

THE GETAWAY GIRL:  
A NOVEL AND CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

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## CHAPTER I

### CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

#### A. INTRODUCTION

The Novel—pick a novel, any novel—is the story of a homeless man, or woman. At least that is what George Lukács argues in his *Theory of the Novel*. When he speaks of homelessness as a defining trait of the genre he means a kind of “transcendental homelessness” or “homelessness of the soul” (62) that plagues the hero and results from him being at odds with his community’s ideals and behaviors. In other words, Lukács’ hero “is the product of estrangement from the outside world” (66). Although Lukács is interested in homelessness as a state of mind, think of the wide array of novels that detail characters’ experiences (no matter how botched or brief they end up being) with more literal homelessness. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* comes to mind. So does *The Grapes of Wrath*. And *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Rabbit, Run*. This is only the smallest sampling, but the characters in these novels are programmed with the same Manifest Destiny software that came standard in the pioneers of the nineteenth century and motivated them to press on beyond the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains. They simply cannot stand still because “they are seekers” (Lukács 60). A seeking person plus an acute sense of homelessness equals a quest about to happen, and, really, what

more is needed to jumpstart a novel? As Walker Percy proves in *The Moviegoer*, nothing. That is it, in a nutshell. Percy's Binx Bolling is among the most prototypical of novel heroes because he is admittedly looking for what Lukács defines as "[t]he world of man that matters," the one "where the soul, as man,...is at home" and has "everything it needs" (65-6). Binx Bolling, with his usual cavalier, conversational eloquence declares, "my peaceful existence in Gentilly has been complicated. This morning, for the first time in years, there occurred to me the possibility of a search" (10). He does not want to be a puppet of his domineering aunt, whose house, when he has lived in it, makes him angry and depressed. His "exile in Gentilly has been the worst kind of self-deception," he realizes while listening to his friend talk about his wife and house. He has been confronted with his own homelessness, and the cool darkness of his beloved movie theater will no longer suffice as a substitute home. While watching the girl sleep in his bed, Andy Quinn has a similar experience in Chapter 1 of *The Getaway Girl*. He, too, must embark on a search and the only logical place to begin seems to be Kansas City, where he came closest to having a home.

*The Getaway Girl* is concerned with literal homelessness and the homelessness we feel when convinced that we do not belong to the local world we live in, or feel emotionally connected to anyone around us. Andy's reckless financial and ethical decisions repeatedly leave him either homeless or on the verge of homelessness, and he ends up squatting in the Van Dynes' empty house after Brook and Frannie have moved away. Being the Getaway Girl has left Meg Wilder, who lives out of hotel suites and rented condos, homeless, too. Ferrell Nash has a house of her own, but the proliferation of knickknacks and her penchant for hyper color coordination reveal her struggle to make

a home for herself. Moreover, Andy, Meg, and Ferrell do not have families to provide them with a sense of belonging.

The hero seeking a home is only half of a novel's story. The other half is the generic but inexhaustible love story, pegged by John Updike as a "pervasive, perhaps obsessive, thread" (*Picked-Up* 19) essential to the novel. Lukács may not have needed to mention it at all because the quest for home and the quest for love are really the same story. Andy, Meg, and Ferrell know this all too well. To them, having four walls and a roof over their heads is all but intolerable when they are the only ones in the house. The three of them are desperate for love. Love, as expressed not only through the Van Dynes' unconditional acceptance of outsiders like Andy and Meg, but also through Frannie's gardening, decorating, and cooking, separates the Van Dynes' house from all the places Andy, Meg, and Ferrell have lived unhappily, and this is why they are so deeply attached to it, why Lew and Frannie's move to a villa on the Lake is so traumatic. This twin search for home and love is the matter of life and death Eudora Welty writes of as the only plot available to writers (98). Shelter—a house, a hut, a hotel room—is one of our most basic needs we must meet if we are to stay alive. That intangible shelter found in reciprocal love is no less essential if we are to stay emotionally alive. Frannie and Lew's life together is attractive to someone like Andy precisely because they have both a home that is a comfortable, welcoming structure and an emotional home with each other built on their time-tested love. Jill's surprising kiss is fortuitous because, in that instant, she seems to be offering those same things to him.



I believe it is through its fidelity to Lukács' formula of the homeless, seeking hero questing for the world that matters, the world that offers love and life, that *The Getaway Girl* earns the label, "Novel."

## B. STRUCTURE

The greatest and scariest thing about the novel, and the thing that has made it so difficult to define, is the fact that it has no steadfast set of rules for the writer to adhere to. There are no syllables or lines to count, no couplet that needs to be crafted into a satisfying conclusion. As I've learned while drafting, revising, and re-revising *The Getaway Girl*, the absence of rules can be anything but liberating. This became frighteningly clear as I struggled to find the structure and point-of-view that best fit the story I was trying to tell.

In its first draft, *The Getaway Girl* was narrated chronologically. It began with Jill by the pool, thinking of her brother, her boyfriend, and best friend taking their spring semester finals, and ended, as it still does, with Andy and Ferrell alone in the Van Dynes' empty house. This arrangement, however, made the novel structurally lopsided. The first third of the novel comprised only a few days prior to Andy's departure to Great Britain and then Hong Kong. Then, the novel leaped ahead seven years, where it remained until its conclusion. The shift in point of view, from Jill to Andy, only emphasized the novel's imbalanced two-part structure. It was an abrupt and awkward transition that needed to be reimagined, preferably without disrupting the two points-of-view or the two spans of time, the narrative present and the narrative past.

As a template, I took Elizabeth Bowen's 1935 novel, *The House in Paris*. What initially drew me to Bowen's novel was the fact that it included a series of chapters told from the point of view of a character who was much discussed by, and in the thoughts of, other characters throughout chapters in which she never appeared. That character, Karen Michaelis, is completely absent from the novel's narrative present. She embodies the past, and in her I saw certain parallels with Jill. Because of this, *The House in Paris*' simple tri-part structure—Present, Past, Present—offered itself as an ideal model when I set out to reshape *The Getaway Girl*. First, it, too, is narrated from a split point-of-view that coincides with two distinct periods of time. The Present sections are told from the perspective of two children, Henrietta and Leopold, while the middle Past section is told through the consciousness of Karen, Leopold's estranged mother. By shuffling around the opening Jill chapters, *The Getaway Girl* adapted easily to this same structure. Andy's chapters effectively became the Present, Jill's the Past, and the restructuring achieved a necessary balance. Jill's chapters became a kind of interlude between the two roughly equal chunks of chapters written from Andy's point-of-view.

Wayne Booth says that to create suspense, “[e]very author withholds until later what he ‘might as well’ relate now” (254-5). *The House in Paris*' Present-Past-Present arrangement is deliberately designed to withhold key details and create suspense in the mind of the reader. Like Leopold and Henrietta, the reader wonders why a woman would choose to abandon her child. Leopold's anxiety over an impending meeting with her grows at the same rate as the reader's curiosity, and in the absence of an explanation for Karen Michaelis' actions, she becomes something of a villain the reader wants to see and confront.

Jill Van Dyne is by no means a villain, but moving her chapters to the novel's middle also helps foster suspense. On the one hand, it would seem to undermine an important source of the reader's interest—Jill's health. Does she live or does she die? That question is answered fairly quickly in Chapter 1. If that is the case, where, then, does suspense reside in *The Getaway Girl's* revised structure? A Present-Past-Present structure transfers suspense from Jill to Andy. Instead of wondering what happens to Jill, the reader wonders what led to Andy that precipitated his decline. Jill's death happened, but Andy's state of mind in the present is related more to the fact that Jill got sick in the first place than the fact that she died. He is haunted not by her act of dying, but by his own actions while she was ill. However, until the narrative transitions into the past, we do not have a full understanding of his behavior or why it would be a source of pain seven years later. In other words, cause-effect relationships have also been inverted and disrupted. The reader is presented at the outset with the effect and is left to temporarily speculate about the cause.

This is a more complex type of suspense than the sort that developed when *The Getaway Girl* was written chronologically. There were only two possible outcomes to the question of Jill's health, and both were easily guessed. The Present-Past-Present structure not only relocates the suspense from Jill to Andy, but from outward action to inward thought processes, where complex feelings and motives combine into multiple possibilities. As Welty says, "What can a character come to know, of himself and others, by working through a given situation? This is what fiction asks, with an emotional urgency driving it all the way, and can he know it in time?" (98). When *The Getaway Girl* is arranged in a Present-Past-Present structure, Welty's questions create a unity of

suspense, an arc spanning the whole novel. Arranged chronologically, however, the novel is fueled, at first, by the question of Jill's health, but, once she dies, it must re-start and begin building up suspense from another source, which, when paired with the imbalanced ration of present to past action, only made *The Getaway Girl*, in its old form, feel all the more clunky.

The logistics of suspense, how to maximize and sustain it, must be among the primary concerns for the novelist trying to decide on the most advantageous structure for a novel. If the novelist fails to consider it, the resulting novel will be profoundly flawed. It risks not even being a novel because “[t]he novel’s progress is one of causality, and with that comes suspense. Suspense is a necessity in a novel because it is a main condition of our existence” (Welty 96). I gave little thought to suspense while writing earlier drafts of *The Getaway Girl*. Perhaps this was because I was too committed to the idea of writing it chronologically. Knowing from experience that I often got into trouble when I went delving into the world of flashbacks, I thought I would make things easy on myself by being as rigidly linear as I could. That, of course, did not serve the narrative well. Madison Smartt Bell says that “the form of a work is its skeleton, if not its heart. There is the articulating armature, and if it is absent, or if too much is wrong with it, no quantity of fine writing will bring the work to life—the story will not stand or walk or live” (22). In order to even come close to standing, or walking, or living, *The Getaway Girl* needed a new form because until it was revised with Bowen’s model in mind, whatever quality writing existed was overshadowed by structural deficiencies too large to ignore.

Over the course of several radical revisions, the one structural element that has not changed is the novel's ending. Aside from some added dialogue between Andy and Ferrell, it remains largely intact from the time it was first drafted. The final narrative destination of the novel is a great source of dissatisfaction for E.M. Forster. He complains that "[n]early all novels are feeble at the end...because the plot requires to be wound up," (95) by way of death or marriage. Death and marriage are attractive options because they allude to permanence (55). They satisfy the desire for closure. Death is, indeed, permanent, and for the writer it is useful because it frees her, along with the reader from having to wonder about the fate of a character and whether or not there is the lingering thread of a good story that still needs to be told. Marriage, however, only offers the illusion of permanence. It is a disingenuous, almost cheap strategy in Forster's view because, "[a]ll history, all our experience, teaches us that no relationship is constant." Forster wishes for more varied and intellectually honest possibilities. "Why," he laments, "need [the novel] close, as a play closes? Cannot it open out?" (96). If Jane Austen stepped in to write the final chapters of *The Getaway Girl*, it would undoubtedly conclude with Brook and Ferrell as well as Andy and Meg marrying. And given Andy's desire for a loving, long-lasting domestic partnership that would seem to be the most logical ending. I am of the opinion that these characters are too fraught with uncertainty and insecurity to be neatly boxed into marriages, even if it is the thing they all presumably want at some point. The "now" of the novel is not the right time. For that reason, *The Getaway Girl* is intended to open out at the end. Rather than marriage, it opts for separation. None of the novel's couples is together at the end. Lew and Frannie have been separated by death. Ferrell has split from Brook. Meg has run away from Andy.

Despite this separation, the ending is not bleak for these characters. It is actually Lew's death that presents them with the opportunity to live differently, to possibly live better. Nothing is settled for Andy, Ferrell, or Meg, so the novel, even after it has been finished by the reader, is still perpetuating that million dollar question that Forster deems essential to its success: What happens next? (27).

### C. POINT-OF-VIEW

Discussion of structure can easily segue into discussions of point-of-view, and vice versa. (I challenge anyone to have mutually exclusive discussions about the structure and point-of-view of either Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* or Woolf's *The Waves*, for instance.) This is because point-of-view dictates content. The omniscient narrator can go wherever he pleases, but when a story is limited to a single character's perspective, the story can only go where that character goes, or relate what that character can reasonably know. Once the narrative present of *The Getaway Girl* coalesced around Andy's point-of-view, chapters from previous drafts, in which point-of-view was much more diffuse, either had to be significantly altered or deleted to accommodate that change. A major change, for example, involved the character of Meg Wilder, the Getaway Girl herself. Before, she had been a fairly dominant character, and at one time, the novel was drifting in a direction that would have made the sections set in the narrative present belong to her rather than Andy. A significant amount of text was devoted to her back-story, particularly her time in New Zealand, her childhood, and her strained relationship with her mother, a plotline which began to take on a life of its own. Her story grew steadily more complex and difficult to integrate into that of Andy and the Van

Dynes. Appointing Andy as the point-of-view character negated much of this material, including a now deleted chapter about Meg's return to her childhood home. And the fact that this material became unusable was a benefit to the novel as a whole, making it more tightly focused. Previous drafts had also emphasized Meg and Ferrell's friendship. They were the focus of two chapters, but with Andy "in charge" of the narrative, these chapters could not remain as they were. My solution was to recast them, to replace Meg with Andy. Given where the novel ends up, with Andy and Ferrell together in the Van Dynes' house, this seemed a natural change to make. Their animosity toward each other has clearly softened by the end and giving them additional, meaningful chances to interact makes that softening more organic and believable.

Overall, point-of-view in *The Getaway Girl* has had a complicated history. In its formative stages, it was about Andy Quinn's return to Kansas City and his encounter with Meg Wilder, the eponymous Getaway Girl. It was a story told from his third-person perspective. In the summer of 2005, however, Jill Van Dyne appeared. She was the product of my efforts to give Andy a past and an enduring connection to Brook Van Dyne and his family. She—and her leukemia—was totally unanticipated, but she and her best friend, Ferrell, interested me. I don't remember why, but I started writing about Jill's relationship with Andy and the impact her illness had on it from her point-of-view. I kept writing from her point-of-view because I liked her. I liked that she was walking a fine line between fear and fearlessness, hope and despair. She was full of contradictions, black humor, and sarcasm. To borrow from that iconic scene in the first episode of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, she had spunk. And because I knew almost immediately after creating her that Andy's story dictated her death, I was faced with a problem. Jill was

essentially the beginning of Andy's story, but once she was no longer available, Andy would have to take over the balance of the narrative. I should probably clarify: Andy's point-of-view did not technically have to take over. Jill might have continued to be the filter for the novel's action, but I was not interested in the kind of fantastic, beyond-the-grave narration other writers have employed to great success. For me, as both a reader and writer, it is too obvious a break from reality, one I did not feel comfortable pursuing.

So, finding myself at a point-of-view crossroads, I took a path that proved to be a dead end; or, perhaps, more accurately, a path that kept going right off the edge of a cliff, and I, like the Roadrunner suspended over the abyss, looked down and crashed, bringing *The Getaway Girl* with me. While writing the chapters told from Jill's point of view, I became increasingly fascinated by Ferrell and her outlook on the world. I think that this, in part, is what led me to hastily expand a novel with two point-of-view characters to one with five. A previous draft of the novel featured chapters written from the perspectives of not only Jill and Andy, but also Frannie, Ferrell, and Meg. My intention was to offer readers multiple perspectives on Jill's death, the story's single most important event. But what really resulted was an unfocused narrative with several unwieldy subplots that could not be easily united. This would be less problematic if I was attempting a novel with Dickensian sprawl, like *Bleak House* or *Little Dorrit*, but few novelists write Dickensian novels with at least two dozen characters and at least as many plotlines. In her essay on writing from the third-person point-of-view, Lynna Williams perfectly describes the predicament I had created for myself: "If too many points of view are offered, we may be undercutting, and underdeveloping, the one or two points of view that are most necessary to tell of the story...if we switch point of view too often, and for reasons that aren't



compelling, we may sever the readers' connection to the characters and, eventually, the story" (123). A common topic of discussion in fiction writing workshops is the question, "whose story is this?" Because I had dabbled in so many points-of-view, the answer for that particular incarnation of *The Getaway Girl* was that it wasn't anybody's story. Worse still, it tricked a reader into thinking it was Jill's story, only to have her abruptly excised from the narrative after five chapters. In her absence came a parade of new points-of-view, none of which was ever given the opportunity to acquire the same depth of emotions or perceptions.

Eventually, a decision needed to be made about point-of-view in the post-Jill chapters. My fruitless experimentation had proven that, in order to be viable, *The Getaway Girl* could support only one other point of view. The question was, whose should that be? The answer became quite obvious. I had to go back to where I started, to a story about Andy Quinn. It was the only answer. At some point, Jill's chapters became the epicenter of the novel, and every decision had to be made in terms of how best to accommodate, enhance, and remain true to those five chapters. Because so much of what goes on during scenes and in Jill's thoughts during her chapters relates to her and Andy's relationship, that second point-of-view needed to reside with someone who could amplify and play off that material. When I returned the novel's focus to Andy, the narrative immediately contracted and cohered around his guilt, homelessness, hopelessness, loneliness, faithlessness, frustration, and ambition, all of which related back to Jill's illness and his response to it. I was forced to inhabit his consciousness more thoroughly and thoughtfully than I had at any other stage in the drafting process. As Williams says, "Once a point-of-view decision is made, the writer creating the story can begin to find his

or her own way *into* the developing narrative; point-of-view choice influences virtually every other decision to be made in constructing a story, but its first importance may be how it draws us, as writers, deeper and deeper into the material, making us see the possibilities” (115).

By focusing on Andy, I tapped into a more engaging, developed voice, one that combined traditional third-person narration with the intermittent use of the technique of free indirect discourse or, to use Dorrit Cohn’s term, narrated monologue. As her definition of narrated monologue states, it “render[s] a character’s thought in his own idiom while maintaining the third-person reference and the basic tense of narration” (100). It is not a technique I recall consciously using in the past, though it does appear in the previously written chapters from Jill’s point-of-view. When preparing to recast the majority of the novel into Andy’s point-of-view, I re-read the Epilogue and came across the moment when Andy hears Ferrell close her car door as he is pulling weeds in the Van Dyne’s yard. He is annoyed because, without bothering to turn around, he assumes it is Janet Kelsey coming over unannounced to show the house to prospective buyers. “Son of a bitch” is his reaction, only the phrase does not appear in quotation marks, nor is it explicitly attributed to him with a tag like “he said” or “he thought.” Instead, it stands by itself looking just like the surrounding sentences that come from the narrator. It is a small moment that I liked. In revision, the narrated monologue appeared more frequently.

Andy is often in a state of frustration, exasperation, confusion, or discomfort, and the outbursts of narrated monologue do as much to reveal these facets of his character as any of his actions. His harried state of mind, therefore, meshes well with narrated

monologue, “which teems with questions, exclamations, repetitions, overstatements, colloquialisms” (Cohn 102). All of which, I would argue, seem far more likely to occur when someone is flustered or agitated. In tracing the history of narrated monologue, Cohn cites pioneers of the technique, including Flaubert, and , later, Virginia Woolf. In particular, she analyzes Jane Austen’s use of narrated monologue. Often, whether it be in the passage from *Emma* she quotes or when Elizabeth Bennet is ashamed to realize her misjudgment of Mr. Darcy, Austen’s third-person narration gives way to narrated monologue when her characters are overcome by emotion and in the throes of an epiphany.

Although Andy does not have a watershed epiphany comparable to Elizabeth Bennet’s, moments of narrated monologue occur throughout the narrative present chapters written from his point-of-view. For example, they break in when Andy wants Ferrell to share his shock at and disapproval of the For Sale sign in the Van Dynes’ yard, when Andy realizes that Lew’s heart attack was fatal, when he considers the Christian concept of eternal life after death, when he wishes he and Meg could just go drink late-night milkshakes and put Lew’s death behind them.

Looking back, I am inclined to believe that my drift into narrated monologue owes something to my reading of John Galsworthy’s *The Forsyte Saga*, which I took up about the time I began my wholesale point-of-view revisions. Galsworthy’s protagonist, Soames Forsyte, is, by most anyone’s estimation, a loathsome man. He is aloof, rude, cruel, possessive, judgmental, and, no matter how obliquely Galsworthy attempts to phrase it, a rapist. Despite all that, while I am reading, I maintain a small bit of goodwill toward Soames. How exactly does Galsworthy do that? Why didn’t I ever succumb to

the kind of hatred toward him that he and his first wife, Irene, eventually feel for each other? I think it can be explained through Galsworthy's use of narrated monologue. He allows us brief, intermittent access to Soames' thoughts throughout the series of novels.

For example, before Irene's flirtation with the architect Bosinney thoroughly destroys her already tense marriage to Soames, Soames' thoughts interrupt the voice of the narrator:

Most people would consider such a marriage as that of Soames and Irene quite fairly successful; he had money, she had beauty; it was a case for compromise. There was no reason why they should not jog along, even if they hated each other. It would not matter if they went their own ways a little, so long as the decencies were observed. (192)

The first two sentences appear to belong to the narrator, the last two sentences to Soames, based on the word "jog," which strikes me as very Soames-ish, as it implies he has no reservations about continuing in a loveless marriage. Here Galsworthy employs his own version of what Hugh Kenner, in his analysis of narrative voice in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, calls The Uncle Charles Principle. Just as Uncle Charles' voice begins to appear in Chapter 2 of *Portrait*, words and phrases that belong uniquely to Soames, and not Galsworthy's narrator, recur throughout *The Forsyte Saga*. As Kenner says of Uncle Charles, "a word he need not even utter is there like a gnat in the air," resulting in "a little cloud of idioms which a character might use if he were managing the narrative" (17).

After Irene's attraction to Bosinney becomes obvious, and she refuses to let Soames into her bedroom, snippets of narrated monologue repeatedly interrupt the

narrator: “He desired no one but her, and she refused him! She must really hate him, then!...If she, so soft and yielding as he had always judged her, could take this decided step—what could not happen?” (216). The same occurs during the perilous moments before Annette, Soames’ second wife, gives birth to Fleur:

If only he could have understood the doctor’s jargon, the medical niceties, so as to be sure he was weighing the chances properly; but they were Greek to him—like a legal problem to a layman. And yet he *must* decide! He brought his hand away from his brow wet, though the air was chilly. These sounds which came from her room! To go back there would only make it more difficult. He must be calm, clear. On the one hand life, nearly certain, for his young wife, death quite certain, of his child; and—no more children afterwards! On the other, death *perhaps* of his wife, nearly certain life for the child; and—no more children afterwards! Which to choose? (591)

In these moments, Soames’ humanity overshadows his often boorish, tyrannical behavior. No one wants to fail at marriage. No one wants to be hated. No one wants to be put in the impossible position of choosing one life over another. The reader, then, shares Soames’ horror, fear, and amazement.

According to Cohn, “narrated monologues themselves tend to commit the character to attitudes of sympathy or irony” (117). As is the case with Soames Forsyte, I think that narrated monologue helps Andy gain the reader’s sympathy. (At the same time it is a tool for amplifying his cynicism and sarcasm.) He is not an inherently likable character. When the reader first meets him, he, a man of thirty, is in bed with an

undergraduate he neither loves nor particularly likes. Moreover, he is prone to self-loathing and was unfaithful to his dying girlfriend, an act he is initially not sorry for, but later deeply regrets. But, when narrated monologue slips into the text, we are brought closer to his fears and anxieties stemming from his loss of Jill, the loss of money, the loss of moral convictions, the loss of the Van Dynes' house, the loss of Lew, and the loss of Meg. His faults fade into the background and he becomes relatable. We can imagine ourselves feeling the same things.

The decision to write from Andy's point-of-view was also the key to the novel's tone. I had no preconceived tone I hoped to achieve, however. Tone is such an amorphous thing, a combination of style, word choice, characterization, physical description, and point-of-view (Stanton 604), it seems almost impossible to intentionally achieve a specific one. There are simply too many variables to consider. As I consider it now, I think the tone of this novel should reflect Andy's psychology and outlook as well as a male sensibility (a difficult thing to achieve when you're a girl). I also think—and hope—that the tone of *The Getaway Girl* reflects the narrative's conflicts. In hindsight, I see the tone as a tug-of-war between reverence and revulsion, as these strike me as Andy's primary states of mind. He reveres Lew and Frannie, their life and their house. He is revolted by, among other things, many of his own actions, many of Ferrell's actions and the unnamed girl in his bed in Chapter 1. If one dominates the other, it is probably revulsion, a caustic, irritable, occasionally belligerent revulsion for the people, places, things, actions, and circumstances that, in one way or another, keep Andy from being the kind of man someone like himself might revere. This tone emerged with the switch in point-of-view because I don't think any of the other characters possessed Andy's same

inner volatility. He makes tone a dynamic element of the narrative, whereas the multiple points-of-view used in previous drafts made the narrative tonally flat and bland. In this draft, tone has become a source of narrative momentum.

To some extent, I think the combination of Andy's mindset and the narrative present's voice and tone are connected to the years I spent tutoring members of Oklahoma State's men's golf team in the Athletic Department's Academic Center. To varying degrees, they were brash, ego-centric, supremely confident young men. They had been raised and educated as professional golfers in training. Because they were all seemingly on the verge of achieving their lifelong goals, fear and anxiety lurked not too far beneath the surface. Was failing to qualify for a particular tournament just the result of one bad round or a symptom of larger flaws in a golf swing or putting stroke that could take weeks or months to put right? A teammate, a can't-miss amateur star, who left school very early to turn professional and struggled mightily, became the subject of nervous jokes and sarcastic asides. (That could happen to one of us! No, that couldn't possibly happen to us. Could it?) Good tournaments and low scores brought on self-reverential highs. High scores and bad play brought on the opposite, self-loathing, frustration and emergency trips to Florida to see their private coaches. And the bad things—bad things related not just to golf but girlfriends, parents, teammates, teachers, coaches, media, etc.—were always relayed to me as quite candid, amusing, profanity-rich anecdotes that, in their minds, seemed to foretell the end of the world as they knew it. They believed themselves to have no margin for error, and they were often in the back of my thoughts as I tried to figure out who Andy was. With that in mind, I hope that

through Andy's point-of-view I was able to arrive at a tone that approximates the tenuous boundary between having everything and having nothing.

#### D. THE GERM OF THE NOVEL: CHARACTER VS. SETTING

By jumping right away into the complex, intertwined topics of structure, point-of-view and tone, I have been getting ahead of myself. It is, therefore, time to back up and ask a big question: Where do novels come from? (Other than the shelves at Barnes & Noble, or the postman who wedges my latest order from Amazon into my mailbox, of course.) What is the spark that lights the fuse that sizzles and sizzles until it ignites a literary Big Bang and, once the dust settles, leaves behind, in all its glory, a universe of words, a language-world of people, flowers, dogs, sunsets, and heartache neatly contained between a front and back cover? As with most things having to do with literature, there is no definitive correct answer. It is a matter of the novelist's personal preference as decided by the peculiar imaginative workings of that novelist's mind. For a great many writers, though, the preferred starting point for a novel is character. A lone actor on an empty stage who needs to be fed some words, some thoughts, and then burdened with a few worries and shortcomings—even some honest-to-God flaws, obsessions and addictions. And after that is bestowed on him, he is given an address, a point of origin, a room or a house or a park bench—a world of his own that, if we are sticking to Lukács' theory, he is nevertheless at odds with. But this must come later. First he, the language-man, must be imagined into life by his creator.

In the prefaces to his novels, Henry James asserts that characters gave rise to the novels he wrote. A particular character is what he calls "the germ" that serves as the



catalyst for narrative action. For example, *The Portrait of a Lady* grows out of his “sense of a single character, the character and aspect of a particular engaging young character, to which all the usual elements of a ‘subject,’ certainly of a setting, were to need to be super-added” (4). *The Wings of the Dove* similarly developed out of his concept of a character: “the idea, reduced to its essence, is that of a young person conscious of a great capacity for life, but early stricken and doomed, condemned to die under short respite” (35). James admits to borrowing his philosophy from Turgenev, who first envisioned a character and then placed him or her in the situations that “would most bring them out” (*Portrait* 5) and reveal his or her true nature. E.M. Forster seems to share James’ (and Turgenev’s) opinion that character is the first ingredient in the recipe for making a novel, arguing in *Aspects of the Novel* that “[i]ncident springs out of character” (90). That ensuing incident, whatever it may be, will dictate a vivid, detailed world that begins to coalesce around the character.

Other novelists, such as Sinclair Lewis and John Updike, also subscribe to this “character first” approach. According to Richard Lingeman’s introduction to the Modern Library edition of *Babbitt*, Lewis’ “central character had a complex genesis with roots in Lewis’ long fascination with traveling salesmen...Even before *Main Street*, Lewis had casually mentioned to Harcourt that he wanted to write a novel about a salesman. Over time, the character evolved into a real estate broker” (xi-xii). Once he had settled on a protagonist, Lewis proceeded “to draw elaborate maps of his settings. Essentially, he undertook to create an alternative reality...a mid-sized American city that was a composite of cities Lewis knew” (xiv). The impetus for Updike’s series of Rabbit novels was his everyman title character. Says Updike, “my intent was simple enough: to show a

high-school athletic hero in the wake of his glory days” (*Rabbit* xi). He traces Rabbit’s origins to his earlier poem, “Ex-Basketball Player,” a simple but poignant portrait of just such a declining former athlete.

On the surface, this seems entirely reasonable. Why wouldn’t the novelist start with character? If Lukács is correct in his assertion that the novel is distinct from other genres because of its homeless, seeking hero, what other place could there be to start from? But it is a curious method when compared, say, to the book of Genesis, where the setting of the cosmos, of earth, is brought into being before God breathes life into Adam and, subsequently, Eve. Setting must precede God’s creation of Adam and Eve because Adam is literally made out of the earth, “from the dust of the ground” (Gen. 1:7). Is there then, something to be said for beginning the novel not from character but setting?

Eudora Welty, for one, rejects character as “the germ” of the novel and champions setting as the narrative element that must precede all others. She vehemently believes that “[e]stablishing a chink-proof world of appearance is not only the first responsibility of the writer; it is the primary step in the technique of every sort of fiction” (50). The writer must start from setting because we are, as humans, naturally and intimately tied to place, to the local world surrounding us. The novel, Welty says, is “bound up in the local, the ‘real,’ the present, the ordinary day-to-day life of human experience” (41). This is the case because “feelings are bound up in place” (47). The radical nature of Welty’s decision to privilege setting over character is illustrated by the fact that those such as James and Forster, who have developed thoughtful theories of the novel, barely acknowledge the power and importance of setting. In his prefaces James devotes no significant discussion to setting. He is much too involved with his efforts to

craft a nuanced representation of a character's mental landscape instead of the physical landscape he or she inhabits. Similarly, Forster devotes two lengthy chapters in *Aspects of the Novel* to character but there is no comparable chapter addressing setting, a curious oversight considering the emphasis he puts on setting in his own novels, namely *A Passage to India*.

While the formidable likes of James, Forster, Lewis, Updike, and, no doubt, countless others, swear by character as the initial building block for a novel, my approach has always been more closely aligned with Welty's. For the novella that was the centerpiece of my Masters thesis, I actually made a special trip to Scottsdale, Arizona—a city I already knew quite well—to pick out a house for my protagonist. In my mind, the story was never going to be true or worth reading unless I had an actual set of four walls to picture her living within. Moreover, the short stories I have written in the past usually came about because of a desire to chronicle my impressions of a particular place. More often than not that place was a vacation destination or a place passed through on the way to that destination. Why that emerged as a pattern, I can't quite say. Perhaps it is because I am not someone who keeps a journal or a diary, and, therefore, writing a story about a place is a way to preserve my observations. Perhaps it is because, in an effort to make a place familiar, my will to observe is stronger in strange surroundings. Or, perhaps it is because these places are ones that I have not previously encountered as the backdrop for fiction. The settings, then, help lend the stories a semblance of originality.

A diluted case of homesickness (one that might more properly be diagnosed as nostalgia) that came and went while I lived in Oklahoma led me to consider writing about Kansas City, my hometown. I had never done it before. The thought never crossed my

mind. Ever. To me it held no narrative potential. For some reason, it began to seem like the thing to do, though. What writer didn't write about that point on the map that is home to him or her? Geographical areas, states, regions, cities, towns become synonymous with particular writers. Faulkner, of course, has Mississippi. (So, for that matter, does Welty.) Katherine Anne Porter is inextricably linked to Texas. Cather to Nebraska. Steinbeck to the Salinas Valley of California. Cheever to the Connecticut suburbs of New York City. Writers take us to these places through their words, and because this is the part of their stories that isn't, in many ways, fiction, our impressions of these very real places are strongly shaped by the details they choose to emphasize. They make characters of these places, and like any other character they have personalities, create tension, and shape the lifestyles and behavior of the actual characters who call that particular place home.

Visiting the square in Oxford, Mississippi, I was thrilled to see that, despite the coffee shops, the Ole Miss Rebels paraphernalia hanging in the store windows, and the SUVs parked in front of the courthouse, it was exactly what Faulkner told me it would be. I felt as if I was not visiting for the first time, but that I had been there before. It was a kind of literary déjà vu. In a strange way I had the feeling that it had all been built using his prose as an instructional guide, and that the town, to this day, belonged exclusively to him. (I half expected the final pages of *The Sound and the Fury* to play out in front of me.) I became intrigued by the possibility of trying this out for myself. I wanted someone to be able to read *The Getaway Girl*, stand at the corner of Wornall Road and Ward Parkway in the Plaza and say, yes, I know this place. I found encouragement in a Calvin Trillin essay from *The New Yorker* titled "The Bull

Vanishes.” I avidly read Trillin’s enthusiasm for lesser Kansas City landmarks that never quite find their way onto a tourist’s itinerary. (Who knew you could write engagingly about Bull Wall, situated as it is, on the gray, squalid fringes of the Kemper Arena parking lot in the West Bottoms! Could there be a place less inviting to the imagination?) It went a long way toward convincing me that, if I took the time to look and reflect closely, I would discover other facets of the city that could become fodder for my own narrative. In a way, Trillin’s essay granted me permission to write about Kansas City as it is today.

Not surprisingly, the earliest drafted chapter of *The Getaway Girl* was little more than detailed description of setting featuring a rather two-dimensional Andy Quinn, having returned from somewhere, taking in the Country Club Plaza while he walked. As he walked, he noted the ways in which the Plaza had changed while he was gone, he remembered the sights and sounds of Christmastime. As a character, he had no vices, no real voice or personality, and only the vaguest history. He was merely an observer. In fact, the most promising and lively characters in the chapter were likely Mr. Tim and Mr. Cliff, the proprietors of Plaza Shoe Shine, actual men whose business my father has frequented for years. In that initial draft, Andy observed that this part of Kansas City was a cobbling together of other cities’ (namely Seville, Paris, and Rome) most recognizable features. Because that draft suffered from an abundance of setting detail and a dearth of character and action, that observation was, for a time, one of many passages phased out, though in dribs and drabs it made its way back in, predominantly during Andy’s reflections on Hall’s department store in Chapter 1, Meg’s restless thoughts in Chapter 7, and Andy and Meg’s late night walk around the Plaza in Chapter 13.

The Country Club Plaza and the Ward Parkway residential corridor were the utopian vision of legendary Kansas City real estate developer J.C. Nichols. In an undated speech on the philosophy guiding his design of the city's famous shopping center, Nichols describes how more than one hundred houses, a grocery store, an old lumberyard, and apartments were removed from the area so that a center of commerce could rise from an area encompassing swampland, a stone quarry, a rubbish dump, and a creek bed. Nichols' vision was not inspired by any design feature rooted in eastern Kansas or western Missouri, but by Spain:

Spanish architecture was selected on account of beauty of design, use of color, its pleasing adaptation to broken roof lines, its towered skyline and the fact [Kansas City] is on the Santa Fe trail leading into that great Southwest, once controlled by the Spaniards...The exterior lanterns on the theatre building are exact replicas of the old candle light lanterns of Castilian days in Spain. The gay colored tile above the doorways were made in Seville, illustrating the gay colors of Spanish structures. The soft tones tiles of weathered appearance in the roofs recall an old Spanish marketplace...Sunny Spain will always live in the Plaza. ("County" 2-3)

Nichols had in mind a picturesque, scale version of Seville, something of a retail precursor to the Epcot World Showcase at Walt Disney World with its faux pagodas and Eiffel Tower, or contemporary Las Vegas. His dream was shared by his contemporaries, August Meyer and George Kessler, the guiding forces behind the construction of Ward Parkway. They dreamed of Kansas City one day boasting "more boulevards than Paris, more fountains than Rome," a phrase which has been an unofficial slogan of the city ever

since. The desire to remake Kansas City in a continental image has since become deeply engrained in the collective psyche of its citizens. For example, it surfaces in the opening sentence of former *Kansas City Star* reporter Ernest Hemingway's story "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen": "In those days the distances were all very different, the dirt blew off the hills that now have been cut down, and Kansas City was very much like Constantinople" (392). In his alternately light-hearted and bittersweet essay, which, at its heart, is about the removal of the larger-than-life bull statue that had stood atop the American Hereford Association Building downtown since 1954, Trillin captures what the city was and what many would prefer it to be:

For a few years in the seventies, those people, many of whom had family or business connections to agriculture, seemed outgunned by the civic boosters who believed that my hometown should actively reject its association with agriculture in order to be considered a sophisticated and glamorous city...a city whose iconic statuary should be more on the order of the rococo fountains in the graceful old shopping district we like to think of as the world-famous Country Club Plaza. (36)

Although he does not express it in these terms, Trillin is disappointed because certain people with the power to do so are reinventing, or rewriting, the character of Kansas City. And as he would probably have to admit, they have succeeded. Trillin does not mention that much of the city's "iconic statuary" is replicated from European originals (an option Nichols advocated for economic and practical reasons). I wanted to make something out of the many artistic reproductions the city takes such pride in. There is, is there not, great irony in a city defining itself through the many ways it has imitated other cities' art and

landmarks? It reveals a troubling insecurity, the fear that a city in the middle of America has no definitive cultural traits of its own to celebrate in art and architecture. The city's affinity for imitation ended up becoming a way into Jill's character. She is an artist and a dreamer, someone anxious to experience the real places and the real art for herself, and the fact that her leukemia may prevent her from ever experiencing them makes having the disease all the more galling. It is one of her many consuming frustrations. Though it may not be explicitly in the text of the novel, I also think Meg's presence in a city of replicas and imitations is a comment on the future of her Getaway Girl persona. She has gone from moonlit strolls along the Seine to an apartment overlooking a dammed, muddy creek, considered to be one of the city's most picturesque features.

#### E. SUBURBAN LIFE IN THE AMERICAN NOVEL

The neighborhood where the Van Dynes live, Mission Hills, Kansas, was part of Nichols' revolutionary suburban vision. Complete with winding streets, trees, shrubbery, parks, and statuary that would help children "develop an appreciation of art" and "learn to abhor ugliness and prize beauty" (Suburban 8), Nichols saw it as the cure for America's chronic homelessness:

Americans from the time the Pilgrims landed have recorded a long history of constant migration. A vast continent has been heroically spanned by hardworking pioneers. Villages were hastily built—thatched roofs—hand-hewn timber—brush-covered sod houses or dugouts in hillsides—meager, hasty places to live, huddled together in protection from Indians and unknown dangers, but always on an advancing frontier...The point I am



driving home—is the fact that the whole early colonization history of America created a practice and acceptance of ‘no planning for permanence’...Here are the assurances we must give future generations: That children can be born, reared, and still live in the neighborhood of their forefathers. That the home, the most precious possession in life—the real heritage of a free people—will have permanent value, and desirable, healthful and inspiring surroundings... (“Planning” 1-2)

Today, Mission Hills remains idyllic and stunningly beautiful, especially in springtime and autumn. For me, it has been a place of wonder and fantasy, a place I have experienced almost exclusively from the backseat of my father’s car as we take “the scenic route” home to the less glamorous and bucolic suburbs of Johnson County after Sunday lunch on the Plaza. It has been a routine we have observed with semi-regularity for most of my life. More Sundays than I can remember have followed this basic itinerary: church, ride down Ward Parkway to the Plaza, lunch on the Plaza, ride home through the twisty, shaded streets of Mission Hills. The sumptuous landscaping, the enormity of the houses and the obvious craftsmanship that went into their construction cannot help but make one think that to live there must be among the most sublime and delightful experiences afforded us poor mortals. At least that is how I have thought of it. In a place so visually appealing, I have wondered, how can anyone have any worries?

Few novelists have shared Nichols’ or my attitude toward the suburbs. In the American novel, the portrayal of the suburbs and those who choose to live in the suburbs has been overwhelmingly negative. The suburbs are a corrupting, oppressive force that gradually erodes a character’s values and moral scruples. In the process, characters are

transformed from noble idealists into crass materialists who lose touch with “what’s really important in life.” Not surprisingly, the suburbs are depicted by American novelists as our present day wasteland. Novels set in the suburbs typically include highly critical descriptions of protagonists’ neighborhoods and homes that emphasize, and often mock, the homogeneity of both. These novels are intent on debunking the notion of the suburb as the ideal place to come home to at the end of the day, the ideal place to raise a family.

Sinclair Lewis offers perhaps the seminal indictment of the suburban milieu in *Babbitt*. Consider this scathing treatment of George Babbitt’s Dutch Colonial home in Floral Heights:

It was a masterpiece among bedrooms, right out of Cheerful Modern Houses for Medium Incomes. Only it had nothing to do with the Babbitts, or with anyone else. If people had ever lived and loved here, read thrillers at midnight and lain in beautiful indolence on a Sunday morning, there were no signs of it. It had the air of being a very good room in a very good hotel. One expected the chambermaid to come in and make it ready for people who would stay but one night, go without looking back and never think of it again. (17-18)

Likewise, in the quintessential suburban novel of the 1950s, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, Sloan Wilson situates Tom and Betsy Rath in a “little house on Greentree Avenue in Westport, Connecticut” (1) that is “too small, ugly, and almost precisely like the houses on all sides of it” (3) and, on the inside, poorly maintained and marred by a question mark-shaped crack in the wall—the result of Tom hurling a vase during an argument with

his wife over money. The Raths' Levittown-like neighborhood is a hot-bed of hard boozing—cocktail parties that last into the wee hours to celebrate husbands' promotions and “prove...Greentree Avenue no more than a stepping stone to the same kind of life on a larger scale” (109).

As suburban development, and novels set in the suburbs, flourished, so did the trend toward negativity and often searing criticism. “Just the adjective ‘suburban’ is often sufficient to communicate derogation, especially in cosmopolitan circles,” says Suzannah Lessard in her lengthy and hardly flattering profile of Oyster Bay, Long Island. “To the intelligentsia,” she asserts, “the word implies philistinism; to idealists, selfishness and compromise; to social snobs, an inferior class” (51). Lessard continues on to say that “[a]ccording to this system of values, only cities and ‘the country’ are authentic places.” *Rabbit Redux*, the sequel to *Rabbit, Run*, finds John Updike's moribund former basketball star at home in Penn Villas, a “ranch-house village of muddy lawns and potholed macadam and sub-code sewers” (*Rabbit* 279), a description that affirms Lessard's point. Updike repeatedly emphasizes the neighborhood's unappealing qualities, particularly the gross, ubiquitous stench from the sewers: “Penn Villas with its vaunted quarter-acre lots and compulsory barbecue chimneys does not tempt its residents outdoors...Here, there is a prairie sadness, a barren sky raked by slender aerials. A sky poisoned by radio waves. A sewer smell from underground” (318).

John Cheever, perhaps the most prolific chronicler of suburban life, levels one of his more scathing condemnations of suburbia in *Bullet Park*. It features the requisite description of the Nailles' cookie-cutter Dutch Colonial where “one could, standing in the hallway, correctly guess the disposition of every stick of furniture and almost every

utility from the double bed in the northeast master's room through the bar in the pantry to the washing machine in the laundry basement" (22). In addition to the relatively bland Nailleses, Bullet Park is home to inveterate cocktail partiers exemplified by the Wickwires, drunks who "were always falling downstairs, bumping into sharp-edged furniture and driving their cars into ditches" (6). The Wickwires inspire the extended rant of "some zealous and vengeful adolescent" (5). It is a blistering excoriation of the residents of suburbia, one the readers are invited to share: "Damn their hypocrisy, damn their cant, damn their credit cards, damn their discounting the wilderness of the spirit, damn their immaculateness, damn their lechery and damn them above all for having leached from life that strength, malodorousness, color and zeal that give it meaning" (5-6). The novel concerns a mentally unstable outsider, the cleverly named Paul Hammer, and his efforts to literally crucify Nailles' son as punishment for the empty and deluded lives the residents of Bullet Park choose to live, and in light of Cheever's relentlessly harsh judgment of Bullet Park, including the ineffectual Eliot Nailles, the reader has little difficulty in seeing Hammer's point of view.

Although Wilson is generally sympathetic toward the plight of Tom Rath, Lewis and Updike also treat their protagonists critically. Lewis treats Babbitt with blatant contempt. He is derided for choosing to sell real estate, and therefore creating nothing of consequence; for being unromantic; and for worshipping modern appliances like his alarm clock. Updike's criticism of Rabbit is more tempered, while still making clear Rabbit's ignorance and racism. Rabbit complains inwardly that "[t]he bus has too many Negroes" (*Rabbit Angstrom* 276). He is portrayed as intellectually lazy just like

the rest of the living dead populating Penn Villas, “whose lives to them are passing cars and the shouts of unseen children” (318).

While I believe all of these to be notable, even superior examples of the novel form and marvel at the writers’ talent for evoking aspects of daily American life in original and surprising detail, I, as a reader, grow weary of the unwritten rule of fiction that demands suburbia be treated as among the most formidable villains in literature. As someone who enjoyed a pleasant suburban upbringing, I have often wondered why this must be the case. Of course, I know the answer to my own question. A soul-deadening suburban setting provides the writer with easy, instant conflict. It creates an attractive psychological struggle for characters who cannot understand how they could have gotten everything they wanted and still remain unsatisfied. They achieve the so-called “good life” only to confront the frightening reality that life was better, and they were better people, before they achieved their dreams of financial success, or excess, as the case may be. (Here is the alienating world Lukács describes.) To remove the stigma from the suburbs would be to obliterate a reliable source of conflict, and stories quickly wither without conflict. In writing *The Getaway Girl*, I wanted to see if it was possible to do the opposite—to set a novel in the suburbs that did not demonize them and did not feature characters inherently defined by and judged harshly because of their suburban-ness.

Kansas City has not figured prominently in American literature, at least not in terms of writers choosing it as the setting for their fiction. It does get a few mentions in Hemingway. In Langston Hughes’ *Not Without Laughter* it is the stereotypical big city, synonymous with danger and amorality. More recently, it is the setting of novels by

Whitney Terrell, such as *The Huntsman*.<sup>1</sup> The most significant novels set in Kansas City, and ones that, in their unique way, continue the anti-suburban tradition in American literature, have to be *Mrs. Bridge* and its companion, *Mr. Bridge*, by Evan S. Connell. *The Getaway Girl* is intentionally a response to *Mrs. Bridge*. I first read it when I was a freshman in high school, after seeing the Merchant Ivory screen adaptation starring Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward as the titular Walter and India Bridge. As much as I liked the movie, I adored the novel as much for its style as its substance. I loved that Connell really mentioned places I recognized, and I loved its structure, those little blocks of titled prose that are “like seeing a succession of matches being struck in the dark, each one illuminating a scene with its brief flair” (Shapiro par. 16). I admired Connell’s meticulous study of a maddeningly proper and paralyzed woman who, despite her varied efforts, cannot assert her independence from either her husband or the culture she lives in. I admired Connell for managing to make India Bridge into a simultaneously funny and tragic character. I wanted to write like that. I still do. But I am glad I did not try to while writing *The Getaway Girl*. I did not want to write a second-rate imitation or a derivative updated version.

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<sup>1</sup> Despite my best efforts, I have never been able to finish *The Huntsman*. I’ve tried numerous times, but get to somewhere around page 50 and can’t force myself to continue. I can’t continue because I can’t accept Terrell’s basic premise that Kansas City is, today, a tragically segregated, racist, backward city that exists in a kind of pre-Civil Rights Movement time warp. (A perception Penguin goes out of its way to promote in its unattributed Introduction and on the back cover of its paperback edition.) Because this characterization is the foundation of *The Huntsman*, there seems to be something off about the verisimilitude of the whole novel. It claims to be contemporary (a *Kansas City Star* headline decrying a blown save by former Royals’ closer Jeff Montgomery places the narrative in the 1990s), yet it feels dated. When objects like answering machines and Egg McMuffins appear, I am surprised, because in terms of action, atmosphere, and theme, I feel like I’m reading a novel set in the first half of the twentieth century. I would argue that the most emotionally charged divisions in Kansas City are not rooted in race but geography. The rivalries, animosities, and stereotypes associated with those who live on the Kansas side of State Line Road versus those on the Missouri side are a part of daily life and profoundly influences the economic and cultural health of the city. The bi-State reality, which is confronted over and over again at the ballot box, makes any meaningful sense of civic unity a challenge.

The best way for me to respond to *Mrs. Bridge* in my own fiction seemed to be to write against it, which proved to be easy, relatively speaking, because in his treatment of the Country Club District, Connell writes from the same place as Sinclair Lewis, Sloan Wilson, John Updike, and John Cheever. However, unlike these other novelists, Connell barely describes the Bridges' home and neighborhood. Based on the Bridges' ideals, their sense of morality, as well as their conduct at home and out in society, the reader can, though, infer a sense of their surroundings. Connell includes no description of the Plaza's layout or design, for example. The reader only learns, in passing, that its buildings are decorated with lights at Christmastime (31) and that given Mrs. Bridge's ability to drive herself there to shop, it cannot be too far from their home. There is no sociological or geographical context given to enhance details such as the fact that Grace and Virgil Barron live in "an enormous colonial home near Meyer Circle" (36), of which there happen to be two, facing each other, along the eastern-most curve of the circle. Although he does not include hardly any concrete physical detail, Connell manages to cast the Country Club District as an oppressive environment that takes its toll on Mrs. Bridge and the unabashedly rebellious Grace Barron. In the text accompanying his 1995 panel exhibit, "Ward Parkway: A Great American Avenue," William S. Worley relies on Connell's novel as evidence that Hugh Ward and J.C. Nichols, in cooperation with landscape architect George Kessler, had succeeded in their efforts "to create a boulevard that would surpass in value all other residential streets in Kansas City" (par. 1) and become its most prestigious address. To make his point, Worley quotes a portion of the following description of Walter Bridge:

The family saw very little of him. It was not unusual for an entire week to pass without any of the children seeing him...Sensing [that they missed him], he would redouble his efforts at the office in order to give them everything they wanted. Consequently they were able to move to a large home just off Ward Parkway several years sooner than they expected and because the house was so large they employed a young colored girl named Harriet to do the cooking and cleaning. (Connell 5)

India Bridge, and Grace Barron too, are victims of their husbands' success. Mrs. Bridge's obsessive need to project the proper image, which living in the Country Club District no doubt exacerbates, compels her, among other things, to enforce the sanctity of guest towels in the bathroom, tear down her son's tower of rubbish in a vacant lot, and never allow herself to be seen wearing pants. Having money to live in such a large home gradually robs her of her self-worth. "Could she explain how the leisure of her life—that exquisite idleness [her husband] had created by giving her everything—was driving her insane?" (202) she wonders. Yet Grace's unhappiness in their genteel pocket of the city is "disturbing" to India because "[s]he belonged in the country-club district, for Virgil was a banker, and yet she seemed dissatisfied there" (35). Mrs. Bridge endures in silence while the bolder Mrs. Barron eventually cracks and commits suicide, a fact that, in one of her many moments of pitiful, yet comical, parenting, Mrs. Bridge tries to keep from her children by telling them Grace was the victim of bad tuna salad.

Because I wanted the Van Dyne family to be a family other characters longed to be a part of rather than escape, I needed to portray Mission Hills, and the Country Club District as a whole, as J.C. Nichols envisioned it (and as I most often see it), grand and



edenic. I could call attention to the idyllic perfection of homes set back from the street and the lush landscaping, the fountains and the sculptures of goddesses and cherubs placed at quiet intersections. In order for *The Getaway Girl* to work, it must be that way. It must be the antithesis of Andy's St. Paul, a grim, slushy, frozen place low on opportunity and hope, a contrast he recognizes when Brook first brings him home to dinner. He is enraptured by the quiet, and he equates quiet with luxury. In his limited experience, the serenity of the Van Dynes' neighborhood is awesome and unprecedented.

Though I certainly did not grow up in the rarified air of Mission Hills, I remember it being rather hip and forward-thinking for some of my high school classmates to look down on the comfortable life nearly all of us had been given by our parents with weary disdain rather than gratitude. I particularly remember sitting in AP Spanish one morning and listening to a classmate, who, like Jill Van Dyne, would go on to die too young from cancer, complaining about how terrible it was that we all had to grow up in the sheltered world of Johnson County, Kansas. Jill, I think, shares some of his feelings, though she probably did not know she had them until her "stupid leukemia" came along. She craves the authentic, and regardless of how picture perfect it is, the Van Dynes' neighborhood is a breathtaking display of manmade beauty. I don't think it is surprising, then, that she would be drawn to the Flint Hills,<sup>2</sup> the antithesis of Mission Hills. Over the centuries,

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<sup>2</sup> On the recommendation of my eighth grade English teacher, I read *PrairyErth*, William Least Heat-Moon's epic history of Chase County, Kansas, the heart of the Flint Hills. (An odd book for a middle school English teacher to suggest, and an even odder book for even the most enterprising eighth grader to actually read.) I would be lying if I said that it had an influence on my inclusion and depiction of the Flint Hills in *The Getaway Girl*. I remember nothing about the experience of reading it except for the fact that it was a very, very long book. I considered consulting it while writing *The Getaway Girl* but did not want Moon's descriptions and impressions mingling with my own. If anything other than my own observations made from a car zipping along I-35 influenced me, it was the unlikely combination of an espn.com article by Ivan Maisel ("Heathman Serves as Unofficial Caretaker of Rockne Site") and the renewing power of fire William Carlos Williams describes in "The Library" section of *Paterson* and "Burning the Christmas

men have been seduced by the simple, awesome beauty of the Flint Hills that seem to stretch to infinity, but the Flint Hills have preserved themselves by rejecting settlers, purging them and forcing them to look elsewhere for land that will allow itself to be inhabited. It is also not surprising that visiting the Flint Hills, is something of a religious experience for Jill, a substitute pilgrimage for the one she does not get to take to Canterbury. It is the physical manifestation of her and Andy's differing views on life, death, and faith. It is where they have to face a troubling, fundamental incompatibility that Andy does not fully process until Chapter 11 when he is riding with the Van Dynes to the Lake. Jill, then, is not just a catalyst used to jumpstart the plot of Andy's decline but a means of amplifying conflict through setting.

In further writing against Connell's novel, I also had to make Frannie and Lew Van Dyne the antithesis of the Bridges. They had to be accessible, affectionate, and accepting. They could not be pretentious, nor could they be enamored with their social standing despite being relatively wealthy and well-connected. After years of marriage, they still had to be in love. In particular, Frannie had to be proactive and exude vitality. Overall, she and Lew had to be good parents. Conversely, Walter and India Bridge are, indeed, terrible parents. His cold rigidity and her smothering adherence to proper decorum drive one daughter away to New York, another to rural southern Kansas and an abusive, unhappy marriage, and a son off to war. By comparison, Frannie and Lew Van Dyne are intended to be the ideal parents that a fatherless young man like Andy would find irresistible. I did not want to make them too good to be true, however, and that, I think is one of the benefits of the chapters told from Jill's point-of-view. Jill challenges

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Greens." I decided to leave *PrairyErth* on the trunk in Lew Van Dyne's den. It is not mentioned by name, but it is the book Jill is thinking of when she asks Andy to get on the highway in Chapter 7.

this positive perception of her mother and father, but their inherent goodness is never compromised because all teenagers turn their parents into caricatures exaggerating their least flattering qualities. She demonizes them (particularly her mother) while Andy romanticizes them, creating another of the underlying conflicts that make their relationship multi-dimensional.

As characters like India Bridge and Grace Barron illustrate, the only thing more unpleasant than the physical trappings of suburbia—its layout, landscaping, and architecture—are the lives of the people unfortunate enough to live there. To be married in suburbia is to be miserable in suburbia. The suburban marriages of literary fiction are either contentious, in some cases to the point of violence, or dull. Whatever shared passions brought the couple together have, by the time the novel begins, long since atrophied. That is, assuming they existed in the first place. Why? Because suburban life is too predictable, too normal, too comfortable. Characters are driven stir crazy. Literature is not the land of happy marriages, and the reason why is obvious. Again, a happy marriage provides little in the way of meaty conflict beyond who will pick the kids up from soccer practice or take out the trash. It is all too quotidian to drive a novel anyone would want to read. As Tolstoy says at the beginning of *Anna Karenina*, “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way” (5). To make suburban marriage and family life “good enough” subjects for literature, authors have driven their characters to the extreme limits of dysfunction and self-absorption so that we end up with the likes of Frank and April Wheeler in Richard Yates’ *Revolutionary Road* or Connell’s Walter and India Bridge. They occupy two ends of the spectrum. In the

former, misery manifests itself in violent physical confrontation, the latter, in well-mannered, agonizing silence.

Marriage in the suburbs has been so vilified, made so grotesque and destructive by so many novelists, that there has scarcely been room for any alternative. In his online video interview with novelist Andrew Klavan, Hoover Institute fellow Peter Robinson playfully needles Klavan because he is “holding up for praise the square, the unhip, the conventional” in so unlikely a place as his thriller novel, *Empire of Lies*. It is a task Klavan embraces, one he sees as important in preserving the health of American society. Because it is so rarely depicted, he goes so far as to say that “putting [a loving marriage set against a suburban backdrop] forward is, in fact, a revolutionary act.” He sees a stark difference between real, lived marriage in the suburbs and literary marriage in the suburbs. The lives of readers do not mirror those of characters they encounter in novels. Novelists are perpetrating a lie, Klavan contends, because, as he says, “you can’t constantly tell us that all marriages are *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* without us coming back and saying, you know, I live in this neighborhood, and see marriages that aren’t like that at all.”

Typically, the hero disenchanted with marriage and life in the suburbs gets up the courage to take charge and act. The hero, alienated in the extreme, can no longer tolerate feeling not only dull but dead, and, so, to feel alive, the hero has an affair. This happens, for example, in *Babbitt*, *Revolutionary Road*, and throughout Updike’s Rabbit novels. Infidelity offers a temporary rush of excitement and danger only available beyond the suffocating living rooms and bedrooms of the suburbs. It is a way to reconnect with the freer, wilder, outside world. *The Getaway Girl* works in reverse. Andy Quinn and Meg

Wilder have been willing participants in a culture that no longer considers casual sex taboo. For them, the world at large has become oppressive and alienating, and they have allowed themselves to become debased. (This is one reason why Andy cannot sleep in the first chapter.) For them, suburbia represent a refuge from moral and sexual chaos because it is the place where Lew and Frannie Van Dyne's marriage has thrived. In Chapter 2, after eschewing a physical encounter with the girl he meets in the bar, Andy Quinn escapes from her hotel room and, literally flees to the suburbs, to the Van Dynes' house, the only place where he feels safe.

#### F. *THE GETAWAY GIRL* AND THE NOVEL OF MANNERS

Although the label evokes stuffy, old-fashioned images of drawing rooms, tea sets, delicate ladies shaded by parasols, and men with cravats around their necks, *The Getaway Girl* qualifies, I think, as a contemporary novel of manners. When the idea was first posed to me, I balked because my mind darted to a picture of a drawing room furnished with handsome Queen Anne chairs. According to James W. Tuttleton, in order for a novel to qualify as a novel of manners there need not be a scene with couples twirling across a parquet ballroom floor or daintily eating a multi-course meal at an endless table. He says, "more often the portrait of manners is put to the service of an ideological argument. The center of the novel of manners, that is, may be an idea or an issue—for example, the idea of social mobility, of class conflict, of professional ambition, of matchmaking, of divorce" (10). This raises the question of whether *The Getaway Girl* presents, through narrative, an ideological argument. I certainly did not set out to write any sort of polemic, and not until I was well into the drafting process did I

become aware of the presence of an argument of the sort Tuttleton identifies. The overall ideological argument of *The Getaway Girl* is a simple, even old-fashioned one:

happiness, fulfillment, and true, sustaining love can most reliably be found in a traditional nuclear family. It is the place where one cultivates a stable identity, self-confidence, and self-worth. And in making that argument, *The Getaway Girl* touches nearly every item on Tuttleton's list. For instance, social mobility, professional ambition, and the perils of matchmaking are all funneled through Andy Quinn.

*The Getaway Girl* embodies John Updike's theory that "the suburban home would replace the city street as the theatre of hopes; private fulfillment and not public justice would set the pace of the pursuit of happiness" ("Edmund Wilson" 201). Consider *The Getaway Girl* alongside a novel of manners with a more overt social consciousness such as William Dean Howells' *A Hazard of New Fortunes* and Updike's distinction becomes clear. Neither the Van Dynes nor Meg nor Andy nor Ferrell are social crusaders in the vein of Conrad Dryfoos or Lindau, Howells' downtrodden socialist. Andy's, Meg's, and Ferrell's actions are not driven by any high-minded concern for the greater good. They are motivated by their desire to heal their individual broken selves and never consider themselves to be representative of larger societal fractures. It is through their more self-centered concerns that the novel confronts a crumbling ideal and asks not only who will be the model for functional, passionate marriage now that Lew Van Dyne has died and Frannie has gone to live by herself in the lakeside Ozark villa, but how capable are Andy, Meg and Ferrell of attaining and sustaining it.

For his novels of manners, Henry James, according to Tuttleton, borrowed from Emile Augier the "intrusion plot" in which the presence of an outsider is "resisted by one

or more persons and accepted by one or more until someone's eyes are opened" (60-61), which usually leads to the elimination of the intruder. In *The Getaway Girl*, there are two such intruders, Andy Quinn and Meg Wilder. Although both were raised in blue-collar households, they are readily accepted into the Van Dyne family and its social circle. The crisis of Jill's illness creates an extreme set of circumstances allowing Andy to be absorbed into the family, while Meg is embraced because she conveniently fills the void left by Jill at a time when her absence is felt all the more because of Andy's return to Kansas City. The Van Dynes make no effort to purge either of them from the family. For Andy and Meg the problem, then, is how to stay in it. Their efforts are futile as the family, with its nucleus in the adored Van Dyne house, disintegrates, a reality Meg does not realize until after Lew's memorial service, after she has come face-to-face with the preserved private world of Jill Van Dyne. There will soon be nothing here for her (or Andy) to cling to: Brook is moving to Memphis, Lew has died unexpectedly, Frannie has decided to move to the villa at the Lake, and Ferrell has ended her relationship with Brook.

The unconventional intrusion plot of *The Getaway Girl* shares more in common with novels like *Brideshead Revisited* or *To the Lighthouse* than more typical examples like James' *The Ambassadors* or *The American*. Andy Quinn is more Charles Ryder than Lambert Strether, more Lily Briscoe than Christopher Newman. Like Charles Ryder, he is the college friend of a son from a notable family who is instantly absorbed into its daily rhythms and lingering, if not escalating, problems. And, like Charles Ryder, Andy embraces assimilation. Neither Charles nor Andy has experienced family life for themselves. As Charles explains to Sebastian Flyte, who is adamant that he shield

Charles from the rest of the Flyte family, “Perhaps I am rather curious about people’s families—you see, it’s not a thing I know about. There is only my father and myself. An aunt kept an eye on me for a time but my father drove her abroad. My mother was killed in the war” (Waugh 39-40). Andy and Charles find contentment and fulfillment in the homes of the Flytes and Van Dynes that seems to surpass that of the family members who actually live there. At Brideshead with Sebastian, Charles believes he has been “given a brief spell of what I had never known, a happy childhood” (45). That joy comes from having found long-sought love. The quest for love is what motivates Charles to accept Sebastian’s invitation to visit Brideshead in the first place: “I was in search of love in those days, and I went full of curiosity” (31). With Jill and her family, Andy finds love that transcends the base routine of one-night stands that pay no emotional dividends.

Virginia Woolf constructs *To the Lighthouse* around a similarly unconventional intrusion plot. While the narrative’s momentum resides in the Ramsay children’s quest to reach the lighthouse, it is also advanced by Lily Briscoe’s desire to fully assimilate into the Ramsay family and their coterie of guests without succumbing to the traditional female roles of wife and mother Mrs. Ramsay insists she accept. She endures Mrs. Ramsay’s repeated attempts to play matchmaker with her and Mr. Bankes because “[s]he was in love with them all, in love with this world” (22). Lily, with her head on Mrs. Ramsay’s knee, wonders: “Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one? For it was not knowledge but unity that she desired...intimacy itself, which is knowledge” (51). In *To the Lighthouse*, this—Lily’s affection for the Ramsays and their world—is the novel’s real love story, not that of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay or the more peripheral one of Paul and Minta. Similarly, for me, the most enduring love story in *The*



*Getaway Girl* is not that of Andy and Jill or Frannie and Lew. It is a familial love story, that of Andy, Meg, and Ferrell falling in love with the Van Dynes.

Unlike the typical intrusion plot, which often concludes with the expulsion of the outsider (for example, Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*), the outsider in these unconventional novels of manners is ironically the last person standing. Once they are at home, in love with a family that reciprocates their love, the family crumbles away piece by piece, person by person, threatening to leave them, as Charles Ryder describes at the end of *Brideshead Revisited*, “homeless, middle-aged, loveless” (350). Just as Andy and Ferrell are left alone in the Van Dynes’ empty living room, Charles—back with his regiment—is figuratively alone at the abandoned Brideshead, and Lily is alone with Mr. Carmichael, marking her old canvas with a single definitive line.

*The Getaway Girl’s* version of the intrusion plot and its portrayal of the family make it an example of a somewhat rare variation on the novel of manners. As Frank W. Shelton rightly points out in his article, “The Family in the Modern American Novel of Manners,” “the American ‘frame of mind’ . . . has been characterized by resistance to the idea of deference to any institution, if it means abdication of individual prerogatives” (34). This includes the institution of the family. The family represents an old, suffocating way of life that the individual must break free from in order to become integrated into the world at large. In the novel of manners this usually takes the form of “the young individual” who “becomes the focal point of the opposing forces of family and outside society.”

*The Getaway Girl* fits squarely in this subcategory of the novel of manners. The Van Dynes are the only true refuge for someone like Andy, who returns to them once he

is fed up with the listless, largely immoral life he has been leading. They offer the chance of rehabilitation to him and to Meg, who is also deeply disillusioned with herself and the way that she has allowed herself to be defined by the magazine she writes for and its readers. Andy and Meg are both weary of their promiscuity, a prime threat to the institution of the family. One reason for Meg's discontent is the fact that, because of her relationship with the man in New Zealand, she has contributed to the potential destruction of a family. And Andy has become exactly the kind of person he disdained when he was with Jill. Not surprisingly, his moral decline begins once he leaves the world of the Van Dynes for Hong Kong, and it is only when he returns that he begins to change.

## G. CONCLUSION

After passing my comprehensive exams in February 2006, I was burned out. I did not ever want to read another book, novel, short story, poem, or play again. The glaring imbalance between the months spent studying and the mere hours spent taking the exam bothered me, depressed me even. It hardly seemed worthwhile. I went almost three years without reading a substantive work of literature, and in that time I did not miss it. Although I did not take such a long sabbatical from writing, I became more staunchly (perhaps childishly) committed to not reading. However, in autumn of 2008, a colleague sent me an Excel spreadsheet of 1001 novels a well-read person should read before dying. The spreadsheet allowed you to check off the titles you had read, and it would calculate, based on age and gender, how many books you would need to read each year in order to complete the list. My colleague had read more than 200 books on the list. I had read about 115. I am just competitive enough that I felt compelled to start reading so that

I could catch up. It was a silly idea, but one that has had an important influence on the process of finishing *The Getaway Girl*.

During the Thanksgiving holiday, I went out and bought Ian Fleming's *Casino Royale*, a book included on the list. It was a slim book, and not an overly serious or academic one. (Who has ever encountered 007 on a graduate seminar syllabus, after all?) I read it in the course of an evening, and when I came to the end, I did not want to stop, so I hunted through my bookshelves looking for books I had bought long ago but never read. I came across my dusty copy of *Atonement*, with poor, doomed James McAvoy on the cover, and started the next day, despite the fact that I had had such a visceral, negative reaction to the movie adaptation that I had privately vowed to never read the book. I started it the next morning and finished it no more than two days later. Overnight I became a binge reader. As soon as I closed one book, I immediately opened another. After *Atonement* came *Revolutionary Road*, *The Forsyte Saga*, *Tess of the D'urbervilles*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day*, *Parade's End*, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *The Quiet American*, *Summer in Baden-Baden*, *Cakes and Ale*, *Appointment in Samarra*, *The 39 Steps*, *North and South*, and *Little Dorrit*. Once I had gotten ready for work each morning, I read from 6:00-6:30 a.m. I read during my lunch break and before going to bed. Eventually, I realized I was reading to write, rather than just reading to read. I developed the habit of needing to read before I could write. It was as if I needed to activate my brain, awaken all the swirling nouns and verbs and adjectives that had gone dormant while I had been eating, sleeping, or working. I found that revising *The Getaway Girl*, specifically burrowing into the mind of Andy Quinn and bringing it to life through words, came easiest when I was reading another

novel with a similar approach to point of view and, to an extent, tone. For this reason, particular novels like *Atonement*, *The Forsyte Saga*, *Revolutionary Road*, *Parade's End*, and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* seemed to spur me on and energize me.

A return to reading was essential if I was going to be able to revise *The Getaway Girl* effectively. Until I began reading again, my days had been dominated by narratives of an entirely different kind—audit reports for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Office of Inspector General. As anyone can guess, a government audit report will never be mistaken for enthralling literature, yet it is a genre all its own rife with formal and stylistic quirks, one of which is a remarkably limited vocabulary, especially when it comes to verbs (occur, establish, obtain, assure, ensure, enact, develop, monitor, improve, oversee, maintain). It is also rooted in certain paragraph structures, sentence structures, and phrases that appear over and over again. (A typical audit report sentence looks something like this: *Until Agency X establishes stronger internal controls, it can have little assurance that ineligible producers will not continue to receive program payments.*) When it came time to get down to the serious business of revising this novel, I felt as if my own vocabulary and ability to craft tight, vivid prose were in danger of being stunted. By not reading, I had done myself a disservice. I had lost touch with the tradition of the novel and with language. According to T.S. Eliot, I had committed the ultimate artistic crime. I, an aspiring artist of the present, had abandoned my responsibility to the works of the past. As Eliot says, "What is to be insisted upon is that the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career" (30). Not surprisingly, the revision process did not gain momentum until I renewed "an apprenticeship to books" (Bell 3)—until I connected

to *The House in Paris*, and became an impassioned reader eager to absorb an array of styles, techniques, and voices.

I think it is important to note that *The Getaway Girl*'s renaissance was not nurtured in a fiction writing workshop. I first experimented with the characters, settings, and themes while writing for workshops, but the first major turning point in the novel's development—the invention of Jill Van Dyne and the chapters told from her point-of-view—took place outside of them, as has nearly every sentence, paragraph, and chapter that comprises the current version. I have been part of some rewarding and enjoyable workshops, but I have decided that writing *The Getaway Girl* away from that environment has been advantageous. It has kept me from being unduly burdened or paralyzed by occasionally conflicting and cacophonous advice from well-meaning peers, who, like me, know just enough about how fiction works to be dangerous. As Madison Smartt Bell says in his even-handed assessment of fiction writing workshops, “Critical analysis is a perfectly safe and acceptable group activity. Creative process, on the other hand, is by nature private and solitary. The writer must maintain psychological privacy to remain capable of imagining the work” (11). I have received no shortage of valuable instruction and advice, but, insofar as *The Getaway Girl* achieves its goal of being an acceptable example of the novel form, it does so in no small part because I had the freedom to think, reason, imagine, and create in a room of my own.

CHAPTER II

THE GETAWAY GIRL

*No place is emptier than the one where someone has been and will not return to.*

-William Least Heat-Moon, *PrairyErth*

## 1. GHETTO

This would be the seventh summer without her. When Jill left, Andy Quinn had been young, exactly seventeen days from his twenty-third birthday. The young were supposed to be resilient. That was the whole point of youth as he understood it, yet something in him was defective and he had not been able to do it. Move on. Get over it. Achieve, to use a word that provoked in him a visceral loathing, *closure*. So, like it had every year, summer was messing with his head, even though it was not even really summer yet. But there were baby leaves on the trees and the dead winter grass had turned a weak shade of green. The girls on campus, some of them still with their Ft. Walton Beach spring break tans, were trotting out their short skirts and flip flops while the boys slouched around in their frayed, baggy shorts. The sun was lingering above the horizon past dinnertime, into the six o'clock news, and the early innings of university baseball games.

He sat up in bed because his skin was sticking to the sheets and to the skin of the girl whose head lay on the pillow beside him. He woke to the hiss of her breath and a raw feeling in the back of his throat. He was hot. Summer could not wait its own damn turn, and asserted itself earlier and earlier each year. For instance, back on the twenty-first of February, the high temperature had been seventy-nine degrees. He knew that because he had made a note of it in his datebook. (The next day three inches of snow fell, but to him that was no consolation.) After two overcast days, for tomorrow, the eleventh of April, the forecast was for a high of eighty-two. The warm air, laden with moisture sucked from the Gulf of Mexico, was already seeping in from Texas and Oklahoma. He went to the bathroom for a drink of water straight from the faucet. Just as he turned out the light, he caught her sleeping reflection in the mirror over the sink, and for an instant, she was not anyone he knew. Her mouth was slightly rounded and slightly open and reminded him of the mouths certain baby dolls have, the ones shaped to drink from a plastic bottle. She was naked except for her jewelry. For some reason she had not taken it off. One of her earrings, like a strand from a beaded curtain, dangled over the corner of her pillow. Her make-up seemed to have gruesomely shifted. It made her look old and washed up. When she had read the news that night on the campus television station, she had worn her hair pulled up, pinned back in a twist, but it was drooping and unwinding itself. It was half up, half down, but still stiff with hairspray. Andy could not make himself get back in bed with her.

The apartment was stuffy. He heard his neighbor's air conditioner kick on. Turning on the air conditioner meant an unqualified surrender to summer and he was not going to do it. He jerked open the window that, for a moment, refused to open, but there



was no breeze at all. The night air was stagnant. It was 3:37 in the morning. Sirens howled. There were always sirens in a college town. From someone else's open window, reggae, Bob Marley singing about one love, sailed out into the street. The sound of it, carefree and effervescent, only confirmed that this was a premature, tropically humid night. In the closet Andy found a dusty fan and plugged it into an outlet by the window. He set the fan on the windowsill. As it oscillated, it rattled the blinds and fluttered the edge of his pillow case that hung over the side of the bed. It rearranged the hair across the girl's forehead.

He sat on the floor beside the bed with his back against the wall and watched her small, unconscious movements. He did not love her, but tonight they had made love in their usual and, for him, only moderately satisfying way: she was adventurous and exhausting while he was efficient to the point of being mechanical. They had recently reunited after one of their occasional and unprovoked cycles of estrangement, which she spent with a Croatian on the tennis team. Andy did not care. In fact, they talked openly of him as if he were a mutual friend they might invite over to dinner one night. "Alec is playing number one singles at Baylor this weekend," she would say, to which he replied with something that sounded erroneously like he cared. Something like, "He better have his first serve percentage up."

The breeze from the fan blowing across her skin woke her. She perched up on her elbows, saw him on the floor, and asked, "What are you doing down there?" She held the sheet to her chest as if there were an inch of her his hands and mouth had not traveled. Though the room was mostly dark, she squinted at him. She always wore too much mascara. From where he sat he could see clumps of it caught between her lashes. At

least she wasn't wearing fake eyelashes. He hated those on her. They made her look like some weird cross between a hooker and Raggedy Ann. "Come back to bed," she said.

"In a minute," he said.

She pulled the sheet and the thin quilt that served as a bedspread up to her chin and lay down. Minutes passed. He thought she was asleep, but then she leaned up on her elbows again. "Did you watch me tonight?" she asked. Her hair was thick and black, and he wished she would let it down. It would tumble past her shoulders and settle over her breasts and she would be like a mermaid. If anything could, that would get him back into bed.

"I was busy." He never watched her. On television she exuded a tiresome fake warmth that killed his desire, which was inconstant to begin with.

"The teleprompters messed up. Like an idiot, Steve froze, so I had to ad-lib for a minute and a half. It was incredible. I knew exactly what to say. I should put that on my audition tapes, shouldn't I?"

He found her ambition noxious precisely because it reminded him of himself at her age. There was a ruthless practicality to everything she did, as if she had calculated a specific, quantifiable benefit from every person she was seen with and every place she went and every word she spoke. Had she known it would expose her co-anchor, leaving her to save the broadcast, she would have sabotaged the teleprompter herself. Who's to say that she hadn't?

"This morning, that man was there again outside the coffee shop, harassing me, asking me for money," she said, still put out by the encounter.

"Did you give him any?"

“Of course not.” Whoever he was, he was one of the transients who lived in camps down by the banks of the Kaw. She would not give him the spare change from her wallet. She was offended by his poverty, but she intended to approach him to see if he would agree to an interview with her. “He’s disgusting. I don’t think he’s showered for weeks.”

She had not asked Andy about his day, and he did not volunteer any details about it either, so she fell asleep not knowing that he had quit his job today; that he was going back to Kansas City, that melancholy shell of a place, to move in with Jill’s brother, his roommate when they lived in a room overlooking Emery Road in the Kappa Sigma house; that Jill’s father, with all of his connections, was arranging a job for him at a financial planning firm on the Country Club Plaza; that Alec, of all people, was coming by with his doubles partner from Malaga to haul away his leather recliner; that his two working lamps and television had been eagerly claimed by the guys across the hall; that everything from his plastic chest of drawers had been stuffed into a suitcase; that his suits were carefully zippered inside a garment bag; that he had been planning this for the last two weeks; that he had no intention of leaving her so much as a note explaining any of it; that yesterday he had invited the transient into the coffee shop and bought them each a steaming crock of vegetable soup, a turkey sandwich on wheat and a brownie; that they ate together at a square table and talked easily of baseball and Buddhism for more than an hour; or that he had loved a freckled, flax-haired girl named Jill who died of leukemia on a blazing late-June day. Those weren’t the kinds of things they told each other. There weren’t many things they told each other.

He was going back to Kansas City because he did not have enough money in the bank to pay next month's rent, even rent for a rat hole place like his, and write the usual check to his lawyer. For most of the last seven years, though, he had been cash flush. Beginning in the second summer without her, he made several hundred thousand dollars day trading with both his own and other people's money. He had moved to Tallahassee because it was a place he and Jill never desired to live or visit, and because the stockbroker uncle of one of his frat brothers offered to hire him. His biggest clients were retired Air Force officers who had spent their careers at the base in Pensacola. They were mavericks in their winter, and because they still craved a taste of danger and the flood of adrenaline through their veins, they were happy to let him use their money to play the markets his way. They approved of him because he was a cocky, smart-mouthed, uncompromising, emotionless young bastard. His strategy was simple, just basic contrarian investing, the tried and true Warren Buffet way. Not that Warren Buffet was a particular hero of his. He wasn't. He found him to be somewhat insufferable, almost a parody of himself.

Andy spent the money capriciously. He bought the thing he wanted most: a house with many bedrooms, big closets, and high ceilings. He filled the master bedroom's closet with a wardrobe of tailored suits, silk ties, and Italian shoes. He bought a low-slung two-door black Mercedes with leather interior and a sound system that, when he jacked up the volume as high as it would go, hurt his ear drums. He bought giant televisions for three different rooms, a motorcycle, and, so he could spend his weekends playing courses that showed up in *Golf Digest's* Top 100 every year, memberships to not one, but two country clubs. What was left, he invested unwisely. The mixed use

office/retail/residential development in the panhandle he poured money into fell apart. Its already tenuous future was decided by a hurricane that made landfall as a Category 3, and leveled the fledgling structures. He panicked. Instead of sticking with his instincts, he started playing the news by trying to parse every *Wall Street Journal* article for clues as to what a particular hiring, firing, or management restructuring meant for a company. None of his analysis panned out. He bought when he should have sold, sold when he should have bought, and executed a flurry of trades when he should have stood pat. The more he lost, the more he risked. In a depressed real estate market, he sold the house at a loss. He got rid of the motorcycle and the televisions and went back to playing muni courses at the discount twilight rates, and drove a dependable early nineties model Volvo sedan with an odometer that had long since rolled past one hundred thousand miles. For a change of scenery, he moved to Manchester, New Hampshire. (He chose it by closing his eyes and stabbing his finger at the full map of the United States in the footprinted Rand McNally road atlas that lived under one of the Volvo's floor mats.) In Manchester, he went back to what he knew about how the market worked and made double what he had the first time.

Then, the lawsuits came. In the last three years clients had sued him twice, alleging both times he had not told them his firm's research analyst was about to devalue their stocks. In the months between the resolution of the first suit and the filing of the second, he moved again, this time to San Francisco. As with the first suit, the mediation hearing for the second was disastrous, but it too was settled before arbitration. The legal fees wiped him out and the lawsuits left him virtually unemployable. For awhile, Jill's father sent him weekly checks—a glorified allowance written on an account that did not

have her mother's name on it. It was his own little stash set aside for the African safari and other adventures he dreamed of taking. Her father had also paid half of the billable hours for the lawyer who represented him in the second lawsuit. Luckily for him, the Bay Area's heaviest hitter when it came to securities and investment fraud was the brother of one of Jill's father's golfing buddies.

On his ever-shrinking budget he could not afford to stay in San Francisco, but there was no place for him to go. He had no interest in returning to the Twin Cities, where he had been raised. Gilded memories of college life brought him back to Lawrence. For eighteen months now he had sat in a low-walled cube in the snug storefront space occupied by the TD Waterhouse office on Mass. Street downtown. A lead-footed guy he played rec league basketball against junior year was his boss. He remembered Andy and his semi-deadly mid-range jump shot from the right wing, and hired him. The office was situated between one of the half dozen stores on Mass. selling university t-shirts and authentic basketball jerseys, and a smoothie shop. All day, every day, the sound of an industrial blender grinding ice chips came through the wall. In Lawrence, there were students who had no money and no concept of the future beyond who they would hook up with on Friday night. There was the poor salt-of-the-earth working class. There was the sizable contingent of sixties dead-enders who detested a strong market economy and wished the town could exist as a utopian enclave steeped in socialism. There was a small aristocracy made up of car dealership owners, bankers, lawyers, doctors, and university administrators who were ensconced in the stately homes crowding the fairways of the country club. Most of them had someone in Kansas City to discreetly manage their portfolios. That left a limited pool of upper-middle class folks

with the money and inclination to invest. The ones he met with tended to be wedded to the old reliables like Coca-Cola, General Electric, etc. Carrying out their two or three judicious transactions a year left him bored and resentful.

He got up from the apartment floor to feel the full cooling blast of the fan. His legs were stiff and there was pain low in his spine, and when he moved a certain way he felt a faraway sting to the right of his abdomen caused by the girl in bed recklessly throwing her weight against him once she had cast aside her clothes. He stood at the window directly in front of the fan. Last call at the dive bar on the corner across the street had come and gone. It was a low stuccoed box with a ramshackle plywood deck tacked on to its side. From three stories up, he could see piles of cigarette butts that had been tossed carelessly over its side. Sometimes, while she was prepping for the newscast, he went there to sit on a secluded stool at the end of the bar and drink whatever was on special. In the light of the few naked bulbs suspended from the ceiling, he appeared no older than the college boys who crowded in for quarter pitchers on Wednesdays. The only difference was that he, for the most part, could hold his liquor. They, for the most part, could not. Every so often a girl would break free from the tight, tittering clot of her friends to approach him. The fact that he was alone and the only male in the place not hungrily cataloging their movements attracted them. The ones who were oversexed and overconfident—the ones who touched his arm or his leg immediately—did not interest him, but he was friendly and, on occasion, talkative with the ones he took a superficial liking to. They played pool or listened to the sad, monotone ramblings of whatever band that had yet to abandon its grunge sensibilities was playing in the dark, far corner of the room.

A panoramic view of Tennessee and Kentucky Streets, the heart of the student ghetto, stretched across the length of the wide bedroom window. His was a plain building with no redeeming architectural features. It was out of place among the once venerable Victorians lining Tennessee Street, which ran along the base of Mt. Oread. Except for a few that were lovingly refurbished, the houses had been divided into mean little apartments and allowed to slide into disrepair. They were houses that had endured much hard drinking, hard partying, and, in general, hard living—things like accidental overdoses and unreported date rapes. Their yards were dirt, except for an anomalous patch of weeds here and there. The screen doors were hanging off their hinges. The paint was faded or peeled away. The wraparound porches were rotting. Spindles in the railings were either missing or broken. Around the corner was the house that had the symbol for anarchy painted in black across its second story. Shoes tied together by their laces hung over the power line spanning the street.

Like extras in a play who had missed their cues, a boy and girl shambled into the scene framed by the window. He was not sure where they had come from. The heels of the girl's boots clicked erratically on the sidewalk. Their talk was gibberish to him, but to them it was uproariously amusing. One tried to out-laugh the other. The laughter devolved into a fight, and the fight made for an efficient segue into lust. Kissing and pawing, they staggered into the side of a car. He hoisted her onto the trunk of a dented Toyota and plied her out of her jacket. His fingers curled about her throat as if he was prepared to choke her. Her skirt had gotten pushed up. The whole of her white, gleaming thigh was exposed. The boy got hold of it and pulled her closer. She was a pretty, anonymous suburban good girl. The campus was overrun with them: ones from



Kansas City, St. Louis, Chicago, Dallas, and Denver. (The girl in his bed was one of them.) Andy recognized the boy. He came and went from the grimy robin's egg blue Victorian down the street. Andy had never figured out whether he lived there or not. All he knew was that his shirts were always tight around his biceps, and there was something liquid about him that made all of his movements sleek and suspicious. He seemed to actively cultivate the mannerisms of a criminal. Andy turned from the window and flattened himself against the wall. Despite the fan blowing across his torso, he was sweating beneath his arms. The girl in his bed lay on her side. He stared at her back, smooth except for the rolling ridges of her spine. There was not a blemish on it, not a single brown mole or pink birthmark. All of a sudden he wanted her badly. He felt a corrupt, terrible kinship with the boy.

*ii*

As a couple, Brook, Jill's older brother, and Ferrell, her sole confidant since kindergarten, would never make any sense to Andy. And it wasn't as if their relationship was some new development he just needed more time to process. Unmoored and dumbed by the trauma of her death, they came lurching together the autumn when everyone was still mourning her. Andy kept waiting for Brook to have what he believed to be the inevitable *this-is-Ferrell-Nash-I'm sleeping with* realization, and end it with her, but so far it had not happened. After this long, Andy now believed it never would. Frankly, he did not know how Brook could put up with her. He had to remind himself, though, that Brook and Ferrell were not predisposed to dysfunction the way he and Ferrell were. The dysfunction was entirely of Ferrell's creation, but he had been sucked in by her vehemence and unflinching contempt. Finding the cleverest, most scalding

insult with which to neutralize her was, for a time, a pleasure Andy savored, and more often than not, Brook had been his willing co-conspirator.

Brook said to meet them for dinner at 5:30 at a restaurant on the Plaza they had eaten at many times before. Andy was early and maneuvered his car into a tight spot near the frosted Art Deco glass doors of Tiffany & Co. He could have found any number of spots closer to the restaurant, but he wanted to walk, to think, to prepare. Despite living only half an hour away, he had not seen them since he returned to Lawrence, and that was by design. His failures had made him self-conscious, especially around Brook, who had never had to struggle to achieve or hold on to anything, and Ferrell, who he assumed would experience a delicious swell of *schadenfreude* at the news of any setback he suffered, no matter how minor.

The only hope he had of projecting the slightest semblance of respectability and upward mobility was to armor himself in a shirt stiff with heavy starch and one of his tailored suits that, while well-maintained, were showing signs of wear if one knew the right places to look. The knot of his tie had shifted off center, though. He could tell because when he lowered his chin it did not squarely settle against the bulge of silk. The whole thing felt off—the size of the knot, the place where the tie's pointed tip rested against his shirt. In all likelihood none of it was any different than it was every other day he dressed for work, but the moment of appearing before Brook and Ferrell, humbled and in need of charity, had heightened his senses and made him paranoid. He needed to start over, retie the thing, but could not do it in the car. If he was going to do it, he needed a decent mirror, one much larger than the car's rearview mirror, so he got out and jogged

across Central Street into Hall's department store. He navigated the maze of perfume counters and dashed down the steps to the basement level.

The men's lounge room was empty when he pushed through the door. It smelled of musk and the piney air freshener that discharged automatically from the smoke detector-like device high up on the wall. Was he paler than usual? Looking at himself in the wall-length mirror above the row of sinks, he thought he was. There did not seem to be any blood in his face, yet his skin, when he touched it with the back of his hand, was warm. Maybe it was just the effect of the fluorescent lights that shone through yellowed panels of plastic. Maybe it was because he was hungry but incapable of eating. He had skipped breakfast and lunch to concentrate on cramming everything he was bringing with him into the backseat of the slate blue Volvo and depositing what he did not want or need at Goodwill and the foreboding barred pawn shop on the way out of town. Part of the problem was the hatchet job he'd done on his face shaving this morning. He had a cut beneath his nose, one to the left of his chin and a longer one parallel to it close to his mouth that, if he smiled wide enough, made him look like a deranged clown. (If there was anything he was going to miss about Lawrence, it was the barber shop on Mass. St. where, every Saturday afternoon, he got a close, old fashioned shave with meringue-like cream dabbed onto his face with a brush.)

On most other days, he believed himself to be slightly better looking than the average man his age. He had the angular features of the actors hired to slather aftershave on their faces in Old Spice commercials. What helped was that he had supposedly been blessed with good cheekbones. He had never known that until a girl from his college photography class told him so. She fancied herself a sculptor, and one day before the

professor brusquely entered the room, she asked if he would be her model for a bust she needed to complete before the end of the semester. He had laughed, which he immediately realized was the worst possible response. Why, on a campus crawling with thousands of people, would she choose him? For his cheekbones, she told him. And, so, he spent a Saturday morning sitting on a stool in Marvin Hall while she molded a block of clay into his likeness, and came near from time to time, to feel his nose and cheekbones and chin with her fingertips. The bust didn't turn out that bad. He really could recognize himself in it, which, he believed, made it better than those of the hall-of-famers enshrined in Canton.

Before he could fix his tie, he had to take off his jacket to achieve a full range of movement. The tie was made of sleek, sapphire blue silk. Wrenching its knot loose, he started from scratch. The silk was crimped in those spots where the knot he fashioned this morning had been pulled tight. With deft flicking movements—around, behind, over, under, through—he completed a half-Windsor, then flipped down his shirt's tennis collar. There. The dimple, that little indented notch below the knot, was as it should be: centered and symmetrical. He slid back into his jacket and left the lounge as empty as he found it. Climbing up the stairs, he noticed the place felt nothing like it did in mid-December, when everyone was sharing in some sort of transcendent, spiritual consumerism. He did not know how to describe it. He remembered it as a narcotic of good cheer and glad tidings and cash changing hands. Today, there was no row of artificial pines wrapped in white lights along the broad aisle connecting women's accessories and men's apparel. There was no pyramid of poinsettias reaching toward the ceiling. There was only the smell of the roasted nuts sold year round at the confectioner's

counter. The women in the store were browsing just to be browsing. They might buy a pair of new pants for the husband whose waistline had expanded during the winter, or maybe a new bottle of perfume. But chances were they probably would not buy anything.

No one had bothered to turn on the player grand piano by the escalator. Perhaps it only knew how to play Christmas carols. Andy sat on its bench with his back to the keys and, for a long time, watched the shoppers come and go. In the forward-thinking world of retail, summer was in full swing. (Free Estée Lauder beach tote with purchase of any 8 oz. or larger fragrance!) A clerk carrying a leaning tower of men's khaki, no-iron shorts from a stock room smiled sympathetically at him. She mistook him for a beleaguered husband dragged out on a mid-week shopping escapade who had been made to wait here while his wife tried on an armload of spring dresses in the fitting room. She came scurrying back his way, this time empty-handed, but returned a minute later balancing another tower of shorts in olive green. She stopped to add her two cents to an ongoing discussion between two other clerks gazing quizzically up at a quartet of white-skinned mannequins that stood on a rectangular carpeted pedestal. A cardboard cutout sun and seagulls dangled from the fishing line attached to the ceiling tile above their heads. The clerks were displeased with the way the mannequins' clothes hung on their fiberglass bodies, as well as their positioning on the pedestal. One of the clerks stepped up onto the pedestal and pinched back the fabric at the sides of one of the mannequin's printed skirt. Their voices did not carry to where Andy sat but the other two nodded, and one gave a thumbs up. She did the same with the other three mannequins and then began the more precarious task of repositioning them on the pedestal. It was the same back and forth

pantomime that played out anytime someone, with the guiding eye of an observer, tried to hang a picture. The clerks on the floor motioned to the left and back to the right. There was one moment of near disaster when the clerk on the pedestal almost knocked one mannequin into another, causing them to topple over like dominos.

Watching them, Andy wondered why, in this age of endless technological advancement, could no one figure out how to make a mannequin that, in certain basic ways, resembled the figure of an actual woman? Like every mannequin he had ever seen, these had limp, synthetic hair in unnatural shades and outdated styles; fingers that were too thin and too long; protruding eyes that made them look like a pack of narcoleptics ready to pass out; garish, permanent rouge; and all the curves of an adolescent boy. They were hideous, diseased looking, and they forced him to get up from the piano bench and leave the store.

As he came out of Halls, he sneered derisively at a car with a roof dimpled by hailstones, a rusting scar along the backseat door on the driver's side, and shopping bags and plastic crates packed tight to the ceiling. It was his car, the Volvo, and his sunglasses were on the dashboard. He wanted them to temper the glare in the western sky as he walked to the restaurant. He had the key in his hand, ready to unlock the door, but as he approached, he heard two sets of pumps hammering the sidewalk. Behind him were two women in similar gray business suits who were reacquainting themselves with the outside world after a day spent cooped up in their offices. They each sipped a limeade from Topsy's and traded gossip they had absorbed since lunch. Advancing toward him was a man in a white oxford shirt and a sweater vest embroidered with the logo of a golf resort in Hawaii on the breast. He had his cell phone melded to his ear. Sandwiched between

the two women and the man on his phone, Andy veered away from the curb. As if to say to the man, who was not paying attention to him or anyone else passing by, “I wonder what down-and-out asshole is stuck with that?” he shifted his eyes in the direction of the loaded down Volvo and continued on past Tiffany’s, the extravagant diamonds shining frigidly in the window displays.

He took a long, circuitous path through the Plaza from Halls to the restaurant and saw that Saks was no longer at the corner of Nichols and Pennsylvania. (He recalled a corporate restructuring and the closing of stores in certain strategically chosen markets.) The building did not even look the same. Its façade, which had been dull red brick, now fit the Seville-inspired architecture of the Plaza’s other buildings. One of the new tenants was a Burberry boutique. In its window were two dressforms wearing trademark Burberry plaid trench coats. He paused, stared at them as if trying to decide whether or not he knew them, and then walked on.

*iii*

A man with his head shaved and small square-framed glasses pointed at Andy through the windows fronting the restaurant’s bar. Andy hardly recognized Brook Van Dyne without his thatch of chronically uncombed hair. His red polo had a deep diagonal crease across its front as if it had been hastily shoved into his locker at the hospital. The shirt was untucked. With it he wore a beat up pair of chinos and Nikes. They shook hands and drifted in the direction of the bar. During the time Andy had been away they only talked on the phone during halftimes of critical Kansas basketball games. They resorted to that routine, though Andy could not name all the players on this season’s roster. What else did they talk about? In college they talked all the time. They must

have had something in common other than basketball and a room in a fraternity house. While they each drank a beer, Brook offered his postmortem of the tournament game that had ended their season, and Andy awaited Ferrell. The moment of first seeing her made him anxious because Ferrell, to him, was half Jill.

Just before she came into the restaurant, he saw her stop short of the doors to paint a fresh coat of lip gloss across her smile. She used the line of windows stretched beyond one of the doors as her mirror. She froze a busboy stacking empty water glasses. Andy had been anticipating Ferrell Nash the college girl, not the woman in black who appeared confident, elegant, and subdued. He did not mean to stare, yet there was the most curious thing about her. Where her hair parted at the side, a long and unmistakable section of prematurely gray hair, like a silver-white ribbon, framed her forehead and half of her face. He thought it attractive. She must have felt the same; otherwise, she would have had it dyed away by her stylist long ago.

Brook raised his beer bottle to get her attention. For an instant a swarm of people wanting to add their names to the hostess's waiting list swallowed her up. Andy reached for his tie and checked to see that the indented notch below the knot was still perfectly centered.

"I picked your pants up at the cleaners," Ferrell said to Brook as she strode toward them.

"Did they get it out?" Brook asked.

"I looked them over and didn't see anything. Your shirts should be done Tuesday. And here *you* are," she said, acknowledging Andy. She tweaked the knot of his tie and squeezed his elbow when he said hello. He gave her the kind of chaste and



formal kiss on the cheek he suspected middle aged men of practicing on their sisters-in-law and certain women at their high school reunions. He wished she and Brook would have continued their domestic chatter, so he could listen for a clue as to how they came to be like this. They acted like they were ready to celebrate their one thousandth wedding anniversary.

Led by the hostess, the three of them snaked between the row of booths to a round table illuminated by the flickering flames of two gas lamps mounted on the wall. “Meg was disappointed we weren’t going to be able to go along to the Crossroads tonight. She wanted to meet you finally,” Ferrell said to Brook. “She’s starting to think I made you up.”

“Who’s Meg?” Andy asked.

“A friend of mine. She’s a writer for a magazine. *Round Trip*. You’ve heard of it, haven’t you?”

He had heard of *Round Trip* only in the context of its publisher, Equinox, he said. Equinox was a mess. Its stock was trading at something like two dollars a share, maybe less. It had brought in a young “hip” punk to run things and already shuttered three of its magazines that had suffered steeply declining ad revenues for the last four quarters.

*Round Trip* was, by all accounts, the next to go, unless, in the interim, the company was acquired by a large media conglomerate. From what little Andy knew, that was unlikely.

Ferrell, with the subtle narrowing of her eyes, made it clear she was not interested in his unwelcome dose of reality. She continued blithely on: “Well, you know how the thing about *Round Trip* is that the centerpiece of every issue are these stories by the Getaway Girl? The Getaway Girl, that’s who Meg is. And she’s here in Kansas City

until sometime in July.” Ferrell found this very exciting. Brook did not, and Andy did not care one way or the other about a writer for a magazine about to tank, even if she was now, inexplicably, a friend of Ferrell’s. She said no more about it, and from then on, the dinner conversation was uneven. It stalled when the waitress edged in to present salads on chilled plates, again when she retrieved them, and later when she refilled their water glasses from a silver pitcher. Each time, Ferrell made a game effort at restarting the conversation. “Oh,” she said again to Brook in particular, “next Thursday is the first night of *Look Homeward, Angel*. Blake from my third period A.P. is the lead.” Ferrell as a history teacher was still a surreal thought to Andy, but there was something appropriate about her endlessly reliving high school. That she taught at a tony private school, the scattering of aloof brick buildings on a sort of acropolis overlooking the parallel curves of Ward Parkway and Brush Creek where she, Jill, and Brook all graduated, was more appropriate still.

For Andy’s benefit, Ferrell added, “You should see this boy. He is destined for Julliard, for Broadway.” Everything she offered up was just this kind of oddment. The topic was going nowhere. Again, she culled through all the marginalia of her day, straining to locate something of interest. “I saw Marsha in the lounge after school, so I finally told her that I’m convinced Abby Dillon is bulimic and that she has really started to scare me with the way her uniform just hangs on her. Her hip bones are barely enough to hold up her skirt. It’s frightening because she’s such a beautiful girl. You’ve seen her.”

“Where have I seen her?” Brook questioned.

“You know. Abby Dillon. The lacrosse goalie. She played so well against St. Theresa’s. You were there.”

Brook was, at best, half-involved in the conversation. Clearly, he could not pick the Abby Dillon girl out of a lacrosse team line-up if she were wearing her goalie paraphernalia. When their dinner came, Ferrell wrenched the conversation in a new direction. Her mother had recently met a real estate developer from Hawaii, married him twelve days later, and moved to Kauai. Brook did not want to get into that. Ferrell’s relationship with her mother was the passive-aggressive train wreck it always had been, and he did not want her to work herself into a fit that would ruin the evening. She relented and, once more, none of them had anything to say. They avoided the most natural topic. No one brought up Jill. Except for the day of Brook’s graduation from medical school, which Andy had flown in from Tallahassee to attend, this was the first time the three of them had been together since her funeral. Andy wished one of them would just be bold enough to say, “Remember when Jill...” That was all it would take. Something small and funny. Andy wanted to laugh with them. They could all probably use a good cathartic dose of nostalgia, but he could not make himself be the one to start.

During the unsettling stretch of silence, Brook checked his phone. “I need to go call in,” he said. He dropped his napkin on his chair and headed toward the bar. When Brook left the table, Ferrell asked a passing waitress to bring a box for his food. “By the time two or three o’clock rolls around,” she explained, “he’ll be ready to eat.” She smiled wanly for Andy to let him know that this was normal and that she had taught herself how to sleep through the sound of the microwave beeping in the smallest hours of the morning. As Ferrell arranged his half-eaten salmon in the container and tipped the

plate to scrape clean the untouched mound of creamed spinach, Andy watched Brook standing at the end of the bar, crouching over it, cell phone to his ear. He twirled a coaster in circles with his index finger until he lost control of it and it spun off the bar, dropping between his shoes. The bartender handed him a pen, and Brook used it to write on a cocktail napkin.

Maybe, now that they were alone, they could speak of Jill. Andy could not explain why it made a difference, but at the end, in the ultimate moment, he and Ferrell had been cast out. It had only been Brook who Jill wanted with her in her room, and for that reason Andy could not say what he wanted to with him at the table. He was not sure what it was he even wanted to say about her to Ferrell. “Have you come to terms with the whole shaved head look he’s got going?” Andy asked instead, aware that he had completely lost his nerve.

“It’s not so bad. I no longer wake up in the night and think I’m sleeping next to a bowling ball.” She reached for her wine glass, and Andy saw her hand, how the sides of it and the tips of her fingers were streaked with red ink from the marker she used to grade quizzes and worksheets. “He’s about to lose a patient. A boy, I think. He has a routine. While he’s waiting, he gets very clingy. You notice how he’s hardly let go of me since I got here? It’s when we tend to have our best se—” She stopped herself, swirled the dregs of her wine around the bottom of the glass, then gulped them down. “After it happens, though, he doesn’t want to be near me. I’ll go two, three days without seeing him. The whole confrontation with death screws with him every time. Every time.” She turned unnaturally cheerful and said, “*Your* hair is quite short.”

He ran a hand over it. “For me, I suppose.”

“I guess it is weird being back.”

Andy took this as a poorly coded message: *It is weird having you back.* “Very,” he said.

Trying to be innocent, she asked, “So you’re alone, then?”

“As opposed to what?” The sharpness she had the unique ability to bring out in his voice was back.

She kept the eye-fluttering innocence going a little longer, as if between the two of them this was not a radioactive topic. “I don’t know. I thought there might be someone.”

“There isn’t.”

“I was curious, that’s all.”

“Fine.” But then he could not let it go: “And what if there was?”

“I don’t know.” She tucked the white streak of hair behind her ear and leaned forward in her chair. “Brook says you have no money. Is that true?” Waiting for his answer, she traced the rim of her wine glass with her finger.

He smirked at her. “It saddens me to inform you that it is indeed true.”

“You don’t have to make a joke of it.” She sat back and crossed her arms.

“Believe me, I have to make a joke of it. Nothing sharpens your eye and ear for comedy like financial insolvency—massive, crippling debt.”

“Well, you look awful,” Ferrell said. She wickedly added, “A good cold cream would help with the bags under your eyes. And you bought that suit before you left for Hong Kong. Am I right?”

The two of them were so good at this. With no effort they had revived their old, bitter game, and it felt good. The last time they had played it with such zeal was at Jill's funeral. They made an awful scene there. Everyone saw it. Leaving the church he had held the car door open for her. It seemed the gentlemanly and kind thing to do since she was the one brave enough to get up and speak from behind the pulpit. She had not embarrassed herself either, though he thought her stories too light and inconsequential and too narrow in scope. Rather than cry, she had giggled and that gave the service a junior high slumber party quality he did not appreciate. It might not have been so bad had it not been in such jarring contrast to the other scripture-heavy portions of the service (Nearly all of the scripture had come from the book of Romans, which he knew to be Jill's favorite. Under the direction of her older cousin, they had been made to stand and recite chapter 12, verse 2.) and the soaring duet sung by two young women who were strangers to him but known to most everyone else in the sanctuary.

Nevertheless, he had wanted to treat her with a degree of compassion, so he had opened the car door for her, which set her off for no good reason and he, sleepless and guilt-ravaged, shouted back. Once and for all he was ready to take her apart, not with words, but his hands. They shoved at one another until Brook separated them. Strangely, it had calmed Andy. It got him through the ride to the cemetery, the mausoleum interment, and the minister's final monotone prayer that echoed in the vault. During that prayer, he had not bowed his head nor closed his eyes. Neither had she. They watched each other seethe and riddled each other with vengeful I-will-never-forgive-you glares.

Ferrell took a compact from the purse that sat on the empty chair beside her and held it close to her nose, then at arm's length. There was nothing about her that needed

fixing or touching up. She was going through this most feminine of rituals to draw attention to her face and say to him, “See how incredible *I* look? I know you’ve noticed, and you know you have *always* noticed.” With her finger she brushed a crumb away from the corner of her mouth. She had made her point.

Ever the monolith, Brook was back, towering over them. In his absence, they were supposed to have been wise and weary adults speaking to each other as friends with common wounds, but they wasted the chance on their clipped, combative nonsense. Before he sat down, Brook kissed the crown of Ferrell’s head. She responded by patting his forearm. These gestures were both real, both tender, and to Andy, both charming in the saddest way. The more he studied them together, the more he noticed a bittersweet complacency between them. Theirs was a love that was exhausted but endured anyway. He was embarrassed by them and, as an excuse to look away, he trimmed a band of fat from what remained of his steak. Brook swooped up his napkin and sat back down in his chair. Andy feared he would have to leave immediately for the hospital. He did not want to be alone with Ferrell any longer than he already had been.

“I was just telling Andy that I’m out of practice,” Ferrell lied. “I said he needs to give me a week or two, and I’ll be back to being the perfect bitch I always am when he’s around.”

*iv*

Brook lived in a spacious two-bedroom apartment in the coolly elegant Iberia, one of three identical high-rises sprouting from the side of the hill that led away from the Plaza and up to Loose Park. Brook dryly referred to them as the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria. The spare bedroom was simply but handsomely furnished. (Andy sensed

Ferrell's influence as well as that of Frannie, Brook's mother.) The bedspread and matching drapes were a rich, masculine burgundy. The patterned decorative pillows on the bed appeared vaguely Southwestern, and the two framed prints on the wall were of Indian cave dwellings. At the foot of the bed was a bench with a flat cushion upholstered in dark leather that matched the headboard. A modest-sized television sat on an easy-turning swivel atop the three-drawer bureau. The bookcase to the side of the window housed the overflow of books that did not fit in the several other cases arranged one beside the other in the living room. Judging by their titles, the books were an odd mixture of medical texts, spy novels, and thick biographies. All in all, it felt very much like a room in a nice boutique hotel a savvy traveler would find off the square in Santa Fe.

Andy had set up Brook's ironing board in the center of the room. He meticulously pressed the triple peaks of the folded, white pocket square he planned to wear tomorrow. Brook and Jill's father, Lew, had set up a breakfast meeting for him and Andy with his friend, Art Driscoll. He owned Driscoll and Associates, which occupied the top floor of the bank building at the opposite corner of the Plaza. It was an informal interview, Lew said. In reality, it was not an interview at all. Art Driscoll had given into Lew Van Dyne's persistent cajoling and agreed to give him a job, only nobody was admitting it just yet. Nevertheless, Andy wanted to make a commanding impression, and a well-folded, carefully pressed pocket square demonstrated that little extra attention to detail. It showed that he thought of everything and would help prove that, in other circumstances, Art Driscoll would have hired him based on his resume rather than Lew



Van Dyne's tactful arm-twisting. Andy hoped it would also distract Driscoll from his shabby suit, which had not seemed so obviously past its prime until Ferrell said so.

Ironing the handkerchief was therapeutic. He liked the iron's heavy exhaling sound as it sighed clouds of steam. He had the news on while he worked. The anchor had been on this station back since he was in college. He believed in the frown on her face and the catch in her perfectly paced voice as she finished reporting on the fifty malnourished dogs discovered on a farm near Grain Valley. It was not the first stages of some cry-on-command trick she learned in high school drama class. If a part of him, from the outset, had detested her, why had he been with the girl in Lawrence for so long? When she let herself be an ordinary college girl and not a dolled up clone of every other anchorwoman on the air, she was undeniably attractive. She was much smarter than the job would allow her to show, and he could not help but admire that noxious ambition. Most importantly, she carried herself as if she was invulnerable, which he most definitely was not. Another factor: her parents, a couple of old prigs well into their sixties living in the tony, reclusive Chicago suburb of Lake Forest, grudgingly invited him to come home with her for holidays. Better, he reasoned, to mind his manners in their chandeliered dining room and endure her father's interrogations aimed at proving him not fit to breathe the same air as his daughter than be alone.

Andy was done thinking of her, not just for tonight, but forever, he hoped. Erasing her, though, unearthed the others who had come before. They were with him as he tried to fall asleep. The girl at the Clinique counter in her fake lab coat. The speech therapist. The dessert chef. The public defender. The court reporter he knew in San

Francisco and the nurse from across the Bay in Oakland. They taunted and heckled him because, as hard as he tried, he could not remember all their names.

## 2. MAKEUP ARTIST

The boy died. The one at the children's hospital. Brook's patient. Andy had forgotten about him. He had been at loose ends because the breakfast meeting did not happen. Art Driscoll could not make it. He was scheduled to fly back from Dallas yesterday evening, but because of thunderstorms spawned by the air mass that was making early April into a dead-ringer for late June, all departing flights from DFW were scrapped and he would not get into KCI until almost noon. Breakfast would have to wait until tomorrow. Andy had put on his suit anyway and spent most of the day camped out on the carpet of Brook's living room with a fraternity alumni directory he found in a cabinet. He penciled in one name, then another, on the legal pad propped up on his knees and, in his mind, broadly scripted telephone conversations with these frat brothers he had not seen or spoken to since leaving school. Before he maneuvered the conversations

toward the intimate topics of money, assets, and net worth, he would ply them with a story—a juvenile anecdote from their shared, but superficial past. He would start and they would happily finish, embellishing along the way. Andy would not correct their inaccuracies, and after ten minutes of nostalgic small talk, they would be bonded again and Andy’s call would not seem strange or grasping but like something that should have happened long ago. Then the turning point would come. He would ease them into the reciprocal pleasantries about jobs, spouses, children, golf handicaps, etc. Those would ebb into talk of vacation condos and retirement strategies, and there they would be: at the place where Andy could deftly propose a renewed relationship, one that would benefit them both. Motivated, in the headlong and healthy way he had been in college, he was pausing to assess the decline of the sun out the balcony doors, when the telephone rang. “Andy?” Ferrell spoke his name before he said hello. Already he sensed that his moment of feeling anointed, young, and clean had been broken. “Brook’s not here. Try the hospital.” He was mildly caustic and dismissive.

“I know he’s not. I wanted you to know that Jordan Underwood died. This afternoon, just after three.” The name meant nothing to him until Ferrell said, “The boy from dinner last night? Brook had to call in and check on him?” Everything she said came out sounding like a question, as if she were trying to prompt him, to get him to assume control of the conversation, when, in fact, he could not figure out why he needed to be told this by anyone, especially her.

“That’s too bad.” He had to say it a second time because her voice came across as distressed, and the first time he said it he sounded inappropriately casual.

“I just didn’t want you to be worried if you didn’t see him for a while.”

He hurled the phone at the couch after she hung up. Over the last seven years, Andy had expertly avoided death. He did not watch hospital dramas, cop shows or D-Day documentaries, westerns, or the Schwarzenegger action flicks he saw in the theater when he was young. He only read the business and sports sections of the newspaper and once broke up with a red-haired police officer in Manchester after she killed the strung out creep who pulled a gun on her during a routine traffic stop. Next time she might be the one outlined in chalk on the pavement. But here came this boy, some defenseless moon-faced toddler named Jordan Underwood whom Andy had never seen and would never know. He had left Andy feeling gutted like the scores of tenement buildings on Main and the warehouses in the Bottoms. Many days, the image of Brook in turquoise scrubs, running shoes and a stethoscope slung across the back of his neck, sustained Andy until the time came to log off his computer and shoulder his limp attaché as he left the office on Mass. Street. In the image, Brook was forever briefing a nurse against the backdrop of a bright mural with enormous butterflies, lady bugs, smiling flowers, and grinning, pink-nosed puppies. Andy had never let himself imagine any of Brook's patients dying. They were, after all, only children. Some of them did not yet know how to write their names in crayon, but they would learn because Brook would heal them all. Andy believed it because he needed to know that someone was living and doing and helping. Pouring over the Kappa Sigma directory had lost its appeal and staying in Brook's apartment made the boy and any failing of Brook's too close.

There was an Irish pub on the Plaza with brass railings, green curtains, dark woodwork, and dim yellow lamplight. From the exterior it gave the place a gimmicky charm. Andy had never been there, but it was the place that first came to mind when he

bolted from the Iberia. At the bar he found an empty stool next to a woman about his age sipping Guinness from a glass. Her name was Eva. A name tag plastered to her brown suit jacket made an introduction unnecessary. In her haste to escape a spirit-breaking corporate event held in a hotel ballroom, she had forgotten to remove it. She had that look about her, a bleary-eyed, power-point induced malaise. Mounting the stool beside her, Andy resolved to wreck himself, at least for tonight.

Eva sold pharmaceuticals and was suffering through a sales seminar at the Intercontinental. Andy bought her next beer and listened to her talk about the lameness of the seminar speakers and her impending marriage to the soccer coach at a small liberal arts college in Ohio Andy had never heard of. She had let her mind roam too freely today during the interminable meetings, and for the first time she was wondering if marrying a soccer coach may be the single most disastrous decision she could ever make. The oppressive expertise of a motivational guru spouting hackneyed sales secrets drove her to it. Andy bet she really loved him and the idea of marrying him, and by tomorrow, between sessions, she would be flashing her ring at an admiring someone. She would wiggle her fingers so the mezzanine's chandelier light played off the diamond's facets. All would be well. But that would not happen until tomorrow.

*ii*

At the intersection of Ward Parkway and Wornall, Winston and Mrs. Churchill, "Married Love," as their life-size figures were known, seemed to whisper about them. While they waited for the traffic lights to change, Eva cast sidelong glances in Andy's direction, invitations to kiss her first and undress her later. She tried to disguise them by debating the merits of her company's stock with him, yet a few minutes later, on her too-

soft hotel bed, with all of his thoughts gone dead and blank, he complied. But when the ice cold band of her engagement ring touched his chest, Andy backed away. He had to go, he said, staring at the wall.

Just as the door crashed shut behind him he heard her curse him. Out in the hall, a room service tray with two uncovered and decimated plates of lobster nearly tripped him up. There were half-eaten dinner rolls on a crumpled napkin and the gross, gaping maw of a baked potato. The drawn butter had sloshed over the rims of the china onto the tray. It shone luridly beneath the hallway lights. The hallway dead-ended at the stairwell door. He would have kept going down to the basement or the bowels of the parking garage had the word LOBBY not been painted in white on a door. He swung open the door and staggered into swank moody lamplight and twinkling jazz piano. Barreling past the check-in counter, the bell stand, the concierge's scroll-footed desk, the valet's podium, and up the sidewalk to the Iberia he still felt himself going down and around the stairwell's endless vortex. He was sweating, but he left his coat on and walked like a man being pursued, ready to break into a sprint. As he walked, he patted at his pockets, the ones in his pants and inside his coat, checking for his keys, his wallet, his phone, his brass money clip. If anything had gotten left behind, he did not think he could go back. But it was all where it should be.

*iii*

As soon as he turned the Volvo off Ward Parkway the street contracted into a slender ribbon of gray pavement. The houses on either side sat back from the road behind heavy iron gates. The next intersection was State Line Road, the silly, permeable boundary between Missouri and Kansas. Where it met Fifty-ninth Street, State Line

Road was a bumpy pair of lanes, nothing like the sprawling artery connected to the freeway by an intricate knot of ramps it would become if he followed it a few miles southward. Traffic was so sparse and he was so impatient that he did not wait for the light to change. He paused long enough to notice moonlight shining on the golden sand in the low-lipped bunkers of Kansas City Country Club, then made an illegal left turn on red and sped on. He was doing more than sixty miles per hour on the uneven road, passed a car poking along at the speed limit, and, at the first opportunity, jerked the steering wheel to the right and crossed into Mission Hills. He had not experienced such an acute blend of exhilaration and desperation since the lawless, full-contact, nose-bloodying games of hide-and-seek the boys in his neighborhood played from the time school got out until early Minnesota dusk swept over the houses. He felt like he was breaking toward “home,” the aluminum shed behind Mr. Hurley’s house and that jerk-off Mikey Armstrong, in his leather bomber jacket, was closing fast. If his stride slowed for an instant, Mikey would tag him so hard he would stumble into a petrified lump of old shit left by Suzie, Mr. Hurley’s arthritic boxer. Mikey’s hand had lunged for the hood of his purple Vikings sweatshirt and missed. The next thing Andy had felt was his palm meeting cold corrugated aluminum.

In Mission Hills, the road was an even more slender ribbon. It dipped and curved around magnificent old money mansions. He slowed the car not because he was, all of a sudden, mindful of the speed limit but because he was finally safe. Eva could never find him here (not that she would ever come looking), nor could the girl from Lawrence, or the monstrous version of himself who had repeatedly bedded one and rejected the other. That version of himself was not smart enough to navigate the dark twisting streets that, in



some places, forked unexpectedly or dead-ended in the bowl of a cul-de-sac. There was a time when Andy could get lost on these streets in broad daylight, but even after years away he still had the complex network of Lanes and Terraces and Courts memorized. Instinctively, he knew not to overshoot the large traffic circle ornamented with a voluptuous, blank-eyed nude on a tall pedestal. He knew he had to ease off to the right as soon as he could because there at the mouth of a cul-de-sac was the Van Dynes' picture-perfect Tudor. It did not quite qualify as a mansion but was still grand, like a scale replica of a country estate.

The terrific listing evergreen on the south side briefly kept the house from view. Years had passed since he last thought of that tree, and he felt guilty for not remembering it as other people would remember friends they failed to keep in touch with. It was taller than the house and had kept Andy's room dark and cool. In sleepy morning reverie he had savored the safe, sealed in feeling and slept a while longer. When the high, sighing winter winds blew, the evergreen's needles ticked the window glass, sounding like a drummer sliding his brushes back and forth over a drumhead.

The Volvo's headlights cast dim rods of white light ahead of him. One of them intercepted a yard sign punched in the grass of the Van Dynes' yard. Drawing up alongside the curb, he was met by the botoxed, plump-lipped face of Janet Kelsey, matriarch of the Janet Kelsey Real Estate Team. The words FOR SALE were unmistakable, but that did not stop him from dreaming up a series of alternatives. It could mark the stop on one of the charity house tours put on throughout the year, or advertise a painter or contractor who had recently done a bit of work on the house. It could be a joke. It could belong in the Lehman's yard next door. Maybe it had been in

the way of a lawn mowing or landscaping crew, so they planted it in the Van Dynes' yard, but forgot to move it back before they left. A clear plastic tube with TAKE ONE! in red letters was attached to the sign. He left the engine running and sprang out of the car to grab a flyer from the tube. Centered across the top half of the page was a full-color photo of the Van Dynes' house. Block letters in a bolded, italicized blown-up font screamed, ***CLASSIC 1940s TUDOR! MISSION HILLS LIVING AT ITS BEST!!!***

What space remained on the page described in plain and inadequate language the house's best features:

- Original moldings and woodwork
- Swimming pool
- Formal garden
- 5 bedrooms
- 5 ½ bathrooms
- Gourmet kitchen
- New 1<sup>st</sup> floor carpet
- Dramatic staircase
- Dining room seating 16
- Walk-in pantry
- Master suite with sitting room
- Mud room

Andy found the list unbearable, as well as the entire premise of the house being for sale and, at some point, being ceded to a strange family. As Andy stood in the glare of the Volvo's headlights, a portion of a phone conversation with Lew suddenly changed in

meaning. Andy had said he would need a place to stay once he moved from Lawrence to Kansas City. When Lew did not offer him his old room, Andy thought it was because Lew recognized that would be awkward and bittersweet. That was not it at all, though. His response, “Well, Brook’s got a good-sized spare room nobody’s hardly slept in,” made sense. After preparing a house to go on the market no one, not even people as benevolent and welcoming as the Van Dynes, would want someone moving into one of their guest bedrooms. He had dealt with real estate agents like Janet Kelsey enough to know she would disapprove of any new clutter, not to mention a suitcase jammed in a pristine walk-in closet. “It’s all about the closets,” he had been told by one of the Janet Kelsey sisterhood. Why hadn’t Lew just told him? Or Brook? Or Ferrell? That was the perfect sort of bombshell for her to drop. He guessed it was old news to them. They were used to seeing the sign in the yard.

His giant shadow sliced the lawn in two. Beside it was the sign’s shorter shadow. He crammed the flyer back in the tube and turned off the car. Lew and Frannie were out. In the midst of comprehending the flyer, he had glanced at the house just to make sure it matched the photo he had in his hand. He saw that the usual strategic assortment of lamps and lights—the simple fixture in the laundry room, the green-shaded banker’s lamp atop the piano, and the grand Tiffany-style lamp in the master bedroom had been left on to promote the cozy lived-in glow of a family at home. If they were home, the kitchen lights in the house would most certainly have been on, as would the one in the upstairs hallway.

He skimmed through the thick grass along side of the house. At the fence, he reached over the gate, felt for the latch, and let himself in. He was surprised to find the

pool filled. It was lima bean shaped and had a low, short diving board jutting out over the deep end. Steam rose off the surface, and the night air smelled faintly of chlorine. Heavy, wrought iron chaises had taken the place of the teak chairs Andy remembered. Their cushions were not awning striped but a solid blue that in full summer sunlight must have been brilliant aquamarine. Far more distressing than that, a tree was gone. A plump, round full-bodied Bradford pear, one of four planted side-by-side along the fence that together acted as a barrier, muffling the splashes from the Lehman's pool and their occasional cocktail and barbecue clamor, had been reduced to a stump. More than likely, an ice storm had claimed it. Only a thin crystal coating on its limbs was enough to break a tree like that cleanly in half. Its thin branches, Y's dividing into smaller, more brittle Y's, could not have withstood the weight. With the barrier separating the Van Dynes from the rest of the neighborhood breached, Mimi Lehman was free to offer her unsolicited critiques of Frannie's tea roses. Burt Lehman, with his decided lack of tact and good sense, could do his disingenuous "Hey, neighbor" act over the fence, interrupting Lew's late evening pipe-smoking ruminations whenever the impulse struck. On the other side of the Lehmans' chalet-style house, a fraction of the Sizemores' imposing black-shuttered colonial was visible. Beyond it was the top of an elaborate stained wood play set in the yard to the west of the Sizemores.

Hunching down beside the pool, Andy dragged his hand through the heated water. (For how long had the pool been heated, he wanted to know.) He removed his shoes and argyle socks and rolled his suit pants up to his knees. Once he submerged his legs in the water, he lay back against the flagstones bordering the pool's edge and listened to the lavish silence. That was one of the lessons he learned here: noise was free, silence was

expensive. Silence was a luxury, and after growing up in a neighborhood of unruly children, mongrel dogs, train whistles, growling cars, shouting mothers, and men who broke things when they got angry, he did not want to give it up. He had noticed the silence the first time Brook brought him to the house. They were playing catch with a football in the front yard while they waited for Frannie to call them in to dinner. “Go deep!” Andy called, sending Brook off in a post pattern toward the cul-de-sac’s dead end. His voice had never sounded so loud. Andy was embarrassed by its booming resonance. He hesitated and threw an ugly, wobbling pass that bounced against the street well in front of Brook’s feet. The thunk of the ball was also blasphemously loud. Initially, Andy found the quiet eerie and unnatural, but fascinating. He had not recognized it immediately because he was too overwhelmed by the house itself: the size of the rooms, the plush carpet that absorbed all of his steps, the ornately carved mantle, the obsidian glamour of the grand piano in the living room, the delicate China displayed in the glass-doored dining room cabinet, the smell of onions and seasoned pot roast that had simmered together all day in a gold-brown broth. Now, that moment when he had his arm cocked back, the tip of the football at his ear, ready to send a tight spiral into Brook’s hands, and was spooked into throwing a dead duck of a pass was his most vivid memory of the day.

Almost as vivid was his memory of following Brook into the house through the garage. Andy had turned sideways to squeeze between a hulking white SUV and a metallic German-made sedan, both of which bore the gleam of a very recent waxing. He noted the tools, the saws, the coiled extension cords and strands of Christmas lights, hedge clippers and the snow shovel hanging in neat rows on pegs. He had thought to

himself, the Van Dynes never needed to borrow anything because they already had everything. He was used to his mother sending him to a neighbor's house to borrow a weed trimmer, a Phillips screwdriver, a curling iron, a can of Campbell's cream of mushroom soup, a paper cup of Woolite so she could soak her lingerie, a step ladder to change the light bulb in the basement. He vowed to himself that he would have a garage just like this, big and clean, with shelves, and cubby holes to store the things a man with a house of his own was supposed to have. He would have a plastic storage box with twenty tiny clear plastic drawers for storing nails of every size, screws, bolts, washers, and thumbtacks. Once he got something, it was going to be his and only his.

His time as a homeowner had proved disappointing. In addition to the palm-shaded house in Tallahassee, he had owned a second home. The other, in a quintessentially New England suburb, or to use the quaint and pretentious term, "township" outside Manchester, was a photogenic Dutch Colonial on a sloping lot in the crook of a par five's dogleg. He bought the houses and then eagerly took on the project of furnishing them. But he did not know what to buy, what best complemented any of the rooms. He was, after all, a man, so he only ever settled on the stereotypical male necessities, things like a grossly large television, a king-sized bed sans headboard, and a pair of collapsible camping chairs on the deck that were essential for weeknight, after work drinking. Inevitably, he ended up with empty space, unused square footage, and the goal of avoiding his house whenever possible. He could never make his houses feel lived in enough to make him want to be there.

As he lay on his back with his legs kicking slowly beneath the water, Andy wondered if it was really the cloistered world of this house he loved most faithfully. The

thought frightened him. Despite all the crap the leukemia brought into his and Jill's and everyone else's life, he had been happy here. He could perfectly recall being out here, sitting across from Lew as the fire in the round open fireplace burned itself out between them. One night, while Lew inhaled the citrus aroma of his pipe tobacco, Andy's eye had been drawn to movement in the house. He saw Frannie transferring tulips in a vase like a fishbowl from the kitchen counter to the table where they had eaten dinner. She fussed with the blooms and repositioned one stalk, then another. Since he left this house, Andy had come to understand that what he wanted most was to get back to a place where the most pressing concern was the arrangement of the flowers on the kitchen table.

*iv*

He was not ready to return to the Iberia, and Ferrell's house was the only place he could think of to go. When she swung open her front door, she had the teacher's edition of a textbook over her arm and a pen balanced behind her ear. After he rang the doorbell, he had seen the drapes in the picture window flutter and her face—that streak of gray hair—peek through. For twenty minutes he drove along 87<sup>th</sup> Street, 87<sup>th</sup> Terrace and 87<sup>th</sup> Place in Prairie Village searching for her house. It was the poor man's Mission Hills: all the features of aesthetically thoughtful suburban planning without the eye-popping extravagance. The problem was that, literally, all of the houses in this part of Prairie Village looked the same. They were all Levittown-style shoe boxes. They were cramped and old and suffered from various leaks, but they were perpetually in vogue, so it did not surprise him that this was where Ferrell had chosen to buy herself a house. He could not remember the exact street. All he had to go on to find it was a comment Brook tossed off at dinner the other night about her house having a pink front door.

“Is it okay if I come in?”

Ferrell glanced back at a clock on the wall. “It’s a quarter til eleven.”

“Never mind. You have school tomorrow. I forgot. I’ll go.” He had scrambled out through the Van Dyne’s gate and back to his car because, while he lolled by the pool, lights came on upstairs in the Lehman’s master bedroom. Andy did not want one of them to spot him and blab to Lew and Frannie in the morning. Or, worse, he did not want one of them to mistake him for an intruder and call the police.

Ferrell snatched at his shirtsleeve and waved him inside. “You’re being strange. What’s up with you?”

“How long’s the house been for sale?”

“Not long. A couple of weeks, maybe. There was an open house last Sunday.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

“Andy—” At the sound of his name, in that particular tone, he was ready to be patronized. As if there were any doubt he should expect exactly that, she paired it with a gently scolding look that seemed more appropriate for a puppy that had peed on the rug. “It’s their house, not mine. They don’t need my permission.” What a cheap excuse for wisdom. It was indisputably true, and the logic was so simple and flawless he was convinced she had to be wrong.

“I thought you loved it.”

“I do, but—”

“Other people living there? Come on.”

“It’s what they want.”

“Why? Why would anyone want that?”



“I think—Brook and I both think—it will be good for them. They’re reaching that point where it would be nice if they had less to worry about, less to take care of. Lew doesn’t need to be up on a ladder unclogging the gutters.” Ferrell was not cooperating. That would be too much to ask. The whole point of coming here was to commiserate with someone who felt the same way he did, yet she was being admirably mature and accepting. Here was the ideal situation for histrionics—hyperbole and victimhood, her bread and butter—and she was blowing it.

Andy launched himself onto her white sofa. “They’re not eighty-five and gimping around with canes and walkers.” On the ottoman near the sofa was a mess of colored folders, worksheets completed in teenage scrawl, a grade book, and the makings of an elaborate quiz game on the Cold War. This, he thought, was what it was like to be one of the students who skulked into her classroom after school, craving guidance and comfort. She probably got that a lot—halting confessions of harrowing pregnancy scares, petty rivalries that exploded into a mafia-like game of threats and retribution carried out in the school parking lot, and tangled at-home dysfunction beyond repair. They spilled their guts, and in return she gave sweet, compassionate crap like she was giving him. When this conversation was over, she was going to write up a hall pass and send him off to the guidance counselor.

“They’re building a villa in one of the new gated communities at the Lake. They’ve been talking about it for almost four years. They want to be in before the holidays.”

Andy slumped deeper into the sofa cushions. “You bust your ass to have a house like that, and you give it up? No way. You don’t do that.”

“It’s been the two of them there for years. I couldn’t have lasted as long as they have. When they go out of town, I stop in to pick up the mail and water the plants, and after about ten minutes, I have to get out. There’s that Bulova clock on the table by the sofa. When we were all there, I don’t remember ever hearing it. Now, all I hear is tick, tick, tick. It won’t shut up. It’s like a bomb.”

The rooms of Ferrell’s house were neurotically tidy, a fact accentuated by the whiteness of the painted fireplace brick, the whiteness of the sofa and a pair of bookcases. Everything had been coordinated and accessorized in the extreme, to a degree that her finding so many pillows, vases, candles and picture frames in complementary shades of blue seemed an exceptional feat. Even the books arranged in a pyramid on the coffee table had been chosen not on the basis of their subject matter (Andy doubted Ferrell had ever had a whit of interest in the splendor of Icelandic fjords) but for the pleasing interplay of white and the varied blues on their covers. What a shameful thing to have in common with her. When it came to interior design, they were both abject failures. It was the only reason he had come up with to explain why his houses struck him as uninhabitable. They might have belonged to a well-to-do bachelor automaton, or, better still, an alien stranger come to earth in a black and white sci-fi movie.

“Do you have coffee, or anything?” He needed to drink something and, if he left here, he was fairly certain his next stop would be liquor a store, and he could not show up at breakfast showing signs of a hangover.

“I can make some.”

“Never mind. Don’t bother.”

She was heading for the kitchen.

“It’s not decaf is it?”

“Absolutely not,” Ferrell answered. “Should I make it half coffee, half milk, like you used to drink?” she asked over running water.

“Just black.”

Stretching his arms to the ceiling as though he had, at last, mustered the strength to get out of bed after a sound night’s sleep, Andy dragged into the kitchen. He arranged the magnets on her refrigerator in a line across the freezer door. “You guys, you and Brook, everything’s fine?” This was not what he thought he was going to ask, but finding her here, alone and awake at an hour when most workaday folks would be in bed, raised the question. She was not visibly concerned about Brook, and that puzzled him too. He waited for her to whirl around, bark that it was none of his business, and come at him with the measuring spoon she used to transfer coffee from the silver Roasterie pouch to the coffee maker.

“No different than it’s ever been,” she answered dispassionately, talking to the kitchen cabinets instead of him. “Those kids, his patients, they’re his life.” He could not tell whether he was supposed to think she was proud of or frustrated by that fact. From her, it was a rare and, he thought, poignant moment of perfect evasion. “In the evenings, he’ll go sit with them, play cards and games. He gets too attached. He’s sky high, almost manic, after he’s told one of them that they’re in remission. But this, what happened today, undoes him physically and mentally.” What she was saying was that Brook loved being near death. It exhilarated him. He loved meeting it vicariously through his patients, getting so close to it and then rebuffing it and, in many cases, denying it entirely, but he could not handle the times he did not win.

The coffee was ready. She poured a cup for each of them. He was leafing through the graded essays on her kitchen table and reading the comments she had written in neat block print in the margins. From her comments, he could tell she was *that* teacher, the beloved one who wrote scores of fawning recommendation letters to the admissions committees at Vanderbilt, Cornell, and Stanford and sincere notes in the backs of yearbooks. She attended the chamber orchestra recitals, standing at the auditorium doors to hand out photocopied programs to parents. She probably hosted Advanced Placement exam study sessions in this very room and made them into a social event, a formal tea party or something, where girls wore flowery pastel dresses to discuss the Sherman Anti-Trust Act and the Gadsden Purchase while nibbling crustless sandwiches from an engraved silver tray. To them she was the absolute pinnacle of refined femininity. To a certain set of boys she was the place where fear and fantasy merged.

She nudged his arm with her elbow and slipped a cup into his hand. “What you say to them here, you’re very firm, but kind. That’s good.” Praising her was strange, but he meant what he said wholeheartedly. “What’d you cover in class today?”

Her face brightened. “Bay of Pigs.” She could easily be prompted into giving the full lesson again here at the kitchen table. By asking about school, he had made them into tentative, temporary friends.

“Fantastic. Good versus Evil. The dark forces of Communism versus Western Democracy. I always preferred Reagonomics.”

“I’ll bet you did.” He caught her slyly smiling at him over her coffee cup. Afraid the smile would last longer than she meant it to, she took a long sip from the cup.

“Reaganomics. Star Wars. Fall of the Berlin Wall. But, of course, we’d shit around for so long with the Great Society and the terrible Watergate apocalypse that the school year conveniently ended with Jimmy Carter. What a downer that was. We’re going to let the hostages stick it out in Iran, kids. Here’s your yearbook and have a great summer.”

“Come see something,” Ferrell said. They went through a door in the kitchen to a cement slab patio enclosed by a shaggy hedge. The yard itself was a fenced-in, flat, grassy rectangle. Ferrell left his side to admire the centerpiece of the yard, a sturdy, pink-tipped dogwood wearing a spreading umbrella of blossoms. She approached it reverently with her coffee cup clasped in her hands, like she was about to make an offering to the tree. She touched the edges of the blossoms with her fingers. “I love dogwoods,” she said.

“They don’t last long enough,” he called.

“There,” she said pointing to a good-sized plot in the corner, “is my garden.” It was an ugly patch of packed dirt, dead vines, and brittle leaves. “Last year I grew tomatoes. They were small, pale runts, and they didn’t taste that great. Brook was very good about eating them. I think I’m going to try cucumbers this year.” Ferrell crossed the yard. “My tulips are coming up. See those green shoots?” She beckoned him to her, adamant that he see the shoots for himself. “I planted four dozen bulbs, all yellow. I can hardly wait for them to bloom.” There were rows of them planted against the house, their green tongues protruded from the dirt like they were waiting to be fed. Andy would have never expected this from her. Despite the lonely, ethereal grace of the dogwood, there was nothing beautiful about any of it. She knew as much but loved it anyway because

she had in mind an elaborate image of what she wanted it to become. She described it to him, but as she did, he was afraid it would turn out to be as suffocatingly overdone as the inside of the house. He did not tell her so. Before coming here he had done enough damage for one night.

“I like that you do it yourself,” he said. “I always hired somebody.”

“Frannie said you’ll never get exactly what you want unless you do it yourself. My next thing is hydrangeas. I want big beautiful hydrangeas.” She had her hands in the back pockets of her jeans and peered down at her bare feet, wiggling her toes in the cool grass.

When they went in the house, he asked for more coffee. He ambled away into the corridor leading from the kitchen to the bedrooms while she refilled his cup. Ferrell had hung four of Jill’s sketches on the wall. They were matted and framed like fine art. She left him alone to stare at them. Andy did not remember these particular drawings, but the figures’ super-long legs and arms, the super-thin ankles and wrists, the pinched-in waists and sharp noses, those were Jill’s hallmarks. He lifted one of the frames from its nail. The figure in the drawing wore a long brown skirt and a blazer, a feminine three-button coat. Its head was topped with a jaunty Robin Hood hat, tipped forward over one eye like the fedora of a film noir detective, complete with a feather in the hatband. On the paper he made out the smudges of her eraser and stray pinpoints of lead where she rested the tip of her pencil to envision the next line she would draw. Down in the corner there was also the faint blush of her fingerprint, no doubt the result of her habit of scrubbing at thick lines to create shading and shadow. Tonight, thankfully, he did not have the willpower to get maudlin and despondent over them. He felt far removed from them. They were

nothing more than drawings by a promising young designer he used to know. By the time he moved from the hallway back to the couch in the family room, he had let them go. He did not mention them to Ferrell as she sat pretending to be busy with her lesson planning.

“I’m tired,” he announced. He had not noticed until now, but he was sore from running. From the Intercontinental to the cave-like entrance of the Iberia’s parking garage, he had been in a dead sprint. His knees were stiff and the muscles in his calves were as heavy as lead. There was a blister on the back of each of his heels. He closed his eyes. Next time, he would know better than to run in a pair of cordovan wingtips.

After a while, the chenille throw that had been folded over the arm of the couch landed softly about his shoulders. One of its fringed tassels grazed his nose. She was not going to stop him from falling asleep on her couch. He was grateful because he could not go back to Brook’s. Jordan Underwood, Eva, and that hated other self of his were staking out the Iberia, waiting for him to return so they could take their turns haunting him for at least this night and probably several more. She switched off the lights in the ceiling and turned on the goose neck lamp that curled over her chair. He peered over at her. She had a stack of oversized index cards on her knee and used a magic marker to script the questions for the quiz game she had planned. In a singsong whisper she spoke the words as she wrote them. *In what European capital did Ronald Reagan meet with Mikhail Gorbachev in October 1986? What term, coined by Gorbachev, means openness and government transparency?* He pictured her at the front of her classroom refereeing the game, keeping score on the chalkboard, raising her arms in a cheer when someone answered a question she was sure would stump everyone, doling out miniature candy bars

to the winning team. His mind was three places at once. It was in Ferrell's classroom as he listened to her lilting whisper and the faint squeak of the marker against the index cards. It teetered at the precipice of sleep, ready to suspend its waking duties for the day. And, at the unhurried speed of a computer about to outlive its usefulness, it searched itself for an equivalent memory, a time when he and Ferrell had been even half as genial and civil. As far as he could tell, tonight had no precedent. Plenty of times they had managed to rancorously coexist, but none of them occurred when they were alone, just the two of them. In the past, they never really were alone. The only other time he could think of defied categorization. To call it a fight would be too simple because, at one point, they gave up fighting, and what fighting there had been was brief, but tenacious and decidedly cruel.

At this very same time of night, it started with Jill shuffling into his room, and bending her head down next to his to breathe hot, dry words in his ear. "You need to do something for me." He remembered the whites of her eyes were enormous, and while she waited for him to answer, she did not blink. This was during that brief period when Ferrell had worked as a hostess at a restaurant on the Plaza known for its secluded paneled alcoves where couples made out between appetizers and the main course. She was downtown, at the Muehlbach Hotel. A customer from out of town had said flirty things she had been waiting for someone to say and she had acted demure and far too interested. He wanted to take her back to his hotel for a drink. He meant to his room, not to the bar, and when he wanted to do more than kiss on the sofa, she locked herself in the bathroom, faked an asthma attack, and said she had to leave. In her wallet she had four dollars, not nearly enough for a cab. Someone had to pick her up.



She was exactly where Jill said she would be. As he pulled his car up to the hotel, he caught her between cycles of wearing a groove in the sidewalk with her addled back-and-forth pace and standing imperiously at the curb as if she were not to be bothered because this was how she spent many of her evenings. He greeted her harshly, saying “Do you have a death wish or something? What was wrong with just waiting in the lobby?” She refused to answer him. “I don’t get why you do this idiot stuff. You’re too smart for it. What did you think was going to happen? You go to a guy’s hotel room and you’re going to sit around and watch TV? Get real.”

“Stop,” she barked.

“I know what people—guys—say about you, what they think when you walk by. It makes me sick. Tonight, the way I found you—here, look—” He slapped down the sun shade in front of her to make her see herself in the mirror lit like a miniature marquee. “The dress, those shoes...if I was some other guy, some asshole like the guys where I grew up, like that Dave Turley you think is the second coming, I’d think I’d have to reach for my wallet to pick you up.” Ferrell smacked at his face with her purse, but missed. The purse only glanced off his neck. She called him “a royal prick.”

They hit every red light on Main until Forty-seventh Street. The neon lights on a windowless strip clubs blinked. A lamp had been left on in the ominous Scientology offices. A lone clerk in his risible uniform stood behind the counter of a McDonald’s that still had a mustard yellow and shit brown color scheme. Except for it and a bar with an entrance protected by a tattered awning, every other business was closed for the night or for good, and had been for as long as anyone could remember. Shadowy figures, whose faces were masked by the bills of their ball caps smoked in a bus stop shelter and put

their conversation on hold to watch them pass. Ferrell's jaw was set and every last one of her muscles was so tense there would be pain rather than relief when she finally relaxed.

Careful not to turn his head from the road, he gave her a sidelong glance. As if he were the man she had reason to fear the most tonight, she had prudishly tugged the hem of her skirt close to her knees. He was not supposed to know it, but she had cried. Her eyes were swollen. She had wiped at them and dragged faint tails of eye shadow to her temples. Her lips were dry, the skin puckered. She had her hands in her lap, working doggedly to remove a hang nail from her thumb. She succeeded, but at the price of ripping a strip of her skin. She put her thumb to her mouth and sucked away the blood welling up around the cuticle. Eventually, she tucked her thumb inside her fist and clenched it as tightly as she could.

A sharp, disturbing possibility overtook him as he thought how the next time she opened her hand there would be a warm streak of blood across her life line. This possibility, or whatever it was, did not come from him. Somehow, it had been planted, injected into him. If he had any of the Van Dynes' Christian inclinations, he would say it was a calling. *He should try to love her.* Love in the sense of an abiding platonic devotion that was unconditional. It would be a gift to Jill, almost an extension of his love for her. With Ferrell beside him pathetically nursing her bleeding thumb, loving her had a certain noble appeal, and if he could have made it happen right then, he might have done it. Who, besides Jill, loved her? No one. Her parents loved themselves and the pursuit of new, creative ways to embarrass and denigrate each other. She had no siblings. No other moderately close friends. The only other relatives she had contact with were an aunt, uncle, and cousin in Clayton, Missouri.

She chose that instant to lunge for the button that turned on the radio. She had conjured up Young MC. He was in the front seat with them cleverly rhyming his way through “Bust a Move.” (What station played old, innocent hip hop after midnight?) He switched off the radio, but the staccato spacing of the rhymes—hello, yellow, fellow—stuck with him. It was a bold and pointless stroke of antagonism. She did it because this car ride through the seamier parts of town, which was beginning to seem endless, bored her. There was his answer. No. He would not do it. Loving her—in any capacity—would be a grueling project requiring more patience and dedication than he had in him. It would be like building the pyramids at Giza or learning to eliminate that unattractive reverse C motion from his golf swing. Until some poor bastard came along who was willing to be sucked in by her good looks, she was going to have to survive on Jill’s love alone.

“So. Here we are. Go on. You can thank me tomorrow,” he said as the car rolled to a noiseless stop on the blacktopped driveway of the palatial Spanish Revival Ferrell’s father ceded to her mother when they divorced. The automatic door locks popped up like jack-in-the-boxes.

She kicked the underside of the glove compartment with her shoe and slumped down in the passenger seat. “Damn it.”

“What?”

“She’s here.” Ferrell strained against her seatbelt to see a light in the arched window at the corner of the second story. Like a rubber band stretched to its limit, she snapped back against her seat.

“You always say she’s never here.”

“Well, she is right now. She’ll see me like this and think something’s wrong and I’ll have to answer her questions and I’ll get mad and we’ll have a fight and we’ll both slam our doors.”

“Make something up.” He would make something up for her if it would speed up the process of her getting out of his car and him going back to bed.

“I suck at lying.”

“Sneak in.”

“No.” She pinched her lips together. She was formulating a strategy, cooking up a story, but then her expression changed. With an almost wistful sigh, she said, “I can’t believe you called me a—”

“I did not,” he said loudly to cancel out the single elongated syllable: *whore*. Long before he knew what the word meant, it just sounded foul to him. “Don’t say that I did because I did not.”

“But it’s what you were thinking.”

“Shit. I mean it, Ferrell. Just shit. That’s all I ever get from you.

“Probably because it’s what you deserve.”

She had taken a zippered pouch from her purse and dumped its contents—her makeup—into her lap. Three times she looked into the sunshade mirror, which had not been folded up, and started to brush on fresh eye shadow. “I can’t do this.” She held out a shaking hand. “You have to do it.”

“No!”

“What am I supposed to do? I don’t want her to see me like this.”

“I don’t care what you do.”

“It’s not brain surgery.” She gathered the makeup in her hands and dropped it in his lap.

He stared at the tubes and containers. They were small, odd, foreign things. He fumbled the foam-tipped brush he took from the eye shadow case. “Hold it like a pencil,” she told him. She faced him and sat motionless with her spine straight and her eyes closed. He was conservative with it—just a single dash of flinty, igneous silver across each lid. Next came the mascara. He unscrewed the wand from the tube. It had what looked like part of a pipe cleaner attached to its end. “Where does this go?”

“Eyelashes.”

He whiffed the first try, but he got it the second time. With each stroke, her lashes thickened. They seemed to get longer, finer. What was the point? And whoever came up with the idea that eyelashes, just as they were, were inadequate? Being a girl was complicated business. They didn’t need any of it half as much as they thought they did. With so many tubes and creams and colors, how did they ever know which was the right one? For the only time in his life, he was grateful to his parents. Thanks to the luck of the chromosomal lottery he had been born a boy and gotten by without all these accoutrements. He—we—us men—only had to worry about razors and condoms, and the how-to with both of those was self-explanatory. Applying make-up was an art, and he felt very much like a make-up artist tending to the big star getting ready to go on set to shoot her first scene of the day. The responsibility of it was daunting, but he was not going to fail. She was already the self-appointed keeper of all his failures, and he was not going to allow this to be added to them.

“That’s good,” she said and handed him the lip gloss tube. It was that signature color of hers—a pearly confectioner’s pink. The upper lip with its pointed little peak was more complicated. He had to hold her chin with his thumb and forefinger. She must have expected him to because she calmly endured his touch. One stroke to the right, from the peak to her mouth’s vanishing point. One stroke to the left.

“Aren’t you supposed to pat it with a Kleenex or something?”

“It’s fine.”

“Were you drinking?” he asked.

“No.”

“You smell like wine.”

“He drank a glass. I only held mine.”

It was in her sweater, woven into the fibers, and it coated the sequins that winked coquettishly at him like dozens of watchful eyes. To really smell it, he would have to move in closer, get his nose nearer her neck. The man from the restaurant had been on her, or she had been on him. Whatever the case, his breath, rich with the odor of fermentation, remained on her. Now it would be on him, in his nostrils the rest of the night.

Andy wanted to believe he was asleep by now, but he was not. The memory had a second part to it, and he was powerless against its coming. Even opening his eyes to watch Ferrell gather up her papers, grade book, and index cards, and jostle them into her tote bag propped against the coffee table was not going to stave it off. Futilely, he tried to counter it with the image of the Classic Cup’s menu as he remembered it. He read through it and decided that tomorrow, sitting at a table with Lew and Art Driscoll, he

would order a Denver omelet with link sausage instead of bacon, and wheat toast instead of white. It was an ill-conceived choice of distraction because breakfast belonged exclusively to morning (except when Frannie made Belgian waffles for dinner on white-skyed winter nights) and the morning—the part of the morning before breakfast was where he did not want his mind to go. But it had raced ahead and was already there.

By the time Ferrell finally slinked from the car to her front door and he crossed the threshold of his bedroom and kicked off the jeans he had dragged on to retrieve her, it was nearly half past one. He slept later than usual, and when he went into Jill's room, she had the breakfast tray with the collapsible legs across her lap. Arranged on it were the usual array of little jars, tubes, divided plastic palettes of eye shadow and lip liner, and a pair of faux tortoise shell compacts. It didn't do anything for her anymore. Her skin was not its normal color, so makeup did not blend in right. She tried a lighter, flesh-toned powder borrowed from Ferrell and that made things worse. The morning ritual of applying blush and lipstick had begun to result in the kind of overcompensating work you expected from a mortician.

“Ferrell called already. She said you were ‘the worst kind of brute’ when you picked her up.”

“Of course she did.” He played it off as one of Ferrell's misguided attempts at melodrama, which he believed it to be.

“Were you?” The rise in her voice was accusatory, parental, and unbecoming. *Were you out playing baseball when Mr. Hurley's living room window broke?*

He followed the powder puff as it swept along her high forehead that, this morning, fit her too tightly. “The fact that I was saving her from herself did not faze her

once. It was Ferrell Nash at her warped and victimized best. In who else's world but hers am I the bad guy for keeping her from being jumped by some pervy scumbag?" He had prepared this answer in the very early morning while erecting a mound of pillows to fall asleep on. It was his last conscious thought, and he was afraid he would forget it, but it was there, right where he left it, at the forefront of his mind. He had known there would be an opportunity to use it, and it came out exactly as he hoped it would. Hearing it out loud, though, it was not half as witty and forceful an indictment as he thought. It was laughably hypocritical, which he just figured out. So what if he was denouncing Ferrell for playing the victim while insisting on the label for himself?

They reached the familiar and inevitable juncture when any discussion of Ferrell had the potential to go in one of two directions. Jill could either lightheartedly dismiss it and chose another, less volatile topic, or it could escalate into a more contentious debate in which Jill defended Ferrell and claimed that for whatever reason she wasn't ever her real self around him, that Ferrell really was, to use Jill's own words, "sweet, loyal, and fun." The longer it took Jill to respond, the more certain he became that they were destined for the latter. He wished sometime Jill would explain to him why Ferrell had to occupy such a central role in the relationship in the first place.

He did not want to wait any longer for her to say something. "Hey, look at me for a second." She could not do it, so she opened the compact again and dabbed the powder puff into the thick cake of peach colored granules. "Before we get in some pointless fight about Ferrell—" He cuffed his hand around her wrist and held it lightly. The compact, with the powder puff back inside its flattened clam shell home, snapped shut. "You know you don't have to bother with this. Nobody expects you to."



She gave him a surprisingly cold and circumspect stare. “Just get out.” With her arms and her feet, which were buried under blankets, she tried to shove him off the edge of her bed. She managed only to upset the breakfast tray and send the makeup scattering across the bedspread and onto the carpet.

“Fine.” He went briskly from her room, confident he had done nothing to be ashamed of. He got four paces down the hall before he wheeled around and strode back to her doorway. He reached a hand over the gaping door and lazily leaned into it. The knob gored his side, but he was too focused on what he was about to say to feel it. “You listen, Jillian,” he said. “I don’t have to take her shit. Or yours.” There was not a trace of anger in any of his words, and he may have been half-smiling as he said them.

v

He walked around the block, down Broadway, along Nichols, and back up Central four times. The goal was to exert himself just enough so that his face had a healthy redness to it by the time Lew arrived for breakfast. He was afraid of looking morose and having an insomniac’s puffiness beneath his eyes. He was in the suit he wore yesterday because he slept too late and had no time to drive from Ferrell’s to the Iberia, clean himself up and change. He was, therefore, without the ironed pocket square. Ferrell had to lend him a tie of Brook’s. The stripes were too wide for Andy’s taste, and there were signs of a thread beginning to loosen near the tip, but he had no choice. Although he shaved in Ferrell’s bathroom, his cheeks and chin and neck were rough. All he got from an old can of Brook’s shaving cream was a flat cloud of foam he worked into a meager lather that was barely enough to cover his face. This, the over-sleeping, Brook’s tie, the absence of the pocket square (his secret weapon), the tint of stubble, could be a

challenge—a test of his resolve and desire. He was still smart and capable of shrewd, incisive analysis when it came to the market, and he had in abundance the special brand of charm men in business used to woo one another to make their deals and advance their careers. He could be dazzling. This morning he might just be more dazzling than he had ever been. His stride became longer and more purposeful. Rather than circle the block a third time, he swung into the restaurant and asked for a table along the sidewalk.

Lew Van Dyne snuck up on him. Andy had a menu in front of his face, so he did not see a waiter point him toward the table. He only heard him boom, “Behold! The prodigal!” Andy set down the menu and got to his feet. Lew was bald and jolly with a closely cropped beard he stroked with his knuckles when he spoke. He was a fitter Kris Kringle who favored expensive palm patterned cabana shirts and chinos over a red suit trimmed in white. He held Andy’s face in his hands, then drew him into a hug, and while they embraced, Andy felt him kiss his cheek.

At ten til eight, Art Driscoll sidled up to the low iron fence separating the outdoor tables from the portion of the sidewalk left to pedestrians. He had a newspaper, not the *Kansas City Star*, tucked under his arm. He was a big block of a man with thinning hair combed straight back from his forehead. In a helmet and shoulder pads, he would have been an imposing presence on the football field. Andy stood to shake his hand. “Andrew Quinn,” he said before Lew could introduce him. Driscoll’s grip was strong enough to crush his pinkie. To talk to them, he removed his mirrored aviator glasses and dropped them into the breast pocket of his suit coat. “Gentlemen, I’d love to stay, but I can’t.” He rattled off all the meetings and appointments that had been rescheduled because of the canceled flight from Dallas. “I’ve got Bernie Fisk up in my office waiting for me.”

Andy had never heard of him before, but Driscoll made him sound important. He was in a hurry, and all he had to say to Andy was, “Come by this afternoon and we’ll get you set up. Tell Barbara at the front desk who you are, and she’ll send you right in.” So just like that, things were settled. He had a job. He did not have to be dazzling. He could have been drooling into his orange juice, and he would have had a job. He felt relieved and utterly emasculated.

As he put his sunglasses back on, Driscoll asked Lew, “We have our usual time lined up for Saturday?”

“Eight-oh-five. Ten tee instead of one.”

“You want the fourth spot?” Lew asked after Driscoll went off in the direction of his office. “You can have it. Lyle and Susan are in St. Lucia for their anniversary, so he’s out.”

“I haven’t touched a club in so long, I couldn’t break a hundred.” He was not going to clatter up to the tee box with a set of clubs borrowed from the pro shop, nor was he going to use an outdated set of Lew’s hand-me-down Pings.

When their breakfast came, Lew liberally salted his pair of poached eggs. “Strictly between the two of us,” he said. Between his thumb and forefinger he dangled the salt shaker by its silver cap. “I’m supposed to be off the stuff, which reminds me—” From his suit pocket he produced a clear orange prescription bottle, unscrewed the cap, shook two pills onto his palm and swallowed them with a mouthful of decaf.

“What are those?” The print on the prescription bottle’s label was too small for Andy to make out the name of the medication.

“I had an *episode*.” Lew’s lips curled with word “episode.” “Just a little one.” He gave his chest a fluttery pat with his palm. “Though to hear Frannie tell it, I was in full de-fib, paddles zinging me with enough voltage to light this place at Christmas.”

“When?”

“Day after Thanksgiving. I got a little tight in all those places you’re not supposed to get tight. The doctor said it was a heart attack.”

The day after Thanksgiving. Friday. Last year. He was where? One amongst a mob of shoppers at a Winnetka mall. He was with her, the anchor girl. It had been a good day for them, one of the rare days he felt connected to her. They were binge buying. More accurately, she was. She had blazed a scorched earth path through all the size four racks and amassed a pile of blouses, skirts, and jeans. She even bought him a suit, a classic charcoal gray three-piece suit with a vest that was snug without being too tight and made him feel vastly superior to anyone he came in contact with. How long would it remain hanging haphazardly among other lesser, forlorn suits from J.C. Penney and Sears on a seldom visited rack at the Lawrence Goodwill?

Now the dots that kept popping up and confounding him could be connected. Andy had to move in with Brook because Frannie and Lew were selling the house. Frannie and Lew were selling the house because Lew’s patriarchal vigor, the still fresh passion of his for his suburban castle, had been compromised by a bum heart. They had to surrender to practicality. He thought of the checks Lew had sent each month. One or more of them had to have been written from a hospital bed. Others were surely written during the ponderous stages of recovery, when merely shuffling to his desk for an envelope and taking it to the mailbox were noteworthy accomplishments.

“I should have known,” Andy said. As a way of showing that he felt slighted, he set down his knife and fork.

“You didn’t need to be worrying about me.”

“How come I didn’t know?” Andy pressed.

“Eat. Your breakfast is getting cold.”

Obediently, Andy took up his fork and poked at the skillet-fried potatoes. He moved all the translucent bits of onion to one side of the plate. “But you’re good now?”

“I’m good. I walk on my treadmill, take my pills. To avoid stress I’ve given into retirement’s siren call.” Lew settled into his rattan-backed chair with his coffee mug lifted to his lips, but abruptly set it down. From the same pocket where he stored his pills, he removed some folded papers that were thin and glossy, curled at their corners. “I knew there was something I meant to show you.” The waiter carried away their plates so he had room to spread out the pages. He held down the corners with a saucer and the salt shaker. “Geraldine faxed this to the office last week. *Spafari*. Frannie can’t say no to that, can she?” Lew sat back again with his arms crossed. He looked smug and victorious. “Once she has her big retirement shindig for me and that’s all out of her system, she has her heart set on a sedate train ride through the Canadian Rockies. Banff, I suppose. This spa twist may be enough to turn the tide. I keep telling her we will not be that couple on the AARP bus tour going to see Andy Williams sing *Moon River* in Branson.”

The ink on the pages was streaked in places, blurring the pictures, but Andy made out a woman stretched across a massage table in a tastefully appointed three-sided hut. Curtains were pulled back to reveal the stark, sun-parched plain. “Three nights in some

sort of luxury manor house near Capetown, access to a private game reserve—here’s the map—at, what is it called?” He turned the pages toward himself so he could read them. “Royal Malewane. It’s got the A-list: elephants, rhinos, lions. Two hundred-fifty kinds of birds. My cardiologist says there’s no reason why I can’t go. It’s not like I’ll be wrestling hippos.”

Andy did not want to hear the same old talk of Africa, game preserves, rhinos, and lions. It irritated him. He had never understood what Lew had to be restless about. His life was full. His wife loved him. His home was a refuge from all the insidious crap over-crowding everyone’s days. He had done a career’s worth of good work. Andy was sure that in this small café alone he could find five, perhaps ten, freshly scrubbed, handsomely dressed young professionals who had been screaming naked babies on Dr. Lew Van Dyne’s exam table. He was a fine, admirable man whom Andy loved profoundly. Why couldn’t he take Frannie to Banff? Why hadn’t he just gone to Africa already? The procrastination, the eternal planning and re-planning, the joy Lew found in it, all of it was so close to neurosis that Andy resented him for it.

What if Andy had done the same, never left his mother’s hopeless and bankrupt neighborhood and let himself freeze to that spot like the packed slush on the winter streets of St. Paul and only sent away for college catalogs and internship brochures just to imagine himself as one of the studious deep-thinking co-eds shown studying beneath a shade tree? Maybe it was not the same. Even the slush softened, melted, dripped into the narrow neck of the Mississippi to be carried away.

Lew plucked a sticky wedge of pineapple from the dish. The waiter had just tried to remove it, but Lew cupped his hand over it and shooed him away. “It’s time, I think—”

Lew paused to taste the pineapple. “This is good. Have the other piece there.” Andy gouged it with his fork and obediently ate the remaining piece of pineapple. “It’s time, I think, to get back to the business of you,” Lew said.

He took up the pen the waiter had left for him to sign his credit card receipt. He began writing on a beverage napkin. Andy repositioned his coffee mug to see what Lew was doing. A list. One that grew rapidly into a chain of names. They were people who respected Lew and who would listen as he imparted an enthusiastic sales pitch of his own, and he would be selling Andy to them as a young man with uncanny instincts. They would believe him because Lew was so forcefully sincere. A few would be more than a little moved by Lew’s affection for someone who once loved his daughter, and that would make them comfortable trusting Andy with their money.

Andy tried very hard not to watch. Rather than watch, he stared at the sun, aflame over the intersection of Forty-seventh and Central. He wanted to knock the pen away and shred the napkin, or dunk it in the glass of water so the ink dissolved away. He wished Lew would stop, that this would be the moment his generosity reached its limit.

“Why do you do these things for me?” Andy wanted to ask when both he and Lew stood, ready to leave, but he did not. He pocketed the list, and he and Lew parted with a hug.

*vi*

Brook was home. His hospital ID badge had been carelessly dropped on a sofa cushion. The Kansas basketball sweatshirt he wore over his scrubs was on the floor.

“Where were you last night?” Brook wanted to know.

“Ferrell’s couch.”

“What for?”

“Long story.”

“What does this look like to you?” Brook stepped into view and held up a take-out box. “An enchilada or cannelloni?”

“Don’t eat it. I can smell it from over here. It smells like dead rat.” Andy added, “You should call Ferrell.”

The Styrofoam box hit the bottom of the trashcan. “I’ll get to it.”

“When?”

“When I don’t feel so shitty. I haven’t slept in twenty-two hours.” He pressed the heels of his palms to his forehead. He looked like crap, a little sallow and in need of a shave.

“Got some late breaking news from your dad this morning at breakfast.” Maybe Andy was baiting Brook, maybe he wasn’t. That would depend on how Brook responded. The walk back to the Iberia had given Andy time to stew and feel betrayed, and he was primed to unload his anger on someone.

“What? About the house at the Lake?”

“No. But that too could be filed under the increasingly popular heading of things nobody bothers to tell me. I only meant the stuff about him almost dying last Thanksgiving.”

“He did not almost die.” When he wanted to, Brook could do eye-rolling condescension as well as anyone.

“He had a *heart attack*. If you ask me, and, granted, I’m no doctor, a heart attack is, in most cases, pretty close to dying. A hell of a lot closer than I care to get.”



“It’s taken care of. Dr. Hong has him on a comprehensive regimen. Medication. Diet. Exercise.” Brook was incapable of responding as someone other than a doctor. His father was another doctor’s patient, and as long as he had received a competent diagnosis, Brook had no reason to worry. Besides, his father was a doctor, too, and in Brook’s mind doctors were a superior, specialized type of man. The diseases they cured knew better than to try to infiltrate their bodies. It made him seem cold, and it made Andy not give a damn about him not sleeping for twenty-two hours or the boy who had died.

“That’s not the point. Could nobody tell me this before now? Could nobody tell me they’re selling the house and moving into one of those cookie cutter gated community villas at the Lake? I’m not some stranger.”

“Aren’t you?” Coming from Brook, this was a scathing rebuke made all the more potent by his insufferable calm. He said it like it was obvious, the most natural assumption. It had all the venom of a well-trained waiter pausing at a table to ask, “More coffee?” Brook had to know that for Andy, the question was excessively cruel. He did nothing without the careful weighing of consequences and anticipation of reactions. That was part of what made him an exceptional doctor.

“What does that mean?”

“Half the time nobody knows where the hell you are. It seems like you move every six months. Mom sends you a Christmas card or a birthday card, and it comes back ‘return to sender.’ One of us tries to call you, and the number is no longer in service. You graduated in December, packed a bag, and took off on New Year’s Eve without telling anybody where you were going. Mom had no idea what to think. You had lived

in her house for over a year and didn't say goodbye. She was sure you'd been smashed up by a drunk driver, kidnapped, beaten, robbed, stabbed. Then she thought you'd joined a cult or jumped off a bridge. Everything short of alien abduction. Three days later, you call up to say you made it to Tallahassee. We hear from you when it's convenient, or, in dad's case, when you need him to write a check to bail your ass out." Brook was infuriated. The only clues were his hands balled into fists at his sides. At the hospital, he was probably wound so tightly that, if a damning blood test or a bone scan came back and he found himself alone in the locker room, he banged his head against the metal doors until he opened a cut across his scalp.

There was nothing to gain by arguing with Brook because he would never allow Andy to feel like they were arguing in the first place. There was no agitation in Brook's voice and no tension in his face. "Fine," Andy conceded. "You're right. Moving to Tallahassee, I handled that badly. Everything was messed up in my head. I felt like I was losing it. I didn't know what to do."

"We all felt like we were losing it." Brook said the one thing that could not be disputed. The discussion was closed and would likely never be reopened.

Andy needed to acknowledge the boy somehow. "I lost half a million dollars once in a day." This was his attempt at empathy, and while he knew it was a crass comparison, it was all he could think of to offer.

"Yeah? How'd that feel?" Brook had given up on finding anything decent to eat and was splayed across the couch.

"Like nothing." Andy had wanted a brutal bodily reaction. "I waited a while, a few days, thinking it could be one of those delayed reaction things, but no. Still nothing.

I hoped I would puke, break out in a cold sweat, you know, or bawl my eyes out, spend a week in the fetal position, or just go flat crazy so it would start to seem real. It never did.”

“Shut the curtains,” Brook said. It was his way of letting Andy know he had no use for a story about squandered wealth. Before Andy could drag the curtains together, Brook had closed his eyes and draped an arm across his face to block the sun. At the window, Andy became engrossed in a crane sweeping the sky like clock hands. Raw materials for a new high rise swung from its hook. Below, traffic streamed along. It was just after ten o’clock now. An aproned figure came to the door at Williams-Sonoma to let in an eager pair of shoppers. A no-nonsense buyer with little use for pleasantries and can-I-help-yous bustled out of the store next door with a bag over her arm. Andy loved this, the capitalist romance of supply and demand happening around him. If it would just take him back this one last time, he would not mess it up.

### 3. FRANCIS MACOMBER

A truck from Kramer Tent and Awning parked along the street obscured Janet Kelsey's ultra-white smile on the For Sale sign. Nosed in behind it was a party rental truck. A florist's van stopped in front of the Lehmans' as Andy, carrying a bottle of wine in his arm like a baby, strode from the Sizemores', where he had left his car, toward the Van Dyne house. He passed by Ferrell's car, parked crookedly in the driveway, and went on into the open garage. He had hoped for a private reunion with Frannie before she had to become happy hostess Frannie and treat him like all the other guests. If what Brook said was true, and Andy assumed it was because the earth had not had its path around the sun altered by the unfathomable occurrence of Brook Van Dyne's first ever lie, Andy had broken whatever meaningful shards of Frannie's heart remained when he left for Tallahassee. He thought he could do whatever little odd jobs needed doing before the

party as a form of penance. But, apparently, Ferrell was here for that, and he was just going to be underfoot, occupied by the menial task of staying out of the way.

It was Friday, which meant the trash had gone out this morning. It left behind the diminishing stench of poultry, vegetable peelings, lemon rinds, and coffee grounds, which mingled with the garage's ever-present smell of Weed-B-Gon and gasoline. Only a beautiful black four-door Audi was in the garage. It had been backed in and its trunk left open. The trunk still needed unloading. Careful not to lose his hold on the bottle of wine, he looped half a dozen plastic grocery sacks over his left arm. They held the ingredients for punch: fruit juice, 7-Up, and two cartons of softening sherbet. Andy wanted Frannie to be there in the kitchen to meet him, so she could fling open her arms and cry out, "Oh! Look who's here! What a helper you are!" Frannie was not in the kitchen, though. On the island sat three more burgeoning grocery sacks. Forgetting the burden of the sacks on his arm, he stopped to stare at the room, to orient himself again. This kitchen was the place where love was made tangible in the form of waffles, grilled cheese sandwiches, and spaghetti Bolognese. The cabinets were maple, the countertops marble. An assortment of stock pots and copper pans hung from a rack above the island. There was a sturdy, weathered-looking table with a bench on one side and three shaker style chairs on the other. At the center of the table were wildflowers in an abstract vase.

He set down the bottle of wine, which he had managed not to drop. Then he freed the grocery sacks from his arm and hunched over to stash the sherbet in the freezer. When he straightened up and raised his head over the freezer door, he sensed someone else close by. Standing in the open freezer door, cold air blasting through his suit, he

turned toward the family room. A woman was worshipfully absorbing the large oil painting of two children that hung over the mantle.

“Can I help you?” He stood in the archway separating the kitchen from the family room. He had an instant to decide how he would behave and, though he knew it was petty and unwarranted, he chose to be haughty and thoroughly disapproving.

Her shoulders jumped. “No. I’m fine,” she said, facing him. She was tall, a bit gangly and gaunt. With her long auburn hair and the loops of freckles across her nose, she could be mistaken for a teenager. If he had been seeing her for the first time somewhere else he would have, without hesitation, decided that she was pretty, but not in the Madison Avenue-Hollywood sense of the word. And he would have liked her more for it. For the moment, however, her unconventional, indeterminate prettiness had no impact on him. If anything, he viewed it as an affront, a put-on. He made no effort to hide the fact that he was pointedly scrutinizing her. Her dress was red, knee-length, splashed with modest-sized polka dots—a riff on the old classic belted shirt dresses, but with a more adventurous neckline. It was a dress for circulating about the room with a tray of martinis and gathering everyone in the kitchen around the new fondue pot while the Hi Fi blared in the background. His instincts told him she was a phony; harmless, but a phony, nevertheless. He did not blame her for the phoniness. It was a survival skill that had to be honed over time if it was going to be useful. You couldn’t just half-ass your way through it, that was for sure.

She squinched her eyebrows together and gawked at him. It was the seersucker suit. People gawked at him when he wore it.

“Where’s Fran?” He sounded hostile and suspicious. He craned his neck around the archway as if Frannie might be hiding from him in the corner.

“You’re Andy, aren’t you?” She came forward and started to extend her hand, but he backed away. He clasped his hands behind him. She knew she was right. The fact that she knew his name but she was a stranger to him made him dislike her more than he did already because she dared to be in the house.

“Where’s Fran?” he asked a second time, the hostility and suspicion having multiplied.

“She and Ferrell are upstairs looking for something. Lew’s first stethoscope, I think.”

“The sherbet was melting in the trunk.” He made the statement into as damning an accusation as he could.

She gestured at the painting. “Do you know who painted this?”

“No.” He was mad at himself for answering her directly when she had repeatedly done the opposite.

“I can’t get over it, how lifelike it is.”

They were fine likenesses of children, just not of Brook and Jill. There was something simple and impish about the artist’s rendering of Brook that did not ring true. The only traits the girl shared with Jill were a single dimple, a little crater in her right cheek, and a pale dusting of freckles, though their distribution across the bridge of her nose was inaccurate. The portrait painter, whoever he was, had missed the spark of green both of them had in their eyes. He had made them brackish and ordinary.

“Meg! Meg! Meg! Come here and see this. Look at Lew! How tanned and handsome he was in Costa Rica!” Ferrell’s sandals thwacked down the stairs, and she flew into the family room holding a square color photograph between her fingers. “Andy, have you seen this? It’s Lew in the clinic he worked at in Costa Rica, right after he finished school.”

“Once, I think.”

“No wonder Fran fell for him.” She passed the photograph to Meg. “Wasn’t he so handsome then?” Ferrell asked her. Then she looked to Andy for his opinion of the picture.

Meg studied the photo for an unusually long time. It had the same effect on her as the painting.

“When did you get here?” Ferrell asked him cheerfully. She surprised him by not making a federal case out of him having come over early.

“A minute ago.”

“And you’ve met Meg, who I told you about at dinner. I thought there was a chance you already had since you’re both at the Iberia. She’s just one floor below.” Andy refused to comment on this coincidence. If Ferrell had mentioned it at dinner that night, he did not remember it. Addressing Meg Wilder, she said, “He’s the reason Brook and I couldn’t meet you in the Crossroads that one night.”

*Why is she here?* Andy asked Ferrell without speaking.

*Because I want her here. Because Frannie and Lew want her here. So quit your glowering.*

*I’ll quit glowering if, and when, I feel like it.*



They communicated in stern, darting looks. Their mutual clairvoyance was an amazing and unsettling phenomenon Andy had long wished he could dismantle and turn off for good. Years apart might have allowed it to atrophy, but no, it had only gone dormant. Thanks to this friend of hers, the phony Meg Wilder, it was activated again.

Ferrell hovered close to Meg Wilder, admiring the picture. “He and Brook have the same eyes. You’ll see it when you meet him tonight.” Ferrell was talking out of her ass. She did that when she was in giddy, girlish overdrive. Lew’s eyes were gray. They had no green spark to them. It was a trait they had inherited from Frannie. How could she not see that? Andy much preferred Ferrell’s more acidic, disagreeable moods to this more saccharine one, which she defaulted to when her restrained adult elegance became too heavy a thing to put up with. There were so many Ferrells to keep track of. The striking one he met in the restaurant before they were seated. The ironic and sarcastic one she did not bring out until Brook left them alone at the table. The hospitable one who invited him into her home. And the adolescent busybody ready to burst with anticipation for tonight’s party. He believed they were all genuine. She was not playing the part of the vivacious girl the way he still stuck to the role of the financial wunderkind, or the way Meg Wilder kept at her part, which he had not yet had a chance to identify.

Frannie swept down the stairs and into the family room holding the stethoscope by its limp rubber neck. Her platinum hair had a just-cut-and-styled smoothness to it. “I knew that was you I heard down here, Andrew.” He approved of her calling him that. It made him feel like he belonged to her. She raised up on her tip toes to hug him around his neck. “Such a snappy suit!” she said. She stroked his hair and gave him a soft phantom kiss on the cheek.

“I brought the sherbet in and put it in the freezer.” He childishly craved her praise and acknowledgment for having done something utterly unremarkable.

“I think Miss Ferrell and I got too caught up in our scavenger hunt. It hadn’t turned to soup yet, had it?”

“Not yet.”

“Then you got here right on time.”

“I thought I could spend a little time here before things get going, if that’s okay.”

“You know you can,” she said. Her warm, accepting smile faltered. It cracked into a grimace, but in a second’s time she restored the smile. The grimace said everything, however. All day, all week, all this time he had been back, she had been vacillating between anticipation and dread. He pictured her moving with furtive discretion down the aisles of the supermarket and amongst the racks of Plaza stores, certain that when she least expected, he would be there. Andy understood. She was afraid, not of him but of her life and her mind with him in them. If he was around, Jillian was near, and she had spent so many years learning how to keep her at a comfortable distance, far enough away that she could not dominate her thoughts and dreams and actions.

The doorbell chimed. “That’s the delivery man from the liquor store,” Frannie said. “He called to say he was on his way.”

“Should I take care of it?” Ferrell was already in the foyer, her hand outstretched to open the door.

“Would you, sweetheart?” Frannie answered. “Meg, go upstairs, and in my bedroom, it’s the second door on the right, I’ve set out my jewelry boxes. Pick out what

you think will look best with the silver pantsuit on the bed.” To Andy it sounded like a made-up sort of task Frannie had invented to get her out of the room. He doubted that was her intention because Frannie was dazzled by her, as star-struck as if Meg Wilder were one of her favorite actresses, like Sally Field, Sissy Spacek, or even Debra Winger. Meg Wilder looked like she had just been given a great honor and went swishing away through the foyer. It sounded to Andy as if she skipped up the stairs.

“I keep feeling like I’m not going to have everything ready in time,” Frannie told him. “Right before I went to the grocery store, I finished stringing the lights on the trellis and set the candles in the hurricane lamps. Did you know I’ve got music for tonight? Live music? The Stan Visconti Trio. It’s not very original because he turns up everywhere, but he’s the best, and Lew should have the best. They’re going to set up by the pool.” She was so animated Andy had to laugh. She set aside the stethoscope to take one of his hands between both of hers, and turned serious. “Do you know I think of you every day?”

“No,” he said.

“No?”

“I didn’t know.”

“Every, every day.” She pushed a lock of hair behind his ear. “Without you here, there are far too many leftovers in my refrigerator!” The phone in the kitchen jangled. “I have to get that. And then I have to change...and see what Meg has picked out for me...”

Through the tall row of windows extending from the floor to the ceiling of the family room, Andy watched a crew of men assemble three party tents, a bar and, around

the swimming pool, a series of round, chest-high tables where people were to set their drinks while engaging in light party talk. Ferrell was at the center of the action, supervising what did not need to be supervised. The workmen were professionals who hardly needed her watchful hovering to keep them on task, but that did not stop her from crowding in to get a closer look at the assembly of the tent that would shelter a small parquet dance floor. She tapped her index finger to her lip as if she were evaluating their work and was trying to decide if she needed to intervene and finish erecting it herself. In the back of their minds they were probably thinking, “Who does this bitch think she is?”

He backed away from the window and took in the living room for the first time. Meg Wilder and that please-notice-me polka dot dress had kept him from doing it before. Slowly, he turned until he had gone a full three hundred and sixty degrees back to where he started. On one of the shelves flanking the fireplace, there were supposed to be three beer steins, real German beer steins Lew got when they visited his brother stationed at Landstuhl. The James Herriot hardbacks and the Time Life Old West books. Where were those? A smooth driftwood carving of a heron—where had that been stashed? And there was nothing on the coffee table. There had always been something on the coffee table. The couch and chairs had been moved, not much, only a few inches, but they had been moved nevertheless. An earthenware jar with a cinnamon colored glaze. What was it doing here? It had been on the dresser in his room, and for a time he kept his spare change in it, yet today it was on Frannie’s escritoire, where it did not belong. There was something incongruous about the ornate, classic style of the desk paired with the simple craftsmanship of the jar that looked like Winnie the Pooh’s honey pot. Slick Janet Kelsey was playing those psychological realtors’ games. She had made Frannie believe that a

trio of beer steins on a shelf was going to make the difference between an eager buyer making an offer and the house being perpetually open on Sundays between one and four.

He smuggled the jar back up to his room. His tree, a solid mass of blackish green, blocked the sunlight except for two bright fingers that reached through the needles and lay across the bed. In the semi-dark, he thought how strange it was for the room to be clean and vacant. For it to seem like the room he knew, there needed to be a pair of his jeans thrown against the chair and the shams on the bed needed to be haphazardly arrayed in a failed pyramid. Their ruffles were puffed and straight, and the bedspread was remarkably taut. He thought of sitting down on it to remember how the mattress felt beneath him, but he did not want to disturb it. The room was comfortable, neither small nor large, but over time, in his imagination, it had doubled in size, so now it seemed cramped. In his mind he must have raised the ceilings too because he felt like a giant in a doll's house. The longer he stood with his elbow on the simple pine dresser, the more normal the dimensions became. He eased open the dresser's top drawer. Frannie had filled it with tablecloths and the plaid quilted runner unfurled across the dining room table at Christmastime. The petite watercolor on the balsa wood easel had returned. It was of a Mediterranean courtyard—cobblestones, potted flowers, an old bicycle, and a sliver of azure sea peeping through the chink of space between two weathered stucco buildings. Frannie's cousin had painted it. A companion to the earthenware pot, it was on the dresser the first few nights he slept in the room before it disappeared one day while he was in Lawrence going to class.

He had left behind no meaningful trace of himself that marked the room as his. There was not even a scratch on the dresser. He always treated everything in the room

with a respect greater than that he granted to most people. All he had left behind was a neon yellow V made by a highlighter gone astray on the underside of the bedspread. When he had had the chance, he should have carved his initials in the closet wall. There was, though, a beaten down path in the carpet. It covered the distance from the pine desk to the door. At the door, it continued into Brook's room. They had shuttled back and forth to compare answers to Calculus II problems. *For 17a, you got 112 for X and 4.925 for Y, right?* There had been grimmer missions too: *Is she awake? Should I go in, or not?*

The sound of high, trilling female voices made him stop mid-stride in the hall outside the master bedroom. Andy had followed the path in the carpet from his room and was heading back downstairs. Through the partially open door, he had a view of Frannie and Meg on the sunlit bed pouring over the necklaces they had dumped from the jewelry boxes onto the bedspread. The glittering mass of necklaces was like a pile of riches spilled from a treasure chest. Also within his sight was a slice of the room's décor of cream and two contrasting shades of blue. There was a sitting room with two chintz upholstered chairs and matching ottoman. Flawless seashells and all sizes of starfish filled a group of shadowboxes on the wall. A massive, ornate piece of furniture, an antique highboy, set against the wall opposite the bed, dominated the room.

"No gold, obviously," Frannie said, setting aside a pair of gold chains.

"Too dainty," Meg ruled on a necklace Frannie held up near her throat. "Better, but still not bold enough," she said of another. She rejected a third: "Too short. We want something long, something dramatic." By the inquisitive tilt of Frannie's neck, Andy could tell she trusted Meg Wilder's judgment implicitly.

“I haven’t seen that in ages!” Frannie swooned. She had in her hands a necklace Andy could not see. “Do you believe I wore that? Back then, we all thought we had to look like we were on *Dynasty*. With a necklace like that, Joan Collins had nothing on me.”

“It’s coming back in style, you know. Everything from the eighties is.” He heard a rustle of chains and the clink of beads. “Oh! This—this is the one,” Meg exclaimed. “Here.” She leaned forward to slip it over Frannie’s bowed head.

“Why don’t you wear this tonight?” Frannie slid a heavy silver bangle onto Meg’s wrist.

Andy’s heart banged against his ribcage. It wanted out. His weight was forward and compressed into his right foot. While he had listened, he had been motionless, but he had to move. When he did, the floorboards sighed. Meg, who sat facing the door, snapped her eyes up. He returned her stare and held it for as long as it took for her realize he considered her an interloper and she should not expect an apology from him. Convinced he had made his point, he tramped downstairs.

*ii*

Stan Visconti and the boys rambled through a jovial rendition of “Fly Me to the Moon” as the guests streamed into the backyard through the side gate. Brook—surprisingly effusive and prone to great gusts of laughter—was there meeting everyone, glad-handing and waving folks in the direction of the bar. Andy overheard him telling a series of risqué hospital jokes to his father’s doctor friends, old med school classmates who had take time away from their lofty posts at St. Jude’s and Cedars in L.A. just to fly out here for the party. Mindful of when to turn her adoring gaze on him, Ferrell stood by

looking like a lovely and devoted spouse. They were the most married unmarried couple Andy had ever seen. Someone commented on Brook's shaved head and Ferrell chimed in with the line about the bowling ball she used on him. Meanwhile, Meg Wilder cruised about in Frannie's wake, ready to shake hands with whoever Frannie introduced her to next. "You need to get an issue of *Round Trip*," Andy heard Frannie tell someone. "You'll love it. Tammy'd been getting it at the office for the waiting room for years and Lew had no idea."

Andy survived five torturous minutes with the Lehmans. In a true tag-team effort, they blurted out a full account of their children's lives. Pete was in St. Louis, Town & Country, to be exact. He had his own executive search firm and, to quote Bert Lehman, "it's going great guns." Sandra was running a little catering operation out of her house and her husband, Neal, was up for tenure in Champaign. Mimi shoved a wallet-sized picture of her grandchildren, four miserable runts squirming off Santa's lap, into his hand. They had been to Grand Cayman and recommended it. So expensive, but so much better than Cabo! Two days ago, Bert had had a benign growth removed from his arm, and he pushed up his shirt sleeve to show Andy the gauze pad taped to his skin as proof. The Sizemores were content to say hello and, in a meaningless way, tell him it was nice to see him again. There were several men Andy recognized from the Van Dynes' country club. The summer he worked there, he had cleaned the dirt and grass from the grooves of their irons and brought their bags to and from storage. They were not interested in him, and he was not interested in them. He said hello to Allie, Lew's nurse, and to Lois, the nurse for Dr. Gerrard, Lew's partner in their pediatrics practice. Don, Lew's older brother who had given the M.I.A. beer steins, surprised Andy with a strong embrace.



They had a superficial discussion about living in Florida and how Don was thinking of leaving Port St. Lucie for Hilton Head.

Not counting Theresa, the thirty-something soon-to-be third wife of Dr. Gerrard, Andy, Brook, Ferrell, and Meg Wilder were the only guests under fifty years of age, so they converged on two chaises near the pool that Brook pulled closer together. Ferrell and Meg drank white wine; Andy and Brook held bottles of Boulevard beer by their necks, often bringing them to their lips in unison.

Andy had been shaken by his encounter with the Sizemores, Ames and Candace. They were a couple of aging, bird-like aesthetes who looked like tonight was their first contact with fresh air after being holed up all winter in a dank, curtained room with their copies of Proust in the original French. More than that, they were utter masters of the down-the-nose, who-are-you unspoken insult. It was courtesy of the Sizemores and the particular brand of unfriendly friendliness they employed to such great effect that Andy had the epiphany he did not want to have. He did not belong here. He had hoped Frannie's unconditional acceptance would be enough to keep it at bay. From Ames he got a jocular clap on the back and a withering, "Hadn't expected to meet you here, Quinn." If Ames Sizemore had used his first name instead of the gruffly dismissive "Quinn," Andy might have been able to withstand it and go on feeling properly festive, but no. He was languishing. He was mad at himself for not having a quip ready to zing Sizemore with. He'd had nothing. And he was growing increasingly positive that he had nothing to say to anyone here, and he never had. He was the nice boy from Minnesota, Brook's roommate, Jillian's sweet boyfriend. He was a curiosity and a temporary presence in their lives, and his time was up. And if Ferrell and Brook and Meg Wilder

did not shut up soon... No, the Sizemores weren't going to get to him. He would be a spectator, a detached listener willing to be entertained by them. With that strategy, he might make it through the evening. He would sit here with his beer at the end of the chaise and wait to see what happened.

Ferrell was bubbling along, mid-story, explaining to Brook how she and Meg Wilder met in the second floor dressing room in Hall's. "I'll have to show you an issue of *Round Trip*. At the back, there's a section, an appendix, with sketches of all the clothes the Getaway Girl wore in the story, who designed them, where they came from, what they cost, so if you were in the same city as the Getaway Girl, you could go shopping where she did and maybe buy the same clothes. That's what she was doing in Halls, picking out dresses."

Brook peeled the label from his beer bottle, rolled it into a skinny tube and held it like a cigarette. He was tapping the toe of his shoe to Stan Visconti's throaty singing of "Summer Wind."

"Tell what you're supposed to do while you're here," Ferrell said, playing straight-man to Meg Wilder.

"The Getaway Girl has been given strict orders to find herself a cowboy." Meg did a proper job of conveying that she knew the concept was ridiculous.

The sound of something illogical got Brook's attention. "There aren't any." He was crashingly direct. Where did his bedside manner come from? It was rarely evident in settings like this.

"Try telling that to my editor. She's sure there are."

“Everybody west of Denver and east of St. Louis thinks that.” Brook rubbed his hand over his shaved head before thoughtfully adding, “Your editor is an idiot.”

Thinking herself quite wise and practical, Ferrell said, “I told her she’d have to wait for the American Royal.”

Ferrell was right, not that she had ever been to the livestock show down in the Bottoms.

“I’ll be long gone by then,” Meg said. “If I have to, I’ll make one up.”

“Make one up?” Brook sounded scandalized.

“Do not make the mistake of confusing the Getaway Girl with a journalist. Read the fine print, and you’ll see what I mean.”

Brook then asked Andy’s favorite question of the night: “Don’t take this the wrong way, but this is London, Paris, Rome stuff. How exactly *did* you end up here?”

“I’m here because no one expects the Getaway Girl to be here.”

That was a nice answer, but Andy had a better, truer one. He could break it down to one word: budget. Equinox was cutting deep, but she was spinning the hell out of it in hopes that she could make them believe that in a list of Rio, Athens, Amsterdam, and Kansas City, all things were equal. If Meg Wilder were here, he mused to himself, who was covering Omaha, Des Moines, Bismarck, and Little Rock?

“Do you want to know what’s amazing?” Ferrell did not wait more than a beat to forge on with the answer to the rhetorical question she posed to Brook. “Like I told Meg, my mother used to subscribe to *Round Trip*, and I would bring all her old magazines over here for Jill to look at, and the issues of *Round Trip* were her favorite. They really were. You remember how she used to have a sea of magazines around her in her bed?” There

was a kind of precious “God-rest-her-soul” intonation to Jill’s name as it escaped Ferrell’s lips. It made Andy wince.

Ferrell may as well have been nineteen again. Andy had a difficult time believing she was not, yet he had just seen her, with flawless Junior League poise, mingle amongst the Van Dynes’ little society of friends and acquaintances. He kept glancing at the streak of gray hair smoothed behind her ear to remind himself. What she was saying did not match what he heard in his mind. It was like she was in a badly dubbed film. From somewhere he had dug up an old, insignificant exchange of theirs outside an auditorium in Budig Hall. She was coming out, he was going in, and she was ready to bust with breaking gossip.

*Do you know what Dave Turley did?*

*No. I couldn’t give a rat’s ass about what Dave Turley did.*

*Well, this is what I heard from Molly Gordon, whose boyfriend’s brother was there. Just listen and find out if it’s true. Please?*

*The guy’s a total dick.*

*That’s your opinion.*

*That’s everyone’s opinion.*

*It’s not so much what he did as what he said. Supposedly...*

She had never listened to him. Not once.

Talk about Jill to whomever you want, Andy thought. Talk to Brook or Frannie or Lew or the Lehmans next door, your selfish, good-for-nothing parents, or a snub-nosed girl in one of your classes who has been hollowed out by her first experience with death. Meg Wilder, however, is unacceptable.

Ferrell came right back again with another straight-man set-up: “Tell him about Sarajevo, how you got to be the Getaway Girl. If you won’t I will.”

“I’d saved all this money, you know, birthdays, Christmases, babysitting, allowance, something like thirty-six hundred dollars. I’d gotten myself a passport, and I was going to Europe. To Paris. To do what, I don’t know. The day after I finished high school I was leaving home. Nothing was going to stop me, and I was never coming back. After 16 hours on a Greyhound bus, I was in the Newark airport, I had my ticket to Paris, and was sitting at the gate when the flight was cancelled. Mechanical problems. I must have looked incredibly pathetic because a man with an English accent waiting for his flight to Prague started talking to me, and after a while, he told me to come with him. He wasn’t kidding. He tossed me an envelope with tickets inside. One was from Newark to Prague and the other was from Prague to Sarajevo. He wrote for a travel magazine I’d never heard of, and the extra ticket was this prima donna demand of his. He always had to have two tickets because he liked having extra space and loathed making small talk with strangers. Before I said I’d go, I told him going to the bathroom, but I really went into one of those airport shops that sell books and magazines, and I found his magazine, *Round Trip*, and there he was: Graham Kelly. The fearless adventurer who got all the most dangerous assignments. I went with him because it would have appalled my mother. I thought I could fly to Prague, slip away once we landed and go on to Paris. But I liked him, so I went to Sarajevo. He was thirty-two and I was eighteen, but after a day or two, it stopped seeming strange. Every night I’d sit by the window in our room and write about where we had gone, whom we had met, in a notebook I’d brought. He asked to read it. I let him, and he said they were ‘very keen sketches.’ I wrote more and when he

was done in Sarajevo, he took me to San Diego to see his editor. I'll never forget it. Graham flung my notebook on the editor's desk like a Frisbee and said, 'You need to figure out a place to send her.' They haggled, and Graham made an idle threat about writing for another magazine. And at the time he was the undisputed star among the writers. He could be such a polite bully. Finally, the editor said, 'She can go to Moscow.' He had this idea of the innocent young girl on her own in the heart of old Cold War territory. There was danger, intrigue, and all of that. And so, that's it. That's why I am who I am. It would never happen today. The magazine is so different now. Mainly because Charlotte, the editor now, I hear she and Graham hate each other like you can't believe."

There really was no follow-up to Meg Wilder's story, and Brook did not attempt one. When he spoke next, he addressed Ferrell. "It's a party. I think we should dance. And this is a good song."

While he and Meg Wilder were by themselves sharing a chaise, Andy planned to remain taciturn and distant as he finished his beer. Done drinking it, he would stand, impersonally excuse himself, and avoid her for the rest of the evening. For a few minutes, the plan worked nicely. He sipped his beer and wondered what would have to be going on in a girl's mind for her to get on a plane with a stranger and go to, of all places, Sarajevo?

"If this was my house, I don't think I could sell it, could you?" Meg Wilder asked.

"No, I could not." Andy let himself notice her hazel eyes. They were insistent, naturally flirting, and had a life of their own she could not control.

“Which room was yours?”

“You can’t see it from here. The window’s around the side. See where the fir tree is?”

“They’re really great people, Frannie and Lew.”

“They are.” His tone implied she had made a gross understatement.

“Another drink?” she offered. He declined. She slipped off to the bar and returned with a flute of champagne for herself and a bottle of beer for him. He had not wanted it until his fingers folded around its frosted neck. Now that he had it, he gulped down half the bottle in a single, long swallow. “After San Diego, you and the Brit, how’d that turn out?” The question was a smug one. Because Ferrell had undoubtedly given Meg Wilder a thorough and biased account of his life and because, to some degree, he thought he had a right to prying and be impolite, he would push until she pushed back.

“He went to Bolivia. I went to Moscow. He didn’t need me. He’s one of those tough, independent men who covet loneliness.” Andy would never believe such men existed. He had desperately wanted to become one, but his failed attempts at it had been so thorough and frequent he did not think it could be done. “I hadn’t seen him at all until a couple of months ago. I was in London and got a suite at the Dorchester.”

“Pricey.”

“Very. And I asked him to meet me, and he did. I wanted to see what he was like, see if he still looked like the picture they kept running in the magazine.”

Andy pushed. “Correction. You wanted to sleep with him again.” She had not said anything about sleeping with Graham Kelly, but listening to her and seeing her speak about him, it was obvious to Andy that they, over the course of so many nights in their

shabby hotel room, had had an intense physical relationship, one he would have bet was the teenage Meg Wilder's first. After a comment like that, she had to loathe him in return, didn't she? A rebuke had to be coming. Offended, she would put him in his place and stomp off, and then he would be done dealing with her.

She squinted at the stream of bubbles rising in her champagne glass. "Fine," she replied brightly as she held up her right hand like she was swearing to tell the whole truth and nothing but on the slender, gold-rimmed champagne flute. "You're right. I did."

"Of course you did." He pushed again. "And?"

"It was a mistake. I have a flair for stupid things like that." She turned Frannie's silver bangle round and round her wrist. "I topped it with an even bigger and stupider thing, though: going to New Zealand and unwittingly having an affair with a married man, which means a significant part of the Southern hemisphere is ruined for me forever. Worse, I'll never be able to look at, let alone eat, a kiwi again." It was forced humor that fell flat. Its failure made her real to him. There was a chance he was judging her too harshly, so he decided not to push her anymore.

Her hand held the empty champagne flute away from her in anticipation of a roving waiter who would take it away. She panned the entire backyard scene and fixed on Frannie and Lew, who were holding hands. Andy did too. The flattering candlelight from the hurricane lamps made them and everyone else beautiful. The Van Dynes were a matched set—the same height, the same shape, the same round faces. To look at them together would be almost enough to convince any black hearted cynic that, out there in the screwed up world, was one person made exactly for one other person. A pang of envy hit Andy squarely in his gut. He had gotten off course, fallen behind. At Andy's



age, Lew Van Dyne had been married for half a decade. He had a son, a daughter was on the way, and his medical practice was beginning to thrive. From his banker father-in-law, he was about to inherit money that would help him buy this house.

“Meg. What’s that short for? Megan?” Andy had to say something to hold off the surge of potent melancholy.

“Margaret,” she said, without turning from the revelry. Her hazel eyes were wide and round. She was devouring it. “Only my mother called me that when I misbehaved, which meant she called me Margaret all the time.”

At the edge of the dance floor, Brook and Ferrell were doing a self-conscious box step at odds with the beat. Their expressions were blandly happy. He was talking and she was nodding. In the midst of his talking, they bungled their steps and laughed uneasily at themselves. Their brows were furrowed as they thought their way through their steps. Ferrell stole glances at her high heels. To hide the fact he had again moved in the wrong direction, Brook twirled her around. When they came back together, they were loose in each other’s arms.

“I think we should give it a try.” Meg Wilder was inviting him to dance, but for a second, Andy thought she was suggesting they try to be like Lew and Frannie just to experience it for a few moments themselves. “Just one song.”

He stood and let her lead the way around the tables and into the knot of dancing couples inside the tent. On the dance floor, they did not speak. The song was up-tempo, rollicking. Every few beats Stan Visconti sang, “Goody, goody.” Her movements were lithe and confident. Her hips swam in languid figure eights. She raised her arms over her head, sending the enamel bracelets on one arm clanking together and skidding down to

her elbow. The full, pleated skirt swished about her legs. His own movements had no fluidity. He dipped in one shoulder, then the other like he was doing the Hokey-pokey. (That's what it's all about!) He clomped his saddle shoes to the parquet and twisted jerkily from side to side. He had no idea what he was supposed to do with his hands, so, from time to time, he smacked them together in a random clap. She deserved a better partner. The hazel eyes were chasing after him relentlessly. They wanted his attention. Without question, they were imminently capable of attracting a married man, and a lonely globe-trotting thrill-seeker who spotted them in a mirthless airport terminal stood no chance against them. Andy was forgetting he disliked her. To remind himself, he glowered at her, really glowered at her. All he could see before him were the shadowy black lines of his own eye lids. But she would never know because she had closed her eyes to feel the plunking of the double bass resonate in her bones.

During the polite applause at the end of the song, Brook and Ferrell sidled up to them.

“We’re cutting in,” Brook said reluctantly.

“Yes,” Ferrell insisted, “time to switch.” Already she had wedged herself between him and Meg Wilder. Had it been anyone else’s idea other than her own, Ferrell would not have been half as enthusiastic. She took the liberty of positioning one of his hands on her hip and the other on her shoulder. He did not want to touch her. There was a lingering hint of perspiration left over from her time outside this afternoon that her perfume could not disguise. He did not mind it. They moved with the constipated agony of middle schoolers at their first mixer in the gym. Of course, it was a slow song, “Moonlight in Vermont.” It was a favorite of Lew’s, and it might have had the power to

reduce Andy to tears if, when he played it on the turntable in the den, Lew did not always sing along with such operatic bravado that it became a source of comedy for him and Brook.

“You really are the worst dancer ever,” she said. Because he refused to lead her, they were not doing anything more than swaying listlessly. “Believe it or not, once he’s had a couple of drinks—drinks, you know, not beers—Brook’s amazingly decent.”

“Huh. He doesn’t seem like much of a dancer.”

Abruptly, Ferrell got to her point, the crux of this cutting in business. “Say you like her.” She blinded him with her most radiant smile. He felt oppressed by it.

“What?”

“Say you like Meg,” she insisted.

“I don’t know Meg.”

“Just say it,” she pleaded, picking at an imaginary cloud of lint on his lapel. He shooed her hand away, but she persisted. “There’s no good reason for you not to like her.”

“Why? What difference does it make what I think? If I said I did like her, shouldn’t that be reason enough for you to ditch her on the spot?”

Ferrell groaned. “Don’t be a party pooper.”

In a joyless monotone, he relented. “Fine. I like Meg Wilder. I said it. Now drop it.”

“But you didn’t mean it.” She slumped and sulked in his arms. Spoiled girl, he thought.

“Of course I didn’t mean it! How can I like somebody I don’t know?”

“Well, the rest of us like her.”

“I got that.”

“It would be more fun if you did too.”

She lowered her eyes and gave up badgering him. She hid from him beneath her thickened lashes. Her chin tilted up from his shoulder to see the bassist play another of his lazy plunk-plunk-plunking solos. She was distracted enough that if he just applied the slightest pressure to her back, she would slide in closer to him. He feared doing it inadvertently, so he relaxed his hand. That way it barely met the fabric of her blouse. As extra insurance, he put another inch of distance between them. Stan picked up where the bassist left off. They were going to play “Moonlight in Vermont” for the rest of the evening, past the time the last guests, full of shrimp cocktail, sheet cake, and liquor, trudged to their cars parked in the curve of the cul-de-sac.

Meg and Brook had drifted to the opposite end of the floor, not that it was any great distance to travel. They were cracking each other up. Then they went into a mode of mock seriousness, and that cracked them up again. She gave him a joking push with her fingertips. Once more they feigned seriousness. They weaved back toward him and Ferrell, picking their way through the moving obstacle course of other couples and smiling apologies at anyone they might have accidentally knocked against.

Mercifully, Stan’s solo was ending. He pulled the microphone toward his mouth in preparation. If Andy had not have been watching he would not have realized that one of Stan’s hands had left the keys so he could take a sip from his glass of ginger ale set on a stool just within his reach and wipe his brow with a towel he wore over his shoulder. The whole sequence took less than half a minute. Any second, his coarse, but pitch

perfect voice would overtake them, and Andy would be home free. Andy and Ferrell were shoulder to shoulder with Meg and Brook now. Brook cued Andy by raising his eyebrows. When Stan came back in, waxing nostalgic about fallen leaves and sycamores, Brook and Andy, in their best imitations of Lew Van Dyne's clear tenor, came in too. They closed their eyes and sang with great conviction. Andy waved his hands like a conductor leading the band. They were being stared at, but that was okay. It was a party and the singing was their own special tribute to Lew. They held the final note longer than Stan held his. Theirs drowned out the shimmering tremolo signaling the song's conclusion. Meg vigorously applauded them. "Oh, bravo!" she exclaimed with sarcastic admiration. Her phoniness was most blatant when she laughed then because she laughed as if she had been in the house when Lew's voice reverberated through its every room. *You don't know. You don't know anything!* A searing hostility flared up in Andy. He had to get away from her.

He bolted for the bar and demanded another beer from the bartender. He downed it with no effort. "Another?" the bartender asked.

"Scotch on the rocks," Andy said.

"Yes, sir."

He waited and grew impatient as the bartender opened a fresh bottle of scotch. He convinced himself Meg Wilder had come up behind him. He whipped around to confront her, but she was not there. She was all the way over near the diving board. Something about the fabric of her dress made the white polka dots shine. The quirky, unconventional free spirit—the packaging was too perfect. She joined Frannie and Lew, nudging in between them. Frannie hugged her shoulders. The Sizemores, Dr. Gerrard,

nubile Theresa, and two other couples soaked up her wisdom on the best hotels along the French Riviera. Candace Sizemore asked if she had ever been in Cannes during the film festival. That was the only time Meg had been there, and it was more of a pain than anything, she said. “But if you had to pick a spot anywhere in the world for a honeymoon, where would it be?” Theresa wanted to know.

He did not catch her answer because cutting through the opening bars of “Luck Be a Lady” was Mimi Lehman’s knowing lisp. They, she and a woman whose dress was too low cut for someone her age, were on his left hand side. “As far as I know they’ve gotten several looks but no serious offers. We, Bert and I, think they’d get a much better response if they had gone \$150,000 lower since they’ve never finished off the basement.” After he stuffed a five-dollar bill into the snifter at the corner of the bar, Andy took his drink and headed for the chaises where the four of them had sat before. Other guests had taken them over, so he wandered about and ended up back near the tented dance floor. He was close enough to Stan Visconti to read the set list propped up on his electric keyboard. It was where sheet music should have been, but Stan Visconti did not use sheet music. Neither did his drummer nor his bassist. That was the life, right there. Stan Visconti had it made playing crowd-pleasing standards for a living. Everyone loved him. Applause, even the tepid pattering from a wedding reception, kept his ego alive. So long as he charged a reasonable fee and showed up on time, he had not a single ethical dilemma to wrestle with. He was immune from the mania of *more*, of bigger, fatter dividend checks.

“Luck Be a Lady” became “The Way You Look Tonight,” and in the four intervening beats of silence while Stan Visconti took another drink from his glass of

ginger ale, Meg Wilder's young, clear voice rang out over everyone's. "Coolum, on the Sunshine Coast, is spectacular." All of the gray-haired, paunchy, liver-spotted men had fallen for her hard. They were wondering where she was when they were her age. She flipped her hair back over her shoulder. Someone said something about the dress that caused her to do a little ballerina turn, which she followed up with a deep curtsy everyone thought was too charming.

The party rambled on. The drinking was measured, the mood mirthful and celebratory. No one seemed to be there just to fulfill some tired obligation. An impromptu roast of Lew broke out among his doctor friends and golfing buddies, but these were loving and good natured tributes. They said nothing needling or cruel, but their punch lines were well timed so everyone knew exactly when to clap and howl. There were toasts and several more rounds of storytelling. Everyone took a turn. Some of the stories were all exaggeration and meant to entertain, but others were heartfelt, and at these, Lew Van Dyne cried. Little by little the party's energy, its refined jubilation, faded into the night. Before long, a sweeping quiet overtook the neighborhood. Andy, Ferrell, Meg Wilder, and the three Van Dynes were all who remained. They were stretched out on lounge chairs around the pool to reflect on the evening. Suddenly, Frannie held up her arms and declared, "Don't anybody move!"

She brought gifts out from the house. Beaming a terrific smile at her husband, she padded toward him in her spangled sandals. First, she presented Lew with a box wrapped in shiny blue paper. Inside the box was a book—a not very new looking book, one that if it was opened too recklessly would drop its pages the way a tree in autumn

drops its leaves on the lawn. It was a first edition of Hemingway short stories. How much did a thing like that cost?

“Oh! But there is more!” Frannie exclaimed. “First, you must know that I, incorrigible Frannie, have been a killjoy for thirty years. For thirty years I’ve fallen asleep next to that man while he studies his brochures and his wildlife guides, his *National Geographics*, and I’ve been steadfast and stubborn and said no in some of the most polite and loving ways you can imagine.” She dangled a leopard print gift bag in front of her husband’s eyes until he snatched it from her. He fiddled with the tissue paper, and Brook exhorted him to hurry up. Lew’s bewilderment at the touch of a plush zebra’s synthetic fur against his hand turned to jubilation when he read the card around its neck and understood what it meant. Frannie’s homemade ticket cut from construction paper said ADMIT 2 TO AFRICA. All the arrangements had been made. Off they would go, the two of them, the second week of September.

“Frances,” he said. “You didn’t.”

“I did. I certainly did.” Her voice leapt excitedly. She had her hands together beneath her chin as if she were praying.

“Did you all know about this?” Lew asked. None of them had an inkling. He took up the Hemingway book, opened it gingerly, and announced, “To commemorate this unexpected and fantastic gift from my wife, I want you to hear these words.” With his face and the words on the page illuminated by the dimming mesquite embers in the fireplace, he began at the beginning of a story about a man and his wife on a safari. He did not so much read it as perform a dramatic recitation.



Andy knew the story. He had only ever read it once, but that one time had been enough for him to feel that certain passages had been permanently fused to his identity. Lew had slipped a paperback copy of Hemingway stories into his backpack the morning he left for his internship. On the overnight flight from London to Hong Kong, while everyone else slept, he turned the light on over his seat and read the book. In college he had tested out of both of the required English classes, which meant he had not read a book that qualified as literature since high school. He did not know how to read for pleasure, so he had approached the stories like they were a school assignment. He had planned to read them just closely enough to have an opinion when Lew quizzed him on what he thought. He started with the three- or four-page shorter stories. The ones about young men going to war and either coming home or dying unglamorously, and those about them futilely loving a woman and succumbing to fear and weakness, made him uncomfortable. He read until there were only two long stories left. He had been tired and did not care to read anymore, but these were really the ones he needed to read, the ones Lew admired most, the Africa stories, the safari tales. The words "Short Happy Life" were in one of the titles. Given Jill's situation, there could be, he had thought, something to learn in a story with a title like that, and it turned out to be about a weak man, with a preening, hateful wife, who could not kill a lion. He read until the hateful, unrepentant wife went to the guide's tent and slept with him. He got to that part and could not read anymore. He had closed the book and tried to get himself excited for his first glimpse of the Hong Kong skyline at dawn. He could not make himself feel anything. There was nothing to do but listen to everyone around him snoring freely. To pass the time, he reluctantly

finished the story and the ending proved a devastating disappointment. It didn't seem fair that Hemingway wouldn't let Francis Macomber enjoy glory and redemption.

Andy returned to the bar to pour himself a drink. The bartender was gone and he had the run of the leftover liquor. Carrying his glass, he paced the length of the pool. He stopped at his chair to wrestle with his jacket. Without setting down his drink, he contorted himself to jerk the sleeves free of his arms. His frustration escalated into an inane physical comedy when he hurled the coat down on the chair and began to pull his tie over his head, where it stuck for a moment like a blindfold over his eyes. He dropped it on the coat, where it lay coiled like a snake. He sat down on the cushion and tried to still himself. The band had left too soon. He needed it to strike up one more Sinatra standard to distract him from Lew, who knew how to put just the right amount of charmingly subtle malice in the voice of the guide, that cocky son-of-a-bitch, Robert Wilson. There was no way he could read the whole damn story. The thing was maybe twenty-five pages long. They would be out here until three in the morning. Surely, at some point, Brook would cut him off. It would be curt, ("Hey, dad, let's wrap it up, okay, or you're not going to have a voice tomorrow.") and with everyone so tired, it would sound a bit rude, but no one would care. They would be too thankful to care.

Soon, Andy was up again, going for yet another drink. A tall wave several stories high was cresting over his head as he dumped bourbon into his glass. He felt the wave rising into a mammoth arc. It was suspended above him until he choked down the bourbon in one violent swallow and clapped the glass down against the bar. The wave broke as the liquor funneled down his throat. With that swallow, he had, at last, crossed over into drunkenness, and he was glad. He had been waiting for it and growing

impatient because it was taking so long. The force of the wave split all of his thoughts apart at their seams. They became loose, tattered threads and then mere molecules—bits of fiber—so tiny he doubted they could be put together again. He hoped not because he did not much like any of the thoughts he was having about Ferrell or Meg Wilder or Lew. Lew, though, was reading, reading, and turning a page without breaking the rhythm of a sentence, and he was not aware of Ferrell rising from her lounge chair to confront Andy.

“Whatever it is you’re doing, you need to stop.” She hissed at him and blocked his path. “Do not ruin this.” Andy responded by knocking back more bourbon straight from the bottle and taunting her with a devil’s smile.

He elbowed past her. On the way back to his chair, he used his diluted energy to do what he had done each morning on his walk from the apartment on Tennessee Street to the TD Waterhouse office on Mass. He used his posture, his gaze, and his gait to assume the demeanor of what he considered to be “the Man of Purpose.” He could tell by his reflection in the pool when he had gotten it right. To be effective, the Man of Purpose required a degree of poise he could not sustain for more than a few labored steps. He shed it all at once, and because his depth perception had left him, he zigzagged into one of the waist-high tables. Luckily, he did not hit it head-on. That would have meant Brook doing triage in the kitchen with dish towels, folded squares of Bounty, and masking tape from the junk drawer, followed by a certain trip to the emergency room. Rather, it was a glancing blow he hardly felt, but it was enough to make the table teeter and enough to make the hurricane lamp come dangerously close to shattering against the flagstones.

Meg Wilder, passively ensconced in her chaise, was tracking his movements. Andy looked directly at her. She looked back. The polka dots on her dress congealed. They were stripes. She was dressed like a candy cane. Her mouth twitched. It twitched again, and this time it curled at one corner into a wry and sympathetic half-smile. Once she, too, had suffered a minor, or even major, crack-up. (Was it the married man in New Zealand?) She rested her chin in her cupped hand and continued to smile part of a smile. Suddenly, he was bonded to her in a way her burgeoning friendship with Ferrell could not match. He would be lying if he said he did not find that to be wholly rewarding. When all else failed, his job in life was to provoke Ferrell's most destructive jealousies, and it was, according to the remote portion of his brain that maintained a tenuous sobriety, happening. It was beginning all over again. Say you like her. Say it. Say it. Say it. He did. The half-smile from across the pool cinched it.

*iii*

He came to in the passenger seat of his car, a gummy tentacle of drool stuck to his chin. The first thing he saw was a blinding explosion of white polka dots on a red background and a lightly tanned arm wreathed in bracelets. His eyes stung, and focusing on any one object too long made it worse. Meg Wilder had driven him home in his car, and they were parked in the curve of the Iberia's half-moon driveway. A hazy memory of Brook loading him in like he was a toddler in a car seat took shape and instantly disintegrated. He panicked and demanded his tie. It was not around his neck or in the backseat.

"It's pink and expensive. I need it."

"I think you left it at the party."

“It’s Pink Panther pink,” he insisted.

“You’ll get it back. You can go get it tomorrow.”

He was only temporarily appeased. With nothing more to say that would bring back his tie, he raged against Ferrell. “Ferrell said she’d be a bitch, and tonight she was a bitch. She thinks she’s like my conscience. Always has. Since— She’s all adult, all mature, a teacher. *Ferrell Nash* is a *teacher* after all the dumb shit she used to do, all because she had this body she didn’t know what to do with. Whenever I introduced her to anybody, I used to say, ‘just so there’s no confusion, that’s F-E-R-R-E-L-L, not F-E-R-A-L.’ That pissed her off like you can’t believe.” Andy kept going: “I hate that story. I hate it. I hate it. I can’t believe he did that. He made us listen to him read it.”

“What’s wrong with it?” Meg wanted to know. “It seemed like a good story. I wish I could have heard the rest.”

“She kills him, shoots his brains out.” To mimic the firing of a gun, Andy smacked the dashboard with his palm. “The whore wife just shoots him. He was a weak, worthless prick, and right when he figures out how not to be such a weak, worthless prick, she shoots him.” Then, he stopped raving and asked: “Why are we still sitting here?”

Andy made it through the lobby and into the elevator with only a nudge from Meg to get him into the revolving door on the first try. He looked wretched. The elevator’s fluorescent light did him no favors. Nor did the seersucker pants. He had gone from being an irrepressible dandy to a clownish drunk. The saddle shoes made his feet look enormous. A small speaker in the corner emitted grating Muzak, a whining nasal saxophone buoyed by airy orchestral accompaniment.

“Fleetwood Mac,” Andy said laconically, without her having to ask. “Gypsy.”

He barely made it out of the elevator before the doors glided shut and it descended toward the lobby. “This is six. This is my floor,” Meg said. “You have to go up one more.”

“I’m being a gentleman. I’m seeing you safely to your door.” He staggered along behind her. Enamored with the serpentine pattern of lines in the carpet, he walked with his head down. His keys jingled happily in his palm.

She paused in the hall to remove her own key from the little black clutch she carried all evening, but just as she did, Andy gripped her arm. He stumbled into her. She collided with the wall, hitting her head. He was strong, but unsteady. Her feet slid out of her sandals and, vaguely, he felt his shoe crunch her bare toes. The teeth of his keys gouged at her side. The raised texturing of the walls scraped both of their knuckles. Once the immediate jolt died away, he felt himself kissing her. He had muscled her against the wall, but the way he kissed her was more ardent than angry, the release of so much pent up longing. He wheezed, and then he shuddered. A spasm passed through his shoulders and he stumbled back. His knees locked. He tipped forward, but Meg Wilder caught him. To keep him on his feet, she had no choice but to hold him. He hugged her too, and for a minute they remained in an uncomfortable embrace, his face crushed to hers. She pushed against him with her shoulder. She could not hold him up any longer. Timidly, he shuffled his shoes back and stood on his own. He saw the torn skin across the back of her hand. “You slammed into the wall. You hit your head,” he said, anguished and disbelieving. They couldn’t be allies anymore. “That’s not what I

meant to do.” He took one of the belt loops of her dress between his thumb and forefinger. “I can get you a band-aid. Brook’s a doctor. He has band-aids.”

She moved his hand away. A streak of her lip gloss was above his lip. It was a wet and sticky blotch beneath. Its scent made him want to sneeze.

“Please,” he said, fingering the belt loop again.

“Maybe you shouldn’t touch me,” Meg said.

“Okay,” he agreed. “I never do this. I mean, I’ve never done this. I promise.”

Down the hall, the elevator, having made another arduous climb to the sixth floor, dinged, and the doors dragged open. They stood up straight and tried to seem normal so whoever came toward them would assume they were just a couple back from a date, anxious to get out of the hallway and into the bedroom. They waited, but no one came, and the elevator doors dragged shut and they were still there in the hallway.

“I want to tell you something,” Andy said.

“Not tonight.”

He stared again at her scraped hand, so she hid it behind her back. “I probably can’t tell it right anyway,” he conceded. But he started up again, forgetting that he had said he would not tell the story. It was pressing so hard, crowding out all his other thoughts. He just had to say it. “I used to stay out all night in Hong Kong. We went to these wild clubs, like insane wild, all of these girls, and these scary thug guys in the back room.” Why had this been so important? Andy could not figure out any link between what he was saying and what he had done a moment ago. If he could only think clearly, it would make sense. But somehow, as he was talking, Eva from the fake Irish pub had been spliced into the action. She was in Hong Kong. She was one of the girls on the

dance floor who wanted to please a young American man like him. She was there for an instant, beckoning him, *don't be shy*, and then she disappeared. "I was afraid they'd kill us, just kill us for no reason if I was dancing with the wrong girl."



#### 4. THE NEW COVENANT

Of all the paintings in the Nelson, Jill's favorite was a Monet, *Boulevard* something. Boulevard of—it was a kind of monkey. Boulevard of Monkeys, Andy used to call it to get a quick rise out of her. *Boulevard des Capucines*. Jill could say it with a perfect semester-at-the-Sorbonne accent. It was a nice enough painting, but not really his thing. But Monet knew how to do a dreary, drab winter day in Paris so you could almost feel a cold mist against your face as you stared into the scene. It was all gray and brown. Old buildings and bare trees. Black carriages, black coats, and black top hats on faceless Frenchmen. On the right side of the canvas, though, not far from the bottom, was a vendor standing along the street with a bunch of pinkish orange balloons in his hand. From across the gallery, the balloons looked like a mistake, like they were just floating blobs of color. It was almost like a kid had gotten hold of Monet's palette and started

making orange fingerprints just for the hell of it. Somewhere an art history grad student had probably written a thesis about those damned balloons. What did they mean? Why were they there? Jill could never exactly tell him what the big deal was, why that painting did something to her that Monet's wall-sized water lilies or Van Gogh's olive orchard could not. All she could say was "I always think I can hear the carriage wheels on the street."

Andy, in his peripheral vision, saw a radiant splotch of orange near the church steps as he made the pain in the ass cut across move at Sixty-third Street to get from the southbound lanes of Ward Parkway to the northbound lanes that ran past the limestone gothic church. Boulevard of Monkeys was his first thought. The orange splotch was a dress. It was Meg Wilder's dress, and with it she wore an enormous disc of a straw hat. Brook had said nothing about her when he shambled in yesterday, red-faced and sweat drenched after his morning run, to deliver a message from Frannie. "While I'm thinking of it, you're supposed to come to church tomorrow. Mom says so." Andy, uninterested in getting out of bed, must have had a spaced-out look on his face because after a moment of waiting for a response, Brook added, "Easter, you know?"

Honestly, he did not know. Yes, the larger than life fiberglass Easter bunnies, the boy bunnies in checkered jackets and the girl bunnies in long dresses fluffed with petticoats, loomed over pedestrians on the Plaza street corners. He went right past the one named Lee and the one named Ellyn on his way to work each morning. Andy was not anticipating Easter, and he had no plans of celebrating it, but Brook did not need to cajole him or bribe him to come—not that he would have anyway. Although Andy never felt the slightest twinge of spiritual yearning, he had always enjoyed the family rituals of

Sunday, getting dressed, tying his tie, driving in from Lawrence only half hung over, piling into the backseat of Lew's car, shaking hands with the greeters inside the church's doors, nodding to ushers, parading down the sanctuary's center aisle before settling into the usual pew in the exact same order every week.

The crowd from the earlier service streamed out through the doors and down the steps, where it clogged together in a great cataract of pastels, spring-hued madras plaids, floral prints, and linen. People had to alter their paths to avoid Meg Wilder's hat. As the pipe organ blasted the final victorious chords of the postlude, the pastors, in their billowing robes and cross embroidered sashes, stood in the middle of the sidewalk, shaking hands, and accepting compliments for another glorious Easter service. Children, some with flop-eared bunnies under their arms, chased one another across the lawn.

Everyone was there, huddled near the steps and waiting for him: Frannie decked out in one of her well-tailored pants suits, Lew sporting a bow tie, Brook looking nautical in his dark blazer and open collared shirt, Ferrell sensibly accessorized and coordinated. "Where's the board meeting?" he wanted to ask her. She was reserved, intimidating, and elegant, but there was none of that old heat emanating from her. It used to be that he would walk by her and feel a blast of hot energy—a potent combination of her jealousy, antipathy, and roiling sexuality. To stand near her and feel nothing unsettled him. This morning, Meg Wilder eclipsed her. Against the stone exterior of the church the dress' color was almost too bright. The shade of orange was no more subtle than a traffic cone. She did not have on a single piece of jewelry, not even a watch. It was all the dress and the hat. They were both simple, just stiff cotton and woven straw, but together they were audacious. She looked like a trainer's wife on Derby Day at Churchill Downs.

“You remember Meg, don’t you?” Frannie asked as Andy stooped to kiss her cheek.

“Good morning.” He sort of bowed to her. He had no idea why. Andy did not know what he was supposed to do with himself in her presence, especially with the rest of them, Easter-happy and ignorant, standing right there. Before he could look her in the face, he glanced at her hands, as if, after this many days, there would be evidence of their time in the hallway, maybe the discolored stamp of a bruise, the harsh line of a scratch, or reddened, broken skin. From what he could see of them, her hands were perfect. Since then he had only seen her once. As he walked to work one morning, he had spotted her at the counter of a coffee shop trying to squeeze honey from a sticky bottle into what must have been a cup of tea while talking on her phone. She had been too occupied to notice him.

The sanctuary smelled of extinguished candles. There were potted white lilies everywhere, lining the aisles, surrounding the pulpit, and fronting the altar. The altar and pulpit were adorned with swags of brilliant white cloth. There was no good place for Meg to put the hat. With Easter bringing out even the most wayward parishioners, every inch of the pew would be needed, so it could not be set beside her. She had to position it on the floor beneath the pew and hope that none of the antsy kids who had escaped a morning in Sunday school sat behind her and stepped on it in their dress shoes.

“Are you not speaking to me?” she asked Andy once they were settled side by side in the pew.

“I don’t know what I could say. Any requests?” Andy hated being glib, but he was cursed with a talent for noxious glibness in the moments he was most insecure and

apprehensive. He reverted to it every time, and it had gotten him in trouble during the lawsuits. People—including his lawyer—had thought he did not take the situation seriously enough.

“I got your note.” She feigned interest in the church bulletin as she spoke. “Both of them. The second one was overkill.”

“Probably. I thought that when I put it under your door.” He also pretended to be immersed in the bulletin’s list of church activities. (*Youth Group Bowling This Wednesday at 6:30. Bring a Friend!*)

Those notes of his were not eloquent. The sentences were disjointed and awkwardly spaced on sheets of Driscoll & Associates letterhead. The first one was silly and stilted: *I am writing to express my sincerest regret...* The funniest thing about them was the way he signed his name—Andrew J. Quinn—in large capital letters. It was like he used his full name in case she was expecting a note from someone else who, in a drunken, despairing moment, also had manhandled her into a wall, bit her lip, and jabbed his keys into her side.

There was the sound of the pews crackling in unison as they were relieved of the weight of bodies squeezed too tightly together followed by the rush of fabric touching fabric. Linen meeting cotton. Sports coats meeting dresses meeting lightweight sweater sets. Everyone was up, hymnals in hand. Everyone was singing. No one needed the words just yet. Not until they reached the second verse. So many hymnal pages turning made a very real breeze along the row. Andy, gripping the back of the pew in front of them, surveyed the sanctuary, the kaleidoscope colors of stained glass shadows on the carpet and the wall, the backs of heads that gently bobbed along to the hymn. Lew’s

gregarious tenor rang out above the voices around them but still melded with Frannie's fearless but imperfect alto. Brook sang with his eyes closed. With her finger, Ferrell tracked the verses word by word across the page of her hymnal. Her voice was clear and sweet, but halting, like she did not want anyone to hear her miss a note. After the first verse, the words of the refrain came easily to Meg Wilder and she sang out unafraid. She was not a gifted singer, but she did not care. Part of him wanted to sing, if only because he did not like being the only one who was not. His silence exposed him as a non-believer, and in this room that fact brought on a nagging discomfort he used to be able to manage with finesse. If he tried, could he believe it? Most likely not. He was programmed for an upright and pragmatic faithlessness that did not let him down, and he was not courageous enough to give it up.

The funny thing was that he was sure he knew the Bible as well or better than these people around him who showed up every Sunday, year after year after year, to listen to the sermons when they weren't trying to patch together the disparate parts of the very strange dream they had had in the night or trying to choose where they would go for brunch. Andy knew about the paralytic man who was told to take up his mat and walk; the bleeding woman; the man with leprosy who was to go and show himself to the priest, but tell no one; Peter's mother-in-law who had a fever; the blind men; the mute possessed by demons; the man with the shriveled hand; the lame and the crippled brought by the crowds to the mountain; the young boy with seizures. He knew the jumble of words that formed the Apostle's Creed and the Lord's Prayer. Because he had heard it every Thursday evening through his bedroom wall, he knew the communion liturgy in its entirety. *This is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many for the*

*forgiveness of sins...* The woman who had come weekly to Jill's bedside with a small roll of bread and a bottle of Welch's grape juice wrapped in a white linen napkin inside a wicker basket was sitting across the aisle, four rows ahead of them. She had effortlessly prayed aloud long, extemporaneous prayers, and in her pocket she had carried a vial of anointing oil, plus, every once in a while, a second vial of murky water from the Jordan River. Her name was Shirley Bennett and she had not changed. She still had a puffy white cloud of hair and a pair of reading glasses on a chain around her neck. She sang out with all her might and did not need her hymnal. He had never been able to make eye contact with her. Even today, he did not think he could do it.

He stared down the carved crucifix hanging behind the altar. There was no visible pain despite His pierced side. His heavy lidded eyes were closed and turned down toward the carpet. He was peaceful. Jesus was napping there. Don't wake Him! He was sinewy, with great veins in His arms. He had the physique of someone who did a decent thirty minutes worth of cardio five times a week followed by a few reps with free weights. He'd be a scrappy player in a pick-up game. His fitness and tranquility struck Andy as fraudulent. This was not what Mary saw from where she stood. Her son could not possibly have looked like that. But she had seen it! John said so. (Another thing he knew.) How could she have watched? He had often told himself that he was hurt and upset because he was not allowed to stay in her room those last few hours. That was not true. He had not protested or tried to change her mind. He dutifully left. He went and crouched down in a tiny space between the wall and the bed in his room and occupied himself by thinking of old song lyrics until someone came to tell him it was over. He'd had Joan Jett on a continuous loop. *Put another dime in the jukebox, baby.* That was all

he could think to do as he watched the branches of the evergreen tree, blown by a southern gale, play peek-a-boo with the scorching sun. To himself, he sang the Joan Jett song to the tune of *Christ the Lord is Risen Today*, keeping the Alleluias in their place.

Finally, there was a breathless Amen and he could sit. During the last verse everything in his stomach sloshed to one side and his breakfast climbed up his throat because he had begun to toy with the possibility that coming back here was an overreaction. He should have stayed in Lawrence. He could have quit TD Waterhouse and done something else. The nicer restaurants on Mass. Street, the ones where kids took their moms and dads on Parents Weekend, usually needed waiters. He could have given sales a try, office equipment or something. Right now, he could be back in that drafty apartment with the sporadically hot water, the dead bolt on the door that did not lock all the way, and the families of industrious spiders. He would not even be out of bed yet. If she stayed on a Saturday night, they were never out of bed before noon. They roughhoused and then made love like they meant it. She filed her nails, and he did sit-ups on the floor in his underwear. Then, depending on their moods, they might start all over again until she declared it time for them to get in the shower, where they stayed until the hot water ran out. From the shower, she streaked back to the bed, crying. "I don't want to get dressed. Let's not get dressed today." She would dive onto the bed and lie on her stomach and read from her history of broadcast journalism textbook while her hair dried in black waves. None of it meant anything. Every weekend brought the same routine, and it meant nothing, but he looked forward to it anyway because her youth, her energy and tenacity, her fine skin that flushed so easily helped him forget it meant nothing and that it was far too late for it to start meaning something. In the middle of the



afternoon, when she left for the library and he stayed behind to pick the quilt up off the floor, straighten the sheets and tuck them back under the mattress corners, he had one thought: *I don't miss her. If she never came back, I would not miss her.*

The choir sang something solemn and partially in Latin. In accompaniment, the organist played unpleasant, dissonant chords. There was a momentous pause, and when the anthem resumed, it turned triumphant and celebratory. Beside him, Meg Wilder attentively followed the phrasings of the soprano soloist. She had goose bumps from her shoulders to her wrists. He could erase them all with a pass of his hand across her skin. Ferrell and Brook and Frannie and Lew and Shirley Bennett and the ancient little man in a wheelchair at the end of the front row and the Lehmans and twin boys he saw discreetly socking each other during the hymn and the pastors seated adjacent to the pulpit and the white-robed acolytes listened too.

What if he skipped dinner and drove to Lawrence? She did not go back to Lake Forest for Easter. She shared an apartment with three of her friends on Kasold. He could show up and ask for her. (Did he know the number? 17D? 17E? 17G?) That would shock her friends. Among them he had a kind of kingly status that fed his ego, kept it alive, actually. They were awed and jealous of her because of him—the slightly older man who lived in the real world. Once a month or so, a couple of them were in a Mass. Street sandwich shop when he came in, dapper in his suit, to order lunch. They put their heads together and murmured about him and tried not to let on they were eyeing him intently. Seeing them would do him good.

He had lost track of where they were at in the service. The offering had happened, hadn't it? The chilled brass plate with the round piece of scarlet velvet at its

bottom to muffle the clink of loose change had passed through his hands. He was never prepared for its weight. It was like an anvil or a bowling ball. Meg Wilder had quietly cleared her throat to get his attention after she deftly slipped a ten dollar bill from her pocketbook and placed it in the plate. He sent it on to Ferrell, and she dropped in a folded check. It lighted on a cushion of bills and stood like a pitched tent, which Brook knocked over with his own rolled up mass of twenties. For some reason, that perturbed Andy.

The pastor's invitation to "give your tithes and offerings" was another opportunity for the word "sacrifice" to be detonated in the sanctuary. That last syllable had a monstrous hiss to it. At least a dozen times already he had heard the word, either in the anthem's English lyrics, in a pastor's preface to scripture read from the pulpit, or in a prayer made before the altar. He was not actively listening, yet he was keeping a running tally in his mind. Every time someone said it, the word pricked him, and, slowly, a wound was opening in his own side. Andy was certain he had never sacrificed anything for anyone, and he was more certain that when circumstances demanded a sacrifice from him, he became more stubbornly protective of what he had and what he wanted. Once, not so long ago, he had a thoroughly stupid, even warped, idea. It occupied him for an entire evening and on into the next day until he had shot it so full of holes he had to acknowledge that it was irrational. Standing, as the congregation was told, for the reading of scripture, it revisited him. The idea was this: what if the anchor girl became unexpectedly pregnant? It was unlikely, but not impossible. There could be a slip-up with her birth control pills. Things like that happened. Fatherhood was intertwined with sacrifice, was it not? Yes. Not biological fatherhood, but economic and emotional

fatherhood. He wished he knew where the idea came from because at the time it took shape he had not had any contact with children, though he had held a door open for a pregnant woman going into Weaver's. It would be terrible to have a wife and not love her even a little bit. And he had yet to see her do anything or say anything that gave him hope of her having latent maternal instincts. That Sunday morning hedonism would certainly come to an end, so they wouldn't even have that to fall back on. If they ever had a real fight (they were not invested enough in another to bother), it would be nuclear in its scope and devastation

The sermon was starting. The pastor was not the one Andy remembered. This one was much younger, a bit of a chess club/science fair nerd, and still learning to sound natural as he spoke in front of the congregation. Andy remembered a grandfatherly man with white hair and big glasses who had an impressive command of even the most obscure scriptures and was, when they needed someone, a great comfort to Lew and Frannie. His name was Gene and, though he knew Andy did not believe, he had been kind to him, too. Pastor Gene had never needed notes to deliver his sermons, but this one, Pastor Ken, arranged a sheaf of lined pages on the pulpit as he rejoiced again in the glory of the stone being rolled away to reveal an empty tomb.

"I imagine that most of you have driven south on the interstate—on Interstate 35—from here to Oklahoma City or Dallas or even as far as San Antonio," Pastor Ken began, not yet done positioning the pages just so. "Between here and Emporia the interstate is, more or less, a straight line running through land no one would characterize as scenic or even that attractive. But after Emporia, not long after you've collected your ticket from the tollbooth and gotten on the turnpike, everything changes. The trees

disappear. The landscape undergoes a radical change and the unspoiled prairie stretches to infinity. In summer, the first glimpse of the green prairie grass is overpowering.

“Back in March, Katie and I drove down to San Marcos, Texas, where she grew up, to see her younger brother, Jake, who is eighteen, play in his last high school basketball game. Since we’ve been married, Katie and I have made the drive to San Marcos at least a dozen times each way, mainly at Christmas and Thanksgiving and for the Dietrichs’ big family reunion at Lake Travis in Austin every Fourth of July. And every time, the closer we get to that stretch of interstate winding through the Flint Hills, my anticipation grows. That first glimpse—and it comes upon you without much warning—never ceases to take my breath away. It is stunning perfection on such a large scale it is difficult to truly comprehend.”

Andy sat forward and stared at his shoes and at Meg’s shoes and at the brim of the huge straw hat peeking out from beneath the pew. Jill would never have gotten away with the combination of that dress and hat. Frannie would have marched her up to her room and picked out something else for her to wear. That had actually happened. Jill had come down the stairs in a weird but flattering dress of her own creation. It was made of shiny, peacock blue fabric and had only one shoulder. The row had made them late. They had to wait outside the sanctuary doors until the opening prayer was finished, and then slide along the wall to a back pew. He and Brook found it hilarious, but then, as the day wore on, Andy worried Jill and Frannie would never stop being mad at each other. It pained him to think of them like that. He began to read the church bulletin, for real this time, but Pastor Ken’s folksy, friendly voice kept penetrating, breaking up his memories.

“As we’re driving, though, Katie and I, we usually don’t talk. If we’ve had the radio on, we’ll turn it off and try to absorb the landscape. I find myself praying as I drive, and I can feel Katie beside me in the passenger seat praying. Just as it happens every time we go down to San Marcos, back in March, I started to get excited around the time we pass that truck stop at Beto Junction, and more excited as we go by the exit to Beto Junction, and by the time we reach Emporia and the football stadium at the university recedes in the rearview mirror, I know we’re not far away and I can hardly wait.”

One of Andy’s legs jounced up and down, and he could not make it stop. Pressing his fist against his thigh, he willed it to stop, and it stopped. This was not going to turn out like Lew’s party. Somewhere in him there was enough strength to keep that from happening again.

“But just as we were on the cusp of the Flint Hills, Katie pointed through the windshield at a gray band of smoke across the horizon. I had noticed, but not ever thought much about the signs along the interstate warning you to watch for smoke. It was range burning season, and there was a truck we could see igniting small grass fires every few yards, and they made a rippling orange blanket of flame along the ground. I was fascinated, but terribly disappointed. On one side of the road the ground was scorched, burned to an apocalyptic black. I must not have been good at hiding my disappointment because Katie leaned in and said, “By July, the next time we pass through, it’ll all be green again. Don’t worry.”

Meg tapped Andy’s elbow. On the back of her church bulletin she drew a cartoonist’s dialogue bubble with the stubby pencil kept in a notch in the back of the pew

in front of them. Inside the bubble she wrote, “Are you all right?” She offered him the pencil. He drew a second bubble. “Yes,” he wrote.

“Fire in the Flint Hills brings renewal, regeneration, green again as far as the eye can see. I’m sure most of you know where I’m going with this, and that’s okay. Let’s think back for a moment to the Old Testament. A common thread throughout the books of the Old Testament is anticipation, longing for and anticipation of a Messiah. We see it in the prophets and in the Psalms. So often, the story of Easter is considered only a New Testament story...”

As Pastor Ken took a brief detour into the third chapter of Malachi, Meg tapped again at Andy’s elbow. In the bulletin’s margin, she had drawn a tic-tac-toe grid and marked an X in the center box. The hazel eyes blazed at him. They wanted him to agree she had cooked up quite a scheme. His palm was open at his side, knuckles against the hard wood pew. Her fist rested in it. He felt her pulse thundering in her wrist. Her fingers relaxed. He had the feather-light weight of the pencil in his grasp. The pencil was warm, its point blunt. He had done her real physical harm. To do something trivial like play a clandestine game of tic-tac-toe in church with him was its own special kind of sacrifice. He wondered why she would do it. He angled his body slightly away from Ferrell. Unless she scooted forward, she could not see. He wrote an O beneath the X. They were using her soft, flat beige leather purse as a desk. She had it balanced on her knees. As he closed the circle of the O, the point of the pencil punched through the bulletin. Meg gulped back a laugh. After that, they were very careful. Softly, with just the touch of the lead to the page, they made their X’s and O’s, and back and forth they passed the pencil, each time a seamless, secret transfer. It was like a magic trick: guess

which hand holds the coin. The words of the sermon no longer reached him. X. O. X. O. ~~XXX~~. (Meg Wilder beat him once.) O. X. A girl in the pew behind them—she was four or five years old and had not sat down once since the start of the service—fearlessly leaned in to spy on them through the narrow gap between their heads. O. X. He could hear her breathing. Each time she inhaled, a whistling sound came from her nose. O. X. ~~XXX~~. (Meg Wilder beat him again.) Andy was afraid the girl would speak. Not knowing any better, she would ask in a loud, sweet voice, “Can I play?” Meg squeezed another grid in beneath a list of church members going to Central America on a mission trip. They did not start the game because, unexpectedly, Pastor Ken’s voice began to rise. Here came his big finish: “But on Easter, we are made new and vibrant again. We are the Flint Hills prairie grasses. It is through the resurrection that we have confidence that no matter how many times we burn our lives down to the ground through sin and unfaithfulness in a way that is far from a controlled burn, we will be sinless and clean. We will be reborn. We’ll all be green again. Pray with me.” The pews creaked and bulletins rustled. While heads were bowed and eyes were closed, Andy passed the pencil to her a final time, and she returned it to its notch.

*ii*

From inside the lidded wicker basket Frannie kept on top of the toilet tank Andy took the bottle of aspirin, shook a handful of pills into his palm, and choked them down. He cupped his hands beneath the running faucet and lapped up as much of the water as he could. Rather than return to the family room, where Brook was methodically stirring a Bloody Mary with a celery stalk, Andy stole into the den. The leather crackled as he eased into the sofa. He listened and heard Easter happening—proliferating—beyond the

walls of the den. He heard the clank of plates dragged down from a high cupboard shelf and silverware gathered up in a fist from a drawer. A pot was set on a burner. The kitchen tap ran on-off-on-off-on. A knife chopping onion made rat-a-tat contact with a cutting board, and the electric opener spun the lids off cans. Eggs cracked against the side of a bowl. A pan was slid into place on the oven rack. Someone fired the mixer to life. High heels crossed back and forth from the stove to the pantry to the refrigerator and back. The women chattered as they worked. Frannie was teaching Ferrell and Meg how to fold cloth napkins into the tulip shape she used for Easter. In the family room, Brook and Lew had the Cubs and Phillies on. Andy heard the umpire make his guttural strike three call. Brook and Lew erupted in protest, and they ranted about the size of the strike zone until Frannie stepped in the room and told them to settle down. Soon the house would smell of the mixture of orange marmalade and Dijon mustard Frannie slathered over the ham before she wrapped it in a dough that would be brown and flaky when it finished baking.

Beside the sofa, a table resembling a step ladder had become home to an untidy pile of outdated *Round Trip* issues. Some, including the one he took from top of the pile, were at least two summers old. It came from the waiting room in Lew's office. So said the worn address labels affixed to the cover. Its pages were creased and wavy, like something had been spilled on them. It was probably rife with germs after sitting on a table in a doctor's waiting room. The corner of the cover was torn away. Entire pages had been ripped out. Others had been defaced by the slashing ballpoint scribbles of a toddler. There was that Graham Kelly prominently featured on the Contributors to This Issue page. Feature for feature, he looked precisely how someone named Graham Kelly



was supposed to look, down to the hiking boots, cargo pants, down vest, and underlying British snobbery. Perched on a rocky outcropping, one foot possessively on a boulder, arms crossed, eyes smoldering, he seemed strong and innately resourceful enough to survive anything—a tsunami, a bomb in a busy square, an attack by guerrilla warriors.

The Getaway Girl's story began at the exact center of the magazine. In miniscule type at the bottom of the first page he found the disclaimer. *Some events and individuals have been enhanced or invented at the discretion of the writer.* Her writing was frothy and gossipy, preoccupied with colors, textures, and the unique topography of a handsome man's face. She wrote for mothers at the end of their ropes, wives whose husbands belched at the dinner table, and female young careerists who rarely ventured beyond their cubicles, took their work home with them, and hadn't had a decent boyfriend since college. This was what they read while they were pampered with a pedicure or ate their microwaved lunch in the office break room. He gained no insight into her from the story. If anything, it made her less accessible. Other than her admission that she was still attached to that Graham Kelly and got herself tangled up with a married man, she made it impossible to get beyond the glossy mirage she made out of twinkling adjectives, cute little verbs, and her uncanny choice of dresses.

He was in a brooding pose with a glass on his knee, and his hunched form at the end of the leather sofa startled Meg Wilder. She was wary, but she smiled shyly through her uncertainty. "Sorry. I didn't know you were there." She backed toward the door. "I was in the bathroom next door and was curious—"

"You don't have to go." Andy did not look at her.

The plantation shutters blocked the sun, leaving them alone in the intimate gray of an unlit room in the afternoon.

“You drink a lot.” Out of the corner of his eye he could see her standing primly like a servant who had been summoned by her employer and was awaiting instructions.

“Not sure why I am right now. I’m quite happy, believe it or not.”

“Seriously? Because you look pretty shitty all of a sudden.” Andy could not tell if she intended this as a joke or a genuine critique.

“There’s no cussing on Sundays.” He wagged a finger at her. “One of Frannie’s rules. Observe the Sabbath, and all that.” He offered her the glass. “Want a sip?” She tipped it back just enough to get a quick sting of alcohol on the tip of her tongue and the back of her throat. “Have the rest.” She downed it, then poured a little more from the decanter on the desk. “If I had to spend the rest of my life in just one room,” Andy said, “I think this would be it. It doesn’t ever change. It looks the same. It smells the same. Pipe tobacco, Aqua Velva, and old books.”

To judge the merits of the room for herself, she made a cautious tour, beginning with the shelves of tightly packed record albums to one side of the fireplace. Randomly, she slipped them loose to glimpse their covers and then nudged them back in place. The Academy of St. Martin in the Fields conducted by Sir Neville Mariner. Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Philharmonic. Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops. Dave Brubeck’s *Time Out*. Leonard Bernstein’s *On the Waterfront*. Frank Sinatra’s *A Swingin’ Affair*. Shirley Jones! Robert Preston! *The Music Man!* Original Broadway Cast Recording.

“Monte Carlo was some kind of wild scene, wasn’t it?” he asked, suddenly alive.

She pivoted around. He had a droll little grin ready for her. He held up the magazine he had open across his lap and tossed it at her. She caught it and came around to sit before him on the wooden trunk. The magazine opened right to “Betting the House—A Getaway Girl’s Thrills Don’t Come Cheap in Monte Carlo.” Someone had bent the magazine back and creased it with a fist so it would lie flat. She seemed bewildered by the sight of her own words in print and the photographs of an opulent hotel suite and more opulent casino. “You gallivanting around with a band of continental scoundrels and grifters masquerading as high rollers...” he said to jog her memory.

As if Monte Carlo were beginning to emerge from a fog image by image, she hesitantly said, “The whole time I was there, I lived on champagne, strawberries, and pastries, and I don’t think I ever slept. It was just one endless midnight. They would all pass out in this couple from Liverpool’s suite, three or four of them in the bed, still in their tuxedos and dresses, and I’d sit at the desk writing...”

“And there was the man with an accent named Ricardo you met playing baccarat. You in a slinky gold gown, with him on the beach at dawn.”

“There was no Ricardo. There was, but it wasn’t him. Ricardo was this shy valet at the casino I wished would talk to me, that’s who I was describing. That guy from the casino, he wasn’t handsome at all. He had a nasty mole right here.” She raised her eyes from the magazine and touched a finger to a spot on Andy’s face not far from his nose. “And sweaty hands and a temper.”

In the paneled den, the orange dress seemed brighter than it had in front of the church. “Were you afraid of me?” he asked. “I was a little afraid of me.”

The goose-bumps had returned to her arms. “There wasn’t time,” she said.

“I’d never done that before.”

She said she believed him and hesitated before she brushed her lips across his cheek.

“Do that again,” he said hoarsely. She kissed his cheek. “Again.” She kissed his chin, then the furthest corners of his mouth. His forehead. His temple. One eyelid, then the other. He asked for permission to touch her, to kiss her in all the same places where she had kissed him.

“Andy? I know you’re in there,” Ferrell called. She pushed open the door without knocking. “Have you seen Meg? Dinner’s—”

*iii*

At dinner, Andy was annihilated by Ferrell’s full and varied arsenal of scowls, stares, and glares. He could not ask for the basket of rolls or pass the tureen of green beans without being lanced to the bone by one of them. Disgust. Derision. Contempt. Revulsion. She had the talent to combine them all in one of those looks. It was nothing short of a tour de force. No one but Andy saw it. Frannie, for instance, was in her glory orchestrating the passing of platters and bowls around the table. Lew was her able assistant, wielding the carving knife with the swashbuckling antics of a cartoon pirate. Ferrell did find time to make a decent amount of conversation, but it came off as decidedly brittle and uninspired. No one, for example, had any interest in analyzing the shade of green the Lehmans had chosen for their shutters and front door. Nor had anyone noticed that the grocery store could never manage to keep a certain brand of yogurt in stock.

Ferrell had burst into the den intent on bowling him over with playful goodwill and encountered Meg Wilder neither sitting nor standing while she peppered his round-eyed, upturned face with the lightest kisses he had ever felt. He had his hands on her waist piloting her to his knees, where she could sit so there would be no distance between them. He heard Ferrell's aborted call to the dinner table, but did not see her at the door stricken and disbelieving because, like a curtain, Meg Wilder's hair had fallen alongside his face. Since then, the rules had changed. Ferrell made them up, and she reserved the right to scrap them and start again from scratch. While they danced at Lew's party, he could have sworn she was keen on being the matchmaker, though that made no sense to him. Today, she stumbled onto evidence that she was getting what he thought she wanted, but rather than be self-satisfied, she was going out of her way to act hurt, annoyed, and threatened. She might know about what happened in the Iberia's hallway. Meg Wilder might have confided in her. She couldn't know, though. If she did, she would not be content to stab at him with icy, sidelong stares. It would have been grounds for a verbal battle royal, one he could not win. She was over there, directly across the table, taking mincing bites of ham and mincing bites of green beans and taking such anemic sips of her wine nothing could possibly be touching her tongue. It's official, he thought. I am done trying to figure her out. Just that simple declaration to himself and he felt liberated. He had achieved a measure of victory over her. Maybe it would only be for today. If so, who cared? He would settle for that. He grinned at her with his mouth full of green beans and made a motion with his glass, a mocking toast especially for her.

Meg Wilder's elbow routinely kissed his as they ate, and they sat closer together than any two people at the table. She held the dish of scalloped potatoes so he could heap

another mountain of them onto his plate. When he had them built up to satisfactory peak, he, newly free from Ferrell, joined Lew and Brook's conversation about the absence of starting pitchers who could reliably go past the sixth inning. Lew was invoking Sandy Koufax. Andy had at the ready a litany of Greg Maddux stats to add to the ones Brook recited between bites of ham he dragged through the cheesy remnants of his scalloped potatoes, but Frannie broke in.

“Girls, while I'm thinking of it, I need your opinion. We need to pick the carpet for the villa's living room. I have samples right here, and I want you to tell me what you think.” From the escritoire she brought out two swatches the size of doll house welcome mats. “I've got it down to two. This is the Deep Cabernet. This is Ripe Mulberry. I want it to pick up the stripe in that chair over there...” Andy forced a cough, left the table and ran himself a glass of water from the kitchen sink. He took one drink, then dumped it out. He paced around, the heels of his shoes on the wood floor voicing his irritation for him, opened the refrigerator door for no reason, checked the handle of the junk drawer to see if it would open on the first try. It did not. What a surprise. Everyone cursed it, and no one made an effort to fix it by simply throwing out years' worth of lame plastic cereal box toys and mangled pads of notepaper. Frannie had spoiled everything with her insecurity over silly carpet samples. It was not like her. She knew her mind. Her tastes were never debatable and seldom changeable. Did anyone really think she would not, in the end, go with her first instinct? Tonight, Andy could see her visiting Lew in his den. She would be fretting over the carpet. She'd sit in the plaid wing chair facing his desk and say she could not decide. Andy could predict their conversation.

Lew: Which one did your gut like best the first time you saw it?

Frannie: The Deep Cabernet, I think.

Lew: Then there you go. That's the one.

The hand-wringing scene in the middle of dinner will have been rendered frivolous.

“You can come back now, I think.” Meg Wilder was at his side. She rinsed her plate and set it in the sink.

“Would you like to get out of here?” he asked, touching the back of her arm. She chewed at her lip and thought a moment. The hazel eyes were unsure. This—a Van Dyne family Easter with its familial warmth and traditions (the three-tiered carrot cake, the boxed chocolate bunny at each place setting, the ham in its pastry shell)—was new to her. She was fond of it and of them. On any other day he would be too, but he was cross with Frannie and in a mood to withhold immediate forgiveness. He could not tolerate being in the house any longer today.

“Now?”

He wanted to say, yes, now, but the table had not been cleared. Lew had not made the switch from wine to coffee. Frannie had yet to slice into the carrot cake. They would have dessert; then they would go.

She agreed, saying, “If I go with you, I won't have to call a cab.” It was not exactly the endorsement Andy had hoped for, but he returned with her to the dining room table believing he could endure a few more minutes.

The cutting of the carrot cake was the ceremonial highpoint of dinner. It was like a one-act play Frannie and Lew put on together for a single performance each Easter Sunday. Lew announced the moment with his imitation of a trumpet fanfare as he presented Frannie with the cake knife. It quavered in her hand, and Andy, as he always

did, picked up on a palpable trepidation coming from her. She could not bring herself to harm this pretty thing she had made. “I think this is my most beautiful one yet,” she said mournfully. It was swathed in cream cheese frosting, and a chain of scalloped piping ringed its top and its base. In its center, a carrot Frannie had crafted from orange and green frosting.

“Oh, Frances, cut the damn cake, already,” Lew bellowed. Once he recited his one dramatic line, she had no trouble sectioning off the first slice. The cake was rich and moist, and Andy had to pace himself in order to finish a whole piece. Brook wolfishly ate his, and Ferrell scraped daintily around the edges of hers, preoccupied, Andy figured, by his many perceived offenses. Meg Wilder, her fork in midair, asked Frannie about the recipe, where it came from, and how long it took her to learn how to spread the frosting in that professional way.

“That recipe, would you believe it, came from a cream cheese package.” She started to say something about the delicate business of frosting a cake but interrupted herself. “You know, I think I will miss having such a spacious kitchen.” At that, Andy had had enough. He nudged the toe of Meg Wilder’s shoe beneath the table, and she caught his meaning immediately.

*iv*

Loose Park, a sizable, undulating square of parkland just south of the Plaza, was situated among homes like those of the Van Dynes, the Lehmans, and the Sizemores. An artificial duck pond had been built at the eastern edge near the stone gate that gave the park a solid European dignity. At the far northwest side was the sunken rose garden, site of multiple weddings every Saturday and Sunday of the spring and summer. At the



southern boundary stood a historical marker and a black cannon. Andy had never taken the time to learn what exactly the marker commemorated. Chances were good it was a reminder of a peripheral, nearly forgotten Civil War skirmish. Today, as was the case on any temperate Sunday, dogs chased one another and panted after overthrown Frisbees. Children skidded down the slide and begged to be pushed higher on the swings. A man Lew's age or older had set up an easel and a stool in a clearing. He was in the earliest stages of a watercolor landscape of the park with the Plaza's domes and spires in the background. Everyone was reuniting with the park. It had been waiting for them to return since the leaves had fallen in a gold and burnt orange storm and the first snow had draped across the grass. It had spent the winter alone, its only visitor an unknown someone who broke out his or her cross country skis once a year. That someone came when no one else was looking and left skinny telltale tracks in the untouched powder. Andy and Meg Wilder stayed off the blacktopped jogging paths and ambled through the grass and the dandelions, her arm tucked through his. She wore her hat, and it cast a funny shadow ahead of them in the grass.

“Let me see this thing.” He took the hat from her head and put it on his. He had his arms out to his sides, pretending to cross a high wire and to be in danger of losing his balance. “It's so huge. How do you wear it? It screws up my equilibrium.” With it on he could not see the Iberia's penthouses above the tree tops.

“If you can't say anything nice, maybe you need to give it back.” It was a teasing rebuke.

She snatched the hat away and carried it by the brim behind her back.

They walked on near a late-day egg hunt. They dodged frenzied pre-schoolers swinging baskets and sidestepped a trio of plastic eggs nesting in a clump of grass. Andy was thinking of the carrot cake, reduced to only a lopsided chunk, enshrined beneath its domed glass cover; the table cleared of detritus; the leftovers sealed away in Tupperware, the china arranged in the dishwasher, the stained tablecloth left to soak in the washing machine.

“Agnostic or atheist—which are you?” Meg asked.

“Lapsed Buddhist, actually.”

“That I wouldn’t have guessed.”

“I have the tattoo to prove it. Here.” He took off his jacket and pulled up the back of his shirt to show her. It covered most of his back, from the shallow valley between his shoulder blades to the middle of his spine. The folds in the robe across the Buddha’s shoulder, the lotus leaf he sat on, and the crown of curling flames around his head were astounding in their detail. “It’s supposed to be a Sui Dynasty Amitabha Buddha. Got it when I lived in San Francisco. A girlfriend—a rather intense evangelical, if you can imagine there being any in San Francisco—talked me into it. It turned her on, supposedly.”

Back in the early Florida days, he had flung himself into Buddhism because, with his internship wrecked by a midnight call from Ferrell begging him to come home before Jill was gone, he thought he should. If he was going to take time to become nearly fluent in Mandarin and develop the raw skill to sustain a basic conversation in Cantonese, and if he was going to study the economics and history of the Mainland as much as he had, it seemed like the next logical step if all that work was going to have any significance. He

feverishly read the important texts, sought counsel from a friendly Buddhist monk, and got little Buddha statues to scatter about his apartment. However, he could not quite get the hang of integrating it into his daily routine. A week or two would pass, and while Andy dug in a drawer for a missing sock, his eye would catch the polished Buddha figurine on the nightstand and he would be startled to remember, “Oh! I’m a Buddhist.”

“A lapsed Buddhist in church on Easter. How does that happen?”

“I like it. There’s a certain intellectual rigor to a good sermon, and I admire that. And it pleases Lew and Frannie, and I enjoy pleasing them.” The answer was part truth, part bullshit, and Andy hated how he sounded saying it.

They sat on the ground, in the shade of a very old tree. Andy did not know enough about trees to know what kind it was. They both sat with their backs to its trunk with their legs outstretched like the hands of a clock reading half past three. The hat was at her feet. On the ground it resembled a flying saucer improbably made of straw.

A cry went out from one of the egg-hunting children. A mother dashed over and the wailing was instantly reduced to the sad puppy whimpering children do when they are about to forget why they were crying in the first place. The mother got down on her knees in the grass. She kissed an invisible wound and coaxed a smile from him, and then he raced away with his basket.

“On Easter my mother played the piano at two different churches,” Meg Wilder said, trying to defend her hair from a freshening breeze. “She would get up at five in the morning to do her hair and be ready for a sunrise service at the Episcopal church around the corner from our house, and she wouldn’t be done until she played for the Presbyterians at eleven. It was a day for her to make extra money. Everyone agreed she

was the best pianist in town, so the churches paid her well, but she pitted them against each other to get even more. The choir directors—every year it was the same—they would want her to wear one of the choir robes, but she wouldn't do it. She had to wear this long black dress that buttoned up the back. It had incredibly wide bell sleeves. It made her look like the mom on the Addams Family. She took me with her, and I stayed by myself in the rooms where the choirs rehearsed. I used the piano bench as a desk and colored in my coloring books. One year I got in trouble for building a giant tower of hymnals. On our way home, if I was good, she would buy me a Happy Meal and a Quarter Pounder for herself. Today, in church, I was thinking about my dad and trying to remember where he was or what he did on Easter. I don't think I ever knew, but he was there most of the time when we got back from McDonald's."

"Other than the bunnies and the chocolate, I don't think I knew what Easter was until I was in high school." Andy was going to go on, but he waited until he had watched her unbuckle the straps of her shoes and slide them from her feet. "The only time I saw the inside of a church was on TV, like in those episodes of cop shows where the detectives have to go talk to the priest about the quiet janitor they've pegged as a suspect for some grisly murder. On Sundays, my sort of slutty aunt Tina, my mom's sister, would come over to do her laundry. They'd sit at the kitchen table, drink cheap wine, fight over whose turn it was to take their older brother to dialysis on Tuesday, and bitch about the rotten men in their lives. I think Tina might have been an escort, a call girl, whatever the appropriate term would be. She talked about sex like I wasn't in the next room playing my one outdated video game, but she always brought Chinese food. Chicken fried rice and beef lo mein. I thought those white take-out boxes with the silver

handles were the coolest things. And on the Sundays when he could come up with a decent excuse to get away from his wife and kids, my mom's boss came over to peel off two hundred dollars in twenties from the wad of cash he carried in his pocket and feel her up while she did the dishes. The whole year during seventh grade I was sure he was my dad, but his name was Lester and I didn't want a dad named Lester. It just sounded like a nasty, uncool name. Plus, I didn't look like him at all. His nose was bulbous, and he had one of those dents right here in his chin. She never stopped griping about how if he really loved her he'd buy her a decent house, but when I had the money to do it, she said I was a snob who was ashamed of her and where I'd grown up. I don't think she ever had a single goal for herself that didn't involve keeping a man. I know for a fact she never had any for me."

"You liked her, loved her, though, right?"

"She was pathetic. I recognized that right away. Thirty years in and that's the only opinion I have of her."

They lolled in the shade of the tree until the children, with their Easter baskets brim full, were herded toward their parents' cars.

Andy decided to be bold. "Brook, he's undoubtedly with Ferrell—"

Meg Wilder chuckled. "You know what's funny?" She wasn't going to let him say what he wanted to say. "I was thinking about this during dinner. Ferrell thinks I'm just like the person she reads about in the magazine." She was both amused and saddened.

"I don't doubt that she does." He hardly took a breath before he began again.

"Brook'll be with Ferrell tonight, so why don't you come and—"

She cut him off again. "I'm not sleeping with you," she said as she got to her feet.

"Good. I wasn't asking you to. Just come stay anyway. We'll lie in bed and talk about our flawed and failed mothers."

"Anything but that."

v

As she passed through the open apartment door in the front of him, he smelled what was left of her perfume. Coming in, turning on the lamps, and checking the light on the answering machine with her at his side seemed familiar. They could be husband and wife. (He wished that they were. Just for tonight.) He was in the mood to generously pay a babysitter, ask how everything went while they were gone, and then steal into the bedrooms of apple-cheeked children and kiss them while they slept. From there he could drift contented to his bedroom where that first powerful surge of attraction would be rekindled by the sight of his wife in her nightgown. He thought he would have been doing that by now. He used to think he would have been good at it, the fathering and the partnering. He was going to be the husband who never had to be reminded to take out the trash and who cooked dinner twice a week.

"Should we have a drink, or maybe coffee? I can make some coffee if you want some." Meg started for the kitchen where a fancy silver coffeemaker was tucked between the microwave and a row of cereal boxes arranged like books on a library shelf.

"Come sit with me," he said.

She flopped down beside him on the couch. He kicked off his shoes, so she did too.

“You got some sun out there,” she said

“Did I?”

“Across your cheeks. On your ears.”

“You did, too.”

Out of habit he turned on the television. Dinner, which sat like a stone in his stomach, had left him sluggish. He did not bother to click through the channels in search of a ballgame or a rerun of a favorite sitcom episode.

“You watch this show?” she asked.

“Not intentionally.”

It was a vile dime-a-dozen reality show, the sort that promises a woman love with one of a dozen loutish, priming men already in love with their own physiques and perceived irresistibility. Assuredly there was a gimmick, a staged and derivative angle to give the show that necessary shot of sex appeal and make a ratings killing in the key demographics. Maybe she was a hot rocket scientist, and the guys were high school dropouts. Eventually, the show reached that critical moment when the woman and one of the contending men made out in a roiling hot tub. The editors were courteous enough to blur out the various exposed body parts, but Andy changed the channel. He kept changing it. A hockey game flicked by. So did two dueling chefs in mid-flambé and the beginning of *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*. An image barely had time to form on the screen before he clicked again. It was that hour of the day when everyone was expected to come to grips with the rottenness of the supposedly civilized world by watching a table of pundits and political hacks spin the events fueling the current news cycle. Andy wanted

nothing to do with them, so he kept clicking until the hot tub scene reappeared, complete with subtitles spelling out the raunchy dialogue.

“Go back,” Meg Wilder told him. “Keep going. One more. There.”

He stopped on Chevy Chase and Dan Ackroyd seated at desks in a classroom.

*“Spies Like Us?”*

“I haven’t seen this in forever. I used to think it was so adult, like my life would be complete when I could see movies like this in the theater. We have to watch at least to the doctor, doctor, doctor part.”

She did not have a dainty girl laugh. It was expansive and guiltless, and she had to open her mouth wide to let it out. “If I get annoying, tell me to shut up and I will,” she said. She could laugh as much as she wanted to. When he asked her to come back here with him, he had had no set agenda, no real plan, though he would have been pleased if they had merely talked until she tired of him. Until he started to talk to Meg Wilder about his mother and his aunt Tina, he was unaware that he so badly wanted to talk to someone. He never talked to anyone about anything other than the market or sports or the weather, and once he got going about the Chinese food and his mother’s boss, he did not want to stop. Those white carry-out boxes with the handles—he had forgotten how enamored with those he was. He wanted to know about the man in New Zealand and about being alone in Moscow. Was it like being alone in Tallahassee? Later she might tell him. For now they were watching the movie. It transfixed her and brought her joy. He sat with his arm stretched along the top of the couch, his hand hanging over the back. He fingered the rough brim of the straw hat she left on the sofa table and thought how funny it was that, from what little he had read, the Getaway Girl strived for a whimsical



sophistication, yet here she was hanging on every crass joke and play-on words from a movie no one would mistake for a sophisticated comedy.

“Doesn’t this seem like the longest day?” After the movie, Meg Wilder scrunched down into the couch cushions and laid her head against the armrest.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to stay,” he said. It was easy to speak freely since the television was off and they were in the dark.

“The mattress on my bed is like sleeping on a door. It’s worse than a door.”

She was staying.

Together, in his room, they turned down the bed. He took one corner of the comforter and she took the other. They stacked the shams in an armchair and turned down the bed together. It seemed like a solemn ritual not to be done flippantly or in the midst of an argument. Meg Wilder got into bed wearing her slip. With his back to her, he stood in the closet and changed out of his suit into basketball shorts and one of his favorite tee-shirts with the Golden State Warriors’ old “The City” logo on the front. It was a shirt he never wore to bed.

“Come over here,” she said to him as he was ready to put the tee-shirt on. “I didn’t get a good look at it the first time.” He stood at the side of the side of the bed so she could inspect the Buddha tattoo. She got up on her knees on the mattress and traced a fingernail along the folds of the Buddha’s robe and around his face. “The level of detail is superb, really. How long did it take?”

“Hours. Forever.”

“Do you regret it?”

“Only once in awhile. I’m used to it.”

“I think it’s brilliant. Just don’t lie on your side. I don’t want to wake up in the night and have it staring at me.”

When he joined her, she had her hair swept over one shoulder and was combing her fingers through it, working loose the tangles the breeze blowing through the park had caused. She twisted onto her side to see him. “Guess where I spent last night—on my balcony.” She said she had gathered up the comforter off the bed, dragged it from the bedroom through the sliding glass door out to the balcony, and made a cocoon of it on the single cushioned lounge chair. The married man in New Zealand owned a spectacular glass house overlooking the surf, and she had gotten used to having windows on all sides and the muted cadence of the sea breaking through her dreams. “To get to sleep anymore, I have to have around me a shifting wallpaper of constellations and clouds. Last night, though, instead of the surf, I made do with the intermittent hiss of passing traffic and the gassy machinations of those Metro buses that stop at the corner.” To Andy, this sounded like it had come straight from an issue of the magazine.

He switched off the lamp beside the bed.

“Am I crowding you?” Meg Wilder said into the dark. She still lay on her side. “I’ll face the other way—”

“You’re fine.”

The bunch of pink balloons that, upon closer inspection, became a flame orange dress, hung from the closet doorknob. He would not have guessed it would end up there. Without her in it, it was a gaudy thing.

There was something that he had wanted to ask all afternoon. It was beginning to concern him greatly. “What’ll you do if the magazine folds?” Andy thought she was still awake, but he was not sure.

“It’ll be fine,” she sighed. “By fall, I’ll be in Dubai.” He did not believe her. She was too confident in her answer to believe it herself. “Will you wake me when you get up?”

“I get up early.”

“I don’t mind...Do you snore?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I don’t think I do either.”

Meg seemed confident that this—the two of them in the same bed—was nothing either of them should worry about. Andy was less sure. In theory, it had sounded ideal, a solution to grim, nightly aloneness that did not echo or recreate any of their more dubious affairs, some of which were known to the other, more of which were not. Now that they were actually side by side, without the protection of her dress and his suit, he worried that they had been kidding themselves.

After she was asleep, Andy moved to the low squarish chair in the corner and listened to her sigh through her dreams.

*vi*

He woke with a start not knowing where, in time or space, he was. He was not, he soon figured out, still in the chair. He was in bed, but his face, and his lips in particular, were not against the cotton pillow case. They were against soft, smooth flesh. With one bleary eye he could make out the windows, set two abreast in the opposite

wall. It was spring, or maybe summer. Or spring verging on summer. The chrome and orange sunrise leaking through the space around the edges of the blinds told him so. Yes. Spring verging on summer, the tipping point when the temperate days are nearly gone forever until autumn. Suddenly, he had his first thought of himself: I have a test today, a final exam, but I did not study. I did not study. The test starts at nine and I did not study. Introduction to Business Ethics at nine o'clock in Summerfield Hall. He had to be there early so he could get his favorite desk with a view of the ROTC ranks coming and going from the Military Science building. If he didn't get that desk, (the one with Chi Omega Girlz Are EAZY carved in the upper left corner and a decades old stain of blue ink spilled like blood from a slit wrist over the rest of the profane graffiti etched into the wood) he wouldn't be able to think.

He had never gone to his own room. He was supposed to go to his own room to study. He was supposed to stay with her just until she fell asleep, and then he would study, and he needed to because he had never read any of Chapter 9 and lost interest in Chapter 13 every time he tried to finish it. He felt all of his organs constrict and fold in on themselves. He was going to be rational and he was not going to move until he had thought himself through the situation. He was not going to thrash around and disturb her. As still as he tried to be, he was very quietly losing his mind over the thought of something other than a pretty, symmetrical "A" on his report card. If he skipped his shower and drank only a glass of orange juice for breakfast and got a package of Ding Dongs from the vending machine on the first floor of Summerfield Hall instead, he could finish Chapter 13. And, if Brook drove, he could skim Chapter 9 and at least commit to memory the terms typed in bold. But trying to read in a moving car made him queasy.

He probably would not remember a thing. How could he have forgotten, and how could he have slept through the night? All night he had slept with his arms around her knees and his lips pressed to her thigh. He never made mistakes like this. It was her fault. Every bad, sad, and worrisome thing he could think of was her fault.

He kicked away the sheet and sprang back. He was on all fours like a dog. Above the headboard was the print of the abandoned cave dwellings. In the striped shadows of the blinds, the cave was a threatening mouth capable of swallowing the room. The cave was so empty it made him shiver down his arms. That was Meg Wilder in the bed with him. She was dreaming. She had a balled fist against her cheek, and the slightest hint of a smirk pulled at a corner of her mouth. The morning sunlight made her hair redder than he had ever seen it. Free of his weight, she rolled onto her side and drew her knees in to her chest. He started over again. That was Meg Wilder, who, for a while yesterday in the park, he had been in love with. And yesterday was Easter. And today was Monday. The Dow Jones was going to open at 10,246. And he was twenty-two years old. No. He was thirty years old. (What a round and ominous number it seemed.) *My God, I am almost thirty-one years old. I feel like I'm twenty-two, but also like I'm sixty-two. That makes no sense, but it's true. Wasted years. Seven of them. I am so much less than I was then. She would not recognize me. (That was her fault, too.) I eat cereal for half my meals. I take things to pawn shops. I have repaired the heel of one of my favorite cordovan wingtips three times with super glue. I am perhaps five pounds lighter and, oddly, half an inch taller, and I have an outrageous tattoo on my back that took forever to finish and hurt like hell. I've forgotten the names of women I've been with, and there have been many of them, some I did not like or respect or have any*

*particular attraction to. I am homeless.* If she wanted to know how he ended up like this, in her brother's spare bedroom with a girl he had deliberately made no effort to seduce and, until a moment ago, convinced he had slept through an all-night cram session for a final exam he took years ago, she would have to go far back into what seemed more and more like their ancient history, because it was happening then. He had been losing himself at just as fast a rate as she was, faster even. He might have knowingly done it to himself. It felt like that, a complete self-sabotage, a kind of living suicide. His objectivity was shot, not that anyone has any genuine objectivity when it comes to judging his own actions, especially the damning and unflattering ones, so he could not be entirely sure. (More accurately, he feared being sure.) His memories had broken down and corroded because they were purposely never exercised, and when he reconstructed them, he did not believe them. If he concentrated enough, a few, like slides in a faulty carousel, flashed to life, bright but blurred and crooked (and sometimes sideways). He needed her clear mind to make sense of them, and her guiding hand that, with the help of her indomitable Swinger, had stitched a dress from a pattern she made herself.

## 5. REFLECTING POOL

So this was summer, airless and monotonous. Even if it was only mid-May, this was summer. This was the summer that \_\_\_\_\_. Fill in the blank. There was always that one real stand-out moment that would assume the role of all-purpose reference point and become one of life's mile markers, the means for fixing in time minor moments, the obscured events of all the other summers. When was the hideous couch in the living room reupholstered? That was the summer Jill, dashing from the kitchen to the pool, tripped over an inner tube and broke her ankle. When was the last time Uncle Jake and Aunt Carol came for a visit in the exhaust-belching Itasca? That was the summer an eight foot long black snake slithered on to the diving board and her father mistook it for the garden hose. But what exactly, Jill wished to know, had happened to spring this year? It had already played itself out in a burst of blossoms and

fleeting breezes, and then morphed into this turgid pattern of grimly identical days. From where Jill sat, the sun itself was not bright. It was the sky that was blinding. Overhead, the stagnant, washed-out sky had that summer-in-Kansas City sheen, courtesy of the milky haze smothering downtown from now until October.

She had missed watching two City of Mission Hills workmen climb down from their truck to uncover the statue at the center of a little landscaped island in the cul-de-sac. One always shambled out to remove the green tarp with a sweeping *Voilà!* motion, like he was whisking a silver cover from a gourmet meal. And there stood the cherub boy in meditative repose, a sausage-like index finger crooked and frozen at his lip. He peered eternally at the heavens, his carved curls blown across his forehead by a persistent breeze perceptible only to him.

Right now, Andy, Brook, and Ferrell were all, as a result of true synchronicity on the part of the university registrar (or whoever controlled the master final exam schedule), crammed into desks. They had stowed their flash cards and notes under the desks and out of sight, and they were poised to fold back the covers of crisp blue books. Jill, meanwhile, was on a teak lounge chair, watching her mother plant flowers and feeling woozy, drug-soaked, and like she was made of very heavy dough. Today she would miss her two o'clock Art History final just as she had missed all the others. Eastern Civ. Drawing I. Honors College Algebra. American Lit to 1860.

She had missed spring and was missing her exams on account of a leukemia-induced, chemotherapy-enhanced malaise. Spring had happened while she was woozy from her latest blasts of chemo. The pageant of spring played while she listened to the swoony ballads on the soft rock station pumped into her oncologist's waiting room,



shoved her arms through the gaping sleeves of a thin cotton gown washed so many times its pattern of clouds and butterflies had faded to white, hung her clothes on the hook bolted to the back of the door, and stared into the ominous warning label on a red bio-hazard bin or new box of powdered latex gloves waiting to be opened. She had spent the coveted string of four or five pristine days, the days when everyone felt obligated to eat outside, in exam room B, her eyes hypnotized by the phone hung next to the paper towel dispenser. Line 2—Dr. Zerman’s private office line—blinked short-long, short-long in untranslatable Morse code that drove her crazy.

Yesterday, during the American Lit final, Jill had been in the passenger seat of her mother’s car, parked in front of a nursery, feeling just as doughy and drug-soaked while waiting for her to pick over the last remaining bedding plants. She fell asleep there in the car with the windows open, wondering what her enfeebled blood cells were doing, and thinking the nursery, best described as a warehouse made entirely of condensation-streaked glass panels, was a far less ambitious, more utilitarian version of the London Crystal Palace, a slide she didn’t think would be on the Art History exam.

Now, as her mother patted soil around her new tiger lilies, Jill invented her own questions to a made-up exam. *Name a basilica-plan church.* (Too easy. Saint Paul’s in Rome.) *Describe its distinguishing features. List at least three.* (Still too easy.) *How does a basilica plan church differ from a central-plan church?* (Obviously, she would compare it to the Ravenna chapel.) *Who designed the gardens at Versailles?* (That would have been an excellent extra credit question. Andre Le Notre, of course.)

The reflecting pools at Versailles would never be blanketed by a blue cover like the Van Dynes’ pool. The cover was dusty and dotted with rain drops that had dried in

the sun. Where it sagged in the middle, a cluster of brown dead leaves had collected. The cover was supposed to be off now. It should have been folded up and stashed in the basement. The sun and all the passing clouds should have been mirrored in the pool's still water. "Has daddy called the pool people yet?" Jill asked.

Her mother pulled off her work gloves. She pressed her thumb and forefinger to the bridge of her nose as if the question had brought on a sudden, crippling migraine and answered, "Not that I know of."

"Remind him."

"Oh, I don't know if we'll get to it." Her mother didn't have to say it, but presumably, if the pool were filled someone might be tempted to have a moment's worth of guiltless fun. Brook and Andy might do tag-team cannonballs off the diving board and that would be unforgiveable.

"That's so unfair." Jill growled and glared at the ugly blue pool cover. "I didn't know we were all under house arrest this summer."

"Jillian—"

"Frances—" Jill shot back.

Rather than respond, her mother mauled the dirt with her trowel. Jill was a bullheaded girl, and Frannie had always been quite proud of her for that reason. It had made her life as a mother so much easier because she knew Jill would never be talked into anything she did not want to do. Jill was never going to need bailing out of jail or the saving reality check of an intervention. To the best of her knowledge, Jill did not even drink and had not ever smoked a thing. Brook was no different, so she had done nothing to prepare herself for a crisis involving either of her children. Before the

diagnosis, she had worried about Jill and Andy, and she had dropped her unsubtle motherly hints to let Jill know as much. The hints had made no difference because Jill and Andy's youthful, kinetic infatuation had been taken to its physical limits. That was evident to anyone with eyes. All of the stray midnight fears that inspired had been replaced by others, ones about treatments, side-effects and the possibility of remission, that did not wait until nighttime to dog her. That was probably part of the reason why she had no objection to Andy practically living in their guestroom. There had just been too much else on her mind to object. And that was why she tolerated his ratty pairs of Levis on the floor, the sometimes unmade bed, and the growing mess atop the dresser: the blizzard of graded quizzes from his advanced Mandarin Chinese class, the belt, the crumpled and crudely designed flyer for a party in Lawrence at Ninth and Michigan, the bottle of cologne, and the smoothed out wrapper from a cherry Tootsie pop. She would not have tolerated that from either of her children, yet she also did Andy's laundry and had cleared old sweaters, snowsuits, and the fur coat she thought it politically incorrect to wear anymore out of the closet to give him more space. At the time, it had been something to do. Just like planting flowers was something to do.

Jill and Frannie were struggling to find a balance between summer as it was supposed to be and how summer was going to be this year. Frannie, admired by her friends, and on occasion her daughter, for being a paragon of genteel, feminine wisdom, was making all kinds of erratic, arbitrary rulings. They were the product of strange logic Jill meant to forgive, but could not. Why was it her mother could have her hundreds of flowers—and a new flowering crabapple—but she could not have water in the swimming pool and her father could not keep his new safari vest?

Just last week, the UPS man had delivered it in a sizeable box addressed to him from an outfitting company in British Columbia. Jill had watched her mother slice through the packing tape with her fingernail, fish out a receipt, and unearth a heavy khaki vest rife with pouches and Velcro sealed pockets. She had repacked it, filled out the return label and bolted for the post office.

Jill's father had been planning his safari and stockpiling things like this since before Jill and her brother were born. It was his release after a ten hour day assuaging the fears of mothers and calming children before their measles shots. Now, though, it was indulgent and insensitive of him, her mother claimed at the climax of, what was for her parents, a rare and startling argument. He had tracked airfares, tribal power struggles, disease outbreaks, and State Department travel advisories for years without ever making any actual plans. Would he ever really go? Yes, he would. He had to, and if she knew her father, he had reordered the jacket, only this time he had had it delivered to his office.

*ii*

Across the yard Jill watched her mother assess her handiwork. She had threshed out the weeds and the gnarled, frost-blanching husks of last year's plants, and shoved them into a Hefty bag for Brook to drag to the curb when he got home. The lilies were in place. So were the coleus. Ditto the two new sprays of sawgrass and the petunias. The petunias were not pretty. Their petals were not vibrant and bugs had chewed holes in most of the leaves, but that was all there was to choose from at the nursery. She would no doubt resurrect them, though, and medicate them with her special mixture of plant food and restore them to their splendor. She needed to be able to do that.

Jill called out to her mother, wanting to know the time. “My watch is inside on the escritoire. 2:15, 2:30, maybe.”

By now, Brook would be quadruple-checking his answers. He was one of those super- thorough types who drew arrows with snaking tails so he could tack on a salient addendum to his answer that might, in the hands of a benevolent professor, lead to a negligible yet gratifying bit of extra credit. Ferrell, meanwhile, was skipping questions two at a time and engaging in a silent dialogue of eye-rolling and head-shaking with the girl in the adjacent desk, and, if the test was devastatingly tough, taking a break to smooth lotion into her hands and arms, causing the rest of the class to turn and locate the source of the sandalwood smell filtering up the rows to the front of the room. Andy was motoring along at the speed of someone who had divined the questions before they were asked. His feet were doing a bouncing, pigeon-toed step under the desk as his brain leaped from thought to thought faster than his hand could write them. He would not check his answers.

And the Green Party pot-smokers who populated her Art History class were filing into the auditorium in the Art Museum and taking one of the awkward and useless lap boards from the pile at the door. Half of them would not know a basilica plan from a central plan, the Hagia Sophia from the Taj Mahal. She, in her maddening abundance of free time, had read the textbook all the way through. Twice. Including the chapters not assigned on the syllabus.

Her mother lugged the hose near the flower bed where she had been working, turned on the water, and let the hose loll from side to side in her hand as she sprayed the petunias. Jill could not sit any longer and watch her preside over the flowerbeds. The trellis wreathed in vines was tiresome. The weathered birdhouses, there on a stone bench for strictly cosmetic purposes, tried her patience. At the moment, she detested the pool for being there and being empty. She couldn't have a normal pool. No, theirs had to be asymmetrical, free of any square corners, with a blue-gray faux pebble bottom so it would look to the unsophisticated eye like a natural swimming hole. Would a simple rectangular in-ground have been so bad? Strangely, none of this had bothered her back when she was healthy. Today, it was as revolting as a plate of spaghetti after chemo.

Jill eased herself up from the lounge chair. With her back turned and the hose running, her mother would not hear her cross the patio and pass through the French doors into the house. Inside, she found her car keys hanging from the pegboard near the door to the garage.

When she turned the key in the ignition, her car radio came on. A guitar howled and a singer screamed indecipherable lyrics. According to the deejay, who sounded like a gruff prison warden, this was "One-oh-seven-nine, the SCAR, Kansas City's new hot spot for alternative rock." Last she knew, 107.9 aired a perky morning drive show and played blocks of vapid commercial free '80s chart-toppers. What else had happened without her?

Her first thought was to show up for her test and take it just to take it. So what if she had withdrawn soon after the semester started? She would turn it in without putting

her name on it. She would be a ghost. But she would not make it on time, and even if she could, she would not be able to drag herself from some far-flung parking space to the art museum.

The trek through the house and out the garage, the wading through dense heat emanating from the blacktopped driveway, the opening of her car door had made her dizzy and her legs leaden. She could not get her other leg in the car. She could not get herself where she wanted to go. She could not, it seemed now, even listen to Prince and Apollonia sing their nasal *Purple Rain* duet on the radio. (She would have settled for that now.) She could not feel the hot steering wheel vinyl scald her forehead as she cried against it. She cried because her world consisted, in its entirety, of a circuit of winding residential streets in Mission Hills, the scenic, grand old uber-suburb, all of them curving in on one another and going nowhere except past the same strand of five-bedroom, seven and a half bath Colonials and Tudors.

The neighborhood was immaculate and verdant. Edenic. The way her head rested against the steering wheel, Jill could see a slice of her street, upside down. Lawns mowed in the crisscrossing pattern of a major league outfield. Petunias spilling from the urn on the street corner. A bit of the Lehmans' half-moon driveway. The Tuttlés' greenhouse. The Sizemores' guesthouse. The shuttered windows of the Halseys' game room. (They had three vintage pinball machines!) The arched iron gate hiding the door to the Milbanks' picture book chateau from passersby. From time to time she forgot anyone else lived around them. The Van Dyne's lot, like everyone else's, was so big, and the trees around it so tall and densely-leaved, Jill could go days without giving a thought to the Lehmans next door or the sweet but senile Tuttlés across the street.

Above all, these were sturdy, incorruptible houses, the work of craftsmen rather than the hyper-efficient crews who slapped up house after house in the city's southern suburbs. That was the point of it. Mission Hills was supposed to be the last stop. To have a home here—and they were homes, not impersonal houses—was to desire nothing more because there was literally nothing else worth desiring. Mission Hills was what permanence looked like. It was what success and good taste looked like. On days like today, its startling, timeless perfection and its uninterrupted calm (When was the last time she had heard the fast-approaching wail of a police siren?) were enough to obliterate the faith and optimism she began manufacturing each morning when she woke up.

“What are you doing?” Jill turned her face from the steering wheel to see her mother. She flapped her flowered gardening gloves at Jill. “I look up and you’ve disappeared. I was ready to call your father.”

“Go away,” Jill said.

Her mother reached into the car and turned down the radio. She smelled of sweat and soil and Chanel. She gave the knob an authoritative twist she assumed turned off the radio, but she did not know she needed to press the knob instead. “Come back in the house.”

“No.” All Jill could see of her mother were the new frog green garden clogs she said made her feet sweat. They seemed too big, like a pair of platypus bills.

Frannie did not know whether to indulge her or protect her. Jill hated seeing her mother like this. Her mother could help her into the car and ride along as she drove around the neighborhood, but they both knew Jill would want more—a drive through the Plaza, then downtown, and who knew where else. Besides, the heat was not good for her.



“Here we go now.” Frannie tried to heave her out of the car. Jill swatted at her with both hands and struck her mother’s shoulder. She had a deep reservoir of aggression, which she saved for her mother, her father, and her brother, for times like this, when she felt cornered and wronged by them. Frannie had learned to resist it, but in this moment she wanted to swat Jill in return to show her this was not the time to play at petulance. Jill could see it in her eyes. She could not do it, though. How could she? Jill was frail and defeated.

“When will Brook be home?” Jill asked. Frannie let her go, but she was still hunched in the car.

“When he’s done with his test. And when Andrew is done with his test. They took your brother’s car, remember?” Now she spoke to Jill like she was four years old, like she had misbehaved at pre-school.

“Brook needs to hurry. I want him here.” Jill wanted to tell him about the radio station. Telling him seemed very important right now. He would miss their favorite segment: “80s Spoken Word” at 8:05 every morning and 5:05 each afternoon. An erudite Sean Connery-sounding voice came on and read 80s song lyrics like they were the sober words of Yeats or Byron. Anything by Duran Duran was priceless, rivaled only by certain Hall and Oates songs. This would be a great loss because the one time she knew of that Brook had gotten silly drunk he called her and recited the first two verses of “Rio” in the best Sean Connery voice he could manage. But then he stopped, said, “Jillian, your big brother is quite, quite...drunk,” and hung up.

“It’s a good thing I found you. You out and about in your pajamas. Really, Jill.” Frannie needed to say something to convey Jill’s foolishness to her, but these were not

the right words. She had forgotten to blend in any love or understanding. With anyone else that would have been the impulse guiding every word she chose, but Jill's frustration had amplified her own.

“Mother, does it look like I'm capable of going anywhere? Open your eyes.” She was done simpering. She had just enough willpower to be a detached, wise-beyond-her-years adult, the persona Frannie found most unbecoming. It was not the attitude of a girl who had been so lovely and personable at the Jewel ball. Jill was not wanting for reasons to live, but if she was, one of them would be that to live eliminated any possibility of having herself identified as a Jewel ball debutante in her obituary. The all-too close-up shot of her tortured slow dance with the cheerless and, at the time, Brandeis-bound Pete Lehman on the *Star's* Sunday society page had been terrible enough.

“Jillian—”

“I can't be nice to you right now. Go sit on the step. I'll tell you when I'm ready to go inside.”

“Two minutes. No more.” Frannie kissed Jill's forehead. She stiffened at the touch of her mother's lips. Jill had not expected that, nor had she expected a tear to slide from her mother's cheek onto hers.

“I said I'd tell you when I'm ready,” she said bitterly. Jill was sorry for treating her this way, but she was too proud to show that her mother's small, soft kiss had disarmed her. Her mother was the dirtiest fighter, always countering vengeance with affection at the least likely moment.

Frannie retreated. Jill heard her gardening clogs clomp across the driveway and swish through the grass. She sat there awhile longer hemorrhaging tears, one leg in the

car, one leg out, numb to another sinister song on the SCAR. The heater was roaring because she had not driven her car since winter, but she felt only an arctic current in her legs and the eruption of nubby goose-bumps on her arms.

This was the summer that \_\_\_\_\_. Fill in the blank. Jill could already fill it in. The summer that 107.9 changed formats. The summer she couldn't get into her car. The summer that she lived, or, and this was the problem in a nutshell when it came to her mother, this was the summer she could just as easily die.

## 6. LILIES

This was also the summer Jill vomited on her mother's lilies. This happened, in fact, the very next day, when she was back, inert on the teak lounge chair. Her revulsion for the garden had passed ,and now she pretended the backyard was the garden of a sanitarium where heroines in old British novels went to recover their grace and gentility.

She had her sketch pad outside with her. It sat open on her lap, but she could think of nothing to draw other than an uninspiring long dress with a halter neckline. Somewhere, she thought, there was a designer who actually set pencil to paper and drew the sketch that became the faded denim gardening culottes her mother was wearing to plant impatiens in the terra cotta pots flanking the diving board. Someone else had seen the sketch and said, yes, there's a market out there for this sort of blowsy casual look. She should not criticize. Really, her mother had a more than respectable wardrobe of

tailored slacks, fine gauge sweaters, and what Jill called “First Lady suits,” those very squarish skirt and jacket sets worn for State of the Union addresses and photo opportunities with foreign leaders’ wives in the Rose Garden, the skirt falling at the knee, the jacket with a modest neckline intended to leave just enough bare skin to show off a string of pearls. They were the essence of middle-aged elegance, Jill supposed.

“Tomorrow, ask Dr. Zerman if he agrees with what Dr. Gerber said Monday,” Jill’s mother said. Jill ignored her. She started to draw a flared pair of gaucho pants, the more runway friendly cousin to her mother’s culottes. She slung a fat belt around the waist of the gaucho pants. She could not remember Monday or anything Dr. Gerber said.

“Did you hear me?”

“I heard you,” Jill said. They would go through this again tomorrow at Dr. Zerman’s office, but at least then Andy would be along. While her mother reviewed her litany of questions Jill was to ask back in the exam room, Andy would read gossipy blurbs out of *People* magazine to mask the fact that he was really asking himself the rhetorical question, “How far off its axis must the earth be for this to feel utterly normal?” Jill knew because she asked herself this very thing.

“Tell Dr. Zerman *exactly* what you told me this morning about your headaches. Tell me again.”

“Like someone hacking away at my frontal lobe with a chisel.”

“A lovely image, Jillian. And I think you’ve made your statement with your hat.”

Jill wore a floppy sombrero low over her eyes. It was left over from a high school presentation on Pancho Villa. This was one of her little rebellions, along with the shirt she made a few weeks ago. She had found an old pink shirt she once planned to tie dye

and ironed on little black letters spelling CANCER GIRL. Her mother was horrified. She had gutted the shirt with sewing shears and threw the scraps away. They battled over hats and scarves now that Jill's hair was a thinning, patchy disaster.

“Isn't your hair appointment today?” Jill asked.

Her mother checked her watch. “Oh, shit, shit, shit!” She sounded like a twittery bird. Her gardening gloves came off, and she was halfway to the house. “And we're supposed to get you on those pills to help your appetite. Those need picking up.”

Once her mother had gone inside, Jill saw a vivid square of turquoise advancing toward the fence. Ferrell Nash bumped open the gate with her hip. In the turquoise linen skirt, she was dressed for a catered garden party. It was the skirt one wore to eat cucumber sandwiches and drink frothy mimosas from tall glasses, but this was likely her singular outing for the day. Late in the afternoon, she would still be wearing it. She would be draped across the armchair in her bedroom, legs outstretched, toes curled through a dresser drawer handle, eating Oreos and vacillating between Oprah and MTV. She had learned this elegant sloth from her mother, a woman straight out of an angst-plagued teen soap opera.

“I knew I'd find you out here,” Ferrell called. “Nobody answered the bell.” Her straw purse swung on her wrist. She had her chin pressed into the magazine atop the tall stack she carried.

“Mother is probably deep in the bowels of her closet.” Jill straightened herself in her chair.

Ferrell sat on the side of the other teak lounge. The purse plopped to the ground as she eased the magazines down onto the flagstones. “I bet she *adores* the hat, señorita. Are you tired?”

“A little. I zoned out during *The Price is Right*.”

The sound of the big wheel ticking to a stop often put her in a sleepy mood, but some back corner of her brain remained alert and tuned in to the imploring invitation to “*Come on down!*” She liked the predictable bids of one dollar and the “*NEW CARS!*” with California emissions, but some mornings the beep-beep-beep of the wheel as it slowed sounded a little too much like the monitors in a hospital room.

“You look pretty today.” To Ferrell, Jill looked like the kind of person she would have pitied too much or been too scared of in the past to talk to.

“No I don’t.”

“I say you do, and what I say goes.” Jill knew Ferrell wanted to believe what she said. If Ferrell concentrated on her eyes and her voice, she was exactly the same as she had ever been. Those were the eyes that had met hers in the dark at a host of slumber parties, and that was the voice that had answered the phone every day after school since they were ten years old.

“What did you bring me? Anything good?” Jill eyed the magazines. She shut her sketch pad and tucked her pencil down the pad’s spiral binding.

“Let’s just say the pickings were slim. Lots of the standard house-frau crap that there’s no way my mother actually reads.”

Jill had little interest in reading anything in the magazines Ferrell brought her. She wanted them for the ads and the fashion layouts. Between naps and long spells of

thoughtful inertia, she spent most days copying the suits and skirts and stiff-collared, open necked shirts hanging on the bodies of haughty Dolce & Gabana and Burberry models. She did, though, experiment and add her own subtle signature. She widened the placket on a shirt or added pockets, slid the slit of a skirt further up the thigh and repositioned it at the knee, lengthened a coat and flared it out at the bottom so it would swing freely while walking, invented an audacious ruffle that would, if some real person wore it to dinner, get dragged through bowls of soup, butter dishes, and wine sauces. She liked drawing cap sleeves and boat necks that laid bare a clean scoop of skin.

Dressed now for the serious business of a cut and color, Jill's mother stepped out through one of the French doors. "I'm going!" She waved at Ferrell. The wave made her silver bangles clatter. She came out to the patio while fishing around in her purse like she was preparing to draw a name for a raffle. As soon as she found her keys, she spoke directly to Ferrell: "Can you believe that?" She pointed to Jill's sombrero.

Her mother came near to lift Jill's chin with her finger and tilt the sombrero back from her forehead. "I can't see your pretty face when you wear that." She smiled at Jill, and Jill smiled falsely back. "Ferrell, you have impeccable style. Tell Miss Stubborn that there are plenty of attractive hats she could wear. I saw one at Halls last week. A tasteful, feminine straw hat with a fuchsia fringed sash."

"Because fuchsia is the color that perfectly complements a death-gray complexion." Jill looked to Ferrell for confirmation. "Isn't that what you read in last month's *Vogue*, Ferrell?" Ferrell lowered her eyes to the magazine in her lap. No, she was not going to speak.



“Stop that,” Frannie snapped. They had returned to yesterday’s futile combat. This was how they communicated now. None of the two dozen brochures Frannie had read on living with leukemia bothered to cover how to endure the cancer in all of her daughter’s words and her long burning stares.

“I don’t want a hat from Halls,” Jill said.

“I thought you loved Halls.”

“Hardly.”

Frannie regained her effortless persona: friendly, slightly addled, and overworked. It should have not slipped in front of Ferrell. “Now I am late, late, late.” Again she talked in harried triplicate. “The boys are somewhere,” she added. “I’m not sure where, but they’ll be back.” She lumped Andy together with Brook now and spoke of him as one of her children. Thank god her appointment had been rescheduled for today. She could not bear another moment here with Jillian this morning.

*ii*

“*This* freaked me out,” Ferrell said when they were alone on the patio. “You will not believe this, Jillie. I mean, I don’t want to believe it.” She jiggled a magazine out from the middle of the pile. The pile slumped, the top half of it sliding under her chair. She opened to a page marked with a card for ordering porcelain Smurf figurines. “I ordered you these, by the way.” Ferrell held up the card. “Smurf-of-the-Month Club. I made that up. That’s not really what it is.” She closed her eyes. “Okay. Take a deep breath.” Ferrell inhaled dramatically, palms up, feigning meditation.

“Seriously, you’re going to wish you had taken a deep breath.” Ferrell opened one eye. She passed the magazine to Jill. It was open to an article titled “After All These

Years You Can Still Drive Him Wild.” A steady hand had underlined whole paragraphs and drawn stars in the margins.

“Those are my mother’s stars. Only hers have that little curlicue at the bottom. I gagged. I really and truly, God-as-my-witness gagged when I saw them. I might gag now. This must be from her let’s-give-it-one-last-shot-at-saving-the-marriage phase.”

“It’s good, isn’t it, that they tried—”

“Yuck. I don’t want to talk about it.”

Jill handed back the magazine. “You brought it up.”

“Keep it,” Ferrell insisted. “You and Andy may need it.”

“Ferrell!”

“Don’t ‘Ferrell’ me. Not when it has been obvious that since virtually day one the two of you—you know if it was me I’d be, you know, sharing things with you.”

“I know you would.”

“That reminds me. I haven’t told you, have I? That guy, Dave Turley, in Brook and Andy’s house, the one from Davis, California, the one everybody calls Davis Dave, he said he’d help me study for my Biology final only I didn’t think he meant for us to *really* study. We were there in his room alone—his roommate had taken his last final the night before—and he quizzes me for *three* hours. Without a break. He said he liked my shirt and that was about it.”

“So? You say you want to, but you don’t really want to.”

“I do too.”

“With Davis Dave?” Jill had seen him once, from across the mown lawn behind the natatorium, hitting a moon-shot homerun off a gangly scholarship hall pitcher in an

intramural softball game. There was something reptilian about him Jill did not trust. She turned the page in the magazine. A woman in a long skirt of tiered ruffles danced to the songs of a mariachi band in a salsa ad. Jill thought she could sew something like that. Ferrell could wear it.

“Maybe.” Ferrell shivered and edged her skirt closer to her knees. A cloud like a blimp suspended over a football stadium passed in front of the sun. They were in a dark pocket of shade. “He has such great eyes.”

“Well, there you go. What more reason do you need?” Jill flashed a picture of a red-headed model in a sun dress with straps that tied in bows. Ferrell made a hacking noise in response. “What did you wear?”

“Jeans and a shirt of yours. That black silky v-neck. If I sit just right it kind of droops down my shoulder. But,” she promised, “not in a slutty way or anything.”

“Maybe you come on too strong.”

“Not possible. We’re talking about a mouth-breathing college guy. I did get a kind of gropey, noodle-armed hug when he walked me to my car. That counts for something, I guess. You, the girl who just out of the blue walks up, grabs a guy by the belt loop and kisses him, and has been joined at the hip to him ever since, have no room to talk.”

“You’ll never get over that.” Jill shut the magazine. She let it fall from her fingers to the patio bricks.

“Never. I still don’t believe you did it.” Ferrell almost did it last night to Davis Dave, but she could not decide if he was worth it. There was some overpowering sensation she needed to have in order to do it, but she had not been able to make herself

feel anything for him. “That should have been me. Shouldn’t it?” It should have. She was the shameless flirt. She was the one ogled on campus on her way to class. Besides, before Andy, Jill had never had a real boyfriend, or even a quasi boyfriend. “It is something I would do, right?” She needed confirmation. “What would Brook do if I did that, you think, stepped up and kissed him?”

“He’d have an aneurism,” Jill said. “Pass out. You’d scar him for life. He’d be in therapy from now until the end of time.”

For years Ferrell had nursed a crush on Brook. To her he was the iconic, bookish young aristocrat who played bocce, sailed skiffs, and tasted wine in fold-out Ralph Lauren ads. Frankly, Jill did not see it, nor did she believe Ferrell felt any sincere attachment to him. What she did believe was that this crush, or whatever type of mild obsession it should be called, was a hobby for her, an ongoing trial and error experiment to see what would make Brook react. While everyone agreed that Ferrell was, to borrow the vernacular of certain Mission Hills dowagers cloistered in their solariums, “just so exquisite,” he was impassive. He had girlfriends now and then, but they were of an entirely different species. They were all spritely and wan and in need of exposure to the sun rather than the fluorescent pallor in the Mallott Hall biology labs.

“And you’re sure he broke up with that mousy Olivia girl?” Ferrell quizzed.

“Pretty sure. She called here the other night, though.”

“What did she want?”

“Mom talked to her. It sounded M-CAT related. He and Olivia have this whole structured study group. It’s like their secret society.”

“Whatever,” Ferrell sighed.

“Guess what—today I’m being an overwrought, tormented, ostracized heroine holed up in a manor house—” Jill began.

Ferrell broke in: “See, now these jeans are too tight. Even for me.”

Jill pretended not to look, but without turning her head she could see enough of a Latin-looking model to know that a sort of oversized potato peeler contraption would be needed to extricate her from her pair of waistless jeans. “A manor house that’s now a sanitarium, like in old British novels, and I have a loyal private nurse.”

“The only books I ever read beginning to end were Nancy Drews,” Ferrell said. “Aunt Cathy gave me a box of Suzanne’s old Nancy Drew books, and I only read those to see if she would hook up with one of the Hardy Boys.”

“Nancy Drew did not hook up with one of the Hardy Boys,” Jill countered. “She had a boyfriend.”

“I know. And he was a loser. But they did—she and one of the Hardy Boys. Which one, I have no idea. Wasn’t one of them Frank? It could have been him. But it happened. They were snowed in at this secluded mountain cabin. They were almost out of firewood, and the killer was lurking just outside in a ski mask. It was a cross-over thing. Like when somebody on one *Law & Order* shows up on an episode of another *Law & Order*.”

“Nancy Drew and the Case of the Horny Hardy Boy,” Jill laughed.

“I’d always picture your house as her house, her uppity dad kicked back in a den just like your dad’s—” Ferrell stopped in the middle of the thought. “God. Check that out. Now that’s who I’d like to ambush and kiss.” She tilted the cover of a travel magazine so Jill could see a copper-skinned cover boy emerging from a swimming pool

at sunset. The surface of the water shimmered with the elongated reflections of light from paper lanterns strung above the pool. He did not look real to Jill. He was too perfect. The beads of water on his chest and lips were too much like diamonds. He stared dispassionately into the camera. He was arrested in the motion of thrusting himself up out of the water with the strength of his biceps. Over the cover boy's shoulder the fronds of blurred palm trees draped the peaked top of a cabana in a lattice work of shadows. A fleck of gold in each of his eyes echoed the pair of lit candles in the cabana.

*In this issue: The Hidden Pleasures of South Beach: Which one of Miami's vices couldn't our Getaway Girl resist?*

"Ferrell," Jill said quietly.

"Huh?" Ferrell tore a succession of subscription postcards from inside the magazine.

"I have to throw up."

"Let's go inside."

Jill had already pushed herself up from the lounge chair. "I can't make it." She did not know where to go. The new row of tiger lilies swayed with the breeze beneath the kitchen window. Jill moved toward them, stumbling, her hand over her mouth. Ferrell caught her around the waist and bent with her over the curled orange blossoms. She tossed away the sombrero just as Jill lunged over the lilies and threw up. She was sick on the fresh black soil smoothed around the plants, on the pale orange blossoms, on the wispy leaves, and on Ferrell's turquoise skirt. Jill saw it on the hem and on Ferrell's knee. Another upsurge rocketed from her stomach and into her throat, but nothing came of it. Ferrell must have felt it too because she steadied her and held her tighter and spoke

to her in a lilting, dreamy voice. Jill could not focus on the words. She could only relax against her. Ferrell's hair felt hot against her cheek.

“We're all right. We're all right,” Ferrell sang in Jill's ear as she helped her up and then lowered her back to the lounge chair. She was being serenely maternal. She wiped at the corners of Jill's mouth with her thumb, oblivious to the stain across her skirt.

She had a real talent for this despite no firsthand experience with pain, illness, suffering, or death. She had never even been to a funeral. The closest she had come was when she had the chicken pox and used a marker to draw red dots all over one of her Barbies—California Dreamin' Midge—so she would be sick too. Ferrell's spots healed, Midge's did not. Her mother told her Midge wasn't going to get better. She gave Ferrell a long, red American Beauty spaghetti box to use for Midge's coffin. Her Barbies had a funeral for her. They all put on their sequin dresses, their strapless gowns and heels. And then she packed them up and brought them over here so they could have a pool party with Jill's Barbies. It was the biggest, best Barbie pool party they ever had.

Jill could hear voices, and shoes striking the floor inside the house. Brook and Andy came out onto the patio from the kitchen. Their shirts were sweat soaked. They had been golfing. They sauntered over, each of them eating French fries from a Burger King sack.

“You missed Andy come within an inch of beaming a groundskeeper,” Brook said.

“Mower came out of nowhere.” Andy saw Jill crouched on the chaise, then looked to Brook to see if he too thought that something important—something he should be able to spot immediately—had been altered. He seemed to be scanning the patio for

the answer, as if it was something as cosmetic and inane as new cushions for the lounge chairs. Ferrell blocked his view of the flowers.

“I puked on mommy’s lilies,” Jill whispered to Brook. “I don’t want her to see.”

Andy stopped where he was. He had pushed sunglasses back into his blond hair. Ferrell moved and he saw it. His mouth was stupidly agape. He set down the sack of fries. His other cheeseburger was in there too. Extra pickles. No mustard. Just the way he liked it. Now he was going to throw it away without ever taking a bite.

With his arms folded, Brook studied the damage, turned to Jill and in a way that was too severe to be serious, said, “You really got them good, didn’t you?” Because he laughed, Jill laughed too. She was so happy to have a brother who knew everything and loved her more than anyone. “Don’t worry about it. It’s done. I’ll handle it.” Brook spoke to her in his doctor voice that he mastered back in high school. It was calm but not patronizing, sympathetic without being cloying, and was copied from their father who, with only a word, could quiet a howling toddler. “I’ll get the hose,” he said.

Andy sat next to her. Their knees touched. He smelled of grass and Gatorade. He stared at the lilies with his chin pulled in. He seemed disgusted. He slid the greasy Burger King sack aside with his shoes and said nothing. Finally, he reached down and scratched at his leg, then brushed away sand that stuck to his skin.

“I feel better now,” she assured him, but she could still feel a caked-on crust around her mouth and could still taste that *taste*. She thought he was ready to say something, but then he noticed the streak of vomit across Ferrell’s skirt. At the sight of it, he gagged little.

Andy turned his head toward the pool. “That’s good,” he said.



When he and Brook had left for the golf course after breakfast, she was out of bed and dressed in real clothes, not her pajamas. This was supposed to be a good day, and she had promised him another one tomorrow. He wanted there to be visible, indisputable progress—a smooth continuum of improvement—every day. He wanted an end point that could be scheduled like a dentist appointment. When that date came, this would all be over, and things could finally go back to the way they were before. To him, the good days alternating with the bad were just proof that the worst was all too near and might never go away. He would say nothing, though. He had learned not to say anything because, if he did, she would say something back. Back and forth they would go until they reached their usual impasse that came about because he could not share her view of death. He did not like it that, to her, there was no shame in dying and that heaven was going to be so much better than this life. So, she *wanted* to die? he had asked. No, no, no, no, she protested. It wasn't about wanting to die or not. It wasn't her choice, and it wasn't his. He did not get it. He did not want to get it, so they did not talk about it. And the not talking about it had been killing them both more than the junk in her bones and her blood ever could.

When Brook finished, he led Jill into the house. Ferrell and Andy trailed behind, but just as Jill stepped into the kitchen Ferrell jerked him aside. Jill heard her before she saw her corner him against the house. From where she stood Jill could only see their legs. They were in perfect focus now that her body had started to recalibrate itself. Before, everyone's head had been slightly off center on their bodies. They had appeared as if they were all caught in a distorting, wriggling heat wave.

Brook had not shut the door completely and she could hear the two of them:

“Hey,” Ferrell seethed, “Do you have to be such an ass? I mean do you even have a heart or anything? Just say something to make her feel better.”

“Get your hand off me, Ferrell.” She had him by the arm. Prissy, whiny Ferrell Nash—a silly debutante and Grade A narcissist if there ever was one, was better at this than him. That’s what he’s thinking, Jill told herself as Brook took one of their mother’s better dish towels from the drawer beside the sink. Few things in life were certain, but Andy had always held fast to the incontrovertible truth that he was Ferrell’s superior in every possible way. Indeed, he was smart, identified once by an enthusiastic guidance counselor as gifted, yet he struggled to master basic empathy and compassion.

“Grow up,” she said and pushed him in the chest. “She’s not contagious.” And then as an afterthought: “I can’t wait til you’re gone.” She couldn’t help herself. “I don’t even get why you’re here right now if it disgusts you so much.”

“Here’s an idea,” Andy seethed. “Just stay in your little fantasy world with Davis Dave or whoever you’re in love with today and leave me alone.”

Brook closed his hand over Jill’s shoulder to keep her steady. She stood with him over the silver sink basin. She let him clean her face with the damp towel, closing her eyes to concentrate on the coolness of the towel as it passed from her cheek down to her chin. She wanted to hear Ferrell and Andy, but Brook ran the water too strongly. It struck at the basin and gurgled down the drain, and their voices were reduced to a flat buzz in the background.

## 7. HARI-KARI

“Ask me what hari-kari is,” Ferrell demanded.

She was carrying out the pretense of studying for her Eastern Civ final. She recited the ancient Chinese dynasties while pacing from the bedroom window to Jill’s dresser with her textbook on her head. She moved with her palms pressed together and her elbows out, parallel to the floor. She kept getting to the Tang dynasty, forgetting what came next, losing her concentration and dropping the book. “Ask me what hari-kari is,” she said again.

“Thish ish Harry Carey with Shteve Shtone from Wrigley Field in Chicago,” Brook said.

Andy let out a snorting laugh. “Remember how he’d say Jose Vizcaino?”

Brook and Andy said it together: “Ho-shhhay Vizschcayeee-no!”

“Hari-kari,” she began, having committed the glossary definition from the back of the textbook to memory, “is a form of ritualized suicide in which a samurai disembowels himself with his sword.”

They were in Jill’s bedroom—Ferrell, Brook, Andy, and Jill, plus her two dress forms. The two dress forms made the room too crowded, like they were just there, poaching, waiting for someone to get up and leave so they could take a seat. Although they were headless, they seemed to be glowering at Andy. They were reading his thoughts and judging him on her behalf because he could not help but think how three days from now he would be away from here. They were appalled, and so was he, but that was the truth. Three days from now he would mercifully be on his way to Hong Kong to begin his coveted internship. Actually, he would be in England for five days carrying out what was left of a plan Jill had masterminded since they were first together. *You’ll go to Hong Kong and I’ll do study abroad—somewhere in France—Paris, definitely—and when you’re done and when I’m done you’ll meet me there in Paris, and then, and then, and then... The train under the Channel. Calais to Dover. Dover to Canterbury. We can see the cathedral. We’ll read Chaucer on the train, and we’ll be pilgrims for a day.* He did not want to go without her. What did he care about Canterbury? He shared none of her Anglophile interests. He had not bothered to read Chaucer when it was assigned in Western Civ. But she wanted some shred of her old plan preserved, and he felt he owed that to her.

Jill, too, felt the dress forms glowering at her because she was too much of a coward to tell everyone to get out of her room. All the squabbling and the sniping had made her desperate for silence. She could kick them out, but after Andy was gone, she

would wish for him beside her and regret having done it. To pretend Ferrell, her brother, and Andy were not really there, she read from one of the magazines Ferrell brought her, the one with the shirtless, airbrushed Adonis on the cover. *If you plan on indulging in a little late night skinny dipping at Miami's new ultra-chic Fandango Beach Club & Villas, it helps to know someone on the inside. Someone both discreet and daring and capable of securing an armload of the hotel's extra-large, extra-plush towels. Someone who can bring them to you toasty warm as the staff graciously does if you are an early riser eager to swim laps before breakfast. Someone who will join you, because, as everyone knows, skinny dipping isn't worth doing if you're doing it alone. I spotted the ideal accomplice: a tawny boy of twenty-one with sun-bleached hair, a deep brown sugar tan and a keen awareness of the fact that I, like every other woman assembled around the pool, was ogling him from behind my sunglasses as he delivered chilled bottles of water...*

Andy was next to her on the bed. He was watching her. Jill felt like they were the geriatric couple in the Craftmatic bed commercials. Press a button, and the mattress would contort, folding them into a tight, crushing U. Was he not always watching her? She thought he must have spotted new visible signs of disease she had overlooked. He had a section of the *Wall Street Journal* blanketed across his legs. When he wasn't watching her, he was making sense of the columns of numbers on the S&P page. Her father had devised a six week contest to see who could get the best return on a hypothetical ten thousand dollar investment in the markets, and he was trying to outsmart him by uncovering an emerging pharmaceutical powerhouse that could quadruple his profits.

“Confucius,” Ferrell began, still sounding like she had ingested her textbook, “emphasized the importance of filial piety, or reverence and respect for one’s parents.” She managed a slow pirouette with the book on her head. Right now Jill did not want to hear her because, for the moment, when she heard Ferrell she only heard her berating Andy. She picked up another magazine from her nightstand. The Getaway Girl was in this one too.

*I cruised the Danube at nightfall with a new friend, the recently liberated lead guitarist of a group that, without warning, had disbanded following a show the night before. The others, a second guitarist, a drummer, a bass player and a lead singer, had presumably returned to the English Midlands. He had stayed behind, he confessed, because he had spent all his money on martinis. Our fellow passengers stared at him and his hair that stuck out arrow straight at two dozen different angles. His dimples, clingy black tee-shirt, and jack boots gave him the aura of someone vaguely famous. The group, whose name he coyly refused to divulge, had played the same out-of-the-way club in Budapest five times before. He knew the city, and as the boat drifted beneath the Elizabeth Bridge and on toward the Independence Bridge, he talked in a hoarse voice of the famed Hotel Gellert in the distance. A juvenile, girlish thrill shot up through my knees and I thought I knew how the girls who gazed up at him from the front row must have felt.*

Once more Ferrell started in on the dynasties. Sui. Tang. Song. The book fell again when Andy interrupted her to witheringly say, “It’s *Tang* as in tongs for an ice bucket, not *Taaang* like the powdered orange juice shit.”

“You shush,” Ferrell snapped. “That’s how I remember it. I have a system and it’s none of your business.”

Andy muttered something directed at Ferrell. “Did you just swear at me in Chinese?” Ferrell sneered. The book on her head teetered, but she managed to elongate her neck and steady it.

“Maybe.”

“Say it again.”

He did. Ferrell tried to sound out the syllables. “I’ll ask my teacher what it means,” she vowed.

“I wouldn’t.”

“So, you’re a real whiz when it comes to biology,” Brook interjected. He was in the window seat with his M-CAT workbook, but he was not really studying. If he were studying, he would have been sequestered in his room. He pushed his glasses up his nose. “I saw you in the parking lot hanging all over the frat boy Svengali, Davis Dave. The Bio book was a nice touch.”

“All we did was study,” Ferrell replied dismissively. Dave Turley was the boy for very weak girls and sometimes Jill thought Ferrell could be exceedingly weak, almost gleefully so. Shut up. That was all she wanted, but Jill said nothing, so the three of them carried on about him with no regard for her. If she could just be alone, she could travel in peace from South Beach to the Danube and back again.

“Uh-huh. You were dressed to be undressed. A little off-the-shoulder action, if I remember correctly.” Brook pulled at the collar of his polo to expose his own shoulder. He looked up at Ferrell. “Raccoon eyes from all that junk you’d painted on yourself.”

“Has he invited you to California yet, to his family’s beach house?” Andy said *beach house* in the baleful way rigid non-believers said the words *alien spacecraft*.

“No,” Ferrell said.

Brook closed his study guide and spoke as if Ferrell were no longer in the room. “When he does, she’ll have to take a number. He’ll have to have one of those McDonald’s signs put up outside the house. One billion served.”

“He will,” Andy said, approving of such gross hyperbole. “A rake like him will do it.”

“A what?” Ferrell did not understand.

“A rake.” Brook repeated, as if changing his inflection would help Ferrell understand.

“A lech,” Andy said with booming finality. “I mean do you even have a *brain* or anything, Ferrell?”

“He was a gentleman.” Ferrell checked her profile in the mirror. She tried to raise her chin but the book slipped. Jill watched Ferrell watch herself.

“I’m sorry if I am not one of your vegan granola girls.” Ferrell turned and posed in front of Brook, a hand splayed on her hip. This was a limp, end of the runway pose. She looked like all her weight had been sucked into her sandals. “And I’m sorry if breathless talk about Rhodes scholar application essays is not my idea of a turn on. Next time, I’ll wear something like this.”

She snatched a dress from Jill’s open closet and hurled it on the bed. It was *the* Easter dress, the long mauve floral one Jill’s mother had bought without consulting her. No one would confuse it with the words *provocative* or *seductive*. It would have been a



fine dress, if she had been planning to ride on the back of a moped through the streets of Rome like the deliriously contented women in American Express traveler's cheques commercials. It was a dress for taking children to school, for making an appearance at your husband's office in the middle of the day.

Her voice now soft and halting, Ferrell spoke directly to her reflection in Jill's mirror. "Not that any of you understand, but I get so tired sometimes of watching other people live." She fled the room with her book gathered in close to her chest. Jill shouted to her, but Ferrell's sandals slapped down the stairs and onto the foyer's wood floors. After a beat of silence, the front door slammed shut.

"Really. You should have seen her. It was embarrassing." Brook was even more earnest than normal, if that were possible. He stood and excused himself. The show he had come to see was over, and there was nothing left for him to do but retreat to his room across the hall.

Jill reached for the dress at the end of her bed. She held it up by the shoulders like she held a dead mouse by the tail between both of her thumbs and forefingers.

"She knows I hate this dress. We made fun of it for weeks."

"It seems okay to me." Andy fingered its collar.

"Mom bought it for me two Easters ago. The Easter Bunny only visits good girls in new dresses. She said that once. Back when I was little." She held the dress out away from her and imagined slicing into it with a pair of scissors as her mother had done with her tee-shirt. She would do it with total confidence, the way Brook would have to cut open a cadaver sometime soon. "I could do something with it, I think," she said.

"Like what?"

“Cut off the sleeves, shorten it, bring it up to the knee.”

“I guess.” He got up off the bed. “Have to go see if Brook’s got a calculator. I think I left mine in my Stats final. It’s weekly tally night for me and Lew. Tonight’s the night he realizes he’s going down.”

When Andy left the room, she had one of her drive-by encounters with mortality, a piercing dose of terror. If she died—whether it was from the stupid leukemia, a snake bite or a freak accident sure to make the news—her mother would want to bury her in that dress. Jill knew it. Jill could not help but launch into a wild ad-hoc inventory of everything she could think of in her closet. Black? Would she need to wear black? Did that rule apply to her or just to everyone else not yet napping in a casket for all of eternity? Because she liked her black clothes. There was one dress she could think of that would not be so bad. She could make a bold declaration: *Mother, this is what I want to be buried in.* Andy was smart about things like that. He could help her write something up. Get a notary or someone else official to sign off on it. But presenting her mother with something like that would freak her out completely. Jill could say that presidents do it. While they are still of sound mind and capable of biking for miles around the grounds of Camp David they write up elaborate plans. The plans were books the size of the U.S. government’s annual budget. She, Jillian Renee Van Dyne, could make a few simple requests like *do not bury me in that god-awful mauve Easter dress, do not let me be remembered as Pete Lehman’s Jewel ball date, do not—under any circumstance—let anyone, whether they be those assembled in the church, a special soloist, the Pembroke Hill chorale girls, or a kazoo band, sing Amazing Grace.* She could not handle that song. Maybe because on the universal countdown of top forty

funeral songs it was an undisputed number one. She would rather have Brook get up and do a spoken word performance of “Hungry Like the Wolf” in his draggy Sean Connery voice.

After she bathed and put on her robe, Jill cranked open the window above the window seat. She heard Andy’s voice down below on the patio, then her father’s. She could tell by the way that he was talking that her father had his pipe between his teeth. They chided each other about their mock investments, but then her father engineered a smooth segue into the topic of Africa. With the authority of someone who had done it himself, he told Andy about a hunting trek through the Cameroon rainforests with the help of Pygmy trackers attuned to the habits of the bongo. Andy asked what a bongo was. Jill sometimes forgot that there were people, probably most people, who did not know about the bongo’s fantastic spiral horns or its russet colored coat. While everyone else in preschool memorized the mundane barnyard roster of pigs and chickens and horses and cows, she and Brook had learned to identify cape buffalo, eland (so easy to confuse with a bongo!), sable, and kerdu.

*ii*

Andy shut her window when he came in. He transferred the sketch pad from her hands to the nightstand. Moonlight, weak and white, cut across her face. She had the collar of her robe snuggled up around her neck. He had spent much of the day not loving her. Sometimes it was exhausting work, but he was suddenly overcome. *I love her.* Jill could feel the change as he eased onto the bed. One knee on the mattress, then the other, then the flattening of his body next to hers. The fire had made him warm. “I’m awake. You talked for a long time tonight. I was listening.” She combed her fingers through his

hair. It was thick and blond and would have been wildly curly if he ever let it grow. “I want to go with him on his safari. I *am* going to go with him.”

“Oh, he won’t ever go.” He was not being accusatory, and he meant no disrespect to her father. He was only stating the truth as he knew it.

She resented him for saying this and sounding so superior about it, like she was a fool for believing her father. “He is too. When the time is right he will go.”

“You really think he will. Going would ruin the fun. No more shopping for mosquito nets and binoculars. That’s the end of the insect repellent collection. When it becomes real, that will be the end of the romance. In his mind he’s already been there anyway.”

He had parted her robe at the knees and was lying crosswise on the bed with his face against her legs. When he talked, she could feel his lips forming the words against her skin. “You won’t cut up that dress will you?”

“I might. Depends on if I can think of something that would work. But then I may just cut it up anyway.”

“Don’t be mean to your mom.” He wrapped the end of the robe’s belt around his finger.

“I don’t want to be mean. I can’t help it. I don’t know how to love her right now. She’s borderline unloveable.”

“She is no different than she has ever been.”

“You can’t see it. You’ve never been a daughter. I think she pretends I’m dead sometimes, like she’s practicing just in case. It’s her coping thing.”

Andy raised up to snap on the lamp beside her bed. “Where are they?” He reached toward the nightstand.

“What? What do you want?”

“All your little pamphlets from the doctor.” They were not there. Her mother had a special place for them inside the drawer of the living room escritoire.

“What for?”

“To see if they’ve added baseless paranoia to the list of chemo side effects.”

“She does. I know she does. It’s just this feeling I get sometimes. But then she always barges in to make sure that just because she thought about it, it hasn’t really happened.”

“You’re crazy.” The robe had loosened. He opened it like he was opening the cover of a book.

He kissed her the way he used to. She was not ready for it. He was not either. Her mouth felt too big for her face, her tongue dry and stiff. She ducked a hand beneath his shirt, then did not know what to do. Her hand froze to his stomach. She could feel the distant reverberations of his heart, but she did not feel the thrill of realizing once more that beneath his shirt was a twenty-year old boy’s body, sleek and slim from playing pick-up basketball in the fraternity house parking lot, from hanging from the doorjamb and doing pull-ups on a dare.

His mouth was open against her neck, but he did not breathe. His fingers pressed into her rib. She felt it again, two of his fingers gauging the width of one rib, then another below it. He understood—really understood—how gaunt she was, that her skin

was just a superficial barrier, and that he may as well have been touching the bones themselves.

“We could—” she started to say, though she knew not only that they could not, but that he did not want to now.

There had been a torturous few moments with Dr. Zerman the endless day of the diagnosis when she, Andy, and her mother listened to Zerman give his *leukemia + sex = bad idea* talk. She had tried to be unflappably adult about it while they all sat on the leather couch across from his desk. There had been a pause, like Zerman had lost his place in the oncologists’ master script for discussing such weirdly linked things as leukocytes and libido. In that pause she heard and felt the crunch of leather as Andy shifted himself away from her and nearer the arm of the couch. Andy was the same tonight as he had been then. He crossed the robe over her chest and retied the belt and slouched down beside her. *In two weeks—now almost thirteen days—I’ll be away from here.*

Since she came home from the hospital, he had been stealing into her room like this every night. They talked in the dark, their laughter sometimes rising and expanding so much that Brook appeared in the pencil-thin space of the open door to scold them. During the day they talked of Oncovin IV drips and her next Cytosan treatment, but while everyone else slept they remembered all of the deadpan things Brook had said that day, and those would bring back to life some outrageous comment of Ferrell’s from months before. Jill believed this to be twice as intimate as moments they had once schemed for. Then there had always been a rush to put jeans back on and button shirts, to smooth out bed spreads and replace pillows.

After tonight she would not think that anymore. He could have stayed through the night and been beside her when the sun cleared the Lehmans' fence, but he was always gone by then, comatose on the guestroom bed. In the truth-telling sunlight, she could not be the first thing he saw. He did not want that upchucking, sallow, dim-eyed, alien girl staring him in the face. From now on, he would forever feel her poking ribs and see that streak of vomit, seeing it on her instead of Ferrell and rejoicing that it had not been him steadying her over the lilies. He was failing her badly, and he knew it. He had to have known she knew it and that the time for concealing and effacing had passed them by. She could try to go along with this, though. They could keep doing this every night, imitating a sort of closeness heightened by absolute silence. She could get good at it. She already was good at it. This was the time, it seemed, for a drastic, saving delusion. She could think of this as love. She had been an attentive date with Pete Lehman. She had let him kiss her after the last dance. She had worn the despised mauve dress to church on Easter and let her mother take her and Brook's picture on the front step. If she could do all that, she could do this.

She thought of touching him again. She did not, though. Rather, she suddenly thought of Ferrell, four streets over, tunneled under her quilt, guarded by a barricade of plush teddy bears and puppy dogs. She was pouting in her sleep and dreaming of very long kisses and very slow dances and very handsome men who would love her very much. Jill was angry at Ferrell and her simple dreams, and angry at herself for being so jealous of them she could not get back to sleep.

## 8. THE GETAWAY GIRL

*I am a girl who has gotten away and gone to Russia. I am not sure why I am here, but I will stay. For now, I will stay on the outskirts of gray and dour Moscow. Today, at center-ice of a rink in a town on the cusp of Siberia, the fleet hiss of skates knifing into the ice saves me. It has become familiar, home-like, and makes being here less drastic. And in the mornings, especially, I need saving. Since arriving, I have yet to wake up, see the frost-bitten landscape through a dirty pane of apartment glass and not think, how did you get here? But then we are rink-side watching a sharp-featured boy—the nephew of a former Red Army defenseman—rip a line of pucks into a net. The sound of the stick making contact is like machine gun fire, the sound of a puck hitting the dented boards like a cannon. I know to watch the footwork and the wrist action. My scout friend talks me through the notes he'll send back to the front office in Long Island, and*



*the longer he talks the more it is as if the world has been reduced to this rink in dire need of a zamboni's smoothing touch, and that is fine with me.*

There were five old issues of *Round Trip* magazine in the stack Ferrell had brought, and since last night Jill had read the Getaway Girl story in each issue at least four times. This one was her favorite. Without meaning to, she had memorized parts of it, like the first chant-like sentences. They had a sing-song rhyme she liked. This story, though, did not read at all like the others. There was no tone of overzealous wonderment, just a peculiar resignation to the fact that she was in Russia for no discernible reason and knew no one, except for another American, a professional hockey scout. Fittingly, the story was not a travelogue at all, but a detached, platonic, hopeless romance between the getaway girl and the happily married hockey scout as they traveled to rinks in dilapidated, unheated buildings and rode in dingy trains through the night to yet another village still existing in a Cold War cocoon. *From Russia with Love: A Getaway Girl Finds Refuge in the Shadow of the Kremlin.* A Getaway Girl. That made it sound to Jill like there was not just one such girl out there, but dozens of them hiding in plain sight, and she could be one of them.

The photograph with the story was grainy, sepia-tinted, and artificially out of focus. It reminded her of the hundreds of arty and mysterious black and white pictures Andy had taken for his photography class last spring. Some of them were matted and framed and hanging here on the walls of her father's den. Room had been made for them amongst the maps, the Audubon prints, and a second cousin's ink drawings of the farm where her father had grown up in western Kansas.

Whenever Andy had taken pictures of her, Jill thought they had a hasty surveillance quality to them—like he was stationed at the curtained window of a cheap motel across the street from where she stood. The picture in the magazine was the same way. It stretched from one page to the next and showed a young woman, seemingly unaware that she was being watched through a lens, passing through snow-packed Red Square. She had been photographed from the side and was anonymous except for the gentle slope of her nose. A fur hat and a coat with a bushy fur collar concealed her face. Her face was obscured enough that Jill could believe she was in Red Square bundled in the coat she had in middle school with a furry border around the hood. Jill may as well have been the girl in the picture because the Getaway Girl was a ghost. She had no name, no picture—not even a three sentence bio on the page profiling the issue’s contributors. In the other issues she was just a cartoon by an artist who signed *Sergio* with an enormous figure-eight *S* to the drawings.

Russia was austere, proud, indomitable. At least Jill thought it was, and that intrigued her. She had seen *Dr. Zhivago* three times (mainly because she adored Julie Christie, her wardrobe and the way she looked in it). She knew her Dostoyevsky, and that was always how Russia seemed to her. She was transporting herself to a bitter winter day in Moscow when Ferrell rapped the heel of her palm against the den’s half open door. She was in jeans and a shapeless tee-shirt that had been washed so many times it was losing its color. Ferrell did not wear jeans in summer. She favored sun dresses, bright skirts, and tiny shorts that drew attention to her legs. Jill could not imagine Ferrell having a shirt like that, not even wadded up in the back of a seldom opened dresser drawer. Her hair was twirled into a haphazard bun, and she had not

applied a single stroke of make-up. This was the sort of thing Ferrell did for effect when she wanted to elicit a reaction from someone, particularly her mother. Grier Nash had never developed the kind of keen telepathic powers Jill's mother had that allowed her to sense her children's troubles and heartbreaks. She could not abide a daughter who did not every day look ready for a cotillion, and the sight of Ferrell dressed down was about the only way she would recognize that her daughter, on occasion, needed the wise and reassuring influence of a mother.

Jill smelled cigarettes. "How come you've been smoking?" she asked. Smoking was not an addiction but an expression of discontent for Ferrell, an accessory to the rumpled clothes. It was a habit for the downtrodden, one she thought she should adopt in properly dire circumstances. She had smoked through her parents' divorce and all through the weeks Jill spent in the hospital. A lighter bulged in the back pocket of her jeans.

"Your mom had me put the stuff you left in the dorm down in the basement. Anything you want moved up to your room?"

"Not that I can think of. How was the test?"

"I don't know." Ferrell shrugged.

"Was there a hari kari question?"

"I don't know. I answered the first three multiple choice and left." She was as blasé and monotone as she could be. She circled the den, running her fingers along the spines of the books on the shelves and spinning the globe on Jill's father's desk. She pulled the stopper from the Waterford decanter at the opposite end of the desk and held it to her nose to smell the odor of old scotch. She did love this room. It was dark and cool

in summer, fire-lit and cozy through the winter. She and Jill used to spend entire afternoons on the rug with the record player, lip-synching to the soaring arias that crackled to life on Lew Van Dyne's opera records. This afternoon she had expected Jill to be in her room or outside on the patio so she could lie down on the couch here and be alone and miserable. She thought she might pull a random book off a shelf and read until she forgot what she had done last night.

“Is that why you smell like you've smoked a pack and a half this morning?”

“I drove back to campus last night. Dave Turley and I went down to Potter Lake. We—” She finally faced Jill and did this thing with her eyes that finished the rest of the sentence. “You know,” she added, in case Jill had any doubt about what she meant.

“Ferrell, you didn't.”

“I had to. You wouldn't get it.”

Jill did get it. Ferrell was jealous. That was all there was to it. Without ever saying so, she had been quite explicit. She found a thousand wordless little ways to say it, and most of them had been invented and perfected by middle school girls everywhere. Ferrell just wanted a little balance. That did not make her unreasonable, did it? Jill had her mother, her father, her brother, and Andy, and together they sat around the dining room table each night and ate pot roast and cherry pie à la mode. They watched movies together. They talked about books and all the world's problems. Meanwhile, she had an estranged father in a beach house at Nag's Head, a mother who had to be running out of moneyed silver-haired men to squire her to all the city's swankiest social events, a cleaning woman named Concetta who came every Tuesday afternoon, and a tank of fish named after the characters on *Days of Our Lives*.

She crumpled down beside Jill and laid her head in Jill's lap. "No after-school special speech, please. I gave it to myself already, and it's not helping. Swear you won't tell Andy or Brook." Before Jill could answer, all that happened at Potter Lake came out in one breathless, agonized jag. Jill did not want to hear it. This secondhand drama made her weary, and it disappointed her. Since her first chemo treatments, Ferrell's optimism and companionship had never wavered. Still, Jill could not help but wish for Ferrell a moment of private terror strong enough and long enough for her to hear all the cells in her body buzz loudly like a throng of locusts. And if Ferrell had that last night with Davis Dave, Jill was glad.

Jill just wanted to go back to Moscow and to remembering how the furry hood of her old coat tickled her cheeks and neck. Instead, she was stuck on campus, on sparsely wooded Campanile Hill, a place where she and Andy had spent weekend mornings taking in the vista of the all-girls dormitories, downtown's blunted skyline, Potter Lake covered in its lid of lily pads, and the empty football stadium cradled in the valley below. Only now it was marred by the indelible image of Dave Turley and Ferrell down by the water's edge. From now on, they would be forever lurking in the weeds.

"I didn't like it," Ferrell lamented. "At all. I'm supposed to like it, right? That's kind of the point. Why couldn't I like it? I know he could tell. The grass was clammy and nasty, and I promise you there was a slug or something ickier than that crawling and slithering up the back of my leg. You'd think the ground would be soft there, but it's not. I was too busy thinking about that and stray dogs and old dog poop and the campus police and my mother and where his hands were and where my hands were. I wish I

could take it back.” She rolled onto her back to give Jill a wounded and regretful look.

“Is that how you felt with Andy at first?”

“Not really. No.” It had been quite the opposite.

“Thanks a lot,” Ferrell huffed. She had mastered the art of searing contempt (another fine trait her mother had passed on) and knew how to infuse her words with just the right amount of toxic sarcasm. She lurched to her feet and left the room. Jill did not bother to stop her.

*ii*

*I am a girl who has gotten away and gone to Russia. I am not sure why I am here, but I will stay.* Jill tossed aside the magazine. It plummeted to the rug like a bird shot out of the sky. It could not take her where she wanted to go. Neither could anything else in this room. It was the room of an adventurer stuck in the life of a pediatrician. There were shelves of guidebooks on Africa, many of them outdated and purchased, her father said, at Abercrombie and Fitch, back when it still sold such things to discerning adults. Below the guidebooks were the shelves of novels and anthologies. Robert Louis Stevenson, Hemingway, Homer, Joseph Conrad, Cervantes, Jack London, Jules Verne. Lewis and Clark, even, and Kerouac. (Her father a closet beat?!) Plus that odd book of Poe’s about a voyage to the warm South Pole. A whole bookcase was crammed with yellow-spined *National Geographics* dating back to the 1960s. Lately, he had acquired a small stack of books on Hong Kong and the mainland, as if he were the one leaving on Monday.

Andy was probably right about daddy. She hated to even think that, but this was a melancholy room, she realized. He should have gone to Africa by now. Was he afraid?

Of what could he possibly be afraid? As a young physician he had been bold enough to spend a year in Costa Rica treating impoverished villagers. Before that he had spent a summer in Wyoming on a cattle ranch. What had happened to his spirit? She feared he had become a complacent dreamer. Jill was the heir to his wanderlust. As she emerged from adolescence and passed into adulthood, it made her impatient. The days never passed quickly enough. She wished she could leapfrog over two or three years of tomorrows or however many it would take for Andy to be on Wall Street and her to be in the Garment District. Once they got there they were going to be travelers, great connoisseurs of life.

Living here was part of the problem. There were those spiral marble columns from Venice, the ones of Verona marble at the confluence of Ensley, Mission, and Overhill roads a few blocks away. And the fountains, urns, and statues decorating the neighborhood's cul-de-sacs, corners, and traffic circles, all of them imported from England or Italy. And then there were the mottled tile roofs of all the Seville-inspired Plaza buildings, the scale reproduction of La Giralda, and the ceramic matador murals. *More boulevards than Paris, more fountains than Rome.* That old Kansas City slogan did not help, either. Neither did the bridges over Brush Creek that made it look like the Seine in miniature. Since she was a girl, the Country Club District—the Plaza and the insular streets of Mission Hills—had teased her and tempted her with these delicious little allusions to the great continental cities. They were transcendent flashes of grandeur that had inspired so many hours of daydreams and whole sketchbooks of drawings. What had been magnificent to her ten year old self, was decidedly less so now. She wanted more than charming replicas.

She could not wait—not until Dr. Zerman got all the toxic crap out of her blood and her bones, or until next summer, and certainly not until she was a fifty-seven year old with a room full of books and maps of the places that made up the glossy landscapes of her dreams.

*iii*

Barefooted and wearing a dark blue pinstriped suit he had purchased no more than hour earlier, Andy paused outside the den before going in. When he did go in, he was going to be cheerful, gregarious even, to show her that last night did not matter. If he could pull it off, she would not know that he had avoided her this morning. Last night they had embarrassed each other. He regretted the way he left her, yanking free of the grip she had on his tee-shirt and stumbling away without saying anything, not even goodnight. When he woke, the time was not right yet to make everything okay, so he had gotten Brook out of bed early, led him on an extra long run down the wide Ward Parkway medians, and dragged him along to Brooks Brothers on the Plaza to shop for his Hong Kong wardrobe. Since they had gotten back, he could think of no more ways to elude her, nor did he really want to.

“What do you think? Am I Hong Kong worthy?” He mimicked the clipped and arrogant strut of a model from one end of the den to the other.

“Love it with that shirt.” Under the suit coat he had on his *Minnesota: Land of 10,000 Fakes* tee-shirt. For some reason, just the way his expensive suit looked with a dorky old tee-shirt erased last night. They would not have to say more about it. She was more interested now in how well the suit fit him. Having observed friends and colleagues of her father, Jill had noticed that some men, regardless of how well cut the fabric or how



fine the tailoring, simply could not convincingly wear a suit. Their shoulders were too broad and square, their necks too bulgy, their tummies too round. He had, though, the ideal build for it: tall, lean, vaguely athletic. The suit gave him a real sartorial power. He seemed to stand more upright, with his chin jutting up and his hands assertively on his hips. He had found his second skin.

“The sales guy talked me into suspenders, too. Braided leather, and those totally kick ass.” He flopped down beside her on the couch and stretched his legs out alongside hers atop the beat up wood trunk that stood in for a coffee table. “What’s wrong with Ferrell? She’s in the kitchen wailing to your mom, I mean really gushing snot everywhere, and I could smell cigarettes in the hall. Did she bomb that test?”

“Last night, after she left here, she had sex with Dave Turley. On the scenic moonlit shore of Potter Lake. I’m not supposed to tell you.”

“So it didn’t go well.”

“She thinks boys are gross, and she wants her virginity back.”

“Dave Turley *is* gross.”

“Let’s not talk about it.” Ferrell, as only she could, had managed to transfer all of her disenchantment and regret onto her, and she was starting to feel like she had had the distinct displeasure of sleeping with Dave Turley. “I had been looking at your pictures.”

“Why?” Andy toyed with the fringe at the tips of the lavender scarf she wore tied about her head like a gypsy.

“Because you’re the one who took them.”

Andy was in and out this room at least twice a day but had forgotten they were there. Although he had gotten pleasure from taking them, he could find no emotional or

artistic value in them now. They were so baldly amateurish. Surely his professor did not think them brilliant as he said they were. Art to Andy was something different. It was the perfect cycle of capitalism, the strategic insight needed to forecast and manipulate the tug-of-war between supply and demand. The invisible hand at work. (If he had a hierarchy of deities, Adam Smith would be his Zeus.) There could be nothing more beautiful than that.

“Bring that over here,” Jill said. On the mantle was his professor’s favorite picture. It was of those anomalous columns that stood like exquisite ruins a few blocks over. Andy took it down and brought it over. In the photograph, the blown up silhouette of a lawn service man aboard his mower was imposed on the grassy slope behind the columns. The professor thought it a trenchant commentary on the haves and have-nots of American society. Andy had in mind no such thing. At least he did not think he did. But then again, maybe a kid—the son of a not yet forty year old woman who had spent her adult life as her boss’ long-suffering mistress—raised in a dumpy part of St. Paul had no choice but to see the world that way.

Jill leaned in to study the photograph. She traced over one of the columns with her fingers. Then she lifted the frame from his hand and held it very close to her face. “Take me for a ride,” she said.

*iv*

The sun glare off the metallic car roofs in the string of dealerships along the freeway made her squint. When the car lots butting up against traffic stopped abruptly, they were replaced by clusters of neat but cheaply built homes—little boxes with decks that looked like they were made of popsicle sticks. They passed a trailer park stretching

farther to the west than she could see, and a packed lot of broken down school buses, delivery vans, and big-rig cabs. Then there were fields. An hour passed and there were no more houses, just barns that had most of their red paint stripped by the elements and faded billboards promising antiques at the next exit.

For a while they had cruised around the Plaza. She wanted to go farther, much farther, but could not think of anywhere to go until she remembered the pyramid of books stacked on the trunk in the den. The book at the pyramid's peak was a stout hardback of at least five hundred pages. It had something to do with one of the counties that, on a map of Kansas, looked like an empty square. Chase County. That was the one. That was where they needed to go.

“Get on the interstate,” she had said. Andy's instinct was to protest, but he had decided to give her whatever she wanted today. Even if that meant taking her two hours from home to a place he had never heard of. If he did, something good might happen, and when he got to Hong Kong, he would have at the forefront of his memories a moment other than last night's awkward and inevitable recognition that the stupid leukemia had altered the way it felt for them to touch each other and be alone together.

Spinning southward down the interstate they listened to the radio and sang along to dumb pop songs no one had thought were cool for at least ten years. Jill was a terrible singer, but she did not care, and he loved that she did not care. As he drove and listened to her reedy voice, he unwillingly thought of Ferrell. When would she ever decide to be something other than a dumb girl? A dumb, pretty girl. Her latest stunt confirmed for him something he knew quite well but had allowed himself to forget. He was lucky to be with Jill and not grasping for contact and false, temporary closeness with someone who,

in the smoky chaos of a party, too willingly accepted his advances. Every weekend he was not waking up in a rented room in an unfamiliar house, one on Tennessee or Kentucky Street that used to be a grand Victorian, but was now a paint-peeling, ramshackle mess with a moldy old couch, an empty case of beer, and an ashy mountain of cigarette butts on the porch. He was not collecting clothes from the floor of the room, putting them on without caring whether all the buttons were buttoned or fitted in the right buttonholes.

Once static had eaten away the music and there were no more radio stations to be heard, Jill clapped her hands together. “Listen to this!” She was consumed by a new plan, and the vivid force of her imagination made her radiant. Andy kept glancing away from the road to see her face. It was the same look she had when she was engrossed in her work and knew she was drawing something clever. When he returned from Hong Kong in December, she could meet him in Los Angeles. Beverly Hills. Rodeo Drive. All those boutiques! Mulholland. Sunset. She would be feeling like herself and, after his introduction to the world of international finance, he would feel victorious. “We could do that, couldn’t we?” she asked. They could, he said. He could not tell her no. She was happy. To his surprise, Andy was too.

The contours of the land changed suddenly after they passed through Emporia. There were no more trees. They had crossed into Chase County and into the Flint Hills. They had driven into the scene on the cover of her father’s book. They edged off the interstate onto a highway running through the pristine rangeland. The road bowed out in a boomerang arc. It was a silvery zipper dividing the rangeland in two. At the horizon the road and the grass dissolved into a shimmery, sulfurous yellow. Jill peered up

through the open sunroof. There were fissures in the clouds that back home had been thick like a woolen blanket. Where the clouds had split, the hot sapphire sky shone through. The trapped sunlight escaped in an array of wide white beams that lit the clouds' gray underbellies.

She guided Andy down lesser roads. She had no idea where they led. Some of them may not have been traveled for weeks. They were rock paved, mostly, though a couple of them were just two dusty ruts with grass sprouting between them. Her aging Volkswagen was not made for this. The roads were rough, and Andy was afraid she might be sick again, but every time they were jounced about, she laughed and raised up her arms like they were careening downhill on a rollercoaster.

Over and over she exclaimed, "Incredible. It's so incredible." She wanted him to agree and to say it back to her with enough thunderstruck conviction to match hers. She saw only the epic blue of the sky and green of the waving grass. She was head over heels for it. Wondering where they were, he drove ahead with her cold hand on his knee.

Andy did not think it incredible, at least not the way she did. At first he was astounded by the stark, rough-cut beauty of the jagged dry creek beds etched into the terraces of grass, but now that they had left the highway and gone deeper in, he was frightened. The lonely grass spread to a point far in the distance where the earth seemed to perceptibly curve. Beauty—especially this kind of arresting, unspoiled beauty—was supposed to attract, he thought. People flocked to tropical beaches with glimmering turquoise waters. They were drawn to the sharp peaks of the Alps. The tour buses passed one after another through the gates of the Grand Canyon. Everyone who was ever here, though, had fled.

He and Jill saw the wreckage of those abandoned lives. Before they disappeared, they had built a pretty little bridge with two arches and a mill made of stone straight from a fairy tale in a Brothers Grimm book. They had lived in mean little houses with disintegrating porches and sagging roofs. They had built a three story school of sturdy red brick, but the classrooms were dark and cobwebbed, the windows were smashed, and the door chained shut and secured with a rusted padlock. They must not have been able to handle the nights. Daylight illuminating the emptiness was uncomfortable. A moonless night or one when a gust front swept in from Oklahoma would be unbearable. There was a horror movie script to be written about this place. He *had* heard of it before. A plane crashed out here once. The old Notre Dame football coach from a million years ago who was always shown in black and white locker room footage on TV during games. That's who it was. The crash killed him.

Somewhere out here there had to be a rancher because the cattle, too many of them to count, plodded along in erratic formations as if they had carefully studied the flocks of birds gliding overhead but could not quite coordinate themselves. Some were under the thin canopy of shade spread by the leaves of the occasional sprawling cottonwood. They all had identical eyes, unthinking and placid. Someone should tell them their slaughter was coming. They were not dead yet, but they may as well have been.

"Let's go back to the interstate," he suggested. They had not met another car for more than an hour.

"Not yet. This is what I needed. I love it. It's perfect." She rolled down her window and held out her arm to feel the sun on her skin and the wind between her

fingers. She could not get over how green it was—spectacularly and endlessly green. Seeing it was not enough. She wanted to be in it. When she asked Andy, he pulled the car over and shut off the engine. She got out without his help. Side by side, they leaned against the car. All the clouds had raced away and left behind a flawless sky of imperial blue. The wind sang the only song it knew for them, a high moaning song that came at them and then suddenly faded into silence. When the next verse came, it was the same but in a higher, wailing key. He gripped her hand. She was inspired, flushed, and smiling. He wanted her to know he could be strong for her, but they were far apart now, farther apart than the miles between this nowhere spot and the traffic choked streets of Hong Kong. He wanted to sync his thoughts with hers, but could not. Out here he felt so small, so acutely mortal. It made his stomach ache. Where she saw heaven, he saw hell.

She slipped her hand free. Without a word, she left him standing at the car. A section of fence was down, and she waded out into the blowing grass. It reached as high as her knees. Her steps were slow and labored, but she was smiling as she walked. She had come to see God, and He was great. The wind caught the ends of the lavender scarf and blew them away from her shoulder. Andy started after her. She sensed him closing the distance between them. To be heard over the wind, she called loudly back to him.

“Stay there. I’ll come right back,” she promised. *I am a girl who has gotten away.*

## 9. CHANTICLEER

Everyone had seen those stories on the news magazine shows about husbands and wives and mothers and fathers who experienced an eerie chill in their bones right at the moment their loved one was taken away in a sudden, tragic accident. A plane crash, perhaps. *They just knew*. That's what they all said. She had been having thoughts of Andy with another girl. It was natural that he should do that, be with another girl, especially because he would be so far away. Every mile between them erased her from his mind a little more until he crossed a certain threshold of miles that wiped her clean away. She did not know when the thoughts first startled her, but they had been revisiting her now and then for several days. They rose up out of all her other thoughts, just like the first tiny bubbles in a pot of water that's been set on the stove to boil. They took shape, levitated, popped, and then were gone for good, at least for a while. When it



finally happened, Jill had gotten the idea that she would be overcome by a chill or other unsettling bodily sensation. She actually felt chill travel through her as she and Ferrell watched *Mary Poppins* in her bed. Was that it? Was it happening right now as the old woman in the park fed the birds? No. It was because her nubby pink blanket, the one she got when she was a baby from the grandma she never really knew, had slipped. She had it around her like a cape and drew it more securely about her shoulders. Canterbury wasn't the place. Hong Kong was more foreign and throbbing with life and bright lights. Against a hard-edged backdrop of glassed-in futuristic skyscrapers, girls would seem prettier there, more vulnerable. The city itself would be an aphrodisiac.

Jill found the remote control deep down in the blankets on her bed and hit the pause button. "What do you think it smells like—the Cathedral?" she asked to get herself back into the proper frame of mind. She was supposed to be doing her best to get at least some vicarious satisfaction from knowing Andy was in Canterbury at this very moment. Ferrell slurped at her tea in one of the china cups Jill's mother let them borrow and nibbled at the end of one of the scones she brought over as part of their all-things-British day. She became pensive and spent a long moment deliberating her reply. "Old sins. What all churches smell like." It was a satisfactory answer, one that did not contradict Jill's own feeling that the church where they went every Sunday smelled of seriousness and moral certainty, but it worried her. Julie Andrews and Dick Van Dyke leaped into the sidewalk drawing, though, and that was her cue to stop worrying. She snuggled her head against Ferrell's arm.

"This is my favorite part," Ferrell said.

"Mine too," Jill agreed.

Blond and healthy as ever, Andy traversed the grounds of Canterbury Cathedral. He was alone, unhurried, and, in an exquisitely tailored charcoal wool suit and gold neck tie, conspicuously overdressed. In contrast, the numerous tourist groups descended from their motor coaches in jeans, sweaters, and rain jackets. The day was misty, gloomy, typical, but despite having brought no overcoat or umbrella with him from his hotel, he was not deterred. He blended into the ubiquitous grayness of the sky and the old cathedral stones. He had a camera with him and took a professional's care in choosing his shots, seeming to settle on a particular vantage point only to perfect it further by moving a crucial half-step to his right or left before committing to the image he had composed. Methodically, he moved around the cathedral's perimeter—from Anselm's Norman transept to the Norman water tower, then around to the south where Bell Harry tower bisected the sky—taking several photographs each time he stopped. On occasion, a chilling burst of wind kicked up and his tie, like a kite's tail, blew out taut and disrupted his concentration.

He had already been inside, smelled the incense and listened to the eerie clap of his polished brogans on the stones and inserted a generous amount of money into the large donation box. He made a diligent study of the tombs, the latten effigy of Edward the Black Prince, memorialized in full armor, the alabaster effigies of Henry IV and Joan of Navarre, and he had his eyes drawn up into the soaring altitude of the choir. He had been here since eight o'clock this morning to take communion, the transcendence of which he could not grasp.

He had circled the cathedral and readied himself for a final shot. So that it captured in full the Norman chapel, Trinity chapel, and the Corona of William the Englishman, he took large backward steps, and adjusted the zoom with each step. Before he took the picture, a man in a tweed blazer steered a wheelchair into view. He pushed it so slowly it barely had enough momentum to move forward. Perhaps the slightest bump would damage the woman seated in the chair. She was a ghostly figure, gaunt and bony. She could not possibly stand on her own, and just the passive act of riding in the wheelchair appeared to tax her. Beneath the hood of her raincoat, he saw a stylish turban fitted around her head. Her hands, with their enormous knotty knuckles, were very still in her lap.

Andy stared. One would think he had never seen the extreme ravages of illness up close before. Part of the time he stared through the camera, but then he gave up the pretense. The man in the tweed jacket, he guessed, was her husband, though poor health and, undoubtedly, the combination of several drugs had rapidly aged her in such unforgiving ways that she might be mistaken for his mother or a normally housebound aunt. Andy was bothered by that and the fact that the cautious pace was of no consequence to the man. Just think what all he must have done this morning. He must have prepared her breakfast, dressed her, maybe even bathed her, lifted her from her chair into the car and out again. He may have been responsible for painting that garish stroke of peach across her thin, pinched lips.

In spurts, the man and the woman in the wheelchair carried on a boisterous conversation. He laughed, leaning in from time to time to tack on an additional aside while using his forearms to keep the wheelchair on course. She even managed to

maneuver her head around so that she could respond with a remarkably beautiful smile and see him laugh. Andy did not take the last shot of the cathedral. He returned the camera to the dry confines of the case that hung over his shoulder and, noting that the mist had vaporized and that there was a band of blue opening up over the tops of the buildings, set off toward the center of town.

From across the street, Andy spotted sales clerks at work in the Gap. One of them would be able to tell him where he could have the pictures developed. Jill was expecting them, and he needed to mail them before he left for Hong Kong. Inside the store, a woman greeted him with the intrusive and programmed friendliness endemic to all retail employees. She presumptuously inquired about the sizes and styles she could help him locate. When he explained he was not interested in browsing for new clothes, the clerk propelled herself toward more promising targets, a mother and her two teenage daughters.

Nearby, a second woman, one who was younger, bent over a rolling cart of sweaters, efficiently folding them with the help of something that looked like a kitchen cutting board to ensure they all came out the same width. She was pale and pretty. Her hair was done up with what looked to be a dozen or more bobby pins. The effect was both artless and flattering, as though the shocks of her hair were the petals of an intricate wildflower. Her earrings did not match. One was an enormous gold hoop, the other long and dangly. He liked her smoky, gray eye shadow. On her wrist, she wore a bracelet of coiled plastic like a telephone cord with five jingling keys attached—one each, he would have bet, for the stock room, the dressing rooms and the drawers to the cash registers.

She spoke first: “Don’t be offended. Audrey glories in her bitchiness.” She was American, which shocked him and seemed to shock and disappoint her too. She sounded as if she were continually disappointed by the fact that every time she opened her mouth she had not succeeded in passing herself off as an English girl. “You look like you could use a dry pair of chinos, though.” Involved completely in his photography, he had not noticed until now that he was wet and must smell of sodden wool and that his pants felt heavy on his waist. “We’ve got plain front and pleated in two colors.” She knew she was making a cheeky and shameless sales pitch, and he figured out that she was selling him both the pants and herself.

She thumbed through a stack of pants on a three-tiered display table as if she were thumbing through the Yellow Pages while explaining how to convert European sizes to the ones he knew from home. He tried on a pair of the pants. “They look good,” she declared once he stepped out of a dressing room. They fit well enough, and now that he had them on he preferred not to put a wet pair of pants back on. Not until she was ringing up his purchase did he ask the question that brought him into the store. She did not reply immediately. He had handed over to her his one and only credit card; during the time that they waited for a receipt to print she held his card between her fingers and several times lifted her eyes from it to his face, checking, he guessed, to see that the name on the card suited him. “Try the chemist around the corner,” she said at last.

With his wool pants and suit coat stuffed into a shopping bag, he wore the dry chinos out of the store. He left the film at the chemist’s, and while he waited for it to be developed he went in and out of the surrounding stores, where he bought a cashmere scarf for Jill, a teapot for Frannie, a beautifully carved pipe for Lew, and a biography of

Thomas Becket for Brook. He crammed them into the bag with his suit. Thinking he should buy something for his own mother, he passed in and out of several more shops to examine mugs and coasters, Christmas ornaments, and pretty pieces of crystal, but he eventually gave up. He found nothing that matched her personality or any of the rooms in the duplex where he grew up. Anything beautiful would wither in that house.

Late in the afternoon, dull sunlight permeated the sky. He was ready to begin the walk back to his hotel. A nap sounded good to him. His room had a fireplace in it and after his nap, if he still felt vaguely damp beneath his clothes, he would like to sit before a fire. He stopped on the sidewalk to orient himself outside the last of the stores he had visited. Bell Harry tower was his compass needle. It was off to his right at two o'clock and pointed him in the direction of the hotel. A familiar figure was coming toward him. The American clerk. She was headed home from work with a purse and giant canvas tote slung over her shoulder. She greeted him with a wave and inquired about his pictures. What was he doing, she wanted to know. "Calling it a day," he said. He should come with her, she suggested. She was on her way to eat. Her friendliness was both aggressive and endearing. He should say no to her invitation, but he did not really want a Quarter Pounder and strange tasting fries. Last night, he did not care for the thick soup and broiled fish he ordered in the hotel's dining room. Eating at the McDonald's he passed earlier had been his only plan. Instead, she took him to a dank little pub, called The Chanticleer, in the opposite direction and recommended that he order the liver.

At their round little table in the Chanticleer, they did not discuss where she went to school or where he went to school, partly because he got the impression from her that school—the American public university experience, the amalgam of football games, date

dashes, cram sessions, keg parties, Thursday night treks through the same four or five bars offering dollar domestic pitchers, hung-over spring breaks on Ft. Walton Beach—had outlived its usefulness for her, and he had started to feel that way himself, or wished to feel it more intensely than he did. They also did not discuss why she was folding crew neck sweaters in a Gap in Canterbury. Rather, they talked about the bands she was most excited to see at Glastonbury in a couple of weeks and about soccer. She had an encyclopedic knowledge of the Premier League and a frothing hatred for Manchester United. He chided her for obsessing over a game that can end in a scoreless tie, or even more nonsensically, and they started a wrangling debate. He refused to concede her point that soccer in England was far superior to any sport in America, especially American football.

“You know who I think you are?” She finished off her tall mug of beer so dark it appeared black in the pub’s lights. “Under your wet, three-button suit and your fancy silk tie, you’re one of those frat boys who always has to be in the front row with all your frat boy ‘brothers’ at football games in December with your shirts off so you’ll get noticed by the TV cameras.”

She was going to ask if he would like to come back to her place. He was certain. She was already in the hallway outside her door, turning the key, inviting him in with a tip of her head, shedding her jacket and discarding her purse. As she cut her portion of liver into precise squares, she was trying to remember what she left on her bed before going to work—clothes she considered wearing but decided against, confirming for herself that she had on underneath her blouse a bra she would not be embarrassed for him to see.

Already Andy knew he would go. He sensed that she knew this too and may have known as soon as he asked her to recommend a place where he could print his pictures. The way he understood the situation he had two choices: to either go with her or spend all evening dwelling on the couple he now despised for ruining his picture. Their image and the lives they must be leading had badgered him all afternoon. He thought of the man trying so hard to make her hot wholesome meals, but they all came out flavorless and undercooked. During her naps that lasted for hours he searched all the magazines in the house for recipes he might try, but she did not mind his cooking. Her appetite had vanished and would not ever return. He could not bear thinking about them any longer. He would go with her when she asked.

She rented a room up on the third floor above the pub, and it really was just a room with no kitchen or bathroom of her own, in a shabby boarding house. To get to it, she led him up a stairwell papered in advertisements and announcements for roommates wanted, an Irish punk band playing downstairs on Saturday night, Labor party propaganda, a writer's retreat in Tuscany. As they approached her door, the carpet in the hall was dingy, grayed by decades of foot traffic, except at the edges where he made out the original shade of magisterial purple. Fitting her key into the lock on her door, she eased closer to him and touched her lips to his chin. The door opened, allowing a large block of sunlight to escape into the rundown hallway. She led him in by the hand. An impressive bay window dominated the room. It overlooked the chemist's shop. Her curtains were made of souvenir tea towels stitched loosely together, one of which commemorated the marriage of Prince Andrew and Sarah Ferguson.



He liked all the things she had scattered about the room. She had wedged a ticket for the Dover to Calais ferry into the mirror frame. Beneath it was a picture. She was at the center of a pack of girls standing beneath the marquee of the Ed Sullivan Theatre in New York. They posed the way a cheerleading squad poses for its yearbook picture, bent at the waist, hands over their knee caps, elbows out. All of the girls wore cheap I Love N.Y. tee-shirts. A trio of carnations, each in its own polished Guinness bottle, lined the window ledge. She kept an electric tea kettle on her chest of drawers as well as a tea bag tin shaped like Shakespeare's Stratford-upon-Avon cottage. Also on the chest of drawers: more bobby pins and a pair of barrettes in a Madame Tussaud's shot glass, a small note pad from the Marriott Forest of Arden, a pictorial biography of Lady Diana Spencer, and a jar of marmalade so close to empty that deft maneuvering of a knife would be necessary if she hoped to extract an amount worth spreading on a slice of toast.

"Tea?" she offered.

"No thanks."

The room was warm. He left the shopping bag on a fat armchair covered in a quilt while she cracked open the window, letting in the drifting, distorted ring of evening church bells. Her jeans showed off a figure that was more curved than slim. This was what he liked most about her. For a while he was content to watch her move about the room. Her jeans fit low on her hips. Each time she bent or stretched an arm to reach for something like a hanger far back in the closet, her white blouse rode up her back exposing the edges of a scalloped lavender waistband.

She conducted her everyday coming-home-from-work rituals. The keys on the coiled telephone cord band went on a hook behind the door. She returned her shoes to

the only vacant slot on the bottom rung of an interlocking plastic rack in the closet. She deposited her watch and name tag in a silver heart-shaped dish atop the dresser. She fit her jacket, which he recognized from the store's window display, over a wooden hanger hanging from the closet door knob. Lastly, she lit a candle. It was a squat barrel of a candle held to a plastic plate by a puddle of hardened wax. There was a scorched vanilla scent when she set the match to the candle wick that masked the room's musty smell.

Once she did that there was nothing left for them to do but come tentatively together on the bed. His arms fit differently around her. Beneath her clothes, she was soft and pink, and the first thing he did before plying her out of her jeans was kiss her soft, bare stomach. He slid the bobby pins from her hair. When he thought he had found them all, she said she could still feel one back near the base of her skull. She guided his hand to it, and he removed it, careful not to let it snag her hair. He left them all on the mattress, so when he rolled away from her onto his back he felt them pressing into his legs. Afterwards, he lingered in her bed to appreciate the ethereal, orange monochrome of the late night sunset that illuminated the room. He admired their bodies in the giant gilt-framed mirror atop the chest of drawers, his subtle muscularity, her soft and healthy fullness that had cushioned him. She flipped the covers over their heads and pulled him down into the pitch-black underworld of her faded flowered bedding, and they came together again.

He stayed past nightfall, past the time the stars switched themselves on like nightlights in the sky, past the time when the candle had almost burned itself down to a molten stump. In her robe, she shuffled beside him to the door and opened it. He carried the bag holding his wadded up suit and the gifts he had bought under his arm. There was

a single bulb fizzing out in the hall. He could smell curry. Along with the muffled but buoyant vocals of ABBA, the smell came up through the floor. He listened while she fastened her hair into a short little pony tail. She held the door open for him with her heel as she tamed a disagreeable piece of hair with a stray bobby pin in the pocket of her robe.

“Those pants will probably be on sale next week.” She patted the bag and kissed him on his cheek. It was a sleepy, wifely kiss, like she had gotten up early just to make him breakfast and see him off to work.

In the front room of his hotel a group of men sat drinking sherry, telling bawdy stories, and playing cards. He ran up the stairs to his room and loaded the bundle of logs left on a mat into the fireplace. At first he was not coordinated enough to light a match, but after several tries he struck a flame into life. The room was drafty and slow to warm. Before the growing fire, he stripped off the chinos, his limp shirt, his socks, and underwear. He showered, and, standing under the stream of water, he waited for anguish to set in because, for the first time in his life, he had failed an important test. Finally, he stopped waiting. He had been in the water long enough. His fingertips were getting those pruny wrinkles. He could not make himself feel what he did not feel. There was no anguish. No guilt. And he was not sorry. He dried himself in front of the fire and sat naked in one of the room’s two wing chairs with a towel across his lap. His clothes were piled at his feet. Casually, he slipped a foot beneath the pair of pants he had bought and kicked them into the flames.

*iii*

After *Mary Poppins*, they watched one of her old Merchant Ivory videos she had played so many times that at certain predictable points shaggy lines wiggled to life at the

top and bottom of the screen and converged across Emma Thompson's face. Then came the grand finale: sparkling, sun-splashed *Much Ado About Nothing*. They swooned over Claudio as they always had. My God, they'd had such crushes on Robert Sean Leonard back when they were twelve and thirteen and did not understand half of Shakespeare's dialogue! They still had crushes on him. Either that, or they told themselves they still had crushes on him because they did not want to give up that sweet and innocent part of their shared girlhood or their idea of him as a perpetually beautiful youth.

The thought of Andy with someone else nagged at her and kept her from enjoying Beatrice and Benedick's crackling wit. Normally, she mouthed the dialogue along with them. *What, my dear Lady Disdain! Are you yet living!* Today, however, the sight of Hero and Claudio rankled her. They lacked vigor, passion, initiative, discernment. Hero was dumb while Claudio was dumber still. She stopped watching. She messed with the worn corner of her blanket, braiding a group of loose threads only to undo the braid and begin again. The blanket sagged down from her shoulders once more, but she was not the least bit cold. All day the sun had been beating through her window. That chill from before—that was it, wasn't it? He had done it. How could she be so certain it happened while not being able to believe it had? She felt no different about herself or about him. That couldn't be right, could it? It was too complicated to figure out, far beyond, she thought, her limited grasp of life. Later she would sort it out and begin the arduous process of assigning meaning. She would rather just skip it, though. She wanted only to see insipid Hero reunite with her insipid Claudio.

## 10. FANTASY LEAGUE

The sun, ascending over the city at its usual pace, forced itself through the brick red curtains. At a certain point every morning, they had a boiling, thermal glow like molten volcano lava. Without stirring or opening his eyes, Andy knew this was that point, but in another moment it would be past. As if drawn up by a massive invisible pulley, the sun would have climbed higher, ruining the effect. For now, though, he felt a warm strip of light across the bridge of his nose and the back of his neck.

He also did not need to move or open his eyes to know he was alone in the bed. Still, his foot went roving about beneath the sheets in hopes of encountering one of Meg's smooth calves. It found nothing, so he pulled his foot back and bent his knee in close to his stomach and concentrated on the warmth across his nose and the brightness on the other side of his eyelids. It was Saturday. There was no reason why he could not lie

here in a state of wakeful lethargy as long as he pleased. The rest of his face was warming, but the sheets were cold, and with a minor shift of his head he settled into a cool patch of his pillow.

He was inclined to stay just as he was because he was at ease. Not a single menacing thought had been waiting for him when his mind switched on at the first touch of the sun through the curtains. Not a twinge of anxiety either. That sanity-destroying one-two punch had been the norm for several hundred consecutive mornings. There was a bleak, dispiriting routine that needed to be adhered to. He was inured to it. First came the hellacious blare of the alarm, an electronic pick axe to the senses followed by the gradual, painful loosening of his muscles that had constricted and cramped overnight. At the same time there often came a bold flash of recollection, the bleary image of himself intently, rather doggedly, making love to someone who may or may not have still been within his reach, and, moreover, someone he did not usually want to face in the unflinching brightness of dawn. Finally, there was the cold, alienating instant of recognition: he was (damn it) still himself. No one had come in the night to reinvent him. He envisioned an intimidating wild-haired, leather-clad sister of the tooth fairy who handled situations more dire than a lost incisor and could perform a weird sci-fi psychological transplant by sucking his conscious and subconscious minds out through his ear like a thick milkshake slurped through a straw. That was childish fantasy, so he continued to settle for Buddhism and its promise of rebirth. A cat, a cockroach, a convenience store clerk, an elder in a tribal sub-Saharan village, a crack-head in a women's correctional facility—he would have gone for any of those options. If there was hope to be had, that was it. Why would he want the kind of eternal life Jill and

Brook and Frannie and Lew believed in? It meant he would be stuck with himself forever.

A change had taken place, however, and the routine had been dissolved. Mornings were wondrous things these days. They had been since the morning after Easter. That Monday, the alarm had gone off as it did with crushing predictability. He had batted his hand at the radio and smacked it quiet. Then, he had stretched and stretched and stretched his muscles. And that was it. The rest of it had been erased. There had been none of the tragic regrettable sex he specialized in for him to remember. There had been no sucker-punch of disappointment at the first thought of himself and his place in the world. There had only been the last thing he recalled before gliding swiftly into sleep: Meg's sincere, satisfied declaration that, "I don't think I've ever really liked orange marmalade before today." It had been apropos of nothing but was, to him, a fitting summation of the day. Except for that single memory, his mind had been unnaturally quiet, as quiet as the shaded streets of Mission Hills on a weekday mid-afternoon.

He had awakened content, and to be contented was such a queer, foreign state of being that he panicked. (Jill was Meg or Meg was Jill. Which way was right? Neither. Meg was Meg, and Meg alone. Margaret. Yes, Margaret.) While he panicked, he actually tried to get the dreaded routine back. He tried to jumpstart it like he used to do in winter with that clunker of his, the cobalt blue Delta 88, he drove through high school and college. Meg was *not* Meg, he told himself. She was his college anchoress, and last night had been one of those exhaustingly physical nights that blended together with the others and left him feeling hollowed out and degenerate.

He could not do it; the panic swelled and things got scrambled that should not have gotten scrambled together. There had been a spike of pain in his head that blurred everything to strange, depthless gray. The pain bored straight through one of his eyebrows. He had feared a premature stroke, and he had feared Meg waking to find him crumpled at the foot of the bed speechless and paralyzed. Time fractured and what happened in the past and what was happening in the present—he had not known which was which. He was taken to all sorts of old unhappy places. He seemed to have been gone for years, only it was just so many minutes, the exact number it took the sun to make its leisurely ascent from the height at which it made lava of the drapes until it lit the whole room like ten dozen high wattage bulbs. He knelt on the mattress, getting on all fours until the pain in his head died away. Crouched beside her he must have had the most confounded, troubled look on his face because when Meg awoke, instantly alert and fresh, she gazed up at him, blinking, and asked him what was wrong. She had gotten hold of his hand and squeezed it as she waited for him to answer. “I snored, didn’t I?” she said, feigning embarrassment. She knew she had not snored. She was just saying that so the shell-shocked gloom in his eyes would go away. He never did give her an answer. There was a blip of a moment when he might have tried, but with her hand covering his, there did not seem to be anything particularly wrong, so he had let it go, and now it was gone, completely gone.

He had not believed it could be real. He had thought he might be experiencing the reverse of hypochondria, an irrational belief that all was well when it was not. But it had to be real because it was not going away. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and every



day that had come and gone had begun with scandalous calm. There had not yet been a single relapse into the reckless fatalism he had hated but had not been able to shake.

This morning, for as long as he had been able to sense that white strip of sun across his nose, he had been hearing fingertips tap dancing over computer keys and, every so often, plastic rustling and fabric rustling and phrases of conversations Meg was having either with herself or the part of herself that had been permanently given over to the Getaway Girl. Andy rolled onto his back and opened his eyes. She was in the bathroom, as she often was on weekend mornings. The bedroom was flooded in sunlight, and through a filmy haze of dust motes he saw her standing at the mirror on her tiptoes. She was in a long dress that appeared to be inspired by the fashion of peasant girls, the ones who slopped pigs and churned butter and had secret meetings with the blacksmith's son up in the stable loft. The back of the dress was unfastened, and she, twisting her arms behind her, tried to close the row of tiny hooks, but she could not get at them. He watched her struggle and grit her teeth and thought of intervening. He just lay there in bed, though, one leg free of the sheets, the pillow he rested on cockeyed and flattened from the punches he had given it at the odd hours when his body needed shifting into another position. She gave up and typed a flurry of words on her computer, which she insisted on riskily setting up right next to the sink. This was serious business for her, and she attacked it with the same intensity as he would when he, with his hollow, but authoritative friendliness, carried out a series of stealth manipulations on a prospective client. He was accustomed to this scene of garment bags on the floor, hangers everywhere, and a stepping stone path of discarded blouses and skirts from the bed to the closet. Last weekend, while he lay on the bed eating fistfuls of Coco Puffs straight from

the box, she had, after much second-guessing, decided what the Getaway Girl would wear to a gallery crawl in the Crossroads and to the Drum Room for drinks. She spent an hour and a half alone deliberating over which simple cotton frock was perfect for sitting on a blanket to watch *The Tempest* in Southmoreland Park on a sticky June night.

“Hey,” he said, finally, his voice coming out rough and tired.

“Help me with this,” she said, padding over to him. She swept aside her hair and sat at the side of the bed. She was letting her hair dry, and that made her neck and the exposed white V of her back moist and cool.

“Thanks, you,” she said when he finished. Before she got up, she lifted the palm of his hand to her lips and held it there. That was the extent of their intimacy, and he coveted that soft, lingering pressure. It was innocent and old-fashioned and uncomplicated. “Tell me if that doesn’t heal those icky calluses,” she added, flouncing back to the bathroom.

After several years of not setting foot on the first tee of any course, and not being able to afford a set of clubs, he was regularly playing golf at some of the city’s more exclusive clubs, the old courses with tight fairways and small circular greens. They were outings orchestrated by Art Driscoll so he could parade Andy before his various cabals of moneyed influence peddlers. And because he had gone so long without gripping a club, the rim of his palm was adorned with an arc of calluses and blisters that Meg had been soothing with dabs of aloe.

He much preferred the benign touch of her lips, though. It was all she was willing to give and all he was willing to accept. In return, he kissed a tender spot between her eyebrow and lightly shadowed lid as he was on his way out the door to the office every

morning. “What will you do today?” he always asked. “Pine for you ceaselessly,” she would reply. It was fanciful, almost farcical hyperbole, spoken with the exaggerated flourish of a hand that came to rest against her forehead as if she were Scarlett O’Hara about to faint onto a divan. Nevertheless, Andy heard an underlying sincerity. During any given day, maybe only for a minute or two, those words of hers had some truth to them, he believed.

Silly banter and measured displays of affection: those were enough. They were of the same mind about that. Without uttering a word to each other, they had established a set of boundaries that were fixed, secure, and, so far, never threatened. That way, when they walked hand in hand across the bridge from one side of Brush Creek to the other on their way to a late evening dinner, there was no subtext to it. It suggested nothing more than what it was and what they wished it to be, a deepening chaste companionship, one that was brilliantly simple in design and mutually beneficial.

There had been plenty of opportunities for the unspoken boundaries to be tested. Since Easter Meg had been with him every night. Brook migrated from the hospital to Ferrell’s house and back again, leaving them the run of the apartment. Meg’s clothes were accumulating in unfolded piles in one of the bureau drawers and at the far end of the closet, where they mingled harmoniously with his suits and dress shirts. (If she ever took the elevator down to her own apartment, she did it when he was away at the office. He had never gotten closer to it than the night of Lew’s retirement party. He did not expect to.)

“Tell me what color you think this is.” Meg curtsied before the mirror.

“Creamed corn.”

She gave his reply some careful thought. “God, you’re right. The gloppy, slimy stuff from a can. Did your mom make that? Mine did. Always with dry, overcooked meatloaf.” She could not write that her dress was the color of creamed corn and expect that to make it past her editor. She needed something dreamy and fanciful. She scrunched her eyes shut and puckered her mouth to show she was concentrating and thinking deeply. “Stardust,” she said with certainty, curtsying again, before she typed another flurry of words. “I had a dream about Seville,” she said, still typing.

“Yeah, and?”

“All I remember is that the air was very dry, and we were buying fruit near a church.”

“Why fruit?”

“I don’t know. Oranges and grapes—no, they were dates—and they were very sweet. We couldn’t stop eating them.”

“We must have made ourselves sick.” He thought she might have blended a dream with reality because she had told Lew about her time in Egypt—Giza and Cairo—and about getting lost among the booths in a Moroccan marketplace while buying saffron and oranges.

“I don’t think we did.” She pulled at her lip and reconsidered. “Come to think of it, maybe we did. Hm.” She strutted about the bathroom, twirled around, and struck a series of dramatic poses so she could gauge the drape, the fluidity, and the shape of the fabric in motion and at rest. “Do you like dates?” she asked as the swirling hem of the dress came to rest above her ankles.

“They’re okay, I guess.”

“I like figs better.”

She raised up on her tiptoes again. He wondered what it was she was trying to see or figure out. She brought about in him no staggering whirlwind of emotions that he had to struggle to contain. No, nothing like that. It was more like a lazy kind of pleasure. Having her near made him comfortable precisely because there were no troublesome urges or escalating passions to negotiate. She caught him studying her, and flashed her hazel eyes at him in the mirror. Everything was alright between them. Her talk of a dream set in Seville was a signal to him. He was relieved because when he had gone to sleep last night he had been unsure. They had not argued or even mildly disagreed, yet he had been responsible for interjecting a mood-killing tension into what was the most therapeutic part of every day, its sweet, eventless conclusion.

In bed last night they had the television on, clicking back and forth from one late-night monologue to the next. The jokes were either contrived or predictable, and he could not get over the sensation that they were draining something out of him. They made him conscious of the passing of time and the big, dumb, looming worry everyone must have about the meaning of life. They brought nothingness into fearful high relief. It had been enough to make him shudder. Luckily, she had turned the television off and they had lain on their sides facing the windows, one of her knees snug against the back of his as if they had been crafted to fit together. Once they fell asleep, one of them would inevitably fold around the other so that they became a bundle of crisscrossed sleeping limbs, but that, somehow, did not infringe on their strict, unspoken boundaries.

“You can’t deny that it *is* beautiful,” she had said somewhat philosophically, like they had been debating this point and had given up on reaching a consensus, only to have her make a last, soft-spoken attempt at swaying him to see things her way.

“It is,” he said.

The view from the window was a postcard with La Giralda squarely in the foreground. Off in the distance, red lights atop the downtown high-rises blinked lazily. An airplane preparing to land at the downtown airport descended from the upper reaches of the sky. It glided lower, then lower still, as if the sky itself were a long series of invisible stairs. On the street, an empty Metro bus lurched to a stop outside the Iberia. The doors slid open. No one got on or off. The doors closed, and the electronic sign along the side changed from Crown Center to Grand Avenue.

She said there were bells in La Giralda. A brochure she read had said so. That was news to him. “They should ring them,” she said. “I think that’d be lovely, the sound of pealing bells. Have you ever been there, to Seville?”

“Never.”

“I wonder if I would think of this as the real La Giralda instead of that one. You know, just because I saw this one first. I don’t know. I think I might.”

“Tell me about New Zealand,” he said suddenly, surprising himself and cutting her off. He had not realized he was fixated on it until he spoke. In actuality, the brief account she had given him at Lew’s party regularly coursed along in tandem with the daily worries, responsibilities, and expectations he dwelled on while planted behind his desk, which had its own panoramic postcard view.

“I already told you.” The response, for her, was sharp and meant to be final. She separated herself from him and lay on her back straight as a stick.

“Tell me again.” When she did not reply, he thought he had made a costly error and corrupted this bond of theirs. In his mind, though, New Zealand was the bond.

“Never mind,” he said. “Forget I said anything.”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Because you think about it all the time.”

She did not want to admit that to him. She tossed the sheet back from her legs. He had thought she was deserting him and going to sleep out on the living room sofa. That, in and of itself, struck him as a severe enough punishment. All she did, however, was shift to her other side, away from him, and pretend to be falling asleep.

He had not expected her to object. At Lew’s party, she had been so disarmingly forthright, and they had been complete strangers, then. (But, then again, he knew what it was like to be less able to speak to someone of important things the better he knew them. He had not been able to tell Jill anything in the days leading up to his departure for Britain and Hong Kong. Around her he felt as if his tongue had been cut out.) Besides, on plenty of other nights, she told him rollicking, unapologetic stories about the Getaway Girl, none of which were particularly wholesome or illustrative of good judgment. Rather, they seemed to be great exhibitions of promiscuity and stylish deviancy. She told him how, in the beginning, she was turned loose on whatever city she and the editor agreed upon and was free to assimilate into whatever crew of bounders, slackers, or inveterate partiers took her in. She hopscotched Europe, bunking in hostels and cheap hotels and surviving on coffee, pastries, and copious amounts of liquor. She haunted

their dance halls and discotheques, drank their idiosyncratic concoctions, sparingly did their drugs, and let herself be paired off in dark smoky rooms with various pierced and tattooed young men. Later, she and a Canadian ex-patriot—a young, tortured intellectual intent on composing a symphonic treatise on the theme of the pending apocalypse and continental Europe’s moral decline—embarked on a string of teenage trysts, one of which took place on a beach stormed on D-Day and sparked a virulent letter-writing campaign. Readers were disgusted by such an affront to solemn, historic ground. But it had brought a spike in publicity for the magazine and an accompanying spike in sales, and that was the point.

“Here,” Andy volunteered. “Let me tell you something I’ve never told anybody.” And he told her an abridged and unadorned version of what he had done in Canterbury. Halfway through, she had sat up so she could follow the emotions as they passed across his face and see the words leave his lips. At the most important part of the story, her eyes left him. They slid to the window and La Giralda, not because she found his actions disgraceful, but because that was her opinion and she did not want to see herself so clearly reflected in him. There were parts he could not tell her, like how Jill was right, there was sin and he was living it, but could not believe what he needed to believe to make it go away. He had not known where to stop because the story was still happening. He could have kept going until he reached the now of him confessing to her, but he stopped somewhat suddenly at the point when he, with forced, and what felt to him unconvincing, heroism, had burst into Jill’s room, jet-lagged and decimated.

“Her face when I walked in the room—“ He let the sentence hang there unfinished.



“It chills your blood,” Meg said, finishing it for him. “Because they’re so guileless and good, and you couldn’t be further from it.”

The man in New Zealand had a daughter, a five-year old princess of a girl who trailed behind her mother and hid behind her legs. Meg had felt like a burglar caught with her hand in a cracked safe. She had come inside from the pool to find a plastic clip in her bag that would keep her hair off her neck. A key turned in the frosted glass front doors and in came a lovely young woman with an audacious diamond on her ring finger. She had been left harried by motherhood and had the look of someone fatigued by travel. “Who are you?” she asked. She could not have been more accusatory and contemptuous. Meg’s instinct was to say “I’m the Getaway Girl.” That was all she could come up with. She was doing what the Getaway Girl did, after all. She immersed herself in the life of the exclusive little stretch of New Zealand coastline the editorial staff had discovered and bewitched a seemingly powerful and chivalrous man who, in this case, lived in a house of tall windows on a bluff overlooking the beach. She wrote about it in cheeky, gossipy hyperbole, and then did it all again in Rome, or Rio or Rotterdam. “I’m Margaret,” she said out loud, choking on her name. She had not expected to hear herself say it.

“Is my husband here?” the woman asked. “Since you’re here, I’m assuming he is.” In his swimming trunks, he sauntered out of the kitchen on cue with a highball in hand and said, “Meggie, I hung your dress up in the bathroom.”

The little girl ran to greet him. He gathered her up and nuzzled her neck and made her giggle and kick with glee.

“Did you know it’s your birthday?” she asked bashfully.

“Is it? I’d forgotten!”

“No you didn’t!” She squeezed his cheeks between her hands.

“Sally!” he bellowed.

Sally, the part-time housekeeper, appeared and led the little girl outside. “Let’s go see the big, blue ocean,” Sally cooed. As she was being led away, the little girl stopped to say, “You know what Grandpa says?”

“What does Grandpa say, mate?”

“That it’s time for you to grow up and come live with us again in Perth.”

The moment she was outside, the girl’s parents began to fight, or, rather, her mother began to fight, while her father, sitting on an arm of the low white sofa, struck an ironic pose and chuckled at her anger and ordered her to calm herself down. Because he would not do battle with her, she turned her fury on Meg. Immediately, Meg’s whole body weakened. She had not anticipated a scene like this. A wife! That was bad enough, but a daughter too? To keep her balance, she had to squat down near the floor. She blubbered and cried huge tears. That Sally was so damn thorough with her rags and polish that she could see her ghastly image in the wood floor. She said she was sorry. She was so, so sorry. She had not known. She said it out loud, but as many times as she repeated herself she could not make the words sound like words anyone could understand. They came out as strangled gibberish. The wife taunted her for crying. She got right down next to her on the floor to jab a finger into her arm and give her a little push. She had no right. She had no right, she kept saying. If anyone should be crying, the wife insisted, it should be her. Meg was not crying over him, that stupid husband of hers. Meg was crying for the girl who had been outside, hypnotized by the beating waves.

Barefoot, Meg ran from the house, down the tight and winding coastal road that ran from high atop the bluff down to the ocean-side village where she stayed in a condo by the marina. She ran three miles. Not until she stopped at her door, did she feel her burning skin and aching knees. She saw her gouged and lacerated feet and threw up in the kitchen sink. For a week, she threw up everything she ate. Then, she just stopped eating and lay on her couch under a blanket. She told her editor she had a virus, something everyone was catching, that prevented her from traveling back to San Diego. She became very thin. Her elbows were like doorknobs protruding from her arms and she could walk her fingers across the ledge of her jutting clavicle. Her figure, which had always featured a few well-placed and well-proportioned curves that the Getaway Girl relied on and knew how to use to her advantage, resembled that of a young boy: flat-chested and hipless. She could not eat because she thought of nothing but that little girl, who, in her gingham dress and flowered sweater, flicked her tongue in and out of the space left by a missing front tooth. A gingham dress, a flowered sweater, her mother's delicate perfume that filled the room, a white bikini and the unknown woman with the hazel eyes who wore it, a hair clip the woman had just dug from her big tote bag as her mother opened the door with a jiggle of the key she kept on a separate ring from all her others. Those were the kind of details a girl carried with her into adolescence clear into adulthood. She would have to retell them to the man she married, and if she had a daughter, she would retell them to her as a cautionary tale tinged with bitter nostalgia. They would become the daunting, inescapable symbols of a family irreparably damaged, and Meg had been the one to do the damage.

It wouldn't have happened if she had just been smart enough to leave New Zealand when she was supposed to. It had been at the end of the four months, after she finished her last story that he, with his lips against her ear and his hand massaging her hip as she watched the midnight surf from the bedroom windows, persuaded her to stay awhile longer. "You don't really want me to be all alone on my birthday, do you?" he had asked. She had not been able to refuse him. During the time she spent weak and miserable on the couch she blamed Graham Kelly. If she had not let him read the diary of their time in Sarajevo she kept in a composition book, and if he had not gotten the idea that parts of it should appear alongside his article, and then not demanded that the previous editor find something else for her to cover, she would not have become the Getaway Girl. She would not have been in New Zealand. She would have had an ordinary life as a waitress at the Red Lobster in the town where she grew up. She had yet to forgive him.

"But you still love him, Graham Kelly. Right?" Andy said. She had never said that she did, but there was no need for her to. It would have been stating the obvious.

"Yes. When I think of him, I do. And when I'm not thinking of him, I don't." He had expected her to say yes. To hear her say it, and say it so frankly, did not make him jealous. It only gave him an unpleasant feeling, something close to, but not exactly like, how he felt just before he got the hiccups. But it was not jealousy. He knew jealousy too well to confuse it with anything else.

"What about you?" she countered.

"What about me?"

"You know."

“What?”

“Brook’s sister. You love her.”

“It’s different than it was.” It had become this hundred million pound thing, a petrified lump of stuff he dragged around everywhere. In truth—the truth he withheld from Meg—he did not want to anymore. He had been trying not to for quite some time. The problem was that whatever he tried had the opposite effect. The girl in Lawrence had been a semi-calculated attempt at forcing the issue. The reasoning behind it was a smash-up of incomprehensible rationalizations and flawed logic. It had made Jill omnipresent. When he was not furious with her for having weak blood cells and weak bones, he was overwhelmed by the ongoing breadth and strength of his feelings for her. They seemed impossible to equal, and he was not sure that he wanted to try. Once, maybe, was enough.

It was Meg’s turn to say something. “Can we stop?” She gave him a piercing look that asked, *Are you happy now?* “I want to stop.” She sounded wounded. “I want to go to bed.”

*ii*

He offered to tag along with her to the city market, but she said he had better not because he would be bored after a while. She would have to talk to farmers and vendors and stop somewhere to sit, think, and take notes and make little sketches of places and things that would jog her memory when she sat down at her computer to write. On top of that, she was trying to figure out this Chase Delancey character she was in the process of inventing. He was the Getaway Girl’s cowboy her editors insisted on. “Cowboy by day, urban sophisticate by night,” she liked to say. The cowboy looked very much like Andy,

she claimed, though his shoulders were going to be slightly broader and his eyes darker. And he would not share Andy's purposely-disheveled blond hair. "But other than that, we're practically twins," he had teased. What was bothering her was his personality. She could not get a handle on the things he said or the ways he said them. If she could just figure out something he would want to buy—fresh herbs or string beans, for instance—then she might get somewhere... Until that happened, she was drawing a blank. He was no one, not even a believable fictional someone.

While she went from stall to stall at the market in search of fine fresh produce and the defining traits of a made-up cowboy, Andy went to the office. He did not have anything specific in mind that he needed to finish or start in anticipation of Monday, but he had noticed that it was not unusual for others, including those whom he did not consider to be particularly dedicated or ambitious, to put in weekend hours. He knew because they were adept at seamlessly slipping the fact into conversation. It was hardly mandatory, but it was tacitly encouraged, and because Andy felt self-conscious about how he had gotten his job (not nepotism, but close), he thought he needed to prove himself worthy even if no one else were there to see him.

He was, indeed, the only one there when he swiped his key card to unlock Driscoll & Associates' brass-handled doors on the twelfth floor. Once he turned on his computer and situated himself behind his desk, he discovered that it was difficult to concentrate in the dark and dead quiet space. His office was across from the copy room, and he was accustomed to the sound of the big, fickle Xerox collating, stapling, and spitting out originals that had been slotted in the tray atop the lid. Likewise, next door

was the break room, and round the clock, he smelled Folgers brewing and listened to it drip and the microwave whir and beep.

Today, all he could hear was a radio left on in a cubicle. It played faint, searing licks of classic rock: Zeppelin followed by the Stones followed by ZZ Top. He clicked through two dozen emails, stopping to watch the reflection of the digital ticker in a picture's frame hanging in the hall. The ticker skimmed along, running endlessly through Friday's closing numbers. The emails had come on Friday between the hours of three and six, when Driscoll & Associates was having its quarterly catered happy hour, complete with open bar, in the conference room and lobby. It was a time for coordinated networking and bullshitting. He had invited six prospective clients. All of them showed up, which he had not counted on because two had not bothered to RSVP. Regardless, they all required individual attention in the form of personalized ass-kissing.

It was a chance for him to display his gently pressing, but easy-going, sweet-talking, sycophant self, but he had not been able to. He tried, but hearing himself talk, nothing he said rang true. For a while he thought it was only in his head, so he tried again. But each time he tried, he sounded more transparently weasly and greedy than the last, until he believed himself impotent. When he should have been pouring it on the thickest, he had loitered near the caterer's assistant in the corner of the conference room. Meanwhile, everyone else in the office made promises they couldn't keep to people who saw right through them but played along anyway just so they could have another serving of cocktail wieners baked in triangles of golden dough, a second bottle of Boulevard, and a Post-It Note caddy emblazoned with the company logo. He had glanced around the conference room and seen a series of corporate still lifes. One was a plate of chicken

wings picked clean, a crumpled napkin, an olive on a toothpick, and a temporarily orphaned Blackberry. Another was two empty bottles of beer, a Driscoll & Associates annual report defaced by a wet ring presumably left by one of the beer bottles, and a sleeve of the logoed Titleists they were giving away to all the guests.

Back in the office, he felt impotent all over again and struggled to compose replies to four or five of the emails, none of which was urgent. He noticed a sheet at the corner of his desk. It was the standings for the fantasy baseball league the two interns had organized. He had only agreed because he thought he could win and it had been a long time since he had won at anything. Their knowledge of the game, and that of everyone else in the office, was sketchy, and that was putting it generously. It was full of gaps, the things you could not expect to learn from a 30-second highlight package on the 2 a.m. *SportsCenter*. They'd soon realize they had awakened the proverbial sleeping giant, he thought. Compared to his golden era of day-trading, fantasy baseball was the weakest sort of gamble, an artificial construct from which you could reap no more than a couple of cases of beer and a rather middling sum of cash. He longed for an ego boost, no matter how superficial, but he had gotten too cute, overanalyzed everything, and been too concerned about proving himself a genius.

His team was in disarray. Not surprisingly, he was dead last. His set-up man had tendonitis in his throwing elbow, and his closer was struggling to clock anything higher than the low-nineties on the gun and had zero control. He was surprised his ace hadn't just shut it down for the season and opted for the kiss of death, Tommy John surgery. That was how things were going. Naturally, no one was hitting. He'd been contemplating the phenom the A's had just called up. The kid was hitting the hell out of



the ball. Four home runs in his first seven big league games. How could he know if he was going to fall into a 1-for-25 slump this week? Then he'd be more screwed than he was now. Thankfully, he had gotten over his infatuation with the right-hander the Red Sox had inserted into their rotation. In Pawtucket, that kid had had a 4-1 record with a 2.01 ERA. Since coming up, he'd inexplicably gone 0-3 with an ERA hovering near sixteen. He wasn't the same player that had been in Pawtucket. That happened all the time. A kid gets in a groove and starts mowing down batters in the minors; fans get wind of it and start clamoring for him to get brought up during the drive-time sports talk shows. When he does come up, he bombs and before he knows it the fans think he's crap and he's getting sent back down to double- or triple-A. It was like they forgot he was the same person who had been mowing down batter after batter in the minors. Then again, maybe he wasn't.

That brought him back round to Meg, whom he had had on his mind this entire time. She had never been exactly as she was the night of Lew's party. That was a tour de force—so much aggressive charisma, style, and authority and all of her shrewd words and gestures chosen for maximum impact. Her elusive and unconventional beauty had been at its absolute peak. The Getaway Girl in her purest form. She had been bigger than the occasion and everyone there, including, Lew, the man himself. But nobody had cared. They had all wanted their turns with her, just a brief audience to see and hear her up close, even if they had no clue who she was. She was a phenomenon. It was a toss-up who was more enraptured, the women or the men. That was hard to believe because every election cycle you would count on a candidate from one of the two major parties holding a two thousand dollar a plate fundraiser in a flat, tented Mission Hills backyard,

bunting and Secret Service everywhere. To have the future most powerful man in the free world holding court near the smoker while one of the city's sainted rib masters slow-cooked baby backs for the dinner's main course, that was nothing to get terribly excited about. The Getaway Girl, on the other hand, they had flocked to her, literally flocked to her, and they had flung their arms around her and smooshed their faces in next to hers so they could all fit in the picture. Just wait until the next issue of *The Independent* went out. A two or three page spread was all but guaranteed. And she had acted as if she expected nothing less than all of that.

In the mornings and those drowsy times spent with the bedside lamps switched off, heads sunk in their plump down pillows tallying up the funny, maddening, and otherwise notable events of their days, she was most distinctly Meg. And Meg was softer, and a fraction more introverted, without being shy. She was demure and incapable of even a hint of narcissism. If he had to choose, he supposed he favored Meg. The Getaway Girl projected absolute invincibility, to the point of flamboyance, which he admired, but he could not relate to it anymore. Yet that invincibility drew him to her, a contradiction he was well aware of.

That she existed as a divided self did not bother him. Didn't everyone do that? He had. The noble, devoted boyfriend stationed beside a sickbed coexisted with the callow libidinous fool. He doubted anyone who claimed to have only one self. Those people were not healthier or better adapted. They were either insincere, in gross denial, or both. In Meg's case, for these last several years, that other self, the one created with the help of an editor and illustrator, eclipsed the naïve girl who was last seen as the very young lover of a handsome British journalist/adventurer.

Andy wheeled his chair over to the window and scanned the sidewalks below, thinking she might be out there. The Plaza sidewalks were teeming with the less than cosmopolitan masses that came pouring out of Nebraska and Iowa every spring and summer weekend. Waves of ill-fitting jean shorts and halter tops passed by. If she were down there, he would have picked her out immediately. She was probably still admiring the blackberries and the homemade candles and the pens of peeping little chicks. He stared back at the pallid glow of his computer monitor. There was nothing more he could do today. Three and a half wasted hours. The place still smelled like chicken wings. How had he gone that long without noticing? He closed the finished email reply without saving or sending it, and on his way out, he grabbed the fantasy baseball standings and shoved them in his pocket.

*iii*

Before he reached the door of Brook's apartment, he heard Meg. She was not yelling, but her voice was unusually agitated, forceful, and loud. He closed the door behind him and stood stock still. She was on the sofa with her back to him, leaning over the coffee table, where her phone lay.

"I don't know what else you want me to say," a man inside the phone said with a lot of false sincerity. He had a raspy smoker's voice.

"Make me understand," she pleaded.

"You know as well as I do that Charlotte's not changing her mind. If it makes you feel any better, it's not just her making the call. Still, if she wants to pull New Zealand, she'll pull New Zealand."

"I just find it really hard to believe that from one month to the next—"

“I wouldn’t lie to you.” Andy highly doubted that. This guy sounded eminently untrustworthy, a one man seek-and-destroy rumor factory. “I’ve looked at the numbers. Cutting our losses before it completely screws us—that’s all we can do. You live and learn, and we’ve learned that these days nobody’s into warmed over pseudo-feminist, I-don’t-need-a-man-to-be-happy, girl power odysseys. They’re just not. People like what they’re used to. To them, this isn’t the Getaway Girl. The market doesn’t lie.”

“So now what?”

“Like I told you, Charlotte’s running July, and she’s drafting an epilogue of sorts that we can tack on to what you’ve already given us.”

“What, like an editor’s note?”

“More of a narrative denouement.”

“Let me write it.”

“She knows your style and voice and the exact note she wants to strike with it.”

“What note would that be?”

“You know, something along the lines of ‘this-was-enlightening-but-maybe-it’s-time-I-got-back-to-what-I-do-best.’”

“So she’s just going to come out and say it was a failure.”

“Not in so many words. We failed to connect with our readers. That is what she wants to say in a between-the-lines, subliminal message kind of way.”

Andy’s keys slipped in his hand. Meg started and whipped around to see him standing at the door, eavesdropping. She snatched up the phone, turned off its speaker, and bolted for the bedroom with it pressed to her ear.

On the coffee table she left behind a scattered collection of papers. He picked one up. It was a memo containing the drafted text of a press release set to go out Monday.

*This brief hiatus presents a valuable and unique opportunity for Equinox and Round Trip to create a renewed sense of anticipation among the many readers who faithfully follow the Getaway Girl on her exciting global adventures. The August issue will feature a special anniversary section: Ten Years of Travel, Trysts, and Trendy Threads, as well as the Top 10 Getaway girl moments of the last decade as chosen by Round Trip readers in an online survey.*

Basic spin and damage control: try to make everyone think your giant fuck-up is a positive and exactly what you had in mind.

Hidden beneath the memo were the proofs for her aborted story that had been set to run in the August issue. If he had not known she had written it, he would never have guessed. Compared to the Monte Carlo story he had read, the style was entirely different. It was more authentic, more thoughtful, and stripped of excess. He liked it. (He had read a few paragraphs of Graham Kelly and recognized in this writing of hers some of his blunt and simple lyricism.) There was no glamour and, most notably, no man. The Getaway Girl was on her own.

Idiots. Those people at Equinox and *Round Trip* were idiots. Presumably operating under the misinformed notion that all change is good change, they had managed to make the single stupidest move imaginable. They had jerked with the formula for the one thing in their floundering magazine that worked and made anyone to notice it. What else should they have expected when they brought in as special editorial

consultant some ego-maniacal little toad whose only claim to fame was helping his dad “reinvent” a third-rate cable network by cramming the programming schedule with classic pro-wrestling fights and their “ground-breaking” original series, an updated knock-off of *Baywatch* ridiculed for its laughably low production values? Andy had read the scathing profile of him in *The Wall Street Journal* months before he met Meg, and, judging from this bit of genius, it appeared not a word of it had been exaggerated.

*iv*

In the evening, they went to dinner on the Plaza. She had said nothing about the phone call or about him listening to it. He did not expect her to.

She wore a dress that was new to him: black, sleeveless, and cut just above her knee. Something in the fabric made it sparkle in the evening sun. Its one notable feature was a deep, narrow slice out of the front that came to a point just above her navel. A wide silver bangle was pushed up to her elbow. With every step Meg Wilder receded and the Getaway Girl roared to life. While they were still in the apartment, she had merely been Meg playing dress up. The dress itself seemed all wrong for her, too adult and provocative, and she fumbled her way into the heeled sandals that had to be wrapped around her ankles and buckled shut. In the elevator, she had slumped beside him, worn out from the rigors of perfecting the look she had in mind, especially her smooth, tight ponytail that tapered into a perfect C-shaped curl. As soon as they hit the street, though, her shoulders went back, her stride sharpened, and she was ready to take command of the city. To walk alongside her, past Mr. and Mrs. Churchill and over Brush Creek, and into the restaurant that was lit as if dusk were falling indoors as well as out, was an experience he would have likened to skydiving or driving an open-wheel racecar at two hundred

miles an hour, if he had done either of those things. It was that same sustained flood of adrenaline. No wonder the men of the world were susceptible to her. Like him, they had been carried along in her personal, rarified jet stream of bold and glamorous confidence. The mystery was where it came from. Andy was too exhilarated to give it any thought.

They waited for the light to change so they could cross Ward Parkway. “You know people stare, right?” he asked. “Like dorky tourist guy in the ball hat at two o’clock.”

“That is the point,” she said from behind the elongated ovals of her sunglasses. She stepped from the curb without checking the traffic. A truck from the company that delivered produce to the restaurants on the Plaza roared past her. Rather than leap back onto the curb, she absorbed its speed. She continued on, sweeping by a Lincoln Towncar and a maroon airport shuttle van. She zigzagged into the next lane to avoid a BMW with the dealer invoice still taped inside its tinted window. The light changed and he raced after her. She was strutting up the sidewalk at a confident clip. “What was that? That was crazy!” he said, catching up to her. She just ran her hand along the ponytail and laughed.

As if there could be any doubt, the transformation was complete by the time they were inside the restaurant. He knew it because every word she said to the hostess was accentuated by a wave or a thrust of her handbag that looked like a large leather envelope. The hostess remembered her from the day before, when she had come in to scout the ideal table for two.

Their waiter neglected them for several minutes, which bothered him but did not faze Meg. She was busy absorbing the ambiance—the propulsive techno music, the glass

cylinders on a ledge sprouting Technicolor tropical flowers, the panels of paint-splashed canvas, and the buzz of bar camaraderie from across the restaurant. The pale, dour staff darted about the dining room in frenetic choreography that did not seem to permit anyone to stop and acknowledge them.

“Look at the wine list with me. What sounds good? I feel like something robust—”

Patience had never been one of his virtues. He got up and went in search of the hostess or a manager who might be able to send someone over. The hostess was apologetic. She would make sure Cole came right away. When Andy started back toward the table, a waiter, pale and dour like the others, who had already fallen in love with the Getaway Girl, was standing behind his chair, leaning into it and carrying on a spirited conversation with her. Cole, he presumed. As Andy crossed the dining room, the waiter came around the table and knelt down beside Meg. She was holding her menu open the way a mezzo-soprano would hold her score as she left an audience spellbound by her aria. He reached across her to point at an item on the menu, then another. She asked a question, and his answer to her was his hands brought together in a circle to approximate the size of a cut of meat. He was at eye level with the sharp point of the slice taken out of her dress and was doing an admirable job of pretending not to notice. The waiter jumped to his feet the instant Andy appeared at the table.

“This is Cole,” Meg said, like he was an old, old friend.

“Sir—” Cole bowed his head solemnly. The stuffy ceremony of some waiters, Andy thought: what was the point?

“Whatever domestic beer you’ve got on tap.”



Cole may as well have pulled up a chair because he spent more time camped out at their table talking to Meg than tending to any of his other customers. Much of the talk had to do with Cole's band, called Antibacterial. They were kind of old school, he said, kind of Depech Modey, if they knew what he meant. They had some gigs coming up and he wrote the dates and locations down for her on a cocktail napkin. She was definitely invited to come back and see them either before or after the show, and she promised she would. If he had not been there, Andy was quite certain that once Cole finished up his shift and counted his tips, she would have been waiting for him in some Westport bar, just past midnight, and they would have gone to a club to hear his friends' struggling, dead-end band do a late, late set. And then he would have taken her back to his seedy little place, probably in one of the run-down brick buildings near Penn Valley Park with the FOR RENT/FREE CABLE signs posted in Spanish.

v

The Yankees were on. The Yankees were always on. If he wanted to watch the Yankees every damned night, he would have moved to New York by now. But they were losing to Cleveland, a vastly inferior team, so that was some consolation. Just before he turned on the television, the Yankees' shortstop zinged a sharply hit ground ball over the head of the first baseman. It should have been a routine throw. The replay ran three times in succession, which was two too many because the count on the next batter was already one-and-one when live action resumed. At the plate was an obscure outfielder. He was lean looking, but he could take a mean cut at the ball. Monday, Andy would have to blow up that fantasy roster of his. (This kid, he seemed like a possibility. He

could hit reasonably well for both power and average.) It was a colossal waste of time and intelligence, but he was not going to lose. That was a fact.

Meg breezed in from the bedroom. She was out of the black dress and into the usual camisole and shorts that were her pajamas. The Getaway Girl was nowhere to be found. She took a carton of ice cream from the back of the freezer and squeezed in next to him on the couch. He peered down into the open carton in her lap. Covered in ice crystals, the ice cream was a frost-bitten, chocolate chip tundra. At the restaurant they had had a fruit concoction baked in little poofs of pastry and drizzled in liqueur. It was sweet, but forgettable, and it had been Cole's recommendation. She had praised it effusively and Cole had persuaded the dessert chef to come out of the kitchen and shake her hand. The pastry chef, red-cheeked and burly, had been immediately smitten.

Holding a spoon in her fist, Meg carved out a chunk of ice cream. "Let me have some of that," he said, guiding the spoon away from her mouth toward his.

## 11. HIGHBOY

“Dissonance? Dissonance?” Meg repeated, brandishing her hairbrush. She paced from the bathroom, to the windows, back to the bathroom, then around Andy’s side of the bed. She gave her hair three rough passes with the brush and asked with even greater disbelief, “Dissonance? That’s the most ridiculous word. Dissonance, dissonance, dissonance...” Over and over and over she said it until it was no longer a word but an idiotic, slithering sound coming from between her teeth.

According to a memo sent during the night, Graham Kelley was the latest victim of *Round Trip*’s cost cutting and restructuring. Meg had set her laptop on Andy’s chest and leapt out of bed, insisting he read the memo and skim through the accompanying charts and graphs and focus group findings. “Dissonance,” which appeared in the text of the memo no less than five times on the first page, was precisely the right word because,

as the data illustrated, *Round Trip* had become a two-headed monster. There was the Getaway Girl *Round Trip* and the Graham Kelley *Round Trip*, and one had little in common with the other. Her readers were, by a sizable majority, female. Graham Kelly's were male. Hers skewed younger, his older. Hers craved fantasy, his preferred gritty reality. Thirty-five percent of readers bought *Round Trip* primarily to read about the Getaway Girl. Only eight percent bought *Round Trip* to read Graham Kelly. The magazine's biggest advertisers, other than resorts, airlines, and countries' tourism boards, were cosmetic companies, jewelers, and couture fashion labels. Yves Saint Laurent, Donna Karan, Ferragamo, and Louis Vuitton: those were its bread and butter. Take them away, and the magazine could not survive. Which was not to say that letting Graham Kelley go and committing itself to a new, narrower focus was going to save the magazine. Andy knew a big, too-little, too-late hail-Mary play when he saw one. This was a gutless stopgap, a strategy that would have worked had it been done one or two years ago.

Equinox did not really have a choice, though. Meg was *Round Trip*'s most valuable asset. She had long since supplanted Graham Kelley as the face of the magazine, even if that face was a cartoon girl with an up-turned Judy Jetson nose. According to the survey data, if you held in your hand the latest issue of *Round Trip*, you, more than likely, flipped it open to the month's installment of the Getaway Girl first. Had she invited the tall, blue-eyed Swedish financier from last month back to her room? Once you got the answer to that burning question, then you'd check in with Graham Kelly, whom you could count on to be side-stepping land mines or trekking through a banana republic stuck in a distant century.

The whole time Andy was reading, her anger and disbelief bubbled on. “What’s he going to do? He doesn’t know how to do anything else. This magazine has been his entire adult life. He wrote the cover story for the very first issue. What’s he going to do, Andy?” He tried to explain to her that if Graham Kelley was anything like she described, he was the sort of guy that did not need to look for jobs because jobs, invariably, found him. “Without him, it shouldn’t even be called *Round Trip*,” she went on, as if she had not heard him.

He tried to make a joke: “Maybe you could get them to change it to *Getaway Girl Monthly*. What do you think of that?” Her face was inscrutable. She did not find him funny.

He made a greater effort to be understanding, to just offer her a knowing nod every now and then, to let her purge everything she needed to purge. That proved to be a challenge because, for the first time, he realized that whenever he heard the name Graham Kelly, he automatically envisioned Meg and him in an iron bed with gray, rough sheets covering a concave mattress in a room with a cracked wall the ugly color of canned peas and a smeary, curtainless window. Then he tried to suppress it by thinking of something else, like the names of the pitchers leading the American League in Earned Run Average, which did nothing to block it out because he knew his baseball statistics far too well for it to be a challenge that required any real sustained thought.

*ii*

At eleven o’clock, he got his sunglasses, his car keys, and the canvas bag she’d packed with sunscreen, two cheap inflatable mattresses, and rolled up beach towels before going to bed, and stood by the door. Frannie and Lew had gone to the Lake for

the weekend to check on the villa's progress. He and Meg were meeting Brook and Ferrell at the house, and the four of them were not going to do anything but drink, eat, and lie around the pool. The idea of having the house to themselves had brought on a powerful teenage giddiness that had rendered Andy useless since yesterday afternoon as he sat in a meeting calculating whether one case of beer was enough, or if he should buy two, and if they should grill hotdogs, hamburgers, steaks, or a combination of the three. "Are you coming?" His question gave Meg a start. She had just plummeted to the sofa in an off-kilter way that made him think her hours of pacing and circling had taken a toll and left her dizzy. She cast him a confused and blinking look over the back of the sofa. "Coming where?" She drew her chin in, stuck her lip out, and quizzically eyed the clock atop one of Brook's bookshelves. "Really? Already?" she asked, remembering.

As she aimlessly pushed the cart around pyramids of Kellogg's cereals and cases of A&W root beer stacked to resemble a sand castle, he shielded her from the aisle lined on one side with rows of magazines. Amongst all the covers a breathtaking shot of a whitewashed cottage overlooking the turquoise Aegean on the front of the June issue of *Round Trip* stood out. Where was Graham Kelly this month? The voice in Andy's head asked this in the most sniveling and juvenile tone. Probably trying to save the free world by hunting down Osama in the lawless mountains between Afghanistan and Pakistan. He was probably an arrogant enough bastard to think he could do it. Where Army Rangers, Black Ops, Predator drones, and every other form of advanced military technology had failed, Graham f-ing Kelly would get the job done, and nail Bin Laden's terror mastermind ass to the cave wall. Maybe he could. He had already done the impossible once. He had succeeded in making a bombed out shithole like Bosnia the romantic center

of the universe. It took stones to do that. It took a man to do that. Andy couldn't do that. Hell, Brook couldn't do that.

*iii*

*Girls—I'm cleaning out the highboy. Check in the drawers. Most of it's old junk, but if there's anything you like, you're welcome to it. Tell Andrew there's a box for him up in his room. Love, Fran.* Meg read the note to him from the kitchen as he, winding the drawstring of his swim trunks around his finger, scanned the family room in search of any new Janet Kelsey-induced changes.

"A box? What box?" he asked, scrutinizing the position of a Wedgewood plate on one of the book shelves adjacent to the fireplace. He thought it too far to the right, but he was seeing something that was not there.

"I don't know. She doesn't say what box. Go look."

While Meg unloaded one case of beer into the Styrofoam cooler they had bought at the grocery store, he bounded up the back stairs two at a time. The box was on the bed. It was *that* box: the one Lew's Father's Day coffee grinder had come in, and that Andy saved from the trash because it was the perfect size for storing two stacks of four-by-six photographs. He had no need to open it. He knew every last photograph stored inside. Many were of landmarks around the city, familiar facades and ornaments, like the fountains and sculptures on the Plaza, the Kansas City Life building downtown, and the glowing futuristic spires atop Bartle Hall, all shot at disorienting angles. The majority of the photographs, however, were of Jill and Ferrell from the mock fashion shoots they liked to stage, modeling Jill's treasured thrift store finds, her original creations, and jewelry on loan from Frannie. They were frivolous, and lacked the artistry and creativity

of the other photos, but they had made Jill happy. In the best of them, she and Ferrell were dressed in matching white toga-like dresses and posed before the Verona columns. They had their hair done up with ribbons the way Athena's might be in an illustrated book of mythology.

The rest were photos he took for class including one wrapped in a grading rubric he had initially wadded up so he, not wanting any success to interfere with his business school master plan, could sky-hook it into the nearest trashcan. Beneath the rubric, his professor, Dr. Talkin, had scrawled out a note that looked like it had been composed with a quill and ink:

*Your best work. I expect to see it prominently placed in your semester portfolio. Consult with your advisor about enrollment in Photography II. If he/she is not amenable, please have him/her contact me directly. My office extension is at the top of the syllabus.*

*Grade: 97/100 A*

The grade had been so outrageously high, Andy could not throw the sheet away. He had explicated every word, read into it every nuance of tone, studied the peculiar flourishes of the handwriting, and, in the process, committed it totally to memory, not just Dr. Talkin's comments but the layout of the page and the rubric's 10 point Courier New font.

The photograph was of Ferrell. On the lawn of a campus building, she had a textbook open in the grass near her feet as she brushed polish over her toenails. Blurred shapes of students carrying backpacks walked around her. She was unashamedly self-absorbed, yet, at the same time, questing for acceptance, a way into the world, and oftentimes, like in this case, going about it all wrong. That was what the picture was



about, in Andy's mind, though he doubted anyone else would have seen it the same way. Dr. Talkin hadn't. He was a great fan of dichotomies, or binaries, as he enjoyed saying in his sweeping, professorial baritone. According to him, Ferrell was "an island of superficiality amidst the throbbing intellects of the university." After saying that, he had glanced out the window of his musty office and chuckled at his own bombast. When it came to photography, the guy knew what he was doing, but he was a bit of a self-parodying nut. On the syllabus, he had renamed the class "Talkin' Photography with Dr. Jerome U. Talkin," and on the first day of the semester, after writing his name on the board in ornate script, he turned to face the class and said, "We might as well get this out of the way now, all you amateur DeNiros. Ten extra credit points for the best Travis Bickle. Don't be shy. Let's have it."

"Who is the girl?" Talkin had quizzed during a required mid-semester conference. "How did you find her?"

"She's my girlfriend's best friend."

"Is she?"

"They're nothing alike," he interjected, afraid Talkin's opinion of him would be damaged if he believed Andy desired vacuous beauty in a woman.

"She's— She's—" Talkin could not settle on the right adjective. That was the thing with Ferrell. She tended to defy simple description. "There is always a best friend, isn't there?" That was a purely rhetorical question, so Andy sat with his hands in his lap and his backpack between his shoes, waiting for an opening to say what he needed to say, that he would not be taking Photography II. Talkin put on his glasses, brought the photograph in close to his face, and said, "It was good of you to maintain a distance.

There's something there, a consciousness, an awareness that would have been exposed had you gotten any closer to her, and that would have spoiled the shot. Very solid instincts. Do you see what I mean?" He held the photo out for Andy to examine. He did not want to say anything because he did not want to seem too perceptive or too knowingly artistic. Talkin was right. Had he been closer, or, more importantly, if she had known he was anywhere nearby with his camera trained on her, it would have turned out to be something completely different. Talkin had given him a moment to study the photograph, and that was Andy's chance, but he chickened out. He did not even try. He let Talkin make his case for Photography II and acted attentive and receptive and led him to believe he'd be back in his class next semester. The first week of fall semester, though, Andy saw him in the student union cafeteria picking around in the salad bar's iceberg lettuce with a pair of plastic tongs. So he wouldn't be noticed, Andy had grabbed a tray and stood facing the line for the flavorless stir fry he had no intention of ordering.

At the bottom of the box, beneath the dozens of let's-play-fashion-photo-shoot pictures and the rubric-wrapped shot of Ferrell, lived a single photograph of Jill, in profile and shot in an uncomfortable close-up. She had been sitting on one of the chaises, her knees pulled up into a sharp triangle peak. It had been a devastatingly silent afternoon between them until she had said she wanted him to take her picture. To be accurate, she had dared him to take her picture. Thin-cheeked and noticeably pale, even in black and white, she wore a long scarf wrapped and tied around her head, its fringed ends falling over her shoulder. It, and her modest hoop earrings, made her look like a gypsy. Neither smiling or frowning, her mouth was relaxed, parted, like she might have just extinguished a match. She was no longer a cute, precocious girl. She was grown up,

a woman who possessed a soft, but fading sensuality, yet she remained formidable and was not to be coddled or patronized. *Look at me and love me the way I am, and if you can't, or you won't, I will keep going on my own.* Her defiant, dying beauty was so aggressive, so unrepentant, that the photograph frightened him. Taking the picture had frightened him because it was such an intensely private transaction between the two of them. He pretended not to remember it. It was only one picture among hundreds, intentionally buried near the bottom. It wasn't there. Only he knew it was there, and he pried open the box's folded flaps and dumped it out. A spilling mountain of photographs covered the bedspread, and the picture of Jill was there at its peak. He held it in his hands. The constellations her freckles formed across her cheeks; they were so clear, so close. He had had names for them, ones he never told Jill. How long it had been since he thought of them. Those freckles had never changed. Her eyes, those were the same. The glint in their big black irises he knew was meant for him, that too was there. Everything was there. She was Jill, the one he loved, not the other untouchable someone he made her into in his mind. It was a good photograph. He had never thought of it as being good or bad. No, it was more than good. It was an excellent, shatteringly honest piece of art. It was tenuous beauty and vitality about to be eclipsed by decay. It was the single greatest thing Andy had ever done.

Under the mountain of photographs was his camera, a used, dinged up Nikon F4 loaded with a half-used roll of film. He dug it out and picked it up. It was heavier than he remembered. It had always been heavier than he remembered. He left the photographs, now more a formless mudslide than a mountain, but took the camera with him, raising it and lowering it like a dumbbell. It fit his hand as well as the old, worn

Rawlings ball glove he had back in St. Paul. So the back stairs leading down to the kitchen would not creak, he took small steps down and crouched against the wall. He balanced the camera on his knee, his finger on the raised oval button, ready to take the perfect shot. Meg was humming, busying herself with the task of setting out the food they had bought. The frenzied angst of the morning was gone. She was pretending this was her kitchen, her house. She reached, reached, reached with her fingertips to the top shelf of a cupboard. Without being able to see where she was reaching, she snared a plastic serving platter. She distributed equal parts pretzels, sesame crackers, corn chips, and plain old round Ritzes among each of the platter's pie-piece-shaped sections. She easily found another dish, one divided in half, and piled strawberries and bunches of grapes in it. She prepared a simple dip of sour cream, minced garlic, onion, and chili powder with exacting conviction. It looked straightforward enough—not that he had ever been much of a cook—yet she squinted at the recipe like there was a hidden code she needed to decipher if she was going to make it right.

When the dip was ready, she arranged the food across the kitchen island buffet style, tidied up, and went out to the pool, where she shed her blouse and shorts. Pinching her nose, she hopped into the water, a thin, tanned column that hardly made a splash. He trailed after her, slipping out through the French doors before they shut. He put the camera to his eye and watched Meg through its viewfinder. She was in love with the luxury of having the pool to herself. In the deep end, she attempted the moves of a synchronized swimmer. Toes pointed, legs up and spread in a crooked V, she tried, beneath the water, to propel herself in a circle with her arms. After less than a rotation, she came up gasping for breath and laughing at herself. It was a terrific shot: her with her

head thrown back, thoroughly entertained by her own antics, pearls of water caught in her eyelashes, and one about to drop from the tip of her nose.

Brook's hand clapped over Andy's shoulder, Meg plunged back under the water, and the shot was lost.

"Talk about a blast from the past," Brook said. "Where's that thing been?"

"I don't know. Your mom left it out for me."

Brook traded him the camera for the can of beer in his hand. "Hey," he called to Ferrell as she fussed with the blender to make margaritas for her and Meg. "When was the last time you saw this?" He put the camera to his face. "This thing's ancient. It still works?"

"We'll see," Andy said, popping open the beer can. It was still too warm, but he drank it anyway. Brook, who had a can of beer for himself in the pocket of his trunks, set the camera down on the patio table, and they waded into the water, holding their beer cans high over their heads.

*iv*

Ninety-three degrees in the shade of a patio umbrella. High humidity and a desultory once-in-a-while breeze that were inconsequential if you were, like Andy, floating on your back, gliding your arms in a snow angel motion through the water, with Meg no more than a finger's length away doing the same. They stopped moving their arms and drifted on the invisible current. On a day like this one, summer seemed permanent. Blissful, idyllic, and, inexorable. Months from now, the days—Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's—would still be like this. The pair of potted hibiscus that bookended the diving board would sprout still more fuchsia blooms. The

sprinklers in every yard would run from dawn to dusk to keep the grass from crisping to a wasteland shade of withered brown, and the ice cream truck, stocked full of drumsticks and bomb pops, would come dinging down the block at half-past two. No one would ever need to don a coat and boots to get the mail. The furnace was never going to kick on and give the house a scorched tinder smell. And as long as the white sun burned overhead, the four of them would be in the pool: Brook shoulder deep in water and smoking a fine Dominican cigar, Ferrell doing expert, pointed-toe handstands; Andy piggybacking Meg about, then piloting her around by the corner of an air mattress, dumping her over when she least expected it.

No one was keeping track of time, so no one was sure when it was that a white lightning bolt with tendrils like the very long, deep roots of a plant, sliced the sky in half. It might have been six o'clock. Or seven o'clock. All any of them knew was that it happened after they had laid waste to a platter of hotdogs and hamburgers Brook had barbecued on the grill. Scattered raindrops pricked the surface of the pool, then stopped. Nothing was going to come of the lightning it seemed, and the day's second bottle of wine went round the circle again. As he drank, Andy heard hushed voices, steady voices in unison, all up in the trees. Rain through the tiers of leaves. Rain warm on his shoulders. Rain pinging off the tops of empty beer cans. A stabbing stroke of lightning, swift and decisive as a slasher's blade set off a mighty cracking sound. They clamored out of the water and broke for the house, skidding over slick flagstones as they grabbed up ruined magazines, soaked towels, and the beer cans lined up on the diving board.

Bundled in the towels they greedily snatched from the linen closet, the four of them huddled at the big window in Lew and Frannie's bedroom to watch the rain lash

loudly at the glass. The storm intensified but ceased to be interesting, and Meg suggested they peek at what was in the highboy. Its top drawer slid open smooth and easy, revealing old, precious, delicate things, monogrammed handkerchiefs and hand-crocheted doilies. The other drawers housed souvenirs, trinkets from parties, concert programs and playbills, small, brown bags of picture postcards, sheets of unused hotel stationery, and dusty yearbooks with yellowed pages. At the back of the bottom drawer were love letters, a packet of them inside an embroidered silk travel pouch made for jewelry. Meg lifted them from the pouch. They were so brittle. As any set of love letters should be, they were tied with a piece of red satiny ribbon. They were creased, worn at the corners, branded by a host of strange faded postmarks, and decorated with bright postage stamps of tropical birds and a man, a general in a military uniform. They came from Costa Rica during the zenith of a hot jungle summer when Lew, only a young, inexperienced doctor then, spent at a clinic in a hillside village.

“What do you think they say?” Meg tugged at one of the letters in its envelope.

“Oh, we can’t,” Ferrell protested, but she scooted closer to Meg anyway and lifted the letters from her hands so she could hold them in her own. She achingly asked, “Do people write love letters anymore?”

They had to read them, Meg decided, but before she could make her case to Ferrell, Ferrell herself whispered, “You read one and I’ll read one.” Meg untied the ribbon and took the letter from the top of the stack. Ferrell, assessing them like a deck of cards she must choose from to begin a card trick, chose one from the middle. Side by side, they lay across Frannie and Lew’s king sized bed on their backs, feet over the edge. It was devious little girl fun, and they waited to begin until Ferrell caught her breath.

“Are you ready?” Ferrell asked.

“You go first,” Meg said.

Andy belly-flopped onto the bed beside Meg. Brook was on the floor with his back against the foot of the bed. Ferrell cleared her throat. “Here we go.” She read with her arms extended straight up and the letter positioned directly over her face. “Dear Francis Brooks—” the letter began. It was witty, sometimes funny enough to make Meg laugh, and was written as one long block of miniscule script, nothing like the indecipherable swirl of ink a doctor used to sign a prescription. It tenderly described the patients he treated, the toddlers, babies, and mothers, none of whom ate well or had the means to properly care for themselves. They were dust-caked, in mismatched ill-fitting clothes, and unbothered by the bug bites that marked their brown sugar skin.

“...I have your picture taped to a cabinet (Christmas last year, your green party dress),” Meg read. “The women say you’re beautiful, and I tell them I agree.” He was heartsick. He missed her, got sick as soon as he arrived, and was feverish for more than a week. He lost almost fifteen pounds and could not get out of his cot. Yet, he was just lucid enough to pen what amounted to a magnum opus, an affirmation of his love for her, which he claimed not to be able to express in simple words. In a remote and primitive place she had never been to and would never visit, he saw and felt her everywhere. He imagined her days from beginning to end in precise and sensual detail down to the pink sunburn he saw on her back and shoulders from taking her small cousins to the pool. The letter ended with this postscript: “What would you say to a swimming pool, a place to keep cool during a long August in Kansas?”



It was Ferrell's turn: "Frances—believe me when I tell you that you and I will have a grand life together." Meg, wanting to follow along, to watch the sentences unfurl, tipped her head against Ferrell's. Andy, in turn, tipped his head against Meg's. "A big house on a quiet street with sunny rooms for them to play in. We will make it the place they will always want to come back to, though eventually I suppose they will have to grow up and leave us... Will any children ever be more loved than ours? I have wonderful waking dreams about it all." Her voice let her down, first breaking, then ebbing away to a tentative whisper before it disappeared.

A lightning strike that seemed to be on the other side of the wall made the house vibrate. The lights blinked on and off. Tiny globes of ice bombarded the windows and danced on the roof. The sound of the rain and the hail was so loud Andy almost did not hear Ferrell leave the room.

v

The scratching kept recurring in his dream, but Andy thought nothing of it because it was an extraordinarily surreal dream that, if it could have been captured on film, would have become an instant avant-garde classic. The dream was three dreams in one, sloppily grafted together with disorienting jump cuts, which meant none of the three dreams' plots—insofar as dreams had plots—seemed to advance. The first was his standard, go-to default dream. What it lacked in originality, it made up for in the chance to experience the onset of insanity within the relative safety of the subconscious. He was in a panicked search for an elusive and most likely non-existent classroom in a maze of hallways and stairwells. Just when the dream version of himself was gullible enough to believe he was getting close—an open door up ahead! voices!—he was not there

anymore. He was watching a band of Turkish Muslims hijack a 747 from inside the plane. They were executing passengers on a tarmac while Joan Rivers (of all people!) reported from the scene. In the third dream, he was waiting in a cramped room at a metal table, with two other people, one of whom was Eli Manning, whom he had pegged as smug and prissy since his days at Ole Miss. They were waiting to take part in one of the grad student experiments you had to complete if you wanted to pass Intro to Psych. They would probably have to take a survey about their self-esteem. But Andy wasn't speaking to anyone because, last time, the girl he took for a fellow put-upon undergrad going through the motions to get an A was really the experimenter and he felt like an idiot when she told him that was the experiment: how do you feel when the person you think is your equal turns out to be the one in charge? And then it was back to Joan Rivers, whose surgically tightened face could not express the horror of another gunshot, another explosion of brains and blood.

The scratching did not go away after he opened his eyes. It was a waking dream, both nearby and distant, like the sound of an old neighbor in Tallahassee ironically playing derivative hair metal on Sunday afternoons in the apartment next door. It was more of a scrape than a scratch, something rough against something smooth. Andy listened and tried to place it. It came from the kitchen. No, from outside the kitchen. He left Meg on the couch, where they had both fallen asleep. She was slumped over on her side and resembled a doll come to life in a children's animated movie, one that, at the sound of an approaching adult's voice goes limp and inert so her secret life will not be discovered.

The storm had snapped a large branch of the buckeye tree that, in summertime, made mottled clusters of shadows on the kitchen table and floor. He thought he could go outside and fix it, not permanently, but just enough so the scratching stopped. The damp flagstones were cool beneath his feet, and the air itself was soft and damp and sweet-smelling. The scent was honeysuckle from the vines woven in and out of the trellis' latticework diamonds. Arms folded over his chest, Andy gave the buckeye a good long appraisal. The branch had snapped at an almost perfect right angle. It hung at the tree's side the way a quarterback's arm hangs lifelessly after a blitzing safety's vicious sack has separated his shoulder. The poor old buckeye had always been a confused tree, never certain of the seasons, and it was perpetually shedding something, either leaves or its nut-like seeds. It was, in actuality, a bit of a sad sack, and its handicapped limb only made it more pitiable and forlorn. Nothing could be done about it now, but since he was outside, he might as well stay. He was in no real hurry to reprise his logic-defying amalgam of dreams. Who's to say they wouldn't become more jumbled and menacing the second time around? The Turkish hijackers could burst into the Psych department room, make wild demands no one understood, and, out of frustration, shoot Eli Manning right before his eyes.

With his back to the pool, Andy had missed Ferrell, in her loose, cotton cover-up, perched at its edge. "Don't come near me. I'm furious with you," she said, her voice leaden but not at all meant to incite. Her legs swirled beneath the water in slow, synchronized circles. She was smoking a cigarette. Holding it lazily, between her fingers, she exuded a haughty, dissolute glamour. The crumpled pack of Marlboros and her phone lay beside her.

He sat next to her anyway, lowering his legs into the rain-cooled water. For daring to defy her, he half expected her to give him a forceful push into the pool. That old stoked heat she had given off was not there, but at least, for most of the summer, there had still been something, like the diminished warmth of a fire's last snapping embers. Tonight, however, she was gelid, and somber, which made sitting beside her discomfiting. "Are you going to ask me why I'm furious with you?" She withheld her eyes from him. They were following a flotilla of curled leaves as it sailed around the far corner of the shallow end.

"Would you really tell me if I did?" he countered, gazing up at the sky. The clouds, which, before the storm, had been stacked high and packed together like cotton balls in a jar, were no more than spider web threads, wispy strands that had captured the stars.

"I think you're the only person I can tell."

It crossed Andy's mind then that she did not have any true friends, no confidantes she met for coffee or a girls' night out. When he suggested Meg, she replied, "I could only tell her if I was someone she made up for one of her magazine stories. If you ask me, in her mind, you're part you and part that silly cowboy she invented."

"Hey, wait a second," he protested. "She –"

"Oh, don't." She pointed the cigarette at him accusingly. "You know I'm right."

"Whatever. I thought we were talking about you. If you're going to talk, talk. Or I'm going back inside."

She inhaled sharply, and exhaled with her eyes closed. "Awhile ago, before school got out, before you showed up, I met someone."

Met someone? She was joking. She had to be. But “met someone” was a loaded euphemism, a gateway to a great many things, all of them amorous, exciting, and in her case, morally dubious. There was no other way to interpret it. Besides, she would never joke about such a thing. That meant this was another of her capricious attachments, a Davis Dave Turley redux. She would pursue, pursue, pursue, and then drop him. Then would come the wailing regret, the contrived shame, and the pandering for sympathy. That was for damn sure. So she’d made a mess of it. Her pinning that on him? Her explaining just how that worked—that was going to be good. He had to figure out if he should play it straight—she seemed distraught—or if he should go with his instincts and deride her anyway.

Before he could decide, she was telling him about a nameless man, the older brother of a girl on the lacrosse team. He worked in Washington, at the Pentagon, or someplace else important and secretive that had to do with the Army. He had been temporarily detailed to Fort Leavenworth for reasons he could not, in the interest of national security, entirely explain. “He has that beautiful, refined West Point masculinity,” she trilled, her voice transformed, stripped of its gravity. Her eyes glimmered darkly at Andy. She had to stop because she was picturing that refined West Point masculinity, and she was transmitting her picture across the few inches between the two of them. Early in the spring, he had often appeared toward the end of practice, his forearms resting on the chain link fence circling the field. The girl, beaming with pride because her brother was such a strong and striking figure, took Ferrell by the hand as the other girls went in a straggling line to the locker room with their sticks, and led her to the fence to introduce them. That day, Ferrell’s only real thought was that her hair was

windblown and her lips were dry, and she had worked up a sweat playing goalie for a series of drills at the start of practice. The next time he came, he watched from the side of the field, where she stood blowing her whistle and correcting lapses in technique. When she allowed five minutes for a break, he engaged her in friendly conversation while the girls drank from their water bottles. And then, on an evening when Brook was late getting home from the hospital, he called her, embarrassed because he had clandestinely searched his sister's phone to find Ferrell's number. Soon, he was calling every evening. In the beginning they talk about lacrosse. It was a subject that could not get them into trouble, and he knew the game far better than she did. Before long, they had expanded to other topics: likes and dislikes, movies and music, coffee and wine, college and childhood. The distorted view of the world one got living inside the Beltway, which was not wholly unlike the distorted view of the world one could get growing up in Mission Hills, and he had years of experience with both. Autumn on the Hudson. Summer in Kuwait and Qatar. He had spent three years at CENTCOM but did only one uneventful tour in Afghanistan, and that was awesome to her, though he said no one should mistake him for a hero because he had spent all day in air conditioning far away from insurgents and suicide bombers.

Ferrell was getting to the part Andy did not want to know about. He no longer cared about how, in her mind, which he had, at one time, imagined to be an old-school pinball machine of fantasies and girlish obsessions ricocheting around and setting off bells and lights, he could be the villain in this story. He did not want to know the nitty gritty details, where and when Ferrell was meeting this guy, what house of cards she had made of the lies and untruths she was telling to Brook. He had to tell her to stop. He

could not be the one she told this too. But she was making it impossible for him to interrupt.

“That week before Easter I’d been telling myself, ‘you’ve got to quit this, get a hold of yourself and act your age. And I had. I really had. I was praying like a fiend in church. I was strong and in control and then I walk in the den. Of course, I didn’t have the decency or the manners to knock, and you’re kissing her. Meg at the edge of the trunk, you at the edge of the couch, your knees touching. It was sweet, like neither of you had ever kissed anyone before. My strength, my control, my common sense—gone, just like *that*.” She snapped her fingers for emphasis.

They had met for brunch on the Plaza the next week, she said. Brook had never known because he had been called to the hospital as the sun was coming up that morning. Mr. CentCom had been going back to Washington for the weekend. Would she like to come? he had casually asked after hailing a waitress to order Ferrell a mimosa, her favorite. The weather was supposed to be good. They could go to the beach at Ocean City. Yes, she had said. And then she said no, she couldn’t. She had made up an excuse and he was very nice about it. Yes, she had said a few minutes later, she would. She definitely would. She would love to. But then she said no a second time, and he was still very nice. He had apologized. It was his fault for asking her so soon, he had said, gently touching her hair. From that she had known he did not intend for them to have a passing sort of fling. She had thought that if it was going to be something, that was what it would be, and believing that made it easier to not feel bad about thinking of him constantly. He was hers if she wanted him, and she did, but she had snatched up her purse and slid

around and out of the booth and out into the high noon sun, both proud of herself and hating herself.

Ferrell, confronting Andy squarely, said, “I didn’t want to end up like you. That’s what I was thinking.” It was like she was reading that love letter again. The words were snagging on each other and did not want to come out. Andy needed her to stop. She was wrong. She should not tell him this. She had smoked her cigarette down to the butt, and groped for another, and the task of lighting it put her at ease. “You were every man who came through the door of that restaurant.” One effortless, prolonged drag, and she was resurgent, tapping into a reserve of confidence. Her confidence had always resided in her animosity toward him. “It was you bursting into her room, like you hadn’t been on a plane for a day, so dashing in your suit with the blue tie that matched your eyes. Before you came back, she was certain it happened, you screwing some other girl, and I’d say ‘no way. You can’t really think that.’” Andy was stunned she had ever defended him. “She asked me, ‘Don’t you feel it?’ And I said, ‘No, I’m not supposed to feel it.’ Once you were back, though, it was like you were trying too hard to be yourself and being you looked like it hurt so bad. I knew right away. I knew Jill was right.”

On the long, dark flight home over the ocean, he had assured himself that he could disguise what he had done with sheer enthusiasm and optimism. Never mind that, if the leukemia had taught him only one thing, it was that he was a piss-poor actor. Even if he failed, it would be alright. He had counted on Jill being too run down to notice. Now, there was something so wicked and vile about that. How could he think that? He had made a grand entrance, smiling his face off, but after he burst through the door of Jill’s room, Ferrell had dashed out into the hall and down the stairs. He caught her by the



wrist and told her she could stay. It was not him being magnanimous. It was him unprepared to be alone with Jill, weakened and half-dead, but smiling and loving him from across the room with the little strength she had left. He couldn't sustain the enthusiasm or the optimism. She had wanted him to come to her, to lie beside her on the bed, so he did and he held her, but there was nothing for him to hold but a skeleton of contaminated bones. Rather than let him stew miserably during those last days, why couldn't she have asked him? He would have told her. He wanted to. It was cruel of her, not like her at all. But it was fitting, poetic even, that she should leave him with a metastasizing tumor on his conscience he had never been able to cure. He thought it past the point of curing. Living without it seemed impossible, almost unnatural.

“I got mad,” Ferrell went on. “I mean, I cursed you every way I knew how, but she would not get mad at you. She refused to be mad at you, but I was mad at her for not being mad at you, and she was mad at me for being mad at you. And we couldn't stop being mad at each other. That's how she left it, 'I'm mad at you, but I love you anyway.' She said it with a smile, too. Total asshole that you were, you were not to be disparaged. She wouldn't tolerate it.”

“It was only once,” Andy said, turning Ferrell's pack of cigarettes round and round with his finger. “I swear.”

Ferrell lay back against the flagstones and blew a long ribbon of smoke through her parted lips. “Once was enough, don't you think?” She picked up her phone, then set it back down. “I was trying to will him to call, you know. If I concentrate hard enough and think about him long enough, I almost think I can do it. The letters, Lew's letters to Frannie, I was listening to Meg and thought I'd made a mistake. I wasn't supposed to be

here tonight. I was supposed to be with him somewhere. Ocean City, maybe. A fancy Georgetown restaurant. I called him while you guys were still pillaging the highboy. He didn't pick up, so I left this simpering message that made me sound like a loser."

She stopped at the end of her thought, waited, contemplated the faint blots of lipgloss at the end of her cigarette, and moved on to her next thought that had been jammed, like an amusement park bumper car, up against the one she just finished.

"Before you came out I was thinking about how Brook and I were in the same French class in high school and one day, right in the middle of the lesson, flat-chested Madame Beasley says, 'Mademoiselle Nash and Monsieur Van Dyne, stand please. Come to the front of the room. You may bring your books. Have them open to page 217.'" Ferrell could do a convincing French accent, thick and nasal. "Why Brook was in a French class with a bunch of sophomores when he was a senior, that's a long story. It had to do with the Latin teacher's husband being transferred and the school not being able to find a replacement. Anyway, he was Jacques and I was Sandrine, and we had to recite a dialogue about cakes and pies in a bakery. He read his part in the most grating monotone, and in the middle of a sentence, Beasley would make him stop and start over and say all the words slow with the proper pronunciation. We spent half the class period up there. He was trying to embarrass me, not that I cared. He was speaking French to me and nobody else. I didn't think life could get any better than that. I still know it, that dialogue. 'Bonjour, monsieur. Je voudrais acheter quatre croissants et une tarte de fruit frais.' Brook knows it too, and out of the blue, for no reason, he'll say, 'Cette boulangerie a les pâtisseries délicieuses, aussi.' He does it because he knows it makes me laugh."

“Did he ever tell you how we ended up like this?” The way she phrased the question was ominous, like she and Brook had never known a moment’s happiness. Brook would never share anything like that with him, or anyone, and she knew it. “It was before you left, quite awhile before you left. The secrecy was kind of thrilling. I loved it. And you never knew until you called from Florida and I answered his phone. I wanted to see your face so badly! But you were very, very stern. All business. I’ll never forget. ‘Can I speak to Brook, please?’” She deepened her voice in a bad attempt to copy his. “Like you didn’t even know me. I was Brook’s secretary, and he was your accountant or something. It was priceless.”

“Here,” he said. He gestured at the lighter in Ferrell’s lap. He had taken a cigarette from the crumpled pack and set it between his lips.

“You’re serious?” she laughed.

“Yes, damn it.”

“You’re serious.” They both watched her touch the yellow body of flame to the tip of the cigarette. He did not let her see that he hated the taste. If he thought about how much he hated the taste, he would not have to think so much about what she was saying.

“I was practically living by myself because that’s when Grier was shackled up on the Plaza with Horse Boy.” Horse Boy was her name for some real old-money Mission Hills stalwarts’ middle-aged lout of a son who had never done anything but fail to make the Olympic equestrian team on three separate occasions and heedlessly spend his parents’ money. “And I liked to sit out on the patio— Oh, sorry. The *terrace* as Grier thought it should be called, and drink a big glass of wine. Gregory would go just about orgasmic over a really good bottle of wine, and he had over three hundred of them, but

she wouldn't let him have any of it in the divorce, so it was all in the basement collecting cobwebs." It took Andy a while to figure out that Gregory was Ferrell's father. He did not think he had ever heard her mention his name before. "Who got custody of the wine was as big a deal as who got me. Bigger maybe. When I was little, before I could read, he taught me to recite the names of his wines just by looking at the label. It was like a party trick. He'd bring me down from my room after dessert, put me on his knee and point at the row of bottles lined up on the dining room table. 'Which one is this, Ferrell?' And I'd say '1973 Bâtard-Montrachet,' Daddy.' And everyone was so impressed. They clapped and laughed and said I was such a smart girl. 'Smart and beautiful like her mother,' someone would always say. I was trying to see how many bottles I would have to drink before Grier noticed any of them were missing, hiding the empty ones behind a wall of shoeboxes in my closet.

"So, one night, I'm out there with my wine, being all refined and grownup and committed to my sort of noble solitude, when I see a shadow moving along the side of the house, and it's Brook. I'd recognize that loping, nonchalant stride of his anywhere. He looked terrible, really terrible, drawn and hollow and disconnected. He just sat himself down and asked for a drink of my wine. I have no idea how long we were out there. It must have been hours. In total silence, him staring through me the whole time. Finally, he asked if he could see my room. That was his idea of seduction, not that I was complaining. We got upstairs, and he stopped short of the door, looked in my room and pronounced it 'even pinker than I expected,' like that was a deal-breaker or something. After that, it was a long time before I spent a night apart from him.

“I thought, finally, I’ll know what it’s like. I’m getting my own great love story! But it was not romantic. He cried a lot over Jill, so much that I would have his tears running down my skin. Medical school, though, those were fantastic years. You never got to see the cute, dumpy place Brook had near the Med Center. I would stay up all night helping him study. I made up all these silly games like Surgery Charades, Name that Diagnosis, Strip Pathology. I never wanted him to graduate because I knew once he did it wouldn’t be the same.”

She told him all of this with bittersweet, awe-struck weariness, like she was a great beauty of old Hollywood, someone who had starred in iconic movies and married a handful of iconic leading men. She was someone like Elizabeth Taylor, for example, and he was her biographer. What she was telling him were all the best stories no one had ever heard. He was supposed to be amazed that all of this had happened to one woman in barely half a lifetime.

“It’s pretty twisted when you think about it.” She stabbed out another spent cigarette. This time, she did not light another. “Jill dies and because she dies, I get what I want. I get the boy I wanted since I was twelve years old and with him came happy Christmases, happy birthdays, hugs and kisses.” Once more, she looked down at her phone. “I wish he would call. I wish he would, Andy.”

But she was done with the handsome young bureaucrat. If he called, Andy did not believe she would answer. She had come to the disappointing conclusion that she was not as brash or bold as she led herself to believe. She had exposed herself as a fraud and that was a demoralizing moment. He knew what that was like. You believe with all of your mind and all your heart that you are unequivocally this kind of person. Only a

snowballing chain of unexpected events gets rolling faster and faster, pulling you under, and you go tumbling and bumping along until you crash at the bottom of the hill. In the aftermath, when you have your first coherent thought, the upshot is that you are not that kind of person and never were. He was not a devoted, sacrificing, monogamous man. Ferrell was not an impetuous, reckless woman. She would be with Brook for the rest of her life. What she had with him was not bad. It was enough. If it had been enough for the last seven years; there was no reason why it could not be enough for the next seven or twenty-seven, or thirty-seven. (She would be approaching seventy! Ferrell Nash, an old woman. That did not compute.) He thought it tragically prudent of her because she feared nothing more than loneliness. She did not have the strength or the talent to live alone and thrive. It was an art, and neither she nor Andy, for that matter, had the patience it took to excel at it.

Far off in the northwest, thunder grumbled for the final time. The brass light fixture above the Lehmans' kitchen table blazed yellow. Through the spaces in the wrought iron fence, he could see the patterned wallpaper and a porcelain painted rooster, part of Mimi's collection of cookie jars. The kitchen went suddenly black, and in the span of time it took Mimi or Burt to feel their way to the switch plate, the floodlights at either corner of the eaves burst on. They engulfed the Lehmans' backyard and the Van Dynes' backyard in unholy brightness. Andy shied away from it. He turned and squinted down at Ferrell's phone laying dark and noiseless between them. She was impervious to the light. Her eyes had returned to the floating leaves. Still squinting, he lifted his head. The wind and the slanted curtains of rain had beaten down the lilies and scattered impatiens petals like confetti left over from a bad party everyone had left early. The snap

dragons were doubled over and appeared to be vomiting up their own blossoms. A pot of white petunias lay on its side. It had rolled about the flagstones and spilled a semi-circle of dirt that was a black, muddy paste. The hibiscus blooms—the ones that were to open tomorrow—had been knocked loose. Some dangled precariously from their stems. Others lay on the ground like miniature folded umbrellas. Matted streaks in the grass marked the course of water that clanked through the drain pipes and gushed out, forming short-lived rivers that ran downhill toward the front yard. You could not have taken more than three paces in the yard without having to step over or around fallen twigs and branches, some of them bearing clumps of glossy leaves beaded with arrested raindrops. It was a contradictory scene. The rain had washed everything clean and made it shine with a soft, moonlit luster even the floodlights could not entirely ruin, but what was clean and shiny was also damaged, broken, defaced, or in disarray.

An act of violence has happened here, Andy thought. He was thankful for not having witnessed it. It could have been worse, much worse. It did not come close to the catastrophic damage of tornadoes that reduced entire neighborhoods to mounds of splintered two-by-fours and puffs of pink insulation. Nevertheless, it was a glimpse of the wrath and destruction that was, from time to time, visited on everywhere but here. Despite what he had lived through in this house, he still believed that truly bad things could not happen here. In the morning, they could clean it up—find the saw in the garage, put on work gloves, drag out a roll of trash bags from under Lew's workbench. They could do it after they ate pancakes. At this hour, pancakes sounded disgusting to him, but that was half the point of them being here: to wake up together in the same house and come clamoring into the kitchen groggy and sleepy-eyed but childishly happy

about a bowl of batter and a bottle of syrup. None of them quite knew how to make pancakes, but they were going to figure it out. The crucial thing that would require one of them to have a hint of culinary intuition was knowing when they should be flipped. That would work itself out, and they would have plate-sized pancakes, brown in the middle and blond and bubbled at the edges. With full stomachs, they would clean up, and to the untrained eye all would be well when they finished. (Just in time for Janet Kelsey's Sunday afternoon open house.) The yard would be as prettily and lovingly groomed as before.

Andy rose and walked around the deep end of the pool, over near the fence where two Bradford pears, those on either side of the ones felled by a past ice storm, had been rent in half with staggering, clean precision. The toppled halves rested on the ground, their branching networks of weak limbs spread like giant oriental fans. They left an unobstructed view of the Lehman's. The elm shading their sunroom listed drunkenly to the left, ready, at just the slightest provocation, like a blue jay landing on its highest branches, to crash through and crush Mimi's chintz-cushioned wicker furniture.

He heard the whispering sound of water as Ferrell drew her legs from the pool. Soon she was near him, right at his shoulder, seeing what he was seeing. "I had no idea it was that bad," she said, her words passing straight through the marrow of his bones and into his blood.



## 12. SOLITAIRE

Ferrell was in full bitch mode. Not with everyone. Just Andy. When she rounded the open tailgate to set her duffle bag amongst the other bags he had already loaded into the back of Lew's big Cadillac SUV for a weekend trip to the lake, she sniped at him, and they got in a few good volleys, none of which had the truly lacerating effect they would have liked. Getting that kind of attitude from her shouldn't have surprised him, but it did. A week had passed, time enough for her jaded discontent to mellow and for the time they spent by the pool to become ancient, inconsequential history. What he had failed to learn that night, however, was that certain things have no statute of limitations. Why would any of what he and Ferrell had said or thought evaporate a mere seven days later when they traveled along in two concurrent times? There was the now of today—riding in the back of Lew's SUV through some particularly godforsaken

corners of south central Missouri—and the now of seven summers ago that cycled around and around and around in a loop like a half hour newscast shown in airport terminals and hospital waiting rooms. It was always that summer. On the cold, snow-packed winter evenings. On the March mornings when spring was waking up. Christmas Eve and Columbus Day. They had apparently taken on the night of the storm as a third parallel now. Managing two was strenuous enough, having three would require a herculean ability Andy doubted he had. That night had precedent-setting potential. That they could become confidants, allies, and advisors was a radical, no, make it seismic, shift. Andy was not sure he liked it. She must not have been, either. The pissy little sneers and that arctic antipathy, those were her attempts at preserving what they were used to, what made sense to them. If that was her motive, he would play his part: spar with her when prompted, ignore—or pretend to ignore—her otherwise. It was, more or less, the old status quo, so it did not bother him. The depth of her vulnerability and uncertainty as she, bereft, sat swirling her legs in the pool, had made him much more uneasy.

Behind him, she swiped vigorously at her nails with an emery board. The sound of it, directly and abrasively projected into his ear, conveyed acute frustration. It did not affect Brook, who sat beside her in the SUV's far back seat reading a paperback with a banana tree and a breaking wave on its cover. And it did not deter Meg from carrying on her dialogue with Fran. Meg was pitched forward, her head poking between Lew, in the driver's seat, and Fran, in the passenger seat, so Fran did not have to crane her neck every time she wanted to speak. The Getaway Girl might be getting away to the Lake, and she was quizzing Fran about the place. Frannie's answers were full of glowing chamber of commerce enthusiasm that Lew spoiled by cautioning Meg that this was not a Lake

Tahoe of the Ozarks. Despite some high-priced condos and new gated communities like the one they were moving to, a couple of well-maintained, multi-star resorts and three or four decent golf courses, Osage Beach was an unglamorous place. Its portion of Ozark shoreline was ringed by old condos built two and three deep along the shore, and an often bumper to bumper strip of State highway crowded by kitschy motor inns, antique malls with tea rooms, miniature golf courses conjoined to go-cart tracks, frozen custard stands, All-U-Can-Eat buffets, rundown cabins, weathered billboards, boat dealerships, and an outlet mall, none of it built with any aesthetic forethought. For that reason, and the fact that it was a classic illustration of the rabid, rural commercialism meant to entice discerning urban tourists, the place had an unpretentious novelty to it that Andy had enjoyed the few times he had been there. It killed him that for people like the Van Dynes, weekends at the Lake qualified as a return to nature.

Ferrell had been filing her nails for so long that, if he did not know better, he would have guessed she had no fewer than eighteen fingers. Throughout the week, he had caught himself at work entertaining the idea of calling her up to find out how she was doing. He liked the idea, and, in his mind, he scheduled a time when he would set aside whatever he happened to be doing and pick up the phone on his desk. On Tuesday, he wrote 2:45 on a square yellow sticky note, penned a box around it for emphasis and affixed it to his computer monitor. At 2:49, he was hiding behind a packet of graphs and charts to avoid the sight of his phone. He procrastinated some more, and 2:45 Tuesday became 9:15 Wednesday morning. Get it out of the way early, he thought, but that did not happen. That was too early, so he committed to 12:30, certain she would not be home. He would only have to leave a message on the machine because she and Meg had

settled into a routine of mornings in shops, galleries, and other Getaway Girlish attractions, lunches in cafes and afternoons with Frannie, acting as her eager apprentices. Had he been really serious about speaking to her, he would have called her cell phone, but he had it in his head that this was a conversation of such delicacy and importance that it required reciprocal use of landlines. He did not want to interrupt her as she navigated a shopping cart across a parking lot or as she held a blouse on a hanger up to her neck to assess the color of the fabric in relation to the color of her ever darkening summer tan.

Unbeknownst to her, Ferrell had also managed to saddle him with fits of sleeplessness, hours when he was alert enough to shower, dress, and go to the office. Meg had brought it on unintentionally one night in bed, twisting onto her side and settling her chin into a soft spot between his neck and collar bone. “Ferrell was in a bizarre mood today—quiet, withdrawn, but wanting me to think she was having fun when she wasn’t.”

“Oh, Ferrell is full of bizarre moods,” he had said, consoling her. “She has as many moods as she does pairs of shoes.”

“We’re at the mirror together, in the bathroom after lunch at that barbecue place, fixing our make-up, and she asks me if I’ve ever written a love letter, and I said, no, I hadn’t. She said she tried to do it yesterday. She actually went out and bought special stationery from that little paper store on Forty-eighth, but she couldn’t do it. She said she spent two and a half hours at the kitchen table staring at the damn stationery. Then, it was almost like she hated me because she all but stares me dead in the mirror, and in the hardest, condescending voice she says, ‘you should go a shade lighter with the foundation,’ like that was her way of settling some score with me or something.”

He so easily pictured it, the two of them, lip gloss wands in hand, bent in toward the mirror, and Ferrell at her most fearsomely beautiful and intimidating, eviscerating Meg with a single cool comment that was an insult masquerading as advice.

“What do you think?” Meg had tilted her face up so he and she were eye to eye and almost nose to nose, and his only response was to draw her closer to him and let his hand travel through her hair as her lids drooped and closed and she left him alone, awake and afflicted.

For the rest of the week, as he waited to fall asleep listening to either her flat measured breath that grazed his shoulder or her fingers tap-tapping at her laptop’s keys, he had tried to shape an image of Ferrell and Brook together in her little over-decorated house. As Brook turned another page of his book with crisp efficiency and Ferrell held one hand’s worth of freshly filed nails up to the window to study her cuticles in the sunlight, he tried again. He was not able to do it. He tried simple scenarios: them clearing the table after dinner, them watching television on the bright white sofa. He could get partway there with either Ferrell or Brook in position with all the necessary props, but never the two of them together. The closest he had ever gotten and would probably ever get was that brief, real life back and forth about Brook’s dry-cleaning. Listening to them, he had been envious. Somehow, quotidian talk of laundry equaled a longed-for closeness Andy could hardly remember experiencing for himself.

The whole business had ruined his week, which irked him, really irked him, now that he thought about it. (Now that Ferrell had resumed her work with the emery board.) This was Ferrell’s problem, Ferrell and Brook’s problem, repressed and left to fester for too long, and it had nothing to do with him. Why should he be broody and distressed?

He and Meg got on fabulously well together. His world, the one that consisted only of him and Meg in his bedroom at the end of the day, was a happy one. Work was work, neither gratifying nor miserable, but tolerable mostly because when it was over, he had Meg's face to study, her voice to listen to with the indulgent leisure of Lew in his study playing Stravinsky on the turntable. They had an ideal arrangement. They amused each other and protected each other from the lingering aftershocks of old hurts, heartaches, and mistakes.

Since the night of the storm, he had, however, become more powerfully drawn to her. He wondered what the connection was. He was not having any sort of carnal awakening, necessarily, just occasional fleeting moments of heightened recognition when she was near. In her travels, she had acquired certain traits, or could make herself appear to have acquired certain traits, traces of alluring foreignness that would be absent one moment, and overpowering the next. In just the last few days, he had detected a dusky, Mediterranean quality in her whisper and a Nordic clarity in an eye that winked at him. Wednesday, at noon, on his way down from his office to get a sandwich for lunch, he got off the elevator and was met by the semi-profile of a woman in a long, black skirt trimmed in rows of lace ruffles. She had her hair coiled in a loose knot against her elongated neck. Her shoulders were square and proud, her posture perfectly erect. Who is that woman? he had asked himself. What is she doing here? He likened her to a young doña, a Goya muse, a comparison that puzzled him because he was not aware of having absorbed so much of art and artists. The woman turned. She was no doña; she was Meg, come on a whim to whisk him away to a lunch much fancier than the one he had in mind. She had rushed forward, taken his arm, and hugged it to her.

She had not noticed him regarding her with greater care and interest, consuming even her most minor movements. Well, he did not think she had noticed. It was difficult for him to tell one way or the other. She had the ability to efface and obscure what was happening in her thoughts. It had made him want to tell her things in hopes that she would share something in return. It worked, too, most of the time, because she wanted it to work. She satisfied him with more tales of manufactured international romance (Milan one night, Malta the next, then Montreal), but something remained in reserve—a detail left untold, maybe even the most important detail of all. He had stopped speculating on what those untold details might be because, when he speculated for too long, she became more of a stranger to him than she had been before, and he did not want to believe her someone he did not, or could not, know.

The swish-swish-scrape of the emery board had stopped. Out of his left eye, Andy had a clear view of Ferrell's image in the window. She had the crown of her head against the glass and her chin in her palm as she, with brazen disinterest, watched the highway's dashed yellow line blur and flash on by. She stared at the passing fields lush with corn, the farm houses with peeling paint and crooked shutters, the small town car dealerships, drive-ins, and brick churches topped with white steeples. In her mind, she might still be trying to write a love letter to Brook. What an odd thing it would have been—a great outpouring of passion spelled out in her perfect, oversized teacher's script.

Lew brought the car to a stop at a town's one swinging traffic light suspended over the intersection of the highway and a deserted Main Street. The slow rotating sign in front of a bank, the only viable business it seemed, flashed a digital time and temperature. The light changed, and as the car eased on ahead, Andy found himself

speculating about the weather in Ocean City. Did the air smell of salt and brine? Where was the best place for fresh crab legs along the beach?

Ferrell became aware of him observing her. She shifted in her seat, blocking her reflection with the side of her hand, but then her hand slid away. She shifted again, not back to the old position, but to one that let her use the window to transmit a certain familiar look to him. It reached him like a refracted beam of light. Meg's and Frannie's voices, an ongoing duet of questions and answers, now focused on the topic of vaccinations required for travel to Africa, sank away to a soft din. He did not want Meg to shrink away, but he was having trouble finding a balance between her and this silent communiqué of Ferrell's. He kissed the crook of Meg's arm, thinking that it would help, but that did no good because Ferrell bristled at the sight of his lowered head and rounded lips meeting Meg's brown skin. He did not need to see her to know she had. He felt it like so many volts of electricity sent straight to his spine. He kissed Meg's arm again. Her cheeks reddened. She squirmed and mouthed the word "don't," though she did not mean it. He would have done it a third time, but he did not because he questioned whether he was doing it for Meg's benefit or for Ferrell's.

Ferrell had not altered her expression. Its meaning required no translation. Although it had been so long since he had last seen it, he realized he had been half-expecting it, and encountering it now, he immediately decided his opinion, rather the whole web of concentric and connecting opinions it invariably set off, had not changed. "Why is it that you can't want me? Why couldn't you choose me?" she was asking with big forlorn eyes. During college that same look made frequent appearances in several variations. There was the plaintive version, the angry version, the jealous version. What



Andy was seeing now was a mix of all three. It had nothing to do with unrequited lust or affection. Far from it. If anyone thought that, they did not know Ferrell very well. Her first impression of him that she, with a princess' royal condescension shared with Jill, and which Jill, in a dead-on imitation, shared with him when they had become comfortable enough to mock their own and one another's friends was this: "That blond hair, with the little bit of curl in it, the eyes—whatever color they are—he looks like a lifeguard. Which is fine for you, but it's not my type." She wasn't just saying it, either. Yet she expected something from him. She needed to be given her due. It was almost too convoluted to explain.

Andy supposed it had something to do with the fact that her entire life people had told her she was cute, adorable, pretty, beautiful, gorgeous, stunning. The adjectives kept escalating because she kept outgrowing them. Her whole sense of self-worth depended on the slightly lascivious flirtations of the boys she danced with at parties and sat next to in class. She expected it and did not know how to react when she did not get it. And she had never gotten it from Andy. Not once had he ever given her a slow mental undressing like every other guy on campus preoccupied with getting laid as many times by as many girls as it took to keep pace with his buddies. It made him a threat to her perception of herself, which she owed in just as large a part to her mother, who could have suffered no greater indignity than for Ferrell to be one or two pounds over-weight. If she was not desirable in that way, what else was she?

Like most any man would, Andy had felt a pang of attraction toward her, but it was unviable. It had been rendered meaningless long ago by her petulance and immaturity, her little potshots and slanders. (Some of which turned out not to be slanders

but awful truths about himself he hated her for seeing with such clarity.) She had no power over him, though his stomach had turned itself inside out as he watched her check her lipstick in the Plaza restaurant window that first evening he was back. He attributed that to not having seen her for seven years. After that, it went back to being what it was: ever-present, but calcified and stored away in a place he could not get to.

Jill, naturally, had always been his answer to Ferrell's half-pleading, half-accusing stare. Even if he had never known Jill, the answer would have been the same. He could not choose her, and he could not love her. There was no mystery or unpredictability about Ferrell, as far as Andy could tell. From the time Jill had introduced them, Ferrell's thoughts and feelings were too naked and accessible. They were entirely too much like his own. Meeting her had been like holding an x-ray of himself up to a light and seeing gray, malignant tumors everywhere. He had been in the midst of one of those periods when he did not want to be reminded of himself, and he could conceive of her as nothing other than a disgusting, inescapable analogue. The two of them were loveless, (he was not yet savvy enough to identify his attitude toward Jill as the obvious forerunner to love) and, for all intents and purposes, parentless. They were plotters and schemers out of necessity because, if they wanted something, they would have to get it for themselves. And they had tenuous, inflated opinions of themselves as a defense against the lovelessness and parentlessness they could never put out of their minds for more than a minute at a time. It had been frightening to see from the outside that same consuming yearning to belong to someone and for someone to belong to you, and the utter ignorance as to how to make that happen.

Jill had rescued him from the tedious string of relationships he botched because he wanted things to be serious, grown-up and permanent. Those girls wanted only a date to a sorority formal, someone to get them into a bar on a Thursday night, someone to keep them from being the one girl without a guy in their group of friends. And sometimes all of that was a pretense for vapid, heartless sex, which he could never, despite plenty of attempts, make himself enjoy. He did it anyway, though, because he thought he did not have a choice. If there was a right way or a better way to get what he wanted, he had not known it. The law of averages would have to kick in, and at some point, by accident or dumb luck, a one night stand would not be just a one night stand. It would give way to the whole spectrum of sensations that went along with love and abiding, resonant desire. It pained him to watch Ferrell do the things that she did because like him, when she felt herself cornered, passed over, left behind, or cruelly denied, she went into overdrive, and the compulsion to act swelled so fast she had to do something, always the wrong, amazingly stupid something.

Compared to Ferrell, Jillian was a whole other story. She was this precocious enigma. Bursting with self-assurance, the girl, for God's sake, had grabbed him by the belt loop and kissed him between dinner and dessert out in the hallway. How was he supposed to anticipate that? (She had smelled strongly of incense and so had the cathedral at Canterbury. Before now Andy had never made that connection, and he wished he hadn't because it introduced the specter of destiny, that the things he would do were cryptically foretold then and had no chance of being undone.) He had expected a mortified, giggling apology, but she was too pleased with herself to apologize. Seated diagonally across from him at the dining room table, she had been full of secrets, secret

plans and secret emotions, all of them revolving around him but expertly masked by an impassive, almost morose face that, despite Frannie and Lew's cheerful, polite questioning about his classes and life in the fraternity house, made him feel unwelcome. She parsed her meat into tiny fragments and ate her green beans one by one from the tip of her fork. It was like she had better things to do than be subjected to dinner at the same table as him. He had thought it would be a hasty, aborted joke of a kiss destined for infamy and neither of them would be able to look directly at the other again. Rather, it was lengthy, satisfying. It was like a well-told story, and it left him dazed and unfathomably happy.

*ii*

Riding in the car was intolerable, especially sitting in the back all buckled in like a child. The highway was uneven, the traffic suffocating. Andy wanted it to be over, but they were at least seventy miles from Osage Beach. Long car rides brought back unpleasant memories of his drive to Tallahassee, when he had descended into the addled, half-mad mental space anyone who drives for long distances across unknown country reaches. It was an infinite and empty space that could be filled by any idea, theory, or hypothesis no matter how disturbing, ridiculous, or superfluous. He arrived there somewhere west of Biloxi, Mississippi, at more or less the exact time when casino billboards began popping up alongside the road, a more glittery, spangled one every fifty yards. By the time he was driving across the stretch of interstate that spanned Mobile Bay, tepid, metallic Gulf water surrounding him on all sides and just a few feet below, his mind spawned a clanging, mortifying idea to fill the void. It would have caused him to pull the car over had there been any place to pull over to.

It wouldn't have lasted anyway.

It wouldn't have lasted anyway.

It wouldn't have lasted anyway.

You know it.

You know you know it.

For an instant, he had been so distraught that his vision blurred and his head pounded. The broken yellow line that kept him safely in his lane, away from speeding semis, vanished, and he thought of wrenching the steering wheel to the right to send the car through the rusty railing and down into the Gulf. He thought he might do it. He had tightened his grip on the steering wheel in case he decided to follow through, but up ahead he had seen land. Against the gray backdrop of the very gray January afternoon was a green sign: Pensacola 54. He saw in the sign a coded message that told him not to do it. But he never was really going to do it. His addled mind had run amok; that was all. He had been driving since six in the morning through strange country made bleakly beautiful by the monochrome of a Southern winter. And he had never driven over an ocean before, and that gave him a funny feeling, a hyper-awareness of his own fragility and impermanence. The ocean was so big, and he was so small—both in heart and body—and what, he wondered, could he possibly do that was worth anything to anyone? He could never be as great as the ocean beneath him. There was no point in trying. Jill, with her dreamer's optimism, could have made trying worth it. Had she ever dreamed of Mobile Bay? No, because no one ever dreamed of Mobile Bay, and that made it the sort of place a man who had been driving too long, nourished only by a Whopper overwarmed under a red heat lamp, and a flat, large Coke, consider driving through a rusted

railing into the deep metallic water. That sequence, which had lasted less than half a minute, no longer seemed real. He could not imagine himself having the impulse to crash through a rusted railing into the ocean.

*It wouldn't have lasted anyway.* There was something to it, though. There really was. A point in time would have come when they would have had a battle over his soul. Before he left for Hong Kong, half of Jill's days were spent in murmuring prayer. She had asked him to pray with her, and she had asked him to kneel beside her bed and take communion from that Shirley woman. He had made up excuses that she was too smart not to see through, but she had not badgered him or allowed him to see her disappointment. Over time, however, the pressure on him to confess, repent, and convert would only have grown. He could not have done it then because he could not do it now. Even if he had wanted to, and there were times—days, weeks in a row—he had talked himself into a fragile state of mind that might make it possible, he was far too skeptical, disinclined and, to use a favorite phrase of Jill's that made him go numb inside whenever he heard it in reference to himself, too hardhearted to give in. They would never have fought about it, though. It would have been oblique, loving warfare, sophisticated, but punishing stuff, and neither would ever have gained an inch of momentum. She deserved a devout and God-fearing man, which he was not. In good conscience, he could not have married her. He could not burden her with his unbelief. That would have been cruel and selfish of him. Possibly more cruel and selfish than Canterbury, and it would take a lot to top that. He might have inadvertently caused her to fall away. That was farfetched, but not impossible. Regardless, he wanted no part of it. He loved her for her gentle piety and devotion. St. Jill of Mission Hills, a nickname for her he had kept to himself. For

someone like him, that made very little sense, but it was true. Faith was meant for her but, somehow, luck of the cosmic lottery, he supposed, not for him. It was like a cleft in your chin or unfettered fearlessness: either you were born with it or you weren't, and the necessary bit of spiritual coding was not in his DNA.

It was a sad truth but not a shameful one, not anymore. He could believe that because Meg was beside him, both in the car now and in bed at night. Because of her, a part of his mind could rest. He could give up the shadow life, the one adapted from Jill's fully scripted dreams of the future. He did not have to fall back into the old gut wrenching guessing game: if Jill were here, what would we be doing? He never failed to come up with an answer, and whatever they were doing was happening somewhere on the other side of the world to a duplicate self he would never meet. That shadow life had become his real life, and, until the morning after Easter, the one he had access to, and woke up in each morning, had been a damn poor substitute.

A line of orange traffic cones divided the highway far into the distance. Andy saw them, bright and foreshortened, through the windshield. Traffic was suddenly reduced to one lane each way. Someone ahead in the long strand of cars was not going the speed limit. At thirty miles an hour, they were never going to get to Osage Beach. Then the car stopped. All the cars stopped. The SUV in front of them crept forward and crept forward a little more. For ten minutes, the chain of cars and boats crept along. They approached the last of the orange cones, and as they did, Andy saw that it was not a slow driver holding up traffic but an Amish carriage rattling along at a steady clip on the highway's shoulder. He gawked at the shiny, black carriage, the matching pair of gray flecked horses, and the couple riding in the seat. They were a majestic pair. He had a hat

and beard. She had a bonnet tied in a bow beneath her chin and wore a starched-looking, pale blue dress. They were young, real, and unaffected by the pick-up trucks and SUVs that zoomed around them towing boats and jet skis. What would they think of a Monte Carlo casino alive with the sounds of clicking chips, bouncing roulette balls, and shuffling cards? Or an opulent beach house made of glass in New Zealand? A Hong Kong nightclub? A cozy English pub? A little village of luxurious tents, base camp for the well-to-do while on safari? A lovely old Tudor in Mission Hills? They might never have thought of such places, yet they looked as though they had never felt themselves deprived of anything. Andy hoped that was true. He wanted one of them to look in his direction so he could search their faces for some sign of confirmation, but as Lew steered the car around the carriage, they both kept their eyes straight ahead on the twitching ears of the horses.

*iii*

In the evening, after Brook won his fourth consecutive hand of gin rummy, he got up from the floor, where they all sat around the coffee table, and asked Ferrell to take a walk with him down by the lake. He reached his hand down to her. He was making a noticeable effort to be suave and coyly charming. She let him pull her to her feet, once she took a last sip of the cheap wine they'd bought that afternoon, and off they went. Andy and Meg sat listening to their heavy footsteps on the wooden stairs leading to the docks.

While Meg cleared away the wine glasses and Andy's empty bottle of beer, he stood at the sliding glass doors watching a family on a houseboat finish their dinner and counting the other boats as they zipped by. Across the lake, five miles down the shore, at



the end of a winding lane, was Lew and Frannie's villa. They had given him and Meg and Brook and Ferrell the grand tour. Lew had made a point of showing them the wall in the family room where he was going to display photos and souvenirs from the safari. "I've cleared it with your mother," he said to Brook. The villa had all the features of the chic rustic style that was so popular: vaulted ceilings, exposed beams, a stone fireplace, granite countertops, and ceramic tile in the entryway. It shared an L-shaped, two-stall garage, screened in porch floor plan with every other villa in the subdivision. Meg and Ferrell raved about the light fixtures and the sinks in the master bedroom. Brook was reserved, but approving. "I think it suits you, Dad," he said, coming up behind Lew to give him a playful shake of the shoulders. Andy had found the newness and smell of sawdust and paint off-putting, but he was complimentary and did his best to match everyone else's enthusiasm. Lew and Frannie were spending their first night in the house in sleeping bags on the living room floor, leaving the four of them the run of their old, two bedroom timeshare with the nice but outdated décor of chrome, rattan, and an overstuffed sectional sofa with upholstery like fine wale corduroy.

Lew and Frannie had been as giddy as children given permission to camp in the backyard. Andy was wishing that he had it in him to be more magnanimous, and that he could be happy because they were happy, when he noticed Brook and Ferrell's unlit figures at the end of the dock. They walked hand-in-hand. Then, Brook got down on one knee and took a ring box from the pocket of his shorts. He cracked open the box like an oyster so Ferrell could see the diamond in the cloud-shrouded light of the moon. "Come here a second," Andy said to Meg. She came from the kitchen carrying a dish towel and hugged his arm as she so often did when they stood beside each other.

“Did you know about this?” she whispered, as if Brook and Ferrell might hear them.

“Not a clue.”

Brook should have rushed to his feet to embrace Ferrell by now, but they were having a conversation, when only one word from her was required. She had her hands on her hips. That was a terrible sign. Then she turned her back to him. An even worse sign. She raised her voice at him. They could not hear her, but the big, spastic gestures she was making gave her away. When Brook could no longer bear kneeling, he sat back and rested the ring box between his feet. Ferrell paced to the end of the dock. Something had to happen. One of them had to move or speak. “What’s going on?” Meg whispered. Andy shrugged. They waited. Boats motored by. Ferrell, without acknowledging Brook, strode past him. He let her have a head start back to the condo. Halfway there, she broke into a jog. The ring went back in Brook’s pocket, and, after a while, he stood and followed.

Ferrell’s sandals pounded up the stairs. The door crashed into the wall when she came in. “I’m supposed to marry him so we can move to Memphis.” She was gasping for breath.

“Why would you move to Memphis?” Meg asked. She had taken three large steps into the center of the room so Ferrell would not know they had been watching.

“Oh, he’s taken a job there. A fabulous, once-in-a-lifetime job. We’re going to get a house. Apparently, it will be just like the ones they show in Fran’s old issues of *Southern Living*. So I’ve been told. Our own little Graceland.” She snatched the car

keys from the kitchen counter. “I’ll be back later.” She left without shutting the door. Meg rushed after her, calling her name and begging her to wait.

*iv*

The two of them, sullen and mute, sat in the living room, Andy angled into a corner of the sofa and Brook just below him on the floor. They were both not watching the baseball game Brook had turned on, even though the Twins, Andy’s team, were playing. It was the top of the twelfth inning, tied at four. The teams had no one left in their bullpens but their most volatile arms, guys who could effortlessly clock one-hundred on the gun, but tended to rifle the ball over the catcher’s head in pressure situations. Andy did not care if the Twins won the game. For the time being, he did not care if they ever won a game again. Another pitcher sauntered toward the mound from the bullpen, and the announcers kept up a dimwitted banter about it being past everyone’s bedtime as the cameraman panned the few remaining fans until he found an obese man asleep in his seat.

A trivia question popped onto the screen. It was too easy. Someone less steeped in Twins history would have said *a*, Johann Santana, but that was wrong. The answer was *d*, Black Jack MacDowell. Andy and Brook liked to place empty bets on these trivia questions. Neither of them was ever interested in taking the other’s money, though. Each of them only wanted a moment of superficial triumph over the other. The prospect of knowing something the other did not was remarkably potent. A couple of nights ago, they had heatedly debated who was the last batter David Cone faced in his perfect game and who recorded the final out. Just because David Cone was from Kansas City, Brook considered himself an expert on his career, but Andy had been right on both counts. To

secure some semblance of victory for himself, Brook yelled for Lew to come out of the den and decide who did the better imitation of David Cone's pitching motion. This was something Brook had a true talent for. He could do a flawless Dennis Eckersley and an equally flawless Nolan Ryan. Together, he and Andy could do a crowd-pleasing reenactment of Ryan beating the living shit out of Robin Ventura. What he was better at, though, was batting routines: Jeff Bagwell, Barry Bonds, Nomar Garciaparra, Ken Griffey, Jr. But, like a seasoned, impartial parent, Lew refused to choose one over the other, which both pleased and unsettled Andy. It pleased him that Lew denied Brook an inconsequential victory, but unsettled him because Brook truly was the better mimic. Seeing him do his well-studied impressions always raised a question: how was anyone supposed to know when Brook was genuinely disconnected from everything around him and when it was a put-on, a guise so he could covertly carry out his keen observations? Often when they watched a game, Andy suspected Brook was mulling over a set of blood tests or an MRI he had studied earlier in the day, but, without warning, he would pipe up to make a trenchant observation ("They should be playing him shallow and shading him to the left.") only someone single-mindedly engaged with the intricacies of the game could make. Right now, Andy could not make out which it was. Given the events of the night so far, Brook's sheer lack of concern was incredible. He dragged the deck of cards from off the top of the coffee table and shuffled them so loudly that the pffft-fftt-fftt of the cards falling in on one another silenced the announcers calling the game. He shuffled the deck again and again, relishing the sound, then dealt himself a hugely ironic hand of solitaire across the carpet.

He was capable of silent, subtle wit like that. However, he was just playing cards because the deck had been handy and it was something to do, Andy thought. When Brook's attention was not diverted by a 3-2 count with runners in scoring position, he earnestly turned through the cards three at a time, setting a six of clubs below a seven of hearts, a jack of diamonds below a queen of spades. Soon he reached a dead end. He turned twice through the remaining cards but had no moves to make. From his place on the sofa, Andy noticed a three of spades that could have been slid over a four of hearts. Brook did not see it, and after cocking his head to analyze the staggered strands of cards—black-red, red-black—he dashed them with a slow swipe of his arm, gathered them into a neat stack, and started the endless task of shuffling the deck.

In the pocket of his shorts, Andy's phone whirred. "Hello," he said. Hello, hello, hello? Meg? Hello? Margaret! It was her number displayed on the phone when he answered. She was somewhere loud, cacophonous, consumed by a propulsive bass beat, and there were shouts of revelry devoid of inhibition. Some were distant, others were as close as if a stranger had snatched Meg's phone from her hand and screamed into it. Meg's yelling voice cut through the din. He heard parts of words and ends of sentences. They came at him in staccato, static-heavy snatches. They had been at that place...the bar...at mile-marker...three guys...Ferrell...buying drinks...Ferrell...asked us if we wanted to...I couldn't let her...in their boat...east maybe... He had to come get them, Meg said, or Ferrell was going to do something.

"What do you mean?" Andy asked.

She's going to do something...

“The boat keys, where are they?” Ferrell had taken the car. If he was going to get them, the boat was the only way. Andy started opening drawers and cabinets looking for the keys.

“That first drawer there. Spare set’s in an envelope.” Andy had only driven a boat once before, but that had been a stately, patrician sailboat out on Lake Michigan with the anchor girl and her father, and her father had been doing most of the work. All Andy had done was turn a crank when he was told to. “Hang on,” Brook said, getting to his feet.

Andy coldly told him to stay where he was.

Meg’s garbled directions made no sense to him. He steered the boat close to the shore. He did not know what he was supposed to be looking for. He killed the motor and let the boat glide over the lake’s lazy, undulating surface. If he blocked out the licking sound of water against the sides of the boat, he could hear a low subterranean pounding. He followed it. He guided the boat down along the shore, to a throng of boats—dozens of them—tethered together to form a listing, uneven dance floor. The moon gleamed weakly overhead, but its light was enough to illuminate the dark, rainbowed ribbons of spilled gasoline suspended in the water. A different grinding, relentless beat pounded from each boat. Bodies flailed and writhed in unison. One lurched, they all lurched, and the boats lurched with them. The moon, filtered through a screen of thin stretched clouds, was not enough to see by. There was a row of tiki torches stabbed crookedly into the rocky beach. They burned a fading, burnished gold and were as useless as the moon.

Everyone was equally beautiful and equally grotesque. You came here to be no one, just a body. You came to touch and be touched. All the bodies together made a

ravenous, seizing animal. He did not want to go near it. If he did, he might not make it back to the yellow papered bedroom he was to share with Meg. He would not get to sleep in the bed with the white wicker headboard that crackled whenever either of them moved, or see her seated at the matching white wicker vanity as she pulled her hair back into a frizzy ponytail. The frat parties from college, those were quaint and prudish compared to whatever this was, a floating rave or a makeshift hell tucked into a cool inlet of black, lapping water. He tied the boat to a rusting pontoon and went where the biggest crowds were, on the decks of two forty-foot motor yachts.

To get there, he had to climb from boat to boat to boat. Around him, boys' bulging, drugged out eyes shined in the night. The faces of girls who woke in the morning fresh and pretty had turned macabre. Half of them were topless. Orange pin pricks of light, the smoldering ends of lit cigarettes, formed low constellations that shifted, died, then reappeared. The stench of pot was heavy in the air and when, by amazing coincidence, the loudest stereos went simultaneously silent, Andy first heard someone he could not see vomit over the side of the boat into the water, then a girl's distant climactic moan from within an unknown cabin. Further out on the water, a police boat cruised by. Tonight, nothing going on here interested them.

On the deck of the nearer yacht, a dancing body near the cabin moved, revealing a bobbing swatch of yellow. Against the bleak, writhing night it was the only color. It was the top of Ferrell's canary yellow bikini, and it glowed in the dark. He glimpsed it only by chance. He had been focused in a different direction, on a circle of girls pounding shots at the encouragement of some harassing boys, but his eye had picked up a brightness like a lit match. She was the same as the others: brainwashed, haggard, high.

A swarm of tanned, drunken college boys closed briefly around her. There was the yellow again. Then there she was, from head to toe. Her mouth hung dumbly open, left that way after a long-expired moment of ecstasy. She had her back against some clichéd campus man-child, shirtless, oversexed, and cognitively underdeveloped, his grubby, tattered cargo shorts drooping below the waistband of his plaid boxer shorts, a fake set of dog tags hanging from a chain around his neck, a filthy ball cap, its bill bent into a long dark tunnel, planted backwards on his head. His name was probably Dustin or Cody or Tyler. She moved her hips against his in careful, sensual, tight figure eights as her arms twirled over her head in the stylized motions of a belly dancer. He clamped a hand, a paw with dirt under the fingernails, over her breast. The other snaked around her thigh. He cranked her head around to kiss her.

Later, Andy would not be able to recall what he said when he reached her. It was something dumb and derivative, along the lines of, “the fun’s over.” He said it with the un-ironic, gruff authority of an officer on a bad cop drama. He had brought her arms down behind her like that same idiot cop, as if he were going to cuff her and pack her into a patrol car. She was startled, not, he thought, by his appearance, but by how quickly he had come, and it gave him the peculiar sense that she had been waiting for him. She let him lead her away.

There was nowhere to move. He pointed her in the direction of where he thought he had tied the boat. His grip on her small bicep was so tight that his fingers ached. Her legs got tangled in his because she kept twisting around, checking over her shoulder for something, to make sure it was still within sight. Andy thought it was that boy. She was vain enough that she had to know if he had replaced her with the first girl he could get his



hands on. Andy glanced back and saw another burst of color, bright like a hallucination. It was an orange flare in the sordid darkness. Meg. She had been wearing that melon orange cover-up over her swimsuit the whole summer. (Was that what she had on when she raced out after Ferrell?) She was far back, threading her way toward them, but rather than come closer, she seemed to recede into the mayhem. She saw Andy, held his stare and tried to tell him something that he, as preoccupied as he was, could not begin to decode. He had forgotten her. She had to have been nearby, but he had never seen her.

v

Steadied against the white dresser, Andy kicked off his flip-flops. They were sticky, and the places between his toes were sticky. It was beer or piss or puke. Maybe a revolting combination of the three. He needed a shower. He needed Meg to get in the shower with him and scrub him clean. He wanted to be close to her after she bathed and slathered her arms and legs in peach-scented lotion. On the bed, she unclasped her bracelets and her necklace, then took the dangling silver earrings from her earlobes. She set them on the glass-topped nightstand. Her eyes and her face went suddenly blank. She just sat with her hands in her lap. Slowly, she tipped over onto her pillow. “So that was fairly awful, wasn’t it?” she said, finally.

“Fairly,” he echoed. He stooped to see himself in the vanity’s mirror. He looked like a refugee or something, a prisoner in his first days at a death camp. He rubbed his hand over that ugly stubble of his, patchy yellow spikes that felt like wires. His eyes were as bloodshot as if he had been drinking. “The thing is, that was normal, if you can believe it. That was vintage Ferrell Nash. It’s almost like performance art with her.”

Meg turned her face into the pillow and let out a scream.

“How’d that feel?” Andy asked, genuinely curious.

“Not bad.”

“Do it again, for me.”

“No, you come here.” She patted the pillow besides hers. “Try it yourself. It’s better that way. It’s the cheapest, easiest therapy around.”

He could have gone around to his side of the bed, but he tried to be cute and crawl across her. He yelped and cursed. He had tweaked his calf muscle getting into the boat, and here he had done it again, only this time the pain was twice as agonizing. Meg massaged his calf and, in sarcastic baby talk, told him it would be okay.

“Here it goes,” he said, once the pain subsided. “Count of three. You and me together.” They both brought their pillows to their faces and screamed, and the screams became laughter, but they were cut short by Ferrell, who stood at the foot of the bed in a lavender nightgown.

“You need to get out,” she said to Andy, treating him like a nuisance interloper who should have known better. “I’m not sharing a bed with him.” She pointed behind her at Brook, though he was nowhere to be seen.

“There’s a couch,” Andy replied.

“I can’t sleep on couches.” She may as well have said that sleeping on couches was for serfs and plebes, not someone of her obvious elevated stature.

“I’ve seen you sleep on a couch,” he countered.

“Not that one. My butt slides down between the cushions.”

Brook appeared in the bathroom doorway. The two bedrooms shared an adjoining bathroom. It reminded Andy of *The Brady Bunch*, Peter and Jan fighting over

whose turn it was to brush their teeth. “Can I talk to you, please?” Brook asked. There was an appalling arrogance to his stance in the doorway and in the little smirk he kept failing to suppress. Andy could have slugged him for it.

“Sure. Talk away.” Ferrell sat at the foot of the bed and crossed one knee over the other in an exaggerated display of primness.

“I mean in here. Alone.”

“No.”

“Just go,” Andy groaned. “Let the man say what he wants to say. Jesus, it’s almost one in the morning. Talk so we can go to bed already.” He wanted out and made a move for the hallway, but Ferrell ordered him to stay where he was, Meg too. There was no reason for him and Meg to be in the room, other than the theatricality of Ferrell demanding that they stay. He flattened his back against the wall and fixed his eyes on the ceiling.

“I know what you’re thinking.” Brook was at his most contrite. “It was sudden, and the logistics were wrong. A rickety old boat dock was stupid. I should have gotten that table, the one you by the windows you always request at J.J.’s.”

Ferrell responded in a brutal monotone. “That’s nowhere close to what I was thinking.” She shook her head and, addressing Andy, said, “I should have done it, shouldn’t I? I could be on a beach in Maryland, some chic restaurant in Georgetown. At an embassy party in an evening gown.”

“What are you talking about?” Brook contorted his face into a cartoonish, quizzical expression.

“Andy knows.”

“What is she talking about?” Brook asked him.

“That was my chance, and I blew it.” Ferrell was up off the bed and meandering around the room. “I think and I think and I think and I want to do the right thing, so I tell him no. That night, though, there I was in bed, faithful as ever, ready for you when you got home, and you didn’t know where I’d been, who I’d seen, what I’d said or thought or anything.”

Brook was utterly baffled. Meg was too. “Ferrell!” she said as soon as she had pieced together what Ferrell was trying to tell him.

“Quit looking so dour and disappointed, Meg. I thought I could count on you. I thought the Getaway Girl was more progressive than that. Nude beaches in the south of France. Sex in the business class lavatory.”

Meg was ready to reply, but Brook did not give her the chance. “Who are you talking about?” He was still more entertained than unnerved.

“You would have liked him,” Ferrell said, her chin proudly raised. “I could always imagine the two of you playing golf together, riding side-by-side in the cart.”

Brook quizzed Andy. “This makes sense to you?” For the first time, he seemed mildly perturbed, more, though, with Andy than Ferrell.

“I’m not saying anything.” Andy turned his face into the wall.

“It’s so lame, Meg, like something out of one of your articles. It’s a cruel thing you do, making everyone else’s life seem so pedestrian, so mundane. I got it in my head that I had to have my own little version of ‘Summer Sizzle in the Southern Hemisphere.’”

“Whatever you’ve done, I don’t care,” Brook said.

“Why?” Ferrell pressed. “Why don’t you care?”

“Because it was an impulse, and you have a well-known history of not being able to control your impulses. Tonight, I took you by surprise, and you acted out because that’s been the pattern since you were a girl, and—”

“Wow. Who knew you’d made the leap from oncology to psychology?” Ferrell laughed. “Not that you would have told me, anyway.”

“I’m being understanding. An adult.” He was offering instant forgiveness, and he was pleased with his gesture. He had that self-satisfied gift-giving face: *look what I’ve gotten for you! I love it, and because I love it, you’ll love it, too!*

“Here’s what I did tonight when I was ‘acting out’—”

“I said I don’t want to know. It means nothing. It’s over. I love you too much to be angry.”

“That’s the stupidest thing you’ve ever said. I let a Neanderthal jerk touch me and kiss me, but you don’t care?”

Brook was typically self-assured, analytical, and proscriptive, none of which were appropriate for the circumstances. “Come in here,” he said to Ferrell. He’d fallen back on his soothing bedside manner. “You’re tired. We can start over in the morning when your mind is clear and you’ve had a chance to rest.”

Brook was failing but did not know it yet. Andy did not want to see it or feel it. He would have preferred to be told about it much, much later. Andy was embarrassed for him. Ferrell, in his eyes, was unchanging. To him, she still had a dizzying, adolescent crush on him. That was all he needed from her, and that was all he believed she was capable of giving.

“I hate to tell you this because I know it’s going to be blow to your ego, but in a marriage, you would be a disaster, an absolute disaster. Somehow you have no clue how it is supposed to work. If you did, you wouldn’t be spewing such warped nonsense at me, or— ” Ferrell paused and drew in a long, slow breath. Her voice moderated. It became almost tender and searching. “Have you ever just sat back and watched your parents?” she asked, her big eyes pleading for him to grasp her point.

Andy held his breath, waiting for Brook to answer.

“Why would I do that?”

*vi*

Brook slept face first on the bedspread. With his arms dangling over either side of the bed and his legs splayed apart, he looked like a dead man. He was snoring. The growl from deep in his throat built to a crescendo but was suddenly cut off, only to resume a few minutes later. Andy did not get how Brook, who had been rejected and derided, could sleep deeply and dreamlessly. It was a doctor thing. Andy was willing to grant him that. To an extent. As important as reading symptoms and designing courses of treatment was the ability to pack a full night’s sleep into a half hour spent curled on a cot, either in the doctor’s lounge or an unused exam room. There was something else to it, though, an elemental part of Brook’s often exhausting Brookishness that could never be changed. Some things he could just not be bothered with. Unless it was a literal matter of life and death, he did not need to be involved. It was a personalized, specialized type of elitism but not an intentional one, and that was part of what made it so maddening. Ask Brook if he thought himself better than anyone else, and he say no. He would answer without hesitation, and he would mean it. He believed completely in that

laudable notion of Christian equality, yet there was always that elitism laced with presumptuousness. He presumed to know Ferrell better than she knew herself, and it came off so damned paternal.

Andy realized he was talking to Brook under his breath. He raged at him from the chair he had pulled up close to the bed. He had his feet up on the mattress and kicked it with his heel as hard as he could. It shook, but Brook did not move. He began tallying up the things he knew about Ferrell that Brook did not. The rage went all the way back to Brook being the only one Jill chose to have beside her. For that, it was just and right that Andy should know Ferrell better than he did. After all she had said to excoriate him, Brook still did not believe that she could want someone other than him. With absolute certainty, Brook had diagnosed it as a whim, a temporary obsession she would let go of as soon as another whim, one just as ephemeral, came along to replace it. Tonight, maybe even for a day, he could indulge her, but then he would expect her to come back to her senses, put his ring on her finger and get down to the business of planning a wedding and moving to Memphis. The wedding must have been his way of blunting the news about Memphis. (At least, Andy conceded, he was aware enough to know he would be blindsiding her.) It was a savvy, but demeaning, attempt at misdirection. She would be too obsessed with all the details, none of which he would give two shits about, to digest the reality that she was leaving her job, her students, her lacrosse team, Lew and Frannie, the Plaza, Loose Park in springtime, the house that she loved. The archetypal, ritualized pageantry of a wedding was the sort of thing that should have appealed to her, and likely it did. No doubt there had been a time when, regardless of whether she felt about Brook as she did now, she would have said yes anyway and, on the spot, started to recite

everything she just had to have, from the flowers spilling over the altar to the specific whiteness of her dress (ivory, not eggshell), details that would make her wedding comparable to, but in so many incalculable ways, superior to the weddings of sorority sisters and Pembroke classmates she read about in the back pages of the *Star's* Sunday Arts section. She would have made it as much of a coronation as a wedding, crowning herself a woman on pace with her peers to achieve the same milestones of womanhood as her mother, even if that mother was Grier Nash.

You think she's kidding, she's being a fickle little airhead, Andy was saying. A rasping noise, one that resembled Brook's snoring, not words, came out of his mouth. You have no idea what has happened. Not until you are driving by yourself to Memphis, unpacking boxes by yourself, sleeping alone in your bed in a strange house. Knowing you, you probably won't understand until you come back for Christmas and, on the twenty-fourth, as all the stores are closing and you're on a mission for a gift, any gift, for Fran, you pass a restaurant and see a man help Ferrell from her fur-lined coat as they sit at their table. She'll have that special holiday radiance some women get, especially when they dress themselves in the brightest, most festive shade of Christmas red. In her case it will be something like an elegant, expensive shawl, cashmere, beautifully fringed, folded into a triangle and wrapped about her shoulders. The sight of her will stir you up like it always did. Not that you'd admit it now. You never would. If you, thick-headed as you are, are ever going to understand, that's what it's going to take, incontrovertible evidence. When it happens, I hope it burns you through, kills you for a while, and keeps you awake the way I'm awake.



Remember that girl, the redhead, the one from Dallas who absolutely looked like she was from Dallas, the total opposite of the waifish microbiology majors you thought you should want? You never wanted me to know when you'd been with her, but it was so obvious, plastered on your face, this dysfunctional mix of shame and satisfaction when you'd come in after midnight, dead tired from those bogus hours at the library. You couldn't keep it up though. What'd it last? Six weeks? Two months? I was supposed to think you were a frigging monk. (You and Jill both had these puritanical eccentricities. With her, they would surface at the weirdest times. Did you know that? I bet not. It does not seem like the sort of thing a man would want to know about his sister.) You were never going to tell me, and I never would have found out, except I saw you in the shadows of Marvin Grove one night on my way back from intramural basketball. That crap team we were on—we'd lost our sixth game in a row, 63-48. You were supposed to play, but you said you had an Anatomy test in the morning. (Very funny, by the way.) And, besides, your stomach didn't feel so good. I just about died from playing twice as many minutes as usual because, thanks to you, we had no bench. You were trapped in the headlights of a car as it swung around the traffic circle in front of the Chi O house. Dallas girl was laughing, and I thought, "Good for him." It made you human, though I'm not sure you've ever been that interested in being human. You've got that doctor's God complex, which maybe you've got to have to be worth a damn. Like you and God are a tag-team. I don't know how it works. Does it get taught to you, or does it come instinctively? With you, it's probably all instinct. We'll slide you into the trinity and have a nice, neat quadrilateral.

You know what I think? She was a little too much like Ferrell, who you'd spent most of your life tolerating, but loathing because she, the shameless extrovert, was always in your face. So you ended it. That's the kind of armchair psychology you get at—Andy checked the clock on the bedside table—almost four in the morning. I'm right, though, aren't I? I bet I'm also right that you fell in love with Ferrell's grief more than you ever fell in love with Ferrell. You fell in love with her grief and the idea that she was a piece of the familiar life Jill took away from you and the rest of us. Jill left you feeling weak and ineffectual, but Ferrell could fix that because year after year after year, the more you spurned her and condescended to her the more she adored you. (Why? I have no idea. If she is nothing else, she is loyal to her feelings.) You could depend on her. I'm not saying that you don't love her now or that you never loved her. It's just a small love that you keep boxed up. You can control it and it never surprises you. If you were doing it right, it would surprise you. You're capable of it because, from what you've said and what I've seen, you feel something like it for those kids who come to you sick and scared, and—

He stopped. He could have gone on, but, instead, he stopped and passed what seemed like a long time forcing himself to sympathize with Brook. He ended up in the spot where he always ended up when he was maddest at him: worn out and envious of Brook's incorruptibility, the quality that had angered him in the first place. Andy rose from the chair and limped to the window. The pain in his calf was sharp, like someone had hold of his muscle and was wringing it out, squeezing it like a sopping towel. The clouds had rolled on, and the moon, full and bright over the lake, was doubled in the still water. The moonlight through the window was strong enough for him to find his way to

the bathroom. Ferrell and Meg had showered before going to bed, and the bathroom had the wonderful, transient, floral scent of a clean woman. He had not showered and still had the terrible party stench on him, in his clothes and in his pores. The door from the bathroom to the yellow room was ajar. He stared back at Brook through the open door into the blue room. On the bedspread, around his mouth, was a dark, undignified spot of drool. Then, Andy peered into the yellow room where he should have been, asleep with his face in the frizzed nest of Meg's hair. Ferrell, sweet and innocent, was in his place. She lay curled in close to Meg. They were breathing in time to the same lethargic rhythm.

### 13. OPEN HOUSE

As was always the case in Loose Park on weekends, the dogs—labs and retrievers mostly—were out in force, bounding after Frisbees and chasing after daredevil butterflies, though Frannie and Meg were lovesick for an orangey brown chow puppy that walked with a funny waddling gait. Only the three of them had come to the park. Brook and Lew were in Memphis to find Brook a house and have drinks in the Peabody's lounge with the med school crony of Lew's, the one who flew in for the retirement party, shot the bull with Brook over gin and tonics, and walked away convinced he had met the brightest young star in pediatric oncology. As for Ferrell, Andy did not have a clue where she was. He had not seen her since they got back from the apocalyptic Lake trip. She and Brook were too scared to break the news to Frannie and Lew. They believed—and why wouldn't they—that Ferrell was moving to Memphis too. Brook had fed them a

sketchily detailed crock of bullshit explaining why she wasn't going along to look at houses, which they had bought, no questions asked. In Andy's opinion, the tenth grade subterfuge was stupid, so he'd stuck his nose into it to make his point, busted Brook for being an insecure wuss, and was told in the politest way imaginable to, as Brook put it, "please fuck the hell off." Andy had laughed in his face, and gone off to his room, laughing. It had earned him an empty parental threat that was just as funny: "I'm serious, Andrew!"

As of now, Andy was officially done concerning himself with their drama, which, because it involved Brook, was going to be made as undramatic as possible. And that's what this was about: Brook not wanting to be wrong. Breaking from Ferrell meant he had made a seven year mistake and for Brook, ordering the apple cobbler for dessert when he should have gotten the tiramisu was the limit when it came to mistakes he allowed himself to make. Today Andy was totally into being in the park and committed to temporarily forgetting the both of them.

The afternoon was warm, but not stifling because a breeze out of the north was giving them a break from the mid-summer torpor. It was, by any standard, a day perfect for a picnic. Frannie had chosen a grassy spot in a clearing where they had an unobstructed view of the frolicking chow and the constant parade of joggers and of babies being pushed in padded, canopied strollers.

"Janet says she has a really good feeling about the Treadways," Frannie said, sounding like she did not want to believe her. She helped Meg unpack the picnic basket. It was a forgotten wedding present from a beloved aunt of Lew's. Frannie had discovered it in a corner of the closet in Andy's old room when she had cleaned it out at

Janet Kelsey's request. They had packed it with cheeses and crackers, a Caesar salad, pesto slathered sandwiches on crusty French bread, a bottle of sparkling grape juice, a jar of Greek olives, and three slabs of double chocolate brownie, ones left over from the batch Frannie had made for Brook and Lew to eat on the plane to Memphis. "She called it her realtor's intuition. She says they're such a dynamic couple—a perfect fit—and she would be shocked if they didn't come to the open house this afternoon and make an offer by the end of the day. If not today, then tomorrow."

Andy pitied the Treadways. They were going to get it with both barrels from Janet Kelsey, a full court press the likes of which neither of them had ever experienced. They could be there now, smoothing their hands along the chair rails, gazing up at the coffered ceiling in the dining room like it was a starry night sky, imagining their clothes in the closets, their racks of favorite Napa wine on the counter, and finding it harder and harder to remain emotionally neutral so Janet Kelsey would not have reason to believe she had reeled them in. Sitting cross-legged on the checkered blanket, Andy imagined Janet Kelsey eroding the Treadway's defenses by introducing a villain. If he knew her at all, and, if nothing else, she had the diabolical craftiness of a born seller in spades, she was pitting them against some imaginary, much more stylish couple ready to top any offer they made, and Mrs. Treadway was ready to pull her husband aside for a private moment of strategizing that was really just a discussion of how best to surrender.

"You know what?" Frannie asked rhetorically. "Last night, before we went to bed, Lew and I were talking about what a kick we get out of having you kids around the pool on the weekends and in the evenings. For a second today, I wanted to say to Janet,

‘Janet, take your FOR SALE with that silly picture of you out of the grass and leave us alone!’”

Andy didn’t say anything. If he did, he could not keep it from being caustic and accusatory, something along the lines of, “If you seriously feel this way, why’d you ever put it up for sale in the first place?” There was no need for him to speak because if Frannie was paying close enough attention, she would realize his silence was just as caustic and accusatory as the words he did not dare say out loud.

“Janet also told me Dallas Leigh is quite a bit younger than Jim,” Frannie went on. Despite having never met them, she was on a first name basis with the Treadways. She was, however, highly dubious of the name Dallas Leigh. It was so pageanty, she kept saying. And she’s not from Texas! In another context, she would have found her to be delightful because Frannie found most everyone, with the exception of Candace Sizemore, delightful. “She thinks maybe twelve or fifteen years younger. And she was walking them through the bedrooms, telling them how fantastic they would be for children because they’re so bright and because of the window seats, but they said they weren’t planning on children. I can’t imagine...” She did not let herself finish describing what it was she could not imagine, but it was no mystery. At least not to Andy. “He does, though, have a grown daughter out in California trying to be an actress. I suppose they could have grandchildren, but then they’d only be visiting, and the daughter will be focused on her career for at least the next few years.”

Frannie was gripped with worry. Selling the house was no longer an abstract concept, but an imminent event. It had become like a dentist appointment scheduled months in the past that had been buried in the pages of a datebook and largely ignored,

but now it was the day after tomorrow and the thought of having a bright overhead light in her eyes, a bib chained around her neck, and a hygienist prodding at her gums was getting in the way of her daily routine. She let out a dramatic sigh full of doubt and anxiety and shame over letting the near mythic Treadways affect her so. Thanks to Janet Kelsey, in the nine short days since their first visit to the house, they had been fully and seamlessly integrated into everyone's lives. They had become, to Frannie's chagrin, her favorite topic of conversation. Frequently, she had interrupted her thoughts on another topic, for example, Mimi and Burt Lehman's bad experience with a waitress at a new Plaza restaurant, to interject a fresh burst of Treadway speculation. Would they keep the paneling in the den? Would their furniture match the woodwork? She could not stop herself.

"Show me the roses, Fran," Meg said. She had been nibbling complacently at a brownie, the rest of which she popped in her mouth as she sprang to her feet. She pulled Frannie up from the blanket and off they went, abandoning what remained of their lunch.

Andy spread his legs out on the blanket and, while watching them start toward the rose garden, he fished three more olives from the small-mouthed jar. Meg and Frannie linked arms. Meg stooped so that their heads almost touched. They were deep in consultation. Frannie was telling her about the ruby ring she was wearing around her right hand. She held her hand up to the sun and wiggled her fingers so Meg, in total wonderment, could study its perfect redness and listen to the story of how Lew had hidden the ring under her pillow on an anniversary fifteen years ago.

The breeze rippled the hem of Meg's flowing sundress and animated her hair. Over the course of the summer, it had grown long, hanging past her shoulders in loose,



natural kinks. Some mornings, before getting out of bed, Andy carefully drew a small section of it away from where it rested against her back to study its thickness and shine and to wind it round his finger like thread on a spool. Beneath it, the sundress tied in a large bow with ends that trailed down her back, almost to her waist. He wanted to undo the bow, he realized. It was too ostentatious a thing not to want to touch it. She had cinched it tight while standing at the bathroom mirror, where he, from the bed, could see her deftly manipulate the two ends. Lately, he had a spousal indifference to her body, which he regarded as something of a triumph. At last he had evolved, and he rather liked himself for it. He appreciated—and was satisfied with—the safe and simple intimacy of her stroking the branching veins along the inside of his wrist whenever they held hands. Dusting the bread crumbs from his shorts, he jogged after Meg and Frannie and snared them each in a one armed hug about the neck when he caught up to them. They both let out a startled, laughing gasp as he planted a kiss on Meg's cheek, then one on Frannie's.

The rose beds formed a large elegant circle crossed by two paved paths that met in the center at a fountain spraying a weak plume of water into the air. Around them was a ring of pergolas arranged like dominoes. The garden was empty. A wedding, a success judging by the applause that had carried over to where they had spread the picnic blanket, was over. The guests were at the reception. The bride and groom had been whisked away in a stretch limo, but the white wooden folding chairs, exactly one hundred of them, remained in neat rows of ten.

Andy's phone let out its plea for attention, a loud electronic trilling noise in the middle of Frannie's horticulture lesson on the garden's 150 varieties of roses. He would take the call, find out who it was, and why anyone would want to bother him on a

glorious summer Saturday, then return to plotting out how he might go about luring Meg behind a vine-shrouded pergola to satisfy himself with a taste of her mouth, no matter how brief. The romance of the bunched scarlet blooms covering the bushes and Meg—everything about her from the flowing jade green sundress to her auburn hair made dazzling by the sun, to the gentle cupping of a flower in her hands when she lowered her face into the heart of its fragrance—produced a dull, agonized hurt in his muscles. She was in a dreamily enchanted state and would agree to this one little breach of their unspoken contract. They had been so good, scrupulously, almost fanatically, adhering to it since Easter. Of course, there were kisses hello and goodbye, good morning and good night, split second, barely felt things that, if he was not careful, made him susceptible to wanting more. But he accepted them for what they were, a key bit of stage direction in their domestic playacting.

Brook was calling, and before he said a thing, Andy could tell he was in a hospital, not the hushed corridors of a children's hospital cancer wing, but a chaotic emergency room. They'd jacked up the rental car, Andy thought, gotten in one of their little scuffles about what lane to be in or what exit to take, and caused a fender bender. One of them had a sprained wrist or had his wind knocked out by an inflated airbag. Something going wrong with Lew's heart did not cross Andy's mind, but that's what it was. Acute myocardial infarction, as Brook insisted on calling it. An occluded coronary artery. There was ischemia involved, whatever that was, and unstable macrophages.

"So what are they going to do?" Andy asked. Sweat under his arms trickled down his sides into the waistband of his shorts.

"Nothing. There's nothing for anyone to do."

Nothing only meant one thing. Nothing meant dead. Lew was dead, and always would be from now on. Brook went through a whole med school lecture on the intricate functionality of the heart before he got around to explaining what had happened. The heart attack had come on in the newly re-floored kitchen of a four bedroom, three and a half bath, plantation-style house in Germantown. The realtor had taken Brook upstairs to tour the bedrooms. Alone in the master bedroom closet, he had heard a noise, one he assumed was the screen door to the patio being forced into place, but when he returned to the kitchen he discovered his father on the floor, beneath a light fixture suspended over the spot where a table and chairs would be arranged. Once he stopped using all of his special, incomprehensible doctor words as a crutch, Brook's sometimes detached, sometimes quavering account sucked all the noise from the park, turning it suddenly into a creepy, pantomimed tableaux of carefree fun and relaxation. Meg and Frannie were no more than five feet away, but Andy could not hear them. Their lips moved but produced no words. Under Frannie's guidance, Meg buried her nose in an open bloom while Frannie caressed the silken petals of a different blush-colored rose. Drunk on the scent of the one rose, Meg sampled the other. Its smell brought a dazed and rapturous look to her face. She was, without question, at her most winsome and desirable. The longer Brook talked, the more sadly inured Andy became to the fact that nothing would come of her looking the way she did or the ache he felt.

Brook's monologue went on but turned increasingly fretful. He was concerned for Frannie and how she was going to handle the grim planning of events that would have to be set in motion before he came back. Brook sold her short. He (and Jill, too) had a

weird blind spot when it came to her. He bought into the Junior League-Friends of the Museum daintiness that made up only a fraction of who she was.

“She’ll be alright.” Andy believed this wholeheartedly, but it still sounded like wishful thinking. “I’m here if she needs anything.” Brook responded with an odd noise. It may have been part of a word, but it may not have been. Whatever it was, it was enough to let Andy know that this was a pretty dubious claim for him to make, like Brook wouldn’t trust him with a pet hamster, let alone his mother.

The initial lightheadedness, that surreal balloony feeling Andy had gotten listening to Brook at first, had disappeared. A man was supposed to project a grave assuredness and sensitivity right now. He had learned that from Lew, actually, who had put on an unforgettable master-class. When Lew hunkered down beside him in the tight space between Andy’s bed and the wall he escaped to after leaving Jill’s room for the last time, the place where he had decided to wait for *it* to happen, Lew put his arms around him, kissed his forehead and asked, “Is it alright if I hide back here with you for awhile? I promise not to stay too long. Unless you want me to. I’ll stay as long as you want me to.” That, Andy resolved, was going to be him today. He knew, without a doubt, the things that needed to be said to Frannie, and Meg, too, and how he was going to phrase them. The words themselves had yet to take shape, but, when he needed them, they would be ready.

Meg was first to detect an exaggerated flatness in everything he said into the phone. He had been careful to stick to either inflected monosyllables or neutral questions that could have been about anything. They were supposed to make him sound unbothered, but he could not quite pull it off. They succeeded only in drawing Meg’s

attention because he sounded so obviously stilted, like a bad actor on stage before his first live audience. She kept glancing at him for a sign, a clue as to what he knew that she did not, until, finally, Andy turned his back on her. He was not ready yet.

The soundtrack of the park—creaking swing chains, dog barks, and the bounce-bounce of short lived rallies on the tennis courts—returned, and he heard Meg ask Frannie, “Now, what’s this one, again?” Her voice had become afflicted with a sugary sweetness. She was playing along, keeping Frannie occupied. There were only so many more moments left for Frannie to be who she was right now, and they were going to let her have them all.

Right then, Brook said, “I need to speak to Mother.”

Andy went to her and steered her away from the roses, “Brook needs to speak to you.”

She took the phone from him, and before she had it securely near her ear, began asking, “How are you liking Memphis?” with a mother’s uniquely cloying enthusiasm.

Andy knew when she knew because her face went slack, and to keep tears away for as long as possible, she twisted and squished it into an awful, unrecognizable thing. Like someone was judging her grasp of manners and decorum, Frannie sat delicately on a chair at the end of the front row of seats set up for the wedding. It was a seat that must have belonged to someone in the bride’s family, a grandmother, perhaps, or a very special aunt. Her conversation with Brook had ended, but she held Andy’s folded phone to her cheek. Meg mimicked her. She too sat on a chair in the front row, the one next to Frannie. She no longer needed to be told. She had figured it out for herself. Frannie positioned herself in stately repose, and Meg did the same. They were great connoisseurs

of flowers, bug life, birds, and trees. Anyone passing by would have thought so. In fact, the geometry of the flowers and that of their leaves, the intricacies and colors, their awesome perfection, such convincing evidence of the Divine, were ideal distractions. So was the pair of fat bumblebees chasing each other through the flowers. They moved so quickly, their wings were invisible.

“It is like they’re wearing striped sweaters, isn’t it?” Frannie remarked.

*ii*

Frannie kept the driver’s seat of the Audi forward and upright. The steering wheel was so close to his chest that if Andy had to slam on the brakes it would have crushed his ribs to bits, but he did not think of taking the time to adjust the seat, to slide it back a good four or five inches, which would at least have given him room to take a full breath. The car knew the way back to the house. He did little more than ride along and instinctively brake at the sight of a stop sign or yellow light. He barely even held on to the steering wheel because there had been no place to park in the shade and the leather encircling it was too hot to grip. Because he did not have to worry about driving, he was free to think of other things. He had an epiphany as the car sailed across the northbound lanes of Ward Parkway, through the divide in the grass median and, finally, the southbound lanes coursing with traffic. The only thing more amazing than the flood of disparate thoughts the mind produced on a so-called normal day were the ones it produced on abnormal days defined by shock and anguish. His fantasy of untying that bow at the back of Meg’s neck had been dashed and replaced by several hundred other things, none which struck him as the exact right thing to be thinking about right now. For example, he thought of his best black suit. He would be wearing it in the coming days,

and a button on the coat was loose and about to fall off. Then he remembered that neither he nor Meg had made the bed this morning. Often they did it together, with him performing the pivotal task of standing the shams and bolster up against the headboard, but today they had both hurried out of the bathroom, dressed and excited to go shopping for the picnic. Next time they walked in the bedroom, there would be a cold, unmade bed, and that was depressing to him. What reason was there to think of that?

All the way back to the house, he was aware of himself having an *experience*. He was aware of it before they left the park, as he passed the phone to Frannie's waiting, outstretched hand. For the next few days, every one of his actions would be recorded and saved in his memory, until decades from now when his memory waned and eventually deserted him altogether. The last time around that had not been the case. The time between Lew crouching beside him on the bedroom floor and Ferrell ripping into him outside the church with her incoherent accusations was a pristine blank. How the hell he had done it was a mystery, but he had managed something of a self-imposed, self-regulated amnesia. He had temporarily suspended his own existence. It was his most impressive and cowardly accomplishment. What was happening now was different. He was different. He had a strong appetite for every sensation, whether it was the hot steering wheel leather or the silent horror Frannie emanated beside him.

The car obediently followed the arrow-shaped signs advertising the open house that Janet Kelsey had stuck in the grass at certain strategic street corners. An awkward thing happened when they arrived home. Janet Kelsey was still there. From the park Andy made three calls: one to her, one to Ferrell, and one to the office of the big gothic church on Ward Parkway. Janet Kelsey promised she would be long gone by the time

they got back, but she was in the driveway shoos a suntanned couple toward their car. The damned Treadways right before their eyes. They were so thoroughly what Andy pictured them to be, down to his collegial v-neck sweater and sharp pressed shorts and her tightly pulled ponytail that had the skin of her forehead stretched painfully taut, he thought he had brought them to life on his own. Andy hated them with a real, murderous intensity. To feel something that baseless and poisonous at a time like this bordered on the dishonorable, he believed. It would have been alien to Lew, always so jovially pious, but Andy had no control over it. Janet Kelsey crowded the Treadways nearer to the car, all but blinding them with the glare of the sun off her gaudy, gold necklace that resembled oversized chain links. And while she did, she applied the full force of her sales pitch with a well-honed saleswoman's chutzpah: one part personal style, one part unwavering eye-contact, one part dogged pursuit of a potential buyer's wants and dreams, and one part encyclopedic recall of everything in the house from the kitchen drawer pulls to the light sockets. With great effort, she finessed them, but Treadway got the urge to walk around the side of the house to inspect the fitness of the air conditioning units and who knew what else. This emboldened Dallas Leigh, who struck off on her own to critically examine the front of the house from no fewer than five different angles. That name of hers was an uncanny fit and seemed to inform every one of her pretentiously feminine movements.

“Go around the cul-de-sac and come back,” Frannie instructed. There could be no grand and mortifying introduction to the Treadways as officiated by Janet Kelsey. None of them could have withstood it. They went so slowly by the house, the car's speed barely registered on the odometer. They passed Ferrell, who was parked in front of the



Sizemores' and scrunched down in the driver's seat like she was on a stakeout. Wendy Kraft was taking down the patriotic wreath she had hung on the door for Fourth of July. The Krafts lived on Marco Island half the year, and when they were in Mission Hills, they operated entirely outside the Van Dynes' social circle. Wendy Kraft did an uncharacteristic thing as Andy guided the car around the curve of the cul-de-sac: she waved. Not only did she wave, she waved with ebullient friendliness. *Aren't Saturdays terrific!* she seemed to be saying. No one in the car waved back. Andy was the only one to see her. Frannie's eyes had been locked on the glove compartment since they pulled away from the park.

"I think they're gone," Meg said from the backseat. They were, and Janet Kelsey was hurrying on her way. She gave them an embarrassed wave while she tried to detach the OPEN HOUSE placard from the FOR SALE sign.

With ease, the Audi rolled itself into the driveway. Ferrell rushed up to the car as fast as her un-athletic stride could get her there and fearfully looked on as Meg helped Frannie from the passenger seat and led her toward the house. They were going in through the front door, not the garage, which was Lew's domain. As soon as Andy freed himself from the seatbelt and got out of the car Ferrell seized his arm. "Fran looks *awful*," she said, as if he had not noticed, let alone witnessed, the corrosive power Brook's call had on her. "Tell me," she demanded.

Andy had only told her to meet them here, not why he wanted her to come. On the phone, she tried to be blisteringly sarcastic, and had he let her get going, they could have had themselves a decent battle. ("What am I doing right now?" She had spit his

words back at him. “I don’t know. Getting ready to set my hair on fire. How does that sound?”)

For once in her life she was going to listen to him. “Something’s happened.”

“Like what? What sort of something?”

“In Memphis.” He was matter-of-fact about it. Just two words: Lew’s gone. In the time it took for Andy to drive from Loose Park back into the heart of Mission Hills, Lew’s death had gone from a heinous joke not to be believed to an incontrovertible truth no more surprising than the color of the sky on a cloudless day like this one. Inside, in his churning gut, that’s not how Andy felt, but that’s how it came out of his mouth. He felt like he wasn’t really in control of his speech because if he were, he would have been much more of a manic idiot.

“That can’t be right,” she argued, being stiffly belligerent with him. Even about this she wanted to fight. She turned pensive and started in on a litany of reasons why he had to be mistaken. Lew was so good about taking his pills. Fran was so strict with his diet. Dr. Hong’s prognosis had been so promising. She stopped. She pinched the bridge of her nose with her thumb and forefinger and got a green, seasick look. Dropping her bulky leather purse on the driveway, she sprinted away. She reached Frannie and Meg on the stoop just in time to fling her arms around Frannie before she went into the house.

*iii*

Andy smelled an unfamiliar scent in the house. It was faintly detectable in the foyer, the dining room, and the living room, too, but grew stronger in the kitchen. The smell was synthetic pumpkin from a scented candle, but Frannie did not own such a candle. It was one of Janet Kelsey’s clever props, a transparent realtor’s trick intended to

create a wholesome ambiance for visitors. Frannie smelled it, too, and together they searched for its source, peeking behind things on the kitchen countertops and glancing inside the cupboards. Where the scent was strongest, Frannie opened a cupboard door and found the candle in a large glass jar labeled Pumpkin Spice. Rather than take it with her, Janet Kelsey had extinguished it and wedged it in the cabinet beside Frannie's soup tureen. Frannie grabbed it off the shelf. Andy thought she might smash it to the floor, but she became peerlessly composed and asked him to please set it out in the garage.

They were not back an hour before Pastor Ken came calling. This was the start of his summer vacation, and in a full L.L. Bean ensemble—twill shorts with an abundance of pockets and zippers, camp shirt, and hiking boots—he bustled in. He was a rail of a man, something his Sunday robe disguised. Without it, he was still abstractly clerical, even if he did seem to be trying to hide a troubling nervousness. When he reached out for both of Frannie's hands, he did so with the same hesitation as when he approached the pulpit to give his Easter sermon. Shutters closed, ceiling fan spinning overhead, they all, at his insistence, sat in the family room. Frannie had the loveseat to herself, Pastor Ken the Queen Anne chair no one ever sat in because it needed a different cushion and was guaranteed to make your ass hurt. Andy, Meg, and Ferrell, meanwhile, sat in a row on the couch like good little children who would not pick their noses or pinch one another while the nice man from the church was visiting. Pastor Ken delivered words of comfort and assurance and appropriate verses of scripture with gentle conviction. Andy could not escape the ungrateful and cynical feeling that these were pre-packaged, composed, and memorized as part of a seminary assignment, and had been spoken to so many other mourning parishioners that they lost a fraction of their credibility each time.

Andy wanted to think well of him. Pastor Ken was a better person than he was, and he was doing what he was trained and, presumably called, to do, but Andy was certain he would never be able to take him seriously, a fact he actually regretted. He could not in a million years imagine going into Pastor Ken's office (sparsely furnished in drab shades of olive and avocado, as Andy saw it in his mind's eye), being led in a prayer and then spilling out the worries, sins, and fears he had a difficult enough time admitting to himself. Would he shock him? Pastor Ken may have never met anybody with a roster of sins as comprehensive as his. That was presumptuous of him. Practically every church around here did some kind of pastoral outreach at Lansing and Leavenworth. All he'd done was sleep around and make some ambiguously unethical transactions with other people's money, and in the grand scheme of things, it hadn't been that much money. Lansing and Leavenworth—that was hard-core. He wasn't that bad. Nevertheless, he secretly yearned for such a person, a confessor, he supposed, but that person was not Pastor Ken. (It might have been Pastor Gene, but that ship had sailed.) Pastor Ken was not here for him, anyway. He was here for Frannie, and she seemed to be gleaming a small, sustaining bit of strength from his presence, if only because she thought she should.

Meg rose abruptly from the sofa and left for the kitchen. She returned with five full lemonade glasses on a wicker tray. The way she carried the tray was weirdly Stepford Wife-ish. She was too erect, too deliberate with each of her footsteps across the carpet, and as she lowered the tray to the coffee table, Andy saw her consciously imitating Frannie. It was plainly obvious. Whenever Frannie served coffee or plates of pie from the coffee table, her knees did a little June Cleaver-Donna Reed bend. It was a

demure little bit of propriety that served no practical purpose, but it looked nice. It looked poised and polite. Frannie had probably watched her own mother do it, and she had been doing it for so long it was completely natural to her. Meg's knees, however, seemed to buckle as she bent them, like she was unsure how much she really was supposed to bend them. She had chosen a delicate moment to make her entrance because Frannie was about to let go of her pride and her woman-of-Mission Hills decorum and really cry for the first time. Andy hoped that she would. Then, if at some point he needed to himself, he would have permission to do it. Without asking them if they wanted a glass of lemonade, Meg handed them out, pushed them, almost, into everyone's hands. Pastor Ken thanked her and said lemonade was a blessing on a summer day, but he took only two measured sips, set the glass on the coffee table, and did not touch it again. Only Meg drank a full glass. When she finished off the lemonade, she lowered the glass from her lips. The ice cubes collided against one another and the sides of the glass, making an embarrassing commotion that distracted everyone from Pastor Ken's earnest recitation of some of David's wise and reassuring words from the book of Psalms. Meg shrank back from the couch cushions. From then on she stared vacantly at the full glasses of lemonade that had been returned to the wicker tray.

Eyeing Pastor Ken's knobby, blanched knees, Andy took back what he had thought before. Pastor Ken had forever lost his aura of divinity.

*iv*

With Andy's help, the obligatory phone calls were made. He sat with Frannie at the kitchen table, and together they made a list of people to call on the back of a folded grocery list she took from the pocket of the Capri pants she liked to wear on weekends.

He had an easy way of opening conversations and preparing whoever was on the other of the line for the news he had called to share. He was tactful and plainspoken, and much better at it than he thought he would be. (In truth, it was no different than the cold calling he had done in Lawrence.) He thought of how each call would touch off its own separate chain of other calls. Friends of friends of friends. At one point, after he had promised someone he would phone again with details of the funeral, Frannie stopped him, and asked him to wait before dialing the next number on the list. She had something to tell him.

“Look at me, Andrew,” she said. The first time he tried, he could not do it. His eyes defaulted to the refrigerator. She rubbed his hand with hers. This was the one moment of the day that he was not in control. “You know I love you very much?” He blinked wildly and nodded. “And you know you are a good man.” He lowered his head to the table, his forehead on her outstretched hand. With her other hand, she stroked his hair in the same way she must have stroked Brook’s hair when he was young and could not fall asleep.

When evening came and the sun was no more than a fading band of yellow behind the trees and the houses, Frannie waved him into her bedroom. He came in and sat on the edge of the bed. She had put on a nightgown and a thin robe that reached down to her blue-veined ankles. She raised her head from the pillow. The side of her hair that had been against it was crushed flat. She felt its flatness with her hand but did nothing to fix it.

“Need anything?” For him to be looking after her was strange. He thought he was going about it in the right way, but he was not certain.

“No, no, no. You don’t need to babysit me.”

“I think we’re all staying here tonight.” He presented the idea as a settled matter because if he posed it as a question (“Would you like us to spend the night, Fran?”), she would insist it was a foolish overreaction and that they would be better off in their own beds.

She still protested, but not vehemently. “Andrew, really now!” she exclaimed, and then she let it alone. She patted her hand to his chest and forced herself to smile for him. It looked like it hurt to curl up the ends of her mouth. There was the same tension as in the faltering arms of a weightlifter. She held the smile until he forced a smile himself, and then her smile collapsed, and as soon as it did, she aged ten years. Her head drooped back to the pillow. Her eyes closed, and she lay motionless. Andy moved to one of the chintz arm chairs in the sitting room. From the chair, he had a view of the bathroom, and beyond it, the spacious closet, bigger than the bedroom he had slept in as a boy. On a peg hung a drawstring bag stuffed with Lew’s shirts. Monday mornings were when Frannie dropped them off at the cleaners.

With an ironic little laugh she said, “This is a big old house, isn’t it?” She was on her back with her ankles crossed and the robe drawn snugly around her. “Sometimes I think that as it gets older it grows bigger. I really do. Isn’t that silly?”

And she was right. The house was cavernous tonight, positively soundless. Andy had a vision of it as this seething, monstrous thing that came alive when all the lights were out. That must have been what she was thinking at the moment her gaze traveled from the glove compartment of the car to the house. He’d seen something in her face that, at the time, he could not explain. Now he understood. On the spot, Frannie would

have given the Treadways the house, literally given it to them. That's what he had seen. She felt divested of the house, cleanly separated. She had taken wifehood seriously. It had been her career. And this house was her great expression of that old-fashioned devotion he knew she found lacking in not only nearly all the younger women like Ferrell and Meg, but women her own age. So many of them had found clever ways to undermine their marriages by reducing their husbands to gossip fodder, portraying them as bumbler and inept lovers. They had grown tired of marriage, but for some reason Frannie never had, not even during the droughts, the dry, desert places she had found herself in. Because they had to endure the loss of Jill and slog through a cycle of grief, helplessness, and disappointment that subsided, but never completely went away, she and Lew were supposed to enjoy a slow, poetic decline and, like a precious aged couple in a fairytale, fade away together. And that was supposed to happen here, in these rooms.

Now she could not stay here. Andy had to admit that to himself. And it seemed unfair, almost, for them to be in the house without Lew. Regardless of her strength and bravery, this one day had aged her immeasurably. There had been a frailty to the hand she patted against his chest. This big old house, as she called it, would swallow her up. He shuddered and concentrated on the stolid highboy. Its shadow, thrown against the wall, had a formidable, reassuring beauty. It was strong and would endure as it already had for over a hundred years. It was the most eternal thing he could think of. It had watched over all of Frannie and Lew's nights in this room. It knew their routine better than anyone save Frannie's and Lew themselves: Lew coming up to bed, rattling the medicine bottles grouped on the bathroom counter, making his night noises—grumbles and harrumphs and sighs—as he settled into the mattress beside Frannie, Frannie clinging



to him and waiting for him to snore until she fell asleep because his snoring was a familiar sound that shrunk the world down to just the two of them.

The house was a relic. Not architecturally speaking, so much as socially, if that made any sense. It was a relic of a man's dreams for the woman he loved and the children they would have. Who, anymore, had lives like the one Lew wrote about in his letters from Costa Rica? Listening for five minutes to Ferrell describe some of her train-wreck parent-teacher conferences was enough to convince Andy no one did. Everyone was divorced. Kids could have four parents and a bedroom in two or three different houses. The worst of them were spoiled, maladjusted little hoodlums susceptible to addiction and sexual deviancy, and they nursed fantasies of violent acts against their oblivious parents. For some of them, there was only one parent to despise because the parent who was absent wasn't deserving of their hate. Then there were the people who weren't divorced, the ones who never married. They were single martyrs made so callous by the indignities of dating life they had renounced the search for a husband or wife. Until old age they planned to live in a one bedroom apartment. Granted it was a nice one bedroom apartment (crown molding, top of the line appliances, a tiled hallway) in one of the nicer complexes, but it was still a one bedroom apartment. It wasn't a home. Not everyone was that way, it only seemed they were, judging by the gossip that found its way to him at work or in the halves of cell phone conversations carried on while the barista put the finishing touches on a tall latte in front of him in line each morning.

v

Frannie dozed off, and when she did, Andy crept away to the hall. The desk lamp was on in his room, casting a punch bowl of light across the blinds. Meg, addled and

unreachable since the park, was in there. He needed to go to her, and he would, but he also needed to check the locks on the doors and the burners on the stove. He was not sure if anyone had thought to close the garage doors, either. He touched his fingertips to the burners. They were cold. He pressed the refrigerator door. It was closed. He checked the garage doors. They were closed, too, and now that he thought about it, he was sure he had been the one to close them after he had walked Pastor Ken out to his car. As he knew it would be, the front door was locked. He flipped the switch in the foyer to turn on the outdoor lights. There was an order these things were done in, and you did not deviate from it. No one had ever explicitly told Andy what the order was. He had learned it from observing Lew or Frannie “put the house to bed,” as they liked to say, while he mixed himself a glass of chocolate milk (heavy on the Hershey’s syrup) to drink in his room as he highlighted a thoroughly uninspiring chapter in one textbook or another.

The French doors to the pool had to be left unlocked because Ferrell lay balled up on the cushion of a chaise, her arm emerging every so often to rid her latest cigarette of its ash. The translucent blue ashtray she had taken from Lew’s den was positioned on the ground where she could reach down to tap away the ash without bothering to look. Andy opened one of the doors, just wide enough for him to squeeze through without the hinges squeaking or the blinds clapping against the glass. He went toward her, his bare feet slipping over the flagstones.

“Don’t make me come inside,” Ferrell said.

Andy reached a hand over the back of the chaise to touch her shoulder. When she did not flinch or protest, he bent down and kissed her hair at the place where it parted and the gray streak began. The smoke she exhaled rose up toward his face, spread and

thinned to nothing. He said nothing more and left her there to chain smoke through the night, or until the last of her cigarettes burned down to the butt and she fell asleep with the rank smell of smoke on her clothes and in her hair, and the taste of tobacco on her lips. He went slip-slapping back into the house, up the stairs, and on down the hall.

After a long, cold shower, he tucked a bath towel around his waist and, wearing it like a kilt, passed through the hall to his room, where he climbed in bed beside Meg. He felt his body make a wet imprint on the sheet and had the unwelcome thought of Lew, also on his back, arms at his side, feet pointing up, tag around his big toe, asleep inside a claustrophobic morgue drawer, surrounded by strangers. Picturing it made him dizzy. He pressed his fists to his eyelids to make the spinning stop, and, soon enough, it did. He eased up to look at Meg. She, too, had showered. Her hair spilled over her pillow in half-dry swirls. Her brow was pinched, and he wondered if she had conjured a nightmare to life. She breathed huskily through her mouth. Each time she exhaled there came a wheezing sound out her nose and mouth. In all the nights he had spent beside her, he had never heard it before. His tired mind superimposed Lew over Meg, and the dizziness forced him back down onto the clammy sheet. She slept fitfully, kneeing him, gathering the covers in close one moment, only to wriggle free of them the next.

Meg had left him today. From the time they had returned to the house, she had eluded him. She became a phantasmal presence he could feel but not see. She kept turning up in unexpected places like the laundry room, where he found her looking like a poor, little waif. She gripped the corner of the washing machine for support and greeted him with a heartbreaking look.

“Come sit on the couch, and I’ll make you something to drink,” he had said. Her tenuous composure had been about to shatter. “I bet Fran’d like it if you kept her company.” He probably sounded patronizing, like he should have been down on a knee to address a child who had suffered the world-ending disappointment of a broken toy. “Scotch, maybe? Just a little?” He held his thumb and forefinger a fraction of an inch apart so she could see he would only pour enough to coat the bottom of a highball.

She convulsed and, if possible, her look became more heartbreaking. “I don’t know what to do.” That was all he could get out of her, a strangled lament she repeated no matter what he said.

“You’ll figure it out.”

“But I don’t know!”

“Here. Follow my lead. I’ll show you.” He had held out his hand. She stared at it, then snatched at it, digging her fingernails into his palm. “We’ll make something to eat for Fran. We’ll do it together. You can show me where everything is in the kitchen. I’ve forgotten.” That was partially true and partially a lie told to give her purpose. He said it knowing there were few things that inspired her like the chance to display her self-taught mastery of the house. She lasted five minutes in the kitchen. She somberly pointed out the pan he should use to fry the hamburgers, but wandered away as he shaped the mound of meat into patties. When he took the hamburger buns from the pantry, he spotted her on the steps, jailed behind the banister spindles, hugging her knees.

“Meggie, come here,” he coaxed. He felt like he was calling a clever dog that liked to hide under beds and behind furniture. She did not come. He sauntered into the foyer, swinging the bag of hamburger buns by its neck. Because he was afraid she would

sense his mild irritation with her, he made an effort to be nonchalant. “I thought you were helping me.” He reached between the spindles to touch her cheek, only to have her jerk back from him. She said she did not know what to do, that she did not know *anything*.

Andy listened to the nerve-wracking sound of her breathing. He understood what she meant. Meg Wilder knew about opulent suites at the Dorchester, hotels on the Riviera, the beaches of Coolum on the Gold Coast. She knew the right way to speak to a concierge. She knew how to finagle her way into first class, speak basic traveler’s phrases in at least ten languages, and snare an intriguing man with a flash of her hazel eyes. In other words, she knew nothing that prepared her for days like this. She’d been everywhere in the world, but did not know how to live. What’s more, she knew it, too. She’d had an inkling, one he thought she diligently worked to suppress, that, as the Getaway Girl, she had long since spun off into a separate, two-dimensional world as flat, colorful, and glossy as the photographs in the pages of *Round Trip*. Today confirmed it, and that sudden confirmation had shocked her into a stupor. Today they’d had to get down to the real marrow of living, loving, and surviving, and she was helpless. There had been the dangerous, overpowering cocktail of feelings—lust and hero worship, to name only two—Graham Kelly roused in her. That had been a taste of living. So had the humiliation in New Zealand. But from those two instances, she had only come away with an awkward carnal reunion and a lame joke about kiwis. The rest, everything from Moscow up to the moment in the rose garden when his phone trilled in his pocket, was, for Meg Wilder, one long, whirlwind fling. Palm trees, spas, room service, white sand beaches, and new black dresses.

Andy watched her sleep. She had stopped thrashing about. She was calm and dozed with an arm across his body and a leg propped on his. She had not retied the dress' bow. The two wide, satin-lined strips of fabric were in a slack half knot that was charmless and crude and glaringly unromantic. She, who always exuded blithe, quixotic romance even in her lesser Getaway Girl moments, was glaringly unromantic. She was as haggard and desiccated as he had ever seen her.

He could not foresee himself sleeping. There was nothing left to do but relive the afternoon until dawn broke over the Lehmans' fence. All of the day's inconsequential details stood out in high relief and reeked of hot roses so ripe and enflamed with beauty they were a day away from spoiling. There was the blinding goldness of Janet Kelsey's gaudy necklace. The taste of brie and cracker he had in his mouth when he answered Brook's call. Brook calling Frannie "Mother," which he never, ever did. *I need to speak toMother.* There was such incapacitating doom in that one sentence of his! The stunning clarity of a disembodied voice over a hospital intercom five hundred miles away. *Dr. Davis, please dial 202. Dr. Davis, please dial 202.* His mind's picture of life as he knew it floating away down the brown Mississippi. The grease from the hamburgers popping in the frying pan and pricking the backs of his hands as he clumsily turned the patties with a spatula. Pastor Ken's slightly feminine calves. Melted ice cubes in untouched glasses of lemonade. The blink of terrifying silence between the time someone picked up the phone and said hello. The upset feeling in his stomach he had because he knew something bad had happened and whoever was on the other end did not. The dry sensibility of the man from the funeral home he spoke with over the phone.

“Margaret,” he said. With his elbow he jabbed at a fleshy spot beneath her ribs. She stirred and murmured. “Margaret,” he repeated.

“What?” she mouthed. In a twisted up mass of sheets, she lay, blinking herself back to consciousness. He needed her, he said. He leaned across her so she could not miss the meaning of his words and his imploring stare. Limpid moonlight seeped through a chink in the blinds and pooled in the slight curve of her neck. “Margaret,” he said plaintively, dragging back the sheets and loosening the towel around his waist. *They* needed this, he told her. All day they had failed each other. He had been too busy being a good man to consider her, while she had been too self-consciously tragic and moribund to be any comfort to him. He had gotten it into his head that this would fix it. The door was locked, he assured her. Just as she was ready to consent with an almost imperceptible lifting of her chin, she gave him the glazed and stricken stare of someone trapped beneath a sheet of ice. He kissed the deep, hollow spot at the base of her throat. Her wet hair was heavy, like rope, in his hands.

Their skin was cold from their showers and from the arctic air blasting down on them from the vent over the bed. It was, at first, a laborious, grappling fiasco. They could not synchronize themselves, but the percussive knock of her pulse through him set him right. It became a solemn, sweetly sad business. In the midst of it, he was certain they had succeeded. He had brought her back, reanimated her. Today, however, was only the beginning. Brook would return with the body of his father. There would be people—the same ones he had spoken to in a voice that after the tenth or eleventh call resembled that of a telemarketer working from a less-than-human-sounding script. There would be a service at the church, only they would not be tucked anonymously back

in the Van Dynes' Sunday pew. They, and their grief, would be on full display in the very front row, closest to the pulpit. For all of that, Andy needed from Meg a certain grace and solidity that would, when he grew weary, fortify his own. In half a day, he had used up all he had, which turned out to be several times more than he had thought he possessed. When they were done, a tinge of romance was back at the outermost edges of her eyes. To make it last, they clutched one another against their chests, but it funneled away at an accelerating speed. Her eyes were dimming, and her freshly bathed body, so powerful and pliant and attuned to his, was turning meek. As they regained their breath, the fire burned out in both of their bodies. After a while, there was no point trying to sustain what was already gone. He shrugged out of her embrace. He sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He rubbed his hands over his face, stared ahead at the empty punch bowl of light on the blinds. "Andy," she said. His name was an apology. Her thick, consoling voice made him think twice before getting up. His shorts were on the desk. He stood at the window and put them on. "I'll be back," he said, scooping the damp towel from the floor.

There was room on the rack in the bathroom for the towel. He left it there and continued on toward the stairs, slowing as he passed Frannie's doorway. Inside, the radio on the nightstand played a long stretch of commercials for foundation repair, divorce lawyers specializing in representing the husband's interest, fast food restaurants with ninety-nine cent specials after midnight, collision repair, and miracle diet pills. Between the time he had left her and now, she had gotten up to turn on the light in the bathroom and open the curtains shrouding the window nearest the bed. Her footprints were visible in the carpet she had vacuumed in preparation for the open house. Andy could not see



her face, but he was certain she was still awake. She lay on her side, a box of Kleenex at her feet, watching for the infrequently passing cars. The usual floorboard creaked beneath his feet. She knew he was there, but she said nothing, so Andy moved on and plodded down the stairs.

Descending to the foyer, he heard the refrigerator running. It was a low, soothing growl. He sat himself square in the middle of the family room couch and listened to it, but the growling ended before he was ready. His mind turned itself on again, rewinding back to the last of the thoughts he had had before appealing to Meg: Lew's body in a cold, dark drawer. His blood and his lips and his skin were cold, and ever so slowly, he was beginning to not look like himself. He was decaying in invisible ways. But that did not matter because he had deserted that body and gone somewhere else, to the place where he would receive his new, perfect body. That's what Jill believed happened. She had prayed it would happen to her. It made no sense to Andy. What was it made of? What was it like to be in it, to inhabit flawless, everlasting skin? He wished there were a way for him to know it was true because, as impossible as it was for him to believe, he wanted, more than anything, to be proven wrong. Out the windows overlooking the pool, he saw Ferrell's slim foot peeking around the back of the chaise. (What was more perfect than that?) She had to have fallen asleep. The foot did not move and since he had sat on the couch, he had not once noticed her arm lowering a cigarette down to meet the ashtray.

Another dimension, where he guessed heaven resided for those who believed in it, was beyond the power of his imagination. The moon, fully round, was a polished, incandescent pearl plucked from an oyster's craw and lodged in the sky. He placed Lew there in a lunar palace of infinite rooms and great marbled halls along the coast of the Sea

of Tranquility. He was in his exquisite, silvery body that did not age or bruise or ache, and Jill was with him. They were eternal astronauts, weightlessly, joyfully bounding about. It was a beautiful idea until he meditated on it for several minutes more and it became ridiculous, childish more than anything else. It was too comforting to abandon, though. He let the idea expand and crowd out the other junk colliding around in his mind. Until morning he would allow himself to believe it and be reassured by it.

All at once, he was too exhausted to think anymore, to feel anymore, to climb the stairs and grope his way back to bed and be with Meg again. Without any trouble he could have tapped into a last burst of adrenaline and achieved the same temporary physical relief. But down here, separated from her, he was, at best, ambivalent. His head drooped. He tried, but failed, to stay awake by staring at the image of the shimmering, pearl moon reflected in the deep end of the pool.

## 14. INHERITANCE

The eulogy opened with a quotation from *The Merchant of Venice*. “It is a wise father that knows his own child,” Brook said, making penetrating eye contact with every person seated in the pews. He had drafted the eulogy in longhand yesterday afternoon. The collection of unruled 8 ½ by 11 inch sheets had seemed to pursue Andy from room to room all day. They were on the big square ottoman in the family room while Brook called the hospital to check on patients. They were on the kitchen island an hour and a half later when Andy passed through to pour himself a lukewarm cup of coffee left over from breakfast, and they were spread across the dining room table when he went to the door to accept a tasteful arrangement of flowers from a delivery man. On each page Brook’s slanted handwriting formed a picture of a craggy seaside cliff. He did not have the flamboyant, arrogant scrawl of a doctor. Rather, his handwriting was compact, an

unpredictable, but legible, mash-up of cursive and print distinguished by the first letter of every sentence that towered over the rest. He did not have the sheets with him at the pulpit, though. He had exchanged them for a thin stack of index cards he withdrew from the inside pocket of his suit jacket after he adjusted the microphone.

He smartly wove together a pithy account of his father's many virtues (and a couple of his less than damning vices), some favorite remembrances, most of them dating back to Brook's childhood, and a few bland jokes told at Lew's expense. Andy had no objection to the content. It was exactly what anyone would have expected. What immediately galled him was Brook's delivery of it, which could only be categorized as extraordinary, and it was extraordinary because it was flawless, and because when he spoke into the microphone his voice became rich and sonorous. It compelled a person to listen—not just hear, but *listen*. He was putting on a clinic in oratory for the reliably adequate but never remarkable Pastor Ken. On the one hand, Brook was like a baldly confident motivational speaker pushing a trite and fraudulent formula that was going to reinvigorate his audience's flagging sales. On the other, he was a candidate, up twelve points in the polls, giving the stump speech he recited three times a day: once, for example, in an airplane hangar, once in a greasy spoon where the local Rotary club met, and once in a high school gym. And he gave the speech day after day to the same reaction of appropriately restrained adulation. The eulogy went on, and Andy picked up shades of a third persona, the late night talk show host delivering his monologue. With the talk show host Brook shared a lazy professionalism that was really a hallmark of genius because delivering that monologue looks easy and effortless, and like something any semi-literate idiot could do, until you try to get up on stage to deliver five minutes

worth of news-of-the-day jokes scripted out on cue cards. That was just it: Brook had infused the eulogy with an uncomfortably rote quality, but Andy was certain no one else perceived it but him. Like the slick politician, Brook knew where to pause for the audience reaction and where to build to a modest crescendo and where to lean into the microphone and become steely and serious. Despite his resemblance to the shyster motivational guru, the politician and the talk show host, the eulogy—or, more precisely, its performance—was authentically Brook. It did not cause Andy to reflect on Lew’s life. It made him intensely and gratefully aware of Brook being Brook. It was a remarkable distillation of his personality. He exhibited that prickly, bookish charm Ferrell could not get enough of growing up, along with some adroitly controlled fits of bombast, while he remained emotionally neutral. In his adult life, Brook had been strong for too many people, namely devastated parents and their ailing children, to show any emotions approximating sadness or grief in front of his family or father’s friends. His grieving and soul-searching was neat and private, done with the aid of a kitchen timer so it did not go on a minute longer than he intended, Andy thought. He was not doing it on purpose, and he may not have been doing it at all (Andy conceded the possibility he was viewing things through a unique and defective lens), but with every gesture and turn of phrase, Brook inched closer to upstaging his father.

Andy, his eyes reduced to slits, stared up at Brook. He watched for Brook’s lips to quiver, or for him to keep his throat from constricting with a series of hard, forced swallows that would interrupt the timing of a joke. That was all Andy wanted, some unintended, physical sign of his suffering, but one never came.

Instead, Brook did a marvelous job setting up the jokes. The cathartic laughter exploded right on cue. Maybe it had something to do with the acoustics of the sanctuary, but it sounded tinny and canned and fit for a sitcom. Andy imagined Pastor Ken's disembodied voice coming over the sound system at the very end to say, "Dr. Lewis Van Dyne's funeral was filmed before a live studio audience." After a while, Andy stopped listening to the words, but because he was human and programmed the same as everyone around him, he automatically laughed when they laughed, even though he did not know what they were laughing about. The sound of his own laughter irked him. So did every last thing about Brook while he was standing up there. The knot of his tie irked him. It had been done haphazardly, and it made the tie too short. The fact that the tie was his own and not Brook's irked him. Brook's bald head, newly shaved and glinting in the light cast down from high up in the peaked ceiling, irked him too, as did the way he had a habit of smoothing his index finger across his right eyebrow from time to time while he was speaking. Along with these came a thousand other old grievances, most of them previously fossilized sophomoric junk from their days in the Kappa Sigma house, that had been dredged up since Brook rose from his seat, approached the pulpit, and opened his mouth. None of it would have bothered Andy half as much if he did not love Brook, and since he loved him, Brook had an immense capacity to hurt him and annoy him. In exchange, Andy, at times, hated him, and this was one of those times. It was potentially the all-time zenith of his powerful, but intermittent hatred, and having it occur while listening to him give his father's eulogy made Andy feel low and rotten. To be overcome by it now meant he was not a good man after all.

He drew Africa in elaborate detail on the back of the funeral program to distract himself, not from Brook, but from himself. The paper was thin and he could see the stoic, bearded Jesus on its cover. He drew the countries, the Nile, the deserts. He drew in everything. Even Madagascar. The blunt lead from the pencil he took from the notch in the pew ahead of him made a steady rhythm as he shaded in Zaire, Zambia, Tanzania, Ethiopia. It was doubled by the steady rubbing of his cuff link against the cover of the hymnal he used as a desk. He kept it steady with the weight of his fist, drawing with his left hand curled around the program to conceal his work from Meg, but she was as captivated as everyone else.

Andy froze, the pencil pressed into the tip of Cape of Good Hope, at a change in Brook's voice. He was reading. He read a passage from a note Lew wrote to him when he graduated from medical school. The sound of Brook reading triggered a memory: Andy, in bed, feeling like a hostage as he listened to Brook read Jane Austen books aloud to Jill. So many nights he had done that. It had made Andy seethe, and when he woke up in the morning he had still been seething, so he had spent the ride to campus in silence, Brook never connecting his silence with anger, envy, or bitterness. Now, Andy made it a point to hate him a little bit more for having been so blind back then.

His pulse throbbed in his neck, and he could no longer concentrate on his map, which, in his mind, was a tribute superior to the eulogy. Further down the row, Frannie nodded her way through it, pausing only on occasion to pat at the corners of her eyes with a crumpled, well-used tissue. Ferrell was again the non-wife wife, her head inclined to show she was lovingly invested in every word and that if Brook lost his place or felt choked by emotion he could look to her for strength. She was fooling everyone and had

been all morning. When he had come into the vestibule from the parking lot, he had found them together, separated from the stream of people filing quietly through the open sanctuary doors. She had fussed with the collar of Brook's shirt and the knot of his tie. Once they settled into the pew, she dug around in her purse and handed him a small wrapped object, a piece of candy or a throat lozenge. Brook had never deserved her, Andy thought. Before, he would have loudly and obnoxiously argued the opposite, but it was, all of a sudden, one of his most staunch convictions, and he could not have been persuaded to give it up. Slinking around the side of the Nashes' house in the late summer gloaming to surrender to Ferrell had been Brook's one extravagant expression of despair and vulnerability. That was before he flipped some switch inside himself that made him stoic but good natured and coolly sympathetic in every situation.

They—Brook and Ferrell—faltered at the end. Rather, Brook faltered. It happened after Meg stumbled through the Lord's Prayer and said Amen a beat too early, after three verses of "Great is Thy Faithfulness," and after Pastor Ken stretched out his arm to bless them all with what was, for him, a stirring and appropriate benediction. As everyone filed out of the sanctuary through the narthex and into the oppressively humid July-at-its-worst afternoon, Brook and Ferrell became separated. Brook escorted Frannie outside on his arm. Andy stayed behind to shake hands with Dr. Gerrard. Meg went out ahead of him, paired off with Frannie's sister. She had run out of tissues, and Meg had plenty to spare. She pulled them from her tiny purse the way a magician pulls colored handkerchiefs from the sleeve of his coat. Ferrell walked crookedly up the aisle, alone, with her head down. Andy was behind her, but she did not know he was there. She held onto the railing as she descended the church steps. Looking up at the traffic that whizzed



along Ward Parkway in both directions, she took the last step with exceptional care and started toward the cars parked between the church and the adjacent stone chapel. Andy closed the distance between them. From behind, he slipped a hand beneath her bent elbow. He came up alongside her, and they walked together. They had one of their long conversations communicated entirely through glances and the pressure he exerted on her elbow to keep her walking straight head. He had to adjust his pace to hers. He wanted to keep going and going, as fast as possible, to push through this day and come out the other side, but her heels made a slow, clockwork sound on the baked pavement.

*ii*

Locusts rasped in the backyard. The rasping built to a crescendo, moderated, diminished, but, at the moment silence settled in, it returned as a low dissonant hum that blended into a chorus with the rumbling refrigerator in the Van Dynes' kitchen. Occasionally, the air conditioner announced itself with a thump and joined in. People had poured into the house after the service, some of them bringing casseroles and cling-wrap covered brownies to supplement the deli trays of meat and cheeses sliced into triangles and arranged like pinwheels, and relish trays with radishes cut to look like blooming roses. But they were gone. It was after ten, and Andy, Meg, Brook, and Frannie were the only ones left in the house. Even Ferrell was gone. The sun was setting, and she had tried to slip away unseen, but even amongst the Van Dynes' grayed and graying circle of acquaintances Andy spied that curious slash of white as she moved out through the door and down the gradual slope of the lawn. He had gone after her.

Leaning out her open car window, she said, "Haven't you been the gallant one these last few days?" She was both teasing him and being serious.

He shrugged. "I don't know."

"You should never try to be modest. I never believe it." He was supposed to accept her words as thoughtful advice. For once, she was not being critical or sardonic or trying to gin up a quick burst of sparring to make herself feel better.

"You'll be okay?"

"I hope so." She made a face, so he would think himself silly for asking.

"I can come over if you want company for awhile."

"No company. I want a bath and maybe a frozen margarita. Maybe two frozen margaritas."

He had felt like he was saying a permanent goodbye to her and needed to come up with something more, something memorable, but he could not think of what that might be. As he thought and rejected every possibility that came to mind, the moment strained for a conclusion, so she started her car, waved, and after circling around the cul-de-sac, drove off in the direction of Prairie Village. He returned to the house, sweat dampening the back of his shirt, and resumed the task of clearing the dining room table. He brought a plate of cookies and a bowl of JELL-O salad into the kitchen. The JELL-O was decomposing, turning watery, and rapidly losing its firmness. The banana coins had wiggled loose and settled in the bottom of the dish in a pool of crushed pineapple.

With a plastic ladle, Meg deposited lumps of warm mayonnaise from a glass bowl back into the jar.

"Just dump it," Brook said. "It's been sitting out forever."

"I feel like doing it." She was terse without meaning to be. She had made a miraculous recovery. Andy did not know how it had happened, but he did not care. He

was just grateful that it had. When the house had been crammed with guests, she made an able hostess, efficient and engaged, herding people into the dining room and perpetually whisking away their used plastic plates.

“Who brought those bars with the caramel and chocolate chips in the middle?”

Brook asked.

Their conversation mimicked the rasping locusts, at times fatigued, at others insistent and unabating.

“Dr. Gerrard’s nurse, I think,” Meg said. “I can never remember her name.”

“I ate three of them. Maybe four.”

Andy chimed in, asking Brook: “Did you see that one plate of food your cousin had?”

“Which cousin?”

“The one who’s not so thin.”

“Eric?”

“He had the biggest mountain of potato salad I’ve ever seen!” Meg said, moving around glasses on the top of rack of the dishwasher. She kept ending up with one more glass than the rack had room for. It was something Frannie had a talent for. No matter how many dirty mugs and cups lined the counter, she made them fit. “It was like the Matterhorn or something.” She tried a third time and, finally, they all fit.

Brook held Frannie’s stock pot by the handles and stretched up to the highest shelf in a cupboard. None of them could figure out what it had been used for, but it had been in the sink along with every other dirty utensil and dish. “That doesn’t go there,”

Meg warned. He froze. “Next cupboard over. She always puts it behind the crock pot and the colander.”

“How do you know that? I’ve lived in this house most of my life and don’t know that.”

“She makes chili in it,” Andy said.

“And potatoes,” Meg added. “She boils potatoes in it and corn on the cob. Eggs, too. If she’s making deviled eggs.”

“Really?” Brook sounded genuinely surprised.

“Give it here. I’ll get it.”

Brook handed it over to her. His work was done, it seemed. He loped into the family room to watch the Mariners and Angels from that depressing stadium with the fake rocks beyond the centerfield fence.

Andy sidled up to Meg, and spoke directly into her ear. “Give yourself a break.” She had been in constant motion the whole afternoon. He gathered her hair in his hands. It had been coiled in a low, tight bun secured with tiny butterfly clips, but when he came back after seeing Ferrell off, it hung loose and wild, and she had piled the butterfly clips on the toaster oven.

“I’m fine.” She searched around her for one more thing to do, but the kitchen was clean except for the table cloth wadded up on the chair. She reached out to more evenly space a row of canisters arranged according to descending height behind the sink.

He discarded his regimental striped tie and hoisted himself onto the island countertop. His shirt yawned open, its collar lifeless. He wrestled the shirt tails from his pants, then removed his silver monogrammed cufflinks.

“This is me standing still.” She presented herself before him with a flourish of the dish towel in her hand.

“You did good today.” He crooked an arm around her hips.

Her mouth twitched, but she did not smile as he thought she might. He centered the straps of her dress on her shoulders. It was a grey silk dress, knee-length, spaghetti strapped, and embroidered in pink and celadon thread with pagodas and cherry blossom branches. At the church, she had worn a boxy, black jacket over it. He traced over a cherry blossom branch on her chest. She messed shyly with the corner of his shirt tail. “I think I’ll go upstairs,” she said, wriggling away from him. With his eyes he followed her up the stairs, her small hips ticking softly from side to side, until she disappeared.

He snagged two beers from the refrigerator, offered one to Brook, and sagged down next to him on the sofa.

“Did you see that?” Brook was wryly amused. He had stripped down to his undershirt. His dress shirt hung over the arm of the sofa. “Fastball, fastball up the middle, and then the bottom just drops out of that last pitch.”

“He better be on tonight because their bullpen isn’t worth shit.” The Angels’ pitcher was a Dominican rookie sensation, and this was the first time either of them had seen him throw.

“There were plenty of decent relievers available at the trade deadline, and they didn’t do jack.”

“But they got that utility infielder, Donahue, from Milwaukee,” Andy said, certain Brook would respond with sarcasm, which he did.

“Cause that’ll win you a pennant for sure.”

“You watch. He’ll swing at this. The guy has more one-pitch at bats than anyone I’ve ever seen...” And that, too, happened, as he had predicted.

Andy had stopped hating Brook hours ago because hating Brook made him surly and gave him a headache. Brook was once more his quasi-brother. (Commiserating over baseball sealed it.) He seemed to be his older brother, though, markedly older. As for himself, the day had not aged him. He was still blond, rangy, clever, and, when it suited him, intent on forcing levity from the most deeply felt things. More than anything, he was anxious for tomorrow. *This* would be over, and because he was not going to work, he could lie in bed for as long as he wanted, sharing a pillow with Meg. Her insecurities and anxieties, would have disappeared in the night, and they would go back to who they were before.

For the moment, baseball was the wrong thing to watch, especially this sort of tedious American League game that would drag along for a healthy four hours that would seem like no less than eight. Already, in the top of the second inning, the Seattle catcher had jogged out to the mound, so he and the pitcher could talk with their mouths hidden behind their gloves to figure out how to get out the mess they had created by walking the inning’s first two batters, a problem that would not have been as serious if they had not already given up five earned runs. And here came the potbellied manager, a man almost sixty years old in a uniform that looked slightly ridiculous even on boys in their athletic primes, trotting unhurriedly from the dugout. He gave the signal to the bullpen, and a relief pitcher sprinted through the open chain-link gate. The guy would have to loosen up, throw some warm-up pitches. In the meantime, the cameraman panned the not yet listless crowd that was still pacified by clouds of cotton candy and melting frosty malts.

If the game continued at this pace, time would slow down, a single second would last as long as ten, and Andy would grow steadily sure that tomorrow was just not ever going to come.

His attention left the baseball as he, for the first time, was able to fully consider something he had innocently found out during the afternoon but was not supposed to know. It was not a secret, technically, because it could not be kept from someone like him for long. Anyone who did what he did would read it in two dozen different places before nine in the morning tomorrow. Equinox had pulled the plug on *Round Trip*. He had been in the foyer trading small talk with the wife of Brook's potato salad-loving cousin and heard the playful pinging noise Meg's phone made to announce a new email. Less than a minute later, he had heard it again, and again. Five times he had heard it. On the japanned table behind him, the phone was peeking out of her purse. The cousin's wife stepped away to get herself a glass of iced tea. When she walked away, Andy slid the phone from Meg's purse. She would not mind that he did. If it rang while she was out of the room, she often called out, asking him to answer for her. The emails were all replies to an already opened message with the subject line R.I.P. *Round Trip*. She knew, but had said nothing. There had not been time. Driving the Audi back from the church, he had seen her in the rear view mirror fiddling with the phone. If *Round Trip* was done, Meg would stay. She had to stay. She did not have an apartment or a house of her own anywhere. There had never been any reason for it.

They could take over Brook's apartment and move to the larger bedroom with the big oval bathtub and twice the windows. It would be theirs, and just knowing that would make the apartment feel different every time one of them fit the key in the lock, opened

the door, and breezed inside. It would make them feel different, too. They would find that they had a bright, laughing passion for one another—physically, emotionally, and intellectually—that proved inexhaustible. His imagination, racing with possibilities, leaped months ahead to Thanksgiving, a cold, clear, snowless day brightened by milk white sunshine that would not warm the ground or their cheeks as they, wrapped in scarves and winter coats, scurried down the hill to enjoy a refined turkey dinner at the Raphael. They would take their time savoring every course and admiring the well-behaved, smartly dressed children at the tables across the dining room with their grandparents. Later, at about the time a frigid but awesome shade of amethyst washed across the sky and the sun dropped swiftly below the horizon, they would set out plates of cookies and a few simple hors d'oeuvres on the dining room table, and another pair of serving platters on the coffee table. They would have a party, well, not a party necessarily, but a gathering. Friends were coming to celebrate the city's defining Thanksgiving tradition, the illumination of the Plaza's miles and miles of Christmas lights. Their balcony would be an ideal vantage point. He wondered who they were, these faceless, nameless people they were letting into their home. Meg was an engaging person, irresistible. By November she will have attracted new acquaintances. While he mingled and kept everyone's drinks fresh, she tended to the music, nothing obtrusive, just nice mellow jazz that carried on endlessly in the background. A few minutes before six, everyone would take up their drinks and huddle together on the balcony, their insides warmed enough by the cider that had been heating on the stove that they did not put on coats. The sky would be dotted with the red lights of private airplanes people had hired to see the spectacle from above, and the helicopters from each of the local television



stations circled overhead. They could hear the drone of their beating blades. On a stage at the place where Nichols dead-ended into Wyandotte, a garrulous anchorman from the ten o'clock news would be leading the crowd in a countdown, 10...9...8..., and, along with a red-cheeked child plucked from the third row, prepared to pull that lever that supposedly made the Plaza into a holiday utopia, but really did nothing at all. And there they would be! The strands of red and blue and green and yellow outlining the towers, domes and arches. It was like magic. Everyone would cheer and clap before turning to their neighbor to clink their glasses together like it was New Year's Eve. Someone in the group would whistled his approval by putting his fingers in the corners of his mouth. Someone else, in the voice of a boozy lounge singer, would start singing the "strings of street lights" part of "Silver Bells." With that, Thanksgiving would be over, Christmas would be on its way, and there would seem to be some shred of hope for the world.

The beer bottle in his hand was empty. He had been so immersed in his waking dream that he could not remember drinking it. He went for another, but as he stood in the glare of the open refrigerator, he changed his mind. The chill from the refrigerator and his holiday fantasies brought to mind the cheap plastic Plaza snow globe Jill had kept hidden amongst the clutter on her dresser. He put the beer back on the bottom and shelf and started for the stairs. As he climbed them, he ran his hand up the smooth, polished banister. If someone were to stop him and ask him what he was doing, he would have said he was looking in on Frannie—just a quick peek—and checking to see where Meg had disappeared to. He would do both of those things, but first he was going to Jill's room. He was going to open the door that was always shut, and he was going to go inside. From time to time, he had wondered what it was like on the other side of the

door, but with each day that went by, he had fewer opportunities to find out. He had failed today to hold Jill at the forefront of his thoughts as much as he thought he should. If ever there was a time for him to go, this was it. There was nothing that could shock him or hurt him after these last few days. There were no new emotions left for him to feel. He could see it now and process it later, maybe at the end of an afternoon he had spent with his back to his desk gazing down at the Plaza's heavy hanging flower baskets and the fluid pre-rush hour traffic, and silently damning to hell the Federal Reserve chairman for meddling with the markets. That would be a good sort of day to take it up again, to pore over it with twenty-twenty hindsight.

He reached the landing and was three quarters of the way down the hall before he noticed that the door to Jill's bedroom was open. A figure stood in the rectangle of open space. The hallway was gray and draped in the crisscrossing shadows of the other bedrooms' half open doors. It must be Frannie. He could not disturb her. He was ready to retreat back down the stairs, but the figure moved, turned so he could see it in profile. It was not Frannie, but Meg, jelly-kneed, and braced against the doorframe.

The plush, new carpet swallowed up his advancing footsteps. From behind, he circled his arms around her, held her against him and asked, "What are you doing?" He put a happy little chuckle into the question. This would be another great thing about tomorrow. He would be able to break his new and condescending habit of speaking to her as he just had, like a precocious child who was always up to something or a puppy that was resisting all its training. Her body went rigid. Holding her became like holding the trunk of a tree. She stammered, could not find the words to match her thoughts, and then gave up.

The flood light at the corner of the Lehmans' eaves shone into the room like an artificial sun. The raking light made the room seem staged. It was the set of a one act play about to begin. No, it reminded him of that weird little gallery of furnished rooms at the Nelson:

Young Woman's Bedroom

American

Early 21<sup>st</sup> century

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Lewis Van Dyne

Museum Permanent Collection

For a time he and Meg were speechless and still, like they really were at a gallery admiring the amazing detail of the display that made it seem like the young woman would enter and flop on her bed. The closet door was open slightly, which was a genius touch on the curator's part. (To think of the room as an exhibit, a piece of art, allowed Andy to separate it from the times he had spent there, so he let it play out as long as he could.) There were clothes inside, including a pair of jeans hung from a peg on the door. The wall above the desk was papered with sketches of sleek women in inventive outfits. They were all dated, and the blank-faced women had all been given names that were penciled on the corners of the pages. Astrid. Camille. Jeanette. Nadia. Ferrell I: Soho Car Coat. Ferrell II: San Tropez sarong. Ferrell III: Saturday morning fox hunt. Ferrell IV: Little Black Suit.

"That stupid lamp," he said out loud, to himself. Another genius touch! It stood at the center of Jill's desk. She had sketched by it at night. Andy had forgotten it and its hideous shade, trimmed with tassels and crystals shaped like tear drops. Jill had thought

it European, a bit French, a little Moulin Rouge, and, therefore, inherently desirable. He thought it a gauche eyesore. Many times, he had walked in to find her flicking the lampshade's tassels with her pencil while she contemplated what she would draw next.

Meg stirred, and he tried to kiss her neck, but she scrunched her shoulder up to her ear, leaving him no room. He waited, tried again, and as he did, she tore away from him. She dug an elbow into his rib cage and used it to push off and give herself momentum. Nearly careening into the wall, she ran wildly for the stairs. She had a gangly, flailing gait like a young animal learning to balance itself on its own four feet. He was left flatfooted, but as she sprang down the stairs, he scrambled after her, fighting to button his shirt. "Margaret!" he called. The shirt billowed out behind like he had wings. He was a big, white bird flying down the stairs. Through the banister spindles, he caught a flash of skin, a flexed leg in mid-stride moving at a diagonal. He jumped the last two steps, and for that he got a temporary jolt of pain through both of his ankles that stopped him where he landed. In the family room, the television flashed splotches of light and color on the wall. The announcer called a routine six to four to three double play. Brook swiveled his head around and looked at him with both bewilderment and disinterest, then turned his attention back to the game.

At the corner of Andy's field of vision was the blown glass bowl, rose-colored and deeply fluted, on the little japanned table in the foyer. The bowl was empty. His keys should have been in it. Since they returned from the church, Meg's black, patent leather clutch had been tucked behind the bowl. It was not there, either. At the opposite corner, he saw the front door partially open, letting in the night's saturated, uncooled air.

Outside, he found her in the driveway beside his car, panting. It was louder than all the neighborhood nocturnal sounds except for the plaintive whining of Vernon, the Gossetts' grim hound dog, one street over. She struggled to make sense of the keys. She had put her purse on the roof of the car to give herself two free hands. One by one, she held the keys up to the moonlight. She could not concentrate enough to recognize the one that would start the old Volvo. Some of them she wouldn't know—for instance, the ones that unlocked the door to his office and the two file drawers beneath his desk, and the one to his mother's house he had been transferring from key chain to key chain since he was eleven years old. He took them from her before she could find it. She was fighting the urge to blink because if she blinked the tears would come like a torrent down her face and clear down her neck. She had yet to cry any tears, at least not that she had let him see. Not today. Not in Loose Park. None. Of all things, his keys were going to bring them on.

“I had to get out and breathe,” she sighed, caught and dejected, not just because she had been caught but because she knew she would be before she wrested herself away from him.

He tried to suppress a smirk and gently told her, “You're not wearing any shoes.” She stole a look at her pedicured feet. “Where are they?”

She pressed the side of her hand beneath her eye to dam up the tears, but they were charting a course of their own around the tips of her fingers and along her nose. “Under the table in the kitchen.”

He went for them and found them right where she said they would be, under the table and at opposing angles, one on its side, one standing up, like they were two pieces of Stonehenge.

*iii*

They coasted down the bending Ward Parkway ski slope at fifty miles an hour, then fifty-five, then sixty. No one could keep up with them. They hit nothing but green lights. He shot through them without braking. This was what he wanted tomorrow to be like: fast and easy and free.

Brush Creek was oil black and sequined by the reflected stars and street lamps. Farther down the opposite bank, perched on a shelf of land that became the steep, steep hill leading up to Loose Park, was the Iberia and its identical siblings. They were big checkerboards of lit and unlit windows. Number 718 was easy to pick out. It was the only one with a groomed topiary on its balcony, which Brook must have owed to Frannie, or Ferrell channeling Frannie's decorating sensibilities. Its curtains were drawn. No one was home.

Meg snapped off her seatbelt. The car was still moving. "I don't want to sit. I want to walk," she said, sounding bitterly disappointed because he had not read her mind.

So he parked parallel to the creek and they walked, first along the wide ribbon of sidewalk parallel to one bank of Brush Creek, then past the darkened Plaza shops. The last of the movies at Seville Square had let out. The theater's neon marquee reflected off the dark store windows across the street. The horses and Cinderella carriages had vanished, gone to wherever it was they went until they reappeared the next evening. The carriage ticket booths—skinny, red, rectangular structures like flimsy phone booths—

were closed up, the price placards displayed on the street corners stored inside. In the shop where Andy got his shoes shined, two straight-backed chairs hulked in the darkness. A fresh stack of white rags sat piled between the chairs, ready for the morning. Diamond-laden necklaces glinted from behind special reinforced glass cubby holes set in the side of the Tivol building. The parking garages were empty. They ambled up Jefferson, then without consulting each other, turned onto Nichols. At night, the buildings seemed to lose their depth and incomparable sturdiness. It was an illusion, a trick the darkness liked to play, but Andy was not worried. In the bronze-orange dawn, they would regain their dimensionality and bulk.

“Back at the house—that was very dramatic.” He knocked playfully against her as they walked.

“I couldn’t help it.”

“Kind of clichéd for you, though.” In his estimation, the situation called for humor, a bit of ribbing to cut through her despondence, but he miscalculated.

Pop-pop. Her high heels stopped on the sidewalk, and she spun around to confront him. “Would you like me to tell you?”

“Of course. You know I do.”

He had to listen closely because she was agitated, but trying not to be, and that made her talk like she was hyperventilating. She said she had been sick of seeing the kitchen and the family room, even the living room and the dining room, where the sight of all the picked over, cold potluck food gave her a twisting nauseous feeling in her stomach. So, she trudged upstairs to look in on Frannie, and she, with her keen mother’s intuition,

sensed Meg hovering near the door and invited her in. Calling her darling, she asked Meg to lie beside her on the bed.

Meg went eagerly to her and Frannie confessed to having just made a rare visit to her daughter's room. "Jillian had the most lovely room for a girl," she said. She had instructed Janet Kelsey to tell everyone who saw the house that it was a little girl's room. The window seat in Jill's room had not been there when they first saw the house, she explained. The husband of a nurse who worked with Lew when he started his practice was a wonderful carpenter. He made china cabinets, the most beautiful china cabinets, and he built the window seat the weekend before they moved in. Inside it, Jill kept her dolls, "her blonde army of Barbies," as Frannie called them, but as Jill grew up, it became a catchall for her fabric scraps, buttons—so many buttons. She collected them, went to garage sales, and would come home with grocery sacks of old clothes and then snip off all the buttons. The inside of window seat was a mess, like an oversized, glorified junk drawer, and Frannie had threatened to clean it out and throw it all away because Jill could not get the lid to close all the way. "Oh, we could fight about the silliest things," she said, not sounding terribly proud of herself.

Frannie stared up at the ceiling fan's spinning shadow and its chain that never stopped jiggling. She lapsed into a mournful reverie. When she felt Frannie falling asleep, Meg dismounted the bed. Out in the hall she stared down the dark corridor at a door at its end. She went to the door with slow, sinking steps. The door did not move when she tried to ease it open with the weight of her knuckle, so she pushed in with her shoulder. She looked inside and had a terrible thought.



None of this—the Van Dynes’ world—was hers. None of it. She could not believe she had missed something so obvious. And she had let herself believe that it was. How preposterous she must have appeared to everyone today, welcoming them into the house, guiding them through the cobbled together buffet, urging them to eat and drink and leave their sympathy cards in a basket set out on the *escritoire*. They must all have been thinking, “Who is this girl? Where has she come from? Why is she still around?” (At this, Meg whirled around and waved her arms in the air, and mocked herself with bitter laughter as they passed by the row of ornate Spanish street lamps lining the median.) For months she had gone on blithely, happily, wholly unburdened and under the assumption that she had discovered a true life, a brilliant one of easy-going, humble privilege that suited her, but it had been nothing more than a summer idyll, her most expansive and consuming delusion. At the church, she had lost her place in the Lord’s Prayer. (“Did you hear me?” she asked him. “Who does that? I know how it goes. Everyone knows how it goes. Weird Buddhist atheists like you know how it goes!”) Nothing came to mind once she reached *on earth as it is in heaven*. In Jill’s doorway, she was crushed, obliterated, and the misplaced words from the Lord’s prayer strung themselves together. *...forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us...* She was the trespasser, and this true, good life she found had been coming apart all along. This house. Lew. Memphis. Ferrell. Seam after seam had opened and everything had fallen through. None of it was hers, and it had been falling through ever since she met Ferrell in the Hall’s fitting room.

There was nothing in the highboy’s drawers, and now Lew was inside the handsome, black urn that sat in its corner. (She was walking backwards, facing Andy,

and every time they stepped into the light of a street lamp, he saw a sad sort of mania in her eyes. He did not know how they got from the falling through and the Hall's fitting rooms to Lew's ashes and the empty highboy drawers.) The Treadways would come back and make an offer, a smart, irresistible offer. The carpet was down and the walls were painted in the lake Villa. There was an empty house in a Memphis suburb where Brook would soon unload his few meager luxuries from a moving van. Ferrell was in her tiny kitchen, staying very busy and strong, contemplating Manifest Destiny and the myriad essay questions it could inspire. There was a pall over the sunny La Jolla offices and lots of hushed gossip about who was going where.

She was someone else's dead daughter, she said. ("I mean, I am, right?") To that, Andy had no reply. Seeing Jill's room, she had thought of her own room. Her own room drowning in clothes she did not bother to hang up or return to her dresser. A wreck of socks and shoes and old notes from Algebra class. Her own room with a roll-top desk too small for her to sit at. Her room with a brass day bed she refused to make. Her own room she forbade her mother from entering. Her own room above the garage. Her own room with a single window, a square with a view of the neighbor's warped siding. She wanted to know what her mother and father looked like but was afraid they had aged in ways that left them diminished or undignified. She was afraid of being too late. Suppose she arrived at an empty, silent house, her mother's piano gone from the front room? What, then, was she supposed to do? She no longer wanted for her parents the life Frannie had lived without Jillian. She was too scared to go back and too scared to stay away, and she could not stay any longer in the house a dead daughter had left behind.

Shaking her hands through her hair, she let out a little scream. And then she sighed and chuckled ruefully to herself. She was done.

Andy could not tell her so, but in the few minutes it took them to speed out of Mission Hills and into the Plaza, he had reached the opposite conclusion. This, the city, was his, not the whole sprawling Kansas-Missouri, Cain and Abel mess, but his limited concept of it: Prairie Village and Mission Hills, the Plaza and sleepy picturesque Westwood, the Ward Parkway corridor, Westport, the Nelson and the Art Institute, Loose Park, Southmoreland Park, the Crossroads District, Crown Center, and Union Station. It was his inheritance. He was in total possession of it, and he had rarely, if ever, felt better. Greedily, he took it in. Not only was the city his, but so were the people, like the bellman patrolling the Intercontinental's covered driveway, the tired woman vacuuming in and out of a maze of cubicles, an unkempt man methodically picking through a restaurant's dumpster in search of something edible, the valet boys who loitered outside all the restaurants in their matching khaki shorts and polo shirts who were now at home or out spending their folded wads of tip money at a bar in Westport, the waitress and bartender moving about the rooftop bar of O'Dowd's Little Dublin. They plunked glasses and plates into a plastic tub. The sound of one plate against another rang out and echoed down to the street.

Ahead was the Plaza Tennis Center. He had never paid much attention to it, but tonight he studied it with proprietary satisfaction. Here was something else that, from now on, belonged to him. The outer courts were dark, but the tall floodlights illuminated center court in concentrated ponds of yellow. Two orange water coolers cast fat shadows across the baseline at one end. The net had been taken down. A banner announcing a

USTA juniors camp hung from the wrought iron fence and flapped in the only whisper of a breeze he had felt all night.

The traffic lights stayed green for long stretches. Cars swished through the intersections without braking. At times, traffic disappeared, and the sound of water dominated. Turgid and still, Brush Creek did not make a sound, but all the fountains splashed monotonously. A sheer, circular curtain of water spilled down from Pomona's marble basin. Water rushed from the two-story manmade falls fronting the Intercontinental. They seemed to have the power of Niagara. The spurting jets of the Nichols fountain could be heard from blocks away. At this quiet hour, even the thin streams of water arching out of the mermaid's horns and the fingers of the Roman boys in the Pool of Four Fauns made a distinct burbling noise. So did the fine needles of water pricking the crouching Diana's naked back and thighs, and the spitting frog that launched a never-ending beam of water onto the chubby knees of a cherub-faced boy. The fountains were his and so were the statues. They were paralyzed and mute, and made the streets more profoundly deserted: Ruth looking blankly skyward, Mr. and Mrs. Churchill, the bronze man reading and eating his hamburger on the rock outside the Seville Square McDonald's, Ben Franklin staring down through the glasses balanced at the top of his nose, the organ grinder and his monkey that looked like a big-eared old man in a bowler hat, the mop-haired boy—a Florentine replica—determined to pry a thorn from his foot.

Because it belonged to him, he could give it to her. The towers, the domes, the rooftop bars, the hanging flower baskets sending down vines toward the street like Rapunzel's long hair, the matador murals, every statue, every fountain, every restaurant table set up on the sidewalk, every strand of Christmas lights, every watercolor and piece

of pottery for sale in the Plaza Art Fair booths during that one weekend in September, and the girls in springtime feeling glamorous in their prom dresses as they paraded around with their tuxedoed dates—every one of those things could be hers, too, if she wanted them. They could share them—fifty-fifty—and be happy. Him offering and her accepting, that would be the cure.

Andy darted ahead and planted himself squarely in Meg's path. When she tried to swerve around him, he took her by the arms to keep her in place.

"I want you to stay." He corrected himself: "I need for you to stay."

He endured a long stretch of silence before she answered.

"What would we do?" she asked, removing his hands from her arms. "Buy a house and have babies?" Her disdain was withering.

"Maybe." He said "maybe" while meaning "yes." She knew him well enough to understand that.

"You're crazy." She laughed. She laughed deliberately in hopes of humiliating him, and it was working. It would have been one thing if she did not mean what she said, if it was a put-on because she did not want to deal right now with such big things as houses and babies, but it was clear, vicious honesty.

He explained to her how "this" belonged to him, and he was giving it to her, for them to have together. It was a jumbled explanation made more obtuse because he never adequately identified what "this" was. He assumed she would know how to interpret the big, sweeping motion he made with his arm for emphasis and rhetorical effect. She squinted at him as if that would help make it clearer, and when she wasn't squinting, she was watching his mouth, like the words were tangible things, made, maybe, of tiles from

a Scrabble game, with both sympathy and fear. The more impassioned he got, the more incomprehensible his train of thought became. Failure dawned on him. He insisted to himself it was only temporary failure rooted in their cross-purposes. “You understand, don’t you?”

Meg answered with the most disingenuous smile. It was the smile everyone adopted when Mimi Lehman got her diarrhea of the mouth and went into gruesome detail about, say, an ingrown toe nail of Burt’s. It was a smile that said, “You’re sweet, but out of your mind.”

He slid onto the bench beside bronze, life-size Ben Franklin. “So, you’re just going to leave me to pine for you ceaselessly?” He reverted back to his characteristic glibness. It was his defense against losing his patience.

“Be serious.” She was brutally dismissive.

He patted the leg of Ben Franklin’s breeches and addressed him: “She’s just going to leave me here to pine for her ceaselessly. Do you believe it?” This glibness of his was the worst kind of compulsion. He wished he could make it stop. “Ben can’t believe it, Margaret. You’re disappointing one of our founding fathers. You should be ashamed.”

Meg was not amused. She had her hands smacked to her hips. The humidity exaggerated the natural kinks in her hair.

“I’m done,” Andy insisted. “I’m done. For real. You can stop. I’ll be serious. Just stop and I’ll be serious.”

She walked on, and Andy was seized by the possibility that tomorrow, which he coveted, could be worse than today. She walked close to the buildings. Her arm rubbed

against the brick and the stucco and the stone and the smooth cold tiles that made up the murals of Columbus's ships and matadors in the bullring. They had made a full circle around the Plaza. Across the street was the Volvo, its interior illuminated by a street lamp. It was the lone car on the block.

Andy jogged to catch up to her. "I think you want that more than anything."

"I'll ruin it."

"You won't. I won't let you. I promise." He reassured her, despite the fact she was on the brink of ruining everything right now.

She covered her face with her purse. "Don't be stupid," she said, the purse muffling her voice.

A minute ago he was crazy, and now he was stupid, but he was not going to retaliate. He was going to be even-tempered and unimpeachably rational. Rationality would wear her down. If it couldn't, nothing would.

"I promise. We could do it. We *can* do it. Maybe not right away. That's not what I mean." It sort of was what he meant, but he could not admit it to her.

A taxi, a black Mercury sedan with a green hood and green doors, glided down Ward Parkway. It sped up to make the green light at the Pennsylvania Street intersection, but the light flicked from green to yellow to red. Rather than rip through the intersection, the taxi jolted to a stop.

"Margaret—" Andy had his hand out. "I meant some day. Not like next week. We'll pace ourselves and make a plan." A plan would do him good. It was what he had been missing. He had not had a decent one, or even a shred of one, since college, when he had approached every day as a series of tasks that had to be successfully completed if

he were to have any shot at getting the internship in Hong Kong. He was going to say to Meg, “Let’s go into Winstead’s.” It was just down the street and still open at this hour. They could order French fries and chocolate shakes, and while they sucked whipped cream through their straws and listened to the Shirelles or the Crystals on the jukebox, she could push off her shoes and set her feet on the mint green vinyl cushion where he sat on the other side of the booth, and somehow, by the time they left, everything would be worked out, and tomorrow would be so very, very near. But none of that had a chance of happening because she had the stricken, frozen-beneath-the-ice look he had seen before.

“Hey, let’s—” he started to ask, anyway, unwilling to give up yet. He finished the question, but she did not hear him because she had broken into a wobbling sprint. She was in the street, oblivious to an oncoming car, as if she knew it would drift into another lane and turn sharply onto Broadway before it reached her. She knocked on the taxi driver’s window. It slid down, and Andy could see the driver’s mass of coiled dreadlocks bundled in a rubber band. If she got in that taxi, Andy was certain he would never see her again. It would take her to the airport, and she would be on the first flight with an empty seat. The taxi driver motioned for Meg to get in, and she did.

Andy shot after her. “Get out of the cab, Margaret.” When he said her name, it was with taunting laughter identical to hers when he had asked her to stay. Andy was enraged now. He implored her to get out, to go back to the Iberia with him, or to the Van Dynes’, or anywhere, so long as she was out of the cab and with him. In another instant, this light that kept the taxi in place, where Meg sat inside pulling strands of hair from her mouth and assuring the driver that the raving man outside was really not a threat, would shine green and bright, and she will have gotten away. A car honked at him. He needed



to get out of the street. He was about to grab at the door handle, but the light flashed to green, and the dreadlocked driver floored the accelerator.

## 15. EPILOGUE

Summer expended the last of its energy in a series of beastly hot mid-September days, but Andy thought nothing of it. Last Saturday, he had returned from Africa, where the heat had clung to him for the better part of two weeks. With Brook in Memphis and Frannie getting used to the strange new solitude of the lake villa, it was up to him, as Lew's proxy, to meet, at last, the most mysterious continent face to face. He saw zebras galloping across the plain and a lion ravaging a fallen gazelle. He ate wild boar cooked on a spit. He saw the African sun, deceptively touchable, rise, levitate, and ooze orange across the horizon. If not for Jeannette and Arnaud, a newlywed couple from outside of Paris, he would have been the youngest one in the group. There were four forty-something women from the hinterlands of Manitoba, one of them the mother of a teenager about to start his rookie season with the Vancouver Canucks; a former MP from

a Midlands district traveling with his father, who, with his bushy eyebrows and sharp nose, was a character straight out of one of Jill's Brit lit novels; twin sisters celebrating their fiftieth birthdays; and a couple from Zanesville, Ohio. They had just installed the youngest of their three children in a dorm room at Ohio State and were finding it quite easy to transition into the life of empty-nesters. Andy was the only one in the group not with someone else, and there had been a kind, but embarrassing, collective effort to make sure he did not feel left out.

He had looked forward to the time he had to himself, before breakfast and before closing the flap of his tent to go to bed, and one morning, he woke just before dawn to go to a nearby pool where the guides had taken them to observe a small herd of zebras quenching their thirst among the wispy reeds. Tight against his chest, he had carried the urn holding Lew's ashes. He flung handful after handful of ashes like he was sowing grass seed over barren ground. He lofted the black lacquered box high, higher than his head, ready to tip it, and let the breeze take the last of the ashes with it. He stopped. He lowered the urn, set it down in the dirt. He turned because he heard a sound. Arnaud, he thought. They were often the first to emerge for breakfast. Andy had not wanted anyone around, and when he checked, there was no one. He turned in each direction, waited and listened. He saw nothing but the sky, the sun, the shallow pool, the thin reeds at its edges, and a black spot in a distant tree, a buzzard or some other bird picking at its wings. Yet there was a closeness on all sides, and the closeness was with him, behind him, and ahead of him, and at his sides as he headed back toward the camp. It was an unusual feeling, but not an unpleasant one. It wanted something from him. It wanted him to acknowledge that Lew was not in the ash, nor was he on the moon. It had urged him,

nudged him to pick up the urn and go back, so he had gone, and it had come into his tent and stayed while he lay prostrate on his cot, and it had compelled him to pray. It was a bad prayer, a child's prayer, but praying it—though he did not know for sure who he was praying to or what he was praying for—came as a release and a relief.

The closeness had come back with him. It got off the plane with him and came to work with him and shared his meals with him. Since he had been back, these, the burnished, late day hours that were neither afternoon nor evening, were his favorite time, and the time when that closeness felt palpably closer still. He left the office, tossed aside his suit and tie and loafers, and traded them for an old tee-shirt and the pair of khaki shorts scarred by a worn square on the back pocket left by his wallet. After work, he labored in the Van Dynes' yard, tending Frannie's flowers until the street lights flickered on. She hired a lawn service before she left, but they put no care into it. Whoever did it made only one roaring, half-assed pass with a riding mower. Judging by how long the grass was, they had missed a week, and the last time they mowed they neglected a stretch along the side of the house. Tomorrow, he would venture over to the Lehmans' to see if Burt had a mower he could borrow. Tonight, though, he worked amongst the flowers planted in the front—those planted close to the house, in the curving mulched mounds on either side of the driveway and in the immovable terra cotta pots on each of the brick steps leading to the front door. During the time that he was gone, weeds, some taller than the flowers and with impressive roots, had grown unabated. He stood sideways, in between two explosions of white and pink impatiens beneath the dining room's bay window, examining the hole left by some mischievous burrowing animal after he yanked up a leafy stalk that had eluded him the night before. It was probably that chipmunk that

streaked across the driveway in a beige blur every time Andy came near. He went back to sculpting the fresh mulch he had spread around the trees and flowers last evening. The mulch was richly brown and smelled just as richly of manure. From the street, it gave the raised mounds a sharp, eye-pleasing definition they had not had before.

These were also the hours when the fast-advancing dusk lit the house in brassy shafts of light and dark blocks of shadow that he would take time out of his yard-work to photograph. In Africa, he had used thirteen rolls of film. He was re-teaching himself how to do it, how to compose a really good shot, and it was becoming more natural by the day. He kept his camera always within his reach, even at work, where it sat, like a paperweight, atop a stack of folders on the credenza and waited in proud silence to be picked up and taken out with him on his lunch breaks. As part of his practice, he had been shooting the house, inside and out, at all times of day in all kinds of light. Jill would have thought it so very Monet of him. The Van Dyne house as Chartres cathedral: that would have gotten a laugh from her and would have made those dimples of hers expand. Perhaps it would become profitable, a new free-market adventure. Perhaps he would revisit Chase County, this time with his camera in tow. Whether he went or not, there would be girls here who would want to commemorate their appearance at the Jewel Ball, couples on the cusp of monumental anniversaries, large scattered families that only came together on rare occasions and needed their togetherness documented for posterity, couples who wanted an engagement portrait taken on the steps of the Nelson. He could put a little advertisement in the *Independent*. Portraits by Andrew Quinn.

Thanks to Jeannette and Arnaud, he had become enamored with portraiture. The second morning in Africa, Andy woke first, and while he waited for everyone to join him

for breakfast, he saw Arnaud pull back his tent flap to assess the weather and taste the air. He was ruffled from sleep and his canvas shirt needed buttoning. One of the tongues of his untied boots lolled to the side. He was too absorbed in the grandeur of the big grapefruit sun and his own untainted marital bliss to notice Andy, in a chair by the previous night's burned out fire, bring his camera from his knee to his eye. That night he photographed Jeannette, languorously puffing on her cigarette as she wrote the secrets of her new married life in a leather-bound journal. "My picture you just took?" she had asked in her graceful, but fractured English.

He told her he had already taken one of Arnaud.

"You are a professional picture taker, yes?"

"No," he said, disappointed by the truth.

"Take one of us together," she insisted. "For our families."

The following day, they rode together in the back of a Land Rover. Andy had spotted a herd of galloping zebras in the distance out of Jeannette's window. If he wanted the shot, he had to act fast. He turned his back against the door. He raised the camera and waved Arnaud and Jeannette together. The Land Rover jounced along the hardpan. It bumped over something, and in that second's worth of weightless elation, he captured the two of them open-mouthed and exuberant. It was a rather wonderful shot, a lucky shot, too. Jeannette's hair was whipping about, and the slight but charming gap in her front teeth was on full display. Her and Arnaud's cheeks were pressed together, and in the background were the zebras, striped blurs in motion. Jeannette bragged about the photo without having seen it. Her endorsement had been so enthusiastic that, over the course of the twelve days, he took spontaneous portraits of everyone in the group. Next

year, or the year after that, he might have a booth at the Plaza Art Fair, and the rambling couples that caused bottlenecks in the barricaded streets would stop to see if they could find a unique or powerful quality to his work. What did something like that cost? Andy had no idea. That was an insider's bit of knowledge he imagined Frannie had filed away. He would have to ask.

He had dreaded coming back because he was sure that Lew's absence would renew the feeling that he did not deserve his job, and that it would return more acutely than before, so much so that for stretches of several minutes of the day he would sit at his desk incapable of doing anything but plotting his fantasy baseball strategy for next season. (While he was gone, he had moved out of last place, believe it or not, and that was without making any of the trades or acquisitions he outlined on the back page of his datebook. He could not remember why they had seemed so important.) And he thought he would find himself tempted again by his vagabond life, and, within a month or two, be bound for Dallas or Albuquerque or Buffalo. None of that was the case. He had a positive balance in his bank account, not as swollen a balance as he had once been used to (the markets were hardly bullish enough for that), but a positive one nevertheless. He was absorbed not only in the Hang Seng, the Nikkei, and the BSE Sensex, but the city as well. It was a good city. A quirky, stubborn city that did not often take well to change or criticism. It was divided against itself, always of two minds that hardly ever met, but it was his and he could not leave. He had taken a morning run along the river. That was a first. And, the other night, after he finished his chores in the yard, he went to a downtown bar to see that waiter, Cole, decked out in copious amounts of eyeliner, play with his band and make supple, snake-like moves across the stage. He had seen a flier

for them in the place where he bought his morning coffee and thought, what the hell, why not? What else do you have going on?

With his back to the street, Andy dug his hands into the mulch and pried a tenacious weed from the earth. He heard a car engine idling. The engine shut off, and a car door slapped shut. Son of a bitch. He was sure it was Janet Kelsey making an impromptu visit with an imperious couple questing for the ideal place to house their expanding collection of abstract art. Over his shoulder he saw Ferrell wave and break into a jog up the yard's incline. At the sight of his face, she smacked her hands to her cheeks in amazement. "Oh my God!" she said. She pointed at him, and, laughing, swayed as if she was about to faint. "What is that?"

"It's a damn fine beard." He had never grown one before Africa. Men of the sort he aspired to be were impeccably clean shaven, but shaving had been such a hassle there he just let it grow.

"You disapprove?" he asked. He met her in the middle of the yard.

"No. Not disapprove. Just different, that's all." She got up close to have a really good look at it. She tipped his chin back with the bent knuckle of her thumb. "You seem to wear it well, though." Satisfied, she gave his chin a little squeeze.

They started toward the house. He strode beside her, but a bit behind. They were done fighting, he thought. For good. He threw a quizzical look in her direction to see if she agreed. The reply came immediately, a knowing, fluttering blink. *Yes. The time for that has passed.*

*Passed into what? You are here, and I want you here, but what are we to make of it? Are we friends? That's an awfully superficial term for the two of us.*



Ferrell was focused on the house straight ahead and did not respond.

“I’ve been driving by sometimes, just to make sure it’s still here,” she said. She sailed along through the thin, high grass, the blades lapping her calves.

Andy tossed the handful of weeds he had been holding onto the pile he had started on the sidewalk. “Want help?” she asked. She readjusted the big, bug-eyed sunglasses nesting at the crown of her head. They kept her hair out of her eyes.

“Not really.” He wiped the dirt from his hands onto the back pockets of his shorts. “You’ll get crap all over your clothes.”

“You pulled up a perfectly healthy petunia, you know that?” With her hands on her hips, she stood by evaluating his work.

“Yes, I know that,” he said. It was a runt, and looked pathetic amongst the others.

The sleeve of his tee-shirt was crammed in the back pocket of his shorts. The shirt hung down and flicked the back of his knees when he moved. He used it as a towel to sop the sweat from his face and around his neck. It was old, irrevocably sweat-stained in the armpits. *Daze of Thunder: Kappa Sigma Soapbox Derby*, it said beneath a copyright infringing image of Speedracer and his monkey. Ignoring the dirt smeared places where he had cleaned his hands before, he put the shirt on. It sucked onto his skin.

“Was I at that?” Ferrell asked.

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t remember being at a soapbox derby.”

“I smoked your boy Davis Dave. That’s all you need to know.”

She settled down onto the brick stoop and picked a blade of grass and tried to see how many green strips she could separate it into. “Where do you think he is now?”

“Who the hell knows,” he answered. He scooped the weeds, their roots laden with dirt that fell to the sidewalk, into a trash bag, which he deposited at the driveway’s edge. “Maybe a used car lot in Van Nuys.” When he returned to survey the flowerbeds for himself, he said, “Talk about a guy with literally no redeeming qualities. I should have clocked him when I had the chance.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know. At the Hawk. Brook and I were there. Turley was shooting his mouth off about you, classless stuff you’d expect from him. He was wasted. I, on the other hand, was a model of sobriety.”

“So you were only three-fourths wasted,” she teased.

“About. Brook wouldn’t let me take him.” This sounded like an off-hand indictment of Brook. Perhaps it was.

“And when exactly was this?”

“*That* fall.” She would know what he meant. *That* fall had followed on the heels of *that* summer.

“You would really have punched him?”

“Hell, yes. Would have been my distinct pleasure.”

“What did he say about me?”

“Don’t make me tell you.”

“How come I’ve never known about this?”

“What’s to know? Nothing happened.”

He had left a box of plant food on the step. Ferrell opened it and emptied it into a jug that attached to the end of the garden hose. Her doing this was an interesting thing to

him. It was not a difficult thing, not technical in the least, but last night he had treated the flowers in the backyard and, in his haste to be done with it, had spilled a quarter of the package of turquoise granules onto the flagstones. Ferrell, though, knew to tear just a small opening at the corner of the package and tap its underside so that the powder funneled into the jug. Although he had seen her garden, he had never thought of her doing all the things it would take for her bulbs and vegetables to grow. She would have to be hunkered down, knees and hands in the earth, clods of soil crumbling between her fingers and clumps of it lodging behind her fingernails.

Ferrell groaned and said, "I think I want to go see my mother."

"Then you should go see her." Andy showered the impatiens with plant food.

"I'm such a baby," she lamented. "Lew dies and all I can think is, 'I want my mom,' as if she would be the least bit comforting. 'Here, Ferrell, have a macadamia nut and come see the new chairs Ronald and I got for the lanai.'"

"How long's it been since you've seen her?"

"A year—" she stopped to count on her fingers, "—and nine months."

"You should go."

"But why do I want to? I know if I do it will be a disaster."

"Because you love her, and you can't help it. She's your mother."

"And I really hate that I love her. And I have no capacity, no understanding of how to show it."

Andy wanted to offer her a succinct, wise anecdote featuring his own mother, nothing too fraught with residual misunderstanding, guilt, or bitterness, just something frank and loosely parallel to her own situation that could communicate his empathy, but

he let the opportunity die. Finished spraying the flowers, he cranked off the water to the hose, detached the jug, looped the hose around his forearm, and returned it to its ordained spot in a patch of bare dirt beside the air conditioner. When he headed up the brick steps into the house, the bottom of his shorts skimmed across Ferrell's shoulder, and she took this as an invitation to follow him inside.

He walked on into the kitchen, but the emptiness of the house froze her. She was doing what he had already done, and done five or ten times over. She was mentally refurnishing the house, repositioning the books on the shelves, placing throw pillows at their familiar angles, re-hanging pictures and clocks, shaking out rugs and spreading them over the floors, grouping knick-knacks. She was arranging the two Waterford decanters on the dining room buffet and the book of etudes open to an *Andante* on the piano, setting the glass dome that housed the Easter carrot cake on the dining room table, fanning magazines out on the coffee table. She was aligning on the piano's lid Jill and Brook's framed elementary school crayon drawings, chalk rubbings, and finger-paintings. She would find, as he did, that the carpet indentations from furniture legs and lamp bases branded into the carpet provide a helpful blueprint and that the years of passing through the foyer on the way up the stairs or out to the pool had ingrained in her a complete inventory of everything she would need.

He took his time washing his hands in the kitchen sink, working the lather up his forearms, rinsing, lapping water onto his face, then contorting his head to drink from the tap. Having her around was good. It kept him from watching dust motes, exposed by the last drawn out minutes of late summer sun, make their endless progress toward the carpet and the baseboards. Not long after falling asleep in his tent, he had been jarred awake by

hunger. He was starved not for food but for Ferrell because, he thought, she is all I have left and I cannot lose her too. He spent the night wracked with worry, balled up in his blanket, afraid she was somewhere other than her pink-doored house.

“Thirsty?” he called.

“What do you have?” Her flip flops smacked the foyer’s hardwood floor as she moved into the family room.

“H<sub>2</sub>O straight from the tap. Booze. Take your pick.”

“What’s this?” He came to the doorway to answer her question. She stood over a green inflatable mattress on the living room floor. He glanced from the mattress up to her. There it was. After being away, he was not used to it anymore, that streak of gray hair she did not let her stylist dye away. Outside, he had been too busy to notice. That she let it be was such a defiant Ferrell Nash sort of thing to do.

“I had to be out of Brook’s place on Wednesday.”

“So, what, you’re sleeping here?”

“Where else would I go?” he answered, wandering back to the kitchen to get his beer. “Frannie’s cool with it.”

“You can’t really stay here. I have a spare room. I’d leave you alone, give you your space.”

“Thanks, but I’ve had enough of spare bedrooms for awhile.” He was careful not to have her think him ungrateful.

“That’s probably true.”

Ferrell flicked open all the blinds in the family room and opened the French doors. A block of slatted late-day sunshine appeared on the carpet, its brightness reaching

far enough that he saw the light gleam off the kitchen floor. “The pool’s empty,” she said.

The pool was like a crater to him, so, as much as possible, Andy left the blinds screwed shut when he was in the house.

“Some guys came and drained it the other day. A liability thing, you know, if someone comes to look at the house and their kid gets away from them and does a swan dive into the deep end without knowing how to swim.”

The Treadways had never made an offer, and Andy did not know how often the house was shown during the day while he was at work, though it had been a day or two since he had seen any new shoe prints in the carpets of the rooms he did not enter.

“These are all your pictures!” Ferrell exclaimed. “The ones you took for your class.” She had knelt down and was rummaging in the cardboard box he left beside the mattress. “Some of these are incredible, Andy. Hey, is this me?”

She had found the photograph Talkin had praised to the heavens. It had been near the top of the stack.

“Of course it’s you. You didn’t even know I was there.”

“Where was this? The grass over by Wescoe?”

“Yeah. More in front of Stauffer-Flint, I guess, if you want to be technical about it. It pretty much guaranteed my “A” for the semester.”

She sat on the edge of the mattress, her knees pulled in close to her chin. The mattress quaked when he sat next to her. He handed her a bottle of water and twisted the cap off a bottle of beer. “Tell me about it. Tell me all about Africa. What’s it like?” she asked.

“There was a French couple in the group, newlyweds. Arnaud and Jeannette. You would have liked them.”

“No, really. Tell me about the place. Did you take pictures? Can I see them?”

“They’re at the office. Next weekend, I’m going to visit Frannie and show them to her.”

“She’ll love that. But come on, tell me about it. Was it fantastic?”

“I don’t know. It’s dry, brown, wide-open.” With the beer bottle in his hand, he leaned back on his elbows. “So, what are your classes like so far? Are they good kids?”

“Third period, the Advanced Placement too-smart-for their-own-good kids, they’re a little uptight. They’ll be destroyed if they get anything less than a perfect score on the SAT. Fifth period, they have a raging case of senioritis already. The sophomores I’ve got second and sixth period, they’re just goofy, hormonal wrecks. They think I’m evil because I’ve threatened them with a seating chart.”

The lightning bugs hovered and blinked. The night was still, but a summer storm approached. Outside, when he stopped once to catch the sweat dripping from his chin, Andy had rested on his heels, looked up to the sky and spotted the mushrooming clouds in the southwestern distance, one of them elongating into a flat-topped anvil. A gust of wind swept through the trees, carrying the shrieks of children on the other side of the fence. The tree branches nodded, and the leaves made a rushing sound. The children were oblivious to the mottled, darkening sky. They were Pete Lehman’s children. He had two of them, a boy and a girl, and a stout little wife who foolishly wore a bikini. His girl’s name was something terrible and effete that she was sure to resent someday:

Athena. The name given to the boy, the, son, the little Pete Lehman-in-training was even worse. Crispin, like an imported snack cracker meant to be served with pâté.

The Lehmans' older daughter, Sandra, was there too, visiting along with her wimp of a husband and their three mop-haired boys. Sandra, gawky, tall and tanned, towered over Pete. She had the unmistakable markers of a woman who played in every possible women's league at the country club: tight calf muscles, a tan line above her knees that the skirt of her swimming suit did not quite cover, and one of those stupid padded women's sun visors with the exaggerated bill. Last night Andy had peered over the fence just in time to see old man Lehman, decked out in his loud batik cabana wear, wheel out a silver bar cart and serve up a round of scotch and waters to the assembled adults.

"Have you talked to Brook?" Andy asked.

"He left a message with his new number in Memphis. That's it."

"You could have brought Beale Street to its knees, don't you think?"

She smirked. "If I'd wanted to."

When Ferrell spoke again into the darkening room, her gentle bravado of a moment before cracked. "Know what I want?" Andy did not answer. He was afraid he knew what she would say. "I'd like to fall in love," she said. "Just once."

"Ferrell—" This was too much. That was all Andy could think. This was too much. They could have these conversations in their silent way, but not out loud.

"Don't say anything," she whispered.

"Ferrell," he pleaded



She laid back on the mattress, on her side, her face away from him. “Please. Don’t say anything. You know how old I am. I’ve only ever been with two men, and neither of them—” She coughed up a sardonic laugh.

The scent of rain water blew in on the wind. One drop, then a second, collided with the windows. Corral the children, Andy thought. Gather them in towels and shuffle them into the stark cold air conditioning. Fill a big plastic bowl with popcorn. Unfold the Candyland board on the carpet. But the Lehman grandchildren played on in the pool. There was the first tremor of thunder, sounding as if it were below the ground, pushing up through the earth’s hard crust.

He could hardly see Ferrell’s profile now that the sun had been surpassed by a tide of gray-black clouds. If not for that curious stripe of white curving around her face, she would have been invisible. He felt a tightness in his throat and in the deepest, lowest part of his stomach. In the silence, did she, Andy wondered, picture Brook in his house, in his leather arm chair surrounded by a fort of packing boxes he would not think to open, watching a baseball game with the volume down? Or in the hospital cafeteria eating the last helpings of chicken á la king and strawberry shortcake? Did she see Frannie, who watched the foam white wakes of speed boats crisscross then dissolve, talking on the phone with her sister? Did she know that Lew was just as much out in the open African plain as he was down the hall in the den? Did she see Grier Nash, her mother, seated at a table with an ocean view, looking barely older than her grown-up daughter as she judged the waiter who uncorked the bottle of wine her husband had chosen? Could she picture Meg anywhere at all? Why would she? He could not. She was gone, untraceable. But

he knew she felt Jill, who filled all the empty space left behind, and knew this was the problem, the terror and the beauty of being here.

There was a warbling Tarzan cry from one of the boys, followed by the snap-twang reverberations of the diving board and a robust splash into the deep end. As if the sound of the diving board triggered her, Ferrell sat up. She lifted the beer bottle from Andy's hand and swallowed what was left. "We need to get away from this house," she said, but she did not move. With the bottle against her cheek, she stared out through the open door. She was listening. They were both listening. The darkness had made them realize that the other was lonely and had been for as long as either could remember. They listened to that predictable call-and-response cadence: *Marco! Polo! Marco! Polo!* They listened to Athena, Crispin, and Sandra's boys flail about in the water.

They were both thinking the same thing, both trying to send a telepathic message across the yard and over the fence to the boy who shouted "Marco!" again and again: just stay where you are, reach out your hand, and there will be someone close enough to touch.

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Doctor of Philosophy

Dissertation: THE GETAWAY GIRL: A NOVEL AND CRITICAL  
INTRODUCTION

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Scope and Method of Study: *The Getaway Girl* is a novel that has undergone extensive revisions in terms of both form and content since the earliest drafts of several now discarded chapters were written for graduate fiction workshops beginning in 2003. Set in an upper middle-class suburb of Kansas City, MO, it conforms to traits associated with the novel of manners and, although the novel does not resemble it stylistically, it is most heavily influenced by the work of Evan S. Connell. Elizabeth Bowen's novel, *The House in Paris*, serves as its structural model.

Findings and Conclusions: The novel explores what George Lukács believes to be the defining characteristic of the genre: the hero's quest to find a home in an alienating world. It takes advantage of the genre's flexibility by disrupting chronology and employing two different third-person point-of-view characters. It also develops character and voice through the technique of narrated monologue. While the majority of novels set in the suburbs of America portray them negatively, this novel aims for a more favorable treatment. It argues that life in the suburbs is the closest thing to home the hero can hope to find. Themes of the novel include grief, regret, family life, the suburbs, and the search for home.

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