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Contour Lines

An excerpt from a longer work

by Susan Kramer

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Date
When I was nine years old, an insane man hid in our woods, so my sister and I weren't allowed to play at the frozen river that winter. The man was accused of a horrible crime, but no one would tell us what it was. We stole the morning paper out of the trash and learned that the man had kidnapped a girl our age, raped her, and left her nearly dead on a park bench in town. In our father's leather-bound dictionary, "rape" was a European herb, or the act of despoiling a woman. But what did it mean? We could only imagine, muffled noises in a dark car.

There was a photograph of the despoiled girl on the front page of the paper, her hair tied up in two braids. We knew her a little, from the ballet classes we took in a big empty room above the bank. She was from two towns away, and she never talked to us. The paper said she'd been taken off a horse near her family's farm. They found the horse chewing at some frozen weeds, saddle empty.

When our parents talked about it, they kneaded the skin of their foreheads between their fingertips, clucking their tongues. There were meetings in the steamy gym at school, adults shifting nervously on folding chairs while we threw snowballs on the moonlit playground. The rest of the time we were stuck at home. They didn't even let us play in the backyard after dark. The woods backed up on our house, so I guess they were scared he'd creep up through the trees and snatch us. Most nights I volunteered to do the supper dishes, just so I could stand on the little stool that made me tall enough to see out into the yard. Scrubbing uselessly, my hands wrinking with the suds, I stared hard at the trees and
watched for the slightest movement—the minute appearance of an arm, a shoulder, a toe.

The police weren't turning him up, but I knew that the rapist was lurking out there-- our woods were a great place to hide. In safer years, during winter storms, my sister and I liked to hide in the low hollows of trees and let the snow build up outside. We played a game, a test of wills: who would panic first, scrambling to dig our way out? It was always me. Carrie would've slept in there till spring.

I imagined the rapist, all skin and bones, shivering inside a tree. I pictured him skating down the river in dirty feet, as we liked to do in our boots. Part of that river was ours, and we were wary of intruders. Just that summer, I'd found the deed to the land in Dad's study, a tin-roofed shed behind the house. I'd gone out to the shed to sulk after an argument with Carrie. I liked to go out there and be alone, to flip through the pages of my father's encyclopedia, white moths fluttering on the windows. This time, squeezing into a corner in search of volume X-Y-Z, I bumped against a thick frame hung behind a canvas curtain. I cleared the dusty glass with my palm. The paper underneath looked crumpled and torn, like somebody had dug it out of the trash. I read the long, old scrawls: "To The Honorable James C. Beckett This Land Is Bestow'd, The Year 1834. Bounded northerly by a line beginning at the mouth of Lewis Creek or Kill and running thence south 85°."

Forgetting my pout, I wiped the dust on my shorts and ran to get my sister.

After I found the deed, Carrie and I played on Beckett land, on our stretch of river and in the surrounding woods, with a terrible feeling of pride. The very dirt and rocks belonged to us and only us. Our water, our moss, our shadowy places. Our outlaw hiding in the trees.
In secret, we collected newspaper clippings about the rapist and pasted them into awkward collages, on pieces of cardboard cut from the box our new rabbit-ear television had arrived in. The malfunctioning TV didn’t interest us, with its blurred figures and red ghosts. Instead, we made posters that looked like maps, the torn edges of our clippings lapping over one another like the arbitrary borders of counties. We liked the odd composite sketch the police had published, its awkward chin and wide, mad eyes. Sometimes, hunched over my drafting table, I see that face emerging in my plotted lines, in the blank expanses of land.

There’s something about that time I never told my sister, and now that she’s gone, it’s as if a weight has been lifted from my arms, and my grief has come down in its place, heavier.

During our house arrest, Carrie and I were always fighting. We lived in a tiny bungalow on a half-acre lot that drooped off the edge of the inherited property. The little room we shared had bunk beds and about twelve square feet beyond them. With masking tape on the thin green carpet, we cordoned off the halves of the room. I kept my side excruciatingly neat. I didn’t want my good art supplies getting mixed up with Carrie’s cheap ones. If I came home to find a charcoal pencil or a calligraphy pen shoved, cap-less, into her fast food cup full of markers, I’d write her an angry note with one of her dried-up pens, something like: “MS. BECKETT, YOU ARE HEREBY RELEASED FROM ANY TIES OF SISTERHOOD AND YOUR FILTHY, SNEAKY PAWS ARE TOO.” And then I’d make a peanut butter sandwich, bundle up and go sit in Dad’s study, spinning his crumbling
lobe, or in a corner of our bleak little yard, forbidden to go farther until the rapist was found.

One day I got angrier than ever, and I never told my sister what came of that, all those years. Since Carrie was younger but not as shy, it was easy for her to humiliate me. This time her cohorts were the twin neighbor girls, Jo and Sara Pike. Walking home from our school bus stop, which was less than a mile away over a steep and narrow road, Carrie came up behind me and yanked my wool cap down over my eyes. She held it there with her cold fingers while one of the twins pulled off my mittens. Then I heard their footsteps crunch through the snow, off into the trees. They weren’t even laughing. I tore off my cap and clutched it in my fist. I was starting to sweat a little from being embarrassed, and the loose hairs around my ears froze to my head. I kicked at the road, clenched my teeth and felt the icy air on them. My fingers were turning red.

“You little idiots!” I yelled into the cold forest. “You’re going to get eaten by that convict!” I stared into the trees. There was no sign of my sister. I tried the word “Shit!” and it echoed against the snow. For all I knew, they could’ve been up the hill by then, running just behind the edge of the woods, leaving round holes in the ice. But I put my hands on my hips and kept talking. “And don’t think I’ll care if you die, Carrie Beckett. He’ll get you, and then I’ll have my own room. I’ll adopt your cat and give him a diet. I’ll forget about you like that.” I dropped my arms and looked up the road. It crested in the gray sky, which was starting to have flecks of pink in it, an early night coming on. I wondered if it would be one of those nights when the sun going down looked like a burning penny. I didn’t want to keep walking, alone with the rapist somewhere, and I didn’t want
to go home and see their victorious faces. So I said, "Hello? Criminal? My juicy little sister and her two ugly friends are out there somewhere. Go on and get them. I'll cover for you." The trees started to murmur in that strange way they'd been doing lately, so you could hear the ice crackle on the branches. I hugged myself, shoving my hands into my armpits to keep them warm.

I yelled to the rapist, "I could help you, you know. If you promised not to hurt me. I bet you're hungry, huh? I know how to catch gophers and squirrels." I hugged myself tighter. A crow flew over me and cawed. I imagined the man in the police sketch gnawing on the slick black loin of a bird. "You're probably pretty scared. You'll go to jail if they find you, and if they don't you'll probably die. I think you're making the wrong choice." I walked a little closer to the trees. In their shadows there was something, I could hear it, but I thought it was a deer or something smaller. It made only light sounds, and could also have been my sister, though I was sure she was home by then, hanging her wet clothes in the mud room. "I guess you don't care if you die. You don't care if what you did was bad, do you?"

That's when he stepped out of the woods. He was so gaunt that his bent arms looked like scissors, the sharp bones of his hands hanging off them, weak. A gnarled beard grew over his chin and throat. He was caked with dirt, blending with the dark trunks. I might not have seen him except for his teeth, which were white in a smile, the color of the snow. He didn't look a thing like the police sketch. He took a step forward and collapsed soundlessly against a tree.

I don't know what to think of this memory now. I don't know for sure it was the
man they'd been searching for, and in any case, I don't believe I was in much danger. He
didn't look like he could run a foot without breaking. I'm sure he was close to death, the
smile one of delirium, not lechery. He made a little croaking sound and I ran, tossing my
red cap at his feet, rubber boots slipping over the ice.

When they let us go back to the river, the police had moved their search to the
north, to Canada. Under the crumbs and coffee stains of my father's breakfast, the Star-
Observer said that the rapist had been spotted in Montreal. But I knew he was still out there,
because the trees hadn't stopped whispering in the very light wind, as if they had something
to hide.

Biking back to my parents' house from the farmer's market in town, I pass the old
bus stop and start up the hill. It's summer, and the trees are tipped with green, and the
bright sun passes through them onto the forest floor. This is where I'll begin my map of
Beckett land, with the forest that follows the road for several miles. I'll mark the
elevations, survey for mileage and density, for natural landmarks. I'll use the old, simple
tools. Magnets and shadows, sleek protractors and lengths of lead. It's not the way I'm
used to working. Everything's done with computers and satellites now—you don't even
need to have been to a place to know your way around it. But I won't be taking any
shortcuts. I have to dirty my hands again with our mud, to cut my feet on our slate rocks at
the river, measuring for depth. It's the only way I can make sense of things now.

I pull the bike to the side of the road and stretch my back. I just turned thirty, and
my joints already feel used-up. I'm starting to talk in twenty-year increments. It's been
twenty years since the gaunt man showed up here. I wonder for the first time if he saw Carrie and the twins as they ran from me, or heard them break through the branches— he must’ve, in the quiet winter woods, where every sound could mean food or danger. He must’ve seen them snickering softly behind their hands, pretty and mean, then watched them bushwhack up the hill, making more of an effort than the joke was worth.

I wander closer to the trees. Weeds scratch at my ankles and calves. Crowds of jagged thistle blooms have sprung up where the hard snow was, years ago in that winter of the rapist. A yellow grasshopper lands on my wrist and I wave it away. Around here, a lot of the trees look sickly, with large, dry growths, or hollows carved by bright-colored fungi. The dappled light moves over my sneakers. A black squirrel scurries out of a hollowed-out trunk. The sun hits something in his hole, sends a gleam of light over my eyes. I stand on my toes to try and see into the hole, but it’s too high. Hoping for what—buried treasure?—I stretch tall and reach inside. It’s damp, and there are twigs and pinecones, acorns, some cold, wet stuff that might be shit. Then there’s something that’s familiar in a curious way, as if I might know it by a different sense than touch. I pull my fist out of the hollow and open my palm. Among the crumbs of soil there’s a tooth, human-sized, with a bronze filling.
Some Saturdays, when we were girls, Mom took me or Carrie by train to Albany. We never went all together. Somebody had to keep Dad from being lonely, which was probably his favorite way to be.

We caught the train in Schenectady. It glided alongside the river at an impossible speed, its steel bones screaming, the colors of coats flying by in a blur, the rocks and bare trees on the riverbed whirling past us. I pressed my face to the window and watched as the scenery intensified. The river veered off to a lovelier place and we were engulfed, first by the darkness of the tunnel, then by the city's gray enormity. My breath left a round patch of condensation on the glass, and it became grayer as the passing landscape did, like a brewing storm.

My mother flirted with the train conductors. They passed through our car with flailing arms, grasping at the scraps of tickets lodged above the seats. At our row, they lingered to lean their shaved faces close to my mother's cheek. Once a thin, pale conductor, whom I recognized as a particular fan of Mom's, smiled at me and said I should follow him, he'd show me something special. I looked down at my knees and picked at a pill on my sweater. My mother said, "Don't be a coward," and nudged me with her elbow.

I followed the conductor sheepishly down the aisle. The train rocked back and forth on the tracks as I stumbled behind him, steadying myself on the vinyl tops of the seats. The conductor ambled smoothly ahead, his legs slim and sure in their starched blue uniform. My mother followed too, careful in her shiny heels, clutching a pillbox hat, which had long
gone out of style, to the top of her head as the train lurched. I glanced pleadingly at her reflection in the dark window. She smiled at the conductor and pushed gently on my shoulders.

We stopped in the space between the cars, where the floor was just a grate over the disappearing tracks. The clash of the train was deafening there, like we were stuck inside a printing press. The conductor leaned down as if to hug me and picked me up by the waist, sliding the side door open. An arm tucked carelessly around my stomach, he held me out in the black wind of the tunnel. The stale air pressed hard against my cheeks. I pinched my eyes shut, though all I could see was the pitch dark. I thrashed my arms against the conductor's shoulders and hands. The roar of the train swallowed up my shrieking, and under it I could hear my mother's loose, high-pitched giggles. It seemed like the closest I would ever come to dying.

When we arrived at the station, I hurried off the train ahead of her, shoulders still heaving with fear, and ran out to the street. I ran until I couldn't hear the click of her high-heeled shoes. The city was serious, in deep winter. Long-legged men in gray wool pants slid by as if on skates, their heads lowered and mumbling. The smell of burning nuts came to me on a pocket of warmth. I stood rooted to the pavement. Buses crawled along the street, spewing clouds of tainted air that dispersed in the crowd of men, making their faces ashen. My hands were gray and sooty from the railings in the station. When my mother arrived, she took my arm between her sharp nails and shook it. I lifted my fingers to her cheek and touched it gently, leaving a patch of black the shape of my hand on her cool white skin.
At my parents' house, I come up the back stairs with my vegetables from the market. The screen door slams behind me, chips of green paint shaking off onto the floor. In the pocket of my barn jacket, the yellowed tooth clinks against some change. I hang the jacket on a rusted hook and call for my mother, to warn her that I'm here. These days, I sometimes catch her crouched on the kitchen floor, staring blankly at a piece of broken glass or a found penny, forgetting herself. I like to give her a minute to think about my voice, to remember who I am.

"That you, Carrie?"

"Mom, it's Alyce."

"Oh," she laughs, coy and dismissive. "That's what I meant." Traces of my mother as a young wife are everywhere. An old red scarf hangs on a lampshade in a corner of the kitchen. Crusty lipstick cases are stacked up on a shelf next to some ragged magazines. I set my straw bag down on the counter. It tumbles over, releasing the vegetables: eggplant and squash, a few tomatoes.

"I thought I'd make ratatouille."

"Whatever," she says, coming in from the front room. She eases herself onto a stool and puts her face in her hands. I can see the thin white skin at the crown of her head, where she's arranged a velvet headband to disguise it. She's dressed all in black velvet today: flowing pants, a deep-necked tunic. Beads of sweat have formed on the loose skin beneath her neck.

"Mother, aren't you hot in that?" I run cold water into the sink and wash the
vegetables, scrubbing their smooth skin with my thumbs. Everything I do in this house feels sad, under the weight of my father's silence, my mother's insolent pain. I'll only have to stay three hours, maybe four. I've given my evenings to my parents as a consolation prize, since I'm the one left over.

"Don't you want me to look nice?" my mother says.

"Drink some water." I hold a glass under the tap and pass it to her half-full. She drinks it slowly, with gulping sounds, not setting it down until it's gone. She makes a little burping noise.

"That's lovely, Mom." I set the vegetables on a towel next to the sink and wipe my hands on it. My chest feels tight. At least I don't have to sleep here—I can wash the dishes and go. I've cleared a room for myself in the old, broken mansion on Beckett land. The only building on the property, it's a garish, sprawling place, and has always, as long as I can remember, been in an incredible state of disrepair. My father says it would cost more money than he's ever earned to make it livable, though it's comfortable enough in the summer warmth. I think of the dust motes over my bed there, the quiet. I lean over the sink and breathe its smell, antiseptic and trivial. "Where's Dad?"

"How should I know?" My mother throws her hands over her head. The pearly pink of her nails makes sparks in the air. "He hardly spoke to me this morning. I hauled myself out of bed at dawn to make him that ridiculous stone-ground oatmeal, and he ate two bites before he disappeared. He doesn't talk to me anymore. He grunts."

I think of my father's shoulders, the back of his head, featureless and grim. Somehow, the pursuit of longevity coexists in him with a ceaseless gloom. My mother's
begun to hate him. I can see it in the way she eats her corn, kernel by kernel, a sneer in her
nose. I say, "He seems sad to me."

"It's not sadness. It's spite. He's finally gotten around to feeling spiteful, after all
these years." She holds her hands out flat in front of her, inspects them for flaws. She's
never really gone with this house, the country kitchen, tiles painted with cornflowers and
cherries. I guess she once had a whim to be a cute mom, done with as soon as the wallpaper
dried.

"Don't you think he deserves it?"

She looks at me with watery eyes and shakes her head a little. "You can't know
what this is like, Alyce. You don't have any children."

"You do," I say. "You still have me."

"Oh, come on," my mother says bitterly. She lowers herself off the stool and goes
to the window, which is clouded with brown dust. Outside, my father's station wagon is
parked on the lawn, the grass grown tall around its tires. "Don't be a baby. Have the
patience to grieve properly."

As always, I'm silent in the face of her. Looking away from me, she mumbles, "I
need some fresh air," and wanders toward the back door. I don't ask, What do you think
I'm doing here? I don't ask, What's so proper about grief? But my being here is a protest
of its own. Carrie would wonder at it, were she to come, caked with dirt, the edges of her
nostrils blue, and look in the window. When she moved back in two years ago, our mother
left a message on my machine in Brooklyn, happily chirping that Carrie had come home. I
called back late that night. My sister answered, whispering, "Who are you?"
"That's not very polite."

"Oh," she said, "hi honey. It's late, what do you expect? I thought you were some heavy breather."

"Are they asleep?"

"Of course."

"What are you thinking, Caro? You'll go nuts with the two of them. Honestly, don't be stupid."

"I like it here. I've got the room all to myself. I'm using your side for my dirty laundry."

Sitting on the fire escape of my building, breathing somebody else's cigarette smoke, I thought of her on the bottom bunk of our old bed, the silly princess phone cradled against her ear. Mom and Dad were nearby, separated by cheap plaster and picture frames, dreaming away from each other. I was jealous, though the idea of it made me so unhappy.

"You can't save them, if that's what you think. You're a little late, Carrie."

"I thought I might get Dad started on a healthier diet. No more greasy bacon and those disgusting biscuits in a tube."

"Fine," I said. "Don't say I didn't warn you." The iron of the fire escape was cold under my toes. Carrie was in what would be her final professional incarnation. She'd taken over the health food store in town, a place that had about four regular customers and a handful of tourists in the summer. Everything in her life was fleeting, so it was no surprise to those who loved her that she died young, two months ago. We'd been waiting fearfully, like a bunch of children ascending the hill of a roller coaster, every inch drawing us closer to
the moment of weightlessness.

My mother screams. I drop the dishtowel and follow the sound into the mud room. Her back turned to me, she’s stomping on something with the heel of her leather pump, arms clenched to her sides. She makes an agonized sound each time her heel goes down, as if it were coming down on her own chest. I put my arm around her from behind and say, “Shush Mom, it’s okay.” A garter snake, not more than a foot long, cowers under her shoe, its head ground into the linoleum. The tail still twitches between her legs.

“Shush now,” I say again, leaning my head on her shoulder. Guts cling to her shoe, her white ankle. She turns to face me. I can’t remember the last time I’ve stood this close to her. She looks up at me, her eyes round and pink, with all kinds of fear and memory in them. I lead her away from the dancing tail. We leave the mess on the yellow floor.

When Dad comes home, we’re drinking tea in the kitchen. Lately he stays away all day, fishing down at the river. His mouth and shoulders are thin and straight, all bone and muscle. The khaki tackle vest he’s had for years hangs off him like a sail. Patches of white hair stick up over his ears—Wings of Man, my mother used to call them when they were blond, smoothing them back with her fingertips and spit.

“Hello, daughter,” he says, resting his rod and reel against the frame of the kitchen door “Hello, wife.”

Mom says, “I thought you were out back all this time.”

“No.” He places a spotted hand on her shoulder for a moment, then goes to pour himself a glass of soy milk. Sometimes I think it doesn’t matter to him anymore who she is,
only that she’s still here, in the house, when he comes back.

“Did you catch anything, Dad? I’ll get the grill going.”

“Just a little whitefish. It’s not enough for the three of us. You take it back to the big house with you.”

I stand up to kiss him on the cheek. We can all hear the milk go down in measured gulps. Both my parents have developed eating habits that repulse me. My mother’s are regressive and messy, inconsistent with her sense of propriety. My father, meanwhile, is fiercely addicted to health foods. Carrie struggled with him over it for a long time, and now that she’s gone he’s become pious. He eyes the vegetables I’ve arranged on the counter, gleaming in their rows.

“You get those from the Mennonites?”

“I don’t think so.”

“They use pesticides, you know. Everybody thinks their stuff is best because they’re so traditional.” He makes a little grunting noise and says, “Hah.”

“I didn’t buy from them, Dad. Those are some farmer’s from over by Turah.”

He nods his grave approval, taking another slug of the pseudo-milk. My mother rolls her eyes and slumps over the counter. “Here we go again,” she says.

“Be nice, Lila. I’ve had a good day.” He sighs and sits down next to her, holding the milk carton with both hands. He studies the nutrition information on the back of the box. Mom reaches for a twenty-year-old Sunset magazine and pages violently through it. I start to chop vegetables, anxious to eat and go, now that they’re both in the room. Dad says to me absently, “How are things out at the old place?”
He asks me every day, as if the regret itself were stuck in his throat. I say, “I found a
door I can set up as a drafting table.” My mother lets out a loud, ungraceful laugh. I hack
into the tough skin of an eggplant.

She says, “You really ought to haul away all that old junk, Sam. The place is
probably crawling with vermin. Clean it up or blow it up, I’ve always said.” She laughs
again. Dad keeps staring at the soy milk. It’s how they argue—her spouting witty slurs,
him impassive till she cries. A breeze rattles the windowpanes over my head, and my father
shudders. It’s a wonder she hasn’t broken him by now.

“It’s fine,” I say. “All that old junk keeps me company. One of these days I’ll go
through it myself, see what I can find.”

“You won’t find anything but rabies, Dear.” She hoists herself off the stool and
comes to my side, picks a cube of tomato from the cutting board and pops it in her mouth.
“Delicious,” she says, a seed dripping over her lip. “Pesticides are so flavorful.”

“Cut it out, Mom.”

She grabs my face by the chin, her hand wet with juice. “Don’t talk to me like that.”

“I’ll leave you two lovebirds in peace,” Dad says, heading upstairs with his milk.

“Call me when it’s ready.”

The old family mansion was built at the turn of the century. My parents’ argument
about it must be almost that old now, too. The story goes that my great-grandmother, a
notorious eccentric, widowed by the Spanish-American war, built the mansion as a gift to
her fatherless son. Halfway through the construction the baby got sick, and Great-Grandma
Margaret bargained with God or the devil, I’m not sure which. She promised never to stop building on that house if her son, my grandfather, were allowed to live. The rest of her days, she added recklessly to the mansion: spires and turrets, fairytale towers, needless stairways, spaces of the house walled-in forever.

Family legend has it that Margaret once misplaced my grandfather. She followed his distant cries for an hour, running through the endless halls in her tattered dressing gown. By then she’d nearly bankrupted the family, and she almost lost her baby too, having walled the napping toddler into a corner of the west wing. Very Poe. But she called the bricklayers back, and they came with mallets, knocking out the fresh mortar and brick till my grandfather’s tiny hand poked through. After Margaret died, when my grandfather was only ten, he moved to Albany to live with an aunt and uncle. The house was left to rot, eerily unfinished, full of debris.

The day after Carrie’s funeral, when I first thought of staying here, I walked the vast perimeter of the house, constructing the shape of it in my mind. As a girl I’d had only a vague understanding of the size of the place, and though I’m usually surprised by how things shrink with the years, the old mansion seemed more tremendous than I remembered. Towers and turrets, a hodgepodge of Byzantine onion domes and Gothic spires, rose high above me, over the trees. Hawks’ nests, three or four feet wide, rested among them. I gathered that from the vantage of the hawks, the house might take the shape of a spider: eight legs protruding from a round atrium, with additions hanging off at bulky, odd angles, like feet. I peered in the darkened windows. In the light that escaped through the dusty panes, the bare floors turned a grainy color of white, as if it had snowed inside. Some of the
rooms were empty, or packed with rotting construction debris. Some of them didn't seem to have doors. So it was true—there were spaces of this great, tawdry palace where no one had set foot for a hundred years.

Carrie and I were forbidden to go to the mansion as girls. Dad told us the story of Grandpa behind the brick wall to scare us away. Our parents considered it a dangerous place to play, but that only made us want it more. We didn't often go inside, but we liked to hide from one another in the dead, shady gardens. Sometimes we gave each other tests. How far will you go in? How long will you stay there? Carrie liked to pinch my forearm till I said I'd do it, stomping huffily up the crumbling marble steps.

The day the police searched the mansion, thinking the rapist might've taken cover there, was several weeks after I'd seen the man in the forest, but I hadn't said a word. I was holding onto it as some kind of collateral. Carrie and I snuck out after the patrol cars, claiming we'd stayed at school for a dance lesson. We hid behind a collapsed grape arbor, watching the men in wool coats and uniforms sift through the magnificent iron doors. I recognized one man, who was walking around with a large pair of tweezers. I'd caught him whispering in my mother's ear at the Christmas bazaar earlier that month. Mom had been manning the booth where people were selling Depression glass. Her nails carefully pink, she'd lingered the scalloped edge of a vase as he leaned his mouth to her ear, one hand on the small of her back. "Oh, aren't you sweet," she'd told him.

Now, the man peered cautiously around the garden, as if he knew he was being watched. I narrowed my eyes at him. "Who's that guy?" Carrie whispered.

I shrugged. If I told her, that would make it real. The detective kicked at the snow
with the toe of his boot. He squatted, one hand on his knee, the hems of his pants lifting to
reveal his garters. I felt for some reason like I shouldn’t be seeing those. I looked away till
Carrie nudged me excitedly, and a deep voice called, “Found something, boys!” Hanging
from the tweezers, in front of the man’s broad chest, was my little wool cap.

“Ally,” Carrie hissed in my ear, “that’s yours! When did you lose it?” I shrugged
and watched the police gather around my mother’s friend. They slipped the hat into a
canvas sleeve. “They think it’s evidence,” Carrie giggled. “It’s just your hat!” I laughed
with her, pretending innocence. Of course I could’ve told her then about meeting the man
on the road, the red of my cap glowing in the snow at his feet, like the blood of a felled
deer. I didn’t, though. We waited till the men turned their backs, then we scampered off
into the trees.

When I first came back to town, I found an ad in the Star-Observer for an old
motorbike with a new engine and tires. Now I ride it every evening through the woods
behind my parents’ place, along the river and around the vast blue swamp, down the
winding driveway, and into the sagging carport of Great-Grandmother’s endless house.
The floor of the carport is overgrown with knapweed and miner’s lettuce. I cover the bike
with a tarp to keep it from rusting in the dew. A side door, itself practically hidden in
weeds, leads to the wing I’ve made my own, a clutch of small rooms — maybe servants’
quarters — in the southeast arm of the building. I keep a fat lemon-scented candle by the
door, to remind me of the lemon tree in front of the duplex I used to rent in Brooklyn.
Behind the shelter of my hand I carry the candle through the drafty rooms. Its pink circle of
light reveals the corners of lampshades and bookshelves, scraps of lumber and glass. I should go into Schenectady, try and dig up an old generator somewhere, but I've actually been putting it off. Instead, when it cools down at night, I light a fire in the green-tiled hearth and curl up in a dusty armchair. I like that during those hours, my whole world consists of this small, dim space, nothing for me to notice or map. I never know such close boundaries in the day.

I've arranged a smooth door across some cinderblocks to make a desk. On my way out of New York a few weeks ago, I stopped at a drafter's supply and went a little crazy, like a kid in a candy store. I bought all the nice-smelling tools I could possibly need—the kind I never get to use at work, where I'm usually at the computer. Steel rulers with rubber backing; a T-square made of smooth blond wood; the little cloth bags of chalk dust for erasing colored lead. Most of the things I bought are still clean and new, unused.

I'm using the a few of Margaret Beckett's silver teapots as canisters for the tools. I found the silver in a cabinet whose lock had rusted open. At first I thought of giving it all to my mother, but then I decided I can't let her know these things are here. She'd probably come with a garbage bag in her fist and raid my little rooms for a yard sale.

I haven't worked much since I moved in. Throw myself into it, that was the plan. Don't think of colors as demographic information. Step out of the key. But I never knew how much I counted on those things, the facts and figures. If I can't make that kind of map, with satellite data and digital vectors, I'm not sure I can make any at all. Still, I can't help feeling that my hand is the only tool that can draw our land. I'm hoping some truth is out there, cocooned in the web of lines I have yet to weave.
Wrapped in a musty quilt, I kneel on the stool at my desk and flip through the sketches I've done in the last few weeks. They're aerial drawings from memory, on sheets of butcher paper held down at the corners by the little bags of chalk dust. For now, I've guessed at the angles of the road and river, the breadth of the forest. Clusters of simple pine trees and rocks, dandelions in a meadow, are the only detailed symbols I've allowed myself so far. Symbols have always been my favorite part of a map: the curly-tailed sea monster breaching up from the depths of an old sailor's chart; the billows of smoke from the chimney of a plantation house. At work I can't play much with that kind of thing, so my map of Beckett Land will be full of symbols. They found Carrie's body in a northerly bend of the river, draped across a log, and I've marked that spot on my sketch with a small charcoal rose.

There is the smell of the chalk, of the silver, the warm crackle of fire, the mildew heavy in the air. But something's wrong with my sketch. I've left out something important, though I'm not sure yet what it is. I cross the room and reach into the pocket of my jacket. The tooth is cold and sharp, with a long, bent root. I set it down on the paper, at the side of the penciled road where the gaunt man was. The firelight sets it flaming.

Still there's no sign of Carrie. I look for her by the river, in the garden, and finally, in Great-Grandmother's mansion. The tall iron doors of the house stand open. Inside I am smothered in dust. Stacks of debris huddle in the shadowed corners. A mouse scurries across the marble, and in fear I rush up a flight of stairs that ends not at a floor, but at a ceiling. I knock on the ceiling with my fist, and the plaster comes crumbling over my face.
Coughing, my cheeks and eyes covered in white, I rush back out to the great stoop.

Carrie’s blond hair leans against the banister, gleaming under the moon. She shines her flashlight against the black sky. Its beam plays over the stars. I cry with relief and she turns to shine the light at my face.

“You’re late,” she says from behind the brightness. “It’s too windy for candles.” She leads me up the steps and out of the night. In the flashlight’s beam, the piles of debris are just that, and they no longer frighten me. Carrie holds my hand, and together we continue the search.

With muttered prayers we learned in school and the shuffling of our snow boots, our hands turning blue in their tight clasp, we sift in and out of the rooms. A cloud of dust follows us, sparkles in the light when we turn to catch it settling. Distant sounds come through the walls. Spider webs catch about our faces and stick to our fingertips, trailing behind us. Velvet curtains hang straight and impassive, like sentries, by every darkened window.

We sift and search. Doors open onto sudden stone walls. More stairs bring us to ceilings, bright with islands of mold. There is the stench of an unclean body, and we follow it through the rooms, stepping carefully over loose floorboards and nails. We hold our damp sweaters over our noses. The smell is strongest by a crumbling brick wall—behind it, a whimpering noise that might be a baby or an old man. Holding tight to Carrie’s hand I peer behind the wall, and there he is, crouched and bony, head clasped between his knees. The blades of his shoulders push sharp against the skin. Just as I reach out to touch him, my sister is gone, her warm hand dissolved into the dark.
THREE

Years ago I bought an antique theodolite, the tool surveyors once used to measure angles in the field. I've never gathered real data with it. I'm not even sure how accurate it is, though it hardly seems to matter. The two thin arms are inlaid with mother-of-pearl, or something like it, and the numbering on the compass card is old-fashioned, with curlicue tails. It balances on a tripod with sharp brass claws for feet. The guy I bought it from, an old geography nut who reminded me a little too much of what I might become, said it was probably built in the late nineteenth century, and might've been used for the construction of the Panama Canal. I didn't believe him for a second - the hinges are way too sturdy to be a hundred years old. But the way he stood there snapping his red suspenders, bushy eyebrows raised as he told the theodolite's glorious tale, I couldn't resist.

I brought it home to my boss, Lucas, whom I was in love with then. Lucas was married, kind of, contemplating divorce, and living with me in Brooklyn while his wife was off reporting on something in Japan. I was only a few years out of college, the youngest person in his mapmaking firm, all starry-eyed about him. We could lie in bed at night, his arm draped over my naked breasts, and discuss the Greenland Problem with ferocity. We planned to travel there together someday, on a cold boat with parkas and backpacks, to judge for ourselves whether the island deserved its prominence on the Mercator Projection. But fantasies like that only lasted so long. When I brought the theodolite home, Lucas was stretched out on the couch with a newspaper, didn't even put it down when I opened the
I should’ve known right then. I should’ve packed his bags, but instead I set the long
oak case in his lap. He folded the newspaper neatly and tossed it across the room.

"The new mapper they’ve got at the Times is a fucking amateur. My brother’s kid
could do better than that with his Crayolas and a fucking ruler."

I knelt next to the couch on the balding Chinese rug, a remnant from Great-
Grandmother’s house, and rested my chin on his chest. “Do you have to swear so much?”

“Look at it—the front page. The Saudi peninsula looks elephantine. And what’s
with that ridiculous bulge on the Emirates? It’s a mess. They think nobody cares about the
U.A.E., so they fuck it up.”

“Don’t you want to know what’s in the box?” I said, and his face seemed to suddenly
melt, like it sometimes did in those days, as if he were realizing all at once how pretty I
was. He’s got these oddly yellow eyes that can be penetrating or distant by turns. It makes
him a great businessman, that unpredictable intensity.

“I’m sorry, kiddo. Why not,” he said, taking my chin in his hand, smooth as a girl’s.
“Is it for me?”

“It’s for us.” I pushed the box up onto his belly, and he opened the brass clasps,
then laughed when he looked inside.

“Cool,” he said. “An old toy.”

“I know, isn’t it amazing?” I lifted the instrument gingerly out of the box by its
smooth arms. “Look at the craftsmanship of the lens.”

“Amazing craftsmanship,” he said emphatically, tucking a strand of hair behind my
ear. His fingers smelled like cigar tobacco. “You want a drink?” he said. He went to pour
himself a glass of scotch. I watched him stride purposefully across the room. Everything he
did was purposeful. He wasn’t even forty then, but his hair was already gray.

"I mean—I know it’s silly," I managed to say. I set the theodolite in my lap. "But
you should’ve heard this map maven who sold it to me. He tried to claim the mother-of-
pearl came from the Isthmus of Panama. When the U.S. took it over."

"Wonderful," Lucas said. "You now possess the spoils of conquest."

I frowned up at him. "Is that all you have to say?"

Lucas shook his head and smiled, tipped the glass back against his lips. "What
people won’t pay for obsolete technology," he said mournfully, munching on a piece of ice.
"It’s suckers like you that make the world go round, kiddo." He still calls me kiddo,
sometimes at the office, and I’ve never stood up to him about it.

Lucas eventually went back to his wife, who glares at me over the salsa every year at
the office Christmas party. He’s careful not to care much what I do with myself anymore. I
took a leave from work after Carrie died—it’s turned into weeks now, and he hasn’t batted
an eye. Still, I know it would drive him crazy that I left my GPS in a storage locker on Long
Island, tossed in with my furniture and books. He thrives on knowing exactly where he
stands.

Obsolete technology in hand, I set out from the mansion at noon, when the fog’s
cleared enough to traverse the forest. Bounded by Lewis Creek at one end, our swamp at
the other, the river and the road, pine forest occupies about four square miles of Beckett
land. Our trees are mostly dense white pines, with their pale trunks and towering mops of
green, and very little light shines through to the forest floor. Even now, under the trees it
could be evening or dawn, a blue cast over the muddy ground. Shafts of gold light, thin as pencils, occasionally pass over my bare legs and arms. It's the season for Chanterelle mushrooms, whose orange heads glance out from under damp logs. On the way home I'll cut some for a risotto.

I head for the road, the western boundary of our land. A woodpecker follows me, knocking his song against the trees. Woodpeckers have always been the scourge of my father's existence, tearing up the roof of his shed and waking him at dawn, though Carrie considered them a sign of good luck. One early morning when we were kids, Dad awoke to the woodpecker's thump and found himself alone—Mom had driven off again late that night. My sister and I heard the gunshot before we could stop him. Carrie ran to the doorway and pounded Dad's tired chest with her fists, pushed him aside and came back in, a minute or two later, with the bloody body of the bird. Her hands were sticky with feathers. I watched in my nightgown from the bottom of the stairs as she dug a shoebox out of a closet, set the bird's body in it and carried it back outside. Dad trudged to his room, mumbling, "Tell your sister to wash her hands."

It takes me a good half hour to reach the northwest corner of the woods. Coming into the heat of the sun from the chilled forest feels like stepping out of a fridge. From here, the road allows me a clear line of sight to the south. Dad used to joke that since they built the road smack on our property line, the eastern lane of travel should be ours to do with as we please—issuing tickets, citizens' arrests, and so forth. But who knows anymore where our land begins and the rest of it ends. There's an iron benchmark nailed into a stump at the edge of the forest, but the tree's probably shifted some inches since old James
stuck it there. Across the road begins a gentle rise that climbs out of the valley, up the Adirondack range. Some of the distant peaks are still white, but the sky's so blue and hot that the snow seems to be melting, making rivers down the mountain flanks. I close my eyes against the illusion, shaking my head as if to dislodge some dust. I need a clear mind for this kind of field work, which I haven't done for years, and which, for all its obsolescence, is more difficult than the work I've always done for Lucas's firm.

I'll measure the road by strides, sighting the angles through the old theodolite. The shadows are shortest at this time of day, which makes for an easier survey, sharp lines and palpable vanishing points. I set up the tripod next to the benchmark, digging its little brass feet into the soil. I had the compass needle replaced in New York, so when I lift the instrument from its case, the needle jumps and begs for the poles. I set it gently on the tripod. The oak case comes with its own set of tiny brass tools, so I use the precious philips-head to screw the theodolite in place. Lucas would laugh so hard at me right now, I know it, and Carrie would kneel in the gravel and gaze in wonder.

In bed, late at night, when we were just too old for fairy tales, Carrie and I used to read The Adventures of Baron Munchausen out loud to one another. The Baron was a debonair but unwitting old explorer, a Don Quixote type, whose travels led him everywhere from the moon to the depths of a volcano, where Venus popped out of a shell in all her pearly glory. My favorite chapters were about the Baron's servants: a troupe of unusual men, each of whom was blessed with one incredibly acute sensory apparatus. A giant ear that could hear every peep for miles around. A skin so sensitive it buzzed with light and heat. An eye so large and perceptive it could see beyond the horizon. This last intrigued me the most—
how did the man with the bulging eye understand the Earth? Could he know, as no normal human can, how it feels to stand on a sphere and watch the corners of the planet curve down around you? Where did his landscape end? Were the things he could see happening now or hours ago? I knew about the stars, and their millions-of-years-old light. Was it ever nighttime in the world of the man who could see forever?

When I learned to do a compass traverse, I was thirteen or so, and I hadn't forgotten the Baron’s keen-eyed friend. I'd checked out a boy scout book called *Down to Earth*, which taught the basic surveyor's techniques to anyone with a working compass and a pair of feet. In our scruffy backyard, I knelt in a patch of dandelions and wild onions, watching the northwest corner of the yard until I could see it with those limitless eyes. I found an empty point—just west of my father’s discarded rain boots, just east of the pump rising out of our well. The point became as solid and true as those objects were, and beyond it a vast, unsounded space. Trying not to wake myself back into the flat world, I slowly lifted the compass to my chest in the palm of my hand. Over the muddy grass, I turned until the compass read north, then pivoted gently back till the needle aimed at my point. The sun glowed hot on my hair as I held still, waiting for the needle to calm, then read the bearing at north seventy-two degrees west. The needle seemed to extend invisibly, like fishing line or a spider's thread. I walked along that thread, careful as an acrobat, until the point disappeared in my feet. Twenty-four strides, north seventy-two degrees west. The first leg of my first map.

I’ve practiced sighting over the years, but I feel rusty, and somewhat at a loss without Lucas’s satellites to guide me. They’re still up there, masquerading as planets. But
all I’ve got now is my eyes, nowhere near as sharp as they once were, and the old scope of the theodolite. I stand behind it and stretch my back, gazing down the slope of the road to the vanishing point. From here I can see the length of a shallow basin—at the bottom, our school bus used to let us off for the long trek up the hill. Crouching over my feet, I peer into the scope and search for the next crest of the road, probably a quarter-mile up beyond the low bus stop. Eyes wide and dry, I wait for the aimed point to crystallize in space, to become something I could touch, if I were to reach out my arm. For several slow minutes, maybe as many as fifteen, I blink as seldom as I can, holding my head so still that it trembles. I can feel the horrible minute parts of things: each jagged piece of gravel stabs the sole of my sandal; each bead of sweat rolls languidly down my back; the sound of each leaf rustling in the wind makes me shiver. But the point never reveals itself. Instead, eventually, a memory: a rusty yellow bus climbs over the hill, and my sister kneels in the back of it, a found newt squirming in her palm. There—that’s it. I aim the needle at Carrie’s open hand and take the bearing. South thirteen degrees east. As my sister runs a finger down the newt’s slick back, I dismantle the tripod, then stride the course of the line till she disappears. Two hundred and fifty strides.

At each new crest or bend in the road, I set up the theodolite again and watch for the memory that will locate my next bearing. Once, it’s my father’s white-walled Cadillac tire spinning in the snow. Another, Sara Pike squatting plump on the asphalt, dared to take a pee out in the open. My mother flagging down a ride to Albany in a Kelly-green dress, bright white handkerchief in her fist. I don’t have a photographic memory, really—I remember the places of things. I’m not so sure that my mother’s dress was green. But I
know that when we found her, Dad and Carrie and I, she was on that spot, south five degrees east of here, waving her handkerchief in the wind and ignoring my father’s cries as he slowed the car: “Stop this lunacy, Lila! We’ll have you locked up.”

It takes all day to plot the course of the road. Finally I come to the southwest corner of the property, the boundary of Mr. MacLeish’s land. He and my father once smoked a pipe together there, leaning on a truck on the shoulder of the road. South seventeen degrees west, and one hundred forty-four strides from where I fell and skinned my knee that same day, embedding a crumb of asphalt I can still see under my skin. I stumbled down this stretch of the road, calling for my father in his cloud of fragrant smoke.

It’s nearly five o’clock, and the shadows are too long to start my work in the forest. This might be slow going, but I’m happy to have a notebook full of pencil marks Lucas wouldn’t understand. I pack the theodolite in its pillowed case and make my way home through the trees.
Outside my Park Slope duplex, a lemon tree sprouted out of the sidewalk. In the winter, when it might've frozen and died, the warmth from a nearby Con-Ed steam vent billowed up around it, preserving the buds. By April, small, fragrant lemons hung on the tree's gnarled limbs. People came from other parts of Brooklyn to pick them, stashing them in briefcases or plastic grocery bags. At the end of spring the leftover lemons gathered and rotted in the gutters. Kids from the block formed warring factions and hurled them at each other, hiding behind mailboxes and telephone poles. Browned rinds and pulp splattered the asphalt, the red brick stoops and window boxes.

Nobody on the block knew when the tree had been planted or why. At the Society of Urban Gardeners, a woman in purple-tinted glasses sifted through the archives and brought me a flimsy manila folder, its seam practically gone from age and wear. There were soil analyses, landscaping directives, diagrams of the tiny stone borders they'd built around the sidewalk trees. And then a petition signed by seventy-five Italians, once the inhabitants of the block. Their names rang like bells —Riva, Tiepolo, Azzopardi. They asked for a lemon tree to remind them of the old country. The letter seemed staged, overly sentimental, like they knew what buttons to push. "Citrus Limonia isn't even native to Italy," said the woman with the glasses, reading over my shoulder. "What a crock!"

I lived in that duplex for about eight years, working at Lucas's cartography firm in Manhattan. Every year, as soon as the lemons bloomed, I called my sister wherever she was living and arranged for her to visit. Sometimes she was already with me, in one of her "dark
times,” as my mother called them, seeking refuge in the attic bedroom of my house. When the first fruit showed up, I’d climb the narrow stairs to find her wrapped in a blanket by the window, staring at the sliver of Manhattan, the gray tips of buildings showing over the neighbor’s roof. I’d hold a new lemon under her nose, and she’d clasp my wrist and smile for the first time in weeks.

Usually, at the beginning of April, I’d take some vacation days and spend them with Carrie in my kitchen. We made lemon curd, candied lemon peel, lemon jelly and tarts. My kitchen was full of cloying, sticky smells. Crystals of lemon-scented sugar clung to the edges of the countertop and the knobs of the stove. Late into the night, we’d sit at the little wood table eating lemon pudding or ice cream, asking each other questions from the Trivial Pursuit cards. The geography questions were the only ones I knew. Carrie was good at all the categories.

We’d learned to love baking, despite our mother’s distaste for housewifery. As kids, we’d eaten frozen peas and carrots several times a week, with some kind of tough pot roast or soggy noodles. My senior year of high school, Carrie and I took over the kitchen. We checked cookbooks out of the town library and bought kitchenware at the Pikes’ garage sale. We made chicken pot pie, green bean casserole with almond butter, minestrone soup. We deciphered the arthritic handwriting of Grandma’s yellowed recipes and learned to make corned beef and cabbage for Dad. He was uncharacteristically agreeable in the evenings. He greeted us merrily as we busied ourselves with peeling or chopping. But Mom just pouted while we cooked, supine on the living room couch with cucumber slices over her eyes. At dinner she slumped in her chair, picking despondently at her food.
Lemon tart was the one thing Mom could make. Her lemon curd was smooth and perfect, her own mother's recipe. She used a store-bought crust, but we didn't care—we loved it. We devoured those pies. I guess we took whatever she could give us. Most years we had the pleasure of lemon tart on our birthdays, and Thanksgiving if we were lucky. But when Carrie and I started cooking for the family, we'd come home at least once a week to that lemon smell in the house. Eventually we grew sick of it. Still, it's one of my nicest memories: a triumph.

The last time she made it, after dinner, we all sat silent as Mom brought the tart to the table. She always looked funny in our gingham oven mitts, like a girl playing dress-up. The rich, buttery smell of the tart made my stomach lurch. It was number fifteen of the weekly tarts. We all just stared at it.

"Well?" Mom said. "Dig in, everyone!"

Dad reached forward and cut us each a sliver. My mother declined. Carrie tapped her fork against the side of the plate, and I didn't touch mine. We sat there silent for a minute. "What on earth is wrong with you all?" Mom said. Carrie shrugged. Dad lifted a small bite to his mouth, chewing slowly. His Adam's apple grew and shrank as he forced it down with a tight smile.

"Oh, stop it," Mom said. "Just stop goddamn pretending. You're horrible, all of you." She tore off the oven mitts, threw one angrily at Carrie and one at me, and stormed off to her bedroom in the back of the house. The door slammed. We stayed as we were, eyes on the tart, its perfect smooth yellow, the golden crust. It sounded like Mom was throwing more things. Carrie's eyes were wide, and Dad was holding a pale, already aging
fist over his mouth. Suddenly, as if he might be choking, he made a small, barely audible snorting noise. Once, then two times quickly, then the laughs started coming, quiet at first, then hearty and loud, then so hard that the sound wouldn’t come, just a teary, open-mouthed hysteria, so violent that Carrie and I couldn’t help but laugh too. The kitchen went blurry behind my tears. I clutched my belly over my wool skirt. Carrie slapped my arm, doubled over in her chair. Soon there was the sound of the car revving up outside, the headlights twinkling on the windows. Dad laughed softer as we listened to the gravel under her tires.

My sister reminded me of this story one year while we sat in my Brooklyn kitchen, rows of miniature tarts on the counter between us. We were in t-shirts and pajama pants, our feet bare, the kitchen warm with the sun from the day, the shouts of New York outside. “Where do you think she went?” I asked.

“Who knows?” She ran her pinky along the inside of a mixing bowl. She offered the tip of her finger to me, and I licked off the sweet curd. “Maybe she went to the drive-in,” she said. “Could’ve been anywhere.”

“Come on. You don’t think she was with Nicholson? Or somebody else?”

“You make her sound like the town tramp.”

“Well, wasn’t she?” I thought of Detective Nicholson’s broad shoulders in his gray coat, moving carefully through the garden.

“She liked to be alone sometimes, Ally. You of all people should understand that.” Carrie looked thoughtful, the lids of her milky blue eyes half-closed. I felt my heart seize a little, nervous that she’d descend into herself again. It was a good year for her—she was
working for a publisher in Philadelphia, living with a boyfriend who played oboe for the philharmonic. He left her not long after, in the fall, and I drove there in a rented car and brought her back to Brooklyn.

“What does that mean?”

“I’m just saying, you’re so quick to judge her. Those tarts were a nice thing she did for us. We should’ve appreciated it more.”

“Oh, right,” I said. “She was just jealous that Dad liked our cooking better. She worked so hard to displease him, but she hated it when he wasn’t pleased.”

“You’re wrong,” she said. “Selective memory.”

I gazed over the glad yellow faces of the tarts. “Ugh.” I held my hand over my stomach. “We’ll never eat all these.”

The next day, we packed the tarts into a basket and delivered them to my friends around the city. We took them to three boroughs and to Roosevelt Island. Carrie had driven up from Philly, and it was nice to tool around New York in a car, like a rich person or somebody from Jersey. We cranked up the radio and careened down the West Side Highway with open windows. We ate tarts in traffic, dropping sticky crumbs in our laps. We double-parked outside the building where I worked and brought tarts to the mapmakers at their bright computer screens. Lucas glanced at us through the glass walls of his office. He gave me a two-fingered salute. His eyes followed the curve of Carrie’s back as she leaned to kiss the receptionist’s cheek.

Everyone loved Carrie—her wide, true smile, and the way she’d touch you when she talked. When I told them six months later that she’d tried to kill herself, jumping off a
bridge into the Susquehanna River, they didn’t believe me. They came to see her at the hospital in Brooklyn, where she lay in her narrow bed, thin and bland as a stranger.

My mother called my apartment every night at two, when she knew I’d be home from the hospital. “How does she look?” she often asked, her voice high and trembling. “Has she talked about it yet?”

“Mom, she’s barely conscious. They’ve got her on all kinds of drugs. Be patient.”

“I don’t understand this. Your father and I are very confused. We want some answers.”

In the study, newspaper clippings from the Philadelphia Inquirer were spread across my drafting table: “Witness Thwarts Susquehanna Suicide, Saves Life.” I fingered the smeared gray edge. The woman in the hospital was not saved. “I’m sorry if I don’t care what you want,” I told my mother. In the kitchen, pictures of Carrie were tacked onto the refrigerator with magnets shaped like countries—Mom had given me the magnets when I first moved away, when she was trying to love me so I wouldn’t vanish. I turned the photos around so their white backs showed. I said, “Anyway, I think Dad would want you to speak for yourself. May I talk to him, please?”

“He’s asleep,” she said, “of course. And don’t be smart with me right now. I’m not in any shape for it.”

“I’m hanging up,” I said. “Goodnight, Mom. I love you.” By then it had become a habit to end our conversations that way. When I forgot to say it, she called back a few minutes later, indignant. How could I be so cold at a time like this? I stood alone in the quiet kitchen. I was wired on hospital coffee and couldn’t sleep. I wrapped a quilt around
my shoulders and went out to the stoop. The chilled air blew the last of fall's bright leaves down the block. Only the lemon tree still seemed alive, with garlands of steam around its branches.

In the morning I ride my bike into town. It's before seven o'clock, and the valley fog still lies low around the mansion. It disperses around me as I ride up the driveway and into the woods.

I want to put in some hours at the Kingsbridge Library, checking out the county maps. I'm curious how they represent our land. Maybe I can learn a few things, or crib some data. Around here the county planners update the topographical maps every four or five years, but they still use aerial photography instead of satellite images; there isn't the money for that kind of technology we have in New York. I'll go them one better and draw it all by hand, just as I please. There's no patron behind this project, no agenda but my own.

I ride along the river instead of the swamp. They run parallel until the river veers west, away from the road. A layer of mist lies over the banks. I can't hear the sound of the water under the roaring engine of the bike, but every once in a while a birdcall breaks through, agitated and clear. I can't name most of the birds around here—Carrie was the little ornithologist. She knew about bugs, too, and the species of frogs we'd find in the reeds, and the reason the coats of the deer darkened in October. I just liked to draw them.

Eventually the river takes me up behind town, into the forest where we used to cut school and smoke cigarettes. Things haven't changed so much—butts are scattered
everywhere. The twigs break under my tires. I know I’m leaving a noxious trail, but I love
how the motorbike disturbs the quiet around here. It’s a piece of New York for me to cling
to.

The library parking lot is empty, except for a couple of small sedans that probably
belong to the quiet employees. I haven’t been in here for years, but it looks the same,
yellow brick and black metal railings, the rusty red sign advertising a fallout shelter. Fat
black crows peer down at me from the edge of the roof. I know those birds, at least,
ubiquitous as they are. In Brooklyn they’d wake me at five or five-thirty, cawing from the
fire escape. They’d pick at the leftover lemons like a bunch of vultures.

Inside, a youngish, silent man sits behind the desk, eerily staring straight ahead. He
seems to be watching something out the back windows, but they’re made of frosted glass,
and I can only make out the vague shapes of the trees beyond them. An old woman kneels
on the floor of the children’s section in a long, heavy dress, shelving picture books. I think
she’s the same librarian I knew as a child, Mrs. Callahan. We were always scared of her,
until her teenage son died in a landslide during a flood year. After that she was teary and
kind to us.

The gold wood drawers of the card catalog line the western wall, and a doorway
beyond them leads to the map room. In high school, I discovered there the “Earth at
Night,” a digital world map whose coloring represents the concentration of light at the
earth’s surface. The EPA developed it in the late eighties to explain why the dimmest stars
weren’t visible anymore. Most of the map is a deep black-blue, and the brightest regions
are smothered in bursts of dandelion orange. The eastern corridor of the United States is
the orangest place on the map. Near Japan, a brilliant cloud represents the squid fleets, who fish at night with underwater lamps. In East Africa, between the Sahara and the rainforest, you can see where farmers burn their fields in winter. At sixteen I pored over the map, awed by all it presumed to know.

"Can I help you?" The man at the desk is looking at me. I'm still near the door in a reverie of that map, as if it were an old lover suddenly brought to mind. It takes me a second to remember why I'm here.

"No thanks," I manage to say, but he's not really looking anymore. His eyes dart around my head and shoulders, irises cloudy and indistinct. He's blind, of course, I see it now. His hands are alert on the desk in front of him, more focused than his eyes. A yellow dog sleeps at his feet, its tail just visible under the desk. A blind librarian? How can that even be? He's probably about my age, with a fussy hairstyle and a calm, sweet face, except for those creepy eyes. I can tell he's quite tall—his legs extend over the seat of the chair and the dog's body in a languid way I usually think of as sexy. It must be hard to be blind and very tall. "I mean, I can probably find it myself. I wanted to look in the map archive. Do I need to show you my card?"

"No, you're okay. Ptolemy will take you if you want." He leans down to pet the dog's smooth head, but his eyes still play over my body. I have a momentary urge to do something crazy, like make a fish face or wave my arms wildly. I also can't seem to form a reasonable sentence. "I know where I'm going," I say. "I mean, I've got it. I'm okay."

"I know your voice," the blind librarian says, smiling. "You're older, though. Are you from around here?"
I'm not sure whether to look at him when I answer. "I grew up here, just up the road. I'm a Beckett." It's the usual way to introduce yourself in town, since most everybody knows your parents or your grandparents or someone you once loved. Still, it feels like a conceit, some assumption of local fame.

He smiles again. It's a small but honest smile—he's not that happy to see me. "You're Alyce," he says. "I was in your sister's class in grade school. Will Emerson, remember me? I was Billy then. Kind of dumb to change it, I guess, but I couldn't hang on to Billy. It didn't seem serious enough for a blind guy."

Of course—the reddish hair, ears too small for his head. Billy Emerson, with the coke bottle glasses, was always tripping over himself. He played with imaginary friends instead of real ones, by himself in a mulchy corner of the schoolyard. In the winter his glasses fogged up on the hot school bus, so when you looked at him you weren't sure whether he was looking back. He and Carrie had been tight one autumn, their fourth grade year. She walked him home, linking arms so he wouldn't fall in the slippery piles of leaves. She sometimes took on "causes" like that, then left them to their own devices, not out of meanness, but with a strange vote of confidence. Billy's family moved away a few years later, when his vision worsened. Now here he is, blind. Can that happen to a person?

"Of course, hi. It's good to see you, Will." I move closer and put out my hand, then pull it back—how would he know to take it? But he stands up and reaches over the desk, moves his hand in a slow arc until it touches mine. His skin is warm and smooth, mine cold from the morning. He doesn't let go. I have to laugh at myself. "Oh Billy, I'm sorry I'm acting like an idiot. It's just—I didn't know you were here. I'm surprised to see
"You didn’t know I was blind either.” He clasps my hand between both of his. I look down at them, surprised. Even the little hairs below his knuckles are red. He squeezes, frowning a little. “I was really upset to hear about Carrie. She was such a good friend to me.” He pauses, clears his throat. Something about the way his hands are, the way he leans so close to talk to me, his voice soothing and low, makes me want to sob. I’ve been meaning to do it, it’s been on the edge of everything for months. But Mrs. Callahan is staring at me sympathetically from the corner of the library. I can’t indulge her with any small-town melodrama. Billy says, “It’s awful. I mean, I hope you’re doing okay.”

“Thank you.” I shoot a smile at Mrs. Callahan, hoping she’ll go back to her books. I let myself out of Billy’s hands. “So, I’m just going to look at some maps. It’s good to see you again.”

“Can’t quite say I haven’t changed, can you?” Why does he keep bringing it up? He’s like an old ex-athlete trying to make jokes about his bad knee. He goes on, “That’s what you do now, isn’t it? I heard it from somebody. You make maps?”

“I’m on a little hiatus, actually. Well, it’s not really a hiatus. Oh, it’s a long story, forget it.”

“You’re working on a project around here?” Maybe he’s lonely—his ring finger is bare. Everybody our age around here has kids of their own now. I’ve recognized some faces in recent weeks, at the farmer’s market or out for a beer. Usually, if they recognize me back, our conversation only lasts long enough for them to get uncomfortable about Carrie. They knew her, after all, as an adult these last two years, but they probably weren’t
prepared for her suicide. Carrie had a way of tricking you by glowing with happiness for a while. I know that Jo Pike, her old partner-in-crime, stayed close to her since she came home, but the others were mostly acquaintances, as far as I can tell. She never mentioned Billy.

"Sort of," I say. I guess I'm reluctant to sacrifice my isolation. He's the first person who's talked to me like this since I came to town. With all the leaden past between my parents, they don't really have room for my project. "I'm trying to put together a map of the land we've got along the river." I scramble for a reason, something businesslike and easy, just to keep from having to answer more questions. "I thought it might help my parents put it on the market." Sell the land? Where did that come from? The land won't be sold as long as my father's alive, and I've always thought I'd fight to keep it too. But before I can correct myself, Billy says, "Oh yeah?" He looks surprised, pale brows lifting above his wild eyes. "Wow, that's kind of sad. I remember playing there with Carrie a couple times when we were kids. It's all kind of blurry, of course. Excuse the pun."

I try to remember when Billy might've been out by our river or in our woods, but I can't see him there. I only remember his lonely place in the schoolyard, skinny fingers wagging at invisible children. He says, "Wow, I must be nervous. I'm making stupid jokes about being blind. Sorry."

"Stop apologizing. We both keep doing that." I smile at him, hoping he can hear it in my voice. He's turned out cute, I think. The eyes are too distracting to say for sure. Ptolemy comes out from his place under the desk and looks expectantly up at Billy.

"Alright, you old dog," he says. "I'm going to take him out for a minute. Good luck
with your maps. Let me know if you need a hand in there."

I thank him as the harnessed dog leads him out from behind the desk and through the front door. Curious, I sneak a closer look at his desk—the computer has a keyboard with a tiny rash of braille on it. So does the phone, and a book I thought was blank is open over the blotter, the raised bumps of the letters taking shape as I lean in. The scalloped edge of a piece of newsprint sticks out from between the pages. I pull it, and my sister's face appears, smudged and joyful, the photo that ran with her obituary in the local newspaper. Her sunlit hair is pulled away from her face, and a stray piece of it hangs against her lip. I took the picture on a trip to the Bahamas before she moved back up here, a little while after her third suicide attempt. It was our best vacation, even after she cut her toe on a piece of coral—we sat in the sand and read magazines out loud to each other and flirted with the coffee-skinned boys at the tiki bar in our hotel. Carrie even slept with one of them, wild on something she'd drunk out of a coconut. It was one of the only times we didn't care much about anything, either of us. I shove the picture in my pocket. Where did he get it, anyway? Who was it that carefully tore her out of the paper? Certainly not a blind man, who'll always know her face as a little girl's.

"Do you need help with something?" Mrs. Callahan asks me, placing a withered hand on my back.

"Thank you, no." I turn to her and force a smile. I don't think she caught me snooping. There's pity in her eyes and voice. "I'm just going to look at some maps."

I used to think there was nothing devious about a map. I was wrong. A map can be
as dangerous as a dagger, with its proclamations of truth—its Lucases scheming with their clients, high above New York. Still, I take comfort in the map archive of a library, the elegant pages stacked close and neat, like playing cards in a brand new deck. I used to do homework in here after school, and I always got the feeling I was the room’s only visitor. It’s always looked the same, washed in a yellow-gray light. The walls are bare except for a standard world map, in mild pastels, with bright red letters stenciled over Antarctica: “Don’t just stand there!”

The county maps are filed chronologically, in long, flat drawers marked by yellowed index cards: “Kingsbridge Valley, 1931” up to 1996. Three or four years separate each file, so the county planning office should be working on an edit now. I settle myself on a stool and slide out the first drawer, then flip through the old beige pages to Beckett Quadrangle, New York, named after my family, its first and only settlers. I hold the map to the light, and it shines through the thinning paper, illuminating the spots and strands of pale blue where our waters are. 1931 was before the Department of the Interior, so this might be the only record of our land from that time. The road my parents’ house is on hasn’t yet been built on this map, but the data for the natural features seems basically correct. I spread the page out flat on the table and lean over it, sliding a magnifying loop across the contour lines of the hills and valleys. There’s the slight elevation of the river’s east bank; Cayuse Hill up behind the swamp; the low plane of the forest that stretches towards town. The places of my childhood swell under the screen of the glass, then shrink back down as I pass them by. At the tenth degree north, seventy east, a pond where Carrie and I swam naked and captured minnows in jars. Near twenty north, sixty west, a rock wash where we
once got caught in a spiderweb so huge it took half an hour to untangle our limbs. With the glass on those coordinates, I can feel the maddening pull of the web’s sticky thread over my eyes and lips, hanging from my hair.

The meadow where my great-grandmother’s mansion stands is narrower on the map than it should be, though it’s possible that the mapmaker’s data was forty years old, gathered before the clearing was widened to accommodate the house. I can imagine it, wild-haired Margaret Beckett ordering men with axes around the meadow, demanding that they dynamite stumps to make room for the arms of her home. Whenever I think of that woman, the minions she must’ve employed to build the place lurk in the background, with their sweat and cigarettes and tools.

The 1931 map whispers against the drawer as I slide it back in place. The edited versions are much the same until 1946, when the first paved roads were built across the bottom half of the property, bright red lines meandering through the faded greens and pinks. As I page through them, an hour passes, two or three, until it’s afternoon and my mind is heavy with Beckett land. Over the two pale dimensions of the maps rise up the hills and trees of my memory, tangible and true, the smooth leaves and stinging nettles and trunks leaking sap.

In the year I was born, 1971, the map is suddenly wild with color and detail. With new technology, the cartographers could more exactly, though perhaps less artfully, show the subtle changes in elevation and terrain. It’s a busier map, and probably less like the one I plan to draw than the older versions. I’m not sure why I want my map to seem antique. Maybe it’s a matter of distance. Maybe I need to trick myself into feeling like I’m far
enough away to see things clearly, in one panoramic view.
Two years ago, with her savings and a small business loan, Carrie bought a health food store. “I’ll probably never have kids anyway,” she said then. “What do I need the money for?” She had all kinds of plans for a juice bar, a fitness room—but none of them ever panned out, since my father’s the only one in town who gives a damn about trying to keep himself alive past seventy. Even he didn’t bother with it till Carrie died at twenty-eight. The afternoon of the funeral, instead of accompanying us all back to the house for some somber coffee and pastries, he drove his truck from the gravesite straight to Carrie’s store, where he loaded up several cases of soy milk, some bags of brown rice, and a haphazard selection of vitamins.

Down the street from the library, I peer in the wide front window of the store. The early sun passes through some many-colored bottles on the windowsill, landing in streaks on the dusty linoleum. White letters stenciled on the window still read “Apothecary,” since that’s what it used to be, and Carrie was too old-fashioned to give up the idea. I fumble with her set of keys, the key-chains their own little painful reminders. A picture of the two of us at the Six Flags in New Jersey, in one of those little plastic viewers. A tarnished whistle they gave her ten years ago in college, to warn off frat boy attackers. I used to make fun of her for hauling around such an assortment of junk, but she claimed she’d lose the keys otherwise. Three months ago, when the police found her body on the riverbank, the keys were hanging off a belt-loop of her jeans, tangled in some moss. Impetuous to the last.

I fumble with them, trying six or seven before one fits. Where did they all take her?
I wouldn’t put it past her to have kept the keys from her various apartments and jobs, just for nostalgia’s sake. If that were true, the keys would lead me up and down the eastern seaboard before I found their locks. Their own kind of map of brass grooves and fissures, like the vectors of a coastline or our mountains. Boston, Philly, a Maryland seashore town, as far south as the Outer Banks, North Carolina. Carrie never lived in one place more than a year – eight months might’ve been the record, with the oboe player.

Inside, grit crunches under my shoes. I should’ve done this weeks ago. I’ve let dust collect on the counters, on the tops of granola boxes. There are the smells of herbs and stale tea. Floating dust motes turn the beams of sunlight into airy bars of gold. I disturb them on my way to the counter, where the grit’s so thick I can write my name in it with my fingertip. I stand behind the counter, where my sister stood to receive her rare customers. Maybe she leaned across the counter on her elbows, gossiping with Jo Pike about kids we knew in high school, complaining about our parents. There are a couple of pictures taped to the drawer of the antique cash register: me on the Carolina coastline, with a sunset behind me; a sepia-tinted wedding photo of Mom and Dad; another grainy black-and-white I don’t recognize. I crouch down to look at Mom and Dad’s picture. God knows where Carrie got it. Mom’s dress is plain and straight, with a layer of lace that gathers slightly at the neck and cuffs. She wears a round white hat with a short veil over her face. Both my parents are long and thin in the photo, about the same height, and they’re smiling. Dad’s clutching her elbow fiercely, and his mouth is open, laughing. Maybe this was the last time they loved each other. Or maybe it’s harder to pin down than that.

The other old picture shows a young girl in a light-colored dress with a wide, dark
ribbon for a sash. She’s playing outside somewhere, on a patch of healthy grass. She has the same round face and pointed chin as Mom does, and even the same sly, full lips. But it’s not my mother, I can tell by the eyes.

Somebody knocks hard on the window, rattling the old glass panes. It’s Dad, gazing out at the street, hands sunk into the pockets of his shorts. His back looks like it’s getting stronger—the hunch of his shoulders isn’t so pronounced. He’s looking less and less like an old man. He doesn’t turn around when I open the door. I search for what he’s staring at, but there’s only another gaggle of crows, preening their shiny dark feathers on the roof of the post office across the street.

“Hi Dad.” I place a hand on his shoulder. “To what do I owe this visit?” He notices me and kisses me on the cheek with papery lips.

“Saw your bike down the street and I thought you might be here,” he says. “Can’t I come by to see my daughter?”

“Of course.”

“I thought I might bring home some more provisions too. We’re running low on Gingerroot. Think she’s got any more back there?”

“Help yourself.” I pass back through the beams of colored light on my way to the counter. Somehow I don’t want to turn on the fluorescent bulbs—only this natural half-light seems appropriate. “I don’t think anyone’s been looting the place, Dad. I’ll bet you’re the only one around here who considers Gingerroot a provision.”

“Oh, haw haw,” he says, poking around on one of the shelves of vitamins. “You and your mother. You’d think my family would want me around a little longer. Wishful
I watch him lean carefully down over his knees, hands on his thighs, to read the fine print description on a squat plastic bottle. It seems he’s in a rare good mood.

“Listen to this,” he says, holding his bifocals out at the end of his nose. They’re attached around his neck by one of those purple elastic things that skiers and mountain climbers wear. “Gobo root. Soothes emotional distress and spiritual unease. Imagine that, Alyce!”

“I can’t imagine it, Dad.” The truth is, I can’t even imagine Dad asking me to imagine that. Before he retired, he was an accountant at a hospital in Schenectady. He always had a penchant for history too, and fishing, but that was as far as he got beyond the world of papers and numbers he lived in at work. In the study out back of my parents’ house are the relics of both his interests: thick, leather-bound ledgers and an antique adding machine; a fifteen-volume “History of the World” put out by the Britannica corporation. As far as I know, the study hasn’t yet seen traces of Dad’s new hobby, the teas and roots and beeswax.

“I’m going to try it,” he declares, dumping a couple of bottles into a plastic grocery bag he’s extracted from his back pocket.

“Do you have spiritual unease?” I ask him, mostly joking.

“Not exactly.” Still crouching, he peruses the other shelves of bottles. “But you know your mother isn’t a restful woman.” I’m surprised by the wry affection in his voice. It seems like over the years he’s developed a mechanism of distance, something to keep Mom’s rage and boredom safely on the edges of his heart. I’m not sure. Sometimes I think
he’s more vulnerable than he lets on.

“Have you seen these pictures?”

A flask of green juice in his fist, he comes behind the register and looks down at the photos, their edges curling back into the drawer. “Look at Lila,” he says. “I’ll be damned.” It occurs to me for the first time, as he extends a finger to touch the image of his young bride’s face, that he once was quite in love with her. Dad’s never been one to showcase his feelings, and in fact there was a time when I wondered if he had any at all. In Junior High we hardly saw him, and Mom’s evenings out were frequent too. Carrie and I, stir-crazy, made a game of running around the house as fast as we could, poking at each other with umbrellas, opening and closing them willfully, though we’d been taught by superstition not to do so. Sometimes we played when Mom and Dad were home, and they’d ignore us in separate, silent rooms. We longed for some kind of reaction. Once Dad grumbled, “You girls are getting too big for this kind of thing,” and we secretly high-fived, collapsing into giggles on the carpet. I never thought that during all that stubborn silence, he might’ve been pining for her.

But he just says, “Hardly looks like the same woman,” and takes a long swig of the juice. The bright green pulp lingers at the crumpled corners of his mouth. “Spirulina,” he says, grinning.

I roll my eyes and point to the old photo I don’t recognize. “What about this one? Do you know who this is?”

Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he adjusts his glasses again and leans in to the picture. “Well,” he says. “Why would Carrie have that up now?”
“Who is it?”

“Can’t be sure, but I think that’s Lila’s cousin Molly. She passed on when she wasn’t much older than this, before your mother and I were even born. But folks used to talk about her all the time. She drowned on Beckett land, in the pond out behind the swamp. Nobody quite knew what happened. When Lila and I started going together everybody was talking about it, what a strange coincidence it was. I haven’t thought of it in years.”

I stare at the little girl’s eyes, the way they turn down at the corners like my mother’s do. “I’ve never heard that story,” I say, though it’s not surprising—Mom’s parents both died when I was very young. (“Passed on,” my father would say, a strange expression because he’s not a religious man, nor even a faithful one. “Passed on to where?” I once asked, and he scowled at me and told me not to be a smart-ass.) My only memory of my mother’s parents is a crystal bowl of candied violets they kept on top of the TV in their house at the other end of town. My grandmother insisted on feeding them to me with her cool, dry fingers, as if I were one of the goats they kept in the yard.

Mom’s an only child, and all of her extended family has moved to the Midwest or California. She’s not really one for keeping up those connections, so I think they gave up on her a long time ago. That there might be a girl with her blood who drowned in our pond, and that Carrie might’ve known this and kept it from me, feels like a betrayal. My face is hot. I peel the picture off the register’s metal face. The scotch tape tears off parts of the image, leaving ragged patches of white on the little girl’s legs and the lawn.

“Maybe Caribou thought it was Lila,” Dad says. His childish nickname for my sister
opens up a hole in my chest. I clench my teeth to keep from losing it. "Molly does look a little like her, I guess, in other pictures I've seen."

"Maybe." I tear the other photos down too and stack them on the counter.

"Aren't you pretty," Dad says, smiling at the sunset shot. I scoff at him and lean under the counter for a rag. There's a bottle of blue cleaning fluid and some towels neatly folded among the dust bunnies. I try to muster my most practical voice. All I can come up with is a scolding tone I regret as soon as it comes out of my mouth. "You know we're going to have to sell this place. And we'll have to get rid of all these products, donate them or something."

He frowns, a tinge of green still on his lips. "Seems like an awful waste."

"Come on, Dad. You can't possibly eat forty boxes of Muesli all by yourself."

He laughs and slaps his palm down on the counter, sending up a brown cloud. "Let's get the place clean," he says, "then we'll talk about it. I'll have a word with Paul Larson, his boy's over at the Century 21 now. Okay?"

"Alright." Behind some inventory notebooks—Carrie did everything by hand—I find a bright pink feather duster, and the whimsy of having such a thing reminds me so much of her, of a costume she might've worn or a play she might've put on with the Pike girls, that when I look at Dad I let out one loud and inevitable sob. I bring my hand to my mouth, wishing I could tug the sound back in, like a frog's tongue.

"Come on," he says, hugging me stiffly. "Come on, now. It's the way of his grief. I've got to let him do it, I guess, though it's been hard to negotiate the mourning of my parents and still have my own.
We spend the rest of the afternoon with the door of the Apothecary propped open, sweeping and feathering out the layers of gray that have gathered since Carrie’s death. The brown cloud migrates out of the store and onto the sidewalk out front. People who know my father walk by, coughing and waving their hands in front of their faces, and he laughs at them mercilessly. A woman I recognize from the bank shoots us a dirty look. She waddles on, brushing off the sleeves of her yolk-yellow blazer. “Old cow,” Dad mutters, and I can’t help but laugh. I haven’t spent so much time alone with him in years.

I map the room in my head as I clean it, an old and dorky habit. Concentric lines show the elevation of the vitamin displays, relative to the bookcases that hold canisters of fragrant teas. The densest concentration of lines runs along a tall wrought-iron bookshelf with tubes of organic lotion and shampoo. The staircase in the northeast corner, which leads to attic storage, is represented by a gradient of earth tones, passing into one another like sand. The space behind the counter where Carrie might’ve stood should be marked by a symbol, but for a moment I’m at a loss. I rest the feather duster on a tin of sunflower seeds. The light in the room seems to shift, the colored shadows bend slightly, the heat of the sun intensifies on my hair. Then it comes to me suddenly: the scalloped silhouette of a wing. It’ll be the symbol for my sister on the map of Beckett land.

Dad sweeps the floor slowly, without much attention to where the dust is going. I scrub at the countertop until it shines my face back at me, the nose so like my mother’s, long and straight, and the pale red freckles we all have, scattered over my forehead and cheeks. Faint, curled V’s are forming at the sides of my mouth. It’s the first time I’ve noticed them. I trace them with my fingertips on the clean formica.
“Something wrong?” Dad says knowingly, shaking a bottle of vitamins in his fist like a tambourine. He leans jauntily against the broomstick. Again I have the feeling that he’s getting younger as I age, and it’s both unsettling and a relief.

Billy was once on Beckett land—I suddenly remember, coasting home past the swamp after dinner with my parents. I must’ve been ten, since Carrie was in fourth grade when she took Billy on, and I in fifth. He spent the night at our house after a long game of flashlight tag in the backyard. It was a game of shadow and light, so it was easy for Billy, no balls to watch or lines to stay back from. Later, he slept in an old felt sleeping bag of Dad’s, brown and green with pictures of deer and pheasants on it, on the floor next to our bunk bed. Our parents must’ve trusted Billy’s bespectacled face—I can’t remember another boy ever sharing our room.

We were restless. Mom and Dad were fighting in the living room, and the sound of things breaking came through the walls. I didn’t want to hear them fighting again, because I had only recently come to know that this would never end. Carrie was still innocent about that. She lay in her bed and listened to the owls outside with some kind of hope, but I knew better by then, so the owls only sounded ominous to me. I could hear the hollow hooting sound they made, and sometimes a big disturbance of leaves, like one of them had spread its wings and feathers in a tree.

Sometimes I couldn’t hear the owls for the sound of things breaking. I stared down at the deer on Billy’s sleeping bag, which was pulled up tight over his head. I listened to try and figure out what they were throwing. There was a crash and a tinkling sound and I
picted a tea cup with a little scene of Chinese boats on it broken into a hundred pieces. I hoped that in the morning, I’d find the thin pretty handle at the bottom of the stairs. There was a pillowcase in my closet with a collection of these shards in it—tea cup handles, pages of books, halves of pencils, and one branch of fake seaweed from what had once been our fishbowl.

When there was a silence I knew someone had come to the door or called, maybe to complain about the racket. I lay with my eyes open and strained to hear the murmurs of what they were saying. Soon I heard the door open and close, and it felt like there was no one out in the living room anymore. I went to the window and saw them get into the truck, Mom and Dad and Mr. MacLeish from down the road. They drove away very slowly into the forest, over the felled trees and pine needles.

I poked my sister and hurried to get on my shoes over the feet of my pajamas, hurling her sneakers at her so she’d know we needed to move fast. Billy peeked his head out of the sleeping bag and whispered, “Where are you going?” Carrie retrieved his thick glasses from the nightstand and put them in his fist. “Come on,” she said softly.

We hop-scotched through all the shards in the living room, Billy crouching so he could feel them with his hands, and made it to our bikes outside on the porch. Carrie had a big wicker basket attached to the back of hers, for carrying berries we picked or quartzes or leaves, and she ordered Billy to climb into it. His legs dangling out the side of the basket, we followed the rumbling sound of the truck. We rode on Beckett land for quite a while. The red lights of the truck sometimes shone out of the trees up ahead. There was a clean, grassy stretch of bank along the river, and soon the truck cut over to it. Carrie and I
pumped our legs hard. I didn’t like that we were heading for the swamp, a vast blue bog that swallowed things into its dark and muck, bikes and bodies of deer. Once I’d even thought I saw a human hand sticking out of it. I’d never gone far into the swamp, so I wasn’t sure if it ever ended or how much of it we owned.

When we got there, Mom and Dad and Mr. MacLeish were just at the edge, where the ground was still firm enough to stand. They were all looking into the middle of the mossy trees, and Dad held a coil of rope in his hand and Mr. MacLeish a shotgun. I followed their eyes with my own and fell upon the snout of a horse, black and slick in the moonlight, and the long line of the horse’s back, and the tops of its skinny legs until they sunk into the mud. It was trying to lift its legs but its knees were stuck. It shook its head violently and whinnied, like it was going crazy trying to get out of there. As my eyes began to adjust I saw that there were more horses, and more, at least thirty, some I recognized from having visited Mr. MacLeish’s pastures, and they were all trying to lift their legs and whinnying. The sound grew until it was a horrible mournful cry echoing off the mossy trunks. Some of them were sunk up to their knees, and the curves of some of their bellies already hung partway in the mud. Carrie grasped me around my waist. I turned to look for Billy—he was spinning around and around, eyes closed, hands clasped over his ears.

“Stop that!” I hissed, and grabbed his skinny elbow. Carrie pushed me away, glowering.

“Don’t touch him,” she said. “He’s got better ears than we do.” And as if they weren’t a nine-year-old girl and boy, trained to snub one another on the playground, she
took him into her long, sharp arms and stroked the top of his head with her palm. “Shhh, Billy,” she said. “It’s just a dream.”

But the horses’ crying kept on. I saw them clearer now, in the dark blues and greens of the late night, and they were gorgeous and sad, trying to climb over each other to safety. The cold air blew out of their noses in clouds. I looked at Mr. MacLeish. The gun shook in his hand. Next to him Dad was taking off his shirt and winding the rope around his fist and arm. My father’s body was beautiful under the moon as he got ready to go into the dark swamp. His broad shoulders and chest glowed. He was more of a hero than I’d ever seen, with Mom next to him making a tragic face, and Mr. MacLeish just standing there, desperate with the gun.

Dad rolled his pants up to his knees and waded partway into the bog, knotting the rope into an awkward lasso. The nearest horse was five or six feet away. Dad moved slowly, the mud pinching and sucking at his hairy legs, the circle of rope held above his head like a halo. Billy was quiet now, in Carrie’s arms, and we all just stood watching. The horse was crying as Dad approached, and in its huge, crazed eyes I could see twice the wavering reflection of the moon. They were so close now that the animal’s jerking snout knocked against my father’s cheeks, but he didn’t move, just stood there under the mossy trees, staring at the horse until it started to calm. It looked down quietly at my father, more from curiosity, it seemed, than relief. With both his arms outstretched, Dad gently lowered the rope over the horse’s head, like clasping a necklace on my mother, who stood in awe with the rest of us.
“Come on,” Dad growled at Mr. MacLeish. I saw him register the presence of Carrie and Billy and me, and I think, through the darkness, he smiled. “Let’s pull.”

I’d forgotten Billy was there that night, but that image of my father has never left me. It’s one of the only times I’ve ever looked on him with surprise.
It's been about a week since I left the mansion. I cooked Dad's whitefish over a fire in the garden, and I've eaten a lot of peanut butter, my addiction since I was a kid. Over my bed, I tacked up the newsprint photo of Carrie I shamelessly stole from Billy's desk, and the pictures from the store—bride and smiling groom, ghostly cousin Molly. On scraps of vellum paper, I've been working on Carrie's symbol, the wing, trying out various intensities of color and detail—peacock feathers, simple black lines. I've tacked up those scraps too.

"Long time no nothing," my mother calls from somewhere in the house when I come by at the end of the week. "Changed your mind about us, did you?"

"This place is a mess." I feel a sharp pang of guilt—it looks like a tornado came through in my absence. Piles of old clothes are strewn across the carpet in the living room. My mother's always been fond of unlikely prints, those that might look better on a couch than a woman—brown and pink flowers, striped purple and green. Dresses in these bright designs shout at me from the floor. "What's going on?" I find her in her bedroom, which is piled even more deeply with clothes, sweaters and blouses I haven't seen for years. I spot the paisley suit she wore for my high school graduation, when, from my place on the stage, I saw her smile coyly at our principal. She's standing in front of the full-length mirror, squeezing into a slinky brown dress. "Oh my God, Mother."

"Zip me up, will you Ally?"

"Are you going somewhere?"
"Maybe." She motions me over with an impatient hand and tries to get the bottom of the zipper herself, then shrieks when it catches on her flab. The curves in the satin of the dress, where it must've once fit Mom beautifully, now reveal a few unsightly bulges. I can only get the zipper halfway up her back, to the thick strap of a lacy gold bra, and she's obviously sucking in her stomach. Her skin is cold on my fingers, though the warm air comes in from outside on a breeze.

"It doesn't fit you anymore, Mom," I say to her, easing the zipper back down.

"What happened to all the black, anyway?"

She frowns at me. "I'm still wearing it on the inside." Resting her arms flat at her sides, she admires herself, turning so that she can't see the open back of the dress. "This is lovely though, isn't it?"

"It's very nice." I step over some strewn pairs of pumps to sit on the edge of the bed. "I had no idea you had so many clothes. What's the occasion?"

"I'm not sure," she says slyly. I've gotten used to these cryptic conversations, though I still can't tell whether she's keeping something from me or she doesn't understand herself. She smooths her knobby fingers down over her breasts and hips. "But for practice, we have guests this weekend."

"Guests?" I try to summon some patience. Outside of Carrie's funeral, my parents haven't had guests for years. It might require more civility than either of them can put on.

I lean back on the nubbly blue comforter. "Okay. Who's coming over, Mom?"

"Well it's your fault, really, getting your phone calls here."
"Phone calls? Who's calling me?" It can't be any of my New York friends—I told them I'd write, that I wanted to disappear for a while. My life in the last few months has become its own opposite: I can't seem to deal with anyone but my parents.

Stumbling on her little gold heels, Mom retrieves a cocktail napkin from the vanity and shoves it into my lap. It's heart-shaped, probably from some years-ago Valentine party, with Will Emerson's name and a phone number scrawled on it three times in my mother's hand. "I remember that boy," she says wistfully, gazing into the mirror, "even though he's changed his name. Carrie will be glad to see him."

"No she won't," I say. "When did he call?"

"Three times, can't you see?" She lets the dress fall around her ankles, revealing a girdle with a fold or two of skin hanging down over the waistband. Some perfumes come to me on the puff of air from the crumpled dress: Chanel No. 5, White Shoulders, Shalimar. My mother's tasseled atomizers admire their own reflections in a line on the vanity. They're the kind of thing she'd have bought in Albany for my father to give her as gifts. It was her way of getting what she wanted without being bothered about the money.

"Finally I took matters into my own hands and invited him for dinner. I asked him to bring his mother, too. I remember her from the PTA."

"Mom, you weren't on the PTA."

She turns to scowl at me through the peach-colored lipstick she always wears. Her white hair stands out in a matted cloud, and in the afternoon light it glows with misbehavior, as if it belonged to some horribly fallen angel. "What do you know?" she says.
I stand and start to gather the piles of clothes onto the bed, where I can sort them and put them away. Some of the fabrics slide smooth against my bare legs and arms, others are coarse and wintry—God knows why she's got those warm clothes out. “Fine,” I say. “When are they coming?” I can’t think why Billy—Will—would call me three times. Did he notice I took Carrie’s picture? Does he want to explain himself? It is a little creepy, him keeping her in his book like that when he can’t even see her at all.

“Saturday night,” she sings, twirling in place with a pair of shimmery pantyhose in her raised fist. The legs of the hose sail gracefully around her head. “Pretty,” she says, tossing them onto my pile. I can tell it’s going to be one of those nights when she's living in some other, more beautiful world. When Dad gets home she’ll ignore him, complaining of the smell of fish in the house without acknowledging its source. At dinner, over and over, she’ll lift a spoonful of vegetable soup and pour it off into the bowl, watching the cascade of red. All afternoon I fold her sweaters and slips, replacing them in the scented drawers.

I remember the perfume girl Mom used to see at the Saks Fifth Avenue in Albany. The girl had stringy blond hair and a long, thin face with bursts of acne. She always wore a blouse with a ruffled collar. I’d learned about syphilis in sixth grade history, and I wondered if the girl had it. Kings in portraits wore those collars to cover up their syphilis sores. Slouching against the lit glass case, fists shoved into the pockets of my coat, I peeked at the skin on the girl’s string-bean neck.
“Mrs. Beckett, I’m so glad to see you,” she cried in a loud voice, though my mother was standing right there, holding a crystal bottle in her hand as if it were a baby. “You’re looking wonderful.”

My mother smiled and pulled back the cuff of her red plaid blouse to spritz the inside of her wrist. Some of the perfume splashed onto my lips, tasting like rotten oranges. I spat it away. “Cut that out, Alyce,” my mother ordered, and turned to the girl with a smile. “You look just fine too, Harriet. What’s this new scent?”

“Oh, that’s Citrus Dream. It’s perfect for you,” Harriet gushed. “Sophisticated but playful. That’s your mother to a tee, isn’t it Alyce?” When my mother closed her eyes, inhaling off her wrist, I made the exaggerated frown of a lizard and darted my tongue in Harriet’s direction. She poked her own purple tongue back at me just as Mom opened her eyes.

“Silly girls,” Mom laughed, and Harriet’s smile crumpled. “I like this one a little. What else is new and exciting?” This was before they started selling perfume as sex, when they were still selling it as class. My mother has always believed herself to have the most class of anyone in our town. Harriet figured this out early on—she knew we were from up north, where a bottle of perfume lasted for years, there were so few occasions to wear it and often suckered my mother into spending a lot of my father’s money. I knew that money was a source of conflict between my parents, so I couldn’t bear to watch. Instead of scowling, which could result in Mom not speaking to me for the rest of the day, I wandered off into the store while my mother and Harriet disappeared into fragrant clouds.
Saks was all dolled up for Christmas. Red and gold satin bunting hung everywhere you looked; well-dressed elves peeked out from under counters and behind displays; a too-skinny Santa Claus roamed the marble floor. Scarves were fastened around the necks of salesgirls and mannequins with tiny sprigs of holly. Bing Crosby crooned over the loudspeaker, and most of all, there were children. Toddlers, babies, pre-teens like me, all in bright-colored velvet dresses and hair ribbons, like little wrapped presents. I felt drab in my gray wool coat. I wandered through the maze of makeup counters, running my hand along the warm-lit glass and shiny brass trim, leaving prints of grease from the potato chips I'd eaten on the train. I made a game of moving from counter to counter without letting go, stretching wide across a busy aisle till I reached the other counter, then finally releasing my hand from its previous station. Women like Harriet shot me cold-eyed looks as they crisply punched their register keys. The sound of those registers was like the beating of their shriveled little hearts. I hated those salesgirls, and to this day they make me nervous.

I tried to remember the path I followed among the gold and red displays. North two counters, east four more, north again one, west five, south three, and east again one to get back home: the Chanel lipstick case, with its sleek black tubes. The saleslady there was an older woman in an elegant suit who smiled at me dismissively, rather than scowling like the younger girls did. North, east, north, west, south, east. I did it faster and faster, inhaling the cloying smells of perfume and the pine boughs hanging overhead. Bells rang: the register drawers, the skinny Santa's jingling boots. Soon I realized it had been a while since I'd seen my mother. I pressed my nose to the glass of the lipstick case, trying to calm my dizzied brain. An elf stared up at me with a ruby-painted mouth.
"Are you lost?" the elegant saleswoman said to me. I looked up at her, so close I could see the lipstick bleeding off her lips into the wrinkles of her face. I shook my head and ran for Harriet's counter.

Harriet was arranging the perfume bottles in the display. I noticed the thorns of holly pinned below her syphilis collar. My mother was gone. "Oh, it's you," she said. Didn't your mother come get you?"

"I was lost," I lied. "Maybe she couldn't find me."

"I don't think so," Harriet said through her smug, pursed lips. "I think she's forgotten you. She went off without even mentioning you at all."

I glared up at her, feeling suddenly hot, and tugged my muffler away from my neck. Harriet brought out a tall, thin bottle of copper-colored perfume, leaned across the counter and sprayed it in my face. I coughed and wiped it out of my eyes with my sleeve. "You like it?" she said sweetly. I was convinced by now that this was some big joke, that my mother was somewhere watching so Harriet could make me smell pretty.

"Okay," I sputtered. "Where is she?"

"I told you, she left." Harriet replaced the bottle and started sifting through some receipts. "Oh well," she said.

I could feel the hot tears swelling up behind my eyes. The last thing I wanted to do was cry in front of this skinny, diseased creature. I gritted my teeth and stared at the marble floor. I could hear Santa's boots jingling on their approach, but I didn't want to cry in front of him either. The first tears fell into the fold of my muffler.
“Oh shit,” Harriet said, glancing around nervously. “Oh shit, I’m sorry. I was just having fun with you. Look, I’m sure she’ll be back, okay? Alyce?”

I tried to make them stop, but suddenly I was short of breath and my shoulders were heaving and my nose was starting to run, like one of the little wrapped-up toddlers running around. Harriet came around the counter and crouched to my height.

“Listen to me,” she said, stroking my shoulders. Her hands were gentle, not sharp like I’d imagined them to be, but she smelled like a funeral home. “I’m sorry I was rude to you. It’s tough around here during the holidays. Do you understand?” Her collar hung down in front of my face, and I could see that there weren’t any sores on her neck after all. She handed me a handkerchief with a reindeer embroidered on it. I ignored her question, but thanked her for the handkerchief and blew my nose in it loudly. Now this was fun. I was suddenly powerful over Harriet, on the other side of the bright glass case.

“I knew this would happen,” I wailed, burying my face in Harriet’s handkerchief.

She shushed me again, with a nervous glance around at the other customers. “You knew what would happen, Alyce? What’s going on?”

“She said she was going to leave me here and never come back,” I whispered in Harriet’s ear. Her grip on my shoulder tightened slightly. The other customers bustled past us, their heavy packages knocking against my legs. “She said you’d take good care of me.” I gazed up at Harriet, as wide-eyed as I could muster. Delicate beads of sweat were forming on the stiff part of her hair.

“Well,” she said. “Well I’m sure she was only playing around. Sure she was. Any minute now, she’ll be coming right back to get you. Absolutely.”
I shook my head and forced a few more tears down my cheeks. She was right, of course—as we stood there, an odd couple of too-young frightened girls in the midst of all the manufactured cheer, my mother came strolling up again, jostling past Santa and the other shoppers, and waved at me casually.

“Oh Alyce,” she said. “I was hoping you’d turn up. We have lots more to do today. Harriet dear, I’m going to go for the Citrus Dream after all. I think it suits me, don’t you? Put it on my charge.” My mother had a way of acting like a rich woman, even in our most dire of times.

“Certainly, Mrs. Beckett,” Harriet chirped—relieved, I’m sure, to return to her side of the counter. I glared up at my mother.

“Hold this for me, will you darling?” She shoved a cream-colored garment bag into my fist. In gold script it betrayed my mother, announcing the name of the Macy’s across the street.

“You left the store without me?” A hot blush crawled up my cheeks. The skinny Santa was jingling past, and he winked at me with a terrible blue eye. Harriet punched her keys. I clenched my fists and dropped the garment bag to the marble floor, then muttered, “Bitch.”

Six eyes were on me then: Harriet’s, Santa’s, and my mother’s, and before I could even think of apologizing, my mother slapped me across the face. Her apple-red nails made ribbons in the air as the moment slowed down, and Harriet lifted her hand to her bud of a mouth in shock. That’s what I remember best: Harriet’s astonishment, the visible conflict on her face. Her alliance to my mother versus the greater good. I appreciated her
revulsion. Still, on the map of my memory, I’ve consigned Harriet to an island—something like a colony of lepers—with the man who held me in the train tunnel and with many others, mostly men: my mother’s enablers.

Mom’s upper lip shook as she pointed a sharp finger at the pile of ivory bag. “Ho ho ho,” Santa sang, less than joyfully, and my mother said to me, “I demand that you pick that up, right now.”

That was the only time my mother hit me. As far as I know, she never hit my sister. On the train ride home, I sat several rows away and watched over the top of my seat as she removed her packages. My face still burned as she ran the hand that had struck me over the fuzzy green knit of a girl’s jumper. I fell back down into my seat and stared at my reflection in the window, my bright red cheek, the skin around my eyes swollen from crocodile tears.

At the station in Schenectady, my father waited in the dark Cadillac, Carrie in the front seat playing a game with a loop of string. The car rumbled with heat. My sister and I sat in it as Dad went out in the cold to help Mom with the bags. “Goddamn it, Lila,” I heard him say. “What all did you buy now?”

“How was it, Cupcake?” Carrie said to me, turning and kneeling on the bench seat. She’d been reading a lot of detective novels then, and had taken to calling me by the nicknames given to the blond secretaries in those books. That’s the thing about my sister—as a child, she was the brightest light you could imagine.

“She bought more perfume,” I said. “Listen.” I wouldn’t tell her about the slap till later that night, safe in our beds, when she could come up the ladder and lie next to me. Now, we could hear the snow crunch under my mother’s galoshes as she stamped them,
and Dad banged his fist a couple of times on the trunk. Backwards on our seats, we
watched them through the frosty window as Carrie hummed a little Christmas tune, First
Noel or some other religious song we didn’t understand. They didn’t hit each other, they
never did. And the earlier violence of the day was forgotten by everyone but me.

Even after I opened a box to find the jumper from Macy’s on Christmas day, it
didn’t occur to me not to stay mad at my mother. Maybe she’d gone off to buy a gift for
me, but I knew that mothers didn’t usually leave their children to uncertain fate in a land of
eelves and salesgirls. I never once wore that jumper. Innocent and new, it hung in its
creamy garment bag until one day, without a word, my mother tossed it in the back of the
car and drove it all by itself to Goodwill.
Mom didn’t bother to find out whether the Emersons would eat meat, so to play it safe, I decide on eggplant parmesan. At the farmer’s market I gather a pile of tomatoes into my arms, but on the way to the scale, they slip out and go rolling all over the gravel. I swear loudly, then remember to watch my language—most of my fellow shoppers once knew me as a toe-headed toddler.

“Careful with that mouth around here,” somebody says in a sassy voice. Jo Pike—Maddox by her married name—crouches down next to me in the sawdust, catching some renegade tomatoes and restoring them to my pile. “That corn has ears, honey. You don’t want it getting back to your Mama about your foul mouth.”

“She’ll think it was Carrie’s mouth anyway.” I lean to give Jo a kiss on the cheek. The sun comes through the crates of vegetables onto her face. She’s always been the prettiest of our Kingsbridge friends, a natural redhead with pinkish skin, a corny sense of humor and more than a few wicked bones in her body. The weight she’s put on after her two kids is becoming on her little frame, while her twin sister Sara really just looks fat, a surly temper taking over her whole face. It was like this at Carrie’s funeral: Jo in a pale yellow dress stained over her breasts with tears; Sara all in black, dry-eyed, checking her watch.

Clutching the last of the tomatoes, Jo squeezes my shoulders and walks me to the scale. “I’d just about given you up for dead too, Ally. You been hiding in that ugly old house all these weeks?”
"It's not so ugly. Come out and see what I've done to the place. There's a coven of bats in there somewhere, I think."

"Well, what are we waiting for?"

I pay a dread-locked kid for the tomatoes—no pesticides from the hippie vendors, Dad insists—and we start out to the road. "Really, Al, I won't let you stay locked up with those bats all summer. Why don't you stay at our place for the weekend? It might do you good to be around some craziness for a few days. Get away from Mr. and Mrs. Sourpuss."

She shields her face with an open hand, the rest of her lit bright against the mountains. Over her arm there's a basket of smooth green melons. I imagine the way her house must be: Jo's handsome husband Steve, a crop duster, breezing in and out in his canvas flight suit; the poppy-headed kids, dripping with melon seeds, shouting and stomping through the rooms.

"Oh, work, you know. I've got to be my own taskmaster. And Mom's got me cooking tonight for Billy Emerson and his mother."

"No shit! The blind librarian himself."

"I went over there to look at some maps the other day, and he hasn't quit calling me since." I think of Carrie's photo, its edges carefully torn, on the cold wall of my room.

"I guess he has a thing for Becketts."

"A thing?"

She shifts the melons to her other arm. "At least come up for a coffee. Steve's got the kids on the river today. Let's gossip the afternoon away. Something tells me that's just what you need." Jo's hard to resist, happy and pink, like a ripe strawberry. I follow her old
Jeep up the hill on the motorbike. We drive down the short stretch of town, past Carrie’s darkened shop, the ramshackle storefronts where impractical things are sold: wrought-iron bath and kitchen fixtures, hand-painted dish towels, Japanese pottery. Some tourists mill around on their bathroom breaks—they’re on their way to Lake George, with sleek sunglasses and office-white arms. I guess they’re the ones that buy the pottery.

Kingsbridge has always been a secondhand summer town. There’s one motel now at the nearest major junction, and somebody opened a B&B a few years back that failed. It’s a place you pass through.

A half-mile past my parents’ house, Jo’s yard is deserted but littered with toys, as if many children just left in a hurry. A plastic trike upturned in the grass; a tire swing inexplicably moving; a miniature t-shirt, stiff with mud, standing at attention on the bottom stair. Jo says, shaking her head, “What a mess. It’s like a bad horror movie, isn’t it? Where did all the little lambs go?” She laughs and fumbles with her keys. “You’ll be surprised how much this place has changed. We probably weren’t wearing bras the last time you were here.”

Inside, the kitchen walls, once a sterile white, have been smothered in a collage of wallpaper scraps: rows of pineapples, tuberoses, strands of ivy, pale plaids. The lines and curls of the patterns collide with one another, then set off in crazy directions. It reminds me of the map of some beautiful, unorganized place, like the Balkans. She says, “Remember Mr. Callahan, who owned the hardware store?”

“The guy who gave us lemon drops for a kiss on the cheek?”
"Sleazy old fool. But he gave me these wallpaper scraps for free when the store went out of business. I guess those smooches paid off." Setting the melons on the counter, she motions for me to sit down and busies herself with the coffee.

"It's kind of art," I say, gazing around, and she shrugs.

"I thought I'd make things seem new after Mom moved out. She's been a grouch since the stroke, but she likes what I've done in here."

"I didn't know your mother had a stroke," I admit. Ridiculously, I imagine widowed Mrs. Pike glued to a chair, staring at the wild walls, her housedress drooping off one shoulder. Jo empties a bag of Oreos onto a flowered plate and shakes her head, ponytail swishing back and forth in a sunbeam. In a weary voice she says, "What you don't know would fill a book, Alyce."

"I've been gone a long time."

"Damn right you have." She sets the plate in front of me and says, "Have a cookie." The rim of the plate is chipped, but I remember eating mashed potatoes off of it, spreading my gravy over the daisy faces with a fork. "I've got some caramel rice cake things if that's better. Carrie brought them over from the store, probably a year ago. I haven't had the heart to throw them out."

I lean across the table to squeeze her wrist. Jo's a person who truly frowns when she's sad, the corners of her mouth stretching down to her chin, like it's a real struggle not to smile. I tell her, "They've got a shelf life longer than I do anyway."

Jo chuckles, but the frown stiffens. "Do you know how often she came here since she moved back? Every day, after the store shut down, while I fixed dinner we talked. I
hadn't seen her in almost ten years, Al. It was like finding a lost piece of jewelry in the couch.” Through a mouthful of cookie, she adds, “Better than that.”

I nod in some sort of agreement, feeling oddly jealous. Maybe it's the smell of the chocolate, the dust of crumbs in my lap, that's making me childish. She brings our coffees to the table. “I guess I just don't understand,” I say, trying to be cautious. I know I'm being unreasonable, but I can't help myself. “I mean, didn't you know something was wrong? Couldn't you have taken her somewhere?”

Jo stares into the glassy surface of her coffee. A fly lands on her ear, and she doesn't move to flick it away. “Look,” she says, “you love me, and you don't mean to act this way, but you can be a bitch.” She goes to the corner and stands in front of a whirring fan, holding the hair off the back of her neck. She closes her eyes, silent for a minute. A spray of purple roses explodes on the wall above her head, framed by pinstripes. “Anyway, I could ask you the same thing. Why didn't you get that skinny butt clown here? I can tell you why. You knew it wouldn't do any good. Carrie was going to run with the salmon if she damn well pleased, and no amount of love was going to make a difference. You know that's true.”

Hot tears jump to my eyes, and I try to wipe them away, leaving sticky black crumbs. Jo moves to get a towel out of a cabinet, then sits down next to me and brushes the crumbs off my eyebrows and cheeks. “What a mess,” she says. I can't stop crying over the crumbs, into my coffee, Jo catching my tears with the towel. She pulls me into a hug.

“Goddamn it,” I say, clutching her.
"You’re too New York for your own good, Ally.” She laughs a little and kisses the back of my hair. I wish I were her daughter, young enough never to feel weak, in this kitchen in Jo’s arms.

"The salmon?” I manage to say, and when Jo pulls back to laugh with me, she’s crying too, cheekbones burning red.

"That’s how I’ve been thinking of it,” she says. “Her body with all those pregnant fish running upstream. How sick is that? It’s the only way I could manage to leave her in that river.”

I try to imagine it: Carrie’s pale, floating hand knocked around by silvery tails. But it only makes me think of how cold she must’ve been. “I’m sorry,” I tell Jo. “I had no right to say those things.”

“We’ll chalk it up to spending too much time with your mother.”

I shake my head and take another sip of the coffee to calm me. A cloud moves over the sun and the walls of the kitchen dim down. In this light, the room has the pleasant feeling of an overgrown garden. I tell Jo about this morning, when I walked in on Mom in a bath that had gone ice cold. She was reading old magazines, letting the corners of the pages hang in the water and disintegrate. The bath was filled with bits of faces and words.

“You ought to take her to a doctor.”

“She won’t go,” I say. “They couldn’t help Carrie, how could they help me? That’s how she thinks. It’s crazy.”

“And she’s having dinner parties now?” She glances at the straw bag piled high with tomatoes.
“Shit, the Emersons. I should get dinner going soon.”

“Dutiful daughter,” Jo says, touching her palms together in mock prayer. “I bet Lila’s always dreamed of having a maid. Maybe she wants you to marry Billy and stick around in Kingsbridge. How ‘bout it?”

“That would explain the phone calls. He’s dying to pop the question?” I giggle and lick the inside of an Oreo. It’s funny to act like girls without Carrie. I’m not sure I’ve ever spent time with Jo alone.

“I don’t know,” she says, “you got a better idea? Some rich New Yorker in the wings?”

“You think I’d be here if I did? Not one rich New Yorker.” I stare into the empty cookie. Lucas shares my sweet tooth—one night we ate all the candy out of a hotel mini-bar and billed it to the clients.

“Right,” Jo says, raising a pale eyebrow. “Carrie told me you prefer the kind that’s spoken for.”

“Not as a rule,” I say. “I mean, not anymore. That was a long time ago. And he wasn’t exactly married.”

“Your sister never liked him.”

“That was her selfishness. I could never be happier than she was.”

“Well, she’s not here to defend herself.” Jo drums her nails on the side of the coffee cup. “Were you happy, really? With a married man?”

“I thought so.” But then there was his voice at dawn, on the phone to his wife, carrying through the vents to where I lay in the cold white bed: *I miss you too, Darling.*
FedEx me some sushi? Sometimes I picture them now, in their happy little nuptial apartment, no kids or anything, eating rice out of a Styrofoam box in front of the TV. The thought still makes my stomach boil.

Jo says, "Carrie could hardly pick the winners herself."

"Right, the paragon of good judgment." A truck peals into the driveway outside, doors slam, the kids are laughing. I start to gather my things. "You know, I think Will Emerson might've had a little crush on her."

"Oh, do you think so?" Jo smirks and goes to the open window. She waves at her family with her whole arm, one hand on the small of her back.

"Be there in a minute," her husband calls. "We brought dinner." Steve Maddox was Jo's boyfriend in high school, a basketball star. "Dumb as rocks," she said of him then, in a fond voice, "but the sweetest thing you can imagine. He's like one of those monks we learned about in world history. The kind that sweep the sidewalk so they won't step on the ants."

"There are my troops," she says now. "Stay and eat?"

"You know I can't." I go to her side and rest my head on her shoulder, cradling the bag of tomatoes. Outside in the yard, Danny and Iris lean over their father's skinny shoulders as he sets about to clean a trout, calmly instructing, peeling out the guts and tossing sheets of silvery scales on the grass. The sunset behind them is the color of their hair. "Look how well you've done for yourself," I say to Jo.
"I have," she says. "I'm good at keeping myself happy, even when things are shitty. I'm lucky that way." She curls an arm around my waist and squeezes. "You Becketts aren't like that, though. Don't tell me your sister was the only one."

I consider this for a moment. I've got to rein in my jealousy. Danny and Iris run circles around the yard, trailing the fish tails behind them like flags.
Billy’s mother is a small woman with a squirrelly face and nervous hands. She’s dressed in work clothes—dusty jeans, a thin plaid blouse. Mom’s still locked in her room, putting on something that requires nylons. When I come to the door to greet them, Mrs. Emerson lingers in the doorway while Billy makes his slow way down our gravel drive with his dog.

“I’m coming, Mom. Go on inside,” he calls, and I’m struck again by that odd ability to see without his eyes.

Mrs. Emerson smiles at me and says, “He sometimes has a tough time with new places.”

“I don’t, actually.” Out of the twilight Billy emerges, Ptolemy in a harness at his side. A thin purple mist settles over the mountains, and set against them Billy looks like an ad, in his parka and khaki shorts, with his wide smile and the dog. Only the eyes, agitated and gray, like little charged protons, betray him.

“I’m so sorry for your sister’s passing,” Mrs. Emerson says to me, taking both my hands abruptly, as Billy did that day in the library. Her hair is pulled back in a loose bun, mouse brown shot through with gray, and her eyes are steady and dark. Billy’s eyes might make me a little anxious with their jitters, but his mother’s stare at me with unbearable earnestness, like the wide glass eyes of a doll.

“Thank you,” is all I can think to say. “Why don’t you come on in? Mom’s just finishing dolling up.”
“Oh,” Mrs. Emerson says, busily straightening her collar. “I’m afraid I was in the garden today and I don’t look so nice. Your mother’s a real lady, I should’ve remembered. Usually, you know, you don’t have to worry about that kind of thing around here.” She speaks in a hushed voice, glancing around curiously at the living room. Stacks of dusty china and glassware teeter with our footsteps, since Mom’s taken to moving things absently from one cabinet to the next, sometimes leaving them piled up on the carpet. I did my best to get everything put away this afternoon, but somehow there didn’t seem to be room for all of it, as if the dishes, long-unused, had multiplied in their newfound freedom. I try to assure Mrs. Emerson that she’s dressed fine. The way she peeks around makes me wonder whether she’s on some kind of gossip mission from her friends: What’s crazy Lila Beckett up to these days? I hurry them into the kitchen. Billy leans down to release the dog from his harness, smoothing the silvery hairs around Ptolemy’s ears.

“Break time for the pooch,” he says. Mom hates dogs—is afraid of them, really—but I’m hoping she can make an exception for this one, whose eyes are our guest’s eyes. “It smells great in here.”

“Will your dad be joining us, Alyce?” Mrs. Emerson leads Billy to a chair, and he pats her shoulder dismissively.

“Leave me be, Mom, please,” he says quietly.

“Dad should be back from the river any minute now.” Out the back window over the sink, I watch for the lights of my father’s wagon through the trees. I told him, of course, about the Emersons—but I’ll be surprised if he even shows up for dessert. Once this week, after Mom and I ate dinner alone, I found him in the dark woods by his favorite
trout hole, sleeping in the driver's seat of the car, an army blanket over his lap. The backseat was strewn with empty yogurt containers, and a deer watched him from behind a stump. Its eyes glowed with the reflection of my bike's headlight. It rushed away as Dad stirred awake, muttering, "Is that you, Lila?"

"You know," Mrs. Emerson says, "when you kids were little, your dad and I did some business together. I was working for Allstate then. We covered a few of the doctors at St. Cecilia's."

"Is that right?" I can hear Mom's ghostly singing from the other room, some strange rhyming ditty she picked up on a children's radio show.

"He was always so polite. Not like some of these accountants you come across in my line of work. Nasty people, usually." She leans back slightly in the weak oak chair, peering down the hall. "Is she singing?"

"Why don't I get you two a drink? Beer or wine?"

"Water's fine for the both of us, thank you."

"I'll have a beer, actually," Billy says. Going into the fridge, I glance back at them just in time to see Mrs. Emerson stick her tongue out furtively at her son. He stares straight ahead, knuckles drumming on the table. "How'd it go in the map room, Alyce?"

"Oh—great, it went great. I used to spend a lot of time there in high school, weird as that probably sounds. So I kind of know my way around. It hasn't changed much." I go to him and place the cold brown bottle in his hand. He thanks me, touching my wrist.
“Actually,” he says, “Patti was in there cleaning this week, getting rid of dupes. That’s why I called so many times. I thought you could come see if there was something to help with your project. Missed your chance, though.”

Well, there’s my explanation—Jo would be bored to tears. Billy Emerson, a perfectly normal and considerate human being? I suddenly realize how rude I’ve been, stealing his picture and ignoring his calls, gossiping about him. Lamely, I try to explain: “I’m sorry I never got a chance to call you back, Will. I wasn’t around here much this week, and there’s no phone over in the Beckett house.”

He smiles decorously at the ceiling, where his eyes have wandered now. “Likely story.”

“You don’t have to be social, hon,” Mrs. Emerson assures me. “We all know what you’re going through.”

“It’s not that,” I start to say, but just then Mom teeters in, draped in something that glitters purple and red, like the backdrop for a magic show. The dress is so long that it catches on her heels. She lifts the skirt to walk more easily, showing the luminescent web of blue veins over her feet. “Welcome,” she sings.

“Lila!” Mrs. Emerson smiles, extending a hand. Mom ignores the hand and takes Billy’s mother into her sequined embrace. “Well,” Mrs. Emerson says, “what an outfit. You look like a movie star. She looks like a movie star, Will.”

“I can smell how wonderful you look, Mrs. Beckett,” Billy says. I almost want to throw up, until he vaguely turns to me and adds, as our mothers chatter about the dress, “That’s my absurd attempt to be charming. What do you think?”
"I think what you smell is Chanel number 24."

"Can I give you a hand?" He stands and holds out his palms. "I'm not as useless as I look."

"I've got it, thanks."

Ptolemy sneaks in from the living room and sniffs at my mother's curtain of a skirt.

"What's this?" she says, wagging a finger at the dog to shoo him away.

"That's Billy's guide dog, Mom. He's very friendly."

"Is he introducing himself?" Billy says. "He does have a way with women."

"Oh dear," my mother says, "I'd forgotten you were blind." Billy laughs, and Mrs. Emerson smiles shiftily to herself, as if to note this latest transgression for future use. Mom goes on, "Well, I hope it likes eggplant! Alyce is quite a gourmet. From living in New York, you know." She's never said a word before about my cooking, except to insist, for Dad's benefit, on its fat content.

"It's nothing fancy." I start to set the table while Mom and Mrs. Emerson reflect on how unfortunately long it's been since they last saw one another. These are the little pretendings of Kingsbridge, its false friendships, based more on the coincidence of geography than on anything else. Those small-town niceties are just what I'd hoped to escape when I left for New York. Friendship means so much more when you can afford to be picky about it, when there are eight million faces to choose from. In a small town, you're as stuck with your friends as you are with your family.

"I don't know as I've ever seen the inside of your home," says Mrs. Emerson, waving her hand around at the kitchen's peeling cornflowers. "Cute wallpaper."
“You think so? I’m sick of looking at it, really,” Mom sighs. “But Sam doesn’t go in for home improvement.”

Mrs. Emerson smiles complacently. “That’s a shame.”

“I’ve wanted a new bathtub for years, but he won’t have it.” Mom takes her seat at the table, fumbling to arrange her voluminous skirts. I scramble for the hot pan of eggplant, burning the tips of my fingers, eager to change this stale subject. For as long as I can remember, she’s been lobbying Dad for a new bathtub, something fancy with marble and, in recent years, Jacuzzi jets. Every month or so she goes to him with a new catalog, suggesting fixtures and fittings: a green ceramic lion to spit the water from his gaping mouth; stained-glass candle sconces to hang above the tub. Carrie and I took to hiding the catalogs when we found them in the mail, since they always resulted in shouting. One year, Mom even went so far as to stage a campaign of filth, refusing to bathe at all. Like old royalty, she covered herself with heavy perfumes and arranged her greasy hair into stiff, elaborate styles. Finally, my father gave an inch or two and installed the ceramic lion’s head, ending the dirty weeks, but not the struggle over the tub. Mom ignores my curses as I suckle my burned fingertips. “What’s wrong?” Billy says to me.

“I just touched the hot pan. It’s fine.”

“Baths are one of my only pleasures,” Mom laments.

“Here,” Billy says, finding my hands. “Where’s the freezer?” I lead him to it and he fumbles for an ice cube, then runs it gently over my fingers. “Better?” His eyes skitter over my hands, and something in me melts over the scorched skin. I can feel myself giving way as I haven’t done since Lucas. Then the fear descends, like a curtain over a stage.
“I’m fine.” I pull my arms to my chest. “It’s nothing.”

Dad tromps noisily into the mud room as Billy holds out his palms. I think his hands are always what moves first, announcing his instinct, just as the eyes of a seeing person might do. “Just trying to help,” he says. I thank him, hiding my own red hands in some pot holders.

“The master of the house has arrived,” Mom announces. And in a louder voice, “Nice of you to join us, Sam.”

The sour smell of river mud wafts in with Dad, whose plaid shirt and tackle vest are crusted with the stuff. “Hello, Nora,” he says, leaning to kiss Mrs. Emerson’s cheek.

“Will. Sorry I’m late, folks. It’s easy to lose track of time with these long days, I guess.”

“Nice to see you, Sam,” Mrs. Emerson says. A blush passes between them, almost imperceptible, maybe the remnant of some old flame.

“I thought you might dress for dinner,” Mom says, holding her hand over her nose. “This isn’t just any old night, Sam. We have guests. Don’t you see that I’ve made an effort? We can wait for you to clean up.”

“Jesus, Lila.” Frowning at the linoleum, Dad goes to the sink to wash his hands.

“You look like a genie.”

“Dad!”

Mrs. Emerson tries to look unimpressed, coughing into her napkin, and Billy says brightly, “I’m starved. Aren’t you, Alyce?”

“Sam,” Mom says through a sneer, “I’m not in the mood to deal with your wisecracks or your bad taste.”
"Enough, now," I say. "Dinner's ready." Everybody silently watches the steam rise from the pan as I serve. Mrs. Emerson looks around at us expectantly, then bows her head and mutters a quiet prayer. Mom sets about cutting her portion into tiny pieces while Dad frowns on his eggplant, pushing it carefully around with a fork. "Is this fried, Alyce Beckett?"

"In olive oil," I say, glaring at him over the pan. "Just eat it, please." He pushes it to the side of the plate and serves himself a heap of salad.

"It must be fun for you two to have your girl back," Billy's mother says. "I wish Will would live at home now. It'd be easier all around."

"Don't talk about me like I'm not here," Billy says. He moves his fork slowly around the plate, finding the eggplant, his salad. "I've got a great place, right down the block from the library. Over the river. I can hear the water when it's high enough." I try to imagine his little rooms, everything pushed to the walls, sparse and clean, filled up by the clatter of the river.

"Sounds nice," I say.

"Ally and I have our moments," Mom says to Mrs. Emerson. Holding a fork in her fist, she stabs a bite of eggplant and adds, "Carrie stayed with us for almost two years. Sometimes I think it was just her way to say goodbye. She stopped by on her way out of the world. Do you think so, Sam?"

My father clears his throat and says, "I don't know, Lila." I sip my beer and stare into my lap. The thought of eating suddenly disgusts me. I push my plate slightly away.
“Well, it’s a good thing you have Alyce at a time like this,” Mrs. Emerson says, peering into her eggplant with those earnest eyes.

“Yes,” my mother agrees. She smiles at me gratefully and says, her mouth full, “At least you’ve always been easier to understand than your sister. I’m grateful for that.”

For some reason, this sounds like a horrible insult. I suddenly feel annoyed by all the pretense, so I lick my fingertips and snuff out the candles in the middle of the table. Mrs. Emerson looks at me curiously.

“It’s funny,” Billy says to me, “I’ve always thought of you as kind of mysterious. Hard to crack.”

“You don’t even know me,” I say, as gently as I can. I don’t want to be discussed like this. For a moment there’s something like envy in me, a longing for Carrie’s kind of escape. She always had a marvelous ability just to leave things behind. When we were kids, she sometimes left for school without me, walking silently ahead while I rushed to catch up, backpack straining against my shoulders. “You’re not supposed to walk by yourself,” I’d say. “I’m older.” But she just shrugged and headed out over the gravel.

Mrs. Emerson raises her glass of water in my direction. “Your parents need you now.”

“It’s the least I could do,” I say, surprising myself. Everyone but Mom pauses their eating for a moment, while she chews loudly on some lettuce. Dad peers at me from the corner of his eye.

Mrs. Emerson adjusts the napkin over her lap and gives me a wide smile. “Maybe I’ll take that beer now, Alyce.”
Mom lets out a loud guffaw, stabbing at her salad. Without the candles, it’s become almost too dim in here to eat, but I can’t turn on that overhead light. I’m afraid it might awaken us to something terrible, like the first roar of a furnace flame in a dark basement.

“So how was the river today?” Billy asks, startlingly blithe.

“Stingy,” Dad says. “I didn’t get a thing.”

“Too bad.” Billy chats about fishing while I grab his mother’s beer. He says it’s a good sport for blind people—you can learn to listen for holes, for where the water gathers in stagnant pools.

“Isn’t that something,” Dad says. “You ought to come out with me sometime, Will. Bring your dog along.” He reaches under the table, plate in hand, and feeds Ptolemy the rest of his serving of eggplant.

“Would it kill you just to eat it, Dad?”

“Very nearly. I’m trying to cut out saturated fats.”

“That’s good of you, Sam.” Mrs. Emerson burps quietly into her napkin. “It’s never too late to start tending to your body.”

“It might be,” Mom says with a snort. “Why are we eating in the dark?” She goes to the wall, stumbling over the sequined dress. The lights burst on, igniting our faces.

“Actually,” Billy says, “I’d love to come down to the river soon, Mr. Beckett. Who knows what’ll happen once you sell. I’ve heard of some developers coming through lately, looking for land around here. Have they talked to you?”

Dad chews slowly, staring at Mom with puzzled malice, as if this were some revenge she’d been plotting. Of course it’s my fault, that white lie I told Billy in the
library, about mapping the land to help my father sell it. I'd forgotten all about that. I can see the gaze between my parents heating up red.

"I don't know what he's talking about," Mom says snottily, like a child with a secret.

Dad points his fork at her accusingly. "Who have you been talking to, Lila?"

"Are you planning to sell your family land?" Mrs. Emerson says. "I had no idea. Won't that be a change around here. Somebody new on the Beckett place."

"Nobody new," Dad says, his fork still hanging. A piece of lettuce drops off of it into his lap. "Not if I have a word to say about it."

"Oh," Billy says, "Alyce just mentioned—"

"You too?" Dad aims the fork to me. "Did your mother get you in on this now? I can't believe it."

"Don't flatter yourself," Mom says. "I couldn't care less about that silly old land."

"With all that's happened recently, Lila. Our daughter passed on the way she did. And here you go behind my back—"

"Stop it, Dad." I touch his wrist, bringing the fork gently down to his plate. "We have guests. It's just a misunderstanding."

"I understand real well, Ally. Your mother doesn't understand."

"You have to admit that land is worth a lot of money." Mom scoops up some sauce with her fork, and it drops on her sleeve before it gets to her mouth. Flustered, I lean towards her with my napkin, but she swats me away. "We could use it, Sam, you know? We aren't getting any younger. I was just telling Nora, these old bones could use a good soak in a nice new tub."
Suddenly sweating, Dad stands and hurls his fork over Mom's head and into the sink, where it lands with a clatter that makes my heart seize. Billy's hands spring to his ears, like they did when we were kids in the wailing swamp. His mother looks on shamefully as Dad storms out the back door.

In silence, we sit in the yellowish glare of the overhead light. Ptolemy, jolted awake by the noise, wanders around the kitchen, sniffing at the linoleum. Mom stares into the blank doorway. Her sequins twinkle mercilessly. I rub my fingers over my eyes, trying to wish that brightness away.

After a minute or two, Billy says, "Did I do that?"

"Maybe we'd better go," Mrs. Emerson offers, wringing her napkin between her hands. We gaze over the remains of the food, the oily sheen of dressing on our plates, the ravaged casserole. I'm reminded that I'm the hostess here, of sorts, and that it's probably my job to make things right. I force a smile and begin to clear the plates. Billy rises to help, feeling for dishes and following me to the sink.

"Please sit," I say to him. "I have strawberry shortcake. You'll have to forgive us, Mrs. Emerson. Maybe it isn't the best time for us to throw dinner parties. I should've thought."

"It's alright," Billy says, in a voice that makes me believe him. I watch him set some water glasses gently in the sink. He seems so at ease, navigating the world with his hands. It's reassuring.

"Thank you for the lovely food," Mrs. Emerson says carefully. "Will, please get the dog."
Mom is staring into her folded arms, rubbing furiously at the spot of grease on her sleeve. Her lips quiver. She says, “All I ever wanted was a decent bathtub. He could never give me that.”

“Take care of yourself, Lila,” Mrs. Emerson says, placing a hand on my mother’s thick wrist. But Mom doesn’t even look up. Maybe she’s gone off somewhere again, to the marbleized bathtub in her mind, or maybe she’s just embarrassed. That’s one emotion my mother won’t admit to. Mrs. Emerson smiles stiffly in my direction. “You take care too, Alyce. I’ll see myself out. I’ll be waiting in the truck, Billy.”

She uses the back door. Probably doesn’t want to be seen coming out of our house. I picture her on a moonlit porch swing, surrounded by some cloying vine, talking into the phone: “I’ve never seen such a display, I swear. That family is done for. And did you hear they’re selling Beckett land?”

Once Billy’s mother is gone, Mom lays her head down on the table. I stand at the sink and run the water till it scalds. The vapors steam my face as I look out at the darkened yard. Emerging from the shadows, Mrs. Emerson wades through the weeds to my father’s illuminated shed. She knocks on the door.

“Are you going to be okay?” Billy says from behind me. Ptolemy nudges my leg.

“Do you want to take a walk or something, clear your head? My mother can wait a minute or two.”

In the square of light at the shed window, the dusty silhouettes of Dad and Billy’s mother talk closely, her hand on his shoulder. Fireflies buzz around the glass, sending
white sparks over their blurred faces. “I’ll be fine,” I tell Billy, wiping the steam from the window with my fist. “But thank you. Maybe I’ll come by the library again this week.”

“I’d like that.” My father shakes his head slowly. Mrs. Emerson touches his face. The clouds uncover the moon as she steps back out into the yard. I turn to Billy, who stands there unaware, running his hand down the dog’s smooth back. These are the boundaries of his senses—walls and windows, distance. He’s trapped in the cage of what he can hear, smell, touch. Maybe this spares him from knowing things he shouldn’t know.

I take Billy’s elbow and lead him and the dog through the living room. He says goodbye to my mother on the way out, but she doesn’t respond—by now she might even be asleep. At the door he says, “I hope I didn’t say something out of line. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

I stare at my toes, ragged and calloused from the summer. They look the way I feel. “No, it’s my fault. I never should’ve said that about the land. I made it up. The fact is, I’m being selfish. I’m taking a little vacation from my life.”

“You’re allowed,” he says. “But you don’t have to lie to me.”

“I know. It’s just that grieving people are always being judged.”

“I won’t judge you.”

“You can’t help it.”

We stand awkwardly at either side of the doormat, like a couple of kids on a first date. Chuckling a little, he says, “I’d like to kiss your cheek now, because I feel like maybe you need some affection. But I’m afraid I’d miss it and kiss something else. Will you give me one instead?”
Grateful for the laugh, I stand on my toes to kiss his forehead.

“That’s not my cheek.”

“I missed.”

“Ah, right.” He grins and heads up the driveway, where his mother waits in the rumbling truck, hands clenched to the wheel. The black mountains hover in the distance, their white caps glowing like planets.

I close the door and lean my head against it. The house seems to settle quietly. When I turn around, Mom’s standing there rumpled and tired in her glorious dress, like a washed-up nightclub singer. She comes to me suddenly and hugs me hard. She presses my arms flat to my sides and holds my head tight against her shoulder. The sequins scratch the bare skin at my throat.

Her breath in my ear, she says, “I know you think I’m horrible, Alyce. But you’re stuck loving me, aren’t you? That’s the way it is with mothers.”

Just as suddenly, she lets go and stalks away. I stand among the stacks of china, listening for the roar of the bath.