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All the keys you need : and other stories

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ALL THE KEYS YOU NEED

and Other Stories

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Julie Myers Saxton

December 2004

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ABSTRACT

ALL THE KEYS YOU NEED and Other Stories

by Julie Myers Saxton

This short story collection is a case study in the subtle interplay of communication and miscommunication in human relationships. It examines the things we say in public, in light of the things we know in private, and the ways we speak by not speaking. Story by story, the characters—fathers, daughters, brothers, sisters, lovers, roommates—use talk as a means of intentional miscommunication, and allow speaking to become a public ritual to lead others away from private truth.

More than just a collection about secrets and lies, *All the Keys You Need* attempts to show the ramifications of misdirection and intentional miscommunication between family members, friends, and occasionally, the self. It explores the way we talk to each other and how we both reveal and conceal our private selves in our public and interpersonal interactions.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Baby Girl	1
Beautiful	27
Charcoal, Chalk, and Dust.....	30
Human Voices	33
Shades of Yesterday	44
Water's Edge	62
Edge of Memory	95
Granger.....	97
Open Windows, Summer Nights	100
A Refreshing Change	119
All the Keys You Need.....	139

Baby Girl

Lindsey didn't even say *hello* when she answered the door. Though I hadn't expected much from her, the force at which she threw the screen door open caught me off-guard. As did her failure to meet my eye before she disappeared back down the hallway. My absence, evidently, had not made her heart grow fonder, and perhaps had made things worse.

I caught the door before it slammed shut again but stalled on the front step to draw a long, full breath before I went in the house. This was my last chance to turn around and pretend the road trip to my parents' house hadn't just happened, despite my cramped muscles assuring me it had. I exhaled and stepped inside.

The house was cool, but bright and clean, the way Mom liked it. And quiet. The place didn't smell the way I remembered, more antiseptic, less ginger cookie. But everything else had stayed the same, the sun filtering through the living room windows and warming large rectangles of brown carpet and wood-paneled walls, the aloe vera growing large and succulent on the windowsill, and the wind chimes tinkling in the breeze outside the back door. My vision of home.

"Mom?" I called out. "Mom, are you here?"

“Shut up, Jenna.” Lindsey’s hoarse whisper came from the back bedroom, followed by her heavy footsteps in the hallway. “Keep it down, would you? Dad’s sleeping.”

“Sorry,” I said, toeing sun spots on the floor. “How’s he doing?”

“If I said better, would you even know what that means?”

I could feel the guilt rise in my bones. No, *better* wouldn’t explain much, since I didn’t know how bad he’d been. I only had Mom’s second-hand reports, but she downplayed everything. She always had, and even knowing that, I let myself believe everything was fine. Lindsey would have given me a different account—that much now became clear—but we didn’t talk anymore.

Lindsey grew tired of waiting for me to say something and left the living room—hard, pounding steps down the hallway, surprising for someone so light. Her walk seemed to forbid me from following her back to see Dad, so I stayed where I was, uncertain what to do. I didn’t dare unload my car yet. Lindsey didn’t know my stay wasn’t a weekend trip and that I had left my husband of less than a year in Albuquerque with no plans to return to him. I hadn’t managed to tell my parents that, either.

I sank into the cushions of the couch and listened to the intermittent jingle of the wind chimes. Thirteen hours in the car from Albuquerque to Orange County. Thirteen hours of dry desert winds blowing through the open windows as I drove 900 miles in the wrong direction. Go west, young man, they said, back when going west didn’t signal trudging home in defeat.

I turned my face into the fabric, breathing in the family dust and odor, which I didn't know I'd missed during my sojourn in Albuquerque, and I fell asleep buried in familiar green plaid and foam.

I woke bleary-eyed as my mother came through the front door from work. Seeing me stand up from the sofa, she ran to put her arms around me and held me close for a long time, a strong, tight embrace that neither of us cared to break.

"Look at you," she said when she finally released me. "You look so good. You've let your hair grow."

I ran a hand through my hair, pulling it back from my face. "Yeah, I guess I have."

"Come sit down. Have you been here long?"

"No, not long."

"I'm surprised you're not back with your dad."

"Lindsey—Lindsey said he's sleeping."

Mom waved her hand at me. "Oh Jenna, you could have gone back. He was so glad when you called and said you were coming." She planted herself in the armchair next to the couch. "Are you on summer vacation already?"

"Sort of, yeah."

"How's Kenny?"

Even knowing the question would come, I had no answer prepared. "He's...good." I looked away, out the large windows and into the backyard.

Dry patches of dead grass outlined the planter boxes, which stood strangely empty. "Doing just fine."

"Well, your dad's much better, Jenna." She smiled. "He walked a bit on the treadmill today. Still goes to physical therapy twice a week. His speech is a lot better. You want something to drink?"

"No thanks."

I didn't take my eyes from the window until I heard a door open down the hallway and Lindsey came into the living room again. She bent down and kissed Mom on the cheek. "I'm taking off now. Dad had his meds a couple hours ago. He won't need anything except maybe aspirin until bedtime. I called his prescription in to the drugstore, and I'll get it tomorrow on my way in. You need anything else?"

"No, sweetie. Go on home."

"Love you. See you tomorrow."

I watched Lindsey walk out the door—tall and thin, like she'd always been, and pale. Her long brown hair was pulled back into a narrow braid that fell to her waist. She looked like someone from an Old World photograph—no make-up and a pilled sweater thrown over a simple dress—where you had to look twice to realize the woman was young.

"She come over everyday?" I asked once the door closed behind her.

"In the afternoons to help out. Takes your dad in for therapy, cleans the kitchen, stuff like that."

"That's nice," I said.

"She's been a big help."

And I hadn't. Mom called about the stroke months ago, and I stayed away, too busy dropping out of grad school and flunking out of a new marriage. But they had Lindsey, who was the better daughter and always had been, and I figured they didn't need me.

My mother gave a short sigh, then smiled. "It's been a change, having him so sick, but we're managing. How's school?"

"Good. It's going fine."

"Getting the classes you need?"

I nodded.

"Jenna?"

"Hmm?"

"You'd better ask what you need to ask. Before you forget how to string more than five words together."

I looked at my mom, her grey eyes clear and understanding, and I felt my throat close. I swallowed hard twice and tried to smile back at her, but faltered. I couldn't say anything. I wanted this to come on my time, but I saw now that I lost that choice by showing up as the prodigal daughter on the doorstep.

"How long do you need?" she asked.

"Couple weeks, maybe." I couldn't get my voice to full volume.

"You can have Lindsey's room."

"Okay," I nodded. "Thank you."

Mom rose from her seat, walked over and kissed the top of my head.
“You didn’t find peace in the desert either, did you?”

“No,” I said. “I didn’t.”

~~~

My father’s hospital bed, set up in my old room, gave a sense of sterility to the blue-painted walls and silver-rose trim, and I felt unsettled by the difference, my painted white furniture and bookshelves replaced with a walker and a bedside table of medicine. I stood in the doorway, looking at the room and watching my dad. I nearly expected to see a body wasted-away and drawn, older than its years and facing the grave, but while he had lost weight and a bit of color, he didn’t look nearly as bad as I feared. He was reading, his bed bent nearly into a sitting position.

After a long time, he looked up from his book and saw me. “Baby Girl.” His face broke into the smile we’d never been able to capture with a camera.

“Hi Dad.” I pushed myself from the doorframe, sat down in the chair next to his bed, and leaned in to kiss his forehead. “How’re you doing?”

“Better today. I had a stroke.” His words came slowly and slightly slurred.

“I know.”

“And my girl got married, without asking me to the wedding.”

I blinked. With everything that had happened since I left, I hadn’t expected him to mention that. “I didn’t invite anyone, Dad.”

"I know, Jenna. I won't tease you." He squeezed my hand. "The pictures looked nice."

"Thank you." I leaned back against the wooden slats of the chair. "What are you reading?"

He held the book up so I could look at the cover.

"Narnia? Seriously? Little young for you, isn't it?"

"It has short chapters. And I used to read it to my girls."

I smiled at him. "You probably had to pull it off my bookshelf. By the way, just exactly how long did you wait before you took over my room? I know you've had your eye on it since we moved in here."

Dad replied in kind, though his words came in sluggish measures. "Oh, until your taillights went around the corner. I thought you'd never leave home."

"I never thought I'd get out of here."

"I know it was rough on you. Home-cooked meals, rent-free living, sparkling company."

"And wow, the night life." I could hear my own words slowing, matching his cadence.

"We made up for it in the mornings."

"Yes," I said. "Six a.m. solos in the kitchen. Full-voice."

"But it gave you an appreciation for music."

"For the bass line of a barbershop quartet?" I asked, laughing. "Not quite. I'm all about the overtone."

"Ah, I see." He drew a heavy breath, and reached out for my hand. "Still don't sing, then?"

"Not even in the shower."

We lapsed into silence, still hand-in-hand, until Dad leaned back against his pillows and let his eyelids close.

"I'll let you sleep," I whispered, starting to rise out of my chair.

"It's the medicine," he said, without opening his eyes. "Makes me tired. It's not supposed to, but it does. Stay for a minute."

I readjusted myself in the chair, waiting for him to say something more, but he fell asleep before he could speak again. Leaning against the side of the bed, I listened to his hard breathing for a long time before standing.

"I'm sorry, Dad." I lifted his book from his covers, placed it beside his prescription bottles, and turned off the reading lamp. "I should have been here sooner."

~~~

I wanted to call Kenny. Our romance had fallen into simple companionship at lightning speed, but he was still my best friend, whether he knew it or not. And I missed him badly. Three days of separation and already I wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed beside him and sleep nestled in the crook of his arm. He'd smooth my hair back, his fingertips tracing the outline of my face, and I'd sink against his chest and know, without him having to whisper it, that everything would turn out fine.

Except that he had left a note beside the fruit bowl, a single line scrawled across a piece of college-ruled paper *Why do your eyes see only iris and pupil in mine?* And he didn't come home that night. I knew he'd be back, to get his things if nothing else, but I walked out and drove across the desert. Everything would be easier, I thought, if I didn't see him again. The marriage had broken months before, and I never tried to mend it. I wondered sometimes if the poet in Kenny ever saw symbolism in our wedding at sunset.

It was all my fault. All of it, as always. Lindsey had a lengthy list of things I'd messed up since childhood, which she liked to trot out on certain occasions. I knew it was only a matter of time before this item got added. But she had little on me that I didn't already have on myself.

I found my cell phone in a heap of things I'd littered across Lindsey's bedroom, and threw myself down on her firm mattress. I hesitated before dialing the apartment. I didn't know what I'd say when he picked up, only that I needed to say something to him.

My throat caught when I heard his voice on the line. "Hi, you've reached Ken and Jen. We're out having fun, but we'll call you back when we're bored."

I disconnected and dropped the phone on the bed. A long time passed before I rolled over and went to sleep.

~~~

For the next two days I played gin rummy with Dad at the kitchen table in the mornings before Lindsey came over. His dragging left side, hardly noticeable when I visited him in the bedroom, became much more obvious when

he was up and moving. Every motion looked like he was fighting against an invisible puppet master, and seeing him inch his way down the hall, all his weight leaning on a metal, four-footed cane, was nearly more than I could watch.

The stroke had not taken his ability to play rummy, however. He held his cards awkwardly in his left hand, but he could throw them down with ease with his right. "Gin."

"You're killing me," I told him, spreading my cards face-up on the table. "Thirty-seven points."

I wrote the score down on a piece of paper and Dad gathered the cards for the next deal. "You'll never beat your old man."

"Maybe not, but I could bake a lasagna in the time it takes you to shuffle those cards."

"You have to stack them just right," he said, tapping the deck on the table, "or you don't win."

I motioned to him. "Here, hand 'em over. I'll do it."

"My deal, my shuffle. You never did learn patience, did you?" He halved the deck and worked the cards back together.

Lindsey banged through the front door with a bag of groceries propped on her hip like a baby. "Hi Dad. How're you feeling?"

"Just fine. Go put those away and I'll deal you in this hand."

"It'll be a while," I told her, still watching Dad. "No need to hurry."

Lindsey had already started toward the kitchen, but stopped to shoot me a dark look. And probably added another point to her mental list of Jenna's Missteps. Dad just passed the cards around.

We waited for Lindsey for a few minutes, and soon she emerged from the kitchen with a cup of tea for herself and a glass of water for dad. She scooped up her cards from the table and began arranging them. "I can't play for long."

She couldn't play well, either—he held cards she should throw, and discarded the ones she needed—but then I couldn't remember how often she had played with us. Usually only dad and I played, unless it was a family game of hearts.

Lindsey kept looking at my hand, though my cards were close to my chest, as if it might give her a clue what to do. "I'm not going to let you see my cards. You might as well stop trying."

"I'm not looking at your cards," Lindsey said.

"What are you looking at, then?"

"I was trying to see your ring."

Both my hands were bare. "Sorry?" I asked.

"Your wedding band. I haven't seen it yet. But you aren't wearing it."

"It helps to look at the person's left hand, not the right." I paused, gratified that I made her blush, then continued on in a quieter voice. "But yeah, my ring's at home." On my kitchen table, atop a break-up note from my husband.

"Is it my turn?" Dad asked.

"No, it's mine," I said. "Sorry." I drew a card from the stockpile, put it in my hand, and discarded another.

Without a word, Dad picked up the card and threw down the three of hearts. "There you go, Lindsey. The card you're waiting for."

Lindsey picked it up and surveyed her hand. "I don't need this! Can I put it back?"

"Yes, but that will be your turn," I said.

She turned toward me. "Why's it at home?"

"What are you doing, Lindsey?"

"I was just asking a question."

"No, you weren't."

"Well, I hope the sex was good." She said it softly enough, that Dad, now partly deaf in his left ear couldn't hear.

"Excuse me?" I said.

"I'm just saying...with all the hassle and then it's over, I hope something was good in it."

"If I said it was, would you even know what that means?"

She dropped her eyes to her cards and didn't say anything else. On Dad's next turn, he went gin, and spread his cards face-up in front of him. I didn't bother to look, but threw my own cards down and shoved away from the table.

After that, I made excuses to get out of the house in the afternoons, often to sit on the sand at Newport Beach. I'd always found something calming in

watching waves crest and tumble across the shoreline. I could watch them for hours. I never managed to explain to Kenny why I loved the ocean, though I never swam in it, and he who never made it to the coast didn't make sense of my ramblings. I wanted to bring him here and show him. He'd love it—the white spill of the break, the spray pushing back to sea on windy days, even the tight feel of salty pores after a day in the sea-drenched air. He'd like the wildness of it, just as he liked uncontrolled desert lightning and cloud bursts.

I always thought I'd get married near the ocean, but I met Kenny in Albuquerque. One night talking at friend's party, and I felt like I'd known him for years. I loved him right away. We dated three months before we eloped, a private ceremony at Sandia Peak at sunset. A pastor, two witnesses—a friend of Kenny's from work and a classmate of mine from grad school—and the two of us. We saw no reason to wait. We had no reason for a big wedding; this would be for the two of us, and we needed nothing else. I didn't think it selfish until I heard the disappointment in Mom's voice, then echoed in Dad's. I didn't know that despite the increasing medical bills even before Dad's stroke, they had a wedding fund for each daughter and wanted to throw a celebration. That I deprived them of all this, I was sure, Lindsey had added to her list.

~~~

Mom said nothing about it when two weeks passed and I had made no signs of leaving. I stayed, playing games with Dad, reading aloud to him as he had to me when I was younger, and I sat alone on the beach in the afternoons. Only once did Mom makes demands on my time, when she threw me a pair of

gardening gloves after dinner and told me to help her plant pansies in the flower bed. We knelt on hands and knees, digging with a trowel and tapping in potting soil with our fingers until dusk. Our talk was breezy until I brought up Dad's stroke.

"Did it hurt him?" I asked.

"He was asleep. Didn't feel anything. Only he couldn't move when he woke up, and he wasn't making sense."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, he was talking nonsense. He'd string words together but they never made a sentence. So, we took him in." Mom tucked a pansy into a hole in the earth and began patting it down. "He got most of his language back right away, which we were thankful for, but his left side is returning more slowly."

I sprinkled some extra soil onto the root ball of the flower. "You know Lindsey blames me."

Mom looked up. "Blames you?"

"Never mind."

"Is that the matter between you?"

"Not entirely, no."

She looked at me, waiting for something more, but I didn't answer her. After a moment, Mom wiped her brow with the back of her gloved hand and sat back. "Jenna."

I made myself busy digging in the ground until her hand came down on mine. "Jenna. You can't hold everything inside forever. You think I can't see how much it weighs on you? You think your dad doesn't see it?"

"Until now I did." I gave a short laugh and pulled away. "Please don't ask me about Kenny."

"I'm asking about Lindsey. You and your sister can't seem to be in the same room."

"It's nothing. It's just, you know—"

"No, you'll have to tell me."

I exhaled hard and looked away. "Lindsey didn't want me to leave for grad school. Dad's heart was bad, he'd had pneumonia that year, and things weren't going well for you at work. She told me that you needed me and I should stay. And I didn't."

"That's why you think she blames you for his stroke?"

"She told me that if he died while I was gone, I wouldn't be welcome at the funeral."

Mom started digging a hole for the next flower. "When was this?"

"Right before I left. Right after she made sure I knew in no uncertain terms that I was untrustworthy, uncaring, and otherwise, a total flake." I looked again into Mom's gray eyes, then away to my own dirt-covered hands. "And she's right. I'm everything she's not. I never thought I'd fail at everything I tried. I never thought I'd let everyone down. Why are you even making me plant these flowers? They're just going to die."

I pulled off my gloves and dropped them to the ground, and made for the house. I'd taken only a couple steps when my mother caught me by the shoulder. "Jenna."

I pulled away, but she grabbed me again, this time by the wrist, and held tight. Though I could have shaken her off without much effort, I didn't bother to fight. I had already acted too much like a child. She looked me in eyes, then pressed the gloves back into the palm of my hand. "Help me finish this."

I shook my head. "Why?"

"Because it's getting dark, and it's not done. There's no reason to leave *this* unfinished."

I looked back to the flowerbed and felt Mom release me, the gritty, rough texture of her gloves brushing against my skin as she let go. I would have preferred her to slap me. It took me another minute before I could nod and pull on the gloves.

~~~

Dad and I read *The Last Battle* together that night until he fell asleep. I kissed him on the cheek, turned off the light, and closed the door behind me. Lindsey was sitting cross-legged in the hallway, and I nearly tripped over her on my way out.

"Sorry," she said, "I just wanted to listen to you read."

"Okay." I stepped past her, but she rose from the floor and followed me into her old bedroom. "What did Mom say to you?" I asked her.

"Why do you ask that?"

"Because I'm not stupid, Lindsey. I'm a lot of things, but I'm not stupid."

"She didn't say much. Only that we're not helping Dad by the way we're acting. Truce?" She held out her hand for me to shake.

"All right," I said, and gripped her hand in mine for a second, then dropped it.

Lindsey didn't move from the doorframe. "You know—he's walking better. And he's speaking better. Faster. All since you've been here."

"You're not happy about that?"

She continued as if I hadn't spoken. "He lights up every time his Baby Girl walks in the room. And she can spend an extra two years in college on his bill, and then she can leave him when he's at his weakest and not come home for three years. And she can get married without telling him, and divorced. But when she walks back into the room—" Lindsey shook her head. "I stayed here for him, and all he ever wanted was you."

"It's not true, Lindsey."

"You can do whatever you want, and he'll still love you. And I do whatever he wants, and he still doesn't. Not nearly as much. He never has."

"It's not true."

"Jenna. Think about it." She drew a breath, then nodded her head as if in resolution. "But you know, I'll just be happy that he's doing better. It's what I want, anyway."

"It's what we all want."

"Yes, but it's not all I want," Lindsey said and walked out.

~~~

Kenny changed the recording at the apartment. "Hey, leave a message."

I wanted to, but I couldn't think of anything to say on the machine.

~~~

Mom had a calendar out at breakfast the next morning, and was signing a birthday card when I joined my parents at the table for an English muffin.

"Next weekend," she told us, "is Fourth of July already. Can you believe it?"

I blinked a couple times. "What's today?" I asked.

"June 29th," Dad said.

Mom glanced down at her calendar, at the crossed-out mark in the square at the bottom of the page, and back up at me.

"It's okay," I said. "You don't have to congratulate me. It's just the paper anniversary. And I'm expecting papers anytime now."

Neither of them knew what to say to that. Mom stirred her tea and Dad just looked at me, as if something more should be added. I went back to eating my muffin.

Dad lay down after breakfast with an aspirin under his tongue, simply saying he didn't feel well. His eyes were closed when I came into his room a little later, but I could tell by his breathing that he was not asleep.

"Want me to read to you?"

He nodded and I sat down in the chair by his bed. Without looking over, he put his hand on the book, pulling it down into my lap. "Are you okay, Baby Girl?"

"Yeah, Dad. I'm fine."

"I'm sorry about Kenny."

"Me too."

"Did he hurt you?" His voice was low.

"No. He wouldn't. He's a good guy. I just—he deserved better."

"Don't say that, Jenna..."

"It's true, though. I didn't treat him right. I messed up real bad. My biggest mistake yet."

"What happened?"

I hesitated before speaking. I'd never talked to my father about Kenny, but it seemed like he wanted to know and that hearing it would put his mind at ease. "Something Lindsey said, about how I only think about myself, kept echoing. I started feeling guilty that I hadn't come home or thought much about everything here. And then I didn't know how to tell Kenny that I felt guilty about the time we spent together and that everything was so good for us when—when—you know. So I stopped...telling him anything. Stopped meeting his eye. Letting him touch me."

Dad's fingers found mine and he squeezed my hand.

"I'm sorry, Dad, that I didn't invite you to the wedding."

“Lindsey sometimes beats against the bars,” Dad said, “but she likes the birdcage. She can leave if she chooses to. But you were the one who needed to fly, and no one blames you for that, Baby Girl.” He opened his eyes and smiled. “Now, did you come in here to read or not?”

I read to him until he fell asleep, his breath coming harsher and less even than I heard it in days, but still he looked peaceful. For a long time I held his wrinkled hand in my own, then kissed it and replaced it on the blanket. Somehow I didn’t want to leave him alone, so laid my head next to him on his bed and fell asleep.

I woke to Lindsey’s voice in the room. “Dad. We’ll miss your PT. Dad.” I raised my head as she tried to nudge him from sleep. “Dad!”

I started to take his hand, but the coolness of his skin made me pull back.

Lindsey looked at me. “Jenna?”

“No,” I said. “No.”

“Go get Mom.”

I stared at my sister, watching her touch my father on the neck and face, without taking in what she was doing, only thinking how gentle she was with him.

“Jenna.”

I sat frozen, able only to stare at my father lying still—so very still—on the bed. Lindsey looked hard at me, but didn’t tell me to get up again. She went herself down the hallway, calling for Mom, her voice in a high register. And I sat.

Mom and Lindsey came running back into the room, and stopped beside the bed, their eyes fixed on my father.

"I was in the room," I said. "I was here."

"Jenna—" Mom said.

"No, he's better when I'm here. He does better. He was fine."

Neither of them said anything.

After a moment, Mom spoke quietly to Lindsey, who nodded and left. I could hear her voice a minute later, talking to someone on the phone. I wanted to go to my mother, put my arms around her, but I still didn't trust my legs to stand, couldn't find the strength to get up.

"You didn't have to go yet," I said, my voice in a whisper. "You were getting better."

When Lindsey returned to the room, she pulled Mom into a tight embrace, her long fingers holding the back of my mother's head as she buried her face into Lindsey's shoulder.

"I was in the room!" Both Lindsey and Mom looked over at me as I pushed myself out of the chair. I made for Lindsey's bedroom across the hall and slammed the door behind me. It wasn't right. He did better when I was there, Lindsey said it herself. I kicked the bed frame, kicked it again, and then threw myself across the bed, landing hard on my stomach. I lay there, gazing at the floorboards until my back started to hurt, and I rolled over and stared up at the ceiling fan. It was still, the blades edged with dust. I got to my feet and left the house for the ocean.

I returned late, only to find the living room awake with light and people. Friends from church and the neighborhood were over. Someone was handing a cup of tea to Mom, and Lindsey sat rocking in the recliner, biting her fingernails. No one said anything when I entered, but this time the dark looks came from Mom's friends rather than my sister. I looked away, out the window to the backyard, but could see nothing but my own reflection in the glass and so turned my gaze to the floor.

The talk was empty and strange, and no one mentioned death. After a while, I walked back to my old bedroom and turned on the light. Dad's hospital bed was empty but unmade. They must have taken him away sometime during the afternoon. His walker stood in the corner, unneeded the whole time I'd been here, and the nightstand, my old white nightstand painted with flowers, was still covered with half-empty bottles of pills. I picked up his book and, still standing, began to read.

"They all die." Lindsey's voice came to me from the doorway.

"What?" I turned to face her.

"Your book. That's how it ends. You don't remember?"

I shook my head. "It's been a while."

"You could have picked something else to read him."

I turned the book over in my hands. "He picked it."

"I know."

“What is all this out there?” I motioned toward the living room. “A bunch of people come here to sit around and do nothing? Not talk about anything important?”

Lindsey didn’t answer right away, but her voice when she spoke held only sadness. “I would have thought that you, of all people, wouldn’t be bothered by that.”

I sat down in the chair, Dad’s book still clasped in my hands, and hung my head. There was nothing I could say.

“Where did you go today?”

“Nowhere.”

“Mom was worried, Jenna. She needed you here.”

I looked up at my sister. “She doesn’t need me. She has you.”

Lindsey shook her head. “I’m not enough. I never have been. That’s why there are two of us.”

“Don’t say that.”

“All right.” She fell silent, but remained in the doorway.

“I’m really sorry, Lindsey. I messed up everything. But...but I did come home, and...I think he was glad for that.”

“Of course he was. He was waiting for you.” Lindsey looked like she might cry, and I wasn’t ready for tears. I set the book down on the bed and started to leave the room. Lindsey, her head bowed, stepped aside to let me pass through the doorway, a gesture that hurt more than anything she’d said or done

since I'd come home. I stopped then and took my sister's hands—her thin, cold fingers—in my own and held them tight. She looked up at me, but didn't speak.

"He loved you. He always did." With her hands caught in mine, she couldn't wipe her eyes. "He just always knew you'd be okay. He couldn't ever tell about me."

Lindsey managed a smile through her tears, and I squeezed her hands before I let go. Then with nothing more I could say, I left the room before I started crying.

Lindsey took care of the funeral arrangements, and I made sure that Mom was getting some sleep. I also fixed a few meals of soup and sandwiches and managed to do the laundry, but I always left the house in the afternoons and stayed out late. I didn't feel I was much good for anything but watching waves. Lindsey was so much better at domestic things. They let me go without a word of reprimand, Mom only insisting that I take my cell phone. I think they were partly relieved when I left. My dry-eyed presence in the house of weeping made them uncomfortable.

I sat on the sand watching the parade of families being replaced by crowds of teenagers, who were finally escorted away by the Beach Patrol at curfew. The winds blew inland hard, making the surf choppy and white-capped. I thought of driving up the coast where the beaches were more rocky to watch the waves hit and break with force against the cliffs. But that required willpower, and I only had inertia. So I sat.

Disconnected thoughts came to me, one following on the other, like the waves on the shore. I thought of my father—how he'd sing in the mornings or in the car, how he'd flip his last card facedown on the table before calling gin, and how he read at my bedside while I was sick, doing all the characters in different voices. How he told me, when I called him about my private wedding, that he loved me and wished me the best, though his voice, as I remembered it now, dripped with disappointment. How he wanted to meet Kenny, to see me. And I never made the time, found the money, or even realized what it meant to him for me to come home.

I pulled out my cell phone, knowing I'd barely be heard over the wind blowing through the mouthpiece, and dialed.

"Jenna?"

I broke at the sound of the voice and started crying.

"He died, Kenny. He's dead."

"Okay, Jenna. It's okay."

"He just died. I was in the room, but—" I didn't know if Kenny could understand anything I was saying or what I was talking about, but he stayed on the line. "She said he was better. And I was reading to him and then—I'm sorry."

"It's all right." Kenny's words came to me over the voice of the waves.

"Go ahead and cry. I won't hang up."

I couldn't speak for a long time, but finally managed to get a sound out.

"I'm sorry you never met him. I'm so sorry." I couldn't explain to Kenny why it

mattered now, no more than I could describe the ocean to him. But I had to try, if only so I could hear his voice on the line and forget that he was, for now, nine hundred miles away.

Beautiful

I see my daughter more often in magazines than around my table. A three-quarter profile, a glimpse of her in Europe, sometimes her face on a glossy cover. She's an up-and-comer, a rising star, or so the media says, as if she first walked onto the silver screen last fall. They only remember the blockbuster, what they call her break-out role, the film that brought her scripts and made the press love her. They finally noticed that she's dazzling—tall without heels, beautiful without smiling, much more her father than me.

I follow her through the media, scanning covers and flipping through pages at the grocery store. Often she's tired—I can see the hollowness in her eyes—but I don't mind pictures of weariness. It's her life, the way she's chosen to live it, and she's a busy girl. It's the sadness that tears me. The smile and the put-on face that for all the world looks like happiness, except to her mother, who can't reach her now because she's off shooting a film and it's two a.m. in Berlin.

I haven't seen her in person in months when she calls to ask me about a photo shoot. A photographer, whose foreign, incomprehensible name rolls off her tongue, wants to do a collection of mother-daughter portraits. Would I come and take pictures with her? It would be in New York; I wouldn't have to fly overseas. And they would dress me—body and face—so I wouldn't have to worry about anything at all.

I care little about the exhibit, but I care a lot about my girl who doesn't talk with me on the phone, but will sometimes tell me things over coffee. And

perhaps during the shoot, there would be a break when we might sit together, for just a little while.

We arrive at the studio's Manhattan high-rise at nearly the same time, coming from opposite directions. She is wearing faded jeans and a v-necked sweater, and she has her hair pulled high into a bun. Tired, she looks, maybe frazzled, like she's just stepped off a plane. And perhaps she has. She doesn't see me right away with her eyes downcast to the sidewalk, but when she looks up, she smiles and kisses me on both cheeks. Then she leads the way inside. In the elevator, leaning against the aluminum wall, she tells me about make-up and wardrobe, how the photo shoot works. It's good to hear her voice.

They dress us in matching tones, pose us side-by-side, and begin clicking and flashing at us against a grey background. Close-ups and far shots, profiles and straight-ons, sometimes laughing, sometimes serious. It's hotter in the studio than I expect with the lights beaming down, and louder, too. The set crew yells to each other while the camera flares and the three-foot fans blow hard across my skin. Assistants brush my face with powder and pull at my hair—fluffing and straightening—between takes. Little more lipstick, they say, just a touch of blush.

Later, the background is turned to green, and we are in contrast—she in sleeveless ivory and I in covering grey. They ask me to stand behind her and take her in my arms, my hands clasped in front of her waist. They want my face beside hers, my chin resting on her shoulder.

She leans against me as soon as I hold her, a sigh without breath, and I feel the weight of her body as she rests against my breasts. I have not in many, many years held her like that, so close for so long. Not since she was small has she allowed me to cradle her, to shelter her in my arms. I find it hard to breathe.

The photographer reminds me to put my cheek next to hers, and he tells my daughter to sit up taller; she's leaning too much on me. She straightens and I come up behind her, covering the distance so that we're touching again. I feel her give a half-smile, and she closes her eyes.

The camera clicks without warning, and I look up as the photographer takes another shot. Beautiful, he's saying, just beautiful. And for this one moment—this one frame of time—I am. Despite my pale, slack skin and my near-colorless hair, despite the sweat tickling my back beneath the sweater. I am the one facing the camera. I pull closer into my daughter whose eyes are still closed, making myself a pillar for her lean against, and I lift my face into the lights, my eyes directly into the artist's lens. Beautiful, he says, hold it.

Charcoal, Chalk, and Dust

I don't feel right opening the blinds. She always left them closed, natural light kept at bay by dusty wooden strips across the windows. She preferred the halogens—bright, hot bulbs reflecting off the walls and ceiling, for the continuity, I think, instead of the color. She wanted to paint with the same light regardless of time. But with the power off, the lamps extinguished, I need the beams of sun through the windows. The cord squeaks against the bearings as I pull on the blinds, the slats unwilling to be raised, inertia itself holding them closed. I tug again and sunlight invades the room, making her studio feel even more lifeless, more empty than before.

I never noticed how yellow and bare the walls are. Canvasses are everywhere, leaning in corners, jutting out from the half-closed closet, lining the cupboard under the sink, but the walls are naked, except for an e.e. cummings poem copied in black ink. The one about a falling leaf, loneliness.

Fingerprints decorate the studio door in prismatic smudges, reminding me of the first time I came here, months ago, when she greeted me with her hands and clothes covered in charcoal. She had forgotten our date. But she invited me in, offered me a seat while she finished, she said, the last little bit of her drawing. I thought it would take only a few minutes. Instead, I stayed nearly until dawn, watching her at the drafting table, sketching, blending, crafting. As she worked, we talked in short exchanges between bursts of creativity when she slipped into silence, concentrating on the image before her.

But they were comfortable silences, where I peered over her shoulder taking in the whole canvas as she saw it. I felt I learned more in those moments, and even knowing I'd go home tinged with charcoal, I wanted to slip my arms around her, hold her against me, and kiss her. I didn't, not then, only because she was so intent on her drawing that I didn't want to interrupt.

Now in the sunlight I see again how chalk dusts the windowsills, the drafting table, and even the kitchen counters. There had always been chalk everywhere. She smelled of it, particles trapped in her hair, sprinkled over her clothes and encrusted beneath her fingernails. Sometimes she'd have it smeared nearly to her elbows, purple and blue and yellow, and she unaware that her skin had taken on some unnatural color that marked everything she touched.

I pull an unframed drawing from among the pictures in the corner: a self-portrait with her name, her script in the left corner. She always signed there in broad strokes of purple. It wasn't her real name, just the name she wanted to be known for, how she wanted to be called. I didn't think to ask her what her parents called her. Perhaps it would have been good to know.

Carrying the picture to the window where the afternoon sun glints down onto the carpet, I set the portrait in the square of light. It's new—one I haven't seen before. My fingers play slowly down the page, tracing the lines of her face, wishing she were flesh, not canvas. Too late I see that she hadn't fixed the chalk. Dark hues come off on my fingertips, and the image and name she's left behind is now distorted, ruined.

I turn away, guilt-stricken that I've marked her last drawing, the last image of herself, with my own hand, and I look instead to the other art pieces leaning against her easels and the yellow walls. Here in the studio, so many drawings in chalk. Her gallery works were often pen and ink, but not here. Chalk. With an artist's name in the corner of a fading canvas, impermanent, unknown, soon to be blurred and forgot.

Human Voices

They had no sightings of whales—no flukes, no plumes, no ridged backs—just greyish-green water and short stretches of rocky islands dotted with seagulls. The tour guide explained again over the loudspeaker how to spot the humpbacks, but Adam had stopped looking. Two hours on the ocean with nothing to show for it. Two hours of inhaling diesel fumes and staring at water broken only by the occasional frond of kelp. Hardly worth the price of admission.

He turned away from the water and crossed his arms over his chest, his back against the railing. His brother glanced at him then back to the ocean, the sunlight on the surface reflecting into his sunglasses. “You okay?”

“I think I’m gonna sit down for a minute.” He didn’t wait for Matt to ask him again if he was all right and he didn’t answer when the question came, just walked to the rear of the boat and planted himself on the plastic bench bolted to the floor. He was glad it was dry, right then the one thing going for him.

The only other person on the bench was a pale blonde with a ponytail and baseball cap, who suddenly jumped up, ran to the side of the boat, and standing on tiptoes, her body nearly bent double, puked into the water.

The force of it surprised him. The day was calm and clear, and the boat pitched no more than a car on the highway, so even without the Dramamine he’d seen her popping earlier, Adam figured she should have been fine. When she was sick a second time, the sound of her misery inescapable from the bench,

Adam went over and handed her a handkerchief pulled from his pocket.

"Here," he said, "take it." She reached out for it with one hand, her head still hung over the water.

He hesitated, not knowing whether to stand with the girl or let her deal with her mess by herself, but finally decided on the latter. It's what he would want, if the situation were reversed. Instead of going back to the bench, he ambled over to where Matt still stood at the gunwale. His brother, however, was not scanning the water for flukes, but watching his exchange with the sick girl from behind his dark sunglasses. "You still carry those?"

"What?" Adam said. "The hanky?"

"Yeah."

"Jessica likes them."

"Yeah, I know."

Adam shrugged and changed the subject. "So, you see anything yet?"

"Nope," Matt said. "They'll call it out over the speaker if they spot something."

"I'm sure they will." He sighed, and resting his arms heavy on the rails, he peered downward into the water, into the boat's dark shadow where the water seemed greener, murkier. "What a weird thing to get comp tickets for."

"You didn't have to come," Matt said. "I thought it would be fun." Adam heard in his words both apology and accusation. Matt had offered a rare invitation for them to see each other, something that had grown harder to do

now that they were two grown men with jobs, one with a wife, and little time to make the trek across town.

"I'm not complaining," Adam said.

"You are."

"Sorry." Adam focused his attention to the seagulls landing on a rock jutting like teeth through the seawater a hundred yards away. Neither of the brothers said anything for a while, then Adam spoke again with a forced cheerfulness. "It's a nice day for it."

Matt nodded, then pointed a little to his left. "The sea lions think so. Look at all of them on the islands. Tons of them."

"Literally," Adam said, following his brother's gaze. "And old sailors used to think they were mermaids. That would be one ugly mermaid."

Matt didn't even glance over. "Nobody thought they were mermaids. You're thinking of narwhals."

"What's a narwhal?"

"I don't know. It's what they thought were mermaids."

"Huh," Adam said. "Well, I've never seen one."

"A narwhal or a mermaid?"

"Whatever."

Adam felt a tap on his shoulder and found the blonde girl standing behind him, now without her baseball cap and looking like she may need to make another dash to the railing. She held his crumpled handkerchief in her palm. "Uh, I think this is..."

"No, no," Adam said, waving her off. "It's okay. You can have it."

"But I—"

"Really, I have others. Please. Keep it."

Adam watched as the girl wandered away, noticing the way her fingers pushed wisps of loose hair back into her ponytail, how her unsteady legs worked against the lilt of the boat to keep her balance. He kept his eyes on her until she slipped behind a line of whale-watchers-cum-seagull-gazers and was gone. She didn't look back, didn't see him watching her.

"She's cute," Matt said, following his brother's gaze. "You should ask her out."

"I don't think green is her color."

"So she doesn't have sea legs. So?"

Adam gave a slow shrug, and it took him another minute to speak. "How'd you know?"

"About Jessica?"

"Yeah."

"I know you. This is how you act when you get dumped," Matt said.

"Besides, she called Sheri."

"When?"

"A while ago."

Adam nodded. "I didn't want—I haven't told—"

"No, I know. It's okay," Matt said. "You all right?"

"Yeah."

They faced the ocean again, first Adam looking into the distance and Matt following his lead, to the waves and the rocky islands beyond them, to seals and sea lions sunbathing and barking. "Singing each to each," Adam said after a while. "I do not think that they will sing to me."

"You want sea lions to sing to you?"

"It's a line," Adam said. "From a poem."

"I know it's a line from a poem." Matt adjusted his sunglasses and took a breath. "It's your whole problem, though. Who the hell cares if mermaids don't sing to you? They sing to lure men to their death, okay? It's what Jessica was doing to you."

"You're thinking of sirens."

"What?"

Adam didn't bother to look over. "Sirens, not mermaids, lead men to their death by singing."

"It's both," Matt said. "Remember Odysseus? He had to stuff the men's ears with wax..."

"Those were sirens," Adam said.

"They were in the water."

"Doesn't make them mermaids."

"What do you know about it? You thought they were sea lions."

Adam started to say something, but the tour guide's voice over the loudspeaker interrupted him, directing their attention to the harbor seals off the starboard side of the boat. Adam turned his head to the left.

"That's port, land-lubber." Matt pointed the other way. "Starboard is that side."

Adam dropped his gaze to the deck, where he began working with his toe to free a small puddle of ocean water from the pocked floor.

"Adam?"

"She wasn't luring me to my death."

"Wasn't she?" His voice was quiet, unassuming.

"I loved her. I'd do anything for her." Adam met his brother's eye, but only for a second. "Marry her, if I thought it would make her happy. Anything."

"And she knew it. That was the problem," Matt said. "I know what you saw in her, Adam. She was gorgeous. Any guy would want to be with that, but she treated you like crap."

Adam didn't say anything, still working at the puddle with his toe.

"You put her up on that pedestal like she was...a goddess or something. She wasn't."

"Sheri likes her," Adam said.

"Sheri likes everybody," Matt returned. "She's missing the part of her brain that tells her which people are annoying."

"Lucky you."

"Yeah, lucky me." Matt smiled and clapped Adam on the back. "You'll find someone. Someone a lot better than Jessica. You just need to jump back in there. You'll find her."

Adam shrugged off Matt's arm and walked off again, leaving his brother to watch, along with everyone else, the seals off the starboard bow.

The boat turned in the ocean and began to make its way back to the pier. The tour guide, her voice scientifically apologetic, explained about the migration, and the feeding patterns, and the possible reasons why the whales weren't showing. It was a good time to see them, the ocean so calm, if they had been there. They still might catch sight of them on their return to the dock, the tour guide said, but Adam knew it wouldn't happen.

He closed his eyes and listened to the sound of the water lapping against the sides of the tour boat and to the high-pitched cries of the seagulls audible even above the noise of the diesel engine. Matt hadn't followed him, and he was alone, his head bowed against the cooling sea breeze, willing himself to think of the boat and the air, and nothing of Jessica or anything else onshore.

He heard a song playing from somewhere—a sweet melody, sung by a single soprano, unaccompanied. He thought it sounded familiar, but he couldn't remember the name or any of the words. The song grew louder and the voice sweeter, and after a while, Adam opened his eyes.

He saw nothing. No one on the deck had music, no tour boats had come near, and nothing broke the rippled surface of the water, except a rocky coastal island a few yards wide in the distance. He squinted at the land, the music seeming to come from that direction, and he saw, almost hidden by boulders and the lengthening shadows of evening, a woman sitting on the shore, singing. She

was brushing her long hair and staring in a mirror. Her green iridescent tail moved in time with the melody.

Adam blinked, and then leaned in for a closer look. Even knowing that she was singing only to herself, he found it an irresistible song, high and clear in sea-drenched air, calling to him from over the waves. A song of longing from the deepest part of the sea, from the deepest part of himself.

Before anyone could stop him, Adam climbed over the metal guard to the boat's outer edge. Matt would have grabbed him, pulled him away, called him crazy. But Matt wasn't there and wouldn't understand anyway. Adam drew a shaky breath and leaped for the water. His foot hit the railing as he went over, and his already ungraceful dive became a belly-flop.

The cold water shocked him as he broke through the surface. The sun had warmed his back while he stood on deck, but now he felt his body close in on itself, slow itself in protection against the cold. He tried to swim, arm over faltering arm toward the rocks, toward his mermaid ahead. The island was farther than he expected, and his jeans and shoes grew heavy on his body, but still he swam toward the voice.

He kept his sight on the rocks, but they always seemed another hundred yards away. His head bobbed over and under the waves and his mouth filled with saltwater as he pushed himself onward, willing his limbs to move through the sapping cold, but feeling his strokes grow slower. He didn't think to signal the boat, only wanting to make it to the shore.

He swam for a long time before the island came any closer, and he still had a long way to go. He had never been a strong swimmer, not even in the heated swimming pools of the city. He didn't hear the singing any longer, only his labored breathing, and then he fell under the water, the numbing cold passing over his head and he couldn't pull himself back up. He fought against the waves, and finally didn't struggle any longer.

It was nice to relax his arms. The water seemed warmer here and lighter, like a breeze rocking his hammock in the backyard. He was nearly asleep, lulled by the soft wind, when he felt something tugging. He fought against it until his mind cleared, and he realized he was being pulled from the ocean. Two hands gripped him, by his collar and his hair, and dragged him ashore. When his body hit the land, he saw the mermaid, her long hair now dripping wet, standing over him. "Are you a fucking moron, or what?"

His eyes closed.

Adam was aware of two things when he awoke: his waterlogged body aching with cold, and the mermaid smoking a cigarette.

He blinked. "Where—where did you get that?"

"Get what?" she asked.

"The cigarette."

She seemed amused, a small smile creeping across her lips. "You can get them lots of places. These, I think, came from 7-Eleven."

"The store?"

"Yep," she said. "The very same."

He nodded and looked away from her. "You're not a mermaid."

"No," she said. "And you're not a very good swimmer."

"It's—it's just a costume." Adam heard the rawness in his voice and hoped beyond all hope that she couldn't hear it. He wanted to be spared that humiliation, at least.

"Spandex and latex mostly." She snapped the material against her legs. Until then, Adam hadn't noticed she had them.

"And the song? The song's a recording?"

The mermaid shook her head. "No, I can sing. The mirror's a microphone."

Adam drew a breath. "Why are you out here?"

"It's a gig. For the whale watching tours."

"Oh." Adam pulled himself into a sitting position, wrapped his arms around his legs, and rested his forehead on his updrawn knees. He felt like crying, the disappointment and embarrassment pressing hard against his chest. He knew the strange woman must be watching him, a soggy, huddled mass, curled into himself for safety, and expected another word of sarcasm, another remark affirming his failure in life.

When she spoke to him again, though, her voice sounded soft, with no hint of mockery. "A boat is coming to get me soon," she said. "We can give you a ride into shore if Search and Rescue hasn't found you by then. Do you have a way home?"

"I don't know," he said. "My brother will probably be at the pier." Adam shook his head. "He's going to give me hell. I can hear it already. God, what a dope."

"It was very sweet," the woman said. "I've been singing on this rock for more than a year, and no one's ever jumped out to see me."

"And the one who does can't make it to shore. Pathetic."

"Well, I'm not saying it wasn't stupid. But it was sweet."

Adam raised his head and met her eye for the first time. "I guess I should thank you for pulling me out of the water."

"Don't mention it. I wasn't going to let you drown."

Adam peered out over the ocean then, feeling the evening sea-breeze blow through his damp hair. The water had darkened in the twilight, the surface nearly black now, tipped with white caps in the wind. The mermaid began to sing to herself in her clear soprano. Adam closed his eyes and breathed deeply, taking in the smell of sea water and a hint of cigarette smoke.

Shades of Yesterday

He was in my mom's old chair by the door, sitting quietly and hardly moving. It didn't occur to me he shouldn't be there—my only thought was that I had to get off the medication. It was driving me crazy. I didn't like that I kept falling asleep. Bad enough that it happened twice last week at school, but now it was going to get me in trouble at home, too. Why bother to take it, if it only brought difficulty instead of relief?

As I rolled off the bed, I caught sight of myself in the mirror. The new cotton dress that my stepmom insisted I wear was hopelessly wrinkled all down the front since I had been sleeping on my stomach with the folds of material underneath me. Just my luck. I didn't know how long I'd been out, but I could hear a range of voices talking and laughing downstairs, so I figured my aunt's birthday party must still be going on. I also knew I'd hear about it for my disappearing act. But it wasn't my fault this time. I didn't mean to fall asleep.

"Wear something that looks nice for once," Jill told me, which really meant "wear the new dress." So now I had to decide whether to go back downstairs with a dress that looked like it had been kept in the bottom of a clothes hamper or change into something less wrinkled but certainly not up to Jill's standards. I didn't have another dress that fit. So, either way, I was sure to get yelled at as soon as the last guest drove away.

As I turned toward my closet, I noticed the man sitting in the chair. He was dressed all in black with black hair hanging over one shoulder, and he was

watching me. I didn't think to be afraid of him or to call out. I have no idea how I knew it, but he wasn't there to harm me. He was just sitting and watching. It wasn't until later that I remembered that Jill would have pitched a fit that a guy had been in my bedroom. I had seen him before, I think. A friend's brother, maybe one of my aunt's friends from the party. Several of those guys had been downstairs earlier, laughing together on the back porch.

I don't remember what I said to him. He answered me with a low voice that for some reason reminded me of steel. I had heard it before, but couldn't remember when we had spoken. Before I had a chance to say anything else, though, he stood up to leave. "Your big problem, Becca, is that you don't know your friends from your enemies. You can't even figure out which Jill is, can you?"

I looked him straight in the eye, my old counselor's trick of confrontation. "What do you know about it?" I said.

"I know enough," he said. "You better think things through. And start doing it pretty quick." And then he left.

Or maybe he hadn't been there, I wasn't sure. I needed off the medication. I couldn't think straight. But my thoughts were clear enough that I knew better than to tell anyone about it.

A few days later, I was curled up in the same chair in my room, my body pressed against the fabric, when my stepsister Ellie came in. She looked so much

like Jill it was unreal. The same sandy-colored hair, and the same line between her eyebrows when she was upset. She was Jill thirty years younger with a kinder, more understanding heart. Ellie smiled at me sometimes, and she had this beautiful smile that even her braces couldn't hide. I sat up as she closed the door.

"She didn't go for it, huh?" she asked.

"No," I answered, looking away. "Big surprise, there. She won't let me do anything." It was always one thing after another with Jill. Yelling, yelling, yelling. Always some misstep, always some problem. It had been my hair, and my clothes, and my fingernail polish. And now it was the earring. A tiny second earring. "It's in my ear!" I said to Ellie, a little louder than I meant to. "Doesn't she know where other people put them?"

Ellie lay down on my bed facing me, her hands under her chin, feet in the air. "She just doesn't want you to do something you'll regret."

"She just doesn't want me to do anything I like." I crossed my arms against my chest. "What's the big deal? It doesn't even look bad. It's not hurting me, and it's not hurting her. Why's she so upset about it?"

Ellie didn't answer me. Maybe she didn't know. She was a year younger than I was, and Jill's ways weren't always the easiest to figure out, probably even for her daughter. After a minute, Ellie spoke again. "Did you tell her about your medicine?"

"Oh yeah," I said, "Like I'd actually bring that up. She'd kill me if she knew I'm not taking it."

"She'd just be worried. She wouldn't be mad." Ellie got up from the bed and sat down on the floor beside my chair. "Let me see your ear."

I pulled my hair back with one hand so Ellie could see the new posthole. "No, she'd be mad. And I don't care," I said. "I don't care. I don't care. I'm not going back on that stuff. I'll talk to my dad about it when he gets back." I let my hair fall from my fingers, and then turned to look at Ellie, suddenly remembering who she was. "You aren't going to tell on me, are you?"

"Your ear's red," Ellie said. "Did it hurt?"

"No more than the other one. Ellie—"

I saw the line between her eyebrows appear then fade away almost as quickly as it came. "You're going to talk to your dad about it?"

I nodded.

"Then I won't say anything. You have an eyelash." She reached out and brushed my cheek, as if dusting it. Then she held her finger and thumb pinched together in front of me. "Make a wish. Thumb or finger?"

"Finger," I said.

She looked down at her now-opened hand. "Thumb," she said apologetically and blew the eyelash away. "Sorry."

"My wishes never come true, anyway." I shrugged my shoulders. "But I guess this means your mom isn't leaving."

I hadn't really thought about what I was saying until I saw her face change. I hadn't meant it to hurt, but the smile dropped from her lips, and she rose to leave.

"I didn't mean it, Ellie." I reached out and grabbed her by the wrist. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean what I said."

"You meant it," she told me. "You just didn't mean to say it. There's a difference."

"I'm sorry. I just, well—I'm sorry."

She didn't take the apology. "It's not always easy for me living here either. It hasn't been easy for anybody." She waited without another word for me to let go of her wrist, her eyes on my hands, willing them to open. I dropped her arm, and she turned and left, closing the door behind her. Then I heard her go to her own room, shut the door and lock it. I hadn't meant it. I hadn't meant it to hurt.

Jill found out that I had stopped taking my medicine a couple days before my dad got back in town. It was just like her—always in my business—to check the bottle like that. She said it was to see if it was time for a refill.

We fought about it for a long time. I tried to tell her to stay out of it, that I would bring it up with my father, but she wouldn't let it go. She just kept yelling at me, over and over, the same things about acting my age, like Ellie does, and taking responsibility for myself, like my mom didn't. I think she said some other things too, but by then I could only register an angry voice rolling over me. I looked up when she stopped talking, thinking I might be able to leave. But her eyes were fixed on my earlobe and the little diamond stud I'd put back in. That

didn't help matters any. The line between her eyebrows got deeper than I thought possible, and for a second I thought she might rip the earring out even though Jill never laid a hand on me. Her style was to yell, at least recently it had been.

But this time she didn't—her voice was quiet when she spoke. "Go to your room and stay there." Like I was five years old.

"No," I said.

Jill took a deep breath and pressed her hand against her brow. Her voice stayed low. "Rebecca, please just go."

I gave in and trudged up the stairs, deciding that when I was at home, I would wear my hair down from now on.

At dinner that night my prescription bottle sat by my plate. "Take your medicine," Jill said. "Or next time I'll mix it in your food." She even watched me take a full glass of water (like the instructions on the label said) and swallow the pill before she let me leave the table. I had to hide it in my cheek and spit it into the toilet later.

Dad and I played a game of basketball in the park the next weekend. It was nice to be on the courts with him again, dribbling and blocking and shooting. His newest promotion meant a lot more business trips and we hadn't gotten to play much recently. We used to play a lot with Mom when she was

around, usually Dad against Mom and me. That was before she flipped out. Anyway, ancient history.

After we finished the game—a long streak of Dad making nearly every basket, and me netting about half as many—we sat down on a cement picnic table to cool off. He passed me a bottle of water from his backpack, and took one for himself. “Rebecca, I need to talk to you for a minute.”

“It’s not all my fault, Dad!” I said.

“I know.” He said it more gently than I expected. “What’s with the medicine?”

“It’s not right,” I told him. “I don’t like the way it makes me feel.”

“What does it do?” He took a long drink of water, letting the sides of his water bottle dent and crackle.

“It makes me tired. I can’t stay awake. And I think it makes me see—makes me confused sometimes.”

“We’ll talk to Dr. Ridley and get you on something else, okay?”

I shook my head. “No, I don’t want to be on anything else. It messes with my brain.”

“It’s supposed to.” He was smiling as he said it, and then put an arm around me, pulling me into a one-sided hug. “We’ll just see what the doctor says. But if he thinks you still need it, then I think you should stick with it. Deal?”

I pulled away from him. “No, I don’t want to be on it, anymore. I don’t like it. I don’t need it. And I want a different doctor.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s Jill’s. She has him give me stuff that makes me too tired to fight with her.”

Dad became quiet after that, just sort of looking at me, and it made me wish I could take it back. It took him forever to say something, and when he did finally speak, the words came slowly. “You think Jill wants you drugged?”

“Well, she—”

“And you think she’s getting the doctor to go along with her, just to keep you quiet?”

I looked away and didn’t answer.

“It’s not fair to either of them, Rebecca. Or to me, if you think I’d let them do that. Dr. Ridley is one of the best doctors we found for you. Just because Jill knew him doesn’t mean they’re trying to tame you with drugs. You know that.” He paused for a moment. “You do know that?”

After a while I nodded. I guess I knew that, but it sure seemed that way sometimes. “I still want a different doctor.”

My father sighed. “All right, we’ll look for someone else. But about Jill—”

“Dad, she won’t leave me alone! She picks on me for every little thing. The way I dress, how I’m doing in school, everything! Why can’t she just leave me alone?”

“I’ll talk to her about it. But you know why.”

“I’m not a five-year-old,” I said. “I can make my own decisions.”

"Yes, you can," he said. He seemed sad. "Becca—"

I knew where this was going and cut him off. "I'm not Mom. I won't do what she did."

"Sometimes you act—a little bit—the way she did." He made a strange gesture, like he was about to take my hand but thought better of it. "You might not see it, but I do."

"Because I'm her daughter," I told him. "Not because I'm not crazy. And I don't like Jill and Ellie watching me, waiting for me to do something that they think is weird. I'm not a mental patient."

He didn't say anything then, and I shoved off the picnic table and stalked away. I hated these talks, and he knew it. Why did he always make us have them?

That night, waking from a dream about my mother lying on a million shards of glass, I saw the man in black by my bed. I squinted at him, trying to see him better in the dark, and raised myself onto one elbow for a closer look. He put a finger to his lips, motioning for me not to say anything. "Go back to sleep."

My eyes closed almost immediately. I roused some time later and thought I saw him sitting in the chair. But I didn't think anything about it. It wasn't an uncomfortable thing.

If Dad talked to Jill about leaving me alone, she was ignoring everything he said. The next week was worse; her nagging and interference became constant, and she wouldn't listen to what I was saying. I started locking myself in my room, which didn't go over very well at all. Occasionally, I could hear Ellie trying to calm Jill down after a fight. I suppose I would have felt bad about it myself if I weren't too busy kicking my bed and screaming into my pillow.

After that week, we started family counseling which I might not have minded except that I would have preferred to play basketball in the park rather than stare at my dad across the counseling room. It was such a waste of time.

Ellie would come into my room sometimes and talk to me. She sat on the floor or lay across the bed while I curled up in the armchair, and we chatted as if we were real sisters. I liked Ellie, and I felt bad for her. It wasn't her fault that she was caught in the crossfire of a dysfunctional family fight. I told her that a couple times, but she seemed to like being in the middle.

She took Jill's side in the arguments when we rehashed them later, but I didn't say much about it after I heard her take my side with Jill. At least she didn't yell at me.

Sometimes when she talked to me, she made me cry.

Every now and then a question came to mind about friends and enemies, and who was which. Ellie, at least, I counted as friend, but one I didn't want to test. What would she say if I told her about the man who watched me while I dreamed, who stood in the places of my strongest memories, and whose unreal

presence I found comforting because he understood me? It sounded creepy even to myself. Perhaps I should try medication again. We'd switched it recently.

Sometimes late at night my dad would call and talk to Jill. I could hear her through the walls, usually without making out the words. Sometimes the tension in her voice made it sound like she was crying. I hoped it wasn't about me, but I had the feeling that it was. I couldn't figure out why else my dad would call so late or not want to speak to me.

I heard her tell my dad one night that she was tired of fighting with me, and she wasn't sure if she could take any more, which made me mad enough to slam my door shut. The fighting would stop if she would just quit bugging me. Why didn't she see that? I told it to her all the time. Everything would be better if she'd just leave me alone.

But she wouldn't or couldn't. Report cards came that week, which was a disaster. My grades had dropped again, despite my efforts. I knew no one would understand that I was trying, that it was just a bad term. As expected, I got a lecture from Jill, which was repeated the next day when my dad got back from his business trip, only with different questions.

"Is it the medication?" he asked. "Do we need to try something else?"

I was busy picking lint off my comforter when he asked it. "I don't think we need to switch," I said, not looking up, "since I'm not taking it, anyway." A moment of truth better left unsaid.

He grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me, which he had never done before. "God damn it, Rebecca. God *damn* it." Something flickered in his eyes besides anger, something scared and sad that I couldn't name, but couldn't look at either. I had to go back to de-linting my blankets.

He took a week off work after that, and he talked to me a lot during those days. About Jill and about my mom. About how I was feeling and about my classes. He pulled me out of school to take some tests. We also went back to see Dr. Ridley, even though I told my dad that I didn't want to go back there.

A couple times I saw the man with the long black hair and the black clothes again. He was standing in the parking lot outside a pizza place we used to go to, and I waved.

"You see someone you know?" Dad glanced out my window from the driver's seat.

"No," I said, dropping my hand into my lap. The man didn't wave back.

The other time, though, he was sitting in the chair in my room after school. I was home alone, staring out the window.

"How come you only show up when I'm thinking about her?" I turned to look at him. "Or in places she used to be. That was her chair."

"It's comfortable." He patted the stuffed arms with his palms. "So, did Daddy get you all fixed this week?"

"Shut up," I said. "That's between him and me."

"Find the right drugs this time?"

I looked out the window again. "You're still here."

"That I am." He stood and came up behind me. I could see his face beside mine reflected in the glass. "You didn't tell him about me, did you? Didn't tell anyone. Now why would that be?"

"There's nothing to tell."

His voice dropped to a whisper. "Because they'll think you're crazy. They'll watch you, report on you."

I didn't say anything, and he stepped closer, so close I could feel his breath on my cheek. "How long before they get you in a soft, round room, just so you don't try to jump through the window like she did?"

And even he, it seemed, had turned on me. The one who accompanied thoughts of my mother as if sent by her, who always knew when I needed someone beside me. I turned around and stepped back from the windowpane. "I'm not crazy."

"Just out of control," he said. "And they look so much the same."

"Shut up!" I was yelling now, unable to hold it back any longer. "Just shut up. You don't know anything."

Downstairs, I heard the front door open and Ellie's voice called up to me. "Becca? You okay?"

The man was gone. I blinked a couple times and looked around the room.

I could hear Ellie's feet on the steps, then she opened my door. "Becca? I thought I heard you yelling. Everything alright?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'm fine."

But I wasn't fine. The new medication made me alternately dizzy and tired, so I stopped taking it. And it must have been one of those you were supposed to step down gradually because after that I couldn't think straight at all. Everything got me so wound up and spun around. I couldn't think about anything. Just like he said, I was out of control.

Jill left to visit her mother the day after I threw her vase of flowers on the kitchen floor. She packed an awful lot of stuff for herself and Ellie, and drove off a couple hours before my dad came home. I have to admit, in retrospect, that smashing the vase was a bit childish. But we were fighting, and I wasn't thinking about what I was doing. I was upset.

My father cried that night. I hadn't heard him do that since my mother died. I sat in the chair in my room, the door closed, fighting my own tears. This wasn't what I wanted, not really. Jill was gone—for good I now realized, not for a visit—and now my dad was crying. Because of me. I'd run her off. I'd made everything worse for him.

I reached for the prescription bottle. I'd take the pills if it would keep him from crying. I hadn't meant to hurt them, any of them. Really, I hadn't.

The house was quiet the next morning without Jill or Ellie, and I had trouble pulling myself out of bed for school. When I finally came into the kitchen, my dad was sitting with his laptop at the table and a coffee mug in his hand. He looked up when he saw me. "Good morning."

"Hi," I said and sat down across from him. He'd made breakfast for me, toast and scrambled eggs, both of which were cold. I couldn't even look at him

to thank him. He shouldn't have done it. I couldn't stand him pretending that it would all be okay when we both knew otherwise. I ate my breakfast as fast as I could, letting Dad return to his work on the computer, and left for school.

I saw Ellie there and tried to talk to her between classes. She shuffled her books in her arms and looked at me, the line appearing between her eyebrows as she spoke. "I guess you got your wish."

"No," I said. "Not really."

"Looks that way from here," Ellie said. "I have to go, Becca."

"Listen, this is all my fault, and—"

"Stop. Don't say anything else. I can only feel bad for you for so long. You're not the only one who's been hurt." Ellie readjusted her books in her arms again and walked away.

"I'm sorry," I called out, but I don't think she heard me. She didn't turn around.

I barely noticed anything for the rest of the day, a faint buzz in the ears came with the dizzy spells, and I just wandered through my classes and the hallways until the final bell. Dad wasn't home when I returned, and I didn't think I could face him—see him trying not to blame me, trying to make things right for the two of us—so I grabbed the basketball and went alone down to the park. All the courts were in use, so I sat on the cement table and waited, bouncing the ball and listening to the rubber ring out every time it hit the cement. I stayed there for a long time, bouncing and catching and releasing. I

found the rhythm soothing, and concentration on the ball seemed to ease the dizziness. When man in black sat down next to me, I tried to ignore him.

"Not going to say anything, then?" His elbows were on his knees, fingers interlaced in front of him, comfortable. "It's polite, you know, to say something to old friends."

"You aren't my friend," I said, keeping my eyes on the ball.

"As if you could ever tell the difference. You with your messed-up little mind."

"I can tell."

"Can you? That's nice to know. So, what have you decided about Jill? Or Dr. Ridley? Or even your dad who seems a bit busy these days. Pretty gung-ho on the medicine, though."

I kept quiet.

"And then there's Ellie. Sweet, little Ellie who rejected you."

I looked at him sitting beside me with a self-satisfied smirk pulling at his mouth. He was enjoying himself a little too much. I wanted to knock the smile from his face, smash it to pieces. I grabbed the basketball with both hands as it bounced from the pavement, and hurled it at him as hard as I could. The ball flew through the air, hit the dirt by the picnic table, and rolled away into the grass. I had missed him. "You shut up!" I yelled. "Stop coming around here!"

"Rebecca?" I looked up and saw my dad walking across the grass toward me. He had the basketball in his hand. "Who are you are talking to?"

I shook my head. "No one. He's not really here."

He glanced around, as if he might see the man for himself, before he sat down beside me. "I've been looking for you for a long time. It's getting dark."

I was suddenly tired. I didn't move, didn't have the energy. Even my words, I could hear, were coming slowly. "I didn't mean to stay so late."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah." I looked him in the eye and saw that he wasn't angry at me, wasn't sad. I didn't have to look away. "I get confused sometimes."

"I know."

"There was a man...I wanted him to be real."

Dad nodded, though I knew he didn't understand.

"I thought he was a friend, at first. He wasn't." I trailed off and Dad just sat beside me until I came back to the conversation. I tried to give him a smile.

"He couldn't even catch a chest pass."

Dad threw me the ball, and I caught it but didn't pass it back. "I sound crazy, don't I? Did she talk like this?"

"Your mom?"

I nodded.

"No." For the first time since he sat down, he looked away. "It was different with her."

I didn't know what else to say, what else to ask about the difference, so I stood up from the table. I wasn't completely sure I wanted to know, anyway.

Dad also got to his feet, and we started home. He put his arm around my shoulder, like he used to do when I was younger, and I didn't look back as we

left the park. I didn't want to see the man sitting by the basketball courts, didn't want to acknowledge I'd seen him at all, with his black clothes and black hair hanging past his shoulders, watching me walk off with my dad.

Water's Edge

Janie

Her mother stood in the driveway throwing something into the trunk of the car when Janie came home from the city pool, dressed only in a green one-piece with a bath towel tied about her waist. Janie made it all the way to the front door and was pulling out her key before Carla slammed the trunk closed and looked at her daughter.

"Get in the car, Janie," she said. "Your father's an asshole."

After a half an hour, with the outline of the city in the rear-view mirror, Janie asked where they were going and got no answer. She asked again an hour later, still with no reply, and she knew better than to ask a third time. Carla was angry—Janie could tell by the way she handled the car, speeding, tailgating, abruptly changing lanes—and she thought it best to leave her mother alone. So she looked out the window, watching the telephone poles pass along the freeway and tried to comb the tangles out of her hair, which had dried wild and smelling of chlorine.

Some time after sunset, they arrived at a house in the mountains well off the paved roads and looking empty and haunted in the night. Carla had a key, which turned reluctantly in the lock, and she led the way inside. "My dad's place," she said, "for fishing in the summer. He brought us up here sometimes. Mom never sold it after he died."

It was a tiny cabin—two bedrooms about the size of closets, a bathroom, and a two-burner stove in the kitchen—but after the long ride, Janie didn't care. She was glad to be out of the car and was ready to fall into bed. Carla dropped her suitcases, then took one of the bedrooms for herself and closed the door behind her without speaking to her daughter. Janie thought Carla might say something once they got out of the car, but the click of the door put that notion to rest. And there was nothing else she could do, so she walked into the other room and stretched out on a musty-smelling mattress, hoping sleep would claim her.

Something about the quiet, though, something about the stillness following the constant rush of air conditioning against her face, kept her eyes open in the dark and brought thoughts she'd tried to avoid in the car. Her mother and father were divorcing, it seemed, and she'd come home at the wrong time.

An afterthought in leaving, like an afterthought in life. She knew some latent feeling of motherhood must have come upon Carla at the last minute, sparked only by the vision of her daughter approaching the house. Otherwise, there would have been clothes packed in the trunk for her instead of only suitcases of Carla's belongings, and not even a toothbrush or a pair of shorts for her daughter. She was still in her bathing suit, an uncomfortable green spandex thing pilling up at the rump and covering her shapeless body in wrinkles, and had only her towel to hide her legs, her embarrassingly long, skinny legs.

Could you call it kidnapping if she got in the car of her own accord? Or if Carla had never planned to take her, and she had just come at the wrong time? It

felt the same—taken unexpectedly away, driven for hours with barely two sentences passing between herself and her captor, and ending in some remote house, miles away from anywhere. The only difference, she supposed, was that she hadn't been bound or gagged.

Not that it mattered, really. Carla's refusal to explain anything or even engage her in conversation had the same effect.

Janie rolled over onto her stomach and let her head drop onto her crossed arms, hoping the change of position would allow a change of thought, a change in consciousness. But she lay awake a long time. She could only think of her sister Rachel, wishing she was there so her steady breathing could lull her into sleep like it did at home, and of her father, who might yell at her, but even though she was thirteen, would still kiss her before bedtime and say he loved her.

The sun woke her early since the windows didn't have curtains. After nearly an hour of failing to get back to sleep, Janie got up and pulled a T-shirt of Carla's over her one-piece, and slipped out of the house. She wasn't sure where she was going, just following the dirt road downhill. Any other day, she might have ventured into the woods, but sometime in the night she'd lost her bearings, drifting in and out of sleep in the passenger seat, and feared that if she wandered too far off, she might never find her way home. Given Carla's sudden disinterest, her mother, Janie thought, might not bother to look for her.

It was quiet, much quieter than her neighborhood at home. Here the squirrels barked and occasionally a car rumbled down the road, but otherwise, it was still. Two houses down, a man was on his hands and knees planting marigolds in the yard, and even from the street, Janie could hear the scritch and ring of his trowel through the dirt.

She walked until the road ended at the lake. Morning mist rose from the water, as if the lake were breathing in its sleep. Janie could almost hear it sighing. She dropped to her knees on the lake's edge and ran the flat of her hand over the reflection of sky. The water parted beneath her fingers, and after a moment stilled and reformed its image of clouds and blue. Again, she touched the face of the water, the face of the sky, feeling the coolness against her palm and watching the world break apart and come back together.

She stayed by the waterside for a long time before she dived into the lake, and the cool spring-fed waters filled her ears. Underwater sounded like underwater wherever you were, she decided, especially if you weren't listening for the clang of a pump. She swam deep, deeper than she was allowed in the pool, sometimes letting the pressure against her eardrums grow into pain before kicking to the surface and diving under again.

Later, when she was drying off on the shore, still breathing heavy, squeezing water from her suit and toweling it from her hair, a voice came from behind her. "Don't look like her, but you're a lot like your mother, aren't you?"

Janie turned around and pulled the towel about her so it draped over her body like a terry-cloth sarong. The man came closer to her, arms folded across his chest. "Taking stuff that don't belong, using whatever suits you..."

"What?" She couldn't quite get her voice to full volume.

"Trespassing on private property," Derek said. "I see you down here."

Janie wiped her hands on the towel. "You own the lake?"

"No, just the land you're standing on."

"Oh." She wasn't sure what he wanted her to do, so she walked into the lake until her calves were halfway covered in water. "To where? Where's the property line?" She pulled the towel tighter about herself.

"The tree with the dead branches hanging over the water." He pointed to the east. "That's one side. And the other is just this side of the boulder."

"All right." She waded around the shoreline, keeping her feet in the water until she was well outside the claimed area. Then she stalked out and dried her legs off.

"Nope, don't look like her at all. Must take after your daddy."

A statement no one who'd seen Janie's father had ever made. She stopped and turned around slowly. "You don't even know who I am."

"You're staying at Earl's old place, so you must be Carla's girl. You know she used to come around here in the summers. Strutting and preening like a real little city bitch. Drove the boys crazy with her cute pink bikini and her long hair. Trouble, she was. Right from the start."

Janie swallowed hard.

"Course, you'll have some problems with that," the man continued, "since the boys aren't around these days, but I'm sure you'll find some trouble of your own. Especially when you get bored up there in that house all by yourself."

"You stay away from my house," she said, her voice louder now, in spite of herself.

"I plan to. I've had more of your family than I ever wanted."

Had she been her father, she might have come up with a quick retort, but she was Janie and could only walk off in silence, letting the man have the last word and feeling his eyes follow her up the road to the cabin.

Brian

He'd spotted her twice today, the skinny girl with the long brown hair, and he was surprised how much she looked like Sarah Jane. He hadn't noticed it when she passed earlier, but seeing her now come up the road at a run, the resemblance was uncanny. It was the way she carried herself, the way she cast her eyes away. And the age, he suspected, probably had a lot to do with it. She must be twelve or thirteen, the same as Sarah Jane, as she always would be.

The girl had been swimming—her hair still dripping onto the bath towel wrapped about her torso—and looked tired. She was panting, her face red, and she seemed a little unsteady on her feet. She also wasn't watching where she was going and might have run headlong into him had he not reached out to stop her. "Easy there."

She was thinner than he thought; he could feel the bones of her shoulders underneath his hands. She pulled away in an instant, and gave a backward glance toward the lake, as if something were chasing her. The word *sorry* was barely out of her mouth before she was rushing again up the hill.

Brian looked down toward the lake, and saw nothing out of the ordinary, only his friend Derek waiting for him on the boulder that marked his property line.

Carla

Every word Janie said was an accusation, every look an indictment, and Carla knew that it was a mistake to bring Janie with her. Her daughter's demand for answers with her intense green eyes—like her father's—was already starting to wear on her. But there was no other choice, really. She couldn't have left her with Peter. Rachel was one thing, Janie another.

"Why do you need to call home?" Carla avoided Janie's eyes in the mirror, as she leaned over the sink to put her lipstick on. She had only just gotten Janie out of the bathroom—she'd taken a fright over someone down at the lake and had locked herself in—and now the girl was hovering behind her in the doorway.

"Why?" Janie repeated.

Carla pressed her lips together then opened them with a resounding smack before twisting down the lipstick tube and recapping it. "That's what I asked."

"So I can talk to—to Rachel."

Carla caught the hesitation, heard the allegation. Janie wanted her father, wanted to hear his voice on the line. Carla would have thought she'd had enough of Peter's rumbling curses to last her a lifetime. Why then would she want so badly to talk to him, especially when Janie said so little to her? And what, Carla thought, did it say about her that Janie would prefer to be with him? That the girl also thought it safer to mention Rachel instead of Peter for her reason to call home was disconcerting. But what would she say, Carla wondered, once she got him on the phone? She couldn't imagine how that conversation would go. "I'm sure Rachel's fine," Carla said, picking up her hairbrush. "Besides, she and Daddy are thick as thieves and I'm sure they're having a grand time without us."

"Even though he's an asshole?"

Another accusation, another she couldn't deny. Carla stifled a sigh and said the only thing she could. "Language, Janie."

"You're the one who said it." Janie spoke as if the words were caught in her throat. She had dropped her eyes to the floor and was kicking the wooden threshold to the bathroom.

Carla turned around then and took Janie's chin in her hand. "Hey, don't look so glum. Everybody's fine." She let go, giving her sullen daughter two

quick pats on the cheek. Then she looked Janie over and spied the green bathing suit beneath her own white T-shirt. For the second day in a row, Janie didn't have shorts on.

"Don't you have any more clothes than that?" she asked.

Janie

Janie would swear it was the first time Carla had even seen her since leaving home. Her mother had a way of looking past her, as if she weren't there. Or didn't matter. Hours she sat beside her in the car, and yet Carla hadn't noticed she didn't have any clothing. And she'd looked at herself longer in the mirror than she had at Janie. What was it the man at the lake had said? *Always strutting and preening*, that was Carla.

She hadn't like the man. It scared her, the way he sauntered over, and the things he knew. Even though he was small, compact like a runner, he had a menacing strength about him. It was the way he stood with his arms folded across his chest, head high, as well as the glimpse of bicep underneath his short-sleeved shirt. But she also kept thinking about what'd he said. He'd called Carla names, and accused Janie of being just like her. The first was becoming more apparent; the second she feared would prove to be true, as well. The whole conversation echoed; she found herself returning to it time and again, wondering if the little man was right.

He also mentioned something about the boys though Janie hadn't given much thought to it at the time—too many other things had crowded it out. *The boys aren't around these days*, he said. And neither, Janie learned in the following days, were the girls. Retirees and vacationing young couples were the only thing the town could boast, no families. No teenagers. The ski resort had closed a few years before, taking the mountain town's economy and anyone who needed a steady income with it. The quaint village had become little more than a collection of fishing cabins for a lake no longer stocked with fish. The library, Janie's hope for an Internet connection to reach her father, had lost funding and closed. The junior high looked like it hadn't been open in ages.

"What about school?" Janie asked one night over dinner.

"What about it?" Carla said.

"Will we go back before school starts?"

Carla wiped her mouth on her napkin, and a red stain of spaghetti sauce spread across the paper cloth. "Janie—"

"There's not one here. Where am I going to go?"

"We'll figure something out, okay?"

More plaguing than Carla's silence was Carla's talking. She'd rather that they maintain shared solitude, like they had in the car or so often in the past few days around the house, than to pretend they were actually having a conversation. She hated when her mother failed answer her questions, and Janie knew she talked past her on purpose because she didn't want to address the

problem. She did it so often there couldn't be another explanation. Janie dropped her fork with a clatter to her plate and put her hands in her lap.

"Come on, Jay. We're doing just fine here. I know it's hard moving, but you'll be okay. You'll make friends. It's just hard at the beginning."

"Friends?" Janie caught her mother's eye. "With who? This place is a ghost town."

Carla sucked in another bite of pasta. "That's a bit of an exaggeration. What about the people just down the street?"

Janie had met the guy, the one who'd been working in the yard a few days before. "Brian? He's 27 years old."

"Not Brian. The other people."

"There aren't other people. Just old folks." Janie gave a sigh and pushed herself away from the table, scraping her chair hard against the wooden floor. She got almost to her bedroom door before she turned again to her mother to ask a question—one she wouldn't have thought to ask a week or two before, but something that was nagging at the back of her mind. "Who pays for this place?"

"What?"

She took a breath and continued. "The water, the lights. Who pays the bill?"

"What difference does that make?"

Taking stuff that don't belong, using whatever suits...

"A lot," she said.

Carla focused on her spaghetti as she wound it around her fork. “Well, that’s too bad. Since it’s none of your business.”

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The lake was cold in the mornings. Janie liked the shock of the water on her body, liked the sensation of the goose bumps rising from her flesh, the dull ache of her stomach pulling into itself. She imagined it gave her for a moment a semblance of womanhood—allowed a hint of hip and breasts—that even this late she had not quite acquired. But as she moved and her body warmed she became again a girl at play, swimming until she was prune-skinned and weary. Only then did she pull herself out of the water to dry off and trudge back up the dirt road to the cabin.

Usually she was alone, though occasionally another swimmer would join her in the water if morning crept toward noon. Sometimes it was Brian, who always greeted her by name before plunging into the depths and swimming the long laps to the far side of the lake. It was more common, though, that she would enter and leave without seeing anyone.

If the day were warm, she’d sit on the shore, skipping stones across the water and letting the sun dry her skin drop by drop. She wished Rachel were here beside her so they could chat into the afternoon feeling the breeze blow their hair out of their faces and watch the ripples move across the lake. She wondered what Rachel would say. She was younger than Janie was, but had her father’s ability to talk things out, put things into words.

Janie thought about the nights she and Rachel had talked in their room about which parent they'd live with when the divorce happened. They knew it was coming—the fighting becoming more frequent and louder—and it was only a matter of time. They'd been wrong, Janie wanted to tell her sister now, every time they'd ever chosen Carla over Peter, they'd been wrong. Their father got angry quickly and cursed and yelled. But he also went hiking with them, took them for ice cream. He talked to them.

Janie hoped that he'd come find her and take her back home.

"She didn't want to bring me," Janie said aloud. "And now she doesn't know what to do with me." The stone she threw at the water sank without skipping. "She doesn't want me here, but won't let me go home."

Janie wanted, too, to tell her sister about the man on the beach, and ask if what he said was true—that she was just like her mother. Was she Carla only younger? She had the same dark hair and green eyes. Her long, skinny body, though, couldn't be linked to her mother or to anyone else. It was her own. Did that count for something, show that she was different?

Janie threw another pebble into the lake, this one skipping twice before going under. And she wanted to mention Brian, the only person in weeks who seemed to notice her and think her worth saying hi to.

Brian

He swam with Derek on Tuesday afternoons. Other days Brian would slip into the water to cool off after working on his parents' house or yard, but Tuesday was training day when he matched his strength against his former college coach. Ten years younger and moving late to the mountains, Brian only knew Derek by reputation until he went to college. There he learned the talk wasn't just hype. Derek was a fast swimmer, rhythmic and strong, and a contender twice for the Olympics, but missing the trials both times—once with a torn shoulder muscle, the other because of a death in the family. As coach, he worked his team hard, relentlessly, toward world record scores, and he worked no one harder than Brian.

Which Brian liked. He liked feeling his body grow stronger as he pushed himself to exhaustion and the sheer accomplishment of taking half-seconds off his best time. He'd joined the team as a way to deal with unrequited love, to get his mind off an all-encompassing crush. He kept swimming because he found he loved it more than the girl. And he was good at it, winning intercollegiate meets, gaining small notoriety in the swim world. He surprised everyone when he told them he wouldn't continue to train after graduation. He'd taken a job as a junior high school coach—something Derek thought was a fate worse than death.

But that, too, had been for a girl, for his sister Sarah Jane and the thought that she might have been okay, if anyone had ever told her she'd be fine. Now he had thirty girls that he could cheer on several times a week, telling them how great they were, even when they faltered. His school was third in the district for

swimming, but had the highest number of returning swimmers every year.

Brian liked that statistic.

He usually met Derek at the lake a little after noon. Today, Derek was already there, but still fully dressed and holding onto either end of the towel hanging from his neck. Brian followed his gaze out to the water where Janie—it had to be Janie, she was the only one out there in the mornings—swam about twenty yards from the shoreline.

“She’s not bad,” Brian said. “Swims a couple hours every day. In the mornings.”

Derek didn’t look over. “She’s awkward. And slow.”

“Yeah, but if someone taught her to do it right, she’d be all right.”

“Leave that one alone, Brian, if you know what’s good for you. She’s trouble.”

Brian looked over. “Janie? Troubled is more like it.”

“It’s how it always starts. Watch yourself, man.”

Just then Janie plunged beneath the surface, and they didn’t see her again until she came up out of the water near the shoreline. She’d swum far enough inland that she was only thigh-deep in the lake.

“All legs, aren’t you?” Derek said.

Brian shot Derek a look, surprised that his friend, who had just told him to leave her alone, was suddenly taunting this girl who was half his age. It made no sense. But worse than hearing Derek’s words was watching Janie’s face crumble. He’d seen it happen with other girls, when after swimming, they

suddenly realized they were naked except for a swath of waterlogged spandex. Strong athletes reduced to nervous bundles, unsure and uncomfortable about themselves as swimmers and young women. All because of an ill-timed and ill-placed glance or word. Now from the shore, he watched Janie look down at her own body and take in, with a grimace, its lack.

“Body needs some work.”

Brian hit him with the back of his hand. “Shut up, Derek. What’s with you today?” He walked over to where Janie stood, seemingly stuck to the bottom of the lake. “It’s natural, you know, with your body type. Your power is in your legs, but you’ll be stronger, faster, if you use your arms more.”

Derek kicked off his shoes. “I’m telling you, man, walk away from that one.”

“I can teach you if you want to learn,” he said to Janie.

“I already know how to swim.” As if the words released her, she got herself in motion and splashed her way past him to her towel and clothes on the shore.

Brian kept talking. “I coach swimming during the school year. I could help you get on a swim team.”

She had her shirt and towel bundled in a heap against her chest. “I have to—go home now.”

Derek’s voice came again from behind them. “Your mom doesn’t care where you are and you know it.”

Brian saw her swallow hard and close her eyes for a second. Then she inched her feet into her flip-flops and started to walk away. By then Derek was calling to him from the water and seemed to have lost all interest in what was happening on the shore. He was ready to swim; it was what they both had come for.

“Yeah, I’m coming,” Brian said. He stripped his T-shirt from his back in a single fluid motion, dropped it on the ground next to his towel and sandals, and waded into the lake. Then the two of them, side by side, kicked out into the lake, leaving a trail of broken water that lapped against the shore. They raced hard, their arms churning through the water and their heads bobbing to the surface and back under. It was the first race in a long time that Brian won.

Janie

When the men were out of view and she was once again alone, Janie planted herself on the beach and began skipping stones across the water. She didn’t want to go home, didn’t want to have anything more to do with the cabin. She didn’t know how long she’d sat, but after a while she saw the men coming back, racing for the shoreline. She scooted away so that she was several more feet from the water, but didn’t get up to leave. Brian reached land first and pulled himself with a splash out of the water. The other—Derek, Brian had called him—was just behind, shoving his dripping hair out of his face. They were both panting as they walked to their towels and dried themselves off.

“Still here?” Derek asked when he spied her.

Janie took a breath and held it for a second before she spoke, uncertain if she wanted to ask. But she had to; Derek seemed to know, and no one else would tell her. "Tell me about my mom." Her voice was quiet.

"What?" Both men turned at the same time to look at her.

She repeated herself, looking only at Derek.

He walked over, as if accepting her challenge and stood in front of her, his shadow falling across her body. "You already know about your mother. Why do you need me to tell you?"

"I *don't* know," Janie said.

"Then perhaps you should ask your father. But she left him, didn't she?"

Janie nodded.

"Well, ain't that too bad."

Brian had come over now and was rubbing the water out of blond hair with his towel. "What's going on?"

"Nothing. She was just leaving."

Janie got to her feet but made no movement to go. "You stand over there behind your property line acting tough. But you can't even answer a simple question."

He grabbed her then by the arm, hard. When he felt Janie trying to pull away, he tightened his grip like a vise. His face was only inches from Janie's, his eyes intensely set on hers, and she couldn't shrink back from him. "What is it you want to hear, girl? You want to hear how many coves and backseats your

mom knows? How many boys have tasted her after an afternoon in the lake? Is that what you want to hear?"

"That's enough, Derek." Brian grabbed him and broke his grip on her arm. "Let her go."

Janie rubbed her upper arm, which would have bruises in the morning where his fingers had pressed into the skin, and started crying. She didn't want to—she'd asked for this, provoked it knowing she wouldn't like what he told her—but the tears came anyway, and she didn't bother to turn away or bury her face in her hands.

Brian was yelling at his friend. "What did you do that for? She's a little girl."

"She's not so little." Derek turned and started to walk back toward his property. "And she asked for it, stupid bitch. Just like her mother."

Before he was completely gone from sight, Janie sank low onto the ground, curled into a ball with her forehead on her knees and she cried for a long time. She couldn't have explained why, and she couldn't stop. His words hadn't shocked her. From sarcastic remarks and jabs her parents had thrown at each other, thinking Janie too young to understand or too preoccupied to hear, she knew Carla had slept with other men before her father. How many and how often and how young she'd been, Janie never wanted to know. Carla had always used people to get attention or whatever else she wanted. She always got what she wanted. Janie just couldn't figure out why Carla wanted to bring her here.

Her mother had never been the nurturing type—something that in times past Janie had been glad for. She'd watched her friends be smothered by hugs and kisses as they tried to leave the house, and listened as they called to check in if they were out after dinnertime. Janie enjoyed her freedom. But the way Carla had failed to recognize her presence since they left home, hardly remembering to speak to her or meet her eye, told Janie that her mother had not insisted she come out of concern for her welfare. There had to be something else, but she didn't know what, anymore than she understood why her father hadn't yet found where she was.

After a long time, Janie reached for her towel to wipe her tears and was surprised to see Brian seated across from her.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah." It came out as a whisper.

"Derek's, uh—he's got a bit of temper. But he won't hurt you."

Janie rubbed her arm and looked up at Brian. "Did you know my mom?"

The man smiled. "No. Before my time."

"I'm not really like her." She tried and failed to return his smile.

"Come on," Brian said, rising and offering to help her up. "I'll walk you home."

Janie let him pull her to her feet. "You don't have to. I'm all right."

"I'm going that way already."

So she walked beside him the short distance home, Brian talking the whole way. It was cheery talk, about nothing of moment—how he'd come back

to help his aging parents with their house over the summer, how he enjoyed the lake—but Janie liked hearing it, as if she were important enough to be told.

Brian

A few days later, when he was returning from the hardware store in town, Brian's father told him that a girl had stopped by. He thought that the woman he'd been dating for the past few months might have driven up the mountain to surprise him, but then his father looked up at him from the recliner. "Young girl with brown hair," he said. "Real thin."

"Oh. Janie," he said. Brian almost asked him if he thought she looked like Sarah Jane, but the man had gone back to reading his newspaper, and Brian knew how he'd answer anyway. He'd look up at the picture over the mantle, the one taken the year before her death, where she was smiling and her blonde hair was curled about her shoulders, and she looked like an angel in soft focus, and he'd say no, the girl up the street looked nothing like her at all. Not like his Jane—as the men in the family had always called her—she'd always been a beautiful girl.

Anyway, the resemblance was all in Janie's manner instead of her looks, and he noticed it again when he spotted her in his driveway the next day. She was watching him replace some of the wood trim on the house.

"Hey, Janie. How long have you been there?"

"I don't know," she shrugged. "Didn't want to bother you."

Brian wiped his brow with the back of his hand. "Well, you can't just stand around hoping people will see you. Come on, I could use some help."

She walked into the yard, and he dropped several nails into her hand. "You're my designated holder. Hand these to me one at a time when I reach for them."

Janie nodded, and they went to work side by side. She was a good helper, passing him what he needed at the right time. They didn't say much to each other until they finished replacing the dry-rotted wood on the house's eastern exposure, and Brian called a break. He went into the house and returned with a bottle of beer for himself and glass of ice water that he handed to Janie. They both sat down on the front steps.

"Thanks for helping," he said. "I didn't want to ask my dad since he tires so easily."

"You're welcome," Janie said and took a drink of water.

Brian shifted, stretching his legs out in front of him. He noticed that Janie, sitting two stairs below him, was hunched over her knees and gripping her glass with both hands. "You okay?"

She nodded and started wiping the sweat off her glass of water.

"You don't talk much, do you?" Brian asked.

Janie craned her neck to look at him, but didn't say anything.

"Guess I should have expected you not to answer that one, huh?" His eyes were laughing, and he reached over and tousled her hair. "It's all right."

A car rumbled past on the dirt road and Brian waved as it went by. Janie followed suit, and then, with her eyes still on the street, started to talk. "I'm out of practice."

"How's that?" he asked.

"It's just me and my mom up there. No one to talk to."

"You don't talk to your mom?"

"She doesn't hear me unless it's something like *pass the salt*. She doesn't really see me either. Not that there's much to see."

"Hey." Brian heard his voice take an angrier edge than he meant. "Don't do that. Don't say that about yourself."

It was the wrong reaction, and Brian knew it as soon as the words left his mouth. Janie stood up, set her glass on the porch, and stepped down the stairs. He watched her walk down the driveway with her head down, long brown hair covering her face. When she had nearly reached the street, he called to her.

"Jane."

She looked up.

"My dad said you came by yesterday. Did you need something?"

"No," she said and walked up the road to her cabin. Brian saw her a few minutes later, towel in hand going toward the lake. He stood up from the stairs when she went by, but she didn't look over.

Janie

She was going to talk to him about swimming, but now she didn't think she could ask him. She was embarrassed how badly she'd misjudged. She thought Brian might be someone she could say anything to, but he wasn't. He'd been nice, that was all. He wasn't Rachel. He didn't understand. And she didn't know what to do if even Brian—the only person who seemed to think she mattered—couldn't understand her.

Nearly a week went by and Janie saw no one. She went to the lake early in the morning, swam for an hour and came back to the cabin, usually before Carla had gotten up. In the closet, she'd found a box of old *Field & Stream* and had taken to reading them one by one, shut behind the door of her room. Even Carla noticed something was amiss and stuck a thermometer in her daughter's mouth. "You don't look well, Jay."

"I want to go home," she said, not bothering to look up. It did no good to talk to Carla. Janie doubted her mother could even understand that it was better to choose loneliness than have it shoved on her, that solitude was easier to handle when self-imposed. That kind of silence, that kind of disconnect, she could endure. Then it would be her own fault that she couldn't live with Rachel and Peter, that they didn't come for her because she didn't ask.

Carla

She watched Janie come and go from the cabin, like she used to watch robins come to the birdfeeder—interested that they’d shown up, but otherwise unable to do anything with them. She and her daughter talked little beyond the civilities, *are you still hungry, good morning, have a nice swim*, but in a way, it was a relief. In shorter conversations, she didn’t have to endure the range of Janie’s disproving looks, which sometime over the summer had gone from disbelief to disillusion. Rather than *I can’t believe you’d do that*, it was *I should have guessed, coming from you*. She found it as degrading as Peter’s cursing, which was ironic since she’d left her husband to get away from those remarks. Now her daughter said the same things, only without volume.

Janie came through the door damp and tangled like she returned every day from the lake, and flip-flopped her way into the shower without so much as a glance in Carla’s direction. At times, she wondered if this were Janie’s way of getting attention—the opposite of her own ways of making herself inescapable, irresistible—and if what Janie really wanted was for Carla to knock on her door, sit her down, and make her talk. But she rarely liked the type of attention—the accusations and the appeals—she got from her daughter, so she just let the girl walk by without a word.

The summer was passing quickly and Carla still had not made arrangements for the fall. She’d meant the cabin to be a temporary stopover, a respite for a week or two while she got her thoughts together. But now she liked the resting place, sitting at the window with a cup of coffee, listening to the wind

in the trees and having no responsibilities, and she didn't want to leave. Janie was getting antsy, but Carla felt she could stay forever.

"Mom?" Janie stood in the living room, brushing out her newly washed hair and sending droplets of water to the wood floor. "If it's the money, I can pay you back. I have some birthday money still at home and..."

Carla dropped her head into her hands. Here it came, this strange burst of talking in the middle of silence, always on the same topic. "We've talked about this already. Why are you still arguing with me?"

"I want to go home."

"I told you, Janie. There's nothing there for you."

"Rachel's there." Janie put her brush on the end table and looked over.

"What about her? Don't you even care about her?"

"Of course I care about her."

"Then—then what?"

"Then nothing, Janie. You do what you have to do sometimes."

"What does that mean?" Janie asked. "What are you trying to do?"

Trying to get more money out of Dad? You bring me along so...so what? So, you can use me to get what you want?"

And now Janie's version of yelling, where she didn't raise her voice. Carla stood up. "Janie, I'm only going to tell you this one more time. You are not going back to Rachel and Peter. Just drop it."

She could see Janie's jaw tighten, a sign since her childhood of swallowed defiance.

Carla took a breath, determined this time Janie wouldn't just walk away.
"What's the matter? You want to live with Peter instead of me?"

Janie said nothing and looked away.

"Really?" Carla shook her head. "All this talk about Rachel, and what you really want Peter."

"You don't—want me here." She was having trouble getting the words out, choking on her emotion.

"You think Peter does? He knows where you are, and he hasn't come to get you. And he's not even your dad, Janie! Why do you think he cares?"

"What?" Janie looked up and Carla saw a mix of bewilderment and betrayal play across her daughter's face. She hadn't suspected, then, that she wasn't Peter's. Because she looked so different from everyone else in the family and because of Janie's own concern about her long, thin body, Carla thought she must have figured it out. This wasn't the way she expected to tell her, if she ever told her at all.

She tried to reach out to her. "Janie? Listen to me, okay?"

Janie shook her head and stepped backward. She didn't seem able to form words, her lips moving, asking a question that couldn't quite come out. Then she turned around and left the cabin, like a startled bird taking flight.

Janie

She stopped short when she saw Derek in the lake. She hadn't come looking to swim—no suit, no towel, both dripping over the bathtub at the cabin—instead she wanted the solitude of the nearly deserted beach. She wanted the space to think; she wanted to be left alone. And if not that, then she wanted to talk to someone who cared. Instead, there was Derek who was unlikely to let her sit in peace.

She didn't want to hear anything from anyone, let alone strange taunting from an old guy who hated her because of her mother. She doubted, at this point, if he could hate Carla more than she did. Whatever her mother had done to him couldn't be worse than this. And this time, she didn't even give Derek the chance to hurl insults at her. Janie jumped into the water fully clothed and swam as deep as she could. She let the water fill her ears and felt relief when the underwater silence took over her senses. She hated that she had to come up for air.

Before she realized it, she'd swum farther than she ever had before. She wasn't paying attention as she skirted the bottom of the lake, and had paddled herself far beyond what she thought she could swim, out where she could no longer see the shore she'd sat on most of the summer. She must have grown stronger sometime during her season on the beach. She felt her clothes dragging on her, slowing her down, but still she swam, pushing herself deeper into the lake.

Brian

Derek was waiting for him, swimming a lazy backstroke a few feet from the shore. Brian waded in and let his body adjust to the cold before the two of them kicked off together for the far end. Derek had a good lead for most of the way, swimming like he had in college while Brian couldn't get into a rhythm. This would have been a competition where he finished well below his normal time.

When Brian hit the opposite bank, Derek was already out of the water, breathing hard but smiling. "Slowing down in your old age, are you?"

"Yeah, a bit." Brian pushed his hair out of his face and pointed to the cloth at Derek's feet. "That your towel?"

"No, mine's with yours." Derek bent and picked it up. It was a tee shirt, a small one. "Huh," Derek said. "Your little girlfriend must have made it all the way out here."

Brian was wiping drops of water from his skin with his hands. "My girlfriend?"

"You know, Carla's girl. What's her name...Janine?"

"Jane," Brian said.

"Yeah, well, she decided to take a swim with all her clothes on." He wadded the shirt and threw it to Brian, who caught it easily in one hand. "And not surprisingly, they must have come off. She's probably waiting for you back here somewhere."

Brian looked down at the shirt in his hands and hoped she was somewhere waiting on the shore, and didn't care for the reason. Perhaps she was exhausted after the swim or tanning on the beach. Anywhere along the lake would be fine, as long as she wasn't underneath the waves. "When did you see her?"

"Just about every day—"

Brian wasn't amused. "Derek. It's not the time."

"Right before you got here. She just jumped in."

"Dammit. Why didn't you say something?" Derek started looking around for other signs that Janie had been here. He'd combed this beach twice before—once for a boy who they found alive near Black Rock Point, and once for his sister, who had drowned herself but not in the lake. Hours of searching the shoreline only to find her in the three-foot pond in the back of their property. Brian didn't want to look at the water; Janie had to be on the land.

"Go back and see if she made it home," he told Derek.

"She's not even missing, Brian."

"And if she were, how long before you think her stupid mother would even notice? Just swim back and take a look around."

"All right. I'll swim back." Derek waded in and started home. It wasn't until he was well out of earshot that it occurred to Brian that Derek hadn't said he'd help with the search, only that he'd go back alone. Brian couldn't let it bother him. He scouted out the shore, looking for Janie among the trees and boulders, twisting her tee shirt in his hands. He called her name as loud as he

could. When he was certain she wasn't there, he got back in the water and swam for a nearby cove that was only reachable by water.

At the edge of the lake, the water lapping against her toes, sat Janie. She was naked, curled into a ball with her hair falling over her shoulders, brushing the surface of the water. She must have gotten tired after swimming this far out in her heavy clothes. Brian gave a sigh of relief and came toward the shore, stopping when he about waist-deep. Janie didn't look up, even when Brian tossed her wet shirt onto the beach beside her, and turned away.

Brian gave her a few minutes, and when he looked back, she hadn't moved except to pull her tee shirt over herself. She still sat with her arms around her knees. "Jane?" he asked. "What happened?"

Janie didn't answer, she only covered her face with her hands.

"Hey, come on. Say something."

When she didn't respond, he splashed her, a plume of water that fell across her skin and dripped down into the lake. She looked up, wiped her face with the palm of her hand, but otherwise didn't respond. Brian splashed her again, a bigger, closer wave.

"Stop," she said. Her voice was barely audible.

"What happened?"

She shook her head, but when he sent a wave of water over her the third time, she started to yell. "God, I hate you. You're just like everybody else. So what if I'm not your girl? You could have looked for me anyway. If you cared like you said you wouldn't have left me with her!"

Brian took two steps backward and let himself sink into the water to his chest. They both fell quiet. Janie pulled at her hair, squeezing the water out and letting the drops run down her arm. "Not you," she said. "I don't mean you."

"I know."

"Why didn't he come get me? I thought at least *he* would care." Janie wiped away a drop of water trickling down her face and shook her head. "He said he did."

"He does," Brian said. "I'm sure he does."

"Maybe. Mom doesn't, though."

This was the part he hated. He never knew how to deal with girls when they started with the self-deprecation. He didn't know what to say, and he wasn't convinced they ever listened. But still he needed to try. "She cares. She just doesn't show it very well."

"Lot of good that does me," Janie said. "It ends up being the same. And I'm stuck with it. He's not coming."

"You'll be all right," he said. "Hang in there. It'll work out."

"Maybe." She was wringing out her hair again and looked up at Brian.

"You soaked me. Why did you do that?"

"To make you mad," he said. "You talk when you're mad."

"What do you care?"

He didn't want to tell her that she reminded him of his sister, that she seemed so much like Sarah Jane in her last few months. It wouldn't help Janie to hear it—she was struggling with herself already, trying to prove she was her

own person. Learning she resembled another girl from years ago couldn't make anything easier. So Brian just smiled and said, "I just thought you could use the practice."

Edge of Memory

She remembers now the face on the pillow—pallid and grey, the skull visible through the skin. She sees it clearly although sixty-five years have passed since she stood over the metal-framed bed, uncertain how to speak to the man who had been her grandfather, her playmate, her friend. He looks thin—so thin—and he doesn't recognize her. He speaks to his brothers Manny and Wes, dead fifty years, as if they're in the room. And she doesn't exist.

He calls her Phyllis and Myrtle and Irma—a number of names in the family, but never her own. She's stopped telling him who she is and answers to whatever name he calls. It's easier than explanation. Instead of his granddaughter, he remembers songs and poems and verses. He sings ancient hymns.

The memory comes to her often in her sleepless nights of old age when she echoes his strains of *Be Still, My Soul* under her breath. She is older now than he was at his death, and she fears that she will soon become the barely-concealed bones on the metal-frame bed. The old one with a fractured memory, a sage whose counsel is lost in dementia.

Already she forgets the birthdays of her grandchildren and sometimes their middle names. Those, at least, she can be told again. The times of her own childhood, though, she feels are slipping from her without hope of return.

She remembers her grandfather now and thinks she knows how he ended up there, touched, bedridden, and not quite 80 pounds. It was the explosion

from the stove, she thinks, but it makes no sense, no more than it did to the ten-year-old girl. Did the fire ignite more than his body? Did it awaken the disease the doctors could not explain? His skin healed, but he was never the same. Then the new-skinned body of the old man began to crumble, unable to sustain the burden of the soul without the mind.

Even now she thinks on all this as she listens to the hallway clock grinding through the night hours. And she can almost remember the man before his accident, before his diagnosis and death, but the memory is worn and faded, and she's not sure it's real. Had she, as a little girl, peered on tiptoes over her grandfather's workbench, watching him use his hand-made tools? Was there a dog named Georgie that sat beside his chair howling in harmony as he played "Good Night Ladies" on the mouth organ? Did he dance in the living room, hand-in-hand with his granddaughter atop his feet? The images sit on the edge of memory, obscured by time, tears, and that skeletal face, and there is no one alive that she can ask to confirm them. They are scenes that she alone knows, and lying awake with her head propped on her pillow, she can almost remember.

Granger

Ten more messages on the answering machine. I've lost count of the total.

"I saw your sign. About the dog. Mine's a spaniel/shepherd mix.

Answers to Frannie."

"Hi, I'm calling about the dog. He's part-border collie. Has a mark on his head like a black moth. His name is Chekhov."

Hi...the dog...goes by Charlie

By Toffee

By Buster

By Max

By Snooper

By Ringo

By Spike

"The dog goes by Rascal, but he doesn't always come 'cause he's deaf."

It's a golden, a corgi, a boxer, a schnauzer, a St. Bernard-Dalmatian mix, a rottweiler, an elkhound. "She's just a puppy."

He is none of these, but an old mutt, greying around the muzzle, and arthritic. He hardly moves from his blanket near the fireplace, except to pad without a whine to the back door or to lick his paws. He's a good boy. I know someone loved him, even if he doesn't have a collar.

I wonder how long his family called for him. We had nearly four hours from the evacuation announcement until the wildfire swept over the mountainside. I left late, watching the footage of flames on television until I could no longer delay in pulling my own creaking joints into the pickup.

Beside the highway, panting in the smoke, his fur dusted with fallen ash, stood Granger. Or so I call him. A slow-moving mongrel that watched for his master with dimmed eyes. I had to lift him into the truck's cab, but once inside, he slept with his head on my thigh until we reached the motel some miles past the next valley.

I posted the sign a week later—on the first day we could return. “Dog Found During Fire.” I thought the rightful owner should describe him to me. I did not expect so many calls—tearful, hopeful calls. So many had left Granger behind, but no one left specifically him.

“I’m sorry, it’s not your dog,” I tell them all. “That’s not him. Not this dog.”

Nobody wants this old boy, a forgotten creature in the mountains.

I call Granger to my side, and he comes readily, if slowly, the end of his tail wagging in circles. Over the past week a game has begun between us where he tries to lick my hand while I pet him. We go a few rounds of interrupted patting and slobber, until he eventually lets his head drop onto my knee and closes his eyes, and I run my fingers through his coarse fur. There we’ll sit until one of us falls asleep.

The dog's name is Granger, and he'll stay with me until someone calls for him, by name.

Open Windows, Summer Nights

Through the open windows, I can hear Joel inside turning in his bed, uncomfortable in the heat. The house, built long before air conditioning, traps the high temperatures even after dusk and the window unit in the living room cannot force enough cool air down the hallway. Our other roommate, Mark, has taken to sleeping on the couch while I have staked my claim on the back porch. I like summer nights—the hot air billowing against my bare skin and the drone of the cicadas rattling even as the night creeps into morning. As a boy, I played outside until dark, later and later in the summer, but was always called in before the sky reached its darkest blue; now I sit out long into the night, taking in what I missed for so many years. Letting the night surround me, its humid grip on my body.

I hear Joel toss again and grumble something. He speaks more often in his sleep during the summer, though he screams only in the winter. I don't talk to him about this. His girl, Sarah, once asked him about his dreams, and though I think she meant his life goals, he walked out of the house and didn't return for hours. She hasn't, to my knowledge, asked him again.

I lie down against the planks of the deck and spread my arms away from my body, feeling the rough surface of the wood on the backs of my arms and legs. I'm not tired and I don't expect to sleep here, only to feel the wood and grit and uneven edges beneath me.

Sometimes I hear things—rats and possums, most likely—out foraging, snuffling through last season’s fallen leaves. Tonight, though, I hear nothing other than the trees rustling in the breeze until the backdoor opens and closes behind me, and light footsteps—bare feet on wood—come near. Sarah stands above me, looking down. I can see only her teardrop face and her long blonde hair that falls on either side of her cheeks as she gazes at me, then smiles. I catch the glint in her eye before she speaks.

“The creature of the night lives!” She kicks me just below the ribs, a little harder than she needs to, and I pull myself into a sitting position.

“Meaning yourself, I presume.”

“Of course.” She sits down close beside me and tucks her legs beneath her. She’s wearing a faded pocket tee of Joel’s, and as far I can tell, nothing else. The shirt, once she’s seated, doesn’t reach mid-thigh. “Warm night,” she says.

I hear the bed frame creak as Joel rolls over again. I put a finger to my lips, then point to the window frame. “He’s not very asleep,” I whisper.

“Not my fault,” Sarah says, her voice much lower.

“No, probably not.” I look away from her, letting the breeze brush against my face, bringing near the chimerical odor of honeysuckle and skunk—forever, for me, the smells of summertime. I breathe in, and hold it.

Sarah wants to talk, I can tell, but I don’t really want to hear it. I am not as much of a “big brother” as she likes to think. Many times I’ve tried, but I can’t cast her in the role of sister. I don’t love her like that.

“Darren?”

"Yeah?"

"Who's Rosemarie?"

I exhale and turn toward her. "Sorry?"

"Rosemarie." She waits a minute for an answer, then begins to pick at the hem of her shirt. "He calls her name in his sleep."

"Oh," I say. "Rosalee."

"Who is she?" Sarah doesn't look up.

"I don't know."

"You don't know or you don't want to tell me?"

Annoyed, I have to clear my throat in order to keep my voice down.

"She's an ex-girlfriend, that's all I know. And I got that from Mark, not Joel."

Sarah nods. "Has she been here?"

"No." I can still hear the mild anger in my voice, and I reach over and take Sarah's hand, firmly, in my own. "He's not cheating on you."

She looks up then, smiles, and returns the squeeze. After a moment, she drops my hand and begins to play with her long hair, pulling it back from her face and twisting it into a knot. It falls as soon as she lets go and tumbles down past her shoulders, and I have to resist the urge to smooth it out for her.

From inside, we hear Joel moving again, a groan escaping, then quiet. Neither of us says anything for a long time, and I feel the tension growing. I don't know what she wants to say to me, but there's nothing I can say to her, not here like this.

After a few more minutes of silence, Sarah stands, straightening her shirt as she rises. "Goodnight, Darren." She kisses me lightly on the top of the head and walks back inside the house. I watch her as she goes, letting out a sigh when she rolls the sliding glass door closed behind her.

I don't see Sarah for a few days, but I know better than to say anything to Joel. He is suspicious by nature, and moreso when it comes to his girl. On Thursday, I find her sitting with a shirtless Mark in the living room after work, talking over the noise of the A/C.

"You've known him for a long time," Sarah says.

Mark scowls, but answers more pleasantly than I expect. "If he didn't tell you, then maybe he doesn't want you to know."

"Why would that be?"

"Got me."

"But you know Rosalee, right?"

"No, I don't," Mark says. "Look, if he doesn't want to talk about it, what do you want me to do? I respect my friend's privacy, Sarah. If you want something, you get it from him. Don't go behind his back for it."

Sarah turns away and looks over to me. "Darren?"

"I've already told you what I know."

"You both suck." Her face is starting to turn red. "Both of you. Suck."

She pushes off from the couch and runs into Joel coming through the front door.

"Hi." Joel stops in the entryway and kisses Sarah on the mouth before tossing his keys onto the end table. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," Sarah says. "Just waiting for you to come home."

"Good thing I got off early, then." He glances over at both me and Mark. "Something wrong?"

"No," I say, and walk out to the back porch. The sun hasn't dropped yet, and the heat rolls over me like a wave, but I'd rather be out here than with all of them inside the house. I lie down on my back on the deck and watch the sky change incrementally from blue to purple to black.

Not long after dark, I hear the door open behind me. I don't bother to sit up, knowing it will be Sarah, trying to get something from me I don't know. Or wanting to log her usual complaints about Joel and his incapacity for intimacy. But no, that conversation never happens before midnight. Not when Joel might be awake to hear.

Besides, the footsteps on the redwood boards seem harsher, heavier. The plastic patio furniture scrapes against the deck, and Mark plants himself in the chair. I have to crane my neck to look up at him.

"God, it's hot. Why do you stay out here?"

"I don't mind it," I say.

"Really? It's an oven."

"More like a sauna, actually."

"As if that helps." Mark runs the tips of his fingers through his hair a few times, quickly, and sighs.

"It's cooling off a bit," I say.

After that, neither of us speaks for a while and I expect Mark to get up and walk back inside, but he stays, leaning hard against the back of the patio chair, beads of sweat forming on his brow.

"You come out here to talk about the weather?" I ask.

"No. Just wanted some air." He messes with his hair again, like he does when he's annoyed. The source of his irritation isn't hard to divine.

"Why don't you just tell Sarah what she wants to know, and she'll leave you alone."

"It's the principle of the thing, Darren."

"Reeks heavily of spite, if you ask me."

"Well, I didn't. But sure, it's no secret I don't get what you see in her."

I look away toward the trees at the property line. Only a breath of wind tonight, barely enough to rustle the leaves. Nothing moves in the underbrush. Behind me Joel's light flicks on, and I hear Sarah laugh at something, the tinkling of her voice coming from inside the house.

"Jesus," Mark says. "Doesn't she ever shut up?"

As if on cue, Sarah's laughter stops, and a quiet falls over the porch.

I glance over at the window then crane my neck to look at my roommate again. "You're lucky Joel closed the window. They might've heard that."

Mark shrugs. "I've said worse to her face."

"Yeah, I'm surprised Joel hasn't decked you yet."

"Joel isn't you."

"Yes, and vice versa." I glance over at the lighted window and the two dark silhouettes beyond, and Mark kicks me in the shoulder.

"Get yourself together, man."

We stay outside until Sarah leaves. Inside the house the muffled conversation has a sharp, truncated feel—the laughter dissolving into exchanges of quick words, whose volume ebbs and flows but never quite reaches normal pitch—and Sarah, we know, has left in anger. Mark and I talk baseball until we hear her car start up and pull away.

The light goes out in Joel's room, and the solitary bulb of the porch light seems suddenly inadequate. For once, I feel like following Mark inside when he rises from his plastic seat and motions for me to come in with him.

We both grab a beer from the fridge and slump down on the couch in the living room, Mark close to the air conditioner. He shifts around for a minute, uncomfortable, before reaching between the sofa cushions and pulling out Sarah's wallet.

"Dammit. Looks like we get a repeat performance tonight." He throws the wallet across the room where it hits the front doorframe and pops open, spilling dimes and pennies over the gray carpet. "How long before she's back, do you think?"

"Give her a break, Mark." I get down on the carpet to collect the coins. "You'd ask questions, too."

"Why don't they just fucking end it?" Mark's scratching the back of his scalp again.

"Because she loves him," I say, dropping the last quarter back into Sarah's wallet and snapping the latch shut. "I don't know why, but she does."

"Yeah, but why does *he* keep *her* around?"

"He's tired of the endless stream flowing through his bedroom?"

"I doubt it." Mark pauses. "Maybe I should tell her Joel's banging Rosalee."

I look up. "Is he?"

"I wish." Mark takes two swigs of his beer and sets his bottle down on the end table. "He probably wishes, too. Pretty girl. Joel was crazy about her."

"What happened?"

"A robbery."

"Someone stole her from him?"

"No, they got robbed. At gunpoint, the whole thing. He wouldn't talk to her after that."

"How come?"

"I don't know. But he never talked to her again, except in his sleep."

When the inevitable knock comes at the front door a few minutes later, Mark excuses himself for bed, a poor pretext given that he's slept on the couch for more than a week. But I can't blame him for leaving since I don't particularly want to see Sarah, either. I know what will be said; it's been said before.

She is, as expected, in tears and against better judgment, I let her in instead of handing the wallet to her through the screen. "Joel's in bed," I tell her as she settles into the couch. I stay standing.

"I know," she nods. "Darren, this isn't working anymore."

I want to tell her that it's never worked. God knows why they've stuck it out this long. Not once have I seen them both together and happy. She comes to me every few nights, recounting their problems as if I were some god-damned girl friend. But I have no advice that she'll listen to. She doesn't want to hear that he doesn't love her, that she's just one girl in a string of many.

Sarah wipes her eyes with her fingertips, then with the back of her hand.

"Here." I hand her a Taco Bell napkin, the best thing we've got for tissue.

"I just—I don't know. I just...want—" She pauses to wipe her nose and loses her train of thought. I stay quiet, watching her twist the napkin in her hands and willing her to get up and leave before I say something everyone will regret. "Why won't he tell me anything?"

"He's like that."

"I know, but he won't talk about...anything."

"Sarah, it's late." I put my hands out, offering to help her up. "Go on back home. Everything's always better in the morning."

"It won't be, though. He'll just keep—"

"Sarah." She looks up and I motion for her to take my hands. "It's time to go."

Sarah puts her palms on mine, and I pull her off the couch and into a hug. She is warm and soft against my body, and I wish I could run my hands over her skin and tangle my fingers in her hair. "It'll be okay," I tell her, my voice low in her ear.

I hear a door creak open behind me, and Sarah's head turns in the direction of Joel's room. Her eyes brighten as a smile starts across her lips, and she steps out of my arms.

"What's going on, Sarah?" Joel's voice doesn't sound like he's been sleeping, though I can't imagine that he's heard anything over the air conditioner.

Sarah walks around me and over to Joel, without even a hint of guilt. She doesn't hear his words as accusation. Taking his face in her hands, she closes her eyes and pulls him into a long open-mouthed kiss.

It's Joel who breaks the contact. He looks over at me, a smirk crossing his face before he puts one arm around Sarah's shoulders and ushers her into his room. He closes the door behind him with more force than necessary.

The sound brings Mark into the living room. He knows, apparently, that he can now couch-sleep in peace and I leave him to it, only nodding to him as I leave the room. I walk out the back door to the patio, aware that the noise of the cicadas and the wind might block the all sound from inside the house if the windows are closed.

A faint knocking rouses me late the next morning, and it takes me a while to realize that someone is at the door and that I'm the only one home. I pull on a T-shirt and stumble out to the doorway to find a short, curly-haired blonde on my front step. I'm suddenly awake.

"Hi," I say.

"Hi." She gives a nervous smile. "I'm looking for Joel Brannard. Does he still live here?"

"Yeah, but he's at work." I find myself smiling at the girl. "But, uh, I could tell him you came by. Do you want to leave your number?"

"He won't call me."

Her certainty surprises me, and her words seem an echo of Sarah's complaint only without tears. "Oh," I say. "Well, then—"

"I'll come back later." She reaches out to shake my hand. "Thanks. And you're..."

"Darren. His roommate."

"Nice to meet you, Darren."

"And you?" I ask.

"Rosalee." She smiles and turns to go. "I'll see you later."

Rosalee returns that evening and Joel answers the knock at the door, expecting to see Sarah. He freezes, one hand on the screen latch, the other on the

wooden doorframe, and says nothing for nearly a minute. Mark and I glance at each other on the couch.

“Wonder if I should have mentioned she’s coming over.” My voice is quiet enough that only Mark can hear me. He laughs under his breath and gives me a thumbs up.

“What are you doing here?” Joel says, still without opening the door.

“Joel, it’s important. Can I come in?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Well, I’m not leaving. So can I come in or do you want to have the conversation through the screen?”

He hesitates, then opens the door. He barely gives her enough room to pass into the house. “Not in here, either. Not with them. My room, okay?”

Rosalee shrugs. “Sure.”

Joel takes her by the elbow and leads her toward his room. She smiles at Mark and me and gives a small wave. “Hi guys.”

We both wave back and watch them make their way down the short hallway.

“Well,” Mark says, standing and stretching, “I don’t know about you, but I think I need some fresh air.”

“What? Mr.-I-Respect-His-Privacy?”

“You’re one to talk, Darren...”

“Hey, I never claimed otherwise.”

“Well, as long as we know where we stand.”

I don't think they hear us roll open the back door and seat ourselves—me on the deck, and Joel in the plastic chair. We can see them in his room since the blinds aren't drawn. Rosalee stands looking at Joel, arms akimbo, her back straight and head uplifted. Joel sits in his desk chair, not meeting her eye. Their voices continue through the open window without interruption.

"Rosie, I already told the police. I couldn't have identified them three years ago. Not even right after it happened. I certainly can't now."

"So, you won't even try?"

"How many times do I have to say it? I never saw them. They shoved me into the meat locker from behind."

I turn and catch Mark's attention and he shakes his head—no, he hasn't heard this part of the story, either. It isn't, I have to admit, the type of thing Joel would mention. Even now with Rosalee, who knows all the details, he doesn't want to talk about it. I've never seen his head bowed that low, nor his eyes averted for so long. With Sarah, he is confident, superior even, and easily manipulates the conversation to his advantage. Here Rosalee has the upper hand—something I never thought I'd see.

"Joel, they nearly killed me."

"And I got to spend hours sitting on a metal floor, wondering if I would suffocate or freeze to death first. Thanks for telling them where I was, by the way."

"I was unconscious, you know that!"

Joel looks up at Rosalee and holds her gaze before speaking again in a much lower voice. "The release was broken. I couldn't get out."

"Nobody knew to look for you, Joel. You weren't on shift."

"And lucky me, I got to wait until morning."

"I didn't ask you to come down that night to see me."

"No," Joel says. "You didn't."

He sounds like me when I talk to Sarah—speaking because it's expected, saying nothing in the process. But there's nothing else he can say unless he wants to betray himself, tell her what he doesn't want to admit. He loves her, and he's failed her.

"I asked for you in the hospital, though," Rosalee says.

Joel's voice drops so low that I can barely hear him. "I don't want to talk about that."

"Obviously."

She takes a breath, but Joel cuts her off. "I can't make it better." He's meeting her eye now. "I didn't see them. Let it go."

She falls quiet for a moment. "Why didn't you come see me?"

"Because I couldn't."

Joel looks away again, and neither of them says anything more.

Even buried in the anger, and even in the ensuing silence, I can tell Joel cares more for this girl than he ever did for Sarah. It's in the way he looks at her and looks away. It's in his voice, the vulnerability that I've never heard in him

before. All of it makes me uncomfortable. Mark must feel it too because he hits me on the shoulder and gestures toward the house. "Let's go."

We try to slip back inside, but the silence is deep enough around us that we can't make into the living room without drawing attention to ourselves. Our bare feet sound like combat boots on the deck, and the sliding glass door rumbles like a train on its track. I hear Joel's window belatedly close as we walk past his bedroom, and I shoot a look at Mark.

He shrugs. "Don't worry, he'll never say a thing about it."

Joel escorts Rosalee to her car not long afterward, but doesn't return to his room. Instead he lowers himself into the armchair and puts his head in his hands. He stays like that for a long time. "Darren?"

"Yeah?"

"Go tell Sarah she can come inside. She's in her car, across the street." He sighs. "Probably crying."

"She see you with Rosalee?"

Joel nods, his hands still covering his face, and then swears under his breath. It's the first indication I've seen that he cares anything at all for Sarah, that she means something more to him than a blonde body.

I walk outside and make my way to her car. Part of me wants to put Mark's plan into action and lie to her. I would only have to confirm her suspicions and let her fill in the rest. Rosalee was here, and she was here to see

Joel alone. The girlfriend, the woman he speaks of in his dreams. Sarah would never know he's only trying to get out of a meat locker, wondering every time he yells if help will come or if his breath is wasted, oxygen turned to carbon dioxide. Or if his body temperature will drop too low first as his muscles cramped with cold. No wonder he screams in the winter.

Mark sits in front of the air-conditioner, and I spread my body in the cooling evening breeze. Joel lies on his bed inside the house that acts as an incubator, only opening a window when the heat becomes unbearable. Sarah only knows that Joel prefers his room to everywhere else in the house in spite of the temperature, and I could make her believe just about anything. An easy end to an uneasy relationship.

She sees me approaching her car and rolls down the driver's side window. I lean in, resting one arm on the frame. "Hi."

"Hi." She's not crying, but she grips the bottom of the steering wheel like she's trying to strangle it.

"You all right?"

"Yeah. So...Rosalee?"

I nod.

"Dammit." She hits the rim of the steering wheel with the palm of her hand. "God damn it. I knew it. I'm so stupid."

"It's all Joel," I say. "Don't take this on yourself."

She shakes her head. "No, I knew about his blonde battalion. I just kind of hoped...that I was the end of the line. I wanted to be the last." Sarah stops

and pulls her long hair out of her face, twisting it behind her. "But I'm not even being replaced, am I? I'm the replacement. God, I'm so stupid."

She shakes her head again and looks away. She's beautiful with her eyes downcast, the color high in her cheeks, her jawline strong in profile, and I wish I could reach in and touch her. I want to smooth the self-accusation from her face, let the lines of anger retreat under my fingers, but I keep my hands where they are on the car frame. Some nights I don't care, but tonight I don't want to be a substitute for her, the way she is for Joel.

Sarah clears her throat. "Why does he do it?"

Even if I wanted to, I doubt I could explain how it must have been to be tossed helpless into a meat locker, knowing his girl is alone in the hands of thieves just outside the door. He could only sit and know he'd failed her in a way he could never make right.

But I don't want to explain. I don't want to justify him to her, so I shake my head and say nothing.

Sarah glances up at me with an expression I can't read. She looks like she might cry or yell or even laugh, and I brace myself for some outburst of emotion. But her voice is even and controlled when she speaks. "I won't be anyone's consolation prize," she says. Then she starts her car and I watch her pull away from the curb and keep watching until her taillights disappear at the end of the street.

"Did she leave?" Joel is still sitting in the armchair, and his question greets me as I come through the door.

I can't help but scowl at him. "Yeah, jackass, she's gone."

"Well," Mark says, "my day's getting better by the minute."

"Shut up," I tell him.

Mark stretches his arms out on the back of the couch and kicks his feet up on the coffee table. "Don't get mad at me because you lost your girlfriend. Oh, but wait. That wasn't you, was it?"

"Just...bite me," I say. I turn and walk out to the back porch to lie down on the deck. There is wind tonight blowing dust across the wooden planks and over my skin, and its rush and rattle blocks all sound from the house. Not that it matters anyway since the windows are closed. As if it were thunder and lightning, I count the interval between the sound of the gust in the trees and the brush of it against my body, but after a while, the wind drops and the feelings of solitude start to settle in.

Joel's alone in his room, but as the hours pass I keep expecting the back door to open and to hear Sarah's feet on the wooden boards. And she'd sit down beside me on the dirty deck, and play with her hair, and we'd talk late into night until we were nearly asleep side by side.

But she's gone now. I'll probably not see her again since she doesn't need me without Joel. I have, like Mark said, lost my girl.

I let my hands play over the rough edges of the deck, feeling the dirt collecting on my fingertips and beneath my nails, all the while looking to the

house. It's late, no light shines through the glass, and I know I'm the only one awake, Mark snoring on the couch and Joel sleeping soundless and dreamless, locked in the heat of his room.

A Refreshing Change

Madame Zenora was a fraud and I knew it before she opened her mouth. The trappings of her tent at the carnival—the spangled tapestries showing the zodiac, the incense candles to one side—were enough to tip anyone off, as were the fake rubies and sapphires covering her fingers and the strangely-wrapped turban shoved too far back on her head. Madame Zenora, it would appear from her roots, was a natural blonde. And the woman’s accent was way off. My grandmother came from Albania, and I know Romany when I hear it.

Zenora ran her acrylic fingernails painted with sunbursts over the palm of my hand, once, twice, and assumed interest in my lifeline before looking up at me. “A refreshing change is in your future.”

I was torn between telling her she sounded like a soft drink commercial and asking her to repeat the message just so I could hear how badly she rolled her R’s. But I wasn’t sure if either comment would start a conversation, and I needed to stay a while in the tent. From the time I handed my tickets to the guy at the door until Zenora dispensed her fortune-cookie advice all of five minutes had passed, which was a problem. I’d seen Jack just down the midway by the Tilt-a-Whirl, waffle-cone sundae in hand, and looking, well...quite a bit like Jack. I didn’t want him to see me. I didn’t think I could talk to him without compounding my regret.

Unfortunately, I didn't have anything to say to the Great Madame Z, either. "So," I asked, "how long have you known you had the Gift?" It was work to keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

"I always know."

"Oh." I waited for her to add something more, but she only sat back in her chair and interlaced her ringed fingers over her stomach. "Is it a family thing?"

"No."

"And so...why palm-reading?"

"That is my gift."

"All right, then." There had to be an easier way of losing a man, so I stood and thanked the seer, who barely acknowledged that I'd said anything. She just sat and played with the large silver hoop that ran through her earlobe, and watched me walk toward the exit.

I peered through the tent flaps before leaving, and outside, not two booths down on the midway was Jack. His back was to me, but I would know that green jacket and baseball cap—and that body—anywhere. I hesitated, wondering what I would see if he turned around and our eyes met. Would marks of sleepless nights be imprinted on his face? Or would his smile, that long absent smile from our early days, have returned?

"You miss him?"

Pulling the flaps closed behind me, I spun around and faced Madame Zenora, who still sat impassive at the table, her expression unreadable. She

continued—in perfect, unaccented English—before I could even voice my question. “You’re avoiding your ex.”

“How did you know that?” I asked.

“Some things you don’t have to be a fortune-teller to see.”

I shrugged. “If you say so.”

“You were married a long time?”

“Yeah. Long time.” I took a deep breath and tried to smile at her. “Hey, help me out here, okay?”

Zenora looked at me with her eyebrows raised in either amusement or contempt, I couldn’t tell which. I expected her to make some remark about me hiding from Jack, but she only pointed to the corner behind her palm-reading table. “There’s a back way. Behind the blue tapestry.”

“Thank you.” As I walked out into the sticky alley between the midway booths, the smell of funnel cakes and popcorn replaced the odor of incense and burnt tea from the gypsy’s domain, and with the fading odor, the thought of Madame Zenora also faded. I was thinking of Jack.

I didn’t see him as I wound my way through the maze of caramel apple stands and ring toss games to the parking lot, but I kept expecting him to appear from nowhere—to see his face suddenly beside me as if he’d been there all along, walking with me. He was good at doing that. And I couldn’t shake my thoughts of him even after I got home, which made it one of those nights where I regretted being alone in the king-sized bed, where I wrapped the blankets around myself, using them as a guard against the chill of emptiness. And I smoothed my fingers

between Jack's pillow and the cold sheets on his side of the bed until I felt my own warmth seeping into the cotton.

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For three months I hadn't seen Jack, not since he moved into the efficiency apartment across town. Some days I could barely remember the end of our marriage—only some of the cutting remarks remained, certain sly words, snide words, laced with frustration and insinuation—but I remembered him moving, his clothes and books thrown haphazardly in bags and boxes, crammed into the bed of his pick-up. He later returned for the 50-gallon fish tank, the only thing he insisted on keeping. After that, I only heard his voice on the answering machine before I deleted his messages.

I rarely returned his calls and I avoided meeting him whenever possible. We agreed that the marriage couldn't stand—too much hurt echoed and magnified between us, too much loss threatening to overwhelm us both. Still I hated that we had to separate after fifteen years together. At times, it was hard for me to remember that Jack, who understood me better than anyone, was now gone, too.

I hadn't expected to see him at the carnival. There was no reason why he should have been there, down by the Tilt-a-Whirl. Traveling attractions came through every year, and while half the town found its way to the fairgrounds during the carnival's stay, Jack and I had never gone, not once in all the years we were married. And today we both showed up alone. Weird. I had only gone because I prefer loneliness in crowds to loneliness alone, and I was tired of the

four walls of my house. Well, that and my brother suggested I might enjoy it, that I should try something new. He sounded earnest, eager that I should go. And then Jack... What would Madame Zenora call that? Coincidence? Fortune?

I couldn't stop thinking about it. Why had he gone? And how did the fortune-teller know? It was strange. The next day, I passed the fairgrounds on my way home from work, and though I wasn't dressed for it—straight skirt and heels—the lights and sounds called to me and I pulled a U-turn and drove into the lot. Madame Zenora sat upright when I entered her tent for the second time.

"Didn't see this coming, did you?" I asked.

She gave a forced smile and motioned for me to take a seat in the high-backed chair across from her. "Mara, yes?"

"Good memory," I said.

"A refreshing change is in your future."

"What?"

"Your fortune..."

"Oh right," I said. "Yeah, I know about that."

"You come for second opinion?"

I couldn't tell if it was sarcasm or not, but I sat down and the fortuneteller took my hand again in her own. She examined my palm closely and caressed the lines stretching across it, this time with her fingertips instead of her painted nails, the soothing, warm touch of skin against skin. "It look surprisingly the same." She looked up at me and wagged her finger in a fashion that reminded me of my grandmother. "But you should use better soap. More moisture."

"Yeah, all right." I pulled my hand away, then leaned back in my chair and crossed my arms over my chest. "I'll keep that in mind."

"So...need to dodge another man today?" She had dropped her accent again. "Popular, are we?"

"No, not really."

Zenora sank back in her own chair, interlaced her fingers, and waited for me to speak, apparently one of her habits, and a disconcerting one. I had paid twice to get in, and she should be the one to say something, maybe give a piece of advice or you know, a fortune. But Zenora only looked at me and waited. And I couldn't do it. Somewhere in the last few months I spent alone, or possibly sometime even before, I'd lost the ability for small talk. Probably the reason most of my friends had stopped calling.

We sat across from each other longer than was comfortable, only the tinny music of the carousel outside covering the silence, until I finally asked the question. "How did you know about my ex?"

"Lucky guess."

"I don't think so."

"An educated guess, then." She seemed uninterested in the conversation. "Reading people isn't hard."

"That's it, then?" I asked.

"What do you want to hear?"

"Nothing, forget it." I didn't know what I wanted from her; I only knew I didn't want to leave. She spoke to me straight—without the hesitation that

comes from not knowing what to say, and without pity in her voice. "You do anything else? Tarot, maybe?"

"Not since my daughter lost the Fool and the High Priestess in a rather impressive game of Seventy-Eight Pick-up. Sorry." Zenora smiled as she stood up. "Need the back way today?"

"No." I rose, straightened my skirt, and walked toward the exit.

"Hey, a freebie." She waited to say it until I was nearly gone, and I had to turn to face her. "The fortune. It may not be about Jack." She was playing again with her large earring.

"How did you know his name?"

"What else would it be?"

I froze. After a second, I cleared my throat and tried to speak, the words coming out in a near whisper. "You believe in names?"

"That's one of the stranger questions I've been asked."

"Well, do you? You know, they mean things. So are they...self-fulfilling prophecies? You become what you're named?"

"Hey lady," Zenora said, "I know I'm cheaper than a shrink and all, but maybe you should be talking to someone else."

It was my cue to leave, so I just nodded and readjusted my purse on my shoulder. "It was Jack who said it anyway. We needed to be careful what we named the baby." I didn't know why I said it. I hadn't talked to anyone about that, except Jack.

"What did you name it?"

"We didn't. Didn't need to. Not for any of them."

"And your name?" She squinted her eyes, as if thinking hard. "Mara means..."

"Bitter," I said, finishing the sentence for her. "It means bitter. Jack pointed that out, too."

Zenora had little to say to that, which was a nice change. She who always had the quick response was left dumb, and I walked out feeling...well, feeling quite bad. Getting the upper hand wasn't nearly as satisfying as I thought it would be. Instead, I wanted that final word from Zenora. She'd done it before—called out a benediction as I left the tent—but this time she said nothing. Before the flaps closed, I glanced back at the gypsy, who hadn't moved from her small table, waiting without sound or motion for me to clear the premises.

I ambled down the midway, past the barkers and booths and the flashing lights of the Ferris Wheel, which all now seemed more garish and fake than fanciful. I walked past stand after stand barely noticing anything until someone called my name. I turned to find my brother sitting bare-chested, flabby, and wet in a dunking booth. I didn't know Steve had run away and joined the circus.

"Two dollars to dump me in the tank," he said. "You know you've been waiting for it your whole life."

"What are you doing here?"

"Working. What's it look like?"

"Freezing is what it looks like."

Steve made some kind of retort, but his voice was overrun by the barker, telling me to pay up or move along.

"I'd better go," I said. "Call me, okay? We'll talk about your new career."

"I get off in 20 minutes. Why don't you come back?"

Although I knew it wasn't late and I had no plans, I found myself checking my watch. Steve saw me do it and didn't roll his eyes, though I expected he knew I had nothing on my agenda. "Yeah, all right," I said. "I'll see you in a bit."

It wasn't worth walking to my car and back, so I bought tickets and rode the Ferris wheel a few times. The ride loses much of its magic when you're alone, but still I liked the night wind blowing across my cheeks and through my hair. A caress from nature, if from no one else. Then I went to meet my little brother.

He was clothed and dry when I returned, and in good spirits. "Not as nice as a night swim, but you know, it is brisk and refreshing." That's Steven. A bright side of life type of guy, despite his less than inspiring existence. Thirty-seven and working in a dunking booth. He wasn't exactly the champion his name would imply, but I held him as hope that our parents just got names wrong.

"I'm sure it is." I gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. "How are you?"

Steve smiled and caught my hand. "I'm all right. You?"

"Yeah, just fine. So, when'd get you this job?"

"It's temp work obviously." Steve squeezed my hand and released it as we started walking toward the parking lot. "But I get to eat this month."

"Always a good thing."

"Yes it is," Steve agreed. "Where have you been holing up, Mara? I haven't seen you in ages."

"Been busy," I responded. "You know..."

"Everything's okay, then?"

"Yeah."

There was a pause, then Steve stopped walking and turned to face me.

"Well, if you need anything, you know you can call me, right?"

I couldn't fathom what in the wide world I could possibly need from Steve. "What?" I asked.

"You know, like fixing the sink or something." He shrugged and started walking again.

"What?" I asked again.

He dropped his voice so that he was barely audible over the noise of the carnival. "Now that the divorce is final."

"Oh God," I said. The last time I'd talked to Steve, Jack and I were only separated. No paper had entered the equation. "How'd you know?"

"I saw Jack."

"Oh." I raked my fingers through my hair. "You just ran into him and he felt the need to tell you that?"

"Not really, no."

"No?" I could feel my voice rising, despite my intentions.

"Mara, don't do this. Come on." Steve was shaking his head. "Jeez, you try to be nice to someone, and look what happens."

"Sorry. I'm sorry." I kicked a pebble down the pathway and watched it ricochet off the corner of the cotton candy booth. "Thank you for the offer, but I'm fine. Where we going?"

Steve's eyes stayed on the stone I'd kicked, then he looked up and smiled. "You feel like coffee? I know a great little roasting company."

The coffee house, several blocks down, was bright, warm, and more bustling than the fairgrounds. Wooden tables were crammed into the corners and sprawled out the door to the sidewalk, all of them filled with espresso-laden denizens with paper cups.

We split up, me joining the queue of caffeine addicts at the counter and Steve trying to grab a table. By the time our order was ready, my brother had found a seat near the back wall, and was chatting with a pony-tailed young woman in overalls who had joined him. My brother, a pushover for a cute girl, even when out with his sister. I collected our coffee from the barista and started to wend my way through the maze of tables toward Steve, ready to set his cup down and leave the store with my mocha. Seeing Steven with someone certainly wasn't going to make me feel better about myself.

"No," Steve was saying, his voice loud over the conversations around him. "It's just my sister."

He knew her. Of course, he knew her. And maybe I should have known her, too—she looked familiar, something about the face or the eyes—but I couldn't place her. An ex-girlfriend probably. He managed to somehow stay friends with most of them.

"Just your sister?" I asked.

At my voice, the girl turned and gave me a long once-over before turning back to Steve. *"This her?"*

Steve gathered his coffee from me, and took a drink before answering. *"Yeah. This is—"*

"Mara," she said.

"Have we met?"

"This is Amy, a friend of mine from the fair," Steve said.

"Nice to meet you." As I clasped her out-stretched hand in mine, everything fell into place. I knew where I'd seen her before, where I'd heard her speak. Zenora looked much younger without her make-up, turban, and sunburst fingernails.

"Amy, is it?" I said.

"Sometimes." She looked amused. *"Don't worry. I won't blow your cover. Have a seat."*

I pulled up a wooden chair and sat down between my brother and his friend. Despite the extra person and the different table and decor, the whole set-

up was uncomfortably reminiscent of the fortune-teller's tent. I put my hands in my lap and turned to Steve, trying to shake the feeling. "So, how you been?"

"Can't complain," he said. "By the way, Mom's worried about you."

Not what I wanted to hear, not the conversation I wanted to have.

"I'm fine," I said.

"You should call her," Steve said.

"I will." I cleared my throat and changed the subject. "So, Amy. How long have you worked at the carnival?"

"I work it every year."

"But you don't travel with it."

"No."

"Amy's a palm reader," Steve said. "She works in the shop down on Oak Street."

"That so?"

"If you know anyone in that area," Amy began, "that you need to avoid, feel free to drop in."

"Yeah, I'll do that."

Steve didn't catch the tone of the comment. "Jack's down in that part of town now, isn't he?"

"Great," Amy said. "Business will be booming."

I shot my brother a look of warning. "Steve?"

"Sorry." He took another long drink, tipping his paper cup high into the air, then set down it with a hollow thunk in the middle of the table. I'd barely taken two sips from mine.

Amy picked up his cup and pulled the lid off. "Read your grounds?"

"Okay."

"You read coffee grounds?" I asked.

"Sure, why not? Modern-day tea leaves."

"I would've thought that tea leaves were the modern-day tea leaves," I said.

"And that's why *I'm* the professional." Amy turned the cup to one side.

"Actually, neither's all that great anymore. Very little in the bottom these days."

Nobody said anything else while the fortune-teller studied the dregs, tilting the container first to the right, then to the left. "Well," she said at last.

"It's a mixed outlook. You may need to look for new work, but there's a possibility for a new relationship. Or a rekindling of an old one."

"Wow, going out on a limb, are we?" I said.

"Let her read yours," Steve said.

I sloshed the mocha in my cup. "Sorry, still full."

"No matter." Amy's voice changed into Zenora's. "I have the gift. I see anyway."

"I bet you do."

She motioned for me to hand it over. "No need so cynical. Pass the cup."

"All right." I slid my coffee over the wooden table. "Go for it."

Amy didn't even take off the lid. She sniffed the coffee through the plastic cover, and then holding the cup by the rim, she agitated the liquid in the container until a blip of mocha perked out of the drinking hole. Then she set it back on the table and eyed it suspiciously, slouching down so that she was at eye level with the top edge.

I turned to say something to Steve, but he was also staring at the cup, his chin nearly resting on the table. They both stayed like that for longer than was comfortable. I glanced around the room, but the other customers, too involved in their own coffee and conversation, didn't to notice the weirdos waiting for a cup of joe to talk to them.

"Well," I said. "Can I drink this before it gets cold?"

Amy straightened and pushed the cup back at me. "Sure."

I made a point of taking a sip before asking. "So?"

"A ref—"

"Swear to God, if you say anything about a refreshing change, I will cold-cock you."

"She'll do it, too," Steve laughed. "I can testify to that."

Amy gave me a smile—one I couldn't quite decipher—and continued. "A reflection shows only what has been. Look beyond the mirror for the future."

"Did you just channel the Dalai Lama for that?"

"No, I came up with it on my own. But it is sorta Zen, isn't it?"

I raised my cup. "Cheers."

"Good on ya," Amy said and clinked (as well as paper cups can) her drink against mine. Steve joined the toast with his empty container and we all drank, Steve patting the bottom of his cup to get the last drop.

"Careful there," I said. "You'll change your fortune."

Steve shrugged. "It's okay. It was nothing new."

"Fortunes often aren't," Amy said.

"No kidding?" I asked with mock sincerity. "Why's that?"

Amy turned to me with a frown. "I don't criticize what *you* do for a living."

"Why would you?"

"You're not above reproach just because you sit behind desk instead of a table."

"And you know this by looking at my hands?"

Amy shifted in her seat so that she was looking directly at me. "Look, I know what you think of me. I see it in your eyes. You think I'm a pathetic white girl playing gypsy and trying to cheat people out of a buck. But I'm not the fake here."

"Of course you're not," I said. "Why would I think that?"

She continued without acknowledging the sarcasm. "Listen, I'm not the one who pretends I'm going to get my man back. I'm not the one who lives in my own thoughts of how it was years ago. I'm not fooling myself about what's in the past and what's ahead and how they're not the same."

I knew if I let myself use my voice, I'd yell. Instead, I took a steadying breath, held it for a three count, and exhaled slowly. Then, leaning across the table, I met Zenora's eye and whispered. "You don't know me at all."

"If you say so." Her voice was as quiet as mine.

I pushed myself up from the table and tousled Steve's hair a bit more roughly than I meant to as I started to move past him. He hadn't said anything through this exchange, just watched in silent curiosity. "I'll call you, okay?"

Amy grabbed my sleeve before Steve said anything. "Mara," she said. "Jack is gone. You couldn't have what you wanted together, and that's not going to change. It's the reason you divorced. Move on."

I yanked my arm away from her. "Who have you been talking to?"

She said nothing, and I turned to my brother, who was looking down again into his empty coffee cup. "You told her all this? Why? Why would you do that?"

"Mara, I didn't."

"Don't lie. You're not very good at it."

"I'm not lying. I never even mentioned you. I swear." He looked me in the eye, and I could tell by his face that Steve, poor honest Steve, was telling the truth. But I had nothing more to say, and so I turned and walked off, throwing my half-full cup of mocha in the trashcan by the door.

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The palmist shop on Oak Street looked quite different from the tent at the carnival. It was converted from an old Victorian, but painted in muted tones

with modest gables and trim, and the artwork on the walls didn't show a single sign of the zodiac. No tapestries, only a vaguely Shakespearean quotation framed and written in calligraphy.

*And since you know you cannot see yourself,
so well as by reflection, I, your glass,
will show you that of yourself,
which you do not yet know.*

Amy entered from another room when she heard the door chime. Her blonde hair dusted her shoulders, and she was wearing a simple short-sleeved sweater and chinos. She stopped short when she saw who had come through the door. I couldn't blame her. I wouldn't have expected to see me a week after that last conversation, particularly not in this place of business.

"Hi," I said.

"What do you want, Mara?"

"Just to talk."

She began to play with her earring, a small diamond stud. "I somehow doubt that's true."

"You know, I couldn't figure it out," I said. "How you knew all that stuff, especially since Steven didn't tell you."

"And you think Jack did."

"Didn't he?"

Amy took her seat and gestured for me to do the same. "No," she said.
"He didn't."

"But you know him."

"A little."

I took a deep breath and pulled my hair back from my face. "You know, it's the littlest things. I thought he might have met someone, but..."

I stopped, and she did nothing but wait for me to continue, her arms crossed in front of her. "Like I said, the littlest things. I had to go by his apartment the other day." I opened my hand and dropped a painted acrylic fingernail onto the table. It had a gold sunburst on a midnight blue background.
"No wonder you knew."

Amy didn't move, didn't blink. "You're his ex, right?"

"Sorry?" I asked.

"As in divorced? Not married anymore?"

I looked away. It always came back to that. After a string of unnamed children, I'd lost a man. Jack.

"Mara, listen to me," Amy said. "It's not about your name, or your parents who gave it to you or even Jack who pointed it out. It's about you thinking too long about what could have been. It wasn't. It isn't. It won't be."

She stopped talking and we sat in silence. This time I was determined not to say anything no matter how long she waited, so I stared at the artwork on the walls. After a while she spoke again, her voice quiet. It was our only

conversation, I realized, that hadn't immediately fallen into sarcasm. "I know you don't want to hear it from me, but that's what I see."

I had come to confront her, and now had nothing to say. She was right—I had no claim on Jack, despite our past, despite what I wished was true. Zenora hadn't told me she knew my ex-husband, but she had played fair with me, listening and giving advice like no one else had in months. She'd met my eye and talked to me without embarrassment, which was change from my other friends and colleagues who'd learned that Jack and I had split.

I looked up at her and reached out across the table. "What other fortune can you tell?" I asked. She took my hand in hers and held it.

All the Keys You Need

Three times I asked Kit to marry me, and three times she turned me down. Her eyes flickered in amusement the third time, as if it were a game, a sort of dance that we did every now and then. “Professor Carson, you know I couldn’t take your name.”

“I’ll change it,” I said. “How about Marlowe?”

And she had laughed, like I knew she would, and we went out for coffee without saying anything more. I had answered her in kind, trying to make light of it all, but I had been serious. The ring was in my pocket. And I would have changed my name—even taken hers—if it meant she’d be mine. I think she knew that and only gave the excuse to avoid speaking the other reasons again. It’d all been said before and nothing had changed.

The dismissals, though, did little to alter our relationship, and we were good friends for a long time—fifteen years, I guess—until her death. We went to lectures and readings together, discussed communication theory over Italian food, and laughed so hard sometimes that she started coughing. She had a spark none of the other students had, none of the faculty either, something I couldn’t put into words. No rhetorical tools could help me with that one.

That little freshman in the back of my classroom, silent and reserved when she bothered to show up, who barely seemed interested in what I was saying, outdid them all in the end. I wouldn’t have guessed from that first semester. She didn’t do the work, and I failed her. But her name graced my roster the

following term—Intro to Public Speaking—and there, in the cramped, dirty room of a state university I met Kit. Until she gave her first speech, I wasn't sure she had a voice. But when she started to talk, I looked up from my grade sheet and stared at her over my reading glasses. She was amazing, mesmerizing and I just sat, making no notes, and let her words come to me in the back of the classroom. That was the beginning.

The end came with my own speech, a request from Kit, relayed by her mother, that I give the eulogy. I never had a harder time standing up in front of people, never had such a loss for words. I was by no means an advertisement for my class; I think I would have failed myself. But how could I articulate what we rarely said, or condense our history, or more importantly, her life into a few words? Regardless, everyone thanked me afterward, saying it was fitting that I gave the memorial, telling me they always thought of me as a son, a brother, one of the family.

I was the only non-family member mentioned in her will, a fact that surprised me more than anyone. I hadn't expected anything, mostly because she never had much. And because I didn't think it right to expect someone who refused me during her life to give me something in death. But Kit had always done the unexpected, this time by giving me her desk, which now stands in my living room, a small, dark presence in the corner.

Early on Saturday afternoon, my sister pounds on the front door. She hasn't called, but I know it's her from the knock and the fact that she doesn't go

away. I pull myself out of bed, into a T-shirt and jeans, and stumble to the living room.

Cheryl has a brown paper sack of groceries and a small stack of books in her hand. "Hey." She sets her load down just inside the door, leans in and kisses me on my cheek, only to scrub her lips afterward with her fingertips.

"Whatcha got there? Four days growth?"

"Yeah, about."

"I brought your books back," she says, pointing at her excuse for coming over. "And I brought you lunch. How ya doing?"

"I'm all right," I say.

Cheryl gives me a once-over, taking in my rumpled clothes and messy hair, and probably the whole of the apartment.

"It's Saturday." I say it as an explanation.

"From the look of things, it's been Saturday for about a week now." She makes her way through the living room to the kitchen and begins to unload the grocery bag, thankfully without commenting on the lack of everything but beer and mustard in the fridge. Or the mound of dishes in the sink. But for once, I don't feel like apologizing for the state of my apartment. If I'd known she was coming, I might have cleaned, but she should know this is what happens if she shows up unannounced.

"Danny?" Cheryl holds an envelope out to me. "Mom thought you might want these."

I don't like it when her voice takes a gentle turn; it usually means something bad. That she called me "Danny" like I was six years old doesn't make me feel any better. I take the envelope and open it, and inside are pictures of me and Kit. They span all kinds of events—birthdays, Fourth of July cookouts, even her college graduation, which startles me. I thought we had been more discreet than that, but there she is, beaming in her cap and gown, my arm around her waist. Mom has labeled it *Dan with student*. I shuffle through the other pictures, surprised to see how often Kit was with me, how many times she was the one beside me at the party. It always seemed I never saw her as much as I wanted.

"God, I look young." I give a short laugh and drop the pictures on the counter.

Cheryl glances down at the photos and lets her eyes linger on them before turning to me with a strange smile. "You know, I always wondered. How come you never married?"

"I did marry."

"No," Cheryl gives me a look. "Why didn't you marry Kit?"

With my mother, I might have feigned surprise and told her again the old line—we were only friends—but I think Cheryl, though she never said anything, always understood that our feelings went deeper. And not having to pretend is suddenly a relief. "Which time?" I ask.

"What?"

“Never mind.” I shake my head and sink into a kitchen chair, crossing my arms against my chest, and echo the old joke. “She didn’t want to be Kit Carson.”

“Well, you know, it’s a hard thing to live up to. Burning Indians out of house and home.” Cheryl hands me a glass of water and sets two plates of food on the table. “Are you sure about that? Maybe you should have asked her.”

I say nothing, but catch Cheryl’s eye and hold it.

“I’m sorry, Danny. I didn’t know.”

I shrug in response, and then draw a breath. Since the funeral, I have sat in my apartment staring at Kit’s desk, saying nothing about her to anyone, just like all the years I held my tongue, believing that if I talked of her only as a friend, she would eventually become just that. I never spoke of her any other way, not to my mom, not to my sister, and certainly not to my ex-wife. But now that it is said, I want to say something more, at least to Cheryl.

“I didn’t care that she was sick,” I start. “I didn’t care about having kids, and I kept telling her that, but she...”

I look away, my eyes wandering to the other room, to the desk. Its solid oak construction made it too heavy for one inexperienced mover to manage, and so it’s wedged at a crooked angle against the far wall. I left it that way, still strapped to the dolly, and I figured I’d maneuver it after I caught my breath. That was two weeks ago. Every time I’m in the living room or kitchen, I stare at it, thinking I should do something with it—at least open it, if nothing else.

I knew the piece of furniture well—a rickety secretary, the patina nearly black with age, and the legs separating themselves from the chest. That antique was either the most or least valuable thing in Kit’s house, and I suspected it was the latter. Why Kit wrote at it, I never knew, but she did, and often. Nearly every time I went over, she was locking the drop-down lid back into place just as I entered her room. She would never tell me what was in it.

Now that the desk is mine, I don’t want to find out. Her secrets were trapped in oak so long, I fear to release them. Perhaps they should age a bit more, like wine in the cask.

Besides, I don’t have the key. Gone, Kit’s mom told me, couldn’t find it anywhere. I suspect Kit herself hid it, only to keep the desk a mystery for a little longer. One last obstacle to finding out what’s inside, a final game for us to play. I can nearly feel Kit smirking at me from beyond the grave, which makes part of me want to leave it locked forever.

And part of me fears what tokens of our relationship she might have placed there. The report card from the semester I failed her. The necklace she wouldn’t accept and I wouldn’t take back. Or perhaps the old cloth-covered journal that she knew I’d already read. Regret, more than anything, makes me leave the desk untouched day after day.

I sigh and turn back to Cheryl who lets me trail off, careful not to force the conversation. She sits beside me now at the table, drinking her glass of water and waiting for me to finish what I was saying. She’s never heard this story, at least not from me, but I don’t know that I can tell it properly. I have a Ph.D. in

Communications and have taught public speaking for sixteen years—and can’t talk worth a damn without a podium and a microphone. Despite what anyone tells you, it’s private speaking that’s a bitch.

“I hadn’t seen her in months,” I say after a while. “I didn’t know about the cancer. Trips in and out of the hospital the whole time I knew her, a constant fight but she always won, and this new thing comes in and...and that’s it. She’d always been sick. She didn’t tell me she was dying.”

“She probably didn’t want you to see her like that,” Cheryl says.

“Maybe,” I say, but I don’t believe it. I’d been with her through too many porphyric attacks, spent too many nights beside her hospital bed for that. I’d watched Kit bracing herself against waves of nausea and pain—her face sweat-covered and drawn, her fingers hardening against her stomach. I’d seen her hands bruised and blackened from inexperienced nurses fumbling with the I.V. And how many times had she sat in my classroom with her head down on the desk, barely moving? Of course, being fresh out of graduate school, full of more theory than understanding, I mistook illness for apathy. The signs looked so much the same in those days, a fact Kit long ago forgave, even if I didn’t. I hadn’t noticed the medic alert bracelet, and I thought she was simply bored until she collapsed one day outside my office.

“She looked awful,” I say to Cheryl. “It must have been bad, and no one called me.”

“What would you have done?” she asks.

I'm not looking at my sister, instead tracing the grain lines in the table with my thumb. "Gone over."

"You could have done that anyway. Why did you need a phone call?"

And that's the one question...of all the ones I've thrown at myself since her death, that's the one I can't answer. True, she hadn't told me she was dying. No one in her family, either, called to tell me how sick the chemo made her, and how, not being able to keep anything down, she'd needed more glucose drips inserted in her veins in those last few months than in entire three years previous. But neither had I called her, or dropped by, or let her have another word of the conversation. We'd broken contact before—after my first proposal, right before my marriage and immediately following its demise—but never for so long.

The last time I saw her, I knocked on the front door and her mother greeted me with a hug and told me Kit was in her bedroom. I walked down the long hallway to the end and turned into her spare, yellow room. Except for the border of daffodils near the ceiling, it had little decoration, no pictures on the walls, no mirror. Only her bed, the ancient oak desk, and a sagging bookcase near the window. Kit looked up at me as she locked the lid of the secretary into place, and I kissed her on the forehead.

"Hey," I said. "How are you?"

"Good. I have something for you." She opened her hands, producing a small gift-wrapped box. "Happy birthday."

"You know it's not my birthday."

"Yeah, I know." She was smiling at me. "Open it."

I tugged on the ribbon and pulled the lid off the box. "A keychain?"

She nodded, still looking at me expectantly.

"Thanks," I said. It looked well crafted, a gold ring with thick key-shaped fob, but I doubted I would use it. I had only three keys—to my office, to my apartment, and to the car—and they fit nicely on the ring I already carried. "It's nice. Now I just need keys."

"You have keys." Kit took a mock-reproving tone. "You have all the ones you need."

"Mostly," I said. "But not all the ones I want." I said it as just something to say, but somehow it came out accusing.

The smile faded from her lips. "Daniel, don't."

"I didn't say anything."

"Yeah, I'm sure you meant nothing by it."

I exhaled hard. "Sorry."

"Jesus, why do you do that?" Kit stood up from the desk chair. "I do something nice and you turn it on me."

"At least I didn't try to give it back."

She hadn't expected that, no more than I had expected to say it, and it took her a second to respond. "The necklace? You're still upset about that?" Kit dropped her voice so she couldn't be heard outside her room. "Dammit, Daniel."

Your divorce wasn't even final and you were giving me jewelry. What was I supposed to do?"

"It wasn't a ring." My words were equally low.

"As if that makes a difference."

"I think it makes a huge difference."

Kit just glared at me for a moment, then moved away and sat down on her bed. Neither of us said anything, the silence thick in the yellow room until I heard her take a sharp breath. I looked over. Her arms crossed in front of her, she was pushing against her abdomen and she suddenly looked pale.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Yeah." But she didn't look up.

I knelt beside her, now drained of anger, and smoothed her hair back from her cheek. "Kit? Are you having an attack? Come on, look at me."

She turned toward me for only a second so I could see her face before she slipped into a prone position on the bed. "No, it's something else. But I'm not feeling too good. Give me a minute, okay?"

I nodded and shifted to the desk chair. I could tell it was one of those times when she didn't want me hovering, touching or even looking at her, so I sat hunched over, with my chin in hands, watching the shadow patterns of the tree outside the window wave across the hardwood floor. It seemed I stayed like that forever.

"Daniel?"

I looked up. "You need to go in?"

"No." Kit shook her head. Her body was now much more relaxed, resting on the blankets rather than tensed against them. Whatever had come over her had passed. "But you should go home."

"I can't leave you like this," I said.

"I'm all right. And my parents are here." She rolled on to her side to look at me. It seemed like she was picking her next words carefully. "What do you want, really, in all this?"

"I want you." I said it without thinking, speaking the simple truth for the first time in years. We'd played so many games—pretended the attraction wasn't there while she studied in my department, joked about cradle-robbing though she was only seven years my junior, and made believe marriage to someone else would change things. And we talked around our relationship, made caustic remarks, and covered our feelings in words. How many times had I twisted the rhetorical tools, the things I taught students every day, to hide myself, protect myself, bury myself in language? And with one simple sentence, I stripped all of it away, something I'd not done since the devastating first proposal.

"You don't want this," she said. "Nobody wants a wife who knows the hospital staff better than her family."

The old argument. And next up would be the one about children—how we couldn't have them because pregnancy would make her worse, and because she could pass her disorder to her children.

"I don't care about that. I'm there anyway. Maybe they'd give me less hassle about visiting hours if we were married." I rubbed my eyes with the back of my hand. "I just want to wake up beside you, hear your secrets."

"I don't have any secrets, Daniel. I don't know why you always think I do."

She was missing the point, and I didn't have anything more to say so I got to my feet, leaning heavily against the locked secretary in the process, and started to walk out.

"Take the keychain," she called.

I was in the doorway already when her voice reached me, and I didn't bother to turn. "I don't need it. I have one already."

She grabbed me by the sleeve and pulled me back into the room. Then she pressed the keychain into my palm and closed my fingers around it. "You'll want it someday."

"Yeah," I said, "like you'll want jewelry." It was the last thing I would say to her. I walked out, still feeling her fingers closed around my fist, the thick fob heavy in my hand.

"Dan?" I feel Cheryl's grip on my shoulder and look over at her. "You okay?"

I nod, a little bit confused. I don't remember what we'd been talking about.

"You gonna eat anything or should I just put it away?" She's already clearing her own dishes to the sink and rinsing them. My plate is untouched.

"Don't worry about the dishes. I'll do them."

"Unlikely." Cheryl gives an amused snort, but turns off the tap. "Well, you need anything else? You want me to help you move that desk?"

I look over at the secretary shoved askance into the corner, the dark wood swallowing the light around it. "No."

My sister walks over and touches the wood lightly, her fingers following the carvings on the lid. "Doesn't really go with the rest of your stuff," she said, "but it's a nice piece. Look at the lock on it. Big keyhole, must've taken a thick key." Cheryl puts her eye to the desk, trying to peer inside. "You call a locksmith yet?"

A thick key. "Not—not yet."

"You know, you might be able to jimmy it. Get a screwdriver in there or something."

Something like a thick key. *You may want it someday*, she'd said and pushed it into my hand. Damn it. It had never looked like anything other than a decoration. "It's a worth a try, at least," Cheryl says, "save you some money. You got a flathead?"

"What?"

"Screwdriver. You know." She makes a twisting motion with her wrist.

"A flathead."

"Slotted," I say. I rub my eyes and sigh. "Yeah, I'll get it later."

Something in my voice makes Cheryl stop, and she gazes back at me for longer than is comfortable, then walks over and kisses me on the cheek. "I think I'd better go. Take care of yourself, okay?"

I nod.

"Shave, at least. Promise me that."

"I will."

And Cheryl leaves, telling me she'll call in a few days and shutting the door behind her. I pick the keychain up from the end table where it's been sitting since I brought it home, and I blow the dust off. It's the right shape, the right size. I turn it over in my hands. Shiny, gold, a fair amount of heft. I don't know when she had it cast. It can't be the original.

I close my hand on it tight, feeling the teeth bite against my palm, and hold it there as long as I can. It leaves red marks, but doesn't break the skin. I clench it again. She must have known then, if she had the key made, and she'd already decided to give me the desk. *You have all the keys you need.*

I open my hand and look again at the key. It still looks like a keychain fob to me but regardless, I take it to the secretary, that dark specter in my living room. I hesitate before loosening the straps to the dolly and pulling them away, but finally, I insert the key. It turns easily in the lock, and the bolt slides back. My hands are shaking as I pull the lid down, and when it lodges into place I can barely breathe. Inside is the velvet box with the diamond necklace. Other than that, as I feared, the desk is empty.