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Wellspring

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WELLSPRING

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Wellspring

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In the small, isolated town of Wellspring, Nebraska in 1971, a 13-year-old girl named Julie Qillag is found dead in the local lake. Authorities can't determine whether Julie was murdered or committed suicide. It's with this mystery looming large—and in the unbearable humidity of Nebraska in August—that another young girl, seven-year-old Victoria Dortmund, is abducted again and again, but, unlike Julie, she is found unharmed on a local beach each morning. As a result of Julie's death, Victoria's abductions, and the isolationist fanaticism of the town sheriff, Art Taylor, Wellspring residents become more suspicious of one another—and watch one another more and more closely—worried that Victoria will meet the same fate Julie did.

In response, Ruth Jensen, one of the town's only transplants, and her friend Pasco Jimenez start spying on neighbors they suspect might be responsible for the disappearances of these young girls—both as a response to the events in the town and as a remedy for their own boredom. One night, Laura Dortmund—Victoria's mother—discovers Pasco and Ruth's spying, and is initiated as a third member of Spy Club. As months pass with the resolution of any of Wellspring's mysteries, Ruth encourages the Spy Club to be more aggressive with their controlling of the town's psyche and to become an even more powerful force in town life. At the same time, the sheriff amps up his campaign to control Wellspring—and the minds of the people in it. Ruth and Art continue their competing missions to hold sway over Wellspring until the inevitable happens: one finally demonstrates power over the other.

Part 1

Unstable Air - 1971

1.

Wellspring

They say that Julie Qillag left her house in the middle of the night that terrible Sunday. It's been humid and the cicadas seem like they've never quieted down this summer, so we can see why Julie had to escape. We just don't understand why she had to go so far. Julie's parents had a boat, a little motorized fishing boat, and they say she took it out onto the lake that night. Her parents never knew why she did it. She was 13. They say she was unhappy. They say she didn't want to start high school. They thought Julie could endure, but maybe her sadness was more all-consuming than any of us could understand. But it's possible there was foul play involved. In any event, Julie motored that boat out to the deepest part of the lake, the part that's full of cattails and lily pads that tied up our ankles when we were kids. The next morning, Julie wasn't in her bed. Her parents called her friends—or, more accurately, her friend—and sent the whole town to search through the junior high school and the First Presbyterian Church, the bathroom, kitchen, and basement of the Fox and Hound Diner on Main, the moldy catacombs underneath the public library. Julie wasn't anywhere. Later, they found the motorboat adrift. Later, the Wellspring Police called in divers from Lincoln to search for Julie among the cattails and lily pads, her long, dark hair ready to trap children's ankles when they swam out too far. Now, a week later, they still haven't found Julie, but they say that some once-in-a-summertime fisherman might dredge up her body, perhaps with bluegill-eaten eyes and a water-ruined nose.

2.

Ruth Jensen

I came to Wellspring in 1960 after marrying Otis, already too old for children at 35 and too broke to turn down a marriage proposal after unlucky nights at Dunfel's Steak and Keno in Chicago. The whole time I lived in Wellspring—over a decade—people didn't trust me. I never really belonged because, for the most part, Wellspringers didn't waste their time on new folks. *Why bother?* everyone thought when there were already so many neighbors who needed rides to church or wanted sympathetic ears to talk about bunions or ingrown hairs or dropped by unannounced with cakes sunk in the middle that they wouldn't dare serve to their mothers-in-law. Otis sold Western Nebraska-bred heads of cattle to the Chicago stockyards in those days, and we met sipping martinis at Dunfel's one night after he'd made a healthy profit selling Elmer Dreyfus's Belted Galloways. Otis felt slick in the city, but never liked me too much because I didn't look like Janine, his one true love, who'd left him thirty years before with a travelling salesman from Wisconsin. Oconomowoc Man sold Janine reprints of the French masters and offered her a life of passion in the woods. Or that's what Otis told me anyway. I heard from someone (a distant cousin of Otis's maybe?) that Janine was living on a used car lot with Pierre (Peter) out in the country, trying to sell station wagons to haggard mothers.

Otis had never had a wife before me, though, and if he could have roasted me up and stuffed an apple into my mouth, he would have. He's dead now, and one shouldn't speak ill of the dead. But I'm going to anyway. Otis only did good things when he wanted people to know about them, and all the bad things he did he stuffed up into his stomach, not even admitting what he'd done to himself. I suppose this was what soured his stomach so bad, made his teeth all green and reeking. He had to conceal so much. Otis wanted more fanfare when he brought me home. A city

person in nice clothes. But he didn't get any. I just walked in the house. What I lacked in impressiveness, Otis made up for in tall tales. For the next few years, everyone thought I was quiet and beautiful and young, even though I wasn't quiet or beautiful and I couldn't even remember being young by that point. The women in town asked me for my skin secrets anyway, and I told them to try mayonnaise masks. But even after their skin was smooth, the women still didn't invite me over for dinner, in part because they didn't like Otis, but also because they didn't like outsiders whose histories they couldn't trace from nursery school. So, by that summer of 1971, I was middle-aged and loud and blemished from too many mayonnaise facials, but most people in town didn't know it.

That summer, all the nasty things that lurked in the dark corners of Wellspring came to life. Before then, Wellspring used to be a nice place. It had red brick churches and well-insulated houses, a high school where the whole town went to watch the boys play basketball, a diner that couldn't fry a solid batter on fish or onions, and charmingly out-of-tune church bells at both First and Second Pres. The people of Wellspring were mostly good, too. Ranchers and school teachers and farmers and shop owners. The people who left you alone unless your spouse or horse died. The thirtysomething women looked like all the other thirtysomething women in the same dresses from the same catalogues, and the fortysomething women looked like all the other fortysomething women in the same hairstyles from Maryetta's Hairstyles and Designs. The men liked to hunt and fish, and the men who didn't like to hunt and fish pretended they did so well that nobody ever knew the difference.

Wellspring Lake used to be a nice place, too, where families boated and fished and picnicked. Before that summer, most everybody had forgotten about Muriel Jimenez, who likely drowned herself in the lake in 1921, and Elyse O'Boyle, a stupid kid who jumped too high off of an overhanging tree in 1940, and bikini-clad Kallie Heckman (still remembered as a knockout) who fell

off her husband's speedboat in 1954 and whose body still hasn't been found. By the time I moved to Wellspring, kids believed the only thing nipping in that water was fish. But that was the summer of Julie Qillag. After Julie died—whether it was suicide or murder or an accident nobody knew for a long time—even the bravest kids refused to swim out too deep, imagining bloodless white fingers tickling their feet and dead girl hair brushing their shoulders. That kind of big city thing does something to small town people. Julie was only a kid. Sure, babies were still being born, and the wives of working men were still creasing their husband's collars. But everyone started looking at everyone else differently that summer. Everyone paid even closer attention to everyone else's business. The old people leered on their front stoops, their eyes nearly falling out of their glasses. The men tipped their cowboy hats to you like they always had, but this time they were taking stock, recording. I've decided the only reason that everything happened there the way it did was because Wellspringers were such good watchers. They grew up there, watching. Watching got them into trouble, but watching got me into even more trouble, I guess.

That was the summer that Art Taylor was appointed sheriff after the ancient Bob Johnson finally retired. At that point, I'd known Art Taylor for a decade, ever since he'd been a man of 25 with a Jarhead haircut and a square jaw. He looked like he'd been pushed out of a G-I Joe mold and put together sloppily. He was both too tall and too fat. People told me that Art had always read the Bible's moral slowly to the kids to his Sunday school class, and said, "You all remember that now." Back when he was deputy sheriff, Art did the kind of grunt work expected of him, posting keep off signs around hazardous locations, knocking on the doors of the elderly or infirm if he hadn't seen smoking chimneys for a few days, pulling cats out of trees in the short-sleeve sheriff shirt he wore far too long into the cold of fall. But he never seemed like he enjoyed any of it. After he was promoted, though, Art became the man who got to do what he wanted. I don't know what he would have been like if he'd been something else, like a grocery manager or a hotel clerk or something

innocent like that, but he was the sheriff anyhow, and thinking that he could have turned out differently doesn't do anybody any good. He let that power go to his head, his little man's power over fewer than a thousand people in this barren part of Washington, but by the way he acted, you would have thought Art was left in charge of a violent city in need of constant vigilance.

I remember when Art visited our house right after he'd been promoted. I'd left the gas grill on in the backyard after I'd barbecued some bratwurst. I can't always remember details. Like renewing my driver's license. Or calling my mother when she was still alive. That year, I forgot Otis's birthday. Art had already entered middle age by 35, and his stomach introduced him. What had been a youthful bulkiness that made Art seem Tarzan-like, able to run his Jane through the jungle, had turned into a nearly solid, girthy stomach that swung side to side almost symmetrically when he ran, which he did, to our stoop that day. He rapped on the front door, and Otis opened it.

"A hazard!" Art shouted as he leaned on our doorframe. I heard that Art got to be the way he was because of his mother. I heard that she didn't love him. Or she died too young. Or she treated him more like a lover than like a son.

"Come again?" Otis said.

"The grill!" Art repeated. "Your grill!"

"Her grill!" Otis cursed and ran to the back of the house to turn the grill off. I followed him to pour water on the smoke. "You tell him it was your grill," he hissed to me. "Your mistake!"

I didn't want to talk about the grill again with Otis later, so I returned to Art. "I'm sorry about that, Art. That was my mistake."

"Do you think you're being a responsible citizen, Ruth?" Art said, still leaning against the doorframe, his eyebrows raised like he was talking to a small child. Art swung in closer to me. I could tell that he found me attractive, that he was attracted to me by the way he raised his eyebrows

and flushed, the way he wore a special cologne (Monsieur Rochas Extra Strength) when he was called to innocuous matters at our house.

“In most elements of my life, yes.” I looked at the ground, and then back up at him. Art’s eyes were disappointed, like I’d failed to study for an elementary school spelling test. “But not in this one.”

“Now, Ruth, I want you to tell me that you’re never going to do that again.”

“Art, I don’t think—”

“Ruth. I want you to promise me that you’re going to uphold your civic duty,” Art said. I heard Art got to be the way he was because he was stupid in school, and the only time he was praised was when he punched kids on their throats or collarbones to knock the wind out of them. I heard Art got to be the way he was because he was born to be mean. “Now, I don’t know what you used to do in Chicago, but this kind of behavior doesn’t fly here.”

“C’mon now, Art,” I said, trying to look attractive the same way that other women did. I turned my chin down, lifted my eyes up, and smiled. “I was just being a silly woman.”

“Ruth. I need you to apologize for wasting my time.” Art stood there, much taller and bigger than I was, and put his two hands on either side of the doorframe, pushing inwards and then outwards, bringing his face closer and further away from mine. Otis sat in the front room reading the newspaper. Years later, when I received a letter telling me Otis had died, I’d forgotten about him mostly by the next day. But that day I felt shame that my husband wouldn’t even try to protect me. He couldn’t stand up to Art, but I couldn’t either. That summer, we learned that Art was law and we were not, and there was no one more obsessed in proving that fact than he was.

“I’m sorry, Art,” I said.

“Good.” Art swung out of the doorframe. “Remember that. And Otis,” he called into the living room, “take better care of your woman.”

“Yup,” Otis called back, his eyes not moving from the newspaper.

3.

Anti-Sugar and High Fats Sign Posted Around Town by Art Taylor

June 19, 1971

To guests of this establishment: if you remain blissfully unaware (ALTHOUGH I WOULD NOT SAY YOUR LACK OF AWARENESS IS *BLISSFUL*) this bake shop and any other kind of sweet shop have been proven by years of TRIAL and SCIENTIFICALLY-RIGOROUS study to cause impure and lustful thoughts in those who partake of their wares. Our children are under attack from a force that seeks to destroy them. Our children are under attack from a force that wishes them to turned from ORGANIZED STRUCTURE, ORGANIZED RELIGION, and GOOD, GOD-FEARING CIVILIZED WAYS OF LIFE. Certainly, you might believe that a sweet couldn't do anyone any harm and in fact brings you a great deal of pleasure. However, this is the first loosening of the brain muscles that ultimately could lead to the demise of your powers of judgment!!

I, Arthur Taylor, have had more than 20 years on the Wellspring Police Force and I have seen time and time again how minor indulgences lead to major indulgences! It is what they call a SLIPPERY SLOPE. As such, I urge you to trust in my expertise. I urge you to trust in my sense of RIGHTNESS and JUSTICE. I urge you to turn from the door of this establishment, and return to the grocery store to create for yourself, instead, a balanced meal of TURKEY, a VEGETABLE OF YOUR CHOICE, and SOME SORT OF STARCHY SIDE SUCH AS A POTATO. If you do choose to enter this establishment, you do so at your OWN RISK. Don't say that you didn't have fair warning! While we all know that all citizens of Wellspring are good and upstanding citizens when they have their heads on straight (AKA WITHOUT SUGAR, RABBLE ROUSING, and ALCOHOL), we all also know that there are beasts inside of each one of us, beasts that could do harm to ourselves, our families, or worse yet, OUR CHILDREN.

4.

Ruth

My family lived in Chicago, but my mother, sisters, and I camped at Wellspring Lake in the summers. My father was long gone, living somewhere in California and trying to put his exaggerations of romantic love on the big screen. My mother said summer in Nebraska meant death. The old people swooned to Heaven on their porches, she said, their arms dropped, they searched for water, they fainted. The sad people went into the woods. The cottonwoods made that nice swishing sound in the summertime, like music. The young people drowned, called back too soon, called by something more beautiful, she said. My mother always used to say that there was something out there in Wellspring Lake on the kind of summer nights that didn't get dark until after midnight. "The stars twist on their orbits," she said. "They rotate half a centimeter, just enough for children's shoulders to twitch up an inch on the right side and drag them down to the beach where they build fires they shouldn't have known how to start."

"Dads always start campfires," my mother continued, "but on nights like these, kids in Wellspring know how to do it, too. Girls come down to the beach after midnight to weave their hair with leaves. They stop complaining about the pain of walking on rocks, and they swim underwater."

My mother always used to tell this story to my sisters and me because it scared us. But she didn't know until later that it was true. I remember building that fire after my family went to sleep. I remember swimming in that lake water, my eyes open, the stars reflected on the surface, me far below it. I'd never liked to swim, but that night my sisters had taken off my dolls' heads, put them onto sticks, and stumped them into the dirt around the tent. Underneath the water, all I wanted to do was to look up at the stars. I was down there too long. My mother came running. She dragged

me out, and put me into a sleeping bag. My sisters covered me with the doll heads, two heads on my two shoulders, my head the third doll. My older sister Georgie said, “Really, we wouldn’t have cared too much if you’d drowned, Ruth.”

By 1971, my mother was long dead, but Wellspring seemed to believe the same thing she did: that every summer, and especially that summer, was a time for dying. Not long after Julie Qillag went missing, Victoria Dortmund started disappearing from her house. Jim Dortmund really was devastated, and Laura Dortmund pretended to be as devastated as she could be about the disappearance of a child who didn’t live entirely up to her expectations. That first night, the first morning, really, Laura told me she woke up early and went out to the kitchen to make breakfast. Jim followed her, his lips puffed and childlike, dumb-looking like always, Laura said, like he’d been nursing all night.

Laura was my dear friend then, but I never understood her entirely. She stayed at home often, and was careless with the kind of pastries she brought to school functions. She took great care with her appearance, though. If you would have seen Laura Dortmund on the street, in church, on the sidewalk, you would have thought she had her life together. You would have thought she had plaid draperies and well-considered flatware, a husband who could barbecue and repair things, a daughter whose teeth grew in and fell out at regular intervals. If you would have seen Laura Dortmund on the street, you would have thought she was the kind of woman who would renew her drivers’ license several months before it expired, send her extended family cards on their birthdays, prune her magnolia bushes. But really, Laura could handle very few of these things. Really, Laura couldn’t handle most things.

Victoria usually didn’t wake up until later. She was nine, and when she woke up, she questioned her parents incessantly about the home lives of her teachers, the ways to use various kitchen appliances, the reasons why air hung in the sky and dirt settled on the ground. In a few

minutes, Victoria would wander out of her bedroom, puffy-lipped like her father, and ask Laura about why she'd dreamed that the ice cream man, shadowy in his truck, had come to visit her. Aside from being able to show Victoria how the blender worked, Laura usually couldn't answer her daughter, and hoped she would sleep as long as possible. But before Laura expected Victoria to wake up, there was a knock on the door. Jim put down his newspaper with a grumpy harrumph and opened it. It was Art and Victoria. "Found your daughter on McDaniel Beach this morning," Art said. He had his hand on Victoria's back like she needed protection from whoever had taken her from her house, but also from the people who had let her be taken.

"What do you mean?" Jim said, taking hold of a teary Victoria, who put her arms around his waist and started to cry. Laura looked at her daughter, who burst out in sobs every few seconds, but she didn't feel anything. That was how it had been through the little girl's whole life: when she was born, Laura wanted to feel her heart overflowing, when Victoria scraped her knees, Laura wanted to feel her pain, when she was abducted, Laura wanted to feel terror and relief, but she never did. She never felt any of those things. Instead, Laura stood there, next to Jim's empty coffee cup, gaping. "What happened?" she asked.

"She was on the beach this morning," Art said, stepping into the living room without Laura or Jim's invitation. "We don't know how she got there. Do you?"

"Of course not!" Laura said.

"This is terrible," Jim said, making a face Laura said looked like he was imitating Pastor Shelley's beatific, god-loving beneficence. Jim Dortmund, who was he? I never knew. Laura and Jim had married young, too young at 18 because of her pregnancy, and even though they'd been married for nearly a decade, he, like Victoria, sometimes seemed dropped into Laura's life unannounced and unwelcome.

“We’re going to do everything we can to find the guy who did it,” Art said.

Laura said she didn’t understand what he meant. Victoria had always been disobedient, running off to her friends’ houses in the middle of the afternoon when Laura would leave her, just for a while, to dry her hair in the bathroom. She would disappear for hours in the back woods of the Dortmunds’ house, playing alone with a pellet gun Jim had bought her, ineffectual with anything that masculine himself, and building stick houses out of the long branches that fell there. Late in the night, Victoria would come home, grinning, her hair matted with twigs and her elbows scraped. Laura predicted that her daughter’s behavior would keep escalating until she turned 18, at which age she would either go to college or join a bicycle gang, and Laura felt resigned to Victoria’s inevitable future: sneaking out in the middle of the night at 9, drinking alcohol and riding around with boys at 14, leaving Wellspring never to return at 18. This destination, this inevitability, gave Laura hope.

I remember coming to Laura’s house for the first time. I was really low then. You know how when you’re low, you’re so low that things are starting to look desperate, you go ahead and imagine a miracle for yourself? That was what I was trying to do, and then there was Laura. She was in one of those beautiful dresses, pink, the kind that twirl around, and she was standing in the sunlight. I know it was a morning, she had her flour out on the counter, was wearing a red lip. And then she smiled at me and her teeth were really crooked, like one was all the way protruding over the other ones, and I found that hysterical. I started to laugh, you know the kind of laugh where you know it’s completely inappropriate to laugh and you’re so embarrassed, but Laura laughed too.

“I’m sure she just went by herself, Art,” Laura said, putting her hand on Victoria’s shoulder, and looking her in the eyes. The last thing Laura wanted was for Art Taylor to hang around the house, investigating and asking all kinds of stupid questions. “Didn’t you, Vicky?” Laura said, bending down and taking Victoria’s hand.

“No,” said Victoria, burying her face into Jim’s pajama pant.

“Are you sure, Vicky?” Laura asked again, squeezing her daughter’s hand. “You won’t be in trouble.”

“No,” said Victoria. “There was a lady.”

“Come now, Victoria,” Laura said again.

“I’m telling the truth, mama!”

“Now, Vic—”

“I’ll settle this, folks. Why don’t you get ready and head on over to the 10 o’clock service, and I’ll come by later? She’ll be ready to talk then.”

“I’m sure there will be nothing to talk about, Art,” Laura said as he headed for the door.

Art tipped his hat and turned back around to Laura. “I’ll be back about one. I’m sure you folks want to get to the bottom of all this.”

Art came back that afternoon and grilled Victoria about what had happened the night before. Laura thought that her daughter had made up a bogus story because she thought she’d be in trouble. Laura would sometimes leave her daughter in her room for hours, letting her bang on her bedroom door until she got tired and fell asleep against it. But Wellspring soon found out that Victoria Dortmund hadn’t been lying. Someone really had abducted her from the house, and would again. Again and again, in fact. Her abductions put our already-frenzied town into overdrive.

5.

RUTH JENSEN'S RECOLLECTION OF LAURA DORTMUND'S PASTRY ORDERING

June 1971

Order: One pink sponge cakes with roses

For: Laura Dortmund

When: June 10

Notes: Laura here again. Says that husband expects baked goods. She hates baking. But no one can ever know, she says, OK, Ruth? I tell her OK, must make sure that cakes made for Laura look original. Laura is very distracted-looking person, her eyes dart around and she smiles when she shouldn't, but she dresses very nice. Wonder about her...

Order: A dozen cinnamon rolls

For: Laura Dortmund

When: June 25

Notes: Laura here again. She says that her husband loves my cakes. Laura tells him they are her cakes, and we laugh. Strange woman. Feels like we are playing trick on her husband together. Kind of fun. Jim Dortmund seems like he has rod in his back, posture is very good.

Order: Two dozen frosted sugar cookies

For: Laura Dortmund

When: June 31

Notes: Laura said that she likes coming here. All the things look delicious, and she said, smiling slightly, that I always seemed so pleasant. Don't know about that! I responded, but I was happy she noticed. Difficult to smile every day, but this is the way things must be. Smiling and sugar cookies. Must confess that I like it when Laura comes too. She is always wearing miraculous dresses and fine hats. Must subscribe to catalogs just to look at the things she wears...

6.

Ruth

I'd lost a shit ton of money in the penny slots in Chicago, all the money I'd made working shifts at Vidlak's Bohunk Pastries baking kolaches and strudel at 3am every morning for the old women in the babushkas who'd pound on the door at 6am every morning except Sunday ready to drink coffee and play cards. I'd sleep all day after my shift ended at 11am until I'd get up at 6pm, eat shepherd's pie or steak and eggs alone at the pub down the street until later when I'd play blackjack with the men and the single leathery-faced woman who'd become my friends. I lived years like this in my early 30's, in semi-isolation, and the world started getting all switched around on me. Weeks were over before I'd scheduled them to start, and I'd miss holidays that I hadn't expected for days. One year my brother Anton--we weren't close but he was obligated god love him--called me and said, "We were planning on strudel for Easter," but that had been a week before and he assured me that nobody had minded. I spent that Sunday down by the river smoking cigarettes and reading a crime novel.

I was good at blackjack but I played it to spend time with Old Ed and Robert and Karen, the most consistent of a revolving door of sallow-faced night dwellers who would rob you blind if you gave them half the chance but remembered the anniversary of your mother's funeral every year. My mother's had been two years before Otis and I met. She died randomly, hit by a car when she was carrying a bag too full of springy-leafed beets to see properly, and it had swiped her. Laid her flat. They never did find out who did it, so I turned to baking kolaches in the middle of the night and listening to the sound of the neighbors' string of crying babies to fall asleep during the day.

There was a girl who came by to play Blackjack with us sometimes. She really was a girl because she told me she was playing blackjack to earn money to buy books and cook herself meals on the single meal in her room in the dormitory at the University of Chicago. That's what she said, Adeline, but by the end of it, I knew that she had more of a taste for winning than for earning money for things as practical as noodles. I think that was her name, Adeline, but I don't know for sure because I didn't go whispering it in my sleep. And as the girl lost more and more money, I kept finding myself giving her more and more money. I can't remember her name because I don't dream about her.

Otis came to play blackjack one night. It was happenstance. He looked at me and saw someone like Janine, his one true love, because I never could wax romantic like other girls, was wearing a simple dress, and had a face that would have been pretty if I hadn't been jowly like a dog. I'm not just inferring that. He told me later. I ate the steak he bought me that night, with Maggie radiating in the corner of my vision, a shape, an energy, and Otis told me how he had a house in the country, in the most charming town I would ever see, and I laughed to be a woman who could laugh at a small country house and not be a woman who lived in intermediate spaces between houses and bodies, sometimes radiating, off in the corner somewhere.

They say it's inevitable that Victoria Dortmund will meet the same fate that Julie Qillag did. That she'll be found someday, floating, her arms broken and her eyes unseeing. In our dreams we see her body tied up in the underwater grasses, floating at us like a mermaid when we swim out deeper than we'd like to in the summertime. It just keeps happening, and who's to stop it? Julie's ineffectual parents haven't done more than lock the door. Jim doesn't even sleep on the front porch with his shotgun like a real man, and Laura doesn't put a palette down for herself in front of the front door to keep Victoria from leaving. And Victoria, we can only forgive her so long for being young. We can only forgive her for so long for being wooed by gifts and novelty. Victoria could help

herself, but she won't do it. They say that there's some real funny stuff going on around town. We're sure that Victoria's getting wrapped up in it, and maybe she can't help what's been happening to her. But we've also met the kind of girl, no matter how young and no matter how good her upbringing, that seeks out that kind of thing, and, more than anything, wants it herself.

7.

Wellspring

Although Muriel Jimenez is most likely dead, we don't know for sure. Really, they see her everywhere. They say she's everywhere. She's peering over the stalls at the local truck stop until they see, to their surprise, that it's just long-haired, wild-eyed Susan, pulling out her mouth with her thumbs and yanking down the skin under her eyes with her fingers. Muriel's crunching on a bag of Lay's at Bag n' Save until we see it's just that lunatic Mrs. Freytag escaped again in her bare feet from the care center down the road. Muriel's in the back row of the high school's misguided production of *King Lear* until they turn on the house light, and they see there's no one in Row Y after all. We imagine that we see Muriel flitting away, too fast for a woman of such an advanced age, in the woods when we're hunting with our dogs, her white nightdress (always a white nightdress) flying. We think that the little piles of stones and berries in our backyards were stacked by Muriel, leading the way to the cottage she'd constructed decades ago in the woods, where she learned to fashion apple pies and a love for humanity so thick that even the hatred we harbor for ever-barking dogs and junior high school functions can't make her lose her love for us.

Muriel Jimenez was a person, but now she's eternal love. Muriel is everyone we've lost and everyone we will lose. She's grief and she's sorrow. She's the loss of hope that something, someday will make the little things different for good. Hair won't be trapped in our drains anymore. Mothers will be proud of the sticker stars on their children's papers. The mail will come on time, with postcards from our brothers. And that's why we hope beyond hope that Muriel's out there. We know that Geraldine hopes for that, too.

8.

Ruth

Wellspring went on some kind of bizarre fast after Art posted that sign to my door, and after I'd pulled it down, he posted anti-sugar propaganda at a bunch of other places, on fence posts and light poles, on the classifieds boards in the front of the supermarket, on the front doors of all of the churches, most next to chipped plaster Christs. The people of Wellspring took Art's remarks to heart, and complied with what he said to do. Laura Dortmund had been visiting my bakeshop often before I had to shut it down. Temporarily, I'd thought, but it would turn out that I was mistaken. Laura stopped me on the street one day when I was putting a "Temporarily Closed" sign on the front of my shop door. I'd given the rest of my pastries and breads, most of them already stale because I've never been an optimist, to the stray dogs that roamed around McDaniel Beach. One homely bitch with a stub tail stood next to us on the sidewalk, tugging apart a cinnamon bun. It was time to shut down. People hadn't come in for the last week, and when they made eye contact with me, usually by accident, they'd hurry to look down again at the ground. Only the old ladies would stare me down as they pushed their walkers with their baskets filled with produce (only greens and meats). I couldn't hold their looks—my face flushed too bad—so I'd bend down, straightening a tray of kugel that I pretended was off-center.

"Sorry to see," Laura said, nodding at my sign. "Only temporary, I'm sure."

"Yes. I'd expect," I said. Laura always made me feel like I couldn't stand properly, like one of my legs was longer than the other. She looked so strange in a town like this, even though she was born here and had never moved away. She was far too glamorous for a town like Wellspring. That June day she had on a wide-brimmed, cloth-trimmed hat and red lipstick, high-heels that clicked

conspicuously on the sidewalk and echoed down our nearly-empty main street. Her outfit was formal enough that I could have worn it to my date with Arnie Fleming to the opera a decade ago, back in Chicago. Then he'd called my outfit—a beige dress and flat shoes—plain, even though I'd worn my mother's mink with the glass eyes to glamorize it.

“Is there a schoolboard meeting today?” I asked Laura.

Laura looked puzzled, an expression that took me a while to figure out wasn't disdain. “No. Why?”

I nodded to her outfit.

“Oh, no.” Laura laughed. “Just for running errands. This is one, in fact.”

“Right,” I stammered, embarrassed that I'd embarrassed her about her dress, even though I was probably the only one embarrassed. For some reason, that day, for the last month since she'd been visiting me to buy her husband's secret sweets, I wanted to be a team with Laura.

“I'm here because I want, well, need, really to continue our little arrangement with Jim. You do all the work, and I get all the credit.” She laughed.

“My shop is closing.”

“I'll still pay you, of course.” She smiled. “I'm sure you can bake somewhere else, certainly?”

That was how I started to bake for Laura, in secret. Of course I would. Of course I did. Laura was the kind of woman who you answered to in this town. The kind of woman who you'd once wondered where she'd travel, but somehow she'd wasted it all. She'd stayed here. I was a person who could have had a big life, sure, but I was no Laura Dortmund.

I had to drive all the way over to Cozad to buy my sugar and flour, since, even though they stocked these ingredients at Bag 'n Save, [ETC...]

The first time I went to Laura's house, a white colonial with a black trim that I'd always admired, I expected it to look like my one rich childhood friend's house. Dorothy lived in Skokie and

had a fireplace and a mother who always hovered around us wiping up crumbs from our mouths towel and accosting us with a dust buster any time we spilled on ourselves or the furniture. But Laura's house wasn't like Dorothy's at all. She had books and magazines strewn all over the living room, discarded sock (men's, women's and children's), balled in the backs of sofas and behind armchairs, envelopes stacked all over her kitchen table, cereal bowls and plates with caked-on spaghetti sauce left on fine furniture.

“I inherited this furniture from my parents, and I guess having it makes me neurotic.” Laura said when I came inside. She was collecting plates from the furniture as quickly as she could. “I have an urge to destroy.”

[Laura and Ruth become friends through baking]

9.

Wellspring

They say that Ruth Jensen isn't a good wife. She's negligent, really. She doesn't press Otis's shirts for his business trips or cook him reasonable dinners. Instead she just brings him her mistakes from the bakery, twisted cinnamon buns and breads with burned bottoms. They say he can't remember the last time he had a steak, let alone a vegetable. We wouldn't want to care for Otis because really, no one cares for Otis, but Ruth is supposed to care for Otis because no one else wants to. And Laura Dortmund, they say their piece about her, don't they? Ruth must be rubbing off on Laura. Laura can't fold clothing or make a bed well, they say, and she feeds her family frozen dinners more often than she should. They say she doesn't care for her girl, that it's her husband who brushes Victoria's hair and takes her to the bathroom, who packs her school lunches and finishes with her homework. Things like that are unnatural. It's wrong for a mother to feel that way about her daughter. And what of their friend, Pasco Jimenez? Who ever heard of a friendship as bizarre as that one? They say Pasco was one of those: an illegal, a Mexican, but don't let anybody know we told you. We don't want to say anything, but we think it might be true, even if his aunt Geraldine has been in Wellspring longer than anyone. Pasco might be a product of kissing cousins in Tijuana, since, really, anything can happen nowadays. They say that Pasco still has connections down in Mexico and sells all sorts of drugs up and down Western Nebraska. That's why all those people stumble out of his house in the middle of the night, why all of those cars idle in his driveway at all hours. We haven't seen any of these things personally, but that's what they say. This lot, these three, they make quite a trio, don't they? We'll mind our own business if they mind theirs, but that's what we heard anyway.

10.

Dortmund Child Found, Surrounded by Stuffed Animals on McDaniel Beach

The Wellspring World Herald

June 26, 1971

Little Victoria Dortmund, 8, was found this morning, June 26, in only her summer nightie on McDaniel Beach clutching two ragged stuffed animals: a lion and a hare. The girl's parents Jim and Laura said that the stuffed animals didn't belong to her. They say they don't understand how Victoria got out of the house, and, since last night, have gone to extreme measures to ensure that the girl cannot leave the house again. "Somehow," says Mr. Dortmund, "Victoria got out of the house last night. I suppose it couldn't have been too difficult. We don't lock our doors."

Last night, Joshua Larson, coming home late from Joe's Bar, thought he heard something on McDaniel Beach. "I was coming home real, real late. After bar close. And I walk close to the beach and I hear some pretty strange stuff. I want to say that I heard Canada goose. Like that weird honking they do, almost like a giant baby or something. But it's the wrong season for that. I know that much. And then I hear something responding, like a kid or a couple of kids or something. I know a lot of weird stuff goes on at McDaniel in the dark. Witch rituals and weird sex s*** from the foreigners and whatnot. I didn't want to get involved."

Victoria Dortmund herself, a child at Stillwater Elementary, seems confused about the circumstances of these nights and unable to provide factual evidence. "She came for me," Victoria tells us. "She knocked on the window of my room and I go and unlock the door, even though Mommy and Daddy tell me not to. She's nice. She takes me down to the beach and she calls the geese. She brings me presents."

We show Victoria several people who might fit the girl's "woman," but Victoria says that the photos don't match anyone she's seen. "No, that's not her," Victoria says. "She's got hair like grandma. She doesn't have nice clothes. The things she brings me, they aren't new. I never seen her around town before."

The girl has been taken for psychiatric evaluation in Cozad. This woman that the girl speaks of, we're told by her psychiatrist, could be a figment of the girl's imagination, an imaginary friend. No one who fits the girl's description lives in Wellspring.

"We talked to the geese, you know, sir, she can talk to them?" Victoria says. "They came when she called them, like little doggies. She petted them and I pet them real nice like grandma tells me I've got to pet Binky. Soft. But we were having real lots of fun and getting along real good, and then she was gone. I don't know where she went. She had no shoes. That made me sad. And I laid down on the bunny and lion and went to sleep. I don't know where I live."

We feel that some of Larson's account can be largely discounted because of his excessive consumption of alcohol. We know that Canadian geese aren't usually found around these parts this late in the summer. However, what else could Larson have been hearing? We know of the strange goings on that beach, as well, and can perhaps attribute some of the happenings to a person, who, for whatever reason, may have abducted Victoria Dortmund from her home. As far as police could tell, though, the little girl was not harmed. If you have any tips about the Dortmund abduction, call the Wellspring Police Department as soon as possible. We fear that these abductions could continue to escalate.

11.

Ruth

Pasco Jimenez and I have been friends since I moved to Wellspring in 1961. Pasco had a little house he'd inherited from his mother when she died, a little blue house with a half-obstructed view of the lake through the trees. Sometimes I'd walk by his house in the summer or the fall on my way to the grocery, and he'd be sitting there in a wicker chair and raise a hand to me in greeting. After a few months of this, Pasco spoke to me one summer afternoon.

"My woman left," he called to me on the sidewalk. I was very committed to buying a ham at that moment, and had difficulty stopping.

"What's that?" I called back.

"She's gone."

I hesitated for a second. But I couldn't leave a man who was so obviously feeling sorry for himself. Pasco was sitting in that wicker chair, a bottle of vodka next to its bottom. "I'm sorry to hear that!" I called to him.

"Who's your true love?" Pasco called back, picking up the bottle and swigging at it.

"What's that?" I walked closer to him.

"I'm fucking hot," Pasco said, lolling his head against the back of the chair.

I knew I couldn't ignore Pasco, so I walked up the drive. He pulled out another wicker chair and a six pack of beer from his garage onto his driveway. That summer I was trying to look fashionable. I'd decided that wanted to be a cool lady in green pant suits and orange coats, on trend with everything, neutral makeup. I wore my hair long and straight. But even though I tried, my sweaty skin melted off the makeup as soon as I got it on, and the summer heat flushed my cheeks so

that I looked like the heavy-limbed Bohunk I was. Pasco was quiet. I took off my shoes and put my bare feet onto the concrete. I stared up into the sun and took one of the beers from the six-pack.

“When I was a kid I was afraid of the boats on the lake, the new speedboats that everybody was buying back then,” Pasco said. “When I kissed Jenny Jefferson, she threw sand in my mouth.”

I laughed. I would learn later that Pasco’s mind skipped in many directions.

“I’ve been feeling real sorry for myself today,” he said.

“You deserve to.”

“Stole some drawer pulls from Jimmy’s. Pestered the bars to give me discounts. My brother shot himself a few months back.”

Pasco told me the story of his life. His brother Wallace had come to visit the week before he killed himself. Wallace lived in Kearney, alone like Pasco himself did, and for the last decade since Pasco had graduated high school, Wallace had written him a postcard each month with the single word: “Alive” on it. Usually the postcards had photographs of Kearney’s famous plaster ear of corn (Pasco suspected that Wallace must have gotten a discount on an enormous package years ago). Wallace looked terrible, Pasco said, much older than his 30 years. His eyes were bloodshot and yellowed, his cheeks were grey, and he had a pallor that made him look like he hadn’t eaten a green vegetable in months. As it was in the Jimenez family, Wallace was the brains and Pasco was the body. Wallace always warned Pasco: he said that a person’s body would always betray him, that he should only rely on his mind. Pasco always thought he was the lesser sibling, just the body, but now, after what had happened to his brother, Pasco didn’t believe that Wallace had it right after all.

“I couldn’t remember a moment of Wallace’s being happy with his brain.” Pasco swallowed. “He brought us last night of the world whiskey, and then he shot himself the next day. I’ve seen you in church. Ruth.”

“Yes,” I said. “My husband is a good Christian. Or someone who looks like one.”

“I think I have to give up being a Christian.”

“Why?”

“If I was a good Christian, I would be able to forgive Angelica. That was my old lady’s name. If I was a good Christian, I would be able to forgive her. But I’m not a good Christian because I went into Cozad and picked up some woman to have sex with last night. Does that shock you?”

I was shocked, but I said, “No. Your girlfriend just left you.”

“We went to her trailer. Afterward she offered me a cigarette, and showed him a picture of her daughter. A second grade fat girl in red braids. I’m just sick about it.”

“You shouldn’t be.” I think I felt something for him even that first day, but it could have been the heat or the beer, both things that I didn’t like to wallow in for long. “I hate my husband,” I said. “I’m sick about it.”

“You shouldn’t be. He’s lard,” Pasco responded, and, for reasons neither of us could understand, we both started to laugh. And that was how Pasco and I became friends, an odd couple, a strange pair.

Pasco was the funniest rodeo clown that Washington had ever seen: he made children choke on their popcorn and cotton candy, he made mothers cover their mouths in shock, he made fathers slap their knees. If you look at the *Wellspring World Herald* on March 5, 1959, you’ll see a picture of Pasco, beaming, when he won best rodeo clown at the state championships. I told him once that he looked like a young Jimmy Stewart in the photograph, something that always got Pasco blushing. Pasco had always had a great love of animals, especially horses, because his father had always raised them skinny and badly, feeding them bald corncobs. Pasco’s father had died sliding in his car into the Missouri River somewhere near Omaha, trying to sell his undernourished steers to the men at the Stockyards. Pasco’s father had been in the rodeo, too, and he’d taken home several first-place awards on particularly lackluster years. Pasco’s father had been quick with roping the calves and

wrestling the steers, but everybody said that he lacked the finesse and the artistic flair that really made someone a legend.

Pasco's mother gave her boys very limited love, which was her nature, Pasco supposed. A lonely spirit. *If only her handicrafts could have been better liked by the society ladies of Wellspring!* Pasco thoughts sometimes, mournfully, when he felt sorry for himself and gouty, filled with too many oily meats or sitting too long in his own stench. He'd look around their living room at times like that and wonder if he'd feel differently if their parents had been different. Pasco's mother was dead, young and sedentary, from a pulmonary embolism made worse from so many hours of sitting, watching television. His aunt Geraldine was a good woman who still lived in Wellspring, and had played some sort of motherly role that Pasco didn't speak about often. He had the kind of temperament that made him closer to the nasty side of things than to the good.

"Do you ever feel like you're moving?" Pasco asked me that first day. "Like, you can feel the earth keep moving even when you're standing still?"

"Sure." I nodded. I didn't know what he meant, but I wanted to be his friend. I still think Pasco might have been shitting me when he said he felt the earth spinning, like he wanted to make me think we connected when he didn't really feel it. But I decided to believe he did feel it. I used to think I was missing that part, missing that way to connect with people. But I believed in Pasco right away. I was an only child, and I felt like he was my brother. Maybe Pasco and I had been birds in the forest in some other life, bright birds that nobody really liked too much, long ago, before either of us needed to speak to understand. I don't know if I believe in reincarnation, though, but I really do believe in God.

12.

Interview #1: Art Taylor and Ruth Jensen, September 18, 1971

This interview was conducted by Wellspring Sheriff Arthur B. Taylor on the 4th Day of December in the year of Our Lord 1971. The interviewee is one Mrs. Otis T. Jensen of 3049 Park Street regarding the disappearance of Mrs. Laura Ann Dortmund on the morning of September 18, 1971.

Taylor: Laura had the kind of life women admired, didn't she, Ruth?

Jensen: I suppose so.

Taylor: Sure. She did. The attractive husband. The well-behaved child—

Jensen: Victoria is not well-behaved.

Taylor: Well—

Jensen: And Jim is one of the most ineffectual men I've ever met.

Taylor: So you say. But you would have to admit that you found her life attractive?

Jensen: I will not admit that because it isn't true.

Taylor: You didn't admire the way she dressed? Those beautiful clothes?

Jensen: My clothes are adequate.

Taylor: Her good looks? Her youth?

Jensen: I never wanted the former, and I'm happy enough to have lived through the latter.

Taylor: Mrs. Rudloff in your congregation suggests that you let your eyes linger over Jim.

Jensen: Mrs. Rudloff is daffy.

Taylor: Perhaps you thought if Laura was out of the picture. We all know your husband has a terrible temper, and—forgive me—he's lost his looks if he ever had them.

Jensen: You're grasping at straws, Mr. Taylor.

Taylor: I'm not so convinced, Mrs. Jensen.

13.

Strawberries Ovanhof Recipe for Laura Dortmund from Ruth Jensen

Ingredients:

1 pint strawberries, washed and stemmed
2 tablespoons sugar
2 packages Jell-O Strawberry Gelatin
2 tablespoons brandy (and more for you to taste intermittently!)

Directions

1. Mix sour cream, brown sugar and Brandy in a bowl.
2. In a separate bowl, whip cream until starts to thicken and add sugar—whip until thick.
3. Fold cream into sour cream mixture and blend well.
4. Serve with fresh strawberries.

I made this one for my mother once, and, boy, was she over the moon about it. When my mother was alive, I felt like I could just wing something, that it could be just OK or pretty mediocre or just completely off the rails and my mother would say, *Wow, Ruth, what an accomplishment!* I feel that way about several paintings I did in high school and my college grades and my marriage to Otis. I mean, ho hum. But my mother was dead before Otis, but I know she would have said something like, *Wow, I'm so proud!* That's what she said about this dessert. Maybe there'd too much brandy, but I don't know. She said, *Wow, this is the best dessert I've ever had!* But I don't trust my mother's judgment, hun. Give em a try, but don't blame me if they're terrible.

14.

Ruth

There was something new in town that month of June 1971. That month, I felt different, on-edge, strange. It had been hotter that summer than I remembered in years past, and it was so dark in those woods that year, darker than I'd ever found it to be before. Like the moon couldn't even shine in there. The darkness was thicker than ever along the roads and sidewalks, creeping in slowly from the lake. There could be anyone in those woods, I thought. Life was getting to me that summer. That first night, I invited Pasco to my house for dinner when Otis left for one of his trips to the city. There was some alcohol involved that first night, I remember that much, and I remember trying to play a game, gin rummy or something like that. I remember Pasco saying, "Goddamn, gin rummy is tedious." Or maybe he actually said, "I'm so bored with pinochle." I don't remember for sure. But whatever he said, I agreed with the sentiment. Sitting in dim houses was nothing compared to being out in the woods. That summer those woods were wild.

"Who do you think is taking the girl?" I asked.

"Is it me?" Pasco laughed aloud after he said this, louder than he probably thought he would laugh when he started laughing. His laugh grew out of his control. Maybe it was the woods that made him laugh that way. Or maybe it was heartburn.

"I think it could be Reggie Smith," I said. "That man who's been renting out Mrs. Gerrard's empty room."

Reggie Smith was a strange middle-aged man who had been renting out my neighbor Mrs. Gerrard's front bedroom for the past few months. He was shadowy and a stranger, oily and a bit discolored. Everything about him seemed slightly yellowed when I watched him get his mail in the

front yard: his elbows, his shirts, his eyes. He would never speak to me if he saw me, but he'd nod, a gesture that I found unfriendly, mostly because my mother always told me it was.

"He's definitely a person." Pasco hiccupped.

"I just want to see what he's doing," I said.

"Check up on ole Reggie?" Pasco said. We were giddy from drinking all night. The darkness outside looked comforting and soft, and my lava lamp was bubbling all red and slow in way that made me nervous. We couldn't sit anymore like civilized people in those hard-backed chairs. That night, the darkness wanted us.

So, we went out to spy on Reggie Smith. The woods were dark, but somehow we knew them. They were the same woods as they were in the daytime, the same woods with the same paths. We still knew the woods, even if our flashlights made the ground in front of us small and patchy, like photographs, quick and temporary spaces we had to move through before they darkened again, before they were gone.

Mrs. Gerrard's living room light was on. In her backyard, there was a playset that her husband had bought before the war. They'd planned to have children after his return, but Herman, a mechanic who Pasco said was a nice man, never came back. Mrs. Gerrard didn't get rid of the playset in the thirty years that followed, though, and the rusted swings, the monkey bars, the sandbox filled with plastic toys still sat there in the backyard. We peered into Mrs. Gerrard's window, and saw her sitting next to a picture of old Herman. She was watching television. She was still relatively young, only in her mid-forties, but she'd never remarried and still lived alone. We stood by the window to see if Reggie Smith would come to watch television with Mrs. Gerrard. But he didn't. Mrs. Gerrard didn't do much. Sometimes she smiled. Sometimes she nodded her agreement with whatever was being said on the set. Sometimes she flicked the glass frame of Herman's picture with her forefinger, like she was conferring with him, asking his opinion on an

advertisement. She flicked her husband's picture one more time and then shut off the TV and turned out the light. We smiled. We had liked Herman, and we liked Mrs. Gerrard even more now that we knew that she flicked her husband's picture. We could just make her out, moving in the darkness to her bedroom.

Since Reggie Smith hadn't come into the living room, we figured that he had to be somewhere else. So, we crept around to the other side of the house where I thought Reggie's bedroom had to be. There he was, our first subject, and we could see him and his room well. He sat on his bed with its white comforter. A wooden bureau and matching dresser held a framed photograph of an older woman who was probably his mother. And sitting on the only other chair in the room was a young man, handsome with pink cheeks and nearly-black hair, cutting pieces of tomato on what looked like a makeshift cutting board. Reggie opened a bottle of wine, and poured two glasses. Then, the handsome young man joined Reggie on the bed. When he turned, I could see his face better. It was Horace Stacey, a young tugboat captain who took people on cruises over in Omaha on the Missouri River. When he came for visits in Wellspring, he stayed with his parents.

I suspected what was coming next and Pasco did, too. Standing unnoticed at the window, we were overjoyed. I elbowed Pasco in the stomach because Pasco was the kind of grinning guy who liked to be elbowed and always elbowed back. Reggie Smith put tomato and cheese onto a piece of bread and fed it to the young man. We raised our eyebrows at each other. The young man and Reggie twisted their arms around one another and drank out of each other's glasses. Reggie leaned over and kissed the young man on the mouth.

That was too much for us. It was too hysterical. We crouched, our fingers and palms and knees on the ground, trying to laugh as quietly as we could. People say that you double over with laughter, but we didn't understand what that meant until we fell onto the wet dirt under Mrs.

Gerrard's awning, nearly hysterical. I clapped my hand onto Pasco's shoulder, and through tears, he said, "Is this ethical?"

"God no," I said back, still laughing. We staggered to stand, still laughing, but didn't wipe the dirt off of our knees and shoes. I didn't know why someone would take little girls, but I figured that someone wasn't the same someone who would be loving with other men and also enjoy Parisian picnics and wedding toasts in Washington late summers. We didn't have criteria for how we would know who Julie and Victoria's abductor was, and we didn't know, if we did find him, what we would do about it.

"It wasn't this guy, right?" said Pasco, "This kind of funny stuff doesn't jibe with that kind of funny stuff, does it?"

Before I could answer, a screen door at the front of the house slammed shut. I looked over and could see Horace Stacey hurrying off down the street. "Stay hidden," I hissed to Pasco, pressing myself against the wall of the house. Pasco did the same. We sat there for several minutes, hearts beating, trying to breathe as quietly as we could. Then, we heard the window of Reggie's room open and slam shut, just over our heads. The lights of his room went off. After a few more labored-breathing seconds, we stood up. I saw a scrap of paper blowing softly underneath the window jam. Pasco and I looked at each other, and even though we didn't suspect that Reggie or Horace were our culprits, we took the scrap of paper out from the window anyway.

It said: "I am sorry I yelled about the price of Fresh Produce. I am still waiting for you Mr. Horace Stacey."

Pasco found this note equally hilarious to the rest of the night's events, so he started laughing again. That got me going, too, even though it hurt to laugh because I hadn't stretched out my stomach muscles to accommodate this kind of hilarity. I hadn't laughed like this in a while, maybe I'd never laughed like this before, but I laughed anyway. We couldn't keep quiet, so I put the

scrap into my pocket, grabbed Pasco's arm, and took off running back to my house. We were still laughing as we ran through the dark woods, but I think you probably already knew that.

As we ran through back to my house, we saw Laura Dortmund walking through the woods. She was alone. Pasco and I stopped running when we saw her, and put our hands into our pockets like we'd been caught doing something we shouldn't.

Laura startled when we stopped so abruptly near her, and jumped back. I can't imagine what she must have thought about two adults sprinting through the woods, sweaty and panting, but she never let on. "Ruth. Pasco. Hello."

"It's a nice night for a walk," Pasco said. I felt for the paper in my pocket to make sure it hadn't fluttered out.

"Too hot, really." Laura laughed.

The sound of her laughing made me itchy, so I said, "We're really sorry about Victoria."

"Oh, thank you."

"We're really hoping that they have their best men on the case—" I said.

"We're helping, too," Pasco said. I could imagine his chest swelling in the darkness, but I didn't take my eyes off Laura.

"Helping?"

"Yeah, extra investigating."

"Pasco," I said. "Stop."

"We just investigated Reggie Smith, and by complete happenstance Horace Stacey, too."

Laura looked at Pasco, and then she looked at me. Then she grinned. "Nobody would ever call me mother of the year," she said. "But I feel as though I should get on board with you all."

I looked at Pasco then and felt like I'd seen him when he was a little kid, hatching a secret plan to catch peeks at the girls' underwear under their skirts. "But, ma'am, if you please, you can't tell anyone. It has to be our secret."

After I got home from Mrs. Gerrard's that night, I was nervous about spending so much time with Laura Dortmund. She was different from us. She was beautiful and young and on her way to becoming Wellspring royalty. I was worried that Laura would ruin us. I felt like there was some kind of huge despair that had settled on top of me, pushing me into my pillows and mattress like I was already dead. I felt like the night we'd just had was the only night that was going to be sparked, was going to be magic, and it was over already. The darkness was against me. I knew if I opened my eyes, a ghost girl would be hovering above me, nose-to-nose. I knew I would see a hatchet man shuffling through our hallways. So I didn't open my eyes and fell into dreamless, uneasy sleep, and woke up achy and sore.

The next night was Laura's test. We met outside of Pasco's house this time, and she wore all black.

"Real inconspicuous," I said, rolling my eyes.

"I'm a spy," she said, hitting me with her shoulder. I closed my eyes and smiled.

We gave Laura her instructions, and we crept back to Reggie Smith's room. The room was dark, so we figured that Reggie was either asleep or still out. We had to take our chances. I had the note already all written. It said: "If you intend on keeping someone as beautiful as Horace Stacey, you'd better buy better bottles of wine."

"Now you need to leave it for him," I whispered to Laura. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Laura nodded seriously, and Pasco hoisted her up, lifting her by her two beautiful leather flats. But she was smaller than I would have been and lighter. Laura jimmied open the window with

the crowbar we'd brought along, and slid the paper in through the opening. Then, slowly so that it didn't guillotine her fingers or slam onto the wood, she slid the window back down so that the paper was latched in place. I watched her do it. It didn't even seem like she was nervous. Pasco lowered her down to the ground again, and she hugged me, elated.

Next week, at church, I saw Horace Stacey there, there with his parents like he was still on the football team, and I think I saw him wink at oily Reggie Smith, who, if I remember correctly, was wearing mismatched shoes. I hoped so at least. I saw Mrs. Gerrard, shabby dress, shabby hat, face scrubbed hard for the Lord, and thought of her flicking her husband's picture. I were glad that she still had Herman, but I wanted things for myself. That was why I wanted to continue. I could make Wellspring a place that was bearable for us. I decided that if we figured out who was abducting those girls, I would be a town hero. And if we couldn't figure out that much, we could still keep the town in line in other ways. I saw Laura in church that Sunday as I went to the front to take my Communion grape juice and wafer. She was wearing a hat that was much more fashionable than mine, and she was backlit in purple from stained glass window next to her family's pew. Framed like that, she looked so beautiful I almost couldn't breathe. When she caught my eye, she winked.

15.

Wellspring

They say that you can't control your mind if you don't control your stomach. They say you really can't know what your mind will do if you're stomach's all willy-nilly, filled with sugary cakes and deliciously-light pastries, perfectly-sugared sweet breads. We remember the once vigorous Carol Swenson, the high school algebra teacher, jogging routines, in his sweat suit, that was replaced by too many sugar sweets. Now he looks wrong, like his skin's been boiled, like it's nearly peeled all the way off. They say that alcohol has been the downfall of many righteous individuals. We remember Clarence Mintz, Wanita's father, and those alcoholic rages he'd go on, spurting gibberish and usually removing his shirt, issuing proclamations of virtue and discredit like he was the King of England. Those kinds of food and drink will turn your mind in a second, we've heard, to thoughts that you'd never tell your spouse about and would make you blush if you thought about them in church. Our town was flush with sweet delicacies before, but we're proud to say we've recently become more rigorous with what we'll put in our bodies. Instead, we have learned to focus on working hard. Instead, we expend our energies in more productive ways, like cleaning all of the crevices in our pantries that really collected more dust than we had expected. Our energies go into hand-beating all of the linens in our closets. We mow the lawn daily now instead of twice a week, and trim up the pieces that grown too long with gardening shears, on our knees.

Really, though, we're so hungry. Really, though, canned vegetables and cottage cheese aren't enough. Our stomachs growl in the middle of the night, but all we have to wake up to are oats. They say that we shouldn't eat sausage or eggs fried in butter or pancakes. Our stomachs growl in the middle of the afternoon, but all we eat are rice crackers. We're ravenous, really. But we have to do

what everyone else is doing. Otherwise, who knows what they'll think of us? Otherwise, husbands will report their wives for indiscretions of chocolate consumption, and old mothers will report their grown sons for pulling refined sugar stashes out of the garbage. They say we must watch one another, and we have taken that mission to heart.

Part 2

Lifting Mechanism

1.

Wellspring

They say Julie Qillag's autopsy was inconclusive. After she'd been missing for eight days, her body finally bobbed to the lake's surface. A floater. Little James Thompson climbed to the top of a tree on McDaniel Beach and shouted: "Julie's just doing the backstroke, everyone!" But she wasn't. They still don't know for sure how she died. There was a drifter named Merle Ashby living in town then, and later on they said that Mr. Swenson, the algebra teacher, had been breathing in the sweet smell of high school girls' hair when they tried to solve for Y. Then there was the failure of a music teacher, Wanita Mintz, who hated the girls with nice voices arguably too much. But Julie wouldn't attract attention like that, would she? We had wanted our girls to be like Julie: chubby in places where breasts and hips should be, cursed with oily skin and acne, thin-lipped, fond of clothes that bunched around her belly button. The kind of girl who would be silent until you talked to her, and who wouldn't shut up when you did. The kind of girl who knew all the answers in math class, but couldn't do any of the girl things like curling her hair or touching boys on their forearms. We thought our girls would be safe if they were like Julie Qillag, but that summer we learned that the world can be dangerous, even for girls like her.

2.

Ruth

On those Wednesday nights over those months, we thought of ourselves as free agents, even though we were not. I sometimes think that was the only time and only place we could have come together. We were all lonely people. We were all alone, really. And really, we liked to think of ourselves as the kind of people who wouldn't mind this sort of thing, wouldn't mind being alone in quiet houses where we could eat what we wanted and have things quiet when we wanted, but we did mind. I surprised myself with how important those Wednesday nights were to me, even years afterwards. We were hungry for those Wednesday nights when Laura and I told our husbands that we were playing poker and watching *All in the Family* on TV. Those nights got us through the week. We built up our excitement in our stomachs, through dinners and kids conferences and lost loves and Art Taylor and our husbands, and Wednesday nights were the only thing keeping us from exploding.

By July 1971, Julie Qillag's murder still hadn't been solved, and Victoria had been abducted twice more. I'd heard something about the music teacher at the school, Wanita Mintz, about how she hated all of the girls with beautiful voices because hers could never compare to theirs. She was bitter and spiteful because all she could do with her once-lovely voice was sing the National Anthem at local baseball games. Wanita Mintz was a Jewess who already looked like she was in her 50's at 35, like her face had been sucked of its luster from too many disappointments. Wanita Mintz's parents were in a concentration camp, though, too, if I remember correctly, and you know grief is heritable. I've always thought those Jewess features prematurely age a person: that pale skin and that dark hair. Those big noses. She received a standing ovation at Wellspring High School for her rendition of

“The Last Rose of Summer” before her own graduation. But when she went off to college at the music school in Lincoln, she wasn’t the best singer or even nearly the best singer, and she had to face the humiliation of being told by her professors to pursue music education instead.

I heard a lot of gossip after Art shut down my bakeshop. All of the time I spent baking and calculating the books and buying supplies, I now spent hanging out at the diner. It’s the only place in Wellspring I really miss now. I’d do almost anything for their crappy fried onion rings with the mayonnaise dipping sauce, even though the batter was never well-fried. The farmers came into the Fox and Hound in the mornings, and sat at their countertop stools drinking coffee. The housewives, like me I suppose, gossiped while their husbands were at work. They reported what Art had said most recently, the newest news on the Julie Qillag and Victoria Dortmund cases. I never knew where the gossip came from. It seemed unreliable and untraceable, but I believed it. And I think that you would have, too.

One thing I’d heard for sure was that both Julie Qillag and Victoria Dortmund had beautiful voices. Julie Qillag sang a solo nearly every Sunday at the Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church and had recently been the lead in the school’s musical, *Westside Story*. I’m told that it was a sight to see Julie Qillag up in that organ loft. She dressed in an all-white choir robe, and the stained glass was struck with sun at the right time on those Sunday mornings. That sun and the motes from the janitor’s shoddy cleaning made Julie seem angelic, transformed from plain to pristinely-packaged and beautiful. She was an unemotive Maria, though, too nervous to unclasp her hands from one another, except to stiffly move them her chest under the direction of Mrs. Mintz.

And Laura told me that she had briefly considered having her daughter audition for the *Lawrence Welk* show after a fly-by-night talent scout heard Victoria sing “O Holy Night” at her elementary auditorium right before Christmastime. He’d told Laura that her daughter’s pure, clear soprano was exactly what appealed to Mr. Welk’s Midwestern sensibilities. By the time Laura shelled

out nearly \$1,000 for professional photographs and white patent leather boots, the talent scout was gone, without a forwarding address. But still, even if she wasn't going to be a television celebrity, nobody could deny that Victoria had a beautiful voice.

We didn't know how it would get so out-of-hand, but we decided that it wasn't that far out of the realm of possibility that Wanita Mintz could have killed Julie out of spite, and, if that were true, it would only be a matter of time before Victoria met the same fate. Laura and I gathered at Pasco's house that day, and I told them what I'd heard about Mrs. Mintz at the diner that morning. Certainly they agreed, that a woman with a streak like that could be the one who wanted to teach a lesson around here.

Wanita Mintz and her husband Bob lived in the part of town where you didn't want to live. People left stray cats around there, and once somebody left off two house rabbits that bred so much it wasn't uncommon to see one staring you down behind somebody's begonia bush. Car bodies removed of their engines, stripped of their innards, piled up on the street. Teachers usually didn't live in that part of town, but Bob was a shop teacher and everybody knew extracurricular teachers didn't make as much as real teachers. Music and shop, Wanita and Bob, didn't earn the respect of most people in town. We'd looked up Wanita's home address in the phone book, and there was her house, pink-sided, white roofed house, planted with several nondescript bushes in the front yard. Outside, the front yard was surrounded by a chain link fence and several low-hanging trees.

"I've met Wanita," Laura said. "Her kid goes to school with mine."

"Makes you think, doesn't it?" Pasco said. Pasco was funny, but he made people nervous. He used to perform in the local rodeo when he was younger. Now that he was more famous, he drove around to places in the country when they invited him to come, in his beat-up car. He dressed in pink overalls and a striped button-down shirt and painted his face white and red and black. He pretended to be sweeping up trash into a basket. He told jokes about fat women and the ranching

lifestyle, implying several times to the hilarity of the audience that these lonely men were driven to sleep with their cows. “What’s the difference between a sow and your wife?” Pasco would ask the audience. “The sow smells better!”

“It really does,” Laura said. She was cold to Pasco, like she wasn’t really sure he wanted her there. “I never thought about Wanita before now, not at all really.”

“Whenever you think that you know someone,” Pasco said, “there’s that moment where it all turns, where they do—”

“Stop waxing philosophical!” I said. We didn’t want to open the front gate of their house, so we scaled the chain link fence. I crawled over one leg after the other, and then I pulled Laura over. We knelt behind a water bin next to their drain pipe underneath a window where the light was on. We knelt on our knees under the barrel and peered up into the room. Three hushed voices were talking in another room far enough away that we couldn’t hear them, and the room we peered into had a half-eaten birthday cake and some red wrapping paper on a dining room table.

The family came back into the dining room where there was a record player. Bob turned on the light next to the player and the room was casted in a warm glow. He put a record on the player, and turned on the machine. Familiar skips of wet air and Bob said loud enough, drunk enough, proud enough that we could hear through the open window, “This was your mother, Caroline. Ten years ago. Singing to a sold out house in Lincoln. Wonderful voice. Glorious voice.”

Caroline and Bob were silent as the string section started to play. Wanita usually looked hard and harried when I saw her in the grocery store, her hair sprung out in strange places from the summer humidity, but while she waited for herself to sing, both someone who was her and wasn’t her anymore, a decade later, a kind of pleasant pink-faced expression crossed her face and she looked pleased. The recording was bad, and even out in the yard, beyond the screen on the window, I could hear Wanita take a big breath. A breath recorded all of those years ago.

But then she started to sing. I haven't always been taken by classical singing, but her voice was something otherworldly, inhuman almost, like the sound came from somewhere supernatural. I sometimes feel that way about baking, that some supernatural force was guiding my hand, but the products were always disappointingly human when they arrived, puffed, out of the oven. But her voice was different. The notes sounded like they were hanging out air, plucked gloriously out of something timeless. The color of her voice was pure. I sat underneath the window with chills pricking my forearms. The skin around my scalp tingled. As she continued the song, about love and loss I knew even though it was in Italian, my eyes welled, and I clutched at the grass on the ground to stop from crying. Her voice was magnificent, tremendous, and now, all these years later, I still wish Otis hadn't smashed that record and I could listen to it again.

I could hear Laura's breathing go raspy as the record continued to play. I looked at Laura. I watched her. Pasco, on Laura's other side, turned at saw me looking. He winked. Laura seemed like she would be moved by fine things, and I was right. She was. When the recorded finished, Caroline clapped and cheered. Bob kissed his wife on the cheek, like she'd finished recording only yesterday. The Mintzes say there, looking pleased behind the birthday cake long after the record had finished. They didn't start the record over again, but instead sat there looking sated, like they'd just had big meal and were a little sleepy and a little dreamy.

"She had you, Caroline, just a few months after that," Bob said, squeezing his wife's hand.

"You made me sing like that," Wanita said, and I looked at her, in the candlelight, her hair soft and her eyes glittering, and I couldn't understand how anyone would see malice in her again. I suspected that someone who could sing that well wouldn't begrudge anyone, especially children, of their own meager talents, half of what hers had been. But stranger things had happened.

Caroline's face turned, and she looked near tears. She ran to her room. Wanita rushed after her down the hallway, to a room we couldn't see. I got up from the grass and ran around the house,

peering in windows, carefully, with Laura and Pasco at my back. I found them, Caroline and her mother, in Caroline's room, on the other side of the house. Caroline was crying, and her mother was rocking her on the bed, stroking her hair. The window was open, and mosquitoes were collecting on it, attracted to the light. "I'm glad I did it. I am. I am," Wanita was saying over and over to her daughter. I don't think of myself as a particularly excellent judge of character, but it was easy to see that night that Wanita was sincere. Laura watched silently. She moved in front of us so I think she didn't think we could see her, but I saw her cry. We waited there for what seemed like a very long time, crouched on our knees outside the Mintz house, until Caroline fell asleep and the house finally went dark. We were very quiet, until Laura turned around, smiled at me, and took my hand. I took out the paper and pen that I started to carry and handed it to Laura. She wrote the note, on her thigh, in their black pants.

Laura took the crowbar she'd packed, and we moved back to the broken window in the front yard. Pasco boosted her up to the window, and she opened the window with an expertise that surprised me. Laura went inside. She wasn't gone very long until she returned to the window, beaming, with Wanita's record in her hand.

The next afternoon Laura called me on the phone. "She called the police," Laura hissed. "I could have told you she would."

I went out to my front stoop to get the newspaper, spread it out over my kitchen counter, and picked up the phone again. "Where is it?" I asked.

"In Crime Page 4."

I scanned to the right part of the paper. "Wanita Mintz of 505 Hawks Court reported the theft of her prized possession: a 1965 recording of her solo concert appearance at the Lied Center in Lincoln. That was the only sign of disturbance, and the Mintzes report that nothing else was stolen from their house. They also report receiving the following notice: 'Wanita your time is past...a

glorious time...but past...now its time for you to be happy for those who are coming after.” If you have anything to report about the whereabouts of the prized recording or the mysterious note leaver, call Art Taylor at the Wellspring Police Department.

3.

3.

“Stranger Danger” Pamphlet Compiled by Art Taylor

Since 1956, I have specialized in the HALTING of the victimization of children here in the Wellspring Sheriff’s Department. All those years ago I started hearing about SATANIC OR OCCULT activity, something that I would term “ritual” child abuse. I compiled this pamphlet to let you know the RULES, EXPECTATIONS, and LIMITATIONS you should could consider if your child says that she or he has been initiated into Satan’s embrace.

HOW TO STOP “STRANGER DANGER.”

For your protection, tell your children to turn down gifts from strangers and NEVER get into a stranger’s car. As far as I can tell, the “devil” makes the members of a Satanic cult kidnap children—mostly runaways, orphans, and other youths outside of the watchful eye of the world—so the cult members can do TERRIBLE AND BIZARRE things to them! Obviously these molesters are not always easy to spot. This means the child molester could be a pillar of our community. Wellspring, you can never know if a person is a SATANIC CULT MEMBER just by looking at him! Here are ways to predict the Satanism or the potential for adoption of Satanism in a friend or family member:

-Do they practice Santeria, Voodoo, or Freemasonry?

-Do they listen to Rock Music?

-Do they stargaze or set other life rituals by the movement of the stars?

-Do they burn incense and practice other East Indian arts?

-Do they believe in the healing powers of holistic medicines including the mixing of herbs, flowers, and teas?

-Do they worship the false gods of Hinduism, Buddhism or Mormonism?

No matter how many BUGABOOS might come out of walls, and as much as I, in my Duty as Town Sheriff, wish I could shut down all types of ritualistic behavior outside of worship of the Good Book, I cannot. The offender might be abusing your child in ways we don't wish to consider. If your child describes being indoctrinated, I believe that your child has come into contact with a severely PSYCHOTIC, or even MENTALLY DISTURBED, offender. It is NOT my goal in writing and distributing this pamphlet to disturb you. It is NOT to make you mistrust your neighbors. From my point of view, any offender who might be STALKING a Wellspring child is not a member of our community, but rather is a stranger. But I cannot say this for certain. Instead, I must insist that you be watchful and weary of your neighbors, your fellow parishioners, and, indeed, if you find yourself indulging too much in SWEETS, ALCOHOL, or GLUTTONY, be wary, Wellspring residents, of yourself.

4.

Ruth

Geraldine Jimenez's mother was listed as a missing person until her 90th birthday in 1978. And then they took her off. Listed her as dead only then. Can you imagine, believing that a woman could wander around the woods until she was 90? What would she have lived on all that time? Berries? Leaves? Jesus, she must have become a hell of a shot with a bow and arrow. I know they didn't really believe there was some ratty old woman, naked except for her Grandma Moses hair wandering around those woods, but really, can you imagine? Geraldine once asked Bob, the sheriff before Art, to declare her mother dead once and for all. "Can't you give my mother some peace?" Geraldine asked. But Bob said, "Procedure, darlin'," and patted Geraldine's hand. I hate when men pat my hand, and I bet Geraldine hated it, too.

Geraldine told me the story of her mother's disappearance. One summer, Muriel Jimenez lost her job as a nurse in Cozad, about twenty miles from here. She couldn't find another one. She wasn't a very good nurse, and if that was embarrassing to Geraldine, think about how embarrassing it must have been for Muriel. After Muriel lost her job, Geraldine says that her mother was home more than she wanted to be, stuck reading the Bible and drinking coffee, looking through want ads and organizing the silverware drawer, the junk drawer, the kitchen cabinets, the mail. Geraldine's father drove a tractor on a wheat farm operation about 25 miles outside of town, and when he came home, feet sore, Muriel would rub his back, his neck, for hours. Over the next few years, Geraldine said that Muriel shriveled up, believing herself useless. Muriel was put in charge of her young brother, Hector, Pasco's father. Muriel's hands got thinner and fluttered often—she couldn't have

injected anyone with a needle without just about busting their blood vessels at that point. Her face got fatter. Her shoulders stooped. She wore grooves bigger than her backside into the couch, and dented all the cushions from sitting still so long. She spent hours cutting her nails in the bathroom with a pair of tiny scissors, peeling each nail from right to left off of her fingertips, slowly.

Muriel Jimenez was a Catholic. The kind of woman who believed in literal interpretations of the Bible, crucifixes bleeding red, Jesus' face in the pattern of Evergreens on the winter-brown fields, Hosannas sung for dead babies, harps (angelic, otherwise). She thought God was punishing her with uselessness. Her belief in messages from God bled into the natural world. The sparrow dead on their snowy front lawn wasn't shot by the boogery Jim Clancy next door and wrapped with a red ribbon for Geraldine, the girl he was sweet on. Instead, Jesus sent it, Muriel thought, because her husband had skipped church to go fishing one Sunday morning. The sun didn't come out for two months because her daughter kissed Jim Clancy once, over the low fence dividing their property because she wanted to see if he had extra nose hairs that made him so snotty. Muriel thought God was shaming her for Geraldine's bad grades and kissing excursions, for her husband's untucked shirts and drinking binges. Once, when Muriel and Geraldine were searching for rocks in a nearby creek bed, she turned over a plain rock that was painted blue and white on its underside. That was magic to Muriel, a surprise, a sign from God, and, as Geraldine watched, Muriel kneeled in the water, dampening her skirt from knee to crotch to do a Hail Mary.

On her 14th birthday in 1920, Muriel brought Geraldine to a local diner for French fries, instructing her to eat only half of the bag. The other half was for the homeless, Muriel said, for the orphans outside. There were no orphans outside, though, and the only homeless, too men frozen in Denver, got all of the canned food they could eat at the First Street Mission. But Muriel thought otherwise. She saw the world differently, so Geraldine left the fries in their package and a paper cup of ketchup outside underneath the restaurant's stoop. The next day when Geraldine passed by the

diner, the fries were gone, the paper cup drained of its ketchup. Geraldine never knew who ate them. But after that, she didn't doubt her mother's sincere conviction for a second. She started to think that her mother's religiousness was starting to become a little obsessive, but she also didn't see any reason why her mother's belief couldn't be entirely real.

Then, not so many months after Geraldine turned 14, her mother disappeared. After Geraldine returned home in the morning after spending the night at a friend's, her father told her that her mother walked into the woods for firewood, for edible mushrooms to dry. Muriel told him she'd be back in an hour. Her father listened to several radio programs, peering out the curtains for his wife, but she didn't return. Late in the evening, Carl put on his galoshes to search. The fog had rolled in from over the lake, and his flashlight beam couldn't cut through it, he told Geraldine later. So he went back inside, stomach sunk low into itself, and thought maybe his wife had walked to Joe's bar down by the wharf, had several pitchers like she sometimes did when she wanted to forget about God's wrath, and lost track of time.

A little later, a group of men from town, armed with their flashlights because it stays so dark those January mornings, went out to the woods to hunt for Muriel. They looked in all the bars and the teashop in town and in all the bars and teashops in Cozad, knocked on Muriel's friends' houses, looked in the churches, the nut house and the jail over there. Old Jimmy drove over to the next town to see if Muriel had sloshed it up at the bar there and then slept it off in a motel. But they didn't find her there, either. Muriel had lived in Wellspring her whole life. She would never have gotten lost in those woods. The local police were called soon after, all the way over from Kearney, and they did the same thing as the townsmen had: they searched in the woods, talked to people, inquired around. Geraldine remembered a policeman saying to her father, "Some women just leave." But what they could have said, what they should have said, what they were all thinking was, "Some women just disappear." Even now, over 50 years later, no trace of Muriel has ever been found.

I think one of the reasons maybe that Geraldine never talked about her mother was because she didn't believe she was gone. For a long time, I think she'd accepted that her mother had fallen or leapt off a cliff or something. But then she stopped believing her own head, later, when she was getting up in years. It's not that she was senile. It might have been her medicine. Her death was real painful, and they gave her medicine to ease it. Plus, Wellspring that summer started doing something funny to people. I think it was all the darkness. All the dreariness. Those crazy stories. All those crazy stories getting blended up in all that confinement, seeing people whenever you went out to the grocery store or the one movie theater.

I don't know if Geraldine missed her mother. I didn't know Geraldine particularly well, but I can say for certain that there was something about her. She served as the stickum or cohesive force in Wellspring in a way that I can't describe in a way that would make any sense to you. Her powers, her magnetism don't even make sense to me now. Geraldine was the PTA president, even after her daughters left Wellspring. She went to church every weekend, but most people did that sort of thing. She was a very quiet person. She talked about not liking the way her hair looked some Sundays, when she couldn't get the curl in right, but she didn't say much else. She'd never tell you if she didn't like the color of your hair, and when you asked her for advice, she'd say, *Whatever you decide will be the right thing.*

But I'm sure that she did miss her mother. I still miss my mother every day, and my mother died over twenty years ago now. But I used to think that she'd still be there when I'd drive by her house, weeding her garden or something. Sometimes, when I used to be able to, I would drive by her house. And when she wasn't there, I don't know, there was still a moment when I thought she might be at the store. If you find me out wandering the yard naked with my Grandma Moses braids, bring me inside and ask me again. Maybe when my mind goes a little bit more than it has so far, it will be easier for me to figure things like that out.

Geraldine was really persuaded that her mother was still alive in the early '70s, though right around the time Geraldine died. She was all doped up on all sorts of medications, and Victoria Dortmund kept winding up on the beach with those natty stuffed animals. And the little girl kept reporting this unkempt, shoeless woman taking her out in the middle of the night to talk to the birds. But no one could figure out who was doing the taking, and everyone in town at least *recognized* everyone else. And somewhere in her terrible pain and her fear of death and the dope that they had her on, Geraldine became convinced that the person taking Victoria was her mother, who would have been over 80 at this point.

Geraldine was in real terrible pain these last few months, and she often came to talk to Pasco about it because Pasco wasn't hard or difficult or even strange. Geraldine's husband was dead, and she seemed sort of glad about it. He wasn't a bad man in particular. She just married him when she was very young, still reeling from her mother's death five years earlier, and she'd never known life without him. She seemed giddy, like a child just free of her parents in those months after his death. She didn't seem like she missed him, not really. She'd lost her cat, who she seemed to miss. Her daughter and granddaughter lived in in Phoenix, a place that seemed strange and hot to all of us, most of all to Geraldine. She'd driven across Colorado once with her husband to visit her daughter and her daughter's husband's house, a single-story stucco place with neutral furniture, half-sunning itself underneath a pair of palms. Geraldine said that she could never put her finger on what made her so nervous about the house, about her daughter's life, but she was nervous about it, and refused ever to return.

After the three of us had finished eating that night, Geraldine told us that she doubled her dose so she could cook that day, but there were so few pleasures left for her, so she did it anyway. At that point, Geraldine had been seeing things. The one time that I had dinner with her and Pasco before the end, she got up several times in the middle of dinner and went to look out the front door.

I wouldn't have known what she was doing, but she told me she was real upset because she couldn't tell what's real and what's not anymore. She always thought her mind was something she could rely on, but by the end, she knew that it wasn't. Those days Geraldine looked pale and sick, her eyes seemed too big in her skull, her skin looked green against the grey under her eyes. Looking at her, I tried to remember that I believed, that I believed in holy light and redemption and an endless afterlife of glowing purple and green stained glass, like the glass in the church my parents took me to a few times when they were trying to get out of the habit of bacon and porch sitting Sunday mornings. I imagined heaven as having years of the endless comforting flesh of Mrs. Stevens, a fat old grandmother I'd always remembered, singularly from that church, welcoming me to the holy gates. But I didn't know if I believed in God when I saw Geraldine, even though this was when I needed to believe, more than ever.

"You look like Jimmy Stewart," Geraldine said. We'd finished dessert, and Geraldine spoke to Pasco, who had on a black sweater and black hat. His resemblance wasn't her delusion, but too generous a description nonetheless. "Just dashing."

For one reason or another that got Pasco crying.

"Pasco," Geraldine said, putting her hand on his cheek. "You don't need to cry."

But Pasco cried anyway, appropriately, the way I felt that a very reasonable person should be able to cry. Great lunging waves of feeling rolled up from my gut and into the back of my throat as I watched Geraldine and Pasco, but I didn't cry.

"I don't mean to shame you, but there's nothing to be sad about," Geraldine said, patting her nephew's face. "I'll just be dead."

Pasco put his head down into his hand. He didn't want to hear a thing about Geraldine being dead.

“My body will be gone. And I’ll be gone. There’s nothing sad about that. They say you shouldn’t get sentimental,” Geraldine said, laughing. “I’m in pain.”

“I know you are,” said Pasco, putting his hand on Geraldine’s forearm.

“Do you remember when Mrs. Taylor was going, Pasco?”

“I can’t say that I do,” Pasco responded.

“Mrs. Taylor’s mind was not good,” Geraldine said. She to be good friends with Art’s mother before Audrey died. They went to church together every Sunday, and she loved Mrs. Taylor so much and felt so sorry that Audrey had a mean and nasty son. Although these were not the words that Geraldine used because she wouldn’t, and also because Mrs. Taylor didn’t likely say that exactly, but instead said that her son was not as empathic as he could have been. Audrey was a kind lady and kindness should beget kindness, and Geraldine said she patted her friend’s shoulder and said that wasn’t the way the world worked at all. “I got a call from Art that Audrey gone out on top of her garage and started hollering about peaches, how she simply wanted warm peaches on top of her vanilla ice cream, and she was hollering, really hollering, loud enough that the neighbors had to come out to get her. And you wouldn’t believe what a woman whose mind is gone, the kind of strength she has. It took that big neighbor, Mr. Langston, to restrain Audrey, who was out there on the roof in her bare feet. I never want to be like that, Pasco. Hollering some nonsense. You won’t ever let me get that way?”

“I figure I owe you a more dignified ending than wandering around downtown, giggling about sour cream,” Pasco said.

I laughed at that, like a schoolgirl, I’m a bit ashamed to say, but Pasco was serious. And Geraldine herself was a bit of a psychic, whether she knew it or not.

5.

5.

Another Sighting of the Bogeyman of Wellspring?

Wellspring World Herald, September 1971

Little Robby Baker was out early one morning hunting grouse with his pellet gun when he thought he saw something moving in the Schwartzwald, north of the city center. The thing was about as tall as a woman, but as hunched and stooped over as most of the local inhabitants of the nursing home. The creature's hair was long and grey, he says, and she looked to be wearing a cotton nightgown and green galoshes.

"I mean, I hear the stories," says Baker, 11. "But I never really believed all them tales about Muriel Jimenez still being out here in these woods. She'd be old as dirt by now. I'd reckon nearly 90. My grandma's in a home already and she's only 75."

There have been numerous so-called sightings of Muriel Jimenez since her disappearance from her Wellspring home 51 years ago this year. This reporter is unsure about why making up stories about Muriel Jimenez's "disappearance" is such an important pastime here in Wellspring. Her death has a plausible explanation. By all accounts, Muriel was a depressive and perhaps slightly psychotic woman, and, for those of you who don't know it, we do have a large body of water in our town. But perhaps our great collective love for Muriel's daughter Geraldine convinces that her dear mother is still with us. That seems cruel to me, but I alone cannot account for an entire populace's behavior.

The first few years after Muriel's disappearance, there were dozens of sightings. There were stems and leaves of edible berries on a path near the beach. Those had to belong to Muriel, people

said. There was a discarded single galosh—green, a woman’s size 7—filled with rainwater and mud in the middle of dense underbrush. There was the report of a young Muriel hanging, swinging, from a noose of her own making in a tree deep in the forest. When the police ran into the woods to cut down the body, however, a trembling Gabriel Faure, disoriented from his unease in dark woods and his addiction to a laudanum and rhubarb tincture, realized he had been hallucinating. Faure, around this same time, also reported a brightly-lit clearing of gnomes and an eternal abyss, a black hole if you will, in the very same forest.

In the subsequent 50 years, more outlandish reports of Mrs. Jimenez have continued to plague our town. In 1930, there were sightings of a woman, long hair flying, running naked across a bluff as witnesses watched, gape-mouthed, from the sand below. In 1940, she was said to have built a shack in the middle of the woods, to which she’d lure men, strip them down and paint them, and chase them through the woods with a flaming torch until they were so exhausted they had no other choice but to let her have her way with them. In 1948, a middle-aged woman was believed to have pulled an errant boater from the lake right before a storm, saving the inexperienced athlete from waves she certainly wouldn’t have been able to handle. In the 1950’s, a slew of at least three individuals followed a path of braided leather to a makeshift hut in which they found a leaf-covered blanket, blackened pieces of aluminum foil, and a week-old fire. All of them attributed the dwelling to Muriel.

If Muriel Jimenez were still alive today, she’d be 85 years old. It’s impossible, people of Wellspring, for a woman to live alone in the woods for that many years. She had no doctor; surely even a bad cold from eating improperly cooked pigeon could kill a woman of such an advanced age. And Muriel has always been reported to be alone. How could anyone live that kind of completely solitary life for over 50 years? Would she even be able to speak anymore? Would she want to?

Regardless of these logical considerations, however, the sightings continue. The reality behind the sightings could be attributed to any number of things. Darkness. Hallucinations in impressionable minds. Inebriation through drugs or alcohol. Or, my personal favorite, superstition. The kind of superstition that lets blind men see has kept a dead woman alive for nearly 60 years.

“Who is that person in the woods?” Baker says. “There’s got to be something out there. I’m not making anything up, and my eyes are as good as anything.”

6.

Interview #2: Art Taylor and Ruth Jensen, September 18, 1971

This interview was conducted by Wellspring Sheriff Arthur B. Rubenstein on the 4th day of February in the year of Our Lord 1971. The interviewer is one Ruth Jensen of 3049 Park Street regarding the disappearance of Mrs. Laura Ann Dortmund on the morning of November 18, 1971.

Taylor: Everybody in town thought that Laura Dortmund was happy.

Jensen: Sure. Just like they think that Bag N' Save's produce is fresh and Fox and Hound is good. They lack judgment.

Taylor: A harsh criticism of our populace, don't you think, Ruth?

Jensen: In my book it's a positive to fail to examine things too closely.

Taylor: Let me rephrase that. Laura was happy. And why wouldn't she be? She had a loving husband, a beautiful child, a wonderful life. Why would a woman like that kill herself?

Jensen: I don't know how many times we have to rehash her dissatisfaction with her life.

Taylor: None of her other friends mention a dissatisfaction, and certainly none of them mention it with the fervor that you do.

Jensen: You mean Mitsi? And Patsy? And Gladys? Well, they wouldn't.

Taylor: You're a truth teller, then?

Jensen: I wouldn't expect you to understand, Art.

Taylor: Explain it to me, then.

Jensen: She was suffocated by this town. She saw no escape. Family, life in a small town can be hard for some people.

Taylor: This town is beautiful. The community is welcoming. Victoria is a dream child, a beauty--

Jensen: That's how you see it, Art, but that's not how she saw it.

Taylor: Don't touch me, Ruth! I don't need to be coddled like a child. I don't have a perception here, Mrs. Jensen, simply, I am stating the facts. Jim Dortmund was Laura's high school sweetheart and the love of her--

Jensen: That isn't a fact at all, Art.

7.

Ruth

In September, the town whispered about a mysterious drifter who took up residence at the Lakeside Arms, a seedy apartment building next to Wellspring Lake. Merle Allen was the kind of man Art hated. I don't remember the exact year Merle came to Wellspring, but when I noticed him, it was like he'd always been around. The other Wellspring men's doughy faces all but disappeared in strong sunlight, but Merle was solid and capable in all types of weather, like good siding on a house. Merle was dark-featured and tanned. He often looked like he hadn't showered for a while, and the women of Wellspring liked that. They liked the way Merle's sideburns blended into his cheek, but Merle never fell for any of them, no matter how many soufflés, cakes, and pies they baked him. Merle didn't care about obligation, culinary or otherwise, and he didn't want to work an honest day. He did only odd jobs, installing shelves in lonely housewives' basements or weeding elderly widows' gardens. He kept to himself and could barely even muster the extroversion to tip his hat to the First Pres pastor on Sundays.

A man like that, new to town with no friends or obligation, was the topic of conversation with the old men in sweat-rimmed baseball caps and old women with sprayed-down permanents who spent their mornings drinking water-slop coffee at the diner. Rumor had it that Mr. Allen used to cook at a fine restaurant in Omaha, but something terrible happened there. Nobody knew what the terrible thing was, but everybody tried to figure it out. Someone told me Merle left his wife pregnant and barefoot to follow the Allman Brothers' national tour. Someone else said Merle's fine thighs were discovered by a travelling photographer and he posed in his underwear for a Nancy men's magazine in the restaurant's kitchen. Others thought he might have been a mafia dropout. An

alcoholic. A knife fighting renegade who slashed a man's face when he left a shitty tip. But some of the rumors about Merle weren't so innocent. People said he was fired from his job because of funny business with a young girl. A girl of 12, a girl of 9, maybe that was Merle's preference, the town imagined. Geraldine saw Merle at the store once when he was obviously under the haze of new love. He was so discombobulated that he kept scanning the jellies and jams, like the bread he needed just might be hiding behind them. "He was giggling like a little school girl," Geraldine said, "and he kept making jokes about peanut butter. I'm no psychic, but even a blind man could see Merle was far gone in love." We didn't know who Merle loved, but we knew one thing for sure: Merle Allen wouldn't stay in Wellspring long. He was my prime suspect.

That Wednesday, Pasco and Laura were more anxious to get started than ever. Laura was my dear friend, but I never understood her entirely. If you would have seen Laura Dortmund on the street, in church, on the sidewalk, you would have thought she had her life together. You would have thought she had plaid draperies and well-considered flatware, a husband who could barbecue and repair things, a daughter whose teeth grew in straight and fell out at regular intervals. If you would have seen Laura Dortmund on the street, you would have thought she understood the world. The kind of woman who would renew her drivers' license months before it expired, send her family cards on their birthdays, prune her magnolia bushes. But I knew Laura well enough to know she wasn't that kind of woman. Really, Laura couldn't handle most things. But one thing Laura could do well, I'd discovered over the last month, was spy. She was never sweaty or pale or twitchy. Instead, she was wide eyed and nimble footed when we ran through the woods, silently bounding over sticks and leaves. She could contort her body to fit into small spaces. Crouch and kneel and climb like a kid.

We crept out of Pasco's house. It was hotter that early fall than I remembered in years past, and it was so dark in those woods that year, darker than I'd ever found it to be before. Like the trees

suddenly sprouted so many branches the moon couldn't even shine its way through them. Like the darkness was newly thick along the roads and sidewalks, creeping in slowly from the lake. Anyone could live in those woods, I thought. Life was getting to me. The darkness outside looked comforting and soft, and inside my lava lamp bubbled all red and slow in way that made me nervous. I couldn't sit like a civilized person in a hard-backed chair. That night, the darkness wanted us. It wasn't far through the woods to the Lakeside Arms, and we knew how to spot Merle's apartment because he told someone about his garden. No one else had a garden at the Lakeside Arms. Sure enough, the last apartment closest to the woods was Mr. Allen's—there was a patch of tomatoes and scraggly carrots. We crouched behind a bush where we could see into his brightly-lit living room. There was his sofa and coffee table and television set, broadcasting, surprisingly, *All in the Family*. Merle sat on the couch. He put his feet on the coffee table, and his cat jumped into his lap. I don't know if you've ever done it, but watching people who think they're completely alone is a surprisingly intimate experience. They scratch their stomachs. They take off their socks and pick their toenails. Their faces express feelings they'd never want anyone else to see: their gurgly love for some small-toothed television actor, their half-delirious relief in passing gas, their contentment in petting purring animals.

After his program was over, Merle, followed by his cat, walked onto his patio, and stood only a few dozen feet from us. Merle pulled a bundle of sticks from his woodpile. He kindled a small fire in a stone-lined fire pit. His cat's ears perked when the fire sparked. Merle added sticks until the fire crackled loud and blazing in the darkness. The lake's waves came insistently, consistently, up onto the beach, and with the sound of crackling sticks, I almost felt comfortable, like I was on a camping trip, crouched there behind that bush. Merle retrieved three mixing bowls and a piece of edged aluminum foil from his kitchen. He set the foil on a metal grill over the fire, took a ball of dough from one of the bowls, and pushed the pastry into foil's corners. He picked up a Granny

Smith Apple out of another bowl and peeled it, a bright tendril of green skin flashing in the firelight, and cored and sliced the apple into the pastry. Laura raised her eyebrows at me. Merle peeled, cored, and sliced five more apples, slowly, methodically, staring at the flame. I raised myself up on my heels and saw he was making a beautiful apple pie—the slices were thin and arranged in a precise design. A piece of art. Merle poured a mixture from the last bowl over the apples, and topped the pie with two slices of glistening yellow American cheese.

As the pie mixture sputtered and bubbled over the flame, the cat paced round and round the fire with a strange leaping and jerky quickness that made the fire look more like a Satanic ritual than anything as innocent as pie baking. Merle watched the cat and its shadow circle and circle. His pupils moved back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, and he looked possessed with his eyes wild like that and the fire flickering in them and the animal darting so quickly around. Merle leapt up from his lawn chair, laughing like a half-brained child, and chased the cat. Pasco crumpled in half in silent laughter, putting his head on the ground to keep quiet, his shoulders shaking. Merle chased the cat close to the flame. It must have singed its tail because I smelled burning fur. Merle ran too close to the fire and nearly knocked over the whole apparatus. I squeezed Ruth and Pasco's hands painfully hard enough that nobody giggled aloud. Merle's laughter reached a pitch as high as the sopranos in the Second Pres choir, and he howled like a creature himself, yowling in a fearful duet with his pet. My feet were numb, but I couldn't move them. I was immobilized, bewitched. Laura put her hand over her mouth. Merle was terrible. He was beautiful. The flames leaped higher. Merle's and the cat's yowls were loud over the quiet cicadas muted by the lake's waves. I saw Merle's primal instincts, animal, feral, brutish, had to be satisfied behind closed doors, in unpredictable ways. If I could have joined Merle in his yowling and circling, in his chasing of the cat, I would have.

“He's a lunatic,” Pasco whispered, rustling a piece of bark louder than was cautious.

“Agreed,” Laura said without turning her eyes away from the spectacle.

“Do we think he’s our man?” I asked, looking from Laura to Pasco.

Merle sat on his lawn chair, panting heavily. He’d pulled the pie from the fire with a towel, tore off blackened-bottom pie pieces with his fingers, and ate them, occasionally throwing hunks to the cat, who licked the sugar and apple from the crust. Merle ate the pie like he’d never eaten before. He ripped shreds of pie with bits of clinging filling and stuffed them into his mouth, scattering crumbs all over himself and the ground. Laura gasped. Pasco nearly convulsed with the effort required to keep his laughter silent. Merle ate enormous bites, filling his cheeks with fruit and pie crust like a squirrel that didn’t know if it would find more food. His eyes closed as he stuffed big, messy bites into his mouth. I imagined the nearly-lascivious feeling of wet pie smeared all over my mouth as Merle greased his lips, his cheeks, his nose with filling. I never wanted to stop watching Merle eat. I wanted to bring him large pizzas, bowls of chow mein, buckets of fried chicken, baby back ribs and buttered corn, tubs of ice cream. He was horrifying. He was magnificent.

“He certainly could be our man,” Laura said, still transfixed. “What do we do?”

“We do what we said we’d do,” I said. “Let him know we’re onto him.”

So we did. We were getting bolder. We saw strange things, and we wanted to let Merle know we’d seen them. If Merle knew someone was watching him, he would be less likely to continue to abduct Victoria Dortmund, if he really was the culprit. That was what I told myself anyway, that was what we told each other so we could seem ethically-minded. We held something over Merle now. He had done something bizarre, something that would get him shunned in Wellspring. Wellspringers would believe our story over his because we were good and God-fearing and upright, and Merle was a strange drifter who was unfriendly at the supermarket.

We waited behind that log until Merle brought the last piece of pie inside. We waited until he turned off the lights. Then I scribbled Merle’s note on a piece of paper I’d brought from home, a scratchy message written on the patio’s rough-poured concrete. It was bumpy and full of broken

letters. I was giddy. I couldn't remember feeling this elevated before, this alive, like my head was floating feet above my body. I don't think I'd ever been delirious before. Laura and Pasco grinned. They snickered, and their energy made me unafraid. The night made me invincible. I picked the sliding door to Merle's apartment with a hairpin. Spies needed supplies, after all. It wasn't hard to jimmy open the lock. The cat rubbed against my legs. My heart beat so fast I kicked her away, and she fell back with a surprised mew. On the kitchen island, uncovered, I saw it: the last piece of pie. Its edges were crooked, its filling falling onto the plate, but I'd never seen anything that looked more delicious. I'd never seen anything I wanted to eat more. I wrapped the pie in its aluminum, and in its place, like some kind of sick, all-knowing Santa Claus, I left the note for Merle. It read: "We've seen what you do at night. We've seen you get out of control with your cat. What else do you do with her? And if you act that disturbing with a pet, what have you done with Julie Qillag? What have you been doing with Victoria Dortmund? Don't think we're not watching you..."

The note in its spot, I slid closed the door and took off running, waving my arms to signal Laura and Pasco to run with me. We were silent as we ran through the woods again, behind everyone's houses, behind all of the shops. We grinned. Everything was silent. Everything was always so quiet in that town, like everyone had died, like there was a sleep curse that would last a thousand years. When we reached Pasco's house, we all ate bites of the pie, hysterically civilized again, with forks. We put the rest into a Tupperware container to protect it from ants and vermin and slid it into Pasco's Spy Shrine. We labeled it "Merle Allen's Apple Pie, September 6, 1971."

Merle didn't report the break in to Art like we knew he wouldn't. Instead, when I saw him at the store, he looked pale and sick, his eyes rimmed like he'd been sitting up all night. In fact, that was exactly what he was doing. I know because I sneaked back to the Lakeside Arms again one night, very late, and there was Merle on his back patio, the cat at his feet, a shotgun in his lap, watching the woods and the water for whoever was out there watching him.

8.

*LAURA DORTMUND'S NOTES TO HERSELF ABOUT
DINNER PARTY*

5am--Wake. Remove overnight mayonnaise facial. Reveal newly luminous skin (God willing). Put roast in the oven, low at 350 degrees. (Roast must perfect because Helen's was so good the other week and people must enjoy it the way they enjoyed Helen's roast)

6am-- Cook eggs, bacon for Jim, Vicky. Eat four grapefruit halves, self.

7am--Walk Vicky to school. Return home and line up hourly lipstick changes: Mulberry, Cherry, Raisin, Rose, Ruby, and dress.

8am--Get Jim out of the house and send him to work. Inevitably rinse the bottom of Jim's shoes like cleaning up for Jesus before sending him out the door and let Jim wear the stupid clip-on necktie that he will inevitably scavenge from the bottom of the drawer, instead of the beautiful silk ones Mother sends from Lincoln

9am--Call mother. Dress for party. Nice teal dress with the drop waist.

10am--Watch Ruth start baking the sponge cakes. Ask Ruth to help with mixing, show particular strokes.

12pm—Ruth will finish the roast and the vegetables, put the cake in the refrigerator. It will be a terrible moment. I will feel the air suck out of the room, the lights dim. Ruth will say goodbye at the door. He will say, "Have a great party, Laura!" But I won't.

1pm—The party must be beautiful. But it won't be. Decorate the table and put out the place settings. Start preparing the stupid pigs in a blanket.

2pm—Victoria comes home from school. Tell her not to mess up anything, eat anything, or talk to me if she can help it for heaven's sake.

3pm—Afternoon cocktail. Lay out what Jim must wear to the party.

4pm—Nap on couch. Wake. Curl hair. Put on silk organza and floured apron to look like I've been baking.

5pm—Jim returns. Tell him to put on the outfit that's been laid out in our bedroom. When he wears it, tell him he looks handsome. Take Vicky to Mrs. Mahone's and give her a kiss on the forehead when saying goodbye. MUST kiss Vicky.

6pm—The party starts. Wear mulberry lips. Take one minute for breathing exercises when guests arrive. Serve cocktails.

7pm—Change to Cherry lips. One minute of breathing exercise. Serve appetizers. Assure guests that the best is still to come.

8pm—Change to Raisin. One minute. Serve roast and veggies. Pray that nobody else has used Merle because Jim can scent a man a mile away. Jim doesn't need to use his nose for those purposes.

9pm--Change to Rose. One minute. Serve dessert. Add fresh strawberries and pour the sauce on plates. Fancy. Fancier than Helen's party, more original, too. Try to convince self that this party matters.

10pm—Change to Ruby. After dinner drinks. Brandy, unless anyone objects. Re-fill aggressively so people get too tired to stay for long. Get everyone out before 11pm.

After—Send Jim to pick up Vicky. Go to sleep. Sleep for as long as like next day. Remember, there is nothing much to do. Very little to do, but still can't do it all that well.

9.

Ruth

I called Pasco and Laura to meet again on the next Wednesday after that first time we'd gone spying on my neighbors. I remember it was Wednesday because Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday had been unbearable. I snapped at repairmen come to fix my refrigerator, my leaky sink, my stalled car battery. I felt urges to kick my dog, urges so strong that I had to kick the wall instead. I walked around with bruised toes that week. When I called Pasco and Laura that day, I thumped my hands against the walls I didn't kick. I pulled my phone cords as far as it could go, onto the porch, into hallways and the pantry, and jumped around like a kid when I said: "Let's all meet up again. Otis is playing bridge at his friend's in Kearney. He's staying overnight. My house. 8pm."

Laura's sister used to write her to invite her to her house in Lincoln for Christmas. Laura always made up some excuse: broken-down car, bum leg, beat-up brain. Her sister never liked Laura anyway so her invitations stopped coming, eventually replaced by "Happy Holidays!" scrawled with blue pen on greeting cards adorned with evergreen wreaths wrapped in red bows. Laura was the only one of us who had a family who ostensibly relied on her. She was the one who left her husband and child every week, and had to tell Jim reasons why she needed to go. Once, she just left the little girl, left the little girl alone without a sitter, because she said she couldn't stand staying in that house anymore, she couldn't stand being near that little girl anymore, who sat like she owned the house, owned the chair, owned all the food in the refrigerator, would stand up to owning the whole street if anybody would let her. Or at least that's what Laura told me anyway. I wouldn't trust what Laura said entirely.

Jim was worse than having no one. He had one those spitty mouths, the kind of lips that were always wet like he'd been licking them, even if his tongue hadn't touch his lips for hours. Once when she wore a to-die-for blue dress, Laura, in my kitchen, me eating deviled egg after deviled egg, and Laura picking the pimentos out of a block of cheese, she whispered to me that Jim told her that she looked fat in it. He told her that he didn't want to see her to eat anything for the next five days except for water and celery. Her parents were shadowy figures to us, a couple of old-time photographs in shaky black-and-white that she had, only, inexplicably, over the toilet on the second floor bathroom. They had gone away, that was all she would say. I used that bathroom only once, and I spent ten minutes looking at Laura with her parents. Once Laura told Jim that she was going to have a girls' night, bake a pie and drink wine with me and talk about the hunks on television. But that same night Laura convinced our Pasco and me both to walk out to the late-night gas station for another bottle of wine, after we'd finished ours. Jim was there, with Vicky, holding her hand and buying her the kind of chocolate candies that she'd wanted.

"She wouldn't stop talking about these," Jim had said, holding the candies out to Laura. "The chocolate bunnies." Laura looked at Vicky as if she couldn't imagine why Jim would buy her the candies, her nose curled into the kind of snarl that ex-boyfriends and her high school track coach would stop enemies and friends alike in her tracks. Vicky, her socks wilting, looked up at her mother and smiled, but Laura did not hug her daughter. She gave her back to Jim, who was looking over Pasco like he was were about to abduct his wife.

"Ruth and I had a craving for some cheap-o chardonnay," Laura said, smiling at Jim, carefully. "We ran into Ruth's dear friend Pasco here in the store."

"That's great," Jim said, looking at Laura and no one else. "Have fun." Jim took Vicky out of the store, and we went back to Geraldine's house with the bottle.

“There will be hell to pay,” Laura said. But somehow I doubted it. Laura had to come anyway, no matter that price. I don’t know if there really was a price anyway, since I had never seen any evidence that Laura wasn’t running the show at their house. She found the silence in her house too much to contend with, and no matter what time of day, the rugs muted the noises, she said, and the window shades muted the light, and Vicky and Jim muted Laura, day after day after day. Laura didn’t want this to be true, she told us, but it was. It was true no matter how much she tried to make herself believe that it wasn’t.

That night, Laura and Pasco came to my house bearing desserts, bottles of wine, tins of nuts. I let them in and took their food, and handed them plates and forks. They all pretended to eat Geraldine’s Cherries Jubilee and sip wine, but we were looking at one another, wondering who was going to speak first. Laura swilled her drink, finished off his pie, and said, “Let’s get this goddamn show on the road.” We all put our half-eaten desserts back on the table, I handed them the flashlights I’d collected from her storm cellar, and again we ran.

Mr. Swenson was our target that particular night. He was the old high school science teacher, and I’d heard rumors that he favored the girls in a way that was entirely inappropriate. He brought them sandwiches and let them stay after school to learn the concepts they’d gossiped through that day in class. He was usually slovenly and timid, but people said he sniffed girls’ hair and ran his finger across the backs of their thighs when they bent down to pick up their books. His wife came to church with a lot of makeup on her face, lashes clumpy and foundation thick, and we suspected it was because her husband hit her. We wanted to find out for sure.

We crept around the darkness of the Swensons’ vegetable garden, settling our stomachs down on the grass beneath one of their enormous picture windows and using our forearms to raise our necks and heads up to see through it. Sure enough, we picked the right window. Our spying good fortune made us think that these nights were fated, made us believe that some spirit of

mischief was with us. Framed by the window, Old Man Swenson sat, curled on a loveseat, weeping. He had his arms around his knees, and had burrowed his head as far as he could between them. The Mrs. towered above him, her face done, her enormous arms moving up and down like a preacher's. She held a wine bottle in one hand, her lips stained so dark that we could see their beet color from where we lay. She screamed at Mr. Swenson, into his ear, making him startle, then moving away from him, sitting on the couch and hissing quiet, angry words. This went on for minutes. This time, we didn't laugh. We were inert. My body felt like it was molded into gelatin; I couldn't have moved it if I'd wanted to. At one point, Mr. Swenson tried to get up, tried to embrace his wife, but she wasn't finished yet. As he came near her, she hit him, hard, winding up and walloping his shin with her wine bottle. He stumbled backwards with a yelp, falling face first over a footstool.

His wife was behind him now. He couldn't see her. He stared straight ahead, grabbing his hurt calf with his two hands. The Mrs. wasn't through yet, though, and with the same bottle, she threw her arm back and hit her husband again on his back, hard, in between his shoulder blades, on his thin spine. We could almost hear the great harrumph of air blowing out of Mr.'s lungs when the bottle crashed into his back, imagined the sound of all the wind being expelled from his body, a great belch like the one made by the creaking boats down at the harbor as they settled in their pilings. Mr. grabbed at his back, protecting his fragile spine with his two hands, cupping his fingers over his shoulder blades and pushing his fingers together, tent-like, across his spine, like a prayer, like a bandage. Tears were in his eyes. The Mrs. smiled as she looked at her husband, a look on her face like satisfaction. Like the cat who'd eaten the bird. Like the cat who'd spit up the bird and then eaten it again. I still think of that smile when I read about terrible things in the newspaper. Still smiling, the Mrs. smashed the bottle onto the hardwood floor, shattering it into hundreds of pieces. Mrs. Swenson left her husband alone on the floor then, and walked into a room where we couldn't see her anymore.

Mr. lay on the floor, holding his back with his two hands, rocking on his stomach from side to side. He lay there for a long time, rocking, crying, holding his back. Laura murmured, *Should we report her?* Pasco sighed, *Terrible. Terrible.* We wanted to feel sorry for the old man. We wanted to run inside, cradle him, tell him that he didn't need to take it anymore. But mostly, our sympathy failed us. He was a man. Any man who didn't keep his woman in line was less than a person. He'd fought in the war. He'd fathered a son. Now, he was an old man who cried. We hated him. We watched as Old Man Swenson let his arms fall to the floor. We watched as righted himself and wiped his eyes with his shirt collar. He hobbled to stand. He walked across the room, heavily leaning on his good leg, and switched off the lights. He went into another room. All of the lights in the Swenson house went off.

The pieces of the wine bottle shimmered in the moon lighting the dark room. They were so beautiful. We'd never wanted anything more than we wanted those pieces. We'd never felt like we were experiencing want with the wrong senses before. We wanted those shards with our tongues. We felt a growling in our stomachs, like we hadn't eaten for days, weeks. We knew we would never be full again if we didn't collect those shards of broken bottle. Pasco said he knew how to open doors with a hatpin. He'd done it before, in the war, he said. I didn't ask why. Laura had a hatpin. We crept towards the front door, leaned over, our backs hunched underneath the windows. I was starving. I clutched at Laura and Pasco with animal fingers. Pasco used the hatpin on the door latch. It was easy. The Swensons' door swung open. In the blackness of their front room, their things looked like anybody else's. They had books on a shelf. A radio in the corner.

In the sitting room, the shards of glass glimmered near a fireplace and a mantel with pictures of Mr. and Mrs., the kids and the grandkids, a couple of floral plants. We walked carefully, sure to walk toe-heel on the floorboards so they didn't creak. Then, I fell to my knees, ravenously gathering up the pieces of glass and pawing up the tiny bottle shards from the floor with the pads of our

thumbs. I was famished. We felt like we were stuffing ourselves on Christmas dinner. We balled up the tiny shards into tissues, filled our pockets with as many bottle shards as we could carry. We knew that Mr. would think that the Mrs., overcome by grief, had swept up the pieces in the night. The Mrs. would think that Mr., embarrassed by his weakness, had cleaned up the evidence.

[LEAVE A NOTE]

Back at the house, we went into my pantry. Behind boxes of rice and noodles, behind rows up of stocked-up ketchup and marshmallows and mustard, I showed them my Spy Shrine. Behind the pantry staples, I kept the note written to Horace Stacey. I labeled the shelf in front of the note with a piece of masking tape written in black marker: "Note between Reggie Smith and Horace Stacey, 8-28-63, Mrs. Gerrard's backyard." Silently, I put our shards of broken glass next to the bucket in the shrine and then pulled out a piece of masking tape and wrote on it with a black marker: "Shards of wine bottle. 1-8-63, Swenson Sitting Room." I pasted the tape in front of our new find, and we all stuffed ourselves into the pantry to look at the things we'd collected. With Ruth and Pasco, I never knew that we could feel so singular, so many bodies moving as one. I never knew that others could bring out such terror, such joy, such fear in us. Such unimaginable emptiness. I never realized how wonderful people could be. We never thought people were so terrible. Destructive. Mean. We hadn't realized before how powerless we were, how powerful. In our own houses, we'd never known. But now, whether we wanted to or not, we did. We knew.

Now, it was Otis at the front door. My husband was out there, too. He must have returned earlier that night. I opened the door for them both. "Gentlemen," I said. "Is something the matter?"

"I highly doubt it, Ruth," Art said. "I'm mighty sure that this has nothing to do with you."

Even though they were allies out of necessity, Art didn't entirely trust Otis. Arthur was the kind of man who if somebody did something wrong one time, they were written off forever. Otis had gotten too drunk at Roxane's one evening, sans me, and, when he'd left, too inebriated, he'd

rolled over Roxane's foot while she was trying to help him back his car up over a pile of over packed snow. Roxane called Art to take her to the hospital in Cozad, but before he'd gone, Otis had apologized to him, over and over, saying, "I never meant to hurt a woman. I'm not the kind of man to hurt a woman." But Art knew that he was that kind of man, no matter what else he said.

"There she is!" Otis said, pointing at Laura.

"She is here," Arthur sighed. He looked at me like I should have known better, like he expected more than to find Laura at my house.

"Sure she's here," I said. "Is there some reason she shouldn't be?"

"There is a reason," Otis said. "Laura left her girl alone."

Art walked over to where Laura was standing, and he put his arm around her. "Your husband says you've been unwell."

Laura nodded, looking at the floor.

"What did she do?" I asked. Laura didn't look up at me when I spoke.

"She left her little girl home alone, can you believe it?" Otis said. "Home alone at a 11 o'clock at night."

"My husband was called away for a meeting, Art," Laura said. "And I already had made these plans."

"The little girl called the police!" Otis said, walking to stand by me, and put his hand around my upper arm. Otis and Art looked so out-of-place somewhere that had been filled with so much light, just minutes before. "She was so scared."

"Laura, now, don't you worry," Art said. "We've heard how you've been having problems."

"Ain't no excuse, in my opinion," Otis said. He looked at Art and Laura as he gripped my arm even more tightly.

"I am sorry," said Laura. "Perhaps Jim shouldn't have left me alone."

“That’s right, perhaps he shouldn’t.” Art led Laura toward the door. “And Ruth, perhaps you shouldn’t be having Laura over for dinner. These kind of things can exhaust a woman in her condition.”

“What’s her condition?” I looked at Art and Otis, then I looked to Laura. Nobody answered my question. I wanted to dig in my refrigerator to send Laura away with a decadent chocolate cake to appease her husband, give her cake after cake to take home as apology, but I didn’t. I didn’t have any cakes in there anyway. Art led Laura away, with Pasco following behind. I waved goodbye.

After they’d gone, Otis didn’t let go of my arm. “Don’t embarrass me, Ruth,” he said. That was the summer my husband Otis turned from mean and ineffectual to mean and out for vengeance. That night might have been when things turned. After that he got worse, leaving me alone less and less. I never knew why he became so obsessive all of a sudden. He never cared that much about me before, for Heaven’s sake, but once I became sought after, he wanted me all the more. It was the same with those burgers they’d been selling for ages at Reynold’s that nobody in Wellspring even liked until the kids from Cozad decided they were tasty.

“I’m not doing anything to embarrass you, old man,” I said, closing the door, but staying on the doormat.

“You better not get too close.”

“It isn’t like that.”

“Sure. Fine. Whatever, Ruth,” Otis said. “Do what you’re going to do, but remember, whatever you do, I’ll find out about it.”

I don’t know what he wanted vengeance from because he’d always been a kind of fat cat in Wellspring. He’d inherited an accounting business from his father, and late into the night, he’d do everyone’s taxes in his thick black glasses, peering through the street-side window when teenagers would pass by, home from their dates. My husband in those black glasses had stopped anyone from

kissing on First Street until they passed his shop, glowing bright late into the night. I felt like I was bursting out that summer, exploding from the confines that Otis set for me. Otis, as much as I hated him and began to fear him by the end of that summer, he was powerful. He could make things happen.

[SOMETHING ABOUT THE SWENSONS REPORTING TO POLICE]

11.

Wellspring

They say that everyone's a stranger. Everyone's a stranger, they say, even to himself.

Part 3

Rising Air

1.

Wellspring

They say it's inevitable that Victoria Dortmund will meet the same fate that Julie Qillag did. Someday she'll be found floating, her arms and legs broken, her eyes unseeing. In our dreams we see her legs tied up in the bay grasses, her arms outstretched in front of her like a mermaid, when we swim out deeper than we should in lake. Just last night Victoria was abducted again. It just keeps happening, and who's going to stop it? Julie's ineffectual parents haven't done more than lock the door. Jim doesn't sleep on the front porch with his shotgun like a real man, and Laura doesn't put a palette down for herself in front of Victoria's bedroom door like a real mother should. And Victoria, we can only forgive her so long for being young. We can only forgive her for so long for being wooed by gifts and novelty. Victoria could help herself, but she won't. She says she doesn't know who keeps abducting her, but we don't believe her. They say that there's some real funny stuff going on around town. We're sure that Victoria's getting wrapped up in it. Maybe she can't help what's been happening to her. But we've also met that particular kind of girl, too old for her age, born world, who seeks out that kind of thing. No matter how young and no matter how good her upbringing, there's a kind of girl who wants that kind of funny stuff for herself. Nobody could blame a man—a boy?—for getting pulled in too deep with a girl like that.

2.

Ruth

The town was whispering about Boris Wolff, a teenager, 15, a sophomore at the high school, and his obsession with sex. When Marcy, a waitress at the diner told me about Boris, I wondered what 15-year-old boy wasn't obsessed with sex. "They catch him in the bathroom sometimes," Marcy told me. "At the high school. In the middle of class. You know." She lowered her voice. "Yanking his thing." I raised my eyebrows. "And people were thinking that he might have wanted more practice." If the town believed that this boy was capable of this thing with Julie and Victoria, I wasn't going to disagree. The town gossip was usually at least half right, so we decided to pay Boris Wolff a visit that night.

We crept out of Pasco's house covered even better than we had been before in all black, with dark caps pulled over the tops of our heads. With the reports in the paper, people were starting to sit outside their houses late into the night, peering. They pretended to read magazines and the newspaper, but we knew, really, they were watching us. Not us in particular, really, because nobody knew who'd been leaving the mysterious notes in people's front rooms and kitchens. Still, we knew we had to be careful. But I couldn't stop after I got a taste for it. I knew that Laura and Pasco couldn't stop either because when I called them, I imagined that they were panting. Really, I could hear Laura breath heavy across the speakers. I led Pasco and Ruth through the underbrush, the back forest that surrounded most of Wellspring. Now, all these years later, I wonder if it was even about getting justice for Julie and Victoria anymore at that point, or, if more than anything, we liked our power.

Boris Wolff lived in a fine Victorian house on a bluff overlooking the lake. His father owned an agribusiness in the southwestern part of the state engineering sturdier corn species, and he made enough money to buy one of the nicest houses in Wellspring. We crawled on our bellies driving our elbows into the grass like a seasoned military unit to the enormous floor-to-ceiling window closest to the window. The house's back windows, I noticed as we crept around to the look in them, overlooked the water, and I imagined that after school, when his mother was still out with her friends and his father was away in Lincoln presenting a mutant corn that could withstand mid-August Nebraska hail, Boris could beat off to the thrum of the waves. I was almost ready to whisper this idea to Pasco when I startled to see Mrs. Wolff, reading a magazine, close enough to the window to keep my mouth shut. But there was no Boris. We crawled around to the other side of the house. On the second floor, next to an enormous old oak, was another window with its light on, illuminating into the night's darkness.

"That's got to be him up there," Pasco said, pointing upwards.

"This was bound to happen sooner or later." Laura looked up. The tree's trunk was several feet off the ground, its first branch close to the lighted window. "Second floor."

"I'll go." I walked to the tree and put my hands on its trunk.

"I'm lithe and athletically supple," Pasco whispered.

"Shut up, Pasco," I said. "Lift me, you two."

"Always the goddamn hero." Pasco rolled his eyes, but motioned to Laura. They stood opposite each other behind me, clasping their hands together into a makeshift stepstool. I put my foot into their interlocked fingers, and they pushed me upwards toward the branch. When I was close to it, I put my feet onto Pasco's shoulders, and grabbed the branch. With Laura pushing the

bottoms of my feet, I pulled myself onto the branch so that I was sitting on it. Next to the bright window, I grinned down at the two of them, and gave them thumbs-up.

Luck was with me again. I could see into the window. It was a boy's bedroom still painted in a light blue, like his parents hadn't repainted since he was a baby, and hung with innocuous boy things like framed photographs of single engine airplanes and faux gold-plated soccer trophies. His bed was a captain's bed made in an expensive-looking dark brown wood. And then there was Boris Wolff. He was a skinny boy, scrawny except for two big biceps that he must have built up doing a single exercise like pushups or pull ups, and was wearing only an undershirt and what looked like a pair of his dad's sweatpants. Underneath the shirt, his back was broken out into painfully-red zits. He was laying on his bed, reading a magazine. A normal funnies magazine for boys. I sat on that branch peering into Boris' room for a long time, watching him read the funny magazine and chuckle periodically, with Laura and Pasco hovering underneath me to catch me in case I could fall.

During those long minutes of watching a child, spying on a child, I began to feel a strange kinship with whoever had killed Julie Qillag and couldn't satiate their taste for Victoria Dortmund—sometimes you couldn't predict when or how things would spin out of control. Here I was, a woman in her mid-40's half up a shadowy tree watching a teenager laughing at a Bugs Bunny comic book. But just as I started feeling sorry for myself, like I was a pervert or a child murderer, Boris put the magazine down. He leaped off the bed. Boris opened his bedroom door, and looked both up and down the hallway. When he was seemed satisfied, he went back to his bed and rummaged underneath his mattress. After he'd gotten his arm as far as it looked like it would go, Boris pulled out what he wanted: a series of Polaroids. From where I sat, I could see their white, automatically-printed backs and bits of shiny-screened color. I wanted the snaps to be of the Mintzes posing by Mt. Rushmore, grainy pictures of Boris' long-dead Golden Retriever, but I didn't think that was too

likely. After years of living in Wellspring, after our weeks of spying, I had come to learn there was usually some truth at the heart of most rumors.

With the photographs in his hand, Boris climbed back into bed. He stared at the Polaroids for a long time. At this angle, I had a better view of the subjects of the photographs. They were what I expected: nudie pictures of women, contorted into sexy poses. I supposed that somebody mass distributed photographs made to look like home-made Polaroids and Boris had taken them home from school. Worse, he'd taken some shots of a girl from his class. Lord knew that he had enough money to do it. But the girls or women in the shots looked less familiar, too. Smaller and less fully-formed than what you'd assume from the women in nudie photographs (big boobs, flat stomachs, wide hips). And then, when I started to think about it I didn't know why Boris would have photographs like that anyway, on Polaroids, rather than an old *Penthouse* that his father would slide under the door one day when his wife was out late or he'd and his high school friends would steal from the secret box underneath parents' beds. I needed to see who was really in the photographs. I tested the branch's sturdiness with my hands, leaning forward with my upper arm strength onto the branch to test its strength.

"Ruth, no!" Laura whispered.

"Don't you move, you old lunatic!" Pasco hissed.

"Shut up!" I said, looking down at both of them. "I won't break my neck."

Feeling like it would hold me, I scooted further down the branch towards the window. The branch was thick the whole length toward the window before it separated into thinner twigs that must have hit Boris' window like claws during wind storms. I kept scooting towards the window until I could see the subjects of the photos more clearly. I was right. The subjects weren't adult women, but young girls, naked and contorted. I put my hand to my mouth.

“What?” Laura whispered from below. She had tipped her neck and shoulders back as far as they could go and was gaping open-mouthed at me. “What is it?”

I shook my head. We’d spied on people who really couldn’t have been the culprit—Wanita Mintz?—and I really had no idea what we were going to do if we found a likely suspect. Boris Wolff was a likely suspect, and we had no plan what to do about him. I couldn’t tell Art what I’d seen. I couldn’t open the window and throttle Boris now, force him to confess. But I had an idea of what I could do.

“Laura and Pasco, go home,” I pushed myself back towards the tree trunk, where the branch was fatter.

“What do you see?”

“This one might be our man,” I said. “Well, our boy.”

“Come down,” Laura said. “You’ll fall. The branch will break.”

I convinced them to leave by telling them I needed them to keep watch at the front of the house. I was alone. I closed my eyes and put my forehead against the tree trunk when Boris started getting intimate with the photographs, my stomach churning with a mixture of nausea and tears. They say that you’ll know when you’ve crossed a line from a normal person into an insane one, but that summer that line became entirely too clear. The girls in the photographs could have been of age. 18-year-old girls could look young, keep themselves young enough to look like children. But I doubted it. I was glad that I’d never had a daughter.

After what seemed like hours—and might have been hours—Boris finished his self-exploration and shoved the pictures back underneath the bed. I let him get fast asleep, and then I inched myself over on the branch. I felt like some kind of demented Pollyanna and hoped that the

branch wouldn't break or crack. Close to the window, which was open just a crack on such a hot summer night, I leaned my ear towards the room. I could hear Boris breathing deeply, a snore rattling through his nose and throat. My brother had slept so soundly at 15 that I used to throw marbles onto his chest from my side of our shared bedroom, so I decided to trust that Boris would have a similar deep sleep. I pulled open the window, and crouched on the branch with my palms on the window pane, I put my first foot and then my second onto the window frame. Now crouched in between the window and sill, I lowered myself cautiously onto the ground. The floor creaked when my second foot landed, loud enough to wake up the heaviest of sleepers, I thought, but Boris didn't even flip around in bed. My shoulders were crunched up almost to my ears I was so nervous, but I made myself breathe before I took another step. This one was quieter, and luckily, the bed was close to the window. Carefully, I lifted up the comforter, some inane pattern of a smiling ship captain again meant for a child, and slid my hand underneath the slick mattress. I grabbed onto one of the photographs. Once I'd slid it out from the bed, I touched it with only the tips of my fingers because I didn't want to know whether or not it was sticky. I couldn't see it well in the darkness, but the shadowy figure looked like a child, a young one. I thought it might be Julie. I hoped it wasn't Victoria. Laura used our excursions as diversions from her own boredom, and she never thought, like I never thought, we'd really bring justice to either of these young girls. Not really. There were people who did that sort of thing, and I never believed that person would be me. But now, it seemed, perhaps it was.

I didn't leave a note for Boris because I didn't want to panic him. I didn't want him to know anything was missing. If I could just drop the photo off at Art's office, with a note saying where it had come from, I knew Art wouldn't ask any other questions. With the photo in my possession, I crouched on the window frame on my haunches, my fingertips on the sill. *I'm too old for this*, I remember thinking, ludicrously, because what I was doing was never entirely age appropriate. Then I

put one foot on the branch and bent my body over to hug the branch before lifting my other foot from the sill. I shuffled on my stomach this way, clutching tightly, wood-burning the shit out of my stomach. I continued this maneuver until I made it to the trunk. I lowered my foot down towards the trunk until I could feel a knot in the bark with my toe. I wrapped my arms around the tree, thinking, like I always did, walking down the street, nodding or smiling or eating, how ludicrous I must look. But I continued. I put my other toe onto the knot. I was lowering my first foot again when I heard distinct footsteps in the backyard. Someone was coming, and I was still halfway up the Wolffs' tall tree. I was so flustered, I climb/fell to the bottom of the tree, dusting off my shirt front after I'd landed. I thought about running, but decided to walk quietly because there's not much that makes a person look more suspicious than sprinting wildly into the night. I was close to the beach, after all, and plenty of people took walks in the middle of the night in Wellspring, I hoped, that my post-midnight excursion wouldn't seem too strange.

I was heading towards the dune that would bring me out of the Wolffs' backyard and down to the beach when I heard a familiar voice hiss, "Ruth Jensen!" I clenched my jaw and turned around. It was Art, right behind me. He jogged closer, whispering my name in a voice that was loud enough to wake the family. I could see a single light in the living room. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Art. Hello." I tried to calm my breathing, but it soundly loud, absurdly loud, in my head. I felt my back constrict and tighten the muscles around my scalp. I hoped that I wouldn't faint. "I couldn't sleep."

"The Wolffs heard a prowler."

The family must have heard me rustling around in the branches, rattling the tree's leaves, the whispers Laura, Pasco, and I had exchanged. We'd gotten away with so much, so perhaps we hadn't

learned to be properly careful. I mocked looking around for the prowler so exaggeratedly I could have been a sketch comedian. But Art, never one for subtleties, didn't seem to notice. "I haven't see anyone," I said.

"Was it you?"

"You?" I said. I'd learned how to play dumb in my blackjack years, and it seemed to be coming in handy now. "Oh, you mean me? Of course not. I couldn't sleep, so I was taking a walk."

I could see Art's face in the dark because my eyes had adjusted to the dimness. He didn't look impressed, but he seemed to be figuring something out, worrying his jaw back and forth, and I wonder if he'd proposition me or confess his love—or offer a more sinister exchange. But in the end he didn't do any of those things. Really, Art could be a meek sort of person, and he just said, "What were you doing in the backyard here?"

"Taking a shortcut. A simple one. From my house to the beach." I pointed toward the beach. "The lake's pleasant."

"McDaniel's not safe at night."

"Right. Right. Silly me. My hero!"

"And you didn't see anyone around the house?" Art looked at me again with that look of his, disappointed, like he wanted me to confess to slobbering all over Mrs. Wolff's windows, desperate to relieve my stomach-ulcering guilt.

"No. No." I said, looking towards the beach again like I was ready to be on my way.

"If there's a prowler around these parts, Ruth," Art said, "and we know there is a prowler around these parts, you need to be careful walking around at night so late."

“Thank you for your concern.”

“I’m surprised at you, really, Ruth,” Art said. “I would have thought you’d known better.” And then he turned and walked away. I blew breath out of my mouth that I’d been holding. But he wouldn’t let me off that easily. He’d figured it out. Art wasn’t a stupid man. He knew that I was the one leaving the notes, taking things from people. That night, Art knew.

As I walked home from Boris’ house, I was shaken. My fingers had lost their feeling, and felt rigid and stiff at my sides. I remember holding them up to the bright moon, and they flapped around like any elderly lady’s. Maybe I had imagined everything. Maybe I had become old, senile, and was wandering around the Midwestern moors somewhere. But then I noticed the sticky sheen on from Art’s spit so close to my face, and my shoulder felt bruised from the pressure of his hand. I wasn’t a messed up enough old lady to hallucinate something as sick as Art’s power, so I gave up. I pressed my shirt deep into my armpits to mop up the sweat. I would have to call Laura and Pasco when I went home, and I prepared how it would go, preparing to mutter to them how seriously I’d screwed things up this time. As I muttered and shuffled back towards home, I saw, just in front of me in a field favored by wild grasses and feral cats that liked to scavenge for mice, a woman, ghostly, glowing in the moon, her gray hair hanging long over her white nightgown. At first I thought it was me up there, the old woman that I’d felt myself transformed into that night, and then I thought that the rumors were true about old Muriel Jimenez, still living off of berries and small animals in the forest. I pressed between my eyes with my palm, and made myself keep walking. And as I got closer to the field, the barefooted woman kept walking, her eyes open only into slits, in her bare feet. She trudged in a daze, barely recognizing her surroundings or her place in space, her arms kept tight into her sides like she was still in her bed instead of outdoors, roaming. I came closer still because the sky

and the ground were so mixed up for me that night, and then I saw who the old woman was:
Geraldine Jimenez.

I followed Geraldine through the field back into the woods closer to town. I knew you weren't supposed to wake a sleepwalker, but I wanted to make sure she didn't wander into the lake or get hit by a passing car or wander, discombobulated, onto some high bluff. She walked quickly, and I had to hurry to keep up with her even though my legs were already sore. I was feeling the results of the acrobatics I'd done off of the tree limb. She passed the bait and tackle shop on Main and kept going, past the smaller houses and closer towards the big bungalows on the bluffs with the wooded views. When she reached where she was going, she stopped. It was the Dortmund house, the same white bungalow where I'd spent so many hours baking for Laura. Geraldine stood in the garden. She found a window and started rapping on the panes with her knuckles. I sank low behind a fat tree trunk to watch. Victoria came to the window, and waved. She smiled. Then she motioned for Geraldine to follow her to the front of the house. Geraldine, still asleep, walked, more efficiently than I'd ever seen her, like she was a robot wound up, to the front of the house. Victoria opened the door, and then smiled and hugged Geraldine, the little shit. Victoria carried a blanket out of the house, like she knew she wouldn't be returning to it that night.

I kept following the pair as they walked towards the beach, Victoria holding Geraldine's hand. Victoria was leading the way. She knew entirely where she was going, even though she feigned ignorance whenever she was interviewed in the paper. Almost immediately she started chattering, babbling some inanities about schoolwork and teachers, about the crush she had on a little boy named Derek who I'd seen for myself and thought looked very sickly. They didn't turn around even once, I think because Geraldine was in a stupor and Victoria was too wrapped up in her story to think about anything else. On the beach I crouched behind a fallen log and peered over the it to see

Victoria and Geraldine walk closer to the water, where birds often gathered. In the paper, the little girl said that Geraldine called for the lake monster, but it really was the little girl calling, a high and lilting drone that made goosebumps sprout all over my arms. Their feet in the water, Victoria put her right hand over her left and cupped her hands. Then, she blew, creating a sharp, high-pitched sound from the space between her palms, the most bird-like sound I'd ever heard with this technique, a technique I tried myself to master several times. I almost thought that the beast really would surface, all long-necked and dragon-bodied like the legend said. If there were any birds around, they would have come when she called. Geraldine stood there in a kind of stupor. She never nodded. She never raised her hands to her lips to blow. She never responded to Victoria in any way. I don't know how Victoria found it appealing to continue following Geraldine out here whenever she tapped, but she did.

Abruptly, Geraldine handed Victoria the two stuffed animals she'd been holding. Then she turned and ran. I still don't know how Geraldine ran that fast. The last time I'd seen her, Geraldine seemed so tired that she would droop into her stew bowl. She had trouble holding up her hands, and using her fork. But whatever force was compelling her to visit Victoria night after night was the same one that gave her a speed and endurance that I couldn't explain.

After Geraldine had taken off, Victoria, still on the beach, said, "Goodbye, lady." Then she spread out her blanket on the beach, and lay on it, the two gifted stuffed animals under each arm. I knew the sand was soft enough to be a comfortable bed, but she wasn't staying there because she didn't know the route back home. There was another reason that she wanted to make Jim itch and Laura despair. After I watched Victoria make a pillow out of one of the stuffed animals, I hurried back into the forest, walking as quickly and noiselessly as I could. I got out of Victoria's earshot, and then started running until I caught up with Geraldine. I followed her moon-lit white back through the

black forest, her bare feet crackling over the evergreen boughs and the splitting branches on the ground. As I ran, laboriously breathing with rattling phlegm in my throat, I realized that Geraldine's body was too stiff in the daytime that she likely couldn't even bend down to see the bottoms of her feet, which would likely be scratched and bloody.

As we neared closer to her house, Geraldine slowed again to her speedy, purposeful walk. With me several feet behind her still, she stopped on her block, and turned back to look at me. I stopped. It really seemed like she was looking at me, that she could see me. I could see her eyes now properly, slits of grey barely open enough to see anything, particularly me, her grey hair matted but free from leaves or low-hanging twigs. She stopped and stood on the sidewalk, rocking back and forth on her heels, and said, "Hello, sir. I've just been out visiting my daughter." Then she turned and started walking again, into her house, where she closed the door and, presumably, went back to sleep.

When I saw Geraldine walking so purposefully through the field that first night, I couldn't do anything but stumble home. I could barely even do that much. My legs were so heavy I could barely lift them, and really, I couldn't even feel my feet. I wanted to be in bed when I still had blocks to walk and I considered, for a second, lying down in the Hendersons' flowering bush, which I usually thought smelled like improperly refrigerated meat. But I made it home. Otis and I had long ago taken separate bedrooms, and when I got into mine, I collapsed. I felt like I could sleep for a thousand years. But when my head hit the pillow, there was Otis, backlit by the increasingly-bright sky from the window.

"Where were you, you little slut?" Otis said. I gasped and shot back up to sitting back against the pillow.

"You scared the bejesus out of me, old man," I said. "Christ. Jesus. Go to bed."

“I keep a girl in a house in Kearney,” Otis said, still sitting with his two hands on the chair’s armrests. “Keep her with an apartment and clothes. Dinners sometimes.”

“Fabulous. Let me go to sleep.”

“If you’re going to do the same, keep it out of my face. Keep it out of my town.”

“I was on a walk.”

“Keep your nasty to yourself.” Otis stood then and walked out of the room. I wanted to react, to follow him and push him hard up against the wall, push him down the stairs, but I was so tired I just fell asleep.

3.

Art's Newspaper Editorial about the "Vigilantes" of Wellspring

August 3, 1971

I am the first to say that I am a good judge of CHARACTER. My training at the Nebraska State Police Academy, a fine, if not the FINEST institution of its kind in this country, and my many years in service to our great town have prepared to issue proclamations about character. Here is the proclamation I am issuing: Here in our fine and goodly town are a trio of vigilantes. They believe that with their feeble powers of observation and their HOMEMADE tricks, they can stop the menace who plagues our most vulnerable citizens: OUR YOUNG GIRLS. This trio believes with simple brandishing that they can stop the problems that are plaguing us.

Let me be the first to say that I am HIGHLY OFFENDED. I am a trained law enforcement officer and have TIRELESSLY spent all of my energies on solving the nature of our recent string of crimes. I don't mean to toot my own horn, but in our part of the state, I believe that my watchfulness and expertise means that I am the most likely of anyone to be able to SOLVE and STOP this vicious fiend. I know that I have the support of the Wellspring Populace behind me, which means, of course, that these interlopers have no place in the course of this investigation. These interlopers only have gotten in the way of my aim and striving for JUSTICE. They disrespect me, and they disrespect you, people of Wellspring, with their lack of belief in me as YOUR SHERIFF.

That is why I ask of you to essentially do what they have done. I need to find the names of these individuals and STOP THEM before it's too late. Before they implicate the wrong person or drive the MENANCE further underground before he can be stopped. So please, concerned citizens,

take your binoculars, take your cameras, take your SHOTGUNS if you have to, and porch sit later into the night than you otherwise would. Look for these criminals, these “VIGILANTES,” before the next home that they sneak into, the next items they steal, are YOUR OWN.

4.

Ruth

After that night I'd seen Geraldine coming for Victoria, I started watching for Geraldine nearly every night again, to see if she'd go wandering. I was afraid that someone would shoot her, really, with all of the gun-toting cowboys corralled into town by their wives' needs for a convenient grocery store. [Ruth explains why she hasn't told anybody else about Geraldine.] Outside, the moon was completely covered in clouds and the woods were dark as I made my way to the Dortmund house. I looked up at the stars for guidance because I read that the godliest of people liked to look at the stars, but finding little support from God, I kept walking. There was something terrifyingly primal about that beach in the night, something that drew me towards the rocks, the water. If I'd lived in Wellspring as a kid, I knew I would have drowned in it, too. The black night had socked in the spot I stood and kept watch by the Dortmund house. Geraldine didn't come every night. After the first time I'd seen her, I'd decided to follow Geraldine around at night. By then my house became too full of spite in the evenings, the lake's lapping too insistent, my own head too knocking full with thoughts I wished I could drain out through my ear into a pan, so instead, during that rainy August, I got out my galoshes and watched for Geraldine every night instead. I knew that Geraldine would be distressed to know that she was the person who had been abducting Victoria Dortmund. She had taught Sunday school. She thought children were all fragile little lambs that were irrevocably imprinted by negative experiences. Unlike Laura, who saw Vicky as an already formed thing, a child-sized adult who could look at the people around her and see them in a way that others couldn't, Geraldine just saw the child as a sweet little girl.

“Hey!” a voice called out across the clearing.

I started and turned around.

“What are you doing there?” the voice came again.

“Art?” I said, standing up. “It’s just me.”

“Who’s ‘me?’” Art’s voice was still angry, insinuating. He strode over to me, so close that I could smell the peppermint on his breath, so close that if it were daytime, I would be able to see up his nose.

“It’s Ruth.”

“And is there a reason you’re sitting so close to Victoria Dortmund’s house?” The sheriff didn’t move away from me even after I identified myself. “Can’t sleep again?”

“I’m just out for some fresh air. Again,” I stammered. I didn’t know why I was so afraid of Art. Most people found me intimidating. But Art stood a whole head taller than me, and I supposed if Art wanted to ram me with his broad chest, force himself onto me right there on the beach, he might be able to and I would be so surprised, I’d just fall to the ground with the wind knocked out of me.

“I don’t like what you all do in that house.” Art whispered. I wanted to hold my ground, but I stepped back. Art wouldn’t mind whatever he thought was happening in that house if he was invited, too. “I don’t like thinking about where it might lead.”

“We’re not hurting anyone, are we?”

Art turned sharply. The moon had come out from behind a series of clouds, and I could almost see Art’s bright eyes in the darkness. Art was one of the most intense men that I had ever

encountered, intensely convicted and intensely serious. “You never know where things like that can go.” He sighed, like he was exhausted nobody in that town could see things from his perspective. My heart beat faster, and I tried to think of something to say, but too quick Art was back in my face. “Don’t think I don’t know about you,” he said.

“Really, Art, I was just out here for a walk.”

“You and that woman. You and that woman *alone*,” he said. “Your husband says you’re something of a dyke.”

I looked at the beach, but I didn’t answer him.

“Are you on some kind of power trip, Ruth? That’s what you’re doing, with the notes?” Art sighed and sat down on the same nearly-rotten log I had just vacated. “Is your appetite simply insatiable, Ruth? Do you want a little girl? A little taste of everything, is that it, Ruth?”

I sat down next to him and put my chin in my hand. I tried to craft something to say back to him that would be both calm and decisive, strong and still true. But I couldn’t say anything, and I didn’t say anything because we heard voices in the woods, heading towards the beach. Art rushed towards the voices, and I hurried after him, sprinting quickly enough to stay stride-by-stride in line with him. Near the beach, Art stood stock still, as if he’d seen a ghost. “Holy shit,” Art whispered. “That’s impossible.” He walked slowly, as slowly as it seemed as he could walk to not let me, the Great and Powerful Lady Lover, see his fear, closer to the girl and the old woman on the beach. I followed Art as he came closer and closer to the pair. “Muriel?” Art said, almost a whisper, that was carried up by the fast-lapping of the lake’s waves on the windy evening. “Muriel?” he said more loudly. I realized what was happening. I couldn’t let Geraldine, in her last weeks on earth, be woken up and told that she’d been terrorizing a little girl, a whole town, really. So I grabbed Art’s arm and pulled him around to face him.

“It’s Geraldine, you idiot!” I hissed.

“Geraldine?” Art said.

“Yes! Can’t you tell?” I spun Art around by his shoulders to look at the old woman. “It’s her.”

“Geraldine.”

“She’s delusional, high on those drugs she takes for her cancer.”

“Poor woman,” Art said. “I’m going to wake her up!”

“No!” I said, holding fast to Art’s arm. “She’ll be devastated.”

Art hesitated. He firmed his lip, and looked back out at the lake. “Geraldine’s not in a right state of mind. Modern medicine. It’s not right.”

“You’re right.”

“I need to tell her.”

“Art, she’s an old woman. She’s sick.”

“She’s disturbing the peace. If the daughter was here, I’d tell the daughter. Get her contained.”

“I can contain her,” I said “I’ll watch for her. Stop her. Every night. Please.”

“I don’t think that’s possible.”

“Why?”

“You are what you are, Ruth.” Art smirked. “Your proclivities will surely get the best of you.”

“C’mon, Art,” I said. “I get it. We have to tell her. But let me do. Please. Let me do it.”

“Why?” said Art. I remembered what they said about Art’s mother. How she’d been everything to him, the only woman he’d ever loved. They said he was jealous of his own father. I could see now that Art hated Geraldine, too. She took his mother away.

“I’ll ease into it.”

“And I won’t?” Art’s nostrils flared.

“I’ll talk her through it. Explain things carefully.”

“I resent you undermining my authority!” Art yelled.

“I don’t mean to--”

“I am a compassionate member of this community. I only want what’s best for everyone.”

I nodded.

Art sighed that world-weary sigh again and put his hands on his hips. He crooked up his face and looked the pair on the beach again. “You’ll tell her?” he said.

“Yes.”

“No funny stuff?”

“No. Absolutely not.”

“I know that it’s you that’s leaving these notes around for people,” Art said simply. “You make them stop.”

“You’ve got the wrong end of the stick. Laura Dortmund and Pasco Johns and I are the only ones in town who are fans of *All in the Fam*—”

“You tell Geraldine about this business, and you keep to yourselves or I’m bringing you in.”

“It’s not—”

“Understood?”

I stared out at the water. I knew we’d been too hasty, of course we’d been too hasty. We had been indiscrete. And now I was backed into a corner. I nodded to Art. He didn’t respond. After that, I sat with Art, for an eternity it seemed like, until Geraldine abruptly left the girl with two new natty stuffed animals, and ran faster than I thought her cancer-ridden, drug-addled body would let her into the woods and into her house. As soon as she was gone, Art stood, looked at me and said, “I’m all right with you fucking the snob. And the Mexican if that does it for you. But leave the old lady to live in peace, all right?”

5.

Charlotte Royale Recipe from Ruth Jensen to Laura Dortmund

Ingredients:

For the bavarois

-gelatin

-1 pound raspberries

-milk

-8 eggs

-a bunch of strawberries

To decorate

-1/3 cup sugar

-1 tbsp arrowroot

Oh, really, Laura, who are we kidding? You're never going to bake this thing. I can't imagine you being responsible for making the strawberry pinwheels, let alone heavy cream. Besides, this cake always winds up looking like a brain. I'll make it for you sometime. When I met you I was in that kind of sorry state a person can sometimes find herself in when she's terribly alone in the world, and she's decided she'll open herself up to loving the first thing that will have her. Really, I was plumb cleaned out. You know, bodily. Emotionally. I was here in Wellspring—why? I was doing what I was doing with life—why? And you, you made me want to go on. I don't even know you really. Maybe you just have those great kind of hips, those hips that were just perfectly rounded outward, not fat, of course. But perfect. That's crass, I'm sorry. I know it's something else about you entirely. It's just that I'm no poet, so I haven't got a good answer yet...

6.

Ruth

Otis was suspicious of me after all of those late nights. I imagine that Art dropped by our house sometime to tell Otis was a menace to society I was becoming and to clap my husband several times on his back to encourage better care and keeping of renegade wives. Otis took that advice to heart. At first, I would come home to find little things disrupted—my underwear drawer misarranged from how I'd left it in the morning or my jewelry box stirred around, earrings taking the place where bracelets should go. Later, Otis became less worried about my reaction, tearing down my dresses and pants to rifle around in the pockets, and then dropping the article onto the floor in a heap. I found my whole closet empty one day, the hangers bare and the clothes in a heap on the floor. Several times Otis would grab my day planner, look at my written-in plans, and whisper, “What kind of obscene sex act does ‘dry cleaner’ refer to?”

“What are you looking for, you terror?” I whispered back.

Because of Otis and Art breathing down our necks, because of the whispery gossip that haunted Wellspring, Laura, Pasco, and I knew our club could never last. And one Wednesday in late August, our premonition came true. I was drooping over the newspaper one hot afternoon when I heard a shattering on the kitchen's linoleum. I hurried into the kitchen, and found Art standing over Wanita Mintz's record, which he had shattered into several hundred glittering pieces on the floor. He was still standing half inside the pantry, and he walked out of it with a twisted up mouth and angry eyes, holding Horace Stacey's love note and the piece of hardtack pumpkin pie, still on its tourism plate from the Mile High City. “What is this shit, Ruth?” he asked.

“Nothing,” I said. The Otis I’d known before wouldn’t have been rummaging around in that pantry. “Just a collection of mementos from Wellspring, a kind of record of the—”

“Conquests?” Otis said, pulling out the photograph of the teenager I hadn’t decided how to report to Art. “You’re sick!” he said, looking at the photograph.

Otis pushed past me to the sink where we kept the plastic bags. “I’m not living with this filth,” he said, taking a trash bag out from underneath the sink and shaking it out.

The artifacts were so important to us they were nearly holy. Art put the pie and the note into the trash bag, ripping off the pieces of masking tape that I had pasted underneath them. He was so angry that he knocked everything off of the pantry shelf, rice, noodles, all in the pile on the floor. He put the photograph of the child in with it, the pieces of wine bottle from the Swensons’ house. His face got redder and redder, his teeth clasped more firmly together. I stood there, quiet. I didn’t know what to say. I felt like a kid who’d been caught by my parents who loomed over me, looked at me with small eyes, told me to be useful. Now, Otis knew. I felt small and foolish. I looked at my hands. Then Otis was pulling on the waders he kept by the door, all the way up over his jeans. He slung the trash bag over his shoulder, and headed down towards the beach. I followed him, shouting, “Otis! What are you going to do with that?”

He didn’t answer me, but he just kept striding, past the sunbathers soaking up the late sun with their baby oiled arms and permanents, kids let loose from their houses after dinner to build sinking sun sandcastles. He waded into the water, up past where the waders went. He got his jeans all wet. He took the bag and threw it out as far as he could. I could see the bag, full now of heavy boxes of food, float for a few seconds before the cardboard boxes started taking on water, and the whole thing, soaked, sank.

“No more!” Otis screamed, still in the water, flailing his arms in front of the startled mothers and their startled children. I nodded and Otis headed back towards the house.

That night, though, I had to tell Laura and Pasco what had happened. After Otis went up to his bedroom, early to watch a racy television program he didn't like me to see, I dashed back out the door. I ran to Pasco's, where we were meeting, on that clear, almost-navy, sky night, the moon bright and clear. I had just only come inside the house, and was telling Laura and Pasco what had happened when Otis burst through Pasco's front door. He grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me hard. He got right up into my face, and whispered, “Sex.”

“No, no, no,” I said back, but he didn't hear me, and he just kept muttering the word over and over again, “Sex, sex, sex, sex,” projecting dollops of wet spittle into my open, protesting mouth. I looked at Laura past my left shoulder and I could feel my heart breaking.

Otis left me then, and headed straight for Laura. He stood inches from Laura's nose, the spittle now rocketing from Otis' lips onto Laura's face. “She's having sex with you.” Otis pointed backwards at me, who was pulling hard at his arm, trying to pull him away from Laura.

“Whaddya mean, Otis?” Laura was scared. “We just play pinochle.”

“Bullshit,” Otis said, the consonants hissed and over-articulated through his yellow-plaque teeth.

“Weird sex shit with you,” Otis focused his attention on Pasco now. He tsked loudly, shook his head, drew back his arm, and punched Pasco right in the eye. Pasco recoiled with the force of the blow and then dropped down onto the floor, down onto Otis' right shoe. Sitting on top of the shoe, Pasco grabbed onto Otis' leg like a little toddler might and hammered the back of Otis' thigh with his other fist. I started yelling, “Hey, now, hey!” and went over to the two men. I tried to pull

Otis away from Pasco, but Pasco was latched onto the other man's calf. I grabbed Pasco underneath the armpits, and heaved him off of Otis. I set Pasco up on the couch, and Pasco stayed there, breathing hard. Then I pushed Otis onto an armchair, holding down Otis' shoulder with my hand. Otis struggled for a second, but then he sat there, panting, whispering, "Sex club. Sex club. Sex club."

"Oh, Otis," I started. "We just do a little collecting. Innocent."

"Naked ladies. Broken bottles for who knows what," Otis said, still short of breath. "I'm not stupid."

"It's nothing, Otis," Laura said. "Just a little arts and crafts. When pinochle gets tiresome."

"Beautiful singing means sensual sex. I heard the record," Otis said, tipping his head back onto the chair's cushion, and laughing a terrible, guttural snarl. I looked at the loose-hanging flesh under his neck, and wondered if having to sleep so close to such a man was what made me so tight-rolled and miserable. Separating from Otis would make me happy, make me better. Otis stood and grabbed me, by the wrist instead of by my hand, and looked at each one of us. I wanted to pull away from Otis, but I didn't. I wanted to save myself, but we didn't. "I've found you nut jobs out," he said. "I'll prove it to everyone." Otis dragged me back out the front door. He led me back to our house, still holding my wrist like a shackle. The moon was even brighter now.

Otis tried to tell our town about us. He told Sam the butcher that he'd caught me swinging from Pasco's chandelier, the old algebra teacher Mr. Swenson spanking my bare buttocks with a wine bottle. He whispered to Father McGillicutty that he'd come over for a friendly drink at Pasco's house and had seen Pasco, Reggie Smith, and Bob Mintz in a backroom, blatantly pleasuring themselves as they looked at a flat-stomached, big-breasted lady on a playing card. He mentioned to Vince Gilmore on an early morning fishing trip that I had had unmentionable things done to me

with fresh produce by a young man named Horace Stacey while the Laura and Pasco watched. Luckily for all of us, Otis was ugly and old and had held grudges against each one of us for years. Luckily for us, Otis had some bizarre thoughts about sex that he'd told our town about for years. Vince Gilmore called Otis disgusting. The rest of the town agreed.

But we couldn't meet anymore anyway. We could barely afford to meet one-on-one or two-on-two or three-on-three, really, because people were really starting to get mean about us. They were really starting to whisper. Laura and I certainly couldn't order bottles of wine at the Fox and Hound. But I still think about Spy Club with our senses all muddled. After that August, when we lost our power, I began to feel worse and worse about casseroles and the old car. Laura did, too. After the club couldn't meet anymore, she unraveled. She called me once and told that she wasn't sure that she would be able to lay appropriate bouquets on her parents' graves that summer, and really, when she thought about it, she was exactly the kind of person who would die while her child was still young. She told me she felt like she couldn't go on anymore. It was the only thing that kept her sane, she said. Now, all she had was the PTA, church functions, family functions, snow removal, casserole baking, catalog ordering, tree trimming, shrub trimming, functioning normally, looking normal, appearing sane. She had never really felt like she could do it all before, she said, and now she felt like it was impossible.

Just because the club was over didn't mean that I was left unchanged. Most everyone moved away from Wellspring in the years that follow. But all of us remember. Now, we hate each other. Now, we love each other. Now, we want to chew the skin of each other's shoulders until it separates from the bone and muscle and we have parts of each other inside ourselves. It's not sexual, Otis. But it's also not necessary, I've decided, because we've already digested each other. We all have the Swensons, Mr. dead in the graveyard in town, the Mrs. a lunatic in Bellevue. Together, we know the

great power of ghosts, real and imagined, the great power of communications we can and cannot understand. There's dead Mr. Gerrard, and now Mrs. Gerrard gone by her own hand to be with him. We have my old secret pantry shrine on Oak Street, filled now with microwavable meals by the Smythe family. Otis died not long after I went to prison from something like shame. I imagine Laura now lives alone, hosting wild parties in her Chicago condo. I've heard from people who've been to one or two of her parties. I loved her, but I never told her. She was so happy, even without me. Still, while I might not be able to remember exactly what was said or who did what, I'll always have the way we felt for that month of summer 1971. For this, I am grateful. For this, I am inconsolable.

7.

Wellspring

They say that Ruth Jensen smelled bad, terrible, down there, and before her husband would let her come to bed, he made her shower. They say that she reeked because of too many men (and women?) in Chicago, that dreadful place, all those years ago wh. Apparently she was indiscriminate. Apparently she'd been that way for years, and you can never really clean up after that, not completely. They say Otis would gag when he smelled her underthings. Often he made her sleep on the couch, and when things got really bad, he sprayed her with air fresheners. They say that even in Wellspring, Ruth Jensen continued to be a fast-moving seductress, even right under Otis' nose, if you can believe it. Someone said that she was with that traveling vacuum salesman, and that she was with him in the car right on top of the extra nozzles that he packed in his backseat. She also almost definitely also made it with Gary Heitzman, Cozad's butcher, before he'd even wiped off the blood from his fingers after a day of breaking down a blue-winning Heritage Hog. And then there's Reggie Smith, many times, with near certainty, that one.

Poor Otis Jensen. It's never been his fault that Pasco is smooth-skinned and Otis was pockmarked nearly from birth. It isn't Otis's fault that Pasco is pleasant about the weather and the high school basketball team, while he's rather unpleasant and obsessive about grocery store transactions and the severity of that One Very Terrible Storm Back in '55 that Ripped Up His Vegetable Patch. It isn't Otis' fault that Pasco can wrangle a heifer in 30 seconds flat and has the muscles to go with such skill. We've seen Otis' scrawny arms poking out like an elderly lady's from his beach-side undershirt way back since he was a skinny 14-year-old in 1930. It isn't Otis' fault that

he got old. Really, it's Ruth's fault that she has big city preferences. Really, it's Ruth's fault that her backside is big enough to really slam slim Pasco into a wall or bed, something that no man, even a Godly man like Pasco could ever resist. Really, it's Ruth's fault that she bakes a fine chocolate cake, which we all know was how she hooked Pasco in the first place.

And Laura. Laura Dortmund. So wholesome. So obedient. One of our town's finest daughters. Laura Dortmund was corrupted by the pair of them into an underbelly of booze and mind-altering substances and unholy sexual union. They say Ruth and Pasco made Laura watch. And that isn't like the girl we used to know at all.

8.

Transcription of Ruth Jensen's Interview with Art Taylor, November 1971

Taylor: You say that Laura was depressed. Her husband disagrees, and, in fact, no one but you have ever made this claim about Laura.

Jensen: Did anyone besides me ever *meet* her?

Taylor: No one but you ever noticed this depressive attitude.

Jensen: I can't imagine why not. Was it the red lipstick?

Taylor: You're funny only to yourself.

Jensen: I'm funny to lots of people!

Taylor: Ruth.

Jensen: Art. Fine. [sighing] How does a person prove a dead woman was depressed? I don't know. She wrote the note.

Taylor: That note looks hasty. It looks forced. Like someone was making her write it.

Jensen: The only thing that made her write that note was her demons. She wanted to die. That's time-oriented I think.

Taylor: Her husband said she still very enthusiastically baked.

Jensen: [laughter]

Taylor: We're going to try this again, Ruth. I didn't want to go down this line of questioning, but I will if I have to.

Jensen: You're persistent.

Taylor: You're only hurting yourself being this difficult, Ruth. You're only making things worse.

Jensen: Mm.

Taylor: I can sympathize with you. I can.

Jensen: I see the limits of your sympathy.

Taylor: No, Ruth. I really do see how you could have done what you did. I don't think that you killed her out of rage or spite. She was just making you mad. She wasn't doing what you wanted.

Jensen: She never made me mad.

Taylor: I can see that. A beautiful woman leading you on. Making you believe that you two could have had something together.

Jensen: She wasn't beautiful. Did you see her flat ass? Besides she wasn't that way. I'm not that way.

Taylor: C'mon, Ruth. I can stick this out as long as you can.

Jensen: She was depressed.

Taylor: Good. What else?

Jensen: She couldn't feel love for that daughter.

Taylor: Keep going. You're helping yourself, Ruth. Good for you.

Jensen: She didn't love her husband.

Taylor: And she loved you?

Jensen: No. I just told you. I'm not that way. [sighing] I've always exclusively had a thing for men in uniform.

9.

Ruth

[Ruth tells Laura and Pasco about Art's ultimatum and they decide to break into his house to find something incriminating]

It was dangerous, trying to break into Art's house. Art had never married, although he'd had a string of girlfriends who he'd found in neighboring towns, all blonde, all buxom, all progressively younger than he was. He'd parade them around to the two restaurants in town, Etta's for breakfast, where each woman would invariably feed Art bites of biscuits and gravy, and to the Fox and Hound, where they'd sit at the two chairs closest to one another, excessively toasting. Since Art always responded to any kind of distress calls, we had Geraldine call and say that she had fallen and was having a hard time getting up. [GERALDINE CALLS]

After she called, Laura, Pasco, and I ran out of the house, in our black clothes. Otis was gone again, and he'd made me promise I wouldn't leave the house. I left the house almost immediately after he'd gone. The Wellspring streets were deserted, like they always were after 9pm. The town smelled like it was on fire with all of the burning wood in people's late summer campfires, and we ran through it, giddy and terrified, for the wrath that would fall inevitably fall if we couldn't complete our mission, the wrath that we could inevitably impose if we did.

You'd think that Art would be paranoid. You'd think he'd booby trap his house with all kinds of devices to keep people out. Heck, you'd think for sure that he'd make sure that his windows were bolted before he left the house. But Art Taylor didn't think that anybody in town could rile his power. He didn't think anybody in town would be stupid enough to mess with the town sheriff. But we were too dumb. And we were too desperate. We had to find a way to save ourselves.

Art lived in a small house on the edge of town, a few blocks from the downtown, underneath three evergreens that provided cover from his neighbors even in the dead cold of winter. The house was grey, two-story house put up quickly in the fifties for the families that Wellspring optimistically hoped would move to town. He had a chain link fence in the backyard and a single faded patio table on which he kept a single planter full now of only dirt. I didn't think that it could be possible that Art wouldn't keep his windows locked, but Laura decided to test them anyway. Pasco hoisted her onto his shoulders, and slide a crowbar under the window jam. She jimmied the window, expecting it to stay closed, I think, but to her amazement and ours, the window started rocking, until she'd opened a small space between the jam. Pasco hoisted her higher and she butted her head in that space, opening it further and putting her arms through. Then she tumbled down onto the floor with an oomph and a little laugh of disbelief. "Come to the front door," she whispered to us, as she ran.

When Laura unlatched the front door, Pasco and I hurried inside. His house was plain, like you'd imagine it to be, with white walls and furniture so mismatched and haphazard I thought maybe he'd confiscated it from random poor unfortunates. Once we were inside the house, though, we weren't sure what to do next. What to look for? Geraldine's distress call could only take Art so long, before he'd be back again. So the three of us split up. Pasco went into the basement to see if Art had stored away any letters from women demanding support for their babies or the like. Laura went to Art's office to rifle through his papers to see if he had laundered any money from the sheriff's department. And I went to his bedroom to see if he had any kind of obscenities similar to Boris Wolff's proclivities.

I headed up the stairs to look for Art's bedroom. It turned out to be the second door on the left. His bedroom furniture was as bland as mismatched as the rest of the house. The comforter on his bed was threadbare and worn. He had what looked like a secondhand-acquired print of a sail

boat docking at harbor hung above his bed. If the room didn't belong to Art, I might have found myself feeling sorry for the inhabitant of this shabby dwelling. But I was too anxious to shed any tears, real or imaginary, so I started looking around for my purposes. I looked in the closet between quarter row of brown polyester sheriff shirts, a quarter row of their matching pants folded over hangers, and half row of brown tweed and black blazers that he wore over his sheriff's suits, unpleasantly tightly over his forearms, on days when he wanted to look particularly menacing or professional. I pushed to the back of the closet, and tore through a cardboard box on the bottom of the closet. I found a single issue of a porno magazine called "Jugs and Tugs," but I didn't think that Art would be too concerned about the people of Wellspring knowing that he had a preference for big-breasted women.

But then, in the back of the closet, folded into crisp, unnatural folds was a sexy nurse costume, a cheap material and a short skirt, complete still with its enormous nurse's cap. I pulled it out of the closet. It was enormous, certainly for a plus-size woman, perhaps even the largest size that they had at the shop where Art had bought it. I laughed at the costume when I pulled it out from the closet floor, and held it up over my head. I shook it out twice—it was enormous. He must have had it special ordered from a catalog or something. But if Art liked his women plump was no concern to the rest of us. I kept searching. I rifled through his sock drawer and all the dresser boxes where he kept his bits and bobs. And then, like I'd done in Boris Wolff's house, I slid my hand in between the mattress and box spring, all along the fitted sheet. I found success. Again. After I'd slid my hand around nearly to the headboard, three Polaroids fell flat onto the floor, their white backs facing towards me. I looked at those white backs on the floor and felt sick to my stomach, like I might throw up. I didn't think Art was the kind of man who get off to pictures of children, but by that point in my life, hypocrites didn't surprise me anymore. I crouched down to pick up the

photographs, stomach still spitting acid up my throat. I closed my eyes, sighed, and then made myself turn over the pictures.

They weren't of children. They weren't pictures of anything entirely graphic. Instead, they were pictures of Art, his fat stomach, his white thighs with their swim trunk tan, his upper arms that were loose and wobbly like an old woman, were all stuffed into the extra-large nurses' uniform I'd found in the closet. Art had done up his lips in red lipstick, drawn thick black lines around the rims of his eyes, rouged his lips. He'd taken several full-body shots of himself using the camera timer. In one, he was bent at the knees with a hand to his mouth, a sly expression of mischief on his face. In another, he sat cross-legged on his bed, smiling glamorously and blowing the camera a kiss. He looked entirely ridiculous, but I was impressed with his wholehearted commitment to his performance. The costume looked tight. The makeup looked laborious. I laughed to myself—we'd done it!—and hurried down the stairs to let Laura and Pasco know that I'd found what we needed. With those photos we could do anything we wanted. With those photos, Art was our pawn. With those photos we could burn the whole town down, and Art couldn't do a thing about it.

I hurried towards the stairs down to the living room, but stopped before the top step when I heard voices. I didn't know what Laura and Pasco could be talking about, unless they'd found something incriminating. I heard Laura's low murmur and Pasco trying to be jovial, but then I heard a third voice—without a doubt Art's, shouting. My first fleeting inclination was to run out the front door, leaving the other two to wrangle with the beast. But even in that moment with my face flushed and heart beating, I knew I couldn't leave the two of them alone with Art. So I ran past the living room into the sitting room, where Art had pushed Laura and Pasco into a corner. When he heard me run into the room, my shoes clipping on the wood floor, Art whirled around to face me.

“And this bitch is here, too,” he said, throwing up his shoulders in false joviality. “It’s a regular party.”

“We were just trying to tell Art,” Pasco started, “about coming to look for him here—”

“That’s bullshit!” Art said. He looked strange. His arms were lifted out to the sides like he was about to take off in flight, and he was flapping his hands softly. “This is my house!” His voice rose higher and higher as he spoke.

“Art. Really,” Laura said. “We’re so sor—”

“Laura, don’t,” I said. “Get over it, Art.” I came to stand in between Laura and Pasco. I fanned out the three Polaroids, white sides facing Art, in front of my face. “Look what we’ve found.”

Art looked at the photographs and his face exploded into patches of bright red and white, and he clenched up his fists and shoulders like he wanted to squeeze his head right off and rocket it into the ceiling. “What are you doing with those?” he shouted, loud enough for Laura to turn her head to the side, embarrassed, like the lady she was.

I knew now the kind of power I had over Art, and flipped the snaps around to show Art the photographs of himself. “Holy shit, Art,” I said. “I never knew you were your own wife.”

Art let out a guttural growl and lunged for me, for the photographs, but I dodged away from him. Laura gasped and grabbed my arm. Art lunged again, but I ran out of his reach onto the sofa. My heart was beating fast, but I was laughing nearly so hard that I couldn’t breathe, moving the Polaroids closer to Art’s face, close enough that he could grab them, and then pulling them up towards the ceiling, out of his grasp. I jiggled on one foot then the other as he grabbed for them. Laura still looked like she wanted to levitate out of the room, but Pasco had his knees bent and his

arms outstretched like he was getting ready for someone to pass him the ball in a basketball game. Art grabbed me around my knees and was about to topple me, so I threw the photographs to Pasco. They fluttered through the air, but Art was too intent on taking me down to grab them before Pasco could take hold and run into the other room. I fell hard onto my side on the sofa, cracking my cheek on the armrest. A stab of pain radiated onto my temple and up and down the muscles in my face and skull.

“Are you all right?” Laura said, running over to where I’d fallen.

I nodded to Laura, but got myself back up—head spinning—and ran into the kitchen behind Art, who wasn’t as fast or as slim as Pasco. Art had a kitchen island in the middle of the room, and Pasco was running around it, with Art just on his heels. Whenever Art would get close enough to Pasco to try and grab the photos, Pasco dart in the other direction around the island. It was hysterical, enormous and lumbering Art grabbing for the quick and nimble Pasco. This went on for nearly a minute, but when Pasco decided to go one direction, Art predicted the switch, and followed him so closely that Art’s long arm could nearly grab the photos. Realizing, Pasco shoved the photos into Laura’s hands. Laura’s mouth dropped in surprise, but she didn’t waste a second, dodging past me and the two struggling men, and running across the room. Art’s eyes goggled and his neck twisted, and Laura held up the photos from the other end of the room to attract Art’s attention away from Pasco. Art twisted away from Pasco, and ran for Laura, who darted past Art towards the kitchen sink. She was fast, yelling as she moved from corner to corner of the kitchen, with the big Art with his bent knees desperately lunging for her. After a few passes like this, Laura leapt up onto the kitchen island, gracefully, magnificently, throwing her body up onto the high counter with ease.

High above us all, Laura taunted Art with the photographs, fanning them in his face, and then jumping back on the countertop and clutching them close to her chest. “Who’s a pretty girl?”

she shouted. Art threw his one leg onto the countertop, but he couldn't get the second one to follow. Art tried again, but again he failed. Laura, laughing in a way that I'd never heard before from her, a way that was almost sinister, pushed the photographs into Art's face when his hands were occupied trying to get his other leg onto the countertops. "Who's the prettiest girl anyone has ever seen?" Laura whispered, smashing the photos into his eyes, and rubbing them all over his face.

Quick, more quickly than I would have thought possible, Art landed back on his two feet in the kitchen, and finally grabbed the photos from Laura. before we could stop them, in a rage, with the speed and dexterity of a wild animal protecting himself, Art opened the table island's drawer and grabbed a pair of scissors. Pasco ran to hang onto Art's back, wrap his hands around Art's neck, and grab for the scissors. Laura put her hands onto Art's eyes to keep him from seeing. But Art rolled Pasco off his shoulder, and pushed Laura away with the scissors—giving her a nasty scrape on the arm—before he ran to the other end of the kitchen and cut the photos up. He cut them in half and Pasco jumped on his back again, but Art was determined and fast now, so he cut them in half again and again and again until they were such small pieces that we wouldn't be able to paste them back together, even if we wanted to try.

Art was breathing hard, staring at the small squares of photos on the ground. Pasco stood behind him, panting, and bent over and put his hands on his knees. "Jesus," he whispered. Laura sat down on the kitchen island, staring at the ground. I still stood near the opening to the kitchen, watching them all.

"You're all going down," Art said, still breathing heavily. "This was the worst decision you could have made—"

"Art, let them go," I said.

"What?" Pasco looked over at me with confusion.

“I’ll deal with it.”

It took some convincing to get Laura and Pasco to leave, but eventually they did. I stood across from Art in the kitchen, staring him down.

“I know what you want,” I said.

Art twitched up his mouth, and looked at me. He raised his eyebrows.

“And I’ll give you what you want if don’t arrest them. Don’t arrest us.”

Art stood still, considering my proposal. “Yep,” he said. He walked up the stairs. I sighed, and followed behind him. When we got into the bedroom, he pulled out the wrinkled nurses’ costume. “I’m going to wear this. You’ll like it better that way.”

[MAYBE TAKES ANOTHER PHOTO OF ART IN THE COSTUME/MAYBE NOT]

We lay there afterwards. I felt sweaty and disgusting, and I wanted to run home to take a shower. I went into the bathroom and wet toilet paper to wash myself. And then I went back to the couch to sit close to Art, who, if I’d already done all that to calm him down, I shouldn’t leave alone now. “My buddy,” Art said. On his arm was the hula girl tattoo, more of a shock to any of us even than the sweat stain he that hot August underneath his chest, a hastily done thing with faded colors completed by a hasty buddy in Hawaii. “He did this tattoo here for me. Out of a kit he bought off some street Jap in Honolulu.” I had seen Art take off his brown button-down sheriff’s shirt and strip down to his white undershirt, threadbare and surprisingly intimate, at church potlucks. The old ladies, translucent fleshed church ladies, turned away from the outline of his matted chest hair and his belly-button against the threadbare cotton. Now, that same intimate chest hair was poking out, playfully, from the top of the nurse’s uniform.

“That doesn’t surprise me.”

“What does that mean?” Art had been brushing his fingers over my shoulder, lightly, like a teenager, and when I said something that he took as insult, I stopped.

“She’s a hula dancer,” I said. “Thematically appropriate.”

“Right. Anyway, it hurt like a sonofabitch. Really did. That buddy didn’t know what he was doing. But I never did see combat, I’m sorry to say, so I call this my war scar.” Art laughed then, loose and gregarious, and a person with a laugh like that, a free laugh like that, almost made me think that I’d misjudged him entirely. I laughed.

“You have a nice laugh,” Art said. “Your husband never said.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“I’m so lonely.” Art started up stroking my arm with his fingertips, slowly.

“OK,” I said, willing my arm to lose its feeling.

“I thought tonight was nice,” Art said. “Did you?”

It was entirely like Art to reinvent the evening’s scenario so it was something different, something that both parties had wanted, for its own. It was just like Art to cast this night in something like love. But my goal still was to oblige and appease him, so I said, “Very nice.”

“I know your husband mistreats you,” he said.

“Sure.”

“I wouldn’t mistreat you.”

I sighed.

“Do you think you could ever love me?” I turned over to look at Art. He still had the makeup on his face, the hastily-done mascara and eyeliner splotched around his eyes and into the lined crevices in the bags beneath, the pink, almost-clownish rouge on his cheeks, the lipstick, cheap, ordered secretly through a catalog certainly, worn off, onto my mouth most probably, still visible only in the chap of his lips. He looked ridiculous, but more than that, he looked pathetic. He wanted someone to love him like this, and maybe if he had someone who could do that he wouldn’t be like he was. But I wasn’t that someone. And really, I couldn’t let myself forgive Art Taylor, no matter how much easier it would be if I could. He propped his head onto his hand, and looked at me with desperation in his eyes. He thought I would continue pretending, I think, but I wouldn’t. I couldn’t.

“You make me feel sick,” I spit the words, and jumped out of bed. “Tonight, any night, whenever I see you. Your fat stomach and your disgusting habits and your stupid power.” I picked up my shirt from the ground and found my skirt and underthings. Art looked like he was about to cry, and then, he did it, he put his face in his hand and started to weep. Still I couldn’t stop. “You’re a terrible man, and, really, a disgusting woman.” I left the room, ran down the stairs, and crashed out into the night. I should have held my tongue, kept pretending until I could have used the night to my advantage. Art was nearly in love with me, and that could have only done me—and Laura and Pasco—some good. Why, I still wonder, all this time later, couldn’t I have answered him with a simple, “Yes, Art, I do”?

10.

Wellspring

They say there's a menace to society—a group, not just a single person—lurking around Wellspring. This group says that it's all about getting justice for Julie Qillag, stopping the abductions of Victoria Dortmund, but we've always heard the voice that's the loudest has the most to hide. We suspect that this group is comprised of strangers who aren't from around these parts, strangers who practice religions that we don't understand and don't support. We suspect that this group doesn't have our best interests at heart, and at the very core of their mission, don't love God in a Christian way. They say that the group dresses in all black, and runs around Wellspring on the kinds of night where the moon is full. They say that the group lures children down to the water with Satanic chants, beautiful, rhythmic music pitched at a volume that only children can hear. Once the children are on the beach, we've heard that they dress them up like lambs to the slaughter, leaves in their hair. Then they drown them, and the children go willingly, into the water, into the light. Then, they say, the group ties rocks to their arms and legs and drags them out to the middle of the lake, where their bodies are dumped to the bottom of the lake, where the group believes that Satan can be the proudest of them. We're not sure why Victoria Dortmund has been spared this final fate. But we are nearly certain now that this is the group that's been causing the turmoil around here. And, more than anything, we're sure that this group needs to be stopped.

Chapter 4

Towering Cumulus

1.

Wellspring

They say that Ruth Jensen's mind was almost gone when she killed Julie Qillag. Ruth had become friendlier and friendlier with the girl, reading Julie's stories and coming to her performances. We know that Ruth could never have children because she married too late, and they say that Julie became like a daughter to her. But Julie already had a mother. They say that Ruth was too motherly to Julie, telling her that her own mother could never care for her the way that Ruth could. We heard about the fine Swiss protractor—a silver one!—Ruth bought for Julie, the way that Ruth said that she could use her East Coast connections to get Julie into Harvard when she turned 18. But Julie was a smart girl, and realized that Ruth's connection went no further than Iowa City. They say that when Julie cut off contact with Ruth completely that made Ruth's mind worse than it had ever been, that Julie's betrayal made Ruth recognize her own failings, that the girl mocked Ruth with insinuations of her own instability. They say that Julie never made it out onto the boat to the middle of the lake until after she was dead. They say Ruth liked watching the life slip out of such a young life. They say she liked the power of it, that she finally felt in control of a destiny that had never been hers before.

2.

Interview #2: Art Taylor and Ruth Jensen, December 18, 1971

Laura was real sick. She was real, real sick. She was undeniably a beautiful lady, but her head never worked right. She said it was because it had been inflamed ever since she and her sister ate those wild mushrooms that one summer when she was 9 and it never recovered. She said she needed to eat more fish. You might have thought she was a real snobby woman, Art, or she might have appeared that way, but she really could see stuff that the rest of us couldn't. She could see into that other side of life, and she got herself convinced that she'd been transformed after death or something in the wrong body. She was so convinced that I couldn't do anything to help her. She needed help. I said that I'd help her as long as she'd get help when she escaped. She hated that kid of hers, that Vicky, and really I think it was Vicky she wanted to escape even more than she wanted to escape Jim. She thought she belonged to the clouds, and that was why she could feel nothing for Vicky. She could only feel something for me because I was basically a vapor. Still a vapor. A cloud and a vapor, she said, what a love story. And I believed her. Never took myself to be an idiot, but a person is always so many things, isn't she?

3.

Wellspring

They say that a body can soapanify in a lake like this one, a mountain lake with our lake's particular composition. It's happened before. A woman was killed by her husband here, and the lake is so deep that her body could never be found. It took 50 years, but one day her body popped to the top of the lake like a cork. We've never really known what a soapanified body would look like, anyway. Would it have porous, gelatinous arms? Would its eyes make the water around it all sudsy, like it had spent too long in the bath? Would it slowly disintegrate, until it became small that it was just a sliver sitting on the edge of the tub? We've never known. But that was what they said probably would happen to Laura Dortmund's body after it's been in our lake for too long, years and years, decades and decades. They say that Ruth probably weighted her body when she tipped her out of the boat. It's hard for us to imagine if Laura wasn't already dead when Ruth tipped her out, but we suppose it's possible that she wasn't. We don't like to imagine it, but maybe there was a struggle in the boat. Maybe Ruth didn't even know what she was doing when she took Laura out there. Maybe she just wanted to reason with her that Ruth should have Laura's husband, that their love was the strongest. Maybe Ruth just wanted to teach Laura a lesson for being too strong, too successful, too good. Jealous people have burning guts, they say. Their guts burn so strong that nothing can satisfy them until they've blown up everything around them, too. Maybe that's what happened with Ruth and Laura. Even though Ruth is a big Norwegian, Laura could have struggle. Laura could have continued to disagree. And we would never put it past Ruth to get mad, to get mad enough to do something that she'd regret. Or maybe mad enough to do something that she didn't.

3.

**Mob Forms Around Pasco Jimenez House as Retaliation Against
“Murder”**

The Wellspring World Herald

September 26, 1971

Last night, late at night, a large group of individuals who had blocked out their faces with Raggedy Anne masks swarmed the home at 2408 Oceanside View. As this reporter came to the scene late, he saw the group standing near the house, just standing there, their hands at their sides, not speaking, not really even moving. Three individuals—Laura Dortmund, Pasco Jimenez, and Ruth Jensen—were believed to be in the house and their outlines could just be seen in the window of the home, darkly outlined against the darkness within the house, as well. This reporter believes that the confrontation began after Pasco Jimenez our dear old Geraldine. Geraldine died just last week, surrounded by friends and family, to be with her late husband, Rod. God Rest Her Soul!

Regardless of the veracity of the claims of stealing Geraldine's life, Pasco came to the hospital and the people surrounding Geraldine's bedside parted. They made a path to Geraldine's bed and Pasco sat next to her. Geraldine smiled and held out her hand. Pasco smiled back at Geraldine and took her hand. Then, both people started laughing, inexplicably, and Pasco reached up and hugged Geraldine. This reporter could hear him whisper to Geraldine, "I'll miss you" but the sound was very quiet and this reporter could have been mistaken.

4.

Ruth

[getting Laura ready to leave]

After the mob formed, Laura and I ran to get the car in the woods where we'd hidden it all those months before. It was covered with leaves and sap, and we had to clear off the windows with our sleeves and spit before she could go anywhere. As we worked, Laura started crying in that silent way of hers, spitting and crying onto her sleeves without blubbing or choking, like a silent movie star who exaggerates to convey something without words. At the time I thought she was crying because she'd finally done the worst thing a mother could do to her child. Really, I thought then that she was crying for me. But now I think back on that bizarre pantomime, and I doubt that I'll ever know what was going on in her head, what she was thinking rather than what she was performing. Laura Dortmund, I decided later, was a consummate actress. Laura wiped the car with her sleeve, a fabric too nice to wipe off a sticky window, and then wipe the wetness from her face with the sticky sleeve.

"Least you can do is cry out loud," I said, trying to laugh. I pushed Laura out of the way of the car. "I'd rather use my sleeve than have you ruin yours."

"This is really it."

"Yes."

"I'm going."

“You are.” I wanted her to look more beautiful in the light that night, someone worthy of sacrifice, but she just looked flushed and sweaty, her cheeks heavy in a way that didn’t suit her. Must have been from too many sweets. Maybe Art really was right about some things.

“It won’t be long, Ruth.” Laura walked closer to me and took my hand. I felt heat rise through my body in a way that I considered important. I never liked to protract anything, not even goodbyes.

That was when I knew Laura loved me. Or at least I thought she did. I know, and really, if I’m not kidding myself, I knew then that Laura was a consummate actor.

