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In the Black Pond, Swimming| A collection of stories and a novel excerpt

Rachel May

The University of Montana

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In the Black Pond, Swimming

A collection of Stories and a Novel Excerpt

by

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These Owls Singing

First, there was a boy named William (William, William, William!), who kissed me in the moonlight in a graveyard, and he touched my side, under my shirt, and whispered sweet things like, “You smell like grape Bubbalicious.” and I could think of nothing better. We pressed ourselves into the Spring-wet ground between sunken plots, the gravestones crooked, weather-worn, a century old. Leafed shadows from the oaks fell all over our bodies. Later, we had shaving cream fights in the house of the boy (whose name I cannot remember now) whose parents were off proselytizing. Summer came early that year, and it was hot. A ha ha ha! We’d laugh, running barefoot all over that house, leaving white puffs everywhere: on the dresser in the bedroom, on the old, torn green rug in the den. We drank raspberry wine coolers, turned on the table fans, fell asleep on the screened-in porch. I woke up thinking, “I just slept with a man!” I was thirteen.

In July, William wrapped his pale arms around me and whispered, “It’s time,” and that was it, it, you know, it. His skin was so white, as though it had never been touched by sunlight, not even a single freckle. We were back in that boy’s house, our bodies naked on the rough green rug. The whole time I watched the fan behind William buzz back and forth and kept on thinking, “Ba dump dump chick,” like there was going to be a punch line after all this sweat and bumping around. I dug my fingers into his arms (leaving red marks at the end) and hung on tight.

But, the second time, we were in the cemetery again, hot daylight. The gray stones around us bore the names of people we knew, church relations from generations ago: Jessup, Allen, Vermanda. The leaves on the oaks were as big as my palms. They
sweat drops of humidity, then blew in the warm breeze like hands waving. And what I
felt was: A HA! Loose. Free. Like flying. Afterward, William looked at me with such a
foggy, admiring gaze. God.

After William came Darren, the winter I was fourteen, both of us hidden half-naked in
hay barn behind the church. After Darren came Luke, who arrived with the wash of
Spring floods. After Luke came Damien. We did it in the dry yellow field behind the
schoolhouse. After Damien came Jemal, who lasted a whole summer, and after Jemal:

My mother tells me I should start to settle down, that it’s time “to think about babies.”
My mother has had seven babies. I am number four. We grew up in a shambling house in
Western Massachusetts, down by the edge of the Tuskana River, where the cattails and
Queen Anne’s lace and brown-eyed Susans grow wild around the house. Our house is
white, paint peeling off its sides like a snake shedding skin. The roof is tin so I can
always hear the rain fall. My mother and my father are Fundamentalists, which means
they love their Lord, and we are to do the same. No drinking, no sex, no smoking, no men
in the house, no dessert on Saturdays in preparation for Sunday service, no speaking
unless spoken to, no disrespecting of one’s elders, no back talk, no lying, no loving, no
hoping for what isn’t right (jewelry or fancy clothes or a plane ticket to someplace far
away), no singing unless it is about God, no joy that cannot be contained, no lascivious
dreams or inappropriate thoughts. And you must repent if you go wrong. You must make
right. Confess, confess, lift up your soul for saving! say the Leaders. We are descendants
of the Quakers, who were founded here. We wear simple clothes. We don’t adorn a thing.
But we are our own special sect. Only eighty members, three generations. We are called
Shenantimes.

Once, we went to a snake taming up in the Adirondack Mountains. I was twelve;
this was just before William, who, by the way, had the blondest hair I’ve ever seen, and
eyes that were an almost transparent shade of blue. The whole family drove up in the van,
“The Hippie Van,” my brothers called it. For three hours, we wound up wooded
mountains, the smell of pine in the air. A black crow flew over the road, cawing. We
passed an abandoned cabin with no panes in its windows. A white birch tree grew up its
center, branches poking out of the crumbling roof. We passed a woman who walked barefoot. She wore a dirty red skirt and had a baby slung across her back, snuggled in a blue papoose.

Finally, we piled out at a shack in the middle of a stand of pine trees. A skinny black-haired man named Barth, who was revered in our area, said, "Welcome," and, "This is God in my hands." He cupped his palms together. Inside, all seven of us kids leaned against the gray-tinged walls and Momma and Daddy stood up straight before us. The room was empty. Barth sat down in the middle, the snake in a basket at his knees. He moved his hands in the air, coaxing, like a dance. He had a wart on his right pointer finger; it stuck out ugly, black. He half sang, half spoke in a nonsense language. The snake was spotted brown with a rattle tail. Its forked tongue quivered. It followed Barth’s hands back and forth, a swaying line of animal moving upwards, mesmerized, until we were, too, and my father cooed and my mother made a small, surprised “ah” sound.

Afterward, Momma and Daddy sat up front saying, "We’ve seen a miracle," and Isaiah and Annah bickered next to me. I looked back and saw Barth waving goodbye to us, hand in the air, eyebrows lifted. When no one waved back or honked or noticed a single thing, he raised both hands and jumped a little bit, like he was desperate for us to see him. I was stuck in the middle of the van, no windows for my hands to reach out of. "Momma," I said, "Daddy," but they were talking to each other and didn’t hear me over Isaiah and Annah and the others. When I looked back again, he’d lowered both his hands. They hung loose as a doll’s at his hips. He stood very still. His head fell forward, just a touch.

Two months later, Barth died of snake bite. When I saw his face staring out black-and-white in the paper, I did not remember a snake charmer with a gift. I remembered a man who was alone in an empty house at the top of a pine mountain. He had no family, no one to cry for him. My brothers and sisters were out chopping wood, my parents at a Leader meeting. So, I sat on the wood floor in the living room by myself, and I cried for Barth. The Leaders and the congregation had no sorrow for him. They prayed, raised their searching hands up to the sky, but they did not cry, because Barth had been called, they said. Barth had gone to God.
Nick was the most handsome, and he wore his hair in dreds, even though he was white. I met him the spring I was fifteen. I’d hitch rides sometimes, down to the kayak school or to the Five Nine’s Bar two miles away or to the Hoot n’ Holler, where all the public high school kids hung out. I met Nick outside the Five Nine’s, in the parking lot, darkness between the cars.

Nick, too, had blonde hair, but his was tinged with streaks of brown that made his head look like a mess of honey all spooled up. He was long, with muscles that ran rippled and smooth over his arms, his chest, his legs. He was an instructor at The Kayak Institute down the road, and he’d pick me up at midnight, me crawling out of my room, over the rooftop and PLOP! onto the grass below. We’d go down by the river to have sex.

“Dooooown by the riiiiiver!” just like an old song, an old movie like the ones we used to watch from the back of the drive-in meadow. Nick and I settled our bodies against the wet river rocks, cattails waving in the mud behind us. He kissed me right here: on the base of my neck, and I moaned. He laughed, said: Shhhh, you’ll wake the birds. As though I could wake the owls, them hooing all night long in the trees, hunting for mice and blind, wandering moles that searched for their food, and then their homes.

Daylight is for religion and chores and work. Sweeping dust off of floors. Hoeing rows into corn fields. Planting seeds. Chopping wood. Night is for loving and singing and dancing in the moonlight, down by the river that reflects it all back. Nick and I danced together after the sex, holding our arms over our heads, waving them in the air, just like the snake charmer did, with all that grace and fear and hope in our bodies.

My brothers have started families, all of them. It was their responsibility to keep up the family name: Sinlander. My father says it’s half disgrace and half pride to be called “Sin” – pride because we have resisted. Ha. We have resisted.

I should be grateful to my brothers. Two of them already have children: Zachariah and Sarah and Rebekah and Mary. Zachariah is the pride and joy of the family, the next generation boy. They live in houses a half mile down the road, back in the swamp land. One of them is a construction worker, the other in training to be a Leader. They both married women from the church. They are faithful. God-fearing. I see them with their
babies every week, their wives holding the children in their arms or by their tiny hands, solid-colored dresses hanging pleatless to their knees.

My sisters will be married soon, too, “Praise God,” says my mother. June has a man who is courting her properly, no sex. I don’t think June has even kissed a man. She’s that responsible. Annah, who likes to tell me that I am a sinner in God’s eyes and heading straight for hell, she is probably going to marry Joseph Connors down the road and bear his children and that will be that.

“And when will it be your turn?” my parents ask, their eyes casting my way. We are making pies in the kitchen. Outside, a wild Spring wind blows at the corners of the house. Momma leans down. The iron oven door creaks open and closed. The twins, Sarah and Caleb, feign study at the kitchen table. They cover their mouths and whisper into each other’s ears. Giggle.

I laugh and pull my skirt up high, to my thighs. I do a little curtsy-dance. A distraction. I clap my feet on the floor like tap-dancers do, like the troupe that came to town last year: clackity-clack sha-tap-tap-tap-tap, and I keep on going until my mother, who has always loved to dance, joins in. We tap our way around the kitchen, wearing mighty grins, laughing together, throwing our voices up to the low cabin ceiling, the flour on the counter falling into the air and rising up, sprinkling around us in a white, fluttery fog.

We will walk a long way, says the preacher, until we find our paths, and the Lord is here to help us. Praise Jesus! He says, his hands in the air, high, fingers stretched wide and tight. Praise Jesus! He says it again, and this time, everyone in the church, all thirty of us, raise our hands and our voices with him. Everyone closes their eyes. My parents sway side to side and hum, and sometimes, my mother will cry because she is so moved. My father will shake his head and shout, AMEN, Good LLLOOOOORD, AMEN! PRAISE JESUS! He stands up and shouts it to the whole congregation, eyes still closed. I keep mine open and look out at all these people with their hands raised up. I watch their faces change: tired, sad, excited, jubilant, anxious, joy. Eventually, the joy will leap out of their expressions, and their hands will twitter in the air, moving it all around like a fan, like wings pulsing for flight. They will all be moved by something bigger than them, which
may be God or communion of feeling, or just plain old self-love, I don’t know. All I know to do is watch it all happen.

Jared kept his eyes open sometimes, too, and we’d meet later in the big red barn behind the church, and he’d hold my hands above my head, pinning them down tight, which is what I like, and we’d do it against the hay bales, which I know is not romantic or even sweet, but with Jared, after church, all we needed to do was get out everything that had gathered in our bodies during those two hours, sitting there in the midst of all those feeling, moving people. The lights from the church shone onto the grass outside, dewy. The barn was dark and smelled of sawdust and hay. We could hear the people out front, their voices a faraway hum. They talked before walking home along the grassy edge of Route Ninety, the narrow, one-lane highway that runs through Devonsville. The church sits right on the edge of the road. A car or two would rattle past. And there was Jared with his sugar-breath and his dark eyes. He’d breathe hot against my neck until a moist spot formed there, and I would lean my face against his and it was like we were emptying out and filling back up again.

I drifted for awhile. In town, there was Mark and Nathan and Jake and Timothy. Timothy came the fall I was sixteen. He had red hair and a big belly that used to slosh up against me when we hugged at the SuperMart on Route Ninety. I was not supposed to be there, because my parents said that’s where the Devil does his work, where hoodlums hang out. People stopped at the SuperMart on their way to other places. Their cars blasted loud music. Cyndi Lauper and Madonna and White Snake. William told me about them in the night. He snuck out to the record store in Walbright every day that fall and listened for hours, told his parents he was studying late at the library. We have all kinds of secrets between us, all kinds of ways of surviving.

This was the same year Jeffrey Watkins came back. He is years older than me, never a lover of mine. When I was ten, he was discovered drinking three times in one month and was almost cast out. He was eighteen. Before they could damn him, he left and went to Florida, land of palm trees. He is a salesman now, which he’d be good at since he was always made to go door to door on Jesus’ behalf.
I came across him and his wife sitting on the deck of our summer-hushed red schoolhouse, swinging their legs in a sad way. He was wearing blue cotton pants and a white button-down shirt, and she wore a red sundress with a lace collar. Lace. They had dressed for the occasion, and now, since they’d failed, they looked all the sadder for it. Jeffrey knew the rules. He knew that Leavers are not allowed to return. But he said he had to try anyway, because he felt half-living to not see his father, to never have his mother look upon his daughters and his wife. To have had a wedding with only one side of the church filled up. And even though he loves his wife’s family, it is not enough, he said. So he came back filled up with hope.

His father said, “Get out.” He didn’t even take a second glance at Jeffrey’s daughters. His own blood.

“You and your ski-jump nose,” says my father, “should be able to find yourself a man. Why can’t you find no man?” I shrug. “Dunno, Daddy,” I say, and I am all smiles and innocence, and I even try to blush on purpose, which is impossible, you know.

Seasons drift in and out, and before winter comes, we chop wood all the time to make sure we’ll stay warm. In the house now, there are five of us kids. We help each other out, and we sing while we work. Spiritual songs, which is what my mother and my father let us listen to on the radio. “Praise our holy lord,” we holler. We raise the axes over our heads and SLAM! Chop that wood into its pieces. First two halves. Then four quarters. It comes apart, the splinters clinging to each other like broken pieces unwilling to give up.

Winter is too cold, and every night is long and dark. Not even owls like the winter, their hooting goes deeper, more distant. Snow falls every day, whitish gray and foggy. There is less sex in winter, because we are huddled in the four-room house together. I cannot sneak out to the river, the barns, the SuperMart. Tracks in the snow would give me away, tell my parents where I have gone. And if they find me, even once, I will be done for.

I sit in the house and read, mostly the Bible because it is what we have. Now and then, I sneak another book into the house from the Walbright Library. but there is only so much sneaking one girl can do. In The Book, I reread the dirty parts, the affairs, the story
of Rachel and Rebekah, the story of Susannah, who escaped sex with the elders, was not duped, was not raped. These are the strong women, the ones I admire, the ones God saw goodness in. The story of the Concubine. She is treated like less than a piece of meat, left outside in the cold after her keeper gives her away. He offers her up for rape and then leaves her for dead. Jesus forgave the sluts, but no one else did. No one else sees fit to help them. The only answer the followers can find is condemnation.

I have my own way of reading the stories, my own quiet smiling God. He is not locked up in their four-walled church. He’s out there humming in the trees.

In the Spring, the Leaders proselytize. This means long trips and parents gone from houses. Husbands and wives, they both go, for two weeks at a time, leaving their Bible-loving children home to feed the chickens, the pigs, watch the little ones. When I was younger, these were the glorious wine cooler days. The Spring I was seventeen, just last year: Martin and Dale and Louis and Darrell. Darrell was from the other side of Route Ninety, and he was black, with eyes the color of young walnuts, and when he spoke to me, it was like a rumbling from somewhere deep and soulful and real, and all I could do was lay back, and whisper into his warm, coil-skinned ear: Yes.

He had a smile that curled up from one side, his right side, and when he started in on a joke, I could see it coming a mile away, with that smile forecasting his words. He had terrible jokes, I’m saying really bad: “What’s green and red and starting to worry?” I’d say, “What?” laughing already, and he’d say, “A pickle in a strawberry jam!” And then he’d put his hands on his stomach, his fingers long and graceful and strong, and he’d lean back, his head thrown up to the sky, laughing.

Darrell did not believe in God.

He was from Walbright, and he worked on Isaiah’s construction crew. But Isaiah didn’t know a thing about us. No one did.

For eight months, we were together. We walked through the woods at night holding hands. Sat in the empty houses he was building, legs hanging over unfinished door frames, moon shining on the glossy needles of the pine trees. The wood frames splintered into the backs of our knees, but we hardly even noticed the prickle of it. We danced together in the schoolhouse field. He’d rest his hand against my back, and I rested
my head on his shoulder, dancing in the middle of the day in all that sunshine. We made plans to leave together as soon as he had enough money saved.

One night in November, dawn just cresting the horizon, tiny flakes falling from the sky. Darrell walked to Route Ninety to hitch a ride home. We’d spent the night in one of his half-built houses. I watched him walk toward the road. Stick out his thumb. Wait. He got into an old blue car with rusty edges. The door creaked open, took Darrell in, closed. As they pulled away, I heard a cackle, and I raised my hand to stop him. But, his face was turned the other way. He couldn’t see me. I walked home through the forest, and the snow fell hard around me. Pine trees were covered almost instantly. Rocks and tufts of grass were suddenly hidden beneath the white. By the time I snuck in my window, my shoulders, hair, and feet were soaked. Annah sat up in bed, looked at me, and rolled the other way.

The next afternoon, Darrell was found dead by the river, his skin marred and scratched. Each of those perfect fingers broken into crooked, gnarled, misshapen claws. His left arm was broken into an angle that was all wrong, thumb on the outside rather than the inside. His chest – that great barrel chest that powered an axe over his head, pounded in nails. carried me laughing into the river in June – was spread out crooked over the ground. The snow around his body was stained red. The white where the blood didn’t touch was too bright and clean.

Men rushed from the ambulance, zipped his body up in a bag – his body, my Darrell’s body.

When I walked away, the whole world looked wrong. The trees were still and bare, topped with white. The sky was clear – a perfect, brilliant, blue. The sun shone down. The snow rose in drifts, sweet rolling hills of white around us, everything clean, as if nothing at all was wrong, purer than ever. I walked through the forest and the now-frozen swamp, down to the river. The water rushed around snow-covered rocks. The trees stood snowy at its edges. A squirrel ran up the side of a pine tree. The great white heron that lived there in summer and fall and had yet to fly away for winter. It stood statuesque in the swamp between the highway and our house. White like the snow. It raised and lowered its skinny legs, long curved neck pulsing forward and then back. It didn’t notice a thing wrong in the world.
I screamed and threw rocks at that bird, that perfect white bird, and when the third one fell near its feet, a splash in the water, it leapt up swiftly and pulled its great white body into the sky. I stood there crying and cursing and staring at the blood on my hands. Darrell’s blood. They’d let me touch him, for the shortest moment, before they zipped him up and took him away for good.

I watched the heron fly away and hated it. And then I wondered if it was him, soaring so white into the sky, and I tried to call it back. I cried and screamed, desperate, saying, “Please please please please.” But it kept flying into the blue sky until it was just a white smudge.

Everyone in town was silent. When I said to one of the Leaders, “Did you hear about Darrell? What will we do?” he looked down at me and touched my head and said, “Pray, Claire.”

Everyone in our church said Darrell was killed because he “didn’t live right.”

I had no one to tell, no one to whom I could cry. Nobody even knew I knew him, not even my sister Annah. I went down to the river that night, and I sang a song up to the sky like those lonely owls, only longer, harder, more soulful. More like a wolf. A wolf looking for the pack.

I walked through the snow all winter, savored its bite on my calves when it soaked through my boots. I thought I should hurt like he had, even if it was only in the smallest ways. Sometimes, I didn’t eat dinner. Sometimes, I’d jump from the too-high branches of a tree, hoping I’d break an ankle, an arm. I never did. My body is too strong.

I trudged through the banks and along the shallow edge of the river, up into the forest. I nestled in old black bear dens, leaned up against trees, climbed the limbs until I was closer and closer and closer to the sky. I’d walk all day sometimes, skipping school. Momma said it was the craving of babies made me act this way. It was high time I married, she said.

Jehovah healed me. That was his name, Jehovah.

When he found me at the beginning of March, I was sitting in an old pine tree, one of my favorites. Its branches curl upwards, arms made for sitting, staggered just right
to climb. By then, my cheeks were chapped red, lips made raw by the wind, heels calloused from my boots. My hair was long and tangled down my back.

When I looked down from a branch near the top, there he was: a red-hatted man standing beneath me, arms out at his sides like wings spread, cheeks rosy and full.

“What are you on the look-out for?” he said.

“For my lover,” I said.

“Am I him?”

I shook my head. I leaned on both my arms, my hands on either side of my legs against the branch. He smiled. When I smiled back, it felt strange against my cheeks.

He came back every day for two weeks, and once the real thaw set in, the river rose with new water, and we walked together. We said little or nothing at all. He held my hand. He rolled his palms over my hair. We climbed trees together like children, sap sticking to our clothes and the skin on the backs of our legs. We walked and climbed all day and then, we’d find each other in the darkness and hold on, sitting together, doing nothing but touching. Skin on skin. Softness and no need for talk.

When we finally made love, my first time in nine months, it was in the field where Darrell and I had once danced together. I thought of him afterwards, and I cried into Jehovah’s shoulder. When he held me, it felt as though I was finally healing up. My whole body woke. It was like pins and needles all over – that pain you know you must endure because it will bring you back to normal.

And then, when I went looking for Jehovah one morning in early May, the world greening, he was (poof) gone.

In church, we keep on singing, “Hallelujah! Praise Jesus!”

“By the time I was your age,” says my mother, “I had three children!” She says it like a scolding, like hot water falling on skin, scalding. She thought that after the winter spell, I’d off and get married, but no. It is July again, and I am eighteen. I look at her and smile and say, “Oh, Momma Momma!” and I tell her a joke, rolling out the dough so that it lies flat and smooth, just like I have been taught. This pie will be a real beauty. “Did you
hear the one about the pickle?” I say, and I am smiling so hard on the inside, but she has no idea why.

In May and June: James was the Jehovah’s witness who came to our door one afternoon. Larry played basketball at the public school. Ted could swim up the river, even when it rushed fast and high with run-off. Danny had funny, knobby knees. Miguel was a kayaker in from Maine for a trip.

And then, for the last time, here is William, who was from eight years ago, before anything had begun. His hair has gone summer white. He takes me out in a canoe on the river, and we sit in it beside one of the banks, the boat rocking gently, side to side to side, our hands holding the edges. We laugh about sex in the graveyard, shaving cream fights, raspberry wine coolers. “I have two stashed in my bag,” he says, and I say, “No,” but yes, he does. We open one each and sip, the night air settling in around our shoulders cool, soft. Here he is looking for all the world like the only one I know, and I have to say goodbye.

In three weeks, William will be married to the seventeen year old girl his parents have picked out for him, and after we have gotten our kicks — all wild one last time — he rests his head on my shoulder and cries. “She’s heinous!” he says, “And her father wants me to help him raise turkeys. Turkeys.” He tells me he wants to run away.

I hold him against me and say, “Go. You should leave this place.”

The words come from my mouth like something that has grown inside me for years and is finally birthed.

On the Eve of Fourth of July, giving thanks at church before the big cook-out, I look around at all these people in their dirty clothes, their hands raised high, eyes closed, trusting, and on this day, I get up and walk out. The worst part is, no one even notices. They’re all still worshipping away. I could have done this years ago, just tapped my way on out the church door.

Outside, the sky is opening up after a hard rain. The stars work their way toward the foreground. I am only eighteen, I say, and I roll my neck around in a slow circle. It cracks.
I know that I might never be allowed back. I might end up just like Thomas. But I also knew in the seconds before I left the church, somewhere in the unthinking part of me that just acts, that I had two choices: to live a life of escaping into another person, or go.

Thomas’ return started my leaving. Darrell’s death sealed it up. And now. William’s marriage has set it into motion.

I think of my family in that little church, raising their arms in joy, singing out to the world. I can hear them from the road. I wonder how long it will take them to know that I am gone, to see that I am a Leaver now, that their own daughter has betrayed them. I wonder what they will say about me, and if I will ever see them all again.

A car comes down the highway, its headlights steady and white. A dog, far away, barks, and an owl flaps nearly silent overhead. It flies into the pines to my right and disappears, a ghost.

This car is coming for me. It is a wide, heavy sedan from old times, motor rumbling, hood swerving back and forth on the winding road like an awkward snake. It pulls up slow. The rumble of the engine louder.

Slow. Slows down, down. Pulls off the pavement. Tires crunch into the gravel at the side of the road.

Stops.

Out pops a man’s head. He is my parents’ age, with slick black hair and a long narrow face. Heavy lines circle his narrow, dark eyes, which look like they’re telling the whole story. They are deep brown.

“Hi there,” he says. He smiles a good smile.

“What’s your name?” I ask, and when he says, “Moses,” well, there it is.

I look up, and the moon comes out. I look down.

“Hi, Moses,” I say, and he smiles wider. His teeth catch the light of the moon, and I see they are yellow. Glinting. It catches me funny in the stomach, that glint, but I tell myself: This is a prayer answered, just go. I walk to the passenger’s side. He leans over, skinny body twisting wrinkles into his gray shirt. He unlocks the door with long, lean fingers, narrow-knuckled like a crow’s claws. They curl over the bulb at the top of the silver lock. Pull it up. He pushes the door open for me. The seat is red leather with tears where the white stuffing pushes through in puffs.
I slide in. The leather is cool against my bare legs. I pull my yellow skirt down over my knees to cover them. The cloth is too thin to keep me warm. I smell pine in the car and look up. One of those flat, tree-shaped air fresheners swings from the rearview mirror.

All around us, it is dark. The Adirondacks slope down, press in on the right side of the road. The forest and swamp – back to the river and my old white house – stretches flat to the left. The moon shines blue light onto the pavement. It looks slick in the night. It is the path I will follow. I think of Darrell and then, before I can stop myself, I slam the door shut. I have to leave now, because I have been waiting for this and cannot wait any longer. Because my whole life has been pushing to this moment. Because it is time.

"Go," I say.

Moses winks one dark eye at me. Smiles. Shifts the car into gear with the long, silver handle on his right, his clawed hand curled loosely around its end. He moves his hand to the white leather steering wheel. Pumps his foot on the gas – knee rising an inch and then pressing down again – a movement so small it could have been a flinch. He revs the engine once, twice, and then pulls away, laughing low, a maniacal chuckle – I realize too late – that I can barely hear over the high, whiny squeal of the tires.
I woke up to the sound of monkeys chatting. They lived in wooden cages behind the guesthouse, and every morning, Vilai, the sixteen year old owner, brought them bananas, leechees, mangos. I turned in bed and watched through my paneless window, saw their tawny backs hunched, their long fingers pulling and peeling and biting at their food. From above, birds called out to each other, singing in the branches.

My brother Terence had gone across the border to Burma and should have been back yesterday, first thing. He’d promised. He was always doing this, running off on adventures, willy-nilly, playing carefree, had been since we were both little. The week before, he’d gone skydiving in Phuket on his birthday, set on the idea even when he saw the run-down prop plane idling on the dirt landing strip. The engine smoked black as it roared down the runway for take-off, and there was Terence, happily tucked inside, smiling through his goggles while I sweated it out from the ground.

Vilai had told us that Burma was not safe. Her black hair swayed behind her as she pushed at the eggs in the iron pan, standing barefoot in front of the gas stove in the kitchen. Nuna, her three year old daughter, clung to her knees. The little girl sucked her thumb constantly, pulled at her bottom lip to stare up at the guests, laughed in a high pitched trill, like a tree-bound bird.

“Burma is filled with bad energy,” Vilai said. “It’s a bad place for farangs. Too many guerrillas. You should not go.”
“I like monkeys,” Terence had said. He pulled a piece of egg from the pan with two fingers. Laughing, he tossed it into his open mouth.

There was no changing his mind. I could tell by the tone of his voice when he told me about the trip, how he was only trying to calm me down, like he used to just before I’d leap from the highest rock at the quarry near our old house in Horton. He’d always convince me to jump, and I’d do it, wishing as I stepped off the rock – both feet tingling with the feel of air beneath them – that I’d never agreed.

That night, Vilai made us dinner. It was yellow curry chicken with rice. Terence drank six glasses of Mekong, Thai rice liquor. I counted every one. “Just think about staying here instead,” I said before we went to bed. He said, “Alright, Gabbie.” When I woke up in the morning, he was gone.

Before I joined him in Thailand, Terence had been traveling for a year. He’d seen India, Cambodia, Tibet. He had pictures of himself smiling with an AK-47 in both hands, on loan from one of the Cambodian soldiers. He’d eaten bugs, bats, birds, had gotten lost on jungled trails when he was hiking all alone. When I joined him, we did it all, everything he suggested, from Mama Hanh’s boat trip in Vietnam where we smoked joints in the middle of hump-shaped islands, turquoise-clear water, arms hooked over black inner tubes; to the honk and holler of Hanoi with its hordes of bicycles and its French ways – that yellow stucco café on the corner; to the rumble of Bangkok with its tuk-tuks and the jade Buddha sitting pretty in the middle of the red and gold temple; and then North again, to Laos, where everything stopped: It was silent there. Trucks rolled for hours over otherwise empty roads, trees hovering green and wet on both sides, the rain coming down cool, a straw-built village – homes on stilts – emerging sometimes through the trees every now and then in a cluster to the left or right. By the time we got to Soppong, in Thailand, we were nearly done with the trip. I would go home in two weeks and Terence would stay to travel North through China. I need to see the Great Wall, he said. And China’s so much more remote. I had gone along with all his ideas, agreed to every adventure, but Burma was unnecessary, too risky.

The day he was due back, I read an article about two men who were picked up there for drug trafficking, both of them farangs, one from Canada, one from the US. They
were sentenced to death. There were no other details. It was a blurb at the bottom of the English newspaper, which Vilai buys every other day. It could be anyone. But when I saw the words US, a stroke of nausea hit me hard. I told myself I could not worry yet, but as the swifts flew across the dark blue sky that night, heading home, and then the bats emerged, I couldn’t stop myself. I watched the bats swoop between the trees in spastic bursts, hunting bugs, until the sky lightened with dawn.

That morning, I sat cross-legged at one of the low dining tables in the main room, which was really a roofed deck built into the hill, a mammoth tree house with a hammock strung up between the pillars that ran in a row along its edge. Behind the dining room tables, up two steps, was the kitchen, tiled in blue.

“No brother?” said Vilai, walking to the kitchen, Nuna clinging to her mother’s long black skirt.

“Not yet,” I said. I tried to sound hopeful.
She made a clucking sound with her tongue.

I ordered eggs for breakfast again and waited for them at the table, watching the Hmong hilltribe woman sewing on the deck. She was there every day in the same place. She sat a few feet away from me, her black and red dress falling around her crossed legs, her goods spread out in front of her on the wood beams: wallets and ribboned purses and hats lined with tiny silver bells, all of it black with accents of vibrant red, yellow, blue, all of it for sale.

Amanda, one of the three other travelers staying there, walked up to the table.

“Not back yet?”
I shook my head.

The night before, we’d made plans to see the monks. She was sixty or so, a Canadian with long blonde hair and full lips that sagged at the corners, hinting that she might have been beautiful once. She smoked a bowl every morning and talked about being zen. I didn’t want to see the monks at all, but I was stuck there, waiting, and I thought that if I didn’t stay busy, I’d lose my mind. No one would hike the forested mountains to the border to look for Terence. If he wasn’t back by the next day, I told myself, I’d find a guide to take me toward the border.
I heard Nuna say something in a sleep-rough voice, and Vilai answered back in Thai, the sound floating up and down like a song. Amanda talked about her meditation retreat in Chang Rai, and how I should do it. *So relaxing,* she said, *mind opening.* I smiled and nodded. When I looked back to the kitchen, there was Nuna, dancing with her hands above her head, twirling in slow circles while her mother turned between counter and stove, cracked eggshells dripping yolk from her open hands.

When Terence proposed this trip to me, I’d been working for The Man for four years. That’s how Terence put it. King of Degrees, he’d just finished his Masters in Anthropology (this after he’d gotten his MFA in watercolor and oil painting and his EMT certification, the latter for practical reasons, he said, for money) and thought this adventure would be a good idea for him, and for me.

“You’ve gone numb,” he’d said to me over the phone one August afternoon. I told him I was grieving. “Long enough,” he said. “Come on.”

We were in the middle of a hot spell then, every day at least one hundred degrees. I stared out the window of my air conditioned office, eyeing the John Hancock building, wondering if I really was seeing drops of perspiration on its million panes of glass, or if I was only imagining. A few years back, they had a problem with those panes flying off the building in high winds. Just unsticking themselves and flailing into the world, mirroring sky and pavement and buildings and business suits, then soaring over the blue harbor, and shattering somewhere, a million glittering shards on the ground.

This was Terence’s big idea, get me on this trip, push me back into the world. But it was our older brother Brian, the lawyer of the family, the practical one, who fronted me the money for the plane ticket and convinced me to go. My boss gave me two months’ leave. I hadn’t taken a single vacation in four years.

Brian didn’t know that Terence drank steadily. Or maybe he did and just never said anything about it. I don’t know. Even I didn’t know, really, until we took the trip together. We’d lived apart for so long by then that we were lucky to talk once a month. It seemed to get worse each week in Asia, until by the time we got to Soppong, he carried a flask with him everywhere, even on our day hikes.
We’d taken a local bus from Chang Rai to Soppong. We rode up the winding mountain roads, careening around corners, the top of the bus seeming to loom over the edge, threatening to take us all down. Plastic bags were tied around the metal poles for those who got sick. Terence sucked Mekong from his flask the whole ride up. He shared it with an old man who sat beside him on the floor. By the time we got to Soppong, he was thoroughly drunk. The bus stopped at an open-air shop in the middle of a dirt road that ran in a brown strip through jungle-green forest. The old man pointed out, saying, “Soppong.” Terence staggered off the bus and slurred a jubilant Sawa diiii! to the woman at the shop. She stood behind the wooden crates of green and red and yellow fruit, her face serious, steady. She stared back at him.

I had to climb on top of the bus to get our bags down, and because this is strictly against Thai culture – for a woman to be above a man – the bus driver hollered at me. Terence staggered across the dirt road, headed for the shade of the trees at the edge. “Get over here, Terence,” I said. He turned toward me, said, “What?” and then lunged forward and fell onto the back of a woman my age. They both toppled to the ground. A group of men jumped from the truck, all of them yelling.

“Get off of her,” I said. He lay on the woman’s back, chuckled, and rolled over to the dirt just as the crowd of men reached him. The right side of his face was covered in reddish dust, little clear pebbles clinging to his cheek like adornments. One of the men helped the woman up, said something to her in Thai. She nodded. A tiny stream of bright red blood dripped from her lip down her chin, and the front of her black shirt and pants were covered in dust. She opened her mouth. The man looked inside. He dabbed her lip with the hem of his shirt, nodded. She shook her braid. The dirt fell from it, showering down her back in a red flurry.

Two of the men stood over Terence. They said something to him in Thai, a long string of words that sounded hard and crisp. One of the younger men, who wore a blue t-shirt and flip-flops, leaned forward to kick my brother in the stomach, but the older man stopped him with one hand on his shoulder.

I dragged Terence up, and moments later, we found two moped taxis to take us to the Sunrise Guesthouse. Terence got on the back of one, I on the other. “Hang on,” I said, “or you’ll get killed.” Terence laughed. Then, he put on a faux-frown. “Serious,” he said.
“that’s me.” He laughed again, hugged the moped driver around the waist, and then leaned into him, his face against the man’s back. He closed his eyes. Body curled forward like that, my blonde brother, who is shorter and fairer than me and more delicate (fine-boned as a bird, our father used to say because Terence was always breaking limbs as a child), looked as if he had surrendered to sleep or the sadness inside him. He became angelic, suddenly at peace with the world and himself. Vulnerable. I could forgive him anything in those moments.

After twenty minutes on the path to the monks, I started to wonder. It wouldn’t take much to get lost forever in those trees, our voices reaching no one at all if we called for help.

“How do you know this is the right way?” I said.

“Intuition for one,” said Amanda, “and second, I asked Vilai.”

I slapped at bugs on my legs and listened to the birds in the trees, their calls light and high-pitched.

“You know,” she said, “this is a great chance for breathing exercises. Let’s try together. Breathe in, breathe out.” She exaggerated the sound of breath in her body while I looked up at the treetops, splinters of sunlight eeking through the clusters of leaves.

Amanda and I crossed a stream, the legs of my pants dragging in the water as I stepped over. I’d been wearing the same pair of pants for weeks.

“Were we supposed to turn somewhere?” I said.

“It’s a straight shot,” said Amanda. “Don’t you worry.”

“I’m not.”

“You’re not married?” she said out of nowhere.

“I’m only twenty-six.” I didn’t want to tell her my tale of woe. I knew what would happen. She’d tell me how sorry she was, and she’d give me a hippie hug, which I would have to endure for countless seconds, and then we’d walk on knowing too much about each other. Somehow, the death of a fiancée seems more tragic to people than the death of a husband. Something to do with being robbed of time, and being young, and only just beginning. Almost a year ago, Rory fell off a dock on the Cape and hit his head on a piling underwater. That’s how he died. It’s such a ridiculous way to go, it could happen in a farce.
I tripped over a root in the path and stumbled forward. My flip-flop flew off my foot and landed in the grass to my right.

“Careful!” Amanda said uselessly.

We heard footsteps, and a boy of twelve or thirteen in a long orange robe ran up the path, smiling, waving his arms like he’d been expecting us.

“Hello, hello!” he said.

We waved back, and when he reached us, he turned and beckoned for us to follow him off the path, further into the shaded woods. The trail was narrow and dry, reddish dust rising up from his flip-flops as they hit the ground. His heels caught the bottom of his orange robe, every step flipping it up against his ankles. He pushed the sash up his right shoulder. His left was bare, smooth. His black hair was cut closely to his head. Dark tree trunks rose around us, reaching up to the thick canopy. Three small black birds fell from the branches with a rustle, dipped and then rose into the leaves, hidden. Something ahead of us moved away in the brush before we reached it. The leaves of grass and little green leaves of the bushes quivered with the movement.

As we rounded a bend in the path, we saw, fifty feet ahead, a short house nestled in a clearing. Sunlight fell on one of its corners. I heard the sound of young voices rising and falling in conversation and then, in a unified, surprising burst: laughter.

The boy led us to the back of the house, where there were two open windows. I peeked inside and saw three or four young monks-in-training gathered around something, their shaven heads clustered and bobbing like flower tops. Outside, three men walked with their hands behind their backs, small smiles on their lips. They took long, slow steps, every move deliberate, the picture of peace.

“I’m going to talk to them,” said Amanda. She walked to the older men, smiling, and when she got close, she clasped her hands together at her chest, palms flat, and bowed her head. “Namastay,” she said.

I wandered to the window in the building and watched the boys. They sat at the far end of an empty room, hard wood floors gleaming like they’d just been polished. Two of them stood up and slapped each other on the shoulder, jubilant. I thought of Terence when he was little, how he used to be just like these boys, playing with his
friends. I wondered if he would be back soon – this afternoon, tonight, maybe walking up
the guesthouse steps right now as we whiled time away here.

When the boy with the toy in his hand turned around, I saw that it was a
Gameboy, of all things, and I laughed.

Three of them saw me in the window and ran outside to say hello. The tallest of
them grabbed my hand and pulled me into the woods, down a path that ran off from a
corner of the house. He pointed ahead, telling me to follow. I hollered back to Amanda to
tell her where I was going, but she was explaining something to the men and didn’t hear.

I followed the boy. We ran through the woods, branches snapping back at me, just
missing my face. I jumped over rocks and roots and darted between tree trunks. We ran
until I was gasping for breath, the air hot in my lungs, sweat running between my
shoulder blades. We turned a final corner, and there, the sky opened up ahead of us, and I
heard a river rushing, and to the right, a cave two or three stories high yawned wide. The
boy pointed to it and said something in Thai. A swift darted out of the opening, rising and
dipping in short spurts of speed. This must be where they came at dusk, I thought, back to
their nests. This was the famous cave, Tham Lod.

We walked through the entrance, up the rough edge of rock that ran along one
side like steps. The limestone was white toward the top, blackened and dripping with
water at the bottom. The river flowed right through its center, and from within, I heard
the echo of water falling, a constant hollow sound. Two canoes were tied to a makeshift
dock on the other side. We walked into the dark entrance of the cave, where a pungent,
acrid smell hit me. A dollop of white fell to my left, just missing my shoulder. When I
looked up, I saw clusters of bats hanging upside down, wings pulled close to their six
inch bodies, more delicate than I’d ever imagined.

“Bats,” I said, but the boy had already run into the cave. I saw the tail of his
orange robe flit around a corner, behind a rock. When he reappeared, he held something
small inside his cupped hands, and as he got closer, I saw that it was one of the swifts,
shaking. Its body was enclosed in his fingers, only the brown head visible in the arch of
his two thumbs. He held it out to me like a gift, waited for me to laugh or smile or act
surprised.

He said something in Thai.
“You should let it go,” I said.
He thrust it in my face, said the same thing again.

“Let it go,” I said. “It’ll die.”

The bird was brown with dashes of white around its eyes, which were black and round. Its head and neck quivered, wings hidden and bound to its sides in the boy’s hands. One side of its face was wet, the thin feathers darkened there and clinging together in tufts.

And I realized then that we should not be there in the first place, that Amanda didn’t know where I was, that Terence was traipsing through the forest somewhere all alone, perhaps lost, perhaps captured by guerillas, perhaps drunk, that I had followed a young boy, a complete stranger, through a forest.

He thrust it in my face again, and when it came close, eyes pulled so wide I could see white at the corners, feathers shaking, I grabbed the boy’s fingers and pried them open. He tried to hold them against the bird, but I wrenched them apart. He said something else, a stream of angry words, his voice rising into a holler, and then his hands were open and the bird darted up instantly, flapped hard and flew away. It rose into the air, out of the cave, its little body swooping up, wings making an arced silhouette against the blue sky.

The boy threw up his arms, seeming to curse me, and then he turned and walked back to the house, silent. I followed, thinking only of my brother, so gone.

When we were three and lived in a duplex on Carpenter Street in Boston, Terence told me that we could play Superman, that he’d jump off the top step and I was to follow after. He climbed all ten carpeted steps while I waited on the slate below. I was seven. I believed he could do anything. He stood at the top of the stairs, raised the red cape our mother had made for him, and said, I’m a bird, I’m a plane! and leapt. He landed beside me, hitting the slate with a smack of his open palms. Your turn now, he said, looking at me. He tied the red cape carefully around my neck and watched as I walked up the stairs. When I stood at the top, afraid, he called, I’m a bird, I’m a plane! I repeated his words, and I opened the cape behind me, and I jumped. I remember the feeling of air rushing
beneath my legs. I remember the feeling of my arms spread wide, the way my body seemed not so much to fall but to soar.

When I landed, I chipped my two front teeth on the slate and bled all over the red cape. Our mother came rushing in. Terence was grounded. But even with aching gums and the taste of blood all over my tongue, I was happy.

I was a serious child, the kind who worried over everything. But with Terence, I was different. The bloody lips, the broken arm when I was ten, the ankles twisted from climbing to the roof of the high school at sixteen and running over logs that spanned the river behind our house at nine, the grounding I got for skipping biology in middle school when I’d taken the train into Harvard Square with him to buy comic books – my adventures with him always felt worth it. I’d walk away exhilarated. He was the reminder a person like me needs.

On the walk back, we came across a black scorpion the size of a small lobster. It was five inches long, at least, and crossed the path in front of us, claws held out before its body like a warning. It disappeared into the forest, hobbling awkwardly into the grass, claws seeming to weigh it down.

“Did you see that report in the paper,” I said, “about the two guys who got caught with drugs?”

Amanda turned around and stared at me, took my chin in her hand. “Gabbie, sweetheart, your brother is not dealing drugs.”

I shrugged her hand away. “It’s not out of the question,” I said. “You never know.”

We walked back in silence. I picked up my pace and walked ahead of her, past the one-story houses scattered along the edge of the field, windows gaping wide and dark, past the gray stone tower by the river where children climbed and hollered. legs swinging from the windowsill ten feet off the ground. Beyond the field, the mountains rose lumpy in the humidity, heat waves blurring their dark green edges.

Friday morning, I went down to the dock a mile away to ask the canoe man about Terence. Vilai said if anyone knew where my brother was, it would be the canoe man. He
ferried people from one side of the river to the other for two hundred baht, less than four dollars. *This tall,* I motioned with one hand. *Blonde,* I said, pointing to the word in my guidebook. He shook his head at me, took the canoe paddle in one strong hand, and pushed away from the dock. I asked at the store near the river, where they sold crackers and noodles and cokes in plastic bags with straws, *Have you seen my brother, a short blonde boy?* The owner shook his head. His wife said, *No.*

I walked the dirt road, back to the guesthouse, nodding sawaa di to three or four people as we passed, being careful not to grimace at the pig’s head and tongue and eyeballs that were spread out for sale on a white cloth on the grassy edge. An old woman in a purple skirt crouched beside them, arms crossed on her knees, talking to a younger woman who squatted next to her. Their long hair was twisted, snakelike, at the back of their heads.

Walking this road with Terence soon after we arrived, we’d seen a woman crouched on the green grass, back to us, a long knife in one hand, almost a machete, arm raised. She was holding something down with her other hand. I looked away. When I looked back again, the woman lowered her hand onto a duckling’s tiny neck, ten other yellow ducklings waddling in circles around her, panicked but not knowing enough to run away.

“Oh,” I said, touching Terence’s arm, “look.”

He laughed. “Dinner,” he’d said.

I walked up the road, breathing hard, and decided to call Brian when I got back to the guesthouse.

On the main deck, there was the Hmong woman sewing a black shirt with red cuffs and yellow ribbons that ran in zig-zag stripes down each sleeve. And there, behind her, was Terence, laughing with Amanda. They sat on the hammock together, hips pressed close, giggling. His eyes were bloodshot and red-rimmed.

“Married?” he said. He pointed at me and then at himself. “No?” His blue eyes opened wide, white-blonde lashes pressed against his pink skin. “How old are you? Twenty-nine? Ah!” He looked to an imaginary person to his left, shook his head, told them what a pity it was that we were unattached at such an old age. He pointed to my
feet, laughing. “So big,” he said. These are the conversations we had with Thais on every bus ride.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” I said. “I was about to call Brian.”

“I got caught in bad energy!” He raised his hands and wiggled his fingers in the air, mocking.

“Terence,” I said.

Amanda leaned to the side of the hammock, rested her head on one bent elbow, in position to watch. I heard Vilai cooking in the kitchen and saw, out of the corner of my eye, Nuna coloring at one of the dining tables. She hummed a quiet song to herself as she scribbled.

Terence sat on the hammock, reclined, looking away. He pretended to watch something in the trees. He used to do the same thing when we were little and he didn’t want to answer our mother’s questions about where he’d been and what he’d been doing out so late. He’d stare away, distance himself, refusing to be caught.

“Lunch!” Vilai called from the steps between kitchen and dining room. “Everyone hungry?”

Terence stood up and walked to the table, his blue fisherman’s pants wrapped tightly around his waist with a sash. I noticed a dark stain along one leg, saw a scab on his ankle. Amanda stood, too, and walked toward me. She touched me with one hippie hand, rested it on my shoulder and said, “He’s alright. Enjoy it.”

“Terence,” I said again. He kept walking to the table. “You bring me here to help me get over Rory, and then you do this. I thought you’d gotten killed. Turn around.”

He turned slowly, faced me.

“You can’t do that,” I said. “You can’t just go, and not tell anyone where you are or when you’ll be back. People worry.”

“People,” he said. “You.”

“Yeah. Me. I worry about you. Drunk in the middle of the jungle all alone. Christ, Terence. You’re thirty-one. What’s ever going to happen to you?”

“Aren’t you one to talk. All you’ve been doing this year is pouting in an apartment in Boston and you’re telling me that I live wrong?”
“You weren't even there,” I say. “You were in Cambodia. I couldn't even call you.”

“It's not my job to save your life, Gabbie.”

He turned back to his pad thai, which was steaming on a white plate on the table. He took three steps. He sat down on one of the cushions, legs crossed. He picked up the chopsticks to the right of his plate, where they rested on a small, white porcelain holder.

“Turn around, Terence,” I said. I stood behind him. He nestled each chopstick in the crooks between his fingers, making pincers.

“Turn around.”

He didn't turn. His blonde head tilted forward over his plate. On the wall behind the table, glossy pictures of trekking trips decorated the walls. People floated open-mouthed down the white water of the Pai River, smiled on green paths in the mountains. The back of Terence’s neck was sunburned red.

He scooped up a pile of noodles, and took a bite.

Vilai was standing on the steps, Nuna huddled behind her, clinging to her skirt. Amanda closed her eyes; pointer fingers and thumbs touching in a loose circle, she breathed in and out. I walked away.

When Terence sobered up that afternoon, he came into the bunk room and woke me. The first thing I heard was the monkeys with their chit chat, and then a gecko hummed behind my head, its croak-whir once strange, now a comfort.

“Hey,” he said. “Come to Tham Lod with me, the huge cave.”

“I went when you were gone,” I said. “You missed it.” I rolled onto my side so I couldn't see him.

“You're leaving in a week and a half. Come with me.”

“No,” I said.

“Gabbo,” he said. I twisted my neck look at him. He smirked and then went serious, blue eyes open wide. His voice softened. “Please?” He is ten again and I am seven. He is asking me to swim in the river behind the house, because it is hot outside, a hundred degrees for the fifth day in a row, and the water will feel cool against our skin.
Part of the reason I’d always said yes was because I think I must have known somehow, that these were chances I would not always have.

“Fine,” I said, “because I’m leaving soon.”

When we got there, it was nearly dusk, the best time, said Terence. We stopped on the rock ledge where I’d stood with the monk boy. A man was in one of the canoes on the river. He raised and lowered a pole, pushing the boat through the shallow water. He drifted to the center of the river, rounded a bend, and was out of sight.

“There are thousands of swifts that live here,” said Terence. “And every night they come back at dusk. They find their nest in the cave, one of thousands, every single time.”

“I know. I read about it while you were gone.”

“But you haven’t seen it,” he said. He raised one finger in the air. The sky went a grainy yellow-gray, the color of a storm back home. In Thailand, it just meant nighttime. A single swift darted through the entrance.

“One,” he said, and then, “Two!”

And then more and more, suddenly hundreds, thousands, swarming into the cave like bees, hardly any space between them, the sound of rustling wings a hum in the air above us. It lasted for minutes, this slew of birds headed to their nests. And all of a sudden, it seemed a miracle, the fact that they could find their own nests in that giant cave.

“Three hundred thousand,” I said.

We stood watching. Once the swifts had dwindled to the occasional bird or two, the bats started flying out, first a few and then, moments later, a swarm like the swifts. They were quieter than the birds, their innumerable flaps a whisper on the air.

“Don’t go on any more adventures,” I said. “Just stick to the beaten track.”

“No can do,” he said.

I turned to him, said, “Please,” but he shook his head.

I turned back to the river, took his hand and held it tight for a moment. I watched the man in the canoe push back to the cave, pole rising and falling in a slow rhythm. He floated under the mouth, and then to the other shore, where he slid the canoe up to the
dock. He knotted the rope at the bow, then stood, saw us, and waved. Terence dropped my hand. We both waved back.

"Sawaa di," Terence called. His voice echoed from the cave, the di rolling over and over at us. We waited there in darkness that fell on our shoulders with its own weight. I started thinking about what comes lurking in the night, what can fold itself out of shadows.

The man called back, and then he walked along the rock edge of the cave, to the trees outside, away.

I thought that when I went home, I would tell Brian and my friends stories of our boat rides and hikes into the mountains and visits to the temples and the caves. I thought I would remember everything with a nostalgic warmth. I would see it all, in retrospect, as an adventure. Already, at the cave, I felt it happening, the way I would talk about the clamor of Bangkok’s streets, the elephant that walked through taxis and tuk-tuk’s with pastel chalk words scrawled in Thai across its sides. I’d describe the monkeys and the guesthouse and the taste of young coconut. Tender, I would say. Sweet.

But that is not how it has gone. I looked at the pictures when they came back from the photo lab and then sent Brian my only copies. I didn’t write notes to explain each one, didn’t even tell him the details of our trip. Terence came home a year later, and by then, he was haggard. He was too thin and wore his fisherman’s pants and flip-flops in DC, where he looked like a street person. Brian tried to help him, fix him. He stayed with Brian. Put on a suit. Went to work in the office as a paralegal. Terence is a smart man. He picked it up quickly. He showed up to work every day for three months.

Maybe it was the change of seasons that made him restless, the leaves turning colors, the chill in the air. I don’t know. He didn’t call me to explain. One day in late October, he packed a bag with his old t-shirts, flip-flops and shorts, bought a flight to Venezuela on Brian’s credit card, and left again. That was years ago. We have not heard from him since.

“Let’s go to the waterfall tomorrow and swim,” Terence said that day by the cave.

“Sure,” I said, watching the bats fly away.

They became tiny dots in the sky, and then, finally, they were gone in the
darkness, searching for their food, and we were left to find the path home through the forest. The trees were black silhouettes around us, standing in bunches like a guarded faceless family. Our feet slipped against rocks and roots and dewy grass. A dense canopy of leaves shielded us from light, shadowed everything. But every now and then, as if gasping for air, the canopy parted, the leaves went away, and there was the weightless night-blue sky filled with shining white stars that seemed to laugh, joyous, down upon us.
That Awe Wonder Marvel Time

Mickey’s so much older than me, and me so old already, nine, I say, nine, and Mickey says, Shoot, Tiska, nine don’t mean nothin’ when you’re twelve like me. And then he passes me the ball – basketball, it’s my game, round bubbly rubber thing in my hands makes me feel good. I aim and I shoot and I score, and the crowd goes bonkers-wild. Oh can you hear them? Sh, listen, they’re in the background.

Hey now, Mickey, pass me the ball, I say, let me make another one, and he says, Tiska, you didn’t make the last one, where you living anyway, some kind of dreamworld? You miss every shot. Those words don’t mean nothing to me, cause I know I make the shots. They WHOOSH! right through the hoop, not even hitting the backboard. That’s called a swoosh, and when I make a swoosh Mickey’s like, Daaaaamn, cause sometimes, it does happen, his little sister can score. I love that look on Mickey’s face like his jaw got slung too low for his face, him standing there in awe.

Momma says awe and taught me how to use it, too. I’m nine and I know some big words like awe and marvel and wonder. At the beginning of summer, I asked Momma for some words that mean you think something is unbelievable and she gave me those, like
giving me candy from her palm. Oh Momma, I said, thank you, and now I use them every day. I love them so much.

Awe is when something is so splendid that you can’t even say it, and your face goes all surprised — but it’s more than surprised it’s also impressed and happy, because you’re seeing something so good you know it’s not ever going to happen the same way again. Like the day I saw my Daddy come back, three weeks ago, in the beginning of August, he walked through the door, not even telling anyone he was coming. He walked through the door wearing black jeans and a baseball hat that was blue and a Knicks shirt, cause we love the Knicks, and his big green army bag over his shoulder. He raised his hand at us and said, Hey kids, hey my kids, how you doin’, and we just looked at him like this: ( ! ) like a big, blank surprised space opened up in our minds and we couldn’t even think. He wasn’t supposed to be home for two more months. Then a second later, I mean, no, a nanosecond, we realized this was no dream, this was our Dad, and we said: Dad!!!!!!!!!!!! with so many exclamation points you can’t believe. Our Dad! Was home!

He said, Well, I got a favor, got some strings pulled. Medical leave, he whispered later to Momma. But right then, we sat on his lap on the brown armchair in the living room that’s His Chair, and he said, Kids, it sure is good to see you. We pressed our faces hard into his Knicks shirt, and I said, Dad we’re happy you’re home. Even Mickey who’s like hard ice sometimes, he was crying he was so happy, and later Momma came home and she smiled like a ninny at our Dad. She said, Why didn’t you tell us? He said, I wanted it to be a big surprise, and she came into the living room and leaned over all of us
and kissed Dad on the mouth. Her arms reached around the whole chair, which looking back I don’t think is possible, but that’s what happens in awe moments: impossible things come true.

*Marvel* is when you keep on looking at something and it is still delicious, even when you have stared and stared and stared, or thought it over real hard. Our Dad being home was a marvel, and from then on, that whole first week, Dad played ball with us and it was like good times, old times, like nothing ever would go wrong. Me and Mickey saying every day, *Man* it sure is good, not even saying what was cause we knew, just looking at each other grinning like we’re eating shit. I heard that one from Dad who says Momma wears a shit-eating grin when she’s happy. That second day he was home, he patted her rear-end when he said it and he smiled, too, and they were in the kitchen fresh from the bed, Momma cooking something hot and splendid-smelling.

Now, one more week until school, I am still working on my dunk. I say, Mickey. I can do it, one of these days, and he says, *Man* (he always calls me Man), you ain’t even ten yet, and you’re a girl, how you gonna dunk? I can’t even dunk and I’m twelve.

Older people, sometimes they act like they know it all, but they don’t get the simplest things.

Look, I say, if I want something hard enough, I’m gonna get it. Look who’s standing in our kitchen right now with Momma! How you think that happened? You think that was magic? No, that was us wishing, and we got it, Mickey, so you start believing. I’m gonna do it, and you’re gonna watch my feet fly up in the air and you’ll
go: Daaaaaaaaamn. You’ll tell the whole neighborhood that your little sister Tiska can dunk like nobody’s business.

Mickey shakes his head and says, Shit, Tiska, you think you can make it in this world, but you don’t know how hard things are.

I say, I know everything I need to know. You ever hear the word marvel? That’s what I’m gonna be.

Mickey keeps on shooting the ball, and three kids walk down the sidewalk on the other side of the chain link fence, one of them running their hand down it so it goes: KSSSSSH, that sound of a warm hand on metal. The three kids talk and laugh about something together. Cars drive up and down the street so smooth – not too loud just a nice rumble – and the sun shines and the trees sweat in this heat. The air turns into thickness right before our eyes.

*Inexplicable* is something you don’t know how to explain even when you’ve worked it over in your mind so many times. Sometimes inexplicable things are good, like miracles, when people get cured of the flu so quick, like that: snap!: and other times they’re more like tornadoes that land in little towns and tear them up for no reason at all, like we saw on the news the other night.

What me and Mickey talk about today is: something’s wrong with Dad. We don’t know what. He’s been home three weeks, and we’ve noticed some things, like he looks out the window for too long, and he has a funny look in his eyes – something that’s the opposite of all my good words, something I don’t know the word for yet.
We walk down the sidewalk to the bodega for milk. Mickey tells me that Momma says he’ll get better, that he’s recovering from something bad happened over there and it happens to a lot of people when they come back home, and when I say, What? Mickey shrugs and says he doesn’t know. I say, But how do we help him if we don’t know? Mickey keeps shrugging. I ask over and over till he gets mad at me. Shut up, Tiska, he says, You think I know? You think Momma tells me everything?

He shoves me a little and I fall off the sidewalk into the street. Don’t push me, Mickey, I say, and he goes: Psh, like he’s had it. Fine, then, I say, and I turn around and head back home.

I’m not supposed to walk around alone without Mickey, but I don’t even care. I don’t know how anything goes now that something’s wrong with Dad and Momma spending all her time talking to him and making things right, saying, Would you like some lunch, Henry? I bought some good roast beef at the store. How bout I make you a roast beef sandwich, nice and thick like you like it? He snaps to and says, Hm? Alright, baby, yeah, and then he turns back to the window and rocks a little bit in his chair.

Last night when Momma tucked me in, I asked when Dad’s going back to work and she said, Soon, baby, soon, and she kissed me on the cheek and turned out the light.

Nobody tells me anything anymore. All I’m allowed to do is lie here and wonder.

_Ambitious_ is what you are when you have big hopes, which is what Momma says I am. It’s like getting a swoosh on a long shot if you get one of those hopes.

In six days, me and Mickey have to go back to school, and I don’t want to, not yet. Mickey, I say, if I can make this shot, we don’t have to go. He says, What you
You think you can make things happen with all your basketball wishing? He shakes his head.

Mickey’s got good grades in school and he has some good friends. But one of them whose name is Darren got arrested last year, and then when he got out, he got into more trouble and died. Mickey put on his good clothes and went to the funeral and sulked all week. He wouldn’t even crack a smile when I did my sunshine dance for him.

You never know, I say, and I step way back to half court, and I turn around so I’m facing the other hoop. He says, Tiska, just take the damn shot.

But I go slow. I bend over backwards to see if I’m right in the middle of the court. I see that hoop upside down. I inch over a little to the right, so it’s right above my head, just: BAM: right there, and I put the ball between my two hands, and I stand straight again and lower my arms and then raise them so fast and hard. I close my eyes real tight, and I wait. I wait to hear the ball hit the net. I am so sure it’ll make it, and I listen. For a long time, it’s riding silent in the air and I don’t hear anything, and then: I hear it on the rim: BANG! It hits the ground and goes bounce. bounce. bounce.

I turn around and Mickey’s shaking his head, talking to two of his friends, Amesto and Mike, the ones Momma says are nice boys. His back is to the court and he doesn’t even see my shot. The ball’s bouncing less and less, lower and lower from the ground, the beats getting shorter and closer together, like a heart before it flat lines like I’ve seen on TV. Then it rolls toward Mickey. I wonder what’s the name for the sound between the beats of a ball bouncing. Not silence, not quiet, it’s something else, like you’re expecting the next bounce.
Those three boys are laughing, and Mike and Arnesto are wearing shorts and Nike high tops and no shirts. Their chests are shiny in the sunshine. It’s so hot that I wish I could take off my shirt, too. I would squirm it up over my head, and feel the summer heat on my skin. I did that one time in front of Mickey’s friends and he didn’t talk to me for three days.

Now I say, Hey, guys! You see that shot? Did I make it? Pretty sure it went in. Right?

Mickey turns around and shrugs at me, Dunno, Man, didn’t see. He scratches at his shoulder with one hand.

You guys wanna play a game? I say, Look, we got four people.

Mickey says, Loren’s on his way. Go see if Dani’s home. He calls it out to me and then turns back to his friends.

Dani is my friend from school. She lives around the corner, on Mark Street, and she doesn’t like to play basketball. She likes dolls and make-believe. I like make-believe fine but I don’t need to be playing with no dolls, brushing hair and putting on pretty outfits. I play with dolls I won’t get anywhere in this world. I have to get good at the same things Mickey’s good at.

I look down at the court so hot under my feet it might melt. There is no breeze at all. The spotted stray dog that lives around here trots down the other side of the fence.

Mickey’s goes, Yeah, Man, ha ha, laughing with his friends.

I say, It’s a wonder you’re my brother, Mickey.

Wonder can mean bad things, too. I am so mad I’m fuming. I am learning some
dark words now like fuming. I stomp off the court, through the metal gate, onto the street.

I wait for the cars to pass, and then I cross and head for Dani’s.

*Anticipation* is waiting, and waiting is hard. It’s like being hungry, like wanting something and not getting it yet, and your stomach going: GRAARGH! turning in on itself.

Every night I say, Hey Dad, how you doing? And he says, Hey baby girl, come on over here, and he picks me up and puts me on his lap in the big armchair. The chair has soft corduroy fabric covering it and white marks where it’s been worn down on the arms. I love it, that chair, because it is like my Dad, so comfy.

He says, How you doing, Tiska? I say, Good. I’m working on my dunk, and he laughs. I like it when he laughs, even more now, because for so long we didn’t hear him laughing, when he was gone. We sat here and waited for him to come home, hoping we wouldn’t hear his name called out from the TV, and Momma saying prayers all the time. And now, he hardly ever laughs. No tickle fights and wrestling on the rug. No playing ball outside together at night, streetlights lighting up the court. Just Dad and this armchair now, me and Mickey and Momma waiting for him to get happy. Mickey asks him every night, Hey Dad, you wanna play? Dad shakes his head or says nothing at all and Mickey walks away slouched.

Daddy, I say, when you gonna go back to work? He says, Soon, baby, soon, just resting for now. He looks out the window. This chair faces the front of the apartment. We can see the streetlamps shining, and if we went up to the windowsill we would see the basketball court. The other apartment buildings shine like magic in front of us, their lights
all warm and sweet, looking like something good is going on inside – dinners and parties and talking and hugs – even though I know, it’s more like yelling or arguing or just plain talking. I like to think it’s more like magic other worlds.

Dad looks out the window, and I lean my head back on his shoulder and turn to see his face. His chin is scratchy against my cheek. I say, Dad you didn’t shave today. He doesn’t hear me. I touch his face with my hand. Pat it. Say, Dad, Dad, in whispers. His eyes stare straight ahead like his insides went foggy. I keep saying, Dad Dad, please, Dad. He stares off.

Dad, I say, remember how we used to play PIG on the court, and we’d make all those shots like the Donald Duck shot where you have to quack and the Kareem Abdul Jabar shot where you have to alyoop. Remember?

I give his cheek a little pinch, and in a blink, he squeezes me too hard around my middle with his big hands, shoves me off his lap like he doesn’t know who I am and how did I get here? I fall onto the floor, land on the carpet.

Ow, I say.

He turns and sees me like I am a surprise to him, here on the floor, and his face goes soft. He says, Shit, and turns and walks out of the room.

I watch him walk away, and I try not cry or say an angry word, because I am half happy he’s come back and half scared of where he’s been going.

*Despair* is one of my new dark words. It is what happens when people don’t see anything good coming their way. Momma says Daddy’s filled with despair right now, but he’ll turn around, not to worry. That’s what she tells me later on when she tucks me in, four
days before school starts. Dad went out with his friend Mr. Jackman yesterday, and when he went out Momma’s on the phone all afternoon, sitting at the kitchen table, looking out the window at the tree that grows outside, its leaves shiny with the heat. She fingers the red placemats and says, Janet, I don’t know what to do. The man is not here. They say it’s gonna get better, but I don’t know. It’s already been over three weeks.

Then, Momma turned and saw me crouched on the carpet behind her, in the living room where the TV and Dad’s big chair are. I stared into the brown rug with my hands under my chin.

She said, Tiska, go outside and play with your brother on the court! He’s across the street. Go on. Now. 

She shooed me out with her hand like there’s a mosquito in the room that’s bugging her. So fine. I go. I stomp all the way to the door and all the way downstairs. I hate the stairwell when I’m alone cause the light on the second floor is out and it’s pitch dark. I don’t tell a soul I’m scared. I hear Mrs. Perkins yelling at Lacey Perkins to clean up her room on the first floor, and I kick an old newspaper at the bottom of the stairwell. I push open both sets of doors and then I’m outside in the heat.

Mickey’s bouncing the ball on the court, working on three pointers.

Mickey, I say, Momma says she doesn’t know what’s happening with Dad, you hear that? He says, Tiska, you don’t know what’s what. I say, I sure do, I just heard it myself.

He looks at me, says, Stop worrying. He passes the ball to me, and says, Let’s just play.
*Detach* is when one thing comes apart from another. This is how Momma describes Daddy sometimes. She says, He’s detached from the world.

I look at my Dad and wonder: Which part of him came undone?

I find him sitting on the front stoop on the third day before school. This is after breakfast. I say, Dad, why you so detached?

He says, Where you hear that, Tiska?

Momma says it.

This is what happens when people don’t know what to do after a bad time; they sit on it awhile. They think on it till they know what to do.

I say, That’s what you’re doing? You’re thinking all this time? About the war?

He says, Yeah, baby, that’s right.

What happened over there? Momma says I shouldn’t know but I think you oughtta tell me. If you don’t tell I can’t make it better, right Dad?

He shakes his head and says, Can’t, Tiska.

Then he sits very still and watches the basketball court, his face all faraway like he’s dreaming with his eyes open. And then, fast, a mean look passes over his face like I made him mad, and he pushes me away hard and stands up like he forgot something. He walks down the street. I stumble onto the curb and step back to catch myself from falling.

Dad, I say.

I look up and watch him. He steps right in front of a fast-moving car. I scream, Look out! but by the time the words come out of my mouth, that car has already swerved and passed, and he keeps right on walking, walking on down the road in his new wobbly
way like he didn’t even notice. He used to walk so long and sure. Now his steps and are small and shaky.

Malnutrition is when you don’t get the food you need and your belly grows big like there’s a baby inside even if you’re just a little girl, like the girl on the ad where the man with the white beard walks in a muddy town in the country and picks up big-bellied children and asks for your money. Twenty-five cents a day, he says. I ask Momma if we could pay twenty-five cents for one of those kids. I say, A cup of coffee! But Momma says, We have our own problems, Tiska.

Now it’s dinner time and I could eat a horse. I say it three times.

Momma says, Sh, Tiska, it’s almost ready, I heard you the first time.

I say, I am in awe, Momma, of how good the dinner smells, and, I have been waiting in anticipation of this meal. I wait for her to say how well I use my big words. She pulls the meatloaf from the steaming oven. There are dark half-moons under each of the arms of her blue shift dress.

She says, Set the table, please, Tiska, go on, now. Mickey, she says. Tell your father dinner’s ready.

I put the forks and knives down in just the right place on either side of the big blue plates. I make everything straight and perfect. I fold Dad’s paper napkin with a straight-line crease and slide it under his knife. Everything is made just right. This is how we can help.

Mickey goes into the living room, over the brown carpet to the tan chair where Dad sits. He looks out the window at all the other shining, warm apartments far away.
Mickey says, Dad, shaking his arm. I look back and see him. Dad, he says again, come to dinner.

Dad jumps like he's been fast asleep. Stop it! he shouts.

Momma turns to look at him. The whole world stops. So quiet and still. Like we are playing statues and no one can move, not even the boiling pots on the stove.

He looks at Mickey and says, Okay, oh, Mickey, okay. He stands up and walks toward the table in the kitchen, and we all start back up again like someone pressed Play.

Momma sets the peas on the table next to the meatloaf. Dad’s brown eyes go softer when he sees us getting everything ready. I see it there, his mind going easier.

Mickey, says Dad, pulling out his chair at one side of the round table, You play ball today? which means Dad didn’t look out the window to see for himself.

Mickey looks at Dad sideways, scared. He says, Yeah, I did, I played three on three all afternoon. We won four times.

Momma says, You mean, yes, I did, and Mickey rolls his eyes and says, Yes.

Dad says, Way to go, Man. He sounds back to normal.

Then he turns to me and asks if I played, too. No, I say. I don’t tell them where I was, how me and Dani dressed up her dolls to go to a ball. Momma knows but she won’t tell.

She was with Dani, says Mickey. I look up and say, So?

Momma says, Two more days till school, you two, come on.

We nod.

Momma’s cutting meatloaf for each of us. She puts a big slab onto our plates, and it lands with a soft, wet sound. I know how good it’s going to taste. I take the ketchup and
squeeze red stuff all over my plate: Ka-spleaaaat, it gushes out, I love it, I love that sound! I make a shirring noise, like bombs falling, and the ketchup lands softly on my plate. BAM! I say. SPLAT!

I keep on making the noise until Momma says, Stop it, Tiska, stop that, hard, like something’s catching in her throat. She slaps my hands like she’s so angry she’s fuming, like she’ll slap me silly if I don’t stop.

Dad puts his face in his hands and shakes his head.

I think, No, no, he’s gone to that quiet place again and every time he goes, it may be that he’ll never come back. He might come back angry, beyond fuming, or maybe he will stay away forever. He’ll forget who we are. Won’t know we are his family. Will think we are strangers.

Mickey over there is silent, just watching.

We all wait.

We hold our breath like we are watching the ball rise and fall and it is the last second of the Knicks game on TV and it makes its arc to the basket so slow before our eyes, all of us hoping. We wait so long it seems like, longer even than my backwards shot took to hit the net, longer even than all the time we waited for Dad to come home in the first place.

And I think, this is anticipation, this is wonder because wonder can be like a terrible mystery, too; this is the inexplicable thing is where is our Dad? Where does our old Dad go? If he never did come back, then that would be despair for us, detached from each other, wondering how to bring us together, with only three instead of four.

Momma puts her hand on Dad’s shoulder.
Finally, finally, lowers his hands. He looks up at us. He doesn’t hit or yell.

He smiles. There are tears in his eyes, I can see, like he’s had to struggle to say those words to tell me it’s okay, like he took a long, hard walk back to this table. His mouth is open. He is breathing loud.

He touches my face so gentle and says, You are my marvel, baby.

And the whole table lets out a big, heavy breath, like we’re deflating – not in a bad way like a ball going flat but in a good way, like maybe soon our bodies will float high enough off the ground to get back to that awe wonder marvel time. I know it will happen. I know we’re going to get there, sure as I know I can dunk one day, me a girl, not even such a tall girl. I’m gonna do it. I will raise myself up for all of us and soar so easy through the air, and dunk, and everyone will smile and feel fine.
Excerpts from In the Black Pond, Swimming,  
a Novel told in Short Shorts

- Prologue -

IMPALED

Miss Mary Mack Mack Mack all dressed in black black black  
With silver buttons buttons buttons

Whisper this to me in the night. Put your palms against mine. Clap with me. Criss-cross,  
apple sauce, do me a favor and get lost. Collapse into giggles. Endless fits that attack like  
convulsions. Take over the body. Lose control.

All down her back back back  
She asked her mother mother mother

Memory: You are there. You are Mary with your raven black hair down your back, your  
eyes two blue globes staring into me. You are my sister gone.

Jump rope, feet stepping quickly over the snap of it. Sing a song about kissing boys in  
trees. Behind the refrigerator, there is a piece of glass. Miss Mary sat upon it and broke her  
big fat – Ask me no more questions, I’ll tell you no more lies, the boys are in the  
bathroom zipping up their – Flies are in the meadow, the bees are in the yard... This is  
us, remember? Red and green striped skirts swaying around our skinny legs. Double  
Dutch. And if we didn’t make it over every rope to the end of the song, we were  
disappointed. We had to switch with one of the rope-swingers. We had to sit back and  
watch.

For fifteen cents cents cents  
To see the elephant elephant elephant

The glass in your cheek was the hardest to see. Impale. The very word is invasive. We  
each felt that glass piercing skin.
Boys brought you tulips on dates, would stand in the doorway shuffling their feet over the slate, sound of scraping in our ears. Stella hiding behind Dad. Mom in the kitchen cooking up a meal.

*Jump over the fence fence fence*
*He jumped so high high high*

Your hair is short now, easier to keep up says Amelia, our favorite nurse. Sunday school with Amelia, you remember? She used to laugh with us at the back tables when I was nine, and then we got separated, and she went to private school the next year so we never saw her. She wears her blonde hair pulled back. She gives you massages, touches every part of your body with her hands. Keeps you from getting sores. *Intimacy.* The touch. I wonder if you feel it.

They said your body flew fifty feet through the air, at least. Willow Smalls saw it. Saw you on the ground. Saw you bleeding. Willow Smalls, of all people. She knows more of this than I do. She knows if your eyes were open or closed right then. She knows the position of your body on the ground. You might have tried to say something to her. You might have sensed her presence. You always did remember everyone.

Your fingers long, reaching out to touch piano keys, and playing. You could play everything Stella and I could not: Beethoven, Chopin, all of the operas, and the classic old songs Mom loved: *Play It’s the Last Dance,* she’d say, and you could pick the tune up even if you didn’t know the song. You could play anything by ear; Mom always said so.

*He touched the sky sky sky*
*And didn’t come back back back*

I miss you, Mary, miss your hands on mine and our secrets whispered in the darkness, in the moments when we were supposed to be silent. Illicit laughter. There is nothing better. All of our lives wrapped up in one another from birth. Stella is so far away now, California. There are phone calls. There are visits. It is not the same. I would have moved away, too, gone right on to Michigan with Gerald if this hadn’t happened.

I am glad to be here with you. Never think otherwise.

*Till the fourth of July –ly –ly!*

I believe you can hear everything. I believe you know it all. Otherwise, all of this is a waste, isn’t it. You are still there, somewhere deep inside your own body, listening intently. You are taking it all in. Someday, you’ll talk back - sit right up, level your eyes and say: *Junie, what’s all this fuss? Here I am.*
Every Good Boy Deserves Fudge, plinkity plink in that even way with the metronome counting—fingers one, then two, then three four five: this is the scale. Ms. Chardell sits beside me in a yellow wool sweater, her elfin self gray-haired, well-postured, breath smelling of the red and white mints whose wrappers crinkle in her pocket.

“One time,” she says when I stop, “two women tried to kidnap me!” She opens her gray eyes wide. Those eyes must have been brown, but I remember them as gray. “I jumped out of the car and ran away, into the woods.”

She lived in a yellow house with blue shutters, a house so small that her two grand pianos—one black and shiny, the other matte brown—filled the whole first floor, except for a tiny kitchen behind them with its stove and sink and four cabinets and a black and white linoleum floor.

One two three four five, one two three four five, over and over again until my fingers did it by heart without my mind telling them where to go. The black keys were my nemeses. Which one flat and which one sharp? I never knew. My fingers wouldn’t reach up and strike them when they were supposed to.

“A half-beat off,” Ms. Chardell says lilting, “try again.”

And when I still get it wrong, she says, “I had a dog named Albert who was as tall as my waist.” She touches her side with one open hand to show me. “Can you imagine a dog so big? You ride horses, don’t you?”

The metronome keeps going. I hear even now, click click click, like shoes tapping on a glass floor, or Maryanne Silver’s fancy dancing at the fifth grade talent show the year before—Christmastime, her red and green tutu bouncing as she tapped in her black satin leather shoes, which were gleaming in the spotlight. I wanted shoes just like that. I had orange corrective shoes with brown laces which Mr. Eldwin had to refit for me every year. He’d set the inserts in after cutting them down or building them up, and I’d stand with my mother and wait in the aisles of boxes, rows upon rows of leather that reached all
the way up to the ceiling, a sliding ladder there for Mr. Eldwin to get them, and the whole store smelled of glue and cardboard.

"Count again," says Ms. Chardell.

I count. I count and count and count, until I remember without thinking, until my fingers have a life of their own, and dance out into the sky where my mind is, up into the gray clouds, and then above – where the air is so clear-blue and so high that not even the rain falls.

THE BLUE HOUSE SINGHS

Down the street, in the big blue house with its flat-faced front, lives an Indian family named Singh. The children are hardly ever in the yard. I don't even know their names, because I hardly ever see them. There is a little girl, I know that – and she has blue eyes, which the rest of the family does not have. The two boys have brown eyes and the parents, too. I don't know where her blue eyes came from. My best friend Danielle has a sister with red hair even though the rest of the family is blonde, and no one knows where that came from, either. "From the milkman," says my Dad and my Mom rolls her eyes, digging up weeds in the back yard rock-and-flower garden.

In the house beside the Singh's, the Baylems live; they have sheep in their yard, which smell terrible even if you ride your bike past them as fast as you can go. Even then, the stink still rises up at you. Last year, Danielle's mother had another baby, and her name is Elizabeth and she has red hair, too. We called her "it" before she was born, a little baby girl who came out so small she was almost unbelievable. She was early and everyone worried for awhile. I could see it while we waited at the hospital every afternoon for two weeks – in the way their hands moved from their pockets to their faces to their purses or their books, turning pages too fast or not at all.

I got to walk into the baby room and look at all the babies sleeping and crying together with their plastic bracelets on their hands and all their ugly faces scrunched up red. Everyone says babies are beautiful, but I think we all secretly know that they come out pruny, like shriveled orange carrots, and get better looking as time goes. Mom says every parent looks at their child and thinks that one, theirs, is the most beautiful ever. She said that's what she thought when she saw me for the first time. And my sister Mary, too.
Two weeks after Elizabeth was born with her shriveled skin, we found out that Mr. Singh was sick. We ran into Mrs. Singh in the hallway of the hospital, where it smells like the witch hazel Mom rubs on my mosquito bites in summer time. No one would explain what was wrong with Mr. Singh, but Mom got on the phone that day, right when we got home, and made plans with the other neighborhood Moms to bring the Singhs some food all week. Casseroles. Moms love to make casseroles.

Two more weeks went by, and then it was June, and we were playing in the yard again and swatting bugs at night. So many mosquitoes here because it is swamp land, with rivers and marshes all around us. The Singhs have a blue light that zaps the bugs at night. Sometimes, if you walk by, you can hear it as bugs fly in and fall away.

I saw Dara walking into the house one night as we drove home, and it was dark because here, there are no such things as streetlights – only stars – and our headlights landed on her body. All the house lights were off except for one yellow window that glowed upstairs. Her hand was on the doorknob, and the headlights flashed on her white-shirted body and she looked at us with her eyes that I knew were blue, and I wondered what she saw with those eyes. I wondered what went on in that big blue house – if it really was a secret or just something no one else ever saw.

**OFF-KILTER**

"I had a squirrel as a pet when I was a little girl! His name was Mr. Fitzsimmons. My father ran over his tail when he backed out for work one morning, and Mr. Fitzsimmons never could climb right after that. His balance was all out of whack."

**HOW BIRDS LIVE**

Certain birds are called ostriches, and they have long white necks and bulbous bodies. This is what we learned in class today: Bulbous. Birds. There are other kinds of birds that swoop and dip and fly with their bright plumes into the great sky, and some that waddle all their days across the ice, black wings flapping even though they’ll never take flight. There are some that live mostly in treetops and twitter back and forth from branch to branch. There are others that are awake only at night, going *hoo, hoo, whoooo are youuuuu?* Others live in the earth, in holes in the sides of cliffs by the ocean in California
or Ireland—prime real estate, says the teacher, water view, ha ha. Some birds live in the coldest parts of the world, and they store up extra body fat for easy living. These birds have to watch out for polar bears, the same color white as the snow, so hard to see, on the prowl for a snack. Some have to look up, into the sky, for hawks that will swoop down upon them for a meal. This is why hawks have white undersides, says the teacher. camouflage, which is a way of disguise. Others have to be careful on the ground—pigeons and doves and pheasants—because wolves and other sharp-toothed things will gobble them up in a happy bite. The ones that live in Florida and Africa have to look out for alligators and crocodiles, whose jaws will rise up from beneath and snap shut with these still-alive birds inside. Some birds, like pheasants and swans, mate for life, and if their mate dies, they will walk and squawk in a search for the one they loved. What they don’t know is that he or she is never coming back. Being a bird is wonderful with all that flying and swooping and singing into the sky, but it’s terrible, too, because no one can explain the most important things to a bird, things we have parents and teachers to explain to us, the most difficult things—like why sometimes the other ones never come back, and what it means to fly, and where it is all those upwards-soaring souls go.

RAISED ABOVE OUR HEADS
Walking into the woods, it is hot now, summertime, and I know Georgie and John have gone off running somewhere. This is their playtime, afternoons of making fires. Mom knows, too, but she doesn’t tell Mrs. McMurphy because Mrs. McMurphy is old and unable to enforce the rules. Mom does it for her, yells at Georgie for starting fires, tells him he could burn down the whole forest, burn down someone’s house. These are things my sisters and I already know. Georgie is a city rat, says Mom, so he never learned.

This is the season of mosquitoes, and when we walk along the creek and into the pond and through the woods out back, they buzz and hum around our ears, up our legs, even sometimes on our bums (when we wear dresses or our shorts are loose), and they bite us all over, leave us itching in our sheets at night. Mom has to witch hazel me because I cannot sleep. The witch hazel takes the itch right out, evaporates it into the air. Mom says, “Watch, you can see it disappear,” and she makes a sound like a shhh, and I
watch the itch rise out of my skin, into the dark, like a blue spark, and then flicker away into nothing.

I know Georgie and John are out there somewhere, but I don’t care. I am going to the treehouse, because that's where I need to be today; I have so much thinking to do. Stella and Mary went off on their way to catch crawfish, and I said, “No, not me, I’m going thinking,” because I am almost in fourth grade and sometimes, you have to walk by yourself and be alone, and listen to your own breath inside you, and only your own feet against the leaves and sticks in the woods as you walk. I go up Rattlesnake Hill and think about how glad I am the snakes are all gone, called out like St. Patrick did in Ireland, I bet, some person fluting them away. I listen to the crackle of my feet, stop for a bite of blueberries from the patch off to the left, wander again to the path, pick up a salamander from under a rotting piece of wood, and then march steady on to the treehouse.

Georgie and John painted a red X on it the summer before to try and scare me away. But I have never been a scaredy cat.

I keep on walking, listen to the crackle of the leaves, the snap of dead twigs, and I hear, to my right, the distant laughter of boys: two boys, Georgie and John, I’m sure. I am wearing my favorite yellow dress with its red flowers. It was a hand-me-down from the Margaret sisters down the street, and I wear it with my white go-go boots which are the best things in the world. They have wide heels and silver buckles that wrap around my calves and they come to just below my knee, covering my chicken pox scar. I stop and listen to the boys laughing. I don’t smell a fire.

I walk to their voices, closer, closer, and then they hear me and turn and shout, “Hey, Junie,” they say, “Nice boots!” They crack up.

“Real funny,” I say.

Georgie’s a secret chicken, can’t make fun of anyone unless he’s with John, who’s a troublemaker. John has twin sisters, identical. He and Gerogie sit like twins on the log, arms crossed, t-shirts streaked with dirt.

“Nice dress,” says Georgie.

“It is a nice dress,” I say, “but you wouldn’t know. You’re a couple of knuckleheads.”

They laugh when I say that.
“Hey, Junie,” says John, “show us your titties.”

I look at those two, crouched on a fallen log, side by side, their legs scratched from playing in the woods all day.

“I don’t have titties,” I say. “Duh.”

John says, “Yeah, you do. All girls have titties. Even my sisters.”

I look at him, and I look at Georgie, who is looking down at his shoes because it’s too much for him, tittie-talk.

“I do not,” I say.

I don’t want titties yet. I’m only in fourth grade. I don’t want all that. I want my dresses and my boots and my good friends, but no titties. When they come, you have to spend all your time putting on bras and sitting in the bathroom. Susanna’s older sister with the red hair told us so. I have more important things to do.

“Fine,” I say, “I’ll show you.”

I walk closer to them, and I reach down and grab the bottom of my dress, and I raise it up above my head so I can’t see anything – just the sun shining through the yellow cloth, and I shout, “See? No titties, stupid!”

John laughs and when I lower my dress, pointing at me.

“I see London, I see France,” he says. “You’re flat as a board!”

He holds his stomach and rolls backward off the log, like I gave him a laugh attack. He crashes into the leaves.

Georgie’s still sitting there with his head lowered, hands beside him on the log. “You didn’t have to,” he says. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

I put my hands on my hips. This is what Ms. Aaronsen at school calls sassing, which is why she’ll give a spanking.

“I don’t care,” I say. “Doesn’t bother me a bit,” and then I turn in my go-go boots and I stomp back to the path, crunching down so hard on those leaves, and I breathe in and out, in and out, and I walk faster and faster. But the faster I walk and the harder I try not to care, the worse it gets. I don’t know why, but something feels wrong – like they tricked me after all – and I run for the treehouse. I climb up the ladder fast, boots slip-sliding on the wooden rungs that are dry as bones.
I get to the top and step over the red-painted X, and then, I let the catch in my throat free, and I sit in that treehouse, and for no reason I could explain to you right then, I cry just the littlest bit. I run my hands over my chest, over my whole body, and then I stand up in my yellow dress and my white boots, and I stomp up and down on the tree house, over and over, jumping, waving my arms, shaking my shoulders back and forth like I’ve seen women do on TV and shaking my hands around me, all of it just to show the world I don’t care, just to show how much I love what I’m made of, and I watch the shame those boys gave me rise out of me into the air and flicker away, just like the itch and sting of a witch-hazed bite.

TRICK

The babysitter girls love to tickle. I can see their searching fingers coming, eager to get at my sides, and I squiggle, squirm away. I squeal – half with the sensation of it, and half with the pleasure of all the attention.

"Look, she laughs before you even touch her," the babysitter says to her friend. She is a faceless girl to me now – brunette, blonde, amber-haired? I have no idea.

Upstairs, my sister Mary is drawing on Cheez-Its to feed to the babysitter, a different one, who we do not like even though she plays with us. She tips us over on the big blue and white chair in the playroom (which our parents do not allow) – faster and faster – until we shriek and she says, “Bedtime.”

Mary hands me the cracker. “Give it to her,” she says. “This side up.”

I look down at the cracker and giggle, cover my mouth. Then I look up at Mary, her brown eyes steady.

“But what if she dies?” I say.

“She won’t,” says Mary, “she won’t even get sick.”

I’m not sure. But Mary says she’ll think I’m cool forever if I do it. So, I walk downstairs and I lay out three Cheez-Its on my palm, plain side up, and I offer them to the babysitter.

“Thank you,” she says.

I watch her, open-mouthed, thrilled. She’s eating the Cheez-Its! Just before eating the last one, she flips it over, and she sees the blue scribbles of pen. Her face goes
dark, and she yells at me, tells me what a terrible little tyrant I am. I turn and run fast to Mary.

We sit upstairs in our dark bedroom, Stella asleep next door, and we laugh, side by side, so close I can feel her ribs rising and falling with each short breath, as we listen to the babysitter cleaning out her mouth, rinsing and spitting and rinsing again, cursing us in between rounds.

**MISS MARY MACK, MACK, MACK, ALL DRESSED IN BLACK, BLACK, BLACK**

Danielle’s tights fell down around her knees at recess today! She ran inside with them still bunched up down there, the red and white jump rope twisted in her hand – no pinky on her left hand because she was born without it – and she said, Look at me, will you? I was reading with Miss Watson, finishing the *Indian in the Cupboard*. Angie Mills was wearing her headgear, erasing the green chalkboard. We all turned around. There was Danielle with her white tights spun around her knees. She struck a pose, one hand behind her head. Glamour queen with her legs strung together.

**TULIPS**

When Mary goes on dates, the boys bring flowers. They ring the doorbell and they wait all nervous, hands grabbing at the edges of their pockets, running over their just-combed hair, making sure the zits at their chin and forehead are in check. Dad gets the door every time, says, *Hello young man*, and acts Very Official, because he is The Dad, and the boys have to Obey Him, Respect his Daughter. Or Else. This is the speech he gives them while they stand in the foyer, feet glancing over the slate with a scratching sound as they shift from one foot to the other.

Mary’s upstairs while this is happening, brushing out her hair or fixing her clear lip gloss. She sits in front of the vanity that Mom and Dad bought her last year, and she gazes at her face. Her hair is raven-black and soft as feathers. Her eyes are wide and blue. She is an anomaly, says Mom, because she is so dark. And the only one in the family with blue eyes is Dad’s mom, which isn’t enough to get Mary the eyes, says Mom. Who knows what happened. Recessive, she repeats over and over. Mary sprays perfume on her wrists. It smells like the lilacs that grow on the field behind Rattlesnake Hill in the
summertime. Run up the path through the woods, past the treehouse, flat for awhile, feet cracking on dry sticks and old pine needles, then down the hill again, and the forest opens wide to a field that hardly anyone knows about. It’s good for running through and screaming and dancing when you don’t want anyone to see. I go there all the time, even now that I am too old for playing in the woods. I am getting close to dating days, too. Not yet, says Dad, one at a time, please. His face gets that center-forehead-crease when we start talking dating. Stella says, Don’t worry, Daddy, never me. She wraps her arms around his waist and sings him a tuneless song in her tonedeaf melody, and he smiles and lets her dance on his feet, even though she’s too heavy for it now. Her curly hair bobs up and down as they move. I watch from the big easy chair that Mom hates because it’s Dad’s from college. I like to run my fingers in the corduroy creases, tracing lines I’ve known since forever.

When Mary walks downstairs, she does not look nervous. She is a beauty. Everyone knows it, the whole town. I bet she will be homecoming queen. She says, Oh, no. Junie, I’m not popular enough, not pretty enough, Stacey Jenkins will get it for sure. That’s the nice thing about Mary, is that she doesn’t know how beautiful she is, or how smart, or how much everyone loves her. She is not the type to lord things over us like that. Luna Pedinia does that all the time in school, every time she gets an A or Tommy Watson, the cutest boy in the sixth grade asks her to dance, she gives us all a snot-nosed look, like, la ti da. It is nauseating, let me tell you. But Mary, she is the kind of person who is so perfect but you can’t even hate her because she has a good heart, too. And she is my sister. She would do anything for me; she said that one time when we were sad about Simon dying. She let me lean against her while I cried, sitting on a rock out front at the bottom of the front yard hill, and she said, Junie, I am here for you forever. It is a good thing to know. It is something you can reach out and feel on the darkest nights, when you are still, inexplicably, afraid of monsters even at the age of thirteen. She lets me slip into her room when I’m afraid, and sleep on the other twin bed with her, because she knows I like to listen to someone else’s breathing while I fall asleep. She never teases me about that. Maybe about my flyaway hair, or my bad piano playing, or my crooked old feet, but never about the sleepovers. And even when she locks me out of her room or teases me or tells me what a brat I am, I think about that time she whispered that she
would always be there, and I know that it’s true. I holler back at her and tell her what a jerk she is, but in my secret heart, I am loving her still.

Stella sings, *First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes Mary with the baby carriage*, and then she makes kissing sounds, shaking her hips.

Stella, says Dad, and she hides behind his legs, playing little sister.

Mom comes up from the basement where she is sawing wood for her new furniture-making craze, and she brushes the sawdust off her red chamois shirt sleeve and shakes the boy’s hand, whose name this time is Steven.

Hello, Steven, she says, Great to meet you.

Mom doesn’t give them the same song-and-dance as Dad.

By eleven o’clock, he says to Steven. And drive slowly and wear your seatbelts.

Mary rolls her eyes and kisses him on the cheek. She is wearing the red cardigan sweater I have always wanted, and the white t-shirt that is just the right amount of tight-and-loose, and her demin skirt with her red patent leather shoes. Mary is popular. It oozes out of her, whether she knows it or not.

Steven’s hair is black and parted to the right, and he checks to make sure his green plaid shirt is all tucked into his chino pants, and he says, These are for you, Mary, in a funny robot voice and stretches out his arm and hands her a bundle of pink tulips. I giggle. You sure look pretty, he says.

Stella laughs behind Dad’s legs.

Mom says, I’ll put those in water. Off you go, you two, and she takes the tulips and ushers them both out the door in one smooth swoop. That’s Mom’s way: smooth, easygoing. *By eleven!* Dad shouts again from the doorway. I watch them drive down the driveway, which is almost a mile long and cuts through the woods, the red brake lights blinking on and then off and then on again, curving further and further away, until they disappear into the trees. Stella stands behind me making kissy noises.

*Mary and Steee-ven*, she sings.

I smell dinner cooking up behind me, macaroni casserole, our favorite. Mom clashes pots and clinks dishes in the kitchen. The faucet turns on, water rushing into the sink. Dad puts on a record. It is opera, which relaxes him, an aria, the singer’s voice rising up and up to notes so high they seem impossible.
Dad sits in the corduroy chair with his eyes closed, a glass of honey-colored whiskey in one hand. Stella jumps onto the coffee table and raises both arms above her head, opens her mouth, pretends she’s the singer. She raises her shoulders and waves her hands around, squints her eyes into little moons and holds her belly like she is trying so hard. I stand against the wall, watching, still seeing in my mind those lights headed down the highway, Mary driving into her grown life while we remain nested here.

This is how we stay, the three of us, until Mom says, *It’s time!* and like magic, we wake up from our separate dreams and walk into the bright kitchen.

**TRIMMING SHEARS**

In the big yellow house beside Ms. Chardell’s cottage, there lives a woman who wears great big glasses and cuts her lawn with scissors. She has a daughter who looks exactly like her, only smaller. Her name is Lucy Anderson and she is in choir with me. She is a soprano with a hardly-there-it’s-so-high voice. When she trims the lawn – every other day in Spring, Summer, and Fall – Mrs. Anderson wears a floppy white hat so her eyes are hidden when her head is bent. She kneels on the grass, hands in white cotton gloves. Like the Alice in Wonderland rabbit, or Alice herself. She trims the lawn with a pair of giant scissors. A lobster lady clipping with her single oversized claw.

She looks up when I walk in the gate and says, “Hello,” without a smile, glasses resting on her cheeks. She leans on her free hand to look at me, claw spread wide open like she might trim my hair if she sees a loose end.

I had a nightmare about her once. She came up to me with those scissors and said, “Young lady, your neck is much too thick!” and just before she snipped me, I woke up.

I skirt her. Walk on the other side of the brick path so I don’t get too close.

“Off the lawn!” she says.

I jump back onto the brick, eyeing her the whole time. The claw glimmers in the sunshine, red-handled. Oh, ugly lady.

I put one hand out to touch the blue door of Ms. Chardell’s house, and with three little knocks, the door opens, and I am whisked inside, where I can breathe again.
POISON IVY ITCH
Cindy down the road said she got poison ivy all over her legs. Look, she said. She lowered her socks and showed me her ankles and calves, and there were the red bumps rising on her white skin. You got it, I said, I never got it, ever. She said, Some people can’t, you know, you may be immune.

A week later, Mary came home with a yellow plastic bowl, and inside the bowl was a bird’s nest made of sticks and moss, with blue eggs nestled inside. I could practically see the heartbeats of those little birds in the eggs, they were so close to hatching.

IMAGO
Imago means learning. Ms. Dry says, “Do you have a cold?” And then THWAP! a snap of her thick fingers against my head. I cry harder. This is backstage at the Christmas play, where giggling is not allowed. You learn quickly here.

When my best friend Danielle visits, she says, “Why are there bars on the windows? So strange.”

I say, “There aren’t.”

She insists, yes yes there are.

She still goes to the public school, where I went, too, until last year. When I go back to Imago the next day, I make sure to check. There are no bars. Only the usual tic-tac-toe window dividers, dirty glass panes in between. The linoleum floors are chess-board beige and brown.

I learn history and science and English. I am three grades ahead of the public school kids, boasts my mother. I hear how proud she is.

Willow Smalls is my best-school-friend, with her long blonde hair. We called a sex line one night at her house and talked for two hours – I don’t even know what we said or heard, but she could make her voice smoky, older – and when her parents found out two weeks later (reading the phone bill), she got grounded.

Peter-with-his-buzz-cut had a crush on me, and we passed notes that said, “I love you,” and, “Do you want to go out?” and when I told Willow, she invited him to her house and they called me, and she said, “You know those notes were only a joke, right?”
I was quiet.
Then: “Yes,” I said, “Of course I know that.”
I saw Willow four years later at the Horton Fair, and she was wearing a black t-shirt, torn at the sleeves, and black eyeliner, and she was with others dressed just as she was. We didn’t say hello.
My other best-school-friend, Nina, has baloney curls and a white yappy dog and water that came from a big round cooler in her kitchen, which a man comes to replace every week when it ran out.
Ms. Dry has a paddle for whipping if you say the wrong words, and every morning we have to go to chapel and recite the right words. Prayers. Responses. “Amen,” and, “Yes, dear Lord,” and on and on and on, the sunshine falling through the tic-tac-toe windows, splattering into perfect painful grids on the floor.

IN THE BLACK POND, SWIMMING
When the water falls across our naked bodies, we moan or shriek or sigh or stay silent – any of these things will do, because it feels so good. Water on skin. The older kids come here to make out, but we don’t. We only come for the sensation. Mom says we should enjoy our bodies because one day we’ll be old like her, with sore knees and an aching back. She doesn’t know we come here. This is sneaking out, in the nighttime when the world is sleeping. There’s a delicious feeling to night-creeping when the whole world has gone to bed.

There are six of us – me and my three best girlfriends and two boys whose names are Gerald and Rob. Last year, Rob got a leech stuck on his penis, just like happens in that movie, only in real life his mother had to pull it off, and she called our mother to check us for them, too.

No one lives near the pond. No one at all.

Down the road, there is a girl-scout camp where I have gone every summer but will, finally, not go this year because I am older, and a mile away is Paulina Chepeski’s house. She has raven-black hair and dark eyes, and everyone says her mother is a witch.

When we swim, we splash and play and make fun of one another. Sometimes, we’ll rub arms with the boys on purpose, just to get a taste of how it feels, testing. We
swim all the way out to the raft in the middle of the pond, and the water is cold, and the
moon shines down on us, or the stars, or sometimes, once a month when it is cloudy,
nothing at all – a moonless night. It’s on these last nights that we tell ghost stories.

Everyone says the ghost of the girl who drowned here lives in the trees. Her name
was Dara Singh, and she lived down the street from me in the blue house and hardly ever
went outside. Her father was sick once, and my mother brought them a casserole. Mom
went inside the house while I waited in the car. When she came back out, she wouldn’t
say anything at all about what it was like inside.

“Normal,” she said. “Just like our house.”

But I didn’t believe it. The little girl had blue eyes that stood out against her dark
skin, like she’d been marked for something special in life, like she could see differently
than the rest of us with our plain old matchy-matching skin and eyes. Mom said then that
she’d grow up to be a real beauty, and that her brothers were all quite handsome, that I
might keep that in mind for one day down the road. “Ew,” I’d said.

But three years after the little girl’s father got sick and then well again, and three
years after Danielle’s little sister was born, the little blue-eyed girl drowned in this pond.
She was only six then, two years younger than me. They said she was on a ventilator for
seven years, and then her family decided to let her go. That’s how Mom said it. “Let her
go.”

The boys are daring me to swim to the other side of the lake now, saying, “Betcha
can’t.”

I look back at them, treading water. “What do you know?” I say. “I’ve been on
swim team all Spring. Wanna race?”

The boys say yeah, and off we go, across the lake, my three girlfriends waiting on
the raft, cheering for me. We can scream as loud as we like here, and no one will hear;
that’s the beauty of it.

We swim, my head in the black water, splashing, arms pushing, fifty yards, sixty,
seventy-five, and I start to run out of breath. I raise my head out of the water to see where
I am. There is the shadow of trees ahead of me. Not far now, and the two boys splashing
beside me, just behind. I am fast. They’ll see. I put my head back into the water, and I
swim, pushing hard for proof of what I can do, cold water shushing all around my body.
arms skimming my hips and then pushing back, pinkies up and out of the surface, hands thumb-side down at my ears. I fall into the rhythm, breath coming easy as I turn my head every other stroke.

And then, ahead of me, underwater, I see a fish – its white underside swaying. It rises up, out of the darkness of the depths, body bending in and out, fins pedaling, eager, like a child. I follow it all the way to the shore, and when we arrive, it bellies itself out of the water, onto the sand, and grows legs and walks into the trees, white arm waving as it disappears. I stand there, water falling away from my shoulders, rolling in great drops off my skin, and I know who it is and am not afraid, because this is not a ghost story.

I can see her blue eyes now as if it is the night our car headlights fell upon her white-shirted body, me and my mother driving home, Dara alone in that big blue house, the single yellow light glowing upstairs. That night, all I could see of her face was the divots and round, dark shadows of the hollows, the sharp-edged brightness of her cheekbones, her forehead. But, I could see her eyes in my mind. It’s the same now. Those blue eyes. They haunt me. She is a shadow in the trees. She is in the periphery, always on the corners of my mind, even when I think I have forgotten. To my memory, it does not matter that I hardly knew her while she was alive. She will always, always be standing, a white shape in the headlights, her blue eyes looking out at me, knowing something I do not know.

The boys splash up beside me, wade to the sandy shore, stand and catch their breath, hands on their knees.

“How’d you get here so fast?” they say.

I keep watching the woods.

No one could hear them scream that day, how she must have called out as she splashed, how her brother must have called as he pulled her in to shore, her lips already blue. It was April, too cold for everyone else to swim. They took a different school bus and got off here. The driver was fired for letting them off without a note, small recompense for a family aggrieved. I wonder how it is for him now, and more, for her brother.

When she was alive, I could tell she had a secret. It was in the way she moved – her hands so full of grace they seemed to float on the air, the careful set of her lips, the
guarded blue eyes, the way she would not run and laugh and play with us in the neighborhood after school (those two years she went) but walked home alone, in even, steady steps that could not have belonged to any normal six year-old. She is playful in death, at least.

One of the boys, Gerald, steps up beside me and touches my shoulder, a cold shock. He has broad shoulders, and his black hair sticks to his forehead in thick, straightened strands.

"Wake up," he says.

I do not know it, but in two weeks, I will kiss him, a sweet, awkward first kiss that will charge my whole body from my heels up through my swim-strong calves, through my spine, to my shoulders and my flushed cheeks.

I turn to him in the night, our skin still shedding drops from the shimmering black pond, and I touch his face, run my fingers down his forehead, his cheeks, over his two wet lips, just because I can, just because it feels so good to touch each other in this life.

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- Part Two -

SOMEBODY, ANYBODY

Snow forts are passé now. Passe is a word I learned from Danielle’s mom, who is a Class Act, says Dad, from New York City. Snob, says Mom, grew up on Park Avenue. Mom says Dad just thinks she’s a Class Act because she’s got big boobs and long legs, and anyone with that combo is okay in Dad’s book. Who knows with them.

Stella keeps begging me to build forts outside with her, and I say, “No way, Stella, they are passé. I am thirteen, young lady.” I walk into my room and close my door.

Stella sits outside screaming, saying, Please, please, please. This is her thing. To make a big fuss and beg until Mom comes and makes me do what Stella wants. When Stella was only three, she’d knock on the front door, even when it was unlocked, and say, “Somebody, anybody, let me in!” like she couldn’t open the door herself, like it was too heavy for her little hands.
I sit in my room, yellow flowered wallpaper looking all wrong suddenly, and I watch my reflection in my vanity, which has pink ruffled edges, just like Danielle's. I begged for it when I saw hers, and finally, Mom and Dad said a whole lot about morals, and then they bought this. I pick up my hand mirror. I stare at my eyes, which are brown, and I curl my lashes with the thingamajig that Aunt Lindy gave me last year, which always pinches my eyelids, and I puff up my hair like Aunt Lindy does just before she goes out with her boyfriend. (He's a forever-boyfriend, because Aunt Lindy won't get married or let him go, either one.)

"Please, please please!" says Stella. She lays down on the blue carpet and bangs her heels against my door. I've seen her do it to Mary's door a million times.

"I love you," she says. "I want to play with you!"

"No," I say. "Go away."

I wince when I catch the curler on my lashes. I pull it away gently, slowly, like I'm trying not to pull my whole eyeball out in one wrong move. I run one finger over my lashes, then down my cheek, my neck, feeling my own soft skin, imagining the way Rob will kiss it one day like they do on Dallas, which I can watch at Danielle's house, and how he'll run his lips slowly down my neck and then we'll hug and dance all night under the disco ball. just like on TV.

Stella starts crying outside. Please, please, please, she says.

I am brushing on my lipstick now, pulling up my hair. It's going gray at the edges. I see the streaks coming in, sparkling up my brown hair like I need more flair. I can hear her voice as clearly now as I could back then, so clearly that I wonder if it is one of my own girls crying out in her sleep. I get up from my stool before the mirror, and I race to their bedrooms, checking the youngest, Jennifer, first, and then Amanda. They are both sleeping soundly. I stand in Amanda's doorway and watch her breathe. Up and down, dreaming, her chest rises and falls, her eyes flutter with the sights she sees on the inside of her lids. My baby girls.

I tell Stella how much I miss her. I tell her how much I wish I could take that time back, leave that door wide open, play with her all afternoon. I tell her how much I love her, really, I do.

She lives in California now, thousands of miles away, a whole world, and Mary sits on the other side of town, in a nursing home, though she is only thirty-seven years old. She is in a coma. I see her every day, but I don’t even know if she recognizes me, feels my touch, knows I’m there.

“Stella,” I whisper, “can you hear me?”

But when I look down again, it’s my Amanda dreaming. It’s my own daughter whispering her most private, secret hopes into the night, sweetening the air with her child’s breath, having no idea that she lives among all my ghosts. No idea that when I hear her voice sometimes, it sounds so much like Stella’s or Mary’s that it nearly breaks my heart. How she calls out, “Come quick, Mommy!” every now and then, and I think, in a swift moment, a lapse of time as brief as a heartbeat, that it is Mary downstairs, Mary at the door, Stella waiting for me out in the yard, ready for me to dig snowforts with her all afternoon, right into an early winter dusk, our fingers freezing in the chill, our laughter spilling into the cold, crisp air and rising up into the blue memory of our lost childhoods.

OUT OF TOWN

Gerald’s saying, “Get the girls, June! Time to go!” and he’s holding a basket on his hip with one arm, a black bag hanging from his other hand. The door is propped open behind him, that old red brick keeping it where it is, and the sunshine falls onto the yellow tiles as if it’s calling us outdoors, making a yellow brick road for us to follow. The girls are playing in the front yard. If I look out the hall window – part the white linen curtains with one hand, the other on the sill – I would see them chasing each other, playing tag around the big oak tree that stands sentinel at one end of the front yard, behind the fence. I can hear them screaming, “You’re it! You’re it!”

I stand at the top of the stairs watching Gerald, whose face is all alight, whose hands are the most wonderful hands I know. They held me through two sweating, aching labors, held our little girls’ hands on walks in the woods, raised the heavy wooden frame
of our house right up over our heads. He can hold anything together. “Come on, girl,” he says. He nods out the door. “The world’s waiting.”

We drive for three hours north, out of Horton. up and up into the mountains of New Hampshire, where the apple trees are bursting with their fall fruit, a red fury of plenty slanting up the sides of the green hills. Other pickers are there already, holding onto their buckets, filling them with what they gather. The children run from tree to tree, eager to catch up the apples from the lowest branches. The parents climb the short ladders, reach into the trees, pick carefully.

“Are we here?” says Jennifer. She’s only three, and time takes longer for her. Minutes feel like hours. Years feel like decades. I remember.

“We are,” I say. I turn around in the seat to look at her, those chubby legs hanging over the front of the car seat, blonde hair pulled into a lopsided ponytail on one side of her head. Gerald gets the girls ready on the weekends.

“See all the apples?” Amanda says. She leans over to Jennifer, pointing out the window.

Jennifer’s eyes go big, “Ooooh,” she says, mouth an o. Everything new to her is magic.

We pick apples all morning, until I am sweaty with the effort of it and my wool sweater itches at my neck. Gerald comes up behind me, mouth against my ear, hips pressed into my backside. He pushes me under on of the tallest trees, spins me around, and kisses me hard on the mouth. I kiss him back, hands around his neck.

He pulls back. “What’s wrong?” he says.

“Nothing.”

“Are you missing her?”

Whenever I get my wandering look, as Gerald calls it, he always assumes I’m thinking of Mary. Today is her birthday. She is thirty-eight. Later, we will visit her with a cake. We will sing together and blow the candles out ourselves. Eat the cake ourselves. Talk and laugh together, while Mary sits there, eyes registering nothing.

“Yeah,” I say.
He reaches his arms around me and holds me close. He is a good man.

Later on, we sit on the side of the hill on a cotton sheet I brought from home. It is pale green with blue flowers. The girls are eating maple candy, which is sap-sugar pressed into leaf shapes. Jennifer has brown sugar stuck to the corners of her mouth. She catches me watching her, looks up at me and grins, cheeks rounding, sunshine falling on her back, blonde hair shining. Amanda flips her ponytail behind her in a gesture I recognize as adult, or at least, pre-teen. She is dark like Gerald’s side of the family. She is growing up.

We watch the parking lot at the bottom of the hill, families and couples getting in and out of cars, doors slamming, people laughing and talking and loading up their bags of apples, picked by their own two hands.

I lay back and look at the sky, watch its blue arc that curves to the edges of the earth and then expands out and beyond, into the greatness of the universe, to stars and planets and moons that I do not know, that are in their own darkness now, hidden by from us by the brightness of our sun. I imagine flying away from here, up into the sky, like a bird, like I used to imagine when I was a little girl, how I would soar away from Horton, into the great waiting world. I lay there staring up at the sky, wishing for what cannot happen. And then, hard and predictable, the guilt comes rushing, for wishing for things to be other than what they are.

I sit up.

“There’s Mommy!” says Jennifer. She points at me with one baby-fat finger. My daughter, her own miracle.

I smile at my girls, touch Gerald’s round knee with one warm open hand.


PALM UP

“Do you remember that, Mary?” I say. “Wasn’t it a hoot?”

Mary stares at me blank-eyed. She is wearing a blue bathrobe and mismatched slippers – one white, one blue, both the same style.
“Wasn’t that the best feeling?” I say. “Laughing like that about feeding her the Cheez-it’s? We got in so much trouble when Mom and Dad got home.”

Mary leans back in her red chair, the one with the stuffing falling out of the bottom. We brought it here for her years ago, when she first arrived.

She nods, like she knows she’s supposed to do something. We are sitting in the hospital room where she lives now, fluorescent lights shining down on her body, casting their pallid glow all over her, this woman who should be so different, so alive.

“Remember that feeling?” I say.

I try to press it into her, my memory. I pick up her hand. I hold it against my ribs and say, “Remember how we laughed.” She stares at me, unseeing, blank. I press her hand harder against my ribs, breathing in and out, and then I laugh. I laugh like we did back then – short, spastic giggles that we tried to hush but could not, those near-maniacal bursts of joy – in and out I breathe and laugh, my voice ringing into this stale air, as if I can resuscitate her with this sound, with my touch, with my own body.

**THINGS THEY SAY**

This is what they say: the aunts and the uncles and my little sister Stella. There was no way to know. And you are not to blame. And you could not have predicted, seen into the future. And who do you think you are, anyway? You are no superhero; you are just an ordinary woman. This was not your battle to wage.


They say: Forgive, forgive, forgive.

But there is Mary sitting before me, breathing in her coma. Can she hear me? Does she know how often I have apologized? Does she know how often I have breathed into her ear that I would take her place in that body if I could. The body made a prison of her soul. Nerves warped.

They have checked her brain activity, and it is hard to say. She could be either here or
there. Caught in this netherworld, my sister, who was always headed for greater things.
The whole world at her fingertips, they used to say. That raven hair, that sharp mind, that
intellect, that smile. She had all the boys begging.

I stare at the blue carpet, a color she would have liked. It is the sky. It is the bluest Spring
flowers made wet with new life. It is the bloom in my heart, which opens and bleeds for
you: half mourning half hoping, for what you might still do, become, see, and live.

**PIT STOP**
Ms. Chardell told me a story once, a woman on the run – the lamb, she said, and laughed.
She had a laugh like a ninny, my father said. A twitter, said my mother, like the smallest
bird, perhaps a sparrow. Ms. Chardell met this woman at the gas station, where she was
pumping gas into her wood-sided station wagon (though the story took place years
earlier, perhaps a decade, I could never imagine Ms. Chardell driving anything but that
station wagon). The woman wore a white scarf tied around her hair, to keep it in place,
and underneath, there were flattened curls in their perfect rows. “She nodded to me and
smiled and said, ‘You know how it feels to be on the run?’ Of course I shook my head,
and she said, ‘Feels damn good,’ and then a police car drove up to the station with its
flashers on and the woman yanked the line out of her car and drove off without even
putting the cap back on the car.” Ms. Chardell found out that she’d shot her husband in
the back. There was a story in the paper about how she was caught in Hudson, a town
away, and Ms. Chardell was sorry for the woman. Only a desperate woman would shoot a
husband in the back, she said. Ms. Chardell saw the bruise on her cheek, a yellowing that
covered her cheek to the hollow beneath her eye. Ms. Chardell said she knew the truth
about that woman, and no one else could admit it. Everyone just wanted her put away,
like that was the answer we all needed in order to sleep well at night, to put things in their
rows again.

**SIGNS I MIGHT HAVE SEEN**
Two weeks before my wedding, Mary came to try on her navy blue silk bridesmaid dress
and the waist had to be taken in again. Another half inch.
“I have a terrible headache,” she said. She touched her calf, because she said it hurt from the walk she took in the morning, up old Rattlesnake Hill where Mom and Dad still lived.

“This keeps happening,” she said, “this ache in my calf.”

I asked her if she had been eating enough, and she looked at me like she couldn’t have heard a sillier question.

“Have I been eating enough? Jefferson cooks for me every night.”

Jefferson was her new boyfriend, of six months, and she was sure he was the one. She whispered it to me one night on the phone a few weeks earlier, and then we burst into giggles like we were sixteen and thirteen again and this was her little boyfriend taking her to the movies. She met Jefferson at a teaching conference in Chicago. He was at the same hotel to confer with a slew of first-rate chefs. Mary by then had her PhD. She was a vet and she taught at Tufts, large animals, her deft piano hands always running down calves’ wiry quick legs and horses’ thick necks and bony faces, fingers slipping into the tight anuses of struggling sheep. She could tell just by touching what was wrong, where it hurt.

She’d had boyfriend after boyfriend since middle school, her pick of the litter, Dad always said, slapping his knee. “Get it?” he’d say. “She’s a vet. Litter.” Guffaw, guffaw, sitting in his old corduroy chair which they covered in the same fabric last year because the arms were so worn but he couldn’t bear to part with it. Same honey whiskey clinking in his hand.

She stood before the mirror in that dress, touching her back with both hands, pulling the fabric taut to see what it would do once it was ready.

“You look beautiful,” I said, “you’ll outshine me.”

She spun in the mirror, her still-long raven black hair swinging behind her, falling down her bare back.

“Prettier than all the other bridesmaids,” I said. “Even Danielle.”

“But still a maid,” she laughed, “and your older sister to boot.”

She twirled again and then turned to me, took both my arms in her cool hands (always cool, no matter what the temperature), and said, “Junie, this is your big day. Can you believe you’re marrying Gerald? He used to pick his nose and wipe it on the back seat of the car all the way to school.”
“Heinous,” I said.

“Heinous,” she said. “Try yours on again.”

I went to the back, and I slipped on the white dress, silk, a simple sheath with a bow neck and empire waist. The seamstress zipped me up, said, “Perfect,” and held the short train so it would fall like a giant white rose petal on the floor behind me. I walked over the burgundy carpet on my tip-toes as if I was wearing heels. The music in the store was something classical, Beethoven, maybe, Mozart, a piece I didn’t recognize. It played tinny from the speakers on both sides of the dressing room walls.

“Da da da da,” Mary sang when she heard me shooshing my way toward her, and when she saw me, she clasped her hands over her mouth and said, “Breathtaking.”

She cried. Mary hardly ever cried, but she cried over me that day. Then she sat down on the plush pink-flowered bench and said, “God, this headache,” and took a bottle of Advil from her purse. She swallowed three more pills.

“And now,” she said, “lunch!”

We walked into the warm wind of a Spring day, gray clouds moving quickly in the sky like time had sped up and we weren’t keeping pace. The wind tugged at our shirts and hair, whisking strands over my eyes, blinding me until I pushed them away with the back of one hand. Mary sang the witch’s song from The Wizard of Oz, said, “I’ll get you my pretty!” and cackled.

We ate at the Country Store, had tuna sandwiches at the little shop in the back, and I told her all about our plans to move to Michigan, how it was a great opportunity for Gerald to teach, how we’d get a little one bedroom house with a garden out front and I’d fill it with tulips for Spring and snapdragons and brown-eyed Susans in summer, and I’d take a whole year off to have the baby. By then, I was pregnant with Amanda. We’d found out just a week earlier, and Mary was the only one who knew. I hadn’t even told our parents. I told her we’d named the fetus Montgomery, because that’s where it had been conceived: On Montgomery Lane down by the pond we used to swim in when we were younger, where Dara Singh once drowned and I’d swim with the boys in late-night summertime.

She already knew our plans, but she let me tell her again and again, because she knew I couldn’t stand not to talk about it.
She laughed with me. She touched my shoulder once, to take a piece of lint off my black sweater. And then, just before she left for Boston again and I drove home to Gerald, she said, as if she knew what was coming, “I hope you know how much I love you, Junie. I hope you know how happy I am for you.”

She hugged me too tightly, as if she wanted to tell me something but could not, as if she was afraid to leave me, as if she wanted me to keep her there for a little while longer, in Horton, where we’d both spent our childhoods, where we knew every single turn in the roads and inch of woods and stories of the people who lived around us.

I felt it then, but I did nothing. I brushed it off, figured it was pre-wedding sappiness, both of us longing to hold on a little longer to the childhood that seems to end on a wedding day, or at the birth of a new baby, forcing us into adulthood.

“I love you, too,” I said. “Now get back to your office, Miss Mary Mack, or they’ll fire you once and for all.”

I watched her get into her car, watched her pull the creaking blue door behind her. Watched her buckle her seatbelt and then turn to me and smile one last time and wave. Then she stuck her tongue out at me and went cross-eyed, blue eyes lolling in her head, and I laughed.

I watched her drive away, and I stood in the parking lot of the Country Store waving goodbye like a maniac as she drove out of sight, both arms above my head, smiling big.

The wind pulled at my clothes like it wanted to tear them off of me, tell me something, stop me from doing nothing. I kept on waving. Her car rounded the bend just before Hendrick's Lane, heading toward the highway, Route 495, and then she was gone.

The wind stopped once I could no longer see her, and the air settled around me, and I think now, remembering that moment first every single day and then every other day and then every few weeks, that even the wind knew I had failed, that right as she disappeared, it stopped trying to help us, threw its hands into the air, and accepted what was coming our way.
In the night, there is Gerald breathing beside me. In and out. Slowly. He is a child in
sleep, both arms tossed up beside his head, legs sprawled out across the bed. He wears
blue pajama pants and an old red t-shirt from his softball days. He stopped when Jennifer
was born, threw his back out picking her up from a bath. He fell down on the tile floor
with her in his arms, shielded her from the fall with his shoulders. He fell at an angle and
threw out a disc. He was nutty on drugs for a week, and then they fixed it with lasers.
Zip, zap, the back is fixed. But not enough to play softball again. The bat swinging, he
says, is terrible.

He breathes deeply and the clock radio to his right plays all night - a buzz of
words that comes crackled over the air. These are men’s voices. Talk radio. Gerald
picked up the habit when he was young. He’d play the radio so he didn’t have to hear his
parents fighting, and now, he can’t sleep without it. When he wants me to laugh, he
whispers, Willie Nelson says the silence is deafening.

What do we think about the death penalty? the men ask. What do we think about
Clinton’s proposals for welfare reform? What do we think about the Red Sox last season
– will they ever make it to the top of the World Series? And then, late in the night: What
do we think about our own souls? Are we going to make it to Heaven or are we damned
to Hell? Think on it, friends, they say, make those tough choices, be good.

Gerald breathes beside me, dreaming, legs twitching. Sometimes, he moans. One
night, he said, Marilyn, take your hand off my thigh. And another time, last July, he said,
You are my one and only, Joanie. When we woke up in the morning and sat down for
coffee, I said, Who’s Joanie? And he said, Only Joanie I know is Joni Mitchell, and I
said, Ah, the one and only. Gerald looked at me funny. I laughed to myself, touched his
knee, kissed him on the outer edge of his dark eyebrow.

The sun fell through the bay windows. It was summertime, and I wore my blue
robe, cotton, and the girls rolled out of bed an hour later. I heard them stumble into the
kitchen, heard Amanda say, I’ll make you waffles, Neeny. And Jennifer said, With
strawberries. Gerald and I had slipped back to the bedroom to make love. We were
naked. We were laying there together, arms around each other, skin pressed close, in the
darkness of our purple-curtained bedroom, warm, and the girl’s voices floated in to us like a dream, like they were people we knew from another life.

Gerald snorts, rolls over and opens his eyes. He looks right at me and says, Is there any more chocolate for me? How come you always eat all the chocolate? Here we go, take a right.

He sighs deeply and stares at me like he’s waiting for an answer. He touches me with one large hand, strokes my cheek softly, Gerald who is the love of my life. Outside, it is February, wind blowing hard across the corners of the house, a howl. The loose storm window rattles in its frame.

You’re not supposed to wake up sleeptalkers or walkers. I learned this as a girl, from Stella, who walked all over the house while she slept. She went to the kitchen one night to clean out the fridge, she said, emptying out every shelf – lettuce and tomatoes and leftover spaghetti on the hardwood kitchen floor. Only the refrigerator light was on. It cast a rectangular glow on the floor, lit up the vegetables and tupperware and the tops of her feet and her face when she leaned in to get more food, curly blonde hair brushing her arms.

Gerald stares at me, half there. He doesn’t even know who I am right now. Would not remember if I told him that I regret this life, that I wish we had gone to Michigan, that I wish I had stopped Mary all those years ago just before our wedding, that I want us to live differently than we do. There is so much for us, I think, and here we are, where we always have been, in Horton.

Gerald has brown eyes and his hair is tousled against the pink flowered pillowcase and his red shirt has ridden up to his chest. The men on the talk radio chuckle about a joke one of them made – the Sox will never make it, Clinton is a hack, who knows. It is all just background noise. I touch Gerald’s chest, pull the shirt down, and murmur into his ear until he falls asleep. The wind blows hard again. The window rattles.

BLUE EYES WATCHING ALL THE TIME
Blue eyes, blue eyes they are always there, the most important in my life. If Dara could have told me, those nights at the pond when I saw her slip from water to woods, white.
body shimmering before my eyes, what would I have said? Thank you? It is good to know?

What would I have done differently? How would I have stopped it? Could a doctor have saved her. my sister Mary slipped away from the world now, betrayed by her own body, trapped between life and death?

She is like Dara in her coma. I wonder if Dara could hear all that time. I wonder if she knew what was happening around her. I wonder for Mary, too. Every single day. Her eyes swim up to the top of her lids, those blue eyes that once charmed men to fall in love with her. They are almost useless now; if she knows where she wants them to go, they don’t go there. They roll in her head a baby-doll’s. I wonder if it is torturous for her now, if she feels all the pain, if she knows frustration.

Everything she has lost, I think, it is too much for a single person to bear. The first to go was Jefferson, her chef boyfriend who could not stand it. He wept as he left, said he loved her, but he couldn’t do it. This was six months after the stroke-and-accident day, which was as long as they’d been together anyway. Once he left, I knew there wasn’t much hope for her to come back again. The doctors were saying, *It doesn’t look good*, by then, that her brain function wasn’t coming back like they would have liked. What a thing to say to a family hoping.

My parents have been feebled by it. It’s been too much for them as well. They visit once a week now, my mother touching Mary’s hand and kissing her forehead and talking to her, but nothing more: no hugs, no crying, no wishing for things that we know are impossible now. She turns away, hunched, leaning hard on her cane, like this has taken everything out of her. Dad still prays for a miracle. I caught him once at the chapel down the hall from Mary’s room, saying, “Bring her back. God, please, please. I cannot live like this.” He was never a religious man. Stella and I and my two children are not enough. Stella is in California now, living with a man she met six years ago. She says she never plans to marry, just like our aunt with her forever-boyfriend.

First, the visitors came in droves, staying at her bedside all day and all night, willing her alive again. But then, as time went on and hope waned, the crowd waned, too. Granny Lynn visited once last year, but then she passed away at Christmastime. The
aunts and uncles come once a year. Georgie still stops by, faithfully, every time he’s in Boston on business.

I brush Mary’s hair for her in the mornings, when I bring her the newspaper and read the news. She used to love the stories about the funny ways people died: falling into vats of chocolate at the Hershey’s factory, getting hit in the face by a rabid seagull’s open beak. I still read them to her every Thursday, when Henry Villano compiles them and puts them in the paper. He’s the editor now, and married to Danielle’s little sister, Elizabeth. I eat a donut while I read to her, and one of the nurses – Jeanette or Suzanne or Amelia – will stop in to say hello. And then I go home to clean the house and, all afternoon, research eighteenth century German poetry. I took a job with a professor at UMass Lowell, one of my old professor’s friends, twenty hours a week from home.

Both my daughters’ eyes are blue, like fate didn’t want me to forget, like I get another chance to protect and I had better pay more attention this time. That’s what those eyes tell me.

I flip the pages of my research, notes written in sloppy cursive that I will have to type later. Strange German words dance crazily in their stanzas. I stop sometimes to stare out at the blue sky, to watch Tigger, our golden retriever, play with his ball in the garden or dig up holes for no apparent reason but the pleasure of the task. I hold the bow loosely in one still hand, the other on my stomach, and I stare out at the yard. I see our ghost-selves playing, chasing after each other, Simon nipping at our heels. It is no hallucination. It is my memory come alive, real people rising out of the flowerbed and dancing solid in the world; it is us, reincarnated as the children we once were. The sun is always shining. We are always laughing. Stella is jumping and I am running and Mary is screaming at the top of her lungs, eyes squinted shut, her whole body glowing white with joy.

**WILLOW SMALLS REMEMBERS**

Willow Smalls has three baby girls. I see her shifting them from hip to hip in town, one or the other in her arms, two in a stroller. She was married twice, both failed. I heard in college that she’d tried to kill herself, then ran away from home, then was found by her father and brought back and put into the psych ward at Walcott Hospital. Danielle’s father was on the board, so he found out somehow and told Danielle’s mother one night
when we were juniors, and Danielle overheard and told me the very next morning in
Home Ec, where we were making aprons. Mine was turquoise with red stripes. I couldn’t
sew in a straight line, so the apron never looked right; it was all askew, off-kilter, like it
was made for a mad chef.

Danielle had only met Willow a few times, because Willow stayed at Imago after
I left. She went to the high school in Brownstone, a mile away from Horton High,
because her parents thought it was a better place. Her father was a doctor. Her mother
was a nurse. They met at the hospital.

Willow looks tired now, her eyes sagging a little too much for a woman her age,
her hips pushing at the seams of her faded black pants, her hair always in need of a trim,
spread like a broom at the back of her head.

“Hi, Willow,” I said one day when we passed on the street. “How’ve you been?”
Usually, we pass with just a hello, or a how you doing, or a nice day, huh? But today felt
different. I was wearing a long skirt. It blew against my bare legs and made me feel
daring.

“Junie. You look great. How’s Mary?”
She was there the day it happened. She pulled over when she saw Mary’s car and
called nine one-one. I asked her later if Mary was conscious when she got there, hoping
maybe she’d said something to Willow, but Willow said, I’m sorry, no.

“Same,” I said, “thanks for asking. And Mike? Still on the road?”

“Home once a month,” she said, “and always at just the wrong time, if you know
what I mean.” She winked.

“Well, ha, yeah,” I said.

I touched her daughter’s cheek, the one on Willow’s hip. I waved to the two in the
stroller. The older one, who wore a purple sweatshirt and black sneakers, kicked one foot
against the footrest, waved back, and gave me a toothless smile.

“I was thinking the other day,” I said, “was it true? About Peter? Or did you make
that up?”

Willow shifted the baby up, a jounce. She held on tighter to Willow’s collar. little
hands clenched tight like she’d been dropped before and remembered.

“What?” Willow said. The baby gurgled, drooled a little down its chin.
“You know, those notes. Fourth grade. Remember?”
“Junie, that was twenty years ago. You think I remember something happened twenty years ago? We have kids of our own.”
“I know, but – you don’t remember things from when we were little?”
“Honey. No, I’m sorry. I don’t remember it at all.”
Honey?
“The notes?” I said. “You said he made it up.”
“No idea.”
“You and Peter made out the next week, after it happened. I heard about it from Nina. Remember? And I asked you if it was true, and you said you were sorry but it turned out he had a big crush on you.”
“Doesn’t ring a bell,” she said.
There was a string of drool from the baby to Willow, child’s chin to mother’s blue t-shirt. Two tourists passed us on the street, matching green sweaters slung around their necks, on their way to see the leaves up north, no doubt. It was early October, the perfect time. Indian summer had hit, and it was windy and warm. The leaves blew at our feet like they’d fallen in the wrong season and were trying to find their way back.
“Look,” she said, “I have to get the girls home or they’ll start fussing up a storm.”
“Why do I remember every moment from that time and you remember nothing? The color of your father’s tights – navy blue. The way we played the piano in your big glass house. I remember every detail, everything. Like a curse! Christ. You don’t remember those notes?”
She shifted the baby up again and grabbed the stroller with her free hand.
“No, Junie,” she said. “I have a life.”
She turned and pushed the children through the storm of blowing leaves on the sidewalk, which were picking up speed, swirling in a tiny furious tornado at our feet.

**NEWS**
This morning, I read to Mary from the paper. The headline is *sewage leak*, a nincompoop contractor who connected the wrong pipes together. We all must boil water before drinking. For two days, they say. I wonder if Jennifer and Amanda’s teachers know.
wonder if anyone will tell them not to sip from the water fountains, tell the cafeteria ladies not to cook with water straight from the tap.

“What do you think of that, Mary?” I say. “Stupid, huh?”

Mary stares up at the ceiling. A tiny string of drool spindles from her half-open mouth. I reach up and wipe it with a tissue, then lean back into my chair again. A red poppy chair that I brought from home. The matching red blinds that I hung three years ago are drawn against the window behind Mary where she sits in her wheelchair. There is hardly ever any sun in here. Everything is fluorescent – all the rooms, the hallways. I bought two halogen lamps to soften the glare. Too much light hurts Mary’s eyes, the doctors say. They can see her flinch.

One day, I missed Mary too much. I craved any kind of reaction, any sign of her old self living in her now-drooping body. It was a Tuesday and Gerald was away, off on a fishing trip with his old friend Robert. I wheeled Mary to the window. Opened the blinds with one hand, the other on her neck. And yes, the slightest motion, a sharp spasm, a sign of pain. I felt instantly guilty for hurting her like that, just to satisfy my own desires. I closed the blinds. It was cruel, I know, but it gave me hope.

“And listen to this: they found a black bear on Mrs. Meyer’s front porch. Says we haven’t had bears here in twenty years at least. Must have gotten lost. Maybe it was a circus escapee. Anyway, Mrs. Meyer said she wouldn’t press charges. What a nut. Remember when she found us tying string to her cat’s tail – what was his name? Panther – and she threatened to call our mother? How old was I then, ten? Nine?”

I flip to the weddings and obituaries. Marty Winkle, who is ten years younger than me, got married this week. Robert’s little brother. I feigned sickness on the wedding day because I didn’t want to see all those people, didn’t want to be reminded of what it is I haven’t done yet. Things I’d intended – dreams I’d had when we were all so much younger – that never happened. Gerald was upset. He went alone.

“I don’t know what it is, Mary,” I say, “but I might be losing my mind. If I don’t leave this town soon –” And then I stop. Because Mary is the reason I am here. And she doesn’t deserve any guilt.

“I love you so much. You know I wouldn’t leave you for the world. I know you’re listening.” I lean forward, touch her hand, newspaper wrinkling in my lap. “Mary, if you
wake up,” I say, “I’ll take you around the world. I’ll treat you to every delicacy you could imagine. You’ll be so happy.”

I rub the top of her hand with mine. I look into her blank eyes, stand so I can stare right into her. The paper wrinkles and slips off my lap, settles on the floor with the sound of a bird’s wing closing in its final, dying motion. Then: silence.

“Mary,” I say. “wake up. I know that you can. I know it’s only a matter of walking toward me in your mind. Just want it. Want to come back to me, to us, to this, your whole life. Remember all the fun we’ve had? I know you can do it. Please, please, please.”

I touch her shoulder, fingers gripping hard, and shout, “Mary! Mary!” There is life in her eyes. I can see memory and desire, somewhere deep, where the blue goes almost white.

“June.”

And it’s her, calling out to me, her voice changed but audible. My heart jumps. She’s come back, at last. Our lives can go on.


And with a jolt, as if I am being woken up from sleepwalking, unsure of where I am and who I am talking to and what I am doing, I feel a hand on my back and breath against my cheek, and I turn and see Amelia, our favorite nurse. I look down at Mary. I look back at Amelia.

“Go on home, June. Relax a bit. Mary will be here when you get back. I’ll take care of her.”

A tremor rises up from my belly, through my lungs, my stomach, my throat, and escapes me in a shriek, a gasp. I sob, big heaves that consume my whole body – arms akimbo as broken wings, chest up and down, shoulders shaking, thighs trembling – they come from someplace I didn’t even know existed, a hollowing of myself that was carved out while I slept and ate and visited and raised my girls and loved Gerald and remembered a different life. An ache like homesickness. I have lived halfway between hope and mourning for too many years now.

Once I start crying, I can’t stop. Amelia runs her hands in little circles on my back. It is not a comfort.
Without a word, I turn and walk out the door, down the long, white linoleum hallway. Slow steps. Still sobbing. A woman in a room to my right coughs. A man slides by in his wheelchair, head bowed, not wanting to catch my eye. He probably thinks someone just died. Or maybe he is wiser, maybe he knows about the gray, complicated spaces.

The double doors stand before me, silver bars across their middles. I push down on the one to the right and it clicks and the doorcreaks and then sighs open.

The late-morning sunshine hits me in a sudden, blinding sheet of light.

I walk right into it.

**BLUR**

Voices above me and to my right and left, a hum of sound around me. I am covered in something soft and light. I am dead. No – there is my daughter’s small hand on my arm, and Gerald’s voice, and another, a woman: my mother. She is touching my face with something cool and wet. I am a child in fever, lost in hot dreams – crocodiles chasing me down narrow streets and babies with hands for feet and the sky has gone purple for good. “Let’s go,” says Gerald and the hand on my arm is gone – lifted away. *Stay!* I want to cry out, but my throat is closed. I am voiceless as a sigh. I slip away again, into the gauzy world I see before my burning eyes. Through the mist, a hand reaches out for me. I take it, knowing it is Mary.

**WHEN I COME BACK HOME**

Everything is different now, with Gerald glancing sidelong my way, eyes that narrow at the edges. Those brown eyes I have known forever, for the first time untrusting. Am I here to stay? Will it happen again, the breakdown? We call it: “the time away.” or: “the illness,” or: “when you weren’t well.” As in: “When you weren’t well, Jennifer lost one of her bottom teeth and I gave her fifty cents under her pillow like you would have done. She woke up smiling.” And as in: “When you weren’t well, the basement pipes exploded and Neil had to come over to help me sop up the mess. We can’t afford a plumber.” We can’t afford a plumber now because I was not well. And because we have spent much of our money on getting the best for Mary and if there is resentment in these words, then I
am sorry. But I have had enough and I am leaving. None of them need to know. The doctors say I need to come every week, to stabilize. They say it was exhaustion that took me away. But I know it was the ache in me to escape, to leave: an egg ready for hatching, or the itch of poison ivy. And what happens when you scratch too hard is that the puss will ooze from the sores and the chick will hatch with the slop of yolk in its tiny yellow feathers. Birth is a messy job.

I have had two daughters of my own; the stretching of skin I never felt, but the stitches the next day: yes. And I remember the blood and the placenta falling to the floor when the nurse turned away for the bin (too late, I laughed in my mind), and I was the same then as any animal. My daughter wet and red on my chest, my body torn, Gerald wiping my hair away from my face, taking my sweat on the tips of his fingers, fat drops covering the miniscule ripples of skin called prints. A womb. All of us salty. All of us new to each other.