Exercises for independence of the fingers| Stories

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Exercises for Independence of the Fingers

Stories

by
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B.A. University of Massachusetts, 1991

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I am a music student. Twice a week I walk twenty blocks to a second floor studio in Times
Square. Leon Kolsalv, my teacher, is dying. He has escaped war, and still, he says he will die
without comprehending his own heart. He makes me finger chromatic arpeggios for a half
hour while he leans against the grimy windows. Across the street, a theater marquis
advertises an upsetting confusion of movie titles: “Locker Room Romp,” “Glossy Inserts.”
If I miss a note, Leon makes me repeat and repeat. Three times perfect, then move on to the
next scale, but not before. At one point he shuffles across the carpet and pulls my fingers up
to his old, hairy nose. “You smoke?” he says. “I want one.”

I have never stayed in remarkable rooms, or rented beyond my means. If you must
know, room #5 in the Motel Penn has a vaginal defect in the bathroom door—a gross error
of pine planking. Could call the design “oval” or “lozenge,” but I’m interested more in the
ture nature of the door, the way such a thing can swing and stay in place at the same time.
My room costs fifteen dollars a day. The bed smells like moth balls, or the sweetness of dead
mice. This is what I say to make the scent simple.

A Salvation Army lady distributes warm stones from a metal box on wheels to
homeless girls who sleep on the benches in the motel lobby behind the glass entrance. The
metal box looks like it should be steaming hot dogs, but instead, there are these grey stones.
The girls, their mouths stuck open from drugs, pile the stones in their arms and rest with
their cheeks against one another. This is why the human heart is the deepest and most
protected organ. It is the last thing, after the fingers, after the nose, after shoulder blade—as
far as I know, in the clinical sense, it’s the last thing to cool. By the time I’m dressed in the
morning, the girls are gone, wherever, and then back to sleep at night on the benches.
Each day I hang posters on the street poles for rock bands. I smooth over other posters, cover up representations of art, bisect words so the letters hang there, stringless. At construction sites, I resist posterbing over the more exceptional cross-sections of pine exposed on the barriers. One day, in the rain, I notice a picture of you holding a banjo. You have little round eyeglasses, a baseball cap. The name of the band you’re in is Headgear, every Saturday night at Diesel Beat downtown.

For redemption at night, I go to Diesel Beat to watch you pound your banjo with Headgear. Leon Kolsalv’s scales are carved inside my ears, and even under the attrition of Headgear’s punk talent I can still hear the arpeggios. They are mathematical, heartless. I’ve become so calculated that I can predict my own dreams. I can play from sheets of music without looking, even when the pages are inverted. Stravinsky, for example, sounds exactly the same played upside-down. Once I tried this just to push Leon over the edge; I flipped the sheet of music, played everything backwards, and he just stared out the window at the movie marquis.

Yesterday my father came to New York on business. He stood at my motel door with scissors in his hands. The girls in the lobby had left behind their stones. My father commented that I was living in a river bed, then asked me for his credit card, which he cut into shards there in the doorway. Then he turned and walked away. I was raised by pirates, far from the sea.

The AMEX office is on Fifth avenue, a seven-block walk from the motel. I keep checking if there’s money on the card, but there never is. Some days I check in the morning and in the afternoon. In the middle, I wait inside a cathedral. The anticipation of money is stimulating. I meet faces rearranged for the stained-glass light. I kneel to look less suspicious,
then nap with the insult of my poverty. A cathedral is an awkward place to ask for spare tobacco.

Saturday, after the posters are completely hung, after I have arpeggied Leon to sleep, I begin the long walk downtown to Diesel Beat and intentionally pass by the department stores. There is no limit to what I’m willing to do to increase my desires. A girl in the plate glass window has my body, but she’s wearing a $700 dress. In the glass I see myself, her, myself as her, and the dress, the dress itself. Blue, insubordinate, perfect for a tonight where I plan to smile, and then stick my head in the bass bins on the side of the stage, where you, undoubtedly, will ignore me though I’m risking deafness for your love. I have sold almost everything, including a charm bracelet, which belonged to my grandmother, who gave it to my mother, who gave it to me, who sold it for twenty dollars on 25th street in order to buy food (instant soup), clothes (black stockings) and clarinet reeds. The cover charge at the punk club is waived by my legs, a trick whispered to me from the girls back at the motel lobby—more leg, show more.

And you fall for me, finally. It only took two Saturdays. You’re intrigued that I know so many titles of porn movies. We lean on the bar at Diesel Beat, the noise of the next band plowing through the room. We are practicing a sign language, we combine our fingers with our mouths. We are trying to get things right somewhere far above this cacophony.

You say, “I wanna be in your bed.”

And I say, “But I’m not in a band.”

“Not band!” you yell. “For christsake, I’m already in a band!”

I remind myself that the process of going deaf can be slow, certainly humiliating. I try to distract you from finding my truths; that I am poor, that I have memorized six clarinet concertos, that I have never fixed a chipped nail, that I have inappropriate taste in socks,
that I have a hole in my stocking just above the hem of this short skirt which, incidentally, is the only skirt I own. That I cannot feel any acute identity.

“Which group does this Stravinsky play with?” you ask, in the cab.

“A Russian punk band,” I say, at your ear, which I am enormously relieved to lick.

In room #5, as you push me against the headboard, the bones in my fingers crackle, little bone by little bone, because I haven’t eaten properly in months. My hands stumble over your back. When we’re in the shower stall, I can’t hold on. The neighbors in room #3 bang on the walls, and despite the slight violence, I fall in love. In the morning, you say,

“What is that smell?”

“Us,” I say, kicking a dead mouse under the bed.

The next Saturday, I take a gig in Bridgeport, Connecticut. The event is called: Night of a Thousand Stars. I will be paid eighty dollars, a miraculous amount of money. I get the gig from the Union. Show tunes, big band, muzac orchestrated for chamber ensemble.

To get here on train I sold Brahms, Tears For Fears, Godspell—all jammed in a milk crate under the bed in Room #5. The train ticket costs $11. A woman in a polyester red suit on the train chomps a hot dog. Next to me, a Girl Scout with cookies. I was told the best thing about being in the Union is they make sure there’s food in the green room for the performers. But there’s no food at the Bridgeport Municipal Music Hall. There isn’t really even a green room, and I think, what a name for a room anyway. Green, that’s a word for the young, for fools. The leeway at Diesel Beat isn’t green, but handsomely plastered with posters and graffiti. In the belly of the Music Hall underneath the stage, I sew up an inch long slice in my stockings and consider dyeing my legs permanently black in order to avoid any future costly holes.
The few snapped bones in my hands have not entirely healed. The pain, which is faint, arouses me. During the warm-up rehearsal, I strain to hear the tuning note. I try to give a pleading look to a second violinist, but everyone is checking their own hands. To show that I am good at this, to prove that I am not, as I may look, a crack pot from a third-rate music school, I whip off some arpeggios there in my seat next to a bassoonist, who in turn, blows out a three-octave scale faster than mine. The chair is jealous of the door, the door jealous of the window. Competitions like these are evidence we are futile and embarrassed, that we are technically no more evolved, whatever the hell that means, than lizards flashing their throats in a wasteland. I could deal with this fact, since we’re all in this together, and yet I am too dizzyingly hungry to give anyone a break.

By Monday, I’m at the AMEX office waving my union check. Look here, I say. Now we can be of some use to one another. Whether I’m ready to admit it or not, I’m done being a music student. The love of a moron seems so much more satisfying than a chromatic scale. I close the door of the AMEX office and don’t look back, the other me waves goodbye through the glass.

Headgear goes on tour, and you bring me. It’s winter. The bus has no heat. At rest stops I collect stones to pile on the hot bus engine, and then scatter them around our seats. We stay in motels in Pennsylvania and West Virginia. We sleep on fitted sheets that close around the bed like fists. We are all restless and apathetic. It is impossible to stay put, to do just one thing. In Zanesville, Ohio, a small town with an awkwardly large number of Lutheran churches, you explain that you find me cold-hearted and, at times, inanimate. I am not giving you enough of myself. I have learned to read your lips, I say, isn’t that enough?

Finally, we are all stranded because the bass player for Headgear disappears with the
bus. Troubling not because a component of the group has deserted us, but because he is, and has been since childhood, bound to a wheelchair.

Miles from here an orchestra has an empty seat, there is an imprint on a bed, a space on a door where we’re not looking, a gaze from stoned girls. Electricity still buzzes in its wires, a beach tries to sing, and nothing remembers us, especially not the motel room objects, staring blankly at each other, giving away none of their secrets.
Above the Spanish city, firemen criss-crossed the burning hills for ten days. Each morning I drank coffee, a new regime for me. An experiment. The city occupied a valley, and I had never been there before. I watched smoke shift over the hills. From a distance such as I was then, the haze appeared oceanic, like surf, and this was pleasurable. Payment for my hotel bill, and a daily amount of cash (equivalent to seven café au laits), were provided by my friend, a bride. I could not afford the unexpected delay in her wedding.

Phoning me from the hills, she said, “This act of God.”

I distinguished the sound of a house burning down behind her voice.

“The wedding?” I asked.

“No, that’s not what I mean,” she said. “These wild fires—can you imagine?—instead of a ceremony!”

I held the phone away from my head and examined the possibility of smoke sliding down the valley walls through phone lines, the same way lightening might highjack a wire.

Days later, I drove to her burnt house near a lake in the hills. The high quality of coffee options along the highway confounded me. At that point, I thought of a thousand things I wanted more than coffee. Lemon soda, for example—the most innocuous of desires. The road advanced through different stages of fire damage, and finally narrowed into steaming pine groves and plush rocks. Handsome weary firemen walked the roadside toward the water to sleep.

The bride, she directed traffic. She held a towel to her face. I wanted to help her, not with the other incoming guests, who parked their cars in piles of soot, but with her tragedy.
And yet, at weddings, there's nothing truly helpful to say, is there? Except, perhaps, your sash is askew?

Little of the house had been spared. The lake—the only available color—remained untouched. Hired help unfolded chairs on a cliff. They also constructed a guitar-shaped ice sculpture in the burnt courtyard. The open kitchen hummed with cooking smells all night: artichokes, woodsmoke, stewed tomatoes. Lit by the moon, the bride tried on her dress for its last fitting. From my smoldering guest room, she looked like a white flag.

The next morning, we all stood on the cliff in the singed grass and munched toast points that had been smudged with paté. There was no coffee, so I drank champagne. Yes, there was coffee. The fires were long gone, and the sky grayed. Certainly the outdoor portion of the wedding would commence, despite the oncoming storm, which was a blessing in those parts anyway. As the first pellets of rain dropped to the grass, I ran with an hysterical sous chef to the courtyard where we covered the beautiful ice with a protective tarp.

Then the processional. A bag pipe player stood in the vertical rain, his bow tie soggy. He had complained earlier of a pine needle lodged in his lung, but went ahead and supplied a pleasing drone, for no one instructed him to do otherwise. Free from the burden of caffeine, I was able to witness the union of rain and air, and I remarked to the chef that soon fragile vegetation would push up from the damage. Out of this wreckage, a new house. I understood the qualities of metaphor, the way it bleeds, the way we reach. Possibly, this is all we have. Even in the rain, birds returned to look for food, because it's the only thing they've ever learned to do.
Woman Falls from the Sky

They push my body from the plane, left for dead, somersaulting through the sky towards Barcelona. I distinctly remember the final shove. How could I not? In the distance, thousands of feet below, I notice the unmistakable mark of Jesus Christ on the mountain—a statue I've only recently learned is named Tibidabo, which translates, I guess, into "I give to you." Meaningless to me, really, at the moment. A statue of a man, his arms outstretched. I think: ascension, though I plummet.

I did not intend to spend my honeymoon this way.

Ropes around my feet, my hands. A towel in my mouth. From the ground, I must look like rain. A speck growing fatter the closer I get to death. I am uncomfortable, but thankfully dressed in jeans. It occurs to me now, as only it could, there would be no way to keep a skirt in proper shape when you're spinning towards the earth.

A clear afternoon, I'll say that much (sadly). In the three days I've been in town, it's been smoggy and polluted, a little bit of a disappointment. Seems someone has finally washed the windows clear of every hazy streak. Even the birds—which I can now see at a disturbingly close range—seem happily confused by the clarity of sky. The birds curve in pin-wheels, dive into cork-screws. Seeing the air like this; it makes me want to quit smoking. And I think, hell, I quit. No bones about it. I'm done with that filthy habit.

I have some time on my hands, it seems, to try to figure how I got here. Not to Barcelona. That's all in place. The spontaneous wedding ceremony, the mad dash to the bank in New York, a dreamy eight hours in the plane, and then the final approach over a beautiful city I'd never seen before. This view makes me homesick for that view. I felt very full of life then. Delirious with love, and hope—Paul and I have plenty of that, and cash too.
We barely knew each other, and I realize marriage is better left to people who've already
been through a few ups and downs, but then again, who's to say you're better off that way?
In my head, it all seems the same. You fall in love. Whether it happens over ten years, or ten
days—the latter being the situation with Paul and myself—you still end up in love. And
that's a one-way road we all walk down. It also occurs to me that life itself is like that. One-
way. No turning back. You're born, and you start walking.

I've heard a comforting fact about falling bodies. Somewhere I read that the human
heart will stop before a person reaches the bottom of their fall. I would like to know,
especially right now, how such a thing could be proved. How do you test something like
that? Still, I am willing to believe the story is true. I am living, and very soon I will be dead,
and the death will happen before my body shatters. Death before dismemberment. How lucky
is that?

I love my husband. We appeared in each other's lives as though we were
searchlights, targets. I have been a good wife, and yet I can't help but blame him for this.
When do you learn for certain what people are capable of? What is there that indicates the
condition of a man's heart? His words?

Because of what's happened, I will be asking these questions for the rest of my life.
It will be difficult to trust a soul again.

I wait to die. My heart still beats. I can say this: it's taking longer to stop than anyone
ever could have imagined.
Soak

There’s a spot on the shore where the river kicked in a dent. Where boats ran aground, and barges slipped by close enough for children to touch. At least once a year, the barges on the river sucked up a few kids, who, my father said, deserved it. I was barely eight, and it was the summer before I started wearing dresses by choice. Luke Roth led me across the meadow and through the tangled vines crowding the river bend. A sand bar the length of a school bus jutted out into the water.

This was in the afternoon. Our parents were far away on a mossy hillside. They were already sparking grills and popping open cans of beer. The sun tried to dry the wet air, but failed, so it was dank out, like wet wool. Luke said if we waited long enough a barge would pass, and from the edge of the sandbar, out there on the water, we could write our names on the side of the great boat. He revealed a pocketful of chalk he stole from the schoolhouse.

We waited on the bank in the sunshine. We colored rocks with the chalk and looked for snakes. We took off our shirts and wrapped them around our hair. Luke pinched a reed from a stalk and pretended to smoke. He had two toes. One on each foot. Where people have other toes, Luke only had clumps of skin. I had a wandering eye. Like a lizard, he said. We tried to trade deformities, but couldn’t.

We heard the rumbling barge before we could see it. “Come on,” Luke said. He pulled me up from the shore. Armed with our names and a fist full of chalk, we ran on the water. He kicked away minnows and tadpoles with a bold splash. I saw the tip round the bend and shuddered; the wall of metal and rust was high as a church steeple. I asked Luke if we could go back to the shore. “Come on,” he said. “It’ll make you feel bigger.”
From where we were standing you couldn’t see the back end of the barge. As it neared, water somehow pulled away from our ankles. Frightened muddy river. The closer the boat came the scrawnier we grew. And then the waves rushed.

"Here we go," Luke said. He held onto me from behind with both arms. "Here it comes," he yelled in my ear, and I closed my eyes. I felt the sunlight blink off. Cold blew up from the river and the roaring of the barge shook our bodies. I think we screamed.

Then the sunlight returned and burned my eyes open. Our hands were coated with crumbled chalk. "We forgot to touch it," I said. But there’s no question we came close enough. Luke smiled at his knees. Our jeans were wet from the waves. I remember thinking, so this is what we do for kicks. I remember feeling ready for the next thing. I remember thinking the waves would eat away at the mud year after year until the earth would have no choice but to let the river win.
Over the phone, a man told Alice her parents had disappeared at sea. She stood at the
bedroom window overlooking a grimy bus stop, the phone resting on her chest as the voice
continued explaining details about a search. Baltimore had grown humid and suffocating.
Alice noticed a woman across the street leaning against the kiosk, a briefcase between her
feet. She could see spots of perspiration dirtying the woman’s blouse, and inexplicably, Alice
remembered her father once saying, *stay on top of your crisis.* She struggled for a context, and
failing, raised the phone to her ear as the man said, “...it’s been three days. I imagine you’ll
want to get down here.”

Her mother and father worked as maritime salvagers in Jupiter, Florida, and it had
been a long time since the three of them spent time together. Tasks busied you. Lives
separated, sometimes so slowly you couldn’t measure the drift. Friends, family, at some point
there were things, major things, in their lives you’d never heard about before. The most
Alice knew was this: her parents retired, and for “kicks”—her father’s word—built a salvage
boat and helped the unlucky rich of south Florida rescue their sunken skiffs or run-aground
sailboats. They were often called to clean out junk-ridden channels along the intercoastal.
Last she heard, they joined up with a man named Herkey who claimed to know a few things
about treasure. The three crossed the Gulf Stream to the out islands of the Bahamas where
they searched for an old wreck her father said was filled with gemstones and gold. When
friends asked, Alice said her parents were good at what they did, and they were in love.

She hung up and began worrying instantly about her grandmother who lived in
Jupiter with her parents. The woman was insane, capable of destruction. Alice thought of
her now as a pet left for too long alone in a closed house. My god, she thought. What’s going on?

She walked to the kitchen where her boyfriend Roger stood measuring equal amounts of methadone into juice bottles lined up on the counter. She felt more important than the bottles. He didn’t look up. “Who was that?” he said.

“I have to go to Florida,” Alice said. She imagined her grandmother eating crayons “In this weather?” he asked, squinting down the neck of a bottle as if he dropped something crucial there and needed it back. Alice wondered if he had heard the stress in her voice.

Before the phone call, they had made decisions. They promised to take lessening amounts of methadone day by day until their bodies could go without. Alice wanted to tile the bathroom floor and redecorate their living room white, paint the walls, tile the bathroom floor. Projects. Roger’s hands shook as emptied the contents of one bottle into another. She needed them to stop shaking. His fingers were gray from a thin layer of silt, and they looked dead.

Both he and Alice were potters. He threw adventurous, deep pots that unnerved Alice. Her own work was tinier. She liked porcelain. Small constructions you could hold in your palm, glazed in metallics, meant to hold jewels. She noticed his shirt was unbuttoned, his hair drooping with grease, and for a moment she couldn’t remember if they were on their way to the studio or had just returned. The coffee pot stood empty near Roger’s elbow, and Alice realized they’d worked all day, and the evening was just beginning.

She described to Roger what the man from the Coast Guard said, speaking in cut-up sentences. They’re gone. The boat too. Nothing. I think Gram is on her own down there, she’s completely alone. Roger picked up a pen from the counter and stirred the liquid, not
really listening. Alice remembered how a counselor once told her that addicts don’t actually see, or hear, they only process the memories of sound and sight they knew before the addiction. That was why it hurt so bad to give it up. You had to really hear, really see. Her parents knew none of this. She was an adult, she taught ceramics, and she had Roger—a quiet man, ten years her elder, who knew when to wear a tie.

She pressed her fingers to her forehead and they felt foreign, not her own, but nonetheless necessary. Roger poured spiked orange juice into a teaspoon, then the spoon rose to her lips and she swallowed.

He said, “Three of these a day for three days, then two a day for two days…”

“I need to take the car,” she said.

“Are you sure,” he said, without the question mark.

“My parents are lost…they’re just gone, Roger.”

“I’m sure they’re are fine. I’m sure they set up your grandmother with someone…”

“Nothing’s there. The man said nothing is left where they were.”

He dusted clay from her t-shirt, looked her in the eyes.

He said, “People leave traces. You’re feeling overwhelmed. Try to hold on until you get some more facts.”

It was like that with Roger: quick, simple answers. Alice always thought of him more as her own shrink than an artist, but then again, the task at hand was the same. Take nothing, make it into something, charge money. It counted for something, this having someone, this caretaker. A simple question haunted her as she watched him measure the methadone for himself, something like, can I make it without you? She didn’t think she could. In fact, she didn’t know the first thing about how that might work, if ever it had to. He looked at her, his face smudged with dried glaze and dirt.
“People don’t just vanish,” he said, sniffing. “Even if they did, you’re in no condition for search and rescue.”

He was irritable. The kitchen looked stupid, it looked sticky and dull. She walked back to the bedroom and picked up the phone again with a slight jerk, dialed the art school, and found a sub for her classes. Then she rang her parents’ house. After several rings she heard the phone pick up, and she thought she heard words as if from another language. Gram, no doubt. A woman constantly confused by day to day facts. Alice slammed down the receiver and regarded the phone. It takes your voice out of your body, she thought, and does whatever it wants. It’s more powerful than me. She began packing a bag—two maxed-out credit cards, sixty dollars in cash, checks that would bounce. More than once she thought of what the sixty dollars could buy outside on the streets, but what was out there had for too long made her feel weak and that was going to stop. She could ween herself here in a hot apartment, or she could do it on the road. Her body would not know the difference.

She pocketed the car keys, tossed as many clean clothes as she could find into the bag then sat there in the bedroom and tried to slow her breathing. After a few minutes, she walked back to the kitchen, unlocked the four bolts on their door and stood there.

“I’ll call later,” she said.

His back faced her. He said nothing, but she could tell he was weeping. Not for her, or for her parents, that she knew, but for the days ahead. The days themselves would empty, take on a different light, and the change would not be painless. Separating, they shared the dread of similar things.

She drove their rusted Firebird south down 95 in a blur of mile markers and exit signs. The last of rush hour petered out, and she pushed the car to eighty-five and held it steady. The farther she traveled away from Roger, the more it felt like she was leaving him
for good instead of just for a week. In Virginia, she passed a station wagon plugged up with sleeping children, the mother tapping the steering wheel. Than woman’s life, Alice thought, what is it like? Within minutes the headlights from the station wagon faded as Alice sped onward, then they were gone.

She tried listening to the radio, but all the songs made her think of either her parents, or Roger. She pretended she had siblings waiting for her in Florida. Healthy successful brothers and sisters who had created trays of good food. At a time like this, she wanted people connected effortlessly by the food they chewed. Instead, there would only the grandmother, who was down there speaking in tongues. That woman who stole Alice’s clothes each time she visited. On the last trip, four, maybe five years ago, her grandmother had walked into the guest room and stood over the bed until Alice stirred, then screamed, at which point her grandmother yanked a drying bikini from the dresser knobs, padded out to the back yard and flung the suit into the canal.

Florida still seemed too far away for Alice to worry in seriousness about the grandmother, or whatever else waited for her. She couldn’t imagine what she needed to do there, and yet this was the only thing to do. People all over the world rushed to places where loved ones were lost. She thought of bouquets left by road sides, crosses built on beaches. From the sky, so many human beings had plunged, shredded by explosions. Families gathered to piece bones together into a body they could say good-bye to, anyone’s bones. Alice wondered whether it mattered in the end—which bones, which teeth. She shuddered, then calculated the miles still ahead. Driving, she felt, for the first time, the small comfort of distances.

At three in the morning, she pulled into the South of the Border rest stop, and began shaking in a deserted parking lot beneath a large neon sombrero. The kitsch, sleepy shops
made her feel sad for America, sad for South Carolina. Roger had filled a Snapple bottle with methadone and orange juice for her, and she held it up to the light. If she took only what she needed, two days could pass without the sickness. The sickness had come once before, at a time when Alice thought she could handle pain, which is the way anyone would think if they didn’t know what lay ahead. Roger located a detox program run by an expensive Zen master who required them each to wear an electronic black box over their heads for five hours a day. The man stood in a penthouse atrium and handed them the boxes and said, smiling, “It worked for Keith Richards!” By hour three Alice was heaving bile all over herself while being consumed by hallucinations of her body permanently attached to the third rail of a train track. Roger carried her in his arms to the street and they bought some pulverized Seconal off a dealer at a neighborhood AA meeting, then went home to re-think. What they purchased would keep them in shape for a few days, then they’d have to come up with the next thing. And then the next. That was a year ago, and their lives were still the same. By her own doing, she knew that, but Roger’s too. They were a team, a destructive one, but nonetheless a team.

Alice climbed out of the car and tried to pull herself together in case anyone was watching, even though the lot was empty except for a few humming semi trucks and fog. The air smelled like tacos and diesel. She searched for a pay phone on the abandoned fake streets of the rest stop and considered whether or not she were the only person in the world with a sense of urgency. Vacationers traveled on 95, or professionals in transport. People with time to gift shop.

When she dialed Roger, the phone rang until their answering machine picked up and her own voice pushed through the wires: “Hi, Roger and Alice can’t make it to the phone right now...” she hung up and dialed again. “Hi, Roger and Alice can’t make it...” The third
time Alice left a message mostly of silence. As she walked back to the car, she recalled the
day they moved into that apartment together. Someone had died suddenly, the landlord cut
their first month’s rent if they would clean up the place. The rooms were filled with the dead
tenant’s things. Books, clothes, an eerie sampling of medical waste containers. The
answering machine with the tenant’s voice still there on the tape. Alice couldn’t stand that,
or the fact the dead man, the “Hi, you’ve reached George...” didn’t have family or friends to
help with the cleaning. The answering machine, an expensive model, was the only thing of
his they saved. The rest they piled outside in an empty lot next to the building where a group
of homeless men had set up camp. The men took the dead man’s furniture, his clothes, even
the books—which they burned in a barrel—and made use of it all, a gesture that comforted
Alice, though she didn’t like to think for too long about the things people leave behind. How
objects, by virtue of being inanimate, could still remain useful, even lovable, regardless of
ownership.

She slept sitting up in the driver’s seat with all the doors locked, then woke at dawn
startled by faces in her dreams of happy children. The parking lot looked pink, and she felt
briefly relieved she was traveling. The distinct southernness of her location, a slight shift in
the barometrics, this shocked her at first, in a good way, as if she were embarking on a
vacation. She felt disoriented by pleasure, and the reasons for her flight from Baltimore
seemed impossible. Her scalp itched, and cold pain radiated from her bone marrow. This
drug prefers bones, she realized, or maybe someone had told her so, a doctor perhaps. Drink
more milk. The sensation she had under the black box a year ago seemed terrifyingly close,
and she opened the glove compartment, grabbed the Snapple bottle, didn’t measure, but
instead gulped a rough third of the warm juice, then leaned back in the seat for a half hour
until the pain stopped. Such was the way with everything: now, not the future. Solve now.
She tried the phone again, and felt hungry. Beeps on the answering machine played long, a truck backing into her ear, and she felt positioned between poles of amnesia, like what she remembered of life before her birth, or what she knew of life after her own death, a line of thinking that left her pacing the wet pavement of South of the Border jamming her open hand in the air, muttering, until she noticed there were other people now, other travelers, and so she stopped and resisted the urge to ask them what they were looking at. She resisted the urge to clarify a few things for the world at large. For example, this is not Mexico, she wanted to tell the travelers. I am not on vacation.

Confused by cravings, she wandered in and out of the opening stores, rubbing her eyes clear. A group of women peered inside the windows of a pottery store. Alice pondered what they would buy to remind them of a point in their lives when they stopped to rest at a place like this. She entered a Mexican gift “canteen” and searched the coolers in the back of the shop for half-and-half, of all things. She paid for the pint and drank it in one guzzle, crushed the carton, then handed it to a check out girl who was dressed in a Mayan rug. Alice read the name tag on the girl’s lapel. It said, “Hello. I’m Pedro.”

“My parents have been abducted,” Alice said, steadying herself. “Has that ever happened to you?”

The girl in the rug snapped gum, looked at her own fingernails, which Alice noticed were airbrushed with yellow stars. The girl blew a grey bubble and said, “You pregnant or something?”

Alice placed the wadded half-and-half carton on the counter without another word, and left with the vague understanding that the capacity for human beings to be unkind to one another was massive. She wondered why that was, what it served.
She missed Roger. On her way back to the car, she convinced herself he was safe. It came down to that. Safety. This disappearance was not unlike the way things were back when they first started dating: mysterious silences, calls left unanswered. And when he finally let her in, she accepted that their union was earned through tests of absence. She felt now like she felt then—shy about phone calls, curious about his independence, permissive. This is what she told herself as she sank back into the driver’s seat of the Firebird. He is being himself. I am the woman I was in the beginning. We are starting over.

It was the only version of the story she was willing to believe.

She kept driving. The highway grew white and flat in the morning sun. She rested her left arm in the open window. Safe for the time being from acute pain, she began to wrestle with how her parents could just vanish, and she refused to believe it could actually happen. They were experienced. The sea had been as much a part of her upbringing as the land. Her memories of childhood were filled with boats. Short trips fishing off the coast of Juptier. Evening cruises down the intercoastal in a neighbor’s troller. Nothing with bad weather, though Alice loved the details of dangerous storms. Her father read books about expeditions ruined by hurricanes, Armadas from Spain splintered by sudden reefs. Her favorite, a book with photographs of murderous waves, some a hundred feet high. Risks, adventure. They were why we kept on living, according to her father.

Alice drives and thinks of back then, the unshakable memories, the patterns carved into who she is, what she’s become, and yet at the same time, like the headlights of a car fading in the rearview mirror, the memories dim, die, slightly, as if dying were something one could do half-way.

She is ten, her father is telling her about an island in the Gulf of Mexico he visited on a three day pass long ago. Deserted beaches, carpets of sea shells.
“You can take anything from the sea,” her father says. “But the sea will always take
back something of yours.” Alice imagines the water crafting and shaping the shells, and she
thinks of things she can leave for the sea --pennies, barrettes--payment for a collection of
shells she will take home to wash.

This place he speaks of cannot be found on any map, a fact her father says he enjoys
as he spreads the charts of the ocean across the kitchen table to show her, his finger landing
on a patch of blue. Here’s the island, honey. To Alice, navigation charts look like paintings
with numbers that identify each color. Five, twenty, fifty. Sky. Sapphire. Coal. Her father
tells her to multiply any given number on a chart by six, and the result gives you an
approximate depth. He tells her that even after doing the multiplication, though, you can
never fully trust the result. Ocean floors, he says, rarely stay put.

Later that summer, Alice finds herself in the cockpit of a Chinese junk, rented by her
father for the novelty of it all—because nothing decent in life happens to people who play it
safe, because risk always involves something new, because a Chinese junk is difficult, and
difficulties make you strong. She listens to the wooden slats on the old boat creak against the
pilings of their slip. Alice’s hair has been pulled by her mother into something called a
French braid. They are going on a long journey, and there will only be salt water for bathing.
We’ll be surrounded by water, her mother says, but it’ll be a challenge to remain clean.

They leave that night under motor, and by morning, if there is wind, they will be able
to raise the sails that remain bunched against the boom, a word Alice has just learned. Her
father shouts hurried instructions to her mother as they both toss ropes from the boat to the
pilings. Alice tries to make herself look confident. She grins at people waving goodbye on
the dock, some of them holding cocktails, some of them shaking their heads.
She hunkers down into a sweater two sizes too big and leans over the stern to watch the marina lights dissolve. The water they cross is calm and black except for the wake the boat cuts open. She concentrates on how long it will take for those small waves to finally hit land, and worries it is too far, and they will die out before they get there. She listens to the way words change on the water. Right and left become starboard and port. Feet become fathoms. Speed, knots. Within minutes, the glow from her father’s lantern at the wheel is the only light Alice can see. A Budwieser sits snug inside a styrofoam nest, a cigar teeters between his fingers.

She watches her mother cross the deck and clutch the lines, a slight wind ruffling her bangs.

“Wow,” her mother says. “I’m scared, are you?”

Alice says no. She feels her mother’s arms pull her close, and smells wool and sea water, a scent that will forever remind her of the beginning of things wholly dangerous and safe at the same time. Her mother sits beside her on the deck. By now they are surrounded by black, no moon, not even the small hint of another boat on the horizon. There isn’t even a horizon.


“I’m here,” her mother says, rubbing Alice’s shoulder. “And I trust your father. In the morning, we can make pancakes.”

“What’s he doing?”

“Plotting,” her mother says. “He’s looking and plotting.”

The engine rattles the wood of the boat, their small troop sliding beneath stars Alice cannot yet name. Eventually she gets used to the dark, and she pretends that nothing is odd about floating at night in the Gulf of Mexico towards an island no one can see. She sleeps
alone, her cheek pressing the hull where water sloshes inches away, the ties of a life jacket laced through her fingers.

In the morning, there is an island. There are pancakes. A beach so white it looks as if clouds have fallen there. Palms bending, her father says, from centuries of violent storms. Her mother is already on the sand, leaning down to examine shells and everyone is happy, everyone is proud they made it here, they are all proud they are different from everyone else in the world. They stay for days in the happiness. A family, known to each other, collecting shells and fish.

As she drove down 95 in the hot sun, Alice wondered if there were other islands that beautiful. Surely, she thought, there must be. Surely her parents were out there right now, still looking.

The Firebird was running exceptionally well. It occurred to Alice that it had been a long time since the car had seen the open road, and it purred gratefully, despite the warnings from Roger. The sporadic sips of methadone managed to calm her alarm about her parents' disappearance. She dodged images of her father slipping off a sinking hull, his mouth filling with water as he yelled for help into a radio. Or the image of her mother, clinging to the salvage ducts at one point, then vanishing into the sky the next, like so many other stories she'd heard as a child about the sea. When these thoughts came, Alice pulled out the juice bottle and sipped tiny drops, and concentrated on driving, nothing else.

By afternoon, she stood, geographically dazed, at a pay phone inside a crowded food court in a Florida rest stop and listened back to her own messages on the answering machine. Her voice seemed far away, which, she knew, it was. Slowly, she thought, I am becoming disembodied. Noise from the food court made it difficult for her to hear herself
well. The messages were plain. Where are you? Why won’t you answer? If you’re there—
send more to my parents house...please.

She held down the lever of the phone for a second and watched a young boy in a
tank top shake a gumball machine that stood near a cookie stand. Where are your parents?
she wondered. Then she tried phoning her school.

An work-study student answered. Someone Alice knew she knew, but couldn’t
remember.

“Alice, I’m so sorry,” the girl said. “You must be going through hell.”

Alice pictured the studio, its high ceilings, students bent over their wheels raising art
from mud. And she pictured Roger, splattered with dried glaze, waiting there by the phone
for her. That’s all she wanted. Just one second of a connection.

“I’m fine, really,” Alice said. “I think everything’s going to work out.”

“Thank God Roger’s there with you,” the girl said.

Alice felt her head lurch, then placed her free hand to the barrette holding back her
hair. She concentrated hard on the condition of her toe nails peaking from her sandals.

Something beyond her, something like panic, clawed at her heart and she pushed it away.

“Right,” Alice said, launching into a sputter about traveling, how great it was to get
out of town. She said having parents like she did, this kind of thing was normal. The phone
in her fist accidentally hung itself up mid-sentence as if her arm decided on its own to save
her from any more embarrassing monologues. She stood waiting for her bones to make the
next decision.

Road-worn families wobbled around her like livestock. The longer she gawked, the
more people began to look less like people and more like direction itself, or the simple flesh
of inertia. Zombies, thirsty only for the blood of moving on. Alice finally snapped out of it
and bought an oversized butterscotch cookie from a pimpled teenager in a yellow “Cookie Junction” hat. As she walked passed the gumball machine, the boy from before pointed at her. Impulsively—was there ever any other way to act?—she handed him the cookie and whispered, “Your family vacation is actually miserable, isn’t it?”

The smell of her own body drifted up to her nose, and she inched away from the boy as he began munching the cookie, his eyes locked to the strings of her cut-off jeans. She was relieved to get back to the car and yet hesitant about moving forward.

By dusk that night, Alice cruised the streets of Jupiter, Florida, stunned she had made it all the way to a completely new place where everything was the same as she remembered it. The night’s heat pulsated between the peach-colored buildings, and the familiarity of the city comforted her. Despite the fact it had been awhile since she’d been there, she knew where to make turns, a knowledge that made her confident, the way anyone would feel going home after a long time away.

She stopped at a too-bright gas station on a busy road. The near-empty Snapple bottle rested against her passenger seat now like a guest along for the ride. She watched it out of the corner of her eye, decided to wait as long as she could before the next hit. The pain was close again, but not so severe, and she thought she could get used to it until it went away for good. She lifted her back-pack of clean clothes from the trunk and tried to find a place to change.

A man behind the counter handed her a stick with a key, and Alice hunted down the girl’s room next to a Dumpster on the side of the building. Inside, she tugged a paper towel from the dispenser and scrubbed with hot water until her face glowed red, and then, holding her breath, she splashed cold water over her skin and hair. With her teeth she scraped grains of old clay from her fingers and rinsed her hands. A white linen sundress lay at the bottom
of her bag, and she unrolled it, held it to her nose. It smelled like detergent, the fabric soothing. She changed from her cut-offs and t-shirt into the dress, walked back out into the gasoline night, tingling.

Her parents’ house looked the same as it always had, nothing much changed: Pink stucco, white trim along the windows. Palms and yucca and vines had grown slightly wilder and bushy. She rustled loudly through the shrubs searching for an emergency key under a rock, she pounded on doors and windows, hoping Gram was in there alive. Finally, she shattered a pane on the front door. No alarms buzzed, no grandmother screeched. Her father had once complained to her about his mother’s bad ears, how everything important had to be written. Medication schedules. Church Schedules. Thank god for the boat, he used to say. We get to get away now and then. Alice imagined the walls of the house flapping with tacked up notes. Sleep by nine, check the stove. Instructions for living.

Once inside, Alice let her eyes adjust to the darkness of that house. She could see through the shadows of the living room to the dock out back on the intercoastal. The empty dock. A body seemed stretched across a chaise lounge on the verandah, but Alice told herself she was just seeing a forgotten blanket. Beyond the porch, moonlight reflected off a black canal snaking through the yards of their neighborhood. Alice’s dress swayed against her legs as she stood in the foyer, bag in hand, a bloody sliver of window glass sticking out her elbow. She felt uncertain, and there was pain hovering now, a flying insect just within her reach.

“Gram?” she said. “It’s me. Gram?”

Alice spread her hand over the wall by the foyer door and flicked on a light. The body at the other end of the house rose from the shadows and turned.
It was her grandmother, strikingly small in size. She shuffled across the living room, a red robe flowing behind her. “Oh goodness! I’ve fallen asleep again! Welcome back Gail, welcome back.” Her voice sounded off key even for spoken words.

“Gram, it’s Alice.”

“Gail! Charming dress.”

Her grandmother stood in front of her now, diminutive, reminding Alice of a piece of dried fruit. She held a small beige hearing aid and squinted at it.

“Don’t like to wear it. I really just don’t like it at all! Why do I have to hear?”

“Gram,” Alice said. “Can you see who I am?”

“Come on in… don’t mind me. Couldn’t find for the life of me that money you left….”

The hearing aid began to buzz as if her grandmother’s ear were beckoning it back into her head. Alice set her bag down and examined her elbow, then noticed the phone on the coffee table, which seemed so far away, miles. It would take miles for her to get to the phone, pick it up, reach the person she needed to reach most. Her grandmother waddled into the kitchen and flipped on the light, opened the refrigerator.

“Let’s see,” she said. “We had a ham in here, didn’t we?”

Alice’s grandmother held the refrigerator for support, the hearing aid bleating in her robe pocket. Alice began to feel a new kind of fatigue, one thick with the promise of insomnia. The ache from her bone marrow hummed, an old annoying friend waiting inside, ready to pop out. She sat down at the kitchen table and counted to three as her grandmother babbled about seafood.

“Here we go!” she said, holding up the head of a moldy fish, half-wrapped in tin foil.

“Dolphin!”
Alice bent over and vomited on the kitchen floor, carefully avoiding the skirt of her dress. She felt it all beginning, the pain, the hallucinations. Her body felt like a plug heading for a socket. She righted herself, held to her face a cloth napkin from the kitchen table, still in its ring.

“What,” Alice said “is this you say about money?”

Her grandmother tossed the fish head into the sink and ran the faucet. The stench hit Alice like the smell of a red tide, which was oddly not nauseating, but nostalgic. Life on the beach, red water, the joy of an upturned starfish, its dead points curling towards the sky.

Her grandmother’s finger appeared in front of Alice’s lip, then pulled away.

“What? Didn’t hear you.”

“Money,” Alice said louder. “What’s this about mon—ey?”

“Before your trip…” Gram yelled. “I remembered about the cash you and Bob left for me but I…”

“Gram, it’s Alice. I am Alice, not Gail. I am not my mother.” She held in another surge of bile. Her grandmother shut off the water and turned, gave a wink.

“Missy little big town,” she said. “Well, well, well.”

It was confusing, but Alice saw in her grandmother’s face a request to go along with the delusion, any delusion, even if just to get each of them through these first few minutes, or the night ahead.

The hearing aid whined and suddenly sounded to Alice like it was in her own ear, yelling at her. She got up and raised her hand as if to say one minute please, I have to go die. She walked outside, the screen door slapping behind her.

At the car, Alice reached through the passenger side window and pulled up the juice bottle, sucked out the last of the liquid, less than a tablespoon. Not enough to help with
anything. Wind rattled the palm trees in the front yard. A light in a house across the street blinked off. It was late, and there would be no sleep for a long time. And it seemed like now, more than ever, she would need that sleep. It was the first thing on a long list of things she wanted, and yet it would be the last thing, she knew, she would get. She would have to work the list backwards—find your parents, find Roger, survive, then sleep. Somewhere on the list, now, there would be her grandmother, who already Alice began thinking of as more of a child than a matriarch of the family. Somewhere on the list too was the possibility of money, enough money to stop the withdrawal. A new thing to look for. A new burden. There were always those. She peered at the stars for a second, which looked painfully bright, then headed back the condo. Her grandmother stood silently behind the screen door, watching.

Alice rinsed her elbow in her parents’ bathroom while her grandmother leaned on the door jamb and prattled about how the money wasn’t where it was supposed to be, and how was she supposed to pay the plumber etc. etc. Alice half-way listened as she fumbled through a medicine cabinet for anything—cough syrup, codeine, anything that might keep the sickness at bay. She found a small bottle of expired Dramamine. She found an unused bar of soap in a dish. A razor that had rusted just from the damp air. It didn’t feel right to search through the house without her parents, and she couldn’t help but think of the last time everything she touched was touched by them.

“Gram,” she said. “Has anyone been here? Called?”

“What’s that?”

“Coast Guard,” Alice said. “Did they talk to you?”

Her grandmother put the hearing aid in and smiled.

“Yes,” she said. “The plumber. He called, he’ll be here. I’ve got it under control, and I can tell you don’t think I do.”
“I’ve driven a thousand….”

Her grandmother placed a hand on her shoulder.

“You must be hungry,” she said. “Let me fix you a little plate of ham.”

“I really, really, *really* don’t want any ham.”

Alice grabbed a bottle of Triaminic and went through the house switching on all the lights. She looked for phone messages, hints, a number for this Herkey person, though she knew no last name. In a ceramic bowl by the phone—a tray, in fact, she had thrown—she saw a business card from the Coast Guard, and a post-up note that said, Plumber wed. @ 4p—$150. She recognized her mother’s handwriting. Her eyes began to feel like swirls. She swallowed everything in the cough syrup bottle, and it came right back into her cupped hands, the green liquid spilling to the carpet.

“Oh my my, Gail. Honey,” her grandmother said, rushing from the kitchen. “I suppose you’re *not* hungry. Sit down for the love of god!”

Alice heard the phone ring. She lunged to pick it up, but there was nothing except a dial tone. She wondered, oddly, how that tone, its steady depressing hum, ever came to be. Where did it come from? Why couldn’t it be something better? Birds chirping. Waves on a beach.

“I’m fine,” Alice said, head in her hands. “Maybe you should go lie down in your room.” *Leave me alone,* she thought.

“The money, oh, and that leak….”

Alice looked at her grandmother. “Well,” she said, irritated. “Since *Gail’s* back home now...then, *Gail* can go ahead and pay the plumber herself!”

Her grandmother grinned at the ceiling, pulled the hearing aid from her ear and it began to sing in her fist.
“It’s not working, dear…” she said, then sat down. She took up Alice’s hand.

Together their skin looked awkward, as if they came from animals widely separated in species. Alice’s spine buzzed. She thought, are we all that’s left?

“I know who you are,” her grandmother finally said, and then: “Am I dead yet?”

“No,” Alice said. “Do you feel dead?”

She realized if there were two of them, then they were not dead. Death was isolation.

She imagined that in death there were no marriages, no unions. Just you. Dead and alone, without your things.

Her grandmother’s eyes watered, the skin below caught the tears. “I’m told they are gone,” she said. “I suppose that’s why you’re here.”

Her hair was barely styled, a detail Alice remembered she always took pains to see to, even in old age. Her father, in fact, used to make sure someone came to the house every other day for that very task.

“I have to take my medication,” her grandmother said. They both leaned back on the couch.

“I do too,” Alice said, exhausted, the metallic drip of cough syrup scratching down her throat. She wondered how long adults could go without medication of some kind or another. She also understood, in an instant, what was next. There would be work. There would be work tomorrow, and the next day and the next. Regardless of her condition, she would have to sit and look at a map of the ocean, she would have to make sure her grandmother’s hair was fixed. A woman on this earth deserved at least that. Possibly, she would have to stay here in Florida in the house of her parents for the rest of her life. She sat up from the couch and looked at the phone.
“I’ll get us some food,” she said. Let’s start with that. But her grandmother was already asleep. Alice lifted her and managed to loosen the buttons on her nightshirt. She found an afghan, one she remembered sleeping under so many times growing up. Before she switched off the lights, she watched the phone for a long time. Receiver in its cradle. Silent.

That night Alice roamed the house in her dreams. She slept in her parents’ bed, stared for hours at the small pots she’d sent down as presents. One glistened in the light from the street, another held rose petals by her mother’s side of the bed. Several times Alice sat up, confused about whether or not she’d been walking. The drug was leaving her, and it was taking its time, whacking its way out her body. At some point a porcelain bowl the size of a human heart, unglazed, white, burst open with dollar bills. She wrestled with her grandmother for the cash. Alice sat up in bed again, then fell back and imagined driving the streets of Jupiter with a fist full of cash, her grandmother belted into the passenger seat. They slowed at every corner, studied with grave, deliberate gazes, every dark figure. The car heater blasted while Alice jammed the knob from hot to cold to hot with only the result of more intense and higher heat. Her grandmother leaned from the car window like a thirsty dog, shouted to the figures who receded into the shade of streetlights—“Bolsas? Tiene dos? We have money!”

This is no place for a child, Alice thought. Then woke, then drifted, then woke again.

By daybreak, she stood in the moist backyard grass, arms folded around her chest. Her dress, drenched with sweat, clung to her skin. She felt bleached by the daylight, and more even-keeled than she had in the past forty-eight hours, although she knew the worst had yet to come. She was getting a break from somewhere, a rest, before more struggle. I must learn, she thought, to appreciate these when they come. Contractions, she figured. It’s
like those. A small boat puttered down the canal, fishing poles spiking in all directions. An old man leaned back against the stern, a coffee cup in one hand, steering with the other. He raised the coffee cup as he passed Alice, and she waved back. It looked like the man had always been on the boat, always had the coffee cup in his hand. It struck Alice that this person had found a way to live that he never wanted to change.

She couldn’t remember how she got to the back yard, or if, for that matter, she’d been standing there all night. She examined her hands and spotted slight wrinkles slowly emerging in ways she’d never noticed before. When she looked up, she saw, in disbelief, an iguana perched a few yards away on the dock.

“Hey, hey,” she said.

The iguana was apple green, achingly bright, at least a two feet long. It turned from her and crawled to the edge of the dock. She heard it slide into the canal with a small splash, the green body slithering away just under the surface. Alice worried he didn’t realize he was swimming, that he was confused… then again, maybe these things did swim and she was seeing it for the first time. Her mother had once complained about exotic pets from the neighborhood that escaped and showed up in the oddest of places. Parrots perched on gas station pumps. Monkeys loping down the highway. Creatures should stay where they belong, she said. How can we save them from extinction if they’re getting run over by cars?

Alice lifted her dress over her shoulders and let it drop to the grass. She wore only a bra, underwear. Anyone looking might think she was wearing a bikini. I like my body, she thought. She stepped to the wood dock and kneeled down. I’m going to find that money, she thought. It’s got to be in that house somewhere. The realization felt sinister, like she was stealing. But from whom? Her drowned parents? The water in the canal was clear. Small fish that looked like pencils huddled near the piling. They won’t bite, Alice thought. I’ve learned
what bites, and what doesn't. She lowered herself to the water and began swimming after the
iguana with the intention of hauling back on dry land, if such a thing could be done. It was
something small she felt certain she could do. The water felt the best anything had felt in a
long time. Far off, she heard a telephone ring, but she wasn't ready just yet to answer.
Reservoir

Hillary and I parked on the boat ramp to Duck Lake at eight o’clock sharp during the first false spring that season. In northern Michigan, there were always four or five false springs and you fell for each one. It was nightfall and the radio on her father’s got nothing but a jazz song picket-fencing in the static. I wore a stupid dress. In the daytime it’d been warm enough to go without stockings, and I got ready for the night thinking it would stay that way, but instead, a wind came down from Canada and made my knees blue.

“This town,” Hillary sighed. “Small enough to fit inside your mouth.”

“Why do you always have to be so dramatic?” I said.

“This is a dramatic time,” she said, but I couldn’t tell if she meant it.

She grabbed a can of hairspray from the glove compartment and doused her head, spiking her bangs over her eyebrows. Then she sprayed a cloud of perfume that left us both coughing.

We had told our parents we were going to a basketball game, then out for ice cream. Instead, we drove a mile or so out to the lake, where we sat waiting for two kitchen boys from our high school cafeteria who we’d paid to buy us a jug of Gallo Rose. We told the kitchen boys we were models. A lie. It was our last year up there, and it didn’t seem to make any difference whether we lied about things or told the truth, or for that matter, whether or not anyone believed what they heard. It was the last year for everyone in that county. All the residents were being relocated so the State of Michigan could dam the Little Betsie River, let the valley fill with water—something, they said, that would help more people than it would hurt. Within a year the spot where we parked, the tire tracks in the sand, the new moss growing under the snow, it would all be swallowed by water. The good trees would be
logged, the school down the highway would be leveled, the hospital too, and then month by month the river would grow to join the small lake. Everyone had to leave, even the dead.

The kitchen boys—Patrick and Avery, brothers close in age—lived in Buckley, a town of pig farms and trailers just inside the county line. One stop sign no one ever stopped at. They told us they were in their twenties. Which is to say, they weren’t boys. Not by a long shot.

Hillary leaned up to the rear view mirror and ran her hand over her face. I heard a branch snap.

“Rabbits” Hillary said.

“Coyotes,” I said.

Hillary clucked her tongue in disgust.

“They’ve been gone for decades. Don’t you know anything?”

“Why are we friends?” I asked. “Really, why?”

She rolled down the window and adjusted the mirror.

“Habit?” she said.

We’d been friends since before we could read, and still, I don’t think either of us knew a single decent thing about the other. We were linked by secrets—her nose job, a stolen math test, the time we fooled around with each other once at camp and felt disgusted. I wondered if those things were enough to keep our friendship alive after the reservoir split us apart.

I pulled the skirt over my knees and shivered. The northern lights spread faint and spidery over the lake. A few ice-fishing huts dotted the snow. Most of them were starting to tip and sink in the thaw, and no one was coming to pull them off that year. I imagined the heavier parts falling through the ice to settle on the bottom. In five years, after the water had
reached its high mark, a family might drive by the reservoir and look at the new birds and
the new beaches and say, now that's a beautiful lake. They'd have no idea what we'd all left
behind.

I thought like that for awhile, then tried to re-focus on my attire. I fiddled with my
bracelets—some mine, some Hillary's—then said, “These guys aren't gonna show.”

She ignored me, took out a Benson and Hedges Ultra Light 100 and sparked a
match. The glow looked comforting.

“I don't think Marilyn Monroe ever really smoked,” Hillary said. She inhaled and
checked the rear view again. “Here we go!” she said

I turned and watched the pines behind us light up, then turned back again to pretend
like I didn't care who might be driving up.

“They're harmless,” she said. She gave her bangs a last spritz of hairspray, opened the
car door and stood in the oncoming headlights with her arms outstretched. I zipped the
leather jacket she'd lent me, got out the passenger's side. I smelled cold pine sap and
gasoline. The kitchen boy I remembered as Patrick jumped down from his truck.

He said, “Hello, ladies, hello!”

I'd never looked too closely at the kitchen boys before. They worked in the
dishroom behind the cafeteria—I'd only seen them from a distance. Close up, Patrick was
handsome. I liked his lips. The other one, Avery, his face looked sprayed with acne. He had
a rocky nose, a mustache. A radio face, my father might have called it.

Patrick held up a six of Strohs Light.

“Thought you girls might want company with your vino!” he said.

I grappled for a fake excuse, found nothing.
“You bet,” Hillary said. She took one of the beers, turned to me and shrugged. I already felt clumsy standing next to her. I wondered if that was the only thing Hillary liked about me. I helped her look good by being less good-looking.

Patrick held out a hand to Hillary.

“Nice to properly meet you,” he said, then faced me.

“Beer?”

“No,” I said. Models, I thought, drink wine. I reached in the driver’s side of the car and grabbed a plastic cup. Avery said something quietly, like he didn’t want to be heard.

“Got more of those?” He said, a little louder.

“Ave’s looking to experience some finer things,” Patrick said, slapping his brother’s back. For a second I thought maybe Avery was “slow” and that’s why he was so quiet.

I tried to feel comfortable in the wind. Patrick unscrewed the cap from the wine we’d ordered, held it up to the headlights and the jug lit up pink.

“A fine year,” he said. “I’m supposed to say something like that right?” Everyone smiled at each other, nervously, then I looked back out at the lake. I wanted to ask them, where are you going when they dam the Betsie? Not because I cared, but because that’s all people ever talked about anymore. Where are you going? Chicago? the U.P.? The question was a burden, and the answer, regardless of the details, was always: we’re going away.

Patrick poured some wine in the glasses, then dropped the jug down into a pile of dirty snow. We stood between the cars and made small talk. Then Avery, the quiet one, finally said:

“So. My girlfriend. She wants be a model.” He flipped through a wallet with his thumb. “Here we go, here’s a picture of her.”
He held out the wallet proudly. “Maybe you know some people she can call.”

“She’s beautiful,” Hillary said. “Look Darla,” her elbow jamming my side. I could barely see in the dark, like looking through a screen door. Patrick flicked a lighter and held it close to the photo, close to me. He smelled like beer and woodsmoke, and I liked it. I tried to catch his eye, but he was focusing on the picture of the lit up girl.

“There ya go,” Patrick said. “Avery’s honey bunch.”

“Nice,” I said, “She’s really...blonde.”

Avery tilted his head, pulled the wallet away from us and held the picture up to the headlights.

“That’s an old perm,” he said. “Now she’s got some kind of frosting job. Pricey. Had it done in Traverse City.” He guzzled the wine. “I drove her there for it,” he said.

I didn’t think Avery’s girlfriend was very pretty at all. Teeth jutting in all directions, a pudgy face. Maybe he saw something I couldn’t see, perhaps he saw potential, and for a second, I felt jealous. Not that she might have potential, but that she had that kind of love in her life. Hillary and I fooled around with boys in basements and trucks and ice-fishing huts and hunting cabins and rec rooms. The Biology lab, a laundry room, Hillary even did it once in the bathroom at Denny’s during senior brunch. Once you start doing things like that, there’s little opportunity for true love in a small town. I couldn’t even imagine what it might feel like, but I wanted to know.

“What’s your girlfriend’s name?” I asked.

Avery smiled as he slid the photo carefully back into its sleeve.

“Mindy,” he said, still looking at the wallet. “Mindy Burke.”

“Now that’s a glamorous name,” Hillary said.
The lake groaned from the thaw, a pinging sound ricocheted under the ice. I heard Hillary say, “Check this out.”

I watched her strut down the boat ramp. She let her jacket slide off her shoulders.

“Pretend this is a runway, okay?” she yelled. “Come on Darla, let’s show them our turns!”

I wished I could join her, but if I did, I’d of probably slipped, cracked open my head. Patrick applauded as Hillary strolled ray of the headlights, spinning every few steps and balancing herself on the slippery cement.

Avery tapped my arm. “How about you?” he said.

“I’m just a face model,” I said. “Not tall enough for runway work.”

“What about nudies, ever do that?”

Patrick stopped clapping and punched him in the arm. “Shut up,” he said.

“What’s wrong with that kinda question?” Avery said. “I’m asking on account of Mindy.”

Hillary walked up and pulled another beer off the sixer, the northern lights waving in the sky behind her.

“We started out in the nudies,” she said.

I wanted to punch her the way Patrick punched Avery, but then again, we were on the same team, and if one lie came undone, they all would. And you don’t want to be out in the woods with two kitchen boys from Buckley who you don’t know when something like that happens.

“Maybe we saw you,” Patrick said. “I mean, we don’t look at those things much, but…”

Hillary pointed at me. “Miss November,” she said.
“No shit!” Avery said, truly impressed.

“Holy Moly,” Patrick said. “You must be talented.”

I smiled at Hillary just to catch a glimpse of her mind. She nodded, raised her hands like she was proud of me.

And so, for the night, I pretended I was someone who’d once been Miss November.

I have to say, I was pretty proud. Hillary was really pushing the issue. She was telling lies that were bound to back-fire, but then again, the kitchen boys could have just as easily been playing along. Either way, the lie started to feel fun.

“Exciting, eh?” Hillary said. “We’re stars, all the way up here and you know us.”

A grin, then another Benson & Hedges appeared between her fingers.

Avery nodded, “Famous people cigarettes,” he said.

Hillary flipped her hair, looked back at the boat ramp. Patrick leaned from the truck with his lighter and its tall flame. She sucked on the cigarette and blew out a stream of smoke the length of a small car.

“You know,” she said. “We’re not going to be models all our lives. You tell this to your Mindy. You can’t rely on modeling. You have to have something to fall back on, and that’s why we’re going to be lawyers first, models second.”

“Medicine for me,” I said, which I thought up just then.

Hillary held the cigarette right to her lips, but didn’t take a drag.

“What about you guys?” she said. “What are you going to fall back on?”

The question hung between the four of us. I heard another branch pop and I figured if something out there was going to attack there were enough of us now to survive. When it had been just me and Hillary in the car, I didn’t think either one of us could save the other.

(pause)
At some point Hillary switched to wine. At some point it got unfairly cold. I’ve spent a lot of time trying to figure out what would have happened if we didn’t go back with them to their house in Buckley, but we did. Hillary was a born leader. Good looks, spunk, and uncanny ability to keep people’s attention on her at all times, even when she fell silent. I suppose I wanted to be close to whatever she was capable of doing. Otherwise, we might have just gone back home and gossiped about this or that boy. But we didn’t.Patrick said, “We have a snake, ever seen a boa?” And off we went to Buckley.

Hillary took Patrick in her father’s car—a decision process that left me sputtering a request to ride with her—and I rode with Avery in the truck. The inside had the same woodsmoke smell as Patrick, but there was something else. Dishwater, I think. And grease. Not the kind of spot for Miss November. The highway skirted Duck Lake, and when we picked up speed Avery lit a smoke, took a drag and handed it to me like he’d known me for years.

“I’m not trying to pick you up,” he said. “In case you’re nervous about that.”

I crossed my legs, tried to strike a pose. “I’m not nervous,” I said.

He turned up the heat and glanced at me. Then he told me a story about where we were going.

“A girl like you probably never seen something like it. Old farm. Right on the lake. Hah, right on the lake this year, after that it’s right under the lake. Anyway, one time, I was six, seven maybe, out in the barnyard doing god knows what and I heard this lawnmower in the sky. A lawnmower, you know....”

“I bet it wasn’t a lawnmower,” I said, handing him back his cigarette. He was talking more than I expected.
“Damn straight it wasn’t a lawnmower. It was an airplane, but I’d never seen one. A single engine job heading right toward the house. I screamed for my folks—they’re dead now...”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Thanks. Anyway, I screamed for my parents who were swimming, real nice spot, I can show it to you, except it’s dark now, but anyway, it wasn’t dark then and they were down there swimming, so I took off shouting, I ran and screamed it’s crashing! it’s crashing! it’s coming!...”

Avery stopped talking and shifted gears, tossed the cigarette out the window.

“So I’m running,” he continued, “and the plane is roaring and thundering and I burst out on the beach and see my folks on this rock in the shallows and they’re, you know, naked. I mean, I didn’t think they were people at first... then I saw a real hand and a real leg! I couldn’t figure out what the hell they were doin’ but for some reason I didn’t think I was supposed to see it, and I just stood there screaming about the plane it’s coming! and it looked like Dad was attacking my mother, shit, you never really want to see your own mother’s hips when they’re gyrating like...”

I had to interrupt.

“Don’t need to hear that part,” I said.

“Whatever,” he said. “I’m just saying, it wasn’t a lawnmower, and it didn’t crash. My folks were makin’ love, that’s all. The plane zoomed right over the lagoon outta sight. Gone. Who knows why it was buzzing our farm.”

I smiled in the dark. It was a nice story. Ahead, I could see the few lights of Buckley bright in the emptiness.
“You still cold?” he said. He reached around back and grabbed a blanket. I spread it across my knees, turned up the radio a little and wondered where his girlfriend Mindy Burke was tonight. I wondered what Avery told her he was doing. I pretended he told her the truth, and she was the type of girl who’d let him do whatever he wanted, and that would make him love her more.

Then, to piss off Hillary, I said: “I’m no model.”

Avery had his arm resting on the steering wheel. He fiddled with the tip of his mustache.

“I know,” he said. “I know that, but I don’t think my brother does.”

I wanted to ask how he knew, but I didn’t care, really. It was more than I wanted to know about anyone—how they learned what they learned, where they got their insights, or worse, what was so transparent about my own act.

“You know about your Hillary and him, right?” he said. “That’s been going on for awhile. He’s head over heels.”

I adjusted the blanket.

“I didn’t know,” I said.

“Well, now you know, Now we have a secret,” he said, and by that time we were slowing down and turning. The headlights flashed across a farmhouse with a slanted front porch. A stubbled meadow spread off to the side down to the lake and I saw a barn at the end of the drive and a chicken coop leaking light onto the snow.

Hillary’s car pulled in behind us, and Avery cut the engine and we sat for a second, looking at nothing. All I could think was, Hillary knows this house. She knows about the snake. She’s seen this all before and didn’t say a word about it to me.
I got out of the truck and left the blanket on the seat. I smiled into the lights from Hillary’s car and decided to see how long she could go trying to make me think this was the first time she’d been out to Buckley with a kitchen boy.

“Wow!” she said, slamming her car door. “Smell that! It’s finally spring!”

Patrick pointed at me and said: “You cold Miss Novem-burr?!”

I thrust out my chest and said, “Not a chance. Let’s see this snake.”

We went inside the house. First the kitchen—dirty dishes piled in ways I’d never really thought possible, then the dining room, scattered with cobwebs and cafeteria clothes and bright light, then the room with the tank. The empty tank. One long snake-less fish tank with nothing in it except a log and some Petoskey stones—smooth rocks embedded with fossils that look like eyes, rocks that you can’t find in any other part of the world except there, and as the boy’s shock about their escaped snake set in, I thought: someone should start saving these stones before the reservoir drowns them.

Patrick leveled a stack of magazines, Hillary stood giggling in the corner with a bottle of Everclear. I wondered where she got it and I wanted to know what she and Patrick talked about in the car. Avery peeled off his coat, smacked the floor with it. And me, I stood there trying to figure out what Miss November would do.

Patrick yelled at Avery: “She’s gone. You feed her?”

“No, it was your turn.”

“You didn’t feed her?”

“It’s your fucking turn, Pat!”

I looked at the ceiling and said, “You guys don’t really have a snake, do you?”

Hillary climbed on a chair and hunkered down, hugging her knees, then ran her fingers through her hair.
“They have a snake,” she said. “I believe them.”

Avery stomped into a bedroom, lifted up a mattress, kicked through a pile of clothes.

Patrick opened a beer that had materialized out of thin air, tipped it to his lips and drank.

They searched the house and the basement and I got up on a chair like Hillary and we waited for a long time. These were the things that bound us, these moments of absurdity, these stories that years later we might try to remember how to tell. I wanted her to thank me, just that, I wanted her to say thanks for coming along so I can be prettier than you. After a while Patrick clomped across the dining room and looked again into the empty tank like maybe his pet had been there all along and he just forgot to look close enough. Then he said, “We’re checking the coop.”

Avery collapsed on a dusty couch while Patrick fumbled around for a flashlight. I was cold, shaking, and as Hillary and Patrick left to go look for the snake, Avery said he had some clothes I could wear if I wanted. In the bright light his mustache looked more woolly crud-ridden than before and this made me sad.

“Come on,” he said. “We’ll go out there, you’ll like the chickens. All girls do.”

He grabbed some clothes out of a drawer in the bedroom, handed them to me.

“Should fit—Mindy left stuff here. It’s clean,” he said.

A pair of off-white jeans with fat red stitching. A olive turtle neck with daisies. The frightening fashion aesthetic of the beloved Mindy Burke. I remembered Hillary once saying “beauty suffers,” but that night it was just too cold to go on dressing like Miss November.

“You can change in here,” Avery said. “I won’t peek.”

He shut the door behind him and I stood there for a second in the bright light and looked around his room. I kept expecting a snake head to pop out of a sleeve, or slink from a pile of crap on the floor. There are things in a man’s world women should never see.
Wadded things. Avery had wadded kleenex, wadded Burger King bags, moldy liquid in coffee cups, posters of KISS, of AC/DC, a calendar with a unicorn leaping across the wrong month, and other things, obvious gifts, like a frame decorated with beads holding another painful photo of Mindy Burke. And the floor, scattered with the same information sheets about re-location that we had at our house, only my father kept them filed neatly, like they were important, when in fact, seeing the way Avery dealt with it, leaving was just an afterthought.

Once I was dressed, I felt warmer, but shy about wearing a stranger's clothes. I folded my dress up into a square and slid it into the pocket of Hil's jacket, put that on, and went with Avery to search for the snake.

We trudged across the barnyard and cracked through the half-frozen mud puddles. Stars pierced through the northern lights, and we could hear Patrick yelling. Avery explained that, in a few days, he and Patrick had to make arrangements to have their family graves moved to a warehouse down in Flint, where the coffins would be stored and then buried again in the next town they moved to. Avery said this was giving Patrick a short temper. He was developing a sensitivity to losing things.

"Guess nothing's permanent," Avery said.

"What about Mindy?" I asked. "She sounds pretty permanent."

Avery picked up a stone and hurled it at the barn.

"We've been through for awhile," he said. "I lied about her still being my girlfriend. Truth is, I was asking the modeling questions 'cause I'm the one wants to get into it. Don't laugh."

"I'm not laughing," I said.

"You think Hillary can help me out?"
I felt a pang hearing that. Didn’t seem fair Avery was sharp enough to figure out I
wasn’t a model, but could still fall for Hillary’s lies. It occurred to me that we believe not
what we want, but what we must.

“Sure, Avery,” I said. “She’s got a lot of contacts.”

We were standing outside the chicken coop, and I could hear Hillary laughing inside
uncontrollably. Avery opened the door for me and we ducked in, light and heat flooding
into my face.

“Dar-la!” Patrick said. “Here chicky chicky!”

Birds blanketed the floor of the coop. Little ones. Big ones. The smell stung at first,
but I got used to it quickly. The light shone bright yellow and you couldn’t see a single floor
board for all the chickens.

“Wow,” I said, and laughed, because it was funny. Their dirty white heads pecking at
each other, jerking in circles, clucking.

“No snake,” Patrick said. “I thought for sure that sucker’d be out here.”

Hillary put her hand over her mouth and pointed at my clothes. Then she smiled in a
way that made me think I would always be less than her, that I could never win, especially
when I was being true to my own instincts, which in this case was simply to stay warm. I
watched her tip back the bottle of Everclear, the liquid spilling across her cheeks as she
chuckled.

I leaned down and tried to pick up a hatchling, but it sprung from my grasp and
plopped down into the chickens, all of them moving in waves and currents. Hillary laughed
again.

“You know,” she said, through a chortle. “This is giving me some ideas for a photo
spread.”
She pulled out a cigarette and held it, pouring for Patrick to flick his lighter. Her hair dangled over her nose, and then it didn’t.

A strand caught the flame from Patrick’s light and a blue flash crawled over her chin, then to the top of her head until her hair began hissing. I watched her stare at my jeans with an expression that looked like she was trying to answer a question, but couldn’t.

The rest of us laughed at her and I felt secretly glad she was making a fool of herself. Patrick slapped his knee and hooted and until we realized Hillary’s hair was vanishing before our eyes. I can’t remember who lunged first, but I like to think it was me. At least, that’s what I say when people ask. I remember Avery running for the truck as Hillary stumbled outside to the snow, her sweater swarming with flames. She was screeched and hyperventilating at the same time. Chickens escaped out the open door and ran hysterically across the yard in all directions and squawked in the black smoke as Hillary rolled on the ground from side to side holding her face.

Patrick emerged from the shadows with a bucket and dumped water over her, and then another bucket’s worth.

“Stop it!” I said. “I think she’s out.” Steam rose off the snow and I wanted to touch her scalp which looked purple and scaly. She sat up, her mouth foaming a little.

“God,” she said. “I’m very drunk.”

“Are you okay?” I kneeled. Up close I could see white and red streaks across her face.

“No,” she said, “I’m not okay” her eyes wandering.

I couldn’t tell how bad it all was and I couldn’t stop staring at her hairless head, grateful this hadn’t happened to me, embarrassed to feel only that. Avery stumbled out the driver’s side of the truck. He was taking care of business. He packed a blanket with snow
and rolled up Hillary. As he lifted her, she said my name, and I didn’t know how to answer. Patrick sat down in the mud, put his head in his hands.

“I think we need to get going,” I said. I knew we going to the hospital, but for a second I couldn’t remember whether it was still there.

Avery yelled from the truck for Patrick to get up off his drunk ass. He revved the engine. I felt a clock start to tick. I put my hand on his shoulder as he wept. “We should hurry,” I said, but Patrick just sat there on the ground shaking his head. Avery hauled me in to the cab and told me to hold my finger in Hillary’s mouth while we drove because he thought she might be in some kind of shock and he worried she would swallow her tongue. I liked being back in the truck with Avery. Hillary smelled sweet against my shoulder, and I didn’t feel a thing except a kind of sick relief that from then on I would be the prettiest one.

No one spoke as we sped down the highway, but I like to think we were all wondering how the valley would look filled with water. The chickens lost in the forest, scampering up the banks as the waves rushed through the trees, or the snake gliding alone in the current for the rest of her life, looking for something to grab onto, or the tourists driving by the beautiful reservoir with no idea what they were really seeing. Hillary and I scrunched together against the passenger side door. I opened her mouth and rested my finger in the corner of her lips, which I didn’t want to do at all, but after a minute or two I got used to the wetness, and understood for certain I was helping her stay alive.
Accidental Drowning

It was four, maybe five in the afternoon on a Sunday, and no one had bothered to flip on the lights. Ethan and his girlfriend Amy—domestic partner, she liked to call herself—watched the rooms grow yellow, then dim. Their kitchen table swarmed with coupon inserts from the paper, empty beer bottles, a plate of half-finished lasagna, and few cd cases, including a copy of the Ramones, which Ethan had played just to annoy Amy, the same way a child might snort in your ear because you said not to.

They’d been discussing the small matter of leaves collecting in the backyard, but the topic mutated into a legitimate fight, and raged on with the day while bottles of beer, then scotch, got ripped open until a point where Ethan—the eldest of four sibling more successful than he—found himself staring into the freezer with a blank heart, his lint-covered flannel making him itch.

He felt underdressed for drinking single malt.

Behind him he heard Amy muttering in the dusk, outside a sleet storm paused. She said, “We need to stop shouting.” Then he heard nothing, a terrifying silence, and he worried the silence would wake up everything in the world. And if that happened, he had no idea what to do next. He remembered their son Wade, who was upstairs, sleeping under an old quilt, his eyes puffy from his own all-day tantrum.

“Right,” Ethan said, thumb to his mouth. “Shhh.”

He poked at the trays in the freezer and listened to Amy whispering at the kitchen table.
“You need to tell me why we’re not married, Ethan. I need an answer.”

He didn’t answer.

This was an old issue. A nagging flaw. After nine years, he couldn’t manage to see marriage as anything more than a kind of death, and these arguments with her always ended with that topic, the familiar hole in the ground all the petty fighting unearthed. He felt tied to her through guilt, comfort, habit—but not love, unless those things were love, unless those things were enough of a reason to stand in front of God and say I will, I will. Maybe those things were reason enough. Maybe they were the only reasons, but still, he couldn’t make the final leap.

If he turned, he knew he would see her shaking an empty glass, glaring at the dishes in the sink. A look that said, another drink, another life, we’re not going anywhere. He closed his eyes, the freezer-air funneling around his ears. The landscape there inside that place a man searches when he shuts his eyes was not that much different than the ice box: unorganized and shadowy, like the interior of a clenched mouth.

“Baby,” she said. “The door?”

Ethan opened his eyes and scratched at the freezer walls for some ice shavings, but gave up and let the door ease shut. He filled his tumbler with tepid water from the faucet, then shuffled away from her to go bag the old leaves that carpeted their backyard. She had said, “The leaves are rotting. That means mold, it means Wade’s allergies. Can’t pretend the leaves don’t exist, okay? Please go out there, just go look at that out there, Ethan.”

Out there, on the back porch, that spot it seemed he’d taken so long to get to, he let the noise of Amy’s voice slip out of his head. Bare maples creaked, and the air of suburban Lowell, usually sooty, was painfully clear. Amy was right. It was completely possible that by not raking the yard, he’d caused their son’s sinuses to clog up like a gutter.
The cup in his hand found its way to the porch railing. He stepped down to the frozen grass and pushed out a cloud of breath. Out of the corner of his eye the yard looked covered with shards of broken beer bottles, and he worried for a split second the fight with Amy had been worse than he remembered. He turned to look back through the door at the kitchen and saw her figure stumbling in the shadows, drunkenly clearing the table, taking care of things. Then he examined the yard again, and the wet leaves looked exactly like wet leaves.

Their house wasn’t much different than the rest of the houses in that part of Lowell, a town he would’ve never come to if it weren’t for him and Amy getting pregnant and having Wade. Ethan fixed furniture for a living, and since Amy said he could do that anywhere—and of course she was right—and since she claimed she had an “excellent shot” at a middle management position with Pierpoint Technologies, and since it was about time they started “going somewhere” with their lives, and since they’d been moving around all over the country for years but not, in her words, actually “going anywhere,” then Lowell, of all the gray, dismal cities in the world, Lowell was where they needed to stay. Out of breath, he kept thinking. This is how we live our lives.

In the seven years he and Amy had lived in Lowell, he’d met only the Phons next door, a pair of Cambodian twin sisters who ducked around the streets like birds. “Hello, Ethan,” they’d say, shouting from their driveway or waving from the street. Always together, never apart. He looked up at their windows, watched the tv light flash and he briefly wanted to crawl between them and sleep, if only to feel looked after for one moment.

Ethan kicked through the sodden leaves in the backyard and felt with his feet for the rake, which, as far as he could remember, hadn’t been touched for over a year. Beyond the farthest edge of their lot a wooded zone sprawled for miles to the banks of the Merrimack
River. This was where teenagers drank two-dollar six-packs in the summer, where cars abandoned themselves, where rainwater gathered in deep pools over the frozen mud, where trees spit off their limbs, settling forever on the forest floor, forgotten. Ethan imagined those woods behind their little house, from the sky, looked like a wound cut into streetlight of the neighborhood. A good place, he thought, to hide a dead body.

He’d never consider actually doing such a thing, but occasionally he thought he could use a line like that to scare up his own fatherly instincts and convince Amy that in order to protect their son from the dangerous neighborhood they’d simply have to move, maybe west to the Berkshires, or somewhere north of Nashua. Somewhere wilder. Somewhere anywhere.

The maples glistened from the sleet. He wanted to bring down the trees once and for all. Why not? Amy had sputtered lists of things he’d yet to finish; why not start this project, then, sever the trees, eliminate the whole leaf problem right at the source? He felt giddy by his own conviction to do something so decidedly violent.

There was a corrugated metal shed, snug against the line of the woods, that hadn’t been opened since the time over a year ago when a freak New England hurricane sent three diseased tree limbs from the Phons’ yard down onto his back porch. Amy, always quick to solve problems, sawed through them the next morning with an old Stihl they borrowed from Ethan’s brother. Wade had dragged the limbs one by one off to the woods to build what he called “lodging,” something Ethan was confident he didn’t want to know about. Amy stored the chain saw in the rusty shed because she wanted it far away from the house in case Wade got curious. Amy was smart like that.

Ethan buttoned up his flannel all the wrong way, then set out across the leaves for the shed. By the time he reached the edge of the yard, he forgot what he’d been so
convinced he had to do. He noticed a skinny path into the woods, cleared no doubt by his son, that circumvented an old lawn mower, some compost, then snaked in through pines and brush into its own murky seclusion. A path Ethan considered checking out, just for kicks.

But then, driven by a rare surge of clarity, he remembered it was much more important to quickly and severely dispense with each tree in his backyard.

He lunged for the rusted door of the shed, pulled with all his weight, an act which produced a shriek that shot directly into his head. He paused, and tried to determine whether or not it was noise enough to wake Wade. Wind crawled under his shirt, and the quiet dark of the sleepy backyards made him briefly frightened. But then again, he was about to fire up a chain saw. How much is there in the world for a man to fear if he’s holding one of these?

The floor of the shed was cluttered with dirt and dust, then stinky droppings, left behind from Lowell rodents he didn’t really want to think about. Ethan bent down and dragged the Stihl into the leafy yard. It felt heavy, about as heavy a toddler. Can I do this quietly? he wondered. When he looked at the metal and plastic, he wasn’t sure how to make it all go, and he thought about Amy. He gawked at the sky for a second, let his breath scatter across the dusk. Then he spit at the ground, lifted the saw and pulled the cord.

Elsewhere, Ethan’s four brothers were napping with mediocre dreams in front of the tv news, or they were doing dishes, nice dishes, matching sets of dishes, from wedding presents. That was one good thing about weddings. Maybe the only good thing. Amy, back in the kitchen, he knew, was hating him. The Phons were no doubt side by side knitting something warm. The little world of others was marching on without him.

He tugged at the cord. It sounded like a beast, wounded, then dead and silent. Ethan stared at the machine in his hands. The bar was rusted. He shivered from curiosity about
what it would feel like to really slice a tree in half. Where would it fall? Where would they all fall? He doubted he could go through with the plan. But having dragged this thing out, he wanted, at least, to get it started. He pulled again. The engine, probably the size of a giant fist, turned over and clattered, this time coughing up a loud puff of dust and smoke. In the distance he heard an occasional car swish by. Neighbors he didn’t know. Someone running to the store for a gallon of milk, maybe, or a video. Sunday night things. The world gearing itself up for another week.

He pulled a third time, pressed the throttle and the chain spun, sending him back a little on his heels, then forward. The handle shook his arms. He walked towards the thinnest tree, guided the saw towards the trunk, and felt the chain begin to gnaw at the bark. He waited for Amy to come and stop him, but she didn’t show.

Sawdust flew up in his face and his mouth. He kept leaning at the tree, trying to make a steady cut. He grew used to the whine of saw, and he pushed harder, changing the tone. “Yes sir!” he yelled. “Here we go!” The bar disappeared almost completely into the tree, then stalled or choked. Ethan let go of everything and stumbled back. He waited for something to happen. Then he walked up to the tree, pushed hard on the trunk, and it began to creak, then tip, then fall. Right onto the metal shed. Kaboom.

Ethan shoved his hands in his back pockets, and chuckled. He considered the color of the dusk, which he wanted to call neon, but settled instead for “triumphant!”—a new color. It was colder than he remembered from a few minutes ago, and he shook his head, gave up. He left the saw there and started back for the porch, his mind empty.

When he looked up, he saw a strange man leaning against the open screen door, flanked by the bare porch light, one naked foot curled over the other, both arms crossed at
the chest. Ethan understood this was a lover of Amy’s he’d just now had the misfortune to
learn about. Thank you, he thought, finally. And then, at the same time: I’ll kill you.

“Daddy?” the man said.

Ethan placed his hand on his heart, jogged to the porch. “Hey kid!” he said.

He leaped a stair up to the back door.

“Come on,” he said to his son. “Get inside, where’s your shirt?”

“Mommy’s sleeping on the table. What are you doing?”

Ethan stood in the mud-room and peered into the kitchen. The overhead light was
on now, making everything bright as a grocery store. Amy had crawled onto the table where
she lay flat on her back, her arms and legs dangling off the sides.

He felt his son’s hand on his cold skin.

“Is Mom dead?” Wade asked.

That hadn’t occurred to Ethan. Amy possessed a determination about passing out;
when it had to happen, it happened, and it didn’t matter where. A few shots of scotch, and
she became narcoleptic. He actually liked that about her. He found the quality endearing.

“Your mother’s not dead,” Ethan said. “This is just good for her back.”

His son lingered in the doorway to the kitchen as if he didn’t want to cross over into
that wreckage. He covered his nose with the palm of his hand and sniffed while he looked at
the kitchen table.

He mumbled, “My bed’s wet.”

Ethan heard this less as a cry for help and more as a fact Wade was stating to anyone
or anything. He could have just as easily been speaking to a shoe.

“That happens,” Ethan said.
He closed the door behind them and led his son through the kitchen to the dark living room. Now that there’d been a nap so late in the afternoon, Wade would be awake for centuries. Ethan grabbed a t-shirt and one of his own soiled flannels from the laundry basket by the basement steps—more chores, undone—and told Wade to get dressed, find some socks. Then he went to the kitchen to double-check that Amy was indeed alive. Her mouth hung open, her eyebrows were arched.

“Aim-ee,” he said, his face right up to hers. He couldn’t hear her breathing, which startled him. What if death, he thought, arrived as un-dramatically as this? A belt quietly snapping under the hood of a car, a light bulb flicking off inside a vacant room. He wasn’t sure whether or not it was okay to act so friendly to her again so soon after the fight. There was always that odd chunk of time when Ethan felt he should be neutral, an hour or so, he figured, when you didn’t admit a damn thing about being wrong or right. He imagined during times like those—post-fight, pre-make up—that they each lived as they would if they had never met, their hearts closed, their priorities temporarily rearranged in a new order, such that something as simple as a grocery list could suddenly become a righteous act of individualism.

“You,” he said, nudging her elbow. “Hey.”

Nothing.

After what felt like an hour of neither of them taking a breath, his cheek flush with her cheek, him leaning over the table in the white kitchen light, finally there came a shortle from Amy’s nose that seemed to kick start both their breathing mechanisms all over again.

Satisfied, Ethan left her there instead of trying to transport her upstairs. The day, the night, it’d all been shot to hell, and folks, in Ethan’s opinion, were just going to have to lie
where they fell. In the living room, Wade had put on the t-shirt and the flannel, which hung to his knees. He was hopping up and down in the shadows, struggling with a sock.

“Were you making more wood for my house?” he asked. A tuft of blonde hair fell over his eyes, and Ethan reached to push it aside.

“What’s that?”

Wade put his foot down, folded his arms and looked at the floor.

“With that saw,” he said. “Are we getting more logs for my fort?”

Ethan had momentarily forgotten about being outside in the backyard with a chain saw and a half-witted goal. It also took an embarrassing amount of time for him to remember that his son was referring to an on-going project of tree-fort construction. He realized Wade was probably building the tree house in order to escape his real house. Ethan couldn’t blame anyone for wanting that.

“You need more wood?”

“Of course. I want to add on a solarium.”

“A what?”

“Solarium, for plants.”

Ethan sat down and rested his hands in his lap. He looked around the dim room at all the unfinished furniture. A ghostly chair with half a back, an upturned end table missing a leg. Triage, he thought. My fault. The mention of a solarium made him want to see his son’s work out back in the woods, mostly because he worried Wade might be better at completing things than he.

“Why don’t we go make an appraisal,” Ethan said.

“I wet my bed.”
“I know, I know,” he said. “It’s not gonna get any wetter. Put on your boots, and we’ll go take a look at this potential plant room.”

“It’s nighttime,” Wade said.

“Not really,” he said. Ethan lifted back a bed sheet draped over their living room window. The sky had cleared, he could see a few stars beyond the streetlights, and the half-moon was bright. He turned to his son.

“Hat, gloves and Daddy’s flashlight,” he said, patting his son’s back. “Go.”

Before Wade, Ethan and Amy had spent their first years together traveling in an old Ram Charger from town to town, motel to motel, all across the country. Ethan never tired of motels, their anonymity, and Amy said she liked them too, because he liked them. She was twenty and rebounding from a bad time of things with her family, with college, and she seemed broken to Ethan, and pretty. The longest they’d ever stayed in one place was two months at a tourist cabin in Alpine, Arizona where there were only three actual locals, and a steady tide of tourists. Amy was good at finding work whenever they needed it, and Ethan was good at calling one of his brothers whenever Amy couldn’t find work. In Alpine, Amy helped out at the gas station a couple days a week, and Ethan fixed up some busted beds and tables around town. The room they lived in was decorated with cowboy garb—antlers, maps, and a bizarre painting of two sheep dogs tied together, or tangled together, in a prairie, howling. At first the painting hung by the door, then Amy moved it above the bed where she said the dogs would take care of her dreams. It was the kind of comment that Ethan would find annoying at any given time before meeting her, but since it was her making the comment, and since she had some college background, he let it slide. Years later Ethan formulated the opinion that in the beginning, there are always red flags, and lust, no matter what you do, makes the flags look white.
After they settled into the house in Lowell, Ethan thought about those days. He thought about all the women he ran across late at night in the various motel bars after Amy drifted off to sleep, or theatrically passed out, back in their room, snug between crispy sheets. Not a single barfly ever compared to her, and he believed he’d turned into the man he should be: free, but connected. High, but grounded. By the time Wade hit kindergarten, that satisfaction started to come unglued, revealing a darker version of himself, of Amy, of their lives. He began to suspect it’d gotten too late to be anything more than what he was, and it made him feel old.

He had a lot of time on his hands while Amy was at work and Wade was in school. For about a year his workshop in the garage stood idle until finally Amy told him her boss, the vice-president of marketing at Pierpoint Technologies, a fairly well-off Mrs. Honzel, needed her entire mahogany dining room set refinished. Mrs. Honzel, twelve years older than him. Rayon jogging suits, high cheek bones, plucked eyebrows. She smelled like roses in a way that Ethan didn’t like. But when she pushed him down one day on the work bench in the garage and kissed at his ear lobe, then his neck, Ethan started to like the way she smelled more and more.

It went on like that for months. Afternoons, lunch hours, office parties—first the mahogany dining room set, then the bedroom set, it went on and on until Ethan began to feel like he had two wives, neither of whom he was married to. Then, one evening, Mrs. Honzel sat in the living room, naked except for Amy’s bathrobe, which aggravated Ethan because that kind of thing made him do more laundry than he wanted.

She said, “Make a choice.”
And he said, “Amy, I guess.” There was more he wanted to say, like, it feels good making love to you, but it feels bad too. Or, she makes me feels safe, you make me feel dangerous, why can’t a man have both?

But it was late. Amy and Wade would be home any minute. He wanted to be alone on a road in the desert driving fast to the Rolling Stones, maybe smoking a joint. Mrs. Honzel dressed with a few hems and haws, said she was disappointed, said she would give Amy a raise and hope it would spur her to move away from him. She hung the bathrobe back on its peg in the bedroom, stomped off without another word, then disappeared down the street in her crimson Prelude.

That night, after Amy bathed Wade, and bathed herself and wrapped herself in the robe and slid next to Ethan, she rolled onto something that poked through to the skin of her thigh. She sat up and dabbed at a blotch of red on the fabric and Ethan, hearing her small yelp, remembered suddenly a thousand things he’d forgotten to undo about that afternoon, about the past months, about, frankly, so many things, and before he had a chance to say a word—as if words could prevent what was about to happen—he saw her kneeling on the bed, her face scrunched into a combination of frowns and questions and tremors as she stared into her open hand.

“What are these doing in the pocket of my bathrobe?” she said. And then his name. Like a gunshot: “Ethan?!”

He looked. What else was there to do? He looked and saw two pearl earrings, studded with diamonds. They were clearly Mrs. Honzel’s. Ethan knew it. Amy knew it. She worked for her, Ethan fucked her. Both of them had good reason to be familiar with Mrs. Honzel’s expensive accessories.
He was trying to stop a volcano with his thumb. His mind heated with possible ways out of this. He smiled.

“A gift?” he asked, “From me?”

Ethan slept in the workshop alone for a month. Amy transferred to a different department at Pierpoint, and everything went back to normal, on the outside.

Since then there’d been questions chasing each other around in Ethan’s head. The questions woke him up in the middle of the night, wrote themselves across the ceiling of their bedroom in the form of fears. The fear that guilt alone kept him with Amy. The fear that their child might not be a good enough reason to stay together. Or worse, the fear that she would retaliate at sometime when he least expected, at which point he would finally get the freedom he wanted but had forgotten how to enjoy. At best, Ethan found the most he could do was to do as little as possible and avoid taking a step in any direction. He knew if he stood still, nothing else would collapse.

He followed his son through the backyard, the beam from the flashlight bouncing across the shiny branches and tree trunks. Their messy lawn, the fallen tree—it all hid in the darkness.

He watched Wade crunch over the leaves in the crappy boots he’d had now for a second winter. There was a hole in one heel. It was time to go to the mall. It was always time to go to the mall. But despite the dark and the cold and the lousy footwear, Wade seemed excited about the jaunt in the woods, and it felt more constructive to Ethan than clearing the yard of dead leaves. They passed a graveyard of rusted mowers and wheelbarrows into the section of woods that gave way to clearer paths. He was impressed by his son’s ability to move through the brush so knowingly. Ethan tried to remember the tree houses of his own youth. There’d been one he attempted to build with string and few stray two-by-fours when he was six, but he lost interest quickly because it took so long and he just left the debris
hanging from the branches like a wind chime. Maybe that’s the only one there’d ever been.

Ethan never saw much use in hiding places until he became an adult.

Wade walked far ahead, swinging his arms and bouncing off fallen logs. The moonlight left the branches snarled in shadows on the frost.

“It’s right over here!” he yelled.

Ethan watched him stumble on the wet leaves, slide, then balance himself. The boy broke into a run and skidded across a clearing Ethan had never seen before. The moon lit the open area in shades of bright blue and purple. It looked like a small swamp, or a meadow frozen over and crammed with brambles.

“Hold up!” he yelled.

Wade turned and squinted.

And then Ethan couldn’t see anything except branches and sky. He felt himself falling backwards, his feet snapping down into what seemed like it should be a coat of thin ice crusted over some mud, but instead, it all turned into several feet of water that came up to his hip and then, humorously, his chest. He thrust out his arms while spikes of cold cut into his skin, something ripped the breath from his lungs. This isn’t funny, he thought. Where did this water come from? He jammed his feet under the frozen muck, searching for something solid, finding little else but more depth. He tried to laugh, then holler. Chunks of ice scratched at his chin. He heaved his arms up to the side of the hole and tried to curl his fingers around the edge of what he’d determined was, in fact, a damn deep pool of half-frozen flood water, but the ice gave way, too thin to hold a father.

“Oh no,” he yelled. Words slowed in his throat. He tried to breathe in, couldn’t, tried again, couldn’t. Every piece of clothing had turned to cold lead. Again, he hoisted his arms up to the surface, and again clods of ice and twigs gave way.
He wanted to say, help, but he felt confused about who would come. He thought oddly of the Phons, who Ethan imagined as people who sat around all day waiting for situations like these. The pain from the cold water was exceptionally fierce. He started feeling parts of his body he never really knew could feel pain. The back of his arm, the top of his ankle. He tried to keep his head back, tried to tread water—keep moving, he thought, this is not a way a man dies. Even though he knew this was exactly how people went. Accidental drowning, man under ice unable to survive in time for help, idiot father swallowed by the earth. The headlines reeled in his mind. Accidental drowning? He thought: how many people, for christsake, do this on purpose?

The beam from the flashlight jumped frantically across the canopy of trees above him. He threw his arms towards a bare tangle of sumac.

"No," he said.

He tasted something metallic, blood, he figured, then coughed on a mouth full of gritty slush. Someone should go for help.

Ethan understood his legs had turned into stumps of some kind, and he told his mind to tell them to keep moving. He felt angry this much water had collected in the woods where children played, where anyone who didn’t know any better could fall into a chasm filled with frozen run-off from the nearest river. He spotted the flashlight again, then he saw it bobbing in the water near, of all things, the wet head of his son who was now swimming towards him with authority. Ethan tried to wave him off, but before he could say anything, he felt the boy’s thin arms grabbing onto his neck and pulling and pulling until the two of them were both on solid ground, resting against a log in a silence punctuated only by the occasional creak of a dislodged slab of ice.
Ethan crawled to his feet and dragged Wade into a standing position. The boy trembled, unable to speak, grey in that light. Ethan said, keep moving son, keep moving. Wade just stood there, his one droopy eye locked on the flashlight still floating face up in the gash their bodies had left in the ice. Ethan bent down and couldn’t feel himself bending. He lifted his son, even though he couldn’t feel the actual contact, a dead hand holding a dead hand, an action his muscles knew to do as if from some distant memory that muscles always have.

He carried the wet boy down the path back to the house, blinking the water out of his eyes. Inch by inch, vessel by vessel, blood warmed through Ethan. They ducked around the fallen tree in the back yard and Ethan tried to remember when that had happened, and by who’s hand. He heard Wade say, “My jeans, wet again.”

“We’re okay,” Ethan said. “We’re okay.” And he kept saying it, pouring whatever warm breath he had over Wade. But he knew they weren’t okay. Something would have to give after this, he would have to take responsibility, take charge of the way things were going. He stood at the back door, the bald spotlight flanking the mess, his son in his arms like a child bride as he struggled to open the door, but couldn’t, his fingers red, and stiff, and bloody. On the other side of the door there would be frightfully decisive answers. Ethan cradled his son, banged on the window. He watched Amy rise in the light of the kitchen and tilt her head as if she’d found something strange in her hands and he became distracted, dizzyingly, by the thought that life would not let him go on any longer as a man entirely incapable of love.
Fish Stories

Peg’s father orders them cheeseburgers because it’s the only thing the motel kitchen can make so late in the day. He promised her they could eat crab or shrimp—things you don’t eat at home—but tonight, he says, they can only get this. The two of them sit with their gray, rubbery dinner on the verandah of an American-style restaurant that’s attached to a place called Casa Palancar on the shore of a dusty island off the coast of Mexico. Peg is jittery from the noisy flight. She is fourteen, and her father is single for the first time in twenty years.

He pokes at the food, which makes her feel sorry for him. It’s been six months since they’ve seen each other. Without her mother there, her father looks peculiar to her, a stranger she’s known all her life. The patio flickers with citronella candles, and Peg worries their late arrival has caused problems among the staff who sit at the bar nearby, heads on their arms, watching.

The resort isn’t anything like the way her father said it would be. Not much else than a few cement hotel rooms, and the cement American restaurant with a blue cement awning. Peg thinks the place looks like a public swimming pool, without the pool. No palm trees, no boys. But there’s an ocean. Her father puts down his fork and sighs, moves to speak then shakes his head. Finally he stands up and pans his arm across the view like a game show hostess. “Darling? This is what it’s all about!” He eases back into his chair without turning from the sea. He has brought her to Casa Palancar so she can learn to scuba.

Peg knows he’s probably brought her here for other reasons as well. Her grades have been dipping in algebra, and her mother complains that Peg should have more friends for her age. The school nurse has sent her home several times with a note expressing concern
for Peg’s sleeping habits. Most nights, she stays awake until sunrise, and during the day—
during algebra especially—she slips into hard sleep. She likes to stay awake, she likes to listen
to nothing, and is disappointed when she misses out. After consulting with Peg’s mother, her
father called long distance to the school, explained his daughter needed to be excused for a
week in order to attend her aunt’s funeral. No one had actually died. Peg doesn’t even have
any aunts. And last year, when she was excused for two weeks, the family’s beach house
hadn’t really burned down. These are just stories her father told, and Peg has listened to
them all her life with a mix of fascination and dread.

She watches him grin at the water, the last rays of sunlight tapering. His feet rest on
the porch railing as he leans back in the wicker chair. A tequila glass is upside down on the
table. Peg’s never tried tequila, and the smell makes her stomach shift. She watches the
ocean darken in the dusk like old blood. Peg understands that somewhere the water meets
again with the land, but from where she sits, it doesn’t seem possible. As far as she’s
concerned, that water wraps around the entire earth.

“Can I go unpack my clothes?” she asks.

“Sure, kid. Door number three,” he says, tossing the key across the table.

“What are you gonna do?”

“Right here. I’m gonna do right here.”

She takes the key and shuffles across the sandy floor toward the bungalows that
spread along the shoreline, relieved that so far there’s been no talk of serious things. But she
can sense the weight of what he has to tell her, the details of why he left home, why he left
her. It’s information Peg doesn’t want about herself, or about love or about what can go
wrong. That news is something she wishes adults would keep to themselves.
Her room is separated from his by a wooden blind. Two single beds line the walls on her side, and there’s a bright red and yellow stitched carpet covering the concrete. Peg puts her suitcase on one of the beds, shakes the blankets on the other. She hangs up a single dress, which she brought along because he told her to bring mostly casual things, but one nice piece. Before her parents split, Peg always packed with her Mom the week before family vacations, and they counted socks and underwear for each day they’d be away, usually taking along too many nice clothes. This trip happened so fast she barely remembered to bring a bathing suit. Peg’s father exports pencil sharpeners, plastic coffee mugs, pins, anything you can slap a slogan on. He was always leaving for other countries and coming back with stories and trinkets. She knows his work is erratic, possibly foolish, and so if someone asks, she’ll make up a better version. “He writes travel guides,” she might say. That’s why we went to Mexico. Peg also knows, from what her mother has said, that her father hides money so people won’t find it. It will be years before Peg ever understands the complexities of debt.

The room begins to cool. Peg reads through a copy of Seventeen that her father bought for her in the Miami airport. She flips the glossy pages and wants lipstick, longer hair, cleavage, but the want for these things makes her feel hollow and restless. She hears her father come into the other room and stumble to the doorway. He peeks from the blind. “Okay, kid,” he says. “Early start. Night-night.”

She tries to sleep. Her father breathes heavily on the other side, and Peg turns on the ceiling fan to drown out his wheeze. After awhile, she takes a shower under the unusual, eggy water. There’s a chameleon darting back and forth on the tile wall. It frightens her at first. She thinks it’s gross, a sign of uncleanliness. She pokes at it with her big toe and the chameleon switches between the colors of terra-cotta and skin.
In the morning, Peg and her father eat eggs and thick slabs of toast out on the verandah. Others are there now, all of them old. Golfers, Peg thinks. These people should be golfing. Her father spends some time turned around in his chair, talking to an accountant from Dallas. They jabber about reefs the size of skyscrapers “out there.” Here’s what her father says: “Twenty-five years of diving and I’d never seen a shark. I’d seen fields of eels, you know, waving in the current like grass. I’d lost a hose to a barracuda the size of my Caddy, but I’d never once seen a shark until that time right out there last year. He came up, looked at me. I just looked right back at him, and he swam away.”

Peg narrows her eyes and tries to remember if her father has ever owned a Cadillac. “How do you know,” Peg says, “if the shark was a ‘he’?”

Her father turns to her. “Women don’t look you in the eye like that,” he says. “Eat up.”

Peg watches her food, tries to summon an appetite. She expected something fancy, but this, this she could get anywhere. The sunshine heats the concrete. The water, lit up by sun, is the color of a blue Easter egg.

“Peggy,” her father says, toast crumbs teetering off his lips. “You need to meet Mike. He runs the scuba side of things here, but you and me aren’t going to tell him this is your first time.”

“That’s just perfect, Dad,” Peg says.

“Here he comes, kid. Don’t be a smart ass.”

Mike slips through the tables and greets the other guests. He’s wearing a white cotton sweater with the Casa Palancar logo stitched on the breast pocket. A palm tree growing out the mouth of a fish. The first palm tree she’s seen in paradise. Peg pushes her body lower into the wicker chair. She doesn’t want to meet new people. At school, other
girls have called Peg a *bitch*. She listens to the word rattle inside her head, but she knows it's not her, she just doesn't enjoy strangers.

"Over here pal!" her father yells. "Right here!"

Mike squints. He smiles at Peg. She notices that he is neither black, nor white but something in between --his hair dirty blonde and twisted close to his head in knots. The first person she’s seen at Casa Palancar younger than her father. She even considers constructing a crush on him, something to occupy her imagination, but he’s ugly. Leathery face, pock-marked. Young, but pock-marked. He doesn’t smile, but instead twitches.

"Hola, friends," he says. "Good morning."

"Mike, this is my daughter."

Mike takes Peg’s hand. "Well, it’s a pleasure," he says. "I am Miguel, or Mike...I from California, and I live here now."

"Hello," she says. She blinks and watches her father.

"How do you like Mexico?" Mike asks.

"It’s very hot," she says.

"But the water, the water is always perfect."

"Oh, I don’t know that it’s *perfect*," Peg’s father says.

"We have some fun dives planned this week."

"Maybe it’s warm," her father says. "Not exactly perfect."

"Okay, okay," Mike says. "We will dive in the warm imperfect water."

She feels the other guests watching them, hears their geriatric chewing. They will be of no help. Her father’s plump hand plants itself on her shoulder, and he clears his throat.

"My daughter’s not *technically* certified to dive," he says. "But she’s been out over a dozen times with me in the States."
“I’m sure she’ll do fine with the group, then,” Mike says.

The three of them grin at one another, each understanding something different about the moment. Mike tugs at a clump of hair. Peg catches a whiff of sweet coconut oil, which makes her think he is trying to hide some other kind of smell. She understands there is something dangerous about him and that her father is incapable of seeing it.

“Boat goes out tomorrow at eight o’clock sharp,” Mike finally says with another twitch. “Until then.”

He moves on and greets the other guests. Peg’s father leans close to her ear.

“He’s a nice kid,” he says. “But if I told him the truth, I’d have to pay for some kind of course for you.”

“I’m going to drown,” Peg says.

“No drowning allowed. I’m teaching you some basics this afternoon,” he says.

“That’s why I brought you down here, pumpkin!”

And that’s the end of the discussion. Peg’s mother had said, well, maybe your father has the right idea, maybe this will do you some good. Time alone with him, another country. She said, You’ll learn something, that’s for sure, Christ if I know what.

Peg is curious about the nearby town which she saw in the distance last night, the harbor and sea front looking carnival-like to her with neon and twinkling lights. She wants to go shopping for postcards, even though she has no one to send them to. She wants to try pineapple ice cream, which the airplane stewardess said she should try, but they don’t have any ice cream like that at Casa Palancar.

So instead of shopping, Peg spends the afternoon in the dim bungalow with her father who demonstrates each bit of dive gear, rapidly explaining the various functions with
vocabulary bent on acronyms. Tuck your BC under the 2-5 ballast, make sure the HP port clears. . . At one point he falls silent, reaches over to pat her hand.

“Are you getting all this, honey?”

“A little slower,” she says.

He smiles.

“You’re my trooper,” he says, and she fears an oncoming lecture, a talk thick with rambling explanations and parental advice. Peg would rather pretend there are no dangers and no complications. She would rather listen to her father lie than to hear a speech about love or sex or Algebra. But there’s no such speech, only a pile of quiet scuba gadgets splayed across the carpet, staring at her.

“Okay then, let’s review.” He picks up a long black hose with a metal contraption on the end. “This,” he whispers, “is where you breathe.”

At dinnertime, Peg’s father makes her drink coffee. It’s stiff, oily coffee. “Strong and sweet like life!” he says. It makes Peg’s tongue feel like felt. They wait and wait. They wait until the workers clear off all the tables after the other guests have gone back to their rooms drunk. Then they carry the diving gear down to the edge of the dock. Peg understands they are constructing a secret, and should this go badly, the secret will reveal itself in embarrassing ways for both of them.

It’s colder on the water, the gusts fierce and salty. Peg’s hair blows out in every direction and she holds her head. Her father reminds her the weather doesn’t matter when you’re under water, nor your appearance. In the moonlight she slips out of her shorts and t-shirt, holds a towel over her bathing suit to stay warm while her father buckles her into the
weights and the air tank. The tank is heavy, like something has sprung from the sea and captured Peg by the back. She kneels down on the dock to steady herself.

“It’s too heavy,” she says.

“You won’t feel it in the water. Hold still.”

Her father cranks open a valve, hands Peg the mask.

“Ready?” he says.

“No.”

“You used to swim fine, Peggy.”

“This isn’t swimming.”

“It’s all here,” he says, leaning under the wind. “Do this for me, pumpkin. I want us to have a great week.”

“It’s too dark.”

“I’m jumping in now, Peg. You gotta give it a go.”

“Why do I have to do this?”

“Jump with me, or try it on your own.”

Peg tries to breathe normally. She bites the mouthpiece and sucks on the air. It tastes like tin and makes it impossible to speak. There’s nothing to say anyway. She thinks about running, but that would be horrible.

Her father leaps off the dock and splashes into the black water.

“Okay, kid!” he shouts. “Lean forward with the weight!”

Peg scoots to the dock’s edge, dangles her fins. She estimates six feet to the water surface. Make him happy, she thinks.

But it all goes wrong. Peg holds the wrong things on the way down. She’s fourteen, she wants to practice kissing, not this. The force of hitting the water knocks off her mask.
Her nose and mouth flood with black waves, she pushes up for air, but can’t breathe from the cold wet shock. Peg panics and sees eels even though there aren’t any eels. She tries to hold her head up, tries to yell, but nothing comes out. Her father swims to her, grabs the floating mask and clears the water from her air hose. “Keep this in at all times!” he shouts, pushing the plastic back in her mouth. He yanks the mask over her eyes, stretching her wet strands of hair, he’s saying, “You’re doing great, just breathe.” And then he clutches both her shoulders and shoves her down under the water. He pulls on her arms. All Peg can hear is her own blood lurching through her body. It’s pushing fast, like a high river. When she breathes, air fills her lungs this time instead of water, but even the air frightens her. She pumps her feet to flick herself free from the gear, to dislodge herself from the water itself, but everything is tied onto her too well. Peg sinks her nails in her father’s waist. She pulls on the air and exhales. She continues to panic, but she gets the hang of it. She has to.

Next morning, Peg’s eyes are seeing funny. Her body had been so exhausted from the diving lesson that she fell asleep instantly on top of the covers. Now, the morning sunlight transforms everyone into photo negatives. Her father’s accountant friend brings two women from Miami to breakfast, and they join Peg and her father. Peg enjoys the fact that the women look like ghosts to her at first. Her father gives her a kick under the table. Be nice, she hears.

One of the ladies talks more than the other. Emma, with freckly arms. She sits close to Peg’s father and twirls her blonde hair. Emma says she doesn’t dive or “do any boating” but it’s just so fun to be part of the group. Peg squirms in her banana-yellow bathing suit, still damp from last night. She’s wearing black neoprene pants her father brought along for her since she doesn’t have a wet suit. She feels like a bee.
“You know they have some darling shops in town,” Emma says. “Ray, I’m sure your daughter would enjoy that, don’t you think?”

“Next few days we’ll be diving,” her father says. “Not shopping.”

Peg shields her eyes from the glaring concrete and pretends not to listen. She can see Mike down on the dock. His arms from this distance look like legs as he loads boxes of soda pop and dive gear onto the pontoon boat. She wonders if he has parents and why he is here like this, alone, far from home, hiding. There’s still water crawling around inside her ears from the night before, but she can hear the chatter of Emma and her father. He’s saying, “And after Peg’s mother passed away, well, I bought the boat and sailed to the Canaries. Yes, really. That’s where I picked up the Spanish. Anyway, I hit a squall on the way over there, lost power, hit thirty-foot waves that knocked out the bilge, had to sail into port with a ripped jib....”

Emma tilts her head and winks at Peg. This Emma doesn’t know a bilge from a bulge, nor can Peg say for sure if she herself knows, but she does know for certain that mother is alive and well in Akron, Ohio. It feels wrong to pretend someone is dead when they’re not. She tries it on like a fact, and she doesn’t like it. Peg notices her father looks happy, so she stays quiet and fidgets with her toast and eggs. He is, after all, her father, and whether he deserves it or not, she wants to please him.

After breakfast, the guests haul gear down to the boat dock. Mike helps lift the heavy bags and tanks. He smiles and nods and lifts and talks and lifts and smiles. Sometimes his face goes blank and he stands still, as if he’s listening to instructions from headphones, except, he doesn’t have any headphones. The sun boils on Peg’s back. The brightness of the day makes her feel like a grain of salt waiting to dissolve in the water. She is nervous. She is nervous the way she was when she first rode a roller-coaster, or first walked into a clothing
store with twenty dollars to spend. She’s learned to tell herself the sensation is just excitement, which is a more fun version of nervous. But there’s too much else for her to remember here, and she shadows her father, hoping he’ll speak up if she puts her mask on wrong, or flips the wrong valve.

The boat churns backwards into the blue bay. Emma stays onshore and waves goodbye to the divers. She’s waterproof, Peg thinks. She’s going to have a relaxing, lazy day. Me, I’m going to die. Eventually, the boat turns away from the land and crosses the choppy water towards the underwater islands and reefs that Peg is terrified to see.

Mike is already in his wet suit. Peg distracts herself by watching him twitch and laugh at something Peg can’t see. He watches her watching him, and they smile. It makes Peg calmer to have him there noticing her, even though she considers him soiled and ominous. He has knowledge and she needs to learn from him, a relationship that begins to feel erotic to Peg.

By the time the boat slows over the reef, everyone is dressed and ready to dive. The other guests secure their equipment and waddle along the deck in their obscene fins and slick wet suits. Mike hits the water first, and then the others pour off the boat into the dark ocean. When it’s Peg’s turn she can’t make her body move. It seems impossible to her that there could be anything under the water but more dark water. Mike and her father yell at her through mouthfuls of splashing waves. As a last resort, Peg pretends she is being chased by a beast.

And then there is the same silence from the night before. It’s as if Peg is diving inside her own flesh to the interior sounds bones make. She sinks in the water and breathes. Every time she looks down, she is closer to the coral formations, which look like clouds, so that her descent is a kind of rising. She can’t recognize faces; the other divers are just
scattered specks, her father among them. At the bottom, her fins fluff the pearly sand. She
wants to laugh. She spots the magenta stripe on Mike's wet suit. His jagged hair looks exactly
the same under water as it does on shore. He gives her a confident wave and, as a group,
they begin to swim like secrets over the reef.

That week, Peg dives with the group two times a day. They travel to different sites,
eat packed lunches on the boat, doze and then dive the site again. Her nerves are cranked
too high with excitement to enjoy the food. The lunch breaks last too long, and sometimes
she swims on her back near the boat to pass the time. Her face to the sun, she sculls against
the lazy roll of the surf. As she swims, she pretends she is a painting of a girl swimming.

One morning, on the way to a shipwreck, Peg's father brags to the accountant from
Dallas: "Peggy was the youngest one in Key West to dive that year. Right, hon? Remember
that trip? She was bringing up two-foot lobsters when those sports from up north couldn't
even get a claw. I've taught her what to stay away from, though. Stay away from the
Barracuda Pub at three in the morning! Ha! Ha!"

Peg stands nearby at the front of the boat, with Mike.

"You like lobster?" Mike asks her.

"I don't like the taste," she says.

"Me as well."

Peg's cheeks are pink from the sun and salt. She feels healthy, strong. She watches
the tip of the boat cut open the water.

"Do you ever see sharks, Mike?"

"Many times," he says. "I respect them."

He lifts her finger and runs it over a jagged beige scar that arcs from his wrist to his
elbow. She wonders how someone so young could get so many scars: his face, his arms, he
almost resembles a map. For no reason that Peg can understand, Mike begins laughing. A long chuckle, sinister.

That afternoon Peg finally perfects her water-entry technique. She holds the mask hard to her face, closes her eyes then tips backward off the edge of the boat. By the time she opens her eyes again she is ten feet below the water’s surface in the clear sea, smoothly diving towards the sand.

Sometimes she can spot her father underwater in the group. He swims powerfully, and it takes work for her to keep up with him. Mike swims near her, though. Peg knows he knows she’s a novice. She’s glad he knows. He has a small board he can write on in the water. He writes “GROUPER” and points to a slow fish the size of a wheelbarrow. He strokes its side, waves for Peg to try as well. The fish is slippery. Is this supposed to feel good? she wants to ask.

On another dive, Peg drifts away without realizing. She follows the trail of a yellow fish who has the puffed red lips of a movie star. Over a ledge of the reef, then down a wall covered with purple fans. The lower she dives the more confident she feels. There is no right or left, no actual distance. Mike comes after her and presses a depth gauge to her mask. “Too deep! Ouch!” he writes on his board. But Peg is ready to float like this for hours. She’s jealous of the fish the way sometimes people are jealous of birds.

On the final day, Peg tangles in floating sea grass as she climbs from the water to the boat. She had stopped wearing the neoprene because the water was so warm against her skin and a few other divers had shed their suits. Within seconds of leaving the water, her legs begin to sting. Shy, she sits on a cooler and holds a soda can against her thigh, then hides her legs under a beach towel her father bought for her at the little gift shop behind the restaurant bar. He was forever buying her things, and the things made her sad, because she
knew he was trying to say that he loved her, and she knew he couldn’t say it and, if he could, it would only make her uncomfortable.

“Kid, you’re a real pro,” her father says. He slaps her on the back as if they’re old buddies, shakes the sea water from her dripping hair.

“This has been great,” she says, but her knees feel feverish. She doesn’t want to crack her father’s bliss, doesn’t want to cause a scene. She leans back in the shade against her pile of dry clothes and pretends to sleep, but can’t.

By the time the boat slows to the dock a rash covers both her legs. Something is very wrong, she thinks. She stands and secures her towel like a skirt. And there’s Emma on shore. A black coral necklace, a pink sun dress. As they unload the boat, Peg’s father says, “Having dinner in town tonight with Emma, okay?”

“You wouldn’t like it,” he says. “Awfully rustic.”

“What should I do?”

“Eat here—you’ve made some friends, right?”

Peg feels the ringing pain below her waist. She blinks to keep her eyes inside her head. Her father swings his gear bag over his shoulder and gives her a pat. “You outdid your old man today,” he says. “Now don’t wait up for me.”

Peg watches him slip his arm around Emma’s waist as they stroll off. Then he stops and walks back to his daughter.

“Maybe you could give me and Emma some privacy later tonight. We’re talking about doing some business together in Miami, you know. Say, until ten? Then we’ll pack up for tomorrow. I’ll ask Carmen to make you one of those frozen Margaritas. Won’t tell your mother if you don’t!”
Peg peels skin off her lower lip with her teeth. “No problem, Dad,” she says. She waves at Emma and her father as they walk away and, strangely, she begins to miss them.

Mike finishes tying down the boat. Peg wobbles on her legs, tearful. When he reaches her, she lowers the towel.

“Something bad,” she says. He crouches to look at her rash, runs his fingertips over the spidery red welts.

“Baby jellyfish, from seaweed,” he says. “No problem.”

“But it stings!”

“It’s nothing,” he says, grinning.

Peg is disappointed that it’s not something worse. She waits in the shade while Mike looks through a sun-bleached, wooden shack by the restaurant. He tosses out crumpled tubes of cream, an empty box of gauze.

“All crap,” he says. “Come with me, guapa.”

He pulls her hand and looks back at her. His eyes, she notices, are slightly milky.

“It’s okay,” he says. “I’m fun.”

The sunlight is fading and the evening winds pick up. Mike drives Peg in a bumpy truck to his two-room apartment about a mile down the gravel road from Casa Palancar. The walls inside are bare and water-stained, the floor packed with red dirt. There are cardboard boxes everywhere overflowing with maps and hoses and fins. Peg is excited to be somewhere she didn’t except—a new house, like a new dress, which makes her feel as though she were a slightly different person than she was an hour ago. He tosses her a t-shirt that hangs to her knees. She sits on a folding chair and sips at a cup of cloudy tequila, which makes her shiver at first. Mike smoothes silver cream across the skin on her legs.

She feels better.
“The old ladies get that sometimes on the beaches,” he says. “They act insulted that
there are other creatures besides old ladies in the sea.”

“You’re so nice to all the guests,” she says.

“Even the assholes,” he says.

“Like my father?”

“I can tell, Peg, that you are different from him.”

“I don’t know. I hope so.”

“How many years do you have?”

Peg grins, remembering the Spanish from school.

“I have... Seventeen.”

“So there is not much difference between you and me,” he says, pushing a strand of
hair away from her eyes.

Peg watches the cream disappear into her skin.

“Let me show you some things,” he says.

Mike eagerly spreads out an ocean map on the floor and points to the different reefs
they visited that week. He shows her the depths, the ridges, the ancient wrecks. She wanders
with him over the blue and white shapes. She can see where the land is, where the water is,
and where the fish live, and she sees it all at once, instead of in sections and spurts.

At one point he kisses, of all things, her elbow. He begins to slid his tongue up her
arm and each next thing is sudden for Peg. The gaps inside her fill with jolts of electric air.
She tries not to smell him, but when she finally breathes in it is not as bad as she feared.
Mike switches off the light and leads Peg to a twin bed matted with sheets where he moves
his dark arms and legs over her body. He kisses her hard, and even though eventually Peg
will learn this is normal, to her, in Mike’s room by the sea, the kisses feel the way she thinks
it would feel to get shot. He’s saying something like, “beauty...beauty...” but she can’t hear for sure. She moves the way he seems to want her to move and tells herself this is an adventure, it is something that will make her bigger. The dusk in the open window turns to night, and they continue. She wants to continue. When he asks if this is something she’s done before, she says yes, I’ve done this a few times. She says it in a voice she’s never heard, and she says it again to make sure she is really there.

Peg tries to stay awake while Mike sleeps. She is heavy from the long day, hungry and genuinely stunned by what’s just happened, yet it’s still too early to return to her room. She wants to stay awake until she can go back and shower off the sea and Mike, though part of her wants to keep his smell for a long time. He is face down, his broad back rising and falling in a steady rhythm. After a few minutes listening to him breathe, she closes her eyes and gives in.

By dawn, Peg’s heart is complicated. For the rest of her life she will remember this knot. She walks away from his room, down the blonde road. It’s barely light out. The morning smells like tangerines and seaweed. In the distance, Peg can see the lamps glowing in the Casa Palancar kitchen.

She tries to think up an excuse for her all-night disappearance, a plausible story for her father. She’s distracted by giddiness, then sorrow. The shoreline is still dark in the new daylight, and she doesn’t want to leave the island. She experiences the sadness tourists sometimes have when they know their time is up, when they realize they were just visitors all along, not really part of that world. Ahead of her, there is everything to fear.

She sits on the cement stoop in front of Room #3 while the sky lightens flash by flash. She can see her luggage stacked inside the room, the nice dress she never needed to wear folded neatly on the bed. It hurts when she imagines her father packing alone. The
bathroom door is open, the shower running. After a few minutes, her father joins her on the stoop, scrubbing his neck dry with a towel. There's time for him to ask questions, but he doesn't. He scoops up a gecko of some sort, lets it rest in his palm. The tiny creature looks up at the two of them, darting its odd head back and forth. It's almost as if Peg and her father have traveled all the way here just to let this silence happen.
Lev Kowalski, a Ukrainian prodigy, barely seventeen, sat alone under a single bulb in the basement beneath Lincoln Center and snipped his fingers nails, which fell soundlessly into a pile of dust and rat droppings. Nearby, a Steinway grand piano—ebonized, gleaming—rose on a lift for its tuning in the empty hall above. The grinding hum of the lift annoyed Lev. He had arrived early in order to find a quiet place to nap, but located nothing, so he stared instead into the moons of his nails. For the past week he'd been sleeping poorly on a recliner in a flat near Brighton Beach which belonged to his overweight, second cousin Kati, who he'd just met. Each night airlines roared overhead through a sky he could not understand, but nonetheless loved, because it was an American sky.

At Kati's, Lev ate scrambled eggs and herring, and—because he was a guest—he went ahead and drank the peppered vodka she poured and poured. His insides felt boisterous from her hospitality. He was not a drinker, not like his dead parents, nor like his dead cousin Yuri, nor like Uncle Mintz, the generous dead blacksmith in Odessa who departed this world directly after delivering a joke, something, if Lev could remember, like "do you know when the first Russian election was held? The first Russian election was held back when God set Eve in front of Adam and said, 'Go ahead, choose your wife'." Death and drinking were the only two ways people left the Ukraine, and seeking originality Lev did what his piano teachers told him. Practice, they, and you'll get to Lincoln Center.
Now he was in America for the first time and he sat thinking, thinking hard, underneath the Lincoln Center Plaza, the very place he'd longed to be. Instead of feeling sharp and confident he was wrought with questions, tempted by freedoms, hungover.

Breakfast with vodka, tea with vodka, cucumbers soaked in vodka, Wheel of Fortune! (incomprehensible) at seven, news at ten, late night evangelists all accompanied by a coffee cup, brimming with Stoli Peppar and set in front of him by Kati's chubby hand while she read to him from a Sears catalogue. The second shot was always easier than the first, and at best, inebriation allowed Lev more courage to augment his hundred-word English vocabulary, which so far contained everything from "hot dog" to "success." At worst, the vodka was a door that let out all possibilities at once.

In the basement of the great hall, he passed his palm under the light bulb, then jammed his fingers shut into a fist. His nerves buzzed from the hangover, and he distracted himself with schemes. Tomorrow, for example, he did not plan to board the Lufthansa flight back to Moscow. His resolution sprung more from a fear of flying than from the crumbling plight of the Soviet Union. Sitting awake in the dark at Kati's the night before, as the airport summoned the churning planes, he decided to stay here for the rest of his life. Here where he could, if he so wished, finish himself as a concert pianist. Where he would not fall from the sky, at once burning and freezing, nor be hurled back through time zones towards a practice room in Odessa where there remained only barbaric piano teachers employed by local, mousy communists. He closed his eyes and imagined the empty Lufthansa seat vibrating without him as the aircraft crawled into the sky. Then he imagined the plane cracking in half and spinning into the Atlantic ocean.

He massaged the inside of his palm, and eyed his tuxedo hanging from a pipe like a dead man. He wanted a career without dress codes. A writer maybe, a thinker of some
kind. A creator of things wholly his own. The secret swelled inside him there under the
stage. And although he told no one of his plans he felt that everyone who met his eyes knew.
Hadn’t Kati’s doorman twisted his mouth in such a way this morning? And the jet-black lady
on the D train with her pout?

As Lev finished off the last shaky fingernail, he heard the footsteps above him on the
wooden stage, footsteps that could only belong to the piano tuner. He closed his eyes and
saw the Steinway, its lid opened high like the flap of a skin wound, resting now, fully raised
to level of the stage. He felt bad that it had to have its wires wrenched. But it did. Over the
past week the instrument had become as much a part of his body as a foot. Everyone Lev
admired had played it, and he felt their sweat and cells on the keys even though he knew that
wasn’t scientifically possible. He listened to the tuner settle on the piano bench and heard
the first pitch before any key was stuck. A pitch no one could see. As he leaned back on the
folding chair, Lev Kowalski considered if the human ear was, in some way, more like an eye.

The long tones continued throughout the afternoon, and Lev too continued opening
and closing his fist, shaking his hands, then staring for chunks of time into the dark corners
of the concert hall basement where he was sure, and then not sure, there were agents, of
some kind, watching him. Occasionally he tilted his head from side to side listening for the
mistaken rustle of dust.

His fears—though he was slow in suspecting this—were partly a manifestation of his
nerve-wracked love for Tatiana Petrovya, the girl he kissed months ago in Odessa by the
harbor on the snowy steps at dusk, and who had since—like nearly everyone in his life
except the barbaric music teachers—died. Her death resulted not from their kisses, of that
he was sure, but rather from a cliché, a lung virus, contracted on her return train-ride home
thousands of miles from the city. It was comical to him, and dreadful. A lung virus. How
simplistic! But still, the memory of her eye-lashes, the fluttering, shy downward glance, it made his hands shake as he mangled this memory with the anticipation of staying put in America and possibly, after tonight’s performance of Rachmoninoff, never playing the piano again. It occurred to him that possibly all such distresses in life are connected, that all pain is one pain, that a pretty girl walking away in the snow could sting as much as the death of a mother. In this condition, he tried to question whether his growing affection for Tatiana was born out of loneliness, or if it came from genuine love itself. But what did it matter? He was falling for her, and she was completely, and unquestionably, dead.

Until her, there had been only one love—music—and now as he rose toward adulthood, Lev wondered whether that conviction was flimsy as well. How easy it is, he realized, to confuse love with servitude. The prodigy was doing a lot of thinking for someone who was about to perform a piano concerto from memory in front of America’s social elite. His head should be clearing, he knew, not filling. His nerves should be quieting, not rising. Lev realized that regardless of whomever was watching, he would absolutely have to leave the hall directly to purchase a little bottle of Stolichnaya Peppar. One bottle, small as a thumb. That’s all.

He stood and scattered his nail clippings with his shoe. He pushed his hands up to his face and examined each finger tip, and then slowly began to unbutton his flannel shirt, narrowly dodging an incoming memory of his now dead aunt Fredoya giving him the shirt for his birthday three years ago. He wondered whether or not it was fashionable to wear flannel in America, even though his choices were slim. There was this shirt, a blue short sleeve polyester shirt, a t-shirt, and one yellow wool sweater with red stripes.

He folded his flannel shirt into a precise rectangle, placed it on the chair, then he pulled the clean linen shirt from its noose. It had belonged to his father, who wore it under a
wool coat by the docks the night he spun the chamber on Fredoya's revolver and dislodged
the back of his own skull. The shirt had traveled with Lev for years from performance to
performance in the Soviet Union, and he felt superstitiously attached to the fabric. In this
manner—slow, foggy—he changed into his tuxedo, like a old man with enough luck to dress
for his own funeral. Not that performing Rachmoninoff was deadly; he had done so without
injury for over ten years. It was more that there was a lastness to this night. There would be,
he knew, the death of a burden, a burden he both loved and despised.

Lev held his bow tie strands out from his neck, then let them fall loose. He
determined the tuner upstairs was about to finish. He knew soon the record company
executive who spoke bastard Ukraine and had breath like someone's hindquarters would
scamper after him with papers and requests and advice about a cocktail party afterwards and
arrangements for a ride to an airport tomorrow. Soon musicians would filter into the
basement, begin unpacking their instruments and honking on their oboes. All of it he
wanted to miss. If this was a finale, he wanted there to be few distractions between him and
the music itself, like lovers on their last night together before parting for far away places.

For a moment, just then, there was no sound from the piano above, and the silent
space confused him. He jerked around and said, hel-lo? And then again, peering into the
corners of the room. There was nothing, and the tuning notes began just as before.

Later, the symphony hall board of trustees, who Lev had seen pirouetting backstage
in their furs the day before, would wonder why the magnificent Lev Kowalski did not use
the green room offered to him, with its mirrors and red leather chairs. And the answer, if he
could explain in English, would be that he did not want to wait behind a door that had his
name taped to the front. He no longer wanted to have his name—there were so many other
things to call oneself in America. Raul. Tim. Lentry! He wanted pink hair, not green rooms.
Most importantly, he wanted to live here in America where he could start a life for himself and Tatiana, his beautiful dead lover. He wanted her to be in New York City with him now, free. This hangover, this apprehension, these trembling hands, he knew she could calm him, her face raised to his, she might say, everything will be fine. He had been thrust into a career of perfection and order—a life which felt so cold—and he feared he was lacking an important connective tissue, a person who can remind you, without provocation, that everything will be all right.

Lev tried to scan back through his life, but he could not say how it all started. He simply could not remember ever deciding to do this. He remembered cigar burns on his knuckles when he was five (chromatic arpeggios perfect ten times or another burn). He remembered one maestro bouncing his back, then rubbing it, and sobbing and apologizing, then slapping him again and saying, you are never going to get this right, are you? There were other things, the rush of attention and love, but it all blurred. It was as though he came out of his mother first and then a baby-sized Steinway slithered out after him.

Lev collected his clothes and stacked them on top of a box in the corner of the room. He pulled his fox cap over his head and tied down the furry flaps. Then he walked with his jello legs up to the stage door and out into the evening.

The streets near Lincoln Center blued from twilight. Gusts of wind pushed icy air into the faces of strangers. Lev stood under the fire escape and tried to decide in which direction to go. He pulled himself into Kati’s down jacket, which made him look like a swollen grape, and lowered his head as he walked against the wind toward a row of neon windows across the street. The air felt wonderful. He watched his black shoes drive over the asphalt and garbage and crud. This is my crud, he thought, I love this crud. He let himself feel far away from the Steinway, he let the coldness disconnect him—if only for a minute—from the
thing. Other pedestrians barged down the cross-walk, bumping Lev's arm. One man came to a dead stop in the middle of the street and laughed right at him, mouth wide open, before rushing away. The dental work, Lev thought, is not much to speak of here either.

He scanned the windows and cross-streets for a place that looked like a store where he might purchase the vodka and, perhaps, a pack of American cigarettes. Another block, and the snow thickened—though the swarm of New Yorkers charged on in the dark as if the weather were an afterthought.

Lev paused at a drug store that spilled with discount hair products and wind-up toys (no alcohol) and then a shoe store with leather bags that cowered at the door frame (no alcohol), finally he stopped at a magazine stand that threw its gold light onto the sidewalk. He bought five candy bars, because he could. He held the candy and lingered for a minute by the magazines. He wanted as much as possible of these kinds of things. He wanted to eat these things even when he was not hungry. Milky Way, Three Musketeers, licorice the color of a piano, and two tubes of Necco Wafers—those chalky, miserable circles—which he would later regret. He folded the change and slid it into the breast pocket of his tuxedo, zipped up his coat and continued on, his hair damp now with snowflakes.

He memorized the shapes of the stores and street numbers so he would not get lost; to him the signs looked more similar to musical notes or rhythmic symbols. 68th street looked like a major third, for example. This alphabet, with its new loops, seemed carnival-like to him. Everything was lit from within and from without. The spastic holiday decorations, mothers scurrying after children, people plastered with shopping bags, all of it throbbing with electricity and lamps and reflection of lamps. Finally, Lev rounded a corner and saw a window filled with white light and bottles. He sucked in the snowy air. So many bottles!
Meanwhile, back in the great music hall, the stagehands, clad in jeans and t-shirts, scooted stacks of chairs across the stage. Black music stands were shoved from the wings, and left on the stage to face each other like sign posts pointing to themselves. The podium for the conductor was hauled out and positioned behind the Steinway, and a random snowy boot bumped the aft leg of the piano. Or perhaps not. Perhaps the Steinway was nudged by a careless hand, or a busy distracted elbow. It was, nonetheless, in the way of things now.

Instrumentalists, each with their own individual histories, began to warm up together, pacing the wings of the stage, walking back and forth as they peeled off scales or long tones or flashy excerpts from the forthcoming program. The sea of mixed up sound was not that much different from a city street at rush hour. The piano tuner, now useless, folded his wrenches into a felt wrap, buttoned his overcoat, then closed the black lid across the keyboard and deserted the hall.

There's no way of knowing pulled the lever that set the hydraulics in motion to lower the piano lift—but as with most tragedies, there is a group of misunderstandings facilitated by seemingly disconnected people, all whom believe they are doing what they were told when they were told to do it. The lever was leaned on, or yanked, or mistaken for the switch for a light. Nevertheless, the result set the lift in motion and the Steinway began to fall.

Two legs clung to the descending section of the stage, one leg remained static. It was like a ship listing from a small wound, then filling exponentially. A cellist nearby screamed, which was the exact moment everything became too late to reverse. The half-assembled tuxedos froze with musicians inside, violin bows hung in the air. The lift continued on its one-way plunge, and a bassoonist—rows away from the event—raised her hands to her ears and pressed shut her eyes. For that was all there was left to do. Hide from the fall.
“Stop the lift!” a stagehand shouted.

“Oh dear lord,” someone else whispered.

“Please, stop it,” a technician said, to no one.

The Steinway began to creak. A beveled foot popped splinter by splinter as the lift cranked lower and lower—drawing and quartering the entire leg—until, at five feet below the stage and falling, the quivering shanks and steel and hand-carved hammers and polished soundboard and 45,000 pounds of wire tension started to ache, stretch and then collapse onto its own emerging debris, wires snapping into violent coils, chips of blonde wood arcing in the air like fireworks. And then a second of silence, as if from a toddler who’d just cut off a toe and had yet to see blood. A silence which allowed time for the affliction to climb into the brain of the piano. And then, the moan.

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There was trouble at the liquor store. Lev struggled with his English and hooked his fingers to the sooty mesh that protected the merchant and the booze from the rest of the world. Customers crowded into the tiny room; they were damp, dark-skinned, yellow-skinned, all angrily rubbing snow from their hands and coats. Lev was trying to ask for a smaller bottle, smaller, but he had yet to hear the American word “less.” It was not a word Americans used often.

“More,” he said. More small, he wanted to say. But the man behind the register just kept swinging his head. He watched the merchant put one bottle of Stoli back on the shelves and pull down a larger one, and then a larger.

“Ok?” The man said.

“No, no, sorry,” Lev said, “Uh, this, no...”

Someone yelled over the top of the crowd: “Mister, go back where ya come from.”
“Come on, you freak!”

Lev knew he was hearing insults, but they meant nothing to him. He laughed. This was not unlike a few grocery lines he’d been in back home. He wanted the bottle. In fact, if it weren’t for his concerns about the price, he might have just gone ahead and bought the gallon, which now faced him through the wire, smiling.

The merchant crouched down to the small circular cut-away in the metal grate, his oily mustache catching on the wire. He held out his fingers, beckoning, and said, “Buddy, I need some ID,” which sounded to Lev like “Muddy, piano the key.” Lev blinked rapidly and guessed the man was demanding payment. He felt for the square of cash inside his coat while people nudged and pressed against him under the harsh light.

Just then he heard the bells on the door clink. He turned and saw a young woman bang into the room, snow and wind scurrying into a cloud behind her. The crowd turned as well, and everyone, even Lev, cringed at her lavender and yellow fur jacket. She poked her chin in the air and brushed a clump of sleet to the floor. She vied for a place in line, but there really wasn’t any line, only a mass of winter coats hanging on impatient bodies. She rose to her tip toes, frowning at the liquor store crowd, and then barged through.

“Oh my. Excuse me, pardon me,” she said, pushing through the dripping scarves. “Out of my way, bucko.”

Lev watched her shove through, her head popping up over other people’s coats, until she reached for his sleeve, and he thought, god, it looks like this woman is drowning. He tried too late to avoid her face, twisting his head towards the metal grate—don’t see me—then he felt his coat slip into her paws.

“Oh my God,” she said, out of breath. “It’s you! It’s...you. Lev Kowalski!”
“No,” Lev said, thinking, no I am not me. You have mistaken me for a Ukrainian prodigy who is supposed to return to his homeland tomorrow.

The merchant rolled his eyes. “Lady,” he said. “Help your friend here, okay?”

The crowd grumbled, pitching back and forth now like a group of passengers on a train.

The woman ignored them, and squinted at Lev Kowalski.

“You are so amazing,” she said.

Lev noticed she had five earrings rimming her outer ear. Radio receivers? he thought, or just an American fashion statement. Her hair was the color of the fresh blood.

The woman turned to the merchant, said things Lev could not understand. He caught the words—asshole and please. He let the sounds jumble around in his brain until he understood she had decided something and this thing, whatever it was, would be okay.

The woman dug inside her jacket pockets and spilled an unconstitutionally large pile of quarters and dimes onto the counter, and Lev, suspecting she was not an immediate threat, fumbled for his own cash. Together they pushed the mountain of money towards the register. She clucked, winked at Lev, then mouthed “stick with me.” He wanted to mouth something back at her, but he had absolutely no clue what she was trying to communicate to him. The merchant loaded up a bag with Lev’s massive bottle of vodka, as well as a bottle of champagne. The strange woman took his hand and led him out to the sidewalk.

“I’m Maude,” she said on the street, huddling under the painful juxtaposition of her hooded jacket. Lev pressed the palm of his hand against his right eye, which stung from the light inside the store.

“Maude,” she said again. “My—name—is...”

“Maude,” Lev said. “I know this. I heard you.”
She angled her head to the side. Lev avoided her stare at first. But, when he finally isolated her face from the mish-mash of purple and red and yellow and snow and neon, he noticed her eyes were the same shade blue as dusk.

“You know,” she said, as they began walking into the snow, “for your money Mr. Boston’s a better deal—though it does a number, I hear. Personally, I hate vodka.”

He watched her shove turquoise-colored gloves onto each hand while she shifted the paper bag from one side to another.

“God, I don’t mean that,” she said. “I’m sorry. Isn’t vodka, like, your national drink?”

Lev smiled. He recognized only the word “sorry.”

“Okay,” he said, because it seemed like a harmless enough thing to say.

She continued talking. Words he recognized popped up at him from her mouth, but remained disconnected to any meaning, and so he listened to the cadences in her voice, the rise and fall of her lines.

“I cannot believe I get to see you play Rachmoninoff, you, I still can’t believe….”

At the mention of the composer’s name, Lev searched the white and black sky as if he were acknowledging a memory. Rachmoninoff, oh yes, he thought, this strange girl must have something to do with piano music. Maybe she works with the record people, he thought, but her clothing does not seem to come from that line. Maybe she is selling tickets on the black market, like the mafia boys in Moscow. In America, he thought, they have prettier criminals. Or she is a decoy, harmless enough, because I’ve figured her out and will play along until the agents come for me, at which point I will run to the piano in the great hall where at least they cannot harm me because I am The Magnificent Lev Kowalski back there.
She continued scooting along, lost in some babble, her black laced boots sliding on the sidewalk. The paper bag she clutched looked to Lev like an odd American flower he wanted to smell. She held it close, crinkling the paper, as though it might blow away from her, from them. He stopped walking for a minute and tried to read a street sign, snow raging around his head.

“What is it?” she shouted.

He said, “I am right here.”

“Yes,” she said, chuckling. “Here you are.”

“No,” he said, pointing to a street sign. “Right? I go.”

“Oh, oh, I get it! Sure, we can take a right here.”

She began walking again, quicker than he. “This way, come on. Let’s get you back there.”

Still, he had no idea who she might be. If she was an agent of some kind, she was doing a poor job. Although in truth, Lev had only heard fairy tales of agents and spies. Defectors, the stories went, were tracked down in America and decapitated. Renegade Ukrainian ballet dancers were robbed of their feet. Sometimes they sent people disguised as eager fans, or friendly cab drivers. And if the Soviets didn’t find you, then the CIA would. And that, perhaps, was worse. Lev once heard that a CIA agent followed a Siberian mathematician into the bathroom of restaurant and forced him to divulge chemical warfare equations into the barrel of a gun. The poor man, who according to legend had twenty-five grandchildren (the number increased each time Lev heard the story), explained to the gunman that he was only a math teacher. He was subsequently shot in the nose for lying. How the dead man was able to get the story back to Odessa, Lev could not fathom. Still, what would he say at a point like that? Yes, there is a nuclear submarine hidden in my piano. Yes,
here in the commode is the arsenal of Kalishnikovs I am smuggling to Cuba. Would they
shoot him if he spoke the truth? That he had come here only with the knowledge of music
and rumors of cheap hot dogs—of sausage and freedom at the same time—knowledge that
can’t possibly threaten anyone’s national security.

But this girl ahead of him, this Marge or Maude, stamping across the snowy sidewalk,
did not feel dangerous to Lev. He watched her inject color into the leaden air. Maybe she
was rushing off to a party where there were others dressed like her. In America, he knew,
early everyone had a party. Each inch of him wanted to follow her there, wherever it may
be. She seemed like someone who had a lot of friends, and he wanted some. He felt the
muscles in his hand begin to vibrate again, like they had been doing all day under the stage.
He shoved them inside his pockets, fingering his collection of candy bars. She has that
bottle, he thought.

A jetliner thundered above in the snowy sky. The roar sputtered and volleyed back
and forth between the canyons of skyscrapers. He looked up and around, trying to locate the
lights on the plane.

“Oh that’s right,” Maude said. “I read somewhere you don’t play outside of Europe
because you’re scared of a flying or something, right? It’s an unreasonable fear, you know,
it’s safer....”

“What?” Lev said, still scanning the sky for the noise.

“Fear,” she said. “you know. Boo!”

“Boo.”

“Right. Let’s get going Lev, can I call you ‘Lev’?”

“Okay,” he said.
The two crossed the street, sloshing in the young piles of snow. They avoided the lines of patrons crowding up outside the hall. Lev felt claustrophobic when he saw them. Women draped in mink or wool. These masses of people. These impatient, rich people—they were here to see him, or were they here to see each other. Men tapped their watches and craned their necks in the snow. Bodies were lit by the glow from free-standing glass cases showing programs and posters. Lev saw one advertisement of a ballet dancer leaping across a blank page. Another ad with a woman dressed like a gypsy, and then finally one for tonight’s philharmonic performance. It said “Tonight” across the top and showed a black and white picture of Lev, blank-faced. He slowed as he passed that advertisement. I am inside that box, he thought, watching myself walk. He tried to see in the glass reflection what he looked like strolling so close to a woman. He worried Tatiana would disapprove. Oh my, Lev thought, I have gone a few minutes without thinking of Tatiana!

His heart sped, and suddenly, he did not want his new companion to leave. She seemed to want to lead him where he needed to go, but after that, he could only guess where the night might take her. They skirted around the outside of the hall and threaded through the dark alley towards the backstage door where the snow sifted down through the fire escapes.

Maude placed the bag on a stack of wood planks by the door and brushed off the snow and dirt. Lev’s chest felt heavier than before. She grabbed her bottle from the sack and popped off the cap. Lev examined both ends of the alleyway for agents—record, government, travel—he was starting to think there was little difference.

“I’m sure you won’t be drinking before this performance,” she said. “But I will because, I don’t know, how hard can lights be?”
He glanced at the bare light bulb above the door, the glass pinging from occasional flecks of snow.

“Lights?” he said.

Maude thrust her hand to her chest.

“Me,” she said, “I do lights in there. For you.”

And so, Lev determined, she was a light. He suspected it was more complicated than that. But for now, with his shakiness returning in full force, it was enough for him to let her be a confusion.

“Can I?” he said. He spotted the clear neck of his bottle peeking out over the lip of the bag.

“You? Right now?”

“Yes please,” he said.

“I guess. It’s your stuff.” She hauled the heavy gallon jug out of the bag. “Why so much?”

A question. Say, okay.

“Okay!” he said.

“Okay,” she said. “Cheers.”

He lifted the bottle straight to his mouth and began to drink. The liquid was warm, which he had not expected, but he gulped anyway, then wiped a few stray drips from the corner of his mouth. Then he rested against the brick wall, and looked down the long alley. This wall, he thought. Towering, cement, windowless. He heard Maude’s voice. She was like some kind of stray pet, and already he was considering why someone would let her go, or even, why she would have wandered.
His fingers felt cold and stiff around the handle of the glass jug. He tried to remember what he had eaten today. At some point in the morning there had been a cucumber and some bread, but after that? He took another swig because the first one wasn’t kicking in. He had felt it travel down the inside of his body, but it had to do the work of a calming hand. He wanted to feel different. He wanted to feel some way he’d never felt before in his life.

Maude held up a cigarette.

“No!” he said. And then yes. He took the cigarette from her and lit it, then took another swill of vodka. Then more, dizzy now from the tobacco. He wanted to say yes again, and so he did. The fact that the word yes created consequence as he said it never occurred to him. The beauty of the word itself was an experience in and of itself.

“Yes, yes, yes.”

Maude’s mouth moved, her head wobbled as she spoke. Lev recognized the sound of questions. They shot out of her like bullets that paused mid air, then dropped to the snow having missed their target. He watched her hold the bottle to her chest as she rocked up and down on her heels trying, he assumed, to stay warm. Why are we out here? he wondered, and then realized it was because for whatever reasons, neither of them wanted to enter the hall.

Above them, the cold storms continued their clash. The plaza at Lincoln Center began to inflate with snow which in turn muffled the clamor of the city. The giant Chagalls hanging blue and red behind the glass facade of the Metropolitan Opera were barely visible from Broadway, and already plows and sanders had taken to the streets.
The scene behind the locked doors of the great hall was much different than the scene in the alley. The hall had sprung into a chaos reminiscent of triage on the front lines of a trench war. Musicians fled into back rooms and offices, hands to their ears, to escape the aftermath of the piano’s death. The sound of the wreckage rose like smoke and spread to the farthest corners of the hall, then turned and hit the other walls, mutated in a cancerous manner as it created a larger, more complex dissonance. It took a half hour for the roar to settle enough so the stagehands could return to the lift and begin assessing the damage.

The conductor, the concertmaster and a hive of perfumed trustees retreated to the green room and shouted. A decision was made through an unnecessarily bureaucratic voting system that included a recounting of votes scribbled on paper, then a decision not to vote since there were an even number of people in the room, and then finally a show of hands, which repeated the stalemate already confronted by the handwritten voting system. Finally, the artists deferred to the rich, and everyone burst from the room with grudges.

They decided the debris would be cleared by the stagehands and another Steinway would be pulled from storage in the basement and cursorily tuned by the prodigy himself. Someone should find the prodigy. Someone should pass tote bags out to the audience waiting in the storm. Tote bags! Fill them with cough drops! Hurry!

And the record agent, ripping his thinning hair, rushed throughout the hall to search for Lev Kowalski. No one had seen him, though a few stagehands, still traumatized by the racket, said there were clothes in the basement that could only belong to a Soviet.

Restless musicians wandered dazed and sad. Those who did not smoke, took up smoking. Some could still hear the piano whimpering—and occasional clang or pop. For years the rumor of that deathly tone would hang in cracks of the cement. For years
instrumentalists would often experience difficulty tuning. There would be in that hall a secret 
no one could hear, but nonetheless felt, the ghost of damage.

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After a completely meaningless discussion about how it was time for both of them to go 
inside—a conversation that neither he nor Maude understood but nevertheless acted 
upon—Lev stumbled to the brick wall and flung open the heavy stage door. Then, almost as 
forcefully, he slammed it shut. He spun around to Maude who was still hopping and giggling 
from the cold.

“I cannot,” he said.

“I’m late, come on,” she said, as she wobbled for the door knob.

He slammed his hand on the door and watched her face swoon close to him in a 
blur. There is, he thought, something porcelain about her mouth. He wanted to give her a 
method that she could use to contact him, because he felt her disappearance approaching 
like footsteps.

Maude spontaneously threw up her arms wide, tipped back her head to catch a 
snowflake.

“Try it,” she said. “Then we go.”

She grabbed his arm and pulled him to the center of the alley. He had done this 
before, sure, he had dined on the weather. But never with American snow. The flakes here, 
he noticed, were fat, like cars. He coughed with his head to the sky, laughing.

“Almost,” Maude said. “You almost got one.”

He lunged here and there, trying to predict the course a given flake might employ. 
He bumped into Maude, gushing with laughter, and then in Soviet seriousness, began again. 
The snow swirled as he spun with his head thrust back and it occurred to him that, from a
distance, the two of them must look like a pair of flirting birds. It was possibly the most liberation he had ever felt, and it warmed him. It made him feel bigger, while the other things—his fame, his destiny—began to shrink.

He felt a freezing spot on his tongue and tasted tinny water. I have captured, he thought, a heavy cold moth.

“Yah!” he said. “Success!”

He righted his head with a triumphant smile, but could not immediately see Maude. He re-focused and noticed the stage door had been opened. Heads popped out around the edges, and Maude seemed to be walking away from everything. The agents had arrived. They were between him and the piano. He crept unnoticed with his hands to the wall, the figure of Maude and her furry coat smudging as he inched away. There was not even a chance to say good-bye to her.

He crept in this manner. The rough cement scraped at his cold hands until he found himself at the corner of the music hall and the plaza. He was drunk, and people were looking for him. By now he figured the doors had been opened, the chandeliers glowed, husbands strolled with their wives, programs were being passed. By now he should be below the stage running through scales, repeating the tougher passages of the concerto. He teetered at the edge of the plaza, closed his eyes for a moment, then began walking away from it all.

Lev saw hoods and hats floating in the blizzard, then realized they were attached to people. Small human-shaped trees, blasted by snow, held umbrellas up over the heads of other trees. An ice-grooming machine circled the fountain in the distance. Why are they grooming a hockey rink at a time like this? he thought. He tried to remember if there was actually an ice rink at Lincoln Center. He continued shuffling headlong into the blizzard.
No, I have read the ice rink is at some other Center, so they are clearly grooming the wrong surface!

Then, without warning, a sheet of snow, which was strangely not cold but instead refreshing, met Lev’s front side. He had fallen distinctly on his face. At this point, he realized how exhausted he was. This day, which rushed by, had been several linked days chugging by him like train cars. He knew there was most certainly the issue of food to deal with, but for now he thought it was best to try to clear his head. He took a few moments to rest like that, face down in a snow drift, fifty-yards away from the front entrance of the great hall.

When he opened his eyes again, his mouth felt full of gravel. He was on his back covered in a slight dusting of fresh snow. Spikes of frozen hair blocked his eyes, and his head felt top-heavy from the wet weight of his hat. He lifted his hand which at first was not part of his arm. The city was as silent as children whispering; only a distant hum of plow trucks could be heard. Lev sat up. The plaza was deserted, and the lights in the surrounding buildings were all gone. He remembered there had been crowds, but now there was nothing except the memory of crowds.

That’s all there was inside the prodigy; he was freed, momentarily, from any consequential anguish associated with abandoning his performance of Rachmaninoff. It was his spirit’s way of protecting him; first the body realizes it is not dead, then, when everything has been flushed with warm blood, when the thaw has made safe the numb bones, only then is a person ready to remember shocking deeds.

He began to walk without his legs, although slowly they joined him. The snow felt more like rain now, and in fact, he noticed, it was raining. He walked for several blocks in the dark towards the direction of the subway, although it did not show up where he thought it might. The shops and restaurants were covered by garage doors, and he could no longer
use them as landmarks now that they were all the same. As he walked, he began to feel something at the bottom of each leg, something sharp, pin-like and with each step the piercing became more and more painful. He stopped and looked down. My feet, he said. There you are.

A mouth opened with steps leading down under the street. Warm air and light blew up from the stairwell, and he understood that he had had the good fortune to find the entrance to the train. He took his time descending the stairs to the subway station. His wet coat glimmered under the station lights, and his tuxedo pants, partially frozen, knocked against his bare skin.

It was not difficult to find a place to sit while he waited for the train. With the exception of a half-asleep token clerk—who Lev at first confused for a watch dog—there were no other people on the subway platform. He sat on a wooden bench and leaned back against the tile wall. He shoved his hands inside his wet pockets, where he discovered logs of candy. He unwrapped one of the bars and started to gnaw at the chocolate. It tasted wonderful. When the pain shot to his skull, he stopped chewing and waited for it to go away.