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Under which this water runs: stories

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Under which this water runs: Stories

by

Jessica Fokken

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment for the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Program of Study Committee:
David Zimmerman, Major Professor
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Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

2007

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For Justin
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“Imagine a story, not of good against evil, but of need against need, where everyone is at cross-purposes, and everyone is to blame.”

- Richard Siken

*The Definitive Version*

“'I’ve never written, though I thought I wrote, never loved, though I thought I loved, never done anything but wait outside the closed door.”

- Marguerite Duras

*The Lover*
Heat

It was a summer of floods. The river and lakes swelled, spilled their banks. For weeks water pooled in lawns and parks, stagnant, unmoving. Heat. The days were thick with it, the air heavy on skin. The only things that moved were small, sweating children, their legs covered in scabs from mosquito bites. Stray animals. Whole days passed in silence.

In the night, the sound of locusts.

*

Charley lies on her bed, knees bent and feet buried in the damp sheets. Sweat trickles down the back of her calves. She watches the ceiling fan turn in the dark as she turns the ring on her finger.

Her lips form the letters in her mouth.

Beside her, her husband shifts in his sleep.

*

She and her husband go to dinner with friends and their friends’ friends. One of them is moving to town. She tenses when he shakes her hand and says her name.

-Charley. Hello.
She sits next to the man who will later become her lover. She smiles and suggests things to order. They talk about a café downtown and the art gallery in the next city. Her husband recommends a state park nearby.

- The best place if you like hiking. Charley and I go all the time, her husband says.

– It could get nasty later this summer. They are predicting an unseasonable amount of rain this month.

The man and her husband talk about work, the steak they both order, books to read. She offers names of writers she enjoys.

The man’s hand brushes her elbow as he speaks. She feels the heat of his knee through the linen.

*

Her lover calls her during the day and asks her to lunch. She smiles over the phone, cradling the receiver between her thin shoulder and her ear.

- Where?

- Your choice.

She pauses. – We’re swamped today. I don’t know.

She hears him grinning. – Come on. How often are you swamped, really?

Charley places her palm flat on a sheet of paper on the worktable, traces it with her pencil while she thinks. Damp spots are left from her fingertips. She starts shading it in. Her grey palm. The bell over the door rings as someone opens it. She looks up toward the front room.

- I don’t think so. It’s too hot to eat.

He sighs. – Fine. I’ll talk to you later.
He hangs up. She keeps shading until the phone is beeping in her ear.

* 

She slips from the framing shop to meet him in the alley, and their bodies collide. He twists her hair around his fingers. She raises one leg and he fumbles under her skirt.

When in the shop she smiles at her customers and compliments the portraits they bring in for her to frame. She imagines raising her skirt, bending just enough so they could see the places his hands rested. Would you trust me, she wants to say, if you knew what I just did? Would you let me look at your family if you knew the kind of woman I’ve become?

She is unused to the smell of another man, the proximity of him. She learns the intimacy in the scent of another. That residue on your skin. She sucks the tips of her fingers to taste it, waits for the metallic sting on her tongue.

* 

The man who will become her lover moves to town in June just before the rain begins. Their friends call and invite them to a welcoming party for him at a bar. They agree to come and buy him a bottle of wine as a housewarming gift. Her husband talks without pause on their way downtown.

- Maybe I’ll invite him to play racquetball next weekend. We’ll be a player short.

She looks out the window absently. -How do you know he plays?

- We talked about it last time.

They greet him with handshakes, and her husband is laughing already. She smiles and says shyly –Hello. Again.
They settle into a booth to drink and talk. The stage is being set. She can hear them shuffling mics and amps. Light music from speakers suspended from the ceiling muffles the sound and other conversations. She watches a man sitting on the edge of the stage running his fingers through scales on his saxophone.

-Charley?

She swivels her head back toward her husband, eyes wider. –Hmm?

-I was just telling our new friend that you work here. Downtown.

She looks at the man, who is looking at her expectantly.

-Oh. Yes. I do. Just down the block a bit, at the frame shop.

One of their friends gets up and so do the man and her husband. Others shift around to be able to speak better. She twists the stem of her wine glass and shifts her attention between the conversation and the bar. The man and her husband are talking loudly, and her husband walks toward the restroom. The man comes back to the booth and squeezes in next to her.

-Is this okay? He asks.

She nods.

The entire length of his thigh is pressed against hers, hipbone to knee. He crosses his legs and his foot slips over her leg. He looks at her and smiles his apology. She shifts and presses her back further into the leather of the booth. He leans over and resumes the conversation.

-Exactly. He says. –Exactly.

He reaches into his pocket, removes a box of cigarettes, and sets them on the table. His hand slips under the table again, back to his pocket. Two fingers touch the hem
of her skirt and slide under the fabric, tips against her bare skin. They stay there for just a moment before he withdraws quickly and puts his hand on the table.

- I can’t seem to find my matches, he announces. – Anyone have a light?

She twists her body away from him, smooths her hand over the table, and tips over her wine.

*

From the backroom she can see her husband in the shop. The phone is still beeping. She hangs it up and slides a painting in front of her, bends over it to look closer. Her dark hair falls in her face, and she sweeps it to one side. She glances up when he walks into the room.

- Hi.

He steps forward to the worktable, leans over and looks at the painting. He gestures toward it. – Interesting.

- Isn’t it?

Her hands continue working as she speaks. – What do you need?

- Lunch.

- I’m not that hungry today. I brought a sandwich from home if I want it.

He rubs a hand over his face, through his dark hair. – That was a quick no.

She looks up and sighs, her exasperation visible on her face. – Honestly, I’m busy right now. I don’t have time for lunch.

- Right.

He smiles a sort of half smile, fake, she knows. – Honey, she says.

- No, it’s fine.
He touches her hand briefly. –I’ll see you later.

She turns back to her work before he walks out of the door. She sees him stop and turn to watch her. –Bye, he says again. She doesn’t look up or nod.

* 

-I need you.

This is something both men said to her once. She wonders what it is about her that would make them say that. That would make someone need her.

She met her husband in college before she dropped out. She worked and waited for him to come home after class. She remembers being amazed at his energy. His certainty. These things she never had.

When he asked her to marry him after four years, she tried to think of all the reasons she should say no. She couldn’t find any.

* 

Her wine spills and blossoms on the table. She picks the glass up, and the man stands and finds a waiter. –Sorry, she says to the group. They are mostly not paying attention. The waiter changes the tablecloth, and the man sits back down next to her. –Thank you, she murmurs.

Her husband returns from the restroom and slides into the other side of the booth. He takes a long swig of his beer and rubs her leg with his foot underneath the table. She smiles at him. He points at her empty wine glass. –Do you need another?

-No, she tells him. –I’m feeling a bit woozy.

Her husband motions to the waiter anyway, and he brings her another glass.
Someone gets up on the stage and speaks into the mic, announces the band. The group around the table stops talking for a minute and claps enthusiastically. –Do you know who this is? One of the women says to her husband. He shakes his head.

The group resumes talking as the band begins. She watches the bass player, likes watching the way he plucks the strings and bobs his head to the music. She is the only one at the table who claps after each song. It sounds feeble.

-How long have you been married?

The man is leaning toward her, his eyebrows raised.

-Just over a year, she says. –But we dated for four years before that.

The man nods. –I wouldn’t have guessed.

Her eyes widen slightly and she looks back to her husband. He is talking frantically with the other people. He winks at her when he catches her looking at him but doesn’t stop. She takes a long swallow of her wine.

Her eyes feel heavy, and her head weaves slightly on her neck. –Is it getting warm in here? She says loudly, hoping her husband will notice and ask her if she wants to go home.

Her husband picks up his glass again and speaks into it. –Are you okay, Charley?

-Fine. I’m just getting warm.

As if planned, her shoulders dip toward the man. She motions at him to stand. –I’m going to go outside, she says. –I need some air.

Her husband nods, and the man rises as she scoots out of the booth. –Do you want me to come with you? Her husband says.

She shakes her head. –No. I’ll be right back in.
She walks away from the group. At the door, she feels someone’s hand on her elbow. –Come on, the man says. –Show me where you work.

*

She sits behind the counter of the framing shop. No one has been in for hours. She brings a chair onto the sidewalk and props the door open to stir the air inside. Her feet burn from the heat of the concrete. It moves over her in waves. She sits and grasps her head between her knees, her hair falling over her face and exposing the back of her neck.

A small, red mark from a mouth bright in the sun, the only time it will see daylight.

She rises, carries the chair inside, and turns the box fan on high. She sits at the desk scribbling their names. One appears after the other, covering the paper.

She drops her pencil on the floor, crumples the paper, and shoves it in her mouth.

*

She stands in the shower and cries. She braces herself against the cold tile, hands balled into fists and her forearms holding her weight. Water runs over her hair and face, streaking her mascara. She cannot imagine that this thing existed inside her, that she had the ability to love one person and make love with two.

-I can’t do this.

She curls herself in the bottom of the tub and pulls her ring from her finger, stares at the band. The metal is cold between her thumb and forefinger. She holds it away from her and waits, tries to convince her fingers to release it, to let it fall and slip down the drain and through the pipes and away from her.

-Charley?
Her husband knocks on the bathroom door and pushes it open slightly.

She starts and shoves the ring back on her finger.

*

The man guides her outside, holding her elbow and reminding her where there are stairs. She stumbles from the entrance onto the sidewalk. She tilts her face upwards and says over her shoulder –Some welcoming party.

She smiles at the sky and closes her eyes. There are few stars, and the moon hangs full and red in the sky. Sweat beads on her bare arms. He steps forward and loosens his tie.

-I can’t stand this heat, she tells him. –The humidity. I wish it would rain. If it floods like they say it will, this whole county will be under water. It will start to smell before summer’s out.

He touches her shoulder and she jerks. –Come on. Where’s your shop?

He follows her up the street, a half step behind her. She feels his eyes on her ankles, the backs of her knees. She crosses her arm and glances behind her, but he is looking at the stores as they pass. She follows the line of his jaw, his neck, his shoulder. His back and narrow hips. Their footsteps the only sound on the street.

She stops and turns abruptly. –This is it.

He looks up at the sign over the door, the frames displayed in the windows. –It’s nice.

She laughs and shrugs her shoulders. –I’m sure it meets all your expectations.

-What does that mean?
She meets him with a steady gaze. –You seem to be the type who has high expectations for everything.

She stops speaking and wonders if she has offended him. She closes her eyes and hangs her head. Sweat trickles down the back of her neck and she presses her palms into her belly. She wants to leave. Why can’t her husband see what this man is doing to her? This disassembly. Pieces of her coming apart and reorganizing themselves inside her. She feels him behind her, the heat of his hands suspended over her skin. His breath is moist on her shoulder blade. She rolls her head back and gasps. –Why are you doing this?

His mouth rests, slightly open, in the hollow of her collarbone. –Because you’re beautiful.

*

Her husband suggests that they go hiking at the state park, something they have rarely done this summer. She protests, mentions the heat, the flood. The stink of the river, motionless in the sun.

They leave the car by the picnic shelter and take the lowland trail, one that takes them near the river. The ground is wet, and they have to pull to get their boots out of the mud. Another pair of hiker pass them coming from the riverbank. Her husband nods a greeting.

-Watch out down there, one of the hikers says. –The water is really moving.

They step over puddles in the path. Tiny clouds of insects, white and buzzing around each other. The cloud breaks when they come near and forms again when they pass. They bite her ankles. The hair at her neck and temples is wet. She has to use his shoulder or trees to steady herself.
They come upon the river as if by accident. The water level is higher than they expected. Her husband tries to pull her closer, but she moves away. –Where did this come from? She murmurs. –It’s the only water moving for miles.

She thinks about walking into it without looking back.

They walk along the riverbank, deeper into the woods. –The car is not this way, she reminds him. The trees thicken, more branches and leaves. They cannot see the sky anymore. Dusk is creeping upon them.

Her husband stops and looks around him. –Listen. He says. –The locusts.

* 

Her husband throws her a surprise birthday party. –I feel old, she tells him earlier that day. –I’m becoming an old woman.

She is always tired. Dark circles have formed beneath her eyes, and if she stares into the mirror long enough, she notices thin lines edging her mouth. Only a young woman can do what she is doing, she believes. A young woman who can see two men at once and be prepared to throw them both away in a moment, when the flutter in her belly dies, at the attention of another man. Not a married woman who cannot imagine ridding herself of either.

The party is catered from her favorite Italian restaurant. Her coworkers and her husband’s friends circle the dining room table, serving themselves from bowls of penne, alfredo sauce, manicotti. There is fresh bread and wine. Her husband ordered cheesecake in place of a traditional birthday cake.

She is honestly surprised when they arrive home to find the house brimming with guests. She puts her hand to her chest and almost cries. Her husband mistakes this gesture
for pleasure, for happiness. Her hugs her close to him and kisses her temple. Various
people stop to wish her happy birthday. She thanks them all and nods her head. She wants
to appear modest.

Later in the evening, her lover approaches, takes her hand, kisses her cheek. –
Happy birthday, he says.

-Thank you.

She does not want to look at him. Instead, she looks at her husband standing
across the room, refilling her wine glass. Her lover gaze follows her gaze.

-Some party. He says.

-Mmm. She touches her mouth.

He leans closer, her mouth close to her ear.

-Is it all you ever wanted?

She looks at him, her fingers shaking. –I don’t know.

*

How is it that two people can do this to each other? She wonders. The wreckage
of it. She doesn’t feel so much the parts that make her up anymore, but the spaces
between those parts.

She can see his body without it being there. What happens when you know
someone so well you can tell the story of their body, the placement of birthmarks, the dip
and rise of their bones? There is a kind of romance in it. A pleasure in tracing those lines.

The scar that runs that length of his back, raised and pink. He braked too hard on
his bicycle to keep from hitting a cat, and his small body tumbled over the handle bars.
He was seven years old. His body on a steel surgery table. The scalpel slicing through his skin.

* 

The flood waters do not recede by the end of the summer. The locusts take over, the buzz starting at the end of the street and moving tree by tree. The sound crescendos until it is deafening. It echoes until nothing can block the sound.

He tells her –You have to make the choice.

She has known her husband for years, was swept into his tide and pulled along. She is safe with him. She knows this.

There is so much about this man who has become her lover that she does not know. Her lover says –I can’t do this for you.

He asks –What do you want?

* 

The man places his hands on her shoulder and turns her body. Her eyes are still closed, and she stumbles over her shoes. –Please. She whimpers.

He takes her hands and puts them on his waist. His hands slide up her arms, skimming the sweat. His palms rest for a moment on her collarbone, and he presses his thumb into the hollow at the base of her throat. His fingers reach up the sides of her neck, the tips of them buried in her hair.

He kisses her and she gives in. She feels a slight pressure on her lips and opens them. She inhales and moves her hands up his back. He pushes hard against her, the line of her body blurring into his. They stumble backward and press against the window of the shop. She says his name into his mouth.
The sky dissolves into rain. It soaks their clothes and their hair and water runs into their mouths.

*

Beside her, her husband shifts in his sleep.

She watches the ceiling fan turning slowly. She stops turning the ring on her hand. The words in her mouth are choking her. She cannot get them out quickly enough.

-I’m leaving you.

In the night, the sound of locusts.
The cigarette burned to his fingertips before he noticed. He dropped the butt in the sand and looked at his fingers, touched his forefinger and thumb together. He spat and shifted his gaze up the beach.

Her body was splayed on the shore, her legs slightly askew. Waves lapped her hair and pulled the thick strands outward. One hand rested near her head. The other wasn’t visible.

He stood at a distance and stared. He had an angular view: a bare foot, long leg, her hand and fingers nestled in the sand. He edged toward open water and saw her arm moving slightly with the waves. He shifted, pulled up his collar, and waited.

It was late November, bitter. The days were short and angry, the sky always grey. He shoved his hands in his pockets and sucked his cheeks. It was deep in the off-season. The beach was deserted this time of year, the summer homes locked and boardered. No tourists, no work. The locals almost had to leave, there was so little to sustain them.

She was facedown, hadn’t moved. He had been walking the beach in the twilight. He liked the grey of sky and water, everything turning bland and colorless. The sand slipping into his shoes. He had moved his way down the slope from the line of summer homes up the beach toward the fishing docks to find his father. And then, she.
She didn’t match, didn’t flow. Her body interrupted the sand and water and sky. Her presence surprised him, her awkward form, her improper dress. Her stillness.

She wore a black dress, damp and clinging to her legs, ridden up to her knees. A black shawl was draped over her back and tucked under her ribs which kept it from blowing away.

He glanced up the beach toward the fishing docks, kept far away from the tourists spots. The tourists didn’t want to see that, smell the rotting fish and the not rotting fish, the darkly tanned men hauling nets and slinging fish into crates to be shipped. The sickly smell of fish and sweat that lingered on them, the sun dried salt on their skin. The boats would be in for the night, the fishing not that good this time of year anyway. No one would be up there.

He wasn’t a fisherman like his father, his brother. He couldn’t handle the smell, the pitching of the boat on the waves. *Twenty-four fucking years of this shit*, his father said that morning when he refused to go. *I didn’t raise a goddamn sissy.* As a child, he’d seen his father come home with a giant hook gouged through the fleshy part of his hand, the part between the thumb and forefinger. His father couldn’t get it free. *Goddammit*, his father yelled. *Just pull the fucking thing out!* His mother wasn’t home and his brother was too young to do it, and he cried, which annoyed his father. He knew his father would hit him. He saw his father’s fingers opening and he started to pull his hand back, so he grabbed the hook and pulled as hard as he could. All he remembered was the blood and how he vomited as it came out.

He looked at the woman again. This didn’t make sense. He took his hands out of his pockets and rubbed them together slightly as he thought. A lone woman, lying on the
shore, barefoot, off-season. He pinched his face toward open water. No work. This woman. He swayed slightly and looked behind him, back down the beach. No one would be there, he knew that. Not even the local teenagers came out here now. They were alone.

He pulled a cigarette from his pocket and stuck it between his lips. She had been still since he first saw the outline of her body on the beach, before he knew the outline was a woman. He struck a match, exhaled, and squinted toward the last moments of sunshine. There would be a frost tonight. He could feel it.

Her body seemed to shift as he got closer, the angle of her legs increasingly awkward. The hem of her dress whipped in the wind, the skirt billowing and descending. He crouched low and took in her legs and knees. The skin was pale, almost translucent, and glowing blue. Her legs were slender and smooth. The dress flashed upwards. Underneath, she was naked. He stood and flicked the embers of his cigarette. Wondered if he should speak. He crept around her body and knelt again near her head. He took the last drag off his cigarette and threw it in the water. Her hair was a mass of wet, black curls. The water tugged them back and forth, her head rolling slightly with the waves. He reached forward, toward her hand, and stopped. Her nails were short and painted clear, fingers long. Piano hands. He carefully slipped his fingers under her hair and pulled it back over her head, away from her face.

Her eyes were closed, her mouth slightly open. Her lips were blue-pink. He hunched over and put his face in front of her, his breath exhaling onto her cold skin. She didn’t move.

She was far too beautiful to be a local. Her whole body was slender, the features of her face dainty. There were smears of black around her eyes. She was young, he could
see that, probably barely twenty, and hadn’t seen a day of work in her life. The kind of
girl he couldn’t bring home, even if he could afford to live on his own.

He stared over his shoulder at the bank of grass leading up in to town. At home,
his mother would be boiling fish and potatoes for supper, his father stopping at the bar far
a drink on his way home. The whole bar would be filled with fisherman, quiet and angry.
No one was catching much lately. The place would be rank with the smell of fish, water
and whiskey.

He touched her bare shoulder at the crest of her collarbone. He stood, hooked his
hands underneath her arms, and turned. Her arm caught beneath her body, and he
propped her on his knee to pull it back up. As he turned, the hem of her dress ripped, the
already low neckline pulled even lower. He unwrapped the shawl from her arm and
tossed it away. It hung from a moment in the wind before it dropped and skimmed along
the beach.

He pulled her slightly up out of the water and laid her in the sand, the dress
knotted around her limbs. Her skin still had a slight touch of warmth, although damp and
growing clammy. She hadn’t been in the water long, he thought. He burrowed his shoe
into the sand and reached for another cigarette. His eyes scanned the now dark horizon as
he struck a match. He exhaled and glanced at his watch.

The bar would be emptying soon, the men staggering back to their wives and
 crumbling homes. His father would part from his brother on the street, and his brother
would go to his own house and his own wife. And he, on the beach with an unknown
woman.
He knelt over her. Her beauty annoyed him, her dress and perfect hands. These kinds of girls didn’t look at him, the summer girls who came out here and laid on the beach in their little bathing suits and laughed. And in the evenings, their short dresses and long legs and their hair down and shiny soft. The click of their shoes on the sidewalk. He watched them as they danced in tourist bars, their honey-colored skin flushed with heat. They never danced with local boys, with repairmen like him, but hurried past them in the street. *Ain’t you ever gonna find a girl, boy?*

It was these kinds of girls he thought of in bed at night, while his father drank in the kitchen and his brother was home with a girl— a wife. He thought of the girls’ legs and their hair and the swells in their dresses. He thought of what it would be like to touch them. He would find himself getting mad and getting hard. There was nothing he could do, no girl to call to whisper suggestively over the phone *Why don’t you come over here tonight?*

He thought of these things while he stared at the girl lying in the sand beside him. His fingers tightened. He imagined her in one of the summer homes, imagined her opening the door for him. He imagined the disgust on her face.

After he pulled the hook out of his father’s hand, after he vomited on the floor when he saw the blood and the bits of skin still clinging to the metal, his father hit him anyway. He saw the back of his father’s hand swinging toward him. Without thinking, he tried to cover his face with his arms, and his father’s hand hit his shoulder. He fell, and as he did, he felt a tearing. Blood ran down his face. The hook was still in his hand.
He touched the scar on his face and stared at the girl. No work. This girl. The water rushed up the beach toward them. His arms tightened. Wind lifted the ends of her hair, and the hem of her skirt rippled. He opened and closed his hand.

He slapped her. Her head whipped to the side. He slapped her again and her face tangled in her hair. He raised his hand to hit her again and stopped, panting. He looked around behind him. No one.

He hung his head, stood, and spit. He reached into his pocket for a cigarette, lit it, and stared up the beach. His father would be home now, the soft glow of alcohol in his veins. He took a drag, backed up the beach and glanced at the water, at the tide coming in. He exhaled and flicked his cigarette and glanced at the woman. Her body shifting with the waves.
This is what I imagine you thinking:

You know you did something wrong. If you close your fingers, curl them into your palm, there is the memory of fighting, the memory of knuckle against bone. Skin splitting.

You cannot place this memory (your fist, bone). You remember fighting as an adolescent boy, pinning your brother to the ground after some stupid argument, one of your knees on each of his shoulders. You remember pulling your fist back and staring into his open, screaming mouth. There were other instances. Once, on the front steps of a white house across town, eighteen and full of hate and meth, someone called your girlfriend a slut. But this time, this fight, there is no memory.

The evidence is there on your hand—the deep gash between your first two knuckles that still breaks open two weeks later. You look down to see blood smeared across your skin. As if your body is trying to remind you. It knows; it remembers. You do not.

I imagine you trying to piece together the memories you do have. You know the date it happened because everything reminds you. It’s written in the police report, in the
statement of charges, the brief in the newspaper. There were witnesses. Even a photo of you at the party. But you do not remember.

The rest of the day comes back in fragments. You remember the front seat of your roommate’s new car, the clean smell of leather. You remember playing pool with a blond named Lindsey, who told you she competed in diving and was into yoga, and she surprised you by slipping you her number before she left. The napkin is still on your dresser, wrinkled, the ink on Call me sometime run from spilled beer. You remember your roommate snapping his cell phone shut and saying, “You wanna get outta here?”

You remember the neon sign of the bar through a rain-streaked window that you leaned against. The colors beamed outward and were caught in the rain. Each drop a starburst of light.

That was what you saw just before you opened your eyes, before you felt the slow pulse that throbbed through your head. You have woken up in jail before, and you knew where you were before your eyes focused. The stink of piss and vomit, of drains that never fully drain, is the same in each. You remember sitting up and staring through the bars with bleary eyes. I was leaning against the wall outside the holding cell with my arms crossed over my chest. I didn’t speak to you while you were released, while you limped out to my car, during the drive to your house. I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t even look at you. But you didn’t speak either. We had done and said it all before.

I find myself imagining you now in these past few weeks since the fight. I can see you sitting on your couch, bent over the papers on the coffee table, trying to figure it all out. The police gave you a copy of the report. You read your statement, and the statement of the witnesses, and the statement of the other guy. The one you assaulted. The one you
do not remember assaulting. At the hospital the police took pictures of both of your injuries and included them in the report. As you go over and over the reports, you find yourself staring at these pictures, at his injuries. The enlarged photos make them look distorted and out of proportion. You cannot imagine anyone’s eye looking the way his looks, the way you made it look.

You heard later that the guy lost some of the vision in that eye. Your roommate told you the number of stitches, but you’ve forgotten. You don’t want to know anyway. If you stare at the photo long enough, you can imagine how it will look later. After the stitches. You can see the scarring.

In those moments, you wish the roles were reversed.

I know you. You don’t want to think about it, but it’s the only thing in your mind. You don’t know how you let yourself do that, get to that point. How you were able to beat someone the way you did. You thought that ability, that desire, was gone.

I thought it was too. But that doesn’t matter.

The witness reports are a tally of all the drinks you had. As you read them, the scene plays out before you. You watch yourself drinking and laughing and stumbling through an unfamiliar house. You watch yourself trying to hit on girls even though Lindsey’s number burns in your pocket.

You watch yourself accept a short length of drinking straw someone offers you. You don’t remember who this is and no one names him in the reports. You watch yourself lean over the kitchen table and pinch one nostril shut. You can almost feel the rush of powder into your nose.
The witness reports are not clear about how the fight started. No one seems to know. The guy you assaulted claims that it was unprovoked. You do not want to believe him, that you started this fight without cause. You know, however, that it may have been possible.

We both know you didn’t always need a reason. How many times did I save you from those moments? After years of fighting with you, after you pinned my shoulders to the ground with your knees time after time, I knew. I learned to recognize the tenseness in your shoulders, learned to watch for your fingers curling into fists. I was the only one who knew and could pull you away. How many black eyes did I get that were meant for someone else?

The reports describe the fight, and later you hear it firsthand from people that were there. How the other guy fought back at first, the scuffle on the lawn, people streaming out of the house to watch. How the other guy tried to give up, walk away, and you refused to let him. How you pinned him to the ground beneath your knees, how your fists met his face over and over again. You can almost remember staring into his open, screaming, mouth. How your roommate and someone else pulled you off, and as they pulled you standing, you kicked him one last time. You did not know how soft a face can feel under a boot. Another kind of splitting.

You wish this was someone else. You know it was you.

But this is the part you do not know and I won’t tell you: I was the one to pull you off him. I didn’t know you were there, but when I heard there was a fight on the lawn, when I was pushing to get out of the house to see, I knew. Your roommate and I pulled you from him. I held your arm and watched the toe of your boot crash into his face. I
pushed you into the back seat of my car. As we drove to the hospital, you pressed your head against the window and clutched your wrist, blood trickling down your hand and arm. In your knuckle, bone.
Flame

The way it happened was something like an accident.

I want to say it was late fall. I want to say that when I exhaled, my breath appeared as a cloud of mist before me. I want to say that my hands were in my pockets, that I was only out late that night for a smoke, that the house started burning long before I turned the corner and stood across the street from the Baxter house.

A crowd started to gather around the street light on the corner. I glanced down the block at the people standing in the street in their pajamas. One or two men stood on the front lawn of the house, shouting. Mr. Baxter passed the youngest boy, then five, to one of them as the family ran from the front door.

Sirens whined in the distance.

I stood underneath the cottonwood tree across the street. The branches hung low over the sidewalk and created a canopy. From anywhere on the street, I was invisible.

Mrs. Baxter hugged the boys tight to her and tried to keep them from looking at the house. Mr. Baxter was yelling, “Where’s Lucy?”

Red and blue lights splashed over the dark houses and people standing on the street. Fire blossomed new in each window.

*
I was seventeen the summer before the Baxter house burned, and often angry. These days I don’t remember the reason, if it was one or many. It was the kind of quiet rage that came along with being a teenage boy. I felt angry and trapped. I used to go out late on those summer nights and walk around the neighborhood, smoking and thinking of what I was going to do once I got out of town.

This is how it began.

It was one of those nights, and I didn’t want to be at home. I slipped out the back door and walked maybe a block through the neighborhood before I stopped to light a cigarette. I walked a little further, took a drag, exhaled, and spit. A light was on in the house across the street; two windows on the corner on the second floor glow. There were brighter spots of light scattered through the room.

As I watched, a girl walked into the room wearing a bathrobe and a towel wrapped around her head. She sat facing away from me, leaned forward, and disappeared for a moment. When she sat back up, she flung her hair over her head and tossed the towel.

I stood there for a while watching her comb her hair. She finally gathered it at her neck and twisted it around something. She rose and moved out of my view.

I shifted and watched a few more minutes, but the girl didn’t come back. The window went dark. I looked at my cigarette and realized I’d maybe taken only a couple drags and was almost gone. I sucked on it fiercely to get as much as I could before it got down to the filter. The window stayed dark. The little circles of light went out one by one.

*
It has been ten years since I first saw the girl in the window. I can still see the way her arm moved as she combed her hair.

What I would like is to look at a lighted window and only remember the first time. Then I want the memory to stop. But it never does.

* 

It was the Baxter house I’d stopped in front of that night, and the girl in the window was Lucy Baxter. “From *lux,*” I heard her breathe once. “It’s Latin for light.”

Lucy breathed. Her words always sounded like they were surrounded by air, as if there was simply too much in her lungs, and her breath carried out the words that were so heavy in her mouth.

Lucy was her father’s pride, the only girl in the family. Mr. Baxter was microbiologist who specialized in some sort of bacteria. He taught at the university thirty miles north of town. Mrs. Baxter cut hair in a renovated room in the basement. The Baxter children were all boys: Rusty, Eric, Keith, and Wylie, the youngest. All boys, save Lucy.

She was fifteen or sixteen and beautiful. Her hair was long and dark, and she had these thick, heavy bangs that kept falling in her eyes. She was pale and doe-eyed, tall and thin. She wanted to be an actress or an artist. She was that kind of girl. Aloof and untouchable.

* 

After I saw Lucy the first time, I kept walking that way whenever I went out to smoke. I would deliberately turn away from her house, but somehow, I always ended up standing underneath the cottonwood tree across the street.
The Baxter house was a large two-story with grey siding and a basketball hoop hanging over the garage door. Lucy’s bedroom was on the second floor in the southeast corner. The dining room was underneath it. Sometimes, I would walk by and catch Mrs. Baxter and Lucy cleaning up after dinner. She was graceful with the plates and glasses, swiveling her body around the table and chairs, slipping around the corner and returning empty-handed. She rarely smiled at these times, but when she did, it seemed to be at one of her younger brothers. The youngest, Wylie, hovered next to her.

One time, as I was standing under the tree branches, watching, I noticed Wylie staring at of the windows in my direction. It was a cool evening, and the Baxters had the windows rolled open. I heard Lucy say, “Whatcha lookin’ at Wylie?” She ruffled his hair as she slid by him.

Wylie pointed. “There’s someone out there.”

Lucy’s arm stopped mid-air and her head swung toward the window. “Mom,” she called in a low voice. “Wylie, come here.” She put her hand on his shoulder and pulled him closer to her.

Mrs. Baxter came into the room, and she and Lucy whispered together. Wylie stared up at them. I slipped behind the tree and between the two houses behind me. When I glanced back over my shoulder, Mrs. Baxter and Wylie disappeared. Only Lucy remained, staring through the glass, her middle finger raised to the dark.

* 

During the summers, I took a job working for the city Parks and Recreation department at the lake on the edge of town. There was a little building that was a
combination picnic shelter, bathroom, and concession stand. I worked the concession stand four summers in a row.

Because the city pool was being renovated that summer, the lake was far busier than usual. It was that last summer that everyone really noticed Lucy. Up until then, she had simply been the Baxter girl, or Rusty Baxter’s younger sister.

But something happened in the month between the end of the school year and the first time she came to the beach, something I couldn’t have seen through the windows. I noticed her and two of her friends walking from the parking lot, through the grass and down to the beach. Her younger brothers, Keith and Wylie, were trailing behind them with goggles and inflatable rafts. Her two friends were awkward and hurried through the sand, their eyes continually scanning the beach. Lucy walked languidly, her feet slipping in and out of the sand. She stopped where her friends stopped, dropped her bag, and spread out her beach towel. Mark, the guy working with me, elbowed my side when he noticed me watching. She handed her brothers a bottle of suntan lotion and watched them smear it on their shoulders and necks.

The two girls she was with sat on their beach towels and removed their tee shirts slowly, looking around once they’d balled their shirts up on the sand. They both wore one piece bathing suits, and the blond drew her knees up to her chest. She left her boxer shorts on, and the other one wriggled out of hers while sitting.

Lucy watched her brothers run into the water, and, still standing, pulled her tank top off in one movement and dropped it in the sand beside her. She pushed her boxer shorts down and stepped out of them. She yanked the band out of her hair, then turned toward the wind, our direction.
When she turned, Mark whistled low so nobody could hear. “Well, well,” he said. “Who knew. Lucy Baxter is hot.”

She was wearing a bikini, one that would have scandalized her father. The top was made of two white triangles held together in the middle with a thin strip of black. The ties around her back and neck were black also. The whole thing barely covered her breasts which seemed to have grown overnight.

But her hips. Her skin stretched taut over her hip bones, a small dip between them. Those hip bones, that dip, would keep me awake every night that summer.

Mark and I stared. Lucy finished pulling her hair into a messy bun high on her head, turned, and looked directly at us, her lips parted slightly.

* 

Months later, after the Baxter house burned down, after the fire department completed their investigation, the newspaper ran that the investigator speculated a candle in the southeast corner of the house had started the fire. The window had been open, and the wind stirred the curtain into the flame. The curtain was first, then the carpet, and somehow the fire spread room to room. Investigators had been unable to trace the path of the fire, and by the time the family evacuated, much of the house was in flames.

* 

I started walking late at night, after it was dark and the insects had stopped ringing in the trees. When the rest of the house was dark, Lucy’s window was often bright. The ceiling light was usually off, and her room would glow with little rings of light.
Once, I stopped under the cottonwood tree and stared up at her window. It was open, and I could hear music playing softly. I heard the scrape of a screen being opened. Lucy stretched her body outward from the window. I saw the unmistakable flick of a lighter, then the orange glow of a cigarette.

She sat on the windowsill and leaned sideways against the edge. The strap of her tank top slipped off her shoulder and hung loose against her arm. She brought the cigarette to her lips, inhaled, and flicked the end. Ashes fell into the flowerbed below.

* 

Lucy brought Keith and Wylie to the beach almost every day that summer. It took three weeks before she came to the concession stand, her hips rolling as she walked. She stepped into the shade of the awning and pushed her sunglasses up on her head. There was a smattering of freckles on her nose, and her shoulders were starting to freckle in the sun.

“Bottle of water,” she said. Mark didn’t move.

I turned to the cooler, set the bottle on the counter. “A dollar.”

She jerked her head toward the shelves lined with boxes of candy. “And a couple of taffies.”

I put them on the counter, too. She handed me two bills, and I passed the change back to her. The tips of my fingers grazed her palm. She tucked the coins into a change purse.

She looked at Mark, then me. “Either of you got a light?”
I shook my head, but Mark slid a pack of matches toward her. She drew a cigarette from her bag and lit it. She tilted her head back, her long pale throat exposed, and exhaled.

“Um,” I started. “There’s no smoking on the beach. Sorry.”

She smiled slightly, as if trying not to laugh, and blinked slowly. “And are you going to stop me?” She took another drag, turned her head to the side, and blew the smoke into the wind.

She glanced back at us, watching her, and pressed her lips together. She turned and walked away, dropping the still burning cigarette in the sand.

* 

As the summer wore on, many of the nights I walked by her house, Lucy’s window would be dark or the shades would be drawn. She watched her brothers during the day, shuttling them to day camps or tee-ball practice. Sometimes she helped answer the phones and give manicures and pedicures in her mother’s salon. At the end of June, she was cast in the town drama society’s summer play and started going to rehearsals in the evenings.

There was little to do in our small town, so on the weekends during the school year, the high school students drove. They called the main stretch of road through town “the strip.” It was maybe five blocks long, and they drove back and forth down it, circling around a gas station at one end and a fast-food restaurant on the other. When they got tired of driving, they would pull over in various parking lots, stereo on, lights pointed toward the road. But because there was nothing to do in the summer, nothing to keep
them occupied except part-time jobs, they cruised every night of the week. Still, ten years later, if I run out for a beer on a Friday night, my car is flanked by teenagers.

Lucy started hanging out on the strip, and because we were going to be seniors when school started, my friends and I drove back and forth on that road every night. I would see her with groups of people huddled around someone’s car in a parking lot. She would sit on the hood of some guy’s car, her hair hanging loose and her eyes smudged with black liner. She had gotten her bellybutton pierced, something I noticed a few weeks into the summer, and she wore short tank tops with flannel shirts, leaned back on her elbows to show it off. She wanted to be hip in that grunge, gritty-chic way.

Sometimes my friends and I would stop in the same parking lot that she was in to talk to people, to check out someone’s new stereo system. She would move off to the edge of the group when there were too many people, and lean against a car with her arms crossed. She so often looked bored. Usually, some guy would be trying to get her attention, and she almost always ignored them.

It was said that Lucy turned down nearly every guy to ask her out. She didn’t have ex-boyfriends, there were no stories about her told in the locker room. Sometimes there would be a whisper, a fleeting rumor, a fantasy, about someone hooking up with Lucy, but they never spread far. It occurs to me now that there were no rumors that she was a lesbian like there were for so many other girls that didn’t date. I guess no one considered it a possibility. People blamed her older brother Rusty, claimed her parents were strict. But it was just a simple fact: Lucy Baxter didn’t date.

*
After I watched the Baxter house burn, after flames bloomed in window after window, after the glass exploded, after the crowd screamed, after the Baxters came running out of the front door, the fire investigator called me. He’d heard I was one of the first people there, one of the first spectators. He asked if I could I describe what I saw. He wanted to know where I was and when.

I told him I was standing across the street. That I’d been for a walk to smoke, since I couldn’t do it at home. I looked up and saw fire and smoke coming out of Lucy’s bedroom window. I ran across the street and yelled up to her to see if she was there. People were already outside, and I assumed someone must have called 911. There were sirens. I went back to the tree and watched.

He asked if I had looked to see if the Baxters were out.

I told him I assumed they were since there was a crowd.

He asked, “Were you a good friend of Lucy’s? Were you over often?”

No, I told him, I’d never been to the Baxter home. I don’t know if I would say that Lucy and I were friends.

He didn’t call again. Before the newspapers ran the final report about the candle, there were rumors that a cigarette had started the fire.

* 

In August, the Parks and Recreation department of the town gave Rusty Baxter special permission to have a bonfire on the beach in the evening. Rusty was leaving for college later that month on a football scholarship. He would be one of the few people from our small town to play Division IA college football. This would be Rusty’s going away party. My boss asked me to be there to supervise.
Most of the previous year’s senior class showed up, but because the party had been well advertised, people who barely knew Rusty were there too. Parks and Rec came out earlier in the day and dug a pit for the bonfire, which now blazed in the middle of the crowd. Someone had driven their car through the grass down to the beach and had rolled down the windows and opened the trunk for music. I leaned against the concession stand and watched. Sometimes, I thought I saw Lucy’s frame slipping between bodies, her hair and shoulders visible through the flames. I rolled my neck, looked around, and took a small bottle from my pocket. I took a quick drink and was replacing the cap when I saw someone walking toward me.

She was wearing a short, spaghetti strap dress and a zip-up hooded sweatshirt. She was barefoot. For the first time, I noticed three homemade ankle bracelets circling her leg. She brushed her bangs out of her eyes and nodded toward me. “You going to give me a sip of that?”

I held the bottle out toward her. She smiled and stepped forward, took a drink. “You know, my brother would kick your ass if he saw that,” she said, handing the bottle back.

I shrugged and gestured to the crowd around the fire, many of them probably close to drunk. “I’m not one of the ones to be worried about.”

She leaned against the building, her shoulder pressing into mine. “You do seem like a nice guy.” She looked up at me. “But I know better.”

I swiveled my head toward her. She wasn’t smiling. She looked back at the mass of people around the bonfire.
I lit a cigarette and watched the bonfire. The was a lull in the music while the
driver changed CDs. Lucy reached down, and, without looking, took the cigarette from
between my fingers. She took a drag and rolled her eyes at me. “This party sucks.”

I nodded. “Technically, I’m not even at a party. I’m working.”

She took another drag and held the smoke in as she spoke. She jerked her head to
the right, toward a grassy rise a little bit away from the beach. “Let’s go over there,” she
said. “We can still hear the music, and you can see the bonfire, and you can share some
more of whatever you got in that bottle with me.”

*

I never told anyone what happened on the little hill by the beach, when Lucy and I
were alone and away from the bonfire. It was one of those things I didn’t want to tell
anybody, a secret I wanted to keep. I was afraid that it wasn’t real, that it hadn’t
happened, that the entire night had been a dream.

But I learned this: those rumors, the fleeting stories, were true. Lucy and I sat next
to each other on the hill, passing the bottle back and forth. I could taste her lip gloss on
the rim of the bottle. She shrugged off her hoodie and flipped her hair over her shoulder.
Her fingers overlapped mine as she reached for the bottle again.

Flames licked up into the sky.

She tipped her head back and smiled. “I could scream right now, and no one
would hear me.”

The strap of her dress slid down her arm, the fabric folding back and exposing the
places her skin was still white.
She turned her eyes toward me. “I’m not looking for anything serious. Just tonight.”

The wood in the fire cracked and spilt, collapsed onto each other. Sparks rained outward.

* 

After the house burned, the Baxters left town. We would hear about them from time to time. Mrs. Baxter and the kids went to stay with family out of state. Mr. Baxter rented an apartment a couple blocks away from the college and finished the semester. He was the one that told me later that Lucy was going to finish the school year from home. He didn’t know about the next years. I asked him to tell her to write me when she felt better, and he promised to pass the message along.

They never came back to town. Very few of their things remained after the fire. Mr. Baxter boxed up what he could find. The same people who watched it burn came out to watch the rest be torn down a month later. The land was sold, and a newlywed couple who didn’t know the fate of the previous house built on the property.

I never spoke to Lucy again. I don’t even know where she is. She simply disappeared.

* 

August passed. The beach closed. School started. Lucy remained silent.

After that night, she didn’t talk to me, barely looked at me. She sent Keith to the concession stand when she brought her brothers to the beach. I watched her from behind the counter, studied her elbows in the sand and the shape of her shoulders. When the boys
were done swimming, were standing next to her wrapped in towels, and she stood to gather her own, I thought I saw her looking at me through the dark lens of her glasses.

The heat of the summer faded quickly into the cool nights of the fall. We passed each other in the hallway at school and she avoided eyes, pretended not to hear me. She was cast in the fall play and took a job as a waitress at a diner downtown. I walked by the diner in the afternoons and caught sight of her through the windows, pouring coffee for old men. I stared until I had to turn around to see her, and I waited for her to look up and see me standing there.

I went in the opposite direction of her house every time I went out to smoke. The dark came more quickly. The leaves on the cottonwoods browned and fell.

* 

These are things that are true: I was seventeen years old when the Baxter house burned down. It was fall, the kind of night where you could see your breath if you looked hard enough when you exhaled. The last time I spoke to Lucy was the night on the beach.

The day the Baxter house burned down, I saw her. She was behind me as I walked out of the door at school, and she stepped close to me. Her fingers pressed into my palm. I looked back. She smiled, and her hand grazed my waist.

I had to go to her house that night. I cut through the alley and turned the corner onto her street. The entire time, I was telling myself how stupid I was being. I tried to convince myself to give this up, to give her up. I stood under the branches of the cottonwood tree across the street from her house and stared upward. Her window was glowing.
The curtain was open and the light faint, but she was there. I saw her frame move by the window. I lit a cigarette and watched her pace around her room. I looked around, at the houses behind me, at the rest of the windows in the Baxter house. Everything was dark. I raised the cigarette to my mouth and took a couple steps forward.

As I stepped onto the street, Lucy appeared at the window. She opened both the glass and screen, and she leaned out to light a cigarette. The fire from the lighter illuminated her face. She lowered both the cigarette and her lighter, looked straight at me.

I jogged forward and stood under her window. “Lucy,” I whispered. “Lucy.” She leaned her elbows on the window sill and looked down, her lips pursed. She rolled the cigarette between her fingers. “Lucy, please.”

She set the cigarette on the window sill and put one finger to her lips. She nodded and disappeared from the window. I reached my hand up to take a drag, but only the butt was there, no cherry. I took two steps back from the house, scanning the landscaping around my feet. Nothing.

I turned and crossed the street, and I stood under the branches of the cottonwood tree to wait for her. The front door of the house opened and closed, and she darted across the street. She was wearing flannel pants and a tank top, slippers. She had a blanket draped around her shoulders. Her hair was up in a ponytail, and I reached toward it, opened my mouth to ask her to take it down. She yanked the band out before I could say anything. Her hair fell around my hand, and I closed my fingers in it.

She half-smiled. I stared at her face, her doe-eyes, remnants of black eyeliner smudged underneath them. Her pants slid down her sharp hips. She touched her tongue to her teeth and said, “I think people would hear this time.”
I nodded.

She tilted her head and her hair slid through my fingers. “What are you doing here?” She pulled the blanket tighter around her shoulders.

My hands were still extended toward her, hovering just over her skin. “I couldn’t wait anymore, Lucy.”

She was almost shivering. “I told you. Just one night.” She looked annoyed.

My hands parted the blanket and cupped her hips, pulled them closer toward me. “That’s not enough.” She put one hand on mine, the other still holding the blanket at her throat. “Come on,” I said. “No one has to know anything.”

She tilted her face up toward mine. “What are you trying to do?” she whispered.

“You can’t keep coming here. I’ve seen you.”

“You haven’t seen anything.”

“I told you before. You may seem like a nice guy, but I know better.”

I pressed my mouth to hers, my hands gripping her hips, and she leaned backward toward the tree. I opened my eyes for a moment and glanced up. “Oh, God,” I said.

She smiled against me and let go of the blanket, put her hand on my neck.

“Lucy,” I said, and she murmured something I didn’t understand. “No, Lucy.” I pushed her away from me and looked up at the house. “Oh, God,” I say again.

She saw me looking over her shoulder, and she turned to see what I saw. Flames were licking up the side of the house, the whole southeast side, and her bedroom window bright. She stumbled away from me and ran across the street up the sidewalk. I followed her. “Lucy!” I hissed. “Lucy!” She disappeared into the house.
I heard screams, and I turned to see people coming out of their homes. They gathered around the streetlight in their pajamas. One woman stepped off the curb with her hand over her mouth. A man touched her shoulder and stopped her, then ran up to the house and stood next to me. We stared at each other for a moment. I yelled at the house.

“Lucy!”

The man started yelling too. “Jon! Rusty! Eric!” He screamed the boys’ names. Another man ran up to and stood next to us. Sirens whined in the distance.

I took a couple steps backward, turned, and jogged back to the tree. I stood underneath it and watched the front door open, Mr. Baxter hand Wylie to one of the men on the lawn, then shove Keith and Eric out the door. Mrs. Baxter ran out after them, stood in the middle of the street, and hugged the two youngest boys to her. She tried to press their faces into her body to keep them from watching.

Mr. Baxter stood on the lawn and looked around. “Where’s Lucy?” he yelled.

The windows on the first floor shattered. Pieces of glass sprayed outward, and fire reached out over the grass. Red and blue lights splashed over the houses and people standing on the street. The firemen disappeared into the house, became ghosts moving through the smoke.

I backed into the crowd and looked at the house through the branches. The wind blew the leaves from the tree over the street. The crowd of people murmured to each other, waiting.

Two firemen emerged from the house, carrying a body. I didn’t want to look, didn’t want to see. There wasn’t anybody else in the house, so the body had to be Lucy. I watched them put her on a stretcher and put an oxygen mask over her face. I stepped out
onto the street. The stretcher was propped up, and she leaned heavily against the sheet. Her face was blank.

Her left arm was mottled red and black, and only bits of the tank top she’d been wearing earlier remained. Half of her body was exposed to the night. Her eyes caught mine, and they began to tear.

I looked up at the house again, at her window. It was glowing.
Stay

The nights are always hot now. They prop the bedroom windows open, but nothing filters through. No breeze, no rain. He lies on his side and looks her. She stares through the window screen at the bricks of the next door building, the space between the two too narrow for even her body to slip through. Their bodies glisten with water. They cannot touch for the heat. He follows the arc of her hand from the bed to her hair. Sweat drips from her temples to the sheets. He stands, and she follows.

She strips the sheets from the bed and hears the scrape of the kitchen table being dragged across the floor. They pull the mattress from the bed frame and lay it in the kitchen, in a small nook framed by windows where the kitchen table used to be. They open the windows and lay naked on the bare mattress. She places her hand firm on the linoleum floor.

-I used to lie on the floor as a child, she tells him. Kitchen floors are always cool, even in the summer. I’d climb out of bed and go lay on the floor. My mother would almost trip over me in the mornings.

They are broke and cannot afford air conditioning. He sets the box fan in one window and turns it on low. High makes her shiver, will give her a cold. On the street
below, someone is shouting. She scoots down the mattress and puts her feet on the floor to cool them. It is three AM.

-I suppose I should get dressed soon.

-Yes.

He wants to make love to her before she goes. He puts his hand on her belly and turns his face toward her.

Her eyes don’t move from the ceiling. He thinks she is close to crying.

-Jacob. She says.

He takes his hand away. She rises and goes to the sink, turns on the cold tap and holds her head underneath it. She straightens and let the water run from her hair and down her shoulders.

*

During the summer, he works the late shift at the factory. She wakes him when she comes home from work, exhausted and smelling of flour. She works at the bakery down the street. She stands in the heat of the oven through her shift, her hands kneading and rolling. Sometimes, he can still taste the pastries on her fingers. She walks in the door and peels off her clothes, leaving them in a trail to the mattress where he sleeps. They have two hours together between shifts.

-Listen, she says. My father was a photographer, but he did family portraits and developed other photographers’ photos to make money. When he was home, there were always stacks of photos sitting around, none of them mine.
He imagines what her father may look like. He has never seen her father, but he likes to imagine that she has her father’s eyes, a blue so dark it is almost navy, the pupil and iris bleeding into one.

He kisses her mouth and touches her shoulder. She has no pictures of her family that he has seen. Just stories. She rolls over and regards him seriously.

-I could be a photographer.

He nods and sits up. She looks at the clock and rises, open the refrigerator, the hair on her arms standing on end.

* 

Every Sunday they both have the day off. They walk to the park and sit in the grass in the shade. She takes off her shoes and lies down with her head in his lap and her arms flung wide. Sometimes, a band performs in the gazebo, or there is a play or a children’s soccer game. These things delight her and make her laugh. Her laugh is delicious, he thinks, so that the whole of her body smiles. She is small, slight with dainty elfin features. Her hair is black and choppy. He watches her dance with the music, and for a second he is sure she is going to sprout wings and fly away.

Afterward, they walk to the river and climb down the bank. She cuffs her pant legs to walk along the river’s edge. He is afraid for her, afraid the river current will pull her away. He wants to hold her. He wants to wrap his arm around her waist and anchor her body to his. They walk to the bridge and climb up underneath the road to make love. They lay sweating and silent, listening to the cars rush above them and the hum of the tires on the concrete. He presses his face into her neck and looks up at her. Her eyes are skimming the water below.
-Stay with me, he says.

She looks down at him, kisses his temple, and licks the sweat from her lips.

*

-My mother, she tells him, was a beautiful woman. She was elegant, classic. Someone was always in love with her. Someone was always proposing to her. But she never accepted. Not until my father. She said he had the penniless artist thing going for him. That’s what made her give in.

She is spinning, twirling in the kitchen. It is raining outside. Bright bangs of thunder and lightening echo in the sky. Water pools beneath the open windows. The power was knocked out earlier, and she had to retrieve a kerosene lamp from the storage closet. They put it on the floor and played cards and checkers by lamplight and drank warming beer. She pulled the ice cream from the freezer, and they ate it from the carton. Everything was unfreezing: packages of meat, corn-on-the-cob, ready bake pie. Ice cubes turned into little puddles in the tray.

He sees her in flashes as she spins. His bare shoulders and golden skin spark white in the lightening. He isn’t smiling.

-Alice, he says.

He wants to take her away from everything, from the tiny fourth floor apartment and the bakery and the city. The city is going to ruin her, he thinks. She needs air, space. He thinks about buying a car and packing their things in it and running away. He cannot hold on to her here anymore.

*
She rises when he comes home from the factory and runs some cool water in the bath while he undresses. The floor is sprinkled with sawdust. H settles into the tub, and she pours water over him, little pitchers of water over his head and back. She scrubs his shoulders and arm and feet. In five hours she will have to go to the bakery.

-Marry me, he says.

She smiles. He has asked her to marry him three times, but she never answers. He can’t remember exactly how long they have been together. All he remembers is her. She seems like forever.

When she leaves, he lies on the mattress and presses his face into her pillow. He dreams of her when they turn old; he dreams of them as children. He wants to have a baby with her. He thinks about lying in bed with her, her pregnant belly cradled between them, whispering together about names. He wants to be old with her, sees her as a beautiful old woman with hair streaked grey.

She wanted to be a painter when they met. He remembers kissing her in winter, her eyes swirling with snow.

*

He knows she doesn’t sleep much anymore. While he works, she dresses and goes downstairs into the street. She needs to walk, to move. The city is eroding her, the size of it pulling bits of her away. Bones press into her skin that weren’t there before, her hips and shoulders and ribs pushing outward. She rubs her palms over her stomach and feels its emptiness.

He followed her once. She takes streets she shouldn’t, passes men with eyes too hollow, girls too young. She has learned to look tough. She avoids the crow of teenage
boys gathered on the corner and pretends to not hear when they call –Hey there baby, where you goin’ tonight, huh, bitch.

A block before the river she goes into a little restaurant and sits at a table by herself. The family who runs it knows her by now, her name and her order. They bring her vegetables and brown rice, tea with milk and lemon. She knows he would disapprove of this extravagance. The family has a little boy with huge brown eyes and a small, unsmiling mouth. He presses himself into the wall behind the counter, peers around the corner and watches her. When she leaves, she rummages in her pocket and gives him fifty cents. He takes it with sticky, chubby fingers and a serious face.

She sits by the river, then, and watches it until it is almost time for him to come home. If she marries him, they will have blue-eyed children. They would buy a house in the country and she would have a garden with tomatoes, lettuce, and asparagus. Her hair would grow long again, and their bodies would grow soft.

* 

-My mother never had to drive before she married my father. She lived in a city, and her father thought it was impractical. After they got married, my father got a job for the summer taking care of this campground way out in the country. A taxi wouldn’t come way out there. So my father had to take her out in his old truck, a stick-shift, and teach her how to drive. She was wearing heels the first time, and my father got so mad, he made her stop the car and he threw her shoes out the window.

He thinks she has told this story before, but he cannot be sure. He nods. She is hanging wet clothes around the apartment, over doors and the edge of the bathtub and the backs of chairs. They don’t use the dryer to save money. He watches her gather his work
shirts and their socks and her white bakery pants from the basket, her waif-like body bending and twirling.

-Were you ever a dancer? He asks.

She stops and considers a moment.

-No, I don’t think so.

He strings a makeshift clothesline in front of the kitchen cupboards. All around them tiny puddles from on the floor. He has to duck to reach the sink. She should have been in ballet, he thinks. A ballerina, a violinist, an actress. He sees all these things in her. She moves past him, and he reaches out and touches her arm. There is only a flash of a smile when she looks up.

* 

Once, he came home to find her standing in the bathroom with scissors in her hand, hair in the sink, and blood running from her fingers. Her face was dry and powder white. She’d been working at the bakery for a week.

-Alice.

She turned and he saw that her hair was gone, the beautiful black fall of hair that reached her waist, gone. He touched his own, still damp with sweat. She blinked, and blood dripped down her forearm.

-Its too hot. Too hot for it all.

She ran her fingers through her hair, held out her bleeding hand.

-I slipped.

He nodded, took her by the wrist, and kissed her palm.

-Okay.
He begins selling things they don't need to buy a car. The unused kitchen table is sold off the front steps for thirty dollars, earrings that belonged to his grandmother pawned. He tries to take out a loan. He hurries through work, he is rarely still and offers to work overtime. The guys at the factory offer him cigarettes to calm him, a beer at the end of the shift, but he won't take them. His muscles are always sore when he comes home, his body tensed until the moment he sees her.

At the end of the week he comes home early and she is standing in front of the windows wearing only a tee shirt. She tries to hide her surprise in a calm face. She walks to the bathroom to run the water without speaking. They go through the motions in silence.

He climbs from the bath and lies on the bed without drying, the fan blowing over his wet skin while she kneels over him to rub his back and shoulders. She pulls her tee shirt over her head and lies next to him, staring at the ceiling. He turns and sees the shadowed outline of her breasts, her concave stomach. He wants to pull her into him, blur the line of her body into his. He is growing tired, his eyelids are drooping. Through his lashes, her body is waving.

The next Sunday they both have off, they go to the park with a picnic lunch. She has packed cold chicken sandwiches, hard boiled eggs, apples, and spice cake. They lean against a tree and pass a carafe of wine back and forth. There is no band today, no play, no baseball games. She lays down, her head in his lap.

-Someone should draw up now, she says.
He thinks he should ask her again. His limbs are tired, aching, and he wants to hold her body while he sleeps.

-I think we should leave here, he says.

She looks up at him with wild eyes and cups his face in her hands. She kisses his mouth. He imagined the drawing, this moment with their kissing, this moment with her tiny hands around his face. They open their eyes and she doesn’t smile when he does.

She is tired, the circles under her eyes growing darker. He brushes his fingers through her hair until she is asleep.

*

The next night, he returns from work and the door is not open, there is no body on the mattress, no water in the bath. All their things are in the same place, untouched. He wanders through the rooms, searching for her, her scent. His body is crying. He touches his face and it is wet, but he doesn’t remember tears. This is how she says no, he thinks.

He stands in the kitchen, in the stillness, and he struggles to breathe. He gasps and it echoes from the counters and walls. There is laughter on the street below. He is sure he can feel the world turn beneath his feet.

Everything is foreign here. He stumbles down the stairs and onto the street. He runs; his legs force his body forward. He runs so hard he thinks his heart may burst, is bursting. His body sweats and his eyes tear—he is drying out. His body is withering and turning to dust as he runs. He will become dust and blow away. There will be nothing left of him, he thinks, and he whispers her name.

He runs over the road and down the river bank, loses his footing, and rolls into the river. He exhales into the water and sits up, puts his face in his hands and cries. The
current pushes against him, and he rubs his hands down his neck and squeezes his shoulders. He can feel the river trying to pull him along. If he closes his eyes, he is sure he can see her, white flashes of her bare skin dipping in and out of the water as she makes her escape.

*  

He stays by the river until early morning until he thinks the wind is passing through him. He pushes himself to his feet and climbs the bank. At the top, he removes his shoes and carries them home. The still dark sky is crushing him.

She would have been rising soon, dressing to go to work, kissing his temple before she left. He sees her smile as she glances over her shoulder and walks out the door. He passes the bakery and stops at the window, hoping to glimpse her, perhaps chance upon her in the street. He sees no one as he walks.

He climbs the stairs, pushes open the door, and peels off his clothes. In the bathroom, he stares at the faucet for a time before he can turn it on to wash. Everywhere, signs of her.

He steps out of the tub and leave the water, goes into the kitchen without drying. He wants to do nothing but sleep.

She is laying on the mattress, thin and naked, her body curled on its side and her hand on the floor. Her hair is damp, and a wet dress lies in a heap on the linoleum. He approaches slowly and lowers himself onto the mattress, lies on his side and looks at her face. She looks peaceful, ethereal. He can’t stop himself, and he touches her hand.

She stirs slightly and her eyes flutter open.

-Hi, she says.
-Hey.

-Stay late?

-Yeah.

He touches her face, pushes his fingertips into her skin. She smiles and shifts closer, lays her head on his chest and lets him wrap his arms around her. The morning is quiet, no traffic, no noise from people on the street. The fan is no longer in the window, and it sits idly in the corner.

She sighs, and he kisses her forehead. He thinks he should be happy, but he is terrified.

-It will be fall soon, she says.

He closes his eyes and nods.
The Other

Nadia,

These are things I know about you: the shape of your neck when your hair is pinned up. The rhythm of your breath while you are sleeping. Above your left breast, there is a small, dark, red birthmark you think is shaped like a bird taking flight. Secretly, you want your eyes to be two different colors, and you are afraid of burning.

I could tell you these things about yourself and it would frighten you. Sometimes, I imagine being in a crowded elevator, and when the doors slide open, it is you who steps in. In the crush of bodies, I would lean forward and whisper all this in your ear. I imagine my breath condensing on your skin. I would revel in your trembling.

You would not know me in a crowd, nor sitting next to me on the train, nor if I took your order for your morning coffee. You are not even sure I exist. But I am one of your worst fears: the other woman. The one who would not leave.

He told me these things about you. While on the street, in restaurants, in my apartment, he speaks of you. He describes it all. He says you would hate this if you knew, your name falling off his lips as he stands before me.

* 

A whisper. A trespass.
Before this, Nadia and he both had other lovers. They have both held other bodies, other voices in their throats. They’ve come to each other with a history, a litany of names from the past. There is an unspoken agreement: all those that came before have been forgotten. They never were. These are the first limbs that have twisted with their own. This is the first time someone has held her voice captive in his throat to taste again and again.

A woman’s name rises between them. A breath. A shadow.

She finds she no longer recognizes his face. He becomes a stranger.

* 

Let me tell you about the first time I saw you. We were at a gathering for a friend, his and mind, a going away party. Do you remember? You did not know the man, the one who was leaving, but you came anyway because our lover asked you to. You stood by his side in a white dress that left your arms bare and exposed. I imagined you wore it for him. He loves your arms.

You hung on to your left shoulder with your right hand, your arm hanging over your chest, and pressed your fingers one by one into your skin. Your other hand hung at your side, clutching a wine glass. Sometimes, he put his hand on the small of your back, and you would tilt your face up toward him, smiling.

You closed your eyes and sighed. I saw your chest rise, your mouth open as you exhaled. You did it quietly, so quietly that no one noticed. As you were opening your eyes, our lover put his arm around you and gestured toward you with his other hand. He said your name. The man who was leaving claimed to remember you. You nodded and claimed to remember him as well. You let him kiss your cheek and smiled at him while he spoke.
Your shoulders and back straightened. Your fingers grasped our lover’s arm and wrinkled his shirt.

Yes, I was there. Don’t search your memory for my face. You will not find me. We did not meet.

*

How does desire first spread? The seeds of it scatter. One’s body feels it part by part. The whole of the body desires before you recognize that tingling.

She is unlike the others. He tells her this is what drew him to her. She sat by herself in a movie theater, her back straight. A narrow scarf was wrapped around her neck and her hair gathered and pinned up above it. The film was black and white. It flickered over her face, the shape of it revealed and hidden in bright shadows. A single white tear was shining on her cheek.

He was with another woman. She saw his figure rise and excuse himself. He paused in the aisle when he saw her. She barely noticed his stare.

When he returned, Nadia heard him slip into a row behind her. She heard the whine of the seat being folded down, as if he were lowering himself slowly while gripping the armrests. She crossed one arm over her chest and put her hand on the opposite shoulder. Her head tilted slightly.

A minute later, she heard the seat rocking back into place as he stood, and she heard his footsteps in the aisle. As he neared, he extended his fingers and reached his hand out. Her forearm lay on the armrest, exposed. He touched her just below the elbow, and his fingers trailed down her skin.
Later, he told her that he fell in love with the shadow of her body, the outline of it in the cold theater. A single tear. He’d imagined it frozen to her cheek.

He gave her a pair of tear-shaped earrings that he found in an antique shop. He whispered to her that if they were separated, they would be the sign. The drops of ice hanging from her ears like the single tear clinging to her face. Her own glass slipper.

* 

He is the only thing we have in common, Nadia. Imagine meeting him at a different time. Picture seeing him the way I saw him.

Imagine: he is wearing jeans and a button-up shirt. The sleeves are loose. His is standing over his desk, his fingertips touching the top lightly. His hair hangs in his face.

Can you see that?

Picture: the building is dark. The sky outside the windows is dark. It is late night, and almost no one is in the building. He let himself in after a dinner alone to finish a project. A take-out box is perched on the side of his desk. The only light is a small circle from a lamp.

Watch me watch him. Watch me finishing something for my boss. Watch me walking to the copy room and seeing the light. Watch me stop in the dark hallway and stare at him.

What do you do?

What did I do?

Maybe I approach him there at his desk. Maybe I wait until he is ready to leave and catch him at the last minute. Maybe I let my hand brush over him and invite him out for a drink. Or back to my apartment.
Or maybe I stand in the dark hallway and watch him. And when he starts walking toward me I back away. And as he’s passing, I touch his waist and when he pauses I whisper what I want.

I don’t have to tell you what that was.

He turns toward me. I touch his wrist and look at his eyes. His hand is shaking.

* 

The man touched the whole length of her arm with his fingertips. He kept walking and did not look back. Nadia cradled her arm to her chest and stared after him. She realized she was trembling. Something in her awoke.

She knew that she should have been offended, scared, appalled. That the gesture was an intrusion. She watched him sit next to a woman a few rows ahead of her. He put his arm around the woman’s shoulder, and as he did, he turned around and looked at her. Her palm was damp against her shirt.

* 

He has changed after being with you. His body is softer; all those hard lines, the solidness I loved has faded. I used to love walking into a crowded place and seeing him there, a flock of people around him. I loved knowing the shape of his body under his clothes. Watching women flirt with him, make overt passes, suggestions. I knew I was the one he was taking home that night.

That is different now, too. There is a flash of you in his eyes, a hesitation before he grips my hips.

* 

Leaving the theater, she pulled her winter coat tight around her and clutched it closed with her fist. When the movie ended, she stayed in her seat and waited. The credits
scrolled down the screen, and the man who touched her arm walked out with the woman. His hand was on the woman’s shoulder. Two coats were draped over his other arm. He walked past without looking or pausing or speaking. She clutched her knees and tried not to stare. When the whole theater was empty, she stood and shrugged on her coat.

Nadia wished she were braver, more aggressive. She imagined standing when the man passed with the woman. “Excuse me,” she would have said, and she would have put her hand on his neck and kissed him. Or she would have waited until they left, and she would have come up to him in the lobby. “I’m sorry, but I think you dropped this,” and she would have slipped a scrap of paper with her phone number, her address, to him. “Ravish me,” scrawled in her handwriting.

She stepped from the theater into the cold night. It was December. The sky looked heavy, thick. The snow was waiting; it refused to fall. She stood on the sidewalk, clutching her coat. Her scarf streamed out behind her, and as she turned, it blew away. Someone touched the small of her back. She stopped, but did not look.

He walked around until he faced her, holding her scarf in his hand. Her eyes moved over his face.

“Do you want to come with me?”

She glanced around them. “The other.”

“She went home. She’s gone.”

She nodded. Slowly. Once.

* 

_If we met, you would place the blame on me. You would spare him. You would stand and wave your slender arms outward, your eyes fiery, your mouth sharp and thin_
as the edge of a knife. If your suspicions were things you could confirm, you would say that I slipped in, invaded, interrupted.

These things would be a lie. It is you who appeared and captured him. Your beauty and hesitant motions hold him hostage. I don't have those things. There is nothing to keep him coming back to me.

*

Snow fell. They lay in bed on a February morning. The radiator sizzles and rattles. A thin layer of mist creeps up the high windows.

A name rises like smoke.

Her movement pauses for only a moment. He does not recognize his crime.

There is no reason to suspect. Nadia knows this. But she has been the victim before, other men have left her for other women. She listens again to the way he said the name, the familiarity of it in his mouth. The shape of his lips around the vowels.

She remembers there had been a woman the night they met. He hadn’t paused; he’d pursued her although he had been with someone else. What would stop him from doing that again? She watched for proof of his innocence. His infidelity.

*

Nadia. His prize. You have a radiant name. “The most beautiful name,” he tells me. He says all things about you are beautiful. Even your thick white thighs. Your appendix scar. That you grind your teeth at night. That you dared think he would look at another woman while he was in love with you. That you have the idea of me. Even that you hate me. The ugly things about you make him beautiful to him.
The way he spoke of you after you first met. The lilt of his voice. If you heard this, you would have known, too. You would have felt yourself fading from him.

* 

Women who could be her—the other—appear where they have not before. The way they speak to him, the way they stand, cross their arms or tuck their hair behind their ears, these gestures become objects of scrutiny. She imagines these women sliding between them, even the memory of the laughs or bare shoulders or the scent of their hair building a wall that she cannot breach.

He introduces her to women he knows. She grips the woman’s hand tightly and searches her face for the thing that would betray them. “Which one,” she thinks. “Which one has him when I do not?”

Waitresses, women in bars, women’s voices on the phone, a passing glance on the street. All these things kill her. She is wilting, piece by piece, a petal at a time. They are all pulling him away.

How does one look for something, someone, she is not sure exists? She is searching for a phantom.

* 

I know the kinds of faces you search when he introduces you to a woman he knows. None of these women could pull him away from you, Nadia. Not one of them could have caught him when he tried to leave. They could not have kept him the way I do.

I am not a beautiful woman. So much about me is ugly, and he knows that. I cannot make a list; I cannot tick them off one by one, an inventory of my deformities.
This is not something you would notice if you passed me on the street. You would not look at my face and turn away. But if you knew me for longer than in passing. If I spoke. Even my voice would betray that ugliness.

That is what he sees when he looks at me. These are not things that charm him, as so much about you does. Nothing about me charms him anymore.

*

Nadia stands at the front door of his apartment building, hands shoved deep in her pockets. She balls them into fists to keep them warm, and she bounces on her toes. She tries not to look at her watch. The sidewalk has not been shoveled. The snow gathers on her shoes and soaks through. Her socks and feet are wet. He is late.

She tips her head back and looks up toward his bedroom window a few floors up. It is dark. She bends forward at the waist, flinging her hair over her head and straightening again. She fingers her earrings, the ones he gave her. She tries not to think of him, of all the places he could be. She thinks, “There is a good reason,” and presses her arms to her sides.

A cab stops in front of the building and he climbs out. He steps carefully through the slush and sand on the road. He face is a tight frown. He eyes read like an apology. He does not speak.

He puts his hand on her waist and leans in to kiss her hello. She nuzzles closer to his neck and inhales deeply. When he pulls away, he raises his eyebrows at her. “Oh, sorry,” she says, touching her nose. “I think I have a bit of a cold.”

*
The moments he is gone. The times he is not with you. It kills you to think of where he could be then. You don’t want to imagine it.

This is what could have happened any one of those nights you did not see him, those times he is late, keeps you waiting.

After work, we take the subway to his apartment. It is full, so we have to stand. He keeps one hand on my ass during the ride. An old woman sitting behind us exhales loudly and turns in her seat to avoid watching. She’s one of those types that won’t say anything when something bothers her, too polite to mention such things, but sighs dramatically to let us know she sees what we’re doing and we should stop. He won’t. He leans over and kisses my neck and earlobe.

I’m sitting on his counter when he comes home from work. Or I’m in the shower. Or lying on the sofa. Or in his bed. The one you are coming to think of as yours.

I’m still there when you buzz up. He presses the intercom button and tells you he will be right down. You huddle in the doorway, wrapped in your winter coat. He grabs his keys and disappears. I watch you from the window. I watch you kiss him hello, watch you take his arm or his hand or watch him put his hand on your back as you walk away. When I no longer see you, I slip on my coat and lock the door.

In all of them, he says your name. He tells me your secrets. The things about you that you despise. Each pulls him further into this hypnosis.

*

She is sure. She knows there is someone.
One morning, on his way out the door, he pauses and calls back to the bedroom where she is still lying in bed. “Will you get my dry cleaning for me? I have a late meeting and won’t get there before the store closes.”

She opens her eyes and rolls over, pressing her cheek into the sheets. “Yeah,” she yells back. “See you tonight.” She hears the door click shut, and she stares at the wall for a long time.

She almost runs the whole way to the store. She gives his name to the man behind the counter. He smiles and retrieves three shirts draped in plastic.

“Thank you,” she says, and hurriedly adds, “Did all the stains come out?”

The man behind the counter looks worried. “What stains? There were no stains.”

“Oh, nothing,” she says. “Wrong shirt.” She blushes and hurries out of the shop.

* 

I know the way you look for me, Nadia. The frantic way you search. The signs you watch for. Those signs you will not see.

But so many times, if you would have turned around, looked up, you would have seen me. We could have met. You don’t know the times I’ve seen you, the times I’ve glimpsed you on the other side of the street, turned, and followed. Those moments you thought were private, when no one was watching. I was there. I have seen them.

I know that you look for me. But I will always be a part of your imagination, that suspicion that nags you, the hint of something foreign in the room. I will never be anything tangible, no real sign, as long as you are searching.

*
They walk up the stairs to his apartment after dinner and a play. It is a cold night; even in the stairwell, she can see her breath when she exhales. She leans against his back as he opens the door. Once inside, she steps out of her heels and exhales, rolling her neck back and forth. She raises her hand to her temple.

“Do you have a headache, Nadia?” he asks.

She nods and takes off her coat, hangs it on the coat rack.

He pulls a bottle of aspirin from the cupboards in the kitchen and fills a small glass with water. He hands them to her. “Why don’t you lie down for a bit? I’m going to take a shower.”

“Good idea.”

He smiles and touches her earring as he kisses her. He walks down the hall, pulling his scarf over his head.

She swallows two of the pills and gulps down the rest of the water. In the bedroom, she peels off her nylons first, then undresses fully. She walks to his dresser and opens the tee shirt drawer. She pulls one out, slips her arms in, and pulls her head through. She leans over to shut the drawer.

Lying between the stacks of tee shirts is a tube of lipstick. Her hands seem detached from her body as she picks it up and holds it in her palm. She looks toward the bathroom. The water is running, but the door is still ajar. She takes the cap off the tube and twists the bottom so the color rises. It is bright. Dramatic. Unashamed.

This is not hers. She does not wear lipstick, would not wear something so bold.

She kneels and jerks the drawer open further. She buries her arms in the shirts and feels through the fabric. She does not know what she is looking for. She stands and pulls
his sock drawer from the dresser and dumps it on the bed. She stacks each pair of underwear on the top of the dresser. There is nothing. She sweeps it back in the drawer with one motion.

She pushes open the closet door and almost crawls under the clothes. She knocks over the hamper and pulls out all the dirty clothes, turns the pant pockets inside out. Nothing. She stuffs the clothes back in a sets it upright.

She pulls the blankets completely off the bed, lies on the floor and looks underneath it. Her knees hit the wooden floor hard. He calls, “Honey, are you okay?”

“Fine,” she yells, and crawls over the bed to the nightstand. She pulls open the drawer. Inside, in the back, there is a receipt for a dinner for two that she did not attend.

The water turns off and she hears the shower curtain being pulled back. She shuts the drawer and lies down on the bed, the receipt still in her hand. He opens the bathroom door. She lies on her side and stuffs the receipt between the mattress and box spring.

He walks into the room and steps over the blankets still on the floor. She rolls on her back to watch him. He pauses in front of his dresser, picks something up, and turns around. “When did you start wearing lipstick?”

“Oh,” she says. “I didn’t. It was a free sample.”

He drops it again and smiles. “How’s your head?”


* 

_He knows you suspect. He’s starting to get nervous._

_Nadia, when will you quit? When will you give up? The harder you look, the more he knows. And one day, he will have to make his choice. And he will choose you._
What more can she do? She cannot prove a crime, an infidelity. She, too, has let looks linger too long, has woken in a sweat after dreaming of a former lover. She has let those names rise in an empty room. She is sure that if he looks hard enough, there would be remnants of a past she says no longer exists.

He claims to love her. That alone should be enough.

*  

I’ve lied to you, Nadia. The night of the going away party was not the first time I saw you. This is the first time.

The night it began. We had gone out to a movie, a black and white movie in an old theater. A rare, but real, date. When the movie ended he escorted me out quickly, more quickly than usual. He helped me with my coat in the lobby. He hailed a cab, told me he was sorry, kissed me goodbye, and closed the door.

I made the driver pull over a block later. I got out and walked back to the theater. When I stood across the street, I knew. You were standing on the sidewalk. You held your coat together, your scarf flying out behind you in the wind. You turned fully toward me, and I saw him step up behind you. He must have touched you, because you stopped. You stared at the ground and smiled.

That was the moment I knew. That was the moment I was forgotten.

*  

When it snows, the flakes melt as soon as it touches the ground. It only accumulates on the grass, in parks, places the sun doesn’t touch. The streets and sidewalks stay wet and turn to ice overnight. In the morning, an old man sprinkles salt
over the few stairs in front of her lover’s apartment building. His only movement is his arm, shaking the recycled milk carton clutched in his fist.

Nadia says good morning to him as she steps out of the building. He does not respond. She scoots around him and carefully steps onto the sidewalk, trying not to slip. The crystals of salt crunch under her shoes.

She is wearing only a sweater. Her winter coat is hanging upstairs on the coat rack. She stretches her arms out in front of her as she walks. The sun warms her shoulders and back through the fabric.

She takes the subway downtown to his office. They plan to have lunch together before she goes to work for the afternoon. She hums softly and crosses her legs. An old lady sits across from her, staring. The woman sighs loudly when Nadia begins humming.

I smoke as I walk back to my office from my lunch break. I know it will be a long afternoon, and I won’t have a chance to slip away. I stole a pack of cigarettes from another secretary’s desk when she wasn’t looking. They’re strong and taste awful. The smoke burns my chest and nose, but I hold it in for a long time before I exhale. I wonder if I’m going to see him tonight. He didn’t come over last week. I flick of the butt of the cigarette into the street.

I pause at the side entrance to the building, the glass door at the street level instead of the revolving door at the top of three stairs. My coffee is hot through the cardboard sleeve. I set it on the mailbox, shake another cigarette out of the box, and light it. I tip my head back against the building and close my eyes as I exhale. The afternoon is
already tedious. The back of my tongue tastes like ash. I can’t smoke this thing. I drop it on the ground and jerk the door open.

I punch the elevator button twice before it lights up. My office is on the sixth floor, and I refuse to take the stairs. Two other people are also waiting for the elevator. The man, a tall guy in a suit, is talking loudly on his cell phone. I look up through the glass elevator shaft to see what floor the cart is on.

The door opens, and we all step in. The man keeps talking on his phone, pausing to laugh loudly while he punches the third floor button.

“Oh God, shut up.” I moan.

He stops talking, lowers his phone, and looks at me. The woman is trying not to laugh.

“Seriously.” I say. “We don’t want to hear that.”

He keeps staring at me, but hangs up and doesn’t say anything. The woman swallows her giggles all the way to third. They both step off, and the man looks over his shoulder at me. I stare at him and realize I left my coffee on the mailbox outside. I punch the button to go back down to get it.

Nadia climbs the three stairs to the revolving door. There is a glass elevator shaft, and the elevator itself is made of glass too. She stares upward and sees it coming down. She doesn’t push the button.

The doors slide open, and she almost collides with a woman trying to get off.

“Oh, sorry,” Nadia mumbles. The woman jerks her head up, lips pursed, but she doesn’t
speak. Nadia slides past the woman into the elevator. The woman’s head turns, and she steps back into the elevator. Nadia touches the button, and seven lights up.

She stares upward at the numbers above the doors, the other woman in the elevator staring at her.

_The doors open, and when I try to get off, I almost run into some woman trying to get on. I look up, and it is you._

_Yes, Nadia, you._

_You step to one side of the elevator cart, and I know I’m staring at you, but I can’t stop. I pull myself back in and the doors close. You touch a button. I don’t. I glance at the key pad, but I don’t know why I did. There is only one reason why you would be here. Seventh floor. You are coming to see him._

_You stare at the little numbers over the door, lighting one by one, ding each time we come to a new floor. Someone gets on at third and stands between us. I can’t see you clearly. There is only an outline of you, your shadow against the steel doors._

_The person gets off at fourth. I cross my arms over my chest and lean against the glass paneled wall. You are trying not to look at me._

_Look at me Nadia. This is your chance._

The man who gets on the elevator at third stand between Nadia and the woman. Nadia exhales softly and looks out of the glass elevator. If she looks up, she can see his office. She cranes her neck slightly so she can see the woman when she looks back.
toward the doors. The woman is looking at her through the man. The man gets off at fourth.

The woman leans back against the wall of the elevator and crosses her arms. Her knuckles strain as she grips her biceps.

Nadia stares at the numbers. “The weather is getting nicer, isn’t it?”

_I smile and show too many teeth. “Yeah.”_

The woman’s smile is strange, too large. Nadia shifts and touches her hair. “I’m so glad winter is almost over.”

_“Yeah. I hate winter. You?”_

“Well, not really. Or I wouldn’t be living here.”

_“Maybe I should move.”_

Nadia looks up at the numbers again and cannot think of what to say. The other woman mutters something harshly and punches the button to make the elevator stop. The cart seems to shake on the cables. Nadia grabs the steel handle. The woman faces her, her mouth in a hard line.

_“Is your name Nadia?”_

Nadia’s grip tightens on the handle. “What?”
I watch your fingers curl harder around the handle. You try not to look at me. You tilt your face toward the floor, but your eyes dart upward. I want to tell you who I am. “Is your name Nadia?”

“Yes.” Nadia’s voice shakes.

Your eyes are blue. That is something he never told me about you. There is a small, bare line in your eyebrow. He didn’t tell me about that either. Maybe he didn’t notice. I point at it. “What happened?”

Nadia touches the scar with one finger. “I don’t really know. It happened when I was too young to remember it.”

Nadia watches the woman rub her hands over her face, then lean over and press something on the key pad. The elevator begins climbing again.

“You’re very pretty,” I tell you. I step toward you.

“Thank you,” Nadia murmurs. Her chest begins to tighten. The woman steps forward again and touches Nadia’s hair and earrings.

I rub my thumb over the tear-shaped earring I know he gave you. “And these are lovely.”
Nadia steps back against the wall as the elevator stops on the seventh floor. She looks at the woman one more time before stepping out. As she does, she hears him say her name. He is walking toward the elevator. “Just hold it,” he says. “We can leave now.”

*Our lover puts both his hands on your waist and kisses you. “Is everything okay?” he asks.*

You nod and touch your face. Your hand is shaking. “Fine,” you tell him.

He smiles and mentions a restaurant for lunch. You tilt your face up at him and smile. You have to raise yourself up on your toes to kiss him. Neither of you notice when I press the button and the elevator starts descending.

*He rolls his head back and forth, says something about work, about being tired. As he turns his head, he glances at me for only a moment. If he sees me, his expression doesn’t betray it. He asks about your day and puts his hand on the small of your back.*

The elevator stops once more before the ground floor. A crowd of people get on. I step to the back of the cart, behind you. I am so close you could feel my breath on your skin. I look at his hand on you. I touch it softly with one finger. He doesn’t move. You are telling him a story about a woman on the subway.

*The elevator doors open. You look up and walk out. I watch you for a moment before following.*

You walk down the stairs and toward the street. He holds your hand as he hails a cab. You suggest walking. He turns toward you and says something I cannot hear. The car pulls up next to the curb. He opens the door for you. You duck into the backseat. He sits next to you and closes the door.
I can see you through the window, talking to him and gesturing wildly. I imagine you are telling him about the woman you met in the elevator who scared you and told you that you were pretty and asked about the scar in your eyebrow. I imagine him asking, “What scar?” You touch it with one finger, and he leans forward to kiss it. He asks how it happened, and you tell him there is no story.

I walk to the curb and stand next to the car as it starts pulling away. You are laughing. You reach up and touch your ear. It is bare.

I rub your earring between my thumb and forefinger. You look through the back window of the cab. Our eyes meet, and you know.
What the Body Forgets

I clutch her hand and sit on the side of her bed. Her body is small, so small. Her legs thin, her hips thinner. As if she had melted away.

My sister paces the hallway. She has called our brother in Michigan. I hear bits of their conversation as she walks by the room. I don’t know, Emmett. Yes, the doctor has been here. There could be more tests this afternoon. No, Mara is with her now.

He will resent me because I am here. No, he already does.

Agnes, my sister, called me this morning while it was still dark. An accident. She did not know what our mother was doing out so early. Five-thirty on a November morning, our mother in her winter coat and stocking cap in her car. A truck driver saw red lights blinking on the side of the road and stopped. Her car in the ditch. Her hands still clutching the steering wheel, her foot still pumping the brake. Red flashed bright over the snow. That is what saved her.

My sister and I sat side by side in the waiting room while she was in surgery, while she was in recovery. I knew it was Emmett that my sister wanted with her. I knew she called me because I was close. Even Agnes could not do this by herself. The waiting. Even in silence, our shoulders touching, my foot next to her leg, that closeness brought her comfort.
An accident.

I lean forward to her. *What were you doing, Mother?*

There is an IV in her hand and monitors I do not understand. Little beeps. Green lights flickering on tiny screens. She is not yet breathing on her own.

She would hate this. When she wakes, she will hate that she is being confined to a hospital bed, that she is being fed intravenously. She will demand her own clothes, coffee. She will want to know where her purse and coat are. Her car.

Agnes comes back into the room. *Emmett is on his way*, she says. She sinks into a chair and crosses her legs. She reminds me of our mother sometimes. The same dark hair, the same tired eyes and slump to the shoulders. Agnes nods toward the bed. *Anything?*

I shake my head, and we both look at Mother. Her hair has been graying lately, thin streaks of it through the black. I reach forward and brush it from her face. She always refused to cut it short, but we will have to now. Near the top of her head, there is a bald patch where they had to shave her hair away to stitch the skin back together.

*I don’t know why she was out.* Agnes puts one palm to her forehead and leans back in the chair. *At her age.*

Sixty-two. Not old, really. She has always seemed younger than her age. Since our father’s death, Mother and Agnes have been fighting about her will, other things. Agnes wants her to get her things in order, wants to know about nursing homes, who will get power of attorney, if she has thought about a living will or a DNR.

*I’m not leaving*, our mother told me. *She can’t get rid of me yet.*

Agnes drops her hand to her lap and looks at me fully for the first time since I’ve been here. *I wish Daddy was here.*
I did not agree. There are some secrets that change everything.

* 

Daddy.

The man our mother married so young. She was 20 years old, working in a department store in Sioux City. She hemmed pants and made alterations on suit coats as men waited. The store specialized in alterations done in thirty minutes or less. She had been helping her mother with seamstress work since our mother was ten years old.

Mother told us the story like it was a fairy tale. August 1965. A young man stood in front of the three mirrors with his arms out. She cuffed the sleeves of the suit coat and pinned them. She hadn’t wanted to look at his face. He was tanned and boyishly cute, a wide smile. He wanted to talk, tried to make conversation to ease his nerves. There was a war. It was the easiest thing to discuss. He was of draft age, of course, and he was scared. He admitted it. He didn’t want to go.

She made the alterations, and the young man came back thirty minutes later. He blushed and asked if he could take her out for dinner that night.

Four days later, our mother and the young man drove toward Nevada in his father’s car. They crossed Nebraska in silence, day fading into night, crossing into Colorado. They drove through the mountains in the dark, and their combined fear allowed them to speak. Mountains became desert. They drove with the windows down. Air shimmered over the road. The vinyl seats stuck to the back of her legs. In her suitcase was her best dress. The suit she altered for him was laid out over the back seat.

The lights of the city dazzled them both. They checked into a hotel. He dressed in his suit and waited in the lobby while she got ready. She wore her long dark hair in a
French braid. Her dress was blue. In the lobby, he handed her three white roses. One was pinned to his lapel.

They were married that night, August 26, 1965. It was a Thursday. They tried three different chapels before they found one with an opening. It was the last night that, according to a Presidential order, a man could improve his draft status by being married. One hundred seventy-one couples were married in Las Vegas that night. Mr. and Mrs. Patrick Callahan was one of them.

*

When the nurse comes in, Agnes goes into the hall again to call home. Her two daughters, Callie and Sam, my nieces, have convinced her to let them stay home from school. I hear her promising them that Grandma is okay, that she will wake up soon.

I stand against the wall. The nurse checks my mother’s vitals and writes them down on the clipboard she is carrying. I want to ask her when my mother will wake up, when her eyelids will flutter open.

The nurse smiles at me as she leaves the room. I cannot speak or smile back. I want to tell her I shouldn’t be here. Or This is the most my sister and I have spoken in months.

I stand next to Mother and touch her hair. Agnes pauses in the doorway, glances at me, and moves on. She probably hasn’t told her daughters that I’m here.

I bend over and whisper to our mother I’m here. I came. Mother, I know.

In the early morning, my sister’s voice was on the phone in the dark. Mara, it sounds bad. I don’t know what it means. I don’t understand the things they’re telling me.
I dressed and drove across the border from South Dakota to Nebraska, Nebraska to Iowa. One city dropped on the junction of three states. My gloved hands twisted around the steering wheel. The bridge over the Missouri was still lit up, bright neon blue and glowing. Below, the edges of the river were freezing, but the water was still swift in the middle. When I was a child, the river would have been frozen by now. Our mother would have taken Agnes, Emmett, and I ice-skating on it already, a secret we shared with her, a secret from our father. He was sure that one of us would find the thin spot and slip through, be carried away under the ice.

I wonder sometimes what other secrets she kept from him. If he knew. If, by both of them refusing to say it, by it remaining unsaid, it became untrue.

* 

The man my mother married was still drafted. They returned to Iowa from Nevada, married, but suddenly shy. He took her to meet his parents. My wife. A shock and a blessing. Perhaps she would keep him from the war. She could be the one to keep him safe.

They set up a small apartment in Sioux City in sight of the river. At night, she lay next to a man she barely knew. She hadn’t considered what would come after the wedding. It frightened her sometimes.

But she could not keep the draft card away. He was married, yes, but he was young. Needed. She went downtown to watch him board the bus, to wave goodbye, to play the role. She kissed him. Her tears surprised them both.

He returned in the winter wounded. She saw the scars when he undressed, and she turned away, embarrassed. She embraced him, curled up next to his body in bed. When
he woke in the morning, she was not there. She saw him look out the window toward her, a small figure gliding across the ice on the river. He ran down to it, shouting, Ella, Ella! He stood on the edge of the Missouri, and she skated to him, laughing. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. She decided in that moment she would stay married to him.

_I don’t know why_, she would tell me later, when I was seventeen. _He broke my heart. The way he reached for me broke my heart. He just wanted to keep me safe._

She was twenty-four when she gave birth to my sister, twenty-eight with my brother. Who could say if she loved him? She gave him his children and never asked for anything. Was that enough?

It was ten years later, at thirty-eight, that she gave birth to me. A mistake. A miracle. No one knows.

_Mother, I want to ask, were you ever happy? Mother, did you love him?_

* Did the nurse say anything? Agnes tucks her phone back into her purse. She doesn’t wait for me to answer. _The girls are just going mad. They want to come down here to see her. I don’t think it will do much good, really._

I shrug my shoulders. I don’t want to tell her that I want the girls to come here. My nieces. I no longer know how old they are, nor would I recognize them if they walked into the room now. Agnes stopped sending their school pictures two years ago.

How can I explain the rift between my siblings and me? They have been wary of me since the beginning, from the moment I appeared as a baby in our mother’s arms. Agnes, at fourteen, was embarrassed. She knew about sex, and she knew the product of
sex. Emmett, then ten, was angry that I was a girl. When our father told him Emmett, a sister, he kicked our father and hid in the bathroom, crying. When I was growing up, my father brought the story up each year on my birthday, smiling between Emmett and me.

But more than proof that our parents knew about sex, more than being a girl, I stole our parents’ attention. Could it be as simple as that? They knew I was different than them. The freckles and fair coloring. Thin in the shoulders and narrow-hipped. I looked nothing like my siblings. She looks like my mother our mother would tell people. She’s been reincarnated in my little girl.

Our grandmother, my mother’s mother, had died before my parents were married. My mother had no photographs to offer, nothing to compare. The river had flooded the basement of her parents’ home too many times for anything to be left.

Later, there would be other sins. Small iniquities to count, to store away. But nothing was as great as the first.

* 

In September, before my mother’s accident, a man walked up to me at a bar in Sioux Falls and placed his hand on my shoulder. Mara Callahan?

I tipped my shoulder and turned. His hand hung in mid-air. Do I know you?

He smiled. We were married once. We stood under the big tree on the side of the playground by the swings. Do you remember?

* 

The doctor steps into the doorway of our mother’s room. Agnes stands when he says her name. I rise and move to stand next to her. She glances at me for just a moment. Doctor, this is my sister, Mara.
He shakes my hand. My sister and I stand side by side. I cross my arms and wait.

*I’m sorry. There is some brain damage. We can’t tell the extent quite yet.*

He shows us a picture of the inside of my mother’s head. He tells us it is from a CT scan she had earlier in the day. He points to a specific place. *This area here.* His pen makes circles around my mother’s brain. *The damage is here. There is a chance that the damage may have forced her brain into an advanced stage of Alzheimer’s. We would need to do a PET scan to be sure.*

Agnes snorts and her hands flutter. *My mother does not have Alzheimer’s.*

The doctor looks at me. I shrug. When he speaks again, it’s to me. *I spoke to your mother’s primary care physician. She was already displaying the early symptoms. You may not have recognized them.*

Agnes touches her temple. *I don’t understand. Early symptoms?*

The doctor looks down. *She may not have wanted you to know.*

He looks exhausted. His shirtsleeves are rolled up to his elbows and his hair is mussed. His eyes are calm. I believe him when he says he is sorry. There is no ring.

He shakes our hands again. Agnes walks to the window and stares, one hand against her chest. I follow the doctor out of the room.

*I’ll be back later today to check on her.* He tells me. *They can page me from the nurse’s station if you need anything.*

*Thank you.*

I watch him walk away and wonder if I had not come when my sister called, if he had not seen my now but met me later, how would it end? If he approached me in a bar and bought me a drink. If I let him touch my thigh under the bar, press against me when
dancing, if I led him out to the parking lot. If he touched my face in the front seat of my
car, if he put his hands in my hair. Would he have felt in me the woman who lay bleeding
and exposed on his operating table a few hours before?

* 

The man told me we were once married. He smiled and I barely recognized him. I
married maybe three boys during elementary school. He could have been any one of
them.

He sat next to me at the bar and bought me a drink, then another. He told me he
rents a house on the east side of town, a two bedroom with a backyard. He ordered me a
drink each time he finished one. Glasses lined the bar in front of us.

*My family moved to Billings in eighth grade,* he told me. I smiled like I
remembered. By eighth grade, I didn’t talk to any of the boys I’d married on the
playground. I wore mini-skirts and pocketed my sister’s lipstick when I visited her house,
filled my backpack with her husband’s beer. I wanted a boyfriend with a car and
cigarettes.

*Montana treated you well,* I said. He turned to face me. He had a small scar on his
lower lip I could only see when he smiled. *I probably would have had a crush on you if
you stayed.*

He laughed a little and put his hand on my thigh. *I would have taken you driving
on Friday nights. I would have taken you down on Fourth Street to the biker bars to try to
scare you.* His fingers moved up my leg.

He gave me quarters for the jukebox, and we danced, our hips rolling together.
My hands reached up his back. His pulled me tight against him and his hand brushed my
breast. I stared at his face and tried to push it into my past. I wanted to ask him, *Who are you?*

When the song is over, I led him out to the parking lot and we sat in my front seat. We kissed like we’re teenagers, and he said *Let me show you my place.*

I know what I should have said and what I should have done, but my decision was made when I let him buy me the first drink, when I felt the throb in my belly as he pressed his hips into me while dancing. His hand was on my shoulder. His mouth was against my ear. *Please.*

*  

It will take my brother nearly twelve hours to drive straight through from Michigan to Sioux City. After she talks to Emmett again, Agnes calls her daughters to tell them to ready the guest room for him. She does not mention me, does not ask me to stay. She must think I won’t, not once Emmett comes. I have never been the responsible one, the calm one.

*Do you want coffee?* I ask. She nods. I walk down the hall and take the elevator downstairs to the cafeteria.

The last time I was in this hospital was when my father died two years ago. He had a heart attack at home, lay on the floor of my mother’s house, unconscious, not breathing. My mother stood over him and yelled, *You stupid bastard, why are you doing this now?* She never thought to kneel beside him, to pinch his nose, to exhale into his mouth until his chest swelled with her breath.
Instead, she slapped him and yelled *What are you doing to me?* A paramedic pulled her outside and into the ambulance. She called me first. *He’s gone and had a goddamn heart attack. We’re going to St. Luke’s.*

It was me who called my sister and brother. I stopped in front of my sister’s house and ushered her outside to my car. It was me who whispered soothing words while she wept. My brother, then in Omaha, called from his car phone. *I’m on my way.* I imagined his car speeding up the interstate. *Be careful,* I said.

Maybe it was me who made the final decision. Maybe I was the one who looked at the doctor and nodded our consent, me who put the pen in my mother’s hand and helped her sign. Maybe I was the only one who did not cry when they said, *Too much time without oxygen. He may never wake up.*

*

In September in Sioux Falls, I sat in the front seat of my car, kissing a man I only knew as a boy. He touched my face and put his hands in my hair. *I want to show you my place,* he said. He put his mouth next to my ear. *Please?*

We drove to the house he rents. His hand massaged the inside of my thigh. It was raining, and the windows fogged. Headlights appeared as a flash, a blur. His house is on a hill, and the car rolled a little when we stopped.

We passed a bottle of beer back and forth, and he laughed as he led me down the hallway. *The wedding night we didn’t have,* he said. I pulled his shirt from his shoulders and discovered a tattoo on his shoulder blade. He touched me as if it would burn him, as if my spine and hips and ankles would sear his fingertips. He murmured *Beautiful* against
my belly. His pillows smelled of rain. His skin was warm. My hair was wet and against my face. I shivered.

*

I buy two cups of coffee, shove packets of sugar and little cups of cream into my pockets, and take the elevator back upstairs. Agnes is almost asleep in the chair. She starts when I enter the room, but she accepts the cup gratefully. I line one of the tables with sugar packets and creamer. Agnes almost smiles.

The doctor returns and decides to do a PET scan anyway. He says things I barely understand: *frontal and temporal lobes. The cerebral cortex. Neurofibrillary tangles.*

My sister is angry. She crosses her arms and presses her thin lips together. *And how would brain trauma make her get Alzheimer’s anyway?*

The doctor looks at me for rescue. I say *Agnes.* I say, *We don’t know. He’s trying.*

It is easy for her to be angry at him, angry at someone who should know the answers but doesn’t. He is a convenient target. I touch her arm and she follows me to the waiting room while they prep my mother for the scan. Agnes sinks into a chair, and she looks old there. She shakes her head slowly and tilts her face up to me. Her eyes glisten. *Is it wrong to be mad at her? I mean, what was she doing! There is no reason. There is no reason.*

She sniffs and puts her hand to her mouth. Two nurses wheel our mother down the hallway, draped in a white sheet.

*

She stayed married to him. She bore him two children. But who can say if she loved him?
Listen. There was a man once. Just once. Her daughter was thirteen, her son nine. She had been a faithful, good wife. These are the things I imagine her telling herself.

When the man approached her on the riverbank, she was not scared. She took his hand and he led her across the ice. He drove her to his house. She saw the pictures of his wife, saw her things: shoes by the door, mascara in the bathroom. The man pulled off her mittens and unwound her scarf from her neck, laid them on the radiator. He knelt and untied her shoes, set them neatly on the rug. He undid the row of buttons on her sweater.

Just once. This is what she thought. She deserved one time. The quivering in her legs was unfamiliar. These were things she wanted to feel.

He led her upstairs and made love to her in daylight. The blinds were rolled open, and sun fell in slants across his back, her face.

Her children were in school, her husband at work. No one would know.

*Just once.*

He drove her back to the river. In the car, he laid his hand over hers on the front seat. She laced her ice skates and glided across the ice. She knew the man watched her.

Who knows if she loved either of them?

At home, she showered and made dinner. No one noticed the change. She ladled soup into bowls and felt his lips on her neck. She did the dishes, helped her daughter with her homework, ran a bath for her son and put his pajamas on the bathroom counter.

In bed that night, it was his breathing she heard, his bright eyes she saw when she closed her own.

*
I stared at the man I knew as a boy as he slept and tested the names I remember against his face.

Adam Baker was the first. I married him because he asked. We didn’t touch the whole time, but later, in art class, he held my hand under the table.

London Allister was a shy boy who liked dinosaurs and bugs. His hair was always parted neatly. London and I were married in the fall after the leaves turned. He wore a neon colored jacket. Leaves fell around us as we said “I do.”

The last boy, Joey Leonard, married me on a Friday. He was the only one who tried to kiss me afterward. When I wouldn’t let him, he married my best friend the next Monday. *You can have him*, I told her, a line I’d heard on TV.


When the rain stopped, I slipped from the man’s bed. I dressed in the dark and walked to his kitchen. I ate bread, cold chicken. I drank milk from the carton. I slipped on the coat that was hanging on the back of a chair, took two beers from the fridge and put them in the coat pockets. I drank them on my way home through damp streets and the hazy glow from the streetlights.

In the morning, I still couldn’t find his name, couldn’t see his face. I remembered his hand on my leg, a tattoo on his shoulder blade.

*AdamLondonJoey. My first loves.*

* 

Emmett was not there when our father died. Agnes and I helped our mother into his hospital room and took turns kissing his cheek and telling him goodbye. I touched
Agnes’s elbow and she followed me into the hall. We stood outside the door and tried not to listen to our mother’s cries, tried not to hear the things she whispered, that she offered as sentiment. Apology.

Confession.

Agnes moved down the hall, leaned against wall, crossed her arms and pressed them into her belly. She couldn’t listen to the things our mother said.

I’m sorry, our mother’s voice repeated. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.

*


My husbands. My little loves.

I wonder if they know a man has stolen parts of them, that I met that man, and he gave me this. I cannot imagine any of them grown up. As fathers.

In late September, after I slept with a man I knew as a boy, I waited. I sat on the edge of the bathtub, clutching the toilet with one hand and a pregnancy test in the other. I thought of my mother.

I imagined her in a doctor’s office. I imagined her waiting in a paper gown. She folded her hands in her lap and clutched them so close together her fingers hurt. The doctor opened the door, beaming, and said Congratulations. She dissolved into tears.

A miracle. A mistake. This inside her. Which did she think?

Which will I think? I looked down. The test in my hand was positive.

*
My mother could not sleep that night after we brought her home from the hospital. She refused to talk, refused to eat. Agnes turned down her sheets while I laid out her nightgown and bathroom.

*Mother,* Agnes said. *Why don’t you try to get some rest?*

She looked between us and spoke the only words she would for the rest of the night. *How do you think I could sleep without him beside me?*

I sat on her bed while Agnes went downstairs. She stared out of the window. *Mother,* I said. *What you said. Is it true?* She closed her eyes and did not answer.

I heard voices in the kitchen, Agnes and Emmett talking quietly between each other. *The things Mom said. I never suspected. No, Mara thought it was best.*

Something slammed, and I heard Emmett yell, *Then it wasn’t Mara’s decision to make!*

There are some things your body knows, some things you do not need to be told to know it is true. In her silence, I knew.

*  

I am six weeks pregnant and haven’t confessed when my mother drives her car into a ditch at five-thirty one November morning. My sister sits beside me in the waiting room, asleep on my shoulder. I think of shaking her awake, of whispering *Agnes, here.* I would gesture at my belly.

They bring my mother back to her room, and the doctor follows. He beckons to me when he sees my sister sleeping. I rise and leave her there to rest, and I follow him into her room.
The doctor rubs his hand through his hair. *I’m sorry.* He says. *Your mother’s brain scans are consistent with the patterns we see in Alzheimer’s patients. However, we won’t know the extent of the damage until she wakes up.*

I cross my arms and stare at my mother on the bed. *So she does have Alzheimer’s.*

*Look, Mara.* The doctor has kind eyes, and he half-smiles at me. *To be honest, we don’t know. The only way to diagnose Alzheimer’s positively is through an autopsy. She was showing early symptoms before the accident. But there is a chance that once some of the inflammation subsides, she’ll be fine.*

I nod. They have brushed my mother’s hair away from her face. I move to her side and touch her cheek. *Thank you.*

The doctor leaves. I sit on the edge of the bed and take her hand. She looks so little like the mother I remember as a girl.

I put her hand against my belly. *Here. A child.* It is more of a dream than a memory. His hand was on my shoulder. He told me we’d been married once.

*Adam. London. Joey.* Sweet boys. They crawled out of my past, they grew up. They left impressions on my skin but would not stay. They gave me this. My memory. My proof.

*Daddy.* Her husband became my father. This is what she told us all. He wouldn’t have ever suspected. This was a secret that would be safe.

*I know.* I was the reason she could not forget. Her own miracle, her mistake, incarnate. How can I be sure?

*Mother.* I want to tell her she is lucky. We both have secrets that haunt us. But she has found a way to erase them.
To forget.
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