Play Your Cards Right

by

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Play Your Cards Right

My cousin could tell you everything you needed to know. She could tell you what music to play and she could tell you the way to listen to it, without smiling, sitting on our grandma’s mildewed carpet, watching the boom box like we were helping to power it. She could tell you how to tear your shirts up and fray your jeans in all the right places, a hole in the right knee, so you looked like you had fought battles. She could tell you about all the boys who had cars and all the boys who didn’t, and when to talk to which. She could tell you to arrive at the church festivals right before full dark, when the sky lit an ultraviolet blue that made your teeth hurt and your white shoelaces glow. She could tell you how to wear your hair long down your back and your jeans a size too small and how to eat funnel cakes in the eighth grade hallway bathroom, crouching together in a stall, so that the boys could go on thinking you never ate at all. She could tell you how to rip the Bars & Bells ticket so that you revealed all five symbols at once, and knew right away if it was a winner or a loser, instead of your earnest stripping of each panel one-by-one—a bell, a cherry, a bar, a loser. She could tell you how to throw the gutted, losing cards to the ground, too, and how to give the winning ones, when you finally found them, to a boy so he could trade them in for new cards, without saying anything, without even looking at him. She could tell you how to play all your cards right, and she could do it with practiced, laughing
helplessness, almost hiding the fleshy realness of herself—the plump whiteness between elbow and armpit, the wet tendon beneath her tongue, the ripe balloons of her cheeks. You could almost forget those parts of her. You could almost believe, when she told you, “Remember, there’s iron in our blood, too,” that we were somehow different from everyone else.

My cousin Karissa lived with us in Cincinnati for a year before she died. I was thirteen, concerned only with surviving eighth grade, when she arrived at our doorstep with a ratty Army duffel bag that I know she took great pains to find. Karissa was fourteen; she was from a different world. She had come to live with my family because her mom was out of the picture at the moment and her dad was struggling with drugs and depression and the chair he had been in since childhood. Polio, it seemed. I had only met him once—they lived in a tiny town in southeastern Kentucky—and he was like some kind of benevolent and misunderstood magical being, cursed to live a sad life. Karissa was his natural fey offspring—mischievous and charming and dangerous—the only kind of creature who could survive her family.

“Don’t smile so much, honey,” she said. We were hanging around the ring toss, watching the boys throw. It was St. Dominic’s church festival, the one closest to home, and we were feeling lucky and brave because my parents were at a show downtown and were not volunteering at any of the booths. Karissa was leaning in so close I could smell her lip gloss. She must have noticed my perplexed expression, because she continued, “Smiling all the time’s the same as never smiling. You see?” Karissa ended all of her pronouncements with “You see?” so they were mystical and absolute. “Smiling doesn’t
mean you’re happy. It means you know someone’s watching you. You want them to wonder sometimes, whether you’re watching or not.”

She kept her face carefully blank while the boys stared back, to demonstrate her point.

“Karissa,” Goldfish said. “What’re you making that face for.”

I first assumed that they called him Goldfish to make fun of him, but Karissa assured me he insisted on the nickname. I never knew his real name.

Karissa turned her back on him to give me a wink, and then whipped around and did her laugh, scrunching up her nose in a way that should have been unattractive if it weren’t suddenly and completely disarming. “Don’t ya’ll worry.” She lifted one shoulder and shook her head at them. “I’m terrific. We’re feeling just as good as we possibly could, aren’t we, Mel?” She linked her arm in mine. We were feeling especially great after the shots of vodka we had taken in the bathroom several minutes ago.

It was mid-August, humid and hot and hard to breathe, but it was that blue time before night really fell, and my lungs could expand a little more than they could during the stifling afternoon. My memories of that night are all stained in that radioactive blue, as if the day took longer to darken than usual, although I’m sure dusk came just as quickly as it did every other night.

Derek stole one of the navy rings from Goldfish—he had carelessly left them on the tent’s table—and threw one toward the peg board, hooping one of the rods. “Double points for a steal!” Derek said, with a sports announcer’s theatrics. The other boy, Gary, tried to steal the remaining four rings, but Goldfish snatched them.
“You all are children,” Goldfish said. He started to walk away from them, toward Karissa and me, and then yelled “Children!” over his shoulder again, to make sure they understood his disdain. Goldfish had a way of setting himself apart from the other boys, of making it seem like he was indulging them, indulging all of us, by being there. This, of course, was what made him irresistible.

I was almost as obsessed with Goldfish as I was with Karissa. He and the other boys were sixteen, juniors. I noticed his oddness from the first time I met him, when Karissa had taken me to a New Year’s Eve party. Goldfish shouldn’t have been popular. There was something about him that was utterly different from the other boys’ stocky builds and loud voices. It was more than how he looked—he had dark hair down to his shoulders, long fingernails, thick eyelashes, and slim hips. It was also the way he spoke, without throwing in “man” after every sentence, unafraid to meet your eyes. It was how he walked with tiny steps, one foot in front of the other; how he sat with one leg crossed over the other.

Karissa was crazy about him, and I wanted to see them get together almost as much. At that New Year’s Eve party, Goldfish had turned to Karissa ten seconds before midnight, while everyone else was cheering and counting down the final seconds of Karissa’s last New Year, and turned her face to the side, so gently, to kiss her on the cheek. They looked beautiful together—his long ashy brown hair falling into her even longer raven hair, the strands of each becoming indistinguishable from the other.

It shows you how naïve I was then that I thought this meant they were dating. Even when I found out that they weren’t—“Maybe sometime,” Karissa had said, with her instantaneous, fever red blush that belied her shrug—I still thought they were destined for
one another. I was a romantic, something I had only recently known the label for after talking to Karissa about her future with Goldfish. “Oh, God, you’re a romantic,” Karissa had said, as if it was a new and terrible species of vermin. “Like soul mates and all that? Honey, do not say that around the boys. Or around anyone but me. Thinking about the future is not sexy.” Then, I took everything Karissa said for face value, but it has occurred to me since that she might not have been as sure of everything as she always seemed.

“Hey, little cousin,” Goldfish said, interrupting my reverie, as if he knew I was thinking about him and Karissa. “You want to toss?”

“Sure.” I was smiling too much, I thought, and tried to flatten my mouth.

“What?” he said. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“Mel wants to.” Karissa slid her arm through mine and walked me to the booth. She lifted her long hair off the nape of her neck for a moment, curling it around her fist like a rope, before letting it fall once again. Derek was distracted by the line of skin showing at her belly when she had her arm lifted.

The band had begun playing on the makeshift stage twenty feet away. The drums and electric guitar were even louder than the announcers in the game tents around us or the mechanical whirr of the rides at the other end of the parking lot.

Karissa looked at the band and shook her head. “What are they doing to those guitars?” She grinned at me. “We have to go to Burning Man. Soon.” I only vaguely knew what this was, and I’m not sure she had much more information than I did, but even when I thought she knew everything, I still knew it was impossible.

“I wish,” I said.
She frowned. “Why wouldn’t we? All we need is somebody with a car.” She looked over at Goldfish and winked.

He scowled. “What.”

We burst out laughing. To me, the festivals were still wild. They were noisy and grimy with grill smoke. During the day, little kids and parents filled the maze of booths, but at night the blacktop filled with adults drunk from cheap beer and teenagers stalking lazily, aimlessly. The energy of the day lost its focus at night and turned a little dangerous—the year before, a teenage girl got kicked out for hiding, in her L.L. Bean backpack, a five foot long black rat snake, which she would periodically wrap around other people’s necks. But Karissa was not concerned by any danger that could fit in a backpack. She was teaching me that these sorts of perils lost their power when you realized you could hold them in your own two hands and drop them whenever you pleased. She was teaching me to take all dark, coiled things in stride.

“Did I tell you Goldfish has his brother’s car tonight?” Karissa yelled.

“No!” I yelled back into her ear.

“We want to go for a ride! Say yes, right now. Your mom will not find out.”

We had snuck out of festivals to go driving a couple times before, whenever Goldfish could borrow his brother’s car. Mostly we would try to go hill hopping, but it was a tough thing to manage in greater Cincinnati—too many cops, too difficult to manage the speed necessary to get air. I’d been in the car when Goldfish got it going fast enough to terrify me, but we never lifted off the pavement.

“We wanted to try Hillside this time,” Karissa said. “Derek’s friends said it was great.” She didn’t even pause before she reminded me, “Summer’s almost done for! We
gotta drink it up!” Her eyes were ecstatic, shining with tiny lights, like the rows of bulbs on the rides rising and falling behind her.

“Okay! Let’s do it!” I said. “But you should text Mom that we’ll be late, at least. Going to a friend’s house, tell her.”

“Throw it already!” Goldfish said to me.

Karissa swiveled her head to tell Goldfish, “It’s a good thing you’re good-lookin.” She said this to everyone, with just enough irony that everyone would laugh.

“Yes,” she said to me, and pulled her cell phone out. It was a big Nokia phone, old even then, with a sticker on the back that said, “XOXOXO.” Karissa would let me play Snake on it sometimes, but she never let any of the boys touch it. “Okay,” she said, speaking right into my ear. “Don’t miss!” Karissa turned toward the boys and yelled, “Gary! I bet you Mel makes one on the first throw.”

Gary shrugged his shoulders. He was quieter than everyone else, and usually startled when someone remembered he was there.

“If she does, you owe her a Coke!” She poked me in the ribs and whispered, “You like him, right! You have to make it!”

“What!” I whispered back. “I do not!” Although I had high hopes for Karissa and Goldfish’s romance, I had few aspirations of my own prospects. Before Karissa had come to stay with us, I didn’t even have friends. My best friend had switched to public school, I had fought with another friend, and I was suddenly unable to break into any group at all. It wasn’t that no one would talk to me, exactly, but that it was so incredibly difficult to enter any of those cliques. They all seemed to purposefully talk in inside jokes and riddles whenever I approached. I spent seventh grade dreading lunch and reading at recess,
wallowing in the sadness of childhood, the time you are unable to believe that things will change. Then, Karissa came, and befriended me immediately, although I was a year younger and still in grade school while she was beginning high school. She had already learned that everything could change and she must have also known that everything could disappear, too.

“Mom wouldn’t even let me date!” I said to Karissa, because I really didn’t want to date Gary, although I doubted this was strictly true about my mom caring. My parents were young and lax and might even have been relieved if I was dating someone. But I believed in the power of small sacrifices—I wouldn’t even try to date, and I would get to keep these friends. I made this deal with God, or whoever, and I really expected Somebody would keep their end of the bargain.

“Seriously, Mel!” Goldfish yelled. “Throw!”

I threw the ring into the tent and missed the board entirely, almost hitting the woman at the adjacent face painting booth.

Goldfish didn’t miss a beat. “Gary, you can totally do better than that. If you don’t make this next one, you still owe her a Coke!”

“What!” Gary said, his almost-invisible eyebrows rising, his eyes becoming red around the edges. He was the sort of person who seemed always on the edge of hyperventilating. He had a habit of sucking on the cuff of his hoodie, where the cotton bound together at his inner wrist, and he took the fabric in his mouth then.

“That’s fucking disgusting, man,” Derek said. “The way you suck on your sweatshirt. It’s got spit all over it. Are you a baby, or what?”
None of us had ever directly said anything about Gary’s nervous habit, although I’m sure everyone had noticed it before, but to hear it described aloud made it suddenly unbearable. The saliva-soaked material hanging from Gary’s lips made my stomach turn, as if he had peed in his pants. Shame spread through the group, dire and contagious.

I shuddered, audibly. “It’s not a pacifier, Gary,” I said.

Derek and Goldfish laughed and I felt relief.


“Let’s get Cokes,” Karissa said to Gary, pulling him away. She actually took his hand as she did, seeming to not notice the wetness at his wrist.

“What is his deal.” Derek shook his head.

I was reeling from this sudden change in alliances—why was Karissa helping him? Was I too mean?

Five or ten minutes later, Karissa and Gary arrived at the ring toss tent cradling several sweating bottles of pop. Gary’s sweatshirt, I noticed, was nowhere to be seen.

Karissa gave Gary a look once everyone had their own bottles opened.

Gary nodded at Karissa. “Let’s go for a drive,” he said to us.

The suburban streets around us seemed especially dark as we gained distance from the festival. My flip flops seemed embarrassingly loud and I was lagging behind the group, trying to walk without slapping the plastic.

Goldfish was running his fingers along each festival goers’ parked car on the street, as if he could key them with just his fingernails. His fingers stilled on a blue Mustang, its metallic body catching the streetlights. The car’s top was peeled down and Goldfish rested
his hand on the top of the driver side door. “Look at this guy,” he said. “Leaving his top
down. Stupid.” He shook his head.

Derek was slightly ahead of Goldfish on the sidewalk. He turned around, now
walking backwards, and threw his empty Coke bottle into the Mustang. “All right!” he
said.

Gary got his bottle into the car, too, and the boys whooped. Goldfish took a swig
of his Mountain Dew and threw the bottle, still half full, into the cab of the car as well.
Derek, Gary, and Karissa were all particularly impressed by this and yelled louder. I rushed
by the car, looking over my shoulder for adults, and saw the neon liquid seeping into the
fabric of the backseat.

Goldfish’s car, two side streets over, was a little boxy, ugly thing from the 80’s, so
small that Karissa was practically on top of me when we piled into the back. Gary pressed
into my other side. Karissa took a pull from the flask and passed it to me and I drank a
little sip since it didn’t take much for me to feel it. I passed it to Gary who took a big
swallow and then another.

I started to put my seatbelt on, but Karissa laughed and said, “What are you doing?”
so I dropped it.

“How do you know where we are?” Goldfish said, to one of us or to all of us.

Karissa nodded and said, “Sure I know.” She gave him a few instructions and then
he cranked some metal CD so loud I could barely hear even the wind coming through the
windows.

Karissa yelled in my ear, “Close your eyes.” So I did. She laid her head on my
shoulder and said, “I’m so glad I’m here.”
I was afraid to ask—here in this car? Or here in Cincinnati with me?

I thought about how little I knew about my cousin. A few nights ago, when she was mad at my mom, she told me about her own. “She’s a bitch, you know? Leaving my dad in that chair. He’s been stuck in that chair his whole life, you know? He’s never walked anywhere. And he’s a good dad,” she continued, looking at me to check that I agreed. “He smokes a little weed, but he took care of us.” Karissa had two older brothers—one in the military and one in and out of jail and rehab. “And she just leaves him, living with some other guy. Ugh. Whatever.”

“Is your dad… really sick right now?” I had asked.

“It’s not like he can’t take care of me. But he has it so hard, you know?”

I had no idea what that meant, or how long she would stay. I could get barely anything more out of my parents, who said things like, “You don’t have to worry about a thing,” as if that was an answer.

In the speeding car—I leaned forward to see the speedometer at 85 and wondered if Goldfish’s brother’s car could go any faster—Karissa lifted her head from my shoulder and said, “I wish I could take you with me!”

“Take me with you where?”

She looked at me, so close that it was hard to focus on her face. “Back home.”

“You’re going home?”

“Course,” she said. “Sooner or later.”

“You don’t have to. You could stay with us.”

“You’re so sweet,” she said. “I love you, Melly.”
Karissa said “I love you,” so easily, something I could never get used to, although I liked to hear her say it.

“I love you, too,” I said, trying to say it as lightly as she did, although it came out, I feared, too seriously.

Derek, sitting in the passenger’s seat and smoking a joint said, “There are so many lights with us.” He laughed, a small, breathy sound.

Goldfish laughed too. “I think you should put that down, man.” The car’s engine groaned as Goldfish pushed it further.

“Take a right here!” Karissa yelled.

We’d travelled out of suburbia, into a less populated, leafy area. The trees were so thick that it looked like we were in the middle of a forest somewhere, even though I knew there must be houses close. I wasn’t certain, but I thought the river must be close by from the drop in temperature.

“Shit,” Goldfish said. “If you know where you are.”

He stopped the car with enough force to make Karissa fall into Goldfish’s seat in front of her. “Dammit, Goldfish, why’d you stop the car?” She leaned forward to slap his shoulder playfully.

“Don’t slap me,” he said, rather testily, I thought.

“Jeeze, okay, okay,” Karissa said.

We were facing a road that seemed even darker for how light it was where we were in the clearing. In front of us the road was heavily canopied by trees on either side and looked more like a tunnel than a road.
“You guys ready?” Goldfish said, but he was pressing the gas before we could say anything at all.

I had never gone so fast. It was difficult to even see the hills as they came. The car’s headlights didn’t seem able to fully penetrate the darkness like they should, and we bounced and flew and Karissa screamed in my ear, “Lift off!” and I knew exactly what she meant, like we had the power to leave the atmosphere and get to a weightless place, and we did reach it, after Karissa screamed, “Faster!” and Goldfish obeyed, and we lifted off the pavement.

At some point the car swerved sharply and then suddenly we were screeching to a halt. I was sure we were all going to plunge into a ditch off the road to our deaths, but we were still on the road.

“Holy shit,” Goldfish said, or Karissa.

“Dude,” Derek said, “I need to pee.” He jumped out of the car before anyone could say anything.

“Oh, jeeze,” Karissa said. “I’m going to make sure he doesn’t get lost for good. You better put the hazards on,” she said to Goldfish. The car was still hanging into the road since there wasn’t much room between the pavement and the trees.

“I’m gunna get some air.” I swung the back door open and leaned on the back of the car, still breathing hard. Every year there was a story about teenagers dying in a hill hopping accident. We were so stupid.

Goldfish opened the driver’s door and joined me to lean on the trunk. “You better watch out for cars,” he said. “Looks like the hazard button doesn’t work. We should make a joke out of that, right.”
“We’re not hazardous enough,” I said.

“No hazards here,” he said.

We both laughed. “No,” he said, “we didn’t find it.”

“You’re a little younger than Karissa, right?” Goldfish had a smile in his voice.

“Thirteen,” I said.

“Jesus,” he said. “When I was thirteen, I was about five inches shorter than you.”

“Why are you called Goldfish?” The wind blew hair in my face and I tucked it behind my ears, casually, I hoped.

“I found a whole case of buried treasure under a lake, and I brought it up, and they said, ‘Goldfish!’”

“But why, really?”

“I swallowed a goldfish whole.”

“Uh-huh.”

“My parents tried to flush me down the toilet once when they were sick of me.”

“Okay,” I said, sarcastic but smiling. Hair got stuck in my face again and I shook my head to get the few strands off my lip gloss.

“Here,” Goldfish said. He took a rubber band from his wrist and pulled my long hair over my shoulder. His hand grazed my neck as he gathered the small strands at the back of my scalp. He wrapped my hair with the rubber band once, twice, very carefully, not ever hurting. “There,” he said. “Isn’t that better?”

“Thank you,” I said. No boy had ever purposely touched my hair before, but I figured I was probably overreacting to think it was flirting.

“You’re so pretty,” he said.
So he was flirting. I stared at him. Didn’t he like Karissa? He moved closer and I was so startled that I did nothing; I saw that his eyes were dark and amethyst-clear and that his lashes curled like a girl’s. I stood still as he put his hand on my hip and kissed me, quickly. I put my hand to my mouth to check that it had really happened. Then I heard Derek saying, “Do you hear that wind? Sounds like a fucking helicopter,” and then I could make out the blurry silhouettes of Derek and Karissa by the trees.

Had she seen? What had I done? And why? I wanted to run over to her, to wrap my arms around her and tell her that I was sorry, that I hadn’t even decided to do anything, that he had just done it before I could react. It didn’t even occur to me, then, to say that he was too old for me and probably too old for her, too.

I tried to meet her eyes as she and Derek approached us, but she didn’t meet mine. “Look, guys,” she said, “we have to go back to St. Dominic’s. I left my phone somewhere. I’ll have to search for it.”


“Come on,” she said, pushing him toward the car. “Let’s go.”

Once we were packed into the car and I was once again in the middle seat in the back I was desperately thinking of how I could ask her if she had seen without showing my hand. If everyone else weren’t there—if Goldfish wasn’t there—I think I would have confessed immediately, whether she knew or not, so that I could beg her not to be angry with me. As it was, all I could say was, “Do you remember where you left it?”

She frowned, but did not meet my eyes. She could just be angry about the phone, I told myself. “It must be by the food tent. Where we got the drinks.”
“Probably someone found it and took it to Lost and Found,” I said.

“Maybe,” she said.

“I bet Mom will buy you another one if not,” I said. “She wants to be able to call us.” I had not yet gotten my own cell phone, but my parents had said they would get me one once I was in high school, so I figured they would get Karissa one too.

“It’s the one my mom gave me,” she said, with particular emphasis on the “my.”

I hadn’t realized how long we had been away. The festival, once we arrived, had completely closed down. The lights were out and the big hulking silent rides and white tents loomed like ships from the parking lot, the pavement covered in a sea of losing Bars & Bells tickets. There were only a few volunteers packing everything up for the night. We headed straight for the food tent, but didn’t find Karissa’s XOXOXO phone. We asked somebody about Lost and Found, but she told us it was locked up for the night and we could try tomorrow. Then she told us we better get lost too, since the festival was over. We scowled and wandered away from her among the tents.

“Karissa,” Goldfish called behind her. She was walking purposefully through the maze of booths, eyes on the ground, searching among the gutted tickets and plastic cups for her phone. “Let’s look tomorrow. We won’t find anything tonight.”

She acted as if she didn’t hear him.

I caught up to her and walked beside her, eyes on the ground. “I’ll search with you,” I said.

After a few moments she said, without lifting her eyes, “Do you like him?”

“Did you—?”
“It’s okay, if you do. You can like him. You should, okay? I’ll be back home soon enough anyway, won’t I?”

“I wish you wouldn’t leave,” I said.

“Let’s just look for the phone.”

My neck was beginning to hurt and I knew my buzz was beginning to fade when I noticed Karissa was looking up from where we were crouched in a booth. I stood up too and saw what she did—the Ferris wheel was moving.

“I thought all the workers were gone by now,” Karissa said.

“I did, too.”

Karissa sighed. “Let’s go get the boys and get out of here.”

“I’m sure the Lost and Found has your phone,” I said, hugely relieved.

We were walking toward Goldfish’s car when I saw the three boys, each wearing jeans that hung low on their hips to show their boxers, sitting on the fence that surrounded the Ferris wheel. They were hunched over themselves on their perch, like giant crows. It seemed impossible that the fence could hold them all. Goldfish had an unlit cigarette in one hand and the flask in the other. His teeth were crooked but reflected the ride’s lights brightly.

“Did you guys—?” I started.

Goldfish grinned. “Yes, we did. Who wants a ride?”

“Someone is definitely going to hear,” I said. I was too tired and too worried about Karissa hating me to try to impress the boys anymore. I threw an arm out to the surrounding area. “Like any of these people.”
The ride itself, however, contradicted my words. It was moving very slowly and strangely quietly. The Ferris wheel was forty feet tall, I learned later. Tall, for a church festival.

Goldfish jumped off the fence, gleefully throwing his cigarette to the ground, so he could enter the ride from the official entrance. The cars were rotating fairly slowly, not more than five miles per hour. Slowly enough, we soon saw, for Goldfish to grab onto the bottom rail of one of the cars from where he was crouching next to the loading area and hold onto the car for a second or two as it rose, so that he let himself rise just two or three feet into the air before he let go of the rail and fell to the blacktop.

“Look at him,” Karissa said. “Fearless.” There was no question in my mind then that she loved him.

Derek, who had taken his place at the controls, whooped in appreciation.

Gary was soon behind Goldfish. Gary was surprisingly agile, and we all agreed that he held on even longer than Goldfish had, falling four feet or so before he hit the blacktop. The cars were just big enough for two riders, and swung dangerously when they took the boys’ full weight for a few moments and I was worried that one of the boys would break something important on the ride.

Karissa lifted the strap of her purse over her head to hand it to me. “You’ll hold this, honey?” It was leather, or rather, fake leather, and was hard and square. I had admired it because it reminded me of something a photojournalist would have.

We watched her grab onto the rail at the bottom of the ride just fine. In fact we were all yelling, already expecting her successful landing, before we realized that she hadn’t landed at all. She was hanging on to the rail as the car rose. Derek was giggling,
as he realized that she had not dropped. In no time at all, she was too high, much too high and we could hear her yelling, although I still don’t know what she was saying. Derek later said that she was calling for her mother. I yelled to Derek to stop the fucking ride, which was of course at that point the last thing we should have done, and we were still watching her, hanging from the railing, yelling up there and thrashing, her black silhouette on top of the ride’s blaring bulbs, as Derek fumbled for the controls, and I still don’t know if we did stop the ride or if it just seemed to move incredibly slowly in those last seconds and then she was free of it, free of the ride and of space and of everything for a moment before her leg hit one of the spokes of the wheel and sent her body tumbling down even faster until it landed, like a body on a pyre, limbs thrown down in all four directions, chest lifted unnaturally high, on the bottom car of the Ferris wheel, where she stayed, as Derek must have stopped the ride after all.

Even without seeing any blood, which I didn’t at first, there was no questioning that she was dead.

Still, I yelled a name, hers or some other name, and I ran over to the ride and someone helped me lift her off the top very carefully so that we could see that her head was bashed completely in such that I couldn’t even see her eyes again.

The funeral was long and terrible, but there were no pleasures in those days after her death, so it didn’t particularly matter where I was. However, I had been dreading meeting Karissa’s mother (was she still really her mother if she had left her? I had wondered. Was she still really her mother if her child was dead?) for the first time. Her mother had never been in town the few times we had visited them in Paducah. I expected
a woman with a lot of tattoos and yellow teeth to barge into the church in the middle of the ceremony and shake me and scream why did I kill her daughter. This did not happen during the Mass for Karissa—the worst that happened at the church was when Gary came and sat next to me in the pew before the ceremony began while my parents were talking to relatives and didn’t say anything at all but took my hand in his and squeezed it so tightly that it hurt, and had to use his other hand to touch my arm to get me to release him when my parents came back so he could sit with his own family.

My parents and therapists and everyone always told me—still tell me—that it wasn’t my fault, but I know that Karissa would not have been so heedless if she hadn’t been upset about Goldfish. Everyone tells you it’s not your fault after someone dies, like grief cancels out responsibility. They didn’t know that I was the only one who knew that she was powerful but mortal, too, and still I let her be taken away. I let everyone go on thinking that she was the changeling daughter, that the world somehow made sense with her gone and me still here.

Although Karissa’s mother never screamed at me, I had met her at the layout the night before the ceremony. Closed casket, of course. Her mother did not have any visible tattoos. She wore something flowy and long and had long hair down her back like Karissa did and in fact the way her cheeks were shaped had something of Karissa in them too, although it was difficult to see when her mother’s face was so lifeless and Karissa’s never had been. She was standing right next to where Karissa’s head should be in the casket for hours, all afternoon, with my uncle in his chair on her other side. I tried to stand with Karissa’s parents as they received condolences from the procession of mourners. But everyone kept telling me that I should sit down, go home, move along. I only stayed next
to her for five minutes, maybe ten. My parents finally took me by the elbows and I let them lead me away. I left her with all the other people who had abandoned her and would, like me, again.
After his girlfriend left him, Alex moved into a house with eleven strangers. The three-story Victorian was one of many on a residential street in a cheaper part of Jersey City than where he had lived with his ex. Things seemed louder here—kids, reggaetón, the clattering highway. Churches of every denomination and language vied for attention among the anonymous bodegas and liquor stores. Trash and trees lined the street. Yet for all this, when Alex first saw the house from the outside, he thought it looked as its first owners seventy years ago must have imagined it would: like a home. He knew that on the inside it was cut up into tiny rooms—hardly the grand mansion that it had once been—but, from the outside, it looked whole. Its siding was robin egg blue, its porch was covered and inviting, its turret softened its edges the way long hair could temper a sharpFeatured face. Maybe Alex could find friends there, maybe even a new girl. He had never thought he’d reach twenty-seven unmarried.

He had heard about the house through his ex’s friend, Penny, who told him there was an open room when she heard about the break up. When Alex would go out with his ex and her friends, Penny would talk about the house’s big family dinners in lush detail—grilled chicken and peaches with thyme and lemon, ricotta, broccoli, and sausage pasta, mutton curry with samosas and mint chutney. She would talk about drinking sake with
her housemates on the porch until the cranky lady next door called the cops. She spoke of the house with pride and affection, and a kind of satisfied self-assurance—she often used the general “we.” Alex had grown up with just his mother and had always wanted a big family. He decided to move into the open room on the third floor, imagining such luxuriant dinners and late nights, imagining that there he would be greeted with smiling faces and an ice cold beer. He imagined a place where he would come in from the mean, strange world and always someone would be there to say that he did the right thing and that he was exactly the kind of person who anyone would love.

Alex had been in his tiny room on the third floor of the house for a month. His room’s view was blocked by a line of chimneys, but if he pressed himself into the corner, he could see the World Trade Center across the Hudson. Alex told his friends back home in Ohio that he had a view of New York City. They didn’t even know enough to laugh. He had not seen any late night drinking games, no loud dinners, no cold drink or smiles. He knew there were other people living in the house, but he didn’t even know their names. He would run into them at the kitchen sink or unloading laundry. At first, he said hi, asked how they were doing, but no one gave him more than a one or two word answer. He had barely seen Penny, either, even though she also lived on the third floor. Whenever Alex caught a glimpse of her she was rushing to leave. He wondered if Penny had made up all her stories and realized that she, too, was a stranger.

The house itself was falling apart more than Alex could ever have imagined from its exterior. Rust ran down the walls of each of the house’s eight showers. The wooden floor of his room was bucking apart, leaving space for what looked like years of dirt in between the panels. The wood itself was splintering enough that Alex had to wear socks
in his room, and after a month nearly all his socks had holes from the jagged protrusions. The house had two kitchens, both of which looked as if they had been abandoned in the middle of some crisis and left to accumulate grime for several weeks—mouse droppings on the shelves, fruit flies gathering by the sink and the cupboards above them, leftover dinners moldering in the refrigerator.

Alex was making toast one morning in the first floor kitchen instead of the one in the basement because he could at least tell the difference, here, between mouse droppings and coffee grounds with the daylight streaming in from the tall windows. Plus, over the past few weeks he had cleared most of the rotting food and wiped the surfaces he had to use. But Alex smelled, not for the first time, the unmistakable stench of decay. He knew there were mice everywhere—he had seen them scurrying out of the burners on the stove, streaking from one corner of the floor to the other like shadows—and he wondered if the stench was a mouse carcass. There was a closed cupboard next to the open shelves, which Alex had thought held only dishes. Now he wondered. Alex opened all of the compartments of the cupboard. He found that there was indeed food stored there in the bottom shelf. Of course, someone had secreted something away where he would never think to look. The smell was like nothing he’d ever experienced—he would have guessed it must have been a human corpse if he hadn’t seen the thin plastic produce bag in the cupboard among the cans of chilies and pinto beans. He sat on his haunches and pulled the bag out, trying not to look at its black, woolly contents. He rose and ran it to the garbage can before the plastic could split.
“My God!” A woman, older than the others he’d seen in the house, entered the kitchen. “Euch!” She waved her hand in front of her face and laughed in a horrified way. “What is it?”

“I don’t know,” Alex said. “Somebody didn’t throw away their gross fucking food.” He took the garbage bag outside and dropped it over the edge of the porch into the can below. When he returned, the woman was on her toes trying to reach the garbage bags on top of the fridge.

“I can get it,” he said. “Sorry I was annoyed. It was so gross.” He felt bad about cussing in front of an older lady. He shook out the bag and put it in the can.

She waved a hand. “Is okay. My husband, he would be yelling. Throwing things.” She mimicked how he would throw something into the stained wall over the sink.

“Oh,” Alex said, “yeah.” Her gesture had reminded him of watching his father do just that during an argument with his mother, right before he left for good. He remembered how the glass had broken into three neat shards.

“He did to me once. Not again. Now I’m here.” She smiled, fiercely, almost a grimace.

Alex nodded, expression neutral. Jesus, he thought, why had he wanted anyone in the house to talk?

“Everything’s a mess here,” she said, stirring something at the stove. “It will get better. Everything fell apart. Most everyone left. New people now.”

“They did?” Alex said. “Why?”

The woman turned to look at him. “You didn’t hear? About D.J.?” She said the initials with such a strange cadence that he didn’t recognize it as a name at first.
“What?”

She sat at the kitchen table. “I should tell you. Sit, sit.”

Alex sat.

“Before you came, D.J. passed. He was house manager. He was sweet, sweet boy. Everyone friends with D.J. Most left after. No one wants to stay where he died.” She gestured behind her. “Left food. Everything mess.”

“He died here?”

“Blood clot.” She placed a hand on her knee. “In leg. Mohammed found him on steps.” She nodded at the stairwell to the basement.

“Jesus,” Alex said.

“Yes.” She rose to stir her pot. “This is why everything is a mess.”

Alex nodded, feeling bad that he had lost his temper, and then getting angry that she was making him feel that way. He hadn’t known what had happened. He had wanted to know everyone in the house. It wasn’t his fault everything had gone to shit.

“Why are you here?” she asked, craning her neck to look at him. “Just moved?”

“I had to find a new place,” Alex said. “After my girlfriend and I split. She said she couldn’t trust me.” Alex was shocked to hear himself confess this to a stranger.

She just nodded. Waved a hand. Continued to stir. “You’re young,” she said.

“You’ll learn from your mistakes.”

My mistakes? Alex thought. Of course she would side with the woman, without knowing anything about the situation. He didn’t say anything. Anna Maria, his ex, had told him he was “unable to articulate his anger.”
He took his toast and escaped to climb the two flights to his room. The heat increased in the ascent. The staircase was wooden, with intricately carved but broken spokes on the railings. The railing swayed at the slightest touch. You were better off not using it at all. The wood was coated with a dull purple paint that offset the dusty footprints. The staircase was too narrow for even two people to walk past each other. The house’s charms were all like this—historic but inconvenient. The heat of the climb made Alex lightheaded and he was irritated, or perhaps just depressed, after the conversation with that woman. He had not found a home, but a house of ghosts.

He reached the third floor landing and saw a girl in the bathroom. Her thin hair was curling on her neck and forehead from the humidity. She was lifting her hair and exposing the back of her neck to the mirror behind her. Her neck was graceful, like the stem of a wine glass. She was struggling to see something by rising and lowering, bending and twisting. She turned over her ear lobe to get a look at the skin underneath. Her back arched against the lip of the sink. The marble-shine of her skin shifted as she moved under the mirror’s bulb lights. The sight of her was startling but satisfying. Inexplicably, Alex thought, “So this is where she is.”

She was Penny, the ex’s friend. Alex had never noticed her like this before. “Hey, Penny,” he said, as if he always did. It came out breathier than he liked from the walk.

She leaned even closer to the mirror, silent for long enough that Alex thought she might not respond. But in the next moment she twisted her long neck to look at him. “Hey.”

She returned to bending the now-pink flesh of her earlobe, searching with fingers and eyes.
“What are you doing?” Alex said, friendly.

“I’m trying to see,” she said. “I feel a lump.” She was almost crying, she was so worried.

“A lump?” he said.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Cancer. It runs in the family.”

Alex laughed. “Cancer? No way.”

She stood upright then, and as she lifted her red cotton shirt from the sink Alex saw the line of water crossing her waist from the sink’s edge. “It runs in the family. It killed my cousin. So it could be.” She leaned back to her contorted position as soon as she finished speaking, the wet line on her shirt meeting the sink in the same place. Her elbow was sticking up in the air as she pulled her earlobe so hard it seemed she might rip it. “Can you see anything?” she said.

“Sure,” Alex said and left the toast in his room at the end of the tiny hallway. He had to close the bathroom door on her to open the door to his room.

She was on her toes when he returned. “I feel it right here,” she said, touching a place behind her ear.

Alex crouched, his head just below her shoulder blades. “I can see something. Small.”

“What is it? What does it look like?”

“Fine. Like a pimple, maybe. I think you’re absolutely fine.”

Penny was unsatisfied with this answer. She reached for a hand mirror on the shelf over the toilet and handed it to him. “I want to see it myself. Can you angle this so I can see it in the mirror?”
“It’s nothing, I’m telling you.”

She pushed the mirror into his hand and moved his forearm where she wanted it. “Almost. Angle it up a little. There. Okay. Hold it there.” She brought her eyebrows together as she considered. Her eyebrows were straight lines, arch-less, like a cartoon character. “I guess I should wait and see.” She touched the spot again with a finger. It was smaller than her fingertip by half.

The little hairs on her neck felt like moss, when Alex grazed them with his forearm. She smelled like dryer sheets and sleep.

“Maybe it feels stranger than it looks. Do you think it—?” She broke off then and met his eyes through the reflection in the hand mirror’s reflection in the bigger mirror. She laughed. “I’m sorry. I dragged you in here and everything. How are you, Al?” She was unbending herself, taking a step away from him. “Break ups are tough.”

He nodded. Anna Maria was his ex. “I’m good. Working at a bar on the Lower East Side. Sending out my resume. I have a phone interview with Liberty Mutual this week. How are you?”

She smiled with one side of her mouth. “I thought maybe you’d move back to Ohio. It seemed like Anna Maria dragged you out here, right?”

“I wanted to move, too,” Alex said. “It wasn’t just for her.”

She nodded.

“Do you still hang out with her?” he said. “Has she been saying how terrible I am to everyone?”

Penny frowned. “No.”

“Ha,” Alex said.
“Well.” Penny smiled with one side of her mouth again, a complicated expression that showed sympathy and sadness. Her teeth were whiter even than her eyes. They were in neat rows and so small that it seemed like she must have more teeth than most people.

“There’s no way you could be sick,” Alex told her. He could tell by her startled expression that she was pleased.

“You’re so certain of it, aren’t you,” Penny said. “You should become a fortune teller. Everyone would love you. They’d believe you every time. You never know for sure, though, do you, although it’s nice to hear. One time you will be sick. A hundred times you won’t be, but one time you will. Oh, God, now you’re getting all depressed too, aren’t you, I can see it in your face. I didn’t mean to do that.”

Alex waved a hand, no, no.

Penny leaned toward the mirror again to get another look at the lump. This time she noticed her shirt getting all wet in the back. “Goddammit. I hate this house.” She laughed while she said it and pet the water on her shirt.

She took the hand mirror from Alex’s hand—it was still hanging at his side—and put it on the shelf over the toilet. “You were sweet to do this. Not everybody would, you know. Help out the crazy hypochondriac. That was kind of you. And you had a whole breakfast made, didn’t you.”

“Just toast.”

“You are so serious! Like a real businessman. There you go, there’s a smile.”

Alex had been sure to show his dimples, which Anna Maria had said were disarming. He suddenly wanted to ask Penny about Anna Maria—the words were even
forming in his mouth: how is she? This would be an opening for the real question: why did she do it? “See you around,” he said instead.

“Hey,” she said before he could turn around to leave. “We should grab a drink sometime. You need to get out, I need to not think about cancer.”

“We should,” he said. “Have a good one.” Alex gave a little wave.

“Tonight?” she said. “Just a few drinks? How about eight?”

Alex considered. Why was he hesitating? He knew it might be a bad idea to date someone he lived with, and yet it was appealing. Stealing kisses in the hallway, rolling into one or the other’s bed. Pretending, when they were in the kitchen in the morning, that they hadn’t slept wrapped around the other. The image of her at the top of the stairs would stay with him, he knew. She could be it. It occurred to him that he was hesitating because of Anna Maria, which filled him with an exhilarating anger. “Okay,” he said. “I’d love to.”

Alex’s ex Anna Maria had said she didn’t trust him with her secrets, but Alex knew there was a man. There was always another man, richer and more handsome, who would tell her in the way Alex had never been able to manage that the sun rose and set for her; that she was what he felt coursing through his veins. This had happened twice before to Alex, this being abruptly and completely left, heartbroken, so he knew what he was talking about. She had probably met him at a bar on one of the nights she went out with her girlfriends. He must have sidled up to her and put a hand on her waist and whispered something serious (she had said he turned everything into “trifles”) and she must have been won over by this new guy’s glamour, by the beautiful fabric of his Wall Street suit and
heady scent of the elderflower cocktail in a cup that would remind her of a chalice. She must have thought that she could start a brand new world.

Penny took Alex to the nearest dive bar. She had knocked on his door fifteen minutes after eight. Her hair was down, past her shoulders, and her skirt was shorter than Anna Maria usually wore. The bar had a naked Christmas tree in the back corner and was full of middle-aged white men who talked to Penny like they thought it was still 1950 and she might be interested in them. They called her honey and told her about her hair and her legs and she touched her hair and the tops of her thighs like she had to feel them to know what they were like and said, “Aren’t they? Aren’t they nice?” She talked, Alex thought, like she had already figured out what to say and who she wanted to say it to. Even her pauses and silences seemed practiced.

She talked about everything. After Alex told her he had been in a band in college, their third well tequila shots lined up, she asked him, “What’s the point of music?”

“The point?” he said.

“To you, I mean,” she said. “What’s the point to you.”

“The applause,” he said.

She laughed. “You’re funny, but that’s probably more what music is about than what people normally say it’s about. That must be a wonderful feeling. Applause.” She looked into the back of the bar like she could hear clapping by the dirty bathrooms. “It would feel like they’re applauding for you.”

“They are applauding for you.”
“Well, they’re applauding for the music, right? But it must feel like, they’re applauding for who you are. You as a person. That they’re applauding for everything you’ve ever done.”

He shook his head. “You have thoughts about everything.”

“Of course I do. Everybody has thoughts about everything. What you mean is that I talk too much.” She laughed again. “Everyone’s always told me I talk too much, especially my mom. She used to tell me that it’s better to be the woman who’s talking least in the room. She says sexist stuff like that sometimes, my mom. Different generation I guess.” She was rubbing her right earlobe still, as if still checking for cancer.

“That’s not what I meant.” Anna Maria, Alex thought, was also a talker.

Penny touched Alex’s knee. “Thanks. Really. It’s nice to hear that people have different views on things than your parents, you know? Do you ever feel like you spend all your life trying to be someone different from your parents and then you realize that you still take your coffee like your mom and tip exactly twenty percent like your dad? Like you can’t help it? Do you do that? Or do you get along with your parents and want to be like them?”

“I don’t get into my family stuff.” Alex’s father was an addict. Alex was glad, even at five, when his father left. When his father did come back to visit, he came to steal whatever he could—once, Alex’s new guitar—to buy oxy. His mother had what Alex knew most would call depression. His family story wasn’t painful to tell as much as it was shameful.

“Oh. Well.” She raised her eyebrows and managed to look into her drink and Alex at once. “Whatever you mean by that, I’m sure it was awful and that’s too bad. All of our
parents must have had such plans, don’t you think? They must have been so sure of where they were going and what they were doing and then one day they got pregnant and didn’t mean to. Or they did mean to, but that kid turned out different from what they wanted. Still,” she said, “even though plans don’t work it’s important to always have one, right. If you don’t have one, you’ll be miserable. I always have a plan. I make detailed plans I know will never happen. I once planned an entire trip through Asia—the airfare, the hostels, I even budgeted for meals, even though I knew from the beginning I would never go. Someone told me that was ‘stupendously sad’ once—those were the words he used. ‘Stupendously sad.’ But I don’t think so.”

“Why would you do that?” Alex said. “Why not go?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “It made sense to me at the time. I had convinced myself back then that imagination was just as good as reality. And cheaper. Ha!” She ordered another drink by leaning over the bar, catching the bartender’s eye—a nice older lady who wore a Mets T-shirt and was teasing the regulars—and mouthing “another round,” making a circle with her hand. “But maybe it was sad. I don’t think it made me feel like I thought it would.”

“Anna Maria and me,” Alex said, “we had this idea we’d backpack through France. Not Europe, just France.”

Penny nodded once. “Everywhere but Paris is great.”

“You still talk to her?” Alex said. “Anna Maria?”

“So you do want to know about her.”

“Everyone wonders about the exes.”
“I thought maybe you were the type to write her name on strips of paper just to set them all on fire in the sink.” She made a little explosion with her hands.

“No. I let it all roll away.” Alex was starting to feel drunk enough that he felt he might be mixing up idioms, and he hated seeming uneducated, but he almost didn’t care in the excitement of talking about Anna Maria. Hearing Penny talk about his ex made him feel profligate and powerful, like throwing a computer out of a window.

“Anyway, she’s fine. That’s nice of you to be worried about her, but I really do think she’s fine. I’m not surprised things turned out the way they did, looking back on it.” She was rolling the ice around in her gin and tonic, making a little whirlpool. The gin kept spilling out the sides. “She didn’t realize you were more vulnerable than her. She didn’t like that.”

“I’m not vulnerable.”

“I didn’t mean to make you sad. Shot?” She nodded at the glasses in front of them.

“I’m not sad. Look, just tell me. I want to know. Was she screwing him?”

“Who?” Penny took another sip.

“I don’t know. Whoever it was. I know it was someone.” She put a hand on Alex’s arm. Her fingers were cold. “I never heard that. I don’t have any reason to think so.”

“Then why? She would have talked about it.”

“I didn’t hear anything. I’m sorry. I don’t know. Maybe it wasn’t one thing. Maybe it was something she realized slow.”

“You’re just guessing,” he said. “She didn’t say anything?”

“No.” Penny rubbed her earlobe again. “You’re still in love with her, huh?”
“It’s been more than a month.” Alex waved a hand.

“So you’re over her?”

“I want to know what happened.”

“Yeah, I get that.” She paused and waited until Alex was looking at her to smile. “There’s only one way to get over someone.” She winked.

Alex laughed until Penny joined in and then they both clutched each other as they bent over, laughing even harder as they both realized the bartender was thinking about cutting them off. Even as they eventually quieted Alex kept his hand at her waist.

“You’re not going to die,” she said.

“What?” Alex said, and was reminded of D.J., who had died before he could even climb a flight of stairs.

“From heartbreak.” She gripped his elbow and shook it a little, like it was all a joke. “It won’t kill you.”

“I never said it would.”

She snorted. “But you’re trying to act like it will. You really are. Honestly—it’s kinda sexy.”

Alex held her tighter. “Kinda?”


“Okay. Whatever.” He released her. “You don’t have to be mean about it.”

“Don’t be mad!” She made a face, pulling her eyebrows together in contrition. “I’m sorry, all right. Let’s go back. I’ve got tequila in my room and it’s better than this stuff.”
Alex let her pull him out of the bar.

Alex thought the house made dating awkward, but Penny liked it. She liked to pretend it was forbidden, and so he played along. There was no special thrill for Alex once he realized that nobody cared.

They were both in the kitchen one night, thinking they were alone, and the woman who had told Alex about the death, whose name, Alex had learned from Penny, was Shakti, came in and saw Penny biting Alex’s ear. Shakti didn’t react at all, although Penny squeaked “Bye!” and bounded up the stairs.

“Hello,” Shakti said. “How are you?”

He nodded once. “How are you?” His ramen still needed three minutes in the microwave.

She shook her head. She turned on her kettle. “I have these terrible nightmares. People coming in the house, breaking in, breaking everything in the house.”

“Well,” Alex said. He made a conscious effort, as retaliation, to not give her sympathy.

She sighed. “Yes.” She sat at the table. “How is Penny?”

“She’s good,” Alex said.

“She was worried.” The woman rubbed her right earlobe. “About something on her ear. A bump. Did she go to the doctor?”

Alex was surprised Penny had talked to anybody else about that. “I don’t know. It didn’t seem like anything.”
“You should ask about it,” Shakti said. “She wants you to worry. To care. Understand?”

Alex shrugged. He hadn’t asked for advice. And there was nothing to worry about. Penny herself had said she was being a hypochondriac.

“Would you like some tea?” Shakti asked. “Take a seat.”

“I’m all right.”

“I agree.” Shakti touched her own ear. “Penny’s ear probably is nothing. But she should go to the doctor. She needs… help. Things like that. One time Penny slept too late, rushing, rushing, going to miss plane. D.J. drove her. Not Newark airport, JFK. Took hours. Who he was. He was… one of a kind.”

“Yeah.” The microwave beeped, saving Alex from having to respond. Penny had never talked to Alex about this D.J.—it seemed like they had been much closer than she had let on. Alex popped the microwave open. “I gotta go.”

Shakti placed a hand on his arm before he could reach into the microwave for the plastic bowl. “Are you okay?” she asked, seriously. She had turned him very gently by the shoulders to face her. She searched his face. “You seem upset.”

He imagined that he could sit down with her and talk for hours about all the things he loved and all the things he hated and all the things that stressed him out. He knew she would listen. He could revert to childhood for a few moments, trust that she would take care of him. He looked at her carefully. He saw pity there. He thought about the word “upset”—the softness of it, the submissiveness.

He stepped back from her. She didn’t understand him at all. She didn’t know his strength.
After two years with Anna Maria, Alex knew everything about her, all of which, he knew now, was a waste. He knew Anna Maria had liked “babe” but not “baby,” hated talking on the phone, and that she believed, despite all evidence, that Coke tasted better in glass bottles. None of this helped him with Penny. They were in the beginning stage of the relationship where Alex never knew what she wanted. Other people would lie and say they liked everything the other liked at first. Not Penny. When Alex tried something in bed with her, she had to be sure to tell him right then she wasn’t “feeling it.” She was direct and demanding, in bed and out, and Alex found that he wanted, more and more, to impress her. He was at a loss as to what would impress her—he had tried everything. Flowers and caresses and attention and listening and offering. She liked him, but he was never entirely sure of her devotion. She did not spend the night in his bed, but moved to her own. She sometimes would say that she could not go out to dinner with him, and, after he asked why, she would say nothing more than, “I want to be by myself tonight.” On these nights, she was sometimes in her room, but sometimes she left to God knows where. There was something inherently strange about her, he began to think. Something she kept hidden. This part of her could be anything; she could be anyone. He wanted to know what this thing was, this hard, small kernel of herself.

A few weeks later, Alex took Penny to a pizza place he liked in the nice part of Jersey City. Penny wanted to try a place in Hoboken, but Alex insisted. He and Anna Maria had found the pizza joint by chance once. A storm hit unexpectedly and they ducked into the closest door. The interior had giant red booths like an Ohio restaurant, the owner
was a nice old man who sometimes spilled your drinks refilling them, and the pizza menu was only four lines long: cheese, pepperoni, sausage, and ham.

They had just gotten the pizza when Alex saw her at the bar. Anna Maria. She was with a silver-blond girl. They were drinking wine and laughing. Anna Maria had cut her hair—she had bangs. Her long hair was straight now, too. It was naturally curly, but Alex had always liked it straight better.

“Unbelievable,” he said.

“What?” Penny said.

“Anna Maria’s here. At the bar.” He nodded toward his ex.

Penny turned in the booth to look.

“Don’t be so obvious,” he said.

“Why would you care? We should say hi.”

“What? I thought you don’t talk to her anymore.”

Penny shrugged. “I never said that.”

“You still talk to her?”

“Sure, sometimes. If I see her around.” Penny rubbed her earlobe. Alex had noticed her doing it all day. The flesh was red from the rubbing. “What are you all upset about anyway?”

“She hates this place. She had no reason to be here.”

Penny reached for a slice of pizza. “It’s not a big deal. We can ignore them if you want.” She slouched in the seat and stretched her loose shirt over her mouth and nose like a bank robber. “She won’t recognize us in disguise!”

“What did you say before?” Alex said. “You’ve been hanging out with them?”
Penny said, “Well yeah, her and some other people.” Her voice was muffled through her shirt. “So,” she said. “Should we sneak out the back way?”

“You don’t have to be a brat about it.”

Penny dropped her shirt. “I didn’t mean anything by it, Al. Look, let’s just eat.” She picked up a slice and folded it.

“So why would you not tell me about her?” Alex tried to fold his pizza like Penny had—like a New Yorker. “If you were going out with her?”

Penny shrugged. “Seemed like you needed to get over her.”

“Jesus.” Alex shook his head, stared at Anna Maria and her friend.

“Well, look,” Penny said. “You can see them now. You wanted to know who she was dating, right? She’s right there.”

“What?”

“Anna Maria’s dating that girl right next to her,” Penny said. She took another bite of pizza. “I forget her name.”

“What?” Alex dropped his slice.

“That girl next to her. They’re dating.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“What’s your problem?”

“She’s a lesbian?” Alex said, and even to him his voice sounded ugly.

“I don’t know. I mean, I guess she’s bi. I don’t really think anyone knows what they are.” Penny had returned to stroking her right earlobe, worrying the bump on the back.
Alex looked into Penny’s face and saw only her doe-eyed, innocent mask. Penny and Anna Maria were the same. They loved to prove their fearlessness, their carelessness. Each lived like she could do anything and wake up the next morning with a fresh, clear mind, like her pool of choices wasn’t finite and ever smaller with each chance expended.

“Knows what they are?” He barked a laugh. “For two years she didn’t fucking know?”

“When society’s all set up so you think one way’s the right way, it’s very hard for people to know. It’s a really tough struggle. And she could just be bi, I don’t know.”

“Come on,” Alex said. “She’s just—she’s getting back at me. She knew how much I would hate this.”

“Oh, come on. It’s not about you.”

“What?” he said. “So you’re taking her side?”

Penny rolled her eyes. “Come on, Alex.”

Alex could see it in her eyes again—the unyielding, hidden part of her. “It has nothing to do with that. Wouldn’t you be upset? If I decided I was gay?”

She took a big breath and let it out audibly, in a huff. “No. It would be your choice.”

“So you can do whatever, with whoever? Doesn’t matter what it does to other people?”

She sighed. “I didn’t say that.” She rubbed her ear again.

“Were you fucking that guy? That D.J. guy?”

“What?”

“D.J. You were with him?”
“Oh my God,” Penny said. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Shakti said something—it seemed like there was something going on there.”

“You’re jealous of my dead friend? Really?”

“I was just asking a question.”

“Oh my God,” Penny said again.

“Would you have cared if he were gay?” Alex could almost see himself from the outside, almost see himself as Penny must have seen him, careless and mean, vicious, even. She didn’t understand.

“You’re being really—” She thought for a moment. “Ridiculous,” she said, although Alex thought that it seemed like she was settling on the word, rather than sure of it. She was frowning—more than frowning. She was furious. She rubbed her earlobe again. “You’re being—” She broke off. She took a big, deep breath, while still stroking her earlobe, softly, rhythmically, and then let the breath out in a long, loud exhale. Like a yoga instructor.

Alex wanted to make her scream, cry, anything; he wanted to see her burst apart.

She continued. “I think you’re overreacting because you saw your ex. I can understand why you’re upset about it, I really can, but come on.” She sounded a little strangled. “It’s like I’m not even here.”

“Penny, stop rubbing that all the time, it’s driving me crazy. You’re not dying.”

“What?”

“Your ear. Stop it. You’re not dying. You’re being pathetic.”

Penny dropped her hands. “What do you want from me? Just what do you want from me? Are you trying to hurt me? Is that it? Just what are you trying to do to me?”
She didn’t understand what Alex wanted at all. This, he thought, was what he wanted. Alex had thought that it was love, but it was more direct than that, and more primal. He wanted what was abstract to become concrete. He wanted to pin down what it was that she thought of him. He wanted her to put it into words. He wanted her to touch it, like she had as the girl at the top of the stairs in the bathroom, bending and twisting to find and touch the most hidden part of himself and determine its shape. Alex wanted her to lay a finger on whatever it was in himself that was just as mortal and he wanted her to know the contours of that, too.
Ileana wanted me to watch over her aging mother for the weekend. Those were her words: “watch over”—as if she were asking me to substitute for God. This was a rather lofty way of putting it. What she meant was: it’d be great if you’d clean out her bedpans and give her sponge baths.

The old woman was restricted to a wheelchair. She could raise her left hand, but her movements were too imprecise to feed herself. She could hardly speak any more, and even more rarely could she string a sensible thought together. She was prone to yelling out when you least expected it— and then, usually in German, her native tongue; sometimes in English or Spanish. She could only speak with the left side of her mouth; the right side was paralyzed. She’d had two smaller strokes, and then a third last month, that had really done her in. Ileana and her husband acted as if Ileana’s mother’s condition was a temporary and fixable one—a bout of the flu, or a broken bone. I thought this was a dangerous approach, and several times I said something to Ileana, to make sure that she was seeing reality, because I didn’t want her to be too shocked when her mother’s time came. But Ileana generally ignored my warnings, and went forward with making plans to travel and visit her husband’s family. “We’ll have to visit Carlos’ parents when you’re feeling better,” she said to her mother, as if the old woman would be as she had been again.
Ileana was standing at her first floor kitchen’s bar making tostones, twice-fried plantains. They were the sort of thing I’d avoided, before I moved to Puerto Rico, to keep my weight down. But Ileana had a knack for taking your mind off of things like your weight. She “lived in the moment” as people would say, which really meant that she had a willfully myopic understanding of how time worked. I never could decide whether to pity or envy her for it.

“I know you love these.” She flipped a tostone with a fork and sent oil everywhere. “You better move out of the way—didn’t you see that? You almost got burned.” She shooed me back with the fork, spraying oil on her white tile. “This is a good wine, too,” she said as she took a bottle out of the refrigerator door. “That rich dama from the clinic gave it to me—Ha! Like it’s better than money. Like it was a gift. And her husband with that pink thing stuck up in him.” Ileana raised her eyebrows on “thing” and we took delighted gasps. “Men watch all that stuff online and think it’s reality. They expect you-know-what first thing in the morning! Every morning.” She looked at me. She shook her head. “You better brush your teeth. You better brush your teeth, after. Every time.”

I laughed and felt the breeze blow in wet, salty air from the bay. This scene was near perfect, I reminded myself, even if it was less than it had been before. I had met Ileana through her brother, Emanuel, who I dated for a year. He was much older than me, which I liked at first, but was what, in the end, made us incompatible. I met his family early, his sister Ileana and his mother. At first, they loved me for making Emanuel domestic, for bringing him home, and then we all discovered we actually liked each other’s company.

I looked back at the shell of Ileana’s mother; the tufts of her sea foam hair rising from her scalp as if they wanted to return to the water. I longed for the woman I had
thought I’d known. I hated nostalgia, a futile desire. I focused on Ileana who was then struggling with the corkscrew.

“Dammit,” Ileana said.

“Can I help—?”

“Yes, yes, don’t just sit there like a dolt—get two glasses down, will you?”

I found the glasses in the washing machine—“Are these clean, Ileana?”

“Sure, they are.” I frowned and turned to the cupboard instead to look for clean ones.

I dragged the step stool from the corner of the kitchen and climbed it so I could see into the back of the cupboard over the washing machine. I pushed the drinking glasses to the side, looking for the slim stems of wine glasses, and found a teacup. It was small and delicate, porcelain thin as rose petals. The painting on the side depicted a man pushing a woman on a swing in a garden, in pastel pinks and greens, their wigs and pointed white faces would have belonged in the palace at Versailles. The rim of the cup had been dipped in gold.

Inside the cup was the spoon. My spoon. The gold was muted and clouded over with age. The contours were soft—the bowl curved smoothly down to the handle, like an attached earlobe. I didn’t pick the spoon up right away, but I remembered before I even touched it that it was oddly heavy, as if it had more mass than its size could account for.

“It’s pretty, verdad?” Ileana said.

“This—” I had to stop, swallow, start again. “Why is this here?”

“It’s in the back for safekeeping. They were in mamá’s room. She says it’s a family heirloom. Brought over from Germany.”
“Oh yeah?” Ileana must never have asked her mother too many questions.

“Sí. I don’t know how old it is, how many generations had the tea set. She said they had a full set—the teapot and other cups and saucers. She says that’s all that’s left.” Ileana turned back to the stove.

I wanted to pursue the issue—how many generations, Ileana? What exactly did she tell you? But I didn’t know the details either. I pushed the teacup and its golden spoon to the back of the cupboard where I had found it.

I found hard plastic wine glasses and set them on the counter next to Ileana.

“Thank you,” she said. “So you can? You can stay with mamá next weekend?”

I was not a nurse, but I had been working at Ileana’s clinic for long enough that I knew the basics. Ileana hired me as a secretary months ago, but soon enough Ileana had me checking pulses and even drawing blood. This wasn’t strictly legal, but Ileana didn’t seem to think this was a problem and the work was at least less boring than filing.

“Claro,” I said, because Ileana always laughed when I tried to speak Spanish. “Where are you and Carlos staying?”

She did laugh, too. “La Concha. Have you been practicing rolling your r’s? Do it again. Everybody can, go on.” Ileana finally freed the cork of the wine bottle with one loud, satisfying pop.

A groan came from behind me, both angry and plaintive, it carried over the breeze from the ocean. The sound was incongruous here, overlooking Fajardo’s topaz bay.

I looked at the old woman as I walked around the bar to sit at the stool again. She slumped in her wheelchair. The sea wind ruffled her cotton-white hair. Her paper skin rippled over her bones when she jerked her left arm. She was positioned at a strange
angle—facing the rocky cliffs at the north side of the bay instead of straight out toward the wide expanse of seawater and Isla Palominos and the hazy outline of Culebra. It was a position no one would put themselves in if they had a choice. Ileana must have been rushing when she left her mother there. This small punishment was nothing—who knew whether she was conscious enough to care—but it gave me a small, mean amount of satisfaction to know that her view of paradise was incomplete.

“Sí, mamá!” Ileana called. “We’re opening a bottle of wine. It’s a Riesling.” She stretched her neck outward to peer at the text on the bottle she held away from her. “Pfalz. A good region, yes? Have you been there, mamá? I don’t remember.” She frowned as she did when she forgot, for a moment, that her mother couldn’t answer. “Jennie,” she said. “Look how mamá’s turned.” She used her lips to gesture toward her mother.

“Of course,” I said, feeling that I should be embarrassed that I hadn’t done it already, but not quite able to manage it. I swiveled the wheelchair so she was facing Culebra’s blurry outline.

“Da,” the woman said, softly at first, and then, getting louder, “da, da, da, da.”

“Jennie,” Ileana said, “I guess she doesn’t like it.”

“What?”

“Didn’t you hear her say ‘don’t?’ Turn her back around.”

“I heard German. Da. Like she’s pointing at the islands.”

“En serio?” Ileana’s brow cleared. “Oh. Good. I heard ‘don’t,’ but I think you are right. You do think so? I want her to be happy.”

“I heard ‘da,’” I said, all I could manage. I knew Ileana wanted to be reassured. She would have liked me to say, “I’m sure she’s happy. You can just tell,” or some other
lie. Usually I would have, for Ileana’s, but the weight of the spoon on my mind kept me from being able to conjure even artificial happiness for the old woman.

That heavy, sick feeling didn’t leave me all afternoon, or that night, or even into the week as I traveled back to San Juan and worked at the clinic. One night during the week I even had a dream that my stomach had turned into a heavy, gilt metal.

Ileana’s mother had given me the spoon several months ago, before her last two strokes. She was someone different then. Her name was Sonja.

“Tell me stories,” she’d say, when I was visiting Ileana’s bay-view house.

I would tell her how my week went—I was doing more and more nursing work. I used to tell her about the sweet things Emanuel did for me when we were still dating. Bring me dinner. Pick me up from work. After a few months, we were close enough that I could complain about her son. “You can’t talk to men,” she’d say conspiratorially. “They don’t care about anything you’d want to have a conversation about.” But what she really wanted were stories from my childhood.

“I’ve forgotten everything before I was thirty years old,” she told me. “Tell me. Your earliest memory.”

“Earliest? I—I remember trying to remember a moment. And I still do. I remember going back to this moment and checking to see if I still remember it. I remember it so vividly. Isn’t that weird?”

Sonja smiled. “You are entschlossen.” She raised her pointer finger, touched it to her nose, and then pointed at me. “You … do not stop.” She was still looking down, off
to the side, as she did when she was searching for the correct way to say something in English.

“Don’t give up, you mean?”

Sonja had the ability to say things with such certainty that you believed her. “Yes. That’s it.” She pointed at me again, not accusatory, but engaging. *I see you*, she seemed to be saying. “Very German,” she said. “Entschlossen. You could come home with me tomorrow and—” She opened her arms wide. “Everyone welcome you. You are German at heart.”

“You think so?”

“Yes. You have German blood?”

“Yeah, on my mother’s side.”

She nodded. “I knew it. You look it.”

“I do?” I had brown hair and hazel eyes; nothing anything like Sonja’s glittering blue irises.

“Da.” She touched her own cheekbones, but she was looking at mine. “Here,” she said. She touched her nose. “Here too.” She smiled as I mimicked her, touching my own cheeks and my own nose. “Tell me what you remember,” she said.

I was going to tell a different story, of remembering a memory, but our mirrored movements triggered a different memory. “This,” I said, touching my forehead, then nose, then lips, now with both hands, “reminds me of a game Mom would play with my brother and me before tucking us in. We would touch like that. We would say… head thinker, nose smeller, mouth eater, chin chopper, giddy giddy gopper. I think—isn’t that from a German nursery rhyme?”
Sonja nodded. “Sounds like German. Why do you remember that?”

“We would do that perfectly in sync. All three of us. Like we had telepathy. More than that, like we all wanted the same things. Like we were the same, somehow. I remember thinking that whatever I did, they would do, too. Of course, they wouldn’t, but I believed it then. Is that crazy?” I couldn’t believe I was saying all this; I never talked like this.

“No,” she said. “It makes sense.”

I shook my head. “Does it? It doesn’t make much sense to me.”

“Like songs. Like Beethoven,” Sonja said. “All singing together. As you said. In sync.”

Sonja nodded, slowly. “I know what you will like. Take me to my room?”

I wheeled her into her room, which was next to the bottom floor’s kitchen. She was already staying in the bottom floor’s guest room because the stairs were too difficult for her. “To the dresser,” she said. “Here. Ja. Danke.” She opened the top drawer of her vanity. There was jewelry, some cash, a hand mirror. Then she found the spoon.

“This,” she said, holding the dusky utensil. “This belonged to an old tea set. This is all I have. There’s only this and—” She broke off to lean over her vanity and pluck the teacup from behind a bag of round cotton pads. “This teacup. Scratched, but whole. The rest lost, or in Germany. Somewhere. I loved that tea set. I kept this… that is why I kept this. You like it?” She saw me looking and handed me the cup. “I wish I still had the others. The teapot. Beautiful. Like this, but more. Gold at the edges, on the handle. Pretty gold, not like that.” She nodded at the spoon lying among some bobby pins.

“Take it,” she said, pressing the cup into my hands. “A part of a set. In sync.”
This kindness was too much; sudden and unaccountable. I couldn’t repay it.

“I can’t,” I said. “It’s yours.”

She just shook her head, adamant.

“I’ll take the spoon,” I said. “I couldn’t take this.” I picked up the spoon and laid the cup with the bobby pins.

Sonja protested, but I insisted that I liked the spoon better. It looked old, and it was heavier than I expected it to be.

“But when I’m gone, you take this, too.” She nodded at the teacup.

“Sonja,” I said, chiding. Her first stroke had been just a month before. But I supposed it made sense that she would only give the teacup away if she believed she were dying. It wasn’t the kind of thing you could bear to lose if you could help it.

Over a year later, while Ileana and Carlos were spending the weekend at La Concha, I was trying not to think of Sonja as she had been. I was walking through the house’s top floor salty-aired rooms, enjoying the novelty of aloneness. I yelled once, as loud as I could, to see how the sound would echo. It turned out that there was none. Downstairs, Sonja groaned in an answering howl. I was staying in a spare room on the top floor. I still needed to feed her. I gathered her pills and baby food and stepped outside to take the concrete steps to the lower level of the house.

I paused on the stairs to take in the view. The bay seemed even closer when the sky was clear and I could see the little islands of Icacos and Culebra in the distance. It was Semana Santa, Holy Week, the week before Easter. There was a beach on Culebra that was full of people during this week. Hundreds took the ferry to the island and camped on
the sand. Flamencio Beach, the most beautiful beach in the world, Emanuel had told me. He said he spent all of his 20s on that beach. Emanuel and his sister had a way of talking about things in absolutes like that: all of my 20s, best in the world, the rest of my life.

I found it remarkably pleasant to be able to look off into the distance and see the island of Culebra and know that there was a beach there that was exactly perfect and that if I chose to go there, I would be happy. The water on Flamencio Beach would be pool water still and clear and light would reflect on the sand and lay lines of light on everyone’s toes.

“Frau,” I called when I entered the basement level. “Guten Morgen! Frau’s a good thing to call you, isn’t it.” She was not Sonja to me anymore. I had decided that the strokes had killed the Sonja I knew and replaced her with this forgery. “Frau Fernandez.” I laid the pills and the apricot baby food on the countertop.

She said something that possibly sounded like “Ick.”

I froze and turned to face her. “Ick? You mean about the baby food?” We had made many attempts to communicate with her, of course. Ileana had been spending at least an hour a day with her doing speech therapy since her third stroke. She did remarkably well after her second stroke, but after the third her speech was drastically limited. Some days she could manage “Ja” and “I know” and often “I can’t,” but other days it seemed like she had lost all connection to language. Lately, she would not even point to an image on the picture board.

“Can you talk today? Listen. Look at me. Did you tell Ileana that cup was an heirloom? Did you?”

“Ick, ick, ick.” She shook her head as she did it.
I crouched in front of her. “Look at me. Can you hear me?”

For the first time in weeks, she met my eyes. “Kee,” she said, and then shook her head, the frustration obvious. “Kee.” She shook her head again. “Kee.” Now there was embarrassment, too. She clasped her left hand on the wheelchair and then said “Ich,” and this time I could hear the German. The aphasia had caused her to invert the sounds of the word. Her mouth was moving, lips pursing and relaxing, something else in her eyes now. Like she was pleading, or angry, and I was surprised I couldn’t tell the difference. “You,” she said, and it was clear as day.

“You and me?” I said. “What does that mean?”

“Kee,” she said again, and I could get nothing out of her after that.

I fed her the baby food instead—it was a messy business, as she kept shaking her head right at the moment before I could get the spoon in her mouth, as if she didn’t want to eat at all. I put her to bed straight after. It was easy; she couldn’t have weighed more than 110 pounds. I hadn’t realized how skinny she was, maybe because her skin drooped in folds away from the most delicate parts of her—at her wrists, elbows, ankles. It was no trouble at all, getting her into bed.

After the second stroke, Sonja had begun to deteriorate. She lost most of the movement in her right hand, and when she did, she stopped seeing half of the world. She would not eat her tostones, which Ileana always placed on the right side of Sonja’s plate. We would turn the TV on for her, and she would stare at the wall instead. And then, without warning, she would jump up, or try to, and tell us with half of her mouth that she had somewhere to go—to the farmer’s market, or Plaza las Americas in San Juan, or to the
“cinema,” as she would say. She used to love to go to the movie theater by herself. She told me it gave her the freedom to react to the movie instead of acting for the person next to her. We would explain to her that she couldn’t drive anymore, and sometimes she would accept it, and sometimes we had to watch her for hours to make sure she wouldn’t go. If you were on her right side, out of view of her left eye, she didn’t see you at all.

More and more rarely would she ask me to tell her stories. One Saturday afternoon while Ileana and Carlos were at some cousin’s graduation party, Sonja broke her silent vigil to ask me, “How are you?”

I was thrilled that she asked—I told her stories from the clinic, about an accident I had seen on the highway on the way over—and felt a surge of hope that this was the signal of a major leap in her recovery.

“I’ve also been thinking of something.” I had been talking for probably twenty minutes and still had so much more to say. She was nodding her head and smiling and saying small words to urge me on. I could have talked for hours. “That spoon that you gave me, I was thinking I could make it into a necklace.” I paused here, checked her reaction. “I would have to take it to a place so they could mold it.” I took the spoon out of my purse. I mimed how they could bend the end of the handle to the base of the spoon’s bowl and mold the two places together so the re-shaped spoon could hang on a chain. “Would you mind? They would have to melt it a little, so the metal could meld together. I’d like to wear it.”

“Why?” she asked, kindly.

“It was so sweet of you,” I said. “To give me something for no reason.”

“You,” she said, and stopped. She shook her head. “You. I can’t.”
“It’s okay.”

She looked off into the distance and took a breath. “Sweet,” she said.

I smiled and squeezed her hand. “Where did the tea set come from? I’ve wondered.”

“From a shop. In—” She paused. She stared at the spoon and frowned.

I knew enough from sitting in on Ileana’s speech therapy sessions that I could help a little. “You can say it,” I said, encouraging.

Sonja met my eyes. “I can’t. I can’t.”

I handed her the yellow notepad and pen we kept nearby. Writing sometimes helped her to be able to say the word aloud. I saw that she wrote “town,” if a bit shakily, and then she said, “Own.”

“Town,” I said. “Look at me. Town.”

“Town,” she said. We both smiled.

She held her hand out for the spoon. I placed it in her open palm.

“This must have cost your family a fortune, right? You told me how hard things were for all of you.”

She nodded. “No money. This was—” She had to write the word again.

“Government?” I read, too curious to remember to make her say the word herself.

“The government gave it to you?”

“Ja,” she said. “From Yoo-den.”

“Yoo-den?”

She wrote it. Juden.
I didn’t know much German; I’d picked a few words up from Sonja and Ileana. But this word I remembered from history. “Jews,” I said. I was aware of my breathing, unsure how to breathe the suddenly alien air.

She nodded. “Jews.”

I looked at the spoon in her hand. “That was a Jewish person’s?”

She nodded.

“And the government gave it to you?”

She nodded. “Juden,” she said, and the contempt with which she said it made the word itself a slur. “Had everything.” She gestured wide, a parody of a welcoming embrace. “Took everything.”

I had known she left Germany in 1945 with a Puerto Rican soldier. I had thought it was romantic. I remembered a poster I had seen from the Third Reich in which a Jewish man sneered from behind a curtain of the American flag and I knew that sneering caricature was the face she still saw.

She was watching my face. She shook her head. “You don’t understand,” she said, sadly. She held out the spoon for me to take.

“No,” I said.

She looked furious, and then, quickly, vacant, and I knew she was searching and unable to find words. She looked into the distance. “I can’t.”

“Just don’t say anything. Okay? Just stop. Let’s just stop.”

I turned away from her—searched with my eyes for something to do—something to clean, or to organize, something to move away from this moment. I heard a clatter behind me and turned to see the spoon on the tile. I picked it up; the metal was slightly
warm, or my hand was cold. An image came to me, then, unbidden, like a nightmare, a memory of a picture I had seen when I was young: an emaciated man—even his bones seemed shrunken—naked, sitting in a chair, legs crossed, looking directly into some camera’s lens. It didn’t seem like he could be upright when so much of him was missing, and the look in his eyes made you think that he didn’t think he could be alive at all. I must have always had the memory of that picture somewhere with me, but it shocked me then as if I had never seen it before; as if I had never known that a body could be a ruin.

I considered throwing the spoon in the garbage then, but I ended up putting it right back where I first saw it—in Sonja’s vanity drawer, on top of more beautiful things.

I didn’t visit the bay-view house for two weeks after that, not until I got the call from Ileana about the third stroke.

It was Sunday morning of my weekend with the woman when Ileana called to see how it was going. I was sitting on the couch on the top floor, my knees pulled up to my chin. I was watching the single-minded parade of ants on the tile, a neat column.

“All good,” I said. “She even said a few words yesterday.”

“So you’ve been practicing with her?” Ileana said. “Bueno. Gracias, nena. And you’re eating well? You ate the habichuelas I made? And the chicken?”

“Yeah, I did. Thank you.”

“Carlos and I are going to the beach today. We’ll be back around nine or so tonight, okay?”

“Okay. Hey—Ileana. This has been bothering me. Have you ever talked with your mom about the war?”
Ileana took several moments to answer. “She doesn’t talk about it. Why? Did she say something?”

“She did.”

“Don’t encourage that kind of talk. She doesn’t usually say anything about it. She had a very rough time growing up. Change the subject if she brings that up, all right?”

“You’ve never talked to her about it?”

“No,” she said, but her voice sounded odd. I wished I could see her face. “And I’m serious Jennie, don’t you ever bring it up with her. It will only upset her.”

“You really never talked to her about it?”

“Of course not. Why would I make her relive all that?”

“But don’t you want to know what happened?”

“Why would I? It doesn’t have anything to do with me.” Ileana was beginning to sound impatient.

“Look,” I said. “That tea set. Do you know where it’s from?”

“It’s a family heirloom. Mamá said—”

“It’s not. She said it was from the government. She said it was from Jews.”

Ileana sighed. “She’s an old woman, Jennie.”

“Ileana.” I let out a breath like a shudder. I wished Ileana were here in person. “Okay. I know. But let me throw away that teacup. I can’t stand it. It was from—it was from a Jewish family. A family. A little girl or—” I was almost crying.

“That tea set is my mother’s, Jennie.”

“Yes, and she got it from the Nazis.” It sounded strange to say aloud. I realized I hadn’t said the word yet. “We need to throw it out.”
“What’s wrong with you Jennifer? Why are you doing this?” Ileana didn’t sound angry so much as baffled.

“I have to go.” I hung up.

I grabbed more apricot baby food from the upstairs kitchen and brought it down to feed Sonja. The bay shone like it always did. The white curtains were blowing everywhere—the clouds were moving so fast you could watch their progress if you were patient.

“Hi,” I said, when I saw her. I didn’t feel like calling her anything at all.

The wisps of her hair were blowing in the wind. She groaned, perhaps in response. She moved her head so that it tilted to the opposite side.

“Time for lunch,” I said.

“I can’t,” she said.

“You’ve got to eat.”

“Can’t,” she said.

“Yes, you can.” I opened the jar and brought a spoonful to her mouth.

“Can’t.” She squeezed the left side of her lips shut.

I moved further toward her right side so that her left eye could see me better. “Fine. We’ll just sit here.”

Her pale blue eye seemed to focus on my face, and then it got out of focus again.

“Kee,” she said.

“Ich?”

“Ich. Oo. You.”

“You. Me. Okay, what?”
I handed her the pen, the notebook. I wondered how much she had been choosing not to speak, instead of unable to do so.

She began to write an S, then stopped, frustrated. “I can’t,” she said.

“You can.”

“Same,” she said.

“What’s the same?”

“Oo!”

“No,” I said. “We’re not.”

She shook her head. She looked out at the bay, but it didn’t look like she could see anything at all. I always expected her to look sad, when she was most at a loss for words, but she just looked blank—like a landscape, the only emotions there were ones you projected. Then she refocused on my face. “Sorry.”

“You’re sorry? To me?”

“Ja. Ja.”

I peered into her left eye and saw that she was understanding. I knew what she wanted. She wanted me to accept her apology, to apologize in turn. To hug. As if I was the one who she should apologize to, who she could apologize to, as if this moment would be her redemption. I had seen it so many times. Even the worst crimes were usually forgiven, so quickly. I knew this was exactly what Ileana would have done. Most people will soften as soon as you give them any kindness at all; they want always to reconcile, to reunite; they will forget everything for a drop of love.
“No,” I said, “I can’t.” I felt satisfaction at the look in her eyes—it was the last thing she expected. It’s the last thing anyone expects; to hear you can live just fine without them.

A few months later, Ileana called me to tell me her mother died. It was the first time I’d heard her voice in weeks. I did not go to the funeral.

But for some reason, before I left the bay-view house that day, I found the spoon in the back of the basement kitchen’s cupboard, behind the plastic wine glasses, and I took the heavy metal utensil with me. I’ve been thinking I should get rid of it. I could give it to a homeless shelter so someone could get use out of it. The thought of putting it in my own mouth repels me. I could throw it away. Maybe into the ocean, so I could watch the foggy gold spin end over end and drop through the waves, heavy enough to cut through the current. But it occurs to me that I could put the spoon into a drawer with all of my other silverware and hope that it would soon be forgotten and that one day I would slide open that drawer, or a similar drawer in another apartment, in another city, perhaps—somewhere cold, without beaches, Moscow, maybe even Berlin—and discover the golden spoon and wonder how it was that it came to be mine.
Layla had almost forgotten how beautiful her sister was. For one thing, they had barely seen one another for the last year while Miranda was at school. But Layla wasn’t thinking of Miranda’s looks as her sister drove her from their father’s house in Cincinnati to St. Bernadette’s College in western Kentucky. While it was the two of them in the car, Miranda became suddenly and completely her older sister, too familiar for Layla to notice anything about her at all. Layla didn’t really remember who her sister was until they arrived at Miranda’s campus and Layla saw all the normal-looking students and parents pulling neon plastic bins out of minivans. Then, Layla could see her sister through these strangers’ eyes. Then, Layla remembered what her sister’s life was like—as distanced from her own as a pilot was from the people he flew above.

Layla took another ice cube from the cooler between her feet and wrapped the white hand towel around it. She pressed it to the ropy skin of her forearm, covering the smile-shaped scar at the inside of her left elbow first, like she always did. Car rides were particularly bad for the itching and the cold was one of the few things that helped. The itching could be tortuous. Layla had once scratched herself so badly that Dr. Mitchell had thought she’d taken a razor to her forearm. The truth was Layla had gouged out a line on her arm with a ballpoint pen one night in bed, after hours kept up by itching, and hadn’t
realized what she’d done until she awoke, turned on the lamp, and found the pen bloodied. It was mostly phantom itching, like pain in a lost limb. The grafted skin on her arm couldn’t feel much of anything, technically. The nerves were gone. Dr. Mitchell had tried to hide her frustration during Layla’s next appointment, but she was furious. Grafted skin doesn’t heal correctly. There was a curved scar at the inner crook of her elbow now. The thin red smile reminded Layla to “scratch,” when she must, only with the palm of her hand, to avoid using fingernails.

The air in cars was always too hot or too dry. Or perhaps Layla had been particularly itchy in a car once and the association had stuck. Even Layla suspected there was nothing logical about many of her anti-itching rules—such as her belief that only a white towel would work because the colored fibers were rougher. All burn survivors were superstitious about the itching. Layla had accepted her superstitions as her only weapons against a life over which she had little control.

“I’m sorry, Layla,” Miranda said, watching Layla take the ice. Miranda was navigating through the throng of cars in front of the residence hall. The campus was exceedingly small, but so were the number of parking spaces. “We’ll be out of this car soon, I promise.”

“Can’t we just park way out and walk? We don’t need to search for a close spot. We can unpack later.”

Miranda frowned. “It’s really hot out.”

“I won’t melt. I’m fine. And I’d tell you if I wasn’t. I know when I’m getting overheated.”

“Okay, okay, I know, Layla-lay.”
“So let’s just walk.” Since the accident, Layla’s body was always an object of discussion. She hated this, and yet, Miranda was right that these dog days of August were some of the hardest. Layla’s grafted skin, as well as the areas that had melted to the adipose tissue, couldn’t sweat. Her body struggled to maintain its internal temperature. She was feverish. Every time she felt like this she thought she was going hypermetabolic, as she had several days after the fire. Her metabolism had spiked in order to mine every bit of energy it could to heal the burns itself. This hard work increased her body temperature by several degrees. If they hadn’t pumped her full of calories, her body would have fevered itself to starvation. They told her she couldn’t have actually remembered this, as she was in an induced coma, but in the heat, Layla’s body remembered it.

“Can’t we just use the handicap—?” Miranda started.

“What!” Layla said. “You still have that?”

“Well,” Miranda said. She paused and looked at Layla. “Okay, okay, here, look. Open up the glove box for me and pull it out, will you?”

Layla found the blue plastic placard and held it with two fingers. “I’m not giving it to you.”

“That’s great, since I don’t want it, do I? So just go ahead and throw it out the window if you feel so strongly about it.”

Layla rolled her eyes. “What? Are you serious? We can’t just throw it out the window.”

“Sure you can. It’ll feel good. Some lazy college kid will find it and be thrilled they won’t have to circle around Target twenty times for the closest space.”
Layla snorted and shrugged and before she could remember to be irritated, she had thrown the plastic handicap card into the grass beside the pond passing them on their left. The pond was small but so bright Layla had to squint to look at it directly. The sunshine must have been coming in at the perfect angle for the surface to reflect the rays. A few Canadian geese were sitting in the shade of an elm tree at the water’s edge. The parking lot wrapped around the pond, to the right of where they were driving, in an aesthetically pleasing but very impractical shape; there was only one row of parking spots close to the dorm, and each spot was further away. Past this long single row of cars was a patch of woods. Layla could guess from the neighborhood that there couldn’t be more than an acre of trees, but there was a coolness radiating from the foliage that belied the woods’ size.

“It’s nice here,” Layla said. “It feels like… somewhere else.”

“It reminds you of somewhere?”

“That’s not quite what I mean.”

Miranda frowned. “Layla. We should talk about something.”

“What?”

Miranda had found a parking spot, rolled the windows down, and turned off the engine. “I’ve been telling a different story about the accident to people here.”

Layla didn’t say anything.

“I hate telling the story. People don’t even believe me sometimes—sometimes so much that even as I’m telling them I’m doubting myself, you know? And I know it’s sort of stupid and weird but I don’t want to go through that if I don’t have to and I figured you wouldn’t either, so I just tell people the easiest thing I could think of which was that it was
an electrical fire. Bad wiring. People don’t even react to that, you know? It’s so much easier.”

Layla felt vaguely angry or upset about this, but she couldn’t locate the feeling or the reason, so she nodded. “I’m a bad liar, though.”

“It would really help me out if you would just go with this,” Miranda said.

Story, Miranda had said. As if Miranda had convinced herself it was just that.

“Why do you tell them anything?” Layla said. “They wouldn’t know to ask you anything.”

Layla looked at her sister’s skin, so perfect it looked more artificial than Layla’s.

“I don’t know, Layla,” Miranda said. “Maybe if I ever want to tell anyone my mom’s dead.”

Layla was surprised to hear sarcasm from her sister. Miranda usually let Layla be the angry one. “Okay,” Layla said gently, suddenly thinking of Miranda spending hours in the hospital. Layla knew their dad had been there a lot, too, but she mostly remembered Miranda, who had never been afraid to hold her hand.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap at you,” Miranda said.

“It’s okay.”

“Are you okay with this?”

“An electrical fire, you said?”

“Yeah, bad wiring. Keep it vague.”

“Okay,” Layla said, because she could see what it meant to Miranda. Still, Layla felt like something was being taken from her, and when Layla could see Miranda like she could today, she felt like Miranda already had everything.
Layla knew she was ugly. Ten years ago, she had been a double of her sister Miranda. Irish twins, people had called them, not only because they were born in the same year. Twin Stahrs, they called themselves, a play on their last name. No one would call them twins now. The accident had gotten away with half of Layla’s epidermis and burned through large swathes of the pulpy dermis below. Certain sections of skin had blackened. Others gone entirely. Ten years ago, a pharmaceutical plane’s engines had suddenly failed in the sky above the Stahrs’ childhood home. The pilot, Leland White, a man who had two children and a divorce, Layla later discovered, had been unable to control the plane as it fell. It had crashed into two small ranch homes in Sorrento, Florida and killed the Stahrs’ 80-year-old neighbor, the pilot, and Diane Stahr, Layla’s mother. Layla remembered little of the crash, but her dreaming mind seemed to remember well. In her nightmares, disasters came from the sky—planes, blimps, and meteors; once, even the moon.

Miranda insisted she remembered nothing of the accident; her subconscious was as unscathed as the rest of her. Layla knew that people were sometimes openly skeptical when Miranda told the story of the plane crash. Miranda had told Layla that once, a new acquaintance had told her, “There’s no way you could survive that,” and Miranda had watched others nod their heads, sure of what could be survived.

No one doubted Layla. The skin of her left side, from her knees to her scalp, was rutted and discolored, like orange marmalade. Her left eye shocked open at the center and drooping at the outside edge. Lips pulled toward the left crook of her neck. The nose warped on the left side, nostril wide as a hog’s. At best, the reconstructed half of her face was a shoddy mask, unable to communicate more than one affect. Her congealed features flattened every expression of emotion into vague distaste.
The plane hadn’t scratched Miranda. At twenty, she had the indolent confidence of a black-and-white movie star. She could blink as slowly as she liked, knowing that people would look when she wasn’t. She fell in love twice a year, at least, and none of her love went unrequited. Layla was certain that if things had gone differently, she would have been beautiful, too. But things had gone exactly the way they’d gone, and people looked elsewhere when Layla closed her eyes.

Before the accident, the sisters had been close. After they lost their mother, after their father turned almost silent in grief and shock, after the months in the hospital, during the years of surgeries and physical therapy, Miranda was Layla’s only real friend. Layla wasn’t sure if this was her own fault or a product of circumstance. It seemed to Layla that most of the kids she knew were slightly afraid of her after the accident. Like her burns, or her bad luck, might be contagious. Miranda told her that this wasn’t true; she said Layla was more afraid of everyone else than they were of her. Miranda didn’t understand the way her beauty shaped the world differently for her, turning disgust into intrigue.

Up until a year ago, Layla would have said that she was Miranda’s only real friend, too. Miranda was confident and sociable and she went to parties and on a few dates during high school, but she mostly stayed home with Layla, saying that no one really understood her like Layla did. The two of them would spend their weekends in the house, watching every movie they could get their hands on, no one to tell them what was good and what was bad, giving equal consideration to romantic comedies and David Lynch, to *Vertigo* and shonen anime. They spent their Sunday afternoons making themselves and their father intricate meals—feasts of fajitas with fresh guacamole and pico de gallo and steak marinated in an ancho chile concoction of their own creation, or spicy chicken tikka masala.
and basmati rice with mango chutney and butter naan. They would spend hours cutting the ingredients, turning their fingers yellow and sticky with garlic, the soap smell of cilantro filling the air, sometimes with music turned as loud as it could go so they could hear the glasses rattling in the cupboards with the bass and sometimes with music quiet enough that they could barely hear it over their own voices. They were usually drinking wine or low-proof liquor if they could get any from the grocery store. They had discovered, at Miranda’s urging, that most people wouldn’t card Layla. Layla and Miranda would eat the meal with relish, as much of their work as they possibly could.

Their father would compliment the meal, eat a small portion, and return to whatever thoughts occupied him. He had never been fat, but in the years after the accident and his wife’s death, he had lost more than forty pounds, as if he could lose the parts of himself that missed her. Miranda was always angry with him. She could only see his depression as abandonment. But Layla couldn’t blame him; she would lose the parts of herself that missed her mother, too, if she had felt she could stand to lose anything more.

Layla knew that if it weren’t for Miranda’s bright, inexorable presence, she might have sunk into depression, too, as she slowly came to know that as much as she might try, whatever happiness she could get out of life would be nothing like what she had always believed.

And then a year ago Miranda abruptly announced she’d be moving three hours away to a small school in Kentucky. She told Layla she’d miss her and that Layla should join her in a year. Layla did, hoping that Miranda meant it when she asked her sister to follow her.
Layla’s room was nicer than she thought it would be, and bigger. Miranda already had a roommate, so Layla was rooming by herself. She would want space to herself anyway, she supposed.

“You’ll be super popular with a room all to yourself.” Miranda raised and lowered her eyebrows dramatically.

“Oh, yes,” Layla said. “No one can help themselves around this face.”

After they had moved Layla’s own neon plastic bins into the room, Miranda told Layla she was having a party. She said she couldn’t wait to introduce Layla to everyone.

“Can you do my makeup?” Layla said, watching Miranda blend foundation into her perfect skin. Layla’s face could not be saved with makeup, but she had decided it helped.

“Of course!”

Layla smiled and pulled a chair up in front of Miranda. “I did my foundation already.” Layla thought that if the lights were very, very dim, her skin might almost look uniform.

Miranda smiled back and stood so she should gather Layla’s hair in a clip.

“I used to love people playing with my hair in school,” Layla said.

“You did? I hated when people would pull at the knots. Close your eyes,” Miranda said.

Layla felt Miranda softly smoothing eyeshadow over her lids.

“Are you excited to be here? Meet some people?” Miranda paused. “Go on some dates… maybe?”
“I guess. I feel like I should be excited.” Layla could almost fall asleep like that, with her eyes closed and her sister’s soft hands on her face. “I had a dream about Leland last night. I just remembered.”

“Oh, yeah?” Miranda said, reluctant. “What’d good ol’ Leland have to say this time?”

“We were in a spaceship. It looked like 2001, a little, but we weren’t walking around upside down in the circle part, we were in a cockpit. And he looked so young, with his gold-blonde hair. He said he didn’t have to fly the ship but that we should stay in the cockpit anyway.”

Layla had been having dreams about Leland White, the pilot of the plane, for years. She had done research on Leland during her months in the hospital on the laptop Miranda had brought. Leland White was only 30-years-old when he died; already divorced with two kids. He had golden blonde hair and looked like he could just as easily have been surfing in the Pacific. He had worked for the pharmaceutical company for only half a year before the plane crashed. Layla had thought she might hate this pilot who was involved in her mother’s death and her own disfigurement, but after only a little bit of research, she saw that it had not been his fault. The company’s maintenance workers were tasked with installing the fuel quality indicators, and they had overlooked the fact that the indicators were made for a slightly different airplane model. Leland must have been just as surprised as the Stahrs were when his plane’s engines suddenly failed, with nothing to indicate that anything was wrong. Layla imagined he was more scared than any of them were. Leland had spent at least a minute or two—probably longer, as the plane would have glided on wind currents a little—falling to the earth. Leland had no chance to save the plane from
falling, and although Layla was sure he had tried to steer the plane away from people, it would have been almost impossible to control a plane of that size (under 50 feet in length) with any precision. People assumed Layla hated him; she didn’t. She understood him.

“Isn’t that odd?” Layla continued, eyes still closed. “We weren’t doing anything in the cockpit. We were just sitting there. What did he mean?”

“So you do think it’s him? Like really him?” Miranda said. “Talking to you? Helping you out?”

“No, you know I can’t believe that stuff. Not really,” Layla said. “But I do think it means something. You know, that my subconscious is telling me something.”

“Open up.” Miranda coated Layla’s lashes with mascara. “I think you’re obsessed with it all still.”

“I just feel so bad for that pilot. Everyone wanted to blame him. The pharmaceutical company tried to, before they agreed to the settlement. And he didn’t do anything wrong. He just wanted to fly airplanes. His father had flown, too.”

“I know, I know, it wasn’t his fault.” Miranda had told Layla once that she has dreams about their mother still almost every week. “Okay, look up. All right,” Miranda said. “Remember to be careful about what you tell people. I really don’t want to have to get into it with everyone. Okay. All finished. Tonight will be so fun. You’ll see.”

At least a dozen people were in Miranda’s small common room. Most were standing, cup in hand. Others sprawled out on the floor. Layla was careful. She didn’t want to touch anyone. Layla tried not to scratch, either. She knew Miranda had warned them about her. No one stared outright.
Layla had been watching only one of them for over an hour. His name was Jeremiah, but everyone at St. Bernadette’s, Miranda’s college, called him by his last name—Brighton. He was beautiful. Unable to stand in one place, unable to sit for hours. Unable to keep a smile for too long, or a frown. His speech was like this too, flitting from one absolute to another, certain of nothing but himself. He took back his burnished yellow hair in a ponytail. His beard was full, though trimmed. He was narrow-hipped and broad-shouldered. He wore ragged, wrinkled clothes, impressively authentic. He was the only person anyone knew who had spent a year in New York City trying to make it. “It” was unclear—music, probably. It didn’t matter. You could tell from his toothy smile that he assumed everything felt good and everyone loved him until he was forced to think otherwise.

Layla watched him. She didn’t worry about anyone noticing. They wouldn’t.

Miranda interrupted her watching, insisting that she “make the rounds.”

Layla had noticed Miranda, too. She had been at the center of everything. The only furniture was a small futon in the corner of the room and a single desk chair. Miranda was sitting on this, one leg crossed over the other. She tilted her chin up with one hand to talk to people standing, tilted it down to talk to those on the floor. She managed to be this supercilious while also being gracious. She refilled people’s drinks, she asked about their families, she offered her notes to a girl having trouble in World Civilizations. Layla was surprised by Miranda’s closest friends. They weren’t all beautiful. They were odd in their likes and dislikes. Their mannerisms too rigid, their phrasings out of touch. Layla had imagined a college Miranda who, it turned out, didn’t exist. Layla wondered if she could ever stop hating her sister as much as she loved her.
“Layla,” Miranda stage-whispered when they finally got to him, “I’m sorry, but you have to help me out. What’s his name again?” Before receiving an answer, Miranda looked at Brighton, put a hand to her temple, and smiled. “I forgot your name already! No wonder I almost failed Bio.”

“It’s Brighton,” Layla said.

“That’s right. How could I forget. So, how do you like it here? It must be boring after New York. But you should welcome my sister here, anyway.”

He shrugged. “It’s quiet here.”

“It is peaceful. I’m so glad you like it. So you’ve been settling in? You live off campus, right? Where are you?”

He turned the corners of his mouth down, shrugged one shoulder. “I don’t like it. The quiet. I can go hours here without seeing anyone. Drive myself crazy.”

Miranda cocked her head to one side. “Yeah, it can be quiet. But it’s great overall, right? College.” She shook her hands in front of her as if Brighton had forgotten the word and needed to be reminded.

“I never thought I’d go to college.”

Miranda didn’t snap at him exactly but she did not speak with her usual charm. “Okay. So why are you here?”

“Seemed like the thing to do.”

Someone called Miranda’s name. “I’ll leave you to it,” she said to Layla, giving her a salute.

“So you just got here?” Brighton asked.

“Yeah, just today.”
“You must be asked this a million times,” Brighton said. “But can I ask, what happened?”

Layla was surprised; few asked right away. “I’m not supposed to talk about it,” Layla said.

“Why not?”

“Miranda.” Layla shook her head.

He shrugged.

But Layla didn’t have anything else to say and it felt important to keep him there.

“It was a plane crash,” she said. “A little plane crashed into our house in Florida and I got caught in the fire. It was this pharmaceutical company’s plane and the pilot—oh.” Layla realized. Brighton was just as she had imagined Leland White. His hair and his smile and the way he seemed to understand something about Layla. Layla stayed silent, watching his reaction. Maybe he would understand—why she should stay in the cockpit, which story she should tell, what she was supposed to do after surviving what should have killed her.

“A plane did that to you?” he said. “Jee—sus. Chu—rist.” He shook his head. He may have had more to drink than Layla had thought. He put a hand out to cover the bad half of Layla’s face. “Look at you. Look at what you would’ve been.”

Layla closed her eyes. He wasn’t anything like Leland White. She traced the scar at her elbow.

Miranda and a girl came over to join them who Layla vaguely recognized as Miranda’s roommate. “Did you know?” he said to the roommate. “A plane crashed into her house.”

“What?” The roommate cocked her head, looked at Miranda.
Miranda met Layla’s eyes. “You might as well tell them all about it,” she said.

“Miranda,” Layla said. “It’s the truth.”

“What truth?” Miranda said, almost spitting the words.

Layla looked at her sister and saw that Miranda wasn’t angry at her.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” Miranda said. “It could have been me. It doesn’t mean anything, that it was you that was hit, and me that wasn’t. It doesn’t have to change anything.”

Layla wanted to be back in their father’s house, together, watching the world but separate from it, as if watching from inside a plane at 30,000 feet. Layla wanted to tell her sister that she didn’t believe in karma or fate or curses, that they could tell a story about an electrical fire. But she couldn’t. This was the only story she had.

The other children understood that Aunt Nina was sick, but Deirdre was the only one who knew their aunt was dying. Deirdre was eleven, but her mother trusted her to fill the crystal water glasses for the weekly dinner with Aunt Nina. Before Deirdre could finish her task, her aunt took Deirdre by the arm, pinching hard enough to bring blood to the surface in five oval blossoms. “You should talk to me before I die,” Aunt Nina said.

Aunt Nina’s looks had improved during the first stages of her illness, when she lost weight and went from slim to supermodel thin. Now, her still unlined skin had darkened and oranged, as if from a bad spray tan. Her eyes were shadowed now, not from the striking eyeshadow she wore, but from the gauntness of her face. Deirdre’s brother had asked Aunt Nina why her skin was a different color, and she’d told him, with wide eyes and a preacher’s affected voice, that it was punishment from God. Deirdre’s mother promptly informed him that Aunt Nina was joking, throwing her sister a look of exasperation.

Deirdre had understood right away that her aunt was joking. Deirdre understood both sarcasm and her aunt’s changing moods. Although she’d only seen her aunt for holidays in years past, Aunt Nina had begun joining them for dinner once a week in the year since the diagnosis. The night would usually end with Deirdre’s mom and aunt
talking and drinking into the night. Her aunt drank virgin cocktails, but insisted that Deirdre’s mother drank the real ones. Aunt Nina said that only one of them was dying. Sometimes Deirdre would try to hear what they were talking about through the vent in her room, but she could rarely decipher a word. Deirdre had always loved seeing her aunt, who looked like a woman on TV. She wore high heels and straightened her dark hair into a glossy curtain. Deirdre’s mother said Aunt Nina’s clothes were too much, but Deirdre thought her aunt had been beautiful. She couldn’t wear heels any longer, but her luxurious clothing and her makeup and hair tried to correct for everything the sickness had taken. Still, she looked much less glamorous now.

Deirdre was saddened by her aunt’s deterioration, and yet she was fascinated by these changes. Every time Deirdre saw Aunt Nina, she recorded the transformations in her mind, just as she’d noted changes on index cards for a science project as her tadpole morphed into a frog. Aunt Nina’s skin was even darker now, and her legs more swollen. The fluid pooling in Aunt Nina’s feet and legs evened the curve of her ankles into perfect columns. Elephant legs, Deirdre thought. She fantasized pricking her aunt’s legs with a needle and letting out all that liquid. Deirdre imagined that if only she could do that, all the sickness, too, would leave her aunt’s body. Aunt Nina would return to her former youth and beauty, in just the amount of time it took the fluid to form a big orange puddle on the floor.

Deirdre felt chosen by Aunt Nina. Deirdre replied, “I will talk to you,” with all the seriousness she could muster, forcing herself to look directly into her aunt’s bloodshot eyes. Nina’s once-sparkling gray-blue eyes had turned dull as shale. Deirdre wanted her aunt to know that Deirdre understood what a gift this was; an adult’s confidence.
Deirdre’s mother had told Deirdre, with the other children, that their aunt was sick. No one had yet spoken of dying.

Aunt Nina squeezed Deirdre’s arm once more. “You’re such a serious person.” Aunt Nina shook her head. “Just like Sally.” Sally was Deirdre’s mother.

“Are you not serious?” Deirdre asked. She could have kicked herself, once the words were out of her mouth.

Aunt Nina drew her long hair over one shoulder as she laughed. Aunt Nina had worried about losing her hair when the diagnosis was still fresh, but she never had lost it, even after a year of chemo. “You’re right. Just now, I was super serious. You tell Sally you’re coming over to my place Friday night. We’ll have a slumber party.” Her eyes could still sparkle with mischief. “I’ll show you my jewelry and you can pick out what you like. You can take it all, if you want.”

Deirdre considered how to answer, knowing that she should say, “No, no, of course, I can’t take your jewelry,” but also thinking of the glinting gems that used to cover Aunt Nina’s neck and wrists and fingers. Deirdre wanted to shine like that. She glanced at her mother, who was hunched over, pulling something out of the oven. So immersed that she hadn’t noticed the conversation.

Aunt Nina seemed to misconstrue Deirdre’s moment of silence. She grasped Deirdre’s hand this time. “You will come over, right? You’ll tell Sally you want to?”

Deirdre wasn’t sure she wanted to, but she was sure she wanted her aunt to like her. "Mom, can I go to Aunt Nina’s Friday night?"
Aunt Nina pulled away, but she looked at her sister. “You should let her. You know I’m desperate for company. All I do is sit around and play games on my phone. I’m becoming Mom.”

Deirdre knew that Aunt Nina had worked for the government, but couldn’t work much anymore. Every time she heard that, Deirdre imagined her aunt striding purposefully in the White House. Deirdre knew the White House was far away in another city, but the thought was ingrained.

“Okay.” Deirdre’s mother smiled and pushed her lighter hair away from her face. “We’ll come over right after school.”

“I meant that just the two of us would hang out together.” Aunt Nina put a hand, lightly, on Deirdre’s waist.

Deirdre was pleased by the gesture. It felt like something two teenage girlfriends would do in a movie.

Deirdre’s mother pulled her oven mitts of her hands slowly as she stood. “Let’s talk about that later. The beef wellington’s done. Deirdre, get your aunt a plate and show her where to sit in the dining room. Then you can round up the kids for me.”

Deirdre brought a plate to the stove as her mother cut into the pastry-wrapped beef with tiny sawing motions. Deirdre heard her brothers and sisters playing in the basement. They sounded incredibly immature; they couldn’t be trusted with something like death.

Aunt Nina shook her head as she watched her sister cut through the beef. “That’s too much, Sally. I told you I’m not hungry.”
“You have to eat something. Keep your strength up.” Sally slid a spatula underneath the delicate creation, pushing it onto the plate Deirdre held, only to have the top of the flaky crust break apart at the last moment.

Aunt Nina frowned and held a fist to her ribcage, right below her skinny breasts. “I told you I hate hearing that. As if there was a way I could fight it.”

Deirdre had noticed the gesture before and always imagined that her aunt’s cancer grew there, although she knew the rebel cells were in her liver.

Sally smiled with effort. “I didn’t mean it like that. Eat however much you want.” She motioned to Deirdre to take the plate and help Aunt Nina to the dining room.

“Did I tell you how Mom keeps giving me these prayer cards for St. John of God? Patron saint of sickness. I keep handing them to cashiers by accident instead of my credit card. They give me this look like, “Do you think this is going to fly?” and that’s exactly the look I try to give Mom every time she gives me another.”

“She’s just trying to be there for you. No one knows what to say. Now go sit down, will you? Set a good example,” Sally said.

“Blessed are the peacemakers.” Aunt Nina mock-saluted Sally. Aunt Nina leaned over Deirdre, who was still standing next to her aunt with fine china plate, to finger the crumbled beef wellington. “It’s all fallen apart. Just like me.” She smiled at Deirdre.

Deirdre liked to be in on the joke and smiled back. “Sort of like beef stew now, right?”

Sally’s eyes swelled with tears. She took a big breath. “It took me hours to make this.”
Deirdre’s whole body felt the blow. She hadn’t meant to hurt her mother. She’d only meant to foster the newly found comradery between herself and her aunt. She’d only wanted to be one of the adults. The beef wellington looked delicious, truly, and Deirdre had been looking forward to it all day. She’d eaten only a Poptart that morning, knowing hunger would sweeten the meal. She’d dressed especially, as she often did when Aunt Nina visited, in a bright turquoise shirt that her mother, in the changing room at the Gap, had told her looked “sophisticated,” a word Deirdre had been allowing herself to think every time she looked in the mirror. She’d even worn the precious 24-karat gold crucifix necklace her mother had bought her on a trip to Israel, a necklace that the pope himself had blessed. Now she knew that the meal was ruined, and that her mom might not stop crying all night. “No. That’s not it.” It was all she could say as she focused on holding back tears.

“She wasn’t trying to be mean, Sally,” Aunt Nina said. “You don’t have to be so sensitive.”

“Nina, just go sit down.” Sally held the plate to her sister.

Aunt Nina did not take the plate. She put her arm around Deirdre. “I won’t let you bully her.”

Deirdre’s mother threw her arms up and looked at her daughter. “Tell Aunt Nina you’re fine and that we can have a nice dinner.”

The two women looked at Deirdre.

Deirdre opened her mouth to comply, but as the words struggled to emerge, the sobs followed. She couldn’t even finish the sentence.
Her mother’s face softened immediately. “Oh, sweetie, don’t cry.”

Aunt Nina kept her arm was around Deirdre’s shoulders. She petted Deirdre’s dark hair. “It’s okay. It’s okay.”

Deirdre struggled to speak, but how could she? She had ruined everything.

Aunt Nina spoke just to Deirdre, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear. “Why don’t we have the sleep over now? Looks like we should give your mother time to cool down, or she’s liable to make you cry all through dinner. And what would be the point of that? We’ll get pizza tonight and watch CSI.”

Deirdre looked at her mother, but Sally was looking at the ceiling and shaking her head.

“We can do that Friday,” Deirdre managed to say. “Let’s have dinner tonight.”

“I’m tired of waiting.” Aunt Nina was looking at Sally. “I could be dead by Friday.”

“Very nice, Nina,” Sally said.

“You think something about what I said isn’t true?”

“Another night, Nina. Soon.” Deirdre was still holding the plate of beef wellington, as if hoping that at any moment Nina might become a different person and take the plate without pursuing this conversation.

Her mother’s eyes were getting teary. Sometimes her mom cried when Deirdre did.

“Sally,” Aunt Nina said. “I feel better today. But the chemo will just make me feel worse and worse.”
“We don’t know what will happen,” Sally said. “You might feel—” She stopped abruptly. “I’m so glad you feel better today.”

“Just this, Sally, okay? I’ve done all you’ve asked,” Aunt Nina said.

Sally set the plate on the counter behind her. “Sweetie,” she said to Deirdre, “do you want to go over your aunt’s tonight? You don’t have to if you don’t want to. But if you do, that’s fine. You’ll have a nice night with Aunt Nina. Your father and the kids will enjoy dinner.”

Deirdre felt as if her entire life would be decided by her answer. Her mother had been working for hours on dinner, and the waste of uneaten beef wellington filled Deirdre with misery. Still, her aunt was dying. Deirdre tried to meet her mother’s eyes, to get an idea of what she was supposed to do, but her mother was only looking at Aunt Nina.

“Okay, I’ll go, Aunt Nina. If that’s okay, Mom?”

Deirdre’s mother drove them the ten miles to Aunt Nina’s apartment. Aunt Nina had said earlier that day that she could drive herself over to Sally’s house for dinner, but Sally had insisted she pick Nina up. It was early spring and still cold by dusk, but Deirdre’s mother was blasting the heat for Aunt Nina, who was always cold.

Deirdre’s mother pulled to the curb and told Aunt Nina to not watch any crime shows with Deirdre. Sally handed Nina a DVD. “I brought this for you two instead. Remember when I took you to see this, years ago?”

“I remember.” Nina grinned. “You were so impressed with me.”
Sally shook her head and turned to Deirdre. “Your aunt ‘guessed’ the ending of this movie at the beginning, and I thought she was brilliant. Your grandmother told me later Nina had already seen it!”

Deirdre nodded, but all she wanted was for the two of them to stop talking so she could get out of the car. Sweat was dripping down her forehead and the small of her back.

“Well, I didn’t want you to know I’d seen it already,” Aunt Nina said.

“If you hadn’t been trying so hard to show off, I never would have found out, Neener.”

After one weekly dinner, Deirdre couldn’t sleep and had convinced her mother to let her stay up. Sally and Nina were giggling and talking over some romantic comedy. Deirdre had heard her mother call Nina “Neener,” and when Deirdre asked about it, both women had broken loudly in with a two-tone ambulance chant of “Neener, Neener, Neener!” and burst into laughter.

“I wanted you to think I was brilliant.” Aunt Nina shrugged.

Sally’s smile softened. “I already knew that!”

Nina took the DVD. “We’ll watch it. No crime shows. Don’t worry so much.”

Aunt Nina stepped out of the car, refusing any help.

Sally pulled Deirdre in for a hug. “Have fun, sweetie pie. Call me if you need anything at all, okay?” Sally paused. “I love you.”

Aunt Nina lobbed the remote at Deirdre. “You can put the movie on. I’ll call for pizza. I’m thinking at least two large, right?”
“Sure,” Deirdre said.

Aunt Nina laughed. “You can eat two pizzas? I’d like to see that.” She walked into the tiny kitchen as she spoke on the phone.

Deirdre realized her aunt was joking, a beat too late, as always. She laughed half-heartedly. She turned the TV on. A crime show was playing, of course. A lady detective in heels and a man with bright white teeth. They were standing over a girl who was face down on the sidewalk. Her hair spread out like the tentacles of some sea creature. The detectives were talking about semen. Had she been shot, or stabbed? Deirdre couldn’t see a wound and wished that she could. She had a terrible feeling the girl had been strangled.

“These are all I like to watch these days.” Aunt Nina had come back to the room. “These guys have it worse than I do.”

Deirdre startled. “Sorry. It’s what was on.”

Aunt Nina waved a hand. “I won’t tell. You don’t want to watch the movie, then?”

Deirdre didn’t want to upset her mother, but she wanted to keep watching. Mostly, she wanted her aunt to think she was cool. But another part of her wanted to know what happened in these shows that she shouldn’t see.

“You want to keep watching?” Aunt Nina asked.

“Sure.”

“Poor thing. Sally doesn’t let you watch anything, does she?”

“She lets me watch all kinds of movies,” Deirdre said, “if she knows where the bad parts are and can tell me when to close my eyes.”
Aunt Nina snorted. “That sounds about right. You know I love Sally to death, but she should let you see some of the bad stuff. Go ahead, you can look. This show isn’t too bad.”

It turned out that the girl was suffocated by her boyfriend.

“It’s always the boyfriend,” Aunt Nina said. “You’re not interested in boys yet, are you?”

Deirdre shrugged. “Not really.”

“Well, someday you will. There’s one trick to boys. Remember: you have to learn to say no to them. Once you do, they’re no problem.”

The show was like Clue, Deirdre thought, and games aren’t scary. Deirdre was proud that she didn’t gasp once. The worst thing was that there was a sex scene—blurry and quick, but still—and that was very embarrassing to watch with even your young aunt.

After they ate pizza, Aunt Nina led Deirdre into her bedroom. “I’ve accumulated so much jewelry. It’s so bourgeois, but, well most of it was gifts anyway.” She pointed to a jewelry stand on a dresser and sat on her bed. “I’m going to have to sit down, but you go ahead and look.”

Deirdre wished she knew what bourgeois meant, but was glad that her aunt knew.

The jewelry box was a big wooden square, each side enclosed by little doors that swung outward, like a mansion’s doors might. Necklaces hung on one side from a circular hanger. Other compartments held rings and bracelets and earrings. The chains were delicate. They sparkled when Deirdre ran her fingers through them. She wanted all
of them. She wanted to spread the booty across the bed and lie in the treasure like a pirate princess.

“That ring was given to me by a man who wanted to marry me,” Aunt Nina said. “He was so brokenhearted over the whole thing that he told me to keep it. He told me to pawn it, if I wanted.”

Deirdre reached for the biggest diamond. “This?” She held the silver band with her thumb and forefinger, not daring to touch the diamond itself.

Aunt Nina was smiling, wistful, but she had her fist to her rib cage and Deirdre knew she was in pain. “That’s the one. Does it fit you?”

“I can’t take this one!”

“Why not? Come here.”

Deirdre handed the ring to her aunt, who motioned Deirdre to sit with her on the bed.

“Give me your hand, Deirdre.”

Deirdre did as she was told and watched her aunt put the ring on her finger. It was very loose.

“That looks gorgeous. It’s right that you should have it. You should have your own diamond ring. Not wait for some man to give you one.”

The diamond was the most beautiful thing Deirdre had ever seen, but Deirdre didn’t want it. She didn’t care about boys, but knew she was supposed to, and knew that she was supposed to get her own ring.

“It doesn’t fit.” Deirdre let the ring fall off into her right palm.
“Keep it,” Aunt Nina said. “Someday you might want it. For the money, if nothing else.”

Deirdre put the ring in her pocket.

“You are so young,” Aunt Nina said. “Do you know that?”

Deirdre did not want to be young.

“I probably don’t seem young to you, but I am. Twenty-eight’s really young. Way too young to get sick. Do you know what the chances—? Sorry. I’m scaring you, aren’t I?”

Deirdre shook her head. She wasn’t scared, exactly. She was embarrassed. Her aunt was acting too emotional.

“I’m sorry. I meant to say—you’re so young, but it seems like such a long time since you were born.”

“Really?” Deirdre would love to hear that her birth was mythic, somehow. Her mother hadn’t told her any good stories about it. “Were you there?”

“Deirdre,” her aunt said. With her stretched and discolored skin, she seemed to look oddly at everyone. “Yeah, of course I was there.”

Deirdre paused. Her aunt seemed to be looking at her oddly, but her stretched and discolored skin might have made that oddness permanent. “You were? What happened?”

Aunt Nina smiled. “It was thunderstorming that day. You came into the world with drama.”

“Really?” Did that mean her life would be full of adventure?
“Can you keep a secret, Deirdre? Will you promise not to tell anyone what I say?”

Deirdre knew suddenly that she’d made the wrong decision. She should have told Aunt Nina that she wanted to stay at home and eat beef wellington, play with her sister before bed, and have her mother tuck her in, folding the comforter under her chin. Deirdre would have slept, still and peaceful, trying to maintain that perfect fold and her mother’s touch.

“What do you mean?” Deirdre said.

“Please, Deirdre. Please promise me. You know that I’m sick. Promise you won’t tell anybody. A secret, okay? Please.”

Aunt Nina was grasping Deirdre’s arm now, her fingers colder than any of the jewelry.

“Oh, Deirdre answered.

“You have to promise.”

“I promise.”

“You have to mean it. You can’t tell anyone. Not your parents. No one.”

“Okay. I promise.”

“Deirdre,” Aunt Nina said, “I was there the day you were born because I’m the one who gave birth to you. I’m your mother.” She paused. “Sally had to take you because I was so young, and I wasn’t married, so it was a secret. But it was me, do you see?”
Deirdre didn’t move her arm from Aunt Nina’s grasp, but she said, with confidence, “No you’re not. Aunt Nina, you’re not thinking right. It’s okay. Maybe you should go to bed.”

“No, Deirdre, I’m thinking clearer than ever. Don’t you feel it? Can’t you tell who your mother is? Don’t you know, Deirdre? Don’t you know me?”

Deirdre shook her head. “I think we should go to bed.”

“Won’t you forgive me? I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you. I’m so sorry. I should have been. I should have taken you away. We could have made it, just the two of us.”

Deirdre wished her aunt seemed more confused than she did. “Please stop, Aunt Nina.”

“Do you forgive me?”

“Okay, I forgive you. Can I please go to bed now?”

“Deirdre, you don’t have to look so scared.”

“I’m not scared.”

“Okay,” Aunt Nina said. “Do you believe me?”

“I think you’re confused.”

“I know this must be hard to hear, sweetie.”

“I just want to go to bed,” Deirdre said.

“All my life, I’ve always made the wrong choice. Every single one.” Aunt Nina was crying.

Deirdre wondered how she had ever thought her aunt was pretty.

“And giving you up was the biggest one. I just want you to know who your real mom is. I miss you every day, do you know that? I love you so much.”
Deirdre’s stomach turned when she heard her aunt sob, like a child, like one of her little siblings. She pulled her arms across her chest, feeling the goosebumps pull the little hairs upright.

“Remember you promised, Deirdre,” her aunt said. “I’m just telling you the truth.”

“Okay.”

“I love you. I hope you know I always loved you.”

Deirdre felt herself harden. She knew the words would burn her throat, and that she had to say them anyway. If she didn’t, that weight might press on her until she suffocated. Not now, but later, when her aunt was dead and buried. Her aunt’s love would press even harder then.

“I love you,” Deirdre said. She thought, I know who my mom is. I know.

Aunt Nina smiled. “I’m so glad we talked.”

Deirdre lay on the couch in front of the TV for a long time that night before she fell asleep. She was imagining the kind of baby Aunt Nina might have had. It would be slightly orange and sickly, carrying some secret poison that would eat it slowly through the years and would only kill it just as it grew up. Deirdre told herself that she wasn’t sick, that none of her insides were multiplying and snacking on the important bits, but she felt a pain start behind her ribcage and spread through her gut. She put her fist to the middle of her torso. Deirdre took out the diamond ring and imagined what it would take to destroy it. She doubted that a hammer would work, but thought maybe she could
throw it in a fire, or boil it until it dissolved. She knew diamonds were strong. Maybe
she’d never find a way to shatter it. But she would try.