

WHAT ADULTS DO:

STORIES

by

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A THESIS

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THE EVACUATION

When the laptop that contained my novel was stolen, my first impulse was to panic, but I ignored this impulse because there was no sense in it. Instead I called my father at his bank. I'd sent him a printed copy a few weeks earlier because he'd said he wanted to read it, and though I knew this was probably untrue, I also knew that sending a copy provided insurance against a situation like this one. I had included a note to that effect and instructed him to store his copy in the freezer, the safest place in case of burglary or fire. On the phone, I asked if he had received my manuscript, and when he confirmed that he had, I said I was coming home.

"Are you really?" he said. "Oh, that'll be terrific. That'll be just great. I'll take the rest of the day off, tomorrow too. We're at the Marriott, by the way, and I know what you're thinking, but Neil, if we can afford a room, why not get one? There's no way I'd fit onto one of those cots, and anyway, it makes more room for the people who have nowhere else to go."

I spent a silent moment waiting for comprehension to descend, then asked what the hell he was talking about.

"The forest fire," he said. "Haven't you been watching the news?"

I was going to tell him that when you get serious about Buddhism you give up distractions like television, but my mind leapt, and I blurted, "Did you get my manuscript out?"

My father didn't answer, and I felt a dark blooming dread.

"Dad?"

He cleared his throat. "You have to understand, Neil, there are lots of things we forgot. They knock on your door and tell you to be out in ten minutes. We barely had time to pack a suitcase."

I shouldn't have been surprised—my father was the type of person who kept the extra house key inside the house, who put hard-boiled eggs back in the carton with the raw ones, who had to yell from the bathroom for more toilet paper. But I couldn't help feeling shock. The novel was the most important thing in my life, and the thought of losing it choked me.

"Lorraine left her jewelry box behind," my father was saying. "Think about *that*."

"You put it in the freezer, though, right?" I asked.

The line was silent. Then he said, "Who puts a book in the freezer?"

I feared for my novel, but I didn't mind going home. Since my graduation a year earlier I'd spent every free moment writing, and now that I was finished, I didn't have much to do. Many of my college friends had moved to other cities, and the ones still in Portland seemed just as distant; they'd received their business degrees right after I'd switched my major to English, and now they were all two years ahead of me in life, though it might as well have been twenty—they had weekday jobs, mortgages, fiancées. My co-workers at the bookstore were equally unavailable, especially the girls. They all thought I was some kind of recluse, partly because I always worked on my novel rather than joining them for beers, partly because I looked like a recluse since devoting myself

to Buddhism—with my head shaved I was a taller, fatter version of Uncle Fester, except that my doughy face was still pink with acne. I spent most of my time alone in my apartment, and I was happy to get out.

Three hours after the phone call I was at the front desk of the Marriott in Bend. “Neil Wilkins,” I told the clerk. I hated using that name to reference him, because it was my name, too. “Neil A. Wilkins,” I clarified.

Lorraine answered the door, and we smiled at each other politely, which was as much as we ever did. Her age was becoming visible—the skin on her face flat and lusterless, a sunburst of faint wrinkles around her lips, deep creases dropping from their corners, which made her chin look like something that could be detached and reconnected. But she dyed her hair its original black, and her body was hard beneath all that tight fabric—spandex clinging to her calves and thighs, a cotton tank top that showed the outline of her sports bra, shoulder straps cutting into the muscles that sloped from her neck. She hadn’t always looked like this. She was one of these people who put on old jeans and held the gaping waist at arm’s length.

“The hotel has a gym,” she explained. “I was just on my way out.” Then she turned and called, “Neil, I’m going!”

The bathroom door opened, and my father emerged in a cloud of steam, naked except for a towel wrapped around his midsection, barely—he held the corners and showed a strip of pink thigh. His torso was hairless, as though the blubber had swallowed the follicles, and purple stretch marks bracketed his belly button. I didn’t know his exact weight, but I could say with some confidence it was well over three hundred pounds. His stomach started just below his neck and made tight teardrops of the shirts he purchased at

specialty stores. He had to buy two seats when he traveled by airplane, and he had a disabled parking permit dangling from his Jaguar's rearview mirror. His size disgusted me, which was why Lorraine disgusted me. She was wrapping her arms around him now as far as they would go and looking up for a kiss, which she received. How could she kiss this man and not feel sick? Or, how could she feel sick and do it anyway?

Lorraine released him, and we switched places, shuffling past each other in the doorway. My father's bloated cheeks were slick with aftershave, which I could smell. He clapped my shoulder. "You been losing weight?"

"It's just the bald head," I told him, though it was true that I'd dropped a few pounds by confining myself to a diet of unsweetened oatmeal, raw vegetables, beans and rice.

He turned to his suitcase and lifted out boxer shorts the size of a tablecloth. "Well whatever it is, it's working," he said, then dropped his towel. I took a step backwards. It wasn't his genitals that unnerved me—they were still covered, in fact, by his sagging stomach. It was the blatancy of the act, the force of his nakedness, the utter absence of any barrier between us.

"I'll wait in the hall," I said, opening the door. "Hurry up and get dressed."

"There's something else I forgot, by the way." He stepped into the boxers. "My insurance papers. They'll have to let me in for those, in case the house burns."

In central Oregon, houses did burn. Two years earlier a blaze had destroyed a dozen homes in a subdivision a couple miles from my father's. He was evacuated then, too. Protecting houses was the first priority of firefighters, but that was hardly a guarantee

of safety, especially with his house tucked into the forest at the back of the development. It was a gorgeous location, but also the location closest to fires.

I had grown up in that house. My parents had designed and built it when I was an infant, and it contained all the memories of my childhood. I had a chance to leave in eleventh grade, when my parents divorced and my mother announced she was moving back to Massachusetts. Instead I chose to live with my father in my hometown. It was an easy decision—he was the one who attended my football games; his was the alma mater where I wanted to earn my business degree. Our conversations centered on topics such as our mutual hatred of asparagus and distrust of skinny people, and these seemed profound connections when I was sixteen. But also I was afraid to leave. I had been a child who'd enjoyed vacations only upon their conclusion, who'd said goodbye to inanimate objects as we drove away—*bye, garage; bye, swing set; bye, fence*. My world was still contained, manageable, and the space beyond it seemed vast and foreign, something that made a person small, something to get lost in. Massachusetts seemed like another country.

I couldn't have articulated any of this then, and I didn't try. I simply stated my decision. My mother said a young man needed a father in his life, she supposed. My father only told me he was glad, and then he asked how the 49ers looked that year. I knew he didn't care about the 49ers, but I cared, so I told him all about it.

We took the Jaguar. It was clean and waxed, shining like a black gem. I recoiled from the luxury but was happy not to burn up more of my own gas, and the air conditioning was a relief in the dry summer heat.

We made our way through Bend to the highway, into the scrub brush and juniper,

high-elevation desert beautiful for its starkness. Then the junipers thinned into arid meadow, and in the distance we saw a wedge of smoke sweeping the landscape, and around it a haze that made the mountains to the west dark and vague. The meadow ended, and the forest slowly converted to ponderosa pines, and as we neared town the trunks were scorched black from controlled burns, an effort to remove the undergrowth that fuels a fire. We had entered the haze by now, and it was growing murkier, but where the highway split toward Redmond was a coffee shop with interior lights burning, cars nosed up around it. This coffee shop was new; it hadn't been there last time I was home, which was Christmas, which I didn't celebrate anymore. We passed the Forest Service station with its oversized sign that said, "Fire Danger Today." The panel beneath these words was red and said, "Extreme." I found this amusing but didn't point it out to my father. He would have glanced at me like I was crazy and then returned his eyes to the windshield. I had just decided this when he gave a sharp laugh and yanked his thumb at the sign and said, "Look."

He slowed as we entered town, a small mountain town sustained by tourism, my hometown. I hardly recognized it. The smoke hung like fog, stained the late afternoon an eerie thunderstorm shade, made the sun an orb, deep red. Familiar buildings materialized and disappeared—the Ski-Inn, where my football team had eaten lunch on game days; The Dusty Rose, a specialty clothing shop owned by one of my mom's old friends; Antler Arts, which sold exactly what its name suggested and had been in business since I could remember—sidewalks empty, businesses closed. Ash began to fall like black snow. Some flakes stuck to the windshield and trembled; others caught our slipstream and vanished. It was silent except for the engine's muffled drone, the occasional roar of a tanker plane,

the syrupy whumps from a helicopter.

“It’s like a war zone,” I said.

“Like the face of the moon.”

My father wasn’t a writer, so he had no need for appropriate analogies, but I couldn’t help myself: “See those trees, Dad? That barbershop? You think they have paved sidewalks on the moon?”

He looked at each of these items. Then he said, “Well, to me it’s like the moon.”

The street split into the McKenzie and Santiam highways. We veered onto the Santiam, flanked by tall ponderosas, their needles holding bands of gauzy smoke. After a couple miles we turned left into the subdivision, and I looked out my window at the obscure oncoming lane, imagining a semi barreling through the smoke. When my father hit the brakes I turned to the windshield. Behind a row of cones two police cars extended sideways across the entrance. I knew right away they wouldn’t let us in, and my heart seized at the thought of my manuscript stranded.

“I was expecting this,” my father said flatly.

He pulled alongside the barricade. An officer got out of a car, and when my father stepped out to meet him, he let in a burst of hot smoke. I had expected the smell to be corrosive, burnt rubber or scorched copper, something acrid and poisonous, but it was more like a campfire. My father and the officer stood in it, grayish, squinting, hitching up their belts.

“I live here,” my father said. “I forgot a few things. I’ll be two minutes.”

The officer shook his head. “My instructions have been very clear, sir. Evacuation zones are easy targets for thieves.”

“I’m not a thief. You can escort me if you want to make sure.”

“This isn’t up for argument, sir. I’m sorry.” The officer turned to look at me, as though maybe I was responsible for the dilemma. Then he turned back to my father.

“I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t terribly important,” my father was saying. “What I forgot are my insurance papers. My *insurance*. Do you understand what happens if that burns?”

“The company has records. You don’t need it.”

“I do need it,” my father corrected him. But the officer was already walking back to the car, coughing hoarsely into his fist.

“Tell him about my novel!” I shouted from the Jaguar. Nobody listened. The officer slipped into his car, leaving my father alone in the drifting ash.

He stood there a long time, looking at the barricade.

The car quaked when he got back in. “Don’t worry,” he said, pulling the door shut. “The house won’t burn.”

I didn’t feel reassured. If any house burned, it would be his, which made my chest ache, and to quell the pain I turned to the Buddha’s teachings. I said, “Pleasure is only a sugar-coated bitter pill, Dad.”

He looked at me, eyes bleary with smoke. “Coated bitter . . . what was that?”

“Forget it,” I said.

He hit the wipers, which smeared black arcs across the windshield. “You want to get a beer someplace, Neil?”

“I try to avoid alcohol.”

“A Coke, then. It doesn’t matter. Maybe later tonight.” He put the car in gear and looked over his shoulder. Before gassing it he peered for several seconds at the smoke. Once we were safely on the highway, he said, “The guys in my Rotary Club are always asking about you, and I never know what to tell them. I was thinking we could have a little chat about your interests, your plans, that kind of thing, since you’re in town.” He ran his palm over his head. “We could have a beer together,” he repeated.

“Maybe,” I said. My father called me periodically to ask these questions, and I always described my life to him as vaguely as possible, because he ran a bank, and it felt silly to explain things such as my failure to renounce coffee. Also, I was trying to distance myself from the background and lifestyle he represented. It wasn’t that I didn’t like him—I did. He just didn’t have much relevance in my life anymore.

I let myself sink further into my misery. I imagined flames creeping through the house, curling my pages, erasing the distinctions between ink and paper. I wanted my manuscript preserved, which was desire, and desire was the ripple that disturbed a pond’s tranquility. I tried to flatten my pond. But there were *ideas* inside that novel, ideas I wanted the world to receive. It was about a young white man who stepped away from his high-middle-class background to become a Buddhist ascetic. He tried to make himself insane so he could experience a deeper level of reality, but when he thought he had succeeded, he woke up in a psychiatric ward, catatonic, and realized his journey to madness had been a delusion—he was actually a writer who had been journeying back to sanity all along.

“You should have kept it in the freezer,” I said. “Why couldn’t you just keep it in the freezer, Dad? This fucking smoke,” I added, rubbing my eyes.

My father reached over my knees to the glove compartment, extracted a packet of Kleenex.

“It’s the *smoke*,” I said.

“I know.” He pulled one out and wiped his nostril and showed me the blackened cone of tissue around his forefinger. “Just imagine what a cigarette does to your lungs.”

“I don’t smoke,” I said, and took a tissue.

“Good,” he said.

The smoke wasn’t as dense on the other side of town. We passed the Forest Service station and approached the coffee shop, and through its plate glass window we could see the people inside, standing, holding mugs, glasses, cups. They looked frantic and happy.

“How about some coffee?” my father said.

I was about to refuse, but then realized the other option was returning to the hotel, where Lorraine would be waiting. I’d never felt comfortable around her. She had met my father the summer I graduated from high school and had married him by my first Thanksgiving back from college.

“Coffee sounds good,” I said.

My father pulled to the shoulder, which was deep with the red-cinder gravel that was scattered on snowy roads in the winter. It crunched and knocked at the floorboards. We could hear the muffled noise of the café as we walked from the car, and it made the town’s desolation seem deeper. Then my father opened the door and it all came spilling out, the clattering dishes and indistinct jumble of voices and music. The air was cool and

smelled of pastries and steamed milk, and there were all types of people—chubby housewives, retirees, tourists, ranchers in cowboy hats, long-haired teens, middle-aged men in golf shirts—all of them drinking something, gesticulating wildly, reciting passages from the newspapers, enjoying the bonds and excitement of distress.

“I hadn’t been here before,” my father said.

“Me neither,” I said.

I followed him to the counter. He kept tapping people on the shoulder to get through and they accommodated him without pausing their conversations. He asked for three types of wine before the clerk lifted a jug and unscrewed its cap. I ordered tap water, room temperature. We made our way to the window. Across the street was a gas station, owned by a different company than when I was a kid, hazy, as though it were at a great distance.

My father said something I couldn’t hear over the clamor, so I made a shallow grin and nodded, but he looked like he expected more, so I asked, “What was that?”

“Are you dating anyone?”

He always asked, and it always made me angry. I didn’t understand why he couldn’t take in the disaster of my appearance and avoid questions about dating. “Dad, don’t. Please.”

He looked at his wine, then took some and swished it in his mouth and grimaced.

“I was only wondering.”

“Well I’m not. Is that all right with you?”

“Yes,” he said. “Criminy.”

I thought about the girls at the bookstore then, considered twisting some awkward

encounter into an episode I could tell about, but remembering these encounters brought back the pangs of failure and regret I always experienced around women. “I don’t have time for dating,” I said. “I’m too busy.”

He raised his eyebrows. “You work thirty hours a week at a bookstore.”

“But I write, Dad. I spend all my time writing.”

He put on a smile, nodded. It felt like a victory, and I took a swallow of my tepid water. Then I checked my pocket for lint and found some. I looked at it and didn’t know what to do with it so I put it back in my pocket.

“Hey,” my father said. He was gazing at the window, which gave back a transparent reflection of us, two enormous, odd-looking men. Beyond it, a woman walked by carrying a bicycle on her shoulder. “When you were a kid, didn’t you used to bike to town on some trail?”

I watched him sip his wine. Then I said, “I know a way around the barricades.”

Driving up the McKenzie, we could see the orange aura over the treetops like the shine of a distant city. A makeshift sign on the shoulder told us the highway was closed, then disappeared behind us. I pulled up my socks, which were the dress socks my father had been wearing, and tightened the laces of my shoes, which were his golf shoes, which he always kept in the trunk. He was wearing my sandals. Outside the day was dimming. It wasn’t smoke; it was dusk, though the difference was barely perceptible.

There was a concrete blockade just past Sentry Road, so my father stopped there. The trailhead was about a mile further, and then it was another mile to the house; the trail ran through the forest about a hundred feet behind our yard.

My father removed his wristwatch, synchronized it with the clock on the dashboard, and handed it to me. “How long will it take you?”

I was a decent runner for a guy my size. In high school I had played defensive line, which was for big guys who were athletic, not offensive line, which was for guys who were just big. I gave myself ten minutes per mile plus ten minutes in the house. “Fifty minutes.” The plan was for him to leave and come back. The news had reported that the National Guard was patrolling to deter thieves, he’d said, and a car parked at a blockade would look suspicious.

“If you see fire,” my father said, “just turn around.”

“You won’t be back yet.”

“I might.”

“Fifty minutes, Dad.” I opened the door and stepped out. The air was beginning to cool and a wind was picking up. I could taste the smoke. My father backed up, smiled and waved from behind the windshield, then executed a meticulous three-point turn and became a wide silhouette in the cab. His tail lights faded into the smoke.

The wind made a rushing sound like a nearby waterfall. The pine boughs bobbed and the needles fluttered. Breaking the evacuation order was like breaking a taboo—there was a certain sexiness about it, an allure in its illicitness. A current thrilled through my chest, and I started to jog.

I hadn’t done much running since high school football, but I carried less weight now, and it made a difference: my legs were light and strong, and as my muscles warmed, they grew stronger. I felt alert, awake. The scent of smoke seemed to diminish as I became accustomed to it, and the cool breeze was pleasant on my skin. My breathing

went deep and even, as it was supposed to when I meditated. During meditations, I had to pull at the air conscientiously, force it to the bottom of my lungs, and this seemed strained and artificial, which, as best I could tell, wasn't the feeling meditation was supposed to produce. I could never maintain the breathing anyway, because I'd start yawning uncontrollably or lose focus. The mind is flighty—when unoccupied it calls up annoying songs, lists of errands, plot points in your novel. It returns to the amazing cleavage you'd seen at the bookstore that day, or to the girls who might have dated you in college, or to your first and only kiss, some girl who slobbered on you at a house party and then fell asleep near the dance floor. By the time you catch yourself and remember your meditation, your breathing has gone back to normal, and you have to start over.

Running, my lungs billowed and huffed beyond my control. Steady. Natural.

By the time I found the trailhead, the metal wristwatch was clammy in my palm and the golf shoes had rubbed raw spots over my Achilles' tendons. I passed familiar landmarks—the straightaway where the dirt turned sandy, the dry creek bed, the stand of aspens, the woodpecker's snag—believing that each one signaled my arrival until I reached the next landmark and believed it again. My legs were heavy, and my lungs had begun to ache. Finally I recognized a mound of dirt my father had once carved into a bike jump for me, and I cut off the trail there, weaved through the bunchgrass and sage, crunching pine cones with my father's golf cleats, and I felt a surge of energy when the forest opened into the familiar lawn, smooth underfoot, and I raced for the deck and stumbled up the stairs and reached the sliding glass door and opened it and I was inside. It smelled like our house always had, of drywall and laundry and something like stale crackers. I was relieved to smell these things. I coughed and coughed. In the windowless

bathroom I turned on the light and brought up all the black phlegm I had collected. I dropped gobs of it into the toilet. They drifted around, floating.

The house was a dim monochrome, but I didn't want to turn on the houselights in case there were patrols. I could see, and I expected my eyes to adjust. There was an astonishing mess—the place always looked immaculate when I visited, not only tidy but dusted, polished, perfect. Now there was a big red splotch on the kitchen linoleum, half a tomato on the breadboard among the crumbs, exposed and shriveling, a pizza box spread over the stove with a full coffee mug at its center. The sink was piled with crusty dishes, and the microwave door hung open. The dining room table held a mountain of unfolded laundry that I guessed was clean, because in the living room clothes lay rumped on the floor, assembled loosely into the shape of a funnel that poured to the bedroom. A blanket was bunched on the recliner to make room on the couch for discarded record sleeves, the bare records stacked atop the player. Propped against the coffee table were several two-by-fours and a hammer, and at its center was the crystal bowl that usually held M&M's or jelly beans, empty now except for wadded Kleenex and a lipstick.

It was the lipstick that made me realize the mess wasn't my father's, at least not entirely—he certainly didn't listen to Pavarotti or Barbara Streisand, or wear the small feminine garments on the floor. I'd always believed Lorraine to be clean and orderly, but this had to be the way their lives looked when I was away, and she was as messy as my father, which pleased me, because her flaws always seemed to justify my resentment.

I had twenty-eight minutes left. I headed to the office first, where a tangle of papers two inches deep covered the desk, gray and golden in the failing light. I wondered

how my father kept track of anything, but the manila folder that held his insurance documents was right where he said it would be, at the bottom of a spilled stack on the floor. The bedroom was in a similar state—sheets rumpled, ties and bras hanging from doorknobs, a curling iron on the floor, change and ticket stubs cluttering the shelves. On the bedside table I found my manuscript, and a wave of relief loosened my muscles. The pages were stacked neatly into two piles, one thick, pages face-down, the other thin, page 299 on top. My first thought was that my father had known I was coming and positioned the manuscript like this to give me a certain impression, but even as I told myself this, I thought about the haste of the evacuation, the disorder frozen through the rest of the house, and I knew, deep down, that he was incapable of implementing a scheme that required such foresight.

The light was draining from the windows, but I laid the stacks together and flipped through the pages, trying to sense the attention they'd received from my father, wondering if he had enjoyed the plot twists, the creepy innuendo. When I found his attention, though, I felt it concentrated not on the story, but on me, and I was embarrassed about the assumptions he must have drawn. Then I got angry. If he had read my novel, why didn't he talk to me about it?

I put the novel inside the insurance folder and looked under the bed. I don't know why I looked under the bed right then, but I did. There was luggage down there, a sleeping bag, a shoebox. I slid out the shoebox and opened it, preparing to be scandalized and aroused, but was disappointed to find only letters. All were in Lorraine's florid handwriting, dated as recently as a couple weeks ago and as far back as my last summer before college. I read an early one. There was nothing exceptional about it, just an

assessment of a movie they'd apparently seen together, a few inside jokes about dry eyes and mustard stains that I couldn't make sense of, and a carefully constrained statement about how much she had enjoyed my father's company. I scoffed at the sentimental inflections, the triteness, the doubled and tripled exclamation points, but I read it all the way through before replacing it.

I found something else wedged in along the side of the box. It was a photo of my father and Lorraine back when she was fat, lying sideways on a bed, naked, their bodies pressed together, arms wrapped tight, legs tangled, flesh rippling. They looked into each other's eyes in a way that said they were in love. At first I wondered if they were engaged in intercourse, wondered if the camera was on a timer or if there had been a photographer behind it, and these thoughts produced a sensation I could easily identify as disgust. But I kept looking, and the disgust gave way to something else, some pang I couldn't identify except to say it was unpleasant. I told myself you weren't supposed to see your father and stepmother in such an intimate situation, and replacing the photo, I tried to feel satisfied with this explanation.

I had twenty-one minutes left. I gathered up the fattened insurance folder and stood. It was a long run back.

Outside I couldn't see beyond the lawn. The twilit smoke looked black, soupy, and the wind sounded deeper than before, more expansive, like an ocean surf. The mountain chill tightened around me as I jumped from the deck, ran across the yard to the forest, and plunged in.

My body ached. As I ran, instead of loosening, it went heavy, muscles like bags

of sand, legs sluggish, as though I was dragging them through deep water. My lungs were making unreasonable demands, and I couldn't get any rhythm to the breathing. My mouth was silty; I spat, but the thick saliva landed on my chin. The smoke began to tickle my throat, then scratch it, and it became more and more painful. My breathing quickened. My lungs itched. When I coughed, my ears plugged like I had gone underwater. I couldn't get enough air. I went dizzy and stopped, kneeled, coughed, took off my shirt and covered my mouth and nose and breathed through the fabric, smelling the mingled odors of wood smoke and sweat, wondering if I could turn back, if it was too far, and a sensation of remoteness chilled me. My heartbeat slushed through the liquid in my ears. Each breath rustled inside me, loud and hollow. The daylight was dimming, and in both directions smoke shrouded the trail, and above me tree trunks rose into the gloom and disappeared. I tried to reason my way through the situation, but I was afraid, and I panicked. I burst from the ground and with shirt pressed to my mouth continued my run, faster now, desperate. My body was an instrument of pain, feet heavy, blisters smarting, legs protesting, lungs aching for oxygen.

I tried to make my mind blank, tried to practice the non-thinking I could never achieve during meditation, but the image of Lorraine and my father kept intruding—the pale flesh flattened from contact, the undulations of skin, the faces soft with contentment, muted smiles and bright eyes. It was an expression my father had lost after the divorce. My last two years of high school I'd seen shallow imitations of it, but not the real thing, not until he married Lorraine. I wasn't pleased to see it return. I had always felt betrayed by Dad's second marriage, not because I believed he was abandoning me—though I did believe that, too, struggling as I was to adjust to the independence of college life—but

because he and Lorraine had dated less than four months, and their marriage further violated my perception of what love was, a perception the divorce had already injured. I knew my father was unhappy, but marrying Lorraine seemed a reaction to his unhappiness, not an act of love, and that was an objective too low and practical for my taste. But his loneliness during those years must have been excruciating, and I realized now that loneliness can make a person more capable of love, because when I tried to imagine that expression on my own face, the expression from the photo—that quiet affectionate joy—it felt so alien that my eyes burned and moistened. I couldn't help imagining that the letter I'd read, Lorraine's letter, was from one of the bookstore girls, for me, and the world began to shiver. The pangs I'd felt in the bedroom surged, and a void opened up inside me, the empty space in my life where there should have been someone, anyone, for me to cling to.

The smoke was thinning, and above the trees the sky had soaked up a strange orange luminescence. My body demanded that I stop, walk, collapse. My legs were losing their power, my lungs strained, my heart thumped so wildly it seemed dangerous, but the worst pain was at my heels, where the shoes chafed open blisters. I pressed on. Then suddenly I turned a corner, and ahead of me was the trailhead, and where the trees opened to the highway stood the cumbersome figure of a man. It was my father, bathed in the dawnish light of distant flames, his face as broad and fleshy as a raw Thanksgiving turkey, but turned sideways, gazing further up the highway. I rushed forward, and cried out to him, so he would know where to look.

WHAT ADULTS DO

Tommy met her at a party through a mutual friend, Edgar, who had once almost burned down the fraternity house by spurting vodka at a raised match. Edgar was married now and had a job organizing an annual wine festival, and the parties he threw were lame, the type where everyone sat in the living room, legs crossed, chatting quietly through ambient music. But they were parties, so Tommy went. He stayed in the kitchen with the liquor and offered to mix drinks. When people accepted, he did the whole routine—twirled the glass, raised the bottle to make the pour long and precise, slammed and popped the shaker, garnished the rim. One man he didn't know reached for his wallet. Tommy had to stop him. After the man left, Tommy opened a fresh beer and carried it to the porch, where he smoked a cigarette and watched the Oregon drizzle turn the lawn muddy. The air was bracing and fresh and smelled of wet lumber. It was still light out because daylight savings wouldn't end for another few weeks, but the light was dim, watery, and Tommy knew the rain would be permanent from now on.

A woman joined him on the porch. She wore a black dress that ended just above powerful-looking calves and held a brimming wineglass away from her body, watching it as she moved. She hadn't been to the kitchen because the wine was in the living room. She paused to lower her lips to the glass, then looked at him and asked if she could bum a cigarette and smiled. Her name was Penelope. She was a social worker but volunteered at Edgar's festival to get free wine, she said. Tommy mentioned that he had recently been

promoted to manager at his restaurant. Then they talked about a movie they had both found disappointing. When he flicked his butt into the yard, she retrieved it and ran both butts under the tap and tossed them in the trash. Tommy followed her to the living room. She kept refilling her wine glass and talked exhaustively about her ex-boyfriend. Twice she omitted the “ex-” without seeming to notice. Eventually she pointed him out: “The sullen one by the stairs,” she said.

He didn’t look sullen to Tommy. He was a little man, early thirties maybe, dressed in black slacks and a black button-down, holding a martini glass that Tommy had filled several times. He stood with a redhead, smiling and nodding as she talked.

“Looks like he’s doing okay to me,” Tommy said.

He and Penelope went outside to smoke again. They ended up kissing and groping and afterwards went to his apartment instead of returning to the party.

The tables were full, the wait time about an hour, he guessed. The murmur of conversation didn’t quite cover the tinkling piano fed in by speakers. Servers bustled, legs scissoring, upper bodies motionless to make them look calm. Whenever they pushed open the kitchen door they released a burst of clattering plates and shouting. Then the door swung closed and muffled the noise.

In the kitchen Tommy found Rick holding the steel salad fridge like a pinball machine and thrusting his big belly at it. He wore a chef’s hat that looked like a white beret, and his apron was streaked brown with meat-juice. “Keep it down back here,” Tommy yelled over the rumbling dishwasher and industrial ventilation and laughter. Even the expediter Sally was laughing.

“Get out of my kitchen,” Rick yelled back at Tommy. “Go sniff ass with the customers.”

Tommy washed his hands to show he wasn't obeying Rick before he went to the dining room, where wall sconces glowed against burnished mahogany and votive candles flickered gently on the tables. He approached a white-haired couple hunched over their split order, table ten. This was the part of the job he enjoyed most, the personal interaction. He clasped his hands and looked at the torn meat. “How are you folks enjoying the rib eye?”

The man concentrated on his trembling fork. “Just fine.”

“You folks have been in before, haven't you?”

The man shook his head. “We live in Alsea. We don't make it into Corvallis much.”

Tommy asked what they did in Alsea and the man told him they bred Chihuahuas. He asked the woman if she enjoyed it and she said yes, tremendously. He asked their names and they told him. Tommy shook their hands. “Well my name's Tom. I'm the manager here. It sure is nice to meet you. I hope we'll see you again soon.”

They said he certainly would, and Tommy moved to table eleven, indispensable to the restaurant's success.

He stood at his bathroom mirror, smiling.

Then he dropped the smile and scrutinized the corners of his eyes and was pleased to find the skin smooth. He lifted his chin and among the shaving cream flecks saw the familiar spot of blood on his voicebox bump. He pressed toilet paper there and with his

other hand lifted his bangs to inspect his hairline. His forehead seemed to have sprouted little bulbs of bare skin. He wondered if this was new or just something he'd never noticed before, then decided he just hadn't noticed. He let his eyes drop to the tightly packed muscle of his upper arm, where veins traversed pale skin. He flexed his stomach and watched it solidify. He was proud of his body because it compensated for a face that belonged to some underground creature, beady black eyes too close together, nose long and pointy, lips curled in. He scraped his bangs down and rinsed the shaving cream and put on his shirt and tie and nametag, which said *Tom Upshaw, Manager*.

Penelope sat at the kitchen table over the newspaper. Steam tendrils untangled above the mug she gripped. It was Saturday afternoon. They had stayed in bed until two p.m., as they had the last three Saturdays.

"Time to go," Tommy said.

Her eyes kept scanning the print. "I just made tea."

Tommy took down a travel mug and set it on her newspaper. "I have to go to work."

"Go then. I want to drink my tea and take a shower."

He stood there a moment. Usually his relationships ended at this point, before they could become relationships. He dated infrequently enough to appreciate them a few weeks, but he generally didn't like the women he dated, probably because they didn't like him. Penelope was different, though. Their conversations were effortless, and he often found himself revealing experiences and feelings he had never admitted before, not even to himself—his secret distaste for casual sex, his fear that he would never marry. Also, she had a distanced quality he found irresistible—in public she always brushed his hand

away when he touched her elbow or back, and after they had sex she often went home, which he'd wanted from other women, but not from her. He was happy to wake up to her groans and grins, her hand reaching between his legs. Plus, he would turn twenty-seven soon, just before the new year, and the longest he had been with anyone was two months, the spring he had dropped out of college. It might be time to make a run at that record.

He put the travel mug back in the cupboard. "Make sure to lock the door when you leave," he told her. "And you can make the bed, if you want."

When he got home at midnight the door was unlocked, the bed unmade. He decided he wouldn't call, but then started to miss her and called anyway.

Two days later she gave him a wallet photo, and he looked at it in the restaurant's bathroom because there was nothing in there to read. She wore a black bikini top and grinned enormously between silver hoop earrings, the ocean glittering in the background. She looked like a mother who hadn't borne her children yet, he thought, though he wasn't sure what gave him that impression. She was almost thirty but fit, built like a gymnast, short and muscular from rock-climbing at the gym. She wore fashionable clothes that revealed her figure. She drank and smoked like he did. But there was something about her—maybe the Irish roundness of her face, or maybe her cautious makeup, or maybe her hair's natural sandy color; maybe it was her smile, gracious and forgiving, or her occasional unsettling sternness; maybe it was just her sweetness, a natural disposition that made him picture floral aprons and oven mitts. Whatever it was, when he looked at the photo he thought of some stranger saying, "This is what I looked like before the twins," and smiling nostalgically, maybe with regret. He wasn't sure if he liked this quality or

not—his attraction to her had a small current of disgust running along its edge.

Someone came into the bathroom. “Tommy?”

Through the crack in the paneling Tommy saw a server’s long black apron. “I’m busy.”

“The POS system froze. Nobody can punch in orders.”

Tommy put away the photo and flushed. He washed his hands, then wiped down the sink and mirror with paper towels. All the servers were huddled by the POS terminal, waiting. They watched with jittery, desperate eyes as he flipped the power switch off, then back on.

Cooks and servers stood in small clusters in the kitchen later that week, holding plates and forks, chatting about gratuities and where they would get wasted tonight. Tommy found the servers who had cashed out and handed them their credit card tips. Then he gave Rick his employee dinner order.

Rick looked at the ticket. “I’m not making this.”

“It’s for me.”

“Order off the menu like everyone else.”

“I’m the manager.”

Rick glared, face shiny with sweat and grease. The black stubble grew too high on his cheeks, almost to his eyes. His head was cleanly shorn. “How about I make two of them, and we race?”

“Five bucks on Rick,” the pantry cook said.

“I’ll take that,” a server said.

They carried the plates to the bar. Servers and cooks huddled around. The burritos were long and fat and leaked juices. Rick wiggled his fingers. Tommy held a knife and fork. He had planned to eat slowly and then congratulate Rick on his piggishness, but when the bartender shouted, “Go!” Tommy felt a surge of energy. He dropped the silverware and dug in. He was hungry. He had lifted weights before his shift. The black beans and steak and potatoes and sour cream and tomatoes and avocados and cilantro tasted good. He crammed it in. He swallowed without chewing. He let the chunks tumble down his chin and didn’t wipe his face. When he started to get full he chewed more. He sipped water. Rick was slowing down, too. His nose wheezed, his breathing rapid. Tommy lowered his head and worked. He was sweating. The food repulsed him. His throat tried to close but he forced it open. The servers shouted to keep going. He was almost done.

Penelope’s cell phone buzzed. They were cuddled up in his bed in the late afternoon, looking at each other dreamily, their stomachs sticky with sweat. She fished the phone from her purse, looked at it, smiled, then put it away and draped herself over him again. A few moments later she asked, “How many people have you slept with?”

He breathed through his nose, enjoying her sour musky odor. “Let’s not talk about that.” He watched her eyes flicker over him and worried his response might make him sound promiscuous. “A number you’d like,” he said. “A nice medium number.” He looked at the thrust of her lips, the translucent fuzz along her jaw, the freckles running the slopes of her nose. “How many guys—” he started to ask. “No, don’t tell me.” He traced the contours of her back. He squeezed her delicate neck muscles, massaged the base of

her skull. The heater clicked off. He closed his eyes and listened to the drumming rain.

“Okay, how many?”

“You’re my twentieth.”

He kept his breathing normal, made his hand continue the massage. A blackhead grazed his fingertips like a grain of sand, and he resisted the impulse to pick at it.

“That’s a good number, right?” Penelope said. “I know people whose number is a lot higher.”

“It’s a good number.” He scooted away so he could lie on his stomach.

She nuzzled him, stroked his calf with her instep. “What’s your number, Tommy?”

“About twenty,” he lied. It was seven.

He was running on a treadmill at the gym. A woman asked him, “Are you going to be much longer?” She had a low voice and severe face, Slavic features, dark sculpted eyebrows, hair woven tightly into a French braid, a woman who would look good in bright red lipstick and a fur coat, he thought. She wore running shorts and a ratty tank top. He had noticed her kicking ass on the treadmill before, braid bouncing with her long strides. She intimidated and excited him.

“I think I’m signed up until noon,” Tommy said through labored breath. His pecs bounced beneath his T-shirt, which made him feel both sexy and silly, like David Hasselhoff.

“On this treadmill?” she asked.

He paused the machine. They went to check the sheet.

“Dammit.” She put a finger on the slot. “I signed up for the wrong time.”

He looked at the slot she was pointing to, then at her nubby fingernail. “Tell you what, Erica—you let me take you for coffee, and I’ll let you have the treadmill.”

Her harsh features softened, and Tommy shed the feeling of inadequacy he’d been carrying all week.

It was late, but he couldn’t do the books until the last customer had cashed out. He was tired. When the knock came, he paused the computer game and opened the office door. Rebecca stood there untying her apron, her face incredulous. She handed him a tab that came to more than sixty dollars—cocktails, appetizers, porterhouse steak, blackberry cobbler. “The guy at fifty-two won’t pay,” she said.

The man was alone, the only customer left. He was slender, maybe in his early forties, dressed in jeans and a grubby sweater, clean shaven, hair slicked into a ducktail. Oily red acne scars textured his cheeks and forehead. He put on an expression of warmth and challenge as Tommy approached.

“Hi, there.” Tommy offered his hand. “How was your dinner tonight?”

“Top-notch.” The man squeezed Tommy’s hand. “Superb establishment.”

“And how was the service?”

“No complaints in that department.”

“Glad to hear it,” Tommy said. “Was there some trouble with the check?”

Yes, the man said. The trouble was, he couldn’t pay. Didn’t have a dime on him. Didn’t have a credit card or check, didn’t even have a driver’s license to offer as collateral. Payment was impossible, he said, and gave a smirk.

Tommy understood it was a scam, but he didn't know what to do except kick the man out. He considered having him work off the debt washing dishes, but it would take an entire shift, and you didn't want someone like this in the kitchen. Then looked toward the hostess stand and saw Rebecca slumped in a booth, tugging her ponytail loose, and he thought about this man accepting her service and kindness, making Rick keep the grill on, making him, Tommy, stay late, and here he was smirking about it, as though he was proud to be a thief. Then it hit him. "Sir, if you can't arrange payment, I'll have to call the police." Tommy felt emboldened by his responsibility, the way he could recognize a problem and tackle it. "Would you like to use our phone?"

The man put on a look of dignity. "No thank you."

He had a busboy keep an eye on the man until blue and red lights pulsed outside, but the man sat there calmly, back straight, hands in his lap, as though nothing was out of the ordinary. A woman officer came in looking burdened by her gun belt. Tommy explained the situation. She led the man to the car, then came back to ask Tommy questions.

He stood at the window afterwards, watching the taillights recede.

"The fucker," Rick said. "Probably pulled that scam all over town."

But it had occurred to Tommy that maybe the guy really couldn't pay. Maybe he was desperate. Maybe he hadn't eaten in days and decided to eat. He mentioned these possibilities to Rick.

"That guy's no bum," Rick said.

Tommy stood there looking out the window. He knew he was being naïve but couldn't help feeling guilty. The rain made diagonal zags under the streetlamp and

textured the parking lot puddles.

“Okay, so he needed to eat?” Rick said. “Fine. He ate. Now he has to pay. You had to make a decision. That’s what adults do, Tommy.”

He thought Rick was talking about decisions until Rick rubbed his eyes and added in a quiet voice, “Pay.”

In a dream, he glanced in the bathroom mirror and saw that his hairline had receded halfway across his skull. The remaining hair was patchy like crabgrass and came loose when he touched it. He tried to remain calm. Oh well, he told himself. At least it hadn’t happened sooner.

He felt a rush of panic when he woke, then relief. He knew he had been lying to himself about his hairline and resolved to look into treatments. Penelope was way across the bed. He crossed the cool space and entered her warm hollow beneath the covers and huddled against her backside. At his touch she murmured affectionately. Her body softened. He smelled her sticky sleep, let his lips graze her shoulder and tasted salt. He slipped a knee between her thighs, not to open them but to become entangled with her. He was lucky to have met her while he still had hair, he thought, and resolved to tear up Erica’s phone number.

By morning he had forgotten this resolution, but he had forgotten Erica, too.

He decided to surprise Penelope at work. He was sitting on the couch in sweatpants and slippers, his hair going all directions. He hadn’t done anything all day but watch TV and drink Dr. Pepper. He put on sneakers and a baseball cap but didn’t shower

or shave, and at the social services office the fat black woman behind the desk asked if Penelope was his caseworker. She had braided hair and huge hexagonal eyeglasses. Tommy pointed his bouquet of red roses at her and asked, “What does it look like?”

She told him that during business hours Penelope could meet only with cases. It was five minutes till five. Tommy scowled and called Penelope with his cell phone, watching the expanse of cubicles behind the front desk, and said he was there. Her head rose above a partition near the back. She smiled and took the phone from her ear and came over. She wore gray slacks, a black button-down shirt, her hair in a bun. She looked like she belonged on Wall Street.

“I tried,” the fat woman told Penelope.

“It’s okay. This one’s current.”

Tommy didn’t know what to make of that, but he didn’t like it. He gave her the flowers. She sloped her eyebrows like when she saw cute puppies, and she kissed him. Tommy saw the fat woman watching and felt a tingle of happiness and pride.

His family was sitting down to Thanksgiving dinner, the air thick with food smells, tall candlesticks burning above the china and crystal and steaming dishes. Tommy displayed the wine label for his mother and father, then moved around the table and displayed it for his younger brother Trevor, who had brought a stunning blonde girlfriend from Arizona, where he studied architecture.

“Are you twenty-one?” Tommy asked the girlfriend.

“I practically am.”

Trevor tugged his tie loose. “Just pour already.”

Tommy sliced the foil and removed it like a cap, spun the corkscrew, popped it, and poured a taste for the girlfriend.

She frowned at the puddle of wine. "Can I have more?"

"You're supposed to taste it," Tommy said.

"Would you just pour the goddamn wine?" Trevor said.

"Easy, you two," their father said. "I'm sure it's fine, Tommy. Go ahead and pour."

Tommy moved around the table, sloshing wine casually into each glass, embarrassment and anger vibrating in his chest. Purple droplets leapt over the rims and stained the white tablecloth. No one said anything. He poured for himself last, then sat, and they began to serve themselves.

"You don't have to open bottles at work anymore, I hope," his mother said, scooping sweet potatoes.

"Never. But it's one of those things you miss doing. Cutting lemons, too. I always liked cutting lemons."

"And how's the manager job?" his father asked.

"Oh it's great." Tommy swirled his wine and sniffed it, detected hints of chocolate and oak. "Lots of problem-solving, lots of responsibility. But I enjoy that."

"My boy," his father said. He had white hair, a red round face, a fleshy neck that sagged over his tightened collar. His expression was different than when Tommy had been in high school, earning C's and getting suspended for going to dances drunk or high. Tommy had been telling himself for years that he didn't care what his parents thought, but he liked this new expression.

“I have a new girlfriend, too,” he said. “We’re getting pretty serious.”

Penelope buckled her seatbelt while he backed down her driveway. She still wore her work clothes, which made her look professional and made Tommy feel like a bum in his jeans and T-shirt. They were going to eat sushi. Tommy didn’t like sushi, but he liked the idea of making a sacrifice for Penelope.

“I’m getting sued,” she said.

“What? By who?”

“This woman whose son we took into care, based on my decision. I had to explain to her that it’s dangerous to leave a six-year-old alone in the house for an extended period of time. How long, we don’t know, I said, because you won’t be straight with us. But long enough for him to get scared and call nine-one-one. So the woman says she’s going to talk to a lawyer. This is fucked up, she says. And I tell her, yeah, it *is* fucked up to leave a six-year-old all alone.”

He could tell by her voice that she was on the verge of tears, so he pulled into a gravel parking lot and turned off the engine. It was dark. He put his arms around her, kissed her temple, smelled lavender shampoo. “Sounds like you were doing your job.”

“We’re trying to *help* people.” Her breathing went choppy. Her chest twitched. “We don’t *want* to break up families,” she said, her voice an octave higher.

Tommy tried to comfort her, but it felt significant to have her in his arms, crying. Her vulnerability touched him.

“Why am I crying?” she said suddenly. “What the hell is wrong with me?”

“Nothing,” he said happily. “Shh.”

He called Edgar early that Saturday and said he had tickets to the Beavers game, then bought tickets from a scalper outside the stadium. They were expensive because it was last game of the season. Edgar wore an orange jersey over an orange sweater and had an orange rain poncho folded on his arm. He asked, "Why'd you tell me you had tickets?"

"So Penelope would let me go." He knew she would have let him go regardless, but he wanted Edgar to understand the level of domesticity they had reached.

The stadium tunnels were made of thick concrete slabs, and there was an overwhelming smell of popcorn. Tommy took a flask from his sock, uncapped it, swigged, then offered it to Edgar. It was ten o'clock in the morning. Edgar frowned at the flask.

"I knew this would happen after you got married," Tommy said. "Remember when we dumped beer on our heads during the barn dance photo?"

"Just let me get some coffee first."

They bought coffee and carried it to their seats and dumped in the whiskey. Tommy had another flask in his left sock and another in his coat pocket. He didn't understand football or care about the game. Edgar kept telling him about players and rankings. It was cold. The sky looked low and dark and deeply textured.

"You and Carol," Tommy said after kickoff, "you fart around each other, right?"

Edgar kept his eyes on the game but grinned. "Sometimes I hold her head under the covers."

"But how'd you go from not-farting to farting? How's that happen?"

“You forget you’re not supposed to, then one day you just fart.”

“How long does that take?”

Edgar stood suddenly and cheered. So did the rest of the crowd. Tommy was trapped in a cave of orange torsos. When it was over, Edgar sat down and said, “Carol farted first, actually. She let one rip while I was tickling her, and she got so embarrassed she almost cried. This was pretty early on. After that I felt like I had to start farting.”

Tommy kept drinking and at halftime called the restaurant to say he was sick. A prep cook answered the phone, and Tommy realized he didn’t know who to ask for, because he himself was the manager.

He ended up going to work drunk. He spent all night playing computer games and dozing off while the restaurant functioned without him.

When he received the Rogaine package in the mail he felt skeptical and foolish but took it to the bathroom immediately and massaged the cream into his scalp like the instructions said.

Penelope came over a few hours later and pressed him against the wall before he could close the door. Outside the rain came down in sheets and made a roaring noise. She gyrated her hips and flicked her tongue into his mouth and lifted his T-shirt over his head. Tommy seized the opportunity to ask, “Will you still like me if I go bald?”

She ran her hand over the patch of ski moguls at his stomach. “As long as you keep this body.”

He decided not to feel belittled. He was glad she liked his body because it made all that time in the gym worthwhile. He thought about how all these years, without even

knowing it, he'd been going to the gym for her.

At first he was startled to see Erica come into the restaurant with a girl friend, both wearing high-heels with pointed toes, wool overcoats, the shoulders matted with sleet. Then he decided there was no reason to feel uncomfortable. They stowed sodden Christmas shopping bags under the table and looked at their menus with serious faces. He waited until they had ordered, then brought over an expensive shiraz.

“On the house,” he said, cutting the foil with a borrowed wine key. “It has a robust blackberry profile with a hint of vanilla. Goes great with everything but salmon.”

Erica's smile went cold with recognition. Her sharp eyebrows accused him. “You're that guy from the treadmill.”

“Tom,” he said, offering his hand, which she didn't take.

“When you ask a girl out, *Tom*—” she spit his name like a cherry pit—“you should take her out afterwards.”

“Sorry about that. I meant to, but things started getting serious with my girlfriend.”

Erica stood, gathered her bags, and walked out.

“She can get kind of intense,” the friend said. She gave him a meek smile and stood. She had a chubby face she tried to modify with strategic makeup. “She'd probably go out with you still.”

“That stuff about the girlfriend is true,” Tommy said. “I think I love her.”

“Can we still have the wine?”

He handed it over.

The rice-cooker bubbled and hissed while Tommy sautéed chicken in white wine, butter, lemon juice, garlic and capers—a recipe Rick had detailed for him. It smelled tangy and successful. He jostled the pan to make it sizzle. The windows were steamy and gray.

“My parents want to take us to dinner next week for my birthday,” he said.

Penelope was cutting carrots. The knife made a tearing sound, then a thwack.

“Both of us?”

“I’ve never brought a girl home before. They’re going to love you. They’ll shower you with affection.”

The cutting noise continued a moment, then stopped; the knife clattered on the counter. He turned and saw Penelope contemplating him, her arms folded. “I don’t know if I’m ready for that,” she said.

“Why not?”

She shrugged and looked down. “It could put a lot of pressure on us.”

Tommy crossed the kitchen to hug her. “We can handle pressure.” He rested his chin on her forehead, ran his hands down her long back. “You’re important in my life, Penelope. I think I’m falling in love with you.”

Penelope kept her hands at her sides.

“I said I think I’m—”

She pulled away and gave him a stern look. “Don’t be ridiculous, Tommy.” Her neck and cheeks were splotchy like when his beard stubble irritated her skin. She gripped his biceps. “It’s been—what? Two months?”

“Two and a half. So?”

She looked down. “You don’t fall in love in two months.” Her eyelashes were suddenly wet. “That’s not love.”

“Hey.” He embraced her, kissed her forehead. “Don’t cry. I’m sorry. You don’t have to meet my parents.”

But he knew what he felt. He’d never been in love before, and now he was.

Tommy’s fingers were frantic on the keyboard. He had already beaten a long-standing high score, and now the Tetris pieces came rocketing down. He reacted instinctively. He was serene, unthinking, Zen-like. Someone knocked on the door. He maneuvered several pieces more, then paused the game.

“There’s a guy here who wants to see you,” the hostess told him.

“Is it a vendor?”

“He just said he needed to see you.”

Tommy rubbed the digital haze from his eyes. He stood, waited for the head rush to subside, then made his way through the bar. The clamor was pleasant and refreshing, the jumble of voices, the tinkling piano, the sound of forks touching porcelain. He smelled a blend of special-occasion aftershaves and perfumes and the sweet scent of liquor. The man beside the hostess stand looked delicate in his slacks and dress shirt. He had slight shoulders and was several inches shorter than Tommy. “Mr. Upshaw?” he asked, looking Tommy in the eye.

Tommy shook his hand. “Call me Tom. What can I do for you?”

The man glanced at the crowd waiting for tables. “Can we talk in private?”

“About what? I’ve got a busy restaurant here, sir.”

“I’m Penelope’s boyfriend.”

Tommy felt his smile go stiff. He recognized him from Edgar’s party now—tanned face that didn’t seem to need a razor except at the chin, straight Roman nose, sincere eyes, flaxen hair disheveled meticulously above a confident square forehead. They were still shaking hands. “Her ex-boyfriend?”

“Her boyfriend,” the man insisted.

“I think you’re confused.”

The man shook his head in a disappointed way that made Tommy believe him. He released Tommy’s hand and wrinkled the corners of his eyes, a pained expression. “Listen, Penelope’s been going through some difficulties lately, but we’re going to try to move past it now, if we can. I know she’s kept you in the dark about all this. But she can’t see you anymore.”

Tommy puffed out his chest. “Says who?”

“Well, Penelope.”

Tommy heard himself yelling. He didn’t know what he was saying, but the little man looked frightened, his eyes like nickels beneath the trendy hairdo, which pleased Tommy. He noticed customers turning, understood that the restaurant had gone silent except for the elegant piano music, but he couldn’t stop himself, not until Rick came charging from the kitchen and bear-hugged him. Tommy was grateful for the restraint because it suggested he was about to do something crazy. He submitted himself to Rick’s powerful arms but pretended to struggle. He didn’t really want to fight; he just felt confused, and deceived. Rick lifted him off his feet and carried him to the office and put

him in the desk chair. He whistled and made some gesture, and a moment later there was a beer on the desk. Tommy felt too nervous to drink, but Rick kept standing there, so he took up the beer and sipped it. It was cold and tasted good.

“We’ll bring more,” Rick said. He tapped the computer screen. “Look at some porn or something.” He left, closing the door gently.

Tommy drank the beer, stunned by the scene he had made and a little amused. He worked his mind over what he’d heard, carefully, like a prep cook thumbing a blade, and each time it snagged on way the little man had shaken his head, as if in resignation. He was angry about so many things he didn’t know where to begin, except with the possibility that it wasn’t true, and he tried making that argument, though he saw all the evidence against it now. Then he tried to inflate his injury, imagining the ways he’d been used, but he couldn’t quite believe in them. He wanted to call Penelope but was afraid to. He gulped the beer and waited for Rick to bring another, which Rick did. Wordlessly, breathing heavily, he set down a fresh pint and removed the empty one. Tommy felt great tenderness for him.

When he resumed the Tetris game, the pieces fell like lightning. They stacked up before he could react. He typed his name on the high score list.

The next morning he passed the fat black woman with the hexagonal glasses and marched down the aisle. He looked into several cubicles but couldn’t find Penelope’s, so he returned to the front desk for directions, which the fat woman happily provided.

Penelope was on the phone. She held a finger at him and continued the conversation for several minutes, cradling the phone against her shoulder and scribbling

notes. Tommy sat and watched her. He smiled. He couldn't help it. When she finally hung up, he said, "Guess who came into the restaurant last night." She kept her hand on the phone and stared at it and didn't say anything, and Tommy felt his heart tumbling from a great height. "Penelope?"

Her face twisted. She covered it with her hands. "I'm sorry."

He watched her cry. He didn't know if he was allowed to touch her. He wanted to put a hand on her shoulder, but he just sat there and watched her battle the tears. Then she calmed down and blew her nose.

"Can we still see each other?" he asked.

She looked at him from puffy red sockets.

"We don't have to be exclusive." He knew he was embarrassing himself, knew he would regret saying these things, but he couldn't stop. "I don't want to lose you. I want you in my life, Penelope. I'm in love with you."

"Stop saying that. It's not true."

It was true. But it wasn't something he could argue.

Penelope stood when he did and embraced him, but her touch was cool, mechanical, detached, and it saddened him that he couldn't have one last moment of affection. She was crying again, so he held her, which was difficult. He let his eyes roam the grid of cubicles, the people working in them. Finally Penelope pulled away. She sniffled and kept her eyes down. "Tommy, I'm sorry."

"I go by Tom now," was all he could say.

Edgar's answering machine said they were at the coast for New Year's weekend,

but Tommy kept calling and leaving messages. When it got dark at four-thirty he poured a shot of Early Times. He tried to watch TV but couldn't care about anything happening on the screen. He searched his CD collection for lovesick songs and listened to a few, but they wouldn't break him open, so he poured more whisky and went through his old photos and found the one of Edgar and him dumping beer on their heads. It was the group photo from the fraternity barn dance. All the brothers wore cowboy outfits, lined up on hay bales, looking with surprise and laughter and admiration at the crazy ones kneeling in the foreground, showering themselves with Hamm's.

He looked at the photo a long time. Then he drove to the old fraternity house. It was a big wooden mansion with brown-edged panels that gave him the impression of a Swiss cottage. On a lower panel someone had written DOUCHEBAGS in ketchup and mustard. The letters sagged wetly, saturated by a moisture that seemed half mist, half rain. As Tommy walked from the car it tickled his face like fog but soaked his hair and jacket.

He recited the necessary proofs of membership and the kid at the door invited him to the basement, where they were having a darts tournament. There was no party because almost everyone was gone for winter break. Tommy followed him down the staircase, which contained the familiar smells of dried beer and cold cement. Enormous party speakers in the basement played hip-hop at low volume. The carpet had been torn away to reveal slick concrete but the smells of accumulated sweat and vomit persisted, tinged by disinfectant. Half a dozen boys holding cheap beer turned to stare at him. They looked like children, smooth-cheeked, spindly, sullen. He tried to call back the old easy feeling, the state where nothing mattered except how much beer was left, but these boys

depressed him, and all he could feel was the big building's emptiness and dilapidation. Someone tossed him a beer, and he decided to carry out his plan anyway—he dumped it over his head and yahoed. The boys only looked at him with blank expressions, then turned to look at each other. A couple laughed, but it wasn't the same. He felt cold and sticky, and silly. Something inside him collapsed then, and he was relieved to finally feel tears in his eyes, hot and satisfying, like the sun.

BRICKS

Sid can feel the sun's impending heat. It hides behind a towering canyon bank and on the opposite bank paints a stripe of amber daylight. The landscape here is brown, brown in a thousand varieties—the vertical canyon walls, the sun-scorched dirt, the dry weeds and desiccated trees, even the sky, pale with flat sunlight. At the front door Sid surveys all of it and cultivates a bracing hatred.

He shoulders the pickaxe, grimacing—the hot spots that developed last week on the his palms have this week erupted, and each morning they tear, fresh and raw, during the first few minutes of work. Sid is twenty-two and unaccustomed to blisters. He hooks his wrist over the handle and sets off across the hard-packed earth, smelling the dust his feet raise. Rows upon rows of sun-baked bricks lie there, waiting to be loaded into the oven behind the clearing. The oven is the size of a school bus, built with coarse adobe blocks that match the color of the dirt around its base. He passes it, passes the chest-high pile of crumbled clay he excavated yesterday, the wooden wheelbarrow, the shovel, and arrives at the ten-foot bank of striated adobe, his office. It smells like a kettle boiled dry.

At first he enjoyed the work, the dry air and thick sweat and morning shadows. The torque and strain of his muscles after so many months of inactivity gave him a feeling of rapture. But then the ache set in. The exhaustion. The blisters. Worst, the tedium. Every day is the same routine, exactly what he has come to Mexico to escape. He wanted some messiness in his life, and here he is, living an existence scripted as rigidly

as it was at home.

He hears the old man's cheerful whistling and with tender palms grips the pickaxe handle where it is stained with blood. When he rocks it back, his shoulders and spine call out their soreness. But he rocks the pickaxe again, building momentum, then takes a breath, heaves it against the firm adobe, loosens a few crumbs, and loses himself in pain. He drops the pickaxe and blinks at his palms, their cracked scabs oozing darkly. He can't do this chain-gang work anymore. He won't. It feels as though he's been doing it for months, though this is only Friday of the second week. He returns to the clearing, where the old man is gathering yesterday's yield. His face is brown and textured like an old baseball mitt. The stubble on his cheeks and chin is storm-cloud gray but his mustache is black. Sid feels an unaccountable contempt for him, the type that detention students feel for a principal. Sid hates his easy whistling, his bright eyes, his eagerness. He hates that he enjoys this wasteland.

"*Señor*," Sid says, one of the few words he has learned.

The old man looks up, face lit, cheery.

"My hands." Sid extends them. He feels a drop of blood roll between his fingers.

"Ouch. Can't work."

The old man says something, then picks up a stone and runs a finger along the calloused ridge of his palm. Sid can't understand the words, doesn't even try, but he gets it. Like a rock.

Sid smiles pleasantly and says, "You're a douche."

The old man grins, pats his shoulder, then picks up four bricks and leads him into the cool dark oven, the inside surface of the adobe fired hard and smooth. He shows Sid

how to stack the bricks into a tight grid, then goes to the adobe bank, spits on his palms, and lifts the pickaxe. He delivers blows to the bank that lift him off his feet. To see a fifty-year-old do the work he can't leaves Sid fuming with embarrassment, shame, and his hatred swells.

He gathers and stacks the bricks. He works slowly because his lower back aches and because he doesn't know what he'll do if he finishes early. When the sun escapes the canyon bank it makes the ground shimmer with heat. He squints and applies more sunscreen—his skin is fair and burns easily. Going from shade to sunshine so frequently gives him a headache, keeps his eyes in a continual state of adjustment. He feels lethargic, but restless, too, and he is sore everywhere. He doesn't want to be here anymore. But he doesn't want to go back.

In southern Oregon Sid works at his father's accounting firm, a business he is expected to inherit someday. It is a small firm but does steady business and provides a comfortable lifestyle. His father—a wisp of a man, docile, perpetually smiling—started it when he realized he would never make partner at Allen & Bausch. His bosses there both had sons who would leapfrog him. He wears an expression of quiet satisfaction whenever he talks about it, which is how Sid knows what is expected of him. It has been an understanding between them since he was a child, and Sid has accepted the responsibility as a fact of life.

That's why he always knew his summer job working grounds crew at Meadow Lake Golf Club was temporary. His place in the world had already been carved out. That wasn't a bad thing. It gave him a sense of security, of purpose, and he wondered how people could cope with the uncertainty of any other existence. Still, he enjoyed the

grounds crew work. He enjoyed meeting his coworkers in the dark silence of early morning, the camaraderie of their sleepy hellos, the rituals of coffee and timecards and gassing up. He enjoyed watching the day begin from his solitary mower, scents of grass clippings and burnt diesel in his nostrils, crisp dawn air in his lungs, a low mist hanging over the fairways that later burned away to reveal spectacular varieties of green—it seemed to him that the human eye was made to absorb as much green as possible. He had found the job on his own when he was sixteen and returned to it every summer. In high school he secretly researched golf course management programs at universities across the country and imagined a life devoted to tending these vast gardens, but only for the sense of peace it generated. He wasn't going to study golf course management. He was going to enroll at Southern Oregon University, declare an accounting major, do just enough work to get by, and then go to work for his father.

That finally happened eight months ago in June. Sid didn't like the job and does not want to return to it.

He spends the whole morning loading the oven, a task the old man can finish in a couple hours. The wife calls to them as Sid carries the last of the bricks to the oven. He stacks them, then follows the old man to the house, which has smooth cement floors, brick walls, wooden rafters that prop a roof of corrugated aluminum. They sit at the kitchen table, which is rustic-looking, disproportionate, obviously homemade like all the other furniture in the house. The wife, who looks several years younger than the old man, drops a napkin-wrapped stack of homemade tortillas between them and serves plates of soupy pintos sprinkled with goat cheese. On the side are a few strips of dried, salty beef.

Sid eats quietly with a fork, disgusted by the old man, who grips the beef with his molars and yanks, then pushes beans with a tortilla and slurps up both. He and his wife take turns reeling off rapid Spanish. They keep repeating a phrase that sounds to Sid like “S-O-S.”

When Sid is finished, he stands, says *gracias*, and goes to his room to apply more sunscreen. On his way he pokes his head through the curtain that partitions Leticia’s room from the hallway. He can barely detect her scent but fills his lungs, savoring the traces of her. Leticia is the old man’s daughter, sixteen and slender and pretty, with flawless creamed-coffee skin, bright black eyes. In his own room he shucks his dirty white T-shirt and slathers sunscreen on, flexing his abdominals, trying to appreciate the faint ridges of new muscle under his fingers as Leticia would.

Outside the sun is bright and hot and tipping toward the west canyon bank. He hikes the dusty path to the river, a secluded section where he and Leticia meet for his Spanish lessons. He finds her on the near side lounging on the river stones, but today two friends lounge beside her. All wear tight denim shorts and baggy T-shirts. Their bras show beneath the wet fabric. It irritates Sid that these two girls would interrupt his time with Leticia. They haven’t noticed him yet and he considers turning back, but when he imagines spending the afternoon apart from Leticia he feels empty.

“Hola,” he calls.

All three turn. The two friends size him up with open mouths. They seem chubby and childish next to Leticia, who says, “Hola, *Seed*.”

He likes the way she says his name. He likes the way the corners of her mouth go sharp when she smiles. She has an elegance beyond her years, a slenderness and posture that demands a black evening gown, which Sid likes to imagine buying for her.

She wrings out the bottom of her T-shirt and ties it in a knot. Her stomach is smooth and brown. Behind her stretches the broad brown river. When Sid reaches her, she stands and slides her arms around his torso and moves her face up for a kiss. Her lips are plump, expectant. Sid wants to kiss them but doesn't. The friends make him conscious of Leticia's age.

Leticia waits, then kisses the hollow at the bottom of his neck with soft wet pressure, and Sid can't help planting a small kiss on her forehead. The friends look at each other and giggle. One says something to Leticia.

"What'd she say?" Sid asks. Leticia has learned English at school and speaks it rather than teaching Sid Spanish.

"That the baby have gray hair."

"What baby?"

She puts her fingers in his hair. "Yellow with black," she says. "For gray."

Sid breaks the embrace. He doesn't like this talk about the future. He sits on a stone, takes off his boots and stuffs his socks into them. He lifts his shirt over his head and feels the sun tickle his chest and shoulders. The friends giggle again. Sid stands and glares at them. "You ought to tell them to beat it," he says to Leticia.

Her face crumples, confused.

Sid waves at them. "*Adiós amigos.*"

They burst into laughter. Leticia scolds them in Spanish and then catches Sid's arm as he stands and steps toward the river. She wades in beside him holding his upper arm. "No worry, Sid. Are my friends. Are nice. Only want to see my pretty boyfriend one time."

He looks at her lean forearm, its sweep of hair sparse and downy and black. He should correct her terms, he thinks, both the *pretty* and the *boyfriend*. The first is effeminate and the second implies he has a future here. But he doesn't want to ruin their affair. Instead he takes a breath and dives headlong. The water rushes through his hair, cool against his scalp, washing the caked clay dust and sweat from his face as he swims an underwater breaststroke. His jeans feel loose and heavy. If not for the friends he would have left the jeans on shore. Leticia would have stripped to her underwear and he would be pressing against her cool wet skin now, tasting her tongue, their hips grinding while he pleaded and she said no. He has taught her how to give an underwater handjob, has twice pushed a finger inside her, but their sex goes no further. She is Catholic, waiting for marriage.

He emerges halfway across the river. Downstream a burro stands up to its belly in the slow current, ears back, eyes half-closed in the sunshine.

Leticia is watching him with her arms crossed. "Sid, you have twenty-two years?"

"Yeah," he says, treading water.

"*Veinte-dos*," she says to her friends, who are standing now. They shrug and pick up their shoes. She turns back to Sid. "The boyfriend of Milagros has twenty-nine years."

Sid begins an easy sidestroke back to shore. "Too old."

The friends are leaving. Leticia calls something to them and when they call back she grins and covers her mouth but doesn't respond. The friends disappear into the brown foliage, laughing.

Sid stands when he reaches Leticia. River water rushes off him. He embraces her wetly, the length of his body against hers. Cords of damp black hair fall over her cheeks

and look bluish in the sunlight. Sid pushes them back, his scabbed palms grazing her cheekbones, and kisses her mouth, finds her firm tongue.

After awhile Leticia pulls away. "Sid, when you have twenty-nine, you still live here?"

It's a preposterous question. "Maybe," he says.

"Here is nothing, Sid. I don't like. Is better we live in Oregon." She pronounces it *oh-bre-gohn*.

"*Or-uh-gun*," he corrects, and pulls her by the hips into deeper water.

The massive shadow of the canyon creeps across the river and when it reaches the shallow water Leticia has to leave. Her father expects her home after the Spanish lesson. Sid sits on a river stone, aroused but unrelieved, and watches her dress. He kisses the back of her thigh. She lingers, then moves away up the trail, casting an expression of reluctance over her shoulder before disappearing. Sid turns to the river and scans the towering brown bank on the other side, aware of his pleasurable longing. He has to tilt his head to see its dark summit.

If not for Leticia he would go back tomorrow, he tells himself. He wonders if he would miss the golf course as much as he did this past summer, when he spent his days gazing at the office window. The window didn't distract his officemates, middle-aged men in dress-shirts who hunched over their desks, and at first this baffled Sid. Later it agitated him. In the fall, when the window went gray, he felt despair. He told himself it was just a matter of getting used to office work, but sometimes, usually lying in bed after his girlfriend Samantha had fallen asleep, he admitted it might be something deeper. He saw the years ahead like roadside telephone poles extending over a flat wasteland,

beyond the horizon, and he felt marooned.

Nights like those, he had a terrible urge to do something reckless. One night he got out of bed, went to the kitchen, and poured himself a shot of rum. He drank it off, puckered, poured another. It was crazy. There was no reason to do it. He had to work the next day.

It was four in the morning when Samantha came to the kitchen. He had been slamming the glass down after each shot, hoping to wake her. He was nine deep. He kept track with matchsticks, arranging them head-to-toe in a neat column.

That weekend he pierced his eyebrow. When his father told him to take it out Monday morning, he made a great show of petulance but complied. He didn't feel much disappointment, actually. The piercing only made him self-conscious. Later he had a small tattoo done on his shoulder, a turtle, and when it healed he covered it with a larger tattoo, a skull. He wanted a tall mohawk but instead dyed his hair black, found it ugly, and buzzed it. He broke up with Samantha. He drove five hours to Oakland for a prostitute and found the experience bland. He broke up with Samantha again. One weekend he went camping with friends from college and took psychedelic mushrooms. It was December and rainy, miserable. He spent all night sneaking glances at a broad tree trunk that seemed to be judging his place in the world. "That fucking tree," he kept telling his friends. "I hate that tree."

Then he found the flyer. He was searching the public bulletin board at the park for a punk show—the music didn't appeal to him but the attitude did—and noticed a handwritten advertisement for a language school in rural Mexico. *Get back to basics*, it said. *No electricity. No pavement. Just pure living. Beautiful natural setting in El Cañón Cobre*

(Copper Canyon). For more information, contact Marshall. There was a phone number. Sid reread the flyer, then tore it from its staples. Mexico, he thought, and felt a surge of giddiness. What would his father say?

He called the number and went for coffee with Marshall, who wore thick dreadlocks and was thrilled about Sid's interest. He explained that he had stumbled onto the *pueblito* during a backpacking trip. It was at the bottom of this deep fucking canyon where they used to mine silver and copper but didn't anymore, so now it was totally isolated. Everything came in on the back of a fucking burro. No shit. He had seen it. Long fucking string of burros, loaded up with flour, cement, beer, whatever. They had running water, though. Don't ask him how, but they did. They used slopes or something. Gravity. Anyway, a mini-van shuttle from a train depot had just been established, and he wanted to share the town with the world, which was why he started the language program. He had posted flyers two months ago, and Sid was the first to respond. The deal was, you paid your own travel expenses but the program was free. You helped make bricks in the morning with your host family and learned Spanish in the afternoons. They'd feed you, everything like that. Great people. Real. He would write them a letter to arrange it, and when he heard back he would call Sid.

The scheme sounded dubious, absurd, but that was how Sid felt, too. "Terrific," he said.

He didn't tell his father because he wanted to be certain the trip wouldn't fall through. Three weeks later Marshall called, and that evening Sid visited home. He declined the cold casserole his mother offered and found his father engulfed in the easy chair, watching a program about ants on the Discovery Channel. When Sid came in he

muted the television and produced a shallow smile. Sid sat beside him in a rocking chair, hands shoved deep in his pockets. They talked about the rain awhile. It was February. Then Sid said, “There’s something I have to tell you, Dad.”

His father waited, smiling impassively.

“I signed up for a language program in Mexico. I leave in two weeks.”

His father glanced at the silent ants on the television, then returned his eyes to Sid. His expression didn’t change. “How long will you be gone?”

“Hard to say. A month, a year—maybe longer.” This was an exaggeration. Marshall had said he could stay as long as he wanted, but he had no intention of staying more than a month, if that long.

His father scratched his scalp and then smoothed his thin brown hair. “Well,” he said, “good. Good for you. That sounds like a good experience. I wish I had done something like that when I was young.”

“What about missing work?”

“Take some time off. That’s one of the advantages of a family business.” He unmuted the television. “Have you tried your mother’s casserole?”

Sid felt heat rise in his cheeks, and it wasn’t until then that he realized he was hoping for a screaming match. He wanted his father to call him foolish and naïve and make demands about his direction in life, which would allow Sid to make accusations of his own, and dismissals, and possibly a rash decision. *You people*, he imagined himself saying before storming out the door, implying something much larger, voice dripping contempt—*You people make me sick*.

Nothing like this had ever happened between them, and it had been silly to expect

it. But Sid felt caged by his father's civility, cheated that he was being denied something as fundamental as generational rebellion.

The river looks still, stagnant, but it is moving. Sid puts on his damp jeans and dirty shirt, his socks and boots. He can't bear to see the old man again, smiling dumbly at his tortured existence, happy when he should be miserable, so he walks into town. Houses squat on both sides of the wide dirt road, sharing walls. Some are brown adobe, some brick. Some are whitewashed but dirty from road dust. Women watch him from shady doorways and make comments to each other in Spanish. He tries to keep his eyes away from them. Instead he looks at the steers eating cardboard from trashcans, which seemed funny at first but now seems mundane. He watches a pack of dogs yap at the heels of a trotting burro. He studies the litter scattered in the brush, crushed red cans of Tecate, the only brand of beer in town. He looks at the men building with bricks, their jeans and work shirts smattered with clay and cement, and he wonders who needs these houses, these bricks. He wonders if Leticia's father built his own house with his own bricks. He hopes so, for some reason. It's a notion that appeals to him.

Sid goes back to the house. It is still sunny there, uphill a quarter-mile outside of town, but the canyon shadow climbs through the brush just beyond the yard. In the clearing lies a grid of new bricks, pleasingly neat, tops dry, bottoms dark with moisture. Sid circles the house and finds the old man kneeling by the mango trees, their branches barren of fruit and leaves dull with dust. He drives a long iron spike into a hole and scoops out dirt with a tin can. Sweat drips from his nose and chin.

Still working, Sid thinks. It's a travesty. He goes to the old man and kneels by the

hole and says, “*Qué pasa?*”

The old man looks up and fills his face with a grin. He shuffles toward Sid until he can hold his elbow, then explains with a series of pantomimes that he is going to plant trees—*limónes*, he says—and hands Sid the can. Sid tells himself he should refuse. But he doesn't. He crouches beside the hole while the old man does the hard work. Then the old man stops, and Sid scoops from its bottom the product of the his labor.

They finish the hole and start another, and they become efficient, two parts of the same machine. Sid loses himself in the rhythm of the work and does not notice when the canyon shadow overtakes them. They have nearly finished the second hole when the wife calls to them. The old man stands slowly, one hand pushing at a knee, the other bracing his lower back. Sid looks into the hole. It bothers him to leave it like this. He takes up the spike, aware of the tenderness in his hands, and drives it into the earth at the bottom. His palms throb. Five minutes later he stands, leaving bloody handprints on the spike and the can, pleased to have the hole finished before eating.

In the kitchen the wife stirs a cauldron and Leticia uses a cloth to press raw tortillas against a flatiron skillet. Sid hears the old man singing in the shower, which is a black tube that emerges from the bathroom's brick wall and pours icy water. He thinks about how much it would hurt the old man to learn about his trysts with Leticia, his blunt probing finger.

For dinner the wife serves a brown broth with cabbage and cauliflower and carrots from the garden and short gray tubes. Leticia and the old man eat with gusto. The tubes are rubbery, smooth outside and textured inside. Sid lifts another with his spoon and inspects it. “What are these?” he asks Leticia.

“You know goat?” She lays her hand below her belt. “Here on goat.”

“Its stomach?”

“No.” She raises her hand above her belt. “Estomach is here.”

Intestine. Sid picks at the vegetables while dusk deepens outside. This is the last straw. He has to escape. He tells himself he’ll enjoy the office after these two weeks of manual labor. If not, he can learn to play golf and buy a set of clubs and whenever he misses the green of the golf course, he’ll make a weekend tee time. He likes Leticia but tells himself she’s not worth this. There are plenty of girls back home. She’s nothing special. He’ll get over her.

The old man eats three bowls of the soup, pats his belly, groans with pleasure, picks up his guitar. Leticia and the wife light candles and attack the dishes. Sid remains at the table a moment to be polite, and the old man forces the guitar on him, tries to teach him. Sid’s fingers are clumsy and weak. He gives back the guitar, says *gracias*, and leaves. Outside, the canyon walls are black and a sliver of moon hangs sideways in a strip of sky washed with stars. He walks to town in the dim bluish light, listening to the old man’s flamenco progressions grow quiet with distance.

He goes to the cantina because he can buy dinner there and ask about the minivan shuttle. He isn’t sure when or where to catch it. Rough, unpainted cement coats the walls and floor. The chairs and tables are wooden and rustic except for two folding lawn chairs. Sid orders tacos showing four fingers, orders *cerveza* showing one. A woman with silver teeth delivers his Tecate, then floats around the room lighting candles. The beer is the same temperature as the muggy air. In the corner a woman rolls corn tortillas and fries beef. Sid wonders if it is the same steer the old man bought from. Last Saturday they

walked to the edge of town where a rickety table stood with a massive flank spread open on it. It steamed in the dawn's gray light. One man hacked at the flank and another dropped the chunks of meat into bags and took crumpled bills without wiping his hands. The table dripped blood. Mangy dogs licked the dust. Sid carried one of the bags back to the house and felt the grotesque warmth of the fresh meat inside. It felt like a living wound.

The cantina fills with other men. They smack their lips after pulling from Tecate cans. Sid recognizes some as the men he saw laying bricks and wonders what the rest of them do. They all look clean and tired.

One sits with Sid. He is short and slim, his mustache soft even at middle age. He raises his index finger and mutters random English vocabulary. "Pig." He sets his eyebrows low. "Run." He shrugs. "Empty."

Sid lets him continue a few moments, then interrupts: "Do you know about the train?"

The man's forehead wrinkles. "Train," he repeats. He raises his index finger. "Airoplane." He nods. "Bus." He pronounces it *boos*.

"No, the train." Sid holds his palms up and pretends to look around. "The train. *Dónde está?*"

The man shakes his finger at Sid. "*Aquí no hay.*"

"But there's a minivan, right?"

The man looks confused.

"*Cómo—*" Sid pauses. He walks his fingers over the table, then points to himself and waves goodbye. "*Cómo adiós?*"

The man looks confused. They sit for a moment in silence before the man offers a handshake and retreats to a table of laughing men. Sid wishes he had learned Spanish from Leticia rather than seducing her. He'll have to ask her about the van, he decides, and immediately dreads it.

Sid orders more beer and eats his tacos. Finishing the fourth, he notices a sweet familiar smell like pollen and charcoal but can't place it until he hears rain tapping and then clattering on the roof. He drinks in the scent and goes to the window, a square glassless opening, and sees by candlelight a black watery curtain. He imagines dust rising from the ground like steam.

The clatter continues, so he orders another beer. He finishes it and orders another, then one more. When the rain sounds like a drizzle, he pays the silver-toothed woman and leaves. He feels a little drunk, and it makes him lonely. Outside the darkness is like a blindfold. He blinks repeatedly, trying to make his eyes adjust. When he closes and opens them he can't tell the difference.

He walks with his arms extended, relying on instinct for direction. The road is slippery with mud. When it dips he loses his footing and sits down. He stands, wipes his muddy hands on his muddy jeans, and continues on. He sticks to the incline on the road's left side, where he can sense the turns, the straightaways, but the rain is picking up again and he walks more briskly than he should and slips again and comes down on his back. He puts his head in the mud, clenches his lips, then stands and continues. Soon he sees a pinpoint of light up the embankment ahead, where the house should be, and he aims for it. He knows he cannot find the side trail that will take him there so he clammers through the clawing brush, planting his hands ahead to keep from slipping, sometimes dropping to

his knees, but always progressing, eyes fixed on the small light. When the hill levels he sees it is a candle the family has left in the window.

He finds his way to the door. The house is quiet, dark. He takes off his boots before entering and feels the muddy weight of his jeans and shirt and considers undressing. He scans the darkness, then takes off his shirt, jeans, socks, his skin tingling and tightening at the exposure. His boxer shorts are clean but he removes them anyway, and cool air touches him. He has a vision of Leticia: She sits on the bed, awake, waiting for him, legs crossed at the knee, naked anklebones hard like marbles. Instead of carrying his clothes to the shower he leaves them on the stoop. He takes the candle from the window and follows it to the hallway. At Leticia's room he pulls back the curtain. She sleeps on her side in a clean white T-shirt, mouth open, hair wild across the pillow. Sid feels his chest tighten, feels the thick pump of blood in his uncovered erection. He places the candle on a chair and slips under the covers, his mind gently swaying with beer. Leticia stirs. He embraces her and presses himself between her thighs and feels the fabric of her underwear.

She opens her eyes. They find his face. "*Seed*," she says, releasing a dreamy smile, nuzzling him. "You are here."

He inhales through his nose and smells Leticia's clean dry hair. He kisses her mouth, which is sticky with sleep, puts a hand under her shirt and caresses her long naked back. His hips push. "Leticia," he says. "I want you."

She kisses him and pushes back with her hips. "Sid, you have no pants?"

"I want you," he says. "*Por favor*, Leticia."

She puts her face in his chest and they continue to grind their hips. When he slips

his thumb beneath the elastic band at her hip, she goes limp.

“No,” she says. “I cannot.” She pulls her hips away and looks at him. “But stay you, Sid. Stay you here.”

For a moment Sid misunderstands. He thinks she knows he has decided to leave the canyon. He rolls onto his back, knowing that isn't what she means. He puts his hands beneath his head. “Leticia, how do you catch the van?”

“Van?”

“A big car.” He stretches his arms wide to show her, then puts them back. “To the train.”

She props herself on an elbow and gazes at him, eyes wide with concern. “You go from here, Sid?”

“I just want to know.”

She studies his face. “No you go, Sid. No you go. You go?”

“I don't know. Maybe.”

She lays her head against his chest. “Sid.” The word starts high and ends low.

On the ceiling the candle makes a ring of light, edges bright, center dim. Sid watches it waver, then says, “Leticia, how do you say, ‘I want you’ in Spanish?”

“*Te quiero*,” she says. “But means other thing, too.”

“*Te quiero*,” Sid repeats. “*Te quiero*, Leticia.”

She presses her face hard against his chest. She keeps it there a long time. It lifts and falls with his breathing like flotsam in rough water. “Okay,” she finally whispers, and takes off her panties quickly. She folds them, stashes them beneath the pillow. When she turns to him her pubic hair rasps his hip. “But no you go.”

Sid finds himself mildly reluctant. He wants more than just a surrender—he wants her desire, her love. Also, he understands that, back home, her age would make this immoral, criminal even. And her virginity frightens him. He has never been with a virgin, and he feels some vague association between deflowering and torture.

He turns to her, feels the hot unobstructed contact. He lifts the T-shirt over her head. She takes it from him, folds it, stashes it with the underwear. Her breasts are smaller than he imagined, their nipples brown. He kisses them, kisses her mouth, climbs between her legs.

“You go?” she asks. “Sid?”

Rather than answering he puts his head under the blanket, kisses her sternum, her stomach, sucks at her belly button, then moves down and smells wet metal. He teases her with his tongue and tastes her sharp sweet taste until she grows slippery and pushes her hips. He lifts up, finds her with his finger, aligns himself. Leticia clutches him. He pushes a small push, and she gasps.

He is gentle, accommodating. He goes slowly and asks Leticia if she is okay. It takes a long time, but he doesn't mind. He wants it to last a long time. When he finally finishes, it produces shudders so intense they are painful, and he feels as though he is emptying himself of everything. Then his head clears. Leticia is crying noiselessly, he realizes, and he becomes frightened. His misgivings return, dragging with them guilt and alarm. He wonders if she is bleeding. The candle has burned out, leaving the air inky black, so he can't check, and he feels he can't ask, either. It occurs to him that the sheets will stain. Then it occurs to him that he should have brought and used a condom, something he never had to worry about with Samantha, who took birth control. He stands

and gropes toward the hallway, fetches a towel from the bathroom and returns and presses it between Leticia's legs. She is crying still, making wet noises now, her chest convulsing, and Sid worries about the parents hearing her. He considers returning to his own bedroom to hide, but doesn't. He holds Leticia, because it's all he can think to do. He tells himself not to panic but sees the situation spinning beyond his control.

After a time she stops crying, but she doesn't speak to him. Sid tells himself he won't be able to sleep. Then he closes his eyes and goes to sleep.

The sunlight in the window is crisp. The room smells musky and sweet. Leticia lies on her back, blinking, fingers locked over her belly.

Sid gets out of bed. On the pillow is a crusty brown stain. He touches the back of his head and feels a twisted crust of dried mud.

"Hide the sheets and the towel," he tells Leticia in a low voice.

She only gazes at him.

He sneaks into his own room, dresses, then goes to the bathroom to urinate and clean himself. He checks on Leticia, who's still lying in bed, then strolls into the kitchen. The wife stands over the stove cooking eggs and heating water in a big cauldron. The old man sits at the table mashing leaves and chilies in a bowl. He motions for Sid to sit, and when he does, the old man catches his wrist. Terror seizes him.

The old man looks at his palm a moment, then dips a finger into the bowl and spreads a thin film over Sid's blisters. It tingles on his skin like a peppermint would in his mouth. The old man looks into his face and grins. "Bueno, no?"

"Bueno," Sid says. He holds out his other hand.

When he has finished applying the balm, the old man leads Sid to the front door. Outside everything is wet. The brush glistens like bronze. The leaves of the mango trees are emeralds in the low sunlight, and the sky is so hard and blue it looks like it might peel. The old man turns to Sid, smiling brightly. He reaches above his head and pulls down fluttering fingers. “*Lluvia*,” he says, and Sid knows he means rain. “*La primavera?*” he continues. “*Marzo, Abril, Mayo?*” Sid recognizes these as the months of spring. “*Mucha lluvia*,” the old man says. He puts a hand on Sid’s shoulder and shows a chili pepper, bright green. “*La primavera?*” He gestures with the pepper, then sweeps it at the landscape. “*Verde, verde, verde.*”

Sid stands with the old man, gazing out at the landscape. He knows he’s supposed to picture an overwhelming green, but his mind keeps returning to Leticia—her folded panties, her patience in receiving his ministrations, her wide blinking eyes. He wonders what she’s feeling, what this all means to her, what she needs from him, and he turns in time to see her carrying the soiled sheets to the kitchen, where her mother waits with boiling water and soap.

TOWNIE

I was working with McEldrige, this geezer who'd been born around here and never left. He hobbled from the locker room right after the hometown kids burst out, single-file, wearing their too-small uniforms and dribbling basketballs, most of which knocked a heel or knee and squirted away. These JV kids weren't the best, but at least they knew how to play. Before last year I'd been reffing middle school games and not even getting paid. For three years I'd had to impose order on a bunch of midgets chucking the ball around and running without dribbling. But I'd managed. I'd done a hell of a job, actually, which was why I'd been promoted.

McEldrige joined me at center court. "How about this sunshine," he said, and gave me a slap on the shoulder, grinning like a proud old grampa. "A man could get used to this."

"Makes it a million times harder to get anywhere," I said. "The snow's all crusty."

"Don't have the sidewalks cleared?"

"I was coming from the other direction. From the college."

McEldrige ran a palm over his shiny head. "You work there this morning?"

"No." I would've winked, but I've never been able to close just one eye. I gave a sly grin instead.

McEldrige smiled back, but it was a half-assed smile. "How's that wife of yours?"

"She's fine."

“Seems like such a sweet girl.”

I watched the visiting team run their jump shot drill, then leaned toward McEldrige and lowered my voice. “That big kid with the red hair. Shuffles his feet before he shoots.”

McEldrige nodded, meaning he’d watch for it during the game. Then he folded his arms and shut up.

That morning’s game was a makeup. Two weeks earlier, it’d snowed so hard they’d closed the pass, which meant the other team couldn’t make it into town. That used to happen to us sometimes, back when I played. We’d be in sixth period, watching the hands of the clock crawl. When the secretary’s voice finally came through the intercom, instead of asking teachers to please release all basketball players, she’d give the news—pass closed, games canceled—and we’d all groan, halfway out the door already. The other guys were bummed about afternoon classes and another grueling practice. For me it was something else. It always made me a little crazy to hear the pass was closed, my worst fear made real—nothing coming into this shithole town, nothing leaving.

Since the snowstorm, though, we’d had some nice weather, nice for a Montana February anyway, sunshine and clear skies and temperatures up into the forties. It was clear and sunny again that morning but cold. On my way to the gym every breath froze all my boogers. I was only wearing a jacket over bare skin, too, so the shivering was pretty bad. I’d left my shirt in the girl’s dorm room because it was covered with her barf. Crystal, was her name. Maybe Kristen. Something like that. She’d still been passed out when I left. And the snow had this layer of ice on top, which wasn’t strong enough to hold my weight, so I kept busting through. Each time I had to high-step, hoping I could lift

myself out and skate across the top the rest of the way, but each time I felt that ice crunch, and I dropped.

I just about had hypothermia by the time I made it to the locker room, which seemed dim after all that blinding snow, smelled of wood rot and stale sweat. I heard a couple basketballs thumping in the gym, but nobody was in the locker room yet, so I stripped down and showered, blasting hot water to wash away the chill, and I felt pretty good by the time I got my locker open and saw my referee uniform crumpled there— zebra stripes, black slacks, black sneakers, chrome whistle, bar of Speed Stick, everything I needed. The jersey and slacks stunk because I always tossed them into the locker rather than taking them to the Laundromat, but that was why I had the deodorant. I rubbed down the insides of the slacks, the jersey. Then some in the sneakers. I tucked in my stripes, hung the whistle around my neck, and headed to the gym feeling like a new man.

As warm-ups ended I started getting butterflies, like always, because I wanted to call a perfect game. That was how you made it in the business. Today the butterflies were especially bad because I hadn't eaten, but when McEldrige threw the jump ball, I focused on the action, and suddenly I was flying around everywhere, bending and twisting and straining to keep my eyes on the ball, on players' feet and hands. I swooped in from half-court to make calls McEldrige missed, calls that nobody argued. I anticipated collisions below the hoop before they happened, watching for position, control, feet planted or a shoulder dropped, the numbers on the jerseys, all of it over in a split second. It was like the goddamn Matrix. Time slowed down. Someone shot a gun while I was reffing, I

probably *could* dodge the bullet.

More people had been showing up to the JV games since I'd started working them. They liked to see my excitement. One of the visiting kids got nudged on his shooting elbow, for example, and I blew my whistle before the ball was out of his hand, running in from the baseline, my one arm straight up, the other pointing at the kid who'd fouled him, and when the basketball fell through the hoop I yanked my hand down so hard the players leaned away. I didn't do it for the performance, though—I did it because I was enjoying the hell out of myself, because I was so wrapped up in the action I lost control.

After the final buzzer, McEldrige and I met at the scorer's table. He smiled and squeezed my arm. "Outstanding work today, Kermin."

"Like usual," I said.

We signed the scoresheet. McEldrige was already shuffling away when Mr. Koch caught me. He worked the varsity games and taught high school history. We used to call him Mr. Cock, but he turned out to be a pretty good guy. He'd been the one who got me started reffing. He'd asked me to stay after class one day my senior year. I thought he was going to tell me I was failing, but he didn't. He said, "I saw this year's roster. That's a rough deal, Kermin. I don't think it's right, not after the three years of hard work you've put in." I didn't answer because I was surprised and embarrassed. "Listen," he'd gone on, "you're going to have some extra time on your hands. You want to ref a few middle-school games, I can set that up."

Now he was scratching his beard and asking had I seen Terry, the other varsity ref. I told him no. He looked up at the electronic scoreboard, which was blank except for

the yellow-bulb numbers ticking down the start time of the varsity game—14:05, 14:04.

“I’ve tried calling him at home,” Koch said. “I’m worried he forgot the makeup was today. Probably took his family out for pancakes.”

“Terry,” I said, like I knew all about him. “Can’t ever count on that guy.”

“You got anywhere to be right now?”

I pictured my wife sprawled on the couch, a package of Oreos resting on her massive stomach, black crumbs caught in the fuzz mustache she wouldn’t wax anymore. She was due in a week or two. Big as a fucking whale.

“Nowhere important,” I said.

“Mind sticking around?”

“Love to,” I said, and I went to stand at center court with him, imagining all the people who’d see me work the game, people who thought I’d never amount to shit—old teachers, old teammates, Coach Walters, Brody and Franklin. And standing there, watching the visiting varsity players practice smooth lay-ins, I saw my whole career unfold—my first varsity game at age twenty-two, and by the next year I’d take over for Terry, and after knocking the socks off varsity crowds for a season, I’d get a call from the college about some old shit retiring, and I’d join their three-man crew, show I was the best of the three, show I was the best of anyone working Division-III games, and get a call from a Division-I league, the Pac-10 or ACC or SEC, who’d fly me out to all the games and pay me enough to buy an Escalade with chrome rims and subwoofers, and because I was the best ref there, they’d have me work March Madness, where everyone would see me on TV, including some bigwig ref who’d decide I should work the pros, the NBA, and he’d hire me, and then I’d have made it. Be calling Shaq for fouls, Kobe for

traveling. Go live somewhere warm, where you never had to worry about a closed pass or crusty snow.

Koch turned to watch the visiting team, so I turned to watch the home team, right as Isaac Templeton caught a pass under the hoop, jumped straight up, and dunked the ball behind his head. And I realized I had a shortcut to the NBA. Isaac Templeton was the biggest thing to ever come through this town. He was six-foot-eight and at age seventeen had a man's body—pale round muscles, hair on his face and chest. He was quick for his size and had a nice touch from the outside. At the time he was deciding between schools like Duke and Arizona and UConn, all the big ones, schools that were like farm systems for the NBA. They had scouts there every game, gray-haired dweebs with clipboards who sat in the first row and dripped hot dog relish on their shirts. These were some important dudes, and now they'd be watching me.

But two minutes before the opening tip, in walked Terry. His comb-over flopped as he stomped his feet to jar the snow from his sneakers, which squeaked and left wet prints on the court when he came to join us, grinning like a moron. I wanted to strangle the guy.

Koch glanced at the scoreboard clock—1:51, 1:50. “Cutting it awfully close, aren't you, Terry?”

“Don't I know it. Car spun out. Gotta get some new tires.”

Koch turned to me. I gave him a look, and Koch said, “We've got a capable replacement here, if you'd like to take care of it now.”

“I sure do appreciate that, Lou, but I need the paycheck. I know it's not much, but that oughta tell you how much I need it.”

In the locker room, as I slipped my coat over my stripes, I told myself it didn't matter. What mattered was Koch chose me instead of McEldrige. I'd have Terry's job the next year anyway, so it was only a matter of time before I was working the NBA. But then I heard the game horn, the screeching sneakers, the blast of cheering, and I got a pull in my throat, a feeling like finding your stocking empty on Christmas morning. Or finding it bulging with what turns out to be an empty bottle of Jim Beam. Believe me, that's worse.

On my way home I stopped at the McDonald's where Brody and Franklin and I had eaten lunch every day for four years, and I recognized the guy working the register—Jeff Arendt, a tall skinny dude who'd played varsity when I was a freshman and dunked once during a game. He wasn't skinny anymore. Probably couldn't even get rim anymore. We pretended we were strangers because he was working at McDonald's and I was holding barfy jeans. I ate my burgers by a window, where I could see the snowy Dumpsters Brody and I used to hide behind during fifth period, smoking weed.

At home I found Vanessa sitting upright on the couch in sweatpants and sweatshirt, black hair smooth, eyes fixed on whatever she was knitting now. The baby already had about dozen caps and bibs and pairs of booties—which were pretty cute, I had to admit, so small they could've fit my big toe—but Vanessa kept making more, like she couldn't stop if she wanted to. She didn't stop now, either. I was already taking off my coat when she asked where I'd been. I put my arms out to show her the ref uniform. “Where does it look like?”

She kept her eyes down. “I guess the game lasted all night?”

“I was out with the guys last night. I crashed at Brody’s place.”

She snapped her head over, and I saw little half-moons of white crud at the corners of her mouth. There was an empty carton of vanilla ice cream on the floor with a spoon stuck in the leftover gunk. “Don’t you lie to me,” she said, wagging her finger. “I called Ken Brody. His girlfriend picked up and told me they spent the whole night together.”

I circled to the kitchen, where she couldn’t see me cringe. “Girlfriend,” I said. “She’s in for a rude awakening if that’s what she calls herself.” The microwave clock said it was only 11:49, but I pulled an MGD from the fridge and carried it to the couch.

“Where were you, Kermin? With some girl?”

“Let’s not fight.”

“Tell me.”

I looked at her like I was trying to make a decision. I could see the real Vanessa in there, even with her face all puffy—the one who used to tell me how great I was and that she loved me, the one who hadn’t been able to keep her hands off me. I licked my thumb and wiped away the crud at the corners of her mouth.

“Tell me, Kermin.”

“Fine.” I popped the beer, took a few gulps. “I *was* at Brody’s. We were gonna cruise the strip, knock back a few cold ones, but then we got a call from Jeff Arendt.”

“Who’s that?”

“He’s a guy we went to high school with. Older. Pretty good three-point shooter, and dunked in a game once. He calls us, and the dude’s sobbing, like bad. It’s embarrassing to listen to. And he starts blabbing about how he wants us to have all his

stuff, his stereo and everything. His headband signed by Dr. J.”

“Is that a basketball player?” she asked, burrowing her dirty feet under my thighs. Her voice was curious now, not angry, and I knew I was home free.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “The thing that matters is that Jeff’s acting so weird. Me and Brody say we’ll take his stuff, sure, but after we hang up we get kind of worried. We feel like maybe we should go check on him, but then that chick who thinks she’s Brody’s girlfriend? She shows up, and Brody tells me to just go alone, so I do, even though it’s butt-ass cold and the snow’s all crusty and impossible to walk in.”

“I hate when it’s like that.”

“But I manage. And when I get to Jeff’s place, I find him in his bathtub pounding whiskey, and there’s a razor sitting on the edge of the tub, one of those disposable ones taken apart. So I say, What’s up, Jeff? And he starts talking to me about how he’ll never make it out of this shithole town except with the razor. He’s probably right, but I don’t tell him that. Anyway, I had to stay up the whole night talking to the guy. I thought about calling you but it would’ve been dangerous to leave him alone even for a second. Plus he made me promise not to tell anyone.”

Vanessa looked sideways. I never knew if she believed these stories, but she always acted like she did. What other choice was there? I drank my beer and waited for her to make the easy decision.

“Next time just call,” she said finally. “You have to call me. I’m your wife.”

She leaned toward me. I didn’t want to kiss her because I expected that sewage taste that came from sleeping, but I did kiss her, and she tasted minty. That white crud must’ve been toothpaste, not ice cream. I pictured her waking up alone but brushing her

teeth anyway so that we could have a nice kiss when I got home, and then I thought of my own mouth—the alcohol, the sleep, the sweat, the cheeseburgers. It must have been disgusting, and here she was digging around with her tongue. It made me feel terrible about everything, especially the lying. I wanted to tell about Crystal and the other college girls, about how I felt when they described their hometowns and futures after we'd fucked. I wanted to explain how after she had the baby I'd stop this stuff, and how she'd start a diet and exercise program that'd get her looking as hot as ever, and how things would go back to normal then, how we'd start tearing each other's clothes off like we used to, and stay in bed all day, talking, touching. I wanted to tell her everything, like I used to.

For the rest of the day I sipped beer and napped because the next day I had to work in the morning and then do another game in the afternoon. I was the only source of income since Vanessa had gotten too big for waitressing, so I had to take my job seriously, which could be tough when you slopped mashed potatoes for college kids with trust funds. You had to remind yourself you were headed for bigger things, or else go crazy.

The next morning was cold. My skin steamed until I was dressed. My breath came out in clouds. Vanessa was just a lump in the blankets.

The sidewalks on campus were salted, bone-dry. The place looked like a college was supposed to look, tall brick buildings, tons of trees, and usually there were young people marching around like they were headed somewhere, which made it feel like the type of place I belonged. But nobody was out this early, and it was dark, and it didn't

look much different from town anyway with everything trapped under snow and ice.

The cafeteria smelled like it did every morning, lemon degreaser and coffee. The warmth relaxed my shoulders and made the tops of my ears burn. In back the cooks bustled around with huge trays and tubs, but they took a moment to holler, “What’s the word, Kermin?” I answered like I was supposed to, and they all shouted, “Hey!” and then went back to what they were doing.

Most of my opening duties were finished by the time the boss opened the front door to let in the nerds and exchange students already waiting, so I stepped out to the yard behind the kitchen for a smoke. There was gravel beneath the shoe-packed snow, two ice-coated lawn chairs knocked on their sides, and a fence to block our view of students. I gave myself just one cigarette per shift because I would need my lungs to race the sidelines with the fast break, especially once I made the NBA, which is what I pictured while I flicked dead ash into the snow, hands numb, eyes watery from the smoke and cold.

The rest of the morning I traded out tubs of scrambled eggs, replaced empty coffee jugs, wiped down tables. It wasn’t the best gig in the world, but it wasn’t the worst. No rush. Just a constant flow. Enough to keep the dining room half full, slightly less around eleven, when I had to change the line for lunch, which I was about to do when Crystal came in.

She was one of these rich girls who pretended she had it rough, the type that shopped at Goodwill and cut her own hair and sewed punk-band patches on her backpack even though her parents were paying a hundred grand for her tuition. Usually these girls came in all dolled up and gaga for me the next day, but Crystal looked like hell, face pale

and featureless without makeup, hair lopsided from sleeping, greasy and clumped together like vines. She wore pajama bottoms and a baggy sweatshirt and an ugly expression. You could hardly tell she was the same girl. “I washed your shirt,” she said, then rifled it over the sneeze glass at me and started marching away. I almost let her go because I didn’t want to make a scene—workers weren’t supposed to date students, obviously, and I needed this job—but then I got worried about the scene she might make if I didn’t smooth things out, and I pictured lying on her firm naked body again, so I rushed around the line, caught up, touched her elbow.

She stopped but wouldn’t look at me.

“Hey,” I said. “Hi.” She looked up then, and her eyebrows loosened a little.

“You’re angry because I left, huh?”

“I’m not angry.” Her voice was aggressive. “I’m not angry,” she repeated.

“I didn’t want to go. I told you there was a game the next morning. Next time I’ll stay.” I smiled and tried to stroke her shoulder, but she pulled back and wrinkled her nose like I was lima beans.

“There shouldn’t have been a first time. I don’t care how cute you are. Did you even graduate *high* school?”

“Now wait a minute,” I said.

“I was drunk.” Her bottom lip started pulling down. “You took advantage of me,” she said, voice cracking on *advantage*.

I glanced around. Sorority clones had packed themselves around a table by the aisle, and a few were watching. I leaned in to keep our conversation private. “We were both drunk,” I said. “It’s not a big deal. Next time we won’t drink so much, okay?”

Crystal?”

Her eyes went wide. “My name’s not *Crystal*.”

I opened my mouth, but no words came. I knew I had just made a mess.

“Kristen?” I managed.

“You don’t even know my name.” Her voice had lost its sharp edge. It was weepy, full of self-pity. Then something seemed to occur to her. Her face tightened, and she locked her eyes on mine. “You can get in trouble for getting a girl drunk and taking advantage of her.”

I showed my palms. “Hold on. You got yourself drunk. And you weren’t exactly resisting.” Which was absolutely true.

“What if I say I didn’t want to do it? You know what that means?”

“It means you’re a liar.”

“You’ll be the liar. You’re the townie.”

I stuck my finger in Crystal’s face. “I’m not a fucking townie,” I said, then spun and snaked between the tables to the aisle. That was what these college assholes called you. Like it was a crime to be born in a college town. Half the sorority girls watched me and half watched Crystal or Kristen or whatever her name was. As I passed by, I saw one girl chattering to the next, her voice low so I couldn’t hear. I tapped her on the shoulder, the one who was whispering, and I stuck a finger in her face. “Fuck you,” I said. “I’m moving to L.A.”

The girls looked at each other like they were about to bust up laughing. A different one said, “Fuck off, you fucking lunch lady.”

“Townie?” I said. “Townies don’t become NBA refs.”

Then they did laugh. I called them stupid cunts and walked away. Something like that could get me fired, but what was I supposed to do? Just stand there and take it? Ask if they'd like more orange juice? Go ahead and get me fired, was my thinking. I'd still be the best ref in the goddamn state.

It was past eleven now. The cooks hollered that lunch was ready, but I ignored them and grabbed another cigarette. The freeze rushed into my sinuses the second I stepped outside. I lit up, exhaled, and noticed the smoke was the same color as the sky, which made me think of McEldrige, all giddy about the sunshine yesterday and then waking up this morning to find it gone. For some reason that depressed the hell out of me.

I clocked out an hour later and left through the back. I didn't want to go home because I was still pretty worked up and might yell at Vanessa for no reason. I thought about going to a bar, but I never drank before reffing, and I wasn't about to start. The JV game didn't start for another few hours, but I could shoot baskets. Then I remembered that I wore my uniform home the day before and left it there. I looked at the sky. It was low and gray like a concrete ceiling, and I thought of McEldrige again. Maybe he'd have an extra uniform. Maybe I'd go cheer that old fucker up about the weather.

I knew he lived on Baker but I wasn't sure where. Most of the places were manufactured homes or dumpy rentals, and I found myself looking for a log cabin or something fancy like that. I'd almost passed it when I saw his pickup parked on a snowy lawn in front of an ugly duplex, light brown with dark brown trim, paint peeling. A jagged gash ran up the concrete steps leading to the front door. I pushed the doorbell but

didn't hear any noise inside, so I banged the door, and it rattled in its frame, flimsy. There was barking, but it sounded tired, like an old obligation.

McEldrige answered the door wearing a purple bathrobe, and the guy had never looked older. The skin on his face hung like a wet rag, droopy around the eyes, sagging his mouth into a frown, dangling under his chin. "Kermin," he said, and tried to gather all that loose skin into a smile. The doorway poured heat.

I yanked a thumb behind me. "It got cloudy."

"Well what on earth did you expect?" He patted my shoulder. "Why don't you come in from the cold." Inside, a golden retriever with shaky hips sniffed my knee while McEldrige closed the door. "Let me splash some water on my face," he said, then disappeared into a hallway, the old dog hobbling along behind. The place wasn't what I expected. Nothing on the walls. Cheap gray carpet speckled with dirt and bits of food, a disintegrating leaf. Couch that was losing its stuffing. Coffee table littered with crusty paper plates and old newspapers and an empty KFC bucket. Two space heaters on either side, pointed at the couch, coils glowing electric orange. Smell of dog hair and burnt dust.

He came back a few minutes later wearing a plaid shirt tucked into jeans, and he looked better, more like himself, which was a relief. We sat on the couch, a stained cushion between us, and watched the dog make a circle as though it couldn't arrange itself properly. There was a silence. I started to feel uncomfortable and wished I hadn't come. Like he needed me to point out the clouds.

"So—" He forced the word and then let it die in the silence.

"I was just wondering if you had an extra uniform I could use," I said.

"You can use it if it fits."

More silence. The dog lifted its head when McEldridge scratched its ear.

“Something bothering you, Kermin?”

I looked at the coffee table, searching for something to say, and noticed the KFC bucket wasn't empty after all. There was a beer can in there, standing upright, a band of sweat around the bottom. “The thing is,” I said, still thinking. Then it hit me. “Your officiating,” I said. “It's not exactly the best in the world.” McEldridge nodded as though this was what he'd expected, and it got my brain working. “It's not your fault,” I said, “but you're getting pretty old. You can't react quick enough. You can't get in position. Probably your hearing's shot, not to mention your eyesight. It puts a lot of pressure on the other ref to work with someone who doesn't pull their weight.”

He kept his eyes on the dog. “I'm not what I used to be.”

“No kidding. Take me for example. Pretty much I'm the exact opposite of you—in shape, young, good eyes, all that. For me, there's a reason to ref. A future. For you, it's just a waiting game until you break a hip or keel over or something. There's no future in it. You'll never rise through the ranks. You definitely won't make the NBA or move to Los Angeles. Me? I plan on doing all that.”

“Glad to hear it,” he said, showing off the gap between his front teeth. “That's the attitude a young man ought to take.”

“But you gotta have talent, too. Talent's a rare thing.”

He cackled and slapped my thigh, and his face looked tighter now, younger. Not young like me, but it had some life, some movement, more than the baggy thing he'd shown me at the door. I was glad I could cheer the old fart up, but I started to wonder how often he was like this. He was always smiling at the gym, but I pictured him alone in

this little house all day, limp-faced, gloomy, moving from the couch to the bathroom and back, hiding a beer can when there was company.

His cackling transformed to coughing. He covered his mouth with a fist until it stopped. "Tell you what," he said, eyes bleary. "Let's you and me make a deal." He cleared his throat a couple times, then hocked something up and swallowed it. "Second cousin of mine that teaches at Douglas, he helps run the state tournament. Doesn't decide it on his own, but he's got a say in who they hire to officiate every year. Now, you don't have any chance until you start doing varsity games, but when you do, maybe I take old Marty out for a beer and give him a highlight tape and recommendation for you. How's that sound?"

Before I could answer he launched into another round of cackling and thigh-slapping. "Priceless," he said, meaning my expression.

And that was all it took to move one step closer to the NBA, I thought. But then McEldridge got serious. He worked himself up like he was angry, stuck a crooked finger in my face. "Now here's the deal. You break this, forget about it. Understand?"

"Whatever you want," I said, thinking he'd ask me to keep quiet about his bad reffing, which wasn't actually that bad. "Name it."

He jabbed his finger against my chest. "You be good to that girl you married. No more funny business. You're lucky, you understand? You tell her that, how lucky you are, and you be a good man, Kermin."

For a moment I was too stunned to respond. Stunned he'd ask that as a favor, but more, stunned he thought I was a bad person.

"Promise me."

“I promise,” I said, mostly from shock.

He smiled a little, like he was relieved, and reached down to scratch the dog’s belly. She rolled over and lifted her paws for him. “Well I’m glad that’s settled,” he said.

But I started wondering what right McEldrige had to call me a bad person. He was the one who’d never left town. He was the geezer living in a dump, alone. He hardly knew anything about me. I’m no saint, but who is?

McEldrige let me borrow his extra uniform, which fit fine, except that the pants’ cuffs hung a few inches above my ankles. It made me feel ridiculous, but it was only one game, and only for a JV crowd. McEldrige drove us to the high school, hunched over the steering wheel, squinting. We did our usual routine during warm-ups, watching for elbows and extra steps, and then we reffed the game, same as always, McEldrige doing his best, which was pretty good, me flying around like a maniac, right on top of everything. The home team lost big. Probably they were worn out from the day before. I was pretty tired myself.

Afterwards Koch met us at the scorer’s table. He glanced at McEldrige, then said to me, “Terry called in. Came down with the flu, apparently. Think you’ve got enough in the tank for another game?”

“You bet.”

I looked at McEldrige. He was grinning like he’d just won the lottery. He gave me a wink, patted the back of my head. “I’ll have to find me a video camera.”

Koch leaned closer. “My guess is, Terry might continue to have car trouble and flu symptoms, unless his wife comes back with the kids. You can probably pull double-

duty the rest of the season if you want.”

And just like that, it was happening. The possibilities became real, and standing at center court, I imagined actually leaving, moving away from the college girls and cafeteria cooks, Brody and Franklin, Koch and McEldrige. Leaving behind all the places I knew, like the spot behind the McDonald’s Dumpster, or the florist where we’d shopped in our tuxes, or the house we’d egged because it was built on our bike pit. Places like this gym, with its wooden bleachers and musty smell of sweat and popcorn, dead spots on the court I could outline with a marker. Or the asphalt court where I’d found Vanessa shooting underhanded free throws in the sunshine.

I turned to watch the home team, and there was Isaac Templeton, the prodigy, the pride of the town, enormous and graceful, bursting from his tiny uniform. The jersey came untucked when he lifted his arms for a rebound. He sagged his shorts but they still reached only halfway down his thigh. I checked the bleachers, and sure enough, there was the row of clipboards. The men holding them ate hotdogs and nachos and M&M’s, all of them, like they’d cleaned out our little glee club concession stand. Behind them, the bleachers were packed. It looked like the whole town was there.

Koch threw the opening tip, and the game started. The action was fast, crisp, guys playing the right way, and the fouls were subtle—fistfuls of jersey, hip checks with hands in the air. I missed a couple calls and realized it too late, or after Koch caught them. In the second quarter he called over-the-back on a play that unfolded right in front of me, and I pictured what the crowd saw, me in McEldrige’s uniform, standing there blindly, sprinting the court with my white socks showing. It made me feel like a jackass, which took my focus off the game, which made me miss more. It got so bad that I started

blowing the whistle just to look involved, and each time I did, I pointed at Isaac Templeton, who showed his palms like I had a gun, his face in disbelief. I called three fouls that way. Each time the hometown crowd got louder—first whispers, then a murmur, and finally, right before halftime, a roar that dropped into booing. It was so loud I had to use hand signals to communicate with the scorer's table: *blocking, number four-zero*. Probably everyone I knew was there, old teachers, teammates, Brody, Franklin, Jeff Arendt in his McDonald's visor, everyone except Vanessa, all booing me. It can get to a guy. So when Isaac Templeton passed me, his head down, muttering, "ridiculous," my throat clenched. I blew the whistle, made a T by tapping my palm against my fingers: *Technical foul, number four-zero*. Isaac Templeton whirled to face me, pleaded, "What'd I do?" And I blew the whistle again, gave him the second technical foul that let me toss him from the game, and then I gave him a third just for the hell of it, and when Coach Walters stormed onto the court, I gave him a pair of technicals, too, and threw him out, and threw out an assistant coach for looking at me funny, and then gave technicals to each of the men holding clipboards.

There was a yank at my jersey. "Kermin," Koch said, teeth clenched. "Get a hold of yourself." There were droplets of sweat caught in his thick brown beard. He was a kind man. A good man. I thought about that a moment, then blew my whistle and threw him out, too.

Walking home. Shivering. No coat, no hat, no gloves. Frozen sweat beaded on my forehead. Frozen sweat gluing McEldrige's uniform to my skin. The sidewalk was slick, and my legs felt tired, weak, so I walked in the crusty snow to keep from slipping. The

cold penetrated the numbness of my fingers, stung their cores.

I was three blocks from the gym when I heard Vanessa call my name, and the instant I heard it I knew she had walked all the way there to watch me ref, which she hadn't done since the season before. I stopped and turned. She was waddling as fast as her little legs could carry her, bundled in ski overalls and huge coat and wool hat. As she got closer I saw her fat cheeks jiggle, and it occurred to me she would never look the way she used to. Not ever.

"I told them to all shut up," she said as she reached me. "I told everyone, shut up, don't boo, that's my husband, he's the best referee ever." She stood there, looking up at me, breathing steam. I knew it was supposed to be a touching moment. I knew it was supposed to make me feel soft and mushy inside, and that the thing to do was give her a big hug and tell her what McEldrige wanted me to. But I didn't care about McEldrige right then. I didn't care about Vanessa, either. I didn't even care that my career as a referee was finished. What I cared about was the cold. It squeezed me like something solid. I felt it all around me, in my balls, my skull, my chest—squeezing. I'm talking cold like you've never imagined. Cold that demands your full attention. Cold that makes you believe there's no such thing as heat.

Vanessa stood there, blinking, her belly straining the coat's gortex, and I imagined the baby living in there, imagined how nice and cozy he must be, not twelve inches from me, basking in ninety-eight degrees like it was some tropical paradise. He didn't even know what cold was. It made me feel a little better, picturing that.

Vanessa took my hand. "It's cold," she said, like she knew all about it. Then there was nothing else to do but go home, so I turned, and we walked in that direction together.

LISTENING

That night the neighbors wake me again. My girlfriend Lindsey has her back pressed against mine and breathes calmly as a child. She never hears them. She sleeps deeply, oblivious to the world. Not me. My sleep is fragile; once it's broken, it's gone. Right away I come fully awake and feel the hot hopelessness of disturbed sleep. But I listen anyway. I lie in the dark and listen to the rhythmic squeaking, the thump of the headboard, the slapping flesh, the groans and encouragements, the pleading, the squealing, the crescendo, and finally the silence filled with these echoes.

What I should do is bang on the wall as soon as I wake, but the problem is that I've already spent three weeks *not* banging on the wall. If I started now, it would communicate not only that I can hear and that it bothers me and to stop, but would also tell them that all this time I've been lying here, listening.

The truth is, I enjoy it. I find it arousing. That's why I didn't knock the first time. I felt a sense of wonder, privilege even. If you listened carefully enough you could see what they were doing as clearly as if you looked through a window.

But I don't want them to know about this.

I turn over, prop myself on an elbow. Lindsey's smooth profile looks bluish in the light seeping through the blinds. She's only nineteen, twelve years younger than I am. She was a virgin before we started up three months ago, not by choice, she says, but because in high school people minded her arm. It's malformed, too small and frozen like

it's in a sling, the wrist loose, fingers dangling. I pull the covers away and roll her onto her back, and there it is, a shriveled monster lying across her stomach. I try to avoid judging the arm like this, though, so as penance I touch it with my fingertips. It's not cold. It's regular body temperature. And it feels like real skin, not thin or rubbery. You can feel the bones and sinews underneath. I don't believe a bad arm could prevent a pretty girl from getting laid, especially in high school, but I do believe her neurosis about it could. I've never mentioned this because she flies into a rage if the arm receives unnecessary attention.

I lie back down and nuzzle her, wishing she was awake. It makes me lonely to be the only one up, and if I can't sleep I might as well be screwing. I slide my hand over her small breasts, down her stomach, through the coarse tangled pubic hair she won't shave, and I know what to do about the neighbors.

"Lindsey," I say. I nudge her shoulder. "Hey, Lindsey. Lindsey. Lindsey." I shake her. I plug her nose. "Lindsey." I joggle her head. "Lindsey."

She wakes suddenly, eyes wide with fear, looking straight through me. Then her eyes go soft and she clutches me. "I was having a bad dream," she says.

"About what?"

She lets go. "It was about," she says, and stops. She looks around the room. "I was in some kind of . . ."

"Some kind of what?"

She keeps looking around.

"I wish you'd tell me," I say. "I'd like to hear it."

"Oh hell, I can't remember." She drops her head to the pillow and closes her eyes.

“Why’d you wake me up, Patrick?”

“I know how to make the neighbors stop, or at least let them know that we can hear.”

The muscles in Lindsey’s face go loose. Her eyes are closed. She’s drifting off.

“Listen,” I say, and give her a good shake.

“What? Do it then.”

“We both have to do it. We have to do it together.” I climb onto her. My erection presses against her pelvis, her withered arm against my ribcage. It feels like something alien. I raise myself away, put some distance between it. “We have to make noise,” I say, and move like I’m thrusting. “Oh yeah,” I say.

Lindsey never makes noise in bed. Sometimes she gasps or pants, but nothing vocal. She mostly just clenches her eyes and moves her jaw around. She’s still very self-conscious about sex, which I tell myself is lovely. But even if she did make noise, the neighbors wouldn’t have heard. They work at a nightclub and don’t get home until two-thirty. The guy mentioned this when I helped him carry a recliner across the complex three weeks ago. I don’t know anything about his girlfriend, except the noises she makes during sex, which remind me of my ex-wife.

“I don’t want to do it again tonight,” Lindsey says. “I’m not ready yet. I’m not in the mood. I’m tired. I have a headache. I’m hungry.”

I realize I’m pretty hungry, too. Now that she mentions it, my stomach feels like it’s caving in. “There are Chinese leftovers.”

“Your breath is stinky.” She rolls me away, gets out of bed and stands over me, blue and lean and naked.

“We don’t have to actually do it.” I touch the knob of her hip and shiver with desire. “We could just make the noises.”

“Go talk to them if it bothers you so much.”

“You can’t just go talk to someone about that.”

“Why not?”

“You just can’t. Not about that.”

“Well I’m not getting involved.”

I make myself smile, because this is what I love about Lindsey—her innocence, her refusal to be corrupted. Today when I came home from work, for example, she was sprawled on the couch watching cartoons. (I’ve given her a key so she can get away from her mother.) I poured a bourbon, then went to the couch and he held the glass to her lips. She shook her head, but I kept the glass there. She shook her head again. That’s what I love about her. I’m glad she refused my plan. My ex-wife wouldn’t have. She wouldn’t even need to be asked. With the noise she made, she would’ve had the situation reversed. Which gives me another idea. “If you won’t, I know someone who will,” I say.

“Don’t you dare.”

But I have to remedy this situation. It does strange things to a person, missing something as necessary as sleep. During the dissolution of my marriage, I spent a long time feeling overwhelmed by the insignificance of my life, of life in general, and I can tell I’m headed back in that direction. I’m moody. I’ve been giving friends the slip, leaving without saying goodbye. At work I’m on probation because too often I go home after lunch instead of finishing my sales calls. I don’t do anything, just sit on the couch, trying to get a fix on the stress and disappointment fogging my mind. Usually I drink

bourbon. Sometimes I find myself wondering how I could acquire a prescription for sleeping pills or painkillers. I want to sit on the bed and drink straight from the bourbon bottle and empty the pills into my palm and contemplate them. I won't take them. I don't even have them. But still.

Plus, I don't expect my ex to answer her phone, much less consent to what I propose. I'm hoping Lindsey will stop me, screw me, or at least agree to make some noise. I get dressed to give her a chance. I pull on socks and a T-shirt and jeans and tighten my belt, but she only watches with wide incredulous eyes, so I turn on the light, which vacuums all the mystery from the room, and take my phone from my pocket.

"If you call her," Lindsey says, "I'm leaving you for good."

My ex answers her cell on the second ring. There's a jumble of voices in the background and the hollow sound of a bottle falling over. "Did you call earlier, Patrick?" she asks, slurring only slightly.

I did. I gave Lindsey money and sent her to pick up the Chinese, then poured another bourbon and dialed her number with a calling card, so she wouldn't know it was me. I listened to her breathe and ask hello. When she said my name I hung up. It wasn't the first time I'd done this.

I sit on the bed. "Where are you?"

"Shandra's."

This is good because Shandra lives only a few blocks away. "I need a favor."

"Now?"

"It'll take maybe ten minutes."

"Doug's here," she says.

“What do I care? Bring him if you want.”

“Know what he’s been drinking all night? Root beer. No joke.”

“I’ve got a new girlfriend who mostly sticks to 7-Up.”

“Know what I’m drinking?”

“Yes,” I say. “Bourbon.”

Lindsey stands in the center of the room, hugging herself. The pillow has left a dent in her hair. She glares at me, then punches me in the shoulder twice before leaving the room, and I’m surprised by the power in her fist.

“What’s the favor?” my ex asks.

I explain the problem. I even tell why I can’t bang on the wall. It sounds perfectly logical when I tell it to her, and I find myself happy to be having the conversation. It almost feels appropriate when I ask her to come make sex noises. For a moment she doesn’t answer, and I realize it is not, in fact, appropriate. “Five minutes is all I’m asking,” I say. “Please, Carmen. I’m desperate.”

Her breath makes a rushing noise against the receiver. “Just a second,” she says, and hangs up.

It’s October. The last time I saw Carmen was May, the day the divorce became final. We were sitting at the kitchen table in the cottage we were trying to sell. I told her about feeling lousy, and she told me to take up an interest.

“You mean like a hobby?”

“Nothing solitary,” she said. “Something that involves interacting with other people. Aren’t you lonely, Patrick?”

“No.” I shook the bourbon bottle and grinned but then lost the grin.

“Jesus,” she said. “Get out and do something.”

I palmed her thigh.

“Not that. And I guess you shouldn’t call anymore. I’ve got Doug now.”

“You’ve got Doug now.” I scratched my jaw and shook my head and looked out the window at the blackberry brambles. I blinked and cleared my throat. “Well, I guess you’ve got Doug now.”

She ended up letting me masturbate with her. In deep afternoon daylight we lay naked on the bed we used to share, a few feet apart, not touching. It was like nothing I’d ever experienced. It was the happiest and saddest I’ve ever been, lying there, each of us working on ourselves but intent on the other.

The activity I started was coaching Little League. The rest of the league called my team Moles Holes instead of the Molson Hardware Cardinals because my players were no good. Every other team had kids that could at least catch a fly ball. Mine just waved their mitts. But I loved them. They were seven, eight years old, and they came to the field like a pack of dogs, running and shouting and laughing. They gathered around me and yanked my thumbs and tried to climb me like a jungle gym and showed their new batting gloves and cleats and sunflower seeds, and when they made a mistake or were reprimanded for horsing around, they gave faces that said the survival of the world depended on my forgiveness. That was the look I wanted from Carmen.

I always forgave my kids. I was eager to forgive. Every chance I have, I forgive.

The season ended in August, but by then I was with Lindsey. I found her in the produce section of the supermarket and instructed her to squeeze and shake and sniff the cantaloupe she chose, though I didn’t know which would tell about the melon’s ripeness.

She did them anyway, eyebrows pinched in concentration. I took the plastic bag pinned between her bad arm and stomach and held it open while she dropped in the good ones. When I asked for her number, we had to go to the bulk foods, where I could ink the digits onto a twist-tie.

Now she's standing naked in front of the microwave, its light on her stomach. Her belly button looks like a yawn. She lets me kiss the back of her neck but doesn't turn to face me. "After we eat I'm going home," she says. "I'm breaking up with you."

I wrap my arms around her, and we sway sideways like we're slow-dancing.

"I'd love it if you answered the door naked like this," I say.

"Why?"

"Because you're so pretty."

She leans into me. "Probably not as pretty as her."

"She's ugly."

The microwave beeps. I keep my arms around Lindsey while she opens it, stirs the noodles, turns it back on. The smell of hot lo mein rises. She cuddles against me, brushes my arm lightly with her fingertips. "I still have to break up with you," she says.

"I'll miss you."

"Well you should have thought of that before." She breaks away and walks to the bedroom without showing her face, probably because she's smiling. She wants to seem angry. That's fine with me. A nice girl like her should be angry. She shouldn't want anything to do with this.

"Sweetheart?" I say. "Sweetie? Let's just go to bed and I'll call this whole thing off."

“Fuck you,” she calls.

I look at the doorway. “What am I supposed to do, Lindsey? It’s just to shut the neighbors up. It’s nothing. I need to sleep, don’t I?”

I peek inside the microwave, trying to prevent my guilt from turning into anger. The plate rotates slowly. I’m about to reach in for it when the knock comes. I hesitate, weighing my hunger, then go to the door. When I open it, Carmen straightens up from the side window and takes cupped hands from her eyes. Her hair is different, short with bangs that swoop across her face. She’s slimmer, too, but her body still curves the way it used to, with breasts and hips. She’s wearing silver hoop earrings and a lacy blouse she once let me ejaculate on. She’s thirty-one, same as me.

“Hello,” I say, and can’t help grinning.

“Hello.” Her lipstick looks fresh. Her gaze is glassy and wanders over the living room as she steps in, then catches on something that makes her brow crumple. “What’s wrong with your hand?” she says.

Lindsey’s standing in the kitchen doorway. She’s put on my sweatshirt, and it hides most of the deformity. Only her hand shows, hanging like a broken claw. “What’s wrong with your face?” she says, then twirls and disappears.

“That’s my new girlfriend. She’s nineteen.”

“Big whoop. Doug’s arms work.”

My grin drains. “So do mine.”

We stand there and look at each other, Carmen swaying almost imperceptibly. I realize how drunk she is and feel jealous.

“Do you think anyone ever listened to us having sex?” she asks.

“I don’t think they had a choice. That’s why I called you. Lindsey doesn’t make much noise. She’s too shy and innocent. But that’s why I love her.”

“I love Doug because he’s so attentive.” She looks over her shoulder as if he might be standing in the doorway. He isn’t, of course. Then she turns back to me. I touch the small of her back, lead her to the kitchen. Lindsey pulls the fork from her mouth and fixes me with her eyes.

“We’re just going to make noise, is all,” I say.

We go to the bedroom and sit on the rumpled sheets, our thighs a few inches apart. When Carmen drops onto her back, her breasts flatten. She closes her eyes and then groans in misery and opens them.

“Do you know what blouse that is?” I ask.

She sits up and looks at me. She’s wearing a lot of mascara. “Yeah. It’s just a coincidence, though.”

We don’t say anything for a minute. She has a scar below her bottom lip from picking a chicken pock when she was four, a shallow chunk of skin missing.

“Should we start?” I say.

“Love to,” she says, and right away begins bouncing the bedsprings. I do it, too. We sit there, side-by-side, bouncing. The bed frame rattles. She pushes herself toward the center and finds a squeaky spot and works on it. I go to the foot of the bed and sit on the floor and shove back so the headboard knocks. Carmen gives a little yelp. She slaps her thigh in rhythm with the headboard.

“You feel so good,” I say.

“I want you on top.”

“How about this?”

“Ahhhh,” she says. “Ohhhh.”

“Oh yeah. Oh baby.”

“Right there,” she says. “Oh Jesus. Oh God yes.”

“Like that?”

“Like that,” she says. “Like that. Like that. Like that.”

“Umph,” I say. “Unh!”

“Oh yes. Patrick, oh yes—”

“Come on,” I say.

“Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Uh-huh—”

“You bitch,” I say. “You whore.”

“Ahhh! Ahhh! Oh Jesus.”

“Oh!” I shout. “Ah! Mmmm.”

“Mmmm,” she says.

We’re both breathing hard. My back aches from shoving the bed, and I can smell the hot oil of the lo mein, which I intend to eat momentarily, but I sit there a moment to recover, staring at the wall.

“Enjoy yourself?” Carmen asks.

I turn, meaning to give a big nod, but Carmen is speaking to Lindsey, who stands in the doorway, watching.

I’m surprised to see her there. In some strange way I expected her to sleep through the noise like she slept through the neighbors. “Do you mind?” I say.

“I could hear from the table anyway.”

“She liked it,” Carmen says.

Lindsey’s smooth legs carry her into the room. She straddles me and sits and whispers, “I want to make noise now.” She sucks my earlobe. “Get her out of here.”

I look to Carmen. She’s frowning at Lindsey but stops when I catch her. “You should hear me with Doug,” she says. “Doug makes me shriek.”

“I’ll shriek,” Lindsey says. “I’ll shriek louder than her.”

“We’re talking about sex, honey. It’s different than getting run over.”

I don’t understand what she means until I notice Carmen’s eyes aimed at the arm. There’s a swell in my chest. “What a terrible thing to say,” I tell Carmen. “I can’t believe you’d say something like that.”

Her eyes go sober. She looks at me apologetically, and that’s when the neighbors start up again. There’s creaking and moaning. We all turn and look at the wall. We look at the broad blank wall. We look at the wall as though it isn’t there. It occurs to me that maybe the neighbors aren’t really having sex, either. Maybe they’re just making noises. There’s no way to tell.

Carmen stands, touches her hair, smiles at us. “Doug’s neighbors have the same problem.” She moves to the door and leaves. Her voice comes from the kitchen, from the living room. “Uuuuh,” it says. “Uuuuh. Ooooh.”

The front door closes. I listen for her voice, her footfalls, an engine turning over, anything, but she’s gone. All I can hear is the woman next door, yipping like a coyote.

I stroke Lindsey’s hair to soothe her, but she shakes my hand away, slides her hips. “Kiss me,” she says, and clutches my chin, gives sloppy kisses with her tongue. “I don’t think I’ve ever been so horny.”

“Don’t talk like that.” But it’s how I feel, too. I run my hands up her ribs to peel away the sweatshirt, trying to ignore the twisting in my stomach.

I take off my clothes while Lindsey kicks away her underwear and spreads herself on the bed. Before joining her I hit the lights, and the room goes silver and black. I lower myself onto her squirming body, and against my stomach I feel the arm. I raise myself up, and there it is, tucked beneath her breasts like a wounded pet. I suddenly feel great tenderness for Lindsey, who’s whispering vulgarities. I find her and enter her and groan.

She says things. I tell her she doesn’t have to, but I like it and find myself saying things back. We say all sorts of things. We make desperate, deliberate noises. We are loud and insistent. We make such a racket that at first I don’t notice the banging. Then I do. Someone is banging on the wall. But it’s coming from the other wall, the other neighbors. I’ve never met those neighbors. I’ve never even seen them. They could be anyone.

THE UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE

A boy named Jay Boswell is enduring the final minutes of physics class. He sits slumped in the front row, leaning backwards and sideways with one hand on the desk as if cruising a convertible, but with the hand he takes meticulous notes from Ms. Monroe, who stands at the overhead projector, glowing. Now and then Jay glances at his classmates, who hold their pens motionless above their notebooks and gaze toward the window with distant eyes. The classroom is oppressive with its cold stone tables, chemical odors, scientific instruments behind glass, droning lecture, while outside the sunshine makes a blinding spectacle of the wet asphalt and matted grass and patches of dirty snow. Empty cars shimmer in the parking lot, and beyond them stand the sun-drenched pines where the forest breaks, and above that the Three Sisters mountains concealed beneath snows that will diminish in the summer but never disappear. Jay ignores all this. He surveys his peers, then returns to the teacher's notes and copies them.

At the end of the lecture Ms. Monroe turns off the projector lamp, and the fan dies with it. In the new silence there is the deep sound of a man's voice in the next room before the rustle of papers and backpacks obscures it. When the noise has subsided, Ms. Monroe lifts her eyes from the darkened projector and asks, "Any questions?"

Jay raises his hand.

"Hold on, everybody," she says. "Jay has a question. Jay?"

He smirks and brings his hand down slowly and puts it in the pocket of his baggy

jeans, concentrating on the attention from his classmates, savoring it as it presses in and nuzzles him. He feels it as a collective mass at first and then feels its rays in varying degrees from individual sources, the strongest of which comes from Annie Tanner, a popular girl with an eyebrow piercing, whom he intends to ask to the senior prom. He has intended it now for almost five weeks. The prom is tomorrow night.

“I was just wondering,” he says to Ms. Monroe. “Do you think Holden Caulfield is a tragic figure or a hero?”

There is snickering, which makes him smile because he believes it is meant for the teacher, and it’s what he intended. But he is wrong. These students who have come through grade school together laugh at Jay, because until a few months ago he parted his hair down the center and read textbooks during lunch. Now he wears a T-shirt designed to look threadbare, a bright ski jacket, and a Stanford cap pulled low to hide his eyes, which forces the band into the crevices between his skull and his small ears, which makes them protrude even further, like fleshy satellite dishes. He never used to wear his cap like that, or buy trendy clothes, or play loud rap music in his car, or ask irrelevant questions in science class.

Ms. Monroe makes an airy sound in her throat as though surprised and annoyed, but she is beaming. “Don’t ask *me*,” she says, opening her arms.

The lunch bell catches her in that posture and the room explodes with scraping chairs and voices. The students collect at the door and funnel into the hallway, and during this time Jay digs through his backpack and sneaks glances at Annie, his heart thumping wildly, because his plan is to follow her and catch her before she joins her friends. He will not excuse himself, or apologize, or ask how she is doing, or preface the question; he

will say her name once, and then he will ask her to be his date. He imagines it as the classroom empties, and, as always, in his imagination she makes an excuse to say no, and he walks away without protest or complaint. He is still imagining it when the last student leaves and the door closes.

He takes a deep breath, feels the relief of failure wash him. It's okay. After lunch he will show up early to his Honors English class and ask one of those girls to be his date.

"Yes, Jay?" Ms. Monroe says. She holds a carrot stick. Her brownbag lunch is spread over the stone laboratory table, though there is a teacher's lounge near the cafeteria. She is tall and middle-aged, with squared shoulders and no breasts and smooth pale forearms, her khakis pulled high, hair cut as short as a boy's. The sirloin-thick lenses of her glasses reflect the bright windows, hiding her bulbous eyes.

Jay looks at her a moment, lost. Then he realizes she thinks he has a question. Actually, he does: "Today you said light is made of photons, but photons are particles, right? How's that possible if light is energy, not matter?"

"It's energy and matter," Ms. Monroe says. "According to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, it can be either one."

Jay's eyes go distant as he contemplates this. "What about—" he says, and stops. "How?"

The door opens before she can answer, and a student with a full goatee pokes in his head. His hair is matted with gel. He wears a bright ski jacket and so much cologne Jay can smell it across the room. "What the hell, Boswell?" Carter says. "I'm freaking starving here."

Immediately Jay stands and puts on his backpack and adjusts his shoulders under

its weight, head down.

“Because of quantum theory,” Ms. Monroe answers.

“Quanta huh?” Carter says. “Quantum cuesta?”

“Would you two like to bring your lunches here and learn about it?”

Carter laughs.

“What do we look like?” Jay says, heat rising in his throat and cheeks.

“Personally I’m more interested in the humanities.”

She gives him a crooked smile. “See you in biology, then.”

Jay is taking physics as an elective and is also taking sixth-period biology from Ms. Monroe because he suffered a schedule conflict as a sophomore, having been too advanced in math. It is a very small school, two miles up the highway from a very small town in Oregon where the pine forest meets the high-desert prairie and tourists get the impression of the Wild West thanks to an ordinance that requires every building to wear a false front.

Outside, Jay takes off his cap and rubs the red track on his forehead, but the sunshine is blinding. He puts the cap back on and pulls the bill over his eyebrows so it blocks his view of everything except what’s right in front of him. There are engines turning over and engines trying to turn over. Hip-hop and punk and country music blend to a clamor, and from the forest comes a frenzy of birdcalls, indistinguishable except for the squawking of the blue jays. The air is heady with the scents of pine pollen and evaporation, and in the sunshine it’s almost warm.

Carter adjusts a wad of chewing tobacco under his tightened bottom lip. “You’re

such a little Stanford boy.”

“Why?”

He pinches a few loose grains from his tongue and then squirts juice onto the ground where Jay has to avoid it. “What I’m interested in is humanities,” he mimics.

“Humanities. Jesus.”

“Fuck off. That’s what it’s called.”

“Well then pardon me, good sir.”

Jay punches him in the shoulder and Carter spins and punches him hard in the chest and then they keep walking. Jay feels a knot of pain in his pectoral but keeps moving as though nothing is wrong.

“Don’t you think she’s a spaz?” Jay says.

“Who?”

“Ms. Monroe. Don’t you think she’s a weirdo?”

“She just needs to get dicked.”

Jay raises his chin and looks beyond the bright cars at the forest’s dark undergrowth. “You think that’s it, really?” he says. “I mean, think about it. No husband and no friends and even the other teachers don’t like her. Imagine what that must be like, being that age and not having any friends or anyone who even cares you’re alive.”

“There’s McCullough.” Carter points across the lot. “McCullough!”

A blond boy turns from a girl and flips them off.

“See Suzie there? She let McCullough put it in her ass last weekend.”

“Yeah, right,” Jay says, gazing at Suzie. Her face is a mask of makeup, her long blonde hair wavy and wet-looking like cooked ramen. He imagines hugging her, just

standing and hugging and being held by her. He wonders if she has a prom date yet.

“You ever put it an a girl’s ass, Boswell?”

“Your mom’s.”

Carter buckles over to show how hard he’s laughing. “Not bad,” he says. “You’re catching on.”

They walk to Carter’s jacked-up Chevrolet and hoist themselves into the cab, which is warm with collected sunshine and smells of hot vinyl, machinery. Carter rolls down his window and discharges a stream of brown juice that lands on the next car’s hood, the Volvo hatchback that belongs to Jay.

“What the fuck?” Jay says. But he doesn’t care. His father bought the Volvo a few months ago without consulting him, and Jay hates it because it’s not the type of car you honk at girls from. It wasn’t worth the price—driving his father back to the house he was renting, a one-bedroom cottage at the golf course he manages, and eating microwave dinners with him, the chicken-fried steak still cold in the center and the cherry cobbler too hot to eat. Everything in the living room seemed shabby and temporary, and he couldn’t square the living arrangement with his impression of his father, who wore expensive clothes and looked sharp in them. He was always trying to give Jay hand-me-downs, and Jay always refused them, but he enjoyed his father’s persistence as much as his father seemed to enjoy Jay’s sheepish refusals. He didn’t offer any clothes that evening. He had just bought Jay the car, after all, which Jay would have declined if he’d known what it would feel like to leave his father at the cottage and drive home by himself.

The intercom loudspeaker blares from the eaves of the school, and the garbled

voice is the voice of Jay's mother, who works in the secretary's office now that she has divorced his father. Jay yanks his cap low over his eyes, hugs himself. He hates hearing his mother on the intercom. He hates that other students hear it.

"Jay Boswell," she is saying now, "please report to the counselor's office."

"Oh shit," Jay says, pushing his cap up his forehead. "I forgot. I have to go to some meeting thing my mom set up."

"During lunch?"

"These teachers go through the office and have to talk to my mom about something, so they talk about me, and now she's worried because I'm getting a few A-minuses."

"Sounds like bullshit."

"It's total bullshit."

"So skip it." Carter cranks the ignition. The truck roars and the stereo comes on loud, with bass lines that make Jay's molars throb.

"These fucking teachers," he says. "You do everything they want, and then they turn on you. They abandon you the first chance they get. They don't give a shit."

"What?" Carter says, head bobbing with the music.

Jay gazes back at the school. The windows are darkened for the lunch hour except the window to the science lab, which shows Ms. Monroe sitting alone at her desk, chewing.

"Let's go," Jay says.

"What?"

"Fucking go, you fuckface."

Carter backs out, wheels around, and races through the parking lot to the highway corridor, and behind them the truck leaves a cloud of blue exhaust hanging in the clean bright air.

At Erickson's Sentry they pass the shopping carts and magazines and enter the deli, where they have to wait in line, because this is where all the upperclassmen congregate. In front of them is a tall fat student with ruddy cheeks and a short one with hair parted neatly on the side, both wearing flannel shirts tucked into jeans. The fat one has no belt, and the short one wears eyeglasses with sun-responsive lenses that appear dirty yellow. They both turn to look at Jay, and Jay looks toward the produce, where plots of vivid color shine in the artificial light.

"Hey, Jay," the fat one says. The short one says, "Busy lately?"

Jay flexes the bill of his cap. He scratches his nose. He finds a hangnail and seizes it with his teeth.

"Fine," the fat one says. "Great."

"What do we care?" the short one says.

They face forward. Jay looks at the backs of their heads. Then he looks at his new friend, who's counting a palmful of change. "What about Tera's?" Jay asks.

"You got an extra dollar?"

Jay takes a crumpled bill from his pocket and hands it over. "What about Tera's?" he repeats.

Carter crosses his arms, considering the question carefully. Finally he says, "Shaves it in a strip."

“I bet she has a bush.”

“That’s what you think about everyone.”

They move forward in line. Jay looks at the tables until he finds each of the girls he likes but none meet his gaze. He adjusts his baseball cap and looks at each of them again. Then he chuckles and says, “I bet Ms. Monroe has a bush.”

“Sick, dude.”

The fat student and the short student carry sandwiches to an empty table and open textbooks. Jay and Carter buy chicken strips and jojo potatoes and carry them to another empty table.

“Did you ask Jennifer yet?” Jay asks.

Carter dips a jojo into ranch sauce. “Prom’s stupid. I’m not going.”

“What? Since when?”

“Think about it, Boswell. You spend a bunch of money on a tux, and then it’s just a regular dance, except you’re wearing a tux. It’s stupid. If you were smart, you’d save yourself the trouble.”

“I’m not smart,” Jay says.

They finish their food in silence except for an occasional assessment of shaving habits and then they drive back. They sit on the open tailgate in the cool spring sunshine, eating candy and watching pretty underclassmen girls.

“Go ask one of them,” Carter says.

“Yeah, right,” Jay says, though he has been trying to do it for the last fifteen minutes. “Don’t worry. I have a plan.”

Jay carries his backpack to his assigned seat at his assigned table, leaving the lights off because he wants whoever comes in next to believe he arrived only a second earlier. Nobody else is there. The walls are white except for the shelves with long blocks of novels and a bulletin board that holds student poems Miss Harris has selected. None of them belong to Jay, which discourages him.

He takes off his cap and looks at the logo, a blocky S with the pine rising through it, and tries to feel proud but can't. His acceptance letter to Stanford gave him a sense of averted failure rather than achievement, because he expected acceptance and didn't want to disappoint his parents, who were going through a difficult time. He is eager to attend only because he believes the other students there will be nerdy, which means less competition for girls. He looks out the window at the three mountains clustered over the trees, dazzling white in the sunshine, plumes of mist moving sideways from their peaks into the blue distance, which means it's windy up there. At Stanford he won't be able to see any mountains, and he wonders if that will bother him. He supposes it won't.

The next student to enter is a girl whose hair has been bleached almost white. She has delicate shoulders and outrageous breasts and wears a denim skirt that shows the tops of her pale thighs. She sees Jay and puts her hand to her chest and says, "Thank goodness," then takes small steps until she arrives at the table, where she sits and unzips her pack and fills the air with scents of melon and powder and peppermint. Jay feels the closeness of her breasts. It's like sitting beside a radiator.

She lays down a sheet of paper and grips her pencil and puts her elbows on the table and looks at Jay. "Chapter thirteen, right?" The skin on her shoulder and collarbone is coarse with gooseflesh.

“Elaine?” he says, but his throat constricts and makes a crackling sound.

“Are you okay?”

He nods and clears his throat several times. Then he tells her what happens in chapter thirteen.

The door opens again and it’s a girl whose jeans aren’t tight, but she has long hair and dark skin and dimples. Her backpack dwarfs her. She looks at Jay and strides across the room. “Wasn’t it amazing?” she says, grinning. “He keeps seeing people’s humanity. That’s what he can’t take.”

“The prostitute, you mean?” Jay asks.

“And when he imagines getting in a fight over the gloves.”

Jay opens the book and pretends to check a couple pages. “You’re right,” he says. Then he takes a deep breath. He coughs into his fist. “Mary?” he manages.

The door opens again and now the lights come on. In the doorway stands a frumpy woman with gray roots and unfamiliar makeup, Jay’s mother. He puts on his cap and pulls it low.

“Jay,” she says, drawing out the word. “Your meeting,” she says.

“I forgot.”

“Well come on, then.” She holds the door open but blocks the doorway. “Let’s go,” she says. “Hey.”

“Class is about to start.”

“Get over here, young man.”

Both the girls are turning pages. Jay mutters something he hopes they hear, but they keep turning pages, so he lifts his backpack and carries it across the room and into

the hallway and walks fast ahead of his mother to make their common direction appear incidental.

The counselor's walls are windowless, interior walls, painted beige, lit by bulbs rather than fluorescent tubing. A desk is pressed into the far corner as though it doesn't belong in the room, and behind it are an armchair, a couch, a coffee table with a vase of exotic flowers that look real. The counselor sits in a swivel chair with his back to the desk as though ignoring his work a moment to take care of this other important matter. He has thick wrists and black hair in need of a trim, and he smiles in a way he seems to believe is kindly. "*Stanford*," he says again. "Are you getting anxious to start?"

Jay shrugs. He sits at the center of the wide couch with his backpack in his lap. His mother sits in the armchair. "Honey," she says. "Take off your cap so we can see your face." He spins it backwards without taking it off and leaves it crooked as though he belongs to a gang.

"Well," the counselor says. "We sure are excited for you. It's a great accomplishment. It's only the beginning, though, as I'm sure you understand, which makes this an important time in your life." He maintains his smile, and Jay notices a tooth that is conspicuously white. "Do you understand why you're here, Jay? You're not in trouble."

"I know I'm not."

"If you really do understand that, that's good. That's the first thing to understand. Nobody is angry with you."

"But we're all worried about you," his mother says.

“Who is?”

His mother looks to the counselor, and the counselor says, “Several of your teachers have reported changes in your performance and behavior, and we just wanted to get to the bottom of it. Maybe there’s some way we can help. Is there?”

Jay fingers the zipper of his backpack. Then he opens it and fingers its teeth. “It’s not like an A-minus is shitty.”

“Jay!” his mother says.

“Not for most students,” the counselor says. “You’re absolutely right about that. You’ve been an exceptional student, though, Jay. But more than that, teachers have noticed a change in your demeanor. Your behavior. They say you used to be such a delight but that now you’re surly and unresponsive. They say you groan when they assign homework.”

“I don’t *groan*. I’ve never *groaned*.”

“But you realize that you show disapproval?”

“Says who?”

“Several of your teachers.”

“Miss Harris,” his mother says, “and Mrs. Frazier and Mrs. Lee and Mr. Weathers, and others, too.”

Jay looks past the counselor at the watercolor hanging over his desk, the three mountains at sunrise. The painting distorts the shape and color and texture of the mountains but captures their posture. Jay can’t stand the sight of them. Their familiarity sickens him. He never wants to see them again.

“I bet Ms. Monroe didn’t say anything,” Jay says.

His mother looks to the counselor. "Who?"

"Science teacher," the counselor tells her, brushing something from his palms.

"She doesn't communicate with us much. But that's beside the point," he tells Jay.

His mother slides to the couch and touches his shoulder. "It just makes us worry something's bothering you, honey. Is something bothering you?" Her eyes are wide with concern, mascara clumped around their rims. The counselor pushes his eyebrows low, tilts his head forward. Neither move. They watch Jay and wait.

"I don't care about the divorce," Jay says, "if that's what you're getting at."

"We're not getting at anything," the counselor says. "But I'm interested that you brought it up. Is it something you'd like to talk about?"

"It doesn't bother me." Jay looks down at his open palms. "It was kind of weird at first, but now I'm used to it. I don't even think about it."

"Is that a good thing?" the counselor asks.

"I'm only saying I don't think about it."

"Should I go?" his mother says. Her voice is soft.

"That's up to Jay. Jay?"

He looks at his mother. She looks back with shiny eyes. Then she starts to cry. Her hand is still on his shoulder, so he takes it, the palm rough and clammy. He flexes his jaw and looks at the carpet, worn thin where his feet rest, and he squeezes his mother's hand. He hates comforting his mother like this. "I guess she can stay."

"No," she says. "I'll go. I'm going." She stands and smooths her sweater and draws her forefinger beneath each eye, then smiles at them and leaves. Jay and the counselor watch the door swing closed, and then they're alone. Jay opens a pouch and

extracts a package of chewing gum, but there's none left. The counselor crosses his legs. The cuff of his slacks lifts to reveal his dark dress socks. He fixes Jay with tough black eyes. "So the divorce doesn't bother you?"

Jay drops the empty package on the coffee table and looks up at the ceiling, at the cork panels painted white. He is conscious of the counselor's attention, and he screws up his face to show he's thinking hard, as he is. He wants the counselor to know he's being genuine, that his parents' divorce really doesn't bother him. What bothers him is his mother's intrusion on his social life, her presence here at the school, the way she misinterprets how he's changing. What really pisses him off is her insistence on this meeting—there are roaches in the urinals, fistfights in the parking lot, vandalism everywhere, and here he is, a straight-A student headed to Stanford, scolded for trying to attain a measure of popularity, for trying to connect with his peers.

These are the things that bother him. Not the divorce. So he turns up his palms and shakes his head and opens his mouth as if to show he's not restricting his words—there simply are none.

What a surprise, then, for words to come. "I hate when my mom cries," he says. "I have to hug her when she cries."

"You feel sympathetic."

"No. I hate hugging her."

The counselor stills his hands. He looks at Jay. "Do you feel embarrassed to hug her?" he asks, and then his eyes move. He straightens up and says, "Shoot."

Jay turns. At the window in the door is a thin girl who never used to wear T-shirts, a sophomore.

“I wish you had kept your appointment, Jay,” the counselor says, checking his watch. “But let’s continue this conversation some other time. Until then, maybe you ought to think about why you feel the way you do.” He spins in his seat and closes a manila folder, then retrieves another and looks at its contents. “Would you let Alexandria know I’m ready?”

Jay does think about it. He thinks about it even as he puts on his backpack and opens the door and sees Alexandria tucking stringy hair behind her ears. On impulse he asks her, “Wanna go to prom?”

“What?” Her eyes become nervous and accusatory. “Is that some kind of joke?”

“Sure,” he says.

In the hallway he finds his mother standing by a row of battered orange lockers, her palms pressed to her cheeks, face rigid, eyes swimming. When she sees him, she straightens her back, gives a little smile, and asks, “How’d it go?” But before he can answer, her smile twists into a grimace, and she opens her arms like a toddler asking to be picked up. Jay hesitates, imagining the wet breathing in his ear, the pudgy chest convulsing against his stomach, and his repulsion strikes him now as monstrous—he loves his mother, and pities her, and hopes for her peace of mind. He casts a glance down the hallway, then bends to hug her, reading the profanity scratched into a locker as she breaks into sobs and clutches at him, his jacket balled in her fists, her face pressed to his shirt where it will leave mascara stains. He is embarrassed, yes, disgusted too, but even more, he is frightened. This boy is only seventeen. He is not as brave or resolute as he believes, and it is frightening to feel his mother tremble against him—this woman who

splits and stacks firewood, who kills snakes with her hand trowel. He calls it something else, shapes it to fit his idea of himself, but that's what it is, fear, and it remains after the embraces are finished and forgotten. It's in him always. It's in him even as he breaks from his mother and turns away and trudges down the hallway in this small-town school where the prairie becomes pine forest and the wind sweeps cold air down from the mountains.

Fifth period is only half finished. In the empty classroom with the microscopes and the emergency shower and the window that shows the assortment of student vehicles, Ms. Monroe fills her coffee mug with cold water from the lab sink, shakes two more ibuprofen into her palm, and drinks them down. She holds her wrist tenderly, as a lover might. She rolls her head sideways a few times. Then she stops rolling her head and lets go of her wrist and continues her biology outline on a transparency for the projector.

This is what she is doing when the door opens and Jay crosses the room to his seat, his jacket zipped to his chin, his Stanford cap turned backwards. She lifts her pen mid-word and watches him as he moves deliberately through the stark clinical lighting. Then she replaces the pen cap without finishing the outline or even finishing the word that lies half-formed on the transparent page.

“Don't you belong in fifth-period, Jay?”

He sits slumped in his chair, eyes caught on some invisible point. “No.”

“Is something the matter?” she asks.

“No.”

“Is there something you want to talk about?”

“No.”

She watches him a moment. Then she looks out at the parking lot, where two fawns stagger across the asphalt and a third rubs its head against a trailer hitch before a doe emerges and herds them back to the forest. She returns her eyes to Jay, who hasn't moved. “What about quantum physics?” she asks.

His eyes come into focus and move to her face. “Okay,” he says.

So she tells what she knows, glancing from time to time at the projector, which is dark and blank: “It's incomprehensible even to top physicists,” she says, “but light sometimes acts like a wave and sometimes like particles. The reason for this is the fundamental impossibility of measuring both the position and the motion of a photon—measuring its position makes it look more like a particle, whereas measuring its motion makes it look more like a wave—but the two measurements counterbalance. The better you measure one, the less you'll know about the other, because the act of observation actually changes the data. This is Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, the first and only scientific principle that says there's an inherent limit on what we can know.”

She explains this the best she can, and because Jay seems interested, she goes on. She talks about Einstein's dissatisfaction with the uncertainty principle, the argument he made against it, the reasons he was wrong. She talks about the famous experiment that showed photons changing polarization to give proper statistical results. It's a phenomenon that boggles the mind, she says as the bell rings and student voices fill the hallway—photons seeming to communicate instantly, no matter how distant. This isn't entirely accurate, but it's close, and it's the best she can do, and because they are still alone she keeps talking—about the irrational nature of quantum theory, about the

incomprehensible processes that only metaphors can describe, about the pleasure of feeling baffled by these things.

During all of this Jay watches her with parted lips and puzzled eyes, looking as though at any moment he might laugh or cry. But he does not laugh, and he does not cry. He only sits and listens. He has taken out a novel and holds it closed over his thumb, waiting for someone to enter. Someone does. Afterwards there are others. But these are the early students, the loners and dorks, and Ms. Monroe continues to speak, so Jay continues to listen, but with his ears pricked, ready, waiting for someone important.