, this was a very different woman, this one he met. When he met her he could hardly stand her because she did not fit the shape in his brain of the woman he had planned so vigorously and extensively to meet. (51)

This may also have to do with point of view—this style of Bender’s and Davis’ is typically omniscient, which is useful. It’s an observation about a character’s thoughts, rather than the thoughts as a character would experience them. For me, this is the most appealing approach. As a writer, I constantly worry about being too heavy-handed, but when observations are delivered matter-of-factly with the meaning behind them implicit, this worry is alleviated, and as I continue to write, I have begun to enjoy this freedom. For example, in my later stories, such as “Making Change” and “Teethings,” I was able to move through the story far more easily than in the earlier “The Greatest Show on Earth,” which in earlier versions, was tortured by my desire to burrow into every thought and feeling experienced by the protagonist. As a result, “The Greatest Show on Earth”
was tortured, and went through six or seven revisions, whereas “Making Change” felt stylistically “right” right away.

**STRUCTURE**

As a student of writing, I am always searching for the techniques that make the difference between a story and a good story, or the difference between fiction and literature—although I do acknowledge the much-disputed and sometimes arbitrary distinction between the latter two. One technique that elevates the experience for me as a reader is the author’s ability to echo the primary conflict with another narrative that becomes vaguely—or overtly—allegorical. This repetition, or layering, of situations is a pleasure for the reader because it expands the reader’s understanding of the situation and demonstrates that the author is in control. In other words, it’s clear what the author is doing, inspiring confidence on the reader’s part, but it’s not heavy-handed, in the sense that the technique, when done well, doesn’t feel like an intrusion, but a natural commentary on the holistic and connected nature of life.

Megan Mayhew Bergman’s book of short stories, *Birds of a Lesser Paradise*, is an interesting text to study through this lens because it has such a unique, specific, and overt type of echo. Specifically, the animal world is used to mimic the characters’ situations, relationships, and states of mind. Though there are instances of direct, isolated metaphor, such as the protagonist’s mother’s house, in “Housewifely Arts,” being described as “empty now, a tiny exoskeleton” (Mayhew Bergman 5). This is a solid metaphor that is strengthened by its role as an echo of the protagonist’s own battle against cricket infestations, an ordeal that prevents her from selling her house and moving
on in life. But most of the metaphors are much broader. The best use of this parallel situation is in “Saving Face.” The protagonist’s personal relationships and sense of purpose are in disarray because of an accident where, through her own carelessness, she loses part of her mouth to a wolf undergoing surgery—a wolf under her care. In the climactic scene, she has a knife pulled on her (her own knife, again through her own carelessness) by an inmate at the working farm she’s inspecting (Mayhew Bergman 74). Again, she is betrayed by someone she’s trying to help. The repetition is a beautiful echo, made even more powerful by the fact that she leaves the inmate with a syringe of euthanasia for a calf and walks away certain he will “do the right thing”, another mistake (Mayhew Bergman 75). Though the reader never sees the consequences, the mistake is tripled, a thrilling blunder.

At times, however, the “this situation is that animal” device does get to be a little much. In “Another Story She Won’t Believe,” only two pages in, the protagonist has already been compared to a moose, her daughter’s boyfriend a stud pony, her daughter a yearling moose. Faye the aye-aye, an important figure later in the story, is essentially the protagonist’s child, self, and father. At this point, the metaphor loses power for me. If everything is everything else, then comparison becomes arbitrary. Knowing where to find that line is important for a writer. The use of echoes, couching stories in metaphors and vice versa, may be an instinctual move for writers, but knowing how far to take it requires skill. If done well, it can be useful for shaping stories.

For example, my story “Everything’s Going to be All Right, Charlie Brown” is quite silly, but I felt it was worth including in this collection because the narrator’s situation of being lost is layered with recollections from a more serious childhood trauma
of a lost object (her parents’ friend’s arm). The layered recollections are able to extract meaning from the narrator’s current situation, for both the narrator and, hopefully, the reader.

This is especially useful for me, as a writer fearful of overexplaining. After finishing “Disorientation,” I worried to my in-house reader that it was too violent. “Yeah,” she said, “But you’re so subtle that I could probably read it and not see any violence at all.” She was right—it’s all implied violence that either doesn’t happen at all or happens “off-screen,” but overexplaining is a turn-off for me as a reader because explanations are not beautiful and they don’t leave any satisfaction for the reader. The layered recollections do the work of explaining the meaning in the primary narrative, and so it is one of my favorite tools.

“Disorientation’s” violence brings up another structural element that’s been a blind spot for me, that I have—with the help of my mentors Lynn Pruett and Dale Ray Phillips—begun to overcome. When taking us through a well-written story, Dale Ray points out all of the “promises” the story makes, either with word choice or questions or an actual mention by the narrator or character. The general idea is that if X is brought up, then it must come to fruition—basically, Chekhov’s gun theory. Lynn reminded me of the same thing when she gave notes on “Disorientation”—it was intolerable that I’d brought up the threat of violence in the first story, and then never followed through. Even on the second revision, I hadn’t followed through enough, and the story wasn’t finished until I made good on my promise of more than just the threat of violence.

Once I began to master these basic elements, I was able to pursue other stylistic goals. My second semester, I wrote “I want to try experimental fiction in the vein of
Lydia Davis” on my goals for the semester, and my mentor at the time, Tommy Hays, gently let me know that I would first learn to master a traditional linear story before I tried anything else. One of the things I considered “experimental” was the modular story, of which I had read many and which Smartt Bell describes so well in *Narrative Design*. After reading about modular vs. linear stories, I was longing to write in modular form, but was unable to keep myself from getting bogged down in the details that led from one scene to the next. In one of my workshops with Lynn Pruett, we discussed “The Largesse of the Sea Maiden” by Denis Johnson, a modular story that was published in *The New Yorker*. Some classmates were skeptical about how the modules were connected, but I was struck by how much Johnson trusted the reader to make the connections and to find meaning based on the way the modules were organized.

A short time later, I read Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets*. I’ve seen Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets* classified as prose poetry, creative nonfiction, and an autobiographical novel. It’s not an obvious model for structure for someone like me, trying to learn to write a traditional short story, but there is still a lot I can learn from it. First of all, Nelson is able to write in this form because she has such complete control of both prose and form. This is the type of writing that inexperienced writers read and think seems incredibly easy, and thus type up a bunch of gibberish that doesn’t work. In other words, Nelson has earned the right to write this way. If I had to describe what she does in *Bluets* to someone who had never read the book, I’d say that she writes a type of modular fiction (or non-fiction) that uses personal anecdote, cultural anecdote, and musings on language—definitions, translations, deconstructions—to create a cohesive story—her story, as far as I can tell—while using the color blue as an organizing conceit. Blue is used to address a range of
topics that essentially fall into the main categories of sex, relationships, self, work, and depression.

This relates to my interest in modular fiction. I enjoy reading it, particularly the style it frequently inspires: poetic prose, fantastical content, or a dreamlike quality. I have begun a few stories thinking they might follow this path, but always end up structuring them in a linear way. While modular stories may seem easier—done well, it seems as though the author has effortlessly dropped crumbs of a story to result in one perfect gestalt—in reality, they require as much crafting as a linear story. One of the big differences seems to be, besides the linear narrative and traditional transitions, the ending, which is already a weak point in my own writing. In modular fiction, the job of the ending seems slightly different. The last several pieces in *Bluets* serve to wind tighter and tighter the topic at hand, recovering from a loss, presumably a relationship. 235 describes pain, 236 normalizes pain, 237 denounces the pain, 238 indicates the narrator is now capable of generosity of spirit, 239 defines love, and 240 reclaims it (Nelson 94-95). The reader still needs to be satisfied, but the technique is different. The movement is different. I am interested in trying modular fiction as much for attempting a new way of writing endings, as one of my problems, my inability to write a good or satisfying crisis scene, may be partly due to my feeling a little silly and obvious when I try to bring things to a head.

**THE CLIMAX**

One of the first things I dive for in a craft book is instruction on writing climaxes and endings. It's the part of writing stories that feels the least pleasurable to me, the most
like work. Pre-writing, scene planning, and sentence design all feel like work, as well, but there’s something about the tremendous pressure on endings and climaxes that intimidates me. It’s the knowledge that it has to be good, and that failure to “pay off” will mean a failure of the entire story. And worst, I (needlessly) worry about the story seeming too dramatic or overwrought. That’s a lot of pressure.

Michael Kardos writes about climax in *The Art & Craft of Fiction: A Writer’s Guide*, and devotes the entirety of chapter eight to endings. He provides a checklist for looking at climax that asks: “What is your story’s climax? Does it have one? Will it be written (has it been written) in scene? If not, why not?” (Kardos 100). The first two questions are rather obvious, yet I frequently find with my stories that the climax is where I bow out. It’s the most important part of the story, and I don’t include it. However, when I do include a climax, I am not always able to identify it, and sometimes have more than one scene that could be the climax. My story “Valhalla in Escrow,” for example, includes a confrontation scene near the end that works as the climax, and yet it fell so short of real confrontation in the first draft that for a while, I was convinced the actual climax was the scene where the protagonist recalls the school play on a Viking ship in middle school. That scene was not intended to be the climax, and if it were indeed the story’s climax, then the story would be different from the one I wanted to tell. So Kardos’ questions are good ones to ask, even if they seem very straightforward, since the answer to those first two questions, for me, is frequently “I don’t know,” and “no.” Sometimes, I am so desperate to answer questions about my own work that I forget to ask questions, which is the place to find the best answers.
Kardos suggests three strategies for ending stories: return to the beginning, return to an object, and look to the future. I reject the “look to the future” method, which isn’t fair because Kardos does explain that he’s not advising an addendum that announces where everyone ends up in five years, but there’s a reason readers despise JK Rowling’s epilogue to the *Harry Potter* series. Leaving off in the moment is far more comfortable for me as a reader and writer, because I need all that future possibility. Even thinking about the future of my characters is too much speculation for me, and prevents me from sticking to an ending.

**MAGICAL REALISM**

Stephen King asserts that “fear is at the root of most bad writing”—he doesn’t just suggest this is so; he argues that he is “convinced” of it, and that even “[i]f one is writing for one’s own pleasure,” the fear can manifest as “timidity” (127). This has certainly been my experience. Besides laziness and assorted blind spots, being able to “let go” is my main obstacle in writing. Some of the strategies I’ve mentioned here, such as point of view, are approached with a specific eye toward how much cover I perceive them as offering. Magical realism, which I’ve experimented with in the past, besides making room for more imagination, provides a type of loophole for my anxiety about exposure. While working on my literature degree, I read some Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a lot of Haruki Murakami, and while I enjoyed what they had to offer, I didn’t see magical realism as a viable option for my own writing. It just didn’t feel very contemporary, regardless of when the stories were published. Then I discovered writers like Julia Slavin and Aimee Bender, and the genre seemed more relevant to me. I wrote a story about
Jesus appearing at a church camp and performing a rodeo, and for the first time, the writing process was—not uninhibited, but less inhibited than it had been in the past.

Magical Realism can also be used to create or uncover authenticity. Many of Elliott’s stories involve elements of magical realism or science-fiction, elements that can be difficult to work into literary fiction. One of the qualities that separates literary from genre fiction is the perceived “trueness” of fantastical situations in the ordinary world, and it is perhaps this first person approach to storytelling that helps Elliott’s work ring so true. Then again, it may just be that memoir is in fashion right now, a result of our appetite for the supremely personal first person confessional.

My last semester in this program, I wrote a magical realism story, which made it into this collection (“Making Change”). Another, “Teethings,” has only the barest amount of magical realism, but because it was, in my mind, not completely fixed in the world of reality, I was able to write as freely as I am, at this point, able. Writing is incriminating, but inhibitions are self-imposed. After completing this MFA program, I am beginning to lose the inhibitions that have kept me from growing as a writer. In “Teethings,” the narrator calls herself “the neighborhood pervert.” In “Making Change,” the protagonist is sexually aroused by examining a cow’s udder. In both of these cases, I felt a twinge of resistance, which Tepper’s article describes as a normal obstacle that must be overcome. She reports that while writing one of her most successful stories, she “sat back in [her] chair thinking: I can’t possibly keep those words in, they’re too disgusting.” But she kept her disgusting line, because that’s what readers want to see. And so I come to terms with the cruel streak that appears in so many of my characters. These are things that people want to read, so it comes back to that universal advice from the writing books, after all:
read like a writer, and write like a reader. In doing so, I have finally begun to come out of hiding.
Postcardy, “Largest Viking in the World.”
EVERYTHING’S GOING TO BE ALL RIGHT, CHARLIE BROWN

I think God put that red-haired baby dyke in the front row for me to enjoy.

I whispered it too loud, and suffered through a glance from the woman whose head I was trying to see around, but the one I’d whispered it to, my little sister, Margo, squinted up toward the front and nodded. She agreed because she knew me, and because she wanted me to be quiet. We’d come out on a prematurely dark November evening to hear my favorite poet read his equally bleak poetry, and my observations were intruding on her fun. I was out past my bedtime because I didn’t have to get up in the morning, due to an uncomfortable but fair period of suspension from my job.

I shushed back at the shushers and slouched into my seat. This seemed important. Not to overstate my significance in the universe, but it seemed like the moment I voiced my affinity for red-haired baby dykes, they started popping up everywhere. That kind of wholly self-centered thinking was supposed to be a red flag for mental illness, but this wasn’t that. God wasn’t talking to me; it just seemed he wanted to send me a token of encouragement—maybe an apology for my twenties being so shitty. God, after all, couldn’t be the somber judge people made him out to be. It was more likely he was an old man who tipped his hat, wink wink, and made sure everyone had sandwiches and bus fare. And, in my case, redheads.

To take the sightings from anecdotal to the realm of hard evidence, I took notes on when I saw them, and where. This was my habit; people were terrible about seeing patterns until they were recorded and inventoried on the page in front of them. There was the IT girl at work—I wasn’t sure how many times to count her, since she was technically one person, but I saw her at least two thrilling times per month. Usually. She was
probably wondering why I hadn’t called her, lately, for a problem easily resolved by
restarting my computer. She was always in jeans, which she wore in a way that seemed
overtly sexual to me—it seemed downright inappropriate, when she came to instruct the
whole department on new software, for her to stand in front of us as though she weren’t
wearing a thick leather belt obviously designed to imply the intimacies of the doing and
being undone. But it always stayed snug around her hips, office casual, technically
professional, and no one else seemed to find her very exciting.

Three months was a long time to be off work—on unpaid leave, as human
resources had specified. Like so many other government employees, I would have been
fired if it weren’t for all the paperwork. The paperwork and the secrets. When I sat down
with my immediate supervisor to discuss my behavior, we had a moment of eye contact
during which every mismanaged project she’d overseen passed between us like a ghost
ship. In my twenties, it would have been humiliating, but in my thirties, I resented the
idea that I was expected to participate in the charade of adult behavior such a long time
after discovering that the entire concept was a fabrication. My supervisor had pointed out
all the places for me to initial my reprimand. Ninety days; no pay; three months of
mandatory counseling. The counseling started my first day back. I walked out with a
moderate sense of shame and two boxes of pens from the supply closet.

Margo was a good sister, and didn’t say anything about the suspension when we
went home for Christmas. She didn’t say a lot to me about it, either. God was still tipping
his hat to me, even on my parents’ outlaw country farm, because there was my cousin,
Cynthia, with her shocking copper mullet. I wasn’t sure whether to count her at first; she
was from the side of the family I got it from, but then she helped my dad skin a deer after
dinner when no one else would, and I was overcome with the holiday spirit. Regret set in
later, after I remembered she didn’t believe evolution and still called Aunt Barbara
“Mommy.”

“Lane, that is your cousin,” Margo said that night, while we were hiding out in the
shed so she could sneak a smoke. It was too dark to see her, but I could imagine her face.
She was a theater major; her face had a lot to say.

“I’m just recording the facts. I saw her, and she fits the type.”

“Yeah, well, facts have implications.” She lit a cigarette and exhaled the first puff
with a disgusted noise so deep it sounded painful.

I added don’t think too hard about this in the margin.

“I noticed you texted on Sunday morning,” Mom said while she was heating up
Thanksgiving leftovers. “I didn’t know you were allowed to text during church.”

Across the breakfast bar, Margo smashed the funny papers against her face.

“Mother, please.”

I stirred my tea. There was no point in explaining that no one went to church
anymore, especially while she looked so wholesome in her blue-flowered flannel
nightgown with tiny scalloped edges around the straps. “I get bored.”

She tested her potatoes with a fork and arched her eyebrows. “You shouldn’t say

Margo put down the paper. “It’s not like it’s God giving the sermon.”

“If you have the right preacher, it is.”
I may not have had the right preacher, but I did have a notebook full of signs that my life was going just fine. I let Margo see it in the car on the way home. She’d seen me writing a long entry about the elderly sales associate at Earth Creations the day after Christmas, and how she’d put her pale, freckled hand on mine to stop me from buying from the new shipment that hadn’t been purified yet. While Margo had tried on boots at JC Penney’s, I’d let her take me into the back room and burn sage until it was thick in the air and my purchases were clean.

“Have you ever been attracted to anyone even remotely appropriate?” she asked after she finished skimming the entries.

“It’s not attraction. It’s counting.”

“It’s a little obsessive. But that’s you, I guess. It’s like Gerald Perkins’ goddamn arm all over again.”

I flexed my hands on the wheel. When we were kids, our parents used to entertain their church friends at the house every couple months, including Darlene Perkins and her one-armed husband, Gerald. I couldn’t have been more than four or five, so his dangling sleeve, in my young, shocked eyes, had been a topic that required immediate confrontation. His idea of a joke had been to feign shock over misplacing a limb that had been there just moments ago. Eager to help, I searched for his arm in the loud, laughing version of my house that made it hard to fall asleep. The adults chatted; I searched. They had dinner; I searched. They played cards in the basement; I still searched. The worst part was that I kept returning every thirty minutes to deliver a grief-stricken report on my lack of progress. The worst part was that I did this every time he visited. I searched long after
the joke stopped being funny. *I’m gonna find it*, I said over and over, even as my parents dragged me off to bed in the middle of my mission. *I’m gonna find it!*

“He should have told me the truth.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re not supposed to tell other people’s kids about cancer for the first time.” She was smoking again, with her cigarette stuck through the crack of the window.

“Still. He could have told me he lost it in Brazil, or something. In a shipwreck. Vietnam.”

“That’s not the point. What I’m saying is that you’re obsessive, and I get that it’s exciting for you or whatever, but maybe it’s not really about the women, and maybe you’re having a hard time with your suspension.”

“It’s about the women.”

“Fine.” The kindness in her voice made me all the more brittle inside. “Then why don’t you talk to one of them?”

There were a lot of reasons why. I had actually approached one of them early on, at the local Panera Bread, after writing up an entry about a girl I’d spotted with an asymmetrical haircut and chains on her jeans. But when I stopped at her table, I realized she was actually a high school boy in the throes of an emo phase, and when he thought I was there to take his dishes, I didn’t correct him.

After Christmas, I was lost. There had been a moment, after carrying the emo kid’s dishes to the bin, that I had considered picking up an application. There were still weeks of free time ahead of me, and there had been the tiniest sliver of truth in what
Margo had said. It wouldn’t hurt to curb my bird-watching. There was even pleasure in the idea of being wholly preoccupied by soups and muffins. But God had other plans for me, and on New Year’s Eve, at a charity burlesque show in the art district, I felt a nudge at my toe—a cane that, when I raised my head, turned out to be sequin-bedazzled stilts, and towering above me, a glowing flame-haired newsie, hair short, face painted. *If you write them, they will come*, Margo had said back in November, obviously joking, forgetting how strongly I believed in signs.

*  

The thing about Gerald’s arm was that I had needed to find it. The grown-ups didn’t seem to care about his loss, would put their arms around him and accept his half-embrace as though it were whole, would look at him without even once staring at the empty sleeve that hung in a polite fold over his shoulder. What they lacked in concern, I would make up for by finding the missing limb—a mission not entirely altruistic, because until it was safely home, there was the chance it would find me first. Placing it in his grateful hands—hand—was the only way to guarantee it would leave my home.

I watched the burlesque show from the sidelines, getting lost in the shifting of shadow and light, sharp focus and sudden silhouette. My colleagues were in the audience. We’d all bought tickets from the city planning office one floor down from ours, because they had organized the event and we wanted political allies in case there was ever another kerfuffle like the one that had happened the year before over parking. They were swallowed up by the darkness, a fan dancer onstage in a solitary spotlight, but I could feel them there. I knew what their presence felt like—especially Doug’s; after all, he was the reason I was on suspension—and they were here with their spouses, feeling that they
were doing something terribly risqué, and not thinking about me at all. We had all done the polite nod-and-smile at the beginning, but there seemed to be some unspoken understanding that we should not speak until I was reinstated. It was possible they were a little afraid of me. We had that in common.

When I got home that night, my downstairs neighbor, whose full-time occupation until then had been cooking onions with the door open, was making pot roast in the crock pot with carrots and celery. The suspension meant I never knew what day it was, but Sunday dinner was heavy in the stairwell, and God was obviously hovering somewhere in the vicinity. I’d brought the newsie home with me—*If you bring them home, they will come*—because while I believed in signs, I didn’t always know how to read them. So the newsie was either a gift or a warning; judging by the easy elastic give of her suspenders when I slid them down her shoulders, so much like the unraveling of a ribbon, it must have been a gift.

She’d left her stilts in the backseat of my car. I woke up in the middle of the night, the hard sole of her foot pressed to my calf and the idea of prosthetics wedged in my mind, along with Gerald’s lost arm. Her stilts were in the car; my notebook was in the desk drawer; my letter of reprimand was in the garbage. There was nothing left to find. Everything was whole, but the impression of a void floated just beneath the duvet until my newsie reached for me with two hands and two knees that sank deep into the mattress.

The next morning, she made crepes with Nutella and banana while I was still asleep. When she bounced back into bed, her face was mostly unpainted. I looked at my pillow, smeared with glitter, and wanted to call Margo to ask what it meant. The thick,
wet slices of banana should have made things obvious. It seemed like the kind of thing that should have gone in a notebook, but I didn’t have a notebook for good things.

“Hey,” she said.

Eventually, I returned to work. My counseling was scheduled for the end of the day every Friday, carefully arranged to provide time for reflection on healthy ways to cope with workplace conflict. Everything was careful, from the paralysis of my secretary’s face when she said hello to the gentle list of tasks for me to begin my first week back. I left work early, pretending it was a long weekend, but still ended up in front of my counselor’s office, one of a row of Victorian homes converted into office space.

It was an odd situation; this man, tall and painfully angular in a lovely sky blue sweater, had been appointed by my employer and would undoubtedly be reporting something to them, no matter how vague—not a situation that encouraged my full trust. Margo, always with an opinion, said I should be honest and make the most of the free therapy. I said that he wasn’t even a psychologist, but a counselor—cheaper, less credentialed. The therapist said to call him Pearly, which seemed a little silly, but he came from that generation when men were still occasionally named Marion or Kelly and it was perfectly normal.

“Do you want to talk about why you’re here?”

I didn’t.

“Have you spoken with Doug since you went back to work?”

“Not yet.”
“Well, that’s all right. Can you explain what it is about him that bothered you so much?”

It had been everything. The way he kept his hands in his pockets, which contributed to the baggy pouch of fabric around his hips; the way he drank his coffee while making eye contact; the way he wrote not his own name, but the name of his food on his lunch containers. He was a creep, but Pearly probably wanted to hear something like what I ended up saying: “Well, I guess we didn’t click.”

“I see. Have you ever failed to click with someone before?”

A trick question.

Out of impatience—or pity—he added, “I suppose I should tell you that I’ve seen the website.”

“If you’ve seen the website, then you should know what it was that bothered me so much.” In hindsight, the website seemed a little ridiculous—not in concept, but in scope. In hindsight, I could have been less descriptive. The list had begun in one of my notebooks, but then Doug CC’d my supervisor on an inquiry about a deadline I was late on, an unforgivable offense, and then the notebooks hadn’t seemed like enough. There was a clerical satisfaction in updating the list every night, recording the transgressions later while sipping wine in bed, away from Doug’s mild, smirking face. The perfect solo sport.

“It wasn’t supposed to be public.”

“But it became public.”

Pearly’s office was serene, but his posture was stiff and he seemed a little damp in the face, like a cop minutes away from twisting out a confession. He wanted to know why
I did it: if I was filled with rage, or had one of those disorders where you can’t feel empathy—or maybe just wasn’t very smart.

He tried again. “What were you feeling when you wrote all those things? Didn't you worry there would be repercussions?”

When I was a child, when I still believed that a smile meant happiness and sorrow was marked by a frown, Gerald’s smile had frightened me. It had been like standing in a burning room yelling fire while everyone else sidestepped the flames as they set the table for dinner. If he didn’t care enough to find the arm, then it would never find its way home, and so I devoted myself to the task, driven by resistance to a world where people could lose a limb and shrug it off with their one remaining shoulder. His face had been pink, as though loss were a thing you could accept in good health, his mouth red, as though being robbed were a joy. He was part of my nightmares—the nightmares of a child—just static and emptiness and a vague sense of danger. I wanted to keep what I had: my little sister and Barbie airplane and both my hands. All these years later, those things were still safely in my possession—and at home, a newsie I hadn't yet recorded on the page. Each night, she stowed her stilts under the bed, and each night, when I woke in the dark, saying I’m gonna find it, she showed me her limbs: one, two, three, four—and finally five, the two of us together.
THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH

One moment, Airman Peter Hubel, a brand new and already disenchanted Air Force mechanic, is watching another airman replace a broken nut-plate, and the next, he’s cupping his chin with a palm full of blood. It takes a moment for him to get there—first surprise, then the razor-ache of a flat-blade screwdriver tearing a ragged track through flesh, and then, finally, righteous anger. This unnecessary mess is why he hates his life. This is why he hates his fellow airmen and their crass, endless, thought-strangling chatter. This is why he hates their constant deviation from the rules.

Master Sergeant Dan Fiske, the NCO in charge and the only person to make Hubel's daily work bearable, is the one to administer first aid. Fiske is a handsome man of about forty with crooked teeth and an extravagantly developed sense of decency. He's the cowboy Hubel had grown up watching on television, all steady aim and puritan work ethic, and when he sits Hubel down at the break room table to wind sterile gauze around his jaw, Hubel can hear the laugh that stays tucked at the back of Fiske's throat. Hey, hey, not bad for your first combat injury. Hubel isn't laughing along. After twenty years wrangling the parts of a plane, Fiske’s hands feel sharp and surgical on Hubel's face, dangerous near his mouth. Later, in the sick call waiting room, which is freezing in the way hospitals always are, Hubel discovers he’s left his uniform jacket behind in the hangar and that his bare arms are marked with prints from Fiske's fingers. It seems a faux pas of sorts—Fiske has left a mess, but it's Hubel’s blood, after all—and he can’t decide which of them is due an apology.
Hubel falls in love twice: once with Fiske, who teaches him how to replace bum compressor blades without losing an arm, and then with Fiske's daughter Min, who does neither of those things but is wearing a blue dress with white buttons the size of quarters all down the front on the day they meet. Fiske has invited Hubel to his church—his goodness, it turns out, is the result of deep religiosity—and allows Hubel to sit with his massive family. Min looks nothing like her father, but like the rest of Fiske’s children, enjoys his unequivocal favor. Fiske looks at her as though she’s made of magic, and Hubel follows his lead. During the service, Min’s baby-white sandals shuffle restlessly, methodically, to a hypnotic effect. Fiske, to Hubel’s left, makes warm sounds of affirmation anytime the preacher makes a point. Lulled by those appreciative hums, Hubel memorizes the slope of Min’s ankles and the cyclical rhythm of her boredom. He’s been waiting to be dazzled for a very long time.

The next day, crouched under the belly of a C-17, he approaches Fiske about a date—Min is still in high school, and he knows the cliché about fathers and daughters and all those requisite threats. He’d planned his words carefully, but here in the hangar, he’s disoriented, anchored only by his boots on the concrete floor and the familiar stench of machine grease and cleaning solvents. This is the smell that clings to even his civilian life now, and he imagines Dan must be the same. Dan’s arms are raised to the auxiliary pane, straining to lock it into place, but when he spares a sideways glance at Hubel, his eyes are squinched with pleasure. That would be fine, he says, and boy would he like to see her with a guy like Hubel. When he says that, Hubel is dazzled all over again, so much that his hand slips on the grease gun and he has to stay late to clean up the mess.
The Fiske’s home reminds him of the hangar. Not its appearance—the two-story house is a perfect pink rectangle, like an unwrapped piece of taffy—but the chaos inside and how quickly it turns to order at his word. No wonder Fiske—no, Dan, as Hubel has been invited to call him—is good at handling his airmen; he’s spent years keeping a houseful of subordinates in line. Of course he doesn’t treat them like subordinates; he doesn’t treat anyone that way, which is probably why, when he makes a suggestion, everyone in the room wants to be first to obey. This is probably what his children fight about: who can obey first. Last one to obey father is a weasel’s knee.

No one has ever obeyed Hubel.

After dinner, which Dan’s wife, Carol, had prepared and served, Hubel knocks on Min’s bedroom door. She’s the only one with her own room, ostensibly too old to tolerate the others, who are still always there in a closely tangled flock. A pack, maybe. They’re only eight, nine, eleven, fourteen years old, and are already more self-assured than Hubel. At fourteen, Dan Jr. matches his height, which embarrasses him. When he opens the door, the boy is dunking a nerf basketball on a hoop fixed to the closet door and Min is across the room, teaching the youngest how to do the Charleston. She’s rolled her floral rugs to the side of the room and is ruining her parents’ records with her sloppy stop-and-go technique. The scritch of the needle raises goose bumps on his arms as he glances around at the cheery yellow curtains, the makeup vanity, and the joyful waving hands of the Fiske children.

“I need to talk to you,” he begins, drowned out by the record. When he repeats himself, she blinks hard and he immediately feels monstrous; he’d said it with too much force. He can’t carry a tune, either, and is certain the two things are related.
The needle, helped along by her hand, makes a sound of irritation.

The two youngest Fiskes are still swimming around the room while their lesson is on pause, and the middle boy is folded up like a Buddhist on the yellow canopy bed, draped in a green feather boa. They’re all wearing feather boas. Hubel can feel their disdain as he waits for Min’s response—if not disdain, then disinterest, far more insulting. He’s in the Air Force, for God’s sake. His car has racing stripes. These are the things that had cache when he was a kid. He wants this—wants Min—and if that means an oddly hostile audience and slow-old-timey dancing, then so be it. She agrees to go out with him the following weekend and then bursts out laughing, bent over at the waist. She looks nothing like Dan and everything like her mother, with long layers of dark hair that fall when she bends, a handful of feathers coming loose to skate across the glossy wood flooring toward Hubel. He steps back before he can stop himself, with an irrational fear of poison in those tiny scraps of fluff.

It’s possible that Dan isn’t handsome. His blonde hair is thinning, and his nose is probably too big, his chin awkward. Everything about him is crooked, technically, but he listens like a priest and carries with him deep pockets of absolution for everyone. Hubel has trouble picturing Dan, sometimes, because whenever he reaches for the image, he conjures the delight instead. Dan, whose forward hands and smiling crescent eyes say: I am delighted to know you; you are a delightful person.

Min, on the other hand, is inarguably lovely. The night of their first date, Hubel takes her to a park where they walk the perimeter of the lake three times and watch the colored fountain lights flicker on as night creeps up from the horizon. She wears an oddly
youthful jumper and jeweled barrettes that match the fountain lights, and lets him hold her hand. At the snack kiosk, she lets him buy her a heavily sugared coffee.

He knows that she hates him. He senses the same deep, slithering distrust girls have always felt for him, as though they resent his pathetic fear-based offerings before he even makes them. His trademark is being too heavy for the situation at hand, and so he asks Min, a girl who loves feathers and dancing, what she learned in school today.

“What did I learn in school today?” She drinks her coffee like a woman with a forty-hour a week job, quick and focused. Hubel hadn’t even started drinking coffee until after basic training; his mother had always warned him about stunting his growth, for all the good his abstention had done. “I don’t know. Did you learn anything at work today?”

“Dan gave a talk about ladder safety.”

“Ohgod.”

“It was important. I mean, it was more interesting than it sounds.” What he means, what she wouldn’t understand, is that Dan is so easygoing most of the time that the rare occasion he gets serious—when he snaps for Jensen to just shut up and listen if he doesn’t want to break his skull like that kid in Alpha-squadron they’re flying at half-mast for today—it’s like a tight hand around Hubel’s throat. And because he learned obedience at such a young age, there haven’t been a lot of hands at his throat—quite the opposite; he’s been ignored and tolerated for so long that it is interesting to be spoken to with that kind of heat. Interesting and important. After all, a man in Alpha-squadron had died. Safety first.

“Okay, Peter.” She pauses. “Pete?”

“Actually, I usually go by Hubel.”
“Ha, I don't think so.”

“Peter, then.”

“Like Peter Pan.” She smiles for the first time.

“I was thinking Peter Rabbit.”

Her mouth bows downward in pity. “God, you're pathetic,” she says, and then kisses him there in the front seat of the car. Her kisses are terrifying at first, partly because Hubel is still in crisis about having said Peter Rabbit, and partly because Min kisses like she’s trying to teach him something about how to hate himself. She smells nothing like machine grease.

When it’s over, she draws back and studies him. “Have you ever done that before?” With the back of one hand, she wipes her mouth hard. “Never mind. Can I drive your car?”

She doesn’t have her license, but his credibility isn’t very strong right now, so he hands over his keys and lets her cruise Dodge Street with the windows down, the night air a cool relief on his burning face. Her hand is clumsy on the stick. She grinds the gears and takes turns too quickly, but when they make the switch back at the end of the evening, she kisses him again, like she’s older than she is and likes him more than she does. Then she thanks him and says good night.

He’s not sure what she’s thanking him for. It’s not clear what his role is supposed to be, here, but from the driveway, he can see the light from the window of Dan’s upstairs study. Maybe he should tell Min to comb her hair before she goes inside, or scold her for such careless driving—even now he can smell the burnt clutch—or go tell Dan they’ve really got their work cut out for them with this one.
If Dan isn’t handsome, then he’s at least interesting to look at. There’s so much mirth and good will gleaming at his surface, apparent in his generous mouth and smile-crinkled eyes, that Hubel feels a deep swoop in his belly whenever that happiness flickers or fades. This is another reason he hates the other airmen; they move freely through their day, never thinking to modulate themselves to anyone else’s mood, and Hubel is left to fill in every unlogged maintenance task and make sure every solution-soaked rag makes it to the bin.

Two months pass. Hubel goes out with Min six times, each date following the same pattern of reckless kissing followed by her disdain. Her prettiness, her light step, and her upbringing had all raised Hubel’s expectations. He should have been looking at her eyes, which are sharp when she’s with him and lambskin-soft when she links arms with Beth and Dan, Jr. and even the little ones. In late August, she sits him down on the front steps of her house and says, “I don’t think we should do this anymore.”

The other children lurk on the far side of the lawn, dismantling a croquet set as they wait.

When she disappears around the side of the house, trailed by the others, he remains on the front steps where they had been sitting, the pink house behind him, the sun on his face. The concrete steps are rough against the back of his bare thighs; tiny points of rock that scrape each time he shifts. For a few moments he runs mortified circles around the idea that perhaps she had been offended by his running shorts, immodestly short, his athletic thighs one of his few vanities. But no, he’s felt her eyes on
him before, their thrilling slide from knee to hem. She hadn’t disapproved. In fact, the few times he’s ever had her full attention has been when he runs bases with the dust clouding up around his bare legs. Once, in the basement theater, she’d tried to coax him into an impossibly small kimono and he’d declined, thinking only of how it would look to her parents, to the other kids.

He examines the rejection until he’s as familiar with its nuances as he is with the fit of a jet pipe into its turbine housing, until he doesn’t feel hurt so much as swindled, and then there’s Dan, coming out the front door and joining him on the front steps. Dan offers a few kind words and a honey flavored cough drop, which Hubel accepts, enjoying the twist of the wrapper as he works it open. Women, Dan says, and Hubel couldn’t agree more. Women: a polite way to point out that he is steady, she is difficult, and because the world is brutally unfair, not even Dan can do anything about it.

What’s odd about this breakup, he realizes later, what sets it apart from others, is that Min hadn’t once said that it wasn’t him, that he was a really nice guy, just the greatest. That line is the smallest courtesy. The sting of is absence is eased slightly when a few days later, Dan asks him to housesit while the family visits relatives in North Dakota. Right there, in plain view of the other airmen, Dan gives the key a jaunty toss, and the miracle is that for once, Hubel snaps it up without the slightest fumble.

The key turns out to be as important as it had felt when he'd caught it. The master bedroom—Dan’s room—is downstairs. Though Hubel has never been inside, he’s felt its cool, dark presence at the back of his neck every time he takes a right at the bottom of the staircase to enter the theater. The theater is the place he’s the least comfortable. The
theater sprawls out across what used to be the garage, before Dan had decided that his
children needed a place to act out their every fantasy.

It’s just ten steps from the entrance of the theater into Dan and Carol’s bedroom.
The theater is quiet as though in wait for its master, but the bedroom is still in a way that
feels bottomless, like a commitment to deep sleep. Hubel has a sense that the proper
place for a bedroom is aboveground, at kitchen-level or above, and that below ground it
becomes more of a den or lair. And Dan isn’t the type of man to dwell in a lair. On the
derasser, a small wooden tray holds the contents of his pockets from the end of the day:
coffee receipts, yellow foam ear plugs, the honey cough drops he always keeps on hand.
Near the closet, an ironing board has been left out, iron unplugged but standing at
attention. This is where Dan irons his uniform in the morning, in just his briefs and
undershirt, careful not to wake his family. A pair of flattened fatigues drapes neatly over
the edge, precisely creased and so off-limits that Hubel sits on the bed and curls over the
great wrenching in his chest, aware for the first time in his young life of his heart as a
vital organ that could kill him.

He doesn’t live here; he will never live here. The unfairness is staggering. He lies
on his side and breathes into the bedspread, the rough cotton weave coming in and out of
contact with his raw, trembling lips until it passes, this jet stream of melancholy that
drifts through basement bedrooms. He knows Dan, but not in this room.

After a few minutes, he gets up to smooth the shape of his body out of the
bedspread. Min’s bedroom is next. He doesn’t even know until he steps into the pastel
space that this is what he’s been looking forward to. It’s astonishing the number of things
one can discover just by looking at the scribblings of a girl, such as how many wine
coolers it takes to make her stumble and lift her dress over her head, and how many young men she's capable of not just allowing but convincing to fondle her barely developed body. What he reads stabs again at his sense of fairness; he’s never done any of the things she describes in unrepentant detail—not with Min, or anyone else. But here she is with this—not a diary, but a brag book.

As he sits on her unmade day bed, Hubel’s surprise diminishes in tiny increments until he doesn’t know how he could have expected anything else from her. The clothes hamper is overflowing, the dresser is a discount bin of paint and polish, and her white sandals are tossed into a corner, lying at haphazard angles, left for dead.

The pages go into his pocket, a thrilling acquisition that he carries for only a few days before confronting her with them. He catches her at the top of the stairs when she’s waiting for the ASL tutor to arrive. The other kids are already downstairs in the theater. Hubel can’t think of any reason the kids would need ASL lessons, apart from collecting one more language for them to whisper in each other’s ears, one more way to exclude him.

She doesn’t look at him, and instead stares down into the stairwell. “So, do you plan to punish me, or is there going to be some kind of lesson?”

“No, of course not. I was just thinking that you might want to go out with me again.”

“Ugh,” she breathes, barely a whisper.

“Am I that bad?”

“I don’t know. Your jokes aren’t funny and your shorts are too short.”

“You’re too young to have such adult secrets.”
“Well. You’re too old to be one of my secrets.” He can only see the side of her neck and part of her face, the way she keeps her eyes on the stairs, trancelike, even when someone from downstairs sings out her name in a clear, playful tone. “So, blackmail. I would have thought you were too boring for that.”

He thanks her and makes a date for the next weekend.

“We’re still on, right?” he asks her each time he phones, and each time she answers in a tone he hasn’t heard before.

“We’re on,” she says. “Thank you.”

Thank you, like a customer service representative, which makes him vaguely uneasy, especially when he kisses her good night and finds her passive and accepting. At least he can still sense her hatred beneath the kiss; that much is the same.

“Did Dan say anything about us going out?” he asks a few weeks into their renewed courtship. She’s still being passive, but with an undercurrent of something black.

Min gathers her things from the front seat. “He says you’re a good influence. He thinks you’re swell. He also thinks I need to be in by midnight, so I’d better go inside.”

The lights are on again in Dan’s study. “Maybe I should come with you. Just to say hi.”

“I won’t be able to sleep if you’re in the house.”

Dramatic. He wipes his face to conceal the chemical fury that pushes its way through his limbs, like the time he’d been injected with iodine for a CAT scan. He wants to go upstairs and find Dan in his study, so that Dan will light up and say come in, son,
come on in. He isn't Dan's son; Dan has plenty of sons, and if those ever disappoint him, he's got a flight of extras at work.

“Pick a card.” Min has a handful of the collectible cards the children are always bartering, confiscating, playing for favors. Each card is a Fiske: Dan, Carol, Mindy, Dan, Jr., Beth, Crispin, Charity, Little Prince Grover. Grover can’t possibly be the baby’s name, but then again, the middle boy’s name is Crispin, a far cry from Daniel, where they began. It’s almost like they gave up and started letting the children name each other.

He doesn’t want to pick a card because he doesn’t want to lose. Everything in this house is a trap. She fans them in a circle down low, near her waist, while the other kids finish the dinner dishes as though even their chores are a production they’ve choreographed and cast with auditions.

“Fine. Pick two, then.” Her black fingernails are invisible against the onyx cards. Trashy. He could probably get her to change the color, if he wanted.

Charity and Crispin had designed the cards. Sixth graders know more about design programs than Airmen, apparently—no wonder they’re bored with him. Min's face is on the first card he draws. It’s a fairly accurate representation: Min with her hair wrapped around her right hand, a host of blurred pastel sibling faces in the background. Then he draws Dan. This version of Dan, huddled in a thick blue bathrobe, is cranky and guarded and sleep-creased. The print on the back of the card says God made coffee for men like me! The valentine-red print on Min’s card says Min’s not here right now. Leave a message.
She peers at the cards like a seer. “Ah, you’re a very powerful man. You always get what you want.”

“Don’t talk like that.” While she technically does what he asks, she constantly defies the spirit of the arrangement. He finds himself checking her attitude the way his grandfather checks the weather, as though it’s a constantly changing and possibly threatening force. She hates the young adults Bible study. Per the arrangement, she’s ready and waiting every Monday night when he picks her up, but she sighs and fidgets all the way there, and doesn’t try to make friends with the others. The hosts, Tina and Steve, live in a townhouse decorated with Sci-Fi memorabilia, which doesn’t win them any points with Min. She brings her own Bible and refuses to share or let anyone read over her shoulder even though Hubel is fairly certain she needs to be scolded about whatever she’s writing in the margins.

No matter the topic of study, the conversation always turns to fornication, which is on everyone’s minds all the time. They attack it from every angle: how to avoid it, how to defeat it, and how it always seems to sneak up with no warning. Hubel checks to make sure Min is listening. She is, raptly, as Steve, blind from birth, addresses his friends’ complaints about his unfair advantage. He's lucky, they believe, to avoid the temptations of a TV-MA world.

“Sorry to disappoint you,” he says, smiling, his eyes fixed on some deep, faroff place. “I have the same thoughts. It's maybe even worse for me. I have other senses, you know. Sharp senses.”

Min seems intrigued by the idea of being able to sin at superhuman levels, which defeats the purpose of bringing her here. Steve and the rest of the group are disappointing
in the same way as Min. There’s a looseness to their bodies and their talk that makes him feel separate, apart from the things they understand.

It's not like he can’t relate. His imagination can take him to as dark a place as anyone’s. Min had called their arrangement *blackmail*, but he's scrupulous about making sure she’s comfortable—or, if not comfortable, then safe. Then, in his bunk at night, wide awake under the covers, he’s preoccupied with the ghost of a salute on his hand, *sir* in his throat. At work, there’s the twist of the socket wrench in another airman’s grease-smudged fingers and Dan’s particular way of whistling the group into order. So yes, he can relate. He just has better self-control than that.

“Did you learn anything tonight?” he asks when they get in the car.

“Yes, I have decided to rededicate my life to Jesus Christ,” she says, and when he says, “Really?” she turns toward the window and screams.

“You don’t have to go anymore if you don’t want to.”

“Oh, but then what if I forget that I’m a sinner?”

Saying cutting things to him sometimes relaxes her, so he looks at the soft curve of her stocking feet and waits for her to sheath her tongue. By the time he drops her off, she's a relatively harmless girl, ready for bedtime.

Never mind Min's unpleasantness, she still follows his rules. She's still his. Dan has no reason to cool toward Hubel, but there's suddenly a question written into his posture, into his eyes, only half-smiling now, that leaves Hubel sick in his stomach. The thing is, he's begun to think of Dan as his, too—his *enough* that their relationship no longer hinges on any outside factors such as teenage girls who wear entirely misleading
white sandals. The sick feeling knocks around aimlessly beneath his skin until it becomes something else entirely.

Another airman asks about the bright spots of color on his cheeks. He responds that it's nothing; anger has always been tricky to identify, so he doesn't even recognize it until he shoves Airman First Class Jensen with the full force of his shoulder on his way to the latrine, for no other reason than having seen him shake Dan’s hand after a long, hushed discussion near the air hose station.

Jensen isn't a teenage girl. After a moment of shock, he shoves back, and then the two airmen are grappling at one another in sudden, bewildered conflict. When Dan breaks them up, Hubel leans cornered, panting, against the wall of personal lockers and Jenson paces in restless circles, hands on his head. "Jesus Christ, Sergeant!" he keeps saying. "I mean, Christ." His undershirt has come untucked on one side, and he has the advantage of sounding stunned.

"Easy with the Lord's name," Fiske eventually says, but his gaze is on Hubel, narrow and assessing.

Hubel watches him as a dog watches its master, head low, reflexes on alert. Dan won't strike him. He's never doled out pushups as corrective PT. He'll prepare a counseling statement that Hubel will be forced to sign, as though in agreement. Hubel's palms slip against the locker where he's trapped; he wants to wipe them on his uniform, but doesn't dare move and draw attention to his disheveled state. Jenson has already begun to put himself together.

"Back to work," Dan finally shouts, and then, devoid of his signature delight, "Airman Hubel, we'll talk about this on Monday."
Hubel spends the evening preparing to paint his quarters, a task for which he's enlisted Min's help, only to realize, as the sky begins to darken and his busy work dwindles, that she might not be coming. He'd instructed her to take the bus after school. Wear something old, he'd said. You're going to get dirty.

Back when she'd asked whether he planned to punish her or teach her a lesson, he'd been shocked by the idea. Neither; never. But now he realizes it must have been the latter, which explains why he's so agitated. She's missing out on an opportunity for hard work and personal growth—and the first lesson should have been obvious: don't sleep with high school boys. The second lesson involves writing down the details of what one gets up to with high school boys.

He goes for a run, the only way he knows how to burn through all the complaints stacked in his chest as though he's been storing up for winter. He runs until the sun sets, and even then doesn't turn back. Once it's dark, he can admit that he's deviated from his usual route for a reason; he's going to keep running until he reaches 422 Peony Lane, a house where he can get both an ice water and an apology. He knows they must be home; it's Friday night, so Carol will be at her book club and Dan will be home with the kids.

The front door is open. He lets himself in and follows the light and noise downstairs to the theater, where Min grips him at the wrists as soon as he walks in. “Oh, good,” she says, “We needed another extra.” She pushes him onstage and puts a suitcase in his hand, a boater hat on his head. Crispin is a geisha in the tiny kimono, gliding around the stage. Every so often, Hubel feels—thinks he feels—the flick of a hem at his calf. When his eyes adjust to the darkness he sees that in the shadowy back row, Dan is
the solitary member of the audience, and that Min is in an ill-fitting flight suit that reads
“Fiske” on the chest.

Onstage, the scene slows, as underwater, even with the tug of Min’s hands. The stage under his feet is the perfect prefabricated nightmare, blocked out and polished and ready for him to hit all his marks. His running shorts leave him too exposed, even when he holds the suitcase in front of his body.

“I need to talk to you,” he says.

“You’re ready for our scene?”

“I’m ready to talk about why you were a no-show today.”

“This is the show right now.” She smirks at him, and then at the others, who clap lightly.

Hubel squints in Dan’s direction. It’s hard to tell, with the spotlight so bright, but he thinks it’s the Dan he remembers from the card he’d drawn from Min’s deck, the same creased, tired face and blue bathrobe.

He wipes his face with his arm, still breathing hard from his run. He has the upper hand, he reminds himself, even if this cunning girl sometimes forgets. “You were supposed to help me paint.”

“I’m not doing that anymore,” she says. She’s wearing a uniform, but neither her hair nor shoes are regulation.

“But what about-”

She shrugs and signs something to Dan, Jr., then laughs. He signs back, and she laughs again.
“What about our deal?” he repeats. Anything to stop her laughing while he’s pinned under a spotlight. “The one where I keep all your secrets?”

“How about I’m your slave?”

Hubel glances out toward the back, toward the shape he knows is Dan’s. “It isn’t like that. She had sex. Not with me,” he adds quickly.

He hears a shriek followed by a muffled laugh, and a scuffle backstage.

“She did other things, too!” he calls out into the dark audience. He’s finally found his stage voice and it feels right to use it to wrestle Min back into her place. “All sorts of things. And she uses terrible language.” He feels rushed by the threat of Min’s reaction, which he knows will eclipse anything he’s trying to say, once she’s ready, so he keeps on. The way she moves too fast and somehow also teases; her shoddy performance at Bible study; that she’d called Steve retarded before she got to know him; how she goes out of her way to make everyone feel stupid. Then there’s the way Dan lets Airman First Class Jensen call dibs on tire service when a really cool plane comes through; why he even trusted Hubel with such a dangerous girl in the first place—and the most egregious complaint, how he’d never said anything about the blood prints he left on Hubel the day of the screwdriver accident. Somewhere during his monologue, he hears the bap-bap-bap of percussion keeping time with his grievances, but they eventually cut off, a move that coincides with the spotlight making a loud clunk into darkness. The sound echoes briefly. Hubel can suddenly see into the audience with clarity. Dan is indeed dressed for an evening at home with his children; his blue bathrobe is layered over flannel pajamas. A coffee mug is in one hand and most of his lower face is covered by the other hand, which compulsively rubs over his jaw, eyes wide and locked on Hubel’s. It’s the same caught
expression he’d had the day SSG Matthews had made an eight-million-dollar mistake on
an RC-135.

This is what she does, Hubel wants to say. She will never understand the
discomfort Dan is suffering, will never herself be mortified or worried, and as though to
prove this point, she cuts in before Hubel can say anything.

“Don’t listen to him. Look at his face; the guy with the scar is always the bad
guy.”

"No!" Hubel drops the suitcase on the stage with a hollow thunk. "You were
there, you saw how I got this." If he grows a beard—if he could grow a beard—the scar
would be barely visible. *Not bad for your first combat injury*, Dan had said, and then
smudged his fingerprints everywhere. Hubel thinks of the signs in antique shops his
parents used to frequent: *You Break It, You Buy It*, which feels applicable to this
situation, as well. Hubel can't always recognize the subtler signals in life, but he feels
irrevocably broken, bought. There must be something to it. And Min didn't hatch from an
egg; Dan—standing now, something is about to happen—had raised her like this, poured
a little *too* much happiness into her young heart, and he should take some responsibility
for it.

"Tell me what to do," Hubel says, choking a little on the last word. If only he
were wearing more substantial clothing. In a different setting. Dan, probably wishing for
the same thing, straightens his robe and tightens the belt. He clears his throat and Hubel
closes his eyes, every thought on hold, waiting for a command.
MAKING CHANGE

Mrs. Mayor is exceptionally cruel at the office on Monday. The rain always makes her demanding, fearful of frizz and other unphotogenic phenomena, and while Libby takes the abuse until quitting time, the moment she clocks out she digs deep into her ample, satisfying stores of resentment. By the time she gets home from work and shakes out her umbrella, she’s cranky and wilted by humidity. The yellow tights she had pulled on with such optimism that morning are wet, chafing, and full of quarters that, when she peels the tights down her legs, roll to the far corners of her bedroom.

Libby gets dressed in sweatpants and gathers the nearest quarters up from the rug, to deposit them in the pickle jar she keeps on her dresser. The coins under the bed can stay there.

Trevor is in the kitchen making French toast. When he sees her, he drops a kiss on her face and pulls a reporter’s notebook out of his cargo pants. “Anything today?”

She tells him about the buck-fifty in her sodden tights, and he scribbles a quick entry in the notebook. He wants to know what she was doing when it happened (commuting), what she was wearing (a second-hand denim dress and rain boots), what she’d been feeling (wet). Then he squints at his notes for a few minutes. With his round face and receding hairline, he resembles a worried baby. A meticulous, perpetually unemployed, worried baby. This is the most paperwork he’s done in years.

“There has to be some trigger.” He pockets the notebook and reaches for the spatula. “Don’t worry, kitten. We’ll figure it out.”

Libby has already figured it out. She should probably let Trevor in on this information—he’s been so endearingly attentive since it began a few months ago—but he
believes in the scientific method, and if she shares her findings, he’ll want to fetch a much bigger notebook.

The first time, which she’d reported to Trevor right away, had happened when she’d spotted a beautiful bust during happy hour at her favorite pub. The ceramic bust had been strangely proportioned in the face, its eyes flat and opaque. Alien. Libby had been eyeing the long, openly defiant slope of the neck when she’d felt a cold metallic flicker between her legs, and when she’d eventually hopped down from the stool, a small pile of coins had been left on the seat, like a clutch of eggs ready for collection.

The coins are always quarters, and always in the newly minted state that lasts only until they’ve been fingered by the general public: clean, reflective, and beautiful. She’s started wearing tights in case of a payout; there’s no telling when it’s going to happen, and the sound of falling change attracts unwanted attention. At first, the payouts had seemed terribly random: a silver feeling would shudder through her pelvis, and then she’d have enough money for the vending machine. It didn’t seem related to the balance of her checking account, and was just as likely to happen on the street as in her own bedroom.

The first nudge of understanding had occurred when she’d accompanied Mrs. Mayor to the state fair for a photo-op with a maniacally smiling 4-H teen and her first place dairy cow. As Libby had waited for Mrs. Mayor to finish making remarks about the importance of livestock in the land of ten thousand lakes, her attention had drifted to the cow’s udder, nearly hairless and scrubbed pink for the show. It was nothing like the cartoonish balloons she had rendered on her childhood farmyard drawings; in life, the organ was heavy—a burden, really—and swollen, textured with ropy veins. The teats were the same aggressive pink as the udder, perfectly sized for a human fist, and Libby had blinked
through the rest of the speech with seventy-five cents scraping around in her tights and a bewildered scowl for which she’d later been scolded when Mrs. Mayor had received the press photos.

Today, the bus had rumbled over the salt and weather-eroded asphalt of Poletown, a rough ride that had, near the back of the bus, rattled the seats with vibrations that culminated in that buck-fifty—maybe it had been more like three seventy-five—and Libby had finally known, with certainty, how it works. And Trevor is great, really, a real Twenty-First Century man who irons her blouses against her wishes and makes artisanal French toast on weekends, but the idea of his poking and prodding her nether-regions in the name of experimentation is too much for a woman who carries a light to moderate workload for most of the work week.

Libby works as the mayor’s second assistant, a less glamorous position than the one occupied by Anifer, Mrs. Mayor’s right-hand assistant, but more suited to her needs, since it allows her to work in a back office and avoid public speaking. Anifer wears slacks and keeps a laser focus on Mrs. Mayor’s policies, contacts, and image; Libby hadn’t even worn panties until her reproductive organs had begun operating like a mint, and probably won’t even vote for Mrs. Mayor in the election next month.

“Are you going out?” Trevor sets the whipped cream on the counter and eyes her rain boots.

Libby is going to the corner pub, the only place worth venturing on foot in this damp northern city with its brick neighborhoods and narrow, salt-ravaged streets. She wants some time alone to ponder what she’d learned on the bus today. Trevor doesn’t drink, but he likes the pub for hipster reasons.
“You’re welcome to come,” she says, and grabs a slice of French toast from the plate.

“I have all these dishes. Meet you later?”

She reaches for her umbrella, which is stowed between the refrigerator and the wall, and pauses when she sees he’s stuck the press photo from the state fair on the refrigerator. She had been wearing a long t-shirt over nubby leggings, and her freckles, which would cost over three hundred dollars a year to properly conceal with makeup, if she obeyed the magazines, had been vivid in the morning sunlight. A chunk of her hair, a shade Trevor calls “peanut,” is inexplicably loose from her ponytail. Not the kind of girl you’d suspect could make money by taking off her underwear.

“Where’d you get this picture?” she asks Trevor, who is watching her carefully.

He looks at it as though he’s never seen it before. “Clara,” he says, and Libby shudders through the poison that Mrs. Mayor’s given name alchemizes in her blood, like a slow, thick injection of loathing.

“I’m not even smiling.”

“You’re not usually smiling,” he says. “I like it. It reminds me of you.”

At the pub, Libby sits at the bar and on her phone, types how to get turned on into Google. The results are promising at first, every hit miraculously geared toward women, but the lists of suggestions may as well have been written for an alien species. According to the experts, arousal begins with confidence, which is a very long journey filled with gratuitous nudity, so she starts a new search: how to get turned on very quickly.
Behind the bar, the bartender with the hawk’s nose and suspicious eyes is teaching the busboy how to make an autumnal old fashioned. *Use the little spoon; stir like so.* She makes him do each step on his own, and offers no praise. *Now, taste. Is it right? Why not?* He hesitates over the array of tools, and cuts the orange rind too thick on the first try. He is falling in love over all those test tubes and purees. She is not.

“Look at him,” Libby says after he’s toddled off to wipe tables. “You’re the potions master, and he’s some poor Hufflepuff.”

The bartender laughs from behind the beer taps. She is either ugly or beautiful, pitiable or impressive. Beautiful, Libby decides, when she steps closer to ask if the drink is good, as though she and the boy hadn’t tasted it themselves, heads bent over cylinders of glass and stainless steel. At the far end of the bar, the bartender’s boyfriend, a cook, experiments with a crock pot, oblivious.

The busboy wants to be a bartender, but he’s so young. He’s young enough that he thinks the real bartenders, in their late twenties and finally serious about whether to get a dog, are adult and worldly. His mother still buys his clothes. *Boytender,* Trevor always calls him, enjoying the connotations, made snide by his jealousy. He thinks Libby is here to ogle the kid, can only see that he’s tall and broad-shouldered, and not, like Libby, his inability to wipe down the counters properly. What Libby actually likes about him is his sadness. His acquiescence under the bartender’s sharp, avian scolding is gorgeous; his longing bleeds everywhere, as though her words have nicked the artery that carries misery to and away from the heart.

“Nicholas needs help with that mess,” the bartender instructs when the kid returns from wiping tables. She points at her boyfriend, the cook, elbow-deep in crockpot
cuisine, his workspace cluttered with drips and detritus. Libby watches him nod, stow his hand towel in his back pocket with a determined shove, and move obediently toward the other end of the bar. He yields to the bartender because he wants to, an impulse foreign to Libby. It’s fascinating, the very concept of fealty, the Arthurian desire to yield to something greater.

The kid’s expression is pained as he laughs at something the boyfriend says, the boyfriend’s hand curled over the back of his neck to bring him in closer to this man who possesses what he never will. Another artery splits open, and Libby excuses herself to the restroom, where she collects almost four dollars from a pair of brand new forest-green tights.

When she returns to the bar, Trevor is casually swiping through her phone. “More rain tomorrow,” he says. “Why were you Googling how to get turned on?”

She considers the benefits of telling him, which elude her, other than the ability to provide a straightforward answer to his question. Lying has always seemed like too much work. She tells him, and just as she’d feared, for the next week he behaves as though the bedroom is his office and he works on commission.

One morning she awakens with her feet in his hands, her big toe glistening wet, chilly in the November air. “Anything?” he asks, hopeful, wide awake, crouched at the foot of the bed.

She curls her toes in tight, like a hedgehog in hiding. “I dreamed I forgot my boots.”
Libby’s main responsibilities are to oversee Mrs. Mayor’s re-election campaign and respond to the steady stream of letters and emails from concerned taxpayers. These letters generally address three topics: traffic, taxes, and dogs. She should respond to every one, but some don’t deserve responses, so she compromises by reading them all and responding to one out of every fifty and then making a to-do of the ones she answers. Her office is in the musty back room of a brick government building downtown, and she is quite happy to curl up on the sagging sofa near the coffee machine and read letters, away from Anifer’s razor-sharp trouser seams and Mrs. Mayor’s nervous chatter.

*I'm writing again regarding my proposal to implement “take your dog to work day” as a city-wide initiative. I am flexible on the date. Attached is a petition with 10,000 signatures of dog lovers, business owners, and supportive employees.*

*Please see the attached research on the health benefits of one-on-one time with animals in the workplace.*

Libby puts this one aside for a response. It’s impressive, how much people care. She can’t imagine caring enough about anything enough to collect signatures, write a proposal, and then see that proposal through to the appropriate channels. It’s not so much that they care, as that they know exactly what they want. Somehow, this knowledge comes to them, and they trust it enough to go after it wholeheartedly, like Trevor with his conviction that if he just finds the right angle of entry then he can jostle loose enough money for them to spend the summer in London. Libby is skeptical of saving that much money quarter-by-quarter—and surely that much copper can’t be good for the delicate feminine Ph balance she’s always hearing about—but she lets him have his experiments, so long as it doesn’t interfere with her sleep.
Mrs. Mayor is up for re-election. Her opposition is a nice grandfather-type whose campaign seems to rely on boasting about his family’s impressive fertility. In every photo, he’s surrounded by a crowd of grandchildren too young to vote but old enough to endorse him. The boys have neatly-cropped hair, khaki pants and light blue button-down shirts. The girls are sweet, feminine, and smiling. They will all be virgin brides and are proof of his trustworthiness. Libby won’t vote against him, if she votes at all. He opposes the minimum wage, but could probably get some real traction on the “bring your dog to work day” issue.

As Libby contemplates whether to put a hold on correspondence until after the election, she gets a text from Trevor with a link to a highly-rated London ghost tour, as though if she just had enough incentive, she could mint a mountain of cash. The closest she can get is to imagine the boy at the bar, desperate to please, working to perfect the cut of a paring knife into the skin of a lemon, and failing. His failure is a vital ingredient.

“If you were different, we’d have enough for London by now,” Trevor had said the night before, after another failed experiment.

She shrugged. “If I were different, I wouldn’t be with you.” It was unclear whether the statement was a compliment or critique; they went to bed in a draw.

In the UK, slot machines are called *fruit machines*, a piece of trivia Trevor had scribbled in one of his notebooks, convinced of its relevance to their situation. He’s disappointed by her lack of ambition in this endeavor, as well as in her professional life, which is difficult to understand, considering that his unemployment ran out six months ago.
“Clara would probably bring you to more meetings if you polished your wardrobe a bit,” he had said once, as though Libby had expressed some desire to attend more meetings. She hadn’t responded. It’s probably case in point that though she hadn’t understood his interest, she hadn’t felt the need to understand, had been happy to drop the exchange altogether because the only thing that interests her less than what Mrs. Mayor thinks is what Trevor thinks about what Mrs. Mayor thinks.

But when she opens the door to Mrs. Mayor’s office, everything clicks into place as though she’s one of Mrs. Mayor’s constituents, finding her own dog issue at last. It makes sense in a deeply satisfying way, the fit of Mrs. Mayor’s thighs over Trevor’s lap in the precariously reclining desk chair, skirt hiked up to her waist. Libby can see that she’s still wearing pantyhose, torn open along the seam. There’s no way Trevor would take such liberties; Mrs. Mayor must have done it herself. This is the first time Libby has ever liked her. *Dear Mrs. Mayor, I would like to implement a city-wide ‘bring your boyfriend to work day.’*

“Sorry,” Anifer says, after Libby closes the door. She’s pink and blotchy in the face, genuinely horrified. It’s her job to make sure things like this don’t happen. “Sorry, sorry, Libby, what should I do?”

It hadn’t occurred to Libby that Anifer would need to do anything, but she’s waiting for a reply, faintly sweaty, near tears. She’s a hard worker, spends all her free time thinking about Mrs. Mayor, and probably has anxiety dreams about what’s happening right now. And somehow, it falls to Libby to offer comfort. Mrs. Mayor’s door is still closed, but it might open soon.
“Come have a drink with me,” Libby says, moving toward the door. She doesn’t know Anifer very well, but the woman is in ruins now, and can certainly appreciate a drink topped by tragically perfect garnish.

Anifer’s eyes are delicate half-moons that curve downward when she smiles. She’s stiff on her barstool, and just unavailable enough for the boytender to linger after he hands over a gin and tonic topped with a rosemary sprig. His eyes move contemplatively over her expensive haircut, the exposed strap of her expensive bra. The rosemary had been the perfect selection for Anifer: beautiful, elegant, but unlike a slice of citrus and its soft, bursting pulp, not meant for the mouth. If Libby is patient enough, she might get another long swallow of the boytender’s pain-laced longing. She might get another buck-fifty. As soon as the thought occurs, there’s that silver feeling again. This is new; Libby has never been much for anticipation, but her body has been developing all kinds of tricks without her.

She orders a beer and leans against the bar next to Anifer. “So, how long has all that been going on?” She waves her hand in the direction of the front door, to indicate what had happened at the office.

“Gosh.” Anifer sits up even straighter. “A while. She said she’s going to make him her advisor. Oh, gosh. Here he is.”

Trevor is as disheveled as the last time she’d seen him. He must have been just behind them; she can imagine his panicked discussion with Mrs. Mayor, a brief strategizing session that had ended with the decision that Trevor would follow and. . .what? Beg forgiveness? Libby is abruptly disgusted with him in the amount of two
dollars and twenty-five cents. As Trevor pleads his case—could be good for us both; creating a position—she shifts carefully where she stands. She’s wearing a dress, but her tights had been in the wash, leaving nothing but the delicate elastic of her underpants to contain the fruit of all this misery.

The bathroom isn’t too far. She can see the door from here, but doesn’t trust what will happen if she takes a step. The problem with Trevor is that he’s got that entire notebook of data and doesn’t know anything. Libby might not know anything, but at least she doesn’t try. There’s a difference, though she’s not sure what it is. She can’t settle on one point of focus right now—there’s the heavy, shifting threat in her underpants, the ache of her thighs from standing just so, Anifer’s tension, and Trevor’s increasingly reasoned monologue. She holds her breath as the silver feeling seems to abate, but when she looks past Trevor to the plate-glass windows that face the sidewalk, there’s Mrs. Mayor, peering inside and knocking with such pathetic timidity, unable to get Trevor’s attention yet unwilling to come inside, and no amount of breath-holding can stop the sudden slide of coin against coin against coin.

They tumble from under her dress in one startling spill and then taper off to the sound of a piggy bank being shaken empty. Libby can hear Anifer’s shocked exhalation—gosh!—but all she can see is Mrs. Mayor peering and peering inside, forehead pressed to the glass, and eventually, Trevor’s stricken expression. His hand is on the pocket where he normally keeps his notebook. “What, Libby.” Trevor finally hears Mrs. Mayor’s knocking. Holding up one finger, he acknowledges her and turns back to Libby, his face beginning to twitch with reaction as he sweeps her with his gaze right down to her feet. “What is wrong with you?”
What, indeed. She shifts slightly, silver all over. People are trying to help, crawling around to retrieve change from the far corners of the room. The boytender is under a table, his pathetic skinny jeans pulling dangerously low. Libby puts one foot forward on the gleaming mess, and when she steps again toward the exit, it feels as though she’s skating away.
TEETHINGS

I’m in Sunday School, learning how to be good. My socks fold down and are edged with lace, so that’s a start. I’m learning a song about the terrible things that happen to people who disobey. The song has choreography. We work at it with our young, flailing limbs, miming various punishments: death by fire, flood, famine. I’m best at dying by famine. The key is to lie flat on the floor and feign rigor mortis until Teacher gets angry and the other children dart nervous glances my way. I’m helping them confront their own helplessness, just as they would with a real death. They should see what I can do with a death by quicksand.

I’m in my twin bed, kicking at Mother. Nightly, I wake just before midnight and yell out all the violence that’s collected in my body during the day. When my parents rush in, they’re frightened by the serrated edge of my screams. With that weapon, I savage the household peace. In the morning, they all hate me, and I have to drink my juice from the glass with the Hamburglar on it, which Mother used to trap a spider that time. Father takes me to Pastor, who says a special prayer in case of demonic influence. They believe in the spiritual, not the physical: As a child, Grandmother sat too close to her mean old daddy’s deathbed, and now, at eighty, she is beset with tremors. A little bit of hell got in when that portal opened, like radiation. Cause and effect. One last fact about Grandmother is that she takes her hearing aids out at night, and likes me just fine.

I’m on my front lawn, undressing Barbie dolls so I can raise them up and expose their bare chests to the cars that drive past. I’m the neighborhood pervert, but no one
notices. Ten years later, a more advanced neighborhood pervert exposes himself to me on the street, and I’m scolded by the police officer for giggling as I run away. That’s exactly what he wants, the officer had explained, and now, my laughter has encouraged this penis. Do I understand? I think about my own disappointment when the cars had not gone careening off the road or even slowed for my peep show, and tell the officer I do understand. Neither of us is punished.

Later, in fifth grade I meet yet another neighborhood pervert, one of those sad latchkey kids from the news, born from worldly mothers and lacking discipline. She takes me down to her basement and teaches me about strippers, how they work on a pole and how their job is to take their clothes off very slowly. This is all news to me—thrilling news, to learn I’d had the right idea on my front lawn, after all—and I sit on the concrete floor watching her spin around the load-bearing pole, inching her shirt up over her bra. I don’t have a bra yet, so when it’s my turn, I start with my belt, a clunky thing with a childish magnetic clasp. I leave the belt behind and later, on the school bus, with the sunlight glinting on her Sunkist-colored hair, I’m reluctant to bring it up. I’m punished for the lost belt, but not the stripping.

I’m eating scrambled eggs. It’s Saturday morning, and I am remarkably unpunished. My sisters are suspicious of this rare desegregation. They feel they are receiving mixed signals about my place in the family, and stare at me as they chew the crust of their toast, searching for answers. Mother doesn’t answer questions. She neither gives time outs nor instructs me to think about my choices. I am simply punished. Dr. Dobson says the adult must always win a power struggle, and she has the stamina of a
woman who as a girl, carried water from a well and used an outhouse. I have the stamina of a prisoner in possession of a sizeable library. The problem is that we’re too evenly matched. But she has the book with my name on it: STRONG WILLED CHILD.

Mother has news. She has read something interesting in her Redbook magazine about how to more effectively discipline her children. Father is also intrigued. They are the two most dangerous people I know.

I’m whispering in class with Jenna, the kind of child punishments are made for. The very idea is a deterrent; she would never choose pain, or shame, or conflict. For me, punishment is always on the table, to be weighed against the thing I want to do. If the thrill of the forbidden side of the neighborhood outweighs the pain of the belt, that’s what I’ll choose. Go get a belt, Mother will say. I’ll choose the widest, softest swath of leather from her closet. Daddy’s belt. If she ever catches on and wants to use the skinny, stinging dress-belt, I may reconsider.

Shame-based punishments are useless, but Teacher likes these best. When we misbehave, she sends us to the blackboard where we must write our name, with a check mark for each additional offense. It’s pathetic to feel shame. There’s respectability in being a little punished. The bad boys are my favorite; there are no bad girls, because it isn’t allowed. At the board, these boys write their name in gibberish, two-foot font, break the chalk. This is our first brush with terrorism, the way they rake the chalk on the board until we shudder and cringe, shielding our ears.
I watch out for Jenna because she seems younger than the others. She has a gray
tooth and her hair is boy-short, brushed with vanilla. These shortcomings aside, she is
very eager to learn the roller skating routines I’ve choreographed. Verisimilitude is
important to us both; I’ve heard about Olympian gymnasts' harsh Eastern European
coaches, and she lets me scold her the way I imagine they do. I pinch her when she
misses a turn, and leave thumbprint-sized smudges of purple on her bare arms. But today,
we are in school, and Teacher is tired of our talking, so here we go to the front of the
room to make a record of our bad behavior. Jenna doesn’t bear this disgrace as well as
she bears my abuse. As reparations, at the board, I make sure my name eclipses hers.

I’m standing in the kitchen corner, taking my punishment. The rule is that no part
of my body touches any part of the wall. I start with twenty minutes, and Mother will add
five minutes whenever I ask about the time. This is the trick: I can’t stop asking. Soon,
my sentence has swelled to twenty, forty, fifty-five. The timer only goes to sixty. With
only the wallpaper in my scope, I am convinced that at my back, the world has changed.
My family has been raptured away, and gangs of godless cannibals are casing the house
right now, wiping their bloody handprints on my bedspread. Or worse, Mother is still
here, and the stovetop timer has stopped. I’m growing like Alice; my shoes are beginning
to pinch. They will discover me months too late, dressed in rags, shriveled in the kitchen
corner like a dead cricket.

In this sense, I am worse than the family dog. The dog has learned a modest
assortment of tricks that go against his better instincts, but he knows they will pay off in
the long run. Yet I cannot let my five minutes run out without turning to see if I'm alone.
Lot's wife, famously alchemized into a pillar of salt, is a perplexing study in common sense. All she had to do was not look back. Don't turn back, they said, don't turn back—but she couldn't stop it, and neither can I.

*

At one point, I’m left alone in the kitchen for two years. This is how long it takes me to muster the courage to swallow my allergy pills whole, with a glass of water.

I’m old enough to care about pop culture. I devour it like a thief and find out about Penny Pingleton, who, like me, is permanently punished. The "P" on her chest, sewn there by her mother, may as well be mine, although her mother is afraid of race-mixing, while mine fears disobedience. I study Penny’s mannerisms, trying to pinpoint her source of happiness, but all I can observe is the obvious: her passivity and her blonde hair, like Jenna, my tiny gymnast, whom I love. Jenna needs to flop her leg a hundred times to fall asleep: lift, release; lift, release; until she loses consciousness. I learn to watch the predictable rise and fall of her leg until I go under. The downside of Jenna is that she lets me go too far with everything. The upside is that when she sleeps over, she doesn’t mind my screams.

I’m listening to Mother and Father discuss how to best punish me. The problem is the church. Mother wants me to go and learn how to be better, but Father doesn’t like how fun they have made things for children. When he was a child, church was being hung by a rope until your prayers became real. Sometimes, a snake was involved. They compromise; I go to church but am kept in the sanctuary to suffer through long, adult
sermons. I fare better here than I ever did in the kitchen corner, because Mother’s parenting, it turns out, has a loophole. Books, she believes, are written by men like Father, to improve and instruct mankind. She is proud when I buy paperbacks five for a dollar at garage sales, pleased when I sit for long hours in scholarly silence with those books. While Pastor drones on, I think about the things I have read. That latchkey stripper had been on to something, and here is where it all comes together: all the places women are willing to pull up their skirts—civil war-era plantations, suburban schools, apocalyptic compounds—the ways a witch might curse and then bless another witch, always with blood, the things men to do wind up in prison, and what they do once they’re inside. I never once look at the clock. I am becoming unpunishable.

A last resort: Mother sees a flyer about a tough love camp, an idea that excites she and Father both. At camp, I’m given a pile of bricks and a backpack of glue sticks. I build every day, sloppily-spaccled walls rising around me like a slow tide, and when I slide the last brick in place, I find myself in another church.

Mother has read something else. She tells me over the phone that she has learned about night terrors from Reader’s Digest. How funny, she says, for such a misunderstanding to have occurred. It all makes sense now, she says, her voice light with relief. She has done a fine job, after all. Dr. Dobson didn’t account for night terrors. She will write him a letter in the morning.
Part of it is that I’m getting older, which means people, even Mother and Father, are more careful about discipline. Now that I’m older, now that I have my paperbacks, I’ve discovered the double life of everyday objects: feathers, leather belts, almost any kind of fruit. This, of course, is how the concept of prison came about; the only way to punish sinners of a certain age is with boredom. Corporal punishment is too exciting.

And Jenna, she doesn’t know about any of this. She’s been saving up. She’s hoarding bad behavior, as though she can offset consequences with twenty years of obedience. Obedience isn't the same as sweetness; she writes dark, furious things in letters she doesn't send, and I'm convinced that her one gray tooth is discolored with repressed screams. She's never pledged me any kind of loyalty, but she has mine. My teeth are toothpaste-white. For years, I’ve shadowed Jenna like the secret service, and now I dream nightmares on her behalf. How terrible to be so unpunished for so long, forever waiting for the belt to strike.
Wink is about to break one of his mother's dearest rules. There isn't any choice; he's tired of walking, and a thumb extended toward a passing car is so little effort, even though a thirst for murder is the only likely reason a driver might inconvenience themselves for a stranger. *Murder or worse*, his mother always includes in her stock warnings, possessed of a fear usually reserved for daughters that Wink will be raped—*and then what, Winchell Meanor?* Wink doesn't know what. He’s never even been in a fight.

Three different cars slow and resume before Wink approaches the passenger door of a creaky blue Corolla, which, when he slides into the front seat, smells of old french fries. He can't afford to be picky, but his mother has raised him to cleanse his hands after touching any foreign object, even her own hand, so he can’t help but clench with dread over the driver's unfamiliar face, odor, radio station. This is a stranger—old enough to seem vaguely maternal, but still young enough to murder him with any number of the items strewn across the floor of the front seat. Wink is unsure of the etiquette. Who is going to murder whom?

He glances toward the back seat at his ruck sack, as though to make sure of its comfort, and to check it hasn’t pulled a knife of its own. As payment for the ride, he tells this reckless woman about his travels, how he’s been living in bohemian tent cities and earning spare change with his music. She is delighted to meet such a free spirit.

Of course Wink has never met a bohemian. Bohemians are part of a group his mother had warned him against—gypsies, vagrants, anyone who thinks it's fine to make do without hot water and indoor plumbing—and the only time he’s ever slept in a tent
had been a few weeks ago in basic training, during a muddy field training exercise. The food had been bland but well-organized, with each meal arranged into a half-dozen geometrical shapes.

The only thing less bohemian than geometry at mealtime had been the bayonet course, which had been like pretty much every other haunted house Wink had been through. It hadn’t been the screaming and howling and flashing lights—it hadn’t even been the obvious trauma of overriding a lifetime of *no running with scissors* to sprint and jump and crawl with a seven-inch blade leading the barrel of an M16. It had been Private Prescott’s reaction to flip Wink’s switch to the *no* position.

Wink has watched Prescott since the day they arrived at basic training. Prescott, blonde and freckled and built like a bully, had tumbled from the womb flag-first. His family had poured him full of enthusiasm for ballistics and then sealed him up tight to keep out soft, disloyal ideas like pacifism and diet soda, whereas Wink has always been endlessly suggestible, open to anything expressed in warm tones and a steady cadence. Wink would have happily spent his life without learning the Soldier’s Creed if, a few weeks after his high school graduation, he hadn’t answered the family phone and been mesmerized by a preacher-throated recruiter whose voice had traveled down Wink’s spine and struck each vertebra in a chord that had hit all his pre-set frequencies—and a few his mother had set him to—and left him sitting, stunned, on the kitchen floor. Yes, he’d said, his mouth pressed to the plastic receiver. Yes, yes. Prescott had taken up where the recruiter had left off, and it had naturally followed that when Prescott had choked on that course and scanned the field for an escape route, Wink, always tracking Prescott with
his eyes, had thought *good idea, Scotty*, and followed him out. By the time they’d missed the next morning’s formation, they’d been eighty miles from post.

When Wink was seven years old, his mother had transplanted them from the small, forested town of Raven Oaks, Nebraska to Fountain Island at the far edge of the east coast. Ellen Meanor, a tall, pensive woman with a long, melancholy face, preferred beach towns because everything was laid out in the open. The woods, on the other hand, were designed for lurking, skulking, evading the hounds. Yet for all its transparency, the beach hadn’t had a lot to offer an indoor boy like Wink. He’d always felt most at home with plenty of adult supervision; even school had been sketchy at times, with the children outnumbering the adults. He’d been content to follow his mother from errand to errand and bask in the long, cool shadow of her attention whenever she allowed it. For the most part, she’d been elusive, always slipping away and using her dense, waist-length hair as a shelter. Wink had once tried to crawl inside with her, but she’d pushed him away and complained about the poke of his angular knees.

The one exception had been in the sanctuary of their small church, before the move. Both the church and the town were called Raven Oaks, an unimaginative comment on the regional landscape, and Wink’s head wasn’t the most reliable source most days, but he recalled in visceral detail how the Sunday sermon was the only time Ellen ever allowed him on her lap. When he’d finally fidgeted enough, she would uncross her hose-smooth legs and let him climb on. From there, he was free to examine all the delicacies that made her so intriguing: the line of silk-encased buttons along her throat, the tiny scallops of lace that edged her sleeve cuffs, and his favorite, the clunky locket she only
wore on special occasions. With his young, tentative fingers, he would trace the embossed patterns—hieroglyphics, he supposed—and think about where this astounding item might have been forged. The silence of the room had nurtured his investigation, the congregants part of a communal rest from which they would all emerge at once, sleepy and disoriented.

If the circumstances were just right—if Ellen was distracted, and Wink was very careful—he was able to pry open the locket’s door with his fingernail and access the reservoir of solid perfume, lavender in essence, ivory in color, and with the consistency of lip balm. When the scent reached Ellen, she would close the locket with a loud *snick* and banish him from her lap, but from time to time, he was able to dip the edge of his finger inside, slicking him with a floral scent that lasted for the rest of the day if he was careful not to wash his hands.

He's committing a crime. This realization begins to take shape when a truck stop waitress asks where he's headed and it seems safer not to say. Through the window, Wink watches cars glide past, and considers whether his head feels right. The recruiter, Sergeant Golding, had spoken with him almost every day between the phone call and when he shipped out, but all Wink can remember now is how the clip of consonants against Golding's teeth had been remarkably similar to the *snick* of his mother’s locket.

Around Kansas City, the cloud of obedience conjured by Golding begins to clear, and Wink is beset with regret that he and Prescott had split up. The Army had always been a vague, grubby concept in his mind, since communal showers were a hundred accidents waiting to happen and physical fitness meant being sluiced in sweat, but only
some parts were like that. He’d lucked out when Prescott, clean and self-contained, was assigned as his battle buddy. He misses Prescott’s confidence the most. It’s easy to follow a guy like Prescott, who could be just another muscled jerk but instead uses his mass to shoulder Wink’s gear when Wink gets tired and starts to fall behind. His immovable bulk is perfect for the battlefield, and he possesses a cool that Wink follows like his favorite comic, avidly watching Prescott tuck his illicit chewing tobacco into his lower lip in their rare moments alone. Ellen would hate this habit; Wink admires the assurance with which he indulges in the routine. Following Prescott away from post had been a logical act, and was technically within regulations, since rule number one was to never leave your battle buddy alone. They’d only split up to travel more quickly; two men traveling together are a threat, while one man alone is a sad story.

In seventh grade, a girl in Wink’s class had taken out a book on hypnosis from the library. Wink lounged on the soccer field at lunchtime and watched her try to entrance another girl, who’d been instructed to lie on her back. The hypnotist hopeful climbed on top and used her voice to draw the other girl down a long flight of imagined stairs. Relax, relax, she had coaxed, every time the other girl fell victim to nervous laughter.

Three false starts, then four—what was so funny about relaxation, anyway?—and then Wink had lost count. The delay in their descent to the bottom stair had become a wedge of unbearable tension in his upper back. The girl on her back had thrashed lightly in the grass, still giggling, until finally, the first girl had thrown her weight forward and drawn her bent knee over the other girl’s midsection.
“Take this seriously or I’ll break your ribs.” Her knee found the bladed edge of the other girl’s ribcage. “I swear to God, I will.”

The other girl had gone limp and exhaled a sound of shock. Wink had exhaled along with her, finally able to breathe.

Down the stairs they had all continued, and when the sixth period bell had sounded, it had taken him twenty minutes to find his algebra class.

The people of North Platte possess an appropriate sense of personal safety, so Wink ends up walking for two miles, wildly paranoid, convinced his Army-issue duffel will give him away. He hasn’t showered in two days, just one step closer to becoming the bohemian he’s been lying about. Lying feels surprisingly good in his mouth. The thrill of it, still factory-new in his chest, keeps him moving forward. Absent without leave, a liar, and the original crime, which he’d committed before he left home, rounds him out as a thief.

Once he finds a ride for the next sixty miles, up front next to a trucker whose cab was wallpapered with pictures of her grandchildren, Wink draws the stolen locket from his pocket and slides the tip of his fingernail beneath the door—just enough to feel the fit, not enough to pop it open.

“You okay, son?” The trucker gives him a once-over, both hands still on the wheel, the truck massive and rumbling beneath them both.

Wink nods and closes his hand around the locket. His head is cold, hair shorn too close to his skull to make him look like all the other boys. “Just tired,” he says. “I’m ready to get to Raven Oaks. I miss the ravens.”
“You miss the crows.” He looks at the woman, the sagging skin under her eyes, her jaunty blue cap. She nods at her own statement. “Crowds of ‘em. Murders. Noisy things, but smart. They recognize human faces, did you know that?”

There’s no reason for it to be so disappointing, but Wink hates the woman for what she’s just said, and for the facts about birds that keep spilling out of her mouth. He hadn’t asked. Without the ravens, his destination is just a town with a church and probably, it turns out, a lot of scarecrows.

Wink’s memories of Raven Oaks are not reliable. In her bedtime stories, Ellen had imbued it with all the mystery and danger of a witch’s castle or the mountain into which the Pied Piper led all those dazed children. The church’s stark, vaulted sanctuary and the surrounding forest were all he recalls—those things, his mother’s lap, and the Ravens, always flapping overhead in great numbers, roosting on every available surface. Those things, he remembers.

When Wink had opened the jewelry box to take the locket, he’d seen another of Ellen’s Sunday accessories—a dainty gold watch with a blue bezel. The wristband stretched to accommodate her hand and then fit back together on her wrist. He’d liked the way the tiny teeth had opened when he’d pulled and then closed tight when he released, and that had been his game: stretch, release; stretch, release. The last time he’d been allowed to touch, he’d caught the fine hairs of her arm in the wristband’s teeth. She’d yelped and slapped his face, right there in the pew, and for the rest of the service, he had sat straight-backed and out of her reach, trembling through waves of febricity that he still feels when he thinks back on it.
He hadn’t thought of it in years, but during hand to hand combat training, he’d thought of nothing else. He couldn’t put pressure on his opponent’s limbs without thinking of the fragility of the human body, couldn’t take a hit himself without being doused in shame all over again. *You’re too rough,* Ellen told him on the day of the slap. She said this while pouring his afternoon tea into a perilously fragile teacup, set up on a matching saucer. A test, then. Desperate to pass, he listened to her warnings about rough boys while curling his finger around the trick porcelain and learning to leave things as he found them.

They’re not far from Raven Oaks when Wink asks the trucker to drop him off.

“There’s a rest stop just up the road,” she says, but she seems relieved. Why wouldn’t she be? He hasn’t been able to muster a good attitude since she told him about the ravens. “Sure you don’t want to wait?”

But Wink wants off right there on the shoulder, where he’s spotted a welcome landmark: Prescott and his ruck sack. Together, they trudge to the rest stop, where a well-maintained picnic area sits behind the building, between the back patio and a thicket of trees. The lawn is newly-cut; petunias bloom in the flowerbeds. It’s all wrong for Wink’s current position as a vagrant, but here he is, sitting down at a picnic table with his battle buddy as though they’re no different from any other family passing through.

"I was gonna look for you at that church you were talking about. I called my uncle and he said we can go back."

The Prescott confidence is in full working order, surprising in its degree of denial, and edged with a giddiness that in Wink’s experience usually precedes someone saying
something to embarrass everyone in the room. It’s only now, sitting directly across from Prescott, that Wink notices for the first time the asymmetrical set of his eyes. The left eye is slightly smaller and drifts outward, toward his temple. Wink blinks, which sets everything right, and on the next blink, it’s wrong again.

“I don’t know, Scotty.” Wink drums his fingers on the picnic table. “I mean, we can go back, but I looked it up, and there’s no way we get to stay. This is their way of weeding out guys like us.”

"Guys like what?"

“Guys who can’t, you know, handle. . .” He studies Prescott’s unshaven face and sidesteps any words that might be sharp enough to qualify as an accusation. “It’s just, there’s more to it than pushups and a seven-minute mile.”

Prescott places his container of dip on the table with a hollow, tinny sound. “I could have handled it.”

An impression of confrontation thumbs gently at the back of Wink’s throat. In response, he twists away from it and drums faster. He nods once.

Prescott senses what Wink is trying to suppress; in response, his pupils expand like the movement of starlings against the sky. “The military is a Prescott tradition,” he says.

There’s an implied directive in Prescott’s fixed gaze. He wants a response—requires a response—and to resist would be for Wink to subject himself to that awful accumulation of pressure again, so he shrugs and, like flinging a grenade, says, “It’s not a tradition you’re going to follow."
Prescott lunges at Wink from across the table, knocks him onto the grass, and shoves him back down when he tries to get up. Wink only tries once. He may not have ever been in a fight, but is full of ideas on how to avoid them. He clutches at the place where Prescott is holding the base of his throat—not choking, not yet. It’s a decision in progress. "Why did you run?"

"I was listening to my body. I always listen to my body. It's the one thing that can't let you down."

But it seems as though Prescott’s body is letting him down, or at least derailing the purpose of the attack. Even now, as he pins Wink with his elbows and hips, he’s too excited. His erection, pressed between them, is another riddle of etiquette: who should be the first to mention it? Wink’s mother’s fears are about to realized; he will be raped, and when people see it on the news, they’ll know he brought it all on himself, because everyone knows that rest areas top the list of places things like this occur. Winchell Meanor, you’re nothing but a cliché.

“You were right,” Wink says, breathier than he would have liked, but his lungs are compressed by Prescott weight and there is now a new item to process: the point where Prescott’s thumb presses into Wink’s throat. When he draws a gasp of air he inhales damp, dense, tobacco breath, and spreads his hands over Prescott’s as though he’s the one giving instruction on how to use a weapon for a change. Still, he doesn’t attempt to pry them off; to do so would be to participate. To admit there’s a problem.

“What was I right about?”

The sky is blue above them. It jerks to the beat of Wink’s pulse and makes him feel sick. This may be what it’s like to lose consciousness, half nausea and half relief, but
he never gets the chance to fully go under, because Prescott rolls off him in one rough movement. Two dachshunds barrel toward them with bossy, uncoordinated yips. Their owner is a man the age of Wink’s grandfather, and while Wink hears him say, “Take it easy, boys,” he doesn’t hear Prescott’s response. Wink stays on the ground, his face pressed to the well-hydrated grass, and when he finally gets to his feet, Prescott is gone.

The church is just a church. It’s set at the edge of a dense forest, and Wink doesn’t realize until he arrives that he’d expected something very specific. A hot spring of worshipers, nude and knee-deep, waiting to be baptized. An altar with a still-bleeding carcass. The man behind the curtain, perhaps, to show Wink his potions and explain the nature of a fugue.

The parking lot is empty, but the doors yawn wide open, propped by a gray wedge of plastic under each side. He steps inside, to the sound of a vacuum running in another room and the ghost of lemon cleaning solvents in the air. The church seems a little left behind, the carpet worn thin in the hallway, hymnals from the seventies. A bulletin board outside the sanctuary advertises babysitters and Bible studies.

The sanctuary is next, that place he remembers best. He’s readying himself to approach the doors, when the silence is disrupted by a shriek with the quality of a yelp, a startled sound that cuts off along with the vacuum. Wink listens from the welcome area, a narrow hallway stretched to the far end of the building, squinting with his whole face. The sounds are erratic—brief silences followed by a scuffle—the sound of chasing and catching an animal. A man’s voice is audible from one of the back rooms, contained in
volume but wild enough to make Wink reconsider how badly he needs to be there. Surely there are other churches in the area, other birds.

Whether there’s real danger here is irrelevant; awkward situations are as repellant as dangerous ones. But Wink has always been impressionable, and he’s recently been instructed to protect and serve, so he feels obligated to call out.

"Hello! I'm a visitor." Churches love visitors.

Another scrabbling sound, and from the hallway emerged, a tall, skeletal figure carrying a package that, when it moves toward Wink and the light, is identifiable as a disheveled young woman toting a baby in a purple romper.

“The pastor isn’t here.” Her lower lip is enormous, and smeared with blood. When she catches him staring, she sucks it into her mouth and licks it clean. “The whole office is closed. I’m just here cleaning.”

“Sure, sure, I’ll just. Are you all right?”

Her gaze flicks toward the dark corridor, then back to Wink, as though he’s the threat.

She may or may not plan to respond; Wink fails to read her before a fellow in khaki pants and a checkered button-up drifts out of the dark corridor, sheepish and smiling as he offers his hand to Wink. “Hi there, sorry about that. George Aubrey.”

“Winchell Meanor.” He’s never introduced himself with this name before. It feels almost like a lie.

George pulls the woman into an affectionate embrace, but she lurches away.

“Call the police. Please.”
In the light, Wink can see that she has the perfect neck to put marks on display—long and pale, the skin clinging tightly to the avian bones of her throat. George Aubrey is well into his work on this exhibition. Wink has that sick feeling again. At the truck stop, he’d picked up a new phone, now tucked away in his pocket. He reaches for it, realizes his mistake, and then lets his hand fall to his side.

She looks from his hand to his face. “Aren’t you going to—“ Wink avoids her with his gaze, letting it fall instead on the baby, which she jiggles on her hip. There’s a smudge of blood on the front of the baby’s romper, just near the shoulder, awful enough that he finds George with his eyes. It’s remarkable how easily they’re able to communicate, he and this unapologetic batterer.

“I guess she needs to get back to work, then,” George says slowly.

“Yeah, I’ll just.” Wink points toward the sanctuary. He’s so close. The tension is all jammed up at the base of his skull, right into his jaw. It makes his mouth slow.

“You’re really not calling?”

“If you’d like, I could take the baby.” It’s a worse deal than even the one he’d signed with the Army.

When she hands him over, the boy’s buoyancy surprises him, helium-light in contrast to the ruck sack Wink has been hauling around.

George folds his hand over the back of the woman’s neck and gives Wink a long look before leads her away.

The baby can’t do much but grip Wink’s collar with tiny, crinkled white knuckles, and attempt to stuff it into his mouth. He’s not bad company at all; he doesn’t interfere with Wink’s entrance to the sanctuary—finally, finally.
In the front pew, he sits, abruptly exhausted. He’s been unthinkably rude; he’s been careless with his own life and now someone else’s. There must be something about the town that makes people behave this way—first Prescott, and now himself. His mother, after all, had been driven clear to the ocean. The stained-glass windows flicker and darken with the shadow of a hundred birds, outside, rising to roost for the evening. Wink can imagine their throaty, excited caws, but the sound doesn’t penetrate—the sanctuary is silent as though empty, and Wink closes his eyes, inviting himself down those elusive stairs, because if he isn’t really here, then there’s been no crime at all.
On a weekday morning, just one press of the snooze button means the protesters will beat Helga to work. One ten-minute reprieve is not worth the crowd in her path, especially since Apple Falls is such a small town that she knows most of the people on the sidewalk. People in the business of saving babies are early risers, especially the week leading up to Mother's Day.

Today, Jen Gustafson is out front with a cluster of middle-aged women and retired men. Helga gives her a nod as she approaches; she and Jen were schoolmates from kindergarten through graduation, and while they hadn’t been friends, the twinness of their experiences—jumping the same rope, hanging their jackets side-by-side in the same coatroom—places Jen, if not in Helga’s DNA, then at least in her tribe. The group doesn’t block Helga from the front door, nor do they step aside. Instead, still waiting for the first coffee run to return, they have an air of disorientation, as if they are unprepared for their first adversary and too friendly to shout without first thinking.

“Morning, Jen,” she says as she fishes in her pocket for her keycard, and then as she recognizes another protestor, “Morning, Soren.”

Jen gives her a hard look. Soren says good morning.

Once inside, Helga removes her hood and smooths her hands over her long braids, still wet, the color of an unripe peach. She had left in a hurry, eager to avoid interactions like the one she’s just had. There’s a back door, but if her clients can’t use it, then Helga doesn’t feel right slinking in as though she’s afraid of Jen Gustafson’s speculative eyes and downturned mouth. Jen has always looked that way. In first grade, when the other kids had been learning about all the messy alternative and forbidden uses for the items in
their boxes of school supplies—pins through the fingers; second skins made of Elmer’s glue—she had been similarly alarmed.

“Mother’s Day,” Shelly, the receptionist, says when they pass in the hallway. She rolls her eyes and Helga makes a laughing sound that isn’t a laugh.

“Are we busy?”

Shelly shakes her head. “Your roster is on your desk. A couple appointments, lots of room for walk-ins.” They both know there won’t be any walk-ins for the rest of the week. The sidewalk crowd gets bold when a lone teenage girl shows up.

This is bad news for those girls nine or ten months from now, but Helga feels a quick sweep of greedy pleasure at the prospect of a free day to engage her current favorite pastime: searching for jobs in places that are not Apple Falls, Minnesota.

Today, Volunteers of America is looking for a new rape and trauma counselor in Bradford, Pennsylvania: population 6,430. When she Googles the town, the images are so familiar she has to check to make sure she hasn’t searched for Apple Falls by mistake, and then immediately moves on to a new search. Helga learns from her mistakes, which is nothing to be smug about, considering she is currently occupied making brand new mistakes.

She could always move to the Cities. There are pages of listings in Minneapolis and St. Paul, an hour away and decades more progressive. She’s forty-three years old, and cannot bear the idea of dying in the town where she was born, where she returned after grad school, where even secrets aren’t exciting because everyone already knows them. The only thing keeping her here now, other than a fondness for supermarket encounters with the people she grew up sharing Fruit Roll-Ups and other lunchbox treats
with, is her square of land: a tiny house with a huge out-building that might have been called a barn if her land grew anything other than weeds, wildflowers, and plum trees.

She thinks of her home as an old-woman house because it reminds her of the one her childhood piano teacher had lived in. Every Monday evening, Helga’s mother would drop her children at the front door and they would take turns with the lessons, one doing their homework in the kitchen while the other pecked away at old Miss Halverson’s upright piano. Sometimes, when Helga is having trouble falling asleep, she thinks about how she would turn her chair toward the wall during those gray winters and press her knees to the heat vent. Long division homework balanced on her thighs, she would worship the heat when it kicked on and suffer a small death each time it cycled off. It had been one of her earliest forms of pleasure, before she’d discovered sex and alcohol and sharp cheeses with jam.

And Charlotte.

Forty had been a little late to discover an entirely new type of pleasure, but when Charlotte, a student in the local community college studio art program, had shown up two years ago and asked to rent her outbuilding, Helga had given her assent and then kept giving it. Charlotte had moved her studio into Helga’s outbuilding, and then moved into her house, where she’s been ever since.

That evening, Helga gets in bed early with her laptop—more job listings—and wakes hours later when Charlotte rolls into bed, smelling of dust and metal and her workshop. She has the physicality of the sturdy, serious factory girls of World War II, forever bent over her projects in the shed, safety goggles in place, plain jumpsuit
stretched over her body and soldering iron in her hand. And like the girls in those charming black and white photos, she is utterly arresting; Helga is unable to look away when she moves, the sure slide of her thighs one against the other, no sway, no awareness of her own body, only her destination. Her face is sweet and round, as is her body—a quiet storm cloud that threatens rain but never delivers.

Even after two years, entire parts of Charlotte are a mystery, but less so to Helga than to others, including Charlotte’s own family. She reminds Helga of a nesting doll, solemn and unknowable. Helga wants to break her open and pour out all the separate Charlottes inside, then put them back together just so she can line them up and kiss them, each one.

She slides her fingers through Charlotte’s barbershop-short hair and says, “Did you get my present?”

“Mm, why do you think I’m so late?”

Helga had found a 500 foot spool of galvanized steel cable at the flea market and left it out back for Charlotte. This is one of the few things about Charlotte she can always guess: which materials she will want to shape into her strange sculptures.

“Did you use the whole thing already?”

“Of course not.” Charlotte rolls against Helga and waits. She wants attention, which Helga gives her in the form of her hands spread over Charlotte’s wide, solid rump. Charlotte is best defined by long silences, hot coffee, and cotton underwear, all the solemn and ordinary things of everyday life. For all her mystery, she’s simple, the opposite of the women Helga counsels on a daily basis, with their conflicting desires and bad decisions. Charlotte wants a space in which to make art, and Helga to warm her bed.
And more than anything, she wants to be left alone. It’s all delightfully easy, and Helga is going to leave her soon.

Charlotte is twenty-one, a ridiculous age, whereas Helga has begun reading her 401k reports when they come in. She still doesn’t entirely understand them, but she opens them now, and frowns at the climb and fall of the green, red, and blue lines that indicate whatever it is that’s happening to all this hypothetical money.

Neither Charlotte nor the terrifying expanse of years between them had seemed ridiculous at the beginning. The girl hadn’t even been a conscious decision that Helga had made. One minute, Helga had been pointing out the electrical outlets and explaining the security deposit, and suddenly here they are, two years later, in the wee hours of the morning, her fingers skating over the rough texture of Charlotte’s underthings. Other things had happened in between, but they all seem insubstantial and subjective when Helga tries to explain them to herself. There is first the way Charlotte had only responded with a smile whenever Helga paid her a compliment, a silence that had been delivered—and interpreted—as a form of intimacy. The cat burials are a more concrete example. When Charlotte had first moved in, she’d indulged a few stray cats, which led to an abundance of kittens. Every few months, Charlotte would knock on Helga’s kitchen door with a box marked *Frenchie or Dandelion* and Helga would dig a hole out near the plum orchard. Together, they would put the box in the ground and return to Helga’s kitchen for tea and butterscotch pudding, simply because Helga had been stirring a pot of pudding on the stovetop the first time Charlotte showed up with her tiny casket, and after that, butterscotch pudding seemed inherently funereal.
A graveyard of dead kittens isn’t exactly a courtship, but by the time Charlotte asked her to take a walk under the plum trees one autumn afternoon, it seemed perfectly natural to let the girl reach up and gather Helga’s long, wind-tangled hair into a twisted bundle that she pressed to her mouth as though she cared nothing for the conventions of kissing. She kissed Helga’s hair, the patch of chilly skin beneath her scarf, and the top button of her coat. By the time she reached Helga’s mouth, Helga would have agreed to anything.

“How was your day?” Charlotte asks in her strange, low voice that few people can understand. The vibration rumbles against Helga’s throat, and for a moment she is torn between sleep and wakefulness, before Charlotte tips her over into waking by asking, “Was my mom there? On the sidewalk?”

“She was.”

“Mm. What did she say?”

Helga digs fingers into the muscle above Charlotte’s hip, contact she needs in order to have this conversation, which will make Charlotte twitchy. “I said good morning; she didn’t say anything.”

“Rude.”

“She was fine. Didn’t have a sign or anything.” Helga can feel the disgruntled stir under Charlotte’s skin, and she smooths it away, because they have an agreement to avoid this topic. It’s an unfortunate and occasionally mortifying fact of life that Jen and Brian Gustafson, Helga’s childhood classmates, are Charlotte’s parents. Charlotte is beleaguered by their existence, but just like everything else, it’s not something she says; instead, Helga senses the current of unease, like the hum of a nearly exhausted kitchen
appliance. Around the house, Charlotte’s natural state is a kind of opaque contentment; interpersonal relationships—specifically with her parents—are what oppress her. Helga, it has turned out, has exquisite instincts when it comes to Charlotte’s unsettling brand of introversion. She simply treats Charlotte the same way she’d treat any nocturnal animal: she leaves the door open, food on the table, and never makes any sudden movements.

She lies still and waits for Charlotte to decide how she feels about what Helga has told her, a fragile expanse of time. Finally, Charlotte sighs and shifts so her face is pressed to Helga’s belly, little huffs of hot breath through her nightgown. This is an invitation to pet Charlotte’s head, trace the edges of her hair, rub the short pieces between her fingers. She’s going to miss this when she leaves, but it can’t be helped. Every day that passes tips them further and further toward farce. She can see it in people’s faces; her arrangement had been titillating at first, but now it’s increasingly sad.

If Charlotte weren’t so grave, Helga would probably die of shame. If she were to embrace any of the fripperies of youth, it would be intolerable, but Charlotte is remarkably single-minded in her pursuits; she doesn’t notice what people think—doesn’t even notice Helga, sometimes—which makes her more like an old woman in every way but physicality. She fits in with the motif of Helga’s house. This is usually enough to make Helga forget that she’s breaking a rule most people follow quite easily: thou shalt not take the children of thy peers to bed. When they’re in public, Helga burns with it, too aware of the telling curve of Charlotte’s young, plump, upper arms and the thick muscle of her forearms, but then they return home together, and when Charlotte asks her to take a walk under the plum trees, everything resets back to that first unexpected twist of her hair in Charlotte’s hands.
In ninth grade, Helga’s class had just begun to develop a political consciousness and read things other than the Scholastic News publications they were forced to read aloud in social studies. Ryan White was in the news, and the administration of Ben Franklin High school decided that this boy, with his bad haircut and blood transfusion gone wrong, was the perfect mascot to bring civic awareness to the young people of Apple Falls. The school counselor hung a banner in the lobby, resulting in a strange, awkward month during which they’d been encouraged to sign the banner with personal messages of encouragement. The paper sprawled across the wall like a tragic mural: GET WELL SOON, RYAN!” and became a pilgrimage for fourteen year olds to scrawl their personal messages in honor of this very serious occasion. I saw you on the news, Jenna Skillings began, while Scott Lundstrom printed You are cool and my church is praying for you. Helga also saw what Jen Gustafson wrote on the bottom right corner: I am sorry you have this terrible thing when you haven’t even done anything wrong.

Ryan White died before they could mail off the banner, and after a chagrined few days, it was rolled up and stored in the principal’s office until enough time passed that it didn’t feel like a failure to throw it away. Charlotte wasn’t born until five years later, so Helga feels justified if she sometimes ignores Charlotte’s rumblings of discontent about her parents, because she wasn’t been around for that first disappointing foray into philanthropy and hasn’t been around for anything, really. Not yet. Helga doesn’t buy into the complaints about kids these days—not when Charlotte works so hard and is so generous with her mouth and the thick, compact thighs that are currently clamped over Helga’s under the covers, holding her steady, reassuring. But she doesn’t understand that
her mother was once a girl—not an exciting girl, but a girl nonetheless, with the occasional exciting idea during the wee hours of a slumber party.

Anyway, these things don’t matter, since Helga is going to leave Charlotte soon, a fact that’s easy to forget when she wakes to Charlotte’s head pressed under her chin, copper and coffee and opinions so cutting that Helga is constantly high on the near-miss of that swinging blade.

By August, Helga is searching for jobs in Alaska, especially after watching Charlotte, for the past week, emerge from the outbuilding red-faced, miserable, too hot to wear the safety hood she uses for welding. Alaska evokes glaciers and cool, dry skin. The most northern cities always need social workers. There’s one opening in Cold Bay, which she clicks based on the name alone, but then she reads that the town holds the record for the most overcast city in America, not conducive to growing plums or anything she can put in a jar. She’s starting a new search when she receives a text from Charlotte:

4:22PM: *come 2 the lake – dad’s here so wear a suit*

Charlotte is the kind of daddy’s girl that tomboy daughters of sonless fathers tend to be, a daughter-son hybrid without any of the princess accoutrements. She had demanded to spear her own leech on the fishing hook and dig night crawlers out of the ground. Helga knows that Charlotte had gone through a phase, in pre-adolescence, of wanting to be called *Charlie*.

“Jen taught me how to be a mermaid,” Helga says an hour later, chest-deep in water, swallowing against the sweet, green taste of lake water in her mouth. Charlotte flops into a backstroke with a scowl, but Brian smirks in his pleasant way.
“I remember that. She almost drowned that time.”

Charlotte dives, disappearing with a final flap of one white foot above the surface. For a moment, it’s just Helga and Brian. Brian has always been the goof, the lanky guy with crazy hair, who played hockey but also sang in chorus. He’s only become handsome since he turned forty, the same time Helga’s own life had bloomed with promise.

Jen would never have really drowned. She’s far too judgmental of people who drown, especially in the winter. Every year, people go through the ice; the only thing that differs is whether they’re on foot, snowmobile, or vehicle when it happens. Jen believes that to end up on one of those news reports is unforgivable. How inconsiderate to make one’s own body into another piece of debris to pollute their beloved waters. The same water that today soothes the heat rash on Helga’s thighs and will later chill men into corpses and thaw them come spring.

Brian smiles at Helga with a twist that implies an impending joke. “How’s business? Not too good, I hope. I’m not asking for a baby boom, but I sure would like a new boat.” Brian is a pediatrician at a clinic down the street from Helga’s office. They sometimes eat together at the café nearby, if it’s crowded and sitting next to a stranger is inevitable. It’s their secret; Jen and Charlotte are too humiliated by one another to tolerate any overlap.

Helga returns his smile. “What can I say? Word’s out that there’s not much cachet in motherhood, these days.”

“Ah, but look at that,” Brian says as Charlotte surfaces some distance away and gives them a pointed wave. Her shoulders are northern-pale in the sun, striking, and while
Helga won’t admit how exactly this relates to motherhood, she takes Brian’s point and waves back at this beautiful girl in the distance.

The heat passes, and September 11th arrives, as it does every year. The day is fraught with enough meaning on its own, but Helga, through her lens of shame, is forced to acknowledge that Charlotte had been learning the alphabet in a kindergarten classroom when the whole thing had occurred. Helga’s first appointment after lunch is a pregnant woman she vaguely recognizes—the younger sister, she thinks, of someone from school. Tricia, she reads from the chart. Tricia has white-blond hair and freckles across the bridge of her nose. She’s tomboyish in the way of a gymnast, nothing like Charlotte’s blue-collar workman style, and smart enough to walk the rhetorical balance-beam and keep Helga at a distance while half-answering the routine questions. She’ll get a referral for prenatal care if she wants to continue the pregnancy, or a different referral if she doesn’t, but she seems to have conjured a wall appropriate for a hostage resisting interrogation, and after just a few minutes, Helga is already frustrated.

“It’s common for women to take this on alone,” she says, just as she feels her phone buzz in her pocket. “But it helps me to help you if I have some idea of what steps you’ve taken and which you still need to take.”

Tricia’s eyes are unfocused as they flicker around the room, searching for an anchor and finding nothing. “I’m not alone,” she says, stalling. “I mean, I know who the father is. I just can’t tell you.”

“You don’t have to tell me. I wouldn’t ask. But it helps if I know how much support he’s giving you, whether you’ve talked to him, what his reaction was like.”
“We’ve been together a few years,” Tricia says, slowly, inspecting each word before she lets it crawl out of her mouth. “But he doesn’t know. He’s married, and. That’s a lot of drama I don’t think I want.”

Helga wants to commiserate, acknowledge that it’s a terribly small town for such private things, but that would just draw attention to her own situation. “You don’t have to think about that right now,” she says. Her phone is buzzing again. “Right now, you should just ask yourself whether you want to continue the pregnancy. Then we’ll go from there.”

Tricia stares at her for so long that Helga starts to think she may have missed something—a question, some kind of red flag, some need that Tricia expects her to intuit and meet. Her eyes are an odd gold color, catlike in their clarity. “Can’t I just have the baby and not tell him about it?”

“It seems like a difficult thing to hide.”

“Maybe I’ll go away.”

Going away sounds like a fine idea. Helga’s phone buzzes again, and she presses her hand to her pocket, considering the nature of emergencies and how likely it is that one is actually occurring in her own life.

“It’s okay if you take that,” Tricia says.

Helga waves away the offer. “So, have you thought about where you would go?”

“No.” She sags into her chair. “It was just an idea. I just hate that he might try to do the right thing, or. . .you always hear on the news where the guy kills the pregnant girlfriend to keep anyone from finding out.”

“Oofta. He’s dangerous?”
“Hardly. He’s a pediatrician,” Tricia snorts, just before she claps her hand over her mouth with a slap that makes Helga wince. Her face is flared pink, freckles pale beneath the blush, and Helga is left playing catch-up. If she’s worried about giving away his identity, it’s not as though there aren’t plenty of pediatricians in town, and Helga certainly doesn’t know all of them. In fact, other than her own childhood doctor, the only pediatrician she knows is—

Tricia is staring again, and this time, Helga stares back.

“Don’t tell anyone I was here,” Tricia blurts.

“I’m not allowed to tell anyone anything you say.”

“Yeah, but. Pillow talk.” The rims of Tricia’s eyes are as suddenly as pink as her face, her mouth twitching downward.

Helga considers feigning confusion, or denying that she might be intimate with someone who might find this information relevant. She considers leaping up and flapping her arms to dislodge from Tricia’s head the image of herself and Charlotte in bed, all afterglow and idle gossip, but her phone is vibrating again, so she plunges her hand into her pocket, a pleasant buzz against her palm. “If you’re really worried about it, I can give you a referral for another counselor.”

Tricia finds this idea agreeable, so Helga sends her off with some reading material and the moment she’s alone, checks her phone, which shows five unread text messages, all from Charlotte:

1:08PM Have you seen my work apron? I took a shift today.

1:12PM Found it, nm

3:48PM Stop by on your way home. I’m the only pie-girl today; I’ll hook you up.
The last message is accompanied by an emoji incompatible with Helga’s phone, so she isn’t sure what the tone is supposed to be. However, Charlotte rarely texts and never asks for anything, so the rapid-fire messages send Helga to her feet and make her drive a little recklessly on the way to the Perkins at exit 43 on the south side of town. The “xo” had been as alarming as the “please hurry.” Charlotte’s affection is quick, rare, and satisfying, but never leaves a paper trail, so “xo” feels like a panic button, a prearranged safe word.

When she pushes through the front door of Perkins and steps into the dim world of family dining, the first thing she sees is Charlotte, sullen-faced as she boxes up a meringue-topped pie from behind the pie counter. It smells like a church fellowship hall: coffee, potatoes, and casseroles with cheese. When Helga was in high school, it was also heavy with smoke, but that’s over now, and Charlotte has no idea there was a time when people could sit in a booth, smoking and talking for and getting coffee refills until they were full of ideas and could barely walk to their cars for the tremble in their legs.

“My parents are here,” Charlotte says when Helga approaches; her voice is so low that Helga reads her lips, a skill she’s refined during their time together. Charlotte’s interaction with strangers is stilted, silent, awkward, and Helga has stepped easily into the role of interpreter. “They’re over there.” She tilts her head in their direction until Helga nods. “They want to throw a graduation party for me. It’s happening, so will you please talk to them with me? They act like people when you’re around.”

Of course they do. For Helga, they were people before they were Charlotte’s parents. She and Jen had grown up attending the same sleepovers, including one in the
fifth grade when they'd been awakened in the middle of the night, moonlight all over the crowded sofa bed they were sharing, their friend Brandi between them. Brandi Benson was the daughter of the school principal, and in that strange moonlit room, Principal Benson had emerged from the hallway, clad in just a pair of white briefs. He’d peered through the living room drapes, looking for the prowler that had set all the dogs to barking.

When Helga had cracked open one eye, she’d seen Jen doing the same thing, both of them wide awake, silent and trapped in the room with their principal and the casual, unselfconscious jiggle at the front of his underpants. Jen—not Gustafson, yet, but Zucker—had understood the horror of a principal without pants, and for Helga, that bond of shared trauma has carried over, even now that it’s become more party-anecdote than trauma.

Jen and Brian are in a corner booth at Perkins, the table cluttered with folders and pamphlets. Brian—Brian G., they’d called him back in school, when he’d been just one of many unremarkable Brians—has gone even further than simply being an able-bodied man with a complete set of reproductive organs, the sin for which they had never been able to forgive Mr. Benson. Brian had used his. He had taken them and at some point, in between vaccinating babies against the measles, handed them over to Tricia with the freckled nose, and now Helga is at Perkins, caught between Charlotte and her parents and the terrible situation they don’t even know about yet.

“You owe me,” Helga says. “Chocolate silk pie.”

Charlotte nods, her mouth a knot of worry. “I have break in twenty minutes. That’s why they’re here.” When she turns, her apron strings dangle like a little tail where
they tie at the small of her back—darling, darling, and Helga agrees to Charlotte’s terms, as always.

The Gustafsons greet her politely; only Jen lets her disappointment show on her face. She looks so much like Charlotte that Helga is momentarily disoriented. She’s never thought of Charlotte as similar to Jen—their temperament is too different—but for a moment, that knotted mouth and round face make Helga reconsider everything. Then Jen speaks, and everything shifts back into place.

“Helga, how have you been?” Her hands come down over the notebook of scribblings.

“Good,” Helga says, pulling a seat up to the end of the booth. “Charlotte wanted me to help with her party.”

“She’ll be on break soon,” Brian says. “Let’s get you some coffee.”

Helga accepts the coffee that appears when Brian flags down the server, one of Charlotte’s work friends who gives her a wink when he delivers the coffee and sets down an extra pile of creamer to the left of her cup.

Charlotte slides next to her dad, bumping Helga’s shoulder on the way, more intentional than not. Sense-memory ensures a surge of dopamine when Helga catches the scent of honey and basil from Charlotte’s shampoo. She resists the urge to curl her finger around Charlotte’s, even though her hand, with her endearingly stubby fingers, is just sitting out in the open on the table. Helga is going to leave her soon, but not just yet, not when glancing at the fleshy swell of her palm is like a blow to the chest.

“I don’t want a party,” Charlotte says, speaking directly to her. “But they’re having one anyway, so I want to set some guidelines.”
“Honestly, Charlotte.” Jen’s face scrunches with disapproval.

“I didn’t even tell you I graduated.”

“Mothers have their ways of knowing. I was thinking a bonfire at the lake catered by Blackduck Eatery.” Jen checks her list, pen in hand, and waits for Charlotte’s reaction, which is to give Helga a narrow, pointed look.

“I don’t know what that face is,” Jen says.

Charlotte covers her face with her hands.

“I think Charlotte might rather have the party at our place,” Helga says. She’s got a pie to earn. “The orchard is a nice place for an outdoor event, and that way, her studio is there. It’s her graduation; people might want to see what she’s been working on. What do you think?”

“Yes, that. Good.” Charlotte drops her hands and nods, glancing back toward the pie counter. Helga is intensely aware of the secret she’s keeping, and wonders if she will be inclined to keep it from Charlotte, who already has one older brother, a forest ranger in Wisconsin. Helga can keep a secret, but this primordial blob is on a timer, like a roast lamb, or a bomb. It all seems like a lot to think about, and Helga is abruptly very sleepy. She avoids looking at Brian.

“So, that’s it?” Jen asks when Charlotte returns to work. “I’m supposed to invite our friends and family to your house for my daughter’s graduation party.”

Helga releases her breath in a huff, and takes a long drink of coffee before she responds. “It’s what Charlotte wants.”

“Charlotte doesn’t know what she wants. She’ll go where the wind blows her.”
“She doesn’t say what she wants. She’s reticent, not spineless. I mean, look at her.” At the pie counter, Charlotte is aggressively ignoring two customers. Jen isn’t the first to suggest Helga has somehow taken advantage, but Charlotte is the magical creature and Helga is simply her caretaker.

“It’s embarrassing,” Jen whispers.

“Well, yeah,” Helga says, and raises her coffee mug in a gesture of agreement. “That’s life. It’s a fucking humiliation.”

Brian clinks his water glass against the rim of her mug.

“No.” Jen’s fingers are clutched at the edge of the table as though she is working to keep it from flying away. “No,” she repeats, suddenly fascinating in a way she’s never been.

“What do you mean no?” Brian curls his hand over her arm, and she shakes it off.

“I mean that I’m sick of—no, repelled by you, all of you and your secret club no one else can join. It’s fine with you that life is a humiliation? Why, because you’re so cool? School is over; why does that still matter? It’s not supposed to matter.”

“No one is cool,” Brian says, nonsensically.

“Helga Lindgard, you came home from college when Charlotte was two years old, and we ran into you in front of the library. You picked her up, don’t you remember? You held her in your arms and said what a pretty girl she was. How could you?”

Helga has lost control of her face, which is blanched and stretched tight, in contrast to the chaos on her belly. “Jen, that’s just something people say. I wasn’t-“

“But you were. You are!”
No one has said the word yet, but it’s there, and Helga is more afraid of it than of the worst kind of violence.

“And all of you with your pathetic little secrets, like I wouldn’t see Tricia arrive for her appointment today.” Helga stares at Jen, who has spontaneously unearthed a cache of power she has, as far as Helga knows, never touched. But even now, she would never make a scene, and she exerts total control over the bank of fury, leaning forward to choke out her accusations over cooling, forgotten coffees. “It’s like you all have a list of the worst things a person could do, and you just keep checking them off, one after the other.”

Helga glances around, but there’s no escape hatch. Charlotte is watching with interest from the pie counter.

“Of course we don’t do that.” Brian mirrors Helga’s own shock.

Jen laughs and pushes her hair—cut to its usual motherly length—behind her ear. Her hairline is damp, her hand unsteady. “Do you have any idea how it feels to know exactly what you want, to have settled on what you wanted such a long time ago, only to have everyone else in your life constantly looking around for a new way of doing things? What’s wrong with doing things the agreed-upon way?”

“Nothing.” Helga doesn’t make the conscious decision to respond; the word feels dragged from her.

Jen’s eyes are wide and wild, fixed on hers. “Good,” she replies. “Then, because I do not share your views on the inevitability of humiliation, the party will be at our home.”
Jen has always been easily embarrassed, even back in school, when she was still Jenny Z. “Jen” had come later, in high school, when she had discovered that you could read certain books and use them to explain who you have become as a person. But back in seventh grade, the middle school had produced an elaborate musical about the town’s supposed Viking heritage. One of Apple Falls’ fondest mythologies is that it had been visited by Norse explorers long before Columbus, and that these explorers had loved Apple Falls so much they’d marked out its borders with buried silver coin so they could keep returning until they someday came back to stay.

Jen had been cast in a main role, due to her exceptional singing voice and willingness to memorize lines. Helga had been given one line, which was to be shouted from the bow of a ship: “Look! Across the waters! Such bounty I never saw!” The line was exclaimed upon approaching Apple Falls, never mind that a Viking ship was unlikely to have sailed on Lake Otswan. The play had been performed near the courthouse, in a courtyard that boasted a thirty foot tall statue of Big Olof, a red-caped Viking who towered over the townspeople as they paid their speeding tickets and negotiated divorce agreements. Big Olof was flanked by a Viking ship, not to scale but big enough for the cast to board and enact their town story.

Helga had been dressed like all the other generic warriors, but Jen had been a Viking Princess—another absurdity believable at the time—in a moss-green velvet dress and horned helmet. Helga still sometimes hums in the shower to the tune of the Viking Princess’s ode to Apples.

Some people had blamed the curse of Big Olof, but Helga doesn’t believe in that. He was carved to look angry in the same way an eagle looks angry, with ferocity and not
ill will. The parents had blamed the tourism board and the tourism board blamed the school, a wheel of blame that still occasionally spins, even thirty years later.

The ship had begun to wobble just after Helga shouted her line. Her arm had still been raised upward, her spyglass pointed to the sky. It had taken a moment to distinguish between the adrenaline rush she usually experienced upon discovering Apple Falls and the actual movement of the floor beneath her feet, but when it finally collapsed onto its side, Helga lost her footing as they were tumbled and spilled onto the concrete. The screams of the crowd had been more polished than any of the songs her classmates had prepared—perfectly in unison, tuned effortlessly to the key of surprise. Helga had loved that moment, the feeling of being upended and expelled onto the ground, as though the ship had rejected their attempt to reimagine history.

Jen had not loved it. Jen, in her beautiful dress with all the dramatic yards of green fabric, had gotten hopelessly tangled on the mast. After the other parents had plucked their children from the chaos—mostly unhurt, except for Christopher M., whose collarbone was broken—Jen was still struggling to dislodge herself, her skinny legs kicking from underneath the skirts that kept her pinned in place. Helga had gotten there first, not yet understanding that Jen had been crying not because she was hurt, but from being dangled in such an unladylike way, and had assured her over and over that no one could see her underpants, really, no one could see anything. Just before her parents had arrived, Jen had stopped kicking for a moment and met Helga’s eyes. “Do you remember Principal Benson?” she asked. “The prowler?”

“Of course,” Helga had said. It had been the first time they’d mentioned it since they’d stopped being children. Jen’s stage makeup had been smeared: red across the side
of her mouth like she’d been hit, smoky trails that marked the path of her tears. They’d locked eyes as an emergency siren rose in the distance, and what unspooled from that moment had been Helga’s first grown-up exchange. Jen had been tallying the shame in her life, and though Helga had the opportunity, she hadn’t known how to explain that though everything was ruined, Jen had been beautiful in her disheveled princess costume.

Helga doesn’t bring home a pie. She sits at the kitchen table and thinks about making butterscotch pudding, instead. That morning, she had received a notice about a job in Grand Forks, North Dakota. She could be gone by Christmas. For the rest of her life, she could imagine that Tricia ends her pregnancy and that Charlotte’s kittens thrive, even the runts. She could imagine that Charlotte had been her soul mate because the universe insists upon its purposes, and not because of Helga’s inability to do things the agreed-upon way. And, of course, she could imagine that Apple Falls had been discovered by Vikings who sailed from lake to lake, looking for a place to bury their silver.
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