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A Three Dimensional Microphysiologic Liver Model For Toxicity Testing

Lindsay Mckinney Miller
University of Alabama at Birmingham

NIGHT COMES EARLY TO THE VALLEY

By

CAITLIN MURPHREE MILLER

JAMES BRAZIEL, COMMITTEE CHAIR
ALISON CHAPMAN
KERRY MADDEN

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CAITLIN MURPHREE MILLER

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH/CREATIVE WRITING

ABSTRACT

Night Comes Early to the Valley is a collection of short stories about vulnerable, flawed people trying to discover the best way to live their lives. They are well-meaning mothers, fathers, children, and lovers, yet all struggle to balance the fulfillment of their personal responsibilities with the realization of their deepest individual desires. The collection highlights characters who are desperate to atone for their mistakes, build brighter futures, and live up to the expectations of their loved ones—only to realize, over time, that the most formidable judge they'll ever face is their own conscience.

…
I cannot interpret for you this collection
Of memories. You will live your own life, and contrive
The language of your own heart, but let that conversation,
In the last analysis, be always of whatever truth you would live.

For fire flames but in the heart of a colder fire.
All voice is but echo caught from a soundless voice.
Height is not deprivation of valley, nor defect of desire,
But defines, for the fortunate, that joy in which all joys should rejoice.

"To A Little Girl, One Year Old, In A Ruined Fortress"
Promises: Poems, 1954-1956*, 1957*
Robert Penn Warren

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It Glitters, Will Fall

The day arrived, as she knew it eventually would, when Sylvia's son decided he wanted to play football. It was a natural decision—obvious, even—but when Mack placed the manila instructional envelope in his mother's hands one night just before he disappeared into some other part of the house, she found she couldn't hide her displeasure. She sat down and spread its contents out on the kitchen table as their dinner burned on the kitchen range.

"Richard," she called her husband, her voice lined with a dark, sharp edge—a particular sharpness that she'd noticed more and more frequently lately. A thing she didn't like and couldn't place.

"What is it?" he said from his chair in the den. When she didn't respond, she heard Richard sigh, and ease himself up—slowly, ever slowly, moving sluggishly enough to both show his annoyance and suggest that she was taking his day from bad to worse. She looked up as his figure darkened the kitchen doorway.

Even in his early fifties, her husband was tall and slim, with well-trimmed hair that grayed at his temples in the kind of distinguished way that Sylvia envied. In the wall mirror beside the door she caught a glimpse of her own appearance—disheveled, dark hair veined with wiry grays and frazzled like an old woman's, her office clothes wrinkled and sweat-damp beneath her apron. She raised an automatic arm and smoothed her crown with the palm of one hand. It struck her with a dull pang of despair that she looked exactly like her own mother did when she, too, had reached the age of 48, but her mother had already finished with child-rearing by then.

Sylvia blinked at her husband. “Did you know that Mack signed up for peewee football this year?”

He crossed his arms and leaned into the doorframe.

“Where? At school?”

“It’s not sponsored by the school, exactly, but they must have posted signups somewhere.” She gestured at the papers in front of her. “He brought this packet home today, with all the forms they want us to sign. Do you know how he cooked this idea up in the first place?

Richard shook his head. “We’ve never discussed it.”

“Do you think your dad talked him into it?” Richard’s father, Dit, was a retired high-school football coach. The man lived and breathed football, and had for the last forty years.

“He wouldn’t have done that, not without talking to us first. Maybe Mack just saw the sign-ups and caught a wild hair.”

“I don’t like it, Richard. I don’t want him playing. We’ve talked about this, plenty of times. He’s only in fourth grade—way too young to be playing football.”

“And we agree in a fundamental sense,” Richard shrugged. “But really—it’s just a peewee league. Maybe it’s not such a big deal for him to play now, rather than later. Get it out of his system.” He picked up a piece of something on the kitchen floor, flicking it into the trash. “Their padding probably weighs more than they do—there’s not many ways to get hurt.”

Sylvia stood up abruptly to scrape the burning chicken cutlets off the bottom of her pan. “But what kind of standard does it set?” she said to her husband over her shoulder. “He’s not even in middle school, but he’s not far from it. Then there’s high school. What if—God forbid—

he's actually good at football? I want him to be focused and make good grades, not get soft brain syndrome—or whatever it's called—at the age of ten."

Richard rolled his eyes. "He's not going to get CTE. It takes a hell of a lot more than peewee ball to get that. Sounds to me like you've been listening to too much NPR."

"Don't patronize, Richard. I just don't want to get him hooked on a sport he can't play more than a few years."

"Dad coached me in peewee when I was his age, and it was plenty safe then. We can—and definitely should—put limits on it, and I agree with you about high school and college. But I can't see that peewee ball would hurt anything." Richard rubbed his face with one hand, leaving dark red marks down his cheeks. "Frankly, I'm just glad he's showing some interest in something. It's a positive step, and maybe we should let him give it a shot if he's got the guts to go sign himself up like that. Things have been so tough for him lately. And, hell—he might even make a friend or two along the way."

They stared hard at one another, Sylvia with her hand propped on one hip, leaning against the stove, Richard holding his ground in the doorway. She thought about how he had stopped coming into the kitchen to sit with her while she cooked—how he'd started hovering around the outskirts of their old routines, somehow creating new routines that she wasn't a part of anymore. They were a solar system: lunar in their natures, pulling and pushing at the same time, orbiting one another like two soft, aging, warm-blooded planets.

Eventually, Sylvia gave in. Richard was a master at convincing her to just *try* something, and it was because she was a particularly open and reasonable woman—she still believed that about herself—that she always gave in. Their discussion that night pointed back to the many

discussions like this they had had before Mack was even born—in bed, late at night, with Richard's hand resting on the soft arch of Sylvia's stomach as the thing inside twisted and danced.

"What if he just wants to play football, and knock up teenage girls, and smoke weed all the time?" she'd asked, her eyes looking through the darkness at the ceiling. Richard had murmured to her in his half-sleep that their child wouldn't do anything of the sort—they'd raise him differently than their parents had raised them. They both had advanced degrees, for God's sake.

She worried so much, then—and she still did, even now. When they found out she was pregnant, Sylvia and Richard were on the older end of the first-time parenthood spectrum—she had been about to turn 39 when Mack was born; Richard, 44—and they gripped one another at night as their child tenuously bloomed in the narrow space between them. Their final round of in vitro had finally taken. Separately they pleaded with the universe—with whatever force held the balance in its hands, God or something else—that this one would stick, and make it all the way to join them on the other side. Sylvia had already suffered through three miscarriages, one of which had died in the eighth month of her pregnancy, when she was feeling huge and swollen and vulnerable in the most terrible way imaginable. She had delivered with the knowledge that it was already gone—a stillborn. After trying for three more years, they had nearly given up—on a child, a family, and possibly each other. Then Mack entered their lives, dragging them back together with the force of his tiny, vulnerable existence.

Part of the problem, of course, stemmed from the fact that they had waited to start a family. Sylvia and Richard considered themselves a highly modern couple from the start, and when they met and moved in together in Durham, North Carolina, they were both in their thirties

and unprepared to sacrifice any part of their professional dreams to have children. Sylvia, at thirty-two, was just beginning her Ph.D. program in clinical psychology; Richard was an assistant history professor at Duke, still in the infant stages of his long, arduous, self-punishing journey towards tenure. They wanted to be together, but also wanted to meet their individual goals, which to Sylvia meant that they could have nothing between them—not even a pet goldfish—that might impede their progress. The years seemed to stretch out before them like an open road, the horizon hazy yet full of endless possibility.

Sylvia's family was supportive of their decision, for the most part. Her parents lived in northern Maryland, and they, too, had not married until later in life. Richard's parents, on the other hand, were more traditional, and considerably more anxious for grandchildren. They made it clear that while they loved Richard and Sylvia, they did not approve of their "liberal" life choices. Dit, Richard's father, had been a high-school football coach in tiny Cary, North Carolina for the length of his son's life. Richard hadn't been as athletic as Dit would have hoped, but Richard worked hard, and even played a year at Elon University before quitting football altogether. Richard confessed to Sylvia that he only ever cared about football because his father loved it; his father's pride was a palpable thing. In college, however, the sweltering August practices and unrelenting abuse of the coaches ended his romance with the sport. Now, Richard occasionally watched games on television and always attended his father's games when he was in town, but otherwise devoted himself to academia. He joked that he was a "football pacifist"—a respectful yet purposefully detached observer. He was an outsider with insider knowledge, he often said.

Mack had football practices two days a week—on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. Richard had to teach an afternoon class on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and when Sylvia brought this conflict up with him the week before Mack's spring season started, he merely smiled in that cool, detached way she knew so well. Like he had known it all along.

"Well, I guess you'll just have to take him, then."

"Are you serious? For Christ's sake, Richard. If you wanted Mack to 'give it a shot,' you should at least be there for support."

"Is there something wrong with his mother being there to support him, too?"

"I don't know anything about football. Nothing, zilch. How will I get all that equipment on him? I don't even know what goes where. What if I humiliate him in front of the other kids?"

"Look, I can't be there. But you can. I'll show you how to get his gear on the first time, and I trust you can take it from there. All his games are on Saturdays, so I'll certainly be at every one of those."

"Fine," Sylvia said tightly, the dark edge in her voice again. "That's just fine. I'm glad you got all worked up about this, and now you're hardly involved at all. This is just great."

Richard gave his wife a hard, warning look. He spoke slowly. "You are very fortunate to have a practice where you can set your own hours, Sylvia. That's all I'll say. I'm not going to engage with you about this, though, because there's nothing we can do to change it."

"How about he not play at all? We'll get him an oboe or something. Piano lessons—something that doesn't involve him getting knocked around like a Ping-Pong ball." Richard walked over to the foot of the back staircase, where he called out to his son. When Mack appeared, Richard reached out to ruffle his dark hair.

"Alright, Mackie my man," he said. "Go grab your football gear. It's in the garage, in front of Mom's Sequoia. We're going to show your old lady how a real football star gets his uniform on."

Football was not a part of Sylvia's life growing up. In Maryland it was pro football or nothing, and her parents didn't care for it either way. When she and Richard started dating, he brought her down to his tiny North Carolina hometown and introduced her to a world she had never known—of Friday night lights, and hot dogs smeared with tart homemade sauerkraut, and children entertaining themselves by rolling down glossy banks of grass at one end of the field. She sat high in the stands with Richard's mother—"The first thing the other coaches' wives taught me was to sit in the back, so you can't hear anyone complaining about the coaching," she had confided with a wink—and watched the whole thing in wonder, like she was taking in a show. It was a part of her husband's life that she struggled to understand, but she saw how he admired his father, so she tried to enjoy it, too.

The touchdowns happened too quickly for her to follow, and the brutal tackles she could do without; her favorite part of those nights, however, were the long passes down the field, when the ball was in the air, spinning in its elegant, looping way. It was a beautiful moment, the most beautiful thing the crowd had a chance to see all week, and she loved how they all fell silent and held their breath to watch. It was a collective intake of air, and sometimes a few people even rose from their seats when the ball left the quarterback's fingers—hundreds of eyes upturned to the sky, watching. It didn't matter to Sylvia what happened next; she generally hoped for Dit's team to win so that everyone would be in good spirits for the rest of their visit. During the noisy, hot games, though, she savored those moments of quiet in the crowd, collective expectation heavy in

the air. In an atmosphere where everyone around her knew more than she did about what was going on, it was a moment when nobody knew what would happen next, including her.

In true form, Sylvia and Mack were late to the first team practice. She circled the parking lot of the Weaver Street Recreation Complex, cursing under her breath, and eventually made her own spot in the grass beside the field's sagging chain-link fence. Sylvia opened the back door and pulled Mack out from where he was wedged into the back seat. With all his gear on, he looked like a tiny Michelin man, and she couldn't help but smile as he tottered ahead of her towards the practice field. He could hardly move in that getup, but Richard said he'd get used to it after a while, and Sylvia hoped—for Mack's sake—that that was true.

When she arrived on the sidelines, she surveyed the group of parents gathered there, and realized for the first time how awkward this situation might be for her. The group was made up mostly of women at least ten years her junior—mothers in their tight workout capris and sweat-wicking windbreakers, their long hair swept off their faces and their makeup immaculate. She felt their eyes surveying her pantsuit and low, sensible heels; Sylvia looked down at her clothing and sighed, knowing that her outfit screamed "working mother," and that this would, as it always did, change the dynamics at hand. No one spoke to her, or introduced themselves. She had never had a good relationship with the stay-at-home mothers of Mack's classmates; hard as she tried (and unfair as she knew she was being), she couldn't relate to them on any subject—age, occupation, interests—and after a while, she simply gave up. Looking around, she also realized that all the mothers had little fold-up nylon chairs. As Sylvia stood there awkwardly, she reprimanded herself for not thinking to bring something so obvious as a chair to sit in.

The ground was soft and damp, and her heels sank with each step. There were a few fathers standing in a clump a little further down the sidelines, and beyond that she spotted a single set of bleachers, where a man sat by himself—a parent, she hoped, not the local sex offender scoping out his prey. She really had no other option, besides sitting in the Sequoia by herself.

"Mind if I join you?" she said when she reached the bleachers. He was a slight but well-built man in a suit, and she seemed to catch him off guard. He looked up at her, startled, and then slid himself down the bench with a jerk.

"Yeah, oh—sure thing. I didn't reserve these bleachers all for myself."

"Thanks," she said, brushing off a spot on the metal before sitting down.

"You new to the team?"

"Yes—that's my son, Mack," she said, pointing. "Number eighteen."

"My boy's number seven—Cameron. And I'm Tom, by the way." With that, he stretched out his hand to her, and Sylvia shook it gratefully.

"Sylvia Freeman. Nice to meet you," she nodded. They sat a moment in silence, their eyes on the field. "I'm glad you're a little friendlier to newcomers than the rest of this group." She gestured to the women down the field.

Tom smiled wearily and shrugged his shoulders. "Ah, yes—the Stepford Wives. They're not so bad, unless you forget to bring the orange slices on your designated day—in which case they'll never speak to you again." Sylvia laughed, and then, realizing that Tom was serious, stopped short. "My ex-wife sits with them on game days, so they're not a huge fan of me, either. I'm sure they know all the gory details. But, what can you do, right?"

Sylvia smiled awkwardly, nodding. There seemed nothing else to do but agree.

"What position does your son play?" he asked.

"Oh, God—I have no idea. I really don't know the first thing about football." She couldn't see Mack's face under his oversized helmet, so she watched his number as he weaved and ducked in a crowd of other players. To fill the silence, Sylvia went on to tell Tom how she wasn't really comfortable with Mack playing football in the first place. He nodded.

"No, I hear you. I was pretty nervous myself, if I'm being honest—I used to play in high school, and I had more concussions than I can count on both hands during those years. But it's also a good way to make friends. At least it has been for Cameron."

"That's what everyone keeps telling me. Mack's dad thought this might be good for him, too. His teacher told me that he tends to keep to himself more than some of the other students—he's on the young end of his class, and might not be as developed as some of the older boys. I'm afraid he's feeling a little social alienation."

"You a shrink or something?"

"Am I that obvious?" Sylvia shook her head. "Something like that—yes. A clinical psychologist."

Tom let out a low whistle and shrugged. "Well, I'm certainly no expert, but fourth grade can be a really tough time for boys—we went through that with my older son, who's in eighth grade now. They're just changing in ways they don't really understand. I wish I remembered more about my fourth grade experience, you know? Just to give them some helpful tips."

Tom smiled at Sylvia—it was a broad, handsome grin, and so direct and open that it embarrassed her. She had to look away. His teeth were even and white, and she felt his eyes searching her face as blood bloomed into her cheeks. He cleared his throat.

“If you don’t mind me asking—and, please, tell me to mind my own business if you do—but, is your ex very involved with your son? I mean, do they spend a lot of time together?”

Sylvia’s head jerked up in surprise, and then her eyes darted down to her bare left hand. She had forgotten to put her wedding ring on again, as she often did. She looked back out to the field again, and, after a beat, spoke with a lack of hesitation that shocked her.

“He’s not as involved as I would like. What I mean is—he’s definitely around, and he’ll probably come to Mack’s games with me—but he’s pretty distant most of the time.” The lie rolled around in her mouth like a secret language, or a heady, expensive wine she’d stolen from her parent’s liquor cabinet.

“Well, being on a team like this might help anchor your son a little, you know? Help him know that other kids are going through the same stuff.”

Sylvia squinted in the bright afternoon light. “I agree with that in my head, but sometimes I wonder about all this time I spent raising him so carefully—worrying about him crossing the street, or accidentally drinking Drain-o, or getting lead poisoning from a toy—and then what? I send him out on a football field to get hammered? It’s just tough to reason with.”

“Protect him all you want, but at the end of the day, he’s still a little boy—and he doesn’t learn much from being a spectator. I know that one from experience.” Tom smiled at her again, and she couldn’t help but smile back. She liked the way he looked at her, and the slow, quiet way the words escaped his lips and settled in the air between them. She had also noticed his long, sinewy fingers and the thick veins that stood up on his forearms, and found that she liked those, too.

Sylvia started noticing small differences in the way that Mack behaved during this time—his confidence seemed up a bit, and he began to use new words and phrases she'd never heard before. "Epic fail," was his favorite—which she hated—but "sick" and "noob" somehow made their way into his vocabulary as well. Her shy, slight son was becoming someone she didn't quite recognize—a tiny teenager, it seemed—and she didn't know whether she was altogether thrilled with the change. As they left practice late one afternoon, the sun setting in the distance, Sylva smiled and waved goodbye to Tom, reaching to tuck Mack's little body against her side.

"Mom," he hissed, shrugging her arm off his shoulder.

"What's the matter?"

Mack looked around. "You can't do stuff like that anymore."

"Why? You too old for a hug?"

"I want Dad to bring me to practice sometime."

Sylvia recoiled. "You know Dad can't make it. What's wrong with me being here?"

"You don't pay any attention."

He jogged ahead to join a group of heavily padded boys, all finishing off packets of Capri-Sun on their way to their mothers' minivans, before she could tell him that he was never too old for anything—that he would miss these moments, someday, as she already did. She wanted to tell him that she deserved to put her arm around him—she had worked hard for him to be there. But, instead, Sylvia fell back a little to put some distance between her and Mack, feigning interest with something in her purse. Tears stung her eyes; her throat constricted. She suddenly saw a string of events in her mind—not a prophetic kind of vision, but a realistic one, shaded by knowledge of human nature—and she saw Mack rejecting her like this at first, and then, later, not even trying. An awkwardness would settle between them, the kind that Richard

had once tried to explain about himself and his own mother. Then she thought about intimacy—the electric current of shared closeness, a thing she craved like oxygen or water—and knew that it would be gone.

She had stopped walking; the vision filled her with such terrible wonder. Then, taking a deep breath to gather herself, she headed to the parking lot, where Mack's sweaty, grassy scent was already filling the car.

It was with a tinge of schoolgirl embarrassment that Sylvia realized how much she looked forward to her time at Mack's practices and games, when she was able to have a conversation with a smart, sane individual that wasn't her husband, her son, or one of the patients that frequented her office. Despite his promise, her husband never made it to come watch Mack play; in his absence, it became Sylvia's habit to sit exclusively with Tom, who took his lunch hour late in the afternoon on Tuesdays and Thursdays just so he could be at his son's after-school practices. She also liked to think that he was coming to see her, as well, but didn't allow herself to dwell on that for very long.

Tom, as it turned out, was 45, and an attorney employed by the city. On the sidelines he told her about his life in downtown Durham: about the independent video store that had just opened up down his block, and the new restaurants he tried—like Dos Perros, a swanky tequila bar in the West End. He confessed to Sylvia that he preferred his tequila in the form of a "lady-style" margarita: frozen and blended with sugar and strawberries, rather than straight.

"That's the test—the person I'm with can't be embarrassed when I order it, even if I'm the only man there throwing back a bright pink cocktail. Oh—and I only go for the big ones." He cupped his hands in the air to give her an estimate. "That's the most important part. The

margaritas must be absolutely massive." They laughed—another inside joke shared between them. Sylvia found herself jealous of whoever he took out, yet his fastidiousness in this way thrilled her; it told her that he must be attracted to her and didn't want to scare her away by constantly throwing out the names of other women.

From the start, however, Tom had suggested that perhaps they might do something together—catch a new foreign movie, or check out a new art exhibit at the Nasher Museum at Duke.

"It's too soon," she'd told him with a sad smile—referring, of course, to her divorce. This was a lie she heard from her patients on a daily basis—it was always too soon after a death or a job loss or a divorce to do anything meaningful—and she suspected he'd understand without pressing.

He seemed disappointed.

"Our kids go to school together, you know?" she'd continued. "I just don't want Mack to be confused, or hurt. I still need a little time to make things right between us."

But when Sylvia was in bed at night, listening to Richard snore and groan, she fanaticized that she really was divorced—and that at Mack's practices, she and Tom could discuss all the difficulties of single parenthood and the pitfalls of dealing with one's ex. She began to feel herself split in two, carving out a space within her that was untouched by time and judgment—a deep valley she surveyed with mild interest, rather than alarm. Reality-based fantasies fought for space beside her psychologist's thoughts. Occasionally she wondered what she would tell herself if she were the patient, yet the gulf was too wide to cross now.

It wasn't that she was in love with Tom—that wasn't the case at all, and the fact of her life was that she wasn't sure she was cut out to love anyone but her son, anyway—but Tom was

a warm body that was definitely not her husband, and who appealed to her in ways she hadn't felt in years. Her desire was a heat between her legs and a flush up the back of her neck; it surprised her in line at the grocery story, and during her sessions, when she was supposed to be listening. As spring emerged around her in all its flowering, pollen-heavy glory, Sylvia carried these thoughts inside of herself the way she had carried Mack—silently protecting this fully formed other person, deliciously secretive in its own way.

On a Friday morning in late April, Sylvia stopped by the school on her way to work to drop off a lunch for Mack; Richard had texted to say he'd forgotten it that morning. Swinging open the heavy doors to the school's front office, she smiled at the school secretary.

"Hi there, Glenda," she said, placing Mack's lunchbox on the counter. "Do you mind giving this to Mack's teacher? He's in Miss Kelly's room. My husband can't get anything right in the morning."

"Sure thing, hon. I'll make sure it gets there." Glenda reached for the bag. Sylvia thanked her and turned to leave but paused at the sound of Glenda's voice. "While I have you here," Glenda spun in her office chair to thumb through a filing cabinet, "I have a form I flagged from Mack's football registration—you guys must have missed it, and the coach needs a signature ASAP. If you'll hold on just one sec—" she tugged a manila folder from the drawer, and held it up in triumph "—I have it right here for you to sign. There you go," she said, pulling out a stack of papers and placing a pink printout on top. Glenda's youngest son played in Mack's peewee league, and she had volunteered to help the league with administrative paperwork.

Sylvia murmured an absent-minded apology and reached for a pen, signing her name on an empty line at the bottom of the sheet. It was an equipment-use agreement. She picked the pink

sheet up and extended it to Glenda. Glancing at the form sitting below it, however, she stopped, her hand suspended in the air. The title, *Spring Peewee Football Interest Form*, ran across the top. It included all her son's information, and the "Parent/Guardian" line was signed with the large, elegant, distinguished signature of none other than Dr. Richard J. Freeman. Richard *fucking* Freeman, she thought to herself—that lying bastard.

"What's this one, Glenda?" she said, holding it up between two fingers. "I see that Richard signed this, but I don't remember it from the packet that Mack brought home."

Glenda plucked the pink printout from Sylvia's outstretched hand and glanced up at the other sheet. "Oh, that's the one your husband came in to fill out during open registration." She looked down at the sheet in front of her, initialed it, and slipped it back inside the manila envelope. "Something wrong? Do you see any incorrect info?"

"I—no, nothing at all. It's all correct. Thanks for your help, Glenda," she said. With that, Sylvia left the stack of papers on the counter and turned on her heel, heading back out into the warm glow of the morning. Some small fissure seemed to crack open in the ground beneath her, and she felt its dark pull as she made her way to the car.

Sylvia and Richard drove Mack to the ballpark the next morning in a pregnant silence; she knew that Richard suspected she was mad about something, but he hadn't said anything about it, which made her even angrier. It was the last game of the season, and the first and only game Richard had been able to attend. Sylvia hated the habitual way he'd handled Mack's equipment that morning—the way he'd reminded Mack to fill his water bottle and double-tie his cleats, like he'd been there all along. What bothered her the most, however, was the fact that she could tell he valued—even savored—her silence.

Sylvia, wearing a short-sleeved sundress and sandals, pulled her wiry hair off her neck into a short ponytail as they pulled into the football complex. Tom would be at the game as usual—she would catch him before the game started, she decided, and ask him to lay low while Mack's dad was there, to help her keep the peace. Surely he would understand that.

Turning the car off, Richard casually hooked his arm over Sylvia's seat.

"Why don't you run on ahead and get warmed up, buddy?" he said to Mack. "I need to talk to Mom." Mack's eyes anxiously roamed the space between his parents' faces before he nodded and jumped out of the back seat, slamming the door behind him with a hollow thud. Richard faced the steering wheel and cleared his throat.

"Mack told me something last night that I think you should know," he said, his voice even.

"Alright," Sylvia responded. She still wasn't in any mood to talk.

"When I picked him up from school yesterday, he was upset—he had this big red mark on his face, and he looked like he'd been crying. At first he wouldn't tell me what was up, but I told him we weren't going anywhere until he told me what was going on. Finally, he told me that another boy in his grade—a kid named Cameron, or something like that—was teasing him, telling him that you were having sex with his dad. They got in a scuffle over it, apparently."

"He said *what*?" she hissed. Sylvia felt her face flush.

"I think you heard me."

"Richard, obviously this little boy has some serious issues. That's ridiculous." Sylvia heard her own voice in her ear, catching the hard edges of its emphasis on the last word. "How does a fourth grader even know about those things?"

Richard looked down at his hands. “The thing is, Sylv, I don’t care what’s going on with that kid. I don’t even know that either of them would fully understand what that means, anyway—but, again, that’s beside the point. The point is, when Mack told me what he said, he had this look in his eye like he didn’t want to tell me—like he didn’t want me to know, because he knew it would hurt me. Like he had reason to believe what that little boy said.”

Sylvia stared at Richard, her eyes wide and her voice dead in her throat. She burrowed deep into her mind, wondered if it was actually possible that Mack had been watching her with Tom on the sidelines during his practices—if she had given her secret away so easily.

“You don’t have anything to say?”

Sylvia hesitated, collecting herself. She tried to keep her expression impassive.

“I’m certainly not sleeping with anybody’s father, if you’re asking me that in a serious way. But—to be perfectly honest, Richard, I’m not sure why you care at all, really. We haven’t had sex in ages—I can’t remember the last time. I can’t even remember the last time we had a real *conversation*. I’m wondering if you’re trying to tell me something, pointing fingers like this.” Inside, she felt the dark gulf widen; she suddenly wondered if Richard had ever known any other side of her than the one she let on—if he had ever even tried to find it. “I can’t decide if there’s anything left for us here—any love, any passion, anything. I can’t find you in this anymore.”

The words escaped her mouth and disappeared into the silent, static air of the car. She had meant what she said—all of it, except perhaps the last part, the part where she picked up the hot potato of blame and threw it in his direction. That she no longer felt any warmth from him—*that* she was certain of. She’d neither seen nor felt warmth from him in months, perhaps even

years. She knew he wanted to pretend like he had no hand in all this; Richard was forever the lofty observer, the hard-thinking academic, the questioning critic.

Richard was staring at her now, his eyes roaming her face, his mouth closed in a tight line. Sylvia was suddenly self-conscious. She knew that perhaps her face was too blank, too serene, her voice too even. She'd seen it a million times on her own patient's faces—that trained look of cool, almost frightening confidence, as if they were looking in a mirror rather than looking at another human's face. It was the look of a lie—not a lie you tell others, but a lie you tell yourself. A lie you don't feel guilty about telling anymore.

Richard seemed to choose his words carefully.

"Sylvia." he said. "Listen to me. I don't want to give any grounds to what some idiot kid said, and I told Mack as much yesterday. But between you and me, I want you to know that some part of me wasn't surprised at what that kid said—and that if there's something going on, whatever it is, then this is your opportunity to wrap it up. An out, if you will. You and I—you and I we can get to later." He reached for the door handle, his knuckles turning white.

Sylvia was amazed. He had absolved himself, wriggled his way out.

"Just do what you need to do, and do it quickly," he said. And with that, he emerged into the humid morning and left her in the car—shaken, exhilarated, alone.

Richard took their two nylon chairs to a spot on the sideline, as if he did it every Saturday. Sylvia hung back, stopping near the concession stand to buy some time. She strained her eyes toward the bleachers, which gleamed empty in the morning sunlight.

Then, she heard a familiar voice behind her.

“Preparing for the heat, huh?” Tom said. She turned to find him surveying her outfit, and the baseball hat in her hand.

She made a face, her smile tight and uncomfortable.

“God, yes. Not even May yet, and we’re already sweating it out.” Tom followed her to the concession window, where she ordered a bottle of water.

Standing in the shade of the pavilion, under the lip of its deep overhang, she heard Tom order the same thing, and as she tilted her head back to let the cool, clear liquid swish down her throat, she closed her eyes. Her ears picked up the day’s sounds—of crickets in the grass and children squealing in the distance, of the shrill whistle piercing the humid morning air. Then she felt Tom beside her, and when she opened her eyes again, she saw him watching the arch of her throat.

She lowered the bottle from her lips.

“What is it?” she said, swallowing hard. Her voice came out almost at a whisper, the back of her hand automatically wiping the moisture from her mouth.

“It just looks so nice—so refreshing—watching you do that,” he said quietly, his voice low and humming. He wasn’t standing very close to her, but she felt as if the air were compressed between them. “Thirsty like someone who’s never had a sip of water in her life.” Sylvia said nothing, her hand still lifted to her face.

Then she spotted the back of her husband’s head. His crown swiveled back and forth to follow the action on the field, and beyond him, she saw the glint and shimmer of her son’s helmet in the sun. She suddenly wondered about what parts of it—this tenuous, complicated thing she had built—she could make off with, and what parts she would have to leave behind entirely.

“Your ex, I gather?” Tom followed her eyes to where her husband sat. “I saw you two come in together. It’s always tense, I know.”

Sylvia smiled, but something within her wouldn’t stop shaking.

“Maybe I should go introduce myself?”

“No,” Sylvia said quickly, her hand suddenly gripping his arm. “Not yet.”

Her throat was dry despite the water, her eyes reflecting the vibrant green field. She spoke to him in a way she never had before, with a hint of fear in her voice. His eyes searched her face as heat rose in her cheeks.

“I can’t wait forever,” he said. “You understand that, right?”

There was expectation in his voice, now. The ball was in the air again—it was spinning in its elegant, looping way, and she was holding her breath. She had been holding her breath for longer than she could remember.

Sylvia made a sound as if opening her mouth to speak.

Arlo Dreams of Twisters

It was the dream he always had, always feared, always expected now, since Russell's death. From there in the valley at the center of his bed, with hard slivers of light skimming across his ceiling, he dreamt the coming of a twister—and he imagined the things he had collected tumbling off shelves and cabinets, obstructing his path and blocking the door. He imagined the old wax cylinder phonograph, the weight of an anvil, crushing his feet and pinning him to the bed; the ancient pipe organ—his love, his burden—slowly, ever slowly, tipping to its side and crushing him beneath its heft. Even the rows of chipped Coke bottles and rotten washing boards swirled about his head, suddenly deadly. From his bed he imagined himself watching the whole thing, helpless. And in those fearful moments before the end, the whole roof would crack open and shift in one terrifying suck of air—and he would look up into the suddenly clear, star-studded sky as if seeing it for the very first time.

Arlo awoke to the whirl and rattle of his oscillating fan, and his son Billy picking his way barefoot down the hall to the bathroom. Arlo had stacked boxes in the hall, nearly to the ceiling. There was a dull thud, probably his son's toe catching a chair leg or an old tricycle. Billy cursed quietly.

It was afternoon. The sun's warm glow gently wept through the slits in his blinds, so Arlo put his hand over his face to block the light. He had been sleeping in the middle of the day again, like an old man. And yet—he *was* an old man, he reminded himself. Retired—he could do whatever he wanted. It was a thought that always startled him at first, then comforted him. He

pulled the single sheet over his shoulder, and, turning his back to the window, closed his eyes until dinnertime.

Billy had shown up at Arlo's house nearly two weeks ago, suitcase in hand and more than a little drunk; he looked like hell. Before that moment, Arlo and Billy had not spoken in nearly five months—not since Russell's funeral. When Arlo sat him down in the living room, his son said that his wife, Caroline, had asked him to move out.

"But what'd you do to her, Billy?" Arlo pressed.

"Don't call me that. Nobody calls me Billy anymore," his son responded. Arlo watched Billy's eyes move from furniture to floor to ceiling, looking everywhere but at him. Russell, who had been Arlo's oldest son, had a similar look, especially around the eyes.

He straightened his shoulders and angled his head from side to side, as if trying to get a crick out of his neck—an old habit of irritation. He cleared his throat.

"Alright, Bill. What'd you do?"

"I didn't *do* anything. She came home from work last night and asked me to move out—said she needed some time to think, without me around."

"You two having problems?"

"I really don't want to talk about it, Dad. We can talk about it tomorrow, but I can't talk about it right now."

"Is it drugs?"

"No—goddamn. Drugs? Please, let's just drop it."

"Tell me what's going on. If you don't tell me, I'll assume you're hooked on meth or coke or something, and you sure as hell can't bring that stuff into my house."

"It's not drugs."

"What, then? Have you turned into an alcoholic? I can smell the whiskey on you now, that's for damn sure. You can just pick up your suitcase and get the hell out of here if you think I'm going to let this slide."

Billy ran his hand through his dark straight hair and stood up abruptly, nearly knocking over the coffee table. He crossed his arms and leaned against the frame of the living room window, his eyes on the dark rolling hills outside.

"Alright—yes. We've had some issues. She's upset that I'm out of the house so much, disappearing for too long. And not talking to her enough—never talking enough. She's been taking me to see different people. Specialists."

"You mean a counselor, or something like that?"

"A therapist. A fucking therapist. Someone I pay 150 bucks an hour to egg Caroline on. We sit there on her couch, and Caroline doesn't shut up the whole time."

"Has all this come up since Russell passed?" Arlo asked. By the window Billy didn't move or respond, and Arlo wondered if it was the wrong question.

"More or less," he responded finally.

Arlo nodded, looking down at the floor.

"So?" Billy said, turning back to his father. Arlo shrugged, and Billy cleared off a spot on the couch to sit again.

"You got a place for me to sleep around here? I think you've about doubled the amount of shit you own since I last saw you." Layers of newspaper and records and old photographs lined the walls and covered most of the furniture in the room. Along the narrow path that bisected the space, Arlo's belongings gathered on either side like banks of snowdrift.

"I've added a few things here and there, I guess."

"More than a few, I'd say." Billy picked up a yellowed magazine from the carpet and dropped it on the coffee table. His eyes rested on the vintage baseballs. "Is some of this Russell's?"

"Some of it," Arlo admitted, turning his attention to the silent television. The antenna picked up the local weather station, a channel played on a loop. Arlo had an emergency weather radio in the kitchen, too, but the warm September night was to be calm and windless.

Billy leaned over and picked up a baseball. There had been nearly a hundred of them at one time, each bearing the signatures of players few people had ever heard of—farm league has-beens. He and his brother were in high school when Russell started it; Russell told him that he thought it might make those players feel good to know that somebody, somewhere, had that ball with their name on it in a collection. When they were younger, Russell had avidly gathered anything that could form a set—fast-food toys, cereal-box games, commemorative soda cans. Arlo had always been a collector, too, but once he divorced their mother and moved out, Russell picked up the habit.

Whenever Billy spotted something for his brother's trove, and no matter where he was—at other kids' homes or even on the side of the street—he would swipe it, coming home with little gifts that he knew Russell would enjoy. Sitting in Arlo's living room that night, Billy felt the weight of the baseball in his hands, tossing it gently from one hand to the other. After a moment he put it back and turned his eyes to the television, which they watched for a while longer without any sound.

The thing about a son was, you either got on or you didn't. Things between Arlo and Billy hung heavy and awkward in the air between them, yet they lived with one another in relative peace. They didn't talk about where Billy was or wasn't going—whether he was still going to his job (Arlo suspected he wasn't), or whether Caroline intended to ask him back. Most of all, though, they didn't talk about Russell, whose possessions mingled with Arlo's and stuck Billy in the side when he sat on the couch, or came up underfoot on a midnight trip to the fridge. It had been five months since they buried Russell; he had been one of hundreds of people killed in a series of spring tornadoes that year, the worst their state had ever seen. As time passed, Arlo began to realize that moving forward all depended on how you treated the whole thing—the place you gave it in your life—and he was beginning to feel that he hadn't done all that well.

His own collections—that was the name he had given them, just like Russell had—were a part of his life he was a little ashamed of, when he was honest with himself. They belied something unwieldy, something he couldn't quite control. He'd always had a fascination with vintage items—of accumulating the possessions of strangers here and there, particularly things people gave away, unwanted. They never discussed it while he was alive, but now Arlo understood that it was a passion he and Russell could have shared. His ex-wife despised clutter; she'd never allowed him to bring home his finds. When they divorced, the boys were still young—five and seven, respectively—and when he rented his first apartment, he had nothing to put inside. He hadn't realized before that moment that he no longer had anything of his own. So, he started gathering.

Three days after Russell's death, as Arlo picked through the pile of rubble that had once been his son's apartment building, he stumbled upon all sorts of odds and ends—rusted milk jugs, Russell's collection of Jimmy Key baseball cards, ancient *Life* magazines—and took home

what had not been blown away by the storm. They were Russell's things, he imagined; he saw things he recognized, and things he didn't. He decided that they had all been a part of his son's prized memorabilia, and he found he couldn't leave them for FEMA volunteers to pick up and put in trash bags, whether they were Russell's or not. So he hauled them all home.

In the following months, Arlo began to build a larger collection—to add on to what he already had, and to what Russell left behind—stopping by every estate sale and highway-side antique mall he could find. Soon he amassed a mountain of objects: old photographs of strangers, spindle-leg furniture, soft-edged bundles of letter correspondence. He moved from a two-bedroom apartment near town to a low-slung three-bedroom rancher just outside of Huntsville, and soon filled up every nook and cranny there as well.

When Billy came to stay with him, he knew by the look on his face that he was thinking about what a pain in the ass all his belongings would be when he was dead.

A few weeks after Billy's arrival, Arlo sat alone in his old leather easy chair, his computer open in his lap. It was evening, and the shades were drawn tight. He clicked on the link to eBay, where he monitored his most recent bids and upped the dollar amount on two—just like he did every night. There was the 1958 Johnny Cash album, the only one missing from Russell's set, and a Confederate belt buckle supposedly worn by General Beauregard himself. He desperately wanted them both.

Arlo heard a key in the door. Billy slowly made his way to the kitchen, and Arlo heard a greasy slap as a bag of fast food dropped to the kitchen table.

"Come on and eat," Billy called through the wall. "I got you something." Arlo snapped his laptop shut and eased out of the chair; in the kitchen, he sat across from Billy at the table.

They unwrapped their hamburgers in silence. Since Billy moved in Arlo had hardly seen him; Billy spent most of his time in the guest room, occasionally emerging to forage for food in the kitchen, or run over to the Dairy Delite, a drive-thru restaurant a few miles away. Arlo had always liked living by himself, but he didn't mind it when Billy thought of him like this—when they sat at the table together to eat, even if they didn't talk much.

"How's the weather looking?" Arlo asked.

"Clear, for now. Radio said rain might be coming later." Billy responded, his eyes on his half-eaten burger. He cleared his throat. "I saw Caroline over at the Delite."

Arlo stopped chewing and looked up at him, surprised.

"Yeah? You talk to her?"

"She was with her mother. I went over to her car and tapped on the window; she opened it about this much." He held his fingers a few inches apart in the air. "She asked if I was doing alright. Then she said they had to get going—somewhere to be. Her mother didn't open her mouth. Didn't even look at me."

Arlo hesitated. "Did she say anything about you coming home?" Billy shook his head, and Arlo searched his mind for something else to say.

"You should find a way to go talk to her," he said after a pause. "Just—don't let things happen the way they did between me and your mom. When you get to not talking at all—that's when you realize the whole thing is already over. It's not the right way to do things."

"That so, Dad? Jesus. No need to fuck anything up that badly."

"Billy," Arlo said, a warning in his voice.

"What do you want me to say? That's the truth. I don't know why you're even bringing Mom into this—that has nothing to do with me and Caroline."

"I'm not saying it does. I don't like the way things ended for me. Sure as hell not proud of myself, or your mother. And I want things to be different for you. Life between your mom and me was never good or easy, not even in the beginning. I didn't want you boys to grow up around that." Billy didn't respond, and Arlo didn't like his look, so he pushed on. "Is that what you think? That I wanted to screw it all up? Leave you and Russell with your mom and hardly be a part of your lives?"

"I tell you what—why don't you go back and tell my childhood self what you wanted? Russell would have liked to hear that, too. That would clear this right up," Billy said. Arlo sighed. He deserved it, he knew—he had always deserved it. He could have guessed that it would happen this way, even before the boys were born, even before he married his ex-wife—but that didn't make it any easier to take.

"We've got to try to put this behind us, Bill. It's just you and me now, without Russell—" At the mention of his brother's name, Billy's fist landed on the table with a sharp thud, and Arlo stopped short. Billy finally looked him in the eye.

"It's not you and me—it's never been you and me, or you and anyone. It's always just been you. *You* and what *you* wanted. If Mom still lived in Huntsville, I swear to God I wouldn't be staying here, so me being here means nothing more than that. And don't talk about Russell, because you didn't know the first thing about him. All this shit—" Billy gestured around the house, at the stacks of baseball cards and newspapers, at the mountains of things that breathed out and settled with their slow, terrible neglect—"most of this shit isn't even Russell's. Or anything he would even want. You're building something out of nothing."

Billy stood up and dropped his half-eaten burger in the trashcan by the door. Arlo stared at the kitchen table, his eyes burning. The front door slammed. This was why he lived alone, he thought to himself. Why he had always lived alone.

Fisher's was a bar located in a strip mall near his house; it was known mostly for the six billiards tables in the back, and as one of the last bars in town that still allowed smoking inside. Arlo usually stopped by about once a week; during the summer he played on a team of four other men in a pool competition, but that was over, now that August had passed. In the fall Arlo usually just came to play, and to drink a little.

"Well, now, look-y what the cat dragged in," a voice purred behind him. Arlo swiveled on his barstool and ran his eyes up and down Trish Harding, her hair shining in the dimness. "Didn't think we'd see much of you these days," she said, winking.

"Oh yeah? Why's that?"

"You got your tail kicked so hard in pool the last time you were here, I thought you'd be sore into next month." She laughed at her own joke, and he shook his head at her as she slid onto the barstool next to him.

"Don't taunt a man when he's down."

"I know, I know. Just teasing. Really, how're things?"

"Quiet, mostly. Recovering from a particularly shitty day at the moment. You?"

"Not so quiet for me. This place is pretty quiet tonight, though, and I'm glad to see you." She motioned to the bartender for a refill.

“How is your kid?” Arlo asked, watching the bartender place a fresh pink drink in front of her. Trish rolled her eyes before sipping from the tiny straw in her plastic cup. Her breasts pressed against the bar as she leaned forward to pull a pack of cigarettes from her back pocket.

“Pretty good, I guess. Tyler,” she said, lighting a cigarette and exhaling a long plume of smoke from her nose, “is still a royal pain in the ass, as always. You’d think nobody in the world had ever been 15 years old before. I don’t know how he can stand himself.”

“What’d he do this time?” Arlo asked, perhaps a little too halfheartedly.

“Well—aren’t you a chatty Kathy tonight, with all the questions.” She rested her fingers lightly on his arm. “Usually I can’t get three words out of you. That bad of a day, huh?” She smiled. Her hand spread warmth through him.

Trish was still new to the area. When they’d first met seven months ago, he’d guessed that she’d had an eye on his money—what money she thought he had, at least—and he felt she had it in mind to pin him down for life. He didn’t like the idea of becoming somebody’s step daddy—he hadn’t done too well at being someone’s real daddy, in the first place. But he was beginning to like her more, especially in the blouse she was wearing.

She’d invited him home once, two months ago, when her son was with her ex-husband in Nashville for the weekend. He’d been struck by the bareness of her house: the clean surfaces, the half-empty bookcase in her den. He’d even glanced behind a closet door on his way to the bathroom, revealing only a bare wall behind a few hanging coats. Arlo realized with some dismay that he’d forgotten how other people lived. Being there with her had given him a lightness he hadn’t felt in years.

Trish held her cigarette over an ashtray and drew closer as she finished telling him about her son's latest exploit: Spray-painting the side of their neighbor's garage to appease his newfound passion for graffiti art.

"So what'll you do about it?" he asked. He tapped out another of his own cigarettes, patting his shirt pocket for a lighter.

"Lock him in his room and wait it out until he's 18, I guess. Then let the world take care of him, just like it does everybody else," she sighed, leaning back on her stool. A dark look passed across her face, but vanished after a moment. She smiled. "You raised a few boys, right? So, you probably know a thing or two. You got any better ideas?" Arlo hesitated, thinking back over the last two weeks.

"All told, they hardly did a damn thing wrong, except for a few stolen crayons and traffic tickets. I got pretty lucky—though, to be honest, after my divorce I didn't do much of their raising. I can't really take any credit." She nodded, her face softening.

"They took after their mother, I expect," she said. She shot him a sly, sidelong glance.

"Not nearly as mean, thank God. Both my sons were better behaved than I was growing up." Trish stirred the ice in her drink as Arlo's face lifted to the TV screen above the bar.

"Any regrets?" she asked—not for his sake, but her own.

"More than I'd like to count. But then—" here he paused, thinking. "When they get older, you can try to get to know them differently." He could tell she'd been hoping he'd say something else more comforting. But he was all out of words like that now.

"Remind me—how old is your youngest?"

"Billy's just turned 30."

"And how far apart was he from your oldest? Was it—Russell?

Arlo nodded. “Russell was just a year and a half older.” He took a sip of his beer. Trish reached out, squeezed his arm.

“Damn,” she smiled. “You really are an old man.”

“Not too old,” he said. He didn’t want to talk about his sons anymore. He slid his hand down to rest on her thigh as she stubbed out her cigarette. Arlo took another long sip of his beer, motioning to the bartender for another round. He wondered if it were Trish herself—and not her clean, spare house—that gave him that light feeling he’d been craving. He’d never taken her to his own home—so full of stuff that he could hardly step in the front door—and he wondered what she’d think about it, and about him. Then he wondered idly if bringing her there would somehow introduce that sense of lightness to his home, too. For now, he decided they’d stay at the bar, have another drink, see where that got them. He couldn’t face going home quite yet.

Later, it was unclear to Arlo how they’d arrived—in his driveway, bumper nosed over the leaning concrete bird feeder, one tire on the asphalt and the other sunk in the grass. His eyes were open and rolling in his head, and he realized that his truck door was ajar, the seatbelt hooked stupidly across one arm. Trish was laughing at him from the passenger seat, her body shaking silently. He knew then that they were both drunk.

“This it?” Her voice was hoarse from the bar.

“Yeah. This is it,” he said, pulling himself out into the night. She laughed again, watching him circle the truck. He went to Trish’s door and opened it, clumsily holding out his arm for her as she stepped onto the pavement. She held his arm unsteadily and bent to remove her heels.

By now he knew just where to step, just how to angle his body to get through the narrow switchback between rooms. Trish, however, paused in the open front door, stunned. Arlo also

stopped short, remembering why he had never brought her there in the first place. The overhead light in the bathroom was on at the end of the hall, and with sudden anger he wished Billy had shut it off before he went to bed—it served only to make the home's objects feel larger, less formed into individual things and more a dark mass surrounding them. Arlo turned to look at Trish, her body silhouetted, her heels dangling from two fingers at the end of one arm.

"Jesus, Arlo—look at all this," she breathed, her body swaying with liquor and echoes of the bar's jukebox. The silence was too loud, and Arlo's face burned. There was nothing left to do, then, but guide her himself. He dropped his keys by the door and bent to pick her up, swinging her over his shoulder and kicking the door closed behind him.

Arlo was sleeping and dreaming again—it was the same dream he had almost every night now. He was watching himself from above as if pressed against the ceiling, and he wondered why it came so frequently these days. In his bed Arlo rolled from side to side, pushing his ears into the pillow to stifle the noise, until he opened his eyes and focused on the ceiling, registering the siren for the first time. No dream, in fact. Looking down, he still had his shirt on from Fisher's—buttons undone to the waist, liquor coming through his skin. He felt a rustling in the sheets beside him. There was Trish, asleep, her bright hair mussed on the pillow, her smooth shoulders luminous in the light from the street.

"*Shit*," he whispered. The wind cracked against the windows, and Arlo felt the house shift and buckle with unseen atmospheric changes. The hairs on his arms stood on end, and his stomach turned—no rain against the windows, only a dark churning in the night. It was a sign of the worst kind of weather. The emergency radio squawked in the kitchen, and then it shut off. Arlo sat up on the side of the bed in his sock feet, listening. His dreams made him uneasy; his

home had no basement, and no interior room seemed safe enough. He knew the spotty construction of the homes in the area.

"Hey—Trish," he said, edging past a stack of boxes to get to the other side of the bed. Her face was buried deep in the pillow, mascara smeared across the clean white fabric. He nudged her again, and she opened her eyes, squinting at him in the half-dark.

"Trish," he said. "There's a storm coming. We need to get somewhere safe." She rolled over and sat up on one elbow, a hand raised to push the hair off her face. Arlo's sheets slid down to expose her bare shoulders and breasts. Her face was perplexed as she looked toward the window.

"The weather radio was blaring a minute ago," he said, almost by way of explanation. Arlo shifted his weight, antsy. "You coming with me? I don't want to wait around inside."

"Where are you going? It's not even raining—why don't we wait it out in here?" Her fingers patted a space on the bed. She reached out for his hand, but he jerked away, suddenly angry.

"I'm not going to get bulldozed in here."

He didn't have time or energy for arguing. In the hall, he stopped in the open doorway of the guest room.

"You'd better get up," he said into the darkness. "Bad weather." The hallway light formed a square on the room's beige carpet. He made out a figure on the bed, and watched as Billy lifted his head from beneath the comforter.

"I don't hear anything."

"Like hell you don't. It's a tornado warning—that means something's coming, whether you like it or not. Get up."

Billy propped himself on one elbow and looked at his father, his voice rising sharply.

"Who's your lady friend?"

"None of your business."

"Yeah? Then why don't you mind your own goddamn business and leave me alone." Billy dropped back onto the bed and rolled to his side, pulling the sheets up once more. "And shut the door."

"Alrighty—fine," Arlo said tightly, slamming the door with a thud. He lifted his voice through the closed door. "Don't say I didn't warn you." Arlo moved toward the closet and rummaged for the emergency flashlight. At the front door he stopped and listened to the howl outside, fear rising slowly in his chest, tightening and seizing his heart until his breath came out in tight huffs.

The wind was wild, unmatched, and power lines snapped like rubber bands against the trees. All was dark—the lazy hills lurked in the distance, and the dry, grassy plateau sat waiting further on. Branches and yard signs and plastic children's toys tumbled across the lawn, weightless; across Arlo's vision their figures moved with elegant slowness. Taking a deep breath, he plunged out onto the porch and jogged across the yard to the drainage ditch out front, near the mailbox. He'd found himself in that ditch on more than one occasion over the past five months, and knew with a little embarrassment that it was panic that drove him out of the house and into that grassy haven.

Dropping into the ditch, Arlo hung low in a half-crouch. Over the lip of earth he caught sight of Trish standing on the front porch, no light behind her, clutching a quilt around her shoulders. He called out, lifting up his arm, motioning for her to join him in the ditch. She

stepped closer, then stopped, resting her hand on the post. Her mouth was open as if she were saying something to him.

In the distance, Arlo suddenly heard a sound he knew, a sound he couldn't tell if he was imagining—the sound of something like a train, low and deep and earth-rumbling. He lumbered to his side and rolled onto his back. It was a thing that he felt but could not see, a sound growing louder as the minutes passed.

Then his son's face appeared above the ditch, looking down at him, his hair blowing wildly in the light from the house. Billy was shouting. Arlo reached out a hand for him and suddenly Billy's face became childlike, the very same kid who pressed his trembling body against Arlo's side twenty years before, while a storm just like this thundered overhead. Arlo saw the tiny twin bed and the action-figure comforter and the little boy's long wrists and ankles sticking out of his pajamas, so thin and frail and painfully new, fresh-formed half inches of the man he was daily growing and stretching out to be. And the other boy clutching his back—Arlo couldn't picture his oldest son now, and the realization stabbed him with a pang of sudden, terrifying grief. Billy dropped into the ditch beside his father and pushed him over, stretching out beside him on the soft fragrant earth. He put his arm over his father's body and shouted in Arlo's ear, but Arlo heard nothing above the din of the storm. He felt his son's warmth and tried desperately to remember the other boy's face. The wind whirled and the trees cried out and the yard's untethered objects skittered and jumped over the ditch as together they lay on their backs and looked up into the depth of the sky as if seeing it for the first time, the last time, all at once.

The Space Between

Howard's affairs had been all innocent and foolish, sophomoric in even a sexual sense. He had never had a real affair with any of them, and when he told Clara that—the truth, in his mind—he meant it. They had all been short-lived, these flings, and worth far less to him than a 24-year marriage of great comfort and understanding. In truth, Clara was a very attractive woman. She had been 13 years younger than Howard when they married—a space of time that mattered very much in the beginning, but lost its significance during the intermediate years of their marriage.

He could still remember the morning five years ago, when Clara had sat down with him at the kitchen table, pulling the coffee mug out of his soft grip and towards her chest with her hand covering its mouth—"I want you to tell me about her, whoever she is" was what she said that day—and afterwards, when she sat outside in the car with the little hard suitcase in the passenger seat and her hands on the steering wheel, keys resting in the delicate pocket of skirt fabric draped between her open thighs. She hadn't really left, not even now.

Howard's girls were all beautiful, of course—their bodies soft and shapely, still blooming into maturity, still firm and supple in both obvious and secretive ways. He was thrilled by how willing—even excited—they were to please him. And they all admitted to him, in one way or another, that they had a "thing" for older men. Their involvement with him likely resolved this desire, which they all deemed dirty, even kinky; they whispered it to him behind shy smiles.

There had been blowjobs, hand jobs, and the occasional feel-up behind the closed door of his office; yet he had only had sex—actual sex—with one of them, Megan Shepherd, a senior in his last service and leadership class before retirement. They were only two months into the

semester when it began. He was—and had been for the past three decades—a university administrator, and though he spent most of his time on the second floor of the president's building, he was required to teach one course a year.

Meg sat in the front corner of his class with her legs folded up against her chest, knees sandwiched tight between her breasts and the desk edge. Her dark hair fell into her face as she chewed on the end of her pen, and she watched him with the kind of heated interest he knew—interest that thrilled him, like a hot shaft of sunlight against his back when he turned around. She was a magnet, constantly pulling his eyes in her direction. When her shirt rode up behind her, parting from the low waistband of her jeans, she didn't reach to pull it down, instead unveiling the expanse of her lower back—smooth and white and unblemished as a dish of milk. He wanted to turn her over and kiss the hollow of her back, to run his tongue up the curve of her spine until he reached the delicate hairs at the nape of her neck. He was transfixed.

Conveniently, Meg was just two months away from graduating with a degree in fine art, and, after their first few classes, she began to stop by his office without an appointment to discuss the assigned reading, which they both knew was light and not difficult for a senior to understand. However attractive, Megan was no more beautiful than many of the other girls he'd been with—certainly no more beautiful than Clara—and she was very young. Even her name, *Megan*, belied her generation and made her seem younger than she was. This was why, during their third or fourth meeting, she told him she preferred him to call her *Meg*.

"Meg," he repeated back to her. After a pause he said it again, for no other reason than to launch the word into the air, to form it with his lips and feel the way it escaped his tongue. "Does it make you feel more grown up when I say it like that?"

She tilted her head. “It’s not about the way I feel. It’s about what you think of me when you say it. Do *you* think it makes me seem more grown up?” Her face was serious, and suddenly Howard knew—with the kind of warm, pleasurable certainty gleaned only from his history of moments just like this—that she wanted to sleep with him. It was then that he finally got up to close his office door.

Howard had always been skittish about the sex part—nervous about the messiness of the whole thing, the possibility of pregnancy forefront in his mind. He and Clara had had just one child, a very long time ago—Rebecca, who had been killed in a car accident at the age of six. It happened one night along a dark road in the dead of winter, on the way home from dinner. Clara and Howard were both two or three glasses of wine in, and he could still remember the way his daughter hummed in her booster seat, her little finger painting pictures in the steamy car window. The light from streetlamps flickering across her face in the rearview mirror. They were never cited as being at fault in the accident, but it broke them regardless.

Howard avoided sexual affairs because he didn’t know if he could love another child as completely as he had his daughter. And, despite the distance that often stretched between himself and Clara, he felt that the cruelest thing he could do to her would be to father some sort of lovechild—a reminder, in some painful way, of all that could have been.

When he considered Meg later—much later—Howard most remembered her face, looking back at him through the crook of her arm. She had smooth pale cheeks and a soft, hooded gaze; her eyelids were delicately transparent, and when Howard watched her from behind through the triangle her arm formed as it draped over her head, her skirt bunched around her waist, he felt that everything about her had this singular quality, this softness. It contrasted so blatantly with Clara’s hard, no-nonsense nature. Clara of unmatched intelligence and sharp

humor. Clara who avoided his hands—Clara who jerked her legs away from his beneath the sheets as if his skin was on fire. After their daughter's death, their sex life became a fit of stops and bursts—as if his wife would forget for a while, then suddenly remember the tragedy.

Meg was the only girl who spoke clearly of desire for *him*, not her desire for older men, and he was struck to the core by it. With Meg, there was a kind of openness—she told him where she wanted him to touch her, what he should say to her in bed. She told him—not unkindly, with her own brand of firm direct cheerfulness—when she wanted him to arrive, and when she was ready for him to leave. She told him about her favorite painters—Paul Cézanne, Marc Chagall, and Frida Kahlo—and her favorite restaurant—Balena, on North Halsted Street—and about her favorite walking path along the river in Ann Arbor, where she grew up. Like Clara, Meg wasn't deferential. Unlike Clara, however, she told him only what she wanted, not what she didn't want. Howard had always yearned to possess the entirety of someone, and there were parts of Clara that he knew she didn't want him to understand—corners of self she wouldn't give up, even after 24 years. Howard had once found a mystery in Clara that was heady, thrilling—until he grew tired of chasing and discovering nothing in return.

Alone in their kitchen five years prior, Clara had leaned forward to him at the table that day, the day he told her about the girl he was seeing then—which girl, he didn't remember now—and whispered into his ear.

"Don't you know, Howard?" Her cheek was barely touching his, her eyes looking past his shoulder and out into the day. "Don't you understand that everyone who is young relates to the world in a sexual way? It has nothing to do with you."

Howard pulled away to look at her, an amused expression on his face—he had never learned to handle truly tragic moments, even now.

"It's men that are that way, not youth," he said, regretting it immediately. His wife sat there in silence, looking at him for a long time.

"Why don't you come with me?" Meg said to him one afternoon in June, lying on the floor of her living room. She had moved out of the dorm, and was subletting a tired single-bedroom apartment off campus. He had retired from his job in April and continued seeing Meg, despite his better judgment. She wanted to see him, and told him so; he, too, wanted to see her. It was a simple equation. Spring had quickly turned to summer, Chicago thawing out before he knew what was happening. His days were engulfed by balmy sunshine and breezy afternoons.

Lying there, she was completely naked—one of those women for whom nakedness was a singular pleasure, a joy. Her body was long and lean and composed entirely of youth—pure, concentrated youth. She was drinking sweet red wine from a chipped coffee mug, her lips stained a deep plum.

"Come with you? Where are you going?" He was sitting on the couch in his boxer shorts.

"California. Didn't I say that?"

"No—you didn't."

"I'm sure I already told you. Anyway, you should come, too. Why not?" She said it casually, and Howard couldn't tell if she really meant the offer.

"How would I do that?" he said, feigning amusement, settling back against the couch. The air conditioner kicked on; Meg rubbed the bare goose-pimpled skin of her hip with her free hand as the cool air glanced over her skin.

"You don't have to—but it's not like you have anything else to do. I'm not even sure what you're doing with your time now—do you even have any hobbies? Retirement is making you a little boring, you know."

Howard bristled. Meg *was* his only hobby, though he couldn't exactly say that now. He sometimes spent his days doing nothing at all—going through the motions of carefully folding up his morning paper, washing his mug in the sink. Though Clara didn't work, she was never home—she hadn't seemed to notice that he had retired. After Rebecca died, he'd never thought to ask her what she did with her days. He assumed she was at home, but now it felt too strange to ask; better to pretend he'd known all along.

After breakfast, he often spent the rest of the day trolling the Internet for bits of news, or sports scores, or even pornography sites where he might discover new ways to pleasure Meg. It certainly didn't take much, of course—she was more attuned with herself than any woman he had ever been with. But he dreaded that she might think him old-fashioned in bed.

"What's in California?" Howard said, hating how it made him sound like some kind of father. He'd once added it up—she'd probably be about the same age as his own daughter would have been now. He didn't want to sound jealous. He wondered if she had another boyfriend, or a former lover out there.

"A job, Howard. What else?"

"I see. Doing what?"

"My uncle has a friend who owns an art gallery in Los Angeles, and he got me a job. Assistant to the curator, whatever that means." Howard raised his eyebrows, nodding. It suddenly occurred to him that if Meg moved to California, he might never see her again. The thought of staying in Illinois with Clara, without Meg—it was too much to bear.

"What about your painting? I assumed you would stay here and try that out for a while."

"I'll do it on the side—a second job, of sorts. Los Angeles is an expensive place to live, I've heard." Howard nodded, thinking the same thing. He fleetingly wondered if her invitation was a way to help pay for her cost of living, but decided to let that go.

"So," Meg said, feeling for her purse on the floor behind her. "What do you say?"

"I'm not sure," he said, trying to sound casual. "I'll have to think about it."

Meg paused as if she were about to ask a question. Something unpleasant. Then her expression softened, and she seemed to decide against it. She fished a cigarette carton from her purse and held it up to Howard; he shook his head.

"Think all you want. But I'm leaving next week." She shook a fresh cigarette from the carton, lit it, mesmerized by the glowing tip. She raised her head. "If it's about your wife—just so you know, I'd understand that, Howard. Say the word, and I won't mention another thing about it. I don't want to get in the way of anything—you know, *big* like that."

"Big?" Howard said.

"Yeah, big. You know, serious."

"As opposed to—what? This, what we're doing?"

"Of course," Meg said, holding the cigarette delicately between two painted nails as she turned over on her stomach. Howard couldn't help but admire the way her breasts pressed together, there, against the floor. They seemed to have a life of their own, in a wondrous way.

After a moment, he spoke again. "And what if I come with you—what if you decide you don't want me anymore? What then?"

"Is that what you're worried about? Maybe I should be asking you the same thing—I think it's more likely for you to not want *me* anymore, don't you?" She paused, then cut him off

before he could respond. “If it doesn’t work out, then you’ll leave, and come back home—or stay. I wouldn’t care. You can do whatever you want.”

Her nonchalance hurt him a little, but Howard was struck even more by the possibility of California and Meg, which seemed new and fresh and astonishingly realistic to him. He reached for the carton on the floor. It was Meg’s turn to raise her eyebrow; she gave him a sultry, amused look as she lit his cigarette, theatrically blowing smoke in his direction.

At home that night, Clara was sitting at the kitchen table, reading a book and drinking a cup of tea. Howard entered the kitchen and poured himself a scotch—a big one, to prepare for what he would say next. He dropped two ice cubes into his glass, the clinks breaking the silence. Then, he sat down across from her.

“What would you say if I left for a little while?”

She raised her head. “Why are you asking me? Do you need my car?”

“No—no. Not just for the night. For a while—a few months, maybe. Or perhaps permanently, I’m not sure yet.”

Clara put her tea down and scanned his face as if to survey him. He wished, as he always did, that he had some kind of portal into her mind, a way of knowing what she was thinking. She didn’t seem surprised, or shocked, but then—she rarely ever did. There was a coolness to Clara’s demeanor that Howard envied.

“Does this have something to do with the girl you’re seeing?”

“You’ve got me,” he said, a guilty half-smile on his face.

Clara didn’t smile. “You’re not difficult to figure out.”

If he were being honest, he'd admit to himself that he had already decided to leave Clara. He'd told her about his affairs five long years ago, and in that time things hadn't improved. She'd already started pulling away in the years leading up to that moment, but it was only after his confession that she finally detached from him entirely. He would leave her and find the kind of happiness he felt he deserved—with Meg, who had promised to love him for the moment, and, though it seemed less likely, perhaps forever. Howard believed her, to a certain degree—if nothing else, he believed that they were the same kind of liars, the kind who could bluff their way forward but still know when to call the whole thing off.

"I think it's a good idea," Clara said simply. She sipped her tea.

"You do?"

"Yes. It's been a long time coming, don't you think?" Howard considered this. A long time coming, indeed.

"When will you go?"

"Next week," he admitted. He had expected her to put up some kind of fight, however weak—something to show that she cared, that she wanted him there. That all the years they'd spent together hadn't been a waste of time.

Clara shut her book. She stood up, moved around the table, and put her lips against his mouth, her tongue dabbing at the droplets of warm scotch on his lips. Her hand rested lightly upon his leg, as it had hundreds of times before, and he reached for her face, holding its sharp lines in his hands.

"So. Shall we—?" she whispered, pulling back to look at him. "One more time, before you go?" And, as it always was with Clara, he was filled with a sudden burning, blinding desire to know her the way he had before. She hadn't wanted him in so long—they hadn't made love in

over a year. There was always something mysterious in the way her desire moved. She was a glacier—he suspected something always flowed beneath, within. Howard nodded, a little embarrassed at his eagerness, taking her outstretched hand and allowing her to lead the way to the bedroom.

He had been in California nearly four months when he received a note from his wife. Howard had no idea how she found the address. She had always been a letter writer—even in the days of email, she preferred to get out her stack of stationary, and write it all down on paper. She was no good on the phone, she claimed—so to get a note from her was not at all surprising.

I'm pregnant. Try not to laugh, was all it said. It was clearly Clara's deeply swooping handwriting, so neat and regular and vaguely ironic. He dropped the note on the table, put his head in his hands—and then, a moment later, picked it up and read it again. Clara was 47—he thought it would be nearly impossible. Eventually he crumpled it up with one hand, tossing it to the trash.

He must have called her fifty times over the next three days, but she never picked up the phone. Finally, he gave in and wrote her back, with one word, simple and direct: *How?*

One long week later, he received a reply. The mail usually arrived around the time Meg got home from work—he knew this, but spent every day of the next week at the window, watching for the postman. Meg didn't strike him as a jealous woman, but he felt that few women truly lacked the capacity for jealousy—despite anything they said to refute it—and he didn't want to find out. There had been just one time that she had asked him about Clara—after his arrival, while they were in bed together—and when he told her that he hadn't even thought of his

wife since moving to California, she seemed hugely satisfied with his answer. He didn't want to leave any room for suspicion—at least, not before he knew more about what was happening.

When Clara's response appeared, he immediately stuffed it into his coat pocket, waiting for Meg to fall asleep that night before creeping into the kitchen to open it. He could almost hear his wife's voice in his head as he read.

> *How? Cruel fate, of course. I stopped taking birth control years ago—it was silly and embarrassing to keep up with that. So it's my own fault, really. Not entirely unwelcome, just unexpected, as many things are in life. Don't make a fuss. I'm sure your young friend will find it amusing—you, less so. I wish you all the best, Howard—I really do.*

He picked up the phone again; this time, she answered. It was well after 2 a.m. in Illinois.

"Clara," was all he said, closing his eyes and listening to her breathe on the other end. "What do you want me to do?" He didn't know what he was supposed to say, or what he wanted her to say to him in return.

Her response was immediate. "I'm not expecting anything from you."

"Why the hell not? How could I *not* do something?" There was anger in his voice. He felt the weight of her silence on the other end.

"Howard—" Clara said, closing her mouth. He heard her licking her lips, thinking. There was a hint of static on the line, and Howard suddenly feared that he might lose their connection—that he might lose her, right then and there.

"Yes—are you there? Clara?"

"I'm here. I was just thinking—do you think we ever recovered from Rebecca's accident? I'm not talking about each of us, separately—we both dealt with that in our own ways, some good, some bad." Howard heard her emphasis, and he suddenly wondered what she meant by

that—wondered what she had done, and what her own secrets could possibly be in all this. “But, I mean between you and me. Between us.”

Howard shook his head, knowing she had asked just to throw him a rope—to show him she understood. She understood better than he had. He felt himself dip into the deep well of his memories, of the places he never allowed himself to go—and then he was weeping, as quietly as he could manage, trying not to wake Meg. Clara remained on the other end of the line.

Meg wasn’t upset when he left. She received the news with a sudden touch of sadness, or perhaps relief, which was swiftly swept aside by the same blithe cheerfulness with which she handled all news—proving to Howard, yet again, that she was as self-contained as any one person could hope to be. Too late, he was beginning to see that she was more like Clara than he had originally thought. Her incredible openness ran interference for the secret places she never revealed.

At the airport, she gave him a chaste kiss goodbye as she would a father or grandparent that had flown in for a visit. It was nearly November, and after Meg drove away, Howard stood outside the airport doors in his shirtsleeves for a few minutes, just to feel the balmy West Coast air one last time. If nothing else, he was reluctant to part with the state’s fine weather.

To his dismay, his time with Meg had been no different than their time in Chicago—his California days mirrored his Illinois days—and this, he knew, was a failing on his part. He never told Meg that Clara was pregnant—didn’t want to see the way she’d look at him, full of some distant sympathy. It was time to call it quits; they knew when to say goodbye. No need to make it about anything other than that.

He took a taxi to his house late that night; he didn't have the guts to call Clara and ask her to come pick him up at the airport. When he arrived, the house was silent and dark from the street—no lights on, no sound when he opened the front door. Clara's Volvo was parked in the driveway; he knew she was there. He paced quietly through the house, finally ending up where he knew he should have started—in his daughter's old room, where the shades were drawn and the air smelled old, musty.

His wife sat in the shadows, her face hidden. He pushed the door open a little wider, his long shadow stretching into the room in the square of light from the door, looking taller, with more breadth than his aging frame held. There was a pile of old baby furniture just inside the entrance, sorted into random piles of good, possibly useful, and worthless. If Clara was surprised to see him, she didn't show it. She didn't move, didn't flinch, didn't even seem to breathe.

"Clara," he said simply—and, as he stood in the doorway, repeated it again. Her name hung in the air between them.

"You've come back," was all she said. It was almost as if she'd been sitting in that chair for weeks on end. She motioned for him to come to her and he approached, dropped to his knees beside the rocker. He still couldn't see her face, even as he felt her eyes upon him.

"You're right on time," she said, her voice low and faceless. "Here." Clara reached out and took his hand, slowly unfolding each of his fingers to place his palm flat against the warm fabric of her blouse. Howard watched his hand with near fascination, as if it were going to tell him something, an answer to every question he'd ever had—all of the guilt and grief and uncertainty absolved, in this singular moment.

"I don't feel anything," he whispered after a pause, a flicker of panic in his voice.

"Wait for it," she said, her voice low, her tone even. "Just—wait for it. It's coming."

The Pillar Robbers

There was a place at the bottom of the hills, at the low smooth nape of the gold-filled mountains—a place where the land opened up like an intake of air into wide rolling spaces, where things constantly changed and one's eyes strained to see the distant horizon. No silvered silence, only cavernous sky-high quiet swept by the ear-hollow hum of thousands of birds and insects, a carpet of tiny chests beating with brave and delicate rhythm.

Down in the mine, when the darkness closed upon him and pressed against his ribs until he could hardly breathe, Garland closed his eyes and saw this place upon the shade of his eyelids like a film projected from the back of his skull—this place outside the hole, out in the open, where life grew.

At nearly sixty, Garland could remember when it was a country that knew no light but that of God's good daylight. He had worked for Keeling Coal Company for thirty years, yet he still awoke each and every morning with a start, hands clutching at the damp faded sheets, trying to unravel how he had made it so long. When the co-op arrived in 1937 to set their little Alabama town on the electrical grid, young Dick Keeling had come beating the bushes for coal miners to work in his new company. He needed young, strong men to help supply energy to the state. They all knew about electricity, of course; they had seen it in hospitals and lawyer's offices on trips to Birmingham, yet didn't have it in their own homes almost two hours away—not yet, anyway.

At twenty-five, Garland sat in the church that glowed amid bodiless dark buildings and listened to Dick Keeling's speech. With nearly religious fervor, Dick described the deep black

seams of coal beneath their rolling hills and valleys—and how increased demand meant the demand for labor increased as well. They'd be set up with a steady paycheck for the rest of their lives, he said.

Garland had been working his father's farm since he was old enough to walk; he'd never earned a salary. In his pew Garland suddenly saw his place in the world, doing something that only real men did—with Keeling Coal on the northwest side of Jasper, at the southernmost tip of the Appalachian Mountains. And when he started on with Dick Keeling, he never did turn back, hard as he tried.

Garland stubbed his cigarette on a fence post as Keeling's 1961 Chevy pickup pulled into the gravel drive. Two men stepped out.

"This here's Wendell Price," Keeling said, his hand on the shoulder of a tall young man not much older than twenty. "He'll be joining your retreat crew on this shift. Show him the ropes."

Garland nodded as Keeling pushed Wendell toward him and turned back to his truck. The kid looked shifty, maybe a little scared. He was huge, wide shoulders pulling the top half of his navy coveralls taunt across their breadth. *Shit*, Garland thought, hauling his rucksack over his shoulder and gripping the cool metal handle of his lunch pail. The kid ought to be scared—the retreat crew was damn near suicide, and everybody knew it. He'd be lucky to make it six months working down there, even if he was careful. Garland nodded at Wendell, their eyes meeting only briefly, and motioned for the kid to follow to the shuttle car. Garland noticed Wendell looking at his bum leg, which was stiff at the knee and dragged behind him a little when he walked. He adjusted it and raised his arm to point at the mine's entrance.

“I don’t know what Keeling already told you, but this is No. 6—don’t forget that. It’s the oldest company pit here. Been dug out near fifteen years now.”

Wendell didn’t respond, only trailed Garland’s outstretched arm to the yawning entrance.

“That’s important, too—she’s an old mine, unstable and mean, so when you get on your knees every night to say your prayers, you best not forget No. 6.” Garland stopped beside the shuttle car to tip his head back and look at the sun one last time. “If you get stuck down there, you’ll want to remember where you are.” Wendell followed the old man’s lead and swung his clean rucksack into the back of the shuttle, catching the spare hardhat Garland tossed in his direction and settling it carefully upon his head. Climbing in, they lay side by side upon the low-slung bucket seat, their faces turned to the sky.

“We work 8-hour shifts, in pairs—don’t ever go down alone, no matter what,” Garland told him in a low voice. “Now keep your head back. Don’t look around.” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Wendell press his head into the seat as the car rumbled towards the dark mouth of the mine. The young man stiffened as the cold sooty ceiling skimmed the tips of their noses on the long ride down.

Keeling’s retreat crew—a group of six men known simply as the “pillar robbers,” in those parts—was called in to retire the company’s oldest and most unstable mines. When a shaft had been hollowed out by machinery, these men worked in pairs, slowly chipping away at the mine’s wide support pillars until each one gave way. Eventually, parts of the mine’s roof would collapse, the cavern laid to rest when it had been stripped of all value.

Dick Keeling was a miserly businessman and exactly the kind of man who would still pull together a retreat crew, even though most companies had abandoned the practice years ago.

Too dangerous, too much money spent on lawsuits—and too many unions demanding an end to the method. Keeling was smart, though, and because he wanted every ounce of profit stripped from his land, he hired only non-unionized, unskilled workers to join this small group of miners, and paid them all in cash. In the dense mining community surrounding Jasper, Keeling's pillar robbers were regarded as either the bravest or craziest men in town.

Garland was the only exception to Keeling's non-union rule. Unbeknownst to his rep, Garland had served as manager for the crew since the early years of his employment. Keeling had taken a liking to Garland from the start, even from the pew of that glowing church; he appreciated the way Garland kept to himself, never growing comfortable enough to ask questions like other men did. He considered his employee to be a good country boy—maintaining a distance between himself and his boss that Keeling took as a sign of respect, even loyalty.

In truth, Garland understood that Keeling was as dark a horse as they come—a man to be reckoned with. There had been times, over the years, when Keeling had asked Garland to help him dispose of certain items that might impede the profits or progress of the company. He would phone Garland in the middle of the night and then turn up with a bundle, or a bag, or a body wrapped in a rug, and hand it over to Garland without a word. It was understood that Garland would then deliver it to the center of the earth, where it would never be found.

Garland had always been uneasy about this—he was a careful and nervous man by nature. Yet, after that first time he buried a body down below, he knew from then on he was a full partner in Keeling's doings.

Wendell and Garland worked most of their shifts together those first two weeks, Garland using every opportunity to show the young man the lay of the land in the five-and-a-half-foot

No. 6 mine. More than once he demonstrated how to shave the coal carefully along the narrow shimmering seams, and how to bend at the waist to alleviate—in part—the inevitable back pain. Although Wendell was a stubborn, tireless worker, with far more stamina than Garland would have expected, he struggled to follow Garland's directions. He cracked awkwardly at the pillars, flinging soot and chunks of rock in every direction, and constantly nursed his bleeding nose and brow, victims to the low jagged ceiling. Eventually, Garland stopped calling on him to do anything properly. If Wendell didn't bring the whole place down upon them, they'd both be lucky.

In the early hours of their sixth shift together, Wendell and Garland worked near the front of No. 6, shoveling the previous shift's chippings into a half-empty coal cart. Wendell set his shovel down and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, wiping his face. Garland tipped the handle of his shovel against the wall. He looked at Wendell and wiped his mouth with his own kerchief, carefully refolding and edging it into his back pocket.

"You mind if I ask you a question?" Garland asked, dropping to his good knee and rolling into a seated position. He settled his sore back against the wall and wished halfheartedly, like he always did, that he could have a cigarette down below.

"I have a feeling you're going to ask it either way." Wendell slid his shoulders down the wall across from him, pulling a sandwich from his pack.

"What are you doing down here? It sure don't seem like it was your idea, far as I can tell." At Garland's question, Wendell said nothing, his massive shoulders hunched. The muscles in his jaw worked the sandwich in his hands, and in the meager light from the fixtures overhead, Garland could see nothing but the whites of his eyes and the sheen of sweat glistening on his jowls.

"What's it to you?" he asked.

"It's nothin' to me. I'm just curious, is all. You hadn't said much about yourself." Wendell seemed to consider this. He examined his sandwich and picked something off the bread, tossing the crumb a few feet away from where he sat.

"My old man died about a year ago, while I was in the pen. He left me in some pretty serious debt trouble."

"Who're you beholden to?"

Wendell stopped chewing and tilted his head in the direction of the surface. "That ugly bastard up there—Keeling. I expect a lot of folks around here owe him money, one way or another."

Garland nodded slowly, also turning his head to the slick ceiling as if following Wendell's gaze. He suddenly felt very sorry for Wendell. Dick Keeling had a good head for business—good for his mines, and bad for his debtors. Wendell was right to say that many men in Keeling's outfit were in some form of arrears to their employer.

"And Keeling's holding you to that debt?"

Wendell shrugged. "You know as well as me that Keeling's the banker in these parts. He owns our house—he owns the rights to the loan my daddy got. Hell, he owns the grocery store, and the gas station, and the pharmacy—everything. He's going to get what he paid out, and then some."

They sat in silence a few minutes, looking out into the low dark cavern. Garland thought about the days fifteen, even twenty years ago, when they used to go up top to take their meals, and have a smoke. The shifts now were endless.

"I know I'm nosing into your business, but is working on this crew part of the deal?" he asked. Wendell stiffened, and after a short silence, nodded. He cleared his throat.

"He said he'd shave off the interest if I worked for him a while. But I earn my wages just like you. Probably get paid the same as you and everything."

"I never said you didn't."

"I'm just saying. I can work to pay off my debts, just like any man here."

"Sounds like it's more your father's debts."

"My daddy spent all his money on me, trying to get me out of prison—so the way I see it, that debt is just as much mine as it was his. He worked for Keeling a long time, and when he went to him for help, Keeling lent him the cash with the understanding that we'd pay that money back, no matter what. He just couldn't gather the funds to pay him back before he died."

Garland regarded Wendell with a searching look as a thought occurred to him.

"Now, hold on a minute—are you Bobby Price's boy?" Wendell nodded. Garland had only brief interactions with Keeling's other miners, but he had known Bobby in passing. Last time Garland saw Bobby, he was buying cigarettes and coughing up blood into a handkerchief at the Save-N-Go on Hwy. 69.

"Did you know him?" Wendell asked.

"Only met him a couple times. He always worked over in Cordova. I didn't know he had passed."

Wendell didn't respond, and the cavern slid into silence.

"You got any other family around here?" Garland asked.

Wendell shook his head. "I got a sister down in Florida. She wrote to me in prison, once or twice." He kept his eyes on the floor, then looked up. "When I make a dent in this business

with Keeling, I'm going down there to visit her—get her to take me down to the ocean, too. I hadn't ever seen it, but she told me it's the most beautiful thing in the world. I still got her letters, somewhere."

Garland nodded, considering him from beneath the low rim of his hardhat. He reached for his thermos, tipping it toward the young man, but Wendell shook his head.

"It's too bad you couldn't work up top, with all the other young guys. These days most of Keeling's mines are open-pit—those lucky bastards." Garland sipped the tepid liquid from the thermos lid.

"If it's so much better up there, why are you still down here? You could've asked for a transfer—or at least got a job in the headframe."

"I'm used to it now, down here. I'd have to start all over, work my way up in a strip mine with all those young guys. The machines they use do the thinking for you—there's no skill anymore. Keeling's looking for strong backs, not know-how." Garland paused and removed his hardhat, running his fingers through his gray hair. "Besides—I don't know shit about all that business, and I'm sure as hell too old to start learning. Most all the old guys like me got out a long time ago."

"But why did you stick around, then? You got a family?"

Garland rubbed his rough hand along his jaw, shaking his head.

"I'm not married or anything like that, if that's what you mean. Worked to pay off our land when my parents passed away—that was just after I started on with Keeling. A long time ago. Never did have time for much else."

"What happened to your leg?"

The leg no longer bent at the knee. “I can thank No. 2 for this—I had a retreat crew about twenty-five years back, when No. 2 collapsed. That was my very first crew. We had more guys on the regular circuit, then. I’m honestly surprised it didn’t happen sooner. That Keeling, he’s a crazy bastard—wanted us to get out as much as we could. When she collapsed, I lost three men, and my leg was crushed down below. Broke almost all the bones. Hurt like a bitch for a while. Can’t bend it much anymore, but I kept it on me—that’s all I cared about. Not losing any piece of myself.”

“That’s why he’s only got us two down here.”

“Yeah. Two at a time—no more, no less. Just in case.”

“I don’t know how you’ve made it all this time. Without going crazy, I mean. I don’t like all this darkness, and the echoes—I like to have some space.” As Wendell fingering the gash on his forehead, he moved his headlamp to the side. It threw light away from the entrance, where the oily darkness began.

Garland considered. “There are times it gets to you, sure. But you just have to imagine something outside the hole that you’re partial to—say, a woman, or your mama’s cooking, or even a pretty spot. It has to take you out of where you are, just long enough. Then you’re all right again—you can make it a while longer, until you get back up to the surface.” Garland eased himself off the floor, reaching for the handle of his shovel. “Then you come back down and do it all over.”

A month later, Garland arrived at No. 6 early for his evening shift. Dick Keeling sat alone on a dry log near the mine’s entrance, smoking a black cigarette and squinting at the fading

sunlight. He had one elbow propped on a knee, his thick belly pulling at the buttons of his shirt. With the other hand, he motioned for Garland to come sit beside him.

"How's the new kid getting along?" Keeling asked, eying Garland with an amused expression.

"All right, I guess. He don't pay much attention to what I tell him—but we ain't dead, so I guess that's something."

"I didn't expect much from him when he came on."

Garland removed a plastic-covered honey bun from his lunch pail and pulled the sticky wrapper off, discarding it onto the ground.

"Wendell's not so bad. Just don't think sometimes, is all."

Keeling flicked the stub of his cigarette into the bushes. "Shit. That kid is dumb as a rock, Garland."

"Well." Garland stopped chewing. "He said something about a deal you and he had, but I just thought he didn't know any better than to get mixed up in your business."

Keeling laughed. "Oh, I'm sure he don't know any better—but it's not because anybody fooled him. Do you know what he did to end up in jail in the first place?" Keeling rubbed his thick hands together and checked the time on his watch. "He got in with these boys from Sumiton—a couple of schemers printing money in their back shed. Yeah, I know," he said, "*printing* money. So then these boys convinced Wendell to carry that money down to Birmingham and give it a try, see if it would pass. He couldn't have been older than fourteen or fifteen."

Keeling lit another cigarette. "Well, you can bet ole' Wendell thought this was his shot at an easy life—money growing on trees and all that shit. What he didn't know was that those

banks scan every bill before they put it out in circulation, and that the feds damn near perfected the art of spotting counterfeit cash in the system. Especially cash printed in a goddamn shed by a bunch of half-wits." Keeling smiled and leaned back. He brought the cigarette to his mouth again. "Bobby Price worked for me a long time, so I loaned him some money to pay Wendell's fine, and the court costs. All that. Totaled to about seventy thousand, plus interest. That boy got out because of it, eventually—and before he did, he and I came to an understanding on how to pay that money back. Wendell didn't make it out to see his daddy before he died, but that's got nothing to do with me."

Garland finished his dinner, snapping his lunch pail closed.

"When do you think he'll be ready?" Keeling said.

"For what?"

"To take over for you."

The setting sun dipped behind the rock wall at their backs, and from his place in its shadow Garland followed the sharp line of daylight that cut across the ground just in front of where they sat. It wouldn't move in his direction anymore—it would only slip further away.

"Where am I going, Dick?"

Dick smiled at him, in a gummy way that made Garland sick to his stomach. "Nowhere. But you've been doing this a long time, and I think somebody else should do it, now. I need a stronger fellow down there. To handle things."

The sound of the approaching shuttle car rattled the mine's entrance and Keeling eased himself off the log, checking his watch again. He turned back to Garland, his face shaded and unreadable against the evening sky.

"Just keep an eye on him. Try to keep him out of trouble."

"And you're sure Wendell's the one you want?"

"He doesn't have much of a choice, the way I see it."

"But what if he won't do it?"

"I'm not in the business of making slaves out of folks. But what do you think is really going to happen, Garland? I mean, when it's all said and done?"

Later, Garland lay on his back in the upstairs room of the house where he grew up. His talk with Keeling had left him uneasy, and he was trying to place the feeling in the pit of his belly. Part of him demanded he be impartial to the whole situation—the way he'd separated his dealings with Keeling from his real life, all those years—but part of him knew that Keeling had turned those years into something Garland wouldn't wish on anyone.

A fly buzzed around his head in the direction of the light and floated there amid the glittering dust, suspended, and he watched it with undue attention. A thought struck him. He weighed it in his mind and sat up.

Off the bed and down the narrow stairs he went, past the ancient grandfather clock and his mother's needlepoint artwork, his father's shotgun mounted above the kitchen door. Walls filled with black-and-white photos of him as a child—no newer children, no fresh progeny to fill those frames. No one left even to remind him of this anymore.

Garland stopped in front of his mother's low sideboard. He dropped to his knee and opened the left-hand door, reaching for the mahogany box on the top shelf. Standing with the box in one hand, he hooked the other around the side of the cabinet, running his palm gingerly down its backside, just past the corner—fingers skimming smooth unstained wood until he found the single nail, and the delicate brass key upon it. The box opened on the dining room table with

a snap, and inside—the money. Garland had a strange, abiding sense of certainty, and the more he thought about it, the more he knew that now was as good a time as any.

The two men had worked together for nearly four months before Garland brought it up.

"So what if you could get out—head somewhere? The way I see it, you've got no good reason to stick around, outside of settling up with Keeling."

Wendell paused in his work, breathing hard. He turned towards Garland.

"What the hell you saying?"

"You heard me—what if you could get out of this business with Keeling and start fresh?"

"I don't have any reason to run away. And I'm not scared of Keeling."

"Like hell you're not. Everybody's scared of Keeling, and there's more than one good reason why you should be, too." Garland's voice was hard. "It's going to take you a long time to pay him back—maybe the rest of your life. Even if you do pay him off, you better believe he'll think of some other way to keep you jerking on his line. You'll spend all your days down here and won't get anything from it but another week in the black." Garland could see Wendell's mind working behind his eyes.

"So I should run off and spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder?"

Garland shook his head.

"You can't run from him. He knows everybody in this state, and he'd make sure he found you, one way or another—wherever you went. You'd have to be dead to be free of him."

"I already knew that." Wendell turned back to the pillar he was working on.

Garland dropped the head of his pickaxe to the ground and leaned heavily on the handle. He lowered his voice as the echoes subsided. "There's a ventilation shaft about a quarter-mile

in," he said, nodding his head toward the heart of the mountain, "a skinny little hole that runs right up to the surface. It's probably four hundred yards to the top, at least. There are some rungs up the inside—not a proper ladder, but something to hold onto—and it's just big enough for a man. It comes out at the bottom of this mountain, near the Black Warrior. If you could make it—and I'm not saying you would, because I can't say for sure either way—but if you did, you could climb out that shaft and not look back."

"You seen it with your own eyes?"

"Once."

"And Keeling?"

"I'd give you a good head start. Then bring this room down myself—they'd think you were a goner for sure. Keeling won't dig up a body if nobody's asking for it—it's too expensive, and too many workers get taken off his other mines. They'd carry the preacher over here. Have a little service at the head. No. 6's been fixing to collapse for a long time now, and Keeling knows it. Hell—that's why he's got you here, anyhow. You don't know any better."

Wendell seemed to consider Garland's offer.

"My house, the land—what'll I do about that?"

"Leave the house—don't take anything. Don't tell anyone. You can't go to your sister's either. Just disappear."

Wendell paused.

"You can't go to her," Garland repeated.

"And you? What'll you do?"

"After you take off, I'll pull some of the roof bolts, put a few sticks in the coal seam. I'd just follow behind. It won't take much."

Wendell cocked his head, quizzical. “You’d disappear.”

“They’d be more likely to believe the whole thing if they thought I was dead, too.”

“But why are you running?”

Garland looked at the ground. He rubbed his neck with a free hand. “Keeling and I have done a lot of business together over the years—some good, some bad. Things I don’t like to think about. It’s time we be done with it. Be good for both of us, really.”

Wendell nodded, but didn’t press. “And you’d get out alright?”

“Well, sure, Wendell,” Garland said, reaching for his pickaxe again. “This ain’t my first rodeo.”

When the day arrived, Garland awoke early to get ready for his shift. He took his time going through the house, tidying up the rooms, wiping down the picture frames displayed in the living room. He washed all the dishes in the sink. He wanted his house in order if things didn’t go as well as he hoped—but even if they did, he knew he wouldn’t be coming back. His instincts told him to expect the worst, but he felt calm, and this comforted him.

Garland’s habit of keeping to himself had paid off over all those years—kept him alive, kept him working—yet he had never considered that it also kept his house empty, and his life free of the warmth other people seemed to know. Now—too late, perhaps—his service to Wendell was as good as anything he could think of. He just hoped he wasn’t sending Wendell into a life as lonely as the one he had created for himself.

They arrived at the mine’s entrance just as two members of their crew, Jack and Leon, came off the previous shift. Garland and Wendell stood next to one another in silence as the men

unloaded their things, bone-tired and shrouded in black grime. They nodded greetings to one another, but did not speak. There was a code among the retreat crew, small as it was; it intimated that minding your own business was always the best course of action. Wendell had arrived in his customary navy coveralls, his dirty rucksack a little fuller than usual, and Garland had done the same. They eyed one another across the shuttle car as Jack and Leon slowly gathered their things and hoisted themselves into their trucks.

"Did you do anything special to your daddy's house before you left?" Garland asked.

"No. Just left it like I always do."

"Good, that's good." Garland stooped to crank the shuttle car. From their trucks, the two soot-covered miners watched them climb into the shuttle. They waved a sort of salute to Wendell and Garland as they entered the dark opening.

The sounds of the surface faded with the light, and soon they were enveloped by subterranean quiet. Down below, upon the rock floor, they emptied out their bags—Wendell's full of food and a few changes of clothing, Garland's stuffed with a fat brown sack. Garland opened the top of the sack and tipped it toward Wendell. It was full of money.

Wendell said nothing and Garland rolled the wrinkled top back on itself.

"I figure you'll need some cash to get you going."

"I can't take that from you, Garland—borrow from one man to get away from another."

"Sure you can," Garland said, shaking his head. "If an old man offers you money, you just take it. You don't ask questions."

"It must be all your savings."

"I've got other money. I want you to take this part with you—we'll meet up, eventually." Garland pushed the sack towards him, and met Wendell's eyes with a hard look. "Go on—take

it." Wendell reached for the sack. He stuffed it in his bag with the rest of his belongings, and zipped it up tight.

"You'd best get going if you want to make it out before sunset," Garland said. Wendell raised his eyes to the old man's, searching his face.

"Garland."

"Yeah?"

"I don't expect I can properly thank you—not just for the money, but for everything. All of it."

"Well," Garland said. His mouth went dry. "You deserve a fair shot."

Wendell nodded, offering his hand in the space between them.

"You're acting like this is some sort of goodbye," Garland said, taking his hand firmly. The palm was raw and warm, covered in black.

"Isn't it?" Wendell responded. Garland's arm dropped to his side. He reached down and pulled at his calf to make his leg straighter.

Wendell turned and made his way towards the center of the earth.

Garland waited until he heard the boy's steps fade. He guessed it would take him fifteen minutes to get to the bottom of the hole, back where the ceiling dropped to three feet and less—and probably another half hour to find his footing and climb to the top. From the bottom of his rucksack, he carefully removed a smooth bundle of dynamite. It was solid in his palm. He weighed it thoughtfully—probably ten pounds, at least. Then he placed it on a smooth dry slice of rock near the entrance.

Along the wall his fingers searched—black with soot, hardly recognizable now. They looked like the hands of a dead man to him. He found a decent-sized hole, and steadily picked at it with his axe until a pile of rock shavings formed at his feet. When it was about six inches deep and a few inches wide, he retrieved the bundle and slid it carefully into the hole, fingering the blasting cap to ensure a tight fit with the roll of fuse in his other hand. He uncoiled the fuse, snaking it back behind the shuttle car. Then he set to work on the roof bolts, prying out any of the long iron rods that would budge and tossing them to the center of the room. The air trembled with the echo of their clattering. With each thrust, the mine's pregnant beams groaned, baptizing him with a sprinkle of black soot.

Garland looked at his watch and pressed his back against the shuttle car, his leg stiff in front of him. He zipped his coveralls up to his neck and pulled the strap of his hardhat tight beneath his chin. He closed his eyes. He whispered to himself with noiseless moving lips, dry mouth working. And as his black-tipped fingers felt through the air for the end of the fuse, he kept his eyes sewn tight and reached into the delicate well of his mind—to find himself there, in that place. Where Wendell climbed out of the dark hole and onto the golden nape of that mountain, his mountain, and stood there in the full embrace of the sun looking out upon the land that was all his.

In Terms of Distance, Not Far

They had worked together for nearly six years by the time George laid eyes on Annie, and when they finally met—hands extended, smiles nervous, an awkward intimacy existing between them, almost as if they'd been longtime pen pals or onetime high school sweethearts—he found himself wishing he had created a more complete picture of her in his mind. George had taken off from LaGuardia in an early New York autumn, watching the auburn-tipped leaves of distant trees fade below him—only to land three hours later in the humid, lingering grip of an Alabama summer. He and Annie were used to all the traditional means of business communication—talking over the phone each and every day, emailing one another when they were going on vacation or out sick—yet the strangeness of the whole thing gave him a sense of unease, a feeling of being at odds with himself. Then, when the tall, thin woman with a dark head of curls and a cardboard sign with his name scrawled across its front extended a hand to him the afternoon of his arrival, he simply didn't know what to say.

It wasn't that she was more or less attractive than he expected, because he had carefully prepared himself for the possibility of both. It was that she simply wasn't what he expected. In their years of working together, he had leaned on the comfort of her voice on the other end. He pictured Annie as a blonde, short and round—pleasant, comforting. She had once had a husband, but he knew she was recently divorced; he had expected some of that strain to show up on the lines of her face, and on the width of her waistline. The Annie he met was not that at all—and, despite himself, he was pleasantly surprised.

Annie wasn't quite sure what to tell her coworkers at the magazine about why George was in town. He hadn't really told her himself—just that he would arrive on a Monday morning, and that he would need a ride from the airport. She didn't want to make up a reason for his visit; in fact, she didn't even know why it occurred to her to lie about it in the first place. So she told them exactly what he had told her: That he would be in the office on Monday afternoon and then out the rest of the week. That he would want a tour of their new building, of course, and that he'd probably want to sample some good southern BBQ before he took off back to New York. That was it. It had been many years since he'd last visited Birmingham, George had told her before he left, and he wanted to see how everything had changed in that time.

In publishing, you got used to working with someone in another time zone. Annie was employed by at a small regional publishing company in Birmingham, home to a bi-monthly medical publication that delivered healthy-living tips to diabetic households across the Southeast; George was a marketing rep for the magazine at the company's corporate headquarters in Manhattan. Together, they worked out the pagination of the publication each month, negotiating the space between George's ads and Annie's edit. It wasn't a large or complicated operation, and she was used to dealing with people in New York each and every day. Over the years, Annie had found that a curious observer could learn a lot about someone's life just by piecing together daily conversations and emails. At this point, she felt that she likely knew just about everything there was to know about George, despite the fact that they had never met in person. He loved coconut cake; he hated bananas. He was a nice guy—polite yet ironic over email, with a pleasant and reassuring voice on the phone. Father of two, married; lived in quiet suburban New Jersey with an hour-long commute into the city each day.

Like George, Annie had also been nervous when he emerged from the gate that Monday afternoon—worried, mostly, that she had been too forward in inviting him to her home for dinner that night.

"I don't want to put you out, Annie," George had said to her over the phone, his voice edged in a strange formality, a last ditch effort to keep things businesslike It wasn't until she had sworn up and down that her cooking was better than anything he'd find near his hotel that he relented, and amicably so.

At the airport, Annie saw that he was a rather short man, solidly built, with deep auburn hair and ruddy skin peeking from beneath the sleeves of his dark suit. She'd brought the cardboard sign to the arrivals gate just in case, holding it self-consciously at her side as if she had forgotten it was there—and yet, when she saw him, she recognized him immediately. A few nights prior to his arrival she had furtively Googled his name and found his photo on the corporate website. Now, standing there, she saw what she already knew: that he was handsome, though not so young as in the photo. Perhaps better looking.

Privately, Annie had her own ideas about the reason behind George's visit—though only a very small part of her had allowed these thoughts in the first place. She and George were very close, particularly for two people working long distance, and she felt that maybe—just maybe—one of the reasons for his trip had been to see her. She knew it was ridiculous to assume such a thing, yet she couldn't deny that he'd been behaving differently lately—calling her at work at late hours, keeping her on the phone for longer than usual. Annie was a night owl, usually the only one left in the office after seven; George, she knew, took the 6:30 p.m. train out of the city every evening, and he had routinely missed it to stay late at the office.

In their nightly conversations they talked mostly about work—and, occasionally, one or the other would drift into a story from their day, or from the previous weekend, and they would laugh together on the phone until one of them shook loose from the revelry of their conversation and found a way to wrap it up. This had been going on for nearly two months—starting out slowly, at first, and building into a regular pattern.

All that time, Annie couldn't shake the feeling that George was feeling her out, trying to get a sense of something—something he wasn't letting on about over the phone. She was a little ashamed that when she'd Googled him, she'd also immediately done the same to his wife, a woman he'd mentioned with less regularity in recent weeks: *Patricia Ellison, New York City*. Annie was equally disappointed and relieved when nothing came up.

At Annie's apartment building later that night, George stood outside on the dark cobblestone street to finish his cigarette before going upstairs. The tall brick structure was situated in an old industrial section of downtown Birmingham—it looked to be an old factory or mill of some kind—and George marveled at the quiet emptiness of the street, tilting his head back to blow smoke toward the sky. He placed the bottle of wine he'd brought on the ground and stretched to take off his jacket. Music floated down from an open window above him, and George wondered to himself if he'd be able to pull off what he had come to do—if Annie was the kind of woman he'd judged her to be.

Upstairs, Annie smiled at him as she opened the door and stood in her bare feet on the cool concrete floor, an old floral apron covering her simple black dress. As George leaned forward to kiss her cheek, he ran his eyes up and down her body; he was surprised at how fresh she looked, standing there in her large, airy kitchen—her hair a touch frizzy, her cheeks flushed

from the oven's steam, one heel arched shyly on top of the other foot. George was careful not to say anything about her appearance, and the absence of his compliment hung electric in the air between them.

She immediately ushered him over to a set of tall glass doors lining the back wall of the apartment, sliding one of the doors back to reveal a spacious, comfortable patio. George stepped out to admire a sweeping view of the twinkling lights and lazy, looming steel giants of Birmingham's city skyline.

"Annie—this is incredible," George breathed. "Just like you described over the phone."

"I know it doesn't look so great from the street, but it's hard to beat this view."

"It would take a couple million dollars to get this kind of space in New York. At least."

Annie followed him to the railing. On her way she picked up her shawl from the back of a chair and swung it around her shoulders, hugging it tightly across her breasts.

"Well, when you don't have any kids—you can do whatever you want, I guess. This used to be a pretty sketchy area, but my ex-husband—Sean—and I bought this place about two years ago. Right before the whole neighborhood blew up."

She gestured to the steel-and-glass high rise a few blocks away, and the handful of trendy shops and restaurants populating the street below. "I guess I have him to thank for convincing me to go through with it. I wanted the white picket fence, the lawn mower, the good schools—he wanted this view, and to avoid acting like a full-fledged adult for a little while longer." Annie smiled, turning back to George. "In the end neither of us got what we wanted, but we got some things we didn't expect—and I got this. Not such a bad deal."

George nodded. Annie excused herself to bring out the food on a tray—pecan-crusted tenderloin and smashed potatoes and green beans blistered in white wine. George let out a low

whistle, and Annie blushed, a flattering pink glow that spread up her neck and into the apples of her cheeks.

They enjoyed one another's company for the rest of the evening—George told Annie about his recent business trip to Tucson, and Annie told George stories from her latest vacation to Greece, the one she took alone, without Sean. They talked very little about work, and, even then, only used its banality to fill the lulls—it was the thing that acted as a binder throughout the evening, piecing together the loose ends of their conversation.

"So why are you really here, George? In Birmingham, I mean. It's a long way from home." Annie smiled warmly at him over the rim of her wine glass. The food was cold and nearly gone; both of them leaned back in their chairs. The sky was clear and cool, a navy blanket that embraced the contours of the city skyline. "Surely you haven't come with a mission from corporate to fire me—I feel certain you wouldn't have eaten my food and drank my wine if you were playing grim reaper."

George laughed; then, putting down his wine glass, his face slowly grew earnest. He leaned forward in his chair.

"Actually, what I'm about to say is quite serious—so, I'm sorry to break the jovial mood." Annie tilted her head and sat up straight. He continued. "First, though, you have to listen and hear me through, the whole thing, before you say anything or make a decision. You know that we've worked together a long time, and that I trust you—that's why I'm here."

Annie shifted in her chair. "You're making me a bit nervous," she said, her smile tight. She drew a breath. "But tell me. I'm all ears."

"The thing is—I'm going to have surgery on Wednesday morning, and I need your help."

Annie stared at him. Then she nodded, prompting him forward with a gesture of her hand.

"I'm a match for someone who needs a kidney very badly." Here George paused, taking another deep breath, "and, after a lot of thought, I've decided to give it to him. The thing is—and this is the part that will be most difficult to understand, so bear with me—my wife doesn't know. And I don't want to tell her—ever."

"You don't want her to know." Despite her better intentions, Annie felt a tiny part of herself swell with pride. She tried to suppress the emotion, but she now held a secret to which George's wife was not privy, and this fact somehow sealed the intimacy that she and George had cultivated over the years. She reached out and took George's hand, which he gripped gratefully.

"She wouldn't approve. And she doesn't know about the situation."

"Tell me where I fit into this."

"I'm required to have someone sign off on the paperwork as my next of kin before I can go under anesthesia. I don't have anyone else I trust to help me, so I need you to pretend to be my next of kin. You can be my sister, my cousin—whatever. I trust you very much, Annie."

After a long pause, Annie found her voice again. "Who is the kidney for?"

"My son."

His response hung between them in the cool air like an accusation, or a confession.

"I thought your kids were in the city."

"That's right," he said. "He's a child from another relationship. My wife doesn't know about him. He was born just after I married Patricia, almost 11 years ago."

"That's pretty goddamn huge, George. You've kept him a secret, all this time."

"It's not a *secret*, per say." George shrugged. His face was ashen, pained. "More like something I've never mentioned. Something we've never discussed. The thing is—and I know

what you're going to think here, so I need you to just try really hard to see my side on this—but I've never actually met him myself."

Annie dropped his hand. "Jesus *fucking* Christ, George," she said, louder than she intended. She suddenly thought about the proximity of her neighbors and their adjoining balconies, and picked up her wine glass to take a deep sip.

George continued, his words coming out in a rush. "His mother is a woman I met a long time ago—a woman I slept with just a few times. I was down here for a sales meeting, and met her at a bar downtown. Her name is Deb—and my son's name is Caleb."

"Why didn't his mother want you to know him?"

"Deb hasn't prevented me from knowing him—I wish I could say that was the case, but that's not true. When I found out she was pregnant, I asked her to take care of it—to just *handle* the whole thing. I told her my situation, but ultimately it was her decision. She decided she wanted to keep the baby. Her family has plenty of money, so we both knew she didn't really need my help to raise him—at least, not in that way." George rubbed his rough face with one hand, looking over Annie's shoulder and into the darkness beyond the patio, unable to meet her eyes. "The thing is, I didn't know the first thing about kids back then—I didn't have any of my own yet, didn't even *want* any of my own at that time, and Patricia and I were just about to get married. I knew for sure that Patty would have left me the minute she found out—she's just so black and white like that."

Annie realized she'd been gripping the round glass belly of her wineglass to her chest, and now she slowly put it down on the table as George continued.

"Deb called me about a month ago; apparently Caleb's had some health problems for some time. I don't even know how she found me, to be honest—but when she called, Deb told

me that both of his kidneys are failing. She asked me to have a test done, just to see if I was a match—she wasn't, and of course, I am." George paused, his voice a little hoarse. He watched Annie's face, trying to figure out if he'd lost her along the way. "I can't tell you how much I wanted that test to go the other way," he continued, his voice hardly above a whisper. "It keeps me up at night, wishing I weren't a match for him. You can't imagine how much it makes me hate myself to feel that way—even worse than I normally do when I think about Caleb."

Annie nodded. George watched as she reached across the table between them to put her hand over his again; he turned it over, gripping her palm. Then he let go, pulling away from her.

"The thing is," he continued, "I never wanted to have a relationship with him because I didn't want my wife to know. It was a long time ago, but—now we're going through a hard time ourselves, 10 years in, and I think in her mind, the fact that I was unfaithful to her right before we got married might mean something larger and more significant in the context of our present situation. I think she would leave me over this."

"I think you've made that option very, very appealing at this point. If I were her—"Annie paused. She leaned back in her chair, folding her shawl tighter around her narrow shoulders. "God, George. If I were her, I'd be more humiliated that you kept this secret from me all these years, than angry over the initial indiscretion. It's so much worse now than it ever had to be."

George nodded, his face drained of color. "I know—I really do know that, I've always known that. But somehow—this kind of lie, it becomes bigger and bigger the longer it goes on. I can't even imagine having to tell her now, because it's just so fucking *sad*. And now, this—I almost didn't come down here. I thought, I just can't do this to Patricia—but at the same time, I can't let my kid die because I wasn't willing to help him."

"We agree on that. So—is this the whole reason you came down here?"

George nodded, and she turned away from him. He knew she needed time to process what he had asked of her, so he stopped talking for a little while. He leaned back in his own chair, reflecting on what a relief it was to finally tell someone about his situation—to express the overwhelming fear and the aching disappointment he felt in himself. He had finally exposed the scope of his selfishness with another human being, and, more than anything else, he was thankful that Annie was removed enough from the situation to not be hurt by him. She could—and probably did—think he was a selfish asshole, but he couldn't hurt her the way he knew he would hurt Patricia. That, at least, was a comfort.

Annie reflected with silent, self-hating fury on the kind of evening she had expected—the one she had prepared for. She ran down the checklist in her mind: the candles, her mother's famous pork tenderloin recipe—even the good red wine, the two bottles she'd spent too much money on. She was humiliated by her foolishness: that old dumb hope that continued to resurface, despite her age and all her experiences with men. She should have known better, she told herself. George had probably noticed all the fuss she'd made; the minute he'd walked in the door he probably guessed at what she wanted from him, and what she'd thought would happen later that night.

Annie shifted uncomfortably in her chair, her face flushing as she remembered the lacy underwear she'd picked out, unearthed from the bottom of her lingerie drawer. She would have guessed—hoped, even—that she and George would be in her bed by now, glistening and exhausted from urgent, passionate sex—not sitting in a static silence, at some kind of deeply moral, quasi-spiritual impasse.

After a while, though, she began to inch down from the sharp peak of her embarrassment, slowly considering the magnitude of what George had just told her. She thought back to what he'd said—about his deep trust in her—and marveled at the ease with which he'd confided in her. He'd never trusted his wife with this information, and, despite herself, she felt as if she'd won some small victory over a woman she didn't know.

She was attracted to George, of course, and though she was disappointed that he hadn't come down to see just her, there was something larger at hand. She realized that *she* wanted to be the one to help him—after all, he didn't want his wife's help. He wanted hers.

Privately, she knew she'd always been like that toward men. Everyone from her mother to her therapist to her best friend told her the same thing, time and time again—that she picked the wrong guys because she wanted to save them. One former boyfriend even told people that she was the one who made him "a better man"—and when she heard him say it for the first time, she felt like her heart would burst within her chest. Annie hadn't liked the guy all that much, but she'd never felt so fundamentally necessary, or so unabashedly feminine. It became her secret goal to always be that kind of partner to a man.

George wanted to do the right thing—this was his moment—and there must have been something about her that made him feel safe enough to follow through, with her help. From that point forward, when he thought about his son, he would think about her.

"Alright," she said finally. She motioned for another cigarette, which he quickly lit and handed to her. "OK. Now it's your turn to listen to me."

George nodded, his face tense.

"I have to be honest with you, George: I don't like this, and I think you understand why. You've been lying to your wife about something so fundamental, so basic to your identity on this

earth—man of conscious, noble husband, father of children, all that stuff. It's wrong, and she deserves better than that, no matter what kind of hard times you guys might be experiencing right now."

Annie stopped and breathed deeply, gathering her thoughts. She brought the cigarette to her lips and sucked on it, exhaling a long plume of smoke into the cool night air. "That said, I'm also not your moral compass—and I can't make you do what I think is right. I'm sure as hell not going to tell her myself, though the thought did cross my mind. That's all on you. But if you're planning to go through with this regardless, I'm willing to help you. If you trust me that much."

George's face seemed to flood with relief. He opened his mouth to speak.

"Wait," she said, holding up her hand. Her voice was quiet now. "Don't thank me yet. You just have to get through it safely—that's your job. Then you can thank me."

Annie watched the glowing end of her cigarette. She spoke again, not looking at him.

"I know I shouldn't ask this question at a time like this—and please don't think it's bad manners or anything like that—but if I do this, will you come back?"

George thought about this in silence.

"Of course," he said finally. "I asked you for a reason, Annie."

They sat in a stretch silence that lasted for what felt like hours, the late summer evening swallowing them up in coolness and quiet. They both turned their chairs towards the skyline, smoking and watching the lazy traffic below as planes glided down toward the airport further away. A train sounded its horn in the distance, deep and low, like a child's wail in the night.

Two days later, George opened his eyes to see Annie sitting next to him, curled up in the little gray hospital chair beside his bed. Her long body was twisted in a strangely elegant way,

her dark curls falling over her knees, and he watched her for a while, the woozy weight of his anesthesia slowly ebbing away as his consciousness took hold.

He felt a kind of clarity he had never felt before, lying in that bed. Suddenly he wondered if he might already be dead—if he hadn't made it through the surgery at all, if Annie was sitting beside him, waiting for his wife to arrive and take his body home. Slowly, he began moving each of his fingers, one by one. He wiggled his toes, and gently lifted his arm to touch the dull ache in his bandage-covered side. The heart rate monitor confirmed the fact of his life with a steady and reassuring tone. His time had not come, after all, and he was relieved.

Then George turned his eyes back to Annie and looked at her as if seeing her for the first time. He felt as if he were looking down into a bottomless well, one that had been there since the beginning of time, and he knew, with his strange newfound clarity, that he had used up this woman's goodness to get what he wanted; he felt incredible sorrow over this fact. It was a depth of emotion that somehow carried no fear, no shame, no guilt—only sorrow, as pure a thing as he had ever known, like a dull yellow light extending the length of his body and out the tips of his fingers and the top of his head, warming him from the inside.

He wasn't in love with her, this he knew for sure—but he'd wanted her to think that he could be in love with her, just to carry them both through to this moment. She was an attractive woman—this he couldn't deny—and he could perhaps have started something with her the way he'd started things with other women since he married Patricia. And yet—he had taken things far enough.

Annie opened her eyes, blinking in the light from the window.

"How are you feeling?" she asked sleepily. "Been up long?"

"Just about 30 minutes or so."

"Why didn't you wake me? Here I am, sleeping harder than the patient."

"You looked so peaceful," he said gently, leaning his head back against the pillows.

"Can I get you anything?"

"No," he said. "Thanks."

Annie stretched her arms over her head and yawned. She looked at her watch.

"Listen," she said gently, meeting his eyes again. "I took a little walk while you were in surgery."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. I want to show you something—you think you could handle a little ride? You don't need to be walking, but the nurse said I could roll you around in the wheelchair if you were up to it."

George eyed her curiously. "Yeah—OK. Let's get out of here."

Annie disappeared from the room, then rolled in a wheelchair from the hall and put the brakes on next to his hospital bed; she helped ease him into the seat, carefully lifting him as he winced in pain.

"You sure you're OK?" she asked. He nodded, and she pushed him out the door and down a sunny corridor, where George closed his eyes and let the light warm his face. When she stopped outside a glassed-in hospital room, in a wing not far from his own room, she wheeled him around to look at her. Then she squatted in front of him.

"I know you didn't want me to do this, but I met him, George," she breathed. "They did your surgeries at the same time. He'd been waiting for you. He's a nice kid—a sweet kid. Looks so damn like you." She leaned in closer to talk in his ear, her eyes fixed on a spot behind him,

her cheek cool against his face. His nose grazed the delicate edge of her jawbone, and he closed his eyes to take in the scent of her neck.

"Don't you want to at least see him?" she whispered. She leaned back to stand up, nodding to the glass behind him.

Startled, George looked up at her with an ashen face.

"Annie," he began. "No. Please don't."

"What are you afraid of?"

"This was not yours to do."

"But it's the *right* thing to do—Jesus, George. You told me you wanted to do the right thing. You've come all this way—he's here, now." Annie's face was open and full of expectation—a still life of certainty. George looked up at her, a slow boiling anger whirling like a quiet furnace within him, his head heavy at the top of his spine. Finally, George pulled himself up to his cold bare feet, calves pressed hard against the wheelchair, gripping Annie's forearm for support—and he looked through the glass, at the little body on the bed. Then he sat down, his face hard.

"Take me back," he said, releasing her arm.

Annie didn't look down at him, her body remaining perfectly still; he watched her in profile, willing her to meet his eyes. There was something in her stillness that told him she'd just figured him out—and George knew with a kind of devastating certainty that she was the only person in the world to know him fully, even now. The space between them grew cold, and George stayed there for as long as he could remember staying anywhere else—rooted to the ground, unable to look away.

Night Comes Early to the Valley

Long before evening she had fallen asleep in the little straight-backed chair by the window, mouth wide open, silver hair tilted against the fabric of the headrest—and now the phone was ringing again. Vera started and cracked one eye, blinking in the afternoon glow from the window as she turned her stiff neck to look out over the front yard. The usual silence of her home had a vacant hum to it—a white noise of dripping faucets and wheezy window units. Cars whirled by on the distant street below. The phone pierced the silence as it sang and gargled on the wall in the kitchen; she didn't turn her head to look towards the sound. She sat there until her eyes adjusted to the bright afternoon, knowing without even thinking about it anymore that whoever it was on the other end of the phone—probably her son, she sensed with some measure of confidence, the phone's ringing growing anxious with each passing beat—would have to wait until she was ready.

"It's Dad," her son said later, sounding stiff and wrung-out on the other end. He spoke before she greeted him. "Hospice says he probably only has a few days left." Vera closed her eyes, leaning against the wall. She wondered how she could blame her son, Michael, even now. She had always taken care of things for him—taken whatever was trembling in his hands into her own firm grip. But this—her dying, estranged husband, Sam—this Vera had left for her son to deal with, and she found it difficult to feel the guilt that might plague other mothers.

"I'm sorry to hear it," she responded.

"He wants you to come see him."

"You said that earlier, when you called—I got your messages."

"Mother. Please."

"He's not talking any more—is that right?"

"Not since I got here."

"Then I don't understand how he told you he wants to see me."

"It was before—on the phone, every time we talked. He asked about you all the time. I just think it'd be good to see him before it's all over."

"So you're saying *you're* the one that wants me to come see him. Is that it?" There was a silence on the other end of the phone.

"Is she there?" Vera asked finally.

"Who?"

"You know 'who,' Michael."

"Daphne is here, yes. Can't get her to leave his side—though, honestly, I'm glad she's around to help me out. We sit with him in shifts."

"She not living in Kentucky anymore?"

"She still has a house there. But she's retired now—I called her when hospice initially called me, and she decided to come down and help."

Vera could hear the relief in Michael's voice, and her cheeks suddenly burned. Daphne was her husband's girlfriend of fifteen years—fifteen years that she knew about, though they had likely known one another much longer than that. They had started their relationship five years before Vera left Sam in the first place. Vera reminded herself silently that she hadn't left Sam a decade ago over Daphne; she had left Sam because of Sam.

Vera sighed, rubbing her temple with one hand. "You know I don't want to go over there," she whispered into the receiver.

"Five minutes—he wants five minutes with you. You're still his wife, for God's sake."

"Only in the eyes of the law."

She heard her son exhale. "But does that mean noth—" he stopped short, collecting himself. "I don't know what else to do."

"Michael. Michael, listen to me. I spent over forty years on your father—forty years of my life, waiting on him hand and foot, only to be—" here she stopped short, breathing, her eyes resting on the stretch of plaster where the phone cradle clung, lonely and pathetic.

"Well—anyhow," she sighed. "What he wants is a long-suffering wife to hold his hand and cry over him in his final hours. I'm not his wife anymore. Not like he wants. He's already got one woman with him. I won't do it."

"Mom." His voice leaned on her as if he were standing right there, pressing her body against the plaster. "I'll just keep calling. As long as he's still breathing—"

"Well, maybe you won't be calling much longer."

There were things, of course, which neither her husband nor her son ever knew about Vera—things she could not erase from her own memory or conscience. Michael had been thirty-five when she'd left Sam. He was a grown man then with his own problems and his own family. The separation seemed to frighten Michael in a suddenly profound way, and Vera never talked with him about it. For more than a year after she moved out of the house—50 miles northwest, to an apartment near downtown Huntsville—she and her son didn't communicate at all.

That had been the toughest stretch, when she felt she had lost her son's love completely. He was the light of her life—though she couldn't express this to him, even if she wanted to—and like all the other mothers of sons that came before and after her, she trained herself to be content,

watching from afar. It was a strange thing. He was her only child, and she assumed she just didn't understand him—yet, no one truly understood anyone else. All she had been through had taught her that. To see him happy had to be enough.

If she was being honest with herself—honesty had never been her strong suit, though she'd adopted it more and more as she'd gotten older, for no other reason besides her own exhaustion with the marathon of a lie—she'd admit her relief when Michael sided with Sam over the whole thing. She knew that he saw his father's decision to carry on with another woman as inherently wrong—and yet, in the end, he also saw Vera's decision to leave as a throwing away of forty decent years. There was a disparity between the two, and he clearly evaluated Sam's faults at a lower standard than her own. So, just as Vera was content to love her son from afar, she also allowed him to continue weighing the two unequally. In Michael's eyes, she had abandoned the ship right when it was headed into the storm. She was leaving Michael to deal with the mess of his father's old age—and, she suspected, the mess of dealing with her old age as well.

Strangely, Michael's animosity toward her freed her from her husband in a way she never could have predicted. Her decision had alienated her son, yet it was her decision alone, and with it, she was outside the reach of Sam from that point forward. She had left their home in a light summer dress and with nothing else—he could have it all, but he couldn't have her.

Eventually, Vera agreed to see her husband, and Michael came to her apartment to pick her up at one in the afternoon. Their destination was a good hour south, deep into the country—to Vinemont, where she and Sam had been born and raised.

“I have to be back by 5:30,” she said over the roof of the car. Michael stood above the driver’s side and nodded absently, his face pale. Her feet were a little unsteady beneath her on the paved lot. “Michael—did you hear me?” she said when he started to duck inside.

He stopped, his hand gripping the open car door.

“Yes. Why?”

“I have plans—an engagement with a friend. From my bingo group.”

“I’m glad you could make time for us,” he said under his breath, slamming the door.

Vera wanted to pretend she had not heard him, and for a long moment she reconsidered her decision to go along. No, she knew—this wasn’t good.

The engine started. Her son tapped the wheel. There seemed no other option than to move forward, so Vera lowered herself in.

A little while later, after she had grown tired of ingesting store names and sales along Highway 31, behind a parade of lane-changing cars—tired, too, of the silence between them—she spoke up.

“How are the kids?” They were entering a world of trailers and shotgun houses now.

“Alright, I guess. Marie keeps them busy as ever.”

“You haven’t brought them around in a while.”

“They’ve been busy—and I’ve been here.”

Vera rubbed the dry skin off her hands. “For how long?”

“I don’t know—three weeks now, maybe.”

“What about your job? Aren’t they upset with you?”

“I took unpaid leave.”

"Unpaid? But I thought you said Daphne was there—that she's taking care of him. Does Sam need both of you there all the time?"

"What are you saying?" Michael asked, the air suddenly tense. Vera sighed. She'd spent enough time sidestepping Sam—she wasn't about to back down from Michael.

"I'm saying it seems a little extreme, you stepping in like this."

Michael was silent.

"I don't want him to be alone—to feel alone, in the end."

"But he has Daphne. Isn't that enough?"

"I'm his son. His family. You are, too."

When they arrived in Vinemont, Vera looked out over her husband's house, which seemed to have sunk a little lower into the soft earth surrounding it—much lower, she felt, than the last time she had seen it. The forest edging the back of the house was dark and silent. The home was a rancher they'd built together in the mid-1970s, a home they had sweated over for years. At the time, it had seemed like the palace they had always dreamed of—sleek and modern, a departure from the drafty, overcrowded wood-clad farmhouses they had both grown up in. Sam's ancestral home still stood off to the right of their house, on the hill, barren and empty now—a monument to the life they had attempted to escape together. Now, their palace was the very picture of decrepitude, with its sagging roof and three huge, scraggly trees shading is corners from the bright sun.

Vera heaved herself out of the car and gripped the door edge, leaning back to take in the trees' height. She held her lower back with both hands and walked over to the edge of the front flowerbed, looking down into its weedy red dirt. The ground around the house had never been

good for planting much of anything, she knew—too much water, the valley deep and often too shady to allow for much light. The trees had started as weeds and had grown into giant ugly things.

Michael called to his father as he keyed open the back door from the screened-in porch; the house was dim and quiet, with dozens of tiny fruit flies swarming the still air. Inside, her husband was half-lying, half-sitting up in his hospital bed in the living room. The house emitted an unmistakable smell of death. Michael scooped his arm around his mother's side and pushed her gently into the room, presenting her to his father as some sort of prize.

"Look who's here, Pop," Michael said, dropping his keys on the table. Sam mouthed wordlessly at her—and though she knew she imagined it, she could almost hear him say her name the way she always loved: *Veyra*. The way her father had said it, that old-fashioned way.

"Don't try to get up, Sam. I'll come to you." Vera managed a weak smile. She felt his eyes on her, though she avoided looking directly at his yellowing face. As she rounded the corner, Vera stopped suddenly at the sight of Daphne and her wild white hair. She was sitting on his other side of Sam's bed, measuring her up.

Michael swung a kitchen chair over to the carpet next to his father's bed, and Vera sat cautiously on its edge. She could hear Sam's labored breathing—a raspy *in-out*, *in-out*, a dark death rattle lurking on the edges of its rhythm. She knew what was happening—they had seen it happen before. They had been together when both sets of their parents had passed.

Michael leaned over his father, smoothed a few stray hairs with a comb, and looked at his watch. "Has he had his 2:30 meds yet?" he asked.

"Just a few minutes ago," Daphne said, her voice husky.

"Anxiety," Michael said to Vera, who didn't realize she needed any explanation. "His breathing has been rough, so his hospice nurse prescribed him some anti-anxiety pills. He might fall asleep while you're here—just sit with him a bit, that's normal."

Michael turned and went back into the kitchen, and then out the back door, to the car. Sam's eyes, watery and red-rimmed, locked on Vera. Their irises were clear and blue as a pool in summer, the same eyes that had pierced her on the day they first met. His mouth moved, yet nothing came out.

"Michael has been good to stay with him," Daphne said quietly, ignoring Sam's smacking mouth. "I suppose you're not so thrilled to see me here." She shook her wild hair behind her shoulders, then reached over with one hand to smooth the corner of Sam's hospital bed.

"I wouldn't have thought you'd be anywhere else, to be honest," Vera said, her voice betraying how tired she felt. "Michael asked me to come, so here I am."

"So it doesn't make you uncomfortable, us being here all together?"

Vera turned her attention to the woman, ten years her junior. That wiry hair, her skin mottled with age spots—something hard in her life had caused her not to age well.

"Daphne—listen to me. I'm just glad Michael has someone to help him out, even if it has to be you." She turned back to Sam. "Why'd you want me to come here?"

Daphne spoke. "He can't—he's not able to speak any more."

"So I heard. Then why don't you tell me why I'm here?"

"The thing is—well, really it was me that wanted to talk with you. The preacher came by, the one from my daughter's church outside Atlanta. He came out as a special favor to me. And

he asked if Sam had ever been saved, earlier in life. He wanted to know about the state of Sam's soul, but the truth is, I just don't know."

Vera leaned back in her chair, silent. She was suddenly aware of the proximity of the furniture in the room—some she recognized, some she didn't—and of the big ugly stone fireplace, flanked by the posters Sam had put up to make the place homier after she left. She felt her mind clear as if coming out of a fog. Now she understood: They had brought her all the way out to talk about Sam's salvation.

"How is it that you don't know?"

"Well—Sam's no church-going man. We've never had cause to discuss it."

"Doesn't that give you the answer you're looking for?"

"This preacher, see, he wants to baptize Sam before he passes. He wants to help Sam accept Jesus into his heart so that he has somewhere to go." She paused, lowering her voice to a whisper. "I think Sam is afraid of what's coming."

"What makes you think he's afraid?" Vera turned back to look at her husband, at his cool blue eyes and his working lips. She noticed that his mouth was an empty black hole; Michael hadn't bothered to put his dentures in. "The Sam I know isn't much afraid of anything."

"Well. I guess I'd be afraid—I think he is. We've had a hard time around here, these last few weeks." Daphne's face screwed up, and despite herself she began to cry, the edges of her mouth turning downward in an ugly grimace. She put a hand to her face. "I just think I would be afraid, is all," she said again, pulling a tissue from the box on the nightstand.

"Are you a church member?"

Daphne stiffened suddenly, getting a little taller in her seat. She tossed her hair again, clearing her nose loudly.

"Why—yes. Yes, I am. I don't go to church every single Sunday but—"

"And you're telling me he doesn't remember getting baptized?" Here she turned to her husband, her face expectant. "Sam?"

Daphne wiped her nose. "He's never said anything to me about getting baptized."

Vera didn't look at Daphne now—only at her husband. She tilted her head slightly, a hint of a smile on her lips. She considered him for a long moment—where they were, the position she was now in. When she opened her mouth to speak, she breathed lightly into her voice, the way she used to when they were in love. She spoke to him directly.

"Yes—I was there, as it happens. It was a Sunday, on the Mulberry River. We all went down to the water together, riding in Pastor Wilson's new Ford. I remember that all I could think about was worrying over Michael putting his feet on the upholstery. And when we got there, the pastor pulled you into that river, and baptized you. I was holding Michael in my arms—we both watched. That's long past, now. How can you not remember that?"

She saw him shake his head back and forth, ever so slightly, and watched his eyes leave her face and search the room blankly—unseeing, internally searching the files of his memory. His breath quickened.

"Yes—you remember, don't you?" she continued. "The day was so sunny and warm, but the water of the river was so cold. I let Michael put his feet in, and he screamed and screamed. The current was fast because of the storm the night before—and you turned to look at me and Michael on your way out there, holding that pastor's arm. Michael waved at you, like he always used to."

She reached for his hand, her cool palm sliding into his grip. She knew that in his mind he was imagining the banks of the Mulberry—warming his face in the dappled sunlight, gripping

the pastor's steady arm as he waded into the cold rushing water. She gently stroked his hand, as if encouraging him to see it just like she told it. He probably felt the smooth slick rocks beneath his feet—probably turned back to look at his young wife in her cotton homemade dress, holding their toddler sun, both of them suntanned and smiling on the sandy banks of the river.

He might even remember, with great creativity, how he'd vowed to make a better life for that family on the bank, right there and then—how he wasn't going to mess around with any more women, how he would look for a better job where he might make more money. This part Vera imagined privately—she knew she couldn't list his regrets for him, but she went through them in her mind. He probably saw his son's chubby hand rise up, and saw his wife gaze at the child's smooth, brown face—and there, in his mind, was an enduring picture of his once-family, on the day of his very own baptism. Vera reached up and touched his cheek, watching the story unfold. As soon as he fell asleep, she let his head rest against his pillow. Daphne was crying in her chair, her hand covering her face.

"I hope that makes it easier," Vera said. She got up to call for her son, but he was leaning against the door, watching, his eyes hard.

The valley was cool and evening nearly dark when they left. Vera had stood in the doorway to her husband's room for only a moment—"Be seeing you, Sam," she'd said, not holding up her hand, even as her son said something quiet and reassuring to him on their way out—and now she was in Michael's car, pulling out the crunching gravel drive and onto the two-lane road that weaved between shallow creeks and overhangs of leafy trees.

After a few minutes, her son's voice cut through the silence. "You shouldn't have done that," he said, his eyes on the road.

Vera said nothing.

He said it again. “You hear what I said?”

“Of course I did.”

“You shouldn’t have done that. You know you shouldn’t have.”

“Why’s that?”

“It’s a lie.”

“How do you know it’s a lie?”

Michael was silent a while. “Well. Is it true, then? Did that really happen?”

Vera looked out the window, her hands working in her lap. She looked down at the lines of her brittle palms, circling the tips of her nails with one finger. Eventually she shrugged, giving over to the feeling she’d had all along—even before today, even on the day of her marriage all those years ago. That it didn’t matter either way. Sam didn’t have time for truth anymore. Believing in what she had said was more important than whether or not it really happened, now.

“He’s not any better or worse off than before I found him—now, or even all those years back,” she said, turning to the window. “You’re not like him, you know,” she said. “Be careful not to let him grow any larger in your memory, when this is all over.”

The car twisted and turned up the road, narrowly piercing the dark row of forest on either side, past sagging trailers and metal-roofed shotgun houses and rows and rows of potato plants, their glossy emerald tops glistening in the twilight. Mangy dogs on long silver chains rose stiffly to all fours, solemn as statues, watching them pass. Michael was driving slowly. When they crested the last hill, the dark tree line broke off on both sides, and all at once the old valley—their home for so many years, both of them—was behind them. Vera’s face was suddenly bathed

with a weak late-afternoon sunlight that stretched and rolled over the nearly empty plateau, a lazy exhale of day that made her breath catch in her throat. She lifted her hand to cover her face.

"What time is it?" she asked.

Michael reached out to tap the car clock.

"I'll have you back on time," he said. "This thing is broken." He leaned forward to catch the sky through the front windshield. "It's not even evening yet."

But her eyes were closed now, head resting in the soft cup of her withered hand; she tilted it against the cool hard glass. She didn't have to look out the window to feel the scenery spinning past her, a blur of movement that changed even as it sped by, even as she herself changed in the seat of the car. There was so much day left. Her mind's eye held the full expanse of the sky.

Look For Me in the Belly of the Whale

Sam was sitting on his front porch smoking a cigarette when he spotted something moving in the tall grass near the edge of his woods, making a little noise against the valley's aching chorus of bullfrogs and crickets. He squinted in its direction, unsure of what he was seeing at first—thinking perhaps it was a doe, venturing out at dusk to feed, and that maybe he should scoot back toward the screen door to reach for the old rifle that rested there. In the darkening valley around him the August evening was cooling to a bearable degree; Sam, watching a little longer, decided it wasn't a doe, and stood up silently. He squinted into the semi-dark, absently flicking the mouth-end of his cigarette with his thumb as he waited. He had just arrived home from another short trip to Scottsboro, and he'd been thinking about how he needed to take a bath—to wash the scent of the other woman off him before he spent too much time with his wife. Sam slowly strode out into the yard, his long legs breaking the smooth-fronted pants at each knee as he navigated the tall grass, and stopped short of the figure when he realized it was a child—a little boy. He stared up at Sam with terrified eyes, no older than three.

For a moment Sam was struck completely silent, as if he weren't sure the child was real; the kid looked so familiar to him, in a strange unsettling way, and he wondered if he belonged to someone at a farm nearby. They lived at least a mile from their neighbors in all directions.

"What are you doing out here, son? Don't you know I could have shot you dead?"

The boy continued to stare, silent.

"Go on, I said—get out of here. Go home." When the child said nothing, Sam called out to his wife. He turned back toward the house, glowing in the distance like it was on fire; he saw

Vera emerge from the kitchen to stand dark in the doorway, her hand resting lightly upon the latch.

"There's a kid out here," he called. The child began to wail at the sound of his raised voice.

"A kid? Where?"

"A boy."

"Out there? Sam—" Vera pushed the door open and followed his footsteps in the grass to where he stood, gathering the hem of her skirt in one hand. She circled the child and then crouched down, speaking quietly. The boy had light brown hair and bright, sky-blue eyes. He didn't answer Vera, but calmed down after a few moments. She looked at Sam, then back at the child, a perplexed expression upon her face.

"It's all right," she seemed to be whispering. "It's all right." Then she stood up slowly, smoothing her skirt.

"What did he say?" Sam asked. His cigarette burned the tips of his fingers.

"Nothing. He's scared, I think."

"What is he—three years?"

"A little over two." Vera was teacher's aide at the primary school in Vinemont—she was good at things like that, of course. "Do you think someone left him here on purpose?"

Sam shook his head at her. "I don't know why they would."

Vera bit her lip and turned back towards the child. She raised him up with a hand on either side of his shoulders. Sam followed them to the house, walking slow.

At the sink, Vera put a washcloth under the spigot and gently wiped the boy's face clean. She pushed his mop of hair up further on his forehead so that she could take in the clear eyes and fat, flushed cheeks. His chin trembled, as if he might cry again.

"There now," she said quietly, rubbing his shoulders as if to warm him up. "We should go see the sheriff. Surely someone is looking for him," she said.

Sam nodded, watching Vera and the child from across the room. She was suddenly smiling at the child—a look that radiated from her face around the room—and it was then, in that moment, that Sam realized it'd been months since Vera had smiled at him. The child pulled on Vera's blouse, trying to get her to pick him up.

"Did you hear me, Sam? We need to call him right away."

Sam nodded again, shaking himself as if from a dream. His head felt cloudy; his adrenaline was fading. He headed towards the liquor cabinet.

"I'll go down and talk to him first thing. I guess we should keep him here, though—just until they find something out."

Vinemont was a small farming community, and they lived a short distance from its center, only a few miles away. The night the child arrived, Sam walked to the nearest farms in all directions to ask if anyone had heard about or was looking for the boy; everyone seemed as surprised as he to hear about it.

The next morning, as Sam made his way along the dirt road to the sheriff's office, he looked out over the Mulberry River—which divided his property with his neighbor to the west—and over his neighbor's rolling fields planted with low even rows of potatoes. Though the river was fuller than usual, the summer's merciless heat had turned the soil mealy and infertile; rumor

had it that no one was expecting a good crop this year. He was thankful, yet again, that he had not followed in his father's line of work—farming—and that though he had accepted the family home after his father passed, he went straight into railway work instead. Roosevelt had given out a number of good jobs before the war, and Sam had taken his chance when he got it. Now things were harder than ever for farmers. Flies hung heavy in the air as he passed, swarming lazily on the pungent corpses of dying crops.

At the station, the sheriff—a man called Grant and a personal friend of Sam's—lit a cigarette and shook his head at the end of Sam's story. He rose from his chair to close the office door. In private, he told Sam that since the summer ended, there had been a wave of abandoned children showing up on the doorsteps of church and government buildings. The children's home near Anniston was full of unwanted children—so full, in fact, that they had begun to shuttle them to homes in other counties.

"I don't know what it is. Maybe it's that people have too many mouths to feed—winter will be here before we know it. Farmer's wives, they can gauge that sort of thing. And," he said, tapping his cigarette into an ashtray and leaning forward in his chair, "God knows they're tough enough to make that kind of decision, for the sake of getting their families through the winter." The sheriff raised his eyebrows and let out a low whistle, looking down at his hands. "Between you and me, I think it's all these men coming back from Europe, high on killing Germans and talking all our nice Christian girls into opening up their legs for a war hero. That's what I think."

"So what are we supposed to do with the boy?"

Grant sighed. "I know they can't take any more kids over at the home in Vinemont. He'll have to be transported to Huntsville, if I had to guess—but I'll need to find out. In the

meantime—you think there's any way Vera could take care of him for a week or so? She's not back at school yet, right?"

"That's a lot to ask, Grant."

"I know—I know it is. But you all don't have any little ones at home, and Vera'd be so good at it. It would sure help us out, Sam."

"We don't even know his name."

"Well, keep asking him what it is—but if he can't answer, we'll have to give him a new one anyway. Call him what you want."

In the end, Sam and Vera decided to call the boy Michael, after Vera's father.

By the third night of Michael's stay, Sam found it difficult to get a full night's rest. The boy slept on a pallet in the corner of their room, and he usually woke up several times a night, crying or calling out for a mother. Sometimes Vera even fell asleep on the pallet with him, trying to get him to go back to sleep. Sam thought he was too old to be sleeping in their room like that—like an infant—but Vera insisted. She said she wanted to have him close by, so he wouldn't be scared. Suddenly Sam noticed the silence in a way he'd never noticed it before. He would listen to the boy's breathing across the room, the slightest stir drawing his attention.

Around two in the morning, he turned over to find Vera facing him, her eyes wide and unblinking.

"I had a dream about you, Sam," she murmured, her voice low and quiet. The sound of her voice made him feel suddenly awake, more awake than he had felt in a long time. He rubbed his eyes, wondering how long she had been lying there, watching him sleep.

"What about?"

She hesitated, blinking. Her eyelashes tapped like dark fans on her cheekbones.

"We were on a boat on the ocean," she said, her eyes glowing in the moonlight like two marbles, dark and rich. "And you were standing on the edge of the boat, looking down. I called out to you, warning you that the water was very deep and cold, and that you shouldn't jump in. You looked back at me over your shoulder, and as I said it, you stepped off." She paused, rubbing her eyes with the back of her hand.

"And then?"

"I searched for you for days, but couldn't find you. Everyone told me that you were gone, but I stayed close to the shore, waiting for you." Vera stopped and took a slow breath. "Finally, days later, a whale washed ashore, and when I saw it, I knew something about it—that something was inside. So I got my knife, sliced it open, and you were there, inside his belly."

Sam stared at her, his breathing shallow in his chest.

"What happened, Vera?" Her eyes were unreadable in the darkness. "Was I still alive?"

"Yes," she said finally, turning over on her back to look at the patches of moonlight on the ceiling. She put her arm up over her head and tucked her cheek inside the crook of her elbow. "I sliced you out of that whale's belly and you slipped onto the sand like a newborn baby."

Sam smiled to himself. He was relieved, and he didn't know why. His mother used to tell him that women were vessels of things men would never understand—that they were closer to nature and to God than anything in the world. It was their special gift, given to them alongside their ability to carry children. His mother had been both religious and superstitious; she often felt moved by the Holy Spirit to know things she would have no other way of knowing. Sam grew up with his face fearfully upturned towards a single stained-glass window in their little country church, his mother by his side with her hands raised to the ceiling, allowing the Holy Spirit to

move in her and fill her with knowledge that no one else could fathom. And Sam would watch open-mouthed, holding his younger siblings' trembling hands, praying all the while that the good Lord would never choose him for such vision, such rapture.

Vera turned toward the wall, her eyes closed. They lay in that stillness a few more minutes, until he wasn't sure whether she was awake or asleep.

In the ten years they had been married—years of unmarked days and slow quiet afternoons and nights passed staring at the moonlight on the ceiling, listening to one another breathe—there had only been a few weeks that Sam suspected Vera to be with child. Finding his wife unusually cheerful, her eyes aglow with a warm, trembling anticipation, he pressed her to admit the source of her inner joy: that her time of the month had passed without issue. She quaked like a lidded stove pot, in the very instant before it boils over. And then, one afternoon two weeks later, Sam arrived home to find that his wife's demeanor had shifted dramatically; he discovered the torn strips of washroom cloth she used every month, carefully placed beside the sink basin. In the kitchen, Vera's tears rolled down her cheeks and into their supper as Sam came to stand behind her at the stove, his hands heavy on her shoulders.

It seemed a terrible waste to him; she was a natural-born mother. Sam often sat on the grassy hill overlooking the schoolyard on his lunch break from the train company, where he worked as a locomotive technician. He sat out of sight, beneath the shade of a wide-armed hickory tree, watching Vera as she laughed with the children and stroked their tousled heads. They rubbed against her like joyful puppies.

A silence had settled between them that often seemed irreversible. They were getting older, now—the years had not turned out the way they had hoped or expected, and they had both

dealt with this fact in their own ways. Sam suspected their silence had everything to do with guilt. Vera's shame about her childlessness permeated every part of her life, and Sam—Sam felt terrible guilt about the other women he slept with, on his trips to Huntsville or Muscle Shoals for the company. He usually spent at least three or four days a month on a repair project in another part of the state, and he used these trips as moments for escape, in every sense of the word. Vera no longer gazed at him with a look of expectancy—for that had long passed—but with a look of concession.

In the past, folks in town had joked that Sam—with his infamous penchant for liquor—was to be Vera's one and only child; Sam had begun to think that they were right. After Michael's arrival, he spent at least two or three nights a week at the VFW—just to get a little space, away from Vera and Michael.

The VFW wasn't supposed to serve booze—in fact, nobody in the county was—but the sheriff and the city police chief were both members, and everybody knew they wanted a drink as much as the next man. So, they got around it. Sam was a favorite among the other guys. His stories were famous—he talked of his time in Japan, of good times, of beautiful foreign women. Hard as they tried, no one could ever guess whether his stories were true or invented.

"And when they opened the curtain, she was standing in the middle of that room naked as a jaybird, with a flower in one hand and a silk robe in the other—smiling at me like I was Jesus Christ in the flesh. So there I was," Sam cried that night, his hands poised in the air. His eyes search the rapt faces of his audience. "Can you guess what I did next, boys?" Here he executed the exquisite pause, the perfectly painted ellipsis hovering above the table. "Well, you bet your asses I pulled up my trousers and hightailed it out of there."

The semicircle of men around him roared with laughter. It didn't matter to them in the slightest whether or not Sam's stories were true—many of them had served in the bombed-out hills of France and Germany, and fewer still on the fronts of Italy and Japan. They all knew about the noise and the grime and the terrible, astonishing fear. Just like Sam, they too awoke beside their sleeping wives in a gasping, wide-eyed panic at the sound of the rumbling train as it rolled through their quiet town—and they, too, invented stories about the way things had been overseas, the way they should have been. To be sure, Sam could tell a story better than anyone in Vinemont. Sam Tomlinson's "so there I was" was an invitation to nothing less than the best show in town—where truth and lies lived in happy marriage, all for the loose-tongued birth and magnificently timed death of a good yarn.

Later, Sherriff Grant slid onto the stool beside him at the bar.

"How's the kid, Sam?"

"He's doing alright. Vera sure gets a kick out of taking care of him. You found out where we might take him permanently?"

"That's just what I came to talk to you about. Looks like they can take him at the children's home in Huntsville, as early as next week. It's something run by a group of nuns."

'Good—that's good. Any idea on where he came from in the first place?"

"Nobody's reported any missing kids that match his description." Grant hesitated. "The thing is, Sam," —here he lowered his voice, scooting a little closer to Sam—"the thing is, I caught a glimpse of the kid in town. Out with Vera."

"Yeah? So?"

"Listen to me Sam: I know this is awkward, but we've known each other a long time, you and I. But—he looks just like you. The goddamn spitting image."

Sam sat there, silent. He knew he'd seen the kid before—and suddenly the sensation of familiarity washed over him. It was like a cold, rough wave breaking against his back when he was least expecting. Then he thought about the look on Vera's face when she first saw Michael.

"I'm sorry, Sam—I'm sorry to point it out like that, but I feel like I have to say something. Do you know who might have dropped him off at your place?"

Sam closed his eyes, resting his cool bottle of beer against one temple.

"No—not that I know of. I can't think of anyone."

Sam couldn't look at Grant; if he did, his old friend would know he was lying. Sam tried to remember the girl from Athens, the redhead, who told him she wanted him to stay inside her while they made love, the whole time. Said there wasn't any risk, none at all. The thing was—and he'd reminded himself a million times, just like he did in the bar—he'd never fathered any children with Vera. This had perhaps made him less careful.

"I'm just saying—it's a mighty huge coincidence," Grant continued. "He can still go to Huntsville, to the Catholic place up there, until they find him a more suitable—or, you know, a more permanent placement. But there are other things we could arrange."

"Like what?"

"You and Vera could keep him. Raise him."

"No. It's not possible, Grant."

"I'm just saying—I know it's a difficult situation. But just think about it. Think it through."

Sam walked home in a stupor, beneath a full moon—he was well aware that he was drunk, but he also had a very clear picture of what he had to do. They were probably all talking

about it now, all over town—they knew, or thought they knew, that Michael was his child, and secretly he was ashamed to admit that he hadn't recognized it sooner.

The old farmhouse loomed in front of him, hemmed in by trees on both sides; quietly he crept into his home and up the stairs. The bedroom door was open, and he saw Vera sleeping there, her face lit by moonlight; the child was on his pallet in the corner of their room, and when Sam picked him up, he did not waken. Down the stairs and out the back door they went, headed towards the car—Michael draped against Sam's shoulder like a soft, warm doll—when Sam suddenly saw the glint and shimmer of the river, down off to the side of the house. It was the lowest point in their valley, and in the quiet Sam could hear the water rushing below, dark and deep. He decided he might like to sit there a while before he went.

Michael stirred in his arms. They were sitting in a clearing of brush, at the end of the footpath that led down from the house. Then Sam felt Vera behind him—she had woken, and followed. Her long hair was braided over one shoulder. The forest on either side of the river was dense and humming with insects and birds, all creatures coming out of the ground or the sky for their first feeding of the day. The moon washed them in a gray-blue glow. They were alone.

"What are you doing?"

She circled where he sat on a low smooth rock, still holding Michael, who had woken and wrinkled his face into a wail; when he spotted Vera, he didn't cry. He held onto the neck of Sam's shirt with his fist balled up tight.

Sam was tired and wrung-out. "I'm about to take Michael to a home in Huntsville—Grant told me that's where he needs to go. With nuns, and the like."

"Why you down here, Sam? It's the middle of the night."

"I don't think so, not anymore."

"You're drunk."

Sam shook his head. "I'm only doing what the sheriff asked me to do."

Vera stepped towards him. "Give me the child."

"He's not ours—this has nothing to do with you."

"I think it does, Sam—I think you know it does for sure, now."

He started to speak, but her hair shone almost silver in the light from the moon, and she looked older than he remembered. He suddenly felt unsure of himself.

"Did I ever tell you about my father?" Sam finally said.

"What about him."

"About my father and my brother, Clarence—the youngest."

"I didn't know you had a brother by that name. I thought there were only six of you."

"There were seven of us, once." Here Sam adjusted his grip on the child, and Michael turned his face to the other side so he could look at Vera. "When Clarence was just three he was struck by a rattlesnake in the pasture alongside the house. Where the wheat used to grow. And my mother—she was completely beside herself. We couldn't find my father—he had walked into town to get the post. So when Clarence got that bite she had me put him on my back and told me to run as fast as I could towards town, towards where my father was, not stopping for anything. So I did—I've never run so fast in my life."

Vera didn't say anything, her features shaded in moonlight.

"Eventually we came across my father on the road—but by then Clarence wasn't talking, just moaning, and swelling up like a rubber balloon. He had the most horrible look on his face—I've never seen fear like that, the kind of fear you have when you don't understand what's

happening, or why—and he couldn't hold onto my neck anymore. So I took him off my back and put him on my front.

"Rattlesnake takes a toll very quickly on a little body like that. So I'm standing there crying and jabbering all over the place, trying to tell my father what happened, and what my mother wanted me to do—and he stopped me. He told me to be quiet. He took my brother in his arms and listened to his breathing, and put his hand on his chest. Just kept listening. Then he told me to follow. We walked down to the river—this very one—and all the while I'm trying to shut up, trying to calm myself. *Quiet, now* is all my father kept saying—but I didn't know if he was talking to me anymore.

"So my father brought my little brother down here and put his feet in the water. He said, *Quiet, now*, over and over, until Clarence died." Sam looked up at Vera. "That's the kind of thing my father had to do, and he was never the same. Not after that. It's the kind of thing any man might have to do—what's best for the child, even if you did bring him into the world."

Vera had been holding her breath for quite some time, and she breathed out.

"Give him to me, Sam."

"I can't ask you to raise him—I can't put that on you."

"All these years you've done what you wanted. But this is mine. It's already done. Now—give Michael to me."

Vera, her eyes dry and her face hard, took the child from him without a word, gently cradling him against her shoulder.

"Vera," Sam said to her back as she turned to go. He aimlessly wondered how he could make her understand—how he could convey the things he was prepared to do for her. Sam watched her in profile, her head tilted up towards the sky, the moonlight catching the delicate

flyaway strands of her hair until they nearly glowed around her head. She rubbed her cheek against the child's smooth skin. Then she turned back and approached Sam, her free hand lifting from her side to cup his face. Michael whimpered on her shoulder.

"Do you remember that dream I had about you? About the whale?" she said, her voice barely lifting above a whisper. "When I cut open that whale in my dream, you were inside—but when I found you, you were dead. I lied to you about it before. That dream was a warning about you, about the way things will turn out between us."

Sam stared at her, his mouth open. "Why are you telling me now?"

"Because I knew you were dead in that dream, but I stayed. I didn't want to leave you alone." Her palm was cool, her voice gentle. "That's the other part."

The river sang to them. And then she dropped her hand from his face.