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The Drowned Girl

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The Drowned Girl

by

Karen Brown Gonzalez

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Department of English
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The girl is leagues and leagues away from the first kiss of prologue, but she, throat caked with mud, white skin scaled verdigris, must be the message within the bottle.

—Eve Alexandra, “The Drowned Girl”

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The Drowned Girl

Karen Brown Gonzalez

ABSTRACT

The Drowned Girl is a novel-in-stories that depicts the lives of eight characters living in a small Connecticut town. This work is one told through varying perspectives. Characters are mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, daughters, sons, and lovers. Their lives intersect physically, and emotionally, and the separate stories reveal the facets and repercussions of events both past and present: the death of a son and brother in a car accident, the life and death of a notorious town figure, the past and tragic future of a young woman, Jules, whose body is found one spring in the Connecticut river. The Jules stories, six in all, document her spiral into despair, and involve the other characters as friends, lovers, and parents. As the locus of the cycle, Jules and the mystery of her death prompt characters to re-view their own circumstances, and the way in which past decisions have played a part. These revelations—of betrayal, and loss, and the way they affect key characters, are effectively inscribed in the story cycle’s ability to convey a communal disparateness. Each character’s story brings a new perspective, and the accumulation of the parts provides a more encompassing view of the whole.

The focus on an upper middle class neighborhood called Ridgewood—a subdivision built on dairy farm land in the mid-sixties—is key to the thematic link that ties the stories together. I am interested in revealing the corruption of the natural landscape, the carving up of rural areas after World War II to create suburban

communities in which family incomes and demographics are almost completely homogenous. The suburb of Ridgewood is mapped by roads designed to conform to a hierarchy that includes cul-de-sacs, and a pattern leading to residential areas of greater affluence. This setting serves as a backdrop to the complex disintegration of the family.

Introduction

My goal in utilizing the novel-in-stories genre, or the short story cycle, is to depict the lives of eight characters living in a small Connecticut town. The focus on an upper middle class neighborhood called Ridgewood—a subdivision built on dairy farm land in the mid-sixties—is key to the thematic link that ties the stories together. I am interested in revealing the corruption of the natural landscape, the carving up of rural areas after World War II to create suburban communities in which family incomes and demographics are almost completely homogenous. The suburb of Ridgewood is mapped by roads designed to conform to a hierarchy that includes cul-de-sacs, and a pattern leading to residential areas of greater affluence. This setting serves as a backdrop to the complex disintegration of the family.

This work is one told through varying perspectives. Characters are mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, daughters, sons, and lovers. Their lives intersect physically, and emotionally, and the separate stories reveal the facets and repercussions of events both past and present: the death of a son and brother in a car accident, the life and death of a notorious town figure, the drowning of a woman in the Connecticut River. These revelations—of betrayal, and loss, and the way they affect key characters, are effectively inscribed in the story cycle's ability to convey a communal disparateness. Each character's story brings a new perspective, and the accumulation of the parts provides a more encompassing view of the whole.

Modern American short story cycles are multi-cultural, deriving from ancient oral traditions that emphasize repeated characters, settings, and situations that create a history and community of tellers. These tales are told by a variety of speakers relating the stories of a group of characters, each having their own resolution, and yet building upon each other. The use of linked tales, from Homer's *Odyssey* and Ovid's *Metamorphosis* to *A Thousand and One Nights* and the widespread use of "cycles" in the medieval period point to early beginnings of this narrative tradition. Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, published in Italy in the 14th century is an example of independent works enriched by inclusion in a group of related pieces. Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, and Mallory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* are others. The modern concept of the short- story cycle, or, as Maggie Dunn and Anne Morris call it in their study, the *composite novel*, appeared in the nineteenth century, and evolved to maturity in the twentieth century. Long misunderstood, puzzled over, and often neglected, critics were uncertain how to classify such important twentieth century texts as *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), *Dubliners* (1914), *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), *In Our Time* (1925), *Go Down, Moses* (1942), *The Golden Apples* (1947) and *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968). Not quite novels in the traditional sense, but somehow more than collections of stories, these works fell into an unnamed middle ground. Many generic labels have been suggested, including *story cycle*, *short-story cycle*, *multi-faceted novel*, *story novel*, *paranovel*, *loose-leaf novel*, *short story composite*, *rovelle*, *integrated short story collection*, *anthology novel*, *modernist grotesque*, *hybrid novel*, *story chronicle*, and *short story sequence*, to name a few. More recently, the term *novel-in-stories* has been popular.

The status of the short story cycle is often disputed, cast as a “beginner’s” version of the novel, or as a form somehow beneath the novel in literary value, despite the many award-winning works that have utilized it. Still, the story-cycle’s ambiguity resists definition. Classification of such a work is dependent on a variety of identifiable devices, and key critical studies have attempted to define what these might be. The first book-length study of the genre, published in 1971, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century*, by Forrest L. Ingram, uses the popular term *short-story cycle*, and focuses predominantly on Kafka’s *The Hunger Artist*, Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, and Joyce’s *Dubliners*. He defines the genre as “a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader’s successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modified his experience of each of its component parts” (19). This definition relies on the “experience” of the text by a reader. Susan Garland Mann published *The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference* in 1989. She delineates two different common “types” of story-cycles: Character-dominated, and those with a theme of isolation or fragmentation. She also identifies various conventions associated with cycles—generic signals, like the title of a work, simultaneous self-sufficiency and interdependence, and tension between the separateness and interdependence of the stories. Her analysis includes *Dubliners*, *Winesburg*, *The Pastures of Heaven*, *The Unvanquished*, *In Our Time*, *Go Down*, *Moses*, *The Golden Apples*, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, and Updike’s *Too Far to Go: the Maples Stories*. Both Ingram and Mann argue for an aesthetic of the short story cycle that asserts unity in

terms of community relationships, as in the cycles in which members of a town or a family reappear in several stories.

Examination of the genre is complicated by debate among critics who hold to varying definitions of what comprises a story cycle. Dunn and Morris's study (*The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition*), like those of Ingram and Mann, emphasizes the integrative aspects of the work, with a desire to view the text as a whole, rather than fragmented parts. In the introduction to his collected essays by critics of the genre, *Modern American Short Story Sequences*, J. Gerald Kennedy claims that the short story sequence's utilization of devices such as fragmentation (through the use of discontinuous short narratives), juxtaposition (the purposeful conjoining of texts), and simultaneism (the concurrent unfolding of separate actions) can be seen as rendering the complexity of modern experience, a multiplicity identified as a feature of the new century. The poetics of the story sequence, Kennedy claims, relies on the tension between multiplicity and unity, the interplay between separate narrative parts and the aesthetic whole (xi). His book collects eleven essays on important twentieth-century works, including Henry James's *The Finer Grain* (1912), John Cheever's *The Housebreaker of Shady Hill and Other Stories* (1958), J.D. Salinger's *Nine Stories* (1953), John Updike's *Olinger Stories* (1964), and Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1984). A final essay by Kennedy himself focuses on Anderson's *Winesburg* and Carver's *Cathedral* and the semblance of community.

Each of the critical studies of the genre seek to establish some aspect of identification, and the methods consist of examining the over-reaching impact of the

individual parts, or, as Karen Castellucci Cox does in her article “Magic and Memory in the Contemporary Story Cycle” focuses on shifting examination to the breaks, gaps and ambiguous signifiers that make the story cycle a unique form. While the story cycle borrows from the genres of the short story and the novel, the appropriations are made unsystematically, and the result is a heightened sense of disorder of the whole, rather than the imposition of an outside structure. Like Kennedy, Cox sees the story cycle’s irregular, often erratic, nondirectional movement, its absence of causal links between physical and psychological events, as mirroring the patterns of human consciousness. Her discussion of Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*, and Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*, explores these writers radical use of the genre to reflect oral tradition and community.

Cox claims that a formal definition of the genre is elusive at best, and her attention is drawn to the ways that the story cycle resists a traditional reading. Story cycles require the negotiation of gaps, places in the text where unifying elements are absent, and breaks in which abrupt shifts in time, place, and perspective occur. It is within these gaps that the reader is responsible for generating meaning. Readers of story cycles must look for meaning in each separate story, and expect that each entity will not follow the same narrative rule. Closure is provisional, rather than complete, claims George R. Clay in “Structuring the Short Story Novel.” We are propelled through open-ended interconnections to the next story. Story cycles usually contain some type of framework question addressed throughout successive stories and answered by the end, and a recognizable protagonist that may be an individual, a family, or a group. Clay

claims that final closure is possible when the framework question is answered, and the provisional closures of previous stories culminate in an overall resolution (24).

Further distinctions of the genre have been made by Margot Kelley in her article “Gender and Genre: The Case of the Novel-in-Stories.” She utilizes Dallas M. Lemmon’s attributes of the story cycle and clarifies them to reflect the more succinct aspects of the novel-in-stories. Unity in a short story cycle is based on spatial and temporal proximity, or on thematic continuity. Kelley claims that novels-in-stories must have characters that are present in all of the stories. In the case of a family unit, “the lives of the various family members are so interwoven that stories about one person presume the existence of, and inevitably provide resonance for stories about, the other family members” (299).

Joyce’s *Dubliners*, then, can be discussed as a story cycle, but not a novel-in-stories.

Kelley also discusses the blurring of the distinction between major and minor characters. Different characters function as protagonist in different stories, and often characters who would be minor figures in novels, like neighbors, assume more prominent positions in the novel-in-stories. Like Clay, Kelley asserts that the climaxes of the stories build upon one another, each with epiphanic moments that, along with the action of the larger narrative, achieve a “sawtooth” pattern. And like Cox, she recognizes that important events in the novel-in-stories often occur off-stage and require a refocusing of the reader’s attention.

Despite the inability to define the form, it can be identified, and organized, broadly, into types by examining the ways in which the reader can unify its separate entities. These fundamental unities that distinguish story cycles from story collections are place, time, cast, theme, tone, and style. While there is less emphasis on a single

protagonist in a story cycle, and on a continuity of development, there are examples in which the linking device is the continuing protagonist, such as George Willard in Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, or Nick Adams in Hemingway's *In Our Time*. George Willard, as the unifying narrator, interacts with the townspeople and grows to manhood. Nick Adams, the most explicit unifying device in Hemingway's story cycle, is featured in seven stories. Evan S. Connell's *Mrs. Bridge* and *Mr. Bridge* are comprised of somewhat chronologically arranged vignettes that focus on their title characters, the characters' children, and the narrow, superficial world they each inhabit. Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son* involves tales narrated by a young drifter, set against a contemporary American landscape, much as Stuart Dybek's *I Sailed With Magellen* features a single narrator telling the stories of characters living in urban Chicago.

The story cycle can be used as a *Bildungsroman*, as in David Huddle's *Only the Little Bone*, which reflects the growth of its narrator, Reed Bryant, as does Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*, and Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, forty-four vignettes about Esperanza Cordero, a young girl growing up in a Chicago tenement. Along with the central protagonist, story-cycles often feature couples—Fitzgerald's *The Basil and Josephine Stories*, Alice Munro's *The Beggar Maid: Stories of Rose and Flo*, Justin Cronin's *Mary and O'Neil*, and Updike's *Too Far to Go: The Maples Stories*, concerning a couple's marriage and ultimate divorce.

The most persistent continuity in the form has been in setting, which offers numerous opportunities for interconnection. The shorter works are part of a cycle that occurs in the same general location—a town, city, or neighborhood, in which landmarks

recur throughout, and tie the events to a sense of place. The place can be as far-reaching as Mars, as in Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*, in which twenty-eight titled sections tell the story of a thirty-year encounter with Earth. Other examples are Joyce's *Dubliners*, (the city of Dublin) Steinbeck's *The Pastures of Heaven* (a development, *Las Pasturas del Cielo*, in central California), Updike's *Olinger Stories* (the fictional town of Olinger, in Pennsylvania), and Edward P. Jones's *Lost in the City* (Washington, DC). The setting can be one that involves, not a single place, but an epoch, or era, such as Fitzgerald's *Tales of the Jazz Age*, Adam Braverman's *Mr. Lincoln's Wars*, and Kate Walbert's *Our Kind*, that tells the collective tale of a group of wealthy suburban women who came of age in the 1950s.

Another connective aspect of the story cycle is the collective protagonist—a group that functions as a central character, or an individual who serves as a metaphor. These cycles are often family-centered, like Christina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*, in which four women of the del Pino family share center stage, or Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club*, which features as a protagonist a transgenerational group of Chinese-American women who meet weekly to play mah-jongg and talk about their lives. The extended family as protagonist is evident in Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, stories of various members of the McCaslin family, in Susan Minot's *Monkeys*, which tells the story of the Vincent family's seven children. Similarly, Margaret Atwood's *Moral Disorder* chronicles sixty years of a Canadian family, from postwar Toronto to a farm in the present. Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* features the tribe as a collective protagonist, each story told from the perspective of related Chippewa family members on a North

Dakota reservation. Characters appear and reappear from one story to the next, and incidents are sometimes described more than once, from different perspectives. The interrelationships are complex, and yet it is the connectedness of the family that links the stories together.

Closely related to the family-based cycles are those that are unified by culture, or community. Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, revolves around characters that all live in a decaying neighborhood called Brewster Place. Robert Olen Butler's *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, tells the stories of Vietnamese immigrants in the Gulf Coast region of Louisiana. Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, concerns soldiers during the Vietnam conflict, and Rebecca Barry's *Later, At the Bar*, captures the idiosyncrasies of the patrons of Lucy's Tavern. *How to Make an American Quilt*, by Whitney Otto, focuses on the eight members of a quilting circle in the California town of Grasse. The connective elements include the narrator's voice, and the quilting metaphor.

James Nagel, in his study *The Contemporary American Short Story Cycle*, maintains that beyond setting and perspective "the richest element of intertextual unity is theme, the coalescence of ideas and implications that resonate throughout the volume" (252). The story cycle is especially suited, with its self-sufficient stories, to handle the themes of separation and fragmentation. Estrangement is present in many examples of the form, particularly in Anderson's *Winesburg*. Susan Garland Mann claims that characters in story cycles are most often separated from each other by the boundaries of each story (11), and the resulting isolation is a common twentieth-century cycle theme, along with disintegration and indeterminacy. Examples of thematically unified cycles include Joyce

Carol Oates's *Heat and Other Stories*, which explores the presence of violence in everyday life, Antonya Nelson's *Female Trouble*, Joan Silber's *Ideas of Heaven*, and Hannah Tinti's *Animal Crackers*.

James Nagel brings up an important issue regarding the analysis and study of story cycles, and that is that they have a dual existence not generally afforded the chapters in a novel. The study of their composition and publication history reveals two material interpretive dimensions: "the textual variants between magazine and book versions and the organizational structure that gives disparate stories an integrated form" (248). Individual stories appearing in magazines have internal unity, but by necessity, Nagel claims, they "lack the structural organization that accrues to the collected volume" (249).

In the composition of *The Drowned Girl* my awareness of this duality played a significant role in the ordering and revising of the manuscript. Many critics have discussed the author's choices in composing story cycles, and just as many have discounted the ability to arrive at any clear consensus concerning these choices. But Nagel's stress that stories that are part of cycles and yet published separately should be examined, is a solid one. Noting changes in characters' names, in dates, and settings, recognizes the goal of the writer to construct, order, and revise stories to create the layers of significance inherent in a story cycle, and missing in stories published on their own.

The Drowned Girl originated from three separate strands of composition. The first was a very early short story (1987) written from the perspective of a teenage girl named Rosalie, whose older sister, Jeanie, has a boyfriend:

She met a boy that worked at a local garage named Barry Castle, and every afternoon Barry would bring Jeanie home on his motorcycle. He had dark hair and wore light blue shirts with his name sewn in cursive on the pocket. He was a war veteran, and he limped a little when he walked, which made him seem, to Rosalie, forlorn and tragic. He smelled of sweat and grease and his eyes were very blue. He worked until ten o'clock at night at the Texaco station, and later he would ride past their house and Rosalie would see Jeanie run out the screen door in a long t-shirt she slept in. Rosalie would run out, too, and sit on his motorcycle and listen to them talk, and watch them smoke cigarettes until her mother called out the window for them to come in.

The second was another story called *Vacation* (1987). In it, a young woman who has moved away from home learns that an old boyfriend has died in a tragic car accident. The protagonist of this story is unimportant. It is the old boyfriend, Jimmy Deason, the boy who drove his car into the tree in front of the library who stayed with me for many years, and whose story I eventually sought to tell through his absence, by revealing the effect of his death on the members of his family. I wrote three of these stories from various family members' perspectives—two sisters, Lacey and Ivy, and his mother, Mary Gail, and into one appeared Barry Castle, into another Barry Castle's son. The third, Ivy's story "Send Me," was published in an anthology in 1994. The others remained in the draft state, a sort of limbo—conceived, but rough and unready, and set aside. From "Send Me," the neighbor, Michael, became part of "True" ("Affairs of a Career Girl"), one of three stories published in 1995 as a Fiction Feature in *Epoch* magazine. The stories were grouped under a single title, *What I Did While You Were Gone*, stories that dealt, not with a boy driving his car into a tree, but with a similar theme of absence.

The third strand that initiated the composition of *The Drowned Girl* was the story of the character, Michael's, memory of a dead girl, and how this comes to complicate his troubled marriage. Originally, the focus of Michael's desire was a stranger he meets at

the Connecticut shore, one who resembled the dead girl. While I understood that Michael's story was part of the others I'd written in terms of setting, the link between them remained a loose one. As time passed I often considered revising the stories of the Deason family, of Michael the neighbor, and the suburban Connecticut setting overshadowed by the memory of Barry Castle. I considered organizing them around a neighborhood lobster bake, letting each character take a turn telling his or her story. At the core of this grouping was Jimmy Deason's drive into the tree, and the themes of guilt, loss, remorse, and betrayal. Not until recently, after writing several new stories that shared the same elements—the cemetery overlooking the bowling alley, the Hukelau and John Brown's, Wintonbury Mall, the subdivision shaded by elms and hickories, the houses with their slate walks, the drinks on the lawns, the adultery and remorse, and the drowning of a girl in the Connecticut River—did an idea of the whole occur to me.

Perhaps it takes this underlying sense of unity to begin the process of creating a story cycle, a novel-in-stories. It *is* an act of creation. Simply placing completed stories in some order isn't sufficient. Because I hold, for the most part, the knowledge of what occurs in the interstices, the gaps, and spaces, I felt I needed to leave clues for the reader within individual stories, to link the stories up with common threads, and eliminate the confusion of unnecessary characters. The process of creating new stories to add to the whole, and revisiting each completed story as a part of a larger work entailed a re-conceptualizing of time, character, and setting, and ultimately, a consideration of theme.

The organization of stories in the novel-in stories relies not on plot, but on character. The plot of individual stories may suggest what is to come next, but it is what

happens in between that creates what George Clay describes as a propulsion toward the next story (24). In considering the order of stories for *The Drowned Girl* it was necessary to recognize both the events that occur within stories, and the events that fall into the gaps, those things the reader intuitively prompts by what he or she has just read. To facilitate this process I rely on groupings of stories in which characters recur. In the first grouping fall the three stories in which the third-person limited protagonist is respectively Martha, Michael, and Ivy Deason (“Love in Suburbia,” “Send Me,” and “The Drowned Girl”). These stories take place in the present, and narrate events that occur either concurrently, or chronologically.

Once I’d composed Michael’s story, I became interested in the character of his wife, Martha. She is the one at home with children, the one who is most physically part of the suburban setting. Her desire for the life she was forced to abandon with her father’s death is fulfilled with the purchase of the house on Maple Hill Road, but she finds that she no longer fits.

Now Martha was part of their circle again, while Lucie splashed with a friend in one of their pools, and Wallis arranged games on the wide lawn. She knew how to ask the right questions to get them all talking so that she could relax back into a folding chair, and listen to the drone of their voices. They were Missy, and Grace Perry, girls who went to Smith and Mount Holyoke, who shared a camaraderie that kept Martha at a distance. There were stories of late night sorority parties, and mutual friends from a world Martha never had a chance to enter. They discussed difficulties with babies and toddlers that Martha had never experienced, so that even in the raising of her children she was a stranger. None discussed a husband who had fallen out of love.

Martha’s story (“Love in Suburbia”) introduces the other members of the neighborhood, the older men and women, Helen and Steve Halsey, and ultimately, a tie to Mary Gail and George Deason, and their family. As the “new neighbors” Martha and

Michael are a distraction to the neighbors, and a sense of the way the community functions, its acceptance of the tragic drowning of a child, further isolates Martha. In this story, Michael is inattentive, and drawn into the world of the Halsey's, and Martha's suspicion that he has "fallen out of love," is partly true. As the opening story, Martha's sets the tone of betrayal, and establishes a sense of things happening below the surface—of secrets and mysteries—that will carry through to the end of the book.

Two of these first three stories make mention of the drowned girl, Jules, and as I wanted her presence to be felt more forcefully in the beginning of the book I placed three "Jules" stories next. The Jules stories, six in all, document her spiral into despair, and involve the other characters as friends, lovers, and parents. As the locus of the cycle, Jules and the mystery of her death prompt characters to re-view their own circumstances, and the way in which past decisions have played a part. Jules becomes the dead girl Michael obsessed about in his earlier story, "The Drowned Girl," and the trigger to remembering her is Ivy Deason, the teenage neighbor who babysits his children. Michael's memory of Jules, infused with the headiness of their affair, is transferred to Ivy, who he believes resembles her. Martha recalls Jules's unabashed sexuality at a moment in which she chooses to exercise her own. Jack Castle's memory of Jules, the only woman he believed he ever loved, is marked by the confused teenager's experience with the harsh reality of Jules's life.

Jules's stories are testament to the unraveling of the family unit through divorce, mental illness, and alcoholism. The first, "Part-Time Virgin, 1978" brings us Jules as a teenager, and includes Martha as her high school friend. "Girl on a Couch" shows Jules

as a high school drop-out, living with two brothers on Maple Hill farm and longing for some sense of belonging, and “Affairs of a Career Girl” details the beginning of Jules’s workplace affair with Michael, in the early years of his marriage to Martha. While the placement of the Jules stories is in chronological order, “Hukelau Jules,” the story placed after these three, presents Jules near the end of her life. The protagonist of this story is Jack Castle, whose reflections on his father, Barry Castle, and his interaction with Lacey Deason, make this a good introduction to the next cycle of stories about the Deason family: “Lawn Man Love,” “Confessions of a Party-Wife,” “Little Sinner,” and “Mistresses.”

The Deason family stories, hinging on the accidental death of Jimmy Deason, are told by different family members. An event that, like Jules’s drowning, has already occurred, Jimmy’s death still holds some mystery for the family members, and the subsequent sense of confusion and loss is another tie that links this grouping. Hidden amidst these stories, too, is the mystery of Jimmy’s paternity, and the connection between George and Jules. As a family unit, the Deason stories create a solid basis from which the others in the book branch off. The final story in this grouping, “Mistresses” takes Ivy Deason forward in time, and her preoccupation with the drowned girl, Jules, leads into the final series of Jules stories.

“Tropical Passions,” “Nude on Thin Ice,” and “The Frontier Husband” show Jules’s slow dissolution and isolation. Glimpsed in “Hukelau Jules,” raising an infant alone, these stories move back in time to reveal the psychological states leading up to this event, and project the reader into the interstice—the time leading up to her death. Jules

escapes to Florida to find she is trapped in her own nostalgia for a past that has irrevocably altered in “Tropical Passions,” and she returns to live alone in a rented apartment without heat in “Nude on Thin Ice.” Her final story, a meeting with her estranged mother in “Frontier Husband,” reveals her recognition of what remains a vital part of her own empty life. Within the gaps of these stories exists Jules’s childhood, her sense of guilt concerning her mentally ill sister, Delores, her promiscuity, and her death by drowning. While I believe the stories reveal enough details to hint at what may have happened, the event of Jules’s drowning is an unsolved mystery that fits the novel-in-stories genre. Without full closure, the incremental movement of the stories toward conclusion is all the genre affords a reader, and it effectively leaves open the image of drowning that I’d like to suffuse the work as a whole.

Although chronology in terms of a consistent plot is absent in the novel-in-stories, the stories of *The Drowned Girl* are arranged in such a way that they are concurrent, or chronological both within their respective groupings, and as groupings themselves. I felt that creating groups of stories would assist the reader as he or she moved through the work, identifying and cataloging characters and details, and that the work as a whole might achieve a certain coherence. As a novel-in-stories *The Drowned Girl* does reflect many of the attributes identified by critics studying the form. While it pivots on a variety of themes—the suburban ethos remains the most unifying. Its implications include the disintegration of the family and the rural landscape, along with a social pattern of exclusion, and the close-knit microcosm that permits a loosening morality.

Some critics mention the novel-in-stories as a form that provides writers the means to acquire publication, especially in the current publishing market where short story collections are difficult to sell, and the novel remains the priority. This attempt to reach a reading public is not new, and while I believe the genre's origins and usage are more organic than contrived, I recognize that the form carries significance in terms of its reception. As a work about women, I wanted *The Drowned Girl* to reveal an ironic stance, and I sought to emphasize this by harkening back to the exploitative aspects of early paperbacks, and their attempts to engage readers with often lurid titles, and cover art. Published by Ace, Bantam, Dell, Gold Medal, among others, and flourishing after World War II, the paperback met the needs of a reading public that craved what can only be described as over-the-top stories about sex, adultery, murder, and mystery—stories that were not new to literature, but were perhaps not so blatantly *sold*. “Good Girl Art” (known by collectors as GGA) that adorned the paperback covers depicted women in a variety of modes of dress, danger, and wantonness. Titles like *Backwoods Hoyden* and *Trailer Park Girl* were common. There was, as well, a sort of playfulness to the books that defied the darker content. “Confessions of a Party-Wife” seemed *playfully* dangerous, *wickedly* fun. I liked the tone of these covers, the short italicized epigraphs under the titles: *Men Were Her Speed, and She Went the Limit!* or *They Spiced Their Lives with Other Men's Wives!* I recognized in them a tone that I wanted to subvert with my own work. *The Drowned Girl's* story titles, based on paperback covers from the 50s and 60s, lure the reader in with a playfulness that the stories themselves belie, and serve as a form of commercialism that the work, as a whole, seeks to undermine. The question

of whether serious fiction can ride on the coattails of the popular paperback isn't as much the issue as whether or not the reader acknowledges the subversive elements of the paperback genre to begin with, and the novel-in-stories, with its fragmented take on contemporary life, is a suitable vehicle for revelation.

Love in Suburbia

The night after Martha's father died of a lightning strike on Penwood Pond, the sounds of crickets came from the foundation of the house, and fireflies pulsed, eerie and tender, at the edge of the woods. Martha left home and walked two miles to the center of town, past Filley Park and its shadows gathering like skirt folds, past the hardware store's smell of loam and chlorine, the Mobil station and its brilliant fluorescence, the library's brick façade where the gnarled roots of trees buckled the sidewalk. She crossed the town green, the grass cool and dewy, to the sidewalk that circled the new Wintonbury Mall, a maze of offices and shops with a fountain at its center. When Michael pulled into the parking lot she simply stepped off the curb and he stopped and she got in. She was sixteen. This is how she remembered it happening. It may have been that her skirt, a flimsy wrap-around, had blown open as she stepped down off the curb, or there had been something slightly desperate about her smile, or the way she held her hands out in front of her. He may have had to step on the brakes to avoid hitting her, but she didn't recall hearing the squeal of tires, or feeling any threat of injury. She would attend her father's funeral at the Sacred Heart Church with her sorrow checked by the memory of what she'd done on the narrow seats of Michael's silver MG.

Michael was an older boy. He already had a girlfriend, one he took out to restaurants in neighboring towns, places like Pettibone's Tavern or Avon Old Farms Inn where Martha had gone as a child. He told Martha they sat in booths and talked, or in his

car parked out under the stars and talked, and he claimed she let him kiss her, but nothing more went on. At the time, it had been easy for Martha to pretend this girlfriend meant nothing to him. When she was with Michael he looked at her with such longing, his eyes so intensely blue they took on a shade of misery she still saw years later as his wife, fixing him a vodka tonic at the kitchen counter, turning to glance at him sitting with his head in his hands at the kitchen table. Overhead, the globe-shaped light gave the room a bluish tint, and beyond the large picture window the backyard woods were in darkness. Michael and Martha had two daughters, and virtually no memories of the past to interrupt their lives.

Their house, in a new suburb in rural Connecticut, was a white Dutch Colonial with a red door, and an expansive lawn that sloped up to the street. The land had once been cow pasture belonging to a dairy that still lay half a mile behind Maple Hill Drive, a red barn with a white two-story clapboard house and an atmospheric haze you'd find in nostalgic photographs. When Martha and Michael had first driven down Maple Hill they'd seen children on bicycles and husbands watering flowerbeds. The tree boughs had swayed overhead, and Martha thought she heard the chimes of the ice-cream truck. They bought the house that summer, despite Michael's insistence that they couldn't afford it, because Martha knew in her heart that it was their destiny to live there. "I have a feeling," she kept saying.

"It's only a house," Michael told her.

"It will be our lives," Martha said.

She spoke fervently, her eyes swimming. She would win him, aware that each time she did there would be a price exacted, as if a bargain had taken place. The conditions were never spoken, but she believed he kept a kind of tally, that one day she would owe him for the privilege of having her way. This kept her wary of his moods and just this summer, one year after their move, she could see that perhaps a balancing of the account would be his falling out of love with her.

She had sensed it first in May, when the lawn became a bright, almost false green, and the pastures surrounding their neighborhood were white with tiny flowers. The bulbs she had planted came up, and in the mulched beds around the house, plants emerged and opened and bloomed and Martha went out onto the back porch in the mornings and breathed in and felt part of whatever was happening around her in the woods. Michael shut himself off, preferring to sit in the dark kitchen bent over his coffee and toast, the burden of the mortgage rounding his shoulders. One morning when she urged him to step outside and look at the back yard, the apple trees suddenly, completely in bloom, he shook his head, and when she tried to grab his arm, to pull him out, he shrugged her off, and she saw that it wasn't the morning or spring that he didn't want, it was her.

Wallis and Lucie came downstairs into the kitchen, their faces closed off as if they sensed something charged in the room. They took out their tiny colored cereal bowls and each got spoons. Wallis went into the pantry and brought out the cereal, silent and purposeful, like her father. Lucie was eight years old, the youngest, the more animated, dark-haired and tiny. Wallis was ten, and had started to lengthen and thin and become almost sallow. She wanted her blond hair long, to her waist—an unflattering length. She

reminded Martha of a child from another era, one who wore cumbersome skirts and bonnets and shoes she had to labor over with a buttonhook. Martha realized she had grouped the four of them—that she believed Lucie was like her, and Wallis like Michael, that Wallis and Michael were the stolid, serious ones, the martyrs, and she hated this about them. Wallis poured the cereal into the bowls on the table, and her face pinched with exactness. Martha watched her from the doorway to the den where Michael had retreated with his paper. Before he left he would enter the kitchen to kiss both girls goodbye, and look at her as he did this, a look that Martha always interpreted as, “These are ours, these beautiful girls,” but that today she sensed meant something else, a kind of vindication, “These are mine, and don’t you forget it.”

She imagined an alliance had been formed—surreptitiously, between the three of them. Their faces touched, their arms intertwined, and Martha waited by the doorway for her little kiss, a small, dry press of lips on hers. Any other day she did not care, but on this morning, the one of the apple blossoms, the lifeless kiss drained her and left a spark of anxiety that grew as summer approached, and the girls’ school ended. As she cleaned and scoured and scrubbed, furiously, hoping to douse it. As the humidity of summer took over, and the mornings were full of cicada noise, and inside, the house fell more and more silent.

Once summer vacation began, the girls moved outdoors with packs of children that showed up at the house each morning. Martha didn’t need to get out of bed to know what they were doing, or who was there, tapping at the screen door. Wallis would send Lucie up to tell her they were going down the street, to the Sheas’, or the Langs’, or out

into the back yard. Two hours earlier Michael would have gotten up and showered and slathered on the lime-scented aftershave he got each year on Father's Day, put on his clothes and left for work. Of this, she remembered only the weight of him on the edge of the mattress, slipping on his socks. The mornings could operate with ease, without her moving from under the cool bed sheet.

During the day the neighborhood women gathered in small groups to sip iced coffees and watch toddlers in plastic pools. They wore cotton shells and twill shorts and sandals decorated with sequins and shells and colored rhinestones, like a school craft project. They were women her age, some younger, who had set aside plans to go to law school, or medical school, given up positions as financial planners, bankers and account executives. When Martha was a girl, she was one of them. They were there at summer camp, forming friendships in cabins and on the brown sand beaches of Lake Champlain. She knew them from her private school, where they wrote their names in big, chunky letters on the covers of their binders, and wore clogs and chinos and turtlenecks. They summered at Point O' Woods, in Maine, or on the Vineyard, boated the Connecticut River to Hamburg Cove. In the winter months they went to Bermuda, or the Virgin Islands. All of this before her father died.

Now Martha was part of their circle again, while Lucie splashed with a friend in one of their pools, and Wallis arranged games on the wide lawn. She knew how to ask the right questions to get them all talking so that she could relax back into a folding chair, and listen to the drone of their voices. They were Missy, and Grace Perry, girls who went to Smith and Mount Holyoke, who shared a camaraderie that kept Martha at a distance.

There were stories of late night sorority parties, and mutual friends from a world Martha never had a chance to enter. They discussed difficulties with babies and toddlers that Martha had never experienced, so that even in the raising of her children she was a stranger. None discussed a husband who had fallen out of love.

Later, they took the children in for lunch on paper plates and watched the soap operas while the little ones napped. The street was quiet under its tree bough canopy, the leaves shifting, making shushing noises. Martha enjoyed the flow of the women in and out of houses, the children's sounds of play, the absence of husbands and their heavy footfalls, demanding things in kitchens. Each day was tirelessly similar, and in their sameness, Martha forgot her dissolving marriage.

In June there was an emergency on Foothills Way, the street behind them, and everyone on Maple Hill came out of their houses when the fire rescue truck passed. It was just after dinner, and the children jumped on their bikes to find out what had happened, riding off into the dusk and disappearing. The adults waited near the ends of their driveways for the news that filtered down the street from CeCe Lang, who had actually walked around the block to witness the tragedy—a little girl had drowned in a shallow brook that ran behind the houses on Michael and Martha's side of the street. She had fallen and hit her head. The children pedaled back, pale, uncomprehending. The tones of the parents became hushed. The wives put their hands to their mouths, the husbands placed arms over their wives' shoulders. All of this while the moths emerged to beat at the porch lights, and the neighbors gathered into small, awed groups. No one

really knew the child. She had been born with Down syndrome, someone said. She had been from the street over, and their little groups around the pools hadn't included anyone from Foothills.

Martha stood beside Michael and held her own girls' hands, watched the people leave their driveways and lawns and congregate. She followed him as he moved down the street, and found herself in a small group of neighbors she did not know. They were older, in their forties Martha guessed, and one of the women was smoking a cigarette, blowing the smoke up into the night sky where it formed a little cloud above their heads. They were talking about another time—years before, when this same thing had happened. “You'd think they'd fill that brook in, or something,” the woman with the cigarette said. The girls tugged on Martha's hands, and the woman smiled at them, then turned to Martha. “Oh, let them go,” she said. Her voice was a little hoarse, but pleasant, a laughing voice. “They're all playing hide and seek.” And she pointed to the yard behind her, where a large group of children were scattering, their bodies flashes of light-colored clothing and skin. Martha grudgingly let go of their hands, and her palms were wet from gripping them. One of the men had left the group and returned with bottles of beer, and the woman placed one in Martha's hand, patting it in a motherly way. “I know it's an awful thing, Martha,” she said.

Martha looked at her, surprised. The woman smiled and Martha could see fine wrinkles around her eyes and mouth. “I'm Helen,” she said, “Of Helen and Steve. We've heard all about you from Michael. I was just telling him the other day we needed to get together, the four of us. Finally welcome you to the neighborhood.” Around them the

men's voices became boisterous. They laughed and slapped each other's backs and lit up cigarettes, and forgot the drowned girl. Martha saw Michael accept a cigarette, watched one of the older men lean over with his lighter. In the light from the flame, Michael's face looked childish and silly to Martha. He had never mentioned any of these people, but Martha remembered times she would look out and see the rake propped against the maple tree in front, or the mower in the driveway covered with cut grass, and Michael nowhere in sight. And she realized he had been with these neighbors—in their garages or their kitchens, sipping cold beers and lighting cigarettes, talking about her. He had gone off and she hadn't bothered to ask him where, as if it had been of no importance. She had wanted him to have friends in the neighborhood, but she had not suspected they would be like these—settled and jaded, women like Helen Halsey, who wore the evidence of her affairs like wampum, who kept her hands on Michael as if he were a prize.

Michael had grown up in a large brick house with two life-sized stone deer flanking the front door. Behind his house was a swimming pool surrounded by a wooden deck, and a boathouse on a pond whose tributaries fed into the very pond, a mile away, where Martha's father had died. Martha had known all of this about him before she stepped off the curb in front of his MG that night. She had gone to his house one winter with a friend to ice skate. There had been a three-sided shelter built on the banks of the frozen pond, with a fire burning and benches to sit on, and she had come in off the ice and watched him from across the room, his breath making a white cloud around his head. Martha's friend had placed a gloved hand to Martha's ear and whispered his name, her breath smelling of spearmint schnapps. The shelter had been warm from the fire, and

Michael had unwound his scarf, and his face had flushed from the heat. Martha could not pinpoint exactly what drew her to him. He had worn a knit hat, and sat quiet and thoughtful in the midst of his loud, drunken friends, and maybe it was his composure, his self-assurance, that she liked. Later, when she'd gotten a closer look at him it was his eyes, the blue of them below his blond hair, and though she had watched him all night, waiting for him to notice her, for a word or a moment with him, his eyes never lit on her, only passed her over, scanning the room for someone else. And because he never approached her, she never forgot him, kept imagining the idea of being with him—on still summer evenings with her face pressed against the pillow, and the sounds of their neighbors coming through her open window—boys out on front lawns playing lacrosse, husbands and wives walking dogs with their mugs of steaming tea—or during the bus rides to the public high school, the town passing beyond the dirty bus window, knowing that one day she would have her chance. She has never told him this, not wanting their meeting to ever seem anything other than a work of fate.

Martha had always believed she could have whatever she wanted, even after her father died, and her mother started selling things from their house in her antique shop—the duck decoys from the mantel, the Staffordshire spaniel that held open the door to the den, these things disappearing without a word, as if Martha and her brother weren't supposed to notice, and so they pretended they didn't—Martha's brother busy making a hide-out in the basement, setting up a game of Monopoly and playing it by himself. And then the crying came at night from her mother's room, and Martha imagined everyone—the Crofts' and the Deerfields' taking out their trash, or searching in the shrubs for a lost

cat—could hear her. Martha’s life changed, but she did not accept any of it. Inside, she desired the same things, and it did not matter how she lived, what school she went to, what clothes she wore. She thought now, in the group of gathered neighbors, the grass damp and cool through her sandals, the night full of children’s voices and deeper, adult laughter, that she had managed to save herself by never acknowledging the sense of loss that drew down the corners of her mother’s mouth.

Beside her, Helen leaned conspiratorially, making plans for that Saturday evening—dinner somewhere, cocktails at seven o’clock. Behind them the children shrieked in the yard, over-tired, and the other groups of neighbors moved inside and turned on their living-room lamps and bedroom lights, and called their own children indoors. Martha discovered Wallis and Lucie at her side, and saw that the men had brought a galvanized tub of ice out to the circle where they stood, and Steve had brought folding chairs, and they continued to drink and laugh, the lit ends of their cigarettes marking their spots in the circle on Helen and Steve’s front lawn.

Martha looked toward Michael, but he had settled himself in a chair, his beer bottle nestled in the palms of his hands, and when she told him she should take the girls home he had leaned toward her, his head cocked, distracted. Helen patted his knee and he turned back toward the conversation on his left, so Martha and the girls were forgotten, except for a dismissive wave of his hand. She waited a moment, listening to Steve tell the story of the last time a child had drowned in the brook—the Martin boy, or the Pitek’s, wasn’t it? he said. And then how they had all gone over to George Deason’s place, and the kids had all fallen asleep on the rec room shag, and George’s wife, Mary Gail, had

made pancakes at four a.m. Helen tipped her head back and laughed, and slapped her leg. “And remember one batch caught fire?” she said. Martha had never met the people they were talking about, though their daughter, Ivy, had been her babysitter for months.

“That was a long time ago,” Steve said. He shook his head, and the group grew quiet, as if observing a moment of silence. Martha wondered what had happened to the family to cause such a pall. Someone cast a quick look over their shoulder at the Deason’s house—and then Helen reminded them of the whiskey sour tasting party, and the lobster bake, and how they steamed the lobsters, twenty or thirty of them, over an open pit dug right into the lawn, and fueled by a mixture of charcoal briquettes, lighter fluid, and firewood left from winter.

“And Barrows fell and cut his lip,” Steve said. Someone lit a cigarette. Martha saw Michael edge forward in his chair, his shoulders hunched away from her, listening.

She rose and gathered the girls and walked back up the street to their house, which sat dark and open at the top of the hill. Inside it was airless and hot, and smelled of the meal she had cooked and hadn’t cleaned up—the ragged chicken bones still on the broiler pan on the stove, the plates still spread on the kitchen table by the bay window. Lucie wanted to watch television, but it was too late for that, and Martha knew that she would have to read her a book to get her settled, maybe even lie beside her in her small bed until she fell asleep, and she resented all of this, pining for the circle of adults down the street, the sound of their conversation, the cold beer bottle with its label sliding off in her hand.

Wallis would not sleep in her room. She stood, in her nightgown with her arms crossed, at the threshold of Lucie's room, and so the three of them lay down in Martha and Michael's bed, and Martha read a few pages of *The Secret Garden* until both girls were asleep. She stayed there in the bed, listening for the neighbors down the street, imagining them in their circle—Steve and Howard Livesy in their polo shirts, their stomachs rounding over their waistbands, and Howard's wife, Marilyn, with her jangling bracelets, her tiny upper lip that revealed her gum line; Jodie and Seth, a young couple with a live-in nanny, who could stay out of the house as long as they liked, and Helen beside Michael, her hand on his leg, her nails exquisite and opalescent, her eyes and voice laughing. Once, Martha imagined, she had worn Papagallo flats with the flowers on the toes, and sundresses that revealed her fragile shoulder blades. Martha tried to remember what Michael had been doing in the group, other than smiling his usual grin, his head bobbing in agreement. She imagined him returning Helen's glances, placing his own hand on her bare knee, and she felt a spiraling emptiness. Outside, beyond the cricket and the frog sound, a laugh rang out, tinny and distant, and downstairs the plates with their remains marked their places at the table.

Martha closed her eyes and dreamed, not of Michael and Helen, but of the little drowned girl she did not know. Her body was small and sturdy. She wore a dress covered with tiny ladybugs. Her hair curled over her ears, and she walked, barefoot, to the edge of the brook. The stones, covered with green algae, made a slippery path across to the other side and a sandy bank. Brook water trickled over the green tops—innocent, clear, its depths filled with frogs and small fish. And before the girl stepped onto the first stone,

her arms held out to balance, Martha reached down and touched the skin of her arms and her face, smelled the laundry soap on her clothes and the sweat in her hair. She breathed the girl in and knew the scent of her mother's perfume caught in the dress's folds. Martha awoke with her face pressed to Lucie's neck, but it would take moments, still lost in the clarity of the dream, to realize she had been breathing in the smells of her own child.

She cleared the table at one a.m., and when Michael came in she was at the sink, scrubbing the broiler pan and crying. She had wanted Michael to see her, to step behind her and ask her why, so she could tell him that they were all self-involved and petty, that a real little girl who had lived a street away had died in the small, half-dried up brook that ran behind their house, and none of them cared. She had wanted him to take her soapy hands in his and hold her so she could smell his lime cologne and the beer and the smoke from their neighbors' cigarettes. But he had not walked past the kitchen, had gone upstairs instead, his footfalls on each carpeted step a slow shuffle, and she was left crying at the sink for a girl she did not know, for someone else's tragedy.

Through Martha's kitchen bay window she could see through the trees to the outlines of the houses on Foothills. One afternoon someone played a piano, and the music, a slow sarabande, drifted through the gnarled apple boughs and pine branches heavy with sap and needles, across the small brook, into their back yard. Martha was in the kitchen making potato salad, and the sound came through the window screens. She stopped what she was doing, left the potatoes steaming in a bowl and went out the back onto the deck, and then down through their patch of woods to the tangled underbrush

which led to the brook. She saw that her own children had worn a path through the ferns and skunk cabbage and thorn bushes, the spindly jack-in-the-pulpit, and she took it, through shoulder-high grasses to a cleared area by the bank. It was hot and humid, and mosquitoes and dragonflies whirred down from the tops of trees. The music had stopped, and she stared at the small flow of water, the way it coursed through a narrow gully. It ran over large rocks and brownish leaves and debris caught in small eddies. And out of nowhere, a man appeared. He stood farther down the bank, on the opposite side, wearing slacks, and a wrinkled dress shirt. He had his tie loosened, and his leather shoes were planted in the dirt. Martha saw him glance up at her. His eyes reached hers across the trickle of the brook, in the haze and the whine of cicadas. She stared at the base of his throat where the loosened tie and his collar met.

“Was that you?” she said. “Playing?”

He shook his head no. She saw his hand go to the tie as if to straighten it. And then the music started up again, and Martha imagined one of those lonely boys with odd haircuts you’d see in the halls at school—strange and distant, with hidden musical gifts. The piece, a scherzo, went on for several bars, and then stopped. They listened then to the sound of the brook, waiting, but the music didn’t resume. The man said he had played once as a child, and Martha too told how she was forced to practice with a metronome.

“In the summer it got hot, and my legs stuck to the bench and that ticking went on and on.”

The man smiled at her, nodding. “Did you study privately?”

“With our neighbor Mrs. Tipton,” Martha said.

“The Mrs. Tipton? On Sharon Road?”

Martha smiled, amazed. They were both from the same town. They’d gone to the same high school.

“The fighting War Hawks,” he said, laughing, his head thrown back in a way that Martha found winning.

They’d graduated many years apart. The man was older, his hair graying. Martha told him she wouldn’t have guessed. He smiled and shook his head. “You say that to every man you meet in the woods,” he said. They laughed. Around them the trees stilled. Martha said how sad it was about the little girl. She went on, as she often did when she was nervous, about how a friend of hers had drowned two years ago, how she’d been found in the river. “Where all of this eventually leads I assume,” she said, watching the place where the brook turned a bend and disappeared. The man made a coughing sound into his hand and she looked up to see his blanched face. He glanced away, as if something had flitted off into the trees. It occurred to her that the little girl might have been his. “Oh,” she said. “You must be—,” The man kept his pained expression averted. It was as if neither of them knew how to disentangle themselves from the idea of it, thrown out now into the air between them. Martha felt the urge to take his face in her hands.

“I’m so sorry.” She took a step forward, treading on the jack-in-the-pulpit. “If there’s anything I can do,” she said.

He looked at her, steadily and shook his head. “It was long enough ago,” he said, almost a little bitterly.

Martha thought this was odd, it had been only two weeks, but she imagined grieving people said odd things, and she remembered how after her father died she'd heard the old women at the church tag sale clucking over porcelain butter pats about how *time heals*.

"Why don't you come up?" He gestured with his hand up through the woods to what she presumed was his house.

Martha did not know if she should.

"I'd like the company," he said. His face was mapped with an uncomfortable sadness. Martha smiled, wanly, sorry for him. She slipped off her shoes, and like the girl in her dream, she stepped across the wide stones to the opposite bank. The girl's father gently took her elbow in his hand.

"Richard," he said. His hand slipped into hers, soft and assured.

Martha said very little of what she was thinking. She followed him, dumbly, through the saplings and fern, up an incline that had no path. Richard seemed to chart his own, holding back thorny tendrils of wild blackberry for her to pass. She thought, "It is almost time for lunch," and "The girls will wonder where I've gone." She imagined she heard the phone ringing in her house behind her, or Wallis's voice calling out. She wondered what his wife would think about her showing up. She followed along behind Richard until they came out into an expanse of lawn, green and tended and bordered by the wild lilies that bloomed on the roadsides, *shithouse lilies*, her father called them, and she almost said this out loud to Richard as she stepped up alongside him. The house was

a modern design, made of cedar siding and one long wall of glass. They stood there on the lawn, looking up at it.

Martha made a sound of appreciation. “It’s lovely.”

There was a porch, similar to Martha’s, and they climbed this set of steps up, and Richard opened the sliding screen door for Martha to pass into the house. All this time he’d been talking about his work. He was an attorney with a large firm downtown. “It’s been almost impossible,” he said. “All the drama and controversy.” Martha didn’t know what he was talking about, but she didn’t ask him to explain.

They stepped into the kitchen where one lone bowl sat in a stainless sink, the sink wide and deep, like a tub. The cabinets were pale wood, with chrome pulls, the appliances all stainless. On the stone counter was a beautiful blue glass pitcher. The light fell into the shape of tree boughs on the floor. Martha saw the dim rooms opening off the nearby hallway—one side of the house in light, the other shadow. She couldn’t imagine a child living here.

“All this silence gets to me,” he said, his voice low.

He went to the refrigerator and took out a bottle of white wine. “Will you join me?” he asked her. “I don’t want to drink alone.”

Martha stayed by the sliding door. She could hear the leaves moving, and glanced behind her. A bit of her house’s roof was visible. “I don’t know,” she said.

Richard didn’t seem sure if she understood his question. He waited with the wine bottle sweating in his hand. His eyes implored her to be accommodating. “Don’t give me any grief,” her mother used to say to her. Martha shook her head. She opened her mouth

to protest, and he took down two glasses. The house seemed empty, and she wondered if his wife worked, or had gone to stay elsewhere—with a mother or a sister. He kept his eyes on her, as if she might bolt. He was kind, and careful, shaking his head.

“I know what you must think,” he said, his voice barely audible. He slid the glass of wine across the counter.

Martha wanted to ask him what that was. “My girls might be coming home for lunch,” she said. And then she wondered if that was the wrong thing.

“Just one drink,” was all he said back.

He reached up into another cabinet and took down a bottle of scotch and poured himself a glass. Martha took the wine. She moved with it into the adjoining room and then stepped further into the house—the windows at the front were high and narrow, with slatted wooden blinds closed against the street. The room was sparsely decorated—a long, pale couch, a glass table. There were smudges on the table, a teacup, a plate littered with greasy crumbs, an old sweater draped over the couch back, newspapers stacked messily on the cushions. She saw a pair of women’s shoes by the front door. There were photographs that she did not approach. Martha heard children passing on Foothills Way, imagined them on their bikes, pedaling slowly, discussing what to do, pointing out the house where the drowned girl lived. Their voices rose, sharp and high-pitched. Behind her she heard Richard’s intake of breath. She felt his hand on her shoulder. She put the glass of wine to her lips and drank.

“It must be very difficult for your wife.” Martha kept her voice low to match the hush of the room. “All of the memories here.” She thought he would tell her where his wife was now that she’d mentioned her, but he did not.

Instead he explained how when he and his wife met they had tried to have a baby. But then that went wrong, and everything else happened so quickly she really didn’t have time to recover. It would have been nice, he said, absorbed with the liquid in his glass, if she’d been given the chance to have a normal daughter. And then he glanced up at her. “I’m sorry. You two were friends.”

Martha was confused. “The little girl?” she said.

“You and Jules,” he said. “My wife’s daughter.”

Not the little girl, but Jules, Martha’s old friend who’d drowned. And then Jules was suddenly there—the smell of her long dark hair, her laugh, her flashing eyes. Martha remembered learning of her death. Lucie had started kindergarten. They’d been living in their first house. It had been a shock dulled by the years that had passed since she’d last seen her, by the routine of children and housework. She had felt regret that they had not ever kept in touch, as if their continued friendship might have altered the outcome. She’d had moments of nostalgia, some of fear. Jules’s death had been suspicious. It had never been determined how she’d gotten in the river. Martha felt the loss now, sharp and fresh.

“Oh, Jules,” she said. She looked at Richard, his wrinkled shirtsleeves folded up, his bare forearm with its wiry hair. Jules’s mother had remarried. Richard then was the husband. “We’re talking about different drowned girls,” she wanted to say, but thought that sounded wrong again. Richard’s eyes were dark and concentrating on her face. He

gave her a wry smile and took her free hand and brought it to his lips. Martha started, and spilled her wine on the carpet. He took her glass from her then, and pulled her up against him and leaned his forehead down to touch her shoulder. She thought he was crying, overcome with the memory of Jules, and she put her arms around him, though she wasn't sure why, or who was comforting who. She thought she should wipe the wine up off the rug, but he held her there, his mouth pressed to her collarbone. He smelled of pine woods. He whispered her name.

“Oh, Richard,” she said. She expected at any moment that he would pull away, and apologize. Then she would have a chance to tell him how she had misunderstood. And yet he didn't move. The moment, prolonged, could no longer be explained. He made a small sound, like a moan. Martha's clothing felt sodden and heavy from the heat in the room. Something stirred in her, stealthily, like a warm confusion. Richard moved the flat of his hand to her stomach. She let him do this because she found she wanted him to. His fingers slid up beneath her shirt, and then down under the waistband of her shorts. In a moment they had undone the clasp. She tipped her face up, opened her mouth onto his. She could no longer be accountable for where his hands went, or what they did. She leaned into the length of him. The room filled with the sudden, startling whir of cicadas.

At first, she felt observed by people who could not possibly see her—her mother, Michael, the missing wife, the boy playing the piano, the little drowned girl's ghost, and then she remembered Jules and stopped caring if anyone saw her. When she made a sound Richard said “Shhh,” as you might to a child who needed consoling. He brushed the newspapers to the floor, urgently. The couch's upholstery stuck to her skin. Like the

piano bench, she thought. So little had passed between them she could think of nothing else. The sweater on the sofa arm smelled of a woman's perfume. Above her Richard's soft, graying hair stood on end. His forehead shone. His face was closed, and intent, an almost agonized expression. From somewhere upstairs came the sound of a door opening, and footsteps, another door closing. His eyes opened, and Martha saw the panic in them. He moved off of her, and pulled her up from the couch.

"I'm sorry," he said. "But you'll have to go."

He fumbled with his pants, with his shirt buttons. Martha tugged on her shorts. She saw they'd left a damp spot on the couch.

Martha had crossed the brook and reached the woods, and in her hurry to flee she'd taken another path by mistake. This one brought her to a clearing where her girls and the neighbor's children had been playing. They had piled the fallen leaves and pine needles into outlines of rooms connected by narrow paths. Martha paused here. Her shorts clung between her legs. Her heart raced. She imagined the children working together, gathering the piles of leaves, someone telling them where to place the outlines, what room was what, all of them moving busily about the woods with their tasks. Like little bees, Martha thought. She followed one path that led to a large, flat rock. Nearby was a pile of decaying logs, and a pot balanced on top—a piece of her Farberware. A spoon stood inside it, and a stew of torn pokeweed leaves and berries floating in water they may have carried from the brook. Around the flat rock were smaller ones—a table and chairs. The kitchen, she thought. From here she could not see her own house, or

Richard's. The brook tumbled past sun-warmed stones. Light filtered through the trees onto the waving fern.

She took another path and came upon a makeshift tent. Martha's old chenille bedspread hung over a rope tied between two trees. It was anchored down on each corner by rocks. Airy fabric was draped at either end to enclose the tent, and Martha recognized the curtains that had decorated the living room when they'd moved in. She'd put them in the basement in a box, too nice to throw out. Overhead the trees swayed, and the curtains on the tent moved out and back. The children had all gone home for lunch. Martha thought that her girls may have gone to a friend's house to eat. The other mother would ask about her, and Lucie would say they didn't know where she'd gone, and Wallis would give her a look. Martha remembered the potatoes on the counter. There was laundry, too, in a basket in the hallway. She stepped closer to the tent and parted the curtain door. Inside a blanket covered the ground, and a book from the public library, *Lake-Gone-Away*, was propped beside a small basket filled with swatches of fabric, thread, colored yarn, and buttons in a small baby food jar. Martha crawled in and sat down in the tent. The bedspread was stippled with leaf shadow. The wind tugged and buckled the sides. She smelled dirt and the dried leaves.

That first night with Michael, when Martha had been sixteen, she had believed that there was nothing for her in the world. She considered now how it might have been any boy who pulled into the Wintonbury Mall parking lot and won her heart, and this no longer worried her. It was Jules who had taught her she could have any boy she wanted,

how simply approaching them—in the school cafeteria, or at gatherings in the Wintonbury Mall maze by the fountain—was beyond the boy’s expectations.

“He’ll be surprised,” Jules said. “You’ll catch him off-guard. ‘Who me?’ he’ll think.” Jules would put on his dull, dumb-boy expression. Martha would laugh.

They’d pass a cigarette back and forth between them.

Martha lay back in the tent and knew she was not destined to be with Michael, even as she remembered first seeing his silver MG, the shine of it in the lot lights, the way it curved around and came within inches of her outstretched hands. The top was down and his hair was tousled, and he had grinned at her through the windshield. He had asked her if she needed a ride, and she had lied and told him, “Yes,” and gotten into the car, smelled the leather interior, fit her legs into the space beside him.

“Where are you going?” he asked, his hand on the gear shift smelling of cologne, his shirt sleeve rolled up along his arm, dressed for a date, which was obvious to Martha now, but at the time she thought everything was for her.

“I’m not really going anywhere,” she told him, her skirt split open to the tops of her legs, her skin damp and shiny from the walk. By this time the car had moved forward to the street, was poised to turn onto the main road. She had not known how to sound—she had simply said the words, and he paused, fidgeted with the gear shift for a moment, the car rolling backward, then forward while he looked at her, and she, finally, looked at him, and without hesitation the gear caught and the car pulled out onto Tunxis Avenue heading north.

“Where would you like to go?” he asked quietly, almost shyly, his eyes fastened to the road ahead. The wind pulled at her hair and the car sped by the places she had just passed walking. She placed her hand on top of his on the gearshift. He glanced at her hand on his, but for the most part kept his eyes on the road, and Martha had the chance to look at him—his shaved cheeks, the way his hair blew in the wind and revealed the place below his ear that was childish and soft. At the next light, a deserted intersection that led into another town, she leaned over and kissed him there, and he turned his face so that her mouth found his, and though she could not see the blueness of his eyes she knew they were on her, studying her in the dark, and the car moved on, and she placed her hand on his leg, felt the weight of his thin summer trousers and the heat of his skin beneath them. He kissed her for a long time at the next stop sign, his fingers woven in her hair, cradling her head, his mouth gentle and persistent. He moved on when a car approached, driving faster on the tiny roads, charting a route that Martha would follow the next day in her mother’s car, to a closed park in Granby, where they turned off the concrete lot onto a grass path and he parked the car, and they were enfolded in darkness.

Martha knew that they talked about themselves at some point, but she did not remember anything but the feeling of his hands, the night sounds drowned out by the sounds of his breathing, his soft groans. His body and its weight were all that mattered, the positioning in the narrow bucket seat, her hands on the small of his back, and the night air touching her exposed breasts, her shoulders and neck, its coolness moving up between the spread of her legs. He had put the seat all the way back. Somewhere a dog on its runner barked at headlights. Bats dropped from eaves and charted courses over lawns

ribboned by mower's blades, their voices scraping like rusty pasture gates. She imagined her father casting his silly line from his rowboat, his box of new lures opened in the stern, his floppy hat, the way his sideburns grew bushy near his ears. Late summer lightning struck the rod on Duncaster Mill. The cows loose on the golf course lowered themselves to the green. Martha's mother set her rings in the crystal dish by the sink, and the air came in through the window, filled with ozone and clover. Over Michael's shoulder Martha saw the sky, brilliant with stars

They would not plan dates after this. He would not call her and ask her to dinner, or a movie, or a party, and pick her up smelling of the same cologne, wearing a nice shirt. She would go back to high school, and date other boys. She would walk to the mall with her friends, or drive her mother's car, and see Michael coming out of the package store wearing jeans and a T-shirt, heading out with his own friends. He'd stop on the sidewalk, and stare at her, the friends calling to him from their car. Or she would see him dressed again for a date, driving through the mall parking lot, and he might catch sight of her and pull over to talk to her, to ask her how she was, what was she doing. At midnight her friends might tell her his little car was circling the mall lot, John Brown's restaurant, the bowling alley, Filley Park, looking for her. He would pull up beside her, and she would climb into his car, and they'd go to the parking lot at Connecticut General, to the reservoir, or the grass road at the park in Granby. He would always have a bottle of something in the car—brandy, or schnapps, or wine, and they would pull in somewhere and drink and have sex. From the beginning, Martha had given him everything he wanted, and she did not regret any of it, despite what people said about her. They did not

know his desperation, his ragged breathing, the damp shine of his skin under the moon, or that she had wanted all of this, had planned it all, and in the end, gotten what she wanted. She wished Jules were here now to see it, to understand. Michael was still the boy in the silver MG, his eyes the same, with the same lost look, and she would still give him anything, but somehow he could not remember what it was he ever wanted from her.

Around her the leaf house corridors fanned out, leading to other rooms claimed by other children, decorated with rocks, and blankets and old sheets stolen from their mothers' linen closets, with discarded plates and cups, with tarnished cutlery and cracked vases filled with wood phlox. Martha remembered the drowned girl's father asking her to go. The way his hands hung loose, surrendered. He had made a terrible mistake. She saw his dismay that she had allowed him to do it, and yet she'd felt no remorse. Even now, lying on the blanket, the bedspread patterned with leaves overhead, her hands moved along her body in place of his. She'd left taking the porch steps quickly at his urging, crossing the lawn. At the entrance to the woods Martha had stopped and looked back. She hadn't expected to see him watching her, but there he'd been, raising his hand, a feeble farewell. She'd seen the glint of his watch. Then a woman had called to him from inside, and he'd turned, need driving him back into the house.

Send Me

Ivy had her neighbor, Michael's, cufflinks. They were hidden deep in the pocket of her dead brother Jimmy's ragged jeans that she wore, along with the rest of his clothes, because they fit her. They were worn soft in the spots where his elbows and knees had rubbed, and they smelled of him, the way she imagined he smelled, the way Michael smelled when he walked her home, his hand on her arm, guiding her under the purple street light, across the damp and shadowed lawn, to her front door.

Tonight it would be the fried Polynesian food and cigarettes of the Hukelau restaurant where he and Martha had gone with the Halseys from down the street. Until this past year, when Michael had asked, Ivy had never taken care of children. To keep his two girls, Wallis and Lucie, busy she relied on memories—how to clip in a barrette, the words to “All the Girls in France,” how to draw, perfectly, a house with a chimney, a tree, and flowers blooming along a curved path to the front door. She taught them yard games like Red Light, Green Light, and Freeze tag, how to take the cut grass and arrange it so that rooms and corridors were outlined on the wide lawn.

Before Michael and Martha had left for the restaurant tonight, Michael sat on his front steps waiting for Martha to finish getting ready. He wore a new starched shirt, and a silk tie. The lit end of his cigarette quavered in the dark. And Wallis tugged on Ivy's hand and said, “Show me again,” and Ivy turned one more perfect cartwheel, her hair dragging

and catching in his lawn, her body upside down, then right-side up, her face flushed with the exertion of tumbling into the night with his eyes on her.

A year ago, Michael and Martha had moved into what had been the Barretts' house across the street. The house had been vacant all spring. When the grass began to grow, the weeds wound their way up the post of the For Sale sign, and the front lawn took on the look of a meadow threaded with slender speedwell and bluets. That spring, Ivy felt her loneliness like a physical pain that made her breath catch. She sat at her window and saw that up and down the street the sun shone off the windows of houses as if no one was inside, like an empty movie lot. On the day Michael and Martha moved in she had stood in the hall closet between the winter coats, an old parka, a brown tweed with a cowled hood, and watched them through the small window at the back—Martha smiling and chatty, and Michael, his head down, nodding every so often, unloading boxes and boxes from their green Suburban. It had been summer, hotter than this year, the kind of heat that made you dull and achy for something to stir.

Ivy saw the way Michael carried boxes too heavy for him. He was slight. His hair was straight and boyish. From far away she could not have guessed the blueness of his eyes, the slight tremble of his hands that made him seem, at times, old and sad. She watched him lean on the car's tailgate overtaken, she would think, by the heat, knowing now that it was this unnamed thing, this baffled sorrow, that she found moving. Sitting on his lawn in the dark, watching him smoke his cigarette, she had wanted to grab his hands to stop their shaking.

Last weekend she had gone with them all to the lake and he had followed her out to the raft. She'd heard his strokes behind her, and she had kept swimming, pulled herself up onto the large wooden platform and lay back into the sun, her eyes closed, waiting for him. She heard the water rush off his body, felt him lie down beside her, their arms touching. Around them, other people sat in groups, talking, or climbed the ladder to the board to dive. Ivy felt the sun-bleached wood under her back, felt the water on her skin in the sun, and Michael's arm, its wet warmth. The two of them lay side by side, their chests rising and falling with heavy breaths. Neither of them spoke.

Ivy did not know what he thought of her. Overhead, a cloud moved across the sun, and she wanted to look at him, to touch the wet pieces of his hair, his mouth, but he moved first, turned to his side and propped his head in his hand and looked at her. Their closeness on the raft seemed to distract him from the usual questions he asked her about her family, or school, or the boyfriend she'd lied about having, and he stayed there, looking, for only a moment, as if recognizing something in their proximity. He got to his feet and dove back into the green lake, the splash slight and quiet under the laughing and goading sounds of the teenagers on the raft. But Ivy had seen something in his face, a confusion she had never seen before.

Later, after they'd driven home, and Martha had taken the girls inside, Ivy had lingered in the garage while Michael carried the cooler from the car. Sitting in the pine woods they had all been eaten up by mosquitoes, and Michael's bites had swollen up—dime-sized sores that Ivy touched with her index finger.

“Don't,” he'd said.

“Just looking,” she told him.

“Go home, Ivy Deason.”

Ivy smiled at him. She turned and left him standing in the garage, by the shining galvanized tub and the rake with its silver tines, and she sensed that he watched her leaving and wanted her back. Tonight, after Michael had left with Martha, and while Wallis and Lucie played downstairs, Ivy put away shoes, hung up the clothes strewn everywhere—over the backs of chairs, hanging from the bedpost. She went on her hands and knees and fished hangers out from under the bed and the bureau. She found Michael’s hairbrush under a sea of neckties on the chair, and she placed it on the bureau where it belonged. She made the bed and found his underwear in a ball among the tangle of sheets.

Through the bedroom window she could see, over the tops of new maples, her friend, Nora’s, bedroom lit up. One day when school was cancelled last winter, during what would become the biggest Nor’easter in twenty years, Ivy and Nora had taken Ivy’s mother’s Cadillac to Southwick, Massachusetts, to a little wood-framed package store with a bell on the door, where it was said the proprietors sold to everyone. Ivy, to her surprise, was allowed to buy a bottle of Southern Comfort and almost a case of beer. She wore Mary Gail’s brown tweed coat and a pair of burgundy leather gloves. Inside the store a man with a black moustache winked at her.

“What are you doing out in this?” he asked, and waved his hand toward the snow falling beyond the glass door.

“I’m having a party,” Ivy told him.

She paid with a crisp bill, stolen from her father's study. The man helped her load the beer into the trunk lined with plush fabric, all lit up and looking warm and safe enough to sleep in.

"Can I come?" the man said. The snow had begun to blow into small drifts. It landed on the man's bare head, onto his moustache.

"Oh, no," she said, climbing into the car. "Only under-age drinkers allowed."

They'd driven back into town, laughing, mimicking the expression on the little man's face. They circled the bowling alley and the A.C. Peterson's restaurant until they saw Sean Sullivan from school walking from Drug City with a new pack of cigarettes, wearing his black leather jacket and fluorescent orange hunting hat with the flaps. Nora climbed into the back seat. Ivy pulled over and opened the door and he stared at her, the snow falling around his shoulders, and then he smiled and got in. He said nothing for a long time, clomped the snow off his shoes onto the mat while they circled around town, past the bowling alley, and Wades Vegetables, back to Terry Plain and Tunxis Avenue. Sean Sullivan was a sophomore. He had hazel eyes and blond hair and a strong, square chin that Ivy would never, normally, have gotten close enough to notice. He sat beside her and smoked three cigarettes, fiddled with the cellophane on the pack. They stopped behind the Farmer's Exchange and got out some of the beer and he looked at her with his eyes slit and finally said, "Who *are* you?"

Nora laughed, a high-pitched giggling sound. They drank the beer and drove past the Texaco and the Stop & Shop, up hills and past Ivy's neighborhood.

Sean Sullivan told Ivy, “Turn here,” and meanwhile the snow fell and the car seemed to float to wherever he told her to go. They picked up his friend, Evan, from a house on Penwood Pond, where the water was dull black through the trees, and the trees leaned in the black glass front of the house.

“Where’d you learn to drive?” Sean asked her. Evan settled in the back seat with a grunt. Ivy could see the top of his red hair in the rearview mirror, saw Nora scoot to the opposite side of the seat and glare at her.

“My sister taught me,” she said. But Lacey had never taught Ivy anything intentionally, only set an example that Ivy was bound to follow—smoking in her bedroom with her friends, stealing cans of Black Label beer from the refrigerator, pretending to go to school each morning, and then going somewhere else, telling Ivy to erase the messages from the school when she got home. Ivy wasn’t sure if Lacey knew how to drive, or if she had ever gotten a diploma from high school after so many days of not being there. When Lacey was gone, Ivy would go into her room and open the bureau drawers and the closet and look at her clothes, sift through notes hidden in shoe boxes, written on white lined paper from her friends, as if they were clues to the person her sister had become.

Ivy drove Nora and Sean and Evan up to High Point Road to the reservoir, past the tree marked with a white X, and Sean and Evan had gone on about the curve and the spot where they might slide. “Slow down,” they both said, Evan’s head popping forward between the bucket seats, Sean reaching out and grabbing the dashboard. Years ago, three people had been killed driving around the bend.

“That’s the tree,” Evan said. One person survived and came to mark it, a big, glowing white etch in someone’s memory. Ivy took the turn slowly, but the back tires slid a little on the ice, and inside the car was quiet until Sean thought to reach out and turn on the radio. He sang, “Darling, youooo send me,” and they passed around the bottle of Southern Comfort.

At the reservoir, Ivy wouldn’t let Sean Sullivan kiss her, and he’d stamped out into the snow and pouted on the hood of the car until she’d gone out after him, laid down next to him on the cold metal and explained that there was something about him she didn’t really want to kiss—he was too confident, too sure. She couldn’t tell him that he wasn’t Michael.

“You don’t send me,” she said.

Sean stared at her from under the orange cap with his beautiful eyes and she saw she’d confused him, that he wanted to kiss her more than ever. They stayed there together, with the snow falling on them and the sky darkening, with the tall moaning oaks and aspens and hemlocks, the air full of the quiet snow, until a cruiser pulled up with two policemen and flashed the light on the car.

“Don’t you know there’s been a State of Emergency declared?” one said.

“License and registration,” said the other.

The first policeman drove Mary Gail’s car with Nora and Evan, and Sean and Ivy got into the back of the cruiser. The officer eased into the driver’s seat and placed his large, gloved hands on the wheel, and began a lecture about all of the things that could have happened to them—death by freezing, car accident. They drove in a caravan back to

each house, dropping everyone off. Nora's parents refused to let Nora near Ivy after that, but Ivy didn't care because lately she was always at Martha and Michael's.

It was Martha, not Michael, who invited Ivy to go places with them, who told her she was part of the family. And she felt like she belonged with them, her love for Wallis and Lucie, even for Martha, never felt at odds with what she felt for Michael. It was all connected in some way that she could not describe. Ivy sat on Michael's side of the bed, holding his cufflinks in her hand. She thought about the bedroom slippers he wore out to the convenience store, the sickle-shaped scar on his thumb, the way he held Lucie on his lap, with his hands cupped over her knees. She knew that her being at the house all the time bothered him. He smiled at her when he had to, when Martha was watching. But later, when they were alone, there was that look in his face. He was worried about her touching his things, maybe guessing that she was not just a neat person, that she had ulterior motives.

And he was right. Ivy never cleaned at home anymore. They had a maid now, Mima, who did almost everything. But before this, Ivy was the one to empty the ashtrays in the morning, sweep up broken glass, wipe the counters, and make the beds. She had done the laundry since she was eight, dusted and ran the vacuum, coming home after school each day to notice handprints on the bathroom door, mirrors smeared, dust on the upper bookshelves, crumbs of food near the baseboards. She would not go to bed each night without dusting the tabletops in the living room, lifting each photograph in its frame and placing it down again in the same spot.

At night, Mary Gail drank in her bedroom with the door closed. Ivy knew this because sometimes she would come out and wander into her room in her nightgown and sit on the end of her bed and seem about to tell her something. Her hairdo would be flattened on one side, and sometimes she brought in her glass, which she set on the end table reeking of gin and lime. Ivy would groan and tell her to leave. Mary Gail would grab her ankle through the covers and hold on. Her messages were cryptic, “One day you’ll understand,” she’d say. “Don’t believe in anything,” she’d hiss.

Her father had hired Mima, who picked Ivy up from school in a little green Peugeot. They would drive a hundred feet or so from the school, and then switch places, and Ivy would drive the rest of the way, the stick shift crunching, the car stalling out at first. Mima would put both her hands over her eyes and make a little sound like a bird’s chirp.

Sometimes, Ivy would ask, “So, who is she today?” and Mima would shake her head at her and click her tongue. She mumbled to herself about “respect” and “dignity.” Ivy would have to get her in the mood to answer.

“Rita Hayworth,” she’d say, finally.

“And wearing--?” Ivy asked.

“White silk pajamas and a hat, with a white veil,” Mima said.

Once when they got home Mary Gail was in the kitchen preparing a stuffed veal roast. The counter was cluttered with dishes, and she turned to them in surprise, holding the roast in both hands, patting at the sides where the stuffing crumbled out onto the floor. Her eyes grew wide and wet, her hands trembled, seemed to weaken at the wrists,

and the roast slipped to the floor with a smack. Mima always hushed her, led her out of the room like a little girl, and Ivy wondered what it would be like to calm another person, to tell them “Hush” and pat their shoulder, to know what to do, like Mima, in the middle of all that mess.

It was midnight when Ivy heard the front door open downstairs, the silver tapping of women’s heels in the foyer. Martha murmured near the stair landing. Michael whistled somewhere else—in the kitchen by the liquor cabinet. Ice clinked into four glasses. The Halsey’s were there, Helen and Steve, already drunk, their voices rose as they moved through the house. Martha’s dress whispered in the upstairs hall, paused outside Lucie’s door. Ivy was lying next to Lucie on the bed, Lucie’s small body curled against hers, her breathing soft and shallow on Ivy’s neck, the only way she would ever fall asleep, though there wasn’t anything she hadn’t tried—reading her stories, one after the other, singing her songs from *Funny Girl* and *My Fair Lady*, and *Cinderella*.

Ivy slipped out of the bed and met Martha at the top of the stairs. She was paused there, as if she couldn’t decide whether to go down or not. She grabbed both of Ivy’s arms and her nails sank in. “What to do,” she said. Ivy smelled something sweet on her breath, and the alcohol smell underneath that. Martha let go of Ivy’s arms and placed both her hands on her face.

“Come down with me,” she said.

“What?” Ivy asked, but they were already on the way down—Martha’s dress hem brushing the carpeted steps.

They went into the den and Martha held Ivy's hand, swinging their arms. Ivy looked over at her face and she was smiling wide and bright. Across the room, Michael and Helen sat together in the recliner. Steve placed a Bob Dylan record on the turntable. It was an old one, woolly sounding with a skip right at the beginning.

Holding Martha's hand in the den, Ivy felt ruffled, half-asleep. Bob Dylan sang "Tamborine Man."

"Here is Ivy," Martha said. Steve and Helen turned to her.

"Well—," Steve said.

"How's your mother?" Helen asked.

"Fine," Ivy said. "Always busy, you know."

Michael edged forward in the chair. He didn't have much room, because of Helen.

"I'll walk you home," he said.

"She's going to stay a bit," Martha said. "It's early."

Helen and Steve glanced at each other. Michael shifted back into his seat but Helen jumped up and smoothed her dress. Michael stared at Ivy. She thought at first he must know about the cufflinks, that he was going to demand them back. In her pocket, they pressed against her leg like two small stones.

"Were you sleeping up there?" he asked.

Ivy imagined she looked like she was. "No," she said.

Martha pressed a glass into Ivy's hand. It was the juice glass that Ivy gave to Lucie because it was less likely to tip.

"A little wine," Martha said. Her eyes were glazed and strange.

Michael frowned. Steve turned away from the stereo where he had been tinkering with the knobs.

“Huh?” he asked at the sudden quiet.

Ivy watched them from a chair by the door. She had watched groups of drinking people all her life and knew how the men’s cheeks would flush, how the women’s hands might wave around, flutter out to touch someone’s arm, or waist, or neck. Their lipstick dried and disappeared, their bra straps and black lace slips showed. A piece of Martha’s hair was misparted, tucked behind her ear. Helen’s clothes were askew. Every so often Michael reached out from the recliner and grabbed the hem of her skirt. She slid onto the arm of the couch and parted her legs so he could see.

Ivy felt the air through the screen door. She heard crickets and the sound of frogs around the brook out back, a throaty, rolling kind of sound like a die in a tumbler. She picked at a hole in the pair of Jimmy’s jeans she wore. On them a girl had written her name in ink—Sarah, or Susan. Ivy couldn’t read it anymore. There was always a girl in love with Jimmy the summer he died. One who’d write her name on the back of his hand in fat cursive letters. One who’d come with him to the house and while he watched TV, or lay down on his bed, she’d paint Ivy’s nails. She blew on them so they would dry, holding them up in the air where Ivy could look at them as if they were someone else’s. One wore her hair slicked back into a ponytail. She had a pair of sandals with gold coins that formed a “T,” that jingled when she walked. She’d play board games with Ivy, sit with Mary Gail in the kitchen and talk about the school play, or the group of popular girls

and the clothes they wore, and Ivy would sit at the end of the table and listen to their voices—the girl’s high and laughing, and Mary Gail’s almost solemn, laden with advice. Other girls would sneak into the house, and do whatever Jimmy wanted behind his closed bedroom door, whining a little before she gave in to his muffled coaxing, slipping out through the basement door and running through the back yards past her own house, cutting through to the street and doubling back, as if she were coming from somewhere else—a girlfriend’s, or the dead end, where everyone went to smoke cigarettes. Ivy was nine years old. She remembered his girlfriends as a blur of patterned clothing, flashing through the wooded back yard like bright birds.

Now, across the brook, a dog barked from another yard—pulling a rope taut, angry, awakened from a dream about leaping a brook that wandered through low, grassy hills. They had a dog once named Amber. She became crazed and chased the streamlined Cadillacs and Lincolns returning home at dusk, the paper boy on his bike, Lacey’s new boyfriends in cars with heavy, powerful engines and thick tires that left black streaks at the end of their driveway. Their father had her put to sleep, though he lied to Ivy and said that she had run away one night, that he had seen her later crossing Mill Pond Road, that she was happy chasing rabbits, living in the woods. He would see her often, on Stone Lane, in the field behind the Farm Shop restaurant before they rolled it flat for apartments, out by the reservoir, and once, on a business trip to upstate New York.

Just yesterday Ivy walked into the living room and her father was there, poking through a drawer in the writing desk. He looked up at her and his eyebrows came

together and he stared. "Ivy!" he said, as if he had been looking for her. "Guess who I saw the other day."

"Amber?" she asked.

She saw his face redden. His eyebrows separated and went back together. She wanted to tell him that sometimes Lacey gave her advice. "Don't believe a word he says," she'd told her. "Hide the vodka from Mary Gail." Ivy wanted to tell him that some lies she didn't mind. She saw her father's eyes soften.

"Last I saw Amber she was poised on the jetty, wet with spray, watching a boat motor out into the Sound."

Standing across the room from him, Ivy knew there was something to believe, not in what he said, but why he said it.

In Michael and Martha's den, Helen and Steve danced on top of the coffee table. Their movements had nothing to do with the music. Ivy sipped her wine and waited for one of them to lose their balance, to grab the other for support, for both of them to fall in a jumble to the floor, cushioned by their drunkenness. They had not been to Ivy's house since Jimmy died, but when they had come over, Ivy would recognize them from the sound of their voices drifting up to her bedroom—Steve's deep but lilting, like the sound at the end of a joke, Helen's increasingly high pitched, her own parents' voices mingling and indistinct, dulled by the Margaritas, the whiskey punches, the straight J&B with ice.

Michael and Martha argued quietly in the kitchen.

"It's her," Ivy heard him say. "It's not me."

Helen and Steve, bored with each other, looked Ivy over.

“How old are you now, Ivy?” Helen asked. She sat on the tabletop with her legs crossed, one stocking foot kicking the air. Ivy had always been a bit afraid of her as a child. She had a way of asking things, and then looking away, easily distracted by her pack of cigarettes, the light she cajoled from someone, so that Ivy never knew if she really wanted an answer. Now, Ivy finished her wine, and wanted more. Helen and Steve sat quietly smoking and she knew they thought of leaving. Ivy went to the doorway and peered into the kitchen. Martha was heating up a can of soup, and the smell of chicken broth that reminded Ivy of being small, of sitting at the kitchen table and Mary Gail with her hands busy at the sink, the soup steaming on the burner, Jimmy rumbling around in the pantry, Lacey on the phone, the phone cord stretched and draped across the backs of chairs, along the floor, snake-like, coiled and long. Sometimes, Lacey twirled it like a jump rope—click, click against the Congoleum.

“I want to tell you something,” Michael said. “It was never me, you realize. It was you, imagining it was me.”

Martha banged the spoon inside the pot. The big kitchen window reflected them like a mirror.

“I just hope you realize this,” Michael said.

Martha turned from the stove. It seemed she had forgotten to let go of the pot handle. She looked surprised as the contents swirled off into the air, landed dripping on the window, the top of the table. The soup left splatters on the walls, on Michael’s left arm that he held out in front of his face. In the doorway behind Ivy, Helen stifled a noise.

Steve said, “Time to go.” They stepped over the spill, and Steve pulled Helen by the arm down the long hall toward the front door.

“Let me walk you out,” Michael said. He stood at the door watching them climb into their car, watching their headlights light up the empty living room.

“I’ll go, too,” Ivy told him, but he stopped her, touched her elbow, and whispered, “Wait.”

Back in the kitchen, the three of them stared at the soup dripping off the walls. Ivy hesitated to clean it up, unsure, wondering if it was something she should do, half-knowing it wasn’t, but still irresistibly drawn to doing it—imagined grabbing a dish towel from the bottom drawer, wetting it in the sink and wiping the soup up off the floor, from between the slats of chairs, under the radiators where she saw it had pooled, bright yellow.

Martha looked at Michael, then at Ivy, slowly, like one of those living mannequins in store front displays, that changed position so carefully and subtly that you did not see them doing it.

“You see?” Martha asked Ivy.

“Go to bed, Martha,” Michael said. His hand shook. He pressed it to his forehead and it stopped.

His white shirtsleeve was soaked through. He touched the small of Martha’s back and pushed her, lightly, toward the stairs. Martha brushed his arm away, still looking at Ivy, winking now, and smiling.

“I’m still hungry,” she said. “Do you want something Ivy? Do you want me to fix you something? We can sit up and talk. I’m not tired, yet. Are you? You’re not, I know.” She pulled on the refrigerator door and it opened. She stuck her head inside.

“We’re leaving, Martha,” Michael said. He took Ivy’s arm like he always did. The streetlight made their shadows long and thin. They moved with their shadows across the cold grass. And there was that small, anxious excitement that Ivy could now intuit, that happened before everything changed irrevocably overnight—while Mary Gail dressed for places she never went, and her father rummaged through boxes in the garage, through cabinets and closets, spending whole long afternoons looking for things he could not find.

Ivy thought she could be driving the loops around town with Nora in Mary Gail’s car, drinking more wine from the bottle, winding up the narrow High Point Road, past the tree with the X where people were killed once when the road was icy and slick, and their car had been filled with music and smoke and empty bottles of beer. Ivy always imagined that this was how Jimmy died, driving boisterously with friends, the car slipping on ice and sliding uncontrolled into the tree. But his had been a different story—driving home, maybe, from where no one knows, alone on a summer night like this one, with something on the radio and the windows down, with the quiet cool night drifting in, soothing him to sleep, to dream of something other than home and the long curved drive and the porch light and the big trees like statues, and the stone wall, and Amber in her pen in the back yard, Lacey sleeping in her room, and Mary Gail asleep on the couch with a book, their father asleep in the big bed, full of the stern, silent steadiness that would later keep his eyes dry, manage the day and the night and the next day after they knew.

It was later than she thought. The porch light was off. Michael walked her up the stone steps to the door, and she was not ready yet to go inside—to the things that lingered in the rooms; the smell of a Christmas tree, or a roast in the oven, to the smell of cold winter air clinging to their jackets hung by the door, to the summer mornings and the way they billowed the curtains out, to the warmth between her parents' sheets on a day home from school, Mary Gail with her tray of tea and toast, the smell of her skin, the feel of her hands in her hair, smoothing, untangling the knots.

Ivy smelled the hydrangea that bloomed wildly along the side of the house. Michael's hand brushed under her chin, moved along the back of her neck and pulled her to him. She didn't have a chance to look at his eyes. They were closed and his mouth was searching for hers. When he kissed her his body was tense and angry and strong. His mouth tasted of cigarettes. Ivy worried that Martha was watching. She worried that the kiss was taking too long, that it would not end and become something distasteful, and she told herself it was just a regular kiss, one a boy in school might give to his girlfriend outside of her literature class right before the bell rang, and she slipped, undisturbed, behind her desk. But it was not that. His hand on her neck slipped slowly down her back. Her limbs felt light and loose. When he finally pulled away she saw his face, white with the guilt of a mistake. He turned and hurried down the steps, the soles of his shoes ringing on the driveway to the street.

Ivy watched the back of his white shirt move under the streetlight, waiting for him to turn and glance back, to give her that look that Sean Sullivan had, but he did not. And she realized she was the one looking, confused with wanting. Inside the house the kitchen

light was on. Ivy closed the door and her father walked out into the hall, slowly, his bare feet padding across the tile, his robe belt slipping its knot and trailing behind him. He twirled a little silver butter knife in his hands. It caught the light from the kitchen and shone.

“Lacey?” he said, then “Jimmy?”

And she knew he was asleep and dreaming. That even in sleep they were the ones he wanted to find.

The Drowned Girl

Michael saw Ivy first at her house across the street, getting into a car with a woman he assumed to be the maid. There had been something familiar about her even then, the calm, assured movement of her arms and legs, the color of her hair, like the chestnuts that fell onto the front lawn of his parents' house. He had been standing at his own car, fumbling with his keys, watching her, but it would not be until weeks later, on a Saturday, when she crossed the street to bring him a piece of mail that had been delivered to her house by mistake, and he'd been raking the few leaves that had begun to fall, changed and sodden in his dying grass, that he saw her up close, approaching him, her hair swinging, her legs long in faded jeans. She handed him the letter without speaking, looking so much like Jules he did not know what to say back. He may have mumbled some thanks when he finally understood she had come there to return the mail, but the moments of his looking at her without acknowledging the letter in her hand worried him, until Martha came from the side of the house and introduced herself and filled the space around them with normal chatter.

Jules had been Martha's friend before they were married. He'd seen her with Martha, driving around in boys' cars, or in Martha's mother's Grand Marquis. But when he met her again he didn't place her as a friend of Martha's, and Jules didn't tell him who she was, at first. Back when Jules and Martha were friends his parents still had the house on the hill with the stone deer out front, the boathouse in back, the pond where, in winter,

children came to ice skate. They had built a shelter on the pond with a large stone fireplace, and everyone from Michael's high school skated there. Michael's friends wearing hiking boots, still hung over from the night before, drank Yukon Jack by the fire, gathered around the huge hearth to wait for the girls to come in off the ice. They had been cheerleaders in navy blue pea coats and woolen gloves who hobbled in, clinging to each other, propped their feet up by the fire, the bright silver skate blades shining, their faces reddened from the cold, their gloved hands hidden in the pockets of their coats. Some mysterious undercurrent marked their faces with a kind of dull surprise. The orange fire danced in their eyes. He had seen her there, too, one winter break, everyone sitting around the fire, the bottles of brandy with their caps off propped on the stone hearth, his hands busy under Martha's green Fair Isle sweater.

And then after Lucie was born, when they were scraping by and living in their first house on the cul de sac, Jules got a job at his manufacturing company, working in the shipping department. That winter he began giving her rides to work. By spring they would drive up Arlen Road and park at the dead end on their lunch hour. She wore flowered skirts and folded her long tan legs up under the dashboard of his MG. Her lips had tasted of tangerine. She didn't work there long, and he never knew what happened to her until years later, when he read in the newspaper that her body had been discovered in the Connecticut River. Foul play was suspected. She'd been there before the thaw, her body frozen beneath the layer of ice. Now he had stood in the yard, listening to Ivy and Martha's conversation, absorbed with the idea of Jules, the looseness the memory brought him, a longing dragging through his limbs.

Michael had first asked Ivy to babysit to have an excuse to talk to her. It had been late fall, by then, and he'd spotted her outside in front of his house with his daughter Wallis. In the cold afternoon her breath made a little cloud above her head. Her hair was full of static electricity, and Wallis had her hand in it, admiring it, brushing it smooth with her fingers. Ivy had looked up as the front door swung shut behind him, and watched him walk toward them, her eyes on him so long he wound up staring at the frozen grass.

"Hello there," he'd said. "Ivy, isn't it?" He felt awkward, being in charge of the conversation. He hadn't put on a coat, and the cold seeped down through the shoulders of his shirt.

She nodded and folded her arms across her chest, and said nothing, her eyes pale blue and wide, her mouth shaped into a small smile. From across the street, at the end of Ivy's driveway, Michael heard trash cans banging together. A tall, graying man in a camel coat and leather gloves called out, "Hello!" and then decided to leave the cans and cross the street to introduce himself.

"George Deason," he said. His voice, in close proximity, was softer, calm and reassuring. He took off the glove and shook Michael's bare hand.

"Took us a while to introduce ourselves," he said. "Ivy tells me you moved in this summer." Michael stuffed his bare hands into the pockets of his khaki pants. The man was a good foot taller than Michael. His eyes were the saddest he had ever seen, and he did not know where to look, at Ivy, who stared at him, watching the exchange, or George, whose eyes, with their penetrating grief, made him feel invaded and perused, all his failings spread out on the cold black asphalt of Maple Hill.

“I was going to ask Ivy to watch the girls for us,” Michael said.

George turned to Ivy. “What about that?” he asked. And then to Michael, “I don’t think she has much experience.”

But Ivy shrugged and smiled, and Wallis threw her arms around her waist, and it was settled that she would come over that Friday evening, even though Michael had not discussed going anywhere with Martha. Later, when he did, she would look at him strangely, as if this were some part of a plan she would work on deciphering. Ivy ended up coming over every Friday or Saturday evening all through that winter, into spring, and now summer. He wondered if Martha saw Ivy’s resemblance to Jules, if she registered it unconsciously. Either way she began having her over other times, for nothing in particular. He would come into the den and there they’d be, sitting on the couch together looking at magazines, Wallis and Lucie nowhere around.

Ivy cleaned the house, and Michael knew she went through his things—organizing his bureau drawers, folding all of his socks and underwear, something he knew Jules would never have done, but that during the brief time they were together he’d begun to ascribe to her anyway, imagining her hands touching his boxers, placing his shirts on hangers, smoothing down the sheets on his bed. When he and Martha returned from a night out he walked Ivy home, the neighborhood quiet and shadowed and enveloping the two of them, their footfalls echoing back off the facades of houses, the tree boughs ponderous and shifting overhead, and in his mind she was Jules. He thought up things to say to her on the walk across the street, up the long driveway to her flagstone

porch. He asked her about a boyfriend, and asked her what he was like. Did he pay enough attention to her?

“I wasn’t a very good boyfriend in high school,” he confessed. “Most boys aren’t.” And then one night he had been drunk and asked her, inexcusably, if her boyfriend was a good kisser. Ivy stared at him from top porch step.

“I’d have to have something to compare him to,” she said.

And he’d done it then. Leaned in and pressed his mouth to hers.

It had been Martha’s idea to get away from the neighborhood, from Helen Halsey and her parties, the Bloody Marys, her lipstick imprints on the cut-glass tumblers, on his collar, along the ridge of his eyebrows. And though nothing had ever come of the complicated web of Helen’s advances, the fabric of her clothes brushing close, her smells—a confusing blend of Final Net and Oscar de la Renta, Michael was coerced into a vacation at his parents’ old cottage on the Connecticut Shore with his wife and his children, and Ivy, who Martha had insisted come along to help out.

Michael drove I-91 in to work each morning, and back to the cottage each evening, following the long stretch of Route 9, down Shore Road, past the bridge and the boats in the marina, past the Goodspeed Opera House, to a salt marsh that becomes part of an inlet running, under foot bridges made of rough sawn planks, between old mooring stones cut from pink granite, the rusted rings still clanking, from Long Island Sound. Theirs was one of the original cottages, its wooden clapboards weathered, the copper roof green from the sea air. He had spent every boyhood summer he could remember there,

and the rooms retained the shabbiness of his childhood—the old decks of cards in drawers, the faded couch, the books stacked on the shelves; *The Fireside Treasury*, the *New Yorker* stories, a Thurber collection, Book-of-the-Month Club selections from the forties. The lamps and their yellowed shades, the shells and driftwood collected for years, arranged still, on the fireplace mantel.

From the beginning, Ivy orchestrated moments when they would be alone. In the kitchen, late at night, both of them standing in the light from the refrigerator, Ivy in her T-shirt, Michael, shirtless, in his underwear. In the bathroom this past Saturday, after his shower, the room filled with steam, the linoleum floor damp and gritty with sand. She slipped in, closed the door and leaned against it, and he felt a panic he could not attribute to guilt or alarm. Wallis and Lucie were gone with Martha, just up the street to the store. Ivy reached out and placed her hand along the side of his face, and Michael felt her cool palm, and closed his eyes. But nothing else would happen. She left him then, as quickly as she had come in. He stood in the clearing steam gripping his towel, the water rolling off his shoulders, down his chest, feeling ridiculous and aroused.

That first week the weather was unseasonably cold, and few of the other cottages were occupied. He returned each night to darkened rooms, the dishes stacked in the drainer, the sand swept from the pine floors, the double doors to the screened porch secured. He would open the doors and stand out on the porch to hear the Sound, and Martha would stand behind him in her wool sweater, miserable, and bored. Lately, they had nothing to say, both trying to appease the other, and neither of them ever happy with the results. On the long drive in to work each morning, Michael convinced himself he

loved his wife, frightened that this love was the only thing connecting him to his children. They were often sleeping when he got home. He touched their hands, their faces, with his lips, felt the dampness and the sand on the sheets. He did not have to imagine disastrous scenes. Already Lucie had slipped on the steep staircase in her woolen socks, and required stitches in her chin. He cautioned Martha about watching them on the beach, how many of the cottages were empty during the week, how she might stretch out on a blanket to read, and fall asleep, leaving Ivy alone, the wide open sea drawing them in, the tinny sound of Martha's radio playing the Guess Who, just like in high school. He believed he had loved her then, driving around and around the center of town in his MG with the top down, searching her out. Martha's hair had been, like Wallis's, long and blonde. When they had sex in the car her hair would fan out on the reclined seat, and days afterwards he would find long strands of it threaded into the upholstery.

With the approach of the Fourth of July, the weather changed, and Dr. Archie and his son moved into the cottage next door, moored their sailboat off the jetty, planted a tall flagpole on the beach and signaled events in the day with a different, brilliant flag—high tide, noon, the cocktail hour. Dr. Archie was an agile, gray-haired man who entertained ever-changing groups of relatives and acquaintances. He and Martha became friends. One weeknight Michael had come home and found Ivy sitting in front of the black-and-white television.

“Where is Martha?” he asked, disoriented at first, wondering if he had walked into the wrong cottage, startled to find the lights all on, amazed by the clutter of things—the old Parcheesi game, buckets of shells, wet bathing suits, a large tub of Noxzema on

the table. And Ivy, with her dark hair pulled up, her blue eyes pale, part indictment, part plea.

“She’s next door,” she said. She spoke quietly, looking at him as she gathered her things to go to her room—sandals, a UCONN sweatshirt, a necklace of tiny colored beads she told him Wallis made for her. She stood for a moment with everything in her arms, always waiting for him to say something. Tonight, he avoided her eyes, stared down at the floor as she moved past him.

“Goodnight,” he said, and she entered the stairwell, her bare feet brushing the sand on the steps. Through the kitchen window Michael could see into the cottage next door, its rooms all lit up, the people’s voices carrying through the open windows. He thought he could pull up a chair and watch them, unnoticed, but standing there, he grew tired. They played some game around the table, drinking, jumping up every so often with their hands in the air, Dr. Archie and his blond, lanky son, and Martha, clinging to a man with dark hair and a squared off, handsome face. He watched them together, their movements designed to keep them touching—his hand on the small of her back, hers sliding up to his hair at the back of his head. Another group danced in the kitchen, teenagers near Ivy’s age, and Michael wondered why Ivy didn’t join them, and then realized she did not because of him.

He stood a few moments more, watching Martha through the panes of glass. In the past he felt he knew everything about her, and this had pleased him, this sameness, the way she picked at her food with two fingers, the smell of her shampoo on the pillow, how she kissed him below his ear, the feel of her lips there, the softness of them along his

neck. Through the window, in Dr. Archie's cottage, the predictability of her movements, the bob of her now shortened hair, her small hands raised up and waving, filled him with remorse.

He rose and went in to bed, pulling the rough woolen blanket up around him, feeling its texture and remembering the time he and his sisters made a tent on the beach with these blankets—it had been the Fourth of July, when one of his father's friends who came to light the fireworks lost part of his hand in an explosion of color that everyone thought was part of the show, raising their glasses into the air, making appreciative noises. The glasses were still there in the cupboard, emerald green, cut so that the edges caught the light. Michael imagined Ivy lying awake in her bed in the next room, the curve of her arm thrown over her head, thinking about coming to him in the dark. He half-expected that she would, and he waited, believing that every shift in the mattress, every slight creak of the wooden floorboards signaled her approach, knew that she was stealthy and insistent, that he would be nearly asleep when she slid into the bed next to him. But it would be Martha who eventually came in to wake him, stumbling, smelling of gimlets. As the dim shapes of the furniture appeared to him in the dark, and the wind flapped the yellow shade, he realized that he probably never loved Martha, that she, most probably, never loved him.

On Saturday morning two girls passed between the cottages selling hot doughnuts, cinnamon buns, glazed and chocolate iced, calling "doughnuts, doughnuts," in plaintive voices that sent Lucie in to tug at the bed sheet, to beg him to get up. He

bought the doughnuts standing in his robe. The smell of wood fires came through the screen door. Fog settled around the doughnut girls' ankles. The one with his change shook earrings laden with gold charms, smiled up at him with a wide, full mouth that one day would be seductive. He noticed this with a pang of guilt.

Afterwards he built a fire. They waited for the sun to warm up the outside. Inside, it stayed cold, and Martha slept, but Ivy came down in her sweatshirt and bare feet, her hair loose around her shoulders, avoiding his eyes for once. They ate the doughnuts in front of the fire and Michael told Lucie and Wallis stories of rowing one of the bulky, orange boats all the way to the creek, where the Sound moved inland and formed the channel of churning water, deeper in spots, depending on the tide, how they would find whole whelk shells high up on the banks at low tide, and row upstream where the water slowed and became placid, still, and tall salt marsh grass grew up on either side.

“There were blue crabs in there,” he said. “And mortar and bricks and window frames of the old cottages that were blown away in the hurricane in 1930.” He didn't tell them about the trampled spots in the tall grass, where they would find bottles of wine and the charred remains of a fire and a sleeping bag, how they once caught John Simons' older brother there with a girl named Nikki Dickinson. She had worked in the store and sold them Spider Man comics. Now, she brought her family to the beach, usually renting the cottage two doors down, the yellow one with the green trim, and Michael could not look at her on the beach with her children without remembering the thick whiteness of flesh, the dark outlines of her tan against the cowboy pattern of the sleeping bag.

“I found a piece of blue sea glass,” Lucie said.

“You’ll find a lot of sea glass near the creek,” he told them. “We can walk down there sometime.”

“I want to be a doughnut girl,” Wallis said.

“I want to,” said Lucie.

Michael smiled at them. “You have to get up early,” he said. It troubled him to think about them grown older, as one of the girls who sold the doughnuts, with their hidden packs of cigarettes, with the hems of their jeans torn out, frayed and dragging in the sand, and T-shirts tied up to reveal their smooth brown stomachs. He had taken one of those girls who sold the doughnuts to the place in the marsh. He glanced over at Ivy, and knew that she had watched him the whole of his story, that she guessed what he would not say, that he could not make a move without her knowing why. He remembered telling Jules he could not see her anymore, and she had given him that same look, predicting his future, reading in it a sorrow she spared him.

The girls wanted Michael to go out with them onto the beach. Outside, the air was heavy with the smell of the salt marsh. The haze burned off the Sound, and Ivy came out through the screen door, stood in the sand shading her eyes, her hair blowing around her shoulders, and told him she was going for a walk.

“Where to?” Michael asked. When he spoke to her his voice held a forced carelessness, which he intended to mask his desire, but which only made him seem more helplessly in love.

Ivy pointed down the beach. She wore her bathing suit top, and her pair of jeans, cut now into shorts. “That’s Sound View,” he told her. As a boy, he and his sisters went with

pockets of change to the arcade next to the Morocco, a bar that had live music on the weekends. The music from the bar and the pinball game's clang became one loud carnival sound. Later, he smoked cigarettes with John Simons in the alley, below a window where a woman hung out her underwear to dry—a white bra stiff with wire and lace, a pair of blue translucent panties. They snuck into the Morocco to watch the bands and drink shots of tequila that Michael would vomit up on his way back down the darkened beach to the cottage.

“A lot of people there,” he said. The public beach was dotted with umbrellas and coolers and colored rafts, people moving in the growing heat toward the water.

“I’m not afraid of crowds,” she said. She smiled at him and turned. Michael wanted to say that was not what he meant, that there might be people who would want her in her bathing suit top and not use his restraint, men with plastic cups of beer, boys high on something he knew nothing about, but he could not explain any of that to her, and he watched her walk off down the beach alone, and wondered if she would meet up with friends, or a boy she knew, imagined the casual treatment the boy would receive, maybe a smile, but no more acknowledgement than that, and he stood in the boy's place and felt the same helpless ache of desire for something he, too, could not have. Wallis tugged on his arm, wanting him to help her with her suntan lotion. He rubbed the lotion on her back where the small bones protruded, the skin thin and delicate around her bathing suit straps. Lucie wanted some next, and Michael stood over them, rubbing in the lotion, feeling their uncomplicated sexlessness, the relief the absence brought him.

By lunchtime Ivy was still not back. Wallis and Lucie came inside, shivered in their damp bathing suits while they ate sandwiches made with soft white bread, and potato chips, arranged on two paper plates. Next door, Dr. Archie raised a flag. Martha wrote out a list for Michael to take to the A&P, irritated with Ivy for taking off. Her silver bracelets shook near her brown hand.

“Does she remind you of anyone?” Michael asked.

Martha looked up from the list, annoyed. “Are you saying I’m not around for the girls?”

He watched Martha’s lips purse with disapproval, and said nothing more.

“Don’t forget the celery,” she said. Her teeth were bright against her tanned face. The shirt she wore over her bathing suit swung open and he saw the slight pouch of her stomach, the way it hung over her bikini bottom. When she turned from him the backs of her legs were marked by the lounge chair slats. Michael thought of the pink silk dress she wore to her senior prom, its neckline with the white seed pearls, the hook and eye clasps in the back that he struggled to undo. He remembered the first night they met, her skirt that split open revealing the shining tops of her legs, the heat of her hand through his pants. He had known as little about her then as this woman, who now was his wife.

Earlier that week, Michael had driven to the house that had once been his parents. His father had died and his mother had moved to the new condominiums that were built where the old Farm Shop Restaurant used to sit. He didn’t know the people who had bought the house, but he parked in the white gravel drive anyway and walked around the side and down the rolling slope of lawn to the pond, past the stone chimney of the shelter

and into the woods that skirted one edge. The tree branches hung like a canopy, brushing the black water. He imagined Jules submerged in the river's depths. She had always had a careless way about her—wearing a sweater with a lipstick stain on the shoulder, forgetting things, her shoes once, a pair of yellow Papagallo flats wedged under the passenger seat of the MG. Jules had wanted something else from him—besides the physical struggle, sweaty in the small space of the car, besides his hands in her hair, holding her face still to kiss it. She really wanted none of that, he thought, imagining her face, the way it might have looked pressed peaceful, perfect, against the river ice. He hesitated in the long grass by the pond's edge, the pond weeds stirring the water like her hair. Once, he'd taken her swimming in his parents' pool—a hot spring day when his parents had been out of town. He and Jules had pushed through a hedge of forsythia blooms. The blooms had caught like yellow jackets in her hair, the branches snagging her silver sweater, a sleeveless, shimmery thing. They left their clothes on the lounge chairs. The hot wind brought the apple blossom smell from the fields, and her body had moved through the water, white against the aquamarine bottom.

He had forgotten Jules so quickly he surprised them both. She approached him one night, months after their affair ended. He'd run into her at the drug store in the town center. She'd taken him in her arms, a friendly hug, but he, afraid to be seen, had pulled sharply away. He saw the expression on her face, how she recognized her own error in trusting him to know what he meant when he said he loved her. In the A&P, Michael stared too long at the Bloody Mary mixes. He felt that the passing shoppers noticed this. And still he could not decide. He placed four different brands in the cart. He moved on to

the next aisle, and then the next, pushing the cart up and down aisles of cat food and cosmetics and baby products, even though none of these things were on the list—thinking instead about Martha at home, tapping her sandaled foot impatiently on the back porch, the cars pulling into Dr. Archie’s sand drive, parking along the narrow street—women in sheer beach robes balancing plastic cups of melted ice and scotch, sliding their smooth legs out of passenger doors, men in wrap-around sunglasses and huaraches, their wallets weighing down the pockets of the swim trunks, giving the horn a blast, laughing, greeting each other with a flash of gold from their wrists. And there would be someone else, one of Dr. Archie’s friends’ daughters, to watch Wallis and Lucie, to let Wallis braid her hair or rummage through her purse, to push Lucie in the inflatable raft and sing “Motorboat, motorboat, go so slow.”

Michael abandoned the cart containing the four brands of Bloody Mary mix and Martha’s list near the greeting cards. He got in his car and drove down Shore Road, past the Laundromat to Hartford Avenue where he found the Morocco, a leaning building of tan stucco lit with neon, with three or four Harley-Davidsons out front, its front door open wide, the darkness inside alluring, cool. He thought he would have a drink and then head back, but he knew he had come to find Ivy, and tell her about Jules, to explain everything, to go back in time to the moment of his life when he forgot Jules, before she clung to his hand and begged him to remember her.

He sat at the bar and drank and listened to the customers’ choices on a jukebox, watched the bartender run a cloth up and down the polished wooden surface. The smells of Hartford Avenue drifted in the open door—fried dough, cinnamon and tomato sauce,

the oily smell of the fryer mixing with exhaust. He drank three bourbons so quickly the ice did not have a chance to melt, and the bartender gave him a look as he set the fourth drink on the white napkin. Michael felt his chest constrict with sadness. He gave the man the fifty-dollar bill intended for the A&P, left the drink on the bar and went out into the blinding sunlight of the sidewalk.

He knew Ivy would find him. The night before he was in Garvin's store and she had appeared at the end of the aisle. He had been looking for the disposable shavers, and she had found them for him, and placed them on the counter with her items—comic books for Wallis, hair elastics for Lucie. It had been closing time, and the lights in the little store went out until only the one over the register was lit. Neither of them looked at each other. They went out onto the porch and began the walk home, and she'd taken his hand and pulled him behind someone's leaning garage and laid her forehead on his chest.

“Tell me what you think of me,” she said, her voice muffled in his shirt.

He did know what he would do if he touched her. He kept his hands at his sides and felt her long hair on his arms.

“Don't ask me that,” he said. She turned her head and placed the side of her face against his shirt, and he knew she felt his heart beating fast under her cheek, felt it himself pulsing up in his neck. And then she stepped back and walked to the road ahead of him. He let her go and breathed in the cool night and looked out over the salt marsh at the stars. He had no idea what love was, if it had anything at all to do with this beating of his heart, with the mistake he made eight years ago, choosing Martha over Jules, if love could leave and return, if he really believed anymore that it was Jules pressing her body

to his, or if he had finally understood it was Ivy, and it was easier to imagine her as a girl long dead, a ghost of someone he could never have again.

Out on the sidewalk of Hartford Avenue, Michael threaded his way through the throng of teenagers, the women with children carrying beach chairs, and pails and shovels. He got to the end of the street, and looked out at the Sound and the people on the sand. He had nowhere else to go. He would have been back from the A&P some time ago, so his absence, at first an inconvenience to everyone, was already forgotten. Standing on the sand, listening to the radios propped beside women slick with suntan oil, their heads resting on their folded arms, he remembered when there was everything to do—hitting golf balls at the driving range, working the pinball games in the arcade, riding his bike through woods filled with blueberries and returning home in the cover of darkness. He felt he had the freedom to do that now, and he had decided to return to his car and head over to the driving range when he saw Ivy walking up the beach. She came to him where he stood with his tennis shoes sinking in the sand.

“They’re wondering where you are,” she said. She still wore the bathing suit top, and the jean shorts. Her hair was pulled back now, and her neck was long and tan, her eyes slit against the late afternoon sun, looking at him in that way she had. “What are you doing?” she asked.

Michael smiled, relieved to see her.

“It took you long enough,” she said. “I waited for hours.”

He believed, thinking back, that he should have voiced some kind of protest, but the whole thing had gone beyond that, and it was easier to remain silent and agree she

was the reason he was standing on the public beach, staring into the crowd. And she took his arm, the way he always took hers when he walked her home at night from babysitting, and he let her lead him down the beach in the opposite direction of his cottage, past the public area, toward another private beach with its own section of cottages. They went around to the front of a green one with white trim secluded by tall hedges, and she pulled a key out of her pocket and they went in the front door. He believed it was the bourbon that kept him quiet and accepting of all of this. Inside the cottage, she shut the door behind them, and they went into a kitchen with dishes in the sink, then into a large, open room where people's things were spread about—shells lined up on the coffee table, books propped open beside eyeglasses, children's sandals lined up by the back door.

“Where are we?” he asked, whispering, aware that they were somewhere they shouldn't be.

“Our cottage,” Ivy said, not bothering to keep her voice low. “George's cottage. These people are the renters. They aren't home.” And she turned to him and smiled. “Silly,” she said. He saw that he could kiss her now that she stood there, waiting for him to. The bourbon made the room spin. He saw vitamins on the kitchen counter, wet towels left on the bathroom floor, the man's shaving kit, the woman's bathing suit hung on the back of the door, the smells of their things, like suntan lotion and the food they cooked that afternoon for lunch before they left the cottage for an errand, or a visit to Old Lyme, or Gillette's Castle.

“We have to go,” he said, feeling a building panic.

Ivy stared at him with wide eyes. She put her hands out and clasped his face. Her body fell into his arms, slender and trembling like a fish. He did not know how he could be expected to untangle himself from her hands, her teasing mouth.

They drove back to Michael and Martha's cottage together. The sun set over the salt marsh. Ivy held his hand, and he couldn't look at her, and then she let his hand go. He heard her sigh as she climbed out of the car. He went around to the beach to find a bonfire started, and Martha and Dr. Archie standing together, Martha's face blotched. Dr. Archie stepped forward and took his arm and steered him up between the cottages to the road, his breath smelling of mint.

"Look here," he said. "We can't seem to find your daughter, Lucie." Michael remembered Lucie calling to him from the back porch before he left that afternoon. He had not heard what she'd said, but he had looked at her, her hair snarled from the salt air and too little brushing, one bottom tooth missing. She had on the sundress she wore for days at a time until Martha noticed the stains on the front, the sand filling the hem—it was yellow with a sunflower appliqué. Some nights, when he went up to see her, she had worn the dress to bed.

He started for the creek, Dr. Archie's white running shoes crunching the gravel beside him. They passed Dr. Archie's other guests helping in the search, inquiring at other cottages, banging drunkenly on porch doors. "A little girl, isn't it?" he heard one man say. Some were headed back down the beach to refill their glasses. A child's voice called "Lucie!" into the wind. Dr. Archie huffed a little beside him.

“You really think she’d come all this way?” he asked.

Michael ignored him and kept up his pace, urged on by guilt and dread. But Dr. Archie, knowing that the celebration would go on around the fire, made some excuse and turned back with a group of nephews, leaving Michael alone on the beach with the creek and the last burst of light across the water—orange-red, with violet trails.

He remembered now, on the creeks’ edge, reading the article about the discovery of Jules’s body in the river, how he’d sat there, stunned, with his breakfast toast, and crumbs on his fingers, and imagined Jules pulled from the water wearing what she wore the last night he saw her—a purple sweater he’d told her once he’d liked, and a white headband that glowed in her dark hair. It was possible, he thought, that Lucie had fallen and, like the little girl in his neighborhood, hit her head. He imagined Lucie’s dress ballooned with salt water, her tiny body washed against the barnacled rocks. Even when he glanced over the granite edge and saw only the foam of sea, the tops of the rocks slick and bare, he still believed that his story that morning had brought her there. Her body might have been carried by the current down the creek, caught in the long grass of the salt marsh, and he searched there until long past dark, following the narrow path through the rough grass along the creek’s edge, then finally staggering back up the beach to the bonfire.

Martha sat cross-legged in the large circle of people, her glass of wine half-buried in the sand, and the brown-haired, chiseled-faced man, with whom Michael now realized she’d probably have an affair, sat beside her, his arm thrown carelessly over her shoulder. They told him that Lucie had been found at the cottage of a friend. Someone handed him

a drink, and he knew he should have felt the relief of having gently side-stepped tragedy. Instead, he was left with the sharpening memory of that afternoon with Ivy, the string ties on her bathing suit, how her skin felt under his fingertips, how he'd taken her hands in his, instructing her in her own loss. An expert in this, after all.

Part-Time Virgin, 1978

Where Jules and Martha sat, out of gas in Neil Mayock's car, they had a wide, sweeping vista of the neighborhood, the houses at the bottom of the street plotted out around curving asphalt, the typical drives and roads and lanes that looped up and down the hills of the Connecticut valley. At the top of one slope, the graveyard stones of Bloomfield Cemetery lined up behind chain link, looked into back yards with cedar decks and above-ground pools. From there the trees fanned out like a blaze. The leaves were blown in cycles around the car. It was an October morning, and Jules and Martha had skipped the day of school and gone instead to Martha's house, where they had smoked two joints Martha rolled on her mother's tavern table, its scars and burns and ale glass rings all part of its worth as a Colonial artifact. The gas gauge signaled an empty tank, but they could not quite believe this. Surely, Martha said, the gauge was broken before they left.

"It must be the manifold," she insisted—something she may have heard from a boyfriend once. She was in the passenger seat, both hands gripping the dashboard. Her hair was soft and brown and wind-blown from their walk through the woods to the pond behind her house. Jules thought it had been hours, at least, since then. She was behind the wheel, a junior, the older of the two, the one Neil Mayock loved, and so, the one entrusted with the keys. The inside of the car, a long, finned 1970 Delta 88 Olds, was sun-warmed and comfortable. The seats were copper-colored vinyl, torn in spots, the dashboard gauges large and round and meaningless to them. They sat quietly, staring out

the big windshield. They played the radio, soft with static, and waited for something to happen. Every so often, Jules tried the key in the ignition. Martha cocked her head to listen. Then she shook it, smiling.

“Can you *believe* this?” she said. She threw her head back and did the laugh that reassured Jules that not knowing what to do was fine. On their left was an abandoned apple orchard, the trees’ branches weighted with wormy, misshapen fruit. To their right were houses bathed in autumn light. The lawns were wet from melted frost. It was not that early, and most people had already gone to work. She thought that Neil Mayock’s love would temper any fury he felt for them not returning when they said. It was a love that he had never confessed, that she had not had to acknowledge, but she knew it was there, read it in his eyes, in his awkward half-smile, his gangly movements walking away, and felt it like a bolstered cushion, a reassurance. He was someone who, with his silent devotion, would give her whatever she asked and in return expect nothing.

This morning had been Martha’s idea. She had forgotten something at her house, she’d said. Ask Neil for his car. He stood outside the high school by the low wall where everyone smoked their cigarettes, left the butts on the ground for the janitor’s wide broom. Neil wore his bomber jacket. His hair stuck out in all directions. He held the keys up, balancing the ring on one finger.

“You’re coming right back?” he said, his face unreadable and closed to her. Jules took the keys, gave him her usual smile that promised something far off and unattainable. She wouldn’t worry, yet, about what the absence in his face meant. She saw that she could drive by Wade’s Vegetables and see if Miller was working, stacking pumpkins,

filling a cooler inside with quarts of apple cider. She had met him that weekend at a keg party at the reservoir. He was going to be an actor, he'd said, brushing his sandy hair back from his forehead. He was moving to New York City in a month, after he collected two more paychecks. The bonfire smoke burned her eyes. Her hands were cold and she kept them in the pockets of her pea coat. Miller had slid his two hands on top of hers inside her pockets, pulled her close and kissed her. His mouth tasted of beer. Its softness was something she wanted to fall into. He lowered his head to her shoulder, and his hair smelled of wood burning. Sitting in Neil's car, staring out the windshield, it occurred to her that this was what love was most commonly mistaken for, this anxious trembling, this feeling on the verge of something.

The radio played Boston, and Martha sang the words to the song, staring out the window. She had her hands folded in her lap, her head against the seat back. She had not really wanted anything at her house. They had pulled into the driveway and gone inside, and Martha put on Teddy Pendergrass while she rolled the joints. Jules didn't ask her why they'd come. Martha's reasons were never clear, but Jules trusted her to always have them. They have not been friends for very long, but a year later Jules will learn that their fathers at one time were close. On the mantel in the den at Jules's is a photo of their fathers with two other men, posed on the deck of the *My Joy*, a boat they chartered out of Niantic. From that trip, Jules remembers her father returning with a cooler full of blue fish, which he cleaned, making a bloody mess in their white porcelain kitchen sink, and froze in the double freezer in the basement.

Jules's father persuaded her mother to use the Lenten Friday as an excuse to prepare the fish, which she did each week, grudgingly, broiling it in the oven on a pan covered with aluminum foil. Jules and her sister, Delores, hated the smell, the oily taste, the tiny bones they swallowed by mistake, that their father assured them he had removed. They were children then, and trusting. Delores would try to read Jules's diary, and wear Jules's clothes, and become friends with Jules's friends, and Jules would avoid her, and throw things at her and say things that now, she worried, were hurtful. But back then Delores went to school like anyone normal, and had a Bobby Sherman fan club with her own girlfriend down the street, fully able, Jules believed, to ignore Jules's resentment. Now Delores left the house and wandered away. They looked for her in their mother's wood-paneled Country Squire, cruising up and down the streets of their neighborhood as if searching for a lost dog. Delores wore the same clothes every day—jeans with knees faded white, a dirty purple parka. She forgot to brush her hair. In a year, she would have a real diagnosis and months spent in the state hospital in Norwich, but at this time, no one dared to suppose that anything was really wrong with her. Jules simply didn't talk to her, a sister born so close that for one month out of the year they were the same age. Sitting now in Neil Mayock's car, Jules did not think about her father, who came home in the middle of the night again, slamming the cabinets, or her sister, who left the house that morning before anyone could stop her, or the photograph on the mantel—men she did not know, posing on the deck of a boat.

She sat behind the wheel, imagining Miller's hands sliding around her waist, how she would hold one of them in her own and slip it up under her Shetland sweater to her breast. She fell back into the softness of his mouth.

Martha sighed. "I guess we should try to find a phone," she said.

They looked at each other. Neither of them wanted to leave the haven of the car.

"Do you know anyone who lives in this neighborhood?" Martha asked.

Jules looked out the windshield, down into the cluster of homes, mid-sized split-level ranches, painted different colors—rust red, sage green, a pale yellow like aged lace. The sidewalks were new, and the front yards contained a few young, spindly trees supported with wires.

"No," she said. "I don't."

Martha tried to adjust the radio dial. "Nothing's on."

Jules knew they had been sitting in the car a long time. Too long, she thought, worrying about Neil's expression that morning, wondering what it meant. "Let's go," she said.

Martha looked at her, surprised. "What do you mean?" she asked.

Jules opened the car door and stepped out. The door groaned on its hinges. Martha got out on her side and they began to walk down the road. The wind caught in their hair, swirled leaves about their ankles. Martha put her arms up and spun around. They stood in front of the first house and considered it. The lawn was threadbare. A rusty red tricycle sat abandoned by the garage. All of the windows revealed drawn shades. There was a

smell about the house of trashcans filled with rotting garbage. Jules thought they should move on. “Too vacant looking,” she said.

Jules lived five miles away, in a neighborhood like Martha’s, with pillared Colonials, and beds of rhododendron bordered with white pebbles, and deacon’s benches under the wide arms of elms, and hickories, and sugar maples. Their homes had slate roofs, and copper windmills shaped like galloping horses. Martha’s house was decorated in antiques, and that morning, they’d rummaged through a pine bureau in the hallway, looking for a sweater for Jules. Martha wanted to walk in the woods, and Jules wore only a cotton blouse. She had pulled out the Shetland cardigan, and tossed it to her. They had already smoked one of the joints. “Wear this,” she’d said, grinning.

Jules looked at the sweater with suspicion. “It’s your mother’s, isn’t it?” she asked.

Martha’s mother did not like Jules. She’d told Martha she could no longer spend time with her. “That girl,” she said, “is not allowed in my house.”

The sweater smelled of the old pine drawer. Jules put it on and mimicked Martha’s mother. “Let’s go, young lady,” she said, doing up the buttons.

Martha led the way out the back porch door, down the incline of dried lawn. The woods were a mix of hemlock and silver birch and maple. The leaves were light and papery under their feet. It was a cool day, and windy, and the wind brought the remaining leaves down around them. Martha stopped and held out her hands as if to catch them. Jules smiled, watching her. The sweater was warm, and she liked its smell of the drawer, and the smell of the dried leaves and pine boughs. The sun slanted through in spots. The

floor of the woods sloped, and they clung to the young saplings and made their way toward the edge of a pond. Jules had never been there before. She did not even know a pond existed so close to Martha's house. It was not very large. Its surface was muddy colored and rippling. Martha lit the other joint and sat down in the leaves, and Jules joined her. They didn't say anything. The trees ringed the pond, dropping their leaves into it, casting their shadows. Closer to the water was an old rowboat, half-buried in the mud. It was the gray color of wood exposed to the elements. Its bow was deteriorating, like a fallen log.

Jules would remember the boat a year later, when her father told her the names of the people on the deck of the *My Joy*, when he told her how Martha's father died. He had been struck by lightning, her father would say, fishing on a pond behind their house. He had his son with him, a little boy, about six or seven. The boy rowed the boat in and run for help, but there was nothing anyone could do. Her father would hold the photograph in his hand, and she would watch his hand shake. She would avoid his face—the broken veins, the eyes, soft and sad, pleading for a chance to compensate for some mistake. He would put the photograph into a cardboard box with fishing reels, *Car and Driver* magazines, golf tees, a hammered tin ashtray, things he would pack up and take away to an apartment she would never see. Sitting in the leaves by the pond, Jules had only guessed that Martha's father was dead, because Martha did not ever mention him, because her mother and her brother had a kind of quiet, deflated yearning about them. And inside Martha's house, Jules had sensed expectancy, as if someone was missing, and everyone was always waiting for an arrival.

Now they wandered up the street and passed house after house. Their excuses were the same for some, “No one’s home there,” Martha said. “I can tell.” Jules took her word for it. Another house looked too run down. “Axe murderer,” Jules said. Martha nodded her head. They forgot to look at the houses, and they just walked, and then they spotted one—white with gray shutters, with chrysanthemums and pumpkins on the porch, a green Falcon parked in the driveway.

“You talk,” Martha said.

They approached the door and Jules pushed the bell. “Who should I call?” she whispered.

“Just call the school office and get Neil out of class,” Martha said.

The high school secretary was a friend’s mother, and she would help them out, and chastise them later. The door opened and a woman looked out at them through the storm door glass. She had her hair pulled up messily in back, and wore a camel-hair car coat like Jules’s mother’s. Underneath it they saw she had on a nightgown.

“What?” the woman asked from behind the door, as if they had said something she didn’t understand.

“Our car ran out of gas,” Jules said. “May we use your phone?”

The woman smirked. “Right,” she said. Her hair was reddish blond. Her face was young and pretty. She shook her head at them and some of the hair fell out around her face. Jules was not prepared for the woman to doubt them. Martha made a noise of disbelief. “Really,” she said. “It’s right up there at the top of the hill.”

“Well,” the woman said, slowly. From behind the glass of the storm door she sounded oddly muffled. Martha glanced at Jules, and rolled her eyes. Jules couldn’t tell if she was still high, or if she was in the silent, empty space the high left her when it receded. From inside the house she heard the cry of a baby that was hesitant at first, then moved into a piercing wail. The woman’s face tightened. Her eyes lit with trepidation. She opened the storm door and stepped outside onto the cement porch with them. Martha and Jules made room. The woman smelled faintly sour, like unwashed clothes. She was without shoes. She stood there beside them saying nothing. The storm door clicked shut and they heard her breathing.

“So,” Martha said. She took a few more steps back.

The woman covered her face with her hands. It was as if she believed she could no longer be seen. Jules felt the woman’s terror like a wave coming off her coat’s shoulders.

“Can we do something?” Martha asked. For the first time, Jules read alarm on her friend’s face. She didn’t think it was something Martha ever allowed herself to feel. Jules saw her eyes fill with tears, and she felt her own body repel being drawn in. She grabbed Martha’s jacket sleeve and moved down the cement steps, tugging. *Let’s go*, she mouthed.

“What’s happening?” Martha asked. Jules heard the tremor in her voice.

The woman removed her hands and her face was wet and old mascara had run in black streaks down her cheeks. She shook her head, *No*, and the tendrils of reddish blond swung and stuck to her face. The woman sunk to the top step and sat there, hugging her

knees. Leaves clung to the lacy hem of her nightgown. Her feet were pale white, and delicate-looking against the dirty cement. From inside the house came the baby's cries. They sounded through the windows, through the storm door, long, and loud and tormented.

"What's wrong with your baby?" Martha asked. Jules had pulled her to the curb now, and they were on the asphalt of the road, and she had her firmly by the sleeve.

"Don't worry about it," Jules hissed.

Martha turned and gave Jules a look—hard and full of indictment. Jules didn't know what to do. They watched the woman take a set of keys from the pocket of her coat and rush across the dead lawn to the Falcon. She held the nightgown up, and her legs flashed pale and thin. She got in and started the car up and white smoke came out of the tailpipe. Martha watched, stricken.

"What does she think she's doing?" she asked. Her voice sounded like Jules's mother's did that morning, full of condemnation. At home, this morning before Jules caught the bus, her mother had been still asleep. Her father slept in the spare room on the single bed intended for guests, the odor of gin seeping from his pores, the sound of his breathing noisy and troublesome through the cracked door. Delores was up, moving around her room. While Jules was in the kitchen eating toast, Delores came out and wandered the upstairs hall. Jules stopped eating. She heard Delores's voice, its dull monotone, telling something to herself. At night, Delores walked up and down the stairs, sleepless. She stood in the doorway of Jules's room and Jules, irritated, a little afraid, yelled at her to go away. Now she felt a twist in her stomach, a dull tightening. She heard

Delores on the stairs and then the front door opening, the storm door's swing and bang. And then her mother was in the kitchen doorway, her robe sloppily tied, her hair puffed up on one side, her face lined from sleep, looking older than Jules had ever seen.

“Was that your sister?” she asked, her voice shrill, knowing the answer.

Jules looked up, and they looked at each other. Both of them denied being the one responsible. “You let her go,” her mother said, tugging angrily on her robe's sash. The kitchen filled with the smell of her Jean Nate. Jules got her books together for school—Calculus, French, her copy of *Heart of Darkness*. The hardbacks were covered in brown paper bags, and on the bags she had drawn in blue and black ink—her name, lines of poems, song lyrics, whorls that formed intricate patterns. She knew then not to say anything.

The baby's mother backed the car out of the driveway and passed them heading up to the stop sign at the top of the street. Jules saw her face as she passed, an almost giddy expression of escape that Jules understood. They were left by the curb, smelling the fumes of her exhaust, listening to the baby scream.

“Maybe she needs something at the store,” Jules suggested.

But Martha was already moving back up the walkway to the cement steps. She was inside the house before Jules could stop her. Jules stood on the curb a while longer. She was cautious when it came to possible disaster. She hesitated and felt the dull pull of shame, its accompanying despair like a small, fluttering bird lighting on her chest. She understood she had failed her sister by choosing to believe she did not have the power to help her. She thought of Neil Mayock, his hopes pinned on the sound of her voice, the

smell of her hair, his dependence on her presence—nudging him with her shoulder, her arms around him to thank him for giving her something—lunch money, a cigarette, the gloves from his hands, his car keys. She suddenly could not bear the burden of the disappointment she must become to him.

Martha did not come out. Jules was forced to follow her, to pull open the door and step into the woman's house. It was clean and orderly and smelled of lemon cleanser. The living room carpet was marked with the tracks of a vacuum. Martha had discovered the baby upstairs. Jules heard her talking to it, making reassuring sounds. She felt her heart step up in the sudden quiet.

“Martha?” she called from the bottom.

And then Martha appeared at the top of the stairs with the baby. She held it cradled with two arms. Its body was wrapped in a pale blue woven blanket. Its head was hairless and shining with dampness. She came down, slowly, and stood next to Jules in the foyer. Across from them on the table was a phone, and she told Jules to call Neil at school.

“What are you doing with that?” Jules asked.

Martha held the baby as if it was something she was used to, as if it was her own.

They were both practiced at finding what they wanted. They'd go to G. Fox's and slip innocently into the dressing rooms of the different departments, approach glass counters manned by busy, distracted salesclerks. They carried large purses, or bags from other stores. Later, they surprised each other with things they thought the other would like—a suede fringed belt, large-belled jeans with a rainbow stitched down one leg, a pair

of Aigner leather gloves. Jules believed it was the constant appearance of new things that made Martha's mother nervous. She would never admit that her daughter had taken them without paying. In her mind, it must somehow be Jules's doing.

Jules was used to accepting the blame for things. She understood the reasons behind the accusations, and she was strong enough to suffer them because she told herself most things were not in her control. She could not stop her father from drinking. She could not change her sister back to the way she was before. She could not pass Calculus, a system of confusing signs and codes that despite her efforts at concentration, refused to be of any use to her. She would fail Advanced English because the teacher insisted on a definite plan behind every text, an approach in which the intentions of Conrad take precedence over *The Heart of Darkness*. Jules stayed quiet in class. She kept notes about what the novel meant, and what it meant changed every day.

"It's a boy," Martha said. "See the blue clothes?"

The baby was round cheeked and pink-skinned. It looked up at Martha and put his small dimpled hand in his mouth and made sucking noises.

"It's hungry," Jules said.

"*He* is," Martha told her. "Go call."

Jules did what she was told. She found a phone book in the table's drawer, and dialed, and spoke to the secretary. It was a long time before they found Neil, and she heard his voice on the other end, deadpan, a pretense Jules hoped was for the office staff. Martha bounced up and down with the baby. She moved from foot to foot, rocking it with her own body. And still, the woman had not returned. Outside on the yellow lawn the

leaves whirled. Jules thought they had blown from other neighborhoods like her own, from the woods that bordered the backyards and the edges of town. She imagined they have tumbled down the hill from the cemetery, where the oaks and elms stand in small groves over select plots. She waited at the window watching the leaves dance and pitch about the lawn while Martha rummaged in the kitchen for formula. The baby, it seemed, simply wanted to be held. It had not cried once since Martha picked it up.

Jules told Martha that they needed to go back to the car. On the kitchen clock they saw it was lunchtime, and Neil would find a ride to come and get them. Martha gave Jules a dubious look.

“You go,” she said.

Jules did not know why this annoyed her. “No,” she said. “We both need to go.”

Martha looked at the baby, and back at Jules. “Hold him while I mix up a bottle,” she said.

Jules had never held a baby in her life. Its weight, the way it squirmed, surprised her. He smelled a little sweet, like marshmallows. When she held him he stared into her face so that she felt compelled to look away.

“Hurry up,” Jules called.

In the kitchen Martha shook up powdered formula and water in a bottle. She came into the living room and stood beside Jules. “Look how you’re holding him,” she said, laughing. Jules plopped him quickly back into Martha’s arms, and Martha widened her eyes. “Careful,” she said.

The decision to take the baby with them to the car was Jules's. Martha would not leave him, and Jules didn't want to face Neil Mayock alone.

"That woman is gone," she told Martha. "We'll have to call the police, or something." It had been nearly an hour since she drove away. "We can probably see the driveway from the car, anyway," she said.

Martha agreed. She wrapped the blanket around the baby's body for warmth. Out in the sunlight, he squinted his eyes, and Martha draped a corner of the blanket over his face. It was still cool, but the sun had changed the way the neighborhood looked. It was more stark, unfriendly and deserted without the contrast of morning shadows. The wind and the blowing leaves made the uphill walk a nuisance. Martha talked to the baby the whole time. She told it *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. She sang it a song that she claimed her mother sang to her about a ship loaded deep, *but not so deep as the love I'm in, I know not if I sink or swim*. Once they reached the car, Martha was relieved that they could see the woman's driveway. They got into the car and closed the doors and the inside began to smell of the baby's sweetness and the formula that dripped out of the corner of his mouth when he gnawed on the bottle's nipple.

Jules turned the key in the ignition of Neil Mayock's car, expecting it to start. Sometimes, she'd learned, if you expected things to happen they did. But this time it did not, and she felt foolish for hoping. She cracked the window and the wind hummed in and filled the interior of the car. There was a chill to it, a bit of winter, hollow like remorse. She lit a cigarette. The smoke billowed out the window and up, caught in the wind that eddied the leaves. She didn't think about Miller anymore. Thinking about him

too much would open up the possibility of disappointment. He might have forgotten her, after all. It wasn't too hard to imagine being forgotten by someone whose life was busy, who was full of plans.

She watched out of the windshield. Every so often she glanced in the rearview mirror, wondering from which direction Neil would appear. She wanted him to be angry, to tell them what to do with the baby. She wanted him to look at her and finally understand what she was like, and yet despite everything, still love her. And then through the wide windshield she saw her sister. She was walking toward them on the same street, but a good mile away at the bottom of the hill. Her hair flew out, knotted and wild in the wind. She wore the purple parka. The leaves gathered around her ankles and swirled up between the legs of her jeans. Jules couldn't see the expression on her face, but she no longer tried to imagine what she thought or remembered or felt, anyway. She saw her sister would reach the car. She would come up the hill on the side by the old orchard and pass them, and Jules knew she would let her walk by as if she was not the girl posed beside her in photographs of her childhood, the two of them wearing Easter dresses or Christmas robes, identical except for color.

Beside her in the car Martha held a woman's baby and sang, gently, a mother's songs. For her there was no lapse of love. The wind buffeted the car, fiercer and insistent. Milkweed floated past caught in some other current. The leaves spun by. The sun lit up the dashboard gauges, cast a glare over the neighborhood. In time, Jules's life would move into its future and she would be a passenger, watching it. Things would occur that she would not know about ahead of time, things less assured of happening, things she

could not predict. And despite the refuge of Neil Mayock's love, the sturdy body of the car and its windows rolled up, despite the comfort of the moment before events were decided, she foresaw a life that was planned for her, filled with things from which she would never recover.

Girl on a Couch

Jules was living in the Maple Farm house with the Mayock brothers, Neil and Philly, when someone from her old neighborhood was arrested for exposing himself to the deaf girl. Neil and Philly had just gotten in from work, and they were sitting around the scarred table with their boots off, wearing gray wool hunting socks. It was winter, so they'd been plowing the Connecticut General Insurance parking lots all night, and Neil had described how the eyes of displaced deer and coyote, peering from the patches of woods left standing on the insurance company's grounds, had sparkled in the truck's headlights. In the middle of the table stood the near-empty bottle of what they'd been drinking to pass the time and keep warm, some of it poured now into their coffees. Outside the snow continued to fall, blow in under the kitchen door, and drift up along the house's peeling wood siding, covering brambles that Jules knew were lilacs. Mandy was the one who told the deaf girl's story, overheard at her parents' doughnut shop counter, where the local men had coffee and smoked and read the Sunday paper. She was swallowed up in Philly's red-and-black-checked coat and a long scarf, which she unwound while she talked, her small hands brittle-looking at the end of the sleeves.

"The guy must be crazy," Neil said.

"Taking it out in this weather," Philly said.

Neil and Philly looked nothing alike. Mandy liked Philly. Jules pretended to like Neil, so everything would be even. She slept in his room with him, and she followed

through the motions of being his girlfriend, which meant letting him do what he wanted with her and acting as if she liked it. Really, he wasn't her type—lean and lanky and too sweet-natured to be attractive to her. When he stood up his body seemed to unfold. In the pocket of his Woolworth shirt he carried a photo of his dead sister, Sarah Rose. Every so often he would pull it out and look at her, and his face appeared to fog over and become unreadable. Sometimes, he would say, "Let's ask Sarah Rose," and his brother would become solemn, and the photo would come out. They'd sit for a moment, as if waiting for the image to respond.

Sarah Rose had died before either of the boys was born. In the photograph, she was a teenager with long, heavy hair that draped her narrow shoulders. She wore a blue peasant blouse, and stood in front of the abundant lilacs holding one of the homing pigeons from the loft that sat empty now in the back yard. For a thirteen year old, her eyes were dark, and portentous. She held the bird in hands that revealed, to Jules, more emotion than her face—the long fingers of one curved under its breast, the other grasping the tail feathers, cradling the bird's body in a clasp of complete love. After she died, the brothers said, their parents had let the birds go. But they would not live in the wild, and for a long time they returned, fluttering around the closed loft, pecking for seed. It must have been wearying, Jules supposed, to have released them in an attempt to forget, and to never be allowed to do so. Jules had always been afraid to ask what happened to Sarah Rose. She assumed it was an accident, or cancer, something that could easily strike any of them, and she felt it would be unlucky to bring it up. Mandy agreed. Neither of them breached what Jules called "the sacristy of Sarah Rose."

Now the wind came at the windows, and the old maples scraped the roof shingles. Mandy sat down at the table with them. “Bet there wasn’t much to expose,” Philly said, winking at his brother. His hair was dark and thick, like Sarah Rose’s. When he didn’t shave, he looked dangerous, almost ruthless, but when he did his face was soft and pale, like the undersides of Jules’s arms. Then, she could easily see him in khakis and a sport coat, his feet shod in leather shoes, traipsing the threadbare Oriental rugs at her parents’ country club.

“You guys are drunk,” Mandy said. “And it’s only nine o’clock.”

Neil leaned forward and put his elbows on the table. He looked at Jules and raised his eyebrows. “So, you know this guy?” he asked her. When Neil spoke to Jules his voice always altered, became soft and tender, almost *crooning*, she’d said once to Mandy, and Mandy had given her a look as if to say—be *happy*, already.

They had all seen the *Deaf Child* sign in Jules’s neighborhood, stuck in the middle of a long strip of tall hedges as if the child lurked there, just beyond the green border. Jules had met Philly and Neil at John Brown’s restaurant bar in the town center, and they’d driven her home nearly every night last summer before she’d decided to leave for good and no one stopped her. She knew they imagined the deaf girl’s hedge covered with snow, and the girl herself accosted somewhere behind it, the man’s pants shucked down around his knees.

“His name is Nestor McAdams,” Mandy said.

“I don’t know any molester named Nestor,” Jules said.

Philly and Neil's mouths opened wide with laughter. Neil slapped the tabletop with his hand, and seemed in pain. Philly laughed at his brother laughing. Mandy flattened her small mouth in the semblance of a smile. She hated it when they drank too much and Jules encouraged them.

"She didn't hear him coming," Philly said.

The deaf child, back when Jules knew her, had been fifteen years old, a babysitter for Jules and her sister, Delores. The deaf girl had hearing aids and could read lips, and her name was Mary Beth. She twirled the jump rope for them, one end tied to the garage door handle. She made popcorn and brought her own cheddar salt. Foolishly, Jules had told the brothers a story about Mary Beth that fueled their imaginations, and regardless of anything Jules said after—that she was flat-chested and had blond frizzy hair held back with two barrettes, Philly and Neil invented their own composites, as if they had seen her one day beyond the tall hedge sunbathing, wearing nothing but a bikini bottom. They brought her up at bonfire parties at the reservoir, at the Sound View Pavilion, at the Candlelight restaurant lounge listening to the bad top-forty band. When Mandy or Jules balked at doing something distasteful or unlawful—sneaking into someone's backyard on High Hill and swimming naked in their pool, having sex with the brothers in the same room, Philly or Neil would say "Let's ask the deaf girl then." The deaf girl had lived with them all summer, as uncanny a presence as Sarah Rose.

"That story can't be right," Jules said now. "She isn't a *girl* anymore."

This quieted the brothers. Jules heard only the scrape of their chairs.

“You always think too much,” Philly said. He gave her a long look, one similar to others she had lately struggled to understand. *I love you*, the look seemed to say. Jules didn’t dare let herself imagine he meant anything by these glances. She cherished them, believing they were all she would ever have.

Then Neil protested that she needed to exercise her intelligence to pass the high school equivalency exam, and asked her what she’d finished reading. And Mandy said she’d gotten doughnuts for nothing, because no one was eating them, and went into the kitchen. When the looks had first started happening, Jules worried that Mandy would notice. But Mandy expected other things from Philly—things that Jules believed were far too easy to falsify. She wanted him to let her spend the night with him and have sex, and take her places in his car. For Mandy, that was what love meant. Jules had never believed differently, until the first time Philly gave her that look, and she saw in it the possibility of anguish and fear, and she knew that she and Mandy had been wrong.

Now Philly looked away, focused on something outside the window. He leaned forward in his chair. “Damn,” he said. “One of the Holsteins is out.”

Maple Farm was once a prosperous dairy. Philly and Neil’s parents had sold the farm and the adjoining land long ago, but kept the house, where they’d lived and then, later, died. Much of the pasture was sold to developers who built Ridgewood, a community of colonial and split-level houses connected by a labyrinth of streets named after trees: Maple Hill, Chestnut Edge, Butternut, and Hickory Lane where Jules used to live. The rest went to a wealthy man who cultivated corn and kept a small herd of Holsteins. He had intended to produce ice cream and sell it in a shop, but so far nothing

like that had ever occurred. Instead, a few hired men worked the farm, and though the functioning of the business had nothing to do with either of them, the brothers still felt an inherent responsibility toward the place.

Neil leaned over to peer past Philly. “No, that’s a black trash bag,” he said.

Jules rose and went to the window. The maple trees that grew by the house also lined the narrow road that led to the barn in back. There, through the blown snow and the bare trunks, she saw a cow. The animal struggled through a drift that swallowed her legs. She thought she saw the panic in her soft, brown eyes. “Oh,” she cried. She moved to the kitchen to grab her coat and boots, but Philly was there first.

“What do you think you’re going to do?” he asked her. He shrugged on his coat. He grabbed an old halter that hung beside the door.

She had no idea what to do. She had never been close to the cows, only seen them from the yard at a distance, lumbering and lowing shapes whose hooves made small ruts in the spring earth, whose defecated piles smelled up the house, and brought large flies that eventually perished on strips Philly hung in every room. She followed him out the door anyway, trudging in his footsteps through the snow. The cold was sharp on her face. She’d forgotten her hat, and the wind whipped her hair around. She found gloves in her coat pocket, and she put them on.

Neil and Mandy had stayed inside, watching from the dining room window. Jules decided that Neil must be the drunker of the two brothers to believe that he couldn’t be of any help. She followed Philly back toward the red barn where the cow stood, making a snorting through her large nostrils. Just beyond the cow the woods began, private land

marked off by barbed wire that the new owner had sold, but that the cow knew, and had treaded through each spring and summer on narrow paths to the pond and fresh clover.

The cow made a frightened lurch deeper into the bank. Jules stayed a bit behind.

“Good girl,” Philly said. “You stay there.” Jules thought he was talking to the cow

but

he had turned to look at her over his shoulder. His movements had slowed, his voice low.

The wind blew through the bare trees, clanking the branches. Then he told her “Shhh,”

and she watched his two hands rest on the cow’s black-and-white flank. She could not,

for the wind, make out what he said, but she heard the low murmuring of his voice, its

soothing cadence. She saw his hands move, flat-palmed across the cow’s back, and she

was reminded of Sarah Rose’s hands in the photograph, their grace. He had the halter

around the cow’s neck in moments, and tugged gently to lead her out of the drift and onto

the path back to the barn. Jules stepped away. She turned and saw one lone shape in the

dining room window. She gave it a little wave.

The sound of the gun’s report seemed, later, as lost in the wind and the snow as Philly’s voice calming the cow. It had an echoing quality, as if from a great distance.

Hunters, Jules thought, then wondered how far the ring of trees extended before

Ridgewood. Out of the corner of her eye she caught sight of something scampering back

under the barbed wire and into the woods, a long tail flying behind it like a dog. She

turned once again toward the house and saw Neil, standing in the road between the

maples, drop the family Remington as if he had just taken aim. Behind Jules, Philly lay in

the snow—splatters of red like petals strewn around his leg. He was grunting, and

breathing through his nose, as the cow had been moments before. She knelt down in the snow beside Philly. She found his hand in the snow and she held it to her face. His eyes were closed and she told him to open them.

“Open them now,” she said. And he did. There was the look again. She held his hand to her mouth. Philly pulled her down into the snow with him so that their faces touched, then both their mouths, warm and desperate. The snow was in her hair, packed into the sleeves of her coat, melting around the neck of her sweater. Jules heard the cow low. She felt the warmth of Philly’s mouth. And then Neil was there, the snow spraying up around his heaving body as he scrambled through the drift. He didn’t say anything. He took the halter off the cow and tied a tourniquet on Philly’s leg. It was only his leg, after all. While he tied, Neil cried openly, and Jules felt an awkward sorrow for him. Philly swore and remained conscious. The bloody leg steamed from its snowy spot. Mandy called an ambulance. Neil carried Philly into the house and left a trail in the snow, and then another trail across the kitchen linoleum. Mandy handed Philly the bottle from the table with a shaking hand. Once inside the house, Jules felt her heart step up, as if it had been held dormant for the time she’d been outside holding Philly’s hand to her lips. She did not let herself think about what else had happened. It seemed that under the circumstances no one would mention it, and so she would never have to. Neil sat down, shaking and cold.

“It was a coyote,” he said. He covered his face with his long fingers.

Philly told him he always had terrible aim. He told him everything would be fine. Jules kept her arms by her sides, her coat still on. She could not believe him.

Later, after they took Philly to the hospital, Mandy went around with a damp towel, cleaning up the blood, and Jules said she would go out to find the cow. She stood by the bloody spot in the snow, and remembered the way Philly's mouth felt. She saw that the cow had followed the path to the barn, and stood now by the barn door, where she had found some protection from the wind. The snow had dwindled to flurries that melted on Jules's face. It was afternoon, but the sky was gray, and it could have been any time of day. Jules supposed the barn was locked, but she tried the latch, and it opened and the cow went in past the others that stood, munching straw or swishing their tails idly. She thought that the animal might know where to go herself, and it was enough that she was inside where there was food and other cow bodies for warmth, and no threat of predators. The barn smelled of hay and feed corn and the cows themselves, a heady scent, almost sweet. Jules found she liked the sound of their movement—the placing of their hooves, their snorting and swishings.

When she was a child she'd visited Auer Farms, a 4-H farm, on a field trip with school. They had all worn their uniforms, plaid skirts, and white socks, and she remembered her shoes had gotten sucked into some mud on the trail, her socks had been splotched, and she'd been mortified. She had been in first grade, and she'd begun to cry, and the other girls had thought she'd wet her pants or thrown up, and they took her to the teacher, who smelled reassuringly of *J'Adore* and patted her head and told her, "Not much longer," as if the trip itself was disdainful. And it had been—smelly and dirty, and the men who worked there, from a distance, seemed tired and overheated, wiping their faces with the backs of their hands.

Now, she breathed in the smell of the barn, and remembered Philly leading the cow, the gentle way he urged her, the shape of his hand on her flank, and then the blood in the snow, and his mouth, its suffering, the pieces of bone and skin and shredded jeans, all of this—her revulsion and horror, her need and her desire, fastened together, a confused blending. Jules felt it would be wrong for her to stay in the house with the brothers any longer, so she went inside to pack her things. Mandy watched her from the doorway, holding the bloody towel. She didn't ask what Jules was doing. She stood there, the towel bunched in her hand, fingers bloodstained, face swollen from crying.

“What if they have to—you know?” she asked Jules.

Jules had her duffel bag on the bed. It was the bag she'd taken to Adventure Camp two summers ago, when she'd gone to Costa Rica, snorkeled and hiked and done everything the brochure promised with teens of her own age group. She had come back from the trip with no clearer idea of how to fit into her own life, and a liking for Camel cigarettes, and a knowledge of the varieties of expensive pot.

“What are you talking about?” Jules asked. “If they have to, they have to.”

Mandy was Jules's first friend out of high school. Mandy graduated last spring, a year before Jules would have if she'd stayed. She worked now at the doughnut shop and made enough money to buy Philly a leather jacket for Christmas, and Jules an antique gold locket she'd seen at a shop in Simsbury. Mandy said that she was following the *no-plan* plan, that one day she would simply choose one of the boys in town, get married in the Sacred Heart Church and begin having children, much as her own mother had. Now she stood glaring at Jules.

“What are *you* talking about?” she said.

“Philly’s leg,” Jules said. “Aren’t we both talking about Philly’s leg?”

She continued to sort through the pine bureau, separating her things from Neil’s and placing them into the duffel bag. Everything smelled of the pine drawer. Jules knew that when she got wherever she was going and unpacked, this smell would remind her of the house, of Neil and Philly, and then, in a heart-wrenching way, of everything else.

“And you think that’s OK?” Mandy said. Her voice had risen to a high pitch. Jules looked at her and wondered if she was having an emotional breakdown. When her mother had one this was the first marker—a kind of high, whining tone to her voice, a thrashing of her arms and whatever she was holding at the time—frozen peas, the blow dryer, a pair of high-heeled pumps. Soon, the items would resist the thrashing and once freed, sail across the room. Jules glanced at the towel in Mandy’s hand. As Mandy became more agitated, Jules’s movements slowed, like Philly with the cow.

“I think,” she said, carefully, “that Philly will still be himself, with or without a leg.”

Mandy’s eyes widened. “Are you kidding me?” she said. The towel flapped at her side. And then her voice rose again. “You’re not *leaving*?”

Jules stopped packing. She knew Mandy was crying, and it was just like her mother, the exasperation and disbelief, the begging for Jules not to go, and then Jules staying for a while longer, a feeble attempt to make everything work out peacefully. Part of her knew she had never wanted to leave then, or now. Part of her longed to stay, to be

condemned to the torture of imagining Philly and Mandy in bed each night in the room across the hall, to wait in silence for Philly's glances, to suffer Neil's attention.

"Neil will think you blame him," Mandy said.

Jules had not thought about this—how it would look to abandon Neil just then.

"And what about me?" Mandy said.

Jules glanced up at Mandy's face—the mascara streaks, the reddened, upturned nose, the sprinkling of freckles. She sighed, and unpacked her bag. She had only put in her summer things, anyway. She didn't have anywhere else to go.

After a few weeks, Philly came home without his leg. At first he could not climb the stairs, and like his father when he had gotten too old, he settled into the back room. It was set up as a kind of den, with wood-paneled walls, a fold-out sofa, and antique duck decoys on the shelves. There was a television, and a phone extension—a whole little world. The room was at the back of the house, with a view of the old loft, and the sun came up in its windows and shone across the fields. Philly lay there, ashen at first, and then as the days passed, ruddier and stronger, and hobbling around, content with the prospect of his prosthetic limb, and walking just as Neil, or the Malucchi brothers, or Lew Vancour, or any of the other town men did. Jules spent each day in the living room chair by the window. She had a set of the Harvard Classics, green leather books with gilt pages that Neil picked up for her at a tag sale. She didn't want to tell him that the books probably wouldn't prepare her for the exam. She accepted them, as she accepted everything from him, because it made him happy. She read Aristotle and Marlowe and

Plutarch. She read *The Tempest*, the same lines over again, distracted now by Philly's presence. Though they were often in the house alone, he kept his distance, and Jules understood this as his way.

Mandy worked more often—the night shift when the doughnuts were prepared fresh for the morning. When she came in she smelled of sugar and fryer grease. She slept alone in the upstairs room. She covered her revulsion as best she could. Philly seemed not to care. “It hurts him when I weigh down one side of the mattress,” Mandy said. No one really believed her, a tiny woman who weighed only ninety-five pounds, but everyone pretended to understand. There was a bit of an investigation into the accident, with the police coming out to ask questions as a formality. Later, there were rumors that Neil had shot Philly out of a jealous rage. Rumors, Jules saw, grew out of threads of truth. She saw, too, that the multitude of possible truths made almost every story impossible to believe. She wondered if Neil had told someone what he'd seen between Jules and Philly in the snow that day, if he'd known what he'd seen, if he'd even seen anything. All of this kept her awake at night, staring at the plaster ceiling, avoiding Neil's arms and legs thrown out in sleep.

She had begun cleaning the house, exploring the rooms and finding left behind things which she read as clues to something she needed to know, its origins placed in the bloody snow by Philly's lost leg. Sarah Rose's old figure skating trophies packed in newspaper. Bits of sequins on a closet floor. Pads of notepaper with lists in old ink: *string cranberries, salt front walk, call Maureen*. Grocery items she found remarkably personal: *Ban roll-on, bobby pins, Corn Flakes*. And then the notebook and its contents,

observations and lists written in a girl's rounded script: *Luna, Sophia, Mystic, Ariel*, and beside *Ariel*, the penciled word: *Lost*. There were notes describing markings, *noble, white-breasted*, and Jules understood that these were Sarah Rose's birds.

She lay in bed beside Neil and thought that here his mother gave birth to three children. She imagined the wet sheets wrung in her hands, the blood, the window tossed open and the cooing of pigeons, the blazing maples, their leaves shivering and damp with dew. Or, the scent of lilacs, and the bees in the farmhouse eaves, the maple shadows moving on the lawn each evening. Long ago, there would be a lighting of candles, and the lowing of the cows, the crickets rimming the old stone foundation. Jules felt Philly waiting in the room below. She felt his even breathing through the floorboards, heard him turn, and the sofa bed's springs recoil. Soon, when the snow had melted, the fields would lighten with mayflowers, and Jules saw there was a window of time in which he might come to her, and still, he did not.

She began sleeping on the couch in the living room. The living room was cold, and drafty, and the couch's cushions were flattened and uncomfortable. Jules awoke each morning before the others, and folded up her blankets and put them away. Still Neil did not protest. His face took on a drawn, pensive expression. By March, everyone was sleeping in a different place in the house, and the snow had melted in the sunny, high fields, and the cows stepped cautiously across the half-frozen ground. Philly was walking with a cane. One day he came out of the den and found Jules folding up her blanket. He raised his eyebrows at her, but said nothing. He had stopped giving her his old glances, as if the kissing in the snow had been all he needed from her. She wanted to ask him why he

was up so early, but she did not. She wanted to know why he did not wish to talk to her, or look at her, but she kept quiet. The silence in the house was something no one seemed to want to breach. They simply looked at each other, and moved away in opposite directions—Philly with the tapping of his cane, Jules with her arms full of the blanket.

She took the blanket to the closet under the stairs. There she had found a Hush Puppies shoebox filled with eyedroppers, and Ace bandages that smelled of camphor, and a small bottle of dried Mercurochrome. She imagined Philly and Neil's mother dressing their small cuts when they were boys. Across the hall was Philly's den, the door open, and the sun coming up through the windows onto the rumpled sofa bed. She went into the room to make the bed, believing Philly had gone. She liked being in the place where he'd slept, to smell him on the sheets and the quilt. She pulled everything straight. Out the window, two pigeons perched on the loft's buckling roof. *Sophia, Eileen*, she thought. Sarah Rose's father would drive the birds in crates and release them. Each time, a little further distance. These locations were marked in her book—*Granby, Southwick, MA*. Her notes recorded the weather—*gray, breezy, rain*. The times each returned; the birds that didn't. Jules pictured her waiting under the maples in one of the old porch wicker chairs, winding her long hair around her fingers, watching the summer sky. She turned now and Philly was there, a presence in the doorway. He smelled of the outdoors. He still wore his coat. Jules felt herself redden, as if she'd been caught.

“The pigeons,” she said.

Philly leaned over to see out the window. He stood and smiled, amused. “Ghost birds,” he said.

“But you see them,” Jules insisted.

She looked out again at the loft. The birds were gone. She did not know why she'd mentioned them at all. This was why no one spoke, she decided. They never said what they wanted. The words were shields to hide behind. She reached for his coat and opened it, pressed herself against him. Philly wrapped his coat and his arms around her. She had her ear to his chest, and heard his breathing. She was conscious of not wanting to unbalance him. She heard him groan, and she remembered the day in the snow, and thought of his pain. When she tried to pull away he whispered not to. His mouth was in her hair, his hands on her breasts, sliding below the bones of her hips. When he kissed her it was different than the time in the snow. It was gentle and probing, like a question. She would answer with her body on the sofa bed, the door softly shut, the sun awash on the quiet duck decoys.

They were not discovered, and in the days afterward, Philly acted as if nothing had happened. For Jules, it was enough that it had. From this she imagined a moment when Philly would announce his feelings for her. A time, perhaps, when Mandy would begin to come by less, and then, after a while, notice someone else at the doughnut shop counter—a boy with a cap over his eyes, a sly smile, and a car with shiny rims in the parking lot. Though it had been Neil who asked Jules to live in the house with them, and Mandy, initially, who introduced her to the brothers, the prospect of being with Philly made Jules happy, assuaging her guilt. Nothing appeared different, but beneath her silence was a churning she could not contain. She was cheerful, and slept later on the couch, heedless of discovery. She asked about pigeon feed and talked of resurrecting the

old loft. There had been pigeons the other day, she said. Mandy gave her a worried look. Neil became grave and reproofing.

“There haven’t been birds for years,” he said.

Philly stood in the doorway and said nothing.

And then one Sunday morning Jules caught Philly coming down the stairs from his old room. She felt light-headed, watching him descend. Mandy came down a while later, her expression vacant, her freckles bright. It was as if, sensing what Jules wanted, Mandy had changed her mind. It may have been that it was spring, with everything pushing to the surface—grass blades, tree leaves, crocuses and daffodils whose long slender stems emerged from the loamy soil, tender and exposed. The lilacs budded and opened and bobbed on their branches. That afternoon, the four of them sat around the living room watching a *Bonanza* marathon. The television picture was unclear, the images separating particles. They had been drinking White Russians that Mandy had mixed up in the kitchen with milk that Jules thought might be sour. It was April, almost Jules’s birthday. She would turn eighteen, something that once seemed pivotal, but now did not. Outside, rain pelted the maples’ new leaves, and it was dim and shadowy in the house.

“I hate this,” Mandy said. “Little Joe never gets the girl.”

“He gets a lot of action,” Neil said.

“But nothing long term,” Mandy insisted.

“Only Little Joe wants long term,” Philly said.

Neil groaned. “Jesus, Philly,” he said. “Don’t speak for everyone.”

Philly had his prosthetic leg off, and Mandy sat beside him, something she usually refused to do if he didn't wear the limb. "Why Neil," he said. "Are you thinking *long term*?"

Neil shrugged. He looked ridiculous, holding the white drink. Jules felt sick and had stopped drinking hers. She looked beyond the violet glare of the television to the couch, and saw Mandy's hand snake up the back of Philly's shirt. Jules had seen her do this before. She would draw a picture on his back with her finger and ask him what he thought it was—a flower, a sun, the letters of her name. After a while, Mandy reached over Philly and grabbed his prosthesis, where it lay beside the couch. She held it with two hands in her lap and stroked it absently, while on the television Hoss balanced his large body on his galloping horse. The grass was trampled and dust sent up. Shots rang out, and Little Joe cried miserably for his dead fiancée.

Mandy stood up with Philly's leg in her arms and stepped away from the television glare into the shadow. Jules saw that she was crying, too. Philly looked at her, incredulous. Neil glanced up and seemed to shrink back into the chair cushions.

"What is wrong with you?" Philly asked.

"I'm holding your leg," Mandy said. She held the prosthesis out and gave it a shake. The joints made a sound like a marionette. "Isn't anyone sad about this?"

For some reason, the brothers both turned to Jules. At first, she thought they blamed her, but then she saw they simply expected her to quiet Mandy down. Jules stood up from the couch and took the limb from Mandy's arms. Mandy was unprepared, the leg slipping easily into Jules's hands. It was soft textured plastic. Lightweight. Jules had held

it before, that other morning in the den. She held Philly's leg now and did not know what to say, overcome with love. The brothers' eyes shifted from Mandy to Jules. Mandy's mouth opened a little in surprise. Her cheeks were still wet with tears, but her eyes narrowed.

"Oh, you were sad all right," she said. "You were packing to leave that day until I stopped you." And then Mandy's face darkened, sensing her betrayal, and she grabbed the leg back. Philly kept his gaze averted, pretending to watch the television. On the farthest couch, Neil bowed his head, his hands in his lap.

Jules saw her mistake unfurl and bloom, a taste in her mouth like the soured milk. It was true that Philly loved her. He had done so at the moment he believed he might die, and later, when she'd gone to him willingly, her love her own wound. Yet, as long as Neil cared for her, Philly would never admit it. She had left herself open to his advances, his violations, believing they ensured her a place in his life, in this house. But, that, too, had been an error. Neither of the brothers thought much about the house, or their mother's labor in the upstairs bed, or the way their dead family's hands had worn down the banister. If she had shown them the lists in their mother's handwriting, the Camay soap packages saved for a sweepstakes, their father's notes in *The Old Farmer's Almanac*, they would have shrugged and shaken their heads. If they noticed the bats flying from the attic on summer nights, they never mentioned them. The pigeons that returned, forced by their terrible yearning for home, pecked at the grass and found nothing.

Jules sat back down on the couch, quiet, dulled by these thoughts. The story she'd told the brothers about the deaf girl had been made up. Once, when Mary Beth was over babysitting, a boy had stopped by. Mary Beth had let him in, and they'd sat together watching a movie with Jules and Delores. After, Jules and her sister had been sent to bed, but Jules had lain awake for a long time, wondering about the boy and Mary Beth, and what they might be doing together. She'd slipped downstairs to the room with the television, its sound soft, a lull of music and intermittent voices. The room, like this one, was dim, filled with particles of light. She told the brothers that she caught them both without clothes on her mother's couch—Mary Beth's body pale against the dark upholstery, her long hair draped down the cushions to the floor, and the boy on top, Mary Beth's hands clasping his buttocks, smooth and child-like between her bent knees. Really, Jules had found them sitting much the same way as she'd left them. Maybe they'd been holding hands.

Now, Jules remembered Mary Beth, the times she'd looked at Jules with a sad, loving glance when she'd done something she shouldn't have—gone through her mother's clothes to dress up, poured her father's cologne and shaving cream and talc into Dixie cups to see what it might make. The way she'd smooth Jules's hair with a gentle hand, a girl assured of what was right. One who would always know when she should have what she wanted. Jules had hidden for a long time behind the loveseat, watching Mary Beth and the boy, but nothing had ever happened, and she'd gone back to bed. As a child, she hadn't known what she was waiting to see. Later, the few times she'd babysat

herself and had boys over, she'd been the one naked on a neighbor's couch, her own legs spread, fervent for something that would be, time and again, evasive and heartless.

Jules saw the rain outside on the maple leaves, against the old glass panes. She saw Mandy's hand slip back under Philly's shirt, and Philly's mouth moving, which meant words were coming out. Tree, house, window. But they could be any words, or words that meant nothing. Jules knew she would do one of two things. She would go to Neil and take his hand in hers, lean in to press her mouth to his, requesting forgiveness. Or she would pack her bag and leave. Someone would surely pass her walking with the heavy duffel, see the way her hair hung in lank strands against her wet clothes. A car would stop for her—a Plymouth with finned lights and dark upholstery, and a smell coming out like peppermint and cigarettes. Behind her, up the road in the house, Neil would pull out the photo of Sarah Rose. Jules's story floated in the room, waiting to be told.

Affairs of a Career Girl

Jules was not beautiful. She knew it was true because she had heard it all her life: from her grandmother, balancing a long, filterless Pall Mall cigarette, who looking down at Jules when she was five or six years old said, “Don’t be such an ugly child,” to her landlady, Lenore, on the phone, a half-made basket in one hand and dried purple flowers in the other, “Oh, Jules isn’t very pretty, but she has other things.” Jules had lived in Lenore’s house for a year now, paying rent for an attic room, but she had not wanted to debase herself further by asking what these other things were, so they remained a mystery.

Lenore’s house was old and large with rooms leading in surprising turns to others, and lots of windows. It was situated on Tunxis Avenue, right before the center of town, the Wintonbury Mall, the Shopping Bag, and Drug City. Lenore’s teenage daughter, Star, lived there, along with Lenore’s truck driver boyfriend, Kenny, when he passed through town. Kenny was a small man who kept everything bottled up. He stayed in a room at the end of the hall and left his brown worn-heeled cowboy boots downstairs by the back door. For the week or two that he was home the house smelled like old clothes and things were noiselessly broken—the storm window in the living room, a cupboard door in the kitchen, the wooden banister. Jules once found tiny pieces of pale porcelain at the bottom of the stairs. Lenore put up with Kenny, but Jules knew it was Star, in her high-school-girl way, who loved him. She’d had sex with him, and gotten pregnant, and confessed it all to Jules the night before, the two of them sitting on Jules’s twin bed tucked under the

dormer of the nearly empty attic. Jules often felt like the orphaned girl in *A Little Princess*.

“What will you do?” she’d asked Star.

Star gave her a befuddled look, and shook out her hair. She wore dangling bronze earrings shaped like deer. “Tell him, right?” she said, as if this was step two of a plan already published somewhere in a guidebook. Jules did not have a clue as to the book’s whereabouts, or if such a book existed. She shrugged, so that Star could interpret it anyway she wanted.

“What about your mother?” Jules asked.

“She already knows,” Star said, and then shot Jules a look. “About the baby.”

The next morning when Jules came downstairs she found Lenore and Star sitting at the kitchen table each wearing one of the wool plaid robes that had belonged to Star’s father, stacking dollar bills in separate piles. Between the piles were coffee cups and an ashtray full of cigarette butts, and the materials for Lenore’s latest craft project. She’d begun making hanging baskets with dried flowers and colored tulle, ribbons, bells and round glass Christmas ornaments. Four of these creations were suspended from the house’s front porch. The ribbons and netting flew around in the wind and the sun glinted off the glass balls in the morning. People driving by pulled over and knocked on the door to find out where they could buy one. Since it was almost Christmas, the people stopped every day and Star had quit her job waitressing at the Farm Shop Restaurant so she could answer the door while Lenore worked furiously in a small room in the back of the house.

Jules thought Star and Lenore must have been up all night. They did not see her on the stairs. She watched Lenore put her arm around Star and they leaned their heads together until their faces touched. They sat this way for a while and stared out the front window as if they were one person. Outside was the gray winter day, but small spots of light moved on the kitchen floor and Jules could see bright fuchsia tulle waving in front of the glass. On the front lawn the grass was so covered with frost it looked like snow.

Jules was almost envious of Star's pregnancy. She was obsessed with the idea that nothing would ever happen to her because nothing had happened to her for such a long time. She would not have been picky about the event. Sometimes, when the phone rang late at night she imagined it was her mother calling to tell her that a family member, maybe even her father, had had an aneurism, or a heart attack, some equivalent to being thought dead of jungle fever, like Sara Crewe's father in *A Little Princess*. She imagined her sister, Delores, on the line, sounding normal and cured of all psychosis, telling her she had met a boy. She imagined Michael from work calling to talk to her about something personal or private or important.

"He's in love with you," Star told her.

Jules thought that maybe Star, in her youth and inexperience, had some sort of intuitive gift. She wondered at how simply wanting to believe this made it all seem possible. Michael lived with his wife and two children in a small development near where Jules grew up, on a curving drive that ended in a dead end, surrounded by pine trees. Jules and Michael's wife, Martha, had been friends in high school, but they had never kept in touch. She only knew of her whereabouts because one day at work Michael told

her his wife's name, and Jules put it all together. She didn't tell him that she'd known Martha when he had begun seeing her, that she even remembered him from that time. Some nights, Jules drove with Star by Michael's house, even though it was out of the way, and they'd slow down and peer through the lighted windows.

"What do you think he's doing?" Jules asked. She pictured Michael and Martha sitting down together to watch television. She imagined him climbing into bed with her, and turning off the light, their two sets of legs joining, sliding along the sheets.

"He doesn't love her," Star said as they turned the car around in the dark. Jules enjoyed entertaining this idea, too.

"She probably doesn't appreciate him," Jules said.

"Or like sex," Star said.

To get to Michael's house they had to drive past Jules's old neighborhood, and she made Star turn and go through it. There were no street lights but each house was lit somehow—with landscape spotlights or lanterns suspended in arched doorways. When Jules lived there she and her sister had stuffed her father's old clothes with leaves and made a dummy they propped by the maple tree for Halloween. On Thanksgiving her father had hung Indian corn on the knocker, and she saw that her old neighbors had done the same, putting paper scarecrows on the front doors, placing rows of pumpkins on the porches, and dried sheaves of corn propped up against lampposts. She and Star had not been by since then.

There was the sound of a car horn outside, and Star glanced up at Jules on the stairs, and winked at her. "Your ride is here," she said.

Lenore looked, too, her mouth a grim line she forced into a smile. “Time for work already?”

Jules knew Lenore would pretend to be happy about the pregnancy and that later, she would ask her who the father was, and Jules would lie easily and tell her she didn’t know. She went out onto the porch while inside Star and Lenore talked in chatty voices about cribs, and changing tables, and educational toys, leaning over their coffee. Cold air blew a strip of pale blue tulle over her face and she had to take one of her hands out of her coat pocket to push it away. Inside the beige sedan at the curb, Michael leaned over and rolled down the passenger window to watch her.

“You have to fight your way through that mess!” he called. Behind her the bells jingled and the wind knocked a glass ball onto the porch. The ball rolled down the steps and broke on the concrete walk. Jules rolled her eyes. Michael opened the car door for her and it scraped against the curb. He wore brown leather gloves lined with rabbit fur.

The inside of the windshield was glazed with ice which was beginning to melt, and Michael wiped at it with a towel.

“Martha left the window down last night.”

Jules didn’t think that Michael told Martha about her, or about picking her up for work each morning. If he had, Martha would have made the connection, too, and come by with her two girls to show them off like new shoes. His not-telling created a space around them, like a protective casing. Inside it they never knew what to say. Michael flipped the heat switch to high and pushed on the gas pedal. He changed the radio station twice.

“This is a good song,” he said. Across the street, children waited for the school bus. There were no adults around to organize them, yet they stood in an orderly line at the end of a driveway. Three boys moved away from the group and marked their spots in the line with their books. “Do you like this song?” Michael asked.

Jules listened. It was an old Simon and Garfunkel song.

“I guess,” she said.

She didn't ask why they weren't going anywhere. At Michael's house, his wife and kids were probably watching the Disney channel in their pajamas. If Martha decided to load the kids in the car and go to the Shopping Bag they would pass by them, sitting in the car in front of Lenore's house. Jules was not sure how things happened to other people, whether there was some great scheme already laid out or whether it all happened at random to no one in particular. She had supposed, at one time, that if she waited long enough, something would happen to her, but lately she had become convinced that this all had something to do with her not being beautiful, and that her waiting would arrive at a future of nothing.

She looked at the clock on the dashboard. They had ten minutes to get to work. Michael stared out the windshield and gripped the wheel with both gloved hands, and Jules wanted to reach over and shake him a little, as if he were asleep. She knew he wasn't because his eyes were open. They were blue and clear and watching the yellow garbage truck make its way down the street. In a few minutes they would have to move.

“It's warm now, huh?” she asked, and he looked at her finally and shook his head. He pulled one glove off, reached over and took her hand. He squeezed her fingers.

“Sorry,” he said, and put the car in drive and pulled away from the curb. They would be late for work and the old ladies in accounting would notice everything— Michael hanging his coat, ruffling his hair, his dazed look, and Jules hurrying to her desk, not even stopping to talk because it was late. She would try so hard not to act unusual that she would look unusual, and they would notice this, too.

On Christmas Eve the employees were allowed to leave early, so for most of the day no one did anything. Jules worked in the shipping department of a company that made lightning rods. They called them *air terminals*, and they were available in tapered or round tipped, in copper, aluminum, tinned, or nickel plated. They also ran machines that turned out miles of braided copper conductors, made castings for fasteners and connectors, and even decorative finials. Jules thought it was ironic that Michael worked here, when his wife’s father had been killed by a lightning strike. She imagined Martha widening her eyes, and then tipping her head back, and laughing about it. She’d grab Jules’s forearm and hold it tight. “I know, I know!” she’d say, shaking her head.

Shipping was in the rear of the machine shop where it smelled of oil, dust and fresh wood cut to make crates. They had to turn their radio up loud to hear it over the sound of the machines and the forklifts. The machine shop was not heated, so Jules wore thick sweaters, and drank a lot of coffee. She worked here with Lee who was a big woman with black hair that puffed out around her head. Her hair didn’t move when she laughed her big laugh. Lee rode a motorcycle and gossiped about the people in the front

offices. She predicted what they would do next, who was secretly seeing who, and laughed about it, spilling coffee down the front of her lumpy sweater.

Today she had taken the bus because last night it had started to snow, and this morning it was still snowing, and the roads were not clear. On their ten o'clock break they joined the machinists outside on the loading ramp for a cigarette. The snow falling made everyone quiet. It landed on Jules's bare head, and on her hands which she held out to catch it. It covered up weeds, scraps of metal and wood, and old rusted drums. It blew around the corner of the building and Jules knew that it was snowing up by the offices, too, and that Michael was watching it fall and melt on the street where they had sprayed salt and sand, where the snow was no longer white but dirty-brown, pushed to the side and crushed under car tires.

A lathe operator named Elliot shuffled his big-toed work boots and pulled a wool cap down over his ears.

"This is nice," he said. His eyes crinkled up at the corners, and he was missing a tooth on one side when he smiled. Jules thought things were better this way, with everything covered up, everything simple and bare, and all one color except the wet black trunks of trees and a flash of something bright red that might be anything—a car or a bird or a Christmas decoration caught in the wind.

Before lunch, Jules dropped off some paperwork up front and passed by Michael's office. She knew as she walked by that he could see her through the glass window. She never went in on her own. He slid in his desk chair to the door, opened it a crack and stuck his head out.

“Hey,” he said quietly so the ladies in accounting would not hear. “Come in here.”

Jules smiled and did what he said. He pulled up a chair for her. Joe Lenkowski from purchasing was there. They were both drinking from cans of Coke.

“What’s going on?” Michael asked. Jules noticed that he had been shooting rubber bands. The window was open across the room and frozen white snow covered the ledge. The air in the office was cold. There were rubber bands all over the floor. He put a handful in her lap. Joe Lenkowski laughed.

“Ask me, ‘How’s the family?’ That’s what everyone else asks,” Michael said. Jules had no intention of asking him anything.

“Hey, Joe, go get Jules a Coke.”

“I don’t want one, thanks,” she said.

He stared at her with his head in his hands. He was grinning. His elbows held down stacks of blueprints.

“I’m working hard,” he said. “What about you?” He scooted around the room in his chair and picked rubber bands up off the floor. There was a look of pain on his face as he bent down and moved, but when he turned to her he was smiling.

“You have a cigarette?” she asked, and took one off the desk. Joe lit it for her and pulled out one of his own to smoke. He stood up and his head nearly touched the door frame. The old ladies in accounting were getting their big black purses out of desk drawers. Michael and Jules smiled at them through the window as they walked by. Joe seemed reluctant to leave. His eyes moved back and forth between the two of them.

“You eating lunch today?” he asked Michael.

“Not today, not today,” he said and glanced at Jules.

It was time for her to leave, too, but she could tell Michael wanted her to stay. When Joe was gone Michael said, “God, my wife is beautiful, you know? My kids are great.” Jules nodded her head. “I don’t know what good it does, though. How’s that boyfriend of yours?” he asked.

“He’s fine,” Jules lied, smiling.

“My wife loves to plant flowers. She’s got this great garden on the side of the house. My kids play on a swing set in the back yard.” He looked at her and his eyes were bright blue. “You’d like my wife. She’s all right.”

Michael put his feet up on the desk and threw a pencil in the air. He grinned at her. Jules pictured running into Martha again, stopping by the house to say hello. Martha would be working in her garden, bending over the dark soil, planting bulbs. She would wear green gardening gloves and have to squint up into the sun at Jules when they were introduced. The recognition would be immediate. “Jules!” Martha would say, and throw her arms around her like she used to. Somewhere, Michael would be watching, surprised.

“I thought about going to church,” he said. “My wife won’t go, though.”

“Oh,” she said. She couldn’t picture Michael sitting in church. He would have to sit still. There would be nothing to play with.

“You think that’s stupid, huh?”

Jules didn’t say anything.

“Whatever, Michael,” she answered finally. “Whatever you want to do.” This was the wrong thing to say. His eyes shifted and he seemed to be looking at something far away.

He threw the pencil out the window and it stuck into the snow on the sill.

“Maybe you have all the love you need right here, inside.” He patted his chest.

“Really?” she asked.

“I’m sure,” he said, but he didn’t sound very sure. Jules stood up to go.

“I’m in big trouble if it isn’t, you know?”

She shrugged her shoulders but he didn’t see. He didn’t try to stop her as she opened the door. She did it quietly, carefully. Outside the door she breathed, as if she had been holding her breath the whole time she was inside. It was wrong of her, she knew, just to go without saying anything, and she waited there, listening. After a few minutes she looked through the window and saw his blond head lying flat on the desk, and outside on the ledge, five pencils like yellow spears sticking out of the snow.

At three o’clock one of the office managers came around and gave everyone a bottle of Canadian Club in a metallic green gift box, shook all their hands and said, “Have a good one.” A few people punched out right then and went home, but Jules stayed behind with Lee, who was waiting for her bus, and with some of the guys from the carpentry shop. The guys sat on half-made crates, opened their green boxes and took long swigs of the whiskey.

“C’mon, Jules!” one of them laughed, so Jules opened her green box, too, and took a drink. She left the bottle on her desk and wandered up front to the offices. Everyone was gone, and without the bright charge of the fluorescent lights the air was settled and dim, almost peaceful. She slipped into Michael’s office and he was there, waiting, standing by the window.

He turned around and shook his head. “Oh Jules, Jules,” he said.

She went up to him and put her arms around him and kissed him. His hands landed lightly on her shoulders, as if they were confused, and then they pulled her in, and he sighed, a sound of relief. He kissed like someone thirsty. Jules thought she might learn to love this feeling, like being buoyed up under water, of drowning and floating. She pressed her hands to his chest. He took her hands and slid them down to the front of his pants. She stepped back and took a breath and looked at him. His hair was disheveled, his eyelids heavy.

“You’re drunk,” he said, reeling her back in.

“Well, so,” she said. “You’re a church-goer.” She did not want to say *married*.

He grinned, then laughed. Jules pined for the bottle of Canadian Club back on her desk. She thought of Martha at home changing a diaper, plopping the sodden thing in the trash, the smell of dinner cooking wafting up the stairs.

“I’m happy,” Michael said. “You make me happy.”

Jules felt a surge of accomplishment and pride. Through the blinds she saw the streetlights flicker on. She wanted to lie down then, on the floor, in the snow, on a solid surface. She tugged on the front of his shirt. A sound came out of her mouth that couldn’t

possibly be her own voice. She didn't feel any guilt. Martha had her babies, and she had nothing.

In a little while Star came to pick her up in Lenore's new car, an eight-year-old lime green Toyota. They drove around in the snow and drank the Canadian Club. Lenore was having a Christmas Eve party and Star didn't want to go home.

"I feel funny," she said. "Inside." She rubbed her stomach. Jules had been wondering what might happen when Star got bored with being pregnant and it was too late to do anything about it.

"She makes a big deal about everything," Star whined. "You'd think it was hers." She told Jules that she would talk to Kenny when he came home.

"What do you think he'll do?" Jules asked.

"Marry me or something," Star said. She turned the wheel too quickly and they swerved into a snowbank and bounced off. The snow had stopped and it was already dark.

"I hate winter," Star said. "We need to work on that plan to go to Florida."

Jules thought this plan was a good one. She felt fearless. Star drove by the party at her house and cars were parked all up and down the street. Lenore had thrown blinking strings of star-shaped lights along the porch railings and all over the front lawn.

"You should see inside," Star said. Lenore was serving eggnog and hot buttered rum. All the lights in all the rooms were lit. Jules thought that she would just sleep in the car. Her body felt heated and impervious. Star tried to turn around and skidded into

someone's Skylark. No one heard the crunch. It wasn't very loud, almost the sound of a footstep though frozen snow.

They drove to Michael's house and everything along the road was shiny cold, mailboxes and telephone poles were buried in snow. The sky was clear black. Tiny white lights were strung along the edges of roofs, draped over hedges and small trees on the front lawns. In one yard a little sleigh and fake reindeer were posed beside a life-size plastic Santa Claus. The windows in Michael's tiny Cape were warm yellow. The light poured through the glass storm door and as they passed by they could see inside—the blue chintz living room and the pictures on the walls, a grandfather clock in the hall, a TV on in the family room, the couch with its red and green holiday throw, the Christmas tree. Jules could not stop looking at everything. Star pinched Jules's arm and she finally noticed Michael's car in the driveway, and Michael standing by it, his hand on the door handle, his head following the bright car. Then Jules turned in her seat and saw Michael climb into his car and start it up.

"He saw us, you know," Star said. They had already turned around. Michael's car was at the end of the street, its brake lights lit.

"Maybe he broke down," Jules said. Star pulled up behind him and Michael climbed out into the glare of their headlights. He didn't look toward them. He leaned against the door of his car with his arms folded across his chest. He wore his wool overcoat, but had forgotten his gloves.

"He saw us," Star said again.

Jules opened the car door and stepped out into the snow. Her foot sank up to her ankle. Tall pine trees surrounded them, dark shapes whose tops swayed and dropped clumps of snow onto the hood of the beige sedan. She half-walked, half-slid over to him, careful in her high heels. Michael watched her, his hair hanging over his face.

“What, Jules?” he asked. A man resigned to what might happen next.

Jules had not thought about what she would say, so it was very quiet for a few minutes. She thought of Martha wrapping a nice tie, or cufflinks, or handkerchiefs. She imagined the children tucked into their beds. She pulled her sweater sleeves down over her hands. Lenore’s car rattled a little, sent white smoke into the cold air. Over their heads the pine branches creaked and moaned.

“No one will ever love you as much as I do.”

Jules thought, as she said it, that it was that other voice, the one she’d heard in his office. And yet he did not protest. He seemed amazed, stunned. He stared at his hands and then shoved them, suddenly, into his pockets. Jules grabbed his sleeve, thinking he would leave.

“It’s true,” she said.

He shuffled his feet. A snowplow passed below them on another street. Star hit the horn, impatient. Jules tugged hard at his sleeve but he would not look at her. He stared away instead, toward the snowplow roaring, winding toward them, the houses shimmering on top of white ice, and since she could not see his face, she had no way of knowing whether or not he believed her.

Hukelau Jules

Jack Castle's father was a local legend in the small Connecticut town just off the Berlin Turnpike. He had a mechanical gift that left his hands permanently black-tinged, that kept a steady row of cars waiting at the Texaco station where he worked—cars that, in the 70's, were still long and powerful: Continentals, Broughams and wood-sided LTD wagons. He loved more women than Jack could count, always a few waiting for a chance, a drive somewhere in one of his cars, a night parked with him in the dry, hot field overlooking the golf course. Jack was raised by the girlfriends, a succession of women too young to know what to do with him, who brought him things; cereal box toys, little metal cars, T-shirts from Daytona Beach—who told him “Eat up now,” at the supper table, but never cared if he didn't. He knew them by the smell of their perfumes, fruity oils, or spray colognes called Musk or Rain, by their leavings—gauzy blouses, and brightly-colored bikini panties left, like mysteries, on door handles, between the car seats, or in the long, ragged backyard grass. And Jack knew engines from the time he was six, grew up among car parts thick with oil stacked in the corner of every room, the smell of the oil coating the food they ate, seeping into the blanket he used at night, becoming as comforting, familiar, as the hum of the cars' tires passing on the turnpike, their engines revving in one continuous expelling of exhaust.

Jack was in love only once. She was a cocktail waitress at the Hukelau lounge where he went, the first time, with Lew Vancour's lawn crew one heavy summer afternoon. He was sixteen and they sat at a large round table, all of them reeking of gasoline and sweat, stuck all over with pieces of grass. They called her "Jules." "Hey, Jules, get your sweet ass over here," and "Jules, darling, why don't you work at Uncle Dave's," which was a strip bar in an old watch factory by the river. Jules came to the table swinging her long dark hair, smiling without showing her teeth, a kind of grin that made Jack wonder if she were mad.

"My daughter won't respect me when she grows up," she said. And when she talked he saw the one crooked tooth she tried to hide. She wore lipgloss he would dream of tasting, earrings that looked like stained glass and tangled in her hair. Her eyes moved around the table, recording the usual orders in her head, until she came to him, and stopped. Her eyes, settling on him, changed. And he stared back, bold, challenging, while underneath the blue work shirt, under the smooth muscles of his stomach, he felt qualms of panic.

"This is Angel boy," said Lew, who was bar-weary, already drunk on the whiskey he brought along on the job, kept hidden under the truck seat. Everyone else laughed and shifted in their chairs. "Give him a fancy one, Jules, you know, fruit, umbrella, the works."

And Jack had taken the cigarette from his mouth and smiled over at Lew and said, "Just a beer," and all the time she'd kept her eyes on him, something like a smile lingering on her mouth. Lew turned his bulk in the chair and nodded up at her, as if to

say, yeah, that's OK, and she turned then, and headed off to put in the order. And as soon as she'd gone they'd all started on him, "Angel baby's gonna get some," but this time it had angered him and he'd sat quieter than usual, and Lew had turned surly, putting his arms up in the air, "Enough," so they stopped.

The name, "Angel" had come from Lew's wife, Francine. He met them both that summer he turned eleven—after his father wandered out onto the Turnpike and was struck by an oncoming car driven by a high school senior and his girlfriend dressed in prom night formals, on their way to a reserved room at the Ramada. Barry Castle's brown Ford truck was found with its engine blown, abandoned in the back lot of Uncle Dave's, where it sat for weeks, splattered with tickets and a red tow warning sticker. Jack had gone to stay with his aunt, his mother's sister, who lived next door to the Vancour's in a subdivision within walking distance of the center of town, where the thirty-year-old houses were small and quaint, with simple cement steps and breezeways, with hedges of forsythia and backyards large enough for barbecues and swing sets and games of touch football. Francine had been one of his father's girlfriends, and she recognized him one day while she was lying out in the sun in her back yard, and called him over. His aunt had seen him in the next yard talking to her—her head propped in her hands, her breasts spilling out of her bathing suit top—and had forbidden him from going over again, but Francine told him stories about his father, and he went over in the afternoons when she was home, just to listen.

Francine's stories would start with a car, or a motorcycle. "When he had the red Harley," she would say, or "Right before you were born he got the Mustang." They

would be outside, in the yard under the hot sun, or in the kitchen at the table, Francine with her glass of iced coffee, her feet up on the vinyl chair cushion. As she talked she would take her hair down and brush it with her fingers, twist it back and retie it. Jack would nod and listen and watch her hands work. If he was puzzled he would try to ask a question. “Was he married to my mother when I was born?” but Francine would shush him with her hand and keep on, as if the answer would come, which it never did. Later, when he was alone, he would try to unknot the series of events, intertwined with his own spare memories to become his father’s past, and never succeed.

Then he met Lew, who had been one of his father’s friends, and who eventually got Jack working on the mowers, then his own truck engine. Jack’s aunt gave him a cot in the basement to sleep on because she didn’t want grease tracked up her carpeted stairs. He didn’t care. Lew told him he was like his father, he had the knack, and Lew’s friends came over to look at his work, left cars there for Jack to fix overnight. And so, by the time he was fourteen, it was believed he would become his father’s son, without any advice or guidance from the man himself.

On the night he died his father had killed a man in a brawl outside the Hukelau—which had shocked everyone, even his friends, who knew how he could fight, but hadn’t guessed the force of his desire, that this particular fight had been over a teenage girl Barry Castle had loved, and who had suddenly changed her mind about him. So it was despair and a muddy-headedness that kept him striking the boy she’d chosen instead, even when he’d fallen and bled onto the black asphalt parking lot.

After the fight, Barry Castle had gotten into his truck and driven off. No one stopped him. He had gone home first, and Jack remembered his father coming in, had watched him lower himself into a chair in the kitchen and place his head in his two bloodied hands. And the weakness Jack saw in him at that moment in the dim kitchen light, as if the weight of his head in his hands was too much to bear, made him afraid. It was this fear that kept Jack from speaking to him, even when his father noticed him in the doorway, and came to him to place one hand on his head before he walked out, his face unreadable in the dark, leaving Jack with the memory of his silence. At sixteen, when Jack slipped out one night to meet his friends and got picked up for fighting, his aunt had refused to have anything to do with him, and it was Lew who had come and gotten him, had all his things in the back seat, who moved him into his and Francine's house.

Francine and Jack stayed up all that summer and watched the late movie while Lew snored from the bedroom—both balancing the couch on either end, the room tinged with the blue glow of the television. They'd watched "Raintree County," and "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,"—Francine wide-eyed on her end of the couch, and Jack seeing himself as all the lead characters, men like his father, full of love and anger, their lives destined for complications. He and Francine never spoke, except when it was over, and she stood up and tugged her shorts down—"G'night, Angel," she'd say, with a kind of sigh, dreading, maybe, Lew's bulk in the bed, the sour smell of his breath. And when Jack thinks back now he feels this time like a warmth, the dull regularity of his life—how he'd fallen as much in love with the smell of the engines, the feel of the tools in his hands, as he had with Jules—all of this infused with the plots and the places of the movies, real enough to

seem possible, to occupy him while he worked—mulching the elaborate beds, pruning the border shrubs of the homes on Chestnut Edge, and Maple Hill.

On the nights Jules worked, Jack watched her weave between the tables with her tray, ordered beer after beer so she would come over and he could smell the shampoo in her swinging hair. Later, he waited outside the back door of the Hukelau at closing time to walk her to her car and get a glimpse inside—at her daughter’s car seat, small cardboard books, a bright pink plush bear. And though he was always there, she met him outside the door with a look of startled doubt, her eyes taking him in, without seeming to, her hands nervously brushing back her hair.

“You drive safely,” he’d say, closing her door. And she’d fit the key in the ignition and light a cigarette, and sit there smoking in the car with the window down—deciding something, mulling it over, while Jack leaned on the fender waiting, watching the toes of his boots. After a while she would start the car, and Jack would have to step away so she could pull out, leaving everything unsaid, his heart beating in his chest.

He kept this up until fall, when the work had slowed to just blowing and collecting leaves, and Lew leaned over one afternoon and told him that watching Jules he looked just like his father, a man who believed he could have whatever he wanted, and though he’d meant it as a compliment, Jack was suddenly uneasy with the comparison. He remembered the one conversation he’d had with his father about women. They’d been working on the Harley in the driveway of the house they’d always lived in together, and one of the girlfriends had just left—the one who wore the moonstone ring, who always

bit her bottom lip. She had packed her things into her Camaro, taking her time, waiting for him to stop her.

“They all have a story,” his father said. He looked up at Jack and grinned, the sweat pooling over his upper lip. It had been summer, humid, just before a storm. The sky above his head had been dark gray, and to the right it was blue with the sun still shining. Jack was angry at his father for letting the girl go, had thrown the wrench down into the grass and stood there, eight or nine years old, missing her already, even though there’d be another in a day or two. Love had always involved great risk, and he knew his father had outwitted the odds so many times that the last girl, whose name Jack could not remember, must have been inevitably the one he could not let go. Jack’s admiration for his father was mixed with that same fear of losing him, and he decided there in the Hukelau that if he wanted to be like him he could never love anyone.

Jack lived with Lew and Francine until he’d saved enough money for a place of his own, and rebuilt the engine of his father’s brown truck that they secretly towed from the Mobil station lot. The rest of his father’s things had been repossessed, the cars and tools eventually sold at an auction for prices that Jack could never afford. He and Lew and Francine had gone and stood in the back of the auction’s open field, the wintered grass pale and trampled, the ground still frozen. They didn’t bid, just watched it all go—the ’55 Chevy, the Mustang, the Harley-Davidson, the tool chest with his name on it, hauled off by some garage owner from New Hampshire. The wind was raw, blowing the auctioneer’s words around, numbing their faces and hands. Francine cried.

“We rode out to Barkhamsted one night in that car,” she said. “I remember the smell of that back seat.”

Lew snorted, while Jack paced in a little helpless circle, wishing he had never come.

He had moved out of town soon after that, tired of trying to be someone he wasn't. He simply gave up the work on car engines, absolved himself from the smell of the oil, had freed the grooves of his hands from the black imprints, and done whatever he could—masonry, carpentry, hauling in his father's old brown Ford. For three years he lived in a place where no one knew his father, and he had been close to forgetting, and almost happy.

He wasn't thinking about anything as he drove back into town, over the last hill and its line of mailboxes, the heavy boughs of maples overhead. It was a hot late-June afternoon, and he had come back to give a quote for a redwood deck on a house on Sycamore Road. Afterwards, he sat in the air-conditioned interior of A.C. Peterson's, and the smell of sugar cones and grease, the broken springs in the booth cushions, made him lonely. He thought of Lew Vancour and longed for the smell of cut grass, remembered girls he'd met traveling in packs from the movie theater to the town green where they carved his name in the benches, women on jobs who invited him inside for glasses of cold water, the number of them from that summer, and the rest of the time he stayed there, all of them impressions through a daze—heat or alcohol or the joint they smoked before they had sex, once or twice, but never more than that.

He saw he could not come back just this once without sensing the town's expectations. In Peterson's their eyes were on him; Dickie Schiffer with his cap low, nodding at him over his coffee, Jimmy Maluchi working on his fries, staring him down, bending to the ear of another man in an Amoco shirt, his lips mouthing a name. He wanted to tell them all, "I am not him," even as he wondered what he must do to be this man, his father, wanting, more than anything else to be him.

He had driven by Vancour's on the way in. The houses seemed worn down by attempts to refurbish them. Weeds spiked the patchy lawns, and the trees were filled with blue-black beetles. Lew's truck sat in his side yard, on cement blocks. And the stillness about the place made him nervous, as if he had dreamed the time he'd lived there—as if it were one of the movies he had watched and he had somehow confused everything—what was real, what was not. So he drove back by after Peterson's, just to be sure, winding through the subdivision, past houses he didn't recognize anymore, to Lew and Francine's house—still reddish-colored, the trees shade longer, but in the dim twilight, more the same than earlier that afternoon. He had an idea that Lew might be able to use him again, that he could go back to mowing for a while—the wide lawns like fields, the curving drives covered in white pebbles, the sweet grass and the monotony of mowing, sweeping back and forth, soothing as a swing.

Lew answered the door. He held a chrome bicycle handlebar and his face was puffy, like he was keeping air in his cheeks. He blinked at Jack through the screen. "Angel?" he said. He turned and waved his hand, and Jack sensed something tired and

old in the way he moved. Inside, the house smelled musty, closed-up. Lew led the way back to the kitchen, where the white linoleum was littered with newspaper.

“Watch your step,” Lew said. Bicycle parts covered the kitchen table—screws and bolts, a red seat, and three small wheels. “For my kid,” Lew said. He lowered himself into one of the chairs and air escaped from the vinyl cushion. Jack hesitated in the doorway, feeling a wave of guilt.

Lew looked up. “You didn’t know I had a kid, did you?” his voice was soft, surprised. His swollen cheeks were covered with stubble. The radio played static music from the windowsill. And Jack waited to hear Francine laugh, for her voice to fill the kitchen and remind him of something else.

“She and Francine live at Francine’s mother’s house,” Lew said, turning from him, picking up a small Allen wrench. “Sit down, Angel. Have a beer.”

Lew fiddled with the handlebar, consulting the instruction sheet—and Jack knew he wasn’t reading anything, that he was probably too drunk to see the print.

Jack took a beer from the refrigerator. And Lew mumbled from the table, let his head fall, then jerked it up. He looked at Jack. “Been a long time,” he said.

“I’ve been busy,” Jack told him.

“So I hear,” Lew said. “Construction? Doesn’t sound like you.”

“It’s money,” Jack told him. “I have a place, a house I’m renting.”

“Heard that, too,” Lew said.

Jack sat in one of the vinyl chairs. He grabbed the wrench out of Lew’s hand. One of the bolts was missing and he leaned down to look under the table.

“What’s your kid’s name?” he asked.

Lew stared up at the ceiling. “Susanna,” he said. “Oh, Susanna, now don’t you cry for me.” The doorbell rang and Lew clumped the chair back down. “Go get that, Angel.”

Jack saw them through the through the screen door before they could see him, a teenage boy, lean and good-looking, and a girl. She put a cigarette to her mouth and lit it, shifted her weight from one foot to the other, bored. The boy put his hand on the small of her back and she stepped away, a slight movement, but one that kept the hand from touching her.

Jack swung the screen door wide, knocking them a step back. They stared at him for a minute while he held the door. And the girl smiled, stepped past him and into the shadows of the living room. She leaned against the back of the couch and folded her arms across her small chest. She wore a peach-colored tank top and a pair of white shorts that glowed in the dim light, and he felt her eyes on him, watching him. They headed into the kitchen, where Lew was waiting at the table. The room had grown dark, and Jack pulled the cord for the light over the sink and the room lit up—the speckled linoleum, the avocado stove and refrigerator, the pine cabinets that inside smelled like ginger and celery salt. Lew blinked. The boy went straight to the refrigerator, brought out two cans of beer and handed one to the girl. “You want one?” he asked Jack.

“I’ve got one,” he said, watching them, the way they popped the cans open and tipped them back, the way the girl hopped up onto the counter and began swinging her long legs. She had a scrape below her knee, a bad one that had just begun to scab over.

Lew, distracted by the girl's swinging legs, seemed to just notice them. "Well, if it isn't Brad. You brought her, huh?" he said.

He turned to Jack. "That's Stacey," he said, laughing.

The girl laughed, too. "No, it's Lacey." Her hair was reddish blond, parted in the middle. It hung over her cheeks, on either side of her face. Every so often she would shake it back. She kept her eyes on something beyond the room, outside the kitchen window, waiting, Jack knew, for the beer to work on her. She tipped the can back until the beer was gone, hopped down from the counter and went to the refrigerator for another.

Lew stared at her swinging legs. "Stacey is on a roll tonight," he said.

"You know it, Lewie V." She laughed again, a calm, relaxed laugh that made her seem older than Jack had first thought. Since she had come into the kitchen she had not looked at Jack once, had stared out the window, or at the floor, had spoken to everyone except him, and because she ignored him, Jack couldn't help watching her, sensing there was something about him that she wanted to avoid.

"Where are you from, Lacey?" he asked.

Lacey tossed her hair back and shrugged, looked up at the ceiling. "Here," she said. She tipped the can back again, a long swallow.

"Her brother put the Vette into the tree in front of the library," Brad said.

The refrigerator whirred on, filling the near silence, the almost inaudible sounds of swallowing. Jack nodded, remembering.

"Her father's the one they thought put that girl in the river," Brad continued.

Lew seemed to sober up. He gave Brad the eye.

“She keeps drinking like that this’ll turn out to be a short night,” Jack said. He could not keep the odd, strangled tone out of his voice.

“The shorter the better,” Lacey said. She looked at him then, and her eyes startled him, glinted with sadness and warning.

“Brad here takes care of her,” Lew said.

“I bet he does,” laughed Jack.

Brad thumped his chair legs down. “Yeah,” he said, moving toward the refrigerator.

“You stay well-stocked, Lew,” Jack said.

“Have another, Angel boy.” They looked at each other, and Lew chuckled. The subject of the girl in the river, of Jules, safely averted.

The one night Jack had gone home with Jules he’d been drunk. He’d had enough of waiting, and he’d staggered around to his old spot by the back door where the liquor boxes were piled up, and the moon made the dumpster shine, and leaves blew by, dark and furtive. He leaned there by the door and his head nodded forward. He was awakened by the smell of Jules’s swinging hair, her face over him where he’d fallen.

“Are you alright?” she asked him.

Jack nodded, and Jules took his arm and yanked on it, and he stood, swaying. He tried to find his cigarettes in his jacket pocket. It was growing cold, and once it snowed they’d be plowing the parking lots of businesses, the winding drives of the homes in

subdivisions. Jack felt that everything was over. “I’m done,” he told her, his hand snaking into his pocket and coming out empty.

Jules stood there looking at him, her breath white, her coat clutched around her. She looped her arm through his and led him around to her car in the lot, opened up the passenger side and told him to get in. Jack went along with this, mindful of his resolve not to love her, but not too drunk to appreciate the way things were unfolding, to hold out some hope.

Jules got in and turned on the car and let it warm up a bit. “I’ll drive you home,” she said, putting the car in gear, backing slowly out of the parking space. “You’ll have to tell me where you live.”

Jack stared numbly through the windshield. “Well, what if I don’t.”

Jules sighed. She pulled out of the lot and onto Tunxis Avenue. She drove through the center of town, all of the lights sparking, and frost forming on the green. It was three a.m.

“You’re too young to be drinking,” she said. She shook her head. She put her hand to her mouth, a gesture he found endearing.

He was never sure where she took him. Out of town, through one light, then two, up and down hills. They pulled into a small gravel lot, into the back of what looked like a business. *Frantiques*, the sign said. They went up a set of wooden stairs and into a small apartment. In the lamplight he saw it was filled with furniture that took up all the space. It smelled of lemon polish. Jules told him to sit down, and a woman emerged from another

room—her hair and clothes rumpled. She stood by the door, looking at Jack. “Who’s this?” she said. Her voice was hoarse and grating. She coughed into her balled fist.

Jules waved her hand. “Long story.”

“She woke up a few times crying,” the woman said to Jules. Her tone was matter-of-fact, and blunt. She put on her coat. “I think her diaper’s wet.”

Jules breathed in, and Jack waited for her to exhale, but it was as if she didn’t. She pressed something into the woman’s hand. “Here,” she said.

The woman grabbed her purse from one of the many tables. “Tuesday?”

Jules said yes. She went to the door and opened it, and the cold air came in, and the woman stepped out. “Thank you Mrs. Farrell,” Jules said. The woman peered at Jack one last time. “Sort of young, isn’t he?” Jules closed the door. Jack didn’t think she’d answered her, and he was glad. From the other side of the door he heard the woman’s hoarse-sounding laugh, and then her footsteps retreating down the stairs.

Jules sat down on the couch beside Jack. She still wore her coat. “Hag,” she said, not to Jack, but to herself.

The couch was comfortable and Jack closed his eyes. He had a sense of Jules sitting there beside him, of her opening a window behind them and lighting a cigarette. He waved his fingers at her, and she handed the cigarette over, and lit another.

“What do you want with me?” she asked him. The smoke shifted out the window, into the cold night.

Jack shook his head. He thought he should tell her he wanted nothing from her, which was what he had planned, but it wouldn’t be the truth.

“Sex?” she asked him. “Is that it?”

Jack protested. The cold air had woken him up.

“What then?” she said. “I can’t be your girlfriend.”

Jules laughed, then. It was more at herself, he thought, than at him. When she laughed the lines around her mouth deepened. Jack reached over and picked up a glass paperweight from the table. Inside the glass was a butterfly. He looked at it, turning it around, trying to think. Jules smoked quietly, watching him.

“That’s an Empress Leilia,” she said, finally. “It was my grandmother’s.”

From inside the other room the little girl began to cry, a soft whimpering sound. Jules closed her eyes as if to ward it off. She pushed herself up from the couch and went into the room. She was in there a long time, and Jack finally went to the door and peered in. The room was small and dim. There was a crib, stenciled with tiny roses, and a nightlight—a ceramic Mary with her hands crossed in prayer.

“You can come in,” Jules said. She sat in a rocking chair in the corner. The little girl was on her lap. In the light, soft and filtered through Mary’s blue clothes, Jack saw the child’s tiny face, the closed eyes and small pursed lips, the mass of soft curls. The child’s feet dangled off Jules’s lap in footed pajamas. Jack leaned against the door. The room smelled of urine and talc. The crib sheets were in a pile on the floor.

“Once,” Jules told him, “My friend and I found a baby abandoned in a house.”

He stepped toward her and placed a hand on the child’s forehead. It was damp, and warm. He felt the hard bones beneath his hand. The child’s eyes stayed closed.

“Where was the mother?” he asked.

Jules rocked slowly, still in her coat. “She ran off,” she said. “She got in her car and left.”

Jack knelt down beside the chair, and looked into her face. “Why did she leave?”

Jules shook her head. “She didn’t come back,” she said. “We had to call the police, and the police came. It got dark. They took the baby away in a patrol car.”

The chair made a gentle tapping on the floorboards. “You seem to be a good mother,” he said. He could admit now that all he wanted that night was to kiss her. He said what he did to make her happy. He welcomed her sadness because it might give him a chance to take her in his arms. He wanted sex, and he’d lied and said he didn’t.

Jules looked at him. “I never said the woman wasn’t a good mother.”

Outside Lew’s kitchen window the sky was gray, almost night, everything dissolving into some other shape. Someone mowed their lawn a few houses down—a husband home from the insurance company, changed into shorts and a clean white t-shirt, or a lonely teenager charging ten dollars, who had nothing better to do.

“Light me a cigarette, someone,” Lew said.

Lacey hopped down with one and handed it to him. She limped back over to the counter and pulled herself up. When Lew asked her what happened she started rattling on about hiding from the police cruiser she was sure was looking for her, how she’d fallen down the incline that separated the bowling alley from the cemetery.

“Her father sends them out after her,” Brad said.

Jack watched her tell the story, how she sprang from the counter, and waved her hands around. Every so often she would shake her hair back out of her face. She saw him watching, but still ignored him, and he looked away, feeling that loneliness from earlier wash over him again. They all sat in the kitchen drinking, while the light faded. They lined the empty cans up on the counter.

Brad talked about Lew's truck, how he'd stolen some parts from shop class that he thought would work, and Lew plunked a half-full bottle of V.O. on the table, all of them waiting for Jack to say something. He felt them waiting, his palms itching, uncomfortable, wanting only to leave them all and their talk. Lacey banged around in the cupboard and pulled out a frying pan.

"Who wants eggs?" she asked, holding the pan like a torch.

Brad leaned against the doorframe, eying Jack, still unsure. "She makes great eggs," he said.

"That's all she makes," Lew said.

Lacey moved quickly, sorting through the drawers, tossing utensils on the counter. She found a station on the radio and turned it up. Everyone made room for her. Lew bent down and balled up the newspaper. And when she passed Jack and opened the refrigerator with a wide swoop, their arms touched—just the tops brushing together. They looked at each other, and this time Lacey smiled, her mouth wide, teasing, loose from the beer. She smelled citrusy, like lemons. Lew had disappeared into the basement. He emerged with a work light and an extension cord and headed toward the front door with Brad in tow. He called back to Jack over his shoulder.

“C’mon, Angel, let’s see what this kid’s got.”

Lacey smirked and sang his name, “Angel,” whipping the eggs up with a rotary beater.

She knew he was watching her. “Omelets,” she explained. She took a gulp of beer, a long drag off her cigarette, then balanced the cigarette on the edge of the counter. Jack grunted, moved out of the heat of the kitchen, the smells of the girl and the butter melting in the pan, the dizzying light cord that the wind whipped around over the sink. Outside, there were deep shadows, and the whine of insects. The lawn mower sounds had ceased, but on the wind came the smell of cut grass. Lew and Jack’s cousins stood in a circle of light by the truck, the truck’s hood raised, all of them leaning over, their heads bumping.

The truck’s lettering was old-fashioned cursive letters, chipped and faded, the truck body forest green, a Ford a few years older than Jack’s, inherited from Lew’s father who began the lawn service when Lew was young. Jack wanted to tell Lew to buy a new truck, to leave the past where it belonged, but he knew that Lew valued the truck more than anything—they had grown up together and it had been like a replacement for his father when he died, its broken glove box, the missing radio dial, the springs in the seat shot on the driver’s side, its smell of cigarettes and spilled bourbon.

Lew looked up, his face wide and white in the glare. “It’s the tranny,” he told Jack. “Been out of work for a month or so, huh, boys?”

W.T. yanked at something with a wrench.

Jack smoked a cigarette on the rim of the work light's glare, surrounded by moths. He looked down at his hands and saw his father's folding white slices of bread together, spread out on the kitchen table top like routes on a map, thick-veined and tense on the wheel of the truck that Jack now drove. He felt the pressure of the one hand that night on the top of his head, a gracious hand, weighted with love and regret. Over by the truck, Lew sighed, turned, and came up beside Jack in the grass.

"These kids have a plan," he said. "They think they can get the truck to work, and I'll get some jobs, some money, see my kid, Stacey there is going to babysit. A nice little family, huh?"

Lew shifted his feet. He laughed out loud. The moths congregated around his shoulders. "Hukelau Jules," he said. "I couldn't believe it."

And Jack looked up finally into Lew's face—the eyes fixed on him, seeing his father in him—a replica, exact in every way, down to the silences, even the unknown part of him the same.

That night with Jules they had put the little girl into the crib on clean sheets and gone back out into the other room to sit on the couch. Jules told him how the girl's father didn't know about her, and sometimes she thought he should, but whenever she called him another little girl answered the phone, and she imagined his other life, and she couldn't do it.

“You know there’s a wife and kids, and probably a Springer Spaniel,” she said. “The whole backyard picnic table and swing set deal. The geraniums and the rhododendrons. The little maple tree on the front lawn.”

Jack thought that the way she spoke this was something she had once known herself. She told him she was giving the child up, had already contacted someone about doing it.

“It’s the way she looks at me,” she said. “It’s like she’s asking me some question that I know I can never answer.”

He had not understood what it all meant at the time. She had let him kiss her, and then allowed him to lift up her black work skirt, but he had felt guilty and ashamed for wanting to do it. Then she’d said she’d have to ask him for money, which made him feel even worse, obligated to allow her to sell herself to him. They had fallen asleep on the couch, Jules in her coat. He’d awakened before her and left, slipping down the wooden stairs, the treads coated with frost, to the road, catching a ride with a guy transporting bread to the local A& P. He had never forgotten the cluttered room, the little girl’s sleeping form spread out on Jules’s lap, Jules on the couch, her face sweet and peaceful in sleep. For a long time he had been angry, hating her, taking it out on the girls he was with.

Jack put his cigarette out in the grass. He stepped up to the open hood and could tell from the smell, the feel of it, how long the work would take, what he would need. He had seen a truck parked in the field behind the Texaco that would have everything. They could get it all in one trip on a night like this—moonless, a pitch black night without

stars. It would run by morning if he worked all night, which he would, allowing himself to feel that need, that desire again, thinking about the girl, Lacey, her mouth, the long narrow shape of her hand, the nails pearl-colored, poised over the button of his pants, maybe waiting for him to tell her no, to move it away. And from the tiny, painted nails, the scrape on her knee that he will touch, gingerly, with his mouth, he feels an ache in her that he could never abandon, and knows he will never step into his father's place.

Lawn Man Love

Lacey went home with Jack Castle on her eighteenth birthday. It was August. She hadn't seen him for weeks, and then one day the trees were full of blue-black beetles, and the heat fanned like oil off the car bumpers, and Jack drove his Ford truck the color of mud into the Mobil station lot where Lacey sat waiting with her mother in the Cadillac. They had been to lunch, and then shopping, a rare outing. An attendant with a surly look pumped gas. In the back of his truck Jack had two big dogs shorn almost bald, their long, pink tongues hanging out, breathless from the heat and too many bugs. Lacey watched him pull in and drive around to the back, and she left her mother with an excuse of using the ladies room. Mary Gail raised her eyebrows, but said nothing, her DTs so bad her cigarette shook ash all over the upholstery. Lacey met him coming out of the men's room wiping his hands on a gray paper towel. It was the same as the first time she'd seen him. A smarting feeling, like being slapped, and then a queasy happiness afterwards. She blocked his path. Jack's eyes narrowed in on her Lilly Pulitzer dress.

“Well, there you are,” he said. Wonder of wonders.

“You don't recognize me,” she said, and he pulled her in to him and kissed her right there in the back of the Mobil station, with the open bays and the men lounging around the parked cars waiting for service.

“It's my birthday,” she said. “You'll have to give me a present.”

“What do you want?” Jack said, sly, but sweet.

And Lacey decided to leave with him in the brown truck, even though she knew it was wrong, because suddenly everything in her life seemed to be happening in the order that it should—the smell of the truck’s sun-cracked seat, the dry air hitting her in the face, and her mother, poor Mary Gail, waiting for her with the windows rolled up and the air conditioner on, filling the long silver car with cigarette smoke, disappearing in the rearview mirror.

Jack lived in a ranch house in Granby, a Connecticut town of the same proportions and appearance as the one Lacey lived in. But the house was a rental, and the screens were torn and mended with black electrical tape, and inside there was little furniture, and a smell of damp and blocked drains and pine-scented cleanser. Lacey wondered, briefly, how he could stand living this way, but knew better than to ask. They had sex on a mattress in one of the bedrooms, and she imagined herself, guiltily, as a victim of abduction, with the black electrical tape binding her wrists, and her cries silenced by Jack’s own insistent mouth. Afterwards she sat on the floor by the window and smoked one of his Lucky Strikes. While he slept, Jack Castle looked so much like her dead brother Jimmy that she kept her eyes averted. She blew smoke out into what seemed to be the boughs of a crabapple, those knotty, dwarfed things with their awful, hard fruit. She counted silently to five hundred and twenty-three, and stubbed the cigarette out on the sill where there were others, a small pile that had grown sodden from what her father called *summer rain showers*. She wondered how she would get home if she were to leave now.

And then Jack sighed, and flung his arm over the edge of the mattress. Lacey froze. She counted to fifteen. “What are you doing?” he asked her. His voice was groggy and not Jimmy’s.

“I’m looking out into the lovely suburban evening,” she said.

Jack sat up and slid to the edge of the mattress and looked out the window. Lacey felt caught in a lie. There was nothing outside but the sad lawn and the tree and maybe some silvery sense of the moon on the tar road. Across the street was a line of similar ranch houses painted different colors. “A white house is fine, said Mr. Pine, but there are fifty white houses all in a line,” Lacey said. She glanced over and Jack wasn’t looking out the window at all.

“What?” she asked, annoyed. “It’s from a book I read when I was little.”

“Who’s Mr. Pine?”

“He lives on Vine Street, and can’t tell which house is his. So, he plants a little tree, and all the other neighbors like the idea so much that they plant a tree, too.”

Jack shook out a cigarette. He was still looking at her, and Lacey asked him to stop. In the growing dark she saw him smirk. The match lit up his face, the cup of his hands. “So Mr. Pine does what?”

“He plants a bush.”

“And the neighbors do the same?” Jack exhaled and watched the smoke float out through the screen.

“Of course,” she said.

“So he brings in the heavy explosives? A bull dozer?”

Lacey stared at him.

Jack stared back and said, “You get to look at me, but I can’t look at you?”

“He paints his house purple.”

“What are we talking about?” he asked her. “Is this some sort of metaphor?”

Lacey laughed. Not many people made her laugh, and she appreciated it, but felt a little sorry, too. “Oh, don’t make me laugh,” she said. “Or look at me, Mr. Pine.”

Jack’s face softened. “My father smoked these in Vietnam. I have a photo of him sitting in a bar in Vung Tau on R&R with a pack on the table.

“Are you trying to be like your father?” Lacey said.

“Do you always randomly quote from children’s books?”

Lacey thought she should now tell him that the only reason she was with him was because he resembled her dead brother. But she couldn’t bring herself to do it. For some reason she cared what he thought of her. “A hole is to dig,” she said.

Jack leaned over and kissed her. She tasted the cigarette, and the slight sourness of his breath. She felt his unshaven chin, and the rising need to be held in place by the wrists.

“A kiss is to give,” she whispered. “Hands are to hold.”

She did not count while they had sex. She fell asleep on the opposite side of the bed, far from his warm limbs and torso. At some point during the night a car’s headlights swung across the wall like a lighthouse lamp, and she awoke. A car door slammed and someone came up to the window and breathed against the screen. “Oh Jack,” the person sang. “Oh Jack.” It was a woman’s voice, and Lacey wondered if she could see inside.

The woman stumbled around amidst the low shrubs under the window. She tried to knock on the old screen, but seemed to lose her footing and fall forward and her whole hand came through. Lacey heard her exclaim. The hand was white and thin. The woman flexed her fingers, and balled her hand into a fist. “Yikes,” she said, and withdrew it. She tried the front door, tapping too lightly to awaken anyone, and then she left. The car moved away slowly, like a car driven in a procession—a hearse, or a parade convertible. Lacey stayed awake after that. She watched the window whiten. She felt oddly relieved that she was just one of many, that she could not be, to him, a *person of interest*.

In the morning Jack stared at the broken screen as he dressed. “Did we have an attempted escape here?” he asked. He stepped into his pants.

Lacey pretended to be surprised and a little afraid. “Maybe someone tried to break in.”

Jack shrugged. “I doubt it,” he said. But he looked at her with new interest. “Maybe they wanted you,” he said.

Lacey got up and followed him into the kitchen. She had the sheet draped around her like a Grecian. “What would they want with me?” she asked him.

She sat at a small card table, and Jack made coffee in an old plug-in percolator. The two dogs ran around in the backyard, huffing and barking, wanting to be fed, and Jack grabbed cans of dog food from a shelf. The kitchen cabinet doors had been removed and the items on them were exposed: mismatched cups and bowls, boxes of Minute Rice, and Instant Mashed Potatoes, and Wheaties, all on faded shelf-paper.

“Mashed potatoes are to give everybody enough,” Lacey said.

They had coffee in two turquoise-colored mugs. Jack eyed Lacey’s ring. It had been her great-grandmother’s, a large garnet in an old ornate Victorian setting.

“What about that?” he said. “Is it worth anything?”

Lacey smiled. “I don’t think so,” she said. The ring was heavy, and a little big for her finger. Jack leaned back in his chair and two of the legs came up off the ground, and Lacey remembered Jimmy doing the same thing, rocking back, perusing everyone.

“You remind me of someone,” she said.

Jack thumped the chair back down. “Well, I get that a lot.” He didn’t seem too pleased about it. His expression turned dark and brooding. Then he stood and took the roll of electrical tape from a kitchen drawer.

“What are you going to do with that?” she asked him. She said it lightly, playfully, so that he turned and stood over her, spinning the roll of tape on one finger.

“What do you think I’m going to do with it?” he said.

“I’m only noting that look on your face. Maybe you’re going to restrain me, and steal my ring,” she said.

Jack seemed not to know what to think. Then he laughed. “I don’t need tape to do that.” He looked at the roll in his hand and shook his head. He went into the bedroom and Lacey heard him patch the screen, and then he came back into the kitchen. “Let’s get out of here,” he said.

He hooked a trailer loaded with a large lawn mower up to the truck and they drove the five miles back into the town where she lived. Lacey thought he was taking her home, and she grew quiet and stared out at the familiar roadside vibrant with the lilies her grandmother used to pull over with a spade and steal. Every so often she felt Jack's eyes on her.

"You're pouting," he said, his voice full of laughter.

Lacey turned and gave him one of her looks of incomprehension, the kind she gave parents, or teachers who underestimated her. "*The edged steel by careless chance, Did into his own ankle glance,*" she said. "*And there among the grass fell down, by his own sythe, the mower mown.*"

Jack grinned. He had a way of driving, hunched over the wheel, as if he were trying to see the road as it passed under the hood. "What's that?"

"Marvell," she said. She snaked her hand into his pants pocket, looking for a cigarette.

Jack patted his breast. "Up here," he said. His eyes were completely serious, she noticed, whenever she touched him.

Instead of taking her home he brought her with him mowing lawns—first the McKay's house on Penwood Pond, where she sat in the truck in her wrinkled dress listening to the radio, watching him ride the mower with his shirt off, sliding down into the seat when Mrs. McKay and Vanessa pulled into the driveway in the Jaguar, popped the trunk and dragged Lord & Taylor bags up the long walkway to the front door. After that, they drove up into her own neighborhood, past Maple Hill and onto Sycamore,

where he cut the Danielson's lawn, and Bryan Danielson came out and stood in the driveway in his khaki pants, with his hair wet and brushed back, and she could tell from his expression that he recognized her. He started across the newly cut lawn, and came up to the window of the brown truck and stood there, his green eyes cold, unsmiling, waiting for her to say something.

“Go away,” Lacey told him. She swatted at the air in front of him.

“What are you wearing?” he said. He shook his head. His voice was the only thing she always liked about him—raspy, sarcastic, almost a drawl. He turned from her and surveyed the lawn, watched Jack swing the mower around the side yard to the back. “This must be a new one,” he said, his face averted, the sun on his hair, lighting up all the waves in it, the reddish gold streaks.

Lacey eyed him. She wanted to light another cigarette, but did not trust her hands to reach for one. She hated his soft white shirt, his shaved cheeks, the way his hands were planted carefully, calmly, in the pockets of his pants.

“Go away,” she said, intending her voice to stay the same, disappointed in the slight quaver in it that he would hear, and pick up on, and goad her with. But then Jack came around the other side of the house, swept up to the curb where the truck was parked, the mower's engine loud, drowning out any talk. He left the mower idling and jumped off and walked up to the side of the truck. Bryan stepped back, and Jack leaned his wet torso over Lacey to grab a cigarette, his hand brushing along the top of her leg, his face turning to place his mouth on hers. He smelled of cut grass and oil. His mouth was salty, and soft. He moved away and she felt the wet imprints of him on her skin, and

she saw that Bryan watched Jack walk back toward the mower, knew that he found the way he moved familiar, that when he turned once, the cigarette in his mouth, the two of them looked at each other. Jack smiled, his eyes squinting, threw his head of hair back a little in greeting. He released the mower's throttle and took off back over the lawn, and Bryan continued to stare at his retreating back, and though the drone of the mower faded, Lacey saw that he was dumbstruck by the resemblance. Lacey was relieved to see that he could not speak again because of it.

Bryan Danielson had been Jimmy's friend. When Jimmy died Lacey and Bryan were in Bryan's bedroom, where his baseball trophies glinted in the darkness, and the cricket noise came in through the open window, and his sheets smelled of fabric softener. His parents were gone on a family trip to the Maine coast, and he had plenty of time to urge her out of her shirt and shorts. As an older boy he knew that their bodies touching, that liquid feeling, was something she had not thought to ward against. Afterwards, she decided that being in love broke through all time and place and barriers of clothing, and she knew she was in love with Bryan Danielson when he made the same claim, fervently, in her ear, his voice breaking. That was before they knew about Jimmy dying, or perhaps just at the moment of his death. Afterwards, it was as if it had never happened.

Lacey watched Bryan as Jack finished the back yard. He had his hands out of his pockets, brushing back his hair, looking away from her. He was in law school now, she had heard, home for a visit this summer. He was thinner than she remembered, and maybe angrier, she couldn't say for sure. Something about her always made him angry. And then Jack was back, done with the mowing, and Bryan looked at her, his eyes no

longer inviolable, and Jack pushed the mower up the ramp into the back of the trailer, climbed in and started the truck up, and Bryan still stood there on the lawn, frowning now, and Lacey said nothing to help him, not a word of rescue. She was almost giddy with spiteful happiness. They pulled forward and drove to the end of the street, and she saw Jack glance into the rearview mirror to check on Bryan, who was still there, watching their progress.

“Boyfriend?” Jack asked, seriously, without sarcasm or hidden jealousy.

The truck engine whined up the hills, and Lacey nodded. “Old one,” she answered, almost ready to tell him about Jimmy—how four years ago he’d driven his powder blue Corvette into the tree in front of the library. How the little local parade that began at the high school continued down Tunxis Avenue anyway, the marching band, and the girl scouts in their white gloves, and the boy scouts with their pressed short pants, and the town council members in open cars, all passing the scarred tree, the remaining debris brushed hastily to the curb.

“If I remember correctly you live around here,” Jack said. He pulled up in front of Lacey’s house. There was the imposing stand of hickories, the blustery shrubs, the mica shining in the stone wall. Her sister, Ivy, was probably at the neighbors house, babysitting. Her father might have been out of town. Mary Gail’s car was missing from the garage. Across the street the neighbors were lining up redwood picnic tables in preparation for the annual neighborhood picnic and lobster bake. Lacey invited him in. The house was never locked, and they went through the front door. Jack took off his grassy boots and stood on the beige carpet barefoot. All of the drapes were closed.

“I suppose there’s no smoking,” he said. He seemed cowed somehow by the dimness of the rooms.

Lacey felt the fluttering of sadness she always did coming into her house.

“Smoking is allowed *dans la maison du désespoir*,” she said.

Jack squinted at her, and then lit a cigarette. Lacey handed him an ashtray made of tin, hammered into the shape of a leaf. “I made this,” she said. “In summer camp.”

He followed her down the hallway to her bedroom, where he leaned in the doorway. His Jimmy-presence changed everything. The sun through the curtains still left a scalloped shape by the bed. Everything was still arranged on the white bookshelves, on top of the bureau—a book she had never finished reading, a glass mug some boy had won for her playing skee ball in Rhode Island, peacock feathers, her grandmother’s rosary in a mother-of-pearl box. In the closet, smelling of cedar, were clothes that somehow didn’t seem hers anymore, boxes of shoes she did not want to ever wear, her ice skates. On the wall behind the door hung the life-sized poster of Elvis when he was young and smooth-faced and sadly beautiful. Lacey sat down on the bed. Jack came into the room and sat by her feet on the floor. He took her ankles in his hands. He kissed her bare knees.

“Get some clothes,” he said. “You won’t look so pretty in mine.”

Lacey, grateful, found a bag and filled it with shorts, and T-shirts. “Don’t you have anything warmer?” he asked.

“Why? Where would we be going?”

“The question isn’t so much *where* as *how long*.”

Lacey nodded, solemnly. She left her room and went to the hall closet and sorted through the boxes for her winter clothes. Mixed in were Jimmy's—the little velvet shorts from when he was a baby, the corduroys with patched knees from when he was five. Ivy had taken the other clothes, the newer ones—the jeans and shirts he wore up until he died. Lacey didn't want any of Jimmy's belongings. She had the duplicate, the actual thing, standing behind her now, urging her to *get a move on*.

They went out the front door, and Jack stood looking out over the front yard, his hands on his hips. “You need your lawn cut,” he said.

Lacey tugged on his arm. “No,” she said. “No sir.”

They left and drove the trailer back to Granby. It was late afternoon, and the sun shone plainly on the row of gray roofs, into the squares of back yard grass. Lacey didn't feel her life had taken a turn for the better. She dreaded sleeping on the mattress below the taped-up window, dreaded the return of the woman with the white hand. Jack went to the grocery store and came back with two bottles of wine. He cooked spaghetti, and the dogs, Lowell and Hero, came in and sat at their feet while they ate, waiting for crumbs.

“My father had a way with women,” Jack said.

Lacey had found candles in a drawer and had melted them onto a plate. They sat in this light, and the rest of the house dissolved around them. The windows were open, and the night came in like something alive and breathing. In the candlelight Jack looked less like Jimmy—a reprieve for Lacey after a long day of seeing him.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Lacey said. “A *way* with them?”

The wine made her disparaging and mean. Jack stared at her over the candles' flame.

"You shouldn't drink," he said.

"You're right. I might end up like my mother."

"We don't want you to do that."

Jack stood and led her into the darkness beyond the candlelight. The night sighed through the window. "Let's go for a drive," he said.

She told him to go without her, and he gave her a sideways look.

"Do I need to get out the tape?" he asked.

"Oh, I asked you not to make me laugh."

Lacey couldn't tell where they had sex. It might have been a closet, or the bathroom, or the couch. It might have been outside on the little lawn under the crabapple. His face was unshaven and rough, and he sighed and swore at her and scraped her skin raw with his chin. She was occupied with his mouth, and the taking off of clothes, and the darkness they bumped into, here and there. Was that wet grass under her feet? She couldn't tell. After, her body was sore, as if she'd tumbled down a hill, or over into a ravine like a body used and abandoned. She put on her nightgown in the bedroom and wondered if she was bruised.

She awoke on the mattress. It was still dark, and there was the sound of an engine, its low rumble distinctive and heavy and she went to the window and watched Jack back a car out of the garage and stop in the driveway, where the engine's idle echoed off the house's asbestos shingles. It was two a.m. The car was white with blue stripes. She went

out into the driveway into the beam of the headlights, and he opened the passenger door for her, and she climbed in.

“So, what is this?” she asked. She half-believed she was dreaming.

“It’s a ’65 Shelby,” Jack said. Then he backed the car out of the driveway.

“Hold on,” she said. “I’m in my Christian Dior.”

“We’re going to the races,” Jack said, laughing.

“When I was little,” Lacey said, “I used to have nightmares about being on the school bus in my pajamas.”

Jack looked at her and looked away, smiling. “Well, now it’s really happening.” He drove the narrow back roads, where the tires slid on the curves, and the chugging engine took over the flat fields and the car flew past the ghostly tents, the big barns lined up, their sides marked with fluorescent graffiti. Lacey felt the speed on the skin of her face, in her hair. Jack drove intently, both hands gripping the wheel, too careful to be good enough to win any race, though she knew, somehow, that Jimmy would have. She had driven with him once in the Corvette, and he had handled the car expertly, as if its speed was the means to find the thing he looked for in girls’ bodies—tenderness, the climax to sex and all its softness mistaken for love.

Jack drove to Day Hill, where the tobacco tents billowed up under the moon, and he parked, and told her the story of the old car races, of his father’s Camaro, and how he took him as a boy to watch him race, one of the girlfriends always there to hold his hand.

“It was loud and dusty,” he said. “It smelled of the fertilizer they sprayed on the tobacco plants. His girlfriends’ hands were soft and as small as mine.”

Lacey turned in her bucket seat and watched him as he talked, waiting for Jimmy's scowl, for his eyes to darken, but it never happened. He pulled her close and encircled her with his arms and talked on about the past and his father, until his life and Jimmy's became so separate she could no longer compare them.

"Once," Lacey said, "my friend and I fell asleep out here somewhere, in a car with two boys."

She'd awoken in the front seat, her head pressed against the shoulder of the boy she was with. Morning mist clung to the hood of the car and the windshield, and the boy had to flip on the wipers so they could see out. The car faced a dead end, barbed wire and a field already full of light and tall grass and waving flowers—Queen Anne's Lace, Black-Eyed Susan, wild purple Lupine.

"The radio played "Ma Cherie Amour," she said.

"*Pretty little one that I adore.*" Jack chuckled. "Did you have your pajamas on?"

Sitting in the car at the dead end, she had shivered. The boy pulled her to him, and she had smelled the stale cologne on his neck, along his collar, felt the outlines of his ribs under the thin cotton shirt—Richard or William, she could not remember his name now. The other girl had sat up with a start in the back seat, her shirt unbuttoned, her hair over her face, and Lacey turned to her and they had begun laughing uncontrollably, to the point of tears, silencing the boys who busied themselves with defogging the windshield, lighting cigarettes, and zipping up their pants.

Now she slid over and straddled Jack's lap, her back pressed against the steering wheel. He kissed her, her face held between his hands. She did not want him to stop, and

when he did she said, “Don’t,” and he looked at her, his eyes blue, and questioning, like Jimmy’s, and she felt a wave of loss and tried to turn away, but he held her there, the hardened palms of his hands cradling her face, and he stared at her, suspicious. “What?” he asked. Lacey felt that he wanted an answer, that he’d been waiting for it all this time, and his patience had finally run out.

Lacey climbed off his lap. She closed her eyes and found she could not count.

“A dream is to look at the night, and see things,” she said.

Headlights appeared then, and she heard the gravel crunch, and a car angled off and pulled alongside them. It idled with its rumbling sound, and through the rear window she saw other cars approaching, each turning off, lining up between the flat, tented fields, aiming their headlights into the lush tobacco plants—Chevelles gunning 327’s, 418 Pontiacs with dual quads, a Barracuda, the back tires thick and hopping in the gravel. Then car doors opened, and people got out.

Lacey watched in astonishment. She began to laugh. Jack smiled at her. He reached into the back seat and grabbed a jacket.

“Put this on,” he said.

It was black leather, and heavy. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” she said.

Someone had beer in their trunk, and they passed them out and sat on the car fenders, drinking. There were people Lacey knew from town—boys she’d been with, boys she had only heard about, who’d graduated high school years before and remained mysteries, boys who’d fought and been arrested, who married young and cheated, alcoholics, carpenters and vegetable stand owners, and mechanics, soldiers with

dishonorable discharges, boys in crew cuts with lovely eyes, boys with scars, ones who were regularly kicked out of local bars. She was the only girl present. She leaned on the car in Jack's leather jacket, and drank and listened to the boys joking back and forth, none of them looking at her, as if she wasn't really there.

Everyone heard the Harley-Davidsons' approach, heard them racing around the curves of the back roads, saw their headlights bend and arc, but no one moved from where they leaned or sat. There were four of them, all of Bryan Danielson's friends on their Christmas and birthday Harleys. Lacey remembered when Bryan got his, the year after Jimmy died. The bikes were brand new, spotless, hardly used. They pulled up into the group of cars and parked the bikes, cutting off the engines, the silence filled by their boot steps on the gravel shoulder. Everyone still lounged on the car fenders, watching Bryan and his friends' approach, and she continued to drink her beer, ignoring him like everyone else.

"Someone going to race here?" Bryan asked. His voice was soft, with its raspy sound. He took a beer out of the pocket of his jacket pocket and wrung off the top. She felt his eyes on her and glanced at him in time to see the slight sway of his torso, the way he shifted his feet to keep his balance. One of his friends stepped up beside him and bolstered him up with his shoulder.

"You've got some nice bikes. What about you guys racing?" someone else said.

"I want to see the Shelby," Bryan said.

Lacey saw Jack smile to himself and look up, first at Bryan, then over at her, his Jimmy-eyes unreadable in the dark.

“I’m ready,” he said, quietly. “Just needed an audience.”

Someone else volunteered to race him—a boy with a blue GTO.

Lacey stepped away from Jack’s car. “Wait a minute,” she said. But it seemed she was still invisible. Jack slid into the driver’s seat and started up the Shelby, backing it out slowly into the street. Everyone cleared away. The two cars idled side by side, their headlights lighting up the pebbled black tar, the yellow line. And Jack looked over at her and winked and smiled with Jimmy’s mouth, his hair smoothed back, his bare arm resting on the driver’s door, Jimmy’s hand, the fingers long and curved and beautiful, dangling there against the shimmery paint.

A finish line was decided on, and people climbed into their cars to drive down the road and wait. Lacey and Bryan were left on the deserted shoulder—Bryan chosen, somehow, as the one to start the race.

“Winner gets the prize,” Jack called out over the engine noise.

“I assume that’s you,” Bryan said. He stood beside her, the only one there who knew why she was with him. “His ghost is wearing me out.”

Bryan’s eyes were still on Jack behind the wheel of the Shelby, lingering, almost needy. The car engines revved up, escalating, thunderous. He walked out into the road between the headlights, and raised his arm. Lacey counted to three and Brian let his arm drop. The cars took off, their back wheels spinning, sparks shooting out of the dual exhaust, and Bryan turned and watched them go, the beer still in one hand, a cigarette in the other. Lacey’s leather jacket, her nightgown, collected the road dust. She watched the taillights and imagined Jack’s car spinning out of control into the tobacco fields, its

fender breaking through the tent posts, one after the other, like matchsticks, coming to rest in the middle of the green plants. She felt an awful fear for him, and then she stopped thinking, and turned away.

Bryan walked over to her, laughing, shaking his head, his eyes full of sadness.

“Can you believe we’re doing this?” he said.

They could not look at each other without the truth marking their expressions—horror, grief, the inexplicable loss. His face was the same one that stared up at her from the pillow of his boyhood bed when Jimmy was still alive and the world had different plans for them. He stepped closer and took her hand. His mouth on hers tasted of bourbon. And she saw then that as long as she kept trying the sadness became something else—a gift, a blessing.

Confessions of a Party-Wife

Summer had always made Mary Gail restless. Like the children, released from school, she would grow hot and bored. She kept indoors, rearranging furniture, planning meals, cleaning out old toys, pining for dusk when the husbands' cars edged up the road, and the men themselves filtered out of their colonials and split ranches clutching gin and tonics. Mary Gail realized even then it had to do with sex, the way that one wife desired another neighbor's husband, his pleasing laugh that reminded her of her father's, the way he held his cigarette, his hair fluffed up from running his hands nervously through it, or a husband who suddenly found a neighbor's wife interesting, her background at Smith, her knowledge of literature, the way, when she bit her thumbnail, her hair fell over her eyes. They'd gather in the Halsey's yard, under the hickory trees, or on Mary Gail and George's front lawn, and the women would kick off their sandals to stand barefoot in the soft grass, and Steve or George would bring out the folding chairs, some still gritty from the beach, and they'd take turns making runs into the houses for drinks.

Mary Gail knew this tradition continued because she would hear the women's voices from her bedroom window—Helen Halsey's whoop, the same, but grittier, Steve's garrulous tone reprimanding her. There were newcomers as well, younger people whose voices Mary Gail didn't know, and sometimes, she would glance out at them and try to associate the voice with a shock of blond hair, or the mannerisms of someone she had

never seen before. About this time Mary Gail decided there was nothing she wanted except to be in love. Once, she had believed she wanted a large home with a pool and exquisite furnishings on a tree-lined street, and she had gotten that and found soon after it was not the thing she'd desired. She had run out of things to want, and then did not know what to do with herself. This was revealed to her during her first AA meeting, sitting in the circle of metal folding chairs in the empty office space in Wintonbury Mall.

The meeting was not the one George had always suggested, which met in the Congregational Church's refinished basement. She had gone to that one, parked in the lot and walked around to the side and knelt down in the grass to peer through the dusty basement window at the gathering group. They had all been women, their expensive shoes pointed toward the center of the circle, their feet crossed at the ankles. Mary Gail wore a silk dress that rode up her thighs as she knelt down, and the narrow heels of her own Prada sandals sunk into the ground. She had squatted there, unbecomingly, until her knees ached, and she'd heard enough chatter about the Junior League, and the historical society, to realize she would not go in. The meeting she chose to attend was at the back of the mall, between John Brown's Restaurant, where she and George had met with friends often enough to drink, and the Prison Store, where they sold handcrafted items made by prisoners for charity.

She attended her first meeting in late July, after Ivy left for the beach to babysit for the family across the street, and she had checked Lacey's bed for two nights in a row and realized she had not been home. George was out of town, and she had been filled with a strange panic she could not understand. Usually, when she discovered Lacey was

missing, she would tell George right away. It would be something she enjoyed doing, a taunt. She would approach him in his study, where he went after they had eaten, while Mima cleared the table, and she would stand in the doorway, and he would glance up at her, and take a large breath, as if to control himself.

“What is it?” he would ask, his face tight like a mask.

“Your daughter is gone again,” she’d say.

His reaction was always the same—a shadow of fear and concern would show in his eyes, which he covered quickly with his hand. When he removed the hand the fear was gone, and in its place was a stony glare, a blaming look, which Mary Gail did not usually wait around to see. It had been this way since Jimmy’s accident, when he had stood at the foot of the bed where she’d been sleeping, the smell of alcohol on her skin, mixed in with the sheets, and told her, “Your son is dead.” And she had never forgiven him, both for not accepting him as his, and for not revealing that at some point he had discovered the truth and never admitted it. She saw now that the business trips that covered up numerous affairs had all been retaliation. She knew and remained firm, even after the one girl died, and the police came around with questions and accusations that never amounted to anything. It shocked her, how long they could live their lives pretending to be a normal family. How pretending to be normal had hardened around each of them, like shellac. It was their job, the leader of the first meeting said, to chip off the shellac and find the person underneath. His name was Todd, and he was, he admitted freely and with a kind of boyish pride, an alcoholic. He wore round wire-framed glasses and Dockers, and looked like someone who had never had a drink in his life.

Mary Gail took her place in the circle the first night and saw that she was clearly overdressed. The rest of the group was comprised of men who worked in gas stations and as laborers, their faces and bare arms tanned, clutching tiny Styrofoam cups of coffee in their large, veined hands. The women, she imagined, spent all day in the insurance companies, pouring coffee, or filing, or acting as receptionists. They slumped morose and defeated next to the powerfully-built men, their hair color fading, their cotton separates wrinkled. Their names, revealed as they went around the circle, were Gina and Joan, Larry and Bob. Mary Gail lost track after the first four or so, and when they came to her she said, "Mary," to be as simple as possible, and to achieve the most anonymity. She had had two vodka martinis at the bar in John Brown's before the meeting began, and it seemed that at least half of everyone there must have done the same. No one wanted to talk much and reveal how happy they really were, gliding on their cloud of Johnnie Walker, or Budweiser. Most of the men's driver's licenses had been revoked, and their wives or girlfriends or mothers had to drive them to the meeting as the result of a court order. They were a variety of ages, but no one was distinctly younger than anyone else, and Mary Gail felt confident that she was not much older than the rest of them, though no one discussed missing teenaged children, or husbands of twenty-two years whom they hated.

What they did discuss was dull, at first. Their childhoods and their past sadness, how they were lonely and had no one in their lives. Mary Gail listened thoughtfully, her chin in her hand. She had brought her glasses, and she wore them, along with a cardigan over her shoulders, like a disguise. All of their stories, as they began to pour out, were

very much the same, and everyone took the same stance and attitude about the things that had happened to them, except one man, who spoke up near the end of the hour, his voice full of laughter and a slur that Mary Gail guessed to be whiskey.

“Listen to you,” he said. He threw his head back and laughed. “What a bunch of drunks.” He had a contagious laugh, and Mary Gail, who had begun placing herself and her story alongside everyone else’s, and had felt the first pangs of self-pity, put her hand over her mouth and laughed as well. Todd intercepted quickly, standing up with his thin arm flapping, his other hand holding the Styrofoam cup, and remembered both their names. “Whoa, whoa there, Lew,” he said. “Mary.” His face reddened, and his glasses fogged up. A few of the group looked hurt, but most chuckled to themselves, and shook their heads. After the meeting Lew approached Mary Gail on the sidewalk and shook her hand and invited her for a drink.

“Let’s wait until the AAs clear out,” he said. He wore jeans and a blue workshirt with his name, and “Vancour Lawn Service” in italic script stitched on the pocket. They stood on the sidewalk and watched the others thread their way through the parking lot to their cars, some casting glances at John Brown’s front windows, where neon Budweiser signs glowed red and violet, and the dark, smoky depths of the bar could be imagined through the slats of the wood blinds. Lew lit a cigarette and offered one to Mary Gail, a Winston, something she hadn’t smoked since she was a teenager.

“You look awfully familiar,” Lew said. He squinted at her. “Maybe I do your lawn.”

Mary Gail nodded. “We have a service. But I don’t think it’s yours.”

Lew laughed. "Well, it should be."

The last of the cars' headlights approached the exit, and the parking lot seemed emptied at last of the meeting goers, and Lew held the heavy wooden door of John Brown's open for her. They sat at a small table in the bar, and ordered, and Lew talked about his wife and daughter who had left him, and Mary Gail sipped at her martini and half-listened, paying more attention to his eyes and mouth, the shape of his chin, and remembered him, suddenly, as Barry Castle's friend.

The realization disarmed her, made her catch her breath. She looked away from him, as if he might, at any moment, discover her identity.

"What?" Lew asked, noticing, following her glance. "Is someone here?"

Mary Gail decided he was anxious about being caught with the whiskey and soda, that he had no memory of the summer she was nineteen and Barry Castle's girlfriend. With each sip of her drink she felt displaced, felt the fuzzy past rear up and become clearer than the small Formica table in the dim bar. She saw Barry Castle's face, his blue eyes, smelled his shirtfront, heard the way he said her name. She ordered them both another drink, and Lew protested, noticing the change in her, claiming he had to get up early, and Mary Gail put her hand on his.

"And?" she said. She thought she must look desperate, that she had not reapplied her lipstick.

Lew smiled and looked down at her hand on his. He held it softly, in his own.

"And you'll have to give me a ride home," he told her, his eyes meeting hers. She remembered how she had gone to him after Barry had left town, found his truck at a

colonial home in West Hartford and waited for him to finish the lawn. She'd grabbed his arm when he tried to ignore her, and she'd begged him to tell her where Barry was. His arm had been wet, and covered with pieces of cut grass. She had even cried, she recalled. Lew claimed not to know, implored her to forget him. He had been thinner then, a young man with dark, wistful eyes, moved by her sadness. He had kissed her on the cheek and gotten back into his father's truck and driven off, and she had not tried to find him again.

Instead, her life had swerved, by necessity, in another direction. She had been pregnant, and in her desperation, hatched a plan she knew from the first was wrong. She reconciled herself to the deceit because of her circumstance, her love for Barry Castle that cancelled out all moral obligation to anyone else. She chose George Deason, a thin, intelligent boy, who always looked at her out of the corner of his eye, when he thought she wouldn't see. He lived in one of the lake houses near Babb's Beach, where everyone they knew brought coolers of beer and lay out in the sun, smoking cigarette after cigarette. Mary Gail clasped George's hand, which was small and thin like a child's, kissed him pressed against a pine tree, down near the roots of trees on the pine needle floor of the woods, and in the sand, by the incessant lapping of the lake water that became part of their breathing. After two weeks George Deason's eyes took on a glazed, tormented look. And just when Mary Gail began to despair, tired of emptying the brown sand from her underwear, her mouth feeling stiff and bruised, of the smell of lake water in her clothes and hair—just when she began to feel the first tinges of panic, imagining herself growing large and obvious, giving birth and having her child taken from her and offered to some deserving couple, George asked her to marry him.

They had been driving around in George's father's Buick, and Mary Gail told him just to keep driving until they found a notary public sign by a white pebbled drive, somewhere past the New York state line. They spent their first night together in an open field sheltered by a ring of trees. George teased Mary Gail for a long time that Jimmy was conceived in the Buick's backseat—his eyes lit up with the idea, which saddened Mary Gail until she grew so used to playing along it became the truth. She had convinced herself that she was attracted to George—he was pliant and passionate—and for this reason she felt no regret, but a calming, settling relief and vague happiness that came, mostly, from her pregnancy, which showed soon enough to ruin their parents' plan for a real wedding ceremony with invitations made of heavy paper, embossed with flowers, her mother's white satin gown that fastened up the back with pearls, and tapered narrowly, unfortunately, at the waist.

They moved into their first house, paid for by George's father, a slate gray ranch way out in the middle of nowhere. The house was one in a short row that faced a line of trees, then a farmer's pasture trampled flat by cows, and beyond that the cornfields that every spring filled their neighborhood with the odor of cow manure. Once Jimmy was born, and she saw the shape and color of his eyes, his dark hair, Barry Castle became someone she dreamed about, whom she imagined would one day return for her, remembering the sly, wicked way her name sounded when he said it, the taste of his mouth, the smell of his clothes, like spearmint and beer.

The martinis in John Brown's bar eased Mary Gail into the past, and Lew, sitting across the table, reminded her of Barry, of the nights they spent together at Filley Park, the cars

lined up and radios playing, how once he had taken her to a movie on the beach. They rode his Harley-Davidson and drank beer—shoved in the pockets of his coat—the whole way on the interstate, not meaning to see a movie on the beach, having it appear, mysteriously, a white, amazing flicker at the end of the street where Sound View Beach and Hartford Avenue meet. The movie was “Bye, Bye Birdie” and they spread his green army coat in the sand, and her hair fanned out, smelling of the shampoo she used that summer they were together. They were far enough away from everyone else so that they could kiss until their mouths were numb, until she was the one who wanted more, and Mary Gail remembered how he’d planned it all—holding back, waiting, knowing he would not be the one to do the asking.

Lew stood up and stepped around his chair. “Let’s go,” he said, and Mary Gail noticed the place had emptied out. She could not recall what she’d talked about. Lew led her outside, where the hot night air blanketed them, and Mary Gail fumbled in her purse for her keys, dropping her wallet on the pavement, her Dior lipstick that rolled, irretrievable, under someone’s car.

“My God,” she said. She bit her lower lip. Lew started to laugh and Mary Gail punched his arm.

She drove the Cadillac carefully, hugging the right side of the road. Lew gave her directions, and he lived within walking distance of the restaurant, a mile or two away, in a small Cape that Mary Gail thought resembled their beach cottage. She had intended to drop him off, to find her way out of the neighborhood and then back to the main road, but

Lew reached over and turned off the car and kept the keys. He climbed out of the car with them, and walked up to the driver's side window.

“Come inside,” he said. He disappeared through the doorway, into the house, and Mary Gail, irritated, remained in the car. She lit her last cigarette, but had to throw it away because she'd lit the wrong end. And she thought about sitting in the car three days before, waiting for Lacey while she used the gas station restroom, a wait that had seemed endless, everything beyond the car's windows surreal and buzzing with heat. She had been furious with Lacey for abandoning her, for forcing her into a position in which she did not know how to act. She had to ask the attendant, a teenager named Manny, to look for her daughter, sounding foolish and confused. Cars waiting for the gas pumps hit their horns behind her, and Manny had to direct her to pull the car into a parking space to continue her wait. He came up to her window three separate times and tapped on it, looking apologetic, to tell her he had not found her daughter, and all along Lacey had been with some boy, predictably insensitive, not bothering to call Mary Gail until after she had to make the decision to leave the station without her. It had been Lacey's birthday. She had decided to make peace and be a good mother and take her shopping, and the bags from Neiman Marcus were still in the back seat of the Cadillac. In the light from Lew's porch their outlines slumped pale and shimmery against the seatback, and Mary Gail felt a sweeping worthlessness, as if nothing she could ever do would be right. Lew, she decided, had gone inside and passed out on the couch, but when she glanced up at the house he was there, standing on the porch. He came down the steps and approached the car and leaned heavily on the door.

“Mary,” he said. His eyes were soft, pleading. “Come inside. We can watch ‘Big Valley.’”

Mary Gail wanted to ask him right then about Barry Castle—whatever happened to him, where he was, but she wasn’t sure how without revealing who she’d been. And she was afraid to know, to hear he had a wife, and a family, and was living across town in a little Cape like this one, setting his can of beer down on the cement steps at night while he smoked a cigarette, watching his kids play “Mother May I?” on the front lawn.

“OK, move away,” Mary Gail said.

She pushed on the car door. Lew stepped back, swaying a little, and she kicked her sandals under the seat and climbed out and asked him to light her a cigarette, which he did, dutifully, grinning at her the whole time. They stood on the stubbled grass, smoking. The night insects whirred around them, and the moon was out, and the grass felt damp under her bare feet. Inside her body she was always still nineteen, thinking about men as the boys they had been, imagining them without their shirts, inept, struggling with the buttons of their pants, with her catches and clasps, their hands roving for skin.

That first time with Lew, they had gone inside and Mary Gail had kissed him, pushed him back on the sagging sofa and entwined her legs with his. He had not known what to do, too drunk, or bemused, and she had done everything, things she imagined while sitting at home in her room, or wandering the empty house with her glass full of gin and melting ice. He did not protest, but laughed, softly, when she undid his pants. Afterwards, she felt a kind of awe with herself, as if some other person had emerged to

claim her body, and she had just gotten it back, tried it on like a new outfit made of soft, sheer fabric. She stood over him, smoothing down her skirt.

“I feel happy,” she told him.

Lew’s head still rested on the couch arm. He had not bothered to pull up his pants.

“I guess you do,” he said.

There was no tenderness or kissing when she left. He struggled to the front door, holding up his pants, and waved to her through the screen. Mary Gail didn’t care. She stepped lightly across the lawn and slipped into the velvet darkness of the car with its gentle, dingy warning lights. She kept the windows down and the night air moved in, rustling the Neiman bags in the back seat, pulling her hair back from her damp forehead. She had driven the familiar roads home and realized she had not really driven them for years, that she had not lived any outward life at all after Jimmy died. She had sat in her house and dreamed up imaginary lives instead, ones that kept all unpredictable events within her control, that she could replay and alter at will. In her world, Barry Castle would return, or the actor from the movie she’d just watched, and they would meet, and be drawn to each other by the invisible connection she believed existed between herself and an unknown someone who spent their hours the way she did, or went through the motions of an average life but felt the space where she fit inside them, and could do nothing about it. She realized, driving with the night air whipping through the car, that since Barry Castle her life had been organized around making do with what came her way, by chance, that she had not had the opportunity to say no or change her mind or turn her life in another direction. She had sat in her house and been battered by events and not

made a single move out from under the blows. On the drive home from Lew's, this struck her as amusing, this image of her ducking for cover, and she had laughed at herself in the car. She thought, crawling into bed that night in her large, empty house, that surely Lew could be in love with her, and she had finally found someone to love back.

But the next day the happiness she had felt the night before, that hopefulness, had faded, and she was left with her stained silk dress, balled up on the floor of her bathroom, and a headache, which she knew would not leave her until her first or second drink of the day, somewhere around eleven o'clock. Mima came and did laundry and vacuumed the rugs and stood outside her bedroom with the vacuum saying nothing, just looking at Mary Gail on the bed.

"What do you need?" Mary Gail asked.

"Where is she?" Mima said.

"Who?" Mary Gail asked, knowing she meant Lacey, not wanting to deal with Mima's questions, her drawn-together eyebrows, the tone of her voice, both soothing and accusing at the same time.

"You know who. Did you call your husband?" Mima leaned on the handle of the vacuum. She wore the blue stretch capris and multi-colored leather slides that Mary Gail had given to her last month. Mima was Portuguese, near Mary Gail's age, and her only friend.

"I went to one of those meetings," Mary Gail groaned.

Mima let a moment pass. She stared at Mary Gail, her brown eyes wide.

"I see how much it has helped you. You're a new woman," she said.

“If you only knew,” Mary Gail said, laughing.

Mima scoffed and turned away with the vacuum.

“You need to worry about that girl,” she called from the end of the hall.

Mary Gail thought she would tell Mima about Lew, and she followed her down the hall, down the stairs to the living room, where Mima put away the vacuum in her gentle, careful way under the stairs, and ignored her. She wanted to shock Mima with the story, but she only stared blankly when Mary Gail told her, and shook her head.

“The girl could be dead,” she said.

Mary Gail felt the same wave of panic she had felt the day before, that urged her to attend the meeting, and she turned from Mima and went into the kitchen and made the drink she’d wanted, and made sure she banged the cabinet doors. She knew Mima was still in the house, that she always left by the garage door, and she waited in the kitchen for her to pass by with her purse.

“You have no right to judge me,” Mary Gail said. She clutched the drink in her hand like a weapon.

Mima paused and came up to Mary Gail at the counter and smiled.

“OK, so who is this man?” she asked. She sat at the long counter and set down her purse. Mary Gail did not trust her look, the way she leaned in to listen. “Tell me again.”

“He’s no one,” Mary Gail said.

“Handsome?” Mima asked.

“No,” Mary Gail told her. “He isn’t really.” She thought about the way his eyes held her, his laughter, but these were things she did not know how to relay to Mima.

Instead, she told her he was Barry Castle’s friend, and Mima’s eyes widened.

“Oh,” she said, slowly.

Mima and Helen Halsey were the only two people who knew the story of Jimmy’s real father. Mary Gail and Helen had been best friends since the Saturday afternoon she’d come by with a pitcher of frozen daiquiris, just after George and Mary Gail had moved into the neighborhood. Helen had gotten a teenaged girl from the neighborhood to watch their children, and she and her husband, Steve, and Mary Gail and George sat in the iron furniture by their new pool and drank and turned up the stereo that was piped out to patio speakers. It had been June, and it had gotten chilly at night, so Mary Gail had gone in and found them sweaters and jackets, and they’d sat there until daylight—Steve asleep in the chaise, George still awake, shooting gathering crows with Jimmy’s Daisy air gun. Mary Gail remembered him at the rim of the pool cocking the gun, the sound of the BB firing out, a poof of compressed air and the slight clacking noise. He had looked silly and virile at the same time, and Helen and Mary Gail had watched him, laughing. Mary Gail recalled that this was the moment she finally fell in love with George because she had noticed Helen’s glances toward him, the way she leaned her head into the crook of his neck, her hands on him all night, flattening his collar, pressed to his chest, the way she hung from him with her arms wrapped around his neck.

Helen was thin and ethereal looking. She dressed in clothes made of fabrics that clung to her body, or draped in sheer folds. She wore her auburn hair long, with bangs

over her eyes. She looked out at everyone from behind the wisps of hair, which made her seem deceptively naïve, and prevented anyone guessing her ulterior motive. Mary Gail found that even once she knew what Helen was up to, she still pretended it didn't matter. While Helen was attracted to George, Mary Gail had enjoyed the idea of the two of them wanting him. She would take her cues from Helen, wearing the same Lilly Pulitzer dresses, and the sling backs with the flower. They would flank George in restaurants and drink from his Harvey Wallbangers, keep their hands on his thighs under his napkin.

Mary Gail, at some point, had told Helen the story of Barry Castle, and it became a private reference between them. At the beach, sitting in front of George and Mary Gail's cottage with their drinks, Helen would lean over and point to a man passing by in his swim trunks. "Is he as attractive as Barry Castle?" Mary Gail soon realized that in Helen's mind, Barry Castle was the man she really loved. George was a piece in an elaborate game, not someone Mary Gail might have feelings for. Sometimes, she thought she might ask Helen if she had slept with her husband, coyly, laughing, as if it might not matter, but she could never find a way to frame the question. She couldn't admit, at the time, that it might hurt her to know the truth. To imagine something real between them.

George accepted all of Helen's attention with an aloofness that Mary Gail attributed to the endless J&B's and ice, the consuming pursuit of yet another adventure with Jack Barrow, and Ed Wilcox and Steve. Around Helen, George's face remained impassive, his eyes vague. At night Mary Gail clung to his broad back and listened to his heavy breaths and told herself that this closeness was something Helen did not have, and she was happy, believing George still loved her, and yet intrigued by the thought that he

also slept with Helen, imagining the occasions when they may have been together, watching them for signs of lovemaking, as if a glance across the pool, or a wrinkled blouse might give them away.

Sitting beside Mima in the kitchen, Mary Gail felt the wet sides of the glass in her hand, watched the shadows of waving trees on the floor. Beyond the kitchen was the deck, and the pool, and beyond that the pasture of the one last dairy farmer.

“So, you will ask this man about Barry,” Mima said.

Mary Gail looked at Mima. “Should I?”

Once, she had tried to describe Jimmy to Mima, who had come to work for them after the accident. She had shown her photographs and told her stories, but Mima had just smiled mildly and nodded her head, indulging her, not really understanding what it felt like to know him, to see him moving across the lawn, climbing out of a car, or poised on the diving board. She had not had the opportunity to stand near him, and have him look into her eyes. Mima did not really believe that Jimmy was Barry Castle’s son. She had tried to convince Mary Gail otherwise since the afternoon she had found Mary Gail semi-conscious on the bedroom floor, and had called the paramedics to save her life. During the wait for the ambulance’s arrival, Mary Gail had told her the story. She had been out of it, Mima had said. She didn’t know what she was saying, she insisted.

Now she leaned on the counter, her eyes slit. “Yes, I want to know,” Mima said. “I want to get a look at this man.”

Mary Gail laughed and finished her drink.

“Go back to the meeting,” Mima said.

And so at 4:00 she showered with a new drink balanced on the edge of the bathtub, and found something to wear that was less expensive. Lacey's bedroom remained empty and untouched, and Mary Gail sat on the bed and looked around it and remembered sitting on Jimmy's bed after the accident, and thinking he would be home soon, having forgotten he would not return. Mary Gail had mastered the trick of convincing herself otherwise, and sustained herself, keeping reality at bay for weeks. But there were those times that she had only the truth to contend with, sitting out on the deck by the pool, seeing the way the sun slanted, its weakness like winter, and realizing it was suddenly winter, and Jimmy was dead, and she was sitting on the lounge chair freezing in a nightgown. Or it would be moments like the ones yesterday, and today, when the edge of panic could not be dulled by drinking more, or taking another pill, or sitting in someone's room and remembering the feeling of the touch of their lips pressed against her cheek, their smell as children, like sweat and the Jean Nate powder she kept under the sink in the first gray ranch house.

At the second meeting she arrived before Lew, and had been about to leave when she saw him walk up and tug on the glass door. He was dressed in a nice shirt tucked into his jeans, and his face shone with the exertion of walking from his house. Mary Gail looked at him as he took his seat, and he laughed, and shook his head. "Pardon me," he said, apologizing for being late. His pack of cigarettes showed over the top of his shirt pocket. The muscles in his legs pressed against the jeans material as he stretched them out. He sat directly across from Mary Gail, and he stared at her, grinning, while Barbara, or Dina, one of them, talked about the time her husband came home with a moving truck

while she was at work and loaded up everything, two bedrooms of children's things, the contents of the kitchen cabinets, boxes of Christmas decorations and mementos, leaving only one small bed and her clothes in a heap on the floor.

“Not even a fork or spoon to eat with,” the woman said. Mary Gail glanced toward her, and she wore a shocked, comical look, as if she were telling someone else's story. Todd, his thin fingers laced together on his lap, looked pained, as if he might shed the woman's tears for her. Lew sipped loudly from his cup of coffee, kept his eyes on Mary Gail's bare legs, watching them cross and recross, and Mary Gail assumed he hadn't listened to a word of the woman's story, that he was thinking, instead, of the drinks in John Brown's after the meeting, and possibly beyond that, to the sex they would have on his living-room couch. His eyes met hers, and he winked and smiled, and Todd, catching this exchange, asked Lew if he wanted to share with the group.

“What?” Lew asked, sitting up straight in his chair.

The woman sitting next to him took over, leaning forward to look into Lew's face. “Are you working the steps?” she asked. “How is it going?”

Todd seemed to enjoy Lew's discomfort. Mary Gail noticed that he smiled slightly, and then covered his mouth with his hand and pretended to clear his throat.

Lew stared into his Styrofoam cup, which he cradled in his two hands.

“I'll tell you,” he said, his voice hoarse, “It's been tough.”

Mary Gail felt a sinking feeling, mixed with the panic from earlier in the afternoon, settle in her chest. She bit her lip, and glanced out through the mini blinds, thinking of escape. Outside the parking lot seemed natural with its rows of parked cars,

with the setting sun glinting off of the hoods, and hers was right there, accessible, waiting for her. But she could not move from the folding chair, felt pinned there by Lew's sudden emotion, his hunched shoulders, his shaking hands wrapped around the fragile white cup.

“Go on,” someone said.

Then he shook his head. “No,” he told them, his head bowed. “No.” And everyone who had leaned forward seemed to relax back into their chairs, and a man from across the circle, sensing an opening, sprang in with his own story—the loss of his father a year before, the emptiness he still couldn't fill. Once everyone's attention had shifted, Lew glanced up at Mary Gail, and she saw his eyes glinted with laughter, and she felt the weight of panic subside. He was still Lew, and they would still have drinks. She would take off her clothes for him, and his story would never be tearfully revealed to the circle of strangers.

That evening at his house was different. They had fewer drinks at John Brown's, anticipating what came afterwards. He led her into his bedroom and they fell back on the bed together. The room was dark, and small and lit only by the light from the bathroom, and Mary Gail couldn't shake the feeling of being in another woman's bed, even though the woman had abandoned the bed and it was clearly no longer hers. The sheets were pale yellow, and the pillows cased in pastel stripes. Lew had tossed the throw pillows to the floor, and those, Mary Gail saw, were in a cabbage rose print. She lay back and Lew eased his weight on top of her, and she felt that at any moment the woman would return, as if the bed carried the ghost of her presence.

She had wondered if this was how Helen felt when she slept with someone else's husband on the bed he and the woman had slept in together for fifteen years, the shape of their bodies carved out on either end of the mattress, the scent of facial cream held within the depths of the feather pillows. Mary Gail had asked Helen about the times she'd been unfaithful, and Helen had not wanted to talk about it. She had rolled her eyes and made a face.

“What do you mean, ‘What was it like?’” she'd said.

Mary Gail had never slept with anyone but George and Barry Castle. At Helen's urging, she would entertain the idea of being with some neighbor Helen had picked out for her, would spend time flirting with him at a few parties, even go off with him to a secluded backyard patio, or laundry room, but nothing much would happen beyond some prolonged kissing. She would never invite him over while George was at work, or meet him at his house while his wife was out of town, or at a motel on the Berlin Turnpike. She did not want him enough, she'd decide, to risk losing everything.

Mary Gail's measurement of desire came from her memory of Barry Castle, a feeling that resonated like a tone, took on a scent and texture, commandeered her entire body and made her weep. He had taken her unusual places to have sex: the golf course at night, where the smell of cut grass got into her hair and skin, where the sprinklers came on and soaked their clothes. They would go into the woods on a Sunday afternoon, and the heavy tree boughs swayed, and the wind passed through the leaves overhead. He would bring a green army blanket, and through it she would sense the layered debris of the forest floor, or the manicured grass of the course, or the pebbled sand of the

Connecticut shore where he took her the last time they were together, and where he would tell her he loved her, something he did, she would realize later, because he would not see her again. It had been rumored he'd gone to work on the Alaskan pipeline, or joined the army, but for Mary Gail it wouldn't have mattered if he had simply moved to another town, if they even passed each other driving over Avon Mountain, or heading into the center to grocery shop. Her life had become something apart from Barry Castle's telling her he loved her on the beach one night, with the smell of the sand and the seaweed, and the sound of the tide receding in small lapping waves against the jetties.

Nothing about Barry Castle had ever seemed real, except Jimmy, and even he became his own entity, removed from a father she really didn't know beyond the feel of his hands on her skin, or the sound of his voice in her ear. There were a few things she knew Jimmy inherited—Barry's dark hair, which he always wore long and shaggy the way Barry had. He had his eyes, and a similar manner of turning his gaze on you with a certain expression, as if he saw in you some marvel, something other than what you saw in yourself. Now, as Lew pressed his mouth to her neck, and slid his hands up the tops of her legs, Mary Gail realized she had no idea what being in love was, that she could just as easily love Lew as anyone, that what you gave someone in the guise of love may or may not be what they wanted.

Lew whispered all kinds of things in her ear, his voice hoarse and tense with desire. In the dark bedroom, under the sway of martinis, she could forget where she was, who she was with. She could create a fabrication of love around this man, whose hands roamed her body, whose mouth near her ear put everything she wanted into words. She

fell asleep in the bed, and awoke at daybreak, the birds loud and irritating outside the window, the sun filtering through the dust from the carpet and spreading across the pale yellow walls. Their clothes were piled at the foot of the bed. Lew slept beside her, his skin sallow and pale on his chest, his upper arms, the rest tanned from working in the sun. She did not look too closely at anything else in the room—photographs of a child, the bureau swept clean except for Lew’s watch, his wallet and keys. She rose quietly and dressed, sat on the edge of the bed and smoked a cigarette.

When Lew stirred she called his name until he turned to her and raised himself up on one elbow.

“What? What?” he asked her, half-asleep.

“Do you know where Barry Castle is?” she said.

Lew squinted at her and pushed himself upright, leaning back against the headboard. He kept his eyes on her and reached for the pack of cigarettes and lit one.

“I do know you,” he said, smiling, pleased with himself for remembering.

Mary Gail smiled back. “Well, do you?” she asked again.

“Do I what?” he said.

“Know where he is?”

Lew’s face changed, and he looked away from her. Outside the window the birds kept up their noise, and Mary Gail knew that Lew believed she had used him, and she didn’t care.

“He’s dead,” he said, his face averted, and Mary Gail reached out and took his face in her hands and turned it toward her.

“Tell me the truth.”

Lew stared into her eyes, and she saw that she had hurt him, and she saw, too, that despite that he would not lie to her.

“I suppose you couldn’t really love me, then,” he said, laughing.

And she wondered if she had told him that, and if she had meant it at the time, if even now she might love him. His eyes were still the same soft brown, the irremovable sadness edging in.

“I always thought I’d find him again,” she said. She did not know how she felt about Barry Castle being dead, about saying she loved Lew Vancour. Lew looked at her the same way he had when she’d clung to his arm and cried twenty-four years ago. He put his cigarette out in the ashtray by the bed.

“We’re back where we started,” he said.

She would leave his house and drive home and go into her bedroom and close the door and imagine the life she might have led with Barry Castle, and the life she might have had with Lew in his cottage-house filled with dust, and realize, even as she dreamed them up, that they would never have made her happy. Outside she would hear the neighbors’ cars start up, their tires on the black tarred street. She would hear the neighbors’ older children gathering to play and argue, the young ones with their mothers around plastic pools. She did not have to look out to know what that life was like, because she had already lived it. She would walk through the house and feel transported to when the children were young, when happiness was something simple, and easy to feel, a thing that got up with her in the mornings when she made breakfast on the plates

with the flowered rim, when she washed Ivy's hair in the bathtub, scooping the water up with a plastic cup and telling her to tip her head back. Happiness was there before she decided she needed something more, hiding below the ordinariness of her life, unknown to her at the time. She would look out into the street and remember the parties at each other's houses, crossing back to their own house over the damp lawns, under the streetlights, under the boughs of trees and the stars. It didn't matter that Barry Castle was dead. She was sure that Helen had told George her secret, but that didn't matter either. Jimmy was dead, too.

And then one morning Mary Gail heard new footsteps moving through the house, the sound of the shower running, the slam of Lacey's bedroom door, and she knew she was back. Mary Gail came out of her room at night. She placed the Neiman Marcus bags outside of Lacey's bedroom door. She got out the phone book in the kitchen and dialed Vancour's and left a message that she needed to hire a lawn service. She gave her name, and address and phone number. Instead of a call the next morning she awoke to the sound of the mower, the smell of cut grass and gasoline. It was a Sunday, and Mary Gail was surprised. She went to the front bay window and looked out. The lawnmower was one of those large ones, with the long blades that jutted out from the sides. She heard it pass from the back around the fence and saw it cut across the driveway to the front. Lacey came up behind her and the two of them watched the man cut the lawn, the wide sweeping arc of the blades in and out of the tree shade, the man's black hair swiped back, his jaunty cigarette. Mary Gail didn't know what she was seeing. Just when she was

resigned to losing everything, here he was. Barry Castle, young and renewed. Jimmy with his hair grown too long.

“Remember how he had to call out ‘Goodnight’ every night from his room?”

Lacey said.

“Twenty times he’d call it,” Mary Gail said, her voice faint, her hand pressed to her heart. “To make sure I was there.”

They stood by the window together, the bare tops of their arms touching, watching a man back from the dead cutting their lawn.

The Little Sinner

That summer of the first lobster bake Howard Livesy told George about his idea to solder chicken wire to the bottom of the metal trash can. They had been outside Livesy's house, standing on the tar driveway, and inside Livesy's wife clapped pans together in the usual disgruntled way of wives preparing meals that their children, called in from a neighbor's yard, would refuse to eat. George imagined that up the street at his house it was the same, Mary Gail scorching the roast, ready to ring the bell that would summon their own children from their distant, other worlds. Their bodies would radiate the smells of sweat and summer grass in the hot kitchen—Jimmy red-faced, dripping from a game of baseball, the girls' stringy hair plastered to their foreheads. Mary Gail would pour out the martinis, and George, listening to Livesy explain how the bit of water in the bottom would steam the lobsters in the trash can just like the smaller stove-top version, could taste the drink, could feel it spread like a warmth through his arms and legs.

George didn't drink anymore. He'd just gotten his two-year chip, and wondered how two years could pass so dully that he hadn't noticed anything but the alcohol's absence. That day with Livesy he'd headed up the street to his own house at the top of the hill, walking under the swaying hickories and elms, relishing the whirl of insects, the lawns spreading lush and tended away from the curb, each driveway holding a finned Cadillac, or a Mercedes, and a low-slung Town and Country. In the 60s, two contractors

purchased the Connecticut dairy farm land that made up their neighborhood. They built homes situated on the tops of rises, with long meandering driveways through trees that had grown stately. They left much of the natural landscape, and so there were stands of hickory and birch among the planted elms and sugar maples. There were long hedges of cedar, and large immovable rocks left by glaciers, that gave the appearance of character and permanence. The homes were ranches and split levels and colonials—large rambling houses of four or five bedrooms and basement rec rooms, with studies and dens with post and beam ceilings. Some, like George, had added wooden decks and pools enclosed by lengths of shadow-box fencing. Standing in his foyer, preparing to cross the street to his new neighbor's own version of the bake, he remembered how the walk up from Livesy's winded him, how his legs had moved with power and youth against the fabric of his Bermuda shorts, how he'd anticipated the return to his own house, the sugar maple's fluttering leaves, the blooming rhododendron, to his family gathering for the meal. Now a maid whose name he struggled for a year to remember set the dinner table. His son was dead. His oldest daughter took off for days at a time and had to be sought out, like an escapee. It was just George and his youngest, Ivy, with her small flat smile, and her quiet observations that made him cringe.

“I've had three birthdays without a present,” she said this past spring.

She had found him in his study. He had fallen asleep in his chair, and he had no idea how long she'd been watching him.

“Well,” he said, rousing himself, patting at the papers on the desk. “I'll be sure that doesn't happen this year.”

He'd forbidden the maid from coming into this room, and now it was full of dust that flitted into the light from the blinds. Ivy stared at him with her funny smile. She raised her eyebrows, like her mother, Mary Gail. "Well, it already has," she said.

He couldn't tell if she blamed him, if this upset her. He reached into his wallet and took out a bill. "I suppose you can buy yourself something," he said. As he did it he knew it was the wrong thing, but she stepped into the room and grabbed the money from his hand, quick and furtive, like a little bird.

"You're the best," she said. And he had no idea if she meant it or not, the way the smile filled her face, and her eyes seemed to light up.

Through his front bay window he could see the lights of the party, torches of citronella encircling the side yard, extending into the back and down to the edges of the woods. Beyond their light George watched the fireflies dart through the leaves of fern and pokeweed. He felt a wave of nostalgia so powerful that he closed his eyes, as if to breathe it in, and clutched the hall banister to steady himself. The events of the past were tinged with the tastes of past drinks, and summer came as gin and tonics with lime, with the unavoidable tang of whiskey sours. He had not wanted to attend this party, aware that he could never equal the parties of his past, but Ivy, his youngest daughter, had befriended the neighbor's wife, and together they had planned the event, placing fliers, of all things, on the telephone poles—gaudy, flapping sheets of fluorescent paper inviting the entire neighborhood to attend.

This would never have happened in the past. The invitation would have been word of mouth, through their close acquaintances, and never mind the rest of the street, or the street over, for that matter. Back when the bake first started the subdivision was new, and it had been just Maple Hill Drive cutting through cow pastures and apple orchards. It was when George bought the cottage at the shore that he had the idea to make it a lobster bake, to drive down to the boat and take it out and pull fresh lobsters out of traps. A band of renegades, he and Steve Halsey and Walter Barrows, all of them still neighbors, waving hello through their car windows, but separated by different failures and despairs, by the simple evidence that things had not turned out as each had planned.

The new neighbors, Michael and Martha, bought their white colonial in the fallout of the divorce of a couple George never really cared for. He saw the new neighbor, Michael, occasionally in town at the hardware store, looking lost in one aisle or another, and disinterested in the coils of green hose he hauled up onto the cashier's counter. His face was boyish and round, and his hair was too long. The wife, on the other hand, impressed George with her energy and her habit of wearing low-cut shirts as she tended her bulbs. The two of them were always out in the yard doing something on the lawn, putting up a split-rail fence, or a new mailbox, hanging a flag by the front door. He had noticed their activity from his garage, from his living room bay window, and he saw them avoid each other's glance, how they walked beside each other and never touched, how each sat separately with the children on the front porch. He felt their avoidance palpably, like the hint of a loss in the market, or the smell of changing seasons, and he knew that

wherever they were headed was inevitable, that they would know it only once they were there, and then, they could not turn back.

He didn't spend much time wondering what his daughter saw in them. They, he assumed, needed her, and he did not begrudge her some life beyond their own odd, empty one. She took care of their little girls, showing them games on the front lawn, braiding their hair with nimble fingers, taking them on walks through the pastures to pick bluets. He watched her once at dusk, her legs long and thin in her cut-off shorts, her hair lank and dark against the back of her shirt. She had not turned around when he pulled into the drive, nor did she acknowledge him when he walked to the curb and stood there, waiting for her to glance his way. He stood there so long that the moment grew uncomfortable, and he imagined he looked, to the neighbors with their cocktails passing by their open screen doors, a little pathetic.

George watched the party a moment more before he opened the door and breathed in the night air mixed with citronella, the briny lobster, and the wood smoke of the fire. Across the yards the ice clinking in glasses and the mingling voices were amplified, and they reached him detailed and perfect—Steve Halsey's deep rumbling narrative, the women's conversations high-pitched and ecstatic. He heard Helen Halsey's distinctive laugh, and remembered the night before the last lobster bake, when Helen decided they should have a whiskey sour tasting party, and someone brought a blender over, and Mary Gail was delicate and pretty in a Lilly Pulitzer dress, dancing through the kitchen with her sour glass, saving the maraschino cherries in the bottom for last. After seventeen years of

marriage he had fallen in love with her again, saw something new and different and alluring. Helen had shown up wearing the same dress, and they were teased about planning the whole thing, had posed together, laughing. And somehow he had ended up with Helen downstairs in the children's rec room. He had tumbled into her arms, thinking only of Mary Gail, reaching for her shoulders, for her mouth, and then realizing his mistake, having gotten too far into it to resist. He saw now how he blamed himself after this—for their bitter marriage, for Mary Gail's drinking, for the other losses that followed, one after the other, like events in a dream, when it had already begun, been set into motion years before he ever had the opportunity to grope under Helen Halsey's dress.

Tonight, Mary Gail refused to go out. He had asked, knowing what it might bring up, a party with lobsters steamed over an open pit, the redwood tables stretched end to end, the table of Beefeaters and Schmirnoff and Chivas, the ice in the bucket, the children let loose in the neighborhood after dark, pedaling their bicycles up and down the street, running off into the woods and disappearing down dirt paths that led for miles into uncharted pastures and meadows. She had stared at him for a long moment.

“Are you talking to me?” she asked. Her face still surprised him. It was so unchanged in the half-light he could not believe she would not jump up from the twisted sheets of the bed and rummage through her dresses, pull one out and create an event of a night that would end near morning, with someone falling and needing a lip or forehead stitched, and others missing, waking to find themselves in a spare bed, or pool house, or disheveled and oblivious in a backyard garden shed. But Mary Gail had not gone to

parties in years, and her face held this too, the sarcastic fury that he could never reconcile because he did not love her anymore, only the idea of what she had once been.

She waved her hand at him and turned away. “Don’t bother me with your invitations,” she said. She wore a pale green silk nightgown, and the glass on the nightstand was full. The light from television made her skin sallow, artificial. He was purposeful with her, avoiding confrontation. He was often out of town on business, but he had trained himself to deal with her when he had to, to expect that one day he would find her unrecoverable on the floor, and he both dreaded and dreamed of the day, as if it would change him from the man he was now, back into the man he had once been.

Outside on the lawn, George heard music. It was faint and jangly-sounding, a stereo from inside the neighbor’s house, where on both floors every window was lit. He thought perhaps the teenagers had moved their own party indoors, though this had never happened before. In the beginning, the children had been young and put to bed, or wandered up to their bedrooms by themselves, and fallen asleep in their clothes, stretched out across chenille bedspreads, the bottoms of their feet blackened by the tar road. George knew, as he stood in the damp grass, as the dampness seeped into the canvas of his deck shoes, that in the end, he had not known where his children went, that during the last lobster bake he would not have thought to look for Lacey, that at some point in the night Jimmy had driven off and not come back.

He had since tried to place himself at the time that Jimmy must have hit the tree, the time of death determined by the coroner, by the first arrivals on the scene—an aged husband and wife living in a historic home on Bloomfield Avenue, who had approached

the car in their summer robes and tentatively reached into the wreck to touch the pulse in his neck. But George could remember little of the day or the night after the whiskey sours, except that it had been the third of July, and so hot they had run the air-conditioner. Everyone had been too hung-over to start the bake, except Howard Livesy, who'd showed up at Helen and Steve's with the metal cans at noon, which was, by then, too late to go for the lobsters, and he and Walter Barrow had purchased some at the local fish market for an exorbitant price, driving into town with the whiskey still working on them in the middle of the afternoon. Somehow, Steve had dug the pit, and laid the metal bars across to hold the cans, and the wives had been roused enough to make hamburger patties for the children, and start mixing up the drinks.

George remembered all of this as a blur, out of order, the time confused and tainted with the smell of Helen's perfume, which clung to the collar of the sport shirt he still wore from the night before. His son died at 2:50 a.m., and by then he saw himself, as if from overhead, seated in an aluminum chair by the open pit in Steve and Helen's backyard. He would have had his drink balanced on his stomach, nestled in the fabric of his shirt, and his feet by the fire. Around him the mosquitoes hummed and the noises of the woods were like something preternatural, impossible to name. The others would have been seated around him, singing by then, or asleep in their chairs, no one ready yet to go home and face whatever life waited for them there.

And crossing the lawn he saw they were all back again, Helen and Steve, and Walter Barrow, divorced now, with a new wife whose name he forgot just as he paused

beside the couple to say hello. Walter ducked his head and looked at his feet, sheepish, like a boy.

“Good to see you, George,” he said. He raised his hand and swatted George on the arm. In his other hand he held a glass full of melting ice that sloshed over the rim at his sudden movement, and George could see, from the grip he had on it, that the party had been going on for a while, that he had hesitated too long about coming, and now they were all drunk, with nothing to say to him.

Helen stood by Michael, her arm threaded through his, and she caught George’s glance with a bemused smile. She leaned on the new neighbor, laughing, and George saw the knobs of her spine revealed in the backless dress, the way her shoulder blades came together like small wings. Michael turned and saw him, removed Helen’s arm and stepped toward him with his hand outstretched.

“Glad you could make it, sir,” he said. His eyes were riveting and blue and full of apology, and George was taken aback at his earnestness, at the deference. He did not know what to say, and so he nodded and said nothing.

“Finally, George!” Helen called out, her voice sing-song, sarcastic. She faced him and held out both arms as if to embrace him, but he stayed back and looked at her, awkward in his soberness. She dropped her arms and her smile and George stepped away, moved through the groups of people he did not know, new and old neighbors he had never taken the time to meet, his friends’ grown children whom he did not recognize, who hooted at him, drunk themselves, and pumped his hand, as if he were, in their eyes, some returning hero. And the topic of the night had been the old stories, the exploits of

past lobster bakes, and he had walked into a retelling of a time that he could not remember, that came back to him as tastes and smells, wracking him with an unaccustomed emotion he did not want to feel.

He was led to a space by the open pit, and he sat in a chair that he could have sworn was the same he sat in years ago, the aluminum frame, the woven plastic slats orange and green and yellow, a chair he might have once slung into the back of the station wagon to take to the shore. Martha was there beside him, her chin pointed and cute, her short hair flipped out at her shoulders, a style once worn by Mary Gail. She grinned at him, pleased with her party, waiting for him, he believed, to acknowledge her. And someone started up the stories again—Walter Barrow, standing in the fire's glow, crouching in his reenactment of a scene—the time the bat got into his house, and how all of them had gone after it with assorted implements: badminton and tennis rackets, lacrosse and hockey sticks, rakes and pool skimmers. The time Barrow's first wife walked out of a restaurant in a snowstorm and kept walking in her fur coat, so that they all had to take their cars out to find her, driving in aimless patterns, sliding on the snow. George felt a mixture of shock and amusement at the story, so that he almost jumped in at parts, his chest thumping with memory and recognition close to pride. He had been that fool balanced on the edge of life. He had once slept with his friend's wife, rolled expensive cars down lengths of icy roads, run out of gas and walked through the north end of Hartford with a wallet full of bills, awoken in a parking garage in New Jersey with no recollection of how he'd gotten there, been up till morning in bars in Bermuda, the Bahamas, in small city pubs and local restaurant lounges, wore the scars of his accidents

like badges, silently, to himself, and suddenly he felt the years of survival sing in his veins like the effects of drink.

George looked past the lit faces ringing the pit, and felt the trees dip and sway, the wide leaves of the elm flip and rustle. He breathed in the night smell of dew and damp woods, of freshly cut grass, and understood the intricate patterns of voices and laughter, the exactness of the landscape, the placement of the houses and the tracings of slate front walks, of border shrubs, of planters full of blooming geraniums. All of these things had left their mark on him, and as he considered the night sky, the pinpoints of stars, he saw his daughter, Ivy, who at fifteen stood poised near the yellow floodlight at the edge of the garage, as if waiting for someone. Her dark hair, usually held back with a simple band, hung loose and long to her waist. She wore a pair of jeans and a tiny shirt which that morning had seemed innocent and childish, but now he saw that the jeans hung low on her hips, that the shirt clung tight to reveal her breasts.

And George thought of his wife as a teenager in her seersucker shorts, left by some boy who'd never loved her. Her desperate kisses, the way she'd thrown herself at him, her soft hair in her eyes and that bewildered look. He'd loved her and pitied her. He'd done the noble thing and married her and accepted Jimmy as his. He doubted men did things like that anymore. There'd been other women since, and women now, one he saw on Thursdays at the downtown Sheraton, and that girl he'd spent too much time with, playing along as if he'd loved her, and then she was dead in the water he boated each summer, and never again could he pilot the river to the Sound without thinking about her as one of the water-logged trees he knew to be wary of. Once again there was no way of

knowing if the child was ever his—a woman like that, who must have surely, he thought, slept with men for a living.

In the distraction of the moment he saw that his neighbor, too, saw Ivy standing there by the garage. George watched Michael's expression change in the firelight, saw his eyes move away, then back, and in his face he recognized a baring of desire before Ivy was gone, disappeared around the edge of the house. Michael rose from his chair, grasped his emptied glass and stepped out of the circle, unnoticed by anyone but George, who followed his silhouette as it passed through the floodlight's beam and then beyond it, with a tortured acuity. There were cheers, and toasts, and a teenage boy shaking George's hand, his shirtfront covered with the emblem of a rock band, a woman kicking her sandal off accidentally into the fire, Helen, with her throaty laugh, turning her knowing glances on him, and Martha, leaning into his arm, smelling like wildflowers. He felt the years sidle up and confront him, pinion him to the chair, so that he had no choice but to sit there until the embers of the fire died down and became ash, subjected to this telling of his past, none of it, he saw now, every really within his control.

Mistresses

The day of the snowstorm Ivy and Laurie shared a cigarette outside on the wall of the smoking pavilion at school. The sky was gray and geese flew overhead in their formation. It was late November, and the hickories and sycamores and maples had been stripped of their leaves, and the leaves had been blown to the curbs for the leaf collector, or raked and bagged, or, despite the town ordinance, burned in metal ash cans, fed to the bright flames by the armfuls. The sun rose over the dead grass and set behind the bare trees. Ivy felt that the only thing that could make this beautiful was snow, and that instinctively they were all waiting for it.

“Like you wait for your period,” Laurie said gravely. She exhaled two perfect smoke rings. Her teeth were tiny and straight, like a child’s.

Neither Laurie nor Ivy had been pregnant yet. But they knew what it was like to wait, stupidly, in those days when they allowed themselves to believe everything happened for a reason. They finished their cigarettes and rounded up Jonah and Billy and Marshall, tapping on the windows of their respective classes, and they all went out to the school parking lot and climbed into Marshall’s car. Billy Grant and Jonah Woodford were two boys Ivy and Laurie had chosen to be their boyfriends, though they didn’t know who would end up with whom. Billy Grant’s family, once soldiers who fought in the Battle of Bunker Hill, owned the local Hukelau restaurant. They also owned the strip mall with the bowling alley next door to the restaurant, and the land behind it, that ran up to

the cemetery. Some said they owned the cemetery itself, and so the bodies buried in it. There were also rumors they owned the rest of the dairy land that the Woodfords didn't. Billy and Jonah had been friends since their Congregational Church Nursery school days. They'd both gone to the same private school, and been kicked out for something they still hadn't divulged. Laurie and Marshall weren't the sort of people they normally hung around with. Marshall's father worked at the Grote and Weigel factory, inspecting casings for their famous hot dogs. Laurie's mother was a fixture of the Hukelau lounge happy hour.

Ivy's father worked, respectably, successfully, in insurance, but once he was called in for questioning concerning the suspicious death of the woman found at the bottom of the Connecticut River. Divers from a university environmental class discovered her the spring Ivy turned twelve. This was not something she could hide from in a small town. People always wanted to know if it was true the woman had bricks tied to her ankles, or if her feet weren't cemented into one of those galvanized tubs filled with ice and soda at annual Memorial Day picnics. They heard she had long dark hair and she was nude, or that she wore a silk kimono-style robe and red patent-leather shoes. She'd been down there for years and was unrecognizable, or she'd been there only a few months—her body caught youthful and supple in the divers' flashlights.

Ivy was never told how her father was connected to the crime. But it was easy enough to assume the woman had been his girlfriend, or at least that he'd slept with her at some point, maybe once or twice, or even regularly, that he'd left something of his at her apartment—one of her grandfather's monogrammed cufflinks, a shirt that the drycleaners

had marked with his name. Ivy was sure there was plenty of physical evidence—hair and fingerprints, and the body fluids there would eventually be new ways to identify—but not enough to arrest him, and no one else was ever accused. Her mother, Mary Gail, was a housewife who hadn't imagined any other sort of life, who probably felt it wisest not to question his innocence. And yet there was never a doubt in Ivy's mind that Mary Gail mistrusted him. She drank most days smoldering with some sort of mysterious regret. Since they hired Mima, Ivy's clothes still appeared freshly washed and folded at the end of her bed, and meals were prepared, and the rugs looked raked over by the vacuum, and the furniture still shone every afternoon when Ivy got home from school. Ivy had grown used to her mother's maudlin sober moments, to her face appearing puffy and pale, with the lines of the bedspread etched into her cheek to reveal she'd been lying down in the middle of the day.

In the evenings before the woman was found there'd been phone calls, ones Ivy answered only to hear an extended silence on the other end. Sometimes there'd be the clink of glasses and a muffled din, what she'd later learn were sounds of a bar. Or she'd hear the Channel Three news, or the Boston Pops opening for "As Schools Match Wits." She'd hear beyond these sounds to cars passing on an interstate, doors opening and closing, and realize, when her first boyfriend plied her with screwdrivers and drove to the Berlin Turnpike one Saturday night, that the woman had called from a motel room. As a child Ivy had waited, patiently listening on the stairs, the phone cord wrapped around the banister. She heard: *One legend relates how he went to Delios to serve for a time as a slave of Eos. He had been blinded by his rape of Merope...* and then the buzzer, and a

girl's voice, "Orion." Her house would smell of whatever had been prepared for dinner—standing rib roast or lamb chops, mashed potatoes, the oily smell of fish on Fridays. She listened to the sounds around her that must have filtered through the phone to the woman on the other end: the water running in the sink, the clank of china as her mother stacked the dirty plates, her mother's voice calling out to remind her of some chore she'd forgotten, or an appointment for the next day.

Ivy's mother thought the calls were for Ivy—one of her friends sharing a story about a girl they hated, the boy from Math who, confusingly, pulled her chair out from under her, and then gave her a cat pin with rhinestone eyes he'd found on the school blacktop. And then, eavesdropping, Ivy's mother discovered Ivy never made any response. Then, she'd come out from the kitchen and stood over her with a dishtowel.

"Who is it?" she'd asked.

Augustus De Morgan discussed its lack of sevens, but he was using the flawed calculation of William Shanks; today it is believed that all... "Pi." Sometimes, Ivy would hear a throat cleared on the other end, or a sigh, or a shifting. It was a woman, she'd determined. She'd hear her brush back long hair from the receiver. She'd hear her breaths in and out, raspy with a cold. She imagined her fanning wet nails, sitting on the side of a bed with her legs crossed, the smell of the polish thick in the room. *This work, an 1893 tempra, prompted its creator to write, "I painted the clouds like real blood. The colors are..."* "The Scream."

"I have to go now, Andrea," Ivy would say.

She still didn't know why she kept this up. The woman called, and both of them waited. She'd hear someone talking about the Hartford Whalers, the man's voice slurred, ice settling in a glass. She'd hear *In Sir Walter Scott's Kenilworth this historical figure lays down his cloak in a muddy spot at Greenwich for the...*, a boy's voice cracking, "Sir Walter Raleigh." Later, when the calls stopped and Ivy put the rumors and the phone calls together, she felt an incredible guilt. Maybe she had been the last person to share the woman's silence. Ivy accepted what she'd come to see as the potential truth in all of it. Her father, player of Heckedy Peg on lawns at dusk, swooping as a witch out of elm shadows to capture them, the man who, levelheaded, pulled over to save a box turtle from certain death on Mills Pond Road, man of stories around summer fires, smelling of shaving soap, lime, tobacco, and Desinex foot powder, had been an adulterer. He sat in his den in his leather chair and never answered the telephone to learn his accomplice had wanted more from him. When Ivy grew old enough to want to disobey him, she did without any hesitation.

"I'm going out," she'd say. It would be evening, a school night, with a below-zero wind chill factor. Her father, forced to rise from his chair, folded his paper.

"You most certainly are not," he said.

Ivy paused at the door. "What are you going to do to stop me?"

Her father paled. "You're grounded, young lady," he said.

Ivy's mother stood behind him, biting her thumbnail. Ivy left the house anyway. She knew she had him, that there was nothing he could do to stop her, short of cementing her feet into a galvanized tub.

The day of the snowstorm Marshall pulled out of the school parking lot and turned onto Bloomfield Avenue. Ivy and Laurie sat up front with Marshall, and Billy and Jonah sat in the back. Their licenses had been revoked, and each of them had cars they were not allowed to drive. Billy's was in his garage, and Jonah's was out in his barn. Ivy and Laurie had never seen the cars, but they assumed they were sporty and new—convertible Firebirds, or Camaros, or something foreign and expensive they didn't know the name of. Marshall's car was a big, gold Bonneville. At one time his grandmother drove it to the Grand Union supermarket, to the doctor on Cottage Grove, to her friend Anna Ward's house to play Whist, and once a week to the library, where she'd pull around back and pop open the trunk, and one of the staff would take the week's return books out and cart them up the loading ramp. Because his grandmother was a Prosser, the family who founded the library in 1908, she could check out as many books as she liked. Now, she was in a convalescent home, and didn't drive. In trade for the car Marshall had to do the weekly library run, and sometimes Ivy went with him to pick up the books. The librarian had them already set aside, but once in a while she'd have been too busy, and Marshall would give her a lecture about her oversight and neglect of an aged founder of that establishment, and he and Ivy scoured the shelves, yanking anything brightly-covered enough to signify what Mrs. Prosser called a *tawdry romance*.

Over the summer Ivy read to his grandmother at Brightview. Mima drove her, past Pettibone's Tavern and the golf course in Canton, the road finally winding through the old hardwood forest to the iron-gated entrance. Ivy sat by the window in Mrs. Prosser's room and read about young women seduced by employers, princes, spies, and

gas station attendants. She read sex scenes set in ancient temples and on lake shores, described in language that made her lower her voice in embarrassment. They coupled with *frenzied writhing* and *hot, wet abandon*. The women had *downy mounds*, their breasts were *cupped* and *pressed* and *freed*. The men were *sleek and tight* and *buried themselves to the hilt*. Mrs. Prosser would lean toward Ivy to catch every word, the smell of her skin like the Tinkerbell perfume Ivy had as a child, with its pink atomizer, and its scent of lilacs. Outside, wood thrush came one by one to the feeder. The man with braces on his legs from polio passed in the hallway. The woman in the next room called out, "Let the cat in, Louis!"

"Read that last bit again," Mrs. Prosser would say, her small eyes fiercely lit. She always fell asleep, her hand held to chest like a pledge, the applesauce on the tray pushed aside, and Ivy kept reading, silently, the dust of the library rising up off the pages, the tree shadows *arching in wild response* on the floor.

The back seat of Marshall's grandmother's Bonneville had a hole burned into it where Laurie's cigarette blew back in without her knowing. Its fenders flaked rust and paint. It had a cassette player that sometimes cut out. If they were all high, they didn't notice. They'd be sitting in Penwood, looking out at the leaves blowing over the windshield, waiting for one of Billy's friends to deliver his pot, and someone would call attention to the quiet.

"What's that?" It was usually Jonah. "That sound."

They'd all concentrate for a while on the silence. Eventually, someone mentioned the tape cutting off, and Marshall would eject and reload, eject and reload. It might take

five or six times before the music came back on. That day, the tape worked right away. For some reason, they were all serious. No one smiled, or made a comment. Ivy said they looked like people about to commit a crime. The music blared, silly and unnecessary. Ivy told Marshall to turn it off.

“Where to?” Marshall asked.

“Woodford’s,” Ivy and Laurie said at once.

Jonah’s house was a historic Federal with a barn and a slate pool and land that backed up to Talcott Mountain, that included acres of old Valley View dairy. His stepmother, Jane, as much an attraction as the house, was a woman they’d heard about from Marshall, who met her that summer when he’d gone to the house. She’d had her hair pulled up in a messy knot, and worn cut-offs and no shoes, padding around the kitchen getting them glasses of iced tea.

“Is that enough for you boys?” she’d asked. She leaned forward on the counter and her blouse opened in a V to show her breasts, and the one small, dark mole between them.

In the car now Marshall made the observation that everything Jane Woodford said seemed to carry sexual overtones.

“It’s like she wants me,” he said.

Billy reached over the seat and gave Marshall a good solid punch. “Have some manners,” he said. “Respect your elders.”

Ivy looked back at Jonah, but his face remained blank and expressionless, a look Ivy had noticed, and tried unsuccessfully to read.

“I think one of you should sit back here with us.” Billy said.

“Yeah, I feel segregated,” Jonah said. He cupped his hands and lit a cigarette.

Lately, he'd been wearing his private school shirts under a torn sweatshirt. Ivy could see the button-down collar, and the shirttails. His jeans had dirt imbedded in the knees from days ago, when they'd hiked up the mountain to Heublein tower, and he led them off on another trail to the ridge, to the old hang-gliding launch, an open space that gave way to the river valley below. You could hear the echo of the guns going off at the firing range, and see the toy-like cars passing on Simsbury Road. Jonah had gone right up to the edge, where there was one cedar, leaning and knotted, and nothing but sky, and knelt there like a penitent in the clay-colored dirt. Laurie had gasped and told him to get back, and Billy had taken her arm and shaken his head at her, given her a hard, serious look, so uncharacteristic she had to pay attention.

“His mother,” he said, whispering.

He did a little pantomime with a cigarette in his mouth. He spread his arms out, and held them over his head like a diver. He walked his two fingers on the edge of his palm, and had them leap off. Ivy and Laurie both seemed to remember the story at the same time. Laurie's face flushed and her eyes flashed at Ivy. Billy was saying that the woman who'd leapt from the ridge years ago had been Jonah's mother. The story was as well known as the one connected to Ivy's father. The woman had gone up there alone one fall afternoon. She'd undressed and left her clothes in a neatly folded pile—a nightgown, a camel hair coat. The clothing was discovered by hikers, sodden and molding and sprouting lichen. Laurie became very quiet. Ivy tried to pretend the knowledge didn't

affect her, but she wondered, the rest of the way to the top, what sent the woman to the ridge with her plan to leap off.

Everyone was too tired and winded from smoking and climbing to go up in the tower, but Ivy had wanted to do it, and she went alone. The staircase was warm, and outside the sun bounced around off the mica in the rocks. She wanted to see the valley again, and the color left in the sugar maples, and she looked out, safe behind the glass of windows labeled with their vantage point—north, south, east and west, each revealing the same hazy view. She read about the man who'd built the place as a summer retreat in 1914, modeling it after houses in a Bavarian village, anchoring it into the bedrock so that it would withstand one hundred mile an hour winds. And Jonah came up the stairs and moved behind her as if to read about the place, too, but instead he'd put his face into her hair, and exhaled, and she could feel his chest against her back, and his heart beating through his sweatshirt. Ivy felt as lightheaded as she had standing on the ridge. Her sadness for him made her awkward and quiet. They stood with their bodies touching, and Ivy leaned into him, and he leaned into her so that she could feel him harden in his jeans. She thought: *hungry urgency, pulsing core.*

Ivy and Laurie had unspoken rules about things. When a boy chose you, he was the one you went with. There was something a little immoral about switching off. Since Laurie was prettier, Ivy was used to liking whoever she ended up with. Maybe his hair was straggily, or he had a potbelly, or a face scarred by acne. Still, there was always the possibility of some hidden attribute—an ardor to his kissing, a certain amorousness, something as simple as knowing what to do with his tongue, or where to go once he got

her pants undone. Ivy had learned it was safer that they always liked her more. Liking someone too much went against everything she believed in, and the whole thing with Jonah in the tower unsettled her. Later, she wondered why she didn't take his hands and put them around her, or turn to face him, and kiss him, but maybe she'd wanted to be seduced like the women in Mrs. Prosser's romances, and for some reason that afternoon he wasn't ready to have her, or else he wasn't sure she was ready to let him. Now in the car Laurie turned and smiled at Billy and Jonah in the back seat.

"Is there room for me?" she asked.

Jonah slid over next to Billy and left a place by the passenger door. He patted the seat. "Right here on the burn hole, sweetheart," he said. Laurie tossed her hair and turned back around.

"Forget it," she said.

Ivy saw her bite her lip. Her skin was very pale, and her cheeks looked mottled from the cold. She glanced at Ivy, and her eyes still surprised her with their color—almost aqua, like the worn velvet couch in Marshall's grandmother's room at Brightview. Once, Ivy told this to Jonah, and he smiled. He said Laurie's eyes were the color of the Gulf of Mexico. Ivy said that sounded romantic, and he looked at her and shook his head.

"I didn't mean for it to," he said. His own eyes were nearly black. There was a sprinkling of acne on his nose, and a cut on his cheekbone from when he'd fallen, drunk, the night before. His lips were usually chapped, his hair dirty. Driving in a strangely quiet way that day to the Woodford's Ivy realized that Billy was by far the better looking of the two, that she might actually end up with the boy she really wanted.

As they passed Riley's Lumber and the engine whined up the cemetery hill it began to snow. Ivy told Marshall to pull over, and he turned into the cemetery drive and she got out and stood in the falling snow and closed her eyes. The rest of them stayed in the car. Ivy heard Laurie say, "She's been waiting for this," a soft aside. She heard Jonah make a noise, like a chuckle. Billy clambered out with a lit joint, and brought it to her. They stood looking down the cemetery hill, the smoke hot and harsh in her throat, the snow landing on their shoulders like the wood shavings from Riley's.

"Sit in the back," he said softly. He looked at her from under his long, soft bangs to see if she'd heard him. Ivy looked away.

"Why should I?" she asked.

Billy shook his bangs back and put the joint to his lips. The end lit up. He exhaled and smiled. "He wants you to," he said. Ivy knew then that they'd had the discussion, that things had been decided. Billy wanted Laurie, and Jonah wanted Ivy. Billy waited for her to return to the car, to climb into the back beside Jonah, but Ivy stood in the snow falling, unable to move. This was how it always went, she thought. Nothing surprised her about Billy's request. If she got into the back seat she would be doing what she'd planned. And yet she could not. She felt something slow-building, like grief.

Ivy went back to the car and got into the front beside Laurie, who glared at her. "What are you doing?" she hissed.

Ivy said nothing, leaden now with the feeling. She heard the back car door slam, and she smelled Billy's coat, the outdoors and the snow caught in the wool. They drove on to the Woodford's, with Marshall telling them a story about the depravity of the meat

packing industry, and no one saying anything in return, so that eventually he, too, stopped talking. Ivy thought maybe it was the snow, changing everything. It fell quickly, thickly, into shrubs and onto roofs and gables. They turned down Jonah's long drive, under the snow-covered arching limbs of beech trees. They went in through the sun porch, where Jane kept her *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* magazines, and a pair of hand-painted reading glasses. They kicked off their shoes. Jane heard them and met them in the kitchen. She had on a wool blazer and jeans and high-heeled boots.

"I was just going out," she said.

"You'd better not, Mrs. Woodford," Marshall told her.

"Is it slick?" she asked.

Marshall looked down at the toes of his white socks, and snickered. In the kitchen, Jonah started pulling open cabinets.

"Yeah, the roads are bad, Mrs. Woodford," Billy said. He beamed at her with glassy eyes.

"So, school's out early?" Jane said. Her boots tapped back into the kitchen.

"Jane, we're going to have a drink. Would you like one?" Jonah asked. He had glasses set out on the counter. Ivy saw Jane Woodford raise her eyebrows at him.

"Aren't you cute," she said, a little sourly.

Jonah looked up at her with that blank expression of his. "I'm having a Harvey Wallbanger," he said.

"What happened to good old hot chocolate?" she said.

But the thing they learned about Jane Woodford was that she was simply waiting for them to convince her otherwise. She was just as bored sitting around in a snowstorm as they were. She was the one who cracked open the Chardonnay, who pretended not to notice when Ivy and Laurie poured themselves a glass. They put on the news to watch the weather updates—the banner of cancellations that ran below the soap opera, the occasional interruption of a reporter waving his arm over a map of the area. The boys had gone upstairs to Jonah’s wing of the house. They had the stereo on, and the chandelier shook from the bass’s low end, and the little bulbs clicked off and on, so that finally Jane, annoyed, got a chair and climbed up to screw the bulbs in tighter. Ivy watched her boot heels sink into the velvet seat cushion. Jane had been in the middle of telling them a story about one of her old sorority parties. Ivy and Laurie had no intention of going to college, but they listened anyway, emptying the wine. Laurie had taken over refilling everyone’s glass, and then Jane climbed down off the chair and told her where to find another bottle in the refrigerator. Laurie left for the kitchen, and Ivy and Jane sat quietly, watching the snow land on the back patio’s cast-iron furniture.

“I’ve always liked being drunk in the middle of the afternoon,” Ivy said.

Jane laughed, and gave her a sideways look. She swiped her hair up off her face. “You’re not like other girls, are you?” she said.

Ivy didn’t know if she meant this as a compliment. They sat on the carpet in front of the couch. Laurie didn’t come back, and Ivy assumed she’d gone to the bathroom, or run into someone from upstairs, maybe Billy, or Jonah, come down for a refill. She didn’t imagine much more than that. Jane sighed and told Ivy her husband was probably living

it up on the West coast, where he'd gone on business. Ivy looked at her, steadily, and shrugged.

“Sometimes I wonder if he's met someone else,” Jane said.

She was watching Ivy, who didn't know how to react, and looked away. Jane tapped her nails on the base of her crystal glass. Ivy glanced back at her and Jane's eyes were wet under her bangs. She leaned in. “He and I were having an affair,” she whispered, her mouth very soft and pillowy, close to Ivy's face. “Before his wife left.” Ivy smelled Jane's perfume on the collar of her blouse, the wine on her breath. Jane shook back her soft hair and sipped from her glass. Ivy paled a little, picturing Jonah's mother learning the news, making her desperate plans. Jane squinted at her.

“He told you she jumped from the ridge, didn't he?”

Ivy opened her mouth to respond, and then understood that Billy had lied to them, that

Jonah had told him to. Jane made a disgusted face.

“That woman is alive and well in Suffield with a whole new family. I think he almost believes his own little story.”

And it must have been the way Ivy looked at her, differently, assessing, imagining her on the edge of a motel bed with a phone pressed to her ear, fanning red fingernails. Jane shifted around so that she faced Ivy, and pressed her forehead against Ivy's. “Don't blame me,” she said. “I'm so tired of being blamed.”

Ivy thought she should pull away from her, but she did not. Their foreheads settled hard and bony against each other. Maybe this was what best friends in sororities

did together, Ivy thought. Divulged secrets, shared tremendous burdens. She could feel Jane's breath and her lips on her cheek. *These high, wispy clouds, sometimes called mares' tails, are found at about 33,000 feet...* "Cirrus."

And then Jonah came to the doorway. He gave them his bland look, one that Ivy now understood meant they should never feel sorry for him. Jane pulled back and ran her hands through her hair. She gave a little false laugh.

"Are you ready?" he asked Ivy.

Ivy and Jane stared at him.

"What's going on?" Jane said.

Jonah had turned away from her and now he glanced back. "We're taking the snowmobiles out," he said.

Ivy stood and joined him in the doorway. Billy and Laurie came down the stairs—Billy's fingers threaded through one of her belt hoops, Laurie's shirt misbuttoned. Marshall was in the kitchen, filling containers with peppermint schnapps and Yukon Jack—a tarnished silver flask etched with a monogram, another that resembled a leather pouch with a strap, and an old canteen. There was a thermos, and a plastic Rubbermaid quart container that Jonah decided was too big.

"For who?" Marshall said, wagging his eyebrows.

Billy had Laurie up against the pantry doors, his hands along her waist, under her shirt where you could see her skin exposed, as pale as that on her face. They kissed, their mouths hidden by Laurie's hair. Jane joined Marshall at the counter, and nudged him, playfully with her elbow.

“I’m coming, too,” she said, ready for an adventure.

Ivy saw Marshall and Billy exchange looks. Jane handed out coats from the depths of a walk-in closet under the stairs. Down parkas with tags from Sundown and Sugarbush and Stowe, the pockets filled with old lozenges and gum wrappers, a receipt from a convenience store, a plastic-wrapped tampon, matchbooks and a folded five-dollar bill—things they laid on the counter before they left, like relics. They had all worn sweatshirts over, except for Billy, who had taken to wearing his grandfather’s navy-issue peacoat—too big, and smelling, faintly, of some lofty attic littered with insect wings.

Everyone trudged out the sunroom and up the path to the barn. In the summer this was gravel, lined with lilies. The pool lay to the left, covered then with vinyl and the snow that continued to fall, heavy and wet, icing up the hems of their jeans. All around everything was new and white and different. Ivy didn’t feel the cold. Jonah had come up to her and put a ski cap on her head, tugging it down to cover her ears. He did it the way you might dress a child, his face serious and intent. Ivy wondered if he thought he had to pretend he cared for her to have her, if maybe that was what she’d wanted all along, and he sensed it. The wool cap, the snowfall, muffled the world. Inside the barn it smelled like something combustible—gasoline and hay, and arrayed on a wall of shelves was an assortment of yard games—rolled badminton nets, and baskets of shuttlecocks, croquet mallets and wickets. There were rakes and shovels and bags of lime and ornamental pine bark. Jonah’s car sat in the middle of it all—not a sports car but an old Mercedes with a sky-blue paint job.

“Oh, I miss those days,” Billy said, placing his gloved hands on the hood, gently, reverently. He and Jonah stood side by side by the front bumper, and Ivy heard Billy say to him, “Maggie Simons, Amie Blackwell, Deirdre Compton,” and Jonah say back, “Check, Check, Check-plus.”

The snowmobiles were lined up along one wall, and Jane leaned against the car, giving them a dubious look. She wore a hat with a pompom. Her face looked tired, and older. As the boys filled the snowmobile’s tanks, she stood over them, asking them if they knew what they were doing.

“How much experience do you have?” she wanted to know.

“Oh, we’re experienced,” Marshall said. “Trust me, Mrs. Woodford.”

Billy handed her the silver flask. “You’re the keeper of the liquor,” he said.

Jane unscrewed the top and took a drink. “Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” she said under her breath.

The snowmobiles started right up. Jonah took hold of Ivy’s jacket sleeve, ensuring that she rode with him. Jane rode with Marshall, who had the least experience. Ivy imagined he’d never driven a snowmobile before. That, along with the distraction of Jane’s body against his, the presence of her thighs and arms, her peppermint breath in his ear, may have complicated everything even more. Billy and Laurie led the way down the drive, out to the unplowed road, and they wound along to the Heublein tower entrance and started up the trail. Ivy knew that Billy and Jonah had probably ridden these trails for years, but they were treacherous ones in the fading light and the falling snow. The snowmobiles’ headlights cut long swaths, but often there were unexpected dips that the

beams couldn't pick up, that lifted her off the seat and flung her about. She imagined that the chardonnay and the shots of schnapps weren't enough to fortify Jane against her apprehension. She could hear her shrieks through the whine of the engines, and when they stopped to have a drink Jane got off and trudged over to Jonah.

"I think it's time we head back," she said. They were under a canopy of pine, and it was warmer without the rush of wind. Jane's breath came out in a white plume. Her nose was red. Probably, this was the voice she used the times she'd tried to be a mother to him. Jonah looked up at her, askance. He wore an absurd hat with flaps over his ears.

"What's that?" he said, lifting one of the flaps.

Billy had lit a joint, and held it cupped in his palm. "It's not much farther," he said. "You'll make it."

She saw then that they were heading for the ridge. Jonah lifted a leg over and swiveled around to face Ivy. He took off his gloves, and found the leather flask, tipped it back and took a drink. His mouth was red, and wet. Jane's eyes pleaded with Ivy to relent. Jonah put his cold fingers on Ivy's chin and turned her face so she'd look at him.

"You're OK, right?" he said.

Jonah Woodford will be the first of a long line of boys she will come to recognize, steering around them carefully, leery of being drawn in. They are unflinching, unforgiving. They reveal nothing. Their souls have been rent and cauterized. That evening the snow fell in the snowmobile headlights and Jonah waited for something from her—a smile, a weakening. Jane tromped over to Billy and Laurie and began imploring

them to turn around. Ivy heard her voice, higher-pitched and disbelieving. She heard her change tactics, promise a warm fire, and more liquor. *Anything*, she said finally. *Just get me off this mountain.* Jonah kept his face close to Ivy's. As easy as it would have been to kiss his cold, wet mouth, and ask him to turn around, she didn't.

Ivy and Jonah led the rest of the way to the ridge. She didn't look to see who followed them. She half-expected to fly off the edge of the mountain, and she waited for the moment, with dread, and exhilaration, with a surrender she has never felt since. But Jonah knew when to slow and inch closer and stop. The snowmobile headlight marked the black sky. Someone joined them and Ivy turned to see Billy and Laurie. The engines cut off, and she heard Laurie crying, and Billy laughing at her.

"I hate you," Laurie said.

Ivy buried her face against Jonah's parka, and heard him clear his throat, a boyish, nervous sound. They passed the flask around, and waited for Marshall and Jane. They could hear the snowmobile engine in the distance. Jonah had a cigarette. As he smoked he told them about King Philip's War, and the cave that existed below the ridge. Once, King Phillip sat in his cave overlooking this valley and watched the warring tribes skirmish. The bodies fell and bled into the loamy soil.

"He sat in it and watched his warriors burn the town to the ground," he said. He threw his cigarette down into the snow, and all they could hear was the wind.

"This is where that woman jumped from," Ivy said. She didn't know what made her say it. Laurie's eyes widened. Ivy saw Billy glance down at his boots. Jonah shifted a

little on the seat. He looked back at Ivy. “Yeah, you’re right,” he said. She thought she saw a trace of a smile.

They sat listening for Marshall and Jane a while longer. Billy said maybe they’d turned back. They never heard anything more, and so they assumed they’d turned around, that Marshall could follow the trail down. They never went back the way they came, or tried to look for them. After the ridge they took another route through the woods and stopped at a wooden building that looked at night like another small barn, except that inside were bunks with a few rolled up sleeping bags, and a kerosene lantern and a fireplace. Billy and Jonah lit the lantern and made a fire, and Ivy could see a stack of board games—Parcheesi and Risk, their boxes mottled with mildew, and a yellowed map of the valley tacked to the wall. The two boys sat at an old Formica-covered table with metal legs, and Ivy and Laurie sat on the floor in front of the fire on one of the sleeping bags. It smelled of dust and damp, and faintly, of a man’s cologne. Laurie’s eyes were red from crying, and when she smoked a cigarette her hand shook. She kept giving Ivy looks, and seemed not frightened but confused. They were mute from the cold and the liquor. Ivy felt the heat of the flames on her face, and kept imagining herself plummeting from the ridge, even though the worst of what might have happened to them was over by then, and all that was left was what they’d planned from the beginning, having sex in this place where there were probably condoms in one of the kitchen drawers, and more liquor stashed up above the sink. In the summer they left the windows open and the night noises and the mosquitoes came in, and the girls left with dime-sized bites, and knotted hair smelling of camphor. It wasn’t any use trying to make these boys love them. They knew

that all along. But maybe Laurie had hoped it, and maybe even Ivy had, for a moment, longed to be viewed as someone other than what she'd amounted to at the time.

The boys drank, and sat talking quietly together, pretending to ignore them. The lantern made hollows in the planes of their faces. Ivy and Laurie listened in and learned that this was an old hunting lodge they'd come to with their fathers. They overheard their stories of deer kills, and spilled blood, and skinnings, and how Jonah threw up in the snow, and his father had called him a pussy, and Jonah had hit him.

"Once, right in the face," he said. "My glove was all iced up, and it cut him under the eye."

"How'd it feel?" Billy asked.

"It felt good," Jonah said. "Really good."

His voice held a certain amount of amazed tightness, as if he hadn't ever spoken about the incident before. The fire warmed the place up, and Ivy could almost imagine she was where she wanted to be. Eventually the boys put out the lantern and unrolled sleeping bags onto the bunks on either side of the room. Ivy could hear the creaking of the wood boards as they stretched out. She and Laurie waited, and then Billy called Laurie over, plaintively. "It's cold over here, sweetheart," he said. And she got up gratefully and Ivy heard her boots clomping across the floor into the dark part of the room. She was foolish enough to imagine Jane settled into her comfortable bed, the old house's furnace chugging on, her feet warming up under the covers. That Marshall had found a place on the couch in the family room, or Jane had given him a bed in the guest room, or that miraculously, out of gratitude and a slight drunkenness, something had

actually happened between them, and Marshall would have a story to confess to Ivy and Laurie sitting on the low wall of the smoking pavilion at school, his feet shuffling the crushed butts, his breath a cloud fogging his glasses.

Ivy stretched out in front of the fire and put her head on her folded arms. The snow blew in spurts against the windows. It piled in drifts around doors and covered porch steps. The police drove cruisers with chains on the tires through the unplowed neighborhoods—up Foothills Way and down Butternut Drive, monitoring everyone’s safety. Ivy imagined herself in her own bed in her room, and her parents’ closed door across the hall, and the clank of the cruisers’ chains past the house. In Brightview Marshall’s grandmother might feel the presence of the snow against her room’s plate glass window. The heat would be on. She’d wear a quilted robe and the mohair afghan pulled up around her. Ivy imagined herself on her aqua-colored couch, reading: *He mastered her mouth and her body until she was weeping with it.* Marshall’s grandmother’s eyelids fluttered, pale and veined.

In the dark lodge Ivy listened to Billy’s heavy breaths, the rustling of clothes, Laurie’s soft assents. Jonah lay alone in his bunk. He didn’t need warmth, or sex, or anyone’s love. His and Ivy’s silences complimented each other, their bodies separated and resigned to other places—his back at the ridge, the snow and the height dizzying. And hers held fast to the silty bottom of the river where the woman takes a final breath of brackish water, where the ice moves in, and then the thaw, until it is a spring day above, the currents swift and tugging her arms, the boats cutting the surface, churning the water on their way to Hamburg Cove for picnic lunches. Buttercups bloom on the banks. The

buoys bob and drag. Hornets nest in the rotting pilings. The shad and trout and river herring nibble her limbs, her face, take small stinging bites, their tails thrashing and quick. The seaweed tangles in her hair.

Jonah rose from his bunk. Ivy heard his footsteps approach and then he was beside her on the floor. He lay back and stared up at the ceiling. They listened together to Billy's last moan, and the ensuing quiet. Their arms touched, and nothing else. Ivy and Laurie will have this one night with these two boys, and then the boys will be done with them. The next day they will learn of the accident, and Marshall carrying Jane all night down the mountain to stumble onto freshly plowed Simsbury Road and the morning traffic. Marshall will survive to show them his foot without the toes lost to frostbite. Jane's face, blue-tinged, eyes open and accusing, her pretty hair frozen with blood and snow, will haunt him for years. Ivy and Laurie will share a guilty feeling, a smothering sense of loss before they part ways and there are other boys. That night in the lodge Ivy turned on her side and looked at Jonah, his profile calm and emotionless, waiting for her to close the space between them, to do what he had heard she did best. But she is a smart girl who will not be used. *The force of the heart's contraction arises from what muscular tissue?* she asked him. Below the ridge houses sat tucked into the mountain, the people in them shadows passing lit windows with cups of tea. Only Ivy sees the woman's body he sends tumbling, white and languid past the ghost of old King Philip.

Tropical Passions

The ledge is just wide enough for their chairs. Jules settles into hers, aluminum with plastic slats. Nearby the power lines tremble and hum like something about to explode. Cars passing below say, “Hush.”

Jules sees a house across the street and thinks: my house—brick front, shutterless, lined with shrubs and small flowering trees, deep grass covered with large leaves, horse chestnut, elm, dried brown, weightless, and something else, which she breathes from way up on the roof of the Hotel Poinciana, where the pebbles slide under her chair as she leans back and hears, “Come inside, Jules,” and what she breathes is not a smell but a sense of the place hiding under the arms of the trees. And then she sees her father’s car, a gold fin poking out of the garage, the red and green lawn mower, and her sister’s bicycle tires. Jules is sure those are the spokes shining. And is that her mother opening the front door? Her head is dark, her step light down the concrete walk, but her skin is too dark. Or is that the shadow of the trees she moves under? She has left the door open.

Jules wants to go inside the house. The desire makes her weak, unable even to lift her hand from the arm of the chair. She is reminded of dreams in which she is running and doesn’t move.

“This is a strange place,” Star says. They are both on the roof, sunbathing. Four flights down in the bar, the band is rehearsing. The music booms up through the floor. The tiny white pebbles roll to the edge of the roof and fall, down, down into the tops of

palms, ping delicately on the hood of a car. Jules listens to the deep pound of the bass, and another sound, higher pitched, plaintive, almost fearful, which is Zelly singing.

“It’s haunted,” Jules says. She closes her eyes, so that she cannot see the house across the street, and the urge to go inside is still there, draining her of strength, so that were she standing in front of it now, she would not be able to step through the door.

“Where are you, Sweetie?” Star asks. She stands over Jules wearing a pair of men’s sunglasses, heavy black frames that slip off the end of her nose. Star’s voice is like singing. She smooths Jules’s hair off her forehead, then disappears. Jules hears her climb through the hotel window into the room.

“Come inside, Jules,” she says.

Jules knows that the house is not her house at all, that the woman she saw looking so much like her mother is not her mother, yet she believes if she goes inside the house she will smell sweet basil, and the smell of the floorboards, the cane rushing on the hall bench, wet from the rain that sprays in through the screen on the open window. The rain is sudden and soft. It is her mother who leaves the window open, who remembers she did while they are driving in the gold car, the tires crunching hickory nuts in the road, Jules and Delores in the back seat, fighting over a Chinese jump-rope, Delores’s teeth closing on Jules’s arm, their mother’s head, covered with bone lace, turning, eyes reproofing, their father’s one thick hand cutting the air, the other still gripping the wheel and driving the car home from church. It is a spring day. The leaves on the trees flip in the wind, bright then dull, then bright again.

“It’s going to rain. The guys are done downstairs,” Star says.

Jules opens her eyes. The sky is boiling, gray-blue. When she stands up to step through the window, cool air brushes her face, her lips, like a kiss. Inside the room she lies down on the bed. The sheets are white and stiff. They wilt from the heat of her body and cling to her skin. She waits for Zelly and the rain starts, heavy drops that leave wet spots the size of quarters on the floor. The wind blows the rain toward the bed, whips the curtains out and back, and Jules watches one chair, then the other, sail off the roof. They fly straight off, bend in the wind, and disappear into the gray rain.

Star is gone. Her room is one flight down. She calls Jules on the phone.

“Get the chairs,” she says.

“Too late,” Jules tells her, thinking, *where is he?*, wanting him there, knowing that under the weight of his body she will have a time and place that is her own, where she is not floating off alone. At home her mother measures the rooms for new wallpaper. She doesn’t know that she has let her children go, one by one like balloons.

Jules has come to the hotel for the weekend.

“It’ll be a surprise,” Star said. “Don’t you like Zelly?”

But the last time they had driven to see the band she sat in the motel room with Zelly for three hours watching his fingers flick over the guitar strings. When he finally reached for her she felt he did it out of boredom.

“Major Will tells me Zelly likes you—really,” Star said.

Jules knew that this might be a lie, but Star believed Major Will loved her, and *she* was perfectly happy.

She and Star drove straight through the night, both of them quiet. They pulled into the parking lot of the Hotel Poinciana and Star said, “Well,” to fill the silence when the car engine stopped.

“I heard this used to be a resort,” she told Jules. “Rich people came up the river on a steamboat.”

“It leans a little,” Jules said, staring up, stalling, not wanting to go inside yet. But then Star slammed the car door and fumbled with her keys at the trunk. “Let’s go,” she said.

Inside the lobby a man on a bicycle pedaled past Jules and out the door. He smelled of river muck. It was eight a.m. She knocked on the door of Zelly’s room for ten minutes and finally the man downstairs let her in with the key. “I’m sure this is the room,” he said, staring at the folds of the perfectly made bed.

Zelly found her that afternoon, as she pretended to sleep. He stood over her and said, “What are you doing here?” more annoyed than surprised, not bothering to wake her, to touch her shoulder, or to say anything gentle, just the question, blunt, too loud. She had to kiss him first, take off his shirt and pretend she did not smell someone else’s perfume, see the skin of his neck, soft purplish from another mouth. Afterwards he kissed her forehead, a sweet kiss that seemed to Jules, a kiss for a child, a reward.

Tonight, she waits and Zelly doesn’t come. She says a word, “Hello,” into the room, to test her voice, to see if it is still there. Her voice sounds the same, with a little lonely flatness to it. She calls her mother collect. Jules’s mother seems edgy, tapping her nails on the receiver. She tells Jules, “Wait a minute,” and drops the phone twice.

“What does your hair look like now?” Jules asks.

“It’s shoulder length, reddish,” her mother says.

Jules imagines her sitting at the kitchen table in their old house, twisting the yellow phone cord, tracing the designs on a white napkin, or passing through the rooms, a bright shadow in an orange flowered robe, her wrists dangling below the quilted sleeves.

“Reddish?” Jules asks.

“He’s home,” her mother says suddenly. In the background a door slams. “Just go watch TV, I’m on the phone.”

Someone’s heavy feet clomp across the floor. Jules realizes with a quick twist in her stomach that this is Richard Sears, her mother’s husband, and that her mother is in her new house, not the one Jules grew up in. But she knew this all along. She helped her mother move in, had unpacked her grandmother’s Haviland china. Now Richard is home, slurring something and her mother is telling him, “Go into the other room and sit down,” firmly, patiently.

“What’s his problem?” Jules asks, still confused, not sure where to place her mother. She remembers the clean lines of the modern house, the bare rooms, the kitchen and its stainless steel, like a laboratory, the wall of windows with views into woods and the trees raining down leaves. It would be winter. During the day the white would send its glare through the glass to reflect off the appliances. At night, the floodlights would click on and the yard would glimmer with ice.

“What do *you* think?” her mother asks.

“Do you want to hang up? Say you’re talking to me,” Jules tells her. She wants to ask why her mother has married yet another drunk, but she does not. Once, in front of a bar in their hometown, Richard Sears had tried to force Jules to go home, and in the scuffle he’d slapped Jules across the face. The slap had a strange metallic echo Jules will not forget, like the feeling of miscounting steps in the dark, of stepping up to one that isn’t there.

“I’ll let you go,” Jules says, mimicking her mother, a woman unable to deal with anyone’s life but her own.

Jules feels inside the pockets of Zelly’s leather pants, goes through his black zippered bag. She takes a shower. In with his shaving things she finds song lyrics written on a folded piece of notebook paper. She reads them quickly, listening for the door, but the song disappoints her. It is a ridiculous love song about a girl with angel’s hair and sweet lights in her eyes. It could not be a song about any real girl. It is certainly not about her. Jules’s hair is dyed black as death.

Now it is late. She looks out the window and her face stares back. Her house could be anywhere, miles away, around the corner, or right there, across the street. Jules opens the window and leans on the ledge. The woman peeks out at her from behind sheer drapes. A blue car pulls into the driveway and people get out, slowly, an old man and two women. Jules doesn’t know them, has never known anyone like them, and the house is suddenly not hers, there are too many trees on the lawn, too few windows, the front door is the wrong color, and without a brass knocker. The visitors move slowly to the door and the woman swings it open. “My!” she cries, surrounded by light, and Jules is dismayed at

the shrill sweep of her voice, the fullness of the woman's hips that she did not notice earlier.

She smells Star cooking for Major Will in their room. She circles the bed and imagines who Zelly is with, someone upstairs, in another room like this. In the bathroom the tiled floor slants up. She sits on the toilet lid and thinks about smoking a cigarette, thinks about where she might find one, roaming up and down the long halls, rapping on the doors of empty rooms.

Last night during the band's break they came upstairs with their drinks and watched the big black-and-white television in Zelly's room. They sat on the green vinyl couch, Jules and Star and Major Will. Zelly sprawled on the bed.

"Show us the rooms upstairs," Star said. She elbowed Major Will. He made a clucking sound and slid down into the couch.

"What rooms?" Jules asked.

"Now you've got her started," Major Will said.

Zelly scooted to the edge of the bed and stuck a beer bottle between his legs. He stared at Jules as if he were trying to imagine her as someone else. *Blond hair*, she thought, he wants me to have blond hair, the kind that is full of static electricity, that clings to the backs of couches and chairs.

"What are you moping about?" Zelly asked. She was surprised. She thought she'd been smiling.

Star licked the salt from the rim of her glass.

“The whores’ rooms are upstairs,” she told Jules. “Their names are on the doors. The rooms are little and steamy, like closets.”

“This place used to hop,” Major Will said. “Whores on every floor, knocking on doors.”

His face was very serious, pinched. He wore small, round blue-tinted glasses.

“Really?” she asked. “When was that?”

“Long time ago. Twenties or thirties, I think,” he said.

“I don’t want to go,” Jules said.

“They’re little tiny rooms, Jules. Little plates on the doors that say their names,” Star said.

“So what are their names?” Jules asked.

“One says, ‘Star,’ I think,” Major Will said. He squinted, trying to remember.

Star grinned and punched him in the arm. Her drink spilled over the green couch and Jules and Major Will had to jump off. Zelly was already at the door, laughing.

“Come on, Jules,” he said. “I want to show you something,” his face masked, his hands reaching for her.

Jules slipped by and ran from him down the hall. Later she hid on the roof ledge, breathing in night mist, the rotting smell from too much rain and shade. She heard them shuffling the pebbled drive below, Star, Zelly and Major Will, their voices floating, looking for her, wondering. If she called to them their faces would turn up like three white moons. “What are you doing?” Zelly would say. He would drag her up all those flights of stairs and show her the rooms, airless, full of the staleness of sweat and powder.

She could not bear to read the names on the doors, so he would read them aloud to her. He would take her into one of the rooms, push her down onto a narrow gray mattress that would explode with dust, set the floors and walls shuddering with the movement of roaches. Her body would fit into the groove in the mattress where a woman named Ruth, dead now, made love, the impression of her spine one long painful line in the stained material. Jules leaned into the old wall, waiting for them to leave, listening to the soft slow grind of the pebbles whispering under their feet.

Now, tonight, the silence of the room presses against her. Jules thinks the hallway is like a possibility, dimly lit, peeling, and yet leading to stairways and more halls, more places to find what she is looking for, though she is not quite sure what that is. She doesn't want a cigarette anymore. Sitting in her room she thinks she hears someone, imagines the whores, their desires sending them up and down the halls in short dresses that shimmy around their knees. Their eyes are bleak outlines against powdery skin. And the smell of them—jasmine, orange blossom.

The hallways seem damp. Mold grows in the ornate corners of the plaster ceiling. Through the open window at the end of the hall she sees the lush tops of trees, gray-green with vines flowering mottled trunks. At night her mother will sit on the couch wrapped in her afghan, doing the books for her new hair salon, purchased to keep her days full and busy. The furnace will click on, and the heat will emerge from the register to toss around the dust. She will have a bowl forced bulbs with the green beginnings of amaryllis jutting out between the white stones. No one here realizes that it is some other season, Jules thinks. They are all southerners, used to summer, the swamps, the wet bark of trees.

She finds Star's room. Major Will has already gone downstairs, his blue glasses abandoned on the bureau.

"Is it that late?" Jules asks.

Star is fixing her hair in the bathroom mirror. Jules puts the glasses on, plops down on the bed where she can see Star, a blue shape struggling with handfuls of hair, crying. Jules doesn't want to know what's wrong, but Star sways into the room and falls back on the bed next to her.

"I drank too much," she says.

"So what happened?" Jules asks.

Star springs up on the bed. "I just love him to death," she says. She pulls her mouth into a sad smile. Her face is blotched blue. Jules smells the gardenia perfume Star dabs on the undersides of her wrists, where her skin is cool and very white. Jules has begun to wonder about the word love again. She feels it is dangerous and strange. She doesn't trust it. When Jules calls home and her mother is gone, out shopping, or lunching, or at the salon visiting with clients, it is as if something has suddenly, sorrowfully been pulled away. "You know," Jules says, "you used to rake leaves and spend time in the yard. You used to cook."

"I know," her mother says, though not as wistfully as Jules would like. At one time her mother's preoccupations would have been what kind of roast her husband would bring home, how she would cook it, where her last pack of cigarettes was. In the drawer in the kitchen? In the cupboard under the bookcase?

Jules wonders if there is a crate of apples in her mother's garage, what the snow will cover up in the back yard. Lost mail, a rake, someone's royal blue glove?

Star tells her she is going to sleep. "I was almost going to have a baby," she says. "I could be a mom right now, cutting up sandwiches into little triangles."

Jules nods her head.

Star's eyes are closed and she curls up on the bed. Jules thinks she should say something kind, but she cannot. She smooths Star's forehead with her hand until Star is asleep. She takes five cigarettes from the pack beside the bed and smokes them one after the other wandering the halls, her feet flattening the buckled carpet. For a while she imagines she is walking with the whores door to door. They pull on her arm like little girls. They run past her down the hall, a flash of bright material, the shimmer of sequins. None of them lasts long. They glow and fade before Jules can see their faces, learn their names. This is a crumbling, wasted place, she thinks. She goes back to the room and lies down on the vinyl couch, slips across that seamless green that looks black in the dark. There is a moon, faint behind clouds. No stars tonight, she sees. She takes off her clothes. The couch is cold.

"Come inside, Jules," she hears. It is her mother's voice, calling from across the street, from their house. Jules is in a group of people. She is twelve years old, clutching a white pillow. Someone had called out for a pillow, and she had run back to her bedroom and taken hers off the bed. She pushes through the crowd and hands it to a man. Mr. Jacobson, the oil man. They are in front of his house, gathered around a telephone pole and a boy who is spread out on the black tar road. They place the pillow under his head

and the pillow is immediately, brilliantly red. Jules stands over the boy, a teenager whose motorcycle hit the pole. The motorcycle is twisted metal shining away in the sun on the sidewalk. The neighbors murmur, a noise that might be a swarm of bees.

Jules's mother is in the crowd. "Jules," she calls, sharper now. But Jules cannot move, she watches the red bloom over the bright white pillowcase. The boy grabs the hem of her dress then, her peach-colored dress with the lace hem and big organdy bow. She tries to pull it back, tugging at it with both hands. Everyone steps away. No one knows what to do. Mr. Jacobson, on his knees in his gray uniform, stares at the air between them. The boy's hand shakes. His eyes say something. His mouth is soft, pale. Jules is aware of aching green lawns, the spike holes in the telephone pole, the smell of the new black tar road still wet from rain, steaming.

She would not have known the boy died if it weren't for the strange plainness of the silence, as if everyone had the breath knocked out of them all at once. Her mother pulls her by the arm. Her father is there, her sister, Delores. They're huddled on the front steps, looking scared. Inside the house her mother smooths and smooths her hair. Her father turns on the television. She sleeps on a new pillow, flatter, with pink roses. She takes the pillow out of the case to make sure there are no stains. She has learned something; dying is not at all like falling asleep. Your eyes are open the whole time, you see it happen. When she closes her eyes the boy's eyes say something. It is not about dying, it is about living.

Zelly slips into the room. He stumbles across the blue shadows on the floor. His body is long and thin, a stranger's. Jules thinks she will leap from the couch in the dark,

spring on him, fall to her knees and lay her head against the soft place below his waist. From the couch she sees him lie down on the bed. She listens to him breathing. Outside in the wide carpeted hall she hears the whores passing by in spangled dresses, the rub of their stocking thighs, their footsteps. They are not ghosts. They are leftover pieces of real women. None of them have angel's eyes. They slide by, brush bare white arms against the wallpaper. Their laughs are muted, hushed, dry as dust. They whisper to her.

Zelly says, "Come here," as if he has decided something. But she has not decided anything. She looks away and pretends she is in her bed in her old house, that there is nothing else but the cool palm of her mother's hand, her voice saying, "Shush, Shush," the white sheet, the flattened pillow, the roses and the roses' stems, green, intertwining with wide leaves. Soon she will tiptoe across the room, slip into the bed beside him. And there will be that feeling that is death lying in the narrow space between them. But afterwards, she imagines, this time, he will do more than kiss her on the forehead. He will tell her he loves her, instead. And that, then, will calm the trembling in her arms and legs.

Nude on Thin Ice

Back in high school, when the mothers of boys would call to say that Jules was not a good influence on their sons, Jules would laugh and make light of it, take bottles from her mother's liquor cabinet and spend the day up in the woods behind their house. There was a dirt road that used to be the main road, that used to swerve up beside the house and disappear into thick trees. You could see where it had been changed, where the old tar ended and turned to dirt and ruts filled with leaves. The old road went straight up. It was a treacherous hill Jules would not want to drive. Near the top you could look down into a ravine and see the cars, the windshields splintered webs, the paint old gray and faded blue. The vinyl seats had burst in spots, the foam stuffing swelling out, mottled, molded. In the summer they were covered with sweet-smelling vines. Violets grew out of the floorboards. Jules and her girlfriend, Mandy, found the cars. They both aimed nose-first into the ravine, one on each side. They took their boyfriends there when the weather was good. The boys all thought they were crazy at first. But Jules always sensed something about the spot, the smell of the cars turning into the woods, the quiet of it happening while she and the boy rolled in the back seat, avoiding the coiled springs, feeling the sun's heat on the metal roof, some blue sky showing where it had rusted through.

Jules's girlfriends, the ones from high school, like Mandy, had all moved on—enrolled in college courses, or gotten married and attained some form of respectability. The ones who lived in town didn't associate with Jules, but the boys, grown up and unhappy with their state in life, still saw her. They took her to their softball games, or to the car races at Riverside Park and then had sex with her after. They confessed things to her, sensing she was not like other girls. In this way she learned that at night, when Mandy Ralston's parents pulled their new Lincoln out of the wide, two-car garage, drove the three miles into town and baked the doughnuts for their shop, Mandy was there at the ranch house on Butternut Drive with her old boyfriend, Tucker. He parked his GTO plain as day in the driveway. Mandy let him in the back sliding glass door, into the basement that had wood paneled walls and green indoor/outdoor carpet.

“Do you call first?” Jules asked him. They were both under the covers. It was New Year's Eve, snowing still. Once in a while she heard a car pass in the street below. The chains on its tires clanked. Tucker laughed. He threw his head back and she felt his whole body shake.

“No,” he said, finally. “No, I don't call.”

“You mean you just show up? You could go there right now?”

He smiled at her. She could just see his eyes squint in the light from the hall. He felt around on the table by the bed for his pack of cigarettes. “U-huh,” he said.

Tucker had known Mandy for three years. Jules was a little envious of this. It was the only thing Mandy had that she didn't. Every so often she saw the three years tug at him, when he played the tape with “Brown-Eyed Girl” on it, when they saw Mandy

somewhere, at Park Avenue Pizza, in Drug City buying cigarettes, and she pretended they weren't there. He told Jules flat out that he used to sing the song to her.

“Maybe you two should get back together,” Jules said then, but he would laugh and change the words to the song for her, “green-eyed girl,” even though she told him he didn't have to do that. She knew he still saw Mandy. He would tell Jules he went by her house, and she'd smile, keep her eyes wide, “You didn't stop? What time was it?” It doesn't matter, she'd say. He believed her and told her everything. No one else knew. The neighbors maybe noticed the car at night, a black GTO with fat tires and blue and red Hawaiian leis hanging from the rearview mirror, but they didn't see the Ralstons, who slept in shifts during the day, who didn't even know their neighbors' names, probably would never enjoy their wooded back yard, or neighborhood lobster bakes. Jules got a kind of satisfaction in the fact that Mandy Ralston wasn't what people thought, that they were more alike than Mandy would ever admit.

Tucker smoothed the covers from the bed and sat up to smoke his cigarette. He wore a flannel shirt. Jules watched him blow smoke into the room, but she couldn't tell if it was from the cigarette or the cold. She wrapped her arms around his waist and curled up on the bed behind him. She warmed her face on his back. She hadn't paid the bill, so there wasn't any heat in her apartment. It was a little place over an antique wicker shop. The building was old and the foundation was made of stone. Usually when things broke, or she needed help with bills, she talked to Frannie, the lady who owned the building and the shop downstairs, but she was away for the holidays.

Tucker undid Jules's arms and slid her across the bed so he could look at her. "This isn't very healthy," he said. "Why don't you go stay with your mother?"

"I like this," she said. "It's like *Doctor Zhivago*."

He crawled back under the blankets. The problem was they were both sobering up and it was too cold to sleep. She didn't tell him that the spare rooms in her mother's house were called *the office*, and *the workout room*, and the one extra room was still painted pale green and lavender, with white shelves built into the walls lined with stuffed animals and Fisher-Price toys in anticipation of an event that would never occur. In the corner was a spot for the refinished crib that still sat in Frannie's shop downstairs. She didn't tell him that if she stayed with her mother it would be temporary, in a make-shift bed on the couch, that she would have had to watch her mother's husband shuffle by at night, scratching down his shorts on the way to the kitchen, an insomniac who wanted his couch back, irritated, glaring at her from the doorway like an owl or a bat. She felt like Tucker should know this already, that he should surprise her by being smarter than she thought he was.

"Dr. *who*?" he asked, and then he shifted the topic back to Jules's mother, how nice she was, how she cut his hair for half-price because he was seeing Jules. Her mother's salon was popular, and her mother was a fixture, prying town gossip out of anyone walking through the door, whether they sat in her chair or not. Jules couldn't imagine how they left without feeling slightly guilty. Maybe because their hair looked so good—they forgot. Jules went to the place, Hair Flair, once in a while. She let one of the hairdressers trim her ends. She stole the makeup displayed on a glass shelf—eye shadow

and teal eye liner from France, stuffed them in the bag with the shampoo that her mother gave her—strawberry-smelling gel in a long white tube.

Last time Jules went she told the girl she wanted something different. She wanted to dye it again, blonde maybe, or red. Her mother overheard and when the girl went in back to mix the color she came over to her.

“Who are you trying to look like now?” she asked.

Her mother’s hair was perfectly straight, in a nice, neat bob. When she talked and moved her head it swished along her chin. She was only a little pregnant then, and you couldn’t see anything under her fuchsia silk blouse.

“I’m trying to look like me,” Jules said. It was that simple, but a hard thing, she saw from her mother’s face, for anyone else to understand. When her mother went back to the front Jules took a pale melon lipstick and some cake mascara while one girl filed her nails and another bent down to sweep gray hair into a dustpan.

She felt Tucker shiver.

“Come by me,” she said. She saw his eyes open, glassy, staring at the ceiling. She pulled on him, but he weighed too much for her to move. His stomach was round. It sagged a little over the elastic of his underwear. Her friend, Betty, from work called him fat. Jules had only known Betty for the few months she’d worked at Connecticut General, the two of them filing endless forms in drawers, smoking cigarettes and drinking spiked diet soda on their many breaks, a job her mother’s husband found for her, one she wouldn’t have for long. Betty had come over the night before last and wanted to know what Jules was doing New Year’s Eve.

“You’re going out with Tubber, right?” she said. She was in the kitchen, getting the glasses. A cigarette dangled from her lower lip. In winter Jules drank amber-colored liquor, whiskey or brandy or dark rum. It burned going down and kept her warm. In summer she had chilled vodka, like an ice cube, maybe with lemon, or gin and tonics. Betty had no problem with the heat being off. She kept her coat and gloves on while she mixed their drinks.

Tucker was up now, putting on his clothes. The new snow and the street light outside made the room blue.

“Let’s go,” he said.

Jules was too cold to get up and dress, but she didn’t want him to leave.

“Go where?” she asked. She stayed where she was, huddled under the three blankets. He reached under and pulled her out but she hung on and the blankets came off the bed with her.

“A ride,” he said. “With the heat on.”

He held her like a baby.

“Let me dress,” she said.

“Just go like this,” he said, and she thought about it for a minute, riding naked on the car seat with the heat blowing out of the vents and snow all around. Then she put on jeans and a sweater and her yellow ski parka. She tucked her jeans into a pair of hiking boots. On the floor she stepped over the clothes she wore to dinner earlier, the black pantyhose, her high heels and a black lycra dress she bought that fit like a bathing suit. They’d gone to La Trotteria, where the waiters wore white cloths over their arms. They

sat at a long table with all of Tucker's friends and their wives or girlfriends. All the women stared at her out of the corners of their eyes. Just before midnight, the restaurant gave their table a bottle of champagne and hats with elastic and glitter, blowers with frayed crepe paper, and balloons. They arranged them around their dessert plates and waited. After midnight Jules saw some of the women sweep their favors off the table and into their purses, and she remembered when she would have taken them herself, stored them in a shoebox on her closet shelf. She had a box for each boy she went with. She kept beer bottle caps, pencils printed with "Junior's Texaco," a Harley-Davidson emblem. Everything was a code that was meant to be unraveled in her memory. Everything stood for a day or a time that she gradually forgot. She couldn't even remember when she threw everything out.

This New Year's Jules's mother had invited her to her house. She and her husband would have a small party and invite a few "nice people," as her mother put it over the phone, her voice soft and leaden from some sort of pill. Jules was glad she had called rather than come over. Usually the minute she opened the door her mother started. It was not the same talk every time. She told Jules her life history, which was always a different story. It was about her parents; her father's eyebrows, the way her mother's mouth sagged to one side, with red lipstick. Or it was something about herself, as a teenager starting her period, or her high school graduation that she missed, but didn't miss, how much better love was then, how she wanted to get pregnant and did, how she never wanted to be pregnant again. At the time, she still was.

“Do you think I want this responsibility?” her mother had said. She pointed to her stomach. Her hands hovered over it, afraid to touch it. Jules was never sure what to say back. She stared at her, seeming compassionless. Her mother looked back at her, about to cry.

“I am telling you this for a reason,” she said.

Jules had figured it all out, but still she didn’t let on. And then her mother lost the baby, and she stopped coming over with her advice. Jules thought finally she had given up on her.

It was the same way with her father. He lived in a beach house year-round, a leaning, peeling thing on Long Island Sound. Jules was there once with Mandy—they tracked him down, went to a little bar where he drank and listened to blues guitar and some rock-and-roll played by a band of old men. He looked like the house he lived in. Jules had skipped school. The bar was full of people rolling around drunk in the middle of the afternoon. She wore white sandals and someone stepped on her foot. Her toenails were painted seashell pink. Later that week, with a boy named Daniel, she would notice the color of the nails, the bright pink on her white feet, notice, too, the bruised spot where the polish was scraped off. They were in the blue car in the ravine. It was just spring and the air was clean and the light was so new and the leaves so green that the toenails seemed unnatural, like a camera flash, catching her eyes, moving like something separate from her against the brown foam of the car seat.

Her father used to call every once in a while. He’d say, “What’s going on?” as if they spoke every day. Before, she would picture him on the beach in an Adirondack

chair, a pair of binoculars around his neck, shirtless, salty, leaning into a cordless phone. She always thought she could hear the Sound, water on sand, maybe some birds and the wind through the phone. Later, after she saw him, she knew that she was talking to a long man in a wrinkled dress shirt with his belly swelling out, lying on a worn couch with a phone propped by his ear and his two hands, swollen and blue, draped over his crotch.

“Come visit me,” he would say. “Bring your sister,” and Jules’s mother would cup her hand over the receiver and tell her what to say back. They sat with their heads together and the phone between them. When they hung up and pulled apart her mother’s perfume clung to the side of her face. She smelled it outside in the sun, in the fresh air. Whoever kissed her along her right ear would comment on it. It stayed all day, bothering her.

“She says she’s engaged,” Tucker said. He was talking about Mandy. They were in his car, and the windshield and the windows were covered with snow. She felt like they were underwater. The heat was on, warming everything up, but it was taking a long time for the ice to thaw so they could see out. She took off her coat. She pulled at the front of Tucker’s shirt.

“She’s doing that to make you mad,” she said, and she kissed him. “Are you mad?”

He grinned and did his laugh so she wouldn’t worry why he thought about Mandy all the time. Tucker reached around and pulled a six-pack of beer from the back seat. The cans were so cold it was hard to hold them with her bare hands. The ice inside banged against the aluminum. They drank them anyway.

“You went out with the guy she’s seeing, didn’t you?” Tucker asked.

“Probably,” she said. She smiled at him across the car seat. There was no need for him to ask her about the new boyfriend. He would be a different person with Mandy. He would stop by his house to pick up the wallet he forgot and bring her inside with him, through the kitchen where his mother would be finishing up the supper dishes or sitting at the kitchen table scanning new recipes in a magazine. She would ask Mandy’s last name and know her parents, invite her for supper one night soon, smile at her, and if there was time, show her something: a crocheted doll she made, a painting or a photograph, a special plant. All of this would happen after one kiss, before he ever tried to touch one of her breasts.

Jules supposed Tucker knew this, that he would change the subject, back the car out of the driveway, finish his beer or light a cigarette. But he surprised her. He took her face in his hands and stared at her. His hands were cold from the beer can. His face was so close she felt him breathing through his nose. She was suddenly frightened, knowing she had not fooled him, knowing that what she said from now on would not fool him either.

“Tell me about these guys you’ve gone out with,” he said. “Why did you give in to all of them?”

“You must mean why did they give in to me?” she asked. She thought she smiled as she said it, but she heard her voice shake. She closed her eyes and felt his hands drop away from her face like a layer of her skin. Her cheeks were cold, exposed.

The snow slid down the warm windshield in clumps. She looked through and saw it was almost daylight. In front of them were the stairs to her apartment, marked by their footprints, the woods behind the place, black tree trunks in white snow.

“What else do you want to know?” she said.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“I want to look at the Christmas lights,” she told him. “I want to drive around town and see what’s going on.”

She was making this up as she said it. She didn’t mean any of it. Really, where she wanted to go was back to the house where she grew up, and then up the old road into the woods, through the snow. She’d like to find the cars and see what they look like buried, white. She wanted to drink something else besides the beer, something like anisette and 151, on fire.

“Is there somewhere else you want to go?” she asked.

Tucker turned in his seat, leaned against the door and slid down. He lit his last cigarette. He slit his eyes at her. She imagined he might be thinking about going by Mandy Ralston’s house, but she couldn’t make a joke about it. She couldn’t suggest he stop, that she would wait in the car if he wanted. She felt only a throb that was not a pain but a hollow, echoing thing. His eyes closed and stayed closed. When she was sure he was asleep, she took his cigarette and threw it out into the snow.

She left the window open. She knew as she did it that she had done this before. It wasn’t winter, though. It was summer in one of the cars with a boyfriend she’d forgotten until now. The window still worked. She rolled it down and the handle broke in her hand.

They had just pulled on their clothes. The air was thick and whining. She was thinking about her shirt sticking to her back, the warm seeping place between her legs. She was sore and bored and the boy's voice was amazed, like the sound of wind through trees. He was telling her he loved her. He rubbed her legs with both of his hands. She listened to Mandy's voice, full of secrets in the air over their heads. She heard a lawnmower start in the neighborhood through the woods. She heard the cord pulled a few times before the engine caught. She imagined the cut grass and children in the yard, splashing in a blue plastic pool, the kind with fish shimmering orange and bright on the bottom, the water clear and cold from the hose. She watched the boy's hands moving on her legs. It was like someone trying to warm frozen limbs.

The Frontier Husband

Jules drives to her mother's house, intending to give the impression she is working steadily at the same job she held the last time she dropped by. She wants her to see she has been taking care of herself, that she wears appropriate clothes, and shoes with closed toes because as she drives it is snowing, and the snow fills in between the grass blades, lines the left-open mailboxes. She imagines it sifts a fine icy lace over the patch of asphalt by her apartment, covering the place where George's car sat. Inside her apartment is the note he left her that morning, the paper growing cold on the kitchen counter, its whiteness the same as the world she drives through now. It is December, the first snow of winter, and late afternoon, the time of day when her mother has her cocktail, and sits in the living room in her wool slacks and cashmere sweater, and Jules wants her to see that she knows this is the time for *visiting*, for *dropping by*.

The snow falls sweetly and cleanly, covering her car's rusting hood, clouding any clear vision of the new dent in the fender. She looks at her reflection in the storm door and sees anyone's daughter, and not the hollows under her eyes, the lines etched deeply around her mouth, the way her mouth trembles, on the verge of something desperate. Inside, the lamplight is warm. She says the right things—*Is Richard home? How was your day?* She sits in the wing chair and regrets, instantly, its softness that feels like sinking. Her mother eyes her, and lights a cigarette, her lipsticked mouth tight and

unforgiving, her hand holding the lighter heavily veined, almost delicate. She crosses her legs. She wears black flat pumps and hose, so that the skin of her ankle is seamlessly colored, narrow and bony like a young girl's.

Her mother's name is Annette. She is named after the Mousketeer from the old Disney show, a girl who went on to make movies with Frankie Avalon. Annette, embarrassed, has never admitted this to anyone in her lifetime. She watches her daughter fiddle with her hair, and understands her attempt, on this occasion, to appease her. Jules has on a cardigan that she gave her when it began to get cold in October, and Annette can see from the creased shoulders that she has kept it on a hanger, that she has probably never put it on before. She wears her hair pulled back in a ponytail that is almost neat, just a few missed hairs around her ears. She has on loafers and, Annette sees, with a small lurching feeling in her stomach, even socks, white mens' socks maybe borrowed from the boyfriend Annette has never met. Annette is not a heartless woman, and she is moved by her daughter's eyes, rimmed with sadness, how she tries and tries and can never get it right, and she is frightened by her own urge to take her daughter in her arms as if she were, of all things, a small child.

Jules is long limbed, a woman not settled into her body, almost rangy, with a gracelessness that dismays Annette. She sits with her legs splayed, slouched down, like a grudging teenager. Annette refrains from asking her to sit upright. She must keep Jules there for a while, ply her with food and the semblance of general conversation, hoping to

extract news of her living situation, force her to confess the increasingly obvious fact of her pregnancy. Annette has become good at this kind of interrogation. It is the only closeness they have, a game at which they are both expert, though Annette has noticed in the last few months it has taken its toll on her, the things she has learned too disheartening, suddenly, for her to want to win any more from her daughter. She wishes that for once Jules would come to her full of contrition, ready to reveal everything, so that the blow, sordid and unhappy as it may be, could fall on her in one weighty moment, and she might move on from there. It was easier, she remembers, with Delores. The doctors took her into their care, and found a place for her to live. She will call with requests that Annette had at first planned to steel herself against, but discovered were so small, so simple, she could not—money for cigarettes, a winter coat, a haircut.

In the wing chair, Jules feels her mother's appraisal, her hesitancy to begin to speak, the way she avoids her presence by lighting the cigarette, fanning the smoke, tapping the ash on the rim of the ashtray, one made of alabaster like the lamps on the end tables flanking the couch, their surfaces holding a pale beauty Jules used to love as a child. They are the only things salvaged from the house she grew up in. Her mother and Richard bought all new furniture for this house, one they admired for its modern openness, its glass walls and sloping yard. Jules discovered her mother had given the old pieces to the Salvation Army, and she'd gone down there and purchased it all without telling her, so that now her small apartment is crammed with the couch and chairs, end tables and breakfronts of her childhood.

Coming into this house she feels as if a layer of her had peeled off at the door. She cannot be the person she is any other time, in her apartment wearing George's clothes, or with him at the Al Di La restaurant's bar, one leg draped over his lap, her hand snaking up under his shirt, the background of clanking plates, silverware tumbling from white cloths, drunken talk, the hum of traffic that slips in and out of the restaurant's glass doors. In the bar, they have Domino, the bartender, with his beautiful shaven head, the wry smile he gives when she leans over the bar and kisses him on the mouth as payment for another round.

At her new job, Jules calls up strangers and asks them questions about themselves. Most hang up. Others answer willingly, with surprising honesty. She learns what products they use to wash their hair, where they like to vacation, their household income. She finds out how often they have sex, the most romantic room in their house, how many pairs of underwear they own. She learns she is nothing like them, that her life has been chiseled down to a simple need she cannot seem to satisfy, that haunts her with an ache that surfaces now sitting in the wing chair in her mother's house.

Her mother tells her that her husband, Richard, is out of town. She goes on about his latest trip, and Jules sees she has worked her drink down to the melting ice.

"I don't know why he went," her mother says. Two bright spots have emerged on her cheeks. "There's a snowstorm and he knew it, and now he'll be caught in dangerous conditions."

"It's Boston," Jules says. "Not the Himalayas." Her mother stops talking and jiggles the ice in her glass. Jules asks her to imagine Richard trekking a desolate and

barren mountain pass in his Brooks Brothers coat, his wool plaid scarf wrapped around his face, his eyebrows dangling ice. Her mother clenches her teeth. Jules sees her jaws work.

“I don’t think that’s funny,” she says.

Jules wraps her sweater tighter and smells George on her skin. She remembers his hands on her. His hair is a mass of graying curls he keeps cut short, he says, so he won’t look *mythological*. “Like those statues of Apollo, or Bacchus. Like those paintings of satyrs.” They met when she worked in the mall at the satellite cookie station, and he was shopping at Lord & Taylor. George came up to the counter, a nameless customer wearing an expensive overcoat. He took forever. He couldn’t choose, he said. Later, when they were in her bed, and he had his nose buried in her hair, he said she smelled like something sugary baking, admitted he had just pretended to be indecisive to be near her longer. Still, she doubts everything about him, even this admission.

“Look at me and say that,” she should have told him. But it was always under a confusion of covers on the bed, his face pressed to her stomach, his mouth on her neck or roaming up or down the tops of her legs. It was never what it was supposed to seem. No one said anything about love for a long time, until she brought it up, and by then, his hedging had become something necessary to her, a fixture in her life.

“Don’t even answer,” she’d said.

“I can’t,” he told her. “I really don’t know what it is. This? Or this?” and his mouth traveled again, over the ridge of her throat, down the curve of her shoulders. She

covered him with her body and claimed him like a territory abandoned by his wife's hands and mouth.

That morning, when Jules woke up and saw that he was gone, she had not gotten into her car and driven to work, but walked to the public library in town, a good three miles in the falling snow. Everything was new with a bluish cast. The snowplows thundered by, making piles. She tromped through in her cardigan and loafers. Inside the library she had sat at one of the tables with the Britannicas, and flipped through the thin, gilt pages, snow melting into the carpet under her feet. She looked casually for *Baby*, and then in other volumes for *Infant*, and *Child*, and found nothing, not one article to help her at least attain the appearance of someone who knows what she's doing.

Below her rib cage, beneath the surface of her skin the baby flutters, a rippling, like bubbles blown underwater, a sudden reminder of its presence that upends her with remorse. The living-room windows blacken and chill, and her mother stands and reaches behind her to tug at the cord for the blinds.

"Look how dark it is already," she says. Jules smells her perfume in her sweater's folds. She imagines if she closes her eyes she will sleep and awaken in her old childhood bed. Her body will be youthful and unencumbered. Her sister, Delores, will be down in the rec room playing Partridge Family records. Her parents will have the shaker out for cocktails. The neighbors will be by—Ted and Judy Simmerspan, and their son, Roger, will maneuver his bike up their driveway and down, jumping a ramp, glancing behind him to be sure that Jules, in her summer shorts, with her hair loose and wet, smelling of the pool's chlorine, is watching. Jules sees his boyish back, the long, thin muscles of his

arms, the ease with which he soars up over the ramp and down again. No one wants for anything. Not even Roger, whose longing for her remains something that finds him and tosses him in his sheets at night, sparing him an explanation. Jules's bed will still have the canopy. She will search through her desk drawers and find pastels and heavy white paper, a pink stationary box full of poems written in the fat loops of her childhood cursive. She will have her food brought to her on a tray, like someone on the mend, or an invalid, and succumb to being cared for as if it is a gift she is obligated to accept.

Annette offers her daughter something to eat. "You're thin," she tells her. "What have you been cooking lately at your place?"

Jules rolls her eyes. "I don't cook, Mother," she says. "You know that."

Annette must now inquire about the boyfriend, a married man who is cheating on his wife, and who has never attempted to secure a divorce. It irritates her, to have to mention him. "So your friend cooks," she says.

Jules ignores her. "I'll have whatever you're having."

"Well, help me in the kitchen," her mother says. Jules makes a face and rises from the chair. Her abdomen is a small round swell the sweater opens to reveal, and she pulls the sweater closed to cover it. Annette sighs. She is tired, she realizes. Before she sold the salon she could work all day and never feel this deadened weariness. Outside it is gray and still snowing, and the lights circling the house have come on, and her daughter is pregnant. In the kitchen she feels the cold through the soles of her shoes. The wall of

glass reveals the wintery yard, like something on a postcard. She watches Jules open the refrigerator wide and look inside.

“When you were little,” Annette says, and stops herself. She remembers her daughter as a child, her hair long and fine and falling over her shoulders, the smell of her coming in from outdoors, like mown grass and lemons, and suddenly the past steps up and interrupts the present. It startles her like a door slammed by the wind.

Jules looks up at Annette. They stare at each other for a moment. “What?” Annette asks, her heart beating quick and light.

“What?” Jules asks back.

Annette reaches around Jules and takes out a casserole, ready for the oven. She makes another drink, with quick, expert movements at the counter.

“I want one,” Jules says, petulant, a tone that seems to offer an opening Annette cannot refuse.

She looks at her daughter again. The oven heats up, the windows darken. “One,” she says, taking out a glass.

She remembers when Jules and her girlfriends would play house. They were too old for dolls and too young for boys, and the game was elaborate, with cast-off furniture arranged in the basement, a table set with pieces of mismatched china, curtains and bedspreads tacked up to separate rooms. Some of the girls wore Annette’s old evening and cocktail dresses. Once, Annette went down and they had brought in large stones from the back yard and stacked them on the cement floor to make a fireplace. They made other

houses outside, in thickets in the woods, dragging out her grandmother's antique end tables and her silver candlesticks, a chenille bedspread, and pairs of high-heeled shoes, things lost under fallen leaves and, eventually, snow.

She guesses all of that could have been practice for what she would have now, but she wonders about her daughter's ability to care for a baby when she cannot care for herself. Annette's husband says their daughter was *well-provided for*. She had *every opportunity*. These are stock phrases he pulls out when something unexplainable happens—Jules's car won't start, she is being evicted from her apartment, the electricity is out, she has no heat, no job. Annette, recalling Jules's childhood, remembers Jules's bedroom—the canopied bed, the rose-colored walls, the dolls lining a shelf, their faces miniature and real, their lashed eyes always fluttering happily open, but she cannot place Jules in the picture.

There are other things she remembers more vividly—drinks with the Simmerspans, parties at various houses of friends, her reflection in their bathroom mirrors always tilting and blurred. Outside would be a different season on their lawn—the grass crisp and knifelike with frost, the dead leaves rubbing together in the trees, front walks spotted with ice, snow falling in the circle of lamppost light, the slippery and swerving drive home. Spring meant a cool walk outside with a cigarette, a patio edged with beds about to bloom, the smell of sex that was just a leftover from the afternoon sun on budding trees. Summer was hardly any clothes, a sheer blouse, a skirt that wafted up, gin and tonics, the lime bright and friendly at the bottom of your glass.

Now her neighbor Ted Simmerspan calls, their conversations a tentative flirtation in which he reveals he is troubled by her aloofness. “Why don’t you ever call me?” he will say, then ask to borrow a rake, her husband’s electric drill. Confronted with him at the door, she feels breathless, then hollow and silly when nothing happens. In the afternoons with her cocktail, she remembers Ted unbuttoning her blouse, the two of them at the foot of his and Judy’s bed, ready to spread out on Judy’s cabana-striped sheets.

She mentions Jules to her husband as coolly as she handles the conversations with Ted. “How can we help her to be happy?” Annette says.

Her husband glares at her across his breakfast toast. “I’ll pay the damn bill,” he tells her, solving everything.

Jules cherishes the drink in her hand. She settles back into the wing chair, into the orange-yellow lamplight. She and her mother slip off their shoes. She forgets her empty apartment, the cold furnace, the darkened rooms lit eerily by the flashing neon of the Al Di La Restaurant on the corner. She wonders how much her mother knows, or if she sits across from her unaware for once. When she couldn’t pay the gas bill, she lied and told George that the power had gone out in a storm. This was in the Al Di La’s bar. Their drinks arrived wet and gleaming in their glasses. She leaned over and tasted George’s bottom lip. It was cold, bitter as the gin. His shirtfront smelled of olive oil and the plates of pasta pomodoro that passed steaming on the waiters’ trays.

Later, in her dark apartment they lit candles, and Jules told him how she used to play Frontier house. Some girls pretended to be the husbands, she said. They had to take

their rifles and go out into the woods to hunt for food. Some wore long dresses and cleaned and prepared meals and took care of pretend children. When the husbands came home from hunting the wives would welcome them back, as if they had endured a long journey.

“Did you sleep together?” he asked, with his funny smile and his eyebrows raised.

Jules told him yes, that at pretend nightfall they climbed into couch cushion beds and pulled up blankets or old curtains as covers.

“And then what?” he wanted to know.

Jules told him the truth. She remembered, a little shamefully, how they had pressed their bodies tightly together, and kissed on and on, getting flushed and warm under the black taffeta, beneath the pale blue chiffon of her mother’s dresses, sometimes taking their clothing off, letting their skin touch.

“It wasn’t all that different with boys,” she told him. “It was all the same before you had an idea what else you should be doing.”

Then it was enough to be without clothes, your damp bodies pressed close.

“Let’s do that,” George suggested, and they did, and it didn’t work at all.

“Now I know what I want when I want you,” she said, shaking, and he held her away from him, gripping her wrists.

“We’re playing the game, Jules,” he said. “We’re pretending we don’t know.”

She nearly cried, though for what she was no longer sure. Their breath came out in puffs of white around their heads. She threw back the blankets, and her body was pale

and slick in the candlelight. She begged him, suspecting, even then, he knew what he would be giving, that he would not give it for anything.

When George left the apartment, he pretended to shoulder a rifle. “I’ll be back as soon as I can, dear,” he would say, deepening his voice, pretending to be the frontier husband, the candlelight throwing his long shadow on the wall. She was three months pregnant, and he did not know. She was still working, and there was some money from that, and from the selling of things—the necklace she received on her confirmation, the bracelet she’d been given when her grandmother died, her collection of silver crystal figurines. George was still happy, lighting candles, bundling up under blankets, and she had no reason to imagine he would not return. She did not think of the baby as a secret. She just did not think of it.

Annette tucks her legs up underneath her on the couch. She has made them each another drink, against her better judgment, but she is not supposed to know about the pregnancy, to have even guessed. She tries to remember Jules as a baby, but the past is hazy, as she tells herself it should be, and she imagines that Jules’s baby will be like starting over, that she will have another chance. She imagines it cradled in her hands, its compact body, its clean, powdery smell. She had failed with Delores, now with Jules. She could not carry the baby she conceived with Richard. She remembers the nursery she’d decorated, how she’d left the room untouched for a year after, expecting another baby that did not come. She imagines a nursery now for Jules’s baby, the wallpaper and the

patterned sheets she will pick out. She tells Jules about the clothes she has set aside for her.

“See if you want any,” she says.

They take their drinks upstairs to Annette’s bedroom, and Annette places a pile of clothing on the bed. Jules looks through it.

“I don’t know if they’ll fit,” she says.

Annette brightens, believing this is Jules’s way of hinting, close enough to her telling.

“Try them on,” she tells her. She plops down on the loveseat, and blends instantly into the fleur-de-lis.

Jules does not want her mother to see her undressed. “Leave then,” she says. And Annette makes a small, playfully disgruntled noise and rises from the loveseat with her drink. Out in the hall, she talks to Jules through the door.

“Did I tell you Roger Simmerspan is building a house on the river?” she says.

Jules picks through the clothing. None of it is anything she would normally wear, and she holds one of the blouses up to herself and looks over into the mirror. The light in her mother’s room is pastel dim. She sets her drink down on the floor and climbs up onto the wide bed and places her head on a pillow. Outside the door her mother talks about Roger and the house he is building, how it will have three fireplaces, how it will have a home theater, and she remembers the teenaged, sandy-haired Roger from across the street, with his white teeth and lean, tan torso, who has grown up and gone to college and is now occupied as a company vice president and good husband.

“His wife’s name is Samantha,” her mother says, and pauses.

“*She’s* expecting,” she says, and the way she says it, as if Jules and the wife are the same, balanced and equal, Jules knows her mother knows, that she accepts the baby like a happy fact, that she is already making plans, believing she must *step in* and *take over*. Jules sees there is a certain way, again, that she is supposed to be and her mother knows it, and she does not. She has wandered into her mother’s house, lured to its lamplight like a moth, mistaking the carpet and sturdy walls, the heat from the vent, even the past, for love. She takes a few slow breaths. She imagines her body on the bed disappearing into the patterned spread until nothing is left but the baby, wiggling and pink and ready for her mother’s arms.

On the bedside table the phone rings, and Jules’s mother tells her she’ll get it in the other room, “Just Richard, I’m sure, checking in,” she calls, her voice receding down the hall.

Annette answers the phone, and it is not her husband, but Ted, who tells her Judy has gone to her mother’s for a few days. His voice is hesitant, boyish and soft, and she can picture him as the Ted she met years ago on a terracotta patio, clutching his drink, his tie brilliant, his hair waving over his ears. Now they are both alone in their large, empty houses, Ted with his thinning hair, his thickened waist, her with her woman’s softness whittled down, the tenderness missing from her mouth. On the end of the line Ted rambles, telling her about his day, arriving finally at the suggestion they get together, have dinner, and watch a movie. The ice clinks in his scotch. Annette listens and plans. In

a little while, she will mix a new drink, put on her long camel coat with nothing underneath, and head out across her lawn, the falling snow filling in her footsteps, the old elms creaking overhead. The new snow will have made the neighborhood a changed place, wild and mysterious. She will feel the air, charged with ice, the snow in her hair, on her upturned face, her life spread out in front of her, fortuitous and full.

Jules goes to her mother's top bureau drawer. Inside are velvet cases, and she chooses one, her grandmother's pearls, a necklace old and valuable, cool and glowing with the history of its wearing. She slips down the staircase and hears her mother's low, giddy laughter coming from the spare room. Outside, the snow falls. She places her drink and the velvet box in the layer of snow on the car's roof. She clears the windshield with her arms, her bare hands. The inside of the car is cavernous with cold. She thinks she will drive home, and maybe George will have returned and she will not have to read the note he left. All day she has pretended she does not know what it says. But there will be no surprises. He will admit he couldn't love her after all of this. He will say he has gone back to his wife, her accusing eyes, her mistrust, and he will suffer now, as much as she does.

She told George about the baby last night. He had not come for four days, and she was afraid. He crawled under the blankets and asked her to forgive him, cupped his hands around her stomach and said something, a joke. She looked at him, serious and unsmiling, and told him. His eyes darkened. His hands dropped from her body like petals falling away. "Why did you wait so long?" he asked, her silence, she realized, a stunning

betrayal. He paced the apartment with his hands on his head, his eyes flashing. She cowered on the bed, her revelation no longer the thing she believed would save her. Look at you, he cried, pointing his finger, as if she was a spectacle.

She backs the car down the driveway, the snow under her tires soft and unresisting. The falling snow obscures the street, the lawns' sweep, the flagstone walks, the garden beds with their bulbs deep in frozen soil, dark and tenacious and waiting. She is not really sure where she is heading. The baby spins and does its dance trying to stay warm—the only thing, she sees now, she will keep. All around the new white world is strange. Jules feels her life erase itself. In the arc of her headlights, from the black bowl of night, her life bends down and spills itself out.

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