



University of
Massachusetts
Amherst

Quirk's End

Item Type	thesis
Authors	Black, Maria M.
DOI	https://doi.org/10.7275/6955257
Download date	2025-03-25 18:43:01
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/23431

QUIRK'S END

A Thesis Presented

by

MARIA BLACK

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTERS OF FINE ARTS

May 2015

MFA Program for Poets & Writers

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ABSTRACT

QUIRK'S END

MAY 2015

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Longing and avoidance are both in play in the lives of Liv and August, two single people at the cusp of middle age who meet while trying to help Santo, a young illegal immigrant, and his son find a place to live. The two circle about each other and eventually fall in love, but almost as quickly old patterns reassert themselves for both. These challenges must be acknowledged and a new way envisioned before the love Liv and August share can mature into something more durable.

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PART I

No birds. Too early for birds. She won't get back to sleep.

Still, she closes her eyes. Breezes through the open window thread their way about the room, the tannic, mineral smell of spring pushing through every part of her, everywhere, even in her sleep-doused body the excitable nextness of things. Up and down Dorset Street, she thinks, these puffs, these zephyrs, turning new leaves in the dark.

Bract. The word presents itself. *Bract.*

She thinks of the road up the mountain, glazed with night rain. She'll get up and bake the Lemon Polenta Almond for this August Quirk. Lemons for sunshine, lemons for spring, lemons for hope. Lemons a gate you walk through hand in hand. Not her recipe, but one of the most seriously lemony cakes she knows. Anyone with a heart would love it. Anyone with even half a heart would soften with this cake in his mouth

She'll use the seven-inch springform to make it taller than last time, and the slivered almonds browned on top, so pretty—it is a marvelous cake. And she made the caster sugar last night so not to wake Santo and Gado with the noise this morning. Shouldn't she just get up? Shouldn't she just make it now, quietly?

Why can't she sleep?

At four she rises, makes her pot of Jasmine Pearl, sits on the couch, the mug on the potholder on her knee. The door is shut but all is quiet in her room where Santo and Gado sleep. She blows into her cup, staring out the window at the sky, which looks only a little light, like one teaspoon of cream has been stirred in. She sits blowing while her mind ranges around the idea of this August Quirk, runs out ahead of the day like a hound let out of doors. Quirk is an old name here. Will she know his face? He owns land on the mountain, she thinks a lot of land. She'd Google him if it wouldn't intimidate her. It's enough to know he can help.

On the phone last night he'd been polite but distant, not liking to be reminded of the debt he owes, yet she'd pushed for a meeting. Santo had done him a great favor by picking him up on the side of Pelham's Pike the way he had, being late for work himself, and after spending the night in a car with an abscessed tooth and his four-year old. Santo had driven the bloody and freezing man to the emergency room. Santo, who could not afford to do anyone favors.

She sips her tea.

August Quirk owes Santo, she can't forget that. He had promised to return the favor Santo had done him, so while he may be rich, and while he may live, most certainly does live, in some grand house on Buckett Mountain, she's going to hold him to his promise. Anyway, she has to. Santo and Gado can't stay with her, there isn't room, and already three days has been too many. And they can't keep sleeping in Domingo's car. That she won't allow. August Quirk is the only card they have.

"End of the road, can't miss it," he'd said. "Cabin on your left, main house on your right. The number's on the door. But I'm not sure what good it'll do."

She'd thought, cabin? Is it his? Is it unoccupied? Is it in decent shape? More than anything else that one word lets her hope.



She'd been right about the house, only it's grander: stone, maybe even marble, chilled and severe in the morning light. No foundation plantings to mitigate the stern angles, so that it seems to have risen out of the ground on its own like a tree. The view of Buckett Ridge in the morning light is superb, regal, and they stand there on the lawn looking at it, and then, turning, gaze up at the dormers of August Quirk's fine house. She feels slight and flyaway and miserably in mind of Michaux Street where she was raised, a beat-up brick bungalow in the Heights in Houston, its hurricane fencing and scabbed-over yard. Chinchbugs, her poor dad used to say as if it were a problem he might solve someday.

The drunken sprawl of it comes flying back: the ruined furniture, white circles bitten into varnish, cock-eyed lampshades, sour milk, flea blood in the laundry where the dachshunds slept, school meetings missed, rice in the pot with a two-day crust, sink full of dishes—always for her, the eldest, the girl. Her younger brother Stephen's initials carved into the kitchen table, good cherry underneath the paint, and hardly a word said—too much shit flying for anyone to care enough. Not a large family, but a large mess. A large smudge there on Michaux Street.

The cabin across the road *is* lovely: stuccoed, square, small, perfectly proportioned, a hip roof, casement windows. It's more cottage than cabin, nothing rustic about it, and, hurray, no lights on, or cars in the drive, and next to it, directly across from the main house, an old cattle pound with an opening where the gate must have been a hundred years ago or more. Old stones covered in vines.

Potato vines?

Together, Santo holding Gado, she holding the cake, they make their way to the porch.

“We’ll do the best we can,” she says to Santo in Spanish. He’s nervous too, this short, squat young man, only nineteen and so much already on his shoulders. He fingers the silver Virgin of Guadalupe medallion around his neck the way he does, then slips it under his Red Sox T-shirt when he notices her watching. She sees him on his bicycle in town with Gado riding the bar in front, always wants to honk and wave, but afraid they’ll crash if she does, their whole enterprise so precarious.

“Let’s see what he’ll do,” she says. “We don’t know if we don’t ask.”

She smiles to calm them both. She’d taken him on, hadn’t she, and without thinking much about it



She knows him, August Quirk. She knows his face, the feeling of looking up at him, the way he crosses his arms and angles his head, bending down slightly to listen to Santo. The worn look about the blue of his eyes. It had been at her landlady's farm.

He takes the cake with a tiny wince as if it pains him somehow. He has a cast on his leg, a walking cast, he calls it, with a little knob underneath to make getting around easier, no crutches required. He's tall, sandy-haired, a little stoop-shouldered, and he has a strong mouth and an almost weary expression. The longest legs. She thinks of his bones.

She says yes to coffee for Santo and to lengthen the meeting. She offers to help, but when August Quirk waves her off, she and Santo settle on the metal barstools, Gado on his father's lap. The room is large, a third of it kitchen, divided off from the living room behind them by this large island. High ceilings, the walls a creamy plaster, a good landscape over the fireplace above the loud ticking of a mantel clock. Fine old furniture with down cushions that have lost their fluff, bookcases, tall windows along the front. Everything simple, everything generous. Expensive appliances. She doesn't say he has a beautiful home, doesn't remark on the spectacular view. It's what people must say to him all the time.

"You're here by yourself?" she asks instead.

And August Quirk nods.

He wears glasses, has a habit of shoving them up his long nose with the heel of his hands as if his fingers are dirty. Already he's taken them off to clean, fogging them with his breath, wiping them carefully with a corner of his shirt.

She asks about the ankle, of course—it's what has brought them together—and he relates (with Liv translating for Santo) how he'd fallen asleep in a chair he keeps in the meadow—a vague wave toward Pelham's Pike and "I don't always sleep very well"—then

awakened in a lashing rain in the dark, fallen over a low wall trying to get down through the cemetery, the most direct course, he says, and fractured his ankle.

“It was a compound fracture,” he says. “And that’s the gist of it,” though she senses certain elements have been excised.

He’d scooted downhill on his rear, getting even more soaked, then hit the ankle hard on something in the dark, a rock, and fainted from the pain. When he came to some time later, no idea when—no watch, no cell phone—he sheltered under the branches of a fallen tree near the road, knowing he wouldn’t be able to manage the long uphill of Quirk’s End.

At this point, August Quirk looks to Santo to take up the story, and Liv translates again as Santo describes how he’d come around the bend to see a man sitting on a log, yelling, waving wildly, and then the trip to the ER.

August Quirk says he admires her Spanish. Wants to learn someday. He asks how they know each other, and she explains that Santo washes dishes at *Heaven*, the cafe where she bakes. He leans against the kitchen sink, arms crossed, waiting for the coffee to brew, for whatever they have come for to find its way out.

“It’s a lemon cake,” Liv says. “Shall I cut it?”

He hands her a knife, but seems indifferent to the cake.

“I have to say,” she says. “I think I’ve met you before.”

He studies her face, shakes his head.

“At Alma Gregor’s sheep farm? Years ago. I’m sure.”

He knows the farm, does not remember her.

She knows exactly. He and his partner had been called out to look at some trees. It had been a lovely crisp autumn day, her first year in the Berkshires, bees and dust motes floating above the hydrangeas on the side of the barn, one of those moments that feels

locked into a kind of amberoid stillness, never to dissipate, every leaf outlined in gold, the trunks of the trees near the road almost black in the shade, and August Quirk's two Labs—one yellow, one black—trailing behind him as he strode across a field. Beautiful, the dogs, the way he moved so loosely on his long legs across the wide rocky pasture, everything about him strong and easy.

She'd been helping Alma with the shearing, always scratching for money, in the barnyard on a break.

But she'd also met August Quirk briefly at the annual potluck Alma held late in the spring for the farm crew, the shearers, all "her people," as she called them. He'd been there too, had come late, during the cake, she'd brought two cakes, saying his dogs were in the car, he'd have to get them home soon—preparing to leave even as he walked in. She'd been sitting on the couch in the living room. He'd held his cap in large hands, these large hands, she thinks now, looking at them, sap all over his pants, apologizing for having come from work.

She'd watched him. He stood at the threshold of the living room talking to Alma, bent down over her old face, listening carefully, his own face utterly still and turned a little to the side, arms crossed as they are now. Holding himself slightly away with a kind of stern propriety. Listening, staring down at a boot tip, not smiling, allowing her words to pour through him, and when he'd spoken—they were clearly talking business—Alma had not been able to hear and August had leaned a little closer and said his bit again.

It had been thrilling to watch him.

"I'm sorry, I don't remember," he says, and she feels the color go to her face.

"Unmarried," Alma had said to her that faraway night, as they'd washed up the dishes later. "And taller than you too, Liv."

“That alone would do,” she’d said, pleased. “And those eyes.” She’d fanned herself with the sponge. That was when she’d first come. Full of hope, freshly divorced at the time.

“So you don’t work as an arborist anymore?”

August Quirk explains how he’d moved over to clocks, horology, a childhood hobby. She does not say so, but she has trouble visualizing a man so tall hunched over clock parts. There is a little gray in his hair now, a gap in his two front teeth that keeps him from being altogether handsome. Like a woman he strokes an earlobe as they talk. He wears a ring, silver, on his hand, but not the left.

Back at that spring party she’d assumed he needed to work like she did, but now she sees he hadn’t. He is not like her.

Dean, her first husband, had not been like her either.

All this time, August Quirk had been living in this house, wearing fine shirts like the one he wears now, doing only what appealed to him. When trees got tiresome, he moved to clocks, didn’t matter the living in it, she thinks, not without bitterness. She imagines him with books about his bed: a gentleman arborist, early retired. The kind of leisure she would kill for.

And bitterest of all: never at that party would she have dreamed she’d still be living in Alma’s little house all these years later, still baking at *Heaven*. No better off in any way. The thought makes her quiet.

He pours the coffees and she lifts the slices of cake onto napkins. Santo takes his and Gado’s, and, as agreed, they go outside so she and August Quirk can talk.



She explains to August Quirk about Santo and Gado: how they'd been sleeping in a friend's car, how Santo is only nineteen, how Santo's girlfriend, Gado's mother, had left them at the border, a frightened girl who'd gotten cold feet. She tells how Santo had waited for her to come back, going through too much of his small wad of cash, how much the *coyote* had cost, how even after three days she had not returned. It had been raining and they'd had to wait for the river to go down anyway, but then it was time to choose, and Santo had chosen to come, join his two friends, Ana and Domingo, in Massachusetts.

They'd been lucky. People die in the desert. She tells how their small group had come across a woman and her baby, sitting under a tree, decomposing in the heat.

August Quirk shakes his head, puts down the cake before taking a bite.

"They could use the help, if you can think of anything. They've been sleeping at my place. We've been turning over every stone we can. Go ahead, try it," she says, sliding the piece of cake back at him.

He lifts it to his mouth, and the same pained look comes over him. "Oh," he says, "that's good."

Sometimes she puts a plate out in the kitchen with little samples and after five minutes it's empty, staff licking their fingers and pressing down on crumbs, whispering compliments as they squeeze by her in the tight hot kitchen. She loves that, baking in public, feeding people. She thinks all the time how she'd like to have a family, bake with her own little girl, and yet it hasn't come to her the way it does to others.

Because she speaks Spanish and understands the kitchen staff—they whisper in her ear, chat, pull her apron strings, flirt, make requests, their favorites. But it is Celia's café, always Celia's. Liv had expected to have her own place by now—that she doesn't is a thorn

that pricks at her every day. She can't afford it, that's one thing. And there's her mother. But she's frightened of it too.

“How come he doesn't stay with this friend with the car—Domingo?” August Quirk asks.

She explains about Domingo's trouble with his landlord. And then the other apartment on Bellevue that hadn't been good for Gado because of the drinking.

“For his job, he'd need to be in town,” August Quirk observes.

“Well, I think—” she begins. “—I don't know. I have an idea, if you might consider it.”

He pulls away from the counter and begins putting things away: the milk, the sugar, the spoon.

She waits until he's still again.

“Of course it would have to work for you, August,” she says, the first time she has uttered his name. “You would have to agree. But I was thinking, while your ankle heals, if they could stay here—”

“Here?”

“And in exchange Santo could help you out, do the things you can't, like drive to town for groceries, or take the trash to the dump, or... take care of the lawn, get down the basement stairs...”

“I don't use the basement.”

“Well, I mean get places it's hard to get to with your ankle. The laundry, the cleaning. Take you to the doctor. You know. He can do anything. He can cook.”

“I can cook.”

“Okay.”

He excuses himself and moves off to the bathroom. When he comes out again, he says, "Have you mentioned this to him?"

"Yes, he was hoping. If it works for you. He could practice his English and you could practice your Spanish. He's responsible and reliable, the sweetest guy you'll ever know. He's just trying to get a leg up. He used to be a wrestler, back.... Anyway."

August Quirk fastens the plastic top over her cake carrier, and she flees to the front windows, saying, "No, no, that's yours. The cake's for you."

Gado is up on the wall of the cattle pound, Santo holding his hand. And the cabin, the beautiful empty cabin, right there.

"I can't eat all this," August says. "Take it for them." And then, "Let me think about it."

She whirls about. "Really?"

He offers her pad and pencil.

"Thank you," she murmurs and writes down her number. "Thank you so much."

"I'll think about it. That's all. Take the cake."

She opens the cake carrier and cuts him a huge piece, slides it onto a napkin. "You will call, won't you? You won't not call?"

"I'll call." But his smile is formal when she says goodbye.



In the car she and Santo high five, and down the road, they chatter back and forth. That his father is so happy, Gado is happy. August Quirk had not said no! They shoot back down the mountain, driving too fast, a bad habit the way she rushes out ahead of herself, but August Quirk is thinking about it! Once more she punches Santo's shoulder. This is the very best they could have hoped for!

They stop at a burger stand to celebrate. They sit at the picnic table next to the parking lot and, despite the cold, lick ice cream off tiny plastic spoons and laugh as Gado drips the pink strawberry down his front. They tell each other it is not a yes yet, they shouldn't get their hopes up, but then go right back to imagining what the cabin is like inside and how it will feel for Santo and Gado to have such a house, and all their own.

"He seems like a kind man, like a good man," Santo says in Spanish. They always speak Spanish when they're together.

"It's politeness," she says, remembering that last, cold smile. "Bred into him. He can't help it. It's New England. I know that kind of family."

Nothing in seven years has reminded her as much of her ex-husband Dean's family as that one brief hour in August Quirk's house. The outward beauty so seductive. The antiques, the good rugs, family photos, how to truss and roast a hen, rig the little yacht *Heyday*, every verse of Good King Wenselas, and all the rest. The ease and confidence. She had hoped it would rub off.

It hadn't.

Liv had put Dean through business school working in a Boston bakery, doing cakes on the side because they hadn't wanted to ask his father for more money, and then the move into Boston proper after Dean had been hired by a big consulting firm downtown. Money,

beautiful old walkup in Back Bay, dinners out, talk of opening her own place, and Dean with all his know-how to help with the business end. At the wedding they spoke of love.

And then one Christmas he'd given her a book on etiquette.

"Etiquette?" she'd said.

"Oh, just for fun. To know things."

"To know things."

It came out she put too much on her fork. Ate too fast. Gulped her wine. His mother had said something.

A month later, for his birthday, she'd bought him a collection of Marianne Moore poems. "Just for fun," she'd written on the title page. "To know things." And then a few years after that, a missed flight at Logan to come home to a woman from his office sautéing onions in her favorite skillet. Asparagus in a pile on her cutting board. She'd stood there at the door of her kitchen, all the cards of her life slick and slipping through her chest.

Dean. He was about finding her way off Michaux Street. He'd just been the one to happen along, willing to have her.

"August Quirk may not come through," she says now to Santo. "You should keep looking. We don't really know him, we have to remember that."

And Santo's smile fades, and they are back to worry. He promises to redouble his efforts, now that his tooth is better. And he thanks her all over again. But the truth is he has spoken to everyone, put notices up in the clinic, in the Latin market, on the board outside the ESL class at the community college annex. And he has rechecked them to make sure they are still up. He has done all he can.

"I didn't mean it like that, Santo," she says then. "You two are welcome to stay as long as you need to. Really. It's fine."

Which is when her cell phone goes off and something shoots through her chest as it used to do in school when Tommy Spiotta looked at her in the hall.

But it's not August Quirk.

□□□

“It’s my mother,” she says and steps away, paces along the side of Pelham’s Pike, cars whizzing by, all the sweet ice cream gone.

“You’ve got to get me out of here!” her mother screams, and Liv once more explains: she’d fallen, broken her tailbone, spent a week in the hospital and is now in rehab in the nursing home in town. “You’ve been there almost three months, Mom. It’s been a long time, but it won’t be forever. You’ll be out soon.”

“I know that!”

“Well then you know that,” Liv says, but her mother doesn’t always know that. She knows less and less.

“Just get me out!”

“We’ve been through this. You have to be discharged.”

“How can you do this to me?” her mother wails. “How can you dump me here and walk away?”

“I didn’t walk away, Mom. I’m here.”

But her mother is screaming, and there are tears in Liv’s eyes as she paces in the dust along Pelham’s Pike.

“Olivia, *plllleeeeeeeeassssssse!!!!*”

What can she do? What can she ever do? She explains to her mother—again!—that the team meeting is coming up, everyone will be in the room, the only subject the date of her discharge. “For an hour,” Liv says. “Isn’t that good? A whole hour we’ll talk just about you.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really, and I’ll make sure they understand. I will. Practice with the walker. Do your exercises. I’ll be there in a little bit, I promise. I’ll bring you books.”

Ransack pops into her head. *Ransack*, she thinks. Run through? Sacked?

“Oh, Olivia,” her mother whispers. “Thank you, thank you. You’re the only one.”



It's muddy, but after work Liv climbs the Pillow, the hill behind her house on Dorset. Two minutes and she's in the woods. A crow caws, a branch drips, an engine on Main Street rattles, a dog barks, she can hear town beneath her—this quiet, which is why she comes: air through her lungs, space between trees. It's all oddly to do with shelter, with haven of one kind or other: Santo and Gado in her bedroom, her mother soon to be discharged without a roof or place to land, and then of course herself—thirty-six, no kitchen of her own, no babies, no man.

And yet, hurray, last night she slept.

Twice she jumps, mistaking striped roots for snakes.

At the fork in the path, she takes the steeper trail to the tumbled boulders balding in the sun on top. The moss is bright green and wet. She climbs the narrow treads of the fire tower, looks down on the grid of town, onto her rented roof.

She looks out across the tops of the trees, thinks of cake.

An August Cake would be... almonds first. Almond flour, then something woody and smoky and melancholy—chipotle, or a dark bitter chocolate. A true August Cake might have a little whiskey. Semolina. But then pistachios come to mind and she thinks that might be more like him, like August Quirk, not that she knows him really. Or the earthiness of kukicha. Or toasted hazelnuts. Why would he give up trees for clocks, and how old is he? Early forties, she guesses. Mid-forties maybe.

An August Cake would need something bitter in it, but not quite chocolate. Espresso? Yes. He seems kind but distant, and certainly not sweet. Only a little sweetened his cake should be, with lots of structure, inner pinnings, he is not the sort to collapse. Dependable in an emergency. But no frosting. Dense with a sauce maybe, and warm. Warm

from the oven. But there's a silence, a sadness runs through him, he keeps himself hidden. Some kind of surprising ribbon of hidden flavor running beneath it all.

He does not call on Tuesday.

Wednesday and Thursday come and go and still no call.

She is past the point of hope, is up at three on Friday, cannot sleep for worry, and then, home from work, he calls. He asks, in that same formal tone, if they might come up the next morning, Saturday. She calls Misha, dear Misha, her relief baker, who always says yes to her.

Liv tells Santo the good news. They high five, dance around her kitchen.

Not sauce but cream, she decides, thinking of his voice on the phone. Maybe it is her own jubilation, but cream comes to her very strongly. A tiny touch of whipped or just a little ball of vanilla ice cream next to a plain unassuming cake not nearly as dense as pound but more like an apple cake. A dark little humble crumbly cake that delivers.

On Saturday morning before they head up, she calls to ask if he needs anything. There's a short pause on the line, and then he says no, he's fine.

"It's okay," she says. "I'm happy to. I know you can't drive."

"All right then, thanks," he says and lets go his list: milk, two percent, canned stuffed grape leaves, almond butter, feta, spinach. "Thanks. I still owe you for the coffee. I'll have to give you a check."

Salt, she says out loud.

She dresses carefully, a blue dress, a flowered sweater she loves from the Goodwill, her tight jeans, her Virginia boots with the covered buttons, makeup. Near the mailboxes she sets a small wildflower into the top of her braid.

On the way up, she feels how her expectations have already gotten the better of her.

The excitement she feels has only something to do with a roof for Santo and Gado. It's a warm humid morning, the kind she loved back home, Gulf Coast glove slipped on but without the petrochemical stink.

He wouldn't have them come if it weren't good news.

She opens the window and lets wind fill the car like a sail, chats loudly with Gado, tells herself to settle down, but instead gives herself more line, is happy, can't help it.



She likes the way his shirt tucks in, the way his hair curls a little around his ears, his strong brown neck and broad shoulders. He wears a soft blue shirt with large breast pockets, sleeves rolled, his wide, flat, strong wrists, the silver ring.

No glasses today. Those eyes.

In the living room, he sits in an armchair, Santo across in the other, Gado squirming on his lap. She's on the couch, three down cushions, one heavily soiled.

"Let him wander," August Quirk says to Santo. "It's okay."

"Cuidado," Santo murmurs, and sets Gado down.

The same distance, the same reserve, but a little warmer now. A little more relaxed.

"Do you still have dogs?" she asks. "It looks like a dog sleeps here."

"Sally," he says with a smile. "She died a few months ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

A book about trees on the end table, the bleached skull of a small animal, a violet nub of candle in a saucer. A mechanical pencil on top of a notebook. "You had two I remember."

He pauses, his eyes look into hers. "I did. Sally was the blonde. Jack the chocolate. Jack died a year ago December."

"I think of you with them. They were beautiful dogs."

He blinks slowly, looks away.

Gado watches his father, hasn't yet touched anything, though he is headed toward a bird carving on the front windowsill. "Manos a ti mismo," Santo says. Hands to yourself.

"It's all right," says August Quirk. "He can't hurt anything."

Santo laughs ruefully when Liv translates.

The room is neat, but it has a neglected, abandoned air, except for what seems washed up around August Quirk’s armchair—a mug on the floor, a book turned over, a phone charger. Up on the mantel, the clock ticks, a tight, brassy sound. It’s either loud or she doesn’t hear it at all.

A few drawings on the walls too far away to see.

“It’s so quiet up here.”

He smiles as if he’s accustomed to the comment, seems to be thinking of something else. He rises then, quickly, as if he’s decided something and stands before the cold hearth, hands behind his back.

“The cabin’s used for storage now,” he says and motions toward the front windows. “It would benefit from being occupied. I didn’t realize how hard a time I’d have. I can’t even make a fire.”

She claps her hands. “That’s wonderful!”

Santo sits up straight, puts down his cup, looks from one to the other, and August Quirk goes on.

“He’d have to clear it out, and I can’t help with that. The stuff could go into the barn, on pallets, and I have the pallets. It needs a thorough cleaning, but it’s furnished. It’s got everything they need, I think. Sheets even. They’d be comfortable, and I don’t think I need that much help, really. But having someone around for some things, for driving, you know, would be great. Carrying in logs. Making this fire.”

“Yes!”

Already Santo’s up and pumping August Quirk’s hand, head cranked back to gaze up into those blue Norteamericano eyes, Spanish and English mixed together.

“I only wish we could understand each other,” August Quirk says to Liv.

“It will come,” she says. “I can teach you.”

Santo scoops up Gado, whispers in his ear. Gado turns, a finger in his mouth, stares in wonder at the tall gringo.

On the way across the lawn August Quirk speaks directly to Santo, not giving Liv time to translate, but she translates anyway, murmuring to Santo under August Quirk’s voice. He’d rented it a few times, he says, but it hadn’t worked out the last time, and repairing the damage had cost a lot. He’d decided not to make the mistake again, and yet it’s such a waste, it needs someone living in it, taking care of it.

“You’ll need to treat it well. It was built by my grandfather for his retirement.”

Liv translating, Santo nodding and nodding. Dazed.

The cabin *is* beautiful: large and square, bed and bath on one side, kitchen and sitting room on the other, open. Mortared blocks of stone anchor the corners, a concrete floor pale blue, is worn to yellow, and past yellow to aquamarine in trafficked spots. Fireplace in the bedroom, ceiling ribbed with beams, three narrow casement windows looking south to Buckett Ridge.

They go through, cranking open windows. Liv pauses at an old framed photo on the wall. It’s in the little hall that leads to the bathroom, the only thing hanging in the whole place. In the photo, a couple sits on a white wrought iron bench in the front yard of the Quirk home with a boy and girl at their knees.

“Is this you?” she asks, pointing to the boy.

“Yes.”

“You have a sister.”

She looks at him.

“Had.” He says it quietly so Gado will not hear.

“Oh.” Liv glances at Gado. “I’m sorry.”

“Can I see?” says Gado, and Liv lifts him up.

“Her name?” Liv asks.

“Grace.”

“How old?”

“Four.”

“What—”

“I’m four!” Gado blurts and wriggles down.

But already August Quirk has turned to explain about the thermostat, the firewood, the garbage, the plaster walls that cannot be nailed into under any circumstances. Santo nods and nods as August Quirk explains and Liv translates, and Gado runs around between the boxes. Soft breezes lift the smell of soot, old cardboard, books, dead bugs.

“He says you will not be sorry,” Liv whispers to August Quirk. “He promises.”

“I’m sure I won’t.”

Outside under the arbor off the bedroom, they sit at the small table and iron out the details. August Quirk says it will be an even trade, Santo’s service for rent. Santo will have use of the truck to get groceries, to get Gado to school and back, to take himself to work and take August wherever he needs to go.

“Until I can drive again,” August Quirk says. “And some yard work, what I can’t do, and help with things as needed. How’s that for now?”

Santo utters thanks upon thanks, which August Quirk waves away, and Gado—small voice, small hand tugging gently on his father’s shirt—whispers into Santo’s ear as Santo whispers back pushes the boy away.

“You’re the only one to drive the truck,” August Quirk says, looking Santo in the eye.
“I want to make that clear. And the speed limit. No speeding.”

“Yes, yes. Only me. No speed,” Santo says in English.

“You’re doing me a favor, cleaning up this place,” August Quirk says at last, clapping the young man on the back.

Gado wants to be lifted on top of the wall of the cattle pound, and so they are left alone, Liv and August Quirk.

They watch Gado balancing on the wall, one hand in his father’s.

“Will you like having a kid around?” she asks at last when it seems August Quirk will not speak to her.

“Isn’t it always good to have a kid around?”

“Is it?”

“Do you have kids?”

“No.”

They watch Gado pick his way between the vines, all the way down one long side of the wall.

“What you’ve done for them,” she says, nodding toward Santo and Gado, “I hope you understand how important it is. You’ve saved them.”

“He’s helping me out too.”

“I don’t want to presume, you’ve been so kind, but it will help me to know how long they’ll be able to stay.”

“Let’s see how things go,” he says, and she turns to look at him, but his eyes are still on father and son.

Out on the wall, Gado shakes off his father’s hand, and August Quirk laughs.

Something in her relaxes then, and she thinks, what the hell. “I don’t have kids either,” she hears herself say. “I’m actually divorced, if you want to know.”

Gado prepares to jump from the wall into Santo’s arms, but won’t. They talk and talk, but Gado won’t jump, and then Santo grabs him and sets him roughly on the ground.

And August Quirk nods, his eyes still on the boy who now runs toward them.

□□□

“Oh my God, you picked up,” Liv says when her brother answers. “I don’t believe it.”

“Sorry,” Stephen says.

“I called you three days ago, Stephen. I don’t know if you remember, but I’m trying to take care of our mother here.”

“I know, I’m sorry. I’m slammed. I emailed you the call-in number for Thursday. The guy’s name is Brian something. Nice, you’ll like him. He’ll take you through the numbers.”

“You’ll be on the phone, though, right?”

She inspects her cuticles, the clouds, the yellow notes stuck to the computer screen.

“Okay,” he says finally. “I guess I could do that.”

“You weren’t even planning on being on the phone?”

“It’s a terrible week, Liv.”

“It’s always a terrible week.” He sounds like he did in high school. Making excuses. Dodging blows. “You’re a complete shit.”

“Okay, fine, I’m a shit.”

“I’m looking at apartments and interviewing caregivers, and I don’t know what she can afford, and I can’t wait until Thursday. I need an unofficial bottom line before Thursday because I’m talking to this outfit on Wednesday. The caregiver alone is going to be over five thousand, and then—”

“A month? Over five thousand a month?”

“Stephen, we might maybe be able to find a two-bedroom for twelve hundred. Not including utilities. And then there’s food and gas and everything else.”

Liv is sitting in the tiny closet that serves as the café's office. It's the third time today she's tried to get her brother on the phone. The gilt and pink-edged clouds of early evening bumble, frozen, at the top of the high window. She waits, but they do not move at all.

"What, are you saying she doesn't have it?"

"I'd rather you hear it from... this Brian whatever-his-name-is."

"Hear what? I thought you said she was okay, that the stock market has treated her well."

"Well, it has, but I don't know if it's treated her that well. I'm actually not that clear on it, Liv, but I'll be on the phone with you on Thursday, I promise. I'll move things around."

"Stephen."

There had been a time. In the kitchen over the cereal boxes on school mornings. Packing up his bologna and mustard sandwiches, picking him up from Little League (too spindly to ever play football) making sure he brushed his teeth, wore his mouth guard, did his homework, had clean underwear, picked up his room. The loan for his first car, the old baby blue Ford Fairlane everyone could hear coming blocks away. She took care of him as long as she could before he spun away from her and into nights she couldn't control.

The night she'd found him burning up with fever, toilet seat thrown up, his little hands around the bowl. His first time ever to vomit. She'd held the fine dark hair away from his face, kept the washcloth warm and clean, made a pallet on the bathroom floor for the both of them to sleep. He was such a wisp and a whip then, all arms and legs, and the plumbing from close up smelling of wet metal, the bare bulb (the fixture had broken). She'd rubbed his back until he finally drifted off.

Not until therapy years later had it seemed strange to her that she hadn't woken her parents. It hadn't occurred to her to wake them. She was the one. She'd gone off to college,

turned her back and disappeared during the worst years—never called, hardly visited, so glad to be gone. When she finally had come back—forced to, after the breakup with Dulcie—he was in rehab. Found his way, without her.

Still, the thing she never says is, I'm doing this alone and I shouldn't be, she's your mother too. She gets mad, she calls him a shit, but she never says it, can't stay mad. Not at Stephen.

“I appreciate all you're doing, Livvie, I do,” he says like a kid trained to say thank you.



The day Liv helps Santo clear and clean out the cabin, August Quirk shows them the pallets stacked in the back of the barn. They stand chatting. He is polite. They talk of nothing. Her brain is a mess of soft yarn, not one original or interesting thing can she think to say, yells at herself all the way home. There had been holes in the worn tee shirt. The skin of his shoulder showing.

A few weeks later, she's wheeling her mother out of the hair salon and he drives by in his gray Toyota truck. On the passenger side, of course, elbow out the window, talking to the driver, maybe Santo, probably Santo, and he turns at just the moment and looks at her, looks quite by mistake right into her eyes. Doesn't say hello or even wave. But maybe there hadn't been time.

At work, or at home in the evening, or with her mother, or in the garden, or falling asleep at night, his face comes to her, lifts itself from the tired day whole and fresh in her mind. There he's been all these years. Only a few miles up the mountain.

Their biggest problem, Santo says, is language. They can't understand each other. They must use a translation application, which is cumbersome. August Quirk won't ask him to do enough, Santo says. He doesn't want charity. Santo wants to prove to August Quirk that he is better off with than without them. The better to avoid eviction when the cast comes off and August Quirk can drive again.

"Do you like his friends? His girlfriend, do you like her?" Liv has asked, but August Quirk doesn't have a girlfriend, Santo says. He's never been married.

"Never?"

And Santo smiles. Shakes his head.



Liv backs into a pothole and can't get out.

On the way to the café's pre-season staff party at Misha's, thinking about a lunch date she's supposed to have in a few weeks with a friend of her cousin, a pharmacist named Flynn. Thinking about the phone call with this Flynn. Thinking you can't tell anything from a voice.

Now she's out of range on a muddy unmarked road somewhere on the outskirts of Devon. She tries to power her way out, digs in deeper, spraying mud everywhere. Out of the car, around the car, back in the car, spinning tires, digging in deeper. Out of the car again, around the car, back in, cursing and digging in deeper. Wet mud drying on dry mud to a dull patty-cake gray and digging in and digging in. What is there to do but sit with her forehead against the wheel, wait for rescue?

No one comes. Long afternoon shadows merge into twilight.

She starts walking. She walks and walks, finally sticks out her thumb and is offered a ride by a woman in with dyed red hair, an inch of gray at the roots who wears a long green velvet dress with a fringed vest like it's 1969 and she's headed to Woodstock. A plastic crate at her feet contains five wine bottles, open, corked, a few plastic wine glasses and a sackful of minis.

"Where you headed?" the woman says and lifts a plastic wineglass from the beverage holder and sips. The toddler in back plays on a baby cell phone.

"Just right in town is fine."

"The lousy luck," the woman says.

At home, Liv calls Misha, apologizes. Says she'll just stay home.

“Can I speak with Santo?” Santo can use August Quirk’s truck to push her Bug out of the pothole.

“I’m on my way!” Misha says and hangs up.

But it’s Celia who shows. In jeans and a gray hoodie. On the way, they drive to Liv’s car. Celia wants to see. There it is, just where she’d left it: a spring green VW Bug covered in mud. A joke of a car, really, especially next to Celia’s silver Volvo.

“We can do this,” Celia says.

“What?”

“We can do this. You just need something to push off of.”

Celia wades through the scrub and high grasses on the side of the road and begins hauling out branches. Liv tries to help. She tiptoes through the mud in her best boots and good pants, pulls at branches gingerly.

She’s getting everything filthy, so she takes off her boots and socks. Then, because the hem of her nice pants is in the mud, she takes them off. Her underwear is black, like a swimsuit really, and no one’s going to come down this road anyway. Then, since it’s unseasonably warm, since she’s gone this far, since she’s making Celia laugh, which she’s never done before, she thinks, fuck it, and takes off her blouse too.

They make a pile of branches, Celia laughing and taking pictures of Liv in her muddy underwear.

They wedge the branches under the wheel, Celia giving them swift kicks. On top of these, going the other way, the next size, then the next, the other way again. “So pretty,” Liv says. A big mud cake with latticework.

When it’s time, Liv gets into the car, starts the engine, takes a deep breath. She is afraid of making a mistake now, of ruining everything.

“Rock it back and forth!” Celia yells. “Then accelerate!” She claps her hands hard.

“Okay, now! Do it!”

Liv shifts into drive, accelerates gently. The wheels spin. “Shit!” she cries. “I can’t!”

“Rock it!” Celia yells. “Back and forth!”

Forward, reverse, forward, and... out! She’s out!

The hooting, the clapping, the profuse thanks.

The apologies.

“Oh, my God,” says Celia. “Would you stop?”

Liv follows Celia to the party wrapped in a blanket from Celia’s car, and it should be fun, hadn’t she been having fun? Stripping down to her underwear and hauling muddy branches? Laughing. Driving like this, dressed in a blanket?

She had made Celia laugh!

But in the dark of her car on the way to the party, she’s miserable. Something in her feels mugged and beaten. She tears at the skin on her thumb, bites at the hangnail until it’s bloodied. She hadn’t slept last night, had been up at three baking tarte toute blanche, a version she’d created as a girl, which is what she does. And now this.

She’s got a box of baking chocolate wrappers beneath her bed in a shoebox. She’s been collecting them over a decade. From chocolatiers all over the world, her secret hoard, her bank account. There’s one in there from the lone chocolatier in Lincoln, Nebraska, his pet beagle on the wrapper. A great chocolate too, which she uses in her Beagle Cake.

But it’s ridiculous. Sometimes. Her life.

Celia with her café, her clean Volvo, her beautiful little Mira, her handsome husband Aiden. With all the things Liv wants and doesn’t have because why? Because of her bloody

thumbs and secret hoards and midnight cakes, because of her screwy mother! And Celia three years younger.

They arrive, the two queens of mud, the two queens of back road know-how. And tall, pale Misha, Misha, already a little sloshy with drink, takes Liv's hand at the door, leads her to his bedroom where he roots out clean flannels, a T-shirt.

"But I've got my clothes, Misha," she says, showing him. "I just need to wash off."

"Mine are softer," he says, "more comfortable. Here." He takes her clothes and stuffs her into the bathroom with his, closes the door.

He finds a place for her on the couch as if she's a feverish child or a visiting dignitary. She laughs at him, he does not know how filthy she feels, no fresh clothes for that, but he's already made her better. She throws puzzled looks back at people who pass, puzzled, by them, it's funny, it's sweet, Misha acting this way. And Santo here in August Quirk's truck, and what she wants, more than anything, is to talk to Santo about August—anything would do.

Gado runs through with Celia's little girl Mira and someone's dog, a Schnoodle. Celia, Liv can see through the window, is dancing with nice-looking Aiden on the patio. Maybe it's the fact that Liv's in flannels, but her heart is able to creep its way around a corner into a little weak light.

She takes Misha's hand. "Thank you," she says and means it.

He surprises her by kissing her fingers. "I should have been the one to help!" he cries solemnly, with his accent.

"You are helping," she says. "You don't know the mood I was in."

He brings her a plate of food, a glass of wine, concerned that he has selected things she will like and settles in next to her on the futon couch. He is flirting but not so much that

she wants to resist. She picks at the food with fingers—and he does too—they share the plate and she can feel something loosening in her. She had never spent much time with Misha. They are counterparts, he is her relief baker, they work on different days, and anyway, he is so watery, so Baltic, so mere! But something, maybe her need or his attentiveness, has made him larger, gallant. She thinks of an old children’s book of her mother’s, the drawing of the tall slouchy Russian prince.

“Now,” he says, touching her knee. “Tell me all about this pothole.”

“Misha,” she laughs. “I like you like this. You should entertain more often.”

“I should.”

He sighs heavily, straight out of Chekhov, and puts his head on her shoulder. “I should drink more, I’m too shy. Tell me about your pothole.”

It’s the oddest, nicest peace that’s come over her. For this brief time there is nothing more she wants. She knows everyone, loves everyone, feels beautiful. She tells him the whole story, the lady with the velvet green dress, Celia, stripping down to her underwear, and ends with the breaking, the stacking, the latticework of sticks, the moment of her foot on the gas.

“So or die,” she says, eyes wide.

“You are very free,” he say.

She laughs. “God, I’m so not, Misha. However, your clothes are very soft.”

He reaches, touches the sleeve. “Keep them.” He looks as if he wants to say more, but then doesn’t.

“What?”

He shakes his head. “Can’t.”

She recites a little poem: “Dust of Snow,” by Robert Frost. “The way a crow/ shook down on me/ the dust of snow/ from a hemlock tree/ has given my heart/ a change of mood/ and saved some part/ of a day I’d rued. Only you’re the crow,” she says.

Misha sits up. “I have to say something. I don’t know if I should. Should I?”

For a moment they look into each other’s eyes.

She shakes her head.

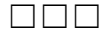
“I don’t know, Misha,” she says doubtfully.

His face falls, he turns away, and then Celia is there asking about the pilot light on his grill, and he is up and Liv is alone again.

She wanders out to the patio and sits in front of flickering votives with Bettina and Marvin who work the front counter, and when they leave she talks with D’America and Santo. They seem to have something going. How nice, she thinks, and begins to feel the sadness rev up again like a wheezy old lawnmower.

But she kills it. She makes herself smile and makes herself happy for them. Misha does not come back, but the feeling of happiness does not leave, it doesn’t leave. She sits curled in the patio chair, watching the party pass through its stages like the documentary of a great life—and then she’s in the kitchen helping to clean up, side by side with him again. She promises to bring his clothes to work. He nods, smiles. “Wonderful,” he says and gives her a squeeze, but it’s over, the little thing they had, whatever it was.

That night in a dream, she is on the road somewhere, late, lost, and she has to walk through muck, through muddy woods, and the ground begins to move under her feet, she is treading on the back of something, something huge that lives just under the surface of the ground. This large thing is rising, hugely rising, when she wakes.



“Stephen. Jesus, do you know what time it is?”

“Ten-ish.”

“It’s ten-ish in Santa Barbara. It’s one-ish here. What’s that noise?”

“I’m eating peanuts.”

“Do you have to chew them in my ear? Where’s Janet?”

“Asleep.”

“That’s nice. And you’re finishing off the night with a bag of peanuts and a call to good old sis who never minds being woken up in the middle of the night. Since she’s got nothing else going on.”

“Tormenting you is my one joy.”

“Glad to be of service. Further service.”

She hears something slam shut, like a drawer, flatware rattling.

“How’s are things?”

She lies there in the dark, cell phone pressed to her ear, listening to him chewing and smacking. She hadn’t been asleep. It’s another bad night, looking through the dictionary, counting cars. So far it’s about a quarter car a minute.

“Seriously, Stephen, quit or I’ll hang up.”

Something on his end falls to the floor. She can’t help laughing. “Forget Janet. You’re going to wake up *my* neighborhood.”

“I’m just trying to get something to eat.”

“So,” she asks. “How are things... Well...”

“Talk to me. Say something funny. How’s your love life?”

“That’s mean, Stephen. Seriously. I’m going to hang up.”

“No, no, sorry, hang on.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. Are you all done with Match?”

“You actually sound like you’ve had a few.”

“I just thought we could try to talk.”

“Yes, I’m finished with Match. I had a date two weeks ago with a guy named Fischer. Newly divorced, friend of a friend. I have another long-awaited date coming up with a pharmacist named Flynn, I have more hopes for that.”

August Quirk does not qualify. August Quirk is all in her head.

“How are his table manners? Fischer’s?”

“His table manners? Fine. Better than yours.”

“That’s good. What’s he do?”

“He’s a small-town lawyer with civic ambitions. He ran for selectman and lost last time.”

“Sorry about that.”

“Really, we’re better off without him. He’s a penny-pincher, personal freedom, Rand Paul type.” She pauses a moment. “He has a paunch already. It’s too depressing for words.”

“And how about this... pharmacist?”

“I don’t know. I’ll call you after.”

Moonlight pouring around the closed blinds. The call from him has made her feel better. Strange. She misses him.

“Stephen?”

“Mmmhmm?”

“What, did you pass out?”

“I just shut my eyes a second.”

“You’re not drinking are you?”

“I’m not drinking,” Stephen says but his voice sounds odd to her.

“You sound a little like you have been.”

“So what did *you* do tonight?”

“What do you think did? It’s a Saturday night May. I washed my hair, tweezed my eyebrows, scrubbed out the dinner pot, and watched a terrible movie on Netflix. Now I’m trying to sleep.”

“Life is good,” Stephen says. “Okay then.”

“Okay then. Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

“My drinking problem,” Stephen says, “was in my youth.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“Don’t get all excited. Yes. I like to get you riled up.”

“Well, don’t. I can’t worry about anything else at present. I’m all filled up. You can’t drink, you know that, you’re an addict and an alcoholic.”

“An addict and an alcoholic. Yes. I’m looking at the big red A embroidered on my shirt right now.”

“Are you going to meetings?”

“Liv.”

“Are you in touch with your sponsor Jerry F?”

Silence.

“Stephen, oh my God, call him.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“So you’re not drinking, correct?”

“No, ma’am!”

“Stephen.”

“Correct. Yes. I mean, no. I said no. *No*. I’m fine.”



Liv is in the garden, trowel in hand, cardboard box at her knees. Weeding, thinking about her neighbors, which is what she always does in spring after a long winter of acting like she hasn't any.

Celia Brown, her boss, owner of the café, had driven by one day, early on, seen her walking home from work. "Hey Liv," Celia had said, leaning across her front seat to call out the window. "You don't live around here, do you?"

"Yeah, right there." Pointing.

"Oh, my God, we're on the same street! I'm at number twenty-four."

Liv took it in slowly, a few beats late. "Really? Which one?" Brightly, to hide her disappointment. "Not the pink house."

"Yes!"

It would be the pink one. She had loved the pink house, and after that she couldn't love it anymore, not in the plain, unencumbered way she had before. Number 24 is across the street and two houses down. A sweet, gabled house with a deep shaded porch. Generous in trim, perfectly proportioned, six shuttered windows in front, pink clapboards, two shades of a lovely fern green on the trim, sashes and shutters. Sounds horrible, but it's lovely, a picture book pink and generous, optimistic, a house for children, daring in its way. If she had a house, would it send out such optimistic, cake-like vibes? Or would she end up with a realistic, somber, grayly ironic, second-guessing kind of a house?

The cardboard box is for the weeds. For a reduction in rent, Liv keeps the yard for Alma. She had once worked on a landscaping crew and knows about scratching in the Plant-tone, laying on the inch of compost, how to cut an edge and turn it, is more interested in a neat garden than a neat anything else—car, counters, drawers. She doesn't have the right

tools, though, and can't afford to buy them. It's useless asking her landlord. Alma's in her eighties now. All she wants is the rent, and on time.

Liv sends the trowel down deep next to another bitch of a dandelion root and pictures the crisp, blackened toes of the Witch of the West under the toppled farmhouse. She'd come out to western Massachusetts after her divorce to simplify, to start fresh. Her own life, finally. She'd landed her job at Heaven, met Alma, rented the house on Dorset. That second spring, she'd driven out to the Culinary Institute of America and spoken to a woman in the admissions office who said Liv would be a perfect candidate for the pastry program. She talked to a financial aid person. Yes, she'd get loans. The bank officer she'd met with a few days later reviewed her case and spoke very promisingly of a bank loan to open her own café in a few years.

And then her mother had moved up and almost right away began forgetting huge slabs of her days.

So never mind that Celia has the pink house and everything else. That Celia is perfect is not her fault. It's not the dandelion's fault that its root is long as a subway tunnel. The trick is to push the trowel down right next to it and challenge! Though she doesn't have the right tool, all she has is this cheap trowel that isn't long enough, that keeps bending. Will that little broken off tip grow into another dandelion?

Yes it will.

And will it be as tenacious as its mother?

You bet.

Not at all like this other nameless thing with the pretty silver leaves, this luckless, winsome thing that slips out of the soil every time without a fight.



August Quirk, she thinks, and throws the trowel in the cardboard box and goes inside. She showers, makes up her eyes, steps into the tight skirt (the one that swirls), buttons up the blouse with darts, the one with embroidered flowers on the gathered breast pockets, and pulls on her boots, her Virginias. She'd bought them in Burlington—faux Victorian boots with large suede buttons and long squared-off toes like crocodile snouts. Named for Virginia Woolf: the boots she'd almost ruined the day of the pothole.

She drives fast up the mountain.

She might have borrowed a shovel from a neighbor. She knows that. She's throwing herself at him. But never mind. Spring is passing. Everything is growing tougher, more durable. See how the fuzzy apple green has darkened? It'll be summer soon, but spring is now: the season of nothing ventured, nothing gained.

She parks out on the road. Santo's got everything looking great. The lawn raked, the side garden weeded and edged. Two new trees have been planted on either side of August Quirk's front door. *Amelanchier Canadensis*, Canadian serviceberry, the tag says. Shadblow. A diminutive. White when it blooms in spring. She backs up to the road and tries to imagine the two new trees, full grown.

Beautiful.

She catches her breath. August Quirk. He's sitting in the shade of the front porch, smoking. When she approaches, he puts his cigarette out in a tuna can.

"You can finish," she says. "I didn't know you smoked."

"I'm done," he says. "Hello."

"Hello to you." She turns, points. "I was wondering. What are those old stones in the ground for? Up near the road?"

“There used to be a fence around the yard in the old days. That was where the gate was.”

She nods, looks about the yard, to calm herself. “Things look good. I like the trees.”

“Santo’s idea. He said the house looked cold.”

“He didn’t.” She looks him in the face.

“He did. Severo.”

“I’m interrupting you, I’m sure. You’re working. I came on a whim. I should have called.”

“It’s fine.” He gets up, holds the door. “Come in.”

The kitchen is spotless. If it had been this clean before, she hadn’t noticed. One sponge at the sink is lined up precisely with a thin white square of soap, nothing on the windowsill, nothing on the refrigerator, the magnets huddled in a corner as if to keep warm. No dish anywhere, no drainer on the counter. A blank pad next to the phone like in a hotel. Where’s the mail? she wonders. Where’s all the junk?

Severo. It’s just the word.

“Tea?” he says, his hand poised above the kettle.

She nods. “It’s my day off. I thought I’d check in, see how things are going.”

“You work with Santo,” he says and shakes dry bits out of the teapot. “You two must talk.”

“We do. But I mean from your point of view.”

“Everything is fine.”

She turns, walks out to the front windows. “You can always call me, you know, if you have....” she shrugs, turns back to the windows.

“Concerns?” he finishes.

She laughs, her heart up in her throat. “Right.”

He’s leaning against the counter now, heel of his hands on the edge, elbows jutting. Waiting for the water to boil. He has a way of staring at a thing—at her, for instance—of not moving off it, as if lost in thought or thinking of other things.

“So what does Santo say?” August Quirk asks. “Is it working out for him?”

“Oh, my God, yes, are you kidding? This is heaven for them. You have no idea. I don’t know where they would have ended up.”

“Well, that’s good.”

“Santo’s got a few worries. Obviously he wants to stay. He knows you’re going to get your cast off soon, and he doesn’t want to get the boot once you’re all better. So there’s that.” She pauses, smiles, but August Quirk does not reassure her.

“What else?”

“He wants you to give him more work. He feels like he’s getting a free ride a little bit. He’s proud. He wants to earn his own way.”

To this August Quirk laughs, but says nothing.

“He knows something about trees, as it turns out,” August Quirk says. “He’s the one who picked out the shadblows.”

“Where they’re from in Mexico, the local cartel has been coming in and clear-cutting come their forests. They drive out truckloads, and the people can’t do anything. If anyone tries to stop it, they’re threatened or killed. They kill anyway. The forests have been decimated. The men and boys try to patrol the woods, but it’s dangerous. Santo used to that. It’s how his father died. People have lost their livelihoods. Woodworkers, lumberjacks, the mushrooms the women used to bring to market.”

August Quirk is fixing the tea, listening.

“Most of what I’ve heard has come from his friends,” Liv goes on. “Domingo and Ana are from Moclín as well. Santo worries about his family. It’s not safe for them.

“He sends home almost all the money he makes, and now, because of you, he can send more, so that’s another reason he wants to stay. He has two younger brothers and a mother. Anyway, I didn’t mean to get into all that.”

“I can’t remember how you like it, your tea.”

“Black. I have a favor to ask. Which is why I didn’t just call.”

Already he’s emptying the wet tea leaves into the compost bin.

“You’re tidy,” she says. “A quality I lack.”

He hands her the tea.

“I wondered if I could borrow a shovel.”

“You came for a shovel?”

“I did. Yes.”

To go out the back, they have to walk through his clock shop, which has the same pin-neat threadbare feel as the living room: paint peeling from the ceiling, a crack running like a scar across one wall, the good Persian rug balding in his beaten track. A dining table draped in sheets is shoved up against another fireplace and coming from all directions the clicking and snapping of clocks. Next to the drill press on his workbench an ornate gold one stands like an encrusted shell, guts laid out in a half-moon on paper towels. Other clocks sit disemboweled on the dining table, each on its own rectangle of white felt, parts laid out, large to small, in perfect semicircles.

“So many tiny parts,” Liv says. “I’d sneeze or something and lose the one irreplaceable screw.” As she passes, she touches the curved wooden top of one.

“That’s a tambour.”

“Beautiful.”

“From the eighteen-fifties,” he says. “Belongs to a guy in Baxter Falls named Creighton Bulger. Passed down in his family all the way.”

“You’re in that kind of business, aren’t you? Old houses, old clocks, things passed down.”

He holds the door for her again—old-fashioned manners—and across mossed stones to the barn where he heaves the door aside and in the dusty murk lifts one of four shovels from its black painted outline on the wall. The boxes and cartons she and Santo had stacked are still at the far end, and there are the table parts she’d noticed then. Tacked to the walls: old posters from the 1970s—Three Dog Night, Grand Funk Railroad, Dave Mason.

“Those were my cousin’s posters, not mine,” he says quickly, and she laughs.

On the wall above his workbench: old license plates, photographs of his dogs, a framed photograph of the house. With the fence, and the gate. 1908 it says in white in the corner.

“I like the house with a fence,” she says.

The barn smells of dust and machine oil and something else. Fur, she wants to say. Scat. As soon as she joins him, he’ll pull the door closed and she’ll have to go. Does he want her to go? He has such manners, it’s hard to tell.

A child’s painting of the barn floating on grass. A photograph of a young woman. Dark hair too, but prettier than she, and younger. Prettier by far.

“My first job was helping a man with his clocks,” August Quirk says, his mind still back in his clock shop, or maybe answering a question she had asked. Maybe it’s taken him this long. “Fifty cents an hour.”

“Really?” she says, still gazing at the girl in the black leather jacket.

“He lived in the cabin after my grandfather died. Arent Knorr. On my first day, he gave me an apron. We took an antique English wall clock apart.”

She turns, listening.

“We took it right down, laid everything out very carefully, exposing the movement with all its wheels and arbors, the strike train on the left, the time train on the right, the weights on their one-hundred-and-fifty-year old strings. The works were rusted and filthy, but we cleaned them piece by piece in a vat of ammonia, polished the plates and the wheels on the buffer, oiled it all with a vial of clock oil that he bought by the ounce from England. He taught me everything I know. He used a box of colletts his father had left to him. You don’t know what I’m talking about.”

She laughs. “No idea.”

She walks toward him in the gloom, shovel in one hand, cup of tea in the other.

“He left them to me. The colletts. He didn’t have children.”

“So he died, your friend.”

“No, he’s still alive. He’s in Maine. I meant when he retired.” He shakes his head, puts his hands in his pockets. “Not sure why I’m talking about all that.”

The bright yard, the dark interior of the barn, and they stand at the threshold now, together. Her chin on the grip of the shovel, dust floating in the light, his eyes, which look gray now, resting on hers.

“And colletts are *what* exactly?” she asks.

“A kind of holding device, like a chuck.”

“And a chuck would be...?” She smiles. She likes him. So much.

“I’ll show you sometime.”

“Okay,” she says, and to keep him from leaving, says, “I used to do bark rubbings in college.”

“Bark rubbings.”

“You’ve heard of rubbing gravestones. It’s the same thing. Only on bark. I made them every which way. I used them for collages. I tacked the paper to the tree. I did it with a friend. I like clocks. But I’m partial to trees.”

“So you were you an art major?”

“For one brief shining moment.”

She looks back at the tabletops leaning against the barn wall, the table legs and bun feet. “I like your barn. It feels very well kept. Like your house. Or is it kempt? Well-kempt?”

He smiles. A breeze kicks up. The yard in mayhem, leaves clapping, somersaulting, light-tossed.

His face, the way he talks, his way of being, even of standing in his clothes, his calm, which calms her, all of it, and he’s taller than she is, and he likes kids, he said so, and he’s obviously intelligent, and handsome and he likes to cook and read, and he’s not married and not gay, she doesn’t think he is.

She waits as he heaves the barn door closed, and when he turns, she says, “I used to teach middle school Spanish in Texas. I could teach you, if you want, August. I could. It might make things easier with Santo.”

He regards her. On his face, an understanding of what she’s offering, what’s being proposed.

They walk toward the front yard.

“But I have to warn you,” she adds, “I’m tough. I like results. I like students who try.”

He looks at her a moment. She smiles her encouragement, her biggest smile.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” August Quirk says. But it’s all he says.



A student art show Liv had walked through, accidentally, searching for a shortcut to class all those years ago. And how she'd lingered, moving from red pine to sugar maple to mountain ash, to white pine and black birch, how her excitement had built, and why? She had never been interested in trees, and the rubbings themselves were not beautiful. They were even dull: monochromatic, repetitive. But huge, they were gigantic, like trees themselves, not so wide but tall, and the longer she stared at them, the more she sensed that something essential had been captured, might be trying to communicate through the chalky patterns, which at first looked uniform but then began seeming with their subtle variations like a kind of code.

The card on the wall said the rubbings had been done in the Northern Hardwood Forest, a transitional zone between the boreal forests of the North and the true deciduous forests of the Appalachian. She had never heard of the Berkshires. She liked the word *boreal*.

The artist was a senior. Dulcia Blears.

Liv searched her out. Three knocks on a dorm door and there she was: six feet one inch and legally deaf. They sat and talked about the rubbings, what went into it, why Dulcie did it. This giant blonde girl holding forth in her garble while Liv sat sunk in a turquoise beanbag chair, nodding, trying to understand her, hands clasped around her knees to hide their tremble.

The first week of classes, Dulcie took Liv out to Bastrop State Park to do rubbings of her own. Loblollies, Mexican buckeye, lacey oak, possumhaw holly. Liv had been this quiet, serious, dutiful girl who made A's for lack of anything better to do, who cranked that GPA up like an umbrella in a shit storm. Come fresh from her dark little ratted world of Never Enough. Never enough money, never enough food, never enough kindness, never

enough praise, never enough love, raised by her sad never enough parents in a never enough house where who cared that she had never enough to do on weekends. Chores and homework, homework and chores.

And then along comes this weird deaf girl Dulcie Blears.

Who knew everyone, hugged everyone, raucous as a crow, a laugher, laughed all the time. And unafraid, that was the thing about Dulcie. She tried everything, didn't matter. She wrote plays, acted in plays, took hundreds of photographs, exhibited them, made art, wrote amazing poems, got them published, was a Studio Art major but wanted to double, triple, quadruple major in architecture, English, politics, gender studies. Loved machines, had once worked in her grandfather's garage and could fix your car if it wasn't too complicated.

Dulcie who seemed to have never tasted the female cake of smallness, had missed out on that essential lesson. Who never thought less of an idea because it was hers so that with her Liv felt for the first time the possibility of not feeling small and insignificant herself, of altering the Michaux Street decree. She changed her major to Studio Art, registered for a drawing and a mixed media class, began a passionate encounter with college, collage, and her own possibilities.

Dulcie said trees spoke through their bark. She believed it anyway. Her parents thought she loony, wanted to pack her off to Gallaudet. "Fuck Gallaudet," Dulcie said so often her friends began to use it as a general epithet.

"I thought I was fine, but I'm short two credits."

"Fuck Galludet."

"How was your Thanksgiving?"

"Boiled Brussel sprouts and tomato aspic."

"Ugh. Fuck Galludet."

And then one late afternoon at Bastrop State Park, as she and Dulcie were lying at the foot of a pine, their rubbings sprayed and dried and rolled up beside them, the ladder still up on the other side of the tree, she can't remember now what they'd been talking about, or even if they'd been talking. Dulcie, who was always full of such quick, energetic movements, turned and kissed her. A kiss not to be mistaken. And what Liv recalls is how that kiss had felt as inevitable, as *unn*-strange as the long shadows of the trees that fell everywhere around them. A fork in the road, and she'd chosen the Dulcie way, and kissed her friend back, and that choice had made her feel brave and clear-eyed and so new. She was inside a wave that had unearthed her footings and was taking out in one long sweep the girl she'd been. She'd fallen in love with Dulcie, and with herself. Not strange at all, and the strangest thing in the world.

Listening to trees, she used to think, had made it possible. Divining the mysteries. Something in their time signature.

She cut her hair, asked her parents for a good camera for Christmas, which she didn't expect but got, and with it recorded every inch of Dulcie's body—from the dark oases of her nipples to her inoperable ears. From Dulcie, Liv moved into the woods where she photographed the branching of tree trunks, the shock of bud taken by frost, the drive of root around boulder, paths ending in brush, tiny twigworks, birds in flight, animals of all kinds, blurred images that she blew up in the art department's dark room, cut up and incorporated into her increasingly successful pieces. One professor named Martin thought her very talented and particularly encouraged her.

One day her father showed up at her dorm bearing a letter from the Dean's Office regarding her change of major. "We never see you anymore," he said. Was shocked by her appearance. "You look like someone else's child." She did: thin, urchin-like, her hair cut at

odd angles and bleached at the tips. The tattoo on her shoulder. They had never been that sort of people.

“This? This is nothing,” she said of her little tattoo. They were having coffee at the Student Union. “You should see my friends.”

He seemed genuinely concerned. He had driven out to see her.

“I’m fine, Dad. Really.” It was almost funny.

He asked her about drugs, but she laughed him off. And anyway, her grades were good, she was alert and healthy.

“But what is it?” he said, peering into her eyes.

“I’m happy.”

“You’ve met a boy,” he said, relieved. And out of delicacy did not probe.

He encouraged her to prepare for employable fields—art conservation maybe, or graphic design. With his dry skin and his old green sweater he talked of such things as if he knew something. He’d missed a patch shaving that looked like a barrier island on his neck. It prickled her with a sadness so violent she had to put her head down on the table.

The crumbs on his shirtfront.

Why had he come? They barely knew each other.

“Dad,” she said and touched his arm. “I’m fine.”

He hadn’t asked to see her artwork. Hadn’t seemed to even think of it.

“How’s Stephen?” she asked. Stephen she knew. Stephen she cared about.

“Stephen?” He screwed up his mouth. “Oh well.” And went for a refill.

And then Dulcie graduated and went off to Copenhagen for a summer program at the Danish Design School. There was a telephone typewriter for emergencies. But then Dulcie’s emails began to hedge, became slight, intermittent. She decided to stay through

September. Travel. And then it came, the letter, snail mail, three pages filled, front and back, saying, “met someone,” time needed for “sorting things out,” her “tree phase” had ended, she was into “larger statements.”

At night Liv sat on a sofa in the dorm lobby with a lamp on, writing in her journal and drinking vodka gimlets from a green plastic Mountain Dew bottle. She ignored her classes. A professor finally called the Dean of Students office. Emergency meetings ensued. Her parents arrived for a meeting in Dean Rupert’s office. She could tell by their faces how bad off she was. She didn’t care. It made her especially happy to scare her mother. To see them struggle to zip themselves into the too tight clothes of proper parents. To cause such waves, to draw so unexpectedly outside the lines, to finally and so spectacularly collapse, it was delicious. It really was. She made no effort to reassure anyone. Hardly spoke.

She was retroactively withdrawn, returned home, went into therapy, was prescribed Prozac, spent a lot of time in her room sleeping, listening to music, and watching old videos of Julia Child’s old cooking show *The French Chef*. She made up recipes, tried them out. She rediscovered her bike in the garage, pumped up the tires, rode.

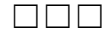
She visited Stephen in rehab on West Shepherd. She’d gone to one of his open Nar-Anon meetings. They’d sat on the porch of the place with coffees. There was a bus stop across the street, and they’d watched a woman dressed all in pink try to get on with her English bulldog.

Stephen took her hand. “Whatever shit you’re telling yourself about yourself, it’s not true,” he said. Tables turned, the first time she’d ever needed his help, and he’d been able to give it, say the right thing. He never could have before Walt, his lacrosse coach, had taken him in, before rehab, before all those Twelve Step meetings.

“You seem good,” she said.

“One day at a time,” he said. Easy Does It. Live and Let Live. Take What You Like and Leave the Rest. He spoke in slogans. She liked him anyway. She hadn’t known if she would. He said he would get into college and kill it. Hopefully in California. She should come too. But they ended up scattering like a clay pigeon shot square. Different directions, and both as far away as they could get.

By the time Liv returned to school the following semester, Dulcie was back. Liv grew out her hair, covered her tattoo, and changed her major back to American Studies so she wouldn’t run into Dulcie in the Art building. Then she went out and got her first bakery job.



“You walking home?” Misha says, coming up behind Liv on Main Street.

“Misha, hi.” Good, gentle Misha with his new faux Mo, his faded T-shirt and mailbag.

“You’re wearing glasses,” she says.

“I scratched a cornea.”

“That’ll do it.”

He takes the glasses off. “They’re terrible aren’t they?”

“Oh, no. No, no. I like you in glasses.”

He falls into step next to her.

“Where are you headed?” Liv asks.

“Wherever you’re headed,” he says, and she laughs at him, she can’t help it. They walk up Main toward the intersection where she cuts up the hill to Dorset. Had he planned this? Had he lain in wait for her?

“We could go for a longer walk,” he says, and cuts his eyes at her, smiling, mischievous, like a kid. She’s remembering him on the futon at the party. He had been so nice and funny drunk.

“Okay,” she says, and puts her hand in her pocket so he won’t try to hold it, not that he would, he is much too shy. Anyway, she’s tired. It’s a quarter of four, and she’s been on her feet since six in the morning, with only two breaks. And she’s hot. She’s hot and dirty and tired. Exhausted.

“I thought you worked at Damon’s on Fridays, Misha,” she says. Damon’s is the restaurant at the fancy health resort a town over. At Damon’s Misha makes healthy desserts.

Low-sugar, gluten-free, low-fat, all kinds of thing to be eaten without guilt. The best of both worlds, but he's barred from making any of it for Heaven.

"I worked a short shift today."

There's a girl in front of them in a pink hoodie, sparkles on her butt pocket flaps. She's pushing a baby stroller with one hand, holding fast to a cell phone with the other. "Tripes are tripes," she says. "They have to be emptied. They have to be scraped and washed." She's walking so slowly, and right down the center of the sidewalk so that Liv and Misha have to squeeze around her. She's got a rough face, plus roseola. "The fat trimmed off and boiled and bleached," she says.

"God, what on earth was that?" Liv says, laughing, once they're out of earshot. "Tripes?" But Misha hadn't heard.

On a stoop three china cups sitting in a row, a fluorescent orange horror mask in a tree, a ginkgo leaf on the sidewalk, and not a ginkgo tree in sight. It's wet, almost black, and here it is the pink of spring.

"You know, Misha, to tell the truth, I don't feel much like walking. I mean any more than I have to."

He nods. "Me too. But I bet you haven't eaten."

It's true, she hasn't eaten since before lunch, and it was only half a muffin.

"We could get a bowl of soup or something, I guess. As long as it's not tripe. Whatever tripe is. Sounds horrible, doesn't it?"

"Tripe is stomachs," Misha says. "My father used to buy it in cans."

"Wretch. Stomachs? Really?"

"Any kind. Cow, pig, you name it."

They end up at Kinney's, a bar—food menu short, the beer list long. They settle on the high stools at the near end only to find the bar's not serving food until five.

She likes Misha. He's sweet. He's a good sweet boy.

“So let's have a drink?” Misha says. “Have a drink, Liv. Olivia. It's Friday.”

“No need to twist my arm,” she says and orders a glass of merlot. He orders a beer. She sets her bag on the bar. She wants to put her head on it, shut her eyes. She's imagining the pleasures of the bath. She'll take one once she's home. Get in bed. She wants sleep desperately, and more than anything, solitude.

“So,” she says. “Here we are.”

Behind the rows of bottles, a mirror frosted like a beer mug in the freezer. In the back of the cafe, in the hall with the restrooms, a man is on the one wildly obsolete pay phone, speaking loudly, enunciating every syllable as if conversing with someone deaf, or stupid. “Oh,” the man says, “that's what you feel like doing now but what's keeping you, huh? There's something keeping you. And anyway they're her ferrets.”

Tripe and ferrets, she thinks. In the same hour.

“So what's up, Misha?” she says when her wine comes. She centers it on the cardboard coaster.

He seems taken aback. “Nothing.”

“Oh, I thought maybe you had some news. I thought you were going to announce something.”

“No. It's just... We never see each other. I thought it would be—”

“Nice. It is nice. I like your Viking notes.”

Since the staff party, Misha's been leaving notes for her inside the Viking mixer. ‘Ordered more almond flour.’ ‘New bucket of base in the walk-in.’ ‘Need more raspberries,

didn't have time to order.' Things she knows already or other people would have told her.

Addressed to L, signed by M.

She points to the frosted mirror. They look like ghosts of themselves. "Look, we're spirits. Ha, ha."

They talk for a while, all the usual stuff: where they're from, how many siblings they have, how they got into baking, where they went to college. Some of it's refresher. The long strap of the mailbag is still slung across his narrow chest, and he wears low rise basketball sneakers, blue, with rubber toes and stars on the sides, slim cut jeans. His faux Mo is growing out.

"This isn't a date, is it, Misha?" She smiles at him, and he colors.

"No." He looks away. "I wish they were serving," he says and scowls.

"Sorry, I'm just teasing. I'm too old for you anyway."

"You're not too old for me."

He says this with such force she finds herself considering it for a moment. Liv and Misha. She's almost thirty-seven, and he's what? Twenty-seven? Twenty-eight?

He tells a story about the chef at Damon's who lost his wedding rings in a huge vat of marinara. He tells it well. Makes her laugh.

"We should move to a table," he says. Shall we relocate?" He points to the table in the bay window at the front.

"Nah." The table seems too permanent. The barkeep passes them a basket of pretzels, which they munch noisily, trying to out-noise each other, and out the window, across the street, a black dump truck reads RUBBISH REMOVAL * INTERIOR DEMOLITIONS * BASEMENT CLEANUP * CEMENT WORK* BRICK BLOCK

WORK. A guy is standing inside the truck, shoveling something—rubbish, she supposes—into a barrel. “I’ve never seen that truck in my life.”

Misha swivels about on his stool, and together they stare.

We must look like a couple of idiots, she thinks. “What is brick block work, I wonder? Do you know?” She is dead tired.

“No idea.”

“Well, you knew what tripe was, is. Tripes. Tripe.” It doesn’t sound like a body part. It sounds like fish.

Shadblow.

She thinks of August, his strong arm up along the back of the bench, the tuna can. His hands. “Drinking in bars still makes me want to smoke. I can’t do that. I can’t start again.”

Blowfish. Blowsy. Bluefish. Blueing.

Misha fingers the edges of his cell phone, which sits on the bar. His fingers move lightly upon it. She thinks of an undersea creature scuttling or making a kind of absent underwater love. Lifting it, letting it drop. Tap tap, tap.

“You’re not a smoker, Liv,” he says. “Are you?”

“Used to be. I used to smoke in the mornings. I was one of those.”

A large prosperous-looking man in good suit slacks and a starched shirt walks in like he owns the place and walks through the bar and disappears down the back hall. Maybe he’s just come in to use the bathrooms. He could come in and do anything he wants, Liv thinks. No one would so much as blink.

Authority, she thinks. I don’t have that.

All at once, the sun slides behind a cloud and it's as if they have all been plunged into a pit.

"I should go," Liv says. "I'm beat. I really am."

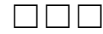
"They'll be serving"—Misha checks his phone and laughs—"in exactly forty-five minutes. Are you sure?"

"No, Misha. Really. But thanks."

She tries to pay, but he won't let her. Outside he says, "Can I walk you home?"

She looks hard into his face. "Sure." Slides her hands back into her pockets.

He had been waiting, she's sure of it.



At six on a Tuesday morning, Liv flips on the light and checks the case. Alberta, who does the soups, arrives, cranks her morning music, and Liv makes her trips out to the walk-ins for the frozen croissants and scones, the base batter and frozen blueberries, the Morning Glory batter Misha made up yesterday—Monday, her day off. She unties the rope of plastic wrap from around the top of the plastic batter bucket.

“Hey Alberta,” Liv says, “check this out.”

Alberta—big-boned, spiked gray hair, every morning dancing to Tina Turner. Right now, it’s *I Can’t Stand the Rain*. She shimmies over to Liv’s little station is behind the baking rack and across from the ovens, hands overhead, hips aswank. She peers into Misha’s bucket.

“The color’s off,” Liv says. “And look how dry.”

“What do you think happened?”

“I don’t know. He forgot something.”

The Morning Glories especially have to be spot on because they’re the café’s only gluten-free baked good. The gluten-free people come in especially for them.

“Bake up a few, see how they taste,” Alberta, and right away Liv regrets asking. She wants to make up a new bucket. But Celia would agree with Alberta. Celia’s the first to toss inferior product, but she hates throwing away anything that’s good enough.

Every day Liv bakes muffins and every day she bakes croissants and every day she bakes scones and every day she bakes biscuits, and every Friday she bakes challah for the Jewish ladies who come in before Shabbat. She makes up the special orders, and the cakes (the cappuccino cake, the apple cake, the almond and lemon delicious) and the cookies, though Misha likes to do the cookies.

The thin veil that forms itself around her as she works—fascia, binding—private but also communal, held in place by heat, by noise, the hum of machinery and timers, chatter and laughter and music. These people she loves, her friends. Like in the art studio in college, this is it: intense work done alone, in the company of others.

She sets the croissants and scones aside to reach room temperature while she pulls down her big mixing bowl and the muffin tins, counts the muffin batter out with her big yellow-handled ice cream scoop that hangs on the wall rack with her other scoops, her Viking attachments, her whips and strainers and mitts and graters, her zesters and juicers and tape and rubber spatulas and pastry brushes and pastry bags and pastry cutters and cutting boards, and her one precious biscuit cutter. Her keys.

Ten big ice cream scoops of batter and then a lavish pour of blueberries equals twelve, then stir and scoop once again onto the squares of parchment and lift and drop each into the tins. Sprinkle of sugar on top and set it aside so the berries will thaw.

Now the Morning Glories.

Most of her baking must be done by 7:30 so the oven will be available for everyone else, though she never makes it, especially on Thursday, challah day, and anyway the ovens are not right, haven't been right, the top one too hot and the bottom one not hot enough, she must adjust cooking times and temperature to compensate. She's been more successful with the top. Some magic fix-it man who knows DOYON ovens is supposed to come, but he hasn't yet.

Eight minutes in, halfway through the bake time for the croissants, and Liv must turn the tins. She sets the timer for another eight minutes and slides in a tin of blueberry muffins and another of the Morning Glories (ten of hers and two of Misha's, after all) into the top oven, and begins on the pear nutmeg muffins, measuring out ten scoops of base,

chopping up a pear, throwing it in, grating nutmeg over the top, washing the scoop, and beginning again with the parchment squares. She pulls the corn dries down from the shelf above her where sits the plastic bins of brown sugar, caster sugar, powdered sugar, baking soda, examination gloves, radio, cinnamon, dill weed, toasted coconut, the Book of Tarts, The Bread Baker's Apprentice, The Pie and Pastry Bible, *Heaven Bakery Recipes*, a box of cardboard rounds, the Dole & Bailey Bourbon Pure Vanilla Extract.

Someone's left the scale dirty.

Last week she found her biscuit cutter in the office.

Six ounces of butter on the scale, softened in the microwave, six ounces of buttermilk, one tablespoon of vanilla, mix, add to 19.95 ounces of corn dries. Last Tuesday Misha left a cartoon drawing of her in the Viking mixer, a good one: two braids sticking out the sides of her head like Pippi Longstocking, finger in her mouth, eyes rolled up, deciding if the batter she's tasting is up to snuff.

She'd shown it to Alberta who'd whistled, said, "God, does that boy ever have a crush on you."

"Nah," Liv answered, but he does and she knows it and she's bothered by it and also flattered. August Quirk has not called, about Spanish lessons or anything. Anyway, it's just a buoying flirtation between workmates, and why not? He's sweet. He's nicer than the guys she goes out with. And he keeps her in batter, in dries, takes a shift whenever she needs him to.

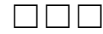
Dries for the corn muffin batter, dries for the muffin base batter, dries for the biscuits, and each day a new muffin: Tuesday pear nutmeg, Wednesday pineapple upside down, Thursday apple pie crumble, Friday cherry raspberry, and always corn, every day.

People drift in. Bettina, Elias, D'America, Santo, the high school kids who serve. The cafe opens. The timer goes off again, someone shouts "Top!" and she takes out the blueberries and Morning Glories. She breaks open one of Misha's.

"No apples," she says to no one in particular, and Alberta comes over, pinches off a hunk and tries it.

"That boy's mind is not on his work. Let Bettina taste it."

Liv shakes her head, holds a finger to her lips. "I'm going to dump the batter, make up new. Misha would want me to."



One down is *sere*.

Sere. She checks it on her phone. 1. *Dry*. 2. *Successive changes in flora and fauna*.

She is outside at the break table by the walk-ins. Thinking she could bum a cigarette from Elias, smoke half and put it right out.

She sits motionless, aware of how close she is, how bad it would be.

“There you are,” Celia says, coming around the side of the building in her tall green Muck boots, Mira on a hip, sunhat on a string against her back. She looks great, always looks great, her abundant, wiry, hay-colored hair hauled up in a flyaway knot. That easy, slurry voice.

“Hi,” says Liv, heart clenched as it always is around perfect Celia.

“You don’t smoke, don’t you, Celia?”

Celia sits, points at Mira, mouths, “Not around her.”

At least that, Liv thinks. A small vicious thought, she knows, but that’s envy, the greenish corner of her soul, nibbled away.

“I quit seven years ago, almost eight now, but I’ve been sitting here thinking about it, I don’t know why.” She sticks out her tongue and widens her eyes to make Mira smile, but she doesn’t. “Wanting one,” she sings. “Kind of *desperately*.”

“Don’t,” says Celia, leaning forward, with surprising passion. “Whatever you do. Don’t.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Mira sits on the throne of her mother’s lap, gnawing on a buttered roll— greasy-lipped, splay-legged, a sliver of delicious belly chub showing from under her little doll blouse,

and Liv can't help it, she has to reach across to squeeze that little chub. Mira, sultan, smiles lazily. All the world ahead of her, Liv thinks. Fat with time.

"I mean it, Liv. Do whatever you have to, but get past it. It could mean years."

"Yeah, quitting was the only good thing that came of my marriage."

"There, you see? Wow, I didn't know you were married."

Liv waves toward the east. "Another life. What are you doing here on your day off?"

"Out for a walk," Celia says. "Wearing her out before her nap. She loves your rolls."

What everyone says to Celia, *Oh my God, Celia, how do you do it!?* Exactly what Liv is thinking, but she's sick of thinking it.

Money. That's what makes Celia possible.

"Were you looking for me?"

"Sort of," says Celia. "Are you okay? You look whipped."

"I haven't been sleeping well. Looking for places for my Mom. She's in the nursing home. Rehabbing from a broken hip." She makes curlicues in the air, sighs. "Dementia."

"Aren't you a little young for all that?"

Liv laughs. "Yes. Thanks for noticing. Yes, I am."

"Do you have any help?"

She pauses. Mentions her brother in Santa Barbara. "But no."

Celia sets her chin on top of Mira's head and closes her eyes. When she opens them, she catches Liv studying her face.

"Sorry," Liv says and looks away, embarrassed.

"Have you ever thought of moving her out to California?"

Liv smiles. "You don't know my brother."

"Well, it's warmer.

Liv picks up the pen and doodles on the edge of the newspaper. “He works for a start-up that apparently is just taking off. So he’s super busy.”

“Just an idea,” says Celia.

Liv scrawls *idea* on the edge of the Eagle. Adds an *l. Ideal*. She has a dictionary on the nightstand. Just the other day she found *dehisce*, meaning to burst open, as the pod of a plant, as the appendix of a person, and *acedia*, meaning sloth or listlessness. *Very* had come just the other day. She’d been at the free clinic, where she volunteers, writing her usual weekly memo about the rate of no-shows that week -- *very high* -- and it had transformed into a little glinting oddity on the computer screen, an entirely foreign thing. She’d stared at it, written it out, turned it over and over. *Very*. It didn’t seem spelled correctly.

Verry? Vary? Veary?

“We’ve just been through this with my grandmother,” Celia says. “Wherever you get her settled, that’s where she’s likely to be until the end. It makes sense to at least choose.”

Liv writes *choose*, draws a careful box around it, makes circles at each corner, then triangles coming off the circles, lines coming off the triangles.

“Sorry. It’s none of my business. It’s just that you look... tired.”

“I work a lot.”

“I know. I appreciate all the work you do.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know.”

“He’d never visit.”

Celia nods. “Okay.”

“She’d just rot in this strange sunny place.”

Old folks. Squares and squares around it. Daggers. Curlicues coming out of every corner. *Folks.* She hasn't been given the proper tools for living. She tries to seem as if she has. But she hasn't.

Celia's up by the Frye bootstraps, does what she has to do, believes in herself. But me, Liv thinks, I'm more like those paper-soled Chinese slipper things they sell off tables in New York.

"Thanks anyway."

"You okay?"

She wipes away a tear. "Yeah. I don't know what's up with me."

She feels like one of August's broken clocks: a broken curiosity on a square of felt. Unticking. Her odd doodles and cold eggs for supper. Hemmed, hawed, flat-out cash-strapped. Maybe it's the right thing to do, the Celia thing to do, sending her mother out to California, maybe it would even be the right thing for Stephen, but probably not.

And she *is* afraid.

Afraid of what? What are you afraid of?

Folks, she thinks and adds more curlicues. *Yolks. Yokes. Yokels. Freckles. Yikes.*

"We should get together sometime," Celia says. "We practically live across the street from each other."

"God," Liv says. "You have time for socializing?"

"If you have me over, I do," Celia says in a put-on Southern drawl. "If you do all the cooking and cleaning, why, it's a time-saver." Tam sayvah.

Liv laughs. "Oh, shoot, ma'am."

"I'll bring the wine. And the baby."

"Great."

But it's impossible to imagine Celia, and certainly Aidan, squeezed up to her little dinette.

She sits on her hands. She would only smoke half and put it right out.

Either that or just call him and be done with it. Though that alone would take every ounce of bravery she has, never mind sending her mother to California.

"I've got something in the oven, Celia," Liv says, and at just that moment Alberta leans out the back door and yells, "Lower oven, Livvie!"

See? she wants to say. See, I do.

"I'm sorry if I upset you," Celia says. "It's none of my business. It's just that we've just been through it all with my grandmother."

"I need all the advice I can get."

"Just don't smoke about it."

□□□

Hi.

She puts the phone down without hitting send. And it goes dark, but the little “hi” is there, radiating its heat into Liv’s comforter, waiting for her finger. As are the bills. Pay me! pay me! Waving their little hands in the air. But as usual she must pick and choose the lucky ones. She pays the overdue car insurance bill, and the overdue electric, late charges, she is always late, but right before she pays the whopper, the credit card bill, she picks up the phone again, checks the movie schedule, edits her text.

Hey August

Sets the phone down again, shakes her head, picks it up, presses send.

In almost exactly four minutes, August Quirk writes back.

Hello.

She writes.

I was wondering... Want to go to a movie Saturday night?

She sets the phone down, winces, does not hit send. Then edits the text.

Would you like to see Raajneeti this Saturday?

She screams, hits send, throws the phone into the armchair and goes outside, imagines August Quirk staring at her text. Deciding. What she would give to watch him now through a window. Or not.

Or not!

Sorry, I can't, but thanks.

No problem she writes back.

The next morning, late for the cafe, she pushes down the plunger of the French press too fast and the hot water shoots up and burns off a patch of skin above her wrist. A

third degree burn. And later, driving home from the grocery store, she is pulled over for speeding. She shouldn't have been shopping at Packard's, anyway—it's not for people like her. She spends too much on food.

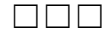
The officer wears reflective sunglasses, and doesn't take them off even though it is almost six—an insult—unfeeling: what's wrong with the world boiled down to one five-minute interaction. She wants to explain to him about the shitty, *shitty* week she is having, about how she is an example of the new middle-class poor the Democrats don't talk about, about August Quirk's five-word text, about her mother losing her mind much too early and the third-degree burn on her arm, but she just hands over her registration and license, looks up at her own bulbed reflection in the glossed phantasmagoria of colors in the man's glasses while trying not to cry. She hates the idea of weeping for police officers.

She gets the ticket. Probably because she is wearing her purple lace cami over a ripped pink undershirt that shows off her tattoo. Sixty in a forty-five. So add a \$150 speeding ticket to \$79.81, and what do you get? She finally makes a left away from the officer onto Dorset.

\$219.81.

\$229.81.

She can't even add right.



Later that evening, lifting her shirt overhead, ready to step into a hot shower when her cell goes off. It's Trista, the night nurse. Her mother has fallen trying to walk "home." Could be a concussion. "You'll need to meet them at the emergency room."

So shirt back on, shoes back on, keys, bag, book, rainy drive to the ER imagining Xs in her mother's eyes, spirals and crosshatches and exclamation points floating about her head on the nursing home floor. When she arrives: a black eye on the left side and a plummy knot on her mother's forehead.

"Oh, Olivia, I'm so sorry to bother you like this." Her mother's floaty fingers.

"It's okay, Mom. I know."

There's the monitor with its red and green lines racing, ever leaving, ever arriving, the trashcan with its billowy liner; the plastic walls and rubberized baseboards, the intercom, voices of medical staff, staccato of various machines. Liv runs water in the sink to check the pressure, opens the cabinets, reads the pamphlets, inspects the stacked blankets, the folds and seams in the green curtain with its netted top, the sealed wipes.

Almost two hours expire behind the green curtain before the doctor finally comes—a small, athletic, puppy-eyed man. Her mother pats her hair, pulls it. "I must look a wreck," she says as if the doctor's arrived for dinner. And then somehow the two are talking about Congress and the continuing resolution.

When the doctor asks for facts, Liv steps from the wall and offers them cleanly, like forceps.

Then there is the CT scan, the hour and a half waiting for results, and by the time Liv is back at the nursing home to meet the ambulance, it is almost midnight. A nurse wheels Liv's mother to Room 106 and gives her the night pill. Restoril. Another nurse will

be down in a minute to change her into her nightie. Liv has one hand on the doorknob. She's almost gone.

"Olivia?" her mother asks sweetly, "could you ask Stephen to do me a favor, please?"

"Sure."

"Ask him to run me down to the corner store."

"Stephen's in California, Mom. We're in Massachusetts."

That lost look. "Oh, yes."

"I'll see you tomorrow."

Then, very, *very* sweetly: "Tell him I'll just run in."

Liv walks back, sits on the end of the bed. "Stephen is in California. He can't take you anywhere. And even if he could, they don't allow liquor in here."

"Oh yes." Like it slipped her mind.

"We've been at the hospital for the last four hours. It's midnight. I need to get home."

"I know that, Olivia." Her mother reaches toward the dresser, her manicured fingers wagging. "Hand me that."

The hand mirror.

"Oh," her mother says to her face. "Oh." The fingers drift up to the bandage.

"You tried to walk, and you fell and hit your head," Liv begins again. She reminds her mother about the broken hip, about rehab. How the big meeting's been rescheduled, but it's coming, it's coming. Rebuilding the wall stone by stone even though it will fall again.

Her mother waves the words away, shoves the mirror jabs the mirror into the space between them. "Well then you do it," her mother snaps. "I'm out of goddamned Scotch."

"You're not out of Scotch. They don't allow liquor here."

"Then put it in your goddamned purse," she snarls, "and carry it in."

“I’m not going to do that.”

And the rage sweeps across her mother’s face like rain across a desert.

“Now, goddammit, you listen to me,” Clara hisses, jabbing a quaking finger into the blanket the way she used to when Liv was a girl. “When I say go to the liquor store, I mean go to the goddamned liquor store!” Furious. Her eyes two bright needles. When she tries to pull herself up on the pillows, she can’t, and this enrages her more. Her fingers grasp and pinch at the blanket.

“Look at the time.”

“It’s *my* life!” her mother screams. The lost finger jabs. “*Mine!*”

“It is your life, I know.”

“So quit trying to run it for me!” her mother shrieks, and her face goes wild and crazy, the hair thin and white and flat against the white, scalp as pale as a pike, eyes carmine, possessed truly. “I will not have this!”

She could be screaming hexes over a cauldron in the middle of a dark wood, Liv thinks.

“I will not have you telling me how to live my life!” Shrieking.

“Mom, please. Come on.”

“*Get me my goddamned Scotch!*”

A middle-aged man in an orderly’s uniform stops at the open door. “We copacetic here?”

The nice one, but Libby waves him away.

“No Scotch in the nursing home, Mom.” She stands. “I’ve got to get home. I’ve got to be at the café at six.”

Her mother wrings her hands. “How could you just dump here?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t have a choice.”

Out into the hall, she sees a nurse coming. Hurry, she thinks.

“What kind of daughter would do this?” her mother wails.

“Mom. Things will feel better tomorrow. That nice girl Lisa will wheel you in a nice hot breakfast and a cup of coffee. You won’t be here forever. Just until the hip heals. I’ll call you from work.” She goes back to the door. “It’ll be soon.”

“You say that to shut me up,” her mother snarls. “I know you.”

Hurry up, Liv thinks at the nurse, who has stopped to talk to someone.

“I hate you,” her mother says, looking right at her, as if every marble is in place. Her mother begins to sob, face in her hands.

“Go home,” the nurse says and pats Liv on the arm. “I’ll take it from here.”

Liv walks down the hall, thinking of Stephen, who has no idea.

She punches in the code at the door and steps out into the night as into arms. Closes her eyes, breathes.



On the way home she stops at O’Flann’s, buys a pack of American Spirits, her old brand, and scratches at the cellophane with her keys until it rips. When she’s done, she stamps the half-smoked cigarette out on the wet asphalt, throws it, and then the whole pack, in the trashcan outside the store.

The streets shine as if iced. Mist and drizzle vague the streetlights. She unrolls the car window to let the spring air pull at her, coaxing, urging, and in her narrow driveway she sits, eyes closed, head back. Branches drip, the gutter gurgles, her neighbor’s dog barks. Merritt. Or Morris. Morris. Tiny roots, she knows, swim in the dark beds, unmoored.

She lets herself into the house and for a full minute stands under the showerhead as hot as she can stand it. In a rush she shampoos her hair, soaps and scrubs her body, beginning, as she thinks of it, with family and hospital and nursing home and ending with something deeper, the panic enthroned beneath her breastbone, the fear acknowledged but never erased—hers now, family gem, exam she has no answers for, humped over the desk in a sweat, last one in the room.

That face she turns toward the world every morning, hooks and lines to hold it in place—that quirky, sunshiny, sensible face. Her good deeds keep her going, don’t they? And they keep her from her life.



The following week, her date with the pharmacist. She is determined it will be an excellent date, that she will be generous and open-hearted, and the universe laughs in her face. Flynn turns out to be a spongy, dull-eyed, narrow, obsessive loner who, when he isn't funneling pills into plastic vials, seems only to commune with his iPad, MacBook, Xbox, and two Sony wide-screen plasmas. They'd had lunch at The Red Lion Inn, an iconic Berkshire destination, her suggestion, and during lunch he had declared his water glass unclean, asked if the sauce for his halibut was made with real cream, and sent back his wine. His shoes were of a crinkly, mahogany, anti-ironic synthetic, his teeth bad. He was oddly impersonal and creepily overeager, tended toward movies and books about exiled races, Armageddon, extraterrestrial microbes. When he forgot himself, he ate with his fingers. The sight of those thick glistening fingers next to those thin bloodless lips, the soft fold of skin under that chin, all of it, catapulted her into violent despair.

Then, at the car, unbelievably, he'd taken her hand and held it.

But there is luck: August Quirk's shovel is in her car, which means she can wipe her hands clean of The Pharmacist and August Quirk in one tidy hour. And she'll not be sad. She'll be grateful for what she has. She'll be grateful for the small sabbath of spring wind tearing about her head now, on the road back up the mountain, and the sweet, mousy comforts of her little Dorset Street life: cupcakes, walks. Her job, which she loves. Santo and Gado.

She'll go to a sperm bank if she has to. When the time comes.

The time, she thinks, is almost here. It's coming. I'm thirty-seven now, she thinks, I'm going to be one of the single, I am. I'm going to be a single mother.

At August Quirk's she parks down the road and tiptoes across his lawn with the stupid shovel. She didn't even use it. Let the dandelions go. No more pathetic overtures, no more flirtations. She leans it quietly against his door and steals back across the lawn.



“Hi there! I’m bothering you. I am, aren’t I?” It’s Celia, her head stuck in the door.
“You’ve got something on your porch.”

“Celia, come in!”

She bears a jar of flowers, an envelope. Misha’s L.

“I’m interrupting your dinner.”

“My dinner of boiled eggs,” Liv says, and shoves the note in a pocket. She hurries back into the kitchen to clear newspapers and folded paper sacks off the table, moves a full bag of groceries from a chair to the counter. “Of course you’re not interrupting. Sit down. Let me get you something?” Remembering her promise of supper. “You wouldn’t want an egg, would you?”

“I’ve eaten.”

“I can make you one real fast.” She makes like a sprinter.

“No, no. It’s just that Aidan’s taken Mira with him to the city to visit his sister and I’m alone. I was headed out for a walk, wondered if you wanted to come. It’s so nice out.”

“Absolutely,” Liv says, standing, mouth full. “That’s so sweet.”

At the corner of Bodine and Dana, Liv is still waiting to understand the reason for Celia’s visit, for surely there is a reason, and then on to Marsh and Summit and Grieg and around the corner to Girard and then out on the walking path through the park and around Moyer and back. Yet they end up back on Dorset forty minutes later having chatted about nothing of real importance. Brothers mostly, for Celia has two younger ones.

“Come over for a glass of wine,” Celia says in front of her pink house. “We can sit on the porch.”

Ah. Now it comes. Whatever it is.

On Celia's porch with its antique wicker and custom cushions, Liv finds herself holding a paper-thin wineglass half-filled with something called Beaujolais Blanc Terres Dorées, nibbling warm crumbly cheese sticks in a little Italian dish with olives, and so violently catapulted back into the Celia Brown force field that she cannot think of a thing to say.

But the reason for Celia's visit still does not emerge. Instead, Celia sits slumped, head thrown back on a pillow, eyes closed. "God, it's so divine to be alone," she murmurs, without seeming to understand that she's not.

Liv settles into her cushion, cheered. "I've been thinking a lot about what you said the other day," she says. "About my mother."

Celia's eyes open lazily, like a lioness's. She holds her glass with two finely articulated, red-knuckled hands, turns it thoughtfully. "I hope I didn't overstep, Liv. I only meant that where she ends up is where she'll probably be for the rest of her life. So you just have to go in with your eyes open, make sure you have her where you want her. You're at a choice point."

"A choice point."

"That's what my mother calls it. When we can more easily change things. Pivot."

Liv slides down in her wicker chair too, as Celia has, closes her eyes. Choice point, she thinks. Pivot. Is she really?

It sounds so definite. So trim.



*There once was a baker from Reest
Who worked with flour and butter and yeast.
His desire to impress
A girl with rhyme, he confessed,
Did not help his case in the least.*

She tries not to think about Misha's limerick. It's a paper liaison, an entanglement of words and cartoons. How could that be serious?

"How old do you think he is," she asks Alberta the next morning. (He's left another note, but it's only a drawing: Liv trying to balance on top of a giant egg with a whisk in one hand, toque askew.)

"Thirty-one, thirty-two?" Alberta says. "And you are..."

Liv makes a face. "Thirty-seven next week. Do you think he's that old?"

Alberta bats at the air. "Oh well, people are all kinds of ages now. I have a cousin who's married to a guy twelve years younger." She's twinkling like a Christmas tree. "So you and Misha..."

"No, no, not me and Misha."

"Has he asked you out?"

"We had a drink, accidentally, kind of. I'm afraid he's going to."

"And... you're..."

Liv slaps hands to face, rubs her eyes. "God, I swear, Bertie, I date and I date and I *date*, I feel like such a good soldier, and nothing! No one! I mean it."

"Really?"

"I don't feel that picky. But I just... *ugh*."

"Misha is not an *ugh*," says Alberta stiffly.

“I don’t mean it like that, I love Misha, I do, but I... I just can’t quite ... *imagine* it.
He’s... well, for starters, he’s too young.”

Alberta turns back to her station, bottom lip stuck out.

“Hey, Bertie, ahem, excuse me”—she waves a hand—“over here. It’s *me* you’re supposed to feel sorry for.”



Alberta has arranged an impromptu birthday party for Liv at Donatello's, an Italian restaurant in the middle of town. Santo arrives first, bearing a paper bag of tubers. Dahlias, he says.

"Flowers!" she cries. "Perfect!" And it is perfect, exactly what she wants. She pats the empty chair next to her. "Sit." It's been too long. They get to talk at work a little, but Santo arrives right before the morning rush, and she's gone before he's off. And Gado, she never sees anymore.

"How're things?" she asks in Spanish. She always talks to Santo in Spanish. His English is improving, but she's always rushing when she's with him. Gado she can speak to in English, but she never sees Gado anymore. "Is August giving you enough to do yet?"

"It's fine."

"Did you talk to him like I said?"

He eyes wander to the door. "He said not to worry. He just wants me to get the groceries and mow." He shrugs. "It's okay."

"He likes Gado, doesn't he?"

"Yeah. He carves little toys for him and reads to him and cooks for him."

"He does? Wow. *Cooks* for him?"

Santo looks toward the door.

"Is that okay? That he's over there so much?"

"I don't know. It's... He likes it there."

"It's not weird? It doesn't feel... uncomfortable?"

He plays with the paper bag, brow knitted, pulls at the staples with a thumbnail. “I think it’s okay.” He opens the bag to show her. “See how ugly they are? But just wait. The most beautiful flowers of all, and from Mexico too.”

“Really?”

“Not these, but dahlias, yeah, they come from Mexico.”

She takes the bag, looks in again, rolls it closed thoughtfully, takes the small bundle with a clutch. “Is something wrong you’re not telling me?”

“No. Everything’s good.”

She dips her chin. If she had glasses, she’d be looking over them. “Really?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. He thinks Santo should go to this new school. He wants to show it to me.” People are drifting in. Santo nods at Elias.

“Ah, and you’re not sure about it. Is that it?”

“He says it would be good for Gado. He says he’d pay for it.”

“Wow.” She sits back, mouth open. “He sure moved in fast.”

Santo’s eyes are on the door, waiting for D’America probably. She can’t help glancing behind her too. “Santo, look at me a second.” She waits, but he only glances into her eyes, can’t seem to keep his eyes on her at all.

“Gado is your son. *Yours*. August Quirk can’t do anything without your okay. So you have to feel right about whatever. New school, whatever.”

“I already feel like he’s done so much.”

“I know. Like you owe him. But you don’t. When is the cast coming off?”

“Next week,” Santo says.

She laughs. “If he wants to pay for Gado to go to a private school, I guess he’s not going to kick you guys out, right?”

“I don’t think so.” People are drifting in, saying hi, ordering drinks at the bar. Santo’s about to say something else when D’America walks through the door with Gado, and he stands up.

“I’ll come up after work this week,” she says. “Okay?”

“Sure.”

She hugs D’America and Gado.

Misha slips into Santo’s chair. Turns his whole body to her. “Happy birthday, Liv,” he says quietly.

“Thanks.”

He hands her a card. This time the drawing is of Misha making a huge towering birthday cake with a big heart balanced on top, an L in the middle of the heart. Happy Birthday, Love, M. underneath.

“Sweet,” she says. “Your drawings are so great, Misha.”

And then Bettina plops down in the chair on the other side of her and begins talking to them, which is a relief. Alba shows up, and then Celia, who presents Liv with a big red rubber spatula tied with a ribbon and announces the appetizers and the first round are on the café. A few people deliver toasts.

A few others order dinner, and it turns out to be a really nice birthday after all. She drinks too much, makes the mistake of leaving Misha’s card on the table so that when she comes back from the bathroom, it’s being passed around.

She can feel Alberta eyeing her. When she sits down he puts his arm on the back of her chair, but only for a minute. Then the waiter is bringing a cake through the bar with a line of wait staff behind him, and it’s flaming with candles and heads turn and everyone’s laughing and batting away the smoke.

“Fire!” someone yells.

Everyone in the place sings Happy Birthday along with her friends, and everyone claps when she stands to blows out all the candles. Today, miracle of miracles, is not so bad.

Misha leans in. “What was your wish?”

She laughs. “Are you kidding? I can’t tell you my wish.”

Flirting out of hunger, she knows. Fool that she is. Her wish is for August.



The next morning, Liv suggests to Santo that she come up after work, but when she gets to the cabin at around five, he's not there. She brings a six-pack of beer and a pizza, parks on the road. August's truck is nowhere to be seen, but Santo would be driving it anyway. August is in the house, she knows. The porch light is on. The kitchen light.

She parks on the road, all the more visible.

She knocks on the cabin door, but of course no answer, Santo must have forgotten. She'd pushed him too hard maybe.

She stands a few seconds, uncertain.

She could sit under the arbor and wait for him. The ridge is in its best afternoon light.

But instead tries the door.

Gado's pallet is in a corner of the sitting room, a tangle of covers with the stuffed giraffe she'd given him. Virgin of Guadalupe beach towel taped over the fireplace in the bedroom. The unmade bed. D'America's things hanging in the closet, a few of her bottles in the bathroom. The floor needs sweeping, the shower needs scrubbing, the counters in the kitchen need wiping, there are dishes in the sink.

She checks her phone again. He forgot.

She does the dishes, a favor, but when he still doesn't arrive, she goes ahead and wipes down the counters, then sweeps the floor and makes the beds.

She decides to wait ten minutes more.

She sits out under the arbor where August Quirk cannot miss her should he glance over.

But Santo does not return, and there is no sign of life from across the road. Write a note and leave, she thinks. Leave the pizza and beer. It'll be a nice surprise with the clean house.

She looks around the cabin for a pen, something to write on, sees an envelope in the trash, pulls it out, and does not mean to see but sees.

It's from Rosa.

It must be the same Rosa. The return address a street in Moclin. The envelope empty.

The girlfriend who ran away, scared.

She sets it back in the trash exactly as before—face down under a full coffee filter—finds something else to write on, jots off a falsely jaunty note and hurries to her car and down the mountain.

She feels sullied, she's not sure why, except that Santo had not wanted to see her, or forgot that she was coming, that she let herself into the cabin the way she did, and then cleaned. Would he be pleased, or annoyed?

That she saw Rosa's envelope.

She'd taken liberties, and now it can't be undone.



Liv imagines putting it to her brother—I've put in my time, it's your turn—and moving their mother out to Santa Barbara. Would Stephen visit? Who knows?

She stays up a few nights, ruining herself for work the next day researching the price of apartments in Santa Barbara, caregiver agencies, assisted living facilities. She even makes some calls. There is enough money for it all to work. For a while. By her calculation, exactly six years. Not bad.

But in the end she can't.

In the end she defaults to her original plan, though one night, in an angry half-measure, she calls Stephen and more or less demands he help with the move. He comes out, and for a long weekend, tail between his legs, cell phone glued to his ear, he does his sister's bidding—clearing out the storage unit, painting the apartment's white bathroom with a blue Clara is allowed to select herself, putting up a more attractive light fixture over the breakfast table, going through books, taking things to the Goodwill.

Then catching his plane back to California.

And through it all this sinking feeling, this dusting of panic over everything.

□□□

“Where’s my car?” her mother’s asking now that she’s out of the nursing home and in the new little house with her caregiver, Vitalija. “Who’s got my car?”

“I do, Mom,” Liv says. “It’s at my house. I’m taking care of it.”

“Well, I want it back! It’s mine!”

“Okay, but Vitalija has to drive. Not you.”

“Don’t be silly. I can drive. I’ve been driving since I was twelve.”

And once again Liv has to show her mother the letter that’s arrived from the DMV saying that she is no longer licensed in the state and must send in her driver’s license immediately.

“I sent in your driver’s license, Mom.”

Over and over again, her mother must re-learn this fact, get furious about it, rage. And now she refuses to go in for her routine checkups—angry with her doctor, who sent the note to the DMV, a fact she, interestingly, does not forget. Without authorization from her mother’s doctor, the pharmacy won’t fill her prescription for Temazepam or Lorazepam or anything else, which means she doesn’t sleep, which means Vitalija doesn’t sleep.

Vitalija has asthma. “I cannot work for your mother if she smokes,” she says.

But Liv’s mother wants to drive, wants to drink, wants to smoke. Wants to live the life she remembers living at twenty-four.

Yes to Scotch, no to the car, and no to cigarettes.

Liv’s hope—old as dirt, unexamined—had been that her mother would settle down, be happy. But her mother is unhappier than ever. Vitalija says it’s the change in routine, the new venue, the strange new caregiver. “She’ll get used to it,” Vitalija says. Liv has to believe it. She has no choice.

But as Memorial Day approaches, marking the café's busiest season, she is seized by a desire to clean. She begins in the faraway upper cabinets of her kitchen where all the junk is—two gravy boats of her mother's, a laughable silver biscuit warmer, also her mother's, assorted coffee cups, ugly vases, ugly votives, her mother's old wooden napkin rings, a pitcher she despises. She will keep only what she loves, only what she needs. She will strip away the dead, see what's left.

For the rest of May—drawer by drawer, box by box, trip by trip to the Goodwill—in the little spare time she has, Liv gives away clothes, old appliances, furniture, dishes. She recycles files, goes through books. A book she hasn't seen for years—*To the Lighthouse*, one night—her old college scratch in the margins, her younger self communing all these years in the drawing room in the summer house on the Isle of Skye with Mrs. Ramsay and James. And reading too long then into the night, finding herself abstracted, the words become objects almost, floating right up off the page in all their thingness like lines of ants. Her hand holding the book become strange, no longer loved and familiar but a wedge of skin stretched between two fingerbones, the worn groove and wrinkle, the glossed scales, a freckle she'd never noticed that seems the beginnings of an age spot.

And she thinks, am I here?

I am here, yes. But a terrible uneasiness creeps back up the passages and swamps the house, the crowding heat of it, and she has to throw the book down and check her email and boil an egg and stand there watching it jitter against the pot and then eat it whole, snatch it down in two bites like would a snake and then turn on the radio and bake something very difficult and then think of who to give it to. Someone, she thinks, who doesn't really want it.

As August Quirk hadn't really wanted the Lemon Polenta Almond.



Late June. Days of brilliant sunshine followed by days of balmy rain. Gutters and culverts gush, water pours. Basements and garages flood. Water is pumped and wrung from everything, the damp finds its way into Liv's jars of beans, into the sheets, into her clothes, swell the insoles of her shoes. Floors sweat. Mirrors haze. And after the rain, fog hovers wraith-like in rips and snatches between trees and over roadways; she enters it and is lost and at once made sharp again. Lost and found, lost and found. And so quickly.

After rain and fog, wind. Wind rakes ripples across the wide water in yards that look like miniature seas. Wet becomes dry, the seas are swallowed. Tiny twigs, needles, silt, trash, pollen bright as football uniforms are laid out by the retreating rainwater in delicate contour maps on drives, walks, shoulders of streets: prim elongated bundles as if regurgitated by some tidy giant. People hew to asphalt, stagger about, stiff, pitched forward, struggling to pull open car doors, clothes blown tight against thighs, hats held down, flaps in fistfuls.

At night Liv's window panes chatter in their sashes and her little house chickers and scutters and hoots. Next door, the dog Morris barks and barks.

Liv lies in bed listening. Companionable wind, she thinks. Curious wind. It wants in, she thinks. That's nice. She lies in bed and welcomes the sifting, scouring, scritch-scratch.



When her mother gets angry now, Liv excuses herself and goes outside to sit on the little concrete patio outside her mother's back door. Sometimes she drives to O'Flann's and brings her mother a cold diet ginger ale and talks about the weather or a book she's just started. What else is there to do? Sometimes she talks about her mother's two beloved French provincial chairs, which are being recovered. How nice the living room will look once they're back!

"Oh, yes," her mother says and sometimes that is the end of it. Other times, her face will twist, she'll whisper, "Liv, you'll run me down to the corner store, won't you? You'll do that for me, won't you?"

"What do you need, Mom?"

"A cigarette!" Smiling guiltily.

"You haven't smoked for years. You can't start now."

"I'll go outside."

"What about when it's winter?"

"I'll go outside."

"But you can't walk. Vitalija will have to help you, and once you smoke one, you'll want to smoke all the time, the way you drink. Even at three in the morning. That's the way it is with you now."

"I don't drink all the time," her mother says, taken aback.

"Oh, Mom. You were up last night at two trying to fix yourself a Scotch."

"I was not."

"Okay."

"Stephen, where's Stephen? Stephen would run me down to the corner store!"



Now that summer is here, the café is packed, the kitchen is hot, and they are so busy there's hardly time for a break. And several times a week, sometimes several times a day, Liv's mother calls the café to ask—the house is no cure—“When am I going home?”

One day at the end of June, in the lull between the breakfast rush and lunch, Liv takes an order of eggs out to the staff table with the front section of the *Times*. Two women are sitting at a table near the windows—one mid-forties, the other in her early twenties. Mother and daughter, Liv is sure. It is the older woman's all-points attention, narrow shoulders tensed, the way she waits for what the girl will say, and also in the desultory way the younger one looks about—at the other customers, at her mother, at the pictures on the wall, at her cell phone, at the scone, as if they are all of equal importance. Or lack of importance.

The two women talk, the mother's eyes on her daughter's face, and the daughter's eyes everywhere, her blonde hair in a careless, rich bun.

Liv has made the scone they pick at now with their fingers.

She is thinking that she and her mother are the mirror image of these two. Liv the one with antenna trained on her mother's every movement, every word, and her mother would be the one looking around for something more interesting.

She flips over the front section of the *Times* to see that the fifty Columbian coal miners are still trapped two kilometers underground. One and a quarter mile. Presumed dead. Rescue workers have descended 700 meters and removed eighteen bodies so far.

She breathes. Puts her hands over her face.

Okay, she thinks. You're here. You're safe. You have a job, and food, and shelter, and no, not August Quirk, but friends. You have friends.

She eats her eggs.

The sunlight gathers in bright pools on the stainless steel counters, the glass cases, the oversized jars of Misha's cookies and biscotti, on the high tin ceiling and on the huge glass-fronted black and white prints of cows and pigs and geese and sheep and goats and chickens. She is used to it now, *Heaven*, with its pretensions. One more place that screams local and could be anywhere.

It's almost ten-thirty. She has three lemon delicious cakes yet to bake, one for the café, two for special order, along with the croissants and scones to get ready and put in the walk-in for tomorrow. And afterward she'll go home and take a bath, read the cookbook Celia has lent her, have a nice long sleep.

"But he's taking you for a ride, honey, because you're young, because he thinks he can," the mother is saying. The girl leans over the scone and hisses something at her, and the mother, startled, looks around. Had she been speaking too loudly? She listens to her daughter, shakes her head. "I disagree," she says, soft but insistent, and the daughter shoves the scone at her and sits back, arms crossed, looking toward the door.

"Yeah, but I'm not you."

She has been thinking of the root rap—. To seize by force and carry off. *Raptor*. *Rapacious*. *Rapture*. It is one thing to grow old knowing that your body has been known, loved, thoroughly used, and another to grow old with a body having been taken out for only a few spins. She thinks this all the time. And now the mother is tearing off a hunk of scone and shoving it into her mouth like some fierce, disconsolate bird.

She must get back.

She splashes her face in the bathroom sink, must check once more on the two women at the front window. They are pushing out of their chairs.

And then she sees something else.

August Quirk.

She's in the dark hall where the bathrooms are. In shadows, but she can see him clearly. He picks up a menu, peruses it.

She slips back into the kitchen.

"Santo," she says. She has grabbed a fistful of his kitchen whites. "August Quirk is here." She swings around, can see him now at the end of the line, studying the bakery case. "Are you expecting him?"

Santo goes back to scrubbing out a saucepan. "No," he says.

"Santo!" Bettina calls. "The bussing station is overflowing, baby!"

"On it!" he calls, pulling off his gloves.

She zeroes out the scale, scoops cake flour from the bin, sifts it over the measuring cups, levels it with a knife. Out to the walk-in for lemons and yogurt. Into the kitchen for eggs. She starts with lemon zest, two tablespoons per cake, juices six lemons. The caster sugar is low, so she scoops sugar from the bin into Alberta's big food processor and turns it on and breathes.

"Hey, Liv!" Bettina calls from the front a few minutes later. "Someone's here for you."

"For me?"

"Yeah, you, baby. Who else I'm looking at?"

She takes off her apron. Okay, she thinks. But I'll only be civil. Perfunctory, faint.

She peeks through the bakery case. August Quirk sits where the two women had been. She goes out, says hello, smiles her zero calorie smile, stands, hands behind her back, asks what he's ordered, blah, blah. He asks about her mother. She asks about his ankle.

“Well, okay then,” she says, turning back. “I really—”

“Can you sit a minute?”

She sits on the edge of the chair, as if to bolt.

So he has come for something. And he has brought what he always brings: that magnetic field that pulls at her every molecule.

He is playing with an earlobe, the way he does. His hair is longer, a little stringy, it looks good, his face more tanned, his eyes blue. The lines around his mouth, strong brackets. He lets go of his ear and runs a long forefinger around the rim of his cup. It thrills her, she can't help it: the ring, his finger, the place where it touches the cup.

He's having some kind of trouble.

“It's okay,” she says and looks out the window. A woman, in her seventies maybe, sits humped and slovenly at one of the cafe tables trying to get the cap off a bottle of Pepsi. Her bottom lip sags and quivers.

“So how are things up on the mountain?” Liv says, exhaling, turning back, resolved.

“I'll be honest. I find myself wondering about those Spanish lessons,” August Quirk says.

This takes her by surprise.

“Are you still available?” he asks.

“Lessons for you?”

“Yes, for me. I hope I haven't waited too long. Fridays would be good. I was thinking weekly? If you aren't too busy.”

Out the window, the woman is still working on the Pepsi cap.

“I don't know.”

He blinks. “I would pay you, of course. Whatever you think is fair. We can work that out.”

“It’s not that.”

She stares at his cup of coffee, which he turns in tiny increments, like a second hand.

“Consider it,” he says. “Think about it, Liv.”

“Okay. I can about it.”

“Call me.”

She nods, looks at him a moment.

His smile is teasing. “Promise? You won’t not call?”

She laughs, stands. “I’ll call.”

PART 2

On the first Friday, Liv begins with simple diagnostic questions. “¿Cómo es tu semana?” she asks.

“Muy bien,” August Quirk says.

“And what have you been doing?” she asks in Spanish.

“Nada mucho,” he says. “Pero no puedo decir mas.” The gap between his teeth.

“That’s good.” She speaks slowly. “Usted puede entender mis preguntas. Se puede decir frases sencillas. That’s good.” When he looks bewildered, she says, “Frases, sentences. Sencillas, simple.” She writes the sentence down. “Se puede decir frases sencillas. You can say simple sentences.”

“I’ve taught myself all I can,” he says. He is clean-shaven, his hair wet. Despite the heat, he wears the long-sleeved blue shirt she loves. Has he showered for her? Does he care what she thinks?

Everything’s as it was: she still loves the way she feels in this room with him. The sorrowful intelligence in his gaze which rests on her so gravely, his hands, his wide flat fingernails, his calm, the way he moves. She has vowed to herself not to overtake him. To follow his lead as if entering a new country. No cakes. No wandering about and exclaiming

over his things. Her rampant, hog-wild hopes have been tempered—it's summer now, and she's made a pact to tuck in her flyaway self.

Unless I know differently, she tells herself, this is only Spanish.

He asks if they can go through *Harry the Dirty Dog*. It is Gado's favorite book, and August can only read it to him in English. "Watch my mouth," she says as she pronounces *manchas blancas, cansado, más sucios, baño*, and she watches his as he repeats these words, as he writes the Spanish lightly in pencil in the margins of the book. She has brought a phrasebook, a Spanish-English dictionary, and a textbook from her junior high teaching days. "These are yours for now," she says in Spanish and pushes them toward him.

She brings out yellow sticky notes and asks him to put them up on the most important things he needs words for. She walks behind him and writes the Spanish on the sticky notes with a black Sharpie. "We will build your vocabulary slowly," she says, "through all our lessons." These words are his homework, along with the chapter on "To Be" and "To Be."

At the door on the way out, she does not pause. "Next week!" she says.

But he follows her out. "I think we're in for rain. Yo creo que mas..." and he waggles his fingers slowly down.

"Lluvia." She spells it for him.

"Lluvia."

"I don't know," she says to be contrary. "I bet tomorrow's nice."



Every Fourth of July Celia sets up blankets on the grass at Tanglewood, and whoever wants to, comes. She shows up early with Aiden and Mira, gets a good spot, brings the wine, blanket, and other supplies. Liv always brings dessert, Alberta the entrée. The rest is catch as catch can—whoever shows, whatever they bring.

Aiden has gone off with Mira to kick a pint-sized soccer ball. Bettina and Alberta are off to the bathrooms, Celia in her chair reading the newspaper, and Liv is on her back, sweatshirt under her head, eyes closed. Misha she feels like a stubborn burl next to her, waiting for her to open her eyes. But she won't, not yet. She likes it here, this dark stage, no one in the audience but herself, thoughts strays that mosey in, sniff about, mosey out.

Her eyes are tricky, crocodile slits that make the oak and maple leaves winkle in the light. There's an elder head to foot in lavender and plum—and sparkled as if in crystal, framed by eyelash—casting forth her aubergine throw. Up and up again and billowing down. Rattly with bracelets, gewgaws, giant dark rings.

Gengams.

Joojoo. Jeepers. Golly, macams. maraud. Marat.

Maybe Santo and Gado will show. Maybe, though a week ago he'd said, "No, I don't like that music."

Never mind Misha. You're here, Tanglewood: the one percent and everything else ease and gorgeousness as far as the eye can see. No weeds, Giotto sky, and yellow blanket raft that floats upon this lovely grass green sea.

This hum.

The human—so much flash, so much distraction. We close our eyes and ears, shut ourselves in flotation tanks, pillow against the noise, or lie like this, pretend to sleep just to shut down the drama house of the head.

Her heart puddles at the thought of it. Is it any wonder we try boring into each other's worlds with our drills, with our pickaxes of words, hand on the other's arm: tell me, tell me, help me understand, and yet we miss and miss and miss, can't find the words, there are no words—

And this sky! Its epiphany shade of blue, its cloudlessness! We gaze into it and feel the something inside that bars us, a locked gate. How beauty has us shaking at the lock and longing to clamber over and into the expanse—

“Liv?”

She sits, blinks, shades her eyes.

“No one else?” Bettina says, hands on hips, lip in a fat pout. She looks about wistfully. “Bummer. I'd thought we'd have a decent showing this year.”

“Nope. Just us chickens.”

“But quality chickens,” Misha says.

“Oh, sure,” says Alberta.

“Anyway,” Liv says, “I'm fond of the small showing.”

Rattle of newsprint as Celia turns a page. Gigantic trash bin under a tree that people stand on tiptoe and toss into like a basketball hoop.

The lady in plum has been joined by others sitting in folding cloth chairs, backs to the stage. They drink something plum-colored out of seltzer bottles.

Sangria? Wine?

“Shall we eat?” says Celia, who makes no move.

There is the usual plethora. Fancy oranges, cream cheese, buttered bread, preserves. Misha's bean salad and Bettina's linguini. Roasted chicken and olives. Preserved lemons. Four different wines. Vino verde. Chocolate pound cake, sugared strawberries.

"Maltese oranges?" says Alberta, tasting. "Seriously? Imagine."

And what else to do at Tanglewood but eat and drink and muse and dream and wait on James Taylor and cannons and firecrackers? Something about the blue sky causes her to brim a little. She wants to say it, somehow, put her love unwisely into words.

"What are cracklings?" Liv asks instead, to no one in particular, knifing cream cheese onto a corner of rye.

"Fried fatty pieces of meat," answers Celia, in an automatic voice, still reading. "Oh," she says, and the paper comes crashing noisily to her lap. "Our heroes have returned." And Aiden, pink and damp and prideful, is suddenly there, Mira straddled across his belly, hanging. They sink onto the blanket like exhausted soldiers, attack the food.

What do they all talk of? Gossip. Carole King's career and affairs. Thigh fat. Leggings. The origins of Tanglewood. Nothing much about the café, since their boss sits behind them. Everyone logy and nappy, and Misha unusually quiet. Alberta has noticed, others too probably, they must blame her, and maybe they should, maybe she deserves it, but she needs a buddy to do stuff with on the weekends: movies and museums. She deserves it, with her mother. If only his heart weren't so crumbly.

"I'm going to go exploring," Liv says getting to her feet. "I need a walkabout." She looks off vaguely in a southwesterly direction. "Maybe the maze. Rescue lost children." She does not want him to come, Misha, does not look at him.

He rises anyway. "I'll come."

And off they go, picking their way around the blankets, which are so crowded now they are practically touching. Every now and then they must turn to get their bearings, figure landmarks.

They're talking about her. About her and Misha. She's sure of it.

Let them, she thinks.

"I just wanted to *amble*," she says to Misha once they're in the clear. "*Saunter*, you know?"

Misha smiles his moist Russian smile. "*Stroll*."

"Exactly. Skip." And she skips a few.

"Right. Do some hearty *striding*," he says, taking an extra-long step.

Under the giant trees with their flagrant limbs, across the backstretches to the maze, which like a huge green honeycomb children instead of bees swarm and hum around.

"Shall we enter?" she asks, though suddenly daunted. The walls are high. It is impossible to see through the bushes from one path to another, to know at all where you are.

"It can't be too complicated, right?" She looks around. "I mean, all these children manage."

"Maybe we should leave a thread?" Misha says. "Didn't someone do that? Leave a golden thread?"

"Who slew the Minotaur? Theseus, I think. Did he leave a thread?"

"Who the fuck remembers?" Misha says. He's happier.

"Are you okay?" she asks. Stupidly. He is, after all, her friend.

And he, lips pressed tightly, reaches for her hand. "I'm better than I was."

"Liv," someone says and she whips around at the voice.

August. His eyes passing over their joined hands before she'd pulled hers back. Gado on his shoulders.

August Quirk says, stepping between them, just come out of the maze.

She is instantly turned up, every knob, all the way.

“Your cast is off. That’s great!”

She asks him about the maze, tugs on Gado’s bare foot, kisses it, speaks to him in Spanish, and remembering Misha, turns to introduce them.

“Misha,” pulling him forward. “This is August Quirk, Santo’s landlord.” To August, “Misha and I work together.” But that is all she says—not friend, not sweetheart. And Misha retreats again, and she is thinking how he must see, how they both must see, what has happened to her.

She has never been able to hide anything.

She chatters on, about the weather, the maze, whatever pops into her head. Lost to herself.

“I’m so glad you guys came, I was trying to talk Santo into it, told him he shouldn’t miss it, but of course how can you even describe the feel of this place, I’m so glad he changed his mind!”

Too loudly, with too much force. Looking at the exit, expecting Santo at any moment.

Then taking hold of Santo’s foot again and tickling. “I think your papa’s lost in there. We’ll go look for him.”

And then she’s going on, can’t stop herself, about last year’s Fourth and how much fun she’d had.

August Quirk says Gado is likely to be asleep by the time the fireworks finally come.

“But you and Santo have to wake him up! He can’t miss it!”

And then she's trying to describe where their blanket is, how he and Santo and Gado have to join them, that Santo should have at least texted somebody to find out where they are.

"It's just us," August Quirk says, when she's done.

"What?"

"It's just Gado and me."

A pack of preteens bound out of the maze, squeeze past, swarming, all over each other with whispers and giggles and fuck this and fuck that.

And once they all pass, August Quirk is saying goodbye.

Once he and Gado are gone, Liv stands a moment, considering the top of the yews.

"Huh," she says.

"What was that?" Misha says.

"Odd. It was odd." But then Liv shakes it off and grabs his arm. "Let's get totally mixed up," she says and walks him into the maze.



“I saw Gado and August at Tanglewood last night,” Liv says to Santo the next day at work. “Why didn’t you come?”

“Tanglewood,” he says, like it’s a country on the other side of the globe. He’s in his long pink rubber gloves Celia gave him, the black rubber apron. Water covers the floor, hot spraying from the overhead nozzle, steam billowing. Liv leans against the large metal sink, her voice so low only Santo can hear.

“What are they doing together all the time?”

“I don’t know. He wanted to take him. He said there are fireworks.”

She crosses her arms, leans in close. “Hey, *I’m* the one who told you about the fireworks. It was fun, Santo. We had fun. We missed you. And the fireworks were amazing. I wish you had seen them. You should have.”

“Okay,” he says, but he looks besieged. Careworn.

“I’m not scolding you, it’s just... Did he even *ask* you? Or did he just ask to take Gado? Or did he even ask that?”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s okay because...”

“Me and D’America. We wanted to hang out.”

“Yeah, but Santo, look at me. Did he even ask you to come along?”

And Santo, scrubbing, not looking at her, says, “He doesn’t mind.”



She comes through the screen door their second Friday, calls out, and from the couch, his back to her, August raises a hand like a white flag. She has roused him, he'd been asleep, and Gado is still asleep on his chest. They'd been reading. *Harry the Dirty Dog*. It lies open on the floor.

August peels the boy off, lays him gently down, and throughout their lesson, they whisper so Gado will not wake. Whisper as two parents whisper in the room where their child sleeps. Throughout, she watches the wet mark on August's shirtfront dry.

She can well imagine the boy's weight as it grew heavier, the heat his little body made against August's chest, the scent of baby-hair and sight of perfect dimpled fingers pointing, nails like wax parings, the sensation as the boy grew quiet and still and heavy as a clock's pendulum that has ceased its motion. She can well imagine how August is falling in love.

After, August in the bathroom, she sets Gado on the counter, says, in Spanish, "I'm leaving now, Gado. Is that okay?"

"I'll see you again," he says.

It seems okay, but how to be sure?

"Is everything alright?" she asks, studying his eyes which, looking into her own, grow watchful. Carefully he nods.

"If something is wrong, you can tell me. You will, won't you? You will tell me, right, Gado, if something doesn't feel good?"

Those round black eyes. He says nothing. Neither nods his head nor shakes his head. And she, not wanting to put things into his mind, smiles, scoops him onto her hip and turns.

August is standing by phone, watching.

He does not act as if he's heard, and she had been whispering. She had been speaking Spanish. But all the way home, she weighs it: he had, he had not. In the end, she decides to believe he had not.



She comes to August at three-thirty now, on Fridays. It allows more time to rest after the café and it puts her on Quirk's End when Gado and Santo are home. Gado is almost always there when she arrives.

She has learned some things.

She knows August cooks dinner for him, buys things he'll like to eat, goes to the library and checks out books for him. She knows August and Gado go on walks together after school, every day but Friday, that August teaches Gado about trees and American Indians. She saw them at Tanglewood. She has seen them in town together twice. She knows the two of them work together in the barn. Gado says he gets to hammer, knows how, has his own.

She knows August makes toys for Gado. He's cut sections from birch branches, which they've sanded and used as blocks. Gado uses them to build walls for "villages". August has carved barnyard animals, "villagers," little houses for the villagers, fences. Every week there's more. She asks, and Gado shows her.

"You have been busy," she says to August in Spanish.

He agrees with that assessment.

"And where is Santo in all of this?"

"Santo? He's busy too."



“Quit trying to reform me!”

“I’m not trying to reform you, Mom,” Liv says. “I gave up on that years ago. I’m trying to keep you out of the nursing home.”

Her mother bewildered. Her mother unmoved. Waving the words away like so much smoke. Trickery.

“Fix me a Scotch.” Thrusting out the glass, furious at having to ask. The grudging “Please.”

Liv fixes the Scotch. It’s three in the afternoon, her mother’s third since two. Vitalija is out on a well-deserved break.

And yet there are days at a time when she arrives at her mother’s little house on Westerly Road to calm. Her mother content enough on her couch, watching the news or some Netflix movie, eating another bland soup Vitalija has concocted. Vitalija creeping about in her baggy pants with her pail of hot soapy water and rags. Making her cups of tea. On rare occasions, if the weather is right, if her mother feels up to it, they’ll venture out into the world. Off they’ll go, Vitalija, at the wheel: to the salon for a manicure or a haircut, to the library, out to lunch. Once they went to a matinee.

It’s a slow fire under damp leaves, spreading. It’s an egg balanced in a tiny spoon while walking up a mountain. Sometimes it works. And when it works, the only sure thing is that soon it won’t anymore. That’s all. Egg breaks. Flames.



The summer wears on, and Liv's weeks gradually arrange themselves around August Quirk. Just as her life had once gathered around the kitchen at the cafe on one end, and her mother in the nursing home on the other, it now draws tightly around August Quirk and the Spanish lesson at the end of the week. He always does his homework, is ready when she comes. In the beginning they had sat at the island in the kitchen, but now, midsummer, nearing the end of July, they sit in the armchairs in front of the hearth to feel the air from the fan in the front window. For the third lesson, and then the fourth, Gado is awake and playing, and she and August sit in the armchairs before the hearth. She watches, alive to the air in the room, the exchange of looks, any hesitancy on Gado's part that feels extreme or out of the ordinary, any weirdness at all, and especially any clinginess or weepiness or change in demeanor when she leaves. She notices nothing amiss.

She allows no English. Every week she drills him, first on vocabulary, then on the week's lesson. At the end, for twenty minutes, they converse in Spanish. They have been through irregular verbs, stem-changing verbs, Now they are at work on the future and conditional tenses.

Unless it's raining, the windows are always open, the fan whirring. On the muggiest days the acrid smell of wood ash permeates the room, which is always quiet when she comes, always neat. Out the windows she can see how motionless hang the maple leaves.

She adheres to her vow. Lesson over, she stands, gathers her things, leaves with a smile. Wants to dawdle, wants to chat, doesn't. If he can stand apart the way he does, she can too.

By August, her fears have faded. In his company she knows nothing but gladness, but she continues to adopt a breeziness, an offhandedness she doesn't feel. Though, she thinks, only someone made of wood could mistake her.

They are like a little family. She thinks this often. For we are going through the motions of it now, aren't we, as if to sense how it would be. With Gado on the floor between them always like this, how can such thoughts not occur to him as well?

As a father, he's a natural. Wide of shoulder, clear of eye. Maker of toys, teacher of lessons, a strider through forests. She would open her café, August would be home with the baby and the clocks. Rather than setting her off him, the way he cares for Gado, in the end, does the opposite.

And yet.

And yet, and yet. Santo is never there. Never spoken of unless by Gado. And it is odd, and she cannot escape the sense that despite the beauty of the picture, something is not right.



“Oh gosh!” says Janet, Stephen’s wife, when Liv finally gets down to calling. “I’m *fine*. I’m *excellent*! How are you! How’s your mom, is she good? Is she liking the new place?”

Sounding as though she’s just been caught at something.

“She hates it. She wants to go home.”

“Oh, gosh, really? She *hates* it?”

“Okay. Dislikes it. Passionately. But only sometimes. She has Alzheimer’s.”

This is a new diagnosis, and maybe what her mother’s condition is called shouldn’t matter, but it does. It makes the edges a little sharper, darker, the trajectory more predictable. Which feels a little better.

Liv is waiting to peel her boiled eggs. For egg salad.

“What home is she talking about? Houston?” Janet says.

“Well, exactly. Who knows? Explaining doesn’t do any good. We have okay days and we have... not okay days. Anyway, you must be getting ready for classes, Janet. It being August and all.”

Janet’s an elementary school art teacher who believes in love, who sighs a lot, closes her eyes and breathes deeply a lot, throws her arms out on beautiful days a la Julie Andrews a lot, as if becoming one with the air. She collects heart-shaped rocks and heart-shaped shells and lines the front walk with them and with little angel statues she buys online. She posts heart-shaped other things on Facebook sometimes—leaves, petals, pieces of driftwood. She sends a homemade greeting card on Valentine’s Day instead of Christmas with a newsy little letter inside. Valentine’s Day is Janet’s.

What to say about Janet? She’s a saint.

She's a saint and she's irritating as hell—as St. Valentine and St. Joan and every other saint must have been in their day. A good person, Liv is always saying to herself—just a little much. Really, in her signature shade of green, which she calls *parakeet*, apples in her cheeks, curly reddish hair like Annie, hazel eyes that brim with tears on the least provocation. To Janet, everyone is a child of God, as she puts it. Everyone has that little Child still inside!

“Even Hannibal Lecter?” Liv said once, to shut her up.

Today Janet is particularly excited. She is planning an art day at the yacht club! In September! They'll paint pictures of sailing ships! Learn the parts of a boat! Read seafaring stories for a week to get in the mood! She had to go through the Yacht Club's Board of Trustees, but they said, sure! Isn't that *great*?

“Wow,” Liv says. “That sounds like a really wonderful day, Janet.”

With a fingernail she taps the hot shells. Takes an egg, spins it on the table. No wobble. Spins another.

Janet was a therapist before she was a teacher. An art therapist, for she minored in art at Fresno State. Her paintings, some of which are framed in the house, are a foggy haze of color with a glow-wormy thing always fighting its way out as if from a cocoon.

God, Liv supposes the glowy thing is. Or Love.

Liv thinks of Celia's pink house. You can tell everything about a person by what shade of pink they go for.

Anyway, she has a good heart, Janet does. She has a good heart, but still, she's a twinkler at strangers, a giver of bills to anyone with their hand out, a picker-up of blowing trash, a helper of old people with groceries, an encourager, a comforter to the sick. And it's not like there's anything exactly wrong with that, with spontaneous acts of random kindness,

or random acts of spontaneous kindness, or whatever it is, it's just that Janet's so un-nuanced, so naïve, so straight, earnest to point of squeaking.

So green, actually.

It's the first time Liv's thought this, how perfect the color green is for her sister-in-law.

As the story goes, Janet had been at a conference at the Hotel Milo in Santa Barbara years ago. A talk she had given had not gone well, and she had taken succor at a seaside bar on Stearns Wharf where she'd gone to write in her journal and sip a wine spritzer, which was pretty hardcore for her. Stephen Lambert, drunk, making bold, had slid onto the barstool next to her.

That had been his second relapse. But being Janet, she'd ministered to Stephen, cheered him on, and he had doubled-down on recovery, wet his hair in the deep end of AA and in the process no doubt trotted out his spindly little inner Stephen-child to bat eyelashes at Janet and weep over stuff.

"Actually," Liv says. "I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Oh?"

"Stephen called a while back. Which is odd enough. But I thought he sounded funny."

"What do you mean?"

"It took me a while to call. I told myself not to, then... you know, whatever. He sounded like maybe he'd been... drinking."

The word sits out there in the cold while she peels the hot egg. She tosses it hand to hand, drops it bouncing in the bowl. The red rooster clock on the wall crows. Five o' clock.

“I mean, I hope to God I’m wrong,” Liv adds. “But I wanted to run it by you, because if he’s relapsed, I’d like to know. Should know.”

“Yes, of course,” says Janet dutifully.

Liv peels another egg, picks the little bits of shell off.

“So has he?”

“Stephen works a lot? He comes home late and sometimes he’s excited—so that’s what it was, Liv. He works, oh my God, soooo hard and all the time—”

“Okay, but—”

“He’s on the phone here as much as he’s on it at work—they really need to hire more people, but they don’t have the money yet, and he’s working on that too, they’ve got soooo many irons in the fire, possible angel investors here and potential buyers there, and they’re getting so much good press.”

“That’s great, but—”

“Have you seen the website? His little company might really turn into something.”

“Wow. That’s great. I mean, I knew that, but—”

“There was another big article in some trade journal recently, and an interview on a cable show, but relapse? No. That’s not Stephen. He can get slaphappy, punch-drunk from work, and, God, sooo tired... And between you and me he feels terrible that he’s not helping you out more.”

At all, Liv thinks.

“But it’s sooo nice you’re worrying about him, from all the way across the country—”

“It’s just that he didn’t seem tired, Janet. He seemed drunk.”

“HMMMMM. Yeah. I don’t think so. Anyway, you know, Liv, I really do want to talk about this, but I’m kind of distracted at the moment? Can I call you back later in the week or something?”

“Mondays are good.”

“I’ll call you Monday. We’ll talk more.”

Janet mumbles a few niceties and hangs up like she can’t get off the phone fast enough.

The rooster clock ticks. Liv sets her cell phone on the kitchen table and stares at it. She peels the rest of the eggs, goes after them with her mom’s old red-handled pastry cutter. Dean’s mother made egg salad with a pastry cutter. Now that Liv is smoking again, it’s the one good thing left from her marriage.

She gets a cigarette, and her lighter, goes out to the porch. The feeling in her chest is old, she knows it. It’s the leaky roof, things-falling-apart feeling from Michaux Street. Her brother’s in trouble, and Janet probably knows and won’t tell her.



For years Monday had been Liv's dull child, dreaded. Plain of aspect, dutiful, slow-witted. But now Monday is her favorite—her one day off. Liv has discovered Monday's simple, quiet charms—its quiet mornings, its empty, open aisles, its light traffic. Yet always, the first question: should she risk ruining it by calling her mother?

If she doesn't, guilt can park itself over her like bad weather, the question never quite resolve. She can be socked in for precious hours.

On some days, her mother is fine.

“Fine.”

Answers the phone herself with, “Oh Liv, how sweet of you to call” like a normal mother. Asks how she's doing. Seems interested in her answers. On these days, what happens in Liv's heart is like what happens inside the mouth when a bite of food is taken after a long fast—a kind of involuntary release. A gush. A lunge. She wants *more*.

No statistics course ever, but Liv wonders: if Sunday is a good day, is Monday less likely to be?

Or, if she bakes something, or brings flowers, will it make a difference? Or if she goes to the time and trouble of pushing for a tweak in her mother's dosages or drugs, will it matter? Will it influence anything? Sometimes it seems so. Other times not.

Her mother doesn't know what day it is. Her mother has no expectations, so why does she put herself through it?

“Hello? Mom?” she says carefully into the receiver, her heart perched on the worn rim of that old abyss. Ever hopeful because sometimes her mother takes her hand. Takes her hand and kisses it and holds it. And Liv will sit down next to her and say, “I love you, Mom,” and her mother will look at her as if she sees her, and she'll say, “I love you too, Liv,” and

when she leaves, her mother will, quaking, reach for her hand, and hold it like a baby rabbit, cradle it, not let go.

And that never happened when she had her marbles. So.

It's not nothing, this is true. But it's nothing Liv can count on. It's like someone else's chairs—either solid and can hold her, or wonky—she can't know before she sits.



In the early days, Liv hadn't even known Santo. He was the dishwasher in back—silent, in early, out late, a hard worker, young, overanxious. She'd look over at the sink and see the kid's back. He hardly ever goofed or hung out, unless he was working at the same time. Work seemed to be his lifeline, his security. He seemed afraid to stop. She never saw him at staff get-togethers, and when she finally asked where he was, someone told her about Gado.

Santo. He spoke Tarasco, his native Purepecha tongue, but also Spanish, and was eager to improve his English. Out at the break table, she'd speak to him in slow simple sentences, teach him vocab, syntax. He soaked it up, everything she taught. She got him and his little boy on the schedule for physicals and regular dental cleanings at the free clinic where she volunteered, brought the forms to him at the café. The day he told her about the man he'd picked up with a broken ankle on Pelham's Pike, he'd been at the clinic about an abscess in a molar. He'd shown her August Quirk's number in blue ballpoint on his arm.

To try to help him had been as natural and necessary for Liv as breathing. He needed his life saved, and she'd rushed in to save it. He'd relied on her, and she'd made a difference. They'd been friends, or it seemed so to her.

But now Liv notices a new reserve. And she's not sure of its origin. Maybe D'America

has said something. Maybe she doesn't like her boyfriend having a friendship with another woman, even one old enough to be his mother. But maybe it's something else.

Every morning Santo's sink is filled with the bowls and pots and Cuisinart parts and muffin pans that Liv and Alberta have dirtied in the two hours of work they put in before he

arrives. A terrible way to start the day, she's always thought. Like having to dig out of a hole before even starting your hole-digging work for the day.

As a favor, Liv begins washing the dishes in Santo's sink before he arrives.

It's something she can do, a good turn, she thinks. But it also feels a little like a white flag, or something to even up the scales. It makes her feel better, but she's not sure what she's trying to correct, or why the little scruple in her chest rubs when she thinks of him now.

She thinks of herself and August in the armchairs before the hearth, Gado there on the floor between them playing. As if their own. She knows better. She's play-acting, testing out the feeling, it's harmless enough, it's only in her head, but still...

It's sticky.

Is she being fair? Is Gado... being... tempted away?

Santo could walk over anytime...

Anyway, he loves coming in to a clean empty sink. For this, he thanks her. For a minute the old Santo, the old smile. But the new reserve, the distance, is still there.



The second Friday in August dawns foggy and gray with something in the air that feels tightened, stringent, suggests a change of season. All day the rain holds off, but the temperature drops. At work Liv worries about Stephen. Janet never called her back. Liv hadn't expected her to.

But now she must call her brother.

When she makes her way up the mountain, she finds August in the back yard. He has set two lawn chairs under the birch. He hands her a fleece. Over her head it smells of wood smoke and... him.

After the lesson, August asks if she wants to go for a walk. "I always walk about now," he says. But he has never asked her before.

Something, she thinks, is changing, not just the weather, and the thought causes something in her to float a moment and she feels suddenly rootless. Fizzy.

Gado, of course, quiet little monkey, is with them, on August's shoulders. The three of them. She feels guilty walking by the cabin.

"Santo's planted another tree!" she says. A little hydrangea whip to the left of the door that hadn't been there the week before. And he's freshened the trim paint where it had been peeling below a window. The house looks better than ever with its sparkling windows, its mulched and blooming gardens and cut grass, swept flagstones out front. He pays no rent. This care is his rent.

Perhaps, she thinks, Santo is all right with this. They only wish him the best. Gado too, obviously.

But as usual, there is no sign of him except the old blue Celica that August lent him the money to buy, which is in the drive.

They walk down Quirk's End. She has not yet asked why it's called Quirk's End. She likes knowing that it will come in time. The fizziness there but quieter now.

There is no need for them to speak Spanish or conform to the demands of a lesson. They might speak of anything, but they walk all the way down to Pelham Pike and cross without a word. They talk to Gado. He comments on the neighbors. They go up the logging road and turn around. She asks how his work is going and he talks about an old banjo clock owned by a schoolteacher named Florence Ketcham. It's beat was badly off, he says, and it has been a struggle to get it right.

"But I have prevailed," he says and takes Gado's hands again. "Haven't I, Gado?"

"Is that why you're in this mood today?" she asks.

Florence, he says instead of answering, is married to a man named Florian so that when they come together they each call the other Flo. They have a houseful of gorgeous clocks, he says.

It seems he had not wanted to speak to her of anything particular.

"You have to wind them all up every day?" she asks. "Your clocks?"

"Every morning and every night."

"Like clockwork," she says, and tears flood her eyes. She has no idea why. Ahead, a gray squirrel runs into the road and eyes them, tail twitching. August lobs something from his pocket in its direction. It runs a few steps and stops again.

He hands her a handkerchief. Her father carries handkerchiefs.

"Are you all right?"

She dabs, laughs. "Yes, I'm fine. I'm not sure what's going on"

She feels his hand, just a dash, ever so slight, on her back. "I was going to ask if you'll stay for dinner," he says.

“Dinner? You were?”

“It would only be omelets.”

“Omelets. I love omelets.”

He suggests the lessons go later, until five.

“You mean just today?”

“Every week. Two hours? Same rate.”

She turns away, pulls his fleece up over her nose so he can't see her smile, can't see her pretend to think about it.

“Okay,” she says as disinterestedly as possible. “Sure.”

When they return, Santo is in the yard. They walk over. Liv expects August to hand the boy over. Oddly, he doesn't.

“Down you go, Gado,” she says and reaches for the boy, waits for August bend his head so she can pull him down, and then he does, and she pulls the boy over August's head like a tight, heavy sweater. He does not want to come down, but she sets him plop, on the ground next to his father. “Time to go home now, Gado,” she says spiritedly, kissing him on the head. “It was fun hanging out with you.”

“I want to eat dinner with you,” Gado says, turning back.

“No,” says Liv in the same instant that August says, “Sure.”

Santo walks away toward the cabin. “Gado, ahora!” he calls, and Liv waves, and he waves back, they are like two sailors hailing each other from the decks of two ships.

Gado's eyes still on August.

“Go on home,” she says firmly now, ignoring the man standing behind her, and giving Gado another nudge. “Go on, buddy. Go on with your dad.” When still he hesitates, she looks into his face hard, raises her brows, lowers her chin. “*Now.*”

She and August walk across the lawn in silence. Inside she flees to the bathroom, the one off the kitchen, looks at her face in the mirror, the wide mouth and dark bangs that cut a line across the pale forehead.

She can hear her heart. A runner heard from a distance. She's furious. The first time she's ever felt this way with August.

She sits on the side of the tub and tries to calm down, his handkerchief spread over her knees. In the corner, in navy: AMQ. She folds it in half and then in quarters, matching up the corners, smoothing and smoothing. Gado likes him, and he likes Gado, but Gado is not his, and he needs to respect Santo's position, his prerogatives, as Gado's father. What happened out there was outrageous, she thinks. Just because August is older and has more power doesn't mean he can take the boy and do whatever suits him whenever it suits him.

She splashes her face with water, stares at herself in the mirror. If he asks she'll tell him what she thinks.

He won't ask.



“Smoke the e-cigarettes, Mom. You can have those anytime.” Kneeling at the other end of the coffee table, arranging the flowers she’s brought.

The irked face, the exasperated arm. “I hate those horrible things.”

She says Vitalija is lying about her getting up in the middle of the night, wanting drinks, wanting cigarettes.

“Vitalija is not lying,” Liv says quietly. “You just don’t remember.”

“I remember perfectly!”

Liv’s been helping all afternoon—getting her snacks, helping with the remote, the telephone, helping her get to the bathroom, pulling down her pants, pulling them back up again, untwisting them, fetching the old purse so she can peer into its pockets, again.

Her life, where did it go?

Now her mother, furious again, forgets the walker, struggles to standing and inches toward Liv at the far end of the table, clutching at the table, at the arm of the sofa, at everything in sight, bent almost in half. Hair hanging, face crazy white with anger.

Liv concentrates on the flowers. The flowers she can do something with. She clips the stems neat, arranges each in the water with the foliage, the shiny leaves. Pretty, pretty, fuck. If she just ignores her mother, how long would it take?

Her mother, inching.

“Where are you going, Mom?”

Her mother close now, bends down, sticks her white face into Liv’s. “Give me a goddamned cigarette, goddammit.”

And Liv, looking into the grocery store daisies, the static: “Mom, I’ll say it again. Vitalija is a godsend. But if you start smoking, she will quit. She’s told me. It’s too much.

You don't remember, but once you start, you want cigarettes all the time, including in the middle of the night. We've been down this road. It doesn't work. The e-cigarette you can smoke anywhere. Even in your bed, Mom. Please."

"I wish you'd leave me the hell alone!" her mother screams, bent low, her face thrust into Liv's.

The coal bursts into flame, Liv juts her face back into her mother's. "What have I done but try to help you?"

"Quit helping me!" Begging. *"Quit keeping me here!"* Hands to her face. Rocking back and forth, teetering. "You've made me a prisoner! I want to go home!"

Liv finishes the flowers. Rises, takes the scissors back to the kitchen. Opens the drawer, shuts the drawer. Stands a moment staring up at the light fixture. What else to do? She hopes for a fall, for an extended hospital stay, something, anything. Others in charge for a while.

Back in the living room, her mother is trying to creep around the end of the couch.

"Where are you going, Mom?"

"To get cigarettes!" she shrieks, turning back and boring into Liv with those wild, red eyes.

"And how are you going to do that?"

"In my car!" Shaking with rage, bent, tottering. But also waiting to be stopped.

"Mom. You can't drive. You know that."

"Fuck you," her mother hisses, screwing the finger into Liv's face. *"Fuck you!"*

Looking right into Liv's eyes. *"I hate you!"*

And the flames leap up the bark, into branches.

Liv looks a moment into the flowers—the merry little (for coziness, for prettiness) daisies—what a joke—and says, “Well, *fuck you too.*”

They shake their fuck you fingers in each other’s faces. Even as it’s happening, she can’t believe it’s come to this.

“You make my life hell!” her mother screams.

“I make *your* life hell?” Laughing helplessly. “I try and try and it’s always something.”

“*Well then, stop!*” Shrieking, hair in strings.

And Liv knows it isn’t fair. This is a woman with Alzheimer’s. But she’s hooked: the woman is her mother.

“And who is supposed to take care of you?”

“*No one! I don’t need any of you!*” Her mother’s arm through the air almost knocks her over. She sinks to the cushions again. Crying, face in hands.

Liv stands a moment in the middle of the carpet, confused.

There’s nowhere else to go. She begins to cry like a child—pretend—to punish the adult who’s hurt her, to force remorse. But as soon as she pretends to cry, the sobs fill the form, become real, and she’s crying, can’t stop. Sweeping the petals and leaves into her palm—the rush of flames, the devouring heart. Tossing it all away.

Leaning down to set the vase on the trivet in the middle of the table.

Just so.



No one can get the drunk to stop drinking. You can only tell the drunk you're there if they need you, if they decide to get help. What is the term? Compassionate distance. She can't remember the term from her Al-Anon days. It's something like that.

Anyway, it seems lame. Not nearly enough.

On break in the tiny closet office Liv finally picks up the phone. Her brother's at work. He won't answer, but she can start the process.

"Liv."

"Oh my God, Stephen. You picked up. I don't believe it."

"Janet told me you're wringing your hands over me again. Just wanted to tell you I'm not drinking. I wasn't drinking then, I'm not drinking now. Appreciate all the concern, but... you know, please."

He sounds irritated.

"I was just worried..." She's sitting in the one office chair, looking up through the high little window at the pale blue noon sky. Just as she had the last time she talked to him at work.

She isn't sure if she can believe him.

He laughs. "You think I'm lying, don't you? I'm not lying," he says.

"You've lied to me before."

"That was years ago. I haven't been that guy for a long time, Liv. You should visit."

"That's a good one, Stephen. First, I don't any money, and second, even if I did, I can't be away from Mom that long."

She waits, her eyes on the square of pale blue. The woe is me card, which he sees through.

“Stephen?”

“Listen, Liv. Are *you* okay?”

“What do you mean? I’m fine.”

“You’re fine. You’re always fine. But you don’t seem fine.”

An old trick—turning the tables, the best defense a good offense. “Stephen, I just want you to know, if you need me, I’m here. That’s all I’m saying. If.”

He laughs. “Excuse me.” He says something to someone else in his office, then he’s back. “Liv, I have to go, but just remember, when you’re ready to admit you need help, I am here for you. When you need me.”

“Right. Okay. I get it, Stephen. We can play it that way.”

“I’m serious. You seem to have nothing better to do than manufacture problems that you can then try to solve. For other people.”

“Excuse me, Stephen. The problems here are, um, very real? If you were here, if you were living my life instead of your sunny California life, you’d realize that—”

“For example, whatever happened to your café? The last time you were out here, the only time you were out here, that’s all you talked about. I was going to help you. Remember?”

“Mom happened.”

“You can’t do anything? Really? Because of Mom?”

“Stephen, I work six days a week, and the rest of the time I deal with her and her caregiver. You have no idea what it’s like. No idea.”

“I respect that, Liv. I do. But I don’t believe—”

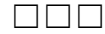
“Well, you should. You should take my word for it.”

“Okay.” Short, clipped. “I’ve got to go. I just wanted to say, one I’m fine, and two, take care of your own side of the street.”

“Take care of your own side of the street. Wow. Is that another one of your nifty slogans?”

“It is.”

“Wow. Thanks.”



August bought a puppy. A four month-old female Golden Retriever named Tuck who, when she arrives, is asleep in her crate under the dining room table in the living room. August has set up chairs under the birch again. They are on the gerund and the progressive tenses.

Already Gado has two Band-aids where the puppy has nipped him.

The citronella burns in a tin bucket. Between them on the grass lies a section of two-by-four with big nails listing, half-sunk. Gado's little ball hammer. Her feet are up on the edge of August's seat, next to his crossed legs, her toenails a nice blue. Sapphire, Janet might say. August has his notebook open on his lap, his mechanical pencil. He needs a haircut, and she hopes he doesn't get one.

In the dappled light their eyes are on each other's mouths. He fingers an earlobe. She could kiss him. She could just stand up, lean over, kiss him. Then it would be done.

Gado is playing in the new kiddie pool August bought. Every now and then he comes up to them, brown tummy glistening, wet hair crested on his head shiny as a crow's, so black it seems blue.

He wants a pomegranate.

¿Cómo sé que tengo una granada?" August says, word by slow word.

"Good!" murmurs Liv, clapping softly.

"Yo lo vi!" Gado says. "In the kitchen!"

It feels like a train in her head, each car loaded with something too big to talk about. Gado. Santo. Why August is learning Spanish so diligently if he's not using it, which he doesn't seem to be. Her brother. She would talk to August about it, but the time never

seems right, and that, that it's never the right time, is another car. There are more: what he's waiting for, with her.

What he's waiting for, period.

August lays a hand on the boy's head, smooths his sopping hair, speaks to him as a parent would. As an uncle would, she tells herself, but it is at moments like this—as one or the other of them reaches out to touch Gado, he is irresistible, or to counsel him or to lay down reasoned, gentle rules—that she feels their disloyalty. For they are both in love with Gado, or at least the idea of him, he is their guilty pleasure.

Santo, she knows, would have to be blind not to notice.

She takes her feet off his chair. It must be well past five, past time for their lesson to be over.

“Gado!”

She turns sharply. It's Santo. He seems almost a stranger, standing there at the edge of the yard. “Ven aca!”

Just as before, Gado hesitates, looks to August.

“Gadito!”

“Gado, vaya,” Liv says. “It's your dinnertime.”

Still he does not mind.

She points. “That's your father calling, Gado. Por ahí! Later for the pomegranate.”

She lifts her arm in a foolish wave. Why doesn't he ever just come over? Why does he stand there as if behind a fence and call like that?

And then, all at once, she is up, walking across the grass to him.

“Come sit a minute,” she says to Santo. Takes his hand, pulls a little. “Please.”

“You're having your lesson.”

“It’s over, it doesn’t matter.”

He looks past her to August.

“It’s fine, Santo.”

She looks up at the sun, which is nowhere.

She drags another lawn chair from the patio, August standing there, looking helpless.

“Maybe you could offer him a beer or something?” Looking hard into his face. Arrow sharp.

Gado, back in the pool, watches.

What is so strange, she wonders? Why does this feel so strange?

August comes out with beers and the pomegranate. He lets Tuck out too, and the dog goes sniffing about the yard, pees on the birch, bounds over to Gado in the pool, tries to leap over the edge, doesn’t make it. But Gado is looking at the pomegranate, for now ignores the dog.

Live hands the pomegranate Santo.

Santo is her friend, and he is the one who needs what they have been lavishing on his son. She should have known better. She has been disloyal. It’s as if they’ve been under a spell, a spell of their own making. It is up to her to break it.

“For Gado,” she says, “whenever you decide.”

Gado comes over, the puppy stumbling after, stands next to his father, his eye on the fruit. He pulls his father by the shirt, whispers in his ear, and Santo puts the fruit under his chair, says something inaudible to Gado, who stands there a minute mutely, and then pulls again, whispers something else, which Santo ignores.

When Santo pulls a third time, Santo says, “Ssssh. Suficiente. Despues! Ve a jugar! Déjanos en paz!”

And Gado goes off to the pool, downcast.

With August, Gado gets what he wants, when he wants, she thinks. Still, it seems unfair. A little pomegranate will not spoil his dinner.

They drink their beers. Liv lugs the conversation forward like a heavy suitcase. It does not matter what August thinks, or what she thinks. Santo is the father. What happens with the pomegranate and everything else is his prerogative.

She talks about the trees Santo has planted, how good the place looks. August says Santo has a lot on his plate, that it helps him when Gado plays over here. She says it's up to Santo to decide what's right for Gado.

"Is D'America at the cabin, waiting for you?" August asks, and Santo, peeling the label off his bottle, says yes.

"Oh, I didn't know that, Santo," Liv cries. "You should have said something. She's welcome to join us!"

"It's okay," Santo says, but he gets up and thanks August for the beer. He hesitates at the pool, but then picks Gado up and the two disappear around the house.

The pomegranate is still under the chair.

"That was terrible," Liv says when they have gone.

August works his empty beer bottle, with great care, into the grass. He takes up the citronella candle, blows it out.

"You make it too nice," she says. "It's too nice for Gado here, and now a puppy? I mean, seriously? A puppy, August? He doesn't want to go home as it is. It's not good..." She softens her tone. "We should take better care."

August stares at his knitted fingers, works his thumbs.

"We've been unkind," she says.

"We have not been unkind."

“But why don’t you like him?”

He looks up. “Santo? I do like him.”

“You hardly talk to him, August. I thought you were learning Spanish so you could talk to Santo, but you two... do you ever just talk to each other?”

“You’re only here once a week, Liv.”

“Oh, please.” She gets up, paces out a little square on the grass. “Maybe it’s unreasonable, I’m sure it is, but I hoped... I don’t know. I hoped for more.”

Tearing at skin on her thumb.

“You hoped for more.”

“I hoped you two would hit it off. I hoped you would... I don’t know. Befriend him. I’m sorry. He thinks you don’t like him.”

“That’s not true.”

Inside, though, he puts on Miles Davis, pours her a glass of wine as if he had no thought of her leaving. He puts out a plate of cheese and crackers and then disappears upstairs, he says just for a second, but he’s gone at least ten minutes. The house is quiet except for his feet on the floorboards above. She waits, looking out the front windows to the cabin.

“I’ll talk to Pete and Connie tomorrow,” he says later, walking her to her car. “I’ll do what I can to get him on the crew.”

“Really?” She shivers.

“He knows trees. He’s a great worker. He’ll be fine.”

“Do you think?”

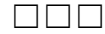
“Connie speaks Spanish. Are you cold?”

“No.”

“You don’t need to worry so much.”

She laughs.

August’s large hand splayed on the hood of her car. Right there. The silver ring
shining.



Two weeks later and Liv is into work before six, at the break table, her thermos of tea, her egg and cheddar sandwich, up the Pillow already, up a lot these days, and now it feels good to be still, in the quiet, in the cool, considering the corkscrews of sound in the trees.

High above and all about the sawings and buzzings of birds tearing at the air. Hoots, then flat funnelings and nicks of sound. A hollowed thumping. She unwraps her sandwich, she's a good wrapper. In Antigua, not the island, Guatamala, she'd worked in a glass factory wrapping glassware in large sheets of newsprint for shipping. Mindless but she'd always liked folding and squaring the paper around the glass, rolling and hampering it up. Frosting cakes can feel the same.

A neat, finished off feeling.

The egg is perfect, not runny but not quite hard. She trims her bites, determined to make it last, and watches a bug make its way down one of the boards of the table. An earwig. Liv watches how it meanders, searching, seeming to drag its rear pincers. When it encounters the rounded end, it turns back as if from the edge of the world. *Ob my God, the end of things! There must be another way!* She watches it fret its way up and down, making its teeny life-and-death decisions, wondering what her own trailings would look like if viewed by a giant. God. Halting, for sure. More or less straight, but full of hesitations and retreats.

Until lately maybe.

She smiles.

Already Santo has been hired by Berkshire Arboreal, already he's put in his notice at the café. When he'd told her, so excited, it had made her whole summer. They'd taken a walk, Santo said. August had spoken to him about the job—its good points, its disadvantages. She

likes to imagine how August might have thrown his arm around Santo's shoulders, spoken to him like a son.

August had them for dinner too—Santo and Gado, D'America, Pete and Connie from the service—and right there over beers, Pete had offered Santo a job and they'd sealed the deal.

“Oh, Santo!” she'd said. She'd congratulated him extravagantly. Made him blush.

She pops the last bite of egg sandwich into her mouth and studies the long scrapes of cloud against the white sky. It's not going to rain. It will be perfect today, and it will be perfect tomorrow when she and August and Gado and Tuck hike up the meadow to have a their lesson and a picnic.

The earwig is gone, a new bug has appeared. No larger than a fifth of a grain of rice. She bends to study it, her braid almost swiping it away: a bright matte, almost fluorescent yellow, an unearthly beach-glass glowy thing, but tiny, tiny, *tiny* with six little black legs thinner than the thinnest line ever drawn—barely there! And it is moving so surely too, so bravely forward, much surer of itself than the earwig, who is a giant handwringer by comparison. What is it doing out in such a big and careless world?

She watches as it figures its way down a board.

A breeze stirs. Everywhere the trees flip up pale petticoats, a typhoon about this tiny yellow dot, which scuttles between two boards and is gone.

She had, last week at their lesson, thanked August, thanked him profusely for the favor he'd done Santo. Tried to make up for the harsh things she'd said before.

He'd done it for her, and maybe not easily, some sacrifice he doesn't mention is perhaps involved. Still, he had waved her thanks away as if he would have done it anyway.



The next day they trudge down to Pelham's Pike and up the logging road and cut up through the hip-high grasses and the late-summer flowers to August's chair at the top of the meadow. Some of the flowers Liv can identify—the milkweed and bull thistle and the silver rod, the Jerusalem artichoke and the pokeweed with its red stem and dark poison berries. It pleases her to know the names of things. The butterfly weed, which she's just learned. Gado holds the leash and rides on August's shoulders while Tuck trots below until he can't anymore and must be carried.

Gus's plastic Adirondack chair has blown over. He rights it and sets Gado and the puppy down into the seat as if into the bottom of a pail, so high are the grasses all around. He and Liv flatten them with the sides of their boots, toppling the nodding pods and the feathery seed heads and the stalks and bladders, working around and around and around and in, like mowers.

Already it's too hot. They move the blanket into the shade of the cherry, slather Gado and themselves with bug repellent, and begin, at first with the simple nouns that surround them—grasses, flowers, air, creatures, bug, barn, ridge, fix, baseball, weeds, world, headstone. But here it doesn't feel like a Spanish lesson. August offers her the chair, but she lies on the blanket, her long legs stretched out before her, propped up on her elbows so she can look down her body at him from behind her sunglasses.

“Deseo,” she says finally.

“Deseo.” He gives a face. “I don't know.” They're still on vocabulary words.

“Desire,” she says and watches him write it in his notebook.

“Respuesta,” she says and spells it.

He thinks about it, flips back through his lists. Shakes his head, watching her more carefully now, stroking that earlobe with a forefinger. Beautiful long fingers. The shining ring.

She has his attention. “I don’t know,” he says.

“Response. It means response.” She stares hard at him, smiles. He can’t see her eyes. “Responder would be the verb. To respond. You know that one.”

“It sounded familiar.”

Gado has taken Tuck over to the cemetery. They are playing among the headstones. He is a child, does not know what they are. Does he know we die? Liv wonders. Is that why we love him so? Why he’s so irresistible.

August crosses his legs and leans his long face on one hand, smiling at her in the shade of the cherry tree. This is the third time they have practiced Spanish under a tree.

He twists, trying to locate Gado. “Can you see them?”

“Yes, yes. I’ve got my eye on them.”

She reaches, taps his boot with the toe of her own. It is as far as she’s ever gone, against everything she’s promised herself. But he’s so slow. And it’s funny how things come, out of nowhere, out of a beautiful day, out of a change in mood.

Things float between them in the afternoon light – insects, fluffs of seeds, dust.

“Sabes algunas cantas? Te gusta cantar?” he says.

“*Conoces* alguna cancion,” she says. “But the other – te gusta cantar – that’s right.”

She knows a few Spanish songs from her teaching days. She stands and sings about a moralizing crow that scolds the village drunkard so loudly in the morning he can’t sleep. The drunkard tries to kill the crow that cleverly eludes him.

Gado comes over to watch, and Liv acts out the drunken parts to make him laugh. She has a nice singing voice, and she spins as she sings, and when she is finished, she sinks

to the blanket again and August and Gado clap. She looks up at the clouds, but she can still see him. August. His head back, his eyes closed.

Is he thinking of her? She can go no farther than she's gone.

"Jugar con Tuck, Gado," he says. "Entonces comemos."

"Nice," she says faintly, the last shred of their lesson. She closes her eyes too and listens to the insects. Against the inside of her lids green kidney shapes drift against black. The kidney shapes from Gado's green shorts.

God, just come, she thinks at August. *Come to me already!*

She sneezes.

"Bless," August says, and for a moment the inside of her lids go dark and cool, and she opens her eyes and he is moving across the sky and the sun appears again and he is on his back next to her on the blanket. Oh my God, she thinks.

Did I accidentally say it out loud?

"You're younger"—he says it softly—"but better at almost everything important."

The sky is not finished becoming. It's behaving, she thinks, like a much younger sky, a morning sky, and she closes her eyes again to keep quiet while all around the tall grasses whisper and insects buzz and hot chlorophyll fills her head. What now, what now!

And faraway, the upset of air that is an airplane's engine and in the tree above them the high-pitched chittering of a bird.

"What's that?" she asks, her voice almost failing. "That bird."

"What?"

"That bird," she says again, her voice flimsy, separate.

"A warbler," he says, his voice grave and somewhere north. "I think a black-and-white warbler."

He takes her hand, warm, large, and then, Tuck is licking her face, and she must release his hand to push the dog away, but she takes it again, and then the dog is nipping, excited by how Gado is bouncing on August's stomach (straddled, riding a horse), or maybe by how they're finally at his level, or by how Gado is now begging to be lifted, airplane style, and August pushes off his boots (holding her hand until the last moment) and she, eyes closed, is listening, listening among the screaming boy and barking dog to how their physical selves, hers and August's, are now convened, the circuitry establishing itself of its own accord in the blanks between their bodies. And then Gado comes sputtering down, an airplane, on top of her.

"Oops," August says. "Engine failure." When she looks up, he's smiling down at her, so close, August Quirk, the same as always, and new.

They have brought snacks, but she can only manage a few slices of apple. Then the mosquitoes come out in force and even bug repellent is not enough. The way back is a blur. What lies behind them—August's body, the feel of his hand, his voice—and what is still to come makes her almost dizzy, puts her in a mood synchronous with the waning light, which feels run through a sieve, everything coarse caught and held away.

At the top of the road, the ridge becomes visible again, a fountain of gold in the late afternoon sun. Santo comes out of the cabin and Liv reaches up for Gado who sweeps down over Gus's bowed head. She walks toward Santo into the sun, Gado on her hip, the boy's head fallen to her shoulder like something rolled off a shelf. And everywhere the light strewn about, grainy as quartz sand, winking. "He's eaten. It was as good as supper. He's tired," she says. "Sorry we're late."

Santo takes his boy.

"Is it okay?" she asks.

He nods, looks past her at August.

“Santo, I’m sorry,” she calls.

“No problem,” he says and raises an arm.

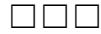
She stands a moment watching as father and son disappear into the cabin. There is the same feeling she’s had before, that she and August have appropriated the boy from a father who does not have the power to stop them, but also that they’re paying now, paying properly. A tender equation, worked out.

And as she turns back, something much greater, that sweeps all misgiving aside: a secure, locked-into-place feeling of having rounded a bend at last, of sailing now into an unspeakably beautiful place—blue, pacific—where all is sweet, where all promises are made material. It is coming now.

It is coming.

“Will you stay for dinner?” August says. A hand at the small of her back, barely a touch, and she nods.

Together they walk across the lawn. She is in it now. She must hold on and let go, be mindful and less guarded—oh my God, breathe. Breathe and remember how the sky went dark the moment August moved across the sun.



In the house a few minutes later, she feels it behind her left ear. She pinches, loses it, feels it again, tries to pull it down the length of a strand of hair, but the hair's caught in her braid and she can't. Then, ah, she has it: tiny dread. She walks, fingers pinched hard on the deer tick. She shows it to August, and washes it down the sink. Runs the hot. Runs the garbage disposal for good measure. Checks the back of her neck, her ankles again.

"Shit," she says. "Would you check my hair? Would you mind?"

"Mind," he says, smiling.

She can feel his body's warmth behind her. He moves her braid to one side, presses her head down. His fingers light warm on the bone behind her ear. Move down to the nape of her neck.

"I keep feeling things," she says.

"Yeah, so do I."

They are gentle, his fingers. He is silent. Only his heat and his breath on her hair, which he pulls a little as he searches. Every now and then he turns her, his hands on her shoulders. At one point, he pulls her closer, so that her face is against his chest. And then, she sighs, relaxes, leans a little into him.

When he is done, he does not step away, but she does, for relief. Her breath still in her throat, everything too warm, her heart pounding.

She feels something on her leg and swings around, spills wine on the floor. Tuck leaps from his crate, barks. But she finds nothing. "I felt another one," she says.

"Go up and check," August says, pushing aside the dog, who is lapping up the wine. "I'll check the dog. The bathroom's at the end of the hall. Take a shower if you want."

In the bathroom, not the one he uses, the one for guests, she undresses. Under the warm spray she runs her hands over every millimeter of scalp, neck, underarms, between her legs, behind and inside her ears, all her attention in the tips of her fingers. Stepping out, she is startled by the sight of her body in the full-length mirror on the back of the door.

She dresses quickly, as if there is a line impatient at the door, runs her fingers through the tangles in her hair and quickly re-braids it. She grabs her boots and socks, pauses in the hall. It is wide, with thick cream carpet. A grown-up house.

She considers the closed doors that line the hall.

She tiptoes to one, opens it, stands a moment, hand forgotten on the knob, synchronizing herself to the stillness within: the twin lampshades, fluted, the white bulbed vase, curtains with their far-faded chrysanthemums. His sister's room, the girl in the picture in the cabin, standing with her parents on the front lawn. The one who died—it must be. And yet also a boy's things: Legos in the corner, nok hockey against the wall, an *Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs* poster above one of the twin beds. She closes the door quietly. Perhaps he's an uncle.

But no, he can't be. His sister had been his only sibling and she'd died at four.

Downstairs she takes up her wineglass again, sips, but must put the glass down again and put her hands, which are trembling, in the pockets of her smock.

"Rice there. Crab cakes here," he says, pointing. He sprinkles breadcrumbs over the crabmeat. "Did you find anything?"

"Did I find anything?" She colors. He'd heard her snooping!

"Ticks, I mean," he says.

"Oh. No, no. And you?"

"I never do. They don't seem to like me."

“Lucky you.”

“There was one on Tuck.”

He doesn't measure. Dry mustard, Worcester sauce, mayonnaise, an egg yolk. He dices a wedge of onion expertly with a good knife on a small board and scrapes it in.

She can think of nothing to say. She plays with the dog on the floor while he cooks. And then it comes to her: the child's room is Gado's. All the toys, his. The bed with the poster where he sleeps when he sleeps over.

As August works, they speak briefly of Lyme. Horror story: a girl, fourteen, who lost her ability to read. “But don't worry, you don't have Lyme,” he says.

“I know. But I live in fear.”

He divides the contents of the bowl into quarters and rolls each into a ball, shapes the cakes, sprinkles each with more breadcrumbs and lays them in the hot oil. He washes everything and dries it and puts it away as he goes. So neat, she thinks.

So unlike her life, in every way.

“You're from Houston, you must like crab,” he says at last, and all at once she sees her old dad, a rope fed through the belt loops in his jeans, holding a can of beer at the boat club on Galveston Bay, kneeling with the net, and she, long brown legs in her short set, lying on the hot boards pulling the string slowly up, hand over hand, evenly, the way he's taught her.

August asks her to make the salad, and it settles her to do something she knows, tear up romaine. He moves about behind her, talking about the house as it used to be, before it was renovated and opened up like this. Their bodies not touching but close. She makes the dressing and he stops to watch, as if it's a test she's taking, his chest only an inch from her arm. “This is nothing special,” she says, pressing garlic into the little jelly jar of olive oil,

anchovy paste, which he has, Dijon mustard, lemon juice, salt, pepper. She fiddles with it, turns and offers him a taste at the end of a spoon. Watching his face as he tastes.

“Perfect,” he says and she laughs.

“Except salt,” he says. “A little more salt,” and reaches around—his chest pressing her shoulder—to pinch more in, pausing for her permission before releasing it. It’s too much, she can’t hardly think.

He lifts the lid on the rice, turns off the heat.

“Did you find what you were looking for upstairs? I heard you walking around.”

She turns to face him, heat rising to her face. “I snooped a little. Sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

“Is that your sister’s room? The one at the end of the hall?”

He opens a drawer, takes out two forks, two napkins. “It used to be.” He takes up the bottle of merlot and refills her glass, and as he does—the neck of the bottle knocking on the rim of her glass—a tremor passes through her.

So what if it is Gado’s room now? So what if Gado sleeps here?

Beyond the kitchen window, the boy’s swing hangs breathless in the maple. Every leaf hangs breathless.

August lights the stub of a candle and they sit in the evening light at the island eating the crab cakes and salad and talking of her time in Central America. When they are done, she rinses, he washes, sleeves rolled up over his nice wrists, his silver ring, his body, his soapy hands so near her own. Any moment he might reach for her.

Is she ready? No.

Yes.

He hangs the kitchen towel on the oven door. Neatly. Centering it. Dinner is over, the kitchen clean. It's time, she thinks.

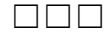
Leave.

"Excuse me," she says. "I'll be right back." And she escapes to the bathroom where she can think. Take his hand? Kiss his cheek? One or the other? Both? *Thank you for a beautiful dinner. I had a lovely time.*

God.

She must simply thank him, walk to her car, and drive away, simple. Just do it, she thinks, and closes her eyes. She's still so nervous!

And then, emerging, as she pauses for her bag (and to say it's time she go, how early she must rise), he's there. Pulling her braid gently down, a bell cord, pulling down so her chin lifts and then he's lowering his face to hers and kissing her—softly, warmly, carefully, as if to mark his mouth perfectly onto hers. Chaste, no tongue, slow, but over too soon: expected and a surprise. He lifts away, still holding her braid. Waits for her to open her eyes, smiles when she does, releases her. "Stay," he whispers, and she, a bell that has been rung, still pouring out waves of sound, nods.



The next morning Gus pulls her barstool between his open legs and she lays a hand on the side of that long face and kisses him. She empties herself of the kiss as she would water from a glass, and still she's telling herself, attend the signs.

He brushes the end of her braid across her mouth.

"Let's take it slow, Gus," she says. "Let's be smart."

He pulls her barstool closer. "Not too smart."

It's like swimming in breakers, she thinks, or camera bulbs flashing. I can hardly look him in the eye for all the brightness.

His jeans, his old t-shirt, hair still on end, coffee on his breath, barefoot. She'd known how to make an August cake, but that was before. He is a tall man standing by the wall, apart, not dancing, deliberating, wounded even, and yet his hands on her hips, so sure of himself in some ways.

"I've got to go to work."

Something sharp, broken, embedded where you cannot see.

First you taste this, then the next, then the next. Still a dry, crumbly cake requiring a sauce or a cream. Still the earthy hints. But then, maybe not. Would a molten center be absurd? He is like that, liquid in the middle, his hands so full of comfort. The flavors must release late. Surprise.

Richer than she'd thought.

"It's funny how we're both named for months," Liv says. "My middle name is June, and yours is August."

"Elizabeth June?" he asks.

"Olivia."

“Olivia June. I like it. It’s a country name.”

“My mother’s sister is June.”

“I was born on the last day of the month.”

“And that’s why you’re August?”

“Yes.”

“If on the last day, you’re barely August.”

“That’s true.” He smiles. “I’m barely him at all.”

When they part, he does not say he’ll call. She waits for it, but he does not say. He will or he won’t. She takes his hand. “Come to my house for dinner on your birthday. I’ll bake you a cake.”

“Ah. Another cake.”

When she leaves: “I’ll see you Friday, if not before.”

She carries that, that *if not before*, all day, a full basket, barely aware of driving, of parking, of getting through work. Like Prince Val, her old Sunday morning favorite, she feels capable of anything with this strange new strength she has.

PART 3

Celia has dug up one of her gigantic Frances Williams hostas. She had tried to divide it with a shovel, but now she is going at it with a hand saw as Liv holds the giant leaves apart. It seems a brutal thing to do, but Celia says the hosta will be fine, that they can get at least four from this giant.

Another plain, long-leafed hosta sits in a clump of dirt on a blue tarp spread nearby, along with a few clumps each of Shasta daisies and a few more of black-eyed Susans. Once Celia saws the Frances Williams in half, she saws the halves in half. Three of the clumps go on the tarp, and one back in Celia's bed.

"I could give you a nice cutting of wilegia," Celia is saying as they cross the street, the tarp held between them. "I'm not sure how to propagate from a cutting, but you could look it up. It's a great way to go. Much more interesting than buying from Foster's."

"And cheaper."

"And slower. But what's the rush?"

"Thanks so much, Celia, for this," Liv says. "Really. An empty garden is a terrible thing."

“Oh God, these things. Phffffggghhhh,” Celia says. She’s got on her Ray Bans, a tight white t-shirt with a pink bra underneath. “They’ll grow like weeds. In a few years, you’ll be trying to give them away too.”

“I didn’t realize you were so into gardening.”

“I’m a mere beginner. What’s a wilegia?”

“A shrub,” says Celia. “Shiny leaves. I’ll show you. Pretty trumpet-like pinkish flowers. Can’t kill it. Or I haven’t been able to.”

And they set the tarp down and stroll along Liv’s border, deciding where the new plants should go.

“Any advice is welcome,” Liv says. There’s the precious tree peony. A columbine. A A coneflower. Two irises. And Santo’s dahlias. “I don’t have much but what I have I’ve just sort of thrown in.”

“How about a tree about here-ish?” Celia says, circling the air with a pink fingernail. “You know, to soften up this line, create a little structure? What do you think? Something small.”

“A shadblow?” Liv says.

Celia looks at her. “Yeah, right. Perfect. You’d have to pull the border out a little, do a little curvy thing here.” She walks out the new edge. “I could help you dig it out if you want.”

“That’s so sweet, Celia, really.” Liv sinks to the ground, lies spread eagle, looking at the white sky. “I get a little bit, and I always want more. Isn’t that the way it is? Hungry, hungry, I’m so hungry.”

“True dat.”

“So now all I need to do is steal a shadblow. And then steal some more plants to go into the bigger bed you’ve just created in my head.”

She gets up and they dig the holes, shovel in compost, also Celia’s, and Liv goes around the side of the house to fill her pail at the spigot. “I could be into propagating by seed, I think,” she says when she comes back.

“It’s the way to go.”

Celia stands in her Muck boots, shoves her sunglasses up into her hair. “And all this time I thought you were a strictly food person.”

“I am a food person.”

“Yeah, but you volunteer at the free clinic. You help Santo find houses. You’ve got your mother. You’re into gardening now, and believe me, you’ll get more into it, not less, that’s the way it is with plants—”

“I helped Santo find *one* house. That’s over. And my mother... is my mother.” Liv leans in, pulls a few weeds, tosses them over a shoulder. “It didn’t feel right to ship her out to California. I thought about it, though. I even did a little research. I appreciate everything you said.”

Celia jumps on the shovel. “And now there’s Misha.”

“What?”

Making Liv’s holes a little wider. “Misha. You guys are going out, right? Who told me that? Liv, you’re going to need to seriously condition this soil. I mean it. Maybe even double dig.”

“Misha and I are friends, Celia. We are just friends.”

A week ago he’d shown up at her house, and they’d gone for a walk. It had been nice, harmless. She’s going to tell him about Gus, but it’s important to choose the right moment.

They'd sat on her porch after, drinking beers. He hadn't tried to hold her hand or kiss her or anything, they'd just talked. She's pretty sure anyway that he's given up on anything serious, that they're just friends. In fact, he'd spoken of Ann Arbor, said he wanted to get more serious about his future, maybe open a café. "Hey, join the club," she'd said, feeling older, wiser, and he'd asked her about that, her plans and dreams.

"How about Angel Cakes," she says, bannerling it across the sky. It had been the name for her place.

"That's nice. Angel Cakes. I like it. Sort of Heaven-related."

Her café she'd planned all through the second half of her twenties and the first half of her thirties, down to the chairs, down to the art on the walls, but it feels so chalky these days, so bleached out, the image harder and harder to make out. Is it an old dream that's dried up, that no longer applies, or is it just neglected like a plant without enough water and sunshine?

Misha. He'd texted her twice since then. The notes are still in the Viking.

Liv pours water from the pail into the hole, and Celia places the plant and pulls the dirt back over its root. Liv comes after, scratching in the Plant-tone.

"Just so you know, people think you're going out with Misha," Celia says, patting the dirt around the last daisy.

"Well, I'm not."

"Yeah, but Misha might be one of the people who thinks you're going out with Misha. So... "

"I should talk to him," she says. I'll do it today, she thinks. After this.

Her neighbor's terrier wanders over. Morris. Liv falls back on the grass again, takes the dog on her stomach, scratches him between the ears, thinking of Gus. She closes her eyes. How he'd pulled her braid. Kissed her.

His bed.

Oh, my God, she thinks, and turns on her side, to spill Gus thoughts out onto the grass.

She looks up at Celia, shields her eyes from the sun.

"Do I not seem like a food person to you? Is that what you're saying?"

Celia turns from considering the bed. "No, I'm not saying that."

"Because I am, Celia. I am a devoted baker. A completely devoted food person."

Celia stands there, a hand over her heart. "No, I only mean that when you first came on, I didn't think I'd have you for very long. Remember those days when you were so serious about starting your own place?"

"Celia, nothing's changed. I'm still serious about it."

"You are? Oh." She turns back to the plants. "I thought you'd given up on that."

"What?"

"I just said I thought you'd given up on all that."

Liv sits. "No. *No*."

"Okay," Celia says and turns back to the garden. "Okay. I didn't know."

□□□

“Arent Knorr?”

Gus has left a message on her phone. When she calls him back, he’s on the way to Portland.

“He’s the one I told you about,” he says. “The one who taught me about clocks. He lived in the cabin when I was a kid?”

Arent Knorr is having surgery at Mercy Hospital in Portland. On his way into a Hannaford grocery store, he tripped in the parking lot, fractured his hip.

“I have to go up there,” Gus says. “I’ll be gone a few days.”

“I know a little about broken hips, Gus. Where is he going to go after surgery. He can’t recuperate in the hospital.”

“I don’t know,” Gus says. But Liv knows. Arent Knorr is old. He won’t be going back to live alone in his house in Maine.

Two days later, on Sunday, Gus calls from Mercy Hospital. He is on the fourth floor, looking out a window onto Winter Street, he says. Arent is in surgery.

“Where are you?”

“Me?” Liv says. “Nowhere. Here. Walking home from work. Passing the antique store. You know, Cooper’s.”

“Tell me. What do you see?”

“What do I see?” She stops, looks around. “I see a biscuit on a bench. I see a red cocktail skewer, a garment rack full of clothes outside. I hear a piano.” She pauses, listening. It’s from an apartment over her head. The windows are open. She imagines a bowed head, long fingers moving across the keys. “But maybe it’s a CD.”

“What else?”

She begins walking. “An empty pack of Newports. I just stepped on it. Okay, now I’ve picked it up. Empty. Too bad. A red Civic. A bumper sticker that says, D.A.D.D.R. Dads Against Daughters Dating Republicans.”

Gus laughs. “I would be one of those.”

Would you? she thinks. Be a dad?

“Will you be back by Tuesday?”

“Tuesday?” he says, and she knows right away he’s forgotten.

“Your birthday dinner.”

She counts five steps before he answers.

“You forgot.”

“No, no. I didn’t. I’ll be home by then. What time you want me?”



Monday, home from the store, Liv puts away groceries. She puts on music, dusts, vacuums. She knocks mud off her sneakers and puts them out on the mat. Washes her sheets, cleans out the fridge, washes the window over the kitchen sink that looks out to the back yard. Then, looking out, decides to mow the yard. Front and back. She cleans the rest of the windows, every last one. His house is always so spanking.

She studies the Brazilian fish stew recipe and chops the peppers and onion so it will be easy to put together when he arrives at five on Tuesday, tomorrow, his first time at her house. They'll take a walk up the Pillow, or maybe walk around the neighborhood.

She'll leave the cilantro and parsley for him to chop. She measures out the corn meal for the polenta, washes the lettuce and the arugula, spins them dry, wraps them in paper towels and puts them in plastic bags in the fridge. She makes the dressing and halves the cherry tomatoes and sets the tomatoes in the dressing to marinate. She has bought two good bottle of cabernet sauvignon, way too expensive, recommended by the man in the wine shop. She washes dirt from the walls, from the doors. She sets the table. At eleven Monday night she remembers the bathroom and scours the shower, puts away all her bottles. Puts the bathmat in the washer.

Stands, looking around, her heart flailing.

At midnight she makes the August cake.

Flour, cocoa powder, ground toasted hazelnuts, baking powder, baking soda, salt, sugar, buttermilk, eggs, oil and vanilla. The pan she dusts with cocoa powder. The batter is liquidy, is only baked for 17 to 19 minutes, creating a cake that collapses when taken out of the oven. When it is still hot she brushes it with an espresso syrup made with sugar, water, and espresso powder, then fills the hole in the middle with a salted caramel spiked with chili and

sprinkles the top with more ground toasted hazelnuts. It is not the cake she had originally envisioned. It is not dry and crumbly at all, but wet and dense and very rich. She will add Scotch and sugar to the cream, which she will whip and serve next to it.

After work Tuesday she visits her mother. Everything is okay, Vitalija says, but could she have a day off on the following Monday?

“Yes,” Liv says. Anything, Vitalija. Anything, anything!

No chickory in the ditches anymore, but she cuts some of the leaves off the largest Frances Williams. She picks up the hake and shrimp at Packard’s, the good store, cuts up the hake. She takes a bath, long, slow, washes her hair, rubs herself with oil, a little orange, bergamot. She’ll add the fish at the last minute. The polenta she’ll also put together at the end.

Stop, she thinks. Lie down.

The house is as clean as it’s ever been.

At around five, she remembers the manicure, hopes he’ll be late. It is then, trying to hold her hand steady, pushing up her cuticles, that it finally sinks in, how nervous she is.

And why?

And then finally a knock. “Come in!”

A man at the door, not Gus, peering through the screen, hand over his brow. “Hey, you’re home.”

Misha.

“Oh, my God! Hi!”

He has a bouquet of flowers. Expensive, from a florist.

“How beautiful,” she says over and over, heart banging, fumbling in cabinets. She’s gotten rid of all her vases, and Gus will come, walk in any minute, and she hasn’t spoken to Misha. She put it off, Meant to do it, but hasn’t.

She has treated him badly. It comes to her at once, whole, a clear voice in her ear. She trims the stems, arranges the flowers in a jar, fluffs them like a wig on a stand, cares nothing. Her big hosta leaves are for Gus, for their big love, in the center of the table.

“You cleaned,” Misha says, turning. He’s been here so many times now, and Gus hasn’t. How strange.

“It’s nice.” He’s nervous.

“Do you think?”

It genuinely pleases her, the compliment, but only for a moment. She moves out from the kitchen, so as not to draw him into it, it is so tight. Maybe thinking that she’s moving to him, he reaches for her, and she offers her hand so that he will not embrace her.

“I’ve been cleaning. Thank you.”

His notes, his flowers, his texts. Oh God.

She has treated him badly.

His hand is damp, his eyes dart away from hers and back again. It must all be in her face. Coming here like this with the flowers has taken a lot, she cannot toss him out, she’s been heartless.

He has hold of her hand.

“Misha—”

—“I hadn’t heard from you”—he smiles bravely— “so I decided to come. I need to talk to you.”

She squeezes his hand, pulls away, goes to the door and quickly scans the street. “Excuse me a minute,” she says and in her bedroom checks her phone. Stands staring out the window at the old quince.

How can this be happening? How can Misha be here and Gus not here? She had told him five. Twice she’d told him five, and yet it’s almost six and there is nothing—no email, no text, nothing.

“Let’s have a glass of wine,” Liv says and brushes by his answer on her way to the kitchen. Pours two small glasses, not the cabernet.

“Let’s sit outside,” she says and nods him outside to the porch.

“You smell amazing,” he says as they settle on the top step, the air heavy with the speech he is about to make. The speech she waits for. Oh hurry, she thinks. Her eyes on the corner.

“I might as well come out with it,” Misha says, looking miserable, his arms around his knees. “You know what I’m going to say.”

His long pale fingers, his smell, which is like the inside of a drawer. He turns to her, angled, his knees touching her thigh. Look at him.

“You’re seeing someone else, aren’t you?” he says. Hands clutched, knuckles white. “You’re waiting for him, aren’t you?”

“I am, Misha.”

“Is he late?”

“Yes.”

Something along the line of his mouth breaks. Don’t cry, she thinks. Don’t.

“How late?”

“Very, I’m afraid,” and she lets herself look down the street one last time.

“You should have told me, Liv. You must have known how I feel about you.”

He’s right, of course.

“Misha, you must know how much I like you. You’re talented and funny and so sweet. And good, Misha. Really, such a good person. But...”

“But.” He turns away. “I knew it, how stupid I am, I shouldn’t have come.” He works the church of his hands back and forth. “Stupid, stupid.”

“No, no, not stupid. It’s my fault. I’m so sorry. I led you on. I told myself we were friends, and I liked being friends, but I see now how unfair it was. I was fooling myself, and you. You have every right to be furious.” She puts a hand on his knee, quickly removes it. “It’s my fault.”

Do not look at the corner.

“How long have you been—” He waves limply toward the kitchen.

“Not that long. Long enough.”

“So it’s serious.”

“It has felt serious to me.”

He hangs his head.

They sit like that and say nothing.

Gus does not come. She goes inside, checks the time, six-thirty five. Still no message. Gets the bottle, the bad one, comes back with it and a cigarette, lit. Refills both glasses.

“Have another drink. Have a smoke.”

“I didn’t know you smoked,” Misha says.

“Only once in a while.” She doesn’t care what he thinks.

He reaches for her hand, and she lets him hold it. “This fool,” he says. “I would never stand you up. Do I know him? Who is he?”

She shakes her head. But what he's said is true. He never would.

"I remember you at the staff party, on the futon. Remember?"

"I haven't quit remembering."

"I was in an awful mood. And you were so sweet. And you made everything better."

He's playing with her fingers, twisting her grandmother's pearl ring. She's attracted to the screwy ones, the wounded ones, the ones with problems. Hadn't she promised to pay attention to the signs?

Had there been signs?

"I'm in love with you, Liv," Misha says. He sounds sick.

"Oh, God, Misha." She lays her head on his knee again, lets it rest there. "I'm so sorry."

When he lays his hand on her head, she picks it up again. "I'm honored, truly. A man like you."

The veins in his temples blue, the thin skin. She thinks of his mother, how much she must love him. Her delicate boy, hair the color of pigeons.

"With me you would never be sorry like you are now with him."

"Misha, I'm sorry *now*. My heart is just... it's all tied up. What can I say?"

And he makes a tiny moan and jumps to his feet, begins to pace up and down the porch, then seems to throw himself down the stairs. "I should go. I'm going."

"Fall in love with someone else," she says and at once hears how cruel a thing it is to say.

"You're perfect for me." He comes back, pulls her to standing, and she does not resist. She knows he wants to kiss her, and for a moment she looks at his mouth and considers it, almost lets herself fall into it.

She watches him pull out of her drive. She cares nothing for him. When he is gone, she throws her wine into the dirt.

Two hours late.

She is certain something horrible has happened. This knowledge comes over her like a shadow; she goes stiff with fear. She calls Santo, who does not answer. She calls Gus, but only his message comes on.

All her beautiful dinner, she puts away. Plans gone to ash. She crawls into bed, pulls a pillow over her head. She will not check her phone, will not move until he calls, or comes, until she at least knows *something*. If he doesn't come or call within the hour, she will call the hospital. If he's not at the hospital, she'll stay here under the covers, without moving, as penance. As punishment. She'll cure herself.

□□□

He calls at almost eight. He's fine. He's on his way. Seems confused at her worry.

"You didn't get a call?" he says.

"A call? You're kidding, right?"

"From a guy named Benny Duggins?"

"Who?"

"Benny Duggins. He was supposed to have called you. Are you sure he didn't call? I gave him your cell number."

"Gus. I've checked my phone a million times. I have been out of my mind."

"That bastard. Liv. I'm so sorry. I hit a fox on the way down the mountain. I didn't want to leave it. And I couldn't call because I was out of range. This fellow happened by, this Duggins, he pulled over, and he promised that he'd call the animal welfare guy when he got in range. Clyde Monson. And I told him to call you too and explain, that I'd be there as soon as I could. I wrote both numbers down for him on the back of a receipt."

She's sitting cross-legged on her bed, a hand on her forehead. "You've been on the side of the road with a fox all this time?"

"Yes."

"A fox?"

"You don't believe me."

"I thought you'd stood me up."

"No, darling, no. I'm sorry I put you through it."

When she doesn't answer, he says, "It had a broken leg. It would have gone back into the woods. It would have died. Liv?"

“Yeah?”

“I’m on your stoop, if you want to come out.”

Out of love, she thinks. Out of love he saved the fox. Maybe out of love had come to her house, out of love called her darling.

She sits on the top step beside him, exactly as she and Misha sat, only she is where Misha had been, and Gus is in her spot. But Misha’s still there, a dark nimbus.

“I’m sorry,” Gus says again, for the one hundredth time, and sets a hand on her knee, and she can’t help thinking how she had set a hand on Misha’s knee and said the same thing. I’m sorry.

“It’s okay.” She wants it to be.

“You smell amazing,” he says and puts his arm around her, kisses her. “You’re upset. I’m sorry I frightened you.”

“No, no, don’t say that.” She breathes, leans into him, her head on his shoulder.

“Are you hungry? I’ll give you a hint. The correct answer would be yes.”

“I’m ravenous. Truly. Hugely.”

“Okay, good.” She smiles. “Happy birthday.”

At the door he asks if she wants him to take off his shoes. “Okay,” she says. She is barefoot.

He steps in, as if into a garden, as if something might come over him. A spell.

“Oh, this is nice,” he says, and she is immensely pleased.

“It’s small,” she says, thinking of his house.

“Small and nice.”

The neat green mid-century sofa she’d found at a junk shop, the wrought iron coffee table, a tidy rattan rocker. A thin seagrass rug on the floor, a TV in the corner. Nothing

special, except that she has chosen everything so carefully. The walls a sand color called Galveston, which is why she'd bought it.

She sets him to work on the parsley and cilantro. She tries to know it all as he does. The hollow-sounding wind chime outside. The Depression-era green on the trim. The calendar by the tan wall phone, the old avocado Formica from the seventies and the sheet linoleum. One of her collages, a small one, by the fridge. The dripping sink.

"Little by little?" he says, for LITTLE BY LITTLE is painted a fainter shade of green over the arched doorway in Desdemona type, outlined in blue. She'd painted it when she'd first come.

"Yeah."

The fish stew must be layered in the pot, everything is cut and ready, and it is fast work setting it up. She puts the lid on and it cooks in twenty minutes, the shrimp turning orange-pink on top of the green cilantro.

She has been taken by something, some melancholy. Will their affair end? Will it be another mortal thing, beautiful in youth, but fading into claustrophobia, irritation, a desire to flee? Will he hold on past the hard places? Will she? This fear is so familiar. She can feel herself skirt around, push it to the side.

Over dinner they discuss the fox.

"Was it making noise?" she asks.

"No. I could see the front leg was broken. It was kind of hanging."

"Was there blood?"

"No. No blood." He smiles at her. "We can talk about something else."

"How did you know to call the animal person?"

"Oh, Clyde. He's a friend of mine. It's what he does. Very knowledgeable guy."

“You had his number in your phone?”

“Yeah. He came, but it took a while. He was on another call.”

“How did you keep the fox from running away?”

“Whenever it tried, I got between it and the woods. It couldn’t run. I talked to it.

This stew is excellent. Really.”

“You talked to it. What did you say?”

“You know. I said it would be all right. I said to hang in there. Fox talk.”

“Did your friend take it away?”

“He sedated it. Yeah. He’s got a whole setup. Let’s talk about something else.”

“I’m glad you stopped, Gus, really. Good for you.”

“Bullshit, you are not. By the way, I can fix that drip.”



They wash up the supper things. She goes into her bedroom, where the cake is hidden, and puts candles in it. Four big ones, four little ones. When she brings it in, when he turns to look up at it, there is a wild lurch inside like she used to feel leaving the tree and arcing out on the rope over the green water of the Guadalupe when she was a girl. She watches his first bite.

“Good God,” he says.

“Do you like it?”

“Do I like it.” He is shaking his head. “It’s beyond fantastic, Liv.”

She’s happy past all reason. “I made it up. It’s called an August Cake.”

Later, after they have had their cake, after they have sat on the porch and talked, he comes from the bathroom, stands behind her chair, stands there with his hands, palm up on her shoulders. They don’t speak. The night has been long, for her the fear and joy equally balanced. She has her cup of tea. They are waiting for his coffee to steep in the French press.

Finally she exhales. She leans back into him, closes her eyes, lets everything drain away. He sets his hands over her ears and kisses her head, wipes away that kiss with a thumb, she can feel this, it is a move he’s made many times. As if to erase and kiss again more perfectly.

“Come here,” he says, and pulls her up and turns her around. The chair falls and they both reach for it. They kiss, his hand pulling out the band in her hair, unplaiting her braid, the other on her back, under her shirt, large and warm, unhooking her bra. She can feel herself slip loose like a knot, she can feel herself slip loose and undo as he presses a thumb along her jaw to draw the curve of her throat and neck and then his hand is over her breasts and down her stomach and down. He stretches his arms down both sides of her, sandwiches

her, squeezes, and then he's pulling at her clothes and his own, and then she is too, his fingers between her legs in the juice, with the gods at table. "Come here," he mutters again as if from a great distance. It is small, the couch a few steps, the living room so near away.

They don't make it. They fuck against the back of the couch and finish on the floor gasping, laughing. When they are tired of lying on the floor, they pour the coffee and she leads him outside, light of moon splashed extravagantly on everything. She shows him the dandelions that have come back as if they'd never been pulled at all. The ferns. The daylilies. The hosta. She watches him.

"Hosta," he says, nudging the plant with his toe. "Daylilies and hosta, the chicken and rice of New England gardens."

"Do you think I'm serious?" she asks. She fingers one of the large ridged leaves, still watching his face. "Do you think I'll ever open my café?"

For she has told him everything.

"Yes, I do. It's not quite the time." He looks at her askance, as if he knows something. "But it will come."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

They walk about the garden, looking at things. She explains to him Celia's idea for a tree, but then, seeing Santo's dahlia, she begins again to worry. She tells him of their short conversation in the café's parking lot. "Ana and Domingo, they've pulled away from him," she says. "They're jealous, or Domingo is."

"That's no surprise."

"He's been fortunate. He lives in your cabin, he works on your crew. He makes more than all of them now."

“It’s okay. He’ll make new friends.”

“But it makes him sad, it troubles him. America, what does it mean? What must he give up? Who is he if he is not the poor *pollo* from Moclin?”

“He’s still that, never fear.”

“But Gus—”

“Come on, don’t.”

They walk about silently in the moonlight, everything an idea of itself. The flowers thoughts of flowers, nodding in the dark. The long-blooming lime green *Nicotiana* that she loves. Her first annuals.

“Do you want to go for a walk?” she says. “See the neighborhood? It was part of my plan.”

He puts one of his long fingers on her face like a blind man, on her lips. His fingers smell like her, and coffee.

They walk across the cold grass, down the street.

Barefoot. Cups full.



Liv peers into the murk of the living room where her mother sits “reading” Anna Karenina, finger in the book now, vague smile, the reaching, flapping hand. That old feeling of not wanting to let go, to hold on and on to the one she’s always wanted more of.

“Hi, Mom, it’s me,” Liv says and waits. It takes her mother longer and longer.

“Hi Olivia.”

There’s a shut-in smell, of old cooking laced with damp basement concrete, though her mother and Vitalija don’t smell it.

“Vitalija says everything’s been okay. Though as usual you haven’t been sleeping.”

“I sleep,” her mother says. “I always sleep fine.”

“The Scotch keeps you awake.”

“That’s not true. I only have a drink every now and then.”

Drop it, Liv thinks. She comes about every other day, usually on her way up the mountain, she has not yet mentioned Gus.

“I’ve brought you something bitter and something sweet,” Liv says and sets the New York Times on her mother’s lap.

A hand drifts down. “Oh,” her mother says faintly and fingers the inky flag.

“That’s the bitter,” Liv says and collapses on the love seat that she has made her spot, feet up, head on the arm. Why is she always sprawling on her mother’s furniture? She’s not a sprawler, is she? She doesn’t sprawl anywhere else.

Well, from here she can see the spruce she loves. Its heavy green skirts and reaching arms. It is so immense, so grand, she thinks, and yet part of it has died, that’s clear. It’s such a shame, she says. It will not last.

But nothing will. And nothing here for very long.

Her mother's voice has grown slight and fluty, she's often hard to hear. If she isn't up to talking, Liv will simply lie here, gaze up at the spruce, provide her presence and hope it is a solace. She daydreams of her life, of Gus, whose bed most days she has risen from. Sometimes she sleeps. Or reads herself while her mother ploughs her way through Anna Karenina, which she has been at steadily, every day, since Vitalija came bearing it as a gift for the lady she was to work for, the lady, she was told, who loves to read.

"Mom? Do you want to know what the sweet thing is?"

Her mother looks up, seems surprised to see her. "What?"

"When I came, I said I had something bitter and something sweet. The bitter is the New York Times"—she points—"in your lap." Her mother looks down, seems surprised to see that too. "The sweet thing is, I've met someone."

"You've what?"

"Met someone, Mom. I've met someone."

Radiance breaks across her mother's face, and the book falls away, the page she is on, lost. "A man?"

"Yes, a man."

"Oh, tell me!"

"Well," Liv says, as if offering a plateful of chocolates. "He's tall, that's the first thing. And straight and strong, he's like a tree. He has the most beautiful eyes. He likes nice shirts. And he cooks."

"Oh, my."

"And he's kind, and smart, and quiet. He doesn't talk a lot. Certainly not about himself. He's a bit of a loner. He was an only child—well, he had a sister."

"Well, that's nice. A girl."

“She died. When she was little. I’m not sure what happened. He won’t talk about it.”

Her mother reaches for her glass of lemonade. Leans and leans but cannot reach. Liv rises, hands the glass to her. “If he won’t talk about it after all these years, it’s probably something.”

“What do you mean?”

“But you’re not a loner. You’ve got lots of friends.”

She smiles. “Not that many. Well, I don’t know, he has a few important people. But he’s quiet.”

“Well then you can help him be a part of things,” her mother says and smiles.

She can still hit it dead on, her mother can, sometimes. Even now.

“His name is August.”

“Oh my, that’s a lovely name.”

“I call him Gus,” she says, and an invisible wave crests in her. Her Gus.

“He’s back in Portland now,” Liv says. “He has a friend in the hospital who’s recovering from surgery.”

“He’s a loner, but not you. You like to be—” Her mother fumbles for the words.

“In the thick of things, in the crush, yes, I suppose I do,” Liv says, thinking of Guatamala, of the hot kitchen. “Maybe he does need that from me.”

Ah, these days. These rare and beautiful days when she and her mother can actually converse.

“Of course he does.”

“He can tell you all about your trees, Mom. Like that spruce out there that’s dying? He would know how to make it well.” And then, compelled by something, a desire to

impress, to add up to something in her mother's eyes, Liv adds, "He went to forestry school at Yale."

"Oh. Yale." A hand to her throat, the same sudden sun breaking across her face.

It feels cheap to mention it, to willfully thrill her mother in this way. Well, anyway, it thrills her too, though she hates that it does. "Now he fixes clocks."

"He fixes what?"

Clocks."

"Clocks?"

She smiles at her mother's surprise. "Yes. I know."

"He must be poor as a titmouse."

Church mouse, titmouse, what is the difference?

"No."

The eagerness she feels to tell her mother about the house, the land, how very, very much land, it shames her, she feels craven, yet she can't keep it from gushing out.

"He must have an awful lot of money," her mother says.

Liv has spoken to no one of this, but now she describes the annuity from Gus's grandfather, the loft in Tribeca left to him by his father. Her mother will forget it all, Etch-a-Sketch, it doesn't matter.

"I think there must be more," she says, "but I don't know. He doesn't talk about it."

And Misha rises again in her mind, Misha, whose notes have ceased, whom she has not heard from nor seen since Gus's birthday.

"Heavens," her mother says. "Lucky you."

"It makes me feel dirty to talk of it."

"Nonsense, Olivia. It's real life."

“His father was a landscape painter,” she adds, ridiculously, as if that will cleanse her. “Whatever he lives on now, Gus I mean, it’s relatively small. He’s careful. Anyway, those things, they aren’t important.”

Her mother laughs, picks up Anna Karenina. “Oh, they’re important all right,” she says. “You know very well how important they are.”

And of course she’s right. How much of the attraction Liv feels for Gus is in what he makes possible for her?

“I don’t think I’m using him. Am I using him?” she asks her mother.

“Of course you are. Big deal. He’s using you, too. That’s love.”

Is it? And is she? How can she take one motive and untangle it from another? What is she hoping for exactly? Is it craven of her to care about his money? Will it harm the tender thing coming into life between them?

Vitalija is at the door. Shy Vitalija. Slow to smile, feet turned out, knees turned in. Vitalija with her waifish hair about her worried face like a little ragged cap, every strand a different length, as if cut with a knife. Her clothes are bought too big off the Goodwill rack, they slide off her shoulders, down her hips. Vitalija, walking softly through the small house, blank-faced, baggy butt, barely audible. “Would you like some tea?”

“Excuse me?” Liv leaning toward her.

“Would you like some tea?”

“No, no, thanks, Vitalija.”

“Or some cake?”

“No, thanks.”

Liv is plied with hot tea and grocery store cake every time she comes, which is three or four times a week, after work, on her way up to Gus’s. In the beginning, Liv brought her

own good cake, but her mother prefers the discount crumb cakes Vitalija buys in the Price Chopper. Clara sings praises over what Vitalija does with the little fists of frozen chicken breasts ziplocked in the freezer, though all Vitalija seems to do is slip them into soup, whole: for chicken broth (more efficient!). Cutting them into tiny danks when they're done. Her mother clucks over the mayonnaisey lunches, the bland dinners, praising Vitalija as if she were a five-star chef. In the refrigerator: browning iceberg lettuce, enormous (a better deal!) sodden cucumbers, tomatos pink and hard as softballs. The quart-sized (cheaper!) Peppercorn Ranch.

One afternoon Liv had made a shrimp curry that was very good, but Clara only picked at it (too spicy, is that ginger?), and now Liv lets it be.

“Do you need to go to the bathroom, Clara?” Vitalija asks. They have their own relationship. They take the good days where they can.

Vitalija helps her to her walker and together they make their slow way, an ordeal that can take twenty minutes. Sometimes, when her mother is feeling down, Vitalija brings the portable commode out to the living room and her mother pulls down her slacks (this too an ordeal) and pees into the plastic catch (ping! ping!) while gazing out the picture window. Her feet have grown pointy in the pretty sandals she insists on wearing. Under the sheets in the morning they seem glued on—livid, rigid—at the end of her ankles.

While her mother's in the bathroom, Liv drifts off. When she wakes, her mother is back sitting on the couch as if she'd never left. She stares out the picture window. The yard is large and abuts a wood. Often they see wildlife, several times a mother black bear with a cub in tow, and three separate foxes. It is fun to search. Once they saw a confused-looking muskrat hobbling around in circles.

Squirrels everywhere.

“Look!” her mother cries, and Liv bolts upright, terrified. A coyote stands at the edge of the woods. They watch as it sniffs the grass, the air, and finally as it steps back into the underbrush.

“A goat! Vitalija, I saw a goat!” Liv’s mother screams, and Vitalija rushes in.

“A goat?” says Vitalija.

Liv is laughing. “That wasn’t a goat. It was a coyote, Mom.”

“It was a goat!” Her mother outraged at being challenged when she is the expert, the one who saw it first.

Liv looks out at where the coyote had been. Sure, she thinks, okay.

“A goat that lives in the woods?”

She looks at Vitalija, shrugs.

“Okay. Maybe it was. Probably it was. Good eye, by the way, Mom. Very good eye.”

Her mother nods curtly, a nod that says, ‘You bet I’ve a good eye, you bet your sweet life I do.’ She scans the yard for the next twenty minutes, sharp-eyed now, vigilant as a Marine.

The goat is a gift. The goat they talk about for weeks.



On Wednesday after work Liv goes to her favorite shop, finds a blouse, puts it on her MasterCard, never mind, feels rich. They're going out for dinner Thursday night, and Friday she's taking a day off work so she and Gus can go to Portland to collect Arent.

She lies out in the autumn sun like a teenager. She is to meet Gus at the restaurant, a place on the mountain called Merry Hill Tavern. Driving there, leaves skitter on all points across the road. The crowns of the maples crimson, it seems, overnight.

She wears gray merino over the lace of the new blouse. They're in a corner, at a window. On the table, he holds her hands. He asks about her life in Houston, about her mother and father, about her college years, her first marriage. She talks and talks. She tries to turn the conversation to him, but he wants to talk only about her.

At ten after ten they're the last table out.

The dark forms of trees across the road, the river near, they can smell it as they walk out to the restaurant's parking lot. The moon, her little car next to his truck in the far corner. All night she's been some other self, high-test, her best: juggling plates, balancing fine intangibles on the end of a stick.

He lowers his tailgate, sits, pulls her in. As they kiss, as he reaches under her blouse, she feels him go hard. In the cold shadows, she unfastens his belt, unzips his pants, takes him in her hand, and he lifts her, arranges her, all through dinner she's been thinking of it, and then he's inside her. The old shocks squeak, scrape, as they quietly fuck and laugh under the moon's shiny blade.

On the way home, they pull off the road and get out and stand together. What are they looking at? Nothing. They watch on the far side of a field the tsunami of dark trees

that has frozen in its crest. Beyond the trees, the hills, and beyond the hills the sky with its
cloudsome dirigibles. The land, ancient, always reminding her of the dead.

“Vitalija, what’s wrong?”

“Livia, Livia!” The soft whining voice, so quiet Liv cannot hear.

Liv has to talk over her. “Vitalija, say it slowly. Speak up.” She holds the phone out so she can see the time: 1:46. It’s the night of Merry Hill Tavern, the night of sex in the back of his truck. But they must get up early and drive to Portland.

“Your mother fell.” Vitalija is crying. “Bleeding. I can’t get her off the floor.”

“She fell?”

“Yes!” Vitalija cries.

“How deep is the cut? Has it stopped?”

“Blood, yes. I’m not sure. But it’s better. Not as much as before.”

“Press on it with a cloth. I’m coming. Don’t move her. Just wait.”

“What is it?” Gus says. Up on one elbow.

“My mother.”

“Do you want me to come?”

“God, no. Go back to sleep.”

And up again and through the night and into the little drive of the little house on Waverly Road, no longer new. Her mother lies on the floor near the bed. Blood is in her mother’s hair, blood is soaking the neck of her pink nightie, blood is in a pool on the carpet next to her ear, blood is on the pillow under her head, blood is everywhere.

“Jesus Christ, Mom.” Liv kneels, knees in blood, feet in blood. Liv lifts the washcloth gingerly. But the light is weak and the cut matted with dried blood and hair. She can’t see it well.

“Oh, I’m fine,” Clara says. “She shouldn’t have gotten you up.”

“Right, Mom. Vitalija, bring a bowl of hot water and all the washcloths you can.”

Vitalija hurries off, hurries back. “Boiling?” she asks.

“No, no, just hot from the tap.”

“I told her not to,” her mother says, shaking her head, her company face on, sweet, drunk, eyes moving between Liv’s face and the ceiling. Closing slowly, beatifically.

Vitalija comes with the bowl. Hurries off to find clean washcloths. Returns.

“Vitalija, hand me the mirror, the one on the dresser,” Liv says. She hands it to her mother. “Take a good look.”

Her mother holds up the mirror. “Oh,” she says, but her expression does not change.

“Yeah, oh. That’s how ‘fine’ you are.”

Her mother’s got that slurry helpless voice, the drunk voice, the clueless, baby-doll voice Liv remembers so well from childhood.

She hands the mirror back, not particularly interested or impressed. Vitalija, stands over them, shaking her head, wringing her hands.

“Vitalija, I can’t hear you.”

“Oh, I can never hear her,” Clara says.

“I did the best I could,” Vitalija repeats. “But she’s up all night. If I say no more, she tries to get up herself. I have to sleep. I can’t work without sleeping.”

“That’s not true,” her mother snaps.

“I know, I know, Vitalija. You did fine. It’s not your fault. It’s impossible.”

Clara looks from face to face as if trying to figure something out. “I’m a lot of trouble, aren’t I?” she says, smiling at them.

“Yes, you are,” says Liv.

“You’re so good to come, Olivia. But I’m fine. Really. Just help me back to bed.”

They clean the blood from the wound and out of her mother’s hair, and they dress the wound with the Neosporin and bandages in the bathroom cabinet. Liv could have called 911, there was a time she would have, the ER, the whole bit, but no more. She doesn’t have it in her, it’s too late, it’s too much trouble. The cut has stopped bleeding. If her mother needs stitches, she’ll deal with it later, after Boston.

They change her nightgown, make her swallow a few ibuprofen and half a sleeping pill, and then, together, they lift her onto the bed.

Liv sends Vitalija to bed. Like a child her mother watches as Liv does her best to clean the carpet. She coos, tells her to go home, thanks her over and over. “We’re going to have to get some carpet cleaner,” she says chattily. She’s in such a good mood.

“We’re?” says Liv as she scrubs. “You mean me.”

Her mother doesn’t seem to hear.

“Children shouldn’t have to do all of the behaving in a family, Mom.”

Her mother giggles. Hands to mouth to hide her smile.

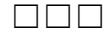
It isn’t enough, the knife should touch on bone. “You’re an old drunk,” she says.

“That’s what you are.”

And Clara’s mouth becomes a line. She turns away, shuts her eyes.

Finally she hears me, Liv thinks, but her heart, so full only hours ago is burnt to cinders now, sunk.

Anyway, she won’t remember, Liv thinks. She won’t remember anything. In the morning she’ll see blood in the carpet and wonder whose it is.



She is climbing Gus's stairs again, five in the morning, when she hears a high-pitched scream. Loud. She stops, can feel it all through her body. But the scream, whatever it was, doesn't come again.

She slips into bed beside him. Waits. It doesn't come.

The night air pushes at the drapes. She drifts.

For how long does she drift, does she wander immobile, perched on a high place inside herself, the hand on her chest rising and falling, forgotten? She forgets even that she lies here, for she has come to a clear high promontory inside herself where she can see for miles. Her mother, whose mess she has just cleaned up, Vitalija, Gus, the people and events of her thirty-seven years like land formations, some near and cragged, others fused by distance, rounded, but all congregated still, in every direction: Santo, Gado, Stephen, Celia, Misha, her father, Dulcie. School, Guatamala, home, her marriage, work, now Gus.

Is it ten minutes? An hour? More?

And then, suddenly, like a light, it comes again—piercing!

A baby's scream! She jumps from the bed, rushes to the window, and there, standing in the moonlight, two foxes.

And this is what she will never forget: the closer one turns its sharp face around to gaze at her. As if it had known she would come. As if it had called her to the window.

For a minute, maybe more, it feels like more, the fox and Liv stare at one another. I am not dreaming, she thinks. Here's the drape, I feel it against my leg.

And then, it turns, is gone.

She stands there thinking about it, for how long?

"Red foxes," Gus says when she comes back to bed.

“You heard it.”

“Yes.”

But she does not say how the fox had looked at her. Her sense that it had come to say something, tell her something.

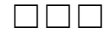
“How’s your mother?”

She nestles under his arm. He curls her hair, which is everywhere, around a forefinger, a habit now.

“How is she?” he says again.

“I don’t know. I can’t talk about it. Look, already it’s almost six.”

“You can sleep in the truck,” he says, “on the way.” And they settle down into the sheets, such warmth and comfort, his hand on her thigh, on her ass, edging around the corner to her cunt, laughing low in her ear, he’s like rain, and she’s wet, wet again as tired as she is, cannot resist him, her hair all over them both like wrack. It’s his steadiness, how he calms and uncomplicates her, the way she can rest in him.



The next morning they drive east. Out the window, Canadian geese sail into view, sweep down above a field, touch down like a final chord—one, then the next, then the next, then the next, almost at once but not quite, not quite, and beyond the field, hills glazed by a milkwash, goldenrod rough in the ditches, the trees in full-throated aria, bleeding heartbreak. The blue of the chickory gone, and what is it about that blue that it should arrive in August, though August is long past now? It's a tempering, she thinks, a common tide of ordinary mercy after the summer's scourge of dust and heat.

God's earth, yes, and they are headed to Boston to bring Arent Knorr "home," as Gus puts it. Arent will be recovering from his operation in what Gus has been calling a "nursing facility". *Commonwealth Court*, where Liv's mother had been. A place Liv had hoped never again to set foot in.

Gus who says "rehab" like it's a good thing. He wants her to tell him what to expect, but there is not one good thing she can think of to say, so she says little.

When they arrive, Arent is waiting, sitting on the edge of the bed: a small trim man with a few hairs on his speckled head, grasping a tidy duffel, glasses held together at the bridge of his nose with a Band-Aid. It's hard not to smile at that, look at the Band-Aid instead of the man's eyes, which are large and swimming behind the giant lenses. It is a face used to smiling, she can see that much: deeply wrinkled, leathery. He has spent his life outside. It is easy to see him rowing across a lake, fish at his feet.

When Gus introduces her, Arent reaches up and pats Liv's shoulder as if she is an overgrown Alice in Wonderland. "She's skinny," he says.

He wears an old wool lumberjack's shirt tucked into khakis that pool a little on top of his black sneakers. The nurses go over his medication list with Gus, insist that Arent be taken downstairs in a wheelchair.

After lunch in the hospital's cafeteria, Liv waits in the lobby with Arent while Gus goes for the truck. The lobby is crowded, and there are people all around them. The old man crosses and re-crosses his legs. She assumes it is his circulation. His hands he crosses at the wrist in his lap, like gloves. She asks how he's holding up. He says fine.

They watch people.

Liv asks if she can get him a drink, and Arent pulls out his wallet and with much effort pulls out a photograph and hands it to her. "That's Madeleine," he says.

"Madeleine. Okay." The image is so worn she can scarcely see the image, but it's a girl in her twenties.

"Lovely," Liv says. "Is she your..."

"Wife."

"I didn't know you were married."

"I'm not."

"I thought your wife's name was Doll."

"It was."

A nickname, Liv thinks. "Well, she's beautiful," she says and hands the photo back.

"She died," Arent says simply and puts it back in his wallet, his wallet back in his pocket. This takes whole minutes.

She sits back and breathes, closes her eyes.

At another point, Arent pinches his glasses at the Band-Aid and very carefully lifts them off his face. Massages his nose.

“Do you have a headache?” she asks.

“No.”

“Is everything all right? Do you need anything?”

“No. The Band-Aid hurts.”

“How did you break your glasses?”

“I didn’t break them. But yes, they are broken.” He says this so mournfully that she promises they’ll see about getting him a new pair. But this little promise, she can feel it, adds a weight she doesn’t want. It is Gus’s business, the broken glasses. This is Gus’s old man, not hers.

“Maddy sold eggs.” Arent says loudly to no one, it seems, in particular, apparently unconcerned with who hears. He is holding his glasses still as one might hold something covered in dung.

“She came to our house every Friday morning at half past seven with a basketful of eggs from her parents’ farm. I’d known her all my life. My mother and her mother were friends.”

He pauses, puts the glasses very carefully back onto his face.

“I would have done anything. I was desperate.” He says this straightforwardly without embarrassment.

“I understand,” Liv says, for what else is there to say?

“No, you don’t. You don’t think I was ever young. No one does. I was young.”

“Of course you were.”

“She was supposed to marry the friend of the family who worked for her father on their farm, but Maddy Spooner, she defied them all, changed the course of history to marry me, Arent Knorr.”

He pauses, shakes his head. “You don’t know what I’m talking about.”

“I do, Arent,” she says.

“I’m telling you this,” he says, and she waits for the rest of the sentence, but it does not come.

“Well,” she says, when she is sure he’s done, “I’m glad. I’m glad you’re telling me.”

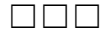
“I know plenty about love.”

“You want to give me advice?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Well, I could use it, any help you can think of.”

He looks at her with new interest, and she smiles. Smiles right into his eyes her most radiant smile. To win him.



After the taller orderly leans in and buckles Arent's seat belt, almost right away he falls asleep crumpled against the door. Later he shifts and sleeps crumpled against Liv. His wool shirt smells of mothballs. She smells mentholatum too and his scalp, which smells sharp, of cats. He wakes briefly when they slow for traffic exiting on I-84, and falls asleep again.

At the nursing home they are greeted by a windblown, blowsy-faced nurse named Patsy, who seems unable to look anyone in the eye.

"Oh Patsy," says Arent—he is a charmer, that much Liv knows by now—"that is one of my very favorite names. I had a girlfriend Patsy whose last name was Smith. I bet you can do better than Smith! What's yours?"

The nurse seems to have trouble of a social kind. Nurse Patsy is dressed head to foot in teddy bears, a grayish fuzz for hair, like lichen on her head. Truly she seems off. Arent has seen this, yet is trying to forge a bond.

I like him, Liv has decided. He's kind. He puts himself out for strangers. He put himself out for Gus.

Nurse Patsy, though, seems slightly stunned by Arent's foray into her personal matters. She does not offer her last name. Instead she goes about her official duties, which involve a checklist. She speaks of her hours, the names of other nurses he will get to know.

"Yes, and what is your last name?" he asks again, once she pauses.

"Brain," she sighs and seems to shrink a little. Her face is red, like she's been under too many blankets.

"Brain?"

Perhaps she drinks, Liv thinks.

“Just please don’t call me P. Brain,” she says, finally, looking Arent in the eye. It seems to take all she has.

Arent bursts out laughing. “Oh, Patsy, that’s good. P. Brain.” He reaches out for her hands, both of them, which she hesitates to give him, but then sees she has no choice. “You’re no pea brain. Take it from me. I’m an authority.”

She has a small mouth. Her smile is like a child’s neat valentine. Nurse Patsy gives Arent the menu selection card and comes around the chair to explain it in unnecessary detail. She stands back and discourses on the food, what is good and what is not so good.

She takes command of the remote control, shows him how it works.

Nurse Patsy takes Arent’s temperature and his blood pressure. She clears things off his dresser and slips them into a drawer. She turns down the bed, pats it. “Wouldn’t you rather rest a little before dinner, Mr. Knorr?” she says.

“No,” says Arent firmly. “I’m fine here, Patsy. Call me Arent.”

There are papers to sign. Gus steps out, and Liv stays back with Arent as she had before. She writes Gus’s phone numbers and her own on a pad of paper.

“You call me anytime,” she says and hands him the pad. She does not mean it. He belongs to Gus, not her.

ARNOLD KNORR! the whiteboard cries. IT’S FRIDAY, OCT 8!

“Ninety-two,” he says, pursing his lips. “That’s not a bad run.”

“Oh, your run aint over. This is a minor setback. If you do your exercises, walk and walk, give it your all, you’ll be back as strong as ever.”

There’s some truth to it.

“How long have you and Gus been sweet?” He means sweet on each other, but she thinks sweet like cubes she fed once to a horse.

“Ever since his sister drowned,” he says before she has time to answer, “he’s been a closed book. I knew him before.”

“His sister Grace.”

“Yes ma’am.”

She wants to ask him everything. The questions crowd. But Gus will be back in a minute.

“I didn’t know she drowned, for one.”

“You didn’t know she drowned?”

“No. He doesn’t like to talk about it.”

At this Arent crosses his hands at the wrist again in his lap and looks up at the ceiling as if praying for patience. He purses his lips, in and out, in and out. Like a fish.

Someone knocks. “You decent, Mr. Knorr?”

“Never in my life,” he calls.

The two physical therapists, introduce themselves. One is bald. The other, older, wears a red-checked shirt like a banker on holiday.

“This young lady here says to work me hard,” Arent tells them.

“You got it, sir,” says the banker. “That’s what we aim to do.”

When it’s time for Gus and Liv to go, Arent is brave. He does not ask how long or when they’ll visit or where he’ll go after. Gus already has done more for him than anyone.

Liv kisses him on the cheek. “I’ll come see you soon,” she says.

He is perched on the edge of the bed, the mirror image of himself that morning in the Mercy Hospital room in Portland. His tidy duffel next to him on the bed.

They are walking out of the room when he says, “Here’s it is, smart fella.”

“What?” says Gus, and they back up into the room again.

“Do you want the girl?”

Gus looks at Liv. Back at Arent.

“If you want the girl,” Arent says, “you’ll have to tell her everything. Otherwise, it won’t be any good. It’ll never work in this life. I’ve told you this. You don’t listen.”

“Don’t do this now,” Gus says to Arent.

“What?” says Liv to Gus. “Don’t do what?”

“Oh, he’s smart,” Arent says to Liv. “You must know by now how smart he is.”

“What?” Liv says and looks from Arent to Gus and back again.

“Go on,” Gus says and holds the door for her. “Go wait for me in the truck.”

When she doesn’t move, he says, “We can talk, the *two* of us. Later. Give us a minute. Please.”

She waits in the truck for almost twenty minutes, and when Gus comes out, he backs out of the spot, exits the parking lot without a word, without even looking at her. His mouth pin straight, pin thin.

At the end of Church, turning onto Lantern Lane, she says, “You’re not going to say anything to me?”

He doesn’t say anything.

“I mean what *was* that?”

Past O’Flann’s. Past the Town Hall. Driving her home. Even though it’s Friday and she’s usually on the mountain with him Friday nights.

“It’s nothing. It’s Arent. He loved his wife. He thinks that makes him an expert on everything.”

He turns onto Dorset, turns left into her drive, throws the gear shift into park, kills the engine, sits there waiting for her to get out, leave him alone. That’s how it feels.

“I thought we’d be going to your house.”

“I’m pretty tired, Liv.”

It’s the first time he hasn’t wanted to be with her.

“He said you were a closed book,” she says carefully. “After your sister drowned.

You never told me that she drowned—”

“I told you she died.”

“I know.”

“And that’s not enough? You need to know that she drowned?”

“I don’t know, Gus.”

“Why is it so important to know that my sister drowned? It was thirty-five years ago.

And it’s no one’s business but mine.”

“Okay.”

He seems angry, angry at her.

They sit. She can’t leave him yet. Doesn’t want him to go home alone.

There are large brown circles in her neighbor’s grass. Pests, disease, like her father used to fight.

“It’s not that I have to know... that exactly,” she says, still staring at the brown grass.

“It’s just that I want to know the important stuff, Gus, and I don’t really care how long ago it was.”

She turns to face him. He seems grim, angry still. He digs a thumbnail into the steering wheel, making little hash marks.

There’s a paper cup lying on the floor. She picks it up, begins to uncurl its rim. “I don’t want to pry, or pull scabs off. I’m just trying to get to know you, Gus. That’s all.”

“I should go,” he says.

“Okay.” But she doesn’t get out of the car. “Did you ever talk to anyone about it? You know, afterwards?”

He shrugs, looks out the window at her yard. “All sorts of strangers all my life have felt free to tell me about it,” Gus says. “How it is.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. Like, ‘it wasn’t your fault, don’t blame yourself... Like they know.”

“Of course it wasn’t your fault, Gus. You were eight.”

“Yeah, like that.” It’s not friendly, the way he says it. “I learned to smile as if the advice was brilliant, as if I’d never heard it before.” He’s looking away, out the window still. “People needed to feel I was going to be all right, that they were being helpful, and I got used to reassuring them.”

“Taking care of them. That’s awful.”

“Yeah, you know, shake their hands, thank them, look them in the eye—good manners can get a kid a long way, I learned that.” An unfamiliar, rancid laugh.

“I’m sorry, Gus.” She rips carefully, evenly, all around the top of the cup, a little fringe. Turns it upside down. A mini lampshade.

“You probably think I need therapy.”

“I didn’t say that. But it’s not like therapy’s a terrible thing. It can be helpful.”

“I know. But some things that just... don’t have answers. Can’t be solved.”

“Solved. That’s not the word I would use.”

She presses it flat, folds up the bottom like a paper bag.

“People say what they need to. I was in the dark, but most of the grownups around me were just as bad in their own ways. Some worse. I learned that too.”

“But some can help, Gus, some know how. People have gone through things.”

Morris the dog, is out, sniffing around the base of Liv's neighbor's bush. The leaves hang crisp and brown, like bats.

She puts the cup down and begins to pick at the peeling vinyl on his glove box. "Why don't you stay here tonight, Gus. I hate for you to go home feeling like this."

"I need to be alone."

She waits. But it's all he says.

"Okay."

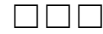
"And would you please... *stop that?*"

She pulls her hand back, surprised. "I'm sorry."

He looks at the cup, in shreds, the vinyl bits on the floor.

"You're tearing everything apart."

"Sorry," she says again Pick, pick, she thinks. Bleedy thumbs. "I don't mean to."



CHARLOTTE HILL, *Reference Librarian*, the pin says. The woman is gobbled at the chin, hoary-browed. A lifetime, Liv is thinking, of hauling in the wood, shoveling the drive, knowing precisely, better than anyone, where things are.

“A drowning,” Liv whispers to the woman. “Here in Paynesbridge, 1974.”

“Oh, the Quirk drowning,” says Charlotte Hill and disappears into a back room.

That is the first surprise—that the librarian knows what Liv is talking about before she even mentions Grace Quirk’s name. Charlotte Hill comes back a moment later with a manila folder. That there is a special file, still, on Grace Quirk is the second surprise.

“We close at five. You can copy anything you need right there. She points at the copier. No smile.

In the reading room, Liv settles into one of the wingback chairs and sifts through the articles. She takes out the longest, an article from the Boston Globe. **GIRL’S BODY FOUND AFTER DESPERATE WEEK-LONG SEARCH.**

The five-day search for missing Grace Quirk of Paynesbridge ended yesterday at 3:12 pm when her body was discovered in ten inches of water under an 18-inch layer of ice in a bend in the Monhegan River not far from the spot she slipped in.

“Everyone loved Grace,” said a tearful Holly Truro, the child’s kindergarten teacher at DuBois Elementary School in the small Berkshire county town. “She was one in a million -- a bouncy, intelligent, curious delightful child. We will mourn her passing for a very, very long time.”

By now all of New England knows the name Grace Quirk and is familiar with the tragic events of last Friday afternoon in the little town of Paynesbridge in western Massachusetts. In the midst of one of the coldest, bleakest snowstorms in recent memory, 4-year old Grace slipped into the 31-degree water of Monhegan River and was swept away. She and her brother, 8-year old August, known to friends as Gus, had just gotten off the school bus, and were looking forward to a long Presidents’ Day weekend. Perhaps enchanted by the glittering winter

wonderland of new snow, they took a detour from their usual route home to visit a favorite site along the river’s bank.

In a statement released last Friday night by the Quirk family, Grace wandered from her brother’s side at a moment when he had become distracted. When he turned back to his sister, she had gotten out onto the 10-15-foot ledge of ice that had formed along the bank. August then ran out onto the ice to grab her, but the ice broke through, and they both slipped into the river. August managed to grab hold of the ice and pull himself out, but Grace was swept away. August’s attempt to follow along the bank proved futile because of the heavy snow.

Though he yelled for help, there were no people or houses within earshot.

As soon as August realized he would not be able to save his sister alone, he ran home for help. Within minutes of their mother Margaret Quirk’s phone call to 911, an emergency search and rescue effort was underway.

Unfortunately, after a few hours with no sign of the child, it became clear that she

could not have survived the river's brutal conditions.

Liv can read no farther. She rests her head against the chair, closes her eyes, and the scene plays like a silent movie in her head.

The knees, the elbows, the long awkward child scrambling, scrambling like a giant panicked spider, up the bank, the moment for jumping in, for grabbing her, gone so fast, the distance she's already traveled—a line feeding out and out and out.

Gus the child tearing as best he can through bare saplings and brush along the bank, boots plunging in deep, heart snarled screaming in his hair, not to lose sight of her, not to lose her. And Liv in her chair in the reading room is oh, with him, breathing hard, face in hands.

How long had he tried to keep her in his sights?

In that deep snow, in that cold, trying to run? Not long. He'd had to stop, he couldn't breathe. He'd stood there in the silent woods, heart flown to the uppermost branches where it perched, watching him, the boy in the snow, the moments ticking by, his sister in the it can't be true the cold and she can't swim and her jacket's wet and her boots on.

Had he retched for fear, the steam of his breath coiling up, and he a mere child and all alone. She gasps, hand over mouth. Her eyes snap open.

A man across the room is watching her. She wipes the tears from her face, turns the chair away, toward the tall arched window. The innermost vault of his being with that inside all these years, enshrined, that horror.

Had he talked to no one in all these years?

Oh, my God, she thinks.

Was everything drowned? The schoolchildren not knowing how to speak to him, how to behave, his destroyed parents, all the well-meaning adults growing quiet on his approach, the whispers, that unhappy mother. His mother and father.

The bitter cold of that black river.

Stepping off the bus that day—enchanted he would have been at the wonderland. The quiet, the spruce, its arms burdened with pillows of snow, the hemlock, the little scratchings of bird tracks on the sandpaper white, tracks of animals. He would have been thinking of the toads and turtles in the bog behind the pond, dead-like in their frozen nestles.

She'd pulled on his hand, maybe, Grace had. Let's stand in the sun, maybe she'd said, and being older, he'd said no, and she'd fought with him, her older brother, and began toward the bank, wanting to get closer, the sun sparkling on the icy shelf, the shelf over the water, the log that looked like some bewitched animal shining black with ice.

An alligator maybe. Something tropical.

How perhaps, perhaps, she had wanted to climb on its back and he caught her, and she had wriggled free. How maybe he then devised a distraction by falling back, spread eagle in the snow. Snow angels.

And yet the bank so much nicer: diamonds among the boulders, and each boulder piled, neat-topped with a perfect cap of white. And the black blade of current making the white whiter and the rays of the sun God-like, and underneath the quiet bubbling a million fairied silences. He would have been gazing into the trees that stood along the bank like fortresses, like giant sentinels. What harm could come? What harm could come with such beauty and quiet and school done and it Friday of vacation week?

His baby sister laughing, pulling on his hand.

And how he moves, curious, toward the bank, ever so carefully, not knowing where the snow ends and the ice begins or how thick. Grasping tight her hand. Stay with me.

The alligator looks so real, and a whole week spread before them.

A feast of days.

The Bible pictures on Sundays at St. Peter's, those rays of light. In the upper branches of a hemlock, a chirruping, a sudden showering of icy sparks on their heads.

Grace's pink mittened hand in his.

He had come to show her the log in the river, the log out at the end of the ice, for to him it looks exactly like an alligator with its long wide shining back and reptilian head, the jaws wide open for devouring.

Maybe it was then he'd seen the thing that had distracted him. Or thought he'd seen it, something moving. Out of the corner of his eye. Maybe. Had he studied the darkness between the trees? Some predator? Gone now if it was ever there, and he too far away to make out tracks?

What had it been?

Grace, come on! Pulling at her hand.

Stop it!

What had caused him to turn away? Had he heard something?

Do you hear me? *Do not move.* I mean it.

And she nods and he lets go her hand and high-steps through the snow, but when he turns back, she is at the river's bank, headed for the alligator.

He bounds through snow to pull her back.

She hurries out to defy him, smiling.

No, no! Grace! Grace! Don't move.

And she, hearing the panic in his voice, pauses, turns. Thinks finally to reach for him.
He inches out. Her pink mitten reaching.
Maybe she had been fine until he'd tried to save her. Maybe it was their weight together that had broken the ice.

The crack, like a hull.
Melee of arms and legs and hair and noise, her mouth and eyes wild as the world turns quick upside down.

The splash.
He's shocked. He's disbelieving. It can't have.
But already she is out too far.
Had their eyes met then? Did she call out? Or was it a quiet beseeching? Does he see her eyes still on him?

Yes, yes. Of course he does.
How long before the silence swallowed her, before she could no longer call, and disappeared beneath the black?

And Liv now, in the wings of her chair, thirty-six years later, whispering mute forgiveness into his skin, her love, as she dries her face, takes up the article, reads on.

She reads of Lieutenant Colman of the Worcester fire department's dive team, and of the temperature that night – 20 degrees below zero, and below zero all week as the search continued; the aquatic excavator that was brought in to break up the ice; the lights provided by the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority; the hundreds of townspeople who for the searchers provided beds, and blankets, dry socks and food at the school on Whitehall Street. And how at 2 in the afternoon on Tuesday, a search dog named Piper showed piqued interest in an area not even 150 yards from where Grace slipped in, and the diver who

entered the water finally to retrieve the body, the others holding a blanket ready for the child's body.

Had he seen the body? Had freezing made it smaller?

Ice in her hair, sticks. She can only imagine.

What had he done that night? Who had said what to him?

There are some things she can be sure of. How his soul flew up into the tops of trees and tangled there. His breathless run, the decision to stop. The run home.

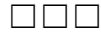
The door he'd pushed open that day the same door she's gone in and out of a hundred times without thinking.

The old kitchen he's described.

Where's Grace? she would have said. His mother. Margaret.

Maybe the pink mitten still in his hand.

And the moment right before he'd spoken. Right before he'd said.



Her mother holds Anna Karenina tightly to her chest like a shield, no place held.

“Can I get you to lie down, Mom? I need to take a look at that cut.”

Her mother’s rogue fingers search out the bandage on her forehead. “Oh, yes,” she says, but does not move.

“Here we go,” says Liv and lifts her mother under the arms from behind, scoots her to the middle of the couch, arranges the pillows, turns her, lowers her head, comes around and gently lifts her legs.

Her mother smiling at the pretty birthday cake Liv brings in on the Spode platter, years ago.

Her mother, drunk and furious, throwing grease-splattered McCormick tins one by one into cold dishwater.

Her mother complimenting her handwriting.

Her mother calling her a slut.

Her mother, drunk, bowling down the stairs on her butt, laughing.

Her mother, smoking on the lounge in the front yard in her bikini, the one with Hawaiian writing and palm trees. Reading another paperback in her Jackie O. sunglasses.

There is the massive bump and bruise, but the cut itself looks fine: a grim purple-lipped smile. Liv washes it, applies more Neosporin and a new bandage.

“How does that feel? Okay?”

She gets her mother upright again, back on the towel, back with Anna and Vronsky, which she so seldom seems to read anymore. “Shall I turn on the television?”

Her mother’s brow furrows.

“Mom, should I turn on the TV?”

“I know who you are.”

“Of course you do, Mom. It’s me.”

She sits down and takes her mother’s hand.

“Mom, it’s me. It’s Liv. Your daughter.”

□□□

“What kind of boy were you?”

“Gus? Are you asleep?”

“I don’t know.”

“What did you think about? What did you like to do?”

She waits.

“Talk to me a little.”

“Climb trees.”

“Really? You climbed trees?”

“Yes.”

“How high?”

He turns, takes her in his arms. “To make your head spin. To frighten the gods. As high as I could go.”

“Really? How old were you?”

“Eight. Nine. Ten. Eleven. Twelve. Until I left.”

“Your poor parents.”

“You already know more than they did. I was out of the house for entire days. My father wasn’t around anyway by then and my mother was scribbling in her little den.”

“Your mother liked to write?”

Silence.

That unhappy mother, Liv thinks.

“Were you by yourself? Or with other boys?”

“Yes.”

“Yes what?”

“Yes alone.”

“A lot?”

“Yes.”

“Always?”

“In the tree. Yes.”

She thinks of him up there alone.

“Were you lonely? Were you a lonely boy?”

“I was used to it.”

She listens to a scratching outside the window, and a soft, faraway knocking. The wind. Used to it, she thinks. Poor little pea.

“You didn’t ever fall?”

“No.”

“Did you ever almost fall?”

“Yes. It was quite gripping.”

“Ha, ha. But why? It was so dangerous.”

“I didn’t think about it. It was the thing to do.”

“Really? What did you do up there?”

“Nothing. I thought.”

“What kind of trees?”

“I just climbed one, a white pine. It was mine. It’s still standing. I climbed it hundreds of times. I got to where I could get up and down very fast.”

And no wonder he’d gone up a tree and not come down. “Its king,” she says.

“Yes.”

“Will you show me?”

She listens again. The knocking sound is gone.

“Will you?”

“Okay.”

“What did you do up there?”

“Nothing. Sometimes I drew.”

“You drew? What kinds of things?”

“Oh, landscapes like my father. Whatever was in front of me. Bark, leaves. My knuckle.” He gives her a squeeze. “Okay now. Sleep. You have to get up early.” He turns away, settles back into his pillow.

“You played basketball of course,” she says into his neck. “With your buddies.”

“No.”

“You didn’t play basketball?” She listens to the ticking of the radiator. “You? Why?”

“Didn’t want to.”

“The team must have been furious.”

“It was easier to play at Taft.”

“Easier? Why?”

“You need to sleep, Liv. So do I.”

Why, she wants to ask. Why do you need to sleep? “What’s Taft?”

“It’s a boarding school.”

“You went to boarding school?”

“Yes.”

“Gus?”

“What?”

“How is Santo doing at work? I never see him anymore. What does Pete say?”

“He’s doing fine. He’s a hard worker. Don’t worry about Santo so much.”

“Gus?”

“Liv.”

“Okay. Never mind. Good night.”



This time, it's early, four-thirty, the room still dark. Liv has to leave for work in an hour, but she has made Gus promise: coffee in bed with a warm scone in exchange for a story, any story, from his past.

He sits up in bed, says he was supposed to have been named after his paternal grandfather, Alan Merriman Quirk, but that his mother changed her mind in the last month of pregnancy.

"I was late. Very late," he says. "Telling the story, my mother used to say I didn't want to be born, that I'd 'backed up' in her womb, dug in my heels, decided to wait out incarnation altogether. That's how she put it."

She objects, but she can see it, his long limbs folded like legs of a card table, his face turned back the way it had come.

"She was small and I was big. Her silhouette alarmed people. That's how her story went. The doctor prescribed bed rest during one of the hottest Augusts in almost thirty years, and there she lay in the hot, humid bedroom of her husband's ancestral home."

"Not here," Liv says.

"Here." Smiling. His long forefinger in the sheets.

Liv is looking at the faint crack in the plaster ceiling that she is coming to know so well. "You were born in this house?" she whispers, as if someone might hear.

"Yes."

"This room?" Thinking of his mother Margaret, the devout Irish Catholic girl from Boston. No pictures of her anywhere but the one in the cabin. A small, pretty woman. Grave.

"Yes, this room."

"But not this bed? You weren't born in this bed."

“This bed.”

She turns to look up at him.

He smiles. “Different mattress. I think. Anyway, when my mother’s water was supposed to break, it didn’t. When she was supposed to efface, nothing happened. Her July due date came and went. She lost patience, took rough walks all over the mountain.”

It kept on, though, the horrible weather, and her pregnancy. Damp, swollen, disgusted, she waited, a fan set up on a planter at the foot of the bed, this tall four-poster, in this room, churning out hot air. Her dark hair piled up on her head to keep it off her neck, her back going into the occasional spasm.

“Finally, as the story goes, she threw *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* against the wall and took up a thriller. I can see it,” Gus says. “Her fury, my father’s goofy, ham-handed helplessness.”

And after the first thriller, another. And another. His mother’s mother had come out from Boston for the birth, returned, come back again. Dust drifted down onto the new bassinette and changing table in the little room that was first the nursery, later the sewing room, and later still his mother’s writing room. Even after the patient doctor insisted on inducing labor, the fight with him continued.

“After a full day and night of labor, I found my way out,” he says.

Liv says, “Forced into the light of the world.”

“By that time, the month had drawn almost to a close.”

“The thirty-first of August.”

“Yes. 1966.”

Gus dips the scone into his coffee and takes another bite. “August,” my mother said and looked down at me—this is how she told it—looked down at this long, quiet baby. She said I looked back at her as if from Mars.”

“You poor little pea.”

“August,” my mother said again, and I blinked. She took it as a sign. Anyway, that’s what she used to tell me.”

Once he starts, he tells his stories well. But so far he has not told the one in that manila file.

“And so you’re August,” Liv says.

“Yes.” His mouth full of scone.



There's the pile of bun feet next to a far wall, the tops of the tables leaning against the wall, the legs and aprons. Gus shows Liv the hide glue softened with water and vinegar, the heat gun, how a few choice blows with a dead blow mallet can take a joint apart. How he must watch for pins.

She's only half listening. She's remembering the day she'd borrowed his shovel, how she'd stood in just this spot.

His vision, he says, is a long table. He and Gado had gone around to junk shops. He had taken each apart because he wants to put them all back together as one.

"For here?" she says.

"Exactly, running front to back." He walks out the length of it.

"But why?"

"Nothing in particular," Gus says.

She laughs. "A huge table for nothing in particular?"

It's an idea he's had, he says. The long table, lots of people, the barn clean.

"It's already clean, Gus. The barn is immaculate."

"No. I mean clean clean. Walls scrubbed, fresh hay on the floor. That smell." In his mind, he says, it's winter. Spruce boughs, candles.

"Like for Christmas, you mean? A Christmas feast?"

"Maybe. People would bring their own chairs, their own plates."

"It would have to be a lot of people."

"I don't know. Once it's here, the occasion will figure its own self out."

But later he describes a dream he'd had as a boy. In the dream he's underneath a long banquet table in a medieval king's hall. There is a tablecloth that creates a long room, a

long room peopled with the legs of the table and the legs of the guests. All the legs are different, even the table legs. Dogs eat scraps thrown to them, chickens and pigeons and sparrows peck at crumbs.

“Are you frightened in the dream?” Liv asks.

“No.”

“You’re not hiding?”

“No.”

“Where are your parents?”

“I don’t know. No. I’m just there.”

There is writing on the underside of the table, he says, in that grease pencil you see on old furniture, writing that looks like hieroglyphs or runes. It is important that he read it for some reason, though he can make no sense of it.

When he crawls out, he sees that everyone has fallen asleep. Heads on arms, slumped in chairs, chins on chests, even the king is asleep, the golden crown on its side in front of him.

Only the animals are awake.

“And then I see him,” Gus says. “A small Rumpelstilkskin-like guy. He’s standing on top of the table, right in the middle. He’s dressed in this hat, in this tunic and tights with long pointy shoes. The king’s fool, I think in the dream. Crazy colors. He dances, slowly, but then faster and faster, in a circle. Whirling like a dervish, as if to music in his own head. Or maybe there was music, I don’t remember.

“His whirling grows faster and faster until finally he leaps into the air and, whirling, seems almost to levitate before coming down, his whirling creating this force against gravity, arms all outstretched. It is a joyful, triumphant thing—head thrown back, the rags and the

bells on his hem flying out in all directions. And that's when the dream ends.”

“How beautiful.”

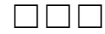
“I've never forgotten it. I used to have it all the time.”

She can't sleep all night for imagining it—the feast in the barn. She imagines old family photographs, black and white, framed on the walls, the magnificent table and its wide runner, which she will make of burlap, or linen. The flowers in low bowls all the way down the center, the candelabra, the steaming platters of food and strings of lights, a million lights, and Japanese lanterns, and children. Heaters to keep everyone warm.

And children and dogs. People standing, offering toast after toast.

And snowfall. Christmastime.

She cannot stop building it in her mind: her winter wedding.



Of his life, especially his childhood, Gus speaks in such snatches that Liv feels she must save each, piece the thing together like a shattered bowl.

One evening they are eating dinner off their laps in the two armchairs before the hearth and Gus points to the painting over the mantel and tells Liv that his father had painted it.

Liv almost coughs up her chicken. "I love that painting!" she cries and puts her plate aside to investigate.

And there it is. *A. Quirk*, in gold. She looks at it, every detail. It's of the ridge, and she does love it.

"When people used to ask what kind of pictures he painted," Gus says, "he'd say, 'Think English, long dead.'"

She laughs, sits down again, and takes up her plate. "I wish I'd known him."

"I wish you had. I liked him. It's what he should have done in the first place," Gus says. "Painting."

"Well, he did in the end. He made the correction. That's worth a lot. With Evelyn Frankel too, I guess."

"That's true."

They seem, she thinks, to have allied against his mother, and it feels unfair. Whoever she was, that small pretty Catholic woman who lost her little one in the river.

She hears the mantel clock again, its ticking. The noise of Gus's clocks (his shop door is always open) seems to recede into the background and then assert itself, leap forward, pounce on her when she least expects it.

On mothers now, she tells Gus about her mother's decline. How at first there had been the kind of lapses that afflict everyone eventually—lost keys, a misplaced credit card, spaced-out names—how she started sleeping later and taking naps in the afternoon, then given up her reading group and night driving, then how the names of the familiar began to drop away: the place she got her hair cut, her first cousin, her favorite restaurant, despised politicians. Then larger chunks split off and floated away, like the calving of bits of Antarctica—what she'd done the day before, Stephen's latest visit, memories of friends.

Liv describes how her mother had stopped by Dorset Street one morning after going by the post office to get her mail, a usual routine. It had been a Monday, Liv's day off. They'd had a cup of coffee at Liv's kitchen table, a nice visit. Her mother had called from home later that day in a panic. She said her bills were lost, that they'd been stacked by the door, she'd intended to take them to the post office.

When Liv arrived, her mother was clinging to the post at the top of the porch steps as if it were the mast of a sinking ship.

Do you think you might have mailed them already, Mom? she'd asked. Now think.

No. I haven't been to the post office in days.

You didn't go this morning?

No!

You weren't at my house earlier?

No! Of course not! I haven't left home all day.

"I told her. I said, 'Mom, you went to the post office this morning. You mailed your bills. You came over after, and we had coffee. You don't remember that?'"

She tells Gus of her mother's shock—the bunched brows, the piercing gaze and disbelief. All commonplaces now.

“Do you think I’ll ever open my café?” she asks. She had been thinking all day again of what both Celia and her brother had said about her having given up.

“Do you want to?” he asks.

“I’m not sure it’s that simple,” she says.

Had her mother really gotten in her way? Or is she just the excuse, like Stephen said?

“If you want to, you will.”

“But will I?”

She had turned away from her artwork, cut that part of her life off completely, never even mourned its passing. If she had kept on, if she hadn’t let the split-up with Dulcie stop her, what would have happened? Where would she be now?

“And yours, Gus,” Liv says. “Tell me about yours.”

“My what?”

“Your mother.”

“My mother,” he says, leaning back in the chair. “Intensely Catholic. Opposed to divorce. Opposed even to contraception. But, ironically, not particularly interested in motherhood either.”

“What do you mean?” Liv asks.

“She liked the rules and ritual,” Gus says.

“No, the not being interested in motherhood part.”

He looks at her, seems to look right through her, exit right out her other side, right out of the house. Presses his lips together, shakes his head. “My mother.”

“You said she liked to write. What did she write?”

“I’m not sure. Essays and stories, I think.” He tells her of the three large boxes full of her notebooks in the attic.

“Really?”

“I think sometimes of burning them.”

She looks at him. He picks a book up from the floor, thumbs through it.

“Burn them? You can’t be serious.”

“What’s the difference between burning them and having them but never reading them?”

“You’re not curious.”

“Curious.” He laughs. “No.”

“And you don’t ever expect to be?”

“No.” He seems quite sure.

“Has anyone ever read them?”

“My father had a friend in publishing, and she sent him some things once, but nothing came of it.”

“Did your dad ever?”

“I don’t know.”

“Have you?”

“God, no. I’d be afraid to.”

That is the end of it, their talk about his mother. He gets up, collects their plates and goes to the kitchen. She looks at a magazine for a minute, but she can feel how he is with it, what he’d said about Margaret. No words but she thinks after a while to get up and go to him, reach her arms around his waist from behind. When she forces him around, he glances down at her, twists away. His eyes wet.

That is all.



Gado can't get enough about the Mohicans. He wants to read books about the Mohicans. He wants to dress like the Mohicans. He wants to build a birch bark longhouse like the Mohicans. He wants to find an arrowhead. He wants to hear Gus talk (again!) about how the Mohicans hunted, how they burned the forest floor to clear it of leaves and brush so they could stalk game, how the cleared forest floor allowed them to travel easily and control mosquitoes, how the burning allowed for the proliferation of blueberries and huckleberries and gooseberries and strawberries, not only for themselves but for the game they hunted, how the burning gave rise to the most fire-tolerant of the hardwoods, which are also the nut-producers—the American chestnut, the white oak, the shagbark hickory. On their afternoon walks, Gus teaches Gado to recognize these trees by their leaves and also by their bark. Gado now knows the chestnut bark beetle spread a fungus that killed nearly all the large chestnuts in the country. He knows the nuts of those trees have taken root, and although those young trees were attacked by blight, they have the ability to sprout from their stumps, which is why there are chestnut trees in the forest today.

An example, Gus says, of inventive children more gifted and fortunate than their parents.

Liv is often along on these walks now. She and Gus behind, Gado shooting out ahead. Today with stick and dog and boots that kick up leaves. They make a racket in the brazen woods. Soon rain will soften the hard spines of leaves, Liv thinks, and snow will come, and then spring with its showers will turn the leaves to mush. All that is not here yet. She and Gus have winter still, deep snows, all of spring!

And more and more and more.

The leaves make faint peppering sounds when they fall. The breeze tugs—freshens, makes her want to hold hands. To hold hands and hug and jump. The chips of birds, the crackling air. Jump up and down for gladness.

Trees growing in a line with interlacing roots above the ground indicate, Gus says, that they might have taken root on a log. That in New England trees germinating on nurse logs are generally hemlocks because hemlocks do well in shade and also do well starting in the moss of a log because of their small seeds. Or that trees growing on mounds where a stump has disintegrated can mean a high water table. Or that when a tree is growing on top of a mound with a pit on one side, how it can mean it has grown up out of the decay of an old uprooted tree's roots that have been ripped from the ground. He explains to Gado about "cradles" and pillows," how several depressions on the same side of their mounds in the area can indicate that the now buried trees were blown over in the same storm.

"Santo and Gado come from beautiful forests in Michoacan," she says. "Before La Familia." The boy, hearing the cartel's dreaded name, looks up at her, stick midair. Something in his eyes that looks like wonder, that looks like fear.

She does it to utter Santo's name aloud. She must say his name sometimes so he will not be forgotten.

"Do you remember your home in Mexico?" Liv asks Gado. "Even a little?"

Gado brings the stick down hard.

"This is my forest," he says stoutly, little man, chest thrown out. "I am an American."



Liv feels the old disloyalty to Santo all the time. It's an old dog at her heels that she, in these early months with Gus, has decided to ignore. He's done so much for Santo, and she is grateful. And Santo is doing so well at work and with D'America, and he is so young and has had such hardship, that she has been all right for now with letting sleeping dogs lie. And yet, she can't help feeling that Gus, unconsciously even, has bought Santo off—with the house (still, he pays no rent), the car, the job with the tree crew, for which, she's sure, all his friends are jealous. Crass, she knows, to put it that way, even to herself, and yet it's how she feels. It does eat at her.

For Santo is her friend, and she knows he must resent how they've inserted themselves. It must contribute to the distance, the awkwardness, the weird formality between them now. It's why she hardly sees him, of this she's sure, why she feels so hesitant, so shy, to even knock on his door.

They never talk. And this too eats at her.

She has tried to impose a schedule upon their little compound—of when Gado can come and when he must go home, how many nights to sleep over, how many to be home. To make Gus understand how unfair it is for a young single father to be run herd over. She doesn't use those words. She hardly knows how to talk of it, to parse it, and no matter what she says she can feel Gus's irritation. She shouldn't push too far.

Besides, there are other things to think about. She has work all the time, and her mother, and she has never called Stephen back, and what he'd said to her about her café, that too eats at her. That she has used her mother as an excuse.

It makes her angry, for what does he know of how much time her mother requires, even with Vitalija. Had he only meant to set her off his trail? Distract? If so, he had succeeded.

And that too eats at her.

□□□

Liv arrives for her PAP smear twenty minutes early. It's the last appointment of the day. The receptionist hands her a clipboard through the sliding glass. The last form is the hardest.

Are you sexually active at this time?

Liv circles Y.

Are you on birth control?

There have been times when she has not had her diaphragm, though she had not been ovulating. There is no M for "Most of the Time."

She circles Y.

Have you ever been pregnant?

N.

Are you in a committed relationship?

Her pencil hovers over the Y, over the N. She puts a question mark. Erases it.

Circles neither.

Circles Y.

Are you trying to become pregnant?

Gus is careful about birth control. She is too, of course.

She would say, in general, in the big picture, yes, she is a Y, she is trying to become pregnant. But in the specific, in the small picture, in the Gus picture, she is an N.

Sort of. She hasn't ever not used birth control. She has thought of it, though.

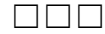
She leaves it blank with an asterisk. She thinks of Meryl, the motocross girl he almost married. She erases the asterisk.

We must talk about this, she thinks.

And yet it is hard to imagine how, who would say what. And does she really want to talk about it? Isn't a blank nicer? It's nicer than an N.

If Y, do you have reason to believe you may not be able to become pregnant?

Easy, that's an N.



Liv finds Arent in the nursing home's "library"—a few thumbbed paperbacks on a high shelf. He's wheeled up to a table with four other ancients who gum blue icing off Happy Birthday plates. Somebody's lucky day.

"Hello everyone," Liv says to cheer them up, but they are too deaf or drugged or daft to answer.

"Gus's sweetheart!" Arent cries, his eyes leaping into hers, beseeching. He's got new glasses. She leans to release the wheelchair brake. "Have you come to take me home?" he whispers, and all at once it is months ago and she is back with her mother in this horrid place.

"Come on, let's get outside," she says and wheels him down the hall.

At the door to the back patio, she punches in the code. Amazing, how the rough stuff burrows and finds a way to stick.

They settle into lawn chairs. "You have to excuse me for smoking," Liv says, and pulls her cigarettes from a pocket.

"I could use one too," Arent says, "if you don't mind."

She lights him one.

The cars in the staff lot are bright in the afternoon sun, and beyond the cars the green wall of pines. The sky is cloudless—a hard wrench of blue above the tips of trees—and a little too cold, especially under the awning, which runs the length of the patio, the protection so tyrannical, she thinks, it protects from sunburn but also from warmth, from light.

"I have a question," she says at last.

"I thought you might."

“That day you said, ‘if you want the girl you have to tell her everything’? I tried to get Gus to talk about it, but he won’t.”

“Of course he won’t.”

“I couldn’t find anything about Grace Quirk’s drowning online, so I went to the library. It was easier than I thought. I just asked. They had a whole file.”

She takes the copy of the *Boston Globe* article from her pocket and unfolds it. “Not only did she drown, but he was with her, the only person with her. I didn’t know that.”

He taps his ashes carefully onto the concrete. “This is nice. I used to smoke, but I hate a cigarette without a cup of coffee. Old dogs. If you don’t mind.” He points behind her, back through the door. “Right back inside and to the right. It’s serve-yourself in the dining room.”

She hands him the article and stands. “Oh. Okay. Coffee.”

But at the door she circles back. “If Gus comes while I’m gone, please put that in your pocket?” She smiles. “I hadn’t known how big an event it was, the search in the river and how many people knew. Or how bitter cold. Or that he’d been alone with her.”

He’s looking at the treetops. “Black’s fine.” He squashes the butt with his old man sneaker. “Help yourself to the coffee, if you like. Sometimes they’ll put out donuts or a plate of cookies.”

When she returns he’s clutching the blanket around his shoulders.

“You’re cold.”

“I’m fine. Let me have another one of those.”

She lights him another. “You shouldn’t smoke.”

He laughs. “I’m ninety-two. Every day is gravy.” He says it with the same faded twinkle, his eyes slits in wrinkled leather. “You couldn’t hurt me if you tried. I might as well be Superman.”

“Okay, but don’t get hooked,” she says. “Gus would kill me if he saw this.”

“Hooked,” he says they both laugh. The idea of anything but death hooking him, maybe, or joy at having things the way they used to be—a cigarette with coffee, the company of a woman.

He peels the plastic off the Styrofoam and sips, takes a nice long drag. “There were two big rules. Don’t go to the river without a grown-up”—the blue smoke seeps from his nostrils and around brown teeth—“and look out for your baby sister.”

She closes her eyes, bows her head.

“And then, when he comes racing in the house, the worst moment of his life, what does she do, that Catholic clothespin. She pushes him.”

“What?”

“Pushes him. Shoves him. And hard. I’m sure she regretted it after, I’m sure she didn’t mean to do it, it was just her body’s reaction, kill the messenger, but that’s what happened. She shoved him so hard he slammed against the kitchen wall and cracked the glass.” He blinks and bats the smoke away. “The kitchen’s different now. That window’s gone.”

Her arms tight around her stomach, she cannot even say, *poor Gus*.

“The only person who knows that, mind you, except me, his mother and himself, is Billie Beirne, their housekeeper. She was in the kitchen at the time. She’s the one told me. Not even his dad knew that dandy detail.”

He takes the cigarette between wet lips and sucks so hard it brightens, sizzles like a steak.

“You were living in the cabin at the time. Fixing clocks.”

“Righto.”

“He was eight.”

“Yes ma’am. A tall pole bean.”

A lone cloud has appeared in the sky. It floats above a spindled pine, looks like a dumpling, pierced. They watch it—it bumbles past—and they listen to the wind, which blasts the sides of the cars and kicks up dust devils in the parking lot.

“And he’s never gotten help? Professional help, I mean.”

“Well, I can’t tell you anything about that,” Arent says and smudges out his second butt, and tells how Gus’s father tried to be home from the city more after Grace’s death, how he, Arent, befriended the boy—“it started out as charity, but we got to where we liked one another, and he was interested in clocks.” Arent hoots. “Billie would come to me because I could always find him. He climbed trees. There was one he considered his, that’s where he always was.”

“The white pine. At least he told me that.”

He tells how smart Gus was, how bored in school, how he’d skip sometimes, spend his day far afield or in his tree, and how little his mother seemed to care when Billie told her the school had called.

“She was depressed.” He shakes his head. “It was a sad business, that whole family.” He drains the cup and hands it to her.

“I don’t know what to do,” Liv says at last.

“To the john now, if you please. I’m like a sieve.”

She smiles, but the meeting's over. She helps him inside and down the hall, and while he's shut in the toilet, she sits on the bed listening to his pee ping uncertainly in the bowl.

Distraught.

The word has always made her think of wire. Tightwire strung between buildings high in the air. Maybe the *taut* inside it.

She folds up the hated wheelchair and stuffs it in a corner, tidies up his nightstand, but she's nervous that Gus will come. If he does, she will pretend.

She gets Arent settled and says goodbye. But then pauses at the door.

"You can help me," she says. "Because you know him. You've known him all his life. Like what happened with the woman he was engaged to—Meryl?"

"Oh, Meryl, sure," he says.

"What happened with her?"

"Meryl wanted children, and you know Gus."

"What? What do you mean by that?"

The old man shrugs and lifts his new glasses off his nose the way he'd done before. Carefully, pinching at the bridge. "He doesn't want them. That's what he told her—"

"He couldn't have. Gus loves children. He's told me so, and I can see it."

"Well, I have no idea. I know he can't be in a snowy forest. Not since that day. Try him, next time it snows. Roads are fine, fields are fine. Not through woods."

She stares. "Gus loves the woods." She says it firmly. "And he's amazing with children. With Gado—"

"Who?" He brushes away the word. "Never mind. I'm beat." He inches to the edge of the chair as if to a cliff's edge.

She rushes forward to help him stand. "I've stayed too long."

“He’s good at beginnings,” Arent says and grabs hold the walker. “He likes the start of things. That’s always his favorite part.”

Now behind the man she hears the boy, the boy like a ghost, like a aural watermark, his breath a sledge in those tender veins, the boots on snow, pounding, everything pounding, the front door bursting open like a pod, the breeze off his mother as she whirls. Billie Beirne there in the background, watching.

Where's Grace?

Where's Grace? That question, down through the years.

“What? What is it, Gus? Where is she?” The panic as she drops to her knees before him.

And when the pitiful words eek out, how she flings them away, heaves them, and with them him, heaves him, not only into that wall, down the years and into her, now. She can think of little else. Falling off to sleep, hiking up the Pillow, knifing up the nuts in Heaven's kitchen, she hears him, that breathless panicked boy, and when they lay together, or walk, or over dinner, she is snatched about the ankles, tripped and tangled by it. She gasps, makes little unwitting cries, and desperate for his hand, grabs it, holds it close—as a mother would or a sister.

“What?” he says. “What is it?”

And then, as he would do, she says, “Nothing. It's nothing. Just a thought I had.” For it is his to speak of, Grace's drowning, not hers, and too big anyway to come at straight. It rises from the ground of their every day relations like a berg, icy blue, invisible until upon them. She must work her way around it.

Yet she knows him now, knows him better and better, or feels she does. She is meant to be with him in it. Fate, she tells herself. The way things are. There is nothing to do

but each come out the womb again, start their histories over, and the way to do it is to marry. To marry and have babies, take care each of the other unto death. That's it. There's no more time, they've kick the tires, Enough of all this waiting, she thinks—waiting to see what Gus does, what Gus says, what Gus thinks! He's all bound about his wound, and never says the thing!

It makes him slow!

If it's fright, if after all he is too frightened still, she'll ask him.

She'll ask if he won't. She'll be the one, as she has been the one from the beginning.

They'll feast in the barn. If not Christmas, spring. Let everything else peel away from them like boosters.

She shivers.

And then, out of the blue, she hears from Alberta that Misha has returned to Ann Arbor. In theory, it shouldn't matter: and yet it hits her square, a hollow blow that rings at the bone, at the center of her being. There had been no notes or limericks or cartoons or flowers or sudden accidental-on-purpose running into each other, not since Gus's birthday. Misha had been absent even at the café's end-of-season dinner after Columbus Day, and now Celia has her interviewing a girl named Regina, twenty-five, for relief baker, and Misha, dear Misha, is churned beneath the wake, as everything is, so the cafe might lumber on.

Misha had been brave. Young maybe, but no child, for he had pulled himself up and made his next move. And she must too. She must make hers.

PART 4

He had promised to take her to his old white pine, and here they are, a few gray days before Halloween, big weather due, a big snow. It's old, the tree, and dying. They peer up the trunk, then back up so Gus can point and explain the sling he'd made, how he'd rigged it for sitting, how it was first made out of canvas and then from a strip of rubber tire Arent cut. He discourses on the advantages of rubber over canvas for making seats for swings. Arent, he says, cut holes with a sharp auger and the seat had a high back he could lean against—it was comfortable for hours at a time. He tells how when he grew too big, he built a platform to sit on with boards cut to size that he hauled up with a rope.

“Didn’t your dad get mad?” says Gado. “That you were up so high.”

“He would have been.”

“I want up,” says Gado, reaching for the lowest branch.

“When you’re older.”

“Lift me,” the boy whines, jumping up, trying for the branch.

Gus lifts the boy so he can touch the first branch, but it’s too high to climb or to sit on, and Gado cries to be put up in the tree.

“Enough,” says Gus and sets him on the ground. “Nobody is allowed to climb trees at four. When you’re older.”

“How old?”

“When your father says it’s time,” Liv says.

“Well, then, I’ll ask my dad!” the boy says, his tummy thrust out defiantly.

She feels Gus look at her, but she puts it from her mind. It’s time she speaks up about what matters.

They sit and peel oranges, leaning over to avoid getting juice down their fronts. Gado pouts. When Gus hands Gado a section, the boy throws it down.

He’s tired, mouths Liv, and lays two hands along her face for sleep.

Gus picks the needles off the orange section and hands it to the boy who refuses it again.

After a few minutes Gus takes out his pocketknife. He sharpens it elaborately on a stone. Spits and swipes and makes a great show of feeling the blade against his thumb. Takes up Gado’s stick and begins carving something on its side.

“What are you doing?” Gado finally asks.

“I’m carving the owner’s initials in this fine stick, so no one mistakes who owns it,” Gus says.

“Ah, that will make it three times more valuable,” says Liv.

“It’s my stick.”

“I know. And your initials are G.M. for Gado Menendez and that is what I’m carving.”

Gado comes around to see. Gus carves and blows and carves and blows, as if Gado isn't there, and after a while, Gado forgets to be angry about the tree.

When Gus is done, the boy takes the stick and practices beating it against the ground, against the stumps of trees.

The word *valiant* comes to Liv, and in her mind Prince Valiant leaps upon Arvak, his steed, and sweeps back his crimson cape. Behind his head a welkin sky. The black snaking river, the perilous cold, and the girl's body frozen under ice, her frozen hair.

"It's better!" Gado declares, all trace of tantrum gone.

"Good," says Gus and puts away the knife.

"What's an auger?" the boy asks a few minutes later, skidding in with his lordly stick. Sucks on orange, lets its juice drip everywhere. Gus explains an auger is a drill for making holes in dirt or wood.

"I'll show you when we get home," Gus says.

"Home," Liv says, but stops herself.

"In the old days," she says instead, "an augur was someone who could look at animals, like a bird—like that bird over there, see that little guy, or a fox—and tell what the gods were saying, if they approved or disapproved."

"But you must spell it with a *ur* then," Gus says.

"Yes." She clears the leaves and with a stick writes AUGER in the dirt. Then wipes away the -ER and writes -UR. "See?" she says to Gado. "Augur."

Augur. Augment. August.

"The root AUG, as in August," she says, "means to increase." She looks at Gus, meaning in her eyes.

He smiles and looks away.

Already the boy has buzzed away. A bee about a hive. Already he is in the distance on his knees looking at a hole in the ground.

She leans back against the tree and watches Gus who watches Gado. A squirrel twitches close and closer. Gus throws it a bit of orange.

“That was good, the way you handled him. You’d make a good father, Gus. I think that all the time.”

She watches him through barely opened lids the way she used to as a child, getting the edges to sparkle. He’s turned away, he’s looking up at something in a tree—it’s nothing, looking at anything but her. She takes a piece of bark and turns it in her hand. Breaks it like an egg.

“Well, I do.” Out of her mouth like ripe fruit finally falling.

“You do what?”

“Want children, want marriage. Eventually. Pretty soon. Not in that order.”

Again she has surprised him.

“Don’t you think of it? I’ll be thirty-eight next summer. You’re already forty-four.”

His gaze slips off hers, onto something behind her head. “I know how old we are.”

“Don’t you at least think of it?”

“Yes, I think of it.”

But not with you, she thinks. That’s what he means.

Misha never was a possibility, but he had loved her, loved her wholeheartedly. There would not have been this. There on her front porch, when things were green. He’d held her hand, almost begged her. She stands, collects the bits of rind still on the ground and stuffs them in her jacket pocket.

She wants to cry.

“You ready to go back?” she asks.

“I’m going number one!” Gado shrieks gleefully, half-hidden by a bush.

Even then she can hardly smile. If they married, what silent agreements would she have to make? Be happy with only part of him. Don’t ask for more. Get used to it.

“Why are you so quiet?” Gado asks them. Slapping at their legs with his hands.

“Why aren’t you talking? Why aren’t you smiling?”

And then, back on Quirk’s End, he yells, “I’m going to be a Mohican for Halloween!” and tears across the road to spear a dank hole in a moldering log.

“Tómelo con calma, chico,” Liv says.

“A Mohican?” says Gus. “I think that could be arranged.”

“That hole is someone’s home, you know,” Liv says.

“I know some people who know some people who might know some Mohicans,” Gus calls, breaks from her side to chase and grab and kiss the boy, and let him go. “We’ll have to shave your head. Is that okay?”

“What,” she queries, “if someone burst through your door with a giant log?” She tries to smile, make a joke of it, but cannot. It’s like something her mother might have said back in the day to spoil her fun. Well, no matter, since neither boy nor man will even look at her.

“A Mohican *warrior*,” Gado cries and cracks the stick against an evil stone and whirls and beats another without mercy.

□□□

“Is that when you’re picking me up? Is that when you’re taking me home?”

“We’ll talk about it later, Mom. I’m at work.”

“I don’t want to talk about it!” Shrieking. *“Why have you left me here?”*

“Stop it. Let me speak with Vitalija.”

“No! You two have arranged this! I won’t allow it!”

All her mother’s things are finally gathered about her—the two Baker tables, the reupholstered chairs, her old botanical prints, even Vitalija whom on good days her mother loves—yet still, when she can manage the telephone, she calls Liv once or twice a week, like this. Beside herself.

“But Mom, I need to make the arrangements!”

“What arrangements?”

“For your plane trip,” Liv says. It’s just occurred to her, and why not? “Vitalija needs to know what to pack for you.”

“What to pack? Really?”

“Yes. We’ll pack you up and put you on the plane.”

“Where am I going?”

“Home, of course.”

“Home?”

“Sure. Now let me talk to her.”

But at three when Liv arrives, her mother has not forgotten the plane trip. She is sitting on the couch with her carry-on, excited, ready to go. Just as Arent had sat on the bed in Mercy Hospital with his duffel.

Liv puts her mother in the car, can't help thinking, you would leave me this easily?
They head for the Turnpike but first must stop at Friendly's.

"Oh, we have lots of time," Liv says. "Why not a snack?"

They nibble on fries.

"Have you heard from Stephen?" Liv asks, "I've been calling him and calling."

She has called twice. He'll return the calls.

"No," her mother says. She hasn't heard from Stephen, though she wouldn't remember if she had.

They move from Stephen to weather, from weather to politics.

From Friendly's they drive to the bank. "You need money, Mom," Liv says and hands five twenties over from her mother's account. Clara flaps the bills back and forth under her chin, rolls down the window, happy.

"Maybe you should put that in your wallet, Mom," Liv says, laughing, and after the bank, the cleaners, though there's nothing to pick up or to take. It's all pretend. "We're still early," she says, pulling out of the lot.

"Early. Early for what?"

"Nothing."

They head to the Price Chopper for a quart of milk. "If you don't mind," she adds.

"Of course not," her mother says. "Why would I mind?"

After the milk, they circle back to Waverly Road, where Vitalija is fixing dinner. "Doesn't it smell good?" Liv says and rubs her mother's feet. She plays Pretend with Gus: pretend we are Gado's parents. She plays it with her mother too: pretend this is home. She plays it with herself: pretend everything is fine, everything will work out.

But it is in moments like this, her mother's crusted foot in her hand, that Gus's love seems farthest away: most beautiful, but most perishable. A gorgeous cake that will be ravaged soon.

Liv gets her mother ready for bed, tucks her in, puts everything back into its neat and unsatisfactory place.

"Livvie," her mother says—sweetly, so as not to be much trouble "I forgot. Tell me one more time. When am I going home?"

Odd, but it's with Vitalija that Liv has said the most. Increasingly, on her way out the door, she hesitates, sits down to visit with this quiet woman who shares her mother's life. Vitalija speaks of her world in Lithuania. And Liv in turn, has said more to her than to anyone of her affair with Gus. She has shown her the Boston Globe article; she has described her conversations with Arent; she has marched out, one by one, all of her worries about how Gus has taken over the care of Gado. But she's also spoken of her past.

When Liv describes her collages in college, it is Vitalija, who suggests collage for her mother.

Liv brings card stock, dress pattern paper, an old anatomy book, maps, gardening catalogues, an old children's book, things from her recycling box, detritus from her day. She buys collage scissors, Modge Podge, glue sticks. They all three sit around the kitchen table, and miracle of miracles, collage her mother loves. She does it happily, is entirely engaged and absorbed, loves what she produces, wants to frame everything and hang it on the wall.

Liv must lean over and hug Vitalija in the middle of it. "Thank you!"

"Directions for the way will be whispered when they come," Vitalija says, smiling. "Not shouted. It's an old Lithuanian saying."



Home.

It's the attic she remembers best from Michaux Street, next to the window, and above it, the mud dauber's nest. She used to sit up there, watch the daubers crawl upside down, fly in through the nick in the top of the glass and out again. Sitting in the sunlight, her mind filled with the swarm and drone. Daydreaming.

Collage. It shouldn't have come as a surprise. The best time with her mother was always when they were doing something. Cooking, sewing. Her mother's mouth pinched full of pins, her head bent over the Singer.

"Are daubers like wasps?" she'd asked one of those summer afternoons.

"Don't ask me about nature," her mother was always saying, guiding the fabric with those little hands, eyes on the needle as it whined. "I just know not to bother the bastards. I know to stay out of their business."

Liv on the straw rug on her knees on the porch, cutting around the pinned-down pattern with pinking shears, eye out for the dark triangles that mean notch it.

"Why stay out of their business if they don't sting?"

The whining Singer stopped, her mother's head popped up. "They're building on the front porch again, aren't they? How many times do we have to knock that damn nest down?"

But the nest is not on the front porch. It is in the attic, waggled up tight where the rafters meet the brick, close to the window. Dream daubers in a dream nest. They come from somewhere.

She will not start kindergarten with Miss Treat yet, in the big school. She'll not yet get to take the bus with Harriet, or stand at the bus stop with her brother. Or carry a backpack. Instead, she turns the knob very carefully, opens the door just wide enough to slip through and

up the stairs in her socks so her mother won't hear. Sunlight a square on the floor that comes from beyond, she can feel it seep through her clothes like wet. The smell—old hot wood and something sharp she cannot name. Maybe spiders. There is something in Stephen afraid of anything that crawls, but she, she's what her father calls intrepid. *My intrepid girl*, her father calls her. Fearless, Webster's says. Brave, bold, courageous, valiant.

Valiant.

Stephen goes crazy when he sees a spider. Which is why the attic has always been hers. When she is here it is as if she is a part of the house itself—a board or a nail or the pink fluff in the walls. As if her mouth has been filled up with the listening that houses do. When she is here, her mother is a faraway dream, only a dream the screen door's slap, the call: *Olivia!*

She dreams the silence of grass as her mother walks across the yard to look for Liv next door. *Olivia!* Answer me! *Liv!*

She would like a room like a cake, she thinks, fluffed and pink, with white trim. Beds with skirts of white seersucker. She has asked her mother. She would talk the dauber language like the lizard in Mabel, the book at her grandmother's house.

Mabel, hand on the wolf's back.

She can tell stories.

Of the time her mother made her sit at the table for an hour after dinner to finish her green beans and how the beans got wickeder and wickeder as she sat there, dank and shriveled as a witch's digits. She'd eat them, but only with more milk, and when her mother had gone for milk, she'd slipped the lot under the rug and made a show of gagging. Kicked heels against floor for effect, reached as if desperate for the glass, desperate for the milk to wash the vile things down.

If Liv talks like a grown-up, her mother sometimes will say things.

“Hi Clara. What are those?”

“These, why, these are elderberries.”

“Elderberries. Where did you get them?”

“Your aunt bought a lot and gave me some. I thought I’d give jam a try. Why the hell not?”

“Are they good?”

“I like them when they’re in a jam.”

“What does it taste like?”

“You’ll know, won’t you? Now outside. It’s a beautiful day. Go.”

Retreat. She knows this. And reappear.

“What’s that?”

“That’s the pectin.”

“Why?”

“It makes it thick so you can spread it. So it doesn’t pour. Now leave me alone.”

Sometimes if she ignores her mother, if she sits and draws awhile.

“So the pectin makes it thick?”

I eat my peas... Olivia’s mother closes her eyes. Standing over the steaming jars, her glasses shoved up into her wavy brown hair, she pauses, trying to remember.

I eat my peas with honey.

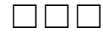
I’ve done it all my life.

It makes the peas taste funny,

but it keeps them on my knife. “That’s Ogden Nash,” she says, and they laugh together, their voices tinkling through the quiet house, but it isn’t enough. It doesn’t last.

Nothing Liv does is enough to make her mother happy.

In the attic, when she holds her face to the sun and almost completely closes her eyes she can see diamonds. They glitter and tremble. She can't tell if it's her eyelashes or something else, something from God. Harriet has hair that comes down on the sides of her face in little coils. Her cheeks make her look as if she is always blushing. On her cheeks her freckles melt as in a hot soup whereas on the sides they become faraway and cold, like planets. Harriet likes to color with the silver and gold and copper. Liv likes the flames, the reds and oranges and yellows. Harriet once reached over and held Liv's hand when they were next to the climber watching Jem Lewis showing off. The feel of that, of Harriet taking her hand, had been its own little shore in the middle of the playground, its own little sun.



“You didn’t need to do that, Gus,” says Liv. “Santo’s probably already bought Gado a costume for tomorrow.”

“Santo? No way.”

She looks up from chopping onions, does not mask her annoyance. “How do you know that?”

“Because. It’s Santo.” Gus had delivered a clock earlier, seen a pop-up Halloween store, and bought the last Indian chief headdress they had. Not exactly what the Mohicans wore, but bright at least. Feathers.

“If you’re Gado, feathers are good,” he says. He grins at her from across the room, coaxing her to smile as well. Pretend, the smile says. Play parent with me.

“It’s not a good idea.”

“You think Santo’s taking Gado trick or treating?”

“Maybe not. But it’s his call, isn’t it?”

Gus starts to straighten, it’s what he does—newspapers in the recycling, bag off a chair and on a hook. “You think it doesn’t matter.”

“I think it’s Santo’s call.”

“Well, it does matter. Gado will never be this age again.”

Leave the kid alone, she thinks. Let them do what they do, Day of the Dead, whatever, however they do it.

Gus calls, and Tuck leaps from her crate.

“Santo’s not going to do it, Liv. He’s not that...”

“He’s not that what?”

“He’s not... that kind of... father. He’s got other stuff going on.”

“Oh, okay.”

She scrapes the onions off the board and into a bowl, begins to peel the garlic.

“I’m taking the dog out.”

“He’s Gado’s father, Gus. That’s the kind of father Santo is. It should be whatever he decides. If Santo doesn’t do Halloween, then he doesn’t do it.”

The door slams. She throws bits of onion at it. Go ahead, she thinks. Walk away. That’s what you do.

She chops the peppers.

The toys, the books, the walks, the meals, the sleepovers, all the involvement with Santo’s son. She’s to blame too. It’s a silent pact she’s made over these months—to keep her own counsel about it, not refuse him or get in the way. To keep things smooth, to make Gus hers.

But is he hers?

At his tree he’d not answered, which, if she’s honest, ought to tell her something.

She pauses, blade resting on the board, and stares out at the worn and beautiful room.

What was it she’d wanted?

This, she thinks, and goes back to chopping. This. To be standing here chopping peppers. Having come from his bed.

It *hasn’t* made things smooth, and it has been at Santo’s expense. She has known that and not wanted to look at it. It has taken a toll. She knows, feels how the muck of it has gathered as between rocks, blocking the way, stopping up what used to flow so freely between her and her friend, for Santo has moved away from her, does not confide in her as he once did. It’s clear as day. It’s not D’America. He feels betrayed.

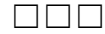
After the peppers, the zucchini. After the zucchini, the olives.

All of that and yet. And yet and yet. She would not lose Gus. She would not.

She could use the word love except that it confuses her, confounds her with its carnival colors, its marketeering, its cheap hawkers and handlers promising eternity, wrapping things in tulle, releasing doves. No, she doesn't like the word. It's too like religion. Too absolute.

She believes in cake, the brief sweet. In what she can touch, feel, taste, even if it's fleeting. In this room—in the way the afternoon light lays the shadows of the mullions atop the chairs and couch as would a net, the ticking clocks, the quiet.

Except for this, we are good together, she thinks. What we have—it's something to be cared for and defended.



“Strange weather,” Gus says when he returns from his walk with Tuck.

“What do you mean?”

“Odd. Warm. And I thought it was going to snow.”

She’s adding spices now. The chili powder, cumin, a little cayenne.

Gus says he’s spoken to Santo who had not been planning to take Gado trick-or-treating.

Liv puts the cover on the pot and sis cross-legged on the floor, pulls the tired puppy to her lap. Let it go, she tells herself and strokes Tuck’s back.

Gus takes the Indian headdress from its wrapper.

“You nailed it,” she says. “He will love it.”

And he will. It’s bright, it’s gaudy, and on Gado the feathers in back will reach almost to the floor.

Gus stops on his way upstairs. “He said the crew may be called out if trees come down. So even if Santo wanted to take Gado out, he can’t.”

“Of course he can. You think other fathers on the crew aren’t taking their kids trick-or-treating tonight? They may be on call, but they all have cell phones.”

“I encouraged him, Liv, I did, but it’s not a holiday Santo knows or cares anything about. He told me I should take him.”

“Okay, okay,” Liv says, hands up. “I don’t want to fight about it.”

He disappears up the stairs.

Still, if she hadn’t prodded, would he have even asked Santo along? Gus prefers not to ask—that’s what she finds so galling. He does with Gado as he pleases. She’s tired of not saying anything about it.

She rises, stirs the chili, cleans the mess she's made, though she never gets his kitchen as clean as he does—a man who boils sponges! She listens to the creak of floorboards overhead and waits for him to come down again, and when she tires of waiting, she climbs the stairs and stands there at the door. He's made the bed, folded and stacked on the bureau her scattered clothes. Incredible, she thinks, what this man sees. And what he doesn't.

“Please try to understand me when I tell you this.”

“If it's so hard to understand, maybe you shouldn't say it.” He leans against the wall next to the bathroom door, his hands behind his back.

“Maybe.” She smiles. “And maybe I should have said it long ago.”

“I doubt it. Really, I do.”

“I don't think you intend... I'll be honest. Okay, I think Gado's been tempted away from his dad. A little. You buy him things, you give him stuff Santo can't afford.”

“Liv...”

“You take him places. He's just a kid, he loves it—of course he loves it. But put yourself in Santo's shoes, how it must feel to him.”

“It feels fine to him,” Gus says and pushes off the wall, raises a blind, pauses at the window now to look into the yard.

“But isn't that just what you prefer to think because it's convenient, Gus? Because what if it was you? To be so outspent, so outplayed... so... so out-daddied? It can't feel like a level playing field.”

She's pleading, she can hear the vein of metal in her voice.

“Tuck, stop it. Liv, don't let her do that.”

She picks up the shoe the dog is chewing on and tosses it with too much force onto the bed. Sweeps the puppy up, which begins gnawing on her braid, on her hand.

“Put her down when she does that, Liv. As it is, you’re all scratched up.”

She sits on the floor with Tuck and takes the rubber chew toy Gus hands her, but she’s impatient to have this out, to finally say it all, her heart is pounding. “I only mean,” she starts again, “that Santo’s the one who needs you. He needs you more than Gado does. Gado has a father.”

He slips into the bathroom so she must call to him, “He’s only nineteen. Imagine yourself at nineteen.”

“Exactly.” But he’s turned the faucet on.

“He’s worked so hard to win your favor, and you hardly seem to notice—”

“Pardon me”—he peers around the open door—“but you speak as if you live inside my head. How do you know what I notice?”

“But he keeps everything so nice, Gus, so neat and trimmed. He replaced that tile in your shower, he fixed the lock on the barn. There were the two trees he planted. He washed the windows. *The windows*. Do you realize how hard that was? The gardens have been completely transformed. Remember how amazing he was about trapping the moles last spring? He didn’t have to do that. And it actually irritated you, Gus. Imagine how—”

“You’re right about the moles. We were only getting used to one another then, and I apologized.”

“Gus.”

“I don’t understand why any of it is your—”

“It’s my *business* because Santo is a friend of mine. Because I care.”

“Care? That’s what this is?” He goes across to his bureau, paws through the sock drawer.

“Gus, can’t you stop moving for a second? And you’re already wearing socks.”

“I don’t know why I put these on, or why I even keep them, they’re so uncomfortable.” He sits, takes off his socks, throws them in the trash, and puts the new pair on. “Santo and I are fine. We have our own way with each other. Really.”

“But your way, Gus—”

“Liv.”

“I mean, have you ever tried to talk to him about his life, where he comes from, his family, any of that?”

“Jesus, Liv. Don’t you even know—”

“But *have* you? Or is it only ever Gado? Because that’s what I see.”

He picks up the plate and cup from the bureau, walks past her out the door and down the stairs.

A minute later, she’s found her purse, is ready to walk out the front door. She’s picked this fight, and she’s glad to have it. Finally.

He washes out the two dishes, dries them.

“I’m sorry to come at you like this, Gus. It’s just that all this has been on my mind so long.”

“I’ve said this to you how many times?” he says, folding the kitchen towel. “Santo’s a teenager. He likes that I take care of Gado. It’s convenient for him.”

“Sure he likes it, of course he does, but once you look at it, really peel it back, what’s there? What are you really doing?”

He stares at her.

“What’s there, Gus?”

“What do you know about what’s there?”

“He owes you, Gus. He owes you everything he has. He needs you. He feels he has to give you whatever you want.”

“And you’re saying I want Gado.”

“If it looks like a duck and it walks like a duck...”

He swats the counter with the towel, throws it against the wall.

“We should probably take this up some other time, Liv. Or better yet, not.”

“I think you’re working something out—”

“I’m sure you think you know—”

She opens the door. Her voice is soft. “Gus. All I’m saying is deal with that other little four-year-old who lives here still. And here.” She touches her chest with a fingertip.

“And then, if you want a kid, have one. Your own.”

In the car, she rolls down the window. The air feels strange for fall. Warm, balmy, like beach air, moist like spring. She looks to the sky. Blotting paper. It's definitely getting cold.

At home she puts on her heaviest hoodie, pulls on a cap, and coils a scarf around her neck, goes out to say hello to her garden. It's been too long. Celia's things still look puny, but next year they'll fasten on. The African basil and gaura, which still look okay, even this late, make up for everything else. She cuts things back, tries not to think of what she'd said to Gus—she is sure she meant it, that she had to speak, and yet something dark buffets her from underneath. She works until she can barely see, until she's chilled to the bone, and once inside draws a hot bath and soaks, flips through a bulb catalogue in the tub, contemplates the daffodils.

So many varieties! And not so expensive. She could save if she gets lots, a hundred. She could put fifty on either side of the front door. Maybe she'll even do it. It would make her feel better, help with winter, help with what's just happened. She closes her eyes and tries to think only of the flowers coming up, their nodding habit, their yellow trumpets.

What will her life be like then, when daffodils are in bloom?

In bed, she calls Vitalija.

"You've given him much to think about," Vitalija says. "Now give him space, time to sort it out."

"I am, I am. But it scares me."

But Vitalija's right. She's been too much with Gus. They both need a break, time to re-balance, she's lost the thread of her own life. This time away will give her time to think, to

go out with friends, organize, clean, to try her brother one more time, her brother is a snarl inside her head.

See, she thinks, this is good.

Liv texts her brother Stephen, then orders twenty-five each of four different varieties of daffodils. Rushes the order.

At nine she holds her phone in her lap, but does not call Gus.

She watches a Netflix movie, opens her one gardening book, reads about planting bulbs. At her windows, the minute scratchings of sleet. The gaura and African basil will be destroyed, but it's good, providential, that she'd cut back everything else.

And just in the nick of time.

See, she thinks again, I needed to be home. Tomorrow will be better.

At one-thirty she wakes, wakes as if it is morning.

Their fight is the air, on her pillow, all Liv can breathe. She lays in the dark. *Deal with that other little four-year-old who lives here, Gus. And then if you want a kid you should have your own.*

She'd broken into the hoard of things not said.

That's what you think of me? Jesus, Liv.

He will leave her. If he's awake, he is thinking of how tired he's grown. The thought makes her lunatic, makes her skin itch, makes her want to leap from bed, call him, wake him, she cannot bear it. In the bathroom she puts her nose to glass. Snow and snow and a tiny scabbling like glass against the pane.

Sometime later she wakes in utter darkness. Snapping limbs ring out like the report of guns. And then the awful tearing cry of sundered heartwood, the noisy hurtle of a tree through branches, the impact which seems to shatter bedrock. Her house shivers in its footings. The quiet behind the rip and crash is a kind of caving in, a collapse inside her chest. She rushes to the window. Outside the snow falls and falls, she can see nothing, yet the feel of that tree falling is with her like a ball hot in the glove.

She feels her way back to bed, tries the bedside lamp, but the power is out. She feels her way into the kitchen and stands there in the dark, uncertain what to do, where to hide, another tree, one of her own, could fall at any moment. She's only been in the basement once—it's awful—the old dirt floor, the ancient coal bin, the mice.

But perhaps sit on the stairs?

Candles, she thinks, and feels her way to the drawer. Finds the matches. For a few minutes, she sits halfway down the basement stairs with a lit candle, waiting for catastrophe.

Everyone must be awake like this, she thinks, fumbling down hallways, leaning onto banisters, cursing dead batteries, lighting candles. How many candles are now alight in Paynesbridge?

But unable to be still, she leaps up again. Out the window in her room she sees dark shapes everywhere against the snow—branches, like a bomb gone off—and the snow plunges and plunges, headlong, not pretty, not sweet.

Downed power lines, she thinks. Live wires on tops of roofs, on sidewalks. It's Halloween.

She hears a distant siren. Thinks of Vitalija and her mother. Vitalija is surely awake, but her mother hopefully is sleeping peacefully under her blanket of Lorezepam. She reaches for her cell phone, can't find it. Checks the bedside table, the kitchen, her bag, her skirt and coat. Where is it? Hoodie. Where's her hoodie? Bathroom.

And fuck and fuck. It's dead. She didn't plug it in. And no landline.

When she remembers, the idea of gas cheers her out of all proportion. She has gas, with a match to light the pilot, she can cook.

Okay. She'll manage.

Is Gus trying to call? Is he worried?

She takes the quilt and pillow from her bed and curls up on the couch, but why it is safer than her bed she isn't sure. She tries to sleep but can't quit thinking of the old maple in Gus's front yard, the other one outside his kitchen window. She listens to the sirens, for there are more, and thinks, okay, calm down, everyone is fine. Power will be restored. In the morning, I'll call them. She lights a second candle, stares at it as she lies there.



When Liv wakes again the house is freezing. She throws on more clothes and goes outside. The neighbors are out. Liv joins them to walk, to see, to be a part of, to pick her way like everyone else through the sloped hillocks of snow, the branches and leaves that cover almost every bit of asphalt. A radical, strange stillness has engulfed them.

Celia, up the street with Mira, calls to Liv as everyone else is calling out to one another, hands in gestures of disbelief: “Are you okay? How’s your house? Isn’t this... *incredible?*”

A big circle of neighbors on Dorset and everyone speaking of where they are supposed to be—work, school, the important meeting that will not happen now, the people who cannot be reached. But what is there to do? People grin, shrug. Oh well. Nothing. For now, there is nothing to do.

The exhilaration, the relief. Even, Liv thinks, the sense that something has thrown the brake, *ordered* them to stop.

She imagines people all over town stumbling from cold houses like doped bears, just as she has done, sniffing at the wood smoke, surveying the damage. Stupefied at first, arms crossed and shy, but then finally warming to one another. Liv shakes hands with Susie from next door who has the brown circles in her grass, who owns the dog, Morris, always in her yard. They walk up Dorset together to see the downed tree only to learn there is another at the other end of Dorset. (She cannot drive, cannot go to Gus’s, and will have to walk to her mother’s.) She meets Alice, who in a pink mohair cap lives three houses down. She shakes hands with the elderly Mr. Hasbrow, the owner of one downed tree. And Liv meets the young couple, Max and Erin, who live next door to him.

The storm has opened a door they all might walk through together. Know your

neighbor, it says. Know how much time you waste on yourself.

The wet, heavy snow has come down on trees that have not yet lost their leaves, and the weaker ones—diseased, old, compromised in some way—have buckled under the weight, causing branches to rip, leaders to split, trees themselves to fall, and people all over town, all over New England, to leap up startled in the dark. Celia laughs when Liv asks if the café is open, for nothing, Celia says, is open except one pizza joint, and there's a line around the block for that. Liv uses Celia's cell phone to call Vitalija, but there is no answer. When she calls Gus, again, there's no answer.

“Don't worry, they're fine,” says Celia. “Have you had breakfast?”

And though Liv hasn't, though she's ravenous, she says she really must begin her walk, she must make sure they're fine. It's that, of course, but it's also that she's never been in Celia's house, and seeing it now, after all that's happened, is more than she wants to try to handle—the fight with Gus has made her too tender to be beset by Celia envy so early in the day.

“Oh, come on, quick, you have to eat. I'll make you something you can take,” Celia says, grabbing her by the hand. There is no saying no to Celia, so up the walk and into the lovely beiges and ivories of Celia and Aiden's home, the calm, clean elegance, the generous moldings, the good everything.

She sits at the breakfast table with Mira and watches as Celia makes the cup of tea in the tall white paper to-go cup with its plastic top (the ones they use at the café). How to feel okay about oneself around this woman who seems to do everything so well, Liv thinks, who appears to have everything she wants, who always looks great, like she does now in the moth-eaten orange wool over her husband's button-down, the old jeans half-tucked into the tall green Muck boots, the impeccable manicure. How perfect her chatter, how perfect her

immense Viking stove, how perfect her tall cruet of fine olive oil which she splashes into the thick, all-clad perfect skillet. And how strange too that Celia seems to want to be with her.

For Celia does seem to want to be with her.

And strange too that Halloween can be cancelled, for it has been. That's what Celia has heard.

The Indian headdress back in its bag, Liv thinks, with satisfaction.

And strange too, so strange, not having to be anywhere, to have the calendar wiped clean this way. Liv keeps starting at what day it is—Sunday, a workday—and how late in the day. And then remembers she has nothing to do but walk to her mother's. Time flaps like a sail she keep thinking to trim, but it will not be trimmed.

“You must spend the night here,” Celia says, standing at the stove, one boot perched atop the other, wet leaves all over the nice wood floor. She wraps Liv's egg and bacon sandwich in a square of waxed paper. “It's going to get so cold, and you don't have a fireplace, do you?”

“No.”

“Well, I have two and a woodstove, so really, it will be warm. You must come if you have no other place to go. Except you have to promise not to strip and dance like the last time we were in trouble together.”

“No dice then,” says Liv, and they laugh, remembering the pothole.

Maybe, she thinks.

Getting to her mother's involves trekking through neighboring streets and through town where the same stillness has fallen over everything, where every storefront, every restaurant, every traffic signal, every streetlight has gone dark. The rumor of the one pizza joint open is correct, and a line does snake down the street and around the corner. She stops

every now and then to check in with groups of people gathered on corners. She borrows a cell phone to try Vitalija and Gus again. No answer, no answer. Santo, she knows, is out with his crew, Gado with Gus or with D'America.

She hears that the storm is unprecedented. The whole town, save a few neighborhoods to the north, is without power. And not just Paynesbridge, or the county, or even the state: all of southern New England is down. Western Mass Electric has never had to deal with anything of this magnitude. Utility workers are being flown in from the South and Midwest. Air quality alerts have been issued because of all the wood smoke. Home Depot is open on generator power, and Target too is open, people say, but already they are out of flashlights. Soon they'll be out of candles too, if they aren't already.

Like others, Liv cannot help but gaze idiot-like at the behemoth trunks that lay across streets and yards, sometimes across the spines of cars and roofs. People reach out to touch the bark as if trying the flank of some expired beast. They point—they all point across near and point across far, and up—considering the hanging branches overhead.

Everywhere stunned amazement.

Everywhere the same story told—of lost power, near disaster, disaster. Nothing else spoken of.

Five have died, she hears this. One child. No one knows names yet. The outage is so vast it will be days before power is restored and debris picked up. It will be days, people agree. And yes, Celia is right, the temperature will drop tonight.

They are on their own. And yet, so odd: everyone is happy.



There are tire tracks in Liv's mother's driveway and a strange emptiness in the sky behind her mother's house. It feels like the wrong house, and Liv must pause halfway up the drive to be sure, to study things, though she also knows this is it, of course it is, yet something's off, and the immense feathered shadow across the back yard she both sees and doesn't quite register—it comes over her and is also overlooked as sunlight eeks over a landscape until one, looking about, says, "Oh, it is morning!" In this way, with a leap in her chest, Liv sees with a horrible certainty at last that a tree is down.

Yet Vitalija's car is here, and her mother's. They must be inside?

She runs up the hill, and stands there with a hand over her heart as if pledging allegiance. It's the spruce. She hadn't thought of the half-dead spruce.

"Vitalija!" Liv cries, but there is only silence.

Her legs beneath her have become weak. She turns back. She cannot think. She must sit down. What to do, what to do! Her head is a muddle.

She opens the outside door as she always does, it's never locked. And then, she must, the inside door that leads from the vestibule to the kitchen.

She calls out in a ringing voice not her own, knows there will be no answer. Their death courses through her. They are inside, their bodies are inside, crushed, the thought inhabits her entirely, she is shaking violently, cannot make herself open the kitchen door. She runs around to the front walk, typically unused. Here are wheel tracks, boot marks in the snow, many boot marks, and front door slightly ajar.

EMTs, she thinks with relief. An ambulance. They're all right then! They could be all right. They are at the hospital. Yet still she peers inside and says, "Mom? Vita?" for this is what she is used to doing.

There is water and mud all over the entrance hall floor. The side of the house looks untouched, but behind the kitchen is crushed, and she can't see around the corner into the living room, but light comes flooding from that room, usually so dark, and she can see the green branches on the floor and lapping up the walls, and hanging as if from the ceiling and flopped over the desk and television, and it is too much, she cannot go in for fear, for fear of what? Of the house collapsing, or something else.

For a moment she stands half in, half out, for it feels as if, with all her gazing at that spruce, with all her musings upon its feathery top, she has called it down, called it in, invited this.

No more.

No, she thinks, and pulls shut the door and runs around to the bedroom windows where she sees the rumpled sheets on her mother's bed, portable commode, the glass of water and the Kleenex box, the little coaster under the water glass. The bureau, the hairbrush, the lamp, everything as it should be. It all looks so normal, how strange!

She runs to the back and sees it all, and it is monstrous, the breach, for the spruce has come right in, landed on top of everything intimate and familiar: the couch, the coffee table, right through the glass window, and the fireplace, through the wall of the kitchen itself, she can now see, so that its branches cascade absurdly over the counters, dishes, the blender, everything.

The trunk has broken the back of the couch, broken open the floor, the concrete underneath, yet left the love seat hardly touched. The coffee table has disappeared, must be in splinters.

She runs back around the house, across the lawn, down the drive, down the road, loose, rattled. She runs, her breath a patient friend who runs along beside, boots in snow like

sand, she mustn't stop, she must keep on no matter. But within minutes, her lungs are on fire and she must stop, lean, hands on knees, and breathe!

What should I be doing? But she can do nothing but this, her phone is dead. I must run and walk and walk and run, and wait for someone to come along.

She looks up and down the road—no car!—and begins to run again.

□□□

“Olivia Lambert?”

The nurse, if she is a nurse, is voluptuous, creamy-skinned, lip-glossed. Not in a hurry when she comes into the waiting room.

Liv stands. But the nurse pulls a chair across the room, motions Liv to sit again.

“How are they?” she asks. Odd. It’s how she had pictured herself and Gus this morning. Talking, but closer: knee to knee, tete-a-tete.

“We have bad news,” the nurse says.

Liv crosses her arms across her stomach, looks at her knees. It can’t be Vitalija. “Bad news,” she repeats. She shakes her head. “Please tell me not both of them.”

“No. Your mother.” She reaches, touches Liv’s knee, draws her hand away. “I am so sorry.”

“I was afraid of this. I went by and saw the house, the tree.”

“She was hit. Her skull was fractured. There are other, extensive injuries. I could go into them, but the doctor will be here soon. He should be the one to tell you exactly.”

She nods.

“I’m sorry. We all are. It was a... terrible, freak accident.” The nurse sits back in the chair, surveys Liv’s face. “Let me get you something.”

The nurse hands over a bouquet of tissues, and Liv takes it, but she is not crying.

“Where was she found?”

“Under the branches in the kitchen. She most likely saw nothing, felt nothing. I’m sure she didn’t suffer.”

That’s what they say, Liv thinks.

“When did the call come in?”

“A little after five.”

“How is Vitalija, the other one. My mother’s caregiver?”

“Fine. She’s sleeping.”

“Oh.”

“She has a broken arm. She’ll be down in a bit. When she wakes up, if that’s all right. She needs the rest.”

“Of course.”

She’s like a meringue, Liv thinks.

The doctor is not like a meringue. He’s Indian, raisin-lipped, with washed-out coffee-colored skin that seems faded and worn like a fabric that’s been beaten against stones. He’s thin young, wears green scrubs, and shuffles slightly so that you can hear him coming and going down the hall. When he walks in, the nurse stands and retreats a little as if the President has entered.

“We’re so sorry for your loss, Miss Lambert.”

“Liv,” she mutters. “Thank you.”

The doctor flips through papers on a clipboard. Liv strains to understand him through his accent, though she cares little about the technicalities. The tree came through the house. Her mother’s skull was crushed, along with her spine. That is the long and short of it. She was killed instantly.

The doctor slaps the folder against a leg and finishes. He shakes her hand. “I am so sorry for your loss,” he says again.

“Where is she now?”

“The mortuary.”

Liv bows her head. Already.

“Yes. It’s what we do.”

How big and blowsy a thing, she thinks, in life, how full of air and fuss and then in death how oddly flat and manageable. How swiftly carted, filed.

“A member of the family will be asked to identify the body within the next twenty-four hours.”

The body.

“I’m the only family here.”

The doctor nods solemnly, bows slightly, steps away. “Donna will help you with the rest,” he says, but Liv follows, burrish, asks for a copy of the ambulance report, “whatever you have on your clipboard there,” she says, pointing. She wants the names of those who had been in her mother’s house. She would like to talk to them. The doctor refers her to the nurse for everything.

He is very nice, solicitous, but he is finished.

Her phone, which is charging under her chair, sputters, hiccups, lights up. There are two texts now from Gus, the latest, just now. *Coming to your house.*

I’m at the hospital, she writes. Can you come here?

Are you okay?

Yes. I’ll explain when you get here.

It’s impossible. Her mother killed by a falling spruce.

And yet, why not, she thinks. Why not? Such a thin membrane—even her memories of her mother on that couch, Anna Karenina clutched to her chest, seem almost dream-like—threads dissolving in the air, saffron in a soup. Even this moment is dissolving, this one—here, it’s unspeakably sad! How am I to penetrate it? How am I to peel back this awful separation, this film!

The tree has fallen, and I must let her go, must let the chips fall, let that part of life die away, let what happens happen. If Gus decides to leave, if that is what is to be, I must let it. Let life come through, take form. And the force of this desire to pierce something, she is not sure, *to act*, causes her to rise and rush to the windows where she stands, breathing hard, as if hands on the rail of a ship. Embarkation. Here, the old country with its invisible tethers, the worn grooves to which she's so used to resorting, into which she's fallen for so long, her mother, for one, but everything else too. Everything that comes with her mother, and more since Michaux Street: that habit. And behind her, when she turns to walk toward it: the future. Her self.

Eventually his gray truck pulls into the lot in back, the truck he calls Rosie, after Don Quixote's nag Rocinante, and she thinks at once of loyal Sancho, Santo, and she watches Gus walk across the lot. August Quirk.

Gado is not with him. He stops a moment, pivots, as if he has forgotten something, perhaps in his truck, but then pivots again and continues on toward the back door of the hospital. My future, she thinks, depends on saying to myself exactly this, how I feel. Everything. She approaches a crossing of some kind inside herself, she must be careful. I must be entirely myself now, she thinks, tumble from the cage I've crammed myself in, for fear, for fear, always for fear. I must let go of this caution, this caution to keep everything pinned in place (the way I think I want it). Let what crumbles crumble.

And a few minutes later he is there, standing next to her at the windows. He sets one of those long arms about her and they stand looking down at the tops of the cars and she cries and swipes at her eyes and in a voice only slightly above a whisper tells him everything—about the long walk to her mother's, the tree, the house, the ride she'd gotten to the hospital.

“She’s dead,” she says finally, turning to him. “My mother is dead.”

“What?”

“Dead. She was in the kitchen, probably rooting around for a drink, it’s what she does sometimes at night when she can’t sleep.” She stops herself. “Did.”

Impossible.

“They found her there, under the branches.” She shakes her head. “It feels so strange.”

He pulls her to him.

“It’s like someone’s taken the keystone out, Gus. The thing everything else has been leaning on, something. Or a tooth. It’s just strange. Like the way I felt this morning, having to remember over and over again that there was no place to go. What will happen now? It’s like... it’s weird.”

“Yes, I know. I remember. I’m sorry about your mother.”

“She never got to meet you. I regret that.”

They stand there. Tuck on the front seat of Gus’s truck, paws on the glass.

“Are you okay?” she says, turning to him. “I haven’t even asked.”

He doesn’t seem so.

“Is everything at your house okay?”

“We’re fine,” he says.

“At the cabin too?”

“Everything is fine.”

“And Arent?”

“They’re on generators. He’s good.”

“And Santo’s out with the crew?”

“He is. He’ll be out all night, I’m sure.”

“And Gado is with—”

He is somber when he says it. “D’America.”

The disks of snow on the tops of cars look like children’s beds, their rounded sides neat like sheets tucked under puffs of down.

“I’ll have to identify the body,” she says and shakes her head.

“Right.”

“It’s going to be awful.” Two hands in her hair. “I... I just don’t know how I’m going to... get through that.”

“I’ll come with you.”

She takes his hand. “Oh Gus, thank you. Thank you, thank you.”

“Then there’s the funeral, the obituary, your brother, your family. All of that. It’s like a long train, the to-do list.”

“Stephen. I’d forgotten. I must call him.”

“Just text *emergency*. He’ll call.”

“The funeral should be in Houston. It really should, it’s where she’s from, where her burial plot is. Which means the body must be flown down. Family, all her old friends, those who are left anyway—they’re all there, and relatives.” Hand to forehead. “I’ll have to take off work. I can’t think of this.”

“I can go down with you, if you want.”

She turns. “To Houston? Really? You’d do that?”

“Of course I would.”

“Oh, Gus. Yes. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

But there's something reserved about him, held away.

"You can't imagine where I was last night," Liv says. "In my head. I was sure you were checking out, that you'd just... I didn't..."

"I've been through this twice myself with my parents. There are things I can help with."

"No, I mean I thought you would be angry. I'm so glad you're not." His hand is in his pocket. She lifts it out, holds it, but he's still looking out at cars.

"You seem somewhere else."

He glances at her. "I'm here." But in his expression, the same reserve.

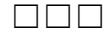
"I know about what happened with your sister, Gus. I've read the articles. I know you were with her. The whole thing. I've tried to imagine every horrible detail of that day. For your sake, Gus... Whatever it is, that or whatever else, I want you to know you can trust me with it."

Donna the nurse steps back into the waiting room. "Liv? I've got someone here for you," she says.

To the nurse, she holds up a finger. Wait.

"I *am* angry about yesterday," Gus says. In this light his eyes are blue and chill and distant as winter mountains. "But your mother's died, and that's what to focus on now. So let's make the arrangements. You'll let me know where to meet you." And he lets go her hand.

And before she can stop him he's across the waiting room and out the swinging doors, and Vitalija is there, red-faced from crying, her arm in a blue sling. And Liv feels terrible running past her, but she does. She runs to the elevator, but Gus is gone.



Vitalija explains how when she finally got Clara to bed at almost two, she herself, exhausted, had fallen into a deep sleep and did not wake when Clara, who had evidently only dozed, got up in the dark and with her walker made it into the kitchen as she sometimes did in the middle of the night, looking for a snack or for another drink.

“She forgets to call me. She forgets I’m even in the house,” Vitalija says. “She thinks she lives alone sometimes.”

“I know.”

“If I’d heard her, I would have gone myself and gotten what she wanted.”

“And it’s so good you didn’t,” Liv says and takes Vitalija’s scratched-up hands. “So very, very good you didn’t go.”

Vitalija’s eyes flood, and she tells—dabbing, blowing her red nose—how she woke when the tree came down, how she went into Clara’s room, it was light enough by then, but how she knew anyway by the noise—“it was like an earthquake”—and by the air—“fresh, like snow, I knew like this”—she snaps her fingers.

How she didn’t want to look.

She tells, Liv clutching both her hands, how she had called out Clara’s name, called and called and heard no answer, knew she’d gone to the kitchen, but the kitchen was full of tree.

“I was in my nightgown. Snow was falling in on me. It was snowing in the house. Everything was wet.”

She leans forward, screws her eyes into Liv’s. “It’s so hard to describe. It was a nightmare, everything was strange. I thought I was asleep. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

Then sitting back, face relaxing. Exhausted, drained.

“I knew your mother was underneath. I knew. ‘Clara!’ I kept calling. Over and over. But I knew.”

Her eyes swell again, redden. Again and again she blows her nose.

I haven’t shed one tear, Liv thinks.

“I’m so sorry this has happened to you, Vitalija.”

“I’m not important. It’s your mother.” Vitalija says this as if it’s true, and evident. Hair ragged about her face as always, a tatty fringe about such plain and anemic features, voice tentative, tiny, like it always is— little nosings into corners—though Liv has never heard her speak so definitely.

Vitalija speaks of how she waded into the branches of the tree as into waves, calling for Liv’s mother, thinking to look for her with her feet, feeling, with her hands, her hands plunged down into the green when the pantry, or something—“they think it was the pantry”—fell on top of her. When she tried to climb out from under it, when she tried to push it away, nails and glass.

“I couldn’t move my arm,” Vitalija says. “I knew I had to get back to my room where my phone was, but I was in agony. I didn’t even know what I was climbing over. Things. Dishes, pans, cooking bowls, a box of pasta I’d just bought, cereal, packages of those shortbread cookies she loves. Loved.”

She looks toward the window.

“I got to my room again. I called 911 and waited. I waited. I was afraid. I was shaking all over. I knew she was probably dead. I didn’t want to find her.”

“You poor thing.”

“I sat on the floor, the carpet was wet, I’m not sure why. Why was it wet? In my room there was a ceiling. It was melting snow. I pulled the blanket around me, and I just listened.”

“What for?”

“For your mother’s voice. For sirens.”

She takes in a deep and quaking breath, exhales, dabs at her eyes. Takes her breath again and again, one breath at a time as if to practice.

“And then, finally, I heard it. Faraway. And then closer. And then the sound of trucks in the drive, two, and then the lights. It felt so good to see, and yet I was afraid. They cut the tree with chain saws. They told me that later. They took me right away. I didn’t know anything—if she was alive or dead. By the time they got her out, I was already here. Someone came in and told me everything.”

Liv is stroking her little scratched-up hands. “Poor Vita.”

“I would be dead now, Olivia, if I’d woken up. I would have gone into the kitchen for her. She’d be alive, and she would have woken up to that. She wouldn’t have known what to do. Can you imagine?”

“I would have found her. But it would have taken time. Here, plug in your phone. It’s best this way. It happened all at once. She didn’t want this to happen to her, what was happening. Believe me, if she were in her right mind, she would be grateful. I know it. The tree saved her.”

She and Vitalija make their phone calls. To Stephen first, who Liv asks to call her father, then to the landlord, then to Vita’s agency, and then to Aunt June, her mother’s sister. She calls the mortuary, arranges to identify her mother’s body the following morning. She calls Gus.

The time is good for him, he says.

“Will you be all right?”

“Yes,” she says.

She says that Dorset is blocked, she cannot drive.

“Can you call a cab?”

“That’s a good idea,” she says. He makes no offers to retrieve them, to have her stay with him tonight, nor does she ask him to stay with her. It’s clear he doesn’t want that.

“Shall I make our flight reservations?” she asks as if he might have changed his mind.

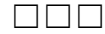
“Yes.”

“It will have to be right away. I’ll get the death certificate before I leave here if I can. I’ll try to get us the bereavement rate.”

“You won’t be able to, not for me, but that’s all right.”

And that’s it. This new caution, this distance.

He’ll pick her up in the morning, he says. They’ll go together to the mortuary.



The cab leaves them at Vitalija's car, which is still in her mother's driveway, and right away, without looking at the house, Vita leaves for a friend's in New York state, a friend with heat and electricity, an extra bed. She offers to ask her friend if Liv can come as well, but Liv shakes her head. She needs to be here.

The temperature has dropped, the wind's picked up. She walks the way she'd come, but it seems someone else who walks. She views herself as from the wrong end of a binoculars, appears far away and small and framed: a spindled figure in a flimsy coat, huddled against cold, encumbered, blue of jaw and eyes all watered.

The cold, the skoosh of her boots on pavement, the squeak of the left one, and the overhead skirmish of leaves still hanging onto trees. Voices near, voices far, and cars, dogs, and the sound of something heavy being dragged.

We are not even yet through fall, she thinks. The grass is still electric green beneath the snow. How slowly time is moving! She thinks of cigarettes and all-day long TV and vodka. Bed. There's what I want, she thinks.

Sleep.

Tripe, she thinks, and the woman pushing her baby down the sidewalk, talking about tripe, brings Misha back, walking along beside her, that feeling that he would do anything.

Even on the side streets a holiday mood, for it's a storm and Halloween rolled into one, children out of school. Some make hay in costumes: run about as pumpkins, witches. She sees a large candy corn waddling across the street ahead, which makes her almost cry again. Above, the perpetually changing watercolor clouds in all her used-to-be colors: Paynes Gray, Davys Gray, Titanium White, Sepia, Indigo, Pthalo Purple, Naples Yellow: the names come to her, they've always been there. He's angry now. We'll be okay, she thinks, and kicks

a branch lying in her way. She stops a teenager, buys a cigarette for two dollars, carries it like a prize to the park and smokes it sitting on a bench. Oh, how good it is to smoke! If she could only buy a pack and take it home and smoke them all, drink some wine. Sleep.

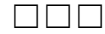
She can't call him. Can't cling.

She moans, hands to face. It's not what she'd said as much as the clamor of her voice she remembers, how it rings out in her head like brass, something too bright, too sure, like an inspector's light.

Maybe Gus is doing for Gado what Arent had done for Gus. With Gado, Gus is the same kind of teacher. He had begun with the birches: the darker-skinned black birch, the yellow birch with its yellowish or sometimes silvery bark that peels off in narrow strips, the paper birch that curls off in pages big enough to write on with a pocketknife. After the birches had come the smooth-barked beech and hornbeam, then the gray furrowed puzzle pieces of the white pine and, the hemlock, the deeply ridged flat rust-colored plates of the red pine. Five needles for a white pine, in keeping with the number of letters in white, though the same was not true of red, which had only two.

Had she gotten it wrong? Had she blundered stupidly, mulishly, not understood what she should have?

Or maybe she'd gotten it right, exactly right, and this is how much Gus hates hearing it.



She walks the streets until it's dark, goes home, lights a candle which she carries in gloved hands room to room, her mind running to dead-ends. No TV, no computer, no Gus, no bath, no comfort anywhere except the hot water which she boils for tea. She pours wine too and alternates her sips from tea to wine and wine to tea. Gus, and Santo too, have fireplaces. Yet they have not asked her to stay. Are they all together?

He is letting her sleep in cold, fend for herself.

She tries to sleep confined in her coat and boots and hat under comforter but cannot get warm. In her mind, the tree, it's branches everywhere, and underneath her mother.

And then, her mother's face, the book clutched tight. That smile.

Oh, Olivia. There you are. Hello.

At seven, still awake, feet like winter brick, she wills herself to rise. Everything is dungeon dark and cold, her breath in little puffs of chrome. Even the candlelight shivers as she shields it with a gloved hand room to room. She brushes her teeth and washes her face in freezing water, brushes out her hair, re-braids it. All of this takes all she has, but it's the promise of fire and light that keeps her at it. She makes two chicken sandwiches, wraps them in waxed paper and sets them in a bag, crosses the street to Celia's. She hasn't yet made airline reservations. Tomorrow she will think of airplanes. Tomorrow together she and Gus will make a plan.

Celia squeezes her hands, leads her like an orphan to the red-tiled sunroom in the back with its wood stove pulsing with heat. Celia offers Liv a rattan chair and a glass of wine. She's made soup. Of course she has. Already warmth is creeping back into Liv's limbs. She hands over her sack of sandwiches. A window seat loaded with houseplants rings two walls, and in the corner, under a giant schefflera, Mira lies asleep.

It's so incongruous, the effect, on so cold a night.

A woman's seated on the loveseat. "Meet my cousin Diana," Celia says.

"Call me Di," the cousin says, but does not rise.

"Perfect," says Celia, smiling at the neatness of it. "Liv, meet Di. Di, Liv."

Live, die, die, live. On any other night Liv might have laughed.

Di is a thick, flushed, excitable-seeming woman wearing gigantic slippers. A counselor in the local high school, she tells horror stories about the students and seems to prefer the poor ones. The rich ones, she says, are spoiled. Pale-eyed, fervid—she moves on to her brother Eddie. Liv can see she often ends up here, on Eddie. He was the only boy, the oldest, given all he ever wanted, never had to work for anything, and ended up.... She glances at Celia, it is dire, it is unspeakable, Celia knows only too well.

Celia looks into her lap, plays with the hem of her sweater.

Di seems to cast about herself a vague disdain for anything linked too much with privilege or comfort or cossetting in general. She doesn't believe in too much love. "Especially teenagers," she says and laughs. The sound is like something metal falling off a truck. "It's taking responsibility," she says, she ought to know. "There's not enough *personal accountability*." And rounds on Liv her small dark eyes. "Do you have kids?"

"God, no," says Liv, hand to neck in self-defense, just like her mother, she thinks, and quickly returns it to her lap. "No doubt I'd bungle it. I'm sure I'd spoil them crazy." She gives Diana her largest, most brazen smile, resists a glance at Celia whose Mira is probably among the wasted brats on Diana's list. She wants to laugh.

Liv is used to thinking of herself as the family unfortunate, though sitting here like this with Diana she feels she's slipped that net. Thanks to Diana she can be herself, can

breathe. She can see how Celia is accustomed to Diana, works around her, is gentle with her, for she is one of Celia's family's unfortunates.

For Celia seems to want to talk to her, to Liv, is trying, or so it feels, to maneuver around her cousin, though she sits on the other side of her. About the café, for one, people from the neighborhood she's met (Erin she particularly likes and Mr. Hasbrow's son who used to be a lobsterman). And so across Diana's broad bow they talk of lobsters, of the ethics of boiling them alive (Diana is outraged by the boiling of lobsters which she makes plain she can't afford and wouldn't buy even if she could), of recipes, of the best seafood restaurants in Manhattan (Liv thinks, well I can't afford them either, lobsters or restaurants, but I'd like to), of kayaking. Diana in a fit of impatience rises in her ridiculous slippers to go off in search of wine.

Liv eats a half a chicken sandwich, sips her wine. In the freezing bathroom, she pees and stares at her flickering face in the mirror. She's happy to be distracted here, and warm, and exhausted by what lies ahead: the grief, the trip to Houston, Gus among her family, the obituary, dealing with her brother and his wife, the grief, the funeral, the house on Michaux Street, her mother's estate, her own life, and the grief.

He'll soften in Houston, she thinks and splashes her face, wipes it dry. We need some time. I'll make amends for my tone.

"Are you all right?" asks Celia.

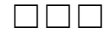
Diana is looking at her too.

"Just defrosting," she says.

Already Di and Celia are pulling out the sleeper, for, in the way of Celia's life, the loveseat they'd been sitting on makes into a perfect bed. Liv and Celia drag a mattress from the guest room, bring in comforters and pillows.

They bring in wood to last the night. Celia tells Diana the story of the pothole. She tells it well, makes them laugh so hard Mira raises her head and looks at them, then turns and falls asleep again.

Potholes, Liv is thinking, as she falls into sleep.



When Liv awakes, the room is empty. Celia and Diana have been tiptoeing around her, she supposes. Had she snored? What time is it? And where's her phone? There, against her foot, but dead again.

She sits and stares into the fire that laps like water, that sends popping missiles into the glass.

The day and its grim demands close in, stand as supplicants would, banging their tin cans. She must get through it, must bend her head and march through it. Perhaps she can charge her phone at the mortuary. She must get cleaned up, be home in time for Gus, get to the mortuary, talk to her brother, make the reservations.

“Good morning.” Celia's at the door, two mugs in hand. “You'll never guess who that was on the phone,” she says and hands a mug to Liv.

“Who?” She thinks of Gus, but it could not be Gus. He has no idea where she is. “Oh,” Liv says and takes the mug. Never has a cup of tea been so welcome. “Thank you, thank you.”

It's strong, Earl Grey.

She must talk to Celia. It comes to her suddenly. She must arrange time off.

Celia folds herself into the corner of the loveseat as if the spot was made for her. She holds the warm mug to her cheek. She's like a cat, Liv thinks. She might as well have paws.

“You'll never guess.”

“I've no idea, but listen, Celia, thank you, thank you, thank you, you totally saved me, I was so cold and tired and slept so hard—”

“Misha! He’s opening his own place! Misha. A bakery called *Angel Cakes* in Ann Arbor, heavy on the gluten-free. Can you believe it? After *Heaven*, he said.” She beams. “My children are going out into the world and procreating!”

“You’re kidding.”

“I’ve been mentoring him for months. What’s wrong—”

“*Shit!*” It’s too much. She sets down the cup.

“What?”

“*Fuck!*”

“Liv...”

“God, I’m sick of this.”

“Sick of what...?”

Liv snatches up her shirt, yanks it overhead, shoves her arms through the armholes, throws her sweater on and wrenches it down. For once she hardly cares what Celia thinks, it’s all down the toilet anyway. She yanks on her jeans, goddamn, one leg, two, tears out the band that holds her braid and rips through her hair with fingers wide, throws the mass of it over her head and roughs it quickly, gathers it with the band. She’ll cut it, dammit, cut in Houston, cut it short, give up, have the whole ruse up at last.

She looks around, breathing hard, takes up the blanket, folds it, slaps it down, takes up the comforter. Begins to fold it too. “Fuck!” she says. “*Fuck!*”

“Liv, what’s wrong? I thought that you’d be pleased.”

“It’s what I want, Celia! And the name *Angel Cakes*? That’s mine! It’s the name I told him. And he’s too young, and so are you...” She shakes her head, some kind of whistling sound escapes her.

“Too young for what?”

“For *Heaven!*” she blurts, but doesn’t mean it. And does. “Never mind. God. It’s too pathetic.”

“Misha’s young,” Celia says. “I’m not so young.”

“You’re younger than I am!” Liv cries and puts the comforter on top of the blanket, yanks up the pillow, slaps it on top of the comforter, presses it down so that it seems to sigh, sinks her face into it. Screams.

“Look, Celia,” she says at last. “I need time off. My mother’s died. A tree fell on her house.”

And then because she must tell it all to someone, she tells it all to Celia who comes over and sits listening open-mouthed, a hand on her foot. “I might have gotten through except this news about Misha. And good for him, I guess, but shit, I’m sick of being jealous. I’m so sick of being jealous of you, Celia, wanting what you have.”

And Celia squeezes her foot and smiles. “I knew that,” she says and goes back to the couch where she sinks once more into her beiges and bones and creams and ivories and takes up her cup and begins to say something, something beautiful, Liv is sure.

“Don’t dare say anything soothing and wise, or I’ll shoot myself,” says Liv. “Or you,” and Celia bursts out laughing and Liv kicks the mattress hard.

“I need to go.”

“Sorry for laughing. I was going to say, watch out for that cup. I love that cup. And don’t kick anything.”

And Liv smiles.

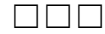
“Also that I’m happy to help you,” Celia says. “If you want. Though you don’t seem to want it.”

“I do!”

“Well, you have to ask. And anyway, you’ve got everything you need already and have had for ages. But we can talk about it.”

“Really?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course.”



There's a silver sedan she doesn't recognize in her drive, parked behind her own car. It's locked, a leather notebook on the seat. An unopened can of seltzer, nothing else. She stands staring at the house. On the porch she opens the screen door quietly, squeezes the latch, throws open the door. "Who's there?"

The toilet flushes. A man walks out of the bathroom.

"Shit! Stephen!"

He's unshaven, his face puffed. Bruisy pockets under the eyes.

"What are you *doing* here?"

He grins. His hug lifts her from the floor. "I just used your toothbrush. What am I doing? I'm freezing my nuts off. Where have you been all night?"

"Who's car is that?"

"It's a rental."

"Why didn't you call?"

"I did."

She rocks back on her heels, looks around the corner into her room. "You slept here?"

He laughs. "Not exactly. But I tried like hell. Where were you?"

She sticks a hand into his parka pocket, and he puts his arm around her and they stand there in the house's morning gloom.

She looks up at him. "You're okay?"

He shakes his head and laughs. "Jesus, Liv, you're past incredible."

It isn't a compliment, but she shrugs it off. No time for all that now.

“Well, I’m glad you came,” she says into his chest. “I’m glad you’re here. How did you get here so fast?”

“Oh, I was at this thing in New York.”

“I was across the street at a neighbor’s,” Liv says, and steps away. “She has a wood stove.”

He moves to the door. “God, I’m cold. Come on, I was just about to get in the car, drive around and thaw. See if I could find some breakfast.”

“What time is it?”

He looks at his watch. “Almost eleven.”

“I have to go to the mortuary. Identify the body. I’m supposed to be there at eleven-thirty.”

“God, don’t do that,” he says.

“I have to.”

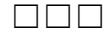
“I mean, I’ll do it.”

She looks up at him. “Really? Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“It’s going to be hard.”

“Didn’t I just say I would?”



Early November, eighty degrees, a cocoon of Gulf Coast damp that gloms onto her, clings and pushes the way she remembers—the mugginess, the salt-tang. And as they drive in, Houston is laid out for miles in every direction, its own nation-state, the lights, the push and sprawl—billboards everywhere, the holiness of commerce, the new concrete forms, the urgent press and ugly freedom, the flags, the loud friendliness, the waste. The waste thrown into the churning wake all day, all night, and without end.

She drives on and it changes. Construction equipment, power machinery, gargantuan public and private works, all of it built with cheap Mexican labor. The high rises and office complexes, the strip mall upon strip mall. The carefully conditioned indoors, the carefully controlled outdoors. Town houses, condo complexes, cars everywhere, everywhere cars and air-conditioning and glass and fencing and sound-proofing and aqua swimming pools and sprinkler systems and lines of trees and gardens and tiny blocks of yards, every living thing paved, mulched, built upon, and still the skulk of constant growth, the humidity damping everything—drooping, rusting, mildewing, clogging, trying to bring it down, trying to return the whole rack of it to coastal oblivion.



When she wakes she's forgotten where she is. She thinks she is at Gus's, but the shadows, the air, isn't right. She waits for it to reassemble, for the hunks and blocks to descend, to lock once more into place. And then, uncertainly, Dorset Street does descend: the dresser, the windows, the feel of the mattress, but no, it's not Dorset Street. She struggles to remember. The world, her life, hovers beyond reach. This bed, she can feel with her hand, is up against a wall and is narrow and the pillow is not that pillow.

And then, finally, she remembers, and Michaux Street descends. Her mother is dead. She turns, remembering, and looks for Gus. He is in the other twin bed. His feet jut out the end. Her childhood room. Her father owns this house now, had bought her mother out. But now he's at his girlfriend's.

And it comes to her too like a lost aroma that these dear and familiar things, the things she calls her own, that anchor her in the world, their nature is to float unhooked from ownership. They are not hers, they can and will belong to others, or to the dump, to time. Even her body will not belong to her.

Sunday mornings when she was little, her father read Prince Valiant to her at the kitchen table, the Sunday sun shining in, her mother's pewter pepper grinder and salt cellar there with the little spoon that came from her mother's mother who died on a farm in Missouri. Before everything went bad. Val came first because she loved him, that blue tunic and red cape flying, the way he turned in the saddle and cried out to Prince Arn or Sir Gawain to have heart, there are things far worse than death! The dark caves and mountains, the hideouts, the tall spires that rise still in her mind on the stone towers that sit like ancient anchors in the misty valleys. And the dresses, the low-slung belts, the long loosely braided hair of the women, why she wanted braids herself.

Her father loved her. She knows this. But he had not been her Val—his passion for everything but her mother faint. He failed from mildness. From too faint a mark.

Or maybe that's not fair.

Out the window, the old wind chime hangs—little owls cut of frosted glass and suspended from nylon line. The owls that used to tangle in the wind. If she asked, he straightened them on the table in the kitchen, working it out like a puzzle, teasing the knots apart with a needle. It took him all morning, making her mother crazy. But he had bought it for her on one of his trips, and he was faithful. He was that.

In the dark now the owls look like a white rag hanging in the air. All the lines straight, though, and each owl quiet.

Her mother is gone.

She hears something scratch. Very faint. Mice in the walls. She thinks of a lady in white standing next to her at the wet rail, pointing. Whale watching in Boston Harbor on a trip. The woman's teeth yellow, like a horse's, and lips fork-marked as a pie. A little spout she said to look for, the water from the blowhole, but there was nothing.

What is the color of that water, her father had asked? What would you call that color? Lifting her up, trying hard together to see the real color, not the blue it was supposed to be. And the waves that moved forever against the side of the ship, that rose and sank and curled away. He pointed at porpoises, wore what he called "deck shoes," was happy in the wind, his hair messed up, color in his cheeks. Her mother inside, reading with the baby. Stephen. The haze of sky that turned into long torn strips, and above that, the pink-blue thrones of angels.

The Orange Crush he bought for them to share. He lifted her onto his shoulders. This was when everything was good. People cleared the way so she could see.

“Wait,” her father said.

He must have put her down. She remembers crouching between his legs, her hands around the wet rusty bars.

“There!” someone yelled.

And the waves became solid and ridged and scarred, mighty and beaten and kingly, of battles, of another world. And then the massive serene eye broke the surface and looked up into her own. The whale.

For long moments it seemed to consider her.

Like the fox, she thinks now.

Liv lies on her back, her hands crossed on her heart, thinking of the whale, her father, the fox, her pretty mother smoking cigarettes inside out of the wind, red lipstick, her paperbacks. Stephen just a baby, in his stroller napping.

And only a few days ago, slumped over the walker, pants twisted, shuffling into the living room, pausing as if to render an opinion, an opinion that still matters. That thwarted look.

□□□

“Gus,” she whispers. “Scoot over.” She had not had the courage the night before. All day he had held himself away. Not cold, but remote. Being around her family maybe. They have not spoken yet about their fight. Now she slips into bed behind him.

“Gus.”

He sets a hand on her thigh. “Hey,” he mutters. Barely awake, friendly. Though he had not come to her bed.

“Hey,” she says and snuggles close, the way she used to, before the storm.



She and Stephen meet with Aunt June's priest, an elfin-looking man with large red ears who had not known Liv's mother. Liv chooses John, the one about the father's house having many rooms, and a poem about dying she finds on the Internet. Stephen will deliver the eulogy. Aunt June has said she wants to speak as well.

When they look at Liv, she shakes her head.

"What will you say?" she asks her brother on their way home.

"I don't know."

"Whatever you do, don't falsify, Stephen," she says. "Don't prettify. Tell the truth."

He says nothing.

Flowers keep arriving at Aunt June's, along with platters of sandwiches and sweets. Liv has promised she'll make a coconut cake and coffee cake and a few kinds of cookies for the reception after—the funeral is tomorrow—but now she thinks it won't be necessary.

A Shit Storm Cake would be more to the point. Undertones of dirt and bark and spruce. Pretty sludge-brown icing. Rotten eggs. Nice ground glass and a dusting of dried mud, powdered. Gus isn't talking to her.

He's talking, but he isn't *talking*. At midday he goes for a long walk. She had offered to go with him, but he says he wants to be alone.

Desperate is so very close to *disparate*. And the little d that makes *power* into *powder*: entirely blowable, like dust. How to squeeze all of this—shock and death and Gus's silence—into a simple cake. It must be either super dense with unexpected elements—little rocks and needles and broken crockery—or hardly there at all, even more absent than angel food.

Than *Angel Cakes*.



“My girl,” her father says when he comes through the door for dinner. He hugs her first and long, and this is new. She used to be the one to hug him first. Kiss him first. She remembers that. As if to show him how.

Maybe it’s his new girlfriend, Liv thinks. This Rennie.

“Isn’t she a sight?” her father says to Gus, who is waiting behind Stephen to shake his hand. For a minute they all stand, everything flushed exclamation. Liv stands back to watch her father and Gus together—to think about how they look together: Gus tall, lanky and well put together, and her father jowly, but looking sharper than he used to: in a good shirt, jeans that fit, loafers instead of the running shoes he used to wear.

The girlfriend.

All the usual things. How glad they are to meet. Gus saying everything he ought, that way he holds himself: reserved, pleasant, attentive. Calm. And her father, so obviously happy. Filling up the glasses, looking over her shoulder, fussing.

Pulling out a chair for Gus.

“Mom gone,” says Stephen at one point. “So strange. Even though I never saw her. I’m used to having her somewhere.” He laughs. “Used to feeling guilty, I guess. I’m glad that’s gone, at least.” He looks at Liv, who smiles at him, is silent.

The three men at the table, Liv at the sink. As ever, she thinks.

Stephen asks Gus about his mother, and Gus says a little about her death, how he understands the strangeness, how he too went long periods hardly seeing her.

Her father, pink, chirpy as a bird. “They weren’t perfect years,” he says to Gus, “but I recall them fondly all the time, when we lived all together in this house. It’s the way it is

with funerals. The sad occasion, but then everyone shows up, and it's wonderful. You can't help but be happy to see everyone."

She knows him well enough to know his eyes are brimming. Even sober, it's the way he is. Way too soft. Her mother was the tough boot.

"Livvie's a wonderful baker, it's what she does—well, sure, you know that," he says to Gus. "This was really Livvie's kitchen, wasn't it, doll? More yours even than your mother's. She hated to cook, Clara did. She liked to read. She was wonderful with people. People loved Clara. Has Liv told you about her mother?"

Liv laughs. "Gus knows plenty about Mom."

Her father smiles. "She used to say, 'I was born for restaurant dining.'"

"That sounds like her," says Stephen.

"So she let me cook," says Liv.

Her father seems not to hear. "The kitchen really was your domain," he goes on. "Sometimes Livvie wouldn't let us in at all."

At that, Gus laughs.

"Sometimes she put chairs in front of the door, took them away when it was time to eat."

"That was once," Liv says, smiling.

"Oh my God," says Stephen, "you did it all the time. Thus the word *domain*." And Gus laughs again.

Hands in the suds, like old times. Looking out this grimy window like she used to, not at them—the backyard hardly changed. That old red pine—well, now she knows its name, at least, and clay pots with nothing in them but weeds and grass around the trunks of trees. Junk against walls, in corners, like washed in on a tide.

Michaux Street, she thinks. Why do I keep hoping?

She sets the table, prefers to, to keep them together and talking. Finishes up the dishes, takes the lasagna out of the oven, slides in the baguette. Puts the butter out. They are talking now about Stephen's company, *Boja*, which its owners, Stephen included, are trying to take public. "It's a busy time," he says. He doesn't talk of it, but she knows he stands to make a lot of money. He's worked hard, overcome a lot, made good. She's proud of him, and she loves him, but there's something bitter in what she feels. She's worked hard too, taken care of him, yet she can barely make ends meet.

She shakes her head. Don't think of that. Think of Gus.

Her mother knew a little about Gus, and Vitalija knew more, but her father and her brother knew nothing. What they think will be based on what they see tonight. Anyway, he fits right in. He would fit in anywhere. With her brother and her father too, he asks questions, listens.

When he listens his face is motionless, utterly still.

"Gus, it's time," she says, and he rises and tosses the salad he's made, and together they serve dinner. Her father fills their glasses again, and for some minutes there is only eating, only talk of food.

"Let's toast Gus," her father says at last and holds up his glass. "We're all so glad you're here, so glad Livvie's finally found someone."

"Dad!"

She can't look at Gus.

"What?" her father says, clueless, still holding up his glass.

Stephen clinks. "Cheers to Liv's latest victim."

“Thanks, Stephen. Really. So nice,” she says, can feel how the color’s gone to her face.

But Stephen thinks it’s funny, puts a hand on her shoulder. “Has she ever told you about her nickname?”

“Stephen, would you stop?”

“Yeah, in high school she helped me with a paper on *The Master Builder*, that play by Ibsen, and when I got a C, Livvie was so outraged she made an appointment with my English teacher, Mrs. Hines, and met with her about it. Explained to Hines why I deserved an A. Why *she* deserved an A, more like. So we call her...you know. *The Master Fixer*.”

Liv rises, collects what plates she can. Does not look at Gus. The table quiets.

“Oh, come on, Liv,” Stephen says, “I’m only teasing.”

“It’s fine,” she says but cannot look at them

“Gus needs to know what he’s getting into,” Stephen says, and she begins to scrape the lasagna left on plates into the trash.

“No dessert?” her father says.

“It’s a condition that affects the women in the family,” Stephen’s going on to Gus. “You ought to know by now. Mom couldn’t leave well enough alone either, though she was less concerned about my grades. Liv cared at least. I know she’s dead now, but Mom”—he looks up at the ceiling, raises his glass—“if you’re listening...”

“Hey Stephen,” Liv says. Rinsing off the plates, putting them, one by one, into the dishwasher. “By the way, why didn’t you let us know you were going to be out east?”

“What?”

“You were in New York for business, right? So, I mean, really, that’s pretty special. You’re never this far east, are you? Or maybe you are and we just don’t know it.”

He's sitting there looking at her, puzzled.

“So I'm up there sweating it out with Mom every day, struggling through that storm, struggling through her life, which is a storm anyway, every day, my life, you don't know 98 percent of it, and hardly a phone call, can't even get you to call me back, and then when you *are* in the area, New York apparently this time, you don't even let us know you're coming. You make no plans to see us. And why is that?”

She pushes off the counter, dips the sponge in water, wrings it out, begins to scrub the splashes of dried marinara off the stove.

“Well, I think we know,” she says. “Don't we?”

“Stop,” says her brother.

“Now you want me to stop. That's sweet. So yeah, I guess I am The Master Fixer. Somebody had to be. And thank God for you I am.”

“Welcome to our little family,” Stephen whispers to Gus.

“Oh, please,” she says. “He's seen much worse than this.” points through the door on her way out, finally allows a glance at Gus, who looks nonplused. “I'll be in my room.”



His knock on the door is so faint she can barely hear it.

“Gus, you don’t have to knock.”

“You okay?”

“I’m sorry about that,” she says and shuts the door behind him. “It’s his little digs. I should have laughed it off, except I can’t. Sorry.”

“He pissed you off.”

“Yeah, he pissed me off.”

He takes her in his arms. “Ah, I’m sorry, Liv.” His fingers on her neck and face, in her hair. Finally. “Come, lie down with me.”

It’s so nice to hear him say it. It’s been so long, or it feels like it has. On the bed she laughs at how his feet hang off the end. Noses into his ribs. “Thanks so much for being here.”

“You try so hard to make things right,” he says. His eyes are closed.

“I try too hard. Is that what you mean?”

“I mean you have a good heart, Liv. That dinner. Your mom. Santo. Everything. You work so hard.”

“Yeah, the Master Fixer.”

“Don’t sweat that. He feels shitty about not being more there for you.”

“It wasn’t like I was so great to her. Well, I tried, but I was shitty sometimes. I was. Impatient, angry.”

“And she was shitty to you. But you were there.”

“Good luck with fixing *that*. Well, we resurrected a little bit. In moments.”

“You show up. That’s the thing. It’s not the easiest course.”

“And yet the package always comes back. Marked defective or ‘gosh, not what I had in mind’.”

He pulls her to him. For a minute they are quiet. She can hear her father and brother in the kitchen moving around, talking. Talking about her.

No Dad, she thinks, no dessert.

Tomorrow the funeral, Liv is thinking. “I’ll have to say something, I guess, to make everything all right again.”

“Unless you don’t.”

Just let things be broken. Not pick them up or glue them back.

“They’re broken anyhow,” she says. “No matter what I do.”

“What?”

“Nothing. It’s going to rain for the funeral. That’s what they say.”

She listens past her father and her brother to the cars out on Michaux, there are so many more now than she remembers. Air through the ducts.

The owl chime, its bare tinkling.

“What’s going to happen to us, Gus?”

“Gus? Are you asleep?”

He pulls her up and kisses her, fully, unreservedly, the way it used to be before the storm, before their fight. No sex in days, but now he unhooks her bra, runs his hand over her breasts, tugs at her belt, peels off her shirt, takes out her braid. She gets up, quietly locks the door, tiptoes back, peels off his pants.



After the funeral, the reception at Aunt June's. Liv parks herself by the piano with a paper cup of coffee and a slice of coconut cake, flips through the photo album, head down. Candles, birthday cakes, sweeps of adolescent hair, the grown-ups with their cigarettes and tumblers full of ice and Scotch.

Gus is across the room talking to a man in a wheelchair, an uncle she hardly knows. She feels quiet. They had made love, but it has not made her feel more sure of him.

Eventually her father comes edging up, as if she might bite.

His girlfriend, Rennie, has not come.

He says they started by playing tennis, hitting balls. She tries to picture her father's legs in tennis shorts. They like to grow tomatoes, the heirlooms, he says, and seems embarrassed.

Perhaps he is a decent teacher, Liv thinks, and pinches off a chunk of cake and gobbles it. Perhaps there have been awards, great victories in the classroom. That could be. He often speaks of his students. He's partial to war histories, she has seen them stacked by his bed, the same one he and her mother used.

He likes biographies too, dips in and out. Underlines things. She's snooped a little.

My intrepid girl, he used to say, though it turns out she is nothing like intrepid. Still, he loves her in his faint, fading way. Her father with his soft sloping shoulders, his light pencil mark.

He is considering a dog, he says. "I have my eye on a Boston terrier named Mike."

"Oh, really, Dad? From the pound?" The way she feels she must take care of him, take care of everything.

"Yes, he's at the pound."

“You better hurry, then, or he’ll be gone,” she says and instantly regrets it.

About Stephen’s eulogy, her father only says, “It was good.” It’s all he says.

Well, it had been brief, she says, and that is good. He’d done his best to make the silk purse out of the sow’s ear, what she would not have done, made people laugh, which she also would not have done. And he had been generous with her, picked her out of the crowd with his eyes and by name, thanking her extravagantly for taking care of Clara.

Vitalija, she had thought. Her care. Her patience. I must call her, Liv thinks. See how she is.

And Stephen had apologized to her last night, and her to him, but he’d gone first. So easily she forgives him everything. They’d taken each other’s hands, declared their love. “All that is over now,” Liv had said and hugged him close, and to her surprise, he’d said she would have his share of the inheritance, however much it is.

“Don’t be absurd,” she said and laughed, but pleased that he would offer.

But he’d insisted that it was, for all she’d done, to even up the scales. “Partially anyway,” he’d said. “Anyway, I prefer it. It makes me feel better.” And he’d smiled and kissed her.

“Later,” she’d said. “We’ll talk of all that later.”

Now she cannot get enough sugar. She picks at the cake with her fingers. She’d used coconut milk, toasted coconut, simple syrup. A cake she knew cold. This one she could make it in a blizzard if she had to.

And throughout the service, Gus’s hand in hers. He’d never let her go. He’d been so good.

She excuses herself, begins to gather plates and cups, women's work, the binding up, anyway, it's what she wants to do, be in the kitchen, her hands in suds. She feels tottering, like on stilts, any minute she could fall, burst into tears.

For they had made love, and she had wanted to believe it put them back together, back to Quirk's End, back to normal, but it had not. "After your mother's funeral, we can talk," he'd said that several times to her entreaties.

In the kitchen, she pinches off another bit of cake from someone's plate, sets it down, then picks it up again and pops it in her mouth. There had been a photo in the album with her in a red velvet dress with lace at the neck. She remembers that dress so well. Her Christmas dress, hair in pigtails, her mother's hand on her shoulder, the engagement ring and wedding band she knows so well, now hers.

But just the hand.

The children shouldn't have to do all the behaving in a family.

She'd said that, hadn't she, to someone?



“It’s a question of trust, Liv.”

“But can’t I ask questions?”

They’re in her bedroom—after the funeral, after the reception. Outside it’s drizzling, early evening. She’s on her single bed, back against the wall, Gus facing her on the other.

“Yes, of course you can ask questions.”

“She looks at him from underneath her brows, chin tucked. “This is about Gado, isn’t it?”

“About Gado, yes, that’s the main thing. But not only.”

“What I said that day about Gado, there’s no truth in that?”

“I don’t think so. But it’s also how you say the things you say, how sure you are you’re right.”

“Come on, Gus. That’s not a dodge?”

He laughs. “You seem to be so sure it is, which proves my point.”

“I do feel sure.”

“Well, there you go.”

“Gus, I’m just concerned about treating Santo fairly. It feels to me like—”

“Yeah, I know. Absconded with his child. Taken over—”

“Exactly—”

“But you’re wrong! And completely unwilling to entertain the possibility that you’re wrong.” He smiles.

“Are you’re sure I’m wrong?”

“I know Santo far better than you do, Liv, and yet you presume to think you know better than everyone else involved. It’s breathtaking, really. What makes you the expert on

what Santo's feeling, on what anyone else is feeling? What *I'm* feeling? Liv, everyone is doing fine. Except you."

She's pulled the pillow over her lap, fingering its folds. "You've never said that before, that you know Santo that well. If that's true, why haven't you said it before?"

"Why do I need to say it, or prove it to you? It's none of your business. It's Santo's business and Gado's and mine. Why can't you trust that I am someone who cares about other people as much as you do?"

She's staring down at the little folds she's made, one between each finger. Now she begins biting a thumbnail, picking at the skin on her thumbs.

"Gus, if you told me what you're feeling even half the time, I wouldn't have to push so hard, or guess, or presume or whatever it is you say I do."

"I talk when I'm ready."

"And when are you ever ready, Gus? There are entire rooms I can't ever go into. I'm always waiting to be let in. And now you're saying I can't even *knock* on the door?"

"It's just that you push, Liv. You push and you push."

"I don't! I've tried so hard not to push!"

"We haven't known each other that long."

"You're not really happy with me, Liv."

"That's not true!"

She scoots to the edge of the bed, where she sits, leaning forward, a hand on his foot, looking hard into his face. "Gus. You had this horrible thing happen to you when you were eight, just tragic, and you haven't gotten proper help with it, or it doesn't seem like you have—you can't even bring yourself to talk about it. I only want to help—"

"Yeah. My life, the interesting case study."

“That’s not how I think of it.”

“You want to psychoanalyze me. You want to fix me. It’s not reducible.”

“That’s really the word you’re going to use? Fix? After the other night?”

“I’m sorry. It’s my experience.”

She’s crying now. “That’s your experience?”

“Liv. It’s not my only experience. You know that.”

Outside it’s still drizzling.

“Why can’t you leave stuff alone, Liv?”

“Leave stuff alone. Let sleeping dogs lie. Don’t talk about it, don’t ask, don’t push...

Whatever. It’s because I have this feeling it’s in the way, that it’s something you’re trying to work out.”

“I don’t want you psychoanalyzing me. You’re not a therapist.”

“You’re right, I’m not. But maybe you should find one.”

“And maybe you should.”

For a moment, they stare across the room at one another.

“I don’t want to fix you, Gus. I’m sorry if it feels that way,” she says.

“I’m sorry I seem so... I don’t know, closed off.”

Evening is coming, the light in the room is grainier and grainier. She wants to turn on the lamp, but doesn’t want to end their conversation, or give him an excuse to end it.

And yet, even as she thinks this, Gus moves to the edge of the bed.

“We’re different, Liv.”

“We’re not so different,” she says, her eyes wet. “You’re this guy who’s gotten really used to being alone, so have I. Stephen was right—it has been a long time for me. But it’s

been a long time for you too. In our own ways we've been stuck, treading water, waiting. I think we've each reached the end of a certain way of living—"

He's putting on his boots.

She sits back. "What? Already I've said too much?"

"I don't move as fast as you do."

She takes his hands, but their eyes are on the carpet between their knees.

"It makes sense to wait," she whispers, as if she doesn't want it overheard, though Stephen's left for the airport already and her father is at his girlfriend's. "B, Gus, I've waited so long already, and now my mother's gone and I'll be thirty-eight next summer, my life is changing, and I want... not the life I've had. I don't know. I feel this tremendous energy to move forward. I want my *own* family before more time goes by, and I need to know if you want that too." She looks up into his face. Twice now she's said it.

He's still gazing at his feet, his hands in hers, but limp.

"You haven't said how you feel about all that, but it's what I'm in this for, with you. I could do it with you. And I want my café, I do, and I'd love your help, but not if you don't want to, and I want to help you too, with what you want, whatever you want, what do you want? I'm never sure."

"Gus?"

He looks up at her. A tight, screwed-on smile.

"God, listen to me. I always say too much! I know you're scared! I know you are, but so am I—" She gets up, sits next to him. "How am I supposed to know where you are if you don't tell me, Gus. I end up guessing." His hand still limp in hers. "Gus, God." A stark bare laugh. "Don't let me hang out here like this. Please say *something*."

He rises.

“Where are you going?”

“I need some air. I need to think.”

“But it’s raining.”

Already he’s at the door. “It’s drizzling, it’s fine.” He doesn’t smile. “I’ll be back.”



The next day. Liv and Gus in the rental car, back from a late unsatisfactory breakfast with her father and his girlfriend. All morning Gus has been quiet and she has been trying to be agreeable, cheerful. To give him space, not push.

He has said he wants to say some things. So they're parked on the street outside her father's house so that he can say them.

"Arent is being discharged."

"He is? That's great. I'm sure he's relieved. Is he going back to Camden?" Trying to keep things light, trying to keep things the way he likes.

"Yes, I'm driving him back."

"Okay. He can't manage alone, though. I'm sure it's in his discharge orders."

"He won't be alone."

"Good. Let me know if I can help." She wants to say she'll help find a caregiver, she certainly knows plenty about all of that, but she doesn't want to push.

His eyes, gray blue in this light, rest evenly on hers.

"I'll be in Maine with him, Liv. For a while. That's what I wanted to tell you."

She studies his face. "A while. How long?"

"He needs the help and I need time. I think we both do."

She turns, looks out the open window into her old yard. Two fingers to her lips, pressing, blotting. "You're breaking up with me." Blinking back the tears.

He doesn't say yes. He doesn't say no. She turns to him.

"Aren't you? That's what this is, isn't it?"

"Why call it anything?"

“Why call it anything? To know what the fuck it is. It’s because of what I said yesterday, isn’t it?” She looks back at the yard. “Stupid.”

“No.”

“Why can’t we just talk, Gus? Just work through things. Why can’t you ever just talk?”

“There’s too much about me you would change. I don’t think I can make you happy, and I’m beginning to feel the same is true for me—”

“Don’t say that.”

“There’s no end to what you want, it seems sometimes—”

“But that’s not true! And I am happy, Gus. I’ve never been—”

“I’m saying I need space, Liv, and time. That’s all.” He straightens, looks at her again. She can see in his eyes how he has removed himself. “I’m flying home tonight. I’m leaving for the airport after this.”

“You moved your flight up.”

“Yes.”

Massaging her forehead. “Without telling me.”

“I’m sorry. I think it’s best if we don’t call or write or any of those things for now.”

Swiping at her cheeks, hand across her mouth. “So that’s it?”

His lips pressed together. “I’m sorry. It’s what I have to do.”

“So the things I said—is it that you don’t want them. Or just not with me?”

“I’m going inside now to get my bag, and then I’m going to drive to the airport.”

She bows her head, and he goes inside. She walks up Michaux. Walks and walks, and when she’s back he’s gone.



On the attic stairs, her childhood self comes back to her: the way the stairs creak, the hot dry wood, the smell of dust, that sour tang. How unafraid she used to be. It takes a while to find her trunk, but when she does, she drags it to the window. The nick in the corner of the pane is still there. All these years.

One by one, her old collages, the small, square, abstract ones full of grays and duns—winterish, geometric, leached of color—though often with a dash of brightness or a ragged curve emergent at the edge. These were done all at once, after Dulcie. A few of these she puts aside.

Most are the early ones, the ones from her beginning—less contained, usually with a field of bark rubbing partially dripped on or slashed with acrylic, sometimes a transfer of a ghostly figure as if walking into being, or dissolving, sometimes faces, one with her face, and naked bodies—words floating through—*bugaboo*, *triceratops*, *pointillist*, *tits*, *dromedary*—she remembers the lists of words she kept on the studio wall.

Where would she be now if she'd kept on?

She likes the impression of effusion, of pandemonium, of coming apart-ness, and the colors too—the pinks, the chemically, algae-bloom greens, the sluggish muds and mahoganies, the shocks of blue and scarlet and yellows. A few large unadorned bark rubbings she has. They're rolled: narrow, huge. What had been the draw? Climbing that ladder she and Dulcie used to haul around, pressing against the skin of silent trees? Like a stethoscope held to the heart. Listening.

That's what Dulcie used to say.

She goes through old sketchbooks, journals, the horrible breakup letters with Dulcie, art supplies, all the photographs she'd taken of the woods, animals, some pornographic. She

is shocked by herself. It's as if the essence of some other person has leaked out. The daring person she'd been.



Once Liv gets back to Massachusetts, the sense of absence grows stronger. She keeps turning in her mind toward the mountain, toward Gus, and then remembering, and turning back again. The raw and painful place in the center of her chest, the hurting, which is almost physical, must soon stop, she tells herself.

Their love, their big love.

Defective.

Marked, "I had something else in mind."

When Liv thinks of her mother and Vitalija, she finds the same sense of absence. Out of habit she turns in her mind toward Waverly Road, then remembers, and turns back again. Vitalija has left a message, and Liv calls her, it is so good to hear her voice. She tells her about Gus, and Vitalija offers to come by, but Liv says no. Nothing comes of talking of it. Nothing can be done. When people ask if she's okay, she's clearly not, she speaks of her mother.

Better to just wait and work, it's all she does. She wakes at dawn, goes to work, stays as late as she can. She eats only when she's at work. At home she drinks and smokes out on the stoop in back, when she can't sleep, binges on Netflix and doesn't care.

She runs through their conversation in her room, writes down all she can remember. She had in effect proposed to him under his white pine. And then again while he'd been breaking up with her. Her desperation so evident. It hardly seems possible that she could have humiliated herself so thoroughly.

Anyway, it's over. Besides Vitalija, the only call she makes is to her mother's landlord, who has salvaged some of her mother's things. She promises to come by, go through it, but she puts that off too, until finally one Saturday afternoon he brings them by in his truck.

Her heart ceasing to beat at the sound of the truck in her drive. Thinking that it's Gus.

"Here's the security deposit," he says. "Security, what a joke, the whole idea." Then seems embarrassed at what he's said.

"It's okay."

He's a kind man, always was.

A small box of her mother's oldest jewelry, things from college and high school—sorority pin, charm bracelet, Liv's Brownie pin, other items—and the two chairs her mother loved, which can be salvaged if she wants the trouble and expense. Everything else in his truck is too far-gone, or not worth keeping. "I wanted you to decide," he says, and then even he is gone.

Condolence cards come in the mail: from Vitalija, from family members, from D'America, a few of her mother's old friends from Houston and up here, friends from work. Santo had called her that first day in Houston. His had been the crew that had removed the spruce.

Now that she is home, he calls again, offers to come by. He knows, of course, of Gus's departure—Gus had left the house in Santo's care—but they do not speak of it. "Are you okay?" he asks instead. A question people ask, she's noticed, even at the worst times. To make themselves feel better, she thinks, for how to answer anything but "yes" or "fine"? A no would be too wrought, force words at a time when there are no words.

"It just take time," Santo says, embarrassed, awkward. It's something else people say.

He offers to come by, and she accepts, but at once regrets it. Realizes she's said it out of something old, habit, maybe, for she is accustomed to wanting more connection with Santo, for some reason. But now, how strange: she dreads his coming by.

She doesn't even walk. Celia seems to understand and does not show up except to bring a pan of enchiladas. "I know how you like Mexican food," she says and right away leaves. It's sweet, the enchiladas, and the leaving most of all. Celia never met Gus. She thinks Liv's in mourning over her mother.

When Santo comes by as promised they sit out on the porch steps and drink beers and skirt the issue. It makes her sad how ill at ease they are. Anyway, he's come out of duty, out of obligation, what he owes. They don't seem to know how to talk to each other anymore.

"You didn't have to come, you know," she says. She means it, or thinks she does, but it sounds rude, and soon he leaves.

The enchiladas she's frozen in little packets of twos. Sometimes she takes one out, defrosts it.

November comes and goes. Stephen calls in the afternoon on Thanksgiving Day, seems to think she's celebrating.

"You're with Gus, right?" he says.

"No, not today, he can't," she says, her voice a little squeak.

"Are you okay?"

That question. "Yep."

But the wall's too weak, and it spills out. She tells him everything, and after he tries his best to help. But he's far away and busy. Here's what people say: useless things. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. One day at a time. Just do the next right thing.

She smiles. The idea that she would even know the next right thing.

Easy does it. One day at a time.

"The Master Fixer," she says, "and look at me."

“I’m sorry about that, Liv. I was feeling guilty about Mom.”

“I know. You told me that. Never mind.”

In mid-December it snows again, the first time since the storm. She hunkers down for a white dry season, what she knows will be privation.



On Christmas Day Liv gives herself a present: spikes to strap on to her boots for walking on snow and ice. She had thought she would use them on the Pillow—that had been her hope.

But now it seems out of the question to put them on, to try to walk up the Pillow.

You show up. Gus had said that to her. It had been true. She does.

She did.

So show up now, she thinks and sits on the couch and prays the little prayer Stephen has sent in an email, the one he uses in the morning. Not her thing maybe, but all she has, so on the steam of this little prayer she dresses, puts on the spikes, goes outside on the afternoon of Christmas Day. On the strength of the little prayer she launches herself down the snowy street and all the way up the Pillow.

It's so steep, she's out of shape, must stop often to catch her breath, but the air through her lungs lifts her spirits. This is good, she thinks. The first good thing in so long.

The next day she walks again, for fear of sliding back. The day after and after that, out of fear of what she'd feel like if she didn't. She begins to walk every day after work, as she had once, only now she keeps to it daily, climbing from the pit of his leaving.

In January, she sleeps and works and walks and sleeps and says Stephen's little prayer to keep her going. Like flying in a dream, that's how it feels: some native lifting from the ground, a flyborn knowing that seems both ordinary and impossible at once.

She begins imagining a dog to walk with her. To keep her company. In mid-January, she goes to the pound, sees a beautiful bulldog-beagle mix. She would name her Bugle. Dog insurance, for with a dog, she'd have to walk, could not slide back. On the way home thinks, you can't walk for yourself? You need a dog to walk for? And hesitates.

She does not get the dog.

Stephen emails, texts, but seldom calls. He keeps that distance. And she keeps it too, does not call him. Santo she has not heard from since his obligatory visit, which stings. She thinks of how much she's done for him, gets angry at herself for keeping score, but she does keep score, and is angry at him for not coming through for her as she had come through for him in his dark hour. He's got his crew now, and his girl, some other gringos he can go to—Connie maybe, the one from Havana—and Pete. Oh well, she thinks. At least she's being honest about their relationship.

Gus she's pushed off the map, yet there he lingers on the periphery, leaning against the wall of her everyday, watching. She imagines him in Maine—getting up, going about his day, what he must do for Arent. Cooking, cleaning, his walks with Tuck. He'd said she pushes, can't be satisfied, that she wants him different than he is. His words like evil fairies swarm and bite.

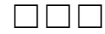
Fixed, he'd said. She wants him fixed, improved. The Master Fixer.

Tweaked. He'd used that word too.

She acts as if she knows his mind, something else he'd said, does not trust him to care for people as much as she does. Does not respect the aspects that cannot be analyzed or reduced. The mysteries.

I talk when I want to talk, he'd said.

I don't need your Cliff Notes for my life.



There's a gray truck in town, newer than Gus's, but a Toyota. A woman drives it. One Monday afternoon on her way home Liv notices this truck ahead of her on Main Street and follows it, driving south, then west. As soon as she begins to believe it's headed up the mountain, it turns.

But she drives on, parks on the shoulder of Pelham's Pike and Quirk's End and sits in her car a minute, wondering what to do and why she's come here. She isn't sure when Santo gets off work, but she doesn't want him to see her car.

It's cold, and she doesn't have her spikes, but the meadow is only snowy, no ice. She heads up.

His plastic Adirondack chair under the cherry tree still. On its side.

She rights it, wipes it clean of snow, and sits in the weak afternoon sun.

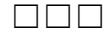
Their last Spanish lesson, the picnic, Gado and Tuck, and how Gus had swooped from the chair to the blanket next to her, taken her hand in his. His large warm hand. It seems so long ago, but it's still so fresh.

It's only half a year.

Inside the cold and winter white, the squirrely barren sky, a small green leaf, just one: her tiny hope that he'll come back and want to see her, try again. Foolish, yes. She knows.

Deadly.

I must find a way to get past this, she thinks. I must.



It's the end of another workday, late February. Liv is reading a seed catalogue in the bathtub when she hears a knock. She starts, heart wrenched, quickly steps out of the tub, skips the towel and throws on her robe, still dripping. The knock comes again, soft.

"I'm coming! Just a minute!"

A man's voice. She freezes.

"Liv?"

"Santo?" She peers out of the bathroom.

Santo. He steps inside. "Oh, my God! Hi! Hold on!" She goes to him, still warm and wet from the bath, footprints wet on the floor.

"You look good!" she says, standing back, he's like a new Santo, Americanized.

"Wow. From pollo to cholo!"

"No way," he says, looking abashed. "I have to buy chinos, shave my head, wear my sunglasses back here. But do you like the hair?" It's short on the sides, longer on top. He has a little goatee.

"Very clean, very chill. You're a man! And your English is much better!"

"A couple of guys on the crew have cleaned me up," he says, blushing, proud. "I will tell D'America you like this"—he points to his head—"she cut it."

He's no longer doughy from bad food and lack of exercise. His work on the crew has thinned him out, made him dark and muscular. He's not dressed in whatever he can find anymore, with hair that juts over his ears and sneakers from the Salvation Army. He's tough, clean-cut, wears Nikes, an Oakland Raiders cap worn backwards, baggy jeans and a white undershirt under his flannel shirt.

A little cholo but still Santo: solemn, formal, from the Purepecha Plateau, with manners from his mother's house: sorry he's disturbed her. Should he come back?

But Liv is so glad to see him. She pulls him to the couch, already she's forgiven him his long absence, everything. "No, no, it's perfect, I'll make us tea. Oh, that's cold!" Clutching her robe closed, tiptoeing fast over the floor to put the water on, then banging into her room to put on clothes.

He seems stunned to hear that she and Gus have split up, and she is stunned that Gus hasn't told him.

"I haven't been here," he says. "I'm sorry."

"Well, you're here now, Santo. That's what matters."

There is something of the priest in him, she's always thought this, even in his new clothes. He has never been familiar, or even very relaxed with her, and she's wondered since the beginning if he's any different with his friends. He must be. She is a grown-up to him. They are not peers. She must remember this.

He knows Gus, and because he does, she finds she wants to tell him everything. She hasn't confided in anyone who really knows Gus. The Boston Globe article about Grace, their argument over Halloween, what Gus had said to her in Houston, the things she'd said to him. The proximity to Gus, through Santo, revs her dangerously. She can feel how the Gus in her head has suddenly come to the fore, pushed off the wall, strolled out to center stage where the spotlights are.

But Santo means he hasn't been here, in this country.

"You haven't been here?"

"No, I've been home."

"You've been in Mexico?"

“It was stupid,” he says. “I shouldn’t have gone, but I made it back alive.”

“And Gado?”

“I left him with D’America.”

“And your job?”

He nods. “They held it.”

“You’re kidding. Wow. They must like you.”

“They’re good people.”

She had thought the folded newspaper he’d carried in under his arm was one of hers, picked up on the drive, but it is his. “I guess you haven’t heard about this,” he says and hands it to her.

The front section of *The New York Times*, above the fold, a photograph of a Mexican woman, looks like a grandmother, with a caption that reads: WOMEN AND CHILDREN AROUND A FIRE HELP GUARD THE STREETS OF MOCLIN, MEXICO AGAINST ARMED LOGGERS.

“Moclin? Oh, my God,” Liv says and checks the date. Yesterday.

The woman in the photograph sits outdoors on a street corner in firelight, a striped shawl about her shoulders. The article is titled, “Taking Back Ancient Forests and a Town’s Destiny”.

“Santo, this is incredible. Your town is on the front page of *The New York Times*?”

“I know. Read.”

Amazed, hand over her mouth, she reads that a group of women in Moclin had attacked a busload of illegal loggers armed with AK47s in November. The women had attacked the bus with rocks and fireworks, and then somehow had taken the loggers hostage. Illegal paramilitary loggers, protected by the state’s most powerful cartel, had been, for vast

sums of money, terrorizing Moclin for years, taking down the trees from their forests and raping, kidnapping, extorting, and murdering citizens who tried to stop them. The police, paid off, had protected the loggers for years as the old growth forests on which the town once relied for its economy and culture were devastated—now almost eighty percent gone.

“This is amazing, Santo,” she says in Spanish. “The first civilian insurgency against a drug cartel in all of Mexico? And in your town?” She can’t stop shaking her head. “Have the police really been expelled?”

“Yes. Run out of town. And all their weapons seized.”

Like a kid, he shows her a new tattoo on his upper arm: a circle with MOCLIN VIVE * LUCHAMOS UNIDOS written around the inside edge – a volcano, in full eruption, in the center.

They speak only in Spanish now.

“And the politicians too, run out. They were all corrupt anyway. The people have set up patrols. They guard the town twenty-four seven. One hundred and ninety-two fires are kept burning in the streets. Well, not that many now. They were driven to it.”

He takes the paper. “This woman here”—he points to the photograph proudly—“is my mother.”

“Your *mother*?”

“Yes.”

Liv stares at the woman. “Your mother is on the front page of *The New York Times*?”

“I know.”

“You must be so proud! Oh my God. Santo!”

“I know.”

“You all are showing all of Mexico, every little town, how it’s done, just like in Chiapas.”

But at the mention of Chiapas his smile fades. He begins to pinch his bottom lip with rough fingers. Opens his mouth to say something, closes it again.

“What is it?”

“She was one of the women who attacked the bus. One of the leaders. I mean, I’m proud of her—she’s crazy brave, crazy angry—but I’m scared for her too, and for my brothers.”

“Is she safe?”

“No, she’s not safe.” Like it had been stupid question, she’s never heard that tone from him. His voice drops to a whisper. “You have no idea what they would do to her.” As if someone might hear. “What they would do to my brothers.”

She stares into his dark eyes, and the weight of it settles between them.

“She says the blockades won’t fail, but they could... I just want to get them out. I already send everything I can down there. Anyway, my mother says she wants to stay, for the fight. She has a voice now, women do. They didn’t used to. She’d be no one here.”

She studies the photograph. His mother’s lined face, lit by the fire, a big, banged-up enamel coffee pot on a stump next to her. A boy at her feet.

“Is this one of your brothers?”

“No, no, my brothers are older.”

“Right, of course.”

She tries to imagine it, Moclin—hard rutted roads, streets that wind into the hills, the mud-splattered, faded pastels of the buildings, wood smoke and church bells tolling in the plaza.

The velvety darkness inside the bars and the volcanitos in the distance.

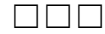
Santo's tattoo. United struggle.

"You're American," he says. "You're safe. It's different there. My father, he was shot by these men. And on our street, a girl, Valeria. I used to play with her..." He stands quickly, slaps the newspaper against his leg as if to dispel the image in his head. "Anyway, there's more."

She points to the paper against his thigh. "More than that?"

"Yeah."

"Okay," she says. "But tea first."



It had been so unlike Santo to just come over without calling first, knock on her door like that. He seems almost a different person, so changed. Now he sits hunched over the kitchen table, hands under his thighs, contemplating the saltshaker. The water she had heated in the electric kettle has gone tepid, so Liv turns it on again and stands watching as bubbles form on the inside of the glass. She waits for Santo to say whatever he has to say.

The kettle begins to ping, and the pings turn to a soft burble.

“It was festival time,” he says at last. “Everyone was out of the house. My mother was home because she was sick...” His voice trails off.

His hair thick, ink black. He’s so young, she always thinks this around Santo—how close to childhood he still is—and now this, a whole life, a whole world away from here she can barely imagine.

“Festival time,” she says.

“It was my father’s cousin. A powerful man in our town, or was, before he was chased out with all the others. High in the police. Bad, and drunk that night, but not too drunk. She thinks it was political, a warning not to get involved with the brujeras who were being so outspoken.”

He pauses, takes a breath, looks toward the door.

“She became pregnant.”

“Oh, God.”

“It was Gado.”

“What?”

He nods.

“But I thought you were... Gado was—”

He won't look at her. "Gado's my brother. My half-brother."

Still sitting on his hands, the Virgin medallion hanging, shining over his mother's image.

The kettle, water boiling, clicks off.

She walks around Santo and out the wide doorway into the living room and back again. "Does Gus know?"

"I'm sorry," Santo says to her. "I should not have lied to you."

"Does Gus know?"

"Yes. He knows everything."

She looks at him, hands in her hair, confused, and then the confusion turns to panic.

"He does? How long has Gus known?"

"It's not his fault. I was the one who wouldn't let him to tell. A while. I'm sorry."

"Santo, it's not that. You don't need to apologize." She goes to him, open-armed, and he pushes back his chair and stands like a child for her hug. "It's okay, Santo. Don't worry."

But it is only Gus and Gado she sees, man and boy: Gado riding on Gus's shoulders, Gado charging around the woods with his stick, Gus holding the boy's hand, talking to him of trees, feeding him, reading—how bitter she'd been that Gus had stolen Santo's son away. And all the time Gado had *not* been Santo's son?

Santo talks on, but she isn't listening.

He feels he has to give you whatever you want.

And you're saying I want Gado.

I think you're working something out—

I'm sure you think you know—

“... It was all on me,” Santo is saying, “and I couldn’t find enough work, not in Moclin, not even in towns around it, and then the baby came...”

She had rushed down the stairs, grabbed her bag off the counter, stood at the front door, she’d been furious, watched him wash those stupid cups. He’d thrown the towel down. And her voice, she can hear it—ringing out in the silence of that room. So sure, too bright.

So sure. No grays.

“... and so I took the baby and I came.” She turns to Santo.

He is looking at her, confused, hurt, brow furrowed. The hardest days of his life.

“I’m sorry, Santo. I can’t... Can you say that again?” She sits, puts a hand on his arm. “Forgive me, all this is just a shock.”

And so he goes through it all again—how his mother had grown so depressed after the rape, crying all day, barely able to function, how they needed money, they were going hungry, and he the oldest but not old enough and no jobs anywhere. And then how his mother wouldn’t breastfeed the baby when it came.

“Santo. How horrible. And you, what? Fourteen or fifteen.”

“Fourteen then. Our neighbor Francisca was trying to help her, but she’s old and we needed money, so Domingo lent it to me and I took the baby and I came.”

She struggles to stay with him, his story is so much worse than hers, and yet her thoughts keep straying as he talks. What she had said to Gus, what he had said to her. Finally Santo folds his arms on the table, sets his head down, like a kid bored in class.

“I said he was mine because I thought you would want to help me more. And then once I said it, I had to act like it was true.”

She’s up and pacing again—front door to kitchen, back to door. It’s a straight shot. They can see each other from every point.

“We used to fight about you,” she says.

“About me?”

“You and Gado.”

In the silence she can hear her heart hammering.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“It wasn’t your fault.”

She opens the front door, tries to calm herself by stepping out into the quiet night. She stands a moment at the threshold, breathing. *You push, Liv.* And shuts the door, leans against it, gazes across the small house at Santo, who still sits, his head on his arms at the kitchen table.

“I used to tell Gus he had no business taking over as Gado’s father. I told him he was moving in on what was rightfully yours, and it wasn’t good. I guess I’m wondering if any part of that true? Did he go too far? You’re not Gado’s father, but you might as well be. His real father is—”

Santo raises his hand as if to block the word.

“No. I try not to think of that... sick fuck. When I look at Gado, I have to fight off his face. Unfortunately, they look alike.” He plays with the medallion. “But Gado’s my mother too. I have to remember that.”

“Right.”

She walks across the room, sits at the kitchen table again, Gus’s voice still in her head. *You want me, but tweaked, improved. Fixed.*

You speak as if you live inside my head. How do you know what I notice?

“Was I right about any of that?” she asks again. “Did you feel angry with Gus, or jealous, or, I don’t know, like you were too in debt to him to speak up?”

Santo frowns, leans back, shoves his hands deep into his pockets. “At first, August was never happy with anything I did, remember that?”

“I remember. The moles.”

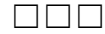
“Right.” He smiles. “The moles. I didn’t understand why he was okay spending so much time with Gado. I was afraid he might be one of those perverts in the newspaper.”

“Right.”

“But Gado was so happy with him.” He gets up. “You have a beer or anything?”

“Sure, I’m sorry.”

She gets the beer. Checks the kettle. Laughs. The water has gone cold again.



“When I first came here,” Santo says, “I mean to this country, my life was.... It was terrible.”

He pauses—his eyes swell, redden—fights the urge to cry. Swipes at a cheek.

“And then later, you helped me. I didn’t want to complain. I had this nice house, nicer than anyone I knew, but... I was... so unhappy. So jealous of everyone. I missed home. Thank God for Domingo and Ana. But there were times I... bad times.”

“Santo. I didn’t know that. I thought you were okay.”

“I thought I should be. I used to think about my friends, they didn’t have any... I don’t know, responsibilities. Or it seemed like that to me. They were out having fun all the time. I couldn’t do anything. And then with D’America—it’s amazing she looked twice at me. I let Gado stay over at August’s more and more.”

Liv looks at the ceiling, closes her eyes.

Santo’s a teenager. He likes that I take care of Gado. It’s convenient for him.

“So Gus was right.”

“What?”

“So no, is what you’re saying. You weren’t upset with Gus, you were grateful to him.”

“Yeah, I was grateful. I still am.”

“I was the one who was so... Oh, my God. Stupid.”

But once you really peel it back, what’s there? The way he’d stared at her. Incredulous.

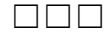
What do you know about what’s there?

“But you’re saying Gado being over at his house all the time caused problems between you?” Santo says.

She shakes her head, looks away. “I caused problems.”

“No.”

“Yes.”



“I used to get so angry,” Santo is saying, “like boiling. I was angry with Gado, with my mother for being so sad, for letting me go north at fourteen with a baby, with my girlfriend Rosa for leaving me at the border like she did.”

“Rosa was your girlfriend, not your wife.”

He looks toward the door again. “But there was no other way. I had no choice. There were times I felt like I couldn’t take it ... and August, windows open, he heard all that—my yelling, Gado screaming. I used to hit Gado. I wanted to take him back to Mexico and dump him... I said things to him. I hope he forgets.”

“I was over there a lot, Santo,” Liv says softly. “I didn’t hear you yelling at Gado. It probably wasn’t as often or as bad as you think it was.”

He laughs, begins to pace again. “You think I’m this saint. I’m just a guy.”

“You’re not just a guy. Ask anyone.”

He seems restless, hands in his pockets, looking around at her things on the walls. “Anyway, I felt sometimes like he’d be better off with.... At least that asshole has money.”

“Don’t say that,” Liv says.

He throws himself back down in his seat, won’t look at her.

“Gus told me I thought I knew what you were thinking and feeling,” Liv says “He was right. I was off the mark completely. But I’m glad Gus was here for you. And for Gado.” She pats his hand. “If he was.”

Santo sprinkles salt on the table, gathers it in a little pile with a finger, his mind seems elsewhere, not on her words.

“August knew who I was, the bad and the good and he talked to me about it, and he loves Gado the way I should but sometimes don’t feel like I can. And he helped me feel that

was okay.”

“He could have told me more. He let me dig my own hole.”

Santo looks up. “What?”

“Never mind.”

“You and August have saved my life. I mean that.”

“I’m glad.”

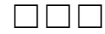
“But there’s no way to make it simple. Like that school in Reesbury August wants Gado to go to next year. He took me by it. Everybody was white and rich. There was one other brown kid, and even he belonged to some white family. I thought no way, Gado’s a poor *pollo* like me, he’s Purepecha, this isn’t who we are, but then I thought, shit, Gado doesn’t remember Moclin. These will be his memories. Of this place. America. I mean it’s all mixed up. And if you want to be honest, August *is* his father, more than anyone.”

“August is not Gado’s father.”

Santo shrugs. “Says who? I’m not his father, and I’m not interested in trying to be. His mother doesn’t want him. Gus loves him. And he has the money and the time.” He looks at her. “Is it bad to think like that?”

“No, it’s not bad. Of course it’s not bad.”

“I’m telling you everything now, aren’t I?”



“Remember when August taught Gado about the Mohicans?” Santo says on his way out to his car.

“Yes,” Liv says, and contemplates her daffodils, how she’d gotten them in the ground so late, and now, with mention of the Mohicans, how she’d gotten Halloween wrong too—angry at Gus for not asking Santo’s permission to take Gado trick-or-treating.

“It made me crazy,” Santo says. “I said to him, ‘You’re already an Indian, Gado. You’re Purepecha. I wanted him to be proud of that, though to me it was always a problem, you know, being’”—he hooks air quotes around the word—“*indigenous*. If anything, I was ashamed. But now I think of my mother, and how brave and disciplined Moclin is, what they’ve suffered and what they’ve done. I even tried to teach Gado some Tarasco.” He laughs. “What a joke!”

She smiles, waits for him at the car.

“What is he going to do with Tarasco?” Santo says. “The Indian he is, that’s not the Indian he wants to be. He wants feathers and moccasins. He wants Big Macs and video games and the Oakland Raiders.”

“Just like you.”

He laughs. “Yeah, like me. It’s all mixed up. And now he wants to be a Viking.” Santo laughs. “Hiccup in *How To Train Your Dragon*. That’s the latest.”

She’s dead tired. She must go to bed, though how she’ll get to sleep she has no idea.

“Don’t feel bad,” he says as he gets into his car. The car Gus had lent him the money for. Probably forgiven the loan.

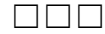
She pats his arm. “I was thinking a few minutes ago. I don’t even know your full name.”

“Rafael Wense Santiago Menenguez.”

“Santiago.”

“My family calls me Santo.”

She steps away so he can back out. “Well, at least I got that part right.”



After he leaves, she sits on the porch steps. The moon, the dark yard, her daffodil bulbs, all one hundred—hidden in the wet cold dirt. Readying themselves.

She had been so wrong.

And yet, something good had come of it, she thinks. Gus is even a better man than she'd known. And now she has reason to speak to him again. Whatever happens between them, she must apologize.

She sits in the dark in her coat, breathing in the sweet air.

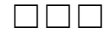
Her pride had been hurt, she can see that much. She had liked being the Santo expert. His life—so exotic, traumatic, with such strong lines and heroic proportions—has high stakes and clear purpose. It had been easy to see how to help, how to insert herself into his story line, and she had flattered herself that playing a leading role in his life would be enough, could substitute for her own. Meanwhile her own... She looks down through the railings to her daffodils sleeping in their cold circles. ... Her own life she's avoided searching for, the story line somewhere, but never quite picked it up and made to happen.

Across the street, Celia's house, the lights still on, is blazing. She strolls out to the end of her drive and stands there, looking at it. All these months and she has ignored Celia's generous offer of help. Hasn't once thought of it. How strange.

And yet how like her.

She thinks of Celia's cousin Di, how locked in her own prejudices Di had seemed—that narrow unalterable track. How unable to see herself from a wider vantage point. That's what Liv had thought of Di, but now she feels she has been prey to the same blindness.

It's been here all along, my life, Liv thinks. I've just been afraid.



In the weeks that follow, mud season, March, Liv is with these new unwelcome truths. She walks up and down the Pillow, on other trails. Walks and walks around this new understanding of herself that is like some large piece of furniture plopped among her things. A piece she has not chosen, that everything else must accommodate.

And always present is the desire to pick up the phone and call Gus. Apologize already! Be rid of this daily discomfort. Better yet, get in her car and drive to Maine.

Yet she does not do it. She must wait. She must be sure that when she finally talks to him, and she will, what she says is right and true.

Santo had come to her with the story of this man, this August Quirk, with a broken ankle picked up on Pelham's Pike. Maybe he'd come to her because she's white, a citizen, because of her Spanish, but maybe too he'd sensed this other thing about her, that she would jump in, both feet—the fixer. Well, she had fixed things—Santo *is* better off, and Gado too, and it is thanks to her. He would never have met August without her intervention.

But then she wonders. Would he have called August on his own? He'd had August's number on his arm. He had wanted her help, but did he have to have it?

She has so relished the idea of being central to his salvation, and she has so loved saving them, she must admit this. She thinks about the day she'd gone into the cabin uninvited and cleaned it up, seen the envelope from Rosa. Tended to his business for him, instead of her own.

What has kept her all these months from taking up Celia's offer of help? Or making an appointment with the bank? Or asking Stephen for help with her mother? She had been so sure of Stephen incompetence. But is he incompetent? Would he have made room in his life for caring for their mother?

She knows he would have.

It would have been an inconvenience, but he and Janet would have done what needed to be done. He may even have needed to do it.

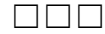
She has been her mother's maltreated, put-upon daughter—oh, how she hates admitting this—how much the victim she has played. Superior, indispensable, self-righteous, insufferable on the phone with Stephen. She must also admit that in some dark corner of her soul she's even liked thinking of her brother as an addict. Acting the savior when she's the one needs saving. Acting the therapist when she's the one needs therapy. Acting the judge when she's the one who's pushed people away.

I go it alone, she thinks. That's what I do. I think it's easier. Maybe I decided that when Dulcie left. Pull it in, stay home, bake an awesome cake.

Think how talented I am.

But never expose myself. Never take the real risk.

I expect to be batted back, told no. I expect to be left, and then I am.



One day in late March, Santo's boss, Pete—Gus's former partner—leaves a message on her phone that Santo's former wrestling coach has been shot and killed. Santo, Pete says, is "super upset, could use some support." Pete is a good friend of Gus's. Strange that she's still on his radar. When Santo answers yes to her text, she drives up the mountain to find him waiting for her in his work clothes, sap-stained, alone. D'America has taken Gado to a friend's.

They take off down Quirk's End, across Pelham's Pike and up the logging road, the way she used to go with Gus and Gado. Walking in and out of moist, cave-like pockets of cool, clammy air. The meadow and woods are still patched with mushes of snow. But spring is here.

Soon Santo is talking about his coach, a man named Danilo Barreda. Santo slaps the bicep on his left arm. "He was alive when I got the tattoo, but now I think I'll make it for him, add his initials."

He talks of the four others killed since the uprising began, and the two kidnapped. One of these has returned, beaten badly but alive. The other man is feared dead. The government has been slow to respond to demands for security, Santo says, but with Barreda's death, something might happen, people say. Rumors are circulating about an army base that may be set up outside Moclin. "But who knows?" Santo says. "And even if it happens, will it be enough?"

He brings her up to date with other developments: the occupation of toll stations along the federal highway between Moclin and Morelia after the killing last week; a silent march for peace through the streets of Moclin with simultaneous solidarity marches in the capital; and demands made by Moclin's new communal council to an Interior minister,

demands that have been met.

“And how is your family?”

“Spirits are still high. But still I worry.”

They have left the logging road, have taken a smaller track through woods, a way she’s never been. “You know where we’re going, right?”

“To the river. It’s the walk I always take.”

“I once asked Gus to take me to where his sister drowned. You know his sister drowned, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Santo says. “We could go there.”

She stops. “You know the place?”

“Yes.”

“He showed you?”

Santo nods, and they keep walking, but this news, like all the rest, makes her quiet. She listens to Santo’s talk about Moclin, but her thoughts return again to their conversation in her room at home, what she’d said about there being rooms he doesn’t let her into. He’d let Santo in.

The path meets up with another path, widens, then narrows through a grove of conifers and oaks, and opens again onto a small dirt clearing. A log. Evidence of a campfire. All around them huge old pines, and then a gradual descent to the river.

“This is it?”

“Yes,” Santo says.

“I mean, where his sister drowned?”

And he nods.

No boulders, no log that looks like an alligator, no steep bank that he would have

scrambled up. The river is narrower than she'd imagined. She walks right down to the water, turns back to him.

“Here?”

And again he nods.

He comes down, stands with her, and together they look out at the snake black water.

“Did he tell you how it happened?”

“Yeah,” and Santo surprises her by laughing. “I was really sad, I remember that. I was going on and on about all my sad life, blah, blah, blah, feeling so sorry for myself. Gado was with us, but he was asleep in that backpack Gus bought.” Santo picks up a handful of pebbles and begins to skim them over the water.

“And then he just told you?”

“Yeah.” Santo shrugs. “He just wanted me to know I wasn't the only kid who's suffered.”

“So what happened?”

“He should tell you.”

“I'm not sure he ever would.”

“Well, it shouldn't be me.”

On the way home, they're wrapped up in their own thoughts. Liv is thinking of her father and his girlfriend, how hip his girlfriend had been, the way she dressed, how much better her father seemed. She also thinks back to her afternoon in the library, of her fight with Gus over Halloween. How she'd told him he's working something out with Gado, that he needs to deal with the loss of Grace. *Maybe some part of it had been true.*

And if you want a kid, have your own.

When they get to the cabin, D'America and Gado are there. She sees D'America

every day at work, but Gado... it's been forever. It feels good to be with them all together. They feel like a little family, despite what Santo has said about not wanting to be a father.

"I have some other news," Santo says.

And still, her heart leaps. Still, she thinks, Gus!

"I can't take any ore of your news, Santo."

"No, no," says D'America. "This news is good."

"Really?"

"We're getting married," Santo says, and puts his arm around D'America.

"Really?"

And D'America bites her lip and nods and thrusts out her hand on which is a ring with a tiny diamond.

"Oh, you all!" Liv cries. "It's beautiful!" She hugs them each, dances around the room with Gado.

"Ah," D'America says, "You shouldn't cry. It's bad luck."

Liv puts her hands together, prayer fashion. "Will you let me throw a party for you? Please?"

D'America and Santo look at each other, smile, nod. "Yes!"

After talking about it, they decide. Santo will call Gus to ask his permission to use the cattle pound for the ceremony and the barn for the dinner. They look at the calendar, decide on April 30, make a guest list, though everyone must be called as soon as possible.

She feels like the parent.

She is the parent.

April 30. They only have a month. But it will be fun.

Then home, down Pelham's Pike, the way it used to be, but different. Strange.
Strangely better.

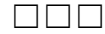
Something opening.

Through the bare branches of the trees the evening sky is dove-gray, pearl, palest yellow—almost a morning sky. She will see Gus at the wedding. He told Santo he would come.

And yet the whole way home, so strange, Liv thinks not of Gus but Celia.

As soon as she gets home, Liv walks over, knocks on the door of the pink house. But Celia can't. "Tomorrow?" she says.

"Tomorrow."



The next day Liv receives a note from Gus. He breaks his long silence with an email about Santo's wedding. It could be an email from any one, from a neighbor. Even a neighbor she doesn't know very well.

I'll be there late on the 27th. I'd like to help with the expenses. Can we talk about that then? Is there anything particular I can do? I look forward to seeing you. Gus

I look forward to seeing you.

No love, no mention of his six-month silence.

It takes an hour to draft a response back.

Hi Gus. Thank you for help with the expenses. We can talk about that when you get here. Yes, would you be willing to create an arch for Santo and D'America to stand in front of? Something simple—vines or birch branches or something? They can't be legally married in this state, but do you have any ideas for someone who would perform the ceremony without calling the INS after? I look forward to seeing you too.

Liv

He writes back with the name and email address of a Congregational minister he knows. Agrees to the arch. *We'll find some time. Love, Gus*

She tries to put the word love out of her mind.

Odd how bad things come all at once—the storm, her mother's death, the split with Gus—and now, tables turned, how good things come all at once as well: the wedding, spring, her inheritance, and this new desire to end the long lonely season of revelation and make a friend.

Liv and Celia, with Mira on her back, have been walking the Pillow almost every day since Liv first went knocking on her door in late March. By mid-April, daffodil-time, Celia knows everything about Gus. After securing Santo's permission, Liv tells Celia his story as

well, shows Celia both the *Boston Globe* article about Grace, and *The New York Times* article with the photo of Santo's mother.

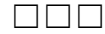
Celia insists on helping with the wedding, the expenses as well as decorating the barn—after all, she says, Santo and D'America met in her cafe. Celia opens up her attic, which contains much of what they'll need: old candelabra, strings of lights, glass hurricanes, torches, vases. Already Liv has ordered the tent, the food tables, the dishes, the chairs for the ceremony, the photos of D'America's and Santo's families taken from their phones, which she's having enlarged for the barn walls, the invitations, the flowers. Then she and Celia take a day and drive to Pearl River in Soho where they find last minute items, including Japanese lanterns.

It will be a potluck, but Liv has hired a caterer for the appetizers and the bar and to warm and serve the potluck dishes out of the food tent. Santo and D'America will spiff up the grounds, clean the houses, everyone will help clean out the barn.

Ana, a seamstress, is making the runner for the table. Pete and Connie will buy and lay the straw. The crew will handle the music. Domingo will be the best man. Liv, Ana, and D'America's sister will be bridesmaids. August will give the bride away.

The wedding cake will be Liv's.

Ha, she thinks. A Lemon Polenta Almond. It has been a year since they'd tasted her last one. Lemons for sunshine, lemons for spring, lemons for hope, she thinks. Lemons a gate you walk through hand in hand.



On the morning of April 27, three days before the wedding, Liv and Celia are up on ladders in the very clean barn, stringing lights and hanging the Japanese lanterns and the streamers they'd found on their Soho trip. They are talking about Moclin, for the remarkable events there have inspired the people of neighboring towns to try to wrest control of their destinies from the cartel as well.

They are talking of this, distracted, when Celia says, "Is that him?" and Liv looks down to see Gus standing in the open door of the barn, arms crossed, smiling up at her. Everything inside her pauses, even the blood flowing in her veins. "Gus," she whispers to herself. "Okay."

"Don't fall off the ladder," Celia says. "Be cool."

Since his email Liv has thought how to handle this moment. How to stay herself, not collapse or fall involuntarily into the shape she imagines Gus wants her to take. She must make amends, she still feels this strongly, yet she does not know Gus's mind. There is no need for a big smile—sincere, yes, not fake, but brief. No need to let her eyes linger at all on his, or search out hidden meanings. Yet no reason to skitter off his eyes too soon either. And when they're done, move right away in the opposite direction. But not rush either—toward him, or away.

She had made mistakes, but the love she'd offered Gus had been as true a thing as she'd ever known, and he had laid it aside. She cannot forget that, she must guard against further injury.

She thinks all this as she descends the ladder, as she slowly crosses the barn to him.

They stand together for a moment, gazing at the transformation taking place in the rafters. It's for him to speak.

“It will be beautiful,” he says. “I can’t wait to see it all lit up at night.”

“The heaters are coming tomorrow, and the hay.”

“It’s good to see you,” Gus says. She feels him glance at her.

“It’s good to see you too.”

He turns, steps out. “Will you walk me around, show me what you have in mind?”

And so she walks him out to the cattle pound, explains where the chairs will be placed, where the arch will go.

“Have you made it yet?” she asks him.

“I thought grape vine like you said. I’m starting on it soon.”

She shows him where she thinks the bar should go—under the maple outside the kitchen window. And the food tent—outside the barn. “Do you think that’s right?” she asks. It’s his place, after all.

“Perfect. Will you sit with me a minute?” and he points to the arbor.

D’America are at work, Gado in school. Liv and August sit as they had that spring morning a year ago when he brought them over to look at the place for the first time, only now their chairs are switched.

“Hi, Liv,” he says again, and something releases in her chest, a spring, and once more she has to pull herself in and up, take a moment, breathe. She scoots her chair back, a little farther from his, and smiles at him, but mildly.

“Hi, Gus.”

They speak for a few minutes about incidentals—the weather, the jobs left to do, his plan for putting together the arch. She is thinking that the ground beyond the cattle pound drops away more precipitously than she’d remembered—she never sits out here. The hills

beyond are blue-green, they wave. From this angle, it feels as if she and Gus sit on the deck of a ship looking out, not to air, but to water.

“Did Arent come with you?” she asks.

“He’s inside, lying down. He’ll be moving here. With me.”

She does not hesitate. “That will be nice for him, I think. He once lived here.”

“He’ll be in the cabin again. Santo and D’America will be moving into town.”

“They are?” She looks into his eyes. “I didn’t know that.”

“We’ve talked about it. We’ve been talking, Santo and me. Talking a lot over these months.”

“That’s good.”

“I’m planning to adopt Gado.”

Her hand floats to her throat. “Adopt Gado? You’re kidding. Seriously?”

“Yes. Well, two years’ legal and physical custody first. That seems to be the law on the matter. So.”

“I had no idea. I guess I’m not surprised. No one tells me anything!”

He smiles. “I know that drives you crazy.”

“Does Gado know that Santo’s not his father?”

Gus nods. “He does. He knows Santo’s his big brother. Santo told him his father died in Mexico. I figured that was his call, not mine. Gado’s been coming up to Maine for visits. He knows.”

“He knows you’re adopting him?”

“Yes.”

“And he’s good with it?”

“Yes. So I’m coming back.”

“That’s great, Gus. Congratulations. You’ll be a great dad. Gado is a lucky kid.”

“Thanks.” His head is bowed, his palms pressed together between his thighs.

The silence they fall into now is energetic, full and lively, moving beneath them as a horse moves beneath a rider, streaming around their chairs.

“Is there anything else I should know?” she says, laughing.

“I don’t think so.”

“Even if I *had* known the truth at the time, Gus, I might still have said all those things I said to you about your tempting Gado away, about using him to work through your feelings about your sister. All that. In Houston you said I pushed, that I thought I knew your feelings and Santo’s feelings. All that was true. I was sure I knew what was best for both of you, and Gado too, and my brother too, for that matter, but I was wrong. I could have asked Santo, but I didn’t, and when I asked you, I didn’t believe your answers. I thought you were disillusioned. It did show a lack of trust, a lack of respect. I’m sorry. Sincerely, I am. I am so glad Santo had you to turn to. He couldn’t come to me.”

Gus nods, his head still bowed.

“I wish you’d talked to me more, Gus. I will say that. I might not have believed you, but... And I don’t know the first thing about your sister or what that experience was like for you, I had my ideas, you’re right, I tried to psychoanalyze you... I didn’t know what I didn’t know. I had no business. And it seems to me that instead of trying to help me see things more clearly, you let me dig my own hole and just keep digging. You let my mistakes gather, then you held them against me.”

“You’re right about that,” Gus says. “And my sister’s death. I never got the help I needed. I am now. It’s helped. I quit smoking too. I should have waited. I’d kill for a cigarette now.”

She smiles, stands. "I just wanted to make sure I said those things. I should get back. I abandoned Celia."

"That was Celia?"

"Yeah."

Overhead, the sound of geese, and then, sailing into view, the wobbled V.

"I think of your birthday dinner sometimes, Gus, how late you were. You scared me. And the fox, the one you hit and tried to save."

"That was a good night."

She turns, looks back at the barn. "It's been hard," she says, "these past six months. We've been split up longer now than we were together. We were hardly together at all. But for me it felt big."

He turns to her. "It feels that way for me too."

She waits, but only a few seconds. It's all he says.

"Listen, I need your advice on something, Gus. Not now. Later."

"Okay."

"Celia wants to open another café. She's not sure where yet—around here, of course—and she's not absolutely sure she's going to do it. I've been thinking of proposing a partnership to her. I've spoken to Stephen about it. She would invest half the start-up money, own half the business, be an adviser, a silent partner, and I'd run it. We'd use the Heaven name. I guess in business that's called a brand."

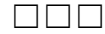
"Ah," Gus says.

"It seems a good idea, if she's game. It would be a great way to learn, and we like each other. So would you think about that for me? You know, pros and cons?"

"Sure. We'll talk later."

She points to the barn. “Okay.”

And as she’d promised herself, she turns and walks away.



On April 30, 2011, four o'clock in the afternoon, Rafael Wense Santiago Menenguez Menenguez of Mexico and Eloisa D'America Segura of El Salvador are joined in holy matrimony. It's a lovely Saturday afternoon, the sky that pale faraway blue, the blue of a sky in a Constable painting, dotted with those same innocent cow-like clouds. The ridge off to the right in the waning light, the air gilt, glittering, and behind the couple, Reverend Glover in his robes, and behind the pastor, the arch made by Gus of grapevine and woven through with greenery, calla lilies and roses.

After the ceremony, as guests rise from their seats, turn to look about—dabbing at eyes, gathering bags, heading off to the yard across the road, she and Gus look at each other, their eyes meet. Not fatefully. Just quietly, quickly.

By accident.

She smiles, but not too big. And looks away, but not too quickly.

And after this victory, she thinks to hang back and visit with the pastor, slip him his check, give Gus time to move off. They have gotten onto the wedding the previous day of Prince William to Kate Middleton when Rev. Glover is pulled away for a photograph and Liv is left alone in the cattle pound, looking off at the ridge. She turns around to gaze at the party in Gus's yard. Everywhere people whisking hors d'oeuvres and glasses of champagne off trays and exclaiming over the beautiful ceremony, the house, the view—smiles everywhere, and Santo and D'America posing for pictures, radiant, holding hands through it all like half-frightened children set down in a strange new wonderland.

The Japanese lanterns hanging from the maple over the bar, the white tablecloth of the bar rippling in the breeze, the light, the women's dresses, the white food tent glowing in

the setting sun, children everywhere, the light, the silky puppy Tuck already grown to full size and Connie's dog here too and running around, and the light.

Just as she'd envisioned. Just as she'd worked so hard for. For Santo and D'America. For Gus.

To show him.

Most of all, she does not want him thinking that she is, in any way, putting herself in his path. In order to accomplish this, she must know where he is at all times, like the cherubim in the Bible with eyes all over their bodies. It is a blessing, she thinks, that she is in charge of the day, has arranged almost everything, and also that she must watch over Vitalija, who knows no one. These duties keep her distracted. Though it is also true that he is in a suit, and she has never before seen him in a suit. The blue of it is, she wants to say, is glaucous.

Glaucous.

Even from far away she is thinking of this word, that color—beautiful with his eyes. And a white shirt.

She has always been partial to Gus in a white shirt.

She looks for Vitalija who is talking to Celia, heads directly for them, links arms with these two new friends, pulls them to the brink of the barn. "I'm going to turn on the lights!" she whispers. "I want you to be the first to see."

She walks over, flips the switch.

They gasp.

It's perfect.

Each place setting—goblets, china, silverware—sparkles, and lined down the center, the bottles of wine, the candelabras, the bowls upon bowls of flowers.

It had not been a Christmas wedding, or even her wedding.

Still, it is magnificent.

THE END