The Obituary Writer

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The obituary writer

by

Corrie Rhoda Byrne

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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Program of Study Committee:
David Zimmerman, Major Professor
Stephen Pett
Linda Shenk
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With thanks to Megan, for walking with me in the graveyard,

to David, for his guidance, good cheer, and the pickled okra,

to Linda, for helping me open the gift of the science and structure of language,

and to Ben, Dean, Deb, Steve and Susan for their feedback, craft, patience and good humor.

“Because in the absence of a mindful creator and ultimate judge, there is no such thing as ‘morality.’ There is only pickling—and its consequences.”

“Craig’s Artisanal Pickles Philosophy” by Lucas Klaus
(originally published on McSweeney’s)
Marian Zuckerman writes obituaries. The problem is that she doesn't write true obituaries. She writes her clients deaths how she thinks those clients would like to have died, or should have died, or how the client's family think they should have died. A heat attack on the toilet becomes an heroic dash into a burning building. One more drunk night behind the wheel becomes a tragic fall through the ice while ice skating. A garage full of gas fumes becomes a snack for an orca whale at the zoo. But not everyone is so understanding of Marian's view of life and death, and a law suit is waiting on her door step, along with several Bibles. Marian's life is thrown into chaos when her job as an Obituary writer is questioned, her home is threatened, and her mother comes back into her life. She moves to Maine where she meets a quirky cast of characters, some of whom will become closer to her than she ever expected.

What starts as Marian's attempt to search for her deceased husband, escape her mother, and deal with the law suit in peace becomes, ultimately, a journey about piecing yourself back together, finding family even if they're not related by blood, and giving voice to people who don't have one--especially when that person is yourself.
THE OBITUARY WRITER
When I call Gary Shamonski’s number I hear the crashing and bangings of a construction site in the background. I offer him my services. He takes his time responding and I keep my body very still, so still, as if a frothing raccoon were in my front yard during the day. He says he’s not sure. I say it can be a good thing; talking out an obit can help with closure. He tells me that if I’m so certain I can come to where he’s working and see for myself that he doesn’t need an obit. I don’t think he should be working, at a time like this, but everyone has different ways of handling grief. Some people pick off all their cuticles, or sleep for days, or stop showering. Some people get four autopsies. I say I’ll see him there. He hangs up.

Penn Station in Baltimore is all white stone, magnificent mounted clocks, columns, arches and grand window panes that have been divided up so that they can be shuttered and put air conditioning units into from the inside. A perpetual row of taxis surrounds the bizarre 80’s era male/female statue that pulses neon from the tips of the fingers, and I wend my way around dais, around the taxis, through the doors and atriums, and let the high space swallow me up: the spotted marble floor, the high ceilings, the stained glass skylights with circles and square details.
The people, sitting on high backed brown wooden pews that are often covered in spilled soda or puke, wait with heads down, keeping their luggage close to them. I know Gary Shamonski won’t be here, he’ll be down on one of the tracks under construction. I spot a mother daughter duo, obvious for the distance they have apart from each other and also their identical baggage.

Linda and Lydia Lamson died by spontaneous tornado damage yesterday in a downtown Baltimore neighborhood. They were the only casualties of this freak weather occurrence; bystanders report that the two were argu-walking (as opposed to dance-walking, the fitness sensation that’s sweeping the nation) disrupting this once peaceful area with their accusations. They are survived by Lars Lamson, Linda’s husband and Lydia’s father, as well as Luke Lamson, Lydia’s younger brother, both of whom seem to be doing well in the face of such a tragic loss. Neither Lars nor Luke are up for talking or making many comments, and seem to be taking the time to catch up on their fly fishing.

Family and friends are directed to send donations to the Mini Rex Rabbit preservation society of New Jersey, of which both women were active members.

Several independent clusters of teenagers dot all over the atrium, most of them wrapped around each other in various ways: heads in laps, hands in hands, sitting in laps, massaging of backs, playing with hair. The business men are marked for their thin and heavily pressed pants as well as their cell phones. Raphael, a regular here, is making his way in between the aisles, holding out his hand, his dread locks hanging down his back, his legs and too-large-pants dragging across the floor as he asks for anything anyone can spare. I’ve give him money before; Richard gave him money first, talked to him first, and then I did, after Richard died.

Raphael Gavroche passed this Thursday last, in Sinai Hospital in Baltimore, due to complications from Pneumonia. Raphael frequented many locations in the Baltimore area, and those who took the time to speak to him found that he had an extensive knowledge of banjo playing, tin can shooting, and Alien Probe Conspiracy Theories. Residing almost exclusively in homeless shelters around Baltimore, Raphael was said to be a friend to most, and a pest to many, but part of Baltimore none the less. He will be sorely missed.

Please donate to Nehemiah House, 410.882.2217 in his honor.

I give Raphael a couple dollars, and let him tell me about the new song he’s learned—a song maligning short people, how they have tiny hands, tiny voices, need to be picked up to say
hello and that no one loves them. He says he can sing it because he’s short. He is, actually; I
stand several inches above him even in flats. I tell him to sing what his heart commands. Then I
head left, down some stairs, through to a part of the station that’s under repair. There are no
people down here; I have to slip under one of those yellow ticker tapes in order to get through,
and then through a stiff plastic curtain. The noise of banging and sawing gets louder. I ask a man
to my right for Gary Shamonski and he gives me a hard hat and points the down to the train track
Gary’s working on.

I step along the train tracks and spot a man on a ladder, with half his body stuck up in the
ceiling. I approach the ladder and stare up at him, call out for him a couple times. Over the noise
of what I think is a buzz saw a little way down he doesn’t respond at first. When he does hear me
he stiffens, drops down a couple steps, and I ask if he’s Gary Shamonski.

Yes, he says, he is. I introduce myself, and he nods. He gestures to his tool box and the
ceiling. I tell him a little bit about what kind of piece I would write. I can see him nodding, half
hidden, but he’s only hmming and huhing.

My cell phone buzzes in my bag. I fish it out. It’s Irene, my boss from the newspaper. I
silence it; she can wait.

Finally I ask how Todd passed. Gary stops, again, drops down a couple rungs of the
ladder. When I can see him I can see that he’s showing several Signs of Grieving—blinking,
staring into nowhere, unconsciously crying (small tears leaking out the corners of his eyes, as if
he’d been in a heavy wind.) I suspect he hasn’t been sleeping. I’m willing to wait for him
because I know what he needs. I put my hand on the ladder, and he just sits there.
He tightens his hand around the ladder and swallows convulsively—another Sign of Grieving. The buzz saw cuts out, and in the momentary silence I can hear him. He says, “Do you know about capillaries?”

I shrug. “They’re small.” That’s pathetic, Marian—that’s ridiculous. Of course they’re small.

He starts to say something, shakes his head, then says, “Todd’s ripped. Four millimeters of capillaries ripped.” He reaches up into the ceiling and takes a hold of a wire, tugging.

I ask, “How did it happen?”

He shakes his head, again, tugs and pulls on the wire while he says, “He started puking at dinner, and I said, you ok, and he said, I’m puking, and I said, you ate something, and he said, no, didn’t eat nothing, and I said, you must have, and he said, why’s the toilet red, and I said, the toilets not red, and he said, its red, and I said, the whole thing, and he said, no, just the puke, and I said, we didn’t eat beets, and he said, think it’s blood, and I said, what, and he said, blood, and I said, what, and then I saw it was blood, and I called the. But then they came and. Anyway that was. That was it.” He looks at his hands and he has a whole mess of wire in his hands.

I start to ask him when Todd was born and all the small details that no one cares about, but which everyone can reel off the top of their head for insurance forms or DMV things or whatever. I find that those things usually help, because all of those memories come from a different part of the brain, the long term memory part.

He starts talking about how they were identical twins and did everything together, until once they fell in love with different girls, and had a fight about which girl to be in love with. Just as he’s getting into it the buzz saw starts up again and there’s a shout at the other end of the tracks. We turn to look. A man over there has lost control and we see several others rush over to
help shut it off and make sure he’s ok. Gary doesn’t move. I don’t move. When I turn back to look at him he’s frowning, a little.

I ask, “You were in love with different girls—was that the first time you had ever done anything separated from each other? What happened then?”

But he shakes his head and moves a step up the ladder, reaching into his tool belt and reattaching the wire into the ceiling from where he had ripped it out. He speaks into the ceiling, “Why the hell are you here, lady? Is this a thing for you? Get people to talk about their problems and then what? You’re like some sort of ambulance chaser? I don’t need no fancy obituary or whatever. Todd was nothing special. Nothing special needed, neither. Didn’t die nothing special and didn’t live nothing special.”

I step back and I can feel the bite of the train track on the instep of my shoe, the cold press of it. “Of course it matters,” I say. “He was your brother. He was your twin. You cared about him.”

Gary lets a bar of metal drop underneath the ladder and I step back a step further as it clatters near me. Gary turns, leans down, and braces one elbow on the top of the ladder. “He could have been anyone. He could have been a drug dealer or a child molester. What if he was?”

I gape and try to change tactics. “Tell me more about Todd. What was he like in High school?”

He reaches lifts up into the ceiling again. “He was a drug dealer and a child molester.”

I bite my lip. “You’re lying.”

“So what if I am. Write it that way. Write that my brother was that way. Do it. See if I care. He was shit to me, see if I care.” He works for another minute. It looks like he’s reattaching the wire.
Finally, I say, “I think you loved him, and I think you want me to write his life how he’d want to be remembered.”

Gary’s head is still for a minute, and then laughs. He laughs into the depths of the ceiling, and his laughter is lost in the sounds of the buzzing and banging and men talking and shouting and getting the hurt man up the steps, into the air, into the station.

He says, “You people are always two-faced about something. Always chasing something,” down into the cloth that he’s wiping his hands on.

It would be good to not feel like I was craning my neck to see him, so I try and jump up from the bottom of the track to the platform where people would normally stand. The concrete is rough against my palms, and I try to lift and jump up at the same time but I’m not strong enough, and my butt get’s caught on the lip of the platform. I try again, again. My pants and shirt are probably going to rip. There isn’t a ladder nearby. He’s watching me flounder. Finally I turn back to him. “Some people feel more comfortable rewriting things a little bit. We could put down the truth about how Todd died, or if that was too difficult for you we could write that he had died some other way.”

His brows furrow. “Why do you need to write about how Todd died at all?”

I cross my arms and futz with my necklace through my shirt. “I always write the death.”

He reaches up into the ceiling again, peering into the darkness between his elbows.

“Don’t you people skip that part? Gone to the angels and all that?”

“I don’t.”

He squints his eyes and sets down his pliers. After a couple seconds his face opens up and says, “Oh. I know you. You’re that woman that was in The Sun.”
“What?” The Sun is Baltimore’s largest newspaper; the big one that has all the news and all the coupons and nothing interesting. I don’t write for The Sun, but apparently, according to Gary Shamonski, the all knowing, all sneering construction worker, they’re writing about me.

Gary starts attacking the wires again, his arms flexing, pulling and twisting. “Yeah. The woman who fictionalizes people’s deaths for a laugh. What, the way Todd died isn’t good enough? You wanna throw him to a—what was the example they had? Throw him to an orca whale at the zoo? Pitch him into a manhole?” His voice gets tighter, raspier, and he says, “What? Puking up blood isn’t good enough?”


“Nothing. Nothing’s wrong with it.”

“Thanks but no thanks, lady. What’d you say your name was? Mary? Thanks but no thanks, Mary.”

“It’s Marian.”

He’s making his way up the track, away from me. He’s talking to his supervisor, he’s got a new tool, and the buzz saw’s going again, so he doesn’t hear me. I see myself out and am gone before he comes back.

Sometimes people don’t want obituaries. That is what I remind myself. Nothing to be alarmed at. So I struck out. So The Sun wrote about me—probably only a side column. Not a big deal. Not everyone ascribes to The Real B’s particular clientele—a mix of Roller Derby sports news, fascinatingly invasive human interest stories (that’s where I fit in), and pictures of food (most of which include one or more of the following: Chocolate, Bacon and/or Chesapeake blue
crabs coated in Old Bay seasoning). It’s a very specific following. The people living in McMansions along the highway, with their hot wings and organic sprouts wouldn’t understand.

Maybe this will actually drum up business. As Maurice says, ‘the strangest connections can bring in business, Marian. Think wider.’ But Maurice runs an investment brokerage firm, which is different from an obituary writer who is obligated to find ten obituaries—good obituaries—a week. Richard and I would have gone to an orchard to pick peaches, and then pickled those peaches, and I would have interviewed the farmer for something. That was back when I did stories other than obituaries. I did little league and peach farmers and art galleries. Maurice won’t go peach picking with me. Richard would have. Richard.

Here is what I will do. Maurice will like this: I will call several others on the list that I got from Lemmon’s Funeral Director when I get back to the office, to ask them if they would like an obituary written personally for them, published in the hip, indie newspaper, The Real B. I will call them and I will move forward. I will move past this.

It only takes me twenty minutes to walk from Penn Station back to work. Everything smells like urine, which is normal for Baltimore, especially in the summer when the heat keeps smells fresh far longer and when people don’t have to go into shelters to stay alive. The Real B is housed in an old brick row home in the middle of Baltimore, a couple blocks away from the Charles Street Theatre and Penn Station. The Real B, like every independently owned anything, is notoriously cheap. They wouldn’t have been able to afford anything so close to Penn Station except that actually, the building’s not in a very nice part of town, and the owners of the building gave them a deal. The landlords own several other spaces nearby and thought, oh, how cute, a real independent newspaper, we’ll be part of the revival of the trendy part of Baltimore, we’ll draw back the yuppies or hipsters or whatever they’re called and get them to live near the
independent theatre, and they’ll pass right by this office. There’ll be this great reputation, a giant sign on the side of the building in fancy old script, maybe with a white guy, his wavy hair parted at the side, his finger pointed at a canned good, and “The Real B” at the top. If The Real B had gotten around to putting that sign up, people would have thought we sold French cut green beans.

So it didn’t quite work out. Next to us is a parking lot and a Mr. Tires Service Center, which has a chain link tire cage prominently featured in the front lot, and a couple rusting Buicks, one on concrete raisers, stuffed to the side near the main shop. On our other side is an empty lot, where the home next to us burnt down some twenty years ago. A thin strip of grass grows there, maybe ten feet across. On both our building and the next building over you can see the bare concrete blocks that partitioned the buildings and that prevented the fire from jumping through. The space from our building to the next (which houses a John’s Carry Out—fresh Subs, Cold Beer and Lake Trout, although I’m not sure where they get the trout, because there aren’t any lakes nearby) makes our building seem doubly skinny. Our printing press is in the expanded building in the back. Across the street are more car repair places, used car lots, or other low brick buildings with too few windows to feel legit. Richard used to give me pepper spray, and sign me up for defense classes regularly. I went to one, once, but felt silly and didn’t go back.

All this makes any yuppies or hipsters or whatever you want to call them this month avert their eyes in horror. Charles St. Theater is a Mecca for artistic types, yes, and they’ve started gentrifying the center of Baltimore into a jogger and sushi-eaters paradise, but eight blocks away, at the corner of N. Howard and 21st, where we are, tufts of grass poke through the concrete and the smell of piss wafts around corners. I kind of love it. I don’t want passersby coming into the office, anyway.
When I get back to the office I stop in at the second floor, which is all light and white crowned molding, unlike the rest of the building, which is faux wood paneling and thin gray stained carpet. Irene’s stuck fast to her old, tried and true methods of layout so there are flutters of paper and stories in pieces all over a large plastic fold out table, even though they recently caved and got a mac book with all kinds of fancy programs on it for final drafts.

I expect to see Irene and Betty McGee around the layout table, but there’s no one there. I step into the room, hesitant because the general writers are not really allowed in here.

“Betty?” I call. “Irene?” Betty wanted to ask about how Todd died. She gets a kick out of people running into burning buildings to save kittens, or being crushed by giant shelves of cocoa beans in the cocoa bean warehouse, and she asked about how Todd died as if his real death was going to be one of those, something sensational. When she asked I nodded, knowing that death is hardly ever like that. It is blood. Yours or theirs, and what do you do with it? It is a place—the copy room floor—or an illness with foul smelling odors that you just have to overlook, and in the end it is a body that looks like it should breathe but won’t and can’t.

Irene’s office door opens to my left, and I hear Betty’s voice. “Marian, come on in.” She does not sound cheerful, the way I left it. Her voice sounds clogged, like there’s something stuck.

“Betty. Is everything ok?”

I stand in the doorway, and say, “I came back to tell you how the Twin died.” Betty reaches up a hand to scratch into her thin, white hair, curled with curlers every morning. She bites her lip.

Irene rubs her hands together and looks like she uncrosses and recrosses her legs under the desk. “I called you, Marian. Were you at lunch?”

“I was with a client.”
There’s a man in a seat to my right who looks like he’s about seventeen. He coughs slightly.

Betty McGee twits her fingers in the hem of her shirt.

“Marian, sit down.” Irene shuffles some papers in front of her and shoots a quick glance at the man-boy. “Marian, this is Mr. Whitely. He’s a lawyer from the firm Haskins and Prewitt.”

I nod, taking a hesitant shuffle into the room, but don’t sit.

“He’s asking us about the full page spread we recently published—the full page spread regarding Maurice and Gideon.” I instinctively lift and tense my head a little, and she says, “Please sit down, he just wants to ask you a couple questions.” I don’t say anything, nor do I move. “He’s asking us if you made up the people in the obituary.”

I look between the lawyer and Irene, look quickly over at Betty, who’s nodding at me.

I open my mouth but don’t say anything. I am a floating fish.

The Man-boy speaks. “Specifically, did you make up or fictionalize Mr. Maurice Benefield or his supposed lover, Mr. Gideon Fracasso?”

I look at him, this Mr. Whitely. “Why do you ask?”

“Marian, please, have a seat,” Betty says, touching the chair lightly with two fingers. I can see a vein along one of her knuckles. I clench my thighs together tighter.

Irene speaks up. “Marian, your reputation at this newspaper precedes you. We’ve told him that you sometimes make up deaths and other details. The newspaper is being sued for slander and libel.”

“What?” I turn to her.

Mr. Whitely shifts and fusses with his tie. “My client is bringing up charges due to Gideon Fracasso’s portrayal as an adulterer and a homosexual, which was printed in this
newspaper and which is damaging to his legacy and his ongoing business prospects for his descendants and community, many of whom operate from religious foundations—“

“But he died thirty years ago! What does it--” I say, and immediately stop, regretting speaking at all.

Man Boy continues “Be that as it may, many of his businesses’ clients operate from religious foundations and eschew any monetary or social relations with people of questionable character.” He speaks with an even voice. “We ask that you recall all newspapers that have not yet been sold to individual homes, and in your next printing issue the apology that I have already handed to you. If you do so, we’d be willing to settle in small claims court.”

My head is full of pressure and my throat is clogged. Richard wouldn’t know how to deal with this sort of thing. He always got very nervous in official situations. It’s one of the reasons he was never automatically promoted—not a smooth talker. Irene and Betty are saying things, mostly, “We’re going to need our own lawyer, you understand that, at least for a consultation,” and “Maybe it was the truth this time—Marian?”

“Marian?” Betty touches me on the hand. I look up at her. “Was it the truth? If it was, all this will go away.”

I pull up on the base of my neck, on my spine. I say, “I’m sorry, I can’t disclose which aspects of my obituaries are made up and which are true. My clients tell me very personal things and I would not want to break confidence. You’ll have to discuss it directly with Mr. Maurice Benfield. He contracted me to write the obituary. I wrote everything with his knowledge and consent.”

Irene and Betty blink, and the man-child sits back in his chair.
Irene regains her composure first. “If that’s all, Mr. Whitley, we’ll contact a lawyer and have him represent our firm in the future. We’ll also contact the owners of The Real B so that we can work out financial issues with them.”

“Of course, of course.” Mr. Whitley stands to go, and I get a whiff of his cologne. Axe body spray. Jesus, I didn’t actually think he was seventeen.

Irene calls Jenny upstairs to show Mr. Whitley out, and Betty McGee hunches a little in her chair. “Stupid kid, probably jacks off to any mention of tits in his law books.”

“Betty.”

“What, it’s true.”

Irene got her eyebrow lines tattooed on several years ago. This is something I think about frequently. “Look, Marian. This will probably be shifted off of you, because if Maurice contracted you to write for him, then we can claim plausible deniability.”

“Is it true, or did you make it up? Is Maurice gay?” Betty McGee asks. Her face opens up when she says the word “gay,” as if a whole world of possibility exists if it’s true, as if she hopes and doesn’t hope for it at the same time, as if it makes a difference.

I shake my head—not because it is or is not true, but because I’m not going to answer. “You know I can’t answer.”

Irene says, “Stop this. Marian, I know this is tough. We love your obituaries. They’re funny, just incredible enough so that most people take them with a grain of salt, as you say, I think they do help people, and we’ve got a weird clientele anyway. And,” she brings her fingers up to use air quotes, “Maurice ‘anonymously donates’ for most of this anyway, so I don’t think it matters in the long run.” It’s a running gag around the office that Maurice is my sugar daddy. He’s the newspaper’s sugar daddy, maybe, but not mine.
I say, “But.”

Betty lets out a bark. “There doesn’t have to be a But, Irene. This is stoneage horse-shit!”

She holds up a palm to Betty, who sits back in her chair, fists tight. Irene leans towards me. “There’s always a but. I don’t think you should fictionalize your obits until this gets cleared up. If you can’t do that, then don’t write the death at all. We can put you on other stories, if that helps. You were in the Sun. There’s going to be more of this. I just don’t think we can afford to keep sticking our necks out, not when it’s so public. The next family member or friend who reads an example of your obit in the paper when their cousin dies—sees other people laughing—it’s all downhill. Even more downhill.”

I look out the window. There aren’t any trees on our block. Other blocks have trees. Irene’s window looks out back, above the annex, to the row of fire escapes in the row homes behind us.

I shrug. This is all so dramatic. I don’t mean to be so dramatic. I need to talk to Maurice. I need to talk to Richard. I need to talk to Richard.

Irene’s talking more, and Betty’s saying more things with curse words in them. I stand in the middle of something Irene’s saying, and I say to Betty, “You wanted to know how the twin died.”

“Oh, I don’t, that’s not important, what’s really, whether or not you told the truth is—” Betty McGee’s pale, lined face, clean of any makeup, is turned toward me and I look down at it.

I shake my head again. “Todd Shamonski died because four millimeters of capillaries split. He started vomiting up blood at the dinner table, and by the time the paramedics arrived there was nothing they could do. That was what happened. No sea lions.” I turn to Irene. “I can’t write that.”
Then I walk out of that small, small room, even if there is white molding around the ceiling and window, even if it is a nice office, as offices go.

The receptionist says something to me on my way out but I keep going, out into the sun, out into the heat, out of the air conditioning which presses in on my temples and squeezes at me, squeezing squeezing.

I walk in between the buildings to the stretch of grass that grows where the old row-home burned. I rest a hand on the naked concrete blocks; let my hand rub against the roughness of the concrete.

Nevermind, I don’t want to talk to Maurice now. I want to pickle, or I want to visit Richard, or I want to—I don’t know.

“Mrs.—Ms. Zuckerman?”

I look up. It’s the man-child, Mr. Whitley, peering in at me from the sidewalk.

“I’m sorry, Mrs.—Ms. Zuckerman, I don’t mean to intrude, but I was getting a sandwich and I saw you leave the building.”

I straighten my shoulders. “I shouldn’t talk to you without my lawyer present.”

“I know, Ma’am, I know. I don’t expect you to say anything you would regret.” He scuffs his feet and hunches his shoulders a little bit. “I work for a bigger firm, and they’re backing me on this case, but I knew Mr. Fracasso, and he was a good man. I just wanted to let you know what harm you perpetrated in spreading lies, the way you have. It’s harmful and—and it’s harmful.”

The humidity swarms around my neck, my temple, my knees, squeezing squeezing squeezing. In old neighborhoods, like this one, cicadas bury and are reborn in cycles without
being disturbed by development. There are more and more of them every few years, and I can hear them pushing in on my ears. *chicacasa chicacasa cichasaciccicica*

“I knew Mr. Fracasso. He was my grandfather. My grandmother sat with him when he died; she said he cried. He wouldn’t stop crying. Looking around the room and crying.”

I am so glad I am alone. I am so glad Maurice is not here right now. I am much stronger than Maurice.

“He was a great man. Made a name for himself, for our family. His investors have started pulling out, since your article—some of our associates have come to us, concerned. You understand.”

I understand. I understand what it’s like to wait for results in a waiting room without anyone’s hand on your back.

“Ms. Zuckerman.” He’s got a fine sheen of sweat on his forehead. “My Grandfather would not have wanted his family, and his name spoiled just for a game, just for a laugh, or just to make someone feel better. This is real. I know you won’t speak. That’s fine. But I just wanted you to think about what you do say, in the future. That’s all. It matters to me and my family. I thought if you understood that, it might help.”

He gives an imperceptible movement forward and then halts again. I’m standing stock still, looking at the ground, at the grass in shadow, looking at the concrete, looking nowhere. The cicadas are so loud. *Chicachicasa chicchasa.*

And then Mr. Whitely leaves, and nothing except the scent of his axe body spray remains.

When I go home I throw several Bibles stuck on my stoop and in my mail box into the trash. The Jehovah’s Witnesses must have come around again.
I get a bill for BG&E, Baltimore Gas and Electric, and I write a check for them and send it back out. I round up to the nearest hundred and take that amount out of my monthly budget that I keep both in my head and sometimes in a journal somewhere, maybe on one of the bureaus, under a pile of clothes. I wrote all of the money down for Richard, because he needed to see the numbers, but now I don’t need to see the numbers to know that I don’t have any money. We used to put on swing music and order Indian food but now I just do it, get it out of the way. With Richard we were getting two salaries, and so we could take vacations and things, but now it’s just me, even if Maurice is donating to keep the paper afloat, to keep me and my obituaries afloat. People don’t pay a lot for a handwritten obituary when they could get a satin lined, steel plated casket to keep their loved one’s body separate from the rest of the world for all eternity.

Maurice donates to the Real B because he says he believes in our first amendment rights, but I know what it’s for. Every year I’ve known him, except for this one, I’ve written an obituary for his mother—full page spread, the works—but his mother died in the late seventies, and apparently still had opinions about Chernobyl, and a favorite song off Michael Jackson’s “Thriller.” Apparently he and his mother built a whole business together, from high school on up. Apparently he and his mother were very very close.

This year I didn’t write about his mother, I wrote about Gideon, Maurice’s best friend out of middle school. They met in a barn, halfway between their two houses. They met because their fathers both had drunken rampages on the same night and locked them out of the house at the same time. They went to the same college and after college they started an investment and brokerage firm going on trips around the world to make contacts and deals and actually just as an excuse to be in hotel rooms together. That’s what I wrote about this year. When Maurice told me
all of these things he told me as quickly as possible, and he laughed through half of it, his loud honking laugh. No mother mentioned.

I look around the living room as the house grows darker and darker. I keep smelling the smell of Mr. Whitley’s body spray on in the empty row house space, his hand on the blank concrete blocks, saying, “How could you do something like that;” giving Gideon and his family a bad name; Gideon looking around and crying while Maurice was in the waiting room.

The sound of cicadas has descended, in the evening to a low roar, and I walk the couple blocks over to Baltimore National cemetery without noticing them, really. Visiting Hours end at 5PM, so I scale the fence. It takes me a couple tries, and I have to find a tree to climb and get a hand hold on. Even then I land wrong and jar my knees and my head on the landing.

Baltimore National Cemetery is a Veterans Cemetery, for firefighters and soldiers and policemen. I don’t prefer it, as far as cemeteries go, because all the graves are identical white markers in geometric lines, but it’s a convenient walk to my house, and there’s a Richard C. Benal who has a nice spot. I’ve put flowers on his grave before.

After checking to make sure I haven’t alerted any guards, I stand in front of Richard C. Benal, who’s next to a large spruce tree, with boughs that sweep down in the middle and lift up. I always have to remind myself that these Richards aren’t my Richard. I try to think that if I am taking care of someone’s grave here, then maybe someone else is taking care of my Richard’s grave up in Maine, even though I can’t. Sometimes I put flowers on the graves of all the Richards, just in case. I do this sometimes for my father, James. That’s how I met Maurice, at one in the morning in a different cemetery, one that’s easier to get into late at night. He was doing the same thing that I’m about to do for Richard, but he’d found a grave for a Gideon, one who’d died in 1934. Maurice’s Gideon is in Alabama.
I kneel and press my forehead against this Richard’s name. Richard Richard Richard.

The pine needles prick against my knees and after a while my feet fall asleep. When I look up the fireflies cluster, hovering and darting in and out of the graves. They’re dying out, I’ve read, recently, because of pesticides and because of developments that turn up the earth that they lay their eggs in. Graveyards and pasture lands are some of the last places left where you can really see them like they used to be.

I watch the glowing yellow lights, feeling my hair sticking to my skull, my neck, feeling my clothes stick to my arms and legs from sweat and humidity and the closeness of everyone’s grief, of my grief, here, this thick blanket of grief; the shadow of the spruce, all the pine trees here in this cemetery, and the hush of all these deaths, and no one here because visiting hours are over means that no one will hear me, no one will see me. I take my clothes off—daring, I shouldn’t do even this, but who’s going to stop me, the air is thick, the sky is still high noon blue, thought duller, now, softer, and quickly falling into night—I look around, no one’s near—I strip down to my underwear. I take my clothes off, except for my necklace. I lay in the dirt, I reach up and trace Richard’s name, over and over, and then I take off my underwear too, and I lay in the dirt.

In the dirt I ask him what to do, how to help Maurice; he would have liked Maurice. I imagine this grave connecting to the one in Maine, where his body is. I imagine a string of light between us. I imagine my words along the string of light, but no words come back to me along the string. I wish I could just disappear, follow the string and traipse away.

But nothing comes back to me along the string of light and soon I lose it, it fades away.

When I walk home, dirt in my hair, pine needles in the neckline of my shirt, a man is sitting on the stoop of my house. He stands quickly when I approach.
“Scuse me, Ma’am, But could I interest you in the word of God?” I brush past him, up the stairs, and futz with the keys.

“No,” I say, and slam the door in his face.

Tuesday morning it’s raining and generally misty. I hope this means that the humidity will let up, but really it will probably just meant that it will be worse. The cicadas have shut up. I get up a little late and I eat some pickled herring on toast. I probably need to talk to Maurice about being sued. I should call him. It’s nine thirty now, but he might be in a meeting. It would be better to call now than wait until noon—that would be a bad time.

I could go into the office. Irene doesn’t want me to write the deaths. But that seems futile. Maybe I shouldn’t go into the office at all. I’m supposed to be lying low. I’d have to change. I can’t go in the old purple leggings I’m wearing now, which I’ve had for so long that they’re saggy and thin around the butt but have shrunk in the legs, so that they don’t reach my ankles. I look at my ankles. Too bony. Too white. And my feet are like giant white boney spatulas. Or like dinosaur feet. You can see the tendons. Richard said he was glad I had big feet, otherwise I wouldn’t be so tall and he’d have to stoop down to kiss me.

I’m in the middle of chewing the herring and mentally reviewing the shoes I could wear to work when my door bell rings, followed by rapid knocking, followed by ringing, followed by more knocking.

Maybe if I don’t respond the person will go away. It’s probably my neighbor, who leaves peaches and zucchinis and sometimes Christmas cookies on my porch because she thinks we’re friends. We’re not friends. I did an obit for her once, listened to her, once. We’re not friends.
The knocking continues. I finally go to the door. Outside I can see the slick road and wet, shiny leaves of summer rain.

A blond woman in a pony tail, white shirt and pressed slacks stands on the other side of the door. “Hello, am I speaking to Marian Zuckerman? I’m Tiffany Tantin, and I was wondering if you had some time for the word of God.”

“I really don’t.” I move to shut the door, but she sticks her arm into the crack before the door closes. I can smell the wet ground wafting into the house around her floral freesia body spray.

“Pardon the intrusion ma’am, but in your current predicament—“

“My current predicament? Excuse me?”

“You’re the writer of the false obituaries. You wrote the orca eating obituary and the false Gideon Fracasso Obituary that we prayed about this Sunday, as well as many others. I believe that you do have time for God. I believe that He can help you see the error of your ways, if you’d only let Him in. I’d like to help you. You shall not steal, neither deal falsely, neither lie to one another. Leviticus 19:11.”

I am a gaping fish. I stare at her, her normal, perfectly formed, not misshapen face. If I saw her on a bus, I would write her an obituary about her father’s pumpkin farm.

She continues, using the time that I have spent gaping to wedge the door open a little further. “I would also like to point out that efforts of contrition on your part can only help you in this trying time, in the eyes of the law and in the eyes our Lord.”

I am frowning. “I don’t think efforts of contrition are really—I didn’t do anything wrong.”
She says, “And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Corinthians, 11:14.”

Tiffany Tantin died Tuesday at 9:30 AM by being smashed to bits in the door of someone to whom she was proselytizing. God understood. Her hobbies include insanity and practicing looking normal.

“Ma’am, I think—ah, um. Excuse me.” I try to close the door but her leg is now in my house too. She has half her body in my house. I can hear the patter of rain pick up a little, and she has to raise her voice so I can hear her over the noise. Tendrils of hair are escaping from her pony tail and sticking to her neck and face.

“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. John, 1:9.”

If I touch her, will I be double sued for harassment or extraneous violence or something? I eye her leg and her black, frumpy sneaker. I say, “It’s not like I’m having abortions in the basement--”

She says, “And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. Mark, 9:43.”

I’m grasping at straws by this point. “Yeah, but if I was, there would be multiple abortions. Bloody abortions. Dead babies in my basement, dead fetuses, here, flopping around, pouring out of women who have sex for money, with AIDS crawling all over them—that’s what would be in my house, you don’t want that, you should—”

She interrupts, and tilts her head to look me in the eye, full on. “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will likewise perish.”

I have nothing to say to that.

She finishes in a quieter voice, “Luke, 13:3.” She pulls out a card and wedges it under my hand on the door. I flinch back; it flutters to the ground. “Call me when you need a higher
presence in your life.” Then she turns and skips down my stoop, I can see her footprint for a moment before the rain puddle thickens and nothing is left but wet.

What can I pickle, what can I pickle. I drive to the store, flicking the windshield wipers back and forth until I realize that the rain of the morning has dried up almost completely, and the constant humidity and low clouds are the only things left. I get cucumbers and eggs because they’re easy, and then I also pick up radishes, carrots, celery, onions, and potatoes for a pickled vegetable mélange. These are staples. Yes. I have at least twenty jars of each in the basement, but you can’t have too much.

When I get home I am just setting up my pot of water and all my ciders in a row so I can choose between them when the door bell rings. My shoulders pull up and inwards. I chop a carrot. If I ignore it, they will go away. There is probably a row of them out there. They are forming an army out there. They are lined up out on the street.

The person starts knocking.

I chop a piece of celery in uneven lengths.

The person has started using two hands—one to ring and one to knock, and I pick up my knife, debating between going to jail for life or escaping out the back door.

I’ve never been any more paranoid than anyone else about people accosting me. Richard’s always the one who carried around pepper spray. Richard’s the one who panicked about strangers knocking on our hotel room door, demanding to be let in—just a drunken frat boy who was on the wrong floor, but still—Richard’s the one who came up with our special knock.
In the middle of chopping another celery I think, oh god, what if. I stop chopping, gripping the handle of the knife, and I listen, stretching to hear. How many times have I done this. Our secret knock is set to the rhythm of “When I’m Sixty-Four,” by the Beatles: two series of short taps, and then two sets of two more solid taps, with spaces in between, and a final knock. Rat-at-tat-at-tat, Rat-at-tat-at-tat, Tap-Tap. Tap-Tap. Tap. Elaborate. Sometimes even when it was him I couldn’t tell if it was our secret knock, if he went too fast. The person at the door is still knocking and I count beats, I compare notes in my head, almost singing along, but still all I hear is meaningless pounding. I float towards the door, ear out. What if I’m just not good enough at rhythms, what if I should open it, what if that’s what would make the difference—

The door handle turns, then it opens—it’s not locked, I didn’t lock it, should have locked it, so stupid—and I’m still standing in the archway to the kitchen with a knife, watching as a head with sandy brown hair and sunglasses pokes through and looks in.

Oh god, it’s my mother.

I wish it was an evangelical, so I could feel another jolt of terror and just stab them, call it self-defense and be done with it.

I wish it was a ghost.

“Marian! Don’t just stand there; Come let me in!” She takes off her sunglasses and opens the door wider. “This door should be locked. I know your neighbors have done alright with the landscaping, but they may have delinquent children. You can’t trust parents to turn out good children any more. Someone could come in and ransack the place!” She turns around, maneuvers and shakes out her umbrella, and props it up just inside the doorway.
“Mom,” I say, swallowing. “What are you doing here?” I put the knife down, only shaking a little. When I turn back around she’s in the living room already, and the deadbolt on the door is locked.

“Don’t say it like that. Say, ‘To what do I owe the pleasure?’ Here, give me a hug.” She comes towards me and wraps her arms around me. It’s always uncomfortable to hug my mother because she’s short (I got Dad’s genes) and also because she holds on way too long. I have to stoop, and then my arms are underneath hers, with my chin on her shoulder, and I sort of pat her back—my hands making swishing noises on the slippery material of her track suit—before trying to stand up straight, but she holds on for another One-Mississippi-Two-Mississippi before stepping back and looking around. “Jeez, Marian, you could have cleaned.”

“Well, it’s just me, and I didn’t know you were coming—”

“If you’d called me back, you would have. It’s not polite to ignore people’s phone calls.” She steps away from me and starts folding sweatshirts and blankets, and collecting all the loose papers and wrappers that are scattered around.

She looks into the kitchen. “And look at what’s going on in here. You’re pickling again, aren’t you.” It’s not a question, and she gives me a look, as if pickling is a bad thing, puts her pile down on the floor, rights the fallen recycling bag, opens the cabinet under the sink and takes out a new trash bag, and in a couple minutes has severely straightened my kitchen. I can see counter space, now. She futzes, and I get tenser and tenser; she keeps up a stream of chatter. She says things like, “the state of your home reflects the state of your mind,” and “no wonder you don’t have any lovers, they take one look at this and must think it’s too much trouble,” and “Marian, this is two months old. I think it can go out.”
I try to say, “I’ll get that later,” or, “I’m in the middle of a recipe,” but she’s under the sink and futzing with my defunct drain.

She pulls her head out. “God, Marian, I think I’ve done you some kind of disservice to have you end up like this. You’re probably still rebelling from that beauty pageant I signed you up for. That was years ago, you need to get over it.” I roll my eyes; I can barely remember anything except getting my eyebrows waxed.

I open up my hands to her. “Look, could you just stop for a second—”

She shoves her upper body back under the sink. “Hand me a wrench,” she says, muffled. “I know you have one around here, somewhere, last time I was here it was in the drawer to your right.”

I have cobwebs in the corner of my living room. When did those get there? “Oh, um, you know, I think I lost it.”

“Stop being petulant. I’m doing you a favor. I’m helping you.” I see one hand poke out of the cabinet, twisted sideways, and wave around at me.

When I don’t move she pulls herself out of the bottom cabinet, narrows her eyes at me, flings open a drawer, finds the pink handled wrench from the set of tools that she bought me that I never use, and goes back underneath. “Richard wouldn’t want his house to fall into something like this,” she says. “He was always very tidy and organized.”

I grip the archway and let my body sway back and forth a little, loose between my ankles and wrists. I don’t say anything. She doesn’t know anything about what Richard would have wanted.
She fishes for a screwdriver next and glances up at me, twisting her eyebrows together. “Oh for Heaven Sakes, Marian. Don’t be so dramatic. He’s in Maine. With his family. You can visit him any time.”

I can’t even say anything to that. She’s using some sort of cleaner and I can smell it wrapping around me, smothering me like I can barely breathe. I grip the archway hard with the edge of my fingertips, but I’m gripping it in the wrong spot, the unfinished back of the molding on the archway, so when step away I feel a sharp prick of pain. I bring my finger up and see I’ve come away with a splinter.

There are several sharp bangs, then, “He would want you to take care of yourself. Meet someone new. Visit your family every once in a blue moon. All this obituary stuff is no good, Marian. He wouldn’t want you to keep being in such a rut; it’s been six years already. Move on. After your father died I took the prescribed three years of mourning and then I got myself right back into the dating pool. That’s what you need to do.” Another bang.

I pause, sucking on my finger. I have pins in the bathroom, because some of my clothes have worn out or loosened and need to be pinned so they don’t fall or look silly. “I’m going to the bathroom.”

“Oh Jeez.” She stands up, the screwdriver in one hand and a cobweb stuck to her forehead. “Don’t ignore or deflect. This is a serious issue you’ve got.” She bends down and picks up some sort of drain filter looking thing. “Look at this, Marian. Look at this. It looks like you stuck your father’s golf trophy down the disposal. I sent it to you because I thought you would want something of his. I really hope I’m wrong.” She holds up a mangled gold arm. She’s not wrong; I stuck the trophy down the disposal because two months ago she sent it to me with a
little note, “Hey kiddo, just thought of you and our golf lessons together! Love Always, Dad.” It was written in her hand.

I say, “I have to pee,” and leave her.

She shouts, “That’s convenient!”

There’s nothing for it. After Tiffany Tartin, Tandin, Tandinadiadu, and the man last night, and Mr. Whitely yesterday, I can’t go into work—or I could. I probably will. But then Irene will remind me not to write the deaths—what else am I supposed to write? Life is boring. In any case, I should go to Maurice first. Plus, I need to pickle, and Maurice has a spectacular kitchen. I can’t dig around in my finger for the splinter right now. I’d probably bleed all over the place.

After dressing sort of one-handed I pause, listening. I hear her banging cabinets again. Then I hear the sound of water running. She’s turned on the faucet and there’s no grinding sound. I can do this. I can do this.

I sneak out and grab my purse from the top of the bookshelf, then I stride into the kitchen, grab a plastic bag, and carefully place all my vegetables and cider bottles into it. It’s a tight fit but it just works. I grab another bag and put all my clean mason jars into that one. The two bags clank against one another. She watches me. “We’re not finished with this, Marian.” I move towards the door, and she takes a deep breath. “I think you should come live with me for a while.”

I shake my head, starting a million sentences to stall her, keep her from her conclusions.

“Something needs to happen; you can’t just keep living here by yourself, with all your—“ she wrinkles her nose and makes several large arm sweeps towards my entire person. “It’s unhealthy. Or—I could move in here, you wouldn’t be with all the old people, then.” She has an upward lilt to her voice, like she would really prefer the latter option.
I’ve got my hand on the door knob while she tells me it’s not ideal, but she’d sacrifice being in charge of the events calendar in order to give me direction. Clearly I need it.

I open the door and step one foot out onto the porch, just like Scary-Bible-Verse-Tiffany today. I say, “I have to go, Maurice needs me,” anything to get me out, but she stops me, again, by asking me if Maurice is my boyfriend.

I say, “No. No he’s—No. He’s got someone.” We all have someone. They’re just dead.

She fluffs her hair, lifts her chin, tightens her lips a little the way she does when she’s looking in the mirror, putting on lipstick, and sets her jaw a little before telling me why she and he would be a good match—their ages, his fondness for sweaters, their matching attractiveness levels. They could be Mr. and Mrs. Bradly-Benefield, down the line, if they combined their names.

I am a gaping fish.

I turn, look out the door. There is the outside. There is my car. There is the world and I can’t be here anymore. I step onto the porch, letting the inner door shut, and pretty much run to my car. She shouts at me, but I can’t hear her because the car is on, the radio is on, and I’m driving away.

Maurice lives in Roland Park. Roland Park is in the fancy, swanky area of Baltimore, where the houses are built at the bottom or top of hills, shielded from prying eyes by height or depth and lots of trees. It’s technically still in the city limits, but it’s flanked by two private day schools, so that the residents don’t have to send their children to public schools (the horror) and also supplied by Maurice’s favorite grocery store, Eddies, which sells things like smoked salmon, deviled eggs, and little pots of caviar. When you walk into the neighborhood even a
block it gets very quiet, every step you take muffled by last fall’s leaves, and large topiaries guard every entrance, along with rough looking stone walls covered in ivy. The houses tend to have “original flooring” and “wine cellars” and there are whispers of hermited authors/actors/producers shoved into various nooks and crannies, just waiting to be spotted.

I type in the code for Maurice’s gates, and they let me into his very short driveway. The first time I came up this way I was flabbergasted that anyone would ever live this way, but now I sort of understand. Maurice has his whole front yard landscaped within an inch of its life. Stone walkways wend in intricate spirals and knots in and out of bushes and flowers and water features. It’s hard to see unless you’re looking at it from the second floor. When you look at it from the second floor, it looks like bright splashes of color and movement and lines all working together. When you’re up close to it you don’t see much at all.

When I knock on his door an alarm sounds, a wailing siren. I give out a shriek and jump back, some of my vegetables spilling onto the Cassandra ivy near me. A window opens a couple seconds later and Maurice’s head pops out.

He’s tense, and then his head drops. “Thank goodness it’s you. These people have been driving me crazy. Hold on a moment.” He retreats, shuts the window, the siren stops, and a minute later he opens the door. I’m still searching around for my last potato in the underbrush.

“Pickling again?” he asks.

I look at him, and he looks like hasn’t slept, and I lose it. “My mother, at the house, she wants to move in! Move in! With me! and this woman, her face was so normal, Bible Verses—I said dead fetuses in the basement, I really, I did, I said dead fetuses—” Maurice gently pries my vegetable bag from my hand, and ushers me into his front hallway. It’s all dark wood and the smell of dust. I’m still hyperventilating. “And then at work they want me to stop writing the
death—and man boy’s cologne and the concrete and grass and—Maurice! They’re suing me for libel! About you! And Gideon! I didn’t say anything, I swear, I didn’t say anything! Please tell him I’m sorry, I’m so sorry—"

Maurice hands me a tissue in his front hall, his foyer, but my finger still has a splinter in it. I hold it up to him, and he raises his eyebrows at me “Splinter,” I say. He nods. We detour to the bathroom, and he waits outside the door while I take a pin from his cabinet. When I get it out, letting the single drop of blood wash down the sink, I blow my nose. He hands me back my bag, then turns and starts to lead me through the house.

“Your mother’s at your house?” he says when we’re passing through his living room, which has a giant picture of his mother, front and center, above the fireplace. Her face is very stern.

But that’s not the painting I hunt for when I come here—it’s in a different place every time—yes, there, in a corner of the fine china cabinet, an oil painting of Gideon. “Yes,” I say. “She says you are handsome in sweaters and wants me to set her up with you.” Maurice barks out a laugh. “She says you’re about the same age.”

He shifts onto his other leg. “What did you say to that?”

“I said you had someone.” We are in the kitchen, where I hoped we would end up.

Maurice clasps his hands behind his back. “Well, don’t we all? It just so happens that they’re dead.” I flinch. “Don’t look like that, Marian.” I nod. I shake my head and nod again.

The floor is a white and black tile that came original with the house, and there is at least one hairline fracture in almost all the tiles I can see. “I went to talk to Richard last night,” I mumble. “But he didn’t say anything at all. Nothing. Just blank.” I cross my arms, then uncross them and let them hang at my sides. “That’s the other thing.”
Maurice frowns by pursing his lips. It’s the most genial frown I’ve ever seen. It’s one of the reasons why so many people trust him with their money. He purses his lips now. “That’s—troubling. I talked to Deon, with better results. He’s says the law suit will turn out all right, although I don’t know how; we have no evidence. I know he’s usually right but.” He rubs his chin. “In any case your apology is appreciated but not needed.” He waits for me to look at him and nod. “He probably would tell you that your mother’s a bitch. Cut her out out out, he would say. Three times, just like that.” He purses his lips, bounces on his toes. “Out out out. Just like that. But probably louder.”

“Out out out,” I say. “Just like that. So easy for him.”

Maurice tucks his hands behind his back. “You know Deon,” he tilts his head to the side and leans forward to whisper, “because he cut his family out of his life so well.” Then opens his arm to the kitchen. “Do what you need to do.” He goes over to a cabinet. “You probably brought your own but, here are all my vinegars.” He opens a lower cabinet and several drawers. “pots, spoons, sieves. Anything you find in the fridge is yours except the marzipan or the wine. The marzipan is from Germany and you don’t want to know how much the wine cost. You know how to use the intercom, but please don’t.”

I nod. “Thanks. I’ll be along when I finish.”

He looks his watch. “Not before one.”

“Yes, not before one.”

Then he leaves me on my own.

Maurice’s house is wonderful because he’s left the first and third floors original to the house itself. The kitchen has all its original appliances, down to the nineteen twenties
refrigerator, the gas range and the warped cabinets. The island in the middle is perfect for chopping and since Maurice never cooks or uses the kitchen for anything except late night snacks, I don’t have to make room. He gets most of his food premade from that fancy grocery store, Eddies.

At precisely one o’clock I take a bowl of some of my picklings up to him. I pass through his largely unused living and dining rooms. So stuffy and still, filled with couches and vases and side tables that a decorator he hired thought made the decor look like “old money.” It looks old, all right. He rarely has company over at his house, and if he does, they stay on the first floor at all times. The second floor is the place he’s done himself—it’s nearly finished.

The main room on the second floor is a complete remodel of the original office that he shared with Gideon. The business now has been split between Maurice’s portion and Gideon’s descendants, and when the split happened he moved the old office to his house. He’s got the same carpet, the same wallpaper, the same desks, the same light fixtures. The first time I saw this office, with the florescent lights, name plaques and the small paper napkins that he takes from his real office and brings here, with the paper cups, I thought, there should be a hotline for this, but then I imagined him going to the office the day after, and I imagined him having to say, “No, we’re not going to Dubai for that trip after all. We can just call them. There’s no reason to go all the way out there. We have conference calls now,” and then coming home to a regular bedroom, and there are no hotlines for something like that, when your lover dies holding the hand of his wife and child. And I think, well, what could he have done differently.

Maurice spins around in his office chair. The coffee pot on the side table makes a beeping noise.
He offers me some coffee along with sweet and low packet. The sugar molecules scatter across the faux wood, but I decline, because I’ve bought my picklings. I offer it to him, even though I know he won’t take any. I say, “Thanks for helping me escape my mother.”

“No problem,” he says, taking a sip of coffee, “Every time I think of her, and the funeral like that, and her making you eat the eggs like that, I just.” He grips the chair handles. “I understand why they took Deon away. They didn’t know. But your mother had no right. He was your husband. Legally.”

The seventies had a particular style that is enveloped in this room. The carpeting has an interesting mix of orange, green and yellow. “Hmm. Yes,” I say, “She is a nasty piece of work.”

“But she’s your mother. I guess I’m lucky. I actually liked my mother.”

I shake my head; this is a moot point. His mother didn’t even know he had a quasi husband. “Ok, but look. They’re suing me. And Evangelicals somehow are ending up on my doorstep. My mother will never stop harassing me, I understand that. But the rest of this. What is this?”

He spins his chair and lifts himself out of it when it opens to the side of the desk. “Come, look, I want to show you something. It’s very exciting.” I pick up my bowl of picklings and follow him out of the office. We go down the hall, past the rooms decorated like the hotel room he and Gideon stayed at in Tokyo, the room in Paris, the room in London. We get to the last room in the corridor, and he pauses in front of the door. “I’ve been searching for this wallpaper for a while. The internet is wildly helpful. I asked a girl at work—don’t tell anyone, but I hired her because she apparently has something called a tumbler, and she says it’s very popular. She won’t tell me what she puts on there.” His voice drops down to a hush, “I think it’s some sort of porn.” Anyway,” he says, louder, and opens the door. Inside he’s got what is probably a bed, a
dresser and a lamp all under drop cloth, more drop cloth down on the floor, and rolls of pink and purple wallpaper leaning against the center clump of furniture. “She found this wallpaper pattern from the Cococabana Palace, circa 1967, Rio De Janeiro. I should probably give her a Christmas bonus. It’s an exact match.”

I step into the room. The walls are blank; he’s scraped off whatever was on there before.

“Wanna give me a hand?” he says.

This is the first time he’s asked for my help or input, and I nod before I even know what I’m doing.

He gives me a loose tee-shirt, and I gulp down the rest of my bowl of picklings. We stretch the wallpaper out to see how it will fit together; Maurice is very particular about it. Then we’re putting paste on the back of the strips of paper, we’re making precise cuts. Maurice stretches himself up to line the paper up with the top of the wall.

“They’re suing me too,” he says, as he smoothes the paper down. “I got served this morning. I assume you told them that I hired you to write for me.”

I nod, running my hand along the edge, making sure it’s straight, that it runs completely in line with the molding. “I think so. Something like that. Should I not have said anything?”

He shrugs. “It’s probably better that I get sued than you. Although maybe now it will just be both of us.”

“But the Evangelicals. One of them, this morning, threatened me. With Bible Verses.”

Maurice cranes to look at me. He’s standing on a chair. “Did they give you the one about the beast raising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, all with diadems on his horns, and leopards and bears and—no?”
“No but that sounds like more fun.” I pause, while Maurice shellacs up another piece of paper. “Mine were just ‘cut off your hand or you will perish.’ Or something.”

Maurice is holding the edge of the paper. “Hold it down there while I—”

“I’ve got it,” I say, making sure the design lines up. I do a couple of impressions of Mr. Whitely and Irene, grumbling about Irene’s edict to stop writing the deaths. How am I supposed to do that?

Maurice doesn’t respond right away, making sure the top is lined up. Then he says, “Mr. Whitely. Deon’s Grandson.”

“Yeah. The nutcase religious side of Deon’s family, the side that doesn’t believe in dinosaurs, the side that kept egging him to get married. I can’t imagine having to be associated with that.”

“I had a long time to get used to it. But Richard died so suddenly. Just over, like that. On the copy room floor.” Maurice quickly sweeps a palm over the paper, getting the bubbles out. “No wonder you’re a basket case.”

He lines up another sheet, and I tug it into place and say, “Maurice, I think you’re being a little hypocritical. At least I could tell people about Richard. Not that I do. But you had to go into work the next day. That’s—that’s—”

He cuts me off. “You had to endure people coming up and asking you questions. Saying things to you, asking you about the funeral. Expressing condolences.” He makes swift movements to get the bubbles out from the center of the panel.

“Maybe you would have liked condolences.” I’m rubbing at the place where the panel somewhat overlaps the panel to the left. I’m probably rubbing at it too hard.
He says over my head somewhere, “You were drugged by your own mother with your own pickled eggs. And she took Richard’s ring off his own finger. She took over the funeral so that you couldn’t get closure on the cause of—I mean, SADS. That’s ridiculous. Those people should be shot—incompetent—”

I raise my voice a little “But you had to purge all of his things before the wake so that they wouldn’t stumble on his spare cufflinks in the bathroom drawer! All because his *wife* thought your house was more suitable for entertaining.”

“Stop.” Maurice pulls back from the wall. “Marian. This panel is crooked. We’re going to have to start over.”

I look and it’s true, the pattern doesn’t match the panel next to it. I let out a breath, run my tongue against my back molars, tasting the last bit of pickle juice there, and then I start peeling it off the wall. It comes off sticky, the shellac leaving oval craters behind. We work in silence, and I can hear the leaves of the trees outside rustling against the house, a squirrel chittering and a bird calling back and forth.

When we get a new panel fitted tight and exact, I say, “I don’t know why you can’t just tell them it’s all true. Absolute defense. You and Deon.”

“How might I do that? By giving them all the love letters he wrote to me?” He’s condescending for a moment and then as he glances away I wonder if maybe there aren’t any love letters. Richard and I never sent any letters—we were never apart long enough to need any. I suddenly feel cheated out of an item I could have held onto.

But I look down. I’m holding the roll of wallpaper to pull out a new sheet. Such a hideous pink and purple stripe. With bows and flowers interspersed. “Maurice, this whole place is a love letter!”
He raises his eyebrows and I extend my hand to give the new sheet to him. He holds it up and I pinch my fingers down the edges to pin it flat against the wall. “No,” he says, “this place makes me look crazy. That’s what this is. I’m fine with that. But it’s not going to prove anything other than I have some bizarre business man travel fetish.”

I have instantaneous images of Gideon and Maurice in the office with black whips, or in the hotel rooms with ropes and ties. Normally I am fine with things like that, but right at the moment, I am not fine with thinking about things like that. “Oh god, you and my mother are the same age. Don’t say the word ‘fetish,’ please.”

Maurice chuckles. “Don’t play virgin school girl, Marian. Richard probably had you bathing in vinegar in the bathtub before dates.”

That image does not offend me nearly as much as it probably should. I make a squeaking noise.

He laughs. “Oh, just don’t poke around into any of the drawers and you’ll be fine.” He twists and gestures with an elbow “Also, that bed?” he winks. “Mardi Gras was a great time of year.”

I sit back on my heels. “So happy for you. What are you going to do about the Evangelicals bombing our houses with their Bibles?”

“Oh Yes. Well I don’t know about you, but I’m going to have to upgrade systems. They’ve been picking the locks. My side security isn’t as thorough and they got in this morning.”

He eyes me. “But of course I handled it well. Firmly. You know. I just told them there had been some misunderstanding. I go to church every week, I know my Bible back to front, sent them on their way.”
I can’t believe it. He’s just going to suck up to them. “You’re just going to—You’re just going to—”

“No. I’m not. Actually, I’m not going to do anything. I was going to leave. Deal with the legal stuff somewhere else, without worrying about nut jobs at the door, or security systems, or people throwing burning bricks through the window.” He trails off into a humm as his eyes dart around the room. That’s his real problem. What if someone throws something and it all catches on fire? What if it all burns?

When we get a new sheet out and line it up I say, “I can’t believe you’re going to leave. We’re not all millionaires; we can’t just all pick up and move when the going gets tough.”

“You could leave too, people move all the time.” He seems perplexed, as though it’s a bizarre circumstance, that not everyone is wealthy.

“How are you just going to leave all this?”

“Some of us are millionaires and can pay people to move all this to a house that we rent for the summer.” He leans against the wall with on forearm.

“Where are you going?”

“Hadn’t decided. Just thought of it now, actually.” He pauses, looks down at me, and I swear he winks. “When we’re done with this I fully expect you to go back to your house, remember that your mother is still there, freak out, decide to leave, and then tell me where we’re going. That way I won’t have to decide.”

I huff. “I don’t like this. I don’t like it at all. My mother isn’t actually going to move in with me. She wouldn’t do that.”

He accepts a new panel of wallpaper from me. “Whatever you need to think. Just pick somewhere nice, would you? I don’t want to go to Texas.”
“We’re not going anywhere!” I say. “Or, you can, if you want. Leave me out of it.”

We’ve gotten to the doorway to a closet. We line up the paper, and then I let Maurice cut it along the molding—he’s much more exact than I am.

I watch him slowly pressing against the paper, into the corner, guiding the blade. When he finishes he flips the exacto knife in and sets it down. “Besides, it will be easier for my lawyer to represent our cases if we’re in the same place.”

I make a non-committal noise and we put up another panel around the closet without speaking. I like the rhythm of placing the wallpaper, smoothing it down, checking for bubbles.

We have to rearrange the boxes and chairs to get to the next wall, and Maurice picks up my empty bowl of pickled items, which I’ve set on a box near the closet door that will need to be moved out of the way, and gives it back to me. “Did you like these?” I ask, even though he hasn’t eaten any.

“They were delicious, Marian. I really loved the extra spice you threw in this time—what was it, I couldn’t quite put a finger on—”

“Cardamom! I put cardamom in this time! I found it in your cabinet and so I threw it in. I didn’t think you would mind.”

“You were quite right. It added an extra layer I was not expecting. How much did you make?”

I tilt my head to the side. “Maybe a couple quarts? A gallon or two? Several batches, in any case.”

His eyebrows tilt up, creating one line of wrinkle along his forehead. “Oh, I didn’t realize it was that bad.”
I shrug. My anxiety of this morning feels so far away, now, feels so distant. My mother was just exaggerating; she just wants me to think about getting my life in order. Living with me wouldn’t be good for her—who would she schedule? Direct? And the bible people will get tired and move on. Maurice is just being paranoid.

When I get home my mother’s car is nowhere to be seen. That is good. Instead, there are not one, but two people, but thank God not the woman from earlier, sitting on my stoop, holding Bibles.

I storm up to them, but before I can say anything like, “this is my house and I am about to call the police to have you taken away for harassment and bizarre morals,” the one, the pimply dark haired one, pipes up.

“Ma’am we know this is a troubling time for you but the Church of Jesus Christ is here to help you mend your ways.”

Then the other one, who has glasses, says, “Here is a pamphlet on the rampant spread of homosexuality in our culture and society. If you would please read it, I think you will find it most informative and enlightening.”

And then the first one picks up where the last one left off. “And if that is displeasing to you, The Bible has many friendly passages about how we can do good in our community and help our fellow man.”

These people will talk all day, so instead I walk quickly around the house, across the lawn, while they follow at a slightly slower pace, and I go through the back door before they can catch up.

The house is cold.
My fucking mother has turned on the A/C.

Number one, Mother, I don’t really have the money to run the A/C day and night. Number two, Mother, I like smelling the grass and the dirt and the trees. Those smells help cover up the smell of the garbage or the defunct drain in the kitchen. And I like the cross breezes.

Also, the house has been cleaned. I’ve been gone from maybe ten thirty and it’s now five thirty, and in that time she has swept, mopped, taken out all of the recycling, garbage, bags, etc. she’s made piles and stacks everywhere possible. My cabinets are rearranged by category, all soups in one, then all vegetables, then all grains. Normally I have all the things for one dinner in one cabinet, all the items for another dinner in another. This is different.

Things are caulked; things are scrubbed; things are freshened; things are wiped.

I can’t even smell myself. I start panicking and find myself smelling my own underarm sweat unconsciously, just to be sure.

On the fridge she’s left a sticky note. “Be Back Tomorrow with my things, Sweetie! Since You Can’t Make Executive Decisions, I’ve Decided to Move in Here for the Time Being—it’ll BE FUN. You’ll see! JUST US GIRLS! Love! Mom.”

I can barely breathe, and when I realize that actually, my body’s been taking care of that for me, it’s been doing it in harsh pants, small dog-like whimpers.

Richard, Richard. I want to go to a cemetery; maybe going to a different grave would yield better results. I’m clenching at my necklace. But then again, maybe he did talk to me last night; maybe this is what he’s saying. I thought about leaving, I felt like getting out. Maybe that’s what he said.

I can’t be in this house, in any case.
I don’t have a computer set up at my house. I’m out the door in five seconds. I drive to the closest grocery store, and put in fifty cents for a newspaper. I skim the want ads: no jobs for outside of Baltimore. The next oldest doesn’t have any either. I might have to go into work and use the computer there, but it’s getting on five o’clock. I throw another fifty cents in and pull out the last paper. It’s an old one—almost a week old, but I open to the classifieds anyway. I skim them all, and there it is: a job for a part time nurse for an old woman transitioning from her home here in Baltimore to her new home in Maine. Even better—where Richard is. I call the number. Just to get out, for a while, just to be out of here, for a while. Just this summer. It’s Maine. I don’t want to think it’s true but maybe it is, maybe he did talk to me last night, after all. Maybe my half wish to leave, traipse away, was actually him pulling me here.

The person who answers the line is female.

“Heart. This is Marian—”

“Marian? I’ve been calling you Mary. Well, glad we’ve gotten that sorted out. Good, I’m glad you called. We’re leaving tomorrow at seven AM sharp. Has Marcine given you any details? She probably has given you all the wrong details; I was surprised she had talked to you at all. But then, I am never sure what’s going on in my mother’s head. She was telling me that Hitler was an acclaimed Native American novelist the other day, and I wasn’t sure what to say to that.”

“Excuse me? Who is this?”

“Who do you think this is? This is Kay, Kay Overfelt. We had an agreement? You’re helping transition my mother from Baltimore to her new nursing home on Clarahaven, Maine? You signed a bunch of papers a week ago after we talked on the phone, but I’ve been calling your number and not getting any response. I have to say, your lack of communication this week
isn’t the best start to a business relationship. We’ll be living in the same house. I should just find someone more reliable, but I really don’t have time. Are you still interested?”

I take a deep breath, read briefly through the advertisement again. This is probably illegal, but it sounds like this Mary person has forfeited her chance, anyway.

I take a deep breath. “Yes, yes. I’m interested. I’m sorry I didn’t get back to you; my phone broke and I’ve been getting all of my things in order. Marceine only gave me a brief outline of what will happen tomorrow. Perhaps you can go over it again so that I understand fully.”

Kay talks for a while. Theoretically, I have been preparing for this trip since I met her, so I make many false sounds of assurance. Her mother sounds either demented or wonderful, maybe both.

When I hang up, I call Maurice.

I say, “We’re going to Clarahaven, Maine.”

I can hear him grinning. “It sounds lovely in the summer,” he says.

“I believe so,” I say.

I spend the next couple hours undoing all the work my mother has done cleaning the house. I bring things up from the basement; bring things down from the attic. I bring down Richard’s computer that I put up there because I couldn’t stand to have it set up and turned on when he wasn’t going to be using it, but now I can’t stand to have it not near me. I bring our jars of seashells that we collected every year at the beach because Clarahaven is an island off the coast of Maine and I don’t know, maybe I’ll have time to go seashell hunting. I bring all my vinegar. I start packing all Richard’s clothes first, in the suitcases we have, but there are too many clothes and not enough suitcases, so all of my clothes and the rest of his go in black trash
bags. I dump my linens in more trash bags. I spread my toiletries along the bathroom floor so I can see them and pick through what I need.

In the hour between 2:30 and 3:30 I make a startling discovery and pretty much that means the rest of the night is shot. I open up a box in the attic, a box of Richard’s old running clothes that my mother must have packed during the week I was out of it.

But they still smell like him. They smell like him, like his cologne, like all of his skin cells, like his shampoo and hair, like his arms and arm pits, like his sweat, like his feet, the palms of his hands, like his glasses case, like the inside of his car, like the inside of this cardboard box, like dust, like me—like salt, like snot, like vinegar, like bile.

I wrap myself around these running shorts, these under armor long sleeve shirts, these track suits. I put them on, layer after layer, I rub myself against them. Richard was wiry, like me. We were physically compatible. We looked similar. Even his hair was a coppery brown to match my muddy red frizz. I could fit into his running shorts and he could fit into mine.

But after a couple minutes I pull back. I am thoughtful; I am a forward thinker. Some of the clothes I put in baggies, and seal them, air tight.

At 6:30 in the morning I throw various bags of Richard’s things that I don’t want Mom to get her hands on into the back of my car. That’s my primary concern, that mom will go through my house and have a yard sale without consulting me. She’ll think, oh, Marian doesn’t need this old lumpy pair of Richard’s boxers, carefully preserved in an airtight baggie for freshness and smell, but this hand crafted diamond necklace from her Aunt Veronica that she’s used to wedge the mouse traps just right—that we have to keep. If I have a box labeled, “Keep forever,” filled with old college books that she and Richard both wrote notes to each other in during lectures, she’ll think that this was a reused box from some other time, some other house move, and that
this label doesn’t apply anymore, and she’ll root through and probably recycle the lot of them—
because who would want to buy fifteen year old textbooks all scribbled over?

So I bring everything. I bring everything of Richard’s that I know is important.
Ultimately everything I need is in the car: some clothes. My vinegar. The sea shell jars. The
things of Richard’s.

When I get to St. Martin’s of the Poor Nursing home after two hours of sleep, I find the
green Toyota Kay told me to look for in the parking lot easily, with a woman on a cell phone,
next to it, pacing. As soon as I park next to her car she comes up to me. She’s got dark brown
hair with strings of gray running through and a strong jaw line, and she doesn’t wait for my car
to stop moving before she knocks on the window. I roll it down.

“Marian. You are ten minutes late. This will set the schedule back.” She pulls a map out
of her back pocket and unfurls it on the hood of my car. An older woman shuffles out of the
Toyota. She’s in a turtleneck and her hair is lying flat against one side of her head; her face is
rectangular and pinched looking. I get out of the car and stand so I can see the map, but not so
close to Kay, with my hands in my back pockets.

Kay points to the map and leans over, slightly. She has very wide haunches. She’s talking
about the route.

“What a Beanstalk,” the old woman says in a lower voice rough, now. I turn to her. She
says, “How many Jacks have climbed you? Or just wolves trying to blow you down for all their
piggy friends?”

I raise my eye brows.

Kay continues looking at the map. “Marcine. That is disgusting. Please do not talk.”
I shake my head and say, “No pigs. Or Wolves.” I stop. “Ghost clothes, though.” I really need breakfast. “This morning I found ghost clothes. Those blew me down.”

The old woman seems to consider this. Kay says something about rush hour traffic, and when she pauses for a breath the old woman says, “Did they smell? The ghost clothes?”

I blink at her. “Yeah. Like Sweat. Cells. Cologne. I—” I’m too tired to explain more, my throat has a pickled radish in it. I say, “I put them in baggies for later.”

She nods at the pavement. “I had ghost clothes too, once. But they were stolen from me.”

Kay turns around. “What the hell are you two talking about?”

“Show on TV,” I say. “Should we get going? You’re coming with me, Right?” the woman nods, yes. Kay made it clear, last night, that my duties as caretaker start right now.

Kay goes to the car and brings out a donut seat cushion. “Don’t forget this, she gets cranky without it.”

“You want me dead,” the old woman takes it from Kay. Kay just smiles.

The woman shuffles over to my car with her overnight bag and gets in while Kay and I sort out details. I will probably get lost, and I will probably figure out how to get back on track again. I can read a map. It is a straight line up, after all. Look. There is Maine. It is the top of the United States. The very top. There is Maryland, somewhere near the middle. There is I-95, which is full of tolls but which will take us up through all the traffic and all the fancy cars and all the cities all the way to Maine.

Kay strides to her car. She has her chest and chin out, solidly leading the way. “Ok, I’ll take the lead in the caravan first, and then I’ll switch off with you, so that we can give our cars an even chance to create an up-wash, the way geese do. You just have to angle your car right.”
She pauses. “On second thought, do you want to take the lead first, so I can show you how to angle the car in the back?” she looks anxious.

“No, no, I think I got it. You take the lead first. I’ll figure it out,” I go around to my car door.

“Are you sure, Marian? The up-wash is a tricky maneuver.”

“I got it!”

“Ok! Rememember, our first scheduled stop is at nine hundred hours around Wilmington. We have to reach Wilmington!” Then she gets in her car.

I shut my door. I put the key in the ignition. It beeps.

“Had enough?” I turn to look at the woman next to me. She’s almost leering.

I lean my forehead against the steering wheel. I groan. “I haven’t eaten breakfast. Wanna stop somewhere?”

She cackles. “I knew it was a good idea to give that other woman the stink eye. You’re much more fun.”

I huff out through my nose. I say. “I’m Marian. Marian Zuckerman.”

“Mrs. Overfelt.”

We shake hands, and then drive to a Double T diner.

At nine hundred hours I get a call.

“Where are you? I don’t see you here? I lost track of you?” behind Kay’s voice I can hear speeding trucks and the sound of the highway.
I swallow the rest of my coffee. “Well, Mrs. Overfelt wasn’t feeling so well with the high speed we were driving at, so I pulled over and we’re getting some breakfast. I think we’re going to take it a little slower. You go on ahead.”

“The course I laid out is the most efficient.”

“I know, but this way you won’t have to worry about her or us.”

Mrs. Overfelt flips through the music in the Juke box at the table, which makes a noisy plastic whacking sound each time she peruses another page of options. She makes an humming noise.

Kay hesitates, and I feel bad, a little, because I can imagine her, alone at the rest stop when she hadn’t planned on being alone. But I can’t keep up with her, and neither can Mrs. Overfelt. “I’m sorry, Kay. I think we’re just going to take longer.”

Mrs. Overfelt opens her purse and withdraws two quarters. She inserts them into the Juke box at the table and punches in a code.

Over the phone I hear another car whiz by. Is she standing in the parking lot? She says, “You should have said that you thought it would take longer. I am not an unapproachable woman, Marian. I am not impractical, or unresponsive. I can listen when there’s an alternative.”

Cold as Ice, by Foreigner, starts playing all throughout the diner. Mrs. O sits back in her booth with her arms crossed.

“Ok. Kay, Ok.”

I can hear her breathe out. I don’t know if she can hear the song in the background. When I hang up Mrs. Overfelt and I don’t say anything to each other as I pay and get back into the car. This time we leave for real.
On the drive up Mrs. Overfelt and I have a great time. It takes us four days to make two day trip because we keep stopping at rest stations to people watch. She says things like, “pro wrestler with size issues,” and I say things like, “double mastectomy,” and then she says, pointing to a man in a vest, “greatest wish is to become a singing waiter.” I disagree with her on that one, the man in question looks more like one of those singing fudge makers from the Inner Harbor, and she gives me a look, when I say that. I say, “What? It’s a tourist attraction. It’s respectable. Those guys work hard. They have to have muscles.” She just laughs.

Kay calls me frequently and at one point accuses me of kidnapping her mother. I take a leap and say “Are you that upset about it?” She gets quiet and says, “Good point. Fine. Keep her, then, but you’re in charge of the medical bills.”

We stay over in cheap motels in Pennsylvania and New York and Connecticut somewhere, right when the houses start to turn into white salt boxes, right when the land starts to look like the salt and the cold never really retreats, even in the summer.

At a rest station in Connecticut I buy a couple audio books to listen to; Mrs. Overfelt falls asleep to the first one, and won’t stop shouting at the second one, so eventually we turn on the radio. We like Garrison Keillor. We like BBC world news because of the British voices saying whatever it is they’re saying. We don’t particularly like college radio or NPR trying to be college radio.

We get to the Rockland Ferry, which will take us over the water to the island of Clarahaven on the fourth day. Kay’s reserved tickets for us, so I pick them up in the small building right on the water, and then walk back across the parking lot to where I’ve parked the car in line with all the other cars, waiting to load. Everything’s scrubby and low, the bushes look
like they barely have enough energy to sprout, let alone flower. I call Kay to tell her where we are, and she tells me to go to the grocery store here to stock up on anything that might be difficult to find; it will be even harder to find on the island, and much more expensive, so I leave Mrs. Overfelt in the car with the windows cracked, waiting in line for the Ferry.

The whole town smells like the sea, like salt and air, and it occurs to me that I’ve never spent more than a week surrounded by the smell in all my life. Richard and I went on vacations to Rehoboth beach in Delaware, but that was only a week or so at a time in the summer. I’ve always lived inland. The grocery store sells beach towels and sun block and I buy some even though I don’t tan—I burn. I freckle and then I burn. I also get several more jars of vinegar, and put them in the car. Mrs. Overfelt nods at me. She’s napping again.

I called Maurice last night, at the motel. He said that he would join me in a week, once he got the movers to pack all of his stuff correctly. He’s flying, of course, and then he’s renting a cottage for the summer in the north of the island. I don’t even want to think about what he paid for it last minute like that.

I perch on a wharf looking out to sea, looking out of the harbor, and stretch my arms above my head. There’s no real shoreline, just wharves and marinas. To my right is a large boat and my left, over some murky looking, beige bubble covered water, another pier, more boats. But the sea extends eastward. Always east. I see a small, slippery head with two black eyes appear and then disappear out in the harbor, where the Ferry will be. I wait for it to come back, but I can’t find it again.

It’s cooler here, at least, the humidity of Baltimore is gone. There are more breezes. I’m cold a little bit, even now.
I go back to the car and Mrs. Overfelt is in a weird position, her head down a little too far. I shake her.

“Mrs. Overfelt?”

She jerks and then stretches out, her left arm reaching up but her right arm staying down.

“Are you ok?” I ask.

She works her mouth a little bit, and it takes a little bit for her to finally say, “Is there. Is there. Is there something wrong?” she says.

“No? Unless you’re not ok? Are you ok?”

“Do I, Do I look ok?”

I peer at her. She seems fine, but I don’t know. I say, “I don’t know.”

She waves her hand at me, so I let her resettle herself, and then we wait for the ferry without talking.
PART TWO

Even before the Ferry pulls in I can see Kay waiting for us, in sweat pants, her arms crossed, and I kind of wish I could turn the car back around, get the Ferry to halt, and go back to Rockland, but we’re here and Mrs. Overfelt says, “here she is, the Dragon.”

I say, “Yes, well, that may be true.” And I knew this before but I’m more aware of this than ever—I’m going to be living with this woman—and this woman is paying me, and Mrs. Overfelt hates her daughter, and I also lied about who I am, I told her I signed papers, she’s going to figure that out. How am I going to do this?

The Ferry is on the east side of a large Cove. I can see a defunct set of wharves closer in to town than where we are, a newer marina on the opposite side of the cove, and in between more houses and what looks like harbor-side shops. The island is tufted with pine trees and granite boulders and wind, I can tell even now, wind on top of wind.

The Ferry speakers come on and tell us to prepare to unload. Kay has perched on a granite boulder alongside the wharf, so she can watch us.

When we unload into the parking lot I park and let her walk over to our car. I don’t get out. She bends and sticks her head inside the car, as well as a crinkled map that she’s highlighted in various places. “Take this road straight along,” she says, “Follow it past the church, the Nursing Home is at the fork, take the right fork for a mile. It’s a big concrete building you can’t miss it. I’ve told them to expect her. Grace is going to look in on her tonight, I’ve got that all settled.”

I look at Mrs. Overfelt, and she looks at me. “Who’s Grace?” she says, and I echo her a split second later.
Kay ignores us. “Then, come back the way you came, take the other fork, but this time come up the hill. My house is on the right, number thirty two, overlooking the town. Can’t miss it.”

Kay retreats and strides away.

“Well,” I say, “Do you want to get dinner somewhere in town?”

Mrs. Overfelt nods, so we get dinner at a little cafe in town. We watch people through the window; children and their parents, old people ambling along the street. It’s a cute street that looks out to the water, with boats bobbing out in the harbor, with different colored buoys. The wind throws news papers here and there. Mrs. Overfelt and I are mostly silent, watching the clouds, watching the sun peek through every once in a while.

Mrs. Overfelt has her back to the register, so when a man comes into the cafe and flirts with the teen waitress on duty—he’s at least forty and looks like someone who wishes he worked on the Pequod—she asks me what I’m rolling my eyes at.

“The man who just came in.” I say.

She cranes her head around. She shrugs. “Lobsterman. Or lobsterman’s son. We used to vacation here. The whole place is full of them.”

He’s leaning on the counter and talking this girl up, gesticulating wildly, tugging on his beard, smiling. She’s giggling, leaning one hip against the counter. Eventually he straightens, pays for a loaf of bread, and leaves. I watch him go.

“I can’t believe that’s all you’ve got. Lobsterman. What about his secret hobby of, I don’t know, collecting young girls or something.”
She looks back out the window. “Probably a Winston Churchill fanatic.” She doesn’t sound nearly enthusiastic enough for that level of detail, so I don’t say anything else, even when a woman comes in with pants made out of fabric dotted with kittens chasing balls of string.

After that I bring her to the Nursing home. We find it right away; it is right at the fork, there’s really only one fork, but it’s a giant concrete building that doesn’t look nice at all. It’s got a couple shrubs around the foundation, and a parking lot, and maybe a garden or a lawn in the back, it’s hard to tell. But mostly it’s three stories of square concrete.

We stare up at it. The sky’s grown darker with low hanging clouds, the wind whipping at our hair.

I take Mrs. Overfelt’s bag from her, hold it loosely in two fingers. “It’s a World War Two bunker,” I say.

“Gas chamber. I’m going to die in there.”

“You’re not right about everything.”

“Maybe not, but Jesus. She really knows how to pick ‘em.”

We don’t say anything. This is awful. I feel sick. We’re both stuck on this island, and Kay’s going to be breathing down our necks. From what I saw of the outside, St. Martin’s was nice, with shutters and wide windows. Here there’s none of that. The windows aren’t even very big. I agreed to this with no thought or anything, just because some stupid bible thumpers were giving me a hard time.

“I guess all your stuff is in there already,” I say.

“Marian, we should just go back. This was a fun trip and all, but we don’t belong here. We should go back.”
“We should just go back,” I repeat, but it’s a question and an answer and nothing all at once.

“We don’t belong on an island like this,” she presses one thick finger into my shoulder. “I never wanted to live here for a long time. This whole place is an inbred community of idiots, You were right, like that man back there, and if you think I’m going to stay here, locked up in a box with—”

“You must be Marian! And Marcine!” A short woman with gray hair strides up to us and then I am hugged. When I’m released, Mrs. Overfelt is hugged, a little more tentatively. The woman steps back, using one finger to pull strands of hair out of her face and mouth. “Let’s get outside rather than shout at each other. Come on, have you had dinner yet?” The woman grabs Mrs. Overfelt’s bag from me and then leans into me a little, rests one hand on my shoulder, and says, “Kay was worried sick when I called and said you weren’t here, but you’re here now and so that’s fine. She’s sent me out here to greet you because I think she needed some time to get herself together, so we’ll just let her have some time to herself upstairs.”

“Kay’s here?” I ask. I flick a glance up at the windows above us but we’re walking into the front double doors and I can’t get a good angle to see into any of them.

“Yes, she’s getting the room set up. It’s a lovely room; you’ve got a view of the ocean. A lovely view. Kay’s pulled a lot of strings getting you in here, it’s really a very tight fit, normally.” We step into the main lobby and I inhale the smell of clorox and old people. It’s pungent and personal.

I look around, the woman’s in corduroys and a blue wind breaker. “I’m sorry, and you are?”
The woman steps back and shakes her head. “Oh! Oh oh. Oh. I’m sorry.” She extends her hand. “I’m sorry, I’m Grace. I’m the Pastor at the Lutheran church on the Island, although really we’re fairly non-denominational. Kay has told me all about you. I’m excited to get to know you—I hope we’ll see you Sunday?” She has a wide, hearty face with red cheeks, and if I were writing her obit I would write her as the caretaker of ferrets, not the pastor of a church.

“Oh, well, I—”

Mrs. Overfelt steamrolls right over me. “What she means to say is to keep your nose out of other people’s businesses. If she shows up to church, fine, but she doesn’t need you or anyone else asking.” A man in jeans and a leather coat passes us in the hall, his hair cropped close to his head, the skin around his eyes nicely crinkled, and he nods first to Mrs. Overfelt and next to me and Grace. We nod back, and I take my hand out of Grace’s.

Grace opens her palms. “Of course, Marcine, that’s—”

Mrs. Overfelt draws herself up. “My name is Mrs. Overfelt. I haven’t lived on this earth for nine hundred years to be treated so poorly by people I could take a belt to! I am tired, I’ve been driving for days sitting on a donut, I’m stuck in this hell hole of an excuse for a nursing home, and you have the audacity to call me by the name my unfortunate mother thought to slap on a birth certificate.

“Well, I will tell you what, Ms. Grace, although I haven’t seen any of that yet, I married my husband over fifty years ago, and though so many people in this country have trampled on the concept of marriage, I stand by my vows. You may want everything to change change change all the time, you may think that’s a good thing, I know you, your kind—”

Grace keeps still, listening with the patience that, I imagine, pastors learn to listen with, but she is slightly red cheeked and her hands clasp together a little too tightly. Mrs. Overfelt
doesn’t notice, probably because she’s shorter than Grace and the light is wrong. I don’t know this pastor-woman at all, but I do know people, in general, and I know that if I was trying to draw something out of her, if I were sitting across from her at a restaurant and if her family member was doing all the talking about the deceased, if I saw those things, I would ask more questions, more and more questions, until she either started yelling or started crying. That’s when I would write the obit.

Mrs. Overfelt has crested the wave of her speech and is now coasting in for the standing ovation. “So thank you, but I have Marian with me if I need anything. And what about the need of the spirit you say? I say, that’s what Mussolini’s for! And Mao! And Rove! They write plenty of books just rife with things for my spirit to soak up! And M*A*S*H! And all those channels with the trains going by, non stop trains, just passing, constantly! What more could we want! So! Madam!” Mrs. Overfelt holds out her hand, even though it shakes a little, “All I need from you right now is my room number, and presumably a key so I’m not robbed in the night, to this rotting carcass of infested mediocrity, and then you can be going.”

That’s the thing about Mrs. Overfelt. She may be right about some things—she may have gotten to this Grace woman somehow—but then she throws you off the scent by talking Mussolini, M*A*S*H and trains all in one go. It’s brilliant. Utter brilliance. Is she crazy? There’s no way to know. I’m holding onto her elbow. She could probably use a shower.

Grace lifts her eyebrows and keeps her cool. “Mrs. Overfelt, my pardons. Kay did not inform me of your preference of name. I apologize.” She pulls the keys out of her pocket. “Room three twenty four, I believe. I’ll leave you to it. If you tell Kay I’m in the car and anxious to start work on next week’s sermons, I think it’ll get her to come down faster.” She smiles a bit.
“Quite right.” Mrs. Overfelt gives a little huff and then sends me a look over her shoulder, a tired look, a look where I can see the red rims of her eyelids.

I step in and take the keys. “Thank you, Grace.” I offer her a smile, as real as I can make it, because maybe I can write her obit, maybe I can know. Maybe I can find out.

When we get to Mrs. Overfelt’s room Kay turns to look at me, her hands on her hips, but I repeat Grace’s message before she can build up any steam. Her arms drop and she says, “Oh, is that, did she say that? That’s, I thought she said—oh well, you still have the map to get back to my house, yes? Good. Just follow it.”

Then she’s gone, and Mrs. Overfelt and I are alone again.

I help Mrs. Overfelt shower, managing to simultaneously keep her upright and also to “keep your eyes on the ceiling! I may need help but I don’t need a voyeur!” She’s shaking so badly as she says this that I tighten my grip.

I get her into her nightgown and promise to come back and show her the island tomorrow, although I suspect she knows it better than I do.

She falls asleep quickly, and I leave before it’s even fully dark out. In the waning light I drive along winding roads while the pine trees whip around, so much blacker than the lightened sky.

When I get to Kay’s house I barely register a white farmhouse. Kay ushers me in through the back door, through the mud room, and I see Grace in the kitchen to my left, a tiny little room that looks like it used to be a sizeable pantry but is now a miniscule kitchen with a couple cupboards and a fridge. Grace is leaning against the counter with a mug of tea in her hands.
I nod to her. “Grace.” I’m tempted to apologize about Mrs. O, but then I think, why should I apologize for her? I should not.

Grace opens up a cabinet and offers me some tea. She says I’ve had a long drive, etc etc, I must be tired. I am tired. I stand close to the oven and shake my head, declining her offers.

Kay says, “Marcine probably put you through the ringer. I’m surprised you didn’t speed up here as fast as possible. Four days in a car with that woman. What a bitch.”

I cross my ankles and my arms over my chest.

Grace puts her hand on Kay’s arm and rubs it, just a little. “Kay.” Kay snorts and shakes her head, and Grace says, “Come on.” She lifts her eyebrows and gives Kay a look. “She’s not that bad.” She turns to me. “Sometimes family are the ones that bother us the most, get under our skin the most.”

Kay rolls her eyes and puts her hand under her hips. “I don’t quite think that—”

“Still,” Grace says, “Mothers.”

“Mothers,” I say. “Pains in the asses.” My house was so cold.

Kay nods, and runs a hand over her hair, pushing a bobby pin back in to hold her bun in place. She sighs, and then says, “Look. I don’t want to overwhelm you on your first night, but taking care of the pain in the ass, as you so rightly put it, is only half of what I hired you for. I’ve got a bunch of stuff down in the basement—just stuff I’ve collected over the years, and I need to get rid of it.” Grace makes a gesture towards the archway with her hand, and Kay says, “I better show you. It’ll make more sense. Come on.”

I follow her out of the kitchen, past a dining room that seems to be mostly lace—lace curtains, lace table cloth—covered in magazines, paperwork, a spare pair of pants in a heap on the table—across a hallway lined with books, and we could go straight through an archway
towards what looks like a living room, but instead Kay stops us at a door to our right. It leads downstairs to the basement. She opens the door and motions me to go first.

I am not sure what to do, at first, because it’s dark—we haven’t turned on any lights in the hallway and I haven’t really noticed until now. I go down a step or two, but I turn around and say, “I’m not sure—I don’t see anything.”

Kay reaches up and pulls on the cord near my shoulder and a bare bulb flickers on above me. I look down the stairs again and am confused because my way is blocked. The stairs are just wooden boards, just the basic stair shape, but a couple steps away from me all I can see are cardboard boxes, set on the stairs. Richard and I’s basement was mainly for shelves of pickling endeavors. Shelves and shelves of mason jars of pickling.

I go down a couple more steps and bend down to look over the stairs, under the lip of the stair well to the main area of the basement.

All I can see are boxes. Just boxes, sometimes bags, in giant towering stacks, as deep back as the basement goes. The light doesn’t illuminate as far back as the boxes go.

“What. What is this?”

Grace whispers, “I told you this should be part of the ad.”

Kay says, “There’s not a lot of storage options on the island. So when someone moves or dies I offer my basement for some of their things. But sometimes they don’t come back for it.” She shuffles behind me. “Most of it can be donated or thrown out or sold. There’s a flea market every Saturday at Grace’s church, and of course there’s eBay and the Salvation Army and places like that. Plus, I’m sure you can give a bunch of things back to the former owners.”

She wants me to go through all of this. I can feel my face contracting, pivoting around this single point of insanity, this single idea that I would be good at cleaning anything.
She’s still talking. “I’m hoping to sell the house. I’m hoping to move—we’re hoping to—well. I’m hoping to have it done by the end of the summer, maybe fall, so that I can use the winter to sort my things, and then sell the house next spring.”

Grace clears her throat and says, “So soon? I thought this was just to give yourself options—This is a fire hazard. You’re going to sell?” I turn back and she’s stepped out of the doorway so that I can’t see her anymore.

Kay is holding the door knob and not talking to me anymore. “I thought we talked about this.”

“A year. Next spring.” I can hear the floorboards creak as Grace goes back across the hall, through the dining room, back the way we came.

“Kay this is a big job, I don’t know if a summer is enough time,” I turn around, but she’s striding after Grace. I can hear their footsteps in the kitchen.

I take my time, sitting on the steps of the basement. There’s no way. There’s no way. The lawsuit is this summer, and I have to take care of Mrs. Overfelt, and—it just seems like so much.

I wait in the silence and cold of the basement steps, the light making my body look like a huge shadow over the boxes piled up closest to me. I’m rubbing at my necklace under my shirt.

I hear a door close and then a little bit later Kay strides back to the basement. “You’re still here.”

“Kay, I don’t think—this is a big job.”

“I’m paying you.”

“I have other responsibilities this summer.”

“Marcine will not take that much work. There are nurses at the home.”
I shake my head. “I mean, I’m part of a lawsuit, at the moment. I’m being sued for slander and libel. I— I wrote an obituary for my friend’s lover, but now they’re saying that I lied about their relationship. I didn’t lie. I can’t help it if they kept their relationship private for thirty years and now there’s no evidence to prove it. So I’m being sued for slander. Me and Maurice. So that’s happening this summer, too. It’s not ideal but it’s happening. I can’t help it.”

I hang my head, my elbows on my knees, so that my neck hangs in between my shoulder blades, letting the tendons in my neck stretch, feeling the muscles in my back stretch along my spine. I rub at my necklace, the metal loops clinking against one another in the dark.

Kay breathes out through her nose and then snaps at me. “You should have mentioned that when we spoke on the phone. That’s an extra complication.”

“Did you have anyone else willing to take care of her?” My skin hurts, mostly under my eyes and along my forehead. I rub my nose and cheekbones and Kay doesn’t answer. “No one responded to your ad, did they? Or if they did they were weirdos that you didn’t want living with you.”

A door opens and I hear footsteps, and then rustling. Grace’s voice comes through the house slightly muffled, “I thought I should start unloading your car, Marian. You must be tired.”

I clench my back molars once, nod, and stand, climb the stairs and join Kay at the top of the stairs. In the dining room I see that Grace has placed a trash bag of clothes and my vinegars on the dining room table. I grab my box of vinegars and say, “Where am I staying?”

Kay leads the way through the dining room away from the kitchen, towards the window seat, the front door, and the stairs up to the second floor. I have to watch my step going up because the nails in the boards look like they might rip the bottom of my feet open if I’m not careful. She puts me in the north east bedroom, with one rickety iron bed frame and mattress, and
a ceiling that slopes so I can’t fully stand up in most of the room. We get the rest of my things into the room, and Kay leaves me in there without much of a goodnight.

When I lay on the mattress I’m pretty sure the bed or the whole room tilts down, towards the north wall, and when I wake up in the middle of the night all I can see through the window is the neighbor’s field with the shed. I guess I slept in the motel beds on the road trip with Mrs. O, but this is more permanent, and colder. I wonder if my mother actually moved in. If she’s sleeping in my bed. I have trouble falling asleep. Moonlight bleaches everything that isn’t cast in shadow, and so it’s all a series of white and black squares, rectangles and diamonds. At night, red is the first color to turn gray, to wash out and look like every other color.

It takes me a week to get a handle on things, but by the next Sunday, I’ve figured things out. Kay has doled out rules like they’re condoms at Planned Parenthood, but it’s come down to a couple crucial ones.

In the mornings I visit Mrs. Overfelt and sometimes we go for a drive. In the evenings I bring her dinner and watch TV with her. So far both of us have been so exhausted by moving in and getting our bearings that there have been no more conversations like the one outside the nursing home that first evening, we’ve resorted to our normal banter, pretending that we’re still in Baltimore, somehow, even though we’re not, and I don’t know how long we can keep it up. During the rest of the day, I work on Kay’s basement. In Kay’s house, the rules are thus:

First: If it’s brown, flush it down; if it’s yellow, let it mellow. “We’re having a water shortage, Marian, and this island may be surrounded by water, but it’s expensive to filtrate it.”
Second: Don’t bring Mrs. Overfelt into the house. I haven’t tried it yet, but I did suggest it. That led to a long, lengthy conversation that I mostly tuned out for because she didn’t say anything interesting.

Third: If Grace comes over, hide at the top of the stairs because Kay becomes a lot nicer when Grace is around or has just been around Grace.

Fourth: Don’t leave boxes of crap from the basement in the hallway.

That is why I am here, about to knock on a strange man’s doorway. I shift my grip on the box and make my way from the car to the concrete steps in front of Gordon Ketterly’s house. The box is half filled with tax documents from the forties and it keeps slipping through my fingers. The black flies (a New England thing—ubiquitous and unavoidable) buzz around me and the crab grass pricks at my ankles. I set the box on the steps and knock on the door before flailing my arms around my head to try and deter the flies.

Yesterday I was in the basement, bringing up more boxes to sort through, when I found this one which said, “Gordon Ketterly, 92 Poplar Lane, Clarahaven, Maine” on the top flap. Most of the boxes just have names like “Wheezy’s basement” or “Jim” or “Living Room” on them, and I can’t do much with those except parcel out the contents to be sold, donated or tossed. So when I found one with an actual address I got a wild feeling in my chest, like when Richard would turn up the swing music and spin me around in our living room. Like, maybe this wouldn’t be so bad. So I stuck that box in the hallway so that maybe Kay could take it with her when she went out, next.

That was wrong. Rule number four. This is my job. This is the job I’m being paid to do.

I slap at a fly near my head, but only succeed in hitting myself.

Marian Zuckerman died this week from poisonous black fly bites. Black Flies have never been known to cause deaths before, but apparently they’ve mutated into
poisonous, flying, death machines. Marian is spared a life of cleaning out someone else’s basement in favor of joining her husband, Richard, in the afterlife, wherever that may be. Do not send flowers. Send Congratulations cards to Virginia Bradley of Parkville, MD.

The first day I was here it was windy and there were no black flies. The second day, the wind was still and they were out in droves. I’ve got large red swellings all over my legs until I started wearing long pants and shirts everywhere.

The whole island is scrubby weeds, wind shorn pine trees and granite boulders. Everything looks like it’s buckling down for the winter—even though it’s the middle of June, now; the whole island is just waiting for winter to come again. It’s funny because most of the island gets by on summer tourism, now, with maybe twelve hundred people living there all year, but during one, maybe two months of the summer the couple hundred vacationers flowing in and out of the summer houses along the edges spend enough money to cover the nine months of cold and ice and blustering seas. The rest of the island gets by on lobstering, which I imagine isn’t the most lucrative of professions. Most of the residents live as close to the center of the ten mile island as they can manage, in small white houses with steep roofs and warped window panes.

That’s what this house looks like, too. No landscaping, just a concrete foundation, these bare concrete stairs, and if I peer around the house a little I can see a ginormous shed or workshop out back. There’s no driveway up to the double doors of the shed, so it must be some kind of storage building.

I pull out one of the tax papers and write a note for the residents, explaining that I’m Kay’s employee; I found their box in her basement and am returning it. Have a great day and please do not call me back.

I’m about to get back in my car when the inner door opens, then the screen opens, and a balding head pokes out. I know this head. This is the head from the cafe that first day who was
flirting with that girl. The one who looks like he wants to go help Captain Ahab down a giant whale.

“Can I help you?”

I do not particularly want to talk to anyone. “I’m looking for Gordon Ketterly,” I say.

“Well, he’s dead; what can I do for you.” The man lets the screen door shut in front of him because of the flies.

Of course he’s dead. “Are you family?”

“If this is a census thing, I sent the form in last year.”

I explain that I work for Kay and that if he doesn’t want this stuff I’ll just throw it out. I wave at a fly and step back and forth, feeling the grass prickling my ankle like biting insects. Those flies are going to crawl up my legs and give me more bites, I know it.

The man sighs. “Fuck.”

“Are you family?”

“He was my father. But I don’t even know what’s in there. Probably nothing important. Yeah, just throw it out.”

I turn away and then he stops me, asking what’s in the box, after all.

I take out the spreadsheet, where I’ve started to keep track of what item from what box goes into what pile, from my back pocket. “Um. It looks like about twenty years of tax documents from the forties and fifties, an X-ray of what I think is a broken leg, a polka dot dress, a ceramic lobster, a moose apron, and a tin full of what probably was some sort of shrine to Winston Churchill. Pictures, news clippings, a little baggie of hair.”

The man looks back inside, then back to me. “I don’t have the room or the time to deal with it. Just throw it out or sell it, I don’t care.”
No more swing dancing. Why can’t it just feel like swing dancing? “Look, sir, I’ve got a whole basement full of boxes like this, I’d appreciate it if you could take this one off my hands.”

“Well it’s not mine and you can probably do more with it than I will. I don’t know; find a home for those Churchill photos or something.” He rubs a hand over his face.

I don’t say anything for a minute. These Mainers—I suspect all New Englanders in general—are more stubborn and terse than anyone I ever met in Baltimore. I’m the one who comes for the food and leaves early while everyone else brings green jello molds and volunteers to clean up after. I resent that now I’m the one doing the work. That wild feeling in my chest has been replaced with a feeling like black flies. I stomp at one by my ankle.


I stuff my list back into my pocket. “This is ridiculous.” He raises his eyebrows and I say, louder, “fine. Great. Thanks. I’ll just take this back.” I gesture to the box and try to bat at a fly at the same time.

“Great. Thanks, Marian.” I freeze because I never introduced myself, and he laughs, once. “This is a small island. Things get around. That’s all.” Then he shuts the door and I’m left with the box and the flies.

I drive back to Kay’s house. Kay’s house has what is probably a lovely view from the top of a raise, out over a valley that looks over the town. Now, with the nice weather, with the sun and easy swing of the tides, the trees have an ok time of it, but I imagine in the winter it’s all they can do to hang on.
The problem with living in such close proximity of the ocean is the smell. I enjoy a good sea smell—salt, gulls, sand, SPF 130—as much the next person, but half the day this smell is the smell of low tide, which is sweet and low and in general smells like a stopped up toilet. Or a septic field. Or a garbage truck. Kay tells me that during low tide all the little creatures who don’t go out with the tide get caught in little pools in between the rocks, and slowly die as the water dries. It’s her favorite thing. The first time I noticed it I asked Kay. She inhaled deeply, through her nose, and smiled. “Don’t you love it?” I said, “No.” She seemed confused by this. What’s confusing about it? Every day, twice a day, I can smell death in the house, and not the nice kind.

I park in the back, in the gravel pad next to her garden. Her garden is not really a garden, more an amalgamation of wild flowers or other things that Grace has managed to plant and care for that keep coming back. I lug the box in through the mud room, kick off my shoes (rule number five million—outside shoes stay in the mud room), past the kitchen, through the dining room with the lacy table cloth and the lacy curtains and the big iron stove heater in the corner, up the stairs that have nails that are sort of sticking up in the corners and look like they’ll rip my feet open if I step on them wrong, up to the guest room where I’m allowed to lay out the boxes I’m taking apart, and onto the bed. The bed is covered in a large orange bed spread with yellow stitching, and yellow rose wallpaper on the walls. It’s outrageous and I want to shake Kay and ask her why anyone would put wallpaper up like that.

So far, most of my time is spent here.

I’ve just put the box down and started inspecting my legs and arms for bites when I hear Kay come in. She shouts at me to come down.
I pause in the middle of the stairs and Kay shuffles through her bag at the bottom, turning to look at me every so often. “Good, Marian, you’re home. Look. I’ve got Marcine’s dinner all ready, so you can go over there any time. How did she like the tacos yesterday?” She tucks a strand of gray hair back into the tight bun at the back of her head. She only ever wears her hair into a bun.

I shrug. “No better than anything else.” In fact, Mrs. Overfelt had yelled at me for a half hour for forcing her to eat something crunchy that hurt her gums, and didn’t I know that the taco shell factories grind up all the varmint—the rats and mice and bats and bugs—that lurk around in places like that, and mix all that in with the corn, so you’re really just eating dirty rat feet dyed yellow?

I say something noncommittal.

“Oh, Marian, that reminds me.” She holds onto the bottom stair rail loosely with one wrinkled hand. “You have seen the signs over the toilets, I assume? Maybe I didn’t discuss this as thoroughly as I needed to when you first came, but fresh water is precious on the island, we can’t just go wasting it. Some people have rain barrels but some of us actually order tanks from the mainland. I’m lucky that I have a well, but it’s not an endless resource. Please don’t flush unless you absolutely need to. If it’s yellow, let it mellow; if it’s brown flush it down. I forget to remind people because all of us on the island understand.”

I nod.

She cocks her head to the side. “Do you understand? I heard you taking a shower this morning for at least twenty minutes. I don’t know what you were doing in there, but that sort of thing will dry a well up quicker than you think. I’m not asking for miracles, I’m just asking for some respect.”
I nod again, all the blood in my body swirling around my face.

She jerks her head in what might be a nod, or might be early warning of a brain tumor or degenerative disease. “Do you need anything before you go over?”

I clench the barrister. “I went over to Gordon Ketterly’s house today.”

She frowns. “Gordon Ketterly. Hmm.”

“His box had an address on Poplar lane? He had a lot of tax papers, and an X-ray, and a Winston Churchill shrine.”

Kay’s eyes widen. “Oh! Mr. Gordy! Oh, right! Oh, he’s dead.”

“Yes. I don’t know who lives there now, but—”

“His son. Doc.”

“Oh, well. Whoever it was—Doc, I guess—didn’t want the box. He gave it back to me. I guess I’ll just throw most of it out.”

Kay looks thoughtful. “Well, don’t waste anything; someone might want the Churchill stuff.”

“Yeah.”

“But I’m surprised that Doc was unpleasant. He’s normally cheerful—if you like that sort of thing.” She flares her nostrils as if being cheerful was bad behavior. Generally I avoid overly cheerful people too, but I would never say anything like that.

I shuffle my foot. “He was unhelpful.”

“He was trying to be a lobsterman for a while, until he crashed his father’s boat a couple years ago.” She shifts her weight and runs a hand along the banister. “He’s always perfectly nice to me. Maybe you caught him on a bad day.”
“Well, whatever it was, I’m just saying that I know you want me to try and contact most of the families of these things, but I don’t think that’s really practical.”

“You’re just getting started. Have you been over to see Grace?”

I frown and don’t say anything.

“Oh, Jeez, I thought I’d told you about that. She has a giant binder of all the names and addresses of people who have lived on the island for the last seventy years. And she knows everyone, anyway, because she’s the pastor, of course.” Kay taps her chin and looks at the floor.

“It’s at the church, anyway, so that’ll be real easy. How are you coming with the flea market?”

I haven’t started on it. “Fine. It’s going well.”

She lifts her eyebrows. “Procrastination does not help anything. I’ve been working on the Clambake for months now even though some people think it runs like clockwork; it runs like clockwork because I work on it for months.”

When she leaves I sit on the stairs, right where I am, exhausted by the whole thing.

When I first met her I thought Kay and I would do well together because she doesn’t waste words, she doesn’t giggle, and she doesn’t assume I want to go bowling on a weeknight, like my mother might. But I’m quickly realizing that she’s worse, almost, because with my mother it’s easy to agree and then do whatever you want. Chances are she won’t figure out what’s happened until it’s too late. But with Kay she tells you to do something and there’s no argument, no other options, and then she quizzes you about it afterwards. Dealing with my mother requires maintaining a pleasant facade, but Kay doesn’t care about whether you smile or not, she’ll ship you off to the library regardless.

I don’t have to stay with her, or here. I’ve thought many, many times about leaving, about driving back to Baltimore, but now that I’m here—a suit waits for me back there. If I’d waited
around the Evangelicals would have just gotten worse. Plus, Maurice is still on his way. I can’t just leave before he gets here.

Eventually I head to Mrs. Overfelt’s.

The nursing home has proven difficult to navigate. No matter which way I go in, once I get to her floor I invariably spend five minutes going back and forth, trying to figure out where her room is in relation to where I am. I tried to make signs for myself—go five rooms past the poster of the monkey wearing a bathing suit and playing a sax, turn the corner and go another two rooms—but the nurses cycle the pictures and decorations around so that the musical, sea bathing monkey appears in different places every other day or so and then I have to figure out the whole system again. The walls are peach, or beige, and no sunlight comes in, ever. Twice this week I’ve had dreams that I go up and down the stairs and round and round the floors, but all I find are gondolas and swans and more stair cases leading to more gondolas, more swans, and never Mrs. Overfelt’s room, and Kay appears, saying, “Marcine’s room is this way,” pointing, so I turn and end up on the wrong floor entirely.

The nurses haven’t moved the motivational “Optimism” poster, with a picture of a snail at the edge of a leaf and looking over the edge, yet, so I turn right, go five rooms down and then enter Mrs. Overfelt’s room. She’s right next to another woman who’s been getting friendly, Myra, who sometimes comes over and watches TV with us, or sometimes brings her checkers set.

When I round the corner I see Myra disappearing into her room and Mrs. Overfelt yelling from hers; then I hear the clattering of something as she presumably sends it crashing to the ground.

“Stolen, you stole it, where’d you put it, you stole it—”
The nurse stands in the doorway, trying to tell her that nothing’s been stolen.

I edge around the nurse and ask Mrs. Overfelt what’s been stolen. She clenches her fists and yells at me, spittle flying, “The clothes! All the clothes! His clothes, I was looking for them, and they’re gone, they’re gone, where are they! Stolen!”

The nurse, a heavyset woman with pale eyelashes shakes her head, her eyes wide.

“Where was the last place you saw them?” I say.

She points to the wardrobe. “That wardrobe, but it was tall, then.”

“And when was the last time you saw them?” I ask, leaning against the door jam.

Mrs. Overfelt is moving around the room in circles, touching perfume bottles, makeup containers, figurines, picture frames on the wardrobe, letting them fall, opening drawers, poking through them and then shutting the drawers again. “I don’t know! I don’t know! They were—clearly marked in boxes and I put them in the truck, clearly marked, clearly marked, but in the new place half my things were missing.”

“Who moved with you? Did someone help you move?”

She keeps walking around and I can’t hear what she says. She’s touching the bed spread, she’s touching the curtains. When her circuit comes around to me I hear, “bitch cunt whore liar cheat bitch cunt whore liar cheat bitch cunt whore liar cheat didn’t push her in didn’t push her in, maybe I should have, bitch cunt liar whore—”

She’s come full circle around the room and I snag her by the shoulders. “Mrs. Overfelt.” She looks up at me, her eyes are bloodshot. “Have you been up all night, thinking about this? Have you slept?”

She shakes her head. “I don’t know what happened to them. To his clothes.”

“Have you eaten?”
She shakes her head. I sit her down and put food in front of her. After dinner I convince her to put on her night clothes, even though it’s only five o’clock, and I put her in bed. I try and remember all the fictitious obituaries I’ve ever written. I tell her the orca one and the tornado one, the man hole one, the skating incident one, the cheese factory one and the one with the vat of chocolate sauce. I tell her as many as I can until she nods off. I right all of the things on her dresser, and then I see myself out.

I start bringing over pieces of things from the boxes for Mrs. Overfelt.

It’s not the same, but it’s something.


I tell her Evaline Schangle’s obit.

Evangeline Schangle, President of the Clarahaven Community Center from 1967-1982, Co-Chair of the Women’s Charity Organization (WCO) Clarahaven Chapter, Employee of the year (1983, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1989, 1992 and 1993) for the Department store Boscovs, in Rockland, was killed in a car crash this week. Although the accident killed her, witnesses noted that as the paramedics pulled her out of the vehicle, she looked as put together as she always did, with not a hair out of place, all her clothes freshly pressed, not even a tear in her stockings.

Mrs. Schangle was an active member of the community and raised three successful and engaging sons. She was always a wealth of opinions and members of the community often came to her for help with any number of issues. Unfortunately, the community’s grief was so great that none of them could be found to comment on her impact in their lives. Her husband, as well, has left the island for a vacation in Spain, most likely to deal with his grief in solitude. Well wishers should send flowers (lilies, if possible) to her island address, where her neighbor will gather them together for the funeral to be held at the Lutheran Church on Saturday next.
She gets a kick out of it, and then tells me that I should throw this stuff in the trash. I look
down at the collection on the table in front of it. When I get back to Kay’s I mark it all with neon
fifty cent stickies and toss them in a giant box with other things that I don’t have time to sort
through.

I would really like to go back to the basement and find more interesting things. I’ve really
only opened up the boxes on the steps and a little beyond; Maybe there will be vintage items
hidden in the back somewhere.

In bring up several boxes (clothes, newspapers, children’s drawings, lobsters, lobsters,
pots and pans) before I find anything worthwhile.

It’s a box full of jars of junk. Each jar is filled with one type of thing: Lint, buttons,
screws, nails, pins, extra bits of string, rubber bands, shreds of tin foil, paper clips, loose staples.
I have no idea how to sell this stuff. I should probably throw most of it out.

But I would like these people. They probably are slightly neurotic. Probably more than
slightly neurotic, probably lived through the depression, and they saved everything they could.

I bring the Jars to Mrs. O. I set them on the table in front of her, while we eat dinner, and
tell her an obituary for these people.

Rosa and Frederick Gaimen both died today, age 90 and 94, in the middle of
their first roller coaster ride. Employees were shocked and horrified to find that their two
oldest clients both had heart attacks mid vertical-plunge. Yet, it is a fitting end to these
two love birds, who always lived modestly, that the moment they lifted off the ground
was the moment they left the ground forever.

Always practical, Frederick worked for forty years as a teacher and educator, and
eventually vice principal and then principal of his school district. Rosa worked for forty
years as a secretary at a dentist’s office. They vacationed by doing home improvement
projects, and thoroughly enjoyed following the NASA space projects. Neighbors and
friends say that Rosa fashioned an almost scarily accurate astronaut’s costume for
Frederick one Halloween, which he then wore in the yard without telling the neighbors
and scared the living daylights out of Bernie Hatchet, who almost shot him with his bee-
bee gun.

The memorial service is Sunday next.
Mrs. O strokes one finger along a jar. She picks it up and caresses the one with all the buttons.

“‘You can’t sell these,” she says.

I hesitate, and then I say, “I know.”

She puts the jar back on the table.

These Jars remind me of the kinds of Jars Richard and I used to pickle, or to put sea shells in. When I leave the nursing home that evening I bring the box of Jars up to the guest room but I stop. These Jars should look like they belong. Not surrounded by Titanic memorabilia.

I go back to standing in the hall with the box of Jars. My stomach gets all knotted up, and I start breathing faster. I’m supposed to donate them or throw them out, but instead I turn right and put the Jars under my bed, with all of Richard’s items. The Jars look better there.

I have to finish packing and tagging everything for the flea market, tomorrow, but I sit under my window for a while, eating the last of the pickled eggs that I brought with me for the drive, letting the smell of vinegar wash over me. Richard used to stand over the pot of boiling things, staring directly down so that his glasses steamed up, filling his lungs. I could never do that because the vinegar stung my eyes too much. His hand on my waist. My hand in his hair.

We set up my table in the parking lot of the Lutheran church, a big hulking building, with dark brown vinyl siding, a bell tower and small, arched, stained glass windows. The air is damp around us. I ask about rain, but Kay assures me that it always feels like this before dawn. I take her word for it. She leaves me to go supervise the other vendors.
An hour later the sun’s come up to a sky full of heavy gray clouds, and the woman in the booth next to me advises me to keep my boxes handy so I can pack everything up in a hurry if it starts raining. She herself brought tarps for just this occasion. She’s wearing a sweater with a kitten on the front and I can just tell that her house has many more items featuring members of the feline species. Cat plates. Cat mugs. Cat carpets. Cat pictures. Funny cat books. Doilies, probably, too. Cat hand towels. Probably five or six actual cats. Maybe more. I imagine that she lets them breed in her closets. She tells me her name while she talks on and on and on, but it was something like Winifred or Gertrude or Brenda and although that fits with her, I don’t need to remember it.

I say, “My name is—”

“Marian, I know. You’re working with Kay.” She nods as if there was a memo that went around. “I’m glad she finally has someone to help out. Before she came—you know, we didn’t have any library but what was in the school, and that was mostly stuff like Go Dog Go? And we didn’t have a proper Town Hall Government, or anything, and we didn’t have any Arts council or nothing, and we weren’t being taken seriously by Vinylhaven or Northhaven. Those two. Running rough shod all over us, with their tourism and their lobstering! Well, now, thanks to Kay, we’ve got our rightful piece of the pie!” She nods. “So I’m real glad she’s got an assistant. Real glad.” She reaches over and pats me on the knee. “You be nice to her, ya’ hear? You treat her nice.”

I blink and make a noise that sounds like an assurance. I was not aware that an assistant was what Kay wanted or asked for. I’m here for Mrs. Overfelt—her assistant, maybe.

I guess it doesn’t matter what the Islanders think. Kay knows what she’s asked of me.
I make a couple sales when the market first opens. A rooster plate, a set of measuring spoons. Most people trail their eyes over the top of my table and move on without varying their strolling pace. The person across the way, selling lumpy ceramics, has a clump of people picking through the mugs and vases. I figure each awkward mug is twelve dollars (how could they be worth more?) and each plate is ten (really, it shouldn’t be that much). I watch as one person buys two mugs. Twenty-four dollars. I turn my attention to the woman with corn hair, yoga pants and sneakers in front of my table. She’s clearly a Day-Tripper, someone who came in on the Ferry for the market and doesn’t live on the island. I bring out the weird, hand sewn purses with “Cambodia” on the label and tell her some story about my cousin backpacking around and picking these up, but unfortunately they’re just not my style. I flick off the price tag, and tell her that since they’re real, and of personal value, I can’t give them away for less than twenty five. She buys them. So gullible.

I look across the way, and am pleased to see that no one’s at the ceramics table except for a pudgy eleven year old who picks up each piece in turn, checks the price, and then sets it back down. Take that.

At six o’clock I tug my sweater on because the breeze has gotten colder, and at six thirty a raindrop rolls down one of the olive green tumblers I found in a box just labeled “Kitchen.”

A half hour later it’s raining in earnest, and my shirt is sticking to my back. Kay’s going around to each vendor, and when she gets to me and Kitten-lady she tells us they’re relocating to the basement of the church. Kitten Lady helps me pack up.

Directly inside the main door is a small, close atrium, with a faux wood donation box and an old, metal light fixture shedding orange light everywhere. It smells like mold and dust, like heavy carpet and old plaster. Straight ahead, the sanctuary has peach colored walls, cracking
plaster, and olive green rugs that smothers all the sound. The pews are painted dark brown, and
the piano is an old upright that looks like it probably has several broken keys. They haven’t
updated anything since at least 1970. Kitten lady prods me in the back and I follow a man in a
parka down the stairs to the right.

The RE area has brightly colored mats on the floor and Dora the Explorer posters on the
walls with animals in Spanish and English. Kay’s helping someone set up folding tables along
the walls. There’s not enough space, and it looks like more than one vendor is sharing a table.
Kitten Lady grins at me.

I set my box on top of the table nearest to the door, and go back outside to get the others.
In maybe fifteen minutes they’re all inside, mine and Kitten Lady’s, although the cardboard is
sopping and tearing under my fingers. I set up the table again.

On my second trip my phone rings in my pocket. Kitten lady brushes past me as I take it
in the Atrium. It’s Maurice.

“Maurice?”

“Marian! I thought you said it was supposed to be lovely this time of year!” I can hear the
ferry horn in the background.

I love him. I love him; I love him; I love him.

I laugh. “Well, at least you haven’t come on a day with flies.”

“Flies? Flies? What kind of flies are we talking?”

“Oh no, if I told you that you’d turn right around and then I’d have to be all by myself on
this island, and that’s not fair at all.”

“I might as well stick around; I’ve got all my furniture packed and everything.”
I look out the doors, as if I might see him, but from the parking lot of the church really all I can see is the road and a couple houses. “Where are you?”

“Waiting for this ferry to unload. How long can it take, really?”

“Forever, trust me.”

“So hey, listen, I’m going to have to see some of this furniture into the house, but I thought maybe I could come hunt you down. Where are you?”

“I’m at a flea market.”

“A what?”

“A flea market; I’m selling things at a flea market.”

“Marian, you are a hoarder, not a purger. You collect, not give away. What is this?”

“I know, I know, but this is—this is the job I’m doing. I’m just—I’ll tell you later.”

“Jesus, well, I have to see this. Marian, giving things away. Selling things. How bizarre.”

“Yeah—so, look, this thing goes until one, so if you have time, just drive into town and ask for the Lutheran church. They’ll give you directions no problem. I’d love to see you.”

“Yeah yeah, no need to get weepy about it.” Kay comes up behind me, taps me on the shoulder and points downstairs with her eyes. “I’ve got to go. See you later?” We hang up and I feel light and airy, and I bounce downstairs, suddenly ready to talk to the unwashed masses.

This time the room is abuzz with people. There’s too many people for the space, and quickly everything smells like warm, wet, human flesh, with a shot of sweat, two shots of socks, and three shots of old person. It’s wonderful.

I sell more things, now, with everyone crammed in. Every so often I look over various heads for Maurice. Nine thirty, Ten Thirty—it really picks up around ten thirty and I lose track of time.
One old man takes twenty minutes surveying the items on the table, picking up first one, than the other, this pewter creamer, that Parcheesi board, before finally buying a single pin in the shape of a frolicking lamb from the costume jewelry box. Only a dollar. He’s telling me about how it reminds him of a pin his Aunt used to have (it’s probably the same one, let’s be honest), when a young woman comes up behind him. She’s wearing clothes with brand names on every zipper and every chest pocket. In the guise of reshuffling the table I bring out the mink stole. The effect is immediate. She coos over it, picks it up, rubs it against her face. “Oh this is wonderful! So soft. Too bad it’s real.” I nod, and tell her I’m selling it for a Native American friend of mine, who hails from a tribe that only uses the furs of animals when the animals have died from natural causes. She lets her palm and then the back of her hand smooth over it in continuous movements.

“Well, I was hesitant to bring it here because it’s expensive. My friend—Young Eagle, but we just call him Young—priced it at a hundred. I told him there was no way I’d sell it for that, but he asked me to try anyway. But I’m not going to try for a hundred. I mean, even eighty is too much.” I can see Maurice egging me on in the back of my head. This is good, keep her going.

“Oh, no, are you kidding? Eighty’s cheap, for something this beautiful. I mean, look at the quality of the stitching! And the backing fabric is so soft. I wouldn’t buy fur, normally.”

I nod, her Grandfather tells her he’s going to keep looking, and she hands me a hundred dollar bill.

I’m finding change for gullible girl when someone picks up the framed picture of Winston Churchill and says, “Ah! You didn’t throw it out!”

It’s Doc, looking cheerful. I hand gullible girl a twenty and a bag. She thanks me, profusely, and then sort of skips over to her Grandfather, who rolls his eyes.
Yes, Maurice, I can sell things. I can.

I turn to Doc, smiling, and say, “I told you I’d try to sell it first.”

He shrugs and puts the picture back. “Yeah but the stuff in that box was mostly junk.”

“Well,” I say. Doc is going bald, but the hair from the sides and back of his head is grown out long, and he’s tucked it into a pony tail. Richard’s hair was always cut close and curly to his head. It was also dark brown, not this stringy, dish-wash water brown that Doc’s got.

“Oh hey look,” he says, shuffling his feet. “Look, I’m sorry about the other day. I was having a hard time of it. I didn’t mean to snap at you. I really didn’t mean to be so unwelcoming.”

I shake my head a little. Pottery Barn, across the way, is empty of customers. The woman I conned out of twenty five dollars earlier passes by the table without stopping. If I were prone to excessive shows of emotion, I’d be fist pumping right now. I look at the box at my feet and think, what would Maurice buy from this box? The watch. I bring it out and put it front and center.

I smile at Doc before repeating, “It’s not a problem.”

“No, it is. You were trying to help and I was acting like a doofus.” He laughs at his own wording. “I was acting like a doofus and you were just trying to help.”

“It’s really not a big deal,” I say, and smile. Kay is across the room, clambering onto a chair to try and open a window, her haunches looking round and ample in her stiff, navy pants. Can people see her like this? I would really love it if everyone turned and watched her looking so ridiculous. I should tell Maurice about this. I wish he was here. Is he here? No. I give a quick scan. He’s not here.
Doc smiles and clears his throat a little. “Hey, but I’d like to make it up to you.” He rests both hands on the table and leans towards me. “Have you had island lobster yet?”

I feel my mouth twitching up. “I’ve had lobster.”

He tilts his head to the side and towards me, to emphasize his left eye and eyebrow. “Island lobster? Because there’s a difference.”

Maurice probably likes lobster. “I mean, I’ve had lobster, back in Baltimore. It was—good. I—liked it.” That’s not true. One time my mother got lobsters from the grocery store. That was the first time Dad went into the hospital for a prolonged stay. The lobster was sticky and messy and I couldn’t get the shell off without smashing it from the top, and then there were little bits of shell in the meat. It was just the two of us at a too large table, and I got frustrated halfway through and went to bed early.

Doc leans his head back and rolls his eyes before jerking back and looking at me. He takes his hands off the table and starts to gesture violently. “Oh, man, you haven’t—that’s it. I’m going to cook lobster for you. Clarahaven lobster—you can’t beat Clarahaven lobster—”

I hear kitten lady say, “Oh, I’ve run out of plastic bags!” to her customer. I hand her one of mine and her eyes light up. “You’re so sweet! Thank you, you’re so sweet, isn’t she so sweet?” she says. What a bizarre person. She keeps smiling.

Doc’s still talking. “We’ll see if we can get any females, so you can try the roe, although you know, if you don’t like the roe,” his voice gets gravely and zippy, “Well then, baby, you can just give it to me.” He points to himself. I think, this man did a lot of drugs in college.

He’s flashing his teeth at me (does he know that the bottom ones have yellow splotches along the sides?) at me and I catch up with his train of thought—he’s talking about us doing
something together. I’m not ok with that. I stuff the extra plastic bags back in the box I have for them. “I’m not one for fish, much.”

His eyes widen and his brows furlough in. “Lobster isn’t a fish, so that’s not a problem.”

“You know, really, it’s fine—”

Kitten lady has completed her transaction and turns to me. “You haven’t had lobster?”

Doc turns to her. “Thank you; that’s what I said!”

“No, I’ve had lobster, of course, I—umm—I liked it, sort of.”

Kitten Lady looks at Doc and then me, looking devious (one eye narrowed a little, one corner of her mouth curling up, something about the nose, too) like I never thought a kitten lady could look. “You have to let Doc cook you some, he’s excellent at it.”

I’m not sure who to address. “Really, it’s not a big deal.” I can’t see the ceramics table because Kay, with her clipboard, is standing in the middle of the room, talking to a bearded man with a giant beer belly. I scan the room for Maurice. What time is it? I check the watch I just brought out. It’s—oh, it’s almost twelve. That means he’s preparing for his twelve to one hour with Gideon. He’s not coming. My stomach falls.

Doc opens his palms towards me. “Hey hey! Look, I’m not going to argue with you. You’re doing me a favor by dealing with my dad’s junk” he extends a hand toward the Winston Churchill photo like it personally attacked him, “and now I’m going to do you a favor. You can decide whether or not you ever want lobster again. And if not,” he puts his hands up, “then I swear I won’t bother you about it. But you have to try Real Clarahaven Lobster once. You’re on the island for a while, you can’t not.”

Kitten-Lady nods. Kay shifts her weight and moves her clipboard to the other arm.
I squint at the man with the tankard and then look back to Doc. “Look, normally I pickle most of my food, I’m not really into—I don’t know, butter or whatever you normally use—”

“You pickle your lobster?”

“No, I pickle beets and chicken and sometimes peaches—”

Doc folds his arms, and then brings one hand to massage his chin as he stares at the ceiling. “Wow,” he says, slowly, “I never thought about that. Pickled lobster. Woah. That’s the craziest idea I’ve ever,” he starts laughing. “What the hell! Let’s try it. I’ve never done it before. Might turn out like crap.” He rubs at his mouth. “Hmm. Do I have any vinegar? That’s the question. And where to get vinegar. Is it something you can get at the grocery store?”

I raise my eyebrows. “I have vinegar.”

“Great. So here’s what we’ll do. I’ll pick you up tomorrow—how about around four? We’ll get the lobsters, like I said. Then you’ll teach me how to pickle and I’ll teach you about lobster. And we’ll try the lobster before we pickle it and then after, as well, so that it’s—what do they call it? Something—a controlled experiment.”

I don’t think that’s what a controlled experiment is. “After you pickle you have to let the flavors sit for a while.”

Doc says, “All right, then we’ll let them sit and test them out later.” He looks at me for confirmation.

Kitten Lady’s nodding and listening. Maurice isn’t coming. If Richard were here, I wouldn’t have to wait around for one old gay man who probably spent all morning with his movers arguing about the placement of a lamp. I wouldn’t have to be conversing with an ex-lobsterman who’s shouting about how much he loves lobsters. I hate this. I hate that Richard’s body gave up for no reason. Dead on the copy room floor. I know about dead bodies, now, how
they defecate and get random erections and twitch from the leftover electrical pulses. I can’t stand thinking about his body doing that in the back of a car somewhere. My Richard My Richard. His knee pressed against mine as we sat on the couch in the student lounge after our first fight. I was in love with him and he didn’t know it until I called him out for leading me on. And then the tilt of his head, his palm against my cheek. And where does that leave me now. Richard Richard Richard Richard.

Maurice, you bastard.

I say, “Um,” and rub at my chest, my neck and the chain of my necklace.

“Great. Great. I’m excited! Pickled lobster,” Doc lets out a giant laugh, “Never heard of that before. Ok, great! Great. This’ll be fun.”

A woman with short hair noses her way between Doc and the table, and starts asking me questions about pricing, if the motorized Santa is selling for fifty or five, if the plate of costume jewelry is being sold one piece at a time or all of them, and if she can pick through and find the one she wants. I tell her the Santa is going for fifty, and no, she has to take the whole box of costume jewelry or none at all.

Doc steps back, looking around as if he’s waiting. Eventually he realizes short hair lady isn’t going anywhere soon, and he waves at me, mouthing “tomorrow at four,” as if I didn’t know what a wave meant. Short hair woman doesn’t buy anything.

Kitten Lady leans over to me and says, “Hey, looks like Doc likes you. What a sweetie. He helped me fix my heater this past winter. Shame about his boat.” Then she has a customer and turns away from me before I can tell her how ridiculous she is. I’m married.

Besides, people like Doc don’t like people like me, and I don’t like people like Doc. They’re too loud and I’m too quiet and that combo never works out. He’s aware of this; he’s just
doing this “Welcome to the island” thing. I’m trying to figure out what to tell her when she gets
done with her customer. But then she gets a phone call, and then she’s talking to someone on her
left, and I’m still planning a long speech in my head about how just because I appear to be a
single woman doesn’t mean I want to immediately pair up with the first buffoon I see, and that
it’s not her business, anyway, and that I bet she dies in a giant flood because no one remembers
she lives in her own house, alone, with her twenty seven cats who claw her to shreds in their
desperate bids to live through the storm.

An hour later the flea market ends and I’ve got an extra two hundred dollars in my box,
although it felt like The Pottery Barn over there was stealing all of my customers. I give the
money to Kay and she counts it again.

She’s grudgingly impressed, and pulls Grace over to hand over the money for the needy
family fund.

Grace shifts her weight back and forth. “Marian, thanks so much. We really appreciate
your work—I’ll tell you, the last time I saw the state of the place I was concerned!” she tucks a
piece of hair behind her ear.

Kay raises her eyebrows and her voice gets tight. “Yes. Yes if I’m planning to sell the
place and move in—”

Grace interrupts, “It’s a good idea to get that basement cleaned out so you have options.
It never hurts to have options. Really, Kay, you should have done it a long time ago, you’re not
obligated to be the island’s storage unit! Now you could build a—I don’t know, a train garden
down there!”

Kay exhales all at once. “I’m not going to build a train garden. But you are right. It’s
good to have options.”
“Options are always good.” Grace lifts her chin a little.

“Yes. To start the process to move in with you.”

Grace bites her lip. “That hasn’t been decided—”

“What else were we talking about, then?” Kay and Grace stare at each other for a couple seconds, and then Grace steps back and glances at me.

“Pardon us, Marian, we’re just hashing out an old argument that keeps going nowhere.” Kay blinks, pulling her head back a little, a small wince, but Grace keeps going. “I saw a lot of people here today; it was good. Mr. Sprocks was here. Haven’t gotten him to come out of his home in probably four months.”

I suddenly remember the conversation Kay and I had about Grace a day or two ago.

“Grace?” I ask, looking back and forth from her to Kay. Grace looks at me. “Kay mentioned you might have contact information for people on the island; I have all these boxes with names but no addresses, or a last name but no first.”

“Oh, yeah. We haven’t updated our system yet, so it’s all still in binders, is that ok?” She turns away and heads towards the opposite end of the room, through the tables that are still set up from the flea market, around a couple people boxing up anything they didn’t sell; over to where I see her office is, as well as another room that looks like it might be a janitor’s closet. She opens that door and it’s not a closet, it’s a mini library, with shelves up to the ceiling, a small table in the middle, and an overhead florescent light.

She goes over to the shelves on the right and pulls out a giant, black binder that’s peeling and showing its cardboard.

She shows me the binders, explains the organizational system the last couple secretaries have set up.
I flip a couple pages and am torn between laughing at how few people have lived here in such a large span of time, overwhelmed because there’s still a lot, and amused that someone would undertake this if they didn’t have to. She tells me I can drop in on her any time if I have questions. She tells me where she lives, how to get into the church and everything.

Kay’s shoots me a look, as if to tell me that I am certainly not welcome to drop in on Grace any time when she is at home, she is just being nice. I put the binder back on the shelf and close the door to the closet-library.

Kay goes up to the car with a box of unsold items, and after Grace takes care of some things in the office I follow her up the stairs with a couple boxes to the atrium. She pauses, watching Kay in the parking lot. She turns to me and then turns out the lights in the hall.

Kay is futzing with the trunk, rearranging things, her hips moving, using her knee for leverage. “You’ve lived here your whole life?” I say.

“Sure,” Grace says. “My father was the Lutheran Pastor and so was his father. I’m the first female Pastor we’ve ever had, and there was a huge scandal about that.” She tilts her head up towards the rain. “People got used to it. People can get used to anything, I guess. It just can’t be rushed.” She runs her hand through her hair. “It’s not wrong to want more time, right? I mean, I can ask for that, right? It’s my whole—it’s my house.”

She turns to me and I shrug. “Sure. You can ask for whatever you want.”

She flattens her mouth and walks out into the rain, towards Kay. By the time she gets there she’s soaked, the box is soaked, and Kay’s soaked already. She puts the boxes in the car and they argue, briefly, it seems, with minimal hand gestures. They come to some sort of consensus. Grace waves one hand at me before she gets in the car, but Kay doesn’t even spare me a glance. Then they’re driving away.
Before going over to Mrs. Overfelt’s I take a shower—a long shower—and dry off, throw on Richard’s old plaid button down painting shirt that’s soft and big on me, perfect for rainy days, and then head over to bring an early dinner to Mrs. Overfelt. I haven’t heard from Maurice and I don’t feel like hunting him down.

When I get there Myra, Mrs. Overfelt’s next door neighbor, isn’t there, which is good. Myra is less intelligent and lucid but more mobile than Mrs. Overfelt, which is probably why Myra hangs out with her, so she can feel like there’s someone worse off than she is. Mrs. Overfelt doesn’t seem to mind. The two of them talk and play poker or checkers sometimes during the day. Yesterday, instead of watching TV after dinner, I watched both women play a game and simultaneously try to rob each other blind. Myra turned Mrs. Overfelt’s attention behind her and then grabbed some of the chips back from the pot in the center, and Mrs. Overfelt went through all of Myra’s cards during a bathroom break. I didn’t interfere because I figured, why shouldn’t they? They’re both on the same page, at least.

Normally, Myra’s daughter comes to visit in the evenings, or comes to take Myra to dinner or something, so I feed Mrs. Overfelt and then watch TV with her for a couple hours. She doesn’t have nearly as many channels as she had in Baltimore, because no one on the island has anything but satellite, which is expensive and apparently unreliable in the winter. Mrs. Overfelt takes this personally.

I open a window to let in a breeze while we watch an opera that’s supposedly in English, but neither of us can figure out what they’re saying. Instead, I narrate, telling her about the baritone’s love of cheese (he goes on about this for quite a while) and the soprano’s lactose intolerance. They can never be together. The soprano is stabbed (or does the stabbing? She
staggers onstage covered in blood and then falls to the floor) and I attribute this to her refusal to live with her indigestion a moment longer.

Mrs. Overfelt laughs, but we hear a buzzing in the room. I know what it is, it’s a black fly. She turns, trying to follow the sound, and I pick up a magazine from the bathroom to kill it.

“Damn Black Flies,” I say.

Mrs. Overfelt points to the small window. “Don’t just stand there, close the window, someone let them in! They’ll breed and we’ll never be rid of them! What kind of place is this, overtaken! Call the exterminator!”

“They’ll be gone by Father’s day,” I say as I slap the magazine against the wall, without success.

“Father’s day! Some people don’t take Father’s Day seriously. Some people laugh it off. Are you going to laugh it off?” She glares at me.

“My father’s dead.” I smack the wall and the buzzing stops. I’m not sure if I actually got it but it was close enough.

“Everybody’s father’s dead. Husbands are dead, sons are dead; all the men, dead. Where are the men when you need them.”

This strikes me as very true. I tell her that.

She purses her lips. “And all we’re left with are women. I hate women.”

“You’re a woman.”

“Do I look like a woman?”

“You look old.”

“Knife my heart out.”

“What about me? I’m a woman.”
“You’re only half of one. You’re so skinny. Don’t deny it.”

She may be right. I make a gesture like, ‘well, sure.’

She pats my hand. “Better to be half and half than whole and fatty. Did you get it?”


“Good. Now go home, I’m going to bed and I don’t want you spying on my underwear.”

I laugh and help her out of her chair. When I do, she raises both arms for balance and the left one wavers, falls, she lets it drop and grips my hand with the right. She works her mouth again, but I notice that only one side of her mouth is moving.

“You ok?” I ask.

It takes her a moment to respond. “Sure.” She says, giving me an askance grin, “can’t an old woman be a little unsteady now and again?” I help her into the bathroom. She shoos me off.

This nursing home does not have that many nurses, so I circle the floor a couple times before I run into someone in scrubs. I haven’t met this woman before.

I say, “I wanted to ask, I’ve been noticing that my—that my.” Mrs. O isn’t my anything. She’s not my mother or my grandmother. “I mean to say that I’m in charge of Mrs. Overfelt, I’m sort of in charge of her care, and I’ve noticed that’d she’s a little unsteady on her feet, or that she forgets words, or that she has trouble sitting for long periods of time—I don’t. I don’t know what that is. Do you think. I mean, does that make sense to you?”

I probably should not be relying on this woman. I can smell cigarettes covered up by floral body spray and five sticks of peppermint gum from where I’m standing.

“Oh, you know, that sounds normal enough,” she says.

“I don’t know,” I say.
“Sure,” she says, “The body breaks down at her age. She’s a kicker, that’s for sure. Gave me a wicked talking to last night when you left.”

I smile. I’ll bet you she did, you overweight lump of lard—did she mention your hair? That crunchy, cheeto orange color that looks fantastic in the florescent lighting? I bet she did.

She’s still talking. “Most of the folks we got here are pretty quiet, but that one—can’t shut her up.” The nurse self-consciously takes one hand and fluffs her hair to the side so that it lays a little better. Yup. Good one, Mrs. O. “So I wouldn’t be too worried about her.”

I nod, feeling the worry from Mrs. O’s unsteadiness ease a little. “Well, keep an eye on her, will you? If you see her getting more unsteady I’ll have her doctor’s appointment moved up or something.” I should think about having that done anyway. Just to be sure the move didn’t make her health worse.

“Oh, that’s going to be hard, unless you take her to the mainland,” Cheeto-hair woman says.

“What?”

“The Geriatric Doctor only comes to the island a couple days a month, so he’s booked way in advance. If you want to get her seen sooner you’ll have to take her to the mainland.”

Great. “Ok. Thanks. Thanks.”

“No problem.” She snaps her gum. Ugh.

I push through the nearest staircase, which dumps me out on the opposite end of the building I was heading for. I should ask Kay about when she was last at the Doctor’s. I don’t even know. I’m worried about what happened at the wharf, in Rockland, and about her general unsteadiness. She’s not concerned, but generally she likes to hide away from everything.
For a while after Richard died I thought, what if it was something I could have corrected, what if it were a health problem like diabetes or heart disease. We could have given him pills or shots or—I don’t know—electric shock therapy or something. You know, anything. Anything to prevent the copy room floor. The tuna sandwich. Four autopsies. SADS.

I’ll ask Kay when the last time Mrs. O went to the Doctor, and then I’ll get her to the mainland to see someone.

Richard would have laughed at her ‘half and half’ comment. He would have gotten all sappy and romantic and said we were half of each other, half to make a whole, and who would want to be whole on their own? I would have groaned and rolled my eyes and not told him I thought he was 100% right.

One time he curdled half and half to make cheese, to make Paneer, an Indian dessert cheese that’s normally soaked in rose water. His hands squeezed the milk curds in the cheesecloth until all the liquid had squished out, and all we were left with was a flaky substance that didn’t taste like anything, so we put it in a vinegar solution. Take out the water and you have cheese. Take out the water and you have brown, dried up hemoglobin. Blood is thicker than water, but water gives blood room to breathe, think, move forward.

My mother would disagree. Blood is blood, she’d say. Friends are fine, but they don’t know you like family knows you, loves you.

My mother’s in my house, holding down the fort, fighting off the bibles, probably speaking on my behalf in court. A whole woman if I ever saw one. Dad was in and out of hospitals for two years with lung cancer and she still managed to be the head of the PTA at my school, be my girl scouts leader and style her hair every morning. When he died she just added on more things and pretended like life was back to normal.
I would not want to be a whole woman, if that’s the way it is. I would not want to be blood to my blood, if that’s the way it is. Blood may be thicker than water, but when it smears, it dries brown.

The next morning Maurice calls me again and demands to know why I didn’t come see him yesterday. I told him he didn’t come to see me; that’s how it was supposed to work. He sighs, as if I was the one who misunderstood. He tells me to stop being pissed off and come see his house.

It turns out that there’s one giant road all the way around the island, in a loop, and if I take that, I’ll get from the “townie” section of Clarahaven, where I’ve been mostly working and living, to the “tourist” section, where Maurice has set up shop. I head downhill from Kay’s house, past the church on the left, past the low income houses where most of the lobstermen live (including Doc’s house) on the right, near the Ferry Docks, past the old Cod Cannery, up and around several hills and swerves, past Mrs. O’s nursing home, on past the elementary, middle and high school buildings that have been smushed together and set on the highest part of the island, overlooking the bluffs that look South. I stop the car and look down, look at the ocean slowly eating away at the island, little by little, look down the two or three story drop to the granite boulders below. I get back in the car before I get too wet.

The road takes me past more houses, though I can’t see these as well because they’re set back further from the road and hidden in the trees.

And then the road dips down and smoothes out, no more potholes, the signs become nicer, and I think—oh, yes, I’ve hit it. I end up going through Pine Street, the center of the Tourist District, which has three kayak rental places, two tour guide places, a variety of knick
knack stores, several wetsuit, swimsuit, camera, fishing gear shops, one very expensive art supply store as well as five art galleries, six fancy eateries, one mini golf place and a “sift for buried treasure” novelty store.

Pine Street is one long street that opens up into a U shape that goes along the harbor of a river mouth, so that guests can eat or walk or roller blade along the water’s edge. As I creep along, looking and watching, there aren’t many people out because of the weather, but a couple people hurry back and forth with umbrellas.

I am angry and upset that this is here—I am also glad I don’t have to see this on a day to day basis. The other consolation I have is that Tourist’s district is to the north, so it’s colder and gets less sun then regular people. The lobster wharves, cod cannery, and most everything that serve people who live here all year long is built on the more protected side of the island, the south side, where there’s a large cove, more hills so that houses and buildings are a little more protected from flooding. Tourist Town is right on the water, right at sea level. Any high sea is going to come right up. I feel a sort of vindictive thrill. Take that.

Maurice’s house is several roads away from Pine Street. He’s managed to rent a whole house to himself for a whole summer with hard wood floors, a loft space, floor to ceiling windows, and a porch that pretty much walks right out onto the water.

He’s on his cell phone when he lets me in.

“Ah yes, well, that is a pickle,” he chuckles at me, silently, winking. “Well, I don’t know where she is, at the moment—no. Unfortunately. No! She has not given me her cell phone number either, the rascal. I just keep getting her land line, and her work number. I know. Daughters these days. Yes. How many hours did you say you were in labor with her? Thirty Six? That’s an exaggeration, surely. No? My hats off to you. My hats off to you. No, Sadly, I am of
the inferior gender and cannot bring life into this world the way you, my lovely woman, can.” He laughs, a charming laugh. “Quite right you are, Quite right you are. Oh, No. I’ve just gone on a little vacation, I’ve got some business contacts in the area and I’m trying to set up a deal with them, but it’s taking longer than I thought. Sometimes these negotiations—you know how it is. People these days just want you to email them this, or that, they ignore a good game of golf or dinner! So I’m wine-ing and dining them, as we say.” He laughs again. “Plus, with everything going on down in Baltimore, I thought it might be best if I let my lawyers handle it down there—and I was getting some terrible people at my house—” he stops, spins around on his toes. “uh huh, uh huh, is that, yes. Yes. Oh? I can certainly sign off on that. Sure. Do you need anything?—That sounds pretty straight forward. The main lawyer from their side is Mr. Whitely—”

Maurice strides into another room, looking around for something and then after a moment comes back in, holding a paper, a finger up to me, winking, and saying, “Yes. Yes, that is precisely correct. My lawyers are handling everything on our end. Excellent.” He pauses, bends over to write something down while she speaks at the speed of lightening, and then stands back up.

“Virginia, I must say, you are a consummate professional.” He pauses again. “Ah well, if I hear from her, which I assume I will have to, in the process of this case, I will certainly let you know. Thank you—be sure to keep me updated. Thank you. Thank you.”

He smiles and after another five minutes of platitudes, hangs up on her.

He turns to me and throws his arms out. “Well, your mother may be a bitch of the highest order, and for the record, she’s mad that you didn’t tell her you’re being sued, but she’s wonderfully useful.”

I rub my thumb along the lines of my other palm. “She’s mad at me, but she’s not mad at you?”
He sits in a chair and stretches out, his hands above his head. “Oh no. I’m an innocent victim of your repressed sexual frustration, your continuous anger at your father’s untimely death, and your own fear of success. You’re the evil harpy who’s bringing down the endangered species of rich white man that we so need to protect in our current political and economic climate. What have I ever done wrong? Nothing. Nothing, I tell you.”

I raise my eyebrows. “And you spent all morning letting my mother talk you to death about my repressed sexual frustrations?”

He instantly folds up and gets to his feet. “No, I talked to my lawyers and scheduled the deposition so that the lawsuit can proceed at our leisure; I talked your mother out of coming up here and hunting for you herself; and before all the hubub I made a sprout and egg white sandwich for myself with organic, whole wheat bread. Did you know,” he steeples his fingers in front of him, “that it’s only good for you if the package says whole wheat? Multi Grain means absolutely nothing because they can process as many grains as they want into the same meaningless pulp as that white wonder bread stuff we all like so much.” He’s walking in front of me and I’m following him without even thinking about it. “But that’s neither here nor there. Look, come see.”

He leads me through the house, up the stairs, to the loft, opens a door, stands just inside the room and flicks on a switch.

Except for the wallpaper, he has somehow recreated the office in the second floor of his house in Baltimore here in Clarahaven. He’s moved in the desk, the florescent light, the shag carpet. We move to another bedroom and except for the wallpaper, he’s got every piece of furniture, every prop of the Tokyo bedroom—everything is here.

“Where’d the original furniture go?” I ask.
“Storage facility,” he waves that away. “Not a big deal.” Yeah, not a big deal if you have movers and money and an insane need to keep your deceased lover near you at all times.

I roll my eyes, and tug at Richard’s shirt—one of his darker colored shirts, to keep away the flies.

He says, “Deon insisted. And I like it. It makes things more homey.” He pauses and says, “Have you found a good graveyard here?”

I shake my head. “No. There’s one next to the Lutheran church but it’s more out in the open. People can just see it from the road. There’s no landscaping. So I haven’t talked to him yet.” He makes a sound with his tongue and I say, “I know.”

“Are you going to visit him? The real him? On the mainland?”

“Yes. Soon.” My shoes are still muddy from the driveway along the edges.

Maurice humms under his breath. “You haven’t already.”

“I had an old woman in my car. I was on a schedule.” I can feel my face pinch into a single line down the middle.

“Sure,” his voice is light but smooth, like he’s trying to agree with me so I’ll agree with him. “Schedules are necessary. I go see Deon once a month. I take a plane out to that hell hole in Alabama every fourth weekend.”

This is ridiculous. I change the subject. “So what did you get my mother to do.”

He inhales, leans against the jam with his arms crossed, and says, “Oh, Marian, it’s brilliant. You’re going to love it, and it’s either going to work like a charm or make your life a living hell for the rest of your life.”

“It’s already like that. Spit.”
“Ok, so you know how that son of a bitch Whitley’s got the whole church like, burning to
convert us?”

“Yeah.”

“Virginia’s offered to weasel her way into Whitley’s home. To cozy up to his mother, or
his sister, or whatever hell kind of family they’ve got over there. Get them to at least stop
throwing Bibles at us. And you know Virginia, she’ll probably search through their underwear
drawers while she’s at it.”

I blink.

He shrugs. “Or she’ll convert to Evangelicalism, in which case, I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s ok.” And it is. I take one more look around. This is the room from when they
were in Rio de Janeiro. Pinks and purples in stripes on the bed linens. I flick off the light switch.
While I was doing a flea market, Maurice was setting up his Gideon rooms. That makes sense. I
had not thought that he would take all his Gideon rooms up to Maine with him, I would have
thought that was too dangerous—what if they get damaged in transit? A lot of these items are
one of a kind. He can’t get these patterns any more. But what if someone threw a brick through
his window back home and the house burned when he wasn’t there? Best to bring the house with
him, I guess.

The rooms in his house when he gets home are going to look so empty.

I walk down the steps ahead of him while he talks about Virginia the Evangelical.

I ask him about the lawsuit while we sit out on the back porch which opens up to the sea,
with pine trees bracketing us on both sides, and granite boulders below. They need to collect our
stories as part of the defense. They have all kinds of defense that says that Gideon was a loving
father and husband. They need our stories—they’ll hope that they can poke holes in our story
and therefore prove that we’re lying about Gideon—but their main objective is to just collect our statements and find out what we know to use that as evidence.

I pull my knees into my chest and let my head rest on the back of the chair, baring my neck to the sky and the sun. There’s a breeze today, so I pull my hair into a bun on the top of my head. Maurice reaches over and pats me on the arm, and looks over.

“Oh god, Marian, what’s that thing on your face?” Maurice asks.

I rub at the red swelling under my ear. “Black fly bite,” I say.

“It looks like you’ve got a disease.”

“This is how I die,” I say. “Black fucking flies.”

The next day I’m drinking tea in the front room (on the window seat looking south, where most of the sun is) when the phone rings, and Kay’s not in to pick it up. After a couple rings I get it instead, and then I head over to the Nursing Home.

Mrs. Overfelt has escaped.

She can hardly walk, but apparently she and Myra have commandeered a wheelchair and Myra’s pushing for freedom. They’ve navigated the maze of hallways and stairways, found the elevator, conned the new front desk receptionist, and rolled right out into the open, where maybe they’ll steal a car and drive right across the open ocean to the mainland, buy head scarves and make a life for themselves.

As I drive towards the home I find them on the side of the road, just out of sight of the nursing home, Mrs. Overfelt’s wheelchair half off the road, Myra towering over her, arguing.

I slow the car and roll the window down. “Ladies, what a nice day for a walk.”
Mrs. Overfelt starts gesturing. “Never trust a woman! Never trust a woman! They’re all out to get you! This woman says we’re going to go to New York City. They kill old women for sport there! They run them over in the street! Arizona will be warm, and dry heat is good for arthritis, my doctor recommends dry heat, but oh, no, we can’t go to Arizona.”

“Arizona’s a long way away,” I say.

Myra nods. “Listen to sense, you old—you old bat! In Arizona there are scorpions!”

Mrs. Overfelt shakes her head. “I’m not going to New York. No way. New York is full of liberals!”

“Mrs. Overfelt,” I say. “I was coming to take you for a drive to the library, and maybe to have some tea with me. What do you think?”

She looks suspicious. I put the car in neutral and open the door. “Myra, I think you have visitors coming today, but they’re expecting to see you in your room. Just right back there.” I point down the road to where the Nursing home is, blocked by trees. “I can take you back, if you’d like.”

Myra looks at Mrs. Overfelt, then at me, and throws up her hands. “You try to do something for someone! She said she wanted to get out! Well, I’m sorry for trying to be accommodating! And you! You’re some kind of vulture. The two of you can go to hell.”

She walks off, and I extend my hands out to Mrs. Overfelt. I haul her up and help her to the car. She steps only a couple inches forward at a time, as if her hips have been welded shut. When she’s settled in I tuck a blanket around her legs, leave her wheelchair on the side of the road because it won’t fit in the backseat, and do a U-turn right in the middle of the road.

We slow down by the library but she doesn’t seem interested in it, so I drive back to Kay’s house.
I help her up the steps and sit her on the window seat in the dining room where there’s still a lot of sun. She falls asleep as I’m making tea. The phone rings, and I answer it. It’s the nursing home. I tell them, yes; of course it’s intentional that Mrs. Overfelt went for a walk. She’s allowed to go where she wants. I join her at the window seat, folding myself so I can sit in the small space she’s not taking up, and watch the weeds blow around in the wind.

Mrs. Overfelt wakes up after about a half hour and starts looking around. I say, “You’re awake, good.”

“What kind of person lives here?” she asks, touching the lace curtains.

“Your daughter.”

“And you?”

“Only by accident.”

She looks around, squinting a little around into living room, where there’s the TV. “What a lunatic. This is a vacation home and she’s made it look all doom and gloom.” She slowly totters herself into the other room. “That is one of the ugliest couches I’ve ever seen. This room should be light and airy, you know, with roses and nice straw furniture. But look at this,” I can see her brushing her fingers over a lamp that has snowflakes stamped into the base. “Ridiculous. Women. I tell you. You can’t trust them to have any kind of sense.”

She leans on the wall, grabs bookshelves, side tables, anything to help keep her balance. I watch as she moves beyond my sight. She shouts, “Where the hell did these books come from?”

“I don’t know,” I shout back, “They’re just here.”

“They’re in the wrong order.”

“I tried to tell Kay that but she didn’t seem to think so.”
“Women.” She appears at the other end of the room and finds the bathroom without having to ask directions. She only shuts the door half way, so I can hear her peeing.

I’m about to ask her if she needs anything when the mudroom door opens. I turn and see Kay and Grace letting themselves in.

They’re chattering and I freeze, hoping they won’t see me behind the lace curtains, hoping Mrs. Overfelt won’t come out of the bathroom, knowing that’s ridiculous.

They kick off their shoes and they’re smiling, touching each other’s elbows, Kay loudly laughing at one point about something someone said, and Grace reaching out to tuck a piece of hair back behind Kay’s ear.

Kay says, “It’s not ridiculous at all.”

“I know, I know—” Grace leans forward, tucks a bit of hair behind Kay’s ear, and then kisses her, just once. “I do want it, but I’ve got things the way I’ve got them; it’s a lot, I just want to make sure it’s a good thing, that we’re not at each other’s throats—”

Kay leans forward and kisses Grace, fuller this time, and I’m probably not supposed to watch this. I look down at my mug but I can hear their hands moving over each other’s clothes, and I can hear the sound of their mouths and their breathing.

And then Mrs. Overfelt shouts from the bathroom, “What kind of person only buys single ply toilet paper? I need double ply, at least! Cheapskate!”

Kay whips around, looking towards the bathroom, I freeze on the windowseat, and Grace says, “Who was that?”

Kay strides down the hall to the bathroom and knocks. “Excuse me, who’s in there?”

“Who do you think’s in here—the tooth fairy?” She croaks. “Who are you?” Then she flushes. She jiggles the handle, and then flushes again.
“Marcine, how did you get—” I can hear her huff of frustration. Grace has backed up, retreated to the mudroom, where it sounds like she’s putting on her shoes. Kay hesitates, takes a step towards the mudroom that creaks throughout the house, but Mrs. Overfelt flushes the toilet again. Kay steps back to the bathroom, knocks on the door, and sort of screeches, “Marcine, there’s a water shortage on the island, and I need for you to not flush the toilet anymore.”

I can hear Mrs. Overfelt laughing, and then she opens the door. “Oh for heaven’s sake,” she says. “Did you decorate this place? Did you throw out all the roses? Where’d you put the furniture? Sold it for profits, used it to keep me quiet, probably slip something in my food every night so I’ll forget, so I won’t tell—”

“Marcine, that is enough.” When Kay comes back into the dining room, sees where Mrs. Overfelt is heading, towards me, sees me, her jaw jumps, and she grabs onto the back of a chair. “Marian, you brought her here even though I expressly asked you—”

“I know.”

“So what is this?”

“This is just. Just an outing.”

Grace has been come back to the archway of the kitchen and says, “Kay, we can go to mine, it’s fine, really—”

“No.” Kay is harsh. She is definite. “This is my house. These are my rules. Marian, I expected you to be in a certain place at a certain time, I asked you for certain things, and you have not done those certain things. I—”

The doorbell rings, and Mrs. Overfelt says, “Well, isn’t Santa early this year.”

Kay opens the door. Doc is bouncing on his toes and whistling. “Doc, I wasn’t expecting any visitors.” That’s her clenched trough the teeth voice.
Doc is immediately on the defensive, and steps back so that he’s a step down.

There’s another door opening and closing; it’s the mudroom. Grace has left.

Kay looks over her shoulder once, and then turns back to Doc. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m here for—” he peers in, sort of past Kay’s legs. “Marian. Marian!” he sees me and waves. “Doc bounces on his toes a little. “Are you ready to start the experiment?” he waggles his eyebrows.

Kay is watching Mrs. Overfelt out of the corner of her eyes, and says, “Doc. I need you to take Marcine and Marian to the nursing home. Marian will feed my mother dinner, and then you and Marian can continue on with whatever plan you and she had for the evening. If it wouldn’t be too much trouble for you, I would be much obliged.”

Doc looks at Kay. “Sure, Kay, no problem!”

“That’s not necessary,” I say, “I have a car.”

Kay raises her eyebrows. “Yes, but you brought her here. You might decide to bring her back.”

Doc’s nodding. “No, it’s ok. Then Marian and I can go get lobster after that.”

I almost roll my eyes.

Mrs. Overfelt’s pipes up again. “Where’re all the pictures? Stole them, burned them! Where’re all the paintings! Do you spit on everyone’s graves? Will you spit on mine? That’s not even a question, I suppose—”

Kay says, “Please bring her back to the nursing home where she belongs, and then when you’re done,” she flings a hand at Doc while she’s glaring at me, “We’ll talk.”

She stomps into the kitchen, returns with a Tupperware, “her dinner,” she says, shoves into my hands, returns to the kitchen and turns the radio up to the salsa station.
I help Mrs. Overfelt outside and into Doc’s car. I go back in for my vinegar (Doc reminds me) and then sit in the backseat with it on my lap.

Mrs. Overfelt keeps going about thieves and liberals, but when Doc gets into the driver’s side she looks over at him. “You.”

Doc nods. “Me. You may not remember me, but you may remember my father, or mother, Patty Ketterly?” He starts the car, puts it into drive, and turns out onto the road.

“Who are you?”

“I’m Patty’s son, Doc.”

“Doc? Who names their kid Doc?”

“It’s ok. Don’t worry about it,” I say.

She turns to me and whispers, “This man is kidnapping us,” without anxiety, as if it happens all the time.

Doc takes me to the lobster docks, and we pick up three one pounders from some guy he knows named Fred. Fred looks familiar but I’m not sure how I know him. He has nice wrinkles around his eyes—the kind that happen when people smile so much that their eyes get wrinkles from smiling, rather than frowning. Doc tells him about how I found some of his father’s things in Kay’s basement, and then we met again at the flea market, and yada yada yada. Fred “hmm”s and “huh”s at appropriate points. As he hands us the paper bag with our lobsters in it, their backs a shiny black green, the orange bands around their claws brighter than they seemed in the light, their legs trying to shove against the sides of the bag and each other, slow motion, unsuccessful, Fred says, “Still workin’ on the boat?”
Doc looks in the bag, nods. “Oh, yeah. I’ve been trying to get some parts from Rockland but they’re on backorder.”

“Been there. Good luck with that.” Fred doesn’t particularly sound like he’s wishing Doc any kind of well, and Doc gives him a wave before heading back up the wharf.

When we get back in the car Doc starts talking really fast about Fred, Fred’s family, the whole nine yards. He’s clutching the steering wheel harder than I think he realizes.

I’ve forgotten to look for it, now that I’ve taken a break from the business of obituaries, but Doc is exhibiting at least two of the signs of grieving. Rapid speech and tightened hands. His tone is jovial but I’ve seen this kind of thing before.

I don’t push. I “hmm,” and “huh,” in the right places. This is what I do. I let people grieve. I let people open up. I let them talk about all the things they’ve never been asked, and then I write it down for them. I can do this.

Doc’s house is that same small white box with warped windows and concrete foundation from last time, no landscaping, giant garage/shed out back. When Doc unlocks the door, I step into a small kitchen, with cracked linoleum and faded orange wallpaper. He’s got about a hundred dishes in the dish drain.

“So, if you’ll notice, I did the dishes ‘cause I knew you’d becoming over.” He sets the lobsters down and starts putting the pans and silverware away. I almost tell him I would have felt more comfortable if he’d let them stay dirty. I almost ask him about his boat too, but I don’t think he’s ready to talk about that yet. Normally people look for me, ask me to help them write an obit, they know what they’re in for. Except for Gary Shamonski, yelling at me from the top of a ladder down in the bowels of Penn Station. I went looking for him. Doc doesn’t know I’m going to help him, so I need to tread more carefully. That way this doesn’t end up another Gary.
He says, “I’m surprised she didn’t remember my mother. They were pretty good friends.”

I look confused, we were talking about Fred. He’s putting dishes away, opening up cabinets and sliding dishes in. “Mrs. Overfelt.”

I nod. “She probably does remember, but she wouldn’t tell you,” I say.

“She remembered the house,” he says, “I guess that makes sense. Their family used to come up here, to that house, every year for the summer. That was before my time, of course, but no one was surprised when Kay moved here for real.” He’s precariously sliding the glasses onto a shelf but he has too many, and they won’t all fit. They clink and slide and look like they’re going to fall onto the floor.

“Doc—” I get up and offer to help, a picking up gesture with my arms, or as if I could hold something for him. He shakes his head, and deftly jiggles them just so until they don’t look so precarious. He says he never has to do dishes since he has so many cups. I nod, my arms still out, empty. He steps back. “She loved their house because it was just a summer home, so it didn’t have to be practical, or sturdy, it could just be wicker. I would have thought Kay would have told you about that.”

“Kay doesn’t tell me much.”

“Kay’s like that, I guess. She and Grace get along. Grace really is her better half.” He lifts his eyebrows and laughs, a hissing laugh, like a joke that he shouldn’t tell but does anyway.

I want to ask him more but I can’t seem to find a question that doesn’t seem like I’m prying, so I ask him where the restroom is, and when I come back he starts telling me about correct boiling temperatures for lobster. He offers me wine or whiskey, but I think mostly he’s asking because he wants some, and besides, after this I have to face Kay, so I say, “Whiskey,” because he doesn’t seem like a wine drinker to me. I don’t really like whiskey, I prefer Vodka,
but I take the tumbler he hands me. After the first glass I’m going back out to the car for my vinegar, and telling him about salt to vinegar ratios, and the pros and cons of adding peppercorns, and how habanera is usually a must. He listens, his gray eyes watching me. He kills the lobsters with one blow to the heart, one swift strike in the back, his hands broad and knobby in the knuckles, and throws them into the pot, their claws clacking against the metal sides of the pot.

He sets the timer and then turns to me. “So, you have to put sugar into a vinegar solution? I never would have thought you’d add sugar. Cause when you eat a pickle—“

“Yeah, it tastes nothing like sugar. Don’t let that fool you. The sugar balances out the acid and rounds out the flavor. Of course, some people take it way too far. They think that we all have to be fat Americans and just eat and eat and eat, and even our pickles have to be seeped in sweet. No. I usually half or quarter the amount of sugar I put in my batches. That’s enough for the stuff to work but not enough to actually taste it.”

“You know I hear ya. I hear ya. Everywhere you look—sugar. Pies and cookies and junk. It’s all crap. Crap! You know, I said, enough is enough,” he tosses back the rest of his whiskey, pours himself some more, tops up mine, and then opens the top of the steamer to check on the lobsters.

“Enough is enough! That’s what I said!” I almost tell him that Richard didn’t like sugar; that he found me in the cafeteria, took the brownie off my plate and replaced it with pickled beets. “Try that instead,” he said, winking at me. I bite that back. I gesture with my tumbler. “You know, my mother thinks I’m such a freak. ‘Marian,’ she says, ‘have a brownie! People are going to think you don’t like them. People are going to think you don’t’ want to be there.’ Well what if I don’t want to be there. What if I’d rather be anywhere else?”
“I know. I know. But that’s the thing. We’re adults. We have to live our own lives. It’s like, Ok, Ma, Ok. Back up.” He laughs.

I nod. He pours me more whiskey. I say, “Do you have any Vodka?”

He jerks his head to the side. Blinks. “I think so.” He disappears into his basement and comes back up with a bottle of Gray Goose.

“Fancy,” I say, swallowing what I have and holding out my glass.

Later, I realize, this isn’t so bad. I’m not a drinker, normally, but this is ok. My head’s clear but my arms feel invisible. So nice to feel that way. The lobsters are out and he’s laughing at my attempt to get the shell off. He holds my hands, my weightless, invisible hands, in the right position to pop the back off. Maurice isn’t here; he’s probably in the Gideon rooms. I almost start to cry. Doc scoops up some green stuff and holds it out for me; I laugh and push his hand away.

We only pickle one of the lobsters; we only use half of the solution, and it only takes one jar.

He’s had more alcohol than me, so I don’t think I’m off base when I say, “So what’s this I hear about your boat?”

He screws the top of the jar on and sits it on top of the fridge. He looks at the counter, slopped with water and bits of shell, open vinegar jars and paper towels.

“Leave it,” I say. He nods and beckons me to follow him.
The boat is in the shed in his backyard. It’s a big space, just one room, and the boat’s in there, a hollow shell, no masts.

“Here it is.” He sweeps his hands at it. “She was beautiful. She was my father’s.”

I walk around it. “What happened?”

“A storm. I didn’t bring her in in time and she got all cracked up. They were just going to leave her at the bottom of the harbor, just going to let her disintegrate, but I wouldn’t let them. Got’er back. Here she is. I’ve been working, trying to get her into shape but I just. I just—anyway. It’s a lost cause.” He drinks more vodka as I walk around the boat, running my hand around its length. He’s clearly been working on it. I say so, and he laughs. “Fred says that maybe I’m not meant to be a lobsterman, that the sea decided, and I shouldn’t fight it.” He laughs again. “Not a lobsterman? My father was a lobsterman, and his father, and his father! It’s in me! Maybe I’m not quiet like those guys, and maybe I never got married, with a wife and kid waiting for me, and yeah, I’m not the most consistent guy, but I’m a lobsterman! You’re out there, pulling up traps, selling lobsters—that makes you a lobsterman! Plain and simple!”

His hairs sticking up from his head, he’s got the bottle of Gray Goose. I ask him about the night the boat wrecked, and he tells me. Tells me about how he was on the mainland meeting with a friend, drinking. They didn’t notice the storm coming in, and then when they did notice, Doc found he had missed the last Ferry for the night. He called Fred and some of the other guys, but they weren’t answering their phones. He nearly tore his hair out. He was a mad man, and the bar threw him out.

And then the next morning, when the sea was calm again, and the sun coming out, Doc got the first ferry back to find that everyone’s boats had fared the night except his. It was way
out in the cove, far from the wharf, its ties frayed and broken, high tide covering the mast so you couldn’t see it. No more boat.

“Do you think someone tampered with it?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Maybe, I don’t know. Those guys never liked me, they thought I was crock! Not a real lobsterman! But they wouldn’t—I mean, we all look out for each other! A code for lobsterman! Lobster code! I should have checked the ropes, the ties, my fault, they would have seen it. Oh god.”

I rub the hull again. He sets the vodka on the ground and runs outside. I hear him vomiting into the grass.

I close my eyes and inhale the smell of sawdust, mold and sea air.


I walk home, my vision swinging back and forth. Doc offered to let me sleep on his couch, but his pain is so much, the corpse of his boat is there, next to his house, and I can’t. I hesitate a moment, because I brought several kinds of vinegar but I know I won’t be able to carry them all home, so I pick my favorite (raw apple cider vinegar, the type Richard used the first time we pickled anything together) and go home with just that. Doc says he’ll bring the rest of my stuff in the next day or so. He doesn’t question that I have a favorite and need to keep it with me at all times.

The next morning I wake up feeling dry and stiff. I don’t have a headache, really, because before I went to bed I drank a glass of water, but I don’t feel like sorting through the basement or
the guest room, either. I lay in bed, staring at the floor, for a while. I hear Kay leave. She’s still angry about bringing her mother over yesterday. Right.

Doc comes by sometime in the early afternoon, with my vinegars. He looks tired and not nearly as cheerful as he did the day before. I tell him to set the box on the stairs and then I make him a pot of coffee. I make a raw apple cider vinegar and water solution for myself, to help clean me out.

We sit in the dining room, across the table from each other. Kay’s got papers and bags and a bowl of over ripe fruit sitting there, so we push them to the side.

He asks me how the basement’s going. I tell him it’s maddening. He offers to help me, but I tell him that I just have to get off my butt and go over to the church for the binders with everyone’s name in them. He nods.

He sips at his coffee. At some point he shakes his head a little.

“Hey, thanks for coming over last night, anyway. I had fun.”

I doubt that; when I left him he was practically crying.

“No, really. It was nice.”

I swallow and say, “In Baltimore I write obituaries. Generally I end up listening to people tell me about the deceased.” I shrug. “Most times they feel better afterwards.”

He lets out a big breath and looks at a ceiling. “Well, thanks. But I don’t think it’s as easy as that. I’m almost finished fixing the boat up but I don’t—maybe I should just leave her out. Maybe I should just forget about it.”

I look at him. “Why—you have a chance to bring your boat back from the dead. If you can do it you should do it. You’re a lobsterman. Be a lobsterman. Take it back. Bring her back.”

The rest of us don’t get that chance. “Who cares about Fred. He’s not God.”
He swallows and nods. “You’re right. Yeah. I’ll finish it. You’re right.”

He looks at his hands, rubs against the lace table cloth. I’ve finished my vinegar solution. I haven’t been looking at him that much, but now I do. He’s got gray stubble and his hair is clumped in greasy locks. He’s closed his eyes and tipped his head back, but after a moment he opens them and looks at me. “Obituaries, huh?”

“Yeah. I used to. Don’t so much, now.” I tilt my head, and the stretch in my neck tendons feels slow and good.

“You should get back into it.”

“No, I don’t know.”

“Why not? Sounds like you’re good at getting people to talk about this stuff.”

I shrug. But he keeps staring at me. “That’s part of why I’m here. I—people sometimes ask me to—” I pause, trying to figure out how to say it without sounding weird. “I always write the death, you know, because that’s the interesting part. That’s what everyone wants to know. But if it’s not a good death the family might have wished for a different death, so instead of a suicide they might want ice skating accident or something, so I write that. It’s cathartic. But now there’s a law suit. It’s more complicated than that, of course. But. Anyway.” I cross my knees and lean back in my chair, swirl the dregs of my vinegar solution in my glass.

He’s frowning. “Oh.” He frowns some more, and scratches his forehead, before inhaling sharply and turning to look at me. “I read about that. About you. You’re the woman who makes up obituaries.”

“What?”
“Yeah. I read about that online. Not the law suit, but I read about you.” He’s smiling, his whole face lighting up. “I can’t believe that’s you! You’re a celebrity! What was it, eaten by an orca—that was fantastic! That’s what I want my obit to be like!” he slaps his knee and I wince.

“That was one death—god—” I clench my knees and thighs together tighter. “How do you know about that?”

He presses his lips together into a half smirk. “We do have the internet here, Marian.”

“Of course.” The house is too full, I realize all of a sudden. I say, “Kay could be back at any time, you shouldn’t hang around waiting for her when she’s like this.”

He’s confused, he’s forgotten about Mrs. Overfelt being in the house yesterday. I remind him and he nods, quick, just one jerk of the head. “Right. Right.” He laughs. “Still. Eaten by an orca whale—classic. Classic.” He smiles at me, his eyes sort of bugging out at me a little, and I stand up, carrying my cup into the kitchen before repeating my worries about Kay.

When he leaves out the front door he’s still laughing in little fits and spurts.

After he goes I head up to my room and pull Richard’s running clothes out from under the bed, from the luggage. I sit on the floor, and open one of the ziplock baggies where I’ve put the sweaty running clothes that still smell like him. I stick my head into the bag and inhale.

Sweat and lingering cologne, skin cells, and it’s not enough it’s not enough, it’s not enough. And I’m screaming in one harsh guttural choke, my hands spasm, clenching and unclenching, my eyes closing, squeezing shut until all I can see is that damn copy room floor, and I’m throwing the bag across the room, his boxers still inside, and then I’m scrambling to get them again, to touch them again, to smell them again.

Breath and breath and breath. The crack in the plaster of the ceiling. Cold white of the ceiling. Darker shadow of the north wall, lighter shadow of the east wall.
It’s not enough but that’s ok. This is what happens. It’s ok. I scrape a palm against my face, wiping away the tears and snot. The burn of my face, the pull of my scalp, the pull against my eyes, my skin.

I pet the boxers, such nice boxers. Black with green alien heads. Soft, fuzzy boxers.

Maurice has done things like this, I know. I lean against the bed frame, looking out the window to forest above the neighbor’s field. I am not alone in this screaming. I look down at my hands. I bite my nails. I toy with the idea of putting my wedding ring back on, but it feels more wrong to separate the two rings, so I just hold them, through my shirt, on the necklace.

I return the boxers to the bag, after one long inhale, impressing the smell on my memory, again, and return them gently to the luggage.

I try to avoid Kay as long as possible, but the house is only so big and Kay is not one to avoid confrontation. I am working in the guest room, pulling out tape after tape of family video from the Bergstrom family. She knocks on the door and I am sitting on the floor, wearing a nightgown I found two hours ago that has a giant bow on the front. I am wearing it because it looked like something I should put on, and I was feeling whimsical. I have no other explanation.

“Marian.” She looks around the room, then at me. “What are you wearing.”

I take it off, ball it up and toss it into the ‘donate’ pile. “Nothing. Just checking for size,” I say, and stand, facing her.

“Right. Well. We should talk about what happened the other day, don’t you think? Better not to let it fester.”
I am of the opposite opinion. I think it would be best to ignore the problem until neither of us remembers what happened, or neither of us cares. After all, I won’t be living here forever. She waits for me to say something, to start, but there’s no way I’m starting this.

“Marian. I expressly told you that Marcine was not to come here, to this house, to my house. And yet you brought her here. She couldn’t have come by herself. I would like to know why. I deserve to know why.”

I look at my feet. “She—it was an outing.”

“An outing?”

“It’s difficult living in that nursing home—it’s so square and concrete.” I grimace, that doesn’t explain things at all.

“That is where she lives. If she wants an outing, take her to the library, or the waterfront. Take her to the Cod Cannery, for all I care. Do not bring her here.” She waits for a beat. “Do you understand?”

I give one jerky nod of my head.

“You are in my employ for the duration of the summer. If I find that that is not a satisfactory situation, or if you are not comfortable with it, then you have merely to make other arrangements. We can revisit the contract you signed and faxed over.”

“No, that won’t be necessary,” I say.

I expect her to leave, but she stays, her palms on the door jam. “This is my house, and I expect a certain amount of comfort in my own home. I expect to be able to bring guests and friends back in my own home. You are quiet and keep to yourself, mostly, so while I am not used to sharing space, I find that it is not yet as,” she pauses, “onerous as it could be.”

I feel as though that may be a lie.
“But Marcine is a different story entirely. She is—she is toxic, for me.”

I can’t ask why, so I say, “Is there anything I can do?” I could take her to the mainland to go to the doctor; I have to ask about that anyway. I could do more for Mrs. O. Maybe I could look up social groups for her to go to, or maybe she would enjoy starting up a movie club or something.

Kay tilts her head. “Oh, yes, there is, actually, the island’s annual clambake is coming up this coming Saturday—in a week. I told you about that, right? I’ve got most everything planned for of course, things can’t go too last minute, but Sarah Jennings just came down with mono and she was supposed to be my assistant with decorations and directing people. So if you would shelve this,” she gestures to the piles around me, “for a week, I do need help with the clambake. That would be good.”

Decorations. Directing people.

I should clarify, I should say, “no, I meant, did you need more help with Mrs. Overfelt, whom I like and care for?” But I don’t.

She practically skips down the stairs, and I look at the room around me, a tearing need for everything to be as dirty and as neat as possible. I can’t decide what I want more.

Instead, when she leaves the house, whistling, I go into the bathroom and I flush the toilet two, three, four times—a dozen times. Flush Flush Flush. Oh yeah. There’s a water shortage.

As promised, the preparations for the clambake end up being horrendous. For the first couple days Kay has me running around the island, collecting various pieces of “Island History” from residents to showcase on the day. She also has me checking on the order of clams (traditionally, the clams were harvested directly from the island, but in the last fifteen years
levels of poisonous red tide bacteria in the ocean have prevented the harvesting of any clams from Clarahaven’s actual beaches. Instead, they get their clams from a clam farm inland), as well as the Grilling team, the Vegetarian team, the Kosher team, and the Casserole team and the Dessert team. She has me check in on the RE children’s unit, too, because they will be responsible for afternoon’s entertainment with several plays reenacting various key scenes in the settling and first years of the island. The evening’s entertainment will be provided by the Gilman Brothers, who play Banjo, Mandolin and Cello, accompanied by their sister, who plays the harp.

The entire Clambake will take place in the school because that’s the only place big enough—town hall not having a kitchen and the church not having enough seating—so I spend a hefty portion of Thursday and Friday taping paper clams with giant eyes and open mouths, looking like they’re smiling and salivating about eating each other, to the inside of the cafeteria walls.

Maurice calls me on Tuesday and says his lawyer is flying up to start training me how to respond to a deposition, because that will happen sometime in the week following the Clambake. On Wednesday Maurice meets his lawyer at the Ferry, wines and dines him over in Tourist Town, and then on Thursday brings him over to the elementary school while I am supposed to be directing various townspeople on where to put the makeshift stage, but in reality I’m just stepping back and just letting them make a group decision and saying, “You guys have good instincts, that sounds great. Do that.”

Maurice and the lawyer, a pale man with short, red hair, no eyelashes and quick, wiry movements, watch me pressed against the wall as the volunteers maneuver the knee high stage back and forth as one volunteer screws and unscrews a leg to get it to the right height. I avoid this backside, then that backside. I say, “Yeah, that looks—that looks—no, you’re right, it should
go over—oh, back that way. Good choice. Good choice. Oh, oh—back where it was before? Yeah, I was going to suggest that too. You’re right. Better visibility, like he said. Right.” I press myself against a wall as a man with too much shoulder and not enough support in his sweatpants strides past me. “This is going to be great,” he says. “I always love seeing those kids. They’re going to be great.”

“Uh huh.”

When I try and come towards Maurice and the lawyer, Maurice makes a casual motion towards my back and I realize I have a cardboard clam stuck in the top of my pants. I toss it on the top of a table.

“Marian, may I introduce Mr. Mustfelt; Mr. Mustfelt, this is Marian Zuckerman-Bradley.”

Mr. Mustfelt extends his hand, and when I take it his grip squeezes mine down and in, and I am aware for the millionth time that my handshake is a limp fish handshake. Mr. Mustfelt asks if there’s somewhere private we can go, but right then the volunteers bang into something that makes a crackling noise. The volunteers pull me over and ask if Kay told me what to do in this situation. I go over to them to stand, watching them sort through wires and see if the amp is ok. I tell them that they’re doing exactly the right thing. They smile up at me. The amp crackles again and people point out various plugs and holes and things to bang.

I go back to taping depictions of clams, where Mr. Mustfelt is still standing. I say, “Maybe you should just ask me your questions here.”

Maurice crosses his arms over his chest. “Marian, I really think—”

“No, this is fine.” Mr. Mustfelt has a high voice. “I want you to be able to answer the questions at any time, when you’re distracted or nervous. So. For these questions, try to answer
with as few actual words as possible, but don’t lie, and if you have to explain, you should explain—all right?”

I nod, and tape another clam. He runs me through a gamut of questions, things like: what is your occupation, where did the two of you meet, have you noticed that Mr. Benefield exhibits any psychotic tendencies? I glance over at Maurice, who sitting at a cafeteria table, his leg crossed, one ankle at his knee, watching the teenager on the makeshift stage practice his mime skills with imaginary brooms, ladders, walls, the works. I look back at Mr. Mustfelt. I don’t think we’re psychotic.

“Are they going to ask that? Is there a point to that question? How can I even answer that?” I ask, waving a clam around and then ripping out a too long strip of tape. The volunteers hook up the sound system, and a loud screeching sound echoes throughout the cafeteria.

Mr. Mustfelt exhales through his nose as several people shout out suggestions to the guy at the sound board. He sits one butt cheek against the cafeteria table. “His mother’s dead; his father’s dead; he was an only child. His employees still think of him as the boss, not as a friend. So yeah, you probably know him closer than anyone. And if we don’t have anything that proves conclusively that Gideon was carrying on an affair with Maurice and that the Whitley’s knew about it, then they’ll just drag this whole thing out. They’re hoping that we won’t be able to prove we didn’t lie, and don’t want to stay in court forever, so we’ll just recant to make it go away.”

I roll the tape strip into a giant mess of a tape ball. “My mother’s looking for evidence as we speak. She called Maurice again yesterday with no news, but still, she’s nothing if not tenacious, so maybe it won’t even be necessary.” I say, slamming a clam onto the wall with a great deal of force. It’s upside down, and it looks like it’s in prime position to look up someone’s
skirt. The cafeteria rings with three more screeches from the sound system in quick succession, and then smooth jazz starts playing through the speakers. There’s more shouting and it turns off.

Mr. Mustfelt doesn’t respond at first. “That sound system is really loud. I don’t think I heard you.”

One of the volunteers speaks into the microphone, there’s a chorus of laughter that I don’t join in on, and I turn back to Mr. Mustfelt.

I lie all the time, about all sorts of things. “Fine. No. I don’t think he’s psychotic. Next question?”

On Friday Kay makes me print out a whole new program and spend all day at the copier, feeding paper into the copy machine, making new programs. Mr. Mustfelt stands by the printer with me and feeds me more questions.

On Saturday Kay is in fine form. She has me holed up most of the day making sure everyone on the list has paid their entrance fee, so I don’t see anyone, which is fine. I do make my way through the kitchen at one point and watch them bring in the giant vats with green netting over all the clams. They came in on the Ferry on the first trip. The kitchens start cooking them immediately, and the whole school smells slightly fishy and very salty.

People start coming in early afternoon, and Kay hauls me up to let people in until the whole cafeteria is chattering and talking. Doc’s in, talking to some older women on the far left corner, near the stage. Maurice isn’t here, of course; this seems like a strange thing for him to go
to. Grace is here; but she’s running around too, putting the kids in costumes and making sure they’re lined up and in order behind the stage. The kid’s plays are her event.

Kay hands me a microphone and says, “Marian, be the M.C.”

And I say, “What?”

She steps back just as I hand the microphone back. “Just announce the plays as they come on. Here, use the program. Bobby McMahaney is trying to get in with food stamps again, so I have to go sort that out.”

“Why can’t I do that?” But she’s already going out the door, and people have already turned to look at me in the front rows, because they’ve seen someone with a microphone.

I turn my face towards the rows of islanders in rows over plastic cafeteria tables. I switch on the microphone. This is horrendous.

“Um. Hello. Is this. Is this thing. Can you hear me?” Someone gives me a thumbs up from the back. “So, so we have some entertainment for you this afternoon. I’m very pleased to announce our first play, titled, Elise and Jimmy Doud make a Pie, performed by our very own Clara Bernett and Benjamin Hoff, along with Ivan Hoff, playing the dog, Skip.” Everyone laughs, and I look towards the stage.

But the stage remains blank, and though we hear some shuffles and sounds behind the curtain that’s been erected, no one is forthcoming.

I see Kay, out of the corner of my eye, come forward, from the clam tables, but she stops when Grace comes out on stage. She looks at me, her eyes wide, and reaches for the microphone.

“Ah, so it looks like we have some last minute changes in the program,” Grace says, “We will be watching Elise and Jimmy Doud Make a Pie, but a little later. We’ve prepared the plays in a new order, which apparently the program does not reflect, so I’ll announce the plays as
they’re about to come forward, so you now have an extra napkin in your hand! Use it wisely!”

The audience laughs, and Grace says, “So this first play is going out to all the fathers out there—Happy Father’s Day!”

There’s much cheering and clapping, and I make a hasty exit behind the curtain. I catch my breath, and relish the relative solitude of being behind the curtain, rather than in front of it, especially once Grace introduces the real first play and the children clomp onstage. I watch them for a minute, but then another group of children move to take their place, and I step over and around several of these new ones, many of whom are wearing wigs and beards and long cloaks and one is carrying a long plastic sword for no reason I can see, until I make it to the hall behind the cafeteria.

And there are Kay and Grace, arguing, the program in Grace’s hand. I catch, “Could have asked me, would have told you—of course it’s different, it’s father’s day, could have just asked me,” and Kay’s interspersed, “This was the schedule last year, this is the schedule every year, this is the schedule,” and then I back up and slip into another door way, into another hallway, and there’s Mr. Mustfelt, red hair, no eyelashes, lying in wait, he must have been tracking me all this time, waiting for me to be at my most uncomfortable—did he even buy a ticket to this clambake or did Maurice just tell him to ambush me here because he knew I’d be frazzled—and he keeps me in the hallway for ten minutes, asking me question after question, the same questions he asked the other day, too, and I stumble over a couple of them but only a little and finally he lets me go.

I hide in the kitchen, the salty thick kitchen, until the plays are done and the Gilman brothers and their sister with her harp take the stage. Kay comes looking for me, needing me to sit and man the table for alcohol tickets.
And so I sit at the alcohol booth, serving it only to people who have little stickers on their hands. They only have beer available, but these islanders get pretty rowdy anyway, and I’m so exhausted by the end of the night that when Doc ambles up to me and holds out his hands, I look up at him and I remember—I remember sawdust, mold, sea air, vodka. I remember how weightless I felt, how good that felt, and I take his hands.

He swings me around. He presses me close to his chest and he smells wrong—he smells like sawdust and sea, not like cologne and skin cells, but the feel of skin on skin is nice, amazing, somehow, and I had forgotten that. I comfort people by holding their hands all the time, but to be pressed against someone—I had forgotten.

Richard used to swing dance with me. This body shape is all wrong—the shoulders are too low and too wide and there’s far too much hair. All wrong. I rub a hand over my sternum, pressing the rings into my skin.

The Gilman Brothers play something fast and then they transition into something slow, letting their sister take the lead. She plucks with intent, her fingers finding each note, studying the string, making sure it’s the right one, and then taking the plunge and plucking it. The brothers time themselves around her timing, so the song speeds up and slows down based on when she can find the notes.

Doc presses his beard into the side of my head, and folds his arms around my back as we sway. Is it so wrong to want to just subsume myself, to wipe it all away and just let go into someone else?

And then before I know it we’ve swayed ourselves to a corner of the cafeteria, and it’s later than I thought, people are cleaning up, but Doc is nudging my head, his mouth is on mine, and his breath smells like beer, and I’m so tired.
When he lifts his head he says, “That was a lot of fun, pickling lobster with you, the other night. I’ve still got the jar— What d’ya think; is it ready?”

It takes me a moment to respond, because my stomach is clamping down around nothing, and I feel like if I don’t fold into myself soon, bits and pieces of muscle, skin, thought, intent, even Richard himself, will just flake off and never come back. I tense my fists, arms, legs, anything I can get to. I shake my head. “No.” I don’t want it to be ready, ever.

“All right,” he says, “All right.”

I leave the bake as soon as possible, waiting for a time when Kay is out of sight before dashing out. But of course I run into Grace; she’s lingering outside, brushing out children’s wigs and putting them in bags on the steps of the school. She waves me over. She wants to talk. We exchange pleasantries and she asks me how it’s going. I hesitate, looking out toward the road.

“Kay can be hard to work with,” she says.

I don’t know how to respond to that without giving her an earful. I just nod and shrug, once.

She shakes out a bag. “These wigs.” She shakes her head. “Kay’s a very determined person,” she frowns. “Sometimes too determined.”

“Yeah. Determined.”

“And I know she doesn’t have such a great relationship with her mother. I’m sorry you’re in the middle of all that.”

I laugh, a little, because isn’t she, too?

“Do you know why Kay hates Mrs. Overfelt so much?” I ask.
She lifts her head and purses her lips a little. “Well, I know some things, but I don’t know which ones are important in this case. I think it comes down to the fact that Kay and her mother are very different personality types, and that Kay has—“she pauses, “I guess she’s always felt like the responsible one. And Kay blames her mother for—for a lot of things.”

“Like what?”

Grace laughs. “Oh. I don’t know if it’s my place.” She pauses and folds her arms across her chest. “But she’s lived alone for so long, now, and she’s never had an employee before. She doesn’t have any children, either, so she’s kind of set in her ways. She does wonderful work on the island because of it, but it does mean that she doesn’t share her space particularly well. I guess neither of us do.”

I only share space well with Richard. I remember, we had our closet divided in half. We both cooked together and cleaned up afterwards together too. Mostly so Richard could put on the radio and sing along. We shared space really well.

I frown and go still. Grace says, “Are you ok, Marian?” I’m not ok; I can’t remember what song he liked to sing. I try to imagine us, washing dishes and singing, we were singing something, but I can only see the shape of his mouth, his awkward dancing, all knees and elbows, the light from the window, the stack of dishes, the crumbs of food still stuck to the plate, we had paella and used actual saffron because Richard insisted we get it right, but there’s no sound, just the image. I’m grasping for a hint of sound—those times he called me at the office, or on my cell phone as I was reporting little league games. Or the times I sat and listened to his conversations with his grandmother on the phone in the living room. No sound. I can see him pacing, see his hands gesturing, the soft brown hairs on the backs of his arms, the gray sweaters he wore in the winter, but no sound.
There’s a hand on my arm and the sudden weight makes all my nerves and neurons jump and scramble around. It’s Grace; she’s come closer to me, saying something comforting but with the upward lilt of a question.

I step back and make my excuses. My muscles are tense, and I have to remind myself to inhale, to inhale cool, open air and of pine and salt. I pass the pine trees and the flag pole in the center of grass, then concrete and asphalt of parking lot again, a group of laughing townies, then down more concrete steps and, and then I’m in my car and the dashboard is dark, with glowing letters (134,098 mi, ¾ of a tank of gas), smell of dust and seat stuffing. No radio. Lights on the road ahead of me.

Park the car next to the shed and cross the gravel, crunching and slipping underfoot. Back door squeaks, boards near the kitchen are silent but the ones in the hallway groan. Dark and dust smell again. Stairs are hollow, and I take them in jumps and heavy pounding. Under my bed is the dark shape Richard’s computer tower. I pull it out and hold it to my chest. A couple tugs of the cords on the computer in the guest room and Richard’s computer is plugged into the screen. His password is my name and his name together in the name our college friends called us, “Marichard,” because we were together so often.

The computer is old and slow and it takes forever to open each file.

And then a wmp file opens, the screen black, the little hour glass turns round and round. I don’t touch anything because sometimes when you click the mouse excessively, everything shuts down out of sheer over-capacity. Instead I fold my knees into my chest and pick at my cuticles.

The video is of our wedding, taken from half way back in the church, so you can’t really hear our vows. The church is bare looking, and Richard and I are up on the dais, shuffling and
sneaking glances at each other, looking awkward. The audience laughs at something Richard says, but I can't hear what it is.

The video changes to the reception, where we’re running in, and swaying back and forth to the first song, and at one point I can hear my mother behind the camera saying, “All they’re serving is curry and pickled vegetables. I can’t believe it. She told me she had the food covered. Did you know about this?” Someone else, one of our college friends, laughs and says something unintelligible before, “we’re ordering some pizza, if you want in on that.” My mother huffs and says, “Pizza! This is ridiculous.” Then the DJ gets back on the speaker and they move away from the camera.

Still, I haven’t heard Richard. He gave a toast at some point—that’s got to be on here.

And then there he is, standing up, lifting his glass, speaking, speaking, his voice—that’s it, yes—distorted by the microphone and the sound system, but I can hear the truth of it through all the electronics. A light tenor, a little nasal.

He says, He says, He says, He says! “Friends and Family, We are gathered here today—oh no wait, we already did that.”

The audience laughs and he leans forward a little bit to chuckle too. He scratches his jaw.

“No, ok, seriously guys. I’m sure I’ve already told everyone this story—” Several people in the audience groan, and he puts his hands up in mock defense. His fingers were so long. “I know, I know! But maybe some of you haven’t heard this story? Maybe—ok, so you’ve all heard this story before, but it bears repeating—it bears repeating!

“The first time I saw Marian was in an intro to Psychology class. She only took that class the first day before she dropped it for journalism, but I took one look at her—” he turns to me, sitting next to him at the table, and he smooths a hand over my head. “I took one look at her,
looking bored and slightly terrified, and then in the course of the conversation she indicated, very slyly, that one of the other students might be suffering manic depressive narcissism — Anyway, I knew she was the one for me.”

A chorus of oohs and Ahhs and laughter raises up around the room and Richard raises his hands.

“But I didn’t see her again! She switched to Journalism.”

“So what was I to do? I thought maybe it was a fluke. I put her out of my head.” He looks down at me, giving me a barely perceptible wink. At the time that wink had blasted through me. I barely heard what he’d said. He opens his arms, his whole body twisting around. “The next time I see her it’s almost a full year later. And there I am, lonely, miserable. There I am, sitting in the dining hall when she walks in with her tray, all alone, and sits directly across from me, at another table. She’s got like, I don’t know, pasta or something, and a brownie. A brownie.” He looks around as if this is significant.

The audience titters, rolls their eyes, laughs.

“She stabs at that brownie with her fork, but doesn’t eat it. She’s frowning at it, she’s sitting back in her seat, one arm across her chest, really just going to town on this poor, defenseless brownie.

“Finally she takes a bite of it—finally—and she spits it back out. It was so horrific that she spit it back out.”

“I was going to go up to her and ask her what the problem was but she was too quick for me.” The audience groans, and Richard says, “I know!”

“So the next day, and the next, I look for her. And finally, a week later, I see her, in the same spot. This time she’s got pie. Same process. Beats that pie to a bloody pulp.”
“Now, some of you may know that my Aunt Mable is an excellent pickler, and taught me all she knew the summer before my freshman year. So I start carrying around a jar of pickled beets in my pocket, just in case. I thought—maybe this is my in. Maybe it’s the sugar that she’s objecting too. Because nothing else on her plate got that treatment. Not the pasta, not the fruit, nothing. It was just the dessert.”

“And then one day there she is, tearing apart a snickerdoodle, and I go up to her, take the plate away, and give her a pickled beet. And I say, ‘try this, instead,’ and as they say, the rest is history.”

The audience claps, and Richard turns to face me, finally, looking at me fully.

“Marian, Marian Monet Zuckerman,” I huff at the use of my middle name, and he smiles before tugging on my hand until I’m standing next to him. “Marian Monet Zuckerman, I cannot imagine my life without you. You are the base to my acid, the acid to my base, the peppercorn to my habenera, the radish to my pickle, the—”

Someone in the audience screams, “ok! We get it!” and everyone laughs.

But Richard only smiles for a moment before turning back to me. “Whatever you want is what I want, and whatever you love I will try to love, too. You are my heart, you are my life.”

And he stares at me and I nod, subsumed, and then he kisses me, and the audience cheers.

I pause the video. I rewind. I play that section over and over and over again, all night.

Maurice calls the next morning to invite me to go kayaking. I’m still awake; I haven’t slept. I get the phone in the kitchen, and tear small parts of bread slathered with butter as he talks. The window’s open and I can feel the breeze coming in; the breeze doesn’t smell so bad this morning. His treat, he says, since we’re both being deposed this coming week, and because
apparently I passed the test Mr. Mustfelt set for me in the ambush last night. I’d forgotten, almost, about that.

Kay gives me a disapproving look as she passes me and brings out eggs for breakfast. She says something about one’s responsibilities taking precedence over one’s enjoyments, so when I go upstairs to get changed out of last night’s clothes (she may also be under the impression that I slept with Doc; not sure) I flush the toilet a couple times, just for good measure.

I meet Maurice and he doesn’t say anything about my dilapidated appearance, although he probably notices. We paddle down Baptismal River, the river near his house, which opens into a wide mouthed cove to the sea. My arms are tired because the current is coming in, not going out, and Maurice has to keep stopping to wait for me, but he does so without seeming to mind or care. The morning is foggy, so the tips of the pine trees and the boulders loom out of the mist every so often, or when we get close enough.

When we get far enough in, Maurice waves at me, and we turn our kayaks away from the sea, and instead into a small inlet, a little lake. Our kayaks sort of slide in with the current, a small waterfall, and then all around us are trees and driftwood along the shores. Further to the left I can see a larger break in the trees, a larger falls, where water is pouring in swifter, through several large logs, caught in between several large rocks. It’s early enough in the morning that everything’s blanketed in fog, so though I can see the trees at the edge of the lake, I can’t see much beyond it.

“High tide,” Maurice says. “We had to come now or we wouldn’t have been able to get in. We’ll be able to see the shifting of the tides soon.” We paddle to the center.
We sit there, just sitting. I’m calm, I guess. There’s not much of a breeze and I tug at my sweater, tense, waiting for the buzzing of black flies, but there aren’t any; the water is still around us.

“How was the Clambake?” Maurice asks, finally. “Mason left after he spoke with you. He said it looked,” Maurice chooses his word carefully, “family-oriented.”

“Family-oriented,” I repeat. I don’t even know what to say about that.

“Maybe a better question is—how are you?”

I shrug.

We drift a little bit further along the width of the lake before I turn to adjust my paddle, my kayak so I can see his profile. “Maurice,” I say, “The Gideon Rooms,” he nods, “do they help?”

He looks confused.

“I mean, I mean, I mean—don’t you sometimes just look at a man—“I point out to the water in front of us, “Look that man there, that wonderful, funny, beautiful man there, who wants you—and the Gideon rooms—I mean, and that man there, he can hold you, can’t he? He can give you that, at least.”

Maurice twists his paddle back and forth, adjusting his position in relation to me. “What do you mean, do the Gideon Rooms help? They’re all I have.”

“No, I know. I know. I know. That’s not—I mean. I know.”

“What do you mean, do I ever look at,” he flicks a casual finger at the empty water in front of us, “that man there. Of course, sometimes. Of course I see men. I see men everywhere. I see a man with Deon’s eyebrows, or there’s a client that Deon would have fumed at, or taken on at once, or there’s a stock that Deon would have jumped on, and I would have had to temper
him—or there are men who move the way he moved, or something. There was that kid doing mime last week. Deon thought mime was hysterical.”

“But don’t you—”

“Marian, if you’re asking if I routinely buy male prostitutes and bring them back to the house and have them call me Daddy and ask them to put on special clothes and pretend for me—Or anything else, more, less or anything in between, then no, the answer is no, because that would be blasphemous. What you’re talking about would be wrong. It would just be wrong to be with someone else. I see men, yes, but I see them through Deon. I see Deon, always.”

I clench the paddle with both hands across my lap and tilt my face to the sky. “But why would it be wrong. He’s dead, he’s dead, they’re both dead—”

It takes Maurice five strokes to get as many boat lengths away from me. I don’t know if he wants me to follow him but I follow him anyway, and he leads me to a spot of the inlet that is closer to the falls, I can see the water coming in, slower now, no more than a trickle, covering the logs and the rocks almost completely. I can see past them now too, out to the mouth of the river, to the sea, to the ocean and the choppy morning, the couple lobster boats out there.

I think about Doc, about how much he wants to be out there with them again.

When I get close enough to Maurice for him to hear me I say, “I’m sorry.”

He nods.

“I didn’t sleep much last night.”

After a moment he exhales. His jaw is still tight and he makes an up noise, a question noise.

“I was watching our wedding video over and over and over. Last night I couldn’t remember what his voice sounded like. I could see him, in the kitchen, singing, but there was no
sound coming out, just an empty hole. So what am I supposed to do with that? How am I supposed to—I just. Doc is all wrong but at least. At least I can hear him.”

I wipe my nose and eyes on my sleeve. Maurice isn’t looking at me. He clears his throat and after a minute he says, “Who’s Doc?” and I realize I haven’t said anything about this person to someone who is arguably my best friend.

I shake my head. “No one. He kissed me. Made me all upset.”

Maurice purses his lips and runs a wet hand through his hair, so that I can see the small droplets clinging to his forehead. He seems small against this big place we’re in, the fog, this big inlet, this thick water, and the sea so close, the constant, unrelenting tides. These aren’t new ideas for him. The things I don’t know about Maurice could drown me, and for a moment I choke on how easy he’s made grieving and remembering and not-remembering look, even though I know how hard it is. I say, “I’m sorry. I know this is old hat to you. You don’t need all this again, these reminders. I’m. I’m sorry.”

We sit in silence for a moment and then Maurice reaches a hand out to me and I take it, the warmth of his blood beating inside his skin, making the damp air, the water on his skin and mine, making even the blood inside my skin just a little warmer, too. I’d like him to hug me and let me cry into his chest, but he lets go of my hand after a minute, and that will have to be enough.

We watch the falls for a little bit longer. The water is continuing to rise, creeping up the banks. “When is high tide?” I ask, when I have a little more control over my voice. “Isn’t the tide supposed to turn?”

He nods and looks around. “I don’t know how much this place can hold.”
We watch the water rise, watch the logs disappear, the rocks disappear, watch the water conceal and overcome everything.

That afternoon I find my way to the Island’s main cemetery. I haven’t done this yet. I stop at the florist’s and buy enough flowers for all the Richard’s and all the James’, because this is an exploratory venture, and I’m not sure how many of each there will be.

There are two graveyards—one next to the Lutheran Church, and one is in something like the center of the island. The north-eastern portion is hillier and has been mined for granite, and there used to be a small town center in this area with a church and cemetery. I go to the Lutheran Church graveyard first, find thirty James’ and five Richard’s, but none of them feel like a Richard I could use to talk to my Richard.

I go to the center of the island cemetery next. I park in a small parking pad with a path that leads to through the woods and underbrush to the cemetery, which looks like it does get regular management, but not as much as the one by the Lutheran Church. This one is more haphazard; it’s older, too, with stones half sunk into the ground, and some of the names scrubbed out by wind and salt and snow. It’s in a small valley, with more dips and raises the further in I get. It looks like there used to be a church on a raise, off to the right, but now there’s just the cemetery, and the whole thing surrounded by woods, pine trees and granite boulders sunk into the earth and covered by fallen pine needles, moss and other detritus.

I’m the only one here, which is nice, so I take my time, tracing names with my fingers if I can’t read them. Fewer Richard’s here, more James’.

But I don’t get very far in before I come to a grave which, compared to the other graves, is fairly recent. When the rest of the cemetery’s inhabitants died at the turn of the century or
shortly thereafter, it’s notable when a grave is a little off to the side and died in 1959. I trace the born date with my finger, because it’s a little worn. 1950. A child. I trace the name as best I can. John, I think. The last name I trace letter by letter. O-v-o-r-t-e-l-l. Ovortell? I try to see or feel if the last letter is supposed to be a t or an l, but I’m not sure.

There may have been something printed on the grave originally, but now it’s so hard to tell, and I had enough trouble figuring out just the names and dates. Why would they put a grave here after the Lutheran cemetery had already been started? I know for a fact that there are people buried in the Lutheran Cemetery who died around 1959.

I bet John Ovortell had a whole collection of metal soldiers. And those monkey things that came in a barrel. And little metal cars. And he had a secret stash of paper dolls that he’d stolen from his sister that he kept and he couldn’t figure out if he liked to dress them up or stare at them. Probably there was also a collection of pine cones and any other seeds or nuts if he could find them—but they would have disintegrated a lot easier. He probably didn’t have many marbles. He wasn’t that good at playing marbles. A friend of his was good, and he always had to borrow marbles from him. It was embarrassing.

I put flowers on John’s grave, and brush a couple fingertips against the top of it before moving on. I trace last names while I’m going and I don’t find any more Ovortells other than John, here all by himself.

I don’t find what I’m looking for, and at the end of the afternoon, when I go to the Nursing home, I feel like going to the cemetery made me feel worse than before, not better, the way it always did before.

Mrs. Overfelt doesn’t seem to want to talk. We watch a string of shows that aren’t fun or interesting; we talk about nothing; we think about nothing. When I leave I have to wake her up
because she’s fallen asleep in her chair. I help her into her night clothes, but she wets herself as we get her pajamas on. She starts crying, apologizing, saying she wears pads that the nurses help her with and it’s not a big deal, I should get a nurse, I should just get a nurse.

I help her into the shower, rinse off the soiled pajamas, and then find a new set. I ask her how often this happens, but she doesn’t answer. I ask a nurse how often this happens, and I find cigarette smell-cheeto hair nurse again, who tells me, “oh, she’s getting old, the body breaks down, it’s not a big deal.”

The next morning I call the mainland and set up an appointment with a doctor. I have to rifle through Kay’s files on her desk outside the kitchen to do it, but so what. So what.

When I get back Kay picks a fight with me about how she looked down in the basement and practically nothing had been done, and she looked in the guest room and she was appalled at the mess strewn all over the place, and how she expected me to be further than this. What have I been doing, she asks. She’s paying me to do a job, she says.

When she’s done ranting I go into the bathroom and flush the toilet several times. Then I go into the guestroom and pick up sorting the piles that I had stopped sorting when she told me to organize the clambake, last week.


In an attempt not to think about anything I end up sorting a lot of boxes without meaning to. It’s an automatic type behavior: go down to basement, bring up box, check for name. If no name, open box: Donate, trash, sell.
I find beautiful things, wonderful things: twenty snowflakes carved in semiprecious stones like obsidian and jasper; a set of photographs of vibrantly colored photographs of microorganisms, blown up to a hundred times the size, all in bright pinks and turquoises; a book full of pressed plants with their scientific names, places and times of collection, everything. Those things I keep, I put them under the bed. I think, these people who collected these things are mine, these things themselves are mine. I am not giving these things up.

A couple I bring over to Mrs. Overfelt. She traces the snowflake stones with one finger and tells me that she and her husband were archeologists in Egypt. She tells me they found King Tut’s tomb together, but didn’t tell anyone because they didn’t think it should be disturbed. She describes the exact brown voluminous pants she wore on their digs. It’s such a nice story.

I find things I wish I liked but that I can’t find the room to care for: a Japanese vase that looks like it’s probably worth something; several sets of old baseball cards; a set of pins and ribbons—something militaristic. I find well loved teddy bears that I can’t do anything with; I can’t donate them without my mother’s face swimming into view and saying, “no one’s going to buy that, Marian, what if it has a disease on it! What if it has fleas! Throw it out!” I don’t know if that’s a realistic worry, but maybe she has a point. They end up under my bed, with a growing collection of other useless items: The lint jars, an incomplete Donald Duck chess set, chipped perfume bottles, a grammar book that had been doodled on so heavily that the words were almost completely incomprehensible under thick black swirls, talking flowers, scratch outs, a whole page of squares.

Those are only a few things. The rest I donate or mark to sell: VHS tapes and DVDs, photo albums and boxes of postcards, dresses, clothes, tableclothes, CDs, records, cassettes, magazines, newspapers—everything.
I sort it all. I organize it all, but at some point I couldn’t say what I’ve come across. The microscope prints were a highlight of my day, but they were a singularity, a small point of light in what is otherwise a rote movement of arms, boxes from downstairs to up, items from inside boxes to piles that then get moved and taken to various places.

The Japanese vase may have been thrown out. I have no idea.

On the day of the deposition I go over to the nursing home to bring Mrs. Overfelt breakfast and to take her on a drive if she wants to go. She’s calm, at first, and agrees readily to people watch in town at the cafe we were at the first day, where we got dinner and saw Doc chatting with the waitress, before we knew it was Doc.

It’s a nice morning, with a breeze and spots of sun rolling over us, and we eat our breakfast burritos outside on a bench. Mrs. Overfelt is having fun talking about the clothing of the people walking by, although her ideal style of clothes is probably thirty years old, and she praises a woman with a perm and shoulder pads for looking “modern” and “put together.”

The problem arises when I try to bring her back to the nursing home, and Mrs. Overfelt refuses to get out of the car. She looks at the building and refuses to go back inside.

“No,” she says, “No, that place is a soul sucking demon place. All the nurses smoke. I’m going to get cancer from how much second hand smoke they’re breathing into me.”

“You’ve been around people who smoke before—”

“That’s not the point!” she shouts, holding a finger up. “That’s not the point! It’s a death box in there! I hate it! I hate it! The walls close in on me! I don’t want to go back! You can’t make me!”
I look at her, at her face, where she’s not making anything up, where she doesn’t have that sly little smile, where she’s not darting quick glances at me to see how I’m going to respond, how I’m going to make this funny. She’s not doing any of that.

I breathe out and look at the parking lot in front of us, and slap at a black fly I can hear buzzing around. “Ok. Ok. Well, I don’t know what to tell you about tonight. I mean, I don’t know where you’ll stay. I don’t know. But we can do something else for today, at least.”

Mrs. Overfelt nods.

I’ve got the deposition today. I say, “Have you ever been sued for slander?”

Mrs. Overfelt purses her lips, thinks and says, “Not slander, no. But tried for murder, once. Does that help?”

“Um,” I say as I turn the steering wheel in a giant U to get us out of the parking lot. “I think that’s different. I think. Yeah. I think that’s different.”

We argue briefly at Kay’s house because I have to go in and change into a skirt, and I think that there’s probably no harm in letting her hang out in the house while I do that, but Mrs. Overfelt insists on staying outside in case Kay gets home, so she sits in the car with the windows down while I change. When I come back inside she tells me I look nice and put together. She’s probably right; I got clothes and the makeup from one of the boxes. It’s not mine.

Maurice has reserved a meeting room in Town Hall for the deposition. I’ve never been here—it’s on the opposite side of town from the church and Doc’s house and the Ferry wharves, closer to the newer Marina, where we got lobsters that one time. The Library is next door. Both buildings look newer than the buildings on the other side of the harbor. The town hall is more of an ungainly design, with vinyl siding and an awkwardly steep staircase up to the main entrance,
but the library is stone, with wide, glass double doors and columns on either side. I would rather go into the library, but I steer Mrs. Overfelt around into the handicapped accessible entrance of the Town hall building, because there’s no way Mrs. Overfelt is climbing up those stairs, and then we navigate through small, florescent hallways with blue carpeting until we get to the main floor again.

The lawyers are waiting for us around a long table. All the clothes changing and hallway navigating have made me late. Mr. Mustfelt does not look happy, although he draws up a seat for me without comment. He’s there along with one other man from his firm. From the plaintiffs side is Mr. Whitely and two other men from his firm, although this whole case is clearly Mr. Whitely’s baby. There’s also an older woman sitting at the end of the table with a typewriter.

Mr. Whitely eyes Mrs. Overfelt. “Ms. Zuckerman, you are the only one being deposed today; is there a reason you have brought your grandmother?”

I pull out a chair for Mrs. Overfelt at the end of the table and she sits. I whisper to her that if she needs to leave she should just go where she needs to go. She knows where I am and how to get back? She nods.

I sit, and I say, “Mr. Whitley, my employment and familial obligations require the presence of Mrs. Overfelt here today, but she should not hinder or worry you in any way.”

Mr. Whitley looks surprised. I forgot how young he is. He is so young that he does not know how to hide his surprise. He says, “This is irregular.”

“But not impossible.”

Mr. Mustfelt rattles off some lawyer jargon, Mr. Whitley sits back and concedes that she can stay, and before we go further I ask Mr. Mustfelt where Maurice is. He says that Maurice
won’t join us until afternoon; they want to know what I know without Maurice present, first. That is not comforting.

“Ms. Zuckerman—”

“Mrs. Zuckerman,” I say. “I’ve been married to my husband for 13 years, and it happens, unfortunately, that he’s been deceased for six of those years, so I would prefer to be addressed as Mrs.”

Mr. Whitely takes a breath and Mr. Mustfelt coughs to get my attention so that he can shoot me a “be-careful” look.

Mr. Whitely takes me through questions about my history—when I was born, when my father died, where my mother is now (he accepts my ‘somewhere in Baltimore; I haven’t talked to her since I left), my recent and current employment. He even verges so far as to ask how many pets I had growing up, and when I lift my eyebrows at him he blushes slightly and moves onto the next question. His partner, next to him, shifts in his chair.

But that sort of thing isn’t going to last forever and soon we come down to it. He asks me how long I’ve been lying when I write obituaries. I say, “I can’t answer that accurately because I write what my client indicates I should write—I let them dictate how the death should be portrayed.”

“But that’s a lie, you’re telling your clients what lie to write.”

Since it’s not a question I don’t have to respond, so I don’t.

Mr. Whitely rephrases. “How many obituaries have you written where you know, for a fact, that the death portrayed was not the one the actual deceased suffered?”

I say, “I couldn’t estimate the number.”
“When was the first obituary you wrote that you knowingly wrote a falsification instead of the truth?”

“2007.”

“And who was that obituary for?”

“Someone who was in a great deal of pain.”

“Do you have a name for that person?”

Mr. Whitley’s lawyer leans over and whispers in his ear. He says, “Question withdrawn.”

They confer, and then he continues. “Why do you falsify the deaths in your obituaries?”

“Sometimes it’s necessary.”

“Why would lying ever be necessary?”

I look at him. “Mr. Whitley.” I lean a little closer to him, whispering. “Haven’t you ever been in a situation where you knew you could make someone healthy if you revised history, even just a little? Maybe your mother is crying because your father isn’t home and you told her he called to say he was late—that’s a lie but it made her happier. Is it worth it? And you’re thinking, well, she’ll find out it was a lie and it will crush her. But what if that lie could just stay? What if you could let that person go on thinking, my uncle didn’t kill himself, no, he died parasailing, like he always wanted. My best friend didn’t drive drunk and spin out, like I always thought she might, and I was at that party and didn’t take the keys, and it’s all my fault—no, she died in an ice skating accident instead, fell through the ice, but she was sober and laughing, and that’s what people should remember about her, because that one time last week we did go skating and she was like that. Is that lie worth it, then? If it might help the survivors? A little?”

I’m staring at Mr. Whitley; he’s gone easy on the axe body spray today, and his blue eyes, the pupils flutter, just a moment, and his breath shakes, and he swallows and says, “Yes.”
The lawyer next to him coughs, and Mr. Whitely blinks. “You’ve made your point, Mrs. Zuckerman,” he says, shuffling the papers in front of him, “Please refrain from embellishment.”

Mr. Mustfelt is leaning in his chair, doing a fairly good impression of skimming through Entertainment Weekly, and after our training sessions I am pretty certain he didn’t ask for something like that but he is not upset about it either.

I look over at Mrs. Overfelt and she’s asleep in her chair.

When lunch rolls around Mrs. Overfelt wakes up and Maurice strolls in about the same time, so he takes Mr. Mustfelt, Mrs. Overfelt and I out to lunch at that same little cafe we went to for breakfast. Mrs. Overfelt is immediately charmed. He ambles with her along the narrow hallways to go out the handicap entrance, shows her the front seat; she coos about the large car he rented; he asks her where she got her hair done (she hasn’t gotten it done anywhere); she tells him he must charm all the fellows down to the tips of their toes. Maurice shoots me a look and I shake my head, putting my hands up.

“Just one fellow, once” he says, finally.

“I had one, once, too,” she says.

“Did you?” Maurice says, looking at her and the road as he starts the car and pulls onto the main road. “What was he like?”

“He was an insurance salesman. Charming. He had these eyes. You have eyes like that too, you know. I tried to go into insurance, after, but it didn’t work out. I’m not charming like that.”
“Insurance is tough,” Maurice nods, and pats her hand, “even for charming people. If it didn’t work out for you you shouldn’t beat yourself up about it. Sometimes there’s just a certain combination of factors that make it work or not work for someone.”

They make plans to have afternoon tea instead of Mrs. Overfelt’s normal afternoon poker game with Myra at the nursing home tomorrow to talk. I sit in the back and scowl. Of course they want to have tea. Of course they want to talk about their oh-so charming husbands. They’ll compare notes, but Marian’s also got a dead husband and no one’s going to invite her along. She’ll be in that stupid little guest room throwing out million dollar Japanese vases and searching on eBay for an hour to see how much a single collector’s edition moose plate is worth.

Mr. Mustfelt leans over to me and says, “Is she going to blurt out things like this later? She took one look at him.”

I turn to Mr. Mustfelt. I thought Maurice’s sexuality didn’t matter, it was just Gideon’s that’s up for grabs. I say, “She has a psychic shop in Baltimore. This is what happens when you don’t believe.”

Mr. Mustfelt quirks a smile at me and adjusts his legs so he’s sprawled out even more, so his legs are spread wider apart; it’s a small movement. The car slows and parks, and we eat at that same stupid cafe for the millionth time. Doesn’t this island have any other restaurants?

That afternoon Mrs. Overfelt is awake and alert, watching the proceedings. They ask me questions about Maurice this time.

“How long have you known Mr. Benefield?”

“Since 2007.”

“Where did you meet?”
“At a cemetery.”

“And what were you doing there?”

“Tending graves.”

“What was Mr. Benefield doing?”

“The same.”

Mr. Whitely shifts his shoulders and flicks his paper over. “Whose grave was he tending?”

“I did not ask.”

“Is this something the two of you do often? Or together?”

“I do it often. I do not know about Maurice. We do not do it together.”

“The first obituary you wrote for Mr. Benefield was about his mother, is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“And you wrote five obituaries for his mother after that, correct?”

“Yes.”

“When did Mrs. Benefield die?”

“I—I believe in the late seventies, although I am not sure of the exact date.”

Mr. Whitely pulls out several clippings of the Real B. He shows them to me and asks me to approve that they’re my obituaries for Mrs. Benefield. Then he says, “Why does Mrs. Benefield have opinions on Michael Jackson Albums and Chernobyl when she died before those things happened?”

I look over at Mr. Mustfelt, then back at Mr. Whitely. “Probably because I wasn’t writing about Mrs. Benefield.”
Mr. Whitely sits back in his chair and asks me to clarify. “I was writing about Gideon Fracasso, but Maurice didn’t want to take out an obituary about him, so he took out one about his mother, instead.”

“Why did you agree to something like that?”

“Because pain is pain. Grief is grief. I found that there might be a way through and I thought it was worth it.”

“Your husband died a couple years ago, is that correct?”

“Yes. In 2005.”

“He died of unknown causes.”

“Of Sudden Adult Death Syndrome, that’s correct.”

“And your father died of cancer, just like Mr. Fracasso.”

“Mr. Fracasso died of stomach cancer and my father died of lung cancer.”

“Is it possible that you lied in Mr. Fracasso’s obituary as a way to project your own spousal and familial grief onto Mr. Benefield?”

Mr. Mustfelt says, “That’s conjecture,” just as Mrs. Overfelt takes that moment to throw a paper cup at Mr. Whitely’s head. It’s only half filled with water, so I’m not too concerned.

There’s a minor flurry of papers and squawking from the lawyers. Mr. Whitley issues some sort of ultimatum about Mrs. Overfelt staying in the room or going. I nod and make assurances.

He resettles himself and looks back and forth between me and Mrs. Overfelt.

“Mrs. Zuckerman, is Mr. Benefield gay?”

“Sometimes,” I say. The lawyers sit up straighter and Mr. Whitely flutters a little.

“Pardon?” Mr. Whitley says. “Can you clarify: what do you mean by sometimes?”
“Sometimes he is happy, sometimes he is not as happy. In the traditional meaning of the word, he goes through emotional crests and slaloms like the rest of us.”

The lawyers roll their eyes.

Mr. Whitely tries again. “Does Mr. Benefield engage in homosexual relations?”

“Mr. Benefield is a bachelor and I believe is celibate.”

“What was his relationship with Gideon Fracasso?”

“They were partners.”

“Can you please clarify?”

“They built a business together. They were friends and, more importantly, as close to spouses as they could get.” I look over at Maurice and his jaw is clenching.

“Gideon’s wife was Mrs. Darlene Fracasso.”

“Mr. Benefield and Mr. Fracasso were clearly prevented by the law and society from making their intentions towards one another public. That doesn’t stop it from being true.”

“So to your knowledge, it’s true that Mr. Fracasso cheated on his wife of twenty years? With Mr. Benefield?”

I frown. “I think it would be more accurate to say that Gideon cheated on his lover of thirty years, Mr. Benefield, with Darlene so that people wouldn’t make life more difficult for them than it needed to be. I think it would be more accurate to say the marriage was—for Mr. Fracasso—one of convenience.”

“And how have you come by all this information?”

“Mr. Benefield.”

Mr. Whitely nods, thanks me, and retreats. The lawyer on his left slides him a paper and he addresses Maurice.
“Mr. Benefield, do you consider Mrs. Zuckerman a friend?”

“No.”

I stiffen, and look at him, trying not to look like I’m shocked and hurt and upset.

“What kind of relationship do you have with her?”

“She is more like a daughter or a niece, or maybe a much younger sister. But in any case, she is a confidant. When I think of a friend I think of people at work or around my neighborhood who come to me during presidential debates because I can tell them what all the arguing about tax ceilings and debt reduction actually means. Marian is much more than that.”

He doesn’t look at me, but I can feel the blood pulsing under his skin, holding his hand over the water. Blood is thicker than water. Thicker than water, but without water, blood would only be a smear on a paper napkin. Would my mother do this for me? Would I do this for her?

Mrs. Overfelt is remarkably calm at the end of the table, her smile crooked to the side, and I raise my eyes at her when the lawyer is asking Maurice more questions. She shakes herself and nods a little. Blood to blood, water to water, and if we can float along on this water, then what use is blood, anyway?

We get out at five o’clock. They’ve asked us everything they can think about our lives and I’ve stayed quiet and twisted words as much as I possibly can. I’ve been honest and lied at the same time.

Maurice offers to bring Mrs. Overfelt back to the nursing home, but she takes one look at the building and balks again, so he turns the car around. We drop Mr. Mustfelt off at his hotel, then, after some argument, make a quick stop at Kay’s house to get the seashell Jars that Richard and I used. Then we head down to Louisa’s Beach, where we can be near the ocean without
having to walk too far. Maurice says we shouldn’t have gone back for the jars, but I say that just because Richard can’t help collect shells and stones anymore doesn’t mean the collection’s complete. If he and I were in Maine together he would have insisted on collecting rocks, just like normal. Mrs. Overfelt nods, agreeing with me, so we go back to Kay’s house, and I dash inside for the seashell jar, and then we’re on the road again.

It’s getting into evening, so we won’t stay out for very long. The sun is gold, slanting low across the road and through the trees, and Maurice follows until it opens up out of the woods, and there’s a gravel pad right by the shore line. When we get out we can hear the constant crashing of the waves. Louisa’s Beach is a cove so the waves aren’t big, they’re more just lapping against the granite boulders, just tumbling the billions of small pebbles against one another in constant small movements.

He helps Mrs. Overfelt out of the car and they slowly make their way to a bench right in front of the car. Mrs. Overfelt sits, and waves her hand in front of her. Maurice nods and strolls a little to the side, peering down every once in a while to look at a stone or piece of sea weed, but he doesn’t go far, and the shape of the cove means I can hear them talking as I step from small rock to small rock, in between the large granite rocks scattered around, looking for shells.

Maurice has his hands in his pockets, and he pivots on his toes in the piles of smaller rocks. “I think you’re making that up; the Rolling Stones didn’t form until most of your children were in their teens! Your legs would have been down to your ankles by then!” he points at her ankles.

I clutch at the jar and start looking for flat topped rocks. When I find one, I stand both feet on it and look down in the cracks for smaller rocks that I can collect and put in the jar. I can’t hear what she says, her voice is fainter.
Maurice’s voice is stronger, and carries back to me. “The bombing? You mean, the bombing in Hiroshima and Nagasaki almost twenty years before? And besides. I’m a business man. I had contacts. I’m very influential. People love me.”

I squat on a stone that lifts me up above the water rushing in and out. I don’t want anything too big or too heavy, because I don’t want them to crush any of the small seashells we have in the jar. I dip my hand down into the water and pick up a reddish brown one, and then another with a white streak. Most of the stones are a smooth gray, with soft edges, but I find a couple with white streaks through them, or with different hues. The water’s coming in, but not too swiftly, and makes small crashing sounds as each small wave curls in on itself. It’ll be cold, tonight, but for now the sun is thick and warm.

I’m moving a little bit more swiftly over the rocks, now, using the pointy rocks to bridge the gap between two flat ones that are too far away from each other. I see a small gray/white stone under the water and I stoop down to pick it up. The water is too cold for anything rational, and when I bring the stone back up it’s not as pretty as I thought. I let it drop.

I hear Maurice laugh, and it’s further away than it was before. He says, “You knew The queen of England? The queen of England?” Then he gets even louder. “Marian! Marian, Oh Deon should be here—Marian, you’ve sided yourself with a woman who lies for a living!”

I smile, my feet planted on two granite rocks about the size of small dogs, pointing out to sea and my body twisted out towards them. I shout, “Just because it’s a lie doesn’t mean it’s not true!” but Maurice cups a hand to his ear and leans forward a little. The wind is coming off the island, towards me, so I can hear what they’re saying but makes it hard the other way around.

I start picking my way back to them, trying to go the same way I came. When I get a little closer I repeat, “Just because it’s a lie doesn’t mean it’s not true. Look at me. Look at you. And
Mr. Whitley.” I step to another rock, then another, making my way in the path between larger, two or three ton boulders. The waves have gotten some of the smaller ones wet since the last time I stepped on them. “I meant to tell you about him, Maurice, I really think there’s something—” but I slip off the top of the rock I’ve chosen. It’s a small rock, and it’s a small step, but I’m balanced back, somehow, and my arms fling out and back and to either side of me, to try and catch onto the larger granite rocks that I didn’t scramble on top of, and the hand holding the jar of seashells hits the boulder, the jar breaks, and my right foot lands in a foot of ice cold Maine sea water.

Glass and shells and stones everywhere. Water in my shoe.

I yell for Maurice, searching underwater for as many seashells as I can find without cutting my hands on broken bits of glass. He doesn’t come right away, and I yell for him again. When he runs up as close to me he says, “Not now, Marian, not now. It’s Mrs. Overfelt. She’s having a stroke.”

I blink up at him. My hand is bleeding. He curses, and when I pick my way to him he wraps my hand in his handkerchief, takes the jar of seashells I’m still clutching, dumps it into his coat pocket and drags me back to where Mrs. Overfelt is sitting, slumped over on the bench.

I can’t even ask him what’s happening. I just reach for her, holding her, calling 911 and Kay and the doctor on the mainland.
Kay’s the one who’s theoretically responsible for Mrs. Overfelt, so she’s the one who’s medi-vaced out with Mrs. O.

For the first time this summer I use the kitchen to make more than a couple eggs or cereal. I open my vinegars and make a new batch of pickling. The vinegar smell swirls around me, drowning me.

Grace comes over and watches me from the archway of the kitchen. I don’t say anything to her, and eventually she leaves.

In Kay’s absence, after the pickling is over, I press forward with the basement, passing on the boxes that have stranger’s names on them. Instead I shovel my way through into the back of the basement, trying to find Mrs. Overfelt’s things that Kay might have put into the basement when Mrs. Overfelt went into the St. Martin’s of the Poor in the first place, when she downgraded from her own house originally. Mrs. Overfelt said she packed everything up, and when she moved into her nursing home her stuff wasn’t there. If it’s anywhere it’s probably here.

I go through boxes and boxes and boxes. Everything I touch could be something of hers, but the names on the boxes don’t match. The boxes without names drive me crazy. The hallway upstairs has twenty blank boxes that could be Mrs. Overfelt’s: filled with scarves and newspapers and model airplanes.

I search that day and the next day, too, dragging boxes around, poking around in them. I’ve probably checked the same box five times because I’m just moving them, I’m not actually getting rid of them.
But eventually I open a box with a giant framed oil painting of a vase of roses, as well as other smaller art of similar topics. I wiggle the box back and forth to see if there’s a name or address on any of the sides. I pull it out and on the back flap there’s just one word, “Overfelt.”

I stand up, full, breathing in the dust and plaster smell. My Mrs. Overfelt. I set that box on the stairs and go back to the area I found it, feeling the concrete under my feet, the low hanging wooden rafters, the periodic bare bulbs and dirty cords hanging from them.

I find four more boxes marked with that name. I bring them all up to the guest room. I open them all and bring out item after item with careful hands. The paintings of roses, the fisherman figurines, the pile of books (more romance novels), the vinyl records (mostly obscure singers from the fifties). The last box has a metal box with a locking mechanism, but when I pinch the catch at the bottom it opens anyway. I’m expecting jewelry, but instead I find papers. A marriage certificate for Marcine Haggerty and Craig Overfelt, from Ulster County Courthouse, NY, with calligraphy swirls all around the edge, and dated for 1946. There’s a black and white photo of a man and woman walking down the aisle. The woman has a thin face with large eyes, and is looking at the man, who’s looking away, off camera. He has dark circles under his eyes, slicked hair and a bony neck. I think, if I squint, I could sort of see my Mrs. Overfelt in the woman in the picture. I put it to the side to give to her. I think there are frames around here somewhere, from one of the other boxes, so I’ll put it in a frame first and give it to her.

Underneath the marriage certificate are several birth certificates. Kay’s is the first, and then a younger brother, John, and another sister, Trudy.

Directly after that a larger stack stapled together, with Mrs. Overfelt’s signature, allowing the adoption of Kay and her younger sister, Trudy, to George McColgan and Ruth McColgan, nee Overfelt, in 1961.
Kay was fifteen, Trudy was thirteen. No adoption for John.

The final paper is a death certificate for Craig Overfelt, of hypothermia and pneumonia, in 1960.

I put the papers back in and close the box, but keep the wedding photo out. This wasn’t what I wanted. I didn’t want pieces of paper that could be stitched into meaning but that had no value. I wanted to give Mrs. Overfelt smells and sounds and memories. I wanted to give her something to come home to, something I could put in a baggie that she could open when she needed to dig around inside of herself.

I go back to the basement but there are no more boxes, no clothes, nothing personal, nothing that anyone else doesn’t have. I try to remind myself that what I’ve found is more than what she had before, but it doesn’t feel like it.

Kay ferry’s back to the island that evening. She comes back in looking like a drowned rat because a storm blew in; she didn’t have her car so she just walked from the Ferry to the house. She could have called and asked for a ride from Grace. Or me, I guess. I mostly mad because I would have stayed with Mrs. Overfelt for much longer, but apparently, according to Kay, the doctors have her well in hand, and will call with any further developments. Apparently she’s in a coma, which is good. I don’t know how that can be good. Doctors will say anything, I think.

I don’t know what to do with my evening. I go to Doc’s house, peering through my windshield wipers and the gray slashing rain, driving slowly. He is very excited because he has finally finished water proofing the boat. He flutters around me like a large bird with a wild kraken beard. I am a pole, I am a pole that he got his tongue stuck on once, an ice pole. I run my hands along the boat, murmur appreciatively. He wants to put the boat in the water as soon as
possible but the rain is still drumming on his shed’s tin roof like hammers and nails. It’s storm season and he’s worried about rougher seas.

I can hardly hear him over the sound of the world crashing on his roof, over the smell of sawdust, turpentine and sea. At least one of us gets to bring our loved one back from the dead.

My mother calls Maurice the next day with big news. She still doesn’t have my number, thank god, so he calls me to relay the news. I am not sure whether it is good or bad.

The bad news is that she’s coming. She’s coming with several members of the family she’s been sidling up to. They’re not all bad, she says. No word on if she’s converted, although Maurice thinks she hasn’t. The bad news is that she’s coming.

The good news is that she has evidence in our favor, and since Mr. Whitley is still here, on the island, with Mr. Mustfelt, she’s coming to bring the evidence up. She’s also bringing the evidence to Maurice, for some reason. She will not say what it is. She thinks we might be able to settle out of court.

My mother thinks she can come into your house and clean and fix and things will magically be better. I doubt anything will change. I guess we will see.

Still no word on Mrs. Overfelt, even though it’s been two days. Kay tells me to bring all the books I have from her basement to the library to sort for the library book festival. I tell her my mother is bringing more lawyers up for another deposition. We’ll probably need to reserve more rooms in Town Hall again. She looks at me, her eyes boring through mine.

“Fine,” she says. “And then this is over? And then they leave?”
I shrug. I don’t know when anything will be over.

“Marian. I think our contract—our agreement about cleaning up the house and taking care of Marcine—will need to be revised within the week. With Marcine in intensive care, I’ll have to look into other arrangements for her. And the basement is nowhere near finished.”

I wince. “All right.”

After doing some more quick sorting, I load up my car with ten boxes of books.

I bring the first box in and love the library at first sight—there is a large glass dome skylight open to the main floor and the walls have built in wooden bookcases, and there are fluffy chairs everywhere. Along the stone walls are glass tiled mosaics of dinosaurs and turtles and prehistoric creatures. I’m directed up to the second floor which has offices, conference spaces and study rooms, but I peek around a little and find a communal study area with more fluffy chairs, a glass window facing the harbor, and several reading nooks with bookcases and reading lamps.

Whoever built and designed this building should win awards. They should be kissed, repeatedly, by the person of their choice. This is what a library should look like.

I find the room where the volunteers are sorting books for the book sale, where Kay is bustling around. I place my box of books on the table and go back for box after box, nodding at the volunteers each time, because each time they say something like, “More books! Oh my! This is so exciting! That last box we opened contained 1982 Edition of the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art Coffee Table book! The pictures were wonderful! We could sell that for at least ten dollars, what do you think, Sue?”

The last box I bring up doesn’t meet that reception. The room is eerily silent. I drop the box on the table and proceed further into the room, around a corner, to see Grace and Kay facing
off over a box of books and the volunteers not so subtly listening in while “sorting” another box at the other end of the table.

“It just makes sense to have it here. It’s the library,” Kay says.

“But we’ve always had it in the church before. The proceeds go to the church,” Grace jabs her hand in the general direction, across the harbor.

“Not everything can happen in the church. God, I am so sick of everything happening around the Church. The church the church. The flea market happens at the church, the children’s plays from the Clambake are organized around the Church. Is there anything you don’t do?”

“You’d think you’d be used to it by now, but if not, it’s not like you’re from here, you can leave, you know.” Grace opens the box almost violently and starts taking out books, putting them on the table.

Kay inhales sharply. “Is that what you think? I’m just going to leave? What do I have to do? I build a town hall, because there’s no space for the seniors to meet and vote except the Church and you mentioned it wasn’t practical. I built a whole library based on things you liked, things you wanted—cushy chairs, skylights, mosaics—for students to study because, while you loved having the kids hang out around, it wasn’t good for their homework habits. I make plans to build a tourist center to get the tourists off your back—to get them on the other side of the island because you complain once about them—once! I do all of that for you, because I—” Kay looks around the room and then presses her hand to her eyes and forehead. “But you don’t want to hear any of that. And now you want the book sale in the church where it always is; but it doesn’t make sense, Grace, the books are here. This is the Library.” Kay expands her arms out to the whole room.
Grace lowers her voice but everyone can still hear her. “Why are you pushing, always pushing, like doing any of that is supposed to make me, like a bribe or something—”

“It’s not a bribe, that’s ridiculous. It’s just because I listen when you speak. Like people do!”

“And it’s so easy for you, you just throw yourself into something, but I’m older than you—” She’s stacking books faster, now, her eyes fixed firmly on the table.

“Who cares?”

“And there are ways that we’ve done things for years now—”

“And we can change that, we can be flexible, I don’t see what the big deal is—”

Grace slams a giant coffee table book on the table, finally looking up, “It’s a big deal because I say it is, and you can’t so cavalierly disregard it just because you don’t understand, or because you don’t think it should be so!”

Kay’s eyes flare, and both are silent.

When it becomes evident that neither is going to speak anytime soon, one of the volunteers—oh god, it’s Kitten Lady—steps forward a little. “Excuse me, ladies?” she says from the other side of the room.

Grace shakes her hair out of her eyes. “Yes, Pauline?”

“We could have it in Town hall? That might be more neutral?” she twists her fingers in the hem of her off-white sweatshirt with a dreamy picture of a grey kitten with big eyes looking out from her chest.

Kay and Grace look at her, and then each other, full on eye contact, tense. But the library book sale is overlapping with the days my mother and the lawyers are coming up, and there are only a couple conference rooms big enough for both the book sale and the deposition.
I step forward. “I’m sorry. I know. I know—I told you this morning, Kay, but the deposition, the lawyers from Baltimore are coming up, and the book sale will overlap with that. They’re going to need room in Town Hall, like last time. There will be more of them.”

Kitten Lady—Pauline looks at me her eyes narrowed, and the other volunteers shift, muttering, but it’s only for a second, and then she looks at the carpet and the rest of them quiet down. “Well, that takes care of that, then,” she says.

Kay nods. “So, Grace. It has to be here. The books are here already.”

Grace’s shoulders are tense, and she turns and leaves, moving past me, without saying anything.

Soon after Kay leaves through the other end of the room, a small door, and none of the volunteers look at me after that.

The next morning my mother calls to tell Maurice, who then tells me, that she and the Evangelicals will be catching an evening ferry over to the island, since she wants to do a little antiquing in Rockland. That sounds ridiculous to me, but I guess there’s no hurry. She says they’re hoping the wind will die down in the afternoon so that they’re not taking the ferry over in the rain.

The afternoon only gets darker, and the wind whips around trees and houses like a sling shot. When I open the door and stand on the stoop I can smell rain; I can smell sea. It’s fresh, and I inhale so that my lungs are filled, my body filled with salt and sharp air. If I walked a little along the road I would be able to see the ocean from the top of the raise. White caps and brown churning water.
This is the right type of weather for Mrs. Overfelt’s stroke and my mother’s arrival. I smile for it; at least something is in the right place, something makes sense. It’s five o’clock—she’s on the Ferry by now. I can feel her coming towards me; I can feel the black knot of clouds and wind coming closer to the island.

I hear a vehicle pulling up the hill, and then Doc’s truck slinks into view. It stops and I see his face in the window, watching me, before he cuts the engine and opens the door. I stay on the steps.

He stands in front of me, hands in his pockets. “Marian.”

“Doc.”

“How’s Mrs. Overfelt?”

I shrug. “They’ve operated and she’s sleeping. We won’t know how much damage there will be until she wakes. Maybe not even until later.”

He looks at the sky; his sparse hair ruffles in the wind. “So you’re staying until she’s back?” I nod and lift my shoulders. “Marian.” His voice sounds like a stretched and twisted tube.

I can see how he longs towards me. He looks how I used to feel about Richard in college. Like a part of me was always spun out and wrapped around him, even when we were home for the summer. Except that it turned out Richard felt the same way towards me, but I have no connections to Doc, and would be perfectly happy if I never saw him again.

But my stomach cramps for him, or maybe it cramps up and I feel hot with goose bumps because he’s so obvious about it, and I’m embarrassed. He won’t say anything about all this, just take what I give him. Perpetually follow along with me.

He sighs. “I was on my way into town. You want to come?”
I should say no, go back into the house. But my mother won’t call again until she’s on the island. “Sure,” I say. He nods and I follow him to his truck after grabbing my purse.

He picks up some boat tool at the hardware store, and we end up getting coffee in the little coffee shop on Main Street before going home. The clerk tells us the storm’s going to be a doozy, that it’s the remains of a hurricane come up the coast. Doc’s concerned for his boat, and I feel him tapping his foot underneath the table. I keep glancing at the clock.

“Is she in the water?” I say.

“Yeah. Got her in yesterday.”

“Did you take her for a ride?”

“Oh. No. I. Um. Had something to do. But she’s in! She’s got her own slip and everything.”

“What’s her name?”

“Oh.” He looks away from me. “Well, her old name was Liliana, because—well, anyway. But, she’s a new boat and deserved a new name! So she’s now, erm.”

“Come on! What’s her name?”

“Nah, it’s not important.”

“Yeah it is. Come on. I’ll find out eventually.”

Doc shoots me a look. “So err, it’s ‘The Merry Maiden Marion.’”

Oh no.

He continues. “Like, you know. Robin Hood’s girlfriend.” He spells out Marion. “Not after you, obviously.”

I look at my coffee cup. “Obviously.”
He looks out the windows to the street. “Look, I’m sorry. I need to go make sure she’s tied in tight, and that everything’s ready for the storm. Do you mind stopping by the docks before I take you home?”

“Sure. No problem. I’d like to see the boat I helped build.”

His face softens. “Yeah. You know, without you, I’d never have gotten her fixed up this summer. It’s all thanks to you.”

I give him a small smile. “You just needed a little push in the right direction.”

He doesn’t say anything to that, but he smiles, and we step into the street.

The air is cool by now, and I feel little pricks of hard rain on my face. Doc walks faster, and it’s a relief when we get to his truck.

We drive by the docks to the Ferry, and I see a little clump of people around the door.

“Slow up,” I say. Doc nods and tells me to hurry up, glancing at the sky and the road.

I run over, hunched against the wind and rain. They’re all in rain parkas, their hair escaping hoods, their faces drawn and their voices lost in the wind and the sound of the ocean just beyond. They’re watching someone inside. I push my way to the center, towards a firm looking figure.

“What’s going on?” I yell, finding it hard to hear myself. The person turns around and it’s Kay. “Kay?”

“Marian!” her eyebrows shoot up. “When’s your mother getting in?”

“On the four thirty from Rockland!”

Doc appears next to me. “Kay? Marian? What’s going on?”

Kay looks between the two of us. “The 4:30 from Rockland stalled out a couple miles away. The coast guard is on their way, but there are over two hundred people onboard! They’re
asking people with boats to help out! The Ferry Master was saying that that Ferry’s due for
service, but they thought it would be fine for another couple rides, but I think with the storm—”

I make a noise or step backwards; Kay and Doc are suddenly looking at me, and she puts
a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t worry about your Mother, Marian, everyone’ll be fine, they just
need to be quick before the storm really hits.”

“Your mother’s on board?” Doc asks, his eyes going wide, the wrinkles in his forehead
deepening. I nod. He turns to Kay and says, “Do you know their coordinates?”

Kay shakes her head. “No, Doc, don’t. There’re enough boats, and yours was just put in.
Fred’s organizing the boats that will be able to handle the waves.”

Doc shakes his head, already backing away. “It’ll be fine! I built the boat, I know! It’s
seaworthy!”

Kay looks like she’s gathering up enough steam for a good lecture that will keep Doc
here for the next five storms, but another man comes up to her with a radio and a large map. She
glares at us and then turns away.

Doc looks out at sea, back to me, grabs my hand and then says, “Come on. They’re going
to need all the boats they can get.” Doc’s voice is firm and his strides are solid as we walk back
to the truck. “Your mother’s on that boat.”

“Not my favorite person,” I say, and I let him tug me towards his truck.

Doc just clutches my hand tighter and says, “She’s your family, the only family you’ve
got,” as if that’s supposed to be an answer.

Once I’ve got my seatbelt on he gets the truck in gear and then guns it, throwing up bits
of gravel and taking the small twisting roads at speeds they probably weren’t meant to be taken
at.
He only slows when the rain starts pouring down in sheets, when the wind rocks the truck. Through the front windshield, through the breaks in the trees I see the water raising and the waves beating against the shore in great arcs, great crashes. There aren’t any birds, or any other wildlife out. No seals playing in the shallows, no small birds looking for bugs, no rabbits.

We park haphazardly and jump out. We sprint down to the docks and see most of the boats are out already. Doc’s boat is bobbing mid way out, tied tightly with thick ropes. It has a small room in the front center of the boat with the wheel and electrical equipment. The back is clean and newly painted.

“Quick!” he says, jumping in. “We’ll catch up!”

“Do you know where it is?” I hover on the slip, anxious.

“I’ve got a radio, they’re probably sending out coordinates.” He holds out a hand to help me in. I look out at the ocean, at the Ferry; I imagine my mother and the people she’s befriended huddled in the cafeteria of the Ferry, staring out at the ocean, knowing the ship isn’t moving, maybe seeing the coast guard ships pulling along side. She would be wearing her head scarf and heels, probably, so she could get to the island in style, with her hair perfect.

I imagine coasting up to the side of the Ferry, seeing her looking over the edge and recognizing me through the storm, her handing me something that will make the suit against Maurice disappear forever, helping Doc with ropes and stuff, busy and able.

I grab Doc’s hand and jump in. “Tell me what to do!”

He twitches his head, giving me a weird look, and then he smiles and rushes to the radio.

“Put this on, in case the wind picks you up and flies you away!” he hands me a life jacket and smiles. I strap it on. I ask him about his but he’s already hauling in ropes and looking busy. I strap it on. I ask him about his but he’s already hauling in ropes and looking busy. He points to show me what to tie and untie, what to keep an eye out for, what to tell him is
blinking. In a few minutes the boat roars to life below us, and he’s carefully backing us up out of the docks area, out of the cove, and then we’re navigating through the waves, around the island. I see the shore, the smudge of dark pine trees and wet rocks go by us, the squat gray and white summer houses, the small rows of square, steep pitched houses where native Clarahaveners live, the square fields, the winding roads along the edge of the island. The rain drives hard into my face.

And yet I’m happy, probably, for the first real time. I feel wild and right. The sky, the sea and I are in cahoots, we are both fighting to be heard, to be seen. The wind lifts my hair, slaps it against my face and neck, my hands clench the edge of the boat, knuckles white and wet, the painted wood feeling slippery and rough at the same time. I can do this, I can bring my mother back to the island on this boat; I can put her in the guest room and run a bath for her, and listen as she chatters away about how scared she was. I can do that.

I join Doc in the small, enclosed area where he’s steering and keeping an eye on the machinery. “How long?” I ask, jittery, knees bouncing a little. I have to modulate my voice so I’m not shouting.

He smiles at me. “Not long.” He has a map on the wall behind me. He points to and shows me how we’re going, in between several smaller islands. The Harbor points south, and there are two small barrier islands protecting the harbor to the south west and south east. “They’re sometimes hard to navigate around, but the water’s high enough for us to not have any problem. So we’ll shortcut and end up at the Ferry,” he hits another point further out, “right here. Maybe a half hour.”
I stay in the small space instead of going back outside, watching the radar, watching Doc flit from one set of lights to another, checking levels and adjusting our course. I can’t see the small islands yet, but it’s hard to see much. Doc’s mostly relying on his radar.

I peer through the rain. “Richard never would have done anything like this.” My stomach jumps when I think about it. Richard would swing dance and pickle but never would have operated a boat in a storm. Never ever.

“Who’s Richard?”

I look at him, and he’s gripping the wheel.

“He’s my husband,” I say finally. Doc looks over at my hands. I reach under my collar and pull out my necklace, the two rings—one that my mother took from Richard when he was in the casket, and mine, so that at least some part of us could touch. When I woke up from the ambien that she slipped into my pickled eggs for a week and found it on the dresser, when it wasn’t on his hand anymore, I looked out my window and there was no storm, there was sun, even though there should have been a storm, a hurricane, just like this one. I tried to go to his grave to talk to him but his grave wasn’t in Baltimore at all.

I grip the consol. I can’t say any of that. “He died a couple years ago.”

He nods, gives it a couple breaths, and then says, “I’ve told you everything about me, but you haven’t told me about that you had a husband?”

“Have a husband.”

“He’s dead.”

If we weren’t on the boat, if he wasn’t driving the boat, if the prospect of wrapping my mother up in swaddling clothes and putting her where she’ll stay and keep quiet so I can give
Maurice what he needs to go back to the life he wants wasn’t so alluring, I would walk out.

“He’s mine. Just like Mrs. Overfelt is mine, not Kay’s.”

He’s stiff. “I thought I was yours.”

My fingernails bite into my palms. “How can anyone be mine—like that?” He doesn’t say anything. I continue. “I’m sorry, Doc, really, that you thought this was something else, but I can’t have that—the real thing—with anyone else. He was it for me.”

Doc stares straight ahead and speaks through lips that hardly move. “It would have been nice to know that before.”

“Like it would have made a difference,” I say under my breath.

“What does that mean?”

I fill my lungs. “It means you took one look at me and it didn’t matter what I thought, you just dove right in.”

“That’s bullshit. All that ‘I’ve never tasted lobster’ crap. What was I supposed to think?”

“You were supposed to think that I’d never had lobster, but that I wanted nothing to do with anyone, and I was trying to get you to go away.”

We’re both silent, watching the rain and waves outside, watching the shore disappear in smudges of wet and wind. Finally he says, “Well you can go to hell. You can go to hell.” He breathes out, then in again and says, “In a few minutes we’ll be through the islands, we’ll get to the Ferry, and you can find your mother and get another ride back. I’m done.”

I blink at the sudden ugliness. I’m still, for a moment, and then I nod and step out onto the deck. The rain plasters my hair back to my skull and I can barely breathe against it.

I look out into the sea, but I don’t see the islands. I see a smudge of island far from us, but no small barrier islands. I look out in front of us, hoping to see the Ferry, but instead I see
something sticking out from the waves, every so often it comes back into view, when we crest a wave. It’s dark and sticking up. It’s thin. Do buoys look like that? I squint my eyes at it, but we dip into a swallow of wave.

We come back up and I see it again, sticking up, waving back and forth, and I can see it’s not just a straight line, not a buoy; it has squiggly lines coming out from it

It’s a tree.

The islands are beneath us.

I look back to Doc but that’s when we dip into a swallow. Instead of coming back up the hull scrapes against something, sticks, crunches and the wave takes us, a brown wall over my head.

Salt and sea and wind, the tearing of my hands from the edge of the boat. The feral feeling of imminent death, that my head will be bashed in, that the waves will take me and I won’t come up again, the knowledge that the boat is somewhere; there are rocks waiting for me.

When I’m swirling under water I try to protect my head, try to get my head up, try to breathe through the salt in my nose, the wet, the cold, the scrambling; Richard, solid against me as we dance, his beak like nose, the pickled beet he slid across from me in the great hall when he took away my brownie, his fogged up glasses, looking over a pot of pickled radishes. And Mrs. O, throwing water on Mr. Whitely, picking at her dinner, sneering, the slump of her face and body to the floor yesterday, Maurice stretching out his hand across kayaks, not looking at me but telling Mr. Whitely that he thought of me as a younger sister, winking at me, paddling ahead of me, and I’m trying to breath, trying to see the next wave, keeping my arms over my head, kick
upwards, always upwards. Salt and sea, sea and salt, and is this a fitting death for me? Is this how my life best concludes? Who will write me? I didn’t foresee this.

I’m mostly keeping to the surface. My life jacket. Doc doesn’t have one. Is he still in the boat? Would that be a safer place? I try to look around for him but the sea is everywhere, the sea has us both.

The storm has gotten worse, I can’t hear; I can’t see; Richard, please help me. Please help me. I love you, please help me.

It’s a miracle I’m still breathing. Each stretch of my arm forward, each raise to the top of a wave is unexpected. I try floating on my back but I panic almost immediately that I’ll bang into something head first. My entire body seems to exist solely to protect my head; I wish I could pull it into my stomach and curl up around it.

I crest a couple waves in a row that don’t sweep me under. I’m able to wipe my eyes and cough my lungs a little clearer, and I see the blur of a large land mass (not Clarahaven, probably Vinalhaven, based on where we were when we crashed) not too far away. It will be impossible to swim there; the current is going to sweep me wherever it wants to go. I’m a weak swimmer, and the only reason I haven’t died by now is the life vest. My long sleeves and jeans make it hard to lift my arms, kick my legs. It would be foolish to spend more energy reaching for something I’ll never get to.

But my arms reach for land anyway. My chest is tight and I get swept under immediately, but when I surface and breathe again my arms stroke towards land automatically, and my feet flutter, pointing me in that direction. I can’t control any of this and shouldn’t try. This is a good enough death, I think, there’s really nothing I can do to change this demise. I’m going to die.
But I keep heading for land, and every time I’m able to see again I think maybe it’s closer. But then I look back and it looks just as far away as it ever was.

I stop trying to look, stop trying to judge distance. I’m breathing and kicking and reaching right now, and that’s all I can care about.

Crest and slalom. Crest and slalom. Crest and slalom.

The waves get rougher, and I can feel a more definite pull, the water pulling me, sweep in and then pushing me back out again. Pulling in and the crashing out. Pulling in and crashing out. I look up and am astounded to see trees leaning to the side, whipping back and forth. So close.

I can see individual branches. Maybe this will work. Blankets, a bed, sleep. Warmth. Breath. Kay’s hand on my forehead.

I sweep up to the top of a wave, look again. Now I can see the rocks, big wet boulders nestled against the bank that’s been eaten away but still supports pine trees above that are high enough to avoid the sea crashing in explosions of foam and sound. There is no part of land without the boulders. More are probably underneath me right now. My chest tightens even more as I connect the pull of the current with the boulders. Even if I swam against the current, even if I chose the ocean, I would end up against the rocks anyway.

This is going to hurt. This is going to hurt. This is going to hurt. This is how I’ll die, probably. I won’t drown; I’ll bash my head in, or bleed out, or puncture a lung, or an organ. I can’t even write an obit for this moment, it’s so clear.

I’m choking in breaths, steeling myself, knowing. I kick and stroke forward, and soon am grabbed by the suction, I’m swept forward with alarming speed, there are giant boulders around
me, I keep my head up and my arms out, tuck my feet underneath, hoping to use them to help me 
rappel against a rock, to cushion the impact.

My preparation doesn’t, ultimately, matter, because I’m twisted around and around and 
then a boulder is right in front of me and I’m wrecked against it. Pain explodes along my left 
side, my arm, my hip, my leg. I’m pulled back with the sucking of the waves, back, ready to hit 
again.

When I get sucked back I wipe my eyes with my good hand, trying to see where the 
wave’s aiming.

To the right of the rock that I hit is a dangling root from a concave of bank. The next 
time the wave brings me forward I use my right leg to push off a boulder and grab for the root. I 
miss.

With the next pull and push of the wave I angle in and try again. I catch a hold of it and 
the ocean releases me, retreats back without me, and I fall because I’m unprepared for the weight 
of my body without water, and my hand, cold, stiff and wet, loses its grip. I drop back, and only 
catch the tail end of the wave sucking back, so that when the wave dashes back in, the full 
weight of it crashes on top of me.

I gasp for breath, cling to a large rock that I can wrap an arm around. The wave sweeps 
through again, and I let go of the rock, letting the water sweep me where I want to go.

This time I catch the root, this time the wave leaves me and I’m still holding on, 
dangling. Once the wave retreats I drop and wrap my hands around more dangling roots in the 
bank, crouching; I’ve found footing on more boulders. The wave comes at me again, but I 
manage to hold on, manage to close my eyes, my mouth. The ocean retreats. I clear my eyes and 
look around for somewhere to climb up.
Another wave swirls around me. My hands are vises. I imagine they’ve been soldered into place.

In the moments between waves I try to find a path.

Another wave. Maybe I’ll just stay here until the storm dies down. That could be hours. But at any moment the water could drag a log or a rock or a piece of jetsam in and fling it into my back. My back, another vulnerability. My head, my back, my stomach.

So many places where death starts.

I decide my best course of action is to move from root to root along the bank until I’m sheltered by a bigger boulder to my right. At least then nothing will come at my back. The next time the wave retreats I rip my hands off of my tangle of roots. I scramble as far to the right, ignoring the way my leg doesn’t really work the way it should, taking harsh, panting, pale breaths, and then lock in on another tangle before the next wave hits.

Another wave, in and out again. Again I scramble, again I lock in.

The next wave, the next scramble, the next tangle of roots finds me sheltered by the boulder, and I see a small gully in the dirt that I could maybe climb up.

I brace against the boulder, dig in. I claw up. I get high enough so that the waves don’t pull against me anymore. The earth is wet and comes out in clumps, and I fall several times.

But when the earth pulls out, sometimes roots are exposed that I can cling to. I dig my feet into the bank, I brace against the rock; I pull and push.

And then I’m grasping at the flat of solid ground, and I’m pulling up with mostly my right arm, and then my torso collapses, lying flat against the top of the world, it seems. I push forward, bring my knee forward, and then most of me is up top, gasping.
I crawl forward into the trees, coughing. I vomit sea water several times. My left arm and leg are almost useless, now that I can rely on my right side only. I’m having trouble breathing. I collapse once I’ve found a tree trunk to sit against, pass out almost immediately.

When I wake it takes me a minute to open my eyelids, which have glued together. I and bring my aching right arm up to rub against them, but there’s only a little improvement.

It’s night, too, so even if nothing was wrong I’d still be a mostly sitting duck. I can’t tell how late it is, if I’ve slept through till almost dawn or if I’ve still got acres of time ahead of me.

The wind has calmed, a little, but it’s still raining. I’m protected a little because of the trees, but I’m aware of the cold, the wind harsh against my skin. I’m cold and cemented into this one position. My right arm has some movement, but my other limbs are immobile. I twitch my foot and pain, red, hot slices of pain, flare up so that I can barely breathe.

The pain recedes into a dull throbbing. My thoughts are slow too, I’m thinking about beds. I can still feel the pull, push and drag of the water in my body and several times I jerk up in sudden fear that I’m still in the water. Every time I jerk my body protests and I spend the next few minutes simply trying to breathe. There’s something under my right hand, something sharp. I finger it and decide it’s a twig.

There’s no way I’ll be able to move until there’s light. I’ll have to wait it out.

It would have been easier to die. Breathing, moving: all of this is much more difficult than dying.

But I guess now I can finish cleaning out Kay’s basement.

That’s a nice thought. I try to smile a little and my lips crack. I taste iron and salt— they’re probably bleeding.
I want warmth; I want to not be in pain. I want someone to take care of me. Doc would do it, but Doc is probably at the bottom of the sea, drowned with his boat, with his life, because of me. I am sorry for that, but not enough. Even if Doc were alive, he would give the wrong kind of comfort. He would make taking care of me all about him, all about how generous he is, all about how much he loves me. When I take care of Mrs. Overfelt, when I wash her nightclothes, it’s not about me, it’s about what needs to be done so that she can go back to watching specials on PBS, or trying to escape, or so that she and Maurice can get to know each other better.

Maurice would take care of me. He said I was his younger sister. That’s what I want. I want him to steer me into his living room and cover me in a blanket and take care of me. But it’s still mired in the Gideon Rooms. Is it so wrong to subsume yourself in another person.

There’s no one else. My life has always revolved around Richard, but the dead can’t help the living. I’ve been looking for him for six years, but there’s no one there.

Something prickles against my neck. I bring my arm up to brush it off. I don’t know if it was an ant. Now I’m imagining bugs crawling all over me, and feel a prickle of imaginary ants everywhere. Maybe I’ll die by ants. They’ll devour me down to the bone. I pull up a couple harsh chokes and sobs. The tears help my eyelids unstick themselves, a little.

I have an image of an ant eaten carcass, and the hikers that will come across it in a week. My mother will be overly distraught at the funeral. Kay will think, “I told you so,” over and over. Grace will say something nice. Maurice will say, Maurice will. Probably devote a room to me. It will be just jars of pickles.

The prickles subside, after a while, after I’ve cried myself into a semi sleep again.
When I pull myself from the fog of sleep again I blink my eyes open and there’s a little light but my eyes are also laced with pain, so I sit, breathing with just the top of my lungs, drifting in and out, until I wake again and realize it’s warmer and I can hear cars ahead. I turn my head slowly, checking for pain. I don’t remember anything banging into my spine, but I don’t want to find out I’m wrong. No pain when I twist to the right, no pain to the left. The wind’s died down, and the ocean doesn’t sound so violent.

I’ll need to try and find my way to the road. I try to open my eyes again, but as soon as I try I hiss and clutch at them until the pain recedes to a dull throbbing. No one will find me out here, at least not for a long time. I can’t wait for them.

I bend my right leg first. It’s sore, it protests, but I don’t feel anything too terrible. The left side will be a different story.

I lean to the right, using my right leg and hand to maneuver me from sitting until my right leg is underneath me. Achingly slowly I shift my weight until I’m forward. My left hip throbs in pain, and my left knee won’t take any weight. I shift back to my right hip. I could scoot like this; using just my right side to move me, dragging my left behind me.

I pick through the trees. I don’t try to stand, because I’m sure I’ll fall and hurt something else. I stop often, breathing from the top of my lungs, because if I try to breathe more fully than that, pain shoots through my stomach and chest.

I dry heave several times.

It turns out the road isn’t too far off. I open my eyes once more to get a feel for the layout—cars coming around a blind curve—almost vomit again from the pain of opening them, and then I wait on the side of the road, propped up, waiting.
I drift in and out of consciousness, propped on my right arm and shoulder, my head falling and jerking up again.

I hear the rumbling of an engine. The rumbling gets louder and louder, and I shift upright as much as I can.

The car sweeps around the bend, actually passes me, but amazingly it stops and pulls over into the ditch on the side of the road. Two people get out, walk towards me. They’re asking questions, exclaiming, and I open my mouth to answer, but all I can say is, “my eyes.”

The man is on his cell phone, and the woman comes up to me. She touches my shoulder, I scream, collapse on the ground, and black out.

When I come to the paramedics are loading me onto the ambulance. They jolt me back and forth, and the air fills with whimpers and cries. The paramedics are asking me questions, but I can’t say anything but “my eyes, my eyes.”

I’m brought through the hospital and it’s so loud, sirens and talking, and it seems like there are so many people there—the whole town. Am I on the mainland? I brush a hand over the gauze on my face. Kay says something from above me, Grace echoes her, their voices close together, and the doctors and paramedics are there, wheeling me, and they touch my hands and then they’re asking about Doc; Grace is crying, she asks about Doc, and I say, “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry.”

I blink. There’s something covering my eyes. I touch the gauze. But I can see the inside of it. It doesn’t hurt to open my eyes.
I stretch out my hands over the linens.

Doc. Maybe he made it.

I don’t believe that though; all the men, dead. All the fathers, all the sons, dead. Men are somehow inherently weaker. Somehow.

My body is thankfully numb. It seemed like the wind in the trees, the roar of the storm, the sound of the world in general was so present I’d forgotten it. But now the silence of the room I’m in is an unexpected respite. I can still feel the pull of the ocean, the waves, pulling me off the bed, pushing me back on.

I like things that are quiet, I like when I’m alone, but now alone reminds me of being alone in the forest, alone against a tree trunk. I look around for a button for a nurse. I push various knobs on the bed with my right hand until I hear a buzzing and a nurse bustles in. She checks my charts, then leaves to get a doctor.

He comes in and his voice sounds like an echo of Richard’s, but I note it with only a small ache, not the full ache it would have been. He checks me over, asks where I hurt, if I need anything.

I tell him I don’t want to be by myself. Can I have a roommate?

He says he’ll see what he can do. He gives me a remote for the TV, in the mean time.

Then he gives me the rundown of injuries. Several broken bones in my left foot, left shin cracked, left knee popped out, left hip cracked, my left 9th and 10th rib both cracked, though thankfully they didn’t puncture my lung. My left upper humerus cracked and my radius bone so broken that the bone had split in three places. I have lacerations, small cuts and bruises all over my face, legs, arms, back and chest from the small stones and debris that the waves threw around me. The palms of both of my hands are deeply cut up, my right more so than my left, from
clinging to roots and then hauling myself over dirt and stones and roots. My eyes had to be flushed out from the sand and salt that got in, which is why they’re covered. I have several minor abrasions to both corneas. My bones have been set and cast, my ribs taped, my cuts cleaned, my eyes flushed. The biggest thing, he says, is the sound in my lungs—a swishing sound that they’re not concerned about at all but that they’d like to keep an eye on, for the time being.

But my spine is fine, my organs are fine. My head is fine. A couple bumps, but not even a concussion. When he says this I feel a thrill of triumph in my chest. There are so many places where death starts, so many places to protect, and what is a broken arm, a broken rib when compared to an intact head? An intact life?

I ask him about Doc and he says he doesn’t know; there were other casualties of the storm, he knows that much.

It’s a strange thing, being a probable murderer of someone who loved you. It puts death into a completely different sphere. I’ve always thought of death as its own entity, doling out life grades. A good grade gets you death by heroism. A poor grade gets you a split capillary, drug overdose, or choking by pen. But this means that I was the one giving out a grade, telling life how worthwhile the life was. He trusted me, and I have unwittingly looked at his whole life and decided that he was worth a death while rushing to the aid of a friend’s mother, putting his whole world on the line. I think, that’s more than he could have asked for from death itself. Death would have probably graded him at a heart attack while straining on the toilet, but I’ve given him martyrdom.
Kay and Grace have more news. They come after I wake, in the evening, and tell me that they found Doc washed ashore, like me, but he wasn’t conscious. They don’t know if he’ll survive. Grace tells me there’s been a candle lit vigil for him, at the church. I’m surprised that the island cares that much about him. She says, “He was one of us, of course.” Kay rubs a hand over Grace’s back and makes a shh-shing noise; the sound of her hand on Grace’s shirt sounds like the sound of sea on sand.

Grace asks me if I’d like a candle lit by my bedside for him. I nod, and she says a quick prayer.

Maurice comes to visit the day I get my gauze off. My eyes are still tender, but clear. He’s wearing the worst clothes I’ve ever seen him in—a boxy white tee shirt and a pair of formless black slacks.

He smiles at the door. “I guess you need more time to heal,” he says, “they said I was all fine. All fine, tip top shape. Tip top.”

I want to laugh, but as he walks towards the bed his hands drag along the walls, and he’s a little unbalanced. Without saying anything else he comes and crawls into bed with me as much as he can without jostling my casts. His eyes are red rimmed and his skin looks like it’s almost coming off.

“What, what?” I say.

“All of him, gone,” he says. “All of him, gone.”

The waters came and took Gideon away from him. All the rooms. Tourist haven didn’t have any protection from coves or hills. The sea came in and took it all away. As we’re lying in bed I feel the waves pulling and pushing, pulling and pushing, in synch with our breath.
When I can move with a wheelchair, Maurice and I move to Mrs. Overfelt’s room, our hands against the walls, listening to her breathe. Maurice throws money around. He smiles at several people. He’s showered, finally, but he’s still in the clothes they gave him after all his and Gideon’s were drowned and he checked out of the hospital that first day. When he comes back, after smiling, he sleeps for a long time.

I learn the nurse’s names. Rosa has yellow teeth but curly brown hair. She brings us lunch. Abdul’s accent is really strong but he touches my arms, my head, my legs, often, helping me move them. Helen keeps up a constant stream of conversation when she’s in; she tells me about her daughter who’s raising show dogs, and her granddaughter who’s going to be in second grade this year. I ask her questions to keep her talking. Maurice sleeps as often as possible.

Kay comes in the afternoon, after we move to Mrs. Overfelt’s room. Her whole body is tight, tense. Half way through her visit, after filling in a dozen forms for me, she blurts out, “You’re Marian Zuckerman. Not Tanner.”

“Yes,” I say.

We look at each other. She looks down at the forms. “You could have been anyone. I invited you into my house and you could have been anyone. How.”

I say, “Your mother sent the woman you actually hired packing. I think. When I called you just assumed—and I needed to leave Baltimore and I just. I ran with it.”

“I can’t believe I didn’t know.”

“You’ve been busy. And I don’t think you wanted to know.”
She clenches her fists. “You could have been a drug dealer or a convict or—” She stops and then looks at me. “We’re going to have to revise the contract.”

I laugh, just a short, breathy laugh because my lungs and ribs still hurt. “Kay, we never had one. I don’t even know what was on the original.”

“I need to clean out the basement.”

“I don’t think I’m the woman for the job.” I pause. “But I do think that I’m better suited to being Mrs. Overfelt’s daughter than you. I can take care of her. I’d like to take care of her.”

“I’m supposed to put my mother in the care of a woman who lies and god knows what else? I don’t think so. I don’t think so.” She shakes her head.

I clench my teeth. “She hates you. You hate her. I love her. She likes me. I think. It’s pretty simple.”

She leans back in her chair. “Your mother is at my house.”

I roll my eyes. “Jesus.”

“She’s been telling me about you. Something about a beauty pageant?”

I shake my head. “Don’t even—that’s not even a thing.”

She lifts her eyebrows. “I don’t know. I kind of like her. She’s able to follow the rules for flushing, at least.”

Oh right. If it’s yellow let it mellow. “Great. You guys should be roommates. You can pin all the rules up around the house and mark them with gold stars. Mrs. Overfelt and I will have our own place and watch PBS operas in Italian and leave dishes out over all the counters.”

Now it’s Kay’s turn to roll her eyes. “Don’t be so dramatic, Marian. We’ll figure out something.”
We’re silent for a minute. I don’t know why Kay’s still sitting there, but she is, staring at the wall. I ask about Doc. He’s awake. He has a spinal injury, but the extent of the damage isn’t clear yet.

She says that Grace is a mess, but they’ve got teams together to clean up the island and eventually to start rebuilding. The homes of tourist town were the heaviest hit—the shops and stores will be everyone’s main concern for right now—but a couple flimsier houses were flooded too, and so they’ve been trying to get to those as well.

I ask, “And you? You and Grace? I feel like I—I’m so sorry.”

Kay smiles, probably for the first time all afternoon. “Grace and I are fine,” she pauses, “I mean, she’s out of her mind with worry, and we’re probably going to hash it out a million more times, but I think it will be alright in the long run.”

I smile.

And Kay smiles, and then she smiles even bigger. “She loves me.”

“Of course she does. Who wouldn’t? You’ve got all those rules.” I say.

Kay laughs.

I watch Maurice and Mrs. Overfelt, and Mrs. Overfelt’s roommate. From the shape of the feet I think it’s a woman, but it’s hard to tell. Richard had very feminine feet.

The physical therapist comes in to visit me and give me exercises to do during the day, since I’m in the hospital, ready and willing. Arm raises, leg rotations. The first day I hobble to the bathroom using one of those walker things on my own, Abdul’s the one on duty and he high fives me, his lips stretching over white, broad teeth. He’s a beautiful man, and I have absolutely no interest in getting to know him as anything more than a sometimes caretaker.
Mrs. O still hasn’t woken up, even though her brain scans “look good.” I’m cleared to leave the hospital a day after my lungs stop making the swishy sound that the doctors aren’t concerned about but have been monitoring, because they weren’t concerned about it at all. Maurice isn’t supposed to be here at all, but is, anyway, staring up at the ceiling most days with crocodile tears in the corner of his eyes.

Grace is the one who comes over to release me from the hospital and help Maurice get me back to the island. Then I sit in the window seat in the dining room while he packs up all my stuff. He even runs a load of my dirty clothes. He asks if I want to separate out Richard’s clothes from mine, for the smell.

I’m so tired; today’s been a lot. I grab at my necklace, clutch at the rings. Miracle of miracles they weren’t lost in the storm. “No,” I say, “just wash them all.”

He nods and brings the hamper to the mudroom, where the laundry is.

My mother comes back to the house mid afternoon, when he’s almost done packing up all the items I took from the basement—the doodles, the broken chess set, the snowflakes, the detritus Jars. I’m keeping them all. I don’t feel bad about that at all.

My mother has fresh red nail polish and a gauzy blue shirt that looks like she’s going on a picnic or something. She comes in the front door, which is so bizarre; did she walk through the lawn after she parked in the back? She doesn’t notice me; she goes into the kitchen, comes back out, sets her bag on the dining room table, and mutters something under her breath.

It’s only when she hears Maurice moving upstairs, making the floorboards creak that she jumps a little and looks up. She sees me staring at her.
“Marian!” She cocks out a hip and purses her lips. “Marian. That is rude!” When I don’t respond she comes up to me and kisses me on the cheek. “I won’t hug you because of your injuries.” Then she goes into a five minute diatribe about how I could have been so stupid as to get into an untested boat in a storm like that. I just watch her and let her get it out of her system. She ends with, “And we weren’t even on the Ferry!”

I close my eyes, then open them again. The light in the dining room moves with the shadows of the leaves of the tree outside. We argue. We always argue. This time feels different, though, because normally when I talk to her I feel like I can’t say certain things. This time I just say whatever the hell I want. Who cares who’s standing in front of me. I’m so tired, and Maurice is packing me up, and we’re going to find a little place to live while Mrs. O recovers.

We argue back and forth a great deal, for a long time, but ultimately I tell her that she is allowed to send me birthday cards and that’s it.

She steps back from me, tilts her head up a little and sniffs. She rolls her eyes and says, “Oh Marian, so dramatic. We’re family. I need you, you need me. Who else do we have?”

“Apparently, you don’t have anyone else. This explains so much.”

She steps back and presses her chin into her neck before lifting it back up again. “Don’t be cruel.” She opens her palms a little. “I’m not asking for so much. I just thought we would be friends, at least, like those TV shows, or like the other women at my complex; they’re always exchanging recipes and bringing over their children, and going to movies. But with you—nothing! You hid Richard away from me. Wouldn’t even have children that I could spoil. Nothing!”

I say, “My god, can you hear yourself?”

“I just thought you’d give me a little consideration. You’re my daughter!”
“What’s that supposed to mean? I have some of your chromosomes. Great.”

She presses her mouth into a thin line. “It means we’re bound together.”

I’m clenching the bottom edge of the lace curtain with white knuckles. “Bound together.”

She sighs. “I know you don’t understand—or maybe hate me for a lot of the things I did. With Richard, with your father. Do you know how much I would have loved having someone take over your father’s funeral? Or your father’s chemo treatments? You went crazy. I mean, four autopsies! That’s not normal, Marian! I knew you’d appreciate not having to deal with the logistics.”

That is so beyond bizarre I can’t begin to address it. “Just because you had good intentions doesn’t mean everything’s fine. It doesn’t matter, ultimately, what you did, or didn’t do, or why. You are—toxic to me, and I don’t need that. I don’t want that.”

She starts to say something, and then Maurice appears at the top of the stairs with a couple boxes. Her entire demeanor changes; she stands up, arches a little bit, and rests one hand against the table. I don’t even know if she’s doing it.

He says, “Marian. Virginia. Everything ok.” He sounds sluggish, like he hasn’t slept in days.

“No,” I say, but Virginia says, “Yes, just fine. Marian and I haven’t talking in a while, that’s all.” She smiles at him but I don’t think he notices.

Maurice catches my eyes and lifts his eyebrows up. I say, “Let’s get this over with. Just throw it all in the car. We can sort it later.” He nods.

Virginia says, “You should not be traveling in your condition. It’s reckless. I can’t believe you’d let her do something like that, Maurice.”

So I say to Maurice, “I just have to cut the bitch out out out.”
Virginia flushes, and seems especially upset when Maurice smiles, but it's a ghost smile.

"Out, out, out," he repeats. She looks between the two of us.

Virginia grabs her purse. "You're acting like a teenager, Marian," but she's shaky.

I say, "Maybe if I'd acted like this twenty years ago, you wouldn't still treat me like a child." She has this horrified look on her face for a moment that she flattens. The moment should feel like a victory, but I just feel tired, I just feel small. I just feel like I didn't want to have to say or do any of it in the first place.

When she leaves, the house feels so much quieter.

I have my walker, and I make it to the car without mishap. Maurice brings the rest of the boxes and bags and sundry items downstairs. Before we leave I remember, and I tell him to go down the basement and get the four boxes marked "Overfelt." He tromps back inside and gets them, nodding.

Richard's grave is the worst place in the entire world. When I lie down on top of it I can feel the sea swallowing me, the waves, pulling me under, crest and slalom, crest and slalom, gasping and heaving.

I bury his ring at the base. I put my ring back on. It's at least two sizes too loose, and falls off immediately. I put it back on the chain. Half and half. Half a woman. Now it's really true.

On the way back I call Kay. Mrs. Overfelt has woken up, and is asking for me. She's not so good about speaking yet, but she's got my name down.
I tell Kay we’ll be there soon. As I hang up I can smell the salt air and sea out the windows.
EPILOGUE

In Baltimore Maurice helps me rent out a small gallery space. It’s got lovely golden oak wood flooring, skylights, and a sort of hush that galleries have that make you feel more settled and introspective no matter what the hell is inside. In the beginning I’d run my hands along the walls and repeat, “this is mine, this is mine,” because it didn’t feel like mine. Now it does, though.

I’ve made what I’ve called a Gallery for the Deceased. I’ve got one room filled with things—the jars filled with lint and buttons, the pictures from the microscope, the obsidian snowflakes and the grammar book filled with doodles—as well as things of Richard’s. I have a whole room devoted to smells: colognes and perfumes, cold creams and make-ups on napkins, the smell of various foods, the smells of flowers—I even have a couple used undershirts for people to smell and remember, maybe, people they’ve known who have smelled like that. There’s a section of a room devoted to obituaries, a video player devoted to video of people telling their stories, a place for people to submit their own stories.

It has taken me a while to put together, but I feel like it’s a more complete version of what I have been trying to say all along.

Maurice has been helping me with it, especially the money side. He knows a lot of old, quirky rich people and has been handling fundraising. He also insisted that I get a paper bound ledger for all the donations and all the expenditures. He told me paper bound was the only way to go, that the fancy computer spreadsheets were clunky and impractical for so many bizarre reasons, which he enumerated, at great length, with his hands in his pockets, rocking back and
forth on his heels, talking about all the columns and rows I could use for each type of expenditure I could record. So I said, “Maurice, would you like to me in charge of accounting?” And that was how that went.

I’ve been in contact with several of the people I’ve done obituaries for in the past, asking for help and input. I’ve been in touch with people who work at morgues all over Baltimore, and caretakers, and funeral homes. Some of them have not been interested in participating, but I’ve gotten a steady stream of interesting objects, stories to record, smells to catalogue—even a couple bizarre emo kids with black hair who want to volunteer after school.

Today I’m working on invitations for the opening gala event. Maurice and Irene insist that an opening event is necessary for galleries like this, so I’m on a website choosing between ridiculous invitation card stock that all looks the same anyway. I’m about to just choose puce when I hear the door open. We shouldn’t have any visitors. Maurice is in the next room, unpacking a shipment of colognes we ordered from eBay.

The door opens and before I can even stand up I realize it’s Mr. Whitely. I tense up immediately. Mr. Mustfelt just told me that the lawyers were handling everything, and that if they needed us he’d let us know, but that things were untangling rapidly. He hesitates, his collar slightly too big, looking around a little nervously.

I say, “I—I don’t think you’re supposed to be here. Our lawyer said he’d call us if there was anything.”

“I know.” He steps up to the front desk. “I just wanted to apologize for the trouble I put you through. You and Maurice.” His jaw is flexing, and he looks around the room. “This is nice. This is a nice place.”
“Yes.” I glance to the next room, and then back to him. “I’m sorry, what are you doing here?”

“You were right. About lying.” I must look blank, because he frowns. “No mean. I mean, about the picture. I knew about the picture and went ahead with it anyway.”

I say, “I don’t understand.” Maurice has appeared in the archway of the adjoining room, his two hands out to span the length. Mr. Whitely sees him, too, but chooses to focus back on me.

“She didn’t tell you?” I shake my head. Mr. Whitely exhales, reaches into his briefcase and pulls out a black and white picture in a plain frame. “She said she would. It’s just been released from the court. The lawsuits been dropped. I said I would bring this because. Because. It seemed right.”

Maurice walks closer to the desk, slowly, not letting his steps make much noise on the hardwood floors.

Mr. Whitely speaks in starts and stops, eyeing Maurice as he comes closer. “There’s a letter. To Mr. Benefield. Um. Inside. When my grandfather was dying. He—he wrote a letter to Mr. Bene—to him—to you, and put it in the picture. He asked that the picture go to you, but. But it didn’t.” Mr. Whitely puts a picture and frame on the counter. It’s a black and white of two young men shaking hands outside of a building. “He asked that this picture go to you, but my mother noticed that you already had one—in your office so, so she kept this one. That’s what she said. She didn’t like talking about you. I mean. Mr. Benefield.

“I am sorry, but. But it’s as you say, Mrs. Zuckerman. Sometimes a lie is the best thing. Sometimes we were happy.” He lifts a hand to his neck to scratch at his hair line, ducks his head in a nod as he leaves, and there’s that Axe body spray again. Jesus Christ.
Maurice has taken the picture, popped out the backing, and found a letter between the picture and the cardboard. He turns around and reads it.

I try not to watch him. He’s lost everything. This is so much.

Why didn’t Richard and I write letters.

Maurice’s back and shoulders curve slowly inwards, tenser and tenser. I try to keep picking out font for these stupid invitations, but I keep darting up to watch him. There he is, hearing from Deon, nothing made up this time.

It’s a long time before he turns around.

When he turns around he says it would be in my best interest to contact Kay and Grace and ask for official legal guardianship of Mrs. Overfelt to be transferred over to me as soon as possible. He says it would make the financial issues much easier to deal with, in any case. He says he knows how the hospital systems work. He says that way it won’t be like when she had her stroke, with me left on the island and Kay called in. He says it will be different, this time. It will be different. He can make it different.

We don’t speak for the rest of the afternoon.

I don’t know what Gideon wrote to Maurice. There are some things one does not ask, even of family, even of water that has become blood.

I call Kay the next day, after Maurice has explained to me all the legal and technical jargon we’ll have to go through to get Mrs. O into my care. Kay picks up and I can hear Grace shouting something in the background, but when Kay tells her who it is, she comes to the phone, too. They have good news on their end; Doc’s physical therapy has been completed with flying
colors, and his paraplegic basketball team on the mainland has crushed the opposition. Am I not proud? I should call him, he’d be so happy to hear from me.

I do not make any promises, but rather assuring murmurs.

I ask about Mrs. O and after some badgering from Grace, Kay says she will complete the paperwork that will allow me to make decisions in her stead, regarding her mother, if I will fax them to her with my real name and social security number in place at the top, she will do that immediately. I can hear Grace on the other end, saying, “Not immediately, we have several boxes to get through first, and I think these might have more moose figurines.” Kay amends her statement to not immediately, but in the near future.

After I hang up the phone, I turn around and see Maurice and Mrs. Overfelt, who cannot walk so well, yet, and has trouble speaking in more than a word or two at a time, but still manages to voice her opinions quite competently. She’s been coming with me to the gallery more and more often, and Maurice is convinced that getting out into varying environments is good for her recovery. She’s in her wheelchair, surrounded by boxes, packing peanuts and small bottles of old perfume and cologne. Maurice kneels in front of her, picking up one after another after another, spritzing them in her general direction.

“Tell me when I’ve found it,” he says. She leans forward, her eyes closed. “Tell me which one is Craig’s.”

Spritz, spritz. Spritz, spritz.