

TO THE END
A Collection of Short Stories

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Master of Fine Arts Degree

MFA Program for Writers
Warren Wilson College

May 2024

Director

Date

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Replacement

Helen arrives five minutes early, a good sign. I've met her twice before, but this time she seems smaller, cheerful and self-deprecating in the doorway. "I'm sorry, I know I'm a few minutes—"

"No, no, come in, come in." Without heels on she's close to my height. She's only three years younger than me, but she has the fresh anticipatory smile of someone whose life is still subject to impulse. She waits in the foyer as I shut and lock the door—I can feel her gaze on my fingers, memorizing which way the lock turns.

"Should I take my shoes off?" she offers.

"Oh, no need. We're not very fastidious about that. Though you might wish to be, of course." She's taking the measure of my floors, factoring in this new knowledge about shoe policy against how brightly and scufflessly the floors shine. "Can I get you anything, Helen? Coffee? A glass of water?"

"That's very kind, but no thank you. I just stopped at a coffee shop on my way over—the one on the corner?"

"Next to the florist's. Yes, we go there all the time."

"The barista was very friendly."

"Oh the service is always excellent." We have drifted into the kitchen all the same, and I fill a glass of water from the fridge dispenser for something to do with my hands. There's a faint delay in the motion sensor that requires one to withdraw the glass slightly before it can overflow, which delay I should warn Helen about, at some point. She has a very sharp, physical glance—even with my back turned I can tell where it lands, bruising the knife block, the salad spinner, the flowers on the ledge underneath the window.

“That’s a beautiful painting.”

“You like that one?” I can’t tell whether she actually likes it, or is thinking about what will go in its place once she takes it down. “It’s one of my grandfather’s. He was never commercially successful, but in the family we’re proud to have his pieces on the walls here and there.”

“It goes quite well with the color of the wall, that lilac.”

“I always thought so too.”

We smile at each other, and for a moment things feel easy. Helen is the first to make it to this stage—there have been interviews over the years, but until Helen, no one came along at the right time with the right qualifications. Helen has borne with patience all the rescheduled meetings, the background checks, the brief involvement of the family lawyer. She is in the home stretch now, and knows it.

“So,” I say. “Where to begin.”

Mark is not home today, by design—he offered to be part of the training, but I told him that would just complicate things, and I wanted to be able to speak freely. Now that I can, I find there’s too much to say.

“We’re in the kitchen,” I say, “so I guess I’ll start with mealtimes. I gave you the list of his dietary preferences, didn’t I?”

“Yes. Allergic to cinnamon, right?”

“It’s a very mild allergy, but yes, one to keep an eye out for. So. The day always starts with coffee. —and by the way, if I say anything that you already know or you’ve heard me say before, feel free to stop me.”

“I don’t mind at all, it’ll help to hear it repeated,” Helen says, glancing up with a gracious smile from her inspection of the silverware drawer.

“Great. Thank you, Helen. So the day starts with coffee. Two heaping spoonfuls in the pour-over—Mark usually makes it himself, but if he’s slow getting up or running behind it’s always nice to get the water started for him. You’ll find your own rhythm with this, but I always try to avoid speaking until he’s at least halfway through the mug. You can acknowledge him, a quick good morning or a hand on the shoulder, but after that you should keep your distance—warmly, of course, a gentle friendly silent presence, there to listen whenever he’s ready to start talking. You’ll know when he’s ready to start talking. It’s best if you’re doing something interruptible, reading a magazine rather than a novel, if you know what I mean. He’ll look up at you a few times over his coffee—it’s okay if you miss the signal, he’ll still address you at some point, but I guess what I’m emphasizing is that warm friendly presence thing. You’re available, you’re interested, but not intense or aggressive in your curiosity. Does that make sense?”

“Perfect sense,” says Helen. Her eyes are bright and clever and she’s leaning forward against the kitchen island, her hands idly panning the marble surface for crumbs, which she will not find.

“Great. So yes. From there you can proceed naturally enough. You may already know this from your conversations with Mark, but what I’ve found really helpful is allowing for silence. You’ll get to know—maybe you already do know—but you’ll get to know the look he gets when he’s about to speak. It can be tempting to flood the silence with some follow-up question or some chattering offshoot of whatever’s under discussion, but if you wait him out, if you let him formulate whatever new thought is on his mind, you’ll be pleasantly surprised, most times, I think, by what he has to say. It’s easy to make the mistake, once you know someone well, of

thinking you can finish their sentences for them. But, you know, how many times have I been sitting across the living room from Mark, drinking our coffee, talking about something ordinary like work or holiday vacation plans, and then out of nowhere he wants to tell me about a certain species of frog that can freeze itself completely and then thaw and survive. Nature's cryogenics. And then next he'll want to tell me about an obscure bill that just got struck down in Tennessee, and then he'll get so excited about a song he heard on the radio the other day that he'll have to pull it up and play it for me."

"Sure, I understand," says Helen, with gentle impatience.

"Anyway—you get my point. Silences. Do you want to sit down, by the way? Let's move to the living room." And as she follows me around the island I can feel how her gaze has settled, as if she knows the kitchen now, the tiled splashback, the cutting boards slotted beside the sink, the two blue-trimmed salad plates drying in the dish rack, has committed it all comfortably to memory. "And stop me, of course, if you have any questions. So Mark typically makes his own breakfast, he enjoys it, but you'll be expected most nights to make dinner, except on the nights that he gets that gleam in his eye and comes home early with specific groceries for some specific complicated recipe he's discovered in one of his books. On those nights it's best if you stay involved, chopping vegetables, stirring, maybe doing some surreptitious seasoning if it seems like things are heading awry. He'll say he's in good shape and doesn't need your help, but these things have a way of gathering their own momentum in a way he doesn't anticipate—he's not very good at timing things correctly, the chicken out and cooling long before the risotto softens—so if you can stay involved and sort of subtly course-correct, it's for the best and will make for a happier night in the long run. You should always let him choose the music when he's cooking. And you should have some kind of music on when you're the one cooking—he'll be

unnerved to come home and find you cooking in silence. Let the record play out, and then let him choose the next one. You'll want to add a few of your own records to his collection, but not too many, and preferably ones that he also likes and will enjoy putting on now and then for your benefit."

Helen nods, not taking notes, but tilting her head and recrossing her legs like she's retaining what I'm saying. I know that she's not going to remember a word of it in the short term, but that it will come back to her in the long term, after she's already made the mistakes I've told her not to make. This is normal, to be expected.

"He likes to have dinner at the dining table. Some nights, when he can tell you've had a stressful day, he'll offer to have dinner in front of the TV, but you shouldn't take him up on that except on rare and necessary occasions, migraines, for example. His family was very much a TV dinner family, maybe he's already told you this, disorganized and maybe a little neglectful, and in reaction to that I think he has a real longing for rituals and traditions. There's nothing he'll like more than hearing about your family's traditions, and if possible he'll want to bring them into your own lives together, make them yours. He might even bring forward some of the traditions he and I had—I hope you won't feel strange about that—I can assure you it's a nostalgia rooted purely in the ritual itself, and not in the person he used to share it with. It'll be a way for him, I think, of gradually rewriting the record so that all the important memories feature you instead of me. 'Remember the New Year's we spent sketching out that enormous floor plan of our future home?' he'll say, and if you want to you can play along as if you remember it too, and eventually it won't make much difference who was actually there. If you don't have any family traditions, or any worthwhile ones, feel free to invent some. I did."

Helen is sitting in his chair, the armchair next to the glass fireplace that we haven't used in years—I could tell her that in the future she should choose the chaise over by the bookcase, but I don't want to overwhelm her, and there is already too much to tell, and all of it is important. She gives no outward sign of being in a hurry, but it is a Sunday morning and I'm sure she feels that I haven't told her anything all that useful yet, anything she couldn't have quickly figured out for herself, her first day on the job.

“Helen, have you seen the bedroom? Would you like to see the bedroom?”

“Mark showed me the upstairs on my last visit,” she says, with a smile that is, it occurs to me, perhaps overly smooth, excessively unruffled. Though I vetted her file as carefully as Mark (more carefully) I am wondering now if Helen is perhaps overqualified. She does not seem as nervous as I'd like her to be; she is behaving as though being Mark's wife is an easy thing, so easy it would be difficult to screw up, one can imagine her thinking.

“That's great. That's wonderful. So Helen, I know technically I'm supposed to use this time to run you through all the logistical aspects of household upkeep, but that's all in your packet if you need it and I'm thinking a more productive use of our next half hour might be to address the more nebulous aspects of the position, and to answer any questions you might have.”

Helen considers this, smiling. “Thank you. I do feel pretty comfortable with the logistics, as far as division of labor and weekday versus weekend habits and travel and couple friends and all that. The packet is so thorough—thank you again for putting that together.”

“Oh, it was my pleasure.”

“As far as questions...” She leans to the other side of her crossed legs and I watch her gaze move across the windowed wooden hutch, the long low bookcase, the turntable, the leather couch with its single tan throw pillow, the Persian carpet vacuumed just this morning, looking at

them very steadily and methodically as if one by one she's stripping them all bare, the dark blank gloss of the TV screen, the staircase railing we installed two years ago when Mark's aging father came to stay with us, the smudge of soot on the fireplace door and the triangle of framed photographs on the mantle above, two of which she'll want to replace, perhaps not the first day she moves in but a week or so later, so that the switch feels casually spur-of-the-moment and not at all calculated. She appears to be searching the room for the right question, but when her eyes come to rest on me I can tell that she has had it ready all along. "I wondered," she says, "why it is Mark wanted to replace you."

There is a glass of water in my hand, which I drink from. "That's an interesting question," I say. "With perhaps a more complicated answer than Mark has led you to believe."

"We haven't talked about it."

"I see."

"He offered, of course. But I wanted to hear it from you."

Helen has leaned into the back of Mark's chair, taking possession of the armrests in a way that feels conspicuously casual. I replace my water glass on the nearby end table, two inches left of the coaster. "If you'd discussed it with Mark in any detail," I say, "you would know that it was my notice of resignation that prompted us to search for a replacement. Mark thought it best that I remain involved through the conclusion of the hiring and onboarding process, to ease the transition."

"And you've been so helpful," Helen says, with a punctuating smile. "In that case, I suppose I'm curious what led you to resign."

I give her the same answer I gave to Mark, three years ago now, over the long runway of the dining table, our forks creating little moving gleams in the waxed polish. “I feel I’ve reached the end of my utility here, and I’m ready for new opportunities.”

“Do you have another marriage lined up?” Helen asks quickly.

“No. Not at the moment.”

“So these new opportunities are abstract, then. But still more appealing than continuing on in your current position.”

It was easy to explain this to Mark, who did not demand anything like honesty, and was satisfied by my evocation of some feared future dip in performance if I should continue to perform the job half-heartedly, which I acknowledged I was just then very nearly on the point of doing. In the three years that followed, he must have been on the lookout for such a change in performance, but I do not know whether in the end he noticed any difference or not. “It’s complicated, as I said, Helen. And I’m not sure it’s very relevant to your training.”

“Well, if I’m going to take the job, I think I have a right to know what could have caused someone to leave it.”

A branch of sunlight has fallen through the east window, illuminating Helen’s nails on the cushioned edge of the armrests and the very few dust motes turning through the air. My water glass is empty. In the glass fireplace to Helen’s left sit three perfectly cylindrical logs, waiting for a season that never seems to arrive. Helen is watching me closely, with the beginnings or the ends of a smile.

“I’m happy to speak candidly with you, Helen,” I say. “But I hesitate to start you off with any negative impressions of the position you’re about to take over, given of course that you’ve already signed the paperwork.”

“There is nothing you could tell me that would diminish my love for Mark.”

“Well, good. That’s good to hear.” And for a moment, under the shameless surveillance of her gaze, I feel so overcome with gratitude that I almost do want to tell her everything, not that there’s anything so dreadful to tell, just the usual, but after all we’ve spent months recruiting and negotiating and it would take months to find someone new. “I just hope you’ll keep in mind that I was very happy with Mark for very many years, and my reasons for leaving are a reflection of me much more than a reflection of him, and I have every confidence that you’ll succeed in this position, and that I want you to succeed, truly.”

“I understand,” says Helen. The thin cascade of dust motes has caught her eye, and I wonder if she’s thinking how she’ll replace these too, gradually: her dead skin, her hair follicles.

“Mark and I had a happy marriage for a long time. And then, as sometimes happens with happy marriages, the impulse of organic affection began to erode, so that our marriage became more an enactment of habit than a reflection of genuine feeling. Many couples continue on this way for years; for us, there was just a moment when I realized that both of us would be happier if someone else were to perform the role that up to that point I had performed, which is when we started, officially, the search for my replacement. And we’re very glad to have found you. Very glad,” I say, and Helen dips her head to receive the compliment with a modesty that seems out of character, disingenuous. “Your qualifications impressed us right away. After a series of failed interviews, your arrival really has seemed providential. And I’m certain that you’ll be able to avoid the little pitfalls and points of tension that gradually arose between Mark and myself.”

“Such as?”

“Such as, well the usual, really. Miscommunication...”

I've pronounced the first example as if a second example is coming, but the next few seconds pass in silence. Helen tilts her head, her gaze falling on my hands, which are wrapped again around the empty water glass. There is something amused and unimpressed about the expression in her eyes.

"What I found," I say, "—and this may be entirely different from your experience and I hope it will be—but what I found is that there are limits to the intimacy that a marriage affords. Generally one expects to feel safe in expressing oneself completely, to the farthest reaches of one's internal world, all things laid bare to the understanding, unconditionally forgiving partner. That's love, after all, isn't it, is the whole unfiltered self laid bare for judgment and judged still worthy. Or that was my view of it, anyway—perhaps you have a more evolved view."

When I chance a look at Helen, she shifts her gaze back to me, so that it's hard to tell where exactly she was looking before—something just past or above my shoulder, the clock above the bookcase or the photos on the adjacent wall or our slight warped reflections in the TV screen, moving when we move.

"And so with Mark, most of the time I truly did feel that I was enacting a real and accurate self, saying more or less whatever it occurred to me to say, behaving the way it occurred to me to behave. But to a point. To a point. There were some things—and remember I'm speaking exclusively of myself and my own experience—but there are some aspects of me that are, I guess I would call them ugly or unsuitable or strange, and there were moments, deep into some consequential conversation, when I would let something slip, or say something without running the sentence through first in my mind, and suddenly some corner of me would be exposed that had always before been kept in darkness, covered in dust, some rug rolled up in the soul. And Mark would give me this look—I would understand suddenly that if what I had just

revealed about myself were true, he would no longer love me. And so I would backtrack, as best I could, and the moment would pass, and soon he would forget or seem to forget having ever seen this darker corner of me, and we would both behave as though I hadn't really deep-down meant whatever terrible thing I'd said. But I did mean it, every time, whatever it was. I came to understand that these weren't isolated incidents but symptoms of a deeper truth about myself, deeper than marriage could go, that I was full of dark corners and dusty secrets and small dead things under the rugs, and that love couldn't look at those things and still want to stay, or that Mark couldn't, at least, and who could blame him. I don't blame him."

I try, with my expression, which is a reassuring smile, to suggest that I have said this for Helen's benefit, though I am not looking at her and can't tell whether she is convinced, whether I am convincing anyone in this room besides myself.

"This was for a short time the source of some sadness, but in the long run I found it was ultimately very easy to accommodate. I learned—not just to protect these darker parts of myself from Mark's sight—but to accept that he would never see them. That I shouldn't want him to see them. Because sometimes all you want is to show your ugliness to another person: to be loved, not despite that ugliness, but because of it. To just tear up the floorboards and the pretense and just be exactly as rotted and dark and horrible as you sometimes suspect you are. But it's not wise, is what I came to learn, because after all there's no guarantee, even in marriage, that you will still be loved. Some darkness is too dark, right? And how's one to know. And so if I have any advice for you, it's, well, ideally it would be to not have any of those dark corners inside you in the first place—" I laugh; Helen is silent. "But failing that, my advice would be to keep them from view. From Mark, from me, from anyone that asks. No matter how tempted you might be. Don't ever say anything true that you can't take back. Don't unburden yourself of anything that

you can't snatch back up at a moment's notice, at the wrong gleam in his eye, at the dawning of some horrible new understanding. Oh be yourself, absolutely yes—but not irretrievably. Does that make sense, Helen?"

I have addressed most of this speech to the smudged glass of the fireplace, whose three logs seem so artificial in their perfection that I suddenly can't remember whether or not they're real. Helen's legs have been crossing and uncrossing in my periphery; I am aware of the great emptiness of the house around us, even the fridge's ice dispenser gone quiet. Helen is inspecting her hands, and I think for a moment that I have upset her. But when she looks up her expression is clear, restive, neither pitying nor intimate. "I think I understand," she says. "Thank you. I appreciate you sharing your experience."

"Of course." For a moment we are both silent. According to my agenda for the training, which I checked over with Mark and emailed to Helen yesterday evening, I am supposed now to talk about finances, spending habits, date nights, anniversaries, holidays, in-laws, alcohol consumption, work-life balance, acceptable versus unacceptable opposite-sex friendships, how to handle differences in taste, how to be supportive in times of crisis, how to encourage without nagging and how to commiserate without presuming empathy, how to indulge without enabling and how to forgive without patronizing, how to take time for oneself without neglecting and how to ask for more without asking for too much, and how to address problems as they arise instead of letting them simmer, and how to fold Mark's shirts. But I have nothing more to say on these subjects, and besides, Helen does not need or want my advice on how to be a wife. Helen wants to be her own kind of wife, and it will take a few years for her to discover, gradually, wryly, as I did, that there is only one kind.

“Is there anything else—” Helen asks, a bit awkwardly, because the pause has gone on too long.

“Helen, honestly, I think you’re ready. Of course there’s more I could say, but I’m sure you’ll learn more by doing than you will by listening to me ramble on. I guess I’ll just finish by saying that I’m here if you have questions, I’ll always be happy to answer them. Even, who knows, ten years down the road, if there’s any way I can be of help or anything you need to know, you can still reach out. All right?”

“Yes, absolutely. Thank you. You’ve been so generous throughout this whole process.”

“I’m excited for you. I think you and Mark will be very happy together.”

“I’m sure we will.” She’s not glancing at the clock, but she might as well be. Her tone falls just flat of the excitement her words suggest, and her smile at me is tinged with a sudden pitying curiosity, as if she’s wondering how on earth I got to where I am. It is suddenly very clear to me that she doesn’t believe me, about any of it—not the coffee routine, not the record player, not the silences, not the rituals, not the risks. She will make every mistake that I did; there is no way to help her, no further use for what I’ve learned.

“You’ll start this Saturday?” I ask.

“Yes, Saturday will be perfect.”

“Great. Well, Helen—”

We stand up. She walks ahead of me to the foyer, and for a moment I think she is going to open the door and let me out. But this is still my house, my married life, for another five days. I turn the lock clockwise and wait. She has paused slightly, looking at the shoe rack, and I know exactly what she is thinking. She is thinking, I’ll have him take his shoes off at the door, starting next week. I’ll clean the soot off that fireplace. But all she says is, “You’ve been so helpful.”

“I’m really so excited for you.” We’ve run out of new things to say. I hold the door as she stands at the threshold, framed by a sudden flare of sun. “Let me know if any other questions arise, but, otherwise, well: good luck.”

“Thank you! Hope you have a great rest of your weekend.”

“You too, take care.”

“You too!”

She descends our front steps and walks without looking back into the bright day. I close the door and listen to the smooth turn of the lock. The reason I never made our guests take their shoes off inside the house is that I didn’t want to seem overprotective of a house that wasn’t mine to begin with. Come on in and track your dirt all over my floors, I wanted the house to say. I can take it. But there was little point explaining this to Helen, who will be walking now at a brisk pace down our street, plotting out all the improvements she’ll make to Mark’s life and to her own, perhaps already considering whether it’s vinegar or baking soda she’ll use to clean the glass of our fireplace, scrubbing at what appears to be a smudge of soot on the upper-left-hand corner, which she’ll realize only after many frustrated minutes and different cleaning solutions is not a smudge after all but some long-ago dirt trapped in a crescent nick in the glass, ugly and permanent.

Nothing that Counts

It's always the same cheese tray, every university event, and Frank has suspected from time to time whether it isn't in fact the same cheese. E.g. hasn't he seen this cube before? He looks around for Claire to make this joke to her, but Claire is not hovering nearby, nor halfway across the room engulfed in small talk with some dreaded colleague, nor seated among any of the clusters of conversation here and there throughout the pews, nor is she standing anywhere near where the student is standing, over in the back by the carpeted staircase, arms crossed, staring at him again.

Nor is Claire near the podium, talking kindly to the last reader, as she often does when the reading has been particularly painful and she knows no other compliments are waiting in the wings. She might have left the room to take a phone call, though Frank doesn't know who would be calling at this hour on a Friday night. Unless it's Cory in some kind of trouble? He checks his phone, but there are no texts from his son, no notifications at all in fact, and Frank makes his way back to the pew where he and Claire had been sitting, as if he might still find her there.

Tonight's reading is at Galbreath Chapel, as the last five readings have been, despite poor acoustics and pews that seem designed more for suffering than sitting (Claire, raised Catholic, would have something to say about this). Galbreath is unused except for university events, and small in the way that historical buildings are small. There is a backup battalion of folding chairs lined up against the staircase wall near where the student is standing guard. The creative writing department has yet to have any need of these backup chairs, though the university continues to optimistically supply them.

Nothing is left in their section of the pew. Frank holds his plastic cup of wine and looks again for Claire, but it's hard to miss the student in his sweep of the room, central and seemingly

determined to catch his eye. The look she gives him is hostile, definitely, and Frank takes a pretend sip of wine and tells himself that it wasn't hostile so much as perhaps just sort of sullen. She's having a bad night; she's high-strung. He had been quite firm in his last conversation with her, admirably, even gallantly decisive and firm. Tonight is the last event of the semester; if he can make it through tonight without incident, with luck she'll switch out of his workshop next semester, and in time the whole thing will be water under the world's sturdiest bridge.

Nearby where Frank stands between pews, two of the poets, Ming and the new adjunct whose name Frank keeps forgetting and re-learning, are talking very earnestly about their morning exercise routines. Up he sidles. "We were just talking about the role of routine in the writing life," Ming says, and Frank has nothing to contribute to this topic but asks some really invested questions while maneuvering himself over to Ming's left side, so that he's mostly blocked from the student's sightline but can still make out part of her chin and shoulder, enough to judge whether she's staying put.

"When I went on sabbatical," says Ming, "everyone told me to be strict with myself, to set deadlines, to install those productivity apps that restrict your access to distraction. But that never worked for me." He is explaining to the adjunct how, during his most recent sabbatical, as is common knowledge in the department, he finished both a new-and-selected poetry manuscript and a collection of scholarly essays, *and* served as judge of a prestigious literary contest, not by taking recourse to grim discipline and renunciation, which in his view "only strengthens the lure of whatever it is we're forbidding ourselves," but, as he explains, by "divorcing effort from output. As long as I spent six hours working at my desk every day, I considered it a successful day, whether in those six hours I'd written three thousand words of an essay or just one single

poem. You have to trust that if you just keep sitting there, day after day, eventually the work gets done.”

The adjunct is eating this up. Frank’s out of wine, but hesitates to move from his current vantage, with the student’s shoulder so securely in view. If Frank felt at all compelled to respond to Ming’s methodology honestly, he might point out that divorcing effort from output is all well and good, but effort and output share the convenient quality of being both already divorced from literary merit, and it is entirely possible, Frank has discovered, to put in an objectively heroic amount of effort, and to produce an empirically incontrovertible one hundred twenty thousand words of output, and for neither to result in a novel his agent is willing to submit to editors, or an essay collection, or even editorial credit on another of those godforsaken prize anthologies themed “Love” or “Ghosts” or “Memory.” Ming knows this, and should also know that the only people who can afford to be dismissive of discipline are the ones who already naturally possess it.

“But we should ask Claire about this, she’s on sabbatical, no?”

“She is,” Frank says, looking behind to see if Claire slipped past him, but the crowd is thinning out and the cheese cubes and little toothpicked twists of salami sit undisturbed and there’s no one up near the front he can even mistake for Claire. Where indeed is his lovely wife.

“It’s been great for her,” he says re: sabbatical. “She’s been very productive.”

“Frank’s wife is a medievalist,” Ming explains to the adjunct, and then over Ming’s shoulder Frank catches sight of her: Claire is standing near the towers of folding chairs, her scarf and coat draped over her arm, standing particularly still as if she’s listening very intently, and when Ming dips his head to laugh heartily at something the adjunct’s just said, Frank can see that it’s the student who is talking to Claire, as Claire stands there noticeably still and listens.

Frank drops his cup, which is empty. “Are you coming by the Cider House afterwards?” Ming asks, and Frank says, “That was the plan, but I’d better go check with Claire. Good to see you both,” picking up his plastic cup from where it’s lolling sideways on the empty pew, beelining to a mid-room trash can from which he can consider the scene more closely, Claire nodding and nodding and frowning more and more deeply, until abruptly her face smooths out again, as if she’s just made some kind of decision. He can’t see the student’s expression from here; she’s gesturing in small tight circles, her weight shifting unconsciously from side to side. Frank is approaching quite quickly. “Which obviously of all people I thought you had a right to know,” the student is saying.

Frank, in the grips of a nearly spiritual nausea, smiles broadly and steps to Claire’s shoulder. “Hello, Amanda,” he says, and he’s pleased to find himself speaking in a perfectly even, natural tone of voice. “I hope I’m not interrupting.”

The student has a patchy flush starting on one cheek. For a moment she won’t look at him and then, defiantly, she won’t look away. “Of course not,” she says. “I was just telling Claire about your office hours.”

“Amanda’s one of the most imaginative writers in the program,” Frank says, with his best bland professorly smile, his mind hurtling through alibis. He hasn’t actually turned to look at Claire yet; he can’t bear to, and besides shouldn’t need to; normally he can feel the radiations of her mood from ten feet away. But in this moment her body isn’t giving off any readings at all—not poisonous rage, not deadly false calm, not even a we’ll-discuss-this-later gritted self-control—instead she stands beside him in a cloud of vague indifference, as if this conversation is the last thing on her mind. “Claire,” says Frank, “I hate to drag you away but we had that errand to run for the Robertses, remember?”

“The Robertses?”

“Remember, I promised Ted I’d stop by on our way to the Cider House, drop off those tools I borrowed,” he says. If she refuses to play along, then what? Claire is too proud to start a scene in front of the student, but she’s not above making him stew in his own wretchedness, and for a moment Frank has the horrible thought that what if Claire sits them all down together at the Cider House, forces Frank to make small talk with the student while she watches with her cold angry justified smile, what if it’s hours before he even knows the exact extent of what she’s punishing him for.

“Tools?” Claire says, and then, to his vast relief: “That’s right. I must have forgotten.”

The student looks from Claire to Frank with a stunned, slightly wild expression. Her eyes have that hard glittery look that can lead to either tears or recriminations or both. “Maybe we’ll see you at the Cider House, Amanda,” Frank says, and steers Claire in a ninety-degree turn toward the exit.

“It was nice to meet you,” Claire tells the student over her shoulder, in the same odd, loose voice, and it occurs to Frank that Claire might be enraged to a depth he’s never witnessed before. She is implacably, menacingly calm. She consents to his hand on her arm, the way he holds her coat while she fixes her scarf. “Ready to go?” he says, meaninglessly—they are still within earshot of the student, who is looking after them with, Frank confirms via quick over-the-shoulder glance, an absolutely searing expression of outraged longing, and despite himself and despite everything he feels his neck heat up and his grip on Claire’s arm accidentally tighten. He holds the door for her, for Claire, and looks back at the student again even though he tells himself he’s not going to, and then the thick peeling doors of Galbreath fall closed and they’re safely outside in the cold.

“All right, Claire,” he says, once they’ve made it twenty or so feet from the chapel. They’re walking underneath the creaking trees of the campus green, the brick pathway delivering them in a roundabout way to their car. The white-gold stains of the streetlamps make everything else look dark. He’s been dreading this moment so long it feels almost familiar, the sharp precipice of his life, the cliff he’s glimpsed in the distance all these months but never walked this close to the edge of, and a part of him, hard to say how small a part, wants to just get it over with and jump. Frank says, “Talk to me.”

“About what?” says Claire.

He was grateful to her, in the chapel, for keeping so coldly still in front of the student, for protecting him. Now his gratitude gives way instantaneously to anger, like a flipped coin. “Come on, Claire,” he says. “Don’t do this to me.”

Claire is walking slowly, looking up at him, but he can’t bring himself to meet her eyes except in short bursts. She seems not lost in thought but buried in it; when their eyes do meet it’s as if she’s trying to make him out from some great distance. What the student could have told her to get her to act like this, Frank can’t imagine. Unless she lied—exaggerated—and Claire’s searching look is an attempt to square the man she married with the man she’s apparently ended up with. Frank can defend himself against the truth, but how is he supposed to defend himself against the deepest, most vindictive reaches of a spurned twenty-eight-year-old’s imagination? Nothing happened between them—nothing that counts, nothing that deserves a label. A few borderline interactions, a hand or two misplaced. They’ve both had their flirtations over the years, Claire and Frank.

“Is there something you want to talk about?” says Claire.

This is a classic Claire tactic. She's trying to bait him; she wants him to guess how much she already knows, lure him into confessing half the truth, so that after he's made his grand apology she can hit him with the other half, destroy any paltry credit he might get for coming clean. He knows this game and it's one he usually loses; he's not going to play.

"How about you start," he says, flatly. She says nothing. He says: "Or better yet let's just spend the night in silence until you've made up your mind about whatever it is you think you know."

There follow some long steps in the cold as Claire looks around at the locked classroom buildings and the undecided flakes drifting around the dark sky overhead. Claire's breath pushes out in faint clouds. Frank is trying to tamp down his anger, his fully unreasonable anger, he knows, after all if anyone has a right to be angry it's Claire, but there is something distinctly punitive and unjust in this purgatory she's putting him through, refusing to even accuse him of anything, forcing him in the negative space to accuse himself. Well, the joke is on her, because he's innocent. In fact what does it say about her that she believed the student straight-off, without evidence, that she trusts him so little that one stranger's word is enough to overcome years of nearly unbroken fidelity, all the thousands of evenings he could have "stayed late at the office" and didn't? He's the injured party here. Unless the student did present some kind of evidence, but he can't imagine what that would be. He was so careful on all her stories, leaving notes he would have left on any student's work, and after all it's hardly under his control who comes to office hours and how many times. If he's to be accused of any wrongdoing at all, it's for allowing the lines to get blurred, but he cleared it all up in the end, granted a few weeks later than he should have, but who among us hasn't had the odd moral slackening or two on account of vanity. Ming,

he feels sure, would have tolerated the student's attentions for much longer than he had, even encouraged them...

His conscience clear, Frank is determined to remain silent. If Claire is going to wait him out, he can wait longer. They descend from the green and cross to where Frank had parallel parked two hours before. Claire nearly walks right past their car—he has to take her elbow to slow her down—and sure enough, as he digs out his keys and clicks to unlock both doors, Claire says: “You’re upset.”

He looks at her across the car. Her brow is furrowed again; she looks strangely worried. Frank has not the slightest idea what to make of this. After a moment, he gets into the car, and she sits on the passenger’s side. He looks at his two hands on the wheel as if that will steady him somehow. “You’re saying I’m upset.”

“You seem upset. You’re tense. What’s wrong?”

Is it possible the student didn’t tell her anything at all? Was just feeling her out somehow, building up to it? No, it’s not possible. There’s nothing benign he can think of that the student would have to say to Claire.

Frank starts the car, pulls out faster than he means to and then brakes at the immediate red light. It’s easier, actually, having a reason not to look at Claire. “What did she say?” he says, watching the light as if it requires his rigid attention.

“What did who say?”

“The student. Amanda.”

Claire’s pause is careful, evasive. “You know I have trouble keeping track of all your students.”

Amanda is, for god's sake, his first infraction, among the student body anyway. There was one incident at a conference eight years back, which Claire knows about. It's not like this is a pattern. "She's lying, whatever she told you."

Claire is watching him with a slow, plaintive look. Her posture has fallen again into an unnatural stillness; her hands are clasped together in her lap, seriously. "I don't understand," she says.

Frank has to consider at this point whether he has himself manufactured the current crisis, whether the student was in fact telling Claire some dull harmless anecdote from office hours and he completely misread her expression and his wife's. His paranoia has been on the rise recently, but this would be a new watermark. He reviews their profiles against the back wall of Galbreath Chapel again and again until it starts to seem possible that Amanda's angry anguished expression, so apparent to him, might in fact have been adequately subtle to escape Claire's notice. This does not seem likely, but neither does anything Claire has said or done since. Frank tries to think back through everything he's said to Claire to see whether he's accidentally perjured himself somehow. He shouldn't have said Amanda's name, certainly.

"I'm sorry," Frank says. If he's wrong and Claire is toying with him, anything he says is going to dig the hole deeper. "I'm sorry. I am feeling a little tense. I didn't mean to take it out on you."

"That's okay," Claire says, sounding genuinely surprised. He turns, and she's smiling at him, reaching out to pat his hand. "It's been a long night."

Spooked, Frank turns back to the road. In the halfglow of the streetlights, Claire's eyes had seemed perfectly empty of malice, clear and gray and maybe slightly narrowed in focus. None of the plausibilities that are occurring to him are good ones. If this is her way of prying a

confession out of him, it's a diabolical one, more dissembling by far than anything she put him through after that conference. It occurs to Frank that Claire might have some even darker secret than his up her sleeve, if this is how coolly she takes the news, assuming the student told her anything of substance. Frank feels on the brink of some extremely ill-advised eruption, his fears breaking apart in binaries: either she's lost it or he has, either she knows nothing or she knows everything, either she's inflicting this on him or he's inflicting it all on her.

"Where are we going?" says Claire.

Frank has been hitting the turn signals especially hard, the brake pedal, the gas. "The Cider House, I thought, unless...? I can drop you off at home if you don't want to go. I'll have to make an appearance at some point."

"The Cider House sounds fun," says Claire.

The word *fun* skims him like a papercut, with its accompanying sting. "Amanda will be there," he says, taking advantage of a stop sign to turn and look at his wife properly. She meets his eyes with an expression he's seen a thousand times, absent but fond, the same way she looks whenever he calls her attention away from her reading—sometimes he'll ask her a question he already knows the answer to, just to see her glance up at him with that same unconscious smile. There's no one else at the four-way stop but he's still looking at her, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"Have I met Amanda?" Claire says.

Her smile is, if anything, slightly apologetic.

If Frank hallucinated their meeting tonight, then maybe he also hallucinated Amanda's presence at the reading, and her appearance in his doorway at office hours week after week, and her crossed-arms lip-chewing burning stare across the table in workshop all semester. Maybe he

will be called in tomorrow and informed that the student for whom he just submitted end-of-semester grades does not actually exist. However troubling the implications of this would be, as far as his own soundness of mind and conscience, it would also be kind of a relief.

They're among the first to arrive at the Cider House. Frank leads Claire to the bar. Now that he can observe her at length, he knows with sudden certainty that she's not toying with him. Her forehead keeps crumpling and smoothing itself out, like a slow-gauge tic. She smiles back when anyone smiles at her, but when the bartender leaves, her mouth falls back into a strange loose hold, like a child's, unaware of any external observation. A few of his colleagues are loudly agreeing at a table over by the back wall; they have already beckoned once for Frank and Claire to join, but Frank held up an index finger, gestured at the bar.

"Claire," he says. From the bartender she had ordered her usual gin and tonic; he picked at random one of the ciders on draft. She's having some kind of shock-induced breakdown, maybe, is what he's thinking now. "Are you feeling all right?"

"I feel fine. I'm a little tired, maybe. It's been a long night."

"Do you want to go home?"

Claire looks around the bar, as if noticing it for the first time. "I don't mind staying here a little longer," she says.

"Did something upset you at the reading?"

"What reading?"

"At Galbreath Chapel. The reading. Claire."

She shakes her head, slowly. The bartender delivers their drinks and she smiles her thanks. "Which night was that?" she says to Frank.

He looks at her and looks at her. She laughs, nervously. “Why are you giving me that look?” she says. Her left elbow is on the bar, her hand nudges the gin and tonic. “Is this for me?”

“Okay,” says Frank. He’s saying it to himself. Claire could be having a stroke. Though this is not what a stroke looks like, as far as he knows. He shouldn’t let her drink anything. He should get her to the hospital. “Claire, do you know my name?” Or is he supposed to ask her own name? He pulls both glasses away from her, moves them down the bar, like they’ve been left there by someone else.

“Gee, I can’t think,” she says. “We’ve only been married, what, twenty-five years?”

This is very Claire, the most Claire Claire’s been all night. Though in fact it’s twenty-seven years now they’ve been married. “My name, Claire, humor me for a second.”

“Your name, as I recall, is Frank,” she says.

“And our address?”

She can tell him their address, their birthdays, Cory’s birthday, their address in the town where they lived for two years when Cory was little, the high school Cory went to, though she’s vague on the year he graduated. She knows their anniversary. She knows the president but not the speaker of the house, though this is not necessarily so out of character for Claire. She can’t remember where they spent the holidays, Thanksgiving or Christmas, or which classes Frank is teaching this semester. She doesn’t know that she’s on sabbatical; she cheers up when he tells her: “Oh, so I don’t have to teach tomorrow!” Tomorrow is Saturday. “I’d like to close my tab,” Frank tells the bartender, and Claire looks around, like she’s trying to remember the cocktail she must have drunk. Frank’s colleagues catch her eye and wave more insistently, and Claire starts to get up, and Frank puts a hand on her knee, and now Harry is approaching across the room.

“All good over here?” says Harry.

Claire brightens, says “Harry! I didn’t know you were here.”

“Frank trying to keep you away from us or something? I promise, we’re all very well-behaved. Well, most of us anyway, I can’t speak for—”

“All good, thanks, Harry,” Frank says. “Claire has a bit of a headache, so I’m going to take her home. I’ll try to stop back after.”

“All right,” Harry says, looking at them both closely. Harry’s office is right next to Frank’s on the third floor of the English building; he has probably seen the student entering and leaving it many times, might even have noticed her talking to Claire. Frank will deal with that later. “Hope you feel better,” Harry says to Claire, with a parting curious look at their untouched drinks.

After he leaves, Claire says, “Do I look sick? I feel fine.”

“You look perfect. But I’m feeling ready to head home, aren’t you? You look perfect,” Frank says again, meaning it suddenly. Claire’s hair is pulled back, the usual three tendrils halfway to slipping out of their pins, her eyes meeting his from their dark bluish hollows, her mouth webbed in very faint soft lines. He has seen her in every state of dishevelment; a hundred nights he has seen her sleep in the same unwashed sweatshirt.

“You charmer,” Claire says, dismissively, smiling. “Sure, let’s head home.”

The bartender returns his card and Frank helps Claire into her coat again, her scarf still hanging forgotten around her neck. On their way out he sees the student, back pointedly turned to the bar, sitting on the table’s end with a group of other graduate students, laughing what seems like pointedly loud. He did not even notice that she’d arrived. This gives him pause; even as he bundles Claire out the door, a part of him lingers still, looking at the back of the student’s neck, the stiff forward jolt of her profile. He once thought he’d always be able to sense it when she

entered a room, that the resulting electric pulse in the air currents was neither his imagination nor his choice. But now he is leaving, Claire is closing the door to the Cider House behind them, and he can't even be sure whether the student's eyes are on him as he leaves, he can't tell.

Claire is quiet as they get back in the car. They sit in darkness for a moment; Frank hasn't turned the car on yet. "Is everything all right?" Claire asks.

"Everything's fine, I'm just looking up directions." Frank is googling: memory loss, sudden memory loss, sudden amnesia, short-term amnesia, memory loss no symptoms. There's something called Transient Global Amnesia that seems to check most of the boxes. All the sites say the same thing: little-understood phenomenon, no apparent triggers, no long-term damage, but one should always consult with a doctor to be safe. He's going to take her to the emergency room, Frank has decided, not because she necessarily needs it but because if she did have some kind of stroke and he didn't get help in time... Twenty-seven years they've been married.

"The Cider House," Claire says, "I haven't been here in ages."

Frank drives a steady fifteen miles above the speed limit. When he takes the second exit off the highway instead of the third, she says, "Where are we going?"

"We're just going to run some errands before we head home," Frank says. His phone, in the cupholder, is lighting up, rattling the loose coins. Claire is not the kind of wife who automatically checks his phone, though sometimes she has noticed her glance flick toward the screen when he types an unusually long text. Claire, now, is looking out her own window, shadows flashing across her jaw and throat, the ends of her scarf wound together in her hands. "You don't have a headache, do you?" Frank says.

"No. I feel fine. Maybe a little tired. It's been—"

"It's been a long night, I know, I know it has. Just a little longer now."

He reaches over and drives the rest of the way with a hand on her knee. Every couple minutes she squeezes it gently, or tucks her fingers into his. When he pulls in and parks outside the emergency room, Claire turns to him with anxious eyes, hands twisting in her scarf. “It isn’t Cory, is it?”

“No, no. Just a friend of mine you don’t know. Broke their ankle.”

“Oh how terrible,” she says. She keeps glancing at him as they walk up to the automatic doors, into the cold white light of the waiting room. He can tell she’s going to ask again.

“Cory’s fine,” he says. “I need to go talk to the receptionist. Can you sit here and wait for me?”

“All right,” she says. She sits in one of the blue vinyl chairs with that same uneasy expression, or something just below or before uneasy, something dawning on her that never quite dawns, and he has an idea.

“Do you have a pen on you?” he says. He finds the Cider’s House receipt in his pocket and accepts the pen from her and writes on the back of the receipt, after some thought, in all caps: EVERYTHING IS FINE! WILL EXPLAIN LATER. “Hold onto this,” he tells her, and up at reception he explains the situation and they say it’ll be forty-five minutes at least until a doctor can see her. But in fact it is only half an hour, and though Frank asks to accompany Claire to whatever small closed room they’re leading her towards, they tell him to stay behind in the waiting room.

“Make sure she holds onto this,” he says about the receipt, and only after the Patients Only door has closed behind her and he’s gone back to their two seats and Claire’s discarded coat and scarf does he realize that he should have written on the receipt, I LOVE YOU.

In his vinyl chair, under the quiet glare of the TV tuned to he doesn't know what talk show, Frank feels it all fall away from him, the hope and the dread equally. Ending things with the student was just another move in the game they both intended to keep playing; he sees this clearly now, just as he sees the crashed pieces of it far below. Claire proofread every inch of his hundred-thousand-word manuscript before and after he sent it to his agent. She took him out to dinner the night he finished, patiently debunked his hesitations about an obscure scene in the twelfth chapter. She must have known the novel wasn't good, but she didn't tell him.

The notification on Frank's phone is an email from the student. His personal account, thank god, not his university one. The email is long and hysterical and changes its mind several times. "I'm sorry for telling your wife," it begins. But then, halfway down: "I'm not sorry for what I said. She has a right to know and I think you're sick for pretending you had no part in what happened between us." But then in the last few lines, another apology: "I'm sorry. I know I've ruined everything. Please call me as soon as you can."

Frank, looking around at the other hapless strangers ranged around waiting, at the clock on the wall ticking past ten p.m., at his wife's coat and scarf slipping down toward the carpeted floor, Frank steps outside and a few feet away from the entrance, close enough that he can still see the Patients Only door through the glass. Amanda picks up halfway through the second ring. She's been crying, he can tell from her voice. The background of the line is quiet and he guesses she's at home, probably left the Cider House as soon as he did. "It's all right," he tells her. He listens to her for a few minutes, and then cuts her off. "Amanda. It's all right. She already knew." Inside the waiting room, the patients door swings open and Claire steps through, the nurse leading her kindly but briskly back to her seat. Claire sits obediently at first, as the nurse disappears behind the reception desk, but soon she starts looking uncertainly around the room, up

at the TV, down at her fist, in which she seems surprised to find a crumpled-up receipt. Frank feels a sudden soul-deep impatience; he can't think of a single reason he should be on the phone talking to the student, now of all times. "She already knew," he says, approaching the automatic doors, keeping Claire in his sights. "There's nothing you can tell her that she doesn't know. A marriage is a complicated thing. Don't presume to understand mine. I'll see you in class, Amanda." He gives her a beat or two of silence, in case she wants to say anything, but there's just the stifled sound of her breathing and he hangs up.

Inside, Claire looks up at him with relief. "Frank," she says. "Thank goodness. It isn't Cory, is it?"

"Cory's fine. I just have to talk to the receptionist and then we'll head home, okay?"

"All right," she says.

He kisses her head, uncrumples the receipt in her hands. "Hold onto this," he says.

The nurse tells him that Claire will most likely be fine. Episodes of Transient Global Amnesia usually last only four to six hours; if she's still experiencing memory trouble tomorrow morning, he should bring her back in, but otherwise they can safely assume that this was an isolated incident, perfectly harmless. Of course if he'd like to schedule a follow-up appointment for an MRI just to be sure, he's welcome to do so. Frank says yes to the MRI and asks if there's anything he should do in the meantime, while the episode is ongoing, if there's any way he can help her.

"Keep asking her questions, that way you'll know when she starts to come out of it. Keep her calm. She's disoriented and confused; it'll be natural for her to feel anxious. Tomorrow she likely won't have any memory of the episode or of the hour or so before it began. Some people

find that distressing; she may want you to talk her through everything that happened this evening.”

“She won’t remember any of it?”

“Most people who experience TGA report remembering very little of the episode afterwards, besides a few disconnected images and thoughts.”

“Thank you,” Frank says—the nurse has already stayed longer with him than she wanted to, he can tell. “Thank you.”

Claire keeps looking behind her as they pass through the automatic doors, back to the glowing red letters spelling out the hospital’s name and the receding white square of the waiting room. But she doesn’t ask any questions; she follows Frank back to the car. She waits, in the dark of the dashboard, for Frank to start the engine. “I’m sorry, remind me,” she says. “We are going home, aren’t we?”

“Yes, we are. Look at me for a second, Claire?”

She turns to him. She doesn’t have her scarf on—she might have left it in the waiting room. He’ll call them about it later. He takes both of her hands in his. Her hands are cold; he should turn up the heat for the drive home. It’s 10:16 p.m. The reading started at seven, and the episode must have started sometime during the reading, or immediately after. Claire looks at him, puzzled, patient, smiling now and then as if to reassure him, or herself.

“I love you, Claire,” says Frank.

She smiles, surprised and pleased. “I love you too.”

“There’s something I have to tell you.”

“I’m listening,” she says. She glances at the emergency room sign, frowns a little bit, looks down at their joined hands and up at his face again. “But don’t you want to wait and tell me when we get home?”

It’s only a sixteen-minute drive back home, and the car is cold. “All right,” he says. “It can wait.”

Their house is full of the hum of the furnace and the dim electric buzz of the kitchen lights. He hangs up both their coats. Claire has been humming the same two lines of a song, restarting every few minutes, never making it past the chorus. There’s something relieved about the way she sinks into the green armchair where she always sits, as if now she’ll remember the rest of the script. Frank, instead of taking his usual place on the sofa across the room, sits close on the coffee table just in front of her, shifting aside their mugs from that morning. Claire reaches to turn on the reading lamp, but Frank says, “Let’s just sit like this for a moment.”

“All right,” she says. “You look very serious, you know.”

“Do I?”

“You look like you’re about to propose to me.”

Frank laughs. He takes her hands again, flattening his palms against her knuckles, trying to impart some heat. His smile fades, but to Claire it might never have been there at all. “I have to tell you something,” he says.

“I’m listening.”

“There was a student, in one of my classes. I knew she was attracted to me and I guess I might have encouraged her. She says that I led her on. Anyway I didn’t set boundaries soon enough. There might be trouble, I don’t know. Nothing happened between us really, it was just a flirtation, but I thought you should know—I thought I should tell you.”

“Oh,” Claire says, pulling away. She looks pale, her hands a little unsteady in her lap. Her lips twist together and then pull apart to speak, but she doesn’t say anything else. Frank waits. He’s still seated on the coffee table, his legs angled on either side of her crossed knees. Most of Claire’s face is in shadow; the left side is illuminated by the harsh white overflow of the kitchen lights. She turns away from him, but only to turn on the reading light. When she looks back, her face is smooth again, just the smallest crease between her eyebrows. “I have to be honest,” says Claire.

“Yes?” Frank says, his throat seizing up with a hope he can hardly recognize.

“I can’t remember what we had for dinner tonight.”

Frank lowers his forehead to his wife’s knee, and is amazed to hear her laughing overhead.

“You don’t remember either, do you?” she says. “I’m telling you, we’re getting old.”

“No, I don’t remember either,” he says. “Will you forgive me, Claire?”

Her laugh is echoing in smiles across her face, in the flat yellow glow of the reading lamp. He can see in her eyes that she doesn’t know why she’s smiling, but that she has a good guess. “I think I can do that,” she says. She has forgiven him so many times; what difference could be made by one more?

Queen Mary's Daughter

She burned all the letters he sent to her, which of course she regrets now. He had handwriting like a child's, she says. Brilliant man, but he couldn't spell to save his life. I ask her if she thinks the letters would be worth something now. Oh no, she says. I could never have sold them.

She tells me again the names of the songs that are about her, based on clues in the lyrics too subtle for anyone else to pick up. The county fair? she says, pointing to track eight on one of the CDs. We went there together. It was only a month or so we'd been seeing each other, and he didn't have a car at the time so we took mine. I told you, didn't I, why he didn't have a car at that time.

Something about his ex-wife? I say.

Right smack in the middle of divorce proceedings, and he didn't even tell me! She took the car, she took the studio, she took the apartment. Thank God they didn't have kids or I'm sure she would have taken those too.

But you thought he was just poor, I say.

Well, I knew he was poor. You can't watch a man live off cigarettes and Salisbury steak for a month and not realize a thing like that. The only thing she didn't take was his guitars. Filled up a whole room at his friend's place he was staying at. Well, friend's place is how he called it. Some kind of friend! You'll want to slice those thin, honey.

I am slicing them thin.

Thinner, like this. You know he left them with me one night? All those guitars. I didn't touch them, just looked at them all around the kitchen like a bunch of colorful jewels. He took them back the next day, I guess he and the girlfriend made up, or at least he didn't worry she'd

smash them all to pieces anymore. She was the one he was originally getting divorced over. Of course, I didn't know that at the time.

And you stayed home from work that day, I say.

I did, even though I needed the money even worse than he did. I stayed right there and I watched those guitars so nobody could break in and steal them, that's how much he'd impressed me with how expensive they all were. I was so hungry at the end of that day I could have eaten one. They had these free soup packets in the kitchen at work and that's what I was eating every day, one for lunch and one slipped in the pocket for dinner. Except when he took me out, and that's when we'd get diner eggs and big slabs of French toast and home fries and all that. You wouldn't believe how much cream he put in his coffee. Said it was free calories. He was always collecting anything free, ketchup packets and those little boxes of jam. Ketchup on bread, that was his staple. He called it the poor man's BLT, couple sad strips of bacon and ketchup on both sides of the bread. He'd say that and he'd wait for you to ask about the L. Go on, ask it.

What about the lettuce? I say.

Fuck the lettuce! She laughs. He'd say it just like that.

Tell me again how you met, I say.

Oh, that's not so exciting. He was in town with some of his college friends, just passing through. I remember seeing them all across the cafeteria. You could tell right away the way he stood out. Funny little hat on and everything. I was cleaning up dishes from the next table and then I came around to their table and I could feel his eyes on me. You need a hand with all those? he asked me. His friends were all still talking over him, they barely noticed I was there. No thank you, I said, but he leapt up anyway and started trying to gather plates and forks for me, knocking things over in the process. He was tall, had that apologetic way of stooping men do when they've

grown too tall too quick. Please, I said, I'm a professional. He laughed at that, and later as he and his friends were leaving he ran up to me where I was spritzing down tables at the other end. You a student here? he said. What's your major? I told him I wasn't a student, but he wouldn't believe me. Art history? he said. English lit? I was quite the beauty in those days, and young, too. I can see how I would have looked like a student to him.

You're still beautiful, Mom, I say.

Oh if only. But you're sweet to say it. The truth is I should have been one of those students. I thought I was so smart going to vocational school. All my friends stuck in classes another four years, while I'd be out in the world making real money. The trouble is I just couldn't settle on anything. Hairdressing, home econ, typing school. For the longest time I wanted to be a flight attendant. I worked as a farmhand for a month too, I never told you that? Sweet old place. The farmer and his wife made me lunch every day after I finished work. Her apple pie could knock a man flat on his back. Mine doesn't even come close, though your father, bless him, still says it's the best he's ever tried. Wait tonight and see. And honey, if you're tired of chopping we can switch and why don't you peel the rest of these.

It's fine, I'm almost done, I say, but she's already taken the cutting board and handed me the apple peeler. She's sliced up two apples in the time it takes me to get one all the way peeled. But then Mom, I say, he just kept asking what your major was, didn't he?

He certainly did. Modern dance? International relations? Anthropology? After a while I started to play along. Why not Astrophysics? I said. He fell back a step, he actually took off his hat to me like they do in the movies. I've been presumptuous, he said. So is it Astrophysics then? No, I said, thinking I was being quite coy. His friends by this point were waiting outside the cafeteria door, trying to wave him over. History? Mathematics? Engineering? Just tell me if I'm

in the ballpark, he said. Well I didn't want the game to end, but I had dishes to wash, so finally I said fine, it's Advanced Gastroeconomics, gastro being a fancy word for food.

I know what gastro means.

Well, you're a smart kid, I'm not surprised. His friends were yelling over to him by then. Will I see you again? he said, and I said, You know where to find me. He came back to that cafeteria every day that whole week he was in town, and we'd sit down and have lunch together in the corner until my boss noticed and got mad at me and I had to go back to cleaning up dishes. Mrs. Farish. Horrible woman.

But then he found you again, didn't he? I say.

He found my mother first. Called every Mulligan in town until he got the right one. I'm looking for a girl named Mary, he'd say, five foot six, curly blond hair, works down at the college bussing tables. Who's calling? my mother said. She hated when men came calling for me, I'd always get an earful afterwards about how I should never give out our number, and I'd learned to give the number of my friend Sharon instead, who lived alone and who kept them on the phone a good fifteen minutes or so, to make sure they were good sorts, as she put it.

So he explained who he was, I say.

He didn't have to explain a thing. At the time his records were just starting to get big enough so that the ladies at bridge club had heard them on the radio. You can put those in the same bowl and why don't you go ahead and mix in the sugar. And you know his looks didn't hurt either. He said his name and my mother said, How do I know it's really you? And he said, Well, let me prove it to you. And he sang her two whole songs right there on the telephone, humming the instrumental bits and everything. Well, by the end of song number two she was so starstruck she would have given him anything. Would have given him my hand in marriage if he'd asked.

She said I'd be home at six and he could call again then if he liked. He thanked her very politely, she said, and then hung up. You can imagine the state we were in when six o'clock came and went, both of us waiting by the phone and pretending to read our magazines. Finally at seven my mother got up in a huff to start dinner, and then my father was griping about how late we were eating, and my mother was saying bitter things about how in her day young men behaved with a little more respect, but she supposed for my generation it was all well and good to wait by the phone for hours just in case a young man so happened to—

And then he called you after all, didn't he?

Yes he did, at nine o'clock on the dot. He'd forgotten about the time difference. Although you know, I never quite believed that. I think he just liked to keep me waiting.

And you talked all night.

All night and into the morning, until my mother learned he was in California and came in screeching about long-distance rates. That's when we switched to letters instead. Back and forth every two weeks at least. Sometimes I'd send him another letter before I'd even received his response to the first. By the time three months were gone by I'd decided to move to California to be with him. I knew my parents wouldn't approve, so I didn't tell them. Packed my bags one night and drove all the way there in my little compact car that I'd bought with my own money. It coughed something horrible the whole way. I thought I'd have to junk it and travel the rest of the way by bus. But I made it, and I found a bed and breakfast right near the address he'd given me, which I found out in the morning was just a PO box. I sat there all day and then went to the bed and breakfast again that night, and the next morning there he was, checking his mail. He was so happy to see me, he walked me all around the city and then found me an apartment the next neighborhood over. Oh it was so cheap, and cramped, and every night the mice would scabble

up the back of the stove and leave their droppings all over my counters. But I loved it, I loved the woman down at the end of the block selling fresh mango and the diner he always took me to, the best coffee around, he always said, and I always said how could he tell if he put that much cream in it. Mud would have tasted good with all that cream. I had brought along a couple resumes with me and I got myself hired for the night shift at a twenty-four-hour diner close to downtown. I sent a note to my parents saying that I was all right and had plenty of money, and I didn't give a return address. And then we lived like that for, what was it? Almost two years.

And you were in love, I say.

Deeply, madly! Of course there were things I didn't know about then. It was always my place we stayed at. He said he didn't mind the mice. He brought an ashtray with him after that first night when I scolded him for getting ash on the kitchen table in my nice new apartment, but besides that he kept almost nothing there. Every day he'd disappear sometime while I slept, and he'd come back in the evening in new clothes and freshly shaved. Some nights he didn't come back at all. He had gigs around the city but he never told me about them until they'd already passed. He said there was no point me paying a cover for bad beer when I could hear him sing any time, and to prove it he'd take out a guitar and sing me any song I wanted, not just his but anyone's. I did go to one of his shows once. I saw him listed on the bill and I crept in the back and watched the whole thing, all the way to when the lights went up. He got swarmed as soon as he came offstage, I saw a woman kiss him right on the lips. This will sound crazy to you, but I didn't mind that he had other women. I figured he probably did. When he came over later that night—he'd always stand outside my gate, chaining cigarettes until he stood in a cloud of smoke, and hooting like an owl, that was our signal—very casually I told him that I'd been at the show and I thought he did pretty good. He was furious. He stayed away a whole week after that. By the

time he finally came back I would have apologized for anything, including things he'd done to me. I said I didn't care if there was someone else in his life, but he didn't like hearing that. I think he wanted to feel some kind of guilty, so he could come back to me and feel like an outlaw rogue getting forgiven by this sweet angel girl who didn't know any better. You see that in a lot of the songs from that time period. All absolution this and absolution that. I wasn't as naïve as he liked to think, but I was okay pretending for a while. I was in love. You'll know what I mean when you're older.

I already know what you mean, I say.

That's right, I forgot about that boy, what's his name, Jacob? Are you two still going together? Here, press in with your finger like this, that'll give the edges that nice crimped look.

We don't call it *going together* anymore, Mom.

Going steady? Boyfriend-girlfriend?

But Mom, if you didn't care about the other woman, then why were you so upset when you came to his house and it was the girlfriend who opened the door?

It wasn't just about the girlfriend, that day. It was a whole lot of things all at once.

You can tell me, I say.

I'm not sure you're old enough for this part of the story.

Mom. I'm almost fourteen.

Well. All right. Don't tell your father I told you this. The thing was that I was going to have a baby. His baby. Except neither of us wanted a baby. Or at least I knew that he didn't. Me, I wasn't sure what I wanted, but I knew that having a baby whose father didn't want it, all alone out in the whole wide state of California, working for too little pay at an office where most secretaries only lasted a few months—

I thought you worked at the diner, I say.

This was after the diner. One of his friends helped me get hired as a typist after he saw how fast I could go on his manual typewriter. It was I guess you'd call it my party trick. I was the fastest around in those days. I always wished there was some kind of competition I could enter. I could have won the grand prize.

Did you tell him about the baby? I say.

Oh yes, I had to. I couldn't afford to deal with it on my own. He was very silent the night I told him. He sat there smoking with the ashtray filling up beside him. I'd been crying before he got there but I tried to sit very still and composed. I pretended I was at work preparing to type a long memo, and that helped calm me down. Meeting notes March 23rd, item under discussion: unplanned pregnancy, Mary Mulligan opening statement. I said I'd get an abortion only I didn't know where or how much it would cost. He was silent another long minute and then he came over and kissed my head and said he'd handle everything and not to worry.

And then he just left you, just like that?

No, no, sweetheart, he was very decent about the whole thing. He paid for it all himself, he sent one of his friends to drive me there and back and to sit there in the waiting room for me while it was all happening. He said he was busy recording that day but I think he just couldn't face it. When I came back to the apartment there was a vase of flowers on the table and an envelope with money, more even than he'd given me for the procedure. I think I knew then, but I couldn't face things either I guess. There was no note on the envelope, not even an I love you or a name.

And that's when you found out about the other girlfriend, I say.

I waited a whole week. When I couldn't stand it anymore, I called the friend of his who'd taken me to the hospital, who had left me his number in case there were any complications after, and I said I needed to know where he was staying. His friend was hesitant at first, knew what I'd find once I got there, but I kept calling and finally he gave me the real address. It was a nice building, with flower boxes in the windows, not at all what I'd been picturing. I rang the bell. The woman who opened the door looked like the same one I'd seen at the show all those months ago. She was pretty and dark-haired and had a shrewd look in her eyes. I told her I wanted to speak with him. She asked who I was, and I said, Tell him it's Queen Mary here to see him. That's what he used to call me. Did I ever tell you the story of how that got started?

Finish this story first, I say. What did she say? She wouldn't let you speak to him, right?

She just said, He's not in, and she closed the door. As I walked away I could hear raised voices, hers and then what sounded like his. It's funny, but it wasn't until that moment that it hit me. When she opened that door I didn't feel much of anything. I had pretty much figured he was living with her when he wasn't off with me. But hearing the way they started in on each other after the door was closed, I tell you, my stomach just dropped. It was so clear to me suddenly that this was a fight they'd had many times before, about many different girls besides me, and that they were going to keep having this fight and keep staying together anyway. He was always going to go back to her. And she would always take him back, because he was who he was, but she wouldn't understand him or accept him for it like I could. They'd just keep arguing for the rest of their lives, and it made me sad to think about that fate for him. I barely made it back to my apartment I was crying so hard. That's when I burned all the letters on the gas stove, and then I packed up everything I owned and I drove all the way back home in two days, in that same broken-down old car. My parents had been so worried they forgave me right there on the spot. I

got a job at the local library and that's where I met your father. Oh, honey, you're crying. I didn't mean to make you cry.

You never saw him again? I say. Ever?

No, never. But if I hadn't been through all that, I wouldn't have met your father, and I wouldn't have known what a catch he was when I met him. That's the happy ending to the story. And you know, I still get to listen to his songs. For years it felt like he was speaking to me through the songs, the only way he could.

The song about the bird, I say.

Oh, there were dozens. But it's funny you mention that song in particular. When you were a baby, I used to sing it to you, and it always made you cry. There you'd be sitting, right as rain, and then I'd start singing that song and you'd start up crying. None of his other songs made you cry. Just that one.

And that's why you have all his CDs, I say.

Well, he's a wonderful musician. Of course he doesn't write songs about me anymore, not for many many years. There's only so long you can be somebody's muse. Your father hates him, you know, absolutely hates him! Used to be whenever we'd walk in the grocery store and one of his songs would be playing, we'd have to walk right back out and sit in the car till it was over. But I don't think he notices so much anymore. Now if you want to be the one to put the pie in you've got to wear mitts and you've got to be very careful, we overfilled it a little. Try to set it right above the foil there, that'll catch any drips. And we'll want to take all these back upstairs before your father gets home. Lord knows what he'd think coming home to all these CDs spread out on the counter. He'll think I'm indoctrinating you.

That's not true. I loved his music already even before I knew, I say.

Well, you would. It's in your blood. But sweetheart, I don't want you to worry about your mom's old broken heart. It was a long time ago, and now I have your dad, and I have you. It's a much better life than any I could have had with him. Being a rockstar's wife is no easy job. All the late nights and the other women and the long months away on tour. I am so glad—look at me, because I mean this—I am so glad that things worked out the exact way they did.

But you never even got an explanation, I say. He never even said goodbye.

I'm a grown woman. What do I need goodbyes for? And sweetie, the truth is, it wasn't a vase of flowers he left me on the table that night. It was just a grocery store bouquet, already wilting because he hadn't even known to put it in water. He was never good at things like that. Your father on the other hand. A born romantic. And speaking of your father, I should get dinner on the stove before the two of you end up eating pie first and dinner second. You go wash up and come down and help when you're ready. Your father's going to think I've been making you cry. I shouldn't have told you half of that, but you like his songs so much I thought you might like to know.

I'm glad you told me, I say. It's a beautiful story.

Nonsense, she says. What about the story of how your father and I got together? Remind me to tell you that one next time. And don't forget to take these CDs up with you since you're headed upstairs.

*

I know how to splash cold water under my eyes after I've been crying. Maybe this is something all grown women have to learn how to do. Maybe this is what my mom did first thing after she found the flowers and before she drove over to his real girlfriend's house. Maybe this is what the girlfriend did that night before she came to bed. I know from online that they never did

have any kids, and they're still together, him and that girlfriend. I wonder if he knows that I was almost his daughter. That I would have been, if my mom had left the money in the envelope with the flowers and driven home that same day with me still inside. My soul was all ready to ship, all bundled up on the conveyor belt with his songs already running through my blood. But God said hold off, and so I got stuck up on some shelf in the warehouse another three years, until finally God got the signal and he sent me all the way down into my mother's arms, where my father would claim me as his own, which I am, mostly.

Principles of Mind Expansion

The girlfriend, Evonne, arrives three minutes late and with such clamorous flair we know she's going to be a hugger. We stand up around either side of the table; her hair smells sweet, her nails squeeze the skin of our backs. She sits down and Doug makes the introductions. Doug has a range of smiles, and this one is the almost frantically happy grin of a kid showing off the fort they built in the woods, something they like so much it'll be unbearable if you don't. You grew up with Doug, so maybe the fort thing is something that actually happened and not just a metaphor. We smile and laugh as big as we can to match, and say it's great to finally meet Evonne, and she says yes yes! and jokes about how Doug's been putting it off, and he teases back, and under the table our knees nudge together in private conversation.

We ask how long they've been together (three months) and how they met (at the gym: Evonne was annoyed with Doug for hogging the best treadmill, and eventually took the one right next to him and set off at such an alarming [and sustained] pace that he was smitten and asked for her number) even though we could have already found these things out from Doug. The new girlfriend is likely the reason we haven't seen much of Doug lately. She is extremely pretty in an angular, sly way, her hair cut along an incline and her earrings looking to be real tiny ferns, swinging every direction as she speaks. "Of course I gave him a fake number," she says, with a burst of bright laughter. "Well, so I texted and I never heard from her," Doug says, hands spread open in the posture of the innocent dupe, "and then I see her again at the gym two weeks later and I'm like, What about that drink?"

"And it's too awkward to explain so I just agree, and we go on our first date that night," she says, nudging him, and he says, "At the end of the night I text her that I had a great time and

the other person writes back, Who is this?" "I had *completely* forgotten about the fake number," she tells us, with an expression like she's winking at each of us separately for individual reasons.

We are torn: on the one hand we find it sweet, this new-couple silliness, arms constantly slung round each other's chairs, looking at each other with mutual delight as if they cannot conceive of any possible dealbreakers, impasses, incompatibilities, as if all love takes is a person this wonderful and then everything is a rush of easy. On the other hand, they're a bit overpowering, so boisterously each other's fans that it makes our own love seem small and tired in comparison. Under the table our fingers overlap on my knee, your index snares my thumb, because we are not threatened by this spectacle, we too have reasons to tease and to touch, even if they aren't as urgent or all-consuming as Doug and Evonne's.

"And I don't have his number either, because I'm an idiot," says Evonne, "so I just have to keep going to the gym hoping to run into him so I can explain!" "And of course I'm not going to that gym anymore because I've just been humiliated, I go on what I think is a great date with this beautiful girl and she pretends she doesn't know who I am, like what the fuck," says Doug with his booming laugh, and then etc. etc. their gym routines finally intersect again a couple weeks later and the rest is history. (We repress a smile at the idea that a couple this young can have history—history, to us, is bloody and ancient, it covers the brutal dark days of our fights and our soft dreary winters together on the couch and distantly, far back, the heady bliss of those first few weeks, when to walk beside you and brush your hand with mine was an electric epiphany. But since then, empires have risen and fallen in our love, our old selves have been buried like ancestors, and though we honor them we do not really understand them and would not trade our lives for theirs.)

Evonne wants a margarita pitcher for the table. Doug is game, and so, it turns out, are you. Doug and Evonne have been elsewhere for drinks before this. It is our turn to tell the how-we-met story, and patiently we enact our usual routine, you downplaying and me correcting, except I skip some corrections and you omit some punchlines. Doug, who has heard the story before, seems not to notice, in fact has taken this opportunity to study the menu while not immediately called upon by Evonne's attention. "Oh here we go," Evonne says when she notices. "He is literally always so indecisive about what to order."

We give her a small laugh, even though we have known Doug for years (you for two decades) and could write whole essays on his restaurant idiosyncrasies, and if we could speak freely (if e.g. Doug and Evonne spent a minute up at the bar) we'd be betting money on Doug's eventual order, always a mystery to him until the last moment but to us, perfectly clear. It is impressive in the sense of impressively arrogant that Evonne has deemed herself the resident Doug expert after three months of dating, but Doug seems credulously amazed at how well she's seen through him. "It's true," he says, "and here's the thing, I'll study the menu for twenty minutes, Evonne skims it for one second and she always out-orders me. Whatever she gets is guaranteed ten times better than what I get." "I'm very in touch with my needs," Evonne says, in the tone of a hair-flip.

We are in our mid-thirties; Evonne might be twenty-nine. Doug is not a close friend but an old friend, which entitles us to judge him because he'll stick around in our lives either way. The margarita pitcher arrives with the waitress behind it, awaiting our order. We override Doug's hesitancy by ordering first—we are allied in our efforts to keep this night moving at a good clip. Everyone gets some variety of burger. Evonne is already pouring out margaritas, filling my glass

to the brim without asking, and I feel your glance at me and appreciate it. “I should just order for you,” she says to Doug. “Remember when at the tapas place on East Main—”

The glass to the right of my right hand is full, and I have options. There is the option of honesty, but honesty is a conversation: I don’t drink, at all, since when, why not, really, ever, not even, okay but what about, just this once, for me, come on. There is the other option, which is for us to surreptitiously switch our glasses every fifteen minutes or so, such that your glass is always mysteriously full again as mine drains in one-third increments. This is the usual option but will require some finesse tonight, just the four of us, the small table.

I can’t tell whether you’re strategizing too or actually listening to the story of Doug and Evonne’s fourth (?) (this is under some debate) date at a tapas bar, where the sheer proliferation of possible tapas left Doug almost incapacitated until he panicked (he does an impression of himself panicking) and ordered four of the same tapa in a row, to Evonne’s great mirth. “Whose idea was it to go to a tapas bar anyway,” Doug mock-gripes, which we learn is a joke, it was his idea. “After that, I realized that a simple menu is key,” Evonne says, isolating the word for emphasis, *key*. “And don’t even get me started on takeout,” she says, and immediately tells us about their takeout-ordering escapades, meaning perhaps to imply with the multiplicity of her anecdotes that she and Doug have been together for ages, but we suspect she is calling forth every single anecdote of their three-month relationship, no takeout order stone left unturned.

They are so boring! Are you feeling this too? We laugh and interject and take our turn telling our versions of the same early milestones. Anyone eavesdropping might think that we are boring too, a thought that rankles and makes you wittier than usual, and me quieter. What is boring about Doug and Evonne is not just the extreme banality of their courtship stories but the energetic telling, so sustained and indiscriminate that it’s wearing us out—you’re tapping your

fingers against my knee again. What a relief to know that we will unpack this later, stepping into the air-conditioned quiet of our home, our grateful exhausted sinking into the couch and one of us will speak first: “So... Evonne,” and the other will say, “She’s a character,” and that’s it, that’s all we will have to say, though of course we will keep going for the pleasure of agreeing about everything, you articulating exactly what I was about to think, and vice versa, until we’ve squared up our records of the night and can file it away in our shared memory, remember that weird dinner we had with—?

Your performance is perfect, your laugh pitched louder than usual. Anyone would think you were having fun. You gesture at me throughout your stories to make it seem like I am talking too, so all I have to do is smile along. The kitchen is slow tonight and we manage subtly to look over our shoulders for the waitress. We are hungry and having to talk loud and close over the music.

“Do you not like your margarita?” says Evonne suddenly.

I know this tone and where it leads. The only way to head it off is to say yes of course I do, the margarita’s fine, I just tend to nurse drinks for an especially long time, I’m forgetful really, and you will chime in with some funny joke-not-joke about how often you finish my drink without me even noticing. But instead I hear you saying, in response to my quick silence, “She doesn’t drink.”

“You don’t drink?” Evonne says, looking at me and not you now.

“Not really.”

“Are you in recovery?”

“No.”

“Or pregnant!” Evonne says, a fount of speculation, and I can feel you at my side about to intervene, but I don’t trust whatever you’re about to say.

“No,” I say. “Not that either.” Evonne’s eyes have awakened to me, sharper than they were before, aglitter with scientific curiosity. The night gets longer. “There’s no reason for it,” I say, because she’s still waiting for the explanation that will make it all right. “It’s just not for me.”

“I think that’s us,” you say, nodding at the approaching waitress, and as Doug and Evonne turn halfway to look, I set my margarita glass directly beside yours with a thunk that I’m sure you understand perfectly.

“Oh, brilliant,” says Doug as the food heapingly arrives, himself having ordered the house burger, the most basic possible choice, and for a moment we feel fond of him. You pick up some thread of asking about Doug’s job as everyone decides when and how much to chew. Evonne is still bright and smiling but lets Doug tell his own stories this time, and when the topic dies down she leans across the table to me and says, “So do you smoke?”

“Not really,” I say.

“No Mary J? At all?”

I give a verbal shrug. Doug has pulled you into some separate conversation. I might be imagining your sympathetic glance, peripheral and brief. I don’t look over at you because I don’t want you to get the credit for some belated rescue, not when it’s your fault to begin with.

Evonne’s eyes haven’t left mine; she is not eating.

“You don’t smoke *at all*,” she says.

“It’s not for me,” I say.

She's still fixated on me but her eyes have lost their precision; she's thinking not about what I'm saying but how she'll respond to what I'm saying. "I totally get that," is what she decides on. "That's like exactly what my mom used to say before I introduced her to it properly, she says it totally changed her life."

"Oh yeah?" I say, and this is all I have to say for the next half hour. Evonne, it turns out, is a drugs evangelist. She wants to try them all, has tried a good number already—I get both lists—she's fascinated by the way they "allow you to access the full power of the human mind. The human mind is so, so powerful." She had an epiphany on acid that redirected the course of her life; she realized, she says, that the mind and body are one, and most people's problem is that they're disconnected from their own bodies. "That's where disease even comes from: dis-ease, you're not at ease with yourself, you have this friction between body and mind and until you can reconcile them under one power of will, you'll never be actually at peace. You get someone with stage four lung cancer, send them to me," veering into alarming territory now, appearing to suggest that if this stage four lung cancer patient met her she'd set them straight—"We're only as sick as we choose to be. With my mom I just had to explain to her, you know, it's all about positive energy. It's about making your mind a positive place to live, because mind and body are the same and if you live in all that toxicity, all that negative energy you're generating in yourself and the world around you, it literally makes you sick." She says her dream job would be to help guide people on their spiritual trips, to show how psychedelics can expand their minds and teach them the truth of the universe and themselves. "I just want to be that safe presence that's there leading you through it, helping you to unlock the mind-body connection and reach that unity of spirit that drugs have given me." She's currently unemployed, Evonne.

"That would be a good fit for you," I tell her.

“See? Thank you. Yes.” All this time we have been eyes locked across the table, Evonne’s speech so intensely transcendent that I knew it would be a betrayal to look away even once. I’ve had a loose fry in my hand for three minutes at least. The men on their side of the table have cleared their plates. Evonne’s face is back to normal, her dark lips and her winged eyeliner looking clever and charismatic, though midway through her pitch I had seen her face shift into ugliness, her sharp jaw misaligned and almost grotesque, her eyes small and bleak in the swollen pallor of her face. Now she is pretty again, her obliging smile directed to her right, where Doug very seriously is answering some good question of yours. Our conversation has closed; I am released back to the group.

My chance at last to finish the fry, the sagging crescent remains of my burger, tepid now, as gracefully you loop Evonne into your and Doug’s discussion of his travel plans this upcoming winter. “Although with the family Christmas, hypothetically if you wanted to come,” Doug starts saying to Evonne, and I stand up without a nod to anyone, and I walk across the restaurant to the all-gender bathrooms, and in the mirror I look young, too young, like someone who might reasonably be conned into a guided acid trip into my own powerful mind, learning whatever it is it would save my life to know. If there was a back door out of here I would walk through it and keep walking. But all doors lead back to beside you at the table, where smoothly you are handling Doug and Evonne’s insistent laughter, and I wonder if there will ever be a time or an age when I don’t have to explain myself, and I resolve again to stop coming out on these nights with you, sitting at these bars with you, making these excuses for you when there you are holding court with Doug and Evonne like you’re one of them, which after all I suppose you are.

The topic of conversation has not migrated elsewhere but tightened its claws. It’s now very important to discuss in detail which drugs everyone has and hasn’t yet tried. You give your

answer as if it's our answer; you speak with quiet diplomacy, and your list feels long, longer than I knew. You've drained both your glass and my own, maybe several times over. The ice in the pitcher is low. This fills me with sorrow; I want to lean my head on your shoulder. For the rest of the dinner I hardly speak, but this doesn't matter because I've already done my time. Evonne hugs me tightly in our sidewalk goodbye and tries once again, with infinite conviction, to talk us into a post-dinner drink at a bar she loves around the corner. You look at me as if you're asking permission, sounding me out. You might have had three margaritas, four, while I wasn't watching. Doug is looking between us. I say something about a headache. Evonne has a mushroom tincture in her purse. "Maybe we just head home," I say to you, but Evonne keeps trying until finally it's you that has to say we're tired, we're boring, we're sorry, ten years of marriage and we just don't have the energy anymore, but you young folks go right ahead, laughing, because Doug is of course your same age. Doug gives us his silly hopeful grin as he says we should do it again, soon, definitely soon! The goodbye lasts another six minutes because Evonne has to pet a passing dog but finally we are walking the opposite direction, toward where you parked. You rest your hand on my back for just a moment.

We don't speak in the car. You turn the radio down and I drive the fifteen minutes home, stopping at all the yellow lights. I pull into our driveway. Our house glows diffusely behind the blinds; we've forgotten to turn off the living room lamp. We take our shoes off at the door and you fill a glass with water as I empty my pockets: wallet on the built-in ledge by the door, keys on the hook, change on the kitchen table, phone plugged into its charger. I sit against the armrest of the couch, leaving room in case you want to sit beside me. "She really had it in for you," you say. "I know," I say. "It's like the way cats can sense the one person in the room who's allergic," you say. You're drinking down your glass in one quick pull.

“Imagine,” I say, “talking a big game about the mind-expanding power of drugs, and then having nothing else to talk about for an hour-long dinner.” I’ve meant to say this casually, but the words came out trembling and I wish they had been better, more incisive, more convincing.

“Right,” you say, considering, as if on another day, in another mood of mine, you might push back on this. “I guess all that mind expansion didn’t do her much good.”

“The mind’s big enough already,” I say, and you don’t disagree, and so I can’t prove it.

I want you to come fill up the empty couch, but instead you disappear into the kitchen, and I hear you gathering up the trash to take it outside. “It’s okay,” you say when I get up to try to help you. “Let me.” So I sit again on the couch and I wait for the loneliness to ebb. Doug has already texted to say they had a great time, “Evonne loved you guys.” I wonder what the first puncture will be in their perfect adoration of each other. I wonder what Evonne will do the first time her body betrays her, when she can’t think herself well again—will she believe that it’s her own spiritual fault? I wonder if I’m jealous of Doug and Evonne and their bursting categorical love, a love without caveats, without asterisks, without the cold abyss beneath the trapdoor, if maybe they know something we don’t, Doug and Evonne. It seems unlikely but possible.

You turn the lights off in the kitchen and you come sit in the armchair across from me.

“That was exhausting, wasn’t it?” you say. “They’re so,” I say, and you say, “Smitten.” I laugh, I say “That too.” I’m watching your face change between expressions. I know all of them but I still can’t predict what you’ll tell me next. “You know,” you say finally, “I’m smitten with you.” “I know,” I say. You tilt your water glass at me and then drink the last of it. You’re hydrating because you had to drink more than you meant to and you can’t be hungover tomorrow; we have an early brunch with your mom, who is coming to town to see us. Tomorrow morning as you sleep in I will vacuum the wood floors and wipe clean the bathroom sink and try to pare down

some of the weeds growing up through our driveway cracks. I will do all the dishes that you promised to do. I will move through the house so quietly that you'll wake bleary and confused, expecting to find me still in bed. Your mom is always early, and I will entertain her in the living room while you finish shaving in the bathroom. You'll have to drive the three of us to brunch because you know I can't parallel park. When she gives you a hard time about taking a pay cut for your new job, I will defend you. I will always defend you. There are times I live inside your body. When you sleep naked half in half out of the sheets I feel them against my skin too.

Tomorrow when your mom orders a mimosa you will order one to keep her company and I'll feel the way the champagne slides inside your mild headache. It's possible there is some crucial human thing I'm missing out on, being the way I am. Across the room you are smiling like you might come over and kiss me soon. When you do, it will fix almost everything. I love you so much I don't want to prove it to anyone. Let's just stay here in this living room with the lamp on and your feet up on the coffee table, and I'll finish your sentences and you'll start mine, till we can't tell anymore which one of us is speaking.

Neighbor

In the grocery store he looks like anyone else: reflectively lofting produce, strolling with an absent focus down the pasta aisle. She follows him as if accidentally, here and there remembering to stop for something off her list. His hair is grown out now, scruffy in a way that looks wrong. She watches him reach for a box of frozen burritos and, embarrassed, she turns away. When he pays, she is down at the produce end, pretending to consider a wall of kale and spinach and chard, but really considering the two brown paper bags he's filled up, whether he is cooking for anyone else these days, whether he's alone.

*

For a while after that she doesn't see him, but she knows he must live nearby because there's a better grocery store downtown, cheaper with a bigger selection, and the only reason she goes to this one is because it's a six-minute drive from her house, and she often sees neighbors there for the same reason. She shares her house with a roommate. The roommate is a former coworker and friend who wouldn't get the significance of seeing Mr. Jenson in the grocery store. That's how she thinks of him, as Mr. Jenson. It was only when the trial began that she learned his first name.

*

The articles are still there, easy to find. She doesn't know where she expected them to have gone. Five years is the maximum prison sentence for this category of crime; most receive a sentence of one to three. Above each article is the same photograph, Mr. Jenson exactly, eerily as she remembers him, his shaved head and the winged slashes of his eyebrows and the clear fine bones of his jaw. He is looking just left of the camera, his lips shut thin, and he does not look sorry or even guilty, and that was part of the problem at the time.

There are no newer articles and hardly any older articles either. Mr. Jenson seems to have existed on the internet only for the brief spell of his scandal. There are probably sex offender lists she could find him on, but she doesn't want to do that, it would feel violating, somehow, or vindictive. The news sites ask her for subscriptions which she will not give. She looks at his photo again and then closes the computer, puts her groceries away.

*

He is not there at the grocery store the next seven or eight times she goes, but one morning out for a run she sees someone from a distance that she knows instinctively is him, though the sun is bright overhead and he is just a tall dark shape at the street's corner. A leash stretches from his hand to the neck of a large loping dog that turns with him and passes out of sight. She continues her run past the corner and up the hill towards home. She didn't know sex offenders could own dogs. This is a crazy thought that she is promptly ashamed of. It has been six and a half years. A year is enough time to get situated, rent a house, pick out a grocery store, adopt a dog. She tries to remember if in the grocery store Mr. Jenson seemed older. But he always had the same crisp bronze ageless skin, and that was part of the problem too.

*

She is older. She is starting her second year of graduate school now, still living in the town that all her friends have left, because she never stopped liking it here. They were all sick of it by the end of college, they shot off to various coasts, where they work inexplicable jobs in data analysis and consumer marketing. She wondered then if there was something wrong with her, why she had no interest in Seattle or Brooklyn or DC or San Francisco. She likes her hometown, her morning runs, her to-go chai latte from the coffee shop downtown, she likes driving along the same highways she did when she was in high school, hitting the brakes at the same spot on the

hill where the cops always hide in wait, her same chai latte rattling in the cupholder until she'd park and carry it into first period, homeroom, AP US Government, Mr. Jenson's class.

*

She has not seen him on her morning runs since, but from the direction he was walking she can guess which block he lives on, and the houses swim and bounce as she jogs past them, and she wonders which one is his. It would be small, and the garden plots outside would be empty. There is a blue house toward the end which she has fixed on as his. As she runs, she thinks about what she would look like through the windows, her bare midriff sliced up by blinds.

*

But the truth is she never believed he was guilty, not until she came to college and learned that women have no reason to lie about such things, and especially not teenage girls, and then the way she told the story (and everyone had stories like that from their high schools) changed, and she denounced him with the casual outrage of someone who had never cared, never defended him, and who thought this kind of thing happened all the time in always the same way, and who had believed the victim from the start when she came forward and had not waited for the evidence to mount up high enough, a pattern, they said, stretching back almost ten years.

*

She knows he will be in the grocery store because his dog is sitting in one of the parked cars, head lagging through the rolled-down window. The car is silver and compact and clean like a rental. She walks into a cloud of air-conditioning and sees him at the register, a couple packets of cold cuts, some oranges. The oranges have spots of green blooming out the navel and this causes a quick twist of regret inside her, as he looks up in her direction. She smiles. He nods back like he's trying to place her. Then he is paying and she is walking past to the milk and the

eggs and the full-fat and two percent yogurt, and she doesn't look back until he has left the store, and she can make out his tires as they reverse and roll forward out of the parking lot at a reasonable speed.

She tugs at her shorts, her hair, and then buys half of what she meant to buy. She is drinking smoothies this summer. Her hair used to reach down to her ribs in high school, but now it is cropped into angles, silky and chic. She probably looks very different. And probably she is not one of the students he would remember. And now he has lost his teaching license and she is getting a master's in art history, and now here they are, neighbors and nothing more.

*

She is so focused on the blue house that she doesn't for a moment realize it's him, emerging from the white house further up the street. She slows down her run. The humidity is high today and she has sweat glistening across her upper lip. His dog is nosing at the evergreen shrub across the street. He holds the leash with an absent-mindedness that feels familiar to her, though it has no corresponding echo in memory. She is half-jogging, almost walking. He nods at her.

"Is he friendly?" she says. "Can I pet him?"

"Sure."

The dog comes up to her waist, she barely has to stoop. "Hello," she tells it. It is black and soft and her hand gets lost in the fur around the neck, as the dog looks up drooling with an indifferent joy. "What's his name?"

"He's a she. Frankie."

“That’s a good name for a dog,” she says, and though she senses that both dog and owner want to move on, she keeps petting the dog for another moment, and then looks up at Mr. Jenson and says, “I’m not sure if you remember me, I think I was in one of your classes?”

He studies her for just a second—he is markedly looking at her face and nowhere else—and then he is looking back out at the road. “I’m sorry, I’m not sure I…”

“Oh that’s fine, I’m sure it’s hard to remember everyone. I was in AP gov, I think it was my junior year?” She knows it was her sophomore year. “I still remember that electoral college exercise you had us do, with the skittles. That was great, I still think about it every election.”

“Oh, thank you.” He is looking at her again, his expression inflected with a slight frown, like he can’t decide whether she is trying to be kind or to torment him. “Well, it was good to see you again. Do you live around here?”

“Just up the road.”

He nods, and it takes two tugs before the dog gives in and trots along on its leash. “Enjoy your run.”

*

She does remember the electoral college class, where instead of a debate, which is what she’d heard other US government teachers did, Mr. Jenson had them organize skittles on their desks to represent the two electors per state, plus per population, plus there was something different for Maine and Nebraska, and somehow by the end, the absurdity of the electoral system had been underscored by which students got to eat the skittles on their desk and which didn’t, and they all left with a vivid sense of injustice, and she remembers thinking at the time how brilliant it was that Mr. Jenson didn’t impose his politics on them but allowed them to discover for themselves what was right. They all knew how he voted, of course. He looked like a

Democrat. He looked like someone who knew how your people had oppressed his people, but who was too polite to ever mention it.

She had respected his politics. He was a great teacher. This is as much as she can say, and still says too little.

*

Now when they pass each other on the street or at the store, he nods, and she says an under-her-breath “hi” or gives a small wave and feels stupid afterwards. She is working this summer at a takeout-only coffee shop on campus. She has never seen him there, but during the slow shifts she imagines the conversations they might have as she handed him his macchiato. By then he will have remembered her from first period sophomore AP US Gov, and will comment on one of the insightful papers she turned in, which she has since forgotten about. And she will recite the constitutional amendments, since it is thanks to him that she remembers all of them, in order, with mnemonic devices for each. And then the conversation will move beyond high school social studies, and as they talk he will wonder and for a moment almost believe that she doesn’t know about the conviction, the prison sentence, the five years, the incriminating documents, the students who came forward and who didn’t come forward, and Laurel. He will know that she must have heard something about the scandal, because everyone did, but still, as they’re speaking, he will allow himself to think just maybe, and she will allow him to think this too. And on his way out of the coffee shop she will say “See you next time” or “See you around”, and he will say it back to her, maybe with a small laugh. See you around.

*

To be clear, this does not happen, nor does she expect it to. She thinks of the way his dog held still, planted, as Mr. Jenson gently pulled at the leash.

*

She was not the only one to defend him, back in high school. This was a different time and he had been well-liked as a teacher. The courts didn't release the names of the minors involved, but of course everyone knew it was Laurel Mazakis who accused him first, and for a long time she was the only accuser and everyone was angry with her. Within a few days of the arrest, Laurel stopped coming to school and eventually took an incomplete for the year and later transferred. And by that time it was clear that Mr. Jenson was in fact some kind of guilty, and according to her friends Laurel hadn't even wanted to prosecute, but it was too late then anyway.

And she had been angry too. She had been angry because, as she cringes to remember saying to her friends at the time, Laurel wasn't even that pretty, and if Mr. Jenson was going to pick any student to sleep with, why her? This was a horrible thing to think, but everyone thought it. And because she had sat in the first or second row of his homeroom class, and laughed at his jokes like everyone else, and a couple times stayed after class to talk about some extra credit assignment or some bonus chapter from the reading, and because her long dark hair had trailed across her test and quiz papers as she bent over her desk circling the correct answer on each multiple choice, she had gone a step further than wondering Why Laurel? and wondered instead: Why not me?

Of course, she doesn't feel this way anymore. She feels lucky not to have caught his predatory eye. And though she had been friends with Laurel back in middle school, they had drifted apart early high school, and so she will never know the true story of why and how and how many times Mr. Jenson seduced her, if she believes the courts, which of course she must, though seeing him it is hard to feel sure.

*

The truth is there was a racial element to all this, because Mr. Jenson was half black. He was striking and likable and easily the school's best teacher, and when he was first accused it sparked a political awakening on the part of his most devoted students, who rallied against the racist legacy inherent to the allegations, the school board's handling of the matter, the extended prison sentence and, of course, Laurel herself, who was white and well-off. It turned out to have been the wrong moment for the awakening, the wrong application. Mr. Jenson was half black but he was also half white, and once the allegations were proven pretty much true, it seemed expedient to focus on the second half, and forget the first.

*

Now when she runs past his house she hears his dog sometimes, and she frames herself from the second-floor windows, the sharp sweaty crease of her breasts, the short swing of her hair, and she feels as if they're communicating with each other, though what she is saying, and how he is responding, she doesn't know.

*

In the supermarket she says, "I haven't seen you and Frankie out in a while," and he says he's been busy with work. Online teaching, he says. And she's glad they're letting him teach online still. He was her favorite teacher, she tells him, and he looks at her with a sort of wary alarm. "Thank you," he says, "that's nice to hear."

*

She has been running twice a day and drinking smoothies for dinner. In the mirror she looks lithe and brittle like blown glass. She has found Laurel on social media, Laurel who has dropped the *l* to become Laure and is now nonbinary. The world in which she could ever speak to Laurel about Mr. Jenson is long past.

She does not know the names of the students he slept with before Laurel, but she imagines they looked about the same, blond, petite, harmless, plain. She wonders in jail what he thought about, which one of them it was all for.

*

This time she catches him mid-walk, too far from his house to duck back in. He watches her approach with a kind of good-natured resignation. "Hello neighbor," he says.

"Hi." She has not been running for long and still feels fresh and lively. "Hi Frankie."

They walk together for a few moments, as if she had been planning to slow her run regardless. "I always see you walking Frankie," she says. "Do you live alone?"

"I do."

"I have a roommate," she says, to fill the silence, and then he asks about that and she answers. Now he knows that she is in graduate school, studying art history. "I took some art classes in college," he says. "They were among my favorites."

They have reached a four-way intersection and it is clear to her that he will pick whatever direction she is not walking. So she says, "I know you had a ton of students and you probably don't remember me at all. But I really did enjoy your class and I think you're a great teacher. And I'm sorry about, you know, everything that happened."

He has paused too, and is looking across the road, as Frankie nudges a patch of weeds sprouting up through the sidewalk. Still without looking at her, he says, "I do remember you, Michelle."

She waits an electric beat, but he says nothing else. And then he says, "I'm heading this way."

"I was going to head that way too, if you don't mind company?"

“Of course,” he says, meaning of course not, and Frankie’s leash stretches out ahead as they walk side by side. He has questions about her classes, and how far she runs every day, and he’s impressed by the answer, and he tells her a bit about online teaching, and how it’s different and the same. At his porch they hang back a moment, finishing their sentences.

“I just wanted to say,” she says, fumbling, “that if you ever want to talk, or, anything.”

“Thank you,” he says. There is another wide beat of silence, the sun pressing down between them.

*

—but the truth is he does not remember her name, or if he does, it’s only because she told him again that first day. And there is a fizzling boredom to his stance, the way he walks beside her, like he is enduring her, waiting for his chance to break free. And she thinks how badly he must have wanted Laurel to risk it all just to have her, five years in prison, five years! Will there ever be anyone to want her that badly? She wants to sit beside him on his worn leather couch and give him a chance, maybe his first and only chance, to tell his side of the story. She will listen to him with her eyes fixed on his eyes and she will know the truth whether or not he tells it to her, and she will pity him. And when he finishes his story, she won’t say anything at all but will keep sitting there, holding whatever glass of water he has handed to her, and she will keep looking at him with absolutely no artifice in her expression, so he will see exactly what she sees and will know everything she knows. And gently she will set her water glass aside and touch her hand to his. She understands. She does, she understands.

*

“Well,” he says, “I’ll see you around.” The dog is tangling its leash around his shins and a breeze cuts through the neighboring lawns, and for a moment neither of them moves.

To the End

During the happiest years of their lives, Katy and Jonah lived in the better-renovated half of a duplex in Nelsonville, Ohio, a town best known for the Nelsonville Bypass, which carves around it at a seventy-mile-per-hour berth. Both halves of the duplex featured a loft bedroom overlooking the first floor, though on their side they'd put up temporary walls to shield whoever was sleeping from whoever was still downstairs watching reality TV, depending on who'd had a long day at work and who had recently been laid off. Katy and Jonah took turns getting laid off and then rehired, usually back at the same places, as their employers had as few applicants as Katy and Jonah had job prospects elsewhere in Nelsonville.

Katy and Jonah had married young, but not naïvely, Katy having been her high school's valedictorian and prom queen and graduating therefore with a respectable range of romantic prospects. Katy knew her options, and after college didn't work out and she saw her friends around her pairing up with some of the candidates whose hearts she'd broken for one reason or another, she decided to stop waiting for romantic love and to settle for practical, steady love, the kind of love that would hold her hair back when she vomited and rub her feet when she got pregnant, which she never did.

Katy and Jonah had watched with some pride and some sense of good luck as the madly-in-love couples of their youth went crazy and threatened each other with handguns, or caught each other in bed with each other's meth-head sisters, or screamed at each other in the movie theater lobby as their kids methodically pumped quarters into the deer-hunt arcade games, or peered suspiciously from the threshold of the smoky dive bar right into its deepest pocket, where it was not quite possible, even with the bartender's collusion, to shield oneself from sight of the door.

Katy and Jonah lived easily together, paid their bills together at the kitchen table every month or every two months, slept wrapped up close together because the heat didn't travel to their loft bedroom and besides their bodies just fit together that way, Katy's arm making a soft V down his chest and Jonah's lips seemingly unbothered by the tickle of her hair all night long. They were both deep sleepers. Having fast-tracked their initial courtship, Katy and Jonah found themselves talking about love less but feeling it more as the years went on, and by now, six years in, they were pretty solidly sure that they were happy together, though they never discussed this nor felt they needed to.

It was October, and wet. The hilltop trees were undergoing their muted transformation, pale red and orange and amber dulling under the sky's gray haze, except for the rare golden hour around five p.m. when the sun lanced out below the cloud cover and set everything alive. Then the hills looked quite beautiful, and the trash blowing around their neighbor's yard looked temporary.

Jonah was washing dishes at home. He should have been at the pizza kitchen, but he'd been fired again two days prior. Jonah was a slow, steady worker who had never learned the trick of performative bustling, and so when the boss came in and all his coworkers exploded in a tizzy of counter-wiping and oven-checking and dough-inspecting, Jonah continued in his slow dutiful way to complete all the tasks that were asked of him. The boss, who went by Giovanni though his real name was Roger, found Jonah's presence irksome, because Jonah was clearly the laziest son of a bitch he'd ever had the misfortune to hire, but also, somehow, got everything done in less time and with better results than the competition, and when this paradox grew too confounding, Jonah would get fired. Three weeks later, having noticed that the team was struggling to fill even the weeknight orders, Giovanni would ask Jonah to come back in.

Jonah was reasonably confident that this pattern would recur, and so figured he had about three wide-open weeks before he had to return to work. When Katy came home from the hair salon, she found Jonah in front of the television with a beer at his side, a sight that filled her with fondness, because Jonah was liable to nurse a beer for hours until it was room-temperature warm and long flat, and every time she poured the dregs of his forgotten beers down the drain she thought of the heavy-drinking husbands of everyone else she knew and looked on her own even more favorably. “Guess what?” she said, kissing Jonah’s hair.

“What’s that?”

“We’re officially on vacation. I got fired too. Laid off, technically.”

Jonah had muted the TV when she came in, and now turned his face toward her, though his eyes swept back to the screen once or twice to check which commercials were on. “I didn’t think business was that bad.”

“Neither did I, but you know Stephanie. She told me not to bother coming in anymore all the rest of this month. She said everyone who wanted a haircut has gotten a haircut and I might as well check back with her in the new year if the salon hasn’t filed for bankruptcy yet.”

“I need a haircut. Mikey needs a haircut. Plenty of guys around here need haircuts.”

“That’s why RJ gets to keep working and I get laid off,” Katy said, not at all bitterly, in fact rather cheerful. She had set her bags down on the kitchen table, a table that was aligned against the right edge of the couch to function as an end table for whoever was sitting where Jonah now sat. The kitchen table had two chairs on either side of it, and every night Katy and Jonah decided together where to eat dinner: the kitchen table, the TV couch, or, on rare nights, upstairs in bed. Upstairs in bed was for the worst days, the days when Katy had been crying or Jonah had been sullen and defeatist, and then the one could minister to the other and carry their

food up the precarious loft ladder and make them tea (they did have one box of ancient teabags) spiked with whatever they had in the liquor cabinet. The kitchen table was for days when Katy felt they were emotionally unaligned and needed to sit face to face and ask each other how they were really feeling. Kitchen table nights usually ended in sex.

“Want to eat on the couch tonight?” Katy said. She was unpacking Styrofoam takeout containers from a succession of plastic bags.

“Sure.” Jonah turned to her fully, both to discover what was for dinner and to double-check the expression on his wife’s face. “And you’re feeling all right about it? About not working till maybe the new year?”

“They’ll need me back before then. People always want a cut for their Christmas photos. Money is okay, right? At least till the end of the month?”

“Money is okay,” Jonah said. “I could try patching things up with Giovanni.”

“Oh don’t do that, he’s such a prick. He’ll come crawling back before long.”

Katy had picked up Mexican from Nelsonville’s only Mexican restaurant, which meant she was feeling lavish. She handed Jonah his Styrofoam box and a clean fork and brought hers to the low wide coffee table that separated the couch from the TV.

“So,” she said. “What season?”

There were other shows they watched while apart, but this was the show they watched together. It was one of those island castaway reality TV shows, in which contestants had to build bamboo shelters and start fires with little hacked-off bits of flint and compete in grueling obstacle courses and conspire against each other and vote each other off the island. At the end, of course, was the million-dollar check. If asked to explain their addiction to the show, Katy might cite the complexity of the social strategy at play, the mix of outright lies and soft persuasion that

winners needed to get to the end. Jonah might point to the physical contest, man versus wild, man versus man, man versus self. But no one ever did ask, and besides, Katy and Jonah both knew they loved the show too much for the reasons behind that love to be so simple.

Each season lasted around twelve episodes, and the episodes lasted minutes or hours past their runtime, as Katy and Jonah dissected who should have done what and whose blunders were understandable and whose unforgivably stupid. When finally one of them suggested sleep, and it was usually Jonah, they moved their discussion to the bathroom, where Katy talked around her toothbrush as Jonah pissed quietly in the toilet. Once up the loft ladder, Katy swallowed the rest of her post-episode epiphanies, but in bed her mind kept buzzing, tucked in a groove of Jonah's chest, one strategic maneuver occurring to her and then a whole cascade of resultant scenarios filling her thoughts. At some point these scenarios blended into high-def dreams, and she woke up still bleary and scheming, as if all night she'd been watching her back.

They had finished another season that weekend, which meant choosing a new season tonight, out of the ten or so they hadn't yet watched. They had saved the worst-rated seasons for last. "To be fair," said Katy, through a mouthful of rice, "no one liked Season 24 either, and we enjoyed that one."

"Did we? I thought we said it was too predictable."

"It was predictable, but we still liked it. Anyway it's either 35 or 43. I'm not watching 39."

"You pick," said Jonah, accepting from Katy her stack of tortillas, as she always ate her fajitas with a fork. "We could always rewatch one of the old ones."

"We could," said Katy. She clicked the remote from 35 to 43 and back again. The icon was the same for every season: big turquoise water and the show's slashing logo. When they ran

out of seasons they would have to find something else to care deeply about. “You know, babe, I still think we should apply. We would kick ass out there.”

“You’d have to eat fish. You hate fish.”

“I could eat fish for thirty days. I could do anything for thirty days.”

“I know you could,” said Jonah, who had always believed his wife capable of anything, and had never quite understood why she stuck around with him in Nelsonville instead of moving to some big coastal city and becoming an actress or a TV anchor, though he never mentioned this, in case the only reason she hadn’t already done so was that it hadn’t occurred to her yet.

“Let’s apply, why not? Wouldn’t you rather win a million dollars than go back to making pizza every day the rest of your life?”

“I’m all right making pizza.”

“Let’s just look into it,” Katy said. She was off the couch and retrieving their laptop from the desk where it was permanently plugged in, unearthing it from a settled pile of envelopes, receipts, and loose change. The laptop had a battery life of about ten minutes, and she plugged it in behind the TV before returning to the couch. “You can watch people’s application videos on YouTube,” she said, and she showed him a few, shirtless men and pantsless women pitching themselves into the camera like it was a date whose attention they were always on the threshold of losing. Jonah looked up from the laptop to find that Katy was watching him instead of the videos. “Easy, right?” she said. “We could do this.”

It took Katy all that week to film and edit their auditions. Jonah was reluctant in front of the camera; she had to make do splicing together his only three takes, and overlaying some photos she found from four years ago of the one backpacking trip he’d ever done. “I think I have what it takes to win,” recorded Jonah said, “because I’m strong, but also I’m subtle. People tend

to underestimate me.” She clipped out the initial “I think.” He looked small on the screen, talking into the slightly fisheyed lens of their laptop camera. She trimmed away his pauses and backtracked sentences. After edits, his video was only a minute and a half long. She watched it again and again, her brain shifting between recognition and alienation, the man on the laptop screen sometimes her husband, so intimately known she could read each thought in the folds of his forehead, and sometimes one of a million sad hopeful cases that she as some intern was scrolling callously through, listening to the first three seconds, moving on. This gave rise to an uncomfortable feeling that she couldn’t name and that echoed heavily under her chest, as if she’d felt it before.

Katy’s own video was three minutes twenty-four seconds. It was hard not to believe, after critically watching hundreds of successful audition videos on YouTube, that hers was very good. She had filmed most of it one day when Jonah was out fishing with some cousins. In the empty house it was suddenly possible to be a different self, a bolder and more ruthless self. She said things she would have blushed for anyone in her real life to hear. She filmed the whole thing leaning forward off the couch, wearing only a sheer unbuttoned shirt and a patterned bikini she had bought years ago and never worn. The whole video was one long take (which had taken about thirty-five takes). At the three-minute mark of the video, she said, “Half of what I just said was a lie. Bet you don’t know which half.” She was angling for charming, withering, a little unhinged. When she watched the final take, she felt the hairs rise on her arms, though that may have been because she was still wearing the swimsuit, and the day was damp and cold. The woman in the video was going places, even if she, Katy, hadn’t.

Not so far along the south bank of the Hocking River, behind the movie theater with its arsenal of deer-hunting arcade games, some of which Jonah had lost countless quarters to in high

school, Jonah and his cousin and his cousin's brother-in-law stood and fished and occasionally spoke. When anyone spoke it was in response to the last thing that had been said, even if fifteen minutes had elapsed since. "Guy I know got hired at that new Menards down a ways, says they pay him pretty well," said Jonah's cousin. The river was muddy and the peeling edge of the movie theater's big political billboard rippled in an occasional wind. "I know three or four people got hired there," said Jonah's cousin's brother-in-law. The fish were sluggish and the cousins kept changing out their lures, spinnerbait to flatsided crankbaits to jigs. Jonah had stuck with his same lure with just as little success. He didn't mind that the fish weren't biting, in fact preferred it that way, not because he had any moral hesitancy about catching the fish but because he didn't like the way his heart started up when somebody's line caught, the shiver of adrenaline, the way his hands tensed on the rod, and how long it took to feel normal and calm again afterwards. "I just don't get driving thirty minutes every day there, thirty minutes every day back, I don't care what the job is. A week of that would drive me crazy," said Jonah's cousin. The brother-in-law spat into the grass, not in response. Jonah was thinking about all the fish they'd fished here before, still swimming around with hook holes in their fleshy lips. "Guess if it's your only option," the brother-in-law said. Some men told their wives they were going fishing and then went off and did other things. But his cousins were good people, and rarely even mentioned their wives. "I don't mind driving," Jonah said. He was thinking how impossible it seemed that a fish wouldn't feel some kind of pain from having a hook stabbed through its cheek, unless it was one of those things where the pain is so painful you don't feel it until later, gradually slowly waking up to the fact that you got stabbed a long time ago, and the way you feel now must be some kind of different from the way you felt before.

Katy submitted their audition videos later that night, without consulting Jonah first, submitting his in his name and electronically signing to some terms and conditions. She mentioned the next day that she'd sent them in, "Just on the off chance." Jonah, to her surprise, was pleased, his enthusiasm for the show apparently undimmed by the experience of packaging and selling himself to its casting director. "What if we're split up onto different teams?" was his main concern.

"We'll pretend we don't know each other," Katy said, "and we'll work together secretly to vote off everybody else."

"Won't they catch on, if we're both from Nelsonville and we keep sneaking off to make out in the woods?"

She whipped at him with the dish towel, just missing. "There won't be any making out in the woods. And we won't both be from Nelsonville. You'll be from Nelsonville, and I'll be from Connecticut."

All that week they slept in till eleven or twelve, Jonah descending the ladder's squeaky wooden rungs to find his wife halfway through her first coffee, the white-blue light of the internet blooming across her cheeks. She wore her fuzzy white bathrobe that she always wore when she got laid off, and he rested his hand under her collar at the soft tip of her spine, and looked at what she was looking at, which was town names in Connecticut, or knot-tying how-to videos (a few rubber bands wound together and discarded on the desk), or tell-all interviews with the show's past contestants, which were rare, she explained, because they all signed NDAs in hard-nosed legalese.

From lunch, which was takeout leftovers, to dinner, which was takeout, they watched the show, bundled up on the couch under the quilt taken off their bed. They started with the season

that had just aired that fall, which they hadn't watched live because they couldn't stand the suspense of waiting one whole week between episodes. It wasn't a very good season. Once their two favorites had been voted off, and these were favorites relative to the rest of the unappealing cast, they stopped discussing what had actually transpired in the episodes and discussed instead what would have taken place if they'd been there on the island, as they well could have been, Katy maintained, if they'd thought to apply to the show sooner. Jonah had yet to hear any repentant word from his boss; they were keeping the heat low at the apartment so as to afford their takeout habit. "I could do one more," Katy said at the end of every episode. Jonah insisted sometimes that they go for a walk, hard-breathing up the hills littered in autumn leaves, and once arranged for them to meet up with couple friends at the dive bar, where Jonah played pool against Stacy's dark handsome husband Frank, and at the corner table Stacy confessed to Katy with fluttering hands all the alarming particulars of Frank's gambling habit. Katy listened and cooed understanding and watched the pool table cut into Jonah's slight beer belly and idly bit her straw and thought on two channels at once. Stacy would not make it very far on the show, she thought.

As week dissolved into weekend, and then all the days lost their distinction and became one long smear of consciousness, Katy and Jonah's collaborative fantasy ascended into a kind of reality. At times it was as if they really had been on the show, and were fondly remembering the highlights of a shared experience, or perhaps it was as if they had both seen some season of the show of which they now couldn't find evidence anywhere online, and had to reconstruct together what had taken place, and in what order, and with what outcome. Their season of the show always ended with the two of them sitting side by side onscreen, final contenders for the million dollars, the vote close, but ultimately irrelevant, because unbeknownst to the voters (though

known to the viewer watching back home), they were in it together, Katy and Jonah, loyally in love from start to finish, and both were coming home millionaires.

“So then we just skip the final vote altogether,” Jonah said. “They can write the check out to both of us.”

“Well,” Katy said. “But don’t we still want to know which one of us wins? Not that it matters. But wouldn’t it be fun to know?”

“I don’t care who wins. You can have it. Unanimous vote. I’d vote for you.”

“I’d vote for you,” Katy countered, a little sharply, and pressed play on the next episode, and tucked the fantasy back in her head where she could arrange it the way she liked.

A week later, Jonah returned to the pizza shop, where he set about swabbing marinara and sprinkling cheese with his usual steady patience. There was no word from the salon. Katy spent entire days in her bathrobe and watched more audition videos online. If they picked her, she would rewatch every season of the show in order and take notes on all the twists. If they picked her, she would learn to start a fire in the backyard from just a machete and a few chunks of wood. If they picked her, she would eat fish for dinner every night.

The call came on an otherwise unremarkable day. Katy had rice on the stove. She answered just before the call went to voicemail, and instead of a robotic voice offering her an unexpected limited-time-offer tax refund or gabbling in some foreign language, there was the show’s casting director, identifying herself with a clipped brittle authority and asking what Katy’s favorite season of the show was and why. Katy’s mind went blank but her mouth moved anyway, in response to that question and the next five. The rice was sticking to the bottom of the pot. Katy paced circles around the couch and said whatever came first into her mind. “We’ll be in touch if we want to move forward,” the casting director said, and Katy, panicked, realizing she

hadn't yet mentioned the crucial thing, said, "My husband applied too, we have this whole joint strategy if we're both chosen, and—"

"He'll hear from us if he makes it past the first round of screening," said the casting director. There was a silence like she'd already hung up, and then she added, "If you were chosen and he wasn't, would you still want to appear on the show?"

"Obviously," said Katy.

The call was over and had lasted only fifteen minutes. Katy tossed her phone violently into the couch cushions, then hurried to retrieve it in case the casting director called back. She turned off the burner under the rice and filled a glass with water, but her hands were shaking. She could only remember two of the six questions she'd been asked. She needed to remember all of them so that she could tell Jonah what they were going to ask if they called him, which maybe they still would.

Only the topmost layer of rice was edible. The rest would sit in the sink until that evening, when Katy fished out the floating bits and scrubbed off the traces with a Brillo pad. She had decided to tell Jonah about the call in person instead of texting him. Then she wondered if it was better to tell no one, so as not to jinx it. The more you talked about these things, the less likely they were to happen. Katy was not religious, but had a pocketful of superstitions that in the aggregate constituted a kind of spiritualism, complete with small rituals and abdications. If she didn't tell Jonah about her call, maybe he would get his. If he didn't get his call, they probably wouldn't call her back anyway, and it would be for the best that she hadn't gotten his hopes up.

When Jonah got home, late, because in his three-week absence from the pizza kitchen no one had taken inventory and they were out of half of their supplies and he had to keep running out to the local Kroger, Katy was reading on the couch. The sight was startling—Jonah had

gotten used to the humming heat of the laptop as a sort of second feature of his wife's face. She was wearing jeans and the sweater she knew was his favorite, because it was soft and low-cut.

"What are you reading?" he said.

"Rereading," she said. "Just a novel I used to like. How was work?"

"It was a shitshow," Jonah said, with complete neutrality, and he ruffled her hair with one hand on his way to the stove, where he checked under the pot's lid. "You made dinner."

"I'd had enough takeout for one week," she said, and Jonah understood this to mean that her obsession with the show was settling back down to its usual manageable frequency, which was how she meant it, though it wasn't true. "Where do you want to eat, babe?" Katy said. She had decided that if they ate at the kitchen table, she would tell him about the call, which increasingly as the hours passed seemed like a hallucinatory extension of her fantasies and not a real thing that had happened, and if they ate on the couch then she wouldn't.

"Doesn't matter to me," Jonah said. "We were on what, episode four?"

"That woman with the tattoos just got voted off. Elle. Ella."

"Helen?" Jonah said, and so they served themselves bowls of Katy's stir fry and sat together on the couch and resumed their season, just one episode that night, and as she turned out the downstairs lights and climbed up the loft ladder in the usual precarious dark, Katy decided that the call from the casting director hadn't happened, because she didn't want to get her own hopes up, or Jonah's, and anyway she wasn't sure that the emotion that kept rising up through her and then getting tamped down again was actually hope.

She did eventually tell Jonah, but that was after the second phone interview, the one where they told her she had to fly out to LA and stay in a hotel and meet with the producers and the show's host. Jonah was buoyantly excited for her; why had she worried he wouldn't be? He

told her he wasn't one bit surprised and he knew she'd get picked for the show and he was going to feel so proud watching her right there on the TV screen, looking hot and surviving in the jungle. It was January now, chunks of dry snow flaking down from the sky, too cold for fire-starting lessons, but Jonah promised he'd teach her as soon as the weather cleared up. The LA flight was booked for March. When Stephanie at the salon finally called, Katy told her she could come back to work for now, but that she might have to leave on short notice. Stephanie didn't care, or especially believe her, and anyway notice was always short in Nelsonville.

"You're going to do great," Jonah said, about the producer meetings and the interview with the host and all of it. "Do you want to practice?" and, sweetly, he asked her the questions she thought they'd level at her, all down her list of fifteen possibilities, and she took a half-hearted swing at each one. Half-hearted because she found herself unable to recapture the Katy of the audition video in Jonah's presence. Sitting across from Jonah, she was just herself, and her answers were tame and predictable, exactly the answers you'd expect out of Katy from Nelsonville, hair stylist and college dropout, whose greatest fear in life was subsisting on fish. "I think I feel ready," she told Jonah, putting an end to their practice sessions, but the next day she went for a walk in the cold and answered all the same questions out loud, telling the trampled grass and the dripping tree branches and the gray watery sun how cunning and clever she could be.

In this way February collapsed into March, and then it was time for Katy to fly across the country with her very expensive plane tickets that the show had promised to reimburse. Jonah drove Katy to the airport and carried her bag all the way to the departures gate. Jonah seemed a little sad, and startled by his own sadness, as if he had only that moment realized that Katy's exciting adventure to LA would be, on his end, just Katy's absence. They kissed shyly but held

each other for a long time. She told him she'd text him when she got there, and that she'd send pictures of the hotel room and the indoor pool and the breakfast buffet. Jonah kissed her again and then waited there with his arms hanging as she moved through the line and disappeared behind a family of strangers.

When she was all the way out of sight, having looked back with one final faraway wave, Jonah returned to his car in the short-term parking lot. He turned the radio up high to cover the car's rattling engine and then drove the hour back to Nelsonville. He had traded shifts with Mikey at work in order to make the trip, so he would be working a double tomorrow plus his usual hours Saturday. The time would pass quickly enough.

The four days she was gone, Jonah put off as long as he could the moment of coming home to an empty house. He worked slower than usual at the pizza shop, and then stayed late to catch up. He said yes to drinks with a few friends he didn't like very much, just to have somewhere to be. When at last he came home, he found himself turning circles around the living room. He picked things up and put them down. He tidied off the desk by moving everything to the kitchen counter, and then tidied off the kitchen counter. He brought home pizza on the first night, someone's screwed-up order, and ate it for every meal until it ran out. Katy's calls were short and harried, as she was always on her way somewhere or recovering from having been somewhere. "I love you," he said at the end of every call, "I miss you," and she said I love you and I miss you too. As they hung up, he thought for some reason of the bike that Katy had bought three or four years ago. Just a shoddy thirdhand bike some coworker was getting rid of, but she'd spent that whole spring really avidly pedaling around the hills of Nelsonville, disappearing for longer and longer rides, as if this hobby was going to be one of the permanent ones. He'd sat at home something like this, one long afternoon after another, waiting for her return. What he

remembered feeling at the time was angry. Couples needed to have hobbies in equal proportion. That all of a sudden she cared about something new, filling a slot that on his side remained empty, had spooked him. The anger died out eventually, it had never made sense in the first place, and anyway by that fall she had lost interest in the bike and sold it the following year. It all seemed silly in retrospect. He wished she was out biking around the neighborhood now, sweaty and happy, soon to return.

Sunday morning he drove to Columbus an hour early. Katy appeared five minutes late, rounding the last turn in the terminal amidst a small crowd of other arrivals. Her hair was bunched on one side, her lips dry. She kissed him and held onto him tightly. "I'll tell you everything in the car, let's just get home," she said, and she held his hand through baggage claim and out to ground transportation.

In the car, as she recounted her trip, he looked over at the side of her face he could see and waited for the relief of her presence to settle. There was this way she twisted her mouth at the corners before she spoke, like she was working the words around her mouth like a cough drop. She had done this ever since he'd known her. He wondered whether the words always made it out, or whether there were some she kept tucked back under her tongue. "But overall I think I did well," she said, slowly, summing up. "Or as well as I could. And what about you, what did I miss back home?"

"Nothing," Jonah said. "A whole lot of nothing," and though he looked around for other words he might be holding back, he couldn't think of any.

The showrunners settled on Katy in mid-March. She was at the salon when the call came, and for the remaining three hours of her shift she said nothing at all to her customers, her mind turning over with an almost sickening adrenaline. She took Jonah out to dinner that night and

told him there, making an occasion out of it, clinking water glasses. “I probably won’t make it very far,” she said every few minutes, whenever their excitement threatened to get disproportionate. “I’ll just have my three minutes of TV fame and then I’ll get voted out and I’ll come home. But still. I’m excited.”

She would fly out of LA in June, with a stop in Hawaii on her way to the island. “We’ve got to get you in survival mode,” Jonah said, and for the rest of that spring, her body was their group project: building fires in the backyard, swimming laps at the community pool, five push-ups for every half hour of TV. They went on runs through the nearby hills, together at first, then, as their work schedules diverged and Katy’s stamina outpaced her husband’s, separately. Katy cut back to thirty hours a week at the salon. Some part of her still believed that the showrunners would take it all away as mysteriously as they’d given it, cancel her flights, choose someone better. The more she prepared, the more convinced she became that all the preparation would be for nothing. But this, in a way, made the waiting period easier. She felt braced for disappointment and all its possible permutations.

April happened and then May. The trees burst open, the cars got rained clean, the air smelled like insects. Katy knew intimately the roads and cul-de-sacs around her neighborhood, knew which fences marked three miles and four miles and five. She and Jonah had stopped watching the show, because they’d run out of worthwhile seasons and besides she said it was making her crazy, but in bed every night, after Jonah twitched and stilled, she rolled off him partway and angled her phone beneath the bed frame so the light wouldn’t disturb him. There were fan articles about past seasons of the show, podcasts, comment threads, everyone analyzing and speculating, and they rarely said anything new or unguessed, but there was always that

chance, and she kept reading. Her friends in Nelsonville didn't normally watch the show, but promised they would watch her season. "Oh please don't," she told them.

The night before her departure, Katy and Jonah listened to each other's breathing for longer than usual. They'd had sex three times before bed and Katy felt sticky and loved and deeply afraid. Finally, when it seemed Jonah really was starting to fall asleep, she squeezed herself deeper against his chest and began to cry, silently at first. Jonah held her close, still on the edge of sleep, and told her it would all be okay. Soon it subsided. What had triggered the tears was the single moment, now past, when it had seemed that Jonah would sleep through the night and she, Katy, would lie awake for hours and minutes and minutes and minutes, comprehensively alone. Now that he was awake too, it was all right, and she was able to fall asleep soon after.

She wore comfortable shoes and a throwaway sweater to the airport. She looked, already, to Jonah, like someone he'd never met, someone worldly and thoughtful and halfway along some far-reaching journey, crossing paths with him only here and now by chance. She was leaving her wedding ring at home with him. It was the most precious thing they had ever spent money on.

They kissed a long time as the airport streamed around them. Jonah's eyes were wet, which surprised them both, because he never cried, and Katy held his face between her hands in a kind of terror that she'd gotten him wrong somehow. They kissed again one last time. Katy was afraid to cheapen the goodbye by stretching it too thin. "I love you," she said, and he said, "I'll see you on the big screen."

Of course, this wouldn't be the case for several months. The show filmed in summer and aired in the fall, giving the producers time to whittle, out of the mind-numbing weeks of footage, some tight and compelling narrative, some justification of how and why the eventual million-

dollar winner deserved to win, cleverly buried in red herrings and the sub-arcs of the runners-up. This meant that Katy would return to Jonah months before she appeared on their twenty-seven-inch TV screen. This also meant that, for the thirty-nine days of filming plus eight days beforehand and three days after, he would not hear from her.

Time, throughout those fifty days, was unreliable, bunching together and then pulling taut, so that sometimes the hours eked past as Jonah sat there on the couch in a dark stupor, and other times entire days fell cleanly out of the record, so that Jonah could not prove with even a handful of memories how the week had passed. In his morbid moments Jonah felt that he was rehearsing for Katy's death. The house was as empty as if decades had passed and he was an old man now, making himself breakfast, remembering his wife like it was only yesterday. He moved from room to room. He could hear his neighbors faintly through the wall, whenever they had their TV on; he had never noticed this until now, when the silence made space for them. Sometimes he hummed to keep himself company. He washed his one bowl and his one spoon after cereal in the mornings and he put them on the drying rack. He spent the better part of a week down in Gallipolis visiting his parents, who told him they'd watch the show when it aired. They liked Katy well enough, though his mother had once called her flighty.

The last week was the shortest. He had dreaded that final week of waiting, had expected time to drip past one minute at a time like the steady knocking of raindrops from their leaf-choked gutter down to the ground, but now at last time gathered into a storm and swept away all the trivial in-betweens of his days, so that suddenly it was time to leave work, it was time to fall asleep, it was tomorrow again and again. He was full of a fear that he called nerves. It was as if, until he saw Katy, none of it had happened yet—he was anxious about how she'd do, though of course by now she'd already done. It was possible she'd been voted out early, right away, and

had spent the past month miserably impatient in a hotel somewhere, not allowed to call or come home in case her departure leaked to the wider public, spoiling the season's outcome. He was ready to comfort her. But, then, it was also possible she'd been on the island all those thirty-nine days, and would come home wraith-thin and full of exotic and grueling stories he could never relate to. He was ready with whatever she needed. If he asked himself what he truly expected, he had no good answer, but rehearsed his condolences just in case.

The airport was quiet and the sky outside was hot. He walked around in his shorts and t-shirt as the air conditioning gradually chilled him. He could not sit still, could not sit at all, actually, and bought one coffee and then another at the kiosk near arrivals. All around him were people waiting. Some were clean-cut and some were fat and florid and some were talking harshly into their phones. He saw himself through their eyes suddenly as a man whose wife didn't exist, a crazy man who waited here all day, day after day, never realizing. He threw out the last third of his second coffee. Any minute now. She had texted him on her return to the US, but just to confirm the time of her flight.

The fear, which he had expected to fall to crushing relief the second he saw her, surged high instead. She looked around for a second, not having spotted him yet. Her face was dark and hollow and her hair was longer than he'd ever seen it. The bag she carried, once orange, was now a layered brown, so caked with dust and grime he could not quite believe they'd let it on the plane. "Katy," he said, too quietly, but she looked up anyway and saw him. In his arms she was absolutely brittle, thin like wires. He kissed her neck and smelled the sterile clean of hotel soap. "Hey, babe," she said. He could not remember if she'd ever called him that, or what it was they called each other.

She needed the bathroom, and was gone again before he'd quite realized what was happening, as he stood there holding her bag. He imagined, ludicrously, that the producers had replaced his wife with an impostor. How would he know? What would he do? But then she was back and smiling at him with nervous confidence, and she led him through the airport, her hand very tight around his, though neither of them spoke. In the car she fumbled for a second with the seatbelt, had forgotten to thump the buckle a few times to get it to click.

Jonah drove them down the ramps and onto 670. He kept looking at her, and, when she caught his eye, quickly smiling. "I have so many questions," he said, though in truth he didn't have any he could formulate. All he wanted was to hear her talk, while his heart settled back into recognizing her. This is Katy, he told himself.

"It's going to be hard to describe," Katy said. She spoke hesitantly and kept looking around, at the cars ahead of them on the highway, at the roadkill on the shoulder and the clear-cut hills rising up on either side. "It's going to take me a while to even..." There were houses pressed right up against the highway, people who fell asleep every night to the mumble of traffic. "Jonah?" she said, in an odd, cautionary tone. "Jonah, I did really well."

"That's great!" He had spoken automatically, the right tone, but the wrong expression, his eyebrows raised too high when he glanced back at her. "That's amazing. I'm so proud of you. I can't wait to hear everything. But, when you're ready. But that's amazing."

"Yeah, I think..." She smiled strangely and clutched his wrist with her hand. Whenever he looked over at her, she was looking out the window again. He wondered for a second if she might be close to tears. "I don't want to get your hopes up. But it's possible I might win. I might have won."

"Won—the game? The million dollars?"

“Yeah. Crazy, right?” She laughed the kind of laugh that fills a pause. “I mean I made it to the end, so. That’s a fifty-fifty chance. And the guy I was up against, people didn’t like him as much... And a few of the people voting, they said they voted for me, though of course they’re not supposed to reveal that, but in the hotel after, they said they thought it would be near unanimous, so. Barring anything really unexpected, I think probably we’re millionaires.”

Jonah needed a good twenty seconds to react to this. “Katy,” he said.

“I mean, after taxes it’s going to be more like five hundred thousand. But still. Big money, huh?”

Jonah couldn’t think of anything to say, until he said, “Wait till you tell the salon.” They both laughed, and then the dam broke somehow, and he was able to exclaim properly, and all through his stupefied glowing chatter his mind was at work, carefully roping off the part of him that had erupted just now in a seethe of shame, because, though he had believed completely that he didn’t know what he was expecting, he knew now that he had never expected this. But after all why shouldn’t his wife have won? He knew Katy was superior, had always known it.

“We won’t know for absolute sure until the show airs and they announce the winner,” Katy said. “So I was thinking, maybe we could pretend, until then, that it’s still up in the air and we don’t know and we’re just proud of me for making it to the end?”

“We are proud of you for making it to the end,” Jonah said. “And that’s all we’re celebrating. We don’t need the money. The money is beside the point. Katy, you’re going to be on TV!”

“I know,” she said, and she reached for his hand again. After he’d passed an Amazon truck and returned to the right lane he turned, and she was looking at him with a tender unhappy expression. “I know it’s strange to worry about this,” she said, “or too early, or whatever, but I

have this feeling that maybe you won't like watching me on TV. I almost think maybe you shouldn't watch this season," she added, with an appended laugh, like she was joking.

"Come on, Katy. You know I'll be proud of you no matter what."

"I know," she said. "I know. I guess the thing is I really played into it. I had a whole persona out there. It's going to be honestly unbearable to watch. For me, I mean."

"It'll be fine. I don't care if you're the big villain of the season. We'll watch it together, and you can tell me what it was actually like when the cameras weren't watching."

"I'll try, anyway," Katy said, and she relaxed her grip on his hand and stretched slightly in her seat. "Have you been okay here? I hope you didn't miss me too much."

"Oh, I barely noticed you were gone," Jonah said, and she laughed, and for a moment it seemed like things were going to be okay.

Katy returned to the salon the next day. She was not allowed to reveal to anyone besides Jonah how far she'd made it in the game, but her coworkers and friends saw how thin she'd gone and drew the reasonable conclusions. They planned to watch the whole season, or at least every episode that had Katy in it. "You really don't have to," she said. Three nights after her return home, she told Jonah she was ready to tell him everything, which she hadn't yet, not in any real detail. They were on the couch and the TV screen was dark but still loomed against the wall, smearing their reflections. "Okay," she said. "How much do you want to know?"

"All of it," Jonah said. "Or all of it that you're willing to—or I guess... There's nothing I don't want to hear about."

"Right. Okay. So, I was on the blue team at first. I worked hard around camp, fixing the shelter and keeping the fire going and all that. So I wasn't much of a target. I made friends with a

few key people. You're going to see them all onscreen, so there's probably no point to me just listing all their names, they won't mean anything to you..."

"Don't worry about me. You can tell me whatever comes to mind."

"I know. Thank you. It's just so," and she made a gesture in the air between them, her right hand circling a space it couldn't contain. "It's forty days that felt like years. There's so much tedium. The cameramen aren't even there a lot of the time. They tell you that if anything interesting happens while they're off duty to reenact it later. A lot of the days we were just sitting around hungry or getting to know each other or trudging back and forth getting firewood, none of which is going to make it on the show. So you're bored, but then also at any moment something incredibly important and consequential could be happening, a conversation you're not part of, or a plot to stab you or someone else in the back, and so you're bored but in a keyed-up high-alert way. You're never alone and if you do go off alone everyone gets suspicious. And everyone lies all the time, because you're supposed to and it's good TV. So every conversation is partly a performance of a conversation, and everything the other person is saying might be totally false, and it might also matter hugely, and so you're trying to memorize everything but meanwhile nod along so that you look like someone who's just innocently listening and not memorizing or questioning at all. And you know that whoever you're talking to is doing that too. So everything everyone says is both meaningless and massively consequential, or maybe not but it could be..."

She stopped here. Jonah had put his arm around her shoulder, not meaning to interrupt, more to reset his attention, which hadn't wandered but had lost immediacy. "So tell me about the first few days," he said.

The first few days were difficult because her team, the blue team, kept losing, and that meant even as they were getting to know each other they were voting each other off, and one wrong suggestion to the wrong person meant a ripple of cold shoulders across camp, as you tried to figure out who and how many were against you... “I stayed ahead of it by telling the right lies to the right people. I’d tell Tina that there was no way I was staying loyal to Rich because he’d screwed me over on the last vote, even though I knew that it was Tina who had screwed me over, so there would be no reason for Tina to run off to Rich to tell him what I’d said and no reason for Rich to set her straight...” It was impossible to keep track, to tug some thread out of the snarl of names and say Who was Rich, Who was Tina. The longer Katy spoke between questions, the more animated she became, so Jonah stopped asking questions. Her enthusiasm was nothing new, he had seen her worked up like this about every season they’d watched together, but it was painful now to be on the other side of it, like looking through the photos of a party he hadn’t been invited to. He thought of the times they’d tried to explain the show to their skeptical friends, probably sounding a lot like this, a cavalcade of names and clichés and show jargon, aggressively indecipherable.

“But you’ll see all that when the show airs, or at least I think they’ll include it,” Katy said. “We did so many of those confessionals, it’s hard to know what they’ll use. I was saying all sorts of things in order to get airtime. I’d argue one point and then I’d pause and argue the opposite.”

“Sounds like you played it just right,” Jonah said, which he’d already said several times that evening. “I can’t wait to watch.”

The night of the first episode, Katy paced frantically, and twice announced she was going out for a walk before coming back in three minutes later, afraid she’d missed the episode’s start.

Jonah had been making popcorn for the occasion, but paused. “We don’t have to watch if you don’t want to,” he said. “We can watch a movie instead. We can do anything.”

“Of course I want to watch,” Katy said, but halfway through the episode, at the second commercial break, she abruptly disappeared up the ladder into their bedroom and came back down in her jogging shorts and sports bra. “Finish it without me,” she said.

“Is everything okay?”

“It’s just hard to watch,” she said, and she returned an hour later, long after the episode was over.

For the next eleven Thursday nights, with an unfinished beer beside him and the overhead lights dark, Jonah watched his wife on TV. He was, at first, not much interested in the other contestants, the camera cutting away too often to some irrelevant bearded stranger, resting too briefly on Katy’s pensive smile. Who cared about the red team? But by the third episode he found himself rooting for some of them, resenting others, forgetting when Katy wasn’t onscreen that she was about to be, so that her appearances startled him and then came not to seem like her at all, but like some stranger he wanted to sleep with. It was a good season; the producers had made a suspenseful narrative out of red versus blue, the strong versus the smart. In some episodes it seemed like Katy was on the verge of doom, and Jonah couldn’t sit still through the commercials, washed one dish at a time or leaned over the back of the couch still watching the screen, as if being a few feet farther from the TV was somehow safer. Even though he knew she’d make it to the end, that she already had. It was just so relentless, the minutes of the episode ticking past, the lens-flare shots of the sun slipping down the horizon. “Katy, no,” he said when she made something that seemed like a mistake. “Shit, shit, shit,” when her team was falling behind in challenges. Every week they lurched a few days deeper into the story. Her lies got a

strand more complicated. “Tune in next week,” said the show’s host, and Jonah’s neck got hot, and he had to walk around the kitchen in a glitter of anxiety as the preview for next week played and Katy’s key turned in the front door lock.

She watched the episodes too, always the same night they aired, downstairs in the kitchen, after Jonah had fallen asleep in the loft. She watched with fixated dread, as the people she’d known and slept next to and fought against and lied to became scentless dreams on her laptop screen, as her own avatar spoke with matted hair and fierce eyes into a camera that she now saw was only a window, a window through which Jonah and everyone else she knew was looking right at her. She could not stand watching him watch her. Instead she streamed the episodes at two or three in the morning, seeing it all through his eyes, feeling his expression change on her own face. She knew the show was heading somewhere unrecoverable. She could not stop it or slow it down.

They did not talk about the episodes after, and Jonah still made sure to ruffle Katy’s hair and to hold her with one steady arm at night. There was someone else, was the thing. In the show. She had made an ally out of some guy named Richard, Rich, and Rich was the one she consulted with in the woods and laughed with outside the bamboo shelter. The camera caught her smile and her hands as they flashed around with no ring. To the other contestants she said she was divorced, with a four-year-old daughter. She explained in confessionals that she needed to seem older, more experienced than she was, that she hadn’t wanted to seem like just another twenty-something recruit with no life experience, there for the “adventure.” She wanted to seem tough, a free agent but not a flirt, or if a flirt, not a trivial one. Sometimes Jonah wondered, watching eight to nine p.m. as the shower ran or as Katy jogged the hills outside, if he was about to get cuckolded on national television. Episode after episode, this didn’t quite happen, and yet

Rich and Katy tore through their opponents, got separated via surprise team-swap, reunited, strategized, laughed, slept close together, though everyone did, it was true, huddled under one another's arms, although did it always have to be Rich's arm, he asked himself. Onscreen Katy was likable, sometimes vicious. She explained her lies quite coldly to the listening camera, but then would laugh, brightly, and Jonah felt the audience's regard swoop up again, as if the whole audience was there in the room with him, reacting and interjecting the way Katy always had, leaning forward off the couch.

"We have to split up Rich and Katy," said the other contestants. "If Rich makes it to the end, he's taking Katy for sure," they said. "Do you think Katy would ever vote against Rich?" they asked each other, and the answer was always no, no chance, not worth trying. Everyone assumed this unbreakable, game-superseding bond between Rich and Katy, and Jonah, watching, could not argue against it. He tried not to look online but knew that fans of the show were referring to them as a power couple. It was a good story. He would have rooted for them too.

There was nothing to accuse and he didn't blame Katy, but he found it hard to look at her sometimes, right after the episode, when she came through the door or down from the loft. The look in her eyes might be more than he wanted to see. They orbited each other respectfully, saying ordinary things, and by morning he could look at her again without fear. Katy, my wife. It was always too late or too soon to bring anything up.

The night of the finale, Katy went out drinking with coworkers, an informal monthly gathering she usually skipped. Jonah sat alone in the sag of the couch. The actual finale would come next week, when Katy and Jonah flew out to LA for the reunion show and the reading of the votes and the crowning of the winner. But tonight was the last episode to take place on the

island, the audience's last sight of these starving beaten-down bodies and their crumbling shelter and their rain-pummeled beach and their mulish fire pit with its thin smoky flames.

They were down to three. Whoever won the last competition would decide who left that night. The competition lasted six and a half hours, Katy and Rich hanging onto their respective ten-foot poles as the sun flared across the screen and their skin melted into sweat. "It doesn't really matter, does it?" said Katy. "Since you'll take me to the end, and I'll take you."

"If it doesn't matter, you can go ahead and drop out," Rich said with his sidelong smile.

"Or you could," Katy said. "Rock paper scissors?"

Scissors beat paper. Rich, after a long moment of decision, the camera crowding in close to his narrowed thoughtful eyes, dropped out. Katy voted him out of the game that night. The jury was a pantomime of shock; Rich looked stabbed. He disappeared into the darkness outside the set and the camera settled on Katy's face, her small unrepentant smile. She and her last opponent made their final speeches. Katy was precise, coherent, magnetic. She would win. There was no way anyone watching could believe otherwise. "Tune in next week," said the host, and Jonah turned the TV off.

He went to get a beer from the fridge and then realized he'd forgotten to finish his first. He left both cans on the table and went to stand outside. It was dusk, clammy somehow underneath the sun's last heat. Katy hadn't texted anything since leaving, which meant she would be home soon. The other half of the duplex was silent like it usually was, the windows dark. Across the street the mattress was missing that had been lying scummy in the neighbors' yard for several months. Katy would probably quit her job at the salon now; he didn't know what she'd do. Wasn't that something couples were supposed to ask each other at some point, earlier on? What would you do with a million dollars? He didn't have an answer of his own, just the

probably stupid idea of buying instead of renting their half of the duplex, or maybe buying the whole building and converting the second half into whatever they wanted, a home movie theater, a master bedroom.

He would have to say something tonight about the episode, something generic, something so that she knew he understood and wasn't upset or threatened or jealous about whatever it was that had been going on with Rich. And then she would say something self-deprecating, so that he knew she didn't take any of it seriously, or that she did take it seriously but was embarrassed to. Headlights coming up the hill. "They'd have to be crazy not to vote for you," he'd say. Something like that.

The car crunched across the gravel of their driveway, parked at a tilt. He wanted to go back inside but stood there on the top step anyway. At the reunion show, the cameras would flash to his face, and the text underneath him would read, in small caps: Katy's Husband. He'd probably shake hands with Rich. That was okay. Rich didn't matter, in the end. What mattered was that Katy was about to get out of the car and look up at him, and when she did, he had to meet her eyes and smile like nothing had changed. The headlights flicked off, the engine snuffed out. A little moment of stillness, watching her silhouette. She stepped out of the car.

"You saw it?" she said.

"I did."

"And?"

She was coming up the steps now, taking his hands in hers, bravely, he thought. Her smile was a little twisted at the corners.

"Well, you're going to win," he said. "They'd have to be crazy not to choose you."

"I know."

“You could have taken Rich to the end. You were going to win either way.”

She was looking down at their hands, tracing the flat pads of his fingertips. “I didn’t want to risk it. Anyway, it was a gesture more than anything. Should we go inside?”

He held the door for her, and closed and locked it as she set down her purse on the kitchen table, kicked her shoes off into the pile by the radiator. In fifteen seconds, if he didn’t say anything, Katy was going to start telling him about drinks with the coworkers, and then they’d talk about Giovanni and how to break the news of his four-day trip next week, and that would be that. Jonah said, “What do you mean a gesture?”

“You know, because of all that nonsense about me and Rich being in this unbreakable alliance. I wanted to show everyone watching that it wasn’t real. It was just a story the cameras were telling.”

“Sure,” said Jonah.

“And, you know, I was selling myself as this manipulative liar person, and so backstabbing my closest ally seemed...”

“Sure, no, I know.”

“But you think I should have kept him around?”

The clock above the oven read 9:16. There was at least an hour left before either of them would climb the loft ladder up to bed. On an ordinary night, this would be the time to sit together on the couch and watch the show. But the show was Katy’s now. The nights would have to pass some other way.

“No, you’re right,” said Jonah. “You were better off without him.”

“My odds were better, anyway. Who knows. We’ll see how the votes go.”

She had turned to the sink, and was emptying the two cans she'd found on the table, beer swishing down the drain. Jonah sat on the couch, and after a moment she joined him, laptop in hand. He put his arm around her shoulder.

"It's a bad habit," she said. "I just want to check what they're saying online about the episode. Otherwise I'll be up all night worrying about it."

"That's fine," he said, and he watched her read the articles. Every now and then she'd interject something, "Machiavellian, that's a compliment, right?" she said, or "Definitely don't deserve credit for that move, but I'll take it." Jonah leaned his head against hers as if he was reading too. All the headlines played off the fateful rock-paper-scissors game. "Million-Dollar Rock-Paper-Scissors Game Results in Most Unlikely Final Two Since Season 29." "Could Rich Newman Have Won It All? Scissors Beats Paper in Explosive Season Finale."

Rich would be remembered as a fool. He, Jonah, would not be remembered at all, except by the few who noticed him there in the crowd the night of the reunion show, clapping when Katy's name was called. They'd all voted for her to win, every single one. Katy. Katy. She was wearing the dress he'd helped her choose. She smiled and ducked her head. Katy. Katy. Katy. The crowd was raucous and approving. Jonah felt the cameras on him and tried to exist. He applauded until his hands hurt. Once the final vote was read, his role was to run up to the stage and kiss her, maybe lift her into the air with the force of his embrace. He had lost count and hoped he would know when it was time. Katy. Katy. Rich was clapping too with a meaningful smile. He did not know whether Katy and Rich would stay in touch after this, or whether she'd contacted him at all since the island. He had not asked. Katy. Katy. Katy. It was time now to be the husband.

At the foot of the stage he kissed her, and she said something in his ear, but he couldn't make it out. He held her tightly and behind her he could see the stage and all the contestants mildly applauding and the host all bronzed over in television makeup off to the right. Then Jonah stepped back and Katy squeezed his hand and he returned to his seat and she returned to hers. The host came over with the million-dollar check and Katy beamed and nudged away some tears with the heel of her hand and held out this hand for the check and lifted it high for the cameras. Jonah clapped as hard as he could, even though he didn't need to, everyone else was clapping too. He would follow wherever she wanted to go. This seemed obvious now—it had always been true. "I love you," is what she must have wanted to tell him, though it could have been anything: I did it, we did it, I'm sorry, we need to talk. Whatever it was, the cameras hadn't caught it, but it was still possible that on the flight, or on the drive home, or in the darkened living room, full of four days' silent dust, she might say it again so he could hear.