How Alive She Was Once

by

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Dedication and Acknowledgements

For my mother

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It had been almost a year since my mother died, and that summer my older sister Martha and I had free reign over the house until our father got home from work in the afternoon. Martha spent most days on the phone in our bedroom with the door shut, listening to R.E.M. or the Red Hot Chili Peppers. I took to lighting matches over the kitchen sink, savoring the sting of sulfur on the inside of my nostrils with each strike. When I grew tired of that, I explored the kitchen cabinets and found more interesting things to burn.

I laid a sheet of tinfoil on the counter and made little piles of salt and cinnamon and parsley. Some of the spices caught fire, some blackened around the edges. Others didn't burn at all. The basil smelled good when it burned, and its small green flakes curled and disappeared into ash.

My father came back from work around four thirty, but sometimes he got in later than that. He was a foreman for Central Jersey Water Company, and he was tired when he got home. For dinner, he mostly barbecued: sausage and chicken thighs and chuck steak. If it wasn't underdone, it was brittle and burnt to ashes. He
wrapped potatoes in tinfoil and threw them on the back of the grill. If we were lucky, they were soft inside their crisp skins. They weren’t half bad once you melted a pad of butter onto them.

We ate together every night, which was different from the way things had been before my mother died. Back then it was kids on the couch and parents at the table. Now, we joined our father at the table and sawed through our meat, spooned soggy boiled broccoli onto our plates, and asked one another to pass the salt.

If it was cool enough out and not too buggy, we ate on the patio, the lightning bugs starting to appear as the afternoon dimmed around us, the crickets and cicadas grinding in the grass. I thought if there was anything to be gained from my mother dying, it was that we all ate dinner together now, even if none of us ever said much while we did.

Martha discovered my little fires one afternoon as I was igniting a dried bay leaf at the counter. I pinched the leaf by the stem and the flame ate it up to my fingertips. I dropped it onto the tinfoil when she walked in, and I wiped my hands on my pants. “You’re not going to tell Dad, are you?” I said.

“I haven’t told him yet, why would I tell him now?” She lit a cigarette with one of my matches and leaned against the edge of the sink, looking a lot like Mom. My mother liked to smoke over the kitchen sink so she could tap her ashes into the
drain. She had short black hair like Martha’s, and it smelled like strawberry shampoo.

“How did you know?”

“Because I pay attention,” she said. “People who don’t pay attention don’t know anything. It smells like ass. I figured you were up to something stupid.”

“I opened the window,” I said. “It’ll air out.” I rolled the tinfoil up into a ball and stuffed it into my pocket.

“Doesn’t smell any worse than dinner usually does,” Martha said. After school let out for summer break, she’d cut her hair short and was experimenting with my father’s pomade to find a style she could wear when school started up again. No matter how she styled it—slicked back and sophisticated, gathered up in the middle like a punk rocker, pushed to one side and set in place with a pretty headband—she despised how it looked. I thought it made her look like Demi Moore.

“You’ll burn the house down if you’re not careful,” she said.

“So will you,” I said.

She blew a long trail of smoke out one side of her mouth. Her lipstick was purple and left a ring on the tip of her cigarette. “Do you want to come feed Percy with me?”

She didn’t have to ask. Percy was a rabbit that belonged to our father’s boss, Mr. Baker, who lived around the block. Mr. Baker was a vice president at the water company and worked all summer from his second house in Maine. Percy had brown fur and a fat belly. I’d never felt anything so soft, except for the fur on the rabbit’s
foot that Martha kept on her keychain for good luck. Mr. Baker was paying Martha fifty dollars to care for the rabbit while he was gone. I would have done it for free.

On our way to feed Percy, I threw the remains of my little fires—the ball of tinfoil filled with ash and singed matchsticks—into our neighbor Joan Peterson’s garbage can. Martha flicked her cigarette butt into Miss Peterson’s rose bushes. It fell through the branches into the dirt with the rest of the crushed-up filters she’d left there this week.

Joan Peterson was divorced and lived alone with a little white schnauzer. She brought dinner over for us sometimes, lasagna or tuna casserole. Martha was always saying nasty things about her bleach-blonde hair or her tight red shorts, but I thought she was a nice lady. I thought maybe I’d come out after dinner and collect all the little butts Martha had left.

Mr. Baker’s yard was about the same size as ours, but there was no chain link fence, leaving it open to the neighboring yards and the dark expanse of woods in the back. The rabbit hutch stood on a small cement patio abutting the house, and it was shaded beneath a big maple tree that grew out of the middle of the yard. The hutch was made of wood and chicken wire and stood about three feet off the ground on four metal legs. The only other fixture in the yard was a small utility shed on the edge of the woods.

“I figured out what I’m doing with the money,” Martha said while she was pouring pellets into Percy’s tin cup. “I’m getting a tattoo.” She seemed to have a different plan for the fifty dollars every day.
“A tattoo of what?” I said. Percy was lying in the back corner of his hutch, his face nestled cozily into the many folds of his chin. The latch on the hutch was broken, and the little door would swing open by itself if the wind blew just right. I pulled the door open and reached my hand in to stroke his fur. His body was warm, and his breath rose and fell under the weight of my palm.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe I’ll get a snake or something on my arm.”

“Why not a rabbit?”

“Jeez, Cassie, can you think of something a little more lame?”

Percy jolted his leg suddenly and readjusted his position so that his back was facing me. I liked that he had some sass to him. I put my face into the entrance of the hutch and took a deep breath in. It smelled of fresh-cut wood and timothy hay and an acrid smell that was unique to Percy.

“Daddy will kill you if you get a tattoo,” I said into the hutch.

“Like he’ll even notice. Why don’t you make yourself useful and fill up the water bottle?” Martha said.

I unhooked the bottle and took it over to the hose on the side of the house to fill it. Martha scattered handfuls of fresh hay onto the bed of the cage.

“Do you know what’s for dinner?” I asked.

“Burnt sausages probably,” Martha said.

“Maybe we’ll get ice cream after,” I said.

“You always say that.”

Our father saved quarters in an old water cooler jug, and he used them exclusively to take us to Ice Cream Palace for sundaes or soft-serve cones. There was
no real indicator of when these nights would occur; they seemed to pop up randomly and at just the right moment. It had happened more often when my mother was alive. She loved ice cream almost as much as I did.

I brought the bottle back to Martha, and she screwed the metal lid onto it and hung it on the inside of the cage. Percy looked up at the nozzle and shut his eyes, disinterested.

"We should split a can of Spaghettios before he gets home," I said. "Just in case you're right."

Martha agreed. "You never know when he'll get back, anyway."

That night, I swam in half-sleep, all the things I burned in the afternoon smoldering on in my head. I imagined a stray ember burning a slow flame somewhere in the corner, like I heard on the news once. A family was burned alive in their sleep when a couch caught fire from a cigarette that was lodged between two couch cushions. Half in a dream, I saw the flames licking up our white linen curtains and peeling the pink-and-blue-flowered wallpaper off the walls. I felt the heat and smelled the wooden cabinets burning like kindling. I wondered if the light bulb on the ceiling would melt or explode.

I climbed down from my bunk and inspected the kitchen, sniffing for the odor of whatever I had burned that day.
When I came back into the room and settled into bed, my sister's voice rang out in the darkness. “What are you getting into?”

“Nothing. I had to pee.”

“In the kitchen?” she said. When I didn’t respond, she said, “No secrets, Cass.”

It was the family rule, but more seriously, it was my pact with Martha. “I’m afraid of a fire,” I said.

“Well maybe you shouldn’t be lighting them, then.”

I looked up at the dim glow-in-the-dark star stickers on the ceiling and exhaled.

“Relax,” she said, her voice a little softer. “If there was a fire, we’d smell it.”

I nodded, as if she could see me.

“Everybody’s going to be all right.”

I shut my eyes, and the impressions of the stars lingered behind my eyelids as I drifted to sleep.

The fear dissolved in daylight. I migrated from the spice cabinet to the junk drawer. I burned a shish kabob skewer from one tip to the other, a worm of ash dangling at the end until it crumbled. I burned a plastic thimble, a clothespin, and a miniature lipstick Mom got as a sample in the mail years back.
It was hot that day, and our father called to tell us to close the storm windows and turn on the air conditioning. Martha went to check on Percy while I struggled with our rusty old windows until they were all sealed shut.

I searched the cabinets for a snack. I found half a box of Cracklin’ Oat Bran but no milk, a jar of peanut butter, but no bread. In the fridge was a pack of raw hamburger meat, a head of broccoli, and some unidentified leftovers from Joan Peterson in a Tupperware toward the back. There were also, oddly, three large peaches stacked in a bowl beside the windowsill.

There had always been fresh fruit in the house when my mother was around. In the summertime, she kept bowls of rinsed blackberries and de-stemmed strawberries cooling in the fridge; in the winter, she put apples in the crisper and slung bananas off the arm of a little wooden tree on the counter. There was a moment when I saw the peaches that I thought she was alive again, and then it was gone, like a dream you remember in the morning and lose over the course of a day.

They were all shades of peach and orange and pink, and they looked juicy and perfect. I wrapped my palm around the biggest one and held its nubby stem to my nose. I breathed in the sweet, faint scent.

I sunk my teeth into it. It was as firm as an apple, and there was no juice or flavor. I unstuck my teeth from the skin and ran my fingers along the wounds I’d left there. Then I saw the folded index card beside the bowl on the counter: “Not ripe yet. DO NOT EAT.”

I couldn’t put it back on the pile looking like that—my father would kill me. I found a small paper bag under the sink and put the peach inside it, and I tucked it far
in the back of the cabinet so it could ripen in the darkness, like my mother had taught me. At least this way, it would ripen more quickly. Then I went to the living room to watch cartoons.

Martha arrived home about ten minutes later and sat down on the couch next to me, pale and shaken. “Percy’s dead,” she said.

I shut off the TV and sat up on the couch. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. I mean I think I’m sure.” She looked like she might cry. I’d seen her cry a handful of times before, from watching *Sleepless in Seattle* or after getting yelled at by my father. I never could get used to it. “I don’t know what to do,” she said.

“Daddy will be home soon. He’ll know.”

“Don’t you dare tell Daddy.”

“Why not? It’s not your fault.”

“Of course it’s not my fault.” She tugged at one of her silver ball earrings and looked down into her lap.

“How did he die?” I said.

“God, Cassie, I don’t know, maybe he had a heart attack.” I wasn’t sure if Martha was making a joke I didn’t understand. It seemed like a gag in *The Far Side* comic.

The air conditioner clicked on and whooshed cool air through the walls around us. I thought of Percy sitting out there in all that fur as the heat of the day grew more and more intense. “You think it was just too hot for him?” I said.
“I thought about that,” she said. She stood up and grabbed a handful of hair with one hand. “Do you really think it’s hot enough out to—” She threw down her arm and turned to me, her hair looking wild.

“It’s hot,” I said.

“Maybe he’s not dead,” she said desperately. “Come back there with me.”

We set off together toward the rabbit.

A part of me thought that Percy would be gnawing on a cardboard toilet paper tube when we arrived. I’d never seen anything dead before. I never even saw my mother after she died. She left one day for work, and then she was gone, and the car was gone, and all that was left was a little wooden box with her name carved into it that sat in the middle of her dresser. I was glad that I never had to see her like that, and I didn’t want to see Percy that way, either.

I followed Martha around the side of Mr. Baker’s house and into the backyard. In the shifting shadows of the leaves above the rabbit hutch, it seemed reasonable to believe that there was something alive inside of it.

I approached the wooden hutch and hung my fingers off the chicken wire that was stretched across the front of it. It was dark inside, and I could see the usual mess of hay and food pellets. I walked around to the side, where a tuft of chestnut fur was pressed against the honeycomb wire.

I took a knobby carrot off the top of the hutch. I lifted it up to the mound of fur on the side of the cage, held my breath, and pushed it forward into the rabbit’s
flesh. Percy didn’t budge. I poked him again, and then I set the carrot back on top of the hutch.

Martha ran her fingers through her hair. “What are we going to tell Daddy?”

I looked into the cage. The light through the leaves reflected off his big black eyeballs, but he didn’t blink no matter how long I watched him. I wanted to reach in and shut his eyes so that he looked like he was sleeping, but I couldn’t.

“Say you didn’t know,” I said.

“It’s kind of a hard thing to miss.” The dark purple polish on her nails was chipping, and she put her fingers in her mouth and chipped away at it nervously with her teeth.

A warm breeze blew against my neck, and the latch on the door came unhinged, startling us both.

“What if you tell him Percy escaped?” I said. “Mr. Baker knows the latch is broken.”

Martha got to her feet. “That’s actually not a bad idea.” She watched the hutch, wide-eyed, as though Percy might reanimate at any moment and lunge toward the open door.

Martha was quiet for a while. She gnawed at the tips of her fingers and breathed heavily. “What would we do with him?”

I shrugged and put my hands into my pockets. I wrapped my fingers around the wad of tinfoil and the sooty ashes inside it. I squeezed the tinfoil in my fist and the image of it flashed into my mind—the pile of sticks and kindling and the limp, lifeless rabbit curled on top of it, the strike of the match and the sting of sulfur. I
knew the pungent odor of burning hair—I’d experimented with a lock of my own
just that week.

“We could burn him,” I said.

Martha turned to me. “Cassie,” she said. “What?”

“Like a cremation,” I said. “Like Mom.”

She shook her head, and she kept on shaking it. She was looking at me the
way everyone had looked at me back when my mother died, like I was making
everything worse just by looking back. She grabbed my shoulder and pulled me
forward into her. She wrapped her arms around me, and I pressed my nose into her
chest and felt so heavy I thought I might topple us both. It was hot, and she smelled
of sweat and cigarettes.

“You’re all fucked up,” Martha said, but she didn’t say it like an insult.

The ice cream truck song started up in the distance, and a dog barked in a
yard.

“We could put him out in the woods,” I said into her chest.

Martha pulled away and held onto my shoulders. She leaned over so her face
was at my height. “No,” she said. “We should bury him.”

We walked together to the shed. She went inside and handed me a big rusty
shovel. She took out a wool blanket next and beat out the dust and wood chips in
the grass. Then she folded it in half, and in half again, and she brought it back over
to the hutch, where she put it down in the grass.

She reached into the hutch and gathered Percy’s thick fluff into her arms. She
laid him down onto the blanket and folded it around his body, leaving his head
exposed to the air. His shiny white rabbit teeth jutted out over his fur. She picked up the bundle and swaddled him close to her chest like a baby. She looked down at him in her arms, and she let all the breath go out of her body with one long exhale.

I carried the shovel into the woods, and Martha carried Percy. We didn’t go too far in, just deep enough into the underbrush so that we were out of sight of any neighbors who might be watching us.

The ground was overgrown with grass and ferns. Martha laid Percy down and took the shovel from me. Moisture gathered along her neckline and on her forehead as she dug. She ripped through thin, vein-like roots that wound through the dirt. She stopped to roll the sleeves of her t-shirt up over her shoulders, and then she started digging again.

She had sweat through her white t-shirt, and the pink of her bra was showing now beneath it. A streak of dirt spread across her cheek. She was breathing hard. When she was done digging, she handed me the shovel.

She unfurled Percy from the blanket and scooped him up into her arms. His leg hung loose against her belly. I knelt beside the hole, and she came down onto her knees beside me. Everything around us smelled like grass and fresh soil, and a bird was hoo-hooing softly in the trees.

She laid Percy down into the hole. I couldn’t watch her cover him up with dirt.

My father wasn’t there when we got back. There was a note on the counter that said he would be back around six and we should set the table on the patio for
dinner. In the time that we had been gone, I realized, he had come home and gone out again. Martha balled up the note and shoved it into the garbage.

We got undressed and piled our dirty clothes in the corner of our bedroom. Martha got into the shower first, and she handed me her damp towel to use when she was done. The shower was steamy when I got in. I let the water run cool and watched a dirty pool form around my feet. By the end of my shower, the smell of lighter fluid and charcoal came in through the window, and I could hear my father scraping down the grill outside.

Martha and I set the table on the patio and sat down to eat in our pajamas. The crickets started up around us, and the sky turned a deep shade of pink. A breeze blew cool against our damp heads.

The burgers were underdone and bled out onto the plate. My father sat across from us, still in his blue Dickie work pants and white t-shirt, stained yellow in the armpits and around the neckline. He was big and broad shouldered, and the burger looked small in his hands. We ate quietly, until our plates were mostly empty.

When he was done, my father cleaned his hands on a napkin and got up to take our plates into the house. He licked a blob of ketchup off the thumb of his free hand, and then he turned to us suddenly, as though remembering something he had meant to say. “Did either of you have anything you wanted to tell me before I bring out dessert?”

I shot a look at Martha. She was playing it cool. “I don’t think so,” she said. She looked at me for confirmation, her eyebrows raised.
I shook my head no and ran through all our crimes in my head. Did he find out somehow about my fires in the kitchen? Or maybe Joan Peterson had seen Martha drop her cigarette butt into the bushes. Then I thought about Percy’s empty hutch, the wooden door swinging in the breeze and clacking rhythmically against the frame.

“Ok,” he said. “Have it your way.” He disappeared into the house.

Once he was inside, I whispered hastily to Martha, “Do you think he knows about Percy?”

“What? No.”

“What if he followed us there or something?”

“Cassie, he was busy doing other things.” She looked me in the eyes firmly. “Trust me.”

My father reemerged from the house and placed three large peaches, one by one, onto the glass tabletop. The third, I registered with a little gasp, was bruised and broken in a constellation of half moons.

He folded his arms across his chest and stood there for a while staring down at us. I couldn’t bear to look at him. I watched a fly swoop down and land onto the broken skin of the peach.

“I even left a note,” he said. He pulled the card out of his pocket and set it down beside the peaches. “I guess I just don’t understand.”

I wanted to protest, to beg—I hadn’t seen the note at all, I never would have taken a bite if I had. I sat there staring at it, saying nothing, as though there were
some mysterious guilty third party who might swoop in and take the blame off Martha and me.

“What’s worse is that you tried to hide it.” He sat down at the table and leaned forward onto his elbows. “What’s the number one rule in this house?”

I could barely move my lips. “No secrets,” I said. My voice was weak and small.

“No secrets,” he repeated.

I looked up at Martha. Her lips were pursed, and her nostrils flared as she breathed. She, too, was gazing hard at the peaches on the table, avoiding my father’s stare. She would never speak to me again after this, I was sure of it. I wanted to tell them it was all just a mistake, like what happened to Percy. But the words wouldn’t come.

“I could easily figure out who did it,” he said. “I mean I could measure it against your teeth.” He looked so sad when he said it that I knew he didn’t mean it. He rested his forehead into his hands. “I don’t care who it was. I just want to know why.”

Martha folded her arms across her chest. We made eye contact, and she heaved a big sigh. She kept her eyes on me when she said, with surprising composure, “Why does it matter?”

My father’s hair fell in clumps between his splayed fingers. It was black and greasy like Martha’s, and I noticed how alike they looked, my father and my sister, when they were upset. “Because if we keep secrets, everything’s going to fall apart.”

“Well I mean, look who’s talking.” Her voice was husky and weird.
“What’s that supposed to mean?” The vein popped up in his forehead that I always thought looked like a wishbone.

“I know about you and Joan Peterson, Dad,” Martha said. “That’s a secret.”

My father sat up straight.

I looked over the fence at the warm yellow glow in Joan Peterson’s kitchen window. How could I not have known? It all made sense now—the casserole dishes, the way my father went out at night for groceries and came home empty-handed. No wonder Martha left her cigarettes in her bushes.

My father let out a big breath, what sounded like part of a laugh. “That’s not a secret.”

“Then why didn’t you tell us?” Martha said.

“I don’t know why,” he said. “Because it’s my business.”

Martha looked away from him and put her fingers into her mouth. She gnawed silently on her nails, her breath quick and heavy in her chest.

“It didn’t feel right to tell you,” he said.

Another fly joined the first on the surface of the peach. The sun had fallen behind the house, and the stars were beginning to appear in the soft blue sky above us. We sat there saying nothing, watching the flies settle on the peaches.

My father took hold of one of the peaches and turned it over in his hands. “I was going to make Mommy’s peach cream,” he said.

Martha was rocking in her chair, looking up at the leaves in the tree above her.
“I miss her every day,” he said. His voice got caught in his throat, and he kept swallowing it down. “I’m not doing anything wrong with Joan, Martha. It’s not cheating.”

Martha examined her nails. “So you didn’t then?”

“I didn’t what?”

“Well I just figured,” Martha said. “I figured it started before.”

My father shook his head. “No,” he said. “Never.”

I looked at the empty chair across the table, and I tried to picture my mother there, smoking a cigarette in her bathing suit, or ripping through the plastic of a Flavor Ice with her teeth. I could see her glasses, and her cheekbones, and the way that she moved, but I was starting to lose little pieces of her. I couldn’t remember if her ears were pierced. I wasn’t sure if she wore her shell bracelet on her left wrist or her right.

“I didn’t tell you guys about Joan because she makes me feel good,” he said. “And that feels wrong.”

Martha pulled her legs up and wrapped her arms around them. In her pajamas, her hair frayed and drying without product to keep its shape, she looked young. She looked like she used to look, before high school, before Mom. “I mean, I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that,” she said. “Feeling good.”

“I miss your mother every day.”

“I know, Dad.”
“I miss her too,” I said. I sat like an island in my chair, thinking about Joan Peterson, and about my mom, and about poor Percy. There was so little I could change about the way things turned out to be. “It was me,” I said. “I bit the peach.”

My father held out his arm to me. I got out of my chair, and he stood up as I went to him. He pulled me close and put his big warm hand on the back of my head. I shut my eyes. It felt good to let my head rest against the softness of his belly.

“But you got it wrong, Dad,” Martha said. When I opened my eyes, she was standing there beside us, looking up at him. “It wasn’t peaches,” she said. “Mom made nectarine cream.”

I felt the air go out of my father’s chest. He didn’t say anything at first. Then he gathered her up, and he wrapped his arms around us both. “How could I forget,” he said.

I smelled the oil on his clothes and the strawberry lotion on Martha’s arms, and my eyes got hot and blurry, because I didn’t remember my mother making any ice cream at all.

We walked together to Ice Cream Palace after that. They didn’t have any nectarine cream or even any peach, so we each settled in solidarity on vanilla.

On the way home, Martha told my father about Percy. He walked with us to Mr. Baker’s house, and we stood in the middle of the yard. We looked out at the dimness of the woods, our father between us, his arms around our shoulders. We
told him about the plan to lie and say that Percy had escaped, and he said that wasn’t such a bad idea.

“\text{*I* told him to get a damn fence,}” my father said. \text{\textquotedblleft Cheap son of a bitch gets what he deserves.\textquotedblright}

When Mr. Baker returned in the fall, our father went along with our story and insisted that Martha still get her fifty dollars. After all her planning, she decided in the end to buy us a rabbit of our own. Our rabbit was the color of burnt toast and was as soft as Martha’s purple velvet dress. My father built a hutch for her in the shade of the maple tree in our backyard. We named her Priscilla. She lived to be more than ten years old, which I hear is a pretty long life for a rabbit.
One thick, sunny August afternoon, Chetty’s father took her for a drive in his pickup truck. They drove down long country roads alongside fields scattered with cows and horses and emus, past rows of corn and tangles of pumpkin vines. Chetty rested her head on the doorframe and listened to the baseball announcer droning on over the radio. They rode with the windows down, the wind blowing warm against her face and through her tangled, copper-colored hair.

“What’s six times nine?” her father asked while they were stopped at an intersection. Rows of lettuce and cabbage stretched out on all sides of them.

It was the year she would learn to multiply in school. Her father had taken to quizzing her on her times tables regularly, and she hated it more than Brussels sprouts. Summer was her favorite season, and multiplication reminded her of the dreadful fall, of nasty Mrs. Brayburn, the gym teacher, and of Lydia Harrison, who got the rest of the kids to call Chetty “Ginger” before school let out last year. She sat up and counted on her fingers—9, 18, 27, 36, 45. “54,” she said.
Her father lifted his eyebrows. “Very good.” He was an electrical engineer at the telephone company, and he was always dressed in a short-sleeved button up and navy Dockers, as though he might get called into work at any moment. He even kept a skinny black tie rolled up in the glove compartment. Chetty had seen him pull it out when he got called in to work last Easter.

Chetty’s mother needed uninterrupted time to clean and get the house in order. Lately this meant getting ready for the baby. As a result, the weekends belonged to Chetty and her father, for fishing or crabbing, for hiking in the woods or lying in the hammock in the yard, or for taking long drives in the country like this one.

Sometimes they drove for several hours, stopping only at a gas station for a soda and a bathroom break before heading back home. Other days they had destinations—a boat show or a county fair, the marina or the boardwalk. Her father liked to seek out and bring home objects from their excursions that he hoped would surprise Chetty’s mother, but most times the gifts just made her angry. Once she and her father visited a house where Chetty chose a little orange cat from a box of kittens. It died of mange before they came up with a name. Another time, a team of men strapped a tuneless piano into the bed of the truck, and her father enlisted the help of all her uncles to move it up the porch steps. Then there was the time at the carnival when Chetty won a giant stuffed gorilla that leaked a trail of tiny Styrofoam innards from the front door to her bedroom. Those nights, Chetty lay awake in bed and listened through the walls to the muffled rumble of her parents’ arguments.

“Six times eight?” her father asked, keeping his eyes on the road.
The smell of rot filled the cab of the truck as they crossed a bridge that passed over a stagnant creek. She spotted a turtle on the bank of the creek and kept her eyes on it until it was out of her sightline. She had a hard time with her sixes.

“Celeste, what’s six times eight?”

“I don’t know, what is it?” she said. She was lousy at memorizing—whether it was a poem or the spelling of a vocabulary word or her times tables. She couldn’t imagine a time when such skills would come in handy later in life.

“You know this one,” her father said. “Use your head.”

He said that a lot, “Use your head,” as though up until that point she somehow hadn’t been using her head at all.

“I’ll give you a hint,” her father said. “It’s the rhyming one. Six times eight is…”

“Forty eight?” she said.

“You got it, chief.”

She liked when her father called her chief. It made her feel important, like an Indian chief or the chief of police. Last week, though, he’d crouched down and said to her mother’s belly, “How’s it going in there, chief?” and Chetty felt hot with anger. That was her special name. It was one in a long line of things that Chetty did not want to share with her impending little brother.

Her father stopped quizzing her and tuned the radio to an oldies station. He tapped his fingers along with Buddy Holly on the steering wheel, and Chetty tapped her fingers in rhythm on her thighs.
They came upon a small dirt road nestled in a shallow patch of woods, and her father slowed down and turned onto it. The truck kicked up dust as they approached a small wooden fruit stand in a clearing off the road. They parked in a gravel lot with a few other cars.

The sun was hot when she jumped down from the truck, and the air was stale with the stench of manure. Her father took her hand. Chetty looked in through the open door of the fruit stand. Tomatoes, eggplants, and cobs of corn still in their husks were piled in mounds on big wooden tables. She spotted a shelf full of pies and sleeves of apple cider donuts toward the cash register. Much to Chetty’s disappointment, her father didn’t take her inside.

He led her farther back on the property to a wooden chicken coop that stood between the fruit stand and a large rusted metal building that looked something like an abandoned warehouse. The coop itself was about the size of their shed and was open on one side. A small wire fence surrounded it. Half a dozen chickens wandered in circles and clucked mildly in the aggressive mid-afternoon sun.

She squinted up at him, and he towered, the large black outline of her father, against the sun.

“Pick one,” he said. He let go of her hand and walked off toward the metal building, leaving her alone with the chickens. She watched him open the door and disappear inside the building. His voice echoed inside it, calling out words she couldn’t quite make out.

She got down on her hands and knees to get a look at the chickens through the holes in the honeycomb wire. She scraped her knees and the balls of her palms
on the rough edges of rocks in the dirt, but excitement dulled Chetty’s senses as she
crawled around the pen and considered the animals in the cage.

She judged each chicken by its fluffiness, the perceived softness of its feathers,
the peculiarity of its beak. In the shade of the coop, shelves of sleeping chickens
were warming eggs in their nests. The chickens wandering outside the coop were
mostly brown, their feathers fluffed and oily. A plump white hen nested fatly in the
middle of the hay-covered ground. She admired its puffy chest and calm, dozing
eyes. Then a skinny chicken with slick, black feathers caught Chetty’s eye. It
wandered wildly about, winding in and out of the idling brown birds.

She deliberated for a while between the fat white hen and the skinny black
one with the floppy red comb turned over on its head. She settled finally on the runt
of the group, being a small girl herself. Plus, she figured, the white chicken was
ordinary, but hers was cartoonish and wild. She thought her father would approve of
its strange, funny little body.

She wondered where they would keep it. Maybe it could live in the rabbit
hutch with Chester. Or maybe her father would build a coop in the backyard so they
could get more chickens eventually and sell eggs in the farmer’s market. Chetty
wondered if a chicken could be trained to live inside, and she imagined it sleeping in
bed with her at night like a curled-up cat.

Her father reemerged from the building with a tall, bony man in a denim
baseball cap and overalls. The man’s shirtless chest was sweaty and streaked with
dirt.
Chetty got to her feet as they approached. She pointed proudly at the scrawny black bird. “This is it,” she said. The chicken scrambled to escape the mild attack of another chicken in the pen, and then it wobbled off and settled in the far corner, tall and awkward.

Her father wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. “That one’s too skinny, Chetty. Pick a fat one.”

“But just look at him, look at how funny he is,” she said.

“It’s got no meat on its bones,” her father said.

The man in the overalls shimmied a pair of work gloves out from his pockets. “I’ll go half-price on that one. It is pretty wiry.”

“At these prices you ought to throw a dozen eggs in while you’re at it,” her father said.

“Free range don’t come cheap.”

“Maybe it’ll lay eggs, Dad,” Chetty said.

The man looked at her, then, oddly, as though she’d mispronounced a word. He pushed one hand into a glove and wiggled his fingers into place. He looked at her father and exhaled a little laugh. Chetty didn’t understand.

“I highly doubt that,” her father said. He was laughing too, or trying not to laugh.

*Use your head, Chetty,* she told herself. “Well, not if it’s a boy,” she said hastily, trying to laugh along with them. “Boy chickens don’t lay eggs, I know that.”

The man coughed into his gloved hand and turned his back to them.
Her father leaned his hands on his knees to meet her at eye level. “So, you know the big tank of lobsters down at the Sea Dog?”

“Yeah.” The lobsters were piled on top of one another in a big cloudy tank in the lobby. They wore yellow tags around their claws and had black beady eyes and segmented bodies that reminded Chetty of bugs.

“Well, it’s like that,” her father said. “Do you understand?”

Chetty looked at the chickens, and she looked at her father. “Oh,” she said. “Yeah.” She felt stupid for not seeing it sooner. She imagined the death of the thing, the head lopped off the body, the blood, the feathers. She had an impulse to unlatch the cage and chase the whole lot of them into the woods behind the farm, to keep on running so that her father would never catch her. But she was slow and clumsy and would never make it beyond the edge of the property.

Her father stood up and took his wallet out of his back pocket. “Do I pay now, or later?”

“Later,” the man said. Chetty looked up at him and caught his eye. He looked away.

Chetty’s hands began to sweat, and the dirt on her palms turned to mud. She wiped them on her pants. Her face felt hot with embarrassment and anger. Her father tussled her hair, and then he grabbed her gruffly by the shoulder and pulled her close to his side. He and the man were laughing now, making jokes about tiny chicken wings and bite-size chicken legs.
“My wife will get a kick out of this one,” her father said. An image flashed in Chetty’s mind: the bird coming out of the oven, steaming, soaking in a pool of her mother’s gravy.

Her chicken stood motionless in the pen, its head flicking left, then right, its comb bobbing comically along. Her stomach tightened. She thought she might be sick.

Her father gripped her shoulder in his big hand and squeezed firmly, affectionately. It occurred to Chetty that he might have thought her smart enough to realize what was happening from the beginning—that he thought he didn’t need to tell her why she was picking out a chicken in the first place. She’d made him explain it, when it should have been obvious to her. Of course they were going to eat it.

Chetty took a deep, controlled breath. She was a chief. She was the chief. They were only buying a chicken for dinner. She could muster up the courage to accept something as simple as that.

“If we take the skinny one,” she said, “we won’t get stuck eating Mom’s chicken soup with the leftovers.” When she said the word “soup,” she let it plop out of her mouth, ugly and unappealing.

Her father laughed. He smiled at her sometimes when she said something funny, but it was rare that she could get him to actually laugh.

“You heard the lady,” her father said. “We’ll take the scrawny one.”

She grinned up at him, glad to be bound together again over her mother’s lousy soup.
The man went around to the side of the pen and opened the latch. The hens clucked and scattered as the man approached. In one swift motion, he snatched the shiny black chicken up from its underside. He held it against his chest as he walked out and latched the door of the pen closed behind him.

“I’ll take it inside where the girl can’t see,” the man said.

“But the sign said ‘kill your own,’” her father said.

Chetty had the sudden, irrepressible urge to cry, but her father would be disappointed if she cried, so she held her breath and hoped the impulse would pass. Crying was for girls.

“Nobody ever really wants to do it themselves,” the man said. He cradled the chicken in his arms.

“Well we do,” her father said. “Isn’t that right, Chetty?”

She knew she should agree, but she couldn’t make the words come. Her chicken was so calm in the man’s grasp that it was nearly sleeping.

“She’s too little,” the man said.

“She’s going to be nine. My father took me here when I was her age.”

“Come on, man.”

Chetty’s eyes were hot and brimming with tears, and she tried her best not to blink. When she finally did, a bulbous droplet sprang loose onto her cheek, and she rubbed it away furiously. She took a deep, practiced breath, and she let it out slowly. The man wasn’t going to let this happen. She felt a familiar affection toward him, the type she felt for her uncles and the mailman.
The man stood shoulder to shoulder with her father. “Look, I’m not doing it in front of her.” He turned and started back toward the metal building with the chicken. The ground crunched beneath his heavy boots.

“Well that’s too bad,” her father called out. Then he turned to Chetty and said, “I’m sorry, chief.”

Chetty made circles in the dirt with the tip of her shoe. “That’s ok,” she said.

The man opened the big rusted door to the building with one hand and took the chicken into the darkness. Chetty and her father stood outside and waited.

The heat off the ground formed ripples in the air and made the creases in the corrugated wall of the building wobble before her eyes. She listened hard for the sound of it, for the crack of an axe against wood and whatever kind of croak a chicken might make while it loses its head. But there was only the breeze through the sunflower garden next door, and the dull murmur of customers in the fruit stand, and the soft clucking chickens on the ground beside them.

Her father lifted his hand to shield his eyes from the sun. There had to be a good reason why he brought her here to do this. He made her do things she didn’t want to do all the time. Like when he told her to try rice pudding even though it had a funny texture, and it quickly became her favorite dessert. Or the way he forced her to practice piano every day until she came to look forward to it. Even the way he had been bugging her about her times tables seemed to have a purpose—she suspected deep down that it would help her at least with her math exams, if nothing else. But then there were the other things, the things that just seemed cruel—the way he yelled at her when she was practicing piano during a baseball game, or the way he
made her eat microwaved blue fish (which she most definitely did not like after she tried it), or the way he left sometimes for work without so much as a kiss goodbye.

“What’s four times six?”

Chetty just shrugged.

“You know your fours,” he said.

“I have to study more.”

“Four times six is the same as six times four,” he said. “We just did that one.

What’s six times four?”

“Six times four is twenty-four,” she said softly. She looked down at the remaining chickens. The white one had wandered out into the pen and seemed fixated on the building in the back.

“Six times one is six,” her father said. “Six times two is twelve. Six times three is eighteen. Say it.”

“Six times one is six. Six times two is twelve.” They recited their sixes together, and Chetty tried to control her quavering voice.

They stopped counting when the man reappeared in the doorway. He walked toward them, the dirt rising up beneath his boots.

His work gloves were sticky with blood. He carried a clear plastic bag, mottled on the inside with smears of black and brown and beige. Flecks of blood streaked the bag’s steamy interior. He held it out to Chetty’s father.

Chetty’s father nudged her. “Take it.”

The man looked hard at her father, and then he bent and presented her with the bag. She held her hands out as though receiving a baby. He laid it down across
her arms. It was warm, and the plastic was moist and sweating, about the same weight as her rabbit Chester. She didn’t know which way was top and which was bottom. She adjusted her hands and felt the warm stump of a neck under her thumb, and she felt a rush of tinny saliva flood her mouth. She dropped the bird and covered her mouth, and she stumbled to the side of the coop and threw up in the weeds that grew alongside it.

There was hardly a thing in her stomach, but she emptied all that remained onto the grass and the dandelions. When her chest stopped seizing, she wiped her mouth with the side of her dirty hand. Her face was wet and gritty. Her vision grew spotty, and she knelt down for a moment. She heard her father approach.

He knelt down next to her. “Oh, Chetty,” he said softly, so the man wouldn’t hear. “I’m sorry, sweetheart.” He rubbed her back in long, circular strokes.

She felt weak and dizzy and embarrassed, and she leaned against him for support. The heat of his body radiated off her own. She wanted him to carry her to the car, to take her home and lie her down on the sick couch and let her watch TV beside the air conditioner. But she wasn’t sick, not really, and she was too big to be carried. When she lifted her head, her father helped her to her feet. He put his arm around her and let her lean against him, his shirt smelling like sweat and aftershave, that distinct and comforting smell. She pressed her face into his side, and in her weakened state she no longer had the energy to try to impress him.

The man had picked the bag up off the ground and was waiting for them beside the fruit stand. As Chetty and her father approached, he went inside.

“Do you want to wait in the truck while I pay?” her father asked her.
She shook her head yes.

He walked her to the truck and opened her door. She scaled up the side of it, and he shut the door behind her and walked off to pay. Chetty rested her head on the side of the door and let her heavy eyelids fall closed.

After a few moments, she heard her father’s feet crunching toward the truck. She heard the hollow thunk of the cooler opening and closing in the truck bed. Her father got into the cab with her and started up the engine. She opened her eyes, and he handed her a sack of sugary apple cider donuts. “For when you feel better,” he said.

They backed out of their spot, and they went bumping up the dirt road toward the exit. She unbuckled her seatbelt and shimmied closer to her father. She rested her head against his arm, and he reached over her head and flipped on the air conditioner. The air gusted warm and then cold against her face.

“Six times one is six,” he said. “Six times two is twelve. Six times three is?”

She shut her eyes and let the air cool the moisture on her cheeks. “I don’t know,” she said after some silence.

“It’s eighteen,” her father said.

Chetty’s father let her watch television and lie out on the couch, after all. She held the bag of donuts in her lap like it was a small animal and watched a ballgame start up between two teams she didn’t care about, and after a while, she fell asleep.
When she awoke a few hours later, the room was warm with late afternoon sunlight and smelled of gravy and dumplings. Her mouth was sticky and stale. She lay in the dimness for a while, listening to the muffled sounds of her parents’ voices through the wall, waiting for an argument to begin in the kitchen. It was quiet, mostly, except for utensils rattling against the sides of pans, the oven door creaking open and shut, the slow grind of a chair across the linoleum. To Chetty’s surprise, she heard her mother hiccup with laughter. Her parents’ banter was soft and secretive, but there was no arguing in there.

Chetty got up and went to the kitchen. She leaned up against the doorframe and watched her mother ladle gravy onto three heaping plates that had already been set at the table.

“There she is,” her mother said. “Sleeping beauty.” Her mother’s belly looked bigger every time she saw it. It was so bulbous that she could hardly reach the back burner to stir the gravy.

Chetty went to her chair and sat down. She picked up the glass of milk on the table before her and took a long gulp. She licked the creamy ring off her lip, and she peeked under a dishcloth at a mound of steaming biscuits. Her father took his place at the table across from her.

Her mother kissed Chetty on the head and squeezed her around the shoulders. “It’s your favorite,” she said. She smelled of housework—lemon furniture polish and Windex. Chetty had the urge to climb up into her arms and press her face into her mother’s chest, but that big belly was standing in her way. Instead, she unfolded her napkin into her lap and waited.
Her mother took her place at the table. Chetty mumbled grace into her folded hands, and then she buttered herself a biscuit.

“Tell your mother what you learned today,” her father said.

She remembered the mottled bag, the warm stump against her palm. She looked down at her gravy-drenched plate. There were little balls of dumplings, broccoli smothered in cheese, a half of a pickle, and somewhere, beneath it all, there was the meat, right off the bones of her funny little chicken.

“She learned her sixes,” her father said. “What’s six times four?”

“Twenty-four,” she said. It came easily to her this time.

“See? You’ll be integrating by parts in no time.” He tucked his napkin into the collar of his shirt.

“Very good, Chetty,” her mother said. She lowered herself carefully down onto her chair.

Her father reached forward and rubbed her mother’s belly. “Not long now, chief,” he said.

Chetty got hot with anger. Her little brother wasn’t even born yet. She had earned that name, especially after what she’d gone through today. But then again, maybe she hadn’t. Not yet, anyway. She looked down at the shreds of chicken on her plate, and she decided that she had one more task to complete before she took the title of chief for good.

Chetty stabbed a dumpling with her fork. She brought it to her nose and sniffed it—savory and salty, glistening with gravy. She lowered the fork back down
onto her plate. She was even hungrier now, but she couldn’t get the feeling of the moist plastic bag out of her head.

She emptied her fork and tried again, this time pressing into a thick hunk of meat. She lifted it to her mouth, and she stopped. She looked up at her father. He was watching her, his fork also skewered and poised above his plate.

Chetty looked hard into her father’s eyes. She had to eat it all, every last bite, quickly and without thinking of her silly bird with its floppy red comb. She wouldn’t let him down this time. She took a breath, and she stuffed the chicken into her mouth.

Chetty was surprised to discover that it tasted exactly the way that chicken and dumplings always tasted. In fact, she thought that maybe it tasted even better than usual. It was juicier, tenderer, soaked in flavor. She ground it up between her teeth and swallowed it down.

Her father smiled, and he ate his forkful, too, splotches of gravy seeping out the corners of his mouth.

It came easy to her after the first bite. They ate quickly and ravenously. She even took a second biscuit. They hadn’t eaten since breakfast, after all, and the day had been long and trying. In the end, she swiped her finger across her empty plate and licked it clean. They drank the last of their milk and ate apple cider donuts for dessert, and then they sat back in their chairs, stuffed and satisfied.

After a while of quiet, the sun fading off into twilight around them, her father belched, and then Chetty did, too, a little echo.
The Hypnotist

I’m watching the wipers sweep rhythmically across the windshield when my husband Andy breaks our long silence and says, “So that Chloe, huh?”

I’ve been thinking about it since we left his office holiday party half an hour ago. He’s only saying it because he knows that I’m brooding. “Yeah, she was a real bitch,” I say.

“Really, June.” He loosens his knit tie and unbuttons his collar. “She’s a kid.”

“Exactly,” I say. “I’m not sure what Ian sees in her. What is she, twenty-five? She’s like that snot hostess at La Vie En Rose. The one with the neon thongs and see-through skirts. Classy.”

Andy is the kind of person who thinks before he speaks. He smiles at me, in that very nice way of his. He reaches across the console and takes my hand. His palm is warm and dry and comforting. “I don’t want this to change how you tell that story,” he says. “It’s a good story.”

“It’s a silly story, obviously.” I look out the passenger-side window at the yellowed reflection of streetlights in the puddles on the side of the road. I’ve fallen
quiet again, because I’m embarrassed and disgusted, and because I can’t think of anything else to say. He probably thinks she’s cute, but I’ve had that argument enough times to know better than to ask. I wish he would just let it lie, but he keeps looking at me and stroking my hand with his thumb. I feel big and stupid and old.

We’ve been listening to news on the radio. Andy switches to a classic rock station, and it’s that Who song they play over and over, as though it’s the only song they ever wrote.

“I don’t think she did it to be mean,” Andy says, launching me into another fit.

“She did too. She’s probably gloating about it now, throwing back another appletini and telling all the other wives what a dope I am. And they’re all probably loving it because they have sagging boobs and flabby bellies and absolutely no self-esteem, and they’re desperately seeking approval from some twenty-year-old in sparkle stilettos who compliments the color of their lipstick and is probably laughing about it behind their backs. It’s pathetic.”

“I don’t mean Chloe. I don’t care about her. I’m talking about your mom.”

We’re only at the Middleton Mall. The parking lot is empty except for a few lingering cars beside the entrances, the last perfume hockers and shoe salesmen cleaning up at the end of the night. We still have another twenty minutes before we’re home, where there’s more wine, and blankets and a pillow and a television that will prevent us from talking any more about my mother.

“I mean you’d think Ian would have better taste,” I say, but Andy won’t take the bait.
At the party, about six of us had formed a group near the bar and were struggling to find common ground. Chloe went on for almost ten minutes about a pair of shoes she bought online that were supposed to be coral but were actually more of a burnt orange. I'm not kidding—ten minutes. The conversation wandered aimlessly from there.

I have a repertoire of stories that I know people enjoy and that I tell over and over, no matter how many times Andy has heard them. I think of them as party favors, alleviating the terrible back-and-forth of awkward first-time conversations about the weather, and what you do for a living, and the temperature of the passed Hors D’oeuvres. Andy says I should get paid, like a clown or a magician. I’m not sure exactly how I got to telling the hypnotist story tonight, but once I got going, the spotlight was on me.

The thing about sharing a memory is that you open it up for conversation, and sometimes there’s no room for conversation. Sometimes it’s perfect just the way it is, stowed safely away in your subconscious where nothing can harm it, like a favorite doll that survived the transition to adulthood. This particular memory is one that I shouldn’t have shared. Andy refers to it as the hypnotist story, but to me, like everything, it’s all about my mother.

It was so hot that day at the county fair that the hog races were cancelled. Even the blue-ribbon animals didn’t want to be there. A man in a flannel shirt and a cowboy hat hosed down a bunch of hogs that sprawled in the hazy shade of their pigsty. The chickens folded up into themselves and squeezed their old-lady eyes
shut. A golf cart carrying teenagers and garbage bags buzzed past us on the fairway, and we choked on the acrid dust that kicked up behind it. My father said to no one in particular, “Beautiful night.”

I wanted to kick him. Half an hour earlier, my mother and I had been nestled cozily on the couch of our abundantly air-conditioned home, watching home improvement shows with our cat Ozzy stretched across our laps. When my father had gotten home from work, he'd forced this upon us, this laborious trip to the fair on the hottest night of the year.

As we walked toward the large white merchant tent, I folded my arms across my chest and silently vowed not to enjoy one minute of the fair. I focused my gaze on my sneakers and tried to ignore the jewelry vendors with their pretty silver rings and matching earrings in the shapes of moons and frogs. Even if he offered to buy me something, I resolved that I would refuse, out of protest.

We walked on to the food vendors with their sizzling links of sausage and vats of yellow cheese, piles of glistening butterfly fries, cobs of corn charred in husks. The air was thick with the odor of hay and manure. For the first time ever, I didn’t have an appetite for the sweet-smelling cotton candy or funnel cake. I ate a hot dog plain on the bun. My mother didn’t eat anything at all.

Beyond the food vendors were the rides, but I refused those, too. The lights on the Ferris wheel and swings lit up in reds and yellows as the sun began to set behind the tree line. The lines were short, and the riders were dreary and green in the face.
We found three empty folding chairs under the entertainment tent and settled there, about five rows from the stage. It got crowded quickly. The strings of bare light bulbs cast a warm glow on the cheeks of children sitting on hay bales around the perimeter of the tent. A band of men with matching moustaches played songs on fiddles and banjos and other assorted instruments that looked too small for their bodies. A man in a red tuxedo herded a bunch of longhaired cats up the stairs onto the stage. I sat between my parents and thought of Ozzy, snuggled in the folds of my favorite fleece blanket, purring.

My mother and I shared an enormous cup of soda and discussed how each act had been constructed. We liked to spoil the magic behind things. We took great pleasure in critiquing the special effects on late-night horror movies and picking away at Styrofoam facades in theme parks.

The man in the red tuxedo guided his cats along a complicated obstacle course made of PVC pipe and chicken wire. “We know what he does every Saturday night,” my mother said. “You’re looking at it.”

A magician in a top hat vanished his assistant inside a small wooden box. “Those girls can bend for days,” my mother said.

A petite pair of acrobat brothers stood effortlessly on each other’s shoulders. “The trick is to make it look difficult,” my mother said, “and people just assume that it is difficult.” She leaned forward and took a sip of our soda.

“Come on now,” my father said. “Do we have to be so mean about everything?”
“Has anyone ever told you that you’re no fun, Roger?” she said. “You’re no fun.” The woman beside her covered her mouth with her hand and laughed.

“You never let me forget it.” He raised his eyebrows at my mother, half hurt, half playful, his natural state of being. My father is a dentist who looks like a dentist. He was shorter than all my friend’s fathers, and his hair was rapidly retreating from his forehead and had already left a big round bald spot in the back of his head. Still to this day, he wears wire-rimmed glasses that are always crooked and short-sleeved button-ups in unflattering variations of plaid.

I tried to read the name of the next act on the show schedule, which was written in chalk on a sandwich board beside the stage. “What’s the last act?” I asked.

“Stop squinting,” my father said. “We have to get her to the eye doctor, Ev.”

“So make an appointment,” my mother said. The woman beside her laughed again, a shrill, bubbling giggle. “I mean, it’s not going to make itself, right?” My mother had a way of pretending to lower her voice without actually lowering it. She liked to think of herself as the fun half of their marriage, the one who made people laugh, kept people happy. And to some extent, she was—her artificial crimson hair and bangle bracelets made her seem more alive than other people, my father especially.

Stagehands arranged metal folding chairs into a row on the stage. “Oh, June.” My mother grabbed my hand. “I think it’s a hypnotist!”

“This will be good,” I said. “I saw a special on TV one time that said these guys travel with a whole group of actors. They weed out the real people by saying
they can’t be hypnotized.” I scanned the audience for suspicious characters. I spotted a woman in a snakeskin dress sitting conspicuously alone across the aisle. I knew she was in on the act.

On stage, a man in a black t-shirt and jeans took hold of the microphone and spoke into it abruptly. “I’m Van Tassel,” he said, “and I am going to blow your mind.” The audience reaction was dull. A couple people in the back found the energy to clap.

“Wait, is that the hypnotist?” I said. His hair was black and gray, and it was long and curly on the sides. He had muddy tattoos on his forearms like my gym teacher. “He looks like Mr. Powers,” I said.

“He looks like Richard Gere,” my mother said. The woman beside her made a sound of agreement and laughed again in that outrageous lilting register. People got like that with my mother, instantly giddy and familiar, like they’d been paired up with the popular girl in class and became cooler just by association.

“What kind of a name is ‘Van Tassel?’” my father said. “I mean is Van his first name, or part of his last?” He folded his arms across his chest. “Your dreamboat sounds more like a male stripper.”

“Oh, look at him getting jealous,” my mother said. She reached her arm around me and poked him in the side. He softened a little and smiled.

The hypnotist continued to try to rouse the audience. He was casual and course, the kind of guy who worked in an auto shop in another life, or maybe even in this one. “Come on,” he said, “who wants to get their mind blown?”
“You bet your booty I do,” my mother said. A wave of eager hands flung up into the air. She put her purse into my lap and stood up to wave her hand above all the others.

I eyed the lady in the snakeskin dress, but she fanned herself with a real estate brochure, disinterested.

My father nudged his body into mine. “Don’t you want to go up on stage, Junebug?”

“I want Mom to go.” I figured she was more likely to be chosen, anyway. She was bright and tall and loud. I was small and dull-haired and frightened to be up in front of all those people.

Van Tassel almost immediately picked my mother to go up. He selected nine others to join her, a surprisingly normal collection of people—a big man and a small one, a young girl and an old lady, all the regular folks who waited in line with us at the supermarket on Sunday afternoons. The lady in the snakeskin dress remained in her seat.

As the volunteers took their seats on the stage, Van Tassel explained the process of group hypnosis. I was surprised by the rather cookie-cutter procedure, the kind of stuff you hear all the time on cartoons and sitcoms. Wasn’t there more to it in real life? It was the usual hypnotism jargon: eyelids getting droopy, arms feeling heavy, a lull into submission and a deep, deep sleep. Once she was seated, my mother engaged the elderly woman beside her in a side conversation while the hypnotist finished his spiel.
“So if I tell you to go back to your seat, don’t take it personally. Some people just aren’t susceptible to hypnotism. There’s always a few in every group I work with.”

I punched my father in the arm. “I told you!”

“Can’t get one past you,” my father said.

“Now, enough of the boring stuff,” Van Tassel said. “You all just sit back, relax, and feel free to close your eyes whenever the mood strikes.” A few of them hesitated. “I won’t bite,” he said.

My mother’s eyes fell shut.

He counted backward from a hundred at a slow and steady pace. The audience murmured along like a congregation at mass. Van Tassel stood behind the line of volunteers and visited each of them individually, pressing both of his palms down onto their shoulders and saying something close to their ears. Whatever he said helped them bridge the transition from sleepy to asleep. They dropped off, one by one, and each person that he put to sleep brought him closer to my mother.

Two seats away now, Van Tassel reached around a grumpy, wrinkled man wearing glasses like my father’s, and he shook his hand. The man stood up and went down the stairs to join his family on the hay bales.

I nudged my father with my elbow. “Another one bites the dust,” I said.

My father squeezed my knee. “And now for the moment of truth.”

Van Tassel cracked his knuckles. I could hear them popping all the way from the fifth row. Then he assumed position behind my mother.
He leaned forward and spoke into the auburn curtain of her hair. I held my breath and waited for her to stand and join us back in the audience. I imagined she would make a big show of it, call that slimy Van Tassel a hack, and gather us up to leave right then. We would have time to get ice cream, and we would share a sundae on the hood of the car and feel smarter than everybody in the parking lot because we knew the truth. “June called it from the beginning,” my mother would say.

But as he spoke into her ear, I watched, astonished, as her lips began to part, and her head leaned back against Van Tassel’s belly. After a few moments, he stood up straight and kept his palms pressed down on her shoulders. As he stood there behind her, her head lulled almost drunkenly from side to side. When he finally lifted his hands from her shoulders and moved on to the next volunteer, her head dropped back heavily and dangled over the edge of her chair. After a moment, she snored audibly through her gaping mouth.

“Oh my God, Dad.” I looked up at my father. “Is this for real?”

My father pushed his glasses up onto his nose. He wouldn’t look away from the stage to meet my eye. “Your mother is a lot of things. But one thing she’s not is a good actress.”

The air in the tent smelled of body odor and carnival food. My stomach felt queasy. I dug an ice cube out of my cup and crushed it between my teeth, my eyes fixated on my sleeping mother.

All of the remaining volunteers came to rest in varying stages of slumber on the stage. Van Tassel walked forward and addressed the audience silently, thrusting
his thumb back at the volunteers and grimacing. Then he spun around on his heel
and said to them, “On the count of three, you’re going to wake up, and it’s going to
be cold, man, I mean really cooooold.” He shook his shoulders and pretended to
shiver. The audience chuckled. It had to be a hundred degrees inside that tent.
Somebody in the audience called out, “Hey, hypnotize me!”

“One, two…three!”

At first, nothing seemed to be amiss. The volunteers roused awake and
surveyed their surroundings. A man who’d fallen asleep against the woman beside
him apologized and wiped the drool from the edge of his mouth.

And then, as though Van Tassel flipped a switch, they all began to shiver.
They were exaggerated and drowsy, in a haze like drunken relatives at a Christmas
party. It was my mother up there, but it wasn’t my mother. She was acting so
strangely, so dramatically, they all were. They were sleepwalking.

My mother was the first to speak. “Ooo, God, it’s an ice box in here.”
Everyone on stage unanimously agreed. They hugged their chests and rubbed their
arms and huddled together for warmth. For a moment I could almost see their
breath escaping from their mouths despite the sweat that formed along my upper lip
and along my hairline. My mother gathered the old lady next to her up into her
arms and held her close, the way she used to hold me in the stands at frigid college
football games.

Now here is the part of the story where I remind you how skeptical I was,
even as a nine-year old. How if it had been anybody else up there on stage—the lady
in the snakeskin dress or my neighbor or my babysitter Sadie—I wouldn’t have
believed it myself. So when I tell you my mother was cold on that sultry August night, I know how ridiculous it sounds. If I hadn’t seen it happen myself, I would doubt it, too.

Van Tassel came to the front of the stage and addressed the audience. “Guys, what’s worse than getting stuck out in the cold?”

“Oh, no,” my father said. Laughter came up in spurts from his chest, and soon he was hiccupsing breathlessly along with everyone else.

Van Tassel grinned. “How about when you’re caught with your pants off?”

My mother shrieked. She picked up the woman beside her by the shoulders and pulled her to sit on her lap. The audience howled. The little old lady held her hands palm-over-palm between her legs to cover herself. The audience went wild over that.

“Oh, jeez,” my father said, removing his glasses and wiping actual tears out his eyes. “Oh, Evvy.”

It was like a comedy routine, only it was my mother and this little old lady, and that made it even funnier. The old lady squirmed out of my mother’s grasp and scrambled to hide behind her chair. As she cowered behind my mother, I started to laugh, too—this was fun, this was funny, this was totally absurd. That was my mother up there making all those people laugh. Only it wasn’t her, it was the hypnotist, and she was just a part of it, a part of something totally unbelievable and outrageous and fun.
Van Tassel let them play it out until it got stale, and the audience lulled. Then he released them from the freeze, and they came plummeting back into the heat of the tent.

The show went on after that. He deprived them of air and then mercifully allowed them to use their shoes as oxygen masks. He put a pie in the oven off stage, and they went crazy over the smell of freshly baked apples. He put them all into outer space for a while, had them lay eggs, and he orchestrated a symphony of invisible instruments. My mother couldn’t play any instruments, but that night, she played the violin.

In the end, he had them close their eyes again. A calm came over us in the audience, too, as he guided them in their minds to a room somewhere in their memories or in their imaginations where they felt safe, where all the pressures of the world seemed to lift off their shoulders and dissipate into the air like steam off a lake. I felt my eyelids grow heavy—I really did—and I thought of the warmth of my mother’s body against mine, and Ozzy purring sleepily on our laps, and my father leaning studiously over the coffee table, fitting puzzle pieces into one another until the whole picture was complete. We sat there for a while, quietly, in our places.

Before he woke them up for good, Van Tassel had one final trick up his sleeve. If they heard the word “trunk” within the next hour, he told them, they would respond, without question, “elephant.”

And that was it. Everyone on stage was awake again, and everything was ordinary. It was time to go home.
My parents held hands on the walk back to the car. We took our time, moving contentedly with the current of families exiting the fair. The rides had gone dark and rested like husks on the hay-laden fairgrounds. The vendors were gone, their tables draped with tarps that seemed to stretch on forever in the darkness under the tent. Despite the heat, a family of pigs huddled together in the corner of the pigpen. We arrived at our car in the makeshift parking lot that would be nothing more than a field of trampled grass after we were gone.

The moon was nearly full and lent a glow to the white peaks of the tents. I waited on the driver side of the car and looked at their radiant tops and the shadows beneath them. I didn’t want the night to end. How quickly your attitude can change about a thing.

My father opened his door and tossed me the keys. “Junebug,” he said. “Grab me a bottle of water out of the trunk.”

My mother examined her reflection in the car window. She pulled her bag securely onto her shoulder and stepped inside.

For a moment, everything was still.

Then she reached out for the handle of the door, and said, to no one in particular, “Elephant.”

And that’s where the story ends. The story always ends at “Elephant.”

Except for tonight. All throughout the story, this girl Chloe wasn’t following the cues like everyone else. She wasn’t laughing when she was supposed to laugh.
Her expression was stern and rigid, her shiny pink lips sloping downward and her brows pursed together in the middle. She slurped noisily on her neon green drink, and she shifted her weight from one leg to the other.

At first, I thought maybe she had a problem with me, like women sometimes arbitrarily do, with the way I look or the make of my handbag. And I wouldn’t blame her—after all, I disliked her for similarly arbitrary reasons. About halfway through, her expression became almost quizzical, like I was laying out clues to some unsolvable mystery. Was she confused? I thought even a dimwit like Chloe could follow this story.

But when I got to the part where my dad tells me to get the water bottle out of the trunk, she jumped in and said too loudly, “Oh, and then your mother’s like, ‘elephant,’ right?”

I stopped talking.

Her husband Ian laughed. Another lady standing in our semicircle sort of chuckled, and she took a sip of wine to cover it up. It grew quiet and uncomfortable.

“I’m sorry?” I said. Andy took hold of my elbow. I felt him asserting his presence beside me, begging me to cool my defenses.

Chloe looped her arm into Ian’s and clung to his side. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to ruin your joke.”

“Joke?” I said. Andy whispered something into my neck, but I wasn’t listening to him. “I don’t follow?”
“I mean yeah,” she said. She was putting on an air of confusion, in that sorority girl way of insulting someone without taking any accountability for it.

“Like, she was faking it, right?”

“Faking it?” I said. I was aware that I was repeating everything she was saying. I hated myself for it, for being caught so unaware. I cleared my throat and prepared my counter attack. Andy put his arm around my shoulders and tried to guide me out of the circle, but I pulled away from him and gestured at her with my wine glass. “Oh no, you’re not getting it, sweetheart. This was for real.”

Her bangle bracelets jingled as she explained. “It’s just that when I was a sociology major, I watched videos of those things on YouTube. People go along with it because they feel like they have to, because they’re up on stage and there’s all this pressure. I just figured…”

“You don’t know me, and you don’t know my mother. She wouldn’t do that. She wouldn’t do that to me.”

Right after I said it, I knew.

_She wouldn’t do that to me._ I could hear it in my voice, the desperation, the naïveté.

Of course my mother had been faking it. The possibility somehow hadn’t occurred to me until that moment.

“Oh my god,” Chloe said. She buried her face into the sleeve of Ian’s tweed jacket. The others in our group tried their hardest to keep straight faces. I felt like I was in high school gym class with my pants around my ankles. I stood there, saying nothing, because there wasn’t anything more for me to say.
Andy said the right thing, though, as he often does. He said, “Let’s get out of here.” So we did.

The rain is letting up, and the wipers are making a long, groaning sound as they swipe across the windshield. “I guess she’s right. My mom could have been in on it,” I say to Andy after a while.

He shrugs and says nothing, this very long, suspended, wordless shrug. What can he say? He must have seen it all along.

Everyone must have seen it. I’ve told that story at holidays and happy hours and dinner parties. I told it to my cousins at my mother’s wake. It must have seemed almost touching, the blind loyalty, a girl devoted to her mother.

Andy puts his hand on my neck and holds it there. It’s warm, and I feel like I can lean my head back and fall asleep.

“It’s pathetic,” I say. I try to make my voice sound light and dismissive, but it doesn’t. “It didn’t even occur to me.”

“Why would it?” he says.

“Because it’s obvious.”

“Not to you.”

“That’s the problem,” I say.

Andy massages the base of my neck with his fingers. “Just because you all of a sudden realize she might have been faking it doesn’t mean she was faking it.”

“Oh you know she was.”

I watch a raindrop skim down the windshield until it’s battered away by the wiper. I guess there really is no way to know for sure. Van Tassel doesn’t show up
on an internet search, and my father is as unreliable as I am. The only person who could set it straight is gone.

“Look, whether or not she was faking it, she did it for you,” Andy says. “If she didn’t stay up there on stage, you wouldn’t even remember that night.”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” I say. But of course, he’s right.

We went to the fair every year, but nothing stands out about the rest of them. When I think about the hypnotist story, I feel her against me in the audience, and I smell her purse in my lap, and I hear her voice up on stage. It reminds me of how alive she was once.

I don’t miss her like I used to. I don’t feel the ache, the hollow place that opened up when we first lost her. I still think about her every day, but it’s more of a longing now, a longing to remember, to make her relevant in my life, because she isn’t anymore. When I tell the story, she is. Maybe that’s why I like to tell it so much.

And tonight, debating over whether she faked it or whether it was real, she’s more alive than ever. It’s like we’re continuing a conversation we started when I was nine years old, after “elephant,” and after we left the fair and I drifted off to sleep in the back seat of the car.
The Wax Museum

As Martha arranged her toiletries on the dresser in the master bedroom where her parents used to stay, she knew it had been a mistake to rent the old cabin. If Cassie was here, they could have reminisced about the creepy wolf painting on the mantle and the big black ants that traversed the logs on the walls. Being here alone was depressing, all these memories, and only Martha here to remember them.

Martha and her sister had originally planned a full week together at the cabin on Lake George. Sissy-cation, they had called it. But then Cassie couldn’t get the week off work and convinced Martha to downsize their trip to a long weekend, and then just a regular weekend. Not ten minutes after Martha and her son had unloaded their bags into their bedrooms, Cassie texted to say she couldn’t make it at all. Martha was disappointed, but she wasn’t surprised. That was Cassie for you.

She would just have to make the best of it, wouldn’t she, like she made the best of everything. She changed into a tank top and shorts and sprayed Charlie down with sunscreen, and they set off to find an adventure of their own.
They drove into town, the smell of pine filling the car, the breeze making a mess of Martha’s cropped black hair. She put on the CD she had made for sissycation, but listening to the Pretenders and the Red Hot Chili Peppers made the passenger seat seem even emptier. She turned off the music and listened to the whirring of the bugs in the passing trees. Charlie had shut his eyes in the back seat. Even at six years old, a twenty-minute car ride could lull him to sleep.

The sidewalks in the business district were crowded. Martha and Charlie walked past the artisan shops with their handmade jewelry and imported clothing, the fudge makers who rolled out sheets of buttery chocolate in the windows, the old-fashioned toy stores with their wooden airplanes and paper dolls. Here was the theater that showed classic movies, where they saw *The Wizard of Oz* the year before Martha’s mother died. Cassie had been so afraid of the flying monkeys that their mother had taken her into the lobby and sat with her for forty-five minutes while Martha and her father finished the movie and a bucket of buttered popcorn.

Charlie got a mint chocolate chip cone at Leonard’s, and Martha got a cup of vanilla. Her ice cream melted in a pool of warm caramel, and the flavor was exactly as she remembered it, buttery, salty, sweet. Everyone had always ordered the same thing at Leonard’s: Martha got vanilla and caramel, her father got pistachio, and her mother got peach swirl. Martha couldn’t remember Cassie’s favorite. She took her
phone out of her purse and texted: “What did you always get at Leonard’s? Rocky road or cookie crunch?”

Between storefronts, they could see through to the lake on the bottom of the hill, where the parasails and canoes and pedal boats drifted across the lake amid the ducks. It was a perfect Up-State New York afternoon, a cool breeze coming in off the lake, the sun warm on their shoulders. Days like this were sure to leave a sunburn, like the day Martha fell asleep on the edge of the dock, looking up at the scattered puffs of clouds smattering the deep blue sky. She could almost feel the cool sting of Noxzema in her nostrils as her mother soothed her pink chest before bed.

“Why don’t we sit down by the water for a while?” Martha said.

Charlie looked up at her with an expectant, disappointed face. His ice cream formed a ring around his mouth, and pale green droplets lingered at the side of his lips. “But there are so many things to do, and we only have one day.”

“Charlie, you hate shopping,” Martha said.

“It’s not just stores,” he said. He scanned his surroundings quickly. His wide brown eyes were hard with sudden impatience. “Can’t we go in there?” He held the sticky nub of his ice cream cone out toward the pillared building across the street.

The wax museum was two-stories high with large white columns on either side of its aging façade. A sign, scrawled in bloody letters above the door, read “Frankenstein’s House of Horrors.” A wax organist was frozen in the picture window on the second floor, microfiber cobwebs mingling with his wiry hair and stretching out to the edges of the window frame. Canned organ music—unchanged since Martha’s childhood—piped out onto the street.
It had been a long time since Martha had thought about the wax museum. Of course he would want to go there, the one place in town she did not want to visit. Her mother had an episode in there the year before Cassie was born. Martha did her best to avoid those places—the pool in the YMCA, the Manasquan boardwalk, the ravine that her mother drove into the day that she died. Martha had been there for all of them, except, of course, for the last.

“I think you might be too little, buddy,” she said. “The wax museum is kind of disturbing.”

“What’s disturbing?”

“It means gross, or creepy. Like something that gives you nightmares.”

“I love creepy stuff,” he said. “I won’t get nightmares, I promise.”

If only such a promise was possible, Martha thought. She twirled a gooey string of caramel around her spoon. “I remember a little boy saying he wasn’t going to get nightmares from watching Gremlins, either, and look how that turned out.”

“That was different, Mom. I want to go so bad.”

“Oh, the drama,” Martha said.

Charlie scowled. He was so much like Cassie was as a child, the husky voice and pin-straight hair, the quick and desperate impulses. Martha sometimes felt like he was her second child, as though Cassie had been a practice run for the real thing. She took her phone out of her bag and turned it on, but there was no response from her sister.

“I haven’t asked for one thing since we got here,” Charlie said.
This was true, but only because Martha had given him everything without his having to ask—candy, ice cream, an overpriced Aqua Man figurine from the comic book shop. She knew that if she said no to this, his one and only request, he would hold it against her for the rest of the weekend. He had tunnel vision that only her husband Elliott could bring him out of. She should have told Elliott to come along after all, sissy-cation or not. She should have known that Cassie would bail.

“We’ll just have to be quick,” Martha said, dropping her phone back into its little pocket.

“Westward, ho!” Charlie shouted, throwing a fist in the air and marching assertively to the crosswalk.

The reception area of Frankenstein’s House of Horrors was a small vestibule about the size of a public bathroom stall and was lined with black curtains. Martha remembered the smell of it, like the musty exhaust of an old vacuum cleaner. A red-haired, freckle-faced teenager was typing messages rapidly into his cell phone behind a wooden podium. His nametag said “BONER” on a peeling black label.

“My name is Boner,” Martha said. She held a twenty-dollar bill out toward him.

“Excuse me, uh, Boner?”

“Huh?” The kid looked down at his nametag and let out a little laugh. “Oh, that’s a joke, lady.”

“You don’t say.”
“My name’s Brian.”

She held Charlie by his shoulders and presented him to the host. “Well, Brian, is he too small to go in?” It was a leading question, but it was worth a try.

Brian plucked the twenty from her grasp and shoved it into a little box on top of the podium. “He should be ok. It’s the little girls that freak out.”


Brian unhooked the black velvet rope that blocked the part in the curtain. He resumed typing into his cell phone with his free hand and said drearily, “Enter at your own risk, all who dare are in for a scare.”

“I can see why you don’t bother with a tip jar,” Martha said.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Beyond the lobby, there was darkness. It was like walking into the dream of a memory—everything was the same as she remembered it, but it was different somehow. She rested her fingertips against the cool surface of the wall. White translucent spots floated in her vision as her eyes struggled to adjust to the darkness. She could make out the black and white tile floor, the paneled ceiling. She heard the air conditioning click on and stutter in the vents.

“Now don’t be scared,” Martha said. “It’s all smoke and mirrors.” It was what her mother had said to her when they watched scary movies, and likely, it was what her mother had said when they’d come to the wax museum so many years ago. Martha’s memory of the day was visceral and spotty, some pieces vivid, others blank.
The wax museum comprised a labyrinth of darkened hallways. On the walls of each corridor were three small square windows, about a foot wide and four feet off the ground. Through each window, wax sculptures were posed in scenes extracted from nightmares—antiquated torture chambers, mostly, but ordinary places, too. Monsters lurked in half-open bedroom closets and bloody hands reached out from under pillows.

Charlie pulled away from her and sprinted down the hallway. He strained to see into the first window, but even on his tiptoes he came up short. When she had come here as a girl, Martha had been too small to see, too. In fact her mother had joked that there ought to be a cartoon zombie painted onto the wall of the lobby saying, “You have to be this big to ride this ride.” There was another detail she thought she had forgotten, revealing itself like a firefly on a moonless night.

Martha went up behind Charlie and lifted him up so that he could see. He was getting so big. She had to lean her knee against the wall for stability as they visited each window in the first hallway.

She recognized many of the scenes, but they were different now, almost funny. When she was a girl, the figures had seemed real, so eerily lifelike that only their deadened eyes had given them away. But now, the skin on the wax figures was ashen with dust, and cobwebs formed in the creases of their eyelids and ears. In one room, Martha spotted a forty of malt liquor tucked in the corner—the remnants, presumably, of an after-hours party hosted by her new friend Brian. In the center of the room, a frail old figure in suspenders and a bucket hat sat at a kitchen table, hunched over a dusty plate of worms.
“Oh, gross,” Charlie said, delighted. Martha put him down and shook out her tired arms. “Look, a stool!” He ran off and retrieved a small metal footstool that was tucked in the bend of the hallway. Martha wrapped her arms across her chest and felt the warmth of his body start to leave her. Every step he took toward independence made her ache a little, even a step as silly and small as this. He disappeared around the corner, hobbling awkwardly with his stool.

By the time Martha caught up with him, he’d already hopped down. “Dumb,” he said, matter-of-factly.

Martha rested her fingertips on the small wooden ledge and looked inside. It was the Bride of Frankenstein, peering up through a small cell window in the faux-moonlight, her green skin sloppily stitched with black thread. Martha’s mother had said, “There’s your girlfriend.” Martha smiled. That was one of her mother’s recurring one-liners, a joke that Martha and Cassie still carried on. “There’s your girlfriend/boyfriend” was one of their meanest inside jokes, but it was always good for a laugh. Martha unzipped the cell phone pocket in her purse and pushed the power button. The dirty satin liner of her purse illuminated in the darkness. Still no response from Cassie.

Charlie had moved along to the next hallway. “Next one’s dumb too,” he called out.

Martha turned the corner and looked in at the first window. She remembered this exhibit. She felt a heaviness push down onto her chest and onto her eyelids, the familiar heaviness that came sometimes when she thought about her mother. There were no wax figures here, just a bathtub, filled with blood.
Her mother never liked the sight of blood. She disliked it so much, in fact, that she wouldn’t eat anything that was the color red—not ketchup, or spaghetti sauce, or Campbell’s tomato soup. She even went out of her way not to use the red crayon when they were coloring together in Martha’s books. So when Martha’s mother had looked in at this exhibit, she really was in rough shape. She’d put her hand over her mouth and leaned her arm against the opposite wall. Martha’s father went over to her and put his palm on the back of her neck. She said, “I feel like I’m going to throw up,” or “I’m going to lose it,” or something else that should have alerted them that something was wrong, but didn’t.

Martha rubbed her eyes and went to Charlie. She nestled her chin in the bend of his bony shoulder. He was looking into the Frankenstein exhibit. The room was dark and dank, the faux-cinderblock walls lined with chains and various antiquated medical instruments. It was that iconic scene, the monster strapped to his table, Dr. Frankenstein pulling down on the big steel lever. This was where her mother had the episode. Here, in front of Frankenstein.

“It’s alive,” Martha said. It was what her mother had said, right before it had happened.

“What is it?” Charlie said.

“It’s a monster.”

“I’m not afraid of monsters,” Charlie said, and he took his stool and went off on his own to the next exhibit.
Martha lingered behind. She rested her forehead against the cool glass of the window. She let her eyes blur out of focus and her eyelids fall shut. She needed a moment here, to remember this thing and then to try and let it go again.

It had happened all at once, although in hindsight, it was clear that her mother had been feeling off all day. She had been quiet on the car ride over, even when they passed a family of deer grazing on the side of the road, which normally would have driven her mother wild. Then at the candy shop, she hadn't gotten root beer barrels, which was unusual, and she didn't get anything at the ice cream shop, either.

But Martha hadn't noticed a thing. She had enjoyed her licorice rope and her banana split, and then she was so enwrapped in the scene with the Frankenstein monster that she hadn't even noticed when her mother fell back against the wall. It wasn't until she heard the sound of her mother's head hitting the tile that she realized. It sounded like someone dropped a melon, a sickly hollow thunk. Her father set her roughly down, and she landed on her feet and stumbled to catch her balance. She turned and saw her mother on the ground, and she saw her seize up, stiff and electric. Her mother thrashed on the tile, making a deep sort of gurgling sound in her throat, the kind of sounds that people made in movies when they were about to transform into a werewolf.

Her father had dropped to his knees beside her, jammed his fist in her mouth, and Martha had cried out “No,” because it looked like he was hurting her. It was the second time she’d seen this happen, but it didn’t make any more sense, even with a name attached to it—it was a seizure, she knew now, it was called epilepsy. Her
father had called out “Hey, somebody,” and then, “Somebody help us.” The
fluorescent panels on the ceiling had flickered and stammered on, and then the
hallway was illuminated, and Martha could see in the harsh overhead light the
scuffed black walls and water-stained ceiling panels and her mother convulsing on
the ground in her father’s arms.

“I think this is the last hallway,” Charlie called out. “Hurry up!”

Martha took a deep breath, and she opened her eyes. She dipped her hand
into her purse and stroked the smooth surface of the power button with her index
finger. She peeked inside, and she pushed the button. Nothing. She left the
Frankenstein monster behind, a little half-moon of grease remaining on the glass
where her forehead had been.

When she turned the bend, she saw Charlie standing up on his stool before
the middle window. Shadows formed drooping caverns around his eyes, and the
glow of the window cast a bluish hue onto his lips. His eyes seemed to shimmer with
the reflection of the light through the window. She went to him and put her hand on
his shoulder. “What’s up, buddy?”

“I don’t like this one,” he said.

It was a patient in a dentist’s office. The walls and floor were a dull shade of
medical green. In the center of the office, which was little more than a counter top
and a freestanding sink, a figure lay back in an old, rusted dentist’s chair. On the
table beside him were a small dental mirror and a bloody pair of surgical scissors. A
spotlight was shining on the patient’s face, and the paper bib fastened around his
neck was crinkled with a smattering of burgundy. Both of his cheeks were snipped clean to his ears, and his skin curled back to reveal a mouthful of bloodstained teeth.

Martha shuddered despite herself. She was squeamish about blood now, too. It was almost as though she had inherited her mother's anxiety. “Oh, it’s just a bunch of corn syrup and red dye 40,” she said, rubbing his shoulders.

“Can we go? I want to go.”

“No nightmares, right?” Martha said.

“No nightmares,” Charlie said. “I promise.” He reached up to take her hand.

They made their way toward the glowing red exit sign. “That last one, it was really disturbing, wasn’t it?” he said.

“It sure was.” Martha pulled him close against her side and gave him a squeeze. Something good had come of this trip, after all. She had taught him a new word.

“I’m hungry,” he said. “What are we having for dinner?”

“Worms,” Martha said, and they walked out into the blinding white daylight.

That night, Martha lay in the stillness of the master bedroom, watching the shadows shift on the stacked logs in the walls, listening to the ringing inside her ears that only happened in Lake George. It was so quiet here, and so dark, that her eyes
and her ears never could get used to it, no matter how long she lay in the darkness waiting for her senses to adjust.

In all her fond remembering with Cassie about the lake, she had somehow never mentioned the episode in the wax museum. Soon after they had gotten home from vacation that year, Martha’s mother was pregnant, and then in a flash, Cassie was born. It was like there never had been a time in which her little sister didn’t exist. They went back to Lake George every year. They ate ice cream, and they rented pedal boats and hunted for frogs in the yard and played cards at night around the dinner table. Martha didn’t think any more about what had happened that year at the wax museum until she was fourteen, when she answered the phone, and a police officer asked for her father, and she learned, moments later, that her mother had died.

They said that she likely didn’t die immediately. They said that she dangled, upside-down, from her seatbelt, seizing. She hung there like that until enough blood drained from the wound in her shoulder that she passed out. Maybe it took a few minutes, maybe more.

This thought would never get easier, the thought of all that blood, and her mother hanging there, waiting. It was possible for Martha to ignore it, to distract herself with soccer practice and bagged lunches and bedtime stories. But there was no coming to terms with the way her mother died, no matter how many years passed by. All alone, and with all that blood around her, a woman so squeamish she couldn’t bear to color the red bulb of Rudolph’s nose.
Martha turned over onto her side and looked out at the moonlit pines that drooped beyond her window. When you first arrived at the cabin, you could smell nothing but the overwhelming scent of fresh pine, but after you stayed a while, that smell faded away, and there were only mothballs and cedar chips and the musty odor of a rarely used bed.

Her phone buzzed on the nightstand, rattling loudly through the silence. The screen lit up the bedroom in a fluorescent glow, and Martha rolled over to pick it up. The bold white letters hurt Martha’s eyes. They spelled, “Sissy.”

“Hey, Cass.”

There was quiet on the line for a moment, and then Cassie said, “How are you?”

“I’m ok.”

Cassie sighed into the receiver.

“Is everything all right?” Martha said.

“I feel like an asshole,” Cassie said.

“Don’t. You had to work.” Martha reached up and took a sip of stale water from her glass. She looked into the master bathroom, the tile glowing blue from the nightlight in the socket above the sink. She imagined her mother’s polka-dotted bathing suit hanging there on the towel rack to dry. “It’s weird being here,” Martha said.

“Is it?”

“Yeah. I’m in a weird headspace.”
“That’s because you’re not drunk. If I were there, we’d be on our second bottle of wine by now.”

“Playing hearts at the table.”

“I’m sorry, Martha.”

“Cassie, stop. You couldn’t help it.”

There was quiet on the line.

Martha switched the phone to her other ear. “Hello?”

“Yeah, I’m here,” Cassie said. “I don’t know. I probably could have gotten out of work.”

“You don’t know?”

Cassie huffed again into the receiver. “I could have gotten out of work, all right? I didn’t want to.”

Martha sat up and turned on the light on the nightstand. “Ok.”

“Look, you’ve been talking about Lake George non-stop since we started planning this trip,” Cassie said. “It’s not a vacation for you. It’s something else.”

Martha didn’t know what to say. She had planned a vacation, but Cassie was right—this wasn’t a vacation at all. She wasn’t sure what this was, or what it would have been if Cassie had come.

“I don’t like talking about the lake,” Cassie said. “I mean, I don’t even really remember it.”

“What do you mean, you don’t remember it? We came here for years.”

“I was like six when we stopped going. I don’t remember the fudge, or the ice cream, or the toy stores. I remember little things, but not like you. I felt so weird
about going. I felt like an imposter. I know that sounds dumb.” She took a breath and let it out into the receiver. Then she took another breath and said, “Martha, I don’t remember Mom like you do.”

Martha bent her knees and pulled them up toward her chest. She felt a surge of quick anger, and then it fizzled, like rain, on the edges of her eyelids. Cassie had been so little then. Of course she didn’t remember. Martha wanted to hang up and go to sleep so that it could be morning and she could go back home, where nothing there reminded her of her mother.

“Are you there?” Cassie said.

“I’m here.”

“I should have come up there with you. It was selfish of me not to.”

“No,” Martha said. “It was selfish of me.”

“Martha.”

“I get it. I do.”

There was a sound in the room down the hall—Charlie was calling for her.

“Listen, Cass, I have to go. Charlie’s up.”

“We should plan another sissy-cation,” Cassie said. “For real this time, like an all-inclusive or something. A whole week.”

“I really have to go.”

“I love you, sissy.”

“I love you too. Don’t be stupid. You know that.”
Martha got out of bed and put on her bathrobe and slippers. She rushed down the hallway to Charlie’s bedroom, and he called out for her again just as she was arriving in his doorway.

He sat on the bottom bunk in the darkness, his legs hanging over the edge of the bed. “I had a bad dream,” he said.

She flipped on the light on the nightstand, and she could see in the warm yellow light that his cheeks were flushed and streaked with tears. She sat down on the bed beside him, and she wrapped the open flap of her robe around him and gathered him up into her arms. She leaned back against the headboard. He pressed his wet face into her chest, and she rubbed his back in slow, steady circles, until his jerky sobs subsided.

“What was it about?” Martha said softly. His hair was soft as rabbit down against her neck.

“Please don’t be mad,” he said.

“I could never be mad at you,” she said.

“It was the dentist,” he said. “I just hate the dentist.”

“I know,” she said. “Everybody hates the dentist.”

He lifted his head and looked up at her. His eyes were puffy, and the ball of his nose was red and running. There were so many nights she’d spent with Cassie just like this, when Cassie had climbed down into Martha’s bunk at home and snuggled up against her, needing to be talked down from a bad dream. It happened every night for almost a year after their mother died. And then at some point Cassie
stopped coming down in the middle of the night, and now it seemed like she didn’t need Martha at all. It was Martha who did the needing.

“But I really hate the dentist,” Charlie said. “In my dream, he pulled out all my teeth, and then he just left me there by myself, and all my teeth were gone, and no one would come and help me.”

“I came,” Martha said.

He picked up the strap of her blue flannel robe and wound it around his palm. He rested his head against her chest. “But you didn’t, in the dream. No one did.”

“Well it was only a dream, Charlie. I’m here now.”

The ringing in her ears had subsided, now that they were together. She let her eyes fall shut, and with his body warm against hers, gently rising and falling in rhythm with his breath, she felt a heaviness fall over her, a deep, tired swoon that settled her into softness of the comforter beneath them.

She felt Charlie’s breath deepen and his body start to twitch with a dream. He would forget lots of things about this trip to the lake. He’d forget the boy named Brian, and the licorice rope, and the Aqua Man doll. In time, he would even forget the dentist, like Martha did. But he would remember this trip—the smell of pine, and the stars, and the quiet. He would remember the wax museum, in some vague way, in shapes and textures. And maybe he would remember this moment, here, resting safely in the folds of his mother’s bathrobe. Martha would remember it, at least, and she would be here to remind him.
In the Glare of the Fallen Meteorite

At the funeral, the priest called it an Act of God. The news reporters said it was a scientific anomaly. Our family talked very little about what happened; we consumed ourselves with the arrangements, what kind of music to play at the service, whether to have pumpernickel or sourdough bread at the reception. My nephew Teddy was struck through the head and killed by a 1.73 pound, two-inch diameter meteorite on the first day of autumn in 1998, while he was scrubbing a casserole dish at the kitchen sink.

At the reception following his son’s funeral, my brother-in-law Ben stood at the kitchen counter swirling his gin in a gold-rimmed glass from an old set that he’d dug out of the basement for his guests. These were the first drinks he’d had in thirteen years. As he drank, he seemed to rumble from somewhere deep down inside, and we weren’t sure if he was clearing his throat, or grumbling to himself, or maybe even laughing. He said nothing, draining the liquor from the glass, churning gently from his big, sweating belly, like a washer that has been overfilled. Beside him, a
black plastic bag covered the window above the sink, and it ballooned and deflated rhythmically in the breeze.

When the rock had sliced through the roof and through Teddy's skull, he had fallen backwards and lost his grip on the casserole dish that he was washing, and it had flung up from his slippery hands and shattered the window. The bag was a temporary solution.

Other than taping the bag over the window, my sister Genie hadn't made much effort to clean the house for the reception after the funeral. She hadn't the time to repair the hole in her kitchen floor, so for now she'd covered it with one of the 12-inch orange traffic cones that Teddy had used for soccer practice.

The party preparations were minimal: we set up foldout tables in the living room for the food, kept the liquor in the kitchen. Everything in the house that reminded her of Teddy—the skateboard and sneakers beside the front door, the half-eaten pack of Big Red on the kitchen counter—remained untouched despite the guests crowding Genie’s ordinarily quiet home. Even the albums that played in the CD changer at the reception were left there from when Teddy had put them in—Blind Melon, Radiohead, REM.

I was in charge of fending off the news reporters. They pulled up in vans, set up cameras and lights, and filmed on the lawn in front of the house. They wore suits and thickly layered makeup, and they gestured toward the black singed hole in the roof. I thought Teddy might have thought it was cool, all that film equipment and real-life news reporters right there in his yard. I checked out the front window throughout the day to see if any crews had arrived, and when they did I went outside,
explained that I was Teddy's aunt, and asked politely if they would leave. Most of the reporters moved their equipment to the sidewalk across the street and resumed shooting. Now and then I’d shout “fuck off” from the window and hope it had ruined their take.

Halfway through the reception, as the day wore on and the vans arrived less frequently, Genie relieved me from my duty and sent me to the bakery for more sourdough sandwich rolls. I rolled the windows down and let the fresh air cycle through the car. On the radio, the newscaster covered Teddy’s service. I pushed a cassette into the deck and listened to Black Sabbath ten minutes to the bakery, ten minutes back.

When I returned, I tripped on Teddy’s sneakers in the doorway. An old man with a handlebar moustache prevented me from falling and held his arm out to keep the bag of rolls I was carrying from spilling to the floor. He instructed me to call him Uncle Bill. I’d never heard of him, but upon later investigation, I learned that he was Ben’s father’s cousin, twice removed. He told me that he was leaving, but if we needed anything at all, he lived in the yellow house on Main Street by Krauser’s. A dozen other semi-strangers offered the same useless courtesy that day.

When I brought the rolls into the kitchen, Genie was squirting herself a glass of wine from the box I’d brought for her, and she smiled at me in thanks.

She took a long swig from her glass as she passed her husband at the sink, and she went out the backdoor into the yard to send Teddy’s friends home. Five of them stood in a semi-circle in the yard, drinking the free booze, cupping a pipe in their
hands and passing it around, the pot smoke drifting indiscreetly out of the sides of their mouths.

I watched from the doorframe as Genie spoke to them, put her hands on one of the boy’s shoulders, a tall kid wearing a Led Zeppelin t-shirt. He tried to hug her, but she slipped out of it and patted him gingerly on his back and led him toward the gate. She seemed so calm, that whole day, her voice unwavering and deep, as though she were the undertaker who was consoling all of us.

The rest of the kids went to their cars and swerved down the road to continue their tribute to Teddy, or whatever else they had planned to do that Wednesday afternoon.

Then it was only the family, the cousins from Delaware eating salami sandwiches and pickles and any of three varieties of lasagna, macaroni and potato and fruit salads, potato chips (stale, now) and onion dip, deviled eggs, Milano cookies and mini donuts. In the morning, there would be bagels and lox, and more sourdough rolls for lunch, and the next day Genie and Ben would eat the leftover lasagna for dinner. In a week or two the last of the lasagna would spoil, the rolls would go stale, and they’d have to go to the store to buy something new.

I had worried that Genie might not eat that day. But she did, everyone did. Even Ben, who hadn’t had anything since the ham sandwich he’d been eating when Genie called to tell him what had happened to Teddy, ate a plateful of the Swedish meatballs I brought. They ate what they ate, and it was enough.
I pulled Saran Wrap over the extra food as the sun set in the yard, and I cleaned out the fridge to make room for the salads. I placed a new box of white zinfandel on the shelf beside the last of Teddy’s Gatorade.

Ben went to bed after the last of his cousins had left the party. Genie and I wandered around the house separately, stuffing empty cups and paper plates into garbage bags, blowing out candles, folding up TV trays and resetting the house back to normal.

At some point, Genie fell asleep on the couch in the living room. I abandoned the sink of dirty dishes and sat in the recliner beside her with a glass of wine. I turned on the TV and set the volume down low, and soon we were both asleep.

When I awoke, Genie was already up, shutting lights off in a daze. I wasn’t sure how long either of us had slept, ten minutes, an hour, halfway through the night. The streetlight glowed behind the curtains on the front window.

The house was so still we could hear Ben snoring in the bedroom.

I took a bowl of grapes out of the fridge and sat at the kitchen table. Genie sat down beside me and plucked a grape from the bunch. Foggy from sleep, she searched for something to say to me.

“Teddy and I had a deal,” she said. “Have I told you this?”

I shook my head no, though I’d heard it half a dozen times already.

“I found weed in his pocket when I was doing his laundry. Have I really not told you this? The deal was he washes the casserole dish, and I don’t tell Dad about the weed,” she said. “I still haven’t told him, you know. About the weed.”
I nodded, but she wasn’t looking at me; she was looking at the bag over the window, pulsing gently in the breeze.

“I mean, there really wasn’t that much of it. So I went upstairs, and Teddy was standing at the counter, eating the last of my tuna casserole, cold, out of the dish. I hate when he does that. I just hate it. Hated it.” She ate the grape she’d been warming in her palm.

“The last thing I said to him was ‘if this is the last I see of it, your father doesn’t have to know. Do the dishes and we’re even.’ And then I went back down in the basement. That’s the last thing I said to him. ‘Do the dishes and we’re even.’” She twisted another grape from the bunch.

“So I was folding the rest of the clothes, and I was so proud of myself for the first time in a long time, for doing everything right and having a son that was doing the dishes and a family that made sense.

“And then I heard the window break, and the thing came crashing through the kitchen floor and the cement exploded up around me. It came right through the floor, you know. It crash landed—literally crash landed. It was so loud, like the house had been struck by lightning.”

“Unbelievable,” I said, embarrassed by having nothing better to say.

“When I went to look at it, it was shimmering in the hole it had made in the cement. Shimmering like that rock you get in gift shops, the fool’s gold stuff, only more brilliant, you know? I looked at it for so long before I went upstairs.

“I wanted to show Teddy and I called for him. I thought he could make something out of it, or use it somehow.”
She rested her chin in her palm. “I guess this happens all the time. One of Teddy’s friends was telling me. These things hit the ground all over the world. I didn’t know that. I didn’t know that I had to protect him from this. This doesn’t make any sense. What the hell happened to Teddy?” She said this in such an ordinary, irritated way, that it sounded like she was asking why he’d missed dinner. As though he might walk through the door at any moment with a McDonald’s bag and a couple of buddies. I sort of expected it, too.

“But the rock in the basement. I didn’t even question it. I just looked at it there, in the light that was coming in through the basement window, and I thought, wow. Look at the universe. Right in my basement, how random, what a beautiful, glittering piece of the universe. I felt,” she shook her head and exhaled, “lucky. Lucky that it had missed me. Lucky that I had witnessed such an amazing thing.”

She sat back in her chair and gasped. “Oh, you think I’m so horrible. Calling this a lucky thing.” And then, for the first time that day, my sister rested her head into her arms and wept.

I told her no. She wasn’t horrible.

But she was done talking. She shut her eyes, and after a while, she fell asleep at the table. I put the grapes in the refrigerator and the glasses into the sink. When my sister startled awake, she stood abruptly and turned to me at the kitchen sink. She seemed disappointed— in me, in the bag over the window, in everything— and she turned to go upstairs.

All I could think to say was what kind of bagel could I get for her in the morning, any kind of bagel at all. I thought I should say something else, something
to make her feel better, some comforting thought to take to bed with her so she didn’t
go to sleep feeling whatever this feeling was. But I couldn’t find the words.