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Currency

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Currency

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STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

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STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

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We hereby recommend that the thesis of Elisha Emerson entitled *Currency* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.

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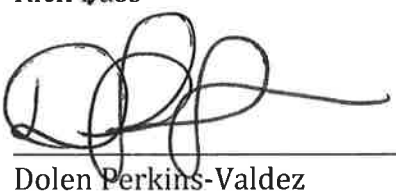

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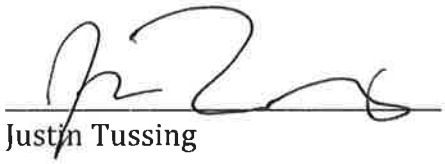

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ABSTRACT

The privileged Watters family, David, Winnie, and their 14-year-old daughter, Faye, struggle to adjust their suburban Charlotte lifestyle to fit a much-reduced income. Their fast failure leads them down separate paths, David after enlightenment through Transcendental Meditation, Faye after the power she feels in the company of her handsome Earth Science teacher, and Winnie in a romantic foray to Alaska after buried gold. *Currency* is a 96,000 word literary novel that follows a family's converging flight to the Arctic where, reduced by discomfort and wilderness, they must renegotiate what is of value.

When a janitor walks in on Faye and her science teacher indecently arranged, David's life priorities feel indecently arranged, too. He sabotages his job and spends his family's savings on Transcendental Meditation. Winnie finds work at the Freedom Geriatric Center as an actor for an experimental psychotherapy portraying dead lovers, sisters, and mothers. Meanwhile, Faye begins to hear inanimate objects make sounds. A notepad hisses. A rock moans. She rides a town bus to her science teacher's apartment and sits outside until he finally lets her in. *Currency* probes that moment when everything changes size, when initial annoyances shrink and reality resumes a new and disturbing sense of proportion.

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Preface

1.

I am sure there are plenty of reasons to push a story through eighty thousand words, and I'm sure it's up to every writer to find that reason or reasons for each book. Discovery has a lot to do with many novels, whether it's the pursuit of a character arc or the quest after a place. In *The Art of the Novel*, Milan Kundera writes, "A novel is often, it seems to me, nothing but a long quest for some elusive definitions" (127). I agree with Kundera. Some books run on questions or one big question.

This particular manuscript started with a constellation of noticing. I noticed myself talking about money too often and at inappropriate times. I noticed myself noticing how others dressed and what others ate and the nice or not nice state of their homes. I noticed myself noticing the opportunities other children had that mine did not and vice versa. Obsession is too strong a word, but I was noticing social class and status without necessarily wanting to notice social class and status, and I wanted to get to the bottom of all that noticing so I could move on and notice something new.

The moment I became a parent, my relationship with money changed. My pregnancy required many doctor visits—none of which I was prepared to afford. My baby required clothing, a monitor, pacifiers, a crib, a car seat. My baby required many things—none of which I was prepared to provide. The act of starting a family insinuated me, by default, into the proverbial rat race, and I hit the ground a little confused but running.

As a parent, being broke felt more sinister and closer to broken, and I wanted to understand what this was all about. More than that: I wanted to understand how money achieved this affective power. Even better: What other "currencies" besides money could wield this driving affectivity too?

People exchange a lot of things. Money started as a symbol, after all, for food and clothing and shelter. People exchange pretty things, entertainment, power, status, and sex. People can buy time and women's bodies and men's bodies and the earth body. The more I thought about the word *currency* as a current of exchange driving people, between people, the more I wanted to reach after the word's impossible center. And what better way to do that than through story?

2.

One thing I have learned at Stonecoast is that a concept, however rich, clever, or profound, cannot alone carry a story. A story takes character, setting, and plot, and I attempted, while writing *Currency,* to keep each one of these very basic elements of fiction as strong and organic as I could.

Currency closely follows the three Watters family members: David, Winnie, and Faye through a major financial transition. While the family struggles together and fails together to adjust their privileged Charlotte lifestyle to a much-reduced income, each family member travels down a separate path with separate struggles. Aaron Hamburger advised me that each character should constantly hold fast to a tension that propels each character forward. I imagine this tension to be a little like

a belaying rope, and whenever I felt lost while writing a chapter, I found this metaphorical rope, and I wrote my character around it.

Susan Conley's seminar on place and Deb Marquart's workshop on the environment have inspired me to write settings that live. I strive to write my environments—whether these environments are individual buildings, cities, or the Arctic wilderness—that breathe, interact, and change. I believe a strong literary setting will follow the guidelines specified by Lawrence Buell in his book, *The Environmental Imagination*.

1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.
2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation; and
4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text. (7-8)

Buell designates these qualities as the earmarks of the "environmental text," but I believe them earmarks of any good writing. Writing any setting with these principles in mind can push the writer's imagination to new, creative places. When followed, these principles result in a vibrant and meaningful setting. They can lead to new turns in plot. A well-written environment can prove a rich source for character development, tension, and change.

This brings me to plot. Before starting Stonecoast I believed a decent plotline was meant to progress in a linear fashion. To be honest, I resented plot and considered it a necessary evil to organizing a readable manuscript. I understand plot differently, now. I see it as an energy, a pulley system that uses tension and change to draw characters forward through a text.

I wanted *Currency's* plotline to split, separate outward, and merge again. I wanted the tension to feel like the inevitable result of a character's changing. The initial and overarching change in *Currency* is that David, the father, loses his job, but the resulting tensions—having to penny pinch, having to renegotiate values—result in more change—new desires, new sources for identity and worth—which result in new tensions. This kind of plot rhythm is something I can get excited about and I hope to repeat in different stories with different plot structures.

3.

Joseph Campbell has directly influenced my opinion of art and the art process. Campbell states that the proper function of art is to arrest the reader via beauty or the sublime. Art serves its own purpose. It does not act in the service of anything else.

Campbell defines any text that moves its reader to desire as pornographic. Conversely, he defines a text that repels a reader as didactic. In his lecture, "The Way of Art," he claims, "Social realism and all that nonsense is didactic art. And most of the novels since the time of Zola have been what I call the work of didactic pornographers; who give you the didactic and then something to carry you on

through the lesson." Campbell, of course, spent his life studying the sustained universality of myths so he understandably inclines toward the transcendent and the aspects of a story most easily generalized.

Campbell also claims that myths change. Not only that, but he often tasks contemporary artists and writers as the "mystics" capable of plumbing these changes through the specific frameworks that art provides. While I don't conceive myself capable of carrying such a noble torch, I do strive to write stories that exist for story's sake, which means I avoid moralizing. I try to sustain judgment.

In his book, *Beyond Good and Evil,* Nietzsche instructs that a good philosopher must: "Not . . . remain stuck to a person—not even the most loved . . . Not to remain stuck to a fatherland . . . Not to remain stuck to some pity . . . Not to remain stuck to a science . . . Not to remain stuck to one's own detachment. . . . Not to remain stuck to our own virtues . . ." (53) and:

> to live with immense and proud composure; always beyond—To freely have or not have your affects . . . to condescend to them for a few hours; to seat yourself on them like you would on a horse or often like you would on an ass: . . . (258)

I think Campbell would agree that this advice applies to artists and writers as well as philosophers.

4.

I did, however, bring two external values (or virtues) to *Currency* that I hope make it stronger.

1. I believe it is important to write about women experiencing their own bodies.

This value is sociopolitical, and I carry it with me always as a woman that writes. I wrote my undergraduate English honors thesis on the role of the contemporary female poet in Western society. I looked to Adrienne Rich, Gloria Anzaldua, and Eaven Boland for examples of how women can use their identities and experiences as women to take literature somewhere stunning and new.

For so long, women's bodies have been portrayed in literature as the objective, as the symbolic and prized, and I believe it continues to be a powerful choice for a woman writer to include the female body as subjective experience. I found this value to be especially true in a book exploring worth and exchange, as women's bodies are often used, quite literally, as currency.

While I have been aware of the women in my life and their different, gender-specific struggles, I was not conscious of the relationship between my own gender and my identity as an artist until that graduating year. After reading Virginia Woolf's classic, *A Room of One's Own*, I began to examine my own beliefs concerning my writing and my sex. I gravitated to writers like Jeanette Winterson, Anais Nin, Naomi Wolf, Louise Erdrich, Doris Lessing, Helen Carr, and Helene Cixous. At once, my primary paradigm shifted. I began questioning concepts like "progress" and the illusionary straight forwardness that demarks the hero's journey. A reality I had accepted, even taken for granted, revealed the hinges and wheels driving it.

2. When writing about money, I believe it is important to acknowledge the exhausting tediousness of poverty—while simultaneously prodding the definition. What does it mean to be poor?

I have noticed that it is rare for a literary novel to tackle the mundane specificities that plague someone without funds. Nearly everything requires money, and lack's burden can prove incessant. I tried to include a little of this in *Currency.* I aimed to plunk my privileged characters in a new reality where they are forced to question their consumption on new levels. Do they buy strawberries out of season? Do they see a doctor when ill? Do they run the AC or use hot water to wash their hands?

This said, I also brought to this book the belief that not all poverties are created equal. The Watters never truly suffer their poverty because of the cushion they have built into their lives. Some of this cushion is a result of their race, of course, a result of their family and the social structure that surrounds them. I realized, as I wrote *Currency*, how some currents don't necessarily circulate everywhere, but get trapped inside groups like little self-perpetuating eddies.

5.

The digital age continues to revolutionize our relationship with reality, and I believe our literature and art should reflect these changes or to at least acknowledge them. The way humans interact with one another is changing. We expect instant communication and things to move at a faster pace. So much innuendo and subtlety

gets lost over the Internet and has therefore depreciated in value. People want and expect frankness over seduction. Courtship is no longer a thing.

High-definition films influence our visual sense. When the *Planet Earth* movies came out in 2006—filmed almost entirely in high-definition—with their sweeping, august panoramas, their eloquent and detailed close-ups—the world leaned in to look. Our ability to perceive the world is changing, alongside our ability to portray it.

Reality is customizable. We can adjust its value (brightness) and saturation (intensity). We may value vividness with high, crisp contrast, or a nostalgic, rosy haze. Through computer programs like Photoshop and Instagram we can easily and aesthetically control and customize our own remembered experiences. Better and better technologies make for better and better images.

Our relationship with ourselves approaches the unreal—the *hyper-real.* Through artificial means, humans are able to summon nearly any reality. For better or for worse, color, language, and life continue to evolve toward greater specialization and specificity. This reality is increasingly hyper-real, as screens and other technologies augment our experiences. Just as a good pair of sunglasses can transform a dull field of grass into something that screams *green!*, all our social networking can transform our lives into *fun!* We watch ourselves on "reality" television. Our news programs throb with heavy editing, music, and other special effects.

To a writer expressing the human experience, this contemporary hyperrealism offers an invitation to play with and push sensation and perception. A hyper-real text can get as close to an image or object or character as it wants. It can slow down as much as it wants—or speed up. By exploiting the inherent artificiality of a text, a writer can use image and pacing to achieve these effects: detailed close-ups or slow pans.

A writer can also use this hyper-realness as permission to push the reader's understanding of what's real. I chose to have one of my characters hear objects make sounds. She hears a stone sing because this reality best fits the truth of her character and the truth of the piece as a whole.

A writer must submit her vision to the word, to the sentence, to the paragraph, to the text as a whole. How lucky. Language is sprawling and its combinations nearly limitless. Writers create their own frames, their own parameters. Writers can use the multi-facets of words and their evolving contexts to push nature's laws and move them in measures most other artists cannot. Ultimately, when a writer pushes language, if she is patient, she can do nearly anything she wants.

6.

Last year, Adelle Waldman published an essay in *The New Yorker* entitled, "An Answer to the Novel's Detractors." She wrote the essay in response to David Shields's "Reality Hunger," a manifesto against the traditional novel. She quotes

Shields as arguing

> novels are often flashes of 'narrative legerdemain'; he calls for 'serious writing,' in which 'the armature of overt drama is dispensed with, and we're left with a deeper drama, the real drama: an active human consciousness trying to figure out how he or she has solved or not solved being alive.' He particularly prizes the lyric essay, which forsakes plot and character entirely. (Dec 2, 2014)

While I am interested in the lyric essay, I do not understand it as a suitable replacement for the traditional novel. This trend—if it is, indeed a trend—reminds me of Otto Rank's *Art and Artist* and his posit that art tends to lean more aggressively toward realism in times of social uncertainty.

Waldman's closing defense resonated with me.

> There remain subjects aside from storytelling that the novel might continue to pursue profitably—subjects that weren't exhausted in the 19th century. A few that come to my mind: interpersonal ethics; the varieties of form conscience takes in individual psyches; the difficulty of getting along with others; the qualities of mind that meaningfully distinguish one person from another (i.e., what makes Vronsky so different Oblonsky so different from Levin). Whatever else it's done, contemporary life hasn't obviated these kinds of questions any more than it has rendered the novel incapable of addressing them.

As I wrote *Currency,* I turned to this list as a guideline toward which to strive.

As an undergraduate, I pursued both a degree in English and Psychology. I enjoy books—both fiction and nonfiction—that shed light on and inform the inner mind. I try to write characters slowly and with careful honesty. I find while writing if I distance myself too much from a character or write too forcefully, the characters make themselves strange and the book veers off course. I have to backtrack to the point where I deviated and work my way back in. I have to submit myself to the character's individual psyche, and only then, will the book proceed as it should.

7.

I tried to apply everything I learned at Stonecoast to this book. I tried to write places that lived off the page. I tried to write complex and real characters. I tried to write an organic plot with real tensions that twisted tightly around ever-changing characters. I am pleased with *Currency* thus far, and I hope to continue to form it into a text that someday others will want to read.

Currency

Part 1

1.

Not only did David claim he lost his job but he forgot to bring home the brie.

"What are we going to bring to the Jordan's?" Winnie said. She sat with her back to the bar. She wore fuchsia suede pumps and a flirtatious pink dress with a lacy black slip. She was aware of a stray track light turned onto her face. She knew from theatre days that the spotlight would simplify her, redden her lips and darken eyes.

He repeated, "They fired me," and Winnie watched his empty hands, how they dwindled there with nothing to hold.

"I'm sure you're not fired. You just got a raise," she said. She was in too much of a hurry to believe him. "You're just trying to get out of dinner. But we have to go. I've already rescheduled twice."

He did not remove his coat. He sank to the couch and said, "We'll pick up the cheese on our way."

He sat stiff in his grey overcoat. The fabric bunched at his sides. He cradled his head. Thinning tufts of red hair stuck between his fingers and scalp. Winnie saw this and the irritating and profound possibility that he had in fact lost his job seared her throat. She faltered. She asked, "Are you going to change?" He did not answer, and she said, "I'm sure it's just a misunderstanding. They just promoted you." When

he still did not reply, she said, “I’m sure you’ll work it out. You’re not entirely serious. Right?”

He stood. His gaze lurched from the large-scale nude hung across from him through the open dining room to the bohemia glass backsplash to the gas range that sang *Hot Cross Buns* when preheated. The cherry wood floor gleamed like a frame around the living room rug. The housecleaner had mopped the floor that morning—she mopped at least twice a week—and he gawked at it now, as if horrified.

“David,” she said, her hand light on his coat sleeve. “You’re not serious, right?”

He said, “No,” and “I’ll go in tomorrow. I’m sure it’s fine.”

This satisfied her—they were running late—and she gathered her jacket and yelled up the staircase to Faye.

“We’re off,” she called and remained to listen for their daughter’s reply. There came a muffled affirmation, a sulky jumble of words. Winnie considered walking up the stairs to better discern. Before The Incident, Faye, who was fourteen, had not been the type to wallow behind a closed door. She was talkative and energetic. She made straight A’s. She competed on her middle school’s Math team and served on the student council. She was a cheerleader and, this past year, founded a Young Engineer’s 4-H Club, a club that met every Tuesday afternoon.

When the custodian, Mr. Harvey, walked in on Faye propped against the desk, her skirt strained over her science teacher’s head while he kneeled and worked inside, Mr. Harvey hollered and Faye screamed. She collapsed onto her teacher, and

his head cracked against the desk. It struck the desk's bottom corner, and blood oozed down his temple.

The Incident scattered everything like a rude burst of wind on a tiny, paper city. The local news withheld Faye's identity, but other social media did not. Faye's club disbanded. She quit cheering, and the question of high school loomed as the due date for applications neared. All this happened six weeks ago, but Faye continued to sprawl across her bed in a catatonic swoon. She did not cry. She did not rage. She did her homework and stared at the ceiling. She spent a lot of time in her room with the door closed.

For the first three weeks after The Incident Winnie sat outside Faye's door. She knocked softly and offered cookies. She called through the wood, "That horrible man. We can't let him win. Faye, you're the victim. You're a child."

When finally, she made it inside, she sat on Faye's bed. She had made it inside, but all she could do was repeat, "You're a child. You're just a kid." Then she cried. Faye squirmed and said nothing.

Those weeks sapped all of Winnie's energy. She avoided the spa, the gym, the local organic market. Thank God most people avoided mentioning The Incident, or when they did, at least they alluded to it loosely with a "How's Faye?" or "How are *things*?" stress heavy on the *things*, and when she did not bite—she never bit—they moved on to safer topics.

It wasn't fair that the public held her responsible for the details. She was the mother. She should have been shielded from the account, not asked to explain it to others. David was no help, either. He just sat there like a flushing potato, and Faye,

well, the only facts she got out of Faye, she had to drag from her that night when it happened and she was still vulnerable and soft.

Winnie had to use her own loathsome imagination to fill in the blanks. She had to picture it a hundred times, in a hundred different ways, piecing the story—and she needed the story, Winnie needed the story for herself—from what restrained or explicit facts she could get. Faye's denial that nothing really happened or had happened before. The janitor's falsetto, eye-witness account, like a color-boosted snapshot: Faye's flushed and mousy gasp, the teacher's bumbling, violent withdrawal. Then there was the teacher's nauseating apology in the principal's office where he admitted to inappropriate relations, but *We did not have intercourse. There was no penetration.* He looked at the wall when he said it, at some typical motivational poster taped there. *Challenge,* it said. Holy shit, Winnie straightened, glanced at her husband, at the principal, is that poster giving him strength?

But, apparently, this was not rape. There was no intercourse. He had not used violence or force—and here Winnie cringed—as she found herself wishing he had, but her daughter had proceeded willingly. And why not? She looked up to this man. He helped her start an Engineering club. He was her teacher, and this was an isolated event that Mr. Harvey thankfully stopped as soon as it started. Faye was okay, although The Incident confused and hurt her. She had not missed school and was maintaining her grades. When Winnie was thirteen she lost her virginity without wanting to, and she turned out fine.

Winnie yelled, “Love you!” up the stairs and followed David to the car. “I mean, David, why must you be so dramatic? There’s far too much going on right now for you to say you’ve lost your job.” They ducked through the cold and dark. “I can’t imagine if you lost your job right now. Can you imagine, David?” Winnie laughed out her window, which, in the dark, had become a mirror. “I’m sure they just said something you took the wrong way. You know you’re very sensitive. You’re too sensitive, really.”

David started the car. There was a soft whirring, a pause, and Bill O’Reilly’s flat, glib voice said, “Chapter Thirty-Three.”

Winnie said, “Who’s he killing this time? Kennedy? Patton?”

“Lincoln.”

“It’s no wonder you jump to the worst conclusions. You listen to such morbid material. I just finished Mindy Kaling’s new book. Now that’s funny and inspirational.” Bill O’Reilly described President Lincoln’s carriage ride to Ford Theatre. In her window turned mirror Winnie could barely make out David’s profile. His jaw doubled in tense reflection. “Have you even had a conversation with her since it happened? All you do is avoid her.”

He did not respond, and she allowed the audiobook to overtake them. Bill O’Reilly had always annoyed Winnie, and her irritation infiltrated the story. It seeped all over the long-dead characters, and the fact that Lincoln rode to his execution was lost on her. Instead, she begrudged Mary her stiff and scripted speech. (“Dear Husband,” she allegedly laughed, “you startle me by your great

cheerfulness.") She begrudged Lincoln his dubious alacrity to reach for his wife's hands after so much life had already consumed them.

David pulled into the cheese market and asked Winnie if she wanted him to keep the book going. She made a face, and he turned off the car and pocketed the keys. She remembered the chill just in time to feel injured he had not thought to keep her warm. She blew on her hands, more out of the thought of being cold than any actual discomfort. She scrutinized the small, polished storefront for her husband, who already stood in line, four people back, his head hunched as if warding off a slap. He would ask the cashier for help and the cashier—clever, minimum wage employee she was—would suggest the most expensive thing they had, some pu pu platter of exotic cheese they would be forced into loving in order to justify the extraordinary cost.

David had left his phone in the cup holder and it began to ring a stock, clipped version of the blues. Winnie saw that it was the local paper, and she answered it with little self-deliberation. Winnie's curiosity superseded her forethought. It jolted through her, and she moved at its whim.

She answered her husband's phone and said, her voice breathy and eager, "David Watters' cellphone." A reporter introduced himself. He said he had some questions regarding the breach at St. Andrew's.

"What breach?" Winnie said. "What are you talking about? This is his wife."

The reporter explained there'd been a data breach, an encryption failure, but he spoke too quickly and with a New Jersey accent and clip, and Winnie struggled to register all that he said. He said he didn't want to waste her time, and that he would

call back soon. She said he wasn't. He could take more time, slow down, and explain, but he had already hung up.

David burst in on her. He wedged a large plastic bulk into the back seat.

"I got the French Plate instead," he said. "Comes with five cheeses I can't pronounce."

"What happened at work?" Winnie said. "A reporter just called." His face broke, a socked glass, and she said, "Holy shit, David. What happened?"

"I told you." He convulsed and stared out the windshield. She felt at once embarrassed and concerned. She smoothed her dress and rubbed his back. He did not respond to her rubbing.

"They can't just fire you."

She was aware of her stupidness, her lack of preparation, and it pained her. She wished that she did not have to speak, that David could talk and tell her everything without her having to respond.

He snorted, "Why can't they fire me? What makes me so special?" He was not accustomed to sneers or snorts and the severity of his expression, even though it seemed genuine, appeared to startle him. He steadied and turned, his eyes wide.

"You've been there forever," Winnie said. "What happened? Please."

"Someone had to take the fall. They chose me." His phone rang again. The number read blocked. "Don't answer that," he said.

The drama of the moment dawned on Winnie and she forgot to reach out to him again. "What?" She said. "What did you do?"

"Nothing. Someone broke into the software and stole a bunch of files, like patients' records and copied them."

"But why copy them?"

"Why does anyone do anything, Winnie? Money. And they're blaming me. It's my software so it must be my fault."

"I'm trying to understand. Why would they blame you?"

"I'm fired." He spoke slowly and snorted again. His snort sounded a little more natural this time, and he did not retreat from it. He said, "It's over."

And now when he said it, she knew it, and she recognized that not only would they have to cancel dinner with the Jordon's, they would have to cancel a lot of things, their February trip to St. Martin, for example, but even that felt suddenly depleted of importance. It was an instant when everything changed size, and she felt a momentary and fizzling sense of relief as her initial annoyances shrank, but this relief gave way to a dull throb, a mounting panic, and her reality resumed a new and disturbing sense of proportion.

"What's going to happen?" she said.

He glanced at her then squeezed his eyes.

"I don't know."

2.

David graduated with a degree in computer science from NC Chapel Hill and found a job through his late father's connections as a Network Manager at St. Andrew's Hospital. He made up for his timidity with kindness and was successful enough to be promoted within five years to the head of the IT Department. His department employed twenty-six people, and he took great pains to know them all. He celebrated their birthdays and learned their spouses' and children's names. He challenged himself to make sincere and relevant small talk whenever he passed an employee to and from his office.

The hospital asked David to build custom in-house software, which he did from the ground up. The software's success lent David minor celebrity at St. Andrews. Every doctor, nurse, and pharmacist carried a laptop and used his software as their reference and recorder. Thanks to David, a patient's file could now include photographs, charts, a record of visits, staff notes, history of medications, treatments, and x-rays. There was a separate but complementary financial tab, along with helpful quick links an algorithm selected based on keywords found in the patients' notes.

David received requests from younger doctors for a network of their own, a pseudo social, pseudo scientific digital community where doctors could discuss their experiences, breakthroughs, and mistakes. They wanted a more efficient and less formal way to collaborate, and David felt prepared, eager, and capable to take their askings on.

David woke to his mornings with a sense of accomplishment. He stepped, successful, into the hot shower's steam. He mattered and his time was valuable, and

the day's busy schedule proved it. But then The Incident squashed his lightness, his accomplishment. The shower steamed like fog. When the janitor caught Faye and her science teacher indecently arranged, his everything that mattered felt indecently arranged, too. Despite David's beseeching Winnie refused to take the man to court. The state would do it for them. She insisted things like that never went well, and she didn't want to drag Faye through the process. So David did his best not to think about it, but then he could think about nothing at all.

He could not focus at work. The slightest sounds disturbed him. His secretary thrumming her fingers on her desk. The heater's click and hum. He languished in his office and streamed entire movies. He scrolled through doctor's notes made public in forums. The names of the diseases interested him, and he said them out loud.

One afternoon while on break he met a woman riding the elevator to Neurology. She told him her name was Maggie Olds and she was a mother. She said she suffered from headaches and one day woke up on the floor. Today, she would learn the results of a test. She expected the worst. She was a magnetic woman, and he wished her luck. He returned to his office less able to concentrate than ever and decided to seek out her file.

He logged in using the system's admins account and looked for her name. The test was negative but the file was so interesting he looked for more files. He searched for himself. He searched for Winnie and Faye. He looked for his daughter's science teacher's files. He could not find the science teacher, but the looking gave him something to do, like sticking a tongue inside a toothache.

He left a back door into the software that he could later slip through from the comfort of his laptop at home. He pursued real people like stories, engaged in the drama of their notes. He sipped decaf coffee, kicked up his slippers and clicked deeper into their misfortune.

He received emails alerting him to an uptick of cyber assaults and ignored them. He saw code and felt exhausted. He told Winnie he needed a vacation, but Winnie said they needed security. What Faye needed was stability, above all. She repeated this to him in January, the night before he was fired. Hackers found David's backdoor and downloaded all of St. Andrew's medical records. They held the patients' files hostage and threatened to publicly release them unless the hospital agreed to a large sum.

Amy Richards, St. Andrew's COO, found David in the break room. He had just bitten into a chocolate glazed donut. She wore a navy suit, turquoise blouse, and smelled like the cooled steam from a long and vigorous shower. She told him she needed to speak with him and propped the door with the medallion toe of her heeled oxford. David dragged his fingers down the sides of his mouth. He made a point to look the other way, out the window and the ash haze beyond it.

She said, "There's no excuse for your negligence. Your security looks like Swiss cheese. I have half a mind to take you to court."

David tried to articulate an apology but failed. He could not choose how much to deny. Her speech ramped with bewilderment.

"HIPAA means something to people. It matters to our patients that their personal information remains protected."

He tried to fight for his job. He made the software, after all, but his sentences dismantled before they could end. Amy Richards's correctness distracted him. She was right. He had made the holes, and he had done it on purpose. Worse: he had read people's personal records for entertainment. Still he claimed he should be the one to fix the problem. He said, "It's my software. Please, let me fix it."

She said, "It's St. Andrew's software, David. It's as if you sabotaged us, and I'm releasing your name to the press."

By the time he reached his car he had to brace himself against the door. His jacket pockets seemed deeper than usual, and he struggled to remove his keys. They continued to snag on loose threads in the pocket's lining. His whimper bounced against the rising brick walls, and this subdued him enough to remove the keys and slip inside the car.

Another kind of man might find some windowless bar with a well-seasoned tender, the kind of place where the wine glasses clinked like chimes. Perhaps he could drink whisky from a heavy weight tumbler until his head thunked against the table, and later, maybe he would careen into the night, his arm slung around the shoulders of a newly formed acquaintance. Maybe he could sing *Oh Susannah!* while his wife removed his jacket and shoes.

He considered driving in the direction of the mall to the nearest Applebee's where he knew they served low carb beer. Instead, he pressed back against the headrest. David's eyes followed the windshield, the fouled winter sky, and closed.

He wouldn't have to go to work, tomorrow. The prospect melted like a small, hard sweet and vanished. He replaced it with intent. Of course his boss would call any minute to ask him back. He'd built that software from scratch.

He sat and waited with his phone in his lap for two hours. He ignored Winnie's five text messages reminding him to bring home a wheel of brie. He insisted on biding his time until that relentless and responsible internal clock warned him, dragged his eyes to the red numbers on the dash, and he acknowledged it was time to go home.

3.

Two months after The Incident and two weeks after David lost his job, Faye began to hear objects think. The objects were not trying to reach out to Faye. They possessed no interest in being heard. Faye understood at once that the objects' sounds—if you could call them *sounds*—were as dispassionate from her as static on the radio, and that her hearing them was not a question of the objects themselves, but a matter of Faye tuning to the correct frequency.

The first thing was a pad of post-it notes, which, in the middle of a prolonged sulk, began to hiss like a bright and shiny machine. Faye circled her room. She pressed her ear to her computer, her cell phone, her tablet, the window, and the floor.

Her heart made a leap and she thought gas leak or bomb. She rushed to the door, and the cheerful hiss, like a baby insect, fanned large and then small as she passed her desk. She lifted the post-its and realized the sound now followed the movement of her hand.

She held the yellow bloom to her ear. Up close, the hiss proved variant with occasional ripples and pops. It filled her with an energy, a surprising get up and go. She fanned through the empty pages, and the hiss brightened. She snatched up the nearest pen and pressed down a line, a scribble. The sound quieted but did not stop.

She flung the pad across the room. It smashed against the wall into two pieces. The hissing increased. Faye picked up the two pieces and ran down the stairs in search of her mother. It was a late Saturday afternoon and her mother sat at the

kitchen island. She worked on a grocery list. She had scribbled through many items with black curlicue ink.

"Faye," she said. "You came down."

"Something's happening," Faye said.

"Yeah," Winnie nodded. "I know. It's great to see you. I'm trying to remember if you like American cheese."

Faye held a piece of post-it in each hand. Her fingers curled around and muffled the upsetting and sibilant sound. "Something's wrong," Faye said. Her hands shook. She pressed the hissing onto the counter.

"I know, honey, it's going to be okay. I promise." Winnie set down her pen and reached for Faye, but Faye stepped backward. She pointed.

"Do you hear that?"

Winnie glanced at the counter. "Hear what?"

"That hissing," Faye said. She jounced her hand to emphasize her point, the yellow pads.

"The post-its?" Winnie said.

"I'm asking you a question," Faye said. "Can you hear anything?"

She felt alive in a way she had not felt since The Incident. Her shoulders rolled forward, her hands clenched and went loose. Her mother was staring. She wasn't even looking at the pad. Faye shoved the two halves at her mother, and Winnie frowned at the paper. The icemaker clattered. Someone started a chainsaw outside. Birds trilled. Faye clenched and swallowed. Her hiss would be buried. Faye said, "Can you hear it or not?"

Still Winnie stared, and Faye panicked with impatience. Was she losing her mind? How could she be losing her mind already? She hadn't even made it to high school. If it wasn't for Mr. Sparks. She willed herself in her mounting panic to believe in all the blame everyone had assured her belonged to him. He was a villain molester, and she, a victim child. He was the predator and she was the prey. He could have ruined her life. He must have ruined her life.

Finally, Winnie moved. She looked from the post-its to her daughter and back at the pad. She said, "What's it sound like?"

"I told you. A hiss. Do you hear anything?"

Faye picked up the post-its and waved them around Winnie's head like flat, clumsy planets.

"Just listen," Faye said, and over and over, swung the pads in great reaching arcs just beyond Winnie's ear.

Winnie sat stiff, center of orbit, until Faye's arms collapsed and her chest stumbled over in breath. She said, "Mom," and Winnie said, "It could be anything. I'm sorry, Faye. My ears aren't the best. The heat can wheeze, sometimes. Could it be the heat you're hearing?" But her heart was not in it.

Faye seemed to emit her own small hiss as she turned and crossed to the side door. She fumbled a moment with the knob—it was locked—and at last managed to let herself out. Though it was cold, she did not close the door behind her. She took long, driven strides to the deck's edge and launched the pad into the bright winter sky. It got as far as the coral berry bush.

Faye was small for her age, barely five feet, and she had become very thin. Yet, she stood outside, and her anger increased; it bolstered her. It poured from her into everything: the porch planks, the yellow wisp of cirrus. Her anger got tangled in the oak trees and slapped against the edges of the pool and with each labored breath, it continued to grow. It connected her to everything. She could climb it. It flared upward as if exuberant with flame.

Her mother called, and she turned. She returned to herself, resumed her small shape, and stepped back inside. She closed the door behind her and offered up her arms to her mother who smelled sweetly of grapefruit. Faye paused as her mother quickly unwound to take her in. Winnie wrapped up her daughter but Faye remained still. Winnie rubbed Faye's back, and whispered shh, as if Faye were crying, but Faye didn't cry.

Instead, she said, "I think you're right. It was the heat."

Then she stood very still and held her breath and leaned forward, just as though she were listening for something scarcely beyond them.

Mr. Sparks was twenty-eight years old, this was public knowledge. He'd studied biology at Duke and spent six months on a butterfly farm in Costa Rica. It was also public knowledge that Mr. Sparks was married with a three-year-old and a baby. His wife had come to the cafeteria during lunch one Friday when she was pregnant. Her ruddy daughter clutched at her neck, and she stood in the entrance long enough to be noticed by the diners. She appeared strangely uncomfortable scanning the crowded cafeteria for her husband.

"Oh my god, she's fat," Faye's friend since the fourth grade, Emma Brickle, said. "Poor Mr. Sparks."

"She's pregnant," Faye said.

"And fat. That's the worst." Emma had spent a vast amount of effort her first quarter refusing to comprehend the differences between anaerobic and aerobic cellular respiration. She met with Mr. Sparks every Monday and Friday until the information could not help but sink in. "Mr. Sparks said the baby was a surprise," she said.

Mr. Sparks said that butterflies, more than any other animal, symbolized human potential. He said they stood for hope and transformation. They symbolized the creative spirit and beauty. He said that if you peeled back the skin of a caterpillar, you could find the tiny, translucent wings of its future self folded within. He said this proved that all of his students already had what they needed to fly, it was only a matter of time and pupae.

"But what do you mean by pupae?" They asked, pens poised, foreheads perspiring.

"You'll know. It's instinct," he said.

He inspired most of them. They crowded his desk and clustered at break. His propensity for metaphor gave him an air of worldliness, while his dark curly hair helped to give his Costa Rican tales authenticity.

Faye's seventh grade science teacher, Mrs. Swanson, was the one who encouraged Faye to start the Young Engineers Club, but Faye chose Mr. Sparks to be the group's faculty mentor. Faye, like many of her friends, nursed a crush on Mr.

Sparks, but, unlike her friends, she said very little about it. Her excitation and sensualities felt too close to be aired. She sensed a danger in her feelings for him, something intimate that needed protection. She intuited guilt when his eyes lingered over her in class. She feigned ignorance when he reoriented on the playground. Always looking, wherever she was, he faced and neared, his eyes lifted from conversation to drift, to rake her body in play. He was a man, she told herself, reminded herself, so she did not say it out loud, because to do so would have meant to betray something small and terrible that she wanted to grow, that she could feel willing itself inside her, just beyond her stomach, like a bright black shock of seared coal.

They met once a week to discuss the club. Faye also talked about herself. She described her shallow mother. She said that she was bored. She said her dad used to understand her but was too wrapped up in work now to notice anything that wasn't code. She wanted to travel, like he had, and after some time Mr. Sparks began to talk about himself, how his wife was always angry and their baby always cried. His daughter crowded him off his bed at night, and now he slept on the couch. He asked her to call him Jason and she nodded, tried it once, and then avoided using his name altogether.

Faye continued to present herself to him. Like a moth to the light she tried to get at the dark center of his flame. She continued to meet with him alone, in the guise of planning Young Engineer meetings. She was unsure of how to proceed, or if it would proceed. She felt guilt, of course she felt guilt, but she'd learned to carry it lightly, folded up into a tiny and translucent state, just inside and underneath her

skin. Greater was her curiosity and instinct, her excitement at night; it grew, and she stayed longer and later with him. When he finally reached for her, it felt preordained. Bright bags sagged at his eyes. His face stippled with his decision to act. She was midsentence, and he stood. It happened so quickly. He cupped her face in his hands. He said, "You're so beautiful," and kissed her and then he kissed her again. She'd kissed boys before, but his kiss fell hard against her lips. His face scraped her chin.

He asked for permission to touch her, and her submission felt legal, like a signature. She nodded. He led her like a doll, by the limp, damp hand to his desk and lifted her up and gently spread her legs. Her skirt caught on graded papers, tests, the top score: 92 circled in red. A pencil rolled and wedged just underneath her bare thigh.

"Can I touch you with my mouth?" he asked and again she nodded. She did not feel the pencil. She felt his face, rough and thorough digging between her legs only minutes before Mr. Harvey came in with his broom and wet eyes, and the room lit with ugliness. She looked down at her legs, her pale shoes, his black curly head, and screamed. She screamed because she was angry. She screamed because it was so real and so disappointing.

4.

David had met Winnie in line at a campus coffee shop in Chapel Hill. She floundered at the register just short thirty-nine cents, and David stood behind her.

He said, “I can get that.”

She turned with a fast smile to take him in. Her smile grew and she thanked him. He waved it off like it was nothing. He recalls, and has since teased her, that she wore no bra that day—just a red tank top dress with matching red lipstick. He wore a beige shirt and tie. Still, she carried her coffee and croissant to his table and asked if he came here regularly. Could she pay him back?

He blushed and said, “Let me take you out,” and to his surprise, she said yes.

Winnie was a theatre major and liked to invite David to cast parties and other receptions. She would joke that he was her financial investment plan in case her acting career fell through, and he laughed every time. David adored Winnie, and her joke thrilled him. He wanted to provide for her.

When his mother was alive, she had painted, and though David never understood what she meant with her blocks of neon, black smears, and stark lines, he liked to look at them. She would prop her latest masterpiece on the mantel and make a show of stepping backward to take the painting in. She tilted her head this way and that, and anticipation knotted David’s stomach for her slow breath. He watched her and wondered what she saw.

He joked that Winnie was his cultural investment plan in case his social graces fell through. His wording lacked Winnie’s same witty ring but his quiet clumsiness only played into his charm. Her theatre friends laughed. Winnie did, too.

She said she wanted to be his civilization. In private she thanked him, said she could be herself around him. She didn't have to try so hard or compete to be heard.

One of the last shows he attended with Winnie was of an automaton theatre, an instillation in one of the obscure, hole in the wall galleries Winnie and her friends frequented for the free wine and atmosphere. They lingered after the show, paper cups filled with red or white table wines, and discussed what it was they'd seen. They debated whether the puppet show was theatre. They leaned and gestured and shouted with an earnest self-importance that, even then, made David feel conservative. *You need actors, real people, for it to be theatre, right?*

"Why does it matter?" David asked later that night as Winnie reclined into his chest. Her hair pressed damp against his neck. The art gallery's wine nauseated her, but they made love anyway.

She said, "Because it's fun," and he stroked her thigh.

He said, "Those machines performed actions. Doesn't that by definition make them actors?"

She twisted her neck to look at him. Amusement tugged at her mouth, "Why didn't you speak up?"

He said, "I didn't think to. That stuff's not important to me."

"It certainly seems important if you thought about it all this time."

They would learn, two days later, that Winnie was pregnant, and though she was already three years invested, she would change her major to financing, which held her interest for six months before she dropped out altogether.

Some weeks after Faye was born, David found Winnie on the couch. It was morning. He had just showered and shaved and pressed a pop tart into the toaster. He did not notice her at first but she gasped and spooked him, though by now, he was accustomed to the complaint; Faye wreaked havoc on Winnie's nipples. The delicate pucker scabbed hard and red. White fuzzed her areolas, and she squeezed tubes of lanolin onto the wounds. She gooped the emollient after every feeding and covered her breasts with gauze.

Winnie winced on the couch beneath Faye's hungry mouth. She looked horrible. Hair stuck to her face and blue dragged at her eyes. Her lips blistered dry and thin. Her ugliness, its accessibility panged him, and he approached her with love. He saw a Chanel catalogue lay flat on the cushion and she reached over Faye to turn the page. A model eyed them darkly. She wore a stippled grey sweater and a snug navy skirt. Her hands stuck partially from her pockets, and a shiny red handbag slung over her shoulder. Winnie tapped the bag.

"I love this."

Winnie's pink eyes filled with the red purse, and he thought, *She must have it*. He knotted the tie at his neck. The baby cooed and all of this moved him to say, in jest, "So your plan paid off," but she didn't understand.

"What plan?" Her voice tensed.

He laughed and tapped the catalogue. He tried to kiss her mouth but caught the corner of her lips, instead. He said, "Remember? You used to joke I was your financial plan or something like that."

"That's not what I meant," she said. "I can't believe you just said that."

Her tired eyes blinked tears. She looked so exhausted, and all he could do was offer to take the baby but she refused even that.

"She's eating," she said.

So Winnie's joke broke off and became a part of their past. Their life was something new, now, and they wandered into this life as best they could. They married. David found a job through his father's connections. He made enough money for Winnie to stay home, though by the time Faye was six months, Winnie complained that she felt useless. She spilled the Classifieds across the table. David reassured her she needn't worry, she was useful enough just staying with Faye, but Winnie returned again and again to the paper.

"I'm not qualified for anything," she moaned and waved her hands over the sprawl of ink. She gestured as if over a vast open space, and they both stared as if into the sublime.

She took roles at the community theatre. She played Linda Lomen, Nora Helmer, Hedda Gabler, and Blanche DuBois. She attended rehearsals at night and handed Faye off to David the moment he came home from work. She no longer obsessed about a job, and David looked forward to spending time with his daughter.

He cooked dinner. Her weight pressed simply on his shoulder. He lay on his stomach and jangled her favorite bright toys. He pressed his palms over his face and pulled them away, swung them open like doors and shouted, "Here I am!" and her head bobbled, intense and listening.

It was David who nursed Faye's passion for science from the time she first expressed interest in ice and why it melted in her cup. He filled half a dozen

receptacles with water—her plastic princess cup, a paper cup from the bathroom, a wine glass, two coffee mugs, and a Bundt pan—and then set them in precarious positions throughout the freezer.

The transformation amazed her. Faye had her father's reserve and quick kindness, his quiet mathematical mind. They mixed water with cornstarch, borax with glue, and baking soda with vinegar. He taught her long division and how to tie her shoes. They bolstered like book ends around Winnie, who proved as fickle as a windsock.

When Faye was nine, Winnie blustered in and said she was done with the theatre. She said it was depressing anyway, all those stupid shows; and now this bimbo rolls in from New Hampshire and starts stealing all those stupid parts that were stupid anyway, and what the hell is she supposed to do—sorry Faye—but she refuses to play second fiddle for some Yankee bitch.

And David and Faye caught each other's eyes. Their silence and patience secured them. Winnie did not return to the theatre, but that was okay. By now, their routine was well set.

The night of The Incident, Winnie called David at work. Her whisper leaked air and it took David much parsing to understand what happened. The events emerged in starkest detail, emphasized by Winnie's terrible whisper, and the thought occurred to him: *Everything's ruined.* A man—a grown up man, his peer—had pushed his hands into the soft clay of his daughter—this little person he'd spent years molding—and now all that effort and love, his life, felt robbed.

Later, in the drive's silence, he rebuked himself for this thought. His reaction felt callous. It was a cave man's reaction. His daughter was a person. People didn't get *ruined*. But all that self-admonishment and evolved thinking fizzled as soon as he saw home. Lamplight glowed at the windows. A wreath hung from the door, and his reaction returned, stronger than before. *Ruined!* He could kill him, and he said this to Winnie over the door's slam, his clanging keys.

"I could shoot him." His voice garbled, a mask over his own voice.

Winnie had already calmed and she advised him to do the same, but this only angered him more. He'd never felt this angry, and he didn't know what to do. He flung his hands at the ceiling and ran them over his scalp. He paced. He hit his fist into his hand.

"Did they arrest him?" he said.

Winnie said, "The city will press charges."

There came a crash, a pounding down the stairs, and there was Faye small in pilled fleece pajamas.

"I'm sorry!" she said, and he turned. He encountered her and something thick and cold grew up to enclose him.

"Go upstairs," he said.

"No. Please. It's my fault. He didn't do it."

"I don't—Go upstairs," he repeated.

"Please don't press charges. Please, don't blame him." She dragged at his arm. Her hands wrenched his skin in opposite directions. It hurt to look at her. His gaze kept slipping from her body to the wall, the door.

"Go!" he yelled, and he shook his hand free, pushing Faye away.

"You don't understand!" she said. "Please."

Winnie stepped between them.

She said, "We can talk later. It's been a long day. Faye, go upstairs."

And that was that. He avoided her, gave her a wide berth in the hallway. His smiles clipped at the cheek. He never spoke to Faye about The Incident again.

5.

Winnie resented Faye her extended isolation. When she lost her virginity at thirteen, no one granted her that luxury. In fact, she didn't tell a soul. But with Faye it was different. It wasn't really rape, was it? And just as strong and immediate as her resentment, akin and simultaneously rising, was Winnie's desire to indulge her daughter. She wanted her daughter to have all the space and time she needed to process and move on. So Winnie gave Faye a month and then another.

The weather warmed, and the camellias blossomed extravagant and pink along the stone path. Winnie cut the flowers and carried them inside, their bright faces popped against her forearms and chest. She floated the blooms in green mugs along the windowsill. She'd seen the idea several years ago in a magazine while at the dentist office. Faye had sat beside her, and she pointed and said, "Wait a minute. That's our bush!" as if she'd spotted a celebrity. "It's a camellia," she read, and Faye nodded and looked closer, out of kindness or interest, it didn't matter. They felt mutually good, even then.

Now when Faye came out of her bedroom Winnie scrambled to greet her. She offered pancakes Faye usually rejected, but this morning when Faye said, "No thank you," she did not turn for the door. Her mouth twisted, and she rocked on her heels.

She said "After school, I think I want to hang out with friends, if that's okay. Emma keeps bugging me, and now that the weather's so nice, maybe I think I could go outside. Emma's convinced it will—you know—help me feel better. And I don't need a ride home, either, because it's like a twenty minute walk from school." She righted herself and adjusted her pack. Her mouth, her shoulders, her arms and legs

all assumed thin and orderly lines. Modest and compact, Faye waited for Winnie to respond, though there seemed no room or need. Of course, she could hang out with friends.

That afternoon, Winnie waited by the window in an armchair she pushed across the sitting room. The cushion's yellow fabric caught the sun, and Winnie crawled into it. She studied the towering oaks and maples outside her window. The spring leaves were almost full grown now, their tenderness deepening in spots.

She had spent the previous night arguing with David. The argument revolved around money, as always these days: on its slow depletion and its potential acquisition. St. Andrew's had given David two weeks severance. The Watters had thirty days worth of savings and after emptying David's retirement account, they estimated they had four months before their money ran out.

David dodged reporters' phone calls halfway into February. The media linked his name with the debacle but only loosely. He was included in initial narratives, but eventually dropped as there was no promise for future drama and the details in which he was involved proved boring. They didn't know him on the streets, but the industry knew him by his reference and resume.

David continued to rise early most days. He dressed in his usual collared shirts and slacks. He kissed Winnie, patted Faye, and chirped his horn twice for goodbye. Mornings sparkled with promise and good feeling: the lawn's grassy glitter, the bright dewy sky. He swore today would be the day someone said, "David, you're exactly what we want. You are the man for the job."

In the evenings, the whole of his optimism deflated on top of him like a heavy parachute. He withdrew, binged on episodes of *Detective Law* he streamed like porn from the Internet. Meanwhile, Winnie squirmed with agitation and guilt. She wanted him up and searching the web for want ads and job forums. She wanted him chasing like a predator.

"Winnie, I do that stuff all day." The light from a nude woman's autopsy lapped at his slightly turned face. "They know me everywhere I go. It's like I'm blacklisted. I'll keep trying, but I almost feel like it'd be better if I wait."

Thick black thread stitched together the nude woman's chest.

Winnie tried not to panic. "And in the meantime?"

"I said I'll keep trying."

"Maybe I could look for a job. I'm sure there's some poorly lit dive that would let me tend bar."

"Of course you shouldn't do that, and I'm sure any place would take you."

"So you want me to?"

"No. I'm just saying you shouldn't put yourself down like that."

He returned to his show. Two detectives and a medical examiner discussed particulars.

"I just worry," Winnie said. "You got that job through your dad, and now that he's gone, I know you're motivated, but—"

David gave her his full attention. "I got that job on my own. Please, Winnie, don't criticize me. Maybe you should go look for a job. Then you'd understand how hard it is."

"Say, that's a swell idea. Maybe I can revive that acting career I gave up. I could play naked dead women like that lady there."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"I gave up everything."

"I never asked you to do that."

They were mutually surprised to find their past still vulnerable even when it was behind them and settled to sustaining wounds. They measured and accused and remembered everything terrible, but whether they slept separate and wounded or intertwined and frightened, the sun rose on a new day, and David kissed Winnie's forehead, and he hummed while he shaved.

Today would be the day, and the morning would feel almost like normal, especially to Winnie, who waved goodbye from the kitchen. She made a protein shake. She saw Faye to the bus. She ran on her treadmill, read in the easy chair and ate cottage cheese and pepper for a morning snack.

Winnie had given up her spa membership, the housecleaner, and unnecessary dining out. They suffered through their budget back when David first lost his job. They plugged numbers into a website that accounted for all their spending. They toggled and wagered.

"I could drink less wine," Winnie said.

"I'll wear suits twice before dry cleaning."

Their sacrificing satisfied them. It felt almost like fun, like a game of strategy, of shifting points and priorities.

"It's only temporary," they agreed.

By the end of March, little else had changed. Winnie tossed unread bank statements into a canvas shoebox. The dwindle of numbers, that rigorous red minus like a censure before every transaction, made Winnie's heart pound. She promised herself she would not wallow in anxiety or loss, so she avoided it altogether. If David did not find work by May, they would have to think of something else. Of course they'd think of something else.

Winnie waited for Faye to come home from school, and in her drowsy warmth she willed a leaf to grow while she watched, but the warmth pressed down on her and she rested her head against the glass. The pane's chill bit through her hair, but it wasn't enough to revive her.

She slept until Faye opened the front door and the sun's rays slanted cool and long. Winnie stood and her gaze scattered over the dim room in pursuit of time or context. Faye's bag slouched slant against one hip. Sweat dotted her upper lip. Sleep snagged on everything. It left wisps along surfaces and feeling.

"What time is it?" Winnie asked, but Faye did not know.

"It's probably late," Faye said. "I lost track of time." She sat on the couch. "I had a good time, though. They do this thing where they go out after school for bagels. They do their homework and study. It's a new thing. Emma bought my bagel today, but maybe I can borrow some money to pay her back?"

"Oh, Faye, honey, that's great." Hope convulsed in Winnie's chest. She found her wallet and removed a credit card.

"Take this."

"I actually think I need cash."

Winnie handed Faye the only bill she could find: a fifty. "Keep both. I'm so glad you're getting out."

"A bagel's only two dollars," Faye said.

"Then that should last."

The next afternoon Winnie did not fall asleep. She did not sit in her chair. She made a zucchini lasagna with fresh tomato sauce and sliced mozzarella. She chopped cucumber, cauliflower, broccoli, and tomatoes into a salad. She tossed in arugula because it was spring and the earth promised so much.

Winnie set the table in the kitchen so Faye would not miss it. If she entered through the sitting room, which was her habit, she'd miss the dining room on her way upstairs. She cut branches from her Azalea bush and placed them in a vase center of the table. She arranged the silverware from salad fork to dinner fork, butter knife, and spoon. The spoon was superfluous, but she set it there anyway, her smile tender. The oven sang *Hot Cross Buns*, and she took out the lasagna. It looked brown in all the right places, and she placed it on the stove to stay warm.

David arrived. He said, "Wow," and Winnie greeted him, glanced beyond him at the door, like she was waiting for a prize, the results of a guess. "I feel good about today," David said. "I was in line for my latte and got to talking with the manager of Gamestop. I told him I was looking for work and I gave him my card. He seemed really interested." He kissed her cheek.

"Gamestop? Isn't that the place where teenagers rent video games?"

"I think you can buy them."

"What would you do there?"

"Whatever he asked me to do," David said. "How's Faye?"

"And what would he pay you?"

David stood by the window that overlooked the back porch.

He said, "I didn't ask."

"Oh, David," she said. "Why do you waste your time?"

He continued to look out the window. His arms clasped behind him. He said, "Is Faye home?"

"No. She's hanging out with friends," and she regretted he didn't turn to her then, because this was supposed to be their celebration. This was news, and she watched him blink and flatten his reaction. He left her alone with her excitement though it snuck up on them both, and, distracted with rejection, she nearly forgot and grabbed at the lasagna pan without mitts.

He saw this and said, "You made lasagna," his voice soft.

Faye entered through the side door. She clutched the straps of her bag and remained outside the kitchen's round, yellow light.

"How was it? How's Emma?" Winnie said.

Faye nodded. She panned the kitchen, her parents, the table, and lifted her smile, a burdensome gift.

"I have so much homework."

"Aren't you hungry?"

"I'm sorry. I just feel like cereal, if that's okay."

Winnie sat at the table. She scooped a large helping of lasagna onto David's plate and then her own. David ducked into his seat, and Faye fixed herself a bowl of Frosted Flakes. Winnie chewed and stared at the point on her lasagna where the steam left the cheese. She stared at this spot, at its perfect brown, and listened to the sound of Faye's clanging spoon.

Later, Winnie passed Faye's door and stopped. She stood so near the wood panes that her breath lashed back at her cheeks. Its damp heat overwhelmed her, and she pressed open the door, relieved to find air, but the stench of curdled milk rose and rushed her along with the blossom of lotion. Empty cereal bowls cluttered Faye's dresser, their silver spoon handles stuck up from them like little, beseeching arms. Bowls interrupted her bookshelf, neat bookends between *Treasure Island*, *Alice and Wonderland*, and *Julie of the Wolves*.

There were the bowls, the smell, but beyond these, Winnie's scan swept like a gasp, the room proved pristine. Faye's usual clutter, the casual shrug of draped sweater sleeves, piled papers, and haphazard books had vanished into a catalogue dream. Every object inhabited its intuitive and right place. Her desktop was cleanly wiped and bare. Her clothes hung in a neat and color-coordinated line. Red sweaters gave way to orange slacks gave way to yellow dresses all the way to a violet blouse. Three pencils lay like soldiers on an otherwise empty bedside table. She had removed all her posters, the photographs and collages, and the walls rose around her like tall empty blocks.

Faye lay on top of a tightly tucked bed, center and still. She stared at the ceiling and said nothing. She did not turn her head. She did not make a noise, and

the silence of the walls compounded with the silence of her breath, and the air became a thick white paint, and the absence of sound was a thing that managed to squeeze in between every convincing crack and possibility. It muted Winnie's thoughts.

Finally, she was able to conceptualize words, but all she could think was that it was all such a waste, and she informed Faye with an almost angry impulse that her father had lost his job.

"What? When?" Faye rolled onto her side, and the silence skittered away, a frightened body of spiders. The lime and pink comforter crimped at Faye's elbow. Her elbow seemed to puncture the blanket, and Winnie's remorse proved reflexive, immediate.

She said, "A while ago, but it's okay."

They had agreed not to tell Faye. The Incident was enough for her to deal with. It was enough for them all. They were the parents. Their job was to restrain calamity, to portion it out the best they could. They had said nothing when Faye applied to the top three private high schools in the county, although the cheapest of them charged over 20 grand a year.

"A while ago? Why didn't you tell me?" Now Faye sat up.

"It's not yours to worry about. I shouldn't have told you," Winnie said.

"Of course you should've told me. You just gave me fifty dollars. Where'd that come from?"

"We have money, Faye. It's not that bad. You don't need to worry."

"Then why did you tell me?" The question embarrassed both of them, and they glared at one another and waited for it to fizzle away. "But where does Dad go?" Faye said.

"To interviews. He's going to get hired any day now."

"Was he fired?"

Faye nodded, and they lapsed into thought. Winnie thought what a wonderful thing to speak to one's daughter, and she tried to find something else she could say that would make Faye say something more so that she could say something more again. She thought of the scarves magicians pull from their sleeves, each yank so dramatic and drawn that the excitement of the scarf's inevitable end bled into its anticipated loss, because even as a child, Winnie had known the scarf was never long enough, not even close.

Winnie said, "Someone told Dad just today that they'd probably call him back."

Faye touched one finger to her mouth and it was no wonder that science teacher had wanted her. She was so inaccessible, so lovely. She was not a gift, though she was contained like a gift, wrapped and bowed and on a high shelf. Of course he would reach for her, and others would reach, too, and because they reached, she would count that reach toward her worth.

Her hair fell into her face and she dragged at it and pushed it behind her ear while it continued to fall. She needed a haircut. She looked too thin. The room smelled of sour milk. Winnie took several steps forward, stopped, and sat on the

edge of the bed. She placed more weight onto her feet than the bed, as if this subtle distribution would alleviate the gesture's nerve.

"I could get a job," Faye said.

"Of course not," Winnie said. "I want you to concentrate on school."

"But maybe I should have applied for a scholarship?"

"Could you?"

Faye fell back onto her bed. Her gaze faded to the ceiling. "I think I need to be alone right now."

"But you always want to be alone." Winnie reached for her arm but did not make it. She caressed a benign daisy gilding the comforter. "Talk to me, Faye. Please."

"I just did." Faye rolled onto her side toward the unfeeling wall. "It's too late for scholarships. All that was due weeks ago. Why didn't you talk to me then?"

6.

Since the pad of post-its, Faye had heard a pencil, a box of tissues, a chair at the library, a couch pillow, a couch, the air freshener in her mother's car, the clothes in her closet and a poster on her wall. She heard objects daily, sometimes four to five times in a day. She did not understand why she heard one object over another or why one buzzed when another hissed.

She researched the Internet for her one symptom and tried not to gather others as she went. Her charged mentality attracted other ailments: headaches, an increased sense of alienation. She stared hard into dark spaces and willed something, anything to move.

She woke in the night, her mind leapt to the attention of the dark. She thought, *I have schizophrenia. I am losing my mind.*

She took every diagnostic test she could find, and her score overtime, that early psychosis indicator, increased with every take. She did sometimes have trouble functioning through days, and her ability to communicate had, as of late, lessened.

She spent languid evenings in the center of her bed and turned from left to right as if this could loosen fear's astonishing wrench. She got up, found her phone, and crouched between the wall and her bed. She called the schizophrenia hotline. She whispered, "I think I have schizophrenia. I hear objects make sounds."

"I'm sorry. I'm having trouble hearing you. Are you in danger?" The voice belonged to a woman. It was a strong voice but far away.

"I think I have schizophrenia," Faye broke from her whisper. She cupped a hand to contain her volume. "I'm not in danger," she said.

“Are you safe?”

“Yes. I’m not in danger.”

“What are you experiencing?”

“The clothes in my closet are whispering, all at once. They sound like a tuning orchestra, all different and conflicting. It doesn’t sound good.”

“Can you hear what they’re saying?”

“No. They’re not saying words. It’s just sounds.”

“What kind of sounds?”

“I told you. They’re whispering, but every whisper sounds different. I think it could be something about color.”

“What’s by color?”

“The sounds they make.”

“Are you alone?”

She paused. Her parents were downstairs. Her dad was probably watching television. Her mom was probably in the laundry room on the computer.

“Yes,” she said.

“How old are you?” the woman asked.

“Why does that matter?”

“You sound young.”

“Do you think I have it?”

“You need to talk with your doctor. I don’t have the credentials to diagnose you. I’m sorry.”

“But do you think I have it?”

"I wouldn't know. It would be impossible to say over the phone. Have any of these voices ever made you feel unsafe or encouraged you to hurt somebody?"

"I don't hear voices. I hear sounds. Just sounds."

"So, you don't feel like you're in danger at all?"

"No. I told you. I'm safe."

Faye tried. She willed herself to hold onto her innocence and to Jason Spark's crime, but innocence was too pure an idea. Faye could not be innocent, but neither could her teacher. She thought it would help to speak with him just one more time. Maybe it would help sort everything out. Maybe she could stop hearing sounds.

One morning, at recess, Emma announced that Mr. Spark's wife had left him. Emma had the habit of pinching her chewing gum between her index finger and thumb. "They just had a baby. I can't imagine how she feels."

Emma and Faye had been friends since the fourth grade when they both forgot their permission slips and were unable to attend the same fieldtrip. Emma talked Mrs. Liberatore, the sub in charge of watching them, into playing Zumba videos on the Smartboard. They pushed the empty desks aside and cleared a circle for all three of them. They danced, Emma, Faye, and Mrs. Liberatore. Faye tripped on a chair, flapped her arms to rebalance and Mrs. Liberatore laughed, "What do you call that move?"

"She calls it Move Awesome," Emma said, and patted Faye's back like a coach.

Faye directed her laughter, a burst of surprise at Emma who at once appeared more interesting. Her severe nose, the haughty kink of her hip now

evinced fealty and safeguard. Faye sought out Emma on the playground and in the cafeteria. They found one another between classes and on morning break. Those first days back when The Incident was everywhere, on everybody's ducking face and in everyone's wooden smile, Emma looked Faye in the eyes.

She said, "I can't believe you guys did that. Did you actually see his wiener?"

"No."

"Well, he's gone now, which sucks. I had a crush on him, too."

"I'm sorry," Faye said. "I'm sorry he's gone."

"Hey, you missed a test in algebra. You can copy my notes if you want."

After The Incident, daily, Faye resolved herself to school. She endured each class stained and enclosed by her scandal. She doodled in margins and startled when called on. She had two months left of school, and she did not feel like trying. She could try again come high school. High school could be her new start.

Emma said, "My mom said his wife took the kids to Arizona. I guess that's where her family lives. You think he'll go back to the butterfly farm?"

"Don't know."

"I wonder if they have laws against molesters there."

"He's not a molester."

Jason Sparks lived five miles from Rosewater Junior Academy. Faye did not know his apartment number, but she knew the name of his apartment complex. He'd said it in passing, during a Young Engineer's Meeting.

"Trouble at Timber Cove," he said. "Neighbors have bedbugs, and we've got to vacate the premises this weekend so they can treat the duplex."

"What's Timber Cove?" a student asked.

"Where I live," he said.

"Where are you going, Mr. Sparks?" Another student.

"To D.C., actually. Kelly's never been to the Smithsonian, so we're pretty excited." Kelly was Mr. Sparks' wife. He said her name, and his eyes lapped at Faye. She held her face still and uninvolved. He returned to the Smartboard, and she scribbled the name, *Timber Cove* at the bottom of her notebook below some notes on Newton's Third Law. The note felt dreamy at the time, a harmless scribbled heart or an addition problem with their initials. She never thought she'd return to it as reference.

Mr. Sparks went to the Smithsonian and returned with a glass butterfly necklace he presented to Faye in his classroom after school.

"Made me think of you," he said. "And I wanted to thank you for starting this great club. And for asking me to be your mentor."

The butterfly's iridescent red fluttered beneath the florescent light. He helped her fasten the necklace's ribbon. She turned shyly, a presentation, her skin pimpled beneath the smooth, cold glass.

Faye wore the necklace now, the glass warm beneath her shirt. She stood outside the school on the sidewalk. She had not touched the gift until this day, until she made her plan. Emma said Mr. Spark's wife took her kids and left, headed to Arizona where she had family. Her mother said Faye was welcome to hang out with friends. She told her to take her time and have fun. Faye plugged the name, *Timber*

Cove into her phone, and the device, with a friendly lack of judgment, suggested the walk would take two hours, tops.

The solid purple line appeared on the screen, a line that would take Faye to Jason Sparks, and she started to walk. She did not give herself time to consider her decision or what it would mean in real life. She only thought, this is what I want to do. This is what I have to do.

She made her decision the night before, when the world at her window was black with reflection. Without the distraction of light her thoughts returned to her fear—that she was losing her mind. To calm her pounding heart, she remembered a method her sixth grade teacher had taught them. She asked the class to lie on their backs in the dark. She played sonorous music and said, "Imagine your most peaceful place. Try to picture it in your mind. Think of that place and imagine you're there."

Faye had scrabbled through a mental digest of backdrop: her bedroom, beside their pool, her dead grandfather's basement, the movie theatre, the bench outside the mall.

She found these landscapes wanting and settled instead into the imaginary white sand of a generic postcard beach, an Everybody Happy Place, complete with crystal water, palm trees, and pops of neon umbrella.

Creating the scene entertained her in class, and she interpreted this recreation as peace, but when she returned to this same beach while in the grip of her nightly fear, the beach proved too flimsy. It collapsed like a piece of cardboard in a low budget play. She could not sleep and her paradise would not stay, so she

indulged herself thoughts of Jason Sparks. The fantasy began at his doorstep with him at the door. He said, “Come in. Come in.”

And here she stopped, backtracked, lorded over her fantasy like an over controlling director.

Now, he said, “My god, Faye. It’s you,” and reached out to touch her face, at which point she cried.

“I’m losing my mind!” she said to him.

Now he invited her in where they sat side-by-side on a warm brown couch. He looked at her like she was whole and interesting, like he had looked at her before The Incident ever happened. She was especially beautiful in her fantasy, all her suffering smudged her face like a wan model. Her lips looked bruised and parted, her eyes hollow and hungry.

The camera of her reverie spanned to linger on the intensity of his look. *How he looked at her*. He perceived her as strong. She was strong. He perceived her as needing help. She was helped. He perceived her as having value. She had value. She leaned hard on his look. Her excitement built, he kissed her, and the fantasy ended. Kiss, cut, rewind. Back to the front door, back to his first sight of her, back to his “My god, Faye, it’s you.”

Rosewater Junior Academy sat at the end of a cobblestone path with an eager green lawn and tulips at the window boxes. The playground was wood and painted with cheerful, tactful colors. There was a vegetable garden, and a six-foot abstract sculpture that served as a jungle gym.

The houses that made up the surrounding neighborhood were brick with white porches and three door garages. Faye walked by them. These were familiar and comfortable. The first mile proved an extension of her terrain; it was welcome and ordered. She knew the walk all the way to the nearest market, where she'd often gone with friends for chips, candy bars, and Slushies, but beyond the market proved unknown. The sidewalk turned. Its concrete appeared flabby and pale. The swollen curb dribbled into a wider street where the cars drove forty-five miles per hour. Their acceleration carried the hair to her face, and she pushed it back, tucked it behind her ears, and left her face exposed.

A drawn squawking made a racket beyond her, at the base of a chain link fence. She heard the squawking in the same way she'd heard the note pad's hiss, the air freshener, the pencils, and couch. She heard it in the inner of her ear, against her back molars. She did not stop to seek its source. She did not allow herself to swivel her head. She was in a hurry. A man yelled something from his window. The crass shout along with the car horn moved by her like a slap. Again, she did not allow herself to turn.

The street Faye walked widened to allow for another four lanes, the air charging with grit in her nose and mouth. She braced herself, watched the broken sidewalk pass beneath her feet. The name, *Topless X,* ran across a building's width like a title. Faye scrutinized the letters' blink for meaning. Steel bars protected the one small window, and the cement door resembled that of a bank vault. A black sports car with a Virginia license plate sparkled against the cement building. A

driving bass ran from the building along the ground and up her legs, and she slowed to note a popsicle stick cross hung from the car's rearview mirror.

A week before The Incident Faye had talked with Mr. Sparks in his classroom. He described creatures called sea butterflies. They lived in the Arctic Ocean and because of climate change and increased acid in the water they could no longer grow their protective shells. He said, "You really got to see them. They're incredible. They've got these iridescent—" but he stopped mid sentence. He said, "Faye, you look so sad."

She startled. She hadn't felt sad, but she warmed to the idea. In an instant, she sought out her sadness and pulled at it like a loose string so that more of her unwound. She turned to him with gratitude and shook her head even as tears spread open her eyes.

"I'm fine," she said. She laughed. "I don't know what came over me."

Her phone told her to turn right and she realized it was already four. She had to get home before dark, and she walked faster. Her steps made a beat she kept under her breath. *Jason Sparks. Jason Sparks. Jason Sparks. Jason Sparks. Jason Sparks. Jason Sparks. Jason Sparks. Jason Sparks. Jason Sparks. Jason Sparks. Jason Sparks. Jason Sparks. Jason Sparks. Jason Sparks.* Her incantation, its repetition mislayed his face. It relinquished all meaning behind his name except syllable and sound.

Her sidewalk disappeared, and she walked in the street. A car drove by and she stepped onto the curb. She balanced as on a tight rope. Her balance gave her pleasure. Her balance became a play. She drew her feet and kicked, leapt forward

and landed on her toes. It occurred to her that Mr. Sparks could drive by, and if he did, he would probably pick her up. She revisited her fantasy to make room for this pleasant possibility and envisioned how whimsical and attractive she would appear engaged in her own private circus.

She passed a rundown playground: a metal slide and plastic swings. A thin layer of mulch mixed with dirt. Three kids sat in a circle and chipped at the mulch with sticks. Their huddle firmed at her approach. The girl sang to the other two boys while they worked. “Mix it up. Mix it up,” she sang. Her stick stabbed the ground. The youngest, he looked two, looked up at Faye and smiled.

She thought she heard him say, “Hi, guy,” to her back when she had already passed them by.

On the other side of the playground was the sign: *Timber Cove*. The driveway looped like the dead end of a street around a spot of grass with a bench. Six duplexes lined the curve. Dumpsters and some straggling holly separated one duplex from the other. A tricycle sat overturned in the lawn of the apartment to the far right, and Faye headed toward it. She scanned the lot for his car.

She knew he drove a red station wagon, but she did not see it in the lot, and her momentum waned. A man stepped from the duplex closest to her but remained on the stoop. He lit a cigarette and scratched his hairy forearm. He said, “Can I help you?”

“No thanks,” Faye said and walked by him, back toward the street. The children were no longer at the playground, and she sat beneath a large beech tree.

People had turned a hole in the tree into a wastebasket. A hypodermic needle protruded between wadded tissue and newsprint.

Faye removed her backpack and checked her phone. Her house would be another two-hour walk, and she wanted to get home before dark. She decided to wait another twenty minutes. She resituated and faced the *Timber Cove* entrance. From here she could see him drive in.

Though the Watters did not press charges, the city opened an investigation. Faye occasionally checked online for developments, but she did not anticipate much. No one could find anything because there was nothing to find. She and Mr. Sparks had never contacted each other save for those afterschool meetings, and nothing had happened save for that one afternoon.

Nothing had happened save for The Incident. But a lot had happened. The rest of it was innuendo and conversation, light touches and glances. Everything had happened, and either everything was right or everything was wrong. But no, he hadn't touched her vagina until that afternoon, and when the officer had asked, she denied even that.

She sat beneath the beech tree and watched the road for his red Subaru until it was time to go. She walked home that day, but she planned to ask for money so she could catch the bus on her next trip. She would return every day after school. She would do her homework beneath the ravaged beech and wait. Eventually, she knew, he would have to drive by, and when he did, she would be waiting.

7.

David exhausted his father's contacts as evidenced by his father's now scribbled-through address book. The book was never a gift. He'd had to go and look for it in the attic through liquor boxes crammed with items he inherited from his father's office following his father's death three years ago.

David could recall the moment he packed the book. Before placing it in the box, he noted the leather cover with interest and curiosity, though he did not take the time to flip though its pages. It was just a list of names back then, a record of his father's sweeping influence. He had to ransack four boxes before he found it again. The book's distressed leather and strap materialized beneath a paperback edition of *Who Moved my Cheese?*

The pages were thin with gilt edges. He drew a finger down the paper's length. It crackled. He kissed the cover for good luck.

He started with the A's. At first, the book felt corpulent with prospect, but he moved through the letters quickly, and his father's boxed capitals, the sharp, cramped vowels and severe arches took on aggressive and admonishing tones. His parents divorced when David was young, and though he continued to live nearby he saw his father infrequently, at holidays and other formal events.

His father helped David land his first job. He seemed eager to do it. It gave them something to talk about. David hoped his influence would last, and he searched online for each person in the book, as well as their professional title and linked corporation. He left voicemails and spoke with secretaries. Some of the people were dead. Some of them had moved out of state. Some of them had lost their

jobs. He sat on his phone with his book and took notes in the margins. He spoke to a half a dozen people that did not recall David's father in the least. Many pursued his vague, if existing, memory, with vowels drawn, "Let meeeeee seeeeee, Maax Waaaaatters. Let meeee seeeeeeeeee."

David took a black sharpie to the names: Kyle Lozens, CEO (of St. Andrew's Hospital) first. He drew a long, thick line across his father's scrawl. He pushed down hard and the ink blotted to the other side. He did not restrain his hand. The pushing tensed his wrist, radiated his forearm, pooled and rushed his elbow. It affected accomplishment, like he'd actually *done* something or cast something off: his father's friends, his father's connections, all those privileges he seemed incapable of grasping for himself.

Yet, he held fast to his hope, and he arrived at the one "Z," Paul Zimmer of Wonder Travel Travelling Agency, with his faith punished but intact. David called Paul Zimmer in advance to set up a meeting. He tailored his resume and wore a peach coral necktie.

A five-foot plastic palm tree stood to the right of the agency's front door, and its synthetic green bristles startled David's periphery. They seemed to cross the air at him, and he jumped and stepped into their bulk. The trunk wobbled, and he caught branches like a bouquet.

The woman at the front desk said, "Whoops." She placed her cellphone face down on the counter top. Travel posters plastered the wall behind her like exotic windows. Italy, California, Thailand, and Costa Rica proposed sanguine summons so remote to his current state he dismissed their appeal with small effort.

"I'm here to see Paul Zimmer," David said.

The woman smiled, nodded, and the man appeared suddenly as if he'd been behind the tree all along. He took hold of David's hand and shook it. Their palms rattled together like power drills.

"Nice to meet you, David." He said, "So, you're good at computers, are you?"

"Yes. I know C Plus Plus and Java. I spent years managing a large team of programmers and designers. It's all in my resume here, if you want to take a look."

"Well, that's great." Paul said. He did not acknowledge the resume. Instead his eyes squeezed at David in a smile that began to feel like a spontaneous test of stares.

David hesitated and allowed his resume to fall by his hip. "As I mentioned on the phone, I think you may have known my dad, Max Watters."

"Real shame about your dad. Real shame."

The woman at the front desk lay her phone down once again and frowned at David with a disproportionate amount of sympathy.

"You're in luck, Dave, because I just may need a computer guy," Paul said. "Our machine's been acting up this past week, and I can't figure it out. Damned thing keeps flashing warning signs at me, like we got a virus or something, but we bought protection for that kind of shit years ago. I called the folks at Mackabee, and they want over half a grand to fix it. Way I see it, it's their software's that's got me in this mess, and I don't intend to give them another dime. Jenny, pull up the screen, honey."

The woman wobbled the mouse and the screen sparked to life. Sure enough, warning messages layered over other warning messages, a spilled deck of cards.

Paul said, “You take two fifty, and you got yourself a job.”

“Fixing the computer.”

“You got it.”

“Just this once.”

“Sure, but if it breaks again, we’ll know who to call. Isn’t that right, darlin?”

The woman nodded. “It’s been such a hassle. I just don’t know how to work around it,” she said.

David looked beyond their eager faces to the poster across from him: Fairbanks, Alaska. Rigorous and stony crags, capped with snow against a blue sky. *Live Alive,* the poster captioned.

“What do you think, David? Do we have a deal?”

“Right,” David said to Alaska and then to Paul, “I’ll do it.”

The job took three hours, and David left with the two hundred and fifty dollars folded in his wallet. He walked the first four blocks to his car with his eyes trained on the ground. He did not want to smile at the people he passed with the long sad drip his mouth and eyes had become, so we walked head down, and tried to summon his father’s face, his posture across a table at a café, but the most he could extract was his father’s handwriting. It rushed him like a series of stabbing peaks, like mountains.

“I don’t know what to do,” he offered the severe and floating letters.

David knocked shoulders with someone and looked up into the face of Jerry Seinfeld. The face was an advertisement on a storefront: Esoteric Books. Below Jerry was a boast: *TM: A charger for your body and mind*. This font was softer than his father's letters. Here were serifs and ancillary white space. These letters communicated gentleness and respite.

His dad had always liked Jerry Seinfeld, and David assumed the poster, along with its promise was a sign, some heavenly guidance. David entered the store.

Esoteric Books was a New Age bookstore, and David paused in the doorway to orient himself. He'd only been in a store like this once with Winnie years ago when she went though a brief incense phase. The smell of it now brought to mind her long hair and short denim skirts, how she held her cigarette. He could also smell sage and new paperback plastic. The smell leveled like the soundscape, flute tinkering over water. The music meandered. It grew and thinned.

A man with a delicate gray ponytail and glasses squatted at the base of some bookshelves and pulled little plastic baggies from an open box. The baggies were filled with rocks, and he piled them in a small mountain at his knees.

"Excuse me," said David, "Is that ad with Jerry Seinfeld for a book, and if so, do you have it in audio?"

"Hey man. No, we don't have audio, but there's a book." The man rose and his mountain spilled in a miniature avalanche. He smiled at the collapsed mountain and then at David. His look was warm but tired. "Follow me," he said. His stride extended from wide swaying shoulders. He wore brown cotton pants and an open blue shirt.

"Jerry loves TM," he said. He handed David a book called *Transcendental Meditation: A Beginner's Guide*. A woman sat on the cover, her silhouette black against a sunset. "Most folks don't understand it. They come in here thinking it's a religion or a cult, maybe too complicated or takes too much time. I've heard it all. Truth is, it's basic and simple, like any exercise."

David flipped the book over, and the cover's coolness folded in his hand. He stared at the blurb without reading it and listened to the man speak.

"Scientists are all over the benefits. I'm sure you've heard studies on the news. It lowers blood pressure, improves relationships, attitude. It's good for creativity and focus."

"So did Jerry help write the book?" David asked.

"No, but he supports the TM movement. A lot of folks practice it. The Beatles, David Lynch, Lykke Li. You've heard of Ellen DeGeneres, right?"

David drew up his shoulders and nodded. "My wife's a fan," he said. "Of DeGeneres."

"The idea is our brains need to rest once and a while. Our society's just go go go, and that's not good for folks. We don't perform well when we can't recharge, just like your phone. Humans need quiet, too, at least once and a while. I'm sure someone like you's felt that need."

David looked down at his suit and black leather briefcase to remind himself what someone like him was like. He said, "So what do you do, sit and say *om*? I thought Transcendental Meditation was where people tried to fly."

"No, we don't force anything in TM. It's all about being comfortable and going with the flow. I'm a certified instructor if you're interested, and I can offer you a free class. There's no pressure to commit. The less pressure the better is what I say. There's already enough pressure out there. Too much, don't you think? Anyway, we meet at the shop here in the back room."

"Thanks, but I don't know," David said. He returned to the book's cover, the woman's stark silhouette. "Maybe I'll get the book."

"You're going to love it," he said. "There's something about you. I can just tell."

The morning shift barista knew David by name. She was in her early twenties with a kale leaf tattooed above one wrist. She played bass in a punk band called The Lofty Bottoms. She was beautiful in that alternative kind of way, and when she saw him, she said, "It's Dave!" Every time, the same way. She said, "Vanilla latte?" and David replied, "You bet. Extra froth."

Their routine was like a high five. It bolstered him and he turned his grin to the room, onto the people with their cellphones and computers, onto the people in conversations, meetings, and sitting alone. David sat with his new book at a table and opened it with a warm sense of compliance and connection.

He'd not held a book in a while. He did most of his reading via audio CD and his tablet. At first the book's objecthood felt excessive, thick, and conspicuous. He lay the book flat on the table, but he leaned more and more while he read until he

poised like a diver, his fingers drumming at the bottom corner of the page, eager to turn, eager for more.

He lifted the book in his right hand. In his left, he wielded a pen he clicked with exclamation. He underlined sentences that turned into paragraphs. He chuckled softly with pleasure. He held the book up and laid it back down. He folded the cover in a loop that rolled smooth against his palm. He wrote *Yes!* And *!!!* in the margins. He drew stars.

"Don't go for what you know you can get. Go for what you really want," wrote the Maharishi. He also wrote, "Success is through happiness," and "Problems will disappear as darkness disappears," and "The important thing is to be able, at any moment to sacrifice what we are for what we would become."

He tore from his father's now worthless book of contacts and wrote on the slip: *Don't go for what you know you can get. Go for what you really want. –The Maharishi.* He folded the strip of paper and placed it alongside the two hundred and fifty dollars in his wallet.

David had always believed in the power of choice and positivity. He spent a good deal of effort on smiling through darker times. The Maharishi not only lauded this effort but claimed it to be the powerful key of achievement. How true. Usually things worked out for David. He had a beautiful wife, a beautiful daughter, a beautiful home. He had just lost sight. He lost focus, got depressed. Now here was an example of how the universe looked out for him. Everything would be fine. All he had to do was refocus his mind and grab the brass rings—or were the rings gold? He couldn't remember.

David read into the early evening. He did not stop reading until he finished the book. Although it was later than usual, he took the long way home, past Esoteric Books and downtown. He hoped the store would be open, or at least he'd see a light, but the store was closed and dark.

It was already dark. He felt a twinge. The sin of his salvation and its private promise of power nestled as close as the night. There. A man crossed the street, his cheeks splashed green beneath a traffic light. There. A woman stepped from her apartment in white washed jeans and black heels. There. Was it? It was. It was the man from the bookstore. He exited a pharmacy with two wine bottles wedged beneath his arms.

David pitched his car into the breakdown lane. This was no place to park, and he left his car idling just in case a traffic cop happened by.

"Hey!" David called. He could not remember the man's name. "Hey!" He took long, sideways strides at the man, his face angled so his car remained in view.

The man's wide shoulders rolled forward and pinched the wine. He stared at the sidewalk with great intensity. He appeared lost in thought, maybe lethargic. Regardless, he did not look up, and David hesitated before placing his hand on his arm.

"Hey," he said. "You work at Esoteric Books, right? I'm sorry, I forgot your name."

The man startled. His attention moved from David to the street and the idling sports car. The vehicle momentarily absorbed him and David giggled. His jaw tensed. "I hope I have the right guy," he said.

"Yeah. I own the store. I'm Will." He snapped to attention and shook David's hand. His grip was firm but allowing.

"I'm David," David said. "I was in your store today. I'm sorry, I know you're off the clock and all, but I saw you, and I just wanted to tell you I read your book. I read every page of it, and I love it. I'm not sure if you remember, it's about Transcendental Meditation?"

Will nodded, smiled. He allowed the wine to slip from his armpits to his hands. His eyes were piercing and blue.

"I remember," he said. "So, you liked the book?"

"I loved it. It makes so much sense. No wonder people are so unhappy. We're just going all the time."

"That's great, David. I'm glad you enjoyed it." His voice thickened. His stance relaxed. He rolled slowly onto the back of his heels.

David said, "I'd really never heard of TM before this book. I mean, I'd *heard* about it; I thought it was different from what it actually is. Like a bunch of kooks trying to fly and starve and all that. How something so great could get so twisted up is beyond me." He glanced to check on his car which was still there and idling.

"Did I mention I'm a certified instructor?" Will said. "I studied TM under some of the original yogis out in Berkeley. What we've got here is a growing community. There's four of us in the class right now. You're welcome to check us out."

"I'd love that," David said. "Some community would be great right now."

Will smiled wide like his stance. Wrinkles sprung at his eyes.

“Being a part of something bigger,” Will said. “You’re a part of it, but are you connected? There’s so much bullshit out there. It’s like everyone’s blind to it, but the community we’ve got at Esoteric Books is priceless. You can’t put a price tag on that. Good folks get it. See what I mean?”

”Yeah,” David said.

“What we got to do is pause and connect with one another. It’s the only real way.”

David’s conviction gathered. It felt acute, and he nodded with such ardor he lost his footing.

He collected himself and said, “This is great. I’ll stop in tomorrow.”

That night he gripped his steering wheel with the full power of his belief until his knuckles blanched white. He understood the moment as the beginning of his future. He was going to get back on the horse, pull up by the bootstraps. With help, he would learn to connect, to allow the universe to course through him like a current, and by proxy, he would succeed.

8.

Winnie had friends she could call. She usually called Allison, her friend from the gym when she needed to complain about something, but back in the winter, when Winnie described The Incident to her, Allison's lips had looked thin in all the wrong places, and when Winnie started to cry, although they stood behind lockers, far away from machines and weights and especially those mirrors, Allison had looked around as if surrounded.

Winnie had college friends she occasionally messaged, but she felt it was unfair to call any of them at this point. They were digital friends, linked to the Winnie online, who was an extension of Winnie, but a different woman. That particular Winnie's joys were magnified. Her every comment, clever. Friends and acquaintances wrote to this Winnie and usually it was this Winnie who replied. She was like a commercial for Winnie, though she was the one who would endure, because she could not call and weep, and it was unfair to hold her to the task. No, to reach into this digital provision of friends to serve Winnie's weaker needs was to do this important and better example of herself a disservice.

Her mother lived in California and her father was senile in a hospice in Denver. She had no siblings, but she still had others to call: the ladies from her book club, her stylist, her manicurist, too, but really, it was better to keep these kind of problems to oneself, which was why Winnie decided to go downtown to buy something instead.

David's birthday wasn't until August but she could always buy something early, and Faye could use a new dress. Now that she was hanging out with friends

again, maybe she would enjoy a new outfit or two. She took Independence uptown, past sweeping fields of new cars, their neon price tags stuck like cartoons to their windshields. There were so many of them. The lots flanked the street as if they'd sprouted and grown there, a wonder of nature.

The lots thinned around the exits. The restaurants and bars wore down, but off the exit and uptown, buildings flourished, their bricks steady, their glass translucent and bold. Winnie didn't have quarters so she parked in a garage on West Trade Street. The daily max was twenty bucks, and this was pretty good when it came to city parking.

The sunlight carried a young, spring heat that dashed the shimmering length of one skyscraper to the next. It ignited a hundred simultaneous windows. It leapt over concrete, around signposts, and canopies. It grazed the bare shoulders of women in sundresses. It kissed the faces that turned to it, and so many turned to it.

The unsparing assertion of Winnie's heels on the pavement empowered her, and she threw up her chin at the three men who sat on the curb. They sat with their knees stuck up by their ears and ate torn pieces of cinnamon bun. The men did not return her interest or disdain. They did not notice her but clattered on in their native tongue.

She entered on impulse a pottery shop. The ceiling was exposed, and the concrete walls and floor reeked of metal and dust. Though Winnie had walked past the store frequently, she had never entered, and she stood for a moment to adjust. Low, spacious shelves marked out a grid. The shelves' wood was unfinished and

supported by cylinder blocks. Against the coarse grain the pottery appeared illumined and large.

Winnie drew long steps. She lingered by bowls and browsed plates. She ran her finger down a vase's whorled stain and took heart when she felt the cashier watching her. She perceived herself perceiving the intricacies of each piece. Her delicate wrist poised over the sheen of a plate though she did not touch it.

She assumed the cashier an expert on art and gestured with the hope that he would recognize in her authentic appreciation, the desire for something beautiful and beyond them. She met his eyes and ducked into her smile. He was probably the potter.

He said, "Good morning," his voice benevolent, perhaps winking, and she picked up a bowl and caressed its smooth bottom. She returned it to the shelf and looped back to the vase. She tapped the bright lip, walked away, and returned once again. At last, as if she'd arrived there by script, she gathered the vase in her arms. She embraced it so it would not fall. Its hard but giving curves impressed themselves on her. She approached the man at the register and slowly removed her wallet. She was not attracted to him, although she needed his approval. She bought what he was selling and hoped he would admire her in exchange.

She left the pottery shop for Marshalls and bought Faye a new jumper. The jumper was yellow with little white daisies. She also bought Faye a new pair of shoes. She was on a roll now, and she entered the Thorny Rose Boutique. She really did need perfume, and she was in the mood for something new, so she bought

herself a small vile of *Bijou Romantique*. It smelled like a blush, feminine and spoiled. The woman in the store told her it was "portrait of a lady."

Winnie walked the clean uptown sidewalks splashed by the shadows of towers and banks. The skyscrapers' gleam rose up around her, elegant with the levity of light. The modern glass structures reflected the sky and out there, competent and among them, it was easy to think she could rise, too, if only she held her breath long enough or assumed the correct form or sustained that dream-like sprint toward a weightless ascent.

But now, her body was hungry and inconvenient, and she took a left toward the Classy Café where she often ordered carrot cake and sat outside one of the tables to watch the park goers across the street. She approached the park at Fourth and South Elm, a parceled block of community green in the Wiley Tower's shade. Sleepy and ornamental dogwoods interspersed the grassy perimeter. In the park's center, a fountain spewed water around which perched a dozen stone birds, three of them in a perpetual state of pre-flight. Yoga classes met here. Chamber ensembles performed here. Young lovers reclined side-by-side in the grass.

Today, a man stood with a clipboard by a bench. He stopped a couple on the sidewalk. He blocked their path with his cowboy boot and waved a clipboard when he talked. The couple nodded and took a step back.

Winnie approached the park from the east side. She would have to cross the park in order to reach the Café, or else cross the road and then cross it again. Winnie set her gaze on the cursive marquis out front the Classy Café. She tucked her purse like a football and quickened her pace.

"Ma'am. Ma'am." His voice came from behind. His *Ma'am* grated her, and she maintained her pace. She tried tossing her chin and slamming her heels. She made it halfway down the block. Through a café window, she could see a couple sipping from the restaurant's mismatched china.

"You dropped something, Ma'am." Winnie turned and though her purse remained wedged in her armpit and her shopping bags roped around her wrist, she clutched at them both. The man stood several yards behind her and waved a white slip of paper. In his other hand he held his clipboard, upside down and turned against his thigh. She hesitated and walked toward him.

"What is it?" she said and held out her hand, though he still stood a good yard away. She continued to go to him and searched for red flags. He was young and well dressed in a short-sleeved oxford shirt and dark fitted jeans. He was pleasant to look at, but this only annoyed her.

"It's a receipt," she said when she was close enough to see what he held.

"It could be important," he said. She accepted the receipt between her forefinger and thumb. He had a dimple. His hair was blonde. It caught the sun and shined.

She said, "Well, thanks."

He bounced his clipboard upright. "Since you're here, we're collecting signatures to increase the minimum wage. All we're asking is a livable amount. In North Carolina, the average cost of living is forty grand a year."

"Is that all?" she said.

"Yeah, well, we're talking basics."

She grimaced then tried to soften the gesture by swinging her bags and purse with breezy disregard.

He continued, “Rent, electricity, internet, phone. Anyway, we believe that anyone working full time should be able to make at least a livable wage.” His top two buttons were unbuttoned and opened onto a smooth, pale chest.

She smiled as if she indulged him. “Yeah, but do sixteen-year-old kids really need to make forty grand a year?”

“If a sixteen year-old’s in school, they can’t work full time, and actually, I know some sixteen-year-olds who do need to make that much, because they’re helping their families out or have families of their own.”

“I’m sorry, I forgot. What’s minimum wage?”

“Seven twenty five. That’s current federal standards. I understand someone with a college degree may see it differently but a lot of these jobs you see as ‘beginner jobs’ are actual careers for others.”

“I don’t have a degree,” she said, her voice sharp.

“Well, then maybe you understand. Someone working full time, that’s forty hours a week on minimum wage makes around 15 grand a year, and we don’t think that’s enough. Lots of states have already raised theirs to ten or more. California, Vermont, Massachusetts, Washington, and we should do the same.” Beyond them, oblivious and fortunate, shoppers enjoyed the playful spring heat. He continued, “We want legislators to know that this issue is important to North Carolinians. It’s a matter of integrity.”

“Of course,” she said. “I’m happy to sign.”

He handed her the pen and clipboard, and she adjusted her bags to one arm. She signed her name.

He pointed. “Your address goes here. It may not feel like it, but this is everyone’s problem. Even yours.” She looked at him. The words felt direct, driving, and ungrateful, and he was in fact looking frank in her eyes. He said, “If you’d like to make a donation for the cause--”

And she interrupted, “I’m sorry, I can’t. My husband just lost his job.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. He did not move his head, but his eyes skirted her shopping bags.

She said, “We’ll be fine.”

“Yeah. It’s tough times,” he said, but his tone shifted, became aimless. He discounted her. He already scanned the sidewalk for someone else.

But she could not stand to be discounted, even by someone so young and she laughed, “I bought a vase. I’ve got a weakness for art, I can’t help it.”

“Yeah, I get it. We’ve all got weaknesses. I appreciate the signature.”

She returned the clipboard and fumbled with her bags. “Do you work for them? The activists?”

He appeared confused then laughed. “No. I work with geriatric patients. In fact, I don’t know what your husband does, but they’re always hiring.”

He padded at his jean pockets.

“My husband’s a web developer.”

He found the card and handed it to her. Black text on white:

Freedom Geriatric Center

Dr. Brian Kuhn, L.P.C., R.R.T. L.A.C., N.B.C.F.C.H.-P.S.

Vitameme Psychotherapy and Hypnosis

Try Again and Let it go

Winnie struggled to decipher the card. “Are you Dr. Kuhn?” she said.

“No, I’m an actor. I work for Dr. Kuhn. *Vitameme* means living memory. It’s this new psychotherapy Dr. Kuhn spearheaded.”

“I used to act.” She dropped the card into the shopping bag with her vase.

“Then you should check us out,” he said. “Thanks for the signature—Winnie Watters.” He read her name from the sheet. “This stuff matters. It’s important.”

It’s not like Winnie didn’t care. She sat by the window in the cafe and watched the young man stop people on the sidewalk. She envisioned a sixteen-year-old mother working a menial job behind a counter. Maybe she lined tomato slices along a hoagie bun. That mother deserved to make a living wage just as much as Winnie or David.

She recalled David’s Gamestop announcement and his excitement when he said it. Her carrot cake sogged in her mouth. What if that was the best he could get? But David had skills. Real, valuable skills. That would never happen. But what if it did? She pushed away her cake. The man with the clipboard must have felt her eyes through the window because he turned to face her. His face lit with recognition, and he smiled and waved. She waved back, relieved, so glad that she had done her part. So glad she had signed his petition.

9.

Following the dismissal bell, Faye rode the town bus to Timber Cove and sat beneath the beech tree with her homework in her lap. The dirt smelled like cigarettes, as did the trunk's hole, but the mottled tree and its saw-toothed leaves cast a long, cool shadow.

Three children, the same three that had huddled that first day and sang "Mix it up! Mix it up!" played beside the scorched slide and swings. They were siblings, Faye guessed. She observed them over her books. She looked for but did not find a parent or sitter. The oldest looked around nine. He was chubby and spoke in a shrill, breathless voice that he directed almost always at his younger sister, whom he referred to constantly.

She looked five, fell in age and size between the two boys. Her hair was kinked and dark, and she wore a peach-colored tutu squashed with red, North Carolina earth. She spoke the loudest and with the most authority. Her sharp Southern drawl brought her brothers' faces up and looking, the youngest with a pet-like blankness, while the older leaned forward, his nostrils flared, benign admiration wide in his eyes.

Their craven freedom awed her. She knew small children to play soft distances from nannies or mothers. They wore sunscreen and hats with visors and got reprimanded for throwing sand. The youngest of the three looked like a baby. He toddled between his sister and brother. A thumb plugged his mouth save for the rare instances he removed it and uttered a string of flabby words only his sister seemed to understand. They threw sand, and dirt, and rocks and nobody scolded

them. Their keen voices rose unencumbered, and Faye listened hard to understand why they were alone.

At first the children maintained a distance from Faye they only crossed with intermittent, shy glances. When the youngest tottered too near, his sister snatched his arm.

"Don't you talk to strangers," she said and heaved him back toward the hot metal slide where they tossed pinecones and watched them fall back down.

They soon lost interest and turned to the swings. The youngest placed a small, grey stone onto the worn plastic seat and pushed. The rock dropped, but the sister wanted up. The seat was too high, and the oldest tried to lift her. His face tightened red with effort. He roped his arms beneath her armpits and around her chest. He lifted, his back bowed, but he couldn't manage and dropped her. They tried again. The swing's chain jangled roughly; the seat bounced at her back.

"Keep trying!" the sister shouted.

He shot a pained look at Faye.

"Don't give up," the sister said.

The older brother groaned and simpered. "I can't. You're too heavy."

"But I want to swing." Now she looked at Faye too, and Faye slid her book from her lap to the grass. She placed her pen onto the book's protected cover and said, "Would you like some help?"

She lifted the girl onto the bleached orange seat, surprised by the lightness of her body. She said out loud, "Wow," because she'd braced herself for more weight. She offered to lift the youngest but he frowned and hid his face.

“He’s shy because you’re a stranger,” the girl said.

“I’m Faye,” Faye said.

With his sharp with worry voice, the oldest said, “It’s okay. She’s nice. She’s trying to help us.”

Faye returned her attention to the street. She would miss his car if she was not careful. Luckily the road arced around the playground, so she had ample time to look, especially if a car slowed to turn into Timber Cove.

“Can’t you push me?” the girl asked. Her pink gel sandals dangled inches over the dirt. The oldest wanted a push, too, and Faye moved between them. She had to consciously alternate the force of her push, as the girl required so little and the boy, with his bulk, needed more. She pushed his soft back, and he leaned into her palms.

“Weeeee,” he said. His smile was self-conscious but willing.

He peeked at his sister; her strong, brown legs kicked at the sky, which was the blooming blue of forget-me-nots.

“Gerald!” she yelled. The youngest stole to the street. He crouched in the dirt near the curb and picked at some grass. “Get away from the road!”

The boy looked up, wailed, and turned his back.

“Gerald!” She leapt off the swing, mid-air, and landed with a triumphant swinging flourish. She marched over to Gerald and grabbed up his arm like an exasperated woman seizing her purse. The oldest, still on the swing, dragged his feet through the dirt.

The girl hollered, “I’m telling Gamma. You can’t go near the street.”

"No!" Gerald yelled. He jerked away from her. Wild, he yanked his arm and screamed back toward the street where a truck sped and blustered dust. The truck's rims and thick bass temporarily dazzled them, even Faye, who turned to watch it disappear around the bend.

"Come on, Gerald," Faye said. She approached him and he surprised her. He lifted his arms and allowed her to lift him. She braced him on her hip. He stank of soured milk and runny shit.

"Where do you live?" Faye asked the girl. "I think he needs a new diaper."

"Ger*ald*!" the little girl said. "You're supposed to use the *potty*. He wears training pants, and now you can't get an M&M."

"Don't you want an M&M, Gerald?" the oldest boy said.

Gerald whined and wrapped his arms around Faye's neck.

"Do you live in Timber Cove?" Faye asked.

The girl nodded. "Come on, Gerald." She stuck out her hand. Its chipped purple polish winked in the afternoon heat.

Faye returned Gerald to the ground, and he shoved his hand into his sister's. Their shrinking fingers made way one for the other.

"See you later," the girl tossed over her shoulder and sounded briefly as careless and world-worn as a grown up adult.

The oldest followed behind. "Next time use the potty," he pleaded. "Don't you want an M&M?"

That next afternoon the kids cloistered around Faye with renewed vigor. They besieged her with questions. Why was she there and where did she live and

did she have a mom or dad and what was her homework about and was her teacher nice at school and did she know their mom?

"We live with our Gamma," the oldest said. Faye sat against her tree, and the boy stood over her, his face swallowed by the brooding, afternoon sun just beyond his shoulder. She squinted and searched for his mouth inside the shadow, gave up, and looked at his sneakers instead. "Our mom's a hairdresser. She's really good if you ever need someone to fix your hair. You could say you know us, but she travels a lot, so you got to call her first. She's got a lot of appointments because she's so good. She cuts our hair sometimes when she comes to visit, except she doesn't cut Joelle's hair, because Joelle won't let her."

Joelle made a face and threw a wood chip at the street.

"Gerald cries sometimes. He doesn't like the clippers, but he gets a lollypop when he's all done. Don't you Gerald?"

Gerald sat between Faye's feet and tore petals from a clover. He didn't acknowledge his brother.

"I'm hungry," Joelle said. "You want a popsicle?" Faye shook her head. "I'm going to get a popsicle. Come on, Gerald."

The oldest lingered before Faye, and she made a visor out of her hand, though she still could not make out his face.

"You sure you don't want a popsicle?" he said.

Faye shook her head. She reopened her book though he remained another minute to brave the discomfort and silence before he trotted off.

Two more days passed and a weekend before the oldest—who, Faye learned at some point, was named Charlie—mentioned their old playmate and neighbor, a little girl named Nora. It was unusually hot for early April. The boiled air stuffed around them like wet wool, and they sweated and breathed and did very little else. Faye sat beneath her tree. She struggled to solve for x and balance equations. The siblings dragged toy cars through mulch. They heaped woodchips into piles and ran the piles down. Gerald sprawled on his stomach. His outstretched hand made languid arcs with a small green car.

"I wish we had a pool," Charlie said. "Nora had a pool. I wish Nora was here."

"We have a pool," Joelle said.

"No we don't. It's cracked. It doesn't hold water."

Faye had forgotten the name, though when she heard him say it, she remembered. She recognized it over math equations and the sound of the empty street. She heard it like she would hear her own name, a sound pattern flagged as important. Her heart lurched in her chest, and her back and arm muscles tensed. She connected the name to Mr. Sparks, his daughter.

"Who's Nora?" she said. Their innocence emboldened her. She walked to them and did not hide her earnestness.

"She used to live here, but she moved away," Charlie said.

"She's our friend," Joelle said. "Her momma had a baby come and then she moved away."

"Did you know her dad?"

Joelle and Charlie nodded. Gerald sat up and stuck his thumb in his mouth.

"Does he live here?" Faye said. She crouched so she was level with their eyes.

"In Timber Cove," Joelle said and glanced to Charlie for help.

"I think I know him," Faye said. She smiled encouragement. "I think he's my friend."

Her heart knocked hotly and wetly. Something was happening. Now. It was happening now. Why didn't she think of asking them before? Of course they would know him! She was going to find out where he lived. She was going to see him. Maybe any minute. Her tongue dragged at her lips. They lacked moisture. She swallowed and smiled.

"Gamma says he's a bad man. We can't go near his house any more."

Faye pulled at her fingers. Her mind washed white with conflicted thought.

"I don't think he's bad," she said slowly. "I could go talk to him, if you want. Do you want me to go see where Nora lives?"

"She lives in Arizona. Gamma said," Joelle said.

"Do you know her address? Maybe you could write her a postcard."

Charlie said, "I'll show you where he lives. It's just Joelle needs to be careful. Just girls."

Faye packed up her things. She leaned over and slipped her books, the smooth covers, one on top of the other. She tugged the zipper up and over the books. She felt sick. They watched her gather her things. She could feel them waiting, feel their poised curiosity. They weren't stupid. They could feel her energy, and they could feel that something happening just beyond their reach.

"I'm telling Gamma," Joelle said. "We're not supposed to go anywhere near him. Gamma said that!"

"I'm not going," Charlie said. "I'm just going to show her."

Charlie led the way. Faye followed. Joelle took up the rear with Gerald in tow. They did not take the street but cut through a thin patch of trees at the rear of the playground. Charlie's thick arms swatted branches. He wore a baggy white t-shirt. A Gatorade logo emblazoned the back: an orange lightning bolt highlighting zippy green font.

"This way's faster," Charlie said, his voice lower than usual. A spider web swabbed Faye's cheek and mouth. She spat and swiped. Joelle giggled behind her.

They spilled into the apartment complex by the dumpsters, and they had to squeeze between the trash's rusted metal and the apartment's vinyl siding. They walked sideways, backs to the apartment. Faye ducked below a window. Her anxiety mounted but then they arrived on the sidewalk and filed one by one until Charlie stopped and turned.

"There," he said and pointed at a door. Apartment 4A. The door was splintered wood and colored the soiled white of a used rag. The numbers were elaborate, a bronzed plastic that, Faye noted with some alarm, emitted an atonal, high-pitched note like the last in a hearing test. The only detail that distinguished his door from the others, besides the singing number and a large nail head stuck in the door's center, was a discolored welcome mat. On it, a butterfly the color of Kool-Aid exploded from a forest of dewy grass.

"That's where he lives," Charlie said.

All at once, they looked at her. Three concrete steps led the way to his door, and Faye stood at their base.

"I don't think he's home," she said. She looked into each alert and earnest face. Charlie's pouched lips, Joelle's combative nose, Gerald's flushed cheeks. They were familiar yet strange out here in this new condition, outside the playground, without the backdrop of swings and slide, and she realized she could know them but not know them at all.

"You going to try?" Joelle said.

"Alright, then." She started for Mr. Sparks' door. The children remained on the sidewalk and watched. She lifted her finger and aimed it at the doorbell, and then she was there, pressing the bell, listening to it ring a classic *Ding Dong*, and she adjusted her backpack, smoothed her skirt. She fixed her mouth in a half open and inquisitive smile, and there he was, in a maroon bathrobe. He'd grown a beard, his hairy toes bare. At first he did not speak. His lips moved, his hands, and his eyes. His gaze gathered momentum and scrambled beyond Faye and latched onto the kids.

"Hey kids," he said in his classroom voice, like bright, worn silk. He would not look at her. He remained fixed on the kids beyond her and on the sidewalk.

"Hi," she heard Charlie, his voice, subdued and new.

Faye trembled. Her hands shook, and she lifted them, brought one to her face her hair. She clenched her hands together at her stomach and lifted her eyes to his dark pupils, his lips pink against the black curl of his beard. The beard made him look strange and old, but she wanted him to look at her so badly. She recalled him animate in front of the classroom. That same mouth explaining the law of

conservation and the different states of matter. Those same dark pupils darting toward her, secretly then openly. Alone in his classroom, those eyes had looked at her, fearfully, almost helplessly over the hem of her skirt.

"Need anything?" his pink lips said.

"No sir," Charlie said.

Mr. Sparks glanced again at Faye, and she caught his eye. His look flashed over and vanished.

"Okay then. See you."

He closed the door and Faye remained to look at the wood's sogged white, the nail head, and the cheap, false letters that persisted with sound.

"Are you sure you know him?" Joelle said.

"I'm sure," Faye said. She turned. Her eyes felt hot and dry. She walked down the steps carefully back to the children, and they crowded around her.

"We have popsicles," Charlie said. "Do you want a popsicle?"

Faye blinked. There was a tear, but she got it with her fist.

Gerald let go of his sister's hand to cling to Faye's leg.

"We live over there," Joelle said. She pointed to the other side of the cul-de-sac, but there was so little to distinguish one apartment from the other: a yellowed wreath, a pink tinsel Easter egg.

"I think I'm going to stay here a minute. I'm not feeing well. I need to sit down." She sat on the bottom step and the kids congregated around her. They held her in an ardent circle. Gerald crawled into her lap. Joelle put her hand on Faye's knee, and Charlie stood, feet shoulder width apart and expressionless.

Mr. Sparks opened his door. He said, “You kids go home now, okay?” They blinked back at him. Faye turned, but he did not look at her. He hesitated and closed the door again.

“Come on Faye,” Joelle said, her voice soft.

“Not now,” Faye said, and so they sat in silence on the concrete steps for another ten minutes. Then Mr. Sparks was outside. He wore jean shorts and a wrinkled T-shirt. He wore sneakers but no socks, and he walked past them, he excused himself by them and kept walking, briskly until he reached a small and dirty white Honda, which he got in and drove away.

Faye continued to sit and eventually the kids grew restless.

“I’m going back to the playground,” Joelle said. “You guys coming?”

Gerald got down from Faye’s lap. Charlie hesitated.

“Come on, Charlie.”

“Mr. Sparks did something to a little girl,” he said. “He’s a bad man.”

Then they all walked away.

10.

"This will change everything," Will said. "TM can bring you wealth beyond your wildest imagination, in spirit and health and finances. It's powerful stuff, man. I hope you're ready."

They stood in the backroom of Esoteric Books. The walls were silvery blue and windowless with thin beige throw rugs strewn in haphazard layers across the floor. Green and purple floor cushions ran the periphery of the narrow walls. In the back corner, a white haired woman sat, her eyes closed, her back straight.

"That's Leonora," Will whispered. "My wife's best friend."

Leonora cracked an eye. She wore a loose, lavender dress. Her long, thin fingers tensed then softened in the folds of fabric in her lap. Her eye closed, and her wrinkled face smoothed. The men stared at her as Will quietly continued.

"A couple others come regularly, but the class is still pretty small. If you know anyone that would be interested—we like to spread the good news."

"I'll see what I can do," David said and tightened his jaw to hide the fact that his life had taken a sudden turn and he no longer knew anybody.

"Come. Sit down. We can sit over here." Will grabbed two cushions from the wall and placed them in the opposite corner, across from Leonora. "I'll get a candle," he whispered. "It helps. Especially at first."

Will opened what appeared to be a disarrayed storage closet. Cardboard boxes heaped on top of papers stuffed into folders stretched beyond their bindings. Will reached and brought down a shoebox filled with partially melted candles of

varying lengths and shapes and widths. He selected a rectangular blue candle from the top and replaced the box in the closet.

They sat on their floor cushions opposite one another.

Will said, "Just make yourself comfortable. It doesn't matter how you sit."

He used a blackened chrome zippo to light the candle. A worn skull was engraved in the metal along with some text. David did not want to think about skulls. He reclined with his legs loose and in front of him. He focused on the candle, on the mute yellow flame.

"You can close your eyes, of course. You do whatever feels comfortable. I've just found the candle helps relax my vision."

Will offered David a "temporary mantra," a generic jumble of syllables David was meant to repeat, to circle like a descending bird.

"The idea's not to force anything. Strive for levity and lack of effort. Imagine you're sinking below your chopping waves of thought, deeper and deeper, below them, where it's quiet and still."

David recalled the Maharishi's words: *Go for what you want*. He didn't know what he wanted, exactly, so he thought about things he had wanted in his past. He had wanted to provide for his family. He had wanted to matter. He had wanted Winnie, and he wanted his daughter to be happy. David tried to want his mantra.

Will's breathing came toward David like waves flipped onto a sudden bank. His breath in the otherwise silent room led David astray. His body not only contained him, but distinguished him from other bodies. He thought about Winnie. Her body was separate, too. He imagined the whole of her separate body, and his

pulse quickened. Once it had felt like their containers spilled into one another. They were so full. They had spilled without pause.

David's doleful arousal, with its nostalgic lust, brought him cascading inward.

I've strayed, he thought, and he sank again toward his mantra. When he strayed yet again, he sank toward it again. It was like falling asleep. Like turning down and condensing one's volume. A chime returned David to the room. He stood. His body felt porous and light. He said, "Wow."

He looked around the room. Leonora's green cushion sat empty.

"You should feel great right now," Will said. "Full of purpose and energy. You should find that already, just after one session, you'll achieve better focus on your goals."

"I do feel great. I can't explain it, but it's powerful. Just like you said."

"You are powerful, David."

David signed up at the counter. For $1000 dollars he received a mantra unique to him. This was critical to his progress down the TM path. These syllables and sounds were not generic, but tailored to his needs, to his specific stage in life. Will promised the mantra would accentuate his silence and stillness. It would lead him further into it, and it would lead the calm further into him.

David also purchased a pulse diagnosis for $300 and $1200 worth of herbs and stones. He joined the meditation group for $200 a month. The group met twice a week, and Will said, "Community will draw up around you like two closed hands."

David practiced his new penchant for sinking everywhere: in the car, at the coffee shop, at the dinner table. He would imagine himself a stone tossed into a stormy sea. The waves of his thoughts leapt and howled. There was a layer of froth, white noise, and then deeper his mantra, deeper his silence, deeper his calm. He practiced this sinking especially at home, where Faye showed up more often.

He was happy to see her range from her room, but he sensed in her a disturbing self-awareness, a physicality that she previously lacked. She wore lip-gloss and stood with her hip stuck to one side. She developed the habit of twisting her hair. He did not know what to say to her. Still she seemed to seek him out.

She caught him by the refrigerator. He filled his glass with water, but something was wrong with the filter, and the stream trickled in a slow, thin line. He heard her approach from behind but remained fixed on the glass, which was now a quarter of the way full.

She said, "Do you ever get worried you'll run out of places to apply?"

Her attempt at maturity nauseated him. He squeezed his glass and smiled.

He said, "It's tough out there, but no point in worrying. Real success comes through being happy."

He turned to look at her, but his eyes kept skidding at the wall.

"So, just be happy. That's it."

"It's really that simple."

He could smell the cucumber melon lotion they'd bought Faye for Christmas. She had pulled it from her stocking. "My favorite!" she'd said.

He wondered what Faye thought when she rubbed the lotion into her skin. Did she think about men or herself or was it just the motion of routine? He lapsed so deeply into the question, it took all his vision to pursue it to the end, and when he returned to the room, his glass was full and Faye sat at the table with a pop tart.

She took a bite and said with a full mouth, "Hey, is there some law that kids have to be watched? Like in public? Like how old do you have to be before you can play at a playground alone?"

"I'm not sure," David said.

Winnie breezed by in her bathrobe. She poured herself coffee. "Why are you asking? I thought kids from the outside weren't allowed on your playground."

"I was just curious. I mean, I feel like I just barely started staying home on my own."

Winnie leaned against the counter with her coffee. "Yeah. You did. You're just a kid, remember."

"We've got to do something about that water filter," David said.

"And how are we going to pay for that?" Winnie said. She turned to Faye. "If there's strange kids coming onto your playground, you need to let somebody know. That could be dangerous."

"Nobody comes in. I think they lock the fence anyway," Faye said.

David imagined a locked fence. The fence in his mind was flawless, white. The golden latch gleamed. He saw his daughter's teacher inside the locked fence and he saw all the children and his daughter among them.

"Got to run," he said and pushed back his chair. He willed on that moment of descent, the splash of his stone. He kissed Winnie and patted Faye's head. He closed the door on them. He whistled and walked to his car.

David carried his mantra inside him like a pendant. It was there when he sipped his latte and re-tailored his resume. His mantra hung in his chest when he introduced himself to managers, shook their hands, one after the other, and smiled like it was spontaneous and heartfelt. It was the promise of his sinking. It hung heavy and gilded, and all he had to do was to untie it, release the string, and down it could drop, down he would sink.

11.

Winnie noticed the change in her husband. He continued to rise early and dress in his collared shirts and slacks. He continued to kiss her and pat Faye goodbye. He continued to come home tired but smiling. He and Winnie continued to chat over dinner. He informed her of leads and the lack thereof.

But for one thing he smelled different. If they went to bed together, she would sometimes catch a hint of wood in his hair, not exactly wood but burning leaves or mesquite. It was almost as if she smelled *incense* on him, but that couldn't be right, and though he kept up their conversations and exchanges, the silences between them, while they weren't lengthened, were harder, less permeable.

Less permeable. That was it. While David remained present, he was less available, more closed. She could not find him, and she lacked the energy to ask him where he had gone. She never thought him capable of an affair, but perhaps she had been wrong. Perhaps between the stress of losing his job and The Incident he had succumbed to some clutching, ugly secretary with low self-esteem. Winnie hated the idea of David running around with another woman. It did not make her jealous in the usual way. It just made her frantic to know. She had to know. The idea of not knowing, of playing the fool, brought on a hysteria that robbed Winnie's breath.

She tried to picture David hitting on someone. It was necessary that this someone was ugly. She had to be cheap with heavy make-up and a cardboard personality. She tried to imagine the woman at a desk with David looming over her, but the actors in her mind's eye would rebel. The woman, this hypothetical secretary, would bat her lashes, turn her head and hint at charm, and David would

smile and say something beyond himself, something really witty and sharp, and the woman would laugh, and goddamn it, she *was* beautiful and interesting, and Winnie's panic would expand, colossal and complete.

She asked him over chicken cordon bleu, "Are you cheating on me?"

And he laughed in a full-throated manner that reminded Winnie of the David in her imagination. He laughed and said, "Of course not. I'm meditating. Why? Can you see a difference?"

So she deserved the manicure and pedicure at Escape Spa. If David had found meditation, she deserved some relaxation, too. She had delayed to replace her foot cream due to its expense, and she painted her own nails three times in a row, but her cuticles pushed forward and encroached onto her work. She did not dare clip them for fear of an infection. Her hands embarrassed her mid-wave, like gaudy signals of her diminishing status. So she gestured less. She wore closed-toed sandals, but she gave up on those when the bottoms of her feet dried out and turned red.

The manicure and pedicure were necessary, and Winnie regretted neither. She forwent her usual wax and relaxation message. She stuck to the basics, and she felt pious and good. She chatted with Beth, her manicurist, at the register. Beth told Winnie about her new kitten, Tony. A mother and daughter stood nearby and they perused a rack of infinity scarves.

"Are these handmade?" the mother interrupted them to ask.

"You betcha," Beth said.

"Aren't they just gorgeous?" Winnie said. "She chooses the best fabrics."

"They're made around here?" the mother asked Winnie.

"Yeah. A Salisbury woman makes them. Am I right, Beth?"

Beth frowned at the computer and asked to see Winnie's card again, and Winnie removed the card for a second time from her clutch. She kept her fingers splayed and stiff, careful not to injure her new coat of polish.

"She's from Salisbury," Beth said. "The woman that makes the scarves."

The daughter asked her mother what she thought about an aqua scarf knotted around her neck.

"It's nice," the mother said.

"Brings out your eyes," Winnie offered.

The girl brightened as did the mother. Winnie turned to Beth who leaned across the counter in an act of confidential concern.

She said, "I'm sorry. I'm sure it's our computer but there's a problem with your card."

Winnie gave a small nod.

Beth said, "I'm sure it's our mistake, but do you have another card we could use?"

Beth's request sounded like a line from a film Winnie saw years ago, in her childhood, perhaps, or when she was a student. She anticipated each word with dull recognition, like a vague memory.

"I'm sure I do. Yes." Winnie said. This line also felt familiar.

"If I were you, I'd would call your bank just to be sure your account hasn't been compromised. That happens a lot these days." Beth was embarrassed. She

smiled, though her eyes became briefly inaccessible, as did the mother and daughter's. Winnie blushed and accepted the card, careful once again with her nonsensical, pink nails.

She said, "I definitely will. You know, I shopped at Pipers during that security breach. I hope it's not that."

"Oh, I hope not, too," Beth said.

"Nowadays, everything's just out there for the taking. You know, that's how my husband lost his job. His company got hacked." Winnie paused. She hadn't meant to admit he lost his job. She plucked the pockets of her clutch. Every card she saw was maxed. They crammed and stuck to each other. "Let's see here." She worked to remove a card and the clutch's tight pocket smudged a ridge into her polish. She withdrew her hand as if burned. She shook her fingers and scrutinized the damage, the ugly gash, and suddenly it occurred to her: The MasterCard! The MasterCard wasn't maxed. Not the one for emergencies, anyway.

"This should work," she said.

Beth relaxed, relieved. She said, "Oh good, what were we saying? Oh yeah, you should see that cat dance. I swear he can keep a beat. We're going to throw him up on YouTube one of these days. My boyfriend thinks he'll make us millions, or at least he'll make us famous. Who knows? Crazier things have happened."

Crazy things did happen. Winnie agreed. She imagined little Tony dancing his way to fame and tried her best not to begrudge him.

Winnie's bank was brick with white marble columns and stone steps. She and David opened the account years ago when they first moved to Charlotte. The large city was daunting, but the bank's deliberate luxuriance flattered them. They passed beneath the shadows with the increasing sensation that they'd achieved something already by choosing the bank as a safeguard for their funds.

Now, the tall brick walls and elaborate, filigreed door occurred to Winnie as something that could also shut her out. A cheerful teller asked Winnie to please have a seat in the waiting area, a cozy concourse of modern furniture surrounding a Keurig coffee maker. Winnie brewed a cup of hazelnut latte and sat to wait.

She met with Steven, the same man who had, one year earlier, helped them navigate the inconveniences accrued when their account number was stolen and used to buy $2500 worth of credits on iTunes. She recalled how he'd stood and paced and frowned. He used both his hands to shake theirs. His hands were generous and warm, and they left confident that he'd retrieve them their money, and he had.

Today, Steven appeared tired. He remained in his seat and leaned onto his desk over clasped fists.

"I'm sorry about this, Ms. Watters, but my hands are tied."

"I think it's a mistake. I'm sure someone hacked our account." She balanced on the edge of her chair and projected her voice as she had learned to do during theatre auditions. She shed her slight drawl for a Hollywood trill. "I'm not sure if you remember but it's happened before."

"Of course that's not out of the question. When did you last check your transactions?"

"Months ago. We made a budget. Maybe I've slipped once or twice but the money should be there."

Steven pushed a pile of paper across the desk toward Winnie. "Please tell me if this is legitimate."

It was their bank statement. Winnie scanned the first page. She forced herself to focus on the business names and locations, on the numbers beside them.

"I can't say for certain," Winnie said. "Let me take it home. I'll look at it more closely."

Steven nodded. "If your account has, in fact, been compromised, we need to know right away. It helps us take care of things. In the meantime you've maxed your DDL, and the interest has, in your case, unfortunately added up." He lifted the pile to the last page where the balance was circled and highlighted orange. "You're currently negative $567.91."

"But how could this happen? Why didn't you tell us?"

"We've sent you three notices in the mail, and I personally called and left a message on your phone " He checked his computer, "March 19th. A couple days ago."

"Well, do you label the envelopes urgent? You send us so much mail, and I'm sure I didn't get a message."

"I apologize for the inconvenience. You opted for the bank to cover your overdrafts when you signed up for the account, hence the fees."

"Let's just close the account. If there's no money in it."

"I'll be happy to close the account as soon as you're able to bring it to balance."

"Of course," Winnie said. "Of course. I'm sorry."

"Of course, there's nothing to apologize about."

But she continued to apologize. She couldn't help it. It all felt so bad, and she said she was sorry at least three more times before shaking his hand and backing out the door. She drove home to the sound of wind buffered at her windows. She could consign her jewelry, maybe some party dresses. She sucked at her cheeks and composed herself around her grip on the wheel. They had had until May, at least until May. What had gone wrong? It was barely April. Something must have gone wrong. She'd spent some extra cash here and there, but nothing excessive. David bought those coffee drinks. She'd celebrated her thirty-sixth birthday, but they'd kept it small.

She arrived at home and tossed the bank statement onto the kitchen table. It made a woomph against the maple, and she sat down, poked the pages into a disagreeable sprawl. There must be some mistake. She did not have to read it. There was no mistake.

Winnie rose and gathered the papers. She didn't want to have to look at them, and she placed the bank statement on top of a box in the coat closet. The shelf was cluttered with odds and ends—Faye's old softball mitt, a pair of ice skates. The clutter shamed her. It made her angry.

No wonder, she thought. Self-disgust formed over her like a film, and she removed the broom from the closet and began to sweep. Her fingernails looked like

candy along the broom's handle. She swept the entryway into the living room, the dining room and kitchen. She swept the sitting room and the office. She swept the entire downstairs, and when she was finished she took out the mop.

She mopped around the rugs, then she rolled up the rugs, and swept and mopped beneath those. She climbed the stairs with a dust rag. She rubbed hard at a mark that had scuffed the wall for weeks. She reached her room and stood before her closet and removed a silk green dress from its hanger. She'd only worn the dress once, to one of David's Christmas parties. She tossed the dress onto the bed and slid another from its hanger. This one was blue with a layered skirt. She'd loved it years ago but that was years ago. She removed another dress and another. Soon a pile of silk and lace lumped on Winnie's side of the bed.

She would get rid of them all. Every single one. The empty hangers swayed and tempered her, and she drew a bath to wallow. She lit candles and turned on the jets.

The tub had always been too large for their hot water tank, and she had to turn off the water and wait three times before the whole thing filled. She found some bath beads beneath the sink and tossed them into the water. She undressed and watched them dissolve. The oily skins collapsed and she reached into the water to pinch them away. She stepped into the tub and rested her head along the back ridge and closed her eyes. She listened to the candle flames eating, licking at their wicks.

David's car door slammed in the driveway, and Winnie rose from the bath. She dried herself off, put on her robe, and listened at the top of the stairs. She could

hear him at the fridge but she did not call out. She returned to her room and to her dresser. She would give herself a facial.

Winnie smeared the grey green mask around her eyes and along her cheekbones. Her skin disappeared in small portions. She took her time and watched her transformation in the mirror. Her face became a crackled landscape of mud and stolidity.

She listened for David's movement, but she heard nothing. She took tweezers to her eyebrows. Eventually, he'd come looking for her. The doorbell rang and David's cheerful hello echoed up the stairwell.

"Hi, boys," he said.

"We're selling popcorn to raise money for the Boy Scouts," a small, confident voice declared.

"That's great," David said. "I've always wanted to be a Boy Scout. Do you think they'd let me join?"

"Shit, David," Winnie said to her reflection. She threw down her tweezers and tightened her robe. She stood at the top of the stairs and whispered, "David."

"We have a new flavor this year," the boy's voice said. "Spicy Buffalo."

"Spicy Buffalo, huh? What else you got? We loved that caramel popcorn last year."

"David," Winnie called his name louder. She spun in a circle and rushed to the bathroom where she grabbed a wet washcloth from the bottom of the tub and shoved it across her face. The mask smeared and gave in streaks.

"And we have chocolate," another kid's voice announced.

"David!" she shouted.

"Just a minute, honey," David sang up the stairs. "I'll take two bags of each. Chocolate and caramel."

"David we can't," Winnie came down the stairs, her arms wrapped about her. There were three of them. Their eyes widened and ducked back to David, who turned partially in between.

"Of course we can. Oh, did you want Ranch? Winnie really liked the Ranch flavor you guys had last year. If you guys still have it, we'll take two of those."

"No, David. We can't." She turned her back on the boys, and positioned herself directly between them and David.

"Why not?" He smiled over her to the boys, then narrowed his eyes and whispered, "Winnie, it's the Boy Scouts."

She whispered back, "We don't have money,"

David whispered, "There's always enough to give. Think Karma, Winnie, and really, do you think it's appropriate for you to be down here in your robe, and what's that all over your face?"

"David. We literally don't have money. We are all out of money. You can't write a check. It will bounce."

David blinked a number of times. "What? When?" He asked it out loud. One of the Boy Scouts coughed.

"Today. I was at the spa and—" She stepped to the side behind the door, and he followed.

He said, "I thought you were done with that."

"It was only my nails. I can't give up on everything, and what about your daily lattes?"

"Well then, we'll use the credit card. We can't just say *no*."

"The cards are all maxed."

"Not the MasterCard."

"That's for emergencies."

"My god, they're just standing there." He pushed by her and around the door. She heard him announce, "Well boys, we've decided to take one of each."

Winnie wedged herself beside David in the doorway. Her robe tugged against the doorframe and the boys took a unified step back.

She said, "How much are they?"

A Highlander idled in the drive. A man sat inside it and looked at his phone. One of the kids glanced back at the car. He held a manila envelope in his hands. The other boy, the one on the left, held a crumpled brochure. He stared at his feet. Winnie pegged the leader as the one in the middle. He was taller than the others and sustained eye contact.

She directed her questions at him. "Do you know how much they are?"

He lifted a tidy chin and drawled, "The popcorn is ten dollars, Ma'am. The chocolate and Ranch are fifteen."

The dad in the car gave a light honk. David smiled brightly and waved.

"How many ounces do you get for that?" Winnie said.

"I'm not sure."

The boy on the left whipped out his brochure and pored over its pages. “Nine ounces,” he said. “You get nine ounces.” He offered the brochure to Winnie as proof.

“Now, don’t you think fifteen dollars for nine ounces of popcorn is a little steep, boys?”

“Winnie,” David said. He held out his credit card. “We’ll take one of each.”

“Cash or check sir?” the middle one said.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” David frowned and Winnie took a triumphant step back. “All I have is credit.”

Winnie gave the Highlander a finger wave and left David at the door. She returned to her bedroom and sat on the carpet beside the bed to wait. After a moment, David entered.

“So what now?” he said.

“You have to sell your car. Like tomorrow. People like us can’t afford cars like that.”

“What do you mean people like us?”

“I mean people who don’t have money like we don’t have money. You don’t have to read into it, David. Maybe you can trade the car in for something older.”

“Sure,” David said. “It’s not a problem.”

“It is a problem, David. We have a big problem.”

“It’ll go away like the dark. It’s okay.”

“What dark? What are you talking about?”

“Your problems. It’s going to be okay.”

"Oh my god, David, how are we going to afford food or gas? We have to eat." Her voice climbed. "What about McDonalds, David? I know they just pay minimum wage, but they'll hire anybody. You'll make at least fifteen grand a year. Oh my god, how do people live on that? What about the coffee shop you love? At least then you'd get tips. Did that gamestore ever call you back? Or the house, but we need something faster than that."

A greyish pallor washed over David, as his mouth receded into a calm thin line.

"It's just money, Winnie. It comes and goes. Our happiness need not rest there."

"What the hell is going on with you? We could lose our home."

"It's just a building."

"Listen to you. It's our home." She stood and searched the bedroom for something to point at, something scathing with sentiment like their wedding portrait or Faye's ten years worth of mother's day cards lining the mirror frame. Instead, her eyes caught the vase she purchased a month ago. She had set it on the fireplace at the foot of their bed.

That man, the protester, had told her about the new psychotherapy, Vitasomething. They needed actors. They were desperate for actors, he had said.

"Listen, I'm doing everything I can," David grabbed her hand and pulled her onto the bed beside him, "Of course I don't want to lose the house, but it's essential we keep a positive attitude. I know it's hard."

His scalp perspired. His breathing came fast. He searched her eyes.

“I’m going to get a job,” Winnie said.

“I thought we had until May.” His scalp reddened. “This is my problem, I made it, and I want to fix it, and even if you got a job, it wouldn’t begin to cover our debt.”

“It would help.”

“I just want to fix it.”

“But you’re not fixing it, and anyway, why shouldn’t I? All I do is sit around the house. We’re supposed to be a team.”

“Faye needs you. I’ll sell the Audi. That should buy us time. I thought we had until May.”

“This is a nightmare,” Winnie said.

“This isn’t a nightmare,” David said. “Look at us. We have no idea what a nightmare means.”

Part 2

1.

Jason Sparks no longer owned a couch. He crouched in his living room beneath and out of view of the front window and looked at the place where the couch had been. Sun filtered gold through the drawn plastic shades, and he scrutinized the dim carpet for the couch's surviving depressions. Similar dents betrayed the absence of a matching chair, the crimped halo of a gone lamp, and the imprint of a shelf.

Faye had come back, and she sat outside his front door. She perched on his cracked cement step, turned toward the lot and away from his window.

He peeked below the shade's hard seam at five-minute intervals. He was unable to tell if she was reading or just sitting, though she was probably reading. She was not the type to sit idle. Not that it mattered. He could still outwait her. He was an adult, after all.

His father-in-law had taken the couch, along with the other living room furniture, and loaded it into his Arizona trailer. He also took Jason's son's crib, his daughter's princess bed, most of the art on the walls, the plants, dining room table, bowls, plates, and silverware.

Kelly, Jason's wife, told her father to forego the coffee table. It was scarred to begin with. The marks were not even theirs. They had purchased the table at Goodwill before Nora was born, before they noticed things like pencil-thin grooves in wood: so the table survived, center of the room, in front of where the couch would have been had the couch remained.

Duct tape and foam gummed the table's sharp corners, a precautionary measure from when Nora first learned to walk that they never bothered to remove because soon the baby would pull himself up. Back when Nora first learned, her lurching totter pitched Jason's heart into his throat. Those days, she seemed always on the brink of affliction, yet all he could do was loom and cower like some anxious, disabled giant. He was really never much help.

Now the living room was empty, but it was not empty enough, and he often sat in his children's room where the emptiness was accentuated: a remaining pink hairbrush, a polka-dotted sock, a dusty pacifier where the crib had been. Here, the emptiness was perfect. It crushed him, left his head in his lap in his hands. His loss heaped on him, and he returned to it daily, as if frantic to feel it in full.

Daily he ran into the bare fact of the apartment's walls. There, to his right, the scribbled yellow of a crayon. He had yelled at Nora, his voice sudden and booming. The crayon fell from her hand, and she struggled to rise, to get away, but she was so young it took effort and a concentration she could not manage. She crawled and cried, and he stormed from the room to find Kelly. Where was she, and why wasn't she watching the kids?

He hated the apartment, but his lawyer thought it best for him to stay, at least for the time being. His court date was three weeks away, and his outlook had improved. In North Carolina, it was a felony for a teacher to commit a sexual act with a student. He faced a lot of time, but there was hope. The sole witness, the custodian, had an unresolved issue with drinking, and how could he see what happened from the door, anyway?

Faye's parents weren't pressing charges and Faye would not testify. There existed no incriminating phone calls, texts, emails or late night rendezvous. His record was impeccable. Most of the students and faculty supported him, and so he denied it. He denied the event until, in his own mind, it churned into an ambiguous and over-stirred muddle of fact and concoction.

She was attracted to him, he could tell, but he didn't penetrate her, really. He would never cross that line. What the janitor saw was exaggerated by memory and retelling. She sat on his desk and he on the floor. They were talking. They were startled.

His lawyer expressed confidence, and he began to believe, he allowed himself to believe, that he would get a second chance. Maybe he would go back to Costa Rica to the butterfly farm. He worked hard there but his free time was his. He indulged his hope with caution and a small amount of paranoia that increased the moment Faye appeared outside his apartment door.

She could ruin everything, and the longer she sat there—it had been an hour and a half, at this point—the more the feeling that he was being set up or watched achieved volume and reason.

In the wedge of piercing light between the shade and the sill, he searched the parking lot for an unfamiliar vehicle. He crawled to his laptop and scanned his hard drive for spyware and then dialed his lawyer to ask if such a thing was possible or legal, but she didn't answer her phone, and he didn't leave a message.

Right off the bat, his lawyer advised him to keep busy, and he had found work as a bilingual customer service representative for a cable company, downtown. His

strong Spanish, educational level, and flexibility—he was willing to work the early morning shift—helped smooth the hiring process. He worked from three in the morning to twelve thirty in the afternoon. The vacant labor eased his hours. Beneath rows of fluorescence, he read from a screen the appropriate replies to a variety of questions. *What's a network? Where is my server? Why is my bill higher this month than last?*

He had no time to think, as his mouth always moved. He finished one call, and there was another call waiting.

In all his life, he had never felt less. The irony being that an excess of feeling marked Jason from his childhood on. In kindergarten, he wept beside the teeter-totter when Jeremy Good slipped off his seat at the wrong moment just to watch him fall. He cried in his elementary school hallway after reading the cast list and realized he would not play the Tin Man. He wrote poems that teemed with stars, roses, and baited breathing. He handed these poems to his love interests within days of identifying them as such. This never went well, and by the end of high school, he decided the blame lay with his features.

His nose was too sensual, his mouth too soft, his wide-set eyes too warm. By the time he reached Duke he was unprepared for the shift. His body settled into the promise of his face. His chin and shoulders set, and girls no longer dismissed him after a quick, inattentive glance. Their boredom changed into loitered interest and some went so far as to admire his gift of poems, but it wasn't until Costa Rica that all his sensuality and feeling hardened into the sexual persona he favored.

His semester in Montverde was through a science exchange program aimed at drumming international interest in deforestation. Jason competed with students from all over the state for the opportunity to spend a semester at the Vida de Luz Butterfly Farm. He wrote a soaring essay interspersed with poetry that compared Earth to a body with diverse parts, an intricate system that relied on the whole to function. He decried the dismemberment of the Earth-body.

Oh, beautiful Earth. You're bio
diverse. Your bio
logy changing your bio
graphy into tragedy?

It was the first time he won anything of significance, and it marked for him a new stage of life, a time of travel, adventure, and more winning. This was also his first time out of the country, and he arrived at the Juan Santamaria International Airport with an ambition that left him exposed, eager to lap up every detail and experience equally and without judgment.

The airport ceiling was all skylight, curved glass that sent his gaze in a hopeful sweeping arc toward the far blue sky and a voluptuous puff of cloud. He moved with the crowd toward the baggage claim and smiled with bright and good humor at a sign in Spanish that designated it as so. *Reclamo de Equipaje* the sign declared in unassuming white font. He had travelled. He was a traveller, and his

vision refused to dip, though he saw below his otherland Spanish, in equal, fat letters, the English translation: Baggage Claim.

In the side pocket of his pack he carried a Moleskin journal he used to record observations on language, climate, and wildlife, but he also, when the mood struck him, scribbled verse. He challenged himself to compose in Spanish with the hope that the lilting l's and rolled r's would ennoble his thoughts and deepen the beauty of his images.

The Vida De Luz Butterfly Farm was owned by the Segura family, a family headed by the matriarch and farm's founder, Lucia Segura. Lucia had two sons, two daughters-in-law and three grandchildren. All of the Seguras, including the youngest—she performed her chores before and after school—worked on the farm. Between the family and a steady stream of exchange students, the farm nurtured tens of thousands of caterpillars from egg to chrysalis. Though a portion of the caterpillars remained as butterflies to lay eggs for a new generation, they harvested most of the crop as pupae. The farmhands packaged the green and brown rolls, like tiny living cigars, into layers of Styrofoam and mailed them to museums, libraries, and schools.

The farm was made up of two long, brown greenhouses the size of gymnasiums. Their tall screen walls overlooked mountains and cloud forest, a tide of dense vegetation so thick and green and sovereign, the black tree trunks appeared as mistakes, hairline fractures in an otherwise cloud-green world.

Inside the greenhouses caterpillars lived and fed on thousands of potted plants arranged in rows. On quiet mornings Jason would stand among them and

listen to them chew. His eyes closed and their tiny mastication would intensify and build to a roar. The mindless abundance of their hunger reduced a plant to razed stem inside of a day.

Feeding the caterpillars proved the most difficult and time-consuming task on the farm. Not only were the farmhands responsible for replenishing the stripped plants with new plants, but also for transporting each tiny larva from one exhausted food source to another. Their white gloves scoured each leaf in pursuit of a caterpillar or, just as important, an invader, a spider or grasshopper.

Verde is the Spanish word for green, and it infiltrated the damp pages of Jason's Moleskin book. *Verde*: vibrant and thick against leaves. *Verde*: Nostalgic and creeping in cloud. *Verde* lingered on the backs of caterpillars and popped like candy against Styrofoam packaging. *Verde* became his word for hunger, but also his word for drive. He dreamt in shades of fern and moss but also mint and sea foam. Everything green. Everything desire. Often those first weeks, he would lie on his bunk and think of the caterpillars chewing, of their mutual and unsatisfied hungers, and, when combined, how loud it could all become.

Jason shared a bunkhouse with three other exchange students: one from France, one from Switzerland, and one from Germany. Every third week, the students were given three days off in a row as an opportunity to explore the surrounding countryside. Jason's days coincided with that of the French student, who had been in Costa Rica two months longer than Jason and who loved to show off his expertise.

The French student, Claude, urged Jason to spend his first days off with him in a hitchhiking adventure to San Jose. The trip took around four hours, and when they arrived in the city it was dusk. They went directly to Club Jineta, a small bar the color of orange sherbet. The smell of beer mixed with citrus oil and floral perfumes. Jason paused in the entrance. He had never seen so many women in a bar. They stood as if consciously arranged, evenly dispersed; a woman every few feet. They sat three to a table and stood along the bar, their backs turned to the tender and faced the club's interior.

Claude was at his ear, "Most of these women are sex workers, though I'm sure some are customers, too."

"Like prostitutes?"

"I told you about the girls. It is very normal here. Well-respected."

Jason's first impression was that every woman was beautiful. They dressed in black cocktail dresses, sequin skirts, and cut-off jean shorts. They toyed with jewelry and chatted with one another. They chatted with the men who stepped in between them.

The crowd, at this point, was still thin enough to part, and he and Claude approached the bar together. Many of the women appraised them, and he ducked with a mixture of shy awareness, terror, and excitement.

"They work independently, so you can barter for a good price," Claude said.

Jason lifted his eyes and looked back at them. He assessed them slowly, his looking a bulwark, because not every woman was indeed beautiful. One had a large nose. Another's eyes were too small and set apart. One had acne and another's arms

were too fat for her shirt. It was early in the evening, and every body, in its objecthood, seemed balanced along a periphery, strained against gravity. They had to fall, those women lining the bar. In his glance, his minds eye, they tumbled like dominos. He thought, every one will fall.

Claude said, "We can meet up later. Have fun. Sometimes I'll get three in one night." He ordered Jason a double shot of rum and started a conversation with a beautiful woman sitting next to him.

Jason prepared a smile, aware of the black light that illumined his teeth and turned on his stool to take in the room. There, in front of him stood a woman who said, "Are you looking for me?"

She was fair-skinned, her eyes black in the confusion of artificial light.

"Maybe," he said.

She wore a neon pink fanny pack over a black mini skirt, and she unzipped it to reveal an assortment of lube.

"This will make you tingle. This tastes like strawberries."

She charged eighty dollars plus the cost of a room. This was Jason's first sex and he attempted to take advantage of her expertise.

"I want to know what *you* want," he wailed over his pleasure.

She said something along the lines of, "No baby. This is you," but he couldn't quite gather the sum of her words. They fluttered against the pillow, where her face was pressed, and he spanked her, one bright, pink slap, because, for the time being, she was his, and he was hungry for her worth.

Every third week, like a student, Jason returned to Club Jineta. Sex opened for him a novel dimension that accorded his past blunders fresh perspective. His capacity for wanting distended, and he learned how restraint could stretch pleasure's arc. His stroll lengthened. His arms and legs moved languidly. His shoulders rolled. His voice thickened and smoothed. He used it to seduce caterpillars onto his thumb.

"Poor caterpillar," he would say, "You don't even know you have wings. One day you'll fly over our heads, and you have no idea."

Only once on his trip to the city did he accept the proposition of someone much younger. She looked thirteen or fourteen. Her breasts were small but round. She approached him on the beach. He lay beside Claude on a beach towel, and she asked him if he was bored. She wore a turquoise bikini, her stomach soft around the belly button. She wiggled.

He stood, grinned and said, "Yeah, I could be bored." She grinned, too. Her stomach bowed outward, and he noted that her suit sagged at the crotch as if purposely stretched.

Claude propped himself on his elbows and squinted.

"You dog," he said. His chest sparkled with sand.

"You can see she wants it," he said. "Don't you want it?" he said to the girl. "I'm doing you a favor, right?"

"I want it," she nodded, and he offered her his arm.

"Look out for police," Claude said and returned to the sand.

"They don't care," the girl said.

They stumbled arm and arm over sunbathers, shovels, and pails.

"Maybe I can teach you something," Jason said after a moment, and he liked the idea so much he said it again. "Maybe I can teach you something new," and he resigned himself to invent something if he had to, just to see the look of innocence and surprise sudden on her face.

Jason's Costa Rica with its caterpillars, butterflies, and women was lovely and exotic until the last month, when it fell apart. While on the beach in San Jose, he met a woman from Montverde. At first, their proximity thrilled him. He snuck away in afternoons to hike with her through the misted trees. They mingled in wet patches of earth. She bent him over a felled tree and pushed his spine into the mud and lichen. He was wild for her freedom, but ultimately it frightened him. He fell in love with her. She read his poems, and she laughed in his face.

Jason's grip on his manhood was tenuous, but he gripped it nonetheless, like he gripped his sweat buckled boarding pass the whole of his plane ride home. He arrived in time for Christmas break, which was when he met Kelly browsing for ice cream at his hometown grocery.

They'd gone to high school together. She was a cheerleader. Jason remembered, but she did not remember him. His travel stories, edited for her sake, brought her fingers to her mouth. Her eyes widened and dropped, and he yearned to abrade her with coarseness. He could spend all he learned on her body, and it would take him far.

She did not laugh at his poems, and they married inside of a year. Nora was born a year after that and in the sleepless nights that followed, in his wife's turning from him, in her narrowed eyes and flat fish legs, he realized a permanence he had not understood until it was already set.

But now it seemed he traded one captivity for another, and Jason peered at Faye from beneath the window shade. She had not moved. She wore a yellow tank top. The straps drooped long bows down her shoulder blades.

He would have to tune her out. He could watch a movie, something violent and absorbing. The violence would relieve him. The body was a thing, and its potential for breaking, for explosion and rot, muted the power of its whole. His body was a thing made up of thing parts, and he strived to get to the bottom of this fact, to get underneath it, where perhaps, he could find sense or salvation.

Again, he crawled to his laptop, lest she see his shadow through the shade. His hands shook at his keyboard, and his shaking enraged him. He stood, his legs ached from squatting. His muscles spasmed. He threw open the front door and said, "Go home."

He slammed the door and slid his back down it.

She had approached *him*. Just like the whore in Costa Rica.

He was on recess duty on the playground. She said, "I heard you know a lot about butterflies."

Her friend Emma lumped beside her, their elbows linked. They kept giggling. Their foreheads fell to touch.

She wore a blue jump suit with tiny pink tulips. She spoke, and her eyes squared him, as if in challenge. She squeezed her bottom lip with her teeth. Kids. They adopted these looks from movies. They had no idea what they meant, like ordering from a foreign menu. What was he to think?

"I do know a lot about butterflies," Jason said.

His gaze darted between them, although Faye's eyes remained steady on his face, her look, palpable. He felt it in his cheeks and his shoulders. He could feel her in his stomach, legs, and dick. She woke up his body, and he tried to avoid her, looked hard at her friend.

"What we want to know," Faye untangled from her friend, swayed front and back. Wind forced her skirt against her legs. "If you touch a butterfly's wings, can it still fly?"

He knew the answer, and he relaxed. He returned to her face and explained, his posture worldly and lean, "Most likely it could. Those wings can withstand a lot of wear and tear, actually. I'm not condoning the manhandling of butterflies, but they aren't as fragile as most people think."

"I thought so," Faye said, and the girls trotted away, their elbows once again linked.

He stood and watched them go. He watched Faye go, and from then on, when he looked, she was there. He anticipated her at recess. He looked for her in the hallway. He peered into classrooms and tried to find where she was.

He allowed himself to look because his days were so long and dull and his evenings so vacant. Kelly ignored him for his children. She was always tired and

cranky. He deserved the entertainment. It helped pass the hours at work, and then, eventually, the thought of her helped pass his hours at home.

But he never would have acted had she not pursued him. She asked him to mentor her group, her inquiry susceptible, open, and soft. He imagined if he touched her, if he placed his fingers on the inside of her thigh, the marks would remain as in the white swell of risen dough. The image obsessed him: his fingers pressed into her thigh.

Her curiosity proved bottomless. She arrived daily after school in her dresses and skirts to ask him about alternative fuels. She asked him about the life cycle of stars. She asked him about relativity and space travel, about Costa Rica, and what it was *really* like. Her restlessness and dissatisfaction showed in her nails and their torn half-moon tips.

"All my parents care about is themselves. And money. Like they can't see all this amazing stuff. There's so much to learn," and here she blushed because the muchness stifled them both. He could teach her. She was hungry for it. She came to him starved for something concrete, something she could take in her hands or into her body and know without a doubt something had happened, and here, he had this thing. He could teach her pleasure and the appetite for that pleasure. He could be the one to teach her, and she would let him. He knew this the first day on the playground when her lip fell from beneath her white teeth.

An erection moved him, and he opened his front door. She was still there, and she turned partially to him though she did not look. She remained transfixed on a small grey stone she held in her hand.

"Faye," he said. "You have to go. Please don't do this."

She lifted her face slowly, as if under a spell, suspended in transition, her eyes glowed with wonder or fear, he couldn't tell.

"Do you hear me?"

She rose. The stone made a fist of her hand.

"Go, now."

"You're a monster!" she screamed. "You ruined everything! I don't care if they hear me!" She looked at him, right at him, then.

"You have to be quiet."

"Shut up!" She screamed. "You lied! You pretended to understand."

Jason charged from his house and grabbed her wrist. He yanked her, she was surprisingly light, and he dragged her up the walkway, into the house and slammed the door. He turned her by the shoulders.

"No!" he said. "You'll ruin everything." He spat his words, and she flinched at his breath. "You can't be here," he said. "I'll go to jail."

"Why won't you talk to me?" she yelled.

He wanted to yell something back about his kids or about how she had no idea what he'd gone through or how he had to be responsible. She was a kid and free but he was an adult. His choices fastened to him, locked chains.

The empty room dawned across her face, and she turned. She did not hide her pity. It flushed her dark cheeks, and his palm tingled with the desire to slap it away. He was surprised to find he still held her by the wrist. Her skin reddened in splotches beneath his hand, and he released her, suddenly frightened.

"It's so empty," she said.

He cleared his throat. His eyes felt wet.

"What happened was wrong, Faye. I was wrong," but now she was looking at her hand and the stone. She uncurled her fingers and raised her palm.

"Something's happening to me," she said. "Ever since that day with you I kept hearing stuff, like this stone."

Her fingers extended. They trembled slightly.

"It's like it's singing," she said, and in the dimness he could barely make out the freckles on her nose, the tremor in her nostrils. That fine hair like down on her shoulders.

He said, "This can't happen."

"This stone is different, though. It's the most beautiful thing." She stepped closer to him and, again, extended the stone like an offering. She waited, expecting something, but what was she asking him? "Do you think I'm crazy?" she said.

"Of course not." He reached for her hand, the rock. He said, "I could be in a lot of trouble if someone found out you were here."

"No one knows. My mom thinks I'm with friends."

"You can't scream on my door step." He released her hand and touched her elbow.

“I don’t want to get you in trouble.” She moved into him. Her head bowed. Her hands covered her face. She stumbled into him as into a surprise, and his fingers flexed around her arm.

There was a knocking. A rapid, anxious throttle on his door.

“I thought no one knew you were here,” he said.

“Should I hide?”

He glared at her but said nothing. He opened the door, and it was that boy from across the street. His t-shirt was too large for him. It hung like a dress over his chubby legs.

“I saw my friend come in,” he said. “I want to talk to her.”

Jason widened the door and Faye stepped into view.

“She was just leaving,” he said.

Her eyes widened, her hand lifted, and for a moment he thought she might throw the stone at him, but her jaw clenched and she stuck it in her pocket.

“Good bye, Mr. Sparks. I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said, and then she left. She was gone.

The shade’s shadow increased. His fingers smelled like sugar, like her lotion. His laptop hummed. His refrigerator hummed, too. Then with efficiency and purpose he unbuttoned his pants to reach after his penis, that old object of which he was a part.

2.

At three in the morning, Winnie decided to go to Social Services. She woke David, jabbed at his shoulder, and announced her decision in the dark. The threat was a gesture toward drama. He did not respond, and she worried he did not hear.

"David?" she said. "I don't know what else to do."

"I just applied for unemployment. My phone interview's tomorrow." His eyes remained closed but his face rumpled with shadow.

"It's not enough. You should have done that sooner."

"So what are we talking? Food stamps?"

"Yes. We're talking food stamps."

He rolled onto his side, propped by his elbow. "I didn't think of that."

"What are you saying?"

"It's only for a little while, and we've paid our taxes."

"You're saying you want me to do it?"

"I don't *want* you to do it, Winnie, but maybe it wouldn't hurt. For just a little while."

"So you're going to let your wife apply for welfare."

He directed his words at the ceiling. "I let my wife do whatever she wants."

"It's not about want, David."

"Right." He closed his eyes. She watched his face for movement.

"You know, they're going to make me pee in a cup. Like in a drug test. I heard it on the radio." She had heard it on Morning Edition in the car months ago. North

Carolina wanted to drug test applicants, and she racked her memory for the story's conclusion. She had either forgotten it or failed to listen.

She sat up in bed and pulled her knees beneath her chin. "Do you want me to have to pee in a cup, David?"

His breathing altered.

What a stupid thing to say. She wanted to shut up, roll over, and sleep, but her husband's sleep, his ability to lay there while her anxious and angry heart screwed deeper in her chest moved her to speech, to say—what? She lunged after words before their power fizzled and all her relief proved moot.

"They were debating it," Winnie said. "I don't care what you say. I won't pee in a cup for those people."

His exhale punctured the air.

"For what people?" he said. "It can't be that hard to apply. Look at all the people who're on welfare. They call them hand-outs, Winnie."

"I think that's different, and what do you mean those people? We're those people."

His sigh reached her face still warm. It filled her nose and lungs like a stale assault. She lifted her head from him.

"It'll work out," he said. The bed creaked. He had rolled onto his side and faced the wall. He was all silhouette to her now, a lump of dark blanket. It was almost four in the morning, and she was alone. Wasn't that why people married? So they didn't have to wake at almost four in the morning alone?

She lay in the dark. Her idea was her company, and the longer she lay, the friendlier the idea seemed. Before she said the idea out loud, the idea did not exist. It was so ludicrous, it had no shape. Then she said it, and its presence proved stolid. The idea *became* when she said it out loud, and now, it could nearly—so easily—be fact. It could be something she did, and why not? She had already imagined it. Doing it, enacting it, was not so different, and maybe she wouldn't have to pee in a cup. Obama was such a liberal. He wouldn't let something like that happen.

"What will we tell Faye?" She said it out loud, but the texture of his breathing remained unchanged. It was nearly five now. She should sleep, too.

Of course, they wouldn't tell Faye. Faye already knew too much. The vision of Faye asleep in bed alone and turned toward her own wall brought Winnie to her feet. She pulled on her robe and crossed the hall. From the doorway she could barely make out Faye's shadow in the dark. The shape's vagueness subdued her. She continued to look at it, in focus and out, like a cryptic ink blot that at one moment resembled her daughter and another moment resembled David and in another moment resembled herself until, at last, morning appeared beyond the lumped blankets and between the daisy curtains.

Respectable landscaping coaxed Winnie from her car and up the wide, concrete steps of the Mecklenburg Department of Social Services. The building was generic modern with intelligent angles and copious glass. She stood and felt exposed before the building's flat stretch. Her shadow fell and broke across the stair.

Inside, the windows towered with sunlight and a blanched, cloudless sky. The furniture was tasteful, maroon and chrome, arranged in two separate waiting areas that divided the room. A muted television showed Rachel Ray breaking feta over corn. Winnie recognized the episode, the recipe. This space was not so unfamiliar. It was a waiting room. People came here for many reasons. Someone could be here adopting a baby.

Around a dozen people, mostly women, sat in the maroon and chrome chairs. No one appeared alarmed, dangerous, or drugged. In fact, a pleasant calm seemed to percolate over their bent and waiting heads. There, on the coffee table was *Southern Living*, *Martha Stewart Living*, and *Highlights*. Winnie relaxed into her congenial expression.

She checked in through a sliding glass window. A pretty woman with a Spanish accent asked Winnie to write her name at the bottom of a long list of other names. She was supposed to write the purpose of her visit. She wrote after a furious and embarrassed pause, *To get help*.

"They did a great job with the landscaping," Winnie said. "Are you typically this busy?"

The woman smiled sideways, "We keep busy, for sure," and handed Winnie a clipboard and paperwork. The stack was substantial, and Winnie sat rattled in the first seat she passed. The woman beside her wore her bleached hair pulled back in a lackluster bun. A toddler played at her feet. He pushed beads around a wire maze and said each color out loud as he moved it. His mother kept one hand on his head, tangled in his short black hair.

Winnie clicked her pen against the clipboard and flinched at the loud sound. The forms started easily enough. They asked her name, address, birthdate, and social security number. They required her husband's name and her daughter's name, but she didn't know their social security numbers. Maybe she could call David, but he wouldn't know Faye's number, either. She looked up and around. Was her daughter's social security number something she should know? On the television, Rachel Ray laughed with Taylor Swift.

They needed proof of her assets. They needed birth certificates and vaccination records. They needed medical bills, David's history of employment, his paystubs. She unclasped her purse and stuck in her hand. She opened and closed her hand but could think of nothing helpful to grab.

A man and a woman entered. The man coughed openly into the air. The woman tugged at his hand as if on a leash. These were the kind of people who peed in cups. The man's cheeks sunk beneath a film of grey. The woman waddled and sweated. She cursed at the long list.

"Goddammit," she said. "Should have made an appointment."

"Read me a story," the toddler said to his mother. The mother wore khakis and a pressed white shirt. She made room for him on her lap and cleared her throat. He brought her a book with a moose on the cover, and when she began her voice proved fluid and strong. A pregnant woman across from them lifted her head. She looked up briefly from a spot on the rug, as if startled.

Again, in the stack of papers, there was a blank. *Reason for visit*, and Winnie cast her eyes like a torn net over the room. They fell to her lap and she listened: to the mother humming, to the man coughing, to the woman cursing.

No money, she wrote in the space. She pressed her pen hard but the slick, plastic clipboard forced her pen into a harsh, jagged line. She could have said to the mother, "Can you believe this? My family just ran out of money like most people run out of milk or eggs." She could have said, "I can tell you don't belong here, and neither do I." She could have said, "But why don't we belong here?"

Winnie stood. She rapped on the sliding glass. The woman at the window barely turned. She appeared in deep conversation with a man, also behind the glass. The man circled his finger at his head and rolled his eyes. The woman buckled over with laughter. Winnie rapped again. The man glanced and pointed, and after what felt like a moment too prolonged, the laughing woman uncurled herself, acknowledged Winnie, and slid open the window.

"How long does this process take?"

"How long have you been here?"

"I didn't mean that. I just mean until we receive benefits."

"What kind of benefits, honey."

Honey. This woman was younger than she was. Winnie blushed against the burden of her words, "The nutrition program. For food."

"FNS applications are processed within thirty days from when they are received."

"Thirty days? But this is an emergency."

Her whisper rushed like a shout and she looked over her shoulder into the lobby. No one seemed bothered. No one even looked up. They all looked down, every single one of them, even the mother, who looked down at her child. Some looked at magazines. Almost everyone else looked at their phones, save for one man who stared at his hands. He sat close to the front, and Winnie could see the dirt creasing his palms.

"I don't think this is going to work for me," Winnie said.

"Cross your name off the list if you decide to leave."

Winnie struck out her name with intention and flourish as if to insult the woman behind the glass, because she was the nearest person, it seemed, with any power.

Faye was at school and David was wherever he was, and Winnie returned to an empty home. The silence, without the cushion of money, rang like an injured ear, and Winnie's solitude offered no respite. She moved quickly through the rooms, up the stairs to her bedroom and the vase and the business card the man had offered her on the street:

Freedom Geriatric Center

Dr. Brian Kuhn, L.P.C., R.R.T. L.A.C., N.B.C.F.C.H.-P.S.

Vitameme Psychotherapy and Hypnosis

Try Again and Let It Go

Winnie sat on the edge of her bed and studied the card. What the hell was Vitameme Psychotherapy and what about those letters after the doctor's name? How could this not be a joke? She used her bedside tablet to search for Dr. Kuhn and found that not only did he exist, but he was handsome, at least according to the thumbnail picture that peppered his image results.

His good looks eased her concern, and she redirected her misgivings at herself. She had not worked a real job since college. She forgot how a professional acted. She was confident at the market or spa or gym, but that was all domestic. She did not know how to perform for a check or even if she could.

Still she would not return to Social Services. It was all so depressing. She did not want to think about it, but her insecurities continued to disturb her. If she couldn't get food stamps, she would have to get a job. She would become a different woman, connected into a current of marketability and capability. Her stilettos would take on new meaning. Her calves would round like nectarines.

She imagined strolling into the Freedom Geriatric Center already transformed, her red heels beating a pulse into the hard, professional floor.

"I'm Winnie," she would say, hand extended before she reached him, and when she did, her grasp would be firm. "I'm an actor. I heard you were hiring."

And why not? She was intelligent, attractive. Sure she had some fine lines around her eyes and mouth, but they disappeared in certain lights, most lights, really. Let David *ohm* himself into oblivion. Her need, her family's need and her ability to meet that need revived her posture. She could feel it in her molars and in the center of her back. She would go in today. There was no reason to wait.

She showered for the second time that day. She took her time with her makeup. She redipped her mascara wand after every application and brushed her eyebrows. She tried on several skirts and slacks before settling on a pair of sky blue pants and a loose silk blouse. Her face in the mirror balanced unflinching confidence with seduction. She tried to memorize how the look felt on her mouth and forehead so she could reassemble it later for Dr. Kuhn.

The driveway to the Freedom Geriatric Center curved through a filigreed iron gate. The palatial structure was not visible until the end, at the last turn, behind a row of palm trees. The pink brick spread into a star shaped mass with towers, covered entrances, and white snapping flags. Azalea bushes buffeted the perimeter, and beyond the glitter of cars and sunny pavement rose fertile green hills and tennis courts.

The parking lot appeared to circle the building, but Winnie swerved into the first available space to avoid the blue-suited valet and the discomfort of not tipping him. He fidgeted by the roofed entrance, and she approached him with great, feigned distraction. She admired the rose bushes and watched the sidewalk for wayward sand blown from beneath the palm trees. Her heels scraped grit into the stone path. Her armpits dampened.

The valet propped open the heavy, glass door, and she nodded thank you without meeting his eyes. Inside, a cloud-sized chandelier dripped light into a marble fountain. The fountain's wet echo and smell saturated the extravagant white

lobby. In the center of the room, a young man stood surrounded by a circular, white desk.

He smiled at Winnie. Freckles highlighted his high cheekbones.

“Good morning. What can I do for you?” His voice sparkled and bounced like the fountain water. Citrus colored chairs clustered formations throughout the large room. Large abstract watercolors decorated the walls in various shades of pink.

Winnie hesitated, practiced her face. “My goodness, what a beautiful place. I didn’t know you could grow palm trees in Charlotte.”

“I know! Apparently, they’re extra hardy.”

“I feel like I’m in Florida.”

There came a low chuckle and Winnie turned to find an older gentleman in a white terry cloth bathrobe. He wore a cowboy hat, and his lips parted. He stepped aside to take Winnie in.

“Hello, Spaghetti. How are you today?” the receptionist said.

“Forgot my towel,” the old man said. His drawl was southwestern. He leaned into Winnie and winked. “Would you like a gentleman to show you around?”

She smiled, “No thank you.”

“Men like me need beautiful women like you. You help us stay strong. Isn’t that right, Brent?”

Brent handed Spaghetti a towel. “Whatever you say, Spaghetti.”

“Whatever you say. Listen to him! You’ll see. It starts when you’re young. The real gravity--It’s what does this--” he pointed at his wide face, thick with age, “--It’s comfort. We’re drawn down to it, son. Starts at your age. I bet you’ve already felt it.

Just remember, good sex is not meant to be comfortable. That's why it keeps you young." He winked at Winnie, and Winnie frowned. The feeling between her shoulder blades and molars fizzled.

"Thank you, Spaghetti, but we can't say things like that here."

"I can damn say whatever I want to say," Spaghetti said. "That's why I fought for this country."

"Of course, Spaghetti. Have a nice day, Spaghetti."

Spaghetti accepted his towel and walked slowly away from them.

"He fought in Korea," Brent said. "Sorry about that."

"It's okay," Winnie said. "I'm actually looking for Dr. Kuhn. I'm here to inquire after a job. I'm an actor interested in the Vitameme. . ." She allowed her voice to trail, unsure of how to end the sentence. She had focused so much on remembering the word *Vitameme* that she could not recall what came next.

"That's great. You see their ad?"

"No, I met someone downtown. He was collecting signatures for a petition." She blushed. "He said you're hiring."

"I bet that was Oscar. He likes to give out cards."

"Yes, he gave me a card."

"I saw him earlier this morning. He sometimes uses the pool, though we're technically not supposed to. I'll tell him you're here if you want."

"No, I don't think-- He probably wouldn't remember me. I'm just here for the job. Do you mind telling me where to go?"

"They'll have to send somebody down, anyway. Just a minute."

He turned his back, lifted a white receiver, and spoke into it. Winnie nodded and smoothed her pants.

"Just so you know," Brent said. "There's an easier way to come in if you're going to the psychology wing. It's on the other side of the building. There's a big sculpture out front of a hawk. You can't miss it."

Winnie nodded again, short quick bobs of her chin. She wanted to look like she was listening, but mostly, she tried to collect herself, tried to remember the feeling of the look on her face in the mirror.

"Hello!" She recognized him from across the room: Oscar, the same man from downtown. "You came!" He wore a pink t-shirt and leather cowboy boots.

"That him?" Brent said.

Winnie nodded and smiled until he was there shaking her hand. She recalled his details warmly, his dimple, the sleepy urgency at his eyes.

"I didn't think I'd see you again," he said. "How are you? Did your husband find work?"

"I can't believe you remember that."

"I'm pretty good with faces." He winked. "Thanks for your signature by the way. It's a long road, but we're working hard."

"That's great," Winnie said. She tucked her hair behind her ear. Meaning filled her voice. "I'm really glad to hear that."

"So, you think you want to work here?"

She turned and scanned the room because it felt like something she was supposed to do. “I thought I’d try,” she said and warmly remembered her own smile, her own dimple.

“Well then, shall we go? We’re a little short-staffed and they might want to put you to work right away. Going out tonight, Brent?”

Brent startled, nodded. “Thinking about it.”

“Hope to see you.”

He about-faced and took long strides. They passed the paintings and chairs into a wide and brightly lit hallway.

“Usually you have to fill out a bunch of paperwork, but I don’t think you’re going to have to do that today.”

“Understaffed,” she said, to show she’d been listening.

They walked quickly and she struggled to regulate her breath.

“Our middle-aged mom quit Monday without notice and our young lady actor’s out sick.”

“Oh,” Winnie said, stung by *middle-aged*. “I guess I have good timing then.”

“I can’t remember what I told you about Vitameme. Did you see our ad in *The Observer*?”

“No. I just held onto your card and—my husband hasn’t found work yet.”

They passed what looked like an Olympic sized pool. They passed locker rooms, a racket ball room, a sauna, an indoor track, gymnasium, and other wide hallways leading to other places.

“It’s like a labyrinth in here,” Winnie said.

"If you ever get lost, which is easy, believe you me, you can use any of these phones to call the front desk." He waved at a white phone hung on the white wall. She hadn't noticed the phones.

He stopped suddenly. Winnie almost slammed into him. "This is us," he said. They entered through an unmarked door into a small lobby. "This is the psychotherapy wing. You can use this entrance, if you don't feel like walking through the whole building."

This room was more subdued; cream replaced the blaze of white. The reception desk was oak and antique. They walked by the empty desk through a door and into a smaller corridor. "I think you're going to audition Sarah's part. You're a little older than she is, but Mindy will make it work." He swung open a door and stepped aside and held it for her. "Can you remind me of your name? I'm good with faces, but names? Eh." He seesawed his hand.

"I'm Winnie," Winnie said. She excused herself by him and stepped into a black, square room. A mirror along the right wall reflected Winnie inside the disorienting dark. Dimmed recessed lighting made it possible to see, but a spotlight produced most of the light in a halo on the black floor.

A short, white-haired man in a lab coat stepped into the light.

"I'm Doctor Kuhn," he said. Winnie offered her hand. He was much older than his picture made him look. The single source of light exaggerated his gaunt features. His beard appeared red and his eyes black, rimmed in pink shadow.

"You are?" he said. His voice was clean and boyish, like Fred Astaire.

"I'm sorry," Winnie said. "I'm Winnie Watters."

She turned after Oscar's handsome familiarity, but he wasn't there.

"Excellent. Let's have a look at you, Ms. Watters. Or do you prefer Winnie?" He stepped from the spotlight and Winnie took his place. She waited beneath the light's scrutiny like a child.

"I don't mind Winnie." She blinked into the dark.

"Excellent. Excellent. You should work for us, Winnie Watters. Are you prepared to audition this moment?"

Winnie threw her weight into her right hip. "Sure. I'm down for anything. I studied acting in college and am pretty familiar with the drill, so you don't need to worry about me."

I'm out of practice, itched at her throat. *I'm a little nervous*, like a hiccup, but a disclaimer felt inappropriate here where it seemed all she had to do was rise to the occasion and fill the opportunities presented her.

"Excellent, excellent." Dr. Kuhn led her to what appeared to be the makeup room. A large woman with thick blond curls stood behind a wooden swivel chair.

"This is Mindy. She's what keeps Vitameme going."

Mindy grimaced and swiveled the chair at Winnie.

"You ready?" she said.

Winnie nodded. She sat in the chair across from a desk and another large mirror. Some of her power returned as she searched for and found her look in the glass. Beside her, Mindy shook out an orange spool of measuring tape.

"I can fill you in while Mindy works," Dr. Kuhn said. "Your audition starts in an hour, so we have to move swiftly, as you can imagine."

Winnie nodded and Mindy pinched her chin to stop the movement. She unwound the tape and placed it against her cheek.

"Have you ever heard the term 'unfinished business,' Ms. Watters?" Dr. Kuhn said.

"Yes," Winnie said.

"May I ask how you heard about us?"

"Someone who works for you, Oscar—"

"She can't talk right now," Mindy said.

"I apologize, Mindy, but I have to gauge what she knows."

"Not very much," Winnie said, and Mindy lifted her hands and stepped back. Her lashes were so long they looked fake. She waggled a finger at Winnie and started again. She placed the tape at Winnie's eyes, then her nose. She wrote the measurements on a legal pad.

"We work with the geriatric population, and I'm sure you can imagine the amount of unfinished business a person can collect in their lifetime. Here, at Freedom, we believe that the best way to deal with unfinished business is to finish it. Confront the offender, apologize to the victim, clarify, thank, say goodbye. You're following me. I can see it in your face, but the unfortunate case for many of our clients is that these offenders and victims and lovers and mothers are mostly dead. So, what do we do when they are dead?"

Mindy took her last measurement and turned to an open laptop behind her on a rolling cart. She pressed the space bar, and a generic beach dissolved on the screen. She waited.

"All that unfinished business was a real dilemma before I invented Vitameme Psychoanalysis. *Vitameme* means living memory, and it's the exciting solution to our client's problems." Mindy typed the numbers into a spreadsheet. Winnie tried to give the doctor her full attention, but the screen's light drew her eyes past him. "Through the use of 3D printers and this wonderful computer program, here, we can take an old photograph or video and resurrect the dead. With your talents—and we hope to use your talents, Winnie—it's possible to send our clients back in time where they relive and rehash." A woman's head appeared on the screen. The face did not look real, but computer generated, ridged in lines and ratio. Mindy clicked on different areas of the woman's face and then clicked out of the program. The beach images returned.

"Obviously low-res, Mindy. We're on a time crunch," Dr. Kuhn said.

Mindy nodded and exited the room. There came a muffled grinding and buzz. The doctor continued, "You may reenact a specific moment from someone's life, so they can say the thing they should have said and emerge triumphant. You may just stand there, and let the client say what they need to say. Does this make sense?"

"I think so." The grinding continued through the wall.

"If audio is available, we may ask you to study a person's voice. We plan to eventually invest in a voice imitator, but not for a while. Most of our clients are a little hard of hearing, anyway." He chuckled. Winnie smiled.

"So, what exactly—who am I going to be today?"

"I'm so glad you asked, Ms. Watters. Today, you are Sophia McDonald, the model of well-respected sculptor and artist, Frank Neice. You are seventeen."

"Seventeen?"

Mindy returned with a silver platter on which facial features were arranged like weird bits of fleshy food, a nose, bits of cheek, ears, and chin.

"Any allergies to latex?" Mindy asked.

Winnie shook her head, her eyes riveted on the platter.

"The cohesive comes off with warm water and soap," Dr. Kuhn said.

The cohesive was a thick, white paste, and Mindy applied it to Winnie's cheeks, chin, and forehead like one of her mud masks. Winnie closed her eyes. She felt a slight pressure as Mindy pressed bits of skin and feature over her own.

Dr. Kuhn's voice entered her dark, "Today, you are seventeen-year-old, Sophia McDonald, and you're Frank's lover. He pays you to model for him, which you do, but when you become pregnant—he suspects the child is not his—you disappear and you steal from him. You take his wallet and other valuables. An heirloom watch and a half a dozen of his sketches."

The paste clumped in her hair by her ears. Mindy prodded the lobes, and the air there changed in temperature and sound.

"Why do you do it?" The doctor continued. "I don't know that it matters. Frank is what matters, because he is our client. He pays good money for this therapy, and it is important that we never judge him. Our job is to help Frank take ownership of the event. He needs to take hold of Sophia's ghost and confront her, and then he needs to forgive her."

"I'm done," Mindy said.

Winnie's face stiffened beneath the glue. Mindy spun the chair, and Winnie's disorientation grew. In the mirror she was no longer herself but a beautiful, teenage girl. Her hands flew to her face.

"But it looks so real," she whispered.

"Of course it does," Mindy said.

Winnie's smooth forehead arced over cat-sloped eyes. Her chin cut a proud and elegant angle around flushed, full cheeks. She ran her fingers over all of this, her actual skin hard and breathless beneath. Her heart cried out for Sophia McDonald, this girl and her youth.

"It can be startling to be someone else," Dr. Kuhn said. "It's not for everybody, but as an actor, I imagine you are well-accustomed to it."

"Yes. Of course." She nodded in his direction, but continued to trace with her finger the earnest heart that was her new face.

"Mindy, will you please help Winnie with her wig and earpiece?" Mindy nodded. The wig was shoulder length and blonde with thick bangs. The haircut belonged to a little girl, not a nude model.

"She was seventeen?" Winnie said.

Mindy handed Winnie her earpiece, a small, flesh colored anvil at the center of her palm.

"It slips right into your ear, like an ear bud," Mindy said.

"Its wireless," Dr. Kuhn explained. "Mindy will use this to instruct you on your lines in real time. It's important that you do not break character. We must never take the control away from Frank. He must always be in control."

Mindy said, “I put your clothes on the desk. You’ve got five minutes.”

“We believe in you, Ms. Watters,” Dr. Kuhn said, and Winnie watched Sophia nod in the mirror.

Winnie found a pair of acid washed jeans and a baggy white t-shirt folded on the dresser. At first Winnie assumed there was a mistake. She expected something more romantic, something *older*. The temptation to do math—how old was this Frank Neice?—buzzed in her temples, but she focused on zipping the jeans instead. This proved difficult, as the pair was small in the hips and butt, and she had to lie on her back on the floor before she could heft the zipper all the way up.

She paused in the mirror and tried to imagine her family. She tried to connect her actions, being Sophia McDonald, with her own family, but in the confusion of faces, they remained remote. She was Sophia McDonald, young Sophia McDonald, and the man she wronged was about to confront her.

Mindy’s voice in her earpiece said it was time to enter the Black Room.

“Frank’s waiting,” she said. “Go to the spotlight so he can see you.”

Her hand lingered on the knob; it was her hand on the knob. *I am Winnie*, she thought, *I am here for a job*.

The lights were brighter now, but the spotlight remained the brightest, and she walked to it slowly; her timidity emboldened her, and she studied him through long and lowered lashes. He bent forward in his wheelchair, his bare skull spackled in dark. She crossed to him, and he shook. His hands at his own face, his fingers wandered over it, as if with similar disbelief.

“It’s you! My god. My angel!”

His arms and hands stretched out to her, like a child wanting to be lifted.

"Go to him," Mindy said in her ear.

His lips pressed wet on her knuckles. He smelled like old women's perfume. "Your fingers have aged." He peered into her eyes, his own glistening with emotion. "But it's you. My Sophia."

She nodded, terrified. This was not acting. It was something else, something insidious and real. With acting there was safety and separateness, but this was different. They had tamped her into this man's life like gauze into a wound.

"It *is* me," she said at last.

He hesitated at her voice. "The doctors say I have to tell you how you hurt me, but you're just as lovely as you ever were. Will you undress for me, my dear? Like old times? May I sketch you?"

Mindy said, "Tell him no. Keep him on task."

"We can't today, Frank. You said you had something to say to me?"

"That doesn't matter anymore. Don't you see? You're here now. I'd rather sketch you. You've always done that to me."

"I don't want you to sketch me. I want you to say how you feel."

"I'm sure you had your reasons. You were so young." He began to pat and then bang at his chest. He frisked his lap and turned, whipped his head from side to side. "Is there a pen or paper in this place?"

Winnie flinched and took a backward step.

Dr. Kuhn appeared. “You came here for healing, Mr. Neice, not to sketch. Ms. McDonald will not be able to stay long, and it’s important for you to tell her how her leaving made you feel.”

“But she was so young. Look at how young she was.”

“How old were you?” Winnie said, unprompted. Dr. Kuhn glanced, distracted, as did Frank.

Dr. Kuhn said, “She stole your artwork. She disappeared possibly with your child.”

Frank made two fists. His face darkened. “It wasn’t my child. The slut. I always withdrew. Remember?” His bloodshot eyes watered. “I gave you freedom. I paid you well. I understood that I alone could not satisfy you, but why did you leave? Why did you feel the need to take from me everything?”

“It was time for me to go,” she said, prompted.

“You thieving slut,” he said. He slammed his fist onto his shriveled knee. Tears streamed down his cheeks.

“Very good, Frank. It’s good to express your anger. Say what you need to say.”

“I thought you loved me. You needed me.”

“Frank, do you think you can forgive Sophia?”

“I cried for you every night. I looked for you. I painted every canvas black.”

“It was wrong,” Sophia said, without prompt. “I didn’t understand.”

“Do you understand, now?” Frank said.

The voice in her ear said, “I understand that I hurt you and I’m sorry.”

"No," Winnie said. Frank's face pinched as did Dr. Kuhn's. The pause spread like a stain, and Winnie acquiesced to clean it. "I understand. I hurt you," she said. None of it mattered, anyway. Her family was far away, and young Sophia McDonald was presumably dead.

Dr. Kuhn guided them through a series of closing exercises on forgiveness. They repeated promises as if in a wedding ceremony, and then Mindy told Sophia to say goodbye.

She retreated to the backroom to a bowl of soapy water and a rag. She pressed the damp cloth to Sophia's face until it loosened and turned soft. The fragments peeled like dead skin, and underneath was Winnie's own face, her red skin roughed by the rag. She rewashed her skin and rinsed it; her face lowered over the bowl so the water could run down without mess. She lifted her head, and there in the mirror her look of confidence returned.

It was difficult, but she had done it. Winnie had done it, and she would do it again. She had nothing to lose and everything to gain. The trick was submission and flow. The trick was the current and complicity with the current. She would say what she needed to say and be what she needed to be and they would pay her for it. She would bring home money, and she could save her family.

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