The garden of open mouths

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The garden of open mouths

by

Lindsay D’Andrea

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing & Environment

Program of Study Committee:
K. L. Cook, Major Professor
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Iowa State University

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INTRODUCTION

The act of writing about real places and regions demonstrates the power of environment over people, and can have the capability to help readers and writers engage with what it means to be from a particular place. During my time in Iowa State University’s Masters of Fine Arts Program for Creative Writing and Environment, my concept of “a sense of place” has been the primary generator of story ideas. I have dedicated my graduate thesis, *The Garden of Open Mouths*, to writing stories that feature the New Jersey Pine Barrens—an area that takes up a large part of southern New Jersey, where I am from. The background for these stories is drawn from my personal experience as well as nonfiction-based research. Often my stories borrow from historical or personal events that inform my understanding of what it means to be from the Pine Barrens and interact with that environment. The sense of place developed throughout *The Garden of Open Mouths* includes notes of ecological and geological history of the Pine Barrens as well as human, cultural, and environmental conflicts.

Despite my engagement with the history and mythology of the Pine Barrens, I aim to create an essence of the real place through a fictional representation that may not always adhere to truth, history, or even reality. The Pine Barrens of my stories is admittedly not the Pine Barrens anyone would find if they decided to hike the forty miles of the Batona Trail. In my fiction, I aim to assemble imagined parts, glimpses of history, and snippets of different characters’ perceptions to achieve the essence of the Pine Barrens (today more properly and referred to as “NJ Pinelands”). I want to portray the Pine Barrens I know—historically and personally—as a place both natural and artificial, both dead and alive, both ugly and intensely, truthfully beautiful.
The stories in *The Garden of Open Mouths* speak mainly to southern, regional, and gothic American literary traditions. I draw influence from writers such as Eudora Welty, William Faulkner, Sarah Orne Jewett, Willa Cather, Carson McCullers, Richard Wright, and many others. Although southern New Jersey is not well represented in the canon of regional American literature, the Pine Barrens is a compelling setting for place-based fiction. On one hand, the area harbors distinct natural forms that make up an ecologically rare ecosystem, but on the other hand it resists the label of “wilderness” in that humans have tampered with and claimed the area at many different points in time.

In my own attempt at writing the region of southern New Jersey, I use form to weave together the elements of community and place; thus, *The Garden of Open Mouths*, like many of the regional works that inspired it, is a short story cycle linked primarily by place. In my mind, a successful short story cycle might mimic the workings of an ecosystem. In between the cities of Philadelphia and Atlantic City, the New Jersey Pine Barrens has specific boundaries, and these same boundaries inform the identity of many of my characters and their relation to one another. The attached “Story Map” will provide a visual of specific locations for the thirteen stories in my collection. The goal of a linked short story cycle is for each work to function independently, but take on a larger significance within a web of other stories. In my collection, all stories are connected by place, theme, trope, and texture. I separated *The Garden of Open Mouths* into three “parts” according to various patterns of theme and trope. The final story in each part is historically based and includes a time marker. The novella—also the title story—anchors the collection.

While regional writing is an obvious influence for my place-based work, the American gothic tradition also fascinates me as both a reader and a writer. My choice to integrate gothic elements
in my work stems partially from my interest in American gothic literature (especially such writers as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, and Flannery O’Connor), and partially from the essence of Pine Barrens folklore filled with legends, ghosts, and monster myths. In many instances, the folklore of a specific place says much about local perception of an environment over time. In particular, Pine Barrens folklore is tightly bound to the history of the Pine Barrens, which has left many “ghost towns” behind thanks to the feverishly changing industries—including glassmaking, iron-smelting, and paper-milling—that suddenly emerged and just as suddenly disappeared in the 1800s. The Pine Barrens have gone through several periods of rapid change, leaving behind scattered stories and ruins, and these shards of remembrance inspire my approach to regional gothic storytelling. In The Garden of Open Mouths, some stories draw from recorded folklore and some create new mythologies.

Despite my attraction to the gothic in these Pine Barrens stories, I am conscious of the problematic symbolic presence of “the wilderness,” a trope visible throughout American literature since the writings of Puritan settlers. Over time, the haunted wilderness has become another theme of gothic literature meant, again, to reflect the instability of the human mind. I am interested, however, in the opposite phenomenon: how the external world affects the internal worlds of my characters. I want to know what happens when a conflicted character settles in a place that complicates the internal landscape. For this reason, several protagonists in my stories are outsiders arriving in a new place or insiders leaving a familiar place, permanently transforming their conception of home. Several of my characters are young and find themselves having to build identities in response to their sense of place in the Pine Barrens. This impulse emerges directly from the gothic tradition, wherein “[t]he American forest appears as a maze-like mystery to which a young innocent is initiated” (White). Initiation and stranger-coming-to-town
stories—modes defined and detailed by Joseph Campbell—often explore identity and change, and can underscore the effect an environment may have on an unstable or uncertain mind.

As suggested by the title of my collection, *The Garden of Open Mouths*, I introduce a major trope of silence and speaking, and explore questions about what is said and left unsaid, as well as who has the power to speak and who or what does not. I understand this trope as a grotesque element that echoes certain memorable tropes in Southern literature, like Carson McCullers’ mutes in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. In my stories, however, human characters are not the only stakeholders capable of speaking or militant silence. The muteness of the pines, the world where my characters find themselves enveloped, embodies and reinforces the oppression, destruction, and exploitation of natural spaces. According to eco-critic Christopher Manes, “Nature is silent in our culture (and in literary societies generally) in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative” (15). Throughout my stories, I explore the terms and consequences of that silence. Some of my characters, like McCullers’ characters, are mute, but also some simply refuse to speak or find themselves unable to speak at pivotal moments. These conflicts come to a head in the collection’s eponymous novella.

In her famous essay, “Place in Fiction,” Eudora Welty maintains that a writer’s perception of the world is the most important factor in creating a work of fiction, so place must be a vital element in any case. All literature has the power to make people think, to reconsider the ways in which they interact with the world, and to cultivate a stronger environmental consciousness. In this regard, I hope my thesis justifies the time I have spent in Iowa State University’s MFA Program for Creative Writing and Environment.
The pines have many secrets and keep them all.

– Henry Charlton Beck, *Forgotten Towns of Southern New Jersey*

Real beauty is so deep you have to move into darkness to understand it.

– Barry Lopez, *About This Life*

All pineys learn to tell stories of the past.

PART I.

RUINS
THE BRIGHT LIGHTS OF HERMAN CITY

For a long time we lived in the Pine Barrens, down on the Mullica River between Batsto and Egg Harbor. The Mullica used to be the main waterway for all industry in the area, whether carting crates of small, spiny crabs from the Atlantic or bog iron to the city. Years after all those industries collapsed, our world continued to exist in relation to that river. This was before a wandering New Yorker bought out the Red Lion Diner, before a great fire in ’92 left behind a swash of char that stunk of arson.

We were a small family, made smaller by the fact that both of my parents worked constantly. My mother cleaned beach houses along the Jersey shore. My father kept a suburban shop, fixing cars. My brother, Trent, had just turned seventeen, all lank and long hair left over from an obsession with the sixties. I lagged nearly five years behind him in age, five years that felt more like twenty-five in experience. He tolerated me because I was his sister, and because I idolized him.

Trent and I called ourselves pineys when really we weren’t so different from those who lived in the fringe towns except that we grew up with the woods, alongside its legends. Trent told me stories. He said once that our family of pineys descended from the Lenape Indians, who lived in the area before anyone else. I never knew the truth of most of what he told me, but I chose to believe.

Sometime in May, before our final Mullica River Canoe Carnival, Trent promises teach me how to gut a fish. We follow the Mullica down to the old glassworks, just east around a tangled cat-tailed bend. Already, though, the sun is starting to fall. Trent is late coming from Spider’s...
house, and I can tell by how loose he moves and how sloppy he talks that he’s on something again.

“Dad will yell,” I say.

He jams his hands into his pockets. “He’s sore ‘cause he’s on the wagon.”

“Well I want to try it,” I say. “Take me next time.”

Trent pushes my hat forward over my eyes. “Stick to curveballs for now, Slick.”

Slick is my nickname—a variant of “sis” dressed in a lisp. One of Trent’s things is nicknaming. He plasters the world with his own words for whatever lives in it. I pout, but I don’t want to be a nag, so I say nothing.

At this point in time, Trent is at the top of his game. He wears faded jeans and a red plaid shirt that used to be our grandfather’s. His rusty blonde hair sticks to his neck with sappy sweat. Under the bill of his Wildwood Beach cap, his eyes shine gray as stone, the whites tinged red.

“I’ve been thinking about this year’s canoe float,” he says, probably trying to shift the conversation.

“Really? What’re you thinking?” I say. “What’s the plan?”

For the past few years, Trent and I have constructed a canoe float for the Mullica River Canoe Carnival every August. All different groups of people build things on canoes and guide them down the river in the dark. Really, the Canoe Carnival is meant as an end-of-summer celebration, an idea that grows stranger and stranger to me every year. I don’t think anyone should celebrate the end of a summer. The Canoe Carnival is just one way we participate in time passing, but at least our preparation for it gives us control. We’re responsible for bringing ourselves to that point.
Trent is always the one with the plans, which is perfect for me, because I can still be a part of big things just by tagging along. Already, our third year building a float feels like a momentous occasion. Usually Trent doesn’t think up an idea or start building until July, less than a couple of months before the big night.

“Shush,” he says. “You’ll scare the fish off. It’s a surprise.”

I clam up, hoping my silence will pay off. Soon we reach a single small line of bricks—once the top of a high wall, Trent says—the first sign that we’re almost there. Not much was left of the glassworks by the time we rediscovered it: a few brick walls hidden in vines, slag mounds covered over in dirt, the arch of the forge barely recognizable beneath its cap of roots.

When we get to the heart of the old glassworks, the brick lifts higher from the earth until it becomes a full archway, the largest remains of the forge. The water is right there, just to the other side of the brick arch by what used to be the wharf, according to Trent. At low tide the jagged crust of old shipwrecked sneakboxes and schooners peaks out from the mud. Today the tide is high, and the dark tea-color water rises almost to the edge of the brick.

“Can you tell me your idea now?” I ask.

“Patience,” Trent says.

Trent kicks the ground at a spot underneath two pines that lean across each other in an X. He lifts a lid of dirt, revealing a cache of his stuff. He takes out the container of night-crawlers and two cans of Bud. I shoot him a sloppy grin when he throws me a can, even though I secretly hate the taste of beer. These offerings are a rare thing, but at twelve I’ve gotten over being a kid, and being a girl. Trent must think I’m ready for this next step.

“Go slow with it,” he says. Then he finds our rods beneath a fallen log, ties new hooks to the ends, and lets me practice the right way to attach the worm on my rod.
When I finish, I find Trent playing with a shard of cloudy greenish glass. He holds it up, examines it. There is a lot of glass in the area, buried or hidden, leftover scrap from the nineteenth century glassworks. Trent has picked up the habit of collecting it.

“Here’s a good one, fresh from Herman City.”

He brushes a wedge of dirt from this new piece of glass and holds it out in the low-leaning sunlight. He twists it back and forth so it shines with a brightness carried from over a hundred years before.

In another hour the dying light forces us back home. My hands smell of worm and fish guts and my head feels heavy on my shoulders, but I haven’t forgotten about Trent’s promise to tell me his idea for the Canoe Carnival.

“I feel underwater,” I whisper to Trent as we approach the back door. He allowed me a second beer, and I haven’t been the same since choking it down in as few gulps as possible.

“Just be cool,” he says. “Lightweight.”

“Am not.”

Trent pushes through the back door. My mother stands behind the kitchen sink, scrubbing the soap scum from beneath her nails. Trent stands at attention and salutes her, something he’s done ever since I can remember.

“Reporting for duty,” he says.

His voice still slips a bit at the end. I don’t speak for fear of what I might sound like. I hide behind Trent and try to look distracted.

“At ease.” She turns away and grabs a pot from a cabinet above the stove. “Where’ve you two been?”
“Wapler’s,” Trent answers. “The great Herman City.”

She shakes her head. “You got to stop living in your ghost towns.”

“All that’s past is present, ma. Gotta run.”

Mom calls after us that dinner is almost ready, but we bound up the stairs and into Trent’s room. He throws off his hat, releasing a whiff of sweat. I steal a glance outside the window while he changes into a clean white shirt. Outside it is black and still and moonless. I can just barely make out the tip-tops of the ragged tree line.

“So, the float,” Trent says.

“We’ll make the greatest yet.” I jump onto Trent’s bed, and my head swirls in a boozy cloud.

“Wait—you know it don’t happen that way. We have to be realistic.”

“What is it, then?” I say. “Come on, tell me.”

Trent flops into his desk chair and twists back and forth in it. He reaches into his pocket, takes out the piece of glass and places it on his desk. He keeps a small collection of other glass pieces on his bookshelf. They are blue and green and brown, ranging from the size of my pinkie nail to the size of his fist.

“When they founded Wapler’s glassworks, it was meant to be this huge project,” he says, turning the piece of green glass in his palm. “They started with the furnace, right? But it was supposed to be more. They had plans.”

“Herman City,” I finish.

“Yeah, but this wasn’t like the other pine towns. We’re talking about the goddamned New York City of the Mullica River. A city made of glass.”

I stare at the ceiling where Trent has hung posters of Keith Richards and Bob Dylan and other old rock stars. I hold my hands in front of my face and move my eyes to pull Bob Dylan
and his guitar in and out of focus. Our first year in the Canoe Carnival, two Augusts ago, Trent dedicated our single canoe float to rock music, complete with papier-mâché statues of different guitars, strings made of fishing line. He played Dylan on his real guitar while we rode down the Mullica together.

Last year, Trent dedicated our float to Edison’s electrocuted elephant, Topsy. Originally, he wanted to include a statue of the elephant, plus two life-sized figures of Edison and Tesla dueling over her, but we ran out of time, so we dressed up as Edison and Tesla and pretended to duel around the elephant while paddling the canoe on either end. Trent even let me be Tesla, the good guy in the story.

“What’s Herman City have to do with the Canoe Carnival?” I ask.

“We’re gonna build it. The glassworks city,” he says. “That’s the idea. That’s our winning ticket.”

Already I can see us standing under the bright lights of Herman City with prize medals around our necks. Trent will lift me to his shoulders, and we will wave to the people lining the banks in the dark or crowding together on private docks along the river.

“All that’s present is past,” I say.

Trent laughs. “Something like that.”

“Well, it sure beats Topsy,” I say.

From downstairs comes the wooden bang of the front screen door shutting, followed by Dad’s dry voice calling Trent. I follow Trent down the stairs and crouch behind the banister. Dad grabs him behind the neck and looks him in the face.

“You get high today?” he asks, barely loud enough for me to hear.
Trent shakes his head. Dad inhales deeply through his nose, as if smelling for something, and Trent tenses. In the next moment he drops his hand from the back of Trent’s neck and turns to me. I try to make my stare less watery, but he does not suspect me. He unscrunches his eyes and announces that it’s time for dinner.

On the Saturday before Memorial Day, we are supposed to begin building our float. Trent chose the date, but early that morning he left for Spider’s house, and I haven’t seen him since. To pass the time, I fiddle around on top of the engineless hemi in the garage. Once in a while Dad will purchase some old car to fix in his free time, but he’s always running low on free time and the cars eventually settle atop the layers of sphagnum moss in our backyard. There they spend the rest of their lives waiting for him to return and salvage them. Usually the weeds get there first. Only the hemi—his favorite—has been saved from rain and snow and wind.

Finally Trent arrives with a knock on the side of the garage. He’s brought Spider along. Spider is another one of Trent’s nicknames, but I don’t remember what his real name is or why Trent calls him Spider in the first place. He doesn’t resemble a spider at all. He’s older than Trent, and taller, too, with lighter blonde hair and darker eyes. He wears jeans and tan construction boots and comes swaggering in with a handsaw slung over his shoulder. He dislikes me, I know, because he will always pretend I don’t exist.

I tell myself again that the only reason I feel a spike of hopeless longing in my chest whenever I see Spider is because I know he’s my brother’s best friend, and so I must feel something for him, too. Sometimes, I get the treacherous feeling that Trent loves Spider more than me, but I can’t blame him for that. When Spider is around, I spend a lot of time trying not to stare at him.
“Hey Slick.” Trent doesn’t look up at me, and he doesn’t apologize for being so late. Both Trent and Spider seem woozy. Their eyelids sag low at the corners like they’ve been up all night chasing devils through the woods. “Spider’s gonna help get us started.”

“You’re late again,” I say, pointing to the sun’s position in the sky. “What happened?”

“Don’t be like that.” He puts his hands on his hips and studies the canoe we stole from a nearby dock for the float. “I’m here. We got plenty of time.”

“Easy, kid,” Spider says.

“Hey, let her be,” Trent says, but the way he says it doesn’t make me feel at all like he’s trying to defend me. His voice is soft and playful, almost daring.

Trent squeezes behind the back of the hemi, pops the trunk from its latch, and pulls out a backpack—another one of his caches. Inside the backpack is a large roll of paper I’ve never seen before. He uncurls the large piece of paper and flattens it onto the back hood. Spider eases beside him and places his saw on the roof of the car.

I jump down from the hood and walk around to Trent’s other side, opposite Spider. Trent’s drawn up a diagram in blue pen, a series of scratchy vertical lines that clearly make out a set of skyscrapers and other kinds of buildings. Vague pine trees tangle around the structures.

“It’s all made of glass,” Trent says. “The whole city.”

“We’ll need two canoes,” Spider says before I can get words out. “It’s impossible.”

“So we’ll get another,” Trent says.

For the Canoe Carnival, people build floats using a single canoe, or sometimes two or three canoes. The two- and three- canoe floats usually take a big team and lots of money and plans. The last two years, our canoes have been singles topped with wooden platforms. I know we can do better than Bob Dylan and an electrocuted elephant, even though they seemed like good ideas
when Trent first explained them to me. On last year’s float, Topsy didn’t even look like an
elephant, more like a fat dog, and my Tesla mustache fell off halfway through the night. My head
lightens at the thought of pulling off a two-canoe float, with all the glass and lighting Trent
describes. I try to forget how difficult it is to construct even just a single canoe float. I tell myself
that with Spider’s help, maybe it will work.

“It’s not even June yet,” Trent says. He turns toward Spider. “We got all summer. All the
time we need, we got it.”

By the true start of summer, after school finally ends, I become a wood nymph. I wander
through the pines with wide eyes. The woods come to me like a strange measure of time, a
continuous cluster of minutes gone and not yet gone. Though I know the woods are not endless, I
can allow myself to be fooled. All around the old glassworks, mountain laurel blooms, brief and
pungent. In another week their palm-sized flowers will shut like a thousand fists.

At any point, as we drink Bud on the banks of Herman City and rehash the plan for our best
canoe float yet, Trent might put his arm around me and try to get me to picture the glassworks at
its height: This is 1850. We’re the last workers of Walper’s glassworks. Look at the forges glow.
Look at the ships dock along the wharf. And for a moment I can borrow light from the sun and
stoke them inside a glassworks most would say belongs to the past.

Mom fears I am turning wild. She ticks her tongue when I come to dinner with dirt on my
hands and makes me shower when I don’t need to. On weekdays, she’s been dragging me with
her to Cape May, Stone Harbor, or Avalon to clean sea-front mansions and second-home condos.
She used to bring me with her when I was younger, but I wanted to go back then. Looking into
the other worlds awed and confused me and made the universe seem big and unknowable, but
now I understand that the houses just belong to terrible, snotty rich people who don’t tip Mom enough. Another thing I learned from Trent.

One day, when Mom takes me to clean a huge house in Ocean City, I sneak out back and lay in the front yard, which is not made of moss or dirt, but gravelly pinkish stones. She finds me there, my clothes chalked up with salt dust from the pebbles, and pulls me by the wrist to the upstairs bathroom. She centers me in front of a gigantic mirror and makes me wash my hands, fusses over my hair.

“It’s just dust,” I say. “Dad’s hands are always greasy.”

“You need to find friends your age, Sarah. Girlfriends.”

“They hate me,” I say. “I hate them.”

I reach for the faucet. A gold seashell soap plate sits to the side of the marble sink. Mom throws me a towel from her bag. I swipe my hands on it and toss it on the counter.

“You have to learn to act like a normal girl.”

I walk past her, out the door, and toward the stairs. I want to ask if she feels normal when she mops the kitchen floors or wipes thin layers of dust from other people’s wall-sized TVs. I won’t understand until much later that she is only showing me a different life, the kind of life she thought she could never have, the kind of life she thought I might be able to find.

“I signed you up for the girl scouts,” she calls after me. I stop halfway down the curling marble staircase. “First meeting is tomorrow, and you’re going. End of discussion.”

I start down the stairs again, thinking of things I could break. There are so many. I could throw something at a window and watch it shatter into meaningless shards of glass. At the bottom of the stairs I reach for some crystal statue on a table by the enormous front doors, then stop with my hand stretched out. The statue reminds me of Trent’s sketches for Herman City,
with all its glass towers and elevators and tunnels, every detail engineered exactly. The grand scale of it all makes my head spin. Instead of yelling out to hear my echo in trough the house, I curl on the leather couch and try to ignore the thoughts I have—that it’s never going to happen, that we’ll never finish the float, not in a hundred more years.

This summer is the hottest in the state’s history. Mosquitoes emerge in armies. Their thousand bodies twitch along the filmy surfaces of marsh and bog. July days grow swampy and fill with heated bug-sound. At night, Dad’s angry voice crams on top of all the stillness gathered in the day. At the top of the stairs, I watch Trent and him lean at each other like dogs tied to their separate fences.

“You need to get it together,” Dad says.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Trent says.

“And don’t you think I don’t know what you’ve been up to with that boy.” Dad points a finger at Trent’s chest. “Oh, I know, buddy. I see you. I’m not talking about the drugs.”

“Fuck off,” Trent says. He smacks Dad’s finger away and Dad steps forward and grabs a fistful of Trent’s shirt.

“Don’t mouth at me, you goddamn pansy.”

“Stop it!” I yell from the top of the steps. “Stop!” I cover my ears as if it might make them quit arguing. I don’t want to hear any more of the fight. I don’t want to hear Dad say those things, and I don’t want to see Trent try to deny them.

Before the fight started, Mom went in her room and shut the door. I go that way, humming with my hands still over my ears. I walk into the room without knocking and find Mom reading a
book in bed. Her hair is starting to go white. I wonder when she got so old. She puts the book down to pull me into her chest. She says something, but I’m still humming, not hearing anything.

It’s hard to make progress on our canoe float with Trent always gone. He continues to sneak around, avoiding Dad, saluting Mom and generally acting charming enough to get away with small crimes and missed curfews. He has stopped inviting me along on his treks to the glassworks. Now and then I go alone and steal beer from Trent’s cache, drink and fish though I am truly no good at either. My days whittle down to basic tasks. I walk the woods alone collecting twigs and stones and glass pieces we could use for our float. I swim in the still, thick river. The water is so warm and heavy that if I stop moving, I worry the currentless weight of the water might pull me down.

Even though I’m not the one with the big ideas, I spend every day working on the canoe float. My plan is to at least get down the platform, so when Trent is ready to help, he can start the hard part—the real Herman City. I camp out in the garage behind Dad’s hemi, banging away uselessly with my hammer. The mess of nails and wood I’ve cobbled together so far amounts to nothing recognizable, but I refuse to give up. I still believe that Trent will snap out of his funk and stop planning long enough to help. I can see us working day and night just to finish in time, and I imagine the rush of relief we will feel when we finally get to ride down the Mullica on our glass city float. When I’m in the garage alone, I do more daydreaming than anything else. In some ways, I am no different from my brother.

If I run into Trent at all, it’s usually around dinner, because Mom has requested his presence at the table and because Dad sometimes doesn’t get home until late night, which means that Trent can eat in peace at least some of the time. The world feels steady when he’s there, at the
table, even if he’s hardly so reliable anymore. As long as he shows up to dinner, nothing can go wrong.

One night, Trent shows up to the table drenched in sweat. He tells Mom he went for a run and sneak upstairs as soon as he’s finished eating. I rush through some dishwashing and then go upstairs to Trent’s room. Luckily, he’s still there, scribbling in a notebook. I wait at the doorway for a moment, watching as he examines a drawing, tears out the sheet, and tosses the crumpled paper ball aside. A few of these paper balls line the corner of his room by the trashcan. Other sheets featuring blue or black scribbles have been tacked to the walls. A fan moves its caged head back and forth on the desk.

“What’re you drawing?” I ask, flopping on the unmade bed behind him.

“A draft tunnel.” His pen doesn’t stop. His foot taps and taps on the floor.

“Oh,” I say. “In Herman City?”

“It lets the flames get bigger and hotter,” he says.

“Are we building a draft tunnel on the float?”

“Dunno,” he says, foot tapping, pen scribbling. It makes me nervous just watching him.

“They’re forcing me to do girl scouts,” I tell him.

“Good for you,” he says.

“Bullshit.” I sit bolt upright on the bed. “Alright already with the drawing. I’m tired of planning. We need to build.”

Trent laughs. He drops his paper and pen and leans over me on the bed. He grabs my arm and twists until I whimper.

“Stop,” I say. “You’re scaring me.”
“You can’t just build,” he says, staring down at me. His pupils are wide enough to seem almost hollow, like two imperfect pearls of blown glass. “You don’t build anything.”

He lets me go and sits back down in his chair.

“But you said. It was you’re idea. I don’t get it.” I try to keep my voice even, but my throat is getting hot and tightening up.

“Calm down,” he says, picking up his pen and paper again.

“No,” I say. “No way.”

I grab his shoulder and shake, but he ignores me. I want to hug him, but instead I kick his chair and run out of the room.

The next day, I am about to leave the garage after another hour of solo work on the canoe float when I hear laughing and shushing. I peek around the hemi and see Trent and Spider coming across the yard together. Spider has Trent by the wrist. Trent shakes him free and pushes him, and they disappear between two mountain laurels toward the river trail. I place the hammer in the canoe and follow as quietly as possible, pretending I am a fox.

I’ve been wandering through the woods so often that I’ve become very good at sneaking. I follow far behind, because I know where they’re going. I keep my eyes on Trent’s white tank hatched through the pines. When they reach the landing, I veer off inland. I slide beneath a small brick archway, press against the sandy soil, and watch. I try to remember the last time we were together fishing as Trent pointed out different features of the disappeared town and the fabled city.
My brother sits on a small patch of brick by the old wharf, and Spider sits beside him. They are so close that their arms touch. Beyond their feet, the rusty shallows of the Mullica seem to boil in the open sun. I hold my breath and wait. The air in the tunnel is sour and heavy.

Spider fidgets with something in his pocket and takes out a little brown bottle with a bright white cap. His hand moves very fast around the cap but doesn’t seem to be doing anything.

“Finally,” Trent says. “I knew you were good for something.”

Spider pries the lid open, puts something in his mouth and tips his head back. Trent takes the bottle next. Whatever’s inside rattles as he shakes it over his palm raises his palm to his mouth. I wonder if Spider and Trent are sick, because I never see bottles like that unless the doctor gives them to me.

“Couldn’t sleep at all,” Trent says. “It’s been too long.”

“Little up, little down,” Spider says. “That’s how it works.”

“I’m cool,” Trent says. “I’m fine now.”

Trent and Spider turn and look at each other. Then Spider grabs the back of Trent’s neck and starts to kind of rub his thumb around. Trent closes his eyes. His mouth opens into a smile.

“You need to relax,” Spider says.

“You know what I need?” Trent says.

I’m still thinking about the way Spider’s hand is moving when Trent swings his head up suddenly and kisses Spider. It’s a long, deep kiss. Trent squeezes the little brown bottle in one hand and places his other hand in Spider’s lap. A pressure builds between my ears, like I’ve sunken very far underwater. Wet heat stings the corners of my eyes. All of my thoughts are too much—the brown bottle, the way Spider’s hands move, the long kiss, the grunts added now. I’m trapped there. I can’t run, because they’ll see me, but I can’t watch either. I press myself face
down into the dirt, palms jammed against my ears so I can only hear my blood and my breath. I make myself disappear beneath the draft tunnel. Where a whole town once vanished, so can I.

By the end of July, with less than a month left before the Canoe Carnival, all the hours I’ve spent in the garage still haven’t added up to much except a few nailed boards, a few pieces sawed and sanded. I manage to finish the platform my brother and I might stand on together, but it seems too rickety, never as sturdy as the platforms Trent has built in the past. I am inspecting one of the boards when my parents appear in the mouth of the garage, side by side.

“Where’s Trent?” my mother asks.

“Glassworks.” I point toward the trail I watched him disappear down a few minutes before. By now I’ve stopped trying to follow him. I don’t want to know what he’s up to. I don’t want to see. I just wait and hope he comes back.

“What’s he doing? Is he alone?” Dad asks. “Is that boy with him?”

“He’s probably just drawing.” I put down the hammer and drop my hands in my lap. Dad punches one curled fist into his pocket and hisses a curse.

“Calm down, Gene,” Mom says to Dad.

“You know what he’s doing there,” he says to Mom and stomps off toward the riverbank.

“It’s just pictures,” I say. “What’s the big damn deal?”

“Sarah, watch your mouth. I want you to answer when I ask you something, okay?” Mom touches the skin beside her ear and then quickly lets her hand fall. “Can you come inside?”

We enter the kitchen through the back door. The heat has moved into the house, and we have no choice but to let it stay. Inside we meet the sound of countless fans, all whirring and clicking and buzzing. Every window with a screen has been opened. We sit down at the kitchen table.
“Sarah, have you seen your brother doing anything strange? Have you seen him with drugs?”

“No,” I say as I play with the saltshaker on the kitchen table.

“Sarah,” Mom presses. She must know I am lying.

“He’s not helping with the canoe,” I say. “He plans, that’s all. He says we can’t build it.”

“Have you seen him with Spider?”

“Sometimes. No. Why?”

“Well, which is it?” She rubs one of her temples, and keeps her other hand fisted on the table.

“We don’t want Trent around him anymore.”

“He’s okay,” I find myself saying, even though I hate Spider in a lot of ways. I hate him for making Dad so angry. I hate him for making me feel shaky. Most of all I hate him for what I’ve seen him do with Trent. Still, sticking up for Trent means I have to stick up for Spider, too. It’s a decision I’ll regret later on, but I’m only trying to do the right thing. I won’t tattle. I tip the saltshaker so a tiny mound of salt leaks out

“Watch out for your brother, alright?”

I nod, thinking he should be the one to look out for me. I know I will not return to the garage or to the flimsy platform of the canoe float. I only want to leave the kitchen and go up to my room where it will be hotter but empty of questions. Later on, Dad will return to the house with Trent, but there will not be any blow-up or argument. The silence will become so thick not even the heat will try to rival it.

Upstairs, I try to avoid looking into Trent’s room. His walls have been tacked over with drawing after drawing of the great Herman City—everything from bird’s-eye views to panoramas to diagrams of workers’ apartments and tourists’ hotels. All of the drawings confuse
me, make me feel a little crazy. I wonder how Trent feels, stuck inside the head that saw all of it in the first place, but never did anything with it.

With Trent always gone and the Pines blistering with heat and taken over by bitter, biting bugs, I can’t find a good excuse to avoid Girl Scout meetings. It is with these other strange girls, who know nothing about Trent’s vision of Herman City, that I finally help finish a float, full of foam board and papier-mâché, dedicated to Smokey the Bear. We even have a few carpenters helping us with the hard parts. It’s a two-canoe float, bigger than anything Trent and I ever managed to build.

My troop leader, Mrs. Mary, decides that a lit banner over Smokey’s head will spell out, 
*Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires!* I don’t tell anyone that Smokey’s wrong, that a fire in some pine forests is sometimes a good thing.

The evening of the Canoe Carnival arrives on time despite the slow, bogged-down days. Just before dusk, troop 154 is busy hanging the last paper chain-linked garlands from Smokey’s ears. Only three girls are allowed to ride on the float, and I am not one of them. My job is to hand out bottles of water and fresh lemonade to the crowds along the river’s edge on the Egg Harbor side. There, the procession ends and the floats dock and anchor to await the awards ceremony.

Because I’m too busy doing my duty as a Girl Scout of America, handing lemonade out to old men and sweaty kids, I miss a lot of the procession. Now and then another canoe passes the checkpoint where a man in khakis announces its name and maker. A sticky applause rains through the air. Five boys Trent’s age play guitars near the awards dock. The sun disappears, and the lights from river take over.

My parents show up together, and I serve them lemonade in pink plastic cups.
“There’s my girl,” Dad says. He takes a cup and pats my head.

“I’m not a dog, Dad.” I squirm away, but the smile seems stuck to my face.

“That float is really something else, Sarah. I think it has a chance,” Mom says.

“Where’s Trent?” I ask.

Dad’s lips turn down. Even in the dark, I can see his knuckles tense a bit around the red plastic cup of lemonade.

“He didn’t come home for dinner,” Mom says. “Have you seen him?”

“He was asleep when Mrs. Mary picked me up,” I say.

Dad examines a cut on his left hand and nods. Mom holds a crease above her eyes. She sips at her lemonade and looks around over the rim of her raised cup.

By now most of the canoes have docked in the small harbor and around the bank. People wander from one float to the next, asking questions of the builders and laughing or telling stories. The Girl Scouts rally around Smokey at the bank. My parents disappear into the crowd, and I rejoin the troop for the awards ceremony. While we sit and wait, the girls around me wave glow sticks. Mine sits unopened in my lap.

The wrinkled reflections of a thousand colored lights scatter on the surface of the Mullica. String lights and bulbs line the decorated canoes, onlookers hold lanterns, and along the bank, lightning bugs blink back and forth. I try to pick out a single bug and follow it, but it’s too difficult. Each bug arrives in one place at one moment, only to turn up somewhere else a second later, without pattern. Just down the river, I spot the bend where Herman City would tower up over the pines if the settlers had not left, if the glassworks had not fallen to rubble—a ghost light to drown out the rest.
A whisper spreads over the crowd. At first I think that they are getting ready to announce the awards, but then I realize that the crowd isn’t whispering. It is the wind, pulling through the treetops in a furry hushing sound. This breeze drops in and seems to steal some of the talk away, little by little, as it courses over the river.

My eyes sweep over the river, and I see the reason for the crowd’s unsettled quiet, their uneasy shift. Down the river, just past the reach of thousands of softly blurred lights, floats what looks like an overturned canoe. A few people near to it crane their necks and point. Others catch on and begin to do the same. By the bank, a few people rush at the water. One person jumps in and swims toward the object in the river. Someone screams.

The girls around me turn from one to another and repeat themselves: What’s happening? What’s going on? Some just open their mouths like dumb fish. I stand up, step over the huddle of girls and press through the crowd. Though there are many lights, I am bowled over by the dark as soon as I leave the troop’s circle of glow sticks. It’s a darkness I won’t forget, so fierce and calculating it must be almost animal. By the time I reach the spot on the bank where the men have jumped in after the thing in the river, more screams have begun to leap out of the night. The air takes on a smell like rust, kicked up from the bottom where shipwrecks sleep.

I cannot see who it is lying face-up on the bank, drenched and encircled by bodies, arms and legs. I wait for my eyes to adjust. It takes a long time for me to know. I watch someone press on the chest of a person pulled from the river. I watch someone else hold up his wrist and check his pulse. His feet hang in the shallow water. Just as I am wondering why they have not bothered to drag the body all the way onto dry land, my eyes find Trent’s pale face, the features bloated by the water, his light hair darkened by wetness. His gray eyes remain open, watching the world.
Four months after Trent’s accident, my mother and father moved us out of the Pines, far from the Mullica River and into the suburbs where my father kept his garage. We got out just before the Christmas following the final Canoe Carnival. My parents hung no lights and chopped down no tree that year. They sold our house in a hurry, couldn’t get much for it because of its place in the Pine Barrens, which still seemed to many like a worthless area to live, too prone to random fires and too far from the reality of shopping malls and bright city lights. Our new place was a duplex crammed right onto the edge of a highway leading west to Philadelphia. The air tinged with a scent of wet trash. The strings of strip-malls and backed up traffic made me wonder what life I’d come from and where I could go.

Not long after the move, my mother offered in a sickening, cloying tone to explain what had happened to my older brother. There had been some kind of investigation, but I never wanted to be a part of it. I wouldn’t talk to anyone, not the cops or my parents. No one found out what I knew about Trent and Spider, the thing I could never forgive myself for seeing. When I told my mother I didn’t want to know what really happened, she went hysterical, marched to the kitchen cupboard and shattered every dinner plate against the floor until my father could stop her from reaching for the glasses. She didn’t understand when I told her that only the truth could ever really die.

Today, the Pines are just the way we left them, a foreign world twenty minutes east. I thought many times of contacting Spider. I heard that he works in carpentry somewhere down by Bass River, that he’d gotten himself clean but not sober. My parents still won’t speak his name. I decided I didn’t need to see Spider again, but once in awhile I’ll visit Herman City. It’s listed on most state maps, though only ruins remain. I never search for evidence. The things I don’t know
are most precious to me, most vital. They make up the pieces of a legend I am building in my brother’s name.
WHAT THE WIND LEFT BEHIND

The night of the storm, Mary Leek listened to the wind tear and sigh around the old house. The low howling reminded her of the sea. Her husband had been a shipbuilder and a sailor, and she found herself remembering one of the storms they’d faced together—a sudden squall on the Atlantic. She could almost feel the bedroom rocking as if over waves, the walls creaking like an empty hull. Sleep had just started to wash in when a crack shuddered the walls and jolted Mary Leek back to the house. She clicked on the bedside lamp. Her heart hammered as she sat up in bed and strained her ears. The wind stopped as if someone shut a heavy door on it. She clicked the light off again, wondering if the crash had been a part of her dream.

The next morning Mary Leek woke in fresh silence, not a gull nearby to break it. She tested her feet on the carpet, eased out the ache in her knees. She got dressed and shuffled to the kitchen for her morning coffee only to discover a pine tree had fallen onto the roof. She knew exactly where it used to stand in the yard. At its new position, it wedged on the eave above the kitchen. The ceiling sagged, and part of its trunk fed through the broken window beneath. Water dripped from a wide tooth of broken glass. What could she do with a thing like that?

She decided to ignore the tree for moment, careful to avoid shattered glass on her way to the sink. She pressed a button on the coffee pot, but it would not turn on. Her heart began to skip at the absence of the tiny light. She turned from the pot and examined the fallen pine tree again, realizing for the first time that maybe they could not live together, that one of them would have to go. Mary had played that game her whole life—you first or me—but she’d been awarded only loneliness, as she watched each friend and then her husband pass on without her. She did not even have a single son to help take away the tree.
Mary Leek slid her feet into her shoes and left the house through the back door. Two deer wrinkled the magnolia bushes at yard’s edge. Another long pine had fallen straight to the ground, twig and debris scattered to either side. She shuffled around each stray limb and trunk on her way to the garage, where she found her husband’s truck. She had to eke sideways against the cobwebbed garage wall to the driver’s side. Just before her husband’s sickness, the front window had been shattered by a rock flung from the road. It was as if the pneumonia that killed him entered through that open space. Mary Leek tried to repair the window by taping up a bed sheet but it kept falling off, the duct tape ripped free and frayed in layers.

She lifted herself into the truck and cranked the engine. She had not left the town of Washington for a long time. On the paved road, gray puddles shone like bits of mirror. She slowed and turned around potholes she recognized and fallen trees she did not. The wet September air buffeted through the broken window. Another newer and larger truck came speeding from the opposite direction. A woman swung her arm out of the window like a single featherless wing.

Mary Leek had once dreamed of running away to join the circus, to greet lions with a smile and be swung from hand to hand high over a hush of ooh-and-ahh, the blurred sea of open mouths below. The day she met her husband in the shipyard, all those dreams diverted into safe harbors. Leek—she liked to joke—what a name to build ships by. She moved to his home among the pines so they could start a family, before she realized that nothing would take. It was no one’s fault, they had told each other. Why should she have felt betrayed? In place of a family, her husband had tried to give her an approximate joy. He built a sailboat for her and chartered a hundred voyages in pursuit of a stolen paradise. Life’s greatest ambition—he assured her—was to find a quiet place close to the sea where no one but the wind could come knocking.
He might’ve given her everything, but since his passing, the tide pulled away and left her marooned. She wanted to believe that her husband deserved some resentment, now that he had gone. Mary Leek had come to see her life as a carefully constructed omission. She thought she knew the shipbuilder responsible for such a design.

When she reached the suburbs, Mary Leek drifted very slowly along back roads, cutting through neighborhoods when she could. The tattered treetops marked a trail left by bouncing wind. Some trees had snapped clean in half, some were trimmed shorter, some left untouched but alert. It must have been a sad wind, she thought, weakened by mountain and forest. It had come a long way.

On each street, chainsaws revved and grated, and shouts of men and machinery filtered through the broken window. Men wearing hardhats cut wires, chopped at torn stumps, and fed debris into chippers. She searched for someone she might ask about her fallen pine, but everyone she came across seemed too busy to help.

For those not working to clear the aftermath, the storm’s retreat seemed like cause for a holiday. People chatted in groups on neighborhood corners. A young girl wearing a bikini sunbathed on a lawn scattered with branches and one fallen tree. Children moved in tribes across the street carrying water guns.

In one yard, an enormous, nearly limbless oak leaned at odds with the ground, its knotted stump propped up on an angle like a fallen buttress for the sky. Mary Leek exhausted herself just watching the oak pass as the truck crept along. She turned around, parked on the street across from the fallen oak, and shut off the engine. Suspended from the tree, a worker wielded his chainsaw from a sling. The saw whined when it met wood. Burnt bark singed the air. She could
not stop watching as, chunk by chunk, the worker took apart the tree. His face shone dark and golden as wet wheat. His hands seemed large enough to hold her up in the air with him.

Heat pulsed behind her eyes. Mary Leek leaned over so she could have a better view of the man in the sling and let herself think of the circus again. What would it have been, to lead the life of a trapeze artist or a funambulist? Clacking across the country by train amidst barking of dogs and growling of tigers, the haze of cigar smoke and the wowing of children at the cages of beasts? She’d be promised a parrot to tame and many wild men to scorn. They would have to be handsome men, like the one in the tree. In her next life, she would not settle.

She lay across the cab of the truck and reached one arm out of the passenger’s window. She twirled her hand into the wet air and watched the man above. They could raise a tent over the town, prop it up right over the fallen oak. Choose beasts from the woods to tame. Let the show begin.

Mary Leek saw the man in the tree tilted his chin toward the truck. He halted his chainsaw and called down to someone in the yard. Then, the man began to lower himself out of her vision. She clawed at the seat, ignoring the pain in her back to bring herself to an upright position, and when she looked out of the window again, the man was walking toward her. She wondered if he had family, or if he’d left them behind. He seemed to be at that age.

“Ma’am?” he said.

She pushed the passenger’s door open and swung her feet out of the truck. She slid off the seat and let her shoes touch the ground. He’d stopped a few paces away. She would tell him about the tree in her dining room. She wanted him to be the one to help.

“Ma’am, you can’t park there,” he said.
She took another step forward and felt her knee give out as her foot came down on chunk of something in the road. A piece of log, she thought, Silly of me not to look. But she was already flying forward, leaving her heart two beats behind, her torso twisting. She would hit the ground and shatter and the restlessness would exit her body. Mary Leek understood this, the fate of a trapeze artist. The best of them always fell alone.

But at the last moment, the man sprung forward, his hands outstretched like massive wings. He had her under the arms—knew enough not to stop her fall cold with a jolt, but to let her momentum pull them together a few more feet to the ground. They sunk like two stunt dancers committing to a final dramatic pose. She closed her eyes and let an imagined applause wash over her like a new tide.
I was seven years old when my grandfather took me to the shore for the first time to see Lucy. We drove in his boat of a car. I can remember running my hands over a layer of fine sand sunk between the seat cushions. It was July, and the rest of my family stayed home working the blueberry fields to prepare for another August harvest. I felt happy to be taking a trip with my grandfather. It did not matter that I knew no one called Lucy. After we had been driving for a while, after the pines took over on either side of the old road to the shore and there could be no chance of turning around, I finally asked my grandfather, who was this Lucy?

“Lucy is an elephant,” my grandfather replied. “You will like to see her.”

I had no idea there were elephants in New Jersey, but I did not question my grandfather. He was a great man, many people said. Even my father agreed with him often, let him always say grace before supper.

“Are elephants from Italy, too?” I asked.

“Elephants wander the earth like spirits,” he said, shaking his head. “They are not of anywhere.”

My grandfather was always talking about spirits. This I understood, at first, as the knowledge of very old people. Looking from my grandfather to the world speeding by outside, my eyes settled on the cluster of objects and charms hanging from the rearview mirror. One of the objects appeared to be a tiny replica of a single elephant tusk.

Mine has always been a family of charms and relics. We glitter ourselves with symbols and beads and cards and scatter our homes with dried palm reeds and statues of the Blessed Mother. My father always wore enough chains around his neck to make a sound like chimes with every
move. Sometimes I think his chains spoke more than he did. He would announce himself with that sound. I eventually learned the power of spirits and the relics used to coax angels or keep evil away, or to speak when words would not be enough.

After we passed under the wagging heads of pine and the road flattened, treeless, I spotted her at last. It seemed like I could see Lucy the elephant from very far away, long before we pulled into the small parking lot at her feet. She was dressed in red and gold toggles, and on her back sat a kind of carriage draped in regal curtains. At the entrance, my grandfather turned some coins into the palm of a smiling man dressed in stripes. My neck began to ache from looking up for so long.

When we got close enough to see the nails and chipping paint, I could not be disappointed that Lucy was a wooden elephant. She loomed over me—the biggest, strangest thing I had ever seen in my life. When I learned I could walk inside of Lucy and appear in the carriage at the top of her back, she amazed me even more. But it was what I would learn on the back of that famous elephant that really changed me. I still hadn’t been through my first communion at that time. Before climbing those steps, there was much I did not know about luck and evil and God.

To this day, Lucy—nine stories tall and hollow—stands on the coastline looking out over the sea. Most things are not so stubborn or permanent. My grandfather passed on before he could take my sons to see the elephant, so the burden fell on my shoulders. I obsessed over the best time to take them. It felt like a momentous occasion. I could not decide, so like the best of my ancestors I came to rely on an anniversary, a sturdy number, an increment of neat timing.

I was seven when I first saw Lucy. I took Luca and Tony to see her exactly seven years after my grandfather’s death. Even then, I feared that I waited too long. They are impatient boys. They
always beg me to take them to the piers in Wildwood or to mini-golf in Ocean City—the kinds of places where their father would take them. They do not understand tradition.

That morning, I made the boys a big breakfast and chatted about my first visit to Lucy. I perhaps should not have talked so much, but at one point Luca perked up from his eggs with this look of wonder, fork hanging from the side of his mouth, and I let myself be carried away. I rushed them into the car without even washing the plates.

We could not see Lucy from far off, like I could when I was young, because many buildings had sprouted up around her. I pointed her out as soon as we turned into the parking lot.

“See?” I said. “Isn’t she great?”

“That’s it?” Tony said.

“What do you say, Luca?”

I looked for the excitement on Luca’s face, but he only sighed. I chose a parking spot, and at first both Luca and Tony refused to get out of the car. Finally, they opened the back doors with exaggerated sighs. They yawned while I paid the teenaged ticketer twenty-four dollars for three admissions and moaned the whole way through Lucy’s hollow gut, up the old iron spiral staircase. We finally reached the tent on her back, the royal hump offered like a throne for over one hundred years to people hungry for that view.

“Your grandfather came here when he was younger,” I said. I pointed to one of the plaques posted around the room. “It says here she was struck by lightning seven times! You see?”

Luca threw his shaggy blonde head in the direction of the sea and then tilted his chin back to ask if it was time to leave. Tony slid his phone out of his pocket and started moving his thumbs around the screen.
Already I knew that this was it, my last chance began to fade and peel around me. They had made the choice before we even left the house. They would not allow themselves to see. I decided not to scold them. Instead I watched the world from atop the glittering red and gold carriage on Lucy’s back and remembered my first view from the same spot, that day when my grandfather took me on my first strange trip to the elephant with a woman’s name.

On that day, my grandfather had picked me up easily and placed me on his shoulders and together we looked out at the sea breaking up along the coast south of Atlantic City.

“Lucy has been here longer even than me,” my grandfather had said.

“That is a very long time,” I said.

“Can you think what all the sailors did, when they found an elephant waiting for them?”

“Did she keep them safe,” I asked, “watching out for them?” I tried to look for ships on the horizon, carrying people from all over the world. I made myself think about how far that span of water really stretched.

“Yes, I think so,” he said.

I thought back to the strange tusk hanging from the rearview mirror in my grandfather’s car, and at once I thought I understood what it meant.

“Is that why you have a tusk?” I asked.

“A tusk?”

“In your car. The horn. Is it Lucy’s tusk?”

My grandfather laughed and shook his head. “That is il corno,” he said, “a different kind of tusk. It keeps away malocchio.”
He swung me down from his shoulders, placed me on the ground, and knelt before me. He adjusted the cap on his head, reached into his shirt, and drew out one of his many chains. On the chain hung another tusk like the one in the car.

“There is much that will try to destroy you as you grow up,” he said, suddenly serious, “so you must always be on guard. Never let bad luck look right at you, nipotina.”

Then he made the sign of the horn by punching down his two middle fingers and thumb and gaffing the air with his pinky and pointer fingers. I had never paid attention to how often my grandfather made this sign, but at once I knew I had seen it before. In fact, he had used it very often for as long as I could remember. Other members of my family—my mother, my father—sometimes made this same gesture, too.

The sky seemed to darken, but it did not rain. Very soon after that my grandfather led me back to the car, and I watched il corno shake at every bump as we drove home through the stretch of pine. On my first day with Lucy the Elephant, I became aware of malocchio following me close behind, a thunder cloud that had run many years and across an entire ocean, just to catch up to me.

Luca had been pulling on my arm while I gazed out at the Atlantic. I could find no ships or freighters, only a few wave-runners and speedboats. The shoreline had shrunken in the distance, crowded out by more and taller buildings eating up the view.

“Can we go now?” Luca kept saying. “Can we go?”

“A minute,” I told him.

I cannot say that I’d hoped my sons would understand the same thing on their first visit with Lucy. I am no longer a superstitious person. I have had time to test my family’s theories. I want to believe that we make our own destiny, as we choose the ground we plow and the seeds we
plant. If I really think about it, belief of my family’s sort strikes me as a sad thing, much sadder than visiting a great elephant only to find it is made of wood and nails.

I walked around the room again, taking my time. Luca kept pulling on my arm, but I would not leave until I had read every one of the plaques again. A few tourists wandered up, paced in a tight circle, and went back down. Finally, I headed for the iron spiral staircase, where Tony had been hanging on the rail. In the Lucy gift shop—a new installment—I bought a small, overpriced plush elephant for myself and slipped it into my purse.

I drove toward home along the same road my grandfather had taken me down the first time I saw Lucy, though there are many lights that way now, and the traffic is always slow. I liked to go that way each time, rather than take the newer expressway. There is something crude about an expressway, about speeding back and forth between cities without understanding how much lies in between.

“You’re going the wrong way,” Tony said. “Dad never goes this way.”

“Can we get ice cream?” Luca asked. “I’m hot.”

“Maybe,” I said.

The two of them protested from the backseat until I stopped at one of the many ice cream stores along the road. I ordered them two ice cream cones and nothing for myself. We sat on a bench near the road to eat. Tony shoved half of the cone into his mouth, ringing his face with chocolate ice cream. Luca looked at his older brother, and I saw in his eyes the glint of a decision to be made. Not a second later, he burst into laughter and did the same, smearing the ice cream even more around his face. What was that twisting feeling that choked me, moved up from my gut to grip around my heart? I would like to forget it.
My plan had not been to stop at my mother’s house, but I wanted to redeem myself in the eyes of my boys. I thought that letting them run through the blueberry fields for a while would be fun for them. I had long since moved out of Hammonton, where my parents stayed even after my grandparents passed on. Something kept me nearby, though, in the woods close to the old cranberry cooperative, which has since been overtaken by a single corporation.

I have never kept il corno on a chain in my car, not for safety or even the illusion of safety. Even so, I know a part of me cannot escape a history mired in these dealings with luck. It was malocchio, after all, that drove my grandparents to this country in the first place with a string of bad growing seasons. My grandparents had kept olive orchards in Calabria and planned to do the same in Jersey, but they learned quickly from other farmers how the tongue of a strange land favors different tastes. It was not long before they heard of different fruit that took to the land better than the ones they knew.

Imagine the amazement of my grandparents when they discovered they could grow the blueberry and its sister, the cranberry. In Italian, there is no true word for cranberry. A cranberry is simply a red blueberry, un mirtillo rosso. These were fruits my grandparents did not know how to cultivate, but their neighbors helped them begin. By the time I arrived at the door of the world they had a thriving field of blueberry bushes and a small share in a cranberry cooperative in the Pine Barrens, just north of Hammonton. My grandparents must have found themselves in a great harbor of good luck. Despite the endless sorrow of leaving Italy, they had to be thankful for a sturdy turn of events.

After my first visit with Lucy, I spent much more time in the fields with my parents and in the pine forest surrounding the bogs on weekends. I thought I could hide from the bad spirits, run like my family had run from one country to the next. I slunk low in the bushes all day until night
showed itself at the ledge of the sky. One of the pendants my father wore around his neck held
the emblem of St. Anthony, and he would clutch the chain in his fist and mutter over the fields a
prayer for me, his only daughter who seemed to always be lost.

This is what it comes to.

Eventually I left the fields and met Tom, the first man I’d ever love. He is not an Italian man.
My grandfather punched the sign of il corno to the air when I announced that we were getting
married. Though he meant to protect me, the gesture looked like a curse, a motion he might have
used instead of a bad word. He had become very old then, but not frail or slow, only more
careful. I do not blame bad spirits for my divorce, but I know if my grandfather were still alive
he would have reminded me that no one escapes malocchio, whether or not they believe.

As I pulled into my parents’ driveway I spotted my father, shirtless, shifting around in the
backyard. My parents’ blueberry fields had shrunk from what they used to be. Most of their
ground had been sold in pieces to build more homes, plus a small park a block down the road. I
had forgotten, too, that at that time of the year the bushes would not be fruiting, would not offer
any reward but the sore bliss of work.

Luca and Tony dragged their feet to the porch. My mother appeared at the door before they
could let themselves in. She squeezed one and then the other and left faint traces of pink lipstick
on their cheeks and foreheads. They looked at one another and snickered, wiped the lipstick off.
Soon after they removed their shoes, Tony took out his phone again and Luca did the same.

I told Tom many times that they were too young to have cell phones, but it never really
became a true discussion. Tom did not want his kids to be left out among their friends, who
apparently had cell phones and whatever other technologies they kept like high-priced pendants to ward off the many natural truths of the world.

“Lorena,” my mother said. She took my face into her hands and looked up into my eyes like she could read them. “Come stai?”

“Fine,” I said. “We went to see Lucy.”

“You miss your grandfather.” She muttered a short prayer and put her hand over her chest.

“They don’t get it,” I said, motioning to the boys who had thrown themselves on the couch and flicked on the small television. “Luca, feet off the table.”

“Do you want some lunch?” she asked.

“Hot dogs,” Tony said, his eyes still on the phone in his hands.

“Anthony,” I said. “Don’t be rude.”

“Please?” he added.

“Me too, Granma,” Luca said.

“I have no hot dogs, but I can make you something,” my mother said.

“They won’t eat it,” I said. “It’s okay. I’ll run out for hot dogs.”

“Yeah,” Tony said. “Hot dogs.”

“I heard you, Anthony.”

I walked over to the kitchen and took a glass from the cupboard beside the sink and filled it with tap water. My mother entered the kitchen behind me as I drank. On the windowsill over the sink stood a little statue of the Blessed Mother, one of many scattered throughout the house. Propped against the base leaned a prayer card with my grandfather’s picture on one side. I recognized it from the wake. The prayer card from my grandmother’s earlier wake leaned against
the other side of the statue. A black beaded rosary snaked around the two images, linking them with the Blessed Mother.

“A shame they don’t look like our side,” my mother said, following my eyes to the prayer cards. “Luca would be so handsome with babbo’s nose.”

“Or hair, or skin. So you tell me.” I finished off the rest of the glass in one gulp. “Daddy’s working? Luca and Tony can help while I’m gone.”

“He’s just tampering with nothing,” she said. “This is not the same farm it once was. I tell him that.”

“Still. The boys need it. They need something,” I said.

“The market is today,” she said. “Say hi to your father before you go. The boys can stay.”

She meant the Italian market, open on Wednesdays and Thursdays in town. There would be no hot dogs there. I asked if she needed anything, but my mother waved me off and set a pot on the stovetop. As I left the kitchen I heard the click-click-click of one of the burners, and I knew she would cook a separate lunch, more suitable in her mind than hot dogs. She would make the boys choose. She did not understand how easily they would turn her down.

I checked in on Luca and Tony, who still had their phones out, before exiting through the back door to where my father worked with the blueberries. He bent over a row of bushes in the small field. I could hear the chiming noise all of his chains made clinking against one another where they fell from his chest. One day he would pass those same chains and emblems to Tony and Luca.

My father had never been like my grandfather. He was a quieter man—less expressive, more solemn. I thought my boys feared him a little, as I had when I was a girl. It had been my father’s
intensity that once drove me from him to my grandfather, whose gentleness and quick smile felt easier to rely on when I was young.

I came up behind my father and touched him lightly on the back, at the spine. He turned his head, smiled at me with his eyes, and stood to face me. This is how crucial fear can be: I might not have grown up with the same appreciation of my father if I had not feared him a bit. It was as important as the kindness that drew me to my grandfather.

“The boys are here,” I said. “I’m headed to the market.”

He nodded, bent over and crumbled the sandy soil between his fingers. “Dry this year.”

“As usual. Do you miss the bogs?”

He moved past me to where his plaid shirt lay crumpled on the ground. He bent to pick it up, draped it around his shoulders, and slid his arms through. His hands began working the buttons. They moved quickly, almost fluttered, but seemed unable to do the job. I stepped forward to help him. He batted my hand away.

I pulled back, but I did not feel good about it. He did not normally move that way, with such a shake.

“The boys wanted to help you,” I said.

“No. I will come with you,” he said. He had finally finished with several necessary buttons and seemed to be satisfied with the few left open at the top.

We walked around the house and toward my car, but my father waved at the keys in my hand like he was displeased. He seemed to be moving well on his feet, so I shouldered my purse and followed him down the drive to the road that would take us into town, to the market.

We walked mostly in silence, because I knew my father well enough to understand that silence could become another way of speaking. My grandfather had been the one with the
stories, and my father for a long time balanced him out with his constant pause. They were a good pair. It would have been easy for a stranger to mistake them for father and son, though they were so different.

At the edge of the sidewalk, a series of maple trees twisted over our heads. Hammonton was a sandy plains area, almost an extension of the shore, not far from the place where Lucy watched the space across the Atlantic. The trees here had been evenly placed, but a little farther north, where I lived, they crowded close and scattered every yard.

We were approaching the market, tables and booths lining each side of the street behind a blockade. The air smelled of garlic and gasoline. I reached into my purse and pulled out the small, plush elephant from the gift shop and held it out to my father. To my surprise, he took the toy from my hand and weighed it in his own.

“You are a tourist,” he said.

I recognized he was only being playful, though he did not smile.

“So grandfather was a tourist, too?” I said.

“He had his travels.” He squeezed the elephant in his fist and pounded his chest once over his heart. This was something my father did when speaking of the dead.

We had entered the market by then, and we walked down the center of the street, flanked on both sides by booths and flags of Italy and Sicily and signs advertising nuts and fruits and spices.

“We need hot dogs,” I said.

My father nodded. He did not swivel his head at the booths around him. He was looking again at the toy in his hand.

“I love Lucy,” I said. I stroked one of the plush elephant’s trunks. “Luca and Tony don’t understand. I wish I could make them.”
“You bring it on yourself,” he said, serious this time.

He did not make the sign, did not punch the air with two fingers up. He held one hand at his side and the other in front of him with the toy. He meant to chide me for turning my back on my family and creating something else, a new family that seemed almost foreign. Our lives had become a fault of my own, a done deed. Luck of whatever kind would not choose to chase me any longer, so he would not ward it away.

“You’re shaking,” I said, and he was. The short trip had worn him out like I’d feared. His fingers loosened with the shake and he dropped the small plush Lucy onto the ground. We stared down at it.

“Sto ben’,” he said, “I’m fine.”

But in three years he would be unable to walk at all. In six he would not be able to eat solid food. I would watch him waste away slowly, battered like a dune in the wind.

We had stopped in the center of the market. I spotted a woman sitting behind a booth, a woman I’d never seen before at the market although she seemed very familiar to me. She wore a red and gold scarf that could not hold back all of her long, silvery hair. I left my father and walked toward her. Something had come over me. I did not notice the unmistakable hump on her back until I was close enough to see the labels on the jars of fruit preserves lined up on the table before her. She smiled up at me but said nothing.

I knew the legends well, about the luck that could be brought from touching the raised hump of una gobba. I dropped my money on the table, enough for seven small jars. I could barely fit all of the jars into my purse, which sagged from my elbow with the weight. I let myself stare at the strange, beautiful woman and thanked her before finally turning away, but I never asked to touch the rounded peak of her back.
When we first arrived in the Pine Barrens, he was just another part of the forest, something unknowable that had been there for as long as a bull pine or salt bog. He drew the town’s first wells, and since we didn’t know his given name, we called him the Water Seeker.

We had been told the Pines could be worked for profit in paper or glass, so we continued east to find the thing that had eluded us. After leaving Philadelphia, though, we didn’t know what to do or where to start. The first of us showed up at a cabin off of the Mullica River with our wagons and mules. At that time, we were curious about the secrets of someone who could survive willfully in those woods. We needed advice. Some were still afraid to drink the water, which had red and rusty hue when cupped inside two hands. We told the old man who lived in the cabin that we were tired, lonely people looking for a place to make our home in the wilderness, a chance to start again. We told him we were desperate, and at that time it was true. The prices of the city had forced us out. We wanted to go.

“We have a little money,” we said, shaking the small coins in our pockets. It wasn’t much, but if it pushed us to move, it could push a woodsman, too.

With a cautious look and great hulk of spit in surrender, the man finally agreed to guide us with his cane. After a few miles’ hike along the Mullica—everyone by then sweat-caked and mosquito chewed—we watched him stab a hole in the sand. Water bubbled up around his cane.

“Drink it,” he said.

“It smells like rust,” one said.
“Proof of iron, but good,” the Water Seeker said.

“Iron,” we whispered among ourselves, knowing what it meant.

The first of us to witness the Water Seeker’s findings sent letters to our friends in the city. More and more arrived at his cabin offering a little money, convinced that only he knew the safe places to draw each well with his cane. We believed for a long time that without the Water Seeker’s help, the success of our town would have been impossible.

We tried to show our appreciation, but the Water Seeker always rejected our invitations to parties and town events, groundbreaking festivals and seasonal fairs. When one of us went to find him, his cabin would usually be empty. If he happened to be at home, he would give our messenger a short reply and close his door again. We could understand that he wanted to be alone. Our invitations were meant as a sign of respect.

We always suspected something strange in the Water Seeker and that magic cane. By the time we had begun to adjust to the grit of daily life, not long after we lost our first crops to early frost and our sons to winter, we uncovered the truth.

The Water Seeker made his money in salt hay and sphagnum moss. Those fishing on the Mullica River would see him in autumn, trekking eastward with his sickle to gather hay and sell it at port. Everyone knew these were scavenged careers, below the royal art of iron forging—but like us, he followed profit. Because of this likeness we shared with him, we forgave the Water Seeker when we learned that he had scammed us. In the Pines near our town, the water lay very near the surface, and all of it turned out to be good. It didn’t matter where we drilled our wells. Water would always come up, reddened with tannins but ready to drink.

*
II.

During the autumn of our third year in the Pine Barrens, a rumor traveled through the streets that an affluent man named Richards had invested in the town and its fledgling ironworks. He had commissioned the building of a great mansion as soon as possible. The news brought with it a giddiness we were only used to in spring. A town meeting had been called to discuss the state of our lives and the progress of our industry. It was a small, privileged meeting. Only our most influential community members were invited. The chosen committee invited the Water Seeker as a formality, given the momentous occasion. Even though we found him out, the good news inspired compassion.

By that time, the Water Seeker had become no different to us than any old man, nothing but a loner living among the pines of Down Jersey. In winter and spring, the Water Seeker’s forages brought him around our town on his way to a swamp or tidal marsh to gather reeds and moss. Once in awhile he would come closer to watch a fence being built or the washing of clothes. Children would point at him and whisper out of admiration or fear. He let them come close and dare one another to grab hold of his cane, which he’d whittled into a lopsided honeycomb.

We hadn’t sent the Water Seeker any invitation in some time, but he had never answered to any community gathering, and we assumed he would ignore this one like all the rest. But when the day of the meeting arrived—the same day the sawyers began cutting wood for Richard’s commissioned lodging—the Water Seeker arrived first to the meetinghouse. He sat waiting for the others in a seat at the end of the table, crooked cane in hand, wearing a hat that hid the curled gray hairs on his head.

“We want to make ourselves heard,” our mayor announced after the others had chosen their seats. “We have everything we need to become the center of Down Jersey.”
Others joined in with plans for building projects, improvements for the jewel of our village, the great furnace. Someone suggested building a canal from the Mullica River. The Water Seeker remained quiet, his only contribution a *pucking* sound from the pipe he lit after opening remarks.

“Old man,” the mayor nodded to the Water Seeker at the end of the meeting. “What will you say?”

The Water Seeker stood with his cane and paced toward a window behind the mayor. He lit his pipe again and spoke through the crack in his lips. “That furnace you keep up all day, you’ll run yourselves out of wood.”

The Water Seeker walked from the window, past the men seated at the table, and let himself out the door without the slightest tip of his hat. The men stared around at each other. One made a joke, and the instance blew over.

As the excited talk resumed, a hunter watched through the meetinghouse window as the Water Seeker walked across town. The hunter was the youngest member of the committee, a representative from a small group of men responsible for bringing in meat for the community. His wife also held a major role in the town as a head gardener. Many thought the hunter would make a great mayor for the town in the future, but he had his doubts. As he watched the Water Seeker disappear into the woods, he wondered if the town should be concerned about the man’s new interest in our fortunes.

III.

Shortly after the town meeting, we received another letter that Richards would be visiting before winter to observe the piney town he’d heard so much about. A team of bankers arrived with their sleek black cloaks and rounded bowler hats to nod at our furnace and smile at the
sound of saws in the distance. Richards himself had not come. We hid our disappointment. It was only a small disappointment, after all. A man of means arranges for other eyes to be his own.

“We started by drilling wells,” we told the strangers. We did not mention the help we’d received from a loner in the woods. “The name of the town means ‘bathing place’ in the native Indian language.”

The speculators laughed at the name and its strange sound, and suggested changing it, but they continued to praise the work we’d done with the land.

“How did you come by this spot in the first place?” one of the bankers asked, after someone explained how we mined iron ore from the Mullica River to use in our forges.

The minister claimed the will of God. The mayor cited good judgment. In the beginning, when we stood before the Water Seeker’s small cabin, we had neither of those things, but we did not disappoint our investors by proving them wrong.

After three years in our town, we learned to tolerate life in the Pines, but we had not truly grown fond of it. Many felt that Richards’ interest in our ironworks arrived just in time, the right moment for relief. Our success had always been precarious, tilting on the mercy of the seasons and nearby resources. Added to that, everyone knew the infamous history of the Pine Barrens, which sprouted new industry as quickly as they condemned it. The woods may have seemed deserted at times, but they were really a graveyard of ghost towns that had once been just like ours.

Even with the relief of Richards’ support, no one let himself rest. We willed ourselves on, a sturdy wheel smoothed by the ground it rolled on. As the days grew shorter and shorter, and we began sawing, harvesting, and readying for that third winter, which would lead to spring and the
coming of our man, Richards. Before the start of the third winter, we had proper wood stores and skilled workers and plenty of young men for the bellows.

Some felt troubled by certain developments since the committee meeting. We noticed a change in the Water Seeker. He started to loop more and more often past the town, sometimes pausing for long periods to observe the construction of the Richards mansion. He would not come into the town to talk or ask questions. Anymore, his visits stopped at the edge alongside the pines we had yet to clear for our furnaces and forge. Sometimes he carried a large sickle on his way to work the salt hay, a sight that made some uneasy. No one went out to see the old fraud, lingering at the edge of town. Most were too busy with another coming winter on their hands, but others whispered about a strange feeling they felt from the Water Seeker.

“I’m sure I see him in my dreams, just staring,” the young hunter’s wife told her husband, as they warmed before a fire one night.

“He’s just an old loner,” the hunter said. He sat on the edge of the fireplace, hushing his knife along a leather strap to sharpen it. “He means no harm.”

“I don’t like it,” she said. “We’ve had a hard enough time here without worrying about outsiders.”

The hunter understood that the transition to life in the Pines had been more difficult for his wife than it had been for him. She and the other gardeners had a difficult time cultivating most crops in the sandy soil. Vegetation failed more often than not, and if something happened to grow, it needed care and protection from the famished deer that roamed the town.

“We have no business judging him,” the hunter said. “He was here first.”

“He’s lied once already,” his wife countered.
Her husband shrugged and turned his knife in the firelight. He had been through the woods more than most people in our town, and he still spoke to the Water Seeker if they ever crossed paths through the pine. The hunter was also one of the first to witness the Water Seeker’s well digging. He had not forgotten the reluctance in the coals of his eyes with every pock of the Pine Barrens’ dry, well-concealed surface. He wondered if the Water Seeker had foreseen the chugging of forge bellows or the echoes of saws cutting through pine day and night. It would not have been surprising if the Water Seeker found their presence to be a poor cure for an old loneliness.

IV.

We had hoped the third winter would be our last strife before Richards’ arrival, but we were wrong. Instead, it became the Red Winter, the winter of the slaughters. The frost had just begun to lose its will the first time we found a sheep ripped apart in its pen at the stable yard.

“Look at the body,” one herder whispered to the others who had gathered around. They pointed to the elongated tears, the flesh hung in strips from the chest. Chunks of wool still floated in the air like a strange, slow snowfall.

“I’ve seen what a wolf can do,” one said. “This, it can’t be.” He knelt down and indicated the randomness of gashes on the corpse.

“If it’s not a wolf or a coyote, what is it?” another said.

“It had to be a beast of a kind,” the kneeling herder said. “That’s one thing for certain.”

A few governing men crowded the body of the destroyed animal, and the women hung back and spoke in shaky voices.

“Keep calm,” the mayor repeated again and again. “We don’t want a panic, now.”
But the slaughters happened a second time, and a third. Only a single sheep had been attacked each time. The young hunter knelt by the body of the third slaughtered sheep, inspecting the wounds.

“They aren’t being killed for food,” he whispered to the others nearby. “No bite marks, only tears.”

After a period of confusion over the repeated gore, the men ignored what they knew to be true and announced that a typical beast—a rogue wolf or coyote—might in fact be to blame. Our mayor put out an award for the animal. Young men roamed the woods with muskets during the day and returned to keep watch from their porches at night. We wanted revenge. We wanted sleep. We wanted to find ourselves in a place where the beasts responsible for our pain would always meet justice.

In the midst of the sleepless days in our Red Winter, the Water Seeker continued to observe the building of the mansion at the edge of town. Many times, he sat on the ground or upon a cut log and whittled small pieces of pinewood with a sharp, curved blade. He seemed to want someone to notice him, and it did not take long for the children to gather and form a crowd.

“A devil with a goat’s head, from the hell-depth of the cedar bog,” he told the small audience that squatted wide-eyed around him while he whittled. “It has found you. Stay out of the woods,” he told them. “Or be hunted.”

Once in a while he would offer a finished carving to one of the boys with a promise that it would ward the devil away, as long as they did not venture far from the edge of town. But these were not friendly figurines. They were small demons with strange heads and forked tails, curled bodies and ghastly faces and soulless eyes. No matter how the children’s parents would try to
wrestle the small idols from their grasps, the children would clutch them and cry. They said that the Water Seeker was good, that he was only trying to help them.

“There’s devils in the woods,” the children repeated to their parents and among themselves.

“Devils, watching us.”

Parents were not so ready to believe these haunted tales. Soon, adults joined the crowds of children at the clearing’s edge to shoe away the Water Seeker. “Old fraud,” they sneered. “Witch doctor.” We all laughed at him, but at night, in the privacy of our homes—the homes we built ourselves, without any help—we drew every curtain closed.

V.

Toward the end of that terrible winter, our mayor received word that the dirt roads had begun to thaw and Richards was finally making plans to move from the city. An icy relief hushed over the town, but high tensions tethered us to our daily routines, and no one could truly relax.

Women walked through the woods wide-eyed and kept their children close. Young men, plagued with sleeplessness, dragged themselves to the ironworks and did not hope for a vacation. We stepped lightly, as if waiting for the shadows around us to strike again, and so they did.

The morning arrived like a mist, drawing a haze over the sleeping town, when the young hunter left his cabin to take over for the watchman at the stable yard. He found the watchman asleep at the barn door. The hunter shook him awake.

“You were asleep,” he said.

“Only resting,” the watchman said. “I swear it.”

The hunter pointed to the barn door, which had been left open a crack. The watchman stood and stared at the black space between wall and door as the hunter widened the gap. The sun had
not risen at that time, so they could not see into the barn. The smell hit them before the hunter
could raise his lantern. A smell very like iron ore, almost like the smell of water drawn from the
Water Seeker’s wells, but thicker. The watchman raised his hand to his nose and coughed, and
the hunter moved into the dark space, swinging an arc of light through the room.

Many of their remaining sheep lay torn across the floor. Blood caked with dirt and wool. The
hunter started to count the bodies, but their dismemberment made it difficult, and he lost his will
to know. A few survivors huddled to one corner. On the eastern wall of the barn, blood splattered
into a message, a thievery of human language: GET OUT NOW.

The incident was kept quiet. The hunter and the watchman notified the mayor and the owner
of the sheep, and the four managed to clean the mess before they could attract attention. The
smell of blood lingered in the barn, and there were questions about the missing sheep, but these
concerns were quieted. The mayor did not renew the announcement for a hunt or raise the reward
for the unknown beast. All good governments make tidy work of concealing their doom.

Even in the absence of knowledge, people began to talk. Some whispered that we were being
watched by the Water Seeker’s pine demons, the devil with the goat’s head. Those of us who
believed the rumors said the slaughters had to be a punishment for our intrusion. The Pine
Barrens had seen many other pockets of people appear and disappear, sometimes fast enough to
forget the bowls in their cupboards and their shoes by the porch. We knew about these places.
We knew about the danger of quick fear and failure, the depth of disappeared hope. We knew the
risks all along, but the Water Seeker seemed to know better the haunts that waited for us in the
shadows. Many came out in his favor, urging that we listen to his warnings.

Some days after walking into the barn, the hunter watched a new night spread through the
pines from his porch. He’d seen something move out there, two glowing white eyes, a flash of a
long, curved blade. His wife, five months with child by that time, peeked through the window curtain.

The hunter stepped off the porch and ran, moving his hand to the knife on his belt. By the time he reached the edge of the woods, whatever he’d seen had vanished. The pines creaked back and forth, masking every other sound. Their pendulous shadows traced a jagged camouflage on the sandy ground. The moonlight did not act like light at all, but like the silver gleam of a trick mirror. *What do you want to see?* it asked, and laughing, revealed the opposite.

VI.

Wind roared and spring arrived in full, along with the letter from the city. On heavy, official paper, a message of three terse lines stated that Richards had cancelled his plans to move to the town citing an unknown illness. The note had been signed by a secretary. The next day, when word got out, all hammers dropped, and work on the nearly finished mansion halted for good.

We began to back away from the fire leaping in the ironworks. The noise of the saws dwindled first. Then the forge slowed: six days running, to five days, to three. We turned our ears to the sound of the woods. A fierce spring wind barreled through the place like a wild animal, bending the pines near to the ground, lifting some of them out by the roots.

The slaughters had ceased, but talk kicked up and did not die down. Some said the Water Seeker was to blame for the blood, that he’d been jealous of our success and angry about our discovery of his fraudulent well-drilling business. Others claimed he was only another victim, a man frightened by demons he knew better than we did. Only a few of us thought the Water Seeker might have been angry about Richards’ promise to expand the town, and these few claimed he only wanted to be alone, that he would have questioned anyone’s right to take over so
much land. We all looked for the Water Seeker, but he would not show himself. He could not be found in his cabin or along the banks of the Mullica River.

Like this, it took a single old man to divide our town. Our savior, the liar. Our first hope, the destroyer.

The hunter’s wife told him she refused to raise a child in such a dead place, and he could not find any evidence to refute her. The first few families left without warning, and then more followed. Some cited the plague of disappearing pine towns and claimed ours cursed from the start. Like those settlers before, many of us left behind possessions—pots forged in the ironworks, cloths and pewter plates, books and toys. Empty vines tangled and crisped to sand in the garden that had belonged to the hunter’s wife. The forges sputtered and died. Our homes lined up in the midst of drastic clear-cuts like mausoleums in an unmarked graveyard. The pines bowed their heads, anxious to move in again on the place we had taken from them.

We still think of the Water Seeker sometimes and tell tales over coal fires in the winter. We imagine he returns to walk the old town and its ironworks. We see him wandering through each empty home and raided store, and then the unfinished mansion, tracing the perimeter of every room. In between ghosted buildings and along carriage-carved dirt roads, the Water Seeker’s wells remain, stuck up like broken periscopes connecting one vanished world to the next.
PART II.

LEGENDS
From a little ways down the dirt road, the memorial looked like a huge dirty tooth sticking out of the sugar sand. It was my place. I went there when the moon shook its head low and the small animals still crawled around, sniffing in the humid air for a direction. The memorial was for a man named Carranza, a pilot who crashed in the woods by accident a hundred years ago. I thought Carranza and I were soul mates after reading about him in a copy of the book my Grandpa wrote before he died. It’s called *The New Jersey Pine Barrens: An Untruncated History*. The dusty, green cloth cover showed just the title and the name of my grandpa, McAnney, which surprising enough happened to be my name, too.

“I’m gonna marry a man like you one day, Carranza,” I said, saluting the rock chunk.

That morning the new sun spilled in from the tree tips, some of it snagging there, the rest falling soft on my skin like a glow. No pinkish light shone off the memorial’s roughened stone surface. I lay on my back in the sugar sand, the flat of my head just touching the stone. Carranza’s memorial stretched wide into the sky. I made plans for my own memorial. I’d build it for my mom. The engravings on one side of her own ugly-tooth memorial would say, “I leave you here where you left me, so there.”

From behind the neverwet bushes surrounding the memorial there came a rustle. A flash of something silvery caught my eye. It darted a smooth swiftness, in and out of the leaning pines. I thought I saw a woman with reddish hair wearing a white coat. My heart gummed up in my throat, that thick-blooded feeling. The ghost slowed and stepped closer. The nearer it stepped, the more it filled in, transforming from my mom’s mirage into a real-life six-point white buck with
watery red eyes. He came all the way to the clearing’s edge, letting me stare, wanting me to see him.

Gabe.

As soon as I called him by name he sifted back into the brush. My heart grew fizzy and odd. I had a theory about Gabe. It went like this. A man predicted his own death by auto accident on route 206, and he drove the road every day until one of those days he fell asleep at the wheel and crashed. On impact his spirit fled into a witnessing buck—a bad thing if what you really wanted was to be good and dead. The buck turned albino with the shock of the rogue spirit of a suicidal prophet. That was Gabe, the same white buck. I found part of this story in Grandpa McAnney’s book, and part of it I added on my own.

Gabe was the real Prophet of the Pines, I was convinced, because he only ever showed up when something was going to happen. Rob Jr. and I proved that fact, since some big event followed every sighting. One time we saw Gabe, and that same night the stars fell out of the sky, a million streaking down to meet us. They seemed to fall so close, we ran around and around to find their landing spots. I wondered why I had mistaken Gabe for Mom, if it was a coincidence of bad morning eyesight or if it meant something. Maybe this time Gabe wanted me to know she was going to come back.

I ran straight home and stomped up Grandma’s porch steps, smacking the chains of the swinging bench to one side. I paused at the front door for a few extra breaths and wiped my leaking nose with the back of my hand, wagering with myself which version of Grandma I’d find when I walked inside.
Grandma sometimes thought herself a prophet, like Gabe. Some days, she’d wake up and claim to be a reincarnated ancient medicine woman from the long-gone Lenape tribe. Whenever Grandma got into her strange moods, I tried to stay away. I wanted to believe that she could heal things with her fake magic or make certain things happen or bring my mom back. But the pretending got old fast, if I happened to look too hard at the truth of it. When Mom first left me, she was always normal, but after a few months, things started to get weird. Already, the space between her moods was getting shorter and shorter.

I heard sizzling in the house and pushed on the door. Grandma was in the kitchen, up and cooking. She slept a lot most days, and that morning the moon had barely silvered out of the sun’s way, but there she was—herself. It was relieving, but a little strange to see her looking so normal, shifting her weight by the stovetop, and not a trace of feathers in her thinning hair. She even wore slippers and an apron. She didn’t turn around when I took my seat at the table.

“Your hands, Edna,” she said. She tip-toed for two plates on the highest shelf, without clattering.

“Aw my hands are fine. I just woke up.”

“I’ll have you know your grandpa said the same thing, and see what happened to him.”

Grandpa died just before the time my mom left me with Grandma. I saw a lot of weekends since then, even a few seasons. I’d only met Grandpa and Grandma a few times before that—a few other weekends, a few small instances

“I thought it was cancer that got Grandpa.”

Grandma squinted at me and slid a crumpled fried egg onto a plate. “You got dirt on your chin.”

I whipped my long stringy hair back and sighed over to the sink to wash.
“Go on, eat now,” she announced after I turned off the faucet, as if I needed permission. “Tonight I’m cooking cutlets.” She smiled down at her orange juice and then the smile went away.

Whenever Grandma was in one of her moods, she did not cook. She’d go around the backyard to preach the plight of her imaginary Lenape tribe to a crowd of rusty spare tractor parts and garden spades or anything that looked like it would listen long enough. She did that all day sometimes. Once in a while she played with fire, too, and that was the thing I hated most. I tried to tell her, but she never listened. So I hid the matches, just in case, if I remembered to.

“Hey, I saw that white buck, just now,” I said, circling my fork over the plate.

“Your grandpa used to love that buck. Used to go looking for him to feed him carrots.”

“Did he run into him a lot, you think?”

“He never said anything about that, but he made me grow an extra plot of carrots in the garden.” She wasn’t eating her egg, just picking. It started to ooze. “Carrots won’t come up easy around here.”

“Do you think Grandpa saw the buck before the cancer came?” I swirled ketchup around my egg. “I think seeing him means something will happen.”

“Used to feed that buck carrots,” she said. She stared off into space and just blinked.

“You think Mom’s coming, Grandma? Maybe she’s coming. You said she’d come back someday. And now, Gabe…”

Grandma gave me a sad look with all the lines on her face. She told me for a while that my mom was just tired, but she couldn’t be tired forever. I didn’t believe that story. It didn’t make sense to me. People fell asleep when they were tired and woke up when they weren’t tired.
anymore. I couldn’t see a reason for a tired person to leave her daughter in the middle of the pinewoods for good.

Grandma’s eyes started to get hazy. It could’ve been in my head, but the air in the room got heavier. What I really wanted was to hug Grandma to keep her there, slippered and awake, but that kind of normal stuff didn’t happen a lot—not the hugging or the keeping.

“I’m going to Rob Jr.’s,” I said. “I can bring back some cranberries?”

“That’d be nice.” She was like a baby vulture, the way she perched her bony fingers together at the edge of her sloppy plate.

After cleaning my dish, I watched my own feet all the way out the door and hoped for the day I wouldn’t have to come back. Then I felt bad for the thought, went back into the kitchen, and touched Grandma on the hand before skipping off again.

I almost made it out of the house before I remembered Grandpa’s book. What I loved most about Grandpa, though I never knew him too well, was that book. Soon after I was left there, I found the book in Grandma’s room right next to the Bible in the musty chest at the foot of her bed.

Grandpa must’ve studied the pinewoods pretty good, because the book spilled over with names and descriptions for sand-growing trees and the animals that live in them. Rob Jr. and I liked to consult Grandpa McAnney’s book about the things we didn’t understand. But there was nothing in there about what to do when people stop thinking they are themselves. There was nothing about mourning people who were still alive, about finding all those people long gone or missing, somewhere between here and dead.
In Rob Jr.’s dad’s cranberry bog, I flipped through the pages of Grandpa McAnney’s book hoping something about Gabe would jump out at me, grab my ear and whisper in it. The cranberries bobbed and twinkled around Rob Jr.’s scrawny body. He was wearing what I called his *sc-cran-uba* suit, an awkward overall slick that covered him like a body-sized boot. Rob Jr.’s bog rake extended from his left arm like a robotic attachment. The long arm lopsided his dwarfish body to the right, so the left side looked shrunken. He swung the rake up, he slapped it down. The berry-blanket swished to reveal a swirl of dark, gritty water.

Rob Jr. was older then me, a teenager once November came around, but I could beat him up easily, so we were even. He pretended not to be impressed with the Gabe incident.

“I don’t know. Probably Gabe is just some blind old buck,” he said

“What about the stars? You saw them fall like that. The other times, too, like when that heavy rain flooded out the roads and the time we found—”

“It’s called *coincidence.*” He rolled his eyes. “You know that word?”

“Easy for you to say. You know your mom ain’t coming back.”

He raised the rake like he would chuck it at me. Instead, in the next breath, he set it down and crawled onto the bank. His *sc-cran-uba* suit squeaked when he bent his legs.

“Before you got here that buck was just a buck.”

“Nah, you just been here too long to see a difference.”

Rob Jr. cracked his knuckles by pressing his fists together. He looked up at the sky. “Dead isn’t a good thing. It still means gone.”

Rob Jr. was never too much of a talker about this stuff, even after he got to know every detail about my situation four times over. I only found out about his mom a while after we met, when I happened to stumble across a loose picture in Rob Jr.’s room and ask some questions. Before that
I had no choice but to like Rob Jr. since he was the only kid around, but after that it was different.

“I was just saying,” I said.

“You wanna trade places? I’ll live with your Gran for a week and you can slave away in this dumb bog.” He picked at the sc-cran-uba suit, lifting it from his skin and letting the fabric snap back again.

“We should look for Gabe again, to ask him,” I said. “He can probably tell us what’s going on.”

“Is this like the time you wanted to go looking for Carranza’s ghost?”

“This isn’t like that, this is a for-sure thing.”

“I have a new crab spider, found it the other day. Pretty cool. You should check it out.”

“And you expect me to care about a spider!” I threw my hands up. Rob Jr. never cared about anything more than collecting bugs. He’d catch one at a time and study it for a few days and let it go after getting way too attached, way too easily. “You can’t just wait around like this all day, all eternity, counting bug legs.”

“Yeah, so what?” He shrugged

Rob Jr. seemed more and more like a lost cause to me, then. Just when I was about to tell him I’d given up on him, he sat up straight and tense like a twitchy rabbit.

“Do you smell that?” he said. He really did look like a rabbit, the way his nose stuck in the air.

“Cut it out,” I laughed. “Smell what?”

“Really. Don’t you smell that? It smells like smoke, burning.” He lifted his chin into the air and sucked in deep.
And then I smelled it, too. My palms tested the dryness of the ground, scrunched around a layer of flaky dead leaves and pine needles. Bonfire.

“Probably someone at a barbecue,” I said. “Some campsite. There’s a billion around.”

Grandpa’s book told us we lived at the edge of a state forest. I turned the pages, looking for a map dotted with tiny brown triangles for campsites and colored lines for trails.

“This is different. You don’t know.” Rob Jr. started to peel off the *se-cran-uba* suit. “You’re not from around here.”

I continued to turn the pages of the book, looking for the map I knew was there. Then, a quaggy man stomped toward us through the cedars that circle the bog. I knew it was Rob Jr.’s dad by his faded deer club cap. No one else lived around that area, not close anyway.

“Boy, did I say you could take a break?” he said.

“No, sir. But I smelled smoke.”

“Damn right you did. We got a big blaze comin’ our way. Clean up your things, let’s go.”

Mr. Upton looked at Rob Jr. only when he needed to, and then only through a constant squint, the way someone watching a horror movie might dare himself to look.

“What fire?” I said.

Mr. Upton turned to me. He shot some air through his teeth.

“Get on home, girl. Can’t you smell the smoke? I’d bet it’s your old woman who set it. Wouldn’t be surprised.” Rob Jr. started forward with Mr. Upton and glanced back, the crease between his eyes heavy. “And you, tell that old woman to stay out of my bogs. This is my damned property, tell her.”

Rob Jr. glanced backed at me with droopy eyes that meant he was sorry. The first wisp of smoke drifted over his head like a thin, black veil as he trudged off with his dad. I sniffed the air
again. Some smoke felt like it got caught behind my eyes and kind of burned. It seemed like the fire might turn up anywhere, behind any birch or catalpa tree, a falling burst from the sky, or even inside my skin somewhere. I hugged Grandpa McAnney’s book and ran down the scrawny-pined path.

Almost a year before, during that first weekend with Grandma, I spent a lot of my time scratching around alone in the yard while Grandma poured through book after book in her moldy brown chair in the den. We met for only meals, and once in a while she’d say a few things straight to me, usually a comment on how I was too skinny.

I’d only been to Grandma’s place a few times before that weekend when Mom dropped me off, but the visits felt routine. When she didn’t come back for me on Sunday night, I knew something had to be wrong. The wind whispered through the pine trees outside the open window in the spare bedroom and honed a sense of doom in me. She always came back when she said she would. The cedar water smell blew over from the bogs, through the open window. It smelled like decay, like death. There were ghosts all over and in my head.

Four days after my mom was supposed to pick me up, Grandma started the station wagon and drove me out of the woods to look for her. She did not complain. She didn’t even seem surprised when we got to the place I called home my whole life and found it empty. Grandma stood in front of the door and I pressed myself into the grass, wanting to sink in. I already knew no grass could grow where Grandma lived, only moss. It was a gritty place with no kids and no neighbors and no sound except the groaning trees, a sound that scared me for reasons I couldn’t explain.
When we got back to Grandma’s we both sat in the car, breathing together. I asked her if my mom was dead and she said no, but I would have to stay with her for some time. Grandma put her knotted hand on my lap. I pushed it away like something dead had fallen on my knee.

After that I got creative. I drew these pictures of Mom scrolled with headlines like MISSING and WANTED and scattered them around the house and taped them to the front door. I made the words on my posters bigger and bigger until they were all that was left, and the images faded into black-eyed outlines that looked nothing like my real-life mother. I ran through the forest, stomping on pinecones and slashing at branches and carving my name into the bark of every pine tree with a kitchen knife until I made a forest of EDNA.

Grandma started to holler at me for not listening, for throwing fits. One time I got fed up with her and called 9-1-1. Two policemen came, but they asked the wrong questions. Grandma said if I called again they might take me away, so if that was what I wanted, I should just do it.

I kept quiet after that, but things changed. When Grandma started getting into her moods and acting different—like someone else, like a stranger—it turned out it was harder to be cruel. Instead, it was a lot easier to feel what it would really be like on my own.

Even as my running feet gave way to the backyard clearing, I still didn’t feel safe. I felt less safe, actually, because the smoke floated in heavier patches by then, as if I had been running toward the fire. My eyes widened and jumped at any hint of the color orange and my throat tasted like steel. Every noise sounded like flames crackling nearby. I shuffled the noises around in my head and tried to discard the harmless ones.

When I separated a string of chants from the other sounds, they led me to Grandma. I knew from the second I heard the chanting that she’d been caught up in one of her moods. She thought
she was a medicine woman of the Leni-Lenape tribe again, and she looked to be preparing for a

ceremony. She sat holding a bundle of small sticks in the middle of a lumpy dirt-drawn circle,

facing the deep woods behind the house. Twigs and dirt strung up in her hair, like she’d been

rolling on the ground.

“Smell the smoke,” she said, holding up a palm to stop me from speaking. She inhaled and

then let out all her breath through her open mouth.

“We gotta go before the fire comes, Grandma, please.”

“A fire heals us,” she said. “Come and sit, child.”

“No. Please.” I shook her shoulder. I tried not to make her upset, because I never knew what

she might do inside one of her moods.

“We have to learn how dead things can live. The fire tells us.”

“That’s crazy talk,” I said.

I threw Grandpa’s book down on the ground. She moved her palm over its bent spine like she

wanted to bless it, or heal it. I reached for her shoulder again, but when she looked at me, her

eyes were hazy and unfocused. She leaned away and trailed off into a string of muttering. At that

moment, a breeze kicked up and carried a new curtain of smoke, the scent of char. A fire spread

faster in wind. I forgot where I learned that, but I knew it was true. Grandma lifted up her arms

and howled her triumphant reply to the gusting gods.

“I bet you started it. You, with those matches. This is your fault,” I hollered. Then I deflated,

leaked out the rest. “I thought you’d be okay today.”

I turned on my heel and ran into the house to search the kitchen junk drawer where Grandma

kept her car keys. I thought if I started the car and called to her again, she might snap out of it. I
couldn’t understand why she wouldn’t help me. Even Rob Jr.’s awful dad came to get him when he smelled the smoke.

Once I got my hand on the keys, I ran back through the door. but Grandma had disappeared with Grandpa’s book.

“Wait! Don’t leave,” I shouted through the shivering woods. Panic fluttered around my lungs. The fire had lost its tame bonfire smell, seemed tinged with something heavier.

I spotted her, far off through the trees. I ran to catch up, but even though she was so old, she’d gone so far. The trees clumped together until she vanished into the flaky pine. The running made me cough. I stopped and turned back, the house barely visible through the pines. All the tip-tops of the trees swished above me. My name jumped out from the hide of every pine where I’d carved it: EDNA, EDNA, EDNA. All the pinewoods wore my name.

One night a few months before the fire, Rob Jr. showed up at the house with a bruise gathering under one wet eye and asked if he could come in. He’d never been in the house before, and I didn’t want to let him in, because Grandma was in one of her medicine woman moods. She’d conjured a wooden tambourine from somewhere and was shaking it around and singing to herself and doing a weird little two-step.

We sat down on the sofa and tried not to talk about what she was doing or what happened to his face. I got this idea from something my mom had showed me a long time before. A bag of uncooked rice and a couple of paper plates later, we were ready. I laid out the supplies and poured some rice onto a plate, folded it, stapled it over, and shook it—a tambourine. After I made one for Rob Jr., we ran upstairs to join Grandma’s dancing. She didn’t startle, like I thought she might. She looked over her shoulder at us, nodded her head, and played louder. Rob
Jr. shook his paper tambourine. I held up both arms and danced with my Grandma and let nonsense words spill from my mouth.

While it happened, I watched from a small space inside my head. My fingertips seemed to be a lot better at touch than I remembered. The wood on the frame of the back door was made of a million separate splinters, and I could feel all of them.

I took my time going up the stairs to Grandma’s room. Since I was small, no match for the blaze, I would have to tambourine again in another game of can’t-beat-em-join-em. I understood there were only two of us left in the whole world: me and that fire. It was time, I decided, to dress for war or surrender. Then, I thought: aren’t they both the same thing?

The cedar closet in Grandma’s room smelled strange and sweet. Toward the back, behind some coats, I spotted a long skirt splashed with yellows and oranges. Grandma liked to wear it sometimes when the shaman in her came out. I ripped the skirt from its hanger, and also an itchy straw-colored blouse, and pressed them to my face to inhale their cedar scent.

Then I got dressed. In the bathroom I managed to find a stained case full of moldy makeup. My eyes shone large and green in the mirror as I smeared lipstick around my cheeks for war paint. I frayed up my hair tied knots in elastics at random spots. Wetting my skin seemed like a good idea, since maybe I’d be less flammable that way. I held my arms under the running faucet and splashed my body and legs. When it was done, I was ready to dance.

I wiggled through all the rooms of the house, up and down the stairs, pausing at each window to watch for changes in the scenery. It was a dance that felt old to me, like my bones always knew it. I searched for fire, staring hard through every window until the pine trees began to look like thin, starving people with flaky skin and electro-shocked green hair. I danced to the kitchen
and tore a long piece of paper towel from its roll. I took a fat red marker from the junk drawer, and at the top of the paper towel I wrote, “Edna’s List of Long Gone, Dead, and Missing Persons,” underlined with two thick lines. Then I composed an unholy list of betrayers: Mom, Grandma, Gabe. I wrote Rob Jr.’s name and then crossed it out again. After some white space I scribbled my own name.

I danced out back again, chanting like Grandma, waving my list and a canteen of water, my last-second weapon. I coughed at the smoke and started to gather sticks and brush to make a weird kind of nest, like I’d seen Grandma do. When the fire came I planned to offer the list from my throne like food, thinking maybe it would retreat, too satisfied then to bother with me.

Outside, it was easier to feel afraid. My eyes hurt and all I could think about was what it might be like to burn to death. How long would it take to go numb? Would I still be alive by the time the fire wore down my hands and feet to nubs? How much of me would remain? That was the thing that stuck with me—how much would remain for someone to find. My shoes? My eyes? My hair? My heart?

Sandwort bushes shivered off to left and I screamed a little thinking fire, but it was only Gabe, his silverish body dirtied behind the haze of smoke. He stepped between the bushes and stared at me. I wanted to believe all of it was his fault. Prophets were nothing but a pain, showing up whenever they felt like it, and no care in the world for anyone else. Just seeing him there like that made my blood burn without any fire to heat it. If I got rid of Gabe, I thought nothing bad would happen to me ever again. Maybe the fire would even disappear.

I crouched down low and scratched in the dirt for a rock, very careful not to spook him. I could only find a heavy sand clod. It crumbled a little as I gripped it, but it felt solid enough to do some damage. I could see Gabe’s pinkish eyes water through the smoke. He held one hoof a
few inches above the ground. His six-horn crown tilted a little to the side. I rose again as slow as I could manage, the clod tight in my palm. I puffed out my chest and swung my arm back, mustering all the curses I could inside of me. But when I tried to launch the dirt clod, someone caught me by the wrist. The clod fell loose. Gabe flicked away, back through the bushes. I spun around, half expecting a fire demon.

“It’s okay,” Grandma said. “Leave him be.”

She panted a little. I couldn’t tell if she was normal or not, at first. A worried furrow stamped on her face, but feathers and twig pieces still scattered through her hair. She reached out to touch my lipstickked face and then tested the texture between finger and thumb. I must’ve looked crazy, too. Just when I thought I would say something, curse, or scream, a lump hardened in my throat, and nothing would come out.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m sorry, Eddie.” She looked away and shifted her weight a little. A bag of scarlet cranberries hung by her side. “It’ll be alright.”

Grandma guided me to a chair in the kitchen and searched out her portable radio from behind the beehive-shaped sugar bowl on the counter. She twirled the knobs and fiddled with the feeler-like antennae. A voice fizzed into clarity. A woman’s voice. It might have belonged to Mom, just as easily as it might have been a stranger. I listened for words and continued to watch through the back door even though my eyes hurt from so much watching.

Grandma folded the antennae to the right and the woman’s voice crackled in: “…latest update from Leektown is that…fire is still raging, but under control. Firefighters…to contain the blaze south…and east of Wharton State Forest, minimizing damages and… All those evacuated
are being told to return to their homes at this hour. No one has been reported injured or missing, police say…”

“So it’s not coming?” I wasn’t sure I believed it. Maybe the fire wasn’t ever a fire at all, just a smoky fear of the thing.

“No, it’s not,” Grandma said. “Leektown’s a ways off.”

“You left me,” I said, unable to avoid the anger pulsing behind my eyes. “You goddamn left me here by myself.”

“Please don’t talk like that, Edna.”

She stretched out a hand, and I batted it away. Then she tried again, and that time I let her wipe the wetness off my cheek. A guilty coil heated in my stomach.

“I brought us some cranberries.” She held up a clear plastic bag filled with red juice and berries. “You forgot them this morning.”

Grandma placed the bag on the table and adjusted the dial on the radio from the woman’s crackled voice to one of her fiddler tunes —the frantic stringed music she listened to while making dinner or reading. We ate straight from the bag of wet cranberries, passing it back and forth between us. My tongue numbed from the bitter taste. Our hands shined red with juice.

“There’s a story in your grandpa’s book that tells where cranberries come from,” she said.

“Did you read it yet?”

“I don’t think so,” I said. I’d only ever read small chunks of the book, not much at all. Mostly I liked to look at the pictures, to feel the heavy spine in my hands and trace the name on the cover when I couldn’t sleep or think.

“I’ll tell it then,” she said, taking a few berries and rolling them around in her palm. “In the Pine Barrens,” she began, without even opening the book in her lap, “cranberries grow in bogs.
The bog got its start after a great war, led by a shaman of the Lenape tribe. The shaman told the people that a herd of mastodons was coming for them, and they would have to fight for their home.”

“What’s a mastodon?” I said.

“It’s like a woolly elephant, but bigger and meaner,” she said. “So the war lasted four days and nights. Many died, but the Lenape managed to drive off the mastodons. By the fourth night, enormous holes scarred the land from all the trampling and struggle, and these filled with water that covered the bones of the dead.”

She held up a single cranberry between thumb and pointer finger. “Cranberries grow in the bogs as a reminder of that war. They keep the memory of those that fell to protect their home—these same woods—and their families.” She popped the berry into her mouth and smiled.

I tried to wrap my thoughts back around the tale, but something wasn’t adding up. I walked over to the sink and stood on the tips of my toes again to see out of the small kitchen window. I leaned forward and cupped my hands around my eyes, pressed my face to the glass, and scanned the unblackened pine trees. I wanted Gabe to see me so he would know I was sorry. The smoke had almost cleared, and the edges of the pines glittered in the fuzzy purple light.

“I didn’t know the woods were so old. And cranberries for blood, I bet not even Rob Jr. knows that.” I turned away from the window. “This place is magic, you think?”

Grandma shifted her eyes toward the ceiling like she was watching something moving there. Behind the fiddler tune, I could hear the wall clock ticking.

“I think it’s got more to do with memory,” she said. “We McAnneys lived here, always. Your grandpa’s dad and his dad and his before. Practically grew from that very sugar sand out there, this whole family. Wouldn’t be surprised if there’s some magic in our blood.”
I wanted to protest, thinking—what blood? What family? A family of freaks and ghosts? But in a weird way, I saw her point, and I knew she was only trying to make me feel better.

“Memory,” I repeated, examining the red juice on my fingers. What did I still remember? Mom, late to pick me up from school yet again, her hair spiraled and sweaty. Mom, nodding off in the middle of a bedtime story. Mom, backing out Grandma’s door for the last time and promising to return with bug spray and white bread. When she returned, she would cut off the crusts for me and we would eat together again.

I sat back in my seat at the table and hugged my knees into my chest. I wanted more time to figure out the answers, but if another fire came to swallow me up, I’d let it. I’d open like a pinecone in the heat.
Malcolm proposed the reunion more out of boredom than anything else, but he didn’t mention that in his email to Tim and Levi, and he didn’t use the word _reunion_. After graduation, Malcolm hadn’t gone off to college like Tim, or into business like Levi, but he still knew a thing or two about stirring up a response. Sure enough, when Levi and Tim read Malcolm’s email, each one felt a similar tug, a lingering anxiousness deep in their roots.

A week later, in Wharton State Forest, a pick-up truck braked at the center of Washington Field. Two doors opened and the three former Pine Barons came out. There had been a town in that spot once, in a time when every dirt road that carved through the woods had a name. The town was rumored to be the hanging site of the pine robber, Joe Mulliner. In high school, Malcolm, Levi, and Tim liked to refer to themselves in Mulliner’s tradition, with the same tone of infamy.

The Pine Barons’ brand of infamy consisted of weed-bombing the suburbs. Once a week, in the middle of the night, the three would drive west from their hangout in Wharton State Forest to scatter dandelion seeds and plant poison oak or ivy across southern New Jersey’s ritziest neighborhoods. Weed-bombing became the main project of the Pine Barons. Weeds were meant to be subtle, or so Malcolm said when he pitched the idea in their junior year of high school. Egg yolk could be wiped away and graffiti painted over, but planting was a permanent gesture.

Malcolm, Levi, and Tim converged on their old pit, a crumbling foundation in the clearing. Inside the old hangout, Malcolm patted one of several sandbags bolstering the foundation.

“From the broken dam in Pemberton,” Malcolm said. He took a seat on the dusty ground and the others followed suit.
“Looks brand new,” Levi said. “Even better than before.”

“You come here a lot since graduation?” Tim asked. He found it strange that Malcolm had returned to the pit alone.

Their group dissolved after high school, when Malcolm, Levi, and Tim each fell upon a different path. Tim had gone to college in Florida, a move neither of the others had expected, and Levi went to work in his family’s cranberry bog near Whitestown. Malcolm floundered in random professions, schemes, and seasonal work. It wasn’t easy for the other two to keep up with Malcolm’s odd jobs and projects.

“You still working at Nixon’s?” Tim asked Malcolm.

“Nah,” Malcolm said, pulling at a hole in one of the sandbags. “I tried school for a while.” He avoided the details that took him from carpentry at the local tech to architecture at a city school, and then back to ground zero. “But the hell with all that. Now I work in landscaping.”

“Landscaping—you?” Tim laughed. The irony seemed too good to be real.

“Guess I had experience,” he said.

Levi took three beers from a backpack he carried, and passed them around. Levi tipped his beer can to his lips and held it there, opening his throat. The next morning, Levi and his father would begin handling the paperwork to sign over their family bogging business to a larger cranberry corporation. The last few seasons had left his family in debt, and they had no choice.

Though Levi and Malcolm never left the area, they hadn’t seen much of each other. In high school, Malcolm had been known more for brains than brawn, but over two years he’d grown several inches taller and several broader. His chin featured a shadow of stubble, and a tattoo peeked out from his sleeves on each bicep: a shovel on one arm, an axe on the other. Levi had
grown too, but only in one direction. His muscles stretched out into lank. Only Tim looked the same, at least on the outside.

Tim had picked up a shovel in the pit and held it across his lap while they made small talk. He recognized it as the same one the Pine Barons used on their old weed-bombing missions. Based on Malcolm’s email, Tim had been under the impression that the night would be dedicated to checking on a few of the yards they hit in high school. The shovel would have no use anymore.

“Remember the one time when that little dog chased us halfway down the road?” Malcolm was saying. “We had to get that last bit of poison oak in the ground, and it comes tearing out.”

“I can’t believe we never actually got caught,” Levi said.

Tim ran his finger in a groove on the wooden handle, thinking of how far he’d come since they last gathered inside the pit. True enough, he felt a surge of curiosity after reading Malcolm’s email, but the feeling had already begun to fade. Their weed-bombing days felt far behind them, and reliving old vandalisms made him feel slightly uncomfortable, like looking through old photos.

Tim distracted himself with the stars. Wharton’s Washington Field boasted a pocket of dark sky inside a span of light pollution. The fraying Milky Way trailed overhead and then dissolved toward the west, in the sky over the city.

“Is that Auriga—there?” Tim asked. He pointed west.

“It’s Hercules,” Malcolm said, tracing the spidery shape with his eyes. “Forgot already?”

“Not many stars in Fort Meyers.” Tim closed his hand over the handle of the shovel across his lap. “I’m out of practice, I guess.”

“You miss this place, though,” Levi said.
“Sure, sometimes.” Tim looked away from the others. He liked the Pines, but they made up only one small corner of an entire world he realized he wanted to explore.

“Alright.” Malcolm stood. He dropped his empty beer can, brought one foot down onto it, and then picked up the tin rind and slid it into his back pocket. “I’m getting anxious. Let’s get out of here.”

“Where’re we headed?” Tim said. He pitched the shovel into the sandy ground and hoisted himself up by the handle.

“Bring that,” Malcolm said, indicating the shovel. “Just one more thing.” He jumped up and reached around one of the sandbags in the corner of the pit to pull out the axe.

“That the same one?” Levi asked.

“Same one,” Malcolm said. “Shovel, too.”

They carried the tools to Levi’s truck and dropped them in the bed alongside a couple of burlap-bagged sprigs of poison ivy. Tim hadn’t noticed the ivy before. He stared down at it.

“I thought we were just checking things out,” Tim said. “What’s all this for?”

“Just in case,” Malcolm said.

Levi started the engine and Malcolm turned up the radio in the passenger’s seat. Tim decided it was easiest to try to go along with Levi and Malcolm, but he had a strange feeling about the night. Excitement had given away to restlessness.

Levi steered the truck through the field and soon found the dirt extension of Carranza Road. He pressed the gas and the forest blurred by on either side. Sweet cedar-wind crashed through the open windows. A steady hum pressed into Levi’s ears. He didn’t think he’d ever get tired of joy riding through Wharton State Forest. Malcolm plunged his head out of the window and howled. His dark hair whipped behind him like a shadow.
Weed-bombing might have been Malcolm’s original idea, but all three had preferred to defend Joe Mulliner’s tactics in honor of an older world—a world that existed long before Wharton and a bunch of other rich men bought up the land to sell to big developers. Wharton, at least, died before he could mess up his part of the Pines. Luckily, the state took over, but all that space to the west of Atsion Lake and around the edges of the protected forest was eventually quartered off into shopping malls and neat spirals of boxy houses. Tidy green lawns and fertilized golf courses pressed in on all sides and broke into the already vague edges of the Pines, where Malcolm, Tim, and Levi had grown up.

“So what’s the plan?” Tim yelled over the wind buffeting through the open windows.

“Who says we need a plan?” Malcolm said. He wondered why Tim felt like he had to ask so many questions. “I don’t make plans.”

“Bullshit,” Tim said.

“Yeah, who ever heard of you making plans?” Levi jeered.

Tim knew that Malcolm was one of those types who pretended to spontaneity but preferred order. He couldn’t understand why Malcolm had been trying his best since high school to toss all of his potential out the window.

“We’ll just check out a few yards,” Malcolm said. “Then, who knows?”

Levi smiled. He knew it wasn’t like Malcolm to carry around the Pine Barons’ old tools and a couple of bunches of poison ivy for sappy, symbolic reasons. Some plan had already been set into place. But as he crossed route 206, Levi realized he didn’t remember exactly how to find any of the yards they hit in high school. He couldn’t even begin to guess, since he’d rarely visited the suburbs.

“Do you know where we’re going?” Levi asked.
“What, you don’t?” Malcolm said. “Who let you drive?”

Malcolm directed Levi to one of the houses, and soon the truck turned onto a typical street lined with perfect, square yards.

“There,” Malcolm said. He pointed out of the front window to a large white house.

“Now I remember,” Levi said, though he couldn’t really be sure. So many of those suburban homes looked exactly the same. In some cases, they were the same, except for the people living inside. Levi pulled the truck in front of the house, on the opposite side of the street.

The treeless yard seemed normal in the dark. A neat garden lined the porch, framed by an absurdly green lawn, especially for mid-summer. He didn’t notice anything out of order, no sign the Pine Barons had been there with their poison ivy and their live oak and their dandelion seeds.

Tim wondered how much it might cost for a house like that.

“What did we plant?” Levi said. “I can’t see anything.”

“Look at this place,” Tim said. “Like we thought a weed would make a difference.”

“It’s alright,” Malcolm said. “There’re plenty others. I’ll drive.”

Levi and Malcolm switched seats, and they visited several more yards Malcolm remembered hitting. He drove the group from site to weed-bombed site, but aside from one yard where a bunch of sloppy dandelions sprouted around a mailbox, nothing they’d planted two or three years back seemed to have taken hold or made much of an impact.

After scanning the most recent yard for results, Malcolm parked the truck at a dead end at the back of a tame, suburban neighborhood. He kept his hands on the wheel and tapped his fingers. He wasn’t disappointed. He knew all along that nothing would have come of their weed-bombing campaign. After spending some time in landscaping—even after the little work he’d
done since the end of spring—he knew that the Pine Barons had been too amateurish in their tactics.

“We were just kids,” Tim said. “It was stupid, really, all that weed-bombing shit.”

“It was fun, anyway,” Levi said.

“It wasn’t stupid,” Malcolm said. “We just didn’t know what we were doing.”

Malcolm was beginning to get tired of Tim’s righteous bullshit. It was like leaving town qualified him to come back and police their group. He’d always been a little bit of a hard-ass, Malcolm thought. Still, he missed the old Tim, who at least made up for cautiousness with loyalty. At one time not too long ago, Tim could be counted on for anything.

“Let’s go back to Wharton,” Tim said. “I want to explore a little more.”

“Explore yourself,” Malcolm said. “We know that place. This is what we’re up against now.”

He waved one hand at the gigantic homes on either side of the road. “I’m not going back.”

“What?” Tim said.

“We’ll do it right, this time,” Malcolm said. “We got everything we need.”

“What are you talking about?” Tim said.

“Come on, man. You had to know,” Levi said. “What’s the axe and shovel for? The poison ivy?”

“Had to know?” Tim said. “Look, I’m not doing this again. Whatever we did in high school, it’s over.”

“One more job,” Malcolm said. “One more weed-bomb.”

“Redemption,” Levi said.

Levi had left a few beers in the truck and continued drinking after Malcolm took over driving. Even though Levi knew it would be bad if they were caught, the beer had made him
loose and nostalgic, and the looming sadness of the coming morning had put him in a reckless mood. He drummed his fingers on the dash along with the music. Tim remained silent in the backseat.

Malcolm turned onto a main road and headed farther west, deeper into the suburbs. Storefront neon and streetlights stitched across the dark like a curtain too heavy to be swept aside. Finally, Malcolm drove the truck into an unmarked neighborhood with a high iron gate swung open to either side at the entrance.


Malcolm parked the truck and killed the engine. Grand houses rose here and there in the shadows, set back off the road away from neighbors. The trees had been trimmed back in most places—just enough to look nice without overwhelming each yard with pine needles. Malcolm popped the joints in his wrists and neck.

“We shouldn’t do this,” Tim said. He leaned forward from his place in the back cab and looked from Levi to Malcolm. “It was a long time ago.”

“Maybe for you,” Malcolm said.

Levi sighed. He knew none of them could get much out of a last weed-bombing mission, but he didn’t care. Levi had always been the calm one, the guy who liked to flow with the tide. He’d taken his punches. Now, he wanted to be the one to dole them out again.

“Those big boggers,” Levi said, “they take everything, until they got acres full of cranberries right to the edges, if you could even see the edges.”

“Your dad’s gonna sell?” Tim said. “For sure?”

By the tone in Levi’s voice, Tim realized that he probably never understood how much the cranberry bogs meant to his friend. In high school, Levi talked about his family’s business, but
he usually seemed resentful that he had to work on weekends. Tim was shocked when Levi chose to go into business with his father rather than go to college. When he heard rumors about the bankruptcy, he thought Levi might look at it as a chance to go his own way.

“They won’t even give us what the land’s worth,” Levi continued. “They’re just gonna take it all.”

“It’s not what you are,” Malcolm said, nodding. “It’s what you own.”

“You knew about the bankruptcy this whole time,” Levi said, narrowing his eyes at Tim. “You knew and you never even called. Never said anything.”

“I didn’t think you’d care,” Tim said. “All you did in high school was complain about the work.”

“Care?” Levi said. “It’s all I have.”

“Listen,” Malcolm cut in. They were there for a reason, and he didn’t want Tim or Levi to forget it. “We were doing it wrong, all that time.”

Malcolm explained how they needed to try to conceal the weeds better so they would come up quietly, without attracting too much attention. For the poison ivy, they would have to look for an unassuming spot where the owner wouldn’t notice its intrusion.

“Who cares about these people?” Tim said. “So what if they have landscaped yards?”

“I’m ready,” Levi said, ignoring Tim. “Let’s do it.”

Malcolm punched at the door’s handle, and hopped from the driver’s seat. Levi exited through the passenger’s side and left his door open for Tim. To Levi’s surprise, Tim hopped out right behind him. The three walked a bit down the road and squinted through the wooded lots.

Malcolm paused at one lot where a house sat at the top of a winding driveway. The mansion flaunted two massive stories of high log walls wrapped with a large porch. The bright white
chinking between dark logs glowed in the moonlight. No cars sat in the driveway. Only two
security lights had been left on, one at the base of the steps leading up the porch and another
illuminating the door—French doors, fogged and rippled.

“Looks like they put down sod,” Malcolm said, pointing to the yard. “We can just peel it up,
stick the ivy right underneath.”

Levi nodded and Malcolm jogged back to the truck to gather supplies.

“Come on,” Tim said to Levi, after Malcolm had gone. “Don’t tell me you still believe that
us-versus-them shit.”

Levi turned away without a word and joined Malcolm at the truck. Tim stood alone at the
edge of the drive, staring up at the house and its immaculate French doors. To Tim, the doors
seemed to glow alone, disembodied from the rest of the house like an ornate portal.

Levi and Malcolm returned, carrying the shovel and axe and the poison ivy, its burlap bag
folded over the leaves like a hood. Malcolm tossed a pair of gloves at Tim and didn’t wait for
him to pull them on before thrusting the burlap bag into his chest. Tim dropped the bag and
cursed. Malcolm took the axe from Levi, and the two headed up the drive together.

Tim watched after the others until they reached the yard. As he pulled on the gloves, he tried
to summon a faded sense of thrill, but it was hard to ignore the danger behind their new situation.
They were adults now. Tim looked around. He had nowhere else to go. If the others were caught,
he would probably be found guilty, even if he didn’t do anything. After another beat, he picked
up the poison ivy and stalked up the drive.

At the top of the yard, Malcolm had started loosening sod with the axe so Levi could dig a
small well underneath it with the shovel. The humid air swallowed a series of wet chops. When
Tim arrived with the burlap bag, Malcolm propped the axe into the soil and clapped him on the shoulder.

The three worked with speed, without speaking. Theirs was an old system made mechanical through practice, and although Tim stumbled once with the poison ivy, the rules of the game came back to him almost immediately. They stood in a circle around a patch of grass peeled up from dark, wet soil to sandier dirt that resembled the floor of the pit in Washington Field. After they planted the ivy and finished layering sod back over the roots, it would look almost natural—like their addition had been there all along.

Meanwhile, though they didn’t know it, a man had appeared at the French doors. He stood behind the light on the porch, watching the work. Levi happened to glance up just as he finished patting the sod around the ivy. Levi’s eyes went wide and he hissed to the others. Tim and Malcolm whipped around.

The man raised his palms to them as if surrendering, and then lowered one hand to close the door behind him. He took a few steps into the light and sat on the porch step. His silver hair stuck up over his forehead. He wore glasses, striped pajama pants, and moccasin slippers.

“I noticed that you’re digging up my yard, there,” he said.

Tim and Malcolm and Levi glanced at each other, trying to get a read on what to do. Malcolm had wanted to run at first, but he ignored the impulse. He didn’t want to give this stranger that satisfaction of seeing him break. He crossed his arms and waited for someone to say something more. Tim was the first to interrupt the silence.

“We were just—”

“Just planting something in there. I saw. Some leafy thing, was that it? Some kind of ivy?”

“We’ll just take it out and go,” Tim said.
“No,” the man said, his voice stern. The man’s hands remained steady, one on each knee. “Leave it.”

The man’s restraint made Malcolm feel giddy, even more reckless. Malcolm wondered if maybe what he wanted all along—from the very start, the very first night of weed-bombing—was to get caught.

“Relax. I didn’t call the cops. First, I’m trying to figure out what you’re doing with my yard when there’s all this.” He waved at the house behind. “Could be anything in there, lots of things a few deadbeats might find worth something.”

“We’re not robbers,” Levi said.

“We’re not stupid,” Malcolm added. He uncrossed his arms and punched his fists into the pocket of his cut-off sweatshirt.

“I never liked the landscaping,” the man said. “All that monoculture. It was my wife’s department.” He smiled and looked down at his hands. “My ex-wife.”

Tim noticed that the sky had taken on a lighter tint to the east. The faint glow promised the night would end and another day would begin.

“I’d like it if you all came inside.” The man stood again. “Since I know you’re not robbers.”

“You don’t get it,” Malcolm said. “You think we’d take orders from you?”

“Malcolm,” Tim hissed.

“Malcolm, is that it?” the man said. A few silver strands of hair fell in front of his forehead. “When you’re older, Malcolm, you’ll learn that it’s rude to turn down an offer to be a guest in someone’s home.”

“Let’s just go in,” Levi whispered.
“No,” Malcolm said, louder. If they went through those doors, that the man would gain the upper hand. They’d be playing by his rules.

“If I go back in there alone, then I’ll be making some calls,” the man said, jabbing his thumb toward the house. “Whatever you want.”

Tim couldn’t be sure if the man was bluffing, but if it was his last chance to barter for his future, he would take it. He stepped forward first, and Levi followed.

“After you,” the man said.

Malcolm sighed and followed them up the porch and through the glittering entrance, into the house. The man entered last and shut the doors behind him.

“Take a seat,” the man said, offering the leather couch against one wall.

Malcolm, Tim, and Levi settled onto the cushions side by side. All three had kept their gloves on. To Tim’s surprise, the man left them and turned a corner down a short hall. A light clicked on in another room.

“We need to get out of here,” Malcolm said, looking toward the door

“No way,” Tim said. “Let’s just see what he wants.”

A minute later, the man shuffled back in carrying a tray with four tall glasses of milk. He set the tray on a cherrywood coffee table in front of the couch. Levi tried to focus on the glass of cool white milk in front of him. A filmy bubble popped at the surface.

“What do you want?” Malcolm said. “Money or something?”

“Money?” the man said. “I’ve got enough of that. But, well, if you’re landscaping for the whole neighborhood, I have some recommendations.” He took a sip from his own glass of milk. “Man across the way runs a company, tests its products on puppies. We’re evil sons-of-a-bitches, all of us.”
“We’re not apologizing,” Malcolm said.

“But why my house?” the man asked. “Why me?”

Tim looked over to Malcolm, who sat with his arms crossed, his jaw set. It seemed like the wrong question to ask, mostly because the answer was so simple.

“Tell me, and you can go.”

“There were no cars. It was dark,” Tim said. These were the usual rules, the factors that had always dictated which houses they chose on any random street.

“You can do better than that,” the man said. “Let’s hear it.” The lines around his face slackened. A few moments passed in silence.

“It’s so damned perfect—this house, the yard. I wanted to see it messed up a little,” Malcolm said. Something about the man’s lifestyle was too boastful, too arrogant. “Just look at your fucking doors.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” the man said. He gestured around the room. “And the walls? Look. Not even real logs. You wonder why it’s so perfect. It’s all fake, all of it.” He raised his glass of milk as if making a toast. “Here’s to me and my life.”

The man drained the milk in one gulp. He placed the empty glass on a small table beside the recliner and stood suddenly from his seat. Tim jumped up from the couch. The man dove toward them and managed to grab the front of Malcolm’s shirt. Two full glasses tipped over, and milk spread and puddled across the cherrywood table.

“The next time you want to judge my life, try living it,” the man barked.

Malcolm felt a few drops of milky spit dot his face. The man held him there for a second, and Malcolm held his ground, trying not to flinch. The lines on the man’s face pulled into angry
angles, but his wide eyes pressed in like he was begging for something. Malcolm reached up and removed the man’s hand from the neck of his shirt. It came loose more easily than he expected.

Tim had already fled through the door when Malcolm ran off the porch. Levi lingered last in the doorway, the morning gathering behind him. From the man’s point of view, inside the dim house, Levi wondered if he might have looked faceless, like a shadow.

“We’re sorry,” Levi said.

The man reached to the coffee table and flung the last full glass of milk at him. Levi dodged it. A stripe of milk cut the back of his legs. He leapt off of the porch, and the glass shattered behind him.

By the time they reached Wharton State Forest again, the sky had lightened to a blank. An August heat rose from the earth and steamed into a cloud over the pines. Most natural predators had faded from the state forest, leaving countless herds of deer to creep at the edges of the woods, their shy eyes always watching.

Tim parked the truck back at the center of the clearing. Levi got out first and headed to the pit, where he’d left his backpack. He’d been thinking of the bog, and of the man in the house with the swirled glass doors. Everyone seemed to want to own something—some piece of land or space in life. Not even the three of them were exempt anymore. Levi surveyed the pines held back beyond the clearing and wondered if it was possible to protect something and demand control over it at the same time.

In the truck, Tim turned in the driver’s seat and watched Malcolm pick at a loose corner of fabric in the back cab.

“We left the axe and shovel,” Tim said. “There could be fingerprints.”
“You want to go back, be my guest.” Malcolm pried away a bit of loose foam from roof. He looked past Tim, through the windshield. He could see Levi lingering at the pit, looking down into it like someone might gaze into a grave at a funeral.

A few moments later, Levi reappeared at the side of the truck and removed the last three beers from his backpack. He held up a can and then jumped into the truck bed. Tim opened his door and Malcolm followed. They piled into the truck bed around the unused bag of poison ivy and waited for light to widen over the tree line. Grasshoppers whined for the rising sun.

“I took it from work,” Malcolm said, pointing an elbow at the poison ivy. “We remove whole bunches of it sometimes from backyards.” He took a swig of beer, reached out and clasped one hand around the ivy.

“You’ll regret that tomorrow,” Tim said.

Malcolm shrugged and continued to fluff the poisonous leaves. He didn’t plan on regretting anything, even though he kept remembering the old man’s eyes in front of his own. Malcolm didn’t understand how someone who had everything could be so angry and empty.

“Some of the ivy I dug up, us three put there in the first place,” he said. “Funny, huh.”

“You knew all along,” Tim said. “You knew we’d go out looking and that there’d be nothing to see.”

“So what if I did,” Malcolm said.

“It doesn’t matter,” Levi said. He watched Malcolm trace the outline of the axe tattooed on his right bicep. Likely, the rash from the poison ivy would appear there, too. Malcolm could be so stubborn. “You don’t just drop a seed and expect it to change shit. It doesn’t happen that way.”

“Change what?” Tim asked. “What were we changing?”
No one answered. Malcolm kept opening and closing his palm in front of his face, like he was watching for the beginnings of the rash. Gnats began to rise and gather in disparate clouds around the truck bed.

A mockingbird called from somewhere in the pines, and the three turned their ears toward the sound. In the clearing, reed grass shot up from the knotted ground, spread into sandwort, and tangled finally into forest. Pitch pine and cedar glowed orange through the morning haze. The woods had been inherited, developed, and stolen, but all of it had come back the way it was supposed to. That was the most they could hope for, anyway—a little more time to recover.
Kath pulls into her father’s driveway for a Saturday visit when something like a gawky star tumbles across the sky. She squeezes the gearshift watches through the windshield as the object curves past a layer of cloud and down into the pines, its turn of arms and legs unmistakable. Kath has spotted many things falling from the sky, but never a person, though she’s read folktales of it happening.

Although a string of closing shifts at The White Horse has knocked her off a normal course of sleep, seeing a person twist out of the sky rattles the awareness back into her bones. Kath pulls the gearshift into reverse, backs out of the sand drive, and immediately heads east through the pines. This is the first morning she has been awake for in weeks. It’s also her twenty-eighth birthday, though she had not thought about it until this moment, like suddenly remembering a party she is already late for.

Kath navigates the quickest route, heading west on the dirt section of Tuckerton Road and parting off to the south down a thin crossroad barely wide enough to be a path. Pine branches smack the old car on all sides.

After spending most of her childhood watching the sky for anything that might drop her way, Kath became skilled at this kind of tracking. She has always known that the Pine Barrens are famous for pulling things down from above them. All different things, dead and dumb and living. The place is a total dumping ground for the celestial, the semi-celestial, and the confused. Her father once blamed the phenomenon on some magnetic property in the sandy soil, something about the balance of different kinds of ore, but she never bought any of his half-baked theories. *Your skepticism makes you a perfect scientist*, he used to say. But Kath is no scientist, not even
close. She knows it takes more than curiosity and a few lay textbooks on triangulation to turn a woman into a scientist.

When she finally slows the car, a cloud of insects floats through the open windows and hovers by her eyes. She looks all around, up at the scrap of sky through the windshield, and then straight ahead again. For the first time, she considers turning back, thinking there might still be time to avoid disappointment. She’s no kid any more. But why should she be so harsh on old fantasies? Besides, she reminds herself, she’s never seen a person falling from the sky.

She shuts off the engine, gets out of the car, and starts walking. The air has moistened. Every now and then she wipes away a string of bugs beading her brow. She’s been walking for a while when she looks off to the left and finds the woman in the woods.

The woman’s body has made a deep indentation in the sand, which puckers up into small dunes around the bases of nearby pine trees. She sits on one edge of this crater with her knees folded together under a long gray skirt. A thin ray of light coming in through the canopy slices across her body, from one shoulder down to the singed hem of her skirt. The trunks around the woman’s crater are charred, the pine needles of several trees shocked orange on the limb.

Kath takes a few cautious steps through crinkled underbrush, worried that the woman might dart off like a spooked deer if she feels threatened. The woman doesn’t notice her, so Kath walks a little closer. The whites of the woman’s eyes are shot through with red, and pieces of twig tangle in her dark hair, but otherwise she might be anyone—someone who could be found regularly at PTA meetings.

When she gets close enough, Kath lowers herself slowly to the ground on the other side of the small sandy gulf. A sharp smell of sulfur rings the cratered area. The woman doesn’t flinch.
A little spiral of steam curls over her head like a question mark. She stares into space, as if she can’t see anything at all. Kath wonders if she’s been blinded in her hurtle across the sun.

“I’m here,” Kath says. “Are you alright?”

The woman turns her head toward her stiffly, like the movement gives her pain.

“You must have come a long way,” the woman says.

“Not too far. I’ve been farther.”

“Is that why you have maps on your arms?” the woman says.

Kath holds up her forearms, covered in five years worth of black-ink tattoos. Sometimes, she forgets how strangers see her when they meet her for the first time. She turns her left arm to reveal her mother’s black-and-white portrait on the inside of her bicep.


“Here,” the woman repeats. “Do you live here?”

“Sometimes,” Kath says, thinking it over. “I mean, I used to.”

The woman nods mechanically.

Kath senses some kind of danger in being too hasty with the woman, so she sits for a moment in the stillness and lifts her gaze to the small, ragged blue space where the woman dropped through the canopy. In a few weeks, she knows the pines will hush together and erase the evidence like they do soon after a big fire, the past folding in on itself to become the present.

“Do you remember falling from the sky?” Kath asks.

“I don’t know,” she says.

“Do you know your name?”

“My name?” The woman sways a little and blinks a few times. “Why should I have a name?”
A worry expands like a fragile bubble inside of Kath’s chest. She doesn’t know the rules—what happens after a person falls from the sky, or how long they might stick around on earth. She needs more time. Maybe the woman will fray away or disappear if she leaves her there, if she doesn’t do something.

“Do you want to come with me?” Kath says.

“With you where?”

“I can help you,” Kath says, though she doesn’t know how.

Kath stands and reaches out with one hand and waits. The woman takes a long time to get up. Her charred skirt crinkles like old paper. As soon as she straightens, she reaches for Kath’s hand. Her palm burns, and Kath whips back her arm. When she holds her wrist up and turns it, she sees that the skin there has reddened into a vague handprint.


The woman stretches her mouth into a small smile. She smells of singed hair and sulfur, like a machine Kath’s mother would have warned her away from as a girl.

When Kath was younger, the mystery of falling things unsettled her, sent her jittery to books and computers for explanations. Simple answers never satisfied her. In one of her favorite books, The New Jersey Pine Barrens: An Untruncated History, she discovered that a famous Mexican pilot was the first to crash down during a goodwill flight in 1920, and that strange things have been falling regularly into the Pines ever since. She found frequent newspaper reports in and around old Washington Township that noted sightings and discoveries. She taught herself how to skim small print in dark libraries and dark skies for small streaks of light.
She kept records, too, like any explorer—long lists of facts and found objects—so she wouldn’t forget. She’d written down all the things she ever tracked from the sky. The official list has been lost, but she remembers some of the items: exhaust pipe, chalice, canoe, gurney, black suitcase (empty), brown suitcase (also empty), a turtle she could not coax from its shell, gas mask, dictionary (several pages missing), washing machine, fishing pole, and one desktop computer monitor.

She also witnessed the falling of a Fort Dix helicopter, but that object never appeared on any list. It was the last thing she followed down from the sky before giving up the hobby. One quiet day, she heard the noise, looked up, and easily followed the chopper’s smoky whine to the crash site—most objects didn’t fall with so much drama—but she had not been the first to arrive. Army men choked the area. Smoke pillared up from the hunk of metal through an immense hole in the tree canopy.

“Nothing to see here,” they told her. “Please clear the area.”

They waved Kath away and ignored her questions about survivors. She was afraid to see the damage, but she wanted to stay. She felt as if she had to know.

At dinner later that day, her father mentioned that the helicopter came from Fort Dix, where he worked as a mechanic. He’d been working there before he met and married Kath’s mother and they moved out into the pines around the base. He continued to work at the fort after Kath was born, repairing jet planes and helicopters right up until her mother died.

When she was very young, her father would sometimes take Kath with him to Fort Dix, a fenced off compound that looked to Kath like a dollhouse neighborhood full of perfect plastic homes she might’ve seen in a toy store. She would act as her father’s assistant and hand him
tools he needed. He would have to describe each tool by shape so she knew which to pass along. *Flat jaw* for wrench and *pointed jaw* for pliers and *broken telescope* for tappet.

Once, when she was still young—long before Kath tracked the falling chopper to its crash site—he took Kath and her mother for a ride in an army helicopter. Up there Kath could see the entire Pine Barrens spread below like an immense, fuzzy green sea. Even though she feared the power that might hide there, waiting to swipe at her family and pull them down, she felt the view was worth the risk. Her mother, on the other hand, could hardly breathe or open her eyes. She kept a hard grip on Kath’s arm.

“Tell me it’s okay,” she kept saying.

Kath remembered feeling happy, shocked at the reversal. Her mother needed her reassurance for once, so Kath let her have it. She gave it away freely, even after they had landed back on the ground.

When Kath followed the Fort Dix chopper down from the sky, she tried to ignore the idea that it might have gone that way because of something her father had done wrong: a few untightened bolts, the victim of a rushed repair. The chopper made her consider a new theory for falling things, that maybe there was no pattern to it, no geological mystery or secret about iron content of the soil. Maybe, she posited, the things she found falling from the sky made up the jetsam of a universe defined by careless mistakes and fateless mishaps.

That theory happened to be the one that stuck.

Only two weeks after she stumbled upon the crashed Fort Dix helicopter, a tractor-trailer carrying a load of harvested commercial cranberries veered across the Garden State Parkway into oncoming traffic and smashed head-on into a car—her mother’s. Kath learned about it before she read it in the papers, which meant it must have had something to do with her life.
Kath never let herself wonder who might have been the first on the scene of that crash. If she ever tries to envision the moment she never witnessed, her imagination stops at the point when the truck traveling too fast northbound skids over the grassy median. After that, she only sees a red wave of cranberries spill over both sides of the highway, clotting all evidence of disaster.

With the accident, Kath’s father started his long process of drowning. He drank during the day and woke in the night gasping. Kath used reason to understand what was happening. She supposed such things occurred to a large enough percentage of the population to be considered normal, but reason couldn’t answer everything. She couldn’t find a statistic in any book or newspaper that comforted her. She took a full-time job. She did not wander the Pines, did not read about falling objects or research the magnetic properties of iron ore. She stopped watching the sky for a long time.

Kath takes the fallen woman back to her father’s house. Part of her feels ashamed, bringing a stranger around—not just because her father won’t like it, but also because she doesn’t want the woman to see him, who he has become. Kath hopes he will sleep the whole day, so she will not have to explain. She promises herself the woman will be gone by the morning. Kath only needs a little more time to ask questions, to help the woman gather herself and her memory. Very often, things that fall from the sky do not reach the ground intact.

Kath enters the front door without need for a key. The woman sways behind her on the porch steps and staggers into the house. The sulfur smell comes off her like perfume—it’s truly unpleasant, terrible even—but her eyes are already beginning to lose their pink edges. They walk into the kitchen. On the counter sits an opened box of cake mix, a mixing bowl, and a half-emptied fifth of no-name vodka. The oven’s green display registers 375 degrees. Since she
nearly forgot her own birthday, Kath did not assume her father could keep track of the days well enough to remember. His effort is almost flattering, until she reminds herself the liquor won in the end. She turns the oven’s temperature dial back to OFF.

“We’re baking a cake?” the woman says.

“It’s my birthday,” she tells the woman.

The woman shakes her head and closes her eyes like she’s just been told sad news.

“I said it’s my birthday. My birthday.” Kath tosses the empty mixing bowl into the sink. It lands with a crash on top of the pile of more ancient dishes, crusted over in food.

“I’m sorry,” she says, still shaking her head.

Kath thinks she detects another small smile starting at the edges of the woman’s mouth. The woman is beginning to annoy her, but Kath reminds herself that if she is patient and calm she might get answers.

“I can’t take the smell,” Kath tells her. “You should shower.”

“I only take baths.”

“Fine,” Kath says. “A bath, then.”

She turns the woman by the shoulder toward the stairs. The woman’s feet land hard on each step, as if her body misses being in that state of falling. At the top of the staircase, she steers the woman toward the bathroom. On the way, Kath steals a peek into her father’s room. She knows what she will find, and sure enough, her father is sprawled on his back on the unmade bed, his mouth open and his eyes closed and the curtains drawn against the sun. Even under the woman’s sulfuric perfume, Kath senses her father’s familiar sour breath in the air. She tries not to let herself get angry. She has to follow a methodology. She must keep a controlled atmosphere, everything calm. The woman must feel at ease.
The woman stands near the sink in the bathroom while Kath rinses out the tub, cleans hair from the drain, and opens the faucet. Her mother had to be the last person to take a bath in that tub. After the water runs hot, Kath reconsiders the temperature and turns the faucet cool again. Kath places a towel on the toilet seat and turns to leave, but the woman gasps and grabs Kath’s forearm. She hasn’t moved so fast since Kath found her in the woods. Her hand burns in its vice grip, but not nearly as intensely as earlier.

“You’re leaving?” the woman says. “Don’t leave.”

Kath winces and nods and pries the woman’s fingers from her arm. The heat is just tolerable.

“Okay.” She raises her other arm and opens her palm in surrender. “Alright, I’ll stay.”

The woman starts to peel off her clothes. Kath tries to look away, but she wants to see if the woman is all woman through and through, even after the fall. She’s not as dumpy-looking as Kath originally thought when she’d been wearing the wool skirt. The skin pulls firmly around her joints and shines pink, almost glossy, in the places where clothing once covered. She steps out of her underwear and into the tub and shivers, reaches over and turns the faucet to its hottest, so steam pours out with the water. Kath looks away and strokes her forearm where the woman grabbed her.

“I feel much better now,” the woman says, immersed in the tub.

Gray water sloshes over the side onto the tile. Kath sits against the wall across from the woman and tucks her toes away from the growing puddle.

“What happened?” Kath says. “You can tell me.”

“Tell you what?” the woman says.

“I know you fell from the sky.”

“Don’t be silly,” the woman says.
“I saw you,” Kath says.

“Are you sure it was me?”

“I found you in a crater. You were burning up. Look at your skin,” Kath says.

The woman holds out her blistered, red arms and stretches her fingers. She turns her head toward Kath.

“Is there any soap?” she says.

Kath gets up and rummages through the bathroom closet again. She opens a box of Harrah’s Hotel and Casino body soap and hands the small bar to the woman. The woman plunges the bar into the water and streaks it across her chest. Her breasts are small, the skin on them pink and shiny. Kath tries not to focus on them, hanging just above the surface of the foamy gray water.

Sulfur mingles with cheap soap. It’s almost a worse smell. Kath tries not to breathe through her nose. The woman keeps her eyes closed while she scrubs, and when she opens them again Kath can see her eyes have cleared. The red has almost wholly faded. Her irises gleam a fierce blue. The woman looks around the bathroom as if trying to understand how she got there.

“This place is a mess,” the woman says.

“I’m trying to help you,” Kath says. “You fell from the sky.”

“Maybe I did, but I hate flying.”

“I need to know what happened,” Kath says. “How did you fall?”

“You’re crazy,” the woman says. “You say crazy things.”

“I saw you. Why did you fall out of the sky like that? Why?” Kath stands. Her heart hammers in her throat. “You have to remember.”

The woman begins to laugh. It’s an airy laugh, like an uneven leak in a gas canister. Kath walks out and pulls the bathroom door shut behind her with a little more force than necessary.
When she passes her father’s room again, he is sitting up on the bed rubbing his eyes. Kath’s stomach drops.

“Who’s here?” he says. “I heard a voice.”

“Just me, and a friend I ran into,” Kath says. “I’m helping her.”

She tries to avoid his eyes and searches the curtained windows behind him. She’s just begun to hope he might be too exhausted to ask more questions when he pushes himself off the bed and squints at her in the hall.


“She fell from the sky,” Kath says, trying to ignore the slide in his voice.

“I thought you were done with that shit.”

“So did I,” she says, crossing her arms. “I guess there’s one thing we have in common.”

He buttons his jeans and scratches his chin. She can hear splashing from the bathroom and wonders if the woman is going to use up the entire bar of soap.

“I made you a cake,” he says. “It’s your birthday.”

“Well, you sure tried,” she says. In truth, the failed gesture hurt her more than if he had simply forgotten.

“You can’t just bring strange women into my house,” he says.

“I found her. I couldn’t leave her out there.”

She feels the pressure of a familiar anger in her throat, pressing upward. Like this, her father would throw off the balance she had tried to keep so controlled.

“Your mother wouldn’t like this. It wouldn’t look right. See?”
He points past Kath, eyes wide, and when Kath turns around, the woman who fell from the sky is standing just outside of the bathroom door with a towel wrapped around her torso. A curl of suds snakes down one shin.

“I remembered,” the woman says.

“I want her out of here,” Kath’s father says. His voice rises and shakes, but already Kath is striding away from him, toward the woman.

“Remembered what? What did you remember?”

“I’m the man of this house,” her father booms.

“Follow me,” the woman says. “I know what happened.”

The woman grabs Kath by the wrist. Her skin has picked up even more heat in the bath. Her hand burns, too hot once again, and Kath gasps.

“You’re hurting me,” she says. “Stop.”

“I want her out of here,” her father calls as the woman drags Kath past him in the hall.

He doesn’t try to stop them. He is crying. His pleas come out wet. Kath understands that her father needs her more than she needs the woman, but she cannot wrench her arm free. The woman pulls her to the top of the staircase, and then down. She is so strong, her hand so hot it numbs Kath’s arm like cold.

“Let go of me,” Kath says, once they reach the ground level.

“I am going to tell you,” the woman says. “It’s what you want.”

“Fine,” Kath says, “but just let go. Let me go!”

The woman is smiling—hot white teeth bared inside raw pink lips. Even after the bath and the soap, she still trails the scent of sulfur.
Her father’s shadow looks down on them from the top of the stairs. By that time, Kath already knows what will happen. She calls out to him. She spots the angle his bare foot takes over the first step. She sees the turn of his ankle as he tumbles forward face-first. The woman yanks her away from the landing. Kath lets herself be pulled. She opens her mouth to scream, but no sound comes out. An ember of fear overtakes all other sense of burning.

Kath pushes her face into the hot, stinking curve of the woman’s neck. In the hellish dark, she imagines herself hovering in the sky above the house, a view like the one from the Fort Dix helicopter a long time ago, a safe place where everything can happen without it happening to her. It feels as if she is falling, but she understands that she is not. She hangs there, waiting to see her family exit the front doors together, unharmed. She will wait a little longer, and then she will know.
Friday nights we go out to Apple Pie Hill and make wishes on the bottle tree. Some of us believe it’s been here longer than anything else, longer than the ruins of sawmills or paper factories, longer than the cities of Chatsworth or Sweetwater. We bring our bottles, still full, useless until we take what’s inside and put it inside of us. Sometimes, after we’re drunk, we climb the old fire tower on the hill and look over the world beneath us, nothing but pine. We’re the only ones left, the last to live in these woods. We don’t worry about police or bears. Jesse tells us there were never bears in New Jersey in the first place.

The bottle tree is dead, its bare limbs left free. When we take turns, we always go in a specific order, oldest member to youngest. Jesse chugs and hangs his bottle on an open branch. This is a how real wish works: if the branch breaks, that wish is shit, done for good. Jesse’s branch never breaks. We keep expecting him to bow out and stop showing eventually like the oldest ones before him, but he keeps coming back.

One Friday we circle up with our bikes for wish fulfillment. No one calls it this. We call it getting hammered, wasted, busted, slammed. We say to each other: Let’s get fucked up.

“Tonight we’re doing it different,” Jesse says. “I’m sick of kid games.”

Some of us have scrounged for bottles our mothers have hidden from our dads, some get our older brothers to supply us, some call in favors from strangers. Altogether, we have more than enough.

“Initiation,” Jesse says. “They do it in Africa. Drink until you can’t see the stars.”

He points up, and we follow his finger to the full moon, cracked behind pine branches.

“We still hanging the empties?” we want to know.
Rules can change, but we want the hunger underneath the booze, the pause before a branch breaks, or doesn’t. Jesse ignores the question and points across our circle, past the bottle tree.

“Youngest first,” he says, meaning Kip.

He throws a bottle to Kip. No one wants to act up, but Kip’s more kid than the rest of us put together. He always wears these faded sweatshirts that fall to his knees. That night the breath bursts from us in clouds, and Kip is still wearing just one baggy shirt.

“Weakest first,” one of us laughs and punches Kip in the arm.

“You’ll down double what he can,” Jesse says. “I’ll hold your mouth open myself.”

He shoves the joker hard enough to send him out of our circle. No one laughs.

Kip stares at the bottle in his hand. Most Fridays that kid gets through maybe two or three before he’s spent and wobbling and the rest of us are patting him on the back and telling him to take it easy. His mouth stiffens into a straight line. He’s all business. For a moment we fear him the most. Then he closes his eyes and twists off the top and chugs. When he’s done a little foam dribbles from his chin. He rips off the label and slips the bottle onto the tree. It holds. He nods his head a little and someone whoops.

We are still playing the same game.

“Again,” Jesse says.

Kip burps and takes another, twists the top, chugs. He does it a third time and a fourth. The tree accepts each of his empty bottles.

By the fifth chug, Kip’s eyes start to gleam, the hard line of his mouth sags. Some of us continue to goad him on, to cheer. Some whisper, pretending Jesse isn’t listening. He keeps going. We are losing count of empty bottles, which we each take turns placing on the tree for
Kip. Every single one holds. We want to know before it happens, how this whole thing ends. We want to make a few wishes, too, want to finish off some beast of our own.

Still, we stand by. The cheers die down leaving the low groan of the wind, the silent screaming moon. Each of us is an archer with his arrow aimed inward. We hate only ourselves.

Above us, at the top of Apple Pie Hill, the old fire tower sways like a broken prop on a movie scene. The ghosts at the top of the tower don’t spot us down there beside the bottle tree. They don’t know about our plans. They keep an eye out for other fires, larger ones. They gaze over the dark sea of pine toward the gritty sparkle of Atlantic City on the horizon. They tell each other about the next time they’ll get lucky.
Duncan reeled in the line on his fishing rod until the hooked fish swayed above the water. He waited for a minute or two like that while a man on the riverbank stood behind a tripod, taking their picture. Someone shouted an indistinct cue across the water. He threw out his line again, and the fake fish plopped, still attached, back into the water. He twisted around to Cyril, his fishing partner, hoping he would know what to do next. Their instructions had been vague. Cyril placed his rod and fish into the canoe and picked up his paddle, so Duncan did the same. They steered the canoe over the sluggish current to a spot closer to shore and dropped their fish back into the murky water. Duncan wasn’t sure which kind of fish the fake ones had been modeled after, but they were each as long as his forearm and must have looked impressive from the riverbank. That was supposed to be the point, after all.

After another few minutes and another call from the bank, they pulled the canoe onto a sandy beach off the widest part of the river where a group of people had gathered for the Fruitland property shoot. Duncan wiped the sweat from his forehead and watched as the cameraman reset his tripod and Black Box Brownie facing another scene that had been set up behind the beach. There, a few scrubby pine trees had been strung up with wax fruit. Nearby a woman was threading more fishing line through the stems of the fruit. She passed each piece with its string to a man in overalls. After the man had collected several oranges, apples, and bananas together he maneuvered his ladder against a pine tree so he could hang the harvest.
“I thought they only grow bananas in California,” Duncan said to Cyril, who had wandered beside him to watch. They’d said almost nothing to each other since meeting earlier that morning.

“Takes a lousy trick to fool a fool,” Cyril said.

Duncan nodded. “If you want to know the truth, I only fished once in my life, before this.”

Cyril grunted and chewed his lip. To be fair, Duncan thought, the job didn’t call for fishermen, only role players. Duncan didn’t have any experience acting or fishing, but at twenty-five cents an hour, he figured he could be just about anything.

The man on the ladder finished hanging a bunch of fake fruit from the tree. Another two men carried a white sign onto the scene and tilted it to face the new position of the Brownie camera. The sign said in bold red lettering, “FRUITLAND: Home to Nature’s Harvest!”

Duncan learned about the Fruitland gig on a tip he’d gotten before the wanted-ad for role players could be printed in the papers. He recognized the job as a new possibility, a brief escape from the life he’d been stuck in. He didn’t see himself as much of a woodsman, but even out in the Pines, anyone might enjoy a few weeks’ reprieve from the work lines. In Fruitland, he could be something: a fisherman, worthy of a prize that would always appear hooked to the end of his line when he reeled it in from the dark water.

A man in a dress shirt and suspenders ambled across the beach toward Duncan and Cyril. He held a clipboard and looked down at it. He flipped one yellow page and then another.

“Fishermen?” he said, still looking down. “We need you out here every morning by seven sharp, they tell you that? Six hour shifts, with a break for lunch at midday. Bring your own.”

Cyril spit at the ground and gazed out over the Mullica River.
“Oh, and easy with the props.” The man tucked the clipboard under one arm, took out an imaginary fishing rod and demonstrated a gentle cast. “Let her out easy, right fellas?”

Cyril chuckled and rubbed his rough chin with one hand.

“Sir,” Duncan said, stepping forward, “I was told there’d be a place for me to stay?”

“Hourly pay is all we guarantee. Take it or leave it,” he said, and moved on.

Duncan kicked his toe at the sand, considering his options, and then went back to the canoe where Cyril had wandered. Duncan guessed that Cyril was a little older than him and that he’d taken jobs in the woods before. He had that gnarled sheen to him.

“You mind if I ask where you’re staying?” Duncan said to Cyril. “I thought there’d be working quarters.”

“Not far off,” Cyril said. “Guess you could say I live here.”

“In Fruitland?” Duncan said.

“No such thing,” Cyril said. “This is the Pines. There ain’t too many real-named towns, aside from Chatsworth down the way.”

“I’m coming from the city,” Duncan said. “I have to find somewhere to stay, or it looks like you’re on your own after today.”

“You drive a Ford?” Cyril asked. He flicked his chin toward a dirt road behind the beach where a few vehicles had parked for the shoot.

Duncan laughed and shook his head. He had left his parents’ home and spent the last of his leftover wages on a train to make it into the Pines, only enough left to get back.

“I couldn’t afford one these days.”

Cyril spit into the sand again.

“All I got waiting for me back there’s the end of a long line for bread,” Duncan said.
He waited for Cyril to say something. Though the market had taken a turn for the worse, nothing had truly been the same since the war, even for Duncan, who was just a boy by the time it started. Sometimes, it seemed like people didn’t want to help each other the way they had before. Cyril picked up his paddle and pushed the nose of the canoe back into the water. Duncan wondered if Cyril might’ve been old enough to fight in the Great War like his father and his uncle. It was hard to tell how old he was. Duncan sighed and took his place in front of the canoe. A moment later Cyril pushed the canoe off the bank and jumped in back to steer.

As they took up their rods again, Duncan tried to remember the first and only time he’d been fishing. It had been a while back, before everyone left for the war. Who had been the one to take him—his father, his uncle, both? Where had they gone to cast their lines? He couldn’t be sure it had ever happened, but if it did, Duncan wondered if the water they’d fished all those years ago could have been as still and red and dark as the one he dropped his line into then, for the good of Fruitland.

Duncan was almost nine years old when his father and Uncle Frank returned from the war. His mother had made him dress like he would for church, and they waited together on the sofa for the men to walk through the door, as if it were any regular workday. His mother kept a handkerchief pressed to her nose like it had been bleeding. Duncan thought he missed his father and Frank equally, but they’d been gone for such a long time in his mind, Duncan didn’t know what to feel. His stomach knotted and bunched up near his throat. His father opened the door first, Uncle Frank lingering behind. His mother stood, but Duncan stayed on the couch. By the time the front door shut, she had fallen into his father’s arms. Duncan stared at Frank, who stared back, unsmiling, like he couldn’t remember his only nephew.
Before the war, his father’s only brother had still been in college, the life of the party. He always performed little tricks for Duncan and his friends. He could make coins disappear or cards change suit. In Duncan’s favorite trick, he would pull a striped handkerchief from his mouth, and keep pulling, its length so surprising, it would seem to never end. When he had gotten all of it out and onto the floor, Duncan would study the artifact that must have taken up every space inside his uncle’s body. *Glad that’s out*, Uncle Frank would say, *but now I’m starving*.

Duncan’s father returned unharmed and, as far as Duncan could tell, as lively as he’d been when he left, but all the magic and charm had abandoned Uncle Frank. He could walk through the world, same as he always could, but he turned quiet and nervous. Duncan learned in school about veterans who’d suffered lost limbs or took to wheelchairs, but his uncle seemed to be intact, whole—not a single part missing on his body.

Duncan’s father insisted that his family take in his only brother. They sold his apartment, which had been just a few streets away, and added a second bed in Duncan’s room for him to sleep on. At night he would whimper and keep Duncan awake, sometimes forcing him to sleep on the sofa in the living room. On good days, Frank might nod to Duncan, but he otherwise did not acknowledge him.

Duncan’s father told him that after seeing what happened in the war, his brother had nothing much more to say about the world, or to it.

“But you saw the same things,” Duncan said, “and you’re fine, just swell.”

His father laid a hand on Duncan’s shoulder and squeezed. He tried to explain with a story about two shepherds protecting their sheep from wolves.
“One does one thing, and the other does something else,” he said, “but the wolves win in the end either way, no matter what or who is lost.”

He had no idea what his father meant, but he nodded as if he’d understood.

Duncan and Cyril maneuvered the canoe to the middle of a widest part of the Mullica so potential buyers could easily see them from the banks of Fruitland as they hauled in their catch every five minutes. The whole thing was part of a campaign that was supposed to stimulate the economy: sell cheap lots in the Pine Barrens, encourage progress on unused land, and reap the benefits of agricultural industry. This is what the boss had explained to Duncan and the team of hired role players the night before. The first thing to do when selling a dead land, he’d announced, is to make it look alive.

Duncan lowered his fish into the water. Both fake fish were made of wax, like the fruit, but apparently whatever chemical coat that kept it from falling apart in the water cost more than a few dimes. Cyril fidgeted with his rod, reeling in and casting so the fish flopped in an awkward arc through the air and hit the surface with a splash.

Duncan felt down about the nonexistent lodging. He wondered if it might be worth it to sleep in the woods so he could continue working.

“Are there any other good jobs out here?” Duncan asked. “Not a one’s left in the city.”

“Work’s everywhere, if you know how to see it.”

“I guess I don’t.” Duncan reeled in once more. The fish neared the surface and emerged unsurprised as always. “I was only ever a butcher.”

“You people don’t get it,” Cyril said.
Cyril had dropped his rod into the canoe and removed his hat and sat hunched forward, combing a few fingers through the patch of hair on his chin. Then he stopped combing and wagged his pointed finger at Duncan.

“All you do is want and want. Me, I go out to the woods, I find what you don’t know you need—find a lot of it—and give it. You can’t find it, whatever. You look at the sandy soil and figure it dead. You figure it worthless, ‘til you hang some fake fruit. I’m glad you do.” He smiled, dropped his hand to his knee, palm up. “That’s how the money comes easiest.”

“I’m not the one who thought up this scheme,” Duncan said. “But I need this job now, much as you.”

Cyril met Duncan’s eyes, and the smile faded from his lips. “You think ‘cause we work together, I owe you something?” He spit into the water. The viscous white glob floated right where it landed as if anchored.

“No, sir,” Duncan said. He shook his head and turned back to the river, but Cyril went on.

“No need to sir me,” he said, exhaling and leaning back in the canoe. “Hell, you ain’t any worse than me, sitting here, putting on a show. A quarter-an-hour’s plenty good for anyone. I guess I got space left on the floor next to the mutt, if you’re willing to take it.”

“You don’t say?” Duncan smiled and stretched out his hand for a shake, but Cyril coughed and turned back to the water.

“Beelzebub makes his deals that way,” he said. “What I’m doing you, let’s call a favor.”

When six o’clock came around and the role players’ first day ended, Duncan and Cyril pulled in their fake fish. Duncan watched Cyril unhook the fish from each of the rods and open the tackle box he carried with him.
“There’s some real catch here, don’t be fooled,” he told Duncan. “But they’re for us, not land buyers.”

Cyril showed Duncan how to hook a worm so it wouldn’t fall off, cast a line without a fake fish attached, and finally catch something real. The empty line felt light in his hands after the heavy fake fish had been removed, and the real fish always felt bigger beneath the water than they turned out to be at the surface. Hanging from the rod, each fish spun, small and frantic, eyes terrible and wide, mouth gasping. It seemed worse than anything Duncan had seen as a butcher’s boy. Cyril cut each line and grouped the tiny fish together like the man on the ladder had done with the fake fruit.

“They eat better than they look,” Cyril said.

After they had caught enough, Duncan pulled their canoe up the bank and they trekked to Cyril’s home along trails that Duncan could not quite make out in the spiny, dry undergrowth. Like the area around the beach, Cyril’s front yard had also been dressed up with wax fruit.

They found Cyril’s wife wandering around the house with a straw basket, gazing up at the tree canopy. She seemed to be looking for something in the sky, shielding her eyes from the sun with one hand. She swung the basket from the crook of her elbow. She did not match what he expected for the wife of a piney like Cyril. When she nodded to him with a smile, Duncan felt the heat push in on him from all sides. An ache pulsed in his chest. Cyril presented her with the fish, and Duncan got close enough to see what was in her basket—the shiny wax apples and pears of Fruitland.

“Tonight’s bounty,” she said, ironically showing off the contents of the basket. “Fresh hand-picked.”
“I don’t like it, but they’re paying extra.” Cyril looked up at the pines above, strung with more fake fruit. “This’s Lucille, my wife.”

Duncan nodded to Lucille, and the three of them they knocked their boots on the porch steps and went inside for dinner. Cyril and Duncan took seats at the table while they waited for Lucille to finish preparing the meal. Lucille already had a lot of food cooking, including a venison steak, as if she had already been expecting a guest. All Duncan ever heard about people from Down Jersey was how mean-spirited and lonely they all were, how they’d shoot you just for looking like you didn’t belong. But Cyril and Lucille seemed too normal to be recluses.

“Nobody’ll buy, anyway,” Lucille said as she washed her hands. “I keep saying we don’t have to worry.”

“Duncan don’t care,” Cyril said. “He’s not from around here. He’s from the city.”

“Well, sure I care,” Duncan said.

Really, he hadn’t thought much about the consequences of working for Fruitland. All day Duncan enjoyed being out on the river, the silence and the calm, but weren’t those qualities the very things that would disappear if the forest nearby was bought up and plowed down?

As Lucille began to serve dinner, a boy joined the table. His appearance formed another surprise for Duncan, who had not pictured Cyril to be a family man. He hadn’t even mentioned a son, just like he hadn’t mentioned his wife. It seemed almost indecent. Duncan thought if he had that kind of family, he’d go on bragging as long as he liked.

“That’s Harold,” Lucille said, pointing to the boy with one elbow as she cut the meat to serve. “Let’s see your plate, Duncan.”

“And how old are you, Harold?” Duncan said.
The boy stared back at him. A few seconds leaked by in silence. Cyril eyed Duncan across the table like he’d said something rude.

“He’s ten,” Lucille said after a final agonizing second of silence.

Duncan did not ask any more questions, but he continued to watch the boy, who ate in polite mouthfuls and excused himself wordlessly with one look to his father. Through his happy haze of feast and drink, something about Harold unnerved Duncan. He told himself that the boy’s silence and his parents’ independent treatment of him were likely signs of precociousness. Even though Duncan had filled himself at the meal, an uneasy envy found room to weigh him down.

The dog that Cyril mentioned happened to live outside, so after dinner, Lucille showed Duncan to the sofa instead. Around the house, the pines hushed as an Indian summer breeze combed through. The line between sleep and waking disappeared as soon as Lucille snuffed the flame in every lantern. Duncan slept better than he had since he was a kid without having to be woken nightly by his uncle on the other side of the room.

As soon as he was old enough, Duncan took a job with a local butcher, wiping blood and gristle from cement blocks, sweeping floors, and checking stock. With an additional mouth to feed, his family needed the extra income. He worked at the butcher through high school and stayed out of college to help pay the bills, which suited him well enough, despite his mother’s protests. Few people decided on further schooling in those days, and he was never impressed with those he knew attending university. He held that the academic mind was a weak one, a belief sustained by his experience with Uncle Frank.

Rather than continue his schooling, Duncan’s first priority was to escape his parents’ house and the blind stares of his uncle, and for the first time since the war ended, it seemed possible.
Business flowed steadily for the shop, and he’d been promoted to assistant. Sometimes, while taking inventory in the walk-in, Duncan tried to imagine the bodies of cut-open cows hanging on the walls to be human parts mangled on hooks. When he walked away from each potentially torturous shift, he told himself he was more like his father than his uncle—the stable and brave type, the type who could return from hell unaffected.

Duncan saw himself as a good person and started to think about a family of his own. He met girls, but always found himself afraid to bring them home and meet his family. Every night, Uncle Frank whimpered across from him in the dark. Duncan wondered how the man could live for so long, forcing himself quiet though he still had a working tongue.

Things had just begun to align for Duncan when the stock market crashed. He lost his job with the butcher, who closed shop along with countless others in the neighborhood. Money went bad and people went poor. At first, Duncan didn’t let himself worry. He knew he could be self-reliant and patient—two characteristics Hoover said would get everyone through the panic.

Another year passed, and all Duncan’s stores of patience and self-reliance drained to empty. He and his father lined up for day jobs at the riverside every morning, while Uncle Frank remained at home, quiet and nervous, watching empty spaces. Duncan imagined all of his hard-won pay going toward the food that his uncle shoved automatically into his mouth at every meal. He felt his anger rolling inside of him, gathering mass. He had always been careful about slandering his uncle in front of his father, but more and more often his bitterness slipped out unchecked.

“He belongs in an asylum,” Duncan told his parents after another long morning jumping from work line to bread line. “We can’t support him.”
“He’s family,” his mother said, as she stitched a hole in a pair of Duncan’s pants. “And anyway, I don’t like those places. They scare me.”

“This is your duty,” his father said. He’d had been washing his hands at the sink. Duncan could sense the heat coming off of him. “As a man, as my son.”

“I know my duty,” Duncan said. “I’m your son, not his.”

“That’s enough,” his father said, shutting the tap.

“He’s taking the bread from our mouths,” Duncan said, coming to his feet at the kitchen table. “He doesn’t even talk, but he sure eats.”

His father strode from the kitchen and entered his office again. His mother took one of Duncan’s hands and tried to calm him. He sat back in his chair and searched the grimy window. He had so much he wanted to do, and yet he could do none of it.

“They’ve been through the war,” his mother said. It was her favorite line, the one she likely told herself to come to terms with the truth.

Every day at dinner, Harold emerged from the woods behind the house like an animal and joined the three adults at the table for fish and berries and bread, but he never said a word. The boy’s appearance made Duncan no less comfortable than he would have been had a wolf stalked from the woods to sit at the table, fork and knife in hand. Duncan searched for clues in the boy’s behavior—the way he cut his meat or ate his peas—but he never revealed a thing. Eventually, Harold would finish his meal and look to Cyril, and Cyril would nod. Then the boy would bring his plate to the sink, clean it, and retreat down the hall.

Duncan tried to mind his business by treating Harold as Lucille and Cyril did. He didn’t ask questions. It should have been easy for him, he thought, since he had so much practice ignoring
another person in his own home. But Harold had the opposite effect on Duncan. He felt haunted by the boy, dogged by his wordlessness, as if the child knew the kinds of things he thought about unexplained muteness and silence. At the same time, Harold’s presence served as a constant reminder that, after the three-week acting gig ended, Cyril would still have his quiet life in the woods with his family, the kind of family Duncan longed for. He did not like to be reminded of the other silence that awaited him back in the city.

At the end of the first week in Fruitland, sometime after lunch, Duncan finally learned more about Cyril’s son. It came from nowhere, as most confessions do, a bird thrown to the wind to see if it might fly.

“Harold can’t talk none,” Cyril announced. “Never did, not ever.”

The news stung, but at the same time, Duncan was not totally surprised. He thought he might have known the truth all along, or else the boy’s silence would not have affected him so much. Muteness seemed to follow him wherever he went. It entrapped him. On the other hand, Duncan also felt relieved that Cyril could admit there was something wrong with the boy. It put a welcomed dent in what Duncan had begun to see as Cyril’s fairytale lifestyle.

“How come?” Duncan asked.

For a moment only the sound of Cyril’s reel answered: a winding series of clicks, then a whoosh that meant he had cast his line again, the fake fish clinging on at the end. Cyril had been warned twice about his treatment of the props. The boss was afraid he’d lose the fish to the river, since it was expensive to make fake fish that could be pulled repeatedly in and out of river water.

“My only son, and he can’t speak a damn thing,” Cyril muttered.
Duncan wanted to know if they ever took Harold to see a doctor—not one of those piney doctors, but a real one. He held back. After so many six-hour shifts, nearly a week together in a boat, plus nights and dinners, Duncan knew what things he should not say to his partner.

“There’s got to be a reason for it,” Duncan said. He wondered what was worse—being born speechless or becoming it.

“Ain’t no reason. Ain’t nothing of God in it,” Cyril said.

Duncan turned his head to face the bank, where a man stood gesturing out over the Mullica as if demonstrating its greatness to the couple beside him. Bright red apples and perfect yellow bananas dangled from the pines over their heads. Duncan reeled in his fish, and the man steered the couple away from the river again. The couple’s appearance was a rare occurrence. Despite the ads in all the papers and the circulation of pamphlet materials in well-off communities, few people had come out to see “Nature’s Harvest!” in the strung-up town. Duncan caught a glimpse of people watching from the shore maybe once or twice a day, but no more.

With all the space in between casting and reeling, Duncan had plenty of time to think, and most times he thought about the war. It had ended a while back, but something about the stillness on the river made him retrace old thoughts. He’d heard things, read things, but the descriptions of the trenches and the bombings and machine guns felt foreign, unknown. What meaning did life hold anymore if a person could be killed so quickly, impersonally? At times he felt close to understanding the weight of whatever had changed his uncle, but then he would pull away, resistant. Duncan considered whether or not talking about his uncle might be a help to Cyril, but he decided not to mention it.

“You know anyone in the war?” Duncan asked Cyril.
“I don’t care anything for no war,” Cyril said. “Let me tell you about this country. It’s what you see around you. That’s it. Land and trees and river. It ain’t no business of mine what they do over there in other parts of the world.”

In the woods, what Cyril said could have been true, but in the city, Duncan knew that everyone’s business belonged to everyone else. And when people who lived under the same flag died, you had to do something about it if you could. Duncan’s heart fell to his stomach when he remembered that his uncle had been the one to tell him that, just before he left. The memory stung like cold water. Duncan would have been very young, but then again, most of his happiest memories from that time centered around Uncle Frank. He cleared his throat and tried to make his mind blank. He watched the unbroken sky above their canoe.

“It’s my business,” Duncan said. “My father was over there.”

“Good for him,” Cyril said. “But me, I got all the freedom I need.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Duncan said.

“I just hope it don’t get taken over,” Cyril said, staring off to the bank where the two prospective buyers had been standing a moment before. “Otherwise maybe I’ll be starting a war of my own.”

Duncan reeled in his fish and let it dangle over the water. Its fake scales shined wet in the sun. For so many years, Duncan accused his uncle of faking his silence, as if it were another trick he might perform for an audience, but suddenly Duncan was the actor. He had taken on a role as fisherman in a play where the stage would be cut up and sold at the end of the show.

Duncan realized that his life had been filled with easy choices. He never had to go to war like his father. Although he told himself he wanted a family, he still hadn’t been tasked with
supporting one like Cyril. Duncan wondered if his anger—his sense of life’s injustices—was even real, or if it was just a prop, hung up to distract from real fear.

At dinner that night, Duncan found it harder than usual to ignore Harold now that he knew the truth. Although Lucille and Cyril carried on conversation, Harold’s silence seemed louder. It pulsed inside of Duncan’s ears. Once, the boy caught Duncan watching him from across the table and met his gaze. Duncan looked away immediately. He didn’t want Harold to see anything in him that he might connect with. When Harold finally left the table as usual, Duncan felt relieved.

Later, after the plates were cleared, Lucille, Cyril, and Duncan stayed up later than usual drinking a cider Cyril called Jersey Lightning. Cyril tipped the bottle to fill Duncan’s cup. Even though he sometimes found a way to get liquor in the city, it had been dangerous, and looking for work had taken up more of his concern. The cider went down warm and stinging. He tried not to drink too fast, because he didn’t want to make a fool of himself.

“I brew it myself,” Cyril said, holding up the unlabeled bottle of amber liquid. “Had a hell of a time with it at first, but now I’m known for moonshine around here.”

“This place never knew prohibition,” Lucille said. “Tell ‘em to put that in the Fruitland fliers.”

Cyril shook his head. “Tell you what, I’ve about had enough of all this acting.”

Sometimes Cyril got frustrated whenever he caught sight of prospective buyers coming to the banks of Fruitland. He never reeled in his fish like he was supposed to.

“Good pay, though,” Duncan said.

“Good pay for what?” Cyril said. “I’m selling my home out from under me. It ain’t right by me.”
“What can we do?” Duncan said. He leaned forward in his chair and studied the glass of liquor in his hands. “We need the money. You said it yourself.”

“Tell you what I can do—I can fight it. I can resign,” he said. “Blow the mission to smithereens.”

“But, why try? Sometimes I wonder about that,” Duncan said. He paused and looked from Cyril to Lucille, who seemed to be waiting for him to go on. “I mean, out of two shepherds trying to protect their flock, one will do one thing, the other does something else…but the wolves win in the end either way.”

“What’s that, some parable?” Cyril said, frowning.

Duncan focused on his drink again, wondering if he’d had too much cider. He had to admit, the saying sounded stupid, less certain than it seemed when his father said the same thing to him as a boy. Back then, he thought the message had been about hope—some survive, even when others don’t—but he’d come to understand that it was really about futility.

“I get it,” Lucille said. “Things happen, and we can’t change them no matter what we do.”

“I’ll be,” Duncan said. “You understand better than I do.”

Duncan and Lucille laughed, but Cyril continued frowning.

“I told him about Harold,” Cyril said.

Lucille nodded, looked away, and took a sip of her drink. “Hope it ain’t an inconvenience.”

“No,” Duncan said. “Not at all.”

“Had to admit, I was hoping that meeting a city stranger like you might shock him outta whatever he’s in,” Cyril said.
Cyril’s expression didn’t change, so Duncan couldn’t tell if he was joking or not. Duncan cleared his throat and finished his latest cup of liquor. Cyril didn’t offer a refill, and the three of them shifted to small talk until Lucille and Cyril finished their drinks and retired for the night.

Later on, Duncan startled awake in the dark after dreaming he had seen the boy standing over the sofa, his silence deafening, frantic as gun fire.

The news in Fruitland could not be called good.

On Thursday of the second week, Duncan’s boss gathered all the role players together and told them they had decided to cut the campaign short because of lack of interest and bad omens from speculators. Duncan took this to mean no one had expressed any interest in buying. They would all be out of work again after one more day, when the new town would be dismantled. All the fruit would be taken down from the trees, which would become plain old pines again.

Duncan bought a train ticket for the next evening, and by the time their final shift had ended, Cyril had set his fake fish free with a particularly powerful cast.

“Good riddance,” he said, smiling as the fish plunked through the surface. “Think you city people might’ve learned by now that these woods wanna be let alone.”

Duncan and Cyril fished a larger catch than any other that evening. Lucille sat on the porch waiting for them while two men in overalls walked the yard with ladders, removing all the fruit from the trees.

“Shoulda called it Fishville,” she said when they held up their medley of perch and pickerel.

Cyril went inside for two glasses of his Jersey Lightning and Duncan watched a man struggle to free a pear from a high branch. When he looked down from the man on the ladder, he found
Harold near the base of the tree. Duncan lifted his hand in a timid wave, but Harold ran off, away from the house.

Lucille cooked a feast, the usual meal plus nuts and wild mushrooms and a green drenched in oil alone that surprised Duncan with how good it tasted. After they had finished eating, Harold lingered behind his picked-at plate. He kicked his feet under the table.

“Stop that,” Cyril said, pointing at the boy.

Harold looked away from his father and at Duncan. Duncan met his stare, felt it all the way down in his stomach where it flipped like a fish. The boy pushed away from the table, walked around to where Duncan sat, took his hand, and pulled. The corner of Cyril’s mouth twitched. The boy kept pulling, so Duncan stood and let him lead the way down the hall and through the door he usually disappeared through alone.

Harold had filled his room with little artifacts of all kinds—stones and shards of glass and glassware, arrowheads and pressed flowers and moss and even butterflies pinned to a piece of wood. Duncan hardly noticed the small, lumpy mattress in the corner. He wandered the room like it was a museum. Harold went to his desk, pointed to a chair, and Duncan sat. Then the boy opened the desk drawer and took out three small, round pieces of metal. He turned Duncan’s palm up and placed the three balls inside. Harold raised one arm straight and crooked the other elbow beside his head and with one finger squeezed a silent, invisible trigger. Bang.

“Bullets?” Duncan said. “Musket balls?”

Harold lowered his arms and nodded twice. Duncan pushed the musket balls around in his palm, wondering what wars had been fought there, and whether they had been against other men or beasts. He guessed Harold might know.

Cyril appeared in the doorway, Lucille behind him.
“Enough of this child’s stuff,” Cyril said. He strode in and grabbed Harold by the arm just above the elbow and yanked him away from Duncan. One of the musket balls fell from Duncan’s palm. Harold’s mouth opened, but no sound came out.

“Wait,” Duncan said, “it’s fine.”

“I decide what’s good for my boy. You ain’t got a say.”

Cyril still had Harold’s arm in his grip. In the shadows, Lucille waited with a hand raised to her mouth.

“I have something to show him,” Duncan said. “Harold, you want to see a trick?”

Harold closed his mouth. He nodded. Cyril loosened his grip.

“You don’t bother yourself about him,” Cyril said.

“I don’t mind,” Duncan said. He turned to Harold. “You got a penny?”

Harold drew closer. He opened the desk drawer, took out a penny, and gave it to Duncan.

Duncan bit down on it, testing its authenticity for fun like his uncle used to. Harold smiled. Duncan held the penny between two fingers, hoping that he hadn’t forgotten the trick. He used it a few times to impress girls, but not often. He closed his eyes for a moment to remember and saw his younger uncle laughing as the penny disappeared from one hand and into the other. Duncan opened his eyes again. He showed Harold the coin in one palm, the nothingness in the other. Then he closed both of his hands to fists.

“Watch,” he said. He brought his fists together and apart again in one quick motion, and when he reopened them the penny sat inside the opposite palm.

Harold clapped his hands together and smiled wider. He drew a circle in the air that Duncan took to mean he should do it again, and he did. Again and again.
The whole time, Cyril and Lucille watched together from the doorway. Cyril’s face had gone blank, like it might during sleep, but Lucille stared hard at Duncan and her son. She seemed to be trying to figure out if a man who knew such illusions could be trusted. Duncan nodded to her and smiled, and finally she relaxed, entered the room, and drew Harold into her chest.

After Duncan had taught Harold the trick’s secret and his parents put their son to bed, Duncan, Lucille, and Cyril went out to the porch for more of Cyril’s Jersey Lightning. The late summer heat had lost some of its heaviness after the sun went down and another light wind picked up. The pines creaked and hushed in the dark while they let their blood grow warm with alcohol. Duncan’s vision swayed. He felt content, although the gig had ended a week short. Lucille seemed upbeat, too.

“I thought he was broke—Harold,” Lucille said. “I know he’s not, but it felt like it. Felt like I birthed Mrs. Leeds thirteenth child on my first try.” She put her hand to her head and smiled. “I don’t know what you did, but it was something.”

“It’s just a simple trick,” Duncan told Lucille. “A little thing my uncle taught me.”

Duncan emptied his glass and Lucille went back inside to get a new bottle of Jersey Lightning. Cyril hadn’t said much since Harold had gone to bed. He sat on the step beside Duncan, swirling the liquor in his glass.

“My uncle’s the same way,” Duncan said. “He doesn’t talk anymore. But he used to. It was the war that did it.”

Cyril grunted. “Guess there’s all kinds of battles that can keep a person from speaking his mind.”

“I hated my uncle,” Duncan said. “I came here hating him.”
They were quiet for a while. Duncan promised himself he would try to be more patient with Frank when he returned to the city the next day.

“I been thinking about your parable,” Cyril said. “The wolves and the shepherds.”

“Yeah?” Duncan said.

“The way I see it, why ain’t we the wolves?” he said. “Didn’t we win out today? Won’t be no shepherds in Fruitland anymore.”

Duncan laughed and Cyril smiled along. Laughing wasn’t a habit with him.

Duncan squinted into the night. From one of the pine trees, a dark, round shape hung high near the trunk.

“Look, over there,” Duncan said, pointing.

Just as Lucille returned to the porch with the new bottle of liquor, Duncan stood and walked over to the tree. The darkness swallowed him a few steps from the porch. His vision crackled and then adjusted. The object hung like a shadow tied to the pine. As he got closer, the light from the moon sliced the piece of wax fruit. He jumped for it—once, twice. Finally, he managed a good hold on it, and the pine let go.

Duncan juggled the wax apple in one hand and wondered if Cyril or Lucille could see him from the lantern light on the porch. Alone under the tree, he realized that his whole life he’d been taken by all the easiest illusions, all to avoid his own cowardice. If he opened his eyes, he would learn to see the blinds and mirrors, the careful distractions hung like props in the dark.

Duncan walked back toward the ring of light on the porch. When he reached the steps, he held the apple out in front of him for Cyril and Lucille to examine.

“The last apple left in Fruitland,” he said.
He closed his hands around the apple and moved both palms over it a few times, like a pitcher preparing to throw a final strike from the mound. After a few laughs and a short, showy set-up, he broke both of his palms apart to display an empty space where the fake fruit had been just a moment before.
PART III.

HUNGERS
At the counter of Oswego River Adventure Rentals, an old woman takes my cash before telling me the water levels are low today. In other words, we will likely be mired in mud for half of the three hours we are supposed to be gliding through the forest on the glassy cedar-lined river featured in glossy pictures around the office.

“Not enough rain,” the lady says. “It’s always like this come August.”

I smile as best as I can. “Is there a map or something?”

“We’re out of maps.” She’s already returned to her game of solitaire. “You shouldn’t need one.”

The woman waves her hand at a framed map of the Oswego River on the far wall. Sam stands in front of it, her chin tilted up. I turn back to the woman and pay for both of us, thinking we’ve come too far to go back now. It’s the right thing to do given the situation, even though I’m broke. Sam’s been my best friend for a long time, and I knew her dad really well. It still stings that Sam didn’t call me about his death after it happened. I had to read about it in the paper before finally giving up and contacting Sam to find out how she was holding up. But I wanted her to need me, to cry on my shoulder like she did when Donny broke up with her in the ninth grade, even though she’d never even kissed him.

After paying, I pull my hair back so it won’t frizz in the muggy heat and lead Sam outside to one of the wooden picnic tables. Sam draws her sunglasses down over her face and refuses suntan oil when I offer some of mine. I swat a bug from my thigh and curse. We wait there for someone to carry our kayak from the garage and load it on a trailer behind an idling bus. A few
more buses—the short kind—cluster in a small sandy lot behind the picnic tables. Someone painted all of them the same greenish color of old penny grit.

“Finally, a girl’s day out,” I say. “You need this. We need this.”

Sam stares off down the forest road, back in the direction we’d come. She hasn’t been very talkative. The kayak trip was my idea. A few times, when we were younger, my dad and Mr. Brenley took Sam and I out here to fish and canoe for some father-daughter time. We even camped overnight once in a cabin on some lake. I never came out here in high school—as far as I know, neither did Sam—but it seems to me like the Pine Barrens is made for this kind of bonding. Nature’s rejuvenation, all that. It’s a sad story. I always loved Mr. Brenley. Everyone did. Aside from being a cool guy in general, he had that rock-star teacher thing going on, or so I hear. The science classes he taught at our high school had been too advanced for me.

“This place isn’t like I remember, though,” I say. “It seems smaller out here, or something.”


“It’s just the bus,” I say. “It’ll go away. Let’s try to live a little.”

But Sam is right. A sulfuric gaseous smell hangs in the air like it’s been here longer than we have and will stick around for a while after we leave.

I watch from a picnic bench as a man with a beard almost as red as his face heaves our faded kayak onto the trailer. When he bends to turn the kayak on its back, a stream of sweat drips from his hair. He grunts, stands to full height, and tugs his jean shorts up around his gut.

“How about that piney?” I nudge Sam and flick my chin to the man with our kayak, but she just shrugs.

The red-faced man waves us over. Of course, we are the only kayakers waiting. We board the sweaty bus and bump down a series of dirt trails barely wide enough to be roads. Sam holds her
temples and mutters about a headache. I don’t have any aspirin, or I would offer it. Instead, I go for distraction and tell her about the guy I’ve been seeing, a starting freshman on the football team. Sam and I haven’t talked much since leaving for college, but I consider us to be the type of friends that don’t need to talk so often.

“Are you singing still?” I ask.

“Sometimes I’ll do an event or show,” she says.

“See? Look at us.” I drape my arm around her and squeeze. “We’ve come so far since high school.”

“Yeah, because singing the National Anthem at little league games is the pinnacle of life accomplishment.” She slips out from under my arm and leans against the rickety bus window.

“Don’t say that. You’re a great singer. You know it.”

Sam had been a part of three choirs in high school. She even made the all-state choir once or twice. I may have had more boyfriends, but I was always jealous of her voice. Sometimes I don’t feel like I have that extra something, a special talent. I am happy, though, and the more I think of it the more I wonder if that’s what makes *me* different, in the end.

The bus finally lurches to a stop. We get off at the source of the river, which doesn’t really deserve to be called a river at all. Out in the Pine Barrens they give things misleading names. I don’t remember thinking about that all those years before, but it’s clear now. A cloud of gnatty bugs hangs out on the surface of the water under a small footbridge and the air smells like rotting wood. A green and orange sign points to the launch on one side of the bridge. The bus driver, his shirt plastered to his skin with sweat, hands us two small lifejackets and shoves our kayak into mud on along the bank.
“You girls keep an eye out for the Jersey Devil,” he says. “Got a goat’s head and these big wings.”

He stretches his arms out to either side. I smile wide to keep from laughing.

“We’re from around here,” I say. “We know it’s just a story, but thanks.”

The man looks confused and shuffles back and forth for a moment, then hobbles over to the bus.

“Think we were supposed to tip him?” Sam whispers. “He was just trying to be nice.”

“Stop worrying,” I say. “You don’t have to tip out here. The rules are different”

We both stare at the pathetic kayak in the mud. I motion for Sam to get in. She ekes the kayak onto the slimy creek, and I step in after. The water is so low at first that I have to dig into mud with my paddle to propel us over three inches of fly-coated goop-water. Sam looks over her shoulder to watch me struggling like that, and then she finally joins in. Eventually we make it around a bend and into deeper water—just deep enough to float on, but at least we can move.

“You ever think about how easy it’d be to disappear out here?” Sam says, resting again with her paddle across her lap. “Just go, and keep going?”

“Not really,” I say. In truth, I hate statements like these. We’re young and beautiful. I don’t understand why she has to talk about disappearing, but I try to go with it anyway. “Hey, it reminds me of that girl who disappeared a few weeks ago.”

“What girl?” Sam says. She turns in the kayak to face me, her eyes wide.

“Wait, you didn’t hear?” Suddenly, I realize it’s a bad time to mention the story if Sam doesn’t already know. It might look like I’m staging a tragedy contest where I hold the trump card. Sure, people have been talking about Mr. Brenley, and how awful it is to lose such a great man—but more recently, the bigger mystery-tragedy is the story about Princeton-bound girl from
the next town over who just vanished. “Well, it’s no big thing. It’s nice out here, right? Nicer than I thought, at first.”

“Laur, what girl?” she says.

“I don’t know much about it,” I lie. “Just some senior at Tuckahoe who disappeared right before graduation.”

“Oh,” Sam says. She blinks a few times and then finally turns around.

We continue paddling in silence for a little while. My paddle keeps scraping the bottom of the river or creek or whatever it is. I have so many questions for Sam, but I want her to ask me a few questions, too. We haven’t spoken in so long, it’s like we’ve gone past the point of having everything to talk about to having nothing to talk about.

“Can we try to get over to that bank for a break?” Sam says.

“Whatever, sure.”

With one hand, I test the muddy water—sticky and hot—and wipe it on the side of the faded kayak. I guess we can forget about swimming. As we paddle over to the bank, I start thinking about those huge, beautiful landscape photos in wilderness magazines. When we were kids, our fathers both made the Pine Barrens seem like this grand thing. I imagine opening a National Geographic to a gritty picture of scrubby pines on one page, right next to a purple mountain majesty on the other. For whatever reason, the contrast is funny to me. A bubble of giddiness rises in my throat. I snort and start to crack up.

“What?” Sam stands in the kayak to pull us to shore, but it rocks when she reaches full height. She plunks one foot into the water to hold steady, but loses her balance and falls sideways into shallow mud water. At this point, I can barely breathe. I rock back and forth, wheezing, gripping the edges of our kayak.
“You’re crazy,” Sam says, lifting herself from the water. Mud cakes her shorts. She wipes some of it off, and then she starts laughing, too. She puts her hands on her knees and leans forward. “You complete asshole.”

Our guffaws crack through the woods as we wipe the tears from our eyes. It’s the best moment of the day so far. It’s good to laugh with Sam again. It makes me feel like we’re still as close as sisters.

“Let’s get wasted tonight,” I say. “I’m so sorry.”

I mention a party I know about, at a penthouse in the city. Invite only, but I tell Sam I can pull some strings if she’s interested. She stops laughing and steps through the water to get her paddle, which has floated toward the opposite bank. She straightens up again with the paddle and squints over the bank.

“Hey, look at that, over there.”

She points to an area on land where the scene seems to change. I stand and follow her finger to where the crippled pine trees and low brush give way to a grove of stiff, limbless trees, bare except for the tops, which are thick enough with leafy bramble to keep sunlight off of the ground.

“You think maybe a fire came through?” I ask.


Spliced among the gray trees I can just make out what she’s seen, a crease of blue that looks like a tarp or a tent.

“It’s just a campsite,” I say. “Boy Scouts or someone.”

“Let’s see if we can get over there.”
We settle in the kayak again and paddle up the bank on one side. Sam has this wide-eyed, hungry look to her, like an animal stalking its prey. I go along with it. Part of me just wants to get home, but I also want this to be Sam’s day. I hope it turns out that I’m the only one who can help her—me, the friend she never even called when her dad died. I take up one of the grungy yellow lifejackets we’d thrown at our feet and sling my arms through it.

“Just in case,” I say, making of a show of tightening the straps. “We have to be safe, now. Remember, the Jersey Devil’s out there.”

Sam ignores me, like she doesn’t even realize I’m joking. Apparently, she’s decided she’s done laughing for the day. Now it’s all business.

“There’s a break in the bend up there.” She points and starts to maneuver the kayak in that direction.

“I don’t think we’re supposed to go that way. No map, remember?”

“Live a little, right?” Sam says, angling the kayak toward an impossibly thin tributary.

“That’s what you said.”

I don’t remember saying that—it seems cold, given Sam’s situation—but I let it go and continue to paddle. I’m starting to get a little bit nervous. I may have lied to Sam earlier, but I know all about that Tuckahoe girl’s disappearance. She was only a class year behind us, from a high school in our same district, and the papers all mentioned something about foul play. They sent search parties all over the place in the Pine Barrens to scan for clues. They haven’t found anything yet, but I don’t want either of us to end up like that girl, new investigations pending.

The edges of the kayak scrape against high banks on both sides of the tight waterway. We have to ditch the paddles again and use our arms on the banks to push ourselves forward. The
sun breaks through the canopy in streams, and soon the burned grove opens into a strange clearing on the right side of the bank. Sam leaps out of the kayak and looks down at me.

“Let’s get out,” she says. “Explore a little.”

I have no choice but to follow. An ashy layer of leaves and pine needles crackles under our feet. Every once in a while a cloud of tiny insects crowds my eyes. Eventually, we can make out two tents through the trees.

“Is that a camp?” Sam stops in front of me and then hurries forward again.

“We might be trespassing,” I whisper.

“I don’t see any signs,” Sam says, louder. She apparently doesn’t care who overhears us.

We enter the camp, me lingering behind Sam. The two tents hang tattered from poles across from each other. A series of ropes and strings seem to hold each of the structures together. When we get close enough I can see an anonymous blackened hunk stuck to a pan beside the circle of ash in between the two tents. The shallow, ashy hole gives me the creeps, but it’s only a fire pit, not much different from the metal ones we used on those father-daughter trips.

A dog barks. My heart drops almost to the balls of my feet.

“Sam,” I hiss. “Let’s get out of here.”

“These tents are set up like rooms,” she says, and keeps on wandering around. I follow, figuring it might be better to stay together. If I run alone I could take a wrong turn. Everything looks the same out here, and I haven’t exactly been paying attention. I get close enough to see into one of the tent structures, where two chairs and a table have been arranged like a dining room. Canned goods and bags of grains have been stored in Tupperware containers. The other tent is sealed off, almost like sleeping quarters.

“Think people actually live here?” I ask, trying to calm down.
Another bark echoes through the woods, closer this time. I grab Sam’s arm and tug a little.

“Who’s that? Who’s there?” a voice says.

We turn and find ourselves staring up at a skinny, middle-aged man holding a shotgun in two hands. Ropey muscles on his arms tighten under his thin, tan skin. He moves his eyes over us.

“What’s two girls like you sneaking around for?”

“We were kayaking,” I say. I shake one flap of the life jacket I’ve been wearing as a joke.

“We’ll go now. We’re sorry.”

Behind the man a young girl appears, clutching the collar of a thin, wolfish dog. The girl might be in elementary school, close to the age we were the last time either of us took a trip into the Pine Barrens.

“Well, where’s your boat at?” he says. “Don’t see no water here.”

The little girl hugs her arms around her chest, letting the leash fall. The dog trots forward, wagging its frayed tail side to side.

“Back by the creek,” I say. “We just wanted to look around.”

I try to pull Sam away, but her arm stiffens. She tugs back a bit, and then leans forward to pet the dog.

“Do you live out here?” Sam asks.

“What if I do?” He narrows his eyes but lets his shoulder droop and drops the gun to one side where it leans against his leg. The dog sniffs around the fire pit and curls up nearby with a nub of charred wood in its mouth.

“Well, I don’t know how you do it,” Sam says. She crosses her arms in front of her and glances around. “I couldn’t, even if I tried.”
At this the man shakes the stern look from his face and loosens up a little more. He hooks one dirty thumb in the belt loop of his jeans and walks over to where the little girl crouches. She takes a piece of hair in her hand and starts braiding it. It unsettles me to see the man and the girl out here together. Sure, Sam and I used to go out to the woods with our dads, but we stayed in a cabin once and otherwise only took little day trips. I don’t understand how this guy can just take any girl like that for an extended outing in no-man’s-land.

“We get on alright.” The man turns his smile down on the little girl. “Get on with just what’s made with our own hands, huh, Darlin’?”

Already I know this is not really true, because I saw boxes of granola and cans in the dining tent earlier. The man leans down at an awkward angle to pat the girl’s back. I nudge Sam again, but she bats at my hand and steps away.

“You have a pretty daughter,” Sam says.

“You ain’t so bad yourself.” The man’s hand dips a little lower down the little girl’s shoulder.

“She’s nice,” the little girl says.

“We don’t mean to intrude,” I say.

“But you can stay,” the girl says. “With the world ending and all, you should.” She bites her lip and takes a rubber band from her wrist to twist around the end of the braid. She looks up at the man. “Can they stay?”

“Ending?” Sam asks.

“That’s right, Sugar,” the man says. He smiles again, showing his teeth like a bear. He keeps the butt of the gun clamped in his armpit. “You don’t got many more chances to free yourself like we did. You’ll be safest out here, when it happens.”
“I don’t understand,” Sam says.

“We’ll just go,” I say. “I don’t think the world’s ending, anyway.”

“But it’s always ending, ain’t it?” The man straightens and clamps one large, dirty hand on the barrel of the gun. “You’re here one day, gone the next.”

“Yes.” Sam starts to nod like she’s been hypnotized, like what this man is saying makes any sense.

“See there? Your friend knows,” the man says to me. “It’d be good for you to listen a little.”

I link my arm with Sam’s and tug again, but she remains rooted there. Her face is blank. She doesn’t seem worried at all.

“My dad used to bring me out here, too,” Sam says to the little girl. “It’s pretty cool, huh?”

The little girl looks up at Sam. “Where’s he now, your dad?”

“Dead,” she says. “He’s dead.”

The man starts to walk back toward us, swinging the gun by his side as he steps.

“Tell you what,” he says, just a few feet away. “I’m willing to let y’all stay here. I’ll tell you some stories. I got some real good ones. Tara here knows.”

“We gotta be getting back,” I say. “We’re leaving.”

“Or you can just stay right there, like I said,” the man says. “I’ll tell you the real story about the Jersey Devil. It’s scarier than the one you know. But don’t you girls worry.” He steps closer to Sam, and his voice drops to a low growl. “Why don’t you let me protect you, be your Daddy?”

I feel my mouth drop open, but Sam’s face doesn’t change. She seems to be processing something—a decision, an action. Several seconds press into an unbearable silence. I smell sap and the whiff of something burning underneath. There’s the gun in the man’s hand and to the right, the dog near the fire pit. For a second, Sam sways, and I have a sick premonition that she
will release my arm and fall into the man and I’ll never see her again. But in another half-second she tightens her grip and steps back in the direction of my tug.

Then the man reaches out. He has Sam by the elbow.

“Let go,” she says, but he yanks harder than me and I fall back. He drags Sam forward and holds his mouth to her ear, whispering something. I don’t see him let go of her, because I’ve already started to run.

By the time I reach the tiny waterway and the kayak, I feel bad that I darted without Sam. It seems like a mistake, leaving her there alone with that doomsday freak. It’s the same feeling I had when I accidentally kissed Donny right after he dumped Sam in the ninth grade, and it might seem stupid now, but I know if she’d ever found out about that, things would’ve been different with us.

I keep glancing behind me, watching out for Sam. Before I can convince myself to go back for her, she appears on the bank. She jumps in and we skid along, propelled by four arms like an awkward insect. When the kayak pokes out into the river, Sam scoops her paddle deep into the mud and forces us out into the main passage of the Oswego River. The kayak grates along the shallow bottom for a minute before enough water gathers underneath to lift us to a float. I keep checking over my shoulder in case the man decides to come after us.

“What was that?” I say, once we’ve drifted a little farther down the river.

“You left me,” she says.

“What did he say? What’d he say to you?”

I’m still panting, trying to regain my breath, but Sam doesn’t appear to be breathing at all. Her shoulder blades flutter slightly as she pulls her paddle through the water, but otherwise she doesn’t move or make a sound.
“What would you do,” she says, “if the world was really ending?”

“That’s what he said?”

“I’m saying that.”

“It’s just not,” I say. “It won’t end. That guy was a freak. He was messing with us.”

The water grows deeper, but no clearer. For a while the kayak hardly seems to move at all. The creek coasts under the kayak without a plan for what to do with us.

“It feels like it will. Like tomorrow I could wake up in this darkness.” Sam holds her paddle across her lap. “Dad’s heart was fine, then it wasn’t. It happened right away, just like that. So how does anyone even know when it’s all going to end?”

I plunge my paddle into the water on either side of the kayak, right then left, and watch dark ribbons of water feather to the banks. I’m not sure what to say. I’d hoped she wouldn’t want to talk about Mr. Brenley directly, but I could see I was wrong.


“That’s all?” She picks up her paddle again and slices it through the water. “You’re sorry. Everyone’s sorry, but for what?”

“It was so sudden,” I say.

I never knew anyone who died out of nowhere, just like that. There’s nothing I can tell her to help her. More than anything, I want to know what happened with the man in the camp, what he said to Sam. I know I’ll never find out. I can almost see the list of things we’ll never talk about growing longer and longer. I watch a mosquito land on Sam’s ear. By the time she reacts with a swat, I know she’s already been bitten.
Around a curve, by another footbridge, I finally spot the landing where the water edges like rust over a wide swash of white sand. Another orange and green sign sticks up out of the water. An arrow points us to the beach.

“I don’t have to go back,” Sam says. She stares off past the sign and footbridge as I attempt to steer us to the beach alone.

“Don’t be crazy,” I say. “Come on, Sam. There’s nothing out here. Unless you count lunatics, freaks of nature. You have to keep going.”

“Keep going,” she says and laughs. “I’m not.”

“What?” I ask.

“I’m not going back to college,” she says.

“What do you mean?” I ask. “Sam?”

I don’t expect an answer. Already the silence presses in. I could talk and protest as much as I want, but I wouldn’t be saying anything that would matter to her. Sam’s stubborn like that.

We pull the kayak up on the beach and wait on either side of it. I keep wondering about us, how close we were, or if we ever really meant anything to each other. Maybe, all this time, it was those couple of camping trips—a few weekends together with our dads—that made us friends in the first place.

Before long the same short bus arrives to pick us up, but a different man hauls our kayak up the beach and flips it onto the rack behind the bus. He takes a lifejacket from Sam and widens his eyes at me. I’ve been wearing the second useless lifejacket almost the whole time. I take it off and hand it to him and all three of us board the bus without speaking. I slide into a seat at the back. Sam chooses to sit across the aisle.
The man drives us back to the rental office along a real road, paved smooth and glittering under the sticky heat. Still, the bus rattles like it’s trying to make as much noise as all its loose screws can manage. Sam leans her head against the window, and it bangs with every bump in the road. She might be sleeping, but I can’t tell because she’s pulled her sunglasses back over her eyes.

I turn away from her and watch the woods pass outside of my own window—pine and sand and more pine, and whatever hides between—just some failed fairytale forest. We might have a history here, but it seems ridiculous that we could’ve hoped such a flimsy place might keep us together. My dad taught me so many meaningful lessons in the Pine Barrens when I was younger. At least I still have that. I can tell myself it’s a good thing to be so happy, so lucky. But if you ask me about one of the lessons I learned in these woods, you’d get a lie. I can’t remember a single one.
Danny’s father announced the move only two months before they would leave the Pines, where he’d been born. His parents had decided to make their Wildwood vacation spot a permanent home. They planned to get settled in before the boardwalk piers could open in summer.

“It’s what Mom wants,” his father said. He placed one large hand over Danny’s shoulder. Danny tried to shrug it off, but his father’s hand pressed harder. “Let’s you and me do this for her.”

Danny thought the change would be easy for his father, who stayed locked in his office working all day, but Danny had a life he didn’t imagine he could pick up and move. He had no time to protest. His mother started packing almost immediately. She bounced around the house, boxing up everything so quickly that Danny’s things started to disappear. He ripped open boxes in search of whatever he needed and left the contents scattered around his room when he finished.

One day, Danny had been rustling through a stack of boxes on the landing looking for an extra Nintendo controller when he stumbled across one box marked “Records” in his father’s capped handwriting. Inside, he found no records, but a messy pile of unlabeled tapes. Danny examined a few of them, then took one and stole away to his room, where he kept a small TV set on top of another cardboard box. He slid the tape into the TV’s video slot, and the scene popped up immediately, no credits or introductions.

Danny had seen enough porn by that time to know what it was and how it worked, but the tape he’d stolen was different. On the screen, two bodies tangled with each other in that familiar
way, moving back and forth in an erratic pattern. The image came in fuzzy, almost like a surveillance video. He could barely make out what was going on. Danny scooted nearer to the screen and waited for another angle, but the video had been shot from directly above, and the camera didn’t budge. There were no arousing close-ups meant to flip the switch that could plunge you into an animal blindness—just raw movement in an empty room, and no sound. Danny clicked the volume up a few ticks, then lowered it again. He hit the stop button and ejected the tape, wondering if it might have been damaged.

Now that he had likely discovered the family porno collection, Danny felt a sudden longing to watch every tape. It wasn’t just the idea of a thousand gritty fucks to whack off over. He thought that maybe he could learn something about his father, who never seemed to have time for him or his mother. Danny hid the single stolen tape in his things and tried to monitor the movement of the Records box from corner to corner, but once the movers arrived, he lost track of its path.

That summer in Wildwood was like any of the others Danny had spent there, except he wouldn’t be leaving by Labor Day, back home where his friends and his dirt bike and his old school waited. Danny wandered the boardwalks and piers alone, looking for other kids to take turns in the arcade or ride the log flume that twisted out over the Atlantic at the end of Pier 3. Everyone he met seemed to be a tourist. They would always come and go.

The rides stayed lit and the music blared into September, but game attendants goaded with less gusto, and the cries from wooden coasters fell from their peaks with less surprise. As the crowds thinned, Danny finally found someone like him—Shen, a neighbor who’d been living in Wildwood since the previous summer. They walked the beach and the boardwalk piers together
or in small groups with other locals Shen knew. They played a few games similar to those Danny’s old friends liked. One involved scouting for girls by the arcade or the Horror House and daring each other to go up to them, hold up their season passes and invite one for a ride. This game, in particular, had always frustrated Danny. No one ever made a move or followed through on the dares.

By the time the piers closed at the start of the fall season, Danny turned his attention back to the Records box. He knew it had to be in the office, but his father spent entire days in that room, and he kept it locked if he ever left. Danny got his first chance to look when his father went away for a sales conference at the end of September. After a few failed attempts at picking the lock with a bobby pin, he finally got in and found the box at the top of the office closet. He made a dare with himself and placed his own bets. He stole the box and kept it at the bottom of his own closet, covered with an old blanket and stacked beneath a couple of other storage containers he had not bothered to unpack.

Danny’s father returned from the conference. Danny waited to be pulled aside after dinner one evening, one morning on the weekend, or one night as they crossed paths in the hall like shadows. Days went by, then weeks. His father never mentioned anything about a missing box.

Every morning, Danny’s mother made his lunch and then drove him and Shen to school on her way to work. She used to work at a hospital in the suburbs, but the commute from Wildwood was too far, so she took a job as a hospice nurse making home visits instead. She talked about her job in the morning over coffee, as Danny shoveled cereal into his mouth. Danny knew most of her patients had chosen not to go to the hospital when they were sick. He knew that most were dying, and those that weren’t still needed help to do little things like eat or shower.
“Shame to say it, but I just hope I never live to ninety-eight.” She spread peanut butter over a slice of bread and took a bite. “Don’t you hope that I do, Danny-boy. I swear to God, don’t you worry about me.”

She worked the words around a mouthful of peanut butter. Danny squirmed at the sound of his pet name.

“Mom, I said not to call me that anymore.”

“Your shirt’s wrinkled.” She ran a hand down Danny’s back in an effort to smooth the creases.

At St. Padre Pio Middle School, all students had to wear the same uniform every day. Danny might’ve looked like everyone else, but he didn’t feel like the rest of them. Even with Shen, who managed to sneak Danny into the ranks of his Wildwood crew, Danny was still the easy target. He wasn’t the only one who wouldn’t let go of where he came from. To everyone else, he was the piney freak, the kid from the Jersey woods—that nowhere, in-between world.

Danny’s mother continued to fuss with his shirt as they headed out the door. He detached himself from her and got into the car, noticing a piece of teal sea glass on the dash in front of the passenger’s seat. It didn’t shift the entire ride, like it had been glued there. His mother had been collecting sea glass since the move, and already the stuff was piling up in strange places.

Shen had been waiting on his porch a few blocks down. Danny rolled down the passenger side window to wave him over. When Shen got into the backseat, Danny twisted around, and they slapped hands. A few minutes later, his mother pulled up along the curb in the St. Padre Pio parking lot, tugging at Danny’s tie before shooing the two boys out.

“I won’t be back until seven,” she said. “Remember, your father’ll be working.”
Danny learned to take advantage of his father’s work habits, always buried in phone calls or sales figures. The mostly empty house gave him a power he could use. Fewer eyes meant more fun, everyone agreed, so he had access to the perfect place to hang.

Later that day, Danny led Shen, Will, and Luke from the school and past the main boulevard toward his house. The group tracked over the bridge that connected beach-town to normal-town, sleeping tourist shops from lazy local year-round joints that cramped along smaller streets. On one of those streets sat Danny’s house, yardless and totally treeless. Danny had loved his summers in Wildwood, but when the season ended, everything changed. The town went dead after September. He could see clearly that his family had left three acres of wooded freedom for a ghettoized string of overpriced, single-season homes.

Once the boys barreled into Danny’s house, Luke headed for the kitchen, but Will and Shen went straight into Danny’s room to be first in line for turns playing Nintendo. Danny joined Luke in the kitchen and poured a glass of milk.

“Dan,” Will called from the hall, “what’s this?”

When Danny turned into his room, Will and Shen were standing over the stolen Records box, dragged from the corner of the closet near the place where he kept the video games. Will was already shuffling through the tapes. Danny’s stomach twisted

“What does this shit mean?” Will asked, squinting from label to label. “Is this what I think it is?” Will’s squint disappeared, leaving a wide grin.

“Where’d you get the stash?” Shen asked. “This is the mother load.”

Since Danny had acquired his own private porno collection, he didn’t know what to do—when to watch, how often. Having the tapes right there almost robbed the experience of half the fun, so he’d left the tapes untouched. He knew he would watch them eventually. He had told
himself there was no reason to rush, but he hadn’t planned on being forced to host a public viewing.

“What’s going on?” Luke said, peeking into the room with half a chocolate chip cookie in his mouth and a few more in his hand. He pushed past Danny and joined the others at the box. Shen stole a cookie lying loose in Luke’s palm.

“Piney boy’s been hoarding all this porn,” Will said.

“I found it,” Danny said, still standing in the doorway. “It’s not mine.”

“Your dad?” Will laughed. “How’s he even see his dick past his gut?”

“Isn’t he home?” Shen asked.

“Why don’t we turn up the volume, then?” Will said. All of his freckles gathered high on his cheeks, making his face look dirty.

“What would he even say?” Shen shook his head. “My dad’d kill me.”

“Maybe, where Dan’s from they just watch together,” Will said. “Family night.” He reached deep into the cardboard box and blindly pulled out an unlabeled VHS from the very bottom.

Danny thought back to the single tape he’d watched and wondered if they were all so strange. He assured himself that it couldn’t be possible. Even if they wound up watching something weird, maybe his friends would find it cool or edgy.

“Pop it in,” Luke said to Will. He dropped back to the ground, hiking up his khaki pants to cover a momentarily exposed butt-crack.

“Wanna do the honors?” Will held out the remote and grinned back at Danny where he sat on the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees, shirtsleeves rolled up.

“Nah,” he shrugged. “You’re right there.”

“Alright then.”
Will waved the tape up to the shuttered mouth of the TV and pressed it inside. A blue blank screen shined back. The others rushed to rearrange their limbs and straighten their backs and crack their necks or knuckles.

The scene blurred into view. Like to the tape Danny watched earlier, there were no credits or introductions. Webbed gray lines cut through the right side of the screen, but on the left side, two people were already furiously humping.

“Gets right to the point,” Luke said. “I like it.”

“What’s with the volume?” Shen asked.

The remote control had been flipped upside-down between Will and Luke. Will moved his hand slowly toward it, using one finger to press the “up” arrow on the volume. There was no sound, none of that moaning, no animal slap of naked bodies, even with the green volume bar at max.

“What the hell?” Luke muttered, but he didn’t budge to switch the tape. He just stared with his head tilted to one side.

The camera zoomed out from the two moving bodies to show several people—a mass, really, one huge chunk of dick, tits, hair, and flesh. Some of the people wore gray masks with slits for eyes, their mouths held in perfect Os or crooked grins. The room that held the churning crowd wasn’t like the rooms Danny had seen in other dirty flicks. No red velvet, long curtains, yellow lamps, or mauve couch. It was bare and dark and must have been cold like the inside of a vault, a place they slaughtered pigs or tortured prisoners of war. Danny thought he spotted a hook on one of the walls, a dark puddle of liquid on the floor. He looked away and steadied himself, retraining his view on the wall just behind the TV. He didn’t want to be the pussy, the coward, the first to give in and look away or suggest they stop the tape.
After another minute the video hatched in gray static and cut out. Danny rolled his head back and forward and loosened his arms at the elbows. He told himself what was next had to be better. He tried not to think of his father watching that clump of people in the gray room.

Suddenly, the tape cut back to a new scene. A man with some kind of tool in his hand stood over a woman in a cage. A small cage, like a chicken coop.

Danny stumbled forward and hit the TV’s power-off button. The image collapsed into a dot of light at the center of the screen and then vanished to reveal the three contorted faces of his friends reflected back.

In a moment, Will and Luke were making their excuses to leave.

“My parents don’t know where I’m at, you know,” Luke said. “Gotta get back for dinner.”

Luke and Will picked up their backpacks and left. Will slapped the side of the doorframe on his way out, a habit he had for leaving and entering any room. Danny had wondered why he did that until he saw Will’s dad do the same thing one day when he and Will walked out of the school gymnasium together after a basketball league meeting.

Shen stood up, shaking his head like he’d taken too many turns on the Pier 4 Gravitron.

“I didn’t know. Before you came over,” Danny said. “I thought it’d be different.”

“Forget it.” Shen lifted his backpack from the floor, raised it to his shoulder, and smiled.

“See you tomorrow, yeah?”

Shen found his way to the front door and Danny sat on his bed and studied the box crouched in the corner, all four flaps open. One flap quivered up and down on the heat blowing through a vent beneath it. Danny could just make out his father’s low, muffled voice drifting down from the office, directly above Danny’s room. He lay back, trying to distinguish his father’s words, a
game he sometimes played since the move. Then, he closed his bedroom door, picked up the remote and flipped it around in his palm. He turned the TV back on.

Every day after the failed porno viewing, Danny found an excuse to go home alone after school. He didn’t know whether to feel embarrassed or whether to get over it, so he tried to blot out both feelings by ignoring Will, Luke, and Shen as well as he could. If he ever heard the doorbell ring, he pretended to be asleep in case one of them wanted to play video games or hang out by the piers. It didn’t take long for Will and Luke to stop knocking on the door or putting notes in his locker, but Shen continued to come by every once in a while to ask for him.

Meanwhile, Danny continued to watch his father’s tapes. They didn’t work like real porn. Danny thought of them more like segments of an investigative special. Each scene represented a set of statistics, each new blurry room a cold report. He imagined himself as a scientist studying the habits of strangers. He coaxed a stony wonder at the men and women lashing out at each other. They sometimes seemed less like humans and more like zombies wearing wet, leery eyes.

Danny hoped he might eventually come across something real, something worth his while, but his father’s tapes were mostly violent, silent, and overrun with certain props he’d once kept separate from the idea of sex: blades, rope, wire, whips, gags. Against those dark backdrops, nudity became the uniform a body wore to invite pleasure as well as pain, an element Danny never considered. Sometimes he couldn’t separate the two in anyone’s expression. He paused the tapes at certain points to look for the exact places where he could say for sure **this hurts** or **this feels good**.

At first, Danny took his time with each video, sometimes rewinding to study the faces in the tapes or to double-check on something he’d seen move in the shadows, but soon enough, his
exploration gathered momentum. He started to click the fast-forward button, pausing every once in a while to get a closer look at a particular position or tool being used in a scene. He didn’t understand what he was looking for, exactly, until he found it.

The next tape seemed like all of the others, but when he popped it into the VHS slot, he knew immediately that it would be different. Like so many of the movies, it had been shot as if by hidden camera, but he could recognize the room and the bed posed within it. The white walls and the mossy green curtains enclosing the windows appeared like a projection from his memory. He was a child again, pushing through the door of that same room, so small he could just make out his parents beneath the covers of their bed.

Danny jumped when his father’s enormous face pressed into view, blocking out the bed. He was much younger in the video, with more and darker hair and a thinner face. Danny felt a small shock to find that the man on screen looked more like himself. His father lifted a hand, and the scene jolted down and to the right, halving the bed and allowing more space to view the carpeted floor. Then, he disappeared from the scene. Danny moved his thumb over the red stop button on the remote.

When his father reentered, he had Danny’s mother with him. Both of them were naked. Her presence surprised Danny, because his mother hated cameras of any kind. She reacted in embarrassment, waved them away. In this video, she still had long hair, which meant that his father probably shot it sometime before Danny’s birth or during his infancy. She’d kept it short for as long as he could remember. The next moment, she swung her head up and looked right through the screen. She gazed almost directly into the camera but didn’t give any sign she knew it was there. If she had, she would have had trouble pulling her eyes away. Maybe she would
have blushed, protested. She wore a lot of makeup—dark smudges around her eyes—though Danny didn’t think she needed it, she seemed so young.

Danny knotted his thoughts and made himself keep watching as his father pushed his mother to her back on the floor and got on top of her. She smiled at first—a small, loopy smile he recognized from the faces of anonymous women in other tapes—but when his father moved one hand from her breast to her throat, her expression changed. Her eyes scrunched and her mouth moved, but his father said nothing back. Danny watched the hand around his mother’s neck. He squeezed the remote. His mother began to kick her feet. She moved her lips again and tightened them as his father thrust harder and harder, one hand around her throat, the thumb pressed under her jawbone. Her face started to go red, even a little blue. After a series of wild thrusts, his father finally slowed and released his hand.

Danny hit the stop button. He realized he had kept his mouth suctioned shut the entire time. He parted his lips and a metallic taste flooded around his tongue. He’d bitten down on the inside of one cheek. He ran to the bathroom and, ignoring his reflection in the mirror, spit a swirl of red into the porcelain white sink.

Danny didn’t touch the tape. He let it sit inside the TV for days without turning it on. His father had left for another conference, a small grace, but his mother made it as hard as she could for him to avoid her. Every morning at breakfast, he tried not to look her in the eye. Danny had been getting good at ignoring Shen, even though they still rode to school together three times a week, but his mother refused to let him get by wordlessly.
The routine could only go on for so long before she started asking more questions. One Saturday she knocked on his bedroom door, a quiet knock that couldn’t disguise her concern. Danny had been in a state of half-sleep. He sat up and shook the curious buzz out of his head.

“Danny? Can I come in?” She cracked open the door a little as she asked.

“I guess,” Danny said.

His mother wore a huge sun hat and a bikini top, even though it was March, too cold to go swimming. A familiar, unpleasant shame jostled in his gut.

“I’m headed to Fourteenth Street,” she said. Danny focused on the brim of the wide hat.

“You should come. It’ll be fun.”

“Sea glass again? It’s everywhere.”

She’d been going crazy with it. Danny found the soft cloudy glass all over—in the bathroom, on the coffee table, even in the sugar cabinet.

“Just to get out a little,” she said. “You need it.”

Danny could tell this was one of those requests he would be sorry to ignore. Now that his mother showed signs of wanting to talk, he would only prolong a process of daily prodding if he didn’t give in. He tugged his baseball cap low over his eyes so he wouldn’t have to look her in the face, and walked past her, out of the room.

After a short drive, Danny’s mother led him up a planked walkway through the dunes and onto the beach. The ocean’s thin lip smirked far off down the famous mile-long beaches. Danny busied himself kicking a hole in the sand on a dune near the place where his mother scanned for sea glass. She kept one hand on her head so the hat wouldn’t peel off with the wind.

“So tell me about school. Is everything okay?” she said. “Did something happen with Shen? You’re always sleeping. Talk to me, Danny-boy.”
“You said you’d stop calling me that.”

He wondered how she could pretend to be so innocent. The fraudulence of it disgusted him.

He studied the sky, sitting on the horizon like a steel slab.

“You seem like you’re adjusting, right? You like it better now?”

Danny sighed. “Sure.”

“I know it took some time,” she said.

They walked farther down the beach, toward the water, where his mother said the chances of finding sea glass were higher. Danny kept his fists in his pockets and pretended to look around for some shine in the sand. While his mother hunched by the tide a few feet down, he drifted toward the overturned body of a horseshoe crab and squatted next to it. It had a strange, blank face. The eyes were set wide on its helmet-like shell. The mouth hid inside, an open slit between its two sets of legs. Its long, sharp tail-spine pointed back toward the ocean where its kind had lived long before there were people to stumble over its body in the tide.

“Leave it alone,” his mother said, coming closer.

Danny nudged the tail with one foot, wondering if it would matter if he turned it over, or if the thing had been long dead. That year, the Atlantic horseshoe crabs had begun to wash up along shore in higher numbers than usual. It had something to do with mating habits, a crazed risk that pulled them too close to shore. There’d been a big campaign that urged people to flip the horseshoe crabs onto their fronts so they could crawl back into the sea. The crabs weren’t always dead, the ads claimed, even if they looked dead.

“Danny, can you bring me my basket?” his mother called.

She bent down, dug into the sand, and came up with a light blue piece of glass. She poked at it in her palm and dropped it into the basket. A briny smell whipped from the ocean.
“It’s just broken bottles,” Danny said.

“I can’t explain why, but they’re beautiful to me.” She held a piece of cloudy blue glass up for him to see, but kept her head down as she continued searching.

“You don’t even do anything with them,” he said.

“You’re always in your room,” she said from under her hat. “Your father is worried about you.”

“Worried? Like he’s any different?” Danny said. “He doesn’t give a shit.”

“Don’t speak about your father like that,” she said.

Danny’s knuckles burned. He felt like punching something, so he kept his fists buried in his coat pockets. Although he tried to stop it, the image of his younger mother flashed in his head. He remembered her blank stare, her dark eyes as they scanned past the hidden camera.

“You don’t even know anything about him.” Danny felt his voice lift and tried to keep it down. “You’re married, and you don’t even know him.”

“Daniel,” she said.

“He said we only came here for you,” he said.

She tried to catch his eyes, but Danny glanced away, toward the surf. He hadn’t noticed before how the tide sounded like a wet cough caught in a man’s throat, a sick groan that wavered up and down. The cold started to vice into him, replacing the angry heat he’d felt a moment before. He lowered his head and walked away, past the horseshoe crab left on its back.

In his room, Danny finally ejected the tape from the TV, threw it in a corner, and punched in another. The new tape featured more strangers, two men holding braided whips and between them, a naked woman with dark red hair. As one of the men tied the woman’s wrist, a relief
flowed over Danny. These people were strangers, no one he knew, so it didn’t matter what happened to them. After a moment, the relief withdrew, and an almost unbearable pulsing thrill took over in its place. Danny fumbled out of his pants and lay back on his bed.

Suddenly, the tapes worked like they were supposed to, like he was sure they worked for his father. Lipstick and blood, spit-lube and leather, women in wigs, whips, harnesses like the kind he’d seen on horses. He couldn’t watch without that jolt that meant he was a part of it. His body knew before he did. It tingled, itched, and Danny tried to do whatever he could to satisfy it.

Most of the tapes, like the first, were soundless. It was actually better, Danny decided, thrilling to fill in the dead air where there should have been moaning or screaming. Volume lived inside of him and outside of him. After a while he forgot how to turn the dials. A few tapes—chicken coops, ragged wires, blood—he kept at the bottom of the box, but even those weren’t exempt. He watched them under certain conditions, in certain moods, when nothing else seemed to coax the pulsing thrill.

He thought back to his old life—the life outside of Wildwood, back in the Pines—but he couldn’t look straight at who he’d been. He didn’t remember, and it didn’t matter. His whole life to that point had been a distraction. Only the tapes, he thought, showed the truth. They revealed what people were made of after all the bullshit had been stripped down.

If it weren’t for the weekday carpools where he had to see Shen, Danny would not have spoken to anyone. One Friday, Danny’s mother pulled up to the curb at St. Padre Pio to let Shen and Danny out. After they both shut the doors, Danny started to walk away as usual, but Shen grabbed his backpack and pulled. Danny stumbled back. He rolled his eyes and started to turn away again, but Shen held on.
“We’re playing basketball this weekend,” he said. “On the courts by Lincoln.”

There was something stiff about the way he talked. Shen had been coming up with new plans after every car ride, and Danny was tired of being nice about ignoring him.

“I’m busy,” Danny said. “Take a hint.”

“Cut the bullshit,” Shen said. “You’re lying.”

Danny shot him a look of warning and stalked off. He would speak to no one else that day.

He scribbled patches of penciled shadows in his notebooks during class. After school he wandered back toward the house along the ocean to avoid the others and to distract himself from the tug that wanted to draw him constantly back to the salty space of his room.

From St. Padre Pio, Danny walked past the empty paint-faded hotels, over the flaking boardwalk. The resort pools had been covered, all entrances locked behind cheaply gated patios, anchors and rope, chipped mermaid statues with their bodies molded into alluring curves. Every wall crumbled more and more the closer he got to the surf. Finally he reached the famous mile-long beach his mother used to chatter about at dinner before every summer season. In early spring, it was nothing but a damp desert.

A wet March wind gusted, sharper where it gathered moisture by the ocean. Danny never found any sea glass, but he walked past six or seven washed-up horseshoe crabs, popping out of the fog. Gulls picked away at the flesh exposed inside bowled shells. The ocean tongued out and back. Danny did not consider that any of them might’ve been alive. They infuriated him, the way they lay there, useless. He approached another one of the crabs on the shoreline, but instead of avoiding it, he placed a foot on its bottom half and crunched down. The brittle shell crushed into a goopy well. He leaned over and lifted the tail-spine, which worked on a hinge like an elbow, and snapped it off in one hard crack. The tip of the thing looked sharp enough to break through
skin. Even the slightest slash through the air released a whooping noise, one of the sounds missing from the videos every time someone swung a whip or chain.

Danny walked the rest of the way along the beach with the tail-spine hanging down beside his leg. By the time he reached the house, his mother had already come home. He knew she’d been working fewer hours, taking fewer patients. He didn’t understand how she could seem so sad when she got to live year-round in her dream home. She didn’t notice the first time Danny came home with the tail-spine, and she didn’t notice the other times after that, when he returned with more and more. His mother had her sea glass, his father had his porn—what was left for him to collect? He laid the tail-spines in the box of porn, crisscrossed over the tapes like a grate.

After his mother dropped Danny and Shen off at school the following Friday, Shen followed Danny all the way to his locker. April had arrived, and the weather was a little warmer. Everyone started to whisper about summer again.

“What are you doing tonight?” Shen asked.

“Not sure.” Danny thought about his dark room, which had begun to reek—salt and dirt, plus something else earthy and sour, a scent he couldn’t admit had come from inside of him.

“You should hang,” Shen asked. “We’re going to Pier 4. Luke’s brother works there, remember?”

“It’s not open yet,” Danny said.

“Sure, yeah. Just be there.”

“Maybe.”

“What’s your deal?” Shen said, “What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing,” Danny said. “I just don’t feel that good.”
“No one cares about the porn, you know. Really. So come tonight.”

Danny shut his locker, shuffled his books, lifted his chin, and forced a smile. Telling his body what to do was like pulling on a set of strings. One imprecise instruction and the whole thing might fall apart.

“I’ll be there,” he said.

“Alright,” Shen said. “Pier 4, by the ticket booth. Eight o’clock.”

Shen turned and walked the other way down the hall. A girl Danny recognized from English class ran by in the opposite direction, her long brown hair waving like a flag. She was a skinny thing, pale with bright eyes. Danny found himself wondering what her colorless skin might look dressed in bruises. After a moment Danny had to open his locker door again for something to hide behind. The bell rang, leaving him alone in the hallway, the reflected fluorescent lights rotting on scuffed linoleum.

Danny had no intention of actually going to Pier 4 to meet up with the others. Later that day, he went straight to his room after school and planned to stay there for the rest of the night. After a few hours, when he exited to go to the bathroom, he found his father sitting at the kitchen table with a mug of steaming coffee set before him.

“Dan,” he said. “I think it’s time we had a little talk. Just us.”

Aside from forced conversation at meals, Danny and his father had rarely spoken since the move. Danny said nothing and waited.

“You’re mother’s worried about you.” His father lifted the mug to his thin lips and blew the steam away.

“Is she?” Danny said.
“Don’t be antagonistic about it,” his father said. “Come here and sit.”

“Antagonistic?” Danny laughed. He crossed his arms and flicked his eyes to the clock. He could still leave for the boardwalk. He didn’t want to, but at least it would give him somewhere else to go, away from his father.

“What’s gotten into you?” his father said.

“Me?” Danny said. “What about you?”

His father’s chair squeaked as he shoved it out from under him.

“You know,” he said, keeping his grip on the coffee mug, “I do everything for you two. Everything. And this is what I get? This attitude?”

Already Danny had turned away. He grabbed his coat from a hook on the wall and slammed the front door. Since he knew he’d be late to the pier, he skipped the knock on Shen’s door and walked alone over the bridge to the Crest, the empty tourist nest closest to the beach. He stopped to piss once he reached the boardwalk, and then continued on. Pier 4 reached out to the ocean with its offering of Ferris wheel, wooden roller-coaster, viking ship, and bungee swing tower.

He found no one waiting at the ticket booth like Shen said, so he hopped the turnstile and listened for voices. It didn’t take long for him to find the group over by a red-and-yellow-striped game pavilion. Danny strolled as evenly as possible toward the tight circle of guys shushing each other and passing something around. Will saw Danny first and twisted his mouth halfway between a grimace and a grin.

“Hey, where were you?” Shen said, parting from the pack to greet Danny.

“I fell asleep,” Danny said.

Luke lifted his chin in Danny’s direction. He held a small piece of curled paper in his hand. Between Luke and Will stood two girls Danny had seen before in school but didn’t know. One
girl popped her gum and the other one in a pink tank top kept badgering Luke to light the thing in his hand. Danny coughed and sucked in the air through his teeth. It tasted salty and raw, free of that familiar fried sugary vomit smell of summer on the Wildwood boardwalk.


“His brother.” Shen smiled. “I said you’d be sorry if you didn’t come.”

“Whatever.” Will shuffled a little and rolled his eyes.

“The perfect spot,” Luke said. He raised a tarnished brass key. “Greg really hooked me up.”

The girl with the gum whispered something to her friend and looked toward Danny and laughed. He looked down at his shoes and then past them, through the slits in the boards where below the ocean rushed in chaotic, foaming spirals below.

Luke led them to the Horror House. It was a cheap scare-thrill where people rode in a cart through tunnels lit with black lights, the walls painted with images that were supposed to be horrific or terrifying or shocking. Sometimes a teenaged worker wearing a costume would jump out near the end of the ride to scare girls and couples. That, Luke boasted, was his brother’s job and how he’d gotten the key to the back door.

They shuffled up a small set of grated metal steps and into the Horror House. The place seemed flimsier from the backside, nothing but a cardboard cutout. Will stayed close to the girl chewing red gum. Danny saw him reach his hand out toward the girl’s hips a few times, then draw it back before touching her.

The door shut once they all made it inside. For the first minute, while Luke fumbled for the switch, they were closed in tight with the darkness. One of the girls shrieked and the second girl
shushed her and laughed. Danny thought about reaching out and touching one of the girls himself. Luke found the switch and a few black lights popped on, casting them in a purple glow.

“Let’s just light it already,” the girl with the pink tank whined.


They walked down the track, along the fluorescent walls painted with glowing images: old men pulling their skin off, ghouls with red eyes and black burnt ribs, a snake crawling out of a dead man’s mouth. Luke led everyone into a separate room through a door off the side of the tracks. The room, lit with black light, was empty except for a few old chairs and a couch. They sat in a circle while Luke flicked at the lighter a few times and finally lit up.

The walls in the room were covered with bright green, toothed plants—Venus flytraps sprouting from large mounds of pink-glowing sand. The plants wove all over the room along a thick, tangled vine. In the mouth of every flower stood a naked woman. The long red tongues of each of the plants wrapped around the tits and crotch of each of woman. Some of the plants’ victims hung their heads to the side, drooling a bit. Some of them showed the whites of their eyes, their mouths downturned and partially open. A few fought back, their fingers gripping the plant tongues. Danny clutched his wrists in his lap and leaned forward.

The others started passing the joint around, coughing and gagging on the smoke, which puffed out like a purple cloud under the black light. Shen passed the joint to Danny. He sucked in until his eyes watered, passed it again, and returned his hands to his lap. Someone was talking about baseball. Will, mashed next to the girls on the ratted couch. He had his hand on one girl’s leg. Danny was having trouble remembering which girl was which. They seemed to have one body and two heads. Their teeth glowed in the black light glare.

“What’s wrong with him?” one of the girls said.
“Dan, you okay?” Shen stared at him with his teeth. His eyes spun in and out of view.

“He’s snapped,” Will said. “Gone-zo. He was always a freak. Just a piney freak.”

“He’s gonna be sick,” a girl said.

Luke tugged at the top of his shoe, looking at the girl with two heads. Everyone’s eyes were all over, scattering the room, looking for something. The naked women on the wall curled up in their flowers.

“Oh God!” said the two mouths of the two-headed girl. “Look at that!”

They laughed a single, synced laugh. Danny thought he could split them apart. He shifted his eyes down at his erection. One of the two-headed girl’s arms stretched toward him. He felt like laughing, too, laughing as he pulled back the skin on the double-faced girl. A hot iron of shame glowed red in his stomach. It hurt so much it almost felt good.

He reached out and grabbed the two-headed girl’s outstretched arm by the wrist. She split from her other half as Danny yanked her forward off the couch. She fell on her knees, her straight, blond hair spilling forward over her face.

“Who’s laughing now?” Danny said.

The girl screamed. The scream seemed to press free from the open mouths of all the women bound in vines on the neon walls. The others collapsed around Danny. Someone pulled him back by the shoulder, and his head snapped to one side. White light flickered in front of Danny’s eyes. His cheek burned. He raised his hand and felt the red, hot swelling.


Danny found the volume dial inside him, turned it all the way down to mute, and staggered through the fluorescent tunnel back the way they had come. He kept walking until the creaking hollow sound of the boardwalk gave way to the soft shift of sand under his feet. All paths to the
ocean had become a certain part of him by then, the map like a birthmark on his brain. He tripped
over something—a small white piece of driftwood peaking out of the sand, curled slightly like a
horn. The splintered wood grain had flattened into a single smooth whorl.

It was low tide. Danny had to walk a long time from the pier down the beach to the water. He
walked along the edge, up and back, the same path he’d been walking from school. Not a single
horseshoe crab dotted the shore that night, nothing in need of flipping or breaking. He shuffled
with the driftwood in one hand, back over the bridge, to the small house with its dry, uneven
lawn, and through the front door. In the living room, his mother lay asleep on the couch, the blue
from the TV screen drawn like a mask over her face.

Danny found the box where he knew it would be, in the same corner of his closet. He
dragged the entire thing from his room, all four flaps open, horseshoe tail-spines grated across
the top, the tapes jostled just beneath. He lugged the box up the stairs, letting it drop and clatter
with every step.

“Danny?” his mother called.

A single light remained on in the upstairs hall. Danny threw the box down before his father’s
office door—the contents made a clashing sound like a broken xylophone—and flipped over one
cardboard flap so the scrawled “Records” label would be clearly displayed.

He pounded with one fist, the horn of driftwood gripped tight in the other. He had planned to
walk away, but once he let his fist strike, he couldn’t stop. He pounded over the sound of his
father’s footsteps, past the heat of a man just behind the door. He pounded and pounded, even
after the single click of a lock, the twisting knob, the opening.
On Saturday, the sixth day of a weeklong summer vacation, Martha Adams prepared herself for another several hours with the wives of the River Side Game Association couples’ retreat. The day had begun like the five before it, bird watching and tea drinking while the men took turns shooting at a wooden deer on a track. The deer rolled stiffly in two directions at a random pattern, “So to mimic the true movements of the whitetail,” said the clubhouse owner, John Zurn. The weekend had arrived, yet none of the members of the retreat had filled their stomachs with any real venison, as far as Martha knew.

That evening, Mr. Zurn had promised a night out on his barge, a special event he’d been saving for the end of the retreat. All week, the corner of his mouth twitched whenever he spoke of the barge. “It is the prize of the Wading River,” Zurn said. “A crowning jewel among skiffs!” From the clubhouse lawn, looking out on the Wading River, Martha wondered if any prize boat of those sulky red waters could truly be considered a prize at all.

Across the other side of the lawn, Zurn invited the husbands to shoot at his wooden deer. Zurn turned his head toward the women lounging by the river, and Martha looked away. The iced tea, as usual, carried a curious taste of sulfur beneath the added sugar. Caroline Hinter had begun talking again. Caroline talked so much for such a small woman that Martha could not keep track of her chatter. Earlier in the week, Martha assumed that the other two wives, Monica and Heidi, were as bored as she was with Caroline, but she soon discovered not to mistake vacancy for boredom.
“John’s barge is a real treat, absolutely something else.” Caroline leaned forward and clutched her hands in her lap. “If I’m being honest, the Half Moon Barge is the reason we keep coming back.”

The Hinters had come down from Princeton, where Caroline’s husband served as a professor of some kind. They came to the River Side Game Association couples’ retreat every summer, and apparently Caroline assumed that bit of truth gave her status.

“What kind of boat is a barge, I wonder,” Heidi said. “I can’t quite picture it.”

“Oh no, don’t try to picture it. That would be a waste. I’m sure it’s not possible to imagine,” Caroline said. She wore a huge straw hat that made her small frame look unbalanced. Her head teetered on her thin neck. “We’ll be seeing it soon enough.”

“I do love a good boat trip,” Monica added. Monica did not usually like to talk about anything more complicated than cake recipes.

Martha tried not to get her hopes up about the barge. Although she was a woman used to disappointment, she could still remember when the prospect of an out-of-doors vacation meant something to her. When her husband, Harry, presented her with the brochure for the couples’ retreat, Martha had admittedly been drawn to the name of the place, Half Moon. It said something of fulfillment or contentment, inviting as an empty cup waiting to be filled. But so far, Half Moon had delivered little of what it promised of birds, deer, and food. In the end, the vacation had been tolerable, with little fulfillment, and therefore no different from her marriage.

Across the yard, it was Professor Hinter’s turn to shoot at the wooden deer, and Caroline paused her one-sided conversation to watch in dramatic anticipation. Two blurred pops rang out, meaning that he managed to make a gash in the wood, and Caroline let out a little gasp of false admiration from beneath her huge straw hat.
Martha eyed the wall of pines on the opposite side of the Wading River. Around the clubhouse, more pine trees swayed in the heat as if they’d been submerged underwater. Martha excused herself from the women’s canopy to see if she could spot any birds in the trees. The women had not been provided with field guides as promised, but Martha remembered the sketchy outlines on a poster tacked to the wall of the clubhouse: “Birds of Down Jersey.” She stood on the dock in full sun, watching the trees, but not a streak of color passed through.

Just as she was about to surrender and return to Caroline’s circle of shade, she spotted a kind of ship approaching from the other side of the river. It looked like a large boxy boat with two decks layered on top of a wider base that helped it float. Martha raised her hand to shield her eyes and squinted into the sun. Five uneven squarish portholes lined the lower quarter, and the walls upper deck looked to be made of huge screened-in windows shaded with a striped canopy. As it inched closer, Martha could make out two men working with wide paddles at either side of the main deck to wing the bulky barge through the water.

Caroline shrieked and came flitting over, holding her skirts in one hand. Monica and Heidi followed behind.

“What a regal beauty!” Caroline said, clapping her hands together when she reached the dock. “It’s even more stunning than I remember.”

“It’s not what I’d been expecting,” Martha said.

Nothing at Half Moon had been what she expected, but the barge was different—by being more ungainly and more unsightly than she’d prepared herself for, it had managed to take her by pleasant surprise.
Zurn opened the bar early that afternoon, soon after the barge’s arrival. Harry downed scotch with the others like his blood depended on. Being in the company of other men affected him in this way. Harry had billed the couple’s retreat as a chance for them to renew their love, but they only spent the ends of the nights together, and by then Harry was usually on the verge of passing out. The women celebrated with port or sherry, but Martha found she couldn’t force herself to drink anymore. Since the start of the retreat, everyone had been plugging themselves with so much liquid and so little food that Martha wondered how anyone in the party managed to remain mobile. There was supposed to be a feast later that night, but Martha tried not to think about it. The thought of food only irritated her hunger.

Martha turned the stem of her full glass between two fingers and watched her husband at the bar, his slight potbelly protruding as he raised his glass for another toast. He was not a handsome man, but he’d had his charms. The other men at the retreat were no better or worse looking than Harry. John Zurn was undeniably the most handsome, with his distinguished, thin face and strong arms. Nonetheless, Martha refused to like anyone who could advertise a vacation based on so many lies. Also, Martha sometimes found him staring at her with a leer that made her uncomfortable. It forced her to consider how men might view her, a thought she did not want to linger on. In fact, she’d gotten married, in large part, so she wouldn’t be looked at that way so often.

After evening drinks, as the sun dropped behind the tree line and lit the sky with a strange orange glow, the couples finally left the bar and gathered at the clubhouse dock, where the barge had been tied. A small grooved gangplank with metal railings bridged barge and dock. Martha could see the flickering lights of lanterns through the portholes along the bottom deck. Lanterns had also been hung in the top deck.
“Last year,” Caroli ne said, sneaking up beside Martha, “you’ll never believe the dancing, the music. It’s all so lively. I hear John’s hired a band—a cornet band. Look, there!”

The band appeared with their instruments at the edge of the dock and began to play a quick, festive tune. Martha could see a few clubhouse workers and strangers also gathering around the dock. Then Zurn emerged from the crowd, waving to everyone, and the music stopped.

“Ladies and gents, the Wading River Cornet Band!” Zurn said, sweeping his arm out to introduce the rag-tag band of horn-blowers. One of the men in the band had a peg leg, and another wore a captain’s hat and a stiff blue uniform studded with brass buttons. Applause crackled among the crowd. Martha wondered where all of these people had come from, and how they were all going to fit on the barge.

Caroline skipped ahead, pulling Professor Hinter by the wrist, to board first. She turned on the deck and waved to the crowd before disappearing around one side. Martha waited, watching the four couples and a string of unknown men and women board. Shadows began to dapple the light from the huge screened windows on the top deck of the Half Moon barge.

Harry rocked on his heels beside her, and then took her arm and guided her toward the gangplank. They must have been nearly the last to board. Once they had made it onto the Half Moon barge, Martha looked over her shoulder to see one of the paddlers, now wearing a gaudy ruffled shirt, unwinding the anchoring rope from the dock.

Zurn had been directing everyone though a small door around the back of the barge and up a narrow flight of stairs that led to the screened-in top level. He greeted Harry with a pat on the back.

“I hope you’ll allow me a dance with your wife, Harry,” he said, turning his smile on Martha.

“Certainly, certainly,” Harry said.
Another member of the crew squeezed by, and Zurn whirled around to say something to him. Martha headed up the narrow stairs before Zurn could say anything else and pressed through the door at the top. Inside, the space seemed larger than it looked from the dock. Martha did not recognize many of the people in the room. Harry led her toward the other retreat husbands, hanging out by the bar. The band had already set up at one corner of the room, and music began again almost as soon as Martha and Harry joined their group. The husbands took up their brandies.

“Who’s driving this thing?” Harry said, winking.

Professor Hinter chortled and slapped at his knee.

“There are paddlers,” Martha said aloud, though Harry wasn’t listening. “It’s not a steamboat.”

“It’s floating, isn’t it?” Caroline countered, like it was the most reasonable answer.

The others nodded around her. Heidi’s round face looked a little ruddier than normal, and Martha wondered how much she’d had to drink. Beyond the large screened windows, Martha could still see the lanterns by the clubhouse dock.

Everyone had to raise their voices to shout over the music. Martha decided she did not care for the band. It consisted of one too many brassy pieces with flared mouths, and their combined sound was almost obscene, too heavy for the space on the top deck. The noise alone threatened to topple the barge.

A waiter holding a tray of port wines approached the circle and offered drinks to the wives. His hair fell dark and wispy, like he never knew a comb, and thinned at the forehead. Like the other members of the crew, he wore ruffled white sleeves, but the thing that really caught Martha’s attention was the patch covering one eye. The patch hung on strap that circled his head
to fasten at the back. Martha had never seen a real person with such a patch before, and she had the strange impulse to rip it off and see what was underneath. Martha let the others reach in and take their glasses. Her tongue had gone bitter from drinking so much tea and wine, and she didn’t think she could stomach another. The waiter watched her with his single eye.

“’No, thank you,’” she said.

He smiled and nodded, and then strode across the room. Martha let her eyes follow him while the others continued their conversation.

“Not a pretty bunch,” Caroline was saying. “Poor Mr. Zurn has a hard time of it, I’ll bet, trying to find reliable woods-people for work.”

“Pineys know their boat-making, though,” Monica said.

When the waiter made it to the door, he turned and looked right at Martha, as if he knew she’d been watching him. She was too stunned to look away. He caught her eyes and nodded once again before exiting. Martha sensed the barge rocking under her feet. It felt a bit unstable to be walking on a room stacked high above the water. It couldn’t hurt her to take a moment of fresh air on the deck.

“Excuse me,” she said to the other wives.

Martha passed by the bar area, stepping through the small crowd of loud-talkers. She held up her dress to keep from tripping. The band kept blowing in the opposite corner, taking up nearly a third of the deck. The cornet player in the blue uniform had lost his captain’s hat. She could see Caroline and the other wives laughing where she’d left them. Watching them laugh without her, Martha felt relieved. She turned around again and slipped through the door. No one stopped her. Beyond, the set of dark, narrow steps led to the main deck.
When Martha reached the bottom of the stairs she could see the waiter with the eye patch leaning over the rail. A string of smoke curled over his head. Above, the shrill yell of the trumpet and the rest of the cornet band seemed barely muffled, but other noises added to it. She could hear the Half Moon creaking, the step and stomp of feet above, the whir of tiny insects around her ears.

Martha walked up to the rail, beside the man. He raised his head and nodded in welcome, his pipe outstretched. She had the strange feeling he had been waiting for her. He was short, but not little. Sweat dotted his hairline. Normally, she would not notice a man like this. It wasn’t necessarily his presence that made her curious, but the things he seemed to be hiding. She tried not to stare at the patch over his eye, which seemed to say that he knew things she could not.

“We’ve been here a week and I haven’t seen you before,” Martha said. “Do you work at the clubhouse?”

“I’m the cook,” he said. His voice was calm, no scratch to it, like she’d expected. He tilted his head and continued to puff on his pipe.

“Oh,” Martha said. She tried to think of something she’d eaten over the course of the trip so she could be polite—but she couldn’t remember a single meal. She questioned whether she had eaten anything of substance all week. Her stomach began to curl in on itself. “I’m sorry, I’d offer my compliments, but I can’t remember the last thing I’ve eaten.”

The cook’s single eye continued to wander over the surface of the water. He nodded.

“All we do is drink,” Martha continued. She touched a finger to her lips. “I am sorry to ask, but isn’t there supposed to be a dinner party tonight?”

“Sure is.” The cook removed the pipe for a moment, and smiled. One of his front teeth was missing. Martha looked away and pretended to be interested in the ripples curling out from the
back of the barge. The Half Moon had drifted farther from the clubhouse banks, the lanterns shaking tiny as fireflies just off to the left. On the party deck, the noise of laughter and talk at times seemed to overtake the cornet band’s brassy bellowing. All around, the pines loomed like an audience, ringing the widest part of the river.

“Can I ask your name?” Martha said, trying not to feel faint. “It’s making me hungry to think of you only as the cook.”

“McAnney,” he said. “Howard McAnney.”

He offered her his pipe and she took it, eager to put something in her mouth. She puffed and tried not to chew on the end of the pipe. She watched as his one eye observed her practiced set of smoke rings. With some reluctance, she handed the pipe back and McAnney replaced the fixture through the hole of his vanished tooth.

The cornet band halted, and the crowd’s many voices lowered without the competition of other sounds. A moment later, the music picked up again in the rise-and-fall tune of a brassy waltz. A few women shrieked, and a commotion of steps gathered into a pattern of stepping and sliding. Martha never heard a brass band play a waltz before.

“You’re missing a good dance,” the cook said. He slid that pipe into his pants pocket.

“It seems that way,” she said. “Well, I never liked waltzes.”

“Neither did I. But how about we try again?” McAnney said, offering his arm. His ruffled sleeve glowed white with moonlight. “I might be a cook but I can step a little at times.”

Martha curtsied and took McAnney’s arm, but instead of leading her up onto the level above, he began to step and slide the waltz right there on the main deck, under the stars. His ruffled shirt felt starchy under her hand. He smelled like smoke and cedar and a little sour like sweat, but McAnney managed to make her feel light and comfortable with their closeness. He looked out
over the Wading River as they danced, chin tilted up in perfect form. Their steps matched the pattern of the waltzing stomps above, but Martha imagined that their feet made no noise upon the deck, that if anyone had been in the cabin below them, they would not have heard a thing.

Eventually, the waltz ended and McAnney released her. The noise above churned back to chaos, and this time, the music matched it. Horns blared and the tuba belched in awkward measures. Drunken footsteps took over, patternless. McAnney brushed a strand of hair off of his face and smiled, showing again the hole from his missing tooth. Martha wondered what it would be like to stick her tongue through that hole.

“Should we go back up?” Martha asked, worried that McAnney might be able to read her thoughts.

He nodded and they headed for the narrow stairs, where they parted to go up one by one, Martha first. At the top, Martha pushed open the door and a wave of sweat and musk rolled over her. Like the sound of footsteps below, the scene had shifted into chaos. Bodies jumbled together in strange dances. One man sat on the bar, pouring brandy into the mouth of a woman on his lap. Martha marveled at how so many people and so much noise could cram into such a small space.

Before the door could close completely behind them, a man burst into the room and started yelling, waving his arms.

“Someone’s gone over!” the man said, panting. The music halted. He leaned forward with his hands on his knees and started laughing. Martha recognized him suddenly as Professor Hinter.

“Son of a gun, it’s a real outing now!” another man said.

The people around the room cheered. The horn player with the blue uniform stepped aside to play a brief, sardonic portion of Taps. Laughter and hooting washed through the crowd.
“We have to do something,” Martha said to McAnney, but she couldn’t bring herself to think of how to save a man gone overboard. She caught herself wondering if maybe it had been her husband.

“Don’t you worry about that,” McAnney said, twisting his pipe to the side of his mouth.

As the horn player continued with his Taps, the band member with the peg leg left the quartet’s corner and started coming toward them. He swung his peg leg out in a series of graceful half circles, and his upper body hardly dipped at all as he moved. He nodded to Martha and leaned over McAnney’s far shoulder to whisper something in his ear, and then headed back to the corner with the rest of the band.

“I have to be going,” McAnney said. He raised Martha’s hand for a moment, nodded, and dropped it again. “G’night.”

He left before Martha could think to protest. She pressed herself against the wall by the door. The peg leg player had returned to his stage and blew a frantic tune on his cornet with the others. By the bar, a man had removed his shirt, and one of the women lifted her skirt for his viewing. Another woman had been laid on the bar, her shoes and stockings removed.

The next moment, Zurn appeared beside Martha. She tried to creep across the wall before he could say anything, but he caught her by the wrist.

“Don’t run away, my darling,” Zurn said. He leaned over and blew into her ear. She could smell the liquor on his breath. It made her nauseous. “I want you to enjoy yourself.”

“I assure you, I am,” she said. “Or I was.”

When she tried to get away, Zurn slipped his other arm around her waist and spun her back toward him. His blue eyes narrowed, and he ran his tongue over his lips.

“You’re as bad as I am,” he said. “Why don’t you show me how bad you are?”
Suddenly, Zurn had her buttocks in one hand. He squeezed and leaned forward with his tongue. Martha ripped his hand away and jumped backwards, and Zurn—unstable from so much drink—toppled forward. He lay face-first, sprawled on the floor, laughing.

Martha fled through the door again, down the narrow staircase. In the night, insects whined and bit and flew at her eyes, which must have shone white in the dark, but Martha told herself she would not return to the screened top level. She went to the deck rail and held onto it. Her stomach pulled into knots of hunger, one for every day of vacation. The Half Moon had drifted closer to one of the banks. A sharp pain pricked her neck. She swatted and came away with a blot of blood.

Just as Martha had been considering jumping into the water, McAnney came around one corner holding a paddle. Martha’s stomach fluttered in relief.

“Had to change course,” he said. His wispy hair had been matted down with a splash of river water. A few beads still dripped from his hairline. Even his eye patch was wet.

“You fell in?” Martha said, still holding onto the rail. Her dress hung heavy from her shoulders.

“Just cooling off,” he answered.

“It’s vaudeville in there,” Martha said. “I can’t go back.”

McAnney shrugged and laid the paddle across his shoulders. When he smiled, Martha was shocked to see that his vanished tooth had been replaced. His teeth appeared to be in perfect order.

Shouts and wild screams persisted from the cabin above, and the music returned to full force, four brass horns bleating off-notes. Martha listened to the life she’d been brought up in unravel into a string of chaos, and she wondered if she would ever be able to return—not just then, but
the next day. Perhaps she had always been meant to escape it but only needed someone to push her, to offer a reassuring nod.

“Come with me,” McAnney said.

She had to nearly shout over the noise that drummed from the top level. She could no longer separate the horns from shrieks and stomps from steps. A glass shattered now and then. She wondered again if so much raucousness was unsafe for a barge, but McAnney showed no concern. He led her around the other side of the Half Moon, past a series of square windows, lights flickering below. A second door, identical to the one on the other side of the deck, opened to a few steps leading down. No matter where they went, they could not escape the boorish noise above.

The space inside the lower cabin smelled like wet wood and salt. Two cots had been opened along the far wall. Five square portholes lined two of the four walls, showing gaps of night outside. Martha wondered how much time had passed since they left the clubhouse. At the room’s center, the crew had set up a ratty, old poker table. The three men at the table wore ruffled shirts like McAnney’s. One wore the captain’s hat she’d seen earlier on a member of the cornet band. None of them held drinks. Although they sat at a poker table Martha didn’t see any of the chips being put to use. Their hands commanded the cards.

“Who’s steering the barge?” Martha wondered out loud.

“Not I,” said the man wearing the captain’s hat.

“The Half Moon near about navigates herself,” another said.

The lower cabin felt much cozier and closer than the top level, but there was no escaping the noise. From above, a series of high- and low-pitched moans began to punctuate the din.

“Won’t be long now,” McAnney announced, gazing upward.
“Won’t be long until what?” Martha said. “I don’t understand.”

“You haven’t ate a thing,” McAnney said. “I’ll bet you’d eat the tail end of a skunk about now.”

The noise started to give way to more moaning and shuffling steps. The band continued to play, but not as frantically. Under the lantern light, Martha could see her arms welted and reddened with bug bites, so many she no longer felt the itch. Sweat had loosened the careful bun in her hair. She felt light and fuzzy, though she hadn’t had a drink all night.

“I need to sit,” Martha said, her vision wobbling.

At that moment, the Half Moon ground to a halt. Martha stumbled forward and caught herself on the back of the chair. McAnney helped her right herself.

“Land ho,” the captain said, tossing his hat to another of the ruffle-shirted men at the card table.

Above, there was no sign of joy at their arrival, wherever they had come. All moaning, shrieking, tumbling, and stomping had reached an end. Even the band stopped playing. Everyone lifted their eyes to the sudden silence. McAnney smiled, full-toothed, and offered his hand to Martha.

“Dinner is served,” he said.

When Martha followed the crew to the top deck, up the stairs and through the door, she witnessed the graceless tumble of bodies, half-clothed and snoring in small piles or face first on the bar. The quartet chatted quietly in their corner, cleaning their reeds and rubbing their cheeks. The crew folded their arms and shook their heads like parents attending their children’s mess.
At one corner, Martha finally found her husband, sunk to the floor with his eyes closed and head tilted against the bar. Slung across his lap lie Caroline Hinter, her dress torn off at one shoulder. Her mouth hung open, lips smudged. Martha let the urge to kick Harry pass.

McAnney appeared behind her. “Shouldn’t have to miss a feast for a mess like this.”

“I’m starving,” she said, and then wondered what it really felt like to starve.

McAnney touched her hand and motioned to the door. Martha followed him down to the deck, where the gangplank had been set up so they could disembark. The Half Moon had docked not at the clubhouse, and not at the other end of the Wading River, but on what looked to be a very small island that rounded out of the dark like a hairy mole on a smooth cheek of the water. Martha could see candlelight not too far off, near the center of the island. From the deck of the Half Moon, a path had been laid out with a roll of red turf. The path led over the sandy shore and through a hovel of pine. McAnney carried a lantern and sang a song, probably one of the tunes famous among pineys:

\[\begin{align*}
&\text{Dancin’ Joe Mulliner, wanted for his knife,} \\
&\text{Arrived one night at Friendship Hall} \\
&\text{To find his lovely wife.} \\
&\text{He told her she must dance for him} \\
&\text{He told her she must sing.} \\
&\text{And when the sheriff came around} \\
&\text{He left for her his ring.}
\end{align*}\]

The red turf ended at a curtain of mosquito netting. McAnney lifted it for her to pass under. The four members of the crew and the four horn players had arrived ahead of her, and they stood bowing their heads in welcome. The table glittered with wax candles. It had been set with nine
perfect placemats and strewn with boughs of pine. At the center sat a doe, legs folded and neck held straight, as if on alert. Two sets of long lashes framed her open eyes. Her tawny fur shone like tarnished gold in the candlelight. Martha had to examine the doe for a few moments to convince herself it was no longer alive, and even then, she couldn’t be sure it hadn’t been trained to sit so still. A large plate of venison—from her butchered mate, Martha guessed—spread out before her, along with heaps of greens and carrots and potatoes and a full boat of gravy.

“I suppose it’s bad luck to eat alone,” she said, taking a seat at one side of the table. She offered the head to the cook, McAnney. The others took their places, picked up their forks, and dug in. Her stomach roared, but she held back for a few moments, observing the easy way the others ate, chewing with their mouths open to allow enough space for stories to come through. It was nothing like the life she’d been trained to lead, silent and polite, every movement of a spoon signaling a set of desirable traits and manners. Finally, Martha raised a fork to her mouth without regard for any propriety. After she had finished her first helping, Martha lifted her gaze to the doe and the doe stared back, elegant and unforgotten, all of her hungers finally come to pass.
I.

Samantha turned from the restless crowd and let the scattered applause follow her off stage, wishing she could shut a door on it. She scanned the sky over the city where a red dusk camped over the Delaware River. In another two hours the Camden Heritage Festival would close for the week, and she would finally be finished singing, at least until her next show came around. When she first starting booking solo gigs after high school, Sam never imagined that applause could be so disappointing. She had looked forward to any stream of recognition, accepted it with the glee of a kid in a talent show. But more than a few years later, she found she was not a kid anymore, or she did not feel like one. The applause had lost some of its glamor.

With the final song of Sam’s second set complete, the time had come to be an adult and console herself with a drink from the bar. Sweat prickled at her forehead from the heat of the stage lights, but as soon as she escaped them a chill set in. May had arrived, but summer still felt like a long way off. She found her light jacket backstage and wrapped it around her bare shoulders, nodding back to strangers who nodded at her. She understood the motion as politeness, not necessarily a note of talent. If you watched someone onstage, you had to acknowledge her off of it. It seemed to be an audience rule, to avoid awkward confusion.

Sam stood in line for an overpriced drink. She had already used her three free drink tickets for the day on martinis, so the next would be coming out of her pay. She had been thinking about the injustice of withholding free, unlimited alcohol from any performer when a large man appeared beside her. Sometimes men approached her after sets, so it wasn’t surprising. But when she searched him out of the corner of her eye, she found no typical guy but a slightly older man
dressed like a cartoon Indian chief. He lumbered there, headdress waving in the breeze like the
crown of an excited parrot. How inaccurate, she thought, but it wasn’t his fault. Like her, he had
been hired to put on a show. The world held only two kinds of people, she thought—the
watchers and the watched—and because they were both the same kind, Sam let the Native
cultural performer catch her eye.

“You have a beautiful voice,” the man said. He looked about her father’s age—the age he’d
be if he were still alive, maybe nearing 60. She always judged men she didn’t know by this
standard.

“It’s a living,” she said, but if it were true, she would not have been living with her mother.

Sam studied the man, trying to scan his intentions. His eyes didn’t wander, and he didn’t
seem twitchy or nervous.

“Indian Joe.” He lifted his hand, palm outward in a stereotyped greeting. At least he wasn’t
wearing face paint.

“That’s not really your name, is it?” she said. Sam wondered if he was one of those types
who never broke character.

“It is what I’m called,” he said.

“I’m Samantha,” she said.

Sam turned away to order gin from the well, watered down with tonic and topped with a
shred of lime. After the bartender had taken her money, the man followed her without ordering
his own drink.

“For someone with such a voice, you don’t seem happy,” he said. “If you don’t mind me
saying.”
“Excuse me?” Sam said. She had walked toward the river, hoping that the man would get the hint that the conversation was over and detach himself from her.

“I know what it’s like on stage,” Indian Joe said.

She said nothing and switched her focus to the rim of her drink. She felt the man continue to stare, unaffected by silence. The Delaware River glittered beside them like a lit walkway. On the Philadelphia side, more lights began to blink on in skyscrapers. A breeze kicked up, and Sam pulled her jacket tighter around her shoulders.

“I’m on again soon.” She pressed the piece of lime between her front teeth and sucked.

“Maybe you’re looking for another job,” he said.

Sam found that she had to wait for each deliberate word to form and fall from his mouth. She turned away from the river to face the man again.

“You’re not even really Native, are you?” she asked.

“Would I dress like this if it mattered?”

He must have had practice keeping his expression so still and poised. Despite the strong wrinkles that set his mouth to a hard line, she couldn’t quite read his tone.

“I have work, if you are looking,” he said when Sam ignored him.

“You think I’m desperate for a job or something.” She wiped a drop of wetness from her upper lip. “Truth is, I’m booked.”

“I don’t mean a show.” He shifted from one foot to the other and the ridiculous leather fringe on his pants swayed. “A different kind of job.”

“Yeah, what kind?” Sam felt sure that he was pulling her leg, that the whole thing had to be a set up for a long joke that ended in some kind of sexual proposition. It wouldn’t be the first time, although a gaudily dressed Native American performer had never approached her before. It
would make a good story. She let the last of her watered gin rest inside of its plastic cup, just in case he decided to breech decorum.

“Gardening, actually,” he said. “No experience necessary. Just looking for someone younger to help out an old man.”

“Gardening? I’m a singer,” she said. “You don’t even know me.” She had no idea why this man would look at her and think gardener. At the same time, her fingertips tingled. She and her mother had tried gardening together for a time, as a way of consoling themselves after her father’s death, but the experiment had failed.

“One performer to another,” he said, leaning toward her, “I think a good voice is the sign of a green thumb.”

“Not in my case,” Sam said. “But I’ll think about it. Thanks.”

She gulped the rest of her gin and tonic and headed back toward the stage for her third and final set of the night. Indian Joe didn’t follow. As for his gardening job, there would be nothing to think about, no number to contact. She stood just off of the stage awaiting her introduction, and thought she would likely never see him again. He was probably just another middle-aged man hoping to impress her. She told herself not to search for Indian Joe or his headdress in the shifting crowd. She did anyway, but she could not find him there.

As she pulled into the driveway, Sam could see a team of unusually fat deer collected right in front of Sam’s mother’s house like they’d been waiting to be let inside and fed from cereal bowls. They lifted their eyes at the headlights. Sam tapped the horn once, and they scattered, white tails stitching a path through the pines.
Sam could not stop thinking about the Lenape Indian performer at the show. It was strange that he would offer her a gardening job, out of nowhere. It made her remember her first and only gardening venture, just after her father’s death nearly five years ago. Her mother suggested gardening that August, after Sam had decided not to return to college in the fall. They started almost immediately, working every day and reading countless how-to books. Sam had wanted to see the flowers and bushes crowd up around the house, blot it out, cover over the doorway, and camouflage the entire yard so she wouldn’t have to look at it the same way again. But the deer ate everything. Sam and her mother were determined, at first, to continue fighting back. They built chicken-wire fences, tried scattering soap bits, and even resorted to chemicals, but nothing fazed the deer. She and her mother had given up less than a year later, but the beasts never left.

Sam let the car idle with the headlights directed at the place where their garden was supposed to be. The fresh soil mounded over chewed stems told her that her mother had started planting again. Just to keep feeding them, Sam assumed. Grow the beast, not the garden. Sam felt ashamed that her mother could surrender so easily, but she was no different. She’d given up altogether on their garden as well as the deer.

A fuzzy blue light hung in the front windows of the house. She opened the front door and flicked on a light. Her mother was asleep, still sitting upright on the sofa with her head back and her mouth open. When Sam slid the keys into her front coat pocket, a corner of folded paper cut against her hand. She pulled it out, held her finger under the kitchen light, and found a small slice of blood near the knuckle, a paper cut. She sucked the blood from her finger. Then she reached in again and found the paper, a square white sheet splashed with a Camden Heritage Festival watermark. A few words had been scrawled in pencil: Think on it again.
He had written his name the way he introduced himself—“Indian Joe”—and included an address but no phone number or email. The thing that caught her eye, though—the reason she did not immediately stride to the kitchen garbage and toss it—was the weird picture underneath the four words: a vice-like plant smiling with oversized teeth. She could imagine its deep voice pleading, in the comic baritone voice she’d remembered from that strange musical she’d seen on television years ago: *Feed me, Seymour.*

She folded the note and kept it tucked in her palm while she removed her coat. Although it was strange and unexpected, the note made her feel relieved. She had been given more time to decide: toss the note and forget about it, or try out this gardening gig. According to the address, Indian Joe lived to the south and east of her town, deeper in the Pine Barrens. Even though the place was close by, Sam had not been anywhere near there in several years, not since the summer after her first and only year in college, when a classmate from high school had taken her on a disastrous kayak trip in the muddy Wading River. In the middle of the woods, they’d run into a deranged piney who believed the world was ending. It was true that strange people sometimes lived in the Pines, but maybe some of those people were only misunderstood.

She went to the kitchen window and looked out through the glare. A laugh track cackled on the TV, but her mother didn’t wake. Another team of obese whitetails tromped back across the yard. Sam wasn’t sure they counted as *real* deer, not given the lives they led. She could not escape the question herself—the sense that her life might be a projection, a cover-up story for the real thing. What were the odds that she was another false creature dropped into a barred and barren realm, tamed to sing like a caged parrot on a perch? She squinted into the dark yard, puddled silver under a cold moon, but the world did not change.
Sam looked back at the note in her hand. She was beginning to feel like it represented a second chance, an exit strategy for the life she’d become too comfortable with. She did not have to tell anyone about it. She could check things out—go to the address, and just have a look at this garden. If it turned out the job wasn’t for her, or if the man tried anything funny, she would leave and forget about the offer. She covered the drawing of the toothy plant with one thumb and then uncovered it again, revealing its jawline of sketched triangle teeth.

Sam sat in her car outside of the house that matched the address on the note. She squeezed the wheel and studied the yard. Indian Joe appeared to live in the tall, narrow house peaked with a sharp roof and featuring an empty, square white porch around a dark green door. A high fence marked with several *Beware of Dog* and *Keep Out* signs flanked either side of the house. A mat of dry pine needles covered most of a gritty, greening stone walkway to the front porch. Pine trees fell around the second story windows. Even the sky seemed to lean down toward the yard.

She had been waiting in her car for several minutes. The look of the house unnerved her a bit. Its location was more remote than she hoped it might be. There were no neighbors. Indian Joe’s was the only number on the short, winding street. The paved road ended just beyond the place where she parked the car, but a smaller dirt path continued into the pines. If something happened to her—if this Indian Joe character turned out to be a creep—Sam didn’t know how easy it would be for her to escape.

Then, she thought of something her father used to tell her when she first started trying out for stage solos: *It takes a brave person to make brave decisions about what life she will lead.* Sam often wondered about her bravery. Sure, she no longer had any problems singing in front of crowds, but she didn’t see herself as someone who had made a habit of making brave choices.
She thought of her mother and their failed garden, and finally talked herself into getting out of the car. She left the doors unlocked, in case she needed to leave fast.

Sam walked up the stone path without letting herself reconsider her decision. She gripped her car key in one fist and raised the other to knock on the door. When it swung open almost immediately, she jumped back a little. A spike of fear jolted through her, and she thought: *Run.* But the man had already appeared in the doorway, dressed in a plaid flannel shirt. She blinked a few times. He’d pulled his hair back into a low ponytail at the back of his neck and wore a set of modest, thin-rimmed glasses.

“Joe?” She cleared her throat, considering how informal his first name sounded alone. Heat traveled to her cheeks. “Indian Joe?”

“Samantha,” he said, in his same deep voice she remembered, though he looked a little older than before. Maybe it had just been the alcohol. “I didn’t think you would come.”

“Well,” she said, “I thought I’d just check it out. Whatever this gardening job is.”

He swung the door open wider and motioned for her to come inside. Sam looked around the porch and back to the man. His gestures were more welcoming than she’d expected. Her father had owned several plaid shirts, just like the one Joe wore.

“Please, come in,” he said. “Make yourself at home.”

She stepped inside. Joe swung around, indicating the dim room before her. The curtains on the front windows had been pulled close. The only light shone from the back of the house, where a sliding glass door led to a bright backyard. The house smelled like black tea and cedar. The unexpected familiarity of the scent did more to calm her, though she wished the lighting was better.
“You look different without the costume,” Sam said, trying to make light of her earlier embarrassment.

“It’s a good disguise,” he said. “I am older without it.”

It was true that in his headdress and fringe, Indian Joe looked more severe than aged. Out of character, he was still an imposing figure—tall and broad and longhaired—but Sam agreed that he looked a little more worn out. In some ways, it was better. He seemed friendlier this way, and less suspicious. Sam loosened the grip on her car keys and slid them into her jean pocket.

“Something to drink?” he said, as they passed into the kitchen.

“Sure,” Sam said. “Okay.”

Indian Joe poured two glasses of water from a pitcher in the refrigerator and they sat down at the kitchen table.

“It’s just me here today, but sometimes my mother visits,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “She’s not aging well.”

Sam took a sip of water and nodded. Light flooded in from the sliding glass doors, but from where she was sitting, she could only see the small deck and the tops of a few tall, green plants beyond.

“What’s it like, being a Lenape Indian performer?” Sam asked.

“That?” he said. “I always had a taste for the stage. I’m sure you understand. It’s fun for me, but it’s just a side job. I work at Galloway College. I’m a botany and biology instructor.”

“Oh,” Sam said. “My dad was a science teacher.”

“Is that right?” Joe said, leaning forward.

“He taught high school, though,” she said. “He passed away a few years back.”

“I’m sorry to hear it,” he said.
He shook his head but did not reach for her hand or touch her shoulder, gestures Sam thought of as intrusive and fake. She forced a small smile to show her appreciation.

“I don’t know much about gardening,” she said. “Can you tell me more about this job?”

“Of course,” Joe said. “Are you afraid of dogs?”

“You have dogs?” She thought of the signs posted on the high fence. “What’s this have to do with gardens?”

“Let’s go out back,” Joe said.

He adjusted his glasses by scrunching his nose and led Sam through the sliding glass door. He stopped short at the edge of the small wooden deck, just before the large flower garden below, and turned toward Sam.

“Now I guarantee, my garden is not like any garden you have probably seen before,” he said. “I want you to know, you shouldn’t be afraid.”

“Afraid?” Sam leaned on one foot to try to see around Joe.

“They’ll like you.” He turned and motioned over his shoulder for her to follow him down the deck steps. “I’m sure of it.”

Sam wanted to remark that plants couldn’t *like* anything, but then something she saw made her hold her tongue. As Joe led Sam toward an opening in the center of the garden, the blooms of the plants turned and followed their movement. She saw one of the plants, a long tubular shape, shoot a thin, barbed tongue from its hooded head to snatch a fly, just like the picture on Joe’s business card.

“What is this?” she said.

“Welcome to my carnivore garden,” Joe said.
“They’re moving.” Sam folded her arms and tried to make herself small. She started to feel a little strange again. She couldn’t quite believe what she was seeing, or that she ever wanted to see it in the first place. She remembered the small toothy plant on the note.

“You’ll get used to it,” he said. “Don’t worry.”

Despite his reassurance, she continued to keep her elbows pressed into her body. The stone walkways of the garden had been set with heavier rocks and swept clean of pine needles, unlike the front path to the porch. All around, the carnivorous plants grew in odd shapes and bloomed in bright colors. Sam could tell that Joe had kept his garden in meticulous order, separated by different sections. Most of the plants did not grow in soil, like her failed garden, but in waterlogged beds gagged with moss or damp sandy pits. Several types of the same plants clumped like small families, and in other places, groups of scattered species stood together.

“Beautiful” wasn’t the word to describe the garden, and neither was “hideous,” so Sam retracted any comment in favor of silence.

“These are my sundews,” Joe said, directing her toward the back of the garden. “If you touch them, you’ll notice that they’re sticky, to trap insects.”

Sam did not touch the sundews. She noticed that they didn’t have obvious mouths, like some of the other plants appeared to have—but they looked like green, hairy tentacles. Some of the tentacles grew very tall, almost as tall as Sam.

“I have several species of pitchers, too” Joe explained as they moved away from the sundews. He pointed out different stomach-shaped pitcher plants, some tubed and tall, some stout. “Pitcher plants are also known as Sarracenia. There are many varieties, you can see. I won’t bother you with the specific Latin names.”
Joe explained how the funnel of the flower of a pitcher plant was designed to swallow up flies that wandered inside, but the blooms of his pitcher plants sometimes smacked their lips and rolled their stomachs. They seemed to play a more active role in their search for food.

“But why?” Sam said. She couldn’t hold back the question any longer. “I mean why grow plants like these? What’s wrong with perennials?”

“Just look at them,” he said. “They’re so much more…engaging…than other plant life.”

Sam wasn’t so sure she agreed. “I think I prefer boring gardens.”

“You learn to love them,” Joe said. “If I’m being honest, this garden started as another kind of odd job. I sell some of my specimens to the college, and to florists.” He sighed. “I have to support my mother, now, and I can’t do that with my wages from the university. Dancing doesn’t cut it either.”

“I bet people would pay a lot of money for these things,” Sam said.

Joe squatted down and caressed the leaf of a pitcher plant with his pinkie finger.

“Yes,” he said, nodding. “But I’m possessive of my garden. I’ve become too attached. It’s hard for me to let them go, sometimes.”

Sam almost laughed out loud at his sincerity. She couldn’t quite imagine becoming so attached to something that looked like a sundew.

“You’d put Little Shop of Horrors out of business,” Sam said.

Indian Joe flashed a crooked smile, as if he’d heard this joke before but had no real patience for it now.

“Ah,” he said, suddenly. “I haven’t shown you my Venuses.” He strode back toward the deck area and squatted down next to a plot of plants similar to the tiny cartoon drawn on his note.
“Venus flytraps are my favorite, maybe because they were the first carnivorous plants I cultivated. Some of these are very old.”

Sam tried to understand the allure of the plants, but she still did not let herself get too close. Many of the Venus flytraps snapped their jaws and swayed out over the path. Some of them were very large, and Sam guessed these to be the oldest ones. Their stems and leaves tangled around each other at their bases.

“Believe it or not, these plants are native to this area,” Joe said. “With the acidic soil and water, it’s easy. In fact, ideal.”

“Well, I’ve never seen plants like this in the wild,” Sam said.

“That’s because you aren’t really looking, or maybe you don’t want to see,” he said, bringing himself to his feet. “My guess is, they like company—other plants, even people. Gets lonely out there, hard to find good food. They have no energy to move around so much, no reason for it.”

“Food?” She raised her eyebrows. “Like what?”

“You shouldn’t believe the movies,” Joe said. He seemed to know what she had been thinking. “You’ll find the reality is much more intriguing, anyway.” He reached into one pocket and took out a shred of dry, reddish stuff. “It’s a compressed protein substance. Crushed flies and maggots, plus a few extra ingredients. Spices, vitamins.”

He shrugged and tossed the scrap of protein to the plot of Venuses. One snapped its jaws like a dog to catch the food, and a few nearby flytraps sagged their heads in disappointment.

Whatever the stuff was made of, to Sam it still looked like decomposing flesh, and it smelled like it, too. Joe handed Sam a small piece and gestured toward one of the plants. Sam knelt close to a fierce yellow flower shaped like a fist-sized, half-unfolded origami bird, its petal wings
masking a rounded body. The petals fluttered and tilted toward Sam. She flicked the piece of
food at it and leaned back immediately.

“That’s a bladderwort,” Joe said, ignoring her squeamishness. He bent down beside her and
tickled the rounded part of the flower. The plant calmed in an instant. “They look a little bit like
bladders, if you examine the bloom closely.”

“So, what do you need me for?” Sam asked. “You seem to have a good handle on things.”

“Don’t be so sure,” he said. “A garden like this, it takes work. Especially this time of year.”

Sam nodded. Although she thought the garden was very strange, part of her admired Joe’s
work. He seemed to be able to get anything to grow. She knew how difficult it could be to
manage even a normal garden.

“My mother and I tried to start a garden once,” she said.

“See? I knew it,” he said. “Performers, we always have green thumbs.”

“No—It never took,” Sam said. “We couldn’t grow anything.”

“Interest is all you need,” he said, stroking another bladderwort. “A taste for it, let’s say.”

She expected him to smile at his own joke, but his face remained blank.

“I don’t know about all this.” She motioned to the garden with one hand.

“If it means something to you, I’ll teach you everything I know—and I know a bit,” he said.

“Remember, I’m a teacher.”

“Well, maybe,” Sam said.

“Wait here a moment,” Joe said.

He walked off along a smaller path around the other side of the deck. Sam leaned over to
examine the bright yellow bladders again. The bloom seemed bigger than Sam had ever seen
in any type of garden. Aside from their somewhat freakish movements, Joe’s plants appeared to
be astonishingly healthy. It was nice of him to want to teach her what he knew. Maybe then, she and her mother would finally be able to grow their own garden.

Joe returned with two small spades, one pair of flower-printed gloves, and a few vials stopped with green plastic caps. Sam pulled on the gloves he handed her, and Joe cleared a spot in the sand inside the plot of Venus flytraps.

“Their roots need massaging,” he said. “Just smooth the sand, like this, and then dig in with your fingers—gloves are okay, too.”

Joe dug in. The plants bobbed their heads, but they did not try to grab at Joe as he worked. They only acted vaguely interested in what he was doing.

“Give it a try,” he said. “I think they’ll appreciate the touch of younger hands.”

Sam hesitated, but she was sure that the plants wouldn’t hurt her, not after seeing Joe work first. She cleared a spot in the sand on the other side of the plot and worked her fingers down toward the roots. The Venus flytraps nearby swayed a little faster. The roots trembled in her hands.

“Look there, you’re a natural,” Joe said. He flashed her a warm smile, and when it was gone, Sam found that she wanted to make him smile again.

Next, Joe showed Sam how to test the acidity of the bog water around the sundews and ladle film away from the surface to keep the plots from getting too goopy. He also demonstrated how to prune the plants, which was the only thing Sam didn’t feel altogether comfortable with, as some plants seemed to get ornery when approached with sharpened shears.

“So you’ll take the job?” Joe said, after they had finished and he had returned the gardening tools to their place under the deck. “I think you’ll see it comes with some unexpected perks.”
Sam looked out over the garden. As the plants swayed back and forth, their leaves brushed together for an appreciative hushing sound. Their movements were almost human. Some of them even looked human, with blooms or stems framed by stomach or mouth contraptions.

In a way, the whole thing was exciting. Since the summer of her father’s accident, Sam liked to keep the doors she relied upon closed tight. If she left any open, who knew what calamities could fly in without her noticing? Lately, though, she could not stop thinking about everything she might have missed over the last five years, if only she had been more open to trying new things outside of what she deemed comfortable or safe.

Sam found that she was nodding—yes, she would take the job.

Together, she and Joe left the backyard and returned indoors. He poured another glass of water for her, but Sam refused it, although she was thirsty. They agreed she would return a couple of days later for her first real shift in the garden. She left Joe’s house before realizing that they had never negotiated her pay.

During the drive home, her hands tingled as if they were asleep or just waking up. Sam stretched them over the steering wheel. Her mind felt light inside her head, loose and unlocked somehow. She understood more clearly than ever that her life had become bland and repetitive, nothing but a series of half-hearted shows interspersed with time spent alone or with her mother. At least Joe’s garden would offer a new scene, a little magic. She felt relieved that she’d made a brave decision for once. Her father would’ve been proud.

Sam’s second time at Joe’s garden had gone as smoothly as the first, with somewhat less of a shock factor involved. He paid her $15 cash per hour for easy work, which Sam thought was very generous of him. He invited her back to the garden a few days later for a third shift on
Sunday. She enjoyed Joe’s company and caught herself hoping that he might let her visit his
garden more often than two or three times a week. It was nice to be able to spend time with
someone aside from her mother.

Although she wasn’t exactly qualified for a gardening position, she could see how the plants
responded to her touch—their leaves thickened, their colors brightened—and because of it, she
already felt needed in the garden, like she’d had this magic green thumb her entire life.

Sometimes, Sam wondered why Joe didn’t get one of his students at Galloway College to help
with the garden, but she knew that some teachers liked to keep their students at a distance.

When she arrived at Joe’s on Sunday—less than a week since her first visit—Joe had already
set out the required gardening tools so she would not have to dig them out herself. She got to
work testing the pH balance of the more watery plots and massaging roots. At one point, she
heard the sliding glass door open and close again behind her as she worked, and Joe came out to
sit on the deck.

“They’re kind of cool, but they still creep me out sometimes,” Sam said. “I can’t believe they
move like this.” She pointed to a Venus, which had just chomped at a mosquito with a bite so
sudden, it made Sam withdraw her hand.

“They’re good dogs,” Joe said, adjusting his glasses and crossing an ankle over one knee.

“Nothing to worry about.”

Sam couldn’t tell if she was supposed to laugh or feel ashamed that she had suggested
something sinister about his garden. Joe seemed to have an almost arid sense of humor that never
flinched at any hint of confusion, especially when she made man-eating plant jokes.

“You have such a nice voice,” Joe said, after Sam had continued to massage the roots of the
nearest plot of Venuses. “It’d be nice to hear it again.”
“I have a show tonight, if you’re around,” she said.

“I mean right now. Why not?”

Sam turned and examined Joe’s expression. He was a more animated person when he wasn’t in character, but he still had that ability to hold his features to a steady blankness. She wondered if he did it purposefully, or if that expression had become a habit.

“Well,” Sam said. “I don’t know.”

“Please, go on,” he said. “We would all appreciate a little music.”

She wondered who he was referring to other than himself, but nonetheless she cleared her throat and hummed to prep her voice in the correct key. She had not known she had perfect pitch until a high school choral teacher quizzed her on different sounds and discovered that Sam could always name the note and copy it.

She started singing the first song that came to her mind, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” Her father used to sing it to her when she was a child, and she sometimes put it on her song list at shows. She’d always loved the bluesy feel of the notes. Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home. After a verse, she let her hands return to the roots. She tried not to focus on the heads of the plants and instead trained her gaze along the high fence beyond the garden. If you get there before I do, coming for to carry me home. Tell all my friends I’m coming, too, coming for to carry me home.

She finished on a long note. After the song ended, she found herself short of breath, though she was sure she’d been breathing properly. Was she so out of shape that a few simple gardening tasks could leave her winded while singing?
“Brava,” Joe said, offering a standing ovation from his place on the deck. Sam was surprised by the accent of the single word, the exact way he rolled his tongue over the ‘r’. “Look, look at the plants.”

The plants were swaying back and forth, more excitable than usual. A few of them puckered their mouths like they wanted to sing. Joe stepped down the deck toward her with a fresh glass of water in one hand. She took it without realizing how thirsty she was and swallowed the entire thing in one gulp. They returned to the deck together so she could drink a second glass Joe poured from a pitcher. He took a seat beside her on the deck’s bench as Sam finished off three full glasses, almost before taking another breath.

“I’m sweating,” Sam said, wiping her head.

“It’s finally getting close to summer,” Joe said. “Humidity is good for a garden like this.”

“There’s this static in my head,” Sam said. “But it’s nice. What is it?”

He shrugged. “You never sing and garden at the same time?”

“No, never,” she said and laughed. “Here, let me put these away.”

Sam picked up the empty pitcher and glass and opened the sliding door to the kitchen. It was dark inside, but as she went to the sink, Sam spotted a very old woman seated on the sofa in the sitting room. She hadn’t been there when Joe let her into the house. The buzzing in Sam’s head sunk down to her stomach and flipped around. This must have been Joe’s mother. Sam set the pitcher and glass in the sink and started to step back through the door to the deck when the woman turned toward her with glinting, wet eyes.

Her voice lilted under a thick accent, but it was not cracked or rough at all. If Sam had heard that voice over the telephone, she would not have guessed it belonged to a woman so old. The woman pressed herself up from the sofa. She had something in her hand.

“I’m Samantha,” she said, still standing at the door. “Nice to meet you.”

“Come, sit,” the woman said again.

The woman had reached the kitchen at a shuffling pace. She took a seat again at the kitchen table, and put what had been in her hand before her—a deck of cards. Sam glanced back outside, but Joe had retreated down to the garden. Sam turned toward the woman and took a seat across from her. She could see the woman a little better, then. Her eyes were the same dark brown as Joe’s, her skin even darker, her hair whiter but just as long.

“We’ll play a game,” the woman said, fanning the cards.

“I’m no good at games,” Sam said, but she did not get up for fear of being rude.

The woman continued to shuffle the deck, lengthening and bending the cards at her will like a magician. Finally the woman held up one card for Sam to see. It showed a man with a feather cap holding a sword in one hand. She added two more to her hand—one with four cups, and one with five clubs.

“It’s like tarot,” Sam said.

The woman clicked her tongue once. “No, no. This is Scopa.”

“I don’t know how to play,” Sam said. “I’m sorry.”

The woman folded the cards back into a neat pile and set them in front of her. “It is an old game, from my country. I will show you.”

The woman fanned the cards again, displaying the suits one by one—cups, coins, swords, clubs. Similar to the deck of 52, each card within a suit had a value one to seven. The eighth card
in each suit featured a lone man in a feathered hat called the knave. The ninth card carried the knight, and the tenth, the king.

“You win points by captures,” the woman said. “You make captures by adding points of the card.”

At times, the woman’s words melded together under her accent, and Sam had a little bit of trouble understanding the instructions. From what she could gather, each person started with cards in hand, and then four cards were turned face-up in the center. Apparently, it was a very good thing to clear the cards in the center by taking all of them at once, and that move was called a *scopa*. Sam recognized the woman’s game as a matter of math and luck. She tried to pay attention to the finer rules that dictated points awarded in *Scopa*, but her head was still buzzing. She felt herself getting thirsty again. Her throat felt dry despite the three glasses of water. Eventually, they began a round, but Sam could barely follow it.

Joe finally entered the kitchen again.

“Let her be,” he said to his mother, who had just cleared the cards at the center of the table for her third *scopa*. “You never let anyone win.”

“I’m sorry, but I need to get home.” Sam pushed away from the table. “My mother’s waiting for me.”

She felt strange making excuses to leave. The old woman set her cards down and clucked her tongue to the roof of her mouth.

“It’s about chance,” she said. “But only the fool assumes that means she has no control.”

“I’m sorry,” Sam said. “I’ll play some other time.”

She said goodbye and made her way through the kitchen and sitting room to the front door. Joe followed, and they went out to the porch together.
“Are you okay?” Joe asked. “You seem a little bit distracted.”

“She just surprised me,” Sam said.

“Ah, yes,” Joe said. “I should have told you I would not be alone today.”

“I didn’t expect to see her there. I just—” She stopped herself short, and wondered why she should feel so betrayed at the woman’s sudden appearance. “Sorry, it’s just me.”

“She is tiresome, but I like to humor her,” he said.

“She’s not going to make me play cards again?” Sam said. “I’ve never been any good at that kind of thing.”

Joe’s eyebrows pressed upward above the rim of his glasses. “Let’s hope not.”

He slid a few folded bills from his front shirt pocket and handed them to her.

“When do you want to come by again?” he asked. “Tuesday?”

“Sure,” Sam said.

They said goodbye and Joe closed the door. Sam dropped the loose bills in her bag and stepped down from the porch into the yard. The buzzing in her head had faded.

Unlike the backyard, Joe’s front yard grew mossy, not a single plant to be found aside from the mountain laurel that bloomed beneath the pines. As she walked down the path she kicked at the sandy soil pressing in from both sides—acidic, Joe had said. Sam remembered a vague middle school lesson about soil acidities. It seemed strange that several things desired to grow in such a dead soil—several lively, nearly terrible things.

She reached her car, parked on the last bit of asphalt before the dirt road. She put her key into the lock and lifted her head just in time to see a black car turn and disappear around the bend at the end of the street.
II.

Sam stood before the mannequin at the mall. She’d been examining the dress it wore but found herself focused on its face, eyeless and lipless and pale. She didn’t suppose shoppers were ever meant to look at their faces, but then why did they have heads? The short green dress hung light and shimmery from the mannequin’s body.

“That one’s nice,” Sam’s mother said behind her. “Don’t you think?”

Sam shrugged and turned away from the spotlight where the mannequin stood. With summer coming, Sam had let her voicemail and inbox pile up with requests for performances. By electing herself Sam’s manager and agent, her mother hadn’t been helping. She would drop Sam’s name into a conversation with any perfect stranger and mention that her daughter was available to sing anytime. Her mother offered every day to take Sam shopping, the only activity they seemed to enjoy together when she was in high school. Finally, Sam had given in, and already her mother had thrown several things into a shopping cart—lipstick, heels, another dress or two.

“Tell you what, that dress would make your legs look great,” she said, rubbing the fabric of the hem between two fingers.

“I told you I don’t need all this stuff,” Sam said.

“You can’t be seen on stage wearing last year’s style. It’s tacky.”

“Just one, then.” Sam reached into her mother’s cart for a blue dress. “This one. That’s it.”

“Let me pay.” Her mother tried to wrestle the hanger from Sam’s grip, but Sam pulled it away.

“I’m not fifteen anymore, Mom.”

Before her mother could continue to argue, Sam strode over to a nearby cash register, laid the dress on the counter, and let the saleswoman ring up the price.
It was sometimes hard for Sam to believe that when she was in high school, her mother barely noticed her talent for singing. She came late to the choir ensemble’s holiday shows and ignored all of Sam’s pleas for voice lessons, saying she would rather she focus on schoolwork. It had been her father who pressed her mother to support Sam, or who came alone whenever her mother was busy. Since Sam had dropped out of college, her mother seemed to be trying to make up for a previous lack of interest, but as usual, she was overcompensating.

The cashier punched the dress’s hanger through the bottom of a plastic bag and handed it to Sam, but her mother wasn’t anywhere nearby. Sam strode down one aisle past the lingerie and found her at a second cashier, paying for the other items that had been in the cart.

Back at home Sam left the bags by the front door and went straight into her room. She lifted her phone to her ear to check her voicemail messages. Most of them were from venues her mother had contacted first, plus one wedding and a Memorial Day beach-opening event in Wildwood. One message stuck out to her.

*Mrs. Brenley,* the voicemail began. *My name is Max Shores. I’d like to talk with you about an urgent matter, and I’d appreciate it if you returned my call at your earliest convenience.* Sam listened to the message twice. Even though it was just as simple as the others, the way the man said the word *urgent* caught her attention. She didn’t think he’d called about a gig.

Sam heard a flutter of plastic bags, and her mother knocked on her door.

“I brought up your new things,” she said. “Did you call that Donna woman back about the Collingswood event?”

“Yes,” Sam said from behind the closed door.

“Well, call back today,” her mother said, catching the lie.
Sam waited a few seconds until the floorboards creaked to signal her mother had left. Then she opened the door again, stepped over the shopping bags, and snuck across the hall to the bathroom. That night, she had yet another gig singing the National Anthem at a local baseball game.

Sam had just turned on the hot water when her mother knocked again.

“I’m in the shower,” Sam said.

“Someone’s here. He says it’s important.”

“He can come back. Tell him to call me.”

Sam closed her robe and splashed water on her face at the sink and brushed her teeth. Her mother returned to the door.

“Sammy, can you come out here?”

“I’m in the middle of getting ready,” she said.

“I really think you should get dressed and come out.”

Sam turned off the water and pulled her jeans and shirt back on. Her mother was waiting on the other side of the door for her.

“He says it’s important,” she whispered. “Plus, he’s sharp. A looker.” She flashed two thumbs up.

Sam rolled her eyes and went down the stairs. Her mother had already let the guy into the house. He’d been examining a baby picture of Sam that hung on the wall almost directly across from the front door. He wore black pants and a pressed gray dress shirt like he was on his way to a wedding or a funeral. He wasn’t particularly tall, just bulky. His shirt stretched around his chest and shoulders, but he had a lean face. Sam could tell he seemed to care a lot about his appearance. This must have been what impressed her mother.
“Hello,” he said. “Ms. Brenley?” He smiled at her, like he was trying to show her all of his teeth.

“I was in the shower.” She put a hand on her hip. “I hope there’s a good reason for this.”

“Your hair’s not wet.” He pointed to her head to indicate its dryness. The gray shirt stretched even more around his shoulder when he raised his arm. A flash of anger burned in Sam’s chest.

“Clearly you don’t know what it means when a woman says she’s been in the shower,” Sam said.

A discontented hiss fell from her mother’s spot at the top of the steps, but the man’s smile didn’t crack at all.

“Forgive me,” he said. “I’m here on business.”

He handed her a card and Sam palmed it without looking at the name.

“Which is?”

“Maybe we can step outside.” He motioned with his hand for her to go first.

“I’m fine right here.”

“Ms. Brenley, I have a sensitive issue to discuss with you. I’d appreciate it.” He smiled again. His teeth shined laser white, almost neon blue against the gray of his shirt.

Sam sighed, folded her arms, and trudged through the front door. The deer troop had gathered in the yard, but they scattered once she opened the door. A black car was parked in front of the house to one side of the driveway. On one side of the car, a decal showed a fox curling its tail over its head. Bold words beside the fox read, Foxy Eye Investigators.

“I’m sorry for the intrusion,” the investigator said. “I tried calling.”

“I’m not hiding anything,” she said. The car had caught her off-guard. It didn’t seem to match her first impressions of the man before her.
“Not at all,” the investigator said. “But you’ve entered into one of my cases, so I have a few questions if that’s okay.”

“What case?” Sam said.

“Max Shores, by the way.” He stretched out his arm. “Name’s on the card, there.”

Sam shook his hand with only her fingertips, then refolded her arms and waited.

“How is it that you came to know a Mr. Joseph Cadenza?” Shores asked.

“Who?” Sam said. She struggled for a moment before remembering the garden. “Indian Joe?”

“Also known as.” Shores turned a piece of paper in his notebook.

“We’re both performers in the community,” she said. The deer were already starting to creep back to the edges of the yard. She detected their rustle around the house. “Can I ask what this is about?”

“I can’t disclose much. It’s a missing persons case,” he said. “I can tell you that my client and I have reasonable interest in Mr. Cadenza.”

“Maybe you should check your sources,” Sam said. “He’s a normal man. I work for him. Gardening.”

“So you have a green thumb?”

He twisted his head toward the dead and eaten flowerbeds in front of the house. His pen continued to move over the notebook in his hand. Sam felt the heat rise to her face and willed it to go away.

“Look, he’s just a loner. Just an old piney,” she said. “I don’t understand.”

“Where did you and Mr. Cadenza meet?”

“At an event,” she said. “I told you, we’re performers.”
“Performers,” he said. He smiled again and jotted down something else in his notebook.

“You sing?”

“Yes,” Sam said, although she suspected the investigator knew that already.

“So can you tell me more about this gardening job?” he said.

“I don’t have to answer any of these questions.” Sam crossed her arms.

“No, of course not.” He folded his notebook over again and slid it into his back pocket. “But Ms. Brenley, a girl is missing. Been several years now, but some people are still interested in what happened to her.”

“Missing?” Sam asked. “What happened?”

Shores paused. He flipped a few pages in his notebook and appeared to be rereading. He nodded his head and then looked up at her again. He wasn’t smiling anymore.

“She was in her final year at a local high school—Tuckahoe,” he stopped again and watched Sam’s reaction. “You must have heard about it.”

“No,” Sam said, even though it was curious. She thought she would have known if someone in her school district disappeared.

“She had already accepted a place at Princeton,” Shores continued. “One of south Jersey’s brightest. Beautiful, too. I assume you want to help figure out what happened to her.”

Sam felt like she heard the story before, but she couldn’t remember where, or when. She leaned toward the house and put her hand on the doorknob.

“Well, I don’t know why you think Joe has something to do with it,” she said.

“He probably doesn’t,” Shores said. “But I’d like to look into all leads.”

“If anything comes up, I’ll call you,” Sam said.
“You have my card,” Shores said. He checked his watch again and started back toward the shiny black *Foxy Eye* Beamer. “Give me a call anytime. I’ll be in touch.”

Sam stood with her hand still on the doorknob while Max Shores sidled away toward his car, opened the door, and started the rich purr of the engine. Although Sam had to admit he was conventionally attractive, she found men like Max Shores vain and slightly repugnant. She wondered what he was hiding that made him so eager to seek out the secrets of others. She watched the Beamer sparkle off down the road, and then she pressed against the door.

Her mother waited just inside, frowning.

“What was that all about?” she asked.

“Some investigator,” Sam said. She was still trying to remember where she had heard about the missing girl from Tuckahoe High.

“I realize that.” Her mother squinted at her. “Who is this *Cadenza* person he was talking about?”

“Please, Mom. Not you, too.” Sam felt she should have known that her mother would try to overhear everything that Max had wanted to discuss privately.

“You took a gardening job?” Her mother’s frown grew crooked and even quivered at the edges. “Gardening for a man under investigation?”

“Not exactly,” Sam said.

“What is it, exactly?”

“Do I have to do this twice today?”

Sam started toward the stairs, thinking of that shower.

“I just want you to be successful. I want you to be happy,” her mother said. “Don’t be so selfish.”
“Selfish,” Sam repeated. She had frozen on the steps with her hand on the banister.

“I thought we raised a daughter who would help others when they needed it.”

“I am helping,” Sam said. “I’m helping this guy with his garden. It’s no big deal.”

“What’s this about an investigation, then?”

“He’s harmless. That investigator doesn’t know what he’s talking about,” she said. “Just let me make my own decision, okay?”

“If you wanted to garden again, you could’ve told me,” her mother said.

Sam stared down at her mother and noticed a bit of wetness at the corners of her eyes. Sam’s heart opened like a funnel, but a separate part of her wondered again if it was past her time to move out.

“I kind of stumbled upon the job,” Sam said. “I didn’t think you would mind.”

“You should be more careful,” her mother said.

“I am careful,” Sam said. “I’m too careful. That’s the problem.”

Sam turned away and continued up the steps, through the tight hallway to her room. Only when she shut her door again did she notice the private investigator’s business card still wedged in her palm.

She told herself she would never call him, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t do a bit of investigating on her own. The story about the missing girl bothered her, especially if the investigator thought Joe had something to do with it. His garden alone might be creepy enough to make other people suspicious of him, if they didn’t know him well. Sam waited for sounds from the kitchen that signaled her mother had started dinner and then left her room to use the computer in the den. She only needed to type in a few key words to find answers.
At once, Sam understood why she had not heard about the story. The girl, Anna, disappeared around the same exact time as her father’s heart attack, a year after Sam’s own high school graduation. She would have been too lost herself, too deep in the fuzzy shadows of her own head to pay attention to any other story or the investigation. That summer, other people’s tragedies could not have been greater than Sam’s. If someone had mentioned the disappearance, Sam probably would have envied Anna, who managed to pull off the greatest trick, the only act Sam wanted from that terrible season when the rules of her life changed.

She clicked through a few more articles online. An archived headline she found on one local news site read, “START OF SUMMER MARRED BY SCHOOL DISTRICT TRAGEDIES.” The article was split down the middle and each side featured a picture of the corresponding victim. The left side showed a picture of Anna in a navy blue prom dress. Beside her, on the right, was a picture of Sam’s father standing before a chalkboard at the high school, pointing to a scribbled formula for the unseen class before him.

Several days passed since the investigator’s visit, but Sam had not returned to Joe’s garden. Her singing schedule had picked up, and Sam told herself that she was too busy to go back. She couldn’t deny that she was reluctant for other reasons, too. Even if she had nothing to worry about, Joe’s implied involvement in a disappearance made her think twice about the gardening job.

Sam wondered more about the garden. The reality of Joe’s carnivorous plants had breached her knowledge of the solid line that separated the possible from the impossible. Their existence made her feel like she was missing something, some critical rule of life she’d never learned. Joe’s garden also suggested that there had to be more to the Pine Barrens than overfed suburban
deer and aimless copper colored creeks. Instead of going straight back to Joe’s, Sam borrowed a few books from the Evesham Township library about carnivorous plants and pinelands habitats. It turned out that carnivorous plants were in fact native to the Pines, but Sam could not find any picture that revealed plants as healthy as those in Joe’s garden. Her favorite book was called *The New Jersey Pine Barrens: An Untruncated History*. It had been written by someone from the area, and it included a lot of strange information and dubious theories and detailed, hand-drawn maps. Using the book as a guide, Sam decided to take a walk in the woods and search for some of the carnivorous plants in person.

One day, after an early singing of the National Anthem, Sam drove to the east into Wharton State Forest until the roads turned to dirt. She parked at a campsite and got out to walk a sandy, poorly marked trail. These were not the woods like those beyond her house, where her mother’s fat deer waited. Despite the campsite, the place seemed to be deserted. She had not been camping in the Pine Barrens since she was younger, and even then, her father had only taken her a few times. Still, the site of the empty camp made her feel even more alone. She wondered how much time the search teams spent looking for Anna. Surely there would be nothing left to find anymore.

Sam tried to focus on searching for wild carnivorous plants, but her path never left the sandy trail, and there was little standing water in that area. She thought she might have been looking in the wrong places, because she did not find any pitcher plants or Venus flytraps. She did not find many blooming flowers at all, just an expanse of pine and sand. *That’s because you aren’t really looking*, she remembered Joe telling her when she said that she did not believe him. *Or maybe you don’t want to see.*
Sam gave up after an hour and returned to her parking spot. She felt short of breath, sapped of the necessary energy to do much more. In her uneasy exhaustion, she thought back to the calm, contented mood she’d been in after visiting Joe’s garden. She assumed going to Joe’s garden made her happy because it was something new and different, even adventurous and a bit magical. If she was being honest, though, she also missed Joe’s company. She liked his willingness to teach her what he knew. She could not forget that, by inviting her into his home and garden, Joe had taken a chance on her, as well.

By the time Sam had returned home again, she had decided that she would return to Joe’s garden. The investigator could think whatever he liked, but it did not make his suspicions true. She decided she could not let a few rumors affect her experience with a person she wanted to get to know better.

Sam pulled her car into park in front of Joe’s house, and shut off the engine. The sound of distant drums filled the small space of silence—two soft, quick beats to one loud. She rubbed her eyes and stared through the windshield ahead, where the pavement turned to dirt and the road narrowed and meandered into scrubby pine. The drums seemed to come from inside the woods. She stared down the dirt road and considered who might have been beating them.

Sam wanted to get away from the drumming. She left the car and made her way across the stone walkway through the mossy front yard to the porch. White crinkled curtains were drawn closed in the windows like wrinkled eyelids. The drums continued beating, louder and louder as she walked, until she was up against them. They were not coming from the woods, but from Joe’s house. She thought again about turning around, but it seemed silly. She had come, finally, and felt ready to work. She knocked on the front door, but no one answered. She knocked again,
but there was nothing. Maybe Joe could not hear anything over the music. When she tried the knob, the door swung open.

Sam peered into the dark house and then hurried through the sitting room and kitchen to the sliding glass door. She felt relieved when she could see Joe on the back deck above the garden, doing some kind of twitchy dance, wearing a white sleeveless shirt and a pair of gray sweatpants, no headdress. He was only practicing. She waited at the doors, wondering about the best way to enter the backyard without disturbing him. Beyond the deck, Joe’s plants jittered on their stalks as if they were trying to find the right way to move to the beat. They looked like awkward children crowding a soggy dance floor.

Joe’s long hair fell in front of his face whenever he pitched his head forward. He had his eyes closed, and wasn’t wearing glasses. His feet stamped in a complicated pattern, and when he missed a beat he stopped, doubled over, and started again. It was interesting to watch him practice, but also a little bit strange. Without the costume on, the ritual dance—which was probably inauthentic to begin with—took on a weird kind of senselessness. After a few minutes, Joe opened his eyes, stopped, and stared through the glass door. She slid the door open across its track and waved.

Joe bent over to the CD player on the deck bench, and the drums stopped. He stood again, loosening his posture. He cleared his throat, but the knit in his brow remained.

“Samantha. Where have you been?” he said, like a teacher might chide a student for being late too late to class.

“Busy schedule,” Sam said. The number of gigs went up for every performer in late spring and early summer. “I’m sure you know.”

A yawn overtook her, and she raised her hand to cover her widening mouth.
“Need a pick-me-up?” Joe crossed his arms.

“Coffee, if you have it,” Sam said.

“I didn’t mean a drink,” he said.

“Did I interrupt something?”

He uncrossed his arms and stepped off the deck, down into the garden. She could see now that he was more annoyed than concerned about her sudden break from the garden. She began to feel ashamed, like she’d been shirking a necessary duty. Joe did not seem to be taking her negligence lightly. She wished he would smile. As she was dabbling in doubts and staging her own investigation against Joe, she’d been the one in the wrong.

“They’ve been missing you,” he said, indicating the flowers with one solid nod of his head.

“As you can tell.”

To Sam, the plants looked more or less the same as always, but she didn’t have the eye for the garden that Joe did. She thought of the awkward way they moved to the drums, and decided maybe they were more sluggish, duller in color and frailer in leaf.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Really. It won’t happen again.”

“People see this garden, and I know what they think,” Joe said. “I know not everyone sees the beauty of it.”

“I do,” Sam said. She stepped down the deck and joined Joe on the stone path in the center of the garden. “I see it.”

“I want to let you in on a secret,” Joe said.

“A secret?” Sam stiffened. She did not think she wanted Joe to admit he had secrets. “What secret?”
“How I keep my garden so healthy,” Joe said. He knelt down, his knees cracking under his weight. “I haven’t been totally honest with you.”

“What do you mean?” Sam said. Although the drumming music had ended, she felt the beat pick up in her blood.

“It’s curious, I admit…but it’s a simple story.” He caressed the stem of a nearby pitcher plant, and folded over one long leaf to examine its underside.

Sam tried to seem unaffected, but her heart picked up its beat, quicker than the drums on Joe’s recording—a beat more like a call to flee than a celebratory dance. She tried to force her mother’s voice out of her mind. *You’re gardening for a man under investigation?*

Joe pushed up from the ground and brushed off his knees. It seemed to take him a very long time to move from a squatting position to full height, where he towered over her. Most men his age would have begun to shrink, but Joe somehow remained sturdy despite his cracking joints.

“Last year, we had some trouble,” he said. “The plants were dying. They were fed, got enough water, everything.” He took a step toward the edge of the stone walkway, reached into the pocket of his sweatpants and tossed a tiny shred of his special jerky to a swaying pitcher plant nearby. The pitcher appeared to twist the rim of its bloom into a cartoon smile like one of the plants on Joe’s note, but as soon as the thought entered her mind, the smile vanished and the plant went very still, like a deer that had been caught munching on gardenias.

“But I figured it out,” he said.

One day when Joe had left for a job at the Mt. Laurel Native Cultural Festival, he said, he’d forgotten to turn off the radio on the deck. When he came back later that night, the garden had perked slightly.

“The plants had this glow to them,” he said. “So, I thought, the secret is song. It had to be.”
Sam waited for the punch line. She thought that maybe he’d been telling her a joke to lighten the mood, but Joe said nothing else. He watched her for a reaction.

“I don’t get it,” Sam said.

“Well, I know it sounds a little crazy,” Joe said. “But they need to be sung to. That’s what makes them grow.”

“So that’s why you really hired me?” Sam said. “So I’d sing to your plants?”

“Yes,” he said, as if one word could resolve her confusion.

He finally smiled, though, and Sam felt herself relaxing. If this was Joe’s big secret, it was a weird one, but not so bad as what it could have been. The image of Anna in her prom dress flashed in Sam’s mind.

“You can’t just sing yourself?” she asked. “Or play the radio again?”

“Tried,” he said. “Turns out the voice matters. They’re picky little buggers. They get bored with radio.”

“They get bored?”

“You’d be surprised how sentient a plant can be.” Joe rocked back on his heels. “All that work before? Think of it as an audition. You made the cut.”

“You lied to me,” she said, although she did not feel offended or put off. Her nerves had almost worn off.

“Would you have come if I said I needed a singer for my plants?” he said.

“I shouldn’t have come anyway,” Sam said.

“But you are here now,” he said, drawing out the words. “And I still need someone to sing to this garden.”

“Well,” she said.
She wanted to find an excuse, a reason to leave, but there didn’t seem to be a point. She couldn’t believe that, all along, Joe hired her just to sing to some plants, but in some ways it made sense. The truth explained a few of his actions, like the fact that he’d offered her the gardening job at one of her shows. And hadn’t she witnessed enough of the garden’s bizarre qualities to believe what he was telling her?

Sam touched her hand to her throat and swallowed. The only thing left to do was to see for herself if singing was the answer. She crossed her arms and hummed a note to align her voice. Various blooms tilted toward the sound. Tall tentacles of sundew pulled together into expectant tufts.

After she started to sing, Sam could not stop thinking about what she should do with her hands. Before, gardening had been the priority—testing the water’s acidity or scooping mounds of sand to bolster the edges of the boggy patches. Singing at all had been an afterthought, before, but suddenly, it had become the main event. The stone walkway turned into a stage, where she stood veiled in shade and sunlight with an audience gazing up at her. She could tell immediately—now that her gardening duties had been removed—that the singing had in fact been the very thing to perk up the garden.

The plants swayed in their plots, all turned toward the spot where she stood with their leaves hushing together, their mouths puckered like the only thing they wanted in the world was to be able to sing along.

“Tough crowd,” Sam said after she’d finished.

Joe nodded. He seemed to be considering something, his eyes fixed to a spot on the ground. Then he raised his eyes to her.

“There you have it,” he said. “Works like a charm.”
With Joe’s insistence, Sam sang a few more songs to the garden. Joe set up a chair in the center of the walkway for Sam to sit on. Even though she didn’t usually like to sit while singing, she accepted the seat. Her limbs felt a bit wobbly, like she’d been running long distances. She wondered if she needed to get more protein in her diet.

As she sang, he continued to bustle around the garden, massaging roots and adding water to a few of the boggier plots. Sam sang six songs before he stopped to offer her water. Joe went inside the house for drinks, and Sam took a seat on the deck bench and looked up at the pines leaning over the yard. The little buzz in her chest returned, and her exhaustion had faded beneath it. Soon, Joe came out with the water pitcher, and she emptied the entire thing herself. They said nothing to each other for a while, listening to the Venuses and sundews sway below them. Sam felt awake and energized. In her good mood, the visit from the private investigator seemed like a dream. She wondered what had taken her so long to come back.

“I feel like I could sing a whole concert, no breaks,” Sam said.

“And you thought the only thing you get out of this was money.” Joe stood and took the empty pitcher in one hand and his unused glass in the other. “This is a good job for you. You’re perfect for it. Plus, I think we make a good team.”

“Yes,” Sam said. She picked up her glass and followed Joe through the sliding glass door and into the kitchen. A hard edge of sunlight cut across the room. Sam took a seat in the bright place with her back to the sun.

“Can you turn a light on in here once in a while?” she said. “It’s always so dark.”

“What’s there to see?” he said.
On the table in front of her sat a sloppy pile of Joe’s mother’s playing cards, all facedown. Sam picked up a card and examined its front—a man with a floppy hat, holding a single large coin made of gold.

“Ah, the knave,” Joe said, taking his seat across from her.

“I’m not a big card player,” Sam said. Personally, she felt life had enough games and wagers without cards.

“Did Mother explain the rules?” Joe took a seat on the other side of the table.

“I don’t really remember them,” Sam said. “Will I have to play again?”

Joe shrugged and gathered the pile into a neat deck. Sam sighed.

“Here’s a hint,” he said. “Whenever you see a seven or a coin card on the table, you want to capture it. Those cards are worth the most, at the end.”

“Great,” Sam said. She looked for a wall clock but could find none.

“I’m trying to help,” he said. “The old lady is good, but she’s not unbeatable.”

“Sevens and coins. Got it,” Sam said. “But I have a show tonight. I have to get going.”

“Of course,” Joe said. He dropped the cards and stood from the table. “Thank you for your performance.”

From where Sam stood on the boardwalk stage she could see the faint, foamy white lines of waves cresting on the ocean. The crowd at the Wildwood Memorial Day festival started out small—just a few people sipping on drinks near the tiki-bar, and a few others in small knots of conversation—but as soon as she started to sing, things began to change. She tried to focus on the sweep of the tide and ignore the people in their small groups, who had all begun to turn their faces up from their beers or away from their friends to watch her. One man had raised his eyes
from his beer mid-sip but kept the glass tipped toward his mouth, as if he were posing for a photo. Some of the beer trickled out onto his chin as he stared. More than a few people watched with their mouths slightly open. This was how Sam knew she must sound as remarkable as she felt. The buzz buoyed her voice under her lungs. She never seemed to grow faint or short of breath.

When the song had ended and the music’s echo dwindled, a hush fell over the crowd. People looked at one another, waiting for some reaction to follow. Sam could not tell how much time passed in stillness. Then, one person started clapping, and Sam found him—the investigator, Max Shores, smirking underneath a swash of gelled hair—before the rest of the audience thundered their applause. Someone whistled, then another. She muttered a thank you into in the microphone and walked backstage.

Another singer dressed in yellow waited backstage with wide eyes and grabbed Sam’s hand in both of hers when she tried to pass her. More hands reached out for her, patted her shoulder or grazed her arm. For a moment Sam imagined herself back in Joe’s garden, every flower swaying toward her like they wanted to press their mouths to her skin. At the back of the outdoor beach bar she spotted a small bathroom hut topped with dry straw and headed straight for it. The hands followed her, strangers now calling her name. Max Shores swept in beside her.

“Come on,” Shores said. “This way.”

He touched the small of her back and guided her in front of him to shield her from the crowd. They made it to the beach bar exit and onto the boardwalk and then headed down a side street, Max managing to disperse the crowd as they went with his smile and some excuse. The two of them found a bench across from a full parking lot. Sam sat and took off her sandals. By then the
sun had almost finished setting. It was Sam’s favorite time of day, when the unlit sky stilled to a deep purple just before going dark.

“You were incredible up there,” Shores said. “I mean, really incredible.”

“Right,” Sam said. She lifted one of her bare feet and rubbed the heel, although her feet didn’t bother her like they normally did when she wore these shoes. She felt fine, better than fine, if not a little confused.

“It’s a compliment,” he said, frowning.

Sam nodded but said nothing. Although she appreciated his help in escaping the crowd, she also felt a bit irritated at Shores’ presence. She worried that he might have followed her. Lately, she enjoyed being alone for a while before or after her gigs. She had even begun to skip the bars and left her free drinks unclaimed in favor of a few quiet moments alone. Something had shifted in Sam’s ability to perform. Her voice had not changed, exactly, but it still sounded better—everyone agreed—and at the end of her sets, she nearly glowed with euphoria.

Beside her, Shores seemed to be struggling with something. Sam waited, hoping he would leave.

“I know about Cadenza’s garden,” he said, suddenly serious. “The monsters he grows there.”

“Is that what this is all about?” Sam said. She laughed out loud. It made so much sense that a private investigator would stake so much on a strange occurrence in the backyard of a lonely piney. “Of course you would think he was some creep. But you don’t know him.”

“Do you?” Shores said. “Because if I were you, I’d be careful with people you don’t know, but I’d be more careful with the ones you think you know.”

“Are you threatening me?” Sam slid her feet back into her shoes and turned toward Shores.

“I’m trying to help you,” he said.
“I’m not a missing person,” Sam said. She stood and smoothed out her dress. “And if you haven’t noticed, I’m doing just great.”

Shores remained on the bench with his hands clasped over his knees. She didn’t feel flattered by his concern, only annoyed. Sam waited for him to say something else, and when he did not, she turned toward the beach and headed back to the stage.

Sam and her mother sat on the couch, Sam with her knees tucked up under her dress and her mother leaning against them. That night, after they had returned home from her show, Sam made them a round of martinis. They sipped through their third round, leaving the olives for last. Sam couldn’t remember when her mother had seemed so happy. She even started playing jazz music over the radio at night instead of watching television, something she hadn’t done for a long time.

“I’m so happy for you,” her mother said, picking the final olive from her glass. “I think we’re finally moving on.” She held out her empty glass to clink against Sam’s, and Sam obliged even though she thought it bad luck to toast without a full drink. “There’s something in it for us.”

“Yeah,” Sam said. “More vodka.”

Her mother had begun to laugh, a little too hard, and got up to make a fourth round of stiff drinks. Sam had begun to hope that her mother would want to retreat to bed soon.

Her mother seemed to be enjoying Sam’s newfound success more than Sam herself was enjoying it. The more Sam sang, the more new clients requested her voice for weddings, festivals, casino stages, and city events. Her mother became manic, collecting numbers and names in a little book she carried to Sam’s shows. Sam understood her mother’s managerial tendencies as a part of her overbearing desire to see Sam succeed. What seemed worse, though, was how her mother became more and more needy in her happiest moments. Sam wished her
mother could be more graceful about her emotions. She felt ashamed that her mother couldn’t manage her happiness as subtly as she could her sadness.

At least her mother had stopped asking questions about Joe’s garden, which Sam continued to visit as often as she could. Sam secretly enjoyed her performances for Joe’s garden more than anything else. She liked the garden’s quiet appreciation, and Joe’s easy conversation afterward. She was even beginning to get used to Joe’s mother, who had not asked her to play cards again.

On days when Sam could not get to the garden or when Joe was busy himself with shows and festivals—Native cultural performers were a highlight at many of the start-of-summer events in the area—she started to take more walks through the woods, mostly to avoid her mother. Sam felt that all the time she’d been spending at Joe’s made her appreciate the quiet decorum of the Pines. The few people that lived there minded their own business. Everything kept to itself.

Sam grew anxious trying to keep up with both her mother and her cell phone, which was always ringing. She began to avoid spending time with her mother after shows. She made excuses about outings with friends or, sometimes, dates. Whenever Sam needed to get away, she drove east until the roads stopped—as they all did somewhere, eventually—and left her car behind to wander some sand trail into the woods. Nothing could follow or praise her there. The only intruders were usually the bugs, which floated in clouds among the pines, but for some reason they did not draw as close to her as she assumed they would.

Even offstage, Sam understood that something strange was happening to her. It had to do with more than just her voice. Sometimes while walking in the woods her thoughts would blur, and she would snap out of a trance somewhere farther along the path—sometimes much farther. These episodes meant nothing, at first. Sam felt proud that she could make her mind go blank,
like a monk’s. It was easy, almost too easy. The woods held so still in summer that anyone could forget herself inside that calm, quiet world.

One late afternoon, after another standing ovation, Sam left her venue and drove south and east until she hit the Pines, in search of a trail to follow. An early June thunderstorm darkened the sky for a moment and let down torrents of rain while she drove. She turned down a road by a stretch of cranberry bogs and parked at the side of an anonymous path. She’d discovered the narrow sand road in a map in *An Untruncated History*. It had originally been a logging road that led to one of the many sawmills in the area, all gone by the time Sam was born.

At first, she’d been afraid of walking in the evenings. Something about the way the pines swayed in the wind gave her the creeps, but as she spent more and more time in Joe’s garden, she began to get used to the oddities of the Pine Barrens. She started to take twilight walks more often, since they aligned better with her schedule. She always returned the car just before dark blurred ground and sky, making it difficult to see the shape of things.

Sam got out of the car and stretched. The pines still dripped from the storm, but the sky had lightened again. Puddles gleamed like reflections of glare on sand road. She let her glittering white dress fell to the sand, and she kept her eyes on it as she changed into a pair of shorts and a t-shirt. She threw her old things in the car and walked. Again, as she wandered down the road framed with pine, she let her mind wander. She walked for so long without remembering that when she came back to herself again it had already started to turn dark.

In Sam’s mind it seemed as if she had blinked, when on one side of that blink was sun and on the other was dusk. She stopped on the trail in the sudden twilight, her breath shivering in her lungs. A dull pain shot up from her toes and then disappeared just as quickly. Sam realized she
had no idea how long she’d been walking. The forest still shimmered from the late afternoon rainfall. She had left her cell phone in the car. She would have no light to see by.

Sam turned and started to run back the way she came. The night dropped down from the trees like a heavy velvet curtain, and her mind fumbled with its sense of space and distance. She ran through wall after wall of humid blue static. She seemed to be running forever in a line so straight she wondered if she might be making circles.

Total dark cuffed in around the trail just as she reached her car. It took several seconds for her to command her hand to find her key and unlock the driver’s side door. The quiet moved in around her, filling all the still space with more stillness. She held onto the open door, bent over, and sucked in the wet air.

She got into the car, leaned back in her seat, and clicked the security light again so it would stay on. Over the steering wheel, on the other side of the glass, a ragged piece of yellow paper curled under the windshield wiper. She stared at it, trying to think if it had been there when she parked for her walk. She was sure it hadn’t, but no police officer would have left her a parking ticket all the way out there. The blood flowed to her cheeks and ears as easily as if she had been hung upside-down from a tree limb. She opened the car door and leaned over it to free the note, then closed it and locked the doors.

*Important: need you here tomorrow,* it said in black ink, and at the bottom corner sat a familiar meat-eater plant, its head thrown back and its tongue lolling out at the words as if they were flies.

The blood pounded in her ears. How did Joe know where she was, in the middle of the woods? She tried to push away the thought that he had been spying on her, that he’d possibly seen her change out of her dress. Joe was her employer, not her master. Sometimes she found
herself wanting to think of him as her friend, but something wasn’t adding up—the note seemed to reinforce that idea. She could not decide if she should be enraged or frightened, but she had to know why Joe had followed her, or how. It could not wait for the next day.

A moment later Sam began driving through the dark in search of Joe’s house. She took a few wrong turns and more than once had to backtrack to a road she recognized. Didn’t any of the roads in the Pines head in any straightforward direction? Finally she took out her cell phone and, ignoring two missed calls from her mother, punched Joe’s address in and let the voice on the mapping system guide her.

She found the house, unlit as always, brooding beyond the stone pathway. She stood by her car, clutching her cell phone in order to see the steps ahead of her. The moon, whatever was left of it, hid somewhere beyond the heads of the pines. Only the top of the roof glowed like it wore a shawl of silvery cobwebs. She knew about the ruins of ghost towns that lay hidden in the woods, and for a moment Joe’s house looked like one of them. It sat there, slumped and dark, as if the house itself might not remember a time when it had served the living. His truck sat in the driveway, the only reminder that the place was still in use.

Sam almost turned around, wondering if this kind of thing had ever happened to Anna, but she shook the thought aside. The note had nothing to do with Anna—it was strictly a matter between Sam and the man who had hired her to sing to his garden. Sam worked up her nerve, strode up to the front door, and raised her fist to knock. She had meant to rap twice on the door, but when her knuckles hit the wood they seemed to only scratch the surface.

She waited for a moment before testing the knob. It was open. She eased inside the doorway, clicking a button on her phone so the screen would give light, but the dark inside the house fell moonless and complete around her. A floorboard creaked beneath one foot. Toward the back of
the house, a square of silvered darkness broke through where the sliding glass doors opened to the garden. She headed toward it, trying to remember what she could of the placement of the sitting room furniture. She stretched one hand out to the wall as a guide. The wood paneling nearly perspired in the heat.

“Joe?” she whispered.

Finally, she reached the kitchen table before the sliding glass door. She placed her hands on the back of a chair. Just enough moonlight allowed her to see through the door to the garden, enough light to see Joe there, leaning over the deck’s wooden banister. He wore only a sleeveless white shirt and shorts. His undershirt glowed under the moon. Sam leaned harder into the chair, careful to keep it from skidding on the floor.

Her eyes adjusted enough to see the tops of the flowers in the part of the garden by the deck. Under Joe’s hand, the heads of the plants swung almost maniacally, quicker and more ferocious than she’d ever seen them before. Shreds of leaf and petal floated up like foam from the frantic sea of plants. A Venus snapped its jaws like a dog. Joe straightened, and Sam’s heart clenched hard to her throat. She became aware of her mouth hanging open. She shut it and swallowed. Joe reached into a black trash bag at his feet—Sam hadn’t noticed it before—and when his hand emerged again a long strip of something dangled from his fingers. He swung his arm over the banister. The mouths chomped and the heads swung. Sam could hear their leaves slashing beyond the glass.

Then another sound shifted behind her—like flat feet along the floor—like something being dragged or dragging itself. Sam turned slowly away from the backyard. At first, the glowing outline of the glass doors pulsed against the dark, but as her eyes adjusted and the memory of
moonlight gave way, Joe’s mother appeared. She stood watching Sam before the sofa in the family room. Sam could only see the wide whites of her eyes, the glow of her silver hair.

Sam would have screamed had she not been so stunned. She put up both her hands in surrender, the phone still clutched in one sweating palm. The old woman only stared as if she did not recognize Sam. Then, unable to keep still any longer, Sam ran through the dark, past the woman to where she thought she might find the door. She turned the knob, opened the door, and flung herself through. She summoned all of her control to shut the door as quietly as she could, but it nearly slammed behind her anyway. She flew down the path, the yard lit like a movie set compared to the space inside the house.

She dove at the car door, unable to control her breathing anymore, so that it came out in sharp wheezes. She started the engine without turning on the headlights and took one last look at the front of the house to see if anyone had followed, but the door remained closed. The pines continued their somnambulant nodding, as if to say there was nothing to be worried about, she was overreacting, she didn’t know what she saw, it was all a misunderstanding. She pressed down on the gas and sped around the corner at the end of the street, though she had a feeling nothing and no one would be interested in chasing her.

III.

Sam rested on the sofa in her mother’s sitting room, staring out at the backyard. Through a thatch of thin pine trees, somewhere in the yard to the east, the deer were starting their rounds to all the neighborhood’s gardens. Sam focused on her breathing exercises, coaxing the wind under her voice so it would come out smooth, without rattling.
A week had passed since she’d last been to Joe’s garden, and almost complete exhaustion had taken over. She tried not to believe that her time away from the garden meant anything for her health, but the longer she ignored her singing duties, the faster she seemed to whither. The pleasant, giddy buzz she enjoyed while singing had become a painful memory.

In a matter of hours she would have to sing again, but it did not feel possible. She had told her mother she was sick, a believable lie, and canceled all of her performances for a whole weekend, then more. That night Sam had to sing at a huge event in the area—the Collingswood Coffee Bean Festival. Sam had refused to cancel any more shows, even though the skin under her eyes had darkened and the rest of her turned a grayish tint she knew would look even worse under lights.

“You look awful,” her mother said. “We’ll really need to work some magic with your makeup.”

Sam took the cup of tea she offered and nodded. Her throat shivered at the first sip. Her mother had been urging her to see a doctor, but Sam refused. She somehow had a feeling that strong medicine would not be able to help her.

“I’m ready,” Sam said.

Her mother cinched her mouth into a tight smile and rubbed Sam’s shoulders. “One more row to plant,” she said. “You want to help? Might be good for you.”

Earlier in the week, Sam had told her mother she quit the gardening job and ever since then, her mother had been trying to reenlist Sam’s help with her own deer-fed garden. She usually made these suggestions for the good of Sam’s health, an irony that Sam found darkly amusing.

“I have to get dressed,” Sam said.
Her mother did not press the issue. She must have known, given Sam’s listlessness, that something as simple as preparation would be no small feat for her. Sam studied the backyard again and tried not to let her eyes close.

Sam thought often about Max Shores and his missing girl, obsessed over her memory of the night at Joe’s and analyzed what she’d seen. She wondered if Joe’s mother had told him about her intrusion, and if so, she wondered if he held it against her. Sam recalled her melodramatic flight from the house in embarrassment. Sometimes she thought her shame kept her away as much as her fear.

Although Sam told her mother she’d quit working with Joe, she didn’t feel so certain if she was done with the garden. It had become clear to Sam that she needed to sing to the plants as much, or more, than the plants needed her. If Joe had anticipated this problem, then he might’ve been the only one to fix her. She started to try and convince herself that perhaps she’d seen nothing odd at all—just a late feeding with a wetter version of the jerky the plants always received. If only she could go to the garden again and sing just one song, she might be healed.

Sam had prepared as best as she could by the time she arrived at the outdoor stage for the Coffee Bean Festival in Cooper River Park. She sat quietly while her mother plastered her face with foundation and blush, and put on the new green dress. Before leaving the house, she’d mixed an energy drink cocktail and popped some aspirin. She wondered again if maybe she was getting the right vitamins and minerals in her diet. Despite all of her efforts, the tea and the breathing had done nothing for her voice, and the constant sluggishness returned.

She resorted to keeping herself calm and sipped on coffee from one of the nearby vendors selling fair trade and organic products. One of the vendors by the stage displayed whole shelves
of bags of coffee beans, each paper label featuring an abstract drawing of a plant. It must have been a coffee plant, but from where Sam stood at the steps of the stage, the lines of the leaves and stem on the large sign blurred into one of Joe’s meat-eater plant drawings. She only half-listened to the announcer say something about a summer star, a new talent emerging from a town on the edge of the Pine Barrens. Sam eyed the plant on each of the coffee bean bags and wondered what he was talking about, until she felt someone’s hand gently guiding her toward the stage lights. Sam’s tongue felt loose in her mouth. She had been sweating more than usual and imagined herself dotted with little beads of water like dewdrops.

“Thank you,” Sam was saying into the microphone. Her voice shattered and broke apart on the air.

Her mother waved from the front row, and the music started. Sam cleared her throat. The crowd was larger than she expected. Everyone had pushed close to the stage to hear her despite the vendors nearby handing out free coffee samples and trinkets. Despite the heat, most people clutched little white coffee cups with dark liquid in them. Sam started singing. She knew it was not coming out right. She focused on the little cups in the hands of many people in the crowd so she wouldn’t have to endure their confused expressions.

Those cups in all those hands reminded her of candles at a wake. They’d had candles when her father died. She realized, standing before the crowd, that it was the end of the month of June—almost exactly the five year anniversary of her father’s death. Until the heart attack that shocked everyone, he’d been well loved at the high school, a science teacher who got involved in charities and clubs, as much a performer as Sam. Still, she was surprised at how many people showed up to the wake, surprised that her mother set up a public vigil in the first place, surprised at so many different people she didn’t know crying harder than she could allow herself to cry.
The whole thing had been a nightmare that never lifted. Now, coffee cups floated in the crowd like vigil candles held out for her—candles that had extinguished, melted, and rotted out. *This is your funeral*, Sam thought, behind the words of her song. *They’ve been mourning here for so long.*

Her voice gave out all at once. She took a breath and tried to continue, but the sound drifted like a balloon slowly deflating from a tear in its knot. Her lungs withered. Sam found her mother again under the lights. She wore a pained look like she was suffering from a migraine. Sam held the microphone at her side, but the music looped on in the background. She lifted the microphone to her lips again.

“I’m sorry,” she gasped.

She tried to place the microphone in its stand, but her hands shook and the microphone dropped, the burst of its fall exploding through speakers. She kept her eyes on the ground and walked off stage left. The muttering from the crowd rose up and over her. People booed and laughed. Soon the announcer returned saying something about technical difficulties. Sam made it just to the edge of the stage and melted onto the steps. She studied the plants on the coffee bean bags nearby, just in time to see a headdress of blue-tipped feathers disappear behind the display case. Sam’s heart beat faster. She could not breathe evenly. Every blood vessel wrung itself out under her skin. Black shades closed in at the edges of her vision.

Sam’s mother appeared at the steps. The look of pain in her face had not disappeared. She knelt down and placed both hands on Sam’s arm to help lift her to standing position, but Sam wobbled and fell.

“I need to sit,” she heard herself wheeze, although she was already sitting. “Something’s happening.”
“Get an ambulance,” her mother told a person nearby. She was very calm and matter-of-fact about it, as if requesting a glass of water.

Soon many faces hovered around her. She watched their heads shake atop their shoulders. Their mouths gaped and flapped while red and blue lights colored the night behind them.

Sam waited in the café parking lot, sweating outside of her car. The sky held the sun overhead like a spotlight. She had never smoked before but found herself craving a cigarette. She could not sing anyway, and without a voice she would need something else to do with her mouth. She touched two fingers to her lips and inhaled the plain, disappointing air. She watched the traffic compress and expand on the east-west route that connected the city to the ocean. Her life had been played out on that route, the path that led to trick endings that only seemed different but were actually part of the same breathing organism, the same sorry excuse for a life.

Max Shores’ Foxy Eye Beamer pulled into the café lot—from the west, Sam noted—and parked a few spaces down from her. She already felt that calling him was a bad idea, but she didn’t know what else to do. Although she had begun to believe Max Shores’ suspicions about Joe, it didn’t change the fact that she needed to get back to the garden to get better. She did not want to end up like Anna. What she needed from the investigator was a reason to return, and protection when she did.

Max Shores greeted her with a handshake and one of his unfailing smiles. Sam knew she looked like hell—her grayish skin, the purple triangles like shadows drawn from her eyes—but he didn’t flinch or draw attention to her.

“Ms. Brenley,” he said. He had put too much gel in his hair, so the glare of the sun glinted off the hardened curls. “Good to see you again.”
“My voice is a little off,” Sam said, unpeeling her voice like a dry husk from her throat.

“Easy on the questions.”

“No problem.” Shores started toward the café.

“I’d rather in the car,” Sam said. “Not so public.”

“Of course.” Shores shuffled his notepad and folders from one arm to the other. His smile came a beat late.

He led her to his car, and Sam slid onto the sun-heated black leather of the passenger’s seat. Shores entered at the driver’s side and started the engine for the air conditioning. Then he flipped open one of his folders.

“What made you decide to call?”

“I want to know more about Anna’s case,” she said. “I want to know what you know.”

“My cases are confidential,” Shores said.

“So is mine,” Sam said.

Shores flipped through his notebook, stopped at one page, flipped again to the next blank and held his pen. “Are you still working for him?”

“Does it look like I’m still working for him?” Sam said.

“I don’t understand.”

She laughed. The air moved through her throat and escaped sounded like a bottle of flat soda being opened. Of course Shores did not understand. No one did. They had run some tests at the hospital, but like she expected, they all came back normal, or better than normal. The doctors had discharged her after little more than one night, despite her skin discoloration and shaky movements.

“It’s been about a week,” Sam said. “I haven’t quit yet. Not officially, anyway.”
“Why did you stop?”

“I thought I saw—something I saw—” She cut herself off and focused on the cars speeding by, most on their way to the beach. They would pass through the woods without ever giving them a second thought, thinking only of the sun and sand at the end of the road. “I decided to put more time into singing.”

Shores started to write in his notebook and then stopped, lifted his pen and gazed out of the windshield. “Does it have something to do with those plants he grows?”

“No,” Sam said, then revised her answer. “Well, I don’t know. Not exactly.”

“What do you do in the garden?” Shores asked. “It’s important.”

“I just garden,” Sam said. “Basic stuff.”

Although she needed him, Sam did not want to tell Max Shores everything. Anna was a singer, too, and Sam didn’t want Shores to think that she had taken up Anna’s old position. Anyway, it was unlikely. Joe had never mentioned other singers before. He told her the discovery about the benefits of song was a recent revelation, something he’d noticed just the year before.

Max Shores asked a few questions about Joe’s family, and Sam told him what she knew about the old woman who was supposedly Joe’s mother. Shores said her name was Michelina Cadenza.

“Emigrated from Italy in—” Shores turned a page in his folder “—1930. At age 10. Sicily.”

Sam remembered the glow of the old woman’s eyes in the dark sitting room the night of her intrusion.

“What would it take for you to go back on the job?” Shores asked. “I’d be watching. You’d be safe.”
“Why?” Sam said, but her head cleared from its haze and her whole body seemed to listen for what she would say next. Something lifted in her bones. “You’re saying I could go back, as a mole?”

“I wouldn’t have to wire you, if you didn’t want.”

“And nothing would happen to me?”

Shores smiled and seemed to throw back his shoulders a bit. He assured her that he knew how to watch without being seen, and that he would never let things get too serious.

“But you’d have to promise me information about Cadenza,” he said.

“What kind of information?” Sam asked.

“Observations,” he said. “Answers. This isn’t a game.”

Even though Sam knew the risks, she already felt her blood rushing toward agreement, a reason to return to the garden and, just maybe, sing again. Above all, Max Shores was offering her protection when she returned to the pines. She didn’t know what might happen to Joe and the garden if Shores managed to college any strong evidence against him, but she also knew that she would be in control of what Shores found out. As long as she refused the wire, all information gathered would have to filter through her.

“When do we start?” Sam asked.

They set a date and time. Shores continued to scan something in his papers while Sam returned to her own car and pulled away. She already felt better than she had even twenty minutes before. The pulsing behind her eyes slowed to a soft beat, and she felt awake, not totally energized, maybe, but more alert. The drive home seemed easier, and although she returned to her bed—where she’d spent a large portion of her time since her breakdown—she knew that she
would be okay. She tried to ignore the little voice that lived underneath the steady pulse in her head, asking why she did not feel more afraid.

On Monday Sam headed east to Joe’s house in the woods, Max Shores following behind in a blue car Sam had never seen him drive before. Sam refused to wear a wire again when he asked. She parked and stood before the house. It sometimes gave her the creeps as more than the garden behind it ever did—something about the steep, sharp rooftop and narrow windows.

As she approached the front porch, Sam tried to calm down and look forward to her garden performance. With Shores just down the road, she was not alone and in no extreme danger. She only needed to see her visit as routine—she would sing to the garden, and maybe she would feel better. She had seen nothing to be afraid of, not really. She wondered to what extent her memory lived in the shadow of a child’s mind darkened by old fears of dark places. Even so, she could not be sure if Michelina had told Joe of her unwanted presence that night, and she had no idea if she would be welcomed back after the intrusion. The air pressed in on whatever was not a part of it, but Sam moved to the door lightly, ready to spring or flee.

She bounced on her toes and raised a fist to knock on the door, trying to remember the last time she felt so awake. A dark crack appeared in the door.

“It’s Samantha,” she said. “Hello?”

Joe opened the door. His hair had been combed straight, a few loose grays frizzling in the heat. She had not expected him to smile, but there he was, with a set of stained teeth bearing down at her, glasses in place.

“Samantha,” Joe said. “I thought you’d died.”
Sam forced a laugh, waved her hand in front of her face. The knot pulled tight in her stomach loosened from her throat.

“I guess the kids are needing me,” she said.

“For certain,” Joe said. She had not expected him to be so friendly and inviting, not after his reaction to her previous vacation away from the garden. This time, he showed no sign of sternness or even disappointment. “You’re busy, I’m sure. I know I am.”

Joe led her inside, past his mother asleep, sitting up, on the sofa. Something fluttered in Sam’s stomach as she passed, but Joe’s mother didn’t open her eyes.

“She’ll be staying with me permanently from now on,” Joe whispered after they reached the kitchen. “Not well, I’m sorry to say.”

Sam wanted to offer her sympathies, but she could not form the words in time. This snagging of her thoughts had been happening to her more and more often.

The flowers in Joe’s garden turned their heads as soon as Sam stepped onto the deck. A few pitcher plants nodded in welcome. A bladderwort bobbed on its stem, but the rest just watched her step closer and closer toward them. She sat in the center of the stone walkway and looked to Joe, who had remained on the deck and the tubes and bladders of the garden all faced her direction.

“I haven’t been able to sing,” Sam said.

“You’re sick?” Joe raised his eyebrows.

His expression seemed more animated, his gestures more emphatic than Sam remembered. Did that mean that he had no idea what she’d seen that night? Maybe the old woman really wasn’t well. Maybe she didn’t remember seeing Sam, or maybe she remembered but never told Joe for her own reasons.
“I’m getting better,” Sam said.

“Just see what you can do.”

Sam sat down in the stone circle at the center of the garden path and cleared her throat. She studied the backs of her hands in her lap and opened her mouth. In the first moment, she thought she would choke on the sound of her song. After a few seconds, though, the pitcher plants and bladderworts perked up and started to mouth along with her, and she felt her voice soften. Warm air coated her throat with each inhale. Her voice healed itself as it came out, and soon Sam was singing like she used to, every pitch and dip of her voice in line. The garden swayed in its constant standing ovation.

“Feels good,” Sam said, after finishing the first song. She closed her eyes and let the old familiar buzz ring through her blood.

Instead of gardening while she sang, Joe continued to watch her entire performance from the bench on the deck. Likely, he had not been expecting her and probably already finished the gardening duties for that day. Behind each song Sam felt him there, his presence like a hollow in the circle that bloomed around her, but every time she glanced at him, he folded his lips into a slight, patient smile. With his long hair frizzling off his broad shoulders and his tan skin and intense dark eyes, he seemed to be more deity than human. Sam found that the fear she imagined she might feel had turned into awe.

After her fifth song, Joe interrupted with a few claps. Sam took a bow. She noticed that some of the plants tried to bow back. The giddy buzz danced through her body, from her stomach to her head and her hands. She felt satisfied with her return. She wondered if she even needed Max Shores. Joe seemed more harmless than ever.

“Come back tomorrow, if you can,” Joe said. “We’re behind.”
“Sure,” Sam said.

“If you don’t mind,” he said. “I don’t want to be an inconvenience.”

As they entered the house through the sliding glass doors, Sam’s hand accidentally grazed against Joe’s arm. He did not flick away in surprise, like she did.

“No,” Sam said. “I’m the inconvenience. I’m sorry it’s been so long.”

“Only about a week,” he said. “For an old man, that’s not such a long time.”

Sam wanted to insist that he wasn’t so old, really, but she kept silent. In the kitchen, he removed an envelope from a drawer by the sink and placed it on the table for her to take.

On her way out, Sam remembered that Max Shores would be waiting for her in his old blue car parked a few houses away, farther up the road tunneled by pines. The buzz in her blood rose and then receded into a fine quiver of guilt. All along Sam thought her job with the garden had crossed some line when really all of the symptoms and sickness, the loss of voice, the headaches—the whole thing suddenly seemed like her own fault. She had kept herself away, only to return as a traitor. She felt foolish to seek protection from Max Shores in the first place, but she would not be fickle. She drove to the rendezvous spot they agreed upon, a café at the edge of the Pines, in the town where Sam lived. Shores swung out in his black Beamer as she turned a corner off of Joe’s street and followed her.

“I got nothing,” Sam said after they had ordered coffees and took seats at a small wooden table in one corner.

“Just tell me what you saw,” Shores said. He took up most of the table with his bulk, and Sam felt annoyed that she had to share such a small space with him. She only wanted to return home and bask in her renewed health.

“His mother was there,” she said. “He said she was sick.”
“Sick how?”

“I don’t know.”

Shores scribbled into his notebook.

“What are you writing? I don’t see how that means anything,” Sam said. “It means nothing. It means he’s trying to be a good son.”

“Leave the analysis to me,” Shores said. “What else? What did you do in the garden?”

Sam paused. She had not yet admitted that her sole duty was to sing to the garden, but she refused to tell him that. Some things she felt she should keep to herself.

“Sam?” he said. “I asked about the garden.”

“What happened to ‘Ms. Brenley?’” Sam stood, leaving her coffee untouched on the table. “I don’t know why I agreed to this.”

She started out toward the door, but Shores called to her from his table. Sam turned and propped one hand on her hip. She felt—and she saw it confirmed somewhere behind his eyes—that she looked beautiful then.

“About Anna’s case,” he said. “You said you wanted to know what I know. I think it’s time I told you.” He indicated the empty seat beside him at the small table.

Sam paused halfway between the door and the table. She had nowhere to be, and she knew it, but the investigation seemed pointless. Five years had passed since her disappearance. Anna was gone, and nothing she could say would help. Even so, she was curious about the investigation—she still didn’t know what it was about Joe that made Shores suspect him.

“It’s too hot for coffee,” Sam said, but she took her seat again at the small table.
Max Shores began with what Sam already knew: Anna had been a student at one of Sam’s rival high schools in the same public district. That school, Tuckahoe High, serviced a large swash of the Pine Barrens area that buffered the sea from the city. Not many people lived in such a large space. Sam and Anna were one year apart, and would have attended high school together if the district didn’t split as Sam entered ninth grade. Just twenty minutes east and one year behind her, Anna had been captain of the debate team at her school, a starting player on the lacrosse team, and a choral singer.

“A good one,” Shores said. “A soprano, like you.”

Sam nodded and looked away. She’d already known about Anna’s singing, but she didn’t like to dwell on their similarities, especially not that one.

“After she disappeared there was an official investigation,” Shores continued. “But the case went cold. That’s when I got the call from Anna’s father.”

Shores explained that Anna’s family couldn’t contribute much information to the case. Anna had already committed to Princeton University. She was excited about it, they said, practically glowed for months after receiving her acceptance. Anna had planned to go on a road trip with two of her friends after graduation, but sometime in June they started noticing a change in their daughter. Anna said she had taken a job as a caretaker for an old man in a nearby town, and that she had found the job through a teacher who was related to the man. No one ever found out who the relation to the man was, or where Anna worked. Her parents chose to trust their daughter. They thought she had earned a break in their questioning and knew how to take care of herself.

Anna worked about two times a week, although she did not often let her parents in on her work schedule. She started to disappear more often and for longer and longer amounts of time. One time she came back very late at night, breathing deeply. When her father—who stayed up
waiting for her—asked what had happened, she said she’d gotten lost while walking through the Pines. Her father found that to be strange, because he assumed Anna knew the woods well. He himself had been part of a local hunting club and he had taught Anna everything he knew about how to determine time and direction in the woods, which weren’t all that big, and in most areas it was rare to go anywhere in them without coming up against a road or house eventually.

Her parents maintained that this was the point when they became suspicious. Shortly after Anna’s late night, they learned from one of her friends that she had backed out on the road trip. By then it was nearing the end of June, with only two weeks to graduation. Anna was named class valedictorian. She had prepared a speech. Two days before she was supposed to get her degree, Anna disappeared for good.

“A few teachers were thrown into the spotlight because of what Anna had told her parents about the job. But her parents were the first suspects,” Shores said. “They were cleared, eventually, though for a while it made things harder for them. They felt the formal investigation was handled poorly, and I happen to agree.”

“So how does Joe come into this?” Sam’s coffee had gone cold in her grip, and she found herself wishing for its heat despite the wet jungle air that fogged the café windows.

Shores explained how he began his own investigation. He did not like to rely on evidence or alibis people had already established. But even after re-questioning Anna’s teachers and friends, he had no more information about the mysterious job she had taken or why she had disappeared.

“Then I found this note,” Shores said. “In Anna’s desk. It had somehow been overlooked.”

Sam’s heart dropped.

“What kind of note?” she said, although she had a terrible feeling that she knew.
“It was signed ‘Indian Joe,’” Shores said. “There was a drawing of one of those freak plants and an address. No phone number.”

Shores said he went to the address on the note several times. He spied on the garden and watched how Joe interacted with the plants.

“It’s sick,” Shores said. “A garden like that should never exist. It gives me the creeps. I couldn’t believe it at first.”

Shores eventually confronted Joe at one of his performance events, but he insisted he’d never known a girl named Anna. He claimed he gave his contact information to many people who were interested in authentic Lenape Indian tribal dance performances or rare carnivorous plants. Shores kept Joe Cadenza in the back of his mind although he’d reached another dead end in his search.

“Every once in a while I parked my car on the road by Cadenza’ place, waiting for a new lead,” he said. “That’s how I found out about you.”

Sam pulled at a hangnail that had formed on her pinkie finger. A small piece of dead skin came off, but no blood glistened in its place. Shores studied her in silence for a minute, waiting for her to say something, but Sam didn’t have any more questions. She felt sorry that she had once assumed he was as dimwitted as he might’ve looked. Sam wondered if she ever cared about anything the way Max Shores cared about Anna’s case.

“I need you to ask Cadenza about Anna,” he said.

Shores took a sip of his coffee and watched Sam over the rim of the paper cup. Sam avoided his gaze. A woman and an older man wearing jogging suits entered the café through the fogged glass door.

“I’ll be right there,” Shores said. “You’d be safe, if that’s your concern.”
“It’s not,” she said. “But okay. I’ll try.”

Together, the evidence of the twin notes and the coincidence that she and Anna were both sopranos was a bit too strange for her to ignore, but she didn’t know what to do with that information. Her life had come to depend on that garden. Maybe Anna had tried to stop visiting, and vanished as a result. Once again, Sam felt pulled between competing interests: go against a man she wanted to trust, or work to bring him down. Both options signaled a fall for her as well.

The buzz from her garden performance had died off, and already her thoughts had begun to stray back to her next visit to Joe’s garden. Sam wondered who would look for her if she disappeared, who would take up a case that seemed to grow nothing but dead-ends.

Sam sat at the center of Joe’s garden, having finished her latest performance. She had polished off two full pitchers of water, and the backs of her hands were very wet, like she’d been massaging the roots in the boggy plots of the pitchers and sundews. Joe went back inside the house to fill the pitcher a third time. Sam tried to even out her breathing. She still felt buoyant, pleasant even, but she could not be so sure that she looked so great on the outside.

“Is this normal?” Sam asked when Joe returned. “This can’t be normal.”

“It’s July,” he said, shrugging. “July in New Jersey. Look at me.”

It was true that Joe’s t-shirt darkened with sweat around his neck and armpits, but Sam felt as if she had jumped in a pool of water.

It was Sam’s fourth day straight singing to the garden since her renewed agreement with Max Shores, but she still had not managed to bring up Anna. Shores had given her angles, coached her in subtleties of making a conversation sound coincidental, posed some ideas for how to bring up
the crucial information, but the right moment had not presented itself—or if it did, Sam had avoided it.

She cleared her throat and tried a new approach, reminding herself that she didn’t need to tell Shores anything. Regardless of the investigator’s role, she wanted answers for herself. Asking the right questions did not have to be a traitorous act.

“Am I the first singer?” Sam asked. “I mean, the first one to sing to the garden?”

“Oh, yes,” Joe said without pause. “Sometimes I invite scientists from the college. But no, never a singer.”

“But you’ve known for a while, right?” she said. “You knew that the plants needed to be sung to?”

“Well, yes,” Joe said. He frowned. “I sang for a bit, but they got tired of me quick. After that, I offered the job to a few others, but no one said yes until you.”

Sam sighed and gulped more water. It hurt a little that she had not been his first choice. She still knew the risks—the connections between she and Anna—but after her performances she always felt partial to Joe. Maybe he’d offered the job to Anna, but she turned it down, which would explain why she had a note, and why Joe said he didn’t know her. It was still possible that something else had happened to Anna. Sam took a deep breath and let it out very slowly.

“I’ve been feeling strange. It’s not just the sweat,” she said. “I think it’s the garden.”

Joe actually chuckled at that. Sam had never heard him laugh before. It was a deep, round laugh with lots of air behind it.

“That’s a good one,” he said. “I think you’re forgetting that you’re changing them.”

“Maybe,” Sam said. “I mean when I sing, it’s different now.”

“I know something that might help you feel better,” he said. “If you want.”
“Worth a try,” she said.

Joe sat down very close to Sam, facing her. Sam felt the new buzz under her diaphragm intensify and pulse.

“Close your eyes,” he said. “Breathe in. Imagine your lungs taking up all the space in your chest. Fill every space. Now hold it.”

She followed his instructions exactly and focused on the way her lungs expanded to take up all the empty space inside of her.

“Now let it go,” Joe said. “Slowly, as slow as you can.”

The buzz beneath her diaphragm vibrated out through her limbs, a warm shiver like stepping into a hot shower after being stranded in a cold rain. Joe continued to narrate breathing directions. After they had gone through one or two rounds of exercises, Joe stood and offered a hand to help Sam up. Sam took his palm and let him pull her to her feet. By the force of his tug, Sam knew that he had to be stronger than his age let on.

They went inside together. Joe’s mother sat at the table with a carafe of wine and Sam offered to pour the glasses for her.

“Vino rosso,” she said, as if it needed explaining. “Drink, drink.”

“I wanted to thank you for your help,” Joe said. “To show you how much I appreciate you coming here.” His face remained still, a little more realized than usual but no hint of a smile.

Sam shifted in her seat and muttered something about it being no big deal—she was being paid after all. To the consternation of her mother, she had not performed for people since the incident at the Collingswood Coffee Bean Festival, even though her voice had returned. She ignored calls and emails, and insisted that she needed more of a break.

“It’s like this is my full-time job now,” Sam said.
“We could use you full-time,” Joe said, raising his eyebrows.

“A good one, this one,” Joe’s mother said.

Sam took a sip of her wine.

“I want to give you something,” Joe said. “A gift. Please accept it.” He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a small gold chain adorned with a single circular charm. He held the chain in front of him and then laid it on the table in front of Sam. “This garden means a lot to me. It is my family, and you are part of it now.”

He smiled then, and Sam could not find the right voice to thank him or to refuse. Something about her had softened him, she could see. She covered the charm with her hand and Joe covered the back of her hand with his. The buzzing in Sam’s stomach flipped and pressed outward to the place where he touched her. When he removed his hand, she turned the small charm, no bigger than her pinkie nail, in her palm—a coin, it looked like, carved with a few tiny symbols of a language she could not decipher. Italian, she figured.

“From one performer to another,” Joe said.

Sam made a fist over the necklace to put it in the pocket of her shorts, but Joe’s mother suggested she wear it. Joe helped fasten the lock behind her neck.

As always, Sam met up with the investigator after her daily visits to Joe’s garden. Across the table in the café, Max Shores held his head in his hands and pressed at his hairline. His hair gel had loosened in the humidity, and a strand flipped loose by his temple.

“It’s been almost a week,” he said.

“I can’t just do this on the spot,” Sam said. “I’m not in the damned CIA.”
Shores stood up and paced a few steps toward Sam, a few away. Then he sat down again at their table.

“We need to get something soon,” he said.

“It’s been five years,” Sam said. “What’s your rush?”

Shores shot her a sharp look. She could see his left temple throbbing. He took a deep breath, as if attempting to calm down.

“It’s my risk,” Sam said. “Not yours.”

This was an argument she knew Shores couldn’t fault. If in fact Joe Cadenza turned out to be dangerous—if in fact he had anything to do with Anna’s disappearance—she would be the one to deal with it. Once again, Sam was beginning to doubt Joe’s role in Anna’s case. He was so kind to Sam. She was sure that if he had gotten rid of Anna and wanted her gone, too, he would have done something already. Even the connection of the twin note could have been a coincidence. Maybe Anna had worked for Joe for a time, but even if Joe had never mentioned it to Sam. Even if he denied knowing Anna, that did not mean that Joe was directly responsible for her disappearance. Innocent people were found guilty all the time off of similar schemes of logic.

“What if Anna just wanted to leave?” Sam asked. “Just get out? Why is that so hard to believe?”

“She was getting out,” Shores said. “She was going to college. We’ve been over this.”

“I’m not so sure,” Sam said. She touched the small gold pendant on the chain around her neck and let the contented buzz slide through her chest. “I think you’re overanalyzing.”

“What is that?” Shores said.

“What?” Sam dropped her hand down into her lap.
“Around your neck.” His eyes flicked from the small charm to her face. He leaned forward.

“You weren’t wearing it before you went into Cadenza’s.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Did he give it to you?”

“It’s mine. I left it there. Earlier. Before.”

“You’re lying,” Shores said. “I do this for a living, you know.”

“It’s just a gift.”

“Don’t you see that he’s dangerous?” Shores leaned back in his chair and folded his hand.

“You’ve even seen his freak garden, and you still won’t believe.”

“Get over yourself,” Sam said. “Why are you so set on this whole thing?”

“I know what he is.” His nostrils flared slightly. “I can smell it on him.”

“And you send me into his house every day, while you sit safe in your car.”

Sam stood, pushed her chair in. Shores opened his mouth and shut it again. Then he stood, too.

“I thought you wanted to help,” he said.

“I thought I did, too,” Sam said. “I’m sorry.”

Shores shook his head. He sighed and reached up with one hand to squeeze the bridge of his nose.

“You decide when you’re finished,” Shores said. “I can’t stop you.”

He leaned his bulk over his chair, and offered his hand. Sam took it, two hard up-downs.

“Be careful,” Shores said. He held onto her hand and gave it an extra squeeze. “I’ll be watching.”
He released her hand and exited the café with his folder and notebook under one arm. An ember of thrill strung in Sam’s blood. She’d been foolish to get mixed up with an investigator. She could take care of herself. No matter what Max Shores said—no matter what she found out since meeting with him—it felt like a relief to have only one thing to focus on, one side to play for. The familiar buzz returned, pulsing beneath her lungs.

Sam returned to the woods for another long walk. Since she had freed herself of the investigator and stopped booking any new gigs, she had more time on her hands to explore. On her walks, she busied herself with searching for wild carnivorous plants. She had yet to find any sundew, bladderwort, or pitcher plants of any kind growing in the Pines, but she no longer doubted that they existed. Anymore, her searches weren’t so much about proving a reality as they were about finding another starving crowd to sing to. She needed more. Sam even dreamed sometimes about starting her own carnivore garden. She doubted her mother’s fat deer would bother those plants. They might even be able to train a few Venuses to eat unsuspecting or particularly daring deer.

Sam felt herself drawn to the woods, defined by it—justified by it in a way that the interiors of her life could no longer dispel or approximate. She accepted her walks as a solid part of a nonnegotiable routine, a task as necessary as a daily search for food. Her mother fell back into her old pattern of nagging ever since Sam returned to Joe’s garden and recovered her health well enough to dismiss any worry of a serious condition. She nagged Sam about “getting out there” again and taking a few gigs. She pressed her to try online dating, to get a real job. On top of it all, her mother became more and more emotional, like she did every year around the anniversary of Sam’s father’s death. Anna had figured out only one way to vanish. But hadn’t Sam’s whole
family—not just her father, all three of them —vanished a long time ago? The people they had been had long gone away, a distance much like death.

The heat that fell over the area grew tropical and stayed that way. Even in the wet heat, much of the Pine Barrens stretched out dry and sandy, in wait for the next fire. But Sam had begun to seek out hiking trails in deeper parts of the Pines where water bubbled up from the ground and moss consumed any sign of earth, sandy and dry. All of her books said that those were the most ideal places for carnivorous plants.

One day, Sam decided to hike through the Great Swamp, a watery area where she felt she would be sure to find carnivorous plants. She stepped through raised areas inside the Great Swamp and tromped through rusty red cedar water in some spaces where she couldn’t avoid it. She’d traded sneakers or sandals for boots and kept her skin covered despite the humidity. Every piece of clothing stuck to her, and although she understood that the cottony heat must have been uncomfortable for most people, she did not mind it as much as she had in past summers. There were many things she did not mind anymore.

As she walked, Sam’s mind became relaxed, guiltless, porous as a sponge in the soaking shade. She kept an eye out for carnivorous sundews or pitcher plants, but she wondered if she was really searching for something else—an end to the common life she knew and the start of another chance at autonomy. The coin that hung from her neck served as the price of admission to that life, paid for by the strange man she could no longer consider a stranger. He was more like a friend, but he wasn’t a friend either. He was too important to her to be a friend.

Sam stopped to search a particularly mossy area of a marsh sprung with cedar trees. There was no raised bank in that spot, just a gradual seepage into wetness. It looked like the perfect environment, a place dank and humid and uniformly soggy. She examined a kind of lily paddling
the water’s surface like armor. She crept along the swamp, her feet squishing with each small step. She almost brought her foot down onto a bed of tiny yellow flowers. Her heart jumped to her throat, and she bent down to get a closer look at the plants.

She lifted a bloom with one pinkie. It had the unmistakable gut-like roundedness of a bladderwort. The size and heft of the thing did not exactly resemble the bladderwort plants in Joe’s garden, but a familiar airy feeling began to rise into her head. She began to sing before she realized it. She got through an entire song, but the plant did not respond except for the most imperceptible vibration, which Sam thought might have been caused by the wind of her breath. She sighed and stood up again, underwhelmed by the little carnivorous flowers.

All at once, her head started to spin. She put one hand on a tree trunk to steady herself and tilted her chin upward. Pine and cedar blurred the edges of the sky. She closed her eyes and swung her head toward the ground. The palms of her hands felt wet, like she had plunged them into the bog. She rubbed them together and lowered herself to a sitting position on a damp sandy spot just before solid earth gave way to water. If she could just sit for a few moments to rest, then she could have enough energy to return.

As soon as she settled, she realized how hard it would be for her to get up. Her weight anchored her there. She blinked a few times and let her gaze relax. Her head stopped spinning and in a moment the air cleared. She sat, breathless and thoughtless, tracing with her eyes the space around her. The air formed a kind of buffer, a physical presence she could almost reach out and touch. Whatever entered that buffer space belonged to her. A buzz similar to the one she picked up after singing to Joe’s garden churned inside her.

Sam felt the air with her eyes until her sight came to rest on a single, large bug hovering near the bog at her feet. She studied its movements. Then, without any demand, her arm lashed out
and the bug struggled and then crunched inside her fist. She lifted her fist to her face. Her entire hand coated with a sticky goop, and when she peeled back her fingers, strands of filmy mucus clung and stretched. A massive dragonfly twitched inside. She brought her hand to her mouth and swallowed it whole, licked the remaining gunk from her palm. It traveled down her throat to her stomach, where the buzz curled around it, entrapped it and devoured.

When she came to herself again, still sitting before the swamp, the light had changed. She looked around her, confused. She didn’t remember how she got there until she saw the tiny yellow bladderworts blooming by her feet. So that was it, the thing she had been searching for. Her hair fell wet and stringy, a few strands stuck to her face as if it had rained. She pushed up to her feet and examined the backs of her palms. No film or mucus, but her skin felt waxy and supple under her fingertips. The thought of a bad dream pressed in, but she did not believe it. An eerie calm cloaked her. It occurred to her that she should be afraid, but she was not afraid. She did not run down the path in the direction she had come. The buzz inside her seemed to have waned, but she knew it only hid there, very much alive.

She got into the car and let the calm guide her back to her mother’s house. She walked through the door. She heard her mother’s feet on the kitchen linoleum, and then she stood wide-eyed before Sam with a spatula in one hand.

“Christ, Sam. Where were you? You were gone all night.”

Sam blinked a few times, adjusting to the words.

“You didn’t call.” Her mother gripped the spatula, and for a second Sam thought she would whip it back and smack her with it. “Don’t you ever do that to me again!”

“I’m fine,” Sam said. “I’m okay.”
“What’s gotten into you?” Her mother took a few quick steps toward her. “You’re all wet. Are you sick again? Are you feeling okay?” She took another step and raised a free hand to Sam’s forehead. Then, satisfied with her temperature, a little bit of panic left her face and her eyes relaxed again. “Well, you need a shower.”

Sam nodded. “I’m okay.”

“I’m making pancakes,” her mother said.

Sam continued to nod and started to head for the stairs.

“Oh and one more thing— ” Her mother skipped back into the kitchen and then returned with an envelope. “This was in the mailbox yesterday.”

Sam took the envelope from her mother and then trudged upstairs, straight to her room, and opened the envelope. Inside was a note on yellow legal paper. Missed you today. Take Saturday off, stay for dinner Sunday. The cartoon of a Venus flytrap licked out toward the letters.

She folded the paper and scanned the calendar hanging on the wall. If she went on her walk on Friday, and her mother was home from work that morning, then it had to be Saturday. She’d been out in the Great Swamp all night.

The calm that had settled over her burst, and her hands began to shake. She had learned to sing like Anna, she had received a note like her, and now Sam knew she was destined to go the same way if she did not do something. The garden’s high was nothing but a trick, like a drug—she would be able to get over it, even if it felt impossible. She might be in pain, but she wouldn’t die. In choosing to trust Joe, she had chosen wrong. She dropped the folded note, dug in her purse for her phone, and found herself dialing the number for Max Shores.
Before Sam was to show up at Joe’s on Sunday, Shores explained the final plan over lunch. Sam did not order anything, only gulped down glass after glass of water. The idea was the same as it had always been, except Sam would be wearing a wire and this time, once and for all, she would make sure to ask some direct questions.

“Don’t you need a warrant for this kind of thing?” Sam asked. Although she didn’t care one way or another what he was allowed to do, she wanted to try to practice speaking normally. Her voice came out unbroken and steady, despite the fact that she felt so uneven and shaky.

“I’ll beg forgiveness later,” Shores said. “Leave the legal stuff to me.”

After lunch Shores led Sam to a more private place in the Pines and attached the wire. They returned to Shores’ Foxy Eye Beamer and ran a few tests to be sure it was in working order. When Shores spoke to her, his voice echoed from the speakers on a laptop he had propped open above the steering wheel. All of Sam’s senses seemed to be on edge, but every once in a while they blurred, so that she barely knew what was happening.

“I feel dizzy,” Sam said. “I feel like I’m gonna be sick.”

“Don’t worry,” Shores said, frowning. “Hang in there.”

He raised one hand to her shoulder and squeezed. The buzz in her stomach did not rise up and flip like it did when Joe touched her this way. If anything, it shrunk back into a cramp. Sam waited for Joe to say something else. She wanted him to tell her that they should reschedule when she was feeling stronger, that she should just get away from Joe for a while. But he didn’t mention it.

“Ready?” he said.

Sam’s vision scrambled for a moment, then righted again. Shores watched her, but he didn’t seem to notice how out of it she was—or if he did, he ignored it. She knew he was very eager to
get some answers, and she thought she was, too. They were finally on the same page, united against Joe and his carnivore garden.

Sam nodded that she was ready, and Joe flashed her a confident smile. She managed to get out of Shores’ car and into her own, and set off alone to visit the garden.

Joe’s tall house sprung up from mossy front yard, its sharp roof jagged at the sky. Sam took a few breaths. Shores would be parked just around the curve in the road. She tried to remember how comfortable she felt after singing to Joe’s garden—a fact she always forgot so quickly and remembered again just as fast. But since her overnight stay in the Great Swamp, she felt betrayed by the high that took hold of her after garden performances. Something was happening to her, and she had a feeling Joe knew about it. Part of her still hoped he hadn’t expected her symptoms, or orchestrated them. If she did not hope for that, her fear might have consumed her from the inside out.

Each stone in the path before her led to the square porch, to the waiting door. She calmed her thoughts, which was easy. Fear made it difficult to think about anything. She had cleared her mind of all excess information, leaving only the capacity to observe and to process.

At the door, Joe’s mother welcomed Sam with a smile too large for her head. The house smelled like pasta sauce. A pot upon the range steamed.

“I’m making my special meat sauce,” Joe’s mother said as she shuffled back to the kitchen.

“Joe’s outside.”

Sam thanked her and stepped around the table, already set for three, to the sliding glass doors. Joe knelt on his hands and knees, clearing some space in the garden. The collection of Venus flytraps around him leaned away. He smoothed the sandy soil once over with each of his
palms and stood. Joe smacked his hands on his pants to free the dirt and wet his lips with his
tongue before spotting Sam on the deck. He raised his palm to wave in greeting. Sam waved, and
then felt like an idiot for mirroring him.

Joe met her on the deck. His long hair was pulled back into a low ponytail, and beads of
sweat gathered on the wrinkles of his forehead.

“Sorry I didn’t show Friday,” Sam said. “I wasn’t feeling good again.”

“It’s fine. I understand.” Joe nodded toward the house and sucked in the air, held it in his
puffed out chest and exhaled. “Smell that?”

Sam nodded and folded her arms against her chest. She did not want to be conscious of the
wire she wore. Play along, Shores had told her. Just forget it’s there.

“Make yourself at home,” Joe said. “Relax.”

Joe reached out and touched her shoulder, and all of the hair on Sam’s body tingled. She
laughed, although he hadn’t said anything funny, and went down to the garden to perform the job
she’d been hired to do. It was hard to believe that she’d only known Joe for a little over two
months. It felt much longer than that to her.

Joe disappeared inside the house as Sam started to sing. Remembering her night in the woods
with the wild bladderworts, Sam did not sit down like she normally did when she performed. The
plants seemed a little more sluggish that day. They mouthed lazily, like they couldn’t bother to
keep up with the lyrics. Maybe it was the wet, heavy July heat. She thought of Max Shores
listening inside of his car.

At dusk, she finished singing and sat alone with the garden, letting the buzz in her stomach
build and settle until it calmed to a faint stir. She watched the sliding glass door, although she
could not see inside the house from where she sat. She’d been waiting for Joe to come out with
some water. He was taking more time than usual, and it was making her nervous despite her contented post-performance mood. Again, she remembered the dream in the swamp, the sticky film on her hands and the way her brain shut off, leaving only her eyes to see and the buzz. She wanted to be ready for what would happen next. The leaves of the pitcher plants shivered, the sundew swayed in the stillness like clumps of sticky wheat. Above the garden the sky turned purple, and the needles of the pine trees turned a darker shade under the last light.

Joe finally appeared at the sliding glass door again, wiping his hands on a wet rag to announce dinner. Sam closed her eyes and took a breath and went inside. Joe’s mother was already sitting at the table, and Joe had just finished pouring wine into their glasses. Each plate heaped with spaghetti and a chunky meat sauce.

“In your honor,” Joe said. He raised his glass.

Sam took her seat and wiped the sweat from her palms on her napkin.

“It looks delicious,” she said to Joe’s mother. “Thank you.”

Her stomach turned flips at the sight of the food. She picked at the plate with her fork and took a few bites. She tried not to pay attention to the ferocity with which Joe and his mother approached their food. Joe lifted the plate close to his mouth and shoveled in heaps of pasta at one time. Joe’s mother curled the noodles into balls on her fork and raised forkful after forkful to her mouth without pause. Sam imagined what the meal would sound like to Shores—a chaotic orchestra of forks clanking against plates and wet slurps between gulps of food. Sam set her fork down.

“You don’t like it?” Joe asked.

“I guess I’m still not feeling good,” she said. “I’m sorry.”
If Joe or his mother were disappointed, it didn’t show. Joe returned to his plate without comment. Only when he finished did Sam try to speak up again.

“Actually, I’ve been meaning to ask you about that,” Sam said.

Joe gave her a flat look and wiped his mouth. Joe’s mother kept eating. “About what?” he asked.

“About how I feel. It’s not normal,” she said. “Something’s happening to me, I’m sure.”

Joe nodded, but seemed uninterested. “People your age, you go through lots of changes.”

“That’s not what I mean,” she said. “This is different. I think it’s the garden.”

The room had turned quiet. The old woman had put her fork down, ignoring the last bit of food on her plate. Her tongue worked behind her cheeks, cleaning the sauce from the spaces between her teeth.

“How about a game of Scopa?” she said.

She produced a deck of cards before Sam could object. Joe cleared the table and stacked the dishes on a counter by the stove. Sam stood to help him, but Joe motioned for her to sit down again.

“I thought you didn’t like games?” Sam asked Joe.

“I’m not playing.” The shadow of a smile danced behind his eyes.

Joe’s mother had already started to deal the cards. Joe turned on the faucet and took a plate in hand under the stream of water. Steam clouded around him. Joe’s mother flipped four cards between them, and the game began. Sam tried to remember the rules—something about sevens and coins—but she felt sure she would lose from the start. Instead of picking up on patterns, her focus drifted. She thought of the wire under her shirt and the coin necklace Joe had given her and the other questions she still needed to ask.
Sam could feel the game coming to an end, the deck of cards running down at the center of the table as Joe’s mother captured point after point. Joe had let one last pot fill in the sink and turned off the faucet. The steam from the hot water lingered over the table.

“Joe,” Sam said, finally. “Did you ever know a girl named Anna?”

Joe wiped his hands on a rag and tossed it over one shoulder.

“Scopa.” The woman swept the last of the cards from the table and clapped her hands together.

Sam kept her eyes on Joe as his mother collected the loose cards scattered before them. He sidled over to the counter, closer to Sam.

“What has the primiera?” the old woman said. Sam thought they should know who won, even without counting the cards.

“Beautiful girls love my garden,” Joe said. “It’s hard to know if one was ever called Anna. Such a plain name.” He stretched out his hand and touched the gold chain that hung from Sam’s neck and traced her collarbone with one finger. Sam placed both palms on the table and tried to stand. “I’m more likely to remember yours.”

“I have to leave,” Sam said. Her panic started to loosen inside of her and take over. She felt suddenly very alarmed. “I need to go now.”

“No, no.” Joe clamped his other hand down on her shoulder. “Stay, just a little longer.”

The old woman folded the deck of cards into her palm, pushed away from the table, shuffled into the sitting room, and then disappeared around the corner by the front door. Joe squeezed Sam’s shoulder once and went back to the counter. He fiddled with a few buttons on the radio and turned up the volume on a channel featuring an elaborate opera. Then, he started to sing in a flowing language Sam guessed had to be Italian. She had never known Joe could sing. In fact, he
had the most beautiful voice she’d ever heard, strong and yet mellow, and the round curve of the syllables had a hypnotic effect although she didn’t know what the words meant. Sam’s head clouded with his voice. She stared at her hands, palm-down on the table. She told them to move, and her feet to run, but no part of her body would budge.

Several questions bubbled in Sam’s head and popped before she could get them out, but finally, one simple thought escaped. *What’s going on?*

She tried to stand again, but the heavy buzzing rooted her to her seat. Joe strode over to her, still singing, and laid a hand on her shoulder, lighter this time, his thumb resting at the base of her neck. He reached down into the front of her shirt with his other hand, down between her breasts, and ripped out the wire attached to the inside of her shirt. Her head pulsed and her vision cracked, but what she saw then came in very clear.

The old woman entered the sitting room again, pushing a man in a wheelchair in front of her. The man looked like Max Shores. Beneath a white dress shirt, stained with red, his wide chest strained against the twine rope that had been wound tight around his body. His head tilted to one side. Blood dripped from one temple. Something had been stuffed into his mouth, smothering his shiny teeth, and his squarish face had puffed and gone purple around it.

Sam moved her lips but no words came out, not that she knew which ones she wanted to use.

Joe continued to sing and lifted Sam from the chair, into his arms like a child. She tried to steady her vision, but Joe’s voice took up most of the space in her head. She noticed the air change, grow moist, and then she felt Joe’s body stepping into the garden. He set her down, inside a mossy plot. A flurry of leaves thrashed around her, every plant whipping its head in the dark, snapping their mouths at the air. Her fingers searched in the sand and moss under her. She dug her wet palms into the earth, spread her fingers below the surface, deeper and deeper. The
Venus flytraps flapped a frantic wind on either side of her. Sweat dripped off of her and mixed with wet soil. Joe disappeared somewhere off to the left and returned to the center of the garden, holding a large flat shovel.

The old woman had wheeled Max Shores to the edge of the deck steps in front of Sam’s place. She gave the chair a slow push, and it clattered down to the garden, to the final step where the chair pitched forward and Max Shores, still tied in, was flung face first onto the stone. The old woman steadied herself on the banister behind and moved down each step inch by inch. She gripped something in the hand she was not using to steady herself and fixed her grip around it.

Joe righted the wheelchair again. Sam could barely hear Joe’s voice over the rustle and sway of the carnivore garden. His mother joined him on the other side of the investigator’s chair. The metallic thing in her hand glinted when she stretched it across Shores’ opposite shoulder and pulled it back across the front of his neck. A petal of blood peeled down his chest, and Shores’ head pitched back. A new buzz curled and lunged inside of Sam. It seemed to take up all of her.

The patch of Venus flytraps snapped around her. Their leaves cut and whipped as they churned, but she couldn’t feel them. She was only aware of her own tongue watering, and as always, the burning buzz. The heat in her body left through her open mouth. She felt hungry. Starving. Her head twitched with the agony of it.

The old woman passed the knife to Joe, who cut the ropes and then lifted the investigator’s left hand. He sliced off each of Shores’ fingers, one by one. Sam could not hear anything over the roar of the garden and the buzz in her stomach. Joe tossed a finger to a set of nearby pitcher plants in another section of the garden. The pitchers followed the track of the finger together like a team of synchronized dancers, all of their greedy mouths mimicking the arc through the air, to the ground. The ones that could reach the place where it fell fought like a pack of wild dogs,
heads curled downward. Joe cut off the rest of Max Shores’ fingers, one by one, and fed them to other parts of the garden. A dark puddle had begun to form beneath the wheelchair. It would have looked like a hole in the earth if not for the moon’s light reflected inside.

*Now, my Venus.*

Joe approached Sam, his hands dark with dirt or blood. He towered over her. She forgot what she was feeling. His presence had become the only thing that mattered. Her head twitched again. He held something out for her, only her. The others would not get a bite of it. Just a taste would make the best feeling, and she could have it all. No need to sing anymore, no deadlines or dates to confer. No one to please but this man, who would take care of her. She let go and leaned forward with her parted jaws to take what she had been given.
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REFERENCES

Introduction


A Note On Further Research

In order to add texture and realistic detail to these stories, I have conducted general research based in history, ecology, geography, cartography, and folklore of the New Jersey Pine Barrens. The “Story Map” provided at the start of the collection is my own creation based on several different maps. Despite all background research, this thesis is a work of fiction. All characters, events, places, and incidents—even those based on reality—are either are the product of my imagination or are used fictitiously.

The third epigraph is a fictitious quote from a fictitious book (*The New Jersey Pine Barrens: An Untruncated History*), which appears in several different stories.