2019

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YANKEE CANNONBALL

By

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A.B., Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 2010

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in Creative Writing, Fiction

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

May 2019

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Virginia broke a stick of sidewalk chalk in half. She dropped one piece and ground it into the asphalt with her clog, scraping it into a hash mark. She walked ten paces and did the same with the other piece.

“Got it?” she said.

Buddy nodded. He was standing in the V of the open driver’s-side door of the Volvo. He rattled the keys in his hand and glanced at the low branches of the willow that overhung this edge of the Home Depot parking lot, as though they might somehow get in the way. Then he nodded to himself and got in the car.

Virginia stood back about twice as far as she needed to in order to be safe from whatever lurchy job Buddy was about to do. She’d been angry and overcautious all along. Robin watched from just past the shadow of the willow, balancing his fishing rod on the back of his neck like he’d seen men do in magazines. The rod teetered. Buddy started the car. Virginia crossed her arms. Buddy turned up the radio and rolled down the window and stuck out his head. The wheels ground around to the right. The car lurched forward and stopped and then Buddy started the engine again and very slowly started to back into the imaginary parking spot.

When he was done he got out and tossed the keys to Virginia, who didn’t move when they jangled past her and landed on the asphalt.
“Pick those up, you ninny,” she said, and Buddy did as he was told. His test was in a week.

Buddy kept the camp chair hidden in the trees by the riverbank. He dug around for it, humming, while Robin tied a red-and-white Daredevil onto the end of his line. When Buddy returned he was stoned—Robin could tell from the way the skin on his face seemed looser, and from his feet. Normally, Buddy walked up on his toes, bouncing off his heels. Virginia had been trying to bully it out of him. “It makes you look autistic,” she said. “Just try walking normally for a change.” That only made him bounce higher. But now he stepped lazily through the underbrush, his feet relaxed, his heels grounded. He was humming the same song as before but with a little more swing in it. They set off through the woods.

Buddy had been at prep school for a year and already he was an expert in things. It was something new every week: cheating on tests with his TI-89, or Chinese teas, or the body types of girls with different hair colors, or certain live versions of certain Grateful Dead songs. Robin was living at home with their mother, Virginia.

Buddy talked with his hands as he bushwhacked past the hermit and pervert nests, looking under blankets with a stick and carrying the camp chair over his shoulder. They got farther from the edge of the parking lot, passed a clearing full of beer cans, climbed over a chain-link fence into deeper leaves, and came out at a bend in the river with a slow spot in it, a bubble line that parted and met back up around an old log. Robin was sure there’d be fish. Buddy parked his chair and Robin climbed down the bank looking for a spot with enough room to cast. The bubble line was up against the opposite bank, forty or fifty feet away.

“Let me use your chair,” Robin said.
“For what?”

“Just let me use it for a second.” Robin planted the chair and climbed up on it and broke off a few branches.

“Redheads,” Buddy said, staring up into the leaves, “are waiflike. They’re fragile.”

Robin held his elbow tight to his ribs, crouched down, and tried to shoot the red-and-white spoon out into the river. It caught on a leaf overhead and dropped into the dirt.

“Their skin is very pale,” Buddy said, “and their nipples—”

Robin tried again, sidearm, and plunked the cast into the shallows.

“Son of a bitch,” Robin said. He could imagine the fish in that bubble line, big-bellied largemouths, greedy and undisturbed.

“—their nipples,” Buddy said, “are pink.”

Robin brought the rod straight back over his head, slashing the leaves with the tip, crouched, let the lure sit for a second on the dusty bank behind him, and then shot it forward, aiming straight through the hole he’d made in the overhanging leaves.

He felt a pressure in the back of his head before he realized what’d happened. He must have had the bail half-open: he’d felt slack instead of the weight of the lure, and only at the end of the cast, when he’d already started to turn in confusion, did the lure pop out of the dirt.

“They are freckled,” Buddy said, “across their whole body.”

Robin heard the jingle of the lure from directly behind him. He reached for the back of his head and felt the monofilament in the air and it was as though he’d touched a live wire. He yelped and dropped the rod, and when the line went tight he yelped again and fell to his knees.

“Buddy…” he said.

“What?”
“Fuck. Fuck.”

“What?” Buddy said.

“Come here. Please. Slowly.”

Robin stayed on his knees, looking into the dirt. Every direction he tried to move sent red-hot pain across his scalp and down his neck. The line was tangled somewhere in the air above him.

“What?” Buddy said. And then Buddy said, “Oh.” He started giggling.


“Looks like you caught one,” Buddy said, with his hands on his hips.

“Please, Buddy. This really hurts.”

“Well, quit moving, then.” Buddy came forward. He reached for something above Robin’s head and Robin screamed.

“Christ!” Robin said. “Don’t do that!”

“Well, what do you want me to do then?” Buddy said. He started giggling again. “You, uh, you caught the back of your head.”

“Cut it, Buddy. Cut the line. It’s tangled somewhere. Please.” Robin was starting to tear up. His mouth was flooding with saliva. He spat into the dirt.

Buddy unsnapped the sheath on his belt. Virginia had given him a Leatherman for his birthday and he wore it every time they went out into the woods. He was always looking for things to do with it.

“Be careful,” Robin said, holding as still as possible. He flexed his ears, loosening his scalp. There was a puddle of drool below his face. The soil here was flecked with white, like in a houseplant.
“Hold still,” Buddy said. There was a jerk on the line and a scalding pain and something cold slapped against Robin’s neck. He collapsed in the dirt.

“What we have here,” Buddy said, standing over him with the Leatherman, “is a classic example of hubris.”

Robin had fallen into the drool. He held one hand over the lure that was attached to his scalp and wiped the mud off his cheek with the hem of his t-shirt.

“I can’t move it,” Robin said. He’d been trying not to blink but he couldn’t hold out any longer. Hot tears ran down his face.

“Hubris,” Buddy said, opening and closing the needlenose pliers. “It’s something you’ll learn about in Leffert’s English One-Ten. One-Eleven if you’re lucky. Hold still.” He stood behind Robin and did something to Robin’s hair and then whistled. “You’re hooked pretty good,” he said.

“Is it past the barb?”

“Oh yeah,” Buddy said. “Way past the barb.”

“Should we get mom?”

“Robby, I just smoked pot. Not a chance. Plus it’s not that bad.” Buddy touched the lure and Robin yelped. “I’ll just get it out. Try not to be a pussy.” Buddy unfolded the scissors.

“I’m going to clip the line a little closer,” he said. “Be still.” Robin clenched his eyes shut. Buddy snipped, and snipped, then positioned Robin’s head and snipped again. A tuft of brown hair fell onto the ground.

“Buddy!”

“Hold still,” Buddy said. “I need to prep the area.” The tears were flowing now. Buddy guided him over to the camp chair and had him sit down. Buddy stood back, then came closer,
and Robin felt Buddy’s breath on his ears, just the way it felt when he was getting a haircut, except that Buddy’s breath smelled like pot.

“I’m going to try the following,” Buddy said. “With your approval. First of all, I think you’re going a little numb back here, which is good. Can you feel that?”

“Ouch,” Robin said. “Yes.”

“Well, in any case, I think we need to do one of two things. Because I can see where the barb is under the skin. It’s not going to back out. So we can either cut the skin, or we can—”

“Ouch!” Robin said, and jerked his head forward.

“Shh,” Buddy said. “We can cut the skin, or we can try to push the hook through the other side and then clip off the end with the barb with my wire cutters.” Buddy held up the Leatherman. He was glassy-eyed and smiling and there was blood on both of his hands.

Robin held out his arm to keep Buddy away. He found the base of the treble hook and felt where the point of the hook was pressing against the rubbery underside of the skin. He gritted his teeth and tugged.

“Mm,” he grunted.

“What are you doing?” Buddy said.

“Just—wait,” Robin said. He tugged again, harder, then really pulled on the hook. The skin wouldn’t give. It was like pulling on denim, or leather. He felt it all the way to his eyebrows.

“I can’t get it out,” Robin said. “I think we should go back to the car.”

“Robby, negative. Let me look.”

Robin swatted his hand away. “Buddy, come on,” he said. “I don’t want to get infected. Mom’ll know what to do. You don’t have to come.”
“I know mom’ll know what to do,” Buddy said. He kicked the dirt. “And I am our mother’s son. Therefore, the knowledge is within me, too. Just let me look at it.”

Robin moved his hands. Buddy pushed the hair aside and studied the area, tilting Robin’s head forward and back. Finally he cleared his throat.

“I think we should push it through,” Buddy said.

“How high are you?” Robin said.

“High enough not to catch myself with a fishhook,” Buddy said.

“Ouch,” Robin said as Buddy pressed on the barb. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“You don’t make any sense,” Buddy said. “Alright. I’m going to start pushing. You might want to bite a stick or something.”

“Fuck,” Robin whispered, and closed his eyes. He squeezed the camp chair’s support bars. He could feel Buddy’s pot breath on his neck. His skin was tight where the blood had started to dry. “Okay,” he said. “Ready.”

Buddy pushed and Robin gasped.

“Ooooh! Damnit, Buddy,” he said. He tried to wiggle away but Buddy had a handful of his hair. He thought he could feel the bend of the hook pressing against his skull. There was a cold pressure in the numb part of his head and a sharp pinch at the center of it.

“Shh,” Buddy said, and then something popped.

It took Buddy a while to get the barb off with the wire cutters on the Leatherman, which turned out to be not that sharp. By the time Buddy slid the sheared hook out of the loop of skin the whole back of Robin’s scalp was numb. His neck was slick with blood and he felt nauseous.

“I want to go back,” Robin said. Buddy was cleaning off his Leatherman on the back of Robin’s t-shirt.
“I think you should take a swim,” Buddy said. “It looks like we sacrificed an animal or something.”

“I want to go, fucking, home,” Robin said, crouching by the edge of the river and splashing water on his arms.

Buddy stepped up behind him and pushed him in.

“What do you want me to do?” Virginia said, sitting at her writing desk with her feet up on the foot of the waterbed. Robin stood on the bedroom carpet, cupping the back of his head with his hand. It had started bleeding again and the skull underneath was throbbing. She squinted at him through the steam from her tea.

They’d driven home in silence, Buddy in the back seat passed out against the window, one red eye half-open as he snored, and Robin up front, the back of his head bumping numbly against the head rest. Ever since they were babies she’d made one of them sit up front—otherwise it made her feel like a chauffeur. Robin could never tell what she saw or didn’t—she liked to stay silent until she had three or four things to say, and then say them all at once, no matter how important they were. When they pulled into the driveway, she sat still for a minute with the car running, then pressed the switches for the rear power windows. Buddy jerked awake as the glass yanked on his cheek skin. She shut off the car.

“It stinks in here,” she said. “Throw away your bathing suits. Buddy, you may not drive again today. Robin, you’re getting blood on the car seat. Go inside and get a rag and clean it off.”

At some point, someone had explained to Robin that the Charles was a dirty river, full of three-eyed fish and old car tires. It wasn’t Virginia, who wouldn’t have come up with three-eyed
fish—she didn’t exaggerate that way—or Buddy, who’d have rather come up with his own idea, that the river was actually *clean*, than accept someone else’s. But it made sense: the way the air wobbled over the canoe anchor when they pulled it up covered in sludge, and all the sneakers and bathing suits they’d had to throw out already this summer.

Robin had locked himself in the bathroom and angled the medicine cabinet door so that he could see most of the back of his head, reflected infinitely in every direction, but the wound itself was crusted over with blood and cut hair. He couldn’t focus and it was straining his eyes to look into the reflections, some of which felt miles away. He’d knocked on the doorjamb of the master bedroom.

“Can you see if it’s infected?” Robin said.

“Turn around,” Virginia said. Robin did, and held his hair out of the way.

“Oh, yuck,” she said. She put on her reading glasses. “Sit down,” she said, and Robin knelt on the rug.

“Explain this,” she said.

“I caught myself with a fishhook.”

“Well, that was dumb.”

“I know.”

She leaned back and put her feet up on the bed, her reading glasses dangling from her mouth.

“What do you think?” he said.

“I think you let Buddy do surgery on you in the woods.”

Robin nodded.

“That was a bad idea,” she said.
Robin nodded. “Do we have to go to the hospital?”

Virginia snorted. “We!” she said. She took her feet down and swiveled back toward her desk. “Pumpkin,” she said, “I’m on deadline. You want me to look at it, I will. But I’m not going anywhere. Why don’t you go wash it off in the bathroom. I’ll be in in a minute.” She put her glasses back on and picked up her pen.

When she came into the bathroom she had the buzzer with her.

“Mom—” Robin said.

“Hush.” She dried the back of his head with a handtowel from the rack. He tried to move away but she had him by the hair. “Shh,” she said, and pressed the buzzer against the back of his neck. It hummed against the bone and hair flew off in all directions. She scraped up the back of his head and Robin winced as the plastic guard bumped over the swelling. She ran it up his head one more time, then turned it off. There was hair and dried blood all over the sink.

“Hold still,” she said. She unscrewed the lid of a plastic bottle, pressed the handtowel over the mouth, and inverted it. Robin smelled alcohol. She pressed the towel against the back of Robin’s head.

“This will sting,” she said, and then it did.

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July 2005

Robin stood behind the trunk of a pine tree in Aunt Jo’s backyard, breathing hard. His glasses had fogged up inside his ski goggles.
He had been crawling around the edge of the yard for twenty minutes to get to a place where he could shit. Buddy and Azalea were out there somewhere, each of them with a guerilla army’s worth of AirSoft guns and smoke bombs and cardboard boxes of Pop-Pops.

He tried to control his breathing. He exhaled steady, steady, steady, then gasped to keep up with his racing heart. He took off the goggles, then his fogged-up glasses, and wiped the lenses on the hem of his shirt. Without the goggles the world glowed crystal blue. Buddy hadn’t wanted to wear them, but Robin had insisted. He was afraid for their eyes.

It was a perfect quiet Vermont day with birds and everything. Virginia and Aunt Jo were driving around to see the yard sales. Somewhere in the woods, hopefully far away, Buddy and Azalea were crawling around on their stomachs fully camouflaged and armed to the teeth.

Robin leaned against the tree and pulled down his pants. A knot dug into his shoulder. He closed his eyes and felt the heat of the sun like fingers pressing against his eyelids.

Tang!—something hit him in the mouth. His vision clouded and his mouth flooded with saliva and he dropped the handful of napkins he’d been holding at his side. He pressed his hands against his mouth, lips closed, afraid of what he’d find. Hot tears dripped off his cheeks and his front tooth throbbed like a piece metal.

“Ohmigod!” Azalea said, jumping from behind a tree sixty feet away. “I’m so fucking sorry!” She pulled off her goggles and started toward him, her rifle at her side.

“Stop!” Robin shouted. “Go away!”

“What are you—oh! My god!” She was laughing now. “Are you okay? Are you…?”

Robin wiped frantically with the wad of napkins and then tried to pull up his ski pants and tipped over in the grass. Azalea shrieked and covered her eyes.
“What happened?” It was Buddy, jogging over from the far side of the house. He’d been hiding behind the woodpile. Robin crawled around behind the tree. There was something hot on his chin and he couldn’t tell if it was saliva or blood.

“I hit Robby in the tooth while he was shitting,” Azalea shouted.

“Wait—wait—let me see!” Buddy was running now. Robin could hear his ski pants swishing.

Robin lay on the couch wiggling his tooth. Buddy and Azalea were on their stomachs on the carpet with the Scrabble set out, not really playing, just building words. Robin’s stomach had been hurting ever since they came inside, and now he lay on his left side, then his right side, trying to imagine what was causing the cramp, trying to figure out how to relieve it.

It was to the right of his belly button and deep, almost in his hips. He could lean, and stretch out, and break the cramp, but it would grab on somewhere else and tighten back up. He rolled face-down on the couch and lay as still as possible, his pain cradled in the gap between the cushions, his head dangling off the seat, his eyes a few inches off the carpet.

Buddy crawled over and sat down on his butt beside the couch.

“Hey Robot,” he said. “How you feeling?”

“I’m fine,” Robin said.

“Let me see,” Buddy said. He pulled open one of Robin’s eyelids and Robin slapped his hand away. He put his thumb on Robin’s chin and tried to open his mouth. “Say ‘aah’,” he said. Robin kept his teeth clenched and curled deeper into the couch.

“Hey, seriously,” Buddy whispered. “You okay?”
Robin nodded. He kept his eyes closed and Buddy moved Robin’s hand aside and pushed gently on his stomach and then he pressed his thumb into Robin’s throat and then finally he crawled away. He said something to Azalea and they both giggled and then someone turned up the volume on the TV.

The carpet was beige, saturated with years of caked dog shit, spilled milk, toenail clippings, crumbs, boogers, dead spiders, dirt from logs, flaked skin cells, and who knows what else. Robin took shallow breaths but he couldn’t shake the feeling that he was inhaling all that dirtiness, sucking it across his teeth and tongue like a baleen whale. His breath caught and he coughed into the carpet, then lurched violently out of the shitcloud and coiled up on the couch, holding his stomach.

When he uncoiled Buddy and Azalea were gone. The remote was six inches out of his reach. He lay facing the setting sun with his eyelashes touching, guiding little snakes around in the crosshatched rectangle of light. From the TV came the vroom-vroom of motocross riders.

Through the floor he felt the chunk—whine—chunk of the jacuzzi faucets followed by the long low rattle of the shower. So Buddy and Azalea were in the basement getting ready to take a rainforest bath. Virginia’d invented them when they were kids: a hot bath with a cold shower on top. Buddy still took them when he was home. Primarily, Robin knew, to jerk off.

The knot in his gut thumped with his heartbeat and he clenched his eyelids and stuck his fist down into the cool crack at the back of the sofa and ground his knuckles into something crunchy at the seam.

He woke up to Aunt Jo’s cool hand on his forehead.

“How you feeling, baby?” she said.
Robin groaned and rolled over. He tugged on his waistband and pressed his fingers into his stomach but the pain seemed to have moved somewhere deeper inside.

“Little warm,” Aunt Jo said. She was a big woman, with huge hands and short curly hair and a little bit of a hunchback. She looked like Julia Child.

She wasn’t actually their aunt. She and Virginia had been roommates in college. Buddy was writing a paper about Virginia at Regent and he’d started doing research into all kinds of things: her childhood, Windsor, Radcliffe, the shadowy lesbian cabal. Virginia had lived with them in the co-op, and published in their zines, and then much later she and Aunt Jo and a few other former cabal members had gone to a sperm bank in Waltham and gotten pregnant. Later, Virginia had gone back again, alone.

Buddy had a photo of her from college, taken on the porch of the co-op. Aunt Jo was the center of attention, and around her women in work shirts and buzz cuts grinned at the camera and flashed peace signs. At the very edge of the photo, stooped over, like she was part of the picture frame instead of the picture, was Virginia: six feet tall, pale and dark-haired, frowning, looking off to the right.

According to Buddy, Aunt Jo had been her protector and only friend. She stood up for Virginia’s rights as a woman and an academic and guarded her from the advances of the other cabal members and made sure she always had a quiet place to write, in the sewing room of the co-op, no matter what party or rally was going on downstairs. She was also the one who got Virginia to start publishing, in the black-and-white pamphlets the cabal printed in the college library and handed out in the Square.

“What I can’t figure out,” Buddy’d kept saying, jabbing his finger at Virginia’s washed-out face at the edge of the photo, “is why she looks like such a bitch. I mean, give me a fucking
break, mom. I’ve read what she was working on. It wasn’t all that great. And I’ve talked to some of these chicks. They’re weird, but they’re nice. They were just trying to help.”

“Maybe she didn’t want their help,” Robin had said.

“Well, she obviously needed it.”

Aunt Jo took her hand off his forehead. “I think you’ll live,” she said, and stood up.

“Where’s Buddy and Zaley?” Robin said.

“God knows,” Aunt Jo said. She pinched her earlobe and wiggled it violently. It was a tic. Buddy could do it perfectly. “Playing grab-ass at the river, I suspect,” she said. “You want some eggs-on-toast?”

“Do you have cinnamon-sugar?” Robin said.

“I could make some.”

“Could I please have cinnamon toast?”

“I don’t see why not.”

Robin sat up slowly. He wondered if the timing of getting shot had somehow strained or ruptured something inside of him. He’d had to clean himself off in the shower and that’s when the pain had started.

“Thanks,” he said when Aunt Jo put the buttered toast down in front of him. She’d cut it into triangles. Next to the plate she placed a little bowl of cinnamon-sugar.

“I’ll let you doctor it up the way you like,” she said.

He poured on the cinnamon sugar and took a bite and then put the piece back down. “I forgot my manners,” he said. “Do you want some?” He held up the other triangle and winced. It was still there, deep down. His abs were exhausted from clenching. Aunt Jo looked at the
toast funny, then accepted it and sat down on the corner of the table. She held her hand under her chin as she took a bite.

“Where’s my mom?” Robin said. “Is she playing grab-ass too?”

Aunt Jo narrowed her eyes, then smiled. She had cinnamon-sugar on her upper lip.

“How old are you now?” she said.

“Eleven,” Robin said. “Sixth grade. Or, as Buddy would say, ‘sik-th grade.’”

“He does say it that way, doesn’t he?”

“He’s an Anglophile,” Robin said. “He also says ‘to-mah-toe.’”

“He’ll grow out of it,” Aunt Jo said, brushing cinnamon-sugar off her palm onto Robin’s plate. “Or he won’t—who cares!”

“Let me get it,” Robin said. He took the plate to the sink and leaned for a second with his eyes closed, letting the knob of the cupboard press into his stomach.

“But, so, where is my mom?” he said.

“She’s visiting the university,” Aunt Jo said. “She has a friend there. I’ll let her explain. They have a lecture series. They may ask her to come speak, which I think would be lovely.”

Robin looked out over the backyard. The sun was getting low. He guessed it was about four o’clock.

“Are Buddy and Zaley actually at the river?” he said.

“I think so, baby. But I’m not sure. They left on bikes in their bathing suits a couple hours ago. You were pretty conked out.”

“Can I go see if they’re there?” Robin said.

“It’s a free country,” Aunt Jo said. “You know where the bikes are.”
He dragged one of the mountain bikes out from under the back porch and then fell to his knees with his face against the woodpile and tried to puke. Nothing came up. He wiped tears from the corner of his eyes and stood up gingerly and tested the brakes on the bike.

Something was wrong, and Aunt Jo hadn’t done anything about it. Neither had Zaley, or his mom, who had gone off on her own. Whatever was happening to him, he thought, was their fault.

He passed the Volvo just before the turnoff to the dirt road. Virginia was driving with her hands at ten and two, leaning forward, scowling into the setting sun. Robin waved. She saw him at the last moment and swerved and did not wave back.

He found Buddy and Azalea walking their bikes in their bathing suits along the edge of the dirt road. He squeezed the rear brake and stuck out his foot and slid to a stop in a cloud of dust.

“What’s up, Brother,” Buddy said.

“Hey Young Blood,” Azalea said.

“Have fun smoking pot?” Robin said.

Buddy threw something at Robin. It bounced off Robin’s forehead and fell in the dirt. It was a berry.

Buddy wasn’t as cool as Azalea. He was tall but extremely skinny, with a sunken chest and shoulders that sloped down from his neck. He was a little splay-toed, and he walked like an Autistic kid, bouncing up off his heels. He’d started gelling up the front of his hair so that it spiked out like a visor and he wore a bunch of dirty bracelets. He talked too fast and every few sentences he stopped to suck in air so that he wouldn’t drool. He was always trying to hock
loogies, and at home he walked around with his hand down the front of his pants. Robin had seen all the boys doing it in the dorm at Regent over Family Weekend. Buddy was an awkward athlete and he cried easily.

Azalea played varsity soccer and varsity tennis as a freshman. She was a skipper on the sailing team and she skied better than any of them. She was almost as tall as Buddy, freckled and red-headed, and when she sweated her whole body turned red. Robin remembered playing Canadian doubles at the Racquet Club and watching it creep up her thighs, mottling on her stomach when she lifted her arm to serve. Buddy said it was because she was Dutch, that this was a genetically Dutch thing. She almost always wore headbands and sports bras and travel-team t-shirts, untied Nikes, and high white tube socks. Now she was in a white bikini and the redness was spreading from her chest over her shoulders and down her arms. Part of it was sunburn, but Robin thought he could also make out red handprints. He swallowed hard.

“I, for one, had a great time smoking pot,” Azalea said. She took a big bite of the green apple she was holding, then wound up and threw the rest into the woods. “How’s your stomach?”

“It’s okay,” Robin said. He walked his bike up beside them put down the kickstand. “Where’d you guys go?”

“Ropeswing,” Buddy said. He put down his own kickstand.

“I didn’t know there was a ropeswing here,” Robin said.

Buddy and Azalea met eyes and grinned.

“There wasn’t,” Buddy said. “Until now.”

“You made one?” Robin said. “Let’s go look!”
“Shh,” Buddy said, looking around. “No. We just came from there. It was getting cold. We’ll show you tomorrow. We hid the rope so no one will know.”

“That’s so cool,” Robin said. “Is it as big as the one at Quabbin? Where’d you get the rope?”

“We found it at the house,” Buddy said. “It’s almost as big. It’s different. You’ll see.”

“We also went to Cumby’s,” Azalea said. She’d put down her kickstand and was looking through a pile of wet clothes in the basket on the back. “Hungry?” she said, and handed Robin a Skor bar.

“Fuck yeah,” Robin said. He opened it and took a bite

“Careful,” Buddy said. “That was in my bathing suit.”

Robin spat out what he was chewing and dropped the bar in the dirt. “What? Why?”

“How would you have stolen it?” Buddy said.

Robin looked at Buddy and at Azalea and then back at Buddy. Their eyes were glazed over and they’d both gotten a lot of sun. Azalea’s bikini strap was twisted. Buddy’s suit was untied and it looked like he had a half-boner.

“What?” Robin said again.

“You want a Cookies ‘n’ Cream instead?” Azalea said. She took one out of the basket and held it out to Robin.

“Was it…?”

“They were all in one bathing suit or another,” Azalea said. She laughed and put it back in the basket and Robin saw that the metal clips on the back of her bikini top were done up wrong. He felt his face turning red.
Buddy kicked up his kickstand. “Don’t just leave that there,” he said, nodding at the Skor wrapper in the dirt. Then he stood on the pedal and crunched off down the middle of the road.

“Psst,” Azalea said to Robin. She lifted the wet clothes. Underneath were half a dozen candy bars, all kinds. She winked, put down the clothes, and kicked up her own kickstand. She stood on the pedal and followed after Buddy. The tag was sticking out of the butt of her suit.

Robin took a deep breath and pressed his crotch into the seat of his bike. His face felt hot and he fiddled with the gear shifter, waiting out the erection. When Buddy and Azalea were far enough away, he knelt to pick up the wrapper. A pain shot from his ribs to his groin and he fell to his knee in the dirt.

“Oh, fuck,” he moaned. It’d been shooting like that since he left the house, the same pain as he’d had that afternoon but sharper and deeper, like someone cranking on a socket wrench behind his stomach muscles. He coughed into the dirt and squeezed his eyes shut and then picked up the wrapper with the half-bar in it and threw it into the woods. He kicked his kickstand and stood on the pedal and swung himself onto the seat.

His vision was swimming as he tried to catch up to Buddy. Azalea was up ahead trying to do wheelies, shrieking every time she almost fell. Buddy was pedaling in wide arcs through the dirt, leaning as far back on the bike as he could, the butt of his bathing suit whapping against the tread of the rear tire.

“Buddy…” Robin said. His head felt like a balloon and the pains were coming fast and sharp now. His stomach clenched and released, clenched and released, and then suddenly it clenched up into his chest. He squeezed the brakes and felt his throat swell and he collapsed
sideways. He got upon his elbows in time for the first dry heave. He heard the squeal of Buddy’s brakes. Then it all came up.

A second later Buddy was next to him.

“Breathe, Robby,” he said. “Hey, breathe.”

But Robin couldn’t breathe. It felt like someone was carving something out of him with a knife. He moaned and pressed his face against the cool stones and he heard Buddy suck in his spit and say something quiet and sharp to Azalea. He heard the click of a kickstand and felt the vibrations of Azalea’s bike tires on the gravel and then Buddy was back at his side, kneeling in the dirt.

“Alright, pal,” Buddy said. “Sit tight.” Buddy’s voice was calm and steady and he rubbed Robin’s back in a circle. “You’re alright,” he said. “I’ve gotcha.”

--3--

September 2005

The newspaper bags went everywhere with them. There was a squishy wad of them in the glove box of the Volvo, a drawer of them in the kitchen, and loose ones in the pockets of Virginia’s jackets in the mudroom closet. They were clear, from the New York Times, and bright blue, from the Boston Globe. Virginia found all kinds of uses for them: smuggling home-popped popcorn into the movies at Cleveland Circle, separating out dirty underwear when they travelled, collecting trash after a picnic in the cemetery, storing AirSoft BBs and puzzle pieces and spare change for the tolls and all kinds of other small things.
When Buddy left for Regent, a week early since he was spending the end of August at a roommate’s house on Cranberry Island, Robin pulled one of the newspaper bags over his head. His nose folded down against his upper lip and his vision swam and when he thought his lungs would pop he tore a hole in the plastic over his mouth and cool air rushed in like water. The Big House felt so big without Buddy there that it was worse than empty. It was a vacuum. He and Virginia communicated in the polite silence of people from different countries whose translator had left the room. They spent their days two floors away from each other, connected by the faintest sounds: a toilet flushing, a kettle boiling, the garage door opening and closing.

That first week without Buddy she worked on her bike helmet. She had it in a vice on the workbench in the garage. The helmet was designed to look like a brain, with lobes in two shades of pink and a crease between the hemispheres, not a cartoon brain but a real brain. The garage smelled like rubber cement. She’d glued a Plexiglass visor to the front of the helmet, on hinges, like on a motorcycle helmet, and when that dried she stuck on a little round rearview mirror. One morning he walked into the kitchen to find her standing in front of the tea kettle, wearing the helmet. She fixed him in the rearview, and scowled.

“Nope,” she said, and took off the helmet. “Shit.” Later that day she was back in the garage, re-gluing the mirror in a different spot.

Some days the only time they saw each other was at dinner, which they ate in front of the TV in the basement. Buddy’d been in charge of choosing movies, and now Netflix seemed to be on autopilot, a new DVD appearing in the mail every day, following some algorithm that was going slowly off the rails.

Robin knelt in the shade at the far edge of the yard with a kitchen spoon. He lifted a big rock and let it topple over in the grass. His eyes adjusted to the black earth underneath.
“Fuck yeah,” he whispered. A millipede uncurled in the dirt as though waking up from a nap. Robin held the mason jar next to it and dug the spoon into the dirt. The millipede started writhing, awake now, and Robin flipped it over into the jar.

It was his first myriapod of the summer. He put the jar with all the others on the dusty picnic table on the back porch.

“Hang on,” she said when she walked into the kitchen. She had a tangle of cords and ID cards hanging from a lanyard around her neck. It took her a couple of seconds to find the mp3 player and turn it right-way-out and put on her reading glasses and hit the button to pause her book. She listened to books-on-tape from the public library. “Well, hi,” she said, taking out her earbuds and letting them dangle. She had on an inside-out sweater and a pair of Buddy’s old jeans. She’d given herself another haircut and the sides were uneven.

“Hi mom,” Robin said.

Virginia put a glass mug of milk in the microwave and set it for two minutes. Then she leaned down and grunted in pain and opened the drawer below the silverware.

“Take these,” she said, handing him a wad of blue and clear newspaper bags. “Put them in your pocket. And chew with your mouth closed.” Robin obeyed. She didn’t like human noises.

There was a skin on her milk. Robin could see it vibrating from where he sat, and little frothy bubbles rising around it and clinging to its wrinkled edge. It collapsed and sank when she poured in the schnapps, and when she stirred he saw it flash up against the inside wall of the mug.
She blew on the surface of the milk and licked the spoon and put it in the sink. Then she looked down at her mp3 player, brought it to the front of the cluster of ID cards, and twisted it so that it faced outward, upside down, where she could see the numbers looking down at it.

“Are you going to be ready to go in twenty minutes?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Good,” she said. “I need some of my jars back.” She put her headphones in and picked up her mug, which was steaming and had left a little beaded perimeter of condensation on the counter. The folded rind of skin had floated back up and was rotating at the surface.

It’d been a good summer for bugs, in real life and in Robin’s dreams, which had been vivid and continuous since his appendectomy. In one of the dreams he walked in circles around a woodpile as a red tarantula climbed in and out of the stacked logs, lingering on the outside just long enough for Robin to reach out his hand. He’d taken it as an omen and had been searching all over the neighborhood for a woodpile like the one he’d seen. In another, a millipede like a bike chain swam at the bottom of a dirty pool as Robin treaded water above it, leaves collecting in his hair and around his neck. In real life, on the days when Buddy was busy making phone calls and shopping for ties and AIMing with Clairmont girls, Robin had hunted for bugs in the backyard, listening to Blink-182 and Fatboy Slim on Buddy’s Discman. He’d seen an earthworm tie itself in a knot, a caterpillar with a green mohawk, a column of fire ants marching unbroken across the flagstone path, tiny orange brick-mites that you could write your initials with, fat bumblebees, huge slow moths with white fabric wings, perfect hollow cicada skins perched for takeoff, termite grubs like pieces of chipped Styrofoam in the black earth, and, one night, a hairy sleeve of Daddy Longlegs wrapped around the trunk of a pine tree. He’d stood, the
beam of his headlamp bobbing with his heartbeat, as two whole feet of tree trunk writhed with spiders.

Anything looked weird if you got close enough. He held out his tongue and studied it in the flat white light that glowed in a ring around the magnifying mirror. He bared his teeth and examined the ridges along his bottom incisors. His baby teeth had been smooth. Virginia had explained why: so that babies didn’t saw off their moms’ nipples. He curled his tongue back like a scorpion tail and two jets of saliva shot out and spattered the mirror. He flattened his tongue and curled it up again but nothing happened.

“Ready, pumpkin?” she called from downstairs.

She’d invited him this morning. They were going to steal wisteria clippings from a yard on her bike route. She wanted them for the trellis by the front porch.

“Do you have the bags?” she asked as he tied his shoes. He nodded. They were a squishy bulge in his hip pocket.

She’d made another hot milk and it steamed in the cup holder between them as they drove. Her lanyard hung from the rearview mirror, swinging in a circle.

“Third,” she said, and pushed in the clutch. He slid the shifter across the gap.

They drove in silence. Virginia refused to listen to the radio—she’d even tried to take it out of the dashboard once, before Buddy stopped her. She had what she called aural anhedonia. She didn’t like sound, especially sounds made by other people. Least of all music. It drove Buddy nuts. Robin wondered if he himself didn’t have some mild version of the same thing. He enjoyed the silence.
He leaned his skull against the window and let it rattle his teeth. He thought of the man with spider eggs in his scalp, how they hatched and thousands of tiny spiders swarmed out under the skin.

“Euhh,” he whispered.

“What?” she said.

“Nothing.”

“Swallow your spit,” she said.

He swallowed.

They passed the middle school baseball diamond. The only bugs there were worms.

Since Buddy left it was as though a force field had been turned off, or a sliding door opened, and Robin felt like he was seeing Virginia for the first time. Her habits: the skin on the milk, the hours she spent nearly unmoving at her desk, her feet up, tapping a pencil against her temple and blowing on her tea. Her trips to the bathroom, her showers, sometimes two or three a day. How little she really ate: toast with tomato and mayonnaise for breakfast, popcorn or a piece of chocolate for lunch, a frozen burrito for dinner.

He was aware of her body, how much it seemed to hurt her. She had arthritis in her hips, and she’d started limping, especially in the morning and at night. She groaned getting into and out of the car, and was slow on stairs, leaning heavily on the bannister. She seemed most comfortable riding her bike. She sat upright, hands wide on the handlebars, her lanyard dangling, headphones in, her jeans tucked into her socks, and pedaled straight as an arrow down the middle of the street until she disappeared around the elbow in the road. Once in a while he saw her coming back in the evening after teaching, and she’d be grinning as she rode, flushed,
her sweater around her waist, hands wide, jeans tucked in, and she’d bump right across the front
yard and onto the flagstone path and up to the front door. She loved riding her bike.

“How’s your helmet?” Robin said.

“It’s done,” she said. “I’m letting the glue dry.”

“Cool,” Robin said.

There was a question that, if he asked it, would transform her. It would get her thinking
and the thinking would excite her and she’d forget about driving, which she hated, and she’d stop
thinking about her poem, which had been torturing her: he could tell because, when it was going
well, she moved her lips. When it wasn’t, her face stayed still. Buddy knew the questions to
ask. He had more practice at it. It had bothered Robin, since Buddy usually started by getting
under her skin. He’d challenge something she’d said a day or two earlier or declare some
dangerous plan that would make her put down her book and stare at him for a second, and in
those moments Robin would shy away, afraid that Buddy’d finally gone too far. Robin was the
midpoint, the one Buddy would keep patting on the shoulder as he said “But—but—but!,” the
one Virginia would wink at when Buddy started pacing and waving his arms.

Now Robin was starting to understand that she liked those arguments as much as Buddy
did. She liked seeing Buddy’s brain work, liked that Buddy wasn’t afraid of her, or maybe that
he was, and she liked the courage it took for him to challenge her. She was proud of Buddy. But
Robin didn’t know how to do what Buddy did.

They drove in silence.

“Mom?” he said.

“Mm?”

“Mm?”

“Do you think we should get a summer house?”
She didn’t say anything. She turned onto a leafy street behind the middle school with no streetlamps and long cracks in the asphalt where tree roots had bulged up underneath. They pulled over. Robin put the shifter in first and Virginia turned off the gas.

“You bike this way?” Robin said.

“Mm,” Virginia said. “It gets you around the stoplight on Route 9.” She had a system of backroads between the Big House and Lesley that avoided stoplights. It seemed to Robin that it took her wildly off-course. She was down to one or two stoplights, total, for the route, and she’d started driving that way, too, wherever they were going: winding, leafy backroads that took them miles in the wrong direction. She hated stoplights.

It was just after ten by the dashboard clock. The air between them smelled like steamed mint. Robin sucked a loogie from the back of his throat and chewed on it. The car settled, swishing and clicking. They got out.

Virginia limped quietly up the driveway. Robin followed her past the garage and into the absolute shadow of the side yard. He nearly bumped into her. She was leaning over a wooden fence, her torso swallowed up by shiny leaves.

There was a clipping sound and the plant shuddered above her. Her arm appeared, holding out a vine, waxy and purple-green in the moonlight. He took it from her and her arm vanished back into the plant.

He pulled a newspaper bag from his pocket and swished it open in the air. He wrapped the vine around his fist and let it expand into the walls of the bag.

They were between a fence and a bay window. As his eyes adjusted, he could make out an inky living room, spindled with furniture.
She was cutting thicker vines now. He twisted them and they coiled into the newspaper bag and when it was full he tied it off and it was like a spring.

He held the bags in his lap as they drove. The leaves were cool slick and dry the way a snake’s skin is slick and dry.

“My bugs are dying,” he said. “What can I do?”

“Are you giving them air?” she said.

“Mm-hmm.”

“Well, what do they eat?”

“I just give them some of the same dirt from where I got them.”

He watched her face as she sipped her milk. It had softened a little.

“It could be the temperature change,” she said. “You have them in the sun. Where they normally live it’s a lot cooler.”

“Hmm,” Robin said.

“How many do you have?”

“Alive?” he said.

“On your bug board.”

“Oh,” he said. “Including the millipede, which I haven’t stuck on yet… twenty-plus.”

He didn’t know that she knew about the bug board. Maybe she’d noticed that her pin cushion was missing from her sewing drawer.

They were under street lights again now. He downshifted as they approached a stop sign and they rolled through it in second gear.

“Mom?” Robin said.

“Mm?”
“What kinds of laws did we break tonight?”

In the pin cushion he’d found an enormous needle, sticking through almost to the other side. He’d taken it to the garage one afternoon, cut off the sharp tip with wire cutters, and bent it into the shape of a lockpick.

She pursed her lips and thought about it.

“Well,” she said, “we trespassed. I guess we stole property.”

Robin nodded, his skull rattling against the window. “Cool,” he said.

They turned onto their street.

“Another question for you,” Robin said.

She made a noise in her throat.

“What came first: the chicken or the egg?”

“The egg, dear,” she said. “The change from non-chicken to chicken is a genetic change.

It’s a mutation. It happens during reproduction. A non-chicken was fertilized and during that process there were genetic mutations that produced an egg with chicken DNA.”

They parked at the top of the driveway. He put the shifter in reverse and ratcheted up the emergency brake.

“Living organisms don’t mutate,” she said, and grunted as she pulled herself up from the car seat. She reached back in and groped for the lanyard on the rearview mirror. “They don’t change,” her voice said from outside the car. “Not at a basic level. Once you have DNA, you’re you.”

She laid out the vines on the kitchen table and showed him how to clip them: just below the leaf shoot and an inch or two above, leaving the leaf attached to a T of stem. Then she
pinned one of the cuttings against the cover of an old New Yorker. With an open pair of child’s scissors she scored a wet white line in the stem.

Once in a while the scissor-tip slipped, opening a colorful ribbon in the cover of the magazine.

Robin left the kitchen and went to his bedroom. He knelt by the bed and pulled out his mischief box. Maybe she’d think the lockpicks were stupid or dangerous. On the other hand, maybe she’d be interested. Maybe she’d know something rare or weird or insightful. Maybe she could already pick locks, and could show him, once she was done clipping and wounding the wisteria on the kitchen table.

--4--

Thanksgiving 2005

Guests started arriving at five. Buddy was ready. He was wearing his grey corduroys and a grey turtleneck and a blue blazer with a Regent patch on the chest and he looked as birdlike as ever, almost as tall as Virginia now. He was fifteen. He handed out glasses of wine from a silver tray he’d dug out of the basement and polished that morning. He’d had to go out and buy the polish himself.

Every year Virginia invited her grad-student poets, young foreign women who didn’t have Thanksgiving where they came from, or young American women on small stipends who couldn’t afford to travel home, or radical young women from conservative families who wouldn’t go home for all the tea in China: all of them wan young women in the kinds of outfits
that made Robin think they’d never been warm in their lives, layer upon layer of denim and
corduroy and wool, thick tights, boots they slipped off at the door, chunky socks. There were
three this year, each with a boyfriend who came through the door after her, holding a bottle of
wine. Where were all the lesbians? Buddy had misled him.

“Come on in,” Buddy said, taking coats from the guests. He handed the coats to Robin
and Robin took them into the guest room and laid them on the bed. He looked at himself in the
mirror, tried to see the back of his head. The stripe had mostly grown out. Buddy came in and
locked the door behind him.

“Is Zaley coming?” Robin asked.

“I fucking wish,” Buddy said, and picked up one of the jackets by the collar. He checked
the pockets one by one.

“Know what this means?” Buddy said, tossing over something in a white wrapper. Robin
knelt to pick it up. “It means the blonde poet is on her period. So don’t get any ideas, okay?”

They fished around in the rest of the pockets and Buddy found a pack of Camel Lights.
He opened the carton and looked inside.

“Um, hello,” he said, and pulled out a joint. He ran it under his nose.

“Whose jacket was that?” Robin said.

“Petra’s,” Buddy said. He put the joint back in the carton, took out two cigarettes, and
put them in his inside jacket pocket.

“Which one’s she?”

“The one without any tits,” Buddy said. He looked at himself in the mirror and combed
his hair with his fingers.

“They’re poets,” Robin said. “None of them have any tits.”
Buddy turned away from the mirror. He smiled and put his hands on Robin’s shoulders.

“I know that that’s my joke,” he said, “but I’m glad that you’re making it.”

Robin grinned. “Are they going to smoke it here, you think?”

“If they do,” Buddy said, “we’ll know. Mom’s drinking already. Things’ll be pretty lawless by Scrabble. And most of them are graduating this year. We’ll see. You ready?”

“Ready,” Robin said. They laid the jackets back out and Buddy patted his blazer pocket and then they went back out into the party.

“Aural anhedonia,” Buddy said, both hands up in the air, twisting what Virginia called the invisible faucets, “is not a thing. It’s made up.”

“I don’t care if it’s a thing or not,” Virginia said. They faced off from opposite ends of the dining-room table, the turkey between them, Buddy leaning forward in his chair and Virginia leaning back in hers, holding a wine glass and squinting at Buddy over the rim. Robin and the poets and the boyfriends sat along the sides of the table, eating quietly and grinning at each other as Virginia and Buddy argued.

“But, but, but,” Buddy said, picking up his fork and putting it back down. “Mom! Listen to me!”

She shook her head and pursed her lips and looked at her guests, smirking.

This was not the same Virginia Robin had lived with for the past three months. Buddy’s arrival had invigorated her. She was the center of attention tonight, and she was enjoying it. She hadn’t told anyone to chew with his or her mouth shut. She was offering people wine.
“Listen!” Buddy said. “I’m not saying you don’t have it. I’m actually saying something sort of interesting. I mean, don’t you think, maybe—maybe—your poetry could be kind of a cool case study? Of someone who hasn’t, like, internalized the structures of Western music?”

A couple of the poets met eyes across the table and then looked back at Buddy. He was writing a paper on Virginia’s work for one of his Regent English classes. She leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs. She was trying not to smile.

“I’m serious!” Buddy said. He put his hand on the arm of the poet next to him. “Petra,” he said.

Petra kept her lips pursed, the corners of her mouth twitching into a grin. She glanced at Virginia and raised her eyebrows, then looked back at Buddy.

“Yes?” she said.

“Petra. First of all, I love your necklace. Second of all, am I wrong about this? I mean, you’ve read ‘Ayenbite,’ right?”

“Of course,” Petra said.

“Well, I mean, is it not a weird poem, the way it sounds? Is it not sort of anti-musical?”

“When I first read it,” Petra said, “it almost reminded me of something in translation. It reminded me of Slavic poetry, translated into English.”

Buddy opened his mouth but didn’t say anything. He still had his hand on her arm. Then he glanced around the table and leaned in close. “Petra,” he whispered. “I’m going to need your email. I’d like to use that for my paper.”

Like always, Virginia separated the Scrabble teams by gender. Robin and Buddy got the boyfriends.
Virginia leaned back in her rocking chair. “Girls go first,” she said.

“Mom,” Buddy said. “We pick tiles for it. There’s a system.”

“Oh, shut up,” Virginia said, and reached into the velvet bag. “Ooh,” she said as she pulled out tiles one by one. The poets crowded shyly around her, some of them standing and leaning over her shoulders.

“Fooey,” Virginia said, then “Oh, fuck,” and then “Ooh—we can use that.”

Buddy picked tiles for the boys. He furrowed his brow as he lined them up on the stand. He’d been drinking wine at dinner and now he was all business. Robin scooted away from the table and let one of the boyfriends, a big Russian who did biology, scoot forward. Across the table, Virginia had the same furrowed brow.

“Are we limited to English spellings?” the big Russian said. Buddy grunted and Virginia didn’t say anything. The Russian looked around. Only Robin and the other boyfriends were available to meet his eyes.

“Only English,” Robin said. “And dirty words count double.”

“Who determines if a word is dirty?” the Russian asked.

“Oh, come on,” Virginia said without looking up. “If it’s dirty, you’ll know.”

It was rarely that simple. Buddy had walked out on games over this—Virginia was a precise player, but she was a maverick for dirty words, often late in the game, often when huge point totals hung in the balance. She’d once played GIZ on a triple-word score, with the tile-bag empty, for seventy-two points, and then explained to a red-faced Buddy that he couldn’t challenge the spelling because sexual slang belonged to an unstable pidgin language with no accepted conventions. It hadn’t helped that GIZ catapulted the females into the lead and that she
explained all this to Buddy with her legs crossed, leaning back in her rocking chair, smiling over a glass of wine, obviously very pleased at having beaten him.

   Eventually the women played NAPKIN.

   “It’s dirty,” Virginia said.

   “Oh, give me a break,” Buddy said.

   “Sanitary napkin,” Virginia said.

   “I don’t think so, mom,” Buddy said. “Put down 26,” he said to Robin, and already he was shuffling their tiles around on the stand. The Russian reached in to move something and Buddy cleared his throat. The Russian removed his hand. Finally Buddy pulled back his hands and looked around at the boyfriends. One of them nodded. “But where…?” another said. Buddy picked up the tiles and laid them down: HEAD, immediately beneath APKI, so it also spelled AH, PE, KA, and ID.

   “Dirty,” Buddy said. “Put down 56.”

   “Dirty!” Virginia said, uncrossing her legs and leaning forward. She put on her reading glasses. “What—PE? That’s not dirty.”

   The poets and the boyfriends exchanged smiles.

   “HEAD, mom” Buddy said, rooting around in the tile bag. “Put 56.” Robin held the pen over the score sheet.

   “HEAD?” Virginia said. “What’s dirty about head?”

   “You want to tell her?” Buddy asked the poets, putting down the new tiles. They shook their heads. “It’s a blowjob, mom,” Buddy said.

   Virginia looked around at her team. The blonde poet nodded. “I think it counts,” she said.
“Well, fooey,” Virginia said, leaning back in her chair. “If HEAD counts, NAPKIN ought to count, too.” She grunted and shuffled her tiles. Robin wrote down 56.

Buddy knew all the two-letter words, or enough of them to fool everyone else—he’d memorized them one year after losing badly to Virginia and Aunt Jo. He played slowly, creating impossible-looking chunks of tiles. Virginia kept on him.

“Hurry up, you ninny,” she said. “What’re you thinking so hard about, anyway? Why don’t you let someone else hold the tiles.”

Scrabble was Virginia’s high-water mark for the year. That wasn’t new. But Robin felt different about it tonight. He hadn’t seen her like this since the summer, since Buddy left, and it was like half of her that had broken off had floated back up to the surface.

Robin’s half was different. With him, alone in the Big House, she lived so deep in her own head that it was like she was on a drug. She’d given that to him, and now he’d given it back to her.

Tonight Buddy and Virginia were mirror images, and Robin felt invisible. Only the Russian boyfriend, whose name was Misha, seemed to know he was there. His girlfriend hadn’t looked at him in a while and Misha was getting restless. He elbowed Robin and pointed at the tile rack, where Buddy, who was tapping his knee and staring off into nothing, had rearranged the tiles to say “SZRLAOE.” Misha raised his eyebrows at Robin.

“Excuse me,” Robin said, and scooted his chair away from the table.

He went into the kitchen. He poured a full glass of wine from one of the open bottles on the island. He took a deep breath and drank the whole thing and put the glass in the sink.
He stood on the back porch in his moccasins. His bug farm looked like a cityscape in the moonlight. He picked up one of the mason jars and held it up to the moon and tinked it and turned it side to side. Then he reared back and hurled it as deep into the backyard as he could.

He slipped into the guest room and locked the door behind him. The coats looked like a huge corpse on the bed. He sat down next to them. He took a dollar from each of the wallets and purses. He pulled Misha’s driver’s license out from the plastic sheath and studied it. It said “Michael.” Robin snorted. He held the wallet at arm’s length in front of him and let go. Then he stood up and walked across the room and on his way back his toe kicked the wallet and it spun under the bed.

There were gasps and laughter from the living room.

Virginia’s notepad sat at the middle of her desk next to a cold cup of tea. Robin flipped through the pages. They were dated at the top. There was no entry for today, not even a date. Yesterday and the day before were short—scribbles, cross-outs, lists. Nothing for Friday, when Buddy’d come home. He flipped earlier and they got long again, whole pages, two or three pages: columns of poems, in her long low flat pencil handwriting.

Robin sat down again and scooted his chair up to the table. Misha nodded at him and slid over the score sheet. Misha’s numbers were tight and boxy. It was 341, girls, to 356, boys, and Buddy had just drawn the last of the tiles in the bag. The poets and the boyfriends had scooted their chairs closer so that they could whisper to each other. They took turns getting up to bring dirty dishes into the kitchen and to get slices of pie and to pour wine.

Buddy glanced up at Robin. He pursed his lips and glanced at the hallway over Robin’s shoulder and then met Robin’s eyes. He crinkled his nose and squinted shook his head in a question. Robin crinkled his nose back. Buddy snorted.
Virginia tilted back in her rocking chair, her legs crossed, with the tile rack perched on her knee. “Mm,” she said. She adjusted her dress under her butt. “That’s interesting.” She shuffled tiles. “Maybe,” she said. “Well, shoot.”

“Whenever you’re ready, mom,” Buddy said.

“Hush.”

“What are you thinking so hard about, anyway?” Buddy said. He clicked their remaining tiles against the lefthand edge of the rack. TELOS. Robin could see where Buddy was going to put it: way up in the corner, where no one else would’ve looked.

Misha reached forward and rearranged the tiles to say “STOLE.” He glanced at Buddy and Buddy said “Mm.” Misha rearranged them back to TELOS.

Virginia tugged on her earlobe.

One of the poets exhaled into her bangs.

Buddy cleared his throat.

Robin felt warm and comfortable. He dug his toes into the carpet.

Then Virginia smiled. She reached for the tiles, paused, then moved one of the tiles to the end of the rack. She leaned forward and uncrossed her legs. Buddy watched her, unblinking. She nudged the board, put down the tile rack, and placed a tile. Everyone leaned in to see. She placed another, then a third, then picked up the remaining four tiles and laid them down together. Buddy leaned forward and read the tiles upside-down.

“KOWTOWING,” he said. “Fuck.”

Virginia cleared her throat. She was smiling, holding the earpiece of her reading glasses between her front teeth. Buddy spun the board around to face him.

Vertically, the ‘W’ made TWAT.
“I guess that counts as double?” the Russian said.

“Did we win?” the blonde poet said.

“How many points is it?”

“Is it over?”

Buddy sat still, staring at the board, his eyes scanning in right angles.

“One-twelve,” Robin said. He’d melted into his seat. “That’s game.”

The poets looked at each other with wide eyes. The boyfriends stood up and got coats from the guest bedroom. Virginia hadn’t moved. She was leaned all the way back in her rocking chair, knees crossed, hands behind her head, reading glasses dangling from her mouth, smiling at Buddy, who was still staring at the board. Then Buddy uncapped Robin’s pen and wrote “-5” under the boys’ score and added up the totals and circled the final scores and then folded the score sheet and put it in the game box. He stood up and followed the guests out into the foyer.

Robin heard him ask: “Does anyone want to smoke a joint?”

Robin looked around for something to put away but the boyfriends had done a thorough job. He sat back down at the game table and started putting tiles in the bag. Virginia smiled at him. He smiled back.

Petra and Misha swished into the living room in their leather jackets.

“Virginia,” Petra said, leaning down to kiss her cheek. “Thank you.” Her boyfriend leaned down and did the same. Virginia smiled at them both. The boyfriend patted Robin on the shoulder and turned to go. Petra crouched next to Robin.

“The still point of the turning world, no?” she said, nodding her chin at Virginia. Then she swished back into the foyer. Robin heard the front door open. The other poets shouted “Goodbye!” and “Thank you!,” then a tunnel of cold air shuddered through the room and the
front door slammed shut. Buddy rumbled down the stairs to the basement. Virginia followed the sound with her eyes. She inhaled through her nose and her rocking chair creaked and then she nodded at Robin, her eyes glazed over, as though the nod were a word, and Robin could tell she was back deep inside herself and would stay there for a while longer.
Layla, the head sailing instructor, had a margarita in front of her, and there was a halo of salt around the foot of the glass.

“Let me ask it differently,” Robin said. “I guess… did you think you were going to live forever?”

Layla had befriended the blonde male bartender. They knew someone in common.

“I mean,” Robin said, licking wing sauce off his fingers. “What I’m saying is: you’re in the subway, looking around, and what do you see? I mean do you see a bunch of interesting, insightful, like, discrete, minds? Are you, like, part of the fabric? Or are you totally alone?”

“Honestly, I can’t stand the subway,” she said. “Someone shit on the six train last spring. I was like, oh my god, an empty car? Have I died and gone to heaven?” She threw her head back and cackled. “I’m seriously thinking about getting a scooter.”

“Because when I was younger,” Robin said, “I feel like I was always on the defensive. Like, everyone else is this kind of hive mind, and I’m on my own. I mean I knew I was going to live forever. I was totally certain. I’m talking age, like, ten, eleven. Literally live forever. You know, that technology will have gotten to that point. Except that the feeling only applied to me. I have no such hopes for any of you, you know?” He winked at Layla. She dropped her jaw in mock astonishment, punched his bicep, and got up to go to the bathroom.
“My friend’s coming.” Layla said when she got back.


“What do you mean, ‘why’?” Layla said. “My friend is coming. She’s coming because she’s my friend. She’s out here for the weekend. What are you drinking?” She nodded at the bartender and he came over. Robin ordered a beer.

“Hang on,” she said to the bartender. She slipped her hand up the back of Robin’s shirt and whispered in his ear: “Buy us nachos.”

“And nachos, please,” Robin said. The bartender left. Robin shimmied his stomach and she pulled her hand away. “I’m not really going to stick around for nachos and friends, I don’t think,” he said. He had his collar of his work shirt up and his head hunched down and he’d been glancing up and down the bar in the mirror. Tuesday was the Fourth, and people were already streaming in from the city, taking Friday off to beat the crowds. No such luck in here. The Amtrak stop was just up the street and the bar was filling up. A train had unloaded an hour or so ago, and another was due any minute, with its bankers and consultants and their little canvas Morgan Stanley gym bags and all the girls in huge sunglasses with their Longchamp totes and everyone would have been drinking on the train and everyone would be fighting for Ubers in the station parking lot and everyone who didn’t get an Uber was going to end up here, and one of those people would be someone Robin knew. He was sweaty. He sweated when he got anxious. The saddle of his underwear was damp and his sandals were slick and stinky. He finished his beer. Layla gestured to the bartender. They had some code. It was her third or fourth summer working at the yacht club.

“I have an exciting plan for later,” she said. “You’re upset about buying me nachos, I can tell, and you’re looking all glum and claustrophobic, but you have no idea what a screaming deal
you’re getting.” Robin nodded. Shadows passed in his peripheral vision and he looked to the window, but it was just a white-haired old Hamptons guy in a boatneck t-shirt letting his dog shit on the sidewalk. He wondered if Layla would want to move to Mosquito Lake with him.

Layla leaned over and whispered in his ear. “Twelve bucks for nachos, but you get to—” She cleared her throat and smiled as the bartender set down a second margarita in the circle of salt.

Robin shifted on his stool, trying to untwist his shorts. Then Layla gasped. She shoved her stool back, stood up, and lifted both arms in the air. Robin tucked in his head like a turtle. Layla laughed, and then the words “fucking amazing” Doppler-ed toward him, and then he felt Layla’s firm hand on his neck. He straightened up and turned around.

He met the friend’s eyes. For a moment things paused. Then Robin opened his arms, grinned, leaned in, embraced her tightly, and whispered in her ear: “Pretend you don’t know me.” He pulled away. “Really good to meet you,” he said, and stuck out his hand. “Barry.”

The strap of her duffel bag slipped down into the crook of her elbow and her hand got heavy and Robin laughed and said, “Pleasure! Absolute pleasure!”

“Barry, Azalea,” Layla said. “Azalea, Barry. Ugh, babe! You look incredible.” The two girls hugged again and over Layla’s shoulder Azalea made wide eyes at Robin. He pulled an invisible zipper across his mouth with his fingers. His heart was racing.

Azalea did look amazing. Her face was flushed, and Robin was back at Nickerson Field, under the lights, sitting on the aluminum bleachers with Buddy, drinking hot cider with bourbon and watching the BU Academy Junior girls sprint around the field in the Powderpuff game, pink streamers snapping from their elastic belts.
He and Buddy and Virginia used to drive up to the Vermont house once or twice a year, sometimes when Aunt Jo and Azalea were there, sometimes when they weren’t, and on those trips he and Buddy would go rummaging through the house for glimpses into Azalea’s life.

Once, Robin had gone up by himself. It was his junior year at Regent. He’d gotten Virginia to sign him out to New York, where Buddy was, though he’d gone in the opposite direction, then rented a car, using Buddy’s driver’s license and credit card, which Buddy’d mailed him the week before. All semester he’d been planning out how to hotwire a car, and the backroads outside Roundtree seemed like the perfect proving ground. Instead, when he got to the house, he’d sat in the rental car in the driveway and drank a bottle of wine and then gone inside and jerked off to a photo of Azalea in a bikini that he found on the fridge. He’d been too scared to turn on the heat in the house, and too drunk to find a car to steal, though he’d brought along a whole sheaf of wiring diagrams and maps of the area. He’d slept in the rental with the engine running and the heat blasting and at dawn he’d driven back to New Hampshire.

Buddy knew all about the scheme to hotwire a car. When he asked what happened, Robin had been partway honest: somewhere in the middle of that bottle of wine, he’d decided that it wasn’t the actual stealing of a car that was so important to him, but the plan to steal a car, which he’d spent months researching and refining. And by not stealing a car, he’d kept the plan, which was the thing he’d wanted all along. Or something like that. Buddy hadn’t bought it, and he told Azalea, and both of them had called him “The Bandit” all that Thanksgiving, refusing to explain it to Virginia or Aunt Jo, and winking at Robin every time he reached for the wine. He hadn’t seen her in four or five years, since the night she showed up at Buddy’s in New York.

And now here she was, groping under the bar for a hook for her canvas Bain Consulting gym bag.
“What are you drinking?” Robin said, trying to get Layla’s bartender’s attention.

“Whatever this babe is having,” Azalea said.

“So in college,” Layla said, “Azalea was my Big Sister on the sailing team, and we used to throw these golf parties—”

“Oh, my god. GUST Golf,” Azalea said.

“G-U Sailing Team,” Layla said. “Golf—you know, like with nine rooms, and every room has a different drink—”

“We made the freshmen host—”

“You guys were so scary,” Layla said. “Ugh!”

“So we’re going around to all the rooms,” Azalea said, “doing the drinks, you know, Peppermint Patties or whatever, Jägerbombs, and it’s all pretty standard. Dance music, you put a t-shirt over the lamp or whatever. And obviously all these freshmen lived in the shittiest rooms, and all their roommates were, like, lurking around at the edges, and all of us upperclassmen were just hazing the shit out of everyone and having a great time. But so then—”

“I honestly don’t know what I was thinking,” Layla said.

“So THEN,” Azalea shouted, raising both arms, nearly spilling her margarita. “We get to this girl’s fucking room, this, like, petite, sweet, innocent fucking freshman, and we’re banging on the door, ready to party, and she opens it, and first of all—it’s fucking dark.”

Azalea widened her eyes at Layla and they both burst out laughing.

“IT’s fucking pitch black in the room,” Azalea said, “and there are fucking curtains hanging everywhere. Like, black curtains across the whole room, and at head-height so you can’t see anything, and you’re walking through, like, this maze of fabric. And instead of music, she’s playing the sound of fucking rain!”
Margarita salt was collecting on Robin’s lap.

“Like, fucking,” Azalea said, trying to catch her breath, “like what you’d hear on one of those white noise machines. Just, rain! And, like, occasionally, thunder!”

“Oh, my god,” Layla said. “It was literally a YouTube video of the sound of different rainstorms. It was an hour long. I actually used to fall asleep to it.”

“But so, but so,” Azalea said, cutting Layla off with her arm. “So, like, a dozen of us, all the seniors, we bum-rush this room, and we get inside and someone closes the door behind us and we all just fucking freeze. And we’re in this, like, black canopy, weaving our way through all these curtains, in a fucking thunderstorm, and we realize that there are blacklights everywhere—”

“I replaced the bulbs in all my lamps with blacklight bulbs,” Layla said.

“—and then Layla, you know, from out of the dark, is like, ‘Welcome.’” Azalea threw her head back and laughed.

“Welcome,” Layla said in a deep voice, her hand on Azalea’s arm, and Azalea sucked in a breath and wiped tears from her eyes.

“And she’s doing this fucking wizard voice, and she’s wearing this black gown, and she’s like—” Azalea did a deep voice, “—‘Please help yourselves to this evening’s cocktail...’”

Both girls broke down laughing. Something wet spilled on Robin’s foot. Robin gestured to the bartender.

Azalea wiped her eyes. “So anyway, our eyes get used to the blacklights, and we get through all the fucking curtains, and at the back of the room she’s got this little table set up with this huge punch bowl, with, like—”

“It was just rum and coke,” Layla said, “but I put food coloring in it...”
“And, oh my god, it stained everyone’s tongues!”

“I put way too much.”

“Anyway,” Azalea said, “I don’t think we even left your room. Like, I think we just stayed. It was too fucking amazing. And the whole time I could not stop laughing, I mean I still fucking laugh, at the thought of you hanging out in that room alone before we got there.”

“Yeah,” Layla said. “I think I was, like, hole six or seven? So it was a few hours before you guys got there.”

“Too, too funny,” Azalea said. “Whew! So, uh, Bobby?”

“Barry,” Robin said.

“Right,” Azalea said. She squinted at him. “Barry. Are you, a, um, sailing instructor?”

“Barry works at the club,” Layla said.

Robin nodded. “How was the train ride?” he said. “Excruciating?”

“Oh, my god. It was awful…” Azalea put her hand on Layla’s arm as she spoke and Robin excused himself to the bathroom. Over Layla’s shoulder, he did three firm lip-zipper motions and Azalea rolled her eyes which meant, he hoped, that she got the message.

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The bar bathroom was a single-stall and Robin peed with his eyes closed. He remembered visiting Buddy on 96th Street, before the accident. Buddy’d been crouched in the half-dark—there was no overhead light, and he always kept the apartment shadowy, lit from the corners with a bunch of weird little low-wattage lamps.
“Make us a drink, will you?” Buddy said from the darkness.

“Yes, my lord.”

“And don’t start in on the ‘Yes, my lords’. Please.”

Robin’s eyes acclimated. Buddy kneeling in front of a bookshelf, trying to wedge books from a stack on the floor back into their spots on the shelf.

Robin went into the bedroom for the bar cart. He rolled it out into the living room, easing it over the sill, and parked it next to one of the dim lamps.

“Why’s it so dark in here?” he said, wiping dust out of two glasses.

“I just like it that way,” Buddy said. “Islands of light. It’s cozier. It softens your features.”

“So you’ve been reading the blogs,” Robin said.

Buddy stood up. “Okey doke,” he said. “Hey, brother.” He faced Robin and put his hands on his shoulders. “Welcome. Great to see you. What news from the ivory tower?”

“Same old,” Robin said. “There’s ice on the sidewalk outside my window. People keep falling. The dining hall workers are on strike. Um. Lot of homeless at Au Bon Pain.”

“The Chessmaster?”

“Chessmaster’s still there.”

“The guy with the violin?”

“Him, too.”

“And yourself?” Buddy said. “Any personal updates?”

“They’ve, uh, they’ve got mom’s book on the ‘Staff Picks’ wall at the bookstore.”

“I guess that counts as personal,” Buddy said. They took their drinks over to the window.
“Do those look like dandelion heads to you?” Robin pointed at the streetlights with his drink. It was snowing, and the yellow bulbs lit up fuzzy spheres of weather.

Buddy wiped the window with his cuff. “Snowglobes?” he said.

“Yeah, that’s good,” Robin said.

“Well, we have a few options,” Buddy said, sitting down. He was wearing one of his comfy indoor outfits: old corduroys, a hoop-necked Grateful Dead t-shirt, two open flannels, and a chunky cardigan. It was freezing in the apartment. “The main question is dinner.”

“I want Szechuan,” Robin said.

“So, like I said, we have options,” Buddy said. “There’s a great little Mexican place on 97th.”

“I want Szechuan,” Robin said.

“There’s also this new hot-dog place on Park. *New York Magazine* did a whole thing on it. So, it’s busy. But I think we could probably sit at the bar. Do you have your ID?”

“Bud, I want Szechuan.”

“Alright, but hear me out. And I should say—this hot dog place is more than just hot dogs. Like, it’s a real dinner place. And so there’s also a fantastic Peruvian chicken place, but it’s a bit of a walk. And…” Buddy stirred his drink with his finger, then licked it off. “I guess we could also do soul food if you want to go up into Harlem. We’d take a cab.”

“Hmm,” Robin said.

“And if we’re taking a cab, there’s also Jamaican. And if you want to go in the other direction, I mean, in terms of fanciness… well, fuck.” Buddy checked his watch.

“Yeah?”
“It’s just… I really should’ve made this reservation. But I feel like it’s way too late. Have you heard of ‘MoFu’?”

“Buddy, I would like to go to the Szechuan restaurant. That same one we went to last time. I loved that place.”

“It burned down.”

“It did not burn down. I passed it on the way here.”

“Alright, but it smells weird.”

“Then you decide, Buddy. My blood sugar is too low for this.”

“Eat a chip,” Buddy said. He stood up and walked into the kitchen and came back with a bag of tortilla chips.

“I don’t want a chip.”

“Robby, eat a chip. You’re being a grouch.” He opened the bag and held it out. “You’ll feel better.” Robin didn’t move. “Do it for me.” Robin took the bag. He ate a chip. “Nice,” Buddy said. “Have another.” The buzzer buzzed down the hallway. Buddy stood up. “I didn’t tell you this,” he said, his voice stretching as he walked away. “But, uh, someone’s coming over.”

“Goddamnit, Bud.”

“No, no, no,” Buddy said. “You’re going to like this.” A girl’s voice on the intercom said, “It’s me,” and Buddy held the button. He came back down the hall buttoning up the inner flannel. “You’ll appreciate this,” he said. “And—” He put a hand on Robin’s shoulder. “This is top-secret.”

“Who is it?”

“You’ll see.”
“I’ve been traveling all day. I’m stressed out and hungry. I want to take a shower. And I don’t want to have to talk to a surprise guest.”

“Robin, relax. You are going to be happy to see this person. Have I ever led you astray?”

“Yes.”

“And please, like I said, this is top secret. It’s kind of a little thing.”

“Does Lindsay know?” Bud and Lindsay had been off and on for eight years. At the moment they were on a break.

There was a knock at the apartment door. Buddy made a zipper motion across his lips, then trotted down the hall, adjusting his layers. Robin stepped out of the sightline of the front hall. He heard Buddy open the door, and the crunch of a hug through a winter coat, and the stamping of boots, and then Buddy said to the person, “Guess who’s here?”

“Goddamnit, Buddy,” she said.

“Hey!” Buddy shouted. “Where’d you go?”

Robin peeked around the corner. “Holy shit,” he said, and he smiled.

It was Azalea Martin, trying to get her scarf off, her hair crowned in snow. “Oh, my god,” she said. She come down the hall, sprinkling water, and Robin met her halfway. They hugged.

“Mm,” Robin said.

Buddy, beaming behind her, closed the front door. “Come in, come in,” he said.

“So are you two fucking?” Robin asked when they were settled in the living room.

They’d outvoted Buddy and ordered Szechuan to the apartment.
“Is that what we’re doing, Buddy?” Azalea asked. “That thing with the arms and the legs?”

“I didn’t know there was a name for it,” Buddy said.

That was the last time Robin saw her. A little after that, Buddy’d gotten back together with Lindsay, and then the accident and everything else.

Buddy used to keep a family photo on his mini-fridge at Regent. It was of Aunt Jo, Azalea, Azalea’s two British cousins, who were a couple of years older than Buddy, and Buddy himself, standing in front of the Vermont house in their spring ski gear, the women in half-zipped 80s snowsuits, and Buddy and Azalea and the cousins in t-shirts and bibs, everyone’s skis pointed in the same direction. Buddy and Azalea looked about fourteen. Robin had no idea what trip that photo came from, but Buddy’d kept it front and center up until he and Lindsay got married, and it was still one of Buddy’s high-security treasure boxes somewhere in the Little House.

Robin didn’t know exactly what Buddy saw in Azalea’s family unit. It wasn’t like it was some traditional, nuclear foil for their own weird family. If anything, Azalea’s was weirder: just her and Aunt Jo and that Vermont house, with its rotating cast of old lesbian boarders and their dogs, blue-blooded New England ladies with radical politics, poets, grad students, and the British cousins, who would come to the States for a few weeks every summer.

Buddy’d gone to sleepaway camp with the Brits one summer. Azalea had gone to a girls’ camp nearby, and Robin, who’d been six or seven, had gone to computer day camp at Brookline High. Buddy came home from that camp with a deep reverence for the Brits, whom he’d shared a cabin with, and Robin thought that was probably where a lot of his weird Anglophilic habits started. The too-short pants. The tea-drinking he got obsessed with at Regent. He’d take the
Downeaster all the way down on weekends to restock his fancy teas at Cardullo’s in Harvard Square and at some little place he knew about in Chinatown. He had an electric kettle and a little tea set on a tray in his dorm room. Robin had heard all about Buddy’s tea services, which he’d hosted in his single all through his junior and senior years. He would make his friends get dressed up in jackets and ties and sit through little lectures and then he’d serve them tea and get them stoned on a vaporizer he kept on his nightstand, which he disguised as an essential-oil diffuser. He’d somehow also gotten his hands on a couple of Henley regatta t-shirts, which he hand-washed and wore on special occasions, and there was a short period of time when he tried the accent, but everyone had made fun of him and he’d backed off.

Buddy’s first year away from home, Robin and Virginia had the whole Big House to themselves. It was cold and lonely and Robin felt empty of ideas and Virginia had engineered little activities for the two of them. For those three quiet months, before Buddy came rampaging home for Thanksgiving full of big chat and new ideas, it was like living in a snow globe. He remembered the meniscus, her explanation of it, on the yellow water in the casserole dish and the way it clutched the printer paper when they laid it on top, a sheet at a time, in the den in the evening on a school night that first fall. She’d knotted the strings of the teabags to a garden dowel, like some crazy fishing rod, and they’d dipped them in the dish of water until it turned yellow and then brown. They’d burned the edges of the paper before soaking it, and then dried the paper in the oven, and finally tied it all up with string. A little folio of blank documents for him to turn into treasure maps and old letters. They’d made a quill pen out of a seagull feather they found floating in the river. And ink. He couldn’t remember how they made the ink.

There’d been another trip up to the Vermont house during which Buddy and Azalea and the Brits had played gin rummy all weekend, and after that Buddy carried a pack of cards with
him everywhere he went. He’d gotten back in touch with the Brits in college, in that Buddy way, through some combination of Facebook and email and long-distance phone calls. He liked to keep in contact with people, liked to gather everybody together at some resort, Regent friends, people he’d met traveling, ex-girlfriends and their new boyfriends, someone’s sister, and always a few foreigners. He liked to make introductions. He liked to help with people’s travel plans. Robin thought he had a real boner for aristocracy. There was usually a prince or two at Regent, and Buddy was always making friends with them, or dating an heiress, or getting invited to someone’s island for vacation. He liked to show them all off to each another.

Buddy never talked to Robin about the Brits. They’d introduced Buddy to drinking and smoking pot, and possibly they’d been around when Buddy and Azalea first started hooking up, though Robin had no idea when that might’ve been. The first time Robin teased him about it Buddy’d punched him in the stomach so hard that Robin puked. He didn’t bring up the Brits or Vermont or Azalea at all after that. It had been Buddy’s private adventure.

Layla’s dad’s truck was already in the gravel loop outside Robin’s cottage when he pulled up. He found her masturbating by lamplight, the jar of coconut oil open on the bedside table, D’Angelo playing from the Bluetooth speaker. There was half a Granny Smith apple sitting on the counter and wisps of weed smoke still swirling at the top of the vaulted ceiling.

He woke up with a start in the middle of the night when her iPhone started talking.

“I’m sorry,” Siri said.

He wondered if he’d been talking in his sleep. Layla rolled over and got dressed in the dark and he heard a thwok as she took a bite of the apple, then the spring of the screen door, the big vroom of her dad’s truck’s V8, and finally, as the red taillights made the turn and dissolved in the trees, the minor-key bloop as her phone disconnected from his Bluetooth speaker.
“Well, well, well,” Buddy said when he picked up. Robin put in his earbuds and plugged them into his phone. “It’s five-thirty in the morning,” Buddy said. “I get a call from an unknown New York number. Perhaps it’s a telemarketer, operating outside of business hours. They have automatic ones now that’ll wait for you to stop talking before they play their message. If you’re a human, don’t say anything.” The line went quiet. Robin picked up his broom. He opened the screen door to the cottage and settled into a golfer’s stance in the doorway.

“Alright then,” Buddy said. “It can’t be my little brother, because he’s disappeared off the face of the earth. Possibly he doesn’t even exist anymore. So who are you? You’re not my wife, because my wife is right here, glaring at me. You’re not my child, who’s feeding Cheerios to the dog. You aren’t a parent of one of my students. Are you?” He paused. Robin took another swing. He’d found a patch of sandy carpet and was sprinkling the sand swing by swing across the threshold of the cottage.

“Are you a cop? You have to answer if you are. Honey—” There was a shuffling sound and a bark, then silence.

“Alright. I am now walking to school. You have twenty minutes of my time. Go ahead, Boy Wonder. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Hey Buddy. Sorry, I thought you had this number. How’s everyone?”

“They’re good, Robin. Can I call you Robin?”

“Don’t start,” Robin said. “What’s that sound? Are you jogging?”
The footfalls slowed. Buddy cleared his throat and spat.

“Brother,” Buddy said. “When you visit, I’ll introduce you to my morning routine. You remember the pyramid model.”

“Of course I do,” Robin said. It’s how they’d done homework in the years they’d lived in the Big House together. Toughest subject first. It was also Buddy’s model for dinner conversations with their mother, for breakups, and for Christmas morning.

“Then you understand already. I’ve already worked out, I’ve eaten all my vegetables for the day, I’ve pooped, and I’ve discussed matters of importance with my wife. Give it a shot. Have I ever led you astray?”

Robin put the broom away and picked up the five iron. He’d found it a few weeks ago in the nettles at the edge of the marina. It was short for him. He slipped on his sandals and walked out into the wet grass beside the cottage.

“Did you ever play golf at Putterham?” Robin said. He positioned the phone in the waistband of his shorts and settled down into a golfer’s stance.

“Matter of fact,” Buddy said, “I’ve still got a rain check for the back nine. I got caught in a lightning storm with Ricky Yamamoto in, uh, two-thousand… six. No expiration date. I think about it all the time.”

“I used to buy weed from Ricky.”

“There are people who still buy weed from Ricky.” Robin could hear his brother’s footfalls again. He was jogging on pavement.

“Did you play righty or lefty?” Robin said.

“I’m insulted that you don’t know this. Think about the club rack in the back yard. My lucky wedge.”
“Alright, but I’m asking because I’ve been working on my lefty swing. There are these mushrooms here you wouldn’t believe.” He took a slow backswing, trying to keep the club in a flat plane, rotating his hips. He stopped the clubhead at the white mushroom before him.

“They’re exactly golf-ball shaped and sized, and the stems are like tees.”

Now Robin took a full backswing, held it for a moment, and swung. The mushroom exploded.

“And Bud, how’s this: since I started hitting these things, more and more of them are coming up. I’m spreading spores everywhere. I’m probably carrying them around on my clothes. Every morning I come out here and there’re a dozen new mushrooms. It’s like getting a free bucket of balls every day. I can actually hit lefty now. I might be a decent golfer.”

“You can teach my son someday,” Buddy said.

“Is he lefty?”

“Is Barry lefty?”

“Barry’s nothing, Bud. It’s just a little thing. Actually, that’s what I wanted to talk about.”

Robin exploded another mushroom and held his breath as the spores dispersed.

“Buddy?” Robin said.

“Go ahead.”

“What kind of mushrooms are these?”

“You got me, kid.”

“I’d like to collect some of these spores,” Robin said. “Maybe market them. Sell them to driving ranges. That’s not a bad idea, is it? You want to make a million bucks, Bud?”
“I’ve got a million bucks. So do you. My dog’s got a million bucks. Find out what it is and if it’s invasive. If not, mail me some. We can set you up with a little spot in the forest for when you visit. You are coming to visit some day? Actually, Rob, now that I think about it, I’d prefer a local species. You know how I feel about New York.”

Robin cleaned the club face with a leaf. There was silence on the line.

“This is Bud.”

“ Weird question for you,” Robin said. “Have you spoken to Azalea Martin recently?”

“As a matter of fact, yeah, I have. She texted me last night.”

“What, uh, did she say?”

“She said ‘I’m at a bar with your brother, but he’s pretending to be someone else.’ She asked me to explain what was going on.”

“What’d you say?”

“I told her to sit tight. I told her you would explain everything.”

“You didn’t say anything, though?”

“Rob, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little pissed off about this. I didn’t sign up to lie to people I care about. I mean, other than mom. So that’s one thing—going from just plain ‘I don’t know’ to having to answer direct questions about you. And remember that Zaley doesn’t have brain damage. She’s not a fucking idiot.”

“I’m sorry. It was a total fluke. Thanks for doing that.”

“Well, Rob, I would argue, you know, that it’s not a fluke. This was going to happen eventually.” Buddy was doing his lawyer voice.
“I’m sorry, Bud,” Robin said. “I didn’t mean for it to happen like this. I didn’t mean for you to be involved. Or Azalea. Can you, uh, send me her number?”

“I’ll text it to you,” Buddy said.

There was a Daddy Longlegs climbing up the wall of the outdoor shower. Robin aimed the showerhead down, away from the spider, and turned it on. Then he turned it back off.

“Buddy?” Robin said.

“Mm hmm?”

“Why are you going in to school at six AM in July?”

“Well, first of all, it’s June. Thirty days hath September. And I teach summer school. It’s the same deal as the rest of the year. You know this. I’m getting a little exercise, then I’m going to take a shower in the locker room. I’m going to have a cup of coffee in the teachers’ lounge and I’m going to read some poems by my students. I’m going to put gold-star stickers on the superb ones and I’m going to put some other kind of sticker on the alright ones. I’m going to borrow the Times from the library and I’m going to do the crossword. It’s my morning to supervise drop-off, so I’ll do that, and I’ll probably play Butts-Up with the cool kids until the bell rings.”

“We used to call it Suicide,” Robin said. “Or Wall-Ball.”

“It’s regional thing, I think. Out here it’s Butts-Up.”

“Suicide is problematic.”

“The whole thing’s a little weird,” Buddy said. “But it gives me street cred with the kids. You know, I’m undefeated. I’m also all-time quarterback at recess.”

“Do you peg them? The kids?”
“I miss on purpose. But I throw it pretty hard. Hey, Rob. Are you doing the crossword?”

Robin stepped out of the outdoor shower. He wiped his feet in the grass. The sky was getting lighter. “I don’t get the paper out here,” he said.

“You know, you can do it online,” Buddy said. “You’ve got mom’s login.”

“I know that, Bud. It’s been a busy summer.”

“Well, you should start back up. Lindsay’s doing it now. She’s pretty good. Not as good as mom.”

“Maybe I will,” Robin said. “Hey, speaking of. Crazy idea. Don’t react right away, okay?”

“I can’t promise anything,” Buddy said. “But shoot.”

“So I’m looking around on the Sotheby’s site—”

“Not this again,” Buddy said.

“Hear me out, Bud. I’m on the site and there’s this listing for a place in Maine. It used to be a hunting club. It’s right on the lake, all waterfront, and there’s a big lodge and a bunch of log cabins, a dock, ten acres of land. I think it would be perfect.”

“Robin, now’s not the time.”

“I’m going to send you the link,” Robin said. “Just take a look. It’s incredible.”

“Rob, we’ve talked about this. No one except you thinks this is a good idea.”

“What do you mean ‘no one except me’? First of all, it’s just you and me we’re talking about. And we’ve been talking about this for years. You came up with the idea.”

“Robin, don’t forget that I have a family. That I own a house. That my son is starting school next year. And for the record, I thought we should get a ski house. Mind you, this is
when I was twelve years old. Then Aunt Jo bought her place and so we basically had a ski house anyway, and we didn’t have to pay for it or maintain it or worry about the pipes freezing or anything like that. It was ideal. As a homeowner, believe me, hindsight is twenty-twenty on this one. You think mom is capable of managing a fucking hunting club?”

“I’m not talking about mom,” Robin said. “Just—look at the link. I sent it.”

“You know I hate doing stuff like this on my phone,” Buddy said. “And what do you mean ‘not talking about mom’?”

“I mean exactly what we’ve been talking about for years. You and I go in on this thing. Splitsies. We throw some money at it, fix it up, maybe hire a groundskeeper or something, and spend summers there. You and Lindsay and Calvin, you’re all in academia. You’ve got summers free. And I was even thinking, you know, I could do some of the groundskeeper-type stuff.”

“I would hesitate to say that my four-year-old son is ‘in academia,’ but I take your point. Remember, though, that Lindsay and I both work in the summers.”

“I’m sure there are summer schools in Maine,” Robin said.

“And what do you mean you’ll do groundskeeper work?” Buddy said. “Is that something you know how to do?”

“Well, matter of fact, kind of, yeah,” Robin said. “That’s what I’m doing right now.”

“Wait,” Buddy said. “I thought ‘Barry’ was the groundskeeper?”

“Buddy, did you look at the link?”

“Yeah, I did. It hurt my eyes. Where are you going to come up with a quarter million dollars?”

“Bud, a quarter million is cheap for this place. Are you looking at the pictures?”
“Robin, that’s a quarter million up front. What needs work?”

“It says it’s all up and running.”

“It says it was run as a summer camp in the nineties. Do you remember summer camp? Shitting in the woods? Bugs everywhere? What about the septic system? I mean, have you looked into this? How’s it heated? Have you considered why this place is called Mosquito Lake?”

“Buddy, it’ll take some work. I realize that. But just imagine. A family compound. That’s the dream, right?”

“That was a certain dream at a certain point, yes. But things are a little different now. Maybe you haven’t been home in a while. And can you explain again what you meant by ‘I’m not talking about mom’?”

“Bud, I mean mom and Art are going to stay at the Big House and this’ll have nothing to do with them. They can visit. Whatever. I just mean, it’s a you-and-me thing. And Lindsay and Calvin and, you know, my future family or whatever. Plus we’ll have enough cabins for friends, guests, whoever. Azalea and the Brits.”

“Watch it, Rob.”

“Sorry,” Robin said. “But I’m serious.”

“Well, so, you’re not suggesting that mom pay for this, then? Because I don’t have a quarter million dollars sitting around. Plus whatever you pay a fucking groundskeeper. Do you?”

“Bud, you do have it sitting around. I mean, one-twenty-five. And I have my trust, which I haven’t touched.”
“I have it ‘sitting around’ in a 529 plan,” Buddy said, “which is a tax-deferred fund for Calvin’s college tuition, not to mention four years of Regent, if we even choose to go that route.”

“Buddy, let’s not have this money conversation. You know it’s there. You know Calvin will be taken care of.”

“Rob, if you hadn’t fucking vanished, I’d’ve looped you in a little tighter on the family finances. But suffice to say, with mom’s medical bills, and all the repairs to the Big House, we’re not as liquid as you seem to think. Look—when was the last time you visited mom?”


“When?”

“Bud, I get it. You’ve settled down. So fuck it. Maybe we can talk about it after Calvin goes to college.”

“Robin, what are you doing out there, anyway? I mean, seriously.”

Robin swung the club with one hand. He smashed a mushroom, then hacked at a tree root.

“And I haven’t ‘settled down,’ at least in the sense that you’re suggesting,” Buddy said. “Come visit. Anytime. Our door is always open.”

Robin dug a little hole with the club face.

“Robin. Hey, you there?” Buddy’s voice had softened.

“Yeah,” Robin said. “I’m here.”

“Should I save this number? Are you going to have it for a little while?”

Robin didn’t say anything.
“I’m sorry,” Buddy said. “Hey, I’m glad to hear you’re getting up early. It can’t be all bad if you’re getting up early.” There was the clank of a push-bar door opening. “I’ve arrived,” Buddy said. “I gotta go. I love you.”

“Buddy, wait.”

“Yes?” Buddy said.

“The, uh, Barry thing?”

“Yes?”

“Well, Azalea saw me.”

“You mentioned that.”

“The reason she was there is that she’s, like, best friends with that girl I told you about.”

“The one you’re fucking? Miss Thing?”

“Yeah,” Robin said.

“The one who thinks you’re Barry?”

“That’s correct.”

“The freaky one?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Lola?”

“Layla.”

“So what do you want me to do?” Buddy said.

“I don’t know,” Robin said. “I have no idea. I have a bad feeling, though. I couldn’t sleep. What if she finds out and goes ballistic? Or tells someone at the club? I might have to bail, Buddy.”
“It’s about time,” Buddy said. “I really have to go. Personally, I think you’re playing with fire. I think this thing has gone on long enough.”

“Thanks Buddy.”

“And please, please don’t get Zaley involved in any of this. That would really upset me. Okay?”

“I’m sorry, Buddy.”

“It’s alright. Hey, listen. Leave the spores. Take the cannoli.”

“What?” Robin said. “That doesn’t really work.”

“Cannoli’s a New York thing,” Buddy said.

“Cannoli’s an Italian thing.”

Alright. Leave the spores. Take, uh. Take…. You know, I like ‘cannoli’.”

“I’m taking the spores.”

“Okay. Love you, brother,” Buddy said.

“Love you, Bud.” Robin left his earbuds in and let Buddy hang up. He’d wandered back down to the outdoor shower, and now he walked around it, tapping the walls with the five-iron.

--4--

Robin stood next to the golf cart and tried to follow Glen’s gaze. He put his hand on the vinyl seatback and jerked it away. Glen was sitting on a throwable safety cushion in the driver’s seat, holding a cup of coffee near his mouth and staring at the rear end of a black sedan parked
diagonally across the gravel outside of the dockhouse. The car’s windows were open and the keys were hanging from the ignition. The air above the car wobbled in the heat.

“What Weak endowed?” Glen said.

“Huh?”

“What does that say to you?” He pointed with his coffee cup. The Connecticut license plate of the car read: “WKNDOWD.”

Robin prickled all over. We know what you did? He took a deep breath, took off his hat, rubbed his buzz cut. He took off his sunglasses and wiped the bridge of his nose and put the sunglasses back on. The flag on the dockhouse roof filled slightly, lifted off the pole, then slumped back down.

“What Weekend Audi,” Robin said. He exhaled.

Glen took a sip of his coffee, then leaned over and poured the rest of it out into the gravel.

“Christ,” he said.

It’d been happening more and more often, these little panics. He’d bump into a member coming around the corner of the bathhouse and, for a moment, when they met eyes, he’d feel completely revealed. Betrayed by his face. Then the member would grin and apologize and mention something about the heat or the wind or the repairs to the dock and the moment would be over.

Or, driving the cart down the gravel path by the tennis courts, as he passed the edge of the green WindStop mesh along the baseline, he’d see one of the players from the corner of his eye and his heart would double-tap—he’d recognize someone he’d gone to school with, or one of
Buddy’s New York friends—and then the person, who was just some member’s kid or visiting cousin, would fade back into the point and Robin would exhale and continue down the path.

It was a reasonable thing to be afraid of. Diamond Head was exactly the kind of place a Regent or Harvard alum might end up on a weekend in June. Robin wasn’t afraid of the membership—he’d checked the member directory, and didn’t know anyone personally—but the degrees of separation were dangerously thin. Realistically, it was only a matter of time before Robin came face-to-face with someone he knew, or who knew him, or who recognized his face from the stories that ran in *The Crimson* or *The Globe* after the expulsion and the lawsuits.

Other than these little panics, the past two months had been blissful. He was on the water every day, running launch out to the mooring field, or adjusting the swim lanes, or shooting the cannon for the weekend races, and when he wasn’t on the water he was working for Glen, using his body, sweating all day, carrying a radio, wearing a pencil behind his ear. He had physical problems to solve, heavy things to move, trailers to drive from one place to another in the big club truck, with his elbow out the window, waving back at the drivers of other trucks who thought he was Glen, and at some who seemed to wave just because they were both in trucks doing work.

Everything Glen said or did, Robin paid attention to—never in his life had he learned so much so fast from one person. Except, he thought, for those first few months along in the Big House with Virginia after Buddy went away to school. He’d felt the same way then.

He took a deep breath. *Weekend Audi* indeed. He followed Glen into the dockhouse, planting his feet, taking comfort in the pepper-grinder feel of gravel under his boots. He felt broad and strong in his clean work shirt. The boats in the marina were rocking gently and randomly in open conversation, a canopy of boat sounds, and a southerly breeze pushed the
sounds through the open dockhouse and out to sea. Glen had already opened all the windows, raised the garage doors, and turned on the gas pump.

Robin was big now. Bigger than Buddy ever was—two or three inches taller, seventy-five pounds heavier. That was another thing that counted as currency around here. The members watched him through their sunglasses as he swung boats around on the crane, and the little campers cheered for him when he lifted an Opti in each hand so that Layla could hose sand off the bottoms. The mothers smiled at him and touched each other on the forearm when he passed through the dining room on his way to staff lunch.

Robin thought he knew what Glen thought of him. That he was strong, that he got to work on time, that he was smart and analytical, though his smarts didn’t apply all that well to this kind of work. He thought too hard about things. Tried to solve them with reason, aimed for a philosophical perfection rather than quick, efficient, concrete solutions. In Glen’s eyes he was a huge, sensitive, introverted young man, a square peg in a round hole but nonetheless pretty good at the job, who desperately wanted Glen’s approval.

Glen also thought his name was Barry Pomerleau, and that he was from Roxbury, MA, where his last job had been as a floor associate at Home Depot. None of which was true. They hadn’t discussed much of Robin’s, or Barry’s, personal life beyond that. Robin had made it clear that he was most comfortable this way, and Glen, if he was curious, kept a respectful distance. Probably Robin wasn’t his first assistant with a closed-off emotional life.

It had started in the nosebleeds at Fenway Park. He’d been there alone, at the home opener against Pittsburgh on a Monday in the middle of the afternoon—anything to get out of the Big House, where he’d been cooped up since his expulsion, doing his community service,
meeting with his PO, zig-zagging around the house like PacMan to avoid Artie and Virginia, losing his mind.

He’d been sitting there stoned in his seat, barely aware of the game, more or less alone, soaking in what looked like a blowout, when he’d noticed a scruffy guy with a backpack on his stomach typewriter-ing his way up and down the bleachers, occasionally picking something up from under a seat and putting it in the backpack. Robin turned his full attention to this man.

Wallets.

Robin checked his own pockets. His wallet was there, but his phone had slipped out and was sitting in the peanut shells under his ass. The seats were like that—bowl-shaped, so that you slid back into them.

He thought about it all night, then got up early and thought about it over breakfast, and then extracted the sports page and checked the Red Sox schedule. The next day he bought a ticket for the 7:05pm game and sat hunched in his seat in the bleachers through eleven scoreless innings. Then Sandy Leon hit a walk-off homer in the twelfth and the fans that were left started filing out, high-fiving and hugging each other and patting their pockets.

Robin stood up and followed and then doubled back as though he’d forgotten something and checked up and down his row and then the row in front of him, occasionally standing straight up and patting his own pockets and putting his hands on his head and looking verklempt. Then he found a purse, and in the next row a wallet, and then another wallet, and he checked the height and weight and photo on the license and thought, jackpot.

Robin took up the broom from the wall of the dockhouse and started sweeping. He made a pile of sawdust and metal shavings from under the table vice and guided it over to the edge of the concrete floor. He worked in little half-moons, consolidating two tire tracks of sand into a
little mountain, and pushed it across the floor into the sawdust pile. He poofed out the dusty corners, collected bits of fuzzed and burned line from under the rope gun, and made everything into one high little pile in the sunlight at the threshold of the garage doors, where the cement floor gave way to a wide ramp down into the gravel. He took the broom by the handle and shimmied into a golfer’s stance.

“Former groundskeeper,” he said. He lifted the broom, then swung it into the pile of sand and sawdust. “The normally reserved crowd goes wild,” he said. The sand sprinkled out into the gravel. The lightest particles, the dust, caught in the breeze and filtered back through the shadows into the dockhouse.

“Oh, come on,” Glen said, and waved a Fisherman’s Magazine in front of his face. He stood up and took off his readers and squinted at the electronic weather station on the high shelf.

“Another beautiful day in paradise,” Glen said.

“A great day to be alive,” Robin said, putting away the broom.

Robin had always cheated in school—on spelling bees in middle school that he didn’t even need to cheat on, on math tests, with formulas on the side of his big eraser that he rubbed off after he’d copied them down. Mainly, on things he was supposed to memorize, and he thought of it as saving the brain space. He hadn’t needed to do it, but he’d enjoyed it. In high school, he saved formulas in his graphing calculator, wrote trig functions on pieces of Scotch tape that he kept on the inside of his belt or the back of his watchband. In college he kept at it just for fun. Even Buddy’s old boat-shoe trick.

Then Virginia had her accident and things got out of control. People asked him for his ideas and he got angry. His brain suddenly felt too precious to share with anyone else. Instead
he threw other people’s ideas back in their faces. He made money off it—little prizes, then big 
prizes, then grants and scholarships. By the end he’d taken sixty grand of the school’s money. It 
was difficult and time-consuming work and took some of his best thinking to pull off. It had felt 
like a kind of art.

He’d found that same feeling at Diamond Head. He’d been working here, as Barry, six 
days a week since May.

It was as good a place as any to have a hangover. Nothing catastrophic had happened last 
night, although Azalea had spent the whole time staring daggers at him over Layla’s shoulder. 
But she hadn’t said anything. He owed her a phone call.

Glen drove with one foot out the side of the cart, brushing the gravel. He avoided the 
speed bump by the tennis courts, leaving the driver’s-side tires in the grass, and pulled in his foot 
as he skirted the rock wall.

It occurred to Robin that Glen knew this property better than the General Manager, or the 
Commodore, or the club’s lawyers, or anyone else. What Glen hadn’t built outright he’d 
repaired or designed or subcontracted out to one of his friends. That went for the workshop and 
the marina, the gravel, the speed bumps, the hedges, and also for the places Robin didn’t go: the 
front office, the bar, the walk-in freezer, the attic.

He followed Glen into the kitchen through the back door. They wove through the prep 
stations. Glen didn’t look around. Robin did: there was so much to see and study. Every 
surface was stainless, everything with a lip and a drain, and the tile floor rose and fell in a series 
of saddles, each with a wide drain.

Glen fixed little things everywhere he went. To be him, Robin thought, on this property, 
would be to in a kind of living museum of old projects. Glen re-filled his coffee cup and stopped
the spigot with a loud pop that spurted coffee onto the floor. Glen did not clean this up. He knew about the saddles and the drains.

Glen always looked a little weird indoors, hunched, creepily pale. He wore soiled Timberland work boots tied military-tight with high grey socks that slipped down his legs and bunched up at the top of the boots. Today he had on his paint-stained camouflage cargo shorts, one of three or four pairs of long cargo shorts that he wore in rotation. Very long cargo shorts—they came down over his knees, and sagged at the waist, lower and lower as the day went on, until the hem of his work shirt just met the waistline of the shorts, and in between was a vivid band of old jersey boxer shorts and corpse-white stomach.

He had a bird head, with bird eyes and a face that came forward like a beak, and coarse hair on his earlobes. Sunscreen collected in white lines in the wrinkles of his forehead and in blobs on his earlobes. Under fluorescent light he looked moist, but outside in the sun he was something else. He was over six feet tall, and hard in a way that made Robin feel soft. He was probably in his late forties. His hands and forearms, the only parts of him that were consistently in the sun, were like wood. In the golf cart they had to lean slightly apart to fit, and where their forearms met, squeezed together at the elbows, Glen’s arm hair hooked into Robin’s like Velcro.

Glen exited the kitchen into the club dining room, a space Robin only felt comfortable walking through in the early morning or after-hours, when there were no members around. Glen led them into the Library, a place Robin never been at all. Robin had to walk slower than Glen to keep his coffee from spilling, and even at this pace he was getting a hot wet hand. Glen stopped next to the fireplace, took a key from his big ring, and opened a door Robin hadn’t seen, flush and painted the same ivory white as the wall and the molding around it.
It led into an unfinished room ten degrees colder than the library. Robin ducked to enter and bumped into Glen and both of them spilled coffee onto the concrete floor. Glen switched on a caged work bulb and shut the door to the library.

“Hear anything?” he said.

Robin listened. There were several different registers of humming in the air around them. It was some kind of HVAC command center, a big plywood closet with metallic ducts branching out in all directions, and the clubhouse’s roof jutted down through the makeshift ceiling. The room was built onto the original outside wall of the clubhouse.

Glen whacked his palm against the plywood and something big lurched and rattled behind them.

“Fuck!” Robin said. The thing scrambled around in the dark behind him. Glen bumped into Robin and they did a clunky pirouette as Glen moved toward the animal sounds and Robin moved away from them. Glen unfolded a stepladder, unhooked a worklight from an overhead beam, and reached into one of the head-level recesses in the plywood. The thing inside clattered against metal, and Glen slid out a heavy-duty Have-a-Heart trap with a huge raccoon inside.

“These fucking things,” Glen said in the high voice he used when he complained. They stood on the sea wall above the channel into the marina. Glen had tied a thin line to the handle of the trap. The raccoon trembled in the corner. It had peanut butter in the fur around its mouth. Glen kicked the trap off the sea wall. There wasn’t much of a splash. The water ran straight through the cage and it sank immediately.

“I got a double-banger last week,” he said. The cage sat on the channel floor, six and a half feet down. “Two of them, two adults, in one cage. What a mess.”
“How long?” Robin asked.

“How long what?” Glen said.

Robin nodded at the water.

“Oh. Three or four minutes.”

When Glen pulled up the cage the raccoon looked much smaller. They drove to the top of the marina. Glen took the dripping cage, wove among the empty trailers to the edge of the woods, and threw the dead raccoon into the trees. Robin felt a drop of water hit his face.

Glen wiped his hand on his cargo shorts, put the cage down on the tongue of one of the trailers, and unzipped his shorts.

Glen had installed the security cameras. Every once in a while he surprised Robin with a new outdoor pee spot.

Robin climbed through the trailers and stood at the edge of the dirtpile. “Am I good here?” he asked.

“You’re good all back in here.”

The dirt gave up a little whisper of smoke.

“It smelled up here all week,” Robin said. “I thought it was a deer.”

--5--

Layla was out on the water in the big red inflatable motoring slowly into the wind, surrounded by tiny sailboats. Once in a while she blew her whistle and the sailboats pivoted, their sails flapping for a second as they crossed the wind, before sailing off in the other direction. The wind moved
across the water in stripes, turning the sailboats on their moorings and veering off in little puffs and lulls that turned the water from blue to black to silver, and when he cocked his head with his sunglasses on all the colors inverted. Out past Layla and the campers, government mark four bobbed like an iron apple in the whitecaps.

They’d been fucking for three weeks. They got together late at night, at the cottage or on her dad’s boat, which he kept in a private marina on Three Mile Harbor. She was twenty-two, a senior at Georgetown, and like most of the sailing instructors she didn’t really need the job. It was something chic to do in the summers and she got to work in the sun, and she really was a good sailing instructor, as far as Robin could tell. She was in charge of the Opti group. The other instructors listened to her. She was smart and charming and it gave him chills when she spoke in her loud voice on the water or on the beach, wrangling the little sailors. It wasn’t a voice that came naturally for her, but she’d worked on it. The moms loved her and the dads flirted with her and at the end of the day she was exhausted. She liked to drink a margarita at the bar, smoke a little glass bowl she kept in a sunglasses case in the center console of her dad’s truck, fuck, and then collapse and watch Chopped and SVU in bed. Eventually she’d get up and put her hair in two sloppy braids and check her tan lines in the mirror above his sink, sticking out her hips one at a time, pressing her fingertips into the sunburns above her waist and leaving little white cat’s-paws in the pink skin.

She had the most perfect watch tan he’d ever seen. The first time, when they were still at the bar, he’d taken her watch off and put her wrist to his face and the sour smell underneath had kicked down some chemical door in his brain. There was something honest, at least, in the way their pheromones clicked—she smelled good. You couldn’t fake that.
Stanis, the tennis pro, was hiding out in his little room at the back of the workshop, restringing a racquet.

“Big man,” Stanis said. They shook hands.

Robin liked Stanis. He’d worked at Diamond Head for twenty years, and he came up to the trailer lot a few times a day to smoke cigarettes. He was in his forties, a long stringy guy from the Eastern Bloc, and he’d played on the pro circuit at some point. He was extremely handsome.

Robin glanced around at the courts. The sprinklers were on in the upper courts and on the lower courts two old guys were lobbing balls back and forth from the baselines. On the demo court, two young guys in sweaty whites were warming up with booming forehands.

“Who’re they?” Robin said.

Stanis grunted. “Watch the guy in the headband,” he said. “Guest of Tad Walters, who’s on the near court. They both play for Yale. Tad’s good, but the other guy, he’s a fucking stud.” Robin studied the two guys, decided he didn’t recognize them. Stanis looked up from the racquet.

“Now hang on,” Stanis said. Robin followed his gaze. A woman in tennis whites was walking across the gravel toward a lone BMW. Robin looked back at Stanis.

“No, no, no,” Stanis said. “Watch.”

The woman reached into her gym bag and the car beeped. She opened the rear door, put the gym bag down in the gravel, and sat down in the back seat with her legs sticking out of the car. Her head was in shadow. She used one foot to pry off her sneaker, and as she did so she opened her knees and flashed a triangle of pink underwear.
Stanis patted the strings of the racquet and shook his head. “I just hit with her for an hour,” he said. “I had a hard-on the whole time.”

“Mm,” Robin said.

“Anyway,” Stanis said, “I’m getting too old for this shit.” He sat down next to Robin in the cart. He stuck his legs out over the hood of the cart and leaned back. “What about your girls?”

“What girls?”

“You know, man, the girls. I see them walking around. You got your pick, don’t you? You been using that new-guy charm?” They had this conversation about once a week. Stanis was older than he looked on the court. Up close, he was leathery, and a little lopsided in everything he did.

Robin adjusted his hat and grunted.

“Allright,” Stanis said. “Hold out on me. Tell me you’re not fucking one of the servers. Or the babysitters. Hot babysitters this year. Or the sailing girls.” He looked straight ahead while he talked, and his voice seemed to vanish in the breeze. He was like a ventriloquist. Two older women in tennis whites walked past the bumper and Stanis waved at them. After they passed Stanis waved his hand in front of his nose as if to clear a smell.

“So tell me,” Stanis said. “Is it a camper? One of the, what, Dolphins? Some of those girls grew up, huh?”

The parking brake clicked off and Barry realized he’d been pressing down on the gas pedal. Stanis glanced over and flicked his eyebrows. “You dog,” he said. “Alright. Let’s go. I gotta show you this fucking fox.”
Stanis kept his eyes closed and his face in the sun as they drove around to the back of the upper courts. The sprinkler cycle had ended and the clay was dry in the sun.

“He’s right over there,” Stanis said. There’d been a fox acting strange at the edge of the courts and Robin was supposed to keep an eye on it. If it got disruptive, or looked rabid, he was supposed to call Animal Control. Otherwise—and here Glen had been vague and knowing and sort of threatening all at the same time—Robin should just take care of it himself.

The fox didn’t look too good. Stanis picked at the rubber soles of his sneakers and did not get out of the cart. It was a red fox and it had nestled itself up against the hot edge of the court, where the clay dust had greened the surrounding dirt, and it was breathing fast. Robin poked it with a stick. The fur was soft where it puckered around the stick and it expanded back slowly when he pulled the stick away. Robin thought he remembered that dogs’ skin got like that when they were dehydrated. This fox seemed a lot worse than dehydrated, but it wasn’t dead.

“Got a game, bud,” Stanis said. “I’m gonna head back.” He was standing now, beside the cart, retucking his shirt. He kept his distance from the fox. “Good luck with this shit,” Stanis said.

“Thanks, brother,” Robin said. “Good luck with the hard-on.”

Animals—animals with medical issues—freaked Robin out. Their instinct was to hide it, to keep it from you, and to survive at all costs, even if that meant waddling to safety with some awful hernia or crunching around on a broken leg. The fact that they couldn’t talk about it, couldn’t tell you where it hurt, was especially gruesome. He poked it again with the stick. He wanted to roll it over, to see if he could see some injury, but he was worried that some last-minute survival mechanism might kick in and that it would lunge at him.
He thought about running it over with the golf cart, but it was too close to the fence, and he might get the cart stuck in the grass.

He thought about all the tools in the dockhouse. He could hit it with something. He could poison it with brake-parts cleaner.

He could bring over one of Glen’s Have-A-Heart trap, nudge it in with the stick, and drown it like Glen did with the raccoons.

The most important thing was to avoid being seen or heard doing something grisly by any of the clubmembers. He tried to remember Glen’s exact wording. Otherwise… take care of it himself.

He backed the cart along the fence until he had room to turn around. He prayed he wouldn’t pass Glen on the path to the workshop. Inside he found a five-gallon bucket with a lid. He took a pitchfork from the wall.

The fox hadn’t moved. Robin lay the bucket at its head. Using the pitchfork like a cocktail strainer he eased the animal over the lip and into the bucket. It was completely limp. He put the lid on the bucket. The leaves were matted where it had been lying.

Halfway to the upper lot it came alive with an awful scratching and Robin’s blood ran cold. He drove calmly past the old women playing dink-ball, then floored it up the gravel toward the pee-corner. The fox had life in it yet, and he could see its shadow scrabbling in circles, its feet like tiny veined leaves through the translucent white plastic. He carried the bucket by its handle over dirtpile and into the deep shaded woods where the earth went soft. Beyond this was marshland. He tipped the bucket on its side and tried to pry the lid off with the toe of his boot. This didn’t work. He stopped and stared.
“Quit being a pussy,” he said out loud. Then he pried off the lid and dumped out the animal into the leaves. He held the bucket like a shield, but the fox lay still where it had fallen. Nature would take its course. He remembered a thought experiment from one of his moral philosophy lectures, freshman year, before the accident. A fat man on a bridge, a speeding train, and a bus full of children. It had to do with choice: choosing to kill versus allowing death to happen. If he had to explain it to Glen, he felt he could live with this.

His radio came on halfway across the parking lot.

“Go ahead,” he said.

“You have a minute to look at the kid’s room?” Robin could see Glen standing in the shade of the dockhouse, his radio next to his mouth.

“Roger that,” Robin said, and waved.

The kid was the junior tennis pro, Stanis’s second-in-command, whose job it was to hit balls to the campers all day while Stanis did private lessons. He was young—a freshman or sophomore in college—and a prep-school kid before that, who drove an old white Lexus sedan with an ACK sticker on the back. He was blonde and he wore the same uniform as Stanis—tight white everything—and he lived in the staff barracks behind the tennis courts. He nodded at Robin whenever they passed on the path, and once offered him a Bud Light out of the back seat of the Lexus on their lunch break. He had huge white teeth. His name was Perrin.

The kid’s room was down a shared hallway and Robin could tell which door it was by the semicircle of water on the hallway carpet. The door was unlocked.

The room smelled like beer and dip spit and wet wood. The carpet was soaked through and it bubbled under Robin’s boots. There were two twin beds pushed up against either wall and
two dressers and two rolling clothes racks, the same stock furniture Robin had helped Glen install in all the staff rooms when he arrived in May. The wood smell came from a big stump sitting in the middle of the carpet, scarred with cigarette burns and hammer dents and half a dozen bent nails driven halfway in. On the dresser was a box of four-inch nails and a hammer with “DHYC” on the handle.

Under the hammer was a sheet of torn-up Bud Light carton covered in markings. There were circles of different sizes and in each circle was a set of initials in it: PMB, which must’ve been Perrin, and RD, which Robin thought might be Perrin’s roommate, one of the dishwashers. He wondered if middle names were an American thing. A couple of the circles said LPH—Layla?

The tiny bathroom was flooded up to Robin’s shoelaces. He took the lid off the tank and grunted.

He radioed Glen from the backyard. He’d fixed the fill valve and plunged the bowl but they were going to need to rent the big dehumidifier again.

Something moved in the grass. He crouched and moved aside an empty propane tank.

It was a big box turtle, up against the siding, one leg tapping the dirt. There was something on its back. Robin took off his sunglasses.

“What the fuck?” he said. “Oh, god.” He stood up and took a step back and looked away.

The phone rang and rang and then the voicemail clicked on.

“Hello,” it said. “This is Paula Poundstone, from National Public Radio. Buddy and Lindsay aren’t in right now, but—” The line clicked.
“This is Buddy,” Buddy said.

“Jesus, Bud,” Robin said, trying to slow his breathing. “Sorry. Thanks for picking up.”

“I have *not* thought any harder about your invitation,” Buddy said, “to move my happy family to a swamp in Maine.”

“Buddy, listen,” Robin said. “This is going to sound crazy, but do you believe in animal signs?”

“Umm…” Buddy said. “No.”

“Well, get this,” Robin said. “This morning Glen and I caught a raccoon. We drowned it in the ocean. That’s normal. But then—”

“That’s normal?” Buddy said.

“Yeah, that’s what you do. But so then I get a call that there’s this sick fox by the tennis courts.”

“Well,” Buddy said, “that’s what you get for—”

“Buddy, Buddy, I know. Listen. I had to put it in a bucket and go bring it to the woods for it to die. It was gross.” Robin shuddered. He was standing at the top of the marina parking lot in the trees where no one could see him. “And then just now,” Robin said, “I’m at the barracks, and I find this turtle. It’s got wood screws sticking out of the shell, Buddy. Fucking wood screws.”

“Jesus,” Buddy said. “That’s fucked up. Who, uh—who screwed the turtle?”

“It must’ve been the kids at the barracks. I don’t know. Or some campers. It was sick.”

“What’d you do?”

“I put it in a bucket,” Robin said. “We called Animal Control. They’re on the way. I gotta go. I just needed to vent for a second. This poor fucking turtle.”
“You remember when I caught that duck?” Buddy said.

“Oh, god, yeah,” Robin said. “I remember.”

They’d been anchored up in the raft, casting pieces of lettuce from their sandwiches at a sunny log where a family of turtles was sleeping in the heat. Buddy was trying to catch one of the turtles for a pet.

Buddy’d been talking to a big mallard that was swimming toward the log.

“Back off, duck,” he said. “Leave them alone.”

“Ducks don’t eat turtles,” Robin said.

“Yeah, well, they scare them away.”

Buddy reeled in and cast right at the duck. The first cast landed behind it and the duck accelerated toward the turtles, churning its feet. Buddy reeled in and this time his cast landed right in front of the duck. It stopped, jerked its head up in the air, then dove. For a moment the water was still, the duck gone but for a little whorl where it’d disappeared. Then the rod tip twitched and Buddy’s eyes went wide.

Robin remembered how the turtles slid off the log one by one, lazy from the sun, and vanished underwater.

Then Buddy hauled back on the rod and started reeling. The duck skipped across the surface of the river like a stone, casting up cones of spray each time it touched the water, and Buddy, his jaw set, fought it like a fish as Robin crouched and shielded his eyes in the bottom of the inflatable rowboat.

When Buddy’d gotten it close enough to the boat to splash them, his concentration broke.
“Oh, fuck,” Buddy said. He dropped the rod and covered his head. Then the duck was in the boat. Robin remembered the jingle of tackle and the sound of feathers, and, beneath that, a quieter and more tender sound from the duck that sounded like hiccupping. The knock of something hard, a beak, maybe, against Robin’s oar. Then the feeling of wind on Robin’s wet arms, flapping, a splash, and silence.

When Robin opened his eyes the duck was gone. Buddy was sitting low in the boat, his eyes wide and his face white. There was dirt all over the yellow rubberized floor of the inflatable and when Robin wiped his hand across it the dirt turned to blood.

“Where’s my rod?” Buddy said. Robin tried to get to his knees and the floor buckled underneath him.

“Um. Buddy,” Robin said. “I think we’re sinking.”

And there in the bottom of the boat, in the pool of pink water that had collected in the low point between Robin’s knees, a column of bubbles rose from a puncture in the yellow rubber.

--6--

“It’s not good,” Glen said, looking down at the turtle in the bucket.

“Should we do something?” Robin said.

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Try to back out the screws?”

Glen turned on the radio and lowered the volume and sat down to look at a parts catalogue open on the chart table.
“I’m not a vet,” Glen said after a minute. “Are you a vet? Listen. We did do something. We called Animal Control. You don’t want to try to do too much. That’s how you get in trouble.” He flipped through the catalogue to a page he’d dogeared. “They’ve got people whose job this is,” he said. “Better to call them. Better for everyone.” He flipped back to the cover of the parts catalogue, dialed a number on his cell phone, and put the phone to his ear. Glen kept his phone at an old-man volume and Robin could hear it ringing.

“Heh-eyy!” Glen said in his cheerful phone voice. He stood up to talk. “It’s Glen from Diamond Head Yacht Club. How you doin’?” Glen put his reading glasses on top of his head and left the dock house and Robin heard the beep and the crunch of the golf cart and then Glen passed by the garage doors toward the marina parking lot, one foot dragging in the gravel as he drove, grinning the big phone-call grin that matched his phone-call voice.

Robin looked down at the turtle. It had two legs in its shell and two legs stuck out, leaning against the wall of the bucket, its head bumping against the plastic. Robin wondered if the screws had short-circuited the controls for those two stuck legs. He wondered if the turtle was in pain. He thought it probably was. There was a clear liquid oozing out from the holes, and around each hole a whitish crust where the liquid had already dried.

Robin went over to the toolbox and chose a long-handled Phillips-head screwdriver. He watched the turtle for a while, with its two dead legs. Then he reached in and held the turtle still by its shell. He fitted the tip of the screwdriver into the head of one of the screws. He gave it a slow turned counterclockwise.

The turtle writhed and scraped and let out a noise like an old door closing. Robin jerked his hands out of the bucket dropped the screwdriver and sat down in Glen’s swivel chair. The turtle was scraping its two good legs against the wall of the bucket—Robin could see them in
silhouette. The legs made a tap-tap-tap sound against the plastic. Robin pressed his palms against his eye sockets and blotted out all the light until his vision swam purple, then stood up and left the dockhouse half-blind in the sun.

He walked down the path looking for a counselor but he couldn’t find anyone and finally he sat down in the empty sailing room and texted Buddy.

“Can I come tonight?” he wrote.

The text bubbles popped up immediately, then disappeared, then popped up again.

“I’ll make up your bed. How late?”

“Late,” Robin wrote. “Don’t short-sheet me.”

“Short who?” Buddy wrote.

At six he found Glen standing on the edge of the bulkhead, casting a snapper popper at the far side of the channel with the little rod he kept on a nail in the dockhouse. Glen flicked a cast, bounced the snapper popper off a piling on the far side of the channel, reeled once, and twitched the rod tip. The popper dipped underwater. “Fish on,” Glen said, and from where he sat in the cart Robin could see the little bluefish, a flash of silver, zigzagging under the surface. Glen lifted the fish out of the water—it was about four inches long, flickering in the air, rattling the rod-tip—got hold of the hook, held it upside down, and the fish slipped free. It bounced once on the wood and Glen kicked it off into the water.

“What a fucking day,” Glen said, and handed the rod to Robin.

Robin nodded. Glen sat down in a plastic lawn chair next to the gas pump. He took off his big straw hat, smoothed the brim, and put the hat over his eyes. The he tipped the chair back
until his shoulders hit the wall of the dockhouse and he sat there like that, balanced on the back two legs of the chair, leaning against the wall.

“What did Animal Control say?” Robin asked.

“Don’t know,” Glen said through the hat. “I wasn’t here when they came.”

Robin cast at the piling where Glen had hooked up. He wondered if Glen could see through the straw. If so, whether or not he was watching. Robin jerked the rod tip, reeled, jerked it again, reeled. In the upper lot, a Mercedes G-Wagon tried to back into a wide parking spot against the fence and failed. It pulled forward and tried again. Finally it parked, and a whole family got out, dressed in white and navy, and filed out along the path toward the dining room.

He’d been here two months. He’d made a little bit of money—he had no idea how much. His fake paperwork, on file in the office, wouldn’t hold up to any kind of scrutiny. But no one seemed to be paying particularly close attention to him. He’d learned a lot. He’d learned that he loved the ocean—loved being on boats. Maybe it was time to get a boat. Maybe there was a lake near Buddy.

The right thing to do would be to say something to Layla. He didn’t think he would.

He’d leave a note for Glen saying sorry and thank-you. It was probably a good idea to get a new phone.
“Last thing about Mosquito Lake,” Robin said, putting down the comics section as Buddy and Calvin came in from the screen-porch. They’d been practicing tying their shoes.

Buddy looked like he’d just finished a growth spurt. His wrists were sticking out of the arms of his navy flannel bathrobe, which was tight at the armpits and fraying at the hem. Somewhere in the attic of the Big House Robin had a red one that matched.

“I’ve been looking into the fishery,” Robin said. “There’re landlocked salmon. And perch. And the fly fishing is apparently superb. Also, in two hours, you’re on the ocean. We can trailer the boat over and go offshore. I know it sounds crazy, but I’ve been thinking a lot about it, and I think it makes a certain amount of sense. Buddy?”

Buddy had come up behind him and was reading over his shoulder. He rubbed Robin’s buzz cut with one hand.

“Mm,” Buddy said. He reached down and moved Robin’s breakfast plate.

“It’s not a very good one,” Robin said. Calvin had crawled into the dog kennel in the corner.

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Buddy said. He picked up the second half of Robin’s banana.

“Mm,” he said. “Yeah, you’re right. Are you ready to turn the page?”

“Hey,” Robin said. “No. I’m still reading.”
“You should smile more,” Buddy said. He kneaded Robin’s neck. Calvin scurried across the floor on all fours, barked, and sniffed the doorjamb.

“You’re menacing me, Buddy,” Robin said. “I don’t like backseat readers.”

Buddy pinched Robin’s shoulders, then punched him lightly in the ribs.

“Buddy,” Robin said. “Please.”

Robin put his hood up. Buddy pulled it back off. Then he pulled Robin’s earlobe.

“Bud,” Robin said, without looking up from the paper. “Are you sure you want your son to see this?”

“He’s four,” Buddy said. “He isn’t forming memories yet. Are you actually reading *Prince Valiant*?”

“You’re blocking my light,” Robin said. A banana peel fell onto the page, right where Robin was reading.

Robin put down his coffee. Buddy bounced on his toes next to him, poking him in the scar on the side of his head. Calvin giggled and disappeared into the hallway. Robin closed the newspaper with the banana peel inside it. He wiped his mouth, folded his napkin, and pushed his plate away from him. Then he sprang up and Buddy yelped. Buddy got to the other side of the island, feinted, and darted out through the doorway, screaming “No!,” and Robin chased him, thundering down the hall. Ahead of him Buddy’s bathrobe flared up and disappeared around a corner. Robin slid around the hardwood corner on his socks. At the other end of the living room Buddy stood panting, bouncing gently on the balls of his feet, holding Calvin in his arms.

“Daddy’s safe,” he whispered in Calvin’s ear. “Uncle Rob was trying to attack him, but Uncle Rob was too slow.”
Footsteps crossed the landing above them, rounded the corner, and came down the stairs. Lindsay appeared in the doorway to the living room, wearing Robin’s old red flannel bathrobe tied tightly at the waist.

Robin had known Lindsay for as long as he could remember. She’d lived just around the corner from them growing up, and used to babysit Robin when he was little. She and Buddy would walk to school together, along with a few other of the neighborhood kids, and later they’d started rollerblading together, with their sneakers in their backpacks. There’d been a skateboarding phase, and a biking phase, and eventually they went back to walking. It started around the time the pervert moved into the neighborhood and went door-to-door announcing himself. The older kids had banded together over that, and Buddy’d done some real soul-searching when the rumor came out that the pervert was interested in boys and girls. For whatever reason, after that, Buddy’d started to see himself, and Lindsay, differently. They first kissed that summer, the night the unofficial curfew was lifted. Buddy let Robin sleep on his floor afterward, and told him all about it.

“Calvin, honey,” Lindsay said. She yawned. “Can you remind daddy and your uncle about the rule we have for running in the house?”

Calvin reared back in Buddy’s arms and put both hands on his father’s cheeks. “No wunning in the house,” he said. Buddy rolled his eyes back and pretended to die. He collapsed to his knees and put Calvin down. Calvin ran to Lindsay and she picked him up.

“You angel,” she said. “You absolute angel.” She kissed him on the forehead and set him down. He vanished around the corner. “You break it, you buy it,” she said to Robin.

Robin’s heart rate was slowing. He’d broken a sweat. He walked over to Lindsay and embraced her.
“Sister,” he said.

“Little brother,” she said.

“Is this my robe?”

“I rescued it,” she said. “Your mother was wearing it out of the house.”

“Goddamnit,” Robin said.

“I’m sorry. It’s true.”

Buddy got up off the floor. “Robot,” he said. “Are you going to see her?”

“I’m going to shower,” Robin said, turning to go.

“Robot,” Buddy said, and bear-hugged him from behind. He hung from Robin’s shoulders with all his weight, and Robin took a heavy step forward, dragging Buddy’s socked feet across the floor. “Robot,” Bud said quietly in his ear. “You need to see her.” Then he let go and Robin lurched forward toward the stairs.

Their mother wouldn’t be awake for another four hours. Since the accident and the surgeries she’d been sleeping most of the time, and when she was awake she rarely left the house. Artie, her husband, would probably be home, in his bike shorts and helmet, wandering sweatily around the kitchen. Robin had no desire to stand around the island making small talk with Artie. He’d had enough of that in the year after his expulsion.

Buddy was sitting in his wooden captain’s chair when Robin came downstairs after his shower. He had a sheaf of loose-leaf notebook paper on one knee and a sheet of stickers on the other. Robin kicked the chair leg, which skritchted over the hardwood floor.

“Doorknob,” Robin said.

“I didn’t—” Buddy said, and Robin punched him on the bicep.
“Not now, Robby,” Buddy said, and Robin punched him again. “Please.” Buddy tidied the papers and the stickers, closed his eyes, took another punch, then shot up and touched the doorknob on the closet door. He returned to his seat, mock-dusting himself off.

“I am the still point of the turning world,” he said, picking up his papers.

“Do you ever give out the purple ones?” Robin said. The top sheet of stickers featured rows of gold and silver stars, many of which were missing, and below them smiley faces, red kites, and purple balloons.

“Rarely,” Buddy said. “This isn’t some Mickey-Mouse operation. Ten of these——” he pointed to the gold stars, “——are worth double Nilla Wafers at Snacktime. Two of these equal one of these. And this Bad Larry——” he flipped through the sheets of stickers and pointed to a row of orange flames, “——means you’re on a ‘hot streak’.”

“Sounds complicated,” Robin said.

“I got it from Snapchat,” Buddy said. “These are all, like, different emoticons.” He flipped through the sticker sheets. “The kids go nuts for them. They each have some occult meaning.”

“Jesus, Bud. You’re on Snapchat?”

“And these ones——” Buddy flipped to a sheet with rows of brains, flexed biceps, and racecars—— “I give to the girls. Have you seen Good Will Hunting?”

“Buddy.”

“Seriously. You know the part at the end? Where Ben Affleck is like, ‘the best paht of my day…’” Buddy waved his hand. “Well, if I get home this afternoon, and your Jeep is still here, and you haven’t gone to see mom, I’m going to be pissed. Sa va?”

“Fuck off, Buddy,” Robin said. “Okay?”
“Robin. I mean it.”

“Does she know I’m here?”

“Robin, go see her.”

“Does she know I’m here?”

“Go see her.”

“Buddy. Does she?”

“No.”

“Alright. Thanks.”

“Good. Hey, Rob?” Robin had started out of the room.

“Yeah?”

“It’s not yoah fault!” Buddy collapsed out of the chair, scattering his stickers, and curled into a ball as Robin pounced.

Buddy left for school at seven, and Robin walked with him. Buddy tried to get them to jog.

“No,” Robin said. “I’ll play tennis with you this afternoon. Or backyard golf.”

“You won’t be here this afternoon,” Buddy said. He was wearing a blue summer suit, four inches too short in the legs and arms, over a French-striped t-shirt with a boat neck, and he had a red bandana knotted around his neck.

“You look like a gondolier,” Robin said. “And you walk like you’re autistic. I thought mom bullied that out of you.”
“It’s a form of genius,” Buddy said. The school bus passed them going the other way and the driver honked. Buddy waved, and Robin could hear muffled shouts from the kids in the back.

“So what do I need to know, going into this?”

“That’s a broad question, Rob.”

“Is she worse?”

“She’s not great. She’s gotten a lot more… unfiltered. Art’s retiring, and—oh, god, Rob, have you heard about the tree?”

“Tree?”

“The oak. In the backyard. It’s got some kind of… rot. Art has determined that it’s going to fall on the house and kill them both. He’s got the insurance company involved, the city, the fucking arborists. Rob, if I have to talk to that man one more time about the tree, I’m going to lose it. He’s trying to get the trust to pay for it. You know how much it costs to cut down a tree? I shit you not: thirty grand. We’re already ten grand into the fucking arborists.”

“The oak tree in the backyard?”

“Our tree, kiddo.”

“That tree’s like five hundred years old.”

“And it’s been struck by lightning a thousand times. I mean, you remember. We used to look at the scars.”

“That thing’s a survivor.”

“Tell that to your stepfather.”

“Don’t call him that.”
“Well, you’ll hear about the tree. You’ll get the full treatment, I’m sure. You’ll get Artie’s famous scrambled eggs. Do me a favor: poke around mom’s bedroom until you find the pile of mail.”

“Say again?”

“Her mail. It’s a new development. She hoards it where Art won’t find it. She won’t open it. If you try to make her, she’ll start crying. And she isn’t, like, discriminating. So you have to go in and find it, throw out all the junk, and open the bills and stuff. You can give them to Art—he’ll handle it. Or just bring them here and I’ll do it.”

“Why won’t she open her mail?”

“Why won’t she leave the house? Why can’t she write a poem? Why does she forget her grandson’s name? She’s broken, brother. It’s a tough pill to swallow.”

They arrived at Buddy’s school and embraced.

“When I was a child,” Buddy said, “I spake as a child. When I became a man I put away childish things. Tell mom I say hi.” Buddy was already watching the older boys clustered by the side of the building, taking turns throwing a tennis ball against the brick wall. One of them bobbled a catch and took off sprinting at the wall. He slammed against it with both hands as the tennis ball slapped the brick above him.

“Wish me luck,” Buddy said. Then he was off, sauntering toward the wall, stuffing his suit jacket into his briefcase, as the boys catcalled him.

Virginia was working on her third collection of poems when a Red Cab, merging onto the Jamaicaway next to the pond, clipped the rear tire of her bicycle as she passed. It was the very stretch of bike lane, clogged with parked cars, that she’d been writing about to the *Globe* for
years. They’d published a series of her letters, and she’d succeeded in getting the city to repaint the lines, but she hadn’t yet gotten them to start ticketing cars that parked in the bike lane. It was such a skinny road that a bicyclist had to hug the parked cars’ doors, which made her practically invisible to cars merging in from the side streets.

She was going fast, at the bottom of Goddard Avenue where the hill bottomed out, and the collision tossed her over her handlebars into a swan-dive. She broke both wrists trying to brace her fall, and her brain helmet, with the visor and the mirror, shattered on impact. She would’ve died without it.

It didn’t do enough. She hit the ground and cracked her head and part of her brain mushed softly into itself. She went into a coma and stayed there for a week and then she came out of the coma and had a grand mal seizure and the doctors went in and started cutting out parts of her brain until the seizures stopped. It was Robin’s freshman year of college.

When they were done cutting she was down most of her amygdala, along with her ability to read comfortably for more than a few minutes at a time, to use screens, to drive, to carry on continuous conversations, and to write poetry.

She was still beautiful: nearly six feet tall, stoop-shouldered, with a jagged hairline and web of thin red scars on her forehead. Before the accident and the surgeries, she’d cut her own hair, with a pair of heavy steel scissors she kept in a mug on her desk, and she wore inside-out sweaters, old men’s jeans, and hand-me-downs from her sons: two decades’ worth of Brookline Youth Soccer t-shirts, Regent greys, corduroys with the wales worn down in the butt and knees, flannels, and Buddy’s old red North Face with ski tags on all the zippers.

After the surgeries she was fifty pounds lighter and she only gained half of it back. She started getting her hair cut and dyed at a salon, and bought new clothes: blouses, leather jackets,
silk things, which she wore with makeup when she taught her “Young Scholar” classes in Dorchester and Mattapan. She texted with emojis. She started to read the Op-Eds. She mixed up ‘who’ and ‘whom’.

Buddy’d acted quickly after the accident. He got the family lawyers on the horn, secured power-of-attorney, transferred the deed for the Big House into his name, and arranged for a prenup in Virginia’s marriage to Arthur, her longtime colleague at Lesley College. Buddy proposed to Lindsay, cashed in some of his trust, and bought the Little House, which wasn’t little at all, though it wasn’t the Big House. It was close enough to Boston that Buddy could drive in in an emergency, and far enough that Virginia wouldn’t be able to stop by whenever she wanted, especially now that she couldn’t drive, though according to Buddy she did still show up from time to time in an Uber, unannounced.

Buddy bobbled a catch, kicked the ball away from the cluster of boys, and took off running toward the wall. Robin closed his eyes until he heard Bud’s hands smack the brick. He remembered playing as a kid, and Indy Goldman tripping on his way to the wall. Indy had pitched forward and slammed his head against the wall. When they got to him there was a pool of bright red blood on the asphalt, and at the center of the blood was the tip of Indy’s tongue. For the rest of the school year he’d had those awful black stitches. Afterwards Robin had grown his hair out, like a helmet.

Buddy was twice as tall as the kids around him and he played just as hard. They got him once and he took his licks at the wall, twitching his butt, catcalling the throwers, hooting when they missed. Then the bell rang, and someone pocketed the tennis ball, and Buddy slapped hands and gave pounds and put on his wrinkled blazer over his pit stains and then the lot was empty and Robin was alone.
The Big House was set back from the road on a quiet street in South Brookline. Robin drove slowly, looking out for Artie’s green road bike. The hedge in front of the house was taller and denser than it used to be. They’d had professionals come and work on it. The dandelions were gone.

Robin parked out front and walked down the side yard, past the solarium and the copse of big pines, and through the back terrace to the lower part of the yard. Someone had done some real landscaping back here. The putting green was gone. He kicked his toe around in the grass where he thought the hole might be, then got down on his knees and felt around with his hands. Nothing.

Buddy’d designed the course in middle school. He came up with the idea after finding an old stand-up golf-club rack and a set of wooden clubs at a yard sale. He painted rocks to mark the four different tees, and he mowed off a little green with the rusty hand mower from the shed. At the center of the green, he dug a hole and buried one of Virginia’s ceramic coffee mugs up to the rim. He nailed the club rack to a tree, and everyone got his or her own club, including Virginia. He’d hung a hand-painted sign above the club rack: “C’mon Downs,” and below that, “Owned and Operated by Buddy Yates.” Buddy held all the course records.

When Buddy went off to Regent the course lay fallow. The green overgrew, the cup filled with leaves, the clubs blew off the rack, and the signs got streaky with pollen. Robin would look out over the backyard from the kitchen window, waiting for his and Virginia’s tea to steep, and get very sad. It snowed and the course disappeared and Buddy came home for
Thanksgiving and for Christmas and he was like an actor stuck in a role. He picked through parts of the house no one had been through in years and filled up his treasure boxes with trinkets. He and Virginia took long car rides and returned looking exhausted, and then he’d put on a voice like he’d just turned a hundred and ask Robin how his schoolwork was going. It turned spring and they visited Buddy for parents’ weekend and he was someone else there, too, and then he came home for the summer and he was exhausted and he didn’t have any wisdom left to share, and one morning he got out the rake and the spade and the hand mower and fixed up the course.

Aunt Jo visited that summer. Buddy had appeared in the kitchen doorway the first afternoon.

“M’ladies,” Buddy said. He’d put on his white thrift-store slacks and a yellow cabana shirt. “Whenever you’re ready.”

“Honey,” Virginia said from her office chair, her feet up on the kitchen table. “Leave us be.”

“Mother,” Buddy said, taking a step into the room. Robin followed behind him, holding the silver drink tray, on which Buddy had arranged four glasses, a bowl of ice cubes, Virginia’s chain-mail seltzer bottle, and a cocktail shaker. “Your sons have gone to great trouble to make our guest feel welcome. Aunt Jo, you can head right out through the door behind you. Bring your shoes. Jeeves, please show her the way.” Robin crossed the kitchen with the drink tray, opened the screen door with his butt, and held it for Aunt Jo as she slipped on her clogs.

“Johanna,” Virginia said.

“It’s fine, doll,” Aunt Jo said. “Let’s see what they have in mind.”

“I know what they have in mind,” Virginia said. “They want you to play golf.”
“Well, why not,” Aunt Jo said. She stood up. She was even taller than Virginia. “I’m like the woman in *Gatsby*. The dyke.”

“Right this way,” Buddy said, slipping past her onto the porch.

Robin waited in the doorway with the drinks until Virginia had put on her shoes and sweater. She paused in the doorway and took a long look at the drink tray. Then she lifted off the top of the cocktail shaker and sniffed it.

“I suppose you’ve made us martinis,” she said.

“Buddy did.”

“And did Buddy have one?”

“Negative, mom,” Robin said. “Guests first.”

Virginia narrowed her eyes at him. She replaced the lid to the shaker.

“Very well,” she said. “Jeeves.” She winked at him. He winked back.

Buddy was at the first tee with Aunt Jo, explaining the rules. He’d given her a club and she was swinging it experimentally. Robin put down the drinks on the wrought-iron table where Buddy kept the bowl of golf balls. He glanced at Buddy, then slipped the yellow Titleist into his pocket.

“It’s a par four,” Buddy said. “Do you know what that means?”

“I wasn’t born yesterday, kiddo” Aunt Jo said.

“Terrific. We generally shoot in reverse order of age, but since you’re the guest, you’ll go first. Hole One is next to the shed—you see the mowed part.”

“The green,” Aunt Jo said, taking a big practice swing. Virginia raised her eyebrows.

“Correct,” Buddy said. “Well, the hole’s in the middle. It’s a coffee cup buried in the grass. You’ll see it when we get closer.”
“What if I hit a hole-in-one?” Aunt Jo asked. She’d selected a ball and was standing next to the painted rock, waggling her giant hips, swinging the club back and forth.

“Oh!” Buddy said. “One second!” He maneuvered around Aunt Jo’s swing radius and picked up the cocktail shaker. He gave it a couple of hard shakes, took off the lid, and poured two drinks. He held the shaker over the third glass and glanced up at Virginia. She shook her head. He let a few drops pour into the glass. Virginia ignored him.

“Jeeves,” Buddy said, and Robin delivered a glass to each woman. Buddy filled the other two glasses with seltzer. Aunt Jo took a sip of her drink. She smacked her lips, looked down at Buddy, who was standing with his hands clasped behind his back, and up at Virginia.

“Jiminy Cricket,” she said. “That’s a fucking martini!”

Buddy brought the cocktail shaker with them as they walked the course. Aunt Jo was a good golfer and stayed a stroke or two behind Buddy, who was under par and going for a new backyard record. Virginia swatted her ball around as usual and refused to keep score.

“The thing is,” Buddy said to Aunt Jo as he wiped mown grass off the face of his putter. “We do practically all the talking. I mean the teacher just sits there and sort of guides us. He chimes in when the conversation starts to slow down, and makes sure the quiet kids get to talk, but otherwise we do all the work. I feel—” his putt doddered over the uneven green and plinked into the hole—“like I’m learning a lot.” He shouldered his club.

“It sure sounds like it,” Aunt Jo said.

Buddy had done a kind of shell game with the drinks as he refilled them. He handed Robin a fresh glass. Robin sniffed it and coughed.

“Last hole,” Buddy said. “For all the marbles.”
Virginia was standing with her hands in her pockets, her club leaning against her hip. She was staring at the birdfeeder, and her lips were moving. Robin watched Aunt Jo watch her, and then Aunt Jo accepted Buddy’s elbow and followed him around the hedge to the tee. Robin approached his mother. She was whispering. He took her hand.

“Hello, dear,” she said. “Are you having fun?”

“Yup,” he said. “Are you writing a poem?”

“I’m thinking about it,” she said. “Don’t tell.”

The signs and the club rack were gone.

Robin let himself into the basement with the hidden key. It was a good basement to watch scary movies in, since one whole wall was windows, and it was easy to imagine some pervert or criminal lurking just on the other side of the windows, looking in.

There was something large behind the couch. Robin turned on the overhead light.

“What the fuck?” he said. It was a mountain of plastic grocery bags, three or four feet high, all of them white or brown and tied in overhand knots. He kicked the pile and his foot went right through. It was bags all the way down.

“Mom!” he shouted, and heard it echo up the stairwell.

“Mo-om!” he shouted again.

He bounded up the stairs to the first floor, slung himself around the bannister, and took the flight to the second floor four-at-a-time.

“Mom!” he shouted outside her closed door. There was a sound within, a pile of blankets falling off the bed, and then footsteps like a child’s.

“Buddy?” she said from the other side of the door.
Robin didn’t say anything. He backed up. His heart was hammering. She opened the door.

“Robin?”

He took a step back. “What’s wrong with your eyes?” he said. He bent closer and she hid her face behind her forearm. She was wearing some kind of silk robe, with matching pants and slippers. He moved her arm. “No way,” he said. “No fucking way.”

The skin was shiny and red, greased with some cream. “Don’t look,” she said.

“Did you get a fucking eye job?” he said. Her arm was all bones. She tugged away from him and hid her face in her hands. Behind her hands, she nodded.

She sat in the shaded corner of the kitchen with a gardening hat on, cupping a mug of tea. Robin sat at the head of the table. She’d changed into a pair of yoga pants and a shimmery sweater and Robin could see that she’d lost another ten or fifteen pounds. Her hair and eyebrows were a new shade of blonde.

“Where are your normal clothes?” he said.

“Oh, I just throw on any old thing,” she said.

“No, mom, that’s what you used to do. Now you look like… I don’t know.”

“Robin,” she said for the dozenth time, smiling and dabbing her eyes with a tissue.

“Sweetie. I’m so happy you’re here.”

“Why is there a pile of plastic bags in the basement?”

“Artie tries to throw them out,” she said, “but I won’t let him. They go straight to the landfill. I’m going to—um. Someone will take them and donate them to…. ” She waved her hand in the air. “You know, the children I teach.” The grease around her eyes caught the light.
Robin tried not to look. “Do you realize,” she said, “that they can’t afford actual backpacks? It’s an entirely black neighborhood. Black, and…”

“Yeah?”

She looked down at her hands and furrowed her brow.

“Black and what, mom? Latino?”

She nodded.

“And you’re going to give them old shopping bags as backpacks?”

“What?” she said. Robin stood and walked over to the fridge.

“Mom,” he said. “I need to know something.” The fridge was full of Whole Foods salad boxes. He crouched to check the lower shelves.

“What are you looking for?”

“A beer.”

“Oh! You know where Artie keeps them?” She started to stand, stopped halfway up, and groaned.

“Sit down, mom. Where?”

“Well,” she said, “they’re in the garage. Artie drinks them warm. He likes the dark ones. Artie will drink one with you. He should be home soon. He’ll love it. I never drink beer anymore. But—if you opened some champagne I would have a glass.”

“Buddy says you’ve been hoarding your mail. Can you tell me where it is?”

She furrowed her brow. “Mail?”

“Jesus,” he said. He left her in the kitchen inhaling the steam from her tea. He went upstairs and looked around what used to be her desk, which was now covered in packets of plant food and dried-up stem cuttings. He checked the filing cabinet where she kept their birth
certificates. Then he checked the bookcase by her side of the bed. Where she used to keep a stack of dogeared books of poetry there was now an old iPod, one of his or Buddy’s, with a pair of earbuds coiled around it. He tried to turn it on but the battery was dead.

Under the bed he found a cardboard box full of mail. Before he went downstairs he looked in the cabinet where she used to keep medicine. There were pill bottles everywhere, a lot of them new, and Robin locked the bathroom door and sorted through them until he found the Ativan. Someone had written the number 6 on the side in blue pen—it looked like Arthur’s handwriting. There were six pills inside. He put the bottle in his pocket.

She hadn’t moved when he came downstairs, except to put her feet up on the table. She used to sit like that when they watched movies in the basement. They’d watch something every night: a third of a movie, or one episode of “Jeeves & Wooster” or “Poirot” or “The Twilight Zone.” They would eat dinner down in front of the TV, with a little buffet of take-out BBQ, or sushi from the grocery store, or frozen jalapeno poppers that Buddy made in the oven. She wouldn’t let them turn the lights off—she liked them on. Buddy would try to trick her. He’d get up to go to the bathroom and lower the dimmer a little bit each time, flickering the bathroom light as a distraction, but eventually she’d catch on and make him turn them back up.

The last time they’d all watched a movie together, after the accident, probably it was Thanksgiving or Christmas, she’d turned the lights all the way down and made microwave popcorn. Buddy tried his dimmer trick, but in reverse, making it a little lighter each time he got up for another beer, but she hadn’t noticed, and finally Arthur asked her if the light hurt her eyes, and she’d nodded, and Buddy hadn’t spoken to anyone for the rest of the night.

“Mom,” Robin said. “You’ve got fan mail in here. You know that?”
She nodded distantly, still dabbing at her eyes. He thought she might have gotten some
work done on the scars on her forehead, too.

“You’ve got blurb requests. You want to write any blurbs? Do you know a Meghan
O’Bryant? Mom? Do you know a, uh, William Shakespeare? Are you even listening?”

Beneath their feet the garage door groaned open.

“Artie’s home,” she said.

“Fuck,” Robin said.

“He’ll be so excited to drink a beer with you.”

“I don’t want to,” Robin said

“Yes, you do,” she said, and for a moment it sounded like her real voice.

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If she’d turned meaner, or more aloof, Robin could’ve handled it. When they were kids,
Buddy’d been self-conscious about how cold she was in the world—to cabbies, to waitresses,
even to the young women who worked the desk at the Brookline Public Library. Robin didn’t
mind, himself. It felt safer, not to give anything of yourself to these strangers. He’d stand by her
knees and look away. But Buddy would stick around after an interaction and patch it up: make a
joke to the librarian, or sneak up to the server stand for a refill while Virginia sat with her chair
two feet out from the table, waving her credit card. She especially hated smokers, who conspired
to burn her children’s eyes out with their lit cigarettes held at exactly face-level. She’d glare at
them in the streets, steering Buddy and Robin away by the hair. If she was tender, it was a kind
of sleepy tenderness that came out when she was thinking about something else, and if she enjoyed their company, it was at a distance. She seemed to like it best when they were out in the world, communicating by dispatch: Buddy away at school with his weekly emails, and Robin out fishing behind the Home Depot with a quarter for the pay phone.

Instead, she’d gotten nicer. She no longer brought stacks of *New Yorkers* to dinner. She couldn’t read them if she wanted to. Now she brought Artie. When she went to the public library for books on tape, she stayed for hours, gossiping with the desk girls. She had long conversations with her cab drivers. The cleaning lady, who’d spent twenty years cleaning the Big House in silence, now had to put up with Virginia following her around every Wednesday, asking her questions in broken Spanish. And Virginia’d gotten it in her head that she’d been a cigarette smoker once. Maybe she had. “Phew,” she’d say, waving her hand in front of her face as they passed someone smoking—then she’d cackle and put her hand on the person’s arm. “Careful!” she’d say. “I might try to bum one. Artie knows,” she’d say as she latched back onto him. “Don’t you, honey?”

As though she had some whole library of secrets that only Artie knew about. The big secret seemed to be that she’d lost track of her life and had started to invent a new one.

She’d taken Robin to see the Phineas Gage exhibit once, in the medical oddities wing of Countway Library. The skull had two holes in it, one on the cheekbone and one right through the top, where the tamping iron, with which he’d mistakenly poked a live charge, shot straight through his head and punched out a hot-dog’s worth of brain. He never lost consciousness. He walked around with a big hole in his head puking and oozing until they found a doctor. Every time he puked it squeezed out a little more brain. Then he went into a coma and when he woke up he had a different personality. They recovered the tamping iron, presumably still slick with
brain, and for the rest of his life, Phineas Gage used it as a cane. They had it in the case next to the skull. He died twelve years after the accident, angry at everyone and suffering from excruciating headaches.

After the exhibit, they’d stopped at Home Depot so Robin could buy a railroad spike of his own. It was still around, lying in the backyard somewhere, unless the lawn people had found it and thrown it out.

Art came into the kitchen in a pair of tight black bike shorts and a sweaty Lesley t-shirt. He was holding a Whole Foods bag.

“Well, goodness,” he said. “Robin. What a surprise. I wish I’d known you were coming, I’d’ve gotten more food.” He started stacking plastic containers on the counter.

“Thanks, Art. I’m good. I already ate.”

“Artie, honey, Robin would like to drink a beer with you.”

“Well, heck,” Art said, looking at his big sports watch. “I was going to do some grading, but I guess it can wait.”

“I’m alright, actually, mom,” Robin said.

“You boys,” she said, smiling. “Have your beers. I’ll open a bottle of champagne.”

“Honey,” Art said, coming over to the table and putting his hand on Virginia’s shoulder.

“I have the tree people coming at four-thirty.”

“I should get dressed,” she said. Art helped her stand up. As she passed Robin’s seat, she leaned down and whispered: “I saw sushi!”

“Where have you been, Robin?” Art said, once she’d left.

“Mm,” Robin said, and walked over to the window.

“Did she know you were coming? Did you warn her?”
“You know, Art, I think I’ll take you up on that beer. You want one?”

“I—sure,” Art said. There were streaks of sunscreen in the creases of his neck, and red imprints on his cheeks from his helmet straps. He’d gotten older.

The beers in the garage were dusty. Robin recognized them from past Christmases. He found a warm Sam Adams for himself and picked a dark beer at random for Art.

“What’s all the furniture in the garage?” Robin said.

“We’re going to rent out the basement apartment,” Art said, picking up plastic bags from where Robin had scattered them.

“What basement apartment?”

“The hot-tub room.”

“The fuck you are.”

“Robin—”

“What are you talking about, Art?

“Buddy is on board with this,” Art said. “We’re converting the hot-tub room into an apartment. It has its own entrance and bathroom. We’re going to rent it out to some doctoral students. A married couple.”

Robin crossed the basement and opened the door to the hot-tub room. It was where he and Buddy had done most of their pot-smoking during summers and school breaks, a weird vestigial wing of the basement attached to the solarium and the laundry room where the previous owner, before Virginia bought the house in the eighties, had put in a jacuzzi, a bed, and a full-wall mirror. He and Buddy had dragged in a picnic table and a mini-fridge and they’d made a little hearth of bricks where they’d kept a hookah. In high school Buddy had thrown parties in there with girls from Regent’s sister school, Clairmont. It was the first place Robin had seen
boobs, during a game of truth-or-dare, and the first place he’d puked, and the first place he’d been slapped in the face, by one of the Clairmont girls who was tripping on acid.

The red walls were now white. The mirror was gone and they’d replaced the old twin crash bed with a new queen, Ikea tags still hanging from the corner. The picnic table was gone, the brick hearth was gone, and they’d put in a pre-fab kitchenette with a half-fridge and a hot plate and a row of cabinets. There was a curtain in front of the jacuzzi. Arthur came up behind him.

“Where’s the hookah?” Robin said.

“Is that what that was?” Art said. “Well, it’s gone.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“You know the situation we’re in. It’s a big house, and we’re not using half of it. It’ll be a little extra income for me and your mother.”

“My mother doesn’t need income.”

“Have you spoken to Buddy?”

Robin grunted.

“Well, it was Buddy’s idea,” Art said.

“Was it Buddy’s idea to do such a shitty job with the drywall?”

“Robin, please.”

“Or this crown moulding?” Robin ran a fingernail between the molding and the ceiling.

“Is this… PVC?”

“I don’t know what it is. Buddy bought it.”
“Christ,” Robin said. He handed Art the dark beer and pushed past him through the doorway. He took the stairs three-at-a-time, crossed the landing, and opened the door to his old room.

“We haven’t touched anything,” Art said a minute later from the doorway. Robin was kneeling at the bookcase, looking through the folder of tea-papers. Robin didn’t turn around. Art closed the door and left him alone.

Robin came out when he heard Virginia on the stairs. It had taken her forty-five minutes to get dressed. She was wearing a glittery beige turtleneck and expensive-looking jeans. She’d covered the scars on her forehead with makeup.

Art had plated the Whole Foods sushi, with a tiny bowl of soy sauce and a dollop of wasabi for each of them. Virginia had set out a pint glass for Robin along with three champagne flutes. She was moving more gracefully now—she must have taken one of her medicines. She popped the bottle over the sink. Art came in holding four beers by the necks. He’d put on a CD in the other room.

“Here’s what we have left over from your and Buddy’s beers,” he said. “We can get them cold pretty fast with a bowl full of ice and salt, if you’d like.”

“Are we listening to music?” Robin said.

“Mm,” Art said. “Vivaldi.” He was futzing with the ice trays in the freezer.

“Really, mom?” Robin said.

Virginia ignored him. She was untwisting the wire on the champagne cork.

“What happened to your aural anhedonia?” Robin said.

Virginia popped the cork. “Honey?” she said, holding the bottle up to Art. He shook his head. “Robin?” Robin nodded.
“I drink Veuve Cliquot now,” Virginia said, sitting down and crossing her legs. “Fancy, huh?”

“Schramsberg was fancy,” Robin said.

“We still drink Schramsberg,” Art said. “This one was on sale at Eddie’s.”

“Artie Goose has developed a palate,” Virginia said.

“Don’t call him that.”

Art cleared his throat. “You know, we got an age on that tree,” he said. “Between a hundred and fifty and two hundred years old.”

Virginia was staring glassy-eyed at Robin.

“It’s so nice to have you back,” she said.

“I’m not back,” Robin said.

“We’ll watch a movie tonight. Artie and I are in the middle of Ken Burns’s “Civil War.” It’s so, um. Wow.” She waved her hand. “And we’ll have Artie’s famous scrambled eggs in the morning.”

“They’re just scrambled eggs,” Robin said. “Regular scrambled eggs.”

“Well,” she said, frowning, “they’re better than just regular scrambled eggs.”

“They’re regular fucking scrambled eggs, mom. Art, no offense.”

“Robin,” Art said. “Lay off.”

Virginia had finished her champagne. Robin stood, lifted the bottle, wiped off the condensation with his shirt, and filled her glass.

“Art, you sure?” he said, gesturing with the bottle. Art put his hand over his empty flute.

“So,” Robin said, staying standing up. He picked up his plate and took it to the window.

“Landlords, huh?”
“Robin,” Art said.


“I love Henry Green,” she said.

“That’s good stuff,” Robin said. “Graham Greene, too, right?”

“Graham Greene,” Virginia murmured.

“Robin,” Art said. “Lay off.”

“John Green, too, right mom?”

“Mm, yes,” she said, leaning back in her chair with her champagne, looking up at the chandelier.

Robin gestured at the backyard with a piece of eel.

“Cee-lo Green. Al Green. Green eggs and ham.”

“Jesus Christ,” Art said.

Robin put his hand on Virginia’s shoulder. She nuzzled his hand with her cheek. The back of her earring pricked his skin.

“You’ll have lots to write about,” he said.

“Robin!” Art stood up from the table, knocking his chair against the counter behind him.

“Quit being a jackass!” His face was red. He stood there trembling.

Virginia closed her eyes. Robin put his hand on the top of her head.

“Don’t make me cry,” she whispered. “It’ll ruin the stitches.”

The doorbell rang. The tree people had arrived.
Virginia wheeled her office chair over to the threshold of Robin’s old bedroom to watch him pack.

“That’s a nice color,” she said, as he held up an old yellow Rec League t-shirt to his chest.

“You want it?” he said.

“I couldn’t, dear.”

(Of course you could.”

“It is a nice color,” she said. He tossed it to her and she pulled it on over her turtleneck.

He tossed more shirts at her as he worked through the drawers, and she made a little pile next to her chair, occasionally swapping out the one she was wearing.

Once upon a time, if she cared about something, she cared enough to do her homework. It made him wonder if these things had been on her mind all along. It wasn’t that she was wrong to be suddenly thinking about, say, race, or class, or wealth, or privilege. It was that she seemed so naïve. Had she been sitting there quietly wondering about social justice in America all along, with a rich tapestry of half-baked center-left takes hiding behind her icy pragmatism? Or had the accident somehow created this?

“Where are you going?” she finally asked.

“I’m not going anywhere. But I like this stuff. I don’t want Art getting spackle all over it.” He’d filled up an old duffel bag with t-shirts and now he went to Buddy’s room and found an old Regent laundry bag. When he came back into his room, Virginia said, “He’s a good man.”
“Sure,” Robin said. He got down on his stomach and looked under the bed. He remembered that he wasn’t scared of spiders anymore. He reached through the cobwebs and slid out an old shoebox.

It was his mischief box. One of them, anyway. Here was his wrist rocket, his grappling hook, a cellophane package of smoke bombs. A Ziplock sandwich bag full of disposable lighters, matchbooks, and cigar cutters. Another Ziplock with Zippos, knockoff Zippos, a butane torch, spare flints and wicks, and a half-empty yellow bottle of Ronsonal Lighter Fluid. He pried up the hinged nozzle with his thumbnail and sniffed it.

“You loved playing with that stuff,” Virginia said. “I used to find burned-up things all over the yard.”

“I didn’t know you knew,” he said. He tried one of the Zippos. It gave a dry spark.

At the bottom of the shoebox was a black leather pouch.

“Son of a bitch,” he murmured. Virginia craned her neck to see.

Inside the pouch were half a dozen steel lockpicks, each with a different zig-zag tip, and the little flat torque wrench. He got down on the floor again, reached under the bed, and rooted around.

“Oh, wow,” he said.

“What is it?” Virginia said.

He pulled out a Ziplock freezer bag full of water-stained old printouts from the inkjet they’d kept in the den.

“Jesus,” he said, opening the bag. The pages were brittle and stuck together, dried into waves, and ringed like a bathtub in yellow, pink, and blue. He blew on the edges and they fanned up and he peeled them apart gently.
“Do you remember Aunt Jo’s house in Vermont?” he said. Virginia nodded. Robin finally realized what it was: her crow’s-feet were gone.

“Do you remember,” he said, “up the road a little, there was that really steep driveway? With one of those portable, like, tent-garages?”

Virginia shook her head. “That doesn’t ring a bell,” she said.

“Well, anyway,” Robin said, “I used to go sneak up there. There was this car parked under the garage thing, and I decided I was going to steal it. Not steal-steal, just take it for a ride. The lady who owned it was like a hundred years old. I decided it would be the perfect crime.” He glanced at Virginia, who was reading the tag of the t-shirt in her hands.

“I had a whole plan,” he said. “Look at this.” He handed her one of the sheets. It was a wiring diagram for a 1980 Cutlass Supreme. He’d labeled the ignition switch in blue pen.

Virginia took the page from him and put on her reading glasses from the top of her head.

“I wanted to do it right before a snowstorm,” Robin said. “I remember watching the weather forecast. Then right before Thanksgiving, my junior year at Regent, I got you to sign me out to Buddy’s. I said I was visiting him in the city. Do you remember that? Well, you signed it, but instead of taking the bus to Logan I took it in the other direction, to Lebanon, New Hampshire, and I rented a car using Buddy’s ID. He’d lent it to me.”

Virginia flipped over the paper, but there was nothing on the back. She put it down on the pile of t-shirts.

“I drove to Roundtree,” Robin said, “and I actually found Aunt Jo’s house. Some old muscle memory took over, from all the times we’d driven up there. I just kept seeing things I recognized. No one was there. I got the key from the woodpile and everything was the same. God—” He tugged his earlobe. “That fucking carpet.”
“I wish you wouldn’t talk that way,” Virginia said.

“You remember Harley?” Robin said. Aunt Jo’d had a dog with some kind of butt problem, and it would drag its asshole around on the carpet. “I was convinced there was dried dog shit just caked into that fucking carpet,” he said. “It made me sick. I would keep my shoes on, even when Aunt Jo asked me to take them off. I told her I had plantar warts.”

“You did have plantar warts,” Virginia said.

“Well, not at the time,” Robin said.

“I took you to Dr. Walker.”

“Foot doctor Walker,” Robin said. “You thought that was so funny. He burned them off.”

“With a laser,” Virginia said. “Do you remember the smell?”

Robin shuddered.

“It made me hungry!” she said. “It smelled just like a cookout!”

“That’s gross, mom.”

“Well, it’s true,” she said. “We went out for burgers afterwards.”

“We went to the Ground Round,” Robin said. “In Cleveland Circle. And I stayed in the car. Because I couldn’t walk.”


They were quiet for a minute.

“So anyway,” he said. “I’m in the house, and it’s totally dark. The lights weren’t working, for some reason. And I think I was afraid to touch anything. I didn’t want to start, like, an electrical fire. Plus the heat was off, or it was really low anyway, and it was freezing. I
remember I could see my breath. So I decide to run a bath. Do you remember that jacuzzi in the basement?”

Virginia nodded, but she’d glazed over again.

“So I thought, I’ll have a beer and take a bath and think through the car thing one more time. Because at that point I’d had it all memorized. But of course the water wouldn’t turn on. Aunt Jo had shut off the pipes. And I wasn’t going to touch the water—I wouldn’t’ve had the first idea. And it was dark. So I’m shivering, I’m tired, the fridge is unplugged, the liquor cabinet is empty except for this bottle of Yellow Tail Merlot. You remember Aunt Jo used to keep that around.”

Virginia nodded.

“And also—” Robin snorted— “I’m holding my breath this whole time. Because of the shit-dust in the carpet. I can’t pee, can’t wash my hands, because of the water. And I don’t have any water in the rental car. Suddenly I’m thinking about, like, survival. I’m going to have to make a fire and melt snow. Or put it on the engine block or something. So I go out to the car to check how much gas I have, and it’s nice and warm in there, so I just sit down in the driver’s seat and I figure, I’ll hang out for a little to warm up, I’ll have a glass of wine, and then I’ll go check out the Oldsmobile. Make sure all the parts match the stuff I’d Googled, or Ask Jeeved, or whatever, because I only knew how to hotwire this one specific kind of car.” He patted the stack of pages on his lap. “Maybe they’re all the same, I don’t know, but I start thinking about it.

“So I sit in this rental hatchback with the heat blowing, drinking this bottle of merlot, which I think I opened by just jamming the cork into the bottle, and I find this spooky radio station playing the Grateful Dead, no deejay, just, like, a whole live show, and I keep thinking, alright, next jam and I’ll take my pack and go do the car. I was planning on doing it on foot.
Otherwise I’d have two cars, right? And then after a few songs, it’s snowing pretty hard, and I
start thinking, okay, I’ll just drive over. And after a while I go back inside and check where we
used to hide cigarettes, in the Scrabble set, and sure enough there’s a pack of Camel Lights,
totally stale, and now I’m in the car smoking, drinking this wine, listening to this spooky Dead
show, I’ve got a glass bowl of snow sitting out on the engine block and I’m drinking this snow-
water, it’s a total blizzard outside, and I have this revelation.”

Virginia’s eyes were closed, but she was nodding and humming out little “mm-hmm”s
whenever he paused. He wondered if she was listening, or if this was maybe the best she could
do now. Artie was probably used to it.

“Mom,” Robin said. She opened her eyes and smiled warmly at him.

“How you doing?” he said.

“I’m good, baby. I’m enjoying your story. Though I really hope you didn’t steal that
poor woman’s car.” She patted his foot and closed her eyes again.

“Well, I’m getting there,” he said. “So I’m sitting there in the snow and, I mean, I’m
shitfaced—” Her mouth twitched. “—and I just feel this big welling-up of relief. It was like
time had stopped. The still point in the turning world.”

“Sure,” she said. “I know that one.”

“I know you do,” Robin said. “And anyway, I never did it. But the point is, I realized I
could, if I needed to. You know?”

“Mm,” Virginia said.

“Are you listening to me?” Robin said.

Virginia opened her eyes.

“Yes, dear,” she said. “I think you’ve told me this one before.”
“I have not.”

“Well, it sounds familiar.”

Robin stood up. “Thanks, mom,” he said. “Good talking to you.” He put the printouts and the mischief box in the laundry bag along with a few of the books and t-shirts. She swiveled her chair to watch him as he passed.

She was still in chair in the doorway when he returned. She was awake now.

“Artie wouldn’t touch your stuff, you know,” she said. “Your brother, maybe.”

“Buddy knows what I’ll do if he touches my stuff.”

“Well, don’t blame Artie.”

As if summoned, Artie came bounding up the outdoor staircase, rattling the house. He’d been whistling.

“Ginny?” he called out.

“In here!”

“Mom, please.”

Art came to the doorway. He was sweating through his t-shirt and had dirt on his hands.

“Most amazing thing,” he said. “The root system of that tree is about three times as wide as the canopy. In all likelihood it goes right out under the parking lot behind us, and way out into the Charmans’ yard as well. I’m going talk to Greg Charman tomorrow. He may want to go in on this with us.”

“Leave me out of it,” Virginia said.


“Oh, goody,” Virginia said, and she scooted out into the hallway on her chair. “I’ll get the sushi.”
“Robin, will you help your mother?” Art said.

“Roger,” he said. “In a minute.”

“Now, please,” Art said.

There’d been close calls since. Virginia had gotten dizzy after taking some pain pills and fallen in the shower. Robin himself had been working under the boat crane at the yacht club when a shackle snapped and the boat came swinging hard right at him. Calvin had tumbled into a hot tub once when he was a baby. Artie got doored by a cab while bicycling through Harvard Square. Lindsay got bacterial meningitis. And Buddy was always having accidents. He slid off the highway after a Phish show in Burlington in the middle of winter and got rescued by a fellow fan with a truck. He crossed his skis in the glades at Killington and got stuck upside-down in a tree well for almost an hour, breathing into a little pocket in the snow, before someone saw his ski tips twitching and called for help. And he dove into a shallow pool once and scraped the whole front of his nose off on the bottom. It was the angriest Robin had ever been—he couldn’t even think about it without feeling cold to the bone. He wasn’t sure what he’d do if Buddy hurt himself.

They watched with the shades down and the lights off. Robin excused himself and finished loading the Jeep. When he came back Art and Virginia were holding hands between their easy chairs. He sat behind them in a rocker. At seven an alarm went off on Art’s phone and Virginia went upstairs to take a pill. At seven-thirty she paused it again, stood up, and stretched. Art started stacking plates.
“It’s my bedtime,” she said. “Robin, honey, you know where the linens are.” She moved slowly, picking up a glass, moving a bottle of soy sauce, steadying herself on the backs of the chairs. She came over to where Robin was sitting.

“See you in the morning, sweetheart,” she said, and kissed his forehead.

“Goodnight, mom,” he said. It was still light outside—the scary windows were just windows.

Art handed him the remotes. “I need to help your mother,” he said. “I’ll be back in a little while.”

“Roger dodger,” Robin said.

He listened to them climb the stairs. When they got to the second-floor landing, Robin went upstairs. He peed and started the dishwasher. He took one last look at his old bedroom. It was messy, and he left it that way. He took two beers from the fridge and gathered the rest of Virginia’s mail from the table. He heard a toilet flush above him. He left quietly.

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It was ten o’clock when he got back to Buddy’s house. The only light came from the back bedroom. He wondered if Buddy had left it on for him. Probably Buddy had known what he’d see at the Big House, and how he’d react.

But the light wasn’t for him. He let himself in with the hidden key and walked as quietly as he could through the house, bumping along the wall. Outside the bedroom door he could hear music. He knocked, and something fell over inside. He opened the door.
Buddy was sitting on the foot of the bed in one of his old Regent tie-dyes and his very oldest pair of corduroys, the yellow ones with rips in both knees. He’d pulled his steamer trunk over from the wall and was using it like a table. Spread out on it, in a neat little grid, were some of his treasures. There was a Dead show playing on the TV.

Buddy looked up slowly.

“Robot,” he said, and smiled.

“Hey there, Bud,” Robin said.

“You’re home early. You get spooked?”

“Yeah, Bud, I got spooked.”

They both looked up at the TV.

“Europe ’72,” Buddy said. “Look at these guys.” Phil had his mushroom haircut, bobbing his head, eyes shut tight, and then it cut to Jerry, like a brown dandelion, as he started his solo.

Robin sat down on the bed next to Buddy. He picked up Buddy’s big bong off the floor. The bowl was already packed. Buddy passed him a lighter.

“Expecting company?” Robin said.

Buddy just smiled and patted Robin’s leg. “I got my card,” he said. “I tell you that?” He held out a handful of vape pens in different colors. “And look at this.” He started handing things to Robin, and Robin made a little pile on the bed. Different bags of weed, all neatly branded, vaporizers, a grinder, papers, a book of filters, and a little glass jar of what looked like honey. Item by item Buddy handed over everything in the cigar box, then he looked down at the empty box, closed it, and put it on the floor.
“Oh, man,” he said, and stood up suddenly, toppling the little pile Robin had made onto the floor. “Hang on. Shh.” Buddy left the room on tiptoes.

Robin shifted to the middle of the foot of the bed. Buddy had spread out an old shirt on the top of the steamer trunk, folded into a rectangle. It was one of his favorites—a beat-up green Lacoste that he’d gotten signed on the collar by Roger Federer. On top of this polo rectangle Buddy had arranged his objects in a grid. They were things he’d kept in his rooms for a decade, on his different mantlepieces, all the way back to their overlapping years at Regent. He had a silver-plated jigger with a little handle that had belonged to their grandmother, and a silver lighter, a pair of ivory dice, a copper flask, Virginia’s silver Varsity Cup from The Winsor School, a tiny mason jar with his baby teeth, a ship in a bottle, and a wine opener made out of an antler. All the silver was tarnished. There were three hand-labeled Dead cassettes. Buddy’d bought a whole rack of them once at a yard sale. There was a fist-sized brass housefly whose wings flipped open to reveal a little ashtray. Robin picked up an inlaid box he hadn’t seen before. He pressed a button and the top of the box flipped open. Two rows of cigarettes rose slowly up on springs. He heard Buddy’s footsteps in the living room. He closed the cigarette box.

Buddy opened the door with his foot. He had three cans and a bottle under his arms and was holding four frosty pint glasses. He’d put on a knit Red Sox hat that Robin recognized from a long time ago.

“Little help,” Buddy whispered. Robin took the beers from under his brother’s armpits and Buddy set the glasses down on the trunk. He closed the door behind him.

“What IPAs have you been drinking?” Buddy whispered.

“Um. Whichever?” Robin whispered back.
“Alright, alright, well.” Buddy looked down at the still-packed bowl, then up at the TV. “You’re going to want to get stoned for this.”

“Buddy.”

“You can’t get these around here,” Buddy said, holding up one of the tallboy cans and studying the label. “I very seldom bust these out. I had to go to the garage fridge.”

“Buddy,” Robin said.

“Watch,” Buddy said, as he poured the beer, holding the pint glass up to the TV screen where Bob Weir’s weirdly tender face and big glasses bug-eyed in the golden beer. “I should’ve brought more glasses,” he said. He crinkled his forehead as he poured the second beer.

“Bud, hey. I’m a little rattled. Mom got an eye job?”

“Um. Yeah.” Buddy held the beer up in front of his eyes as he poured, as though he was trying to keep it on a level.

“Did you approve of it? Did you pay for it?”

“Yes, Robin.”

“What the fuck, Buddy?”

“You caught me at a pretty stoned moment. Can we not talk about this right now?”

“They’re converting the hot-tub room into an apartment?”

“That’s correct.”

“You gave the thumbs-up on that?”

“Are these rhetorical questions?”

“I’m not okay with any of what I saw today. I’m really, really not okay with it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I mean, are you not not okay with it?”
“Drink this, Rob. It’s called ‘Heady Topper’. It’s the best beer in the world.”

Buddy set the beer down on one of the Dead cassettes.

“She’s, uh. I feel like she’s all gone, Buddy.”

“Smoke that bowl, Rob. Try the beer. Please.”

“Tell me you don’t feel the same way.”

Buddy leaned back on the bed in kind of a half sit-up, with his eyes closed, like his stomach hurt. He held the half-poured bottle in one hand and the half-full pint glass in the other. He was frozen, as if he were trying to summon the strength to sit the rest of the way up. He looked weak. The Dead played on in the background. Buddy opened his eyes.

“Rob,” he said. “Look. You had your shit to deal with. I know that. But I’ve been working full-fucking-time on this. I meet with the lawyers weekly. I have conference calls with fucking Art. I had to buy an actual filing cabinet. It’s over there under the tapestry. Virginia is non compos mentis. That’s a legal thing, Rob. It means I control her debit card. I give her an allowance. That house? The roof’s all rotten. There are squirrels in the attic. I have to deal with that. You know how much it costs to repair a copper roof? We’re on a historic plot. I have to go through the town on this stuff. Fucking, hedges. We’re into the millions of dollars in medical bills. Insurance doesn’t let you just cruise on this stuff—they make it really fucking hard. I talked to Lindsay about taking a year off from teaching to deal with it. The only reason I didn’t is that it’s actually good to have the money right now. That’s how tied up our shit is.”

Buddy hadn’t moved while he spoke. Now he blinked and sat the rest of the way up and finished pouring the beer. “Drink this beer, man,” he said. “It’s called ‘Pliny the Elder’. It’s very rare.”

“Bud…”
“And you know what? That shit you pulled in the Hamptons didn’t exactly glue the family back together. I mean, can you explain this to me for a second? You were a fucking groundskeeper?” Buddy’s hands were shaking. He put down the beer. There were now three full pint glasses on the top of the steamer trunk. He picked up the last can and tried to pop the top. Buddy’d always had shaky hands, especially late at night, and it had gotten worse. Now he was tearing up. It had taken a lot out of him, to pull himself together for this speech, to control this emotion, and now his high was swirling on him. He’d been that way as a kid, too: the first to roughhouse, the first to get hurt.

“I had to get away, Buddy. I don’t know what to tell you. I was living with mom. It was impossible. I really thought I was going to lose it. I moved around for a couple of months and it just didn’t feel right. I was unstable, Buddy. Some pretty manic highs and some pretty bleak lows.”

“So you, like, assumed an identity? How does that even work?”

“It wasn’t that hard.”

Buddy picked up the bong. There was a stack of half-melted ice cubes in the neck. He lit the bowl, milked it, then pulled the stem and took the hit. He closed his eyes and exhaled against the TV screen, where the smoke billowed out and glowed. He kept his eyes closed, the bowl shaking in his hand.

“Robby,” he said, his voice hollow with smoke. “I’m your brother. I have a lot of things to get off my chest, obviously, but don’t hold out on me. We share many of the same interests. So you pulled a little Harry-in-the-night. Tell me about it.”

“I found a driver’s license.”

“Barry?” Buddy said.
“Yup. Barry Pomerleau. From Roxbury.”

“Where’d you find it?”

“You ever been to Fenway,” Robin said, “and seen those guys combing the bleachers after the game? Looking for wallets?”

“Is that what they’re doing?” Buddy said. “Huh. I didn’t realize that.”

“Well, I was at Fenway,” Robin said, “and I found a wallet.”

“Like, accidentally?” Buddy sat up straighter.

“I mean, no,” Robin said. “Not accidentally.”

“Jesus,” Buddy said. He thought about it for a minute, then shook his head. “So how’d you get, like, work papers?”

“I just filled out the normal ones in Barry’s name. I faked the social security number. I guess they never checked.”

“Fucking, wild,” Buddy said. He replaced the bowl and offered the bong to Robin.

“And I just cashed my checks. Like anyone else, I guess. I’m not sure how that stuff works. But it was sort of straightforward.”

“Did you do, like, an accent?”

Robin lit the bowl, milked it, pulled the slide, and took the hit. He held it for a second and let it out slowly.

“I did not do an accent. Though I did kind of talk differently.”

“Do it,” Buddy said.

“I can’t.”

“A-suh, a-suh, a-said, I’m a-Barry!” Buddy said in his Foghorn Leghorn voice, sticking out his chest and slapping his thigh. “Ah-m the grounds-keepuh!”
“New York’s in the north, Bud.”


“Thanks Bud. That’s good.”

“Drink one of these beers, kiddo,” Buddy said in his normal voice. “I got them special.”

“You want to tell me about them? Which one’s the rarest? Which one’s the ‘Heady Popper’?”

“Your jokes are no good here, Rob. This is the one you want to try.” He handed him a golden pint glass. Robin took a sip.

“Alright,” Robin said. “Yeah, I mean, it’s pretty good.”

“Pretty fucking good,” Bud said. “Try this one, too.”

Robin did.

“But listen,” Bud said after a minute. “I’m serious. I mean I got the bug too, but not like you. That’s, what, identity theft? A felony? Plus obviously violating your probation? I mean I talked to your PO, Richard, like, a number of times. Richard Gwan.” Buddy smiled at something in his head. “He was no match for my intellect, Rob. I dazzled him. But still, I mean, this was big potatoes. You could’ve gone to jail. Like, real jail.

“Prison. I know.”

“You weren’t scared of that?”

“What do you think?”

“I would’ve been fucking terrified. We aren’t cut out for jail.”

“I thought a lot about that.”

“I mean, you almost went. You’d’ve had to do, what, two years?”

“Yup.”
“That’s pretty fucked up. Can we agree that that would’ve been really, really bad?”

“I thought a lot about it, Bud.”

“What are you saying?”

“I mean, I got away with one. The lawyers did some weaseling. Mom’s accident factored in. All told, I should’ve probably gone to jail. I talked to Gwan about it. He told me I skated on this.”

“So that’s great. Good karma.”

“I feel weird about it.”

They switched beers and Buddy held up his finger to silence him. It was the same gesture he used to make when a tennis shot was out. It had always pissed Robin off.

“So the one you’re drinking now,” Buddy said, “is the Melvin Two-by-Four. They brew it in the back of this Thai restaurant in Jackson, Wyoming. Incredible place.”

“Thanks,” Robin said. “Delicious. So, Bud. Is this what you do at night?” It came out sharper than he’d meant.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, how often are you down here? What’s, like, the nightly routine?”

“I’m celebrating. I get to see my brother.”

“I didn’t think you thought I was coming home.”

“Well, I’m reflecting on your visit. I was celebrating having you back around.”

“So, what, like… two, three nights a week?”

“Sure.”

“After you put Calvin to bed?”
“Yeah, sure,” Buddy said. “I put Calvin to bed and then I come down here and I have a

couple of beers.”

“Lindsay too?”

“Negative, Rob. Just me.”

“How’s your brain doing?”

“Excuse me?”

“What do you use your brain for these days?”

“Rob, your tone has shifted, and now I’m feeling a little self-conscious. I’m not sure

what you’re asking me. Is that on purpose?”

“Bud, I’m just wondering. Are you still writing?”

“Not all that much.”

“Are you still reading?”

“Robby, stop.”

“Are you still rapping? Remember you used to make those raps?”

“Stop it.”

“So what are you doing, Bud? Besides wall-ball?”

Buddy took a long drink.

“I’m not giving you a hard time,” Robin said. “I’m just trying to figure this out.”

“Fuck off, Rob,” Buddy said. His beer hand was shaking.

“I’m serious. I mean, you have a fucking Lamborghini in the driveway, and you’re doing

what? Laps around the block?”
Buddy was blinking hard and his Adam’s apple was bobbing in his throat. The foot of the bed was sagging where they were sitting and Buddy’s treasures had accumulated between them.

“Bud?”

“I’m raising a son, Rob. It’s hard work.”

“Yeah?”

“I have a family. And I’m a teacher. It might seem ticky-tack to you, but I think it’s important.”

“So that’s your big work? I’m not saying that in a disrespectful way. I’m just trying to wrap my head around it.”

Buddy took a deep breath. “I know you fetishized her brain,” he said. “So did I. But it’s gone.”

“Do you feel groggy during the day?”

“I do this a couple night a week. Usually not this late. Lindsay falls asleep better alone. She listens to audiobooks, and I come in and shut them off after she’s asleep.”

“Because I felt razor-sharp this summer,” Robin said. “I was on, Buddy. Firing on all cylinders.”

Buddy picked up one of the vape pens and studied it.

“I went from feeling like I was going to actually kill myself, watching mom get up at noon and dealing with her fake memories and her, like, half-baked takes, and Art’s holier-than-thou bullshit, and all this legal stuff, and it was like I was getting buried, and then I was in the city for a little while and that was a disaster. I probably blew, I don’t know, fifteen grand. I felt like a disease. I was doing all my leftover Ritalin and, like, barely sleeping. And then suddenly
I’m in Montauk and I hit on this thing and I just ran with it, Buddy, and it was like I was working on something again. I mean I felt like I did that last year of school. I was laser-focused. I know you know that feeling.”

“I sort of figured you were onto something,” Buddy said. “I mean, the stuff at school. I don’t know that we ever really talked about that. As you know, I did some cheating, kept notes on the insole of my boat shoe, that kind of thing. I got a kick out of it, but the couple of times I saw you… I don’t know. It was something else. You were working pretty hard on it. That’s why I never really got on your case.”

The band had stopped playing and the audience was milling around on screen, doing pinwheels and exhaling clouds of smoke.

“How’d you get caught?” Buddy said. “I’m realizing now that we really never did talk about this. I was scared to ask. I went the mom route, I guess. Total denial.”

“I got greedy,” Robin said. “I kind of picked a fight at the end. I got a little precious with this one bullshit professor. I guess I wanted him to know. Know that I knew.”

“Fuck, Rob,” Buddy said.

“Anyway, he caught it right away. The whole thing unraveled from there.”

Buddy took a deep breath. “I was pretty pissed,” he said. “I mean, we saw something coming—we all knew it was going to be self-destructive. But I thought, like, cocaine. A DUI. Get a girl pregnant. Something straightforward.”

“There was cocaine.”

Buddy nodded. “Obviously. Me too. But I guess that was the sideshow for you. I mean, I couldn’t fucking believe it when it happened. You went for your own jugular, Robby. You see that, right?”
“Who’s we, Buddy?”

“Me, Lindsay. Mom saw something coming, too. Art.”

“Well, what about you?” Robin said. “You left New York like a house on fire. Like, clothes hanging out on the line. You were a ghost. The guys couldn’t figure it out. I couldn’t figure it out. I mean, I didn’t really try. I kind of filled in for you, Buddy. Not just the apartment.”

They didn’t talk for a minute.

“You wore my clothes, didn’t you?” Buddy said.

“They didn’t fit.” Robin picked up one of the vape pens from the floor. “How’s this going to make me feel?”

“You won’t be disappointed,” Buddy said. Robin sucked on it. It tasted just like lavender.

“You know the sick thing, Buddy?” he said. “I was thinking about jail the whole time. Like, I was reading books about it. Doing research. And I started working out. You remember Halloween?”

“God, yeah,” Buddy said. “That’s the first time I really noticed it.”

“I was working out a lot. Stuffing myself. It was just about, like, sheer size. I wanted to take up as much space as possible. I was scared. I wanted to be ready.”

“Jesus.”

“I know.”

Buddy picked up the last of the full pint glasses. He split it into two glasses and handed one to Robin.

“This is ‘Sip of Sunshine’,” he said. “It’s from Connecticut, but try to see past that.”
“It tastes like the other one,” Robin said.

“I know you’re fucking with me.”

“What time is it?”

“It’s, uh, eleven,” Bud said.

“How eleven?”

“Eleven… thirty. Shit. I meant to tell you. We’re going to the Reservoir on Monday.”

“Quabbin?”

“Affirm. You have a bathing suit? We’re taking the canoe.”

“To the ropeswing? Can I borrow one of yours?”

“Affirm, brother.”

“Shit,” Robin said. “Well, alright.”

They used to go to the ropeswing as kids, with the canoe on the roof of the Volvo. Sometimes there’d be older boys there already, sitting around the rocks in their wet sneakers, shoving each other and laughing. Every few minutes one of them would disappear up into the tree with the rope, and a minute later he’d come flying out, shoelaces streaming, from some impossibly high branch. His buddies would whoop, and Robin and Buddy would stand sheepishly at the edge of the clearing, picking at the mesh of their suits and feeling especially small and pale.

Buddy’d almost gone for it once. They were alone, and Buddy climbed up the rungs and into the thick leaves, but Robin couldn’t get the heavy rope up to him. So Buddy climbed back down, carefully on the wet rungs, and they went back to doing foot grabs from the regular spot on the bank.
It was the little rattail that scared Robin the most. There was a grapefruit-sized knot at the end of the rope, and below that was a thin little line, three or four feet long, so that you could grab it from the water and swing the rope back up to shore. The rattail was made up of all different little pieces of string and twine and frayed ends of the big rope, and it was thin but strong. Robin was afraid that it would wrap around his ankle when he swung and dash his brains out against the rocks on shore.

He could feel his pulse in his ears. He held in the bong hit and then exhaled slowly, controlling his diaphragm.

“Whenever you need to go to bed, just holler,” Buddy said through the little magazine-insert filter he held between his lips. “But how about one Julia Child?”

“One we haven’t seen?” Robin said.

“I’ve seen them all,” Buddy said, “but sure. One you haven’t seen.”

Robin scrolled through videos. “Lobster?” he said.

“Absolutely,” Buddy said. “Classic.” Robin clicked “Play,” and the screen cut to a bed of dark green seaweed. Julia’s hands rooted through the seaweed, her head and torso out of the frame, and then she parted the seaweed to reveal the claw of an enormous lobster. It moved slowly in the seaweed, as though it’d been drugged.

“Hey, Robby?” Buddy said.

“Yeah?”

“Pause it a sec,” Buddy said.

“Don’t get greedy.”

“Just one thing,” Buddy said. “Art.”

“Bud—”
“I know you hate him. But you’ve got to give him a break.”

“He’s a putz.”

“Affirmative. But look. You remember, after the first few surgeries, you stopped picking up her calls? A couple years ago?”

“They got unreasonable,” Robin said. “Plus, I was right across the river.”

“Right. And I recall that you avoided her like the plague. Well, she doubled down on me. She was calling me probably ten, fifteen times a day. Little shit—funny things she saw on the street. Fat people. She started noticing fat people everywhere. She got all paranoid about it.”

“I remember the fat people.”

“But it was also, like, ‘How do I turn on the heat?’ She spent, like, two or three weeks that winter with no heat. Couldn’t figure out the thermostat. I showed up for a visit and I could see my breath. She was wrapped in blankets and her lips were blue. Or one time I get a call from the Wine Merchant—”

Robin chuckled. “Is that place still around?”

“Listen to me. I get a call from the guy: she’s there in her bathrobe. Actually, your bathrobe. She had no idea where she was. She tried to buy a bottle of champagne on credit. The Wine Merchant guy had to walk her home, with me on the phone, telling him where to go. The next morning she didn’t remember anything.”

“She’s broken, Buddy. I know.”

“Well, yeah, you know, but I was having to deal with it. So I mean, I know you think Artie’s a loser who took advantage of her accident to steal her away from us. But it wasn’t like that. He knew the score going in. He had plenty of bathrobe moments, too. One night she took
a cab out to one of these schools she goes to in Dorchester. I mean, nighttime, Rob. Fucking, Dorchester. Again in a bathrobe. The cops picked her up, thank God. I was here. She would’ve spent the night in jail. Artie went and got her.” Buddy took a deep breath. “I had him on speed-dial, Rob.”

“Maybe she needs another surgery.”

“He takes care of her, Rob, so you and I don’t have to. And he loves her, and it’s not easy for him, and he’s a stalwart fucking guy for doing it. Take my word for it.” Buddy was breathing heavy and his beer hand was shaking again.

“Okay, alright,” Robin said. “I’m sorry. I appreciate everything you did. I appreciate what he’s doing. I just don’t like him, that’s all.”

“You don’t have to like him. That’s fine. He can be a putz. But, Rob, you’re a threatening guy when you want to be. You’re huge and you’re fucking mean. He’s terrified of you. So let him off the hook, alright? He’s being a lot braver than we are.”

“Jesus, Bud. Okay. I’m sorry.” He thought about Art helping Virginia up the stairs after the movie, getting her to sleep, and bracing himself to come back down. All the hours he had to himself every night. All the bike rides. “I mean, yeah, I’m sorry,” Robin said. “I am.” He looked around for his beer and ended up just putting his hands on his knees.

“I know,” Buddy said. “Me too. Here, give.” He took the remote from Robin’s hand. “You’re on beers. Two more each. Hup, hup!” He punched Robin in the thigh. Robin stood in a daze. Artie was stuck in his head—the way he’d stood tall as Robin passed him in the stairwell, the way he clipped his Leatherman to his belt to talk to the tree people. Counting Virignia’s pills and writing numbers on the labels. “Let’s go, brother,” Buddy said, standing with him, rubbing Robin’s buzz cut and kicking his toes. “Hup! Hup, hup!”
Robin tapped Buddy’s old “C’mon Downs” sign with his finger. The sign was nailed to a tree above the club rack in Buddy’s backyard.

“Downs,” Robin said. “That’s, like, what—a racetrack?”

“It’s, like, pastures,” Buddy said. “Or hills. You can use it for a golf course.”

“I’m glad you saved this stuff.” Robin took the lefty iron from the rack and swung it at a dandelion head.

“I saw Artie sniffing around,” Buddy said. “He’s got all these hangups about the trees now. I figured the course was safer here. Follow me.”

The Little House was on the edge of the forest and the yard was a big lush dogleg around two sides of the house. At the edge of the trees was an old two-story hay barn, and Buddy pulled open the sliding door with his free hand. He gestured inside with his coffee.

“You’re fucking kidding me,” Robin said.

“You know the drill, kiddo.”

Robin wheeled out the old hand-mower. “I can’t believe this thing still exists,” he said.

“Feel that analog power.”

“It doesn’t even squeak,” Robin said, giving the mower a few test pushes. “You sharpened the blades.”

“Mm-hmm,” Buddy said. “Careful. The green’s over there.”

Robin mowed in circles as Buddy knelt by the buried coffee mug at the center of the green, trimming the grass around the hole with a pair of kitchen scissors.
“I understand why you were drawn to the groundskeeper business,” Buddy said, standing up and surveying the green. “It was drilled into you in early childhood.”

Robin parked the mower back in the barn and followed Buddy to a small tree in the corner of the yard. There was a piece of wood hanging by picture wire from one of the branches: “Hole One.”

“Okay,” Buddy said. “Tee is anywhere within an arm’s reach of the cherry tree.”

“Is that what that is?”

“Yeah, but it’s not fruiting yet. It’s a par three. Age before beauty,” Buddy said, setting down his ball.

Buddy’s first shot soared across the yard and plopped down on the green. Robin punched his into the woods and a deer bounded off into the distance.

“Do people hunt around here?” Robin said.

“Mm,” Buddy said. “I don’t know. We mostly go to the farmers’ market.”

“You should get a gun,” Robin said.

“My politics don’t really allow it.”

Robin nodded.

“You should still get a gun,” he said after a minute. “That would be fun.”

“Yeah, I know,” Buddy said.

They both looked off into the forest. Then Buddy grunted and they headed out across the yard.

“I should call her,” Robin said as he searched for his ball.

“Mom?”

“No,” Robin said. “Azalea.”
“You didn’t call her?” Buddy said. “Robin, fuck.” He hacked a tree-trunk at the edge of the green. “I told you not to get her involved.”

“So I shouldn’t call her?”

“That’s not what I mean.” Buddy’s putt plinked into the cup. Robin swished his club around in the deep grass.

“Do you still talk to her?” he called out. “Like, regularly?”

“Shh,” Buddy said from the edge of the trees. “You’re right there.” He pointed his club.

“What do you mean, ‘shh’?”

“I mean quit yelling.”

Robin chopped at the roots and missed the ball entirely. He tried again and his ball sailed out into the high grass at the edge of the green.

Buddy was waiting for him at the edge of the trees.

“Sorry, Buddy,” Robin whispered. “I’ll quit yelling.” He chipped onto the green and putted in.

The second tee was from the back patio, and they knocked on the kitchen window and waved to Lindsay. Buddy took a handful of sand from a flowerpot and funneled it into a little pile on the top step of the deck. He took a short swing and shot his ball toward the front of the green. Robin mimicked Buddy’s shot and his ball landed on the green.

Halfway across the yard, Robin whispered, “You don’t want me yelling, or you don’t want me yelling about Azalea?”

Buddy brushed past him without meeting his eyes. They found their balls and putted in, orbiting each other. Hole three was in a small clearing in the woods, next to the green knee-high sprinkler box. They hot-potatoed barefoot across the sharp underbrush.
“You have to squeak it out through the trees,” Buddy said.

“Do you think Azalea would want in on Mosquito Lake?” Robin said.

In a flash Buddy had him by the shirt. Robin shook him off and swatted his hand away.

“Cool it, Bud,” he said. He was about twice as wide as Buddy, and three or four inches taller. He’d gotten bigger working at Diamond Head, and Buddy’d gotten skinnier. They stood there holding each other’s sleeves, breathing heavily.

“What aren’t you telling me?” Robin said. He let go of Buddy’s shirt. Buddy’s coffee mug was shaking. Robin dusted off Buddy’s shoulders and neatened up his shirt on his shoulders. “Hey, I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t know.” Buddy inhaled through his nose. “I mean, I still don’t know,” Robin said. “But let’s talk. What’s going on?”

That was Buddy. First to shove or hit or curse, first to get wet eyes when the fighting started in earnest. He stood there with his coffee in one hand and his club in the other, shaking like he had Alzheimer’s, breathing through his nose and staring up at the house. His eyes glistened.

Buddy exhaled and his whole body rattled. “You can’t just—” he started, and blinked hard. “This, fucking, Mosquito Lake thing—you can’t just—that’s not how—” Robin tried to take Buddy’s mug from him. Buddy pushed him away and spilled cold coffee on Robin’s toes.

“Alright, hey,” Robin said. “Chill out. I’m sorry.”

“You can’t just take all your favorite things and jam them together,” Buddy said. “That’s not how it works.”

“Favorite things?” Robin said. “What are you talking about?”

“I mean, a fucking summer camp?” Buddy said. “It’s a fantasy. You want to just buy this place, plop me down, plop down a boat, plop down some weekend girlfriend, and, you
know, wall off mom and Artie. And do what? Go fishing? Sit around the campfire? Do what, Robby?”

Buddy turned to face him. This was taking a lot of energy for poor Buddy. Robin felt weirdly calm, as though he were watching this conversation through a periscope.

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about, Buddy,” he said.

“And Azalea?” Buddy said. “I mean, what’s that about?”

“You tell me,” Robin said. “I bumped into her at a bar. Now it’s the end of the world.”

“You bumped into her at a bar while you were pretending to be someone else, and then you never address it? I mean, what’s she supposed to think? And you’re fucking her friend? I mean, it’s threatening, Rob.”

“Buddy, to be honest with you, I don’t really care what she thinks. But it seems like you do. What aren’t you telling me?”

Buddy finally put down his mug. It was stained all down the sides. Robin was still trying to get the feeling of the cold coffee off the top of his foot, kneeling forward to rub it in the dirt.

“We had a thing,” Buddy finally said.

“I know you did.”

“No, I mean, another thing.”

“When?”

Buddy fished the golf ball out of his pocket and dropped it in the dirt. “Couple years ago,” he said.

“Jesus, Bud. Really?”
“I fucked up. It was stupid.” He took a huge swing and fired the ball way over the whole yard. A second later a faint “thwok” sounded from the thick woods. Buddy took a second ball from his pocket and dropped it in the dirt. “Sorry,” he said. “I needed that.”

“Does Lindsay know?” Robin said.

“Not exactly. But the Zaley thing—she’s wise to it in a more general sense. She doesn’t think I ever got over her. She things I’d spring at the chance. Which, you know… I mean, there were a lot of times that I didn’t. But you know about us. You know how it’s been.” Buddy took a normal swing. His ball arced out over the yard.

“Sure, Buddy. Not that you ever let me in on any of that stuff, but I had a pretty good sense.” Robin’s shot landed right next to Buddy’s. Neither of them moved. “You want to tell me what happened?”

Buddy took a deep breath. “I went up to Roundtree to go skiing. Like always. Aunt Jo and her new girlfriend were there. It was like a double-date. And you know how it is, with all the ski stuff. Long underwear and everything. You know how Zaley gets all red.”

“You’re kind of hot and cold at the same time,” Robin said.

“Yeah. Your skin’s all tingly.”

“Mm-hmm.” Robin felt his pockets. “You have another ball?” Buddy nodded and fished one out of his pocket. Robin wiped his club face with the ball of his foot.

“So?” Robin said.

“So, you know,” Buddy said. “I’m like Lady Macbeth. I can’t sleep.”

“What about Zaley?”
“I don’t know. I mean, she was single. I think it was pretty bad for her too, though. We both kind of freaked out. Maybe in different ways.” He picked up his mug. “That girl’s a double-black diamond, Rob. I really don’t know.”

Buddy led the way out of the woods, lurching barefoot across the sharp underbrush.

“Bring your sandals,” Buddy said once they’d putted in. “Last tee is in the barn.”

The light was streaked with dust. “Wait for me to get to the top,” Buddy said as he climbed the wooden stairs to the hayloft. “I don’t know how safe any of this is.” Once Buddy’d disappeared overhead Robin stepped up carefully, leaning as much of his weight as possible on the two-by-four that served as a bannister. He found Buddy silhouetted in the open barn doors. It was a twenty-foot drop to the grass below.

“Why is this like this?” Robin said.

“Honestly, I’m embarrassed to say I don’t know. I guess you backed a tractor up and loaded the hay in directly? Maybe?”

“That sounds right,” Robin said. “So how do we do this?”

Buddy got a handful of sand from a bucket by the stairs and made a little tee in threshold. “Par three,” he said. “Careful on your backswing. So who was that girl, anyway? Lacey?”

“Layla,” Robin said. “Honestly, Bud, it was weird. Like, I think there was kind of a lady-and-the-tramp thing going on, where she thought I was this blue-collar dude, and she really got off on it. In some gnarly ways. And I don’t know if I told you about her, but this girl was fancy. Like, hedge-fund fancy. She was a national champion sailor at Georgetown. With Zaley. Diamond earrings. But the sex, Buddy, Jesus Christ. She had some real kinks. It’s like, she’d ask me to do some sort of ticky-tack thing, like buy a bottle of wine or pick up the bar tab or
something, something money-related, which, like, I guess she thought was a hardship for me. And then she’d offer herself up in exchange. It was transactional.”

Buddy was nodding and looking faraway. “No shit,” he said. “She was slumming.”

“But that’s the thing,” Robin said. “That was part of it, yeah. But also I think she needed an excuse to get, like, *fucked*. Like, she wanted to feel like she owed it. Any little thing. Like, ‘Oh, I was ten minutes late, now you get to do X, Y, or Z to me later.’”

Buddy whistled. “Miss Thing,” he said. “And she was late on purpose, right?”

“Oh, sure. Or it would be something else. But in a way it was really sweet, you know? Like, she knew what she wanted, and she was really earnest about asking for it, in this circuitous way. I’m not sure she’d fully processed all of it, you know, on a Freudian level, but I think she felt safe around me.”

“That’s cool,” Buddy said. “I mean, that sounds special. On the other hand—”

“I know, I know, I know,” Robin said. “It’s bad. It’s really bad.”

“It’s kind of an intense betrayal,” Buddy said.

“I don’t feel great about it,” Robin said.

Buddy was nodding and Robin was shaking his head. Finally Buddy set down the ball he’d been holding. “This one doesn’t count,” he said. “I’m just going to whale on it. I’ll aim into the woods.” He took a practice swing and then stepped up to the ball and whacked it out into the trees.

“Nice,” Robin said. He blew out a lungful of air. “Shit, Buddy,” he said. “Can I tell you this one thing though?”

“You may,” Buddy said.
“She liked to—um. A couple of times, we’d be out at the bar, and she’d go the bathroom, and then she’d come back and say, like, ‘Hey, I just took two Xanax.’ And then she’d take a shot and go to her car. And I was supposed to wait for a little while and then go back to my place. And she’d be there passed out on the bed.”

“Woah,” Buddy said. “And you were—”


“That’s dicey,” Buddy said.

“It felt dicey.”

“Yeesh. Did you do it?”

“Kind of,” Robin said. “I woke her up and double-checked.”

“Well, that seems like the right thing to have done.”

“Who knows,” Robin said.

Buddy reached into his breast pocket, pulled out an imaginary pack of cigarettes, shook one out, lit it, and took a deep drag. “I hope she finds the right guy,” Buddy said, exhaling.

“I do, too.”

They were quiet for a little while.

“Did you guys get along otherwise?” Buddy said.

“Oh, famously,” Robin said. “I’ll reach out to her at some point.”

“Mm,” Buddy said. “That’s something to think about.”

As the sun rose the dust in the barn seemed to rise with it, glowing like filaments and floating upward in the plywood-colored light.
“You know,” Robin said. “I was thinking about what you said about, like, jamming together all my favorite things. And so I have a question. I mean, what about you? What about all your treasures?”

Buddy’d always kept treasures. The first time Robin visited him at Regent, over parents’ weekend of Buddy’s freshman fall, he’d had all these objects lined up on a wooden TV tray on the top of his mini-fridge. They were familiar things, little doodads that Robin recognized from the Big House, laid out in a grid: a sugar spoon from the silver chest in the dining room, a white key from the old piano, which they’d broken while wrestling, one of Virginia’s Asian-looking bowls from the kitchen, with the blue and white design. An empty shotgun shell. A harmonica on a piece of pink chamois-cloth. That kind of thing. At Princeton he’d done the same thing on a little end table next to his couch. A piece of glass candy. A cigarette case. In New York he’d kept them on his mantle, including hand-written cards, which he’d gotten into—he’d send them to his friends, and they’d send them back, in all this stupid fancy handwriting on thick manila paper they’d buy at the stationary store. He had a few from Azalea, Robin remembered—her handwriting hadn’t looked as forced.

The treasures in the Little House were family things, photos and Christmas cards and beautiful, tactile objects. Buddy always had nice blankets, for instance: one on every chair, heavy blankets that you could spread out and take a nap on. They had a pelt on the piano bench, a Tiffany lamp over the reading chair. Lots of old hardwood furniture they’d plundered from the Big House or from Lindsay’s parents’ farm. Artie called it “home shopping.” But Buddy still had all his secret treasures, too, tucked away in cigar boxes or mixed in with his weed stashes. The little trinkets he’d been playing with for decades that spelled out some secret journey he still thought he was on, and which he’d been on, alone, since he was old enough to keep secrets.
Buddy had a creative streak, and Robin had always given him a hard time about being afraid to use it. Buddy would be really good at something, and then stop cold. As a kid, he drew cartoons, but he quit when he went away to school. In New York, he and one of his pals would get high and record diss raps about celebrities. Somehow they got noticed by the *New York Post*, and then by TMZ, and then they showed up in *New York Magazine*’s “Approval Matrix,” between “Brilliant” and “Lowbrow.” The pal went on to deejay parties, but Buddy freaked out about the attention stopped going out. And for a few years he’d written his class’s update for the Regent Alumni Newsletter. It became so popular that they made him a columnist. After the accident he stopped doing that, too.

For years Buddy would send long, beautiful family emails about his travels, and he was always traveling somewhere. They were detailed snapshots of some moment—the woman next to him on the train, who’d brought her own loose leaf teas for the trip, and whom Buddy talked to for an hour about Oolongs and Rooibuses—that would zoom out to some bigger idea, some theory or philosophy he’d been chewing on in class. There were recurring characters: his eccentric professors, his eccentric dormmates, a love interest, and always a villain. And then they’d wrap up as suddenly as they’d started: “Anyway, the shower’s free, and I’m late for check-in, so… Love, Buddy.” For Christmas every year Virginia asked for emails, and Buddy had sent one or two a month, like clockwork, until the accident, when those, too, stopped cold.

For a long time, Robin waited to see. He didn’t like to watch Buddy fail, and this not doing something always felt like a failure. The only person getting in Buddy’s way was, for whatever reason, Buddy himself. He couldn’t seem to settle on what to use his brain for, so he just kept it whirring along in a low gear, making people laugh. Writing, real writing, was out of the question for either of them—Virginia loomed too large.
Another of Buddy’s thousand-word emails would bloop into Robin’s inbox, featuring the same web of fools and villains, and some unlikely hero—Buddy was always only a side character—and the weird hallucinatory moments of transit, and the one crystal detail every few paragraphs—and Robin would drop what he was doing and read it right there on his phone, with that deep hurt in his stomach.

Then one weekend he was staying with Buddy in New York, helping him pack for a trip, and he stopped in front of one of Buddy’s little shrines: a rock from the top of Mount Kilimanjaro, propped up against a needlepoint patch Buddy’d had made for the trip, which said “Yates Expedition—Summit or Bust.” Buddy’d paid for the patches himself and mailed one to everyone in the family before he left. Robin’s was on a t-shirt that no longer fit. The rock and the patch were both sitting on the base of a lamp carved out of some African wood, and hanging from the branch of the lamp was a silver bracelet with animals carved into it. They were the “Big Five,” Buddy’d explained in one of his emails: lion, rhino, buffalo, elephant, and giraffe. He’d seen them all, and then commissioned the bracelet from one of the silversmiths near the airport to celebrate. He gave the bracelet to Virginia when he got home. So he’d made one for himself, too.

It had struck Robin, studying this shrine, which was just a few surprisingly nice objects clustered together on a dusty thrift store end table, glowing yellow in the tavernish light of Buddy’s apartment. It was not an accident. None of it was. Not the lighting or the dust or the arrangement or any of the weird little objects or even the extra day in Arusha that Buddy spent waiting for his bracelets. Not the trip, or the friendships Buddy’d made with his globe-trotting classmates. He’d been building something all along, and he kept a blueprint of it with him wherever he went. “One nice thing about living the way I do,” Buddy’d said to Robin as he
darted around the dark apartment, adding things to the pile on the floor—by which, Robin thought, he meant alone, and in complete control—“is that everything…”—Buddy slapped the sides of his duffel and closed the zipper—“…is in the last place I left it.”

Buddy shot his ball out through the glowing square into the morning light.

“Mm,” he said. “My treasures.”

“You know,” Robin said. “All your mantelpiece stuff. You had it out last night.”

“Well, sure,” Buddy said. “I mean, yeah. I guess it’s the same instinct. But those are just keepsakes. You’re trying to move around much bigger pieces.”

Robin stepped into the light and crouched and gathered up the sand pile Buddy had exploded.

“Like, the Mosquito Lake thing,” Buddy said. “I totally get it. I’d love to be able to, like, rearrange various past and present versions of ourselves and assemble them all together in the woods and go sailing and fishing every day. That sounds awesome. But everyone has to want it, and I don’t think everyone’s version of paradise is the same. You know? Lindsay’s isn’t, for instance. I doubt the public school system in, you know, Mosquito Township is anything to write home about. For Calvin, I mean. And Zaley? I know you were just pushing my buttons, but—she’s got her whole life, too. Me and her together is bad news. And mom and Artie. You mentioned them first, so don’t look at me like that. We can’t just bail on them. You tried, and how’s that working out?”

“Alright, alright,” Robin said. “Alright.” He hit his ball and lost sight of it immediately.

“I’m not a doctor,” Buddy said, “but I think you’ve got a kind of nostalgia problem. A lot of this stuff that you seem to want doesn’t exist anymore.”
“I hear you, Buddy,” Robin said, squinting out into the sun. “But you’re bumming me out.”

“Well, no, hear me out,” Buddy said. “This is important. Like, for instance. What is this banter we do? I feel like I’ve been in a talky-movie for the last couple of days. Don’t get me wrong, it’s fun, I’ve missed it. It’s great material. But I’m starting to feel *too* sophisticated. Like, am I just nervous? Am I nervously performing for you, Robby? Do you feel that way, too?”

Robin nodded.

“I mean, do you know how many Shakespeare references I’ve made in the last two days?” Buddy said.

“Two.”

“That you know of! But seriously. I’m tired, Robby. And I feel like you just showed up here in the middle of a giant crisis, like a years-long crisis, and I think I know why you’re here, but instead of dealing with it we’re just doing this routine.”

Robin swallowed and nodded. He whacked the floor with his club.

“Do you want some help, Robby? Are you okay?”

Robin shook his head. They were both staring out through the glowing hole in the wall, which had melted and flooded itself into a Rothkoesque goo at the edges of Robin’s eyes. Buddy put his arm around Robin’s shoulders.

“It’s a good backyard golf course,” Robin said,

“Yeah,” Buddy said. “I think I’m finally happy with it.”

Robin nodded and blinked.

“How did you extricate yourself from the Barry thing?” Buddy said.
“I just left,” Robin said. “I’ve had my phone off ever since.”

“Are you worried?”

“Yeah, I’m worried. I feel really bad.”

Buddy traced a design in the sand with his club.

“So you went to see mom,” Buddy said.

Robin nodded.

“It didn’t work out,” Buddy said.

“That’s correct.”

“Well, sit it out for a few days and take another whack. Once you start repairing this, I think you’ll see things differently.”

“She’s not going to get better,” Robin said.

“Of course not. And she’s never going to win the Nobel. And Artie’s going to whine about the trees. At some point they’ll have to sell the Big House. And we’ll keep chipping away, kiddo. That’s how it goes.”

Robin nodded. “Fuck,” he said.

“You got that right,” Buddy said. “And in the meantime, I believe you’re away.” He tapped the floorboards with his club. “Hup, brother,” he said. He stamped his foot. “Hup, hup!”

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“Good morning, Merry Sunshine!” Calvin shrieked. He cannonballed onto the foot of Robin’s bed. Buddy and Lindsay stood in the doorway holding coffee cups. They all sang together, with Calvin chanting the words as he bounced on Robin’s legs.
“Good morning, Merry Sunshine,
Why did you wake so soon?
You frightened all the stars away,
And scared away the moon!”

Calvin leaped knee-first onto Robin’s crotch and Robin curled up into a ball under the duvet, moaning.

“Calvin, honey,” Lindsay said.
“Good job, son,” Buddy said.

Calvin tugged the pillow out from under Robin’s head and hit him with it. Robin protected his head and looked around the room, squinting to focus. The bong was gone, the cigar box gone, the steamer trunk stowed neatly in the corner. Robin grabbed Calvin’s ankles and lifted him up in the air.

“Buddy,” he said. “Do you have a fishing rod?”

“Wife?” Buddy said.

“I think you’re in luck,” Lindsay said.

They trolled a red-and-white Daredevil spoon as they paddled, Buddy in the bow and Robin in the stern. Lindsay sat on a cushion in the middle reading aloud from a collection of Roald Dahl stories. Calvin was behind Robin, leaning out the back of the boat, watching for fish.
They approached a low stone bridge and something made a hollow knocking sound against the underside of the boat. The slide through the shadowy water under the bridge and it knocked again.

“Better not fall in,” Robin said.

“Why?” Calvin said, turning around.

“Trolls,” Buddy said from the front of the boat.

“What’s trolls?” Calvin said.

“Oh, you didn’t know?” Robin said. Lindsay closed the book around her finger.

“Didn’t you hear them?” she said.

“That was trolls?”

“Yup.”

They paddled in silence for a few strokes, then emerged back into the sunlight.

“Where are they now?” Calvin said.

“Oh, they only live under bridges,” Buddy said. Calvin turned back to the stern but this time didn’t lean out over the water. He held on to a handful of Robin’s t-shirt.

“Beautiful day we’re having,” Buddy said.

“Just beautiful,” Lindsay said.

“Will we catch one with the hook?” Calvin said.

“Oh no,” Robin said. “They eat things much bigger than that.”

“That would only whet their appetite,” Buddy said.

“Plus, they’re blind,” Lindsay said.

“That’s true,” Buddy said.

“They’re blind?”
“Yup,” Lindsay said. “Remember that sound under the bridge? They have bald heads and they swim around under there looking for food. One of them must’ve bumped into our canoe.”

Up ahead another bridge came into view. Calvin squeezed past Robin and crouched down next to his mother. He whispered something in her ear and she hugged him. “It’s okay, doll,” she said. “We’re safe in here.”

They paddled silently between high dirt banks through a forest of White Pine. Robin did long, smooth J-strokes, keeping the boat straight, working on his form. “Switch,” he called out, and he and Buddy switched sides, passing their paddles over the boat. A drop of lakewater ran off the paddle, up Robin’s arm, under his shirtsleeve, and into his armpit. Then the reel behind Robin made a zipperling sound.

Calvin screamed and grabbed Lindsay, burying his head in her chest. Buddy threw his head back and laughed, his paddle on his lap.

“Don’t worry, baby,” Lindsay said, and made a silent “Ha!” face as she patted Calvin’s head. Robin picked up the rod, set the drag, and started reeling.

“It’s not a troll, buddy,” Buddy said. “Remember, they only live under bridges.”

“It’s a Largemouth Bass,” Robin said, bringing the fish up alongside the boat. Calvin lifted his head to look. The canoe drifted, turning slowly toward the righthand shore as Robin leaned over the rail to get a look. The bass flickered and swam hard and he let it take out line so that Calvin could reel it back in.

“Here,” he said, and offered the rod to Calvin.

“You’ll have to help him,” Lindsay said, and she nudged Calvin toward the back of the boat. Robin put Calvin on his lap, kept one hand on the rod, and showed him how to reel.
It was a nice bass. Robin de-hooked it, dipped it in the water, and held it up for Calvin to see. Calvin stroked its side with one tiny finger.

“Wet your finger first,” Robin said. “Yup, like that. It protects his skin.”

“Now what?”

“Now we put him back.” And they did.

The ropeswing was on the other side of the second bridge. This bridge was even lower than the first: a narrow triangular stone tunnel that must’ve been the oldest in the Reservoir. It was low enough that as a child he could reach out and touch the cool stone, and Buddy in the front used to stick his paddle handle up into the apex of the roof and spin it like a cotton-candy cone, collecting a little bolus of spiderweb, which he’d reach back and deposit onto Robin’s t-shirt. Robin had been terrified of spiders, and of all Buddy’s tricks, this one used to crack Virginia up the most. Good outdoor fun, she called it, and neither did she object when Robin charged Buddy and threw him out of the boat.

They approached the bridge, and Calvin grew silent. Buddy looked over his shoulder, grinning, and Lindsay shook her head. Robin kept them on a beeline. They passed into the shadow of the bridge.

Robin and Buddy stopped paddling. They slid through the cool air, their wake creating little wavelets that slapped against the stone walls not five feet away on either side. Buddy dipped his paddle into the water. Robin reached the handle of his own paddle up into the darkest shadow at the top of the stone roof. Lindsay took a handful of the back of Calvin’s shirt. Then came a knock against the hull of the boat.

Calvin screamed and tried to run to the bow. The boat rocked. Robin half-stood, reaching forward, trying to deposit the little ball of spiderweb on the back of Buddy’s shirt.
Buddy was leaning over the side, his paddle underwater. The boat rocked. Calvin and Lindsay both screamed. There came another knock against the hull, and Buddy craned to see their reactions, leaning farther, and Robin lost his balance, and as they slid out from the shadow and into the sunlight the canoe tipped too far and they flipped.

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They had the ropeswing to themselves. They’d dragged the canoe halfway up the bank and tied the bow line off to a tree root and laid out their wet clothes on the bushes to dry in the sun. Lindsay had propped the Roald Dahl on a log. Calvin still had his life jacket on, and wouldn’t take it off, even when Buddy hunched down and confessed that they’d made the trolls up. The old stone bridge was only twenty yards away, and Calvin had it fixed in his sights.

Robin warmed his eyelids in the sun. Buddy sucked on one of his vape pens. The rope hung slack out over the water. Calvin ran past with a stick, whipping it through the air, then slowed at the rocky bank and crouched, drawing a neat line through the dirt.

“You shouldn’t’ve brought a banana on the boat,” Lindsay said. “It’s bad luck.”

The bank dropped off sharply to the water, and Robin remembered how the rocks got slicker and slicker as you climbed, dripping, back up to the swing spot. It was the same rope—Robin recognized the yellow twine sticking out from the side of the knot, bird’s-nested in years ago.

“Anyway,” Lindsay said. “The two of you. I know you don’t want to hear it. But someone needs to be the voice of reason and empathy, right?”
Robin glanced at Buddy, beamed thoughts at him. Stop her! Buddy was hunched over his stomach, sucking aggressively on the vape pen.

“I mean, I never worshipped her,” Lindsay said, sipping from her beer. She knew neither of them would interrupt her. She’d bushwhacked her way through these conversations before. “I liked her a lot back in high school. She intimidated the shit out of me. I always felt like I was too girly, and like she held it against me that we were dating. This was the Catch-22 of being your girlfriend, Buddy. You were too charming. If a girl was sucker enough to get dazzled by it, then she wasn’t good enough for you. You too, Rob, but less so. You weren’t really the girlfriend type.”

“Thanks, Lindsay.”

“I was on eggshells every time I came over. But my point is, do I get along with her now? Get along, yeah, sure. Anyone can get along with her now—you just nod and smile. Do I enjoy my time with her?”

“Linds…” Buddy said.

“I generally do not. The race stuff, the money stuff, it bothers me. Her stories are impossible to follow. She lies and I don’t think she even means to. A lot of the time it feels like she’s just struggling to connect the dots. But I’m not scared of her anymore. I can actually relax. And I can empathize. You two, though, you’re like children. It’s all resentment. Buddy, relax. You need to hear this. Robin, relax. You need to show her a little empathy. A little compassion. Walk a mile in her shoes. It’s this whole victim thing with you two.” She tipped back the last of her beer, pinched the can, and tossed it at the canoe. “Kobe,” she said. “Look. She had a horrible accident. She suffered. She’s suffering. Give her a break, alright?” She stood up and dusted off her butt. “Fuck,” she said. “Don’t follow me. I’m peeing.” She
scrambled down the bank, waded into the water, and floated out. She turned over on her back and treaded water, her neck tense, arms swishing. “Relax!” she shouted. “Jesus!”

“All right,” Buddy muttered, standing up and crushing his beer can. He tossed it into the canoe. “Rob, will you do the honors?”

Robin felt his stomach turn over. “Can I finish my beer?” he said.

“Brother, it’s a beautiful day, and you can do whatever makes you happiest. I’m just making a general announcement that I’m ready to do a little rope-swinging. This is not to put any pressure on anyone.” He stretched his arms and crossed them over his bird chest. Robin glanced out at the rope, hanging slack over the water.

“All right,” Robin said. “But I’m going to let you feel it out first. Find out if that bus is still in there.”

Buddy used to say that there was an old school bus submerged in the water just past where they swung. There was a road, if you kept trekking up the bank, but there wasn’t a house, or a school, anywhere nearby. Just the gas station where they’d buy deli sandwiches and steal candy bars. But the bus had given Robin the spooks as a kid, especially in the final moments before he let go of the rope, when several times, as he flew into the sunlight, he caught glimpses of a yellow bulge in the deep water.

It was the same rumor they told about the river at the edge of the Regent playing fields, where there was a little footbridge that all the soccer players would jump off after practice. Robin had jumped off it a thousand times—they all had—but always from the same side of the bridge, where the afternoon sun lit you up as you fell. No one, not a soul, at least as far as Robin knew, had ever jumped from the shadowy side.
“Here I go,” Robin said. He stood up, finished his beer, and tossed it into the canoe. He adjusted and retied his bathing suit, one of Buddy’s, which was uncomfortably tight. He climbed down the bank, holding tree roots as he went. He stepped out into the water and felt the soft bottom muck ooze between his parted toes. He paused when he got to his balls. He could feel sharp things prodding at his feet through the soft muck. Roots. He found one solid enough to stand on, tensed, and bobbed on the balls of his feet. He splashed both hands and dove in.

The rope hung twenty feet off the bank, just past the polleny wall where the shadow from the pines gave way to hot open sun. He rolled over on his back, stroked downward with both hands, and reached up for the tail. He got a hold of it, pulled himself halfway out of the water, and got a firm grip on the frayed ends just below the knot. He hung there for a second, dripping, out of the water to his waist, and felt the whole muscular rope above him swaying in the air. It disappeared into yellow-green leaves high above.

He hung and relaxed his arms and let his joints fill with air. Then he gave it a test swing, sending a wobble high up into the white-birch leaves. It ricocheted back down into his hands. Buddy waved from shore. He was holding onto one of the wooden rungs nailed to the birch trunk and leaning out over the steep bank.

“Alright!” Buddy called out. “I’m ready!”

Robin arched his back, swung the rope as far behind him as he could, then bucked forward and sent the whole heavy rope swinging toward shore. Buddy caught it, closing his eyes and flinching as the wet tail slapped him in the stomach.

Buddy was an awkward athlete. He swung in a fetal position and let go too early and his startled yip was swallowed up by the river. Calvin and Lindsay clapped from shore. When he came up Robin was already climbing up the bank, leaving muddy footprints in the dirt.
“Toss it up here,” he said. “Let me show you how it’s done.”

He stood on the high point of the bank, holding the rope, leaning back against its weight, flattening the curve. He stamped his feet in the dry dirt. He tried out different grips and finally settled on one, with the tail in his lower hand, and the loop of it resting against his stomach where his ankle couldn’t get caught in it. He felt like the pendulum on a giant grandfather clock.

“Whew!” he said, shimmying his hips and blinking water out of his eyelashes. “Alright then!” He adjusted his grip and felt his muscles twitching. “Any buses down there, Bud?”

“Just the one! Let’s see it, you weenie!”

He leaned back, wiggled his fingers, stamped his feet, and went. He swung out over the steep bank, cleared the rocks, rose up over the water, passed through a wall of sunlight, and threw the rope out to the side. He hugged his knees and crashed into the water.

“I saw the bus!” he shouted when he surfaced. And he had, or something like it. “Don’t get it muddy!” Robin shouted, but Buddy was already scrambling up the bank, his bathing suit dripping everywhere.

They swung, taking turns. Lindsay joined in, shrieking every time she let go of the rope, and Calvin floated around in the shallows in his yellow life jacket, splashing and singing. The bank became a mudslick. Buddy found a tennis ball in the woods and they tried to catch it in the air. The water was skin-warm.

“Sister,” Robin said, while Buddy flailed around in the water with Calvin. “Let me as you a question.”

“Shoot.” She was lying on the canoe cushion in the dirt, her hat over her eyes, Buddy’s vape pen blinking in her hand. The sun had moved overhead.
Sometimes Buddy was there when she came over to babysit, and other times it was just the two of them, and then it felt almost like a date. Lindsay would tape the schedule to the wall below the phone, the same schedule she used all around the neighborhood, and she always lit candles for dinner and sat them at opposite ends of the long dining room table, with full silver.

“So,” she’d say, “tell me about your day,” and he would, and she’d say, “no, all the other parts,” and then he’d make up adventure after adventure, and she’d nod the whole time.

“What’re the odds you’d be interested in some lakefront property in northern Maine?” Robin said.

“Mosquito Lake?” she said.

“Then you’ve heard of it.”

“Only half a dozen times. Buddy showed me the pictures. It’s tempting, man.”

“What’d Buddy say when he showed it to you?”

“You know. ‘It’s a crazy idea! It doesn’t make any sense!’ Then he went and Googled it for an hour.”

“Hmm,” Robin said.

“He loves you, Rob. He wants you to be happy. And deep down he loves the idea, the same as you. Me personally? I’m more of a sand-and-sun type. But either way, it’s not quite the right medicine for this point in our lives. You know?”

“I know,” Robin said. “I just can’t help thinking about how cool it could be.”

“No doubt,” Lindsay said. “No doubt. And believe me, Buddy’s dreaming, too. You wouldn’t believe the ideas he’s run by me. One of the other dads just bought a piece of land on the beach in Belize. He’s turning it into a hamburger bar. Buddy lost his mind over that. He was on Google Earth every day. The guy wanted him to manage the restaurant. That’s when we
bought the grill. I get to see the crazy side. But I think he tries to show you the other side—the pragmatic side. I think part of him sees how seductive that kind of thinking is, and he’s trying to protect you from it.”

“Hmm,” Robin said.

“Because, face it, Rob,” she said, taking off the hat and rolling onto her elbow. “You don’t have a ton of, uh, infrastructure in your life, you know? There’s not a lot keeping you grounded. As I understand it. You don’t mind me saying that?”

Robin shook his head. “No,” he said. “You’re right.”

“And in the same way that you want to build this beautiful fantasy life with Bud, he wants the same thing with you, but he knows that until you’re anchored a little more firmly in the world that’s not really going to happen. Not with you disappearing all the time. It’s really special for him that you’re here, but he’s also pretty worried that you’re just going to disappear again. You know?”

“Hey!” Buddy shouted from the water. He was crouching in waist-deep water, with Calvin balanced on his shoulders.

“Mom!” Calvin shouted. “Uncle Rob!”

“Watch!” Buddy shouted.

“Jesus,” Lindsay muttered, waving. Then, “we’re watching!”

Buddy sprang up and Calvin launched off his shoulders, shrieking. The water around them was muddy. Buddy came up wiping his eyes. He marched to shore, Calvin dog-paddling behind him.

“Whataya think?” Buddy said when he reached shore. He was looking up into the trees.

“What do I think what?” Robin said.
“Should I go for it?”

“I don’t know,” Robin said.

“What?” Lindsay said

“The high swing.”

“It’s kind of hard to get the rope up there, right?” Robin said.

Buddy scrambled up the muddy bank and stood at the trunk of the birch, looking up. He tested the lowest couple of rungs, then grabbed ahold and stepped up.

“Be careful,” Lindsay said.

The older kids couldn’t’ve been more than sixteen at the time. It wasn’t rocket science. But Robin’s gut was knotting up.

“Brother!” Buddy shouted down. How’m I doing?”

Robin put his hand on the tree trunk and looked up. A drop of water fell directly in his eye.

“Goddamnit, Buddy,” he said.

“What?”

“You’re dripping on me.”

“Alright, but do you see where I am?”

“I see you.” Buddy was about twenty feet up, haloed in leaves, hugging a big branch that stretched out over the water.

“Well, I’m at the end of the ladder. I think I’m supposed to climb out onto this branch. And, I guess, swing from there.”

“It looks a little hairy from here.”

“Yeah, I mean…” Buddy’s voice was moving in the leaves. He was looking around.
“I feel like the kids who did this were always wearing shoes,” Buddy called down.

“Should I be wearing shoes?”

“It’s deep water,” Barry said. “I guess it’s for the impact? I dunno. Those guys were also doing, like, backflips.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Fuck it.”

Lindsay swam out and hung from the bottom of the rope, kicking her feet and swaying in the water.

“Robby,” Buddy said from the leaves. “You’re going to have to climb it up to me.”

Robin craned his neck. “How did the big kids do it?” he asked.

“You know,” Buddy said, “I can’t remember. I feel like they threw it. But I can’t see how.”

Robin took a step up the branch with the rope. It was heavy. He wasn’t sure he could get to the tree.

“Buddy,” he called up. “What’s the math on how heavy this rope feels the farther up the bank I get?”

“Umm…” Buddy shifted above and a cluster of leaves shuddered way out over the water. “I mean, it’s like a pendulum. So, um…”

“Don’t you teach math?”

“I teach the times tables.”

“Well, it’s going to be some trig function,” Robin said. “Right?”

“I mean, we can figure this out,” Buddy said. “If we treat it like a pendulum, then look at force vectors. Right?”

“Okay… yeah, okay.”
Lindsay climbed the bank in a towel. “It’s not a pendulum,” she said.

“Baby,” Buddy called down. “How much would you guess this rope weighs? Like, the whole thing.” Up above Buddy adjusted his footing and a patch of leaves shook far out over the water.

Robin and Lindsay both looked at the rope. It was pretty thick—two inches maybe, and, say, sixty feet long.

“I’ll say… a couple hundred pounds?” Lindsay said.

“That was my first guess, too,” Robin said. “But now I’m thinking more. I mean, imagine it in a pile on the ground. That’s a lot of rope.”

“True,” Lindsay said. “I’m imagining it in a wheelbarrow. It’s heavier than a person, for sure. So what do you want to say… three hundred?”

“Four?”

“Four hundred pounds!” she called up to Buddy.

“Okay,” he said. “I buy that. So force of G on the rope is four hundred pounds. Again, assuming it’s a pendulum.”

“It’s not a pendulum!” Lindsay shouted. Then, to Robin, she said, “the weight isn’t at the bottom. It’s all along the rope. It’s different.”

“Mm-hmm,” Robin said. “Yeah. You’re right.”

Lindsay picked up a stick. “Look,” she said. She scratched a line in the dirt. “Treat it like a four-hundred-pound rod.”

“Yes,” Robin said. “Yes, yes.” He wedged the knot between two big nails in the trunk that seemed to be there for this exact purpose. He picked up a stick. “Which is the same as a pendulum but half the length,” he said. He drew a circle at the center of Lindsay’s line.
“Yup,” she said. “Now build a triangle out of the force vectors. They all have to cancel each other out.”

“Buddy!” Robin called up. “If you imagine that the weight is concentrated at the center, then you can treat it like a pendulum.” He looked down at the dirt again.

“I mean, you’re still making a few assumptions,” Lindsay said. Robin nodded.

“Can we solve it?” Buddy called down.

“Yeah, babe,” Lindsay shouted back. “We could. But why don’t we solve it on the way home?”

“Okay!” Buddy said.

“It’s a right triangle,” Robin said. “It’s sine-something.”

“I have paper in the car,” Lindsay said.

Up in the tree, Buddy was drawing something with his finger in the air.

“Soh-Cah-Toa,” Robin said. “I used to just cheat on all this stuff.”

“Sine thirty is a half,” Lindsay said. “That’s the only clean one. Here, come on. It’ll give us something to do on the drive.” She tugged on the rope. “Woah,” she said. “It is heavy. Bud! How do you want to get this up there?”

A little shower of riverwater shook down from the leaves.

“Robby, can you climb it up?”

“Calvin!” Lindsay called out. “Honey!”

“How strong is the ladder?” Robin said.

“It felt pretty strong.”
“Okay. Don’t drip on me.” Robin adjusted his grip just above the knot and with his other hand grabbed the highest rung he could reach. He climbed using his elbow. The rope got lighter as he climbed. He passed it up to Buddy.

“This isn’t too bad,” Buddy said. “I’m just going to swing from right here, I think. I have no idea what those big kids did out on the branch. It’s not very welcoming.”

“You could just climb down.”

“I know. But I’ve always wanted to do this.”

“Alright. Well, I’m climbing down.”

“Hang on. I need to grab higher up on the rope. Can you help me? Just hold here.”

Together they inched their grips up the rope until Buddy was holding it more or less taut.

“Fuck,” Buddy said. “I’m scared.”

“Careful, Buddy. Don’t get your foot caught in the rope. Throw it out to the side.”

“Off to the side. Yup.” Buddy mimed pushing the rope away from him.

Lindsay stood at the base of the tree, holding Calvin in her arms. He had a roly-poly in the palm of his hand and was poking it gently. The knot of the rope wobbled and jerked in the air above the bank as Buddy got into position.

“One sec,” Buddy called out. His voice had lost its armor. Robin put an arm around Lindsay’s shoulders and pulled her tight.

“I’m getting in the water,” Robin said.

The river had gotten colder. Robin swam hard to the middle and rolled onto his back, out of breath. From here Buddy didn’t look so high up, but there was a lot of rope below him.

“Here goes!” Buddy shouted. He gave the thumbs-up, and Robin returned the gesture. Buddy was sitting on the branch now, the rope tight to his chest and neck. Lindsay and Calvin
bounced nervously on the bank. Buddy twisted his hands on the rope for grip and inched forward. His chest muscles tensed. His bathing suit had ridden up his thighs. He slid forward off the branch.

There was a jerk in the rope as he fell, and the jerk seemed to jounce Buddy’s hands. He lost his grip. Lindsay screamed. Buddy’s body cartwheeled in the air and he dropped into the shallow water. Robin couldn’t tell which part of Buddy landed first. He was already swimming as hard as he could toward the splash, shouting into the water, the world yellow-green around him.
Figures passed back and forth on the second-floor landing. One of them, tall and slightly hunchbacked, who kept bringing things to and from the kitchen, was Aunt Jo. Robin had never thought about her age before, but he calculated it now: she was sixty-one or sixty-two.

The second woman was enormous, with shoulders like candlepin balls. She had on a man’s work shirt and a red bandana. She’d gotten up once to use the master bathroom and once to smoke a cigarette on the balcony. Robin thought this must’ve been Aunt Jo’s new girlfriend. She must’ve also been the owner of the dented red Tacoma in the driveway with the vanity plate “GRITS.” The third person was Azalea. The three of them were having dinner on the screened-in porch.

Robin was high. He’d taken two Ativan and half a Ritalin on the drive and he was feeling buzzy and comfortable, even though the seatbelt was digging into his chest. Everything in the car had rolled forward and there was an empty beer bottle between the gas and brake pedal, which Robin identified as a potential risk if he were to try to drive somewhere later.

He pressed his feet into the footwell and unbuckled himself. The door swung out on its hinges. He double-checked the e-brake, checked that his wallet and dead phone were still in the glove box, checked his eyes and teeth and tongue in the rearview mirror, breathed into his hand, got out, and slipped in the mud. He caught himself on the door handle before he went down.
Closer to the trees the mud was thatched with pine needles. He used the tree branches like monkey bars.

He’d been grinding his teeth on the drive and his mouth felt dehydrated and scummy. He tore off a handful of needles from a pine branch, bit down, and spat them out in the mud.

He knocked on the front door. Nothing happened. His knuckles tingled. Someone laughed upstairs. He knocked again, harder, and heard a chair scoot back. A shadow passed across the window on the landing above him. A few seconds later the deadbolt clunked open and the door opened a crack.

“Christ almighty,” she said, and opened the door all the way. It was Aunt Jo, holding a steak knife.

From upstairs, someone called out “Get ’em, Jo!” and cackled.


“I know who it is. C’mere, baby,” she said, and took him in a big hug, the knife pressing into his shoulder blade. He kept his mouth closed tight. She released him and stepped back. She’d filled out and gone grey. “Holy cow,” she said, looking him up and down. She clapped him on his big shoulder. “You hungry?”

“Well, sure,” Robin said, and followed her inside. He wasn’t hungry, not with the Ritalin in his system, but he thought it wasn’t a bad idea to eat. He had to keep tabs on his blood sugar or he’d get grumpy.

The house smelled like ski boots and unmade beds. Robin took off his shoes and felt the crunch of the old carpet under his toes.

“Is Harley…?” he said.

“Dead!” She waved a hand in the air.
“Johanna!” the husky voice shouted from upstairs. “You okay?”

“Just a minute!” Aunt Jo shouted back. She closed the front door and squared up to Robin, rolling her shoulders back and cracking her neck. She was still holding the steak knife.

There was sauce on it.

“Alright,” she said. “Twenty words. Why are you here?”

“Um,” Robin said.

“Spit it out.”

“I was in the neighborhood.”

“Are you in trouble?”

“No. Everything’s fine. I—”

“Bullshit.” She squinted at him, hands on her hips. “Are you high?”

“Who is it?” shouted the voice upstairs. Aunt Jo stayed staring at him, eyes asquint, and after a few seconds she shouted back up the stairwell:

“It’s Robin Yates!”

The husky voice said “Who the fuck is Robin Yates?” A quieter voice answered but he couldn’t hear what it said. A chair scooched across the floor.

“Alright, alright,” Aunt Jo said. “Come upstairs.” She pushed him out ahead of her and he padded up the familiar stairwell, his hand on the bannister. Behind him, she said, “You got some talking to do.”

Azalea sat at the head of the table, her feet up, holding a glass of red wine. Next to her, their chairs nearly touching, one hand on Azalea’s shoulder, was the girlfriend. She was like a giant from a fairy tale.

“Hello,” Robin said to the room.
“Hello to you!” the huge woman said.

“Hi, Robby,” Azalea said. She saluted with her wine glass.

“Kit, this is Robin Yates. Virginia’s youngest. I’ve told you about Virginia.”

“You’ve told me about a lot of people, doll. Robin, I guess it’s a pleasure to meet you. We thought you were a robber. You’re lucky we’re so comfortable up here.” She winked at Azalea.

“Robin,” Aunt Jo said. “This is my friend and partner, Kit Davidson.”

“Friend and partner!” Kit said, and barked out a laugh.

“Robin says he was in the neighborhood,” Aunt Jo said, sitting down on the bench seat. “Which can’t possibly have been true. So what is it, Robin? Is it your mother? Is it the law?”

“Mom,” Azalea said. “Give him a break. Robby, have some food. Get yourself a plate.”

Robin stared at her, his eyes welling. Then he inhaled and gathered himself. He went into the kitchen. Azalea followed him a minute later.

“The fuck, man?” she said, putting an empty wine bottle in the sink.

“I’m sorry. I’ll explain everything. I promise.” His mouth felt sulphuric. He poured himself a glass of grapefruit juice and swished it around.

“Is there anything I need to know right away?” Azalea said. “Is it an emergency?” She grabbed his ear and stared at his eyes, then glanced at his mouth and released him.

“Everything’s fine,” Robin said. “I’ll explain, I promise. How badly am I interrupting?”

“You’re fine,” she said. “Have something to eat. We’re just sitting.”

Robin filled his plate and joined the women. He saw Azalea and Aunt Jo exchange a series of glances. A small conversation about him.
They were talking about guns, and kept talking about them after Robin sat down. Aunt Jo had just bought her first shotgun. Kit was going to take her out shooting in the morning. A spring-loaded clay-thrower they’d ordered had arrived and was half-assembled in the laundry room downstairs. They were arguing about who was going to put it together.

Kit broke first. She burped and then looked Robin in the eye and said “Excuse me.”

Robin nodded.

Kit grunted.

Robin grunted back.

“So you were raised by a woman,” Kit said.

“I sure was,” Robin said.

“What kind of woman?”

“That’s a big question,” Robin said.

Kit nodded. “You’re right about that.”

Azalea stood up from the table. “Mom,” she said. “Leave everything. We’ll clean up later on. I’m going to show Robin around. Don’t do the dishes, alright?”

“Twist our arms,” Kit said, and put her arm around Aunt Jo’s shoulders. Aunt Jo just waved her hand. They slumped against each other on the bench seat.

Robin started stacking plates and Azalea gave him a sharp look.

“Roger,” he said, and put the plates down. Then he said, “Hey, Kit.”

Azalea froze.

“Mm-hmm?” Kit said.

“What’s GRITS?” Robin said.
Kit grinned. She licked her lips and patted Aunt Jo on the arm. “Girls raised in the south, honey,” she said.

“I wish you’d remove it,” Aunt Jo said.

“I make an exception for Johanna,” Kit said. “Long as she behaves like a lady.”

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“What’s GRITS,” Azalea said, three steps ahead of Robin on the stairs. “And I’m here trying to protect you.”

“I thought it was a fair question,” Robin said.

“Yeah, I know you did,” she said. She turned to face him on the landing, holding onto the bannister for balance. “I’m going to have a beer. Do you want one?”

Robin nodded.

Azalea was taller, more skeletal in the face, less rounded than she used to be. She had her hair up tight in a ponytail and her freckles ran together on her cheeks. She looked like she could still give an accurate dead-arm. She came back with two beers.

“I also took a little bit of acid before dinner,” she whispered. “There’s more if you want.”

“Buddy’s hurt,” Robin said.

“What?”

“Buddy hurt himself. Today. At the ropeswing.”

“Jesus. What happened?”
“He slipped off a branch. He fucked himself up pretty good. Jesus Christ. Do you have any mouthwash? Or a mint or something? Something’s wrong with my mouth.”

“Yeah—wait—come in here. Are you serious? Is he okay?” She led him into one of the bedrooms and fished around in her bag and handed him a piece of gum.

“He’s fine. He’s at the hospital. He dislocated his shoulder and, uh, separated his retina. And I guess he swallowed a bunch of water. He was pretty fucked up.”

“When did this happen?”

“This afternoon. Ugh, fuck.” The gum absorbed all the moisture in his mouth. It tasted chalky and sour. He pushed past Azalea and out of the room and spit it out in the bathroom sink. He ran the tap and put his mouth under it and swished.

Azalea handed him a hand towel. “You okay?” she said.

He nodded.

“So, wait,” she said. “He fell off a ropeswing?”

Robin nodded again. He spit in the sink.

“At Quabbin?” she said.

“Yup. He slipped off the branch.”

They were quiet for a minute.

“Wait,” Robin said. “You know about Quabbin?”

“Oh yeah,” she said. “I know the ropeswing, too. We used to go with your mom.”

“You did?”

Azalea nodded. “A few times. When we were in high school. We’d take the trains down and your mom would pick us up from South Station.”

“Where was I?” Robin said.
“I don’t know,” she said. “Probably just at home. You used to sit in your bedroom and, like, pick locks.”

“I did used to do that,” he said.

“Do you want to go to the basement?” Azalea said.

“Oh, shit,” Robin said. “The basement.” He dried his face and hung up the towel.

“Yeah. Also, did you say you had acid?”

“I do.”

“I’ll take you up on that.”

“You sure?”

“As long as I can stay here tonight.”

“That’s sort of what I assumed,” she said.

The basement smelled the same. Azalea hit the flat triple switch on the wall at the foot of the stairs. Robin crossed the room and put his hands against the glass of the porch door. On the other side, big dark spiders hung in dense webs that glowed orange in the porch light.

Azalea went upstairs and came back with a little mason jar.

“Should I call Buddy?” she said.

“Only if you want to talk to his wife,” Robin said.

Azalea put down the mason jar on the ping-pong table. She turned to face Robin.

“Alright,” she said. “First of all, fuck you for saying that. He’s like a brother to me. And second of all, what are you doing here? And third, what was that shit this weekend?”
“I didn’t mean that in a mean way,” Robin said. “I’m sorry. I meant it, like, literally, you’d be talking to Lindsay. Buddy’s zonked out. And also, don’t give me that brother shit. You guys have been fucking for like fifteen years.”

Azalea opened her mouth, then closed it. “Twelve years,” she said finally. “And he’s still like a brother to me, so fuck off.”

“How about cousins?” Robin said. “That’s less creepy.”

“You didn’t answer my second question,” Azalea said. “What are you doing here? And how much acid do you want? A quarter tab?” She looked him up and down. “Or maybe a half?”

“What’d you do—a quarter?”

“Yeah. It’s really mellow. But you’re twice as big as me.”

“Mm,” he said. “Yeah. But it seems like you maybe do it more than me?”

She sat down on the couch and opened the jar and took out a little perforated sheet. She cut the corner off one of the squares and put it on her knee. Then she pushed the mason jar under the couch.

“Got to keep it in the dark,” she said. She took his hand and transferred the tiny piece of paper to his palm.

“Just eat it?” he said.

“Yeah. Just put it on the roof of your mouth. Don’t swallow it. Leave it there for, like, a minute, and then you can swallow it or spit it out or whatever. I mean, swallow your spit, though.”

“Roger,” he said. He put the paper in his mouth and lost track of immediately. He tried not to swallow, and searched around with his tongue.
“But yeah,” she said. I do it sometimes. It’s a B-school thing. There’s this group of second-years who throw drug dinner parties. It’s really… civilized.” She stared at the wall for a few seconds. “They’re all going to be so fucking rich,” she said.

“Hmm,” Robin said. He located the piece of paper against one of his molars. He checked his watch. It had been two minutes. He swallowed. They sat side-by-side on the couch, beers between their knees.

“So, a hundred words,” Azalea said. “Go.”

“A hundred?” Robin said.

“I mean, just tell me what’s going on. Sorry. It’s a thing my mom does.”

“I remember that,” he said. “She did it to me upstairs.”

“Ugh, god,” Azalea said. “I used to hate that. She did it to everyone who came over.”

“So you live here now?” Robin said.

She looked at him sidelong, opened her mouth a little, and wiggled her jaw. “Robby,” she said. Then she said it again, drawing it out: “Robbaayyy.” She punched him hard in the leg. “What the fuck are you doing here, man?”

Robin took a deep breath. He untangled the crotch of his shorts and scooched into the couch. “I didn’t really know where else to go,” he said.

Azalea raised her eyebrows.

“After Buddy fell,” Robin said. “I’ve been staying at his house. Since I saw you.”

“I don’t understand,” she said. “Were you living out there?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Robin said. “I’ve been out there since May.”

“Fucking my friend Layla,” she said. “Why did she think your name was Bobby?”

“Barry,” Robin said. “That’s who I was out there.”
“What do you mean?” She was tapping her feet and twitching, like she was listening to music.

“I was pretending to be someone named Barry.”

She stopped twitching and raised her eyebrows.

“Can you give me a little more information?” she said.

“I was… literally, pretending to be someone named Barry. I had his driver’s license. I was working at the yacht club as him.”

“Okay, but, why?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“I mean, were you scamming someone?” she said. “Were you stealing from the club?”

“I don’t think I was scamming anyone,” he said. “I was doing the job.”

“Well, you were scamming Layla,” Azalea said.

“Okay, yeah,” he said. “But I really didn’t mean to lie to her. Other than the name, I really was just being myself.”

“Robin, look,” Azalea said. “If I’m being honest, I already know about the Barry thing. I made Buddy explain it to me. But I’m trying to get you to be straight with me. And I’m thinking, right now, that you maybe don’t have any clue how seriously bad this is. You took advantage of her.”

“I’m really sorry,” Robin said.

“Don’t tell me!”

He stared at the carpet and Azalea stared at him.

“I should call her,” he said.
“That’s the absolute least you should do,” she said. “Look. I know you. You’re also like a brother to me. Or a cousin or whatever. I know, or at least I sort of faintly understand, that you have some serious issues and that you probably didn’t mean to hurt anyone other than, to some extent, yourself. But to a normal person, that’s, like, really abusive behavior. Do you see that? Do you see that you violated a whole lot of emotional and physical trust?”

Robin nodded.

“Hey,” she said. She moved her head around until he met her eyes. “Hey. It’s alright. I just need to know that you see that.”

“I see it,” Robin said.

“Do you?”

“I get it, Zaley. I’ll call her. I’ll go fucking see her. I feel terrible. I didn’t mean to violate anyone’s trust. I was just trying to get away for a little.”

“Alright, alright,” she said. “So, what? You can’t stay at Buddy’s without him?”

“It’s not that,” Robin said. “I just can’t be around a hospital again.”

“Why don’t you go to the Mansion? Or the Palace, or whatever you guys call it?”

“The Big House,” Robin said. “I mean, you know what happened with my mom. I can’t really be around her, either.”

“So… I’m your third option?”

“You’re my third option, Zaley. Third of three.”

“Well, I’m honored.” She finished her beer. He still had most of his left. His mouth still felt sour and he tried to breathe away from her. She was jiggling both knees. Then she stood up and stretched.

“I’m going to turn on some lamps,” she said.
Robin patted the warm spot on the couch. “We used to play this crazy game down here,” he said.

Azalea hit a switch and the fluorescent overhead light went off.

“We’d take all the pillows from the blue sofa,” Robin said, “and the ones from the bench, and ones from upstairs, every pillow we could find, and we’d make a giant pile of them against the low wall there, and cover the pile in blankets.” It was like remembering a dream. “The game was that one of you would go hide in the pile of pillows, and the other one would take a running start and just cannonball into it. But you didn’t know where the other guy was. So it was kind of like Battleship. Then you’d switch.”

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“We played every night. As soon as Virginia went to bed.”

“Didn’t you get hurt?”

“Oh, yeah, all the time. Buddy broke his toe. One time he elbowed me right in the eye. One time we smashed our heads against each other. It must’ve been a mistake—he was coming out of the pile or something, or still rearranging the pillows. Anyway, we just went forehead to forehead. Neither of us could remember what happened. We got blood all over the place.”

“I remember that,” she said. “You did a shitty job cleaning it up.”

“We had to throw out some of the blankets,” Robin said. He knelt by the dividing wall and ran his hand over it. The paint was spiderwebbed and he could feel indentations in the wood. “We called it ‘Yankee Cannonball’,” he said. “Bud’s invention.”

“Ask me if I’m surprised,” she said.

“There’s nothing surprising about it. I just haven’t thought about it in a long time.” He lifted the couch cushions and looked underneath.
“What are you looking for?” she said.

“I dunno,” Robin said. “Nothing.” What was he looking for? He knelt and stuck his hand down the crack at the back of the cushions. He pulled out a white plastic BB. “We used to do this thing called ‘the Scrounge’. When we ran out of money, we’d go searching around in all the couch cushions. You needed a buck twenty-five for a slice of pepperoni. You remember that?”

“At D’Antoni’s, yup. Before that it was a dollar.”

“Well,” Robin said, ‘we could usually find enough change for a slice. And then we’d do the Weed Scrounge, too, when we ran low on weed. Buddy used to grind it up on the arm of the sofa, and there were always little crumbles of it in the carpet. I think he did a sloppy job on purpose so that there’d be some extra for the Scrounge. Jesus, sorry. There’s a lot coming back right now.”

“Relax,” she said. “Do you want to see the house?”

Robin nodded. He felt like he was floating.

“You guys used to come here a lot, right?” Azalea said, leading Robin up the stairwell.

“We did, yeah,” Robin said. “We’d come out for a week in the winter. Or early spring. Whenever you guys weren’t using it, I guess.”

“You and everybody else,” Azalea said. “It wasn’t even really our place. I mean, I never left anything here. Clothes or anything.”

“Not true,” Robin said. Azalea cocked her head at him. “We found your underwear once.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Azalea said.
“Seriously. I mean, not on purpose. We were in the laundry room, smoking pot. Buddy though he heard someone so he went to hide the bong behind the dryer. He goes to get it out and there’s this pair of underwear stuck to the bottom.”

“Of course you were smoking pot in the laundry room. My mom used to say she could smell it after you guys stayed here.”

“We usually smoked in the backyard. Is there still a woodpile back there?”

“Yeah, but hang on,” Azalea said. She took a step up toward the second floor and listened. Then she stepped back down. “What underwear were they?”

“Say what?”

“How’d you know they were mine?”

“I don’t remember. Maybe they weren’t.”

“Fuck you. What underwear?”

“You really want to know?”

“You’d better tell me.”

“They were… ‘Thursday’.”

Azalea slapped a hand over her mouth. “Oh, my god,” she said.

“Purple.”

“I know,” she said. “Fucking, Thursday! I thought I left those at Jeffrey Kleinstein’s house after the Super Bowl. Jesus. My whole life is a lie. I can’t believe you remember that.”

“I was like five years old. It was memorable.”

“You were smoking pot at five?”

“Alright, I was older. But Buddy’s the one that took them.”

“Buddy took them?”
“I’ve said too much.”

“Oh!” she said, turning to face Robin.

Robin couldn’t have been older than nine or ten, so Buddy must’ve been about thirteen.

Buddy’d kept them for a long time.

“I hated this carpet,” Robin said, scuffing it with his big toe. “You remember you used to have that dog?”

“Oh, I know,” she said. “It turned out he had worms. I don’t even want to think about it.” She opened a door on the landing. “You remember the game room.”

“We used to play these Scrabble games on the floor in here, except we’d do it in reverse, just lay out the tiles and start building, and the point was to make the highest-scoring board you could. I think our record was, like, six hundred.”

“So, you mean, you were nerds,” she said.

Robin crouched in front of the bookshelf. The scrabble box was nearly flat under the weight of a bunch of other board games. “Affirmative,” he said. “We used to keep cigarettes in here. Shit, I’m realizing that we spent a lot of time in this house. More than I thought. My appendix burst here once.”

“I was there,” she said. “Yeah, you guys did come up here a lot. Your mom used to do lectures at the university in the summer. And then you know about Buddy.”

“I know what about Buddy?”

There was a groan from the porch and a chair scraped across the wood.

“That he and I used to come out here.”

“You mean when I saw you guys? In New York?”

“Well, no. We both lived in New York then. I mean, like, high school.”
“You and Buddy came out here in high school?”

“I figured he would’ve told you. This was probably a bedroom when you were here. It’s now my mom’s office…”

“Wasn’t he dating Lindsay?”

“Yes, he was,” Azalea said. She opened the door of the office and presented it with an outstretched hand, like Vanna White. The twin beds were gone. The carpet was still there. “It was a naughty time,” she said. “Look at this.” She led him into the office. In the closet, where they’d used to keep sheets and pillowcases and those awful staticky fleece blankets, there was now a huge wooden armoire.

“I see,” Robin said.

“Close your eyes.”

“What? Why?”

“Dead serious. Close them. In fact, leave the room for a second.”

Robin squinted at her, and she put her hands on her hips. “Okay,” he said. He left the room and stood in the front hall. He walked over to the front door and cupped his hands around his eyes and peered through the glass. The Jeep was still sitting there, halfway down the last bit of driveway, holding fast.

“Oh, okay,” Azalea said from the office. “You can come back now.”

She was standing in front of the armoire, except that the whole front panel had opened outward, and inside were half a dozen guns.

“Holy shit,” Robin said. He pulled the string over his head and the closet light came on.
“I know,” she said. “It’s unreal. She got all these in the last year. Actually, some of them are Kit’s. It’s since they started dating. They shoot targets out back. Try to shoot deer, but I don’t think they’ve hit one yet.”

“I remember your mom being strictly anti-gun.”

“It’s weird out here. The far left and the far right sort of touch at the edges. There’s a whole bunch of them, they meet up and go tromp around in the backyard and shoot stuff. I’m actually totally fine with it. I mean, someone’s going to shoot their eye out, but still. It makes her feel safe. And I don’t think she’s ever felt safe. I guess she’s getting old.”

Azalea shut the front of the armoire and locked it with a little key.

“Eyes,” she said, and Robin covered them with his hands.

“Wow,” Azalea said. They’d moved to the wraparound bench by the fireplace. Azalea was lying on the carpet doing yoga stretches, nodding at everything Robin was saying, and once in a while she lit on some pose or movement that seemed to give her pleasure, like curling her toes and rubbing the tops of them against the carpet, or pulling on both of her earlobes at the same time. Robin tugged on his own earlobes.

“I know,” he said. “It was very transactional.” He was lying on the bench like a corpse, with his hands crossed over his chest.

“Well,” Azalea said, going into a back bend, “she was always kind of a freak.”

Robin stood up. The air in the room had gotten darker and colder. He was walking through the air, parting it like a wedge, leaving a wake behind him. He swished over to the jacuzzi. He hit the light switch on the wall next to it and the green tub lit up prismatically. It was full of dust and dead roly-polies.
“I jerked off in here once,” he said.

“Excuse me?”

“The first time I got stoned. It was a really nice night. Wow, I’m sorry. I realize this is your house. But it was… meaningful, I guess.”

“Don’t let me stop you,” she said.

He turned on the hot-water tap.

“I was kidding,” she said.

“No, no, no, no, no,” he said, “I’m just…”

It gushed out hard, swirling the dirt and dead bugs in a pattern that looked sort of fallopian. The water was extremely cold. He let it run until the last of the dirt had made the circuit and then he shut it off.

“Is your mom there too?”

“What? Where?”

“At Dartmouth? I thought she said…”

“Oh, yeah. She’s in the MFA program. She’s writing a memoir. Now she and Kit are writing it together I think. But, no, it’s great. It’s weird, but it’s great. I see her all the time. I guess I haven’t seen you in a really long time, but, yeah, my mom and I had this pretty big falling out. Right after I moved to New York.”

“Wow, I’m sorry,” Robin said. “I didn’t know. What was it about?” He worked the lever on the jacuzzi and closed the drain.

“Actually, it kind of had to do with Buddy. I mean, it had to do with a million things. But this was at that same time.”
“I’d love to hear about the Buddy stuff, too,” Robin said. “I mean, later. He never told me about it.”

“Great,” she said. “Queue it up. But yeah, it was just this weird moment where I was suddenly doing this whole New York thing. I was working at Bain—at”

“Mm, yeah, Bain,” Robin said. The drugs were working.

“—and so I was traveling four days a week, eating out every night, you know. And I told her I wasn’t coming home for Thanksgiving, and she goes, ‘I know.’ Which really pissed me off. I don’t know why. I mean, I think I know why. My therapist and I kind of figured out why. Oh, and she also said something like, ‘Who’s the guy?’ And you know my mom. She’s so, so perceptive. And I don’t think she was being mean. But I took it as this whole attack on my lifestyle, which I was already super self-conscious of, and I just flipped on her, and told her, you know, all the normal stuff. ‘I’m not you’, whatever. When really I was just kind of freaked out about the whole thing, too. Like, I felt like a total imposter, doing this totally basic, fratty, New York, consulting, thing, and making all this money. And I took it out on her and gave her a pretty rude earful and that was that, in terms of our relationship, for, like, two years.”

“Wow,” Robin said. “Hey, do you mind if I actually run a bath? I have gym shorts in my car. Let’s keep talking. But I’m also just dying to take a bath. I think it would feel really good right now.”

“By all means, man,” she said. “Be my guest.”

“Okay, great. But keep going. What happened?” He turned on the hot tap and let it run at full strength.

“I mean, I finally realized I was just totally projecting all this anxiety and self-consciousness onto her,” Azalea said, “and I was afraid that I really was becoming this shallow,
basic, money- and status-oriented person, and that I’d lost touch with or rejected this world I’d grown up in, which was my mom’s whole world, and her whole ethos, too. And at the same time I had started thinking of her as this, like, bumfuck yokel, and that was really, really hard for me to face, that she was out-of-date, and not even all that progressive about a lot of stuff, and that I was just smarter and more with it and more fucking feminist than her, and I had developed a lot of self-hatred over those feelings. A lot of shame.”

“You’re really good at talking about all this,” Robin said.

“Therapy, man. It was a journey. And then one day I had this total fucking breakdown. Or, like, epiphany, I guess. Epiphany-breakdown.”

“A revelation?” Robin said.

“Sure, yeah, a revelation. A breakthrough. It was Halloween. And I was doing, you know, like, the chicest possible Halloween. Some rooftop party with a bunch of really fancy people, and a deejay, and we were all on this really pure Molly, and I was dressed up like Carmen Sandiego in this rad fucking coat and hat, and—anyway, I just got in this mood, and I started thinking about how fucking _successful_ I was, and then I went and started poking around this penthouse, and I ended up in the master bedroom—”

“Carmen Sandiego,” Robin said.

“Exactly. And I ended up in front of this huge mirror, like, posing, and then for some reason I started thinking about Halloween when I was a kid. Maybe you remember? My mom used to do this thing where, before we went trick-or-treating, me and whoever, we all had to do this scavenger hunt around the house. Like, a spooky scavenger hunt.”

“I can’t remember that,” Robin said. “I wish I could remember it. I don’t think I was there.”
“Well, it was this whole thing. And I’m remembering these scavenger hunts, which, by the time I was in, like, seventh grade, I was just so over, and it was so embarrassing, my mom making all my friends prowl around the house looking for, like, Cadbury Creme Eggs hidden in the basement, and making everyone put their hands in bowls of spaghetti and stuff. I was mortified… I hated it. And so I’m remembering this, and suddenly it hits me just how much work she used to put into it. She was alone, you know? Like, always alone. In this big-ass house. And she probably spent the whole morning buying these special candies and making, fucking, spaghetti, and hiding shit all over the place. For like ten years she did this. And I was so, so ungrateful. I was embarrassed. And she knew it! And she just plugged away, year after year, long after I’d stopped even pretending to participate. And I’m looking at myself in the mirror in this giant red hat and this, like, thousand-dollar crimson wool trench coat, and I’m thinking about my mom, all by herself, making spaghetti in the kitchen in the middle of the woods. And Robby—I just lost it. I fucking sobbed. I remember at one point the door opened and the host, you know, whose bedroom this was, and who probably going to tell me to beat it, and she took one look at my face and just left me alone, and closed the door behind her.”

The tub was full and steaming. Robin shut off the water. “That’s wild,” he said.

“Yeah. And so anyway, I finally reached out to her, and I went home for Thanksgiving that year, and we talked it out, and she was so cool about it. I realized she’d known all along and was just waiting on me, which was just so beautiful and encouraging, and I explained to her that I really just liked doing this, the consulting thing, the New York thing. I liked the problem-solving, and the travel, and the whole pace of it, and she was just like, ‘I know.’ Like, ‘Yeah honey, you always had that in you.’ You know, just zero judgment, and she was like ‘I’m just happy you figured it out on your own, and happy you’re back, and happy we can talk about it.’
And, boom, we were fine again, talking again. And a year later I’m back here at school and she’s at school and everything’s fucking great. I mean, I’m happy. We’re both happy.”

“Amazing,” Robin said. “Amazing.” He dried his hands on his shorts, took a step toward her, and opened his arms. She stepped into them and they hugged, tight, and Robin felt his face filling and twisting, and he sniffled hard. He let go. “Amazing,” he said. “I’m gonna go get my gym shorts.”

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Holy mackerel. The entire night sky fanned out overhead, and around it a black ring of treetops sponged up the starlight.

He peed behind the Jeep and then crept into the woods and from here the house glowed like something enchanted. A safe house for a traveler. He wished Buddy were here, wished it were Virginia upstairs, putting the dishes away wet, mumbling poetry. But the outside world felt wide-open and beautiful as well, and the Jeep sat up like a guard dog on the hill, its knobbly tires caked in mud, and he patted the hood and gave a low, friendly whistle. Then he opened the trunk and rooted around in his supply bucket for the glossy gym shorts at the bottom.

He watched through the upstairs window as Aunt Jo and Kit did the dishes together at the sink, then one of them shut off the kitchen light. A minute later the light came on in the second-floor bathroom, the master bath, Virginia’s old room, where he and Buddy had filled a thousand water balloons.
“I thought I’d join you,” Azalea said. She was in an old stretched-out blue one-piece bathing suit with “USA” on the chest. She’d made it a bubble-bath.

“You were out there for a while,” she said. “I got us beers.”

“Amazing,” Robin said. “Thanks for waiting.” He stood behind the half-wall to change. Azalea stood and put her foot in and then lowered herself into the water.

“Oh, yeah,” she said. “That feels good.”

“Traincar style?” Robin said. Azalea nodded and moved to the wall-side of the tub, and Robin lowered himself in next to her, his feet at her shoulder, his hips at her feet.

“Well, that feels fucking amazing,” he said. Azalea nodded. She’d closed her eyes. She was covered in bubbles except for her face, and Robin slid down so that his chest was underwater. He put his feet up against the cold tile wall.

“It’s good acid,” he said.

“It really is,” she said.

“So, question,” Robin said. “You were sort of the same deal as us, right? Like, your mom went to a sperm bank?”

“Yeah, man,” she said. “My mom, your mom, that whole group. I think there were like six or seven of them.

“Buddy called it the ‘shadowy cabal’,” Robin said. “He did a bunch of research on it. Wasn’t it mostly just a lesbian thing?”

“Do you not know the story?”

“I only know what Buddy told me, and I think he was kind of making a lot of it up. My understanding was that it was this radical-feminist, end-of-the-world type thing. No attachments, undermine the patriarchy, et cetera.”
He felt a fart coming.


Robin shook his head. He suppressed the fart, then wished he hadn’t. It had been dishonest. Her shins were slick against his ribs, and the hips of their bathing suits were held together by underwater friction.

“Basically,” she said, “this dude gets shot down, a pilot, and he ends up in this wartime hospital and he’s completely braindead. Like, vegetative. Except that he can say ‘Garp,’ and he gets a hard-on at the same time every day. So this woman nurse who’s caring for him decides to fuck him and get pregnant so that she can have a kid without having to deal with a man.

Anyway, my mom though this was the funniest thing. So she got her friends together and made this club and they called themselves ‘Garpers’ and they wrote editorials in the paper and stuff. It basically started as a joke. Except a few of them actually did it. My mom, your mom, this other woman who used to stay here a few times a year. A few others. There are a bunch of us kids floating around.”

“How’d you find out about it?”

“It wasn’t a secret. My mom told me about it in middle school.”

“Hm,” Robin said. “I don’t remember Buddy ever asking about it directly. I know I didn’t. I think he got the information from his interviews. He did a big project on all this stuff in high school. I think he was probably the leading Virginia Yates scholar in the world.”

“Buddy was very weird about it,” she said. “He had some hang-ups. He took it personally. I told him to go to therapy. Do you know if he ever did?”

“I think so. Lindsay made him.”
Azalea didn’t say anything. She let herself slide down until her head was underwater, then she slid back up and wiped the bubbles off her face. She looked like a kid. The skin on her neck and chest was starting to mottle.

“I was super jealous of her,” she said.

“Don’t be. I mean, I love Lindsay. But don’t be.”

“Easy for you to say,” she said.

Robin tried to slide down and dunk his face, but he was too big. His shoulders pinched up against her hips. He got water in his mouth and came back up.

“Did you ever go to therapy?” she asked.

“Negative,” he said. “Well, actually, that’s not true. I had to, for a little while. As a court-ordered thing. But it never really took.”

“You ever think about going back?”

“It has occurred to me, yes,” he said. “It would probably be a good idea.”

“Because you’re wound up pretty tight,” she said. “Also, I mean, there’s obviously some underlying stuff with the cheating and, you know, the identity theft?”

“Mm,” Robin said.

“Plus,” she said, “that crazy shit that happened with your mom. I mean Buddy was all wrung out over that. I assume you were too?”

“Affirmative,” Robin said. He built up a crown of bubbles on top of his head, then gave himself a long white beard. “Who am I?” he said.

“I don’t know. Poseidon?”

“That’s good,” he said. “How about now?” He wiped off the crown and rounded out the beard.
“Umm… Santa?”

“Close. Hemingway.”

“You would,” she said. “Hey—” She kneed him in the shoulder. “You don’t hide it very well. You want to talk about it?”

“About what?” he said. He filled his eye sockets with bubbles.

“Your mom,” she said.

He washed the bubbles out of his eyes. “Normally,” he said, “I would avoid your question. I’m extremely good at avoiding that question. But tonight I will explain myself a little bit, because I’ve been not-thinking about it pretty hard, and in the process, I realize, I’ve actually been thinking about it.”

She nodded. “No pressure,” she said.

“Well, okay,” he said. “But, so, earlier, when you were talking about Thanksgiving, I was thinking. Not ignoring you, but just remembering how, when I was a kid, we used to play Scrabble every Thanksgiving after dinner. It was Virginia’s big game—she insisted on it. We played teams, always boys versus girls, and so she’d have some of her poetry students on her team, and Buddy and I’d have their boyfriends on our team. Oh, and it was dirty Scrabble. Double points for dirty words. Buddy hated that. He was a really good Scrabble player, but he was very formal about it.”

“Well,” she said, “he’s a Virgo.”

“Um, sure,” Robin said. “But so, he didn’t like the dirty-word rule, because it was subjective. Anyway, Virginia used to just smoke us. And her poets just kind of huddled around her, soaking her in, and she and Buddy were always the only real players at the table. And later, me. Anyway, Buddy used to get pissed when she beat us. Or when she challenged him, which
she did a lot. Sometimes just to tick him off, I think. Anyway, one year Buddy memorized all the two-letter words, and we actually came close to beating her that year—she challenged him on a few of them, AA and stuff—”

“Aah-aah?”

“Yeah, AA. It’s a kind of lava.”

“You fucking nerds.”

“Anyway, she never looked up a list or anything, but she also never forgot a two-letter-word that Buddy played, and so by watching him she sort of learned the list too, over the years. Oh, he fucking hated that. Neither of them knew what the stupid words meant, either.”

“Virgos,” she said.

“But, the point is, she was a great Scrabble player. And I got pretty good too, but I could never beat her, either. I mean, you know, once in a while we’d get lucky with a big word, maybe win that way. But, so, fast-forward. She breaks her head open, gets all these surgeries. And the first Thanksgiving that she’s healthy enough to be home, she gets out the old Scrabble set. And Buddy and I are thinking, what do we do? But she insists on doing everything the same as always, boys versus girls, us versus her. So we go for it. And you know what happened?”

“You beat her.”

“We fucking smoked her. It wasn’t even fair. These poor poets on her team, the ones who stuck around, they were trying everything, and she wasn’t listening, she thought she was still good, but she was getting, you know, seven, eleven points—just garbage.”

“Well, I mean, that makes sense,” Azalea said.

“But, so, it’s been like that ever since,” Robin said. “I mean, the next year, which was 2012, I think, which was the last Thanksgiving I spent with her, we tried to mix up the teams.
But she wouldn’t do it. So we basically ended up just bailing. We let the boyfriends take over and we just sat there and tried not to watch. It was really sad.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I get that. That’s depressing. I haven’t seen her since the accident, but I’ve talked to my mom about it. She was pretty torn up.”

“Watch your toes,” Robin said. He turned on the hot tap. The water bored a hole in the bubbles.

“Alright, so, but how do you feel about it?” she said. “I mean, that’s what a therapist would push you on here. I don’t mean to push you on it, necessarily. But I’m just saying.”

“That’s the thing I’m not super great at,” Robin said. “I don’t really know how I feel. Not in a way I can articulate. I certainly have moods. There are things that piss me off. But I don’t have this clear, packaged set of feelings about my mother. Believe me, I’ve tried. I’ll say something and it’ll sound completely false. So I try again, and it’s like I’m trying to convince myself of something. Some causal link. You start to make it causal, or linear, and it stops feeling true for me. And I don’t want to feel something just because it fits a narrative. Or because there’s some really specific ten-cent word that someone’s dying to use. You know?”

“Well, but, that’s what a professional’s for. I’m not trying to strong-arm you here. I just thought you seemed like you might want to break through on some of this stuff. It doesn’t take much. Or, it didn’t for me. Just a little push. But we can talk about something else if this is upsetting you.”

Robin realized he was making himself small, curling away from her, crossing his toes. He straightened out and splashed his face.

“What’s your tattoo?” he said.
“Oh,” she said. She rolled to the side and pulled up the hip of her bathing suit. On her side, above the waist, was a new-looking tattoo of an island, a tree, and a rowboat, tied off by a long line to the tree trunk.

“Cool,” he said.

She craned her neck to see it herself. “I thought it was kind of a nice idea,” she said. “How you can kind of come and go from the little island.”

“It’s kind of a Vermont-y looking tree,” he said.

She smiled. “Exactly,” she said. She let the edge of the suit down and slipped back under the bubbles.

“Alright, fine,” he said after a minute. “I have another anecdote. Is that okay with you?”

“Don’t be rude,” she said.

“Well, this is where my mind is going. I think this is how I access this stuff. Is it alright if I tell it?”

“I’m sorry. I’m kidding,” she said. “Yes. Go ahead.”

“So Virginia used to have this enormous waterbed,” he said.

“Really?” she said. “A waterbed?”

“No joke. A California King. Big enough that all three of us would sleep on it when we were little.”

“Was the water… cold?” she said. “I guess I don’t know how waterbeds work. I didn’t think they were real.”

“There was a heater in it,” he said. “The water was warm. It was awesome. The frame was like a giant pool, with this rubber reservoir in it, and the bed had this huge headboard with a
round mirror and lamps and bookshelves built into it, and little cupboards by your head. All dark hardwood. It was an awesome bed.”

“I can so imagine your mom having a waterbed.”

“Right?” he said. “Doesn’t it just make sense? Anyway, this water bed, it had an overhang at the foot, like two or three feet, and under the overhang was this tiny door, with a tiny little doorknob on it.”

“I’m picturing the door in ‘Alice in Wonderland’,” she said. “With the talking doorknob.”

“Yes. Exactly. And this tiny door led to a crawlspace under the bed. I mean it was probably a structural thing, access to the frame, or so you could, like, deal with a leak or something. But it was also just this Gothic little den—all these struts, like a cathedral ceiling or something, and dusty cobwebs everywhere, and about two feet of clearance, and you could crawl around the entire footprint of this king bed. And I mean it was incredibly dangerous. It was strictly, strictly off-limits. That was one of Virginia’s hard rules: no going under the waterbed. I think she actually taped it up once, or even tried to, like, screw it shut. But, obviously, we went under there all the time.”

“I feel like the couple of times I came to your house there was always some secret room or trap door or something,” Azalea said. “It was a little freaky.”

Robin tried to remember when she had visited. He couldn’t. Maybe he was thinking of the wrong era—that she hadn’t visited when they were kids, but that maybe Buddy had brought her home later on, when they were older.

“Freaky…” he said. “Well, right, yeah. I mean I guess that’s what I’m saying. This place was totally magical. Whenever Virginia was out of the house we’d take our sodas or
whatever and go in under the bed. We had all these books down there—all the *Goosebumps* and *Hardy Boys*, and flashlights, because it was pitch black with the door closed, and all these snacks and stuff, and all these pillows. We had our Pogs down there. At one point we brought in our sleeping bags. It was a total secret hideout.”

He felt another fart coming on, and this time he let it out. The tub rumbled Azalea’s jaw dropped. She made a face at him with her eyes wide and her jaw stuck out and then she covered her nose and mouth with her sudsy hands.

“Anyway,” Robin said, grinning, piling suds up over the site of the fart. “Anyway—so! Buddy got this idea that we should try to sneak in there while Virginia was home, and actually try to *sleep* in there. And so it became a mission, and we planned it all out for some non-school-night, probably this was the summer, and we stashed everything in there ahead of time, and after she put us to bed, which was always, like, a soft bedtime in the summer, we snuck out and waited until she went to brush her teeth and then we crawled in under the bed and waited for her to come back. And she came back and got in bed and we could tell she was reading because we could hear her turning pages and picking up and putting down her mug. She always had a mug of hot milk with peppermint schnapps before bed. I mean, that was the defining smell of my childhood.”

“This is giving me a totally new vision of your mother,” Azalea said. “I always thought of her as this tall, distant, otherworldly poet lady. Like, with no earthly needs. Now I’m imagining her drinking peppermint schnapps on a waterbed.”

“Oh, yeah, she had earthly needs,” he said. “She drank a lot of peppermint schnapps. And she used to fart when she wrote poetry. But hang on. This is the best part. So we lie there in the dark for a while, listening to her read and drink her milk, which always had this really
gross skin on it, because she would boil it in the microwave. And then we hear her put the book down, and turn off the light, and we’re being totally silent, and you can kind of hear the waterbed gurgle a little as she’s shifting around. And then after a few minutes Buddy finds my face with his hand and he puts his finger on my lips, like, ‘Shhhhh’, and then there’s this little snap and this flash of light and suddenly this TV turns on right beside us.”

“Shut up,” she said.

“I know. He’d somehow, without me knowing, he’d run an extension cord under the carpet and into the bedframe and he’d dragged in this little TV we had in the basement for playing video games, and he’d brought in the Super NES and all our games.”

“Super what?”

“Super NES. Super Nintendo.”

“I’m enjoying this anecdote,” she said. “How old were you?”

“Umm. I was, probably… seven? Eight? Maybe older?”

“So Buddy was… twelve or thirteen?”

“I guess so,” Robin said.

“So he was doing this for you,” she said.

“I mean, we were doing it together,” Robin said. “It was a mission.”

“No,” she said, grinning. She lifted a handful of suds and squeezed it into the air. “He was twelve or thirteen, and you were his kid brother, and he set up an adventure for you. That’s so sweet.”

“Well, that’s not how I saw it.”

“Then it worked,” she said. “Do you think your mom was in on it?”
“No way,” he said. “No way she was in on it. Not under the bed. She was really strict about us going under there. Though, I guess she did, sort of, generally approve of that kind of thing. Sneaking around, reading past bedtime. She was on board with that, philosophically.”

“Robin, that’s so fun. It sounds magical. But, again, we’re still in anecdote-land. What are you getting at with your mom? And don’t bite—I’m just trying to help.”

“Well, let me finish,” he said. “And yes, it was magical. That’s the point. Because, so, however many years later, Artie moves in, and they decide to get rid of this waterbed. I feel like it had sprung a leak or something. So Buddy, Artie, and I rent this dumpster and we go in to take the thing apart. Which was really weird, because this is Virginia’s bed, it’s her bedroom, and at this point Buddy and I aren’t really comfortable being in there. Or, at least, I wasn’t. Because Art’s in the picture, he sleeps there too… it was just weird. But so we somehow drain this rubber mattress, with a siphon, into the bathtub, and we drag it out to the dumpster, and then we start taking apart the bedframe. And it’s just… garbage. Shoddy construction, all the wood’s composite, it’s glued together, plus there are pennies everywhere…”

“Pennies?”

“Yeah, in the big rubberized area under where the water bag was. Like, dozens and dozens of pennies. Loose change. I guess she would fall asleep with her pants on and it would fall out of her pockets. I have no idea. In any case, this magnificent bed from my childhood turns out to be totally bogus. You could tell right away by looking at it. I guess we just sort of imagined it differently. Or, I did.”

“Was the little secret cave still there?”

“I mean, yeah,” Robin said. “We took the whole thing apart. It was still there.”

“And?”
“And it was fucking dangerous! I mean, in hindsight, it was this this cheapo, glued-together frame, with two thousand pounds of water jiggling around on top, and we were down there underneath it wrestling around against the structural supports. We took the whole thing apart with just a couple of hammers. It was sketchy. And we found all these gross old snacks and stuff. Stuff we’d stashed down there. Potato Stix, Slim Jims, sodas—it was gross.”

“Well, I’m glad you weren’t crushed to death as a child.”

“Or suffocated. I think that was another concern. There was a limited amount of air in there.”

“Or suffocated,” she said.

“So I guess I was just a little disillusioned,” he said. “You know, that it wasn’t mahogany or something. That it wasn’t as nice as I remembered it.”

“But it was still a magical place for you, right?”

“Well, yeah. But what I’m saying is—I don’t know. As an adult, it was a sad moment. It wasn’t the same as I remembered it.”

“I think you’re being a little hard on yourself.”

“Alright,” he said. They were quiet for a minute. “Yeah,” he said. “I guess it also scares me that we could’ve gotten hurt.”

“Well, yeah,” she said. “You’re lucky.”

“But I mean, it makes me sad. Like, really sad.”

“I don’t follow,” she said.

“It makes me feel really sad to think about the fact that one of us could’ve gotten hurt, and that then everything would’ve been totally different. And the fact that we had no idea we
were in danger. It makes everything feel really fragile, now. Like, have you ever almost gotten hit by a car or something?”

“Sure, yeah,” she said. “Probably.”

“Whenever that happens to me I get really sad for, like, a week,” he said. “I was biking this summer and nearly got hit by a landscaper coming around a corner. It fucked me up for a while. I couldn’t make eye contact with anyone. It was weird.”

“You should see a therapist, man.”

“I know.”

“Do you think that has to do with your mom?” she said.

They were pressed against each other and Robin didn’t want to move a muscle. Azalea had suds up to her chin and she was resting her head on the edge of the tub. Her eyes were closed.

“Well, yes,” Robin said after a while. “I do. But I can remember being really freaked out about head injuries. Even as a little kid. I used to freak out at the ropeswing because I thought I was going to get my ankle caught in the rope and smash my head against the rocks. And I used to be super weird about playing wall-ball at school. I’d play normally until I had to run to the wall and then I’d pretend to roll my ankle or something and limp around so I wouldn’t have to sprint, because I was afraid of tripping and going headfirst into the wall. And every year in youth hockey they’d show us this PSA about Travis Roy, who was this BU player who went into the boards—”

“I know who Travis Roy is,” she said. “They showed us the same PSA.”
“Ugh,” he said. “So fucked up. I couldn’t watch it. I feel like I skated about half-speed my entire hockey career because I was so nervous about going into the boards and breaking my neck.”

“That’s a legitimate fear,” she said. “A lot of these are.”

“I think I fixate, though. It’s like if you get a new shirt and you’re afraid to wear it out. I’m that way with my brain. I’m afraid to hurt it. Or over-extend it. I’m very protective—I don’t like to share. Like, with the court shrink. We’d have these conversations and suddenly I’d feel like I’d shared too much, like I’d given away too many of my thoughts, and I’d just shut down, and all day I wouldn’t talk to anybody else. It would make me so angry.”

“Well, thanks for talking to me,” she said.

He braced himself on the edge of the tub and stood up. It was happening: he was going into the place where he felt bad for himself. Buddy used to call him ‘Ferdinand the Bull’ when he got like this. Virginia would make him eat a handful of chips to bring his blood sugar up. Azalea stayed where she was as he toweled off.

“You can turn on the fireplace if you want,” she said. He hit a switch on the wall and the gas flame thumped on.

“I’m going to get another beer,” he said.

“Will you get me one?”

“I will. Do I have to worry about your mom?”

“I think you’re safe,” she said. “Will you bring me a pair of sweatpants from my bedroom? In the duffel bag? And my grey sweatshirt? And my cigarettes? And, uh, my lighter? It’s on the bureau.”

“Anything else?” he said.
She shook her head and closed her eyes and slipped underwater.

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Azalea had the same duffel bag that Robin did. Buddy got them from some secret company in Maine and was always giving them to people as gifts.

“Firebomb,” Robin said. He flicked the lighter and tossed it at Azalea, who was sitting wrapped in her towel in front of the gas fireplace.

She gasped and shielded her face and the lighter bounced across the floor. “Ugh,” she said.

“How long are you out here for?” Robin said. He stood behind the dividing wall and got dressed.

“Just tonight,” she said. “I live twenty minutes away. I come and go. We do dinners.”

He handed her the pack of cigarettes. She took out a joint.

“Can you pass me, um…” She looked around. “The soap dish?”

“What about this?” he said, holding up an empty beer bottle.

“That’ll work,” she said.

She stayed in front of the fire and he sat against the wall beside her. They passed the joint back and forth.

“What about you?” she said. “How long are you staying for?”

“It’s a good question,” he said. “You mean, like, here? Or… around?”
“I mean I assume you’re not staying here after I leave tomorrow morning. Or are you going to hang out with my mom? Chop some wood? Shoot guns?”

“Actually, yeah,” he said. “Sorry. We didn’t tell you.”

She touched the joint to the mouth of the bottle, shaping the ashes.

“Honestly,” he said, “I was considering doing it again.”

“Doing what?”

“I was kind of winging it at the yacht club,” he said. “It was always just an experiment. I mean, at any minute I could’ve bumped into someone I knew. It was doomed to fail. But the weird thing was just how well it actually worked. And I kept asking myself, like, what if I took it seriously? And went somewhere where no one would know me or ask any questions and really thought it through? Like, have you seen that YouTube video of the guy who starts with the paperclip and ends up buying a house?”

“You’re not serious, right?”

“Zaley, bear with me,” he said. “Have you seen it?”

“I mean, I know about it.”

“Well, I think that if I can find another driver’s license, that’s kind of the paperclip. And I know where I can find a driver’s license. I was thinking Wyoming, or Montana—somewhere where there aren’t a ton of people. I could work at a tackle shop. Or I could drive trailers for fishing guides. And in the winter I could coach hockey. Buddy could be my reference. He’s done it before.”

“Okay,” she said. “But why?”

“I think he kind of gets off on being part of the scam.”
“No. I mean, why would you want to do that? What’s the appeal?” She dropped the roach into the bottle.

“I don’t know. I like fishing. I like this kind of work. I feel like I learned more this summer than I have at any other time in my life, and I want that feeling again. I felt handy.”

“Well, that’s great,” she said, “but why do you need a fake identity to work at a fishing store in Montana?”

“Well, I mean, I don’t,” he said. “I don’t know. It keeps me sort of insulated, I guess. I feel like I’m more comfortable when I’m a little removed from other people. It makes me feel safe.”

“You have some stuff to work through, man,” she said. “Have you ever heard of a chicken jibe?”

“A what?”

“A chicken jibe. It’s a sailing thing. Say you want to change direction, and you have to jibe to do it. Jibes are tricky. It’s easy to capsize. If you’re scared to jibe, you can turn two-hundred and seventy degrees in the wrong direction, and tack instead of jibing.”

“Why is that a bad thing?”

“It’s not a bad thing,” Azalea said. “Not necessarily. In a storm, it might be the safest thing to do. But it’s also kind of a pussy move. You can sail your whole life and never jibe. But you spend a lot of time spinning in the wrong direction.”

“You’re telling me this is a metaphor?” Robin said.

“I’m telling you that you should Google therapists,” she said. “Just find one and go. I’m serious. And in the meantime, if you want to feel handy, you can help my mom put a hot tub on the deck.”
“She’s putting in a hot tub?”

“She and Kit are, yeah. Out back. They want to watch the deer in the field from the hot tub. She keeps talking about the deer in the field. I’m like, ‘the ones you keep shooting at?’”

Come here,” Azalea said, and she stood up. “I’ll show you.” She picked up the pack of cigarettes and led Robin to the back door. “Careful,” she said, and ducked under the spiderwebs and out onto the deck. “There are some monsters in there.”

“I remember,” Robin said. He had to squat nearly to the ground to clear the webs. “We used to shine the flashlight at them through the glass. You could cast these huge spider shadows on the underside of the porch.”

The house was on a hill, and the back of the basement opened onto a deck that overlooked the field. Above the deck was the second-floor dining porch. Azalea walked to the edge of the deck and lit a cigarette in her cupped hand. She offered him the pack and he shook his head.

The deck was a mess. There were old bikes lined up on one side, a propane grill, a plastic kiddie basketball hoop, a rusty metal dog kennel, and a pile of bark and woodchips where a woodpile had run out. There was a path through the clutter that led to the steps where Azalea was sitting, and the rest of the deck was unusable. It was pressure-treated lumber and it was worn bare in patches and it looked like it would give nasty splinters.

“She wants to put a hot-tub here?”

“Yeah. Right in the middle. And put furniture around it. Make it into a usable space. Put in a little wet bar.”

“What’s underneath?” Robin said.
“Fuck if I know,” she said. “Take a look. There’s a flashlight by the door. You’re the handy one.”

Robin found a yellow plastic flashlight on the ground next to the door. It wouldn’t turn on.

“No batteries,” he said.

“Well, you can investigate in the morning.”

He stood next to her and looked out over the field. He held out his hand and she passed him the cigarette.

“Let your eyes adjust,” she said. “You’ll start to see deer. They’re all standing super still right now. They know we’re here.”

He let his eyes adjust.

“Montana,” she said. “That’s fly fishing, right?”

“That’s what it sounds like, yeah.”

“You ever done it?”

“Not really,” he said. “I got a rod this summer.”

“So you’re actually thinking about this?”

“The rod was unplanned. Some member left it in the dockhouse and I took it. But I guess so, yeah.”

She passed him the cigarette. “Look,” she said. “Big buck.”

It sure was. It had been there the whole time, twenty yards away.

“Tell you what,” she said. “You can live with me for a little while. I have an extra bedroom. Talk to my mom in the morning. She’ll put you to work.”
“I don’t think, uh….” Robin kicked the railing. “She wants to put a full-size hot tub out here?”

“Talk to her. I don’t know.”

“I don’t think so. I couldn’t.”

“Shut the fuck up, Robot,” she said. “You’re the one who drove up here out of nowhere. You’re lucky I was here.”

“Yeah, that was a risk,” he said.

“How’d you even remember where the house was?”

“I didn’t,” he said. “I crossed my fingers. I figured I’d remember the roads when I got up here.”

“You got a little while until hockey season,” she said. “Honestly, my mom could use some help. Like I said, she’s getting old. Kit’s old, too. It’s the blind leading the blind. Stick around for a little, offer to help, and see what happens. We can split my rent.”

“Hmm,” he said.

Then—oof!—she punched him in the ribs. He doubled over

“‘Great plan, Azalea,’” she said.

“Ouch,” he said. “Jesus.”

“‘Thank you, Azalea,’” she said, “‘whom I hadn’t seen in years until this weekend, for your hospitality, and for your unquestioning support, and for nipping this fucking thing in the bud.’”

“Thanks, Azalea” he said.

“‘And thank you, Azalea,’” she said, “‘for how fucking patient I was with you after that Layla shit.’”
“Thanks, Zaley,” he said. The buck was still standing there, motionless, his summer antlers bony in the moonlight.

“You’re welcome, Robby” she said. “I’m glad you came up here. You know that, right?” She put her arm around his shoulder and pulled him close. “Are you going to talk to my mom in the morning?”

“I am.”

“Are you going to quit being weird and act like a human being?”

“I will.”

“Alright,” she said. “Let’s go inside.”

“Do you have class tomorrow?” he said. He was leaning against the doorjamb of Azalea’s bedroom while she rummaged through her duffel.

“It’s July,” she said.

“I don’t know how B-School works.”

“It’s still an academic-year type deal,” she said. “I’m working in a research lab for the summer. But I’m off for the Fourth.”

“Well, do you want to play tennis or something?”

“Sure,” she said. “Let’s play early. Get one of the good courts. Do you need to borrow a racquet?”

“Mm. Yes, I do.”

“Do you have sneakers?”

“Can I play in these?”

“Let me see the soles,” she said. He lifted his foot.
“You need non-marking soles,” she said. “I might have something. We’ve got stuff lying around. We can check in the morning.” She stood up holding a dopp kit from the same brand as her duffel.

“Brush-and-flush?” she said. “I think we have some extra stuff under the sink.

“Did you get that from Buddy?”

“What? My Nalgene?”

“No. ‘Brush-and-flush.’ That’s a Buddyism.”

“No it’s not. Everyone says that.”

“Come on,” he said. “That’s all Buddy.”

“Our counselors used to say it at soccer camp. Not everything’s about Buddy.”

“My mistake,” Robin said. “Down with Buddy!” He held up a fist.

“Shut up,” she said.

“So,” Robin said. “I have a question.”

“Mm,” Azalea said. She was leaning over the bathroom sink, brushing her teeth, and Robin was watching her in the mirror.

“And I don’t want to put words in Buddy’s mouth,” he said, “but I think he probably wants it too, with his whole heart.”

Azalea spit and looked up and met Robin’s eyes in the mirror.

“I wish I had my phone,” Robin said. “I want to show you this. But what I’m saying is, hypothetically….” He took a deep breath. “Buddy and I are talking about buying an old hunting-and-fishing lodge on Mosquito Lake in Maine, and turning it into a family compound, and we want you to go in on it with us. I mean, not necessarily even financially. Just, we want
you to be a part of it. Your mom, too, if she wants.” He pointed at the ceiling with his
toothbrush. “And Kit. My mom and Artie will be there… that’s one of Buddy’s conditions.
Anyway. What do you think?” He exhaled.

Azalea cupped water to her mouth, swished, and spat. She shut off the tap and dried her
face with a handtowel.

“It’s right on the lake,” Robin said, “and there are a bunch of log cabins, and a dock.
You could have your own whole cabin. Total privacy. And a sailboat. I’m serious.”

Azalea rehung the towel. Her face was red from the rubbing.

“So that’s what Buddy was getting at,” she said. “I couldn’t figure it out.”

“There’s apparently pretty good trout fishing,” Robin said. “Wait, what?”

Azalea went back to her kit and started pulling out jars and tubes.

“Wait,” Robin said. “What did Buddy say?”

“I feel like he used to talk about that when we were younger,” Azalea said, talking into
her dopp kit. “A ‘family compound.’ And then I was talking to him this weekend, after seeing
you at the bar, and he made some joke about it. He said your mom was getting too fragile for
suburban life, and the next stop was either the glue factory or a cabin in the woods. He wanted
to know if I’d ever sailed on lakes.” She straightened up and looked at Robin in the mirror. She
had dots of white lotion on her cheeks and forehead. “I thought he was kind of asking me
something,” she said, “but I didn’t know what. He said your mom was paying for it.” She
rubbed in the lotion in little circles.

No way, Robin thought. No fucking way. He looked down and saw that he was still
holding the toothbrush and he put it in his mouth and started brushing. So Buddy had been
thinking about it. Which meant he’d crunched the numbers. He wouldn’t have dared mention it,
not to Zaley, if he hadn’t crunched the numbers. Robin knew he was serious about the school district thing, but maybe he wasn’t thinking year-round. No, definitely not. And that changed everything… less to worry about in terms of winterizing, septic. Was it still on the market? He hadn’t checked in days. He patted his pocket.

“Hey,” he said, touching Azalea’s back. “Hey.”

She shut off the tap. “What?”

“Can I borrow a phone charger?”

“Sure,” she said. “It’s upstairs. I’ll grab it.”

“Where are we in the state?” he said.

“Excuse me?”

“In Vermont. Like, east-west. How far east are we?”

“Um? Pretty far east? The New Hampshire State Liquor Store is, like, ten minutes away.”

He was almost halfway there already. Boots on the ground. A lot of questions he could answer even at night. See about the access, the waterfront. He checked his watch. It wasn’t even midnight. The Ritalin was still surging and he could get coffee at White River Junction. He could be there and back in six hours. He leaned in next to her and spat out his toothpaste.

“Is it a car charger?” he said. “Or, I mean, do you have an adaptor? For, like, a cigarette lighter?”

“What are you talking about?” she said. She zipped shut her dopp kit and turned to face him.

“I, uh, I’m not ready for bed,” he said. “I’m going to take a drive.”

“What? Where?”

Curtis
“I don’t know,” he said. “I want to ride this high for a little longer. I feel like hitting the road.”

She stared at him.

“So you’re leaving?”

“No,” he said. “I’m not leaving.”

“It sounds like you’re leaving.”

“I’m not leaving. I’m just—I’m excited. I’m doing a lot of thinking right now and I feel like hitting the road for a little while. I’m not leaving. I promise.”

“Should I be stopping you from doing something?” she said. “How high are you?”

“I’m fine,” he said. “I promise. I’ve had three beers in….” he checked his watch. “Three hours. The acid’s on the way down. Scout’s honor.” He held up his right hand.

She looked at his hand and then back at him.

“Okay…” she said. “Well, don’t get lost. Be safe. There’re gonna be cops out for the holiday. You know that, right?”

“Hey, Zaley,” he said, and took her face in his hands. “I love you. Thank you.” He grabbed her in a bear hug and then kissed her on the cheek. “Oh, hey!” he said. He reached into his pocket. “I got us something.”

“Scratch tickets?” she said.

“Two each,” he said. “I bought them on the drive up.”

“Should we do them now?”

“Let’s save them for the morning.”


He put two fingers to his eyebrow. “See you for tennis in the morning,” he said.
He’d forgotten the charger. Didn’t matter. He had a map somewhere.

He barely had to turn the key: the Jeep vroomed like it’d been waiting this. He kept the headlights off so he wouldn’t flash the house and when he came to the top of the driveway he cut the wheel and as his taillights lit up the treetrunks behind him he tried to brake there was something hard in the way of the pedal. He crunched into a tree.

Fuck. He put it in park and pulled the e-brake and got out.

The beer bottle was wedged directly under the brake pedal. He pulled it out and threw it as hard as he could into the woods.

He’d smashed the right rear taillight. The bumper was a little crooked. Otherwise everything looked fine.

Had Zaley seen? The lights in the front of the house were dark. Her bedroom was off the back. She couldn’t have.

He passed the 30 MPH sign, craggy and lunar in his weak low beams, and counted power poles as he climbed the hill. He had a hard-on, which he only realized when he leaned sideways to get the map from the glove box and felt it pressing hot against his thigh.

His heart was racing. The moon was nearly full, centered in windshield. He didn’t unfold the map—not yet. He knew where the highway junction was and he knew he needed to go east. He rolled down the windows and took a deep breath and felt like inhaling forever. He was weightless. He inhaled again and felt his whole body expand and he held the steering wheel
as tight as he could at ten and two and even those muscles felt air-soft as he kept expanding, shadows blooming around him, and the car underneath him like an enormous hand lifting him out into the dark.

Fifteen minutes later he pulled over to pee and he felt like he was in a low-gravity dream, his feet barely touching the ground. He ran down the asphalt and jumped as high as he could.

He was alone on the road and he took it up to sixty on the two-lane highway. The centerline disappeared under him. He tried the high beams, tried the radio, turned them both off, and drove with just the engine noise around him, the full-moon sky as three-dimensional as he’s ever seen it.

Buddy would be in charge of backyard golf. Why not make it nine holes, or eighteen? Thirty-six! Calvin would grow up on it just like they had. The three of them could come up on long weekends, school holidays, just like they’d done at Roundtree, and Zaley was only two hours away at school. They could have a little fleet of sailboats and she could teach them all to race. It wasn’t a bad drive from Boston, either, and there was a flight from New York right into Portland. Robin could pick people up from there. Because he’d be there year-round… why not? It stretched out in front of him: first, the big projects, which he’d need to contract out—making sure the place was livable, and safe. After that, he’d have all the time in the world for projects. He knew enough to know what he needed to learn. He’d open an account with one of the big mail-order parts companies and make budgets for everything, including a discretionary budget for when no one else was around… a groundskeeper’s per diem.

Why stop at groundskeeper? He wondered if there was a cooking school in one of the towns around the lake. He’d watched enough Julia Child.
Virginia and Artie would be there. Not all the time, but enough that it was their home too. He shuddered with relief at this thought—his breath came out as a moan, and only the bumper strip kept him from driving off the shoulder of the road. Of course they could come. They’d have their own cabin, the nicest cabin of all, and Robin would put in a wine cellar for them under the main clubhouse. A jacuzzi for her arthritis. He’d make it right with Artie. Artie could be in charge of trees. He’d be family arborist. Robin would keep a separate beer fridge for Artie, set warmer—Artie liked his dark beers warm.

When Virginia was up there she’d have Robin’s full attention. He’d budget that into his annual plan—a plan for his time, too, like he’d had with Glen. A list of tasks every morning, every Monday, every season.

She could wear his old shirts and he’d beat her at Scrabble and he wouldn’t feel guilty about it at all. She wasn’t going to live much longer. Her brain couldn’t handle it.

Ten years? Five? This was a thing he hadn’t allowed himself to think about. After the last of the surgeries, the doctors had been clear: whatever happened, they didn’t want to go in there again. She was already playing with the house’s money, and when it ran out, it ran out—count your blessings, the doctors had said, at the last numb meeting.

Her face was in his head, now, somewhere in the middle distance, and she was nodding at him—nodding in that way she used to, the nod like a spoken word: “Hi,” or just: “I see you there.” They hadn’t spoken much during those early years together in the Big House, after Buddy went off to school, but she’d never stopped nodding at him, and now he nodded back at her through the windshield—two nods for ‘I’m sorry’, three for ‘I love you’. He hit the wipers and then shouted “Ha!” He steadied the wheel with his knees and pressed his palms against his eyes. He hit the rumble strip and looked up.
The red-and-blue lights in the mirror were kaleidoscopic.

--6--

He had no need for a phone call. He was where he was supposed to be, sitting against the wall in a holding cell at the police station in Holderness, New Hampshire. He hadn’t even had his wallet when he was stopped—it was sitting on the mantle above the gas fireplace in Zaley’s basement. It hadn’t been a hard decision for the arresting officer. Robin had been bawling so hard he could barely see the road to pull over.

He wouldn’t have called her if he could—if he’d had her number written down, or if he’d remembered the phone charger. She was on drugs too. This was no place for an innocent person on drugs. And what difference did it make? He deserved to be alone and he preferred it. He stood up a little wax-paper star against the wall with all the others. He’d made them from the wax-paper sheaths his ham sandwiches had come it. That was the last one—he’d run out of wax paper.

Not too long ago, he supposed, this kind of moment was a referendum on the people you held dear. You needed to know a person’s number, know where they’d be at whatever hour, and trust them enough to be sympathetic. And to post your bail. That section of Robin’s Venn diagram had shrunk to nothing.

The other holding cells were empty. It was just Robin and Officer Boniface, who was on overnight duty. Kenneth—not Ken. Robin had actually passed the field sobriety test. He wasn’t
drunk. But the officer who made the stop had arrested him anyway, and taken blood, and Robin hadn’t argued. It had felt right. This was where he was supposed to be.

They’d booked him and Kenneth had shown him to his cell and asked Robin if he wanted to speak to anyone. The answer was no. Kenneth explained that he was going to try to get through to Robin’s probation agency, but that at this time of night he wasn’t sure if there was much anyone would be able to do until morning. He asked again if there was anyone Robin could call. The answer was still no.

It wasn’t a large building. There was a lobby and then a short hallway with half a dozen holding cells in it. Kenneth, who was the only other person in the building, had left the doorway to the hallway open and Robin could hear him watching YouTube videos at his desk. They were walkthroughs of some video game, five or ten minutes each. Kenneth had been watching them for hours. If Robin needed anything, he was supposed to shout. So far he hadn’t needed anything, but Kenneth had come by twice with ham sandwiches and lemonade.

Robin had been tearing out the little wax-paper stars, a family of them, all different sizes, and letting his brain turn to metal. He was out of options, and that came as a strange relief. He was going to jail. In New Hampshire or New York or Massachusetts, he didn’t know. No one had explained anything to him. But he had the feeling that a whole lot of things were coming to a close.

He looked up when headlights washed across Kenneth’s desk. Robin scooted to the edge of his cell and from there he could see half of the clock on the wall in the lobby. It was something-forty-five in the morning. Robin guessed three or four. Maybe it was a changing of the guard. Robin hoped not—he felt a strong bond with Kenneth and his video games.
Kenneth paused his video and walked over to the front entrance and unlocked it. On his way back he stepped into the hallway and pulled the door off its magnet. It inched shut on its hydraulic arm. Robin could hear the car’s engine idling out front and then a door opened and shut and then the headlights washed back across the little window in the hallway door. A moment later the front door to the station jingled open.

Robin could hear voices in the lobby. Then the window darkened and the hallway door opened.

“Ohmigod, Robby,” Azalea said, and ran down the hallway to Robin’s cell. The door stayed open behind her, stuck to its magnet, but Kenneth did not follow.

“Zaley, I’m so sorry,” Robin said. He wiped his nose and rubbed his sleeve into his eyes and then leaned close to the bars. “Don’t let him see your eyes,” he whispered. “That’s how they know.”

“Are you okay?” she said. “Did you have an accident?”

“No, no, I’m fine,” Robin said. “I bashed my taillight outside your house. But I’m fine.”

“How long have you been here?” she said. “Why didn’t you call?”

“I’m not sure,” he said. “It took a while. We did fingerprints and stuff. What time is it? I didn’t have my phone. I thought you’d be sleeping.”

She was crying a little and she laughed and wiped her nose. “Sleeping? Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Wait,” Robin said. “How did you know I was here?” He heard the sound of another engine out front, and then the sweep of headlights.

“Hang on,” Azalea said. “I’ll be right back.”

“Wait—Zaley!” he said. She stopped halfway down the hall.
“Yeah?” she said.

“Go home. Please.”

She snorted and left.

Robin sat back down on the floor. Then he noticed his wax-paper stars and crawled over and put them in his pocket. He heard a booming laugh in the lobby and then Kenneth’s voice and a minute later the hallway door opened again.

Azalea led Aunt Jo by the elbow. Kit came in behind them, with her huge arm around Kenneth’s shoulders. He tried to slip the hold but she kept him tucked tight into her armpit. His glasses started to slide off his face and she finally released him.

“What you know,” Kit shouted, “that Kenny Boniface once belly flopped so hard at the Y that he puked in the pool?”

“Alright, alright,” Kenneth said, wiping his lenses with his tie. He slipped back through the doorway into the lobby.

Aunt Jo stood in front of Robin’s cell. She reached through the bars and grabbed Robin’s ear and twisted it.

“Ouch!” Robin said.

“Mom!” Azalea said.

“That’s what you get,” Aunt Jo said. “You’re lucky my daughter wasn’t in that car.”

“I’m sorry,” Robin said. “Ouch. Fuck.”

“I’m sure you are,” she said. “Azalea says you work for me now.”

Robin looked at Azalea and back at Aunt Jo. “What?” he said.


“Oh,” Robin said.
“We have one picked out,” Kit said. “We’ll show you. Huge!”

“I’m sorry,” Robin said.

“You said that,” Aunt Jo said.

“I don’t think I can help with the hot tub,” Robin said. “I’m going to jail.”

Kit snorted. “For what?”

The door in the lobby jingled. Azalea disappeared again.

“You should go home,” Robin said. “I’m sorry you came out.”

Aunt Jo sat down in a chair in the hallway. “Nice try,” she said. He put her head back against the wall and closed her eyes.

“How did you know I was here?” Robin said.

“A little bird told us,” Aunt Jo said.

Kit wandered down the hallway, inspecting the other cells. Robin felt lightheaded. He sat down on his cot. There were voices in the lobby. Then the door banged open.

“Robot!”

Oh no. Robin backed up in his cell. It was Buddy, in a wheelchair, wearing an eyepatch, with a sling on his arm. He had a blanket on his lap—one of the heavy pelts from the living room of the Little House. Azalea walked behind him, pushing the chair. When they got closer, Robin saw that Buddy had his phone in his lap, the screen frozen on something yellow. Azalea wheeled Buddy up to the bars. Robin slid down the wall onto his butt. There was a noise from the phone and suddenly the frozen yellow screen seemed to catch up to itself.

“Hi Robby!” the phone said. “Say hi to your uncle!” Lindsay’s face filled the screen, and then Calvin’s. They were waving.

“No, no, no,” Robin said. He hid his face in his hands.
“We love you, Robin!” the phone said. Then the audio glitched and went silent.

“Hi, brother,” Buddy said. “They’ll be here in the morning. But they couldn’t wait to see your smiling face.”

Robin squeezed his eyelids shut until they swam purple. He could hear Kit clinking bars at the far end of the hall. Buddy’s phone made a FaceTime sound and then a blip. Robin peeked out through his fingers. Lindsay was back on the screen, facing out from Buddy’s lap. Buddy whispered something into the phone and handed it to Azalea, who took a few steps down the hallway.

“Hey,” Buddy said.

Robin uncovered his face. His skin was sticky with old tears. His eyes felt swollen.

“Buddy,” he said, “why is everybody here? I can’t handle this right now.”

“Relax,” Buddy said. “Ignore them for a minute. How you doing?”

“I’m alright. Is that, uh—” he nodded to Azalea, who was talking quietly into the camera of Buddy’s phone.

“Mm-hm,” Buddy said. “Believe it or not. Stranger things have happened, I guess.

Hey.” With his good arm he pulled himself right up to the bars. “Robby. C’mere.”

Robin slid his butt across the floor of the cell.

“I’m sorry,” Buddy said.

“What? No, I’m sorry, Bud.”

“Robby, listen to me. I’m sorry. I’m sorry about the fall. I’m sorry about this.” He lifted the arm in the sling. “I know I scared you. Hey.” He reached into the cell and rubbed Robin’s buzzcut through the bars. “You’re okay,” Buddy said.

“I wish everyone would go home,” Robin said.
“I know you wish that,” Buddy said. “That’s part of your whole problem. Well, tough noogies, okay? You’re stuck with us.”

Robin looked around. Aunt Jo seemed to be asleep in the chair beside the cell door. Azalea was FaceTiming with Lindsay. Kit was testing the strength of the bars of one of the other cells. Kenneth was watching a video on the lobby. Robin felt bewildered.

“How’d you get here?” Robin said.

“I took the world’s longest Uber. With the wheelchair in the back. I’m handicapped, now, so…”

“How did you know I was here?”

“You’re going to love this,” Buddy said. “The cops called our old pal Richard Gwan, who called me. At one in the morning. He suggested that I gather as much family support as I could and that I come get you. Now, Richard didn’t know I was in the hospital at the time.”

“Jesus, Bud. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to leave you there. I just—”

“Hey, Robby, hey. Quit apologizing. I was saying: you made quite an impression on Richard Gwan. He and I had a real heart-to-heart in the Uber.”

“He’s not—”

“No, I mean, on the phone. He’s looking out for you. Officer Kenneth out there, too. This could’ve been a lot worse.”

“What do you mean?”

Robin heard another car crunching across the gravel out front.

“I mean that you’re lucky, brother. You’re out on bail. I just asked Kenneth not to unlock you yet. Didn’t want you to bolt.”

“Well, but, I’m going to jail,” Robin said.
“Oh, I don’t think so,” Buddy said. He adjusted his eyepatch. “First-offense DWI in this state is just a fine. You’ll have to go to court, but it’s not the end of the world.”

“They took my blood, Buddy. I was pretty fucked up.”

Buddy waved his hand. “Like I said, consider yourself lucky. Lucky you didn’t kill someone. Lucky you didn’t kill yourself. Lucky you’re a white man in America. You name it. You did a boneheaded thing, Robby, but you made out.”

“What about my probation?” Robin said.

“I had the same question. Gwan says it’s no big deal. You were a white-collar criminal, brother. There was no sobriety clause. I guess they weren’t that afraid of you.”

“Well… what about New York?”

“What about it?”

“Did… isn’t there…?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Robby,” Buddy said. His face squinched up and he winced. “Ouch,” he said. “I just tried to wink.”

“Are you serious, Bud?”

“Dead serious, pal. No word from New York. Richard says you need a stronger support network, and that’s what we’re here to provide. You’re still on your soft-ass probation. That hasn’t changed. And with all this, you’ll have some fines, you’ll have to take a few classes. You will lose your license for a little while. But, like I said. You’re lucky.”

The door to the station jingled and Robin heard more voices.

“Hang on a second,” Buddy said. He pushed himself away from the bars and nodded at Azalea, who put the phone down on the ground across the hall so that it was facing Robin. Then Azalea wheeled Buddy down the hallway and out into the lobby. The door shut behind them.
“Hi kiddo,” Lindsay said, then fuzzed out for a second.

“How you doing?”

“I’m good. I’m in jail. How’re you?”

“We’re good on this end. Calvin came down with something, otherwise we’d already be there. But we’ll come up in the morning.”

“Please, Linds,” Robin said. “You don’t have to do that.”

“Oh shut up, Robby,” she said. “We’re coming. Who’s all out there with you right now?”

“Well, good, Robin. I’m glad. I’m glad you’re safe. You’re almost out of the woods.”

Robin nodded.

“I’m going to pee,” Lindsay said. “Don’t hang up.”

“Um—okay,” Robin said. Lindsay walked off-screen and Robin was left looking at the mantle over the fireplace. He lowered himself to his butt. He was extremely tired. He hadn’t been around this many people who knew him—really knew him—in years.

“Still doing okay?” It was Aunt Jo, talking with her eyes closed.

“Yeah, I guess,” Robin said. “So Azalea told you guys?”

“Zaley? No. Buddy called directly.”

“Hm. Well, thank you.”
“Don’t sweat it. And I’m serious about the hot tub thing. Do you actually know what you’re doing?”

“I worked on a lot of the plumbing at, uh—at my last job,” Robin said. “I know enough to help.”

“Well, good. You’re hired.”

The door at the end of the hallway swung open. Kenneth stepped through and held the door for Buddy, and behind him Azalea.

Then Artie stepped through the door, and behind him, looking dazed and shiny in the hallway light, was Virginia.

Her arthritis was worst in the mornings and at night—it’d been that way since they were kids. She was wearing a pink silk nightgown. She looked around the room but her eyes didn’t settle on anything and Robin could tell she was on a lot of medicine. Artie whispered in her ear and nudged her down the hallway and then he looked up and saw Robin. He nodded, and Robin nodded back, and then Kenneth slipped past them and put a key in the cell door lock. He opened the door and Robin was face-to-face with Virginia.

“Hi baby,” she said.

“Hi mom.”

“How you doing?”

“I’m good, mom. I’m sorry you had to come all the way out here.”

“Oh, don’t worry, dear. Artie and I had a lovely drive. Did I sleep the whole way, Artie?”

“You sure did,” Artie said.
Robin could feel something cresting inside him. He held out his hand and Art took it and they shook.

“I’m sorry, Art,” he said.

“Nothing to be sorry about, Robin,” Art said. “We’re just happy you’re alright.”

Artie’s pain went deep. Robin could see that now. He held onto the handshake. The thing cresting inside him filled his throat.

“Art…” he said.

“I know,” Artie said. “It’s okay.”

Then Robin pulled him close. For a moment Art didn’t seem to know what to do with his hands, then he clapped Robin on the back, and when Robin didn’t let go Art reached around him and hugged him back.

“You boys,” Virginia said. Robin turned to face his mother.

“Mom,” he said.

She nodded at him, and he hugged her tight. She was all bones.

“Oof!” she said. She patted him on his shoulder blades. “It’s good to see you, baby. I don’t know why we had to do this here, but—”

“Mom,” Robin said into her hair. “I’m sorry. I love you.”

“Well, thank you, dear” she said. “I love you, too.”

Over her shoulder Robin watched the people in the hallway. Kit was perched impossibly on Aunt Jo’s knee, telling a story with her enormous hands, and then she threw her head back and laughed. Aunt Jo was patting her leg and nodding along. Buddy’s phone was back on his lap, and in it Lindsay was hunched over the kitchen counter, her back to the camera, turning something with her whole arm—a corkscrew. The bottle opened with a “pop!” and for a
moment every head in the hallway turned to the camera. Buddy touched the phone absentmindedly with his good hand. He and Azalea were arguing about something—arguing and smiling, and then she snapped the elastic of his eyepatch against the back of his head. He looked right at home in his wheelchair, sulking, demanding sympathy, until Azalea stepped back into range. Then he reached over and punched her in the hip.

Azalea was moving slow, grinding her teeth, her eyes darting around, and Robin knew how she felt.

“That’s enough, honey,” Virginia said. “You’ll crush me.” Robin released her. He felt huge and hollow and weak as a baby.

“Let’s get you out of here,” Artie said, putting a hand on Robin’s back. “We’ve got room for four. Azalea, did you drive?”

“I Ubered,” Zaley said. “But I can ride with my mom.”

“We took the truck, honey,” Kit said. “You can ride in the bed. You got a sweatshirt or something?”

“Take my pelt!” Buddy said, trying to steer the wheelchair with one hand. “It’s a beautiful pelt! I got it—let me see—”

Slowly, the whole group of them pushed down the hallway toward the lobby of the station. Buddy had an evidence bag with Robin’s belongings on his lap and he managed to hold the door for everyone, propping himself in the night air, and he patted them each on the hip with his good hand as they passed. Robin was last.

“Are these scratchers?” Buddy said, holding up the evidence bag.

Robin nodded.
“You have a twisted sense of risk and reward, brother,” Buddy said. “Do you mind pushing me?”

Robin put him in a wheelie and steered him toward the Volvo.

“Why’d you do this, Bud?” he said. “Zaley could’ve just gotten me.”

“I thought you might be happy to see us,” Buddy said. “And, Robby—stop the wheelchair. Come to my good side.”

They stopped in the gravel.

“I’ve known you for a long time,” Buddy said. “I know you better than you know yourself. And I think we were pretty close to losing you there.”

“I flew a little too close to the sun.”

“Not just the driving, Rob. I mean all of this. Since the accident. You’ve been trying to make yourself disappear. And it’s not—hush!—it’s not because you want to disappear. It’s because you don’t know how to ask for help and you don’t think you need it and you’d rather go to jail than feel like you made one selfish emotional claim on any of us.”

“Buddy…”

“Hush! I’m not done. I had a whole Uber ride to think about this.” Buddy held a shaking finger up in the air. “What I’m saying is: except me. You seem infinitesimally more comfortable asking me for help, and I take that as an enormous honor. So even though you didn’t ask for it this time, I have delivered what you didn’t know you needed. Which is—hush!—which is all these people, Robby. We all love you and we’re all not just willing, we’re actually excited to drive out here in the middle of the night in your time of greatest need because, maybe, you have finally gotten yourself into a position where you can see how much you need us
and want us in your life. Okay? Even that girlfriend of yours, Miss Thing. Call her back.

Unmute us. We all deserve a little more of you.”

Buddy put his shaking hand back in his lap. Everyone else was waiting in their cars.

“How do you watch Intervention?” Buddy said.

“I love Intervention.”

“Well, consider this an intervention, then.”

“You’re a weasel, Bud,” Robin said. “Is this why Zaley gave me acid? To open my heart?”

“You’re on acid?” Buddy said. “Shit. I thought you were just stoned.”

“So that wasn’t part of the plan?”

“The plan was hatched when I got the call from Richard Gwan. He deserves partial credit. He believes in the power of family. And I didn’t even know you were at Zaley’s until I got the call. I put two and two together.”

Robin put his hand on Buddy’s shoulder. Buddy’s whole body was vibrating. Buddy reached up and patted Robin’s hand.

“Well, some of it might be the acid,” Robin said. “But I think it’s working.”

“You promise?” Buddy said.

“I promise.”

“How about mom?”

“Mom too,” Robin said.

Buddy squeezed his hand. “That’s great, Robby. That’s great.” Then Buddy let go and wiped his eyes with his sleeve and cleared his throat. He put his feet on the footrests. “Okay,” he said. “Hup, hup! To the Volvo, Jeeves!”
Buddy eased himself into the backseat and Robin folded up the wheelchair and loaded it into the trunk.

“Alright,” Kit shouted over the sound of the truck engine. “You follow me!”

Artie gave the thumbs-up. Zaley, who was sitting in the bed of the truck, wrapped in Buddy’s pelt, gave a thumbs-up back and slapped the roof of the cab. Robin slammed the trunk on the wheelchair and squeezed himself into the backseat.

“Move over,” Robin said.

“You move over,” Buddy said. “Ouch, stop.”

“GRITS,” Artie said. “Huh.” He put on his blinker and followed Kit’s truck out onto the highway. Something crinkled in Robin’s pocket.

“Hey, Buddy,” Robin said. “You want one?” Robin held out one of his wax-paper stars.

“What am I looking at?” Buddy said.

“That, there,” Robin said, “is a star I made out of my ham-sandwich wrapper while I was in jail. A souvenir.”

“I’ll be damned,” Buddy said, holding the star up to the window. “This is a treasure. Is that authentic ham juice?”

“I made one for you, too, Artie,” Robin said. “And you, mom. I made one for everybody.”

“That was thoughtful of you,” Art said.

“Mm,” Virginia said. “Thank you, dear.” Robin couldn’t tell if she was listening, or if she was even awake.

Artie stayed a safe distance off Kit’s bumper and every time he braked he put his hand on Virginia’s knee.
Buddy was in and out. The sedatives seemed to have caught up to him. He was smiling out the window, adjusting his arm sling, letting his skull rattle against the glass. The car was quiet except for Artie, who said “Mm” every few seconds, as if he were counting something in his head. They turned off onto Aunt Jo’s hill. Virginia stirred and adjusted her shoulders, and then in the glow of the streetlights her ghostly hand appeared between the car seat and the door. She patted the air, a phantom pat six inches from Robin’s knee.

So that’s all it took, he thought: an unmuting. He scooched. A yes.