Federal Chickens

by

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Military Ball

The alarm radio switched on at 0600. Fletcher woke to the country station’s scratch and twang volleying into the blackness of a February Anchorage morning. The sun, gone by midafternoon, wouldn’t rise for hours. He sprang up in the dark, flipped the light, and hit the deck for sit-ups. His abs burned as his shoulders curled off the carpet, his scrawny belly mushing over the ratty elastic of his briefs. He needed to tell Mom to buy him some new underwear.

He pulled on sweatpants, bounded down to the treadmill. The living room had a radio too, but he preferred cadences for jogging. He was his own drill sergeant, the call and the response. He barked both parts quietly as his feet slapped the whirring band; Mom was still asleep.

_Mama, Mama can’t you see? What JROTC’s done for me._

_Some people talk behind our backs, but we’ll beat ’em on the PT track._

_PT! PT!_  

_Good for you! Good for me!_
He ran an extra mile just to exhaust his nerves. Military Ball was less than two weeks away. He couldn’t put it off any longer. He had to ask Kara.

He double-timed to the bathroom and hopped on the scale. Still 117. He studied his chest in the mirror, pale as the snowdrifts collecting around the house.

Then it was time to put on the uniform. He’d spent an hour last night on the boots alone, polishing the leather with a hanky: thousands of little circles to get that immaculate mirror-shine. With a boot between his knees, he’d tried to compose what to say to Kara: should he lead with a compliment, something about her pretty hair, perhaps, or just go in with the question, point-blank? He hadn’t decided.

Once he’d put on the stiff green pants and his boots, he wrapped the plastic cuff stuffers around his calves so the pants would blouse crisply over the boots. He slid on his class A jacket, checked his brass, made sure the JROTC insignia was affixed five-eighths of an inch above the collar notch. Everything was sharp and gleaming, ready for school. And for Kara.

“Nathan, remember to put the garbage out,” his mom called to him from the kitchen.

He slumped. Frustration wedged in his gullet, he double-timed to the garage, heaved the bags out of the barrels. The frigid air turned the darkness into invisible bayonet tips, prodding Fletcher at all points. He wished his mom would change the dead porch light, wished the street had lamps. Tiptoeing through the abysmal maw of deep winter, he listened for a hoof scrape or snort. His ears hurt from the cold, straining toward any sound. He was afraid he would hear one, but even more afraid he wouldn’t, and instead run straight into it.

Please, no moose.
People from Outside think bears are scariest. Wrong. Bears keep to themselves, unless they get a taste for garbage. Moose are everywhere. Midtown, downtown, tromping through neighborhoods, lolling in traffic. They are stupid and therefore dangerous. Moose wouldn’t think twice about trampling a sixteen-year-old squad leader.

Fletcher made it to the curb, but the bag in his right hand sprang a leak. Splat. He looked down to see the stinking entrails of spinach lasagna. A massacre of wilted green had dissolved the perfect shine on his right toe. Not some little smudge, his boot was FUBAR.

Back in the house he yelled, “MOOOOOOOOOOOOM.”

She came down the hall, twisting her gray hair into a bun, dressed in lavender scrubs, the same shapeless uniform of beckoning comfort she wore every day to the children’s ward at Providence. Nursing had permanently etched tired concern into her face. Sometimes he felt like he was her patient, another receptacle for pity. He stabbed a finger toward his boot, angry with her for buying the cheap bags. He hoped this wasn’t a bad omen for asking Kara.

“Well, honey, don’t you have other shoes?”

“No.” He felt a tantrum brewing, despite his military bearing, and pushed it down.

“Oh, Nathan.” She put a hand to his cheek. “This stuff stresses you out.”

Nathan. He disliked the soft sound of his first name. She was the only one who used it. Everyone at school called him Fletcher. He preferred his last name for its sturdy, barbed syllables. He rolled his head away, distancing himself from his mother’s sympathy, which always spoke to a younger boy, a quivering, fragile self. He knew what she was doing too.
She tried to bring Dad into everything. Angry? Hungry? Didn’t do your homework? Must be because Dad was on a rig off the coast of Nigeria. Whatever. Dad was cool, and Fletcher could hardly remember the earliest years of his life, back when they all lived together before the divorce.

Fletcher sat at attention through his first three periods. A green pole of patriotism in a sea of civilian frivolity. Girls snapping gum. Guys shrouded in black hoodies. Fragments of rude conversation. “Oh, what the fuck, man.” “You got my shit?” So much false bravado. He was happy to be different, a part of the JROTC family. At lunch he took his brown sack to the ROTC room. He didn’t have friends he ate with regularly, but people were always coming and going there, so he was never alone. Fletcher knew how he’d end up if he weren’t a cadet. He saw himself in other shrimpy, tribeless guys, the ones who walked everywhere alone.

He refueled on ham and cheese. It was almost time to approach his target, wispy blonde angel Kara Hyder. She had a kind, thoughtful face that he’d studied for weeks, extracting little insight. He’d tried conversation starters like “The torch of knowledge is turned upside down on your lapel, want me to fix it?” Failure to launch on every attempt. She was a LET 3, a junior like him. She was so quiet, she hardly talked at all—a fact that seemed to boost his prospects. Maybe she was just waiting for him to ask.

Fletcher hadn’t gone to Military Ball the two previous years. Now was different. Now he had a drill-team cord and award ribbons. Now he was a squad leader. He ought to be able to get a girl. He never knew when Dad was going to call, but next time he did, Fletcher didn’t
want to mumble yet again to the other side of the earth, “Nope, no girlfriend right now.” Dad’s disappointment always doused him with shame; even when Dad didn’t say much, “Really, bud? Still nothing?” floated above the din of whatever port he dialed from. Plus, all the ROTC guys in senior leadership positions were going. Fletcher hoped for a promotion to platoon leader next year. Attending the dance was integral to showing them he was all about battalion camaraderie.

The JROTC hour started with inspection. Fletcher scrutinized his four squad members’ uniforms. He felt a tingle leaning over Price and Wong, the two females. They stood at attention, eyes focused forward. Fletcher’s own gaze ranged freely over their chests.

Senior Army Instructor Colonel Mejía continued the economics unit after inspection. The colonel’s shock of white hair was always perfectly trimmed against his dark-brown skin. The silver oak leaves pinned to his shoulder boards were the hallmarks of a lifetime of achievement.

Today the colonel stood at the lectern and warned them about the foolishness of young soldiers with money. He talked about when he was posted in Grafenwöhr, Germany. “A lot of eighteen-, nineteen-year-old soldiers, they rush out and buy fancy cars, thinking they can handle big monthly payments on an E-3 salary since the army covers room and board. Not a good idea.”

Fletcher respected the colonel more than any man except for Dad, but he was unconvinced. He could see himself, a roguish young private with a Lexus. If you had no other responsibilities, why not?
Fletcher’s gaze wandered to Kara. Her uniform pants were too short. He watched her black-socked ankles bobbing beneath the table. Stray blonde hairs grazed the collar of her olive jacket.

The bell rang. Kara stood and gathered her books. Fletcher approached, trying to breathe normally.

“Excuse me, Kara.”

She looked up. A couple of LET 1s walked by, eyeballing them.

“I was wondering if you would go to Military Ball with me.” Fletcher forced himself to look at her, even though he felt his internal organs were about to crash to the floor, like an aerial bomb dropping from the hull of a B-52 Stratofortress.

Kara shrank into her jacket. Her cheeks purpled. She whispered too quietly for him to hear and started to turn toward the door.

Fletcher’s heart pounded. What did she say? He couldn’t let shyness keep them apart.

“Um, sorry, I didn’t hear. Will you go?”

This time it was clear from the movement of her lips. No. Her eyes glistened with fury, since he’d forced her to say it twice. Fletcher felt nauseous. The adamancy of her refusal was a sucker punch, as if he’d suggested something dirty. Erase Kara, forget about Kara. This couldn’t spoil the road to Military Ball. There were other girls. Plenty of them. And to prove the insignificance of Kara to himself, he was going to ask one right away.

He walked to his locker and spotted Melissa Blazek. She had green eyes. On uniform
days, she pinned her hair in braids wrapped around her head, princess-like.

“Hi, Melissa.”

“Oh, hi, Fletcher.” She uncapped a lip gloss.

He smelled sticky fruit. “Do you have a date to Military Ball?”

“Uhhhhhh—”

“Want to go with me?”

Her brows came together, lips open and shiny. “I’m busy.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

Fletcher stewed through the last two periods. Kara had hurt his heart, and the two girls together had laid siege to his pride, but the day wasn’t over. Battles lay ahead.

After final bell, he returned to ROTC. He preferred to avoid the bus and do homework amid his fellow cadets until his mom got off work. Fletcher spied Dawn Cook. She sat with her best friend, Kayla McDermitt, in the row of chairs that separated the classroom from the inspection area. Her uniform jacket fit tightly over her curves. She had a weird sense of humor, always said “Hiya, Fletcher!” in the halls. Anyone was a far cry from sweet Kara, but so long as there were girls who hadn’t been asked, a decisive victory was within reach.

“Dawn, could I talk to you for a minute?” he asked.
Dawn looked to Kayla, then said, “I guess?”

“I was thinking we could go into the hall?”

“No. Here.”

“Okay, well.” Fletcher breathed in, ready to exhaust his artillery. “Military Ball is coming up and—”

Dawn dropped her jaw. “Yoinks!” she said. She shot out of the chair, spun her arms in cartoon circles and ran outside.

“Dawn!” Kayla laughed, trailing after her.

Fletcher felt a clap on the shoulder and his chest curdled with anger. Whoever it was had probably smudged his brass, but then he saw that the hand belonged to battalion commander Tim Swiderski, the highest-ranking cadet in school. Tim had applied to West Point; he told everyone an ROTC scholarship to Cornell was his back-up plan.

“Hang in there, Fletch. I love that can-do spirit. But maybe spread it out, huh? Maybe ask one girl a day?”

Fletcher grumbled, “Yes sir,” as Tim swung his bag over his shoulder and left. Fletcher plopped into a chair and thumped his chin into his palm. He needed a girl. His lack of experience in that department was as glaring as if he’d put on his uniform and walked out of the house without a tie or any brass. Each rejection stung, but he had to press on, even though his heart yearned to hunker down and mourn unattainable Kara.
“Hi Fletcher,” whined a high little voice.

He looked up. Shelly Cobbler was closing in. He knew all about Shelly. Everybody did. Her eyes and nose were tiny between chubby cheeks. Her pants tugged at her thighs. Her breasts—Fletcher willed himself not to stare at them, not exclusively. Her hair was the same dull brown as the faux-wood tabletops, and she wore it in a slicked-back bun every day. She was a LET 3 like him, but still a corporal—one of those cadets who never had the grades for promotion. Wide hipped, shuffling between the tables, she reminded him of a water buffalo he’d watched breach the surface of a pond on the Nature Channel.

“Hi,” he grumbled back.

“You look sad. What’s up?”

Fletcher wondered if news of his blunders had trickled as far down as Shelly. She herself was frequent fodder for battalion gossip. She didn’t seem unaware of this, just uncomprehending that she ought to be ashamed.

“Nothing,” he said.

“I can tell it’s something. Want to go somewhere and talk?”

Fletcher looked at her chest. Her bosom was so tight against her shirt that her name tag didn’t lie flat on the fabric. His mom wouldn’t be here for twenty minutes.

They started down the hall. She asked again why he was down. He wasn’t going to talk about Kara or Melissa or Dawn. Instead, he said he’d only seen his dad twice in the past year, and he wasn’t sure when he’d be back from Africa, or if another job would shuttle him
somewhere else. Concern for his dad seemed appropriate for the occasion.

“Wow,” she said. “That is sad. I get it, though. It’s just me and my grandma at home, and she can’t do much.”

Fletcher nodded. He’d expected she didn’t have parents.

“Kyle’s parents are separated too,” she said. “Also Jordan’s.”

Kyle was the captain of the color guard. Jordan was in riflery. They were cool guys. Fletcher knew about Shelly and the two of them. He’d heard the talk. Saw Jordan shrug when he was teased. Fletcher remembered him saying, “It’s just like when there’s free pizza, man. Even if it’s not your favorite kind, you’re still gonna take a slice!” Shelly talked as if they were her friends.

They walked a little farther and came to the set of double doors that led to the pool. He followed her inside and across the deck to the stairs leading to the second-story bleachers. Shelly knelt to tie her shoe on the landing. Fletcher looked around.

“It’s nice here, right? So quiet.” She gestured as she stood up.

He could smell chlorine, but neither the pool below nor the bleachers above were visible from where they stood on the landing—an alcove of total privacy. The swim season was over. This hidden space on the stairs was the perfect defilade to ward off infiltrating teachers or other students.

“Yeah. Nice.” He took a step toward her. It was only a matter of time, he could see that now. He wished they weren’t in uniform, but that was excusable. Men in uniform had
always done this. Wartime dalliances, goofy but permissible—take your leave and see about a girl, or bring her back to base as a “local guest.” It didn’t matter so much who she was. A man had needs. Fletcher had needs.

Shelly raised her finger and traced the letters on his name tag.

He held his breath and brushed his thumb on COBBLER. And thought: *gobble her.* Fletcher looked into her face. Her lips had a nice shape. Her eyes were dark and small. Were they pretty? No, not buried in those balloony cheeks. She would never be pretty, but she could be useful.

Their chins tilted together. Her tongue slipped into his mouth like a snail switching shells. It tasted like nothing. Fletcher spread his fingers on her back. Her name tag collided with his award ribbons. They swung into the stairwell corner. He pushed his crotch against hers. The thick double layer of their uniform pants blunted the feeling. He wanted to see her breasts, but her shirt had tiny buttons, and he didn’t know how to undo the black neck tab under her collar. Why, why did this have to happen on uniform day? He kept his mouth attached to hers, squeezing and rubbing in heated frenzy until he was sure Mom was idling in the pickup zone.

“I gotta go,” he said.

“Really?” She sounded surprised but not upset, like someone had just told her it would rain instead of snow tomorrow.

He still wanted to see her boobs.
Seated across from Mom, Fletcher hunkered over his turkey loaf. He ate vigorously.

“You must be hungry,” she said.

Fletcher raised an eyebrow and chewed. He was no longer a person who had not made out with a girl.

Mom asked about his day and he responded in monosyllables. She asked if he’d read the news. He had not. It was looking certain there would be another war.

Fletcher wanted another war. Afghanistan was winding down, and Fletcher needed a war for when he graduated next year. Actually, he hoped he wouldn’t miss this next one. Some said it would be over in a matter of months.

“I trust they’ll make the right decision,” he said, referring to those at the top of the chain of command.

“Why? Why trust them?” Mom was doing that thing. She liked to act like they were having an equal conversation, but really she just wanted to change his mind.

Actually, he was sure by the defeated way she looked at him on uniform days that she’d prefer it if he weren’t in JROTC at all. She never said so, though, which Fletcher figured was because she didn’t want to give up ground to Dad in the battle for preferred-parent status, a fight every smart divorce kid uses to his own advantage. Dad thought JROTC was the greatest thing Fletcher had ever done. Mom was always the bleeding heart, Dad the pragmatist. Just because Dad was absent didn’t mean Fletcher would switch sides.
He decided to level her: “Mom, don’t you want to make sure we don’t get attacked again?”

“You know, Saddam doesn’t have anything to do with al-Qaeda.”

Fletcher flinched. He didn’t know that. His politics were supposed to be practical. He couldn’t let her win on facts.

“Look.” He used the argument he’d heard Corey, the captain of Bravo Company, profess at lunch the other day. “Say a mom tells her kid that he better not have pot in his room. She’s going to come check in one month. Do you really think the kid will still have pot in his room one month later?”

“Are you trying to tell me you have pot in your room, Nathan?” Mom looked like she might laugh.

He was annoyed that this possibility seemed so remote that she could joke about it. “Not right now!”

“Okay, honey,” she said. “Hey, also, the next ANWR march is downtown next weekend, and you know you have an open invitation to join me. You could even wear your uniform.” ANWR—pronounced an-war—the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, was chief among his mom’s political causes. Every two weeks she and the other tree huggers gathered to protest allowing oil companies to drill there.

“Mom! No!” Fletcher always wondered if she’d care so much about oil if it weren’t for Dad’s job.
She kept talking, said a bunch of things about global warming, oil greed, and war—stuff she probably heard on NPR. Fletcher’s mind turned back to the stairwell. Maybe Shelly could take care of some more of his firsts.

Fletcher ate lunch in the cafeteria instead of the ROTC room on Friday. He was afraid Shelly would be there and sit with him. He needed clear boundaries.

Two tables over, he spotted LET 1 Luz Preciado eating with two other Hispanic girls. Luz had a cute, mischievous face. She was always rolling her lips together like she was swallowing an inside joke. He reckoned the other guys hadn’t noticed her because she still dressed sort of young. He didn’t know her friends. They weren’t in ROTC. One was fat, and the other was even smaller than Luz, didn’t look like a high-schooler at all. And Luz, Luz was just right.

Fletcher pushed away his tray. He was a squad leader and she was just a private. She should be impressed with his rank. “Hey, Luz,” he called out.


He sat down without invitation. He remembered once watching Corey, the Bravo Company captain, flirt with a table of LET 2s. He borrowed a line verbatim. “What are you ladies up to over here? I came to investigate.”

“Nothing!” her fat friend keened. “We’re not doing nothing!”

“I know you’re up to something,” Fletcher growled. “I’m going to find out.”
The trio giggled. Their black hair shone under the fluorescents. He “grilled” them for several minutes, until Luz told him her troubles. They wanted to hold dance-team practice after school, but Luz’s parents weren’t having it.

“Her grades suck,” the little one explained. “So her mama say she has to go home right after school.”

“Actually, they may let me stay if I get a tutor.” Luz dazzled him with a thoughtful smile. “Could you tell them you’re my tutor?”

“Well, if I told them, I’d really have to do it.” He nodded, though he only troubled over his own grades enough to keep a GPA that allowed him to maintain rank.

“Sure, sure,” Luz said. “You can tutor me.”

“I could teach you all kinds of things,” Fletcher said. He held her gaze, intoxicated with confidence.

The two friends giggled. Luz did her smile-swallowing thing. The time was right. Now, the surgical strike.

“I want you to go to Military Ball with me.”

Luz gasped. Fletcher tensed, it almost sounded like a horrified noise but then—

“I would love to go, but my parents are so strict. I don’t know if they’ll let me. I have to see.”

“Would it help if I asked them? Like when I talk to them about tutoring—”
“No! Don’t mention it. Only I understand them. I will try.”

The bell rang. He tried to put his arms around her as she stood up, but she dipped out of reach and bounced off. Fletcher watched her go. His imagination reconfigured, positioning Luz in the spot previously held by Kara. He could see himself slipping a flower corsage onto her tan little wrist. But without warning, Shelly’s breasts barged into his thoughts, like tactical-entry battering rams smashing the door to his consciousness. Those breasts pulled at him with more urgency than this new thing with Luz.

Everyone was crowded against the windows when Fletcher arrived to his final class. Mrs. Davis was saying, “Sit down, sit down,” but no one was listening. Fletcher joined the lump of excited students. Saw what they saw. Two moose on the frozen front lawn, near where the buses were lining up to take kids home. The bull shuffled behind the sow and clambered on top of her. “Oh, they gettin’ it on!” somebody yelled. “Ew!” “Gross!” groaned the others. Moose. Fletcher hated them, but watching the bull’s thrust left him awestruck. He couldn’t look away. No one could, until Mr. Kendall, the bow-tied English teacher, stalked outside with a fire extinguisher. “Oh, Jesus, Hank . . .” Mrs. Davis gasped. But the white cloud sent them trotting out of sight.

Fletcher lingered at his locker after the bell. Now he had two targets to work into his battle plan. The situation required stealth.

He walked to the ROTC room. Looked in, but didn’t enter. Shelly was turned away, her hands folded on her hip, reading the bulletin board. He studied the way her butt pushed
against her jeans. How could he make her turn around without going in? He didn’t want other cadets to see them together. He had to keep it covert.

“Wassup, Fletch? You coming or going?” Tim Swiderski barreled into the room, every entry a performance.

“Going, sir.”

“Catch ya later, then!” Tim always guaranteed an encore.

Finally, Shelly turned. She wore her winter coat, but it was unzipped to a V-neck tank top. Cleavage. A big purple butterfly stretched across the fabric pulling on her boobs. Fletcher’s breath shortened. He jerked his head, motioning her into the hall.

“You look nice,” he said.

“Thanks.” She hugged her elbows, pushing the breasts up toward her collarbone.

Fletcher wished he could fall into them.

He talked about the last time Dad called as he walked to the pool with her. Maybe that was the price of admission. She said her grandma was pressing her to get a job, even though she already did all the cooking and cleaning.

They went to their special place in the stairwell. The bra unhooked in the front (she did it). Fletcher spread his palms over them. God, yes. Squeezed, sucked, licked. After a time, she undid his pants and knelt before him. God, yes. God, yes. God, yes.
The weekend. Two agonizing days of quiet monotony after a week of thrills and conquest. The house was so still. From his bedroom Fletcher could hear Mom downstairs, shuffling her newspaper. The snow made everything outside still. He waited out two daylight cycles. The sun crossed low on the horizon, each afternoon ending with the light bleeding out of the pale winter sky. It wasn’t a big house, but it was too big for two people. Mom allowed Dad to stay with them when he visited, and that was the only time it felt full. She disapproved of Dad’s life, but his father’s adventuresome detachment was Fletcher’s greatest inspiration. Dad had been proud when Fletcher told him he joined JROTC. Dad had always regretted he didn’t serve. Still, as an oilman, he went around the world pulling blood out of the earth, which seemed like the second-best thing. His parents were such opposites that Fletcher had difficulty picturing them married. The fact seemed embarrassing to both of them now. Actually, when Fletcher thought back to his early childhood, when they’d all lived together, his memories of Dad were bright and sharp. Mom was fuzzier, as though Dad’s presence was so big that it took her out of focus. Now Fletcher only had his mother, her stack of magazines, her antidrilling-protest phone tree tacked on the refrigerator, the weird African-sounding Paul Simon CD she put on at five o’clock. Fletcher longed for Monday, hardly believing he still had dozens of weekends to endure before graduation and enlistment carried him away from Alaska.

Fletcher thought about the week ahead. He needed a two-pronged strategy. He wanted Luz for Military Ball, maybe she’d even be his girlfriend, but he also wanted to clear all the bases with Shelly before he got tied down. These were special ops. He was well on his way to becoming Delta Force, juggling women like high-powered carbines.
Monday went according to plan, propelling Fletcher to new heights. If high school social life was previously a losing battle, the tide had turned. He was days away from winning the war, ready to unfurl a star-spangled banner emblazoned with “MISSION ACCOMPLISHED” across the aircraft carrier of his life. He was almost to port, ready for the masses to champion his arrival.

First, Luz found him at lunch. She sought him out! She clamped her baby-doll fingers around his elbow and dragged him to an empty classroom and picked up the phone. Fletcher pitched an elbow against the wall, huddled over her as she spoke to her mother in Spanish. She handed him the receiver.

“Mrs. Preciado? This is Nathan Fletcher. I’d be honored to tutor your— My grades? . . . Math? I got a, let’s see, hmm . . . I think I got a B.” Actually, it was a C.

Luz rolled her eyes and took the phone back. The Spanish got louder and faster. She slammed down the receiver. “She says she wants me to have a girl tutor.”

Fletcher rubbed her back. He felt her stiffen, unused to a man’s touch. He thought she needed comfort. He drew her in for a hug and tried to hold the moment, but she pushed away with a quick, “Gotta go!”

That was okay, he could be slow with her.

The day ended. He returned to the ROTC room. Shelly lolled near the whiteboard
in a short black skirt. He watched her thighs rub together, squeezed against the hem. It was much too cold for such a skirt, but there she was.

“Hey, Shelly,” he said.

“Oh, hey.” She turned away and picked up a marker, popped the cap off and on.

“What’s up?”

“How come you don’t eat lunch in here anymore?”

“Oh, I’ve been going to my science teacher at lunch. I need help.”

Shelly nodded. She started for the door. Together, they headed for the pool. Fletcher marveled. She gave so much and expected so little.

When they got to the landing, Fletcher took off his own winter coat and fluffed it across the floor like a picnic blanket. Shelly sat down on the lining.

Their first moves were awkward. The floor was rock hard. Fletcher put his palm down, and it came up sticky from spilled soda. After a few minutes, Shelly scooted out of her underwear. Fletcher’s whole body electrified with want. Did he need to take his pants all the way off? No, around the knees would suffice. She took him in her hand and pulled him inside her. Target locked. Fletcher’s virginity turned to rubble.

She reached for her underwear afterward, but she didn’t put them back on. Instead, she stuffed them between her legs to catch the drips. She clenched the balled-up panties under her folded arms, then tossed them in the garbage by the locker rooms on the way out.
“Are you going to Military Ball?” she asked.

“Oh, I don’t know.” Once again, his lies assembled in skillful formation. He hadn’t given it much thought, he said, and he didn’t like dancing. Shelly didn’t say anything, didn’t even nod. Fletcher concluded by saying he didn’t even know who he’d go with. There. Good. Set it in stone. It was too bad if there was some misunderstanding, a portion of collateral damage, but they’d entered into this series of engagements on equal footing. Besides, it shouldn’t even be that big of a deal. He wasn’t her first. Shelly’s face was blank. He’d been inside her, but he was locked out of her head. He didn’t understand her at all. He gave her a quick hug before he left.

Garbage day, uniform day. Fletcher remembered to take the bags out before he suited up this time. The journey was no less terrifying. The cold. The dark. All the same. He could feel the blood pounding in his head and hoped the sound of it wasn’t masking the sound of a big bull, especially not that rutting one from the school lawn. God, no. Drop the bags. Sprint back inside. Catastrophe averted. He carried on with his Thursday.

Fletcher wondered as he walked the halls if he seemed different, now that he’d gone all the way. He even thought some ROTC kids were looking at him oddly.

“Fletcher! My man!” Gary Donham, Alpha Company first sergeant, raised a hand for a high five. He was flanked by two other LET 4s. “Way to slay the ladies, dude.”

How did he know? Fletcher glanced behind when they passed. Gary’s shoulders were
shuddering with laughter. So they were making fun of him, but it was good-natured. Just like the others got ribbed when they’d had their turns with Shelly. Two more ROTC kids passed, girls this time. They too looked at him before hurrying on. Fletcher practiced his sheepish grin. He pictured himself saying, “I don’t know, man! It just happened!”

He didn’t have to wait long to practice this phrase. When he got to his locker, Ellis walked up. Also a junior, Ellis was only a LET 2. He’d joined late. He was even shorter than Fletcher, with thick glasses. Sometimes he talked to Fletcher like they were friends.

“So what’s going on with you and Shelly?” Ellis asked.

“I don’t know, man! It just happened!” Fletcher smirked, only afterward realizing he’d jumped the gun a bit.

“You guys did it by the pool?”

Fletcher shrugged.

“She’s telling everyone she’s bummed you won’t take her to Military Ball.”

Fletcher scoffed. “That is definitely not happening.” He slammed his locker for emphasis.

Fletcher’s platoon leader, Derrick, gave him a double-eyebrow raise when he got to class. Anthony, another squad leader, greeted Fletcher simply by shouting, “THE POOL?” Everyone knew. Other cadets had done it. Other cadets had done it with Shelly, but people were treating this differently. Maybe it was the stairwell part. It would’ve been better to be somewhere else, like a car. But it was subzero outside and Fletcher didn’t have a car.
Fletcher’s undershirt stuck to his skin under his jacket. Usually he liked the stiff bulk the uniform added, but today he felt conspicuous, even though he was dressed like everyone else. He could feel them all imagining him, undone on the linoleum with the sluttiest girl in the battalion. How had they found out? Shelly, of course. She’d talked. He wouldn’t want to trade his virginity back, but he hated how everyone was twisting the story, giving it the stink of desperation.

Fletcher rocketed out of the room when the period ended. He needed to pin down Luz for Military Ball and end this pool story—maybe deny it altogether. He felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned around, didn’t see anyone at first. That’s how little Luz’s friend was. She looked like a fifth-grader.

“Luz wants me to tell you she’s not going to your army dance.” The girl stared up at him through pink glasses.

“Why? Her parents?”

“No. She doesn’t want to go.”

“Tell her I want to talk to her—”

“—Oh, she also wanted me to say she doesn’t like you.”

The girl kicked her toe back and spun away. Luz was lost. Had she heard about Shelly? Or had she only ever wanted him for that phone call? No, it had to be Shelly. Shelly had ruined everything.

Fletcher started toward the cafeteria but stopped. He didn’t want to see Luz. He
didn’t want to go to the ROTC room, either. He was sure to be teased, or worse, see Shelly. He didn’t want to eat lunch on some hallway floor, not in his uniform. Too undignified. Nowhere to go, Fletcher grabbed a notebook from his locker. He would pace the hall until lunch ended. If anyone asked, he’d say he was on his way to homework help. He took wide steps full of false purpose, a lie in movement. Humiliation lurked in all corners. Evasive maneuvers were all that could save him. It almost worked.

“Fletcher, I’ve been looking for you.” Tim, the most senior cadet, the very top of the student chain of command, stopped him in the hall. He clutched a Pepsi and a bag of Skittles.

Fletcher remembered that he hadn’t eaten. “Yes, sir?”

“Follow me.” Tim’s voice struck the tone of an order.

Fletcher fell into step behind him. Tim led them to the space between the two sets of double doors leading outside—cold enough to guarantee privacy. Fletcher’s sweaty undershirt chilled instantly, presaging disaster.

“It’s come to my attention that you have had relations with Cadet Shelly Cobbler.” Tim looked at him, expressionless.

Fletcher nodded silently. This was the end. Tim would tell the colonel. He’d be demoted, maybe have to leave the program altogether.

Tim’s words buzzed around his ears: honor, the mantle of leadership, upstanding citizenship. Basically, Tim remixed the cadet creed they’d all had to memorize. “You must
accord yourself in proper fashion,” Tim finished.

Fletcher nodded again, unsure what accord meant.

“You must make good on your promise to take Shelly to Military Ball.”

“What?” Promise? Who promised?

“Yeah, I heard from some of the girls, and then I saw she was looking real down in the ROTC room. She didn’t want to tell me at first, but finally she did. You can’t tell a girl you’ll take her and then take back the offer.”

“But—”

“—Plus, you’ve been needing a date anyways. Shelly’s the one, so what’s the holdup?”

“I—”

“—And Fletcher, don’t let on to anyone we had this conversation. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

Tim walked away. The pieces crystallized as the bell blared. Shelly had fixed things up good, telling everyone he’d promised to take her. Tears of contempt boiled behind his eyes. Shelly, who always wore her hair the same way. Shelly, who rotated the same three shirts to school all week. Shelly, who didn’t understand that people thought less of her, not more, for giving it up so easily. He hated her because she’d known something he hadn’t: that they were the same. The mismatched ranks on their shoulder boards were a lie. She knew
people would expect him to give more of himself to her than other guys had—the battalion saw him as no better than she.

He found her after school in the ROTC room, offering up a commendable performance of bummed out, pretending not to expect him.

“Hi, Shelly.”

“Oh, hi,” she mumbled.

Fletcher steeled himself and delivered the invitation.

“Really? You want to go with me? Are you sure?”

Fletcher looked down into those fleshy cheeks and her jutting chest below. Her breasts tugged at him even though he wished they wouldn’t. He would honor his word to Tim. Duty. Sacrifice. This was a soldier’s lot.

“Of course I do,” he said.

Saturday arrived. Fletcher told his mom he needed her to drive him to the florist for the corsage. She said the protest was downtown at noon and he’d just have to ride along because that was the only trip she wanted to make that day.

She parked at a meter across from Town Square Park, the city’s permanent, pee-smelling homeless camp. A group of people who looked like Mom were already gathering. They had
gray hair and glasses like his mom. They were thin like her and wore nice outdoorsy shell jackets like hers.

“You coming?” she asked. She was pulling her poster board out of the car. “DRILLING = KILLING” it said, above a picture of a baby caribou.

Fletcher shook his head. He watched her go to her look-alike friends, all of them boring and serious and absurd with helplessness. Even if she were right, how could she stand to make such a pointless gesture? A man in a duct tape–patched parka stumbled toward a bench. Mom’s group raised their signs toward the downtown traffic. None of the passing cars cared. Vagrants were their only audience.

Fletcher pouted. He slumped down in his seat, tucked his fists into his jacket sleeves, the car already losing heat. Shelly was just supposed to be a one- or three-time thing, and now the engagement was protracted. He had miscalculated. He was deeply tangled. Saddled with her. The dance would be the end of it, but even that seemed like an eternity. The pool thing had permanently sullied his reputation.

What if it didn’t end with the dance? What if. He thought about how she’d wiped herself off afterward. Surely he couldn’t have. Not on the first try. He felt dizzy and sick. Of course, if that happened she’d keep it, hook him forever. There would be no carefree years traveling the world, blowing his pay on fun. He’d have to pay for diapers and baby stuff, even if the kid wasn’t his. He wouldn’t be a happy-go-lucky grunt but one of those miserable nobodies living a life impoverished by complications. Shelly would sit at home, do nothing, live on his soldier’s wages.
Fletcher sank into a cold well of self-pity. His mother’s protest bobbed in his peripheral vision as up ahead a moose appeared in the intersection, one block away from where Fletcher sat. A bull, it blasted out of nowhere, running full tilt, spooked, shooting around the block, just as a small red car zipped under the traffic light. Everything happened too fast: a blur of beast and machine. Fletcher watched as moose and metal shattered and fused in the intersection. The moose flipped off its feet and punched through the windshield. It was in the windshield and on top of it, hooves kicking viciously toward the gray sky.

Fletcher looked away. He couldn’t see any more. He shouldn’t. He shouldn’t. He shouted “MOM! MOM!” She was a nurse. She could help. He was too young to see. But he knew. Even though his mom was so concerned about global warming, this. This was why she drove the jeep he was sitting in and not some tiny trap like the red car that had crumpled like a chip bag in the intersection. Death happened like this every year.

He looked for Mom. They’d dropped their signs in the snowbanks. All the protesters were running toward the accident. Mom was out ahead. Fletcher got out of the car and walked in the opposite direction. Determined not to look back, he escaped into the mall. The indoor heat cradled him. It smelled like perfume and warm pretzels. He was still a child, in years and before the law, and shouldn’t have to confront such senseless violence.
Madison

Madison was my best friend. That day, she parked two blocks from the courthouse. The sidewalk was edged with blackened slush. Puddles spread over the pavement, forming a trail of dark lagoons that made it impossible to walk a straight path. No one in Anchorage thought of the departure of winter as spring. Spring sounded too pretty. Breakup. That’s what we said instead. The time of year when snowmelt reveals the filth underneath. That image – the city unveiling its damp, dirtied self in patches – sticks with me, though it’s been more than a decade. I’m still mulling, making sense of my role (which was ancillary, I admit, not even co-starring). I think if I could connect all the facts into a causal sequence that explained the end of my friendship with Madison, I would stop thinking about it. Somehow, that hasn’t happened yet.

I plunged a hand into my purse, scrambling for quarters and finding only pennies, lip gloss, tampons, a sticky hard crumble that dug under my fingernails. Granola bar remnants, most likely. “I know I’ve got change somewhere,” I mumbled, staring into the dark folds.

Madison walked around toward the meter. “I got it.” She pushed coins into the metal slot. Her blonde braids hung below the logo of her winter jacket like ropes.
I stopped searching for change and hugged my sides. Through huffed clouds of breath I watched the dial tick over to the three-hour max. Since I couldn’t contribute anything, I decided instead to pay for breakfast. Not feeding the meter was just one more way I’d missed the mark with Madison since the night of April 23rd of the previous year. This was my day to course-correct, to prove I was a worthy best friend, the designator we’d claimed for each other since age six. I hadn’t been much help getting Madison this far, but I’d see her triumphantly over the finish line. My warmth and encouragement would shine brighter in both our memories than my deficiencies leading up to this day. I thought I was on my way when she’d picked me up that morning, but I realized I’d have to restart the clock. Everything after the meter would redeem me, I thought.

Our sneakers ground wetly on the pavement. Exhaust curled up toward the stoplight above the muddy cars idled at the intersection. I’d expected three of us: me, her, and her mom. Her dad was driving separately from work. But when Madison picked me up she said her mom was home in bed. Massive migraine. I thought back to the afternoons of our childhood: we’d tiptoe past the cracked door to her parents’ bedroom with our My Little Ponies and glitter batons, careful not to talk above a whisper until we’d reached the basement playroom. Today, if Madison was upset, she didn’t show it. A migraine was a migraine, but I wondered to myself why her mom couldn’t take a pill or something. I’d seen through Madison’s eyes over the last ten months how often people don’t do what you want, even at the most critical times, when they’re supposed to be there for you. On the bright side, her mother’s absence was a mark in my favor. I’d showed up. By comparison, I was looking good.
My first failure was the night of. I’d left without her. I had a strict midnight curfew, and she’d told her parents she was sleeping over. We didn’t get to the party until ten-thirty, not wanting to appear over eager. She touched up my eyeshadow before we got out of the car. I closed my eyes and felt the brush pad alternating with the dab of her pinky.

“Elaine, you should do smoky eyes every day,” she said as she finished. “You’re a fox,”

She squeezed my butt on the way up the driveway, for encouragement.

We walked in to the sound of beer pong teams yelling *ha ha fuck you* and *chug* over the dining room table. People from school clumped and spilled out of every room. Musty plumes loomed over the stoners in the living room. Although this was a first for both of us – we weren’t in the party crowd – the scene seemed familiar; I recognized it from teen movies: a party, as it should be.

Everywhere, it was too loud to talk. Nevertheless, Madison slipped into a group and found something to laugh about. It was harder for me to jump into the thick of things. I didn’t want to be her shadow, so I walked around, traced the purple punch splatters on the textured wall, and found my way to the master bathroom. There I surveyed Andy Chamot’s mom’s nail polish. I started back downstairs and ran into Rosie Velasquez on the landing, also not a partier. She asked if I’d begun my position paper for AP lang. I could tell by the way her eyes followed the people stumbling around below us that our conversation bored us both. Not for the first time in my life, I yearned to be the Madison, the one throwing my head back, flashing a bright chunk of perfect teeth. I told Rosie I needed to get a drink and
went to check on Madison. She was holding court before a new group with a story about
field-dressing a caribou, one of her standards. "My bou," was how she referred to it. The
double entendre elicited chuckles that gave way to gasps when she mimed working her knife
around the chest cavity and yanking out the esophagus. Madison was so pretty; she risked
nothing by being outrageous. I raised my eyebrows and tapped my index finger on my wrist.
She paused long enough to say she wanted to stay a little longer. I wandered away into
forgettable conversations, ever aware of the narrowing window to get us home before 12:01.
By eleven-forty, I couldn’t go more than two minutes without checking the time on my
phone. Dread crept into my stomach. I went back to find Madison.

“They’re going to be so pissed,” I shouted over the music.

Madison waved me off with one hand. The other pumped the keg handle, as if she’d
done it many a time. I could list our actual combined drinking history: small pours of beer
and wine at family dinners; the champagne toast at my sister’s wedding; the time we got
buzzed on wine coolers at her dad’s company picnic. The short list of our alcohol-sweetened
experiences made my nagging to rush home all the more disappointing. We were supposed
to cross into this new territory, the parents-away booze rager, together. But I didn’t have
time to contemplate loyalty and shared rites of passage. I didn’t want to be yelled at, or
worse, give my parents an excuse to deny me the concert band’s San Diego trip the following
December. The fear of future fun denied must have blazed in my eyes.

Madison finally said, “You know what, I’ll just crash here.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, covering my bases.
She held the spigot over her cup, filling it with foam that oozed over her fingers and dripped onto the tile. “Yeah, I’ll find a ride home in the morning. I’ll be fine.”

I ran to the car, my mom’s Acura, started the engine, unwrapped three pieces of gum, spritzed myself with Clinique Happy, and blasted down the highway with the windows down to purge any smell of smoke in my hair.

Later, when I thought back on just before I left the party, I remembered Gordie sitting on the couch across the room. Legs spread wide so that his sweatpants stretched taut across his lap – he rolled a tumbler between his palms and watched the room with hooded eyes. His black hair was gelled up like a sticky forest over his forehead. Stanley Chan walked up and stuck his fist out. Gordie bumped it, but also rolled his eyes, as if deigning to acknowledge they were the only two Asian guys at the party. Stan dropped his arm and shifted his weight, looking as awkward as I felt. A varsity hockey player, Gordie tiered above Stan in our social hierarchy. Gordie held up his empty glass. The gesture reinforced the existing order, even though Stan shook his head and refused to fetch him a refill. Gordie wasn’t Gordie’s real name. It was a nickname, after a famous hockey player, something I’d heard he’d picked up back in peewee hockey. He’d always made up for what he lacked in size with speed and ferocity on the ice. Not even teachers called him by his real name, a name I wouldn’t learn until months later. In my memory, Stan drifts off to the beer pong table and Gordie blows out through his lips, looking darkly restless. But I’m not really sure he was on the couch then, or if he’d even been talking to Stan. Everyone remembers something different about that night.
Madison had two hours before the hearing. We walked into the first empty cafe we passed and sat in a booth by the windows. I ordered coffee and an omelet. She got oatmeal and tea, caffeine-free hibiscus. She couldn’t drink coffee anymore; anxiety kept her over-stimulated. She pulled up and down on the fat square of lift tickets, several seasons’ worth, hanging from her coat zipper. We waited for the food. Underneath, she wore a blue peasant top. She looked pretty in an outdoorsy way with her braids and her ski jacket and flowery embroidered shirt collar, like she was ready to conquer the switchbacks of some Chugach hiking trail. Or sling her skis over her shoulder and trek towards the unsullied powder, which is to say, she looked like herself, not like someone headed to court. She hadn’t worn that shirt since that night, but today she’d recreated every detail, right down to the braids. I didn’t get it. I doubted he’d remember what she wore. But I didn’t tell her it was weird to wear a peasant top to court. I just hoped her clothes wouldn’t interfere with my best hopes for how the day would go. A squat, gray-haired woman in a black apron came and asked what we wanted.

“That waitress has more hair on her chin than my dad.” Madison smirked after the woman had taken our orders and was (most likely) out of earshot.

“Yikes,” I snorted. A little meanness had a fleeting restorative effect, like it pleased Madison to be reminded the world was full of things deserving of disdain. “Give it another week and she’ll be able to braid the strands,” I mused.
“Maybe,” Madison sounded far away, as she often did. It might have been her preoccupation with the case, but it felt like something else, like an unwillingness to fully engage in our banter. But I couldn’t bring up this change with her or anyone else without sounding impossibly self-centered.

My second goof was in spilling the beans to my mom on the same day Madison told me what had happened at the party. She called on Sunday afternoon, the second day after, hours before our joint piano recital. She said she went into a bedroom to makeout with Gordie after I left. I wasn’t surprised to hear that; they’d been flirting for weeks. She didn’t call it rape, only said she told him she didn’t want to go all the way and he did anyways. Oh my god. Are you hurt? Are you okay? Are you hurt? I repeated my questions because of course she wasn’t okay. Gordie, of all people. I couldn’t make my brain compute. Yeah, I’m okay, she said. I mean I’m not okay, but like, I dunno. I guess I don’t know. She trailed off. I asked if she was still going to the recital. She said yes.

We arrived separately, with our moms, and sat in the same row to watch all the little kids plunk through their pieces. I played Debussy, she played Chopin. She didn’t even make any mistakes, but she didn’t take cake or punch after. That was the only signal that something was wrong, and the moms didn’t notice. She even laughed when my mom teased her about being able to hear her sparkly blue fingernails on the keys. Madison had always defied our piano teacher’s entreaties to cut them. I wondered, if I held her hand up to a light and peered at the bed of her nails with a magnifying glass if I’d find his skin cells there, or maybe
some blood. Then I wondered, since none of her nails was broken, if that had any bearing on what she claimed happened. My stomach flipped. She was my best friend. My job was to believe. At least I knew that much.

I tried to make the story anonymous on the drive home with my mom. “So if a girl goes into a bedroom with a guy at a party,” I began croakily. I wanted my mom’s wisdom to conjure something that would change the situation, make it less devastating, illuminate next steps. Her shoulders crunched inward behind the steering wheel. “Can the police do anything about it?” Of course she knew that I was talking about Madison. My despair shouted Madison’s name. Despite how badly I wanted a reason to feel better, all my mom said, very quietly, was, “No, not usually.”

Madison and I talked again on the phone that night. Because of what my mom said, I didn’t encourage her to call the cops. I didn’t even think of suggesting the public clinic, but I sat in the waiting room on Monday when she decided to get tested for everything after school. She reappeared after the exam, white-faced. I trailed her to the parking lot.

"How’d it go?” I asked.

She shrugged.

"Did they do a rape kit?”

"Nah, came in too late for that.” She brushed off this colossal disappointment as if it were no more than finding only full-calorie Coke instead of Diet in the fridge.

"So what else did she say?”
"Not much."

"Could she tell you were hurt?"

Madison side-eyed me.

"I mean, I know you're hurt, but could she see"—

"He tore my fourchette, okay?" she snapped.

"Okay," I murmured. I knew it could be harder to tell what happened on girls who weren't virgins. Madison wasn't. I had to look fourchette up on the Internet later. Although her words stung, they also relieved me. It was good to hear some authority had vouched her story. She hadn't given me any details about how things had proceeded with Gordie in the bedroom. Had she unzipped her pants, or did he? How much happened before she said no? When did arousal become fear? I even wondered about position; how he'd held her down. I couldn't bring myself to ask, but I wished she'd volunteer the information.

On our way to her house, she mulled filing a police report. The conversation continued all afternoon in her bedroom. She demanded justice; I told her to do what she thought was best. But I nodded more firmly and agreed that rape would definitely be hard to prove when she ticked off reasons to forgo. Tuesday, she drove herself to the station alone.

The waitress set down our food. Madison stuck her spoon in the oatmeal. Her hand hovered over the bowl before she dropped the metal handle, clattering it on the ceramic rim.
My own plate didn’t look too appetizing. Why had I ordered eggs? Their smell made me nauseous.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” she said.

I watched her walk to the back, tug on the brass handle to Women’s, probably going to throw up. She puked almost every day at school, leaving in the middle of class, or coming in late after. Usually, this manifestation of her unrelenting anxiety wasn’t even preceded by a dirty look or shitty remark. It was like a daily attempt at expelling a poison, as if her body belonged less to her than to what had happened to her.

No one at school said much before the arrest. The gossip was little more than whispered speculation. Afterward, everyone had an opinion. Anyone who was at the party claimed authority, and each attendee’s circle of friends echoed those claims. How much Madison drank that night was a hot topic. I’d heard her say four beers once, another time she said she couldn’t remember. Justin Rabinowitz told me the correct number was three beers, as if he’d stood by with a tally counter. Crazy rumors abounded. Such as, Madison had asked Gordie to prom and the charges were revenge for his rejection. Such as, she’d been in competition that night with two slutty freshmen girls to see who could give the most blowjobs. Such as, he was affiliated with a local branch of the Japanese mafia, never mind he was Hmong, not Japanese, and now Madison’s family was leaving Alaska and seeking witness protection. The misinformation serviced both sides, but the antipathy for Madison burned hotter. People hung onto the fact that she’d gone to the bedroom willingly. Plus, Gordie didn’t hurt for
romantic prospects. He’d gone out with plenty of girls like Madison. His track record of homecoming and winter formal dates attested to a preference for lanky, long-haired girls whose locks ranged in color from frosted blonde to a more muted flaxen. Why rape if he didn’t have to? One day, Madison and I were in the hall during passing and a short Asian girl came up to us. She had a bob haircut and her gray XL GAP sweatshirt hung on her like a cloak. I didn’t know her name. She looked up at Madison and said, *I know how he really is. I believe you.* I was incredulous. This girl wasn’t even Gordie’s type. Madison felt differently. She didn’t miss a beat. She said *thank you.*

Looking back, I think people at school relished the scale of Madison’s come down. Everyone admired a funny, pretty, athletic girl with a car and a Coach purse, but there was even more pleasure to be gained in fingering her bad behavior. The magic of Madison drained away, she was no better than anyone in their eyes now, in fact, she was worse. They believed she should be punished. Someone, we never found out who, poured sugar in her gas tank in the student parking lot. Her dad had to leave work and tow her little car to the auto body with his pickup. She asked me to drive her home, but I was on the spirit week committee and there were banners to paint. She had to take the bus.

Thankfully Gordie had graduated. We’d heard he was taking engineering pre-reqs at UAA, but he had no shortage of defenders at school. People wanted to know why Madison didn’t scratch or bite, or call out to others in the house. I wondered those things, too. I think she could tell, but I never asked and she never explained. Looking back, I think we all
wondered why she didn’t save herself the humiliation of the aftermath by defending herself in the moment. We gave ourselves too much credit. We thought we’d have handled ourselves better. Some part of Madison might have agreed with the consensus, because she kept throwing up every day.

Since everyone knew we were best friends, many thought I was the best person with whom to discuss their opinions. They knew they couldn’t question Madison. She was good at making people feel stupid. Her main tool of intimidation was a rich vocabulary. I heard Shawn Cates tell her he didn’t think people who drank and messed around should be able to decide later that it was a crime. Madison responded that Shawn, with his profound capacity for critical thinking, seemed misplaced in remedial math. Shawn’s eyes went glassy. He called her a bitch and shuffled off. Unlike Madison, I was slow with retorts, bad in debates, and as such, a perfect receptacle.

I got paired with Tou for an in-class trig assignment. I did all the math. He talked. He wasn’t even one of the asshole’s friends. Gordie’s friends were all hockey players, his teammates. The kind of guys who wore plaid button downs tucked into slouchy jeans, dip tins pressed into their back pockets. So, white guys. But Tou and Gordie were both Hmong, and I guess their families knew one another. Anchorage has all kinds of Asian communities — Korean, Filipino, Taiwanese — some followed the oil boom up, others had green cards from helping the U.S. military in their home countries. Even before, when we’d watched Gordie from the bleachers — tearing around the rink, slamming into boys from rival schools, he always spent a lot of time in the penalty box — I’d wondered why his parents stuck him in hockey, early and persistently enough to earn a varsity spot. Football was
mixed. Koreans, Mexicans, white kids, black kids. Hockey was more insular, reserved for
guys with family ties to Wasilla, not Laos. I solved for the missing angle in class while Tou
explained, as if reading my mind, that Gordie’s real problem was messing around with white
girls:

“Asians keep it in the family,” Tou said. “If we have problems, we let the families solve it.
I told Gordie he shouldn’t have been fooling with white girls. White girls go to the courts.”

I made a face. No one had ever informed me that we white girls might had a set of
unifying traits, separate and distinct from other races. Tou made us sound powerful and
tricky.

Madison returned and dropped into the booth. I signaled for the check and paid for the
food she hadn’t eaten. She barely nodded, which made the gesture feel less gallant. I felt a
swell of impatience and reminded myself that the nearly assured victory of a lengthier
sentence was yet to come. I could see us, very soon now, side-by-side at the plaintiff’s table,
eyes shining, jaws steeled, valiantly facing Madison’s attacker. I had never been to court.

At the courthouse, we dropped our purses on the x-ray belt and stepped through the
body scanner. We collected our things on the other end and walked into the lobby. Colorful
fiberglass rods hung above the atrium, the requisite regional artwork, fake northern lights.

We walked upstairs. A stricken family burst out of one of the courtrooms. Samoan, I
presumed, by their complexions and curly black hair. They wore blue and gray sweatshirts
and everyone was crying. Madison was also dressed casually, but she had a North Face coat,
tacked with expensive lift tickets. Somehow this difference, of money and means, made me
think the family shed tears for the guilty. My cheeks burned, embarrassed by my snap
judgment — *What did I know? What did I know about anyone, really?*

Madison’s dad came up the stairs, wearing what he always wore, jeans and a tucked-in
flannel button-down. He was an engineer, traveled the state figuring out water treatment
systems for the villages. Flannel could be white collar. In Alaska, even millionaires wore
flannel.

He walked over to us and nodded at me. “Thanks for coming today,” he said, tucking his
fingers into his front pockets. “It means a lot to us that you’re here. You’ve been a good
friend to Madison for a long time.”

Madison lowered her eyebrows and glanced at me like, *My dad: Ridiculous.*

“I’m going to go in and sit,” he said. “I’ll see you girls in there.” The door closed behind
him.

“I think it’s going to go well,” I announced.

She nodded. “It’ll be fine.”

“No, you’re going to do great.” I felt like a coach, preparing my athlete for the final
round. I’d been hinting, though not speaking aloud, my secret projection all month. The
two sides had bargained down to second-degree assault. I used to think there was just one
charge — Rape — and that it carried a lengthy sentence, but that wasn’t true. According to
what the lawyers had decided, Gordie would get only two months in prison and permanent registry as a sex offender. Madison was pleased about the registry. He’d turned eighteen just six days before the rape, ensuring the court would consider him an adult. The registry meant a lifetime of crappy jobs, online mug shots, public shame forever and ever, amen. But I thought she was settling for too little. I wanted more for her. I felt optimistic that once the judge heard the statement she’d been drafting and reciting to me for weeks now, Gordie would get more prison time. The judge could do that. It was in his power. And Madison was so good with words. I’d seen teachers shake their heads and stutter when she corrected them. They’d hounded her to join the debate team when we were underclassmen, though they knew her by reputation alone. I was certain that the judge would enact a tougher sentence after he heard her statement. Then I would be the one who’d believed in her power to change the outcome, and that would outweigh all my shortcomings in the interim.

It seemed possible. Two months was just so short. It would be more like six weeks, since it’d taken his family awhile to raise bail. But it was also bold to hope for more, I knew. Gordie’s arrest had surprised everyone. A fluke, some strand of conscience, had sealed his fate. The detective was matter of fact when she’d filed her report (“probably a waste of time”), but the law required every single rape report to be assigned a detective, even if there was no rape kit. The detective made arrangements to tap Madison’s phone call. When Madison dialed Gordie, he wasn’t surprised she wanted to talk. “You hurt me,” she said. “I know,” he said. “You raped me,” she said. And Gordie agreed to that too — eliciting silent fist pumps from the cops. He said he was sorry, wished he could change it, promised never to do something like that to anyone again.
There was one other thing, about the charges. I don’t know how much it mattered, but a couple months before Madison reported the crime, the newspaper ran a bunch of stories about a teenage burglary ring. Guys were skipping school to steal TVs and jewelry from nice houses on the hillside. Three of the guys were Hmong. Two were white. But people remembered the Hmong names, and one of the burglars had the same last name as Gordie, which was Moua. My mom asked me if he was related to Gordie. Not that I knew of, I said. Actually, people had ribbed Gordie about it at school, and it had made him mad, he’d said he didn’t know anyone like that. My mom nodded and said it was an interesting coincidence, especially in light of how quickly Madison got her tapped call. Then she said she had a friend at work who went to the police because she was getting hassled by this sleazy energy lawyer she used to date. He’d slashed her tires. The police dragged their feet for months, nothing happened. Like I said, I don’t know if it’s a fair comparison. And if the same last name was a factor, I guess Madison was just lucky, in an uncomfortable way.

It was almost time when they came up the stairs. We stopped. The father and brother were dressed in khakis and white polos. The mother wore a dark blue dress, her hair in a netted bun. The three of them looked at us and we looked back. The father held the door and they filed into the courtroom. This was years before anyone I knew attached the word systemic to talk of racism. Much later, I wondered. Suppose it had been someone else on the hockey team, someone with an Anglo surname whose parents could afford a private defense? We had the house advantage. I’ve realized the worth of that.
“I can’t believe they brought his little brother.” Madison was breathing heavily. “Like, way to set a great example,”

“Forget them. Don’t think about them. You’re going to go in there, we’re going to do great.” This was it. My final pump up. What was the max? Fifteen years? Life? Madison could make it happen.

Envisioning our victory, I didn’t hear approaching footsteps until a chipper man’s voice addressed us, “Good luck today,” he said. “I heard the judges are in a good mood.”

We turned. He looked about the same age as our dads, pale, with a brown mustache, brown pants, a blousy shirt and knit tie, a stack of folders under one arm — the original template, I imagined, for what the weak and unpopular turn into as adults. He had nothing to do with Madison’s case. He was a nobody; some stranger’s lawyer.

“What?” I said.

“The judges are in a good mood,” he repeated, absorbing our silence. “I mean if that’s what you guys are here for.”

I could feel her giving him her hate stare. The man’s face fell. He’d meant well. There was something pitiful in his slump, cowed by two teenage girls. I blurted, “Thanks!” with errant sympathy that made me sound younger than I was.

He walked away. I felt sick. The hearing was about to start and I was still failing. My eyes watered. I braced for the redirection of her hate stare. And why shouldn’t she? We had an invisible contract written across a decade of friendship. We had no less than five matching t-
shirts, platform sandals, and go-go boots that neither of our moms liked us to wear. We’d borne witness to the arrival of each other’s pubic hair. We’d both already been accepted to colleges out of state, which meant separation, but before that we were supposed to finish our childhoods in tandem, collecting commensurate boyfriend tallies, double dating to every dance, exasperating our moms with cartilage piercings when we found a shop sketchy enough to do minors. We were supposed to be a united front. The offending lawyer went into a room at the far end of the hall. Madison smiled, like she had a joke for me, not in a nasty way. She said it more like a comforting elder: “well, at least we don’t look like victims.”

“Ha ha! Yeah,” I cackled. At least there was that. Seconds later I doubted myself, perhaps I should have responded more mutedly. Madison was a victim. I didn’t have time to consider the division between us further because the bailiff opened the door and called her name. He showed us to the plaintiff’s table. They brought Gordie out from behind the prisoners’ door. His hair was trimmed short and free of gel. He wore a blue button down that was a little too big. He didn’t look at us. No one looked at anyone.

We stood for the judge. He sat. We sat. The judge read the charges, then asked Madison to speak.

“That night changed my whole life,” she began.

A pleasurable thrill looped through my stomach. It was a strong start.

“He will go away for two months, but I will never be who I was before.” Then she started to cry.
I gripped her hand and rubbed my thumb across the back of it. Trying to press composure into the bones and tendon. She continued to say how he’d hurt her, but it was disorganized, not the logical flow we’d practiced. Why hadn’t she taken my one good suggestion: Bring notes. Now how would the judge know she used to have the second-highest GPA at school, that her salmon-spawning observations earned a blue ribbon at last year’s citywide science fair, or that she was a crack shot, invited to Sweden for an elite trapshooting competition, but stayed in town for this. She finished, “Whatever happens to him can’t equal what I’ve lost.”

By contrast, his statement was short, his voice husky. He said he was very sorry and that he hoped if God could forgive him, Madison might forgive him someday too.

The judge was the best talker. He led with general remarks on sexual violence, condemning the fact Alaska has the nation’s highest rape rate; he offered his support for the two-month sentence, in light of the offender’s youth and the contributing factor of alcohol, which had clearly diminished both parties’ judgment. He tapped the gavel. It felt like the sentencing hadn’t even happened. But as I heard the small audience, her dad, his people, start to shift behind us, my greater disbelief was for the fact I’d thought there might be any other outcome. The bailiff came around to collect Gordie. He held his grim composure and didn’t look at us as they led him back through the prisoners’ door.

High school ended. We took pictures together in our synthetic gowns and cardboard caps. Even though the sentencing didn’t go off as I’d hoped, I thought I’d done enough. I
was there at the table. Hadn’t somebody said eighty percent of life was just showing up? There had to be a cementing quality to having sat next to my best friend during a sentencing — what could undo a friendship anchored to that kind of milestone? Even her own mother hadn’t been there, and it wasn’t like she could disown her mother. I was in the clear. I’d done all I could.

I didn’t see Madison much in June. Summer is busy, I told myself. We met up on a Saturday morning at a coffee shop. A flyer on the bulletin at the entrance called for victims of sexual violence to decorate t-shirts for a clothesline display in Town Square Park.

“Hey did you see this?” I pointed it out to her. "This is cool.”

She read the flyer, then moved to the counter and ordered a scone. I could see myself standing on the grass holding clothespins, helping Madison hang her defiant visual protest. I brought it up again when we sat. We could go to the craft store for fabric markers. It sounded good. I’d want to do it if I were her.

“Elaine, are you fucking kidding me? I am never doing that.” She looked at me like I didn’t know her at all. We finished our drinks quickly.

I worried then, felt unsteady about us, but a week later she asked to borrow my purple leather clutch, the one my mom had given me for my sixteenth birthday, like, here-you’re-a-woman-now, have a clutch. Madison wanted it for some opera night her family was attending.
“Aw thanks!” she was all smiles when I dropped it off. We went to the backyard, sat in the deck chairs and bullshitted. She told me about the miserable beige skirt suit that her mom insisted on buying her at Banana Republic, allegedly a college necessity. She scrunched her nose and I noticed her freckles had darkened; she’d been outside. I felt happy for her. Things were getting back to normal.

The opera came and went. A couple weeks went by, I called to see if she wanted to go to a movie but she was busy. I asked her out to pizza, to the mall, a walk along the coastal trail, but she always had an excuse. I was leaving for Seattle in six days, so finally I emailed, told her to let me know when I could come retrieve my clutch.

*Didn’t I give that back to you?* She replied within the hour.

*No, I don’t think so,* I wrote.

*I’m sure I did,* she wrote.

*I would’ve remembered. I know you didn’t, can you look around for it please? It was a gift and I really want to bring it with me.* I wrote.

Two days passed and she didn’t write anything, so I asked again.

*I don’t have it.* She wrote.

*Okay, wow,* I wrote. *So you lost it? Are you going to apologize? I’m just surprised. You’ve never been careless about stuff and that bag was important to me.*
She never responded. I tried calling and she didn’t pick up. I relayed the problem to my mom as she was preparing dinner. She paused chopping onions and said to cut Madison some slack. What? I asked. Why? Because she’s had a hell of a year, my mom told me, who knew what she was thinking or feeling, and the bag was no big deal. Mom said she’d buy me a new one.

For me that wasn’t the point. It was insensitive of Madison to lose my stuff, but the one other possibility was worse: Madison was exacting a shady punishment for something I’d done. That couldn’t be the case. I wouldn’t allow it. I had been there for her. I was inculpable. So I called her one last time from the gate, as my flight was boarding. I left a long message, said I was upset, but that I hoped she would call. I didn’t demand an apology this time, just said I wanted to talk. I hoped she’d had a good summer, and that college would go well. I ended the call and knew she wasn’t going to call back.

That was thirteen years ago. I live in Philadelphia now, of all places, so far from home. Still, when spring rolls around and the cold smell of snowmelt fills my head, I find myself rewinding the chain, still searching for the link, trying to connect the events of that year to the end of our friendship.

Sometimes, like in group conversation in a noisy bar, I reduce her to a quip, Oh yeah, I had a childhood best friend, but she stole my clutch and we never spoke again! She’s too firmly embedded in my early life to be cut from the story. Annalise from work is the last person I chose to tell about Madison. It’s something I inevitably do with new female friends. The
friendship turns from superficial pleasantries to something more intimate, and I recount my breakup with Madison. Annalise, with her honey-hued french braid and take-charge attitude in the conference room, reminds me of her. I always finagle my way on to Annalise’s project teams. People don’t change much. I’m still a colonist in life’s apiary, forever buzzing around a queen. It’s not easy, always going over the same unraveling. Annalise may be my toughest audience yet.

"Jesus Christ, Elaine. That poor girl. I almost don’t want to be friends with you, and I’m only hearing about it." Annalise says. She crumples a napkin into her whisky tumbler at our usual after-work dive. "Everyone expects the world from rape victims. It’s so unfair."

I open my mouth to defend myself, but instead drain my glass, chewing the green olive with my front teeth. This stuff is in the news all the time now. It wasn’t always. They never used to tell us that as soon as a girl said no, it became a crime, even if the clothes were already off. I’m not like everyone else. I can’t pretend I was born so enlightened, that no cruelty ever sprang from my ignorance.

Annalise is suddenly very busy with her phone, shrugging on her jacket, goodbye and see you tomorrow. I watch her push the door and splash away through the ice puddles. No one can quite hide their misgivings about me when I tell Madison’s story. Our story. I feel sour and shaky, as I always do, in the recounting. Mortified. I know no other atonement.
Hope Gold

Cold drizzle spattered the strip mall parking lot. Steve hunched forward and hurried under the awning in sour anticipation. He glimpsed his own frowning mustache in the window glass of the satellite phone store. The door bells jingled, but the mouse-haired gal behind the counter barely nodded in his direction, too busy staring at the phone in her hand. She was holding a regular cell phone, not one of the bedeviled pieces of shit they’d sold him last year. The store had gray carpet and fluorescent overheads. He’d probably have wound up a hopeless case like Lou if he had to spend all day in a place like this. Could definitely see that.

“Can I help you?” she finally asked.

“I don’t know. You tell me.” He tossed his satellite phone on the counter, rattling the glass. “This thing is showing the wrong date. I was out in Hope last weekend, could barely get it to work. See here.” He pointed to the date on the analog screen with his crooked pinky, the one he’d smashed on a trailer hitch long ago on that godforsaken dairy farm. “This thing says it’s April 18, 2009. That’s way before I even bought this phone.”

She took it off the counter and pressed buttons until a blinking circle of dots appeared on the screen. “It should work now,” she said. A minute later, the normal screen returned.
“There.” She pointed to the corrected display. “The software update from last November caused about one in five phones to have issues, but I’ve installed the latest version. You’re good to go.”

Her sing-song satisfaction steamed him. His satellite phone was important survival gear. “So you knew there was a problem and you didn’t tell anyone? I was out in Hope, I had an emergency and could barely get this thing to work.”

“They issued an update as soon as they found out about it,” she said.

He imagined the spinning black dots on the analog screen blinking in her pea brain. “I pay you people two hundred bucks every six months just in case I need to use this thing — You had an issue affecting a bunch of customers and didn’t say so?”

“Hardly anyone had a problem.”

“What about the ones who did? Did you ever think about sending a letter?” He pressed his fingers to the sides of his head and pushed off in a firework motion, gesturing to the stupidity of this entire operation.

“Well, we did email everyone at the time, but that was two updates ago, sir. You should always install every new update.”

The door bells clanged violently behind him. One of the damnest things about this life was that you could be a self-made man — grow up on a poor dairy farm getting walloped by your old man, beat tracks north as fast as you could, work construction in thirty-below, the
snow going sideways, balls freezing off. You could help build the state’s vital artery, the
greatest feat of modern engineering on the planet — eight hundred miles of steel pipeline
with capacity to cradle two million rushing barrels of Prudhoe Bay crude oil. You could
make a pile, lose it, become a plumber, start a business, provide good steady jobs for six
people, pay your taxes and still, still have to endure people who did not value hard work.
They were everywhere in Anchorage these days, easily spotted behind the city’s cash registers
— the under-motivated and under-employed. Young people, mostly. The only thing their
generation had over his was easy understanding of every new electronic doohickey. They
lorded it over old guys like him with thoughtless exasperation, and an eyeball roll, “Oh it’s
easy, just press this.” He couldn’t stand it. He plopped into his work van and checked his
cell. There was a text from his older sister Janine.

_Heard anything from him?_ she wrote.

Steve tapped _n-o_. Janine lived about an hour’s drive from Lou, but Steve was closer to
him in age, only fifteen months older than their youngest sibling. He’d always taken an
interest in Lou, tried to set him on the right path. The responsibility had fallen on his
shoulders after Dad’s death. Over the decades, in many attempts, he’d tried to interest Lou
in turning a profit. He’d even invited Lou up to take a crack at his new hobby down in
Hope.

He popped the middle console and reached between CD cases for the Altoids tin where
he kept his happy thought. He stuck his thumb under the metal ridge and the lid clicked
back, revealing the dusting of hearty yellow flakes clinging to the edges. By today’s price
($1,320 an ounce), he was looking at about three hundred dollars. He kept most of his haul at home in a plastic container tucked in a drawer behind a pile of wool socks. He was going to get little bars made at the end of the season, stamped with ONE OUNCE FINE HOPE GOLD, and a logo of his girlfriend Trudy's creation. She was working on a sketch of a splashing whale tail. He liked that, flukes flapping on the wealth they’d pulled out of Hope’s dirt. It wasn’t like the old days. He knew old timers who’d kept years’ worth of nuggets in coffee tins until the price shot up. Then they bought themselves nice boats. He’d once seen a miner tip a stripper in pennyweight nuggets. That was back when more guys open carried and people snorted coke right off the tables at Chilkoot Charlie’s. Alaska wasn’t like that anymore. Gold mining was a rugged pastime, but no longer a path to fortune. Nevertheless, he and Trudy were making out pretty good this season. He’d had already covered the cost of renting the dredge, and wanted to work out a percentage for her. He’d paid all the upfront costs, but Trudy was a big help, had put in a lot of weekends out at Hope. She laughed off all his suggestions though, said she was just there to enjoy his company and summer weather, that she liked him as a boyfriend, not a business partner. Her brush-offs bothered him. He hated debts of any kind. He put the tin back and phoned her. He told her about the text from Janine.

“Are you going to call him?” Trudy asked.

“Why? He said not to.”

“I know, but maybe he didn’t mean it.” That was Trudy, always thinking of others. She didn’t really understand about dealing with Lou, though Steve had explained a good deal.
She was always trying to get Steve to see Lou as a product of history and circumstance. There wasn’t anything to be done about the past, but Steve believed every man responsible for changing his own circumstance. He told Trudy he’d pick her up for happy hour at five.

If anyone deserved sympathy it was Trudy, not Lou. She ran her own business distributing quilt fabrics to craft stores statewide. Every year got harder, with more people buying their supplies online or from box stores carrying cheap bolts from China. Trudy was not much younger than him. She had a house she wanted to pay off and a kid still in high school, so she didn’t buy health insurance. He understood the gamble, but then she slipped on the ice last winter, busted her knee, and had to pay out of pocket. No one told her that she could have asked the hospital to only charge what they’d get from Medicare for the surgery. It set her back on the house. Trudy was someone who took care of herself and didn’t complain or blame anyone when she was dealt a shit hand. He was mad at Lou on her account: She was still limping, but being a good sport, helping out, going over the sluice box with her tweezers, picking out the shiny flecks, fixing ham sandwiches for lunch. They were having a great time, and then Lou ruined it from two thousand miles away.

In more than one past relationship, the final feedback was that Steve wasn’t an open person. He was trying to do different by Trudy. He made a point of doing the sensitive things: cooking her his special beef-stuffed bell peppers; remembering to ask about her day and concentrating on what she said; and, though he disliked talking about himself, he was trying to do more of it, to build intimacy, because Trudy was a remarkable and beautiful woman. He wanted her to stick around. He didn’t care for childhood reminiscing, but it seemed a natural place to start. He’d already told her how he’d tried to teach Lou the value
of a dollar since back when they were two Oregon farm kids. He’d recalled for her how he
and Lou used to play pirates in the forest beyond the pasture. Their ship was a felled Douglas
Fir. Steve was captain, being older. Clam shells and sand dollars scavenged on the old man’s
grudging, infrequent family beach trips were their treasure. There was always a reason not to
go to the beach, something else to do on the farm. They kept the shells in a mossy depression
covered with branches. Dad was always saying nothing ever came easy, to guard tightly
whatever they had.

Steve remembered waking up the morning after the Columbus Day storm. Dad was
yelling goddamn it all to hell in the kitchen. Steve pulled back their bedroom window curtain.
Part of the fence was blown over, lumber scattered in the driveway. He’d wondered even
then if it was the damage riling Dad. Cows were fine. No one hated the cows more than
Dad. Somehow the kids convinced him to drive them out to the coast. Steve was surprised
that he agreed. Dad probably wanted to rubberneck; he could get deliciously preoccupied
with other peoples’ misfortune. Mom wanted to stay home and clean up, but relented when
Dad hustled everyone into the truck. They had to skirt tree boughs and debris on the road.

The three kids spilled out of the backseat and down to the shore; Mom followed slowly
with a bag for picking up garbage. Dad leaned on the hood and waited. There were buoys
and cartons, huge seaweed-wrapped chunks of driftwood, lots of trash. Steve found a crab
pot, three shell casings, and a soggy magazine with a picture of a big blonde in frilly
underwear. He was worrying over how to get her home, afraid if he folded the page in his
pocket he’d ruin it, when Lou came running.
“Look everybody!” Lou cried. Elbows locked beside his ears, hands high in the air, he held up an enormous glass float, perfectly round, bigger than his head. He pushed it up like he was giving it to the sky. The sun broke through the clouds, beaming on the pale green orb. Mom and Janine cheered. In Steve’s memory, even Dad nodded from the top of the sand. Lou knew it. The wind blew back his blond hair, and he smiled with his whole face, missing his front teeth at the time — he’d found the best thing on the beach.

They stopped at the only open store on the way home so Dad could buy smokes. Mom waited in the car while Steve, Janine, and Lou followed Dad in and crowded the candy rack. Steve had some money he’d earned caring for their neighbor’s chickens. Janine had money too, since she was old enough to babysit. Lou didn’t. Already, even back then, Steve had told Trudy, you could see the pattern developing. Lou asked Steve to lend him a quarter, and he almost did before he remembered the glass float in the trunk.

“If I sell it to you, can I buy it back later?” Lou wanted to know. He had a powerful sweet tooth back then, a precursor to more ruinous cravings.

“Sure, but the cost might change.”

“Well, probably not much, right?”

Steve shrugged.

“Careful, Lou,” Janine warned. “Stevie’ll take you to the cleaners.” She paid for her M&Ms and walked out to the car. Of course she’d warn their youngest brother off, but not lend him anything herself.
Dad watched as Steve paid for astro pops and taffy. Lou took his share and skipped out to the car. Dad grabbed Steve’s shoulder. “Don’t give it back to him,” he said.

“What?”

“That brother of yours can’t think more than five seconds ahead. He’s got to learn.”

Steve kept the float under his bed in the room they shared, although Lou had no doubt expected he’d add it to their treasure pile in the woods. Lou offered twice, then three times, as much as Steve had paid for candy. Dad shook his head with a smirk, winking at Steve over the back of Lou’s head, when Lou pleaded to Steve at dinner. Steve had no choice but to hold fast; he knew that Dad’s scorn would redirect toward him if he gave in and returned the float to Lou.

“Just tell me what the amount is, and I’ll start saving up,” Lou said in bed that night.

Lou’s anxious questions started to annoy Steve, especially since floats weren’t even worth that much. They washed up all the time. Lou had no sense, selling too low, then asking Steve to name his price. Steve thought of a way to extend the lesson. He hadn’t told Trudy this part, because it embarrassed him a little, even after all these years.

“Why don’t you start by shoveling the pen for me tomorrow,” Steve said.

“Then I can have it back?”

“I didn’t say that.”
Lou sighed and rolled toward the wall, but the next morning Steve watched him heft the shovel, taller than he was, and ladle cow turds into a bucket. After that it was easy to get Lou to do chores, and in the woods, Steve ordered him about in the fort building. He got Lou to give up his half of the seashells. Lou seemed to forget the score entirely, as if the mission all along was just to make Steve happy. Steve couldn’t remember how it ended. Mom must’ve noticed and told him to quit taking advantage of his brother. The float stayed under Steve's bed until he left home. He didn’t remember any bitterness from Lou. Mostly he remembered the two of them poking slugs with sticks and pulling up fistfuls of ferns to make clearings for their forts. All that tromping in the woods was in the back of Steve’s mind when he took up gold mining. He’d asked Lou to come up and help. They weren’t kids anymore; Steve would’ve cut him in on any profits, above operating costs.

Steve drove out of the parking lot, headed to a house call on the hillside. He punched the radio knob to silence the a.m. talk show and let his mind hover on Lou. Like a wheel spinning in air, his thoughts cycled through the years, each spoke a point of divergence: Steve’s life moved ahead while Lou’s went nowhere. Steve had done all he could. Probably too much. Maybe if there’d been more tough love, Lou would’ve turned out better. Trudy would disagree with him there. She’d said that in her experience, tough love was just potting soil for resentment.

Dad drank even harder during Steve’s last year at home. He banged around the house, cuffed whoever was within arm’s reach. Janine was already gone, moved a whole state away
to wait tables in Boise. One evening Dad plowed Steve’s head against a doorframe. His offense had been a disrespectful "yeah" and an eye roll when Dad slurrily asked if Steve had added fresh sawdust to the cow pens. Steve’s head ached for hours after. Nighttime was worst. The old man was most volatile after dark. Steve got a job at the movie theater that kept him away most evenings. He couldn’t wait to get out of the house. Lou, being the youngest, might have got more than his share of Dad’s knocks. It hadn’t been good to leave Lou at home, but Lou was old enough then, he could’ve got a job too. Then Mom would’ve had to endure Dad alone. Steve was no hero. Everyone commends the brave older sibling who sacrifices himself to the father-tyrant. Those are the stories that get told. What of the one who looked out for his own skin? Less inspiring, but probably more common than the courageous type, Steve reckoned. An article in Life said they were paying guys three grand a month to build an oil pipeline in Alaska. In an interlude of sobriety, Dad told Steve it looked like a good idea: everyone knew there was money up there, and even if his son had to live in an igloo, it’d beat a lifetime of stinking goddamn milk cows. Steve left the day after graduation, told Lou to come along next year.

Steve was skunked his first two weeks in Fairbanks. The whole country wanted a pipeline job. On the advice of a guy staying at the same flophouse, he paid off the union man with his savings. Flew to camp four days later. Twelve-, fourteen-hour days, he and the other workers fed four-foot-wide galvanized steel pipe into vertical supports. They obliterated the rest of waking time with jug vodka and Schlitz. Steve drank even more when the wind blew a certain way and made the outhouse stink like the farm. Everybody partied. Working in the middle of nowhere was boring and everyone had more money than ever before. Steve steered
clear of the drugs, but partook of other distractions that bumped up the highway from Anchorage. Hookers bunked at the Tonsina Lake Lodge. At first he went with the ones who resembled girls from back home, but realized he liked them older and bigger, liked getting lost in tits and flesh. Plus the older ones didn’t eyeball him like he was a puzzle in need of putting together. The guys in camp ribbed him for chubby chasing. He didn’t care. He was 19 and, with so much overtime, making more than Dad ever had, earning more even than a sitting congressman. Days became weeks and months. Winter came. The wind-chill factor defied the living, and then a phone call from Mom. She said Dad had died. Heart attack. She told him to find a flight home for the funeral. Probably shouldn’t have been a surprise. There were no days off in dairy farming. Every time the old man cursed a cow, threw a tool, or kicked a barn or bucket seemed posthumously justified. At home, Lou said Dad had slumped over watching *Wheel of Fortune* and that was it. But everybody knew it was the farm that did him in.

Steve thought the long trip home would dry him out, but he felt shaky during the service at the Baptist church. The whole family’s attendance had been irregular there, nobody’s more so than Dad’s. Steve wondered anxiously if the extended family packed into the pews could smell or otherwise detect that he’d spent the last eight months becoming a degenerate. He didn’t cry. He peeked at Lou who looked shell-shocked but not sad. Janine stared at nothing, like she was at a bus station, waiting to board. Steve felt guilty on behalf of all three of them. Their father wasn’t perfect, but it was egregious to think ill of the dead, especially with him not even in the ground. And hadn’t Dad done his best to put food on the table, suffer his work, and provide? Surely he’d tried, in his way, to do the right thing. Steve
resolved to pick up where Dad had left off. He started by asking Lou, again, to come to Alaska.

“I’ll even loan you money for the bus ticket,” Steve told him. Everybody was back at the house.

“Sure, thanks, I’ll think about it.” Lou took his plate and went to sit by Mom in the living room.

Steve couldn’t quite figure out their closeness. Maybe he should’ve made a stronger suggestion, but he knew somehow that Lou wouldn’t be coming.

Steve spent two years on the pipeline, in three different camps. He’d put a decade’s worth of miles on his liver, and had just enough cash in his bank account to keep making truck payments. It was the same for everyone. When crude came swishing down the pipeline, the oil companies made sure there’d never be union labor on the North Slope again. Steve couldn’t blame them, from what he’d seen and done. Boys in another part of the world might be sent out to spear a lion. Steve severed his childhood by drinking and fucking and forcing the earth to deliver its wealth to the nation. Without a regret or hard feeling, he slapped a bumper sticker on his truck: Please God give us one more Prudhoe Bay, I promise not to piss this one away.

With the oil running, plus the billion-dollar pay out the federal government fed to the native corporations, there was money flying around everywhere. You didn’t need many brains to catch some of it. Steve worked construction in Anchorage, took the necessary courses, found an old timer to work under, saved money, started his own plumbing
company, and never looked back. By the time he was successful enough to offer Lou an apprenticeship, Mom was sick. Janine was married and living an hour away. Steve didn’t know what Lou had been doing back home, but now Lou was determined to stay. It was noble and all, but no one had asked him to. Steve had gone back three times before Mom died, and she was a little weaker each time. Lou had taken on more around the house — the laundry, the kitchen, her prized vegetable garden. They’d sold the cows shortly after Dad passed, so Lou hitched his ambitions to a health and human services certification through the local community college, but no county job emerged. Lou blamed budget cuts, but Steve suspected his DUIs had something to do with it. Mom let him know that much before she went. Steve bawled Lou out, but what could he do?

They sold the farm two months after her death. Lou wrote a letter to both Janine and Steve after the funeral, proposing he stay on and slowly buy them out. Really, he couldn’t afford it, working gas station jobs and the like, especially with the property market soaring. He sometimes had girlfriends, but they never lasted. Lou only ever found ones with bad debts or troublemaking exes. Each had some problem Lou couldn’t save her from, but that never stopped him trying, even if it meant miring himself in a money jam or suffering some dip-lipped redneck idling in his truck in Lou’s condo parking lot, trying to figure out if his woman was holed up there. Steve thought Lou should get a gun. Count that as one more piece of untaken advice. Lou couldn’t be moved to stake his claim in the world; he wouldn’t even commit to defending what little washed his way.

Steve went back every year or two. They’d sit in the cramped kitchen in Lou’s little condo drinking coffee, hardly saying anything. Mom, Janine, the changes in town, were their
usual conversation topics. They never talked about Dad. Like Steve, Lou had a full
mustache, but his was lighter. They were built the same, bulky through the chest and
shoulders, lean-legged. But Lou was somehow more brittle. They were like copies from the
same Xerox, only the machine ran low on ink when the time came to print out Lou: he was
missing lines and impossible to read. Steve planned his trips around hunting season. Over
the years he perfected his travel routine so that he was in town for the big family meal.
Sometimes they drove together to eat at Janine’s. Her house was too loud and crowded for
Lou or Steve to stand it for long, so other times she packed her husband and three kids into
her van for the hour drive back home and they all ate at the nice hotel. Steve always shared a
brotherly catch-up breakfast with Lou, but with the farm sold to Californian retirees, each
reunion was tinged by loss, as if by giving up the acreage they’d surrendered their common
ground. They were less familiar to one another away from the farm, sitting in Lou’s dim
living room or in a diner booth, where omelets and hash browns offset the stilted
conversation. Lou didn’t like to hunt. Steve spent most of these trips alone in the woods.

Steve wasn’t neglectful. He called Lou every month, always asked how he was doing. The
answers almost never changed, until the time, years ago now, Lou said, “Well, I took up oil
painting.”

Oil painting? He may as well have said belly dancing. But he told Steve he’d taken some
classes, that he liked painting the beach, the street view from his living room window. He
also liked painting old photos, pictures of Mom’s garden, the huckleberry bushes below the
old mailbox, sunlight on the front walk. It was an odd hobby, more still because Lou was
preoccupied with their childhood home, a place Steve thought about so little that sometimes
he wondered if he even really remembered it. Steve began asking about the painting every
time he called, always wanting to know Lou’s plans. Lou finally sent him a painting one
Christmas: the old house, cows at pasture in the background. Steve hung it in the bathroom.
People laughed when he told them his brother was a painter and where he’d hung his work.
The joke belied his feelings. It was more complicated. The colors were nice. The bathroom
wall allowed him more time to contemplate it than other spaces in his house. Steve noted the
intricate detail of the flower boxes and Mom’s shake-roof birdhouse. By comparison, the
cows were blurry, the fence posts no more than quick dashes. Lou had painted it as if it were
Mom’s home, which was strange. Steve had always thought of it as Dad’s house. Everyone
else just lived there, abiding by the old man’s rules. It was ludicrous, painting. He shook his
head, flushed. That brother of mine.

Nevertheless, he pushed Lou toward the imperative that seemed to evade his brother,
even in middle age: making money. If he realized the futility of painting scenes from the
past, maybe he’d move on to some worthwhile endeavor. What was the end game? Steve
didn’t know much about art, but Lou’s wasn’t the kind of stuff they put in museums. The
message eventually stuck. On one of his calls, Lou told him his artwork was up for sale at a
coffee shop.

“How much you asking?” Steve inquired.

“Forty, sixty, somewhere in there.”

“That’s it?”

“Owner said that’s the range folks tend to buy something.”
“How long does one take you?”

“One painting?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Depends. I spend a month or so on ones like I sent you, but those I’m not selling. The owner thinks people will like my beach scenes. One of those probably takes six to ten.”

“Hours?” Steve’s jaw dropped. He held the phone away from his mouth for a moment and swung his head around. “Forty dollars for ten hours? You know that’s how much I make in thirty minutes?”

From then on, when he called Lou he’d casually mention something he’d bought for forty dollars. Soon it was a compulsion. Every time he talked to Lou, he listed his purchases: Forty dollars on gas for the generator, new snow machining gloves, beers for his employees, fancy synthetic long johns, the masseuse who worked out the knot in his shoulder, the Super Bowl betting pool with his hunting buddies, on and on. Forty was nothing. Why pour so much time into nothing?

Steve drove the van down the highway to the Huffman exit and ascended the hillside to a bumpy gravel road. His house call that afternoon wound up being to one of those cabin-mansions Steve was partial to, a three-story A-frame with natural-wood siding. More house than he could afford. But also the kind of place poised for a big price dive, with all the oil company layoffs. Soon there’d be way fewer people around with the means. The wife showed
him to the kitchen with the dripping faucet. It took no time at all to change out the washer. He charged for the whole hour anyways. He had overhead, and that was how it worked. A hundred bucks for something so simple was not much different than charging fourteen thousand for a routine knee surgery. But that was the way of things. Until somebody devised a better system, everyone just got reamed. The woman thanked him for his time. He asked to use the bathroom. He didn't have to go, but when he came back out he said he'd noticed her showerhead and asked if she'd considered a thermostatic system. They made them now with LED lights and rain effect, easily turning a humdrum bathroom into a spa experience, and more affordable than ever. She tilted her head and smiled, which he took as a good sign. He left her a product catalog and his business card, making a show of writing his cell number on it before handing it over. Then he headed back down the mountain to pick up Trudy.

He found a spot close to the front of her building. She'd said to text from the parking lot, but he walked up anyways to see if she needed help carrying anything. He hated how her leg still bothered her, seemed almost criminal after spending all that money.

“Knock-knock.” He rapped on the frame to her one-room office.

Trudy looked up. Her face eased into a smile, eyes crinkling, graying blond curls from the mussy bun on her head going everywhere. “Hello-hello.” Piles of fabric lined the walls. The space smelled spicy and sweet from the jar candle on her desk. He especially liked the panel quilt hanging behind her: twelve squares each depicting a different Alaskan animal — moose, puffin, lynx, bald eagle. She appreciated the outdoors as much as he did. That was
what had torpedoed his first marriage: *She didn’t like hunting!* he’d told everyone, and lo and behold Trudy walked into his life equipped with her own gun closet. He’d lost count of the times he’d made the joke, until Trudy put a hand on his arm and said that surely that wasn’t the full story. But who wanted the full story? Did Trudy really want to hear how he’d worn down his ex? How he’d hammered his logic over her feelings? Sometimes about big things, like not moving Outside when the economy and tax structure was so great in Alaska, but more frequently about stupid stuff. Not conveying enthusiasm when, at age 42, she took up the time suck of attempting a college degree. Refusing to buy the hormone-free dairy because it cost more and was a big scam anyways. Finally his wife did what he couldn’t have imagined – what Mom had never even threatened to do – she left.

Trudy pushed back her chair and limped over. Her hips brushed the desk and fabric. He loved her ample figure, how her thighs pushed against her jeans.

He set his hands on the soft of her waist and stooped for a kiss. “You ready?” he asked.

“Yep.”

“Need me to grab anything?”

“Not unless you want to carry my purse” — she gave him a look — “Relax, Steve. I got it.”

In the car, she let down her hair, releasing a flowery product smell. “Did you call him?” she asked.
“Who?” He paused and glanced, catching her look of reproach. “I’ll call him this weekend.”

She sighed.

“Look,” he said. “Janine calls every day. He never answers, and she’s the one who picked him up after. The guy gets more attention than he deserves.”

He’d been with Trudy almost two years. Disagreements could go unspoken. He knew she thought he should call; he was closer to Lou than Janine. That was exactly why Steve wouldn’t. He wished she understood. Somehow she didn’t, and not for his lack of trying. He’d dribbled out most of the history, was probably starting to repeat himself. He wished she’d say, *Steve, stop worrying about him. You did the best you could.* Then maybe he could cease replaying the same memories, a loop that whirled free from the friction of meaning. The reasoning that had guided Steve’s life and made him a success was a smooth plane. Lou’s circumstance had no traction. His little brother had failed to face reality and help himself. He’d made his own misery. When they were almost to the bar, Steve thought of a story Trudy hadn’t heard yet.

“Did I ever tell you about when Janine wanted everybody to go to San Antonio for her birthday?”

“No.”
“Oh yeah, we had all these emails, back and forth, trying to pick a hotel, and of course Lou won’t chime in at all. We both know he doesn’t have the money. So finally Janine says what the hell and buys his ticket. And you know what?”

“What?”

“He got tanked and missed his flight. Didn’t bother to call anyone until three in the afternoon.”

“Maybe he couldn’t afford the hotel.”

“He was supposed to room with me.”

“Maybe he was embarrassed, I mean even to be around you guys.”

Steve wiped the air with his hand, nosed into the parking lot. “Damned if you do, damned if you don’t with that guy.” He shifted into park and looked over.

Trudy rolled her head over so her chin rested on her shoulder, quiet just long enough to unsettle him. “Boy, am I ready for a margarita.” She unbuckled and eased out on to the asphalt.

Steve popped the middle console and stuck the Altoids tin in his shirt pocket, thinking his regular waitress Rhonda might like a peek.

They sat down and Rhonda came by looking, as usual, like a weathered Woodstock princess, her gray hair in two long braids swinging down the front of her work shirt. She
brought him his usual coffee and a brandy and Trudy her margarita. Then she asked if they’d seen the big *Alaska Dispatch News* headline — the permanent fund dividend crisis. The politicians were saying the state could no longer afford its annual oil-profit payouts to every Alaskan man, woman, and child.

“According to the Constitution,” Steve started in. “The resources of the land are disposed to the people of the state, to do with as they see fit”—

“But everybody needs to contribute,” Rhonda cut in. She’d served him as long as he’d been coming, had a good head on her shoulders, even if she was a lefty.

“That’s fine. I do not disagree. But until I see every state worker take a hit, don’t tell the family fisherman in Naknek or Cordova, the one paying Obamacare premiums on his seven kids, that they’re not getting their PFD.” He enjoyed getting into it with Rhonda on the old politics. He always tipped the same, even when she managed to piss him off.

Trudy twisted her wrists. Her bracelets clinked.

“You can gut the schools, Steve,” Rhonda slapped a stack of cocktail napkins on the table. “But you still need to educate the kids coming up now. Oil’s not coming back.” She glided away from their table.

He took a loud sip of coffee. The bitterness matched the sour spot in his stomach. True, the pipeline he’d built now took eighteen days to transport oil from the North Slope to Valdez. In peak times it was four, but production had been slowing for going on two decades. Low capacity meant low speed.
Workers from the nearby office tower started trickling in, but the bar didn’t fill up like it used to. BP layoffs. Now Shell was packing out of the Chukchi Sea. Everybody, every last barmaid in town, was going to feel the hurt. He looked over at Rhonda, he could see even now she wasn’t busy. He waved her back over.

“Well if education’s so important, wish your schools could’ve done a better job with the bozo in the satellite phone store I had to deal with today.” Steve recounted the gal’s blank stare when he told her he had an emergency in Hope.

Of course then Rhonda wanted to know about it. Steve felt the Altoids tin pressing on his chest. Trudy was rubbing the salt off the rim of her glass.

“You want to hear about my emergency?” Steve sighed. It might be a pretty funny story, depending on how he told it. “Trudy and I were out in Hope, at our site” —

"Site?” Rhonda asked. "Like a mining claim? Didn’t know there was still gold out there."

“Plenty! I only go for the stuff I can get with tweezers, but they also got what the call flour gold. You can see it, makes the dirt shine. I’ve watched videos about how they extract it” —

"Sounds like a pain in the ass,” Rhonda said. "This what he makes you do all weekend?" she asked Trudy.

"Yes,” Trudy said.

“Alright alright alright! Anyway, we’re at the site and I still have signal enough for texts, and I get one from my brother Lou, sent to me and my sister. Here, I’ll just read it to you.”
He took his phone out and scrolled, he then read in a melodramatic tone: “Dear brother and sister; know that I love both of you, even though we don’t really know each other. I’ve tried my hardest and I’m done trying. Be well, I won’t be seeing you.” Steve glanced up.

Rhonda and Trudy looked at one another.

“So then,” Steve went on, ”and I’m too far out, bad reception, can’t call out, and I gotta use the satellite phone to call my sister — she lives closer. Took three calls just to make her understand it was me because the damned sat phone wasn’t working right. After I got hold of her, I text Lou back, asked him why it is I won’t be seeing him, and he says because he’s going to be with Mom. So then I ask him what about the family reunion we got planned for Thanksgiving, cuz I’m trying to get him away from… that kind of thinking.”

Rhonda’s face was flat.

“Trudy here wanted to drive back to town, but I said no, I’m not leaving Hope. Whatever he’s gonna do, I can’t stop it from Anchorage.”

Rhonda nodded, but looked skeptical.

“And we’ve been through this with Lou before. He’s rotated through both of us. We’ve both chipped in on his mortgage more than once.” Steve glanced at Trudy. “I’ve helped him out with his bills this year. Now he calls asking for this, that, and the other.”

Recognition seeped into Rhonda’s face. Everyone had a relative like that.

“So my sister Janine calls the cops — you want to hear the next text Lou sent us?” Steve made his voice even drippier: “Dear siblings, thanks for calling the cops. Now I am in jail and
will lose my job since I was supposed to be there at seven a.m. tomorrow. Please do not contact me again.” Steve screwed up his mustache and shrugged.

Rhonda laughed. “They took him to jail?” she wiped her eyes.

“Where else they gonna put him?” Steve said. “But hey, he got to keep his phone.

"Ha!” Rhonda laughed, then left to take care of another table.

Trudy changed the subject to the quilting business. She said she was having a time meeting the demand for tropical novelty prints. Steve stared into the dregs of his coffee. He felt a small bubble of guilt, no bigger than a baby’s burp, for making fun of Lou. So he was younger when things went south at home. Whatever went wrong was only a difference of degree from what the rest of them, and Lou’d had plenty of chances to get the hell out. As recently as last Christmas: Steve mailed him a card with a print out of his mileage statement, circled the balance and wrote — *buy you a round-trip! Anytime!* Appealing to Lou’s sensitive nature, he’d even included a print out of Robert Service’s *Spell of the Yukon.* Steve didn’t care for poetry much, but he liked this one because it talked about adventuring north to get rich. The verses spoke to him personally:

*There’s gold, and it’s haunting and haunting;*

*It’s luring me on as of old;*

*Yet it isn’t the gold that I’m wanting*

*So much as just finding the gold.*
It's the great, big, broad land 'way up yonder,

It's the forests where silence has lease;

It's the beauty that thrills me with wonder,

It's the stillness that fills me with peace.

Lou never mentioned it. When Steve finally asked, Lou said he didn’t think he’d like gold mining. Not even the way the poem made it sound? Wasn’t that exciting? The line went quiet. Steve listened to the pause, thinking this might be a turning point.

Suddenly Lou blurted, “Robert Service was a hack!” The conversation ended shortly after. Lou was impenetrable. You could try to reach him through his own interests and he’d still rebuff you.

If they were truly headed into a different time, maybe Lou would’ve been better off born into this new era: People cared more about tending to their feelings than about discovering what was achievable through hard work and determination. He raised the idea to Trudy. "Lou should’ve been a millennial." he said.

"What? How’s that?" she asked. "Have you been listening to anything I just said?"

He had not, which was a slip up, but he had to get this out: “Cuz he’s sensitive and helpless. Would rather be a victim than figure himself out.”
“Woah, harsh!” Trudy said. “For a guy who doesn’t like to talk about the past, you sure spend a lot of time dogging on Lou.”

“What about it?” he snapped. Though really, he wanted to know.

“Lou’s life probably didn’t turn out how he wanted. There’s probably a reason.”

“Oh really? So what are we supposed to do? Drop everything? Orchestrate our lives around fixing his?” Steve couldn’t tell where the anger came from, only that it was there.

“I think it’s sort of like my sister,” Trudy said, obviously referring to the one in Palmer, now on her fourth marriage. She rested her fingers on his wrist. “Our parents split right after I finished high school. She had three more years, and then money was a lot tighter. Betty got married the week after graduation. She made one mistake after another.”

It felt like a scold even though Trudy’s voice was soft. He folded his arms and tucked his fists into his armpits. He didn’t like what she’d said and decided he’d drive her back to her own place after dinner, even though it was her weekend off from her kid. “I don’t care what happened when,” Steve said. “At some point, everybody needs to bear up and take responsibility for their own life.”

“I’m not saying any different,” Trudy said. “But sometimes things just don’t work out.”

Steve pushed back on the table. It was all too heavy for him. He should’ve just shown Rhonda his gold rather than ruin happy hour with all this. He hated how Lou made it impossible for him to enjoy himself. Steve’s phone rattled by his glass. The name on the screen must’ve put dread in his eyes.
“What?” Trudy said. "Is it him?"

“No, it’s Janine.” He left the table to answer. There was no good reason for Janine to call now. “Yeah?” Steve maneuvered between the tables, past Rhonda laughing with a couple of suits.

“Got in an hour ago.” Janine said. "Found him in his bathtub with a kitchen knife.”

“Oh, Christ.” Steve felt a weight drop through him like an anchor scraping bottom. The sequence of events immutable: one moment he’s making a joke of Lou, next, this.

“He’s alive for now. Lots of blood though.”

“Should I catch a plane?”

“I don’t think it’s necessary. Not yet, anyways.”

They hung up. Steve walked toward the entry. He had to push through a glut of Japanese tourists in the foyer, aiming their telephotos at the king crab shell mounted in glass behind the hostess’ stand. That’s all the state was now, something to take a picture of.

Outside, the smell of wet asphalt grazed the back of his throat. He didn’t want to get in the van, didn’t want to be anywhere. He stumbled past the cars toward the uncleared strip of land between the road and restaurant, like an animal seeking cover. He walked into the trees, footsteps crunching on dead leaves and sticks. The woods were indifferent to anything he’d done wrong. Shrouded in trees, he could imagine all the clocks stopped. He could see Lou running down the beach amidst the wreckage, his green glass float sparkling between his
hands. But the clocks hadn’t stopped. Time curved away from him. He should have done more to keep Lou tethered to this world. Not more, but something different. What?

Steve saw the sharp angles of adjacent office buildings poking above the birch branches. The pungent sweetness of tall grass and devil’s club clung to him. He looked down and saw a tremendous rhubarb at his feet. Beneath flouncing leaves, big stalks splayed like arteries, blood-hued, bursting from the dirt. He took the tin from his pocket. He’d never tell anyone about his secret tribute, paid to whatever spirit might keep his brother alive. He popped open the lid. He sent his gold scattering into the undergrowth with one big breath.
Sputnik's Release

Tonight the real trouble starts. Sputnik’s yowls are shrill and persistent from the moment I walk in. I replenish her water, glop wet food in her saucer, then sit on the couch with a styrofoam bowl of street noodles, the cheapest dinner to be had in Shanghai. I’m a poorly paid junior architect; noodles it is, most weeknights. The cat eats quickly, then resumes her meow-meow picket, threading through the coffee table legs and rubbing my ankles as her jaw stretches to expel the repetitive complaint. I drop a piece of oily pork on the floor, but she ignores it. Her tail twitches. A shudder ripples through her gray striping. If it’d been up to me we’d have called her Ashtray. Or Smokestack. But instead she is Sputnik, after the satellite. On her fourth trip around the coffee table, she flings herself into a bow, paws forward, backend splayed toward the ceiling, showcasing her rear anatomy. I pick up on the longing. Her writhing could be an imitation of my own heart. I think we’re both in for a long night.

My phone buzzes. It’s my coworker-roomate, Zheniya. She’s out to dinner with clients. I tap to see a picture of a spiky brown log bathed in clear orange sauce in a white dish.

What is it? she texts.
Sea cucumber, I think.

Looks horrible!

I reply with a frowny face and then write, *wait til they’re in good mood, not too drunk, to talk abt ground floor — and also — Sputnik is in heat.*

It’s Zheniya’s last night on a business trip to Kunming, and she’s at a banquet for our firm’s biggest project, the luxury condos we’re building there. Its English name is Richman’s Plaza. Our local colleagues assure that the Chinese is less gauche.

I wish the office had sent me instead – it’s easier not think about Ben when I’m busy. Also, I’m the better architect, not a visionary or anything, but a really good executor. I excel at plotting next steps and turning my plans into reality. I would’ve liked to make my case in person to the Kunming city officials. I think I could convince them. But I’ve given Zheniya my explicit instructions.

A digital rendering of Richman’s Plaza rests on the coffee table. The tower stands several times taller than everything for blocks, like a gigantic steel finger. The city officials waved us off when we told them it would block all direct sunlight to the row of old homes to the west. Building codes don’t apply to those old homes, they said. I’m still holding out for first-floor mixed use. The bureaucrats want to put a massive parking garage on the basement and ground floor. Shops could serve the whole community, plus increase the tower’s livability and hence its long-term value. That’s how I told Zheniya to sell it to them. It’s a *value proposition.*
Sputnik head-butts the couch and meows. It was a mistake not to go out. The city is awash in drink specials. Too much time alone always turns my thoughts to Ben. It’s 3.30 a.m. in Alaska. His day hardly beginning. I’m living sixteen hours into Ben’s future, but he wouldn’t be impressed if I put it like that to him.

Ben and I met a year ago. I could hardly believe I was living back home. My plan was clear: Step One - finish architecture master’s at the University of Oregon; Step Two - get a job at an award-winning, or at least award-seeking, boutique firm in a major metropolitan. Instead, I graduated into global recession and spent a year behind the cash register at the campus bookstore. I fixed my lunch breaks so that every Tuesday at 1.30 p.m. I could keep stopping by office hours of my most acclaimed professor. Everybody said it was important to network, now more than ever, and he’d always liked the work I did in studio. I held out hope he’d give me the inside edge, pass my resume to someone who was hiring, until the day he folded his hands on his desk and said that while it was always a pleasure to see me, office hours were for enrolled students. I called home in tears. The following week my dad said there was a drafting position for me at his engineering firm. I used to believe nepotism was for the incompetent and under-motivated, but that was pre-financial crisis. I said goodbye to Eugene’s pine-shrouded strip mall drizzle and returned to Anchorage.

My parents followed the oil boom to Alaska before I was born, and my childhood was undergirded with the assumption I would succeed them somewhere in the Lower 48, anywhere with a more hospitable climate. I would justify their two-plus decades of brutal
winters in exchange for high wages, low taxes, and oil-profit payouts by leveling up. I used to get home late from school activities and my dad would be in the living room, a bottle of wine and a tub of shea butter between his feet. He liked to drink and moisturize before the evening news. He’d massage his chapped knuckles and cheerfully muse that his Kendra (me) would go off to college and never come back here.

When I did move home, I set up headquarters at the dining room table. I had to-do lists, printouts of job leads, loose sketches. I drafted all day at my dad’s work, then came home and drafted for contests. If I could win a design contest, surely someone would hire me. My parents tiptoed apologetically around the mess. Who but the bankers could’ve predicted? Anchorage wasn’t so bad, they suggested, in spite of all their complaints about the dark, the cold, the long flights to grandma’s house. Want us to buy you a snow bike? New pair of skis? They said I needed a hobby. I didn’t need a hobby. I needed a weekly reprieve from their guilt. I signed up for a music appreciation class at the university.

The class met Wednesday evenings. I noticed Ben the first day, seated in front, hunched forward and ready to pay attention. He had a broad, square face that registered little emotion, that instead seemed anchored to some deep, imperturbable calm. He kept his mass of blond curls knotted in back. I pondered that hair, like a big tangle of fishing line suspended above the bulk of his shoulders. I was transfixed. Nobody with hair like that could need a job. I looked at the back of his head in every class until the day the instructor played “Ride of the Valkyries.” Spurred by that conquering horn theme, or maybe just the realization that I did need a hobby but I wasn’t that interested in music, I moved up to sit beside him during the break.
“Did you like it?” I asked.

“Sure.” His lashes slow-blinked, golden-hued and impassive.

“Want to get coffee?”

“Okay.”

I’d meant to say sometime, but we left class in stride and walked toward the coffee cart in the student union. I looked at my phone before we got to the barista. There was a message from an Illinois number.

“Hold on, I need to check this,” I said.

“Just tell me what you want.”

“No, one second, I’ll get it.”

“Regular coffee?”

I nodded and walked toward a table with the phone to my ear. The voice of a nice-sounding HR lady said she liked my portfolio and would keep me on file, but the firm wasn’t hiring and wouldn’t until next year, maybe.

He set down our coffees. “Bad news?”

I laughed shortly. “Just a job I didn’t get. It’s a firm that only does hospitals, which would be boring, but they’re in Chicago. That would’ve been cool.”

“I played a folk festival there once. Good pizza.”
Like me, he wasn’t a full-time student, just there for edification. I learned he played double bass in a bluegrass group, one I’d heard of. He had a pleasant almond smell that reminded me of the natural food store. He listened patiently to my job stuff.

“What about you?” I asked. “Ever think about getting out?”

He smiled and shook his head. “Couldn’t live anywhere else.”

For a moment I pretended I felt the same. I felt very light, removed from the weight of my ambition.

“I want to stay,” he said when our cups were empty. “But I have band practice.”

We saw each other most days after that. I was nervous the first time I went to see his band. The folk stuff all sounds the same to me, always lots of bygone platitudes — sorrow, country rain, some woman’s problem with a white dress — but Ben’s band was good. He stood in the back with his hair down, delivering the dark string rhythm, low and beckoning. Even though their songs didn’t have the vintage sentiment that usually puts me off, they were a little muddy, and the verses were salted with political irony. In short, not the kind of music a car company would ever use for an ad. And that was great and all, art that rebukes capitalism, but then what? Ben kept himself afloat in a cramped one-bedroom by tutoring high school orchestra students and playing weddings and corporate functions. The place smelled like stale cigarettes from previous tenants, but it was nice to be anywhere besides my parents’. Weekend afternoons we’d stay in his bed, no lights on, until the pale pink sky faded to blue then black.
“Ideally though,” I had to know, “what would you want to be doing with music?”

He stretched and thought a moment. I watched the outline of his ribs push against his chest covered in pale downy curls. “I don’t know,” he sounded mystified. “I think I’m doing pretty good.”

*Well, I remember thinking, doing pretty well.*

I spin the printout of Richman’s Plaza on the coffee table, so the tower is upside down. I slump into the couch for warmth. Shanghai’s humid winter chills our little apartment. Laundry racks crowd the living room. Our clothes keep turning brittle with mildew. The sparkly red character for double fortune, leftover from Chinese New Year, is peeling off the wall. The electric space heater is on, but all the warmth collects at the ceiling. When I stand up I feel the temperature difference in my ears, so instead I hunker down, tuck my feet up and away from the wretched cat. I don’t know what to do about her. Bad luck that her hormonal chemistry chose to active on a night when Zheniya is gone. What are the odds? Better I suppose than mine and Ben’s ever were. He never fit anywhere in my five-year plan.

We wouldn’t have even been friends in high school. I hamster-wheeled through four years of volunteer club, sports, talent shows, and pep week committees. My friends were the same. I doubt Ben was ever so invested in things a person could letter in. My friends’ parents were lawyers, engineers, accountants. Alaska was a generational pitstop. All our parents planned to retire Outside. They wanted us there, too. And everyone had managed to leave. I knew of one girl from our circle who was back in town, but I couldn’t bring myself to call
her. She must’ve felt the same. Ben’s upbringing was different. I heard about it those winter afternoons in bed. His mom was a back-to-the-lander, albeit a straggler, the movement was practically over by the time she fled Cleveland suburbs for some deep-forested pocket of California’s Emerald Triangle. Ben was little when the drug war ratcheted up. The DEA sent helicopters full of special agents armed with assault rifles to backwoods pot farms. Ben and his mother lived on one of those farms, and it became too much, so she moved them north. By then his dad was out of the picture, irrelevant after his return to Ohio. Ben’s mom supported them teaching fiddle and guitar. They fished in the summertime and foraged for berries and nettles. In winter he spent the weekends busking with her in the Northway Mall. Sometimes he still did, although less so once I was in the picture.

Zheniya finally texts back. *What do you mean in heat? The apartment is cold right?*

I search for how to tell it simplest: *She wants a boy cat and is being super loud and bad.*

Ten stories down, taxi tires crest and retreat like waves on the rain-slicked street, which would be soothing but for the melancholic overlay of Sputnik’s yowls. She circumnavigates the living room, and cries and cries, a mournful, lascivious orbit. I imagine Ben in each part of the room she passes, he’s seated at the dining table, lazing on the couch, standing by the window and looking out on the rain. Sputnik can’t keep it up all night. Something must be done. My phone dings. Zheniya has sent a picture of a startled-looking steamed fish covered in scallions. *I don’t know what anyone is saying but they’re starting to take baijiu. Should I?*
There’s no polite way to retreat once you start drinking at a banquet. Zheniya could use her female status to bypass the competitive shots that government officials all seem to love. I’m irritated with her about the cat so I just respond Yes.

Sputnik meows especially loud.

“It’s hopeless!” I scold. “Nothing here will satisfy you!” But this sends her trotting back toward me. She faints onto her back, keeps her ass flicked up. Any way the feline body contorts, it’s as if she’s spinning on that pinched access point.

I get up and go to the kitchen, pull the dusty bottle of Great Wall merlot from the top of the fridge, something I wouldn’t even cook with in less desperate times. I take a Seven Up and fill a tumbler to the rim with a mixture that creates purple fizz, a trick I learned from my coworkers at our year-end dinner.

Back on the couch, I open my laptop to google remedies for cats in heat.

First thing a lot of expats do when they arrive is adopt a cat. Not me. I wasn’t falling for it. But I understand how the desire takes hold: Most of us arrive alone. And once you’re here you can’t help but feel sort of rich and helpless, even if, like me, you make the equivalent of twelve hundred dollars a month. It’s still three times the pay of your Chinese coworkers. Everywhere, wealth smashes up against bare survival. Rusty bicycles thread through black BMWs on the thoroughfares. Migrant workers pick plastic bottles and metal scrap from the garbage. Gucci stores have gobbled up the prime real estate, and behind them crumbling
brick houses are strung with laundry lines. I can’t read Chinese, but I know what a demolition sign looks like. Not that I see that many posted. Most of the work is already done. And then you happen on a box of mewing kittens in People’s Square, where everyone seems to leave them. I had my kitten-box moment. I spotted the quivering cardboard next to some bushes outside a children’s play area. I looked down at the blinking, breathing, soft fur huddle, and thought about how good it would feel to save one small thing, but only for a minute. Somebody else — someone more vulnerable to lost causes — would come for them. It wasn’t my burden.

Zheniya arrived six weeks after me. She walked into the office in a bomber jacket and spike heels that marked her as eastern European even before she parted her thin lips and told us in her throaty accent, breath huffing the consonants, “Hello, yes? I am Zheniya. I think I work here now.” She had a crooked smile and short black curls flung to a ponytail. I’d been staying in a tiny, windowless hostel room, unable to find roommates. My local coworkers did their best to help, offering the cards of real estate agents, but I didn’t make enough on my own to pay a deposit and realtor fee. Zheniya and I decided to rent a place together. We found a two-bedroom in a multi-tower complex close to work with nice furniture. Our landlord, Ms. Xia, a bank executive, had decided to leave everything and buy all new for her next place. Zheniya and I set up housekeeping. We were both good about dishes and keeping toilet paper stocked, and she always offered me some of the fruity candies and spicy peanuts she brought home from Seven-Eleven. She’s generous in lots of small ways, which helps our apartment feel like home, whereas I’m the one who’s better with logistical tasks, like making sure Ms. Xia is paid on time and arranging maintenance appointments. In her second week
at work Zheniya started calling herself Jenny because neither the Chinese, the Italians, the French, nor I could pronounce Zheniya. Half the staff made the switch. The rest of us were too used to it to change. I still probably say it wrong.

We got to know each other in the evenings, flopped on Ms. Xia’s matching leather sofa and armchair. We drank weak beer and watched pirated DVDs, after which the talk turned to home. Zheniya’s family is from Moscow, but she was born in Azerbaijan, the daughter of scientists employed by the Soviet Ministry of Oil and Gas. I told her my parents were engineers, that my dad’s firm mainly took government contracts to build military housing and rural schools, and my mom worked for an oil company.

“Ah, like my parents,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“Going to the far away place for the sake of development,” she said. “Just like us too, actually.”

It was true. What geography was next on the carousel of global progress? And who would go to the next booming place, our children, or our Chinese coworkers?

After we’d been living together a month, Zheniya came home with something dark and furry cupped under her neck.

“He was alone on the subway platform! I couldn’t leave him.” She raised the kitten above her head. The kitty meowed quietly, paws paddling the air

“Wash your hands,” I said. “Your clothes too, and take a shower. Those things” —
—“Don’t worry, I will take him to the animal doctor tomorrow. I will feed him, whatever, everything, the litter box, everything, I promise.”

I sniffed. There was always another mama cat dragging her belly through the puddles near the downstairs trash bins. *Why even save one?* I didn’t ask, because Zheniya brought the kitten in on a day I was especially missing Ben. It was more important to have our evening couch ritual: Maybe I could tell her more about him, rather than argue about a cat.

“SPOOT-nik. That is what I will call her,” Zheniya announced. She told me it meant fellow traveler, appropriate, since we were both a long way from home.

The next day at work I took a break from drafting a staircase to look up Sputnik. The only space milestone that had seemed to matter in school was the moon landing. I guess because Russia got the rest of them — first satellite, first dog, first man, first woman, first spacewalk. I pulled up old headlines in fear-mongering black capitals, warning of Sputnik, ‘the baby moon.’ There was cause for concern. Spinning out there, eighteen-thousand miles an hour above the world. From that vantage, able to see everything, what could it know about us?

The Internet is slow and the pages, when they do load, provide only vague suggestion.

*Put a hot water bottle in the cat’s bed.*

*Try an herbal remedy.*
Which herbs? The listicle doesn’t say. Sputnik jumps onto the couch, extends her jaw and meows at my face. I hop up and move to the armchair. I wonder if Ben would know what to do. His mom is the type — longhaired, boney, somewhat witch-like. He brought me to her house after we’d been dating awhile. She served chamomile in mugs with wobbly bumps that asserted they were hand-thrown. We sat at the table and she asked how I felt about the new proposed natural gas pipeline. I said I didn’t have a strong opinion and touched my fingers to my eyebrow: a headache coming on. She went to the kitchen and started rummaging for a tincture. She said chasteberry was good for all the symptoms — cramps, bloating, headaches. My cheeks got red and I looked at Ben. He shrugged, not reflecting my embarrassment. I told her I wasn’t on my period, that I get this weird sinus thing when the weather changes. She returned to the table and watched as I rummaged in my purse for Advil. She noticed the metal logo below the zipper, Coach, and remarked that the bag must’ve been expensive. I said snappishly that it had been a gift. At the same time Ben admonished her to give it a rest, but in a tone that said he was more amused than annoyed. If anyone would know what to do with this cat right now, she would. Maybe she’s passed the wisdom on to Ben. I’ve broken down and called him over Skype before. Never a good idea, but he always listens. I talk and talk until I get scared. Listening is his way of drawing me back, the suggestion carries across dead static. Nothing good ever comes of it, and it’s past four there now.

When the music appreciation class ended that spring I was no closer to a job in Seattle, San Francisco, Dubai, anywhere. The world’s construction was mostly still ground to a halt.
Ben invited me to tag along on his band’s statewide summer tour. I was bored at work and about to turn twenty-five.

“So you’re going to, what, camp all summer?” my dad asked.

I’d walked into his office to give two weeks’ notice. I suppose I could’ve done it over dinner at home. “Yeah, pretty much,” I said.

He grunted and shook his head, reached for a stack of papers.

“It’s been slow since February,” I reasoned. “You pay me for forty, I work ten.”

He kept shaking his head. His desk was crowded with three-ring binders. File cabinets lined every wall, even against the windows, blocking most of the view, but for a sliver of glass where the blue and white Chugach peaks jutted above the beige metal. “It’s just uncharacteristic, Kendra,” he finally said.

And so what if it was? I thought but did not say. The more time I spent with Ben, the more I felt like I’d missed out on some part of growing up Alaskan. But what exactly? I had to find out for myself.

Most of the band piled into a Volkswagen bus. Ben and I followed in the wood-paneled minivan, the same one his mom had driven up to Alaska two decades ago. Our caravan left Anchorage and I pressed my face to the window on the stretch of Old Seward Highway that follows Turnagain Arm. Sea and sky mirrored blue. The channel was perfectly flat. The
mountains across the water were snowy halfway down, and their reflection in the still surface beckoned like an upside down world.

“It’s great you’re coming,” he said.

Sometimes there were motels or loaned cabins, but mostly we stayed in campgrounds. The band would go set up for whatever gig, and I’d drive to the store. I was good with the dutch oven, could approximate jambalaya. They complimented my cooking, not too much, but enough that I knew the most important part was that I was welcome. We slept in Ben’s two-man tent, unless it rained, then we’d squeeze into the van with the instruments. My hair always smelled like campfire. So did his. I woke each morning to his curls spilling over the edges of our pushed-together air mattresses.

In July I ruined my clothes in a coin-op washing machine. My nice jeans, pullover, button-downs — everything came out spotted white from someone’s leftover bleach. Lea, who played guitar and mouth harp, gifted me a pair of drawstring Batik pants, two tunics, and a paisley tube dress. I startled myself in the smudged mirror of a state park bathroom wearing the tube dress, braless, hair loosely braided, four days out from my last shower. So far from what I’d envisioned in architecture school: Blazers and nice sneakers, a desk in an open-plan office with big windows, a wide-angle view of the cityscape. What city? The vision was fuzzy. I still checked my email wherever I could. Later that same day I Skype-interviewed with a firm in China from a bar on the Homer spit, my laptop perched on a knotted wood table. Out the window, light rain dappled the gray water of Kachemak Bay.
We passed the long driving hours counting bald eagles, moose, the occasional bear. We stayed up late around the orange embers, steeping in smoke and pulling pieces of grilled trout from its foil wrapper. The grease on our fingers transferred to the brown necks of beer bottles. The sun lingered low on the horizon. Since it never got dark and we lived outside, the weeks passed as if only one single valiant day.

We arrived in Valdez for a festival in August. The beach bonfires blazed after midnight. I leaned into Ben and watched the flames.

“We should do this again next summer,” he said.

“Oh really? What kind of job could I get where I could pick up for three months?”

“See if your dad will rehire you,” We both laughed. I hadn’t spoken to my parents since we’d left, only emailed. “Let’s see, Lea’s a bartender, Jake’s a server, or, you could be a teacher”

“A teacher?”

“I think you’d be a good teacher.”

We were quiet, musing. Then Ben stood up and pulled me with him. We walked down the beach, away from the crowd, and toward a hulking piece of driftwood, which by the power of inebriation looked like suitable privacy. Our footsteps clattered on rocks as we picked our way around ribbons of kelp and seaweed slicks. I was happy. I had been all summer, but I had a little reception and I also had my habits. I used my free hand to pull my phone from the deep pocket of the batik pants.
“Seriously?”

“Just need to check a minute…” I mumbled, reaching my arm up like extra height might do the trick. The tide stopped shy of our shoes. I could feel the mood pulling away over the dark water.

“You can look tomorrow.”

I had a feeling though. I waited for the bright blue light of global connectivity to travel from left to right on the screen. My emails downloaded. “EEEEEE! Yesyesyesyes!” I had the job in Shanghai, but I needed to be there in two weeks.

Ben turned and walked back to the strumming silhouettes.

I splash more wine in my glass. I’m out of Seven Up. Sputnik rubs aggressively against my legs, so I tuck them up again, flick my fingers and hiss at her. She coils up, preparing to jump into my lap. Her need is unrelenting and repulsive.

Did you ask about the ground level? I text Zheniya again, a minute later adding, Say they can still have garage, just part of G/F for shops.

I open a new browser tab and turn on the proxy network I use to get around China’s block on Facebook. I do this to look at Ben. Stray cat hairs drift over the keyboard. I click through photos of him playing at a wedding in the Talkeetna lodge. He’s wearing a suede vest and a string tie. Wenwen, who sits next to me at work, caught me looking at the same
photo earlier this week. Before I could close the window she said, “Wa! Looks like Bao-luo Niu-man.”

“He?” I asked.

It took a few minutes, but with a little description and guessing I understood her: Paul Newman. Wenwen loves westerns. I can’t stand them. Sputnik has abandoned the base of my chair and pushes against the entertainment center. Her moaning carries. I touch my fingers to my neck and flinch for their lack of heat. I pick up my phone again and type to Zheniya that I’m thinking about calling Ben. This time she responds right away.

DON’T.

On my last day in Anchorage we drove to Whittier to fish off the rocky breakwater. Turnagain Arm was just as calm and blue as when we’d begun our trip in the early days of summer. The tide was out, mudflats silvered in August sunlight.

“Pull over at the wayside, I want to take a picture,” I said.

“The tunnel opens in ten minutes, I don’t want to wait for the next pass.”

We drove on, but still missed the cutoff for Whittier-bound traffic on the single-lane tunnel through Maynard Mountain. Ben exhaled and cut the engine. It was quiet but for cars whizzing by in the opposite direction.

“Radio?” I asked.
“I’d rather not.”

I reached over and touched his shoulder. “You could come visit,” I suggested sweetly. I knew, on a rational level, that I’d miss him, but triumph and anticipation for the great new adventure suppressed sadness I might’ve otherwise felt. Life would be much smaller if we could foretaste our regrets.

“I’m not going to China.”

I rolled my eyes, “Well then!” What could I say? I’d been trying to leave since we met. We sat silently until the tunnel opened.

It was overcast and raining on the other side of the mountain. We pulled into the harbor parking lot. The windshield blurred with cold splatter.

“We could get halibut and chips at Varly’s,” I suggested.

He shrugged.

“What are you so mad about?”

“Nothing. Let’s just go home.”

“Are you mad I’m leaving?” Sadness would make sense, but when there was no conceivable path forward for us, so it was unfair for Ben to sour our last day together.

He scratched his chin. “Yeah.”

“So I should just, what, keep working for my dad forever and be your girlfriend?”
“You could.”

“Very forward-thinking of you, Ben.”

“Jesus, that’s why I didn’t say anything. Go to China. You’ll probably build something really nice.”

I’d made the mistake of telling him my offer, so he knew it was half what my dad paid. He didn’t understand. That was the way of architecture. Better, more interesting projects meant less money. All my most talented friends were practically starving. And besides, I could never do something so regressive as table my career for a guy in a folk band. My mother’s generation marched for workplace rights. Women my age had an obligation not to cede that ground. I attempted to explain again, “Christiana, who got this internship in New York, makes less than minimum wage based on her hours, but that’s just what you have to do if”

“People can get you to do anything if you’ve convinced yourself it’s art.”

“Excuse me? People use what I make. How many shows did you play for free this summer?”

He sighed. “Sounds like you know what you’re doing. But I don’t want to have lunch.”

We hugged goodbye in my driveway, but he wouldn’t look at me. He slipped a folded square of frayed notebook paper into my hand. I read it once he’d pulled away. He’d written his well wishes, said he hoped that the job was everything I wanted and that I’d find
fulfillment on my chosen path. Also, that he was grateful for our time together. I keep the note in my cosmetic bag. Sometimes it strikes me as heartfelt, and other times it just reads like flaccid hippy bullshit. But what did I really want? A grand gesture? I still would’ve left.

That final night in Anchorage my parents took me downtown for dinner. They told the hostess, the busser, and the waiter that tomorrow I was flying to my new job in Shanghai. They clinked wine glasses and tried to say “thank you” per the instructions of the Mandarin learning CD they’d picked up at the bookstore. The phrase whistled through their teeth like “She-she.” A high note, followed by a lower one, like an indictment. I cut into my osso buco and, to my great dismay, thought of Ben’s mom. We’d stopped by her house that morning before Whittier to pick up a cooler. When we got back in the car she stood waving goodbye, her face half masked by the glass chimes dangling in her front window. I raised my hand to wave back. She looked so pleased, it unnerved me. I’d pulled my fist toward my chest and looked away.

“Don’t think your mom is going to miss me.” I said.

“She thinks you’re fine.”

I snorted.

“She’s just skeptical.”

“Of what?”

“Um, everything I guess — neoliberalism, unchecked growth, the whole ‘global project.’” He was quoting her.
“Yeah? You should ask her about the millions of people who climb out of poverty every year in China.”

“I could turn the car around and you could ask her?”

“Forget it, let’s just go fishing.”

Sputnik jumps on the coffee table and walks over Richman’s Plaza, flops on top of it, twisting left and right. Zheniya never responded when I asked if she’d said anything about ground-floor shops. I pick up my phone and call her.

“What did he say?” she answers.

“Who?”

“Your ex.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I didn’t call.”

“Good girl. How’s our baby? Poor thing.”

“Clearly she’s not a baby. So don’t feel bad for her. She’s being an asshole.”

“Yeah, but I think this condition is really uncomfortable. It’s like hurting her.”

“It’s hurting me. Listen: Did you tell them about the, about the south side, the stores, I mean refiguring the ground floor.” Seven up and Great Wall were talking for me. I hadn’t
realized how much I’ve had. “Even these wealthy guys living there, they’re gonna want a fruit stand or some sort—”

“My god, all dinner, Mr. Li? I think this is his name. He makes so much noise when he eats, and then when his mouth is full he’s saying the garage will be full of BMWs. Black BMWs”

“So what did you say?”

“I didn’t say anything. They think more cars equals more modern.”

“You didn’t even say anything? Then what the hell are you doing there?”

“Hey come on now, these plans were finalized.”

“Nothing is ever finalized!” I shout at her. Sputnik backs me up with a yowl. “Did you hear that? Do you hear how awful Sputnik is?”

“I’m sorry about the cat and the garage,” Zheniya says. “We all think it’s a bad choice.”

“It’s a horrible choice!”

“We can’t fix everything, we can only try our best”

“You have to make them understand”

“Yes, but they have already made up their minds. I will take Sputnik to the doctor when I am back. Try to be nice to her since she’s hurting. Mr. Shen is waving to me. I think to do another shot of baijiu. Sorry Kendra, bye.”
Shanghai means *above the sea*, but I haven’t seen open water since I arrived, not since that last day driving beside the inlet with Ben. I can’t take it anymore. It might not be ethical, but I’ve read all the Internet has to say and there’s one thing I can do. It’s time for decisive action. I push off the couch, head sloshy with Great Wall, but steadfast and pure of intent. Sputnik yowls. It’s time to put an end to this insatiable wanting. I stride to the bathroom.

The vanity bulbs flicker. The counter is tacky with toothpaste residue and mossy gray film, what smog turns into when it descends to Earth. I push around makeup tubes and Zheniya’s Cyrillic-printed toothpaste. Hunting for Q-tips, I squat and duck my head and shoulders into the sink cabinets, finding cleaning products and cotton balls, a dehydrated cockroach that died on its back. The musty enclosure smells like cheap soap tinged with shit. No Q-tips. I close my eyes, feel my own pulse behind the blackness, beating towards some means to an end, anything that will quiet the night.

Then a vision. The pencils on the drafting desk in my bedroom. Like a monk emerging from the meditative cave, I push back from the cabinets and rise.

In the bedroom the tips of my thumb and fingers pinch the perfect pink nub, attached to the yellow shaft, flat on the opposite end, a dot of graphite tucked into a wood circumference. An eraser is no bigger than a Q-tip. The cat forums instructed against daintiness with reminders that a real cat penis is covered in prickly barbs. Now all I have to do is grab her.
“Here kitty, kitty.”

She yowls back, the sound carries direly through the hall. I follow it to the living room, but she’s no longer on the coffee table. I look behind the chairs, under the laundry racks, also the kitchen. She sounds from all directions. Just as I’ve made up my mind, she’s disappeared. I can feel her circling, as if she’s slipped within the walls. The whole apartment keens with the siren of a thousand cats. Where is this howling coming from? I hear her, but she’s nowhere to be found.
The chickens arrived in Fort Yukon on a Wednesday afternoon flight in July of 1955. Peter heard the plane well before it appeared above the spruce and birch trees. Ezekiel asked for twos. Peter said Go Fish. Ezekiel picked a card from the deck, stacked on the hull of his father’s canoe behind the cabin. Both boys sat cross-legged in the dirt on either side, chins resting on the overturned boat. The plane’s buzzing grew louder until it sounded like the engine was rattling right between them. Peter said nothing. Finally, when the DC-3 popped out of the clouds, Peter dropped his cards facedown, that they might continue the game later, and said he’d better get down to the field. Ezekiel dusted his hands on his pants, said he’d come too.

“They only need one person,” Peter said as they started to walk.

“It’s not just the chickens,” Ezekiel snapped. “My uncle Bill is coming back today.”

“What’s your big hurry to see him?”

Ezekiel shrugged, “Maybe he’ll bring me something from Fairbanks.”
“Why would he do that?” Peter knew his Gwich’in friend’s conscience wouldn’t allow him to hide his intentions long.

Sure enough, Ezekiel clapped his hands together, exasperated. “If you get sick or your family goes somewhere, maybe I can fill in for you.”

“We’re not going anywhere, and I won’t get sick!” Two ptarmigan swooped over the dusty road. A dog barked from behind one of the cabins. Peter could smell fish smoking. He hated to argue; Ezekiel was his only real friend for hundreds of miles in every direction. He also knew Ezekiel’s family had run up a debt at the Northern Commercial store where Peter’s dad clerked. Trapping season — when everyone could refill their pockets with earnings from the pelts of lynx, ermine, and mink — was months away. A lot of families were tight on cash in summer, but Peter had his own problems. He needed money too, so he could buy a motor scooter from the Sears Roebuck catalog. With wheels he wouldn’t have to worry as much about outrunning big Ed. Ezekiel might need money, but Peter needed to hang on to his life.

They arrived in silence at the airfield. The shiny metallic DC-3 taxied down the gravel strip. Ezekiel grumbled: “You can’t know if you’ll get sick or not. Nobody knows that.”

Peter didn’t respond. He was fixated on the plane. The engine died. The propellers slowed their blurry twirl. Peter’s family had moved to Fort Yukon for his father’s job. Now Peter was finally coming into his own gainful employment. The chickens would give him purpose, like the store did for Dad. He would no longer be just the only white boy in town. He’d be someone doing a small but necessary part of building up the territory. He heard
Ezekiel blow out, sputtering his lips. Peter turned a little farther away, not wanting to dwell any longer on their disagreement, not knowing how the chickens would change things, or how things had been changing since even before his family arrived.

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The previous winter in Fairbanks, the doc said selling ads in the *News-Miner* was burning a hole in Dad’s stomach lining. In the evenings Peter hunched over his homework at the little kitchen table and watched Dad pour a glass of gin and retreat to his easy chair to rub his temples in little circles. Mom sat in the opposite corner writing to Aunt Ingrid back home in Camas, Washington. If Peter could read just one of her letters he thought he’d learn lots. She would only say she was telling her sister not to worry even though Dad had dragged them to the coldest, darkest place on Earth. They’d be getting good and rich, any day now. Dad had it all figured out. Peter asked if Aunt Ingrid was very worried about them. Mom told him Aunt Ingrid was petrified. The ice clinked; Dad’s face disappeared behind his highball. Mom folded her paper and tucked it in an envelope, to be delivered to the post office.

Their first winter in Alaska passed like that, in the tiny Fairbanks cabin, the sun setting as the school day ended. In the evenings, the three of them cramped together in their strange new home. The spare stubby black spruce forest on the outskirts of town was visible from the backyard. School wasn’t too bad. There were lots of kids like Peter. It was the same for everyone: the dads had decided to move the families north into the territory. Some of his fellow fourth graders said their moms were happy, while others had moms madder than
Peter’s. In the spring the doc told Dad to find a less stressful career. It so happened Dad had sold a classified in the employment section that very day: Northern Commercial needed a general store clerk at Fort Yukon. Eight miles above the Arctic Circle. Fort Yukon: the name held the promise of a real Alaskan odyssey.

“Over my frozen keister!” Mom said. No way was Dad’s new job moving the family into the bush. She wanted to go back to Camas, where there was family and friends and neighborhoods with rose bushes. Dad could get a job in the sawmill. People weren’t meant to live in this much dark. Dad slid his fingers around her wrists and talked of opportunity. He was an anxious salesman, but also a good one, no more so than when he was on to his next big plan. Statehood was on the horizon. There were bound to be more lucky breaks up here than back in rainy old Washington. Plus, how could he deny their son the chance to take part in settling the Last Frontier? By then Dad had wrapped his arms around her waist. He murmured into the space between her neck and collarbone. Mom shook her head, but Peter caught the flash of her smile. She rolled her eyes, and Peter could read her resignation. Peter wondered if someday he’d have Dad’s wooing magic. Later, when they were home alone, Peter asked Mom if she was happy to move somewhere new. She told him she had a prayerful heart, and hopefully a short stint whacking about the woods would cure Dad of his need to shoehorn their lives into something torn from the pages of an adventure magazine.

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They moved when the school year ended. It wasn’t until they were buckled into the roaring DC-3, flying over the squiggly brown tributaries of the Yukon River and dark green
forest, that Peter thought to ask why the town needed Dad. Couldn’t someone who already lived there be the store clerk?

“Oh I don’t think so,” Dad raised his voice over the engines. “They’re trappers. They don’t want to be cooped up inside.” He told Peter the Gwich’in didn’t use to live in one place, that they’d followed the caribou herds. A hundred years or so back, the Hudson Bay Company had arrived and set up a trading post, then the Native trappers started selling their furs and staying in one place more. “They make good money on furs,” Dad said, “As long as fancy ladies in Paris and New York got to have their big fur coats, the Indians’ll do alright.”

Mom didn’t seem to be listening. She was facing the window but she turned. “Also Peter, Northern Commercial probably needs your father because the clerk has to be someone who can keep the books and place orders.”

“Why Dad?” Peter asked.

“A lot of them out there aren’t educated,” Mom said. “Some in the villages can’t read. When I worked at the airport, they’d pay for their tickets in beaver blankets, and some just made an X on the paperwork. They didn’t have signatures.”

Peter gasped. There wasn’t much worse than being illiterate. It was shameful, Uncle Eli back in Camas couldn’t read. He’d quit school early to work. Mom called him a Tragic Figure. However, Uncle Eli was also a water witcher; he showed up with his special stick anytime somebody needed a well dug. And, of everyone Peter knew, he told the best stories. Peter wondered if perhaps certain special powers were only bestowed on those with space in their minds not taken up by books.
Dad spoke sternly. “Don’t you ever feel sorry for them, Peter. They’ve got a different way of life. Pay attention and you’ll learn a thing or two.”

Mom twisted the back of her earring and turned to the window. Something about the gesture told Peter there was plenty to be sorry about.

They moved into a one-room cabin behind the two-story Northern Commercial building. Rough logs notched together at the corners, fringed with insulating moss, formed the four walls. The roof was smooth planks covered with rust metal sheets and tar paper. An old bathtub and two rain barrels sat outside. The outhouse and two rows of empty dog kennels were in the back. Not much to look at, and a ways distant from the nearest cabins.

Mom kicked the bathtub. “Petey, did I ever tell you I could’ve married a dentist? He was almost done with his schooling when your father got home from Germany.”

“The one she didn’t know she was waiting for.” Dad squeezed her shoulder, grinning all around.

“More like the nail in my coffin.” She slid away to haul a suitcase into the cabin. That’s how it was with them. Dad made the decisions and Mom went along, jokes and all. Peter wondered if she truly regretted giving up the dentist.

Mom and Dad unpacked. Peter stood in the tall grass and squinted toward the far road and cabins that lined it. A hundred yards off, a Gwich’in man came out, followed by two small children. The three started to walk uptown. Peter wondered who his friends would be.
He had comics and toys he could share that the kids in town had probably never seen. It would be different than in Fairbanks, where all his classmates were like him. Dad had said Peter would be the only white kid in town. He hoped to meet a medicine man. He liked the idea of praying to Mother Nature. Feathers, smoke, mystic dances. That all sounded more fun than Mom’s book-bound Quakerism.

Dad started his job at the store, and shortly after Mom found work preparing meals at the tourist lodge uptown. Peter spent the mornings alone in the shadowy cabin, the sun slicing between the oilcloth window curtains. He went outside when he got too hot and walked along the river, which was the color of creamed coffee. That’s what they drank, hauled in buckets and stored in the rain barrels. Dad spread dried mustard seed over the surface. The seeds expanded and sank, collecting debris on the way down. They boiled the water, but it still tasted muddy.

Peter lingered at the store and watched people go in and out. Most customers were Gwich’in. A few were white men. Everyone ignored Peter. Some arrived in small skiffs. One was an old white man with a long gray beard and a smile with more gaps than teeth. He tipped his bowler to Peter. A *sourdough* was what they called his type. Peter wondered if the man came up in the Gold Rush, more than fifty years ago. The man looked old enough. After awhile Peter returned to the cabin and read Hardy Boys on the front step, looking up now and again, hoping someone would talk to him.
They’d been in Fort Yukon a week when Dad came home one evening, a pike wrapped in brown paper under his arm. He announced he had bought a dog team off an old-timer, some ancient trapper who wanted to go back and visit family in the Lower 48 while his legs still worked. Mom twisted a dishtowel around her knuckles. She wanted to know why they needed a pack of dogs. Dad said the team would be the best way to see some of the country after winter arrived. Peter watched Mom’s face pale at the mention of winter. The brown paper under Dad’s arm darkened as the fish soaked through. Mom snapped at him to take it outside and clean it before bringing it into her home.

Peter followed Dad down to the cleaning station by the river.

“She’ll come around.” Dad said. “Let’s give her a minute to cool off.”

Peter nodded. So far, life in Fort Yukon was dull enough to make him want to go back to Camas too, but he thrilled to think of himself perched in a big fur parka on the back of a sled, calling “Mush!”

Dad took the blade protector off the filleting knife.

“Can I name them? All of them?” Peter asked. “The dogs, I mean.”

“They already have names, son.”

He watched Dad cut the fish into long strips of milky flesh. He sliced into the meat and with one smooth pull separated it from the scales. He gave Peter a turn, but Peter pulled jerkily and left globs of meat stuck to the skin. He asked to try once more, but Dad took the knife back and finished the filets.
Summer was warm and buggy. The dogs moved into the kennels and barked like hell at feeding time. Peter sweated, refilling their bowls and picking up poop. The dogs were big and dirty and unfriendly. Dad explained proudly that they were working dogs. Peter would’ve preferred a team of friendly mutts, like the pups that ran loose in their old neighborhood in Camas. After finishing the thankless dog care, Peter’s days stretched out torturously while his parents worked. They’d brought their record player from Fairbanks, but all the records except Charlie Barnet and His Orchestra broke in the move. Peter put it on and snapped and shuffled between the beds, the table, the oil drum stove. He played it over and over, pantomiming the sax, the trombone, the upright bass until he was sick of every riff. One of the tracks was called “Cherokee.” Someone ought to tell Charlie Barnet that Indians didn’t go for big band music. The only thing Peter ever heard wafting on scratchy radio waves from the other cabins was country twang.

Now and again he’d spot big groups of kids tearing around, hollering at one another, leaving a cloud of dust in their wake, but they never came by his cabin. Sometimes Peter wandered into Northern Commercial and perused the stacks of cans and dried goods. Much of the merchandise was behind the counter where Dad worked, and people had to tell him what they needed, just like in an Old West store. Actually, Fort Yukon was so far West there wasn’t hardly any West left before the Bering Strait, and beyond that, the Soviet Union. When the customers left, Dad asked what Peter needed. Nothing, Peter answered. A minute later he was back outside on the banks of the Yukon. Dad’s job was in the store, Peter’s job was to be a kid, make friends, tromp around. He tossed a stick into the current and imagined
it traveling way, way out, all the way to the frigid ocean, but it listed toward shore and settled in the mud.

On a blank and lonely morning, Peter sat outside and assembled a flank of green army men in the dirt. The huskies were quiet in back, flopped halfway into their kennels, bellies moving up and down in the sun. Peter positioned the soldiers in a double column, readying a siege, when he spotted someone walking along the banks. A bigger boy, older than Peter, with a square face, cheeks darkened to reddish brown by sun, and hair that hung chopply over his ears. Peter made a hopeful assessment. The boy caught his eye, then looked away. He was bigger, but still a kid. Maybe, outside a group, he’d come talk to Peter. Maybe if he had an older friend, the other kids would know he was alright. Peter kept looking over. The boy turned again. Their eyes met and Peter’s heart rose. This could be it, the turning point. The boy’s steps grew faster, but Peter could see now that his was angry. The boy came straight toward him. Peter raised his arms, to shield himself. The boy trampled over the army men. He bent over, shouting “WHAT ARE YOU STARING AT?”

Peter’s mouth slung open and he shook his head.

The boy stalked off, turning once to glare back.

Peter’s face felt hot, but his insides were cold jelly. Shaky on his feet, he scooped the bent army men and retreated into the cabin’s muggy shadows.
Something more disturbing happened a few days later.

Each day was a new challenge: invent ways to pass time. On this particular day, Peter’s goal was to get good at tossing candy up and catching it with his mouth. He didn’t have enough candy, so he was practicing with dried beans, spitting the ones he caught into the dirt. He promised himself he wouldn’t quit until he could toss and catch perfectly ten times in a row. He couldn’t even get one, but then he realized the trick was a steady toss. Soon he was up to seven successful mouth catches. The goal was in sight, but on the eighth attempt the bean slipped down his throat. Peter doubled over. He coughed and swatted at this back, then stuck his finger down his throat. The bean came back up, with a mouthful of half-digested blueberry pancakes. Peter wiped his mouth with his wrist. He looked up and saw an old Gwich’in woman staring, two little children gathered at her skirts. Her startled eyes were angry. She cupped her wrinkled hands around the children’s heads and pulled them to the far side of the road, staring back at him as she went. She said something in their language. Peter felt ashamed even though he didn’t understand. He went inside and lay down on his cot. He stuck one of the green army men in his mouth and clenched it between his teeth, biting hard until it was bent and syrupy with spit. He released his jaw and the mangled figure dropped to the floor. He fell asleep. When he awoke, he pretended the old woman was a dream.

In the evenings, if there wasn’t fish, Mom warmed up canned meatballs and stews Dad brought home from Northern Commercial, or sometimes rabbits snared by the kids in town
who traded them for candy. Dad recounted all the interesting people he’d met over dinner.

Mom didn’t have many stories. At the lodge, she mostly met government workers and rich tourists, in town so they could say they’d been above the Arctic Circle. Dad had learned enough Gwich’in to greet people and do simple transactions, and he was eager to share.

“Vanoodlit is their word for white man,” Dad explained. “It means He Who Is Born With Land.”

“How come?” Peter asked.

“Well, they have a whole different idea about land. They don’t believe in a man owning one little square of it. Actually, they think that’s pretty stupid.”

“Who do they think should own it?”

“They don’t think about that. They pass down their trap lines, one generation to the next. They believe in taking care of the land, not owning it.”

Peter didn’t understand. He could tell Dad expected him to be impressed.

Dad caught Mom’s eye. “If you and your mother took an interest, it’d do you good. We’re lucky to be here. Places like these, they’re going to change real quick”—

Mom swirled her head, lips zippered into a smirk. She made an O of her mouth and fluttered her hand, squealing “woo-woo-woo-woo-woo” just like the Indians in the Westerns Peter used to watch on Saturdays at the Empress Theatre in Fairbanks.

Peter laughed.
“They don’t do that.” Dad said. “Don’t do that.”

Mom picked up her fork with a shrug. Peter was also tired of Dad telling them what’s so great about Fort Yukon, so was happy she was his ally, even though she didn’t have it as hard as him. Mom had her job at the lodge, and also a friend. Nurse Margaret commuted from Fairbanks and when they were both off work, they’d play gin rummy at Margaret’s cabin. The best thing would be if Nurse Margaret had a son. Peter wanted this so badly that he thought it wouldn’t hurt to ask. But Mom just said, “Silly, Margie isn’t even married.”

Peter awoke early one morning. Only six a.m. and the temperature was creeping into the seventies. He used the outhouse, then sat on the front steps, listening to the morning quiet. It was nice, without the town’s central generator buzzing, hardly anyone up, and just the quiet water moving, and the still trees and tall grass. A father and son walked by. The father had black bushy eyebrows and a small mustache. He wore a green plaid shirt. The boy was darker than the father, but they had the same oval face and button nose. The boy wore a striped shirt and looked a little younger than Peter. He watched Peter as they passed. The two walked another thirty feet, then stopped. The father said something and the boy nodded, then started to walk back toward Peter.

“My daddy said you can come see our fish wheel,” he said.

“Where is it?” Peter asked.

The boy pointed to where the Porcupine River flowed into the Yukon.
“I have to ask,” Peter said. He hurried inside and shook Dad’s shoulder. “Somebody, a boy asked if I can go see his dad’s fish wheel. Can I?”

“Who?” Dad grumbled.

“What?”

“Who, goddammit.”

Peter ran outside and asked the boy’s name. He said Ezekiel. Peter ran back inside. Dad said he didn’t know any Ezekiel. Peter ran back out. The boy said his daddy was Joseph Morris.

“Oh sure,” Dad mumbled. “I know Joe. He was at the store, talking about getting you boys together.”

Peter raced outside.

“You coming?” Ezekiel asked.

Peter nodded and in step they started toward where the father waited. He smiled and they started down the bank. Peter’s legs felt jumpy. Finally a chance for a friend. But what to say? In the silence, Peter realized he hadn’t introduced himself, so he said, “My name’s Peter.”

“I know your name,” the father grinned. “Your dad says you’re ten.”

Peter nodded.

“Ezekiel’s nine.”
Peter met Ezekiel’s eyes.

“So you came from Fairbanks?” the father asked.

“Yes. I was born in Washington and lived there til I was eight,” Peter said.

“Washington! The evergreen state,” the father said.

They arrived at a clearing where a small metal boat was beached in the grass. Joseph grabbed one side and the boys pulled up the other.

“Are you Christian?” Ezekiel asked.

The question startled Peter. “Uh yeah. We’re Quaker,” he said, although mostly it was Mom’s business.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a kind of Christian.”

Ezekiel nodded. Once the boat was in the water, the boys scrambled to the middle bench, and Joseph pushed off from the stern. He jerked the chain on the outboard motor and the engine roar broke the quiet. Fort Yukon grew smaller behind them. Peter watched the white fringe of wake bubble away from the hull. He rested his hand on the cold gunwale. Town disappeared and then there was just banks thick with bright green grass and dark spruce forest beyond, broken up by the occasional cabin. He didn’t want to seem like he’d never visited a fish wheel before, so he sat very still and kept an eye on Ezekiel. The boat
skimmed passed several wheels, their wooden baskets turning in time with the current.

Finally, Joseph brought down the throttle and angled the boat toward land.

Peter craned his head to watch the timber supports curl through the air. The scooping baskets splashed in a lazy circle. As they neared the wheel’s platform, something shiny and greenish flopped in the rising basket. The fish slid into the holding tank. Ezekiel scrambled out, gripping a pole with a sharpened end. He speared the fish in the tank and scraped them into a bin at Peter’s feet.

“Dog salmon!” Ezekiel declared.

Peter nodded, looking down at the splotchy green and pink scales, the curved jaws that only old salmon had. Finished, Ezekiel sat back down by Peter. The newest fish wiggled on top of the others. The boys looked at each other and grinned. Peter was elated. But then noticed the spots on Ezekiel’s splotched and darkened teeth. Peter willed away his disgust, but he couldn’t recapture the pure happiness of a moment earlier. He turned to watch the riverbank and pushed his tongue along the bottoms of his healthy molars.

Peter’s mood sank further when Fort Yukon appeared. He didn’t want to be home, bored again. It was still so early, but once ashore Ezekiel said summer camp at St. Stephen’s started at ten. He told Peter to come.

Peter heard Mom’s voice as he approached the cabin. She sounded angry. He only caught the last of her words—
—“not meant for this. Not one bit.”

The door swung open and she barged out, her eyes red and glistening. She didn’t even look at Peter, just started up the road to the lodge.

Peter walked into the cabin’s dark. Dad was seated on the bed, dipping his toothbrush in a tin cup. “How was it?” Dad asked.

Peter wanted to ask about Mom, but knew he’d better answer Dad’s question. “Neat. The wheel’s really big and they got a lot of fish.”

Dad smiled, wiped his mouth. “You know,” he said. “The Gwich’in didn’t invent the fish wheel. Their old timers used to have a kind of long funnel trap, but then white men came up and taught them how to use the fish wheel. They learned they could get more fish that way. How about that?”

Peter nodded vaguely.

“It’s lucky we’re here. We can learn from them, they can learn from us. Ask Joe, I bet he’d tell ya he’s real glad they got a wheel now. Life’s getting easier here. And we’re a part of that.”

“Uh-huh,” Peter said. He didn’t doubt it was true, but sensed Dad was saying it because of Mom. Mom missed everyone in Camas. Dad made it sound like being in Fort Yukon was somehow more important. He felt uneasy, knowing that agreeing with Dad was picking sides.
St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church was a big log building, about the size of three regular cabins, with a square bell tower and a cross on top. Inside hung a painting of Jesus in his loincloth. Beaded caribou hide draped the altar.

The children in the front pews turned and trained their curious brown faces on Peter. He spotted Ezekiel on the end of the second row and ducked in beside him. A Gwich’in man in a black two-button coat walked to the front. Peter asked if that was the priest. Ezekiel whispered no, it was Reverend Bill, and he was a deacon. The reverend led a prayer. Then each child was called up to say a verse from a chapter they were to recite on some future Sunday. Most had to be reminded every few words. Some were too shy to even speak. Ezekiel was the most confident, delivering each word with forceful enunciation: “...all your need according to his riches in glory by CHRIST JESUS!”

Peter studied the kids. Some were paler, and one even had green eyes, but they all spoke in the same Gwich’in accent. Next Rev. Bill passed out crayons and butcher paper. Everyone knelt on the floor and used the pew for a coloring table. They were supposed to draw pictures for their assigned verses. Several asked Ezekiel for advice. One wanted to know how to draw a yokefellow. Ezekiel said it was a man who sold eggs. Peter wasn’t sure about that, but his new friend pronounced it with such authority.


Ezekiel smiled. “My grandfather is a priest,” he said, when Rev. Bill moved on.

“Here?” Peter asked.
“No. He went back to Pennsylvania before I was born.”

Camp ended at noon. Ezekiel said he needed to pick his sister up from summer school, but Peter could come too. The other kids waved to both of them as they left. Some even called, “Bye Peter!”

“So you’re named after the Apostle Peter?” Ezekiel asked on the walk.

“Uh-huh,” he replied, though unsure.

Ezekiel said he was named after the prophet. The father of the biblical Ezekiel was a priest. Ezekiel’s father was a trapper, but they both lived on rivers. The prophet Ezekiel had foretold the destruction of Jerusalem. He saw little angels standing beside four wheels, and he warned everyone about what was coming.

“Then the worst woes came to the city as it drank down the cup of God’s fury,” Ezekiel intoned. He flung his hands toward the cabins they passed and scrunched his lips together, expelling burst of air to mimic explosions. Peter picked up a stick and whipped the grass alongside the road. The two boys cut a path of imaginary ruination all the way to the school.

Students were spilling out just as they arrived. They must’ve let Ezekiel’s sister’s class out first. Little kids were pouring through the doors, and a girl with chipmunk cheeks and a too-big pink dress aimed herself toward them. Behind her, a taller figure emerged. At first Peter thought it was the teacher, since he was a foot taller than the rest, but then Peter recognized him.

“Why?”

“Didn’t go to school before. His parents took him out on the trap line. Now government says everybody’s got to go to school.”

Peter was transfixed. He stared at the boy and felt a tingle. The boy who’d smashed up his army men was a second grader. Second graders were practically babies. Something giddy bubbled up and, before he could help it, he laughed. A second grader! The humor died quickly. Ed spotted Peter too and tightened his fists. Peter looked left and right for escape, hesitating only out of embarrassment, but then a fat white woman appeared in the doorway.

“Edward? Where is your paper?” the woman bellowed. “Get back here.”

Ed slumped and turned. Peter looked at Ezekiel, who raised his eyebrows and smiled. Ed looked back and Peter’s heart sank.

“Hi-ya, Esther! This here’s Peter,” Ezekiel said when his sister arrived before them.

Peter nodded hello, but he felt rotten, was sure Ed knew they’d been talking about him. Nothing to do. The day Fort Yukon finally produced a friend, it had also confirmed an enemy.
Peter spent all afternoon with Ezekiel and Esther. The boys built a tower of dried sticks in the woods, and when it was almost as tall as Esther, who delivered armfuls of twigs to support the efforts, the three took turns heaving rocks at it. Ezekiel coached everyone to find the biggest rock, bend the knees, then throw in an arc from the middle of the chest. Peter preferred to throw rocks like a baseball pitcher, but Ezekiel was the one who sent the tower toppling. He was nice about it though, said he was sure Peter would be the one to knock down the next tower they built, tomorrow. *Tomorrow.* Peter swelled with happiness. The days would no longer pass in a sludge of loneliness.

Peter smelled fish frying when he arrived home. Dad was leaning in the doorway with a can of beer. Someone on the plane in from Fairbanks must have given it to him since Fort Yukon was a dry town.

“Your mom’s got some big old pike steaks on the stove — you hungry?” Dad asked.

Peter nodded, although he’d rather have ground beef.

“A man is up from Anchorage,” Dad said. “He’s a water guy. Has a job he needs done. I told him I know a boy.”

“Me?” Peter gasped.

Dad laughed. “Tomorrow he’ll tell you all about it.”

Dinner was fried fish, pilot crackers, canned green beans and peaches. The delicious meal tasted of possibility. Out the window, for the first time, Peter noticed the many colors of Arctic wildflowers blooming in the yard. It was strange: He finally felt like one of the kids,
and then to come home and learn his first job awaited, it was sort of like becoming a man. Maybe he could grow to feel at home here the same as Dad.

“Why’re you grinning like a cat with a mouse?” Mom asked.

Peter shrugged, “No reason.”

“I thought you were bored.”

“No, not anymore.”

“Just wait ’til school starts,” she said. “It’s going to be a big step down from Fairbanks.”

“That’s not true,” Dad replied. “Even if it is, my boy’s getting educated by the world!”

He laid a hand approvingly on the back of Peter’s chair.

“Oh yes, living among hunter-gatherers is sure to make him a bright star. Who knows, maybe he can become president.”

“Lay off, Bev.” Dad said quietly.

“But really, whose world do you think you’re preparing him for?”

Dad shook his head. Her words died in the cabin quiet. Peter wished Mom were happy, but if he could find his way around town, she ought to be able to get along too.

Dad and Peter met the government man outside Northern Commercial the next morning. Back in Camas, Peter might’ve been a paperboy, a grocery bagger, or a
neighborhood window washer. But this was Fort Yukon and there wasn’t any need for those things. Peter was going to be a sewage tester. Together the three of them walked to the sewage lagoon up past St. Stephen’s, on the edge of the woods. The lake was square and fenced off, to keep animals out. It didn’t smell, thank goodness, but something scummy and green grew on top. Peter had seen the truck around town that came to empty the sewage holds behind the cabins. This is where it dumped the contents. The government man showed Peter how to set the little raft with its bottle and pulley system on the water, then lower the bottle by feeding out line, so that it could slurp up the “black water,” then be pulled up, toweled off, dropped in an envelope and mailed to the health department in Anchorage for analysis. Peter would test the pond once a week, for which he would be paid $3.20.

His parents had a strange argument that night. At first Mom was horrified by the job, though Dad assured her Peter would wear gloves. Then she wanted to know why some other boy wasn’t picked. Dad said why not Peter. Mom asked if there wasn’t another child in town who needed a job. Dad said there wasn’t. Besides, it was hard enough to get the Gwich’in to cooperate with the government; it wouldn’t be worth the trouble finding one. Mom asked if he didn’t think it was a little unseemly, in town only one month, the newest people there, and their son gets a little job when a government man comes around? Shouldn’t a man of the people like Dad be a little more concerned with fairness? Dad said she was making a mountain out of sewage lagoon; Peter would be providing a necessary service. Mom said, whatever you need to tell yourself, Harry. Then Dad got an angry look but didn’t reply. No
one spoke until it was time for sleep. Something unsettled loomed above their still bodies beneath the knotty rafters.

Peter started the walk to the sewage lagoon around noon. Gray plumes twisted up from cabins where lunch was cooking. He waved to Esther and three of Ezekiel’s younger siblings when he passed their house. The youngest of the three in the yard was baby Daniel, but he couldn’t remember the names of the other two. Ezekiel was one of twelve, fitting somewhere in the middle of the pack. He spent more time with Esther since they were closest in age. The cabins thinned out. Peter passed St. Stephen’s. He was nearing the turnoff to the lagoon when something tugged the back of his shirt. He turned and looked up into Ed’s face, feeling Ed’s hard knuckles where they clenched his shirt.

“No do it,” Ed said.

Peter looked behind Ed. There was a smaller boy, closer to Peter’s size, a little farther back, and he had a handful of rocks. The smaller boy raised his wrist, but his bottom lip puckered uncertainly. Peter used the moment’s hesitation. With the hand that wasn’t carrying sewage-testing supplies, he struck down on Ed’s forearm and stumbled away, tripped, and fell on top of his gear with a crunch. Ed lunged. Peter rolled and sprang up, running back toward town. He heard footsteps behind him, but Peter was fast. Out of physical danger, he heard Ed calling after him, YOU BETTER RUN, WHITE MAN. Peter’s vision blurred and his breath came in gasps. He was just a boy. A boy, not a man. He
couldn’t help anything, hadn’t asked to come to Fort Yukon, hadn’t done anything to deserve this.

His lip swelled from where he bumped it on the fall. The testing equipment was mangled. The health department would need to send new gear. Peter flopped on his cot and waited for his parents to return. Sapped of energy, eager for their sympathy, he hoped maybe the incident would prove that Fort Yukon wasn’t for them. Better to go back to Fairbanks, or hell, why not Camas.

Instead, his parents had an even worse fight that the previous night. No one comforted him before they started bickering. Dad said Peter needed to toughen up, take his licks, and Mom cut him off. No son of hers would be going around fighting. Dad wanted to know how she expected the boy to fit in, and she said she didn’t care if he fit in or not. Their shouts made Peter flinch. He’d never seen Mom so fierce. As they continued to fight, Peter started to glean that it wasn’t just that she didn’t want him to fight, but that she didn’t want him to fight Gwich’in boys in particular, that somehow that was extra wrong. Peter didn’t want to fight anyone at all. Confused and anxious, he fell asleep in his clothes.

It rained for a week. Peter played at Ezekiel’s — a cabin much fuller than Peter’s since the family was so much bigger. The place had a musky smell from the pelts his mother treated. She was in and out all day, cooking, cleaning, patching clothes, running after Ezekiel’s youngest siblings. Peter was fascinated by her. She was around the same age as his mother, and she had wavy hair she tied back with a strip of fabric. Ezekiel had mentioned
that when his mom was younger, before having children, she spent several winters alone working her family’s trap line when no one else could. Peter had never thought of a woman doing something as tough. She was the bravest most capable one he’d ever met. He got up the courage to ask her, if it wasn’t very boring, living all alone in the woods like that. She shook her head. He wanted to learn from her, but she was always so busy, so he lingered at the cabin and asked his questions one by one, learning that the hard work of keeping a fire going could keep you warm at thirty below and that you noticed a lot more about the birds and animals out there, without the distractions of town. He wanted her to be friends with Mom. She could teach Mom how to survive and even enjoy the winter she dreaded. At home Peter suggested that Ezekiel’s mother come over for dinner, or Mom could invite her to gin rummy at Nurse Margaret’s. Finally Mom snapped, “Give it a rest, I don’t need a matchmaker.”

“I wish my mom was like yours,” Peter told Ezekiel one afternoon. Ezekiel looked at him blankly. Peter hesitated. He didn’t want to admit his mother didn’t like Fort Yukon, which might hurt Ezekiel’s feelings. Instead he said, “she argues all the time with my dad.”

“Oh mine does that too. She thinks my daddy spends too much at Northern Commercial. We have a big bill, your daddy said we don’t have much more credit. My parents fight lots. Big, big fights.”

Peter felt his face redden to hear Dad had some involvement in the unhappiness between Ezekiel’s parents.
Ezekiel grinned and twitched his eyebrows. “I don’t worry about those fights because afterward I hear them at night.”

“Hear what?”

“You know,” Ezekiel grabbed the leg of a chair and shook it, grunting “Unh, unh, unh, unh! That’s how come I got so many brothers and sisters.” He burst out laughing.

Peter recalled half-waking two nights ago. A hung sheet veiled his parents’ bed; behind it he’d heard a similar rattling and dreamily imagined his father vigorously scratching a mosquito bite. Ezekiel’s wisdom was a salve. He needn’t worry about his own parents.

The replacement water tester was scheduled to arrive on Friday. As the day grew near Peter ballooned with dread. One afternoon he and Ezekiel lay on their stomachs flipping through the Sears Roebuck catalog. Peter thrilled when they turned to the shiny red Allstate scooter. If he could zoom through town on that he’d be safe. His hope evaporated when he spotted the price. He’d have to test sewage for years to afford it.

“I’m a dead man,” Peter muttered. His troubles poured forth. He started with the day Ed trampled his army men, and explained the danger of risking a run-in with Ed every time he had to go to the sewage lagoon.

“You should take the devil dog with you,” Ezekiel said when Peter finished.

“What devil dog?”

Ezekiel looked surprised. “The one with one blue eye and one brown eye on your Dad’s team. No one goes near your kennels because of him.”
Amazed, Peter wondered how much his former isolation could be blamed on the ugly dog. “I can’t take him near the chickens. I wouldn’t be able to control him.”

“Tie him up at the church. I can ask Reverend Bill for you.”

“Could you? Thanks, that would be the best.” Peter exhaled, once again grateful that Ezekiel had the answers.

“Sure.” Ezekiel said. “And if your dad hears of any new jobs, like yours, tell me. I need a job too.”

Rev. Bill allowed Peter to tie the dog, whose name was Bobo, at St. Stephen’s when he did the sewage testing. Even some adults clung to the far side of the road when Peter went past with Bobo. He didn’t see Ed again. Peter didn’t give a second thought to what Ezekiel had said about wanting a job too. He didn’t think he’d hear about more jobs, but then Dad called him down to North Commercial one afternoon to meet Mr. Stewart, another man from the Health Department in Anchorage. Mr. Stewart leaned against the counter and explained that the kind of mosquitos around Fort Yukon were the kind that could carry encephalitis. The Health Department had wanted to take blood samples. Mr. Stewart gave Dad a knowing look and said everyone knew Indians wouldn’t agree to getting poked. Peter watched Dad nod. He wondered why the Gwich’in would be more disagreeable about getting poked than other folks. That’s where the chickens came in, Mr. Stewart said: On his next trip to Fort Yukon he was bringing up a coop and six hens, to be stuck somewhere
buggy. Then later the Health Department would send someone to test for the disease in them. They needed someone to care for the chickens in the interim.

“Back behind that sewage lagoon looks good and buggy, and I hear you’re already the man in charge of that operation,” Mr. Stewart smiled at Peter.

Peter nodded politely. Mr. Stewart said he’d have to take care of them every day. Peter shivered. Ever walk uptown tempted fate, even with the big ugly dog on a rope. He couldn’t mention it though. Dad expected him to straighten out his own problems with Ed or anybody else. He’d earn a scooter a whole lot faster with a second job. Peter was so busy thinking he didn’t notice Ezekiel had walked in until he approached the counter carrying a small gray pelt, hardly longer than his hand. Dad picked it up and turned it over.

“Well buddy, smaller than last week. How about a dollar?”

Ezekiel nodded. Dad asked what’ll it be, and Ezekiel pointed to several kinds of candy behind the counter. Finished with his purchase, he turned to Peter, asked if he wanted to come play. Dad and Mr. Stewart waved him off, and he followed Ezekiel to the door. Mr. Stewart said, “Did you see the teeth on that one! What a sight!” Peter frowned. He didn’t reckon Ezekiel heard, but Mr. Stewart didn’t seem to care one way or the other.

Ezekiel offered Peter a taffy.

Peter unwrapped it as they walked along the river. “Looks like I might be able to get that scooter after all,” he said and told Ezekiel about the new job.

“How many people do they need? Can I do it too?” Ezekiel asked.
“Just one, I think.” Peter looked away, remembering what his mother had said about unfairness. He needed that scooter.

“Can we go back and ask? Let’s go back to the store and see. Just see? Okay?”

Peter allowed Ezekiel to drag him back to the store to see if Mr. Stewart was still there, but by the time they got there he was gone and Dad was busy with other customers.

“Darn it!” Ezekiel said, kicking dirt outside Northern Commercial. “When did you say he was coming back with the chickens?”

“Next week, but I’m telling you, they only need one kid,” Peter said.

“I’m going to ask him when he comes back.”

Dad arrived at the airport shortly after Peter and Ezekiel on the day the chickens arrived. Mr. Stewart came off the plane and shook Dad’s home, said hello to Peter. He didn’t notice Ezekiel. Together the four loaded the coop, feed, and the six chickens housed in a metal frame carrier into the back of a pickup. Dad and Mr. Stewart got in the front, Ezekiel and Peter climbed into the bed with the chickens, and the truck rumbled toward the sewage lagoon. Ezekiel stuck a finger into the chicken carrier and made a smoochy noise at the birds. Peter was nervous. What if when they got to the site and Ezekiel asked about the job Mr. Stewart decided he was a better boy to do it? Maybe Mr. Stewart would have the same idea as Mom. Peter needed to earn that scooter. He couldn’t take Bobo everywhere all the time.
Peter’s worries proved unnecessary. Mr. Stewart rattled off a stream of instructions as they set up the coop. Peter nodded and nodded. He glanced at Ezekiel now and again who hung back, silent. He never managed to ask Mr. Stewart anything. It surprised Peter to see his friend act shy. That wasn’t how he thought of Ezekiel at all. Ezekiel talked non-stop when it was just the two of them, but then Peter remembered whenever they went to the store Ezekiel only ever responded to Dad’s questions, was never first to speak. The chickens were settled into the coop, the errand almost concluded, when loyalty to Ezekiel and the memory of Mom’s words compelled Peter to pipe up.

“Ya think, I’ll need a hand? Somebody else to help me?” Peter asked. He looked to Ezekiel.

Mr. Stewart frowned, then followed Peter’s gaze. “This here’s a one-man job. You not up for it, Pete?”

“Oh no I am, I was just thinking maybe I could use some help.”

Ezekiel wore a blank expression and followed the conversation with his eyes. Dad and Mr. Stewart sized up the situation at the same time.

Mr. Stewart said, “Mighty nice of you to think of your friend”—

“Mr. Stewart needs one boy he can rely on. He’s counting on you, son,” Dad said. “I hope you’re not standing hear telling us you can’t be responsible.”

“Oh no, I can. I just, I can,” Peter mumbled.
“Well good! How’s about we head over to that lodge, have your mom fix us some hamburgers.” Mr. Stewart said.

Later Dad lectured Peter on how once someone offered him a job it was important to assure them he was capable, and to not try to meddle in how they choose to conduct their affairs, especially if the employer was the government. Dad said it was nice Peter cared about his friend, a footnote to the scold.

“Mr. Stewart picked you because he knows me. He trusts me, and your behavior is a reflection on me, understand?”

Peter nodded, so tired of failing his father’s expectations. He understood.

Taking the water sample was easy; the chickens weren’t. They smelled bad, and the coop was quickly coated in shit. It had bad drainage, so when it rained the birds wound up wading in it. Mr. Stewart did a good job of picking a place for mosquitos though. If Peter stood still his arms were quickly covered in bloodsuckers. But Ezekiel tagged along most days and that made the chore almost fun. Plus, Ezekiel was a big help. Someone was coming up now and again and letting the chickens out. Peter suspected Ed. The boys would arrive and see the little door unlatched, and then they’d spread out, running hunched over with arms outstretched, grabbing the birds. Peter grew to like them despite the hassle. Grateful for Ezekiel’s efforts, Peter shared chicken-naming honors. Peter names his three after baseball players — Hank Aaron, Mickey Mantle, and Yogi Berra. Ezekiel named his three after candy
— Hershey, Chuckles, and Chiclet. Whoever it was continued to unlatch the door, and soon Yogi Berra disappeared permanently.

Despite Ezekiel’s attachment to church, Peter still wanted to meet a medicine man. He thought that they were good enough friends now he could ask. He did it on the way back from feeding the chickens.

“I don’t know any of those bad things.” Ezekiel shook his head.

“But didn’t they used to have them here?”

Ezekiel shrugged disagreeably.

“I’m sure they used to,” Peter pressed, “before the missionaries came. Or maybe the villages without churches have one.”

“I don’t know anything, so don’t ask me about that bad stuff.” Ezekiel stomped away down the road. Peter trailed after, but a weight hung between them the rest of the afternoon. Over dinner Peter recounted the conversation to his parents.

“That’s just stupid,” Dad said dismissively. “No reason for him to get upset about a question like that.”

Gently, Mom said the missionaries worked very hard to teach people new ways and sometimes that meant rejecting the old ones, whether they were good or not.

“Enough!” Dad snapped.
That’s how it was now. Despite Ezekiel’s reassurance, Peter was worried again. He hadn’t heard his parents’ bed rattle at night for quite some time. Any little thing set them arguing. For instance, when he’d asked them why Ezekiel’s teeth were rotted, they fought. Mom thought Dad shouldn’t sell so much candy to the village children, their parents didn’t know any better. Dad said it wasn’t his place, and probably it had more to do with how infrequently the dentist flew in, if they found a more regular doctor all would be well. Peter learned it was better to ask Mom his questions in private; the things he was curious about made Dad grumpy. Once he asked why Ezekiel’s white grandfather moved back to Pennsylvania, when his Gwich’in grandmother lived in a cabin upriver. Another time he told Mom he thought it was funny how Ezekiel had eleven brothers and sisters, but only two uncles and one aunt. Why would his parents decide on such a big family when they had hardly any siblings themselves? Mom said a lot of people got sick in the past. When more whites moved in, they’d brought diseases the Gwich’in had never been exposed to. Very likely Ezekiel had aunts and uncles who’d died before he was born. She cautioned Peter not to ask. Peter remembered the old woman who’d looked at him in fear and anger the day he’d thrown up the bean outside the cabin. He didn’t mention it to Mom; he didn’t even like the feeling of remembering that woman. As often as Mom provided answers, Peter balanced his curiosity against how much he hated the way she thought Fort Yukon people should be pitied from a polite distance. She titled her head sideways and smiled when he talked about his time with Ezekiel, like there was something cute and not quite believable about their friendship. This annoyed him so much that finally he snapped and told her Fort Yukon wasn’t as bad as she believed.
“It’s true I’d rather be back living among the people I grew up with,” Mom sighed.

“That’s natural, you know. It’s never done Indians a lick of good when whites move in, so I don’t know why your father thinks us being here will turn out different.”

“Of course it’s different!” Peter sputtered, instantly mad. Dad liked the people of Fort Yukon, so did Peter. He wouldn’t do anything to hurt them. They weren’t living in some Western. Nobody was stealing land. Nobody was getting scalped. Dad was helping people by running the store and letting them buy on credit. Peter was helping make sure nobody got encephalitis. It was lucky they were here. They could learn from the Gwich’in and the Gwich’in could learn from them, just like Dad had said.

“If you say so.” Mom’s voice was gentle, accommodating. “Maybe it is.”

Peter was surprised by his own anger, and realized how much his feelings had changed. He liked Fort Yukon now and would defend the rightness of their living there. The discussion was over.

In August, Peter received an invitation to Ezekiel’s Uncle Victor’s fish camp. They’d spend ten days upriver, catching and smoking fish for their winter stores. Peter rushed home to ask Mom. She was hanging laundry on the lines outside.

“That was nice of them to invite you,” she said carefully.

“Can I go?”

“I don’t know. I’ll have to talk to your father.”
Peter came home for dinner to a quiet house, and when they sat down to eat Mom said that they didn’t think it was a good idea to send Peter on such a long trip. Dad didn’t look up.

Peter knew they’d reached some accord in his absence. “But why?” he asked. He directed the question at Dad, who wouldn’t look at him.

“You might be a burden on his uncle,” Mom said. “And we don’t know him that well. Besides, who’d take care of the chickens?”

“But they want me to come! You guys could take care of the chickens!”

“Well there’s other reasons.”

“Like what?”

“Like we don’t know what you would eat.”

“What kind of reason is that?” Once again, he looked to Dad who still wouldn’t meet his eyes, this was all Mom’s doing. Dad was just tired of fighting her. Peter couldn’t decide which one made him madder. He chewed his dinner viciously, choking down tears at the table.

Glumly, Peter reported to Ezekiel and Esther that he could not come, and when they asked why he repeated what Mom said about not knowing what he would eat.
“We’re going to eat fish!” Esther said, wide-eyed and straight faced. There was a silent pause, then the siblings burst out laughing. The joke lasted all afternoon. Ezekiel asked Esther, “What are we going to eat at fish camp?” his voice growing increasingly mock desperate. “Fish!” Esther said. “Fish! Fish! Fish!” Peter trailed behind, disappointed, the butt of the joke.

The days were longer with Ezekiel gone, and even with Bobo Peter worried about running into Ed. He saw him cross the road up ahead once and Peter turned and went home, so the chickens missed their morning meal. He felt bad cheating them. He’d grown attached to the five remaining. Chuckles was their leader; she pecked the others to reign them in. Mickey Mantle was most amenable to getting picked up and petted. Even though they stank and the mosquitos swarmed when he visited, the chickens were the highlight of Peter’s days with Ezekiel gone, until the morning he arrived and saw that the coop was gone, not gone — he noticed a path cut between where it had stood and the shore of the lagoon. The little fence around the lagoon was mangled in one section, and then Peter saw the wooden corner of the coop poking out from the still water. It took a minute for Peter to comprehend. When he did, he felt scared and sick. Someone had drowned the chickens in the village shit hole.

Dad sent a Teletype message to the Health Department in Anchorage about the chickens, even though Mom thought he should let someone else do it. He was acting like he
was the mayor, she said. Dad said it was necessary to inform Mr. Stewart. He received word back: An investigator was coming from the Fairbanks FBI office. This caused a disagreeable buzz in town, that the agency would send someone about some dead chickens. Even Mom and Dad were surprised. Four days later Agent Kelly arrived to collect interviews and evidence on the destruction of government property and sabotage of a public water treatment center.

Agent Kelly didn’t look like an FBI agent to Peter. No fancy suit. Agent Kelly wore trousers and a button down plaid, just like everybody else. Peter watched him walk into Northern Commercial just as Ezekiel’s dad motored his boat to shore.

“Hi Peter,” Ezekiel’s dad Joseph said. “You know Ezekiel’s back.”

“Oh? Where?”

“Home, got in yesterday.”

“The FBI came.”

“I know,” Joseph said. He shook his head. “That’s not good. They’re gonna want to catch somebody.”

“I hope they do,” Peter replied.

“It was bad what happened to your birds,” Joseph said. “But let me tell you about something that happened last winter. One of my nephews was out alone, working his trapline and he found a frozen fish on the lakeshore. Nobody else was using it, so he figured he’d get his fire going, thaw it out, and have it for dinner. And that’s what he started doing,
but last minute he changed his mind, had himself beans from a can, and tossed the fish to one of his dogs. The dog ate some fish and then it started wailing and about a minute later it fell down dead. Know why?"

Peter shook his head, frightened.

“My nephew look at that half-eaten fish and he saw it had a slit in its belly where someone put strychnine. Know what that is?”

Peter shook his head again.

“That’s a poison the bush pilots like to use to get fur animals. It’s illegal, but they’re lazy. They don’t want to do all the work I have to do checking my traps. They think they’re sneaky when they take their ski planes and go land on the lake, but we know who it was. And you know what? We didn’t call no FBI man to come arrest him.”

“Why not?”

“Because we know it’s never any good when they come poking around.”

Peter wanted to ask another question, but Dad came out with Agent Kelly and said they were going to go eat lunch at the lodge, Peter too. Joseph returned to unloading his boat.

Mom served up well-done hamburgers before joining the table. Agent Kelly said that back at Quantico, he’d never imagined he’d get sent up the Yukon River chasing chickens. Peter thought his burger tasted burnt. His parents and Agent Kelly gossiped animatedly.
about mutual acquaintances in Fairbanks. He hoped lunch would be over soon so he could
go find Ezekiel. Mom brought out cake for dessert.

Agent Kelly addressed Peter. “So tell me young man, did you notice anything out of
place when you went to see the chickens?”

“Well yes. They weren’t there.”

“I mean before that.”

“Sometimes somebody else had let them out. I had to catch them in the woods.”

Agent Kelly peppered him with questions. Peter described his whole routine. Mom and
Dad exchanged a surprised glance when he talked about taking Bobo for protection. They
hadn’t even noticed. No one understood. What a relief and satisfaction to have Agent Kelly
take him seriously, jotting notes in his spiral pad the whole time Peter talked.

“You’ve been a tremendous help, son,” Agent Kelly said.

Peter, Dad, and Agent Kelly started back downtown. Walking beside Agent Kelly,
noticing the way his eyes moved over the cabins, Peter was more aware of the fraying fish
nets dropped over fence posts, weeds growing up around rusted skiff hulls, roofs patched in
mismatched plywood, paper, and corrugated metal. Dad must’ve noticed too. He said the
cabins weren’t much to look at. Peter thought he would say next that the roofs were like that
because no one wasted any scrap, and people hung on to their old boats and broken
equipment. You never knew when a part could be salvaged to repair something else. Dad didn’t mention those things.

“Who’s that?” Agent Kelly asked.

Peter looked up. Down the road, the figure of a boy struggled with something red-feathered and squirming under is arm. Where could he have found it?

Agent Kelly jogged up to Ezekiel. “Where’d this chicken come from?” Agent Kelly demanded.

Ezekiel, wide-eyed, dropped Chuckles and she fluttered away, poking down the road.

“That bird is government property! Do you know what a felony is?”

Ezekiel’s eyes watered. His mouth hung open. He looked at Peter and back at Agent Kelly. “I found him,” he whispered.

“What’s that? Speak up!”

Ezekiel shook his head, looked again at Peter.

The incrimination in Agent Kelly’s voice stung Peter. He didn’t want to embarrass the man who’d been so nice at lunch, an FBI agent who’d come all that way to help them. Peter understood what it was like to come to town and not know anything. Plus, he remembered the scolding Dad gave when he spoke up to Mr. Stewart when the chickens arrived. Peter pressed his lips together. He said nothing.
Finally Dad said, “He’s my kid’s friend. They pal around, and he couldn’t have done in
the birds. He was at fish camp until yesterday.”

“Is that so? Where’d this chicken come from?” Agent Kelly asked.

Dad asked Ezekiel, “You find him in the woods? You were bringing him back?”

Ezekiel nodded.

“Grab that bird for me, will ya, Peter?” Agent Kelly said.

Peter scuttled after Chuckles. She fluttered wildly until he was able to press down on her
wings. Dad and Agent Kelly followed behind. Peter picked up the bird and turned to
Ezekiel, still in the road, empty-handed, a dark stain blotching the inside seam of his
trousers. Peter looked away, clutching the chicken against his guilty heart.

Agent Kelly took the next-day afternoon flight out with the chicken packed in a
cardboard box. Peter went looking and found Ezekiel tossing rocks into the river.

“Hello,” Peter said.

Ezekiel tossed a long thin rock. It plopped flatly, sending up brown spray. “Now I know
why your mother called you your name.”

“What?”

“Because you denied. Just like Apostle Peter said he didn’t know Jesus, you pretended
you didn’t know me.”
“Sorry. I didn’t know what to say. It’s okay though, you’re not in trouble. He left.”

Ezekiel sent more rocks torpedoing into the current. Peter mumbled another sorry and left.

A few days later, Ezekiel came by and asked Peter if he wanted to pick berries. Peter said yes, relieved to have his friend back, but unsure why he was forgiven. They’d been out for an hour or so, their buckets halfway full when Ezekiel announced that he knew who drowned the coop.

“Was it Ed?” Peter asked.

Ezekiel shook his head, “No no no, he went to Chalkyitsik to see his grandfather. He’s not even here, but my mother told me last night. I know who.”

So Ed wasn’t even in town. It occurred to Peter that he might’ve spent a lot more time thinking and worrying over Ed than vice versa. “So who was it?” he asked, attention returned to Ezekiel, brain fast-forwarding: Dad could send a message to Fairbanks on the Teletype. Ezekiel’s name would be cleared, and Peter would be redeemed.

“I’m not telling you,” Ezekiel continued to pick berries as he spoke. “Even if it was a bad thing to do, I’m not saying who.”

“But why?”

“Because you’ll bring us trouble. You and your father.”
Guilt wedged painfully in Peter, far beyond that which he’d felt when he fell silent before Agent Kelly’s accusation. It would take Peter to adulthood before he could articulate the reasons for this feeling, but what was clear then was the difference between Ezekiel and himself — a divide that no amount of apology or time or friendship would ever obscure.

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Peter never knew who drowned the chickens. Some customers told Dad the perpetrator was drunk on moonshine and dared to do it, but no one ever gave him a name. The following year, 1956, the Alaska Native Allotment Act was amended. Territorial government needed someone to make sure each Gwich’in man, woman, and child received the acreage they were due, based on the Secretary of the Interior’s mandate to individualize land ownership. They picked Dad for the job. Chuffed, he reminded Peter and Mom that here he was the vanoodlit — He Who is Born With Land — going door to door to make sure everyone, even the tiniest babies, received their real estate. Fort Yukon families were anxious. Consigning what had always been theirs to paperwork provided little assurance that it would remain that way.

Peter grew up to and became a history teacher in Anchorage. He lectured ninth graders on the Tang Dynasty and Roman Empire, but in his spare time he studied the history of the state. Dad had moved the family to Alaska to witness a beginning, statehood. But it was an ending, too. By the time Peter entered college, the fashion industry soured on fur. Poverty and dependence proliferated in Fort Yukon. Even as a boy Peter was bothered by Mom’s
aloofness toward the Gwich’in; as an adult he wondered if Dad’s failure to see what white settlement really wrought was not the more egregious oversight.

These were things he often thought about, so he was delighted to be flying to Seattle for a conference and find himself seated next to a Gwich’in linguist. The woman introduced herself as such when she saw that Peter was reading the memoir of famous Athabaskan fiddler Bill Stevens. Peter quickly exhausted his Gwich’in conversation ability. He asked the linguist about vanoodlit, curious if land ownership truly was built into the Gwich’in conception of whiteness.

“I’ve heard that interpretation, but I don’t think so,” she said. “Our neighboring tribes from Upper Tanana say nondle. I think our word probably comes from theirs. And the Tanana word may have come from the Tlingit word. Tlingits say dleit kaa, which means snow man.”

Peter nodded. He turned to the window, looking down on craggy, white-capped mountains. Snow man sounded right. Crude and impermanent.