

THE WORLD OF ONLY LIGHT

by

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The World of Only Light

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Abstract: *The World of Only Light* is a collection of short stories. A young woman drops out of university to follow her lover to the coast of Washington, where she finds herself drawn slowly away from him into a final isolation in the bleak north-west wilderness. Two friends plan a summer of wild adventure, only to fall into a strange, dreamlike malaise. An artist shadows a stranger through the streets of Venice. A woman sets out on a pilgrimage to pray for a dying acquaintance she can't bring herself to visit. The stories evoke various lonely landscapes, from the gray coast of Ireland to a small town in the Texas desert. Here, the struggle between the desire to be known and the desire to disappear is measured in physical distance: the careful distance between two bodies, the distance between the cold sea and the small human self, the distance between an act of prayer and an act of love.

"It was a sea of shadows... as they walked, they waded knee-deep in the lovely lake. For the shadows were not merely lying on the surface of the ground, but heaped up above it like substantial forms of darkness, as if they had been cast upon a thousand different planes of the air."

*-George MacDonald*

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## THE DEEP POND DOOM

*For three months sitting in the pubs the smokeswerve in window light as day faded out, rosin off strings, the wet beards of Guinness, grey flashing grins, the faint dent of fiddle on my neck when I cradled it in my lap to listen, Belfast crew, shudder of doors, flute gasp, half-heard joke, someone's shout at the rasp of a reel, night fog coming over me, the warm weight of your hand at my waist, feet continuing to lift to the lilting beat as you whispered on. I closed my eyes shuddered felt the mouth in the night not you but something else—rain on my winter body flooding it and filling it until it couldn't be drowned anymore. My underwater eyes. The Drunken Landlady its spin of notes speeding wild in us for the final time. Sweet burn from the watered whiskies I held dampening my hands, the bow's horsehair blurred and torn, the cases black, open-mouthed to swallow night fever. Telling me your phone number and writing it on my bare arm with Sharpie. Bled through my skin for weeks into a bluish bruise into a story I sometimes tell.*

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I waited in the alleyway around the corner from your house. I could see the water, yes, and on it little painted boats rocking, some of them wrapped in cloth, half-hidden. I waited in front of your door. You see I couldn't tell how much I needed you. Through the door, I could hear a distant fiddle. At least I would see you, maybe speak—say

something. So I knocked. You came down and opened the door, still holding your fiddle lightly by the neck. Were you happy to see me? How could I know? Your gray eyes always unreadable as the sky. And also deep, as if somewhere, light... *I just came by*—but I didn't finish. Everyone else was still at the pub: Sally, Cleek, my sister who'd flown in to visit for the week. I had left them with a lie about going to the store for cigarettes. You leaned against the door, your gaze moving beyond me, and I peeled a bit of loose paint from your door frame. Royal blue. I don't think you saw me; I slipped the color into my pocket, quick as I could. After a moment you said *want to come up?*

Upstairs the room was filled with light. You put water on for tea and showed me the new violin you were making. It was reddish gold, glowing. When I put my hand on its smooth back, it breathed in. *What kind of tea?* you said, going into the kitchen. I didn't answer. I lay down on the floorboards and closed my eyes. The insides of my eyelids burned red-gold. I could hear you in the kitchen, moving around, setting out mugs and lifting the kettle from the stove. I thought I might never go back: to the pub, to the room I rented looking over the city—its spires, bay, blue of the Burren across the water. To America. I thought if I could just stay here on your floor, and you could stay where you were, one room away—But in the end I left and walked back to the pub, wearing an old coat of yours. My shoulder burned where your hand had rested a moment, as if tired, when you draped your coat around me after tea, when I couldn't get up and couldn't stop shivering...

\*

I looked out my window at a mountain. *Sliabh na mBan*. The mountain of the women. I didn't know what women. *Lost*, I imagined, one way or another. But I was there to rest. Drinking pots of black tea with second-cousin John and walking the muddy farm paths with his wife and little son. I had thought I should leave Galway now you were gone—to Germany, Dodd had said. For just two weeks. But it felt unbearably long. I tried to picture you, your remote eyes taking in that country, but I couldn't. Germany, you in Germany. What did I know about a place like that? What did I know about you, your bleak northern eyes? I lay in my foldaway bed listening to recordings of pipes, their reedy wail. Seamus Ennis: the drone of his pipes starting up, then his voice, old and muffled: *because—Seamus Ennis once met a little leprechaun truckly howl, at the bottom of the garden gluth and up the garden path, which came up from that, in the limeretty limeretty hill-hockles...before the earthien throne, before the leprechaun era, and long before the Argy-fargy. And that was in the deep Pond Doom, before the Emerald Isle was ever dropped (plop-plop) in the water...* What was he saying? It was like another language, the way he sounded, his hoarse words like something dug up wet from the ground. Covered in earth. Then the pipes again, settling into their voice, their wail. The sound of wailing began to fill the room... I labored up the mountain of women, winding and staggering in the clumpy grass, alone except for my breath (a cloud), the goats flocking here and there on the peak's cold reaches. On the mountaintop, a small sharp stone on a stack of stones. My hair blowing in my eyes. My hands numb and tingling. And below me, all around, the fog, the green running fields. So it wasn't only you, this wildness. It was a country, a

country I could see and touch and breathe. I breathed in the cold, deeply, like sword swallowing: the cleanness of that pain.

\*

Back in Galway, I saw you in the street. Your skin ruddy, your hair newly trimmed. You said, *going round to Padraig's to check on Michael Chang's fiddle. Where're you headed?* Because I wasn't headed anywhere, I went along with you (a *dander*, you used to say). Uninvited. The music at Padraig's, always only so-so. I sat alone in a corner booth, dabbling my fingertips in the wet rings on the table. I drew a pattern of waves breaking. You were moving around, running your hands over Michael's fiddle, going off to make calls on your phone. I could see you standing outside through the square of glass, the little window in the door: your head bent, listening to someone faraway in the fading afternoon. I looked around the room. The light dulling, the warm wood tables and gleaming brass of the bar, still and empty. Michael's arm describing slow arcs over his fiddle. Colm Alva's brother on a stool up at the bar, his fat back. You slid back into the booth and sighed. You began to talk about your phone. I half-listened, trembling. I thought in the end, I hated you. My body drunk with it, or with something dark emanating from the gut—your gray eyes shifting every time they met mine, your heavy gold earring, your full, sharply-cut lips. I wanted to *hit* you—hard as I could, and in the face—your cheekbone made my mouth water. I wanted to bruise it, bone against bone—I wanted to put my hands on your face.



\*

At first I'd thought the gray city was dreaming, and that I was, and that we'd flow into each other like two slow-surgings bodies of water, but it wasn't like that, not quite. I was in it, and then suddenly I was outside of it again. But it pushed us together and we went out to eat. After a session one night, as if by accident. Arrogant face, I had thought. Short, beer-bellied, your hair already graying. Your playing in the session too fast, too wild, your bow skittering over the strings. The uncontrolled rasp of it. Then suddenly sitting together in the glare of lights, blinking over fish and chips, as if we'd washed up together out of the bay. Wet and slightly dazed. You talked about yourself—you were clever and funny and dirty all at once. Your northern accent was strange to me in the beginning, then not strange. Sleepy afternoon sessions at Taaffe's, the walks down the quay, the bites to eat, nighttime sessions at Taylor's, wine bar next door, someone's beery livingroom, 24-hour diner. Your violinmaker's hands brushing my waist, my hair, playing with my fingers, and me edging away. You at thirty-six were twice my age, and I didn't know, I didn't know... Days of this: a whole spring, a gray twilight. In which we'd wander, up the hills out of the city, down to Galway Bay where the swans glided white against the deep blue of the water, the evening sky, the Burren that seemed to fade and drift away. Each night longer than the one before. I could feel then how far north I was. We wouldn't call it true night till it was four in the morning, well over, day lightening over the bay as I

leaned my forehead against the cool glass window of the cab driving back up the hill to my room.

\*

*You're getting to the age where you need sex*, you said. I put my hand to my mouth and laughed—my mouth that no one had yet touched. You never asked to, or perhaps you were always asking. Later, Dodd would ask, once you were gone and he and I had been out to the wine bar. *Can I kiss you?* We were sitting on his bedroom floor, listening to some records from the eighties. *No*. I thought how I didn't want him, then I thought about that word. *Want*. Something akin to nausea: a sickness in me that bloomed and grew under your gaze, your hands. You see I wanted you, but I was afraid. Or I didn't want you, and yet I also didn't want to be alone. Or I didn't want you to want me in the way that you did, always running your eyes up and down my body, making jokes about sex. I wanted everything to be like a sad old song playing in the distance; I wanted above all to suffer nobly, or at least to suffer... I shook my head, and the room throbbed with wine. Where was Dodd? I got up, stiffly, from the ground. The house was dark; he was nowhere to be seen. I let myself out into the street, into the pooling yellow of the streetlights. Or then if the wanting wasn't you at all...if after all it was something else, back behind everything, only I didn't know how to get at it? What had I imagined coming over on the plane, watching the green patchwork of the fields burn through the mist? Some heartbreak, some transformation. Months later at Padraig's I'd watch you talk, your eyes

empty, unseeing, your lips shaping meaningless words—*my mobile, my trip to Donegal, my latest violin*—and then, when I hated you, when you didn't care any more, I'd want it then: I'd hear it in me, its black refrain—*your mouth on mine, your mouth on mine. Your mouth.* With a kind of rage.

\*

A session in Taaffe's. Lowering sun coming in the dusty window, the pub gone hazy with smoke. All the regulars—Dodd, Desi, Padraig. You were about to leave for Donegal, and I could tell that at any moment, *something* would happen—some violence. I could feel it, heavy in the hollow of my chest. Ready to break out of me or in me like some giant ship's mast going down. I pressed my fists to my breastbone, behind my fiddle, bending over so you wouldn't see. To hold this, its splintering wood, for a little longer. You were next to me, your bow flashing in my peripheral vision. Your fiddle—I couldn't bear its sound, as if it had a *throat*. Out of which, this feeling...

In the end, I left with you—almost like before. Except I said, quickly, *Where are you going —the workshop? I'll go around with you to get my bow.* You couldn't say no, could you? As I said this I turned away. Shaking. We went out into the street, along the quay to your house. You talked about a violin you were making, gesturing with your free hand. High above us were tiny seagulls, their thin calls. I was blind, stumbling. The world went white. You touched my elbow, said something, your face turned towards mine. I closed my eyes, felt your fingers on my skin. I couldn't hear a word you said.

\*

A going-away party in my honor. Federico made cream puffs. He showed me how to fill the puffs with cream using a special kitchen tool. A nice, quiet dinner at his house, and then a little party at 2 Newtownsmith, but it was hard to care about anything that happened. By then you were gone to Donegal, rambling in the wild north. I went upstairs, then downstairs. I sat on the stairs between the floors listening to voices, muted, in the kitchen. The thick smell of soup and whiskey. Your empty room. I went in and sat on the bed, looking for something secret, something that would reveal—what? Stacks of books against the wall: Yeats, Seamus Heaney. Books on violin-making. Travel guides: Berlin, Rome, Prague. I leafed through them but found nothing, only pages and pages of maps, empty placeless cities where you weren't. In your drawers there were only clothes smelling faintly of detergent. I draped a shirt over my face and breathed in. This smell, was it you? I couldn't remember your smell, if I ever knew it. But I remembered the beginning: that night I slept over without meaning to, how you made me a bed on the floor from a sleeping bag and some folded blankets, then kept inviting me to share your bed instead. I had been in Galway for only a week. *There's plenty of room*, you said. And I could hear you shifting around under the covers. *I'm fine on the floor*, I said. My heart beating against the cold hard ground. You shifted some more, then suddenly, in the darkness, laughed. *You're probably right*, you said. *I wouldn't be able to keep my hands to myself.*

## THE SAN JUAN ISLANDS

*June*

Sam said so far the summer had not been very wild.

We were sitting on the front steps of our house, smoking. The late sun burned into our long, dark hair and the warm, pebbly concrete of the steps pressed tiny red dents into our bare thighs. The street and the house were empty, and through the open door we could hear Led Zeppelin on the radio.

“The summer's just getting started,” I said. “Just you wait and see.” I wagged my eyebrows at her. She shook her head a little, and sighed. We looked at the line of trees across the street. They moved their branches slightly, like breathing.

“This time of day always makes me feel kind of sad and shitty,” said Sam.

“Everything makes you feel that way.” I smacked her bare white thigh. “Let's have some fun!”

“Quit it,” she said, shifting away. We listened to the radio. “So—what are we going to do?” she said, lighting another cigarette. The sun, sinking behind the trees, flooded her face for a moment with intense light.

“What?” I said, even though I had heard her. I was looking at the faint horizontal line on her forehead, the soft blond hairs around her lips. I had never realized how many tiny hairs a woman could have on her face.

“What are we going to do?” she said again. I half-closed my eyes, tilting my face

up to the last of the light.

“Everything,” I said.

But already I could tell this wasn't true. Sam had moved out to Seattle a month ago because she wasn't doing much and neither was I. We were twenty-two and we didn't know what to do next. *We might as well do nothing together*, I told her. *Plus it's beautiful out here. We can have adventures: go salsa dancing, sail up to the San Juan Islands, eat those little donuts from the market...* We hadn't done any of that. Sam had been fired from her job as a door-to-door activist for the Sierra Club two weeks ago, and now she slept in till noon every day and then watched TV or went downtown to shoplift, while I went to work and then fooled around with Hank. Only we weren't really fooling around—we just hung out in his apartment, drinking from sweaty cans of Miller Lite and listening to Chris Isaac on his fancy sound system. I had a boyfriend, David, but I was mad at him. I wanted him to move into the city to live near me, but he said he couldn't, his job. Between the two of them, I had a lot on my mind.

Every evening I wasn't with David or the other one, Sam and I would sit on the steps in front of our house until late at night, with all the windows and doors open and all the inside lights on. We drank whisky from coffee mugs. The city was experiencing a heat wave: the mornings soared high above us, hard and bright with heat, and the nights whirred with the pulsing sound of crickets and frogs and fans propped everywhere in windows and doorways.

“I wish we had friends,” Sam said, looking out into the darkness. “I'm bored. I'm sick of just looking for a job and getting wasted all alone every night.”

“I could invite some people from work over,” I suggested.

“Not that lame-o,” she said, rolling her eyes. “I don't know what you see in him. Besides that he wants to fuck you.”

“I wasn't talking about him,” I said stiffly.

“Whatever,” she said. “One boyfriend's not enough, I know how it is. You need every guy you meet to want you.”

“What about you?” I said. “You're just as bad. I've seen your closet, and underneath your bed. And in your suitcases. You're going to get busted one of these days.”

“I don't have any money!” she said, her white face flashing. “What do you want me to do? Just hang around the house alone all day, with nothing!”

It was early June, and already I could tell that the summer was going to be a hot one. David said it would be, and he should know.

“Hot and lonely,” I complained to him. “When are you going to move over to the city?” He shrugged in the way I hated and said,

“What do you want me to do, quit my job?”

“Fine,” I said. I got up from the kitchen table and went out onto the deck where I could see the canal, crowded with sails in the white midday sun.

“Don't get all angry,” David said. He came over and put his arms around me but I held myself stiff. All through college we had had a fairly easygoing relationship, and if I

got mad, he would tease me and make ridiculous sad faces until I couldn't help laughing. But things were different now. We weren't kids any more, and I wanted him to take me seriously and move in with me. Or at least *near* me. Right now he lived on an island that was over an hour away, what with the bus and the ferry and then driving to his place. He worked long days doing construction, and between that and my job, we only got to see each other once or twice a week.

“I feel like I'm always just waiting around to see you,” I told him. I kept my voice low, and cold, so that I wouldn't start crying like I always did.

“You have Sam,” David said, shaking me a little in his arms, cajolingly. He tried to look into my face but I turned it away and stared blindly out toward the blue of the canal. “And what about at work?” he said. “Aren't you meeting anyone?”

I was silent a moment, then I shook my head mutely.

Hank was a captain and I was a deckhand at Odyssey Tours down on the waterfront. The boats moved between the islands and the mainland, but there were also harbor and lake tours where we'd circle the waterfront, going around and around every hour like something in a trap. All around us, the water spread out dark blue, still cold even in the months of sun. On my first day of work back in May, Hank had come down from the wheelhouse and watched me while I swept, cleaning up the boat at the end of the day. He seemed to be done with whatever a captain was supposed to do, and he pulled up a chair and sat down, leaning back, in the way. I swept around him for a while and then I circled in closer, still ignoring him. He was handsome in a pale, Nordic way—



strong jaw, broad shoulders, light blue eyes. I stole little looks at him when I went around him with the broom, and I could feel that his body was aware of mine moving behind him. Finally when I got in close I glanced up at him and said, *you're in the way*. He just smiled as if hugely amused and gazed at me, so I kept going. "Don't you have something to do instead of sitting around lazy and useless?" I said, and he laughed. Of course a deckhand wouldn't normally say things like this to a captain, but I could tell already that I could say whatever I wanted and he would laugh, even if it was shocking. In fact that was the point.

"I didn't know girls could be sailors," Sam had said, when I told her my job.

"Well we can," I said. "But I'm not a sailor, I mean these aren't sailboats."

"Hm," she said, and gave me an appraising look. "I didn't think you would like a job that's so...physical, somehow."

"Why not?" I said, mildly annoyed. But I knew what she meant. I never exercised, I loved to lie around in bed, to smoke, to burn in the sun, to eat a carton of Ben and Jerry's in one sitting. Now, though, I could see that my body was beginning to change, and I liked it. My arms were brown from the sun and my biceps had a new firmness. The work wasn't too hard, but it did involve lifting the heavy doors of the boats when we came into the slip, using the boat hook to pick up the line on the dock and fasten it as the boat came in, then jumping across the narrow gap between the boat and the dock to secure the lines there too. The line was just a rope, thick and heavy and bristly, but we weren't supposed to call it a rope. So I didn't. I wanted to get everything right. I walked carefully when I was on the boat, trying to match my step to the gentle roll of the boat on

the waves. For the first few weeks, it was hard, and sometimes I stumbled or walked crookedly across the room. And then when I was at home I could still feel the motion of the water under my feet—the sidewalks, the carpet, all of the ground that used to be firm and fixed now undulated. After a couple weeks, though, I got used to moving between solid land and water, and I could walk straight and sure wherever I was. I could feel my calf and thigh muscles growing inside the black Dickies I wore as part of my uniform. The uniform looked good on me. At least that's what Hank said. So at work I was fine, I slung the heavy wet lines on the dock and sold rum and cokes at the bar and vacuumed and polished handrails and flirted with Hank.

Sometimes we worked together, and sometimes Hank worked on one boat and I worked on another. When the boats were docked we could see each other across the empty slip. He liked to shout rude things to me across the water and I'd laugh and give him the finger. But even more I liked to pretend I didn't know he was there, watching me. Sometimes I'd joke around with Diller, another captain, where Hank could see me, leaning in or touching him on the arm. Other times I'd go up on the top deck and gaze out over the water, smoothing back my hair, knowing how I looked in my white shirt with my long hair lifting in the wind. Evening—the end of the day, the water quiet. And something was coming on—something was going to change. I could feel it already, a tiny hinge turning in the dark. From this distance, the islands looked like they were turning to smoke.

*July*

I had the day off so I said to Sam, “Let's go to Golden Gardens.” David and Hank were both working, so I had nothing to do. We were eating breakfast at the kitchen table, in the white blaze of the windows. It was a strange thing: because the weather had been so much the same, ever since May, it felt like summer was standing still, or like time itself was standing still, like there had never been anything before this summer and there would never be anything after it either, it would just go on and on—one perfect gleaming day after another. Of course everyone was thrilled—everywhere I went, the grocery store, the bus, the cafes, people talked about the weather. *What a gorgeous day* they'd say. Or *can you believe this weather?* And I would agree: *I know. Unbelievable!*

But to tell the truth it made me feel oppressed. As if we were walking around under heavy glass, or in a mirror. And facing us was another mirror where we could see ourselves. And we kept looking back and forth from mirror to mirror until we couldn't tell which of us was the original, real person, and which was only the reflection. Both of us trapped there, staring. Everything was too bright, too shiny. That's how it felt—surreal like that. You couldn't trust what you thought you were seeing, and every morning you woke up to your heart pounding, thinking frantically *what day is it? what day is it?* and trying to remember what had happened yesterday, quick, so you didn't feel quite so shadowy.

Sam didn't want to go to Golden Gardens though. She wanted to take the bus across town to check out this cafe that was also a bookstore and also a Buddhist temple

or something.

“It's not a *temple*,” she said. “It's like a Buddhist...learning center.” She frowned. “Or—meditation. A meditation center.”

“I don't know what that is,” I said, annoyed. Sam was always getting enthusiastic about places like this, just because they were different from, say, a church. Or a regular cafe. A Barnes and Noble.

“It's cool,” she said reflectively, as if seeing it in her mind's eye. “I think it'd feel peaceful. And I want to get a book on meditation.”

“You don't need meditation,” I said. “You need a job. Something to do.” It was hot in the house, too hot for eggs. I put my fork down. All I wanted was a huge frosty pitcher of lemonade.

“I can't look any more,” she said. “It's too depressing, I need to take a break.” She breathed deeply in and out through her nose as if to calm herself, then looked over at my plate of eggs. “Are you going to eat those?” I pushed them across the table.

“When's the last time you applied for a job?” I said. I was starting to feel worried about her lack of money or any real plans. Right now it was okay, we were just floating along the surface of the summer, but even though it felt eerily timeless, the summer wouldn't really go on forever. Especially in Seattle. In a few months there would be rain. I looked at Sam, but she was concentrating on my eggs. I thought about Hank, and then David. Were they thinking about me? Did they miss me? I imagined them, David over on the island or peninsula at some construction site, and Hank driving one of the boats, steering out to some distant island. They could both be thinking of me this very moment.

I pictured shimmering waves of longing sweeping towards me over the Puget Sound.

Then I sighed and turned back to Sam. "I don't want to sound like your mom. I mean I know it's hard, but still." I paused, but she didn't respond. "And, I don't know. I guess I'm kind of tired of Buddhism."

"Do you even know anything about it?" Sam said accusingly. She had finished my eggs and got up to look for a bus schedule. "Do we still have that schedule?" She began to rummage through one drawer after another.

"It's just that suddenly *everyone* is a Buddhist, you know?" I said. "Honestly I'd rather be a Muslim or something."

"Yeah right," said Sam. She had found the schedule and was running a finger down it, reading. "I can just see you in head-to-toe black."

"I love black," I said. "It's my favorite color."

"You love being practically naked too," she said. "There's a bus that leaves in ten minutes."

"I don't want to go to a Buddhist bookstore," I said. "If you don't want to go to Golden Gardens, let's just go shopping downtown."

We went downtown. The thing was, we had almost no money. Sam had no money really, and I didn't have much because, although my job paid pretty well, I'd been paying her portion of the rent until she could find a job. So we wandered aimlessly from one air-conditioned store to another. The whole city was sweltering. Everyone looked disheveled and limp, and the hot air that came up from the sidewalks reeked of trash and tar.

"Is it bad to still find other people attractive," I asked Sam. We were at

Anthropologie.

“I don't know,” she said absently. “Can you help it?”

“I don't know,” I said. I smoothed a pile of silky skirts, imagining going in to visit Hank with this skirt rippling around my hips like water. I turned over a price tag. \$88. “Sometimes I just have this feeling, like nothing will ever be enough, you know what I mean?” I said. I looked over at Sam just in time to see her hand slip quickly into her pocket. She glanced at me, then looked around the store nonchalantly. Her gaze was intent, narrowed, as if she were looking at something far away. “Sam,” I whispered, checking for salespeople.

“Yeah let's go,” she said. She looped her arm through mine and led me out of the store quickly. Once we were on the sidewalk, she breathed in and out deeply, and then smiled at me.

“Can you please not do that when I'm with you?” I said. But it was hard to be angry, because she looked so pleased with herself. Her cheeks were pink, and her lips trembled like she might start laughing. She kept one hand in her pocket, fingering whatever it was.

“Go on about Hank,” she said. “Even though I think it's stupid.”

“There's nothing to tell,” I said, blushing. There was. But I didn't want to tell Sam, because I knew she'd get angry. She liked David and said Hank was a loser. But when I said *why? explain why*, she didn't. Just looked at me and raised her eyebrows.

What I didn't want to tell her was that two nights ago, I had slept on one of the work boats. Or tried to sleep. My shift had ended at three and I had told the others to

leave without me, I was too tired, I'd sleep on the boat, go home in the morning. But I wasn't really tired. There had been a party on the boat, and even though all I'd done was pour Jack and coke and vodka tonics all night, I felt drunk on the deep bass of the music that seemed to pulse up out of the water, and the hot throb and flash of colored lights, and the lateness of the night, and I was wide awake. I had gone into the wheelhouse, where I knew Hank would come in the morning because he was working the early shift. It would be foggy by five when he came onto the boat—the world ghostly, lost in mist. He would be tired, his body still thick with dreams. At least that's how I imagined it. His body like some sleeping animal's. He'd open the door and not notice me at first. When he saw me, his heart would begin to pound. Almost certainly he'd been thinking of me. Wondering if he would see me today. Maybe he'd been hoping, always, in some warm remote shadowy part of himself, that some day he'd come in out of the fog to find me there in his wheelhouse, curled up shivering under my black crew jacket, pretending to be asleep.

Of course, nothing had really happened. We sat together for a while and he made me some hot chocolate, and then I rode back and forth to the island with him a couple times before I got off and took the bus back home to sleep. Still, I didn't tell Sam about it. Back at the house, she had spread her loot out on the kitchen table. Three pairs of dangly earrings, a chunky gold bracelet, a pink tin of flavored lip gloss, two tubes of mascara, a delicate bottle of amber-colored perfume, five shades of red lipstick. She opened one of the lipsticks and studied its smooth red surface.

“You got all of that?” I said, staring. I picked up the perfume and read the label, then set it back down. I felt worried and also a little envious, but I knew I could never

steal anything. The only thing I had ever stolen was a pair of pink plastic earrings from a friend in middle school, and I had felt so terrible about taking them that I ended up flushing them down the toilet.

“Don't you sometimes feel like just biting it off?” Sam said, looking at her lipstick. But she didn't. Instead, she glided it slowly over the soft full curve of her bottom lip, again and again, as if she were tasting it. The lush red made her mouth startling.

“I don't know if you should be taking all this stuff,” I said uneasily, fingering the shiny little heap. “What happens if you get caught?”

“I won't,” she said dreamily. She opened lipstick after lipstick and tried them out on her wrist until her whole forearm was bright with red. I thought I should say something more. But I couldn't think of anything. So I just leaned my elbows on the table and watched until she put down the last lipstick and sighed and shook her head like someone trying to wake up. She pushed back her chair from the table and went to the sliding glass doors, where she stood for a moment looking out. There was nothing to see there but her reflection, and behind her, mine, sitting at the kitchen table. Some lights of the city shining through.

"Let's get drunk," she said.

David and I went to check out this Neopolitan pizza place near my house.

“This is nice,” I said, smiling across the table at him. Wine, candles, rustic little wooden tables. And the pizza was really good. But he was frowning.

“So who's this guy Hank,” he said. I felt a swift wave of giddiness at the name,



but I tried to play it cool. I shrugged and picked up my wineglass, but my face was tingling and my hand felt heavy.

“What do you mean?” I said. “He's just this guy I work with.”

“Sounds like you've been spending a lot of time with him,” he said in a tight voice.

“What? What do you mean? Who said that? Sam?” He shrugged.

“No—well yes, she said something about him, and I said who's that? And then she looked funny and said something like he was a friend of yours. But I'd never heard of him before.” He spoke levelly but he wouldn't look at me, he was staring down at the table. I pushed my wineglass away and took a sip of water.

“I've mentioned him before,” I said. “Anyway he's just a friend. God.” But my voice, my eyes, I don't know why I kept it up. We both knew I was lying. Yet I couldn't stop.

“I don't like you going over to some other guy's place,” David said. His voice was getting quieter and lower. I leaned towards him, suddenly furious. His aggrieved look and downcast eyes—I couldn't stand it.

“What?” I said in a loud, rude voice. “Can you speak up? I can't hear you.” He glanced up, surprised. When his eyes met mine I sat back again quickly, accidentally knocking over my wineglass. The wine spilled all over the tablecloth. “Shit—shit!” I muttered, grabbing the glass and mopping at the table with my napkin. Wine was everywhere. I felt tipsy and confused, what with David and Hank and then everyone in the restaurant staring at me. I put my napkin down and bit my lips. I could feel my eyes

beginning to fill. The waiter came over and cleaned it up for us and we sat there and watched him, avoiding each other's eyes. When he went away again David put his elbows on the table and looked at me and said, more calmly,

“I'm not breaking up with you. I'm just saying I don't want you going over there anymore, or seeing this guy more than you have to. Okay?” He held my hand over the table and I squeezed his hand tearfully and murmured *okay, yes*. I didn't know what I was saying. All I knew was that I was lonely, terribly lonely. I was so lonely that I understood, suddenly, that I would say anything, do anything, to make David stay. But I would keep Hank too.

I didn't see Hank for a week. Then I was bartending on the *Lady Mary* and he came onto the boat. *Hey stranger*, he said, looking at me with his cool, light eyes. He didn't say he had come to find me, but he hung around the bar, where I was. We were heading out to one of the islands, and all the tourists had gone up on the top deck to look. There weren't many of them anyway—the day was pale and windy for once—so I sat up on the bar, swinging my legs, and he leaned against it. He was leaning so close to me that my whole body tingled. As if all my atoms were straining towards him. When the boat rolled, his arm would press warm against my leg for a moment, then shift away again. Josh was there too, which made it safe, just a friendly conversation among coworkers. That was how I explained it to David in my head. *We were all just hanging out talking—me and Hank and Josh*. Josh was a deckhand too. He was fat and bald with a spreading red mustache that made him look like an old colonel, even though he was fairly young.

When he said he was going out to smoke, I tried to make him stay. That was for David too. *See? I wanted him to stay!*

“Don't you know Josh? Smoking is bad for you,” I said.

“Addicted!” he said, holding up his hands as if he was surrendering. “But then that's what I wanted. I started because I wanted to see what addiction was like.”

“Really?” I said. “Why would you want to know that?” Josh stroked his mustache.

“Because it's interesting,” he said. “Wanting things that are bad for you. Human desire etcetera. Human nature. I wanted to understand it better.”

“And do you?” I said, laughing. I felt giddy, lightheaded. I kept swinging my legs like at any moment I might launch myself into the air. Hank was quiet and handsome in his black jacket, listening to us talk.

“Sure,” Josh said. “Now I know all about it and I can't quit, because you know what. That's addiction. That's what addiction is. To be honest, I doubt I'll ever quit.” We all laughed, and then Josh went up on the top deck to smoke. Once he left, there was a silence. I was thinking how I would explain it to David, but I knew I wouldn't explain any of it, because I wouldn't tell him. I kicked my legs nervously, and then suddenly Hank grabbed me by the ankle and pressed my leg back against the bar to keep it still. I laughed, or maybe it was more of a gasp.

“Careful,” he said, smiling a little. “You're going to hurt someone.” He had stepped away from the bar, but he kept his hold on my ankle. I could feel the warm pressure of his fingers on the delicate bones there. I held still, not quite looking at him

and trying to control my face, which I knew was flushed and hot. My heart pounded as I waited to see what he would do next, but he didn't do anything. After a moment he let go of me and said he was going up to say hi to the captain. I sat there a moment, feeling my heart slow and my body cool, and then I slid down and began to clean up the bar, disappointed but also a little relieved. There was still technically nothing to confess to David. When we began to approach the dock, I got ready to go out to tie up the boat. Because it was cold, I waited inside until we were almost there, looking out the porthole. I heard Hank come back down the stairs but I didn't turn around. Then he came up beside me and looked out too, close enough so our shoulders were touching. After a moment he said, "God you smell good." I was wearing this French perfume that a friend had bought for me in Paris. It smelled like lotus and cedar. But I didn't say that; I didn't say anything.

Later that day I was alone in the wheelhouse. Hank was on now, and I was off, but I had stayed on the boat anyway. He had gone out for a moment, leaving his jacket hanging on the wheel. I looked around to make sure there was no one there and then I lifted a sleeve and smelled it. It didn't smell like much, mostly just like the plasticky stuff it was made of. I looked out the window and I could see him down on the dock, talking to a new girl who had just passed the captain's test. He was supposed to be training her or something, but I couldn't see why they didn't just have one of the older captains do it. Surely they would be better equipped for that kind of thing. Hank and the girl—Molly? Mandy?—were leaning together over a piece of paper, her hair swinging towards him like a curtain. I felt cold. I felt I was losing my control, my perspective on the situation

between me and Hank. Situation. A stupid word. I didn't even know what the situation *was*. In the beginning, in May, it had all been very jokey and flirtatious and light: I would make fun of him, pretend to scold or mock him, and he would say rude or inappropriate things to me in return. It was fun, almost innocent. But now whenever I was around him I felt this quiet settle on me, as if I were listening for something, and I didn't know what to say or how to flirt any more. And he had changed, too. He didn't tease me or talk as much as he used to, yet it seemed like he tried to find any excuse he could to touch me. So sometimes we would just be sitting in the wheelhouse together for a whole hour saying very little while all the time the air was filling up with this prickly, tingling tension. But now who was this Mandy person? I looked again. They had moved a little apart so I could see her face. I didn't like the way she was smiling up at him. She wasn't even pretty. I had my perfume with me, in my purse. I took it out and sprayed some on my neck, but I noticed that the scent seemed to fade after a moment. So I picked the bottle up again and went over to his jacket, where it hung on the wheel. When I sprayed the jacket, I could see the perfume billow out in the afternoon sun—thousands and thousands of tiny particles of scent, making up that mist.

### *August*

When I got home from work late in the afternoon, Sam was lying out on the deck, wearing big sunglasses and a mismatched bikini with about twenty different bracelets on her arms. “Working on your tan?” I said, nudging her with one foot. I had decided to

forgive her for telling David about Hank. For one thing, she wasn't doing so great, and I was beginning to get worried. She didn't even pretend to look for jobs any more, and she had these plum-colored circles under her eyes. She wasn't stealing quite as much, but the things she was taking were becoming stranger. A mouse from a pet store. A pound of ground beef. Somebody's wallet, left on a bus. She didn't try to use the credit cards or anything, she just spread the stuff out on the table, lining it up in neat little rows—license, Alaska Airlines credit card, library card, Safeway card, gym membership card. *Are you sleeping okay?* I had asked her and she had looked at me with these glazed eyes and shrugged. *I've been taking those sleeping pills, but I don't know. I have these dreams,* she had said. She took out some more cards and made another row. When I said *what dreams*, she said she didn't want to talk about it. I was beginning to regret that I had asked her to move out to Seattle. I already had my hands full with my own problems. It was the height of the season: downtown the market and the waterfront swarmed with tourists, and I was working fifty, sixty hours a week sometimes. Not that I minded—in fact I liked being busy—but every night I was tired, my muscles sore from lifting and jumping and cleaning, my throat raw from talking, my body drunk from so much sun. And then David and I were fine again, so I tried to spend my days off with him—we didn't talk about Hank, and there was nothing to say anyway. I gazed down at Sam. Her body looked pale and blotchy in the sun. I unbuttoned my white work shirt and took it off, kicking my black shoes into the kitchen.

“How was work?” Sam said, barely moving her lips. I sat down and lit a cigarette.

“Fine,” I said. She extended her fingers for the cigarette and I handed it to her.

“What did you do today?” She exhaled noisily but didn't say anything. “When's the last time you left the house?” I said. I slipped the cigarette out of her limp fingers.

“What do you care,” she said bitterly. She sat up and pulled off her sunglasses. Her eyes looked naked: small and bloodshot. “You're so busy raking in the dough, flirting with hot sailors all day, then coming home to make out with David every night.”

“Every night!” I said. “I barely see him.”

“Whatever,” she said. “At least you're not just sitting at home alone all day with nothing to do and no one to call. This summer sucks. In fact this whole city sucks. I don't know why I moved here.” She was staring at me like I was the person in charge of this city.

“You can always go home,” I said flatly. Her eyes hardened.

“What, to my parents' house? In fucking Tennessee?”

“I don't know,” I said wearily. I handed her back the cigarette. “I don't know what to tell you. If you hate it so much here.”

“I hate it everywhere,” she said, but as she said it, the anger seemed to drain from her voice. She sounded thoughtful, as if this were something she was just realizing. She said it again, almost tenderly. “I hate it everywhere.”

I got off work early and took the ferry over to the island to see David. It was a gleaming blue day, and I was unhappy. Not because of David—everything was fine there—but because of Hank. Often when we got off work, he would give me a ride home. He had a small black racing car—a convertible—and when he drove me home the world

would whip by faster and faster, making me gasp, and we'd look at each other and laugh. But today I hadn't see him when I'd gotten off work, and I suspected that in fact he hadn't left but had stayed on to be with the new captain girl, Manny, Mandy. Because she was still a beginning captain, she always worked the Taxi, which wasn't a car but a little boat that ferried passengers from one part of the city to another. It went back and forth all day. In fact I could see it now, from the ferry: squat and white and low, leaving only a small frothy wake in the water that surrounded it. Beyond the Taxi, the Sound spread out, opening vast and blue to the horizon, where the farther islands faded in the late summer haze. I leaned over the railing, narrowing my eyes at the Taxi, but it wasn't near enough for me to see if he was on it with her. Still, I watched it. I felt sick at the thought of him with Manny, who I happened to know was single and thought Hank was "super hot". He couldn't possibly like her. He was on the verge of being in love with me. I didn't go to his place or look for him at work any more, because I'd promised David, but when he drove me home we would linger in the car for a while before I went in, and each time he was getting closer to kissing me. It was the safest I ever felt, sitting in the warm dark of that car knowing that he was falling, falling towards me, and yet I didn't have to do anything about it because I had David, who was the one I was really with. I thought maybe I could keep that feeling of falling. But Manny was a problem—so available. And even though her face wasn't pretty at all, she had these big boobs she was always bouncing around. I could feel sweat blooming in my armpits and trickling down my sides. I felt shaky, sick. Where was he? I looked at the Taxi again, but it was moving farther away now. Finally I took out my phone and called him. He picked up right away.



“Hey, where are you?” he said. He sounded concerned.

“Where am *I*?” I cleared my throat.

“Yeah, where'd you go after work? I looked for you all over but you were gone.”

“Oh,” I said. So he hadn't stayed on to be with her. I sat down on a bench. I felt weak and wobbly.

“Do you need a ride?” he said. He sounded kind of forlorn, as if he missed me. It made me feel strange, disconcerted, even though surely this was what I had wanted.

“No,” I said briskly. “I'm on the ferry going over to see David.” I wasn't sure why I told him this.

“Oh,” he said tonelessly. There was a brief silence, in which I could feel things shifting. Maybe after all I was wrong about the falling; maybe it couldn't be sustained forever. I felt suddenly impatient—with him, myself.

“Well, I'd better go,” I said.

“I'll see you later,” he said. A kind of question.

“Yeah, I'll see you at work,” I said, still in this oddly calm voice. I sat there watching the Taxi move small and white into the distance, and suddenly I felt happy to be on the ferry, alone, moving away from the land. I thought of David and Hank, and instead of feeling desperate and anxious as I had all summer, I continued to feel calm, almost even happy. I stood up and leaned on the rail, looking out, and my body felt strong and brown and full of straining life.

The summer was almost gone when Sam got arrested, one blinding-white day in

August. She had been stealing men's underwear from the Nordstrom downtown. I got a call from the cops, telling me not to bother to meet her in Pike Place Market for lunch, because she was being held at the police station. When I got home from work that day, there she was, lying on the sofa watching TV. Her face was pale, but otherwise, she looked the same. She didn't look at me.

“Hey, they let you go?” I said. I sat down carefully on her bare feet.

“Yeah,” she said, keeping her eyes on the TV screen.

“Well...what happened? How'd you get caught?” I said.

“I don't really want to talk about it,” she said languidly. One of her arms was dangling limply off the sofa. I picked it up and laid it over her stomach, and her eyes shifted towards me. I smiled faintly at her and her gaze shifted away again. In a way, I was glad it had happened. It meant the summer was over. She would go home, and I would stop working on the boats, stop doing whatever it was I was doing with David and Hank. I would decide what to do next. There wasn't much to say, but it was the end. I got the box of popsicles from the freezer, and we sat there, biting into them carefully. There were seven in the box, and we ate them all; we took turns with the last one. We sank further down into the sofa, watching a car fly off a cliff and burst into flames in the forest below. Somebody crawled out just in time, bloody and coughing. Blackened, they limped off into the trees.

“That would never happen in real life,” Sam said. “They'd be deader than dead.”

*September*

Summer was gone, and I moved to the island to live with David. In the cold evenings we'd lie under a pile of blankets and talk about moving to a new city or even a different country for a while. I still worked at Odyssey, but I'd failed to show up for a couple shifts recently, and the scheduler had gotten angry and taken me off the schedule for a month. I didn't care. I was going to quit anyway. I hadn't seen Hank for a couple weeks, but I decided I would see him one more time, and explain, or maybe apologize. Maybe I'd kiss him, just once. It was something I could take or leave.

I didn't leave the island that much anymore. David and I had a nice routine together. In the mornings before his work, we'd get up early and go down to the bakery, where we'd sit out on the deck and smoke. We would have coffee, and warm cinnamon rolls. Then he'd go to work and I would go home and read, or clean, or look at maps of different countries, practicing the names out loud. *Prague. Burundi. Glasgow.* Sometimes I talked to Sam on the phone, but not much. She had moved back in with her parents and was waiting tables, thinking about going back to school. When I told her about the countries I was considering she just said *oh yeah?*

One of David's friends had a small motorboat. All summer we had talked of boating up to the San Juan Islands, or down the coast to California, but the truth was that it didn't run very well, no matter what he tried. So he kept it in his yard covered with a blue tarp, and we went out in his canoe instead. Three or four of us. We'd bring food and

beer, which weighed the canoe down so that it was very low in the water. Two of us would paddle and the others would sit still. We'd wind around the island, exploring little inlets where the trees hung down low and the water moved green and murky. Here everything was still, waiting: only the paddles made a slow, liquid *lap lap* as we'd glide. *Should we go around the bend?* someone asked. *It seems like the stream keeps narrowing, it might get too shallow up ahead.* But no one answered.

There was something there in the afternoon light—a pulse—a shifting movement that rippled, restless, the hanging green of the trees. I waited, listening—but nothing happened. There was a rustling sound over on one bank. Someone behind me shifted, and the canoe rocked, steadied itself gently. We drifted on into the far reaches of the afternoon, moving through the shadows on the water.

## ORDER

She lives alone, as I do, but she seems to live better than I, more carefully. There is a structure there, the kind of considered structure that has eluded me my whole life. We are both single women, a little past middle age. We are neighbors and friends, and her way of living is always before me, and I watch her from day to day. I try to find the kernel of difference between us, I study her. Her bobbed silver hair is always making a movement of lushness. When we meet on the sidewalk (she walking her small ginger cat on a red leather leash), her perfume wafts towards me like a warm cirrus cloud. Her eyebrows are smooth twin wings. Her newspapers are crisp and intellectual. At midsummer, she wears a white linen shirt and eats arugula slick with vinegar out of a bowl like a polished tree trunk. She does not drip oil onto her shirt or click her teeth against the tines of the fork. She keeps small unused soaps in her bathroom. Scents like verbena and apple. Her hands are always clean and fragrant but when I go into the bathroom to look, the soaps are still new, untouched. She keeps six plump bath towels in a woven basket by her tub. These towels are often warm, from the dryer. Sometimes I pick one up and press it to my face. When I unfold it, the towel releases a faint whiff of lavender.

At night she sleeps with her window open, listening to faint classical music on the radio. I know this because I go for night walks. The night walks take me by her house, where her bedroom is on the first floor. All summer the window is wide open, so when I pass near it, I can see through the drifting ghost of curtain her sleeping form curled

elegantly under its sheet. I want to know what kind of sheets she sleeps in, so the next time I am over at her house, I excuse myself to use the bathroom but go instead into her bedroom. The bedroom is shaded from the evening sun. It smells of eucalyptus and cedar. I go over to her bed and lift the white coverlet. The sheets are of dove-colored silk. I run my hands up and down her dove silk sheets, then I smooth the coverlet and cross the room to her dresser. When I slide open her top drawers, I find her panties and brassieres, folded neatly in a cherrywood organizer. They are expensive-looking, silk and lace, cool to the touch. I bury my hand in the pile of soft fabrics and I let it close on something. I lift it out: a pair of lilac silk panties. I slip these quickly into my pocket. I shut the drawer and leave the bedroom, closing the door carefully, so that it makes no sound.

I begin to collect items from her house. It is easy enough. I can go over to borrow things: a cup of sugar, a trowel, and she will invite me into the kitchen or living room. She will leave the room to bring what I have asked for, and this is enough time to choose something. One day I choose a slim, rectangular box of matches with tulips on its cover. Another day, a small paper package of coarse pink Himalayan salt. Another, a bar of vanilla and black pepper soap wrapped with twine. I carry these objects home and place them in a cardboard shoebox that I keep hidden under my bed. From time to time, I will touch and look at these beautiful things, but I will not use them.

One day she tells me a strange thing. Something has gone wrong. We are experiencing an Indian summer. She is still sleeping with her windows open, listening to classical music through the night, but now in the middle of the night she sometimes wakes to find that this music has changed. It is no longer classical, but jazz, or worse, talk

radio. She does not understand how this could happen. The classical station never plays anything but classical music. I shake my head: I don't understand it either. That night on my walk I stand outside her window for a long time, listening. There is eerie music playing inside—waves of pulsing sound like electronic crickets. She tells me about this new-age music over the fence the next day, and as she speaks she becomes flustered, pink. Her hair is slightly ruffled. I can see that she does not know what to do. She looks oddly lost. There is mascara on one eyelid. And as the days pass, things worsen: the garden fills up with dead leaves; a scratch appears on the sleek black side of her BMW; I see her leaving the house in wrinkled khaki slacks and a sweatshirt. And her window closes: when I pass at night, I can no longer hear the music from inside. Sometimes now I knock on her door to borrow a cup of flour and she does not answer, though I know she is at home. I knock and ring the doorbell and look through the window, but there is no response.

I see that the radio will have to go. It will have to be carefully replaced. I consider for days, a week. I open my shoebox and inspect its contents: I lift and weigh each one in my hand. I smell the soap and taste the salt. I rub my cheek against the silk panties. Then I drive to the store. I purchase a recording of gentle surf washing a beach. I wrap this gift and place it on her porch where she will be sure to see it. *This beach*, I write in the note I attach to my gift, *is a remote island beach made of sparkling white sand. The seawater is jewel-toned and clean. There is no seaweed on this beach, and no tourists. No natives, either. The beach is perfectly smooth and alone.*

## SUNDAY

That Sunday, Della decided to go to church. She was lying in bed when the idea came to her. She had been lying in bed for a long time. She had woken in the night with a violent jolt, but all she could remember of her dream was the fear. It was dark in the bedroom, and she lay still, huddled against the broad warmth of Nick's back, while the fear slowly ebbed. After a while, Della rolled back to her side of the bed and stared up at the ceiling. There was nothing to see, so she sat up in bed and blew her nose. When it got cold sitting up, she got back under the covers. She lay on her side, one hand under her pillow, one hand warmed between her thighs, and looked out the window. She could see a small square of dark gray sky. She lay still for a long time, looking out the window. Gradually the sky lightened to a pearly gray.

Della got up and moved, shivering, through the cramped little hall and into the kitchen. She got the phone book from on top of the fridge, turned up the thermostat, and went back to bed. She looked up *Churches*. There were different categories: *Churches-Assemblies of God*, *Churches-Baptist*, *Churches-Charismatic*. Della hadn't thought of that—she wasn't sure what the differences were. But perhaps a Catholic church. She had always liked the sadness in the face of the Virgin Mary, and there was something appealing about the idea of cathedrals full of incense and echoes and stained glass. The sense of vast spaces. There was one church called Our Lady of the Sea. Della liked the sound of that. It was some distance away, near the ocean. She decided to go anyway.

“What're you doing?” Nick murmured. He rolled over, yawning, and butted his



head against her hip. His eyes were still closed.

“I’m going to church.”

“What?” Nick opened his eyes. He looked at her.

“I’m going to church. Want to come?” Della let the Yellow Pages fall to the floor with a thud. Nick turned impatiently back to the wall and yanked on the sheet.

“You’re stealing all the covers,” he said.

“If you want to come you better get up now. I have to leave in forty minutes,” said Della. “I’m going to Our Lady of the Sea—it’s Catholic. Like my grandma used to take me to.”

“You serious?” said Nick. He turned onto his side and wadded the pillow under his head. He looked at her, his eyes half-closed, smiling. “You’re really going to church?” Della nodded.

"I want to pray," she said, and blushed. She frowned at the closet door, its load of drying towels. "For Angie."

"Pray?" Nick's smile twisted. "But Del—you don't believe in God. And Angie—Angie's going to die, you know that." His voice became gentler, and he moved his hand to Della's thigh, but she shifted away. "There's nothing we can do about it." Nick looked sad but also a little scornful. "I'm going to visit her later if you want to come this time. Wouldn't that be better than..." The scornful look took over and he shook his head.

"Church, Del? Serious? Church is for people who can't face facts—like that yes, Del, we're all going to die. And then what?—nothing!—that's it. We die, and that's it." Nick was sitting bolt upright now, earnest and naked, his hair sticking up on one side. Della

looked away and shrugged. She walked to the closet.

"You don't have to come," she said.

Nick had been Angie Lee's caregiver for almost a year. He took care of her in her messy, cigarette-reeking trailer home. Angie was sixty four, Southern, and very fat. She smoked a pack of Virginia Slim Lights a day. She lived with her two cats, Aussie and Baby. She had three kinds of cancer and one of them was killing her. But it hadn't been killing her a year ago. When Nick first started working there he came home every night with a funny story about Angie.

"That Angie Lee, Del," he'd say. "I get a serious kick out of her. You know her cats, Aussie and Baby? Well listen to this. Every single night, Angie tells them to go to bed, she says 'night-night time' and shoos them into the bedroom—and get this! they actually do it, they go!—and they have these little cat beds, you know? and they get in their beds, they listen to her. Doesn't that kill you? She has those little cats all trained."

He told Della how Angie got really mad when she watched soap operas and yelled at the soap stars and once even threw a half-full can of Diet Coke at the TV.

"Angie Lee!" Nick said, shaking his head, smiling. "She's so stubborn. She insists on watching soap operas even though she knows she'll just get mad—she can't stand how stupid everyone is on those shows, but she keeps on watching."

Della saw a lot of Angie Lee that year. Della and Nick shared a car, an old white Hyundai. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, Della dropped it off at Angie's after work, so Nick could take Angie out somewhere—to the supermarket, or to the doctor—and Della

changed into her workout clothes in Angie's bathroom and jogged home, looping around and around the neighborhoods between Angie's house and theirs.

Whenever Della knocked on the glass door of the trailer and waved, Angie would say to Nick, "there's your sweetie!", and then Della would come in and pet Aussie and talk to Angie a little. Angie loved to talk to Della. Nick got a kick out of pretending to be jealous. He would sigh and scuff his shoes on the carpet and say that Angie loved Della more than she loved him. Angie always laughed.

"She's such a sweetie!" Angie said, beaming over at Della.

Della laughed awkwardly and leaned down to pet Aussie.

"I should probably go," she said.

"How do you talk to someone who has cancer?" Della had asked Nick once. He had lost a grandfather to cancer, so she thought maybe he would know. But he had only looked at her strangely.

"What do you mean?" he said.

"Well, she's going to die," Della said slowly. "Sometime soon. Don't you ever talk about it? Doesn't she? Or what *do* you talk about?" Nick shrugged in a quick, irritated way.

"No we don't *talk* about it—why would we? We talk about normal stuff—TV, her cats, her nephews. Maybe sometimes about her feeling sick."

"But how can there be normal stuff when she's going to die soon, and you know it, and she knows it too! How can you *not* talk about dying, that's what I just don't get!"

Della said. She felt unaccountably close to tears.

"What's there to say?" Nick said. "Anyway, Del, she's probably not going to die that soon. Take it easy. She could live years still."

But just last week Angie's daughter had had her moved to a hospice care center downtown, and now the doctors were saying she had less than a month left to live.

Nick still saw Angie every few days. The hospice people took care of everything now, so Nick just went to visit. He was looking for a new job.

"I'm worried about Angie, Del," he said. He was sitting at the kitchen table fiddling with the label on a bottle of beer while Della washed up after dinner. "She hates it at the hospice. You want to know what it's called? It's called Happy Valley—is that a joke? Happy Valley? It's sick!" Nick was always angry when he came back from visiting the hospice, but he could never stay that way and after a few minutes he got sad and quiet.

"I don't know what to do, Del," he said. "Angie's doing so bad and she's really depressed. Today she told me she just wants to die. She's so confused, she's always falling asleep and waking up, all disoriented—most of the time she doesn't even know who I am. They just have her on all these meds constantly, mixed up with this Kool Aid stuff! It's horrible." Della put down the sponge and turned to look at Nick, wiping her damp hands on her jeans. He was staring into his empty beer bottle. "She said to say hi to you though. When she was more with it. She said to tell the sweetie Angie said hi. She can barely talk anymore, just mumbles. But you should come visit her with me, Del. She'd like that, I know she would." He glanced up at her.

"Oh—sure," said Della. She smiled and nodded, then turned to wipe down the counter. But though her heart was heavy with pity and sadness for Angie, she shrank from the idea of seeing her. It had been hard enough before, when she was just sick, but now—Angie was going to die, and soon. Della didn't know what to say to someone who was dying.

When Della pulled into the church parking lot, she found it inexplicably empty. She felt blank with disappointment, and sat still for a moment, her seatbelt fastened, listening to the ticking of her car as it cooled. She looked around. A few cypress trees. Gravel and beach grass. In the distance, dunes that hid the sea. Della climbed out of her car. She could smell salt and seaweed as she walked around to the front of the church. It was hardly a cathedral—more like a chapel, but at least it was pretty, built of white-painted wood, with a small bell tower and a big red door. Della tried the door, but it was locked.

"Damn it!" she said softly, and rattled the handle. She looked around vaguely but there was no one in sight, so she walked back around the church and peered in the stained glass windows. It was hard to see through such bright color, but she could make out the wavering lines of pews and the high ceiling. Up near the front of the church there was a table with candles, and behind the table were three paintings. It was hard to see the paintings—Della moved from a square of red glass to look through the green. She cupped her hands around her eyes and squinted. Yes—there was Mary holding the baby Jesus. Then Mary again, bent over Jesus' dead body. The third painting was of a man with lines

of light streaming out from him, his right hand raised. Probably Jesus too, she wasn't sure. Della peered at the paintings for a while. There was something really beautiful about them, no matter what Nick said. Of course none of it was true. But she still wanted to pray for Angie. She wished the church was open.

Della wandered back to the parking lot, then crossed the street and headed slowly towards the ocean. It was only a block away. She wondered if maybe she could pray on the beach. It sounded silly, but maybe there in front of the ocean would be almost as good as a church. The street turned into a sandy dead end and then she was there—the sea opening and spreading and crashing before her. The sea was immense and dark and the sky was the same gray she had seen from her bed, light and pearly, but now it stretched up and up, beyond what she could see. For a minute Della felt almost dizzy, but then she laughed: it was as if she had never seen the ocean before.

There were a couple people down the beach to Della's left, throwing balls into the waves for their dogs. Della liked how the dogs plunged in so unafraid—she had always been scared of the ocean, and was still a weak swimmer. She walked slowly down the beach, away from the dogs and the people. The sea and the sky were beginning to look stormy and Della wondered if it would rain. Soon she was far from the people, on an isolated stretch of sand. To her left was the ocean, to her right were dunes covered with beach grass. Beyond the dunes lay beach cottages—pale blue and pink, deserted at this time of year. Their big blank windows gaped at the ocean. She remembered that she had been going to pray for Angie, and stopped. Should she pray here? Della looked around, her eyes scanning the cottages, the shoreline, but she was alone. She paused, and then

slowly got down on her knees. She didn't know what to do with her hands so she just rested them on her thighs. She cleared her throat nervously and looked around again. No one was there. Della tried to think of a prayer. She had known some once, things her grandma would say in the dark before she tucked Della in for the night. What would Nick think if he could see her now? Della felt like giggling at the thought of what Nick's face would be like, but something stopped her. She looked all around again, still kneeling awkwardly in the sand. No one, still no one. But the sea and the sky seemed almost to be waiting, watching her. They looked so dark and threatening that Della wanted to get up and run back to the small, safe shelter of her car. Only—Angie. Angie would die soon. She *had* to pray. She had come all the way out here. She might never go see her. Della bent her head and closed her eyes. She folded her hands.

"Oh Mary full of grace," she said. Was that right? Her voice sounded hoarse and strange—even among the crashing waves and the wind it sounded loud. She could only remember little parts of prayers—were they even prayers? "Be with us now, and at the hour of our death. Our Father, who art in heaven...deliver us from evil. Oh Lord and oh Mary, have mercy on Angie. Have mercy on her—and on me—on us—" Della broke off abruptly and looked around. There was no one there. The sea and the sky had grown dark and there were clouds crowding thickly together, moving slowly in, coming faster as they got closer. Della knelt, her clasped hands falling apart. She watched them come.

## KNOWLEDGE

I was talking to my husband's friend, on his boat. He was depressed, attractive, leaning against the steps in his flannel shirt rolling a cigarette. We were sitting inside the boat, a little wooden cave strewn with the wreckage of flattened beer cans and bottles filled with cigarette butts. We rose gently up and sank back down, moving with the motion of the boat. Through the open hatch behind him I could see the far edge of the island, its shadow and gleam shimmering up into view one moment, then sinking again. "Well I think you should move," I said. "To the city, you could be near us." I had come over alone on the ferry because my husband was too busy to visit the island just now, and I worried about this friend, though he was more my husband's friend than mine. My husband had known him twelve years and I had known him five. He had lived his whole life on the island. "I worry about you," I told him. I watched the tip of his tongue glide along the edge of translucent paper, his thumbs smooth it down into a plump, finished cigarette. He laughed, glanced up at me.

"Why?" he said, and lit the cigarette. He turned towards the hatch to exhale into the square of chilly gray sky.

"I don't know," I said. I looked around. "You just work on your boat all day, drink all night at the bar. Who do you see? Who do you know here?" He shrugged. "You must be lonely," I said. "You need other people in your life. Friends."

"I see people," he said, "I'm not completely cut off from humanity." He looked at me. Blue eyes like a slap. I looked away.



"One night stands don't count," I said. "What about real friends? People who really know you—can boss you around, tell you how to live your life," I joked. He was gazing out the hatch; he didn't say anything. He smoked. After a minute he said,

"Does anyone know anyone? You think you really know me?" And he looked at me like we were strangers, sizing me up.

"Don't," I said, frowning. I could feel my face flush. "Of course I know you." He nodded slowly, considering. "Can I have a cigarette?" I said. His gaze darted up at me. He laughed.

"You don't smoke," he said.

"So?" I said. "Will you roll me one or not?" He took out his pouch of tobacco and rolling papers and rolled me one on his knee. Once or twice he glanced up at me and smiled. "What?" I said, but he just shook his head.

"Here." He passed me the cigarette.

"Thanks," I said. I looked at it. "Can you light it?" I put it between my lips and he leaned over, holding the small flame steady with both hands. "Thanks," I said. I smoked carefully, and he leaned back against the steps, watching me. We regarded each other through the haze of smoke.

I wanted to tell him that not only did I know him, I *knew* him. I wasn't just some woman, kindly and naïve, the wife of his friend. I could imagine his life so vividly I felt I was inside him. I could imagine waking bleak and emptied of goodness, the rushing excitement of last night's whisky gone cold. Morning coffee quickening a sweet hopefulness that sank and faded in the blank stretches of the afternoon. At night, sizing

up the swell of jean-clad ass, the solid quiver of tank-topped breasts, a wolfish ache tingling in the teeth and loins. I smoked my cigarette like I was inhaling truth—slowly, reverently.

He bit the cap off a bottle of beer, spit it out.

“Want one?” he said. A dare.

“Sure,” I said, though I'd never liked the taste of beer. I held out my hand. He handed me his beer and opened another for himself.

“Cheers,” he said, and we clinked bottles and drank, eyeing each other. He was smiling like he thought I was pretty funny. But I was serious now. I felt I had something to prove. I drank the bitter beer down. “Like it?” he said, and I said yes.

It was only later, going back half-drunk on the ferry, that I realized I might be wrong. I had thought I could climb inside of him—inside everything that was wooded and dark and hidden in him. I wanted to feel in my own body his shivering life, to look him smack in the eye and tell him: *I know*. *I know* you. Just for a moment. Even if it wasn't true. I sat there thinking about him as the ferry hummed across the dark stretch of water, but after a little while my attention began to wander. I could feel the low throb of a headache beginning, and as the ferry carried me away from the island, my body seemed to cool and harden, sinking back into itself. I felt sleepy, but too cold to sleep. So I wrapped my arms around my chest. I watched myself idly in the glass of the window, my pale reflection floating on the black of the water or sky.

## SEXY-BODY ALISON

Alison didn't steal. Stealing was too scary and besides, Tommy, her youth group leader, had told them during Talk Time that stealing meant you weren't grateful for the blessings you had. Alison wanted to be grateful, or at least she wanted to be a grateful kind of person, but it was hard when you had as little as she had. Alison was thirteen. She wanted: breasts and a real bikini, a pink-and-white one to show off her tan. But her mom didn't approve of bikinis, and she said that Alison was still too underdeveloped to wear one anyway. Alison thought it was unnecessarily mean of her to point this out; she already knew she was flat. When she watched her reflection in the bathroom mirror every morning as she brushed her teeth, her T-shirts seemed to wrinkle and sag where her breasts should be. She tried to pretend she didn't care, making fun of her own flatchestedness in front of her friends, but at night when she lay in bed in the dark she felt so impossibly full of longing that her eyes would fill with tears. She would think about Derek Yanuzzi, his green eyes, while she slipped one hand under her nightshirt to prod the slight, puffy softness around her nipples. *Please*, she would whisper. *Please God*. Then she'd wait, listening into the silence until it seemed to crackle and burn with her waiting. God never said anything back. Sometimes Alison imagined a ghostly, deep kind of voice saying things like *be patient my child*, or *if you have faith, even as small as a mustard seed, your wish will be given*, but she knew in the end that this was just her.

On days that were extra hot and humid, Alison and her mom sometimes walked

the mile to the country club pool, even though Alison's mom said eight dollars a person was highway robbery, and how was she supposed to buy groceries next week. At the pool, Alison kept her shirt on over her old blue one-piece. *Don't you want to swim?* her mom always asked her, but Alison just shook her head and dragged her faded towel back in the shade under some dusty old oak trees. She didn't want to be seen. Her mom looked embarrassing, with her weird bathing cap and the thin raised veins like blue spiders crawling all over her ripply thighs. She heaved her body down into the water with a sound like *oof!* and turned back to give a thumbs-up to Alison, who shrugged and looked away. Once her mom was into the rhythm of her laps, Alison went over to the snack bar and bought a Fun Dip and a Coke and took them back to the tree. All through the month of July, the air had been heavy with the smell of melting tar, and all the roads and parking lots shimmered like at any second they might go up in flames. Alison burned her bare feet walking over to the snack window, and even in the shade of the trees she could feel the constant cool crawl of sweat down her sides.

Alison liked being at the pool. She never got bored sitting there while her mom swam, because she was working on a secret project: creating her ideal body. This wasn't just an idle thought for her; it was a careful, precise process. Leaning back against the rough bark of the tree, Alison licked tangy candy dust off her Fun Dip stick and watched girls stroll around the pool. All of them except for the littlest kids and the lifeguards had cute patterned bikinis on, and as they went by, their wet feet slap-slapping the hot pavement, Alison picked out the best, the sexiest breasts: the breasts she planned to have.

Breasts were always first; then she'd go on to choose a butt, legs, stomach, back. Once she had made her selections, Alison would mentally glue all the different parts of the girls' bodies into one whole kind of a body with her head on it. It wasn't easy; she had to tilt her head back and sit stiffly, her eyes squeezed shut and rolled up in their sockets with concentration. But eventually it would emerge in her mind, like something mythical moving up out of a dense fog: a sexy-body Alison—still her, only with high, round breasts that shook and gleamed in her bikini top when she walked around the pool. She would hold very still for a long while imagining this—the satisfying *jounce-jounce* of her new breasts, the slight seductive sway of her curvy hips—while above her the oak branches ruffled in the warm wind. Then she would sigh and open her eyes again and select clothes for her future sexy self, the kind of clothes her mom called *immodest* when they went to the mall together. She chose polka-dot bikinis and bright pink halter tops and cropped peasant blouses that would show your stomach. Faded denim miniskirts that hung off your hips. Ripped jean shorts so short the pockets peeked out the bottom. A white eyelet sundress with a plunging back. The whole process, imagining her body-to-come and then choosing the clothes, usually took a couple hours. By the time she was done, Alison felt limp and drained but also hopeful. It would come; she had faith that it would come. She'd drink her warmish Coke and lie back on her towel. The green tree light rested her burning brain.

Every Monday through Wednesday, from ten until three, Alison babysat for the Millers, a couple from her church. It was an okay job, even though they didn't pay that

much. *Marni makes at least eight dollars an hour when she babysits*, Alison told her mom, but her mom just frowned and said *they're poor seminary students. And five dollars an hour is plenty. What do you do that's so hard?* When Alison was dropped off in the mornings, Mrs. Miller would give Alison instructions before she left for her job at the counseling center. The instructions were the same every day, but Mrs. Miller always repeated them anyway—quickly, and in a low, worried voice, as if she thought Alison might have forgotten them from the day before.

As soon as Mrs. Miller left in the morning, Alison checked the fridge and the cupboards, but the Millers never had anything exciting, no Coke or anything. Alison fed the baby smelly mush out of little Gerber babyfood jars that the Millers kept in tidy stacks in the cupboard. It was sort of fun to choose what to feed the baby—turkey and turkey gravy? pear mango guava? sweet potato?—but in the end they all looked alike, the way the baby smeared them all over his face and hands no matter how neatly Alison tried to slip the little plastic spoon into his mouth. After Alison fed the baby and wiped him down with a damp cloth, she took him into the living room to play, or sometimes out into the small side yard where she'd set him down on a blanket in the shade. She'd lie down too, half on the blanket, half in the bristly grass that made her legs itch. She would lie there in a kind of daze, only reaching to tug on the baby's fat little legs if he crawled too far away. She thought about how her life would be once she had breasts. It seemed to her that everything would be different—everything. She could see herself walking in a kind of warm white-lit slo-mo down the hall at school in the eyelet sundress. Or maybe the

denim miniskirt and halter would be better. Derek Yanuzzi would finally look at her. He'd look at her and look at her—at the tanned curve of her breasts pushing against the thin white cotton of the sundress—and he'd forget all about Christy Kane, who had once looked pointedly at Alison's flat chest and raised her eyebrows and said *God, did you even start your period yet?* and all her dumb friends had laughed and said *Christy! Don't be such a bitch.*

At lunch time the baby ate another jar of babyfood and Alison ate the buttered pickle-and-salami sandwich she had brought with her. Afterwards, Alison tidied up the kitchen and the baby and then the baby slept in the hot afternoon. There wasn't any air conditioning, only a lazy ceiling fan that stirred the humid air around in slow circles. Alison lay on the couch, fanning herself with a magazine and looking around the living room. She thought the Millers' house was ugly. The ceiling was low and white and diseased-looking. *It's called a popcorn ceiling*, Alison's mom had explained when Alison asked about it, and Alison had said *well it's gross*, even though she knew her mom would shake her head in disapproval and say *Alison* in the quiet way Alison hated. The Millers' sofa and easy chair were old and brown, covered with fat quilted pillows and orange and white afghans. On one wall, there was a painting of Jesus looking sad, and on another, framed photos of the Millers. Alison didn't think the Millers were ugly exactly but she did think they were the most boring-looking couple she had ever seen. Mr. Miller was tall and skinny and stooped. He had thin, mousy hair and frameless glasses, and when he drove Alison home from babysitting, he never said anything except *thank you* and

*goodnight*. Mrs. Miller was plump and had a tight brown perm and a laugh that Alison thought of as a matronly laugh. Like she didn't really think anything was all that funny but she'd laugh anyway just to keep things comfortable. She wore glasses too, and on Sundays, floral dresses with wide white collars. Sometimes Alison tried to imagine Mr. Miller proposing to Mrs. Miller: what he would have said, or if they'd kissed afterward—and if they did, was it a passionate French kiss with tongues, or a thin dry kiss like the ones her parents gave each other? But in the end, she couldn't imagine any kiss at all between them. After she got tired of lying on the sofa, Alison would pour herself a glass of apple juice and walk down the hall to check on the baby. He slept with his mouth open, his cheeks flushed with the summer heat. Alison liked to stroke his back a little as he slept, gently, with the back of one finger. She tried to see if he looked like Mr. Miller or Mrs. Miller but lucky for him he just looked like a normal baby still.

By mid-August, Alison's chest was still stupidly flat and she was starting to feel worried. School started in three weeks, and what if by September nothing had changed? Alison started to pray more, and harder. Every night she waited until the house was dark and quiet before she got out of bed and knelt on the carpet. Tommy had said something last week about how the way you prayed made a difference, how it was different if you were lying in bed praying half-asleep or if you were kneeling. Kids had started to laugh when he said "kneeling" but Tommy had said, *I mean it, you should try it sometime. Where your body's at isn't just physical, it's spiritual*. So Alison tried it—first kneeling upright with her elbows on the mattress and her chin on her clasped hands, and then,



when she got tired, collapsed down on all fours with her face in the carpet and her arms stretched out in front of her. This felt like an especially holy pose. The prayer itself was always the same: *please God please. This is the only thing I want. It's the only, only thing. Please please give me this wish please God.* She couldn't bring herself to say "breasts" to God because it seemed embarrassing and also kind of disrespectful, and she couldn't think of what else to say, so she focused on filling up her heart and brain with how much she wanted this, sometimes even holding her breath until the tears stung her eyes and she started to shake with the intensity of it all. Then suddenly she'd let out her pent-up breath in a great rushing whoosh and collapse onto her side, gasping. That, she was sure, he would *have* to feel.

One afternoon as she was coming out of the baby's room, Alison noticed that the door across the hall, the door to the Millers' bedroom, was open. It had never been open before. Now it was open just a teeny-tiny crack, but she went to the doorway and peered through the crack. She couldn't really see anything, so she nudged the door with her foot until it swung slowly open; then she stood in the doorway and gazed around. Everything was very neat in the Millers' bedroom. The bed stood in the middle of the room. It was big, spread with a blue-and-pink checkered quilt and cushions with patchwork dolls holding hands sewn onto them. Sitting propped up against the cushions was a real, porcelain doll in a pink taffeta dress, with long blond ringlets and big blue eyes. When Alison picked up the doll, its eyes closed a little. It had very thick black eyelashes. Alison set it back down on the bed and turned to the dresser. The wooden dresser had an oval

mirror attached to its top. Alison put her juice glass down on a doily on the dresser and looked in the mirror. Her light brown hair was long and lank, tangled. Her face looked pale and her eyes, mournful. The night before, she had prayed on the floor for what felt like hours, and in the end she had held her breath for so long that she started to feel dizzy and see sparkly gray spots behind her closed eyelids. When Alison's mom came to wake her up in the morning, Alison was lying curled up on the floor because she had felt too exhausted after holding her breath for so long to climb back up into her bed. She still looked tired; the skin under her eyes was puffy. Alison frowned, then suddenly smiled at herself, widening her eyes as if in surprise. That was better; she even looked pretty. When she didn't smile she looked a little bit like a horse, a sad horse. She turned to the side and studied her chest in profile, but it was the same as always, flat and bony and empty. She pounded her fist hard against her breastbone, then lowered her hands and stared at herself in the mirror again. She felt tired and ugly and sad.

She looked down at the top drawer of the dresser, then she slid it open, just a little. She could see something frothy-looking, pink and white. She pulled the drawer all the way open. There were a couple of lace-collared, flowered nightgowns on top, and underneath, a stack of dingy striped panties and several big, washed-out looking bras. All of them white. Why didn't Mrs. Miller get a pretty bra? Something from Victoria's Secret maybe, purple silk or black lace. Alison had seen a Victoria's Secret catalogue one time at her friend Marni's house, and she had snuck it into the upstairs bathroom and sat on the toilet and studied it for so long that Marni had come to the door and knocked and said,

*are you okay? You've been in there forever.* Alison had stuffed it quickly behind the extra rolls of toilet paper and flushed and washed her hands and come out and Marni had looked at her suspiciously and said *are you sure you're feeling okay? You look feverish.* Alison fingered Mrs. Miller's bra, rubbing the material between her finger and thumb. It was worn and stretchy but still soft, and the straps were grayish but smooth to the touch: they felt satiny. Suddenly there was a sound outside like a car pulling up. The Millers! Alison's heart jumped up in her throat and she quickly shoved the drawer back into place and ran out of the Millers' room and hurried over to the couch and grabbed a magazine and sat down. She sat there trembling, trying to calm herself for when they came in. But after a few minutes no one had come inside, so she knelt on the sofa and looked out at the driveway, and it was someone at the neighbors' house, not the Millers. Alison slid back down into the sofa and sat there for another minute, breathing slowly and evenly. She put the magazine down on the coffee table and looked at the clock: a quarter to two. They wouldn't be home for over an hour still.

Alison got up and went into the baby's room and looked at him. He looked fine. She closed his door most of the way and then tiptoed-ran back into the Millers' room and carefully shut their door too. She went back to the dresser and slid the drawer open. She picked up one of Mrs. Miller's bras and slipped her arms through the straps, studying herself in the mirror. She looked ridiculous. Her face was all red and flushed, and the giant bra dangled from her shoulders, limp and wrinkled. She took it off and studied it. She hooked the back of the bra together, then she pulled it on over her head. It still

looked huge and tired, so Alison opened drawer after drawer, looking for socks. She knew she shouldn't be doing this, but she suddenly felt like she couldn't stop, like all the pent-up worry and longing was spilling over now as she jerked drawers open, yanking loose one of the drawer's glass knobs in her hurry. Even that didn't stop her; she tucked the glass knob into the pocket of her khaki shorts and kept looking. Finally she found some balled up white sport socks. She separated the socks quickly, folding them in half and slipping a few into each cup of the bra. Her hands were trembling slightly. Even with the socks the bra looked bad, lumpy, so she folded still more socks and stuffed them in. Soon she had ten socks in each cup. She turned to the side and inspected her profile. It was still lumpy, but not too bad. She looked like she had enormous breasts. She thought about Mrs. Miller's enormous breasts and how they would fill the bra cups, nice and round with no lumps. She thought about Mr. Miller touching Mrs. Miller's enormous breast and that made her feel tingly and sick, and then she thought confusedly about Derek Yanuzzi touching Alison/Mrs. Miller's enormous breasts. She closed her eyes and ran her fingertips over the thin stretchy material of the bra, pretending it was Derek's hand. *You're sexy, Alison.* She opened her eyes. This was wrong. She had to stop.

Alison looked down at her sock breasts. They looked so pretty. Why couldn't she have them, why? Her cheeks were flushed and she was sweating, so she took off the bra and put it on the bed with the two piles of socks. Then she pulled off her T-shirt and the childish gray sports bra she wore and put them on the bed too. She picked up Mrs. Miller's bra again, careful not to spill the socks onto the floor, and refastened it over her

bare skin. Alison looked at herself in the mirror, smoothing and caressing the breasts until they looked nice and round, like real breasts. She was uncomfortably warm, and beads of sweat were beginning to trickle down her ribs and gather on her upper lip. But she didn't move. She stared into the mirror. She thought she had never seen anything so beautiful.

## THE FIELDS

She loved the singe of smoke in her throat. In the early afternoon, she sat smoking on the broad steps of her apartment building, feeling the blowing warmth of fall. Light and shadow flowed over her body, and over the sorrow that woke and moved in her now even while she slept. She was in her second year of college and lived off-campus with several girls who were not friends but who treated her with the remote friendliness she was used to from women. She had never made friends easily with her own sex; it was men that she loved, especially since her recent, sudden prettiness made this love natural and reciprocal. In her first year of college she had basked in her prettiness, she had felt the light of the eyes of men surround her so that her body felt weighted with an accumulation of beauty. Under this weight she felt safe. She lay in several beds that year, feeling each time the hands and mouth of a man who now seemed to her like a boy as he touched her reverently. Each time, she stopped short of sex because it felt dangerous, uncontrolled—an act that might erase the shyness from a boy's eyes, might shift or split the smooth kernel of her self. It was only the eyes of men that she loved, and the life she inhabited in their light. In her mind, her own image flashed and beckoned, drawing all the light out of a landscape that slowly darkened around her.

In her second year of college she stopped going to men's beds. As she grew used to her prettiness, the feeling of being desired was no longer enough. Sometimes she

would lie in Luke's bed, but that was different. Luke was her best friend and never tried to touch her, even when they lay side by side in his narrow bed listening to music and talking, or looking out the window at the tree that shimmered and stirred outside, shaking its shadows down into the room. She loved Luke with a deep, proprietary calm that was troubled only when his eyes lingered on her too long, as they sometimes did, or when he lay so close to her in his bed that her body warmed and tingled with his nearness. And then one day he said—*do you know you're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen?* It was a warm afternoon at the end of September; they were lying side by side, not quite touching. His voice when he spoke was slightly muffled by the pillow, making his words lighter, almost silly. Less like a declaration of love. But his eyes were too blue—naked, shining—and she had to look away before she could laugh and treat it as a kind of joke. *You should have seen me at fourteen* she said quickly, averting her face so Luke couldn't see how his words surged in her. *Braces, glasses, bone-thin.*

It was only later in her own bed that she gave herself over to his words, allowing them to open and echo inside her, one by one. Of course she had often been told she was pretty, even beautiful. But no one had ever been in love with her before. *The most beautiful thing I've ever seen. The most beautiful.* It was as if her whole body was flooded with light.

Yet as the fall days turned and shortened, she stayed more and more in her own bed. Luke's love—at first as gentle and involuntary as breathing—as if the mere existence of her beauty were enough—began to change. Nothing was as it had been,

nothing was simple. One night her eyes met Luke's across a crowded room—and in his gaze, where before had been only affection, there was now an urgency of question, or demand. She looked away, stricken. But there were days too when Luke met her with a calm friendliness that left her feeling bored and irritable. Slowly, she stopped going to class. She drifted. Mornings, she would lie between her gray flannel sheets and listen to the girls she lived with as they moved from bedroom to bathroom to kitchen, blow-drying their hair, laughing and complaining. She could hear, from the dim cave of her room, doors and phone calls and dishes rattling in the dishwasher, and faint music—the music a murmur through the wall, coming from the rooms nearest hers. By late morning, the apartment would be empty, and she would leave her bed to sit, wrapped in a quilt, by the window in the living room. This was the only moment of the day when the sadness that was in her shifted. Through the window, she could see the neighborhood spread out below her: brick and leaf and cracked pavement, and through the hanging trees, a glimpse of people passing. Watching those small bodies hurrying along the sidewalk, she felt her sadness become expansive and deep, like an ancient, weary wisdom. But after a little while, the sadness invariably shifted again—it sank and settled to its accustomed place—and she would go outside to sit on the steps and smoke the first cigarette of the day. When Luke came by—bringing the freshness of the cooling days and his warm body moving through them—they sat in her room and Luke talked about his day. He told her funny stories from class, or about a new band that he liked, and she listened. His eyes when he looked at her were bright and somehow shuttered. She began to wonder if the words she had heard were real—had he really said them? *The most beautiful thing I've ever seen.*



She couldn't recall their sound, no matter how much she turned them over in her mind. Now in the evenings she was often alone: she lay in bed, watching deep-sea programs on TV. The bedroom glowed blue and filled with the sound of the sea and the narrator's voice, and slowly these would lull her to sleep, where she drifted each night in a vast cold dark lit by flickering creatures that fanned through the darkness, appearing and disappearing at the very edge of sight.

In November, the rhythm of her days was suddenly interrupted by Ella. She and Ella had always been loosely connected through Luke and their other male friends. They saw each other sometimes on weekends, at parties, where they bummed cigarettes off each other and had tipsy, distracted conversations, their eyes always darting away to where the boys laughed or wrestled or argued. She didn't like Ella, who seemed shallow and pretentious to her, and she didn't think Ella liked her very much either. Still, all through their first year and a half of college they had maintained a low-level, working friendliness. Then one day she came back from a solitary walk to find a letter from Ella slipped under the door. The letter was rambling and sentimental, and confessed that Ella and Luke had slept together—not planned, it had just happened—but that their time together had been so amazing, so raw and honest, that Ella now wanted to be with him—only seeking her blessing first because she knew Luke was her best friend and she, Ella, wanted to respect that special friendship.

She threw the letter away and went outside to smoke. The days were growing cold—the sun hung pale and low in the white sky, and the wind blew dry leaves across the

sidewalks and streets. She wore a sweater and wool pea coat and boots, and sat with her arms wrapped around her knees, holding the cigarette close to her face. The smoke burned dully in her throat and her fingers were numb and trembling. She thought about Ella: her round brown eyes, slight chubbiness, low-cut shirts that revealed deep white cleavage. She thought about Luke, what would make him happy. Three days ago, he had written her a letter that had brought her quickly the two blocks down to his apartment. But once she was there, she sat on the edge of a kitchen chair while he leaned against the counter, and they were silent for a long time, avoiding each other's eyes, before she finally stood up and said *I don't think I could ever...* Luke's hand was gripping the edge of the counter. She touched him, quickly—his white knuckles—and then she left. For two long days she hadn't seen him, and then yesterday he had knocked on her door. He had come up and sat cross-legged on the end of her bed, talking and joking with the same everyday kindness as always, and the terrible, supplicating look was only in his eyes when he wasn't speaking.

She told Ella she didn't mind and then suffered the hugging and the telling, with tears, about Luke—how incredible he was, so different from the last guy Ella had dated, and how close they all would be now—Ella hoped—like three best friends. When Luke came by the next afternoon and looked at her gravely from the doorway, she lied to him too, looking away and saying with light, dismissive sincerity *I'm glad, you'll be good together*. She nodded vaguely at the floor. Luke insisted, *Everything will be exactly the same, we'll be just like we are now—Ella understands about that*—and she smiled and nodded and said *yes* and in her mind *goodbye*.

In the following weeks, Ella and Luke began to spend more and more time together. Ella slept in Luke's bed and wore Luke's sweatshirts, spoke knowingly, wryly, about Luke's habits. All of this was expected, unavoidable, yet it made her feel weak and sick at heart. As the days and weeks went by, the sight of Ella and Luke together made her feel more and more uneasy, until she had to leave any room they entered. She was alone most of the time now, lying in bed until dark, turning and sweating in her flannel sheets, falling asleep to no dreams, to dimness, then waking again to the similar dimness of her room. There was only one dream that came to her now—though not a dream, because she entered it waking, not sleeping. The dream was of a hill where she would be alone and not afraid. It was tall and narrow, somewhere near the sea—a sea not seen but sensed—a salt warmth in the air. The hill's grass was pale yellow, dry, and clean. It gave off a faint crushed sweetness when she lay down in it under the sky that arched high and bright overhead. Beyond the hill she could see fields, gold and green and dim, and beyond the fields a blue haze that might be the sea or clouds, or the place where they met. Far below the hilltop was a road—a sandy, empty road that wound around the hill and away again. Sometimes as she lay in the yellow grass the thought came to her that there was someone there, on the road—but when she sat up quickly, her heart beating fast, the road was always blank and warm as the light. Yet this sense of waiting, of a traveler that was coming, stayed with her. She felt no fear on the hill except that she might miss the traveler. Sometimes, when she sat up to look down the road, it seemed to her that a shadow was gliding away just where the road moved beyond her vision. At other times,

she would kneel in the high, blowing grass, watching the road, the bend where the small dark figure would emerge from the green side of the hill. When she came out of this dream, she would get up out of her gray bed and stand barefoot in the middle of her room, remembering. And whether she slept or woke, the sense of waiting remained.

A night came—one of the last nights—and there was a party in someone's apartment. She went even though she didn't want to go. She had begun to feel that she needed to be around other people—their voices and bodies a tether that kept her back from some inner brink, that held her to the physical world with its smells of sweat and warm deodorant and marijuana. The party was deep, pulsing—dark and crowded with bodies. The bass of the music throbbed in the soles of her feet as she walked through the room holding a plastic cup of vodka and melting ice. She was stopped occasionally by a group of acquaintances, and she would stand still, ducking her head and nodding near their moving mouths while the music and the vodka made slow hot waves in her. After a little while, she would turn and move away again, pointing to her empty plastic cup in excuse. But soon she didn't stop, didn't pretend to listen to anything other than the music that was rising in her, that filled her with sound and rhythm—was it the music or her heartbeat? She felt her neck, its pulse strong and fast against the pressure of her fingers. Someone called out to her across the room and she smiled, turning, but she couldn't see in the dark crowd who it was that had called her. There were faces there, many faces, and bodies—blooming white in the flash of lights, then melting again into shadow. It was hot and close in the jostle and press of damp bodies, and as she stood still among them the

room began to slow down, and she was watching one face come and go—it seemed to sharpen and turn into a cartoon face, or was it an animal’s face—it made her laugh, only when she laughed she could feel her head was too heavy—it was sinking down, back away from the rest of her—she was falling. She stumbled and someone caught her, and then suddenly she was weaving fast across the room to the door. She surfaced in the quiet of the bright linoleum hallway and Luke and Ella leaning close together against the wall, their bodies quickly separating, their surprise, concern, their hands reaching out to steady her. She pulled away. *Hey, are you okay?* Ella said, coming after her, but she had already seen in the instant before they turned from each other how Luke had changed—he had changed. *Fine fine, I’m fine,* she said, her voice too loud, trembling, and she didn’t know what her face looked like but she waved her hand at them not to follow and stumbled away down the hall.

Back in her apartment, she lay in bed and felt her body throb and flash in the nothingness of night. There was no sadness left in his face at all. Only a kind of happiness, with Ella. Herself erased and gone. Her beauty forgotten. She found that she was shaking uncontrollably—a shaking that began somewhere in her gut and seized through her whole body until her teeth chattered in her head. She clenched her jaw to make it stop. His eyes on Ella. Seeing fully Ella—no haunting image of her own face. Gone, gone. She got up and went into the bathroom. In the harsh glare of the overhead light she inspected her face. Still there: her dark eyes burning, cheeks flushed. Her mouth still full and sweet—beautiful. *Beautiful.* She watched her lips in the mirror move,

whispering that one true word—her face in the mirror radiant, furious.

She wrote him a letter. She sat by the window at dawn and watched clouds gather, a truck shudder by. Her body was tense, electric. She gripped her pen. She wrote briefly, pressing down so that each word was engraved on the sheet of notebook paper:

*I think I'm falling in love with you*

*I think I'm falling*

*I'm falling*

While it was still dark out she got on her coat and hat and walked the two blocks to his apartment. The street was silent and empty, his curtains drawn. She slid the envelope under his door and stood there on the stoop for a moment, waiting. That afternoon she took a train home for Christmas break. At home she stayed in her room, away from her parents. Every night, she watched TV until everyone else was asleep. Then she would venture out into the other rooms, the quiet house mysterious now in the dark. She liked to move from room to room, slowly, feeling the cleanness of the carpet underfoot, the warmth of the linoleum. Sometimes she stood by a window and looked out into the night, but there was very little she could see—only the faint outlines of trees standing against the dark blue sky.

During the day, she went for walks in the nearby fields. The grass was brittle, crisp with cold, and she could walk for hours in the clear silence of the day—her breath steaming, face tingling. Ahead of her the field rose with a gentle inclination, reaching pale and straw-colored to the gray horizon. She walked and felt the warmth of her own body. She knew that Luke would come. She knew that she had made him love her again and this knowledge filled her with gratitude and awe. The fields and sky, the winter birds, all seemed suffused with a deep and palpitant yearning—and suddenly she saw herself small and strong and wild in the field, and all around her, the empty fields unfolding, field upon field—opening to spaces that tangled up into woods or flowed into roads—so many roads stretching on and on—roads that meant leaving and roads that meant coming, roads that ran to darkness, away down towards the sea. The world moved through her with its gentle, heavy undulations, moved through her with the weight of light, and Luke and his coming were in the light, and she knew, as if she had always known, that by the time he came she would be gone.

## AT THE MOUNTAIN OF THE SPIRITS

Train into the countryside to walk the spirit mountain. Holding her hand on the train and singing a song about a rabbit. Her wide black eyes watch the blur of gray and blue out the window. The conductor admiring her, everyone admiring her, smiling from the seats around. She sings the rabbit song for the conductor and everybody claps. The acrid smell of smoke flows back over the body of the train, blackening the windows in billows. For lunch we eat rice and meat wrapped in dry seaweed. I tell her the story of my great-grandmother who saw the spirit of the mountain, not a seven-tailed fox or a white tiger but just a voice in the trees. Quiet, like a light, a brightness. That's what she told me when I was little. A tree full of light. Everyone in the village called her crazy, they warned her the gods would punish her disrespect.

*Look!*—I look out the window where she points. A swarm of birds swoops, thinning and then darkening over distant fields. It stretches and contracts, making a moving shadow in the sky. She presses her finger to the glass. Towards noon, we approach the three-horned mountain from the south. She sleeps in my lap, her fine black hair fanning over her round cheek. In the train station, she wakes and begins to cry, so I sing to her again, the song about the three-legged crow that covered the sky with darkness. Through the village and out into the countryside, our shoes stirring up dust. The hills lean in towards us. I hold her small hand in mine. She hums as she walks along, studying the dirt road with furrowed brows. Her brows are often furrowed—such smooth little furrows, so serious. The great green mountain rises from behind a hill. I point to the



three peaks, say their names. She puts her arms up to be held—or she is trying to hold the mountain. I pick her up. *The mountain of the spirits*, I whisper in her seashell ear. *That's where we're going.*

## OUT OF THE DESERT

The time of day I like is somewhere around 4 AM, when the sky first turns from black to dark blue. The donut shop is usually quiet that hour, only sometimes a trucker stopping in, so I can pull up a stool behind the counter and sit and look out through the wall of glass windows. First there's only the sky turning, then after a while I can see the straight stretch of highway and the Shell station on the other side, pale blue ghosts in the light. That time of day it always seems to me like things might change, like there might be something new coming in with the light and the clean morning air. Customers coming in early I can see it in their faces: they believe it, and for that little hour in the dark blue light I believe it too, though maybe I should know better by now. The last thing of all to come clear is the desert out beyond, and by then it's day, 5 o' clock, and Bev comes in sighing for the morning shift. First thing she does is pour a big paper cupful of coffee and pick out her donut. At least she acts like she's picking out a donut, but she always chooses the same kind, sugar-raised. She likes to look them all over, though. She sits at the counter chewing slowly, her eyes still half-closed, and I leave her there and go in the back to check on the fresh defrosting batches. Then I box up the old donuts to take to the homeless shelter downtown.

\*

The methadone kills my appetite but I'm always thirsty after the long night so after I drop off the donuts I head over to JJ's and sit at the bar and drink a few beers and watch

TV. When I finally drive back to the apartment Lila's up getting breakfast and packing her bag for school. I make myself pause in the kitchen and ask her how she slept and all, though the truth is I don't much feel like doing it. My daughter makes me uncomfortable. Ever since she's back. I can't quite put my finger on why. The years she was gone, or the ways she changed during her disappearance. Even her eyes are a different color now. She says it's from the trauma of what was done to her, and I guess I could see that. Anyway I stand in the doorway and chat for a couple minutes, then I tell her to have a good day at school and I go into my bedroom and lock the door. I turn on the the window AC unit and the noisemaker and strip off my damp underclothes and get under the covers. Winter and summer I sleep under a warm quilt, so I keep the air up high with the noisemaker fuzzing white sound over top of it. I lie in my bed and the room fills up with cool air and with the white light of day, but I wait and listen through the ocean sound of the noisemaker for the front door to slam shut. Only then do I close my eyes.

\*

After Lila came back to us there were all these people coming around wanting to know the story, the real story, what really happened—TV people, cops. What could I give them? I didn't give them much, though Sarabeth said I was wasting an opportunity. *Opportunity for what*, I said, but I knew she meant money. She just looked away and shrugged. The real story was lost somewhere in what I couldn't remember, in the blank spaces of those years. When I think of that time now—the months before Lila

disappeared—all I remember is drinking too much and fighting with the kids and then over and behind everything the heat of that summer that you could *see*, white and wavy over the sidewalks, cracking the dry yellow dirt where the clumps of grass stiffened and died. It bleached the sky pure white. The only sound in town was the thick metallic rattle and hum of air conditioners going and the occasional car passing. I remember walking from the store to where my car was parked in the street and suddenly noticing the eerie stillness. Like there was a lid over the whole town, keeping us trapped, or maybe keeping something out.

\*

What can you say about someone disappearing? One moment Lila was there; then she was gone. Like solid ground that blows into dust, like these dreams I have all summer of snow. All day I dream it's falling and falling, light like icy feathers on my face, and then I wake mid afternoon with a parched mouth, tangled up in my cotton sheets. When Lila disappeared she was thirteen years old and already a little bitch. Always getting in trouble, shoplifting, cheating, cutting class. And violent too, I couldn't even give her a smack without her cussing and screaming and hitting me, saying things like *I hate you* and *I wish you were dead*. She'd do it with her brother too, but Jimmy was older and bigger and Lila would get the worst of it. A few times we had the cops over here because a neighbor complained about the noise, and more than once I had to pull Jimmy off his sister. When he was in his right mind he was a good brother, but Lila never learned to be

careful around him, though she knew as well as I did by then just how crazy cocaine could make a person.

\*

I was on my own then, and now, and most of my life really. There was Sarabeth and Jimmy's dad who I lived with for a while, but he was always driving off somewhere, gone for whole weeks at a time, leaving me with the two little kids and no car. Back then we lived in a double-wide outside of town, and I'd make a bed of blankets in the wagon and pull the kids into town so I could buy what we needed to get by, bread and hot dogs and milk. Haul it all back under that metal-hot sky with my feet swelling up like two sausages. Finally he didn't come back. I waited a while, then I figured he was really gone. After he left there were a couple others, one of them Lila's dad, but to be honest I don't remember any of them much anymore. The hands of one, the shoulders of another, the reek of the plaid shirts left crumpled on the bedroom floor, a shadow in a doorway, coming or going. In my mind now there's just these blurry shapes of men fading into each other and then fading away into the desert, where they all drove off to somewhere else in the end. Or died. I don't miss them. I have a routine now, a schedule that helps me keep my life going, which is more than I can say for any of them.

\*

When I get up in the afternoon I fix myself a couple bologna sandwiches and a Diet Coke with lots of ice and I sit and watch the soaps until Lila gets back from school. She doesn't stay long, just long enough to drop her backpack and eat a sandwich and some chips. Then she's gone into town, or sometimes Sarabeth's. Sarabeth who was overjoyed at Lila's return in a way that worried me, though she never understood why. *What's the problem Momma?* she'd ask. *Lila's back! It's a miracle, a true miracle from God.* But then I look at Lila and something just doesn't feel right. Her eyes, her facial expressions, her strange muffled-sounding voice. I know that's not my daughter. I can't say how I know though, and if it's not Lila, who is this girl who came out of nowhere? Saying she was my daughter who'd been gone three years, held and tortured by some experimental sect far out in the desert. They did something to her eyes with drugs and needles to change the color from brown to blue. I don't know. I look into her eyes sometimes, their flat shiny blueness. I don't know that I believe in the miracles of God but I believe in his punishments alright.

\*

People thought it was strange that I wasn't more desperate when Lila disappeared. They said I was a bad mother. Jimmy said not to worry, he said she'd just run away and would be back sooner or later. Or maybe not, but anyway it was her choice, nothing we could do about it. I suppose I believed him, at least at first. I was sleeping the day she disappeared; it was Jimmy who answered the phone when she called asking for a ride from the mall. He told her to get a ride with her friend, or else to walk home. That's

what he said to me afterward. Only then she never came. When I woke up that night Jimmy was sitting in front of the TV half passed out, half watching football and I said *where's Lila?* He didn't say anything, just shrugged. For a couple days we thought she must be staying with a friend, then we called around and no one had seen her. We waited another week, to make sure she was really missing and not off somewhere sulking, before we called the cops. They acted like it was a suspicious thing, us not calling them before, and they took Jimmy away with them for questioning. In the end they let him go. I never questioned him. The only thing I ever said was *are you sure that's all you remember? Nothing else?* and he said *Momma I swear.* I guess in a way he's always been my favorite, maybe because he's the one who's most like me. Since Lila's disappearance he's cleaned himself up. He lives out at the rehab center over in Thorp, a coordinator of some kind. When I called to tell him Lila was back, at first he didn't say anything. I kept saying *Jimmy? Jimmy?* because I thought the line had gone dead, and then he'd say *I'm still here.* Finally I said, *well, don't you want to come home and see your sister?* and he said maybe he'd arrange to come out next week. He didn't come then though, so Sarabeth called him up and he said maybe the week after. But he didn't come that week either.

\*

When Sarabeth drops Lila off after dinner she asks me to come outside a minute. Lila's watching TV and doing her homework. Sometimes she looks so ordinary. Then she turns her head and sees me watching her and for just a moment I think I see her smile this little smile in the flickering light. I follow Sarabeth outside. *Well?* I say. She's standing by her old pickup, frowning, her arms crossed up over her chest. *I want Lila to come stay*

*with me and Billy for a while*, she says without looking at me. I shrug. *That's fine*, I say. *Is that what Lila wants?* Sarabeth nods, then she says *and it's what I want too. You're always gone all night, then sleeping most of the day; it's just not much company for a kid.* She looks worried that I'll be offended, and I realize she doesn't think much of me as a mother. Well, I haven't been the best mother, to her or to any of them. I did what I could at the time. I fed them and clothed them and sent them off to school. Tried to teach them to show some respect. Now they're beyond me somehow, almost like strangers. I look at Sarabeth, her bleach-blond hair blowing stiff around her face in the evening light. She's starting to look older, wrinkles coming around her eyes, and I think about pulling her to the store in that little red wagon. But all I say is, *if you're sure. We'll pack up her stuff and I'll bring her over tomorrow after school.* And I feel the cool wind of relief.

\*

Now Lila's over at Sarabeth's I see her just once a week. Maybe less. I like having the trailer to myself again, afternoons when I get up. I make my sandwich and my Coke and sit in front of the TV, but sometimes now I turn the volume off so I can watch the TV and be quiet at the same time. The sun comes in the west-facing window and moves across the carpet until the whole room glows with gold. Outside, there's the wind, there's the neighbors' wind chimes, maybe a dog barking now and then. The faint sound of trucks passing on the highway. But all of this seems to me like pure silence. These days I don't think about my life. I just don't. Or not in the way most people do, worrying about



what will happen next, if they'll be happy, regretting the things of the past. I've taken all that and shut it up, like putting it away in some dusty back closet of my mind. Funny how you can do that. And then I give myself over to what's now—the food that I'm eating, whatever show is on, what I can see and hear: afternoon light passing away, the dim wash of sounds that makes me notice just how quiet it is. This is my life now. I figure it's as good a life as I've lived, in its way.

\*

But there's this man that's been coming round. Sarabeth tells me this on Sunday, when I'm over for what she calls "family dinner". We're eating chicken and green chile casserole when she says *a detective came by today Momma*. Lila's not at the dinner table; she's over at a friend's house. Sarabeth says that she's often gone these days, that she seems restless. *A detective?* I say. *What did he want?* But I already know; I can feel cold in my gut that something's coming. I guess I've known ever since she came back home with her flat blue eyes, with her wild story of a cult out in the desert. I guess since then, I've just been waiting.

\*

I don't have to wait long. He's at my door the next afternoon, asking if he can come in a moment. I tell him that we've already had the cops, that I told them everything

I knew after Lila disappeared, and then again, when she reappeared. *I'm not a cop*, he says, and he takes off his cap and scratches his head. He's middle-aged, overweight, sweating through his button-down shirt: I can see the dark stains bleeding from his armpits. I wait, watching him through the screen door. *I'm not a professional detective*, he admits. *I'm just interested in this case. If you have even a moment to talk...* But I tell him I don't, I have to get ready for work. He'll have to come back some other time. I start to walk away, back into the kitchen, and he says quick through the screen, *why have her eyes changed color?*

\*

Jimmy calls and says he's coming home for the night to see Lila. *About time*, I say, *it's been two months now*. He doesn't say anything to that, just *I'll see you tomorrow*. And when he comes he doesn't say much more. He looks tired, skinny. Dark circles under his eyes. We drive over to Sarabeth's for dinner, and at first Jimmy won't come in. *I'm going to have a smoke first*, he says. His face is white in the evening dimness. *It's just Lila Jimmy*, I say, *she's still your sister*. He looks at me with his big dark eyes and doesn't say anything and after a moment I look away. *I'll be inside*, I tell him. I go in and Sarabeth says *where's Jimmy?* Lila looks up from the sofa where she's reading a magazine. For once she looks curious, not that strange, flattened-out look she normally has. I tell them *outside* and Lila gets up. *I'll go out and say hi*, she says. I shrug and look over at Sarabeth, but Sarabeth just smiles real big like this is good, this is what's

supposed to happen. Lila swings out the screen door and after a minute I can hear their voices, talking. But after another minute Lila comes back in. *Where's Jimmy?* Sarabeth says again, and Lila says he isn't feeling good, he decided to walk home. *What?* says Sarabeth. She runs to the door and looks out and shouts *Jimmy!* but though we all hold still, listening, there's no answer. Sarabeth walks back over to the counter and sits down and wipes her forehead. She shakes her head. Then: *look*, says Lila, and we both turn to look. A gold necklace dangles from her hand: a fine, thin chain with a small gold cross. It swings in the light, shining. *What's that?* I say, and Lila smiles her little smile. *He gave it to me.*

\*

That was the last we saw Jimmy. I tried calling him once out in Thorp but he didn't answer, and it wasn't long after that I got the call that he had overdosed.

\*

I live out in Cottonwood now. It's a tiny little town, less than fifty people: just a ten-mile stretch of sand by the side of the highway. I work for an older lady, helping take care of her grown daughter who's severely mentally retarded. I sleep in an old RV in the backyard, and all day long I take care of this girl. Cara. Her momma goes out to the community center to play bridge, or else she lies in bed watching TV. She's getting older and her health isn't good, and besides that she looks pure exhausted from taking care of

her daughter for almost seventy years. Cara isn't easy, but I don't mind. I bathe her and feed her and keep her from hurting herself doing something dangerous. I have to watch her constantly. It's strangely restful though. She can't speak but she kind of moans and hums to herself as she wanders around the house or the yard, and her eyes have a faraway look like she's seeing things the rest of us can't. She doesn't ever really look at me, maybe because I'm too close.

Every once in a while I go home to see Sarabeth. She's not doing too good. It was a real blow to her, Lila not being Lila. It was the detective who pieced it together. He kept coming round asking questions and more questions and finally Lila broke down and admitted that she wasn't Lila after all. She was some other girl, some runaway from Idaho or some place. She had seen a show about Lila's disappearance on TV and for some reason she thought she'd come down here and pretend to be her. When the detective asked her why, she said, *I thought it'd be easier to be someone else*. That was all she said.

Sarabeth went into shock; at first she refused to believe any of it. She kept calling the girl Lila even after the truth came out. Then the girl's parents came down to take her back home and Sarabeth stopped going out. She stayed in her trailer for three months refusing to leave even to get groceries. At first Billy was sympathetic, then he was less sympathetic, and in the end he took off and left her. That woke her up a little; she went back to work at least. When she called me on the phone I told her, *stick to a routine*.

*You'll be surprised how much it helps.*

I stick to mine. I sleep with a baby monitor next to my bed in case Cara wakes up in the night. It makes a fuzzy crackling sound that lulls me to sleep, and I can hear the

girl moaning in her sleep, or sometimes snoring, and that's a comforting sound too. I don't dream: I just listen to the night noises, like sea sounds washing over me. And if I do dream, it's not of anything *happening*, it's more like a sensation, something cool and wet, something that might bathe me: snow falling, or else the rushing of water. But this is the desert, and we're far from anything like that.

## THE CHANGE

She stood in front of the mirror, watching herself smoke. She looked just right, holding her Marlboro Light casually between two fingers, or taking a drag and slitting her eyes at her reflection. She wasn't sure about exhaling, though. When she tried to blow the smoke out, only a pale little wisp wafted up to kiss the mirror, then disappear. That wasn't right. The smoke was supposed to billow forth luxuriously, in a slow and sexy cloud, like you were full of mystery and sadness. Like you were Audrey Hepburn. She carefully patted the cigarette out in the sink, bending over to peer at the wet gray end. She dropped it into the trash, picked up the pack, and shook out another one. She smoked by the dirty little window and looked out at the fog and the evening coming in, dark blue. She had been in London five days. She had come to have her heart broken.

\*

She had been planning it intently for a year and a half now, working at Rite Aid in that hateful blue vest, saving her money, waiting, all for him. She had first heard him at a reading in a small but packed bookstore in her hometown. No one interesting had ever come there before; it was a small town hidden in the Connecticut woods, with only one high school, three bars she was too young to go to, and the bookstore. Usually the readings were boring, hoarse old men writers in ugly sweaters, or middle-aged women

who read embarrassing poems about sex. But then *he* came.

He was not, at first, handsome. He was almost forty, with shaggy black and gray hair, a heavy face and belly, and shoulders that looked discouraged, or maybe tired. She hadn't been paying attention. But as he opened his book and began to read, she turned to look at him. His voice was low, intense, strangely sad sounding. He read for half an hour and his writing seemed to her also strange and mysterious, full of things she didn't understand, but wanted nevertheless—wanted immediately and urgently. He read for half an hour and then he stopped and looked up. Amidst all the applause and smiling and turning heads and shifting bodies, she stood still, looking at him, and suddenly he turned his head and looked right back at her. It was only a moment, then he looked away again, but she felt as if he had touched her face in front of the whole room.

\*

It stayed with her. She lay in bed that night and felt again and again the shock of his eyes on her. In the following weeks she read his book feverishly, over and over. On the inside jacket there was a photo of him looking out at her. Under the photo it said that he lived in London with his wife and two children. And so she decided: she would go to London. She would find him. He would remember her. They would fall in love. It would be beautiful and also tragic, she knew, because in the end they would do the noble thing and part, for his family's sake, but also because it had to end like that. They would say goodbye and he would walk away with only one last look. Her heart would be broken and

she would return home, but everything would be changed. Life would be transformed. She would live forever in his world of sad mystery.

\*

Outside on the street she lit her third cigarette hunched in the doorway, protecting the flame with her hand. She inhaled and felt her lungs fill with smoke and hope. She was utterly alone in the strange city. London lay before her, glittering with lights, stretching out into the blue night like a dream. As she walked down the hill she could see it in all its vastness, and beyond it the dark sky. She felt strangely elated. She was ready to change. She was ready to suffer.



## IN NORTH POINT

In North Point the sea was cold—cold and gray with swollen, crashing waves. Dirty foam gathered at the tideline, and flies crawled on heaps of drying seaweed. Emily sat in a patch of damp sand, watching David surf. At least, she thought it was David. From where she sat on the beach, the surfers all looked the same to her. Every once in a while one of them suddenly sprang up out of the water and balanced in a kind of fluid crouch, cutting swiftly across the surface of a wave before it dissolved into whitewater and the surfer fell back into the sea. Emily liked the way the surfers fell—a limp, graceful flop, as if they were falling into bed instead of the cold winter sea. The surfers falling into the sea was the only thing Emily liked about North Point. It was the only *human* thing. Everything else chilled her—the inhospitable beach, the small shapes that waited out there in the sea with a strange stillness, as if they waited not for waves but for something else, something terrible, shining and inevitable.

Yet she was the one who had insisted on coming along, who had obstinately imagined fine white sand and seas the color of swimming pools even though by now she knew Washington beaches were all the same—dirty, wet, bleak. From a distance, maybe the distance of a postcard, it would appear very picturesque: mountains of rock jutting up out of the dark water, the pearly sheet of the sky, and back behind Emily (small, half-lost on the beach) the encroaching black of the woods. When Emily sent postcards or photos to friends back east, they always said the same thing: so beautiful, so *wild*. And she had

to agree—this remote place was wilder, more beautiful, than anything she had yet seen. But its beauty only made her more unhappy.

That morning, before dawn, she had woken abruptly, gasping. She jolted up in bed. The room was dark. "Shhh..." It was David, pressing her back into the pillow with his broad hand. "It's okay. Time to get up. Can you hurry and get dressed?" Emily nodded, and David patted her shoulder and went back out. She followed him with her eyes—his wide shoulders and narrow hips, the compact muscled length of his body. She wanted to sleep burrowed into that body, hidden in it, cradled. "Em. Get up." She opened her eyes. There was David again, his shadow leaning over her. Then he was gone. She sat up on the edge of the bed, blinking in the circle of lamplight. Her body was still blind with sleep, and she wanted to sink back into its animal hum, but after a moment she stood up and stretched, listening for David as he moved around the kitchen.

They drove the length of the island to pick up Cal on the north end. Everything was quiet; the car's headlights brushed against dark evergreens and fog. They pulled into Cal's driveway, where he was wrestling his board into its bag. He dropped the board and did a little dance in their headlights, and David rolled down his window and hollered, "Let's go!" David and Cal had gone to high school together and now they surfed together. Cal had long, heavy blond hair, a skinny kind of restlessness. He was a carpenter too, like David, but while David specialized in cabinetry, Cal made ugly expensive furniture out of driftwood that Emily suspected he harvested illegally. Emily liked Cal and yet she couldn't take him seriously. He was always flirting with her in an abrupt, nervous way that made her smile as she might at a child playing an elaborate game. It didn't bother

David. He just smiled and said that Cal had always been like that with girls. Cal amused David, while David's calmness seemed to irritate Cal, and yet Emily could sense a stubborn loyalty between the two friends, although they showed little open affection. It was a mystery to her, the friendship between men. So much seemed to take place underground, hidden at a depth well below dirt and root.

\*

Before leaving the island, they stopped to buy bitter black coffee at the gas station, the only place open at five in the morning. Standing there outside the gas station's mini-mart, Emily looked down the empty length of the street. There was the library, there was the diner, the hardware store, all of it unreal and ghostly at this hour. It was still dark out, and so quiet that she thought she could hear, in the distance, water lapping the night shore. She stood still, listening, half-dreaming, her paper coffee cup hot in her hand. Then David said "Em, coming?" and she turned and followed him to the car.

For the first part of the trip, David blasted the heat and Emily dozed in the back seat, using a wadded towel as a pillow. David and Cal sat up front, talking in low voices. The old Subaru was packed full of gummy, sandy surfboards, wetsuits in trash bags, stacks of faded towels and six-packs of beer. Emily had even thought to bring a cooler of ham and cheese sandwiches and some apples for lunch. And a checked picnic blanket, and napkins. They would have a picnic on the beach, looking out at the glassy sea. Winter

light would surround them, bathing their faces where they sat close together in the clean grassy dunes.

Emily woke up when they crossed the bridge that connected the island to the peninsula. She sat up and stretched, looking out the window to where the river moved away to the north and south. "You woke up," David said, watching her in the rearview mirror. She smiled at him.

"Mind if we listen to the radio then sunshine?" Cal asked. He fiddled around until he found the heavy metal station. "Ye-hes!" he said, and turned it up loud so the car's speakers vibrated. He did a dramatic head-bang or two. David shook his head and smiled, and Emily laughed and took a sip of her coffee. It felt like high school again—though not of course her own high school years, which had been lonely and dull—years of solitary reading and studying, of watching movies with her parents on Friday nights. No, this was like living someone else's high school experience: a wild, west-coast kind. She could imagine how it would have been. All the high-school boys would be carelessly handsome in their old plaid shirts. And elusive—always cutting class, vanishing to surf or skateboard in some secret spot. And the high-school girls would be gorgeous and foul-mouthed, with long wavy hair and a taste for cheap whiskey.

\*

Like Lena. Lena, David's first love, his high school girlfriend. She was one of those girls, Emily could tell—confident and beautiful without caring anything about it.

Once, when Emily had asked, David had shown her a photo of Lena. In the photo, Lena was sitting on a rocky beach wearing one of David's button-down shirts and short white shorts, her hair blowing around her face. She looked into the camera with eyes that were dark and mysterious. Bedroom eyes. Emily had never had eyes like that; her mother had once described Emily's eyes as "kindly." *Kindly?* Emily had protested, offended. Her eyes were round and gray and crinkled when she smiled, but *kindly* made her sound like a grandmother. Her mother had insisted that no, it was a good thing, a compliment—it meant that she looked trustworthy and good. She had gone on about the importance of kindness and goodness, and finally Emily had nodded and said *no I know, I know it's supposed to be a compliment*. And her mother had gazed at her with incomprehension and said *well of course it is, what else would you want to be?* Most days, Emily felt she was pretty enough. She was so small and slight that people often thought she was younger than twenty-three, but she had fine short ash-brown hair and long black eyelashes and a dimple in one cheek, and even if her eyes were a little too round and her nose a little too large, she was still pretty. At least David seemed to think so. But whenever she looked at the photo of Lena, Emily felt restless. She had stolen the photo from David and now kept it hidden in her wallet in a small zippered compartment. The few times she had spoken of Lena to David, he had laughed and teased her, and then after a while he'd gotten sick of it and told her to stop dwelling on the past—Lena had been a mess, crazy, and anyway it was all so long ago now he couldn't remember a thing. So Lena was gone, who knew where. It was Emily who lived with David in plain fact, in daylight—silly, to feel envious of a high school girl. Emily reached up and draped one

arm over the seat back, pressing her hand to David's chest, the rough wool of his shirt. He looked at her in the rearview mirror and put his hand over hers in a brief caress. She leaned her head against the seat back and breathed in the warm, damp smell of his skin. She could see in her peripheral vision the pale whorl of his ear, its slightly pointed tip. He was telling Cal about work, about a new job he had for some wealthy people on the south end of the island.

"Gonna milk 'em for all they're worth," David said, and laughed shortly. "Nah. But you should see this place." He shook his head as if deeply disappointed.

"Yah?" Cal said. Emily was quiet, gazing out the window. She didn't like the way David talked about people who had money.

"They're still people," she had said once, after some scornful remark he had made.

"Yeah, but they're different."

"What do you mean, they're different?" Emily had said, putting down her knife and fork and folding her arms across her chest. He had shrugged, not looking at her, sipping his beer.

"Just different, that's all," he'd said.

"What about me? Am *I* different then? Is that how you think about me, too?" Her throat had begun to swell up, and she had pushed away her plate, and David had come over to her then and put his arms around her and told her to forget it, of course not, of course he didn't mean *her*.

Yet the sense of difference remained, no matter what David said about Emily being an exception. Her wealthy New England family (who David sometimes referred to

as "the aristocracy", but always gently, as if he didn't mean it) and her upbringing—the boarding schools, horse-riding lessons, family vacations to Florence and Corfu—couldn't be erased. *Though it isn't as if you were raised in absolute poverty*, Emily would say defensively, and David would agree: *I've got nothing to complain about*. But Emily knew that there could be no real comparison between them. David's father owned the island paint store and his mother worked as a nurse at the local hospital. Although they had enough, David had always worked part-time jobs after school and during the summers. *I didn't mind*, he'd say. *It was good for me to work*. And Emily would shrug sadly. She had never had a job. A few weeks after she had moved to Washington, David had suggested that she look for a job, and Emily had agreed, but the truth was that she didn't know how to.

"What would I do?" she asked her mother on the phone. Her mother was not sympathetic.

"You don't need some *job*," she had snapped. "You need to go back to college and finish your education. What are you *doing* out there, Emily? Who is this boy? Your father and I are really worried about you; last night I woke up in the middle of the night and couldn't go back to sleep. I have a very bad feeling about all of this."

So Emily had to reassure her all over again about David, about her happiness with him. About the fact that this was just a "break" from college, a much-needed break. *It's not like I'm never going back*, she said. But she wondered if this was true. During the days that David was at work, she'd bike to the small island library to use the internet to look for a job. She'd sit there in the afternoon drowse of the musty-smelling library,

surrounded by old people who sat for hours reading novels and magazines or mumbling to themselves and coughing. She searched Craigslist and the local paper, as David had told her to do, but there was rarely anything on the island, and even when there was, it was never something that Emily could picture herself doing.

\*

As they neared the coast, the towns they drove through thinned and became smaller and damper. Old wooden houses gave way to cheap plastic siding and then to aluminum trailers and RVs surrounded by piles of junk: rusted-out cars, orange-and-blue plastic kiddie slides, old floral sofas disintegrating on porches. All of it slowly disappearing into a jungle of deep green weeds. Only the forest of evergreens was the same—dark and tall, looming against the gray sky. It felt terribly forlorn to Emily. But the farther they went into this ugliness, the more David and Cal seemed to sharpen with a kind of tense gladness—they rolled down their windows and sniffed the salt air, speaking a language that meant very little to Emily—all about point breaks and tides and sandbars. Their eyes were bright, strained, as if they could already see the waves breaking through trees and houses. A damp, fishy wind slapped through the car and Emily shivered, looking out at the outskirts of North Point. North Point was a small, wet seaport, home to a large commercial fishing fleet. The fishing boats went far out to sea for their catch, but other than this, the town remained isolated and stagnant. It seemed to exist only in relation to the sea—the range of its motion limited to a repetitive, tidal ebb and flow. On



the road into town they passed a low gray windowless building with a sign *Toys Topless*, three surf shops, a strip of dive bars, and a dingy Red Apple market.

On the main street of the town there was a cop car sitting parked on a narrow strip of grass.

"Cop," Emily told Cal, who was driving, but he just started to laugh, not even glancing in the direction of the cop car. "What?" she said, looking to David.

"It's not real," he said, smiling.

"What do you mean?" She looked again.

"The cop, it's stuffed," he said, jerking his thumb. And she could see as they passed the cop car that the cop inside was a dummy dressed in police uniform, complete with cap and sunglasses. The stuffed cop sat stiffly against the car seat, staring out at them with its mirrored sunglasses. Its arms hung limp and fat at its sides. Emily stared, twisting in her seat, following it with her eyes as they drove by. She turned around and watched it grow smaller in the rear window. The further away they got, the more it began to look like a real cop again, even though Emily knew now that it wasn't. But its shadowy watchfulness seemed somehow to follow them.

"Why is that thing there?" she asked. No one answered her, though—David and Cal were arguing about what spot to check first—so she said it again. "Why is that thing there?" But David just shrugged.

\*

A little way outside of town they pulled up in front of a flimsy wooden shack. Cal's cousin Ryan came out into the yard. Ryan had gone to high school with David and Cal too, but after graduating, he had moved to North Point to fish. Emily couldn't understand how anyone would want to become a fisherman, even though Ryan had tried to explain it to her once: the way fishing worked, he said, was that the boat was far out on the open ocean for several months. It could get wild out there, with sometimes freak storms, and only a couple hours' sleep at a time. And sometimes these weird lulls—a silence that would come. The rest of the time it was pretty choppy, and the work was hard and dangerous: lifting hundred-pound crates head-high and stacking them on the slippery decks. You had to learn to move with the motion of the wave or it could all come crashing down on you. You had to be careful not to fall overboard into the freezing black sea. It required a kind of grace. Once there was enough fish, the boat came back in and everyone got a few months off and a fat wad of money to spend. Maybe thirty thousand. And then, just when the money was all used up (*on what?* Emily wondered), it'd be time to head out again. *I still don't see why you'd want to do that*, she'd told him, and he had laughed and said *that's because you're a pretty little girl* and then he had gotten up and stretched and gone out for a smoke. He did look, Emily thought, the way a fisherman should: tall and thick, with a big round head, cropped black hair, and a beard.

"What's up, cousin," he said, clapping Cal on the back. "Dave."

"Is that a rifle on the porch?" Cal asked.

"Yah, I was out hunting bear yesterday," Ryan said. He got the rifle and handed it to Cal, then spread his arms so they could see his army fatigues. "Stealthy, right?" he said, grinning. David laughed.

"Hunting *bear*?" Cal said, frowning. He swung the rifle up to his shoulder and sighted down its length, pointing it at the front door. "Did you get anything?"

"Nah," Ryan said. He took the rifle back.

"Where do you hunt bears around here?" Emily asked. Ryan gestured vaguely.

"In the forest," he said. "But come on in, guys, come on in."

The house was chilly, as if there were neither insulation nor heating. The linoleum floors slanted alarmingly, and the only furniture in the living room was an old brown couch with burn marks on the cushions, a beanbag, and a coffee table made out of a cardboard box covered with an extra-large red T-shirt. *Board to death*, it read. The faux-wood walls displayed two huge canvases: one, some kind of graffiti art, and the second a painting, done in lurid reds and yellows, of a massive wave with the sun setting behind it. A surfer surfed down the wave towards a pornographic-looking mermaid, who rose up out of the sea beaming. Ryan stopped in front of the paintings so that they could admire them. "A friend did those," he said with pride.

In the kitchen, Ryan introduced them to his housemates, Pin and LeBaron, who were sitting at a small Formica table drinking cans of Miller Lite and smoking. Pin was an obese blonde with lots of very curly hair, on top of which was perched a small gold plastic tiara.

"Short for *Pincess*," she told them. "And today I'm a fuckin princess for real cause it's my birthday." She stared at them. There was a short silence.

"Happy birthday!" Emily said. Pin nodded.

"You guys want beers?" she said. "The fridge is loaded for later, but me and LeBaron thought, why not get started." LeBaron was rolling a joint on the table. He was lean and dark, his face shadowed under his cap. He seemed reluctant to acknowledge their presence.

"LeBaron...that's unusual," Emily murmured. She hardly knew what she was saying. She gazed around at the house, at Pin and LeBaron, and everything seemed surreal, stretched and distorted like a trick mirror. Even the cool gray light leaking through the window seemed to fall at a strange angle. There was a silence as they watched LeBaron lick his joint and light it. Pin adjusted her tiara.

"LeBaron's my brother," she offered.

"Well, we better get going." Ryan said. "We'll see you guys later on."

"Yeah," Pin said. "You all are invited to my party tonight. You gonna come?" She pointed at Emily. Emily glanced at David.

"Okay," she said.

"You better," Pin said, fixing her with a beady gaze. "*All* of you better be there."

\*

When Emily grew weary of sitting on the beach, she hiked back up through the black woods to sit in the small shelter of the car. She made a nest out of folded towels and a salty sleeping bag, and held her damp feet in her hands to warm them. The ocean was so cold here, so full of cold-eyed fish and vast drifting webs of seaweed and who knew what else. Deeper down, whales maybe and sharks, and deeper still, those strange whitish burning things that lived in regions of unbearable pressure. But all of that was just what David liked—the strange, the unknown—even the cold. The sensation of moving over the surface of the unseen. When he came back in from surfing he always seemed a little different: bigger, wilder, his eyes still traveling back from some point on the horizon. *It feels like you can't see me at first*, she told him once, and he just laughed and came after her with his icy hands.

\*

When Emily and David met, she was living in Boston, finishing her final year of college. On a Saturday night, she had gone out to a club with some girlfriends as they sometimes did, in part to drink and dance with each other and in part to make fun of the trashy people who really went to clubs. They danced for a while, at first lightly, half-mockingly, but then with increasing seriousness as the night went on. Any man who tried to move in on their group was rejected with quick scorn: they danced only with each other, in a tight bright huddle, their earrings flashing in the throb of red lights, their bodies glittering and undulating to the thick *doom* of the bass that vibrated up through the

soles of their feet. And yet they danced *for* the men they wouldn't dance with, Emily understood that. When Kathleen whirled into her and slid her ass rhythmically up and down the length of Emily's thighs, it wasn't really something between them—it was Kathleen and the men who watched somewhere out there in the surrounding dark. But Emily preferred to dance alone, a little apart. Sometimes she closed her eyes so that everything else was gone but the music that moved up through the floor into her body, the lights that came and went on her up-tilted face.

At some point late in the night, Kathleen came back from the bar holding two drinks and smirking. She handed one to Emily and leaned her hot hand on her shoulder. Her breath was gin and cigarettes and metal.

"That guy said to give this to you!" she shouted, her voice hoarse under the surge of the music. "He likes your dancing!"

"What guy?" Emily said. Her face felt hot, and her voice and movements loose and a little delayed, like moving through water.

"Drink it!" Kathleen said. She sloshed her drink against Emily's. "Over there, by the bar...in the shirt."

"The one in the plaid shirt? Who looks..."

"Like a construction worker?" Kathleen laughed.

Emily looked towards the man at the bar. She thought that he was looking at her too. She swallowed her drink, feeling the sweet burn in her chest.

"I'm going to thank him," she told Kathleen, but Kathleen wasn't there any more. So she stood up and she could feel, as she walked through the crowd, the heaviness of her

slim pale legs swinging in her tight skirt, a low throbbing in her ears, atoms tingling in her fingertips.

Later, she and David would laugh about the way they met. *You in a club*, Emily would say. *I still don't know what took you there*. And David would grin and say *who knows, it sounded like a good idea at the time*. But this answer never satisfied her. So then she'd say, lightly: *why me? didn't you think I was just another yuppie college girl?* He would consider, or pretend to consider. *I don't know what I thought. I liked your dancing. And you didn't end up being like that*. Emily usually let it drop here, but his words filled her with a feverish eagerness. *Like what?* she wanted to demand—*like what? Then what am I like, instead?*

Three months ago, Emily had flown from Boston to Washington to visit David for the weekend. She never returned. Despite her parents' furious disapproval, her friends' protests, she dropped out of school without even returning to pack up her room or box up her clothes and books. She didn't know how to explain what had happened. He had looked so out of place in that club, with his plaid shirt and old jeans, but he had leaned comfortably back against the bar. Handsome as a big somber dog. When Emily crossed the room, he had pulled up a stool for her as if she were walking into his kitchen. *When I flew out here*, she told Kathleen on the phone, *I could see the coastline, and then little islands, and then just water going on and on. I don't know. It's different here. There's something that, the farther you go...but she didn't know how to explain what she meant. Something about being on the edge of the land, where it began to disappear. Kathleen*

wasn't interested in what it was, anyway. *God doesn't it rain all the time there?* was all she said. Emily promised Kathleen she could have anything she wanted if she would clear out Emily's room for her, and then she immersed herself in David's world: his tiny, drafty house on the south end of the island, his wool shirts that smelled like fog and rain, his high school friends, his dog-eared books about sailing and carpentry and historical expeditions. David welcomed her in easily, without ceremony, accepting her with a calmness that quickened at times into a rough, teasing tenderness. When he made love to her, he held himself up on his elbows, a little away from her, and watched her face with his brown eyes that were somehow neither near to her nor far.

\*

Emily shifted restlessly in her nest. Her breath had steamed the car windows so that it looked as if she were lost in fog. The morning was passing slowly. She put her socks and shoes on and walked back through the woods to the beach. Both were deserted—there were no animals, no other people in sight. She stood in the wind on the beach and shaded her eyes with her hand, trying to find David, but at the moment there were no waves, and all the surfers sat on their boards waiting, rocking gently in the ripples like sad upright seals. She wrapped the picnic blanket around her to block out the wind, and then wandered up and down in the sand, avoiding the sodden tangles of seaweed. She had the uneasy sense of being watched, though who could be watching her she didn't know. All the surfers sat with their backs to her except when they caught a wave. Once or twice,



David had waved to her right before he plunged back into the sea, but that had been hours ago. Now it seemed he had forgotten all about her.

Someone was running towards her through the darkness of the woods. A tiny bobbing shadow that became a surfer and then became LeBaron, zipped into a wetsuit, his board under his arm. He stopped near her, set his board down and started doing something to it, kicking sand over it and then rubbing it in. He didn't look at Emily or say anything.

"I didn't know you surfed," Emily said hesitantly.

"Yah," he said, and glanced up at her. "You don't?"

"No," she said.

"What are you doing here then?" he said abruptly.

"What?" She looked at him, uncertain, half-smiling.

"If you don't surf, why the fuck would you come out here to freeze your ass off on the beach?" At first Emily thought he was teasing her, but he stood up and gave her a cold, slow, measuring look. She felt the blood rush to her cheeks.

"I don't know," she said. She tried to make it a joke. "Why not?" But her voice came out all wrong—hoarse and strained. She cleared her throat. LeBaron's dark eyes seemed to swallow her whole and then spit her out again. He leaned towards her as if he were going to share a secret, but Emily shrank back.

"C'mon," he said, and beckoned with his finger. Her heart beat faster. She stepped towards him, registering in an automatic way the cold dark gray of his eyes, the thin

vertical lines on either side of his mouth. He smelled like wood smoke and like something damp and fungal—the insides of mushrooms, or dirty moss. She closed her eyes. He leaned in and whispered, his breath warm in her ear.

*"You don't belong here."*

She jerked away and stared at him, stricken.

LeBaron's eyes met hers and he made a harsh snorting noise that might have been a laugh. Then he was jogging away again, off down the beach. Emily sat down in the sand. Her hands were shaking, and she pressed them against her thighs to steady them. She watched him enter the water and begin to paddle out past the breakers with quick, firm strokes, pushing his board down and duck-diving the waves that were breaking towards him.

What he had said was true.

She didn't belong. Yet she had invited herself along even though David had asked, repeatedly, if she wouldn't be bored just sitting there while they surfed. And she was bored, terribly bored, but more than that she felt flimsy, thin, like she was dwindling to a shadow on this remote beach, and she couldn't tell if it was the place that was wrong somehow, or her. Reflexively she thought of Lena—if it were Lena here instead of her. She was not the kind of girl to feel lost. Emily imagined her sitting out there in the dark water, her eyes remote, fixed on the horizon, her body warm and strong in her wetsuit. While Emily's sensitive ears ached just from sitting on the cold beach. She shook her head. Foolish—childish—to think of her in moments like this, to wonder what she would do, or say. How she would look.

"Hey." Emily looked up, startled. David was coming up the beach towards her. She felt a rush of relief at the sight of him, his wet, solid shape.

"I thought you'd never come out." She tried to sound cheerful. David dropped his surfboard into the sand and sank down next to her. He looked wild, larger than usual in his exhilaration. He leaned in and kissed her, a cold, briny kiss. "You taste like the sea," Emily said, and shuddered involuntarily.

"Is that bad?" David said, smiling down at her. She shrugged, then shook her head.

"Do you want some sandwiches?"

"I'm starving," David said. So Emily got the towels and sandwiches and beer, and they huddled together and ate, watching the other surfers. "See LeBaron out there?" David gestured with his sandwich. Emily nodded faintly. "He's amazing," David said. "Could've gone pro." LeBaron took a wave. "Watch," David said. And as she watched, Emily could see that there was something about LeBaron that set him apart—cutting white into the black glass of the wave he moved with the slippery wildness of a sea creature, or of the sea itself. Emily put her sandwich down. She felt sick. "I don't know what keeps him in this town, when he could be out there traveling, competing all over the world," David said. They watched LeBaron leap out of the wave as it crumbled. For a moment he seemed to hang motionless above the curling lip of the wave—his small figure suspended, reaching against the sky.

\*

Pin's birthday party was being celebrated at a bar called The Knotty Pine. "The Knotty Pine, ha ha," Cal said.

"What's funny?" Ryan said.

As they headed towards the bar, David slung his arm around Emily's shoulders. She stopped walking then and held him around the waist, looking up into his shadowy face. "What is it?" he said. "You okay? Tired?" She stood on her tiptoes and buried her face in his neck, inhaling the smell of him—milk and soap and a faint musk. David laughed. "Em?" But Emily didn't say anything. She felt she was floating somewhere above him, untethered, like a thin dream—no connection to the warm reality of David, his alert muscular male body. He was like a big lithe rippling cat—wonderful to look at, to touch. But his mind was hidden, flowing smooth and dark behind his eyes. She couldn't imagine what he saw when he looked at her out of those eyes.

"No, nothing," she said. David laughed, and kissed her on the forehead.

"A nice cold beer is what we need," he said.

Inside, the bar was crowded and dark, packed with dense shadows. There was loud music playing, a mix of hard rock and country, and just under the music, the swell of loud voices. In the middle of the room, glowing white in a flood of light, there was a tree. It was an old dead tree, all its bark scraped or fallen off, but it appeared to have grown right up through the building. It began back behind the bar and branched up along the

stairway to the second floor, its pale raw limbs intertwining with the steps. Cal nudged her.

"Fuckin awesome, right?" It looked like something you would think you had dreamed some drunken morning, waking up late, head awash. A bar with a tree in it. Emily didn't like it. It was so naked and dead, so prominent. But then she heard a shriek, and there was Pin pushing towards them, massive and red-faced in her sparkling pink dress.

"You *came*," she said, pulling Emily into her bosom.

"Thanks," Emily said nonsensically, but she couldn't tell if she actually spoke out loud because the room was so noisy and Pin's flesh so all-encompassing. In her ears there was a muted, underwater roar. David and Cal were moving away toward the bar to order drinks, and Ryan was talking to a couple girls back behind her somewhere. Pin released Emily and loomed over her with a loose, wet smile.

"Come meet people!" she said, gripping Emily's elbow with her strong, sticky hand. Emily hesitated, but Pin pulled her away from the bar into the dense crowd of bodies. Emily looked helplessly around for David, but he was standing by the bar waiting to order, and just winked and waved at her. Wherever Pin went, the crowd parted for her, rippling and then surging in again to close around Emily. They pushed through the humid, smoky length of the room, through the press of bodies, but Pin didn't introduce Emily to any of them. Instead she pulled her into the narrow bathroom and left Emily to stand there while she wedged herself into a stall. "Ahhh..." she said. "Too much fuckin beer." Emily washed her hands and looked at herself in the mirror. When she tried to

smile, her lips trembled. Pin emerged from the stall. "You know," she said, "I knew this chick once, could stand up and piss like a dude. But I don't get how she did it, do you?" She grabbed her crotch and yanked on it, pretending to take aim, then looked at Emily and laughed a slurry laugh. "She was fuckin nasty." Pin sighed, as if deeply oppressed by the memory. "God. Let's find my brother." Emily went pale.

"Oh—" she said shakily. "No. I'd better find David."

"Why? You got something against my brother?" Pin said, blinking at Emily's reflection.

"No, it's just..." Emily stopped.

"It's just what?"

"I don't think he likes *me* very much." She said it so quietly that at first she thought Pin might not have heard her.

"What?" Pin muttered. She was staring at herself with small wet empty eyes. She pushed at her tiara with one hand. "He likes you, course he likes you, you have tits don't you?"

"Only when I saw him on the beach," Emily said hesitantly, "he was...he looked at me like..." She paused. She didn't know why she was telling Pin this. But there was something reassuring about Pin that made Emily feel she could talk to her. Her drunkenness, maybe. Or her solidity. Emily looked at them standing there together in the mirror. She was tiny, white, a faded little boy next to the fleshy pink mountain of Pin. And her eyes were frightening in her white face—huge and black.

"There's only one way he looks at girls—*pretty* girls, I mean." Pin leered at Emily in the glass.

"I don't know," Emily murmured vaguely. Her body felt airy and unreal, and she realized suddenly that she hadn't eaten any dinner, or really any lunch either. Yet despite the feeling of emptiness in her, or maybe because of it, she wasn't hungry. She thought of LeBaron's dark eyes that had seemed to swallow her and spit her out again.

She let Pin lead her back out of the bathroom into the din of shouting and music, but instead of going back into the main room of the bar, Pin pushed her into a small, smoky side room. "*There* you are," she said, letting go of Emily and collapsing dramatically into an armchair. LeBaron nodded at his sister. He was lounging on a dingy sofa with some other people—a couple guys and a pretty Asian girl wearing dark purple lipstick. They stopped talking and looked over at Emily standing in the doorway.

"Help you?" said one of the guys.

"She's with me asshole, she's my friend," Pin said, taking hold of Emily's wrist again without looking at her.

"Hi," Emily said. The emptiness in her was doing strange things. She felt dizzy. LeBaron glanced at her, then away again.

"Let the girl sit *down*," Pin said wearily. "Jesus."

"Sure," said LeBaron flatly. "Get comfy." He shifted over on the sofa and looked at Emily. It was a hostile look, intended probably to keep her away, but she crossed the room and sat down carefully on the edge of the sofa. It was easy—like sleepwalking. The

others filtered out. The Asian girl gave her a cool stare and went over to Pin, and they leaned together, whispering. Emily slid down the sofa, closer to LeBaron.

"Don't get too close," he said, and laughed harshly.

"I saw you surfing earlier," Emily said.

"Yah," he said. The hostility of his voice had relaxed a little. She could feel him looking at her, waiting, but it was the only thing she could think of. The way he had moved with the sea that afternoon, the concentrated ferocity of the grace now shut up again in his body. But she didn't have anything more to say about it; she was empty, burning. She pressed her cold fingertips into her hot cheeks.

"Want to go outside for a smoke?" Emily said. Her voice a sleepwalker's voice, hollow.

"What?"

"A smoke?" She gestured towards the door. She could only look at his face briefly and think, *a wolf's face*, before she got confused and had to look away again. "Do you smoke—I mean, do you have cigarettes? I could use a cigarette." There was a short silence, then LeBaron said,

"Okay." Emily thought she could hear amusement in his voice, but she didn't care. She stood up, and after a moment he stood up too. He waited, watching her, his cold gray eyes almost smiling. Pin and the Asian girl stared at them. Emily thought, *am I doing this? am I? what am I doing?* but the questions were purely automatic, the metallic clicking of the mind. They weren't real. Underneath the questions was the wave, its tug on her light body: *farther, farther*. She led him back out into the bar. It struck her that



David was out there and would see her with LeBaron, but she couldn't think about it properly. She moved through the dense crowd in a kind of dream, out into the night.

\*

Behind the dumpster in the alley it was she who pulled off her jeans and socks and sneakers while LeBaron stood still watching her, his face in shadow. It was she who leaned in to inhale his neck, its smell of dirty moss—she who reached out to touch his face, her fingers feeling in the darkness for his eye sockets, his lips. And when suddenly he gripped her jaw, when he reached down with one hand to unzip and then backed her against the wall, his hands bruising her thighs, her buttocks, she swung her legs up around him, she wrapped herself around his waist. She could feel the rough brick wall cutting into the skin of her back, the damp night air on her nakedness. LeBaron's mouth and teeth—his sharp hipbones. She was weighed down, erased—she was vast as he pushed into her, heavy like the ache of soaked land that's eaten by the sea.

\*

She stayed with LeBaron for only a couple weeks before she moved away, up the coast. The town she lives in now is smaller than North Point and even farther north, on an Indian reservation that sits on the very edge of Washington state. Emily is strange in this place, but nobody seems to care or to pay her much attention. She works two jobs, as a

receptionist at the health clinic and a part-time waitress at the local diner. It's a life she likes for now. Her parents worry, of course; they speak to her gravely over the phone, asking *what went wrong?* and *when are you coming home?* She always says *soon* without knowing what that word might mean, what kind of measurement it makes within a life. She misses her parents and her old friends, she misses David. When she thinks back on that night, what she did, it comes in flashes, fragments: David's white face emerging out of the darkness of the bar; her body still throbbing, back bleeding through her T-shirt; the fight between David and LeBaron in the parking lot, short and oddly perfunctory. A few punches, then their bodies wrestling each other to the ground. Their grunts and heavy breathing against the quietness of the crowd that trickled outside to watch. And then suddenly, as if by mutual consent, the two of them separating, and even as they gazed coldly at each other, Emily had the sense of a strange understanding between them. Then David disappearing, gone. Not looking back at her even once. But she feels that she couldn't have chosen differently.

\*

When she works the early shift at the diner, she gets up at four to shower and dress and open the diner by five. She drives along the coast road, and though she can't see the ocean she can feel its nearness in the dark. At the diner, she is alone except for the cook, and she makes coffee and arranges napkins and utensils all along the clean linoleum of the bar. The early light comes in dark blue and the diner is empty and warm. In these moments of the day beginning, she is lonely in a way that engulfs her, that floods her

with something like awe. It's not an unwelcome feeling, this suffering; it's somehow familiar, as if it had been waiting for her a long time. It will hold her, she thinks. This weight will hold her to the ground.

## THE WORLD OF ONLY LIGHT

Hana is following Louis M. But she doesn't know that yet; his name will come later, once she has met him at an art opening and decided to secretly follow him to Venice. Right now they are two strangers walking down a street in downtown Paris on a Tuesday in March: one walking ahead, one following behind. She doesn't know why she chose this man. She has been following people all day: she's an artist, she lives in Paris, she can feel her insides tremble now, a mauve and gray quivering, as she follows this man. Maybe it's the way he walks—there is a slight, shy swing to his step, and his long peacoat hangs open, making a movement like two beige waves around him as he walks. But also, it's nothing to do with him: it's about following. She follows first one person and then another: an old man whose hair stands up on his skull like a soft dandelion. A pretty teenage girl quietly picking her nose. And now this man, with his shyly swinging legs and his waving coat. As she follows each one, she is suffused with tenderness, watching the head and shoulders of the one she has chosen out of all the others. They are so innocent, so unaware of her watchfulness close behind them. She longs to, and sometimes she does, reach out to brush the back or the arm of the one she has chosen. When she does this, touches the warm wool or leather or nylon, or even, in the heat of summer, bare skin, her heart begins to pound. She is so near to them in this moment, so near! Her eyes fill with tears, and she thinks, sometimes, that the one she is following will turn, when touched, will stop and look at her while the crowd flows around them and away. As she walks, this

imagined moment fills her body with a heavy, liquid yearning. From time to time, she has to stop and close her eyes, she has to stand very still in the street that swims with light.

\*

Art opening: Hana, in white, walks in front of a deep blue painting. Her dress is simple, short and tight, exposing her long legs and the faintly freckled tops of her breasts. Her hair is blond today and her blue eyes are startlingly outlined in black. She wears heavy black earrings that make her earlobes throb every time she turns her head quickly. She likes this, the small recurrence of pain in her body; it gives a certain shape or weight, a gravity, so that when she stands in front of a square of blue, looking, she doesn't get lost, or not entirely. There is the tug of pain that will pull her back, return her to her body.

*Hana!* It is Martine. They cheek-kiss and Martine says, *this is my friend...* and it's him, the one she followed this morning in the street. He smiles and puts out his hand, and Hana moves her hand towards his; their hands touch, they fumble together and grip. His hand, in hers, is warm and damp: bewilderingly ordinary. He has a name, Louis M., which she only half-hears in the moment of their hands meeting. He has an unremarkable middle-aged face and voice and body and job. They talk about the paintings a little, and also about Martine's husband, who refuses to attend art openings. *A Philistine, a complete Philistine when it comes to art*, Martine laments theatrically. Louis M. laughs at her, and Hana can see that his teeth are faintly gray. He is not attractive, no. Still he is the one she chose that morning, and followed, and now he has come to her again like a sign. Of

what? Hana waits, listening. She burns inside her white dress. Behind the ordinariness of this man, there is something electric, leaping. She waits for it to be revealed but it remains stubbornly hidden in his plain, polite face and suited body. There is not enough time for her to find it, for her to know. Already the crowd has thinned and quieted. The gallery fills with the cool darkness of late night. Martine shifts, easing one bruised-looking foot out of its high-heeled shoe; she stretches it, sighs, and slips it back in. She glances at her watch. Hana leans in to Louis M., nodding, her blue eyes wide and attentive—and when at last he turns to Martine and says *better go home now, for tomorrow—Venice* she thinks: ah!

\*

The light comes in and spills over the white sheets of the bed. Hana sits cross-legged on the end of the bed in a short yellow robe, facing the big ruined mirror that hangs on the wall. She is trying on a wig. The wig is made of long, scratchy black hair. It has straight-cut bangs that hide her eyebrows, lending her face an expression of deep, almost pained, surprise. Hana tugs the wig down over her ears and tries to smooth its hair. When she shakes her head, the wig stays in place; the hair doesn't move, not even the bangs. She shakes her head again, more violently this time. The bangs move a little, stiffly.

She stands up and drops her robe so she is standing naked in front of the mirror; she studies her body under the black wig. The wig has transformed her. She recognizes

the parts of her body: full breasts with uneven mauve nipples; small rounded belly dipping down to a smooth brown triangle of pubic hair; strong legs, low-slung buttocks. But the wig sitting on top of the body has made it into the body of a stranger. Its scratchy caress on the bare skin of her shoulders and chest excites her; she touches her breasts, looking into the wide blue eyes in the mirror. She thinks about Louis M. walking somewhere out in the streets that surround this hotel. Perhaps he is passing even now, bundled up in a shirt and tie and trousers and overcoat. She wants to see him like this: she, naked, watching from above; he, hidden in his clothes, unaware, below. She hurries to the window and stands in a pool of white light looking out, but though she waits until the sun drifts away behind a gray mountain of cloud and she begins to shiver and press her body against the still-warm windowpane, she doesn't see anyone she recognizes.

\*

She calls the Cavaletto, the Danieli, the San Marco. She sits on the white chenille bedspread with the phone heavy in her lap and the phonebook open on the bed beside her. She calls hotels and *pensiones*, asking for Louis M., but again and again she is told *no, no guest of that name here*. She wanders across pigeon-littered plazas and deep down alleyways, her heart pounding every time she sees a man who resembles Louis M.. She gets lost and has to sit, exhausted, on the cold stone steps of a church until she has the strength to go on again. Often as she walks, she recites his name like an incantation, giving it to each cobblestone, each brick. He might have passed this way yesterday, this

morning, twenty minutes ago. She has no way of knowing. His absence fills the city like the sound and smell of the water; she is consumed by it. Her only comfort is the certainty that they share this city that tilts and floats on its gray bed of water, its weather, both of them wandering somewhere in its streets and cafes. Together they are small and chilled under the low gray sky, in a dense fog that enfolds the city for three days.

\*

Hana is sitting in a cafe stirring a cup of cold cafe au lait one morning when she finds him. She had woken that morning and for the first time had felt the leaden weariness of defeat in her limbs instead of the hope that usually surged through her body so that most days she woke up gasping. As she sits stirring her coffee, she thinks, *maybe two more days, or perhaps three, and then...* and then she sees him. Her body knows before she does: she feels the nerves shoot and prickle in her fingertips and toes; her scalp crawls under its wig; her palms are suddenly slick with sweat. Louis M. enters the cafe and walks up to the counter to order. Hana slips her sunglasses on and adjusts her wig so that it sits low on her forehead; she opens the novel that sits by her elbow and lowers her head slightly over it. Louis M. leans one hand on the counter as he talks to the barman. His back is to Hana. She studies his hair, his peacoat, the heels of his brown leather shoes. Except for the slight tremor of her hands that press damply into the pages of the novel, Hana is the very picture of calm. But inside, her body rushes and thrums. Louis M. has come to her; *he* has come to her, just when her hope has given out, just when she needs



him most. She watches him warmly, almost lovingly, with a sense of intense gratitude. Her body is limp, shaken with the relief of release. He has come.

\*

Hana moves through the city like shadow or light cast by water. Or this is how she tries to move, shushing her body until her hips ripple like liquid, her feet become fog. She is following Louis M; she is wearing her wig, a patterned headscarf, and a long black coat buttoned up to her chin. Her camera is slung over her shoulder and her notebook and pen rest in her coat pocket, where they bump against her thigh as she walks. Where is he going? Louis M. walks and walks, turning down one narrow street and then another, and Hana follows. Sometimes she follows him close and sometimes she lingers far behind so that he, too, becomes little more than a shadow in the distance. She teases herself, almost losing him. But when he turns a corner and disappears, she is suddenly sick with fear. She begins to walk fast, then run—she is sweating, panting, until she turns the corner and finds him again across the square, gazing into a shop window. He is looking at a pair of shoes. When she sees this, this moment of ordinary, simple desire, Hana is flooded with a deep feeling of satisfaction. Quickly, she raises her camera fitted with its Squintar lens: she points the camera 90 degrees to Louis M.'s left, at an archway, but when she looks into the viewfinder, there he is: a small dark figure, back turned to her.

\*

On the seventh day of following Louis M. there is a change: he has a woman with him. Hana is bewildered. Where did this woman come from? Louis M. and the woman (slim, dark hair pulled back into a bun) are sitting under an umbrella at an outdoor cafe, eating lunch. Hana takes up her position at a nearby cafe, craning her neck to see how they are talking. Is he touching her? Smiling? There are too many people in between for her to see them clearly. A waiter comes and wants to know what she'd like. Hana stares at him. For a moment she is confused: *what she'd like?* She orders an espresso but when the waiter brings it she doesn't touch it; it sits and grows cold on the table.

When Louis M. and the woman leave the cafe Hana follows close behind them. The woman has her arm linked with Louis M.'s, and she smiles and talks up at him as they walk. Hana trails farther and farther behind. She is trembling. She has been betrayed; she thinks, *how could he?* It is difficult for her to remember that in fact, she is not in love with Louis M.

\*

On the thirteenth day, Hana follows Louis M. into a sweet shop. It is a small shop, it is a risk, but she is consumed with the need to know what kind of sweets he will buy. She will stand at a safe distance and see what he purchases and then she will buy the same sweet and suck on it as she trails him today. She imagines this intimacy: the same hard shape and tang of the melting sweet on his tongue and on hers. Louis M. enters the

shop and, after waiting a minute, Hana does too. There are a few other customers in the shop, so Hana feels safe. She walks to the other side of the shop from Louis and removes her sunglasses to study the glass containers of sweets. The glass chocolate case has a thin mirror running along its top, and Hana watches Louis wander the far side of the sweet shop. She fingers the camera around her neck, wondering if she dares to take a photo. *Can I help you?* Hana looks up, startled, to see the proprietor of the shop on the other side of the counter. *No, no*, she murmurs, blushing and sidling away. She has lost track of Louis; she looks in the mirror strip, searching, and suddenly there he is, his face looming up just behind hers. She gasps faintly and turns away, fumbling for the door. As she passes Louis M. their gazes catch and snag together a moment—a wave of fear washes through her—then she is outside the shop again, breathing in the air that smells like salt and mud. Hana begins to walk away over the bridge, but she feels faint and shaky and has to stop and lean against the cool stone side of the bridge. She hears the door of the sweet shop tinkle open behind her, but she doesn't turn around. Perhaps it isn't he, perhaps he didn't notice...

*You are following me*, he says. The strangeness of his voice after all these days. She turns slowly. Louis M. is standing a few feet away from her, his head tilted slightly to one side. He is holding a small paper parcel from the sweet shop, and she feels a momentary, ridiculous sense of loss over the unidentified candy. He doesn't seem angry or afraid. Maybe he is both; but whatever he feels, he masks it with a thin, twisted smile.

*You knew?* Hana says. *How did you know?* They are standing together on the bridge. In the watery light of morning he is different again, a stranger speaking in a

strangely nasal voice. But he is also the one she has searched for, has followed for nearly two weeks. The moment is not what she expected it to be, if she did in fact expect to be discovered. She feels thin, unsure. Louis M. smiles again, a strange, obscure smile.

*Your eyes*, he says simply. *That's what you should have hidden.*

Hana stares at him, then drops her gaze, as if perhaps it's not too late. Her body burns and quivers. *It's my project*, she says, but it comes out as a near-whisper. She clears her throat. *It's my project. The following.*

*For your art?* he says. *You are following me for your art?* Hana nods, and he seems to think about this for a moment. *You followed me for two weeks?* She nods again, very slightly. She avoids his eyes, watching instead the slow swirl of water as it passes away under the bridge.

Despite his questions, Louis M. does not seem particularly curious. In the end, he is cordial, he shakes her hand and wishes her luck. *But please, do not follow me any longer*; he says politely. Hana agrees. Her body feels strange: deflated, dull. Is she ashamed? And of what? She thinks vaguely that she should eat something, some lunch. Louis M. says *well*, and looks around the street, but Hana can't let him go yet, not like this, so she says, quick, the only thing she can think of: *may I at least take your photo one more time?* Louis M. considers. He begins to shake his head, slowly, and then he says, *okay, just one photo.* Hana takes her camera in her hands and focuses on Louis M. She says *one, two*, but when she says *three* his hand flashes up to block her shot. She lowers the camera and stares at him, and he looks back at her, again smiling his odd smile. For a moment, they gaze at each other, and Hana doesn't know what she feels. She feels empty,

and a little bit cold. Louis M. shrugs, and they shake hands again. Then he says goodbye and walks away from her down the street.

\*

Of course it is a lie. Hana waits on the bridge for a minute, staring blankly down into the water. Then she trails him back to his *pensione*, being very careful to keep her distance. Louis M. must have believed her, for he never looks back, but something has changed. The following is no longer so secret, and her body no longer rises like a balloon of light; it feels cold and flat. Still Hana follows him for two more days before he returns to Paris, but she is not near to him now. In fact, it seems to her that with each passing moment, she is receding into some distance measurable only from the body of Louis M.

\*

Hana takes two more photos, one at the Venezia Santa Lucia train station, which they depart from together on a rainy morning. Hana snaps Louis M.'s car, then climbs aboard the Eurostar several cars down. As the train curves north, she rubs her cheek against the blue plush of the seat back, wondering if Louis M. is also facing west. The train car is quiet. In the afternoon, light spills over her cheekbones. She watches shrubbery burn into a blue haze, and eventually, she sleeps. At the Gare du Nord, she takes her last photo: the back of Louis M. as he walks briskly across the platform and

disappears into the crowded station. Hana exits the train and steps down onto the platform. She stands still in the crowd, waiting: she lets him go. Then she, too, enters the station and transfers to the metro to go home.

\*

So then this is the end—what she is left with, what she knows. She lines them up on a blank white wall: she studies them. There are several photographs of Louis M. seen from a distance. In one, he is close, facing her. In one, the shadow of a hand comes up to hide the shadow of a face.