Turn and other stories

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THE TURN
AND OTHER STORIES

by

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Date
On the morning of his mother's service, Wayland stood on his father's front porch holding a 30-pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon like a briefcase, his golf clubs slung across his back. His mother's dying wish had been for him to keep his father away from her funeral. She had been quiet and sincere and hopeful when she asked, the way that the terminally ill are, but also the way that his mother had been her whole life. He had said yes, not because he thought he was the man for the job, or because he wanted to try to be that man, but because she looked like a jack-o-lantern the second week in November and he didn't know what else to do about it. It was a chronic problem – getting into future situations to escape the situation at hand.

His father opened the door dressed in his suit with his hair combed down, though they didn't need to be at the church for hours. He didn't look anything like he did before Wayland's mother got sick. He put on weight as she lost it, color returned to his face as she greyed out. He got strong for both of them while she became weak, was the consensus, and he did it for her.
“Wayland,” he said. “Who put you up to this?”

“We have time for the top nine,” he said, like his older brother Gary had told him to do the night before. He brushed past his Dad sideways into the house and sat down at the kitchen table. The plan was so simple, his brother had said. It was foolproof. Gary was in real estate, the kind of guy people slapped on the shoulder and called a real son of a bitch – a guy who was prone to getting things done. Gary had a membership at the country club where Wayland worked full time as a golf ambassador. Wayland was baffled that his mother asked him to keep his father away and not his brother, like she was pulling a trick on him.

Wayland opened his father’s first beer and put it in front of his chair. Then he opened one for himself. He tried to be natural, to drape one arm over the empty chair next to him, to take casual belts from his beer, but his father wouldn’t have it. He wouldn’t even sit down.

“I wrote something for your mother,” he said, pulling a folded yellow paper from his jacket pocket. “It’s a poem.” Wayland didn’t know how to deal with the man in front of him. The person he knew had disappeared. His father stopped drinking nine months before, the day his mother was diagnosed. He stopped in the middle of a can. Threw it in the garbage without pouring the other half down the sink. After that, he started hanging around the house instead of golfing. He started listening to his mother’s needs. He stopped ripping through the house and started mowing the lawn.

“Dear Babe,” he started, and his face immediately reddened. “How I loved your strong, thick thighs.” He paused for a long moment.

“Save it for the service,” Wayland said, like his high school basketball coach would say about fighting before a game. If anything could prevent him from going through with
the day, it was nostalgia – feeling bad about the changing the present. He reached across the
table and snatched the paper from his father's hand, tucking it into his own pocket.

His father started crying a little, which Wayland had never seen before, or imagined.
No noises, the tears in straight lines out of the corner of each eye and a bright red nose. He
slouched down into his chair and stared at the beer Wayland had set in front of him.

“This was Gary's idea.” His father said it like a statement more than a question.

“No, Dad. I just thought we could loosen up a little before we went.”

“Did he think I’d just start up again and run to the golf course without a second
thought? Did he think about anyone beside himself?”

“Gary’s on your side. He said he’d call us half an hour before things started so we’d
have time to get over there.”

Really, Gary had said he’d call Wayland's cell when the service was close enough to
over that they wouldn't even catch the tail end.

“I think you’re taking this too hard.” Wayland said. He tried to sound sincere, but it
came out like a commercial. “Relax, have a beer.”

“He thought this will keep me away? He thought it would be like at his wedding?”
He shook his head, slow, disappointed. A year ago, he would have shoved a chair into
another chair.

“Dad, you know I couldn't stop you from going.” It was a strong defense – that
Wayland couldn't stop him, that Gary would never have sent Wayland to do something
important.

Wayland could see something change in his body movement then, a stiffness that let
him know that he had already decided on just one. He crossed and re-crossed his arms,
waiting long enough that it didn't look like Wayland had convinced him. Finally, he reached
over to the side of the case nearest to him and ripped a hole in the side of the box like a
superhero tearing through a concrete wall. He didn’t touch the beer Wayland had opened
for him.

“Is this what you all want?” he said.

He took a small sip, like it was steaming instead of ice-cold, and held it like it was
hot, too, with two fingers and a thumb. A big, immediate change didn’t happen once he
started drinking, like Wayland had assumed. His father’s face didn’t change back to the way
it had been. He didn’t grow in size. He also didn’t grab his throat, choking, or slam the can
against the fridge, foam flying. He took a few more sips. He handled it a little more. His big
hand curled around the can until it looked like he was drinking from his fist. Wayland drank
too, though he normally didn’t. He drank because of what Gary told him was his mantra:
there are things you have to do, and other things you have to do in order to get the first
things done.

“How much time do we have?” his father asked. No slurring, no gravel. A bit tired.
He opened a new can and licked the foam off his fingers.

“A few hours,” Wayland said. “Plenty of time to split a bucket at the range.”

“Can’t we go after?” His Dad hadn’t golfed since the diagnosis, and for the first time,
he seemed a little tempted.

“I’m not sure if it would be proper to go right after,” Wayland said. He didn’t know
what he was talking about. He felt like when Gary Jr. asked him questions about the world
that he should but didn’t know the answers to, like about how nerves or refrigerators work.

“Gary will call when it’s time?” his father asked. He looked doubtful, keeping his
eyes on Wayland, but he got up out of his chair. He placed their empties gingerly at the
bottom of the recycle bin and picked up the rest of the case to take with them — still steady,
still controlled. They didn’t speak in the car, though Wayland was waiting for a familiar explosion from his Dad – some good reason that made stopping his father from getting to the church out of his control.

His father had been a great alcoholic. Great was the word people often used. To Wayland, great meant to transcend your personality and become a single thing – an embodiment of the thing that you had spent your life perfecting. It was amazing and terrible. It deserved respect. But as terrible as his father had been, he wasn’t sure if he should be punishing the person in front of him. It was as if his father had been healed the moment his mother got sick. There was no reason to keep him away if he was changed for good. Everything he did had been directed toward her since her sickness – Wayland had seen him washing her nightgowns in the tub, probably because he didn’t know how to work the machine. Near the end, he had bought a bouquet for beside her bed and rubbed a petal up and down her forearm.

Wayland had asked Gary whether or not he should do it, since Dad had been so good, and had Gary grimaced, but it was partly to conceal a smile. Gary reveled in discomfort and conflict. He had the idea that Gary was raising Gary Jr. right just to show their Dad how easy it was to break the cycle. It was his love of uneasy situations that was the difference between them – the reason he was rich from real estate deals and that Wayland worked at the golf course, not instructing, not playing, not grounds keeping, but simply making sure that whatever happened, happened smoothly. Wayland had known about the difference since he was eight, when their dad ran through the house, systematically slamming the doors and shattering their doorframes, ending with the front door as he walked out of it. Their mother tried hiding in the bathroom to cry, but the door kept swinging open on its splintered frame so that she had to give up and act calm. Wayland found the experience
unpleasant while it looked to him like Gary was taking notes to break out the story on second dates.

When he asked Gary if he should go through with it, Gary said, “One year doesn’t make up for twenty-nine. Do what Dad would have done before Mom got sick.”

Wayland felt a small boost of confidence on the golf course. He was a good golf ambassador. He kept people where they needed to be, doing right without being mean or confrontational. He was good at whistling at a pretty drive, changing pitch with the altitude of the ball. He also knew the right kind of silence to follow hooks or slices, one that conveyed empathy instead of disappointment or embarrassment. He knew how to break up fights between friends. The secret was to make them realize themselves.

They sat on their spread-out jackets in the grass, the case of beer between them like a picnic basket. Wayland knew the best place to sit and wait for your party to be called over the PA system – dry, nice view, equal parts sun and shade. When they heard their name, they stuffed the rest of the beers into their pockets and into the golf bag.

His father birdied on the first hole. He had a butter swing, like the slow-motion arc in instructional videos, the path of the golfer’s movements slowed and blurred so you could see the beauty in it. He peaked around seven or eight beers. Wayland remembered that he’d laugh at the TV around that point, that he’d tell him stories about old ball players, that he’d pinch his mother’s waist on both sides so she’d squeal in the good way.

He was two under by the fifth hole, in his stride. Wayland whistled when the ball went up. When he pulled one to the left into the trees they were both good-hearted about it. When he went to find the ball, his father chased geese, a sand wedge stuck out in front of him. All that, and the day was beautiful for golf, and for everything else Wayland could think
of except for funerals. He looked at the soft roll of the green and imagined the cemetery across town. Wayland was grateful they were all outside. Really, he was having a good time.

And it wasn't only because of the golf and the beautiful day and that he might finally be doing something right for his mother. It was his Dad. He had missed him. At the seventh hole, he watched him pull his club so far back that it almost touched his elbow, perfect and powerful.

“Oh, Wayland, that dog will hunt,” he said, watching the ball float down the fairway. He closed his eyes and howled.

They talked about golf. His father took over driving the cart — speeding a little and taking turns too fast, but nothing that made Wayland more than excited. On the ninth hole turn, though, there was a steep incline where golfers tipped their carts the most often. Wayland had put up a cautionary sign.

“Keep the wheel straight,” Wayland said. “Let off the gas a bit.”

“I taught you how to drive,” his Dad said. “Don’t teach me back.” He hit the gas and jerked the wheel to the right. The cart skidded out, teetered on two wheels, and came to a stop near the bottom of the hill. He immediately looked like he had done it on purpose.

“Superman,” he said. Wayland didn’t say anything. He sprang out of the cart before it stopped rolling and took the remaining beers out of his suit and threw them on the ground. His Dad ran from one to the other, picking them up like Easter eggs, and jogged ahead of Wayland. His job was no longer keeping away the man who had taken care of his mother over the last year, now he was keeping away the person she had married.

He thought maybe his Mom asked him and not Gary was because she knew he would screw it up, and that’s what she truly wished for. He wouldn’t be able to keep his father from the funeral, and his Mom would be thrilled to know that he cared about her
enough to thwart her plans. Maybe what she wanted was for Wayland to show up at the house with his suit and beer-briefcase and for his Dad to say no and pass some sort of test. If his mother had really wanted her husband to stay away, she could have asked him herself and he would have done it, just like he'd done everything that she'd asked since she got sick.

The ninth hole sat against the clubhouse and parking lot, and Wayland could pick out the shape of his car's bumper. It was their last chance to pick up and make the service. His Dad hadn't asked the time, and Wayland had been too afraid to check. He willed the cell phone to ring, for it to be Gary telling him anything. His Dad was walking very deliberately now, not stumbling, which is how you can tell a great alcoholic from the amateurs. Wayland took a long time to pick a club, to stall at the ninth hole, to keep the car in sight.

Wayland double bogied to slow things down, waiting for his Dad to say something about getting going. As they walked towards the tenth hole, Wayland felt any control he had slipping away.

Although most golfers didn't notice it, the tenth hole was a tricky spot that caddies and administrators and ambassadors paid close attention to. The tenth hole tee box faced the eighth hole tee box, almost parallel, and the tenth hole fairway curved around towards the eighth hole so that a certain subset of golfers – the very young, the very old, the inexperienced wives of experienced golfers – tended to hit balls onto the wrong fairway. Fairly often right at the eighth hole tee box. Accidents happened.

Wayland's Dad passed his stride almost seamlessly. Somewhere, recently, he had lost his jacket on the course and one of the legs of his pants had gotten caught in one of his dress socks. He looked comfortable, not like he had for months. Wayland was starting to feel comfortable, too, that neither of them had much responsibility anymore. He father
looked at the scorecard and said, "early to ripen, early to rot," twirling his club in the air beside him.

At the tenth hole he got down on his knees and spent a good thirty seconds balancing the Titleist on the tee. Then he stood, bent over and ready to swing, for another few minutes, sometimes resting all of his weight on the head of the club. When he went for it, though, he missed the ball completely, a worm-burner, and an impressive divot thudded a few feet in front of him. He made minute shifts in his stance, then lost his balance and swayed. He reached back and sliced hard right, straight toward the eighth hole tee box where a foursome was getting out of their carts.

"Fore," he whispered.

The foursome scattered, arms thrown around their heads, some hitting the deck, as the golf ball ricocheted off the cart in front. They walked toward Wayland and his father as soon as they began to get up, shoving their arms in the air and shouting things that were too far away to understand yet. In his periphery, Wayland saw his Dad fiddling around at the tee again. By the time he turned around, his father was already in mid-swing — somehow a beautiful instructional-tape swing, his anger improving his accuracy like Wayland remembered. Another ball glided through the air toward the foursome. The first ball had been an accident, it seemed to Wayland that it had reminded his father of what used to make him feel good. The second ball flew over the men's heads, but only because they ducked. It made their shouting louder and turned their viking into a march.

Wayland was frozen. The only thing he could think to do was check his cell to see if he'd missed Gary's call. Nothing. He thought about grabbing his Dad and making a run for the car.
He remembered when Gary’s wife turned around and threw the bouquet at her wedding a few years back, she hooked it hard left and it flew right at Wayland’s mother, who was seated at a table at the edge of the dance floor. She caught it, Wayland thought because it was a natural reflex to catch things that are flying right at you. His father ripped the bouquet out of Mom’s hands and threw it behind him, back toward the bride. Then he started yelling. Maybe it was because she was married to him, and shouldn’t be catching bouquets, even in self-defense. Because of the open bar. Because he thought it was flipping ridiculous to have to feed all these people for free, or because Gary shouldn’t have picked Charlene because she had narrow hips. Whatever combination, it was a great scene – his father had made the wedding his night, had made it memorable because of him. Gary ended it by punching his father in the gut. Wayland watched the whole thing.

As the golfers approached, Wayland wished for his golf ambassador crew neck and nametag. He jogged to meet them in the middle, his arms out waving, don’t fire.

“We’ve been a misunderstanding,” he said. They didn’t look convinced.

“Don’t take it personally, he said. His wife just passed away,” he said. They stopped and Wayland stood at the end of the line of them, to appear to be on their side.

“Does that give him license to act like an idiot?” The man who spoke stood next to Wayland. He had the dark golfer’s tan and wrinkled squint of a course regular. A good ambassador can spot these details and take advantage of them.

“She was my mother. She died three days ago. Golf and my mother were the only two things that made my father happy. Her funeral was this afternoon, and he couldn’t even stand to go.” Mentioning the funeral broke the day for them. It would get them out of the fight, but bring them somewhere worse. They had played ten holes. The sun was weaker and
the afternoon was almost over. They were both guilty – neither of them could pretend to have forgotten.

The men started looking a little understanding, a little less angry, as if they were contemplating losing something like golf. But when Wayland looked at his father, standing across from them, his face was five minutes behind the conversation – a thin line of a mouth and hard-focused eyes. He drew back his arm and Wayland watched the form of it, his whole body twisting and turning to lend force to the blow. Wayland moved to protect the golf-tanned man, and the punch landed in the center of his mouth. Wayland’s face went numb and then the pain flared. His father fell on top of him. Wayland didn’t know how to fight, he didn’t even learn after Gary’s wedding. His father worked one arm around his neck and reached inside Wayland’s jacket pocket with the other. Instead of the cell phone or a beer, he came up with the folded yellow paper. Wayland worked one hand free to check his teeth.

“Don’t tell me your mother put you up to this,” he said, sounding like he didn’t want Wayland to tell him if it was true. The foursome pried his arm away and lifted them off the ground. They were full of pity for a father and son who only have golf left. They led them to the clubhouse holding them at their elbows like they were blind. They placed them in seats at a corner table, mumbling things about talking it through. Wayland wasn’t sure if he’d screwed up yet. Wayland wasn’t sure if his mother had caught the bouquet on purpose, even if it had been through to her by accident.

His father asked again as soon as the foursome was gone. “Did your mother put you up to this?” He tried to prop his body up on the table with his elbows.

“It was my idea.”

“No it wasn’t.”

“Please lower your voice for the other members.”
He lowered his voice. He leaned toward Wayland so his chin was almost resting on the tablecloth. "Just tell me it wasn't her."

"It's almost over." Wayland said.

"I wouldn't have screwed up if I had gone," he said, but he said it like a question.

He picked up the menu and tried to focus, like the answer was inside.

Gary called as they were finishing lunch. He said, "Are you at the clubhouse?"

"Is it over?" Wayland asked.

"I told them Dad was too upset to come. That you stayed with him. I wrote up this note from Dad to Mom and everybody lost their shit when I read it."

Wayland hung up the phone. The service was over, and his mother was gone. His mother was gone, but his Dad was back. He pawed at his folded yellow paper. "Oh, Babe. Dear Babe," he said.

Wayland was sobering up fast. His father was looking for another person to give him a chance to explode. It was like Wayland was back at the house years ago when it felt like the place was turned on its side, all the doors gaping and hanging open on their broken hinges.

Something was gone from his father’s eyes, an absence that made him familiar to Wayland again. He waved over a waitress. She was frightened, but she came anyway, because Wayland used her name and smiled without his teeth. That was less threatening. He was a good ambassador. It was over, except for the bottom nine, and Wayland ordered drinks, more for them and one for the waitress. Silvia. She had been one of the people there clapping her hands together the day an angry player flung his entire golf bag into a water hazard and Wayland asked him to leave peacefully. When the man returned a few minutes later, to tell him that his keys and wallet were in the bag, Wayland had dove into the muddy, weedy murkiness, searching without being asked, as ambassador.
HOW YOU CAN TELL

It's Annie Anderson's second week working at the paper. She has the same name as me, first and last, though I've been here for four years. Sometimes it makes me think about identity, but mostly it's been causing unrest in the office. Our bylines in the paper read the same thing, and the day last week when I tried to add the E for Elaine to my articles was the same day that she tried to add the E for Elisabeth. It's become a constant struggle: the mystified readership, the mixed-up emails, the who's-on-first phone conversations. I explain it a hundred times a day: she's the opinion editor and I'm the news editor; she's the soft stuff, and I'm hard.

When we hired her, I backed the guy with fewer qualifications and a different name from me.

This weekend Annie went on a date with the sports editor, Quint. I only know because they went to a benefit dinner for the new animal shelter and the only place where news travels faster than a small Iowa town is a small Iowa town's newspaper office. Apparently, Annie is a do-gooder who likes to benefit things in need. She's also mentioned
taking in strays and donating to the food bank more times than she should for it to be as altruistic as she makes it sound. I hold the belief that if everyone took care of themselves, we wouldn't need to take care of others. In this way, making sure my own cat is comfortable and healthy is a grass-roots operation that I don't feel the need to discuss in the office.

The date with Quint is a point of contention if you can have contention when one person doesn't care. It's one thing to know that the sports editor prefers someone else to you, but it's another thing to be the second best person called Annie Anderson. Quint was hired the same year that I was, and although we have never attended a benefit together or even eaten outside of the print room, we've got something together you don't need food to confirm.

"Annie."

Larry, the editor in chief if you don't count his ancient absent dad, lumbers into the newsroom and toward our desks. Annie and I are sharing an office until Larry figures something out. We used to both turn our heads at our name but now neither of us does, even though we can tell who he's talking to from his tone. He has my latest article all marked up by the copy editor – Larry calls them Freudian slips but they're just regular mindless typos. No matter how slowly and carefully I go over my work I can't see my own mistakes, and I imagine Annie saying something about how this could be projected onto my greater life outside of the paper but she never would. She's very nice, which is the worst part. I find myself constantly digging for material on her, which usually comes to incriminating things that Annie might be thinking, if she weren't so nice.

Larry smells like an empty bag of fast food, all grease stains and used napkins with smears of mayonnaise. He's hugely obese though all of his weight is concentrated in his middle, which creates the impressive optical illusion that his tie is three inches long. His
ankles and wrists look like a regular man's ankles and wrists. It's how you can tell it's a vice and not genetic.

"The copy editor is our last line of defense before we go to press, Annie. The copy editor is not our mommy. He is not here to wipe your bum and clean up your messes." He waves my article like evidence in a courtroom. I've heard the copy editor-mommy speech before.

"I read it out loud this time."

"You even had a typo in the Corrections section this week, Annie. There are three thousand people in Pella who expect quality and accuracy."

Annie touches me on the shoulder after Larry stomps out, as if people went around touching other people on the shoulder.

The editors take cigarette breaks in the back room with the huge dusty printing press that hasn't been used since computers. It looms over us. Quint and Annie and I sit on metal stools at a metal table and ash into something round and metal and obsolete. Annie and Quint sit on one side of the table and I sit on the other like an interview. They ask me questions not related to the talk I had with Larry about my Freudian slips even though that's what they're wondering about. This is because they're not hard-hitting journalists who throw tact aside to get to the real story, at least not during our smoke break. They say, how's your brother, Annie? Did you do anything over the weekend? We fidget with our cigarettes because we're used to jotting down notes when we talk to people.

I tell them Larry is sick of having to deal with the copy editor trying to deal with me. That he often looks at me and then in the direction of his dad's empty office, the place he uses to ax people. I say that I hope Larry dies of his vice soon. Everyone thinks it, but no one else says it, because it will probably happen soon and no one wants to be the one who
said it. I can only hope Annie thinks it, and that when she does, she feels a little less good for a moment.

Annie goes on and on about herself and I feign interest while trying to catch Quint's eyes watching her. It's how you can tell if a person really cares. She's just moved from Chicago (she says she was yearning for a life-change) and her column's called City Mouse. I throw her some hardballs but uncover nothing about their beneficial dinner. She talks in perfect quotes: “Driving down Route 55 in mid-May makes a person wonder why anyone wouldn't want to live in Iowa.”

Quint doesn't say much because he stutters. It's why he enjoys writing, or perhaps why he writes instead of doing something else. He can ask questions without stuttering, but he can't answer them. It's about performance under pressure, which might be why he likes sports.

I've learned the best thing to do with a stutterer is to be patient and to keep eye contact. A lot of people think that looking away is polite, but really it's worse, because you're acknowledging the problem. Quint stutters a lot around Annie, and it's because she not only looks away but also tries to finish sentences for him. It's like charades, except more embarrassing. “Tuesday?” she'll say. “Grocery store?” “Swiftly?” I'm guessing that when he asked her to the animal shelter benefit he was probably looking for the stapler.

My brother Matt tells me that not making small talk is no way to make friends. That I should let Annie and Quint be happy together. He also tells me that he adds insights into my life that I am blind to, because people can never clearly see themselves. It's true. I see people not seeing themselves every time I do an interview. Someone making a definitive statement about themselves is how you can tell they're lying, or at least dead wrong. When Matt tells me I take my work home with me, I ask him several follow-up questions.
Quint and Annie leave together, but I light up another cigarette. I smoke two packs a day, and not just so I can lurk in the print room. I need it. In journalism school they said that every writer has a vice, just one, and that they have it bad. Larry has his bad. Fast food three times a day, plus trips to the bakery down the street, where he claims he rustles up stories from the locals but comes back with mostly muffins instead. The copy editor drinks and collects matchbox cars. It sounds like two vices, but really it's one vice and one symptom of that vice, though I'm not sure which is which. I like to think our ad person philanders, because of all the calls she gets.

I don't think Quint has a vice, which is why he has to stutter. He's got it as bad as Larry has it for triple patties and sesame buns unless he's drunk or talking to me. I'm not sure whether to be flattered or insulted. Do I lower his inhibitions? Do I make him feel warm and relaxed and nauseous?

"A-Factor." Quint is standing above my desk, and I look up at him while continuing to type. He thinks he's solved the Annie problem by giving us nicknames. I'm The A-Factor. Annie's Annie. I'm not sure if I got the short end of the stick -- I can't even ask him what exactly A-Factor means.

"A-Factor, Annie wants to go out on a story with you." He's standing perfectly still, his shirt tucked into pants the right length, his hair combed and gelled like it is every day. I can't stand to look at him, this person who is doing Annie's bidding.

"She's Opinion. Her stories come from sitting at her desk and reading my stories." I cross my arms and look away on purpose while Quint tries to find his words. I want to see him crumble before me.
“She wants to do a piece on the new police cruiser to see if it was necessary. If both the cars go out on a story you could bring her.” He runs all of his words together because he often gets caught up on constants at the beginnings of words. I’ve almost got him.

“Why can’t she ask me herself?” A hard-hitting question that will upset him to the point of stuttering, which means I’ve won.

“She’s new here. She’s sh-sh-shy.”

“She should do a piece on that. It would be better than the one she wrote on how rewarding gardening is.”

He cups his hand around my elbow and leads me into Mr. Pender’s office. No one’s ever seen the man except for the black-and-white photo on his desk from the 40s where he’s standing next to some forgotten politician and wearing one of those stereotypical reporter hats that say PRESS above the band. Not a thing in the office has moved since Mr. Pender had his first stroke in ’95, you can tell from the even layer of cigarette grime that covers everything. It looks like maybe someone put their hand on the window a few years ago, and it might have been me. Quint and I used to hide here when the paper got to be too much, though we haven’t since Annie started. It’s our place more than Mr. Pender’s.

“Annie,” he says, “she’s nice.” Usually, if you wait quietly after an unsatisfactory answer, the interviewee will speak again, and more honestly. “You and I don’t have much in common, A-Factor.”

“But you’ve never even tried going to a benefit with me.”

“You don’t seem to support anything.”

“She isn’t even a reporter. She writes a diary entry once a week. She wrote about bunnies last week.”

“It’s called a c-column. They were hares.”
I walk a few steps and wrap my arms around him, which is what Matt told me not to do again under any circumstances. I ask if it’s okay, but he can’t answer – he stands there with his arms at his side. I only feel like this with Quint – a little gentle and tender. I want to protect him instead of tear him apart for his story. It’s not about getting to the bottom of things with Quint, I think that’s why we’ve never gone to a benefit, it’s just about being around him, about not looking away when he’s struggling.

I like to think that Quint’s named that because he’s the fifth oldest child in his family. I don’t know this, and can’t verify it, but I like to think that’s it. Maybe the constant lack of verification is what it is about him. Maybe that’s why Annie likes about him, too. Was he born of the fifth day of the fifth month?

I like to tell Larry I’m going to look up records in the public library when really I’m just going to the public library to sit and think. It’s my favorite building in town because the second floor is made of thick, cloudy glass, and if you’re on the first floor looking up, you can see feet materializing and disappearing one after another as people make their way down the aisles.

It’s a good place to people-watch, because like any good small town, everyone uses the library. Pella is just small enough that I know everyone well enough to go off like the Bible: Marian Lawson, owner of Second Hand treasures; wife of Henry Lawson, chemistry teacher; mother of Cooper Lawson, Pella Tigers Offensive Lineman and Colin Lawson, winner of the Seventh Annual Martin Luther King Jr. Essay Contest. Todd Marthensen, known for his Christmas decorations; husband of Merle, known for her nonsensical statements at school committee meetings, father of Tyson. It’s taken me four years.
Annie Anderson is a few study carrels away. She's probably researching something for real, which is almost worse than anything else about her: the way she wears linen sincerely, how her bracelets match her earrings, how everyone says she's pretty when they're really just thrown off by how clean she is.

I'm caught staring. She stops her loopy note taking and walks over to me.

"I'd like to go out on a story with you. I'm sorry I didn't ask myself. I mean, to ask Quint to ask you — it was ridiculous, with his handicap." I would never write the word "handicap." It's a euphemism, and it's vague.

"He stutters. Have you done any reporting?"

"I thought this would be a small enough paper to start at."

I get a call from Larry and use it as an excuse to leave. He says "typos" without saying hello or goodbye.

Matt's driving me to the Pella Regional Community Health Center, because I asked for it. He's a caregiver, and you'll hear about it if you call him a caretaker. He's the occupational therapist at the Adult Day Care on the third floor, where he mostly makes two-liter bottles and popsicle sticks look like other things while the old and demented watch. He claims that he learns important life lessons from working with the elderly, but he's only told me two: people are only truly happy when talking about themselves and tattoos are never good ideas.

I'm going to volunteer, to help some people who can't help themselves. Matt is sure I only want to go because of Annie and Quint.

"Are you doing this because of Shitty Mouse?"

"Have you ever met a Matt Anderson?" I ask.
“Once, at Adult Care. He sang blues standards and sighed a lot.”

“And didn’t you feel a sense of competition with him?”

“He was incontinent. He hated crafts.”

“Working with the elderly might make me nicer or more understanding.”

“It will only make you fear the future.”

When we get to the Day Care, I can see where he might have gotten that idea. The adults have just finished their lunches – they have crumbs and sauces dripped down their fronts and half of them are still smacking their lips together. They’re all hunched in wheelchairs and scattered around the room like between rounds of bumper cars. I try to think of a positive lead for a story about the place, something uplifting, but nothing comes to mind. I can see why Annie sticks to animals.

We wheel them around a table and hand out paper and markers and that’s when I see Mr. Pender, oxygen tubes disappearing up his nose. I know it’s him because it looks like a skinny, old version of Larry and he’s wearing the same glasses as in the picture in his office.


I sit next to Mr. Pender and try to talk. Simple, leading questions like you would ask a child in an interview. “Are you enjoying your day?” “Were your tater-tots enjoyable?” I thought I might curl into a ball and sob if he said anything was not enjoyable – if he mentioned the tubes or wheelchair or the other adults. If he couldn’t put a sentence together.

He grabbed my hand, like in slow motion. He held my forefinger and middle finger, which matched his own, stained yellow with yellow nails.
“A big smoker,” he said. “A lady reporter. These modern times.” He chuckled to himself.

“Did you enjoy working on the Register?”

“Leading question, miss. Try, ‘how is your experience working on the paper?’”

“How was your experience working at the paper?”

“I still own the damn thing. Do you have a cigarette?” He rubs his hands together, like Larry does.

“No, sir.” I lied.

“Always carry them. People will talk when they’re smoking. It’s distracting.”

Matt stood in front of everyone and gave instructions about drawing turkeys for Thanksgiving cards for their families. He was like a child talking to a panel of dolls and plush animals. I put Mr. Pender’s hand on the paper, trying to smooth out the knots and crooks. I put my hand over his, to trace it, our cigarette fingers overlapping. His eyes float up from the paper and lose their focus.

“Got to check the cap height on the banner. Body text is slanted on four.” I imagine he’s back in the print room, the press roaring and spewing out papers – that he’s sifting through papers in his mind that are still on his desk across town. I want to tell Quint about what he could tell from my fingers, how he still had it. I want Annie to see me here, our touching hands.

I call Matt over, who tells me most of them go in and out.

“Anne.”
Annie’s new thing is calling me Anne and I like to think that she hopes it spreads like a disease. I wouldn’t mind Anne if my last name wasn’t Anderson, but the sound of two indefinite articles in a row is too much for any journalist. I don’t answer to it.

“Hey A-Factor, Annie’s talking to you.” Quint says it so I listen. Annie’s standing beside me with a hand-written letter. It’s from someone angry about the paper, and it’s too vague to tell which Annie Anderson it’s addressed to. Both Annie and I have a hunch it’s me. It’s a Freudian slip in the news section.

Annie starts laughing when she realizes the mistake – It’s spelled Walter Hancock, no ‘d’ – and that it’s not her fault. It’s a nice, genuine laugh that doesn’t implicate anyone, doesn’t mock anyone, doesn’t offend anyone. Similar to her sweaters.

I want to say that I made the mistake because I’ve been busy volunteering at the adult day care, but I stop myself. If I brought it up, it would lose all its weight. I wanted Quint to find out by accident. Instead I say that I did it to upset Larry, and Annie laughs her easily amused laugh again.

At the paper we get punished for mistakes with bad assignments: the winter festival that means hours outside covering things like the ice sculpture garden and using words like “whimsical” in the lead; the regional spelling bee that means interviewing a 13-year-old who’s smarter than you; talking to the superintendent about money. So when Larry looked at the police blotter early on Monday morning, started laughing, and made a line for my desk, I knew it was time for retribution for what I had done to George Hancock and his family.

“Two cars and an ambulance at Herold Realty.”

“Both cars?”
“Must be a pretty big story.” Larry is looking mischievous. In an article, you can’t say things like that, because then you would be the interpreter instead of the herald of facts. In an article, I could only say, “Larry’s frown hid a deep smile. His palms were pressed together at his chest.” I couldn’t mention his obesity, although it is a fact, because it would cause a bias in the reader.

I read the blotter and walk to Annie’s desk as fast as Larry walked to mine.

“Both cars are on Broad Street. Are you ready?” She looks up from her very genuine column and gives me a genuine smile.

“Really?” she says, and she’s immediately nervous and excited; that is, her eyes light up, and she fumbles with her papers. I know she’s looking for drama, a great story, humans at their best in times of trial, our brave men and women in uniform.

It takes us a few minutes to walk downtown, but when we get there the guy I see I need to talk to is sitting on the back bumper of an ambulance and still traumatized. He still doesn’t grasp exactly what has happened to him, and that’s the best time to talk to a person to get the full story.

“There was blood everywhere. Everything was smashed and turned over.” I look around and he’s right – Dwight Herold Realty is a mess. The front picture window is shattered, most of the desks and cubicle walls are in pieces. There is, indeed, blood everywhere. It’s interesting, but after working at the Register for four years, I know better than to assume that anything is interesting. Further down the sidewalk, three or four cops stand around a struggling buck covered in his own blood. The animal is so weak his antlers are keeping him on the ground. I tap Annie’s reporter’s notebook and she starts taking notes.
“What happened this morning, Dwight?” Using people’s names makes them more likely to confide in you.

“I guess the deer wandered into town and saw his reflection in the front window. He lunged at the window and got trapped. He hurt himself pretty badly trying to get out, and managed a lot of property damage along the way. I found him this morning.” Annie nods, satisfied. She starts to close her notebook, but I’ve just started. Dwight’s pale and not standing. I go for the emotions behind the stories. Sometimes it takes a half-hour to turn on the plumbing.

“You discovered him this morning? Did you immediately understand what was happening?”

“I told you, there was a lot of blood. I was a little confused.”

“Annie, he’s told you already,” Annie says. I ignore her.

“Why are both cruisers and the ambulance here? All for the deer? You called 911 and reported a confused deer? You understood the situation upon entering your business?” he starts to look around, which means he’s looking around for an answer other than the truth. I push him with one last question. “What did you report to the police this morning?”

“I just walked in and saw mayhem. There was blood still dripping from the glass shards. I though everyone was dead: Brent, Wendy, Andrew, Susan from accounting.”

“What did you think happened to them?”

“I thought they must have been murdered. I though the guy who did it must have been huge, crazy, a monster. That’s when I heard something moving in the break room. And I called out for him to show himself, but no one answered. I called 911.”

“But it wasn’t a murder at all.” I remind him. Dwight starts crying, which means I can now use the phrases like his face splashed with tears in the article.
“Annie, stop,” Annie says. I look over and she’s trying not to cry, too. She’s bursting with empathy.

“What did you think when the deer came out of the break room?”

“I thought – I couldn’t figure out why the murderer would have brought the deer in.”

When the rifle goes off, Annie slaps her hand against her mouth like the shot had come out of it. I walk over to the deer and the police without comforting her. The captain is ready with his string of sentence fragments and cop words. Cops are the worst people to quote next to children— they say “vehicle” instead of “car”.

“Mating season. Perpetrator was a buck. Saw his reflection and jumped at it. Tore around the office all night.”

The conversation turns to how many points the buck is and who’s in charge of making the sausage. I look back at the ambulance. Dwight’s color is seeping back into his face while Annie is looking paler and paler. She’s standing with her arms crossed away from all the action. I walk up to her.

“Do you want to talk to the captain about the new cruiser? Did you bring a notebook? A pen?”

“How could you talk to that man the way you did? How could they shoot that deer?” She starts to tear up again. She needs a vice.

“You should see what we do to bunnies here. And mice.” I begin walking back toward to office, and she follows.

I tell her I’ve only covered one murder, that the last one in Pella was the year I got here – a guy stabbed his best friend because his best friend was trying to drive home drunk. That it took the murderer five minutes to confess that he did it and a few hours to say why.
If you get enough information and good enough explanations, nothing is out of the ordinary. Getting to the bottom of a story is always disappointing. It's the middle that's interesting.

I look at her and see someone completely harmless. She's not listening, and I suspect she's still thinking about the deer, and possibly a column about deer. I ask her why Quint is Quint, and she tells me that it's short for John Wentworth Copeland the Fifth.

"See?" I say.

I often imagine getting a call about Larry's death, so early that I'm not at work yet. I picture walking to the office without showering, to get to the story while it's still fresh, to find Larry sprawled out on the ground in the front hallway, stiff, colorless, a little deflated or maybe spreading outward like a pudding. I add blood and maybe burst catsup packets. Sensory details: a silence so strange for a newsroom – perhaps two phones ringing unanswered and the police blotter telling us that the ambulance has been sent to our own address, but a complete hush from the keyboards, the printer, the shocked staff. I'll walk in and everyone will look at me – the person who said the thing about Larry out loud.

I imagine Quint and I working together writing the feature article about Larry's life, and how Annie would only be able to say something benign about wishing she had gotten the chance to know him better.

When I climb the front stairs into the office the day after the deer story, Larry is there, turned toward me and standing. A strong light, much stronger than usual, is shining on him from his father's office, lighting up his face and the dust that floats around it. Someone has cleaned the grime from the windows.
Annie emerges from the editor's office with a box of old papers and puts her arm around him, whispers something in his ear. I am amazed at her ability to touch people, physically. Larry looks how I pictured him on the way to the office—a little deflated.

I walk to Quint's desk for an explanation. I don't ask, I point.

"She's taking Mr. Pender's office. Larry said it was okay."

"It's not fair. That's our place. It's for the editor-in-chief."

"I'm upset, too, Annie, but she told Larry she couldn't keep sharing the office with you."

"Mr. Pender would be upset if he knew. I met him, Quint. He could tell I worked here."

"Annie told me how you treated her. She doesn't even know if she wants to try reporting again."

"She doesn't have the heart for it. She gets too involved."

I look at him while he finds his words. I'm patient. "She's internal." He tries to speak again, but his mouth just opens and closes like a fish.

I don't wait for him. "You've never cared about me." I take my hand and put it over his. I imagine Annie's hand a little softer. "But I understand how you work."

"Annie sees something b-better than that."

Matt tells me that when people talk, they never listen to the other person; they're just waiting for their turn and thinking about what they'll get to say next. He says it gets worse as we get older, and by the time they get to adult day care, they cut out the other person until they're just talking into their bowls of mush. I wonder if anyone even listens to what they say when they're talking, like how everyone thinks that they are misquoted in the newspaper—it might be like listening to your voice on answering machines or how that deer looked into the
window of Herold Realty and saw an enemy. I listen to Quint because he requires it. I watch his face because it makes everything worse to look away.
I wake up and everything looks new and suspicious. I check the expiration on the English muffins. I examine Scout's gums without knowing what to look for, wondering if I deserve a dog. I stand still in that space at the bottom of the stairs for a moment and ask myself if I am physically healthy when I should be thinking about the day ahead.

I still take a shower. I wonder where the water is coming from, I wonder about reservoirs and treatment plants and the echoing trickle of underground wells. Do we have a well? Do people still have wells? I look in the mirror afterward and instead of seeing myself I understand that humans are hairless, like rat tails and elephants and baby moles. How strange eyebrows are.

I go back up to my bedroom to make sure that I was right about my husband Elliott not breathing smooth the first time I got up. I crouch next to him on the bed and put one hand on his stomach and one near his mouth. I match my breathing to his to see if it's comfortable or if I'm struggling, factoring in that he's twice as big and a bit older. The process makes me sigh and yawn. While I'm up next to his face, I see the baby mole features
peeking out – pink wrinkles and delicate almost-invisible hairs and a slow movement in the jaw.

I doubt Mole Elliott. I calculate what percentage of my life I have known him, and then try to figure out if I care about him the right amount. His face looks different when he is asleep, when his personality isn’t affecting his features. I can’t imagine what his voice sounds like, or what he would look like covered in a fine fur. I try to have his voice say something in my mind, but it’s only me saying, “Really? This guy? Thirty percent?”

I try snapping out of it, but I can’t manage. I turn on the television and instead of seeing people interacting in places, I see actors and sets and scenery. It takes the punch out. On the radio, I hear papers rustling in the background instead of the news stories. I try to concentrate on a magazine story, and read about a celebrity who has fractured his femur. I want to feel compassion for him, but instead I think: which is worse, a bone fracture or a clean break?

My mother taught me a trick when I was little about what to do if your day is a disaster. She taught me to take off my clothes and get back into bed and close my eyes for five or ten minutes – it didn’t matter if it was already afternoon or even night. After five or ten minutes, you get up, get dressed, brush your teeth, and pretend like whatever came before didn’t happen. She liked to add in some stretching and a fake yawn. She’d put on something nice, a soft dress, for her second attempt at the day.

I take off my clothes and put them away until I am naked again. I slide into bed next to Elliott and try not to think about anything. I have fleeting thoughts about thread counts and district spending and then my mind wanders back to the English muffins again. I focus on relaxing and keeping my eyes shut. Mold is growing long before it’s big enough to see.
When I wake up, my first thought is about time, not a thought about what time it is, but a thought that’s too abstract to fit into my routine. My problem is not fixed. Elliott is awake next to me, though his eyes are barely open. Mole eyes. He burrows his face into my chest and tells me I’ll be late for work. He doesn’t know I’ve been up. Beautiful, furry Scout jumps onto the bed.

“I think Scout needs a toothbrush,” I say. “We need to be responsible.”

“He doesn’t have opposable thumbs, Sweetie,” Mole Elliott says.

I am suspicious of this response. There are an infinite number of possible responses to my statement and he has chosen this one. There are not an infinite number of men, but there are billions. Even to the pickiest women, there are dozens. He has chosen this response over an alternate response, “Yes. We need to be responsible.” There is more burrowing. Comforter tunnels.

I flip the covers off myself and over Elliott’s face when I get out of bed. He laughs in the dark, not wondering about my motive. I stretch and yawn. I bet on response and responsible having the same Latin root, though I haven’t taken it since college. The two words juggle in the background of my head. To respond is to answer; to be responsible is to answer for yourself.

“What’s worse,” I ask, “a hairline fracture or a clean break?”

“Are you okay?” he says. “Your bones?”

“My bones,” I say. Elliott has a skull in his head—hollow empty eyes, no nose, boney smile on a clacking jaw, all hidden. Humans each have a skull. It’s grotesque and sinister. It’s similar to the thought I had about time—that we’re together because it’s hurtling us forward together. I am standing naked in front of him, palms out like an anatomy
diagram, which I don’t do most mornings. I have veins, I have muscles, I am showing him layers.
NANTUCKET RESCUE AND RELEASE

I held the parrot over the boat’s railing with both hands, knowing that even if I wanted to drop him, he’d stop in midair by spreading his wings and fly back up to my shoulder. He looked even more exotic than usual, bright green and yellow against dull blue water and dull sky. His body was moving with me and the boat and the waves but his head stayed in the same place. He was wrapping my dangling necklaces around his claws. I couldn’t decide if I had the guts to give the bird back.

I threw up over the railing, I didn’t know if I was nervous or seasick.

The ferry was packed. It was two weeks after Memorial Day, but the schools had just let out and a lot of families were heading to Nantucket for the summer. To summer, is what they said. We – my friends Simon and Elliott and I – could only afford a weekend.

I stumbled around the perimeter of the boat and found Simon and Eli sitting at a booth in the cabin on the lower deck. They were arguing over weird cribbage rules, which was the main reason they played. Simon was gesturing like a high school economics teacher and Eli had his hands folded on the table like a high school English teacher. Both of them
were still wearing their hip young teacher tweeds and pastel button downs. Their cards were lying facedown by their elbows. I slid in next to El.

"You okay? You don't get sick on the ferry." He took my shoulders and shook them like a coach talking to an injured player. "We need you at 100 percent."

"It's rough today," I said.

"Do you get points when there's a suited jack in the crib or just when it's in your hand?" Simon was tired of talking about Peggy, which was what we were about to start doing.

I said, "It's just when it's in your hand," but he just looked at El and didn't pick up his cards.

For the first time since high school, all three of us were on summer vacation — ten weeks. And for the first time since the summer after we graduated, we were heading to Nantucket for the weekend to start the ball rolling. We'd all done our own thing out of college — Simon had gone to China to teach English for two years, El had tried to live in New York and then L.A. and failed at both — but now we all found ourselves back in Boston, teaching. Most things were the same. A few little things were different. Simon and El had become cynical instead of playfully cynical. My hair had faded almost to brown. The fourth member of our group, Peggy, wasn't with us and Larry Bird, Peggy's parrot, was.

The trip to Nantucket used to shape the rest of our summer, so we didn't have to figure it out ourselves. The summer I had dated Simon, we had our first kiss on the ferry home. The summer I broke up with El, it was in a tent in the woods near Great Point. The summer before college, the trip was perfect and everything was cool and we promised each other that we'd go again the next summer, which was as far into the future as we could see.
Peggy wasn't with us this time because Peggy was already on the island and had been for a year. She had moved home right after college to work as a paralegal and last summer she had taken our annual biking trip to Nantucket alone, to find herself. What she found, her parents told us, were hippies. She left everything – her boyfriend, her job, her apartment on Beacon Street, and her unfortunately named miniature macaw. Peggy had called her parents once, to tell them where she was and that she was okay, and that was it. Her boyfriend moved to Philadelphia, her job was lost, her apartment was sublet, and I got stuck with Larry.

"I don't know anything about basketball," I had said when the boys were forcing the bird on me.

"All the more reason you should live with the Legend," Simon had said.

"I don't know anything about birds."

"Do Simon and I look like ornithologists?" El had said.

"I didn't even know that was the word for it." Then the bird was on my shoulder, where it had sat and shat ever since.

Larry and I got by – I think we would have gotten along better if he hadn't been abandoned by Peggy and if I hadn't been abandoned to the bird. He was a lot of work care-wise, not to mention that he repeated the same eight inspirational Larry Bird quotes over and over again, whether you needed to be inspired or not. He developed a nervous problem not long after he moved in with me – he started pulling his feathers out and bobbing his head all the time. Often, Larry would remind me that a winner is someone who recognizes their god-given talent.

If we found her on the island, I was thinking that the only reason I wouldn't give Peggy her bird back was if she wanted it.
“Do you think she’s stopped shaving her pits yet?”

“Jesus Christ, El.” It was my job to pretend to be shocked by the boys.

“I bet by now she thinks vegetables have feelings.” Simon pulled at my suede jacket and looked for a reaction.

We had been making predictions about Peggy all day. All year, really. The only things we knew for sure were the things that Peggy’s parents had told us when they had us over for dinner the previous fall, a few months after she had disappeared. During her one phone call, she had told them that she was happy, that they shouldn’t worry, that it wasn’t exactly a commune. Her parents didn’t believe any of it. Peggy’s mom had forced seconds on us to keep us longer and kept on using the wrong stereotypes.

“They make you sell all of your belongings and then they use the money to buy things for themselves. They brainwash you so you think it’s okay,” she had said, and, “They don’t believe in medicine – if you get sick they think it’s part of nature and let you suffer and die. They get the common cold and kick the can.”

Peggy’s parents wanted us to go to Nantucket right away and get their daughter back, but we didn’t, because we all thought Peggy would learn a good lesson and come back by Thanksgiving. No one winter in Nantucket unless they have to, and when they do, they call it spending the winter or staying for the winter.

It was summer now, though, and we needed a vacation. Simon and El claimed to miss Peggy. They said it wasn’t the same. Simon used the word keystone. More importantly, though, El was getting married in the fall to a girl none of us disapproved of. The invitation was sticking out of his jacket pocket and it would be delivered personally this weekend because, according to Peggy’s mom, hippies don’t have mailing addresses. Because of the something to do with government.
“Maybe she wants to leave but she doesn’t have money for the ferry.” Simon had picked up his cards and was pegging around the cribbage board.

“Maybe hippies burn their money and only deal in sea shells and bong hits.” El was checking Simon’s move, recounting the holes with his pinky. The mystery of Peggy’s leaving was only trumped by the mystery of Peggy’s not coming back.

We didn’t have a plan, and El thought this was okay since hippies didn’t plan – they were unpredictable and we had to be, too. “We’ll go where we feel like she’d be, and that’s where she’ll be. Hippies do stuff like that. We have to understand them to capture them.”

We knew we would find her. There were only 10,000 people on the island. We could bike around it at least six times in a weekend. It was three miles wide and 14 miles long and hippies didn’t have the money to live in most of the neighborhoods.

“Hey, Redhead, guess where we’ll find her.” They still called me Redhead even after everybody else had stopped and even though I had proven to be more of a brunette.

“Madaket,” I said. It had nice beaches and small houses. It was on the less dramatic south shore of the island. Lots of year-round residents. I wiped my salt-sticky hair out of my eyes.

The first part of the bike trip was always the worst, right off the boat through downtown over cobblestone streets that made your bones knock against each other. We picked our way past cheap tourist traps and restaurants we could never afford until we passed the tennis courts and hit the closest thing the island has to open road. Larry huddled in the basket on the front of my bike and gnawed on the back of his neck with his beak. I couldn’t tell if he was more traumatized than normal. Simon and El rode fast because it was
getting dark and because they would love to make the other one ask to slow down. If one of
them did ask, he'd say, “Slow down for Red,” so that the other one would look like an ass.

A few miles south, outside of town, we turned off the road and begin biking through
the woods towards our campsite, the same one as every year. It had gotten dark, but the
moon was out and the white sand on the path lit our way. Simon and El wouldn’t let me
help with the tent even though it was mine – they wouldn’t even let me tell them what they
were doing wrong. I went for wood.

We knew we couldn’t act until morning. El got the fire started and we ate tinfoil
dinners and s’mores. El dragged a log over to the fire for the three of us to sit on and put a
stump opposite us, for Peggy, he said. Simon poked a marshmallow onto a stick and
balanced it between the stump and the fire. He told us Peggy would be there by this time
tomorrow night.

“We’ll have to give you a bath, cut off your dreads, burn your patchouli-smelling tie-
dyed garments – you might be disoriented at first, but you’ll soon remember yourself.” He
talked at the stump as the marshmallow blackened and dripped into the fire.

I tried to picture Peggy changed and I couldn’t. Then I tried to picture her how I
knew her and that was hard, too. Shy Peggy. Conservative Peggy. The boys called her Sis and
jumped on chances to defend her. Irresponsible Peggy – buying tropical birds on a whim.
Giving them stupid names. Sweet, guilty Peggy – keeping the bird so she would remember
not to be impulsive, and as punishment. I looked at the stump and saw her with her arms
and ankles crossed, only understanding half of the boy’s jokes but laughing at all of them
anyway, because she thought that the way they said things was funny all on it’s own.
“Maybe we should make her cut down a tree and burn it or make her throw some Styrofoam cups into the ocean. Make her prove that she’s changed her ways.” El was hunched over a map of the island even though we knew all the roads.

The boys had decided that I was the one who would tell Peggy that we were going to bring her home when we found her. I didn’t bother to argue – it would have been two to one. I was her best friend, they said. I had Larry, they said, and Larry was the key.

“If she looks like she wants Larry, tell her she can’t have him unless she gets on the boat,” Simon said.

“And if she ignores him, if she still can’t handle it, you need to force him on her. Tell her that if she lives with hippies, she must subject Larry to the hippies. You’ll work the guilt angle.” El couldn’t refold the map.

“Don’t you think she’d feel guilty by now?” I said.

“No. She needs to see the bird. Everything will come rushing back. Can we pick a few more feathers off his back? He needs to look like those kids in those commercials.”

“Master the fundamentals,” Larry said.

Simon picked up where El left off. “She’ll hold Larry and remember how good it is to care about something – something besides the environment and Dead tribute concerts. She’ll look into his eyes and remember how good she looked in club pants and how good veal tastes if you don’t think about baby cows. She’ll watch Larry take a little ball of scrap of paper downtown and stuff it and she’ll recall how important it is to have real friends who do real things.”

El laughed at Simon. “And she’ll see you, Redhead. With the bird.”

I saw Peggy the Christmas before her departure from Boston and my return – I visited her apartment and she took me to the restaurant where her boyfriend was the
executive sous chef and a functional alcoholic. He filled our table with appetizers and
desserts, French-Asian fusion. I told Peggy the food was good and she said that the money
was, too. She said it would be perfect if he ever got home before she and Larry were asleep. I
hated her stability – I was dating a non-functional alcoholic who didn’t cook – and I had
pretty much stopped calling her after that.

That was also the last time I had seen Larry and Peggy together. She said the thing
had been driving her crazy, that it was just as bad as having a toddler, that Larry was worse
than a toddler because Larry could fly. They were inseparable.

She knew it was her fault and that’s why she didn’t fix it. Peggy hadn’t bought the
bird because she wanted one; she bought it because she thought it would be funny to have a
bird named Larry Bird and maybe because she thought it was out of character. We were
seniors in high school. Even Simon and El got tired of the joke. They said he was ruining the
group dynamic. She said they were jealous, and they didn’t say anything, which meant that
they agreed.

The next day we biked and swam and ate subs and walked down every beach we
came to, just like any other year. We found Peggy when we weren’t looking for her, at Great
Point, with a lighthouse in the background that was a calendar favorite. She was doing back
flips off of the sand dunes onto the beach with five or six other people. Five or six hippies,
specifically. We dragged our bikes through the sand towards her, tried to finish our ice cream
cones before we got there, so it looked more like we were on a mission.

Peggy had always been pale – Irish – but all of her freckles had expanded until they
touched. Her shoulders and nose shone brown. She had on a halter-top and loose dungarees
that hung off her hipbones. She didn’t have dread locks – El lost ten bucks – but it didn’t look like she’d brushed or cut her hair since I’d seen her last.

She walked up to us and the hippies followed behind her. She said, “This is Simon, El, Larry, and Redhead,” and she gave us each a hug. She left Larry on my shoulder and he started bobbing his head and side stepping more urgently.

She was happy to see us instead of happy and surprised, something that I guessed came with learning to be laid back. Really, they all looked pretty happy, not just Peggy. Simon saw me looking at them and mouthed, “It’s the drugs.”

The hippies introduced themselves. The hippies hugged us like Peggy did. The women’s loose breasts flattened up against my chest. The men smelled like men. I forgot their names as soon as they said them, I just remembered that they sounded normal, not like Crystal or Serenity or Hunter.

They asked me if I wanted to try jumping off the sand dunes, but I stayed cool, folded my arms and told them I’d rather watch. The hippies understood and accepted my feelings. Simon and El jumped, though they spotted each other the first time. El was usually scared of stuff like that – he never went bridge jumping with us even with all of Simon’s teasing – and I guessed that he was probably just doing it to get in good with the hippies so we could get closer to Peggy from the inside.

None of us had seen Peggy do anything like this, not since she got a bloody nose from diving off the high board the wrong way. Simon got out his camera to try to take a picture when she was exactly upside down. El whispered, “Hippies believe that if you take their picture, you capture their soul.” The three of us huddled together.

After a while we followed their lead and rolled up our pants to walk along the beach. We turned our heads to look at the mansions and then turned our heads to look at the
Atlantic. Some of the hippies had brought butter knives and had bottles of cocktail sauce shoved in their back pockets. They dug up quahogs and ate them still bubbling seawater. They asked me if I wanted one and I wished that I had jumped off the sand dunes earlier instead.

"Are you a vegetarian?" It was a man speaking, the one who shook his head every few seconds to keep his corkscrew curls out of his face. He had wrinkles around his eyes from squinting.

"Oh, no. I love meat."

"The parrot's name is Larry?"

"Larry Bird. He's a retired basketball player."

"Yeah."

I searched for the word for me -- the one that made me cringe when my mom used it -- *square*. I bet that there was a new word for it, one for the younger generation, one that I didn't even know yet. Not even knowing the word made me one, I sure. I tried to stop crossing my arms in front of me as we walked.

We biked to the hippies' house, in a part of Nantucket where the locals live, a tiny place in the woods surprisingly close to our campsite. The original hippies, the ones who hadn't grown out of it like everybody else's parents, had stayed home to cook dinner -- three baskets worth of whole-wheat spaghetti and plates full of more quahogs.

The house couldn't begin to hold all of them. In the back there was a chicken coop that had an addition for humans. Both were filled with mattresses that had blankets but no sheets and low tables and couches that had been through it. A box of Phish bootlegs with no cassette player -- with no outlets -- in sight.
At dinner, we sat on plastic lawn furniture in the side yard and ran our hands up and down our arms when mosquitoes landed on them. We ate off of giant wooden spools that once held some sort of industrial wire or rope. We drank wine out of matching gas station cups and I tried to figure out which one worked there. Then I tried to figure out if hippies had jobs.

Peggy sat with us at one of the spools so it was just the four of us. We used our chance alone with her to get on the offensive. Peggy was still acting laid back, but she had to know what was about to happen.

“Red, do you have something you'd like to tell Peggy?” El wanted me to offer her the bird. Or tell her she couldn't have it – I wasn't sure which.

“El is getting married at the end of August. Right before school starts up again,” I said.

Peggy was happy but not surprised. “Do I know her?”

“No, she just moved here from North Carolina last year. She's an art teacher. She's not horrible at all.” El and Simon backed me up with enthusiastic nods.

Peggy didn’t do anything for a moment, but then she seemed to remember her hippie self and got up and ran to El with her arms stretched out. El had this look on his face like he was being attacked by an animal – one that no longer shaved her pits. He got out the invitation from his pocket and she backed off.

Peggy opened the envelope and read the invite. “Rachel Elizabeth Kerr.”

“I don't know if you can get away,” El tried, and Peggy didn’t say anything. “She's keeping her last name.” He was looking at Simon to bail him out.
Peggy crumpled the invitation up into a ball, threw it towards me, and made her hands into a basket. Regulation height was about two feet. Larry dunked it, which might have been impressive if he didn’t have wings.

The hippies at the next spool over laughed real slow. They took their hands off of their chins and their elbows off of their knees and clapped a few times.

“I know what’s happening on the court,” Larry said, repeating the trick over and over. He whistled the NBA theme song that they played on NBC about twenty times a game.

“Bird never dunked that much. It’s just not historically accurate.” Simon couldn’t believe Larry was catering to the other side. “You should teach him to assist, take some shots from the outside.”

“That’s a beautiful church,” Peggy said to El. Larry jumped on Peggy’s shoulder and started picking things out of her hair.

Peggy and I talked about the bird – about where the bird should end up. We went for a walk, not on the beach, just on the gravel road she lived on. Larry was still perched on her shoulder, not mine, but she looked uncomfortable about it. I couldn’t believe I was jealous.

“Do you want to come home?”

“Not yet.”

I decided to follow through with Simon and El’s plan, except I decided that I was bluffing.

“I think you should have Larry. He hasn’t been the same since you left.”
"I don't know, Red. Sometimes I need someone to tell me that if I give 100 percent, everything will work out in the end. But I don't need someone to tell me ten times a day."

"Larry has emotional problems," I said.

"Yeah." Meg was walking differently than before, but I couldn't place how.

"I don't want him," I said.

"How'd you end up with him?"

"You left."

"Let me talk to everybody," she said, meaning the hippies.

"Let me talk to the boys," I said.

She asked to keep him overnight, and I agreed, afraid that Larry would embarrass me and grab onto Peggy's shirt if I tried to take him back to the campsite. I wondered if they would disappear together.

When we got back, we found the hippies laughing at Simon trying to join the drum circle and Simon laughing at himself. Peggy took his drum away and handed him a tambourine, sat leaned up against his shins and began playing. She blended right in.

Outside of the circle, I talked to El. He was convinced the hippies wouldn't let Peggy keep the bird — that the five of us could catch the morning ferry the next day. It was a typical thing for him to do, to stand fast as soon as he figured out that he would be wrong.

"I wished they'd play something quieter like hackey sack," he said.

We biked the short distance back to the hippie compound the next morning. Peggy had talked to everyone about keeping Larry like she had said she would.

"They said it's inhumane," she told us.

"Which part?" El asked.
"They said he's upset because he's being exploited for his entertainment value."

"He's a goddamn parrot, Peggy," El said.

"He was fine before you left," I said.

"He likes playing basketball," Simon said. "They were laughing at him yesterday."

"I guess it's not natural," Peggy said. "I guess we already set him free."

That's when I noticed that Larry wasn't on Peggy's shoulder and that he wasn't on mine. I looked up and saw a group of hippies not far off, standing with their arms hanging at their sides and staring straight up. Larry was towering above them, like the real one might have. He was in a pine tree.

He said, "Push yourself."

He said, "Don't give an inch." He pulled out some feathers from his outstretched wing — big ones — and they floated down to us. I couldn't imagine how Peggy had gotten him to leave, but whatever she had done had broken him altogether.

"He's at the end of his rope," I said, and El said, "He's a goddamn parrot, Red."

"We need him," Simon said, and Peggy started crying.

Simon and El immediately began to plan Larry's rescue. They started unrealistically, talked about cutting the tree down. Then they threw some balls of paper up to him, but he just bounced back and forth between limbs. Then they decided to hammer some boards to the tree — like a tree house ladder — but by the time they got back from the hardware store with the hammer and nails, Larry was gone.

Sweet, guilty Peggy spent the day in the chicken coop, face up on a mattress, her knees pointed up, her arms close by her sides. The hippies looked in at her from the doorway but didn't go any closer. Simon and El and I kept more of a distance, looking at the
hippies looking at Peggy I was thinking that we might have her back. I was wondering what she was regretting.

When she emerged that evening, she had a plan – she had broken us into pairs and worked out who would search along which paths. She speculated which direction he would have gone, if there he would be attracted to a certain kind of tree, if he would be on the ground or in the air. The hippies, always supportive, always kind of bored, agreed to do whatever they could. We glanced at the ferry schedule and then followed along.

We looked for Larry Bird for a week. We biked all the trails in the woods, we called for him, we shook his can of nuts. We craned out necks to see up into the trees until it hurt if we stopped doing it. I tried to figure out how many days Larry would last in his condition and without food and guessed probably not this long.

In the evenings, Simon and Eli played four-on-four volleyball on the beach with the hippies even though Eli had stopped trying to get in good with them on the inside. Our cell phones died. We ran out of clean clothes. Slowly, we were blending in with the hippies – we had sand in our tangled hair, our sunburns had faded into tans on our cheeks and collarbones. I swore Eli had started to talk a little slower and laugh more. The boys were adamant – they weren’t leaving the island without Larry.

“Peggy?” I said.

“Whatever, Redhead,” Simon said.

“You want to leave a soldier behind?” Eli said.

Peggy still hadn’t been the same since Larry had left. And by that I mean she’d been different from how she was when we first found her with the hippies and also different from how she was before the hippies, when it was just us.
"Why would he do something like that?" she said, which didn’t make any sense because she had pushed him away. "Why wouldn’t he know to come back?"

Near the end of the week, she spent a night sitting on the stump at our campfire. She ate marshmallows even after Simon told her they had gelatin in them. She was pretty quiet. Embarrassed. She wouldn’t go back because she thought she had made the wrong decision.

"Do parrots migrate?" Peggy asked.

"He never has before," I said.

"We just have to keep strong, Sis," Simon said. "You know what Larry would say if he were here right now? He’d tell us that it isn’t over until the final buzzer sounds."

On the eighth day of searching, Peggy told me that when we found Larry, she’d keep him with her on the island. For me, I told her it wasn’t a problem. We said these things because we were both confident that he was gone for good. We talked about high school, but she didn’t slip back into who she had been. We were checking ourselves for deer ticks, tiny black dots that you can’t tell from freckles until you run your hand over your skin. I wasn’t exactly sure what I was looking for. We both had one leg up on the plastic chairs in the backyard.

I asked her how Nantucket in the wintertime, and she told me that on the beach, the snow looks like the sand. She said it was hard to make a living and to live with so many people in such a small place.

"Is it harder than living in Boston," I asked.

"It’s what I chose," she said, and, "You should dye your hair back to red."

"I thought you guys believed in keeping things natural."

"Only for ourselves," she said.

"They guys say that if you don’t come back, we’ll lose the group dynamic."
Peggy laughed and said, "drama queens." She found a tick in between two of her toes, where her skin wasn't tan. She pinched it between a finger and a thumbnail and plucked it out. She put it close up to her face, examined it, offered to show it to me. She flicked it to the ground. I was frightened of her.

"I think you should go back," I said, more for me than for her. "I'm going back."

"You haven't gone back yet," she said.

At the end of the week, Rachel Elizabeth Kerr showed up to collect us – she found Simon and El and the hippies on the volleyball court as the sun was setting. I'd called her from a pay phone the day before, to give up our location and to tell her we'd had some trouble leaving. When we saw her, we remembered ourselves. We acted like kids who had been caught running away from home, Simon and El scratched the eight days of stubble on their faces. El was quick to blame Peggy and Larry. Then he got on the offensive and said he wasn't married yet. Then he tried to make her eat a quahog and that got her to smile and laugh. She didn't say anything about how she found us, and we didn't say anything to Peggy about when the ferry left in the morning.

When we got back to Hyannis Port, El figured out that he had lost his car keys on the beach. Rachel went for the spare – an hour away – and we biked figure eights in the empty parking lot, listening to the sand grinding in our gears. Larry's can of nuts rattled in my backpack.

"How long until Peggy has a hippie baby, Redhead?" El said as we passed each other.

"I bet she gets a hemp sling to carry it around in," I said, trying to control the bike with my arms out at my sides.
“I bet she names it something like Willow,” Simon said.
ACCOUNTING

Beanie was nannying when Charlie crawled for the first time. He rolled onto his stomach, did a tiny baby push-up, and was off. Beanie clapped her hands, whooped and ran to tell Mandy, who was in timeout for biting herself. Mandy jumped up and down when she saw it and then hugged Beanie tight.

There was one thing — that the baby crawled backwards. He tried to go forward, and he was looking forward when he went, but something was off and he ended up backing into walls and furniture. Beanie wasn't surprised to see it at all — strange things happen to kids who don't get enough attention. She and Mandy shook some toys in front of him to get Charlie going right, but he couldn't do it. He would look at the toys like he was going toward them and then get more and more upset as he got farther and farther away. Beanie thought it must be like looking in a rear view mirror.

Usually when Beanie nannied for a kid who had a first — his first steps, his first words, his first successful trip to the bathroom — she wouldn't say anything to the parents. She would let them see it for themselves later, the second or third time, and let them think that they were around often enough not to miss anything important. With Mandy and
Charlie’s parents, though, she wanted to tell them as soon as she saw them, which she hoped would be any day now. She would tell them because it might spark something in one of them or make one of them snap out of it. Maybe they’d be concerned about the backwards thing.

Beanie figured that the parents, Carla and Daniel, were going through a divorce, or at least heading into one. Beanie figured that they were having more than just a few marital problems, from the lawyer’s letters on the countertop. She hadn’t seen them in the same room together for a couple of months. When Daniel left his home office, he crept around the house like a big cat, padding socks and shadows disappearing around corners. When Carla was home, she made a lot of noise so he knew exactly where she was and where he shouldn’t be. Beanie wasn’t sure what would happen when they met again, she didn’t even know who she wanted to win.

Communication had not only stopped between Carla and Daniel, but between the three of them. Beanie started noticing when she realized that all of them had been feeding Peanut, the family golden retriever, so that he was vomiting every day. For a while after that, all three of them had stopped feeding the dog. A few weeks ago he started trying to run through the Invisible Fence and Beanie could hear him yelp each time he got zapped.

The kids took naps in the afternoons. Beanie watched soaps with the volume down and called the suicide hotline. Matt, her fiancé, was the director, and the only person manning the lines around in the early afternoon, when suicidal people find a little hope in the prospect of a new day and maybe some lunch. The middle of the night is when the thinking happens.
“Do you want to talk about feeling lonely, depressed?” Matt said when he heard her voice. It was a game they played, that Beanie was really calling the line for help.

“I’m pretty sure my divorce with Garrett made me lose Raul’s baby.” She stole plot lines from *The Young and the Restless.*

“I’m sorry that’s the case. I’ve heard spending time with your betrothed alleviates stress.” Matt had become the champion of steering the conversation toward Beanie quitting her job. Beanie had become the champion of deflection.

“I’m not sure if Raul would approve.”

“It’s been four days since I saw you awake, Bean.”

Beanie walked into the kitchen and fiddled with the wad of bills on the counter. Beanie could guess how long Daniel and Cindy would be gone by how much money they left out for her. She used to get a check each week, but now they paid her every day in cash like they weren’t sure if she would last to Friday. Lots of times now, she would get paid twice, once by each of them, by accident, maybe, or for bribes.

“Charlie crawled today,” She said.

“In an attempt to get out of there*”

“Matt.”

“Come home for dinner tonight.”

“These kids aren’t going to raise themselves. I think Charlie might already be damaged.”

“If you really wanted to help everyone, you’d leave and let them pull themselves together.”

Beanie cared about Matt – she wanted to marry him – but he didn’t need her like Charlie and Mandy did. Matt could take care of himself. Matt took care of strangers all day.
The kids didn't even know to ask where their parents were. The best way to forget that she had responsibilities to Matt was to keep her distance, to come home to see him sleeping and wake up to him gone. A voice in her ear when the kids were sleeping, so that she knew he was there and that he loved her.

Carla came home at one in the morning smelling like office carpeting and fresh Xeroxes. She worked long hours at an big deal accounting firm in the back bay, not so much because she liked to work, Beanie figured, but because she wanted to stay away from the house. Her family problems had landed her a promotion.

"Charlie crawled today." Beanie braced herself for she didn't know for what.

"Huh." Carla was taking off her long black coat, her bright scarf, her fitted black business jacket, her necklace, her tiny black shoes. "That’s good."

"Backwards."

"Huh?" She tugged off her earrings and pulled something from her hair that made it fall down. She reached up under her skirt and pulled at her pantyhose.

"I don’t think it’s a big deal. The backwards part, I mean.” It didn’t register.

"Did Daniel eat dinner with you and the kids?"

"Yes." Beanie lied because she thought she might get more information that way.

"Lazy," Carla said.

Daniel had recently quit his accounting job to become a consultant. This meant spending the last few months hiding in his home office and eating out of Tupperware. He said that you only hear the success stories about people moving off-track, because the other stories are too embarrassing to tell and the people who would tell them are hiding in their home offices.
Carla walked over to her briefcase and pulled out her keys and a stack of photocopied papers, an audit that she had finished with.

“This is for Charlie. I had my secretary check it for staples.”

Beanie nodded. “I’ll see you in the morning?”

“Sure.”

Beanie eased her front door closed and tiptoed to the bedroom. She peeled off her clothes without turning on any lights. She tried to wake Matt up while she was getting to bed.

“I made seven hundred dollars this week,” she whispered.

Matt flipped over toward her. He was mostly awake. “You don’t even deposit it anymore. The coffee table looks like we’re dope dealers.”

“You can deposit it into your account.”

“I’ll need to handcuff myself to a suitcase to get it to the bank.”

“I’ll come home early tomorrow. I’ll talk to Daniel about getting off.”

“Remind him of the children before you go.”

Beanie looked at Matt’s face looking up at the ceiling, his features becoming distinct as her eyes adjusted – his nose jutting in every direction from football and playground fights, the ruts of his smile lines webbing out from his eyes. She didn’t see the urgency she needed. There wasn’t a disaster there, only sadness and frustration. Matt could wait, Matt could have the situation explained to him. Matt couldn’t be permanently damaged. She stretched her arm across him, liking that her arm was exactly as long as his chest was wide.

“Get any good calls today?”
“No one who was seriously considering doing it.” He sounded disappointed, and
Beanie was too.

The house was quiet when Beanie got in the next morning. Fresh coffee stains told
her Carla had just left, faint music told her Daniel was awake in his office upstairs. She
unfolded and counted the twenties on the table. Seven. A long day and night.

Mandy was awake already, naked, sitting on her legs, ankles crossed. She was
grasping a wooden hammer too near to the head, trying to bang a round peg into a round
hole but not getting it right. When Beanie told Carla and Daniel that Mandy had behavior
problems, or handed them notes from the preschool, they looked at her like she was telling
them something too personal.

The baby would sleep for a few more hours, then wake up and quietly stare at the
ceiling and wait for the babysitter. It was like a documentary Beanie saw about Russian
orphanages. That babies won’t cry if nothing comes of it. He was a good baby, and Beanie
told Daniel and Carla that, too.

When Mandy saw Beanie, she was on her in a second, mixing up all their limbs
talking too fast to understand. Beanie untangled herself and held Mandy at arm’s length. She
was like most five year olds – mostly straight lines and undeveloped features, like a real
person was just starting to come out. No moles, no scars, dots for nipples. Beanie pulled her
hair back out of her eyes, leaving behind the leftover baby wisps that framed her face. She
used her pinkies to wipe the crusts from the corners of her eyes.

“Let’s get dressed for the day,” Beanie said.

“And then ride bikes in our clothes?”

“Sure.”
She bounded up the stairs and yelled, “Hi, Dad!” as they passed the office door. She wriggled into her clothes mostly by herself, all shades of pink with cartoon characters Beanie watched with Mandy on Sundays.

“Dad’s working in his office is why he can’t ride bikes,” Mandy said. Kids know somehow when to repeat lies back to you. She pulled a pink jacket and pink Velcro shoes from her closet.

Before her parents had started their quiet war, Mandy hadn’t been much more than a job for Beanie, but now she was involved. When it first started happening, Beanie thought it felt a little bit like falling in love, and now she knew she was. Strange feelings started kicking around in her chest when she saw Mandy sleeping or painting or running. Cold feelings started when Carla or Daniel walked into the room and tried to claim ownership because they had her first. She looked at Mandy’s shapeless nose, her freckle-less skin, her simple eyes. If she kept raising Mandy, maybe Mandy would grow up to look like her.

“Beanie, help!” Mandy was hobbling around the room, one of her heels hanging out of her Velcro shoes. “Beanie, my shoe!” Small things made her explode, more than other kids her age. It would take an hour to calm her down.

That afternoon, when Charlie started crawling for the second time, Beanie went to get Daniel. She had only knocked on his office door once before, when Mandy split her head open on the kitchen counter, maybe on purpose. He had never said it, but she had the idea that she wasn’t supposed to disturb him except for emergencies.

Daniel was spread out on a day bed watching grainy golf on a portable set balanced on his stomach. The shades were down. Several self-help books were splayed open to parts, which ones Beanie couldn’t be sure. He looked like he was on strike from his life.
“When did Carla come home last night?”

Beanie lied. “Dinner.”

“Did Mandy ask for me or her yesterday?”

She had asked for neither. “Her.”

“That’s only because she’s never in the goddamn house. Mandy thinks she’s an abstract concept. Like Santa Clause or television.” These words were planned, things he wanted very badly to yell in Carla’s face. Beanie could tell from the delivery.

“Charlie’s crawling.” She fell short of the exclamation point she was trying for.

“Make sure he doesn’t get into anything. Sockets.” His eyes drifted back to the screen.

Beanie tried to take in everything in the room before she had to close the door. An electric shaver on the desk. A coffee mug of soggy cereal. A mini fridge in the corner with a hot plate on top.

“I was thinking of meeting Matt for dinner tonight.” She threw the comment out into the room more than told him.

“I’ll have to talk to Carla.”

Beanie shut the door. Downstairs, she sat Charlie next to the couch in front of the TV and handed him his mother’s old papers one by one. It was his favorite thing to do. He took each piece in both of his hands, crumpled it in his fists, then slammed his fists together, and them pulled them apart hard and fast, ripping the sheets in two. He smiled and screeched and reached out for the next piece, with half of the last piece still tight in the ball of his other hand. Mandy wanted some paper because Charlie had it.
Beanie and Mandy watched scary movies after dinner and after Charlie fell asleep on a blanket in the living room. They leaned into each other, Peanut spread out on top of them smelling like a curling iron from his latest escape attempt. Beanie thought censorship night make Mandy less likely to handle life as a grown up. Also, she wanted to see Mandy scared instead of angry for once.

“When’s Mom coming home?”

“After you go to sleep.”

“What’s The Thing?”

“I guess it’s just a thing.”

“That’s kind of awesome.”

Beanie had taught her that word. She’d also taught her how to button, how to make macaroni and cheese, and how to work the stereo. It was like she was building a new prototype of herself – one that was younger, with a little more energy and hope. Maybe Beanie would have been a little more solid if she had seen The Thing when she was five.

At eight, Beanie got up and put her coat on. She would go upstairs and tell Daniel she was leaving, and she would already have her coat on so he knew she was really going to go. She could pick up Chinese food on the way home, and she would pay for it with her twenties. She would get a lot of Chinese food, to show Matt that the twenties were for them.

“What’s your coat for?”

“For when it’s cold outside.”

“No, Beanie!” Mandy attached herself to Beanie’s leg like a brace. She was exactly as tall as Beanie’s leg was long. “Don’t leave me alone!” Peanut started barking short barks.

“The Thing isn’t real. It’s a movie.”
“What thing? What thing do you mean?” She buried her head in Beanie’s thigh, and Beanie could feel the tears seeping through her jeans. Beanie couldn’t tell her not to cry. If she stopped loving Matt, he would turn out okay in the end. If she didn’t show up, if she left, his features wouldn’t develop just a little differently.

As soon as Beanie took her coat off, Mandy was back to normal.

“Can I braid your hair?” Mandy’s still-chubby hands raked and pulled and parcel out Beanie’s hair like Beanie had taught her. They were back on the couch.

“You know I love you,” Beanie said.

“Don’t turn your head, you’re messing me up.”

Beanie called Life Line before she fell asleep, though Matt didn’t work Thursday nights. The guy she got didn’t follow soaps.

“I’m just afraid that my emotions for Raul will cause another diabetic episode,” she said quietly, looking at Mandy curled against her. “I shared a steamy kiss with Garrett.”

Soap opera children didn’t develop correctly. They were always sent to boarding school so their parents could focus on their webs of love and deception and intrigue. They returned in a few seasons, eighteen somehow, with soap opera haircuts, ready to join the action. They weren’t always in the background, wondering where their parents were. Needing attention or not knowing what attention was.

“I’m not sure if I’ll last another season,” she said.

“Season?”

When Matt first told her what he did, Beanie had pictured Life Line as a floor in a high rise sectioned off into cubicles. Each person at each cubicle had a headset and typed on a computer and talked in soothing tones. People called with their desperate problems and the operators said things like, “One moment, please.” They had a searchable database of
reasons to live. Really, though, the place looked like a basement hangout – a few scratchy couches to sleep on between calls, concrete floors, a couple of smudgy-yellow rotary phones. There was a hand-written list of questions to ask callers if there was a lull in the conversation: when was a time you didn't feel hopeless? Is there friend, family member, or coworker that you could talk to? This was the place that delivered the message – don't do it, life is something.

Beanie woke up in the morning to Carla yelling up the stairs. She had her briefcase in one hand and was waving a letter around in the air with the other. Beanie braced herself.

“You're not getting Charlie, Daniel. They won't give him to you. You're unemployed!” The way she said it, Beanie understood it was the worst thing you could say to an accountant.

There was silence and then the office door opened. Daniel bounded down the stairs wearing only a pair of sweatpants. With each big cat padded-sock stride he took, Carla backed into the kitchen. When she backed against the fridge, she flung her briefcase so the two halves opened up like a bird and rained down papers. It landed in the living room. She threw it nowhere near Daniel, but it showed her willingness and ability.

“You're never home,” he said, “You're television or Santa Claus.” He was flustered.

“You wouldn't be able to feed or clothe them.”

They weren't listening to each other, but only taking turns saying things that they had been going over in their minds for weeks, following their own lines of argument, justifying each of their actions. Beanie went to Mandy in the living room, her head peeking over the arm of the couch. Beanie sat behind her and lifted her into her lap, one hand across her waist and the other across her chest, like a seatbelt.
“They’re only talking,” Beanie said. She could see the scrunched worry lines on Mandy’s face, and hoped they wouldn’t leave marks. That her mouth wouldn’t naturally turn like that.

“Mom and Dad are talking,” Mandy repeated back.

Charlie flipped over on his blanket, and scooted to his mother’s briefcase. He felt around until he found a piece of paper, crumpled it, and ripped it in half. He screeched. He felt around for another.

“Charlie!” Carla ran to her baby and swept up her audits. Then she hurried them back to the kitchen counter like they were getting more ruined by the second. “How did he get over here?” Beanie sat perfectly still, hiding behind Mandy, not wanting to be dragged in.

“He’s been crawling. You didn’t get the memo?” Daniel said.

“He doesn’t even respond to you,” Carla spit back. She put her hands on her knees and changed her tone. “Com’ere Charlie! Com’ere!”

Daniel chimed in from the other side of the room. Peanut ran between the two of them, tail wagging, ignored.

Charlie looked at his parents, really focused on them, and crawled into the TV behind him.

The house was quiet except for the ice shifting in the freezer. Beanie was back on the couch and Mandy was back on her lap. Carla and Daniel and Charlie were on their way to the pediatrician, though Beanie tried to tell them it wasn’t a big deal. Beanie had packed up all of Mandy’s pink things and then unpacked them. She had thought about boarding schools. She had called Life Line and listened to the busy signal that meant two real people needed someone to talk to, that the high-rise cubicles didn’t exist.
Mandy was quiet. She didn’t ask when her parents would be back, though Beanie thought it would be soon. There were two red lines centered above her nose, where her forehead had been scrunched up, lines that would take hold, web out and deepen with her personality, lines that would mean that she had learned to be alone and lonely, that sometimes looking up at the ceiling and waiting was a little easier than crying. Beanie fixed them a little something for lunch and then sat on the floor next to the back door to put on her shoes. Mandy followed her over and stepped into her mom’s narrow black pumps. Her feet slid down into the tapered points of the toes.

“Look, Beanie. Look.” Her urgency was gone, and when Beanie got up to go, she scrunched up her face but didn’t ask about it.
Warren promised Penny that he would never look for her after she left, so when he sits on his couch in the front room, facing the picture window, he stares perfectly straight ahead as people go by. Sometimes, when a woman on the sidewalk is still in his periphery, he is certain that it is her and it takes all of his will not to turn his head and look, but to wait for her to walk into the center of his vision. She might be walking on the balls of her feet, or she might have the same way of craning her neck forward to get a better look at the world, but it hasn’t been Penny, not for years. He only sees women who have parts of the idea of Penny about them.

She told him when she left that their twenty-five years together had not been wasted, but Warren wonders what happening to his time now.

Like on many of the other days he spends sitting on the couch and watching out the window, today Warren becomes sad by the afternoon. He brings his legs up and folds his arms in and bows his head down, every part of him crumpling toward his stomach.

He gets up to eat for something to do – saltines with jam and butter. The only sounds in the house are his – the glass jar being twisted open and spun shut, the hollowness
of the chair sliding across linoleum, his chewing and breathing. The voice in his head like a low buzzing: it's so quiet. It's so quiet. He finishes his little meal. More of his little noises after he's done: stepping on cracker crumbs, running water, a lingering cough from an old cold. So quiet, so quiet. They're not surface thoughts anymore, or not as often, they create a constant, deeper feeling that affects his mood: he still misses Penny, he still misses his cats, he can't wait for Mitchell to stop by and see him.

When he returns to his position on the couch, his little noises no longer drawing attention to the silence, he calls for Zachary by tapping on a can of tuna he keeps in the pocket of his cardigan. In moments, the cat jogs in from the hallway, his paws on the carpet making Warren’s favorite sound, like tiny rolls of toilet paper dropping onto tiny cushions. Zachary wants into his lap, forcing Warren to bring down his legs and unfold his arms. The cat jumps up and licks Warren’s wrinkled hands and his wrinkled face, tail waving like at a victorious battle or like on a ship.

Zachary is beautiful. He is black, sleek and shiny like new pavement. The pads of his paws are black, his gums are black, his whiskers are black, his velvet nose is black. His eyes are green, and when he blinks, his whole face disappears into a silhouette. Zachary is soft, even softer than a rabbit in certain places—behind his two front legs and on the tips of his ears and at the middle of his belly. Each time he purrs, his whiskers vibrate and Warren feels peaceful for a moment. When he is sleeping belly up, as he is now, in a crescent, with his four black legs in the air, with his tongue sticking out a fraction of an inch, Warren wants to cry, because it is so beautiful.

Zachary is the only cat that survived the raid. Warren never found out where he hid, but wherever it was Warren is sure it must have been dark, and Zachary must have had his
green eyes closed. The animal control officers found all the other cats, cats that had to be put to sleep because of their poor health.

It was two years ago. The men wore brown jump suits and masks over their faces, because the fumes from the urine burned their eyes and lungs. Warren had tried to keep things tidy over the last few years by putting down layers of newspapers in all the rooms and on all of the furniture, but it became out of his control. He had also emptied bags of litter and food everywhere, for the cats. The things cats leave behind were everywhere. One of the men had vomited in the kitchen sink.

“Jesus Christ,” the animal control officers had said.

The men searched the basement and the attic and everything in between, collecting cats with long sticks with loops on the end. When they thought they were done, when almost one hundred cats were running tiny frantic circles in rattling cages on the lawn, the officers pulled the refrigerator out from the wall and found four more cats hiding back there, three of them living and one of them dead.

After they left, Warren spread out on his newspaper- and urine-covered bed and cried. The cats were all that he had, at least since his wife had gone away four years before, to dance with a physicist. He cried until the sun dropped below the sill of his bedroom window, where cats usually basked, and then he cried in the gloomy dusk. When it was night and the room went black, he moved into silence, his arms thrown to either side of him, his palms up, empty. Then Zachary jumped into his lap.

At first, because the cat was all black, even his gums and whiskers, Warren thought that only the idea of a cat had jumped into his lap. But then he saw the green eyes staring at him and felt the cat’s sleek, soft fur under his fingers. Warren began to cry again, but
differently than before. He cried like he wants to cry when he sees Zachary sleeping belly up with his four black legs in the air and his tongue sticking out a fraction of an inch.

After Warren and Zachary nap together on the couch, Mitchell comes to the house and looks for something in Warren’s kitchen cabinets, he doesn’t say what. Really, he’s looking for cats or for signs of cats.

“Nope,” Mitchell says, vaguely, when he had opened and closed the last pair.

He’s looking for cats because he handles Warren’s case. The day after the raid two years before, Mitchell had made sure that Warren’s house was scrubbed down, that all of the walls and the floors were cleaned and even the ceilings, which can get messy if you live with nearly one hundred cats. He bought new used furniture for Warren’s little house. Mitchell also made sure that the judge understood that Warren didn’t know what he had done, so that the animal cruelty charges were dropped. It’s all part of Mitchell’s job at the Poweshiek County Mental Health Center.

Mitchell asks to see Warren’s furnace, as he usually does when he visits, so Warren leads him down the steep stairs, confident. Warren doesn’t hide the cat during these visits; Zachary knows to hide himself. Whenever he hears someone coming up the walkway, he perks up his ears, freezes for a moment, and then zips away. Sometimes he zips upstairs and sometimes he zips downstairs, but Warren is sure that he always ends up in the same dark place that he never bothers to look for because he knows he could never find it, the place Zachary went during the raid.

“I’m looking to replace mine,” Mitchell says about the furnace, while poking around the rest of the basement. Both of them are professional about the process. They stand
around the furnace, looking it up and down, to make their trip downstairs seem authentic. For a moment, Mitchell breaks the scene and smiles at Warren.

He smiles because soon they will be sitting down together and talking about their week, like regular people. Warren considers Mitchell to be his best friend, and Mitchell likes the idea of it. It has to be a secret, though, because Mitchell handles Warren’s case, and because Mitchell’s a young man and Warren’s much older, and because Warren is crazy, according to the state of Iowa. These are not good reasons not to be best friends with a person, but they are reasons to keep it a secret.

Upstairs, in the bedroom and office, Mitchell finishes the search by digging around in the closets and looking under the furniture. It’s more of a ritual than a search for him – he’s looked for two years without finding anything; he trusts his friend. Warren stands by, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, a little bored, asking himself if he remembered to hide the litter box and Zachary’s squeaky-mouse in the shed that morning and knowing that he had.

“I’m done,” Mitchell says, finally, getting up from all fours. He pats Warren’s back, as a sign that they could start acting normal again. He’s relaxed and relieved, and Warren knows it, since his face has the strange trait of expressing every emotion he has, perfectly, the moment he is having it.

Mitchell’s blond, tall, big in the arms and shoulders without being built. Everyone, including him, thinks that maybe his body is a little too big for his demeanor and much of the time it seems he’s so shy he’s not sure what to do with his body. Warren finds it comforting. He’s not a replacement for Penny, but he’s company, he’s someone who understands, he’s someone who makes the silence of Warren’s house into a peaceful quietness.
Penny left after twenty-five years because she took ballroom dancing lessons. Warren couldn’t take the lessons with her, because he is physically and socially awkward and dancing is half physical and half social. She left with her partner.

Before she went, she told him that if you waltz for long enough, it seems like everything in the room is swirling except for your partner’s face, instead of the other way around. She said that even your mind swirls, and the sensation makes you need that one still thing – his eyes, his cheeks, his thin physicist lips – that it makes you hold on as tight as you can. Nothing else matters when you’re dancing, she said. She also said, in a moment of doubt, while she was standing still, that she wasn’t sure if she was in love with the right things about her partner, that maybe it was just that she had looked at his face for long enough. But she left anyway.

Warren had thought about centripetal force and wondered if it would have helped if he had been a scientist. Or if it would have helped if he were a dancer. That maybe some greater knowledge of something would have helped him understand.

In the kitchen again, Warren and Mitchell agree that it is a nice day, maybe the first real, nice day of spring, and that they should sit on the new used patio furniture in the backyard. Warren pours two glasses of strawberry Kool-Aid and counts out two coasters. It is so different from sitting on the patio furniture alone.

Today’s Warren’s sixtieth birthday. When they are settled down outside, Mitchell announces that he has a surprise.

“T’m taking you out,” he tells Warren, “but we should wait a while to go, because the time before the surprise is always the best part.” Warren thinks that Penny is the only other
person who would have said that, just like Penny is the only other person who would think to surprise him or to remember his birthday. He shifts in his lawn chair with excitement.

But right when Warren feels like everything is exactly okay in the world, when he isn't focusing on tiny, sad sounds like the patio table's umbrella turning in the breeze, he catches sight of a can sitting on the edge of the porch, a can of tuna that he had placed there last night. He looks deeply into Mitchell's face and thinks that Mitchell has not seen the can yet, the evidence of cat-related activity. He freezes, both his mind and his body.

Mitchell keeps talking, about how he's saving up for a new exhaust system for the beat-up BMW M6 he bought, how people who know call the M6 The Shark because of its shark-like nose, and maybe also because of the way it cruises. He spends all of his money and all of his extra time on these things, more than he should, because he spends most of his days with very difficult people and cars are easy.

Mitchell likes Warren a lot more than his other cases, because Warren has an animal hoarding problem and that's seems to be the end of it. He never threatens to slit Mitchell's throat and piss down his neck. He never sees the image of the devil in the last three bites of his Grape Nuts, and even if he did, Mitchell knows that he would think it was merely a strange coincidence. Warren never calls Mitchell's emergency number in the middle of the night, or even during regular business hours.

"And I got these new rims, ones that spin. Though I won't see them spin until the thing's running. Until the Shark's in the water."

Warren isn't listening, he concentrating on not looking at the can of tuna.

The tuna is not for Zachary, as Zachary is an indoor cat. The tuna is for a different cat, a cat that Warren hasn't met yet – a stray who needs a person as badly as Warren needs more cats. Even when he had almost one hundred cats running around his house, many of
them sick, many of them wild, with even the ceilings getting less clean each day, his happiness had always grown with the coming of every new litter.

Mitchell sees Warren staring off into the distance so he turns the conversation towards Warren. “Do you miss Penny more today? Because of your birthday?” He asks as a friend, not as a case manager.

Warren thinks he should say something about Penny, but he isn’t sure what, so he tells Mitchell about when he had all the cats, how he would lie on his bed and they would walk all over his back, knead his buttocks, fall asleep across his neck like fur scarves. How the smell of the waste and the feel of the damp newspapers under him would fade and fade until they were gone. Sometimes, ideas of Penny would fade a little, too.

Mitchell can’t fully understand, but unlike with his other cases, he can begin empathize and to relate. Warren is lonely. Warren’s heart’s been broken. Warren’s sadness is sane. These are the things that he thinks connects them: Warren’s capacity to continue caring, his openness to care for as many things as his heart needs, his ability to endure the present by focusing on the past and future.

“The Shark puts me at ease,” Mitchell says, trying to relate. “Looking at it, I mean. Sitting in it.”

Two flies, the first of the season, swirl up around each other and then land on the tuna and then swirl up around each other again. Warren scratches balding head and fiddles with his coaster. Warren hears the buzzing of the flies and thinks he can smell warm tuna.

“I’m ready for my surprise,” he says.

He drains his glass and stands up. He walks the porch like a captain walks the deck of his ship, hands folded behind his back, observing. He walks toward Mitchell and kicks the
tuna can over the edge of the deck, coughing at the same time. What he's done is obvious, though Mitchell says nothing.

When they circle around the little house to the front lawn, Warren sees that Mitchell is not driving his normal car, but an old one that looks brand new, bright orange. Mitchell opens the door for Warren and tells him it's a 1974 restored 2002-Tii, original paint, recent winner of the 2005 Des Moines BMW Car Club Concourse Event. Warren, who is a bigger man, is careful getting in.

"Is this the surprise?" Warren asks, so he knows whether or not to be surprised.

"No," Mitchell says. "The surprise is beyond your wildest dreams."

Warren’s dream is to have Penny come back to him, even after six years. Warren’s wildest dream is that Penny never left at all. Below those two things is Warren’s realistic dream, that he could one day be surrounded by cats again, the whole house purring like the BMW 2002-Tii under him, so many cat tails waving through the air that he wouldn’t be sure whether the tails were moving or if the house was moving and the tails were still.

Warren assumes that Penny’s dance partner had a greater understanding of the workings of the world, number-wise. Warren knows that his understanding of the world is simple, with no math involved except perhaps for addition and subtraction. He thinks that that was why she had loved him, because he can’t think of another reason. She had loved him even though it was funny the way he chose his words and the way he stood. She had hugged him around his big belly and petted his wispy, spotted head. At night, he would lie in bed and she would massage his back until he fell asleep.

"She would be my wildest dream," Warren says, looking out the window like he hadn’t been out of his neighborhood since the grass had come alive again, which was true.
He realized he didn't miss her more on his birthday, because he couldn't think of a way to miss her more than he usually did.

"I think you'll still have a nice time," Mitchell says.

"I'm having a nice time even now."

"Me too, Warren." Mitchell takes the curves and corners fast in the gleaming car, so fast that they feel the suspension. He accelerates out of them, too, so fast that the leather seats squeak under the force of their pressing bodies. His driving style at first seems uncharacteristic of his personality, but Warren likes it and sees how it fits. The car is an extension of Mitchell's body that isn't awkward — he can make it move smoothly, and while he's driving it, everything seems a little easier.

They pull up to a neat little house beyond the edge of town, miles after the pavement stops and the gravel and cornrows begin. Warren immediately spots three cats relaxing in the front window. All big ones.

"It's just for a visit," Mitchell says as they walk up the pathway.

Because of what he promised Penny when she left, he never looks her up in the phone book or contacts her sisters or lurks in the physics wing at the college. But he does look for her in the faces of other women. The woman who opens the door is not her. She is the right age, but she is shorter, thicker, and has lighter hair with more grays mixed in. She does not stick her thumbs into the waist of her pants like a feminine cowboy. She does not keep her hair out of her eyes with a pair of glasses she hardly ever uses for seeing better. Warren guesses that she would not turn her head to the side and laugh with her eyes open if he tried to say something endearing about her thumbs in her pants or her glasses on her head.
"I'm Susan, and you must be Warren," the woman who is not Penny says. "I breed Himalayans. For showing."

The show cats are different from the cats that Warren lost in the raid. They have flat, retarded faces like their cousins the Persians. Their bodies are explosions of white fur, their tails and legs and ears are tipped with silver or brown or gray. They prance and lounge about the room, satisfied and bored.

The front room is not dirty with cat things, it is very clean and most everything is covered in doilies. Lots of the doilies are covered with framed pictures, of the fur explosions sitting or standing with excellent postures, with blue-draped backgrounds and golden signatures in the corners. Their eyes look like the eyes of men in old portrait paintings. The mantle is covered in huge ribbons, red, blue, yellow, and white, some of them faded and some of them new.

Susan brings out a basket of kittens and rattles off their full show names: "This is Twinklepaws Queenie Fay, this is Felix Foolish Fortuna, this is Pussyfoot Greedy Guts, this is Rumbletum Grayfoot La Di Da." Mitchell had stopped naming his cats when there started to be a lot of them, and he never gave them names like that, but names like Susan, Jamie, Franklin, Matthew, Joanna, Meredith.

The kittens opened their eyes only the day before, and they are just beginning to puff out like mini explosions. Their movements are weak and their mews are almost inaudible. Warren picks up all four at once with shaking hands and rubs his face in them. He looks at their little behinds, sees that La Di Da is the only girl, and he pets her with his entire hand, all at once, happy and sad – such a nice pet that La Di Da smooshes herself against the bottom of the basket with pleasure.

"Gentle," Susan says gently.
He plays with the kittens for an hour, spending time with each of them individually and then petting and holding all of them at once. Mitchell stands the whole time, filled with as much pleasure as Warren though for different reasons. He thinks that maybe surprising someone else is the best part of surprises. He feels a little bit like someone's father and a little bit like someone's son.

Mitchell catches on quickly that something is not right on the car ride home, because that's Mitchell's job, and because Mitchell knows Warren better than anyone. Warren is staring out the window like before except now his legs are pushed up against the glove compartment and his hands are stuffed in his cardigan. He's hunched over, with his chin down, singing.

La di da, la di da, la di da.

It is a crazy thing to do, Mitchell recognizes not from his training, but from common sense. It is somewhat unlike Warren. He pulls the car over in the gravel and kills the engine. Warren stops singing. The new silence reveals the little sound of the wind blowing through the soybean fields and, more importantly, a muffled mewing. Mitchell is staring out the windshield and still holding the steering wheel like he's still driving. He waits for Warren to speak, but Warren says nothing.

"Do you have something to tell me Warren? As your case manager?"

"Thank you for the surprise." Warren's arms tense up and the mewing stops.

"Warren, you'll smother the kitten."

"The kitten?" Warren rolls his big lips against each other.

"The kitten."
“It was going to be a surprise,” Warren says, meaning the litter of half flat-faced, black-and-white kittens he was planning to have by winter. “I thought it would be better if I waited.”

Warren takes La Di Da from his sweater and puts it on the dashboard. She blinks at them, which is almost all a kitten can do.

“I ignored the tuna because of your birthday,” Mitchell says. “But this, but this.”

Not because he is Warren’s case manager, but because he is Warren’s unspoken best friend, Mitchell does not turn the car around. He drives back to Warren’s little house. Now, La Di Da is exploring Warren’s kitchen table and Warren is trying to figure out what he’s done. He returns to the moment that he took La Di Da from the basket. How as he cradled the kitten inside the front pocket of his cardigan, he felt strong and weak at the same time. How he was thinking of a formula at the time about whether it could be mathematically possible that two cats could make him more than twice as happy as one cat. About addition and subtraction and multiplication.

Warren tries to explain himself. He tells Mitchell about Zachary, and how beautiful he is. He tells Mitchell that he never found the cat during his searches because he is all black. While he’s talking, he is looking down at his yellowed hands and at his paunch that pulls his brown cardigan tight. When he is finished, he sees a terrible thing on Mitchell’s face. For the first time, Mitchell is thinking that he is crazy. His tone changes to the one he uses with his other clients.

“I’ve never seen a black cat in this house. I’ve been to your house many times.”

“I’ll be right back,” Warren says, “I’ll find him.”
He starts in the basement, behind the furnace, and he works his way up. He flips over mattresses, he overturns side tables, he tries to inch the refrigerator away from the wall like the men in the jumpsuits did. He gets out his can of tuna and taps the top with his one long fingernail, kept long for that purpose.

Mitchell sits on the couch in front of the picture window with La Di Da. He looks for black cat hairs on the couch and finds none. Then he feels ridiculous for having looked. There was a reason that Mitchell visited Warren, and it was not because they found comfort and companionship in each other. It was because the state of Iowa knows Warren needs help. He feels the guilt start creeping in – taking Warren to the cat breeder was no different taking one of his alcoholic patients to a liquor store.

Warren is convinced the cat is in the attic, because it is the only place left. He sticks his hands in the darkest corners, finding only silky webs and the bites of shingle nails. He runs his hands along the highest rafters, upsetting only dust and mouse droppings.

He searches the trunks and boxes, one by one, shoveling with both hands. Knick-knacks from vacations they took twenty years ago. Piles of Christmas cards. Baby clothes still on tiny hangers for the baby that didn’t make it home from the hospital. In one of the last boxes, he finds Penny’s old clothes, things that didn’t fit anymore and things that went out of style. He touches each piece of fabric and tries to remember touching each one before, when she was inside them. He hasn’t held the waist of the bright orange mini-dress since the 1970s. He hasn’t seen the black wool turtleneck since her father’s funeral. He finds the green skirt with sequined swirls at the bottom, the one that put all eyes on her even when she had her thumbs stuck in the waistband like she was about to draw and shoot.

Once Warren saw her on his street, by accident, way back when he only had one stray and her kittens and he was still in control. He bet that she was on her way downtown,
going to the farmers’ market as she liked to do on Saturday mornings. He stared straight ahead and let her walk in and out of his view, like she was walking across a picture. In those moments, he forgot to see if she had in her walk evidence of a greater knowledge of the workings of the world, physically. He forgot to notice if she looked older or if she looked well. He forgot to look at her hands to see if anyone was holding them. He looked at the slope of her forehead, the angle of her chin, the bridge of her nose, how every part worked together to create Penny’s face. He had thought that she had been wearing the green sequined skirt that he had just found up in the attic, but holding it now he knew he must have been mistaken, though about how much he couldn’t grasp.

There are a few boxes left after that one, but Warren stops. Four men, trained in finding cats, armed with poles with loops, had not been able to find Zachary. He would not be able to find him either.

He lumbers down the stairs to Mitchell, hands out and empty. Mitchell is lying on the couch asleep with La Di Da sprawled out spread-eagle his chest, like a leg-and-tail pointed star, her tongue sticking out a fraction of an inch, so that Warren wants to cry in both ways.

Mitchell doesn’t ask if Warren found the other cat. He doesn’t ask anything because he knows. He folds his arms across his chest and holds his elbows, then he puts his elbows on his knees and his hands in his hair. Then he puts his hands on either side of him on the couch. If he were in his car, he would have one hand on the steering wheel, one hand on the gearshift.

Warren tries to explain again, but Mitchell’s face and shifting arms make him trail off. The kitten will go back to the Himalayan woman. It will no longer be appropriate for Mitchell to handle Warren’s case. Warren stands with his knees slightly bent, moving from
one foot to the other, upset that he doesn’t know how to do social things. He thinks that if he had just been able to present Zachary, he could have kept them both. The friends cling to each other for a moment, though not physically, and then Mitchell walks out the door.

Warren watches Mitchell get into his new antique car and un-parallel park in three jerks, forward then backward then forward. He only stands there, but he isn’t wasting his time. He’s trying to imagine the world as a globe, to really imagine it, and that everything is turning so fast that the force of the movement is the only reason that he stays with two feet on the ground. Usually, he prefers to think of things as they are to him. He is already thinking about where he put Mitchell’s emergency phone number, so he can talk to his friend again and try to mean the right things, so that Mitchell understands the physics of his world and not just the other way around.

As soon as the car noises fade off – the sound of building and building and then a relaxing with each up-shift – Warren hears another sound behind him, like tiny angels walking on tiny clouds, with bedroom slippers on.

“Do you understand what you’ve done,” he asks Zachary as he turns around, thinking that perhaps the cat shouldn’t understand, and that perhaps two cats wouldn’t, either. He wants to pick him up by the scruff of his neck, so that he goes limp except for a pair of zombie arms. He wants to put their faces so close together that that’s all that the other can see.

The end of a little mouse is dangling from Zachary’s jaws, back legs struggling against the cat’s chin. He tries to present it to Warren, a gift, but the mouse is still alive and begins to scurry off. Zachary catches up to it in two bounds and takes it in his paws, positioning his jaw around its head. Warren steps back and looks away, though he can hear the small sounds of delicate bones crunching and delicate purring.