Who Are You With?

by

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Origin Stories

Their first months of ecstatic infatuation, Girl and Boy were the type of people to scorn that most standard of cocktail-party questions: what-do-you-do? Rather than answer straightforwardly, they’d poetically discuss their curiosities and visions. Human existence, they believed, was far too complex for the flattening language of economic occupation. To reduce it as such was so derivative, so clichéd. So American! When it later became clear how derivative, clichéd and perhaps American they were behaving, earnestly discussing the mysteries of life while sipping boxed chardonnay at noisy gallery openings and roof deck parties, they laughed at their younger, clumsy attempts at originality. By then they’d set their sights on a different question: how’d-you-two-meet? People—strangers even—noticed their glow and felt they had the right to know.

“Mets game,” Boy told Roommate after Girl first slept over. “They put us on the Kiss Cam, thought we were a couple. All Shea Stadium was watching. We couldn’t disappoint.”

“Earth Day,” Girl told Realtor after she and Boy decided separate apartments no longer made sense. “My sign said Save the Glaciers. His said Hug a Whale.”

How’d-you-two-meet became a game, a challenge, an exercise in imagination, a habit.

Boy, on the phone with Dad in Ohio: “St. Mary’s, first pew. She’s full of light and joy.”

Girl, talking to Mom in Miami, after describing the ring: “Pet store. He’s a bulldog guy.”
Boy, on their Italian honeymoon, to the ex-pats who pegged them for fellow Americans: “Nevada. I was hitchhiking, thumb aimed to heaven. She was an angel driving cross-country.”

Girl, to the Italians: “On the flight here from New York. He proposed during takeoff.”

Boy, to B&B Owner, during their five-year-anniversary weekend at the shore: “Iraq, third tour. I took a round to the butt. She was the field surgeon. We got to know each other real fast.”

Their boldness delighted them. Other times, usually after a heavy, regrettable meal, or a fight, they felt less creative: then they’d simply have met at the gym. Online. A bar. AA.

Girl, to Marriage Counselor: “A meditation retreat. No talking or eye contact between practitioners was allowed. But he slipped a note onto my mat—Meet me in Nirvana for a drink?”

Boy, to Son, at age five: “Your mother was a mermaid. I was the lucky guy on the beach when she came up for air. Look closely and you can still see ocean in her eyes.”

Girl, to Granddaughter, at age six: “We met at the sushi buffet on Noah’s Ark” (“Kidding,” Girl later amended to skeptical Granddaughter, “We’re old, but not that old”).

Oh, but then they are. And, as happens, the many strands of the past snarl and knot into a hopeless spaghetti bowl of memory. When Meals-on-Wheels Volunteer makes pleasant chitchat during his deliveries, asks how’d-you-two-meet, Boy and Girl can’t distinguish the real from the imagined. Boy recalls a noisy party, downing three
chardonnays for courage, approaching Girl. Girl recalls playful small-talk, then someone irritationally intruding, asking, of all things, what-do-you-do? Boy, she remembers, said he was developing an immortality potion because there was so much he wanted to experience in life. To which Boy recalls Girl saying, But we don’t die. We’re like butterflies, drifting in the wind from one flower to the next. So let’s refresh our drinks, gorgeous, and someday I’ll find you again. These things they remember.

But they also remember the Kiss Cam. And Boy recalls the hot Nevada sun, the ache of his thumb, the crunch of tires on roadside gravel. Girl remembers emerging from the sea, her long mermaid hair tangled with kelp and salt. She knows that fizzy gin-and-tonic Nirvana buzz.

Meals-on-Wheels Volunteer listens and smiles. He notices Boy and Girl holding hands beneath the table. “However it happened, you two love birds met. What else matters, am I right?”

Boy and Girl think he must be right. They feel lucky without knowing exactly why. Probably because Meals-on-Wheels Volunteer has the most wonderful smile, and his voice is so gentle. He washes their dishes sometimes, once took out the kitchen trash. Double-checks to make sure the refrigerator door is shut tight. The little gestures. Girl and Boy don’t forget.
Furloughed

Teddy was feeling good about the winter furlough. It came every year at this time, the moody, slushy limbo between the start and heart of the season. Teddy and the other fellas from the highway department had been sent home to rig their plows and wait for snow. Until the snow, there was nothing to do. No work, no responsibilities, no reason not to be awake at three o’clock in the morning, watching the live broadcast from Japan. Sprawled on the den couch, Teddy surrounded himself with the necessities: a cooler of High Life to the right, Cheez-Its and peanut M&Ms to the left. Sweet, savory, and sudsy, all equally accessible. And Shale, asleep at Teddy’s feet, recently walked and fed, her bowl topped off with fresh water; no disturbances there. With the exception of bathroom breaks, no need to get up at all. Perfect, because cheese-n-rice, could the cable networks milk an event or what?

Most of the hoopla leading up to the launch was pure-grade fluff, repeating cycles of commentary, analysis, and prediction. Not so different from the endless slog of nonsense before the Super Bowl kickoff. Now, for instance, a slew of aerospace engineers were employing glossy charts and digital simulations to prove how Hoseki’s diamond had no chance of escaping Earth’s gravitational hold. Then—flash!—a second slew of engineers, a second set of charts and simulations demonstrating how her diamond absolutely would. Back from commercial. Panel #1, bowtied art department chairmen ticking off the reasons why the stunt failed to qualify as capital-A art. Panel #2, V-necked, tattooed art gallery owners saying, no, no, no, Hoseki’s “so-called stunt” would be heart-wrenching Art in every possible way.

Was it art? Hard to know. Charlie—he would know.
Teddy dialed his son’s area code, then hung up. He drew a fresh High Life from the cooler. Three in the morning in Maine was also three in the morning in Massachusetts. Not that he was afraid of waking Charlie. Artists kept strange hours. Lydia used to paint whenever she felt the urge, said inspiration didn’t always strike when convenient. Charlie hadn’t necessarily inherited his mother’s nocturnal habits, but there was the chance that he was awake, maybe painting right now. Still, Teddy couldn’t bring himself to call. One scenario: Charlie, occupied before his easel, Teddy interrupting. Another scenario: no easel, Teddy still interrupting. Either way, Charlie might detect the High Life in Teddy’s voice. He might ask if something was wrong.

Back to the pre-game hoopla. By the time weather conditions at the launch site mellowed—countdown finally drawing near—Teddy had to admit that maybe the hoopla wasn’t complete pure-grade fluff after all. He’d actually learned a thing or two. He now knew the life story of Hoseki, the artist. Her name, in Japanese, meant jewel. Teddy understood, in a basic way, the carbon extraction-fusion process she’d employed to turn some ten thousand human cadavers into a diamond the size of a school bus. And this interesting fact: the bodies had all been donated, from around the world.

What if he’d donated Lydia? Cheeses, imagine! What if Lydia were right now, at this moment, part of that rocket’s sparkling nosecone, her twenty-five pounds of carbon (total carbon being a touch under 20% the mass of a human body, thank you very much pre-countdown hoopla) about to shoot into the sky to zip around the cosmos for eternity? No, donated wasn’t the right word. Folks had actually paid for the privilege of having their remains fused together with thousands of others and flung into space. To imagine donating Lydia, required also imagining a million Yen lying around, which—thanks
again, hoopla—was something like ten grand, or, about nine and a half more grands than Teddy had.

So much imagining, so many what-ifs!

The what-ifs tended to come late at night, High Lifes clinking like wind chimes in the melted ice of the cooler, nothing to wake up for in the morning. The fellas at the highway department grumbled about the unpaid winter furlough. Teddy didn’t like it either, but not because of the money. Stack a few cords of split wood in the shed, cram the pantry with essentials, wait for the plowing to pick up and fill the cracks—a little foresight and any idiot could make it till spring. The hard part was the lack of routine. The absence of structure. All those empty hours for the imagination and the what-ifs. Always difficult, even with Lydia for company. Without her, darn near impossible. What helped was making plans. Making plans and following them.

Teddy twisted the cap off a new High Life. The woodstove ticked and popped, warming the den. What to do tomorrow? He settled on the crop of odd, purplish crystals on the far side of John Brown Mountain. He and Shale had come across them last month. Tomorrow he’d grab his rock pick, go collect a sample. He’d take the round-about way, make sure Shale got herself a nice long trot. Heck, he’d make a day of it, bring along some biscuits, a thermos, some coffee and brandy. It was a good plan, the same good plan he’d made a dozen times the past few weeks. But tomorrow would be different. He patted Shale. Her tail thumped against the floorboards. This year, he and Shale were going to enjoy the winter furlough. They’d make plans and follow them, do nothing but what they wanted. Like staying up till three o’clock in the morning to watch the world’s largest diamond shoot into space.
Commercials faded out. The screen cut to mission control. A crowd of engineers and artists, neon cocktails in hand, counted down in sing-song peals of Japanese. Front and center stood Hoseki. Hard to believe she was in her mid-fifties, same age as Teddy. Her face showed half as many years. Maybe it was the lighting, or the flattering lenses of the cameras, or that her wrinkles went unnoticed with so much else to draw the eye: blue wig, pink eye shadow, brass-buttoned Victorian uniform with lapels and epaulettes. She looked like one of the Beatles in their Sergeant Pepper period, if one of the Beatles had been female and Japanese. Lydia, at that, would’ve made some Yoko Ono crack. Teddy chuckled to himself and reached for another High Life.

The counting-down crescendoed. Three-two-one grew into a roar of cheering, applause, hoisted cocktails. Hoseki threw back some phosphorescent elixir, brushed a blue curl from her eyes, winked, threw a kiss to the cameras, and, as if christening a battleship, smashed her empty glass against a wall and then pushed a large red button. The screen cut to the launch pad. The rocket rumbled, light burst from below, smoke swelled outward in thick, rolling plumes, and who the hell’d believe it, the darn thing actually lifted off.

The rocket soared, thrusters burning furiously. The diamond nosecone glittered in the setting Japanese sun. Teddy pictured Lydia as a facet of that winking ascension. Lydia, at the kitchen window with a paint brush, tracing the stuttered paths of raindrops running down the glass. Lydia, downy and warm beneath the quilt, her limbs pretzeled with his. Lydia, here on the couch, yanking the cork from a bottle of wine with her teeth, taking in the broadcast while mostly talking over it, telling Teddy between swigs that sending a piece of art into space where it’d last forever, impossible to buy or sell, was the
greatest work in all human history, Hoseki the purest folk artist to come around since the first gal to paint a horse on the wall of her cave.

Boy, that kind of thing used to annoy him. Lydia, talking over the television, making it impossible to hear. A little wine in her and suddenly she was the world’s expert on everything. Funny how the annoying things turned out being those he missed the most.

His eyes stung from staring at the screen too long. He twisted open a new High Life and blinked a few times as the glow of the rocket faded into the twilighting television sky.

* 

Teddy woke the next morning to Shale licking his bare feet. Daylight angled through the den windows. The television was still on, blaring. The volume hurt his head. He grabbed the remote, pressed mute.

Shale whined and licked his hand. She was hungry, anxious to go out. Despite getting along in years—her black coat graying around her snout and paws—Shale had hardly slowed down. She was inexhaustible, even for a lab. Teddy scratched between her ears. He was slouched deep in the couch. His back ached. His mouth was dry. He had to pee. He needed to get up. Shale needed him to get up. But he didn’t quite feel like getting up. He did and he didn’t.

This had been happening lately, this reluctance to get out of bed, or in this case, off the couch. Not exhaustion. Not laziness. More like a pressure on the chest that made the thought of doing anything other than falling back asleep so unappealing. Some fellas at the highway department had gone through the same thing as Teddy, lost someone in a similar way, which was all at once, no warning, and years too early. They told him to
hang in there, said things would change for the better. Teddy had hung in there. Four winters of hanging in there, and here came number five.

Sometimes what helped was counting down from ten.

Teddy counted, got to zero, didn’t move.

Sometimes more than one countdown was necessary. Charlie had needed many countdowns the summer he learned to dive. Nine years old, his toes curled over the edge of the dock on Flying Pond, his skinny arms raised above his head, palms pressed together as if in prayer, body goosebumped and shivering.

Did Charlie remember that summer? Maybe not. It would be nice to remind him. Plus, it’d be good to have something to break the monotony that their phone calls, for whatever reason, had taken.

Charlie took a while to pick up. He sounded as though he’d been sleeping. “What’s going on, Pop?”

Teddy blanked. The muted television replayed clips of the countdown, the blastoff, Hoseki’s rocket climbing into the sky. “Did you catch the launch?”

“No, it went too late. I couldn’t stay awake. But I saw the highlights this morning. Pretty wild stuff. What about you?”

“Sure did. Shale and me both. Caught it live. Doesn’t mean I understood it, though. What do you make of it, Charlie, as an artist—is it art or not?”

“I’m an art teacher, Pop, not an artist.”

Teddy glanced at Lydia’s colorful paintings. They covered the den walls and there were boxes more in the attic. “But you still paint, right? You make art, you’re an artist—isn’t that the way it works?”
“Sometimes.”

*There!* That flatness in Charlie’s voice. What had Teddy done to put him on edge? Was he no longer allowed to play the part of father, now that his son was nearly thirty? Couldn’t a grown man still be encouraged? When had all this become so delicate? “How far you figure the thing’s made it by now?” Teddy said. “Mars?”

There was a pause.

“I thought you watched the launch,” Charlie said.

“I did,” Teddy said. However, judging from Charlie’s tone, from the pause, from the agitated looks of the morning TV news personalities that Teddy hadn’t noticed until this moment, there was clearly something he should’ve known but didn’t. Perhaps, Teddy admitted, he and Shale may have briefly dozed off.

Charlie filled him in. The rocket, as many predicted, had been unable to escape Earth’s gravitational field. Instead, it was thrown into orbit and promptly smashed to pieces by space debris. They were still assessing the damage, charting the trajectory of the larger fragments, attempting to determine whether the diamond itself—believed to be unharmed—would remain in orbit or fall back to Earth.

That was part of it, Charlie explained. The other part was Hoseki, who now claimed to have planned for this very event. She’d never aimed to sling her diamond into deep space. Sending it into orbit was her goal all along.

Teddy unmuted the television. Hoseki was speaking into a bouquet of microphones. Layered over her voice, the English translation said something about the universe and mankind, the chorus of existence, completing the loop of artistic evolution.

“I don’t know, Charlie. What’s the point?”
“She’s a conceptual artist, Pop. I don’t think there is a point.”

Another long pause, then Teddy heard himself stupidly asking Charlie about work, which sent the conversation slipping back into its usual ruts. They were parallel ruts, the kind Teddy’s truck carved in the muddy back roads each spring. One rut was Teddy asking Charlie about his job, his condo, his guy friend, and so on. Charlie gave his pleasantly vague non-answers, then the conversation skipped over the grassy median strip of those things not said and settled into the other rut, which was Charlie asking Teddy about Shale, the house, plans for the furlough, his rock collection. All of this ended, merged into goodbye—okay, talkyoulater, ayep, realsoon. Too late, Teddy had forgotten why he’d called in the first place.

*

Shale wound through the trees and leapt over the stone walls, threading a here-and-there path of her own. She crossed the trail up ahead, stopping briefly to look back. “Right behind you, girl,” Teddy called out. It was early afternoon and they were hiking the Loop Trail, Lydia’s favorite. She’d never understood the point of returning the way she’d come: the best paths always circled back to where they started.

Teddy’s boots left prints in the dusting of snow that had fallen earlier that morning. The dusting was perfect, enough to see Shale if she wandered, enough to crisp the air and clear Teddy’s head. And, most important, not enough to stick to the roads. The forecast predicted heavy snow come evening, but for now Teddy and Shale were free.

He backtracked along one familiar-looking section, cut into a birch grove, and scanned the ground. The snow made it difficult to recognize exactly where they had come across the crystals last month. Oh well. They were finally out, rambling around John
Brown Mountain as planned. Stillness and silence draped the forest. The snow soaked up all sound. Remarkable. Walking with Shale in these sparkling woods instead of spending the day behind the wheel of his plow—Lydia would’ve declared it a victory worth celebrating twice. Teddy took a long drink from his thermos, brushed the snow off a stump, sat down, and took another.

Lydia had been incapable of leaving a victory uncelebrated. A snow day, for instance, no school for Charlie, the snow wet but not too wet, just right for sledding down John Brown: victory. Or say Hannaford’s had a special on ice cream sandwiches that didn’t exclude the redemption of a coupon she’d clipped that morning: another victory. Or life pre-Charlie, the summer Teddy and Lydia got lost up by Moosehead, the cool stream, their clothes heaped on the hood of the car: a big-time victory, celebrated once as the water rilled over their shoulders, and then once again, right afterwards.

A branch snapped. Teddy wiggled the chill from his toes. He hadn’t capped the thermos; the coffee and brandy were growing cold. He drank what remained, then heard something, a faint, faraway sound that floated through the trees. He tilted his head. There it was again: a yelp.

Teddy shot up from the stump and whistled, already moving in the direction of Shale’s barking. He’d lost track of the time. It wasn’t like her to be gone this long. Probably she’d come across something irresistible. Probably a deer carcass. Probably rolling in it right now, stinking to high heaven. But then, as Teddy ran through the woods, the deer carcass became an out-of-season hunter, a poacher’s trap, a bear rousted from hibernation. Teddy’s pace quickened. He stumbled over roots, swatted at branches. He coughed to loosen the tightness in his throat. “Here, girl!”
He crashed through the brush. Shale was at the edge of a clearing, sniffing the ground. Teddy knelt and ruffled her coat. He fed her a biscuit. She nuzzled his hand for another and licked his face and then he cried a little, which was funny, because Shale was fine. So why the waterworks? Pure relief, he supposed, which seemed like an odd reason to get all weepy, worked up over something that could’ve gone wrong but didn’t. And since Lydia—definitely something gone wrong—he’d kept that heaviness from spilling out. Getting teary-eyed now over nothing seemed pretty foolish indeed.

He fed Shale another biscuit. Then he noticed the clearing. It was the size of a swimming pool, and completely bare of snow, as if someone had built a large bonfire and let it burn down. Except there were no embers, no ashes. Very strange. Shale seemed to think so too. She loped around the perimeter, sniffing. She relieved herself, then kicked up the ground behind her, flinging scraps of snow into the clearing. Strange suddenly became stranger.

The snow, when it touched the ground, began to melt, slowly but steadily, like an ice cube in a mug of hot cocoa. Like the snowballs Charlie used to enjoy setting on the woodstove to disappear in one long hiss. Teddy peeled off a mitten and darted his hand into the clearing. The air was warm, slightly so. The ground, too. He sifted a handful of pine needles through his fingers. Shale looked at him and perked her ears. “Got me, girl,” Teddy said. Maybe it was a hydrothermal vent? Exciting, but unlikely. Not much tectonic activity in New England. Maybe Charlie would have an idea, or one of the old-timers down at the Variety Store. Teddy would call, ask around later. But then another idea came to mind: what if it was natural gas? Natural gas would not be exciting. If word got out—forget it—some Colorado fracking operation would come swooping in with their
bulldozers and drills to knock down the birches and pines, turn John Brown into a hunk of Swiss cheese, run the waterways the color of coffee. It was happening elsewhere, nearby as Pennsylvania; Teddy had read an article in *Field & Stream*. Probably better if he didn’t tell Charlie, didn’t tell anyone. He fed Shale the last of the biscuits and slapped her haunches. “Come on, girl, let’s forget this place.”

He set off, retracing his boot prints back to the Loop Trail, and not five minutes later walked straight into the clusters of crystals. He’d stepped right over them earlier, too worked up over Shale to notice. He chuckled, shook his head. A sign if he’d ever seen one, old John Brown Mountain telling him to calm the heck down and look where he was going.

He squatted over the crystals. There were a half-dozen, each about as large as a hearty loaf of bread. He dusted one with a mitten, clearing the thin film of snow. The crystal shone with the milky purple of the lavender soap Lydia used to buy at the farmers’ market. Teddy breathed deeply through his nose. Summoning Lydia’s scent wasn’t always so easy. The cold didn’t help. He tugged at the crystal. It was frozen in the ground. He chipped off a cigarette-sized sliver with his pick and dropped it into his pocket. He drew another deep breath through his nostrils, filling his lungs. The original plan of hiking the entire Loop Trail no longer seemed so appealing. He whistled for Shale. Better to hurry home the way they’d come, hunker down in the den, crack open a High Life, see what was on TV.

They headed back, bushwhacking through the woods in the general direction of the trail. The sky turned a dark gray. It began to snow. Thick flakes flecked Shale’s coat. Teddy, seeing that their tracks would be covered, reached out to snap a tree branch every
ten or so paces, an old woodman’s practice to mark the path. Next time he and Shale wanted to find the crystals, they wouldn’t have to rely on dumb luck alone.

*  

Teddy’s kitchen table showcased his rock collection. Rows of minerals and gems and their identifying index cards occupied the space where he, Lydia, and Charlie had shared countless pancake breakfasts, cold-cut lunches, and birthday dinners. The index card beside the sliver of lavender read: Tourmaline. Teddy had identified it with the help of his Audubon field guide. Tourmaline wasn’t abundant in central Maine, but neither was it terribly uncommon. Purple tourmaline, however, was rare, and in such bread-loaf quantities as Teddy had found, unfathomably rare. That rare did not mean valuable—especially not for milky, opaque tourmaline—was fine; the discovery was still exciting, and anyway, Teddy didn’t have the chance to be disappointed. As soon as he was ready to settle into the couch for the evening, the highway department supervisor called. The snow, after starting and stopping all afternoon, had finally made up its mind.

Plowing jobs were often just a couple of hours. Sometimes six or seven passes were all Teddy needed to clear his assigned stretch of Route 41. This storm was different. Twelve hours and the snow was still falling. Teddy lost count of the number of trips he and Shale made up and down 41, back and forth, the plow grating along the pavement, the snowflakes swirling hypnotically in the cones of his headlights, the talk radio host droning on about the governor. Impossible not to nod off now and again. The plow’s blade scraped against a snow bank; Shale whined from the passenger seat; Teddy snapped back to attention. He straightened the wheel, only to squint and lose himself again in the patterns of sifting snow. Mr. Peanut, wearing his top hat and monocle,
skipped alongside the truck. The exhaustion was incredible. It mixed up the mind. If Teddy wasn’t seeing things, he was muttering to himself. He explained to the talk radio host why the governor was a fool. He explained to Shale why she was such a good dog. He spoke to Lydia, promised he’d come home safely. Of course he would; he always came home safely. Hadn’t let her down so far, had he? He spoke to Charlie. They had a refreshingly pleasant conversation. Teddy asked Charlie what he wanted in life, and Charlie said he wanted Teddy to be happy. What a kid! Charlie asked about Shale. Shale was fine. Your mother? Your mother’s fine. Charlie? Me? I’m telling you, everything’s fine, fine, fine!

Teddy and Shale rode out the storm, keeping Route 41 passable. They arrived home the next morning after the snow had quit. Teddy opened the truck door at the top of the driveway. Shale leapt over his lap to the ground. She ran up the front steps and scratched at the door to the house, hungry. Teddy rested his forehead on the steering wheel and closed his eyes. He took a long, shaky breath. The truck cab smelled of diesel and dog and nothing else. He counted down from ten, dragged himself inside, shed his winter clothes in the mudroom, tossed Shale a biscuit, and collapsed on the couch.

* 

He awoke at dusk, his nostrils stinging from the cold. Shale was asleep on her bed. Her breath fogged the air. Teddy had to get the woodstove going. He would, after a little TV. A little TV, a High Life, then he’d attend to the stove. What if that was all he did from now on, same as last winter—TV and High Life? What if he didn’t even bother to stoke the stove this winter? Or answer the phone? Or leave the house?
Here they came again: the what-ifs. Time to make a plan. Time to count from ten and make a plan. He caught his reflection in the black square of the television screen and glanced away. One of Lydia’s largest paintings hung directly above the television. Teddy examined it for the thousandth time: blue sky, green fields, a farmer riding a tractor in the distance. The farmer was waving to the foreground where two women were buying vegetables at a farm stand. One woman held a bag overflowing with greens. She looked fatigued. The other woman seemed fresh and relaxed. A word bubble drifted from her mouth like a cloud of smoke: *Cut yourself some slack, baby. 100 years from now, all new people.* Teddy had always found the painting darkly cheerful, similar to the wooden placard (*Life’s short, eat dessert first!* that Lydia had fixed over the stove. This time around, however, Teddy saw no such cheer. The farmer waved from the horizon, but the women were positioned left no possibility of seeing him. The farmer was destined to go back and forth on his tractor, pass after pass. His gesture would never be returned. A little man, alone, riding the thin line splitting land and sky.

Teddy pawed around the cushions for the remote and turned on the news. More of Hoseki and her diamond. *Cheese-n-rice,* was nothing else happening in the world? He half-heartedly tuned in. The diamond, apparently, would not be plummeting back to Earth. Or rather, *they* would not be plummeting. Upon collision with a decommissioned Soviet satellite, diamond had become dia-monds, fracturing into four sedan-sized pieces. A meteorologist eagerly explained that, just as regular satellites could be seen on a clear night, Hoseki’s diamonds were also visible to the naked eye. Three were acting like typical satellites, arcing across the night sky. The fourth was not. By chance, its altered velocity following the collision so closely mimicked the speed of Earth’s rotation that it
appeared unmoving. Geostationary orbit, the meteorologist called it. Rather than arcing across the sky, that fourth chunk of diamond seemed more or less stuck, a point fixed in space and time.

Teddy turned off the television. He counted from ten and sat up. He counted again and swung his feet to the cold floorboards. One more set and he lifted himself to standing. A victory worth celebrating. He got a High Life from the fridge. He drank it, rinsed the bottle, and cracked another. He fixed some boxed macaroni and cheese, ate a few bites from the pot and washed it down with another High Life. Falling back asleep sounded good. Too bad he’d just slept twelve hours straight. He moaned out loud, something he couldn’t remember ever doing. Shale came padding into the kitchen to investigate. Teddy set the pot on the floor. Shale dug in, tail wagging. Teddy watched, wishing she’d keep eating and wagging her tail and never stop. Because as soon as she was finished, she’d look up and then things would have to go on. Today, tomorrow, all winter long. Just like last winter and the winters before.

The fellas at the highway department who said things would get better—were they full of it, or was Teddy simply not trying hard enough? Had to be one or the other. Unless he was trying too hard. The things that unsettled him, maybe he needed to quit giving them an audience. Like maybe he wasn’t supposed to mind so much that Lydia’s smell was escaping him. Maybe, instead of indulging, he could just note the fact and move on. Then another possibility crossed his mind: what if he didn’t want to move on? What if he was purposefully indulging in Lydia, hanging onto her because life had become too small to handle by himself? What if he actually enjoyed being sad in this way? What if, what if, what if.
Shale looked up, the pot licked clean. Another High Life was in order. Then steps could be taken toward formulating a plan to push aside the what-ifs and move on. Teddy stuck his head in the fridge. Two High Lifes were left. His shoulders sagged. A future with two High Lifes was impossible. Soon afterward, he’d have to manage with one, then none. He kicked the empty pot. He hadn’t meant to kick it—had maybe meant to just kind of nudge it—but there it went, careening into the cabinet below the sink. Shale scampered for cover. Teddy moaned again. He seized the edge of the kitchen table and sent his entire dumb rock collection clattering to the linoleum. It was such ridiculousness, such overreacting. He knew. But he couldn’t ignore the facts. The fact that only two bottles of High Life remained. The fact that he’d started collecting rocks just to keep busy. The fact that Shale’s coat was graying. The fact that he could no longer recall how his wife of thirty years had smelled. The fact that all these facts together led to one awful conclusion: Teddy, like that fourth chunk of Hoseki’s diamond, like that farmer on the horizon of Lydia’s painting, was stuck in time and space, alone, alone, alone.

No, not alone. There was brandy. Teddy dove into the pantry. Thank God, the bottle was three-quarters full. He celebrated with a healthy swallow, then grabbed the High Lifes, stepped through the rubble of rocks and gems, and sank into the couch in the den. He turned on the television and got to drinking. It was a good plan, one he vowed to follow until it sent him back to sleep. He polished off the High Lifes, transitioned to brandy, and had nearly finished half the bottle when the phone rang.

“Pop? You there?”

Oh, boy, how the heck was he going to get through this? The den spun, swirling Route 41 snowflakes caught in the headlights of his plow.
“You okay? Pop?”

He was okay. Just mellowing out after a long stretch on the job. Why was Charlie calling? Something wrong?

“Nothing wrong. Only making sure my old man’s all right. That was some nor’easter. What’d she hit you with? We got eight inches.”

Shucks, that was no nor’easter! Little sneeze of a snowstorm, over and done with before she got going. Hadn’t seen a real nor’easter in years. Remember those old blizzards, hunkering down, snow up to the gutters?

“Course I do,” Charlie said. “Sledding down John Brown, you, me, mom—”

Charlie knows about John Brown? Loaves a lavender popping outta the ground?

“What? Pop? You okay?”

Everything’s fine! Cheese-n-rice. Could everyone stop asking that for once?

“Why are you yelling? Turn down the TV. Are you drinking?”

Wasn’t Charlie’s job, worrying over his old man. Speaking of jobs, how was Charlie’s? His guy friend? His condo?

“Pop, cut it out. Turn off the TV. I can barely hear you.”

Lavender, Charlie, your mother’s lavender.

“What’s going on?”

Hard saying not knowing.

“Jesus, you’re drinking again, aren’t you?”

Charlie shouldn’t curse.

“Pop! Come on!”

What about lavender. Does Charlie know? The rarity of it?
“What are you talking about?”

Does Charlie remember the smell?

“Pop. You want me to drive up? I can leave on Friday. I’ll leave from work and drive up.”

Shale was begging to go out, Teddy explained, and hung up. He seized the bottle of brandy by the neck and shuffled into the mudroom. Shale, at the sight of him pulling on his coat and boots, leapt from her bed, ran over and scratched at the door. “Not tonight, girl,” Teddy said, and staggered outside. The snow was up to his knees. He tossed his head back for a pull of brandy and lost his balance. It felt just like falling backward onto the couch.

Teddy nestled his head in the snow. The galaxy spread out above. It was a moonless night. The nearest city, Augusta, was fifty miles away, and hardly even a city, so not a ray of ambient light blurred the space between his yard and the cloudy belt of the Milky Way. The television blared from the den, loudly enough to cut through the ringing of the telephone, the barking and clawing of Shale at the door. A commercial jingle faded, the news returned. Hoseki. Teddy heard her voice, imagined her at yet another press conference. Probably wearing some crazy new costume. Where did the woman come up with this stuff?

His eyes widened. He scanned the sky, skipping over the handle of the Big Dipper, Orion’s toes, finally settling on a single point of light brighter than any star or planet. Hoseki’s diamond. The fourth chunk stationary chunk. A pinprick in the ceiling of the night.
Charlie was a smart kid, but he didn’t know everything. Teddy saw now that there was a point to Hoseki’s stunt. You only needed to tilt your head back. That diamond up there was hewn from mankind. Didn’t matter who individually composed it. What claim could any one lump of a person still make from inside a fused mass of humanity? Everybody returned to carbon at the end of the day. Which meant that everyone was up there, hanging in the heavens. Everyone that had been, everyone that was, everyone still to be. All of them looped through that pinhole in the night, circling back to where they’d started.

Teddy blinked. He thought of the Loop Trail. The tourmaline. The strange clearing. He brought the brandy to his lips and drank. Warmth blossomed in his chest.

Then it hit him. It wasn’t natural gas. The warmth wasn’t coming from within the earth. It wasn’t coming from below, but above. Improbable, of course, what he was figuring—the angle would have to be perfect, everything lining up just so with the sun. And in Maine of all places? His own backyard? Improbable didn’t even begin to describe it. But so were the odds of stumbling across six loaves of purple tourmaline, not once, but twice. The news blared. Shale barked and clawed. The telephone rang. All noises receded into the background. Teddy was sure of it: Hoseki’s fourth diamond was acting as a giant magnifying glass, refracting the sun into one focused point on John Brown Mountain. A spot of warmth, made of everybody. Made of Lydia.

He staggered to his truck, rooted around the glove box for the flashlight, steeled himself with slug of brandy, and headed for the Loop Trail. Five big steps through the snow, he stopped. Shale was on her hind legs, yelping and clawing at the door, hysterical. Teddy couldn’t leave her, not like that. He went inside, pulled the giant bag of biscuits
down from on top of the fridge, and dumped the contents across the floor. Shale whimpered with joy and plowed into the pile, too content with the feast to notice when Teddy opened the front door and slipped outside.

*

Teddy slogged through the wet, heavy snow, following the bob of his flashlight from snapped tree branch to snapped tree branch. His makeshift trail markers served him well and soon he was back at the crystals, the loaves of tourmaline hard beneath his boots. He took a long pull from the brandy and stuck the bottle in the crook of a tree to save for later. He squinted into the dark woods and worked to catch his breath, then bullied ahead through the brush and snow, swinging the beam of his flashlight in wild arcs across the trees.

He scrambled over stone walls and fallen branches and shallow gullies. His boots filled with snow. He lost a mitten. He took off his hat. The air was getting warmer. The clearing had to be nearby. But it wasn’t. Of course it wasn’t. There was no clearing, never had been. An opening in the woods, perhaps. Some strong winter sunshine. That was all. He’d imagined the rest, filled in the holes, believed what he wanted.

Then why couldn’t he turn around? Why, instead, was he planning to cover the slope again, then the south-facing slope, then all of John Brown Mountain, until he found it? Because making plans was important. Making plans and following them.

On he went, until he tripped and fell. His flashlight blinked out. He stood and hit it against his leg. Light flickered on. Something glinted in the V of a tree. The brandy. He’d been walking in circles, and had stumbled into the crystals yet again.
He drained all but a swig from the bottle, wedged it back in the crook of the tree, and then a wave of exhaustion hit him. So much tromping around. Suddenly he was tired and hot and sick to his stomach. Sweat ran from his armpits, down his back. He shimmied out of his coat. He needed to stretch out, just for a minute.

He lay down in the trampled snow, using a loaf of tourmaline as a pillow. A breeze trembled the pine boughs overhead, parting them like curtains to reveal brief glimpses of night. Clusters of stars appeared, vanished. He searched for Hoseki’s diamond. He couldn’t find it, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t there. His eyes stung as though he’d been watching too much TV, stung so much they began to water and tear. Hot tears spilled down his cheeks, five years finally forcing their way. He shivered with warmth and brandy and Lydia. Very much with Lydia. The breeze carried the faintest trace of lavender, as though she were near. He took quick, ragged gulps of cold air. The hair on his arms stood on end. He became warmer, stopped shivering, didn’t feel so sick in the stomach, slipped in and out of sleep. He spoke to Lydia, apologizing for his sluggish words, for staying out so long, for failing to find her. He told her he’d be home soon, and wondered if there was something, anything, he could’ve done differently. Lydia said he ought to cut himself some slack. One hundred years from now, she started to say, but then Shale cut in, interrupting.

Her barking grew louder and she came crashing through the brush. She leapt onto Teddy and lapped his cheeks and spun circles around him, her tail lashing his face. She whined and burrowed her snout beneath his arm. Teddy coughed and sobbed and rubbed a numb hand across the scruff of her neck. Had he left the door open? Either that or she’d broken through a window. Whichever way, she’d found him, and Teddy knew she
wouldn’t go back alone, no matter how cold she got. He patted her side. Her belly was round and swollen with biscuits. “Aw, girl,” he tried to say, his voice cracking. One hundred years from now everything would be different, but until then, there were some things that still needed attention. Some things still mattered. Like Shale. And Charlie. And Teddy. Teddy mattered, too.

He knew what had to come next. He had to count to ten and get to his knees. He had to stand, pull on his coat and hat, leave the brandy where it was in the crook of the tree, and feel his way into his old footprints. By landing new tracks within old, he and Shale could spare themselves the trouble of forging a second path through the deep snow. It would be easier to get home this way, and a fast, easy route home was paramount. He had to hightail it back, get the woodstove roaring, make sure Shale was warm. Then he had to call Charlie. And Charlie had to be awake. Just had to be, because, cheese-n-rice, there was so much to say.
Unwinding

Hickory and Joey Bags twitched in their lawn chairs, coming back to life. They’d been zonked on Canadian Ghost for twenty, thirty minutes, long enough that I was starting to get nervous. Nervous and impatient.

We were sitting behind Hickory’s trailer with our feet in the kiddie pool. The beer was running low and glimpses of morning sun flashed through the trees. It was early, but I could already feel the air warming, the beginning of another brutal July day. One full cord of seasoned, split wood behind Teddy Whitfield’s place needed moving. The sooner Hickory woke up to lend me his truck, the better. One cord meant an easy few hundred bucks this time of year, the tourists needing logs for their campfires. It wouldn’t be enough to replace my mother’s Chrysler, but it wouldn’t be nothing, either. At least she’d know I was trying. This was back when I’d recently understood the full extent of her disappointment. I suppose you could say I was eager to set things straight. I kicked Hickory’s chair.

He twitched again, finally opened his eyes. “Brinly?” His voice cracked.

“You got it,” I said. “Still here.”

He scratched his beard and squinted, as though we hadn’t seen each other in years. Joey Bags was still out, trembling like a sleeping dog.

Canadian Ghost, this new synthetic, was supposed to do some trippy, neural coupling thing, meaning whoever smoked from the same batch would pick up on one other’s thoughts. “Minor-league telepathy,” Joey Bags called it. He’d brought it back from his monthly run across the border to Quebec. I was skeptical, but curious. Joey Bags
had a way of getting his hands on some seriously weird shit. But he and Hickory wouldn’t share. They were still sore at me for using up all the month’s minutes and text messages. The three of us had gone in on a family plan to save money. “And we did save money,” I pointed out, but they didn’t care, because now our phones were useless till August. So they smoked the Ghost without me to get even. It only seemed to zonk them out, but still, it would’ve been fun.

Hickory rubbed his eyes. “What are you doing here, Brinly? What do you want?”

I fished the last beer from the kiddie pool. It was obvious we were starting over at square one. “I’d like to borrow your truck, Hick.” I spoke with great patience, as I had earlier, after walking across town from my mother’s to find Hickory and Joey Bags by the kiddie pool. They’d been hanging out all night, drinking, playing music, hadn’t slept, had meant to call me—had wanted to call me—but, “well—” Hickory had made a phone out of his thumb and pinky finger, held it to his face and shrugged.

“So Brinly wants my truck.” Hickory was savoring the words. “What for?”

“Chores.”

“What kinda chores?”

“Yeah, what kinda chores?” Joey Bags said, springing up, all at once awake. He brushed back his dreadlocks and smoothed his T-shirt and crossed his legs at the knee. A flip-flop dangled from his big toe.

“Kind of chores that need doing,” I said. “Trust me, Hick. I’ll bring your truck back with a full tank.”

He and Joey Bags shared a look. I didn’t need any neural coupling crap to know what they were thinking. The three of us went way back.
I snapped the tab off my beer, flicked it into the kiddie pool. “Man, can I use your truck or not?”

Hickory sloshed out of the water and stood, wobbling a moment to find his bearings. “Not. I can’t be late for work. It’s my first day.” He crossed the backyard to his trailer. The screen door slammed shut.

I watched Joey Bags roll a cigarette and stick it behind his ear. Then it hit me, what Hickory had said. “Hick got a job? How’d he convince someone to hire him?”

Joey Bags tilted his face to the sky. The sun had just broken the tree line. He chewed thoughtfully on one of his dreads. “How does anyone?”

Hickory stepped back outside wearing khaki shorts, a brown Dunkin’ Donuts T-shirt and an orange ball cap. His socks matched, his shoes were tied. I hardly recognized him. Pills, powders, you name it, in the years since high school Hickory had taken on so many demons that I couldn’t always recall what he’d been like before. How he’d looked when we were kids, for instance, flipping over driftwood logs to hunt for crabs. All of us had caused trouble for our families, but Hickory had torn his to pieces. They were just waiting for him to get arrested for real and find some help. His little sister Annie blamed us. Annie was the worst. Joey Bags and I had run into her the week before, outside the Variety Store. We were having a smoke, keeping an eye out for teenagers who’d pay us to buy them beer, when she pulled up in her Dodge. She told us to do everyone a favor and jump off a bridge, drown ourselves in the Penobscot. She said that my brother Kayton would’ve been ashamed. “Pathetic,” she said, “five years out of high school and you’re still acting like the world forgot it owes you something.” That really stuck with
me. I remember thinking it was such a perfect description of Joey Bags. Later I recognized that she was talking to me.

Hickory slapped the hood of his truck. “Let’s go, I’ll drive you guys—”

Joey Bags was already up and out of his chair, saying great, he had some business to attend to. He peeled off his T-shirt, dunked it in the kiddie pool, wrapped it around his head like a turban, and hopped into Hickory’s truck.

I waved them off. “I’ll kick it poolside.”

I needed time to chew things over, reconfigure my plan to get at Whitfield’s woodpile, and without getting caught. The last thing I wanted was another run-around with the police. I’d been through that rigmarole too many times, always for harmless, petty stuff—trespassing, disorderly, open container, possession, operating an unregistered vehicle without a license—but believe me, the harmless, petty stuff starts adding up. A little bad luck, too many wrong places at too many wrong times, and one day you’re suddenly a guy with a record. My last run-around (“disturbing the peace,” or, put differently, “singing enthusiastically downtown after the bars closed”) got me three months probation and twenty hours community service. I was fine with that—any number of hours in an orange vest picking up cans on the side of Route 2 was better than jail—but then the judge started in on my mother, who was sitting in the back of the courtroom, lecturing her to stop enabling me and so on. I couldn’t not stick up for her, just like I knew Kayton would’ve. The only difference was that Kayton would’ve known how to go about it diplomatically, without earning himself an extra month probation and another ten hours walking the side of Route 2. It was a bad scene, one that didn’t need repeating.
“Suit yourself,” Hickory said, and locked his front door. He and Joey Bags drove off. The throb of the truck's engine spiked as it turned onto the North Road, then faded.

I checked the back door out of curiosity. Windows too. Hickory had locked his trailer up tight. I rummaged around the bushes for the beers I’d stashed while he and Joey Bags were zonked. The cans were sweating, still cool. I chugged one to lighten my load, tossed the empty in the kiddie pool, grabbed the rest and headed for the tracks.

*

The North Road was best avoided in the summer, especially when traveling by foot. It was the most direct route from Hickory’s to town, but it hugged the coast. There was the traffic to consider, all the tourists fighting for parking spots by the beaches, the exhaust, the hot pavement, the cops. I preferred the tracks. They curved through the woods where it was quiet, just my footsteps on the loose gravel, the dry whine of the cicadas. Tall birches and pines lined the embankment, good for morning and afternoon shade. If something needed to be thought over, the tracks were a better place than most. I’d walked them plenty. Deer and wild turkeys sometimes did too. A few times I’d come across a moose. Once, a black bear, and although you’re supposed to clap and yell to scare black bears off, this was the spring after Kayton got rammed by the drunk driver, when I’d developed a particular devotion to doing the opposite of what I was supposed to. Also, I’d never heard of a bear sighting so close to the coast. Maybe a hundred years ago, but not anymore with all the new development, so I guess I wanted to appreciate the weirdness of the moment. I just stared that black bear in the eyes and he went on staring right back. I didn’t know if he was sick or bored or lost or what. For all I knew he was wondering the same about me.
I downed Hickory’s beers one after another as I went, walking between the rails, landing my steps on the wooden ties. I knew I should’ve been saving the empties to redeem at the Variety Store, and I hated to litter, but the urge to bend the cans like horseshoes over the rails was too great. Ever since we were kids, the itch to leave stuff on the tracks to be flattened and smashed and cut in two by the trains was one that needed scratching. Pennies, bottle caps, fluorescent tube lights. Joey Bags, when we were in middle school, left a dead skunk. Tracks reeked for days.

I stopped to pee, marking a railroad tie with my initials. Up ahead the tracks cut sharply to the right. They would straighten out for a stretch after that, curve left, cross a tidal creek, then arrive in town. I knew the route well. What I didn’t know was how to move two cords of wood without Hickory’s truck. My chest tightened a little at the thought of losing out on what I’d assumed to be easy money. I knew that feeling and didn’t like it. Unchecked, it would either make me give up completely or do something stupid. If I wanted to pay my mother back and keep things from becoming worse than they already were, I had to keep a level head. But I didn’t have forever. Last time I’d scoped out Whitfield’s, there was a realty sign at the foot of the driveway. I yanked it out of the ground and chucked it into the woods, but it was only a temporary solution. Whitfield’s was a pretty piece of property; any day now it would be crawling with tourists looking for a summer home.

I zipped my fly, stretched and yawned. I hadn’t slept well the night before. Angus, my mother’s new boyfriend, had locked me out of the house again. I’d slept on the porch. Mosquitoes were awful. Angus told me to come back once I could reimburse my mother in full (he believed these kinds of phrases made him sound sophisticated: *reimburse in*
Angus didn’t like me. I wasn’t a big fan of his either. I could tolerate Joey Bags and Hickory busting my balls, but Angus was doing one worse: trying to convince my mother to cut me off. Of course I was going to replace her car. Whitfield’s woodpile was my big first step. I just needed to close my eyes. A little rest, then I’d be able to think straight.

I scrambled up the embankment, found a flat rock overlooking the tracks, and stretched out. The sun was more or less overhead when I woke up to the smell of cigarette smoke.

I thought at first that I’d been dreaming, my mind playing nicotine tricks—I’d recently quit to save money—but then I heard the clatter of footsteps on railroad gravel. I crawled to the lip of the rock. There, walking the tracks, was Russell Kenney.

Russell Kenney, last I’d heard of him, had enlisted right out of high school. He’d bulked up in the years since, exchanged ten or twenty pounds of baby fat for muscles that looked like sharp cuts of beef. He wore a gray T-shirt tucked into fatigues, and big shit-kicking boots. His head was shaved down to a fuzz. He’d been Kayton’s year, a freshman was I was a senior. We crossed paths between classes, but never had reason to be much closer than that. When I thought of Russell, I remembered a quiet, friendly kid. Maybe that was why I felt so unusually happy to see him again.

I got ready to jump down and shout hello, but right then he stopped, took a long drag from his cigarette, and exhaled in one loud sigh, almost like a moan. The sound was unnatural, and made me pause. I watched him stare off into the woods intently, as if he’d heard an animal. But of course there was no animal, nothing but trees and more trees.

The only thing more embarrassing than witnessing another guy having a moment like that to himself is to let it go on and risk getting caught in the act. So I let out a loud
Tarzan yell, beat my chest and leapt down to the gravel. Russell responded by dropping his cigarette and pulling a gun from his waistband. It was a revolver, polished chrome, handsome but absurdly big, like something out of a Western.

“Russ, chill. It’s me, Brinly!”

“Hands!”

I raised my hands, thinking for a moment that I’d made a mistake, that this wasn’t Russell Kenney. His voice was deeper than I recalled. But then something relaxed in him.

“Brinly? Brinly Croy?” He tilted the gun and flicked his wrist, popping out the cylinder. A fat brass round fell into his palm. He pocketed the round, spun the cylinder, and flicked his wrist again, neatly snapping the cylinder back into place. The revolver went under his belt at the small of his back. Then he bent to pluck his cigarette from the gravel, and strode over, smiling warmly, hand extended. For all he’d changed, Russell Kenney was just as friendly as I’d remembered.

* 

We sat on a rail, catching up, Russell’s pack of cigarettes between us. I’d smoked one and my hands were still trembling so I helped myself to a second. I asked how the Army had been treating him and he told me he wasn’t in the Army but the Air Force Reserves. He’d shipped out to Afghanistan. Three tours. He’d been spending his R&R overseas. He told me about traveling Germany, seeing the sites. This was his first time home in years.

"Back to back tours?" I asked.

"Back to back to back. Gearing up for a fourth."
“Why would you keep signing up for a thing like that?” I really did want to know.

“Good money?”

“Not especially.”

“But not bad money.”

He coughed into his hand. “Sure. Better than no money.”

I lit another cigarette, watched the smoke spiral into the sky. "Get shot at much?"

He cracked his knuckles. "Some."

“Any folks die?”

“Course folks died. It’s war.”

“I thought the war was done with.”

“You’re thinking Iraq.”

“Did we win that one?”

He tossed a chunk of railroad gravel in the air and tried to peg it with a second chunk. It went wide. “You sure ask a hell of a lot of questions, Brinly. You writing a book?”

I laughed him off like I would Hickory or Joey Bags. We talked some more. Once it felt as though we’d caught up, I asked if he had a truck I could borrow.

"Used to. My brother sold it.” He ashed his cigarette on the rail with a delicacy I found myself imitating. Then, making conversation, I suppose, he asked about my brother.

“How’s Kayton?”

I looked at him out of the corner of my eye. He honestly had no idea. I couldn’t blame him for not knowing; bad things happen all the time. “Up at UMO,” I said, which
would’ve been the truth. “Forest ecology. Graduates next year.” Russell nodded, as though he’d expected no less. Kayton’d had that way about him. Full of promise. You didn’t feel shy assuming he’d do big things; you could say so and know he wouldn’t let you down.

Russell and I sat and smoked. I asked if I could shoot his gun. He ignored me, or pretended not to hear. He threw some more gravel in the air.

"I’ll tell you, Brinly, I did some shooting, but mostly it was runway construction. Construction, demolition. Learned my way around all kinds of explosives. Moved some wicked earth. All said and done, boredom’s likelier to kill you overseas than bad guys. I spent more time with a pick-ax in my hands than anything."

He displayed his palms, calloused and rough. Angus was always doing this, showing off his hands, comparing them to mine. He made being a logger sound as if he were Paul Bunyan, taming the Maine wilderness with nothing but a handsaw and an axe, when in fact all he did was sit on his ass in the air-conditioned cab of a diesel-powered John Deere skidder. Same as how he’d set a bucket of donuts in the woods for bait, climb into a tree blind with his AR-15, and call it hunting. Kayton would’ve had plenty to say about Angus.

"What about you, Brinly?” Russell asked. “What’ve you been up to?"

I sucked up a long string of spit that I’d been dangling between my knees. "Aw, man, come on." But then I realized he was asking sincerely, as if I actually had something to tell him. So I crushed out my cigarette and said, “Got engaged last spring to a girl from Augusta,” starting with something believable, then adding, for flourish, “Augusta by way of Virginia.”
"Southern girl." Russell grunted, as though he couldn't agree more.

"That's right. Sweet as a pea." I was on a roll. "We'll probably stay in Waldo County so I can keep on with the fire department. Did I mention I was doing that, volunteering? And coaching Little League, too. Plus I’m—"

Russell cut me off. "What’s your record?"

“My record?”

“Your team. What’s your record?”

I whipped a chunk of gravel sidearm into the woods. “Honestly, Russ, we’re in the middle of a pretty big losing streak. But I tell them, ‘Fellas, don’t get so down on yourselves, there’s always the next game.’ And you know what?—those kids have heart.”

“That’s great,” Russell said. “Really, Brinly, it’s really, really great.”

His third really came off a little overly-enthusiastic. I couldn’t tell if he actually believed me or if he just wanted to, out of pity. I tried to appreciate it either way; it felt nice to let my mind wander. But at the same time, it didn’t seem right that such an ordinary, pleasant life of mine should require an act of pure imagination. I felt the kick of my mother’s disappointment again. My chest tightened and in that moment I had the terrible thought that if I didn’t set things straight with her, nothing good would ever come to me.

Russell asked me something else but I flipped it back on him. I no longer wanted to talk about my life, real or imagined. "I'm thankful guys like you are out there, Russ. Stick around next time you make it home, OK?" I slapped him hard on the back.
He winced, dug into his pocket, and held up a pill bottle. The sunshine through the orange plastic reminded me of light through stained-glass. He shook out two fat white Pez pieces. Percocet, at a glance.

There’d been a period after Kayton in which I became friendly with Percocet and its many relatives. I’d made a clean break, at least from the worst of it (unlike Hickory and Joey Bags, who’d never even attempted; and in fact, with those two constantly gobbling down everything in site, I’d always believed I deserved more credit for my self-control). But the way things were going today, that awful tightness in my chest, I granted myself a one-time exemption.

"Allergies?" I asked.

Russell tossed one into his mouth, swallowed. "Percocet."

"Percocet-what?"

"Percocet. Pain meds." He massaged the back of his neck. "Backhoe shovel knocked me ass over teakettle."

I rubbed my knee. "Don’t I know it. Foul ball. Clipped me at batting practice last week. Couldn't walk for days. Doc wrote me a prescription. Which of course I lost.‖ I laughed for effect.

Russell dropped a pill into my hand.

"Per-co-cet.‖ I tested the word, casually inspecting the tablet while my heart wept and cursed with joy.

That old buttery warmth bloomed forth. Russell and I sat on the tracks, staring into the woods, smoking and yakking. Kayton and I used to do the same thing, discuss whatever randomness popped into our heads. Russell didn’t have half as much to say as
Kayton, but he was willing to hear me out and chime in, which was more than I could expect from Hickory or Joey Bags. I wondered out loud whether mosquitoes ever die of old age, mosquitoes who avoid getting swatted, or trapped in spider webs, or starved from lack of blood, mosquitoes who simply live out their little mosquito lives happily from beginning to end. Russell figured at least half of all mosquitoes probably did, on account of there being so many. He used his thumbnail to crack another Percocet in two for us to split. We had another cigarette each, and then I got onto the subject of patron saints. Don’t ask me why, but it suddenly struck me as curious that there exist patron saints for musicians and waitresses, ice skaters and undertakers, lumberjacks and forest rangers, for practically everything under the sun yet not a patron saint of the patron saints themselves. Who were they supposed to pray to? Who the hell was looking after them?

Russell scratched his chin. “Maybe there is someone, only she doesn’t go around advertising herself.”

“What makes you so sure it’s a she?”

Russell looked at me like I was an idiot.

We might’ve happily gone back and forth like that all day, but then came a whistle through the trees. The rails hummed beneath us.

“Incoming,” I said. Russell didn’t budge. He closed his eyes, crossed his legs at the ankles, and shifted his weight, as if settling into a La-Z-Boy. I laughed and nudged him. It was like trying to move a pallet of shingles. The sounds of the train were growing louder.

“Russ,” I said, a little wildly, “quit messing around!” I kicked his boots, hard. That brought him back. He heaved himself to his feet and we scrambled down the
embankment. Another whistle, then the train bombed around the bend and thundered by, a blur of rust and steel. I could’ve watched it forever. Russell bent to collect a handful of gravel, and clanged the chunks off the passing cars.

The train left behind a heavy mass of empty space and silence that gave me the fidgety feeling of wearing a suit in church: hot and stuffy, a little irritable and not sure why. I glared at Russell. He’d sidetracked my entire morning. How many lost hours had I wasted with him? I could hear Angus, lecturing me on all the skills and trades I could’ve picked up since high school and had not. Angus treated life like one big never-ending project: either you were improving yourself, working toward a goal, or you were a waste of space. I decided then to get Russell drunk and hit him up for a loan.

“Let’s go, Russ.” I started off toward town.

I’d been so fixated on Whitfield’s woodpile that I’d overlooked the obvious solution sitting next to me this whole time. If Russell had been gone too long to hear about Kayton, he wouldn’t know any better when it came to me.

He fell into step behind me, no questions asked. I took it as a good sign; he was hungry for orders.

*

The sharp scent of creosote, the clack of our boots on the gravel, the rill of the tidal creek beneath the railroad trestle. The walk was pleasant, but increasingly slow-going. Russell’s spasming back required attention from his pill bottle, and then my bum knee would need additional assistance as well. The sun was ruthless, forcing us into the shade of the woods every so often where we had to smoke to keep away the mosquitoes.
One of these breaks, Russell insisted I take his last cigarette. With reluctance, I did. Between the cigarettes and pills, Russell’s generosity was killing me. I nearly reconsidered involving him in my financial troubles, and honestly might have, if not for the looping memory of the night I banged up my mother’s Chrysler.

I’d expected her to be happy: happy I wasn’t hurt, happy I’d been sober enough to know to refuse the breathalyzer, happy I’d avoided jail. And maybe her being quiet was a kind of relieved happiness, but I didn’t see it like that, not at the time. “Look on the bright side, Ma,” I said, “you’ve still got one son.” Her eyes watered and she asked Angus to stay the night.

I apologized straight away. It’d been a dumb, drunk thing for me to say. I promised to buy her a new car (a new used car), to which she replied, in a wanting-badly-to-believe-but-didn’t voice, “That’s sweet of you, Brinly.”

But I was serious. I had a plan: I’d call every relative, even my father’s side, and explain that my mother’s car had totaled and without wheels she couldn’t make her shift at the Dinner Horn. The problem was that my mother, almost a year earlier, before I’d pulled myself out from the cruelest of my dependencies, had called to warn the relatives against sending me money.

Angus could go on all he wanted about how I needed to cut my hair and shave and quit polluting my body and get a job. This thing with my relatives, on the other hand, really shook me up. My mother had seen something in me, and long before I crashed her car.

I’d heard her say, on more than one occasion, that she’d invite the devil to dinner before ever again talking to my father’s side of the family. But that night, as I burned
through all our family-plan minutes for the month July, and then all our texts, I found out she’d called every cousin, aunt, and uncle. Even my father. She’d even called him.

*  

I made my pitch when we reached the Route 41 crossing. “Estimating by the position of the sun, Russ, I’d say JP’s is open for business.” I leaned an elbow on his shoulder. “Thirsty?”

"If you’re buying I am."

“Wish I could. I’m broke.”

“Same here.”

I didn’t believe it. "Three tours for Uncle Sam and you come home with empty pockets?"

"Came home with plenty in my pockets. Then I spent it."

He untucked his T-shirt to hide his fancy revolver. A gun like that couldn’t be cheap, I knew, but still. "No way. Impossible. I thought you just got back last week."

“That’s right. I’ve been unwinding.”

I stood deflated at the sandy shoulder of the road and leered into the glint of the cars zipping by, the tourists up from Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York, Connecticut. They trawled our coast every summer, hopping from antique shop to saltwater taffy store to clam shack, searching for whatever it was our little town could give them that their ordinary lives could not. I caught the glimmer of their BMW whites and Escalade blacks, and I could practically catch the scent of money as it passed me by. Whitfield’s woodpile, on the other hand, wasn’t going anywhere. I saw it sitting behind
the garage, waiting to be carted away. I kneaded Russell’s shoulders. "You’re a strong
SOB, aren’t you?"

Russell stared ahead. The seagrass played against the cuffs of his fatigues. A car
drove by, tires hissing on the pavement.

“Russ, you OK?”

He turned slowly, his eyes glassy. I remembered the feeling, fresh to the world of
opiates, everything peaceful cobweb and fog. "Right,” he said. “I suppose I am.”

*

A parked car sat at the top of Whitfield’s driveway. We hung back in the woods,
slaughtering mosquitoes, waiting for whoever was inside the house to leave. Russell was
confused. He insisted I explain again what we were doing.

“It’s simple. We sell the wood to Ernie at the Variety Store, then we split the
profits, fifty-fifty, minus my finder’s fee.”

“What about Whitfield? What’s he want?”

“Whitfield doesn’t want anything. He’s dead.”

Russell looked at me, unblinking. He slapped a mosquito on his neck. “But how—
"

“Seriously, Russ? I don’t know, Whitfield owed me, OK? He said I could have
the wood if he kicked the bucket before he paid me back. It's all in the will. How’s that?
He’s dead, so what’s it matter? It’s not like we’re hurting anybody."

Russell glanced at the house, then back at me. He couldn’t let it go. “If it’s in the
will, why are we hiding?”

“Now who’s writing a book?”
A woman appeared in Whitfield's doorway. We grew quiet. She stepped outside, looked back at the house, scribbled some notes on a clipboard. An appraiser or a realtor. When she drove away we got to work.

The wheelbarrow was still in the garage. I'd made note of it during my previous visit, after coming across Whitfield's obituary in the *Bangor Daily News*. I told Russell to wheel it around back. I checked the front door, the back door, the basement bulkhead, the windows. All locked. It would've been a simple break-in, but that was one line I was glad not to have to cross, the home of a dead man. Plus, I'd already peered through the windows, done an appraisal of my own. Not much worth taking.

Russell hollered for me. He'd found a second wheelbarrow behind a gardening shed. I ran around back to join him at the woodpile. We peeled off the tarp. The sweet smell of mulch and chainsaw grease bellowed out, and there they were: two beautiful, sturdy rows, waist-high, stretching across the length of the back of the garage.

We started picking away, log by log, flinging them into our wheelbarrows. We worked steadily and quietly. The logs made hollow *clok* sounds as they landed on one another. The wheelbarrows creaked, settling. I began attempting neat no-look, behind-the-back tosses, and got a little carried away. One log went wide just as Russell bent over. It was unfortunate timing.

He stood, puzzled. Then his wound opened. He brought a hand to his scalp, examined the blood, and fainted.

“Russ!” I rolled him onto his back and slapped his face like they do on TV. His eyes didn’t open. I grabbed my phone to call Hickory, then remembered we were out of minutes, and anyway, Hickory was standing behind a Dunkin’ Donuts counter and
probably wouldn’t pick up. I considered breaking into Whitfield’s to use the landline, dial 911. But that would leave Russell with a lot of explaining to do. Things could get back to me.

I examined his injury. It wasn’t so bad, a flap of skin no bigger than a nickel. I took off my T-shirt, soaked it under a spigot, and pressed it to his head to slow the bleeding. After a minute or two, I soaked my shirt again and wrung it out. The cold water ran pink down his temples and face. He sputtered, blinked, propped himself up.

“Man, you just zonked right out. Lucky I was here.”

He didn’t seem surprised. “That’ll happen. Low blood pressure runs in my family.”

He drank from the spigot, washed himself best he could. I guess he was too loaded on pills to piece together exactly what had happened, and I didn’t see what could be gained in reminding him.

We returned our attention to the job. Soon our wheelbarrows were full. The bad news was that the dent we’d made wasn’t so inspiring. The Variety Store was a good half-mile away; by my calculation it would take three or four trips to move all the wood.

Russell must’ve read the expression on my face. “Best not think about it,” he said, and lifted the handles of his wheelbarrow.

We rolled our loads down the driveway and onto the road. I had to stop and rest every few steps. The heat had become stifling, even in the shade. I grew lightheaded and dizzy. Sweat stung my eyes. I realized I’d eaten nothing but beer and pills all day. My wheelbarrow was overloaded, difficult to balance, especially when I needed to slap a mosquito, or when we plowed into the woods to hide from cars, which I’d insisted we do
as a precaution. I looked over my shoulder. The realty sign they’d replaced at the foot of
Whitfield’s driveway was still in sight.

Russell waited for me to catch up. His T-shirt was soaked around the pits. Otherwise he seemed unfazed. He shook another Percocet from his bottle, the last judging by the pitch of the rattle, and dropped it into my cupped hands. I held it on my
tongue, then swallowed it dry. “Come on, Brinly, come on,” he chanted. His eyes
were wide and as glazed as honeyed hams. “I’m not letting you quit, bro. Return with
honor.”

I’d later learn the expression to be a common Air Force saying, but at the
moment, in my weakened, troubled state, I was sure Russell had gotten into my head. He
hadn’t, of course, but when he put his thick hands on my shoulders and we locked eyes,
obody could’ve have convinced me otherwise. I knew that he knew. He knew how badly
I needed this money, not how I usually needed money, but in a new desperate way that
mattered more than all those other times put together. He knew I couldn’t return to my
mother till I’d set things straight. He knew about Kayton, the years since Kayton, and
how no amount of setting things straight could turn back that clock. He knew I was
honestly ready to start figuring out ways to make it right from here on out. And he knew
that I knew he knew. It was as if we’d smoked from the same batch of Canadian Ghost.
Russell and I looked at each other and I felt my eyes widen and glisten like his. Then he
glanced over my shoulder and his eyes grew wider.

“Scatter!”

There wasn’t time to ditch the wheelbarrows. Russell hurdled over a stone wall. I
dragged myself behind a tree. I heard the downshifting of gears, the squeal of brakes. If it
was the cops, they’d see the wheelbarrows and we’d have to run. I poked my head around the tree. It wasn’t the cops. It was Hickory.

I crashed out of the woods, hollering and waving. The brake lights flashed red and then the holy-heaven-white of the reverse lights. The engine whined, backing up. The emergency brake cranked. The door opened. Helixes of smoke curled out. Hickory, wearing his Dunkin’ Donuts uniform, stepped from his truck.

I threw my arms around him and explained everything in one long breath: why I was soaked through in sweat, my T-shirt stained in swirls of rusty brown, why Russell Kenney—remember him, Hick?—was lumbering out of the woods, his T-shirt also ruined with blood, his head wound, the wheelbarrows, the wood, and so on.

Hickory nodded and picked at his shirt collar, as though he regularly encountered such situations while driving around. I thought at first that he was doing what Angus did, which was to let me list everything I’d done over the course of a day in order to make me feel shitty for messing around while he’d been working. But then—just as I was in fact starting to feel a bit shitty—Hickory said, “I’ve been driving around forever looking for everybody. You guys need a hand?” and everything became clear. I recognized his look as one of my own: poor Hick was only a little stoned, and feeling left out.

* 

Ernie, who owned the Variety Store, offered fifty bucks for the truckload. He said he knew the wood was stolen. The three of us tried to act like we’d been wrongly accused, but I suppose we didn’t put enough heart into it. Then Ernie looked around and said, "Sixty, if you unload it on the double.”
He threw in a sixer of High Life as a bonus for a job well done. I cracked open three and passed them out as Hickory steered us onto the road, and then three more two minutes later. "Cheers," I said, and drained my can in one long go, trying to keep down the image of Ernie selling Whitfield’s wood to the tourists at five dollars per shrink-wrapped bundle. He’d make a killing. That tightness returned to my chest. I rested the back of my head against the seat and closed my eyes, tuning out Hickory and Russell, who were talking earnestly about professional golf. By the time we pulled into the gravel lot behind JP’s, I’d committed to putting a positive spin on things. Twenty bucks was better than zero bucks. Rather than a few big risky steps toward paying my mother back, I’d make lots of little steps. Lots of little steps would be more manageable, safer, keep me out of trouble. Tonight, for instance, I’d buy one drink and save the rest of my money. One step at a time.

But of course that’s not what happened.

We grabbed three stools. Hickory smoothed his twenty-dollar bill on the bar, the same way they pay out at the casino in Bangor. He bowed his head and did a take on his usual prayer. “Lord bless Mom, Pop, Annie, Brinly and Brinly’s family, Kayton, Russell and Russell’s family, JP and JP’s family.”

His voice ebbed and warbled along with Springsteen's from the jukebox. He held up three fingers, and like a dream JP appeared. Cold beers, whiskeys, a basket of fries. I bought the next round. Russell, the one after. Minutes and hours melted together. The jukebox wouldn't quit, as though it were feeding itself.

At some point a young couple wandered in. Pastel pants, polo shirts, boat shoes: they were in the wrong place. Not to seem rude, I guess, they sat down anyway, putting a
few empty stools between themselves and us. Beer for him, cosmo for her. JP struggled with that: a couple ice cubes, vodka nearly to the rim, a squeeze of lime, a jigger of cranberry juice like a splash of blood. The woman took one sip, smiled flatly. She had a rock on her finger the size of a pea, I swear. Yet I was so committed to remaining positive that I didn’t once think of cutting off her finger, nor did I contemplate the many obvious ways that her diamond could change my life. And when the man caught me eying his woman, I didn’t tell him to fuck off. Again, happy thoughts. Instead, I clapped Russell on the shoulder and shouted down the bar: "Russ here just got back from Iraq. Third tour, gearing up for his fourth."

The man raised his beer. "We appreciate your service. Next round’s on us."

Russell jabbed a thumb at Hickory and me. "What about my pals? They just enlisted."

The man took in Russell’s slurring words, our bloody shirts. He studied my beard and Hickory’s, our shaggy hair. He nodded to JP. "Whatever these fellas are drinking."

He quickly paid and shook Russell’s hand and then he and the woman left.

JP brought us our drinks. Russell snickered to himself.

Hickory clinked his bottle against mine. “Goddamn. Our rewards keep multiplying. This is better than the Bible, man, wine into more wine."

I cupped my hands around my beer, cooling them. My palms were hot and raw from handling the wood. Scraps of bark clung to my pants. My back and arms ached. Walking over all that sharp railroad gravel had left my feet sore. I knew this was what Angus was always talking about—the virtues of a hard day’s work—and I tried feel good about it. I tried to feel grateful like Hickory, or slaphappy like Russell. But when I saw
the young couple’s unfinished drinks sweating on the bar, it brought me back to the happy life I’d spun for Russell: coaching Little League, volunteering for the fire department, coming home to my sweet-as-a-pea Southern girl. I thought of Kayton studying up at UMO. I wondered how my mother’s life would’ve been without my father, without Kayton’s accident. Without me. I saw all the possibilities for everyone—my mother, Kayton, Hickory, even poor Teddy Whitfield—stretch out in every direction. The hardest to believe was the one looking back at me in the mirror behind the bar. I didn’t know how this had happened.

Then Joey Bags appeared. His sandals flopped loudly as he joined us at the bar. He did a double-take. “Russell Kenney?”

Russell grinned sleepily. I put him one beer from zonking out.

Joey Bags squeezed Russell’s bicep. “Kid, you’re freaking huge!”

Russell gave a thumbs-up, leaned his head against my shoulder, closed his eyes.

“Russell Kenney, wow.” Joey Bags stared at Russell as if he were trying to remember something, then he said, “Someone buy me a beer. I come bearing good news.”

I reached into my pocket, but only out of show. I’d spent my twenty dollars, just as I’d known I would the moment I told myself I wouldn’t. Forget taking lots of little steps, I couldn’t manage even one.

Hickory gave Joey Bags his beer, and then Joey Bags explained how he’d swapped a bag of Canadian Ghost to a Penobscot Indian for a map to a secret Matsutake patch. He slapped the map on the bar. It was drawn on the back of an envelope in shaky red ink.
Hickory held it up to the light. “A Matsutake patch?”

Joey Bags draped his left arm over Hickory, his right arm over me. Russell was still resting on my shoulder.

“Matsutakes, my dear amigos, are a very rare, very valuable mushroom. If this thing’s for real, we’re going to be minor-league rich.”

He took the stool on the other side of Hickory and they entered into one of their frantic, hushed conversations. I knew they’d let me in when all the details were ironed out. But I didn’t want anything to do with another plan. I was sick of plans, sick of everything. I scratched the label off my beer, dropped the soggy bits into the bottle, swirled them around.

“Russ,” I said quietly when he stirred on my shoulder, “you’re not looking so sturdy. Think you’ll be OK getting home?”

“Don’t worry, Brinly,” he said without raising his head. “You can crash on my couch. Long as you need till you get back on your feet.”

“That’s not what I meant,” I said, but then I realized it probably was what I’d meant, at least in part.

“Hey,” I said, just between the two of us, “what were you doing on the tracks this morning?”

I wasn’t dumb; Russell’s drawn-out moan, his revolver with one round, his reluctance moving off the rails, train bearing down. My mind went back to the spring after Kayton died, my staring contest with the black bear. It had ended when the bear got bored, lumbered off into the woods. I’d won, but I remember a small, bitter part of me felt let down.
“Well I always told myself I’d walk the tracks when I came home,” Russell said.

“It’s real quiet out there. Takes you back, know what I’m saying?”

“Yeah, Russ,” I said, “I know what you’re saying.”
Ask For More

Joanne sits on her suitcase at the crumbling edge of the empty bypass road. The shuttered gas station is behind her, the blackening Utah evening before her. Not a good situation. Joanne is aware, and she is aware that merely being aware will not help. No matter how carefully she analyzes the many ways her situation is not good—approaching darkness, dropping temperature, rattlesnakes—she will still be here in the desert, no closer to North Carolina.

Joanne pictures a map of America. Point A is in Utah, here on her suitcase, where the bus driver kicked her out. Point B, in North Carolina, is Joanne’s baby grandson. The continent of white space between Point A and Point B nearly brings Joanne to tears. Joanne has never met her grandson. This was supposed to be their first visit (will be the first, she corrects herself). Joanne is fifty-two. She’s experienced what she considers a working woman’s fair share of disappointment, pain, and hardship. She thinks of the bus driver, though, and feels the closest to what she might call hatred in a very, very long time.

She takes a deep breath. Another thing that will not help her present situation: assigning blame.

Joanne knows this, too, but it’s difficult to resist, with so many distinct strains of blame from which to choose. One, obviously, is the Greyhound driver—that tattooed, heartless man who wouldn’t look Joanne in the eye (wouldn’t even hear her side of the story) as he swung her luggage from the belly of the bus. There was also the awful young woman (tattooed as well, Joanne can’t help reminding herself) who initiated the quarrel
that got them both kicked off. But the bus driver had done the kicking. Then again, Joanne reasons, he wasn’t even a real bus driver. Greyhound should never have allowed him behind the wheel. That was another strain of blame: the nationwide Greyhound strike. All the regular, professional drivers were walking picket lines. The last-minute replacements, the scabs, were ruthless, ruling their buses like private fiefdoms. It was all over the news. One driver had made headlines by kicking a passenger off in the middle of the Sierra Nevada mountain range, late at night, for snoring too loudly. Joanne’s best friend, Karen, had warned her. Karen, of course, was also to blame.

Not that Joanne is assigning blame.

Blame, she reminds herself, will not get her to Point B. Neither will panic. She flips open her phone. Still no signal. Her shoulder aches. She rummages in her handbag for the glucosamine and a bottle of water, swallows two pills, then pulls out her Marlboro 100s and lights one. She orders her hand to stop shaking. It stops for a moment, then starts up again. Her other hand joins it.

The moon breaks free of a mesa on the horizon. A thin eyelash of a moon, so delicate it momentarily distracts Joanne from the shake in her hands, the flutter in her throat. The combination of twilight and moonlight makes the land appear powdered, like Joanne and Karen, after a shift at the vitamin factory, when their hair is dusted in probiotics. The blades and branches of the nearby desert brush are washed in the same pale shade of white. *Yucca, jimson, sage.* Even in the faint illumination, Joanne can identify the different plants. She likes knowing wild organisms, their names and quirks. Back in Oregon, it was mushrooms: *matsutakes,* tasty and spicy, almost impossible to find; *Amanita virosa,* the “Destroying Angel,” pure white, wickedly lethal; and the
“Humongous Fungus,” that one honey mushroom sweeping across four miles of Eastern Oregon forest, supposedly the largest, oldest living entity on the planet. Southern Utah, the place Joanne’s called home for the past five years, is too hot for mushrooms. She’s gotten used to knowing things a little more dry, a bit more scratchy.

I-70, the interstate highway, is a far-off river of white headlights and red brake lights. Joanne knows she should walk there. The bypass road, where the bus driver dropped her, is clearly unused, abandoned. There was the solitary pickup truck that drove off with the awful young woman (how the young woman was able to get a ride so easily, who in their right mind would offer someone like her a lift, Joanne still cannot fathom), but otherwise not a single vehicle has passed. Distant I-70, on the other hand, with its steady stream of traffic, holds the potential of help, the possibility of continuing on toward Point B. But twilight is fading, soon gone. What used to be a long stretch of bypass road and desert separating Joanne from the highway is now a lake of darkness that she doesn’t dare traverse. Three things Joanne has not grown used to since moving to the desert are rattlesnakes, tarantulas, and scorpions. She can’t imagine the darkness crawling with anything else. Joanne stays put. She sits on her suitcase as though it is a stool, trying to quiet her hands. She flips her cell phone open and closed, checking and rechecking for a signal she begins to doubt will ever appear.

Joanne is used to sitting on a stool. There’s nothing else to sit on at the vitamin factory. Mrs. Wells, the owner, says stools are better for the back. You can’t slouch on a stool, she says, though by the end of a shift Joanne often finds herself proving otherwise. Mrs. Wells believes in something she calls workplace diversification, which is why
Joanne is capable of doing any of the five jobs (sorting/sifting, filling, inspecting, packaging, shipping) required to turn mounds of powders and herbs into pills and capsules. Mrs. Wells says workplace diversification keeps the job from becoming rote. Diversification acts as a bulwark against injuries common to occupational repetition.

Karen says it’s baloney. Karen says Mrs. Wells doesn’t give a rat’s behind about her or Joanne or any of her two-dozen employees. Karen says the stools are to prevent them from nodding off at the conveyor belts. And workplace diversification, Karen says, is how Mrs. Wells keeps any one of them from becoming too important to fire.

Karen is the reason Joanne no longer lives in Oregon. Karen left, moved to Utah for a man. He ended up running off, Karen ended up with a job. A win for her, Karen likes to say, because there was a better chance of coming across a unicorn guarding a pot of four-leaf clovers at the end of a rainbow than finding a job back in Oregon. Joanne wasn’t having much luck herself. Karen told her about the opening at the vitamin factory, said she could put in a good word. Joanne wanted to know how soon she could start. Karen found her a small place down the street from her own, and furnished it with help from the Goodwill. Joanne arrived to a Hershey Kiss centered on the pillow of her new bed. It was just like old times, neighbors once again.

Karen has always been there for Joanne, especially in difficult times. Especially in the difficult time, years ago, after Joanne’s son was born, when working to avoid her drunk of a husband was a full-time job and then some. Karen helped Joanne and her baby boy change apartments, again and again. Each new move required a little more haste, until the fire that ended her husband’s life. Joanne and Karen settled in together at the same apartment complex after that, their open-door policy strict and unwavering. It was
fifteen steps from Karen’s doorway to hers. Joanne remembers. She counted them in the Oregon summers, running barefoot across the hot patio concrete.

She flips her phone open. Nothing. Even if she could get in touch with Karen—who would, without question, drive out here to get her—the idea is to be moving east, toward Point B. Not west. Anything but west. Joanne consults her mental calendar. She might still enjoy one day with the baby. Two, if she’s lucky.

Company policy at the vitamin factory allows for one day off per year of employment. Employees can carry the days over from year to year, use them for vacation, sickness, however they see fit. Mrs. Wells makes it clear that the freedom is theirs.

Karen likes to say that, in Europe, Mrs. Wells would be thrown in jail for her vacation policy. Workers in Europe get four, five weeks vacation, paid, by law. America, Karen likes to point out, is the only rich country in the world that doesn’t guarantee days off. Even in China they get a week.

In that case, Joanne likes to say, she and Karen better start brushing up on their Chinese.

Joanne guarded her five days like a mama bear her cubs. When the flu went around, she didn’t allow herself to get sick. When that moron Gus struck her with his side-mirror in the parking lot, she didn’t have a doctor look at her shoulder. (She would manage with discounted glucosamine from the factory’s retail counter; her husband had left her with a high pain tolerance, if little else). Even if Mrs. Wells offered a health insurance plan—which she didn’t—Joanne wouldn’t have taken time off. She had to keep
her five days safe and intact. The urgency of seeing her grandson while he was still a baby demanded it. Yet the problem remained: Utah to North Carolina by Greyhound was nearly three days, door to door.

Flying was out of the question. Joanne had never been on a plane. The thought made her short of breath, even before 9/11. Amtrak was safer, but too slow. Going by car wouldn’t work either, not with gas prices the way they were, and nobody to share the driving. Joanne tried persuading her son to bring the baby west. Her son worked at a Marine base. Unable to find employment in Oregon, he’d enlisted, done two tours in Iraq, gone through the military shuffle, and landed a desk job outside Jacksonville. A demanding desk job, apparently, because a family trip to Utah wasn’t feasible. So it was up to Joanne. But even if she tacked on a Sunday—the one day the vitamin factory closed—it meant less than twenty-four hours with the baby before turning around and heading home. Five days, all Joanne had, were simply not enough.

So ask for more, Karen said.

She made it sound as easy as asking a waitress for coffee.

Karen was always telling Joanne to stand up for herself, to quit being a doormat. Joanne’s past, what Karen knew of it, didn’t matter: tough stuff, Karen said, move on. Like when Gus winged Joanne in the parking lot, Karen wanted Joanne to report him: file for workers’ comp, find a lawyer, sue Mrs. Wells if she wouldn’t let the claim go forward.

Joanne wasn’t so sure. There was Helen, their former co-worker, to think about. Helen had developed an allergy to the probiotic powder that hung in the factory air like sifted flour in a bakery. Incapable of doing the job without breaking into hives, she’d
talked about filing for workers’ comp. Before she could, Mrs. Wells set her free to pursue the opportunities another career path might afford. Mrs. Wells’s words. Joanne recalled them exactly.

Karen said it wasn’t a fair comparison. Joanne wasn’t breaking out in hives. The only thing Joanne was allergic to was sticking up for herself.

Not true, Joanne said. There was a difference between sticking up for herself and being stupid. She wasn’t a doormat. She just didn’t like ruffling feathers unless she absolutely had to. Who could tell what else might shake out?

Ruffling feathers came as naturally to Karen as sleeping and eating. She argued over repairs with her landlord. She haggled with managers at Walmart. She talked back when Mrs. Wells asked her to stay late, work an extra shift. She said no with a comfort, a pleasure that bowled Joanne over. Karen wanted to organize a union at the vitamin factory. Joanne wanted Karen to keep her trap shut. In a right-to-work state like Utah, getting caught with the “u”-word coming out of their mouths was reason enough to get themselves canned.

Compared with that, Karen argued, asking for one extra day off didn’t sound so bad.

She had a point. Joanne could ask Mrs. Wells, or wait another year. It wasn’t much of a choice, not with her grandson getting older by the day.

Joanne wiped her clammy hands on her pants and knocked on Mrs. Wells’s office door. Mrs. Wells told her to enter. A minute later, leaving, Joanne tried not to smile too broadly. Mrs. Wells had given her the day. Unpaid, of course, but enough. The trip to North Carolina would work.
The sky is plastered with stars. An evening chill sweeps across the desert, rustling the sage. Joanne shivers in her green Ducks sweatshirt. She is also wearing jeans and white sneakers—comfortable, loose-fitting clothes. Her hair, stringy and silver, is tied in a simple ponytail. She’d planned well for the long bus ride. She’d planned well for North Carolina, too: a swimsuit, a beach hat, a few nice things to wear to dinner (her daughter-in-law had mentioned the Olive Garden). Joanne, who has always planned well, couldn’t have known to plan for the desert at night. Of course not. But, she reminds herself, pushing away the image of her dead husband, she’s certainly planned her way out of worse. She digs into her handbag for another Marlboro 100. She lights it, and smoking, peers down the bypass road. Left, right, it fades into darkness both ways. She’ll finish this cigarette, then walk along the pavement to the busy highway. It feels as if she’s already on the move.

Karen asked Joanne how she felt after negotiating with Mrs. Wells for an extra day off. Needing something, demanding it, succeeding. Standing up for herself—felt pretty good, didn’t it?

Joanne hadn’t exactly demanded anything from Mrs. Wells. More like she’d begged. But yes, she admitted, it felt pretty good.

Maybe too good.

The old Joanne never would’ve made such a fuss when the young woman on the bus told her to turn off the overhead light. The old Joanne would’ve been agreeable, eager to please. The old Joanne would’ve told herself that it was getting late, that she had
a long, long ride ahead, that sleep made sense. She would’ve turned the stupid light off. Instead, she thought of Karen, and insisted, politely yet firmly, that the overhead light stay on. She needed to get her word searches done, she said.

The young woman rolled her eyes. She needed to get some sleeping done.

Joanne suggested she find another seat.

The young woman shifted her weight. Her midsection hung over the center armrest, invading Joanne’s space. Joanne guessed she was in her mid-twenties. She was quite fat. *Heavy* was probably the nicer term. Doughy rolls of flesh spilled through the gap between her tank top and shorts. Her clothes were pink. So were her furry slippers, and her mascara, nails, and the butterfly tattoos that ran up the terraced slope of her midriff. She had a pink and black zebra-print pillow folded beneath her head. Joanne was not one to judge, but honestly, what kind of person went out like that?

The young woman readjusted her pillow and closed her eyes. She began breathing deeply. Joanne returned to her word search, an Australian-themed puzzle. She circled *aborigine* and moved on to *boomerang*. The woman stirred. She muttered something that sounded an awful lot like *witch*, reached up, and turned off Joanne’s light.

Joanne said nothing, simply turned the light on and went back to her word search. She acted as though she’d found *boomerang* and calmly moved on to *kangaroo*. Joanne wasn’t calm. She stared at the word search without seeing it, *boomerang* and *kangaroo* lost in a blurred soup of consonants and vowels. Her heart was racing. Her boldness both surprised and thrilled her. She was glad, almost, when the woman again turned the light off.
Joanne turned the light back on. Was finding *boomerang*, finishing her word search, really of such importance? No. The word search no longer had anything to do with it. She was finally responding to Karen’s coaching. She wasn’t being a doormat. She was remembering how to stand up for herself. This was not the old Joanne.

The young woman sat up, her face close to Joanne’s. Her breath smelled like cheese. She called Joanne a cunt. A fucking cunt. She turned off Joanne’s light, slapped Joanne’s arm away when Joanne went to turn it back on, then stood in the aisle, screaming how she hated people, oh, how she really fucking hated them. She was fucking sick of motherfuckers.

The peacefulness of the bus shattered. Passengers jolted from sleep. Joanne shrank against the window. The young woman stomped in the aisle. Her face turned red. She pounded her fists on the overhead luggage compartments. She covered her ears and emitted a long, pained wail that reminded Joanne of the fisher cats howling from deep within the Oregon woods.

The commotion was so spectacular that Joanne didn’t notice the driver exit I-70. Not until the overhead lights flickered on did she see they were no longer moving. The bus was stopped on a long bypass road that looped far from the interstate. A small gas station sat across the road. The sky was dark orange, evening molting into night.

The driver’s frame filled the aisle. A massive man, the fabric of his uniform strained to accommodate his chest and biceps. Joanne thought he looked more like a member of a motorcycle gang, a longshoreman, a lumberjack—anything but a bus driver. (Which he wasn’t, Joanne later remembered, only a scab, a temporary replacement). He
pushed a button and the bus door hissed open. He jabbed a thumb outside, and told the crazy lady to get the fuck off his bus.

The young woman didn’t argue. She grabbed her pillow. As her fuzzy slippers flopped down the aisle, Joanne caught two words printed on the rear of her shorts—*Sweetie Pie*—and then she was gone, out the door.

Joanne relaxed in her seat, breathed for the first time in what seemed like hours. She felt good, similar to what she’d experienced leaving Mrs. Wells’s office: righteousness, validation, justice served.

But Joanne had misheard. The driver had said *ladies*.

The driver whistled at her. He jabbed his thumb at the door.

Joanne sat and blinked, unbelieving. What had she done?

Let’s go, the driver said. He rolled up his sleeves, revealing an intricate web of tattoos. Joanne saw two red-capped *Alice in Wonderland* mushrooms, *Amanita muscaria*, one inked into the crook of each elbow. Meshed patterns of fine, thread-like filaments sprouted from beneath the mushrooms and extended down the driver’s forearms to his wrists. Joanne, for one brief moment, saw the driver as an ordinary man with his own interests and quirks, a family, perhaps, the capacity for reason.

There had been some kind of misunderstanding, Joanne explained. She was a grandmother, and—

The driver cut her off. He said that was probably true. We’re all of us something. But that didn’t mean Joanne got to stay on his bus. He’d seen Joanne back there, flipping the overhead light on and off, trying to get a rise out of the crazy lady. It took two to tango.
He gave Joanne two options. One, she could get off now. Two, she could refuse. Then he’d call the cops. Disruption of interstate travel, he mentioned, was a federal offense.

A young man with shaggy brown hair stood. He pointed at Joanne and said she hadn’t done anything wrong. The only law being broken here, the young man said, was kicking an old lady off the bus in the middle of the desert.

Joanne wanted to hug him.

The driver laughed. He didn’t know they had a lawyer on board. The only law out here was him, the driver. He tapped his chest. He was the captain, this bus was his ship. Maybe the young lawyer hadn’t ridden Greyhound before? If he needed time to think things over, he was free to step outside. He could keep the ladies company, buy them a soda-pop at the gas station across the street.

The young man closed his mouth and sat down. Everyone looked at Joanne. The driver reached into his pocket for his phone. He said he was going to call the cops. He guessed it would take them an hour to arrive. Passengers groaned. One turned to Joanne and yelled at her to get off the bus. He called her *grandma*. The way he said the word made it sound like an insult. Another passenger shouted that Joanne was going to make them late. They all had places to get to.

Joanne went dizzy with confusion. The work of surviving her husband, she believed, had taught her all she needed to know about keeping people from finding ways to be upset with her. She hadn’t been yelled at since, not in ages, and never by a whole crowd at once. Panicked, she stuffed her word search into her handbag, and ran off the bus.
The driver located her suitcase and removed it from below. Again, Joanne mentioned that she was a grandmother. Again, her pleas made no impression. The driver slammed the cargo hatch shut. He climbed the steps, the door hissed closed, and the bus lurched forward. Joanne watched it disappear down the road. She was alone in the dwindling twilight.

No, not alone. Joanne tensed, and spun around. The young woman was across the road, waddling over to the gas station. Joanne watched her approach a pickup truck, the only vehicle in the lot. The driver’s-side window went down. Joanne saw the young woman’s lips move. The woman tossed her head back, laughed, promised God knows what, ran around the front of the truck, hopped into the cab, flipped Joanne the middle finger, and the truck drove off.

Then Joanne was alone. Truly alone, she discovered, crossing the road. The gas station was closed, and not merely for the night. The doors were padlocked. A single light shone through a window. The bus driver must have seen it, Joanne told herself. He must have. What he couldn’t have seen were the empty shelves, the snowflakes of rust that spotted the floor, the paint peeling from the walls. The curled strips of paint reminded Joanne of the cedar trees in Oregon, their papery, shagbark trunks.

Joanne takes a final drag of her Marlboro 100. Other than the soft crackle of the cigarette, the desert is silent. Cars and trucks pass east and west on the horizon without a sound. She tosses the filter to the ground. She stands, extends the suitcase handle, and sets off down the long bypass road. The noises of movement—the pad of her sneakers on the pavement, the wheels of the suitcase rolling along—are encouraging. She will walk to
I-70. She will get a ride. She will arrive in Denver, the next stop on her itinerary, and catch a bus from there. She will make it to Point B. She will.

She picks up her pace. A few minutes later, headlights appear. Joanne shouts and waves. She steps slightly into the road. This chance, she vows, will not pass her by.

The young couple, a boy and girl, are polite as can be. They call Joanne ma’am. The boy runs from the driver’s side and heaves her suitcase into the bed of the truck. The girl moves to the center of the bench seat to make room. They are gorgeous. Both have golden hair held back with beaded turquoise headbands, and smooth skin that looks bronzed from the sun. The boy wears a number of hemp necklaces, and a vest with no shirt underneath. He is slender, muscular. The girl is long-legged like a dancer. She wears a white cotton dress and dangly earrings of wire and crystal that shimmer like dollhouse chandeliers. She pats the seat beside her. Joanne climbs in, muttering a string of thankyous and blessyous. The truck is old, but neat and well-kept. The cab smells of burnt sage. Twangy, upbeat country music plays from the radio. Joanne shuts the door. The dome light winks out.

The boy shifts from neutral and hurtles the truck down the road, talking excitedly as he changes gears. The girl straddles the gearshift. She talks in the same animated way, chattering on and on like a typewriter. They interrupt and echo each other. They laugh and sing along to the radio. When Joanne makes attempts at introductions, conversation, they speak over her, cut her off, change subjects, leave her behind. They answer her questions before she’s finished asking. Joanne manages to piece together very little: the
boy and girl are coming from some festival. Lots of music and dancing. Joanne sees the whites of their teeth in the dim glow of the dashboard lights. They are smiling, happy.

Joanne smiles, too. She’s happy for them. They are in love, clearly. She looks at the boy behind the wheel and sees her grandson, grown, a polite young man, a compassionate and understanding partner, soft and forgiving, happy to be in the presence of the one he loves. Nothing like his grandfather. Joanne, for twenty-five years now, has worked to exorcise her husband from her thoughts, her nightmares. Yet he’s stubborn, even in death. He still appears in the supermarket aisle, in line at the post office, the bank. He withdraws, but never fades completely. Joanne will hold her baby grandson, though, and the past will fold, shut for good. A fresh start. This she knows. She looks out the window. She peers into the darkness, and smiles. She’s happy for herself. She’s heading east. It’s difficult to believe, or to concentrate on anything else.

Later, the boy asks Joanne where they can take her. He has already asked her this same question, and she has told them.

Denver, she says again.

The girl sighs, sounding disappointed. She says they will drive Joanne wherever she wants. It’s part of their big plan. She explains their big plan: to drive around America and do good deeds. To pick up beautiful people and help them. She calls herself an angel. The boy, too, she says, is an angel.

Joanne, after five years in Latter-Day Saints country, is no longer surprised by this kind of talk. Angels never appeared to her personally, or to Karen, but their neighbors certainly got regular visits. Joanne and Karen laughed that the women on their street couldn’t seem to wash the dishes without an angel popping by to chime in. Joanne
thought it sounded exhausting. Karen agreed. Was privacy ever allowed? Could an angel be asked to come back later, say, during a commercial break, or after a hot flash passed?

The boy and girl, though, don’t look Mormon. More like hippies, if anything. Joanne doesn’t know what they are. Yes, she does: they are in the business of doing good deeds. They are gorgeous angels. So Joanne tells them about North Carolina, about her grandson, whom she has never held. The boy and girl listen without interruption. Joanne goes on about the vitamin factory, Karen, Mrs. Wells, the battle for time off. The brute of a Greyhound driver, the awful young woman with Sweetie Pie printed across her—

The boy punches the steering wheel.

Joanne trails off, becomes silent.

The boy punches the wheel again. And again. The horn beeps weakly each time. It’s not right, he says, what happened to Joanne. A grandmother! It’s not right.

The girl’s earrings jangle as she shakes her head side to side. She makes choking, sniffling sounds. She’s crying.

A small alarm goes off in Joanne’s head. She tries to change the conversation, asks how far to Denver, when will they meet back up with the interstate?

They don’t do the interstates, the boy explains. Interstates are dangerous. All those big-rig trucks. Drunk drivers.

They prefer driving alongside, says the girl, who seems to have cheered up. It’s prettier out here. She sighs. She asks Joanne if she thinks that is true—that it’s prettier out here.

Joanne sees nothing but darkness, and the lights of I-70, though they seem to be growing farther away. Certainly, she agrees. It’s certainly prettier out here.
Then the boy raises his voice and asks Joanne where she would like to go. Where
can they drop her?

The alarm in Joanne’s head grows louder.

The boy asks again. Ma’am?

Denver, Joanne says quietly.

Denver? The girl sounds insulted. She wants to know what happened to North
Carolina. Joanne doesn’t want to hold her baby grandson? She doesn’t care about baby?

Yes, Joanne says, steadying her voice. North Carolina, Denver, either will be fine.
The alarm in her head is blaring. Something is very wrong. She regrets having babbled
on, earlier. Suddenly she doesn’t want the boy and girl to know about North Carolina or
her grandson or anything else. She wants out of this truck.

The boy whoops and hollers. He guns the engine. Denver it is! He and the girl
gasp for air, they laugh so hard. They turn up the radio and sing along. When the song
ends, the girl turns down the volume and asks Joanne where she would like them to take
her. Where can they drop her off?

Denver, whispers Joanne. She can barely push the word out.

The girl coos. People say Denver is supposed to be beautiful this time of year. She
asks the boy if he’s heard the same thing. She calls him baby.

The boy agrees with the girl—people say Denver is supposed to be beautiful this
time of year. He calls the girl sis.

Joanne then hears a loud grating. She looks directly out the window and tells
herself that it is not the noise of grinding teeth. But it is. The sound puts her hair on end,
sends a buzzing into her own molars. Her throat constricts. She notices the boy and girl
are no longer speaking. When was the radio turned off? Joanne hears herself asking them to stop the truck. She imagines the sound of her voice filling the cab. No, not her voice, Karen’s voice. Karen would say something. Karen would not act like a doormat. Karen would have no trouble asking—demanding—they to stop the truck. Joanne swallows. She has the words, but they cannot escape her throat. Telling the boy and girl to stop would give them the chance to refuse. And what will Joanne do then?

The truck bumps over a pothole. The radio skips back on. The boy and the girl are again laughing, singing. Joanne sneaks a look. The boy is drumming his fingers against the steering wheel. The girl is leaning on him, stroking his hair. Both are smiling.

Joanne’s phone blips and buzzes, vibrating in her handbag. The familiar sound, the sensation, could not be more immediately uplifting, like a life vest suddenly strapped around her chest. She is connected, back within the range of service, nearing something.

The girl asks if the message is from Joanne’s grandson. Did baby send a photo of himself at the beach? Are the beaches nice in North Carolina? Is the sand white and soft between the toes? And what is baby’s name?

The message is from her husband, Joanne says, surprising herself. She never could’ve imagined a situation in which the mention of the man would bring a sense of
security. Yet it does. He comes rushing back. He’s agreed to meet her in Denver. He’s flying in, cutting a business trip short.

The girl wants to know what kind of business.

Sales, Joanne tells her.

The girl asks what kind of sales.

Vitamins, Joanne says. She fumbles with her phone, trying to answer the girl and type at the same time. *XOXO*. At the moment she can’t think of writing Karen anything else. She doesn’t want to worry Karen, or wake her up, not when there is nothing that Karen could do, no way she could help. Joanne keeps typing: *XOXO*. Just as she hits *send*, the phone loses reception. She is back out of range, cut off.

The girl notices that Joanne has no wedding ring. Did she lose it? Yes, Joanne says, she lost it. It’s an easy lie, not entirely false. Joanne did have a wedding ring. She tossed it into the fire that was the end of her marriage, after her son was born. It was a real fire, the kind that curled the edges of photographs, made them disappear along with important papers and identifying documents.

The girl shrieks, ripping the dark quiet of the cab. It tears the air out of Joanne’s lungs. It freezes the moment. When time continues, Joanne is still there. They are all still there, in the truck, on the road. There has been no accident. The girl is neither hurt nor scared. She is excited, bouncing in her seat, yelling for the boy to stop. Baby, she squeals, we found another! She points ahead. A figure is standing at the edge of the road.

The truck slows. The headlights bring the hitchhiker into focus: a heavy woman, dressed in all pink, a zebra-print pillow under her arm.
Now Joanne is the one shouting, begging the boy to keep going.

He steps on the gas. They speed past the young woman and come to a quick stop. Joanne lurches forward. Her seatbelt catches, digs into her chest. She feels the engine idling through the floorboards. She feels her heart in her throat, behind her eyes. She feels the boy and the girl, too. They are staring at her.

The bus, the woman, Joanne stammers. It’s her—the woman from the bus.

The girl whispers in the boy’s ear. He wrenches the gearshift, looks over his shoulder. The engine whines as the truck speeds in reverse. The radio blares a country song, a love ballad, sweet and slow. Everything else is happening so quickly.

The young woman comes back into view, a burst of pink illuminated by the reverse lights. The boy cuts the wheel sharply in her direction and the truck veers off the road. Joanne braces herself as the truck bounces over the uneven desert terrain. Bushes and weeds slap the grill and scrape the undercarriage. The girl punches the dashboard. We missed, she cries, we missed!

The boy jams the truck into gear and bumps back onto the road. He drives until the headlights find the young woman. She is splayed out beside a large rock, her skin bright white in the glare of the lights. She raises her head, climbs to her feet. She is missing a slipper. Her knees are scraped, dark and glistening. She holds a hand to shield herself from the headlights. Even in the brightness, her eyes are wide with fear.

Joanne finds herself attempting to identify plants. She follows the span of the headlights and spots a clump of what could be Skunkbush, maybe, or perhaps Russian Thistle. There’s a tree that looks like a Juniper, its branches dotted smoky blue with clusters of berries. Joanne searches for familiar names, looking intently at anything that is
not the terrified young woman. Then the music ends. The country love ballad is over. The radio emits gentle static. Joanne notices the heavy breathing in the cab. The girl is panting, as if she’s just finished a long road race. And the grating sound again, the grinding of teeth.

Panic roars through Joanne like a flashflood. It licks her to life. She thrusts her phone into her handbag and reaches for the door handle.

The girl grabs her arm and squeezes. Her fingernails dig into Joanne’s flesh.

Stop it, the girl says. Her earrings jangle.

Joanne, incredibly, does what she is told. She releases the door handle.

There is more whispering. The girl clears her throat. They have a proposal for Joanne. A deal.

Joanne hears a metallic pinging sound. The boy pulls a tire iron from beneath his seat. He hands it to the girl. The girl places it in Joanne’s lap. It is cool, smooth and hard.

Avenge thyself, whispers the girl. Avenge thyself, receive your rewards.

Become an angel, says the boy, a vengeful angel.

The young woman, zebra-print pillow underarm, is hobbling up the road. The boy shifts into first gear, crawling along to keep her within range of the headlights, until the woman stops. She doubles over, breathing hard. Her cheeks are wet and shiny with tears.

Just one swing, says the girl, her voice low and hoarse with excitement. One itty-bitty swing, and we’ll take you straight to Denver, to North Carolina, to baby. Fair is fair, pinky swear.

Joanne feels herself slipping away. Someone else fills the space; she views the scene from afar, as though watching television. The actress playing her is believable,
except for the steadiness of her hands. She’s been pushed into this role once before: sleeping pills, a night of generous pours, a lit cigarette, the old shag couch. Joanne had planned well. She was very careful. She waited for smoke, then limped out the back door, baby boy in her arms. Her husband, in more ways than one, had started the fire. Joanne merely fed the flames.

But that was different, Joanne says to herself. She’d had no other choice.

Light floods the cab of the truck. The door chime dings. Tire iron in one hand, handbag in the other, Joanne steps down to the ground. She plants her sneakers firmly on the pavement. She looks at the bloodied young woman bent over in the road, and then across the desert void to the reds and whites of the I-70 traffic in the distance. She looks inside the truck. The boy has his arms wrapped around the girl. They are smiling widely, teeth clenched. Their pupils are dilated, squeezing out all but the thinnest ring of white. Joanne notices a fine yellow dust coating every surface in the cab. Like probiotic powder, it tints the girl and boy’s hair, also their faces, arms and legs. It was the desert dust making them appear golden and bronzed. Joanne sees they are not such gorgeous angels after all.
Who Are You With?

Early Melodies

Lydda hears the familiar diesel throb of the Emergency Sanitation Corps truck as it stops outside Lemkin Gardens. From the street comes the squeal of brakes, the sharp hiss of compressed air, the chattering of the men in their breathing masks and papery white suits as they collect the refuse bags from the sidewalk. The truck then jerks to a start, continuing toward Citi Field. The avenue is quiet again. There is no traffic like before: no buses, no cars, no motorcycles. Lydda’s father and Francis and the other Sanitation Corps workers who live at Lemkin Gardens have already left for Manhattan on the morning 7 train. Birds roosting on the elevated tracks chirp their early melodies.

Five months ago, when they were new to America, this would’ve been the time for Lydda’s father to wake the girls, prepare them for school. Now Lydda rolls off the mattress, careful not to disturb Dalia, turns on the electric kettle, and begins to sweep. PS 143, like all the schools, like all the stores and delis and houses and most buildings in New York, is closed until the sewers get fixed, which the mayor says could be as early as next month. Then the water will be turned back on. The people will return.

Lydda’s father says the mayor doesn’t work underground, replacing burst pipes. The mayor has no idea. Manhattan alone will take a month, never mind Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens. Fourteen treatment plants, seven-thousand-plus miles of pipeline, all backed up, overloaded, in need of repair. Yigal Goldstein planned his attack thoughtfully. The damage is immense.
Lydda hopes her father is the one who has no idea. It is true that he works for the Emergency Sanitation Corps, but he’s a former professor of English at Baghdad University, not a plumber. What does he know about pipes? He could be wrong. The mayor could be right. PS 143 could reopen. Her teacher, Mr. Ricardo, said the fifth grade would take a field trip to the Bronx Zoo at the end of the year. It is April, almost May. There could still be time.

**Between the Two of Them**

The doors of PS 143 are chained and covered in plywood. The only entrance is a cafeteria window by the dumpsters in back of the building. Lydda and Dalia usually ride scooters there to play after they’ve completed their daily lessons and Lydda has swept and Dalia’s eyes are glazed over from too many cartoons. Lydda crawls through the cafeteria window first, then guides Dalia, cupping her head to protect her from the jagged teeth of glass. Lydda is eleven years old. Her father has told her many times, just between the two of them, that she must help look after Dalia, who is only five. Lydda helped look after Dalia in Baghdad, then in the Green Zone, and here, in this now-empty place called Queens. Nights when Dalia can’t sleep, when she awakens, shaking and crying, Lydda brushes Dalia’s long black hair and tells her the stories she remembers from her mother: “The Wonderful Miserable Garden.” “The Forgetful Clock.” “The Silly Cucumber.” Since arriving in America, Dalia hasn’t wet the bed once. Her nightmares are fewer. She is even speaking again. Not Arabic, only English, and not whole sentences, but words all the same. Sometimes even three or four together.
Lydda: Fifteen unicorns prancing on a rainbow, how many hooves in all?

Dalia: Twelve storks join the unicorns, how many animals in all?

Lydda and Dalia: Why did the unicorns and storks meet on the rainbow?

Compose a story using full sentences and correct punctuation.

Lydda’s father leaves daily lessons for the girls. The lessons must be in English because Dalia won’t read Arabic. If the lessons are in Arabic, Dalia will watch cartoons. Lydda is glad for the English. It’s a sign of sophistication to know multiple languages. Sophistication, Lydda understands, is how you let other people know what you know. It isn’t easy. There is always so much more to know.

Back home in Baghdad, of course, it was the war: the Americans, the battles, the neighborhood militias, the alliances and boundaries that shifted from day to day. Lydda kept a notebook to track the many sides, who did what, who was with whom. She followed the war the way her uncles followed their football teams, the World Cup. Her notebook contained lists of questions and unusual words:

White Phosphorus.
Depleted Uranium.
Blackwater.
Donald Rumsfeld.
Collaborating.

Now, after five months in Queens, Lydda has a new list with new terms:

Yigal Goldstein.
The Sons and Swords of David.
MREs (Meals, Ready-to-Eat).

Typhoid.

Permanent Resident.

A month ago, Yigal Goldstein, an Israeli settler, used a computer virus to shut down the city’s treatment plants, and then he and his followers blew themselves up in the central control rooms, preventing the systems from being turned back on. This much Lydda understands. What she does not understand is why. What does New York City have to do with Israel’s colonies in Palestine? What were the Sons and Swords of David? Yigal Goldstein was from Brooklyn—how could an American also be an Israeli? Why did he return to attack the city of his birth? What side was he on? Lydda’s father says she will be a journalist, or a historian, but most likely a professional pest. Secretly, he is pleased with Lydda’s many questions. Lydda knows this because he once said that she was just as intelligent and curious and persistent as her mother, whom he rarely mentions anymore, usually only in his sleep, when his voice is soft yet forceful, not quite a whisper, not quite a prayer.

The Toilet Bomber

The TV calls Yigal Goldstein a terrorist, but Lydda likes her name for him better. Every time she says “Toilet Bomber,” Dalia giggles. And the TV is wrong. Backed-up toilets and excrement in the streets is not terror. In Baghdad, the toilets never worked. The gutters regularly bubbled with raw excrement. The stench was terrible, of course, but it wasn’t terror. Not the same as a car exploding outside the tea shop at the end of the block. Or corpses on the sidewalk in front of the police station with bound hands and
missing heads. Or the things said to be happening in Abu Ghraib. Or masked men knocking and entering in the middle of the night, neither whispering nor removing their shoes, slamming a father against the wall, bouncing the butt of a rifle off his skull. Or a mother, going to the market, never coming back.

The only people the Sons and Swords of David actually harmed were themselves. The real mess, Lydda understands, came later, after some millions of New Yorkers foolishly disposed of their excrement, polluting the parks and streets, the rivers. Sickness followed. Evacuations, lootings, the National Guard. “To break Baghdad,” Lydda overheard her father say to Francis, “it took cruise missiles and military invasion, mercenaries and smart bombs, a decade of occupation and civil war. New York City collapsed after ten days with nowhere to flush.”

The collapse happened quickly in March, four months after Lydda and Dalia and their father landed at LaGuardia with nothing but their clothes and refugee papers. They’d only just begun to fill their new home in Lemkin Gardens with a mishmash of furniture from secondhand stores and the curb. Lydda and Dalia had enrolled at PS 143, completed their first few weeks. During that short time, Lydda quietly observed her school, her teacher, her classmates, their Monday-through-Friday lives. Mr. Ricardo’s lessons were much simpler than her father’s, allowing her the opportunity to take careful notes:

Via makes silly faces at morning meeting. Mr. Ricardo tries not to smile and asks her to stop. Via stops. Via is from Korea.

Biiron is from Africa. He reads alone at lunch, a new book every day.

Each morning, we must stand and pledge allegiance to the flag.
Each afternoon, before going home, we must shake hands with Mr. Ricardo.

Mr. Ricardo’s palm is warm and soft.

A missing lunch box, a misunderstanding between friends, a bee sting during recess: such events, as far as Lydda could tell, were the worst that ever happened at PS 143. She was almost ready to accept that it wasn’t a dream, that this easy new world now belonged to her too. If she’d known it was about to vanish as suddenly as it had appeared, she would’ve urged her father to take her and Dalia to visit the famous toy store with the Ferris wheel. Or the other even more famous toy store with the giant floor piano. Or the M&M store with the wall of chocolate. The Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, the museum with the dinosaur bones. Yigal Goldstein took all this from her, and more. She never even had the chance to leave Queens.

Now, when Lydda plays with Dalia in front of Lemkin Gardens, when they ride scooters to PS 143, it seems as if Queens has left her: crushed plastic bottles and shopping bags and mounds of rotting garbage smother the sidewalks. Long rows of shuttered houses and shops line the avenue; doors are chained or covered in plywood, windows broken or missing. And the dark mud of excrement spreads like a stream in the spring rains. A helicopter chops overhead, a Humvee rumbles by. The thud of rotors, the crunch of tires on broken glass. Lydda, when she closes her eyes, has traded one war zone for another.

**Not Prisoners**

Lydda’s father says it would be wrong to keep her and Dalia locked in their small two-room apartment all day. They are girls, not prisoners. No other children live in
Lemkin Gardens anymore, only Sanitation Corps workers, like Francis, and a few of their elderly relatives, like Francis’s mother, Mrs. Freeman, who listens to loud music all day by herself.

The girls may play outside as long as they don’t touch anything: not even the pink and white blossoms that have been falling from the trees like the pretty bits of silk their mother used to braid in their hair; not the yellow flowers with tops like upside-down bells that seemed to appear overnight, somehow pushing through the excrement and filthy soil. When the yellow flowers first appeared, Lydda and Dalia picked as many as they could carry back to the apartment. Their father was displeased, cross at the girls for disobeying. Rules, he said, were to keep them safe, to keep them from becoming ill. He made Lydda record his words in her notebook; she promised not to forget:

- They must not play outside when it is raining.
- They must not play outside the day after a rain.
- They must not talk to anyone in a uniform.
- They must not travel farther than one block from Lemkin Gardens.

It’s three blocks to PS 143, but by climbing on a Dumpster behind the school, Lydda can see the top of the tall brick building that is Lemkin Gardens, and she can hear the faint warble of Mrs. Freeman’s music, which makes three blocks more like one.

Lately, perhaps because the days have become soft and pleasant, Mrs. Freeman has taken to opening her windows and turning her speakers to face the street. In Baghdad, the call to prayer played from the minarets five times each day. Mrs. Freeman’s music starts right after breakfast and ends just before dinner. “Break every chain,” the deep voices sing. “Precious Lord, take my hand.” “I shall not walk alone.”
The rich swells of the music sound both happy and unhappy at once, which Lydda
knows shouldn’t be possible, and yet she experiences the very same feeling when she
thinks of the Bedouin palaces her mother made by pinning sheets to the bedroom ceiling,
draping shimmery cloths from the walls, addressing her girls as “my princesses” with a
dramatic bow and a ticklish kiss to each foot. Lydda sees that Dalia too knows the
strangeness of happy unhappiness. As she watches cartoons, for instance: laughing one
moment, crying the next. And their father, that one night at dinner when Lydda asked him
to demonstrate the difference between British, American, and Australian English: he had
them all laughing with his funny accents before his smile suddenly flattened, disappeared,
and his words sputtered out like a lantern low on oil. He stared at the wall with a glazed
look that reminded Lydda of Dalia’s TV-watching expression during commercials—as if
he’d emptied himself out, turned himself off.

“Papa!” Lydda said, almost shouted.

He blinked, looked at her, surprised.

Collaborating

When the Americans came to Baghdad, they closed the university and hired
Lydda’s father as an interpreter. Lydda overheard her friend Shada’s cousin
describe interpreting as “collaborating,” a word Lydda knew to mean “working together”
but that apparently could also mean “working against.” Now her father collaborates with
the Emergency Sanitation Corps. He wishes he had a job that wasn’t underground and
didn’t smell so awful and didn’t give him headaches and that allowed him time to read: a
job guarding a museum, a library, or a row of empty townhouses in a quiet, rich
neighborhood. Lydda knows her father tells her and Dalia these things to teach them a lesson. Because in the next breath he always reminds them that it’s better to be thankful for what they have than to be upset at what they don’t.

Despite the trouble that has followed them, they still have each other. They have food and bottled water and electricity. They have the good fortune of living in Lemkin Gardens, one of the first buildings fixed up for Sanitation Corps workers. The lights do not flicker, the walls do not shake, the tea glasses do not rattle. They are far removed from the chatter of gunfire, the whistle of falling mortars. Their first months in Queens, Lydda’s father couldn’t find work. Now, thanks to the Toilet Bomber, the work is endless. Soon, he says, they will have saved enough to move. He talks of California. A house by the ocean, close enough to hear the surf. Orange trees in the backyard. Lydda bites her tongue. Her father’s head seems to ache less when he is thinking not about what he has but about what he does not.

PS 143

They have imaginary food fights in the cafeteria. They use the waxy-smelling pastels in the art room. In the principal’s office, although the intercom no longer works, Lydda holds it to her mouth and makes Dalia laugh with silly morning announcements like Mrs. Alvez did on Wacky Wednesdays: teachers must walk backward; children must wear their socks on their ears; lunch will be woolly mammoth burgers and M&M’s; after-school activities are canceled because the escaped Bronx Zoo gorillas are expected to cross into Queens by three o’clock sharp.
In her own classroom, Dalia draws on the blackboard, something Ms. Jackson only allowed during Free-Choice Fridays. Dalia draws flowers and rainbows and stick-figure families in forceful shrieks that snap the chalk.

In Lydda’s classroom, Dalia climbs on a desk and dances, stomping her feet, fluttering her fingers overhead like the springtime petals that drift from the blossoming trees. Lydda, perched on Mr. Ricardo’s tall stool, orders the class to sit down, behave. She twists the ends of an imaginary beard between her fingers, as Mr. Ricardo did when he was pretending to be cross but really trying not to smile. Dalia sticks out her tongue and stomps harder, nearly laughs herself to the floor.

Lydda pulls down the map and points with a meter stick. Dalia’s eyes flash from the long bent arm of California to the lumpy sideways heart of Iraq. Lydda sees it too: the two places are on opposite sides of the world, as far away from each other as they could possibly be.

Dalia flops into the reading corner, buries her face in the lumpy pillows. Lydda sits beside her. She braids and unbraids her sister’s hair, tells the story of the forgetful clock that is always losing track of time, running late. Once the forgetful clock was even late to her own birthday party. When she finally arrived, her friends were all gone. The candles had melted. They looked like lily pads on the cake. But the forgetful clock wasn’t sad. She simply reset the hands on her face back to the time when the party was scheduled to start. Her friends reappeared in their chairs. The lily pads grew into candles and burst into flame. The forgetful clock made her wish, blew out her candles, sliced her cake.
While Dalia naps, Lydda runs a hand over the laminated name tags on the desks of her classmates. They are all gone, either to Citi Field or living with relatives in other parts of the country. Lydda thinks they probably have new fifth-grade teachers. She wonders if Mr. Ricardo remembers her name.

**Citi Field**

Citi Field, the color of sand and topped with tall arches, reminded Lydda of Saddam’s Al-Faw Palace and the Umm al-Qura mosque, and other places she couldn’t forget. Her father said that Citi Field was once a baseball stadium. In the days immediately following the Toilet Bomber’s attack, the field became one of the emergency relocation shelters for those, like Lydda and Dalia and their father, who arrived on foot with their clothes and papers, thirsty, unsure where else to go.

They joined the thick crowds that surged across the hot parking lot. People carried their possessions on their backs, in shopping carts, in plaid plastic laundry bags. Lydda heard Farsi, maybe Spanish, what might’ve been Chinese. The only white people were in camouflage, standing on Humvees by the entrance gates, passing out bottles of water.

Their father, taking the girls by the hand, pressed ahead to the nearest soldier, accepted three bottles of water, and made for the stadium entrance. Dalia wouldn’t go. She stood, rooted in place, trembling as she had when sick with fever. Their father scooped her up in his arms, rubbed her back, said that soldiers—in America—were only allowed to help, guard, not hurt. Dalia shook her head. Soldiers weren’t the problem. “Stinky,” she said, pinching her nose. Crowds parted and regrouped around them. Then,
in a gust of warm air that wafted from the dark innards of Citi Field, Lydda smelled it too: the Green Zone.

It came back to her at once, the fusty yellow tang of too many bodies in too small a space. Disease. Nightly rocket attacks. Ghostly, leering men from Pakistan, India, Egypt, brought to Iraq to build the new embassy buildings, living side by side like hogs, smoking cigarettes in cots, nowhere to bathe, their eyes glassy from the pain pills they ate like candy. Their father pleaded with the Americans, said a labor camp was no place for young girls. The Americans promised it was temporary, promised to move them as soon as space became available. “Soon” turned into one week, then four. Dalia got diarrhea, fever, stopped talking. While their father ran between government ministries, military posts, NGO offices, working to obtain the necessary papers, Lydda pressed a damp cloth to Dalia’s forehead and made her sip bottled water. She told the story of the silly cucumber, whose jokes kept people laughing so hard they’d forget they were hungry. The cucumber escaped every time.

As Lydda tilted her head back to take in all of looming Citi Field, her father’s hand tightened around hers, remembering. He turned, led them against the current of people, back across the parking lot and into the streets where the air stank only of excrement. The Americans, he said, had helped enough. From now on they would look after themselves.

**Checkpoint**

PS 143 doesn’t smell so bad, and only once did they see a rat. Lydda and Dalia, during their neighborhood explorations, have come across far worse. They only need to
hold their noses when they run past the bathrooms on their way to the gymnasium. There they push open the big double doors and skip squeaky circles across the glossy wooden floor. Unlike the playgrounds and parks, the gymnasium is clean and safe and belongs to them. They do cartwheels and flap their arms, fly to the top of the aluminum bleachers, prance and neigh like unicorns. They kick a ball against the wall. They play checkpoint: Dalia must answer correctly when asked who she is with: Zarqawi or Mahdi Army? Sunni or Shia?

“Mahdi Army.”

“Wrong.” Lydda pokes Dalia’s chest with the butt end of a floor-hockey stick that is now a rifle. “Come with me.”

Lydda’s father warns Lydda not to scare Dalia with these games, but Lydda knows it’s important for Dalia to practice what to do, what to say, in case the Americans send them back.

The Americans will not send them back, her father says. He reminds Lydda of the identification cards he keeps in the metal box by his mattress along with their refugee papers, an envelope of money, and the emergency phone. The identification cards are smooth. Tilted to the light, they glitter with eagles and official seals. They say “permanent resident” across the top. Her father stresses the word *permanent*.

Lydda knows better than to believe that words and glittery seals can keep a promise from being broken. She remembers the Green Zone, and before the Green Zone, when the threats first came, when the masked men knocked late at night and entered without removing their shoes. The Americans promised to help, promised to protect Lydda’s father, their interpreter, and his family. Promised to keep them safe and alive.
Lydda finds it embarrassing that her father forgets so easily. It doesn’t seem very sophisticated of him at all.

“Al-Sadr or al-Amiri?” she shouts at Dalia, her voice rebounding off the gymnasium walls. “Who are you with?”

Housekeeping

Lydda’s father is always tired and hungry and smells of bitter disinfectant after laboring in the sewers all day, which is why Lydda works to have the house in order before the evening 7 train returns. While Dalia watches cartoons, Lydda sweeps. She smooths the wrinkles from the bedsheets. She ties the refuse bag, takes it to the sidewalk, then lines their provisional toilet—a plastic bucket with two boards parallel across the top—with a fresh bag. She lights a leaf of sage in the sink and zigzags between the corners of the apartment, leaving trails of spicy white smoke to clear the air. She arranges the water bottles in neat, even rows, and organizes the plastic utensils on the kitchen counter, grouping them by type, spacing the groupings a precise index finger’s width from one another.

Lydda’s father says she fusses over their home too much. He says she should put down her broom and read a book, watch cartoons with her sister. Lydda knows he is only being polite, just as her mother used to tell her to always refuse a gift three times before accepting. Lydda enjoys cleaning. She keeps their rooms neat and sweet smelling, while outside there is nothing but filth and stink.

From downstairs, Mrs. Freeman’s music sings about a bank in Jordan. Then the music abruptly stops. It’s time for dinner.
Dinner

Dinner is simple. It comes in brown paper packages called MREs that are delivered to Lemkin Gardens, along with bottled water and clean refuse bags. The packages have a chemical that heats the food without fire. Tonight it’s peaches, bean-and-cheese burritos, peanut butter crackers. Lydia arranges the meal on the carton they use for a table, tells Dalia to sanitize her hands.

“Papa?” Dalia stands at the window, watching the avenue and the elevated tracks.

“Soon,” Lydda says, though she realizes now what Dalia has realized already: the evening 7 train should have come and gone. Lemkin Gardens should be filling with the noises of returning workers, the smells of incense and sage, bean-and-cheese burritos. Lydda glances at the metal box containing the emergency phone. Her father has an identical phone that he takes to work. The phones are programmed with one another’s numbers. In case of an emergency, if one of the girls was to become sick, or hurt, they are to call him, then go downstairs to wait with Mrs. Freeman. But this is not an emergency. The evening 7 train is merely late.

Lydda serves dinner and reviews their daily lessons, ordinarily their father’s job. When he arrives home, more tired and hungry and sore than usual, at least he will be pleased to see his girls behaving so responsibly. He will compliment Lydda for the clean home, the dinner, the smell of sage. The way she continues looking after Dalia.

15 unicorns prancing on a rainbow = 60 hooves in all.

12 storks + 15 unicorns = 12 animals in all.
Lydda attempts to correct her sister’s mistake, but Dalia only stabs her peaches, chews her fingernails, glances out the window. The setting sun streaks the sky with pink, silhouetting the elevated tracks. Lydda moves from mathematics to language arts. She reads her story aloud: “Fifteen unicorns climbed the rainbow because they were hungry. The fluffy clouds tasted like baklava, the wispy ones like pistachio. When all the clouds were eaten, the unicorns got stomachaches. Their friends the storks arrived to rub their bellies. Everyone felt better.”

Dalia goes to the window, watches the tracks.


Dalia doesn’t move from the window.

Lydda lets out a long breath, then organizes the lessons for their father to review later. She comes across Dalia’s story, reads it to herself:

*The storks wr lost and so the storks flu tu the rainbow tu be up hi to c as far as posibl and the unicorns wr taking up all the rum on the rainbow so the storks pushd them off and the unicorns fel on the grownd and all of them wr killd*

Twelve animals in all remain.

**The Wonderful Miserable Garden**

There once lived Amilla, a river spirit who tended a flower garden. A spirit flower garden, as everyone knows, is a place of splendid magic. In some spirit gardens, the flowers speak. In others, they walk around serving tea and sweets to guests. The magic in Amilla’s garden was different. It appeared only if somebody happened to pick a flower. That person could then imagine any wonderful place in the world and instantly travel
there for a day. It was such an incredible magic that people came from all across the
kingdom to visit the place they loved or missed most. Amilla, worried that her garden
would soon be picked clean, planted a second type of flower with a second type of magic.
Whoever picked one of these would travel to a miserable place and, for one day, be very
unhappy. Amilla believed this would keep her garden safe, and for a long time it did. But
one day a little girl, knowing no better, picked a flower. Instantly she found herself in a
stone cellar crawling with bugs and smelling of rotten meat. She shivered and cried and
gagged in the dark and thought she would never again see sunlight. Imagine her surprise
when, one day later, she suddenly reappeared in Amilla’s garden. She kissed the ground
and laughed and somersaulted in the grass. Amilla, seeing that people were far happier
returning from a miserable place than from a wonderful place, knew her garden was
doomed. She filled her pockets with seeds and flew off to plant new flowers somewhere
far away, in a place that people would least expect.

Dalia, nestled against Lydda, falls asleep. Lydda rests the hairbrush on the floor
by the mattress. It’s well past midnight. On the floor, next to the hairbrush, is the
emergency phone. Lydda does not call. If she were to call, she would make this an
emergency. This is not an emergency. Their father simply hasn’t yet returned.

Those Who Need Help Now

The Emergency Sanitation Corps truck does not arrive in the morning to collect
the refuse bags outside Lemkin Gardens. The absence of sound tugs Lydda from sleep
like an alarm. She rolls off the mattress, careful not to disturb Dalia, but Dalia isn’t there.
Except for a large wet spot and a rumpled sheet, Dalia’s half of the mattress is empty.
A sharp knocking comes from the apartment hallway. A woman’s voice. Lydda rushes from the bedroom to find Dalia standing by the front door, which is closed and bolted. Tears run trails down her cheeks. She holds the emergency phone in one hand.

“Girls?” It’s Mrs. Freeman. Her voice is wet and ragged. She continues knocking. “Girls? You in there? You hear from your daddy? Lord, TV’s saying there’s been an accident. My Francis, he didn’t come home, won’t answer his phone. Girls? You unlock the door now. Come downstairs till we know what’s what. We’ll pray together, is what we’ll do. I have some lemonade mix I’ve been saving. The pink kind.”

The girls stand silent and still. In case of an emergency, they are supposed to call their father, then wait at Mrs. Freeman’s. Their father’s instructions said nothing about Mrs. Freeman coming to them. Their father is friendly to Mrs. Freeman. So are Lydda and Dalia, and Mrs. Freeman is friendly in return. But they don’t know Mrs. Freeman. Not really. She shouldn’t be knocking on their door like this, upset, telling them about an accident. She’s scaring Dalia. Lydda too. Both girls flinch at each sharp blow of Mrs. Freeman’s knuckles: a familiar, terrible sound.

“Here’s what we’ll do,” Mrs. Freeman says. “I’m going downstairs to fix some lemonade and a plate of cookies. Then I’ll be back up. We’ll have ourselves a snack and a prayer until we know what’s what. Girls?”

Mrs. Freeman waits a moment, shuffles away. Lydda, in the quiet, hears a thin voice coming from the emergency phone. She snatches it from Dalia.

“Papa!” she says in Arabic. “I am sorry. Dalia called without permission. There is no emergency. We are fine. Do not worry. When are you returning home?”
“Hello? Who’s this?” The voice is male, American, and impatient, like the soldiers who used to stand guard on the street corners in Baghdad. “Am I speaking to a relative of Tariq al-Alusi?”

Lydda ends the call. “Look what you’ve done,” she hisses, glaring at Dalia. “Papa is going to be cross at us.” Dalia glares back at Lydda, says nothing. The phone lights up. Their father’s number. Again the man, asking her name.

“Listen, sweetie. You’re at Lemkin Gardens, right? Don’t leave. We’re sending someone as soon as we can.”

Lydda turns off the phone and switches on the TV, flipping from Dalia’s cartoons to the news. A woman with blonde hair says something about a leaky gas pipe. An explosion. Dead and wounded. Search for survivors. The images show smoke, flashing blue and red lights, bodies on stretchers, bloodied bandages, men clawing through hunks of concrete and twisted spikes of rebar.

Lydda follows the figures in their papery white suits and breathing masks, looking for her father. She thinks he is probably helping. Back home, he always assisted in such emergencies. He said there were two sides: those who need help now, and those who will need help later.

Lydda turns off the TV. Dalia looks to her with watery eyes. Someone is coming for them. The man on the phone said so. Without their father, they will be taken to Citi Field, and from there probably sent back to Iraq. Lydda understands that it’s up to her, right now, to help them both.

“Pack your things,” she says. “We’re going to school.”
A Hundred Little Tasks

The night a man called to say that Lydda’s mother was not coming home, Lydda’s father filled the immediate emptiness with a hundred little tasks. He instructed the girls to pack their clothes, to shut the windows halfway and open the doors three-quarters, to turn off the lights and take the pillows out of their cases. He ordered them to wear two pairs of socks, to drink as much water as could fit in their bellies. He even told them to put on their hijabs, which they only wore for the Eid feast because their grandmother was what their mother called “old-fashioned.” As their father shouted his commands, he ran from room to room, completing a hundred little tasks of his own. He stuffed clothes into a bag, rummaged for his eyeglasses, scribbled a letter, all the while speaking rapid English into the phone cradled between his cheek and shoulder.

Now Lydda does much the same. She commands Dalia to unplug the TV, to brush her teeth, change her clothes, fold the bedsheets into triangles, pack her knapsack. Lydda empties the metal box into her own knapsack, along with the sage and their lessons and her notebook, and as much of her clothing as will fit. She fills two clean refuse bags, one with MREs, the other with bottled water. The hair on her forearms prickles, and the inside of her mouth turns pasty, as if from thirst, yet she remains quiet and moves precisely. Dalia too. She is no longer crying. She is calm and focused amid the flurry of activity. The hundred little tasks leave no space for worry or questions. Lydda knows worry will come later, once they are safe. Not until they were behind the thick concrete blast walls of the Green Zone did their father put his head in his shaking hands and start to cry.
**One More River to Cross**

The bulging knapsacks and the heavy plastic bags make riding their scooters slow and clumsy. The morning sky has clouded over. The air is calm, without a trace of wind. One block from PS 143, Lydda’s front wheel catches in a crack. She falls, striking her knee on the pavement. She winces, stands up, brushes her filthy hands on her pants, then hears the growl of an engine. “Hide!”

She and Dalia drag their scooters behind a pyramid of garbage on the sidewalk. They duck low. The warm, ripe stench makes Lydda’s stomach clench.

A convoy of National Guard trucks. Lydda thinks they were sent for her and Dalia, but the trucks drive past Lemkin Gardens, toward Citi Field. When they disappear from view, Lydda rights her scooter, slings the heavy bag of MREs over her shoulder, tells Dalia they must hurry. Dalia doesn’t hear. She’s squatting by an iron sidewalk planter. In the planter, poking up from the rubbish, grow a cluster of the pretty yellow flowers with tops like upside-down bells.

“Dalia, we must go.”

Dalia stands, holding a flower by the stem.

“Put it down. We’re not allowed to touch.”

Mrs. Freeman’s speakers faintly crackle and flare to life, startling the girls. “One more river,” a man sings from two blocks away. “I’ve got one more river . . .”

“Papa is going to be cross,” Lydda says. “It’s against the rules.”

“So’s going to the school,” Dalia says.

Lydda sighs. There is much to do. They must get to PS 143, hide their scooters, bring everything inside. She must clean Mr. Ricardo’s classroom, make it suitable for
eating and sleeping. She must find a bucket and two boards for a provisional toilet. She must change out of her filthy pants. Lydda thinks she will probably write a daily schedule on the board like Mr. Ricardo did. She and Dalia will attend art, library, gym. They will continue their lessons. Lydda will record everything in her notebook. Perhaps she will clean more than Mr. Ricardo’s classroom. Perhaps she will clean all the classrooms, one by one; when the sewers are finally fixed, PS 143 can reopen without delay and Mr. Ricardo can take them to the Bronx Zoo. In the meantime, once a day—no, five times a day—Lydda will turn on the emergency phone until her father calls. When she hears the thunder of the evening 7 train on the elevated tracks, she will sneak to the corner to see if he is among the returning workers. But first she and Dalia must travel one more block to PS 143. Which means Dalia must pick up her bags and get on her scooter.

“Give me the flower,” Lydda says, extending an arm.

“No.” Dalia draws back. Bits of broken glass pop beneath her sneakers. She grips the flower with both hands. Her knuckles whiten. From Mrs. Freeman’s speakers, a woman tumbles low, rises: “‘Oh Lord’ (Oh Lord) and ‘Oh Lord.’”

“Dalia! We must go! Now! Do you want to get sent back to Baghdad?”

“Yes.”

Lydda kicks a plastic bottle by her foot. “You understand nothing!”

Dalia’s eyes fill up. She glances suddenly over her shoulder, as if she might run. Lydda drops her bag and lunges, rips the flower from Dalia’s hands and tears it to pieces, sprinkling the ground with tatters of petals and stem. Dalia cries out, then squats down and picks another flower. And another. And another. Wildly, she pulls bundles of yellow
and green from the earth, purposefully violating their father’s rules, trying to make Lydda angry. Lydda knows this, and it’s working.

“Stop!” Lydda grabs Dalia by the shoulders, but Dalia holds on to the iron planter, refuses to be moved; her tiny body is hard and wiry and hot in Lydda’s grip. Both girls cry out now, a long, thin wail that rises above Mrs. Freeman’s music until Dalia lets go. Together they tumble to the ground. Lydda scrambles to her feet. Dalia does not. Dalia lies on her back on the filthy sidewalk and closes her eyes. She appears as though she’s done crying, done yelling, done doing anything other than looking tired and empty, like their father after an especially wearying day: too exhausted to eat or review their lessons or talk about California, too tired to do anything but slump onto his mattress and wait for sleep. Something wells inside Lydda. She crouches beside the planter, picks a flower.

“Dalia, guess where I am.”

Dalia cracks an eye, sniffs, doesn’t answer.

“With you and Papa, at the toy store with the giant piano. He’s hopping on the black keys, we’re hopping on the white keys. We’re dancing, making music.”

Lydda picks another. “Now we’re in California. Hear the waves collapsing on the beach? Smell the oranges? The ocean?”

Dalia props herself up on her elbows, breathes in through her nostrils.

Lydda picks a third flower. Her voice drops to a hush. “We’re with Mama, in bed. She’s telling us the story of Amilla’s miserable wonderful garden. You’re a baby. Mama is lying on her back, hugging you to her belly. You rise up and down with each breath she takes.”
Dalia crawls to the planter, picks the tallest of the few remaining flowers, holds it beneath her nose. She scrunches her eyes shut and travels somewhere far away from Queens. Mrs. Freeman’s speakers moan and crackle. A bird rustles in the garbage, pecking at a Styrofoam container. The mangled yellow petals scattered in piles by Lydda’s shoes smell faintly sweet.

**Who Are You With?**

Four months earlier, in Lemkin Gardens, Lydda had found herself growing frustrated at Dalia. That afternoon, when Lydda had stopped by the kindergarten classroom to collect her sister and walk her home, Ms. Jackson stooped down to Dalia’s level and, smiling, said to Lydda, “How are we going to get this little sweet pea to open her mouth?”

Their first full week at PS 143, and Dalia still hadn’t said a word. She hadn’t spoken since the Green Zone. Lydda was beginning to fear she might never speak again.

“How will you make friends?” Lydda asked. They were sitting on the floor of their apartment in Lemkin Gardens, coloring with markers and paper that Lydda had borrowed from Mr. Ricardo’s classroom. Their father was out searching for work. “How will you show Ms. Jackson your sophistication?”

Dalia’s marker made soft squeaking sounds as she focused on her picture: flowers, a clock, a Bedouin palace.

In a flash of irritation, Lydda snatched Dalia’s marker, streaking the paper. “Say your name.”

Dalia scowled, swiped the air.
Lydda held the marker high overhead. “Say your name. Say ‘Papa.’ Say anything!”

Dalia walked to a corner of the room and stood facing the wall. For some reason, Lydda felt angrier with her sister than ever before. “You must at least try!” Lydda blurted. “What if we get sent back? And Papa is not there to look after you? And I’m not? What will you say when they ask who you are with? Sunni or Shia? Dalia? What will you say?” Lydda, without realizing, was yelling now, loudly, desperately. “Say something! Who are you with? Who are you with?”

Dalia spun around. Her face was red, her fists in tight little balls. “With you,” she said, her voice small but sure. “I am with you.”