Riparia| [Short stories]

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The University of Montana

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RIPARIA

by

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Date
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It wasn't that the house was so big, it was the cleanliness I found appealing. There was an order. It made sense. Carter was out, his parents away, and I sat in the den alone, inhaling his dad's leather chair. It had deep cracks and smelled like tobacco generally and scalp at the top, where his head must have rested. Carter and I had been in love for just over a month, and this was my first time sleeping over. We met at our Quaker-founded high school, the People's Prep, in Brooklyn. I noticed him staring at me in our U.S. History class, and knew he'd be my boyfriend that year. When we first kissed—at my mother's loft, after school—my knees buckled and I fell to the rug. He came down too, our mouths still attached. We were seventeen then, but it's a year later now and everything's different.

While Carter bought the condoms, I slid off the chair to flip through his dad's record collection. It was mostly jazz and blues, like my father's, although without the sixties folk and Ravi Shankar.

The elevator doors opened and I glanced up at the redness staining Carter's cheeks, and my stomach muscles tensed. He dropped his keys into a ceramic bowl on the front-hall table, and his boots left brown puddles across the shiny parquet floor to where I sat, grinning. I eyeballed the small, brown-paper bag that crinkled when he set it on the couch. We'd planned to lose my virginity that Saturday.

"Continue?" he said, sitting next to me. We greedily resumed making out, his cold hands in my hair, my warm ones over his back.

He scooped and carried me into his parent's bedroom, scuffing the walls with my sneakers and us laughing, which made me less nervous. It was about four-thirty, I remember, because the light was golden from the afternoon sun through the bare trees of Central Park.
After we noticed a smudge of blood on his parents’ sheets, and after he reassured me that the maid would take care of it, we clung to one another, trembling.

Mr. and Mrs. Knight arrived from their country house in Greenwich the following day, and having never met them, I awkwardly stood at Carter’s side. I thought she looked like an airline stewardess or a former beauty pageant contestant who never got very far on the circuit because of a slightly crooked nose and a large, heart-shaped ass well-displayed in tight-fitting slacks, I noticed, when she hung her coat in the hall-closet. Mr. Knight resembled a professional-basketball coach or the host of one of the brainier game shows.

“Well, she’s pretty as a picture,” his mother said, looking at Carter while she delicately shook my hand.

“I told you,” he said.

Mr. Knight pulled me into his chest and kissed the top of my head. “Hey sport,” he said. Trapped in his armpit with my neck craned at a painful angle and my nose mashed against his itchy, wool-smelling sweater, I braced for a nouggie. At last, he released me and held out my hands. “It’s Saribel, right?” he said, strangely altering the vowels.

“Sari’s fine,” I said.

“Make yourself at home,” Mrs. Knight said, “and we’ll go out for an early dinner, how’s that?” She shuffled through the mail and disappeared down the hall, her unbuttoned Oxford billowing like sails.

“Sounds good, Mom,” Carter said, throwing his too-heavy arm over my shoulders. He led me to the den while Mr. Knight remained in the foyer with his hands on his hips.

“Carter boy!” he said, following his wife to the back wing and their bedroom, with its two walk-in closets and those his-and-her bathrooms.

“Why do they have two?” I’d asked earlier, in their bed.

“Romance? It’s probably why they’re still married.”

“Do you think?”
“No,” he said, bringing me closer. “They’re still in love, and they’re good people.”
“Good people get divorced,” I said.
“True, but my dad says it’s like Humpty-Dumpty—once broken, always broken.”
I decided to take this as an indication of Carter’s marriageability.

In the den, he channel-surfed and I watched. We had the same taste in TV, which is important. I was feeling ecstatic over my position as his girlfriend and ridding myself of virgin status. We’d spent the weekend in his beautiful apartment and were soon going out to eat with adults who seemed intelligent and kind. Everything felt right, and I’d never been so content on this side of river. I was living with my mother in Brooklyn then, and my only overnight sojourns into Manhattan were to stay at my dad’s plant-choked apartment in the West Village that smelled of litter box and spores. His wife Stephanie, a yoga instructor, grew mushrooms under the sink and in the bottom of closets. I’d be searching for a tennis racket or the basketball, only to discover Dad’s biggest salad bowl brimming with gray shiny fungus. After sufficient mitosis, Steph would make teas from her bacterial experiments. At his place, I slept in a loftbed, my face three feet from the ceiling. Airless and hot, it felt like a coffin and was right above their bedroom, which gave me insomnia from worrying I’d overhear the Tantric sex my mother said they were into. Also, I had to see my fourteen-year-old brother, Redwood, who must be called Charles or he won’t respond. My dad, a lawyer, issued some fake papers to let Redwood “change” his name when he turned ten, but he’s still Redwood Steingarten on his passport and birth certificate, a fact he denies.

I felt more comfortable among these forest-green walls, blown-glass paperweights from the Museum shop across the street, bronze statuettes of slim horses on the mantle, Fifth Avenue and the park, and my good-looking boyfriend with perfect teeth whose elbow dug into my thigh while he stared at the oversized television set, his mouth ajar. Their walls were shelved with thick art books and decorated by historical maps of the Scottish isles well-framed in gold; my folks preferred obscure collections of poetry, fat candles stuck to
swap-shop coffee tables, thirty-year-old mandalas, and Buddha shrines. Carter rested his head on my legs, and I wove the soft, straight hair into tiny braids while we waited for dinner.

In the Knights’ car, a driver at the helm, Mr. Knight sat in front and Mrs. Knight with us in back. Her perfume, though delicious, made my temples throb. “So, Sari,” she said, turning her face to me like a klieg light, “Carter says you live in Brooklyn.” When she moved, her clothes rustled expensively.

I nodded and said, “With my mother.”

Mrs. Knight’s gaze made me insecure, her features so neat and tidy, the face well-poised. My family’s looks were the opposite, swathed by a wide, sloppy brush. Our genetic canvas had clashing hues that dripped and bled, while the Knights were like Monet’s water lilies—pale, harmonious, pretty.

“And she’s a painter,” Mrs. Knight said.

I nodded.

“I’ve heard of her. I don’t know if Carter mentioned it, but I paint too.”

“Dad,” Carter said. “Sari’s never been to 21.”

Mr. Knight wrenched around. “Well, you’re sure in for a treat.”

“It’s a cool place,” said Carter.

In the thirties on the East side, bisecting a block of old, skinny brownstones, were two of those lantern-bearer figurines my father condemned for being so racist, though these were Caucasian, indicating the presence of 21. We descended a few steps into the subterranean restaurant and Carter whispered, “This used to be a speakeasy. Look up.”

Above our heads, hundreds of old, white pipes fastened by tiny hooks covered every inch of the low ceiling, and my face feigned the awe I knew the Knights expected of it. My true opinion was that the decor glorified tobacco-smoking and masculinity, or was that my family talking?
The restaurant’s wealthy clientele seemed to be the stately old, silent in well-tailored suits, bankers loudly toasting themselves above bleeding steaks at tables of ten or twenty and strewn with bottles, or small clusters of women out for a weekly girl’s night, perhaps after the book club, all with diamond studs and engagement rings. I felt like a conspicuous outsider, even with Carter holding my hand through the room.

“What are you doing for Christmas, Sarah?” Mr. Knight said, unfurling his napkin.

“Oh,” I smiled. “It’s Sari, Mr. Knight.”

“I’ll get it right if you promise to call me Paul.” He winked.

“And me Debbie,” said Carter’s mother, her chin on her hand.

“Deal,” I said, surprised by my falseness. I found our superficiality a pleasant switch from the political debates and screaming at Redwood that went on at my father’s, and the new-agey women’s groups at my mother’s. “I’ll be in New York for another few days and then I go to Mexico with my brother.”

“Her mother’s got a house in San Miguel,” said Carter. “It’s really artistic there.”

“Sounds bohemian,” Paul said distractedly, reading the wine list. After he selected a red, the very old waiter hovering near his elbow mumbled, “Good, sir,” and seemed to give me a disdainful look before he left.

“So,” said Paul, “your father’s a lawyer.”

“Yep.” I hoped they didn’t ask what kind because then I’d have to admit that my dad was a public defender on civil rights cases, with mostly death-penalty clients.

“That’s great,” said Debbie, and we grew silent before our menus.

I tried to change the subject. “And you’re having a ski-trip Christmas.”

“We sure are,” said Debbie. “And we’ve never been to Taos, so we’re real excited. Whitney, Carter’s sister, is coming too. She’s in medical school at Stanford.”

“Oh,” I said, although Carter had told me that already. He spoke of Whitney, as he did his parents, with a reverence I envied.
“What does your family do for the holidays?” Debbie blinked at me innocently. Was I supposed to tell her how we avoided Christmas and Hanukkah because of their commercialism? And that instead of exchanging gifts, we worked in a soup kitchen with my father, while Mom had us donate to charity?

“Oh, spend the day being together,” I said. “Take a walk through San Miguel.”

Paul peered over his menu to the other side of the room. “That’s Fritz Ramsey over there,” he said. “I should go say hello.”

With a tight smile, Debbie watched him cross the restaurant. “Clifford, I mean Fritz, is on the board at Fleet,” she said. “He’s been an associate of ours for years.” A manic laugh rose from her and she said, “That date! It could be his daughter.” Carter and I chuckled lightly, and I noticed a sadness in Debbie’s eyes.

“What kind of company is Fleet?” I said. Carter had told me pharmaceuticals, but nothing more specific.

“My grandfather started it a long time ago,” she said, her face regaining its luster. “The company is based in Silver Spring, Maryland, and it makes products for physical detoxification and personal health.”

“Mom, let’s be honest,” Carter said. “It’s a laxative business. Enemas, suppositories. But we’re basically just shareholders, now.”

I stared at the bread basket.

Debbie said, “Grand-dad was initially interested because of some gastro-intestinal probl—”

“That Fritzer,” Paul said, returning. “They’re getting younger and younger.” He held the wine bottle to see how much was left, and then said to Debbie, “Should we get you another?” Carter shrank low in his chair and I excused myself to the bathroom. He followed me and grabbed my hand near the door.

“You’re doing so well,” he said.
"What was the wine thing all about?" We ballroom danced a few steps on the maroon carpet.

"Nothing, really," Carter said. "My mom once drank too much, but not anymore. Hey, let's go outside for a minute."

Without our coats, the air was frigid and we rubbed each other's arms for warmth.

"I think I want to go with you to San Miguel," he said, his breath hot in my ear. "I could come from New Mexico after Christmas. What-say we're together for New Year's."

I looked up, beyond him, at the buildings, the sky.

That night, Carter's parent's let me sleep in Whitney's old room, and in the morning he and I had our first spat.

"I wonder if I should drink coffee," I said, pouring myself a glass of orange juice. "I woke up so many times to use the bathroom. That food. Major diarrhea."

"Don't talk that way in my mother's kitchen," he said.

"It's supposed to be a big secret?"

"You don't need to broadcast it."


"Fleet. Look, it's just how I was raised: we don't go blabbing about our bodily functions."

It was time for home, for Brooklyn. I had to be downtown to see my dad that night anyway, so I left, knowing that when Carter got to San Miguel, the conversation would be a vague memory.

*

Dad lived in an artist's co-op on Bank Street, courtesy of a sublet through his brother Jerry, a performance/installation artist. Before Jerry left for Berlin to direct an avant-garde mask troupe, he'd made it big in New York, but you wouldn't know it from
his apartment. Walking through the courtyard of his enormous, yellow-brick building, I noticed its windows were fogged from moist radiator heat or boiling pasta water, probably, and sprawling plants that made the apartments look like greenhouses. Carpeted in orange—the color of insanity, according to my mother—the long hallways held stagnant odors of acrylic paint, turpentine and Chinese food.

I walked into Dad’s place without knocking, since he never locked the door, and found him neatly arranging two table settings in the kitchen. When we hugged, I smelled garlic in his big halo of frizzy, graying hair my brother calls his “Jewfro.”

“Just us tonight, babe,” he said, his small, close-set eyes exceptionally blue.

Stephanie was teaching a class at the uptown Yoga Zone, and Redwood was smoking pot with the skaters in Washington Square Park, he said, matter-of-factly. The steak tartare from the night before lent Dad’s tempeh with vegetables new appeal.

He’d already begun slurping his food, one of many eccentricities, before my chopsticks were in hand. “What’s the story with the new guy?” he said. “I imagine it’s serious if he’s going to San Miguel with you.”

In under three hours, that information traveled from me to my mother to Redwood to my father.

“What’s his name again?”

“Carter,” I said. “Carter Knight.”

“Of course; how could I forget a name like that? I was thankful it wasn’t Reagan.”

“We’re in form twelve together at the Prep,” I said. “What do you want to know?”

“What his parents do, and are they Jewish.”

“They’re Wasps,” I said. “They live on Fifth Avenue.”

“Give me a minute to figure out how I feel about that.”

“I’ll put on some music,” I said, and went into the living room where my uncle’s ancient stereo collected dust.

“What’s the father do?” he said, his Brooklyn accent thicker from having to yell.
I chose Billie Holiday and returned. “You know, I don’t think Carter’s parents do so much. Work-wise, anyway. At 21 last night—”

“You went there with them?” He laid down his chopsticks and tilted his head to one side, then rocked back and forth while making evaluative faces. “I’ve never been to that joint,” he said.

“You’d hate it. So we’re in the middle of dinner and Mr. Knight tells me he doesn’t really work, ‘per se.’ He’s only in the office once a week.”

“So the mother’s loaded,” Dad said, slurping. “I hate that first family crap. This here’s third generation, and proud.” At the “p” sound, he spat tempeh onto the table.

“You know it, Dad.”

“What does the mother do with herself?” His Brooklynese made “mother,” “mutha.” “She a lady-who-lunches?”

“Last night was the first time I met them, so I’m not an expert yet.”

“And you’ve been seeing this fellow for how long? Sari, honey, that’s not good.”

“Come on, Dad. It’s not like you’ve met him. We mostly hang out in Brooklyn. Near school and stuff.”

“Just as long as there’s no reason behind it,” he said.

“Do you want to hear about them?” He waved a hand at me. I concentrated on operating my metal chopsticks. “They’re both artistic, and Mr. Knight’s writing a novel.” I took a bite and added, my mouth full, “A ‘crime-noir set in turn-of-the-century Gotham.’”

My dad laughed through his nose, more of a wettish snort.

“Mrs. Knight is trying to learn the cello,” I continued, “and takes classes at the Art Students’ League. They read a lot, buy things at auctions and go to charity balls, it seems.”

“Where does the dad go when he does work?”

“Her family’s company that I forget the name of.” I didn’t want his ridicule.

“Honey, make sure it’s not biological weapons. No, seriously: I guess they don’t sound too awful.” He gave his crooked smile.
“They’re totally liberal.” I wasn’t sure about that, but it seemed possible, considering Carter’s oral report on the Equal Rights Amendment.

“Registered Democrats?”

“Of course!” I had no idea.

“I’d still like to see you with a Jewish boy from a socialist-communist background.”

“Manipulate Redwood, not me.”

At the mention of his name, my brother slammed the front door, called “Yo,” and heavy-booted down the stairs to the kitchen.

Dad leaned in and whispered: “He’s been seeing a Latina.”

There he was—the pimples, the greasy hair, the wallet chain, the baggy pants—and I stood to kiss his cheek. We love each other, we really do.

“‘Sup, bitch?” Redwood sat with us.

“What did I say about the misogyny?” said my father.

“Sorry. Any din-din in the hizzy?” He got up to check the stove.

“When do you fly to your mom’s?” Dad asked me.

“I told you like a million times already: the day after tomorrow,” Redwood said, dropping food onto his plate from above to make an unpleasant noise. “Are you high?” He left the cover off the wok and grabbed a fork from the silverware shelf. “Sis and I are outtie,” he said, dancing over to us. He sat down heavily, smirking and pleased with himself. Then he flung his hair back with one sharp flick and doused his food with soy sauce.

“What are you saying?” I squinted at him.

“Would you get it with lockjaw?” He shoveled in an enormous bite and said, mouth full, “Since when are you so bougie?”

“You don’t know what ‘bourgeois’ means,” I said.
“Kids,” Dad said. “How are things with Tina, Charles? She’s been calling a lot.”

To me, he added, “She sounds very nice.”

“Bitches is bitches.” Grinning at me from beneath his bangs, which had fallen forward, Redwood opened his mouth to show me the half-chewed tempeh. As dumb as it was, I laughed.

“You know,” Dad said to Redwood, “I’m getting pretty fed up with you.” He pushed his chair away from the table. “Some wine, Sari?” I nodded and watched him shuffle to the wine rack, defeated.

“Getting?” Redwood said. “Hey Dad, why don’t you bust that super-kind. The bud in Stephanie’s sewing basket is the bomb.” He laid his dish in the sink and started to walk away, but my father, without looking up from the wine bottle he struggled to open, growled, “Do it.”

Redwood gave the plate a cursory rinse and leapt up the stairs, saying, “I’m at the movies with my posse.”

“It’s a school night, so—” Dad said, glancing at the clock, but the door-slam cut him off. He slumped into his chair and fingered the tiny pieces of cork floating in his wine.

“Put him in boarding school,” I offered.

“What, for institutionalized elitism?”

“That public school he goes to is a joke. You’ve got to send him away. He’s just going to get worse.”

“I don’t want to see him at a snob factory.” He stared off and said, “He wouldn’t survive New England, anyway.”

“You know he smokes cigarettes, right?” I said. “And drinks?”

“Those schools have even more. Reddy might just be precocious, you know. The divorce seems to have affected him worse than it did you.”

“I was older,” I said, and then changed the subject by asking how Stephanie and her mushrooms were, which perked him up. He cleared the table and I did the dishes with
eco-soap and the water-saving method he insisted upon, and then we reclined in the living
room so he could listen to jazz. While he snapped, I noticed my clothes were covered with
cat hairs and the soles of my socks had turned black from the floors. After a couple of
songs, I stood to leave the dusty, cluttered apartment—ignoring my father’s protestations
not to—because I felt similarly chaotic and disheveled there.

“I love you, Dad,” I said, shrugging into my coat. “And thanks for dinner. I’ll call
you from Mexico on New Year’s Eve, O.K.?” When I slipped out the door, his hopeful
eyes shined at me from the dark hallway and I felt guilty over something I couldn’t name.

* 

In San Miguel, Redwood, my mother, her boyfriend César—all of them managed
to get to me. Redwood pissed me off by sleeping with one of my mother’s new
laundresses, Sofia. She was his first—he insists he had sex at twelve, but no one believes
him—and older than him, seventeen, I think. He kept walking into furniture and stumbling
down steps, dizzy, and affected a look of sarong with no shirt, in emulation of César’s
sex-god style, except Redwood’s chest was bony and hairless. He wouldn’t acknowledge
Sofia outside of the laundry room where it happened, and she asked me, was that because
she was Mexican, or worked for my mother? Neither, I told her, and went to find him for a
scolding. I also resented that we lost our virginities within the same week.

Before that, my mother and her cleavage met us at the airport, sashaying through
the terminal, waving her fingers and calling, “You-hoo! Kiddies!” On the way home, we
tried a shortcut of César’s and got so lost the drive took four hours, and not the usual hour-
and-a-half. We kept pulling over for her to sob and bounce her head on the steering wheel.
Redwood pointed to an old man with a donkey and said, “Mom, let’s ask this—”

“Shut up!” she screeched. “Let me think!” Proud of her competence in Mexico, she
refused to ask for directions so we drove up and down the same dirt roads for hours. We
arrived home in the dark, exhausted, hungry and irritated, and when César said, “What
happened?” my mother pounded his chest, fell to the floor and wept. César managed to coax her to bed, where she spent the following day on Valium.

A few days later, in the garden picking basil and tomatoes for Josefina, the cook, we had an argument over Redwood-and-Sofia, which my mother described as “achingly sweet.” The wind blew long curls into her mouth, and as she pulled strands from her lipgloss, thick clumps rose and spun around her head like serpents.

“What’s so sweet about it?” I said. “They have sex in the laundry room, emerge all flushed and sweaty, and she goes back to work while he heads for the pool, ignoring her until later when he’s ready for more. What would her mother think?”

“Honey,” she said, examining a tomato, “why are you so uptight over this?”

“I’m not uptight, Mom. It’s about inserting ourselves into people’s lives without thinking of the consequences. I bet it means something different to her than it does to Redwood.”

“You’re hyper-critical, just like your father,” she said, and after a pause, “I’m the one who suggested it.”

“What do you mean?” I shielded myself from the sun. “How?”

Eyes cast down the hill toward town, she said, “It was time for Reddy to become a man.” Her gaze returned to me. “I casually mentioned something to each of them, and it worked out divinely.”

“He’s only fourteen!”

“Don’t get all worked up.” Crouching, her hair in one hand, she searched for more tomatoes. “Redwood is a mature fourteen, we all know that.”

“Advanced, maybe, but not mature. You should see him around Dad.” We walked toward the house, me with a bouquet of basil and my mother holding a straw basket.

“He and your father have some issues,” she said.

“Sofia’s too old for him.”
“Honey,” she linked an arm through mine, “I’ve told you: it’s stage, not age. Look at César and me.” He was twenty-six to her forty-three.

I unhooked my arm. “I think it’s wrong you arranged it.”

“What, as opposed to right?”

“Just don’t ever try it with me.”

She laughed and said, “I’d hope it was too late for that.”

“As if I’d tell you!” I said, and fumed across the yard with a dust-cloud around my legs. Not wanting to see her, I didn’t come to the table that night for dinner.

And then there was César. He’s the reason my mother bought a house in Mexico, because when they first started sleeping together, a year after the divorce and around the time of Stephanie, they traveled to San Miguel, his hometown. Redwood and I wondered what this struggling painter who lived in his street-level, one-room gallery in the Lower East Side with no shower wanted with our plump and aging mother, and decided early that he couldn’t be trusted. We figured he had several gorgeous, arty girlfriends, all in their twenties, dancers and such, and that he only showed up at Mom’s townhouse in Brooklyn a couple nights a week for her cooking and amenity-rich bathrooms.

Since she knew I couldn’t stand the guy, he didn’t move in with us, but she usually bought him tickets to Mexico, and on the night of our tiff in the garden, when I snuck into the kitchen hoping to graze leftovers, assuming everyone would be through cleaning and long-gone, I encountered César rubbing up against my mom from behind, with her bent over the counter. It was a moment I wished wasn’t happening because they were grinding into each other, gyrating and whatnot, and she moaned, “Not here, César, not here,” all breathless and panting and I hated them for exposing me to it. If not for the way her forehead shone and her lips were pulled back, showing teeth, and her hand grabbed his butt to push it harder, then I might have been able to pull a Redwood—who at that point probably had more sexual experience than I did and didn’t take things nearly as seriously—and say, “Ew, please,” but I didn’t.
After witnessing that spectacle, which sent me to town for a dollar-burrito and two cervezas, I was stunned when César hit on me. I’d been reading Marquez by the pool—Redwood and Sofia were in his bed and not on the laundry-room floor, which he probably saw as a gesture of intimacy; my mother was in her studio—when César strolled over in a sarong and wrap-around shades. He’s handsome, but his shoulder-length hair makes him look like he’s trying too hard, and his bulbous pectorals and biceps not only reveal how much time he spends at the gym, but also dwarf his legs, skinny to begin with.

“Hey,” he said, eclipsing my sun, “what’s up?” His left pectoral twitched, probably from doing pushups before coming over—he’s like that.

“Nothing,” I said. “Trying to read.”

He removed the sarong and sat cross-legged on the hot tile in his mini-Speedo that Redwood called a “banana hammock.” I stood because being so close to him in just my bikini made me nervous. On the ledge of the pool, I hung my legs in the water.

“Do you want some sunblock rubbed on your back?” he said, behind me.

“No. I’ve been lying on my back.”

“But you’re not now.”

“César, if I wanted sunscreen there, it would be.” I splashed the water with my foot. “Thanks, though,” I added.

“So it’s getting pretty serious with what’s-his-name, huh?”

I turned around. “Well, he’s coming down here, isn’t he.”

“I guess he’s all right,” César said. They’d met a few times at our apartment, but I tended to whisk Carter up to my room so he couldn’t notice much. “But I’ll still be jealous.” He stood and as he walked by, grazed my lower back with his toes. It jolted me into the pool and after surfacing, I stood with my arms around myself and watched him swish away, skirt in hand. I tried to do angry laps but the pool was so tiny, I could only go a few strokes in each direction, circling like a bug.
San Miguel’s artistic, new-age spiritualism gave my mother license to be more flaky, ethereal and hyper-emotional than usual. She regressed to a former self, it seemed, to the Elaine pre-Redwood and me, when she and Dad took peyote at their naked dinner parties. The drugs she and César did in Mexico, coupled with an apparent sexual renaissance, worried me as to what Carter might think. Josefina the cook confirmed Mom was “loco” lately, and the kitchen teemed with their arguments about “the Zone,” my mother’s trendy new diet. When Carter arrived on New Year’s Eve morning, the house in a fever pitch over our party that night, I bolted out the front door and threw my arms around him as if rescued.

*  

“Is this too weird?” I said. We tromped to the mesa behind our house in the bright midday sun. Carter’s face, browned from skiing, made my stomach flutter.

“It’s fine.” He took my hand. “Really, it is.”

I smiled weakly. Earlier, my mother had summoned us into the kitchen. “Kids, I have a project,” she’d said. I rolled my eyes. “You said you’d help, Sari.”

“What,” I said.

“We’re having two mushroom sauces for the fajitas—Josefina’s morel,” and they exchanged a nod, “and psilocybin, prepared by me.”

Carter laughed at the ceiling, but I was mortified, though not surprised. She told us to go to the Riveras’ land, down in the valley. “He’s got dairy cows,” she said, “and you’ll look in the manure patties. They’re skinny and brown— is that right, Josefina?”

She nodded, stirring.

“In the dry cowpies,” my mother said. “Only check those.”

“Isn’t it pretty sketchy to pick wild mushrooms, Elaine?” said Carter.

“Yeah, Mom,” I said. “Don’t we have a field guide?”

“You’ll be fine,” said Josefina. “Just pick what’s in the cowpies.”
I believed everything she said, so we each took a gallon-sized Ziploc bag from my mother, who instructed us to fill them. On our way out, she said, “If you see Mr. Rivera, just tell him who you are.” She and Josefina had a brief exchange, and then my mother came to the door. “Actually, say Josefina said it would be fine.”

“Whatever, Mom.” I kicked a stone down the driveway.

The land in Rivera’s valley was greener than ours, and smelled more of cactus and sagebrush. Carter and I stooped over ashy mounds of dried cowshit, some deceptively arid on the outside but still wet underneath, and between thumb and two fingers, pulled the skinny stems up and out. The task was soothing and meditative, but when I thought about what we were actually doing, I became anxious.

“You mother’s pretty different here,” Carter said, crouching, the words almost lost in his chest.

“You mean more painful to be around?” I stood erect so he could hear me. “As are Redwood and César; I can’t deal with any of them.” I thought of his parents, so pleasant and benign. I missed them.

Carter sat on a flat rock, his half-full plastic bag waving at me. “Sari, you shouldn’t talk that way.”

“You don’t know,” I said, my eyes tearing with self-pity. I walked over to him. “My family’s insane.”

“Come off it.”

“It’s true. They’re freaks, and I’d probably despise them if we weren’t related.”

“That’s an awful thing to say.”

“I just feel so different from them.”

“So? That’s normal,” he said, pulling me down to his rock. “You’ve still got to love and respect them. Don’t give them that kind of influence. Remember: you’re separate.”
We sat that way for a while, me between his legs and leaning back, and gazed silently at the bowl-shaped valley, the ripple of baggies all we heard.

At the party, my mother and César’s friends stood under the red Chinese lanterns Redwood had strung over the pool, or wandered into the gardens on paths illuminated by flaming tiki torches. The night air was cool and sweet with jacaranda blossoms, and classical guitar drifted from the stereo inside. A throng of Mexican girls surrounded my brother, his success at charming them measured by the periodic giggles. César, in the white silk blouse unbuttoned to his navel and billowy, white linen pants my mother told him to wear, darted from person to person like an exotically-plumed bird. Half-hidden by the orange bougainvillea that crept up the house, Carter and I leaned against a pink-adobe wall and observed. The guests stood clutching plastic cups of punch, or sat on the patio furniture with thick paper plates on their laps. My mother clicked over to us in golden, low-heeled mules, and I reached into her swarm of hair to disentangle an earring.

“Come inside for a sec.” Taking a hand from each of us, we were led to the kitchen counter and a cooling, heart-shaped pie with a wrinkled, buttery edge. “I saved the prettiest of your mushrooms and made a love tart,” she said, beaming.

“Mom, that’s so sweet.”

Carter said, “Elaine, you didn’t have to—”

“Look, you guys.” She pointed to the platter of hallucinogenic mushrooms, and said, “It’s all gone!” Only a brown puddle of sauce remained. She walked away, but I pinched a corner of her sparkling caftan. I felt the thin metallic strands, and she turned.

“How long does it take?” I said.

“A hour or so.” She widened her eyes and floated off, tripping already.

Carter found a knife and cut the tart down the middle. Laughing, we intertwined arms, but the first bite was so bitter, we withdrew them to concentrate on forcing it down.
After slugging some milk from the carton, we wiped the crumbs from our lips and returned to the party.

"Shrooming with the parents on New Year’s," said Carter.

"Let’s talk to people,” I said. We separated for about twenty minutes, finding each other when the effects kicked in.

"Woah," Carter said.

"They’re pretty strong." The glowing lanterns swinging over the pool left trails of pink, and the guests’ faces were skull-like, their features drawn and hollow. But I felt warm when I saw Redwood and César gossiping together in a corner. Scanning the patio, I located my mother telling a story to a woman who clutched her belly with laughter. My mom’s wildly-moving hands appeared multiplied, like Shiva with the six arms. I walked over and hugged her. Still talking, she slid an arm around my waist, and I returned to Carter.

Thomas, who helps my mother with her gardens, came over to say hello. He left after we’d chatted briefly, and Carter narrowed his eyes at me.

"That guy wanted you,” Carter said.

"That was my mother’s gardener. He’s married.”

"He was flirting with you, and you flirted back,” Carter said.

"I was just being nice. Relax.”

"How am I supposed to relax?” he said. “Your brother and mom and her friends are your examples, and they’re all doing it, sleeping with them.”

"I’m in love with you,” I said, “and I’m not going to have an affair with a Mexican.”

"It’s too sexual here.” He looked around with a worried expression. “I don’t feel comfortable.”

"Let’s go down to the flower garden.” I held his arm, and he confessed that the few times we’d smoked pot together (stolen from my dad by Redwood and sold to me) were
his only drug experiences. On a bench surrounded by my mother’s perennials, I tucked his hair behind his ears. “Do you really think I’d cheat on you?” I said.

“I don’t know, Sari. Your family tweaks me.”

“Wait, today you told me to be more accepting of them.”

“I said you should, not me.”

“You know what, I think only I’m allowed to criticize them,” I said, feeling sober.

“I’m afraid you’re going to be just like them,” he said. “That you’ll be into younger guys, like your mom. Or that you’ll sleep with Mexicans who work for you, like Redwood. And do all those drugs and stuff. I wonder, like, how different you are.”

“Earlier you said I was separate. That I’m my own person, remember?”

“That was today,” Carter said. “I know them a little better now.”

All he’d done was stick torches in the ground with César and help my mother set up the booze table. “They’re normal people,” I said, “having a party.”

“Oh, so now they’re normal,” he said. “I thought you couldn’t stand them.”

“They’re family; I have no choice but to. I’ve been annoyed, that’s all.”

He looked at the house and the small clusters of people growing louder as they tripped. The tiki-torch flames threw shadows against the adobe walls, and the pool lights glimmered there too. From where we sat, the party, red from the lanterns, had a hellish glow, which I hoped Carter didn’t notice.

“Maybe me coming here wasn’t such a good idea. I actually think I should leave.”

He winced at me and checked his watch. “I could call my dad. Ask him to send down a Fleet plane. They’ve got a two-engine prop that could land on the mesa, I bet.” He groaned and leaned over, chest to knees.

I stared ahead. It was almost the countdown.

“Carter,” I began slowly, “you got here today. Now you’re tripping and being a little drastic. This is only the drug.”

“No, Sari, it’s not. I was just skiing for a week with nothing to do but think, and I
decided...” Pause. “I decided I just can’t deal with certain things. Like how dark your
dad’s life is. It’s just so bleak, him trying to spring gorillas from jail.”

“What?”

“You know what I mean. Black guys who raped and killed people. Monsters. This
is who your dad deals with, all day, every day, and I can’t handle it.” He sniffed and
choked on his tears. “It makes me worry you might be dark, too. That you have this thing
inside you. The thing your family’s got.”

We heard noise-makers and a countdown starting at sixty. My mother called my
name. Was I dark? I didn’t know what that meant. Did I need Carter to rescue me from my
family? Maybe I should live with his parents. In Whitney’s old room. I heard my name
again. “Coming!” I yelled. I asked if he’d join me for the countdown.

“I’ll stay here,” he said, rubbing his eye with a fist, like an infant. “I don’t want to
celebrate anything.” I said I’d be right back and ran up the hill.

My mother stood between César and Redwood, their arms around each other,
yelling, “Twenty-three, twenty-two, twenty-one...” I joined them, and she asked me where
Carter was. I pointed to the garden. She gave an inquisitive look; I shrugged. I held
Redwood’s hand and blew a horn while he rattled a metal noise-maker. At the New Year,
everyone kissed, and some jumped into the pool, with and without clothes. After kissing
my mom and brother, I turned to find César’s face in mine, his tongue probing my lips. I
stepped back, wiped my mouth and sneered.

Returning to Carter, I said, “My God.”

“What happened?” he said, gloomily.

“It might be a little bit too much fun up there.” Winded, I sat next to him.

“Too much fun. That’s my problem, Sari. Are you going to be the type of person
who has too much fun?”

I didn’t think so. I wanted quiet, not chaos. I wanted to be good.
In the morning, we woke early to make flight reservations. Mr. Knight had laughed when Carter requested the plane, but he offered to pay for our tickets. I packed silently and went to look for my mother. Finding her outside in her bathrobe, squinting from the sun as she collected strewn cups and plates, I told her we needed to talk. A few people slept at our feet, so we spoke in hushed tones.

“What is it?” she said. “Why are you dressed already?”

I led her away from the pool so we didn’t have to whisper. Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath. “Mom, Carter and I are leaving early.” I stared at the ground. “We got an afternoon flight and our cab’ll be here soon.” My mouth twisted.

“What?” She stumbled into a pool chair, spilling coffee light with cream on her white silk robe. “What’s going on?”

“Carter doesn’t feel all that comfortable here.” I pulled up a chair. “He loves you, but there are certain things he can’t deal with.” Leaning in, I said, “He’s a little more conservative than we are.”

“Don’t pretend to conspire with me. My life is too unconventional for him, so you leave? What, do you feel the same way?” Her face crumpled and she wept.

“Of course not.” I reached over to her. “I love him too, though, and want this to work.”

She pulled away from my touch, wiped her cheeks and swallowed hard. “Good luck,” she said, rubbing her nose. She sniffed and stared at me hatefully. “This is just first love. Not worth making sacrifices for. But you’d put our relationship at risk because some preppie says your background doesn’t work for him?”

“Mom, I’m only going back a week early. You’re over-reacting. This is not that big a deal.”

“I’m not dumb. You’re leaving because you both think I’m too ‘wild’ or something. He hid in the garden last night when we should have all been together. I opened up my house to him, and he rejected it. It’s over between me and that boy.”
"Please, Mom—"

"And remember this: the only difference about Wasps is they ignore the elephant in the living room." She stood and brushed by me, then stopped to turn. "And where do you plan to stay? There's still another week before school, and our housesitters won't change their plans for you."

"Carter's house in Greenwich, probably," I said, sulking.

"Greenwich!" She stormed into the house, slamming doors behind her.

*

The gray skies were bloated with slushy snow and freezing rain, and the sad, drenched lawn and shivering trees made me long for Mexico. I'd start to question why I'd left, but then Carter would creep up behind the chair and rest his knuckles on my collarbones, and my doubts dissolved. He told me that leaving Mexico strengthened our relationship, and that we'd always be together. In his parents' drafty stone house, we rehearsed being married: he did yard work, carried in wood and made fires, and I followed the recipes marked in his mother's cookbooks, shopping at the Greenwich Safeway with the other housewives for my ingredients. We enjoyed hours of cable television and drove to the cineplex almost every night. I improved at sex, which made me think of my family: would I have been so judgmental of their appetites had I understood them?

One evening, we rented a movie about a suicidal alcoholic, and Carter wept during the film.

Afterwards, I said, "I've never seen you cry from a movie before."

"This one must have really affected me." Legs splayed, he sat child-like on the floor, waiting for the tape to rewind.

"Why, do you think?" I said, from the couch.

"Yours is not the only family with problems, you know."

"Are you saying I have obvious family problems?"
“Sari, that’s why we left Mexico.” He loudly shut the tape inside its box.

“No, we left because you were having problems. We should get that straight.”

He looked at me for a few seconds and said, “Fine, you’re right. It wasn’t your family, it was me. I couldn’t deal.”

“Thank you,” I said. “So what did that movie have to do with your family?”

He groaned and stood up. “I didn’t want to get into this, but people are always saying how it’s good to talk about things.” He put the video-box on top of the TV, and joined me on the couch. Sighing, he said, “On the ski trip, my mom drank pretty hard. Nothing major or anything. Just, like, two scotches before dinner, then wine. Maybe a lot. I don’t count her drinks. Then she’d have some after-dinner cordials or whatever.” He stared at the wall, his eyes wide. “There was the silver flask, too. For nips on the chairlift. Just to keep her warm, she said.”

“Wow.”

“So one night, Whitney goes,”—imitating her voice with a girlish whine—“‘We need to do an intervention for Mom.’ I was so pissed.”

“Why?” I said.

“Why what?”

“Were you pissed.”

“Because she needs to learn how to leave well-enough alone,” he said. “She’s gotten meddlesome lately.”

“It sounds like it wasn’t so ‘well,’ though.”

“I said, ‘well-enough.’ My mom’s been in detox before. Both her parents drank a lot, so she’s got the tendency, she says. It wasn’t that bad, though. She’s moderate, and every now and then it gets heavy, which it was starting to do.”

“And what happened?”

“Whitney gets my dad to agree on the intervention crap, but I refused ‘cause it seemed stupid. It wasn’t the right time or place. So I went skiing instead, and just like I
predicted, my mother freaked and hit the bars. She got so drunk she passed out at one, and some guy brought her back to the condo.”

“Jeez,” I said.

“She agreed to go to Hazledon again if it’s not better soon,” Carter said, tracing the border of a pillow with his finger.

“Carter, I’m sorry.”

“She’ll be O.K.,” he said, brightening. “She’s a trouper. And she usually keeps her promises to stay moderate. I should show you the contract she signed. We were the witnesses. Dad was going to frame it, but he thought she might get embarrassed.” He went to the writing table near the picture window. “Come look,” he said.

I got off the couch and walked over, but only because he wanted me to. “Gee,” I said, holding an edge of the curled document. In the center was Debbie’s moderation pledge, and below, all the Knights’ signatures. Carter gazed lovingly at the parchment while my eyes wandered to the still-open drawer beneath it. Among the rubber bands, paper clips, half-roll of Breath Savers and spare keys, was a fuchsia business card. The color was so garish I had to pluck it from the clutter. “What’s this?” I said. Together, we read the card.

Erotic Fantasies Fulfilled
Dominatrix Cross-Dressing S/M & Asian Massage
212-673-9136
by appointment only

He snatched the card from my hand and turned it over. On the back, someone had written the name Kathleen Shiraki and circled it.

“Is that your dad’s handwriting?” I said.

“What is this?” he spat. “Fuck it: I’m calling.”

“Wait; why? This could be nothing. Maybe it just ended up in there. You shouldn’t jump to conclusions.”
“Who said anything about conclusions? It’s curiosity. It’ll probably just be a lady heavy-breathing and I’ll wonder if my dad ever called.” He pressed the numbers on the cordless with his thumb, and brought it to his ear. “Actually, I don’t want to know,” he said, handing me the phone. “You do it.”

“What am I supposed to say?”

“Ask if they know who Paul Knight is,” he said. “Or try to make an appointment.”

I waved at him to stop talking in time to hear a woman’s voice say, “Hel-lo?”

“Hi, um.” I thought of what to say.

“Is there something I can help you with?” she said.

“Yeah, I’d like to schedule an appointment for Paul Knight?”

“Of course,” she said. “When, and with whom?”

“He said for the usual?”

“Hmm. The usual. I’m not sure if that would be. Let’s check the file.” I heard typing, and then she read aloud. “Paul Knight. O.K., here it comes.”

Carter hovered next to me, furrowing his brow and biting nails.

“Paul Knight,” she continued, both rushed and blasé. “It says Beverly or Kathleen. Suite 1210 at the Carlyle unless otherwise notified.”

I heard more tapping of keys.

“Huh,” she said. “There’s an appointment scheduled for Wednesday, with Beverly. Did you want to reschedule?”

“Nope,” I said. “Sounds like it’s all set.” I hung up. Carter didn’t need to ask.

He retreated to his old room, listened to Cat Stevens and looked through family-vacation photo albums. Then he slept for fifteen hours. I made him an afternoon breakfast, from a page in his mom’s cookbook that said “Carter’s fave,” banana-walnut pancakes with whipped cream, strawberries and heated maple syrup. His limbs seemed heavy and his face swollen from crying when he finally came to the table. I handed him a cup of
coffee. He fell into a chair, looking awful. I said, “I’m going to give you the same advice you gave me.” I put a plate before him. “You’re separate from your parents. Don’t let their lifestyle-choices affect you.”

“Not ready yet,” he said.

So I monologued about the movies we’d seen and rented, what our classes were going be like, how relieved I was that my mother had two more weeks in Mexico because I feared she’d be mad at me forever, maybe, when we heard a car roll over the gravel driveway, come to a stop and the engine turn off.

“You expecting anyone?” I said.

“I don’t think so,” he said, thickly.

“Your parents do know we’re here, right?”

“They’re in New Mexico,” he said. “Did I tell my dad we’d be here?”

We went to the window to see a gold Mercedes-Benz parked at the side of the house. Squinting, it seemed that the two people in front were embraced.

“Who are they?” Carter said.

“You don’t know?” I said. “Should we go tell them to leave?”

He opened the kitchen door and went out in only his boxer shorts, barefoot. He bent to peer inside the car.

“Mom?” he said. From where I stood in the doorway, in an apron, I saw the couple separate, and the man turn his head toward Carter. He looked somewhat familiar, even with his mouth an “O” and his eyes wide. The passenger-side door opened, and indeed, it was Debbie. In stiletto heels, she wobbled around the front of the car.

“Don’t you touch me!” Carter said, his palm between them. The man opened his door and got out, and that’s when I realized it was Fritz Ramsey from 21.

It was cold, standing there, so I closed the door. I also didn’t want to hear the yelling—it reminded me of my own family—so I watched from the window. Fritz removed his blazer and handed it to Carter, whose lips were purple. Carter threw it into the bushes.
Debbie tried to touch him, and he flung around, screaming. When they walked toward the house, I ran into the dining room to listen, my back against a cool wall.

"What are you doing here?" Carter said.

"I had to come back a little early," Debbie said.

"What for? Where's Dad?"

"He's skiing with Whit," she said. "Carter, sweetie. Listen. I took their advice and got a room at Hazledon, but I had to come home first."

"So why are you in Greenwich? With him."

"If you'd like to know the truth—" Fritz started.

"Not from you," said Carter.

"Clifford and I came out here just to say good-bye. It's over."

"What is?" he said, sobbing.

"Honey," said his mother.

I felt uncomfortable, and had to leave. I crept into the living room, sat at the writing table, and called a taxi service. Silently, I got my bags and put them on the front porch. I scribbled a quick note to Carter: Went home. Good luck. S., and left it on the couch.

The afternoon light was yellow-gray while I waited on the slate steps of the front porch. I felt the cold rock enter my bones while I listened to the birdcalls, my head cocked and me not entirely unhappy. I thought about how good I'd feel when the conductor, walking through punching tickets, announced, "Last stop, Pennsylvania Station, all doors." After the escalators, the upper level would smell like Zaro's Bread Basket, and I might feel tempted to buy a warm, salty pretzel, but instead I'd head right for the subway to get to Dad's before dinnertime so we could hit John's Pizzeria on Bleecker Street. Then we'd stroll through the West Village, and I might let him hold my hand. Of course, he'd have to get an espresso if we saw a movie. Me showing up unannounced would make him forget that I never called on New Year's. I'd sleep in Redwood's room, and maybe
straighten it up for him. But the first thing I'd do after dropping my bags was call my mother. If she laughed hard enough at what I told her, there was a chance I'd be forgiven.
Duck

I look around the table at the faces of my family. My mother Magda, step-father Les, Great Uncle Harry, a hunchback and Magda’s favorite relative, born-again Aunt Lil, my other aunt, Zelda, from the Upper West Side, Uncle Jacob, a bipolar manic-depressive, weepy this weekend, my grandparents Louis and Virginia, her nursemaid Rhoda adjacent, here to push her wheelchair, Magda’s cousins Sam and Beth, their spouses, their children and my brother Carl. Mouths open and close. Other than the obvious—talking, laughing, arguing, eating—I notice shameless yawns, help-me grimaces, smiling insincerity and drooling. It’s good too see everyone here, like this, except for Carl, his mouth loosely open to reveal a lolling tongue, his cheek too close to the plate. I notice an elongated saliva droplet making its descent into the swirl of peas and mashed potatoes and soggy turkey breast below. His head, eyes shut, rests in the crook of an arm bent like a backwards-C around the imitation China, his blurry features a testimony to the two, fat, pink Darvocet and four vodka martinis he consumed just prior to now. Beneath his muddled skull are needle marks from when he used to shoot cocaine, fortunately concealed by the brand-new Brooks Brothers shirt he’s borrowing of mine, still stiff and thick. My grandfather shouts to no one in particular, “Wake him up! On your mother’s birthday, she has to see this? Are we not civilized? Who did this to him? Magda, your son! Please!”

We’re assembled in a Holiday Inn banquet room near Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, celebrating my grandmother’s eighty-third birthday. The event falls in August, so we use it for a reunion as well, always returning to the small, coastal town of Duck. No one’s sure why Duck, it’s simply where we do it. A dozen or so rooms get booked, usually by Zelda, either here or down the beach at the Ramada, depending on who hosted the year before and pissed everyone off. Arguments between us—the Dursts—and hotel staff, including price-haggling and demands to see who’s in charge, tend toward broken promises of never again. Conveniently forgetting previous insults, both hotels end up accommodating us
every other year because with a group this large, it must be worth it. We return grudgingly, overtip to spite the management and hold contests for best moniker: Helliday Inn. Ramadan. Raman Noodle. Ramakeyacrazy.

Our rented dining room looks out to the sea. My grandmother has been positioned so she can gaze beyond us and have her thoughts occupied, now that she’s almost deaf. She won’t wear a hearing aid because they’re “hideous, just ghastly,” and while her vanity remains intact, her mind has waned. During cocktails she asked me how school was and didn’t I just adore the gals in New York, though I’ve since moved and haven’t been on a campus in years. “I loved Manhattan so,” she’d said, with a light fluff to her thinning hair. “Boy, was I some kinda beautiful.”

On the walls of the Sandpiper Room hang triptychs and diptychs of semi-abstract, pastel ocean scenes: reeds against a dune; gull in flight before a sunset; foamy waves; moonlight over glittering sand. It’s freezing in here—these cheapy hotels always are. My sunburn chills me further, and I shiver, hunching into the blazer Magda forced me to wear. I refused her suggestion of a tie, passing it onto Carl, figuring he could use the points. If he wasn’t so zonked on Virginia’s pills, I’d ask him to come to the bar with me for a smoke. Instead I catch Uncle Harry with his pinkie in his ear, hiss “Pssst!” at him and make the universal gesture for Cigarette?: two fingers on pursed lips. He rises, smiles, tosses his napkin down.

Harry’s young for seventy-five. He lives in Paris so I rarely get to see him, and I like it when I do. He suffers no embarrassment, it seems, over the protrusion above his shoulder blades, and not only do I admire this, but I often forget the hump’s there and pat it affectionately, or lay my arm across the top.

A bartender tells us we can smoke in Mallard’s Cove, an antechamber off the Beachcomber’s Lounge, so we carry our wineglasses into the greenhouse-like atrium, all rounded edges and a sloped ceiling. “Classy,” says Harry, sitting on an over-stuffed, polyester cushion crammed into a wicker chair.
The room has a disturbing, Biosphere II quality to it, but since it's of shoddy, all-glass construction, Arctic air has leaked out through the panels and I warm up. I ask Harry about his relationship, what we always discuss, and he tells me he's got news about sex after seventy. “We're not trying to look hot anymore, Evan,” he says. “Jean-Paul and I are arthritic old queers. Who can fret over the cut of trousers?”

I'm interested in this, but I suggest we return. To avoid seeming rude, I say, knowing he'll get the joke: no one will have noticed we left. My nose chills once back in the Sandpiper Room, and I see Carl's head is still nestled in the crook of a meaty arm. The biceps are like atrophied thighs and will strain my shirt-threads. At least he looks comfortable, unlike my mother, nervously rummaging in her purse, frantic. She's groping for her vinyl cosmetics case, I bet, and yes, it's extracted and she searches through the smaller bag until locating the Clinique lipgloss, her talisman for duress: turbulence, traffic jams, an argument. She glares across the tennis court-like table at Carl, past the bouquets of what she and her sister Zelda requested not be there—carnations, gladioli, filler of ferns, baby's breath. This, like our room service making us wonder if we really ordered the Continental Breakfast or only dreamed we did, confirms the theory that we're getting the opposite of what we ask for.

My step-father massages my mother's hand and nods at Lil, who's explaining the reasons for her relocation to an Arizona commune. Magda appears to be half-listening while she coats her lips with goo and squints at Carl. Everyone's engaged in conversation, including my grandparents—the loudest among us, they shout: “Is your meat tough?” “Yes, I can barely cut it. How's yours?” “What's that?” “I said, MINE IS TOUGH.” “What?” “Jesus, Ginny, I said, MY MEAT IS TOO TOUGH. YES.” “Oh. So's mine.” Carl's not talking, though, and neither am I. He's snoring, and I'm watching him.

Magda pulls her hand away from Les and says, “Oh, why didn't I hide Mom's pills?” Softly, so her cousins won't overhear but loud enough for me to. “Evan, you should have told me,” she says. “You understand this, these, those people. Him.”
She knows too, but it’s true I’m more informed from my job as the publicity director for a West Hollywood needle exchange, a position I sought from powerlessness to help Carl, just as Magda uses meetings. Alanon, Narcanon, Naranon, AA. Families of addicts, mothers of addicts, weekly support groups, coffee klatches for mothers and others to kvetch. She’s spoken with every addiction-and-recovery specialist in the D.C. area, she brags, including the Virginia suburbs. She and Les even met at a meeting. His daughter had just died from a heroin overdose, his wife divorcing him right after.

While Les become self-protective, Magda clings. Refusing to see what she’d prefer not to, now that Carl is “off the streets” and avoiding the hard stuff, Magda insists he’s fine, fine! After all the meetings and therapy sessions, for every time she was told detach, she still hasn’t.

We continue moving the turkey-gravy-mashed potatoes around on our plates as waitresses poke their heads in to check on us. In a town where graduation tassels dangle from the rearview mirrors of every Buick Skylark and Geo Prizm, these girls find us crazy: no toasts, no presents, all yelling. This morning Magda and Zelda inspected the banquet room and told the Special Events Coordinator for the hotel, a fiftyish, wide-hipped woman named Joyce in red-framed glasses and a coarse, hairsprayed bob with the ends curled under, that the room just wouldn’t “do” without some adjustments. I was on my way back from the beach when I discovered them walking through the pool area, led by Joyce and her clipboard, and I decided to follow along, wanting the sand on my feet to dry. Plus, it’s often a comfort, family. Who knows you better? Not as much gets lost in translation.

Joyce sighed and rolled her eyes as the two women flicked light switches and asked if dimmers could be installed, or at the very least, lower-watt bulbs.

“This is a birthday party for our eighty-three-year-old mother,” said Zelda. “We don’t want everyone looking crystal-clear, if you get me, Joycie.” She leaned in and whispered, “We’re old.” My mother and aunt howled while Joyce’s frown remained still.

They offered instructions on which flowers were to be avoided, gave her the
seating chart and place cards, and asked if candles would be possible. Unscented. They selected wine, opined on the menu. Joyce wrote it all down, giving the impression requests would be met. None were, so Zelda grumbles from her end of the table, “They can’t get it right unless we’re vets, is that it?” Slug of sherry. “A United Front of Dental Hygienists? NASA Wives from—Jesus! Will someone please tell me why we keep coming to this god-awful town?”

“What’s that?” Virginia says.

“She says Happy Birthday,” my grandfather tells her.

Sam and I heave Carl up by his underarms, and as we ease him into the lobby, I kick his Achilles, hard. This stirs him.

“Good job,” Sam says.

“Wuzza?” says Carl. “Who’s that?”

We’re in the elevator, its display of red numbers beeping the ascending floors, and surge to eight, where almost every room is occupied by a Durst, or the spouse of one, guests not related to us having vacated. In fact, ushering Carl, with Sam on one side and me the other, is made more difficult by Beth’s kids, Will and Chloe, who run up and down the hall with white sheets around their heads, screaming about Atlantis. Carl winces when they stomp by. Because he’s too floppy to assist, I probe his pants pockets for his key card.

We drop him to the bed, and suddenly, as though the increased circulation processed the Darvocet and vodka, he’s woken up, snapped to, everything fine, he’s back to normal, his old self.

Sam shakes his head at Carl and says, “It pains me we’re related.” He turns on one tasseled loafer, says, “Shitty little punk,” and heads for the door. There’s a stain on the butt of his khakis, dark red from the strawberry parfait Chloe dumped into his chair earlier, and Carl stares at the wrinkled back of Sam’s jacket with a look of, What’s his problem?
The door slams hard from a cross-wind in the room, and Carl, not yet alert enough to start at the sound, pulls a crinkled pack of smokes from his shirt pocket. He offers me one. I take it, a Newport, and sit at the table in the corner, near the sliding-glass doors I’d opened when we first walked in to clear Carl’s odors of boredom and dirty skin. My forearm sticks to the tabletop, comes up with a noise. I brush off the pot seeds and green dust, thinking of how wherever Carl is, not far is a flat surface tacky from resin and cluttered with dope paraphernalia—balled-up rolling papers that failed, stems, a blackened pipe cleaner.

Outside, the sea crashes, its tide encroaching. We smoke in silence, him propped on pillows, sneakers splayed. He looks down at his wide belly, chin doubling, then tripling, and lifts the purple and green tie resting there, limp. He makes as if to burn a hole in the back, near the label, with the fiery end of his cigarette.

“That’s Les’s tie,” I say.

He lets it drop and grabs the remote from beside him. Shoots, zaps the TV. I hear the whiny tinkle of what sounds like a porno soundtrack, then unmistakable groans over slapping sex.

“I ordered this earlier,” Carl says, looking at his watch. “Good timing.”

“You’re so organized,” I say. “Planning your jerking off.”

“Leave if you want to be a cop,” he says.

I sigh, then stand and walk out to the balcony, relieved he didn’t rile over the masturbation comment, as he knows I know he hasn’t had an erection in months. His penis a taboo topic, ever since his prostate problem. There’s a condition: painful, possibly precancerous. Doctors, of which he has several, attribute it to Seldane, the antihistamine he took for a cat allergy. Every house he lived in was filthy with them, his druggy roommates too broke for spayings, but then he became hooked on its jittery buzz.

People, the family, Magda thinks it’s the blowjobs he gave for coke-money. That time, which Carl says felt like a silent, black-and-white film with Arabic subtitles, was a
Les, who’s a psychiatrist, thinks Carl’s impotent because he’s not “dealing” with his homosexuality. But how can we know he’s gay when he doesn’t know? I say. It’s true he didn’t need to be hustling, all that money coming from Magda just to live in Portland, do drugs, sleep. Perhaps he had too much time.

There’s a couple laughing down below me, where the sand, lit by the hotel, looks like snow. It’s summer, I remind myself. August. They’re both drunk, and the man swings her by the wrists. It could be a tender moment or a dangerous one, and she too seems unsure how to interpret it.

“Hey Carl,” I turn and say. His hand is down his pants, just holding things, as if for security. “Want to walk on the beach? It’ll clear your head.”

“No,” he says. “What do you mean, ‘clear my head?’”

I step over the metal runners of the sliding doors and take a drag, selecting my response. I notice he’s poured himself a double from the minibar. The tiny Smirnoff bottles stand like chess pieces on the bedside table, and a plastic cup from the bathroom sink teeters on his bosomy chest. The remote is clutched in a sweat-creased, I imagine, palm. I look from him to the reddish image on the TV, a flash of a woman on her hands and knees, implants, a couch, before looking away. “You were pretty wasted for Gin-Gin’s dinner,” I say. Our grandparents remain Gin-Gin and Pop-pop, while our mother’s Magda. It reminds her she’s a person, with contours and edges. Distinct from Carl and me.

“Yeah, what a blast,” he says into his collar, eyes glassy on the screen. “You’d have checked out too, if you had the—” Coughs. “I don’t know how your night was, but mine was painless.”

I return to the concrete box suspended above the beach, my roost. The moon reflects silver off the water, and comes straight for me whether I step left or right, something I find momentarily entertaining. Waves render Carl’s movie and the tinkle of ice-cubes, a sad sound against plastic, inaudible. I can, however, hear my mother crying in
the next room. Their balcony doors wide, her weeping, inescapable, takes over. Hearing her, my chest feels cool and hard. The sensation is familiar, and I take odd comfort in it.

I first felt it, the ache then nausea then numbness, when my father died. He had colon cancer, which spread. I was fifteen and Carl seventeen when we three, those remaining, splintered into what seemed like separate directions. Carl barely emerged that final year we both lived at home, my knowledge of him limited to the heavy metal and cigarette smoke drifting from under his door.

Though he'd transformed into a sullen death-rocker, I still worshipped my older brother, and followed him out to Oregon. As a role model, he'd have to do. At his art school, he managed to befriend all the other depressives from prosperous families, the kids collecting unemployment. Carl visited me at Reed to shower, sleep and eat, all without saying much, but I could tell he appreciated the cleanliness of my quarters. I finally realized who, or what he'd become when he slept with my girlfriend Clarissa, with whom I had my first real relationship. I'd driven out to the stripmall near my house for Korean take-out and returned to find them flushed and half-dressed, Clarissa with that messy clump of hair in back, tell-tale sex-head. “We just connected,” Carl had said, as if that explained it.

“He's an embarrassment to this family,” I hear my mother say, her voice garbled by phlegm and tears. I'm on my third cigarette in a row, lulled by waves and the occasional chord from a whiny, disco riff and an “Ooooh, yeah.” Magda's pacing, I bet, yanking out earrings, kicking her sandals into a corner of the closet. Trembly fingers move down her blouse, unbuttoning. “He managed to ruin yet another evening,” she says, stronger now. “Ruined!” Crying. “What did I do wrong?”

Les probably sits at the end of their firm, wide mattress, his legs two fleshy tree trunks, tie loosened, cufflinks out. He jiggles them in one palm, perhaps, examines them while questioning what he's married into, again, how it's Rachel all over, only worse. How long will he keep telling Magda her son needs a job, he just needs a goddamn job?

“You're paying him to stay an addict,” he often says, referring to all of it, her shuttling Carl
to his analyst because he never learned to drive, retrieving him from massage, carting him along for her facials and pedicures they sometimes get together.

They have an unspoken agreement, Magda and Les. He gives Carl prescriptions—Ativan, Valium, codeine, Xanax—because that’s how Magda wants it. She fears Carl will return to harder drugs if he doesn’t get his pills. “We’re lucky he’s alive,” she’ll say, and who can argue with that?

I look at the lump on the bed, my brother. His body is shaped like a gentle, sloping mountain, apex his belly button. All at once, it seems, I go from loving him desperately to hating him to not caring at all and considering a return to my room to read the new Esquire. He needs to move, breathe.

“Carl,” I say. “It’s nice out. There’s a moon. Let’s smoke on the beach.”

“The moon?” Carl says.

“Does anything interest you?”

“What do you think?” he says.

I ignore this. “Magda’s crying because of how you were tonight.”

Carl adjusts the pillows behind him. “Stop being so neurotic.”

“You shouldn’t be drinking and taking downers,” I say. “Your prostate condition is worse than you—”

“What did I tell you about being a cop?” he says. “I can’t take this! Just let me watch the fucking movie.”

“I’m not being a cop,” I say, the terminology alienating. “Why not just tell her you’re sorry, even if you don’t mean it. She did so much to get us all here, and this is the first reunion you’ve been to in a—”

“And the last,” he says. “I don’t know how you do this year after year without killing everyone.”

“They can be fun,” I say. “Our relatives.”

“They’ve all marked me as a big failure.”
“Look who you’re talking about,” I say. “Hunchbacks, spinsters, madmen.” I’m trying to be funny. “Are we talking about the same people?”


“How about apologizing to her, or at least saying hi. Please?”

He looks as if he might be considering it, his head raising half an inch or so, then seems to change his mind. Sinks back into his damp, soiled pillow. I walk over to his bed and grab his shirt. My shirt. I have no idea what I’m doing.

“Don’t!” Carl shouts, then slurs: “I have post-traumatic stress disorder!”

“Who doesn’t?” I say, pulling him up from the bed.

The roaring waves are too loud. Deafening, and I’ve broken a sweat getting him out here. Beneath my clothing, my skin is hot and tingly. Sea spray coats my face, stings my eyes. I am salted and damp, hands slipping on his flesh. My blood is speedy, and everything hurts.

Carl’s big, but I push him to the lip of the ocean.

“What’re you doing?” he screams. “Leave me alone!”

We’re wet to the shins. I dart behind him, and shove. “Get in,” I say.

He flounders and chokes on water, predictably. Head up, mouth open, he gasps. A huge wave knocks him, and several long seconds creep by. I step from my wingtips.

In the dark, sea mist blurs the contours of things. I dive, my head mashing into Carl’s flank, his ass, maybe, or his back. Some section of torso. I fight the suck of the undertow as well as the current, but manage to get both arms around him and us to the surface.

He no longer sputters, he looks dead. I scream his name, slap him. I’m almost hyperventilating. Stumbling out of the sea lugging his two-hundred pounds, I twist my ankles and fall forward, dropping him to the sand. His body falls like a carcass. I tilt his chin, remembering TV shows. I pinch his nose, thinking of movies, and the words,
"Breathe, dammit!" enter my head, in someone else's voice. I separate from myself, watching me give him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, while I busily strive to recollect everything learned once, elsewhere: Blow. Blow. Blow. Listen. He turns his head, pukes out a shot-glass of murky water, opens his eyes and blinks confusedly at me, just like the actors do.

He doesn't say, "What happened?" and I don't give him a chance to because I return my lips to his, tasting the bitterness of his vomit. It's not so bad: booze, no dinner. He struggles against me, turns his head and writhes. I plant both hands over his ears and kiss my brother as if he were a lover. I stick my tongue into his mouth, too. He recoils into the sand, far as his head will go, but I keep after him. We reach a point that won't yield, and here he relents. I cradle the top of his head with my arm.

My hand drops from his wet, sandy hair to his crotch. I place my palm over his genitals, cupping. I want to warm them, and there's movement. We continue to kiss, Carl doing it back. His lips are firmer than mine. We have very different techniques, which somehow surprises me. Still, it feels innocent.

He's probably thinking, as I am, of us practicing how to kiss when we were boys, until descending into giggles. We'd listen to "Dear Prudence," the best, most ultimate love song.

I give him my hand, lifting. He looks vivid and alert.

Uncle Harry yells from his balcony, "What's going on down there? Is everything all right?"

I pull Carl inward and feel his wet shirt, my shirt, against me. My chin rests on his shoulder, and I breathe him in. On the sand where he'd just lain glows a phosphorescent outline, like a police drawing, his impression leaving a silvery contour.

"We're fine," he says, his throat hoarse. He slides out from beneath my arm and tells me he wants to walk. I watch him move down the beach, the white of our shirt shrinking until it is a speck. Before I see it disappear, I look again at Harry. He's leaning
forward with his elbows on the railing, his head dwarfed by the mound behind it. Extending out from him are the balcony lights of the others.
In the Sand

I recline in the canoe
I recline in the wooden canoe,
moored in the round pond
by an anchor that fell in the watery cool,
and caught on a rock in the sand.
In the sand
crawl delicate crayfish over pebbles
on thin legs and tiny white pinchers.
In the sand,
frogs’ eggs are laid among thin sandy grasses
that are moored in earth around stone
worn by sand, smoothed by the stream
in the tiny spring that flows from below.
In the sand,
moored in deeper mud streaked
by tiny, thin worms,
roots moored deep in the black soil,
wet, dark, where it smells
of earthworms, the compost in my mother’s
squash patch,
In where worms burrow and aerate,
air how! the pond I’m on has
air blowing over tired legs,
wind ruffling the surface
with silver coin “S”
“good to be moved”
Oscar Night

Thin paper crinkles and she slides the soft
pillowy square from the padded envelope.
She lifts edges of wrapping to unfold a silk slip—
thin, pink, with tiny straps. It slithers out.

It could be a dress too, she thinks, stepping in, except she’ll never wear it.
Her sister finds them for twenty-five cents at Shirley’s.
She’s mailed five or six already, as apologies.

They hang in a row on hooks in the back of the closet,
swatches of yellow, opaque nylon, sheer black poly.
Flowered trim. A lace edge. This new one will join
the others, her arm flinching when she reaches past
for something to wear.
A Razor’s Edge

Russ, in the next booth, shouts for pomade. “Kathy! Goo!” He’s attaching a hairpiece. Men prefer he weave, but I can read follicles, cowlicks, parts and greasy shafts like Braille. There’s a thin blond girl in my chair, elbow kneading the soft place, where it was once big. That was the year we won Hairstyling State Championships. Trimmings dry into caterpillars, mashed beneath my pumps. Later, when I sweep them up, I’ll feel her sharp bone.

He hates the list. The piece of yellow paper I tore from a legal pad when I was seventeen is thin and frayed, soon to disintegrate. It’s filed behind the red folder exploding letters, cards, photos, junk. The list is long, and he’s never seen it. I slide it out, skimming down. Mostly, I love the title. ‘Men I’ve Slept With’ has a line through the last two words. ‘Fucked’ was added, then crossed out for ‘Made Love To.’ ‘Made Love To’ replaced by ‘Had Sex With,’ which stayed.

I tell Russ, first your hairpiece goes, then my list. A fair exchange. I’d even torch it for him in my washing sink, and after seeing it burn, we’d play our Aveda game where we blindfold each other with legwaxing strips and sniff bottles, guessing what’s what. We arrange them in a row on the counter, after closing when combs and brushes are dunked in blue sterilizing jars, scissors have been wiped clean, and Flowbees rest snugly in their bases, batteries charging. It’s good to smell product before the long drive home.
From her window on the twenty-first floor, the edges of the Flatiron were softened by humidity. The office was silent this Friday morning in August, but felt charged, and almost defiant with potential. Next to her computer drooped an orchid, one of several her boss used to decorate the black surfaces. She rubbed its petal distractedly, the blossom too perfect and still. Emma, Emma Katz, her full name Emelina, was the personal assistant to Bill Pennington, editor and publisher of Art & Home. She had big hopes for her first job out of college, because at school, she was obsessed with other people, all the time wondering what they’d think of a book she read, the apple she ate, and even her socks. On arrival in New York, though, she dyed her hair bright purple and kept saying “Hey, you,” when she passed a mirror. Bill cleared his throat in the other room, sounding thready and sickish. She tilted her head and awaited his call, then fed pencils to the quietly-whirring sharpener for the jar on his desk, which she rotated each day. Finished, she sealed them in an envelope and stuck it far back on a shelf.

She imagined soaring from her window to ride air currents when the mail guy approached, his Walkman loud and the metal cart tinkling. She’d never learned his name, and as he handed her a slab of letters, she tried to make eye-contact to mouth the word “thanks” and motion “remove your headphones” so she could introduce herself, but he skulked off, just wanting to finish. She sliced into Bill’s mail with the opener and put what were mostly invites on a mirrored tray edged in gold. Her chair screeched when she pushed out, and she squatted to see if it had left a mark, which it hadn’t, but she wet her thumb and wiped the floor anyway.

Bill required the staff to wear crepe-soled shoes so he wouldn’t hear them walking. Still, he told Emma she pounded, and she saw this a jab against her extra fifteen-to-twenty of them, padding she was used to. She tiptoed in, and Bill, bloodshot and pale as he
squinted at his computer, its back a tangle of cords facing her, waved her over to him without glancing up. She whispered good morning and set down the tray, and Bill dismissed her with a wrist-flick as he reached for the letters. He had no Bluish haze, no electric glow, and she left convinced his computer hadn’t been on, and he was staring at his own dark reflection.

She started his tea in her office, at a table with another orchid on top, plus a microwave, and a water cooler and mini-fridge below. This cart, which Bill had named the Foodie, had shelves for plates and condiments, and she arranged his lunches there, while others used a communal kitchen down the hall. Her phone rang, and Bill said, “I need my tea.” She presented it at eleven every morning, so he was early.

“It’s got to steep for seven and a half minutes,” she reminded him, placing a lid over the green leaves.

“Something’s wrong with me,” Bill groaned. “Have you ever taken Ecstasy? A horrible pill.”

She laughed while planning what to say. Bill probably didn’t need to know that she once bought thirty hits to sell on campus, a phase she hardly remembered. The seedy things her boss did on his own time made her uncomfortable. He was supposed to be wholly different from her parents, a cleaner, more respectable version, at least.

When she said nothing, Bill snapped, “Thanks for the sympathy,” and hung up with difficulty locating the cradle.

She brought the remaining mail to Ivan, Bill’s editorial assistant. Ivan rendered her somewhat superfluous, but once Bill started his memoir, “Trust Fund Account,” the research would occupy her. She shoved the letters into Ivan’s in-box, still feeling embarrassed over last week, when she’d asked if people ever had drinks together after work, and Ivan said, “Why would they?” She worried he thought she had a crush on him. Both were twenty-two and just graduated, and the only young people there. Ivan wore a headset with a foam bulb at his chin. “Thanks,” he grunted, from his game of computer
solitaire, and she felt him watching her walk away with the unlikely impression that Ivan might be interested, but dismissed it. At her desk was an email, and she surged with excitement, thinking Ivan, but Bill had sent it, asking if she’d check on his monograms, and pick up the jewelry he’d ordered. People called her lucky to work in publishing, but the place needed some hallway soccer, or a margarita party in the copy room.

She removed a tray from the Foodie for Bill’s tea, and understood why the trays depressed her: Emma’s mother used to encourage her to stay home from school and be fed in bed, with soap-operas in the background. Emma made three tray-trips a day for Bill, four if he had dinner there, but today she was leaving early, if he said she could. She brought in the tray on the balls of her feet, placed it next to him, and said, “Your shirts aren’t ready, I called.” She hadn’t checked with Brooks Brothers, but midtown would be hot, with crowds leaving for the weekend. She still had to ask if she could join them, but had on baggy, linen shorts, and even if almost culottes, no one wore shorts at Art & Home. Hers once belonged to an aunt, and earlier she’d thought they’d pass, but now tried to hide behind his desk. Bill bit into a biscotti, his mouth too dry to chew, and pieces crumbled out.

“The earrings are at the MoMA shop,” he said, eating cookie off his tie. She nodded, the task familiar. Every week she bought presents for his wife and in-laws—pepper mills and towel bars—and her tastes were improving already. Bill was secretly gay, but known to her by the videos she returned in a manila envelope and the men who called. She often mentioned that her mother was a lesbian, and Bill would act as if he saw no connection.

“Boy, is the Limelight ever a dump,” he said, the teapot rattling as he poured. “I hate myself.” She liked when he got human this way, just not too human. Bill stirred in honey with a trembling hand. “There was a fashion party,” he said, “and who can turn down drugs in the VIP room?”
"We know who can’t," she said. He rested his spoon in the saucer and glowered at her. His office was bright, and she went to drop blinds and fluff pillows. He’d feel better with his wife’s new earrings in a box. She craned to see his screen, curious if his editor’s block had gone.

Bill lifted an eyebrow at her. “Do you need my credit card, or what?”

“No, no, I’ve got it,” she said, and returned to her desk, regretful for hovering. She forwarded their calls to Ivan, grabbed her wallet and stopped in Bill’s doorway to offer suggestions for content. A piece last month on painters and their dogs was her idea, which she denied after seeing it in print. If Bill wrote a proposal today, he’d probably let her leave for Nantucket.

“What about women sculptors and their cats,” she said, but Bill wagged his head no. “Do-it-yourself studios,” she tried, and he looked at his screen. “A photo essay on barns?”

“Emma, go get the jewelry.”

“Galleries in the Carolinas,” she said.

“It’s been done,” he told her, and his eyes, all black with pupil, traveled down her body to rest at her knees. She squished on crepe soles toward the elevators, past the middle-aged women bantering in their carrels with an enviable busyness, and Bill called after her, “Hurry back!” Her ears popped as she descended, and outside the air smelled of chemicals.

Fifth Avenue was sparse before the lunchtime deli rush, and she noted she had more thoughts when not in the office. She stared up at dirty stacked windows, each a small cell of industry, and someone brushed into her, saying, “Watch it.” The moment made her acutely aware of existing, with that tingly feeling she sometimes got on subways, seeing herself in the glass and realizing, “I’m alive,” or, when doing dishes, but never at Art & Home. Still, she thought the job would help defer less to others, since Bill needed her so.
She waited at a light, and sweat running into her eyes smudged the taxis the color of sunflowers, a whole field of them in Spain, maybe. How did her Human Studies major (a bit of this, a touch of that) earn her tea and pencils? A bolder woman might have quit weeks ago, but assisting Bill was Emma’s most independent move, since all she’d known was Vermont, her mother’s farm an hour from school, and Emma home for laundries and meals, with friends buying pot grown by her mother’s lover.

A bus pulled up on Fourteenth Street and bathed her in diesel, and heat pressed down on her burning head. Sweat tightened her elastic waistband, and she thought of her father’s comment: “Everyone should get the experience of living in New York under their belts.” She didn’t see him much, which was common in divorced families, and she wanted that kept secret, since her dad was a famous painter. Wall-sized canvasses, with lots of color. Art & Home did a feature on him a while back, and since she started working there, they’d seemed closer.

The M14 trundled along, and she waved her arms to feel the steamy air, as if off a plane in the tropics. She saw herself crossing a Third-World tarmac, legs muscular, briefcase swinging, her stilettos over the cracked tar with weeds popping up. She’d have flown there to research an article, instead of another family vacation, her brother Charles always disappearing and later found with the chambermaid.

In Washington Square Park, teenagers slumped under spotted trees with diseased-looking trunks. Wallet chains glinted above skateboards, and cigarette smoke hung in the air. The girls wore torn fishnets and platform boots, their eyeliner melting, while boys looked available to buy or sell a dimebag, a pose she’d learned to recognize from her brother. He’d developed a sinister edge in grade school, and she felt churchy around delinquency. Weekend stoners checked out her shoes and culottes as if she were a cop, as if purple hair meant nothing. She longed to shout, I know how to take a bonghit! From a three-foot Graffix, even.
But at work, the shorts had made her feel like one of these kids, a waste product, Charles called them. She needed to change into a skirt if she wanted to leave early, so she veered left to buy one, but a new outfit could attract more attention to the old, and she resumed her path, scattering pigeons and dander. She ran her hand over the credit card in her back pocket, the edges angular and reassuring, hard like a battery.

The Museum of Modern Art Store was empty but for two elderly saleswomen, bespectacled and smiling. Emma swerved to the rack of posters in back and as she turned them, each frame gently whacked the one before, like in a record shop or campus bookstore. The women eyed her from behind, thinking she’d come to shoplift, but Emma turned to see one arranging a display of copper plates, the other Windexing counters, oblivious. She placed Bill’s card on the glass, and the woman handed the purchase across as if it were a homemade snack and Emma the beloved grand-daughter. Who could blame her for being paranoid? Hers was a family that never made it smoothly through customs.

A cake stand of cookies towered in a sandwich-shop across the street, and she decided she deserved one, because she still had to order Bill’s lunch and request some hours off. She and Charles were plied with sugar growing up, as soon as their father left, and it calmed her but gave her brother rashes. She walked back to the office with a cookie and lemonade, and Ivan was focused on his Rubix Cube when she passed his desk. He glanced up at her and laughed.

“What,” she said.

“Nothing,” said Ivan. He turned the squeaky toy and suppressed a smile.

She dropped the bag to Bill’s couch and presented him with the receipt, noticing his frantic typing too late. Bill jerked his chin toward the desk, for her to put it there. “What’s on your face?” he said, the letter-keys silent. Emma wiped her mouth and cheeks, and felt the waxiness of chocolate. “Yes, it’s Friday,” said Bill, “but please.”

She washed in the bathroom, knowing she’d have to ask soon, but the way he’d stared at her, with his attention so direct, made her wish she could do it electronically. At
her desk, she sent Bill an email of menus, waited for him to choose a lunch and called to
order it, a routine with a shred of glamour. She dragged her weekend bag out from under
her desk, and plucked the one-piece bathing suit from the top to hold close and smell ocean
salt, her mother’s silted pond and the pool at Woodford, where Bill had also gone to
college. He appeared next to her and was speaking breathlessly. “My quesadilla!” he said.
“Will you call Lupé’s, and tell them to make it on the vegetarian grill?”

She lowered the suit and said, “They know already.” A lie, but he’d ingested horse
tranquilizer and Comet the night before.

He thanked her, and returned to his office. She left the suit on her chair and
followed, Bill noticing her only when he sat. “My editor’s letter is funny this month,” he
said, and she nodded, knowing she’d rewrite it on Monday.

“I keep thinking of the Deerfield River,” she said. “I don’t know why.” Bill had
been a coxswain and Emma a rower in college, and they’d spoken of crew in her interview.
She came to his side of the desk and sat on the couch, trying to seem relaxed. “Probable
because it’s so humid out,” she said, and looked at New Jersey. “Those farms would stink
in spring.”

Bill folded his hands, waiting.

“From the manure,” she said. “And livestock washed in, too, remember? Did your
boat ever hit any cows? I can still feel my oar against a pig.” She crossed her legs at the
knee.

“Why are you telling me this?” said Bill.

“No reason,” she said, and rotated her ankle. “Can I leave at three?” Her nipples
went hard, the office always freezing. She hunched, then straightened to feel less clumsy.

“Today?” he said. “Why?”

She tugged at the hem of her culottes, but the back of her thigh still flashed him.

“Nantucket,” she said, softly.
He rolled out to face her squarely, confrontationally, as if he were a coxswain and she a rower eating cupcakes in the boat. She looked left, then right, and finally at the beige wall above his head.

"Ivan can do your afternoon tea," she said, "and the shirts won’t be ready until next week. Were there other things?"

"Just your usual responsibilities," said Bill, and he reached up to pinch his earlobes. He tried to tuck some hair behind his ears but none was long enough, and he traced his fingers along his jaw, ending in a prayer-pose. "You’re supposed to be at your desk, available," he said, inspecting his cuticles.

"Yeah, but you know…" Emma said, and stopped herself from telling him she’d be reading magazines. "You’re right," she added, but wished they could speak honestly, since Bill had taken Ecstasy, and she’d tried it, and both knew about the cows.

"Are you happy here, Emma?" he said.

"Happy," she repeated, as Ivan would’ve. Bill sighed and looked at the ceiling.

"I hate to do this," he said, and then, to himself, "Oh, it’s so hard. Look, you’re not a bad person, just a confused one, maybe, but I don’t think it’s working out for us."

She felt herself detach from her life and observe from above.

"Perhaps you’d be better off someplace else," Bill said.

No! she thought, then yes, she deserved this. So what if her father’s article got a mound of letters and bumped up circulation? She rarely saw the guy.

"It’s not just you asking for the day off," said Bill.

"Can we forget I said anything?" she tried. "I take it back, really."

"That’s just what I mean," Bill said. "Art & Home is not a joke for me. This is why I get up in the morning."

Her ears rang, and one went quiet for a moment, windy, like a shell. Crepe soles padded down the hall, and traffic below was suddenly loud.
“Let’s stay in touch,” Bill said, “and I want to maintain a working relationship with your dad.”

The floor felt jittery, like turbulence. “I don’t think I understand,” she said.

“Sorry, but I’m letting you go.”

Bill explained that she obviously resented the trays and errands, while she tried to decide if this was discrimination. He’d often step back from her, seemingly afraid of her body, and grew flustered around it, waving at dust motes only he could see. “So today is fine, then,” he said.

“Fine?” she asked, thinking she’d been rehired.

“For you to leave,” said Bill. “Now, if you’d like.”

Her face was a red ball when she fled the room, shielded by her hair brought forward. Bill probably hadn’t liked the color very much. Her bathing suit taunted her from the chair, and she threw it in the bag, zipped the top, its fabric catching in the teeth, and swallowed a lot to keep from coughing. An email bleeped on her screen. “You may tell future employers you resigned,” Bill wrote, “and I wish you luck. Best, W.P.” No hug. No handshake.

She crammed a package of résumé paper, Post-its of many sizes, Art & Home labels and fountain pens into her backpack, and checked her desk for anything personal, but she had no photos of friends or an aerobics schedule, just a cut-out of a 1970’s Marvin Gaye, and she’d leave him for her replacement. She grabbed her duffel and bobbed her head for momentum, anxious to smell hotdogs, candied nuts, sewage and B.O. Burped from the Park Avenue door into the dampening heat, she went to the nearest payphone to call her friend Rose. “I was just fired,” she shouted, over a wailing fire engine.

“Yeah, I hear the siren,” said Rose.

“No, I was fired,” Emma said, and a man walking past shot her a look. She tucked further inside the booth. “I can’t go to your house.”

“What?” said Rose. “Sun and cocktails and you’ll be fine. You play tennis.”
Emma imagined the Foggs, Rose’s parents, with their tan forearms and perpetual juleps. Mr. Fogg would smack her on the back all weekend, saying, “So they axed you, huh. You got canned, didja?” Teary, she hung up, the word “fired” so terminal, and walked toward home.

A warm gust pricked her legs with dirt and specks of glass. Her bag made her doubly sweaty and bumped into harried, smoking secretaries. They darted past with salads, their rayon outfits manila-toned and sporting plastic buttons. She went to Lexington, where the employed population would be smaller. Delivery men rang sprightly bells, and old people stopping to adjust a cane or check for a receipt made her feel as if she were the one on synthetic drugs.

The windows of the low apartment buildings around Gramercy Park reflected the tall trees, their branches brooding under fully open leaves. She found it strange that the fenced-off garden was always empty. On the park’s south side, the wrought-iron gate had been left open the width of a pinkie, probably by accident. She pretended to use a key as if she lived there and slipped in, the air cooler and filtered by trees. She crunched over gravel to a shaded bench, birds screeching above. A car horn bleated in the distance, and through leaves, jet noise sounded far-off. She looked at the movie stars’ apartments, imagining chandeliers and high ceilings, but her studio had its charms: shiny floors, two windows and a loftbed, and a psychic in the storefront, with many small children luring the ice-cream truck each night, its eerie song rising up.

At the far end of the park stood a man resembling her uncle Hughie. He was a paranoid-schizophrenic and probably rooted before his TV in Indiana just then, or stumbling to the flotilla of pill bottles on his kitchen counter. She realized how puffy-eyed and greasy she must look, her bag marking her a trespasser. The man gazed the length of the path and took it toward her.

She worried about Bill’s lunch, whether Ivan would know to microwave the quesadilla and where to find the hot sauce.
The guy had stains down the front of his distended belly. Old food, layered on an expensive shirt. His pants were fully unzipped, yet still up, somehow. He seemed less perverted than Uncle Hughie, who constantly spoke of how “fascinating” he found young women, and would ask about her friends, their looks, names and ages, when she saw him at her grandmother’s. Emma’s mom would flee the den, shouting, “He’s crazy!” to her mother, as if that hadn’t been diagnosed at birth. Every time she spoke to her uncle on the phone, she could tell he was masturbating.

The guy stared at her, his eyes wet and lonely like a clown’s. She figured he was mentally ill and lived in one of the ritzier buildings with an aged mother. He approached and she got to her feet, slung the bag to her shoulder and left, with reluctance and guilt, as if she owed him a conversation. The gate clanked shut behind her.

On Irving Place, the sidewalk outside a high school was dotted with gray circles of old, hardened gum. They clustered near the entrance and on both corners in nervous social constellations. Soon she’d be calling her parents, her father silent and forbidding at first, then he’d chastise her for bungling his connections. He wanted more magazine articles, and what if she fucked everything up? he’d say. How could she be such an asshole? Her mother would feign disappointment when really she was thrilled, not wanting Emma to have a life too different from her own.

She turned onto Fourteenth Street, and the businesswoman-in-the-tropics fantasy of before embarrassed her, in light of events. Across the way, the sidewalk below the Palladium awning was also in-laid with old gum. Her options seemed to involve picking vegetables on her mom’s farm, or sitting in Tompkins Square Park with her back breaking out from polyester. “How can you wear that stuff?” her mother said. “It doesn’t breathe.”

“Breathe,” said Emma. “It’s a shirt, not an animal.”

“My point exactly,” said her mother.

How had she become suddenly unemployed? She tried to blame Bill’s sexuality, for making her so at ease, just like his drug use had. There was also the Limelight, or
whoever invented Ecstasy, or each of the ninety-four degrees out, a temperature of the most crimes, above that and people were simply too hot. No—she could only blame herself, not the job that was never really hers.

Staring into a Kentucky Fried Chicken on the far corner was someone with a slouch like her old boyfriend’s, his shoulders raised—a sign of insecurity—and pitching him forward. Other than the high-school love she would’ve married were they not seventeen, with Joe Newbury she’d had her only real relationship. She once heard that shoulder stance was determined by self-image divided by what you thought others thought of you, and for Joe it equaled bad posture, which made him less threatening. The guy looking inside the restaurant must have seen her in the glass, because recognition moved through him, and when he turned, it was Joe. They hadn’t spoken since she wouldn’t go to an orgy he’d organized during his Senior Week, and then he graduated.

Joe had new flourishes of acne and booze-bloat, and seemed perfect. Also scruffy sideburns, and a ring in his nose. He told her how much he liked her hair. When they hugged, she felt a stirring and saw him as a secret, something hers alone and met by no family member.

The reunion excited him less than it did her, she could tell, but he expressed a little interest, probably because he needed something to do. A shadow moved in and made the streets golden and then dark. The sky, hazy-white moments ago, turned blackish and roiled with clouds pricked by high seagulls. A boom of thunder shook the ground, and people squealed and ran, covering up with newspapers. Wind rattled a sign for cigarettes outside a deli, and rain pelted her arms. She and Joe ducked under the ledge of a Chinese restaurant and watched steam rising from pavement as swaths soaked the avenue. Car tires became tacky and loud. She didn’t mention the firing, not trusting him since he left her for a roomful of naked people. “Come with me,” he’d said. “You’ll be the only junior.”

“What happens, you toss out condoms and people dive for them like piñata candy?” she’d asked.
“Basically,” he said, and that ended it.

“We met in a snowstorm,” Joe said now.

And she often relived that night. He’d been at the sink in her dorm’s bathroom, washing mashed potatoes off a tray from the dining hall. They went to the steepest hill around and rode the tray until it broke and sent them flying, her cheeks melting the snow stuck to them. Joe bought a silver-disc sled from a thrift store the next day, with cracked leather handles and small dents, and called it a gift but kept it in his room.

“Who was at the KFC?” she said, thinking maybe a girl he ditched for her.

“Just somebody who owes me something,” Joe said. “You want a drink?”

It would make telling her parents easier, but before she could agree, Joe said they’d get a six-pack because bars were rip-offs filled with chain-smoking strangers, and he had asthma. They were spattered crossing to a bodega, and he went inside while she waited near the fruit pyramids. A couple embraced several feet away, the woman leaning back on the man’s arm, her cigarette extended. Both sneaked glances at themselves in a mirror behind the flowers. Emma wondered if she and Joe were ever in love. He mostly provided her with an alternative, something else to think about when her brother became a crack addict and started selling methamphetamine. She’d been going to Alanon meetings in a church basement that winter, where wives of alcoholics hugged her after, “My name is Emma…” et cetera. Because of Joe, she went home less, avoiding a kitchen clogged with pot smoke and their talk of rescuing Charles.

Joe came out with a six-pack in a paper bag under one arm and tore into a candy bar, dropping the wrapper to the sidewalk. She picked it up and threw it away. Joe ate the chocolate in quick, compulsive bites, and offered her none. “Where’s your crib?” he said, swallowing. He wiped the corners of his mouth with his hand. The rain surged, and they had to talk over it.
From under the awning, she led him to Sixth Street, between B and C, and Joe chattered about his punk band, his eyes catching on cars, signs and people. She felt cheered by the small patches of blue above.

They sat on the floor near her windows and listened to thunder setting off car alarms. Though early—Bill would’ve recently called Ivan to remove his lunch plate—her apartment was dark, and she couldn’t see Joe very well. “I got my nipples pierced,” he said, and leaned in to kiss her. Perhaps she’d learn to like pierced nipples. The kiss was surprising, and he had a metallic taste, but soon she thought of her old bed from a long time ago, and her room back then. The children of the downstairs psychic were splashing as if a fire hydrant had been loosed, and she wondered if they had on their bathing suits. They screamed playfully in Spanish, a language it seemed she knew without speaking a word.
Tigris & Euphrates
Chapter Two

Joe drove her to Penn Station in the rusted Peugeot he kept outside his apartment in Brooklyn, on a block strewn with condoms from parked-car prostitutes. They hugged briskly, and past his shoulder the closed shops of Seventh-Avenue—Houlihan’s, Sbarro, Wigs Plus—looked warm and inviting, and tempted her to stay. “Let’s see each other when I get back,” she shouted, her words swallowed by morning traffic. Joe waved and ducked into his pointy black car.

The bright-lit station was silent and deserted. “One way to Providence,” she said, through Plexiglass holes. She slid the ticket into her wallet, bought a cup of weak coffee and sipped it above some steps down to a gate, her arms cold on the railing. The split six-pack of yesterday, margaritas and vodka afterward gurgled and burned. She wondered if her reluctance to leave the city was because of Joe, or worry to see her father. The black sign overhead shuffled its letters and numbers. Maybe the tunnels emptying into Harlem would ease her to sleep.

The tiny blue baggies Joe left in her bathroom trash can were identical to those on the streets of her neighborhood like confetti, also jaggedly torn by teeth. She didn’t ask if he was on drugs, to respect his privacy, she thought, when really, she hadn’t wanted to know. Also, she’d learned from Charles that some people should never be asked, Are you high? That much had been obvious from his speedy conversation and endless interest in sex without climax. Still, she liked his company. She hadn’t had time to figure out what it all meant, since whenever Joe shut himself in the bathroom for an extended spell, she’d called her parents, both of whom convinced her to come “home.” Then Joe would emerge, scratching himself beneath her loftbed, and she’d hang up, her hopelessness, which she hadn’t admitted to feeling, worsened.
She turned and leaned against the metal bar, thinking she should've let the relationship end the first time. But people connected so infrequently that it seemed smart to keep friendships alive, but also faithless and afraid. She thought her sense of her own possibilities might be too narrow. She boarded the New Englander with a grease-stained newspaper, the seeds of her sesame bagel soaking through its bag.

The air above the white platform smelled clean, with a tinge of brackishness. She’d last visited her dad at Christmas, so in summer, Providence felt like a different city. He’d attended her graduation as well, but afterward, mashed into Woodford’s one café, they were distracted. Escalator wind flapped her clothes and lifted her hair. Upstairs, the station was mostly empty. Mid-morning sun bounced off concrete, and she fumbled for her glasses, the sky bigger than what she’d grown used to. Her hangover, mostly cured by sleep and scenery, was replaced by a surprising relief to be elsewhere.

Elms and oaks on College Hill stood out against tall houses with downtown views, making a mosaic of green and pastel. She walked toward it, prodded by a warm breeze that hinted the day would turn grossly hot. Along the entrance to the station, young trees with silvery, winking leaves led down to the river. Ever since the Art & Home piece on her father—“Top of the Hill”—she felt an ungainly daughter-of status, and wondered if the businessmen recognized her from the picture of her and Charles flanking Phil, from when her nose still looked big. The town used to be a place to smoke cloves and wander in thrift-stores, but now she felt as if everyone knew that she, Phil Katz’s daughter, was up for an overnight.

At a Mexican restaurant the previous evening—not to honor Bill’s final quesadilla but because Joe wanted Sombreros, a succession of which was all he “ate,” and when she asked about the sweetness, he stirred one with his finger, sucked it clean and said, “Mmm-mmm!” then flexed his new biceps-tattoo of a chain saw and imitated the sound until people glared, and she decided that she and Joe, who’d been a sculptor in college and now built
sets for downtown, experimental theater very occasionally, should be outlaw New Yorkers
together, lost and unemployed—her plan had been to only see her mother, but she and Joe
went to her apartment before the bar so she could call her father, their conversations best
when she was drunk, too, his ice cubes musical, and agreed to stop in Providence first.

Her bag weighed more than yesterday’s, her temples already damp, palms and
armpits stinging. She sped her pace, fearing that Phil forgot their talk and left for the beach
without her. They’d spoken late, with him sounding sniffly and soon-to-be-passed-out, in
which case his wife Stella would creep in to slip off his shoes. “Let’s go, papa bear,” she’d
coo. Emma joined them for one other Family Beach Day, back at fifteen or so, near the
time of that photo, her hair an asymmetrical bob. Her half-siblings were cranky toddlers
then, her step-mother not yet medicated, and Emma had gone behind a dune to consider
hitch-hiking to Vermont. Instead she remained on the hot sand with no towel, redder each
minute, the Cure loud on her Walkman. Standing on the beach with a gun in my hand…

After climbing a small hill she veered left at an intersection, and suddenly art
students—some of them her father’s—were everywhere: reading on a small triangle of
grass, clutching cups of coffee, picking clay from their fingernails. It’s summer! she
thought. Go away! But why should they, when college was the best it would get? Her foot
caught on a frost heave and she stumbled forward, the sensation of lost balance pricking up
her scalp. She stared at her sneakers until passing the students, and those outside a
sandwich shop further down.

From the brick sidewalk of Benefit, she turned onto her father’s nearly vertical
street. Her steps became clipped, her body pitched forward. Phil lived on a hill loved by
crew coaches. She paused half-way, yanking a T-shirt from her bag to wipe her face and
neck. She thought of beach mist and frothing waves, soft-serve, but first she had another
hour of travel, in back with Phil’s kids and his squeaky cooler. He’d bought an expensive
car and wore fedoras and leather coats, yet used vinyl luggage and a Styrofoam cooler from
when he couldn’t afford to fly, his road trips made with snacks and beer.
At the crest squatted his condo of frosted glass and white stucco. Depending on the weather, it could resemble a mausoleum or a Japanese lantern. The chime was polite, suburban. Her step-mother opened the door after a few minutes, in just a bikini. Stella leaned in to pat her hot back and kiss somewhere above her shoulder. Hugging Stella was like clutching cardboard in the wind.

“Your dad’s still pulling himself together,” Stella said, hopping the steps to the living room. Emma followed, wondering why Stella had on a swimsuit, since she never swam and burned easily. For the day to have a theme.

Her half-siblings kneeled at the kitchen counter, slathering bread with peanut-butter and jelly. Emma dropped her bag to the floor, Stella swooping in to whisk it upstairs. Steven and Stephanie slid from their stools to be hugged passively, with appreciation. They were dark and overweight, somewhere between eight and eleven. Emma liked them and they her, and it stayed easy that way, mild and uncomplicated. She grabbed a Rice Crispie Treat from the fridge and padded upstairs to find Phil.

Below a frosted-glass picture window on the landing, where two hallways led to bedrooms, perched an iridescent vase of plastic carnations. Phil was crouched at the bottom of his closet, searching for a flip-flop, his face shiny and red, like a vegetable. Stella stepped from the bathroom, wrestling into a sundress. When she poked through and saw Emma, she inhaled sharply with her hand to her chest, as if they’d been caught having sex. That Christmas, though, everyone bleak from white wine with lunch, Stella confessed they didn’t. She and Emma had been loading the dishwasher, and Emma said nothing, imagining the information as a dirty cup to put on the rack.

She’d broken the no-children-in-the-bedroom rule, and the white carpeting, white bed and white furniture did make her feel out of place. Stella’s family, the Rezzas, looked down from a wall of photos, the oldest like those dogs with too much flesh. Phil stood and pulled Emma into his warm chest, his scent familiar. They kissed on the lips, closed-mouthed and dry. He stepped back and said, “Let me look at you.”
His flip-flop at her waist reminded her of the time Jeanne spanked Charles with a shoe. He’d stolen candy from her purse, candy she’d probably intended for them, and Emma watched from between a door and its jamb, thinking Jeanne hadn’t wanted to touch Charles’ skin. “Get ready, kiddo,” Phil said, returning to the closet. When he called her that or dumpling or babe, she always felt like a small naked Christmas tree with a star.

The cold guest room had more white carpeting and sealed windows. She shut the door, feeling a sort of vertigo. Added distance from the hill seemed to enhance it. The air at Art & Home had felt similarly thin, and above a certain floor, she’d felt her lower organs drop. She sat on the bouncy bed and opened her bag, wishing Charles had come, too.

They liked to sneak into Stella’s bathroom, to her tower of catalogs, the high-tech scale, the neatly cluttered medicine cabinet. They’d peer inside the mothball-smelling linen closet, the shelves organized with signs from Steffie’s label-maker: king-fitted, wool-crib, hand-up, guest-queen. At first they’d giggle, get quiet and leave spooked, the light-string depressing.

Changing into her bathing suit, she mistook the excited yelling from downstairs as that from a neighbor’s yard. Someone called for her, so she left her belongings exploded, closing the door on the mess. Steffie and Steve’s voices echoed off garage walls as they threw chairs, bags and towels into the Range Rover. She brought the cooler from the kitchen, noting Phil had switched to hard plastic, and slid it in, careful not to leave a scratch. She climbed onto the leather, resenting Phil’s success while trying to remember it was no one’s fault she and Charles missed out.

The garage-door closed and they idled in the glaring driveway, silent. She caught Joe’s odor and felt she shouldn’t be sitting so close to the children. No one had mentioned the firing, nor her hair, and she brought a piece around to check. “Why are we still here?” she said.

Phil cleared his throat. “We never discussed which beach to go to.” Stella tittered.
But Stella usually planned in advance. Emma figured her arrival had disrupted everybody. Phil put a hand on his wife’s knee, and asked her preference. His hairy knuckles looked strange there, as if for display.

"Number one!" Steve said, and Steffie joined in, chanting, "Num-ber one! Num-ber one!"

"Hey!" Phil barked, and they grew silent. He put the car in drive, rolling toward the Newport beach with the densest crowds and best odds for seeing a classmate.

Once out of Providence, Steffie and Steve began whispering to each other while looking at Emma, hands around mouths. She stared at furniture stores and car lots, and decided that since she’d traveled there, she may as well try to talk. She leaned across Steffie’s knees, inserting herself between Phil and Stella. "It’s too bad about me losing my job, huh," she said.

Stella turned, her face sympathetic. "Yeah."

"Not if you get a better one," said her father. He prodded a tape into the cassette player, and an aria filled the car. The kids tried to imitate it, warbling. Phil brought the music to the front. "That magazine’s a little precious."

Precious. The only and most accurate word. He was brilliant! She settled into the leather, feeling it belonged to her. Steffie’s foot came up against Emma’s chin, making her chomp the inside of her cheek. Her sister’s head was where her feet should’ve been, with Steve tickling her. Emma’s mouth swelled. Phil and Stella were quiet up front, staring ahead. Emma asked the kids to tell her about camp and school, their friends and teachers. They probably received plenty of attention at home, but she wanted background noise. She looked out at the planed, fertile landscape.

They arrived at Newport at around one o’clock, the air thick with fried lunch. She rubbed her tongue along the new wound. Her siblings fidgeted, and she felt tempted to swat their plumpness. The sky was a milky haze, like on most Northern beach days, but free of major clouds, so they decided it would get clear. Waves of heat rose from the
parking lot they anxiously searched. Some cars had surfboards propped against the sides, open trunks and guys changing from wetsuits with towels around their waists. “Are they leaving or just posing?” said Phil. He sent Stella’s window down. “Ask this idiot his situation.”

Stella balked at the tidal air rushing in and sent her window back up. “He’s rubbing oil on himself,” she said. “He’s not going anywhere.”

They bickered over where else to park while the kids stared out miserably. Emma tried to breathe from her abdomen. Not my family, she thought. Not my family. They bounced over a speedbump and Phil braked, saying, “Here we go.” They all watched an elderly man and woman, tanned and attractive, stroll from the changing rooms to a compact car, put their beach chairs in and spread wet towels beneath the rear window. The couple sat without moving for a few moments, and Phil whipped into their slot before they’d fully backed away, hissing, “Fucking fuck fuck.”

He parked and jumped out, a bit frantic. He’d carry the umbrella and chairs, Emma the cooler, Stella her magazines and the blanket, while the kids controlled the towels. “Can you handle that?” he said. They nodded, as a group. Marching past lunch lines and onto the sand, Emma hefted the plastic box to her shoulder to navigate. They could be just another family, except who was she? The nanny. Stella’s wilder, younger sister. A drifter.

“Let’s head there,” Phil said, pointing to an open expanse at the far end. She focused on his footprints, heel-heavy like her own. Heineken bottles rattled when she adjusted the cooler. They stepped over bucket-and-shovel sets, picked around sand moats and dodged foam missiles that whistled when thrown, and the cold little waves.

Emma plopped the cooler at their chosen site and sat down wearily, its red lid searing through her shorts. Sweat stung her eyes, and dabbing her brow, vodka-smell wafted from her underarm. She felt sure Joe was spending the day with a woman. She didn’t know how she knew, except for the fear that bloomed in her chest. After lunch in
Chinatown, they’d look at graffiti under the Manhattan Bridge, share a forty and watch skateboarders. It was a date he said he’d take Emma on.

“I’m so glad we’re here!” said Stella. Phil stared at her, hands on his hips. His mouth was open as if he wanted to speak, but found nothing to say. Emma got up to help Stella unfold the blanket. They spread it flat, and Emma placed a sandal on each corner. Stella moved the shoes away, tucking the tips under instead. They positioned the three chairs to face the shore, while Phil made an umbrella hole, wiggling the stem back and forth.

Steffie and Steve had stripped their clothes and taken off in short-legged sprints toward the water. Stella clucked her tongue at the small piles, shook out the clothing, folded and shoved them in her bag. She removed a wad of fashion magazines and fanned them on the blanket. Emma wanted them stacked near Stella’s chair instead, and tried to think of a way to suggest this, soon giving up. She removed her tank top and shorts, and looked down. Just five weeks and she’d become an office insect, her body molting. “Does anyone want to swim?” she said.

Stella shook her head, her ponytail bristling out the rear of her baseball hat. The cap had a G on the front, for the Gap. Gentile, thought Emma. Goy. Gefiltefish! Phil stuck a beer into a foam sheath that said “Let’s Party” in bubble letters. He told her he wanted to get hot before going in. She walked toward the low, distant waves alone, feeling Stella’s eyes on her backside. You mean drunk, she thought.

Steffie and Steve zoomed straight at her, shiny and goose-bumped. “It’s freezing!” Steve shouted. “I can’t feel a thing.”

“Please say Mom packed cookies,” said Steffie, her jaw rubbery.

Emma continued toward the water, her ankles soon stung. Steve was right about the temperature, but New England beaches never got very warm, which she liked about them. She eased in by inches, the waves helping. Once her hips were submerged, she tried to relax her bladder. She turned to face the shore, where Phil stood drinking his beer,
gazing one direction and the other. She wondered what he thought of the activity along the ocean’s edge, the volleyball game and speed walkers, the metal detector, girls in bikinis. She wished she knew how it all looked to him, what it meant.

Beyond Phil, Stella leaned out from her chair to the cooler. She dug around, handing sandwiches across to Steffie and Steve, who clutched Cokes and stared numbly at the ground. Draped in towels, they looked like colorful bats. Emma dunked and got out, feeling nicely condensed. Phil had on his Speedo and a straw hat with the chin strap down. He grinned as she approached and took a long sip. He probably had no idea his beer holder said Let’s Party. When she got close enough to hear past the wind, he asked if she’d like to go for a walk.

“Yeah, just let me cover up,” she said.

“Tell them what we’re doing,” he called, and something else that she missed, which sounded like, “You don’t need more than that!”

Her hair dribbled over Steffie and Steve. They sat cross-legged on the blanket, leaving peanut-butter thumbprints on Stella’s magazines. “Dad and I are taking a walk,” she said, stepping into her shorts, the rear instantly wet. She grabbed her sunglasses and glanced at Stella, under the umbrella. She’d put on a long-sleeved shirt and blanketed her legs with a towel.

They had a headwind that quickly dried her skin and turned her arm hair blond with salt. They talked about who else came to Beach One (instead of Two or Three), whether tourists or locals, and what their professions might be. Phil explained why Rhode Island’s economy was depressed—Massachusetts and Connecticut monopolized employment, Republicans taxed the poor, tourism fostered a slave mentality and the Mafia screwed everybody—and while she didn’t pay close attention, she appreciated his knowledge of real-life things like industry and wages, topics her mother had no interest in, until his voice sounded as if his ideas, and not the audience, were all that mattered. She knew Phil preferred abstract conversations to personal ones, but had he always monologued? She
wondered if he’d seemed distant her whole life and she hadn’t noticed until now, when needing his help. They fell quiet, hearing surf and talk from the thinning crowds, with an occasional jet of laughter. “What if I don’t get another job?” she said.

“Don’t while away too much time at your mother’s and you’ll be fine,” he said. “You sure you even need to go there? I’d start looking right away.”

“It’s a short visit, and I can make money at Mom’s.” She hadn’t planned to, though. A jogger passed, his golden retriever barking at waves. “You haven’t responded to my hair.”

“Oh, it’s pretty,” Phil said, looking at her as if only noticing it then. She could tell he considered it a phase, but this was her, and she wanted it to stay.

“Did you tell Clarice what happened?” Phil’s dealer was a friend of Bill Pennington, and had originally put them in touch.

“Nah. Bill will, if he needs to.”

She suddenly felt embarrassed for thinking Phil would concern himself with her work life, and talk about it with his peers, even. “This is all so humiliating,” she said.

“Aw, come here, kid,” Phil said, pulling her into an one-arm embrace. His affection was sporadic and sometimes seemed violent. One time, he drove her to the airport and bit her cheek, the meaty part above the bone, after they’d kissed and hugged good-bye. It left a mark like a hickey, and her mother kept asking if he’d ever done anything inappropriate to her or Charles. He hadn’t, his love was just repressed, and so could feel volcanic.

They walked with his arm across her shoulders and hers around his middle. Phil’s skin was sun-warmed, and she thought they probably looked like lovers.

“You’ll find something much better,” he said. “Where did you get such low self-esteem from? Your mother and I are confident, and Charles... well, I’m not sure about him.”
She bent to pick up a shell, not because it interested her, but to rearrange their bodies. Her dad's flesh against hers had started to make her feel uncomfortable. She'd noticed a creepy arousal in herself, which was not uncommon in his presence. She attributed it to being with Joe so recently.

"Someone from Art & Home called me yesterday," Phil said. "Probably right after Bill gave you the heave-ho. They want to do another article about me, with a sidebar for Stella's recipes."

She emitted a laugh she'd never heard in herself before. High and strained, like a cackle. She focused on a tiny ship far away, then stopped walking. "But you won't do it, of course." Her feet sunk into sand.

Phil turned to her, his skin dark as if he'd been coming here every weekend since June. "What, you have hard feelings? I thought the job bored you."

"Never mind," she forced out. They continued walking.

"They did a good job on the last piece," Phil said, "and I've got a show in L.A. soon, plus one in Dallas, so now's a good time for publicity. As Clarice says, things are happening."

Phil's posture straightened and he had the excited, withheld look he got when talking about his career. In other circumstances, she might have felt proud of him, too. "Want to turn back?" she said.

With the sun behind them, he told her about a painting he'd finished—big and from a dream—and what famous person just bought one. He said his salary at the college he taught at was going up. He expressed how it felt when students said he affected their moral, social and artistic lives. She murmured supportively, thinking they should be talking about her, but she didn't know how to assert herself, whether to blurt her confusion or seek pointed advice. Phil resented any display of feelings, saying they didn't exist or he didn't believe in them. He'd called her Sally Sensitive when she cried, even about the divorce. Her eyes darted from Frisbees to sprawled humans, out to distant houses and a fat
seagull on the sand. She imagined she looked like Joe the day before, distracted in the rain. It comforted her to think of him.

On Family Beach Day, the umbrella-and-blanket area was known as Base Camp. The kids seemed to be napping while Stella read. The haze had gone, the day almost too sunny. Phil replaced his empty bottle with a new one. He guzzled some and said, “Who wants to go in?” Steffie and Steve rolled around sleepily. Phil dove between them, holding up his beer and shouting, “Watch it!” as they kicked and flailed. Nearby parents glanced over. Emma rummaged through the cooler, which smelled of old apples. She said she might eat something, so Phil walked toward the water with Steve and Steffie groping for his hands.

She took a fistful of pretzels, realizing she’d left the Rice Crispie Treat on the bedside table in the guest room. It could be an ant-covered cube by now, darkly migrating through the house. She brushed sand from the blanket and lay flat, snickering to consider how her step-mother would react.

“How are you, Stella?” she said, blocking sun with her arm. She resembled an aging Hollywood star, a patient.

Stella looked up from her book and said, “What?” as if she hadn’t been staring at Emma from behind dark glasses. Stella didn’t seem to like her, but always acted intrigued. She repeated the question.

“I feel perfect.” Stella leaned forward, plucked off the sunglasses and folded them.

“But you know what I think?”

Emma propped herself on an elbow and said, “No, what?”

Stella picked lint off her sleeve. “That you seem really depressed.”

Emma leaned back and shut her eyes.

“Well, are you?”

“Isn’t everybody? Sometimes, at least?”
"No, not clinically." Stella’s chair squeaked as she shifted position. "This is serious."

"I was fired yesterday." Behind her eyes, everything was orange, and black when she blinked. The sounds of waves, birds and people blended together. "I appreciate your concern," Emma said, thickly. She turned her head and opened one eye.

"Good, because I am," Stella said. She pinched her lower lip with her thumb and middle finger, and dropped her hand to her lap.

Emma could tell Stella was about to disclose things that she didn’t feel ready to hear.

"I don’t know if Phil told you," Stella said, "but we’re having a few problems."

Emma was rigid, unsure what to say. Why did she feel she couldn’t handle this? "I’m sorry," she finally managed. Lame, it was the best she could do. She closed her eyes, aware of Stella’s impatience for her to say or do more.

"Anyway," Stella said, cheerful again, "I think you should take the anti-depressant I’m on. Only if you’re single, if you know what I mean."

She did, and also that a kinder person would’ve taken the chair next to her, asking questions, intently listening, but she was tired of failed marriages. After several minutes, she sat up and looked at the sea. She thought of hiding in the sawgrass, between gentle mounds, but was an adult, and couldn’t. She twisted half-way behind her. "Feel like swimming?" She got to her feet. "Come on, it’ll be fun."

"No thanks!" Stella lifted her book and started to read.

Emma walked toward the ocean’s edge, kicking sand to make it squeak. Asking Stella to swim was cruel. Everyone knew she couldn’t stand salt water. She paddled over to her dad and the kids. They were getting out, they said, their lips blue. A wind picked up and rippled the surface. She tread water in circles, hoping the cold would make her feel something for Stella. The sun began to drop.
After the food and drinks were gone and most people had left, the sand pipers came
to feed where the tide had been. Steffie and Steve buried their father in the sand. Emma
watched from her side, her head propped on one hand. She rolled onto her stomach and
smoothed the two hillocks she’d made, miniature dunes that resembled very firm breasts.
She mashed them flat, looked up at Stella and said, “What do you think of dinner in
Newport?”

Steve hopped to his feet and stomped around. “Yes!” he said, pumping his fist. His
brown torso jiggled.

Phil winced, trying to see where Steve landed. Steffie continued to pack sand, her
Steffie held the beer bottle to his lips, Phil lifting his head to meet it.

“Do the drunk-man face,” she said, and he did something with his features that
made her laugh.

Emma wanted a change of location and to eat. She sat at Stella’s ankles, her step-
mother suddenly powerful, since she made the food decisions. Emma preferred a restaurant
to a winey meal at their house, where Phil would try to distract her from noticing how
much Stella piled the kids’ plates but only nibbled, while Emma formulated what to tell
Jeanne.

“There is that joint that we like,” Phil said. “What’s-it-called, Scales.”

“How are we supposed to shower?” said Stella. “You should see yourself.”

“You make it sound like I’m toxic.”

“Actually, this beach is really polluted,” said Steve.

Phil sat up, the sand crumbling off him. He got to his feet looking a full shade
darker, a pointillist human.

“And I bet you just got cancer,” said Steffie.

“Steffie!” said Stella. “Take that back.”

Steffie started crying and blubbered, “I’m sorry, Dad.”
"They’re tired," Phil said, his hand on Steffie’s head. To Emma, he whispered, "She doesn’t know what it means."

Emma missed her mother and Louise, Jeanne’s girlfriend. They talked about seed catalogs and herbal remedies, women’s basketball.

“What’s wrong with showering here?” said Steve.

Stella looked pleadingly at Phil. “No shampoo, for one,” she said. “No clean towels, no soap, no hairbrush, no anything. Scales is an elegant establishment.”

“I don’t see why that stuff matters, if we’re paying,” Emma said.

“Then you clearly don’t get it,” said Stella. She took off her hat and shake out her hair. Frosted, it could use a touch-up. “Newport is a certain way in August.” She stood and brushed herself off, with no sand on her.

“Pretentious?”

“Are you hungry or not?” said Phil.

“My friend Jimmy’s got a place,” said Steve. “His mom and dad would let us use it. Dad, where’s your phone?”

Stella laughed a light cascade and dusted Steve’s back. “No, silly. We’d never do that.”

“Why not?”

“What we could do,” said Phil, “is use my friend Renny’s place.” He stuck an empty bottle in the cooler.

Stella’s mouth went twisty, a line between her brows. She ducked her face and began dismantling Base Camp, then abruptly stopped. Shiny magazines slipped from her arms. “Will no one be there, at least?” she said, bending to retrieve them.

“I’m pretty sure she’s away.” Phil rubbed himself with a towel.

Emma watched, thinking, that must feel good, dead places coming to life. “Who’re we talking about?” she said.
“A colleague whose cats I occasionally feed,” said Phil. “She has a summer house in town.”

They gathered their things and walked toward the parking lot, Phil and Steve ahead, the others following. Phil looked down at Steve, who was talking animatedly. Emma tried to imagine him seeming that entertained by Charles. He must have at some point, and she’d forgotten.

At the car Phil said, “Let me call and make sure.” Stella climbed into the front, her neck like a rod. Something was wrong, but Emma wasn’t sure what. From Jeanne, she’d learned that Phil had a reputation for cheating, but suspected some was exaggerated from hurt feelings.

She looked at the digital clock past the steering wheel. Joe would be wandering back from Chinatown with that girl, stopping at a bar on Ludlow. Finally, she felt a twinge for Stella. I love her, she thought, and reached forward to touch her step-mother’s shoulder. Stella tensed, then settled into the hand. Phil folded his phone and got in.

“Nope, she’s gone,” he said, starting the engine. He gave Emma a hard stare in the rear-view mirror.

What did that mean, that he had girlfriend? That he knew his wife was unstable and they should conspire against her? Both? Perhaps he’d only been looking at the ocean.

Stuck in the crowded lanes of town, the sidewalks clogged with people in T-shirts and shorts, licking ice cream or tourist-town candy sticks, she could imagine horses on the cobblestones, passing broad shutters of clapboard houses. They parked outside a faded brown cottage a few blocks from the restaurant, on a high street overlooking marina shops hawking lobster ashtrays. The house had a widow’s walk and a weathervane. Phil shut off the motor.

“Perfect,” said Stella.

They tumbled onto the street, car doors slamming. “Aren’t you coming?” Emma said.
Stella shook her head and reached for her book.

"But you insisted we shower."

"It's fine!" Phil said, leading them to a set of splintered steps with peeling white paint. "She never got in the water." Rubber sandals slapped his heels.

Blue-glass bottles of dried cattails lined a window ledge festooned with dead bees. In one of the mud-room windows hung the sign, "When God Made Man She Was Only Joking." Emma almost wished this was the house of Phil's girlfriend. The piece of paper suggested otherwise, but minutes ago, she'd decided she wanted him to be happy. Content, at least.

The musty house smelled of cats and sandalwood incense. Phil directed the kids to the upstairs bathroom, suggesting Emma use the one off the kitchen. The cottage felt like an old, narrow boat, which Emma found pleasant but thought she probably shouldn't have. He handed her a towel from a thin, slatted closet. She peered into his face for another clue, his eyes blank.

A window in the shower looked onto lilac and bougainvillea bushes in a fenced back yard. The unmowed grass had dandelions and bursts of tiny, white flowers. In the wharf below, dinghies reflected late-afternoon sun, while bells on larger boats rang sporadically. Seaweed, or what she hoped was seaweed, washed past her toes. She glanced up to see Stella striding toward town, pissed.

"Dad! Come here," Emma said.

His heavy footsteps plodded the steps. "What is it?" He stood outside the door.

"Stella's freaking out. You could still catch her."

"I can't hear a thing," said Phil. "I'm coming in."

He stuck his head past the opened door, causing a draft that cooled her. The shower curtain was translucent, so she turned away. But they used to swim naked, when her parents were married. Sometimes she almost doubted that Phil and Jeanne ever lived
together. It ended when she was six, and could seem like just another book read to her then.

"Stella was fuming down the hill," she said, into a tile corner. "She looked upset." Emma feared he wouldn’t take her seriously, with her back to him. She wanted to stick her head out and say, "What’s really going on? Whose house are we in?"

"I’m sure she just felt like walking," Phil said. "Be right back!"

The corkboard clicked shut. Emma craned to see him out there, catching only a flash of T-shirt. After she’d dried off and was sampling Renny’s cosmetics, Phil reappeared outside the door. "She was making us a reservation," he said, and stepped away. Emma squirted lotion into her palm and gazed through the window.

She sat on the couch, dust rising from cushions into sunlight. Phil banged kitchen cupboards, and she flipped through a year-old photography journal. Stella should feel satisfied: Emma liked salt water and hadn’t wanted to stand in a slimy-bottomed tub her father probably used with what’s-her-name, but the view had been nice. Phil brought a tumbler of Scotch into the bathroom, then came the hiss of shower. For a few seconds, she pretended she was Phil’s mistress, in their rented cottage, waiting to go for dinner.

She went to check the car, Stella not back yet. She liked the style of whoever lived here, especially the green-velvet couch covered with pillows. Resembling a dragon that took up most of the living room, it sat across from a fireplace jammed with books. She realized why the sloppy house felt familiar: this Renny person was a bohemian, which Phil still found attractive, if she was indeed his girlfriend. Seeing that he liked ethnic wall-hangings and paper bags filled with cans and newspapers made his marriage with Jeanne seem more real, and the idea of being his Newport lover fell away, leaving him a dad.

She climbed the steps to the second level with her backed stooped and feet turned to the side, the ceiling low, the planks short. Steffie and Steve were giggling in the center of the room, near the bed that touched none of the walls. Emma compared her futon in its slim loft-space, the ceiling three feet away, to this tousled sleigh of mismatched bedding. The
kids were still in towels and seemed to have showered together. She stood near the top of the stairs to watch. It looked like they were kissing, but they’d touch tongues until someone, usually Steffie, pulled away. A few times Steve tried to kiss her.

"Stop," said Steffie.

"Ronnie Jock asked me to teach you."

"I’m only nine."

They stood before a large window, outlined by sea, its many shades of blue changing from wind and currents. Emma backed out of the room, worried that later, if they found their parents too confusing, they’d experiment seriously. From a middle step, she yelled, “Let’s go! Stop fooling around.” Just to scare them.

They spilled from the house with damp hair, Phil securing the lock. “I liked it there,” Emma said, quietly, so Stella, wouldn’t hear. Phil nodded and jingled his key ring. Stella sent the windows up and got out.

Scales was filled with yellow light and not yet crowded. Emma relaxed as Phil and Stella sipped their cocktails. Steffie and Steve went to watch a woman shucking oysters near the brick oven. At the bar, yachtspeople in striped shirts conversed quietly, except for the boating terms. Jib! rose above the tables. Fathoms! Phil studied the wine list and snapped his fingers. A waiter came, and Phil said, “No, I was summoning my children.” The man scuttled off.

“I’ll go get them,” said Emma. By the cooking area, behind a glass panel that jutted into the restaurant, were beds of ice. She stood between Steffie and Steve to look at the shiny, wet octopus, marlin and pink bass, a profusion of clams, scallops like tumors and imperious lobsters. “Fish!” she wanted to shout at Phil. She had a fantasy of pushing Stella’s face into squid suckers. Excitedly, she whipped around to their table. They’d been seated in the center of the restaurant, to Stella’s probable discomfort, since they were all under-dressed. Phil hooked his finger at Emma, in and out, his mouth pinched. She pulled her half-siblings away.
“Sorry,” she said, sitting. “It’s like an aquarium.”

“What are we eating?” said Phil. The wine steward appeared, and her dad blurted something in French that sounded like a sneeze. Stella took a pad and pen from her purse to write what they wanted: baskets of things steamed and fried, halfshell plates, poached fish, bouillabaisse, iced tea.

It was as if they hadn’t realized their hunger until the food arrived. They grabbed at rolls, reached for horseradish and tartar sauce, knocked salt shakers and bumped elbows, but not Stella. This was how it should always feel with Phil, that they were related. Stella described things as perfect: the restaurant, the wine, the day. What about the tension earlier? What about Renny’s house?

Stella stood from the table, appeared light-headed, and collapsed into her seat. She tried again, slowly, and wobbled to the restroom. They continued eating. When Stella returned, Steffie said, “Can we be excused?” Her eyes shone at her brother: ice cream with allowance money. Stella said yes, but don’t get lost.

The tables were all occupied, and Phil ordered another bottle of wine. Tan people in new-looking clothes waited in small groups outside.

“What are you doing for Labor Day?” Stella said.

“I may not have a job then,” she said. “Why?”

“I look forward to holidays.” She seemed shy. “The kids and I do a lot.”

Emma thought of last Christmas, when Stella baked variously-shaped cookies and spread them over the kitchen table with cups of food-coloring paste and toothpicks. They’d decorated them for hours, with edible silver beads and sugar sparkles. Stella drew a green dollar-sign on a Star of David cookie, held it up and said, “Look, everyone.” Emma waited for her father, who was Jewish, to react. He glanced over, sipped his wine and continued painting a reindeer.

“Aren’t holidays just ways people break up monotony?” Emma said. She realized this could sound critical and added, “Not that you’d use them that way.”
“Wasteful, too,” said Phil.

“You cynics,” Stella said, giggling.

“I never believed in Santa Claus,” Emma said. “You and Mom told me those characters were made-up, the Easter Bunny, the tooth fairy.”

“The youngest child is often disillusioned young,” Phil said. He looked at people clustered near the door.

“I was never illusioned,” said Emma. “You guys didn’t bother pretending.”

“Really?”

“Probably because the marriage was a myth,” said Stella, “that no one believed in, either.”

Emma thought she’d misheard her, hoped she had. It felt like with the cookie, though, when she knew she hadn’t mistaken Stella’s motives, and could say nothing.

Phil lifted his hand for the waiter. The man had just passed, but walked backwards to hover with a tray of shells and lobster bodies. “We’ll take the check,” Phil said.

She felt sentimental from the syrupy wine. “It’s as if I never had a childhood,” she said. “It ended so early, when you left.”

“No, honey,” Phil said, patting her hand. “You’ve got it reversed. You’ve never had an adulthood.”

He and Stella laughed heartily. Emma didn’t know what to say or do, and joined them. Her cheeks felt stiff, her eyes unyielding. She almost had wrinkles. What sort of adulthood was he advocating?

The family slowly headed to the car. In back of them, the sky was streaked with pink and orange. She turned around to see it, up the hill in reverse. Joe could be watching the same sunset, from a fire escape, maybe, his new friend beside him. It would sink past different waterways, below a horizon that seemed so distant from her now. In the reddish light, she imagined their faces looked very, very adult.
Emma crosses the sloped sidewalk to rap on the glass of her mother’s double-parked car. Jeanne looks past her rustling newspaper, the air-conditioner on high. Her hair is flung over her shoulders like epaulets, and she has a foot on the dashboard, picking at its heel. She tents the paper and steps out saying, “My poor little baby, my sweet little girl,” arms wide because Emma was just fired and has come to regroup. The kiss is a slobber, her neck perfume-ripe. They heave the bag over the lip of the trunk together.

Jeanne glides into traffic without looking, oblivious of the honk. She asks if Emma is hungry and how the visit went with her father.

“Not well,” Emma says, and can they please go straight home. “To the farm,” she adds.

The car smells like a well-scrubbed cow. To soften its edgy technology, Jeanne gives it names: the Green Machine, Jade Warrior, Stealth Emerald.

Before Emma noticed Boston, they’re on Route 1, a river of liquor stores with permanent facades. She dives into Jeanne’s bosom, making staccato nasal huffs, and drops between the seat belt and steering wheel.

“Get up,” Jeanne says. “That’s dangerous.”

The car phone rings, and Emma swings into her seat. Outside a family restaurant are fake bulls and heifers, supposedly grazing.

“I’m looking right at her,” Jeanne says.

Emma knows her mom is talking to Louise, Jeanne’s girlfriend. They chat about the vegetables that should get picked today, Emma closing her eyes to swim through her mother’s voice. Her jaw falls, then the rest of her.

Lately Emma’s felt tired of being herself. The continuity—that this is who she’ll be until death—is claustrophobic.
Jeanne hangs up, the signs indicating that Chelsea, Stoneham, Wakefield and Reading lie beyond all that green.

"Louise says hi," Jeanne tells her.

"Where was she calling from?"

"Pruning in a cherry tree," Jeanne says.

Emma feels as though her ribs were contracting. "Louise brings a cell phone?" she says. "Did you buy it for her, too?"

They loop past a Camaro with New Hampshire plates and a No Fear sticker on the ski rack. The driver has a crewcut and insect shades, his headlights rolling out like cartoon eyes.

"Louise works very hard," Jeanne says.

Emma inspects the back seat for farm crates, a clipboard, some evidence her mother sold things in Boston. She lifts a crinkling Neiman Marcus bag, searching for an errant leaf of salad mix.

"I got sheets for your room," Jeanne says.

My old room, Emma thinks, though "your room" sounds nice, too. She has no other room, her apartment all one room, which doesn't count.

The speedometer hovers in the eighties, and while Emma is proud that her mother used to want to race cars—it's fun to tell people, and Emma never hoped to become an anything—she can't stop seeing their flight into a ditch, with the anti-climactic fireball.

"Pedal to the metal," she says. She wants this to sound neutral.

Jeanne slows enough for the Camaro-driver to shoot by. He shows Emma his middle finger.

"Tell me about Providence," Jeanne says, reaching into the glove compartment for hand creme. "How were the Stupids?"

That's what Jeanne calls Emma's step-mother, Stella, and her half-siblings, Steffie and Steve.
Emma dabs lotion onto Jeanne’s knuckles, explaining that yesterday, after the beach, Stella insisted they shower before dinner in Newport, so Emma’s dad brought them to his mistress’ cottage, Emma felt sure, to bathe.


And for a moment, Emma’s not sure which one her mother means. “At least you’re faithful,” she says, feeling oddly married to both parents.

Jeanne pulls a wand toward her, and floods the windshield with blue fluid. She does it again and then some more until the pump whines, liquid spreading to the sides.

“All right!” Emma shouts. “You got them.” She presses the spot where thumb and forefinger join, kneading the semi-circle.

“There’s a pot-luck at the house tonight,” Jeanne says. “The workers are putting it on, but we invited our friends, too. It should be great.”

“Great,” Emma repeats, as if it meant the opposite. She’d expected dinner to be the three of them, quietly discussing what went wrong in New York. Louise she could ignore, but the college kids erased her mother. “I would have come another time,” Emma says.

“You’ll love it,” Jeanne says. “They’re performing an old-time jug-band jamboree.”

Emma digs in with her nails, leaving a row of tiny white smiles, frowns, or both.

“The party’s to celebrate a new basketball court,” Jeanne says. “They mixed and poured the concrete themselves.”

“You let them put cement on the yard?” Emma says, trying to level her voice. Lumpy grass had been good enough for her and her brother.

“I guess I evolved,” Jeanne says.

Emma hits the scan button, the college radio station absorbed into hills, the rest of the way classic rock or oldies. Jeanne’s hand feels like a bird, tense and full of small bones. The forests thicken, and were they to stop, she knows the air would smell yeasty.

When she was fired two days ago, a layer peeled off her like a Fruit Roll-up. It had been lost, floating in the city, and now seemed to be back.
“Heard anything about Charles?” Emma says. Her brother has been missing, or just extremely out of touch, for over a year.

She imagines their car leaving invisible trails, like strands of DNA.

Jeanne retracts her hand and sniffs, offering the left one. “Skeeter says he’s in Charlottesville.”

Skeeter: a former john who fell in love with Charles, though Jeanne won’t call him that.

Emma pokes the cassette that’s poised in the deck, and the Jimmy Cliff song, “Many Rivers to Cross,” fills the car. Jeanne sings in a falsetto, unabashed, her voice catching. She once said the lyrics reminded her of Charles.

Emma puts a finger near her ear, stares out, skirts closer to her door and waits for the song to end. This is how a younger her would react, so she decides to sing, too, and has to be loud to sound O.K. Jeanne raises the volume until bass and distortion conceal Emma’s bellowing, even from herself.

Jeanne’s lasagna is like a multistoried building, with tofu and squash for the floors, broccoli and sesame seeds the roof. Red wine flows into the gaps—as insulation—to steam the noodles when covered with foil. Wine pinkens the grated cheese. It could also be a body.

Louise enters the kitchen in dust-faded jeans, her boots dropping squares of mud. She and Emma embrace like prizefighters, Louise punching Emma’s shoulder. She swats Jeanne’s behind on her way to the bathroom, and Emma returns to cutting apples for a pie. She feels too girlie and complicated.

Jeanne wipes her hands on her pants and looks around. The lasagna’s ready, she announces, and moves onto berries, rinsing, sorting, and then she’ll whip the cream.

“Will Louise be preparing something?” Emma says.
“Of course,” Jeanne says, but she sounds unsure. “I think I’ll do a quick bulgur salad, with carrot and currants,” she says, inspecting the cupboards.

“That’s too much,” Emma says. “If you go overboard, people might get embarrassed.”

“I find it fun and easy,” Jeanne says. “So there.”

Emma wants to force her mother upstairs to nap or bathe, positioning her before the TV. Jeanne’s been driving for hours, and Emma could put in the lasagna, but Jeanne’s face is flushed, her hair springy around a shining forehead.

Jeanne washes the eggbeater prongs, Emma’s mouth rushing at the prospect of licking them.

“Damn, another cow,” Jeanne says, glancing out a side window. “Go get rid of him, will you, Emma?”

Emma rises, wondering at what age people can refuse. In the stale living room, Louise’s messes erupt in small piles, here and there. A baseball hat on the couch instead of a hook.

The crickets sound electric, the sky turbulent and hot. She claps at the cow, a bell clanking out the rhythm its chews. “Leave,” she says. “Move.” Big and black, eyelashes, a cud, tongue in nostrils. “Go away,” she says, shoving its flank. She turns toward the house and yells, “Mother!” and it must be similar to the owner’s call, because the cow trots along.

Walking back, she notices puffs of smoke below the rise, coming through the screened-in worker kitchen. It’s from a cigarette, pot smoke much denser, but still, they should be helping. A girl emerges with a cup of wine and a book, and sits at the picnic table.

Inside, the house is cool and smells of just-cut basil. “The workers have started drinking,” Emma says, falling into a chair. She rubs her new mosquito bites.
Louise pops a beer on the wall opener. “I gave them the afternoon off to cook,” she says.

Emma suspects Louise of not washing her hands after the bathroom, and would like to mention it. She recently touched a cow, true, but that’s different. She concentrates on making her apples exactly the same width.

Louise complains to Jeanne about a tractor part that keeps breaking. She destroys things intentionally, Emma thinks. Grinds gears for a secret, aggressive thrill, plows over rocks for pleasure. Now, though, Louise seems genuinely angry.

“I had to fucking walking all the way back!” Louise yells.

“You need some mothering,” Jeanne says, resting a palm on Louise’s cheek.

“No, I don’t,” Louise says, stepping away. She takes the seat across from Emma.

“Come here,” Jeanne says. “I can make it better.”

Louise fills her chest. “You want to baby me?” she says. “Then take out your titty and let’s go.”

Emma squirts lemon juice on her apples, discovering hangnails and paper cuts she didn’t know she had. “Spare me!” she says, surprising herself.

“This is how grown-ups talk,” Louise says, pushing out from the table. She dumps a bag of Brussels sprouts into the sink, water coughing as she bangs them against the sides.

Emma stares at the holes in the back of Louise’s T-shirt.

Jeanne sidles up and says, “We gonna grill those?”

Emma and Jeanne decide to wear dresses to the party, and Louise will slick her hair into a pomade shell. Emma’s only seen her mother in cotton pants with stretchy waists, no matter the occasion. She isn’t sure she likes the change.

They carry tables from the basement to the grassy hollow, secure the legs and flick them over. Emma follows Jeanne to the front-hall closet to choose tablecloths. From a
basket on the floor, they select an African kenti cloth and a white cotton one with red lilies. People arrive holding platters just as the material’s spread smooth.

A crowd encircles the two workers about to cut the ribbon around the basketball court. It’s been looped to the pole and draped on nearby trees like police tape. The couple is tan with bleached-out smiles, and Emma imagines them in paper fast-food crowns. Guests applaud, releasing their babies to crawl among scampering dogs.

Emma takes her plate to one of the stumps Louise chopped earlier. Next to her sit Winnie and Samuel, garlic farmers whose family she knew in grade school, the kids married and living north of here, she learns, with several children a piece. Emma asks about the garlic harvest, and they comment on Jeanne’s crops. They discuss soil and weather, Emma realizing she has no reason to be at this party.

They feel trapped by her, she thinks—what does she know or care of farming?—so she excuses herself to a spot between Louise and Jeanne, the grass crushed and damp.

Louise sucks her teeth after each bite, a new habit. “Gross, how can you stand that?” Emma whispers.

Jeanne forks her lasagna. “Stand what?”

“Louise, that noise. She sounds like an old man with dentures.”

“I don’t even notice,” Jeanne says. She turns to someone on her left, then rotates fully away.

Emma moves to a mound above the basketball court with her plate. She vaguely remembers Louise having a few fake teeth, but what about manners? She wonders if the workers think her mother is insecure. Emma’s life seems suddenly very exposed.

A small girl approaches with the basketball, too big in her arms. Emma steps on the hand-prints left in the concrete, arranged as a peace-sign, and dribbles. She may be the first to do so, and what if it’s like at a wedding where the bride and groom initiate the space? She rolls the ball over her shoulders and passes it to herself under one leg, which scares the child, who flees.
Jeanne cuts into the pie, the knife coming up gooey with apple. Men stand close by with the boyish, longing looks they sometimes get near women and food. Emma slithers in from behind to grab her mother’s middle.

“Don’t,” Jeanne says, shaking free. “I need to make sure there’s enough.”

The guest’s plates are palettes of pie-slivers and berries. Near the outdoor kitchen, workers congregate with a harmonica, guitar and bongos, plus a tambourine and maracas loaned from the house. Those with pots, pans and upside-down buckets will hit them with wooden spoons.

A boy blows a note on his piccolo, and the racket starts, unrehearsed and awful. It’s like a marching band where each member plays something different. Emma identifies with those who tap their yogurt containers noncommittally and seem unsure where to look. The audience fans to the greenhouse, many of them smoking. Dogs skulk away, low to the ground.

From inside, where Emma has gone to spy, the workers resemble actors pretending to be children. The guitarist and drummer stop to discuss possible covers. They want real music! she thinks. She darts to the living-room stereo and flips through Jeanne’s albums, her fingers quick, then bounds the steps two at a time to her old room that’s been preserved since high school. She crouches near the dusty LPs, her hands trembling.

She’ll put speakers in the downstairs windows, and sound will bounce off the new court, reverberating between the house and the barn, where people might dance! She brings several albums to her window and evaluates the crowd, back and forth, wondering what they’d like. It occurs to her she’s stood in this spot for so many parties.

The album is dusted, the needle’s been plucked and the speakers rest against the screens. She presses the power button, ready for the horn solo on the English Beat, side B, but gets only a flat hum. She starts again, but still, no music. Checks the connections, the cords, functions and plugs.

Louise. She probably poured beer down the back.
Outside, the party has fallen alarmingly quiet. Emma needs to rescue it from turning awkward, but she hears an expectant murmur that grows over the dying bongos. Maracas scratch and a woman clears her throat. Emma glances behind her at the sad, stupid speakers in the windows.

Jeanne’s voice is good, much better than Emma’s, and she’s playing guitar. The song sounds like a radio hit that Emma somehow missed. Jeanne doesn’t need to watch her chords, and Emma wonders if her mother has been jamming with the workers all summer. Emma’s features begin to feel rigid, like a dummy’s. She hopes the guests don’t think she moved to New York and turned crazy.

The audience wants another, but Jeanne returns the guitar to its owner, who strums a ska version of “Take Me Home, Country Roads” that swells into a sing-along. They all replace “West Virginia” with “West Vermont,” lengthening that last syllable, and whoop each time. She envisions breathing fire on them and flits to her mother before others swarm. Jeanne collects the bottles, pouring out remnants.

After the guests have gone, the workers are drunk in their kitchen and Louise’s TV saturates the den with blue light. Jeanne and Emma have to clean now, or animals will come and kill the chickens. They drag their Hefty sacks along like defeated Santas.

“Why aren’t we separating the trash?” Emma says, her bag half-full. Usually they wash plastic and burn the paper.

“It’s too much work,” Jeanne says, collapsing a tin tray with her foot. She crams it into her bag, Emma wincing at the cat-food cans it could’ve been.

“Since when?” Emma says, a small explosion in her chest.

“We’re phasing it out,” Jeanne tells her.

Emma hears a video-game noise in her head, the one when your player’s been gobbled and just before Game Over.
They stash the garbage in big, silver containers, Emma feeling as though she were discovered on the Interstate and brought here as a temporary helper.

In the kitchen, Jeanne puts dishes away and Emma stands in the French doorway with no doors. They reminisce the party: who came, what tasted best, the outfits. Jeanne’s barefoot and leaning on the counter, drying silverware with the hem of the bathrobe she has on over her dress. Emma misses the jittery dance Jeanne used to do, getting people fed and to school, the refrigerator stocked, groceries in. Their shelves have just enough for two.

"Why don’t you go put on your nightgown?" Jeanne says, hanging a colander on the brick fireplace.

Emma wants to seem this comfortable in a room or a house somewhere, but fears it will never happen. Going up, the steps feel different, as if the wood were recently sanded, or her home carried off on a trailer and switched.

Early the next morning, a loud voice from downstairs travels under her door. Even asleep, she recognizes the sound of Marie, a masseuse who lives in a bus. Emma pulls on a robe and staggers to the kitchen, her scalp itchy from dreaming.

They all greet one another, asking, how did you sleep? Emma squeezes in for a glass.

"So, anyway," Marie says, continuing their conversation. "We barely came up for air."

Emma reaches into the fridge for O.J.

"And we were using our fists!" Marie says.

Emma shakes the jug and closes her eyes, thinking about pasteurization.

"So what, that’s nothing," Louise says, and the women laugh.

Marie asks if there might be any coffee left. The carafe is empty and Jeanne gets up to fill the kettle. Why Marie can’t do it? Emma thinks, though she was hoping her mother would.
Fisting, to fist. An ugly name, it sounds painful.

She puts the juice back and sees there are no more eggs. She’ll go outside for some, and they’ll think they’ve upset her and that they should censor themselves, but they barely seem to notice.

“I’m getting eggs,” she calls, the screen door banging. Alongside the house, she hears snippets:

“Recently fired... pretty moody.”

“How someone could live there...”

“She’s still adjusting.”

Dew soaks her feet, and mowed grass sticks to the wetness. Driveway dirt and pebbles, too, which she tracks onto the basketball court. Near the barn’s basement entrance, chips from the cordwood pile feel splintery.

Under the barn, the ground is spotted with sunlight. Feathers and dander hang in the air. Hens gurgle throatily, nervous, aware of her. She opens the wire door and collects two eggs for each pocket. She should contribute more to the household, she thinks. She prods a fat bird out of the way. It clucks and flutters, aggrieved. Warm eggs lie below.

Emma clasps the wire and turns, her bathrobe bulging like tennis shorts. From above comes drowsy conversation. She freezes to listen.

Two women and a man, on one of those narrow mattresses. A pot-luck hookup, they happen every time, inspired, she thinks, by the medley of flavors. There’s giggling, and she cranes for a moan or a thump.

“Jeanne’s not really a dyke,” a woman says.

The floor is dirt-packed, with old nails scattered around.

“She slept with a worker last summer,” the man says. “A guy.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” the other girl says. “Though it is sort of gross. What about Louise?”

“She’s definitely queer,” he says.
“No, I mean does she know?” the girl says.

Emma hardly hears her. She cups her pockets because she’s shaking, and leaves through a side door that faces the brook. Aspens grow on an island in the center.

This is where the machinery gets unhitched, the truly broken ones left to rust. Go for it Louise, Emma thinks. Wreck them all.

Nearby, someone treks from the outhouse to the barn, still yanking up his long johns. He seems like an actor pretending to do that, and the people inside rehearsing lines. She bends to check the birthmark on her knee. The tall grass could be a set.

She walks briskly to the main house, cradling the eggs, and climbs the basement stairs to the bulletin-board of photos. On the worker schedule and time-log, Louise has left instructions to pick tomatoes, with a spelling error. Emma surges with unusual protectiveness.

Among the pictures from other summers is that one she’d looked at for a while yesterday. He’s handsome and driving a truck with a dog in back, but the farm doesn’t allow pets, she remembers. She takes out a pushpin and imagines scratching horns or a small, rectangular mustache on him, making lonely holes of his eyes. She could also scribble him out completely, all white.

Jeanne rests against the sink, washing the morning dishes, Marie’s gone for her bus and Louise is out irrigating. Emma puts the eggs away and faces her mother.

The shoulders, ankles and hair are familiar, but the owner could be in an airport. She grabs the colander and heads to the blueberry field.

A net draped over the patch keeps out birds but traps beetles inside, so she hurries, bombed by iridescent insects. From a corner comes the squeaking of a bewildered bird. She lifts the furled edge and the sparrow flies away, wobbly at first and then steady. Letting it go was too simple, and the bird will do it again.

Jeanne and Emma cook scrambled eggs and blueberry pancakes, or Jeanne does. Emma scrapes out half the butter Jeanne sends across the skillet. Her mother is almost
fifty, Emma thinks, a person. If Jeanne were free, then Emma could be, too. She edges the fruit closer so her mother won’t forget to add them.

Jeanne ushers Emma to a chair and spoons eggs at her plate, presenting pancakes as they are done. She kisses the top of Emma’s head and says, “Mmmm, sugar.” Flicks off the burners and sits with her coffee, a murky cream swirl on the surface.

They play a game where Jeanne pretends to like watching Emma increase the size of every bite. “Check it out,” Emma says, loading her fork with pancake and egg. She shovels it in and starts to choke, her eyes tearing. It’s scary enough to be exciting, and finally she gets it down, snake-like.

“Good girl,” Jeanne says.

Jeanne gives Emma a haircut on the picnic table in the front yard, the late-morning sun not yet hot. They develop an idea-list of jobs Emma could look for after a week here, maybe two. The hair pieces dry quickly, separating like filaments of speaker wire before wind takes them. Jeanne circles, snipping at the air. “I think you’re done,” she says.

Emma stands to brush herself off and shake her head, her shadow doing the same. Jeanne dumps the water on the driveway, rivulets streaming past where Emma’s bent, loosing the trimmed bits.

“How about just a big salad for lunch,” Jeanne says. She turns on a spigot, its splash tinny against the metal bowl.

“Why, you on a diet?” Emma says.

“Never,” says Jeanne.

“Yeah, right. Trying to look good for just one, or all the workers?”

Jeanne’s expression changes from vexed to pitying, as if Emma must have a crush. They say no more about it and cross the driveway to the salad greens, where they stoop in adjacent rows and search for the mature leaves. Emma offers a handful to her mother, who
extends the dish like a collection plate. She eats a piece of spinach, the dirt gritty as glass.

“I’m probably paranoid,” she says. “I’m dating a person I don’t trust.”

“Be careful,” Jeanne says.

“Did you ever cheat on anyone?” Emma asks. “On Dad or Louise?” She hopes she seems casual and not how she feels, desperate and pent.

“You’re old enough, I guess,” Jeanne says.

I’m not, Emma thinks. They rise, facing each other.

“Dad and I both did,” Jeanne says. “In Saint Lucia.”

The year they lived on the island when Emma was five was generally thought of as the last time things were good. Emma feels as though she were seeping into the soil.

“I knew about him,” Emma says. “Not you.”

“It’s important to have secrets,” Jeanne says, but it’s not what she means. “Why should only he get to?” She turns and walks to the house, her legs choppy, knee-locked. Somehow, this feels like an argument.

The soil near Emma’s feet resembles brownies, cracked to reveal a darker, wetter brown. Emma calls to Jeanne and follows, still holding a wad of leaves. She is suddenly reluctant to join her mother in the shade. The layer that peeled off in New York is back, not to fill her out but to leach her opaque. “I want to leave for the city earlier,” she says.

Jeanne nods as if she understands, and may even be glad. Emma feels her contours shrinking and expanding, so she’s either a bland shadow or densely concentrated. Jeanne stretches her hand, which Emma, stepping onto the yard’s darker half, grabs onto.

Jeanne pulls ingredients from the shelves for a dressing, each bottle meeting the counter with a thud. She tugs the utensil drawer so the silverware jingles, smacks the mustard jar on the floor to wrench off the lid and grinds in pepper with her arms flexed, elbows up. She shakes everything together, smiling at Emma in such a way that Emma can’t return it.
The lettuces crunch loudly and Emma’s cheeks tingle from the goat cheese. She might be allergic, or it’s a cosmic form of cannibalism since she’s a Capricorn. She doesn’t believe in astrology, though Marie has done her chart.

She gets up to check the fridge for cilantro and it feels strange, having never thought to alter her mom’s food before. She holds a clump at Jeanne, who shrugs and sips her portion of the beer they’re dividing. Emma rinses the branches, shaking them on the sink, plucks the leaves and sprinkles them in, stems down the garbage hole in the counter.

“When do you plan to go?” Jeanne says. “I have to get you your ticket.”

They eat from the same bowl, their forks clanking and occasionally, getting stuck.

“I’ll take the bus,” Emma says.

“The bus?” Jeanne says, her lips glistening with oil. “You don’t want to do that.”

“No,” Emma says, “but I will.”

Her tone must be right because Jeanne doesn’t say, No, buses are vile, you’ll be next to a talker, let me pay for a flight.

While Jeanne naps later, Emma quietly calls for the Trailways schedule from a desk in the dining room. It’s too green and blue outside, fake-looking. She writes the times on a stiff piece of stationary, drawing curlicues above and below to make a scroll, then folds the paper into a hard square and walks through the woods with it in her sneaker.

She returns to find Jeanne fixing coffee, which they bring to drink in the perennial beds. Emma won’t let her eyes fall on her mother’s because she could too easily change her mind, or decide to stay for the rest of the summer.

It’s late, and Jeanne and Louise went up hours ago. Emma stands at the sink, moon-lit, drinking milk from a bottle, the yellowish cream catching in her teeth. Across the way, a faint glow burns in the barn. The truck for the Brattleboro market’s been packed with beans and eggplant, flower pails and bushels of zucchini. Whoever goes will pick
corn to bring, too, feeling for ripe ears in the dark. Emma checks the list above the basement stairs. It’s Kirsten’s market, and the guy with the dog grins at her, his face open, and even generous.

She eases the screen door closed, the night lush with fertile smells. Light shines around cracks in the flimsy plywood, which wobbles when she knocks. “Come in,” someone whispers.

Lying under a sheet is an attractive, black-haired boy who could use a shave. He has underarm stains and reads by an oil lantern, though the barn is wired. She squats to seem less obtrusive and asks where Kirsten sleeps. He thumbs at the planked wall on his right, to the dun gaps between boards. Emma doesn’t want to wake her, and this guy probably knows what time Kirsten leaves, but what might he say at breakfast?

Walking back, she calculates all she has to do before five-thirty and wishes she’d seen the title of his book. Muffled orange haze comes from the yurt tucked into the woods. Workers built it years ago, and some prefer to sleep in there. A thin creek trickles past it, down to the basketball court.

Laughter spills out the yurt’s tiny door, and she desires to crawl inside. She’d participate in the group back-rub, the henna-tattooing, whatever they do. People judge their parents to avoid becoming just like them, she thinks.

Waiting in the pre-dawn cold, she can barely make out Kirsten slouching into a coat. They drive toward a red line at the base of the periwinkle sky until turning at the dairy farm. From her road they pick up another, the sunrise behind them. The milk farm on the corner was recently sold, its cows carted off. The owners remained, in a house more peeled than painted. When Emma was little, she would visit the calves, and they’d suck her fingers with hot tongues, their mouths deeply-grooved.

“See those two silos on the rise?” Kirsten says. Her first words of the day.

The tall one has a rounded head, the other pointy and short. Family friends called them Phil and Jeanne, after her parents. The silver is tarnished in the dim light.
"They've got cellular towers in there," Kirsten says. "Like for car phones and beepers."

Crows swoop and caw above the fallow corn fields. Jeanne never mentioned the Johnsons had rented their silos, and Emma knows her mother's reasons for not telling her what they stored instead of grain were good.