This isn't about hats

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"This isn't about hats" consists of four short stories, all written from a first person narrative perspective. Each story involves its narrator in some moment requiring the making of a choice: to take sides between loved ones, to commit to love, to make or ignore social connections. Issues these stories explore include budding and failing romances, a cross-cultural encounter, and being raised under and growing away from a crumbling marriage.
This isn't about hats

by

Joseph Paul Carney

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of
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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Joseph Paul Carney

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
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I would like to thank Joe Geha, Susan Carlson and Joe Kupfer for their support, availability and creative feedback regarding these stories. They allowed me to proceed as I needed to, and be independent as I needed to without ever feeling terror from isolation.
I'm waiting for Jack, my driving instructor. I've left the engine running and the car vibrates a little and my body tingles. This is the first time I've driven and everything feels like it did after I fought and lost that giant, ugly yellow catfish at Keystone Lake last summer, like if I got out of the car right now I couldn't walk too well because everything would be like rubber.

On the road, Jack, my driving instructor, was calling out, "Hit it, Jimbo!" to switch lanes, "give it the juice, Jimbo!" when I merged onto the parkway for the first time. "You're smooth," "you're a natural," "chicks will be swimming in"-- I'd heard all of this so far, and when he'd said that last one, I'd imagined Lisa sitting where he was, her legs open, her head rolling against the head-rest, air slipping in the windows.

Once, when the speed needle tapped forty-five, ten below the speed limit, Jack got a little serious. "Come on, Jimbo, he said. "I can't be seen in a car going this slow."

We got off the parkway and into this residential neighborhood and he said that he had to stop somewhere for a minute. He directed me to the apartment complex and said to park anywhere and I pulled in next to an orange pickup truck and bumped softly against the curb. I asked him if I was going to do drills here.

"Huh?" He wrinkled his forehead at me. "Drills?" He studied me until I guess things snapped into place. "Oh, oh-- just turn that engine off for now, or whatever, don't worry about it." Jack smacked my shoulder blade and turned a little toward me. "Now, that was good driving there," he said, pointing back over his shoulder. "And that was good parking,
the way you pulled right in. You're doin' it," he said, smiling with yellowed teeth. He took
his sunglasses off, and got out, holding his jacket and sliding it on outside the car. He tugged
his black jeans up to his waist and jogged around the back of the building.

Now Jack returns. He walks back to the car, scratching his cheek with his eyes on the
pavement. I figure he's in his thirties, like he couldn't be my dad but he could maybe be an
uncle. He's basically thin, but the way his baggy clothes flake off his frame and the way he
droops his head makes it like everything's sagging toward the ground. He climbs in.

"Blow out of here," he says, looking straight ahead.

"Leave?"

He nods and gestures toward the road with his arm.

Jack doesn't explain anything, and we drive for a while through the neighborhood
streets, and he only tells me to make rights or lefts when we reach stop signs. But all the
streets are the same, no sidewalks, thick trees planted every twenty yards, bending over and
cooling the street, their leaves twisting in the wind and throwing out baseballs of sunlight. I
start to think we're going in circles or squares.

"I was just checkin' on my woman back there," Jack finally says. "That's all."

I nod, and it's quiet for a little while.

"Her car's there. She drives that green sporty job," he says, as though we'd talked
about it. "It was parked right there, but she's not in the apartment. It's her day off, and her
car's fucking there and she isn't. She isn't there."

I hear Jack sigh out the window and I keep my eyes on the road.
The streets are narrow. A car comes from the opposite direction and I slow down and nearly drift into a yard letting it pass. Jack doesn't say anything. I have to make a few turns on my own. When I come to stop signs, I look to Jack, but he's still staring into his side mirror or out the window.

"Where do you think she is?" I ask him.

"That's the question," he says. "I gotta lot of theories on that one. But I don't want to get into much of it." He stops talking and about ten seconds later starts back up. "She coulda been in the shower. She's got a glass sliding door and I jimmed it, but it was locked. She coulda been in the bedroom, too, you know?" Jack points straight out the front window. "She coulda locked herself up in there. You know what I mean?"

I drum my hands on the steering wheel and nod my head, trying to figure out what he's talking about.

"Let's get," Jack snaps suddenly. "What am I doing, dragassing these bullshit streets."

He directs me back onto the parkway and says that if I don't mind, we'll cut the lesson a little short.

"How about I get some music flowing?" He turns the radio on and says, "this is how it's going to be when you're out there. The radio's gonna be blasting, the girl's gonna be putting on the love songs." He asks if I have a girlfriend, turning the knob, not getting much but static. When I tell him that I've been going out with Lisa for two weeks now, he slaps my leg with the back of his hand.
"You know where I'm at, then," he says.

"We met at a beach dance a few weeks back."

Jacks smiles at me and nods, his hand still fooling with the radio. "Beach dance."

"Yea, you know, with fishing nets and palm trees. She had a tiny skirt on. She was leaning right into me, real close."

"Uh-huh," Jack says, not looking at me. "How close? Tits?"

"A little, but..."

"There we go!" Jack says, interrupting me as the reception clears up and music breaks through the speakers. "The Stones!" Jack nods at me even though I haven't said anything new, holds up his index finger, and joins the music: "don't need a whore, don't need no booze, don't need a virgin priest, but I need someone I can cry to..." He tells me to shift lanes for practice, motioning with his arm to the other lane, but he never stops singing. I look over at him once on the way home and his eyes are closed, his lips mouthing the words.

* * *

On the phone, Lisa asks how Jack is, but she calls him, 'the instructor.'

"You didn't wreck or anything?" she asks.

"Wreck? No. We were listening to The Rolling Stones, right there in the car with me doing close to seventy on the parkway."

She asks if I did any parallel parking or turning exercises or anything like that, the ones they make you do for the exam down at the state police station.

"That'll happen," I tell her, "but what's the hurry?" I tell her how Jack said that today
I needed to 'get into the flow.' "Anyway," I say, "he said I was a natural driver. He said I had a real calm vibe."

"Did you talk about when you're getting the license?"

I tell her that once I get these lessons done, I can go, and then she reminds me that I can go now, since I have the permit.

I ask her what she did today and she says she spent two hours by herself in the park.

"What were you doing?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. Just walking around. It's quiet. I like getting away like that sometimes."

"Getting away from what?"

"Just getting away. And then I came home and I've been trying this math homework."

"Why don't you ask your dad?"

"No. He's been nasty all week. Each day he comes home and I can smell the whiskey around his face."

I tell her that I can do the math for her in health class again; she can give me the assignment at my locker. I figure that if I'm not doing her work then I'll be watching Robby Vukmir sketch in his notebook, drawing things like Mrs. Snyder, the sixty-year old history teacher, naked except for boots and garters, with a whip in her hand. Lisa says she might go see the teacher in the morning instead, though she's said that a few times before.

*  *  *

*  *  *
My mom comes back with my father after picking him up at the bus stop. She's holding a white bag of fast food, and tells me to grab anything since it's all the same. I go to check if my father needs help with any bags. He's holding his briefcase under his arm and reaches out to me and fixes the collar on my shirt, wiping his feet back and forth on the door mat, and asks me about the lesson, looking down at the rug. He grabs a handful of french fries from the bag before my mother walks away and stuffs them in his mouth.

"I think I'm a good driver," I say. "He never said I did anything wrong."

My mother asks where I went, calling back while she enters the kitchen.

"Were you speeding?" she asks, her voice moving away.

My dad asks me about Jack, but he calls him the 'teacher.'

"He was laid back," I say. "I think it relaxed me."

"You don't want to relax," my dad says, fixing his eyes on mine.

I say I meant relatively and my dad just nods and tosses his briefcase on the table and says he's going up to check the news. "You're on your way," he says, looking back at me and smiling.

I grab a hamburger and a package of fries and pour myself some milk. I take the stack of newspapers in from the front sidewalk and read a newspaper in the living room for a while as I'm eating and then afterwards, with the wrappers crumpled and stuffed inside of the empty red glass on the table next to me. I read about a lawyer who got fired for showing porn movies to younger associates in a board room. There are actually details about what got the woman in the firm, the one who ratted him out, upset, saying the movies included
animals and rape scenes. This is why I read the paper.

My father comes down the stairs wearing his white business shirt and a pair of sweatpants. I try to remember exactly where I drove with Jack so I can tell him. But my father tells me that it's almost five o'clock and he points at the stack of papers in the front hall and heads into the TV room.

There's a stack of glossy ad inserts on top of the papers. Rick, my route manager, is always bitching at me for ignoring them, but with him there's always something. Once he accused me of stealing. He came to the front door, busting out of the white sweatsuit, the porch light shining on his sweaty head, saying that the Brices had called, missing a magazine and an umbrella from their back porch, and that they also hadn't been getting the inserts. I told Rick I had nothing to do with it, which I didn't. I did take a couple of cans of coke from the Davies' back porch once, but it was close to ninety degrees, and I'd taken magazines from people, but nothing-- ever-- from the Brices. I'd offered to show Rick the umbrellas in our closet, we have seven or eight, and he told me not to be a "prick."

That night I'd asked my dad why Rick would have come to the door, why he didn't just call, and my dad said that Rick probably wanted to see the look on my face. He started telling me about Hamlet, a play, and some scene that I can't remember, but how it sort of related to Rick and the missing umbrella and wanting to see how people react to being accused of something. My dad asked who else could have taken that umbrella, and it was like he and Rick were playing ball together. I got upset at my dad and said something like, "how could you doubt your own son?"
Jack doesn't apologize when he arrives twenty minutes late for our next lesson. He's wearing the same black jeans and black jacket. He talks about someone he used to know who lived in my neighborhood, a Vincent something, he says, and tries to remember where, pointing to several houses, wagging his fingers at them. All he says is that he once worked with the guy, and that the guy had all sorts of drug connections. We've been on the road about ten minutes when he asks me if I've sneaked the car over to Lisa's yet. I tell him no.

"No? What are you waiting for?"

"I don't have the license."

"But you got the skills. All you gotta do is call her up and set a time. If her folks got a problem, meet her in a park or something. Look at you, you're driving. You can drive over there."

"I don't know about my parents," I say. "I don't even know if she'd want to. During the week she seems real busy. All we have time for is talking on the phone."

"Work with that, then. You ever try it on the phone?"

"Try what."

"What? Ask her what she's wearing. Ask her to take it off for you. You never did that before?"

"Well she's my first girlfriend," I say. I glance at Jack. He's watching me, not the road. "I guess we haven't got to that yet."

"You oughta go for it. She'd do it for you."
"Maybe."

"Hey, I know she would. It works for me-- even with the classy girls I've dated, the ones I never thought would've done it."

Jack talks about an ex-girlfriend of his, Gina, who ate pizza with a fork and knife. "And even she loved it," he says. I nod and don't say anything for a while. We're looping in and out of my neighborhood, just driving the streets, not doing anything new or really going anywhere.

"So you just ask them what they're wearing?"

"Just ask her what she's wearing," he says, shaking his head and shrugging like it's that simple. "You don't have to announce it or anything. She'll figure it out."

Jack announces that he has an idea. Since we're talking about Lisa, he says, we could go visit her. He says that we could take her driving with us and he'd feel her out on the whole phone thing.

"You can't ask her," I say.

"No, no," he pats down the air with his hands. "I'll ask her indirect questions, like about movies and if she uses lotion and things like that. I'll be able to tell, believe me." He says that we can go driving with her and then we'll hash out the possibilities afterwards.

"Besides," he says, "you gotta drive with her sometime. This'll be like battle conditions. You gotta be like a monk. You gotta learn to drive and block sex out." He explains that we can pick her up, zip around for a while, and maybe he'll let me cut it loose for her on an open road where he knows there's no police.
This whole thing seems like a great idea to me, though I feel my stomach tightening up. I try to think of how this could be wrong, but I figure it can't be since Jack's the licensed instructor. And anyway, there's no turning back, even if I wanted to. I think Jack would give me a hard time.

I waste about ten minutes looking for Lisa's house since I've never driven there myself. There are giant trees in her yard, ivy climbing the bricks of the house, spouts of water flowering from the in-ground sprinkler system. The black Cadillac is resting in front of us like a yacht. Jack whistles. I get out of the car without looking back at him. I rub my hands together, then on my pants. I hear cars pass, but I can't see them because of the hedges along the street. The sprinklers are gushing up and out right next to the brick path I'm walking on, but they don't hit me; there's only this fine mist.

Mrs. Fitzpatrick answers the door, letting me in, filling out her khaki pants through the hips and wearing a green sweater that sticks tight against her breasts. Her hair's pulled back and she gives a nice, surprised smile, contented almost.

"James," she says, addressing me like I'm a formal guest, "this is a surprise."

"I drove here-- with my instructor."

Her head rears back like she's impressed and then she tells me that Lisa isn't home, that she's shopping with the girls. She lets me inside anyway. This house has high ceilings; my eyes go right up. And it feels like all the dirt, all traces of people have been sucked out, like all's being sprayed out onto the lawn. I can smell lemon wood polish like it's for dinner. The maids were over, I guess, and maybe the one Lisa thought sifted through her drawers
looking for money. A television is playing in the kitchen and the six-foot grandfather clock is beating away in the next room.

"What are you here for," she says, her eyes narrowing a little.

I tell her that I was going to see if Lisa wanted to come riding.

"With you?"

I tell her that it was Jack's idea, and then I have to explain who Jack is. I tell her how it would be good practice.

Mrs. Fitzpatrick's face smooths out, gets almost shiny, maybe from makeup or maybe from her calmness, and with her hair pulled back it's like her head's been rubbed down and polished like a statue's. But she looks serious. She tells me that she doesn't see the logic of driving people around when I'm only learning. "It's dangerous," she says, and then she says that she's sure I'll be a fine driver, but that's beside the point. Then she looks up over my shoulder, her face looking confused, and I turn around and it's Jack, at the door. He waves at her, and looks at me and then the door, like I should open it. I immediately wish we hadn't come.

"Yes?" Mrs. Fitzpatrick says, her head cocked forward.

"I'm Jack Osteen," Jack says, and he reaches out to shake her hand, though he practically has to reach to Mrs. Fitzpatrick's thigh to get hers. She lets her hand be shaken and takes a step back.

Jack stands there and smiles awkwardly. "Are we waiting?" he asks, and his eyes climb the stairs to the second floor.
"Lisa's not here," her mother says.

"Oh," Jack says. He rubs his mouth. "I wish I'd known that."

"How would you know? You don't know her."

"Right," Jack says, nodding.

"And I don't like the whole idea. I told James."

"James?" Jack pauses, his eyes bunching up. "Oh, James," he says, motioning to me. And he nods some more, like he doesn't like the whole idea, either. His arms are crossed against his old black windbreaker. His sunglasses rest on the neck of his shirt. And now I notice that he's unshaven.

"I want you to know," Jack says, uncrossing his arms and placing his hands in his pockets, shuffling his feet, wrinkling his face, "this wasn't for kicks. I'm trying to replicate the real driving experience. It's part of my philosophy. I'm trying to accomplish some, uh, verisimilitude here, not just driving, but the whole circumstance, the whole context. In medicine, they call it holistic."

Mrs. Fitzpatrick's eyes drill right into Jack, like she's looking inside of him. I lean toward the door.

"Okay, that's all fine," Mrs. Fitzpatrick says, "but I'd rather you guys drop the whole idea."

"Affirmative," Jack says, and he smiles crookedly at her. "This is some house." Jack whistles and takes a step forward and peers left into the living room.

"I'm leaving," Mrs. Fitzpatrick says, pointing out the front door. "I'm on my way out,
so let's end this."

Jack snaps his fingers and says that we need to get back to work. I have my hand on the doorknob.

I tell Mrs. Fitzpatrick that I guess I'll see her soon, and she nods and looks right at me and doesn't say anything.

In the car, Jack raps his knuckles on the window, and looks at me with his eyebrows raised, like it's my turn to think.

"That was kind of a kick in the gut," he says.

* * *

In the living room, my mom holds out her finger, telling me to wait, finishing a paragraph from her book, I guess. A trumpet plays softly in the speakers. She tells me I'm early and she tells me that she's warmed dinner since she's going out with her friend, Patty, the vegetarian. My mom eats from a bowl of sliced apples. She asks me about the lesson and I say it was okay and then say I have to run to the bathroom upstairs, which I don't. But I don't feel like talking or lying about the lesson right now.

Later that night I call my friend, Brian, and tell him about what happened. He says that he doesn't have much time to talk, that he and a few guys from school are going out to a movie. I ask him what movie and he says he doesn't know, then he says that I could come along if I really wanted to. Before we hang up, he says that maybe Jack was going to force Lisa and me into the back seat and watch us and yank himself off.

I lay around in my room for a while listening to music, pulling out the collection of
women's magazines from under my old school notebooks under the bed, thinking about what Brian said about Lisa and me in the car. If she would have gone with us today, I could've pulled into a gas station, let Jack out to pay or take a leak, and peeled off, driven us out to country club road, rubbed my hand up and down the inside of her thighs, licked her neck, asked her what she needed.

I call Lisa.

"What was this afternoon all about?" she asks.

"It's under control."

"What's that mean? Why the hell did you come over like that?"

"I was driving."

"You were practicing."

I tell Lisa to relax, and she says she's not uptight, that she doesn't need to relax, but that she's pissed off. She actually says that, "I'm pissed at you."

I say that I don't mean to scare her, and she says she's not scared. I tell her what Brian said, about Jack wanting to watch us in the back seat.

"Are you trying to scare me?" Lisa says that I should only worry about getting the license. She says it's been a long day and she needs to go to bed, and she says goodnight to me. The red numbers 7:33 blur on my clock, and the phone is cold, sitting in my hand, until the beeps tell me to hang up.

I lay back on the bed for about an hour, leafing through the yearbook and looking for a picture of Lisa, but the only one is her by a locker with some friends, and it's before she
grew her hair out, so it looks unfamiliar. In my head, I run through all the times we've hung out so far in these few weeks, which I guess is seven or eight. I think of when we slow danced that night we met, and how her lower back felt, like a cat's fragile bones under the fur, and how that one time we went to the mall she reached for my hand to hold it and we walked like that for a while until she saw a friend in a store and ran in. The memories seem totally different from the way she was on the phone, and it makes me think of when Brian had said she was using me for when I got my license, but then I'd given him a real serious look and he'd said he was only kidding about the whole thing.

I read a poem for tomorrow's English class, about a kid who grabs trees bent over by snowstorms and swings on them for fun. There are some far-out lines, like: "They are dragged to their withered bracken by the load." I don't bother trying to figure them out with a dictionary or anything like that. I figure that if Mrs. Smithson calls on me in class, maybe I'll compare swinging on trees to driving, since it's all about the thrill. By the time I'm finished reading, it's pouring outside with the thunder rocking hard and closing in. It all makes me wonder if rain could bend trees like the snow does in the poem.

* * *

It rained all night and all day and now the air is heavy and the trees wrinkle like garbage bags half-filled with water. The ones I usually cut underneath on the route are sagging and too low and a few times I stripe my back with water bending underneath. My shoes are slick from walking through the lawns, and I slide my feet and slice them through the soggy grass. I'm on Beech street, which runs straight uphill to a dead end of trees, a little forest right in
the middle of this neighborhood, with houses not far on the other side of it. But I don't like to think of it that way. I like to think there are lakes back there, or wide, grassy stretches.

I deliver to the back door of Mr. and Mrs. Garland's house; they're in their eighties. He still goes down to the tennis club every day, wearing a white hat, a long-sleeved white cotton shirt, white long pants and white shoes, and each day he winds up and putters out and waves at some balls. When I collect from him in the evenings he's always wearing a white button down shirt and a striped tie, smelling fresh with his hair looking wet, like he's going to the office, though I know he just plays tennis, and sips drinks afterward in the clubhouse with a happy, confused look on his face.

There are four bottles of coke on the floor of the back porch by the door, next to a few high stacks of old newspapers, and there's one more bottle and a bottle of rum on the kitchen counter, which is just inside the door. I put the paper down and I pick up this old, metal tennis racket, and twist it around in my hands. I take a few hard swings to see if it'll make a noise like the ocean when the air runs through the strings, but it doesn't. I took a Newsweek from their mailbox once since it had some great pictures of bathing suits in an article about the fashion industry, and they never said anything about it. But the racket would be useless. The rum is almost full, though, and I push gently on the door, but it's locked. I get ink finger prints on the white wood by the doorknob, and smudge them a little trying to rub them off.

Someone honks a horn on the street as I'm walking down the driveway and there's an old black, sporty Japanese car, a Toyota or Honda, in front of the house. I stare at the
man in the driver's seat until he waves me to him. It's Jack.

Jack's wearing the big, crooked smile and he tells me that he figured the route would be around here, though I don't ask how he knew I had the route. He asks if I want to do some driving, "on the house," he says, since we'd been cutting some of the lessons short.

"I have to do these papers," I tell him. There are about ten left in the bag. A strong wind cuts through the trees and shakes water on me. "I have to do them by five," I say, looking up at the leaves.

Jack tells me we have time and he steps out and gestures toward the driver's seat.

The car is old and small, but the black dash and vinyl seats are polished and the inside smells fresh, like oranges. I pass my house and drop off the paper bag and Jack leads me on to the parkway.

"That route must be a drag," he says at one point.

I tell him I need the money and he says that he knows how it can be, girlfriend and all. Then Jack says that this girlfriend talk reminds him of something, and he asks if I'd do him a big favor. He says he needs to see Christy, his girlfriend. He reminds me that it was her place we checked on that first day. "You don't mind coming along, do you," he says, shaking his head. "We're almost there, anyway."

I don't ask him why he needs me to come and I don't think he's going to explain. He asks me to pull around to the back of the apartment complex where we can see into the living rooms through the sliding glass doors. He climbs out, hunched over, and holds his palm out to me, telling me to wait, and steps through some plants to get to the door we've
parked in front of. Then he waves for me to come over, and he goes inside while I lock the
car doors. A woman with dark brown hair pulled back, kind of heavy-set, lets me in. She's
wearing shorts and a tight yellow t-shirt that says "Ryan's Pub" and has the number 11 on it.
She looks like she's twenty-five, which means she must be about ten years younger than Jack,
though she has a serious, old look on her face.

"I'm Christy," she says, asking my name. Her eyes are wide open, like with
excitement or maybe anxiety. She looks around and past me, as if to see if others are
coming. "Jack's already in the bathroom," she says, pointing toward a door in the back of the
apartment. I step inside to the living room. There's a tan carpet and a brown couch and a
brown armchair, and there's a wall between the living room and the kitchen, which is the
back, but there's an opening cut in the wall, like a window, and through it the kitchen is
bright, all white with the light on. There's nothing on the walls, but plants everywhere:
hanging, standing six feet high, collected on tables like empty beer cans.

Jack comes out and walks into the kitchen. He comes back out holding a can of Coke
and a can if beer, and holds the Coke up in the air before tossing it across the room to me.
"Watch the carpet," he says. Christy picks up newspapers and a paper towel with crumbs on
it from the coffee table. She turns the television on and hands me the remote control, then
she tells us she'll be right back and goes into the next room. Jack follows toward the door,
moving slowly, almost tiptoeing, holding his finger up to me like he's telling me to wait, then
giving me a wink and a thumbs up, before going in after her. Before the door closes, I hear
Christy's low voice say, "no, Jack," like the voice of a schoolteacher, but then the door shuts
and everything's quiet.

Christy's television picks up two good channels and two others are fuzzy. I walk over and look at pictures on her bookshelf. There's one with Christy and four other girls wearing graduation gowns and caps, with a huge lawn and trees behind them, like it must be at college, and one of her and a dog on a boat in the middle of a lake. I don't see Jack in any of the pictures. There's a green photo album under the coffee table, and I flip through it and it's filled with pictures of mountains and lakes and canyons and a couple of mountain goats and things like that. There are hardly any people in any of them, but in one there's Christy and some guy, not Jack, standing by a sign that says, 'Continental Divide.' They're both wearing sunglasses and are wrapped around each other.

I hear Jack in the bedroom: "you're not hearing me," he says, and I put the album down and pick up the remote control. They've been in there for ten minutes or so. Maybe Jack's grilling her about the other day, asking where she was. Maybe he brought me here as a witness, to prove she wasn't home. I walk over, leaving a few inches between me and the door, staring into a scratch in the wood and listening, but all I hear is Jack say, "hey," in a whisper, and then I hear something hitting the wall, like a fist.

I move away and into the kitchen and take another Coke out of the refrigerator, and grab three pieces of white bread and two slices of cheese and eat them all individually, right there in the kitchen, fingering peach fuzzy leaves on a short plant on the counter, reading a postcard from New Orleans off of the refrigerator. It has an alligator on the front, and on the back, someone named Mandy writes, "It's good to be insatiable down here. Nobody has a
conscience. You'd love it." The "love it," is underlined. I chug half of the Coke in the kitchen, and I open Christy's cabinets and find a bottle of rum and a bottle of gin next to pretzels and chips. I rub my finger on the rim of the bottle of gin and taste it, then take another swill of the Coke.

I watch some of a news show with a *People* magazine in my lap. Christy opens the door and walks out, wearing the same t-shirt but purple sweatpants. I toss down the magazine and lean back on the couch. Jack calls out to her if she'll turn the lights off. His voice sounds weak, like it's breaking up. She walks to the kitchen and stops in front of the refrigerator and stares at it for about four seconds before she opens it and takes two beers out. She walks back into the bedroom with them, not looking at me, and I hear her say "no," like she's tired. She says, "no" again, more serious this time, then, quietly, something like, "he's been waiting twenty minutes."

Christy comes out wearing sandals and glasses, holding keys with a big plastic rainbow key chain, and she tells me that she'll ride me back home.

"Are you sure?"

"Yea." She's looking at her keys, flipping through them.

On the ride home, things are quiet until I tell Christy that she has a nice apartment. She shrugs it off and says she wants to move. She says that she needs to get out of the city. I ask her why and she says that she just needs to.

"You know what I do for work? I answer phones for idiot accountants." She says that in college she studied to teach young kids. "And I don't even need to teach," she says.
"I'll work with them; I'll do social work, whatever. But I need to do something like that, help people who can still be something. I'm stuck with people in these ruts. It's doing me in."

"Where would you go?" I ask her.

"I guess I'd go far away. I'd go west, maybe to Colorado or Utah or something like that. Or maybe to the south. I don't know, but I'd go far away, like a whole new deal."

I ask her if she'd leave Jack like that.

"Huh?"

"Would you leave Jack?"

She smiles and says, "I never thought about that. It didn't really cross my mind."

She asks me if I'm scheduled to drive with Jack again. I tell her that we have a lesson in two days.

"Do you have to stick with him?" she asks, looking straight down the parkway.

I tell her that most people would just stay with the same guy, unless something happened.

"Couldn't you practice with your parents?"

"My dad works. He said from the start that he liked the idea of me getting the lessons from a pro."

Christy nods.

"My mom said she'd be too scared driving with me."

Christy says, "I get it."

* * *

* * *
I tell Lisa the whole deal over the phone.

"So I figure it's what they must have been doing," I say, hoping she'll ask me what it sounded like or if it got me hot.

"But you weren't listening or anything, were you?"

"Not really. I couldn't really hear much anyway."

"I don't know why he brought you there in the first place," she says.

"Well, it wasn't a lesson. It wasn't scheduled. I was on the route and he just picked me up."

"But why did he take you there? Why would he come and pick you up and take you there."

"I don't really know," I say. I try to think of what Jack and me have done, talked about, so I can give her a better answer, or give myself one. The whole idea of getting naked on the phone, that idea, seems like the biggest thing, since it was like Jack was taking me under his wing. Maybe that explains it; maybe he was showing me how to make things happen-- over at Christy's. "I think he likes me," I say. "So maybe he just wanted to hang out."

"But that's a little strange."

There's a pause on the line. I take a few deep, silent breaths. "Hey, Lisa."

"Yea?"

"What do you have on?"

"What do you mean?"
"I mean, you know, what are you wearing?"

"I'm wearing sweatpants and a sweatshirt, and I have slippers on. It's freezing here. My dad's got the air conditioner on arctic Why?"

"Well, I'm only wearing shorts and a t-shirt. It's hot over here, you know?"

"You should open windows, then."

"I guess. But, do you have to be wearing all those clothes?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't know."

"You've been strange, lately."

"What do you mean?"

"I think maybe you should change instructors. Don't you want to just get the license."

"Sure"

"I think you should change. It's all getting kind of old, all these weird things."

Lisa starts talking about how tired she is and I tell her that I have to study for my civilization test.

She says, "maybe I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Maybe?"

"Well-- I mean, I will."

I drop my books onto the couch in the TV room. The room's connected to the kitchen, like you could watch a game while doing the dishes if you wanted to, and I get some chips and Coke and sit down on the couch and balance my notes on my lap and glance
through them with the baseball game on and the sound off, licking the grease off my fingers to keep the notes clean. My father comes into the kitchen with a magazine under his arm, and slaps it onto the counter. I hear him fishing through the refrigerator, unwrapping plastic packages, starting the microwave. He walks over to my chair holding a full jar of relish, working it open.

"This isn't the way to learn," he says, looking at the game, the bottom of the jar pressing back into his stomach.

I tell him that I'm just scanning the notes and that after the game I'll put some quiet time in, but I don't tell him that I have a test.

"You'll regret this kind of thing," he says, and he grimaces, giving the jar a good twist until it gasps and pops open. The microwave beeps four times. The phone rings, and my father ignores it, fixing his food. After three or four rings, it stops. My mother jogs up the stairs, sweating, pointing to the phone, talking to me.

"It's a man," she says. She glares at my father, and says, "I was working out," and jogs back down the stairs.

I say hello into the phone and the voice asks, "what did she say about me?"

"Who is this?"

"It's Jack, man. Come on. So what was she saying about me?"

"What do you mean-- Christy?"

"Yeah. I need to know. I don't know what's what anymore."

I say that she didn't tell me anything about him. "She talked about what she wanted
to do," I say. "She said how she wanted to teach."

"Teach? What's she want to teach for? Who does she want to teach?"

"She said it's what she studied."

"Hmm," Jack says, like he's thinking it over. "Right, right. But what else?" Jack asks me if she talked about a guy with sandals who comes to Christy's to borrow the laundry soap. He asks if she cried in the car or talked about what had happened at the apartment. He asks if she flirted with me. I have to ask him to repeat himself a few times because he slurs some words, like maybe he's loaded. But I can't tell for sure. I decide not to tell Jack about Christy's whole moving idea.

My dad puts the rolls and ketchup back into the refrigerator and looks in at me. I tell Jack that I'm studying for a test, and he asks who else is home.

"Only my parents."

"What's your mom doing?"

"Working out, I think."

"Why don't I talk to her, then."

I ask Jack why and he says that he has to talk to someone, and I have to study.

"What can you say to her?"

"I can say a lot of things to her," Jack says. Then there's this quiet. "Really," he says, "I need to talk about you, your progress-- driving."

I walk downstairs and stop in front of the closed door to the exercise room. I hear a television news show, and my mother making the exercise bike hum. I think about Christy
on the ride home, the things she was saying, about how she'd like to leave and start over. I go back up to the phone.

"She can't come."

"Why?"

"She doesn't want to talk."

"That's lame. That's the oldest one."

"She doesn't."

"Jimbo, you holding out one me?"

"No. I'm not doing anything."

"I know you're not. That's the problem."

"What?"

"Nothing. So you're not gonna let me blow her mind?"

"No."

* * *

Four days later, the new instructor is on time. He's stocky, with his head shaved entirely, like a swimmer, and he's wearing a red sweater. He shakes my hand and says his name is Ron Coulson, and he asks if I'm ready.

I tell him I can't wait to get the license.

"Right," he says, tapping the top of his head. He reaches into the car and grabs a clipboard. "Scheduled a test," he says, nodding. "Let's see what's what first, okay."

I start the engine and he tells me to shut it off.
"Adjust those mirrors."

"What?"

"Adjust your mirrors," he says, talking quickly. "Adjust the rearview mirror, the door mirror." He stops talking and holds his hands out. "Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Look at me." He waits until I look at him, looks down at his lap and back at me. "We aren't the same height, body shape. We're going to use different mirror positions. You have to do this every time. Every time."

I jerk the little black lever on the door mirror and it keeps shifting too much or not enough.

"You ever do this?" he snaps.

"Sure," I say, still jerking with it.

Finally, I get it right. I pull out and before I even get two hundred yards he tells me to check my speed.

When I make my first turn, Ron Coulson tells me that I need to slow down into the turn and accelerate out of it. I do the reverse a few times.

"I don't know what you've been doing," he says once.

At a busy intersection I wait my turn and a little longer, and he barks, "go now, go!" After I've lunged through, he says, "there are other people out here. You're responsible for their lives."

He tells me that I switch lanes too quickly, that my parallel parking jobs are too crooked, that they'll never pass, and finally, with him breathing down my neck like this, I
blow a stop sign on a quiet neighborhood street. We're thirty yards past it when he slams on
his break, and like magic, the car stops. He wrenches it into reverse and the car backs all the
way to the stop sign. "I don't believe you did that," he says, and he stares at me for a few
seconds, like he's trying to scare me out of the car.

"I don't know who you had or what he was teaching you, but you're not ready. Even if
you passed, I wouldn't want you on the road."

"I had Jack. I drove fine with him. He never gave advice. He told me I was good. I
never blew a stop sign before."

"Who's Jack?"

"He has dark hair, a black windbreaker." I want to tell Ron Coulson that Jack wanted
to talk dirty to my mother, that he wanted to jerk off to my girlfriend, but I keep my mouth
shut, since it's probably what my instructor wants from me.

He recommends two more lessons, minimum. He says that if I go for the license now
I'm being selfish and I'm endangering lives.

That night I say those exact words to Lisa on the phone: "selfish," "endangering
lives." We hadn't spoken all day, not even in school. She'd stopped coming to my locker
between classes. I was late for English because I waited at her locker until the class bell
rang.

"So when do you think you're going to go?" she asks.

"I'm driving with him next Saturday, and then the Saturday after."

"That's almost two weeks."
"He said I should drive around the neighborhood with my parents in between, but I don't know. I don't know if it'll work. I told my mom and she said to talk to my dad and he said he'd see." I tell Lisa that I can get my mom to ride us out this weekend, if she wants.

"I don't know," she says. "I don't know about this weekend." She doesn't explain, and then she says she's tired and I say she's tired a lot. "I have long days," she says.

I feel like something could be happening here, and I think I need to ask her about things, maybe about us, like one of those serious talks you see on television. I ask her if everything is okay at home, with her family and everything. It seems like the thing to ask.

"It's rude to pry," she says.

"I just want to see if anything's wrong."

"I'd tell you if I wanted to."

"Okay."

Lisa tells me that she hopes the new driving instructor works out, as if she wouldn't be there to find out.

* * *

I'm stabbing a stick into the dirt of my mother's ceramic planter, waiting for Ron Coulson on the front porch steps. I feel nervous because I haven't driven all week. I didn't ask my parents, even though my mom said she'd do it if I needed her to. I told her I could wait. The urgency seems gone. If I had the license right now, I don't know where I'd go.

I thought that Jack would stop by on the route, and I guess I've been looking for him. And I thought he might call. After the things we'd gone through, I thought he'd track me
down. If I picked up the phone one day and he was on the other line and said he'd be over to
do some driving, to let me cut it loose on the road and find the women, maybe try to win Lisa
back, I think I'd go with him, or at least I'd want to. But I guess that would be a bad idea.

Ron Coulson pulls up in the maroon car, right on time. I walk over to him and he
shakes my hand firmly, like it's all business, and no hard feelings, even though he sort of
bitched me out the last time.

"Ready?" he says, unsmiling.

"I'm going to try my best," I say.

He nods, but he doesn't smile. He looks me right in the eyes. He looks at me and
says, "we're gonna do this right."
Angie would call me her boyfriend and squeeze my hand. I'd say to her parents' guests, in the middle of the country club party, "what flowers, beautiful dress," pointing so that's where they'd focus, not getting into anything that was happening with me. But she was off greeting by herself now, and her best friend from college, Brenna, was telling me where in Las Vegas she'd be living in a week.

Guests filled in around us at the bar, two to three deep in places, jailing the two bartenders sweating under the square of lights. The room sparkled like a rich aquarium with its brass rails and polished wood, with framed photographs, drinking glasses hanging from wooden racks above the bar, the middle-aged women's streaked, dyed and burned hair, and their jewelry, and the men's ruddy, polished faces, with the white ceiling bleaching everything out a little. My drinks were spreading inside of me and I'd known Brenna for about two hours when I looked right into her huge eyes and told her that I needed to get away, that going west would be the perfect solution.

"Solution," she said, squinting her eyes, crunching ice and studying my face. "For what?"

"I guess for everything. It would get me out of my father's place."

"And you need to go across the country for that?" Brenna's confused look washed away as she looked past my face at someone else, and I felt Angie's fingers on my hand before I heard her voice.
"I need you again," she whispered into my ear, her breath warm on my neck, her scent of lotion and shampoo passing through me, her breasts leaning into my back. She moved off of me and spoke to both of us, with new short hair, alert eyes, looking very thin in her black dress. "It's the McDowells," she said, pointing across the room to an older couple standing somewhat alone beneath photos of members of the country club, the men's faces on the wall hung like big, smiling quarters. "He's my dad's old boss and she made me sweaters," she said, priming me with the information like she'd been doing all night. "They're very old."

Walking over, I took Angie's hand and moved a little closer to her, felt her lean into me. She told me my palms were sweaty, which I wish she hadn't noticed, and I rubbed them on the back of my pants and straightened myself out again, tugging at my tuxedo vest.

"Marty," she commanded, stopping and looking up at me. "You look fine. You're perfect. Don't change a thing. If you keep fussing like this they'll think I'm dating a neurotic." She pinned my arms against my side, looking up at me the whole time. "There," she said, wrapping her left arm inside my right.

The ex-boss took me on with some questions while his wife looked on and smiled vaguely, her face packed hard and colored with makeup. He asked me where I was from and where I went to school and what I did. His face was smooth and shiny and red, and when I told him about working in the paint store, he nodded once, slowly. He asked a few details about it, like how long I planned on staying, and I answered to his chin while he grimaced, like he'd stubbed a toe.

"I'm sorry about him," Angie said when we left. "He can be an asshole."
I said, "what?" like I didn't get it. "He asked me about work and I answered."

"But the way he kept after you about the paint store," she said. "You shouldn't feel bad about it. You do what you have to do."

* * *

We waited by the coatroom near the front door while the photographer checked her equipment. Mrs. Lynn was shoved into this very tight blue dress, showing cleavage, wearing some crystal or diamond necklace, her blonde hair wrapped up above her head and spraying down in strands, and Mr. Lynn was pacing quietly in his tuxedo, his lollipop stomach dropped onto his medium frame, holding a bottle of beer, not talking to anybody, playing up the grouch role for being taken from his buddies, shaking his head at me to show how ridiculous he thought this was. He sat down in a plush red chair below a painting of an English countryside with one of those old gray walls and brown cottage and trees and no people, something about the field of wheat or the sun giving it all this golden reality. He crossed his legs, was wearing no socks.

After different pictures were taken, the photographer pointed to Angie and me like we'd done something wrong and said, "you two now."

"Okay," Angie said, extending her hand to me. "Here we go." She brushed strands of my hair to the side.

Mr. Lynn said, "I've seen enough," and started walking away.

Mrs. Lynn hissed, "Jack, get back here." But he grinned back at her and took a few jogging steps and kept going.
Angie sat on the end of the green wooden bench and I had to get on my right knee, to her right, and put my left arm around her back, my right hand on her knee.

"Come on," the photographer said, "put your arm around her. Squeeze her tight, like you mean it." She stepped from behind the tripod and squeezed herself with her arms.

"Come on, mom's here, kids. Get right next to each other."

I knocked my face into Angie's and people laughed. Angie said, "so smooth," patting my cheek with her hand and looking at her mother. The photographer said, "not bad," crouching down to the lens, and Brenna had come over and was smiling behind her, several couples had gathered nearby. The camera light and lights from the lobby poured onto us.

After all the flashes Angie said a few words to the photographer and Mrs. Lynn said to me, "it wasn't all that bad," and asked if me and Angie would wait by the greeting line for any last guests. She took hold of Brenna's hand and whispered into her ear. She told us she was going to introduce her to Bruce Watson's son, raising her eyebrows and tugging Brenna toward the other room, saying something about law school. Brenna turned and gave Angie a mock helpless look before disappearing into the bar.

"You're face is red," Angie said to me, leading me over to the table by the greeting line, where all the flowers for handing out had been.

"It's that alcohol," I said, sitting on the edge of the table.

"Or the pictures," she said, tilting her head, taking one of the remaining white flowers in her fingers, holding it up to her nose. "I'm sorry about the big production in there, but we don't have any pictures. It's been a year almost, and I'm tired of explaining to people why I
don't have any. There's no real explanation. I feel stupid when they want to see you and I don't have anything."

"Right, there's no real explanation," I said. It seemed like a moment where I could have said something significant, something like, 'maybe we're not for pictures, maybe we're not like that. Maybe we're just something. Maybe I'll want to leave in a week.' But I said, "we just don't have any. You've been away a lot, at school, and so what are you going to do? They're just pictures." Words dropped out of me like boxes falling from a truck. "We've been apart a lot," I said. "You can't worry about it."

The lobby was empty; we were alone; there was nobody to greet. I stepped away, looking around, making some of my own space.

"Are you okay?" Angie said, watching me. "Do want to go somewhere?"

"No," I said, moving over to her again, sitting back down. "I'm fine. I don't need to go anywhere."

"You seem tense," she said. "You shouldn't be. You're doing fine. You look great. Everyone who's meeting you likes you. Brenna can't get over you."

"What do you mean?"

"She said you were cute. She called you a commodity."

I asked Angie if Brenna was really going to Las Vegas in a week, and she nodded.

"Are you going to miss her?" I asked.

"I guess. But I think we've been growing apart the last few months. All she wants to do is move around. All she'd talk about at the end of the school year was getting away."
She'd call me crazy for wanting more school. I think this is what has to happen, but I don't know. I think this is what happens to people. People change."

"Sometimes I think moving far away would be the best thing," I said, glancing at Angie then looking into the lights of the crystal chandelier in the middle of the room, thinking of the things I'd never tell her. My dad woke me up every morning with his scratchy coughing in the shower, and every morning he was in the kitchen when I came in from mine, washing his dishes, alone, in front of the window in his dress clothes, the light sort of pouring in and watering him down in those final minutes before he left for work. My mother would call twenty minutes later, knowing he was gone but not referring to him, talking about nothing: things she heard on the radio in the car, read in the back pages of the newspaper.

I said to Angie, "I guess everybody has those thoughts, about packing up and hauling it all off."

"I don't know," she said, wrinkling her face like she was thinking, shaking her head. "I don't think I do."

Brenna came walking in a few minutes later. Angie asked her about Tim Watson.

"I know he has good grades," Brenna said., rolling her eyes. "I need some air," she said. "I'm going to walk, okay."

"Why don't you go?" Angie said to me. "I think you need to wake up. You look half-dead, and I've dragged you around enough."

I said to Angie that I wasn't really tired, that I'd go with her, since I felt I had to say something like that, but she said I couldn't; she said I needed to go with Brenna to make sure
she didn't wander off forever.

"Remember," Angie said, "my father's giving the toast before dinner. He'll be plowed. He could say anything. So you have to be there."

We headed toward the back staircase, down a green carpeted hallway with white walls, not saying anything, down the stairs, past the locker rooms and golf pro shop, past black and white photographs of golfers and the golf course itself and the construction years, men in jackets and ties standing beside a great, resting bulldozer. We shoved through the door out of the air conditioning and were wrapped in the warm summer evening. We stood underneath the balcony, next to the eighteenth green. It was getting near dinner time, near seven o'clock, but there was at least one and a half hours of light left, and so the sun was still strong in the sky, and in our faces. I could hear the string quartet upstairs, almost above our heads, seeming even more elegant now in the distance. Laughter from the party dropped down in crumbs.

I told Brenna how it was pretty over by the tenth hole and that we could walk there instead and get away from the balcony and the party. She asked if I'd ever played with Angie's dad, though she called him Jack, and I told her about how we played twice, and once he made me drink two martinis with him in the clubhouse afterwards.

"Did he ask you about your plans for his daughter," she said in a sort of John Wayne voice.

"We didn't talk about her," I said.

Brenna took her shoes off as we started down the hill from the tenth tee. They were
like sandals, with all these thin, black straps, and she held both of them in one hand and her drink in the other. The course was cleared out. I could see two golfers in the middle of a distant, rising fairway straight ahead, looking up like they were frozen in a photograph. We didn't say much for a while, walking down the hill. She said the grass was spiny, that it felt like she was breaking it under her feet, and each time she stepped it sprung through her toes, against her green painted toenails. With her hands full, her hair swung around her face.

Brenna wagged a finger at me, the shoes flopping along with her hand. "You and Angie," she said. "When you guys started out, she couldn't stop talking about you. We were roommates, so we talked about those things. But she really talked about you. When the semester started, she was kind of crazy at first since you guys were split up. And you'd only been going out what, a week?"

"You know, we've spent more time apart than together," I said. "She was at school all year. There was that week in the summer, Christmas break and now, this summer. That's it."

"But that didn't make a difference," Brenna said. "She'd want to call you and I'd tell her to go ahead and call, and she'd say it was your turn or she'd say something about the phone bill. You made her do strange things."

"The phone bill?" I wanted to shove all this new information away somewhere.

"Yeah," Brenna said, pivoting on her heels, as though to indicate the whole property of the country club, like it was all Angie's. "The phone bill."

We were near the tenth green. Behind us a hill rose for about thirty yards until it met
a collection of old trees, like a tiny forest in between the tight, cropped fairways. Clouds
moved overhead, and it was still very light, but it was like I could hear the sun dropping
away over the hills into the next neighborhood, the whole evening being boxed and taken
somewhere.

"I know how you two met," Brenna said, pointing the shoes at me again. "She poured
wine into your mouth that night. And it was at a private party in a nightclub. See, I know all
this. You were this huge presence in our room. You should be flattered. And there wasn't
even a picture of you."

"That one we took in there was the first one together. I guess I never really wanted
one."

"You looked very handsome," she said. "She looks beautiful tonight."

I nodded and said, "I didn't even want one in there."

Brenna frowned, like she didn't understand. She looked up, vaguely at the sky, then
toward the clubhouse. "Maybe we should head up to make it in time for the toast," she said.

"Okay," I said, "but why don't we finish our drinks first."

Brenna shrugged, looked around below her and slowly sat down, pulling her knees up
toward her chin; I could see her arms and calves, light against the dark green dress, her hair
spread over her shoulders like a scarf. I walked around, above her for a while, and she
watched me, then I took off my jacket and sat down next to her. I'd never sat on the course
before, and it was cooler on the ground, but exciting, like if was I drunk in a tuxedo on this
golf course, anything was possible. And then it didn't seem like a golf course anymore, but
this huge piece of empty land.

We sat for a while, I don't know how long, and we didn't talk, though I didn't feel I needed to. Eventually, Brenna stretched her arms out, then touched one of her hands to mine, and my body turned on, and she said, "maybe we should go. We're going to be late."

I leaned over and kissed her; her lips felt hard and didn't really open, but I think she kissed me back for a few seconds and then we sort of pulled away, or she did, and she rubbed her lips with a few fingers, looking at the grass.

"Okay," I said, "we should go."

"Uh-huh," she said, looking away from me, and we left our empty glasses in the grass and walked up the hill without speaking. We walked in on the blessing of the food. In the front of the room in front of hundreds of guests Mr. Lynn had his head bowed and was standing next to a tall, fat priest with a full, brown beard who also had his head down while he talked. We waited in the back, not looking at each other, while the priest's words floated over the tables and drifted against us, and I tried to make myself feel more like I should have felt, but I felt better than that.

When the silence broke, Brenna went to her table to sit with Angie's cousins and I walked to the front of the room. Angie, her great aunt and uncle and her mother were seated. Mr. Lynn was standing over a seated couple a few tables away. I said, "we were on the golf course," to Angie before I sat down.

She nodded with her mouth closed, and a jaw muscle moved. "She pointed to the three filled glasses above my plate, one of water. "Those are yours," she said, pointing to the
other two. "That's white wine and that's champagne. There was a toast."

"I'm sorry," I said. "That's where we were, on the golf course. She likes to be outside, I guess. It's nice out there, but I'd seen enough a while ago."

Angie looked toward the large, glass balcony doors, to the smoky gray sky, the last breaths of daylight. "It's okay," she said again, glancing at me. "Eat." She poked one of the small tomatoes in my salad with her fork.

Mrs. Lynn widened her eyes at me on the other side of centerpiece candle. I smiled at her, then at the aunt and uncle and then mouthed, "I'm sorry," to Mrs. Lynn.

She made a face like she didn't know what I was talking about, and Mr. Lynn sat down and took a drink from his glass of beer, looked over his plate, his salad and the basket of rolls in front of him. His sandy hair stuck to his forehead a little with sweat. He looked up at me and Angie.

"He was on the golf course," Angie said to him, as though they'd been taking bets.

Mr Lynn nodded approvingly.

"I'm sorry I missed the toast, Mr. Lynn," I said.

"Your loss. I killed," he said, chewing a roll, a crumb sticking to his lower lip, looking off at other tables to his left.

"Stop worrying about it," Angie said. "Anyway, I'm glad Brenna's not clinging to me. She's done that before at our parties. She'd stand around and smother me."

* * *

I took off my tuxedo and put on a pair of shorts and laid back on Angie's bed. Angie came in
and took her dress off and laid down, moving on top of me. If she was upset with me at
dinner, I think she was over it now. She'd slept in the limousine.

"Ready for sleep," she said, through my teeth.

"What about the wine?" I said. "Didn't your dad want us to drink it with him? Didn't
he say that on the way back?"

"We can go down later. We don't have to go down at all."

"But he asked us. What do you think? We should go, right?"

"Aren't you sweet," she said, pushing herself up a little with her arms, holding her
face a few inches above mine, hair hanging alongside her cheeks. "Thinking of my father."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. I didn't say there was anything wrong."

"Come on," I said. "It's just wine." I pushed myself up to kiss her, but she'd started
moving off of me.

Angie put on shorts and a t-shirt silently and we joined everyone in the kitchen,
which was white and brighter than any room had been all night. Brenna was talking to Mrs.
Lynn by the sink, whispering something that made them laugh, and Angie brought two
glasses of red wine over from the counter, and gave me one. Mr. Lynn loped into the room
with an open can of beer, wearing only boxer shorts, his prodigious stomach tan and
swaggering over his thin legs. Angie offered him some wine and he shook it off with his
hand. He announced, with the can raised, that he was going upstairs to wait for his wife in
bed.
"I'll see you wonderful people in a year," he said, his back to us, walking to the stairs.

Angie asked if I wanted anything to eat. I told her that I wasn't feeling up to much. I said that the free bar was catching up to me.

She put her hand to my cheek, my forehead. "Isn't life tough," she said. I shifted my head a little. Drops of somebody's red wine dried at my feet on the white floor.

"Let me get you something, some pills," Angie said. She left to the bathroom.

Brenna was opening and closing cabinets and staring into them. Angie's mother poured the rest of her wine into the sink and said goodnight, that she'd see us in the morning.

"What do I want," Brenna said, under her breath, eating from a handful of crackers.

"Hungry?" I said, watching her profile.

"Starving," she said. She glanced at me and then studied the food in the cabinet again.

I rested my chest against the island in the middle of the kitchen and fingered the handles of a set of knives in their wooden holder and took long whiffs of a red, cinnamon candle. Brenna stared into the same cabinet. Angie brought me the aspirin and poured me a huge glass of water. She held it while I took the pills and she watched me drink the water while Brenna left the kitchen without any food and sat down in a brown leather armchair by the television in the next room. Angie patted my cheek and then we followed Brenna in and sat on the couch. Angie had me rest against the end cushion and she laid back into my chest. Brenna was flipping absently through the channels, her dress still on, her legs pulled up under her body on the chair.
"You'll ruin that dress, Brenna," Angie said, twisting her neck to see Brenna's face.

"I know," Brenna said, shrugging and smiling. "You're probably right." She shifted her weight but didn't move her legs. "I should change," she said, looking down at herself.

We didn't talk much while Brenna flipped channels for a while, then Angie asked if I wanted to go upstairs. Brenna was staring at the television like she didn't hear us. We both said goodnight to her and she smiled, turning her head back away from us quickly. Angie went into the bathroom next to her room and I laid down on the bed and turned on the small television to an old movie and closed my eyes. I thought for a second about running downstairs to check on Brenna, even though I didn't know what I'd have said to her, if I'd have said something about Las Vegas or said I was sorry. But I laid in bed with my eyes closed, listening to Angie brush her teeth.

In the dark, I imagined these running, colored Christmas lights Angie had hung on her door and wall in the winter, that had been there that one night in December, the last time we were in this bed together, running the whole time, penetrating that night like background music. Afterwards I'd told her she was beautiful while I traced a finger slowly down her neck and between her breasts, and I laid my head on her stomach and she asked if I'd drive her back to school, if I'd promise to visit her on weekends. I didn't really want to leave, not physically, but I wanted to take back all I'd said, her being beautiful, and I wanted to take back the intimate gestures. When she fell asleep, I left.

I left and drove around and listened to music and second-guessed myself for a while before I got too tired to keep my eyes open. I was living with my mother then, and I saw her
in the living room through the glass door before she saw me. It was about four o'clock in the morning and the room was dark except for the round, oriental lamp next to her and the television flicking lights onto the wall. She had the newspaper piled on the table next to her, a section of it in her lap, and she must not have been waiting up for me because the door was locked, and when I knocked, this look of terror crossed her face. When she let me in she kissed me and said I scared her, but didn't ask me any questions about where I was or what I'd been doing. She looked wide awake but also worn out, like from a long day of work, like you could see it in the flatness of her eyes, and the day hadn't even started for her, and for me it was just ending. Things between us, I thought, were totally flipped, two people in two different places, and something about seeing her then, like that, let me know that I'd done the right thing, sneaking out, getting out, and it gave me these feelings of freedom and sadness.

But Angie called the next day all pissed off and asking these questions about my feelings and why I'd leave without saying goodbye and what I was trying to tell her. I apologized and lied about having had to be somewhere that morning. It seemed easiest that way.

"Are you going to fall asleep on me?" Angie said, standing above me, in from the bathroom. She put her hand on my forehead.

"I don't know. I don't have to."

She kneeled onto the bed, her knees straddling my waist, looking down at me. I ran my hand up under her shirt, along her rib cage, feeling each bone, and back down to her waist, running my finger tips over to her belly button. I left my hand there and looked at her. She gave me a confused look.
"What?" I said.

"Your face. What's wrong."

"I don't know if anything is."

She leaned back a little, away from my hand, and I dropped it onto my chest. Someone knocked on the door and it opened a few inches.

"Jesus," Angie said. She called out, "wait," and said, "if that's my dad."

Angie checked in the hall. I could hear Brenna's voice. I think Angie was asking her what was wrong, and Brenna kept saying, "I don't know." Angie came to the doorway and Brenna said, "no, not in there."

"What is it," I mouthed to Angie.

Angie shrugged, looked back at Brenna, and took a step toward me, whispering, "I don't know what she wants. She wants to talk to me. Maybe she's depressed."

"Leave her," I said, steadying my voice. "She'll be fine."

"I can't leave her."

"Brenna," I called out, "what is it?"

"Nothing," Brenna's flat voice answered.

"Brenna," Angie said, "why don't you come in."

"No." Brenna spoke more quietly now, like a whisper. "Come on," Brenna said. "I need to talk out here."

Angie stood in the doorway's crack of light. "I'll be right back," she said.

"Come on in, Brenna," I said. "Come on. I'm serious. We'll all talk."
But Angie was out in the hall. It seemed like they were there for a long time, enough time for Brenna to talk and say enough, but really it was only a minute or so, or not even, and then they were both in the doorway, Angie looking in, Brenna staring into the doorframe.

"What?" I said, sitting up, resting my weight on my elbows.

"Okay," Angie said, "Brenna's going to sleep here, too."

"No," Brenna said. "I'm not."

"It's fine with me," I said. "I can sleep on the floor."

"No," Brenna said, starting away from the door, down the stairs, her voice diminishing. "I'm sleeping on the couch. I know where the blankets are."

Angie sat down on the bed and tucked her legs under her body.

"What was wrong?" I said.

"I don't know. I asked her what she wanted to talk about and she just looked at me. She said she needed to talk and I asked her to tell me and she said she couldn't. She gets this way sometimes, like I don't know what she'll do. She gets this drunk and she just acts strange, and I think it's because she doesn't want to be alone. I know her."

"Do you want me to check on her?" I said. "Sometimes a stranger helps."

"That's okay."

"I could. I know it makes a difference sometimes."

"Do you want to?"

"I don't want to, but I'm saying it might help. There are things I couldn't tell my best friends that I could tell, I don't know, other people. It's not just me. I've heard people say
Angie watched me while I spoke and after I'd stopped. She said, "if you want to be with her, go ahead."

"I think you're taking this wrong," I said.

"No, I'm not. Go see what's wrong with her."

"I need a glass of water anyway," I said. "So I'll just get that. Do you want anything? I'll bring it right up."

Angie shook her head. "I'll sip some of yours," she said. I kissed her forehead and said I'd be right back and she closed her eyes and gave no expression.

Brenna was lying on the couch with the television on. She turned to me and turned back as I headed in from the kitchen toward her.

"How are you?" I said.

"I'm fine," she said, not turning her head to face me. "It's Angie I need to talk to."

"I'm sorry."

"She needs to know about you," she said.

"You think so?"

She turned and looked at me before she said anything. "Yes," she said, then she turned away again and we didn't say anything for a little while.

"I didn't mean it," I said, watching the side of her neck. "I know you're old friends. It just came out of nowhere."

"I know. But it happened. You did it."
"Just me?"

"It was you."

Angie was lying on her bed with the television on, the sound off. She looked prettiest like that, her eyes closed. She opened them and studied me standing there and said, "where's the water." I'd forgotten. I closed my eyes and breathed out.

"But that's why you went down."

"I know. But I talked to Brenna and I forgot. She didn't really want to say anything, so I didn't help much."

Angie laid still with her eyes on the television. There was a bombed-out building on a late night cable news show. Rescuers were digging around, lifting wreckage with their hands, pulling out bodies. We both watched this horrible footage, not saying anything, not knowing what had happened, or where it was, but taking it in together, her lying down and me standing above her. Then the newscaster in the studio talked about it, but the sound was too low to hear, and then they moved on to another story.

"I think you should go," Angie said, her voice jabbing the silence, her head never turning to me.

My body went a little numb. I watched her look at the television. I patted for my car keys in my pocket.

"Home?" I said.

"Wherever. I don't care."

I waited for her to say something else, but she didn't look at me. Her lips were
pressed tightly together. I looked around for my clothes without moving my feet and gathered my tuxedo and backpack and left the room, taking backward steps, watching Angie not take her eyes off the television.

I went downstairs and stopped in the front hall and listened to the air conditioner and a clock ticking somewhere. I walked into the living room again. The television was off and the only sound was Brenna breathing in her sleep. I watched her for a while from across the room, then snuck to the edge of the couch and crouched down, my face just inches from hers. I could smell alcohol around her mouth. I crouched there and watched her breath easily for a while and my presence didn't affect her, like she could have been in Las Vegas already. She went on breathing like that, sleeping, and I listened for footsteps, not sure if I'd run or stand my ground if somebody walked in, looking for some answers.
The voice bangs out of the tiny bar inside, next to the lobby where everyone else is waiting for
the buses that should be here at five a.m. I look at Brad and he shrugs, then I look through the
window at the bodies inside turned toward the sound or turning back away from it now that it's
stopped. My face is a stranger drifting in the reflection, my wet hair blown around my forehead,
my right eye blackening worse and worse, and cut up. I haven't shaved since that night, four
nights ago, when I'd come from the club and seen Rob out there alone with those two guys from
Texas, and helped, and gotten the shit kicked out of me in the middle of the street in front of all
those people. It's been calm this morning, and it calms again, Brad smoking his cigarette here on
the sidewalk, the only thing happening being the wind lashing in with cold, deliberate strokes,
bending and rustling palm trees, flapping the loose beer signs on the fence of the night club
across the street. It's a smoky dark, a deep blue marble, and the ocean across the street has
vanished, or grown into the sky.

The voice comes again, like out of a barrel. I jump a little, but Brad doesn't notice. An
urge to move inside comes and goes.

Brad mumbles, "shut up, shut up," under his breath.

A smaller voice shrieks, "get out!" from in there, his voice a referee's whistle splitting the
air: "get out!" Then there's the slamming of wood on wood, maybe a chair banging into the
floor.

I turn to the door as it explodes open and a big man trips toward the street. He looks
around, looks to be maybe twenty-five or so, and he has a small face for his body, and he doesn't
seem to process us, then starts away down the sidewalk. He's probably six foot three, two hundred and sixty pounds, and well-dressed, or I guess he's dressed like an American, in jeans, a golf shirt, a jean jacket and a red baseball cap pushed high up on his forehead. But he must be Bahamian because I'd only seen a handful of black Americans at the clubs this week-- there'd be the Bahamian bouncers at the doors, and then a club full of white college students. And no Bahamians were allowed in the hotel-- the manager, a white guy with a French accent, had told us that on the sidewalk the first day. He said that even if we became friends with them, whatever the case, they couldn't come up, that there'd been problems in the past. Maybe they weren't allowed in the bar, either, and maybe that's why he'd gotten kicked out.

The Bahamian's holding a can of beer, about twenty feet away when he stops walking, looking down the road toward where it curves inland and winds into downtown Nassau, to the powder blue storefronts and the straw market where we'd haggle with the merchants, usually older women, over dollars, for t-shirts and belts.

Brad says he's going back into the lobby. "I'm not dealing with this guy," he says. "You coming in?"

"I don't know. I think I'll stay. It's comfortable out here," I say, shrugging to him, thinking I can't be near everyone who saw me the other night, even the strangers, that there's only these final minutes to keep them from seeing me again, remembering how I was, lying there, staggering up and stumbling off, tears in my broken eye. I'm who I was then.

Brad points to the door and cracks his knuckles. "You just holler if you need us," he says, and laughs. "We'll be ready."

The man walks over, slowly, his eyes on the sidewalk, his feet scratching along the
ground. I lean against the dark wooden planks of the building, feeling the splinters brush against
my neck, closing my eyes when I'm not watching him. He stands a few feet away and stares into
the lobby window. His face is soft, with small features, and his shirt is wrinkled, with a small
tear up the side. Without moving his feet, he turns his neck and looks across the road, losing
some balance. Then he looks at me.

"That your group in there?" he says with the Bahamian accent. "What's going on."

"In there?"

"All them inside," he says, flipping his arm like a rope toward the building. "There's no
room."

"Everybody's waiting for the buses. We're going to the airport, back to America."

He takes a drink and shakes the can, holds it out, offering me some. I shake my head and
he studies my face. He tips the can and drinks the rest and tosses it down. He searches through
pockets in his jeans and his jacket, pulling out some change and a few paper bills from different
ones. He turns all the paper money over in his hands, counts it out, then puts it back into one
pocket inside his jacket. He looks up at me, like he'd forgotten I was there.

"I hate this island in the morning," he says in a low voice.

I nod like I know what he's talking about, watching him look across the street.

"I know you like it here," he says, his words splashing through his drunken mouth. "I bet
you like all this," he says. "What's your favorite thing here?"

I watch him until he points at me. "This island's kind of sucked for me lately," I say, and
point at my eye.

"How?" he asks, expressionless.
"Americans."

"Why?"

"My friend started it. The guy pushed in front of him at the bar."

"What happened to your friend?"

"He hurt his hand."

"Stupid motherfuckers," he says, shaking his head, looking away but giving me a sideways glance, like I'm one of them. "So the whole week was bad?"

"I guess not."

"So what about before that? Tell me what you liked."

It seems like he's loading these questions into a gun. I say, "the second day we rode a boat to a smaller island two hours out, in this boat, just fifty of us, for thirty dollars. That was nice."

"I've never done that," he says. "Tell me about it."

"The island was empty," I say, thinking back to the day like it's from another year. "The only other people were serving us food and wine. They'd pour glasses and set them up at this bar and we'd take them and go. And when our food came, we ate like three helpings. We needed to save money, you know. We stole fruit. We took these big oranges down to the ocean and ate them there and chugged the wine and watched girls snorkeling. This island was just sand and trees with tree roots running through the ground. And it's strange to see ocean on all sides of you-- it's like being in outer space."

He nods without smiling, his mouth slightly open. I've been talking me for too long, I think.
"You live in a beautiful country," I say. "You live in a beautiful part of the world."

He keeps nodding like that. I tug down on my old baseball cap and look out. The brim shields me from the sun climbing over the horizon, here at the end of the world, slips of water smeared orange out there.

"The farther you get out there," he says, pointing, "the more beautiful it is. You get out there, there's less people, less shit. But I guess you know better than me. I never saw those islands." He doesn't look at me when he says this, and the two of us look out to the ocean like we could be on the same wavelength; it could look that way from inside the lobby, and I think about ways to get back in there with the people, excuses, but I guess don't want to be there, either. I want to look out at the water by myself. I want to go back to that island and let the warm water boil my face until it heals and come back when everything's been forgotten.

"Feel my leg," he says, pushing my wrist with his finger tips. My body clenches.

"Push my leg. Push it right here." He taps the middle of his thigh. He nods and his whole body nods, his knees flex, his waist dips. "Come on, go ahead," he says. He punches it.

I tap his leg and pull my hand right back. I don't remember what I felt. He's watching me; his lips are pressed together.

"No, push!" he says. "Punch it. Hit it hard! Look," he says, after watching me stare at him. "I'm telling you to do it." I place my fist on his leg and push in.

"Come on, give it a punch."

I lightly punch his leg and he shakes his head.

"Hard?" he asks.

"Yes," I say, not knowing if it was or not.
"It's not a leg. It's rubber. It's not a leg." He looks at me with his eyes narrowed while I nod. "It's not a leg," he says again. "I have one leg left."

I've never met anybody with a fake leg, I think, but he's out here drinking, walking around. I ask him, "why did you want me to feel that?"

"Because I got it blown off, man. Because this happened right down the street, in the parking lot of that McDonald's. He points up the road to my right without looking away from me, but I can't see a McDonald's or anything like it. Straight ahead, there's a playground with a basketball court and an old gray swingset. "I was bleeding to death next to the bushes," he says. "I'd smeared blood into my mouth. The bone was broken up like an old broomstick."

"That's terrible," I say, thinking of how it's us two out here, alone with our injuries. But I don't say that.

He makes a gun with his hands and fingers and fires it above my head, his hand snapping backwards, his mouth making the sound of the explosion. "Terrible," he says. "That was my life-- the guns, the night. This is what I get for that."

"You think you deserve that?" I ask him.

"The first person I robbed was from America," he says, ignoring my question, bouncing an index finger at my face like the person was me, "a big man. I could've robbed old men and women, but he was big and strong. I got him by the docks when the sun was going down one night, stuck the gun into his back. He was big and strong and said, 'don't kill me.' He said that. He said, 'my family's down here.' I fucked with him and slapped him around until he cried a little and I took his twenty dollars. It was like my payment, like he owed it to me."

"I don't understand."
"It's my island, man," he says, his voice low, but rising in pitch. "People like him come down here and I may as well get out. Places won't let me in. So I said fuck it. That's the way I thought. I'd go out all night. I'd do all terrible shit."

"Did you kill anybody," I say, wanting to take the words back; they float dangerously in the silent air.

"No," he says. "I shot one. That's why this happened." He taps on his false leg. "They shot back." He kicks at the crushed beer can on the ground with his real leg and stumbles, curses under his breath.

I turn away from him while he's doing all this.

"Let me tell you the real story," he says, after he gathers himself. "This is what matters. In the hospital this little old woman gave me the book, the Bible. She pointed at my leg and was like, 'I know what happened.' She said, 'you need to read it.' I read for two minutes and put it down. I said fuck these words, and I told her that to her face, and so she read it to me, and I couldn't leave, I couldn't move out of the bed. She read the parts about spreading love and loving the neighbor. She took my hand in her two hands and took my fingers and spread them out and made me look at them.

"Let me show you," he says. He steps toward me and I step back, seeing the Texan rushing at me, again, again, his blue hat closing in before I can react, then I'm on the ground and staring up at beautiful girls watching me, my eye shutting down, beating away in pain. The Texan's voice pummels in like hail-- 'Get up, motherfucker'-- things like that.

"Come, on," the Bahamian says, looking at my hand, reaching for it. "Let me show you." He pulls my hand up from my side. His hands are warm and he opens up my palm and makes
me look at the fingers spread out like that. "Now," he says, "think of all you can do with that--
good shit, I mean. That's what she taught me. She was like an angel. She spread the message
like I do now."

He stops and holds his index finger out to me like he's gathering himself. "God made all
of this." He says, raising his voice like he's talking to a group, spreading his two arms out before
him, jarring his balance. "I don't think you know shit about the Bahamas. But I'm letting you
know about me." His face strains with emotion, like he's about to cry, but one of those drunken
crys, the ones that come and go without warning. But he doesn't cry. "I try to love everything,
everybody," he says. "I try."

"I know," I say, nodding. Strong gusts of wind blow a blue plastic bag across the road to
our feet, but he doesn't notice it.

"I let you know about my story," he says. "You need to spread the word."

He reaches up and takes off his red hat. "This is rich, expensive in America, right?" he
points to the designer label on the front. He reaches in and pulls out the brand tab inside.
"This is American? Popular?"

"Yes."

"I want you to have it." He reaches over and takes off my old Pirates hat and jams his hat
on my head. He puts my hat on his, and it's not adjustable and it's too small and crooked. But he
doesn't fool with it. He leaves it there and smiles for the first time since I've met him.

"We trade," he says. "Maybe you never come to the Bahamas again, but this is a
connection. This is like a way to spread the message. Wear that hat. I'll take your hat. I don't
care that it's old and shitty."
I look at my hat on his head, and think of the beer can crunched and discarded, and later, the guys on the bus watching my pathetic, assaulted face under the new hat I didn't want—my favorite hat taken away. "It's not really a fair trade," I say. "Yours is nice and new. I don't feel right."

"This isn't about hats," he says.

"I know," I say. "I know this isn't about hats. But I've had that hat for three years now. I wear it everywhere. It's part of me." I watch his face smooth over and go a little limp. "I don't know if you understand," I say, "but it means too much."

"You can't trade," he says, his face deflated, his voice flattened.

"Don't take this wrong. I don't mean to offend you."

"You do offend me," he says, his eyes are stones ready to drop from his face. He holds his hand up and spreads his fingers out and looks at it and puts it back down. He takes his hat off of my head and puts my old hat back on mine. I take it off and hold it in my hand.

"I don't want trouble," I say. "I appreciate what you said, but I don't want trouble."

"You're not getting trouble from me," he says. "I'm done with you."

"I know this isn't about hats. I know it's more important than that. But we don't have to make this trade to make a connection."

"I don't need to make a connection."

"But I think we have."

I watch his face stop considering me and turn away. He opens the hotel door and plunges inside. I can't think of where he can go in there. There's the bar he's been kicked out of, the crowded lobby, and nothing else, only cramped rooms he's not allowed in.
On the bus, I tell the story. Brad gives me a look like I should have known better, but Rob and Mike can't believe the whole bit about God; the man who got kicked out of the bar said that we need to spread the word.

"He had some things to say," I tell Brad, a little later. "He was a decent guy."

"He was hammered," Brad says. "That hat's not worth him. How can you take it seriously when the guy's drunk like that, getting kicked out of places."

When the bus had come, everyone gushed from the hotel, including the Bahamian, and he didn't look my way. He raised his arms above the people, like he was wading through thorny branches, walked off, then disappeared up a side road.

I say, "Brad, he's not allowed in that bar."

"Enough," he says, holding his palm up to me. "It doesn't matter. We saw from inside. He couldn't stand straight. I was watching. I told the guys to be ready, for god's sake."

"It was nothing like that," I say, feeling the hat, how cool it is, wondering how cool it felt on his head for that minute or so. "Nothing like that was going to happen. He showed me some things. He made some points. He showed me his hands."

Brad turns his head to me slowly and places a finger over his lips. "I got no sleep last night," he says, closing his eyes.
"You'll be leaving soon," my dad said the other morning, sitting down next to me at the breakfast table, his shirt and tie on, his hair still wet. He dropped a steaming muffin and a paper towel onto the table, pulling his hands away from its heat. "So why don't we try some fishing. We can rent a boat."

"Sure," I said, nodding, looking down at the sports page. "What about mom?" I asked.

"We'll check it out," he said. "I'll talk it through."

We ate breakfast in silence. My dad got up and dropped a hand on my shoulder. "Let's try to make this work," he said.

At three o'clock at the school it was steaming hot, and from inside the car I watched my brother Jeff's football team doing their final sprints on the baked, tan grass practice field. A fat lineman dropped to his knees and vomited at another player's feet. Jeff swamped the car with his smell, studied his legs like to make sure they were there and drank half a Gatorade I'd brought for him in one chug. I mentioned the fishing trip and he said right off that he'd love to go. Then he asked what I thought, and he asked if mom had said anything.

Later that day my mother was getting ready to go out to dinner with a friend, and brushing and spritzing her hair in the bathroom. She called to me in the kitchen and asked if I was going fishing. I asked if she'd talked to dad about it.

"He only mentioned it," she said.

"I don't know," I said. I opened the pantry and shook a cereal box. "We didn't decide anything." She walked in behind me. "Dad mentioned it," I said, turning to her, "but we didn't
"Maybe I'll go. Jeff seemed like he'd like to."

My mother nodded, her head down, searching through papers on the telephone desk.

"Is that okay?"

"Yes," she said, looking up at me, her face tight and closed-off, squeezing out a smile.

* * *

This is the morning of the trip: I walk downstairs and in on my silent parents at the breakfast table, the paper spread out, the round light blooming above them with darkness still blanketing the backyard, their reflections clear against the glass sliding door. I sit down. My mother is showered and dressed for the day, her hair drawn back. My dad's wearing a tattered white undershirt that sticks to his chest, his hair sticking up in places. The rash of poison ivy he'd gotten a few weeks back clings to his neck and dots his cheek.

He'd called himself immune to those weeds along the side of the house, and stumbled into them drunkenly. I'd returned from a tough jog, was grabbing my knees and breathing heavily when I spotted him from the sidewalk. He may as well have been naked, wearing an old, tight-fitting t-shirt and cut-off sweatpants. He looked like a marooned gym teacher, hacking out there in front of the house, red in the face.

And my mother's only sympathy for him when he announced the poison ivy last week in the living room had been to ask flatly, "what were you thinking?" She didn't look at him when she said it, but turned pages of a magazine. When he asked what to put on it, she said, "it'll be there for a month. And it'll scar if you keep clawing at it."

He'd stood above us, scratching. The rash had freshly broken from his cheek and neck
like acne. I said that I had cut sweat socks and used them like tubes, or sleeves, on my legs, when I'd had it the summer before, though not as bad as he had it. My dad nodded and scratched. My mother's eyes flashed at me, then dug back into the magazine. My dad left to search for medication.

My dad long gone from the room, my mom had said to me, "there's anti-itch cream in the bathroom upstairs, on the second shelf, I think, in the cabinet. And I think we have pills that help in the night, for itching." She told me to find them and give them to him.

"Lin," my dad says, pushing himself to his feet and standing over us, smiling in anticipation, "what fish do you want to eat tonight?"

"None," my mother says into the newspaper. "I don't want any."

My dad lets a slight smile and waits, maybe for her to say something else. "What are you doing today?" he asks her.

"I'm visiting Jack."

Uncle Jack is my great uncle, my mom's dad's brother, sick with pneumonia, probably dying from it. My mom had been going to see him a few times a week for a few weeks now, taking my grandparents with her since they couldn't be left alone much any more. I hadn't been there to visit Uncle Jack once, and I don't think Jeff or my dad had either.

"What about your parents?" my dad says, his eyes narrowing a little.

"I think I'll take them," she says. "I have to." She looks up at him after saying that.

My dad chews on his lip and gives a slow, single nod; then he leaves.

When we leave the house, my mother doesn't tell us to be careful or wear sunblock, or anything like that. She's in the kitchen by the goldfish bowl and we're at the door. She asks my
dad what car he's taking, if he's left her keys for the station wagon. When my dad tells her yes, she waves me over with her hand and asks me the same question. She makes me check for her, rifle through her purse and dangle the keys as proof.

* * *

Jeff and I split from my dad in the bait shop, brushing to the back of the store while he fetches the bait and tackle-- liters, hooks, weights and swivels. Jeff and I step through this forest of hunting-- rows of guns and shelves of ammunition, walleye and pike and bass and crappie mounted on the walls, and bucks' heads and a bobcat, and a turkey, and racks of orange and camouflaged hunting suits and lines of hats. Jeff points me to a crossbow hanging in the rafters that seems half the size of a manta ray. In the back of the store, we watch a gray largemouth bass with a white, filmy eye swim in its huge, white undecorated tank for a few minutes. I ask Jeff if he remembers Bubba from a few years ago, the largemouth they'd advertised as nine pounds on the sign by the road. Jeff nods, watching the fish drift.

We walk back to the front of the store. Jeff tries on an orange hunting cap along the way. At the counter, my dad's asking the wiry, bearded cashier about the industrial development out here. The man shrugs and mutters an answer while my father nods and narrows his eyes, leaning in.

I push through the door. Jeff follows me and we stretch and wait and squint by the car. Jeff slides on a pair of sunglasses he'd hung on his shirt collar. "Let's get our Bubba," he says.

My dad emerges, smiling and holding the bag of tackle and a beige floppy hat with a dangling orange price tag. He tugs the tag off, lets it drop and shows me the impenetrable, green inner lining. He raises his eyebrows, then digs through his jeans, scratching at his shins.
rash is there, too. My dad is unshaven, as he is maybe three times a year, with his hair staying with him well, graying well. Aside from whatever alcohol's doing to my dad's organs, he looks good, almost like an ex-athlete or a war veteran, where the extra weight seems earned. He looks down the road for a moment. The wind chases two trucks blowing past on the highway, and the sky is open and unbroken.

"We got our perfect day," my dad says, looking back and forth at the two of us.

Jeff nods and takes off his glasses and looks up. He motions for the hat and my dad tosses it to him. Jeff puts it on and looks at himself in the car window, and leaves it there. We climb in and drive off. My dad spurs the gray BMW, his gift to himself a few years back, past blonde wheat fields. Then we nuzzle a railing crossing over the thirty-year-old lake; the sun cracks down on the water, waxing it silver. We pass the spot where, a few summers back, we had come upon a truck smoking from its crunched hood, and thirty yards behind it, a flipped car, its slab of black stomach exposed, still simmering from a head-on collision. Skid marks steamed from the grass median, and chunks of the car's teal frame were blown across the four lanes of road. I can see it again like it was: no police or medics had arrived, and several cars had pulled over to the side.

My brother saw a woman crying inside one of the cars. And a man who'd pulled his truck over jogged toward the destroyed car and stopped suddenly a few feet from it. We saw him jog and halt, and then take steps back and hold the top of his cowboy hat. My dad told us not to look, cruising past like a pace car. I looked, couldn't see any blood, then looked to the side of the road, in the bushes, but still saw nothing. I had looked into the trees, while my dad told us twice more not to look.
"You know," he'd said later, in the boat, "those cars must have pulled over because they'd seen it happen. They must have been spooked." My dad was cutting a worm, squinting, while the sun banged off the white plexiglass bench and into his face. "We just missed it. We're lucky."

In the marina parking lot, away from the highway, the air seems very still. Only a few cars surround ours. We rent a functional motor boat, though the floor is carpeted and has a livewell for keeping fish swimming and living longer. Each of us drops into the boat, staggering, rocking it, fumbling the equipment and bags of food. A girl showing most of her tan, thin legs runs me through the boating rules while I finger the ripcord on the motor. I turn around and look past my father at Jeff. He raises his eyebrows at me then looks back up at the girl. She's somewhere between my age and his, and in her drowsiness, exudes asexuality, looking right through the wood of the dock or through the floor of the boat while she instructs us. My dad jokes to the girl that she can retire off business like this.

"Anyway," she says, looking over the top of my dad's head, "you don't blow that orange whistle on the motor unless it's an emergency."

I twist the handle to full throttle and drive right out to the middle of the lake and anchor us with a cement-filled coffee can near some older men in other boats. Trees crowd down by the water and cars hum across the bridge like breaths, and other boats relax underneath it. My brother and I drop our lines in and watch nothing happen there quietly while my dad spends the first forty-five minutes redoing a rod he'd assembled the night before. I'd watched him struggle with it under the fluorescent workbench light in the basement, his rashes looking redder and more malignant there-- the pale skin under the bleaching light. I'd sat on my brother's weight
bench and untangled snags on the other two rods while he stood, his feet shuffling independently beneath him, his glasses lowered crookedly on his face. He didn't look around, or at me, may have forgotten I was there, but only at the rod and reel, burning his mind and fingers into it, harnessing the sobriety, I guess.

In the boat, he talks about the rod with bemusement, or wonder: "what in god's name," he says, untangling things, like he had nothing to do with it, like it had somehow gotten fucked up on its own while we all had slept, which, I guess, is almost a sort of true way of looking at things.

We only have smallish hooks and the night crawlers, and so when we start catching fish it's only a few tiny panfish and some decent perch. We drop the sunfish back in like coins, and we keep the perch, but only because we kill the first by getting the hook gorged deep in its stomach. We have this bloodstained, white plastic instrument that looks like a drink stirrer for disgorging, but we take too long finding it and getting a good grip on the fish and getting the hook popped out, and we just rough it up too much and make it bleed everywhere and kill it. It's not the first time we've done this, and we all make comments like, "shit," and, "too bad," out of guilt and embarrassment because the person who hooks one like this has messed up, and then for it to die in the boat takes a sort of group-botch-effort. Perch don't struggle much to begin with. They're not that strong, or maybe they just give up easily. Some rise only with the resistance of seaweed, or a sluggish drag on the line. But they're pretty fish, with the perfect fishy spines and the green and gold stripes, and each one we catch excites us. We all watch it come aboard and flop into the livewell and we talk about how nice it looks.

"This is getting like Chatauqua," my dad says at one point, after we'd dropped about our
fourth perch into the livewell, reminding us of the trip to the lake in southern New York when we'd caught more fish than ever before, filleting and eating the perch.

"But we caught like forty then." Jeff says, picking a worm out of the white, plastic container, holding it up in the air, watching it shrink and expand.

"Okay, okay," my dad says.

So we catch the fish and sweat while the sun dominates the lake. As morning burns away, the boat makes a pool of the heat. I try to lay down on the bench seat, propping my neck with a life preserver, but the metal is too hot and hard, and my neck is too sweaty and the life preserver slips each time. My brother takes his shirt off, revealing his high school football biceps and chest and I'm almost afraid to look since he's grown broader than me.

"Who are you trying to be?" I say to him.

"Come on," he says, "it's hot."

All the while my dad's been making and taking several calls on his cellular phone to and from his secretary or office manager at the firm an hour away in Pittsburgh. He never mentions the fishing, or how it's going. I don't think the women know they're talking to a man in a boat. At one point, my dad hooks, lands and releases a tiny sunfish all the while cradling the black phone against his neck, and giving advice about how to question a man named Frank DiSalle to prepare him for an upcoming trial. He launches these cold streams of business that seem to float over the lake. He talks and I can occasionally hear the women faintly assent on the other line. He amends all of their suggestions. "Oh, I'm fine," he says once, "I'm on the fourteenth hole."

Off the phone, he scratches himself a lot. Sometimes he caresses the pink bumps on his cheek like his hand is my mother's and they're both twenty-five again. He takes his glasses off
and looks at his damaged skin in the reflection.

We eat apples and my brother and me toss our cores toward the shore, and my dad flips his into the water like he's releasing a fish and it bobs away from the boat. He reminds us of the time we went fishing about ten years ago. It was this lake, and it was a boat like this, but that day was overcast and rain clouds clamped down and a storm covered the lake. In a slight panic, my dad had tried to start the boat in shallow water, and the blades of the motor struck rock and sounded gunfire, thunder, the end of the world.

"You were so calm," my dad says to me. "You sat there and took it all like Jesus." He smiles, like in admiration.

"But Jeff went nuts," he says, looking at my brother, who's fooling with his reel.

Jeff had tried to jump from the boat. My dad pulled him back in. He physically wrestled Jeff into his seat. He gripped Jeff's forearm while they rode through the storm to the marina; that's what I remember most—my dad's big, hairy forearm swallowing Jeff's.

"I thought the boat was going to blow," Jeff says.

Jeff right now looks huge next to my visions of ten years ago, dad reigning him in, hugging him, stopping him from bailing out.

We return the boat after lunch. I open the livewell and six perch are swimming vigorously and the one perch is floating dead. We don't have a cooler or anything like it to keep them in, so my brother wets a torn towel we'd brought and scoops them with it and wraps them inside the blue plastic grocery bag we'd brought our food in. The six writhe and will die in there like that. The marina is packed now, mainly with campers and pickup trucks. An overweight family with a German shepherd is boarding a pontoon boat, the daughter carrying a big radio, all
of them wearing buckled life preservers. My dad checks in about the boat and my brother and I pack the car, pulling the back seat down and sliding the rods through the trunk. Jeff holds the bag of fish and looks at it and around the cool gray of the spotless interior like something has to give.

"We'll stop for ice," my dad yells to us, wearing the new hat for the first time, and fooling with the camera for the first time today. He asks us to pose by the car. We take our hats off and my father calls us 'perch killers' and snaps two pictures. He can't help himself, smiling at us. "My handsome boys," he says, and we drive away. My dad has me call mom from the car and ask her if we should get certain foods from the store since we have the perch, but she's not home and I don't leave a message. We stop and eat fast food, but forget the ice for the fish and by the time we reach our driveway at home, the bag is damp and warm and my dad has to leave the trunk open to air out.

"That was nice," my dad says, waiting for us to respond.

I agree and Jeff yawns, "yes," stretching his arms in the driveway. I put the bag of fish on the picnic table, in the shade. My mother's green station wagon is in the driveway.

We open the door and the dogs rocket out and Jeff routes them to the back yard. My dad's voice booms perfunctorily throughout the house as he drops the keys on the table, "hullooo ... hullooo..." There's no answer and he jogs, empty-handed, down the wooden basement stairs. I leave the rods in the corner of the kitchen instead of following him and putting them away.

My mom is half-asleep upstairs in the den, with an afternoon cable movie flickering, the volume too low. The light is off but the sun from the window douses the couch and my mother. She sits up and smiles through the sleepy confusion. I sit down on the chair next to the couch.
"We caught about seven perch," I say, "and some others."

"When did you get back?"

"Now."

"Where's your father?"

"He's downstairs. He called up here. I heard him call you. I guess he went into the basement. I think we're going to cook the fish."

My mother frowns at me. I ask her what she did and she tells me that she took her parents shopping for groceries and then to her father's heart checkup and then to visit uncle Jack.

"He's lost almost a hundred pounds," she says. "His legs are blue and swollen. He gets no circulation there."

Uncle Jack was huge and barrel-chested once. He'd tell my mother she was beautiful.

"Those brown eyes, Mary," he'd always say. "What would I do without 'em?" He'd say it and I'd look at my mother like I was suddenly seeing a different person.

"Was Aunt Sally there?"

"Yea, but she doesn't know what's going on. She keeps asking when Jack can drive home. And my parents don't really know, either. It's not easy."

I shake my head, or nod, or something.

"He's dying," my mother reminds me.

"I know," I say.

She frowns at me again. "What are you doing now?" she asks.

"I might watch TV or clean the fish."

"Why doesn't your father clean them?"
"Because I always have. I cleaned all the perch at Lake Chatauqua, and it was good."

"Lin?" my father calls, his voice climbing the steps. My mother doesn't answer. Her face seems to lock up and close down, her lips pressed together tightly. My dad moves to the doorway behind me. "Hi," he says.

My mother says, "hi," quietly.

"We caught some perch."

"I heard."

I untie my shoes slowly and listen to the voices on both sides of me.

"I think we have seven. We can make some fillets."

"I told you I don't want any."

"Not to try at least?"

"No."

"With the right vegetables and seasoning-- come on. We'll hit it with some butter and lemon and spices."

"I don't want any." She emphasizes the final two words. "I said that this morning."

"Do you want anything from the store? I have to go."

"Why?"

"Because the fish aren't worth the hassle of filleting and grilling unless you do it right. Remember Chatauqua, how we did it then?"

That trip was more than five years ago. I remember shopping with my mom in a small market by that lake, buying a fillet knife and food to go with all the perch we'd caught, and
she'd stood over the stove that afternoon frying the fish in the small, white kitchen, my father cutting vegetables, working with her.

"We don't need anything," she says, her voice thin and worn. "We have some vegetables. You don't need to go. I'm fine with what we have here in the house. Don't say you need to go for me or for vegetables."

My dad doesn't say anything. I look up at him as he's looking away from my mother and out the window above her.

"You guys decide what you're going to do. I'm eating what we have," my mom says. "I want to get some sleep now."

I tell my mom that I'm going downstairs and she nods at me. I don't look at my dad as I walk out. I hear him ask about my mom's day and she says she's tired and doesn't want to get into it. I look up, halfway down the stairs, and my dad is still standing in the doorway.

Downstairs, in the living room, my brother is watching television with his feet propped up and the fan cruising above at full speed.

"Watch this," Jeff says, turning to me for a moment, pointing at the television. A huge bald man with long blonde hair and blue tights is harnessed with leather straps, trying to pull a bus behind him on what looks to be a boardwalk in Florida or California. There's no steady movement, but every few seconds he screams and lunges and the tires roll forward once or twice.

"Is he really doing that?"

Jeff nods, a huge grin on his face, never moving his eyes from the picture.

I ask him if he wants to help me with the fish, not knowing what he could do.
"Do you need me?" he asks, looking up to me for a second.

My dad breaks in, walking briskly through the room and asking if we need anything from the store. I ask him why he's going and he says to get vegetables to go with the fish for cooking out.

"Didn't mom say we have everything?"

"But we need squash and zucchini," he says. "This is our fish, right? We earned them. We've got to get this right-- fresh perch." He says goodbye and leaves energetically, like he's going out on a date, saying he might stop at a few other stores since he's going to the new shopping center. He'll come home with a buzz, I know, and then sneak whiskey preparing and grilling the food in the backyard.

I tell JetT to forget about the perch for now and go back upstairs, past my mom, to the third floor instead of cleaning the fish. I sort through a stack of magazines in the guest room where my father's been sleeping since the spring. I discovered this on my own, unceremoniously, when I came home for Easter break. I just went to bed that one night and heard the radio and then heard him snoring. His room is next to mine, like we're brothers now, or dorm neighbors, though we've never spoken a word to each other up here. One morning we both tried to use the bathroom at the same time. He brushed against me, wearing his boxer shorts and glassless face and said, "sorry," and I stared at the wooden hallway floor. His radio keeps me awake some nights, though I've never considered saying anything. Once, I tiptoed in and turned the volume down, watching him as I crept out.

The room appears inconspicuous, with the clock radio and lamp stranded on the nightstand, no drapes or blinds or curtains in the window, sunlight spraying through the tree
leaves outside and scattering onto the old wooden floor. None of my dad's clothes are in here, but a pair of blue socks on the floor, and there's a watch with a leather band by the radio, and a few pictures that appeared some time during the summer. I guess my dad put them there. There's one of the four of us at a Christmas party a few years back in an implausible pose: my mother sitting in a blue armchair with my dad, Jeff and me surrounding her like she's our crown jewel. And there's a picture of my dad's father's face, who died less than a year ago. Amidst all of the eulogizing of him, my mother had reminded Jeff and me that grandpa had been a drinker, too, and while that didn't make him a bad person, we should know it. A few days after grandpa died, my dad was drunk and talking about how much grandpa loved me and Jeff, even if he never said it, and it was the only time I'd ever seen my father cry. And it was the only time I'd seen him drunk when I thought that it was normal for him to be drunk right then, since he was mourning.

The full-length mirror makes me look thin, like a thief. I take a sports magazine and lie down in my bed. The room is suffocating from my clothes and books and boxes, which are all waiting in their eager piles to go back to college. On the wall across from the bed there's a picture of two brown trout lying parallel on gray riverbank pebbles, and there's a picture of me and a golden retriever I'd met and befriended at the beach in North Carolina when I was twelve. I'm wearing a red cotton shirt, my hair's being blown, the sky is gray, and I'm holding an orange tennis ball, touching this big, wet dog, who I'll never see or touch again. My mother hung those while I was at school, and she's also placed an Indian rug next to my bed, where I put my feet when I wake up in the morning, and there's a dish of potpourri on the dresser, and I can faintly smell it still; it was fresh when I arrived home way back in May. I notice these things; they'll all
be here when I'm back at school. I close my eyes for a while and think about something my dad said on the lake. He was talking about how much my mom misses me when I'm at school.

"You should know that," he'd said. "Maybe tell her you'll miss her, or write or call more."

I'd gotten kind of quiet when he was telling me this. "Look," he'd said, "I'll stop bugging you. But she doesn't listen to me. I tell her how much she means to you, but she doesn't want to hear it from me."

* * *

I doze off until my dad calls up to me about the fish. In the kitchen, my mother is feeding the dogs. I pour myself juice.

"Where is your father?" She asks me.

"He went to the store. But he just called up to me. He's home."

"There was a phone call for him."

My mother puts the dishes down on the floor and the dogs eye the food and each other and ease their way into it. My mother asks my brother if he'll change the television station to the news and I sit at the table with her. I'm next to the glass door and I watch my father exit the garage with a roll of paper towels, heading toward the side of the house where the grill is, and the storm door to the basement. He rubs his cheek with the towels and subtly loses his balance, his left toe catching on the walkway. I guess my mother notices me watching him.

"Is he in the garage?" she asks, looking right at me.

"He was," I say. "He just walked into the basement."

My mother stares at me.
"What?"

"What do you mean, 'what.'"

I look away from her and to the television and don't process anything on the screen. I look back at her.

"Don't act like you don't know."

"Okay," I say.

"Something's got to give," she says quietly, with a firm voice.

"I know," I say, looking down at the green tablecloth.

"I'll act myself if I have to. I need you," she says, pausing like to gather herself, "but if it comes to me alone..." She stops there, in mid-phrase. She shakes her head and looks out the window, but I think only to look away from me.

I get up and leave the table, stopping in the kitchen and looking at the television. My mother picks up a section of the newspaper and bites at the tip of her thumb and stares into the page. I turn and go to the basement to get the fillet knife and some old newspapers.

I can't find the fillet knife. The light is on in the workroom.

"Kevin," my father calls. "Is that you?"

"I'm looking for the fillet knife."

"Isn't it upstairs?"

"I thought it was in here, by the sink." I'm stepping around piles of laundry, checking under the sink, on shelves, on top of the old brown oven we only use on holidays.

"You could use a sharp knife. It doesn't have to be a fillet knife."

I enter the weight room slowly, knocking the door with my fist on the way in. My dad
looks over at me from across the room, then opens and closes two cabinet doors in rapid fire, shuffling some papers and drill bits inside them. "I'm looking for some sandpaper," he says. Then he blurts, "The knife's not in here. If it's not by the sink or upstairs, then I'd use a carving knife, or a steak knife." My dad scratches his leg brutally. He stops and shakes his head at me. I can't tell if he's telling me no knife or if he's shaking it because of his leg. His expressions seems haphazard, blank then alive then absent again.

"The skin won't be easy to cut without the fillet knife," I say. "Is it even worth it? Should I even cut them?" I look around the room at the hiding places, on top of shelves, in between coffee cans filled with nails and screws on the work desk. I stand by my brother's black weight bench, above silver weights scattered on the green cement floor, across the small room from my dad and the tool shelves and the work desk, and the saws and hammers and paint brushes hanging from hooks on the wall. Old paint and wood finish cans line one side of the floor, stacked two to three high.

"Sure," he says, his eyes working hard at staying on my face, his jaw tightened. "We need to do this. I got everything. I bought the things. It's all go." He leans back against the gray wall.

I look at my dad and don't say anything. I watch his eyes leave me and travel the room a little.

"Just use another knife, a sharp knife," he says. "It'll work alright. You can use a knife from the kitchen." He shrugs at me, indicating that a kitchen knife is the way to go.

I watch his eyes some more, not saying anything.

"That was some fishing," he says, breaking into a disproportionate smile. "I'm glad we
went. I was proud of you out there."

"Proud? Why? It was just fishing."

"Well, the whole thing. Being out there, catching the fish. Think about when I had to do everything. I had to drive the boat, cut the bait, fix the rods, drive the car. I'm just proud." His big smile won't leave his face.

"Yea," I say, nodding, not really looking at him.

"You can use any sharp knife," he says, not making any transition back to the original subject.

I nod again, not in his direction. I leave without saying anything.

I take the newspapers and choose a big carving knife from the kitchen, and walk past my mother and brother and out to the picnic table. I spread newspaper and unwrap the perch and take one out and lay it on the table and flies jump from the bag to the fish. The knife is dull, the fish's color is washing away and the body is stiff and warm. I'm more concerned than usual with cutting my fingers off. My mother walks onto the patio with a broom in her hand.

"What are you doing?" She asks.

"These are the fish we caught."

"You're still eating them?"

"I was thinking of it. I guess he went and bought other stuff to go with it."

"Look at all the flies."

"Mom, we always ate them."

"Then eat them," she says, looking away from me and into our neighbor's yard. She turns back and starts sweeping with a stony expression on her face. She brushes acorns and dirt into
the bushes and pachysandra, taps down the edge of a loose brick on the patio, pulls a stray weed from between the cracks. I jab mindlessly at the fish while she sweeps all around me. When she finishes sweeping she goes inside without looking at me, leans the broom against the porch screen, leaves the glass door open, walks into the kitchen, over to the sink and washes her hands, looking down at them, her head shaking from the scrubbing.

I clean the first perch and clean another. On the table lay four skinny fillets, a bag of five more perch and a swarm of flies. I take the fillets inside. I wrap them tightly in plastic wrap and set them on the counter next to the new bag of vegetables. Then I take the bag of perch and walk out the front door and get in the car and drive around the neighborhood. I have to drive for more than a mile or so before finding a place to pull the car to the side of the road near some woods. I toss the fish out there, bag and all, and pull back on to the road quickly and absentmindedly, and a pickup truck blasts its horn, passing me, swerving into the other lane.

I gather myself and drive away, thinking about how on that day, on the lake, after we'd seen the crash, my dad remembered adjusting the radio in the bait shop parking lot before leaving and how those few seconds may have prevented us from being there when it happened, which, at the time, I took to mean that the three of us would have otherwise died right there on the highway together, with my mother at home.

Twice in the week after we saw that wreck I dreamt about dying in a car with my dad, never actually dying, of course, but nearing death and knowing I was going to die with him. In both dreams, what got me most was seeing my dad's face; it was slashed and bloody, all streaming down and slipping off of him. And he told me in the car, while we died together, that he loved me. The dreams shook me, and then embarrassed me. The images were so
melodramatic, and saying, 'I love you' like that just wasn't my father's style.

I pull in the driveway almost having forgotten what I'd just done, with the fish and everything. When I remember I feel this quick tug in my stomach, like a tug on a fishing line. My dad is a bit incredulous about me throwing the fish away. We are in the kitchen together. My brother and mother are somewhere else. He tells me that we could have frozen them and used them later. I show him that there are still four fillets, enough for him if he wants to cook them out on the grill.

"But we all caught them," he says, seeming very sober all of the sudden.

"I know," I say, looking at him.

My dad quietly pours himself a glass of water with his mouth closed.

I think of more to say, more ways to say it. But I don't say anything else. I look at the four skinny fillets wrapped in the plastic on the counter behind him. They'll feed him tonight, I think, and that's enough.