

FOOL'S GOLD  
Excerpt from a Novel

by

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*All three heads of the dog  
turned toward the sound of its name.*

—from “The End of Girlhood” by Traci Brimhall

## June 2013

### 1

Vi should have known he was coming.

The rain dumped blackly from the eaves. It was a thick night, not cold but clammy; she'd gone out in the long June dusk to shut in the chickens and realized they had been sitting in their coop for hours, already asleep. Vi thought of putting the radio on, or one of Sal's precious records, but instead sat listening to the sound of water.

She was home alone. Sal was sleeping over at Ernesto's. And maybe this was why she should have known: whenever Sal was out, even just across the neighborhood, Vi's mind ranged out, too: cruising over roads like a bird at low altitude, watching for Sal, or for danger.

Sal was safe at Ernesto's. But Vi's mind still ranged, breathing the hugeness of night over wet clay, and the exhale of the pines. Scouting Sal's perimeter, the pinpoint of light that was Ernesto Cordero's house on 9th. Light poured from the Corderos' kitchen onto cold frames and a trampoline littered with leaves, all drenched. Inside, the kids melted on the couch with their sock feet pointing skyward, or sprawled together in Ernesto's room, gazing into the bright liquid eye of a phone.

So, she should have seen him.

She should have seen him walking from where the trucker dropped him off at the Shell station. Walking down Four Corners Road as rain ran into his collar, no longer trying to hitch, cringing into the wet mass of woods as cars peeled by with their brights on. Turning right on Highway 19, then crossing onto Irondale Road, by the espresso stand where high schoolers sold bad coffee. Then trudging the steep, sharp left, up 7th and into the neighborhood. Dark,

trafficless blocks where rain dumped through cedars, battering the summer gardens. The sad miniature ponies at the corner were out of sight in their little barn. Crossing Moore Street. Horton. Kincaid. Maude.

If her powers were half what she thought they were—if she really did have some intuitive sense of threat, especially to Sal, she should have known.

But the rain was dense. Crackling down like static, it had cloaked him. It had hidden him until the knock.

At the knock, Vi hesitated, though she couldn't say why.

And before she was up from the table, the old ceramic knob turned. Then stopped.

And then she was on him—she *did* know, her body knew, her mothering guts. She flung the door wide and he was there, rain pooling in the brim of his old fedora, his Carhartt collar, the one shapeless bag on his back, and she said, “Oh, Lowry. Oh, you're home.”

Vi's circling self, her eyes and ears in the air above—with a blur and a *whoosh*, it all contracted, convulsed around spacetime like a star.

## 2

Lowry wouldn't cross the threshold unless asked.

She reached for his hands, half-swallowed in the frayed, long sleeves. They were horned with calluses, blanched and cold. His bad circulation. “Come on,” she said. “Come *in*.” Vi didn't wait for him to set the bag down. She gathered him close and held him there, soaking her own clothes, knocking off his hat, her face to the rough, wet press of his cheek.

Lowry, her son, allowed her to hold him while he dripped. She paused, pushed him away, looked at his face, and hugged him again. He didn't speak. They hung a minute in a lit silent circle of awe. Finally she said, "You need a bath."

He sighed, a long, slow breath she didn't know he'd been holding. He shifted the bag. "Yeah, okay," he said. "That would be nice."

"Go. Go." She herded him down the little hall. "And I'll find something dry for you."

He said in a light, odd voice, as if practicing, "Thanks, Mom."

He paused outside the bathroom door. They looked at each other; the hallway felt too small for her thoughts. "I can't—but what are you *doing*? What have you—where—? Oh, Lowry."

"I was—" he said. "I came—" and then he laughed nervously. "God, how do you start?"

Vi touched his cheek. "Okay. I know. I know. That's why I'm running you a bath. It's what I know how to do."

"We'll have time to talk, though. Right? If you'll—I mean—"

"Go ahead. Wash. I'll make some food, and then we'll talk. If we can't talk about everything tonight, we need to talk about Sal."

Lowry blinked and shifted. He looked down the hallway with sudden bewilderment. "Sal. Is she here?"

"She's at a friend's for the night. She'll be home tomorrow, which means we need to figure some things out. In a minute. Here," Vi said, pushing past him to turn on the tap. She tested the bath with her fingers, and when it was hot enough, she sank the plug into place. The crash of bathwater mixed with the rush of rain outside.

She went to the old office that had become her bedroom after her hip went out, when she could no longer climb the stairs with ease. Rummaging through drawers, pulling out her own clothes, too big for him. That would be fine. A plaid flannel work shirt, old green corduroys, Smartwool socks. The pants would be huge on his tiny waist. She could send him up to Sal's room, to borrow a belt. One Sal wouldn't miss. The bathroom door was closed when she got back. "Use anything!" Vi called through it. She left the folded clothes on a chair right outside.

Vi's chest thrummed. Her pulse vibrated. With Lowry settled in the bath, her mind flew again over the pines to Sal. She called Ernesto's mother.

"Marta? Hi, uh—something's come up. Do you think you might be able to keep Sal for the day tomorrow? At least till after lunch?"

"Oh, sure. The kids already asked if I could drive them to the skate park on my way to work. I was going to have Sal call you. Are you okay? Is everything okay?"

Vi wondered how dire she really sounded, or how shocked. She thanked Marta, promising to explain later, as her mind already whirled elsewhere, everywhere.

She knew Sal and Marta and Ernesto had finished dinner; the kids were getting sleepy, winding down. How lucky Sal was at Ernesto's tonight. Lucky for Sal, mainly. Vi would get Lowry out of the house first thing tomorrow, until they formed a plan. And lucky for Vi: that she could be alone now in the clammy night, in the sound of rushing water, under the same roof as her son, Lowry, her boy, her only son. Sal's father, back out of nowhere, after being dead for nine years.

### 3

Out of his wet clothes, Lowry felt better.

He sat on the edge the tub for a long time, the water so hot it needled him, then eased in bit by bit with careful, controlled exhales. He lay without moving, his eyes fluttering shut.

Nothing felt real. The bath was lukewarm before he started soaping himself. He used a washcloth to exfoliate. The grime went deep; he was covered in train dirt, that powdery, oily residue that sticks to everything. Even his stomach looked gray, though mottled from heat and friction. He soaped his armpits, neck, groin, ass, feet. It had always surprised him to come back to himself like this, to see his own nakedness after days, weeks, or months bundled in fabric, sleeping with boots on and his pack under his head. He touched his body in awe, surfaces he'd forgotten.

Thighs. Ribs. The hair on his belly. He looked peeled and vulnerable. He washed his penis, swirling fingers through the floating pubic hair with no arousal, like he was washing a baby.

The rain had stopped. He couldn't hear traffic. His splashing felt loud in the quiet house. He sank fully underwater and let it enter his ears, twinging with unknown vibrations. Vi moving in the kitchen. She would interrogate him soon, but he knew she needed him to wash, eat, sleep, like it was her own body come in from the storm.

He toweled, watching pills of dead gray skin slough satisfyingly away. The bathwater looked awful. He had to reach back in to drain it, and cringed at how it clung greasily around his wrist. Vi had left some of her own clothes folded on a chair outside the door. The big, rough flannel work shirt smelled like her. It hung to his thighs. The corduroys wouldn't stay up. He put his wet hat on again, for comfort. Somehow perfectly attuned, after all this time, Vi popped her head into the hall.

“Go get a belt of Sal’s. They’re in her top dresser drawer. I can’t get up the stairs so well these days.”

In nine years, the house had barely changed. But on the landing he opened the wrong door first, the door to what had once been Vi’s room, now clearly the spare. It was bare: just a futon, some apple boxes and a filing cabinet. As he stood looking in, Vi (always aware) shouted up to him, “You can sleep in the spare room with the futon!” Lowry had to stop himself from calling back, like a teenager, *I know*.

The other door was to Lowry and Misha’s old room, now modified with a peace sign in puffy paint. As he opened it, he expected two contradictory things, both impossible: either the room as they’d left it, or the detritus of a five-year-old daughter. But Sal was twelve now. He stared in from her threshold, for the first time feeling like a stranger.

Sal’s room smelled like nag champa and house paint. Two walls had been freshly painted black. There was a poster of some psychedelic cats, and a row of amethyst crystals in varying sizes lined up on the dresser. Heartthrobs he’d never heard of, plus a busty black-and-white Elvira in a fake-old golden frame. Some dried flowers. It was the room of someone who was floundering toward an aesthetic. Bemused, he kept staring. A skateboard with anime stickers. Black nail polish. Was she a goth now, or a little mall punk? Was she shopping at the Hot Topic in Silverdale, taking the ferry to Seattle to lurk on the Ave with her friends, the way he used to? No. She was only twelve. She was a reader. There were books all over the bed: *Persepolis*, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, *The Prophet*, a *Hunger Games* book, and, of course, *The Bell Jar*. Or almost thirteen? What bands was she listening to? He looked around for CDs. Time felt swimmy. He was unsteady. He was suddenly ashamed to be in her room. He felt the forcefield of a hidden personality, distinct and private and unknown to him, almost as strongly as if she were

there, on the old blue quilt among her books, black nails and naively referential plaid and random wallet chains, mouthing in withering tween exasperation: *Dad*.

Except he was making this up. And in truth, he couldn't see her. The Sal he imagined was a smooth placeholder who slid away if he tried to pin her down. The Sal he could really picture was the only one he knew: a silky little dumpling not yet in kindergarten, with a helmet of fine, streaky blond hair.

Guilty, he pushed past her forcefield and inside. Some furniture he remembered, the little wicker nightstand and a shelf. The dresser was new. Had they even had one, in this room? He thought of Misha heroically building a wall of storage cubbies out of milk crates and zip ties. How they could have lived here, all three of them—Lowry, Misha, little Sal—in this one bedroom, stretched belief.

He opened Sal's top drawer first and it stuck, knocking over one of the amethysts. Sure enough, there were belts in there. He wondered how Vi, if she couldn't climb the stairs, even knew where Sal's belts were. But Vi knew everything. She always had. It was the best and worst part of being mothered by her. The first belt he saw flashed rows of silver grommets, but he found another one, behind some scarves, just worn brown leather.

Under and between the belts was a detritus of small objects that he blinked at vaguely. A bright lump of metal—stone? —that gleamed like crumpled foil. He thumbed it, drawn to the shine, and saw the printed label from a classroom mineral display: *iron pyrite*. All sorts of other little objects rattled at the bottom of Sal's drawer: thin bangle bracelets, pens, a ceramic kitten, teaspoons, and a pocketknife. A white Bic lighter. Magnets, loose keys, seed pearl earrings, a votive in red glass, a Beanie Baby, a chrome tire-pressure gauge, a Hot Wheels car. It was a like a magpie's nest.

Curious, Lowry opened the next drawer, and this time felt a bolt of unearthly surprise. As he touched Sal's shirts, jumbled and unfolded, he remembered them fully: the patched hoodies, plaids, and patterned, thrifted button-downs. The old band tees. The shirts were *his*.

Lowry had taken almost nothing on the day he left. Even the clothes on his body hadn't belonged to him. And through all his years of absence, when he thought of Irondale—some part, he realized, had pictured this room untouched, just as he and Misha must have left it that last morning. As with many other things half remembered, his mind negotiated a slick black ice of loss.

But the shirts were, unmistakably, his. He itched to take one, but he was already dressed. And they felt unassailable: his own possessions uncovered like this, in their private sleep. He freed the brown belt from Sal's inexplicable midden, then shoved both drawers quickly shut. He neatened the row of crystals. He threaded the belt into his mother's pants and buckled it at the most well-worn spot. We're the same size, he thought, awed by this phantom child who'd spent the past nine years eating, growing, thinking, generating heat. While Lowry wasted away in one hiding place or another, a dead man in the afterlife. He closed Sal's door softly. He smelled onions frying and took the stairs down two at a time.

#### 4

Vi had made spaghetti, adding the onions and a pound of ground beef to the canned sauce. She poured Lowry a full glass of water that he gulped down, gripping it in both hands like a kid. Somehow rain always made him thirstier. "Thanks, Mom."

"Did you put your clothes in the wash?"

“Oh—no—” he said, then did it as if sleepwalking. He was starving, and also so warm, finally, that he could only think of rest. Vi piled food on a plate and at first they were quiet. Watching him eat soothed her. He looked up, heavy-eyed, some sauce on his lip, in the sheltering pause before speech. A beat. He was waiting for her to start it.

“I don’t know where you’ve been—” No. Again. “I don’t know what—” Lowry filled his mouth with spaghetti and chewed slowly. When the pressure of her gaze became too much, he looked away. “Okay,” said Vi, deflated. “But we have to talk about Sal before she comes home tomorrow.”

“Is she wearing my clothes?” he said.

“Is she what?”

He swallowed the wad of food. “My clothes, my shirts. They were in Sal’s dresser. Is that what she *wears*?”

Vi looked at him piercingly. “Yeah, sweetie. That is what she wears.”

“Not, like—not even Misha’s clothes, even.”

“Misha’s stuff is too girly,” she said, faintly smiling. “I still have everything of hers, of course. I kept everything from the both of you. But I think it’s best not to take any of your old clothes yet, tonight. If you don’t mind wearing mine. Sal is a bit attached. It was like something clicked on, over last summer, and that was all she wanted to wear.” Vi waited while he chewed and swallowed. “She still thinks you’re dead.”

The house breathed on him, the bright overhead bulb throbbed with some animal knowledge. Though he believed Vi really couldn’t climb stairs anymore—the pain in her hip showed plainly—he still felt like she’d set him up. Sending him up to Sal’s room like that, to encounter her there.

“Do you want me to go?” he said. His mind stuttered and stopped.

“Well, stay here tonight, of course. Get some rest. But tomorrow, maybe—we should figure out what to do.”

“You don’t want me to see her.”

“Lowry, what are you *doing* here? Do you have a plan?”

“Mom, I just wanted to come back. I missed—I needed to come back.”

He watched a controlled storm of emotion, trembling in the deep grooves by her mouth and between her wild gray brows. Her lips pursed and released. “We missed you, too. We never stopped missing you. But you know it’s not safe to be here. You *know* you can’t stay. And so, if—what does that do to Sal, sweetie? How does she handle that? That’s my thinking.”

“I got a fake ID. It’s a really good one, check it out.” He showed her, proud, but Vi grimaced as she held it in two fingers.

“*Mordecai Butler?* Are you kidding me? Why not John Smith? How did you even *get* here? Where have you been? You can’t—I just—sweetie, it’s too much.” She was holding her face in both palms.

“I took the train to Seattle and walked on the Bainbridge ferry and took the Strait Shot bus to Disco Bay. I hitched up 20 to Four Corners and then I walked.”

“You can’t *be* here. You can’t even go outside!”

“It’s been nine years,” he said. “I’m dead. Mom, so much has happened, I’ve been—I was—” But there was no way, really, to start.

“People know you. It’s a small town. Nine years is not long.”

“Can’t I be my own cousin? Brother? *Twin* brother?” She stared. Lowry pulled his wet hat down over his face and wiggled his eyebrows.

“Be serious.”

“I grew a beard. How recognizable can I be?”

“Don’t be delusional. Nine years is nothing. Everyone will know you. You can’t leave the house. You can’t go anywhere where you might be seen. Hitchhiking up here? Traveling up here? That was *insane*. Do you get that? What if you’d been picked up by, I don’t know—Susan Stroman from the Post Office. Or one of the Decklers. Did you know Cameron Deckler’s moved back and married that girl Carla what’s-her-face—you know, the pretty one? They moved out to Cape George, they’re having a baby in October. Lowry, they could have picked you up. *Anyone!*”

He tried to muster something, but he couldn’t. “I’m so tired, Mom.” She reached to stroke the damp hair off his forehead. “Why didn’t you tell Sal before?” he said.

“You know why. She wasn’t old enough to keep a secret like that. At five or six? At ten? Even from her friends? At school, everywhere? The way she’d have to do. I don’t know she’s old enough now, but I suppose we’ll just—if we can find some way—”

“If I can’t leave the house, where do you want me to go?”

Vi raised both hands. “Just say it. Did you come back for her?”

Sal. His blond little dumpling. The truth, he was ashamed to think, was no. Not till he walked into her room, smelled her incense, and saw the books on her unmade bed. Then it hit him so hard that, for a minute, it was like she’d been his reason all along. “Yeah.” He was filled with the pulse of missing Sal, enough that he almost believed himself.

He wished Vi didn’t know so much. But she only said, “You’re tired.”

“Super tired.”

“There’s sheets and blankets in the closet upstairs. The futon pulls out. We’ll talk more in the morning. We’ll figure out what you need, and where you can go. We’ll figure out how you can see her. You *will* see her. We’ll work it all out, I promise.”

“Let me help with the dishes.”

“Next time. Scoot.” But first she held him again: his fragile bones, damp hair, his breath, heart, teeth, all present in their heat and animal density. “I want to know where you’ve been,” she whispered, and he didn’t answer. Not ashes, not buried, she had known this, but—alive. Alive, alive.

## 5

Lowry didn’t bother to pull out the futon or make up a bed. He just flopped down and rolled in a blanket and shut his eyes. He passed into unconsciousness as the clouds cleared and a bit of moonlight ticked over his face.

Vi didn’t sleep. She had hurried him to bed, away from her, despite wanting him near. She had made him go upstairs because she couldn’t stand his closeness, the mother reflex so visceral it was like she’d given birth to him herself. She lay flat, feeling her body twinge. Her hip. She rubbed her temple. Losing him had almost killed her.

Her mind hit against the problem, cracked on it, turned it over. Where could Lowry go? She had tomorrow morning to get him out of the house, to keep Sal from knowing. Out of this gossip small town, with all its danger, but still near. Near. Now everything she wanted to know, or tell him, blanketed her at once. It jammed her system. Her wandering mind had tried to reach him over the years—hourly, daily, especially at first—but she’d lost the signal. She had no clue what he’d been doing, how he’d been living.

Maybe Poulsbo. Or Tacoma. She would drive him in the morning. Lowry could get a cheap hotel for the week and then rent an apartment, get a job with the stupid fake ID. If he wasn't right here in the heart of his childhood life, he might get away with it. And she could visit him. Vi could. Eventually, with Sal. He had grown a beard. It *had* been nine years. He'd been declared dead with no hassle. He wasn't even, technically, a wanted man.

If she could just help set him up somewhere close, they could plan the future together. Vi would have time to strategize. She would plan to bring Sal and Lowry together, to bring him back into Sal's life in the way that was gentlest, the least possible shock to the system. And only once she knew Lowry could stay.

Did he have any money? They would talk in the morning. Vi would check her bank account. Because once Sal learned he was alive, there was no undoing it. Vi massaged her hip with both hands and thought, He can't leave Sal again.

Her mind flew over the neighborhood, over treetops shining after rain. The wet ribbon of Highway 19. Sal asleep at Ernesto's. They were nestled together—Vi knew they slept this way, still—and she wondered if he'd come out to her yet. He must have. Those kids told each other everything. She saw her dead friends in him and wished him an easier life.

## 6

Vi was wrong. Sal wasn't asleep. She was not at Ernesto's.

Sal was alone in the woods, in the dark, on the slope above Chimacum Creek.

The rain had stopped, but every step Sal took soaked her: waist-deep in wet salal bushes, with the low, shaggy arms of the cedars brushing her neck and face. It would have been cold, but she was moving fast.

Sal had finally done it. She had finally stolen something from Ernesto, and the rule was, one you took it, you could not give it back.

After dinner they'd watched *Moulin Rouge* in bed, Ernesto's choice, and she woke up just enough to close the screen and put the laptop on the floor. Sal flopped over, sensing his delicate open jaw, his sweet, deep breathing beside her. Ernesto slept with an arm flung toward her as if they'd never fought, teeth flashing under the moon. They had been friends so long.

Sal's parents had both disappeared in a day, which was itself unbelievable. Here, then gone. Everything, nothing. They had famous names: Lowry Taggart and Misha Glass, two kids who died trying to rob the Hadlock Credit Union in 2004. It was the most spectacular tragedy Jefferson County had known in decades. And the third famous name was Denis Navarre, who got away with it.

Sal's mother, Misha, was shot during the robbery by a bystander. They found Lowry's remains in the burned-out getaway car. Denis had murdered him and run with the money—no one knew how. He was still on the FBI's Most Wanted.

Sal knew this mostly before meaning to know it. The things people casually said—or didn't, as if Sal's existence was the most delicate wound. Teachers babied her. Or they mentioned arcane details of the robbery as someone cut her with a look: *You know what I'm talking about.*

She had Googled it and drowned in the stack of headlines. Skimmed some stories while her mind jittered elsewhere. Clicked away. She had finally asked Vi for the details, to not feel bested by Cara Macaluso, at lunch recess, singing *I-know-something-you-don't-know* with the power of being right. Vi had sighed and sat down squarely and told Sal everything as nonviolently as she could, and the story took on that dimension, too: Vi's steadfast narrating voice that made impossible things real.

And there were her parents' photos, published: her mother laughing and her father, someone said, like a teenaged Don Quixote, which meant nothing to Sal and anyway he was grown—they weren't really kids, though everyone called them that—with his lean, sad face and longing eyes. The photo of Denis Navarre sank into her mind like lead.

She had been nearly five. Her parents' deaths coincided almost exactly with the onset of her precocious reading. After Vi took their place tending Sal in the crowded little bedroom, her development flagged in all directions but that one. She nearly stopped speaking. She seemed to stop growing for a while, this stubborn kernel of a person, little blond nut with her face walled off, voice stifled, unwilling to crack. Even the friendship with Ernesto, which Vi initiated out of sheer desperation, had been nonverbal on Sal's part as she suffered him to follow her around, chattering.

All Sal had still wanted to do was read. And she did let Vi hold her. They spent years like this, with Sal leaning into Vi's big, soft sides and belly and breasts, a bulwark of denim and flannel, both reading. Sometimes Vi only pretended to read, but if Sal knew this, she never looked up. Later Sal discovered the world of orphan children: Matilda, Mandy, Charlie Bucket, Lyra Belacqua. Many were true orphans, but there was another category, a rarer one, in which the parents, against all odds, came back. Sal also read fat books of fairy tales in those years, curled into Vi's soft bulk. Stories where wishes were granted at great cost. Where steadfast heroes wrested their loved ones from the fairy kingdom, or back from the dead.

That Sal had become an orphan overnight: this was the biggest sign something important would happen to her. She was the only orphan she knew, besides her own father, whom Vi had taken in as a child in exactly the same way. Ernesto claimed to be a half-orphan, but even Ernesto Skyped his dad in Zimatlán. Or maybe something about Vi gave it away—maybe Sal,

without knowing, picked up Vi's waiting and watching. Maybe she saw how Vi's eye darted to a stranger sitting under his hat, spare-changing outside the QFC. How someone's walk or voice would snap Vi's head up and make her eyes go clear as rainwater.

And Ernesto. That night, Sal had watched him sadly, as he slept. Small-boned, still a chatterbox, insufferably a nerd, and loyal.

The rule was, you could not go back. You could not return anything you took. Stealing changed you; it crossed you into another world, alone. Sal knew Ernesto's room by heart. She had eased her legs out of the comforter, striped by moonlight, and then stood. The rain was done. The world was gently still. She did it with no missteps, never stubbing her toe in the dark. Sal's hand lowered softly to the back right corner of Ernesto's desk. She took a carved and painted wooden turtle, palm-sized, with a wire-hung bobblehead, that his dad had mailed him from Zimatlán.

## 7

She had snuck out of the Corderos' house. She had to. Past Ernesto's mother's door with the song of its white noise machine, and into the rainwashed wee hours of night.

Sal started learning the rules in fourth grade, in Miss Anette's Gifted Language Arts class, on her day for classroom chores.

It had been Sal's favorite class, her favorite classroom. Miss Anette had been her favorite teacher, old but not as old as Vi, two tendons alert in her long neck. Each day Sal's love for Miss Anette roiled her. That dark hair held by one gleaming tortoiseshell claw.

The chores were light. Watering the jade plant, dusting with a fleece on a wooden stick, emptying twin pencil sharpeners. One student per day stayed during recess, while Miss Anette

graded worksheets, rarely lifting her eyes. Sal liked their mutual privacy. It was best to be silent together with someone.

She carefully dusted the shelf Miss Anette called “the curio cabinet,” which was not a cabinet, with its array of small objects: different-sized pinecones, seedpods, chestnuts, shells. Three fossils. A row of labeled stones and minerals: amethyst, sulfur, quartz, pumice, agate, and pyrite. And storm-dark obsidian you could run your thumb over, glassy like terrible water.

The thrum of Sal’s love was big, and she was glad for the silence; no words could hold it. She gave her love to tending each thing in turn. She straightened the Reading Rug and poured more pellets for Clementine, the class rat, who didn’t need them. The cool fan whirred and everything talked. Sal spoke with each squeak of her shoes, the water from the plastic can as it hit the mulch under the jade plant. A gray, spellcast light shimmered the plump green leaves. And in a minute she ruined it. Sal wanted the obsidian, but it was big, more than fist-sized, and there was nowhere to hide it. So while Miss Anette’s attention was on her desk, what Sal pocketed was the shining piece of pyrite: fool’s gold.

Quickly she knew her mistake. The pyrite, brightest thing on the shelf, would be the most easily missed. But it was in her pocket now, true and hard, and telling her the rule which was, *you can never go back*. She looked up make sure Miss Anette wasn’t watching, but saw, with the cold of a deep-sea depths, that she was. Her eyes were black glass. Flat as a seal’s, not human. You could never, never, never, never, never go back.

Sal stood motionless in her misery. Her glance fell meaninglessly on the bug-smudged window, then the groove of a long, familiar scratch in the checked floor. It seemed like she had known this scratch her whole life.

She waited for Miss Anette to say something. But Miss Anette turned back her to worksheets and never spoke. Sal finished her chores and hurried to recess as the air became gummy.

“Thank you, Sal,” Miss Anette said as she passed. Sal ducked her head without speaking and rushed to the playground, feeling that only there she would be able to breathe.

But even outside, too much was happening. Cara Macaluso yelled at someone about dodgeball and the Emmas were dancing in front of two fifth-grade boys, and Ernesto walking somewhere with his little crew of nerds hailed her but it was impossible—you can’t get to me, she thought—as Sal ran behind the gym storage shed and into a wet, wrecked grove of maple drowned in ivy. Emma B had said this place was where Byron and Emma M French kissed. No one was kissing now, but the woods were lit with danger as Sal felt an uncomfortable spark, like their ghosts were exactly here, kissing and re-kissing through her body forever.

And a vein of shame, deep, wide, and mineral, rode through her, with the pyrite in her pocket and the gummy brown air of the classroom she had crossed through under Miss Anette’s flat gaze. She gripped the thing in her pocket without looking, a square-crystalled shape that gouged her palm, and she squeezed till the pain smote her and then finally pulled it out to watch her clenched fingers, blotching red-and-white, uncurl. There the thing lay, fool’s gold: sharp and shiny, cruelly only hers.

The rules were this: Sal reentered the playground with a secret life. She looked round, grateful Ernesto and his friends were out of sight now, and wondered if anyone here could know. She saw fifth-graders moving in a tight, dangerous knot, one rolling her body as the girls around her screamed with glee. And just then that girl looked away from the friends who held her, not *at* Sal but their faces turned toward each other. Her name was Star Cherryman. Sal stood with hands

on her thighs, the hand that had clenched the pyrite still ringing like a struck bell. She felt the clear, pure, horrible outline of love.

For years, Sal kept the pyrite in her dresser drawer, below a jumble of scarves and belts. And sometimes the need overcame her out of nowhere and she would take something else, like Cara Macaluso's jelly pen, or a box of wintergreen Tic Tacs from the checkout at Aldrich's, or Emma B's bracelets from her unlocked locker after gym. And the rule of her stealing was: no going back to how things were before. She had tried turning herself stupid to get dropped from Miss Anette's Gifted Language Arts into regular Language Arts, and failed, but her raw silent love for Miss Anette was now untouchable, stashed in a cave of secrets with so much else.

Anything Sal took went in the drawer with the pyrite. Like a planet, a magnet, it drew flotsam into orbit. Sometimes harmlessly and sometimes not: a key off a key ring, or Bethany Tarpin's earrings from Swim Club sleepover, with real pearls. Ernesto didn't know. But she had thought she would never take anything from him.

## 8

Last summer, summer before sixth grade, she'd started wearing Lowry's clothes.

All her parents' things had been there, in the room that gradually became Sal's own. Throughout her younger childhood, after the robbery, Sal would cry and throw a fit when Vi tried moving anything to storage, even just into the spare room next door. Sal unpacked and repacked the cardboard boxes and milk crates, which she knew by heart. Her mom's soft sweaters in shades of green and brown; black jeans; legwarmers; black-on-black Converse. Sal, destined to be bigger than Misha in every dimension, tried these on but her body felt wrong in them, exposed. She got breasts early, a delinquency she crushed under a too-small Speedo top. She quit Swim

Club. Her dad's shirts were bigger and looser: band shirts for the Smiths and the Ramones, long flannels and button-downs, hoodies that swallowed and saved her.

"You look like a boy in that," Ernesto said at first.

"No I don't," Sal said quickly.

She could see each thought twinge over his sensitive face. "It's cool," he finally said.

"I *don't*," she said.

But in Lowry's clothes her secret life grew. The pyrite under Sal's belts was an old talisman, now mostly ignored, but the rule was still the same. You could never go back. Her next favorite teacher was Mr. Graham, for Drama, a big, nice buffalo who taught improv warmups like Zip-Zap-Zop. He told the class to walk around the gym like different people. *Imagine you have a string on a certain part of your body, and that part pulls you forward. Put the string on your nose. Feel your nose pulling you. See? Now put it on your belly. See? See how that changes your walk? That's where you find your character. Now lead with your knees! Now lead with your toes! Now lead with your hips.*

Sal practiced a monologue from *Tom Sawyer*. "Now, how would Tom walk?" Mr. Graham wondered. Sal led with her pelvis, splay-kneed and loose-shouldered, sidling and slow, sitting backwards on her chair with knees apart. Mr. Graham boomed, "Incredible! Sal, now you're really moving like a boy!"

Tom Sawyer walked deep in the woods, in Lowry's clothes. Afternoons, avoiding Ernesto, Tom strode the densely-treed slope down to Chimacum creek. Second-growth alder and cedar and Doug fir; ferns shuddering dark dull green; baldhip rosebushes, salmonberry, snowberry, and ocean spray with flowering plumes. Slender, rosy-barked madronas, their trunks smooth as human skin, that Sal would palm or rub her cheek against. At the foot of the slope,

near creek-level and hidden in the trees, was a one-room settler's cabin with green lichen on the walls, inside and out, and a split-log floor. It was empty except for a cook stove rusted into a block. Tom walked across the room.

## 9

Sal was going there now. Deep, deep in the night, in the wet woods after rain.

She was soaked: her jeans, her shirt which was Lowry's shirt, her skate shoes. The carved and painted turtle stolen from Ernesto was in one hand. The rule could still be wrong, Sal thought. I could still put the turtle back before he wakes up, and we could stop fighting and be normal again. But she knew better.

She had gotten her first period that night at Ernesto's house. Her chest had been sore all week as she crushed it down relentlessly in the Speedo, afraid it was growing. The small of her back ached. After dinner she peed, then looked in the toilet bowl and saw her wad of paper unfurling pink as a rose.

Marta was the one to tell, obviously, but she was on the phone. Sal looked round the bathroom, found a box of tampons she didn't dare touch, then wadded toilet paper into her underwear.

*"Ernesto,"* she whispered, falling across the couch with sudden dread. *"I just got my period."*

His face flickered. "Uhhh...like, congratulations? I guess?"

"No, thank you."

"Well, like, what am I *supposed* to say?"

"You're supposed to be sorry for how much my life absolutely and completely and totally

sucks.”

“Oh. Bummer. I dunno, though. I mean, It’s like—you’re, like, a *woman* now. My cousin said that once,” he added quickly, throwing up his hands.

“I’m not a woman! Take it back!”

Ernesto tried to be funny, his tender face contorting as some imaginary grande dame.

“*There comes a time in every young girl’s life...*”

“Oh my God, shut *up!*” she said. “I should have just told your mom. I just thought, like, I could tell you everything.”

“You can,” he said, hurt.

“You don’t tell *me* everything. I mean, you never—”

“*I do!*”

“—You never even told me you’re gay.”

His face fell. The sensitive muscles moved in waves and she wondered if he was going to cry. “I’m not—I mean—”

“*Ernesto!*”

He flapped his hands at her and wouldn’t speak. Such a crush of sorrow behind his eyes. The rules are, Sal thought, you can never, never, never, never, never go back.

Their watching a movie was Marta’s idea. Sal would have just gone home. But Marta got off the phone, looking alarmed, and found the kids stricken on the couch, not talking, so stiffly and stormily that with absolute bewilderment she fluffed and cajoled them, promised to drive them to the skate park after breakfast, and suggested activities as if they were six again. Ernesto climbed the stairs with tragic dignity but allowed Marta to cuddle them both into bed with a movie. Which nobody would still let us do, Sal thought, if we didn’t all know he was gay. She

didn't say it. Ernesto picked *Moulin Rouge*. Sal wondered for the first time if he had secrets; real secrets. A true secret was a necessary organ in the body. A cave of space to live in. Without that, how? The world pressed too close against you, knowing everything, and there was nowhere to go.

What got her up from Ernesto's bed in the night was a fear that she might bleed on the sheets.

## 10

Sal's other secret was this: after her parents died, she hadn't seen their bodies. And around the time of the pyrite, she began to do spells.

Her spells were half fairy-tale and half from observing Marta, who let Sal join them for Día de Muertos. For years Marta entertained Sal's pale, serious face, drawn hard with yearning. Marta, how do you talk to the dead? Sal imitated, then riffed. She lit candles, picked flowers. She left food next to her parents' photos. Marta shrugged at Vi, a little wryly, saying, "She loves the culture," but knew it wasn't really that. Sal's hungry eye scraped over the world for any conduit, any access to magic, and once she found it she hoarded it, to get what she wanted. She wanted her parents back.

Vi wasn't religious. When Sal asked why, she only said, "Not my thing." Sal was free to go to mass with the Corderos at St. Mary, Star of the Sea; Vi never stopped her, but also never mentioned it. Sal mostly liked the chanting, the incense, and the flowers. She didn't know the Latin parts, and when Marta and Ernesto went to Spanish mass on Saturdays, Sal couldn't follow that either. Ernesto spoke Spanglish to his mother, but to Sal he spoke a very American English in a pretty, pitchy voice.

Meanwhile, Sal littered her life with spells. Her life itself became a prayer. Her actions prayers. She had started dreaming of Lowry and Misha. Dreams where they rose from the grave to her, or reached for her through every obstructing medium: darkness, oceans, soil, fog. Dreams where she just came home one day and found them there and a syrupy joy flooded her, too pure to be real but too sweet to wake up from, a joy so powerful it uncurled her body, unclamped her chest, softened her face. In dreams she felt her orphanhood both vindicated and forgotten, her parents not dead, never dead. It was all a mistake. It was over. They were alive.

It was June. June-uary, Vi called it. The surprise rainy month between sweet, flowering May and high summer. Sal and Ernesto had both finished sixth grade with all As, because they did each other's homework. The night's downpour had cleared, and as Tom Sawyer walked through the woods, Ernesto's turtle in one hand, he sensed the heat of an impending dawn. I can't explain it, Sal said out loud to no one, as if anyone wanted to know.

The canopy opened slightly as Tom Sawyer veered down the slope. The sky was a different, lighter black, the moon unseen but felt. Gestures and shapes of things materialized. Below, by the creek, the pillowy layer of moss on the cabin roof. The slow, gleaming skin of the water.

The end of the path was steepest, slippery when wet and boobytrapped with roots. Sal stumbled just once, streaking clay-heavy mud down one thigh. The fist with the turtle stayed clenched tight; the other hand splayed for balance. The cabin roof leaked in one corner, the lowest, and the floor there had rotted out. But most of the interior was surprisingly dry. The door hinges Sal had once, in a moment of proud ingenuity, sprayed with WD-40, did not move well, but they moved. The door opened enough to admit a Sal-sized body, and closed enough to make Sal feel safe inside, unwatched by everyone except herself.

She was weary. Tom Sawyer vacated the cabin, and in his place was an aching body doing girl things. Bleeding. Her left hand clenched and released around the smooth, lacquered shape of the turtle. Sal sat on the floor, which was velvet with dried creek silt; every few winters, the creek overcrept its banks and the tea-brown water rose past the cabin threshold. She figured this was why it was abandoned. She would go up the hill and home in a minute, but not yet. She wondered if the creek rose now more than it used to. Or if even that first winter, in eighteen-whatever, some little pioneer family got flooded out, realizing as the water rose and rose that they had made a grave miscalculation.

## 11

She burst from the woods on Swaney; after crashing through brush, the road felt humorously easy to walk on, like a trick. Home was there, at the corner. The windows dark. Sal opened the unlocked door very softly. The house smelled like spaghetti. She kept the downstairs light off and so didn't see Lowry's coat, bag, and shoes by the door. She left her own wet Converse next to his, and on soggy sock feet tiptoed up the stairs.

The overhead light in Sal's room felt too bright, after the woods. She was still holding the turtle and opened her top drawer sadly, to place him in the accumulation within.

Someone coughed through the wall.

Sal froze. She imagined Ernesto; who else could it be? Had he followed her here? Had he seen her swaggering as Tom through the dark, wet wood? Did he know everything and still forgive her? Another cough. It was coming from the spare room.

Still holding the turtle, Sal stepped into the hall. She tapped on the spare room door.

*"Ernesto?"*

No answer.

Sal opened the door and turned on the light. She saw the body on the futon and screamed.

Lowry opened his eyes and also screamed.

Downstairs, Vi woke up terrified, knowing someone was in danger.

## 12

There Sal was. His kid. Wearing his clothes.

Lowry pulled himself up from a deep dream state under the harsh overhead bulb. He felt like a nocturnal squid, forced toward fishermen's lights against his will. He shut his eyes again, rallied, and blinked.

Sal was soaking wet, which gave him the odd feeling he was seeing himself from a few hours ago. They were almost the same height. That Smiths shirt was like an old friend. He'd forgotten. "Hey there, Kiddo," he said. "You're not supposed to be home."

"*Dad!*" shouted Sal, and she ran to him, cold and wet, sobbing and sobbing.

Vi was forcing her way up the stairs, controlling the pain, breathing deep with each step. Lowry held his kid in his arms. She was not even as he'd dimly imagined, though she was too close, and crying too loudly, to see at all. But she was bigger, older, stranger. There was a violent thoroughness in how she clung to him. He had imagined, somehow, a happy meeting. Anything but this.

"I'm not supposed to be home?" Sal said finally, in a small, clogged voice. "Why?"

"Oh, no, I just meant—"

"Cause I was at Ernesto's?"

His head was fogged. "Who's Ernesto?"

“My best friend. But we had a fight. Sort of. It’s complicated.” Sal pulled out of his arms, to look at him. Her face was mottled, eyes and lips swollen. Her chin-length hair, still streaked with blond, stuck to her cheeks. Inexplicably, there was mud on her neck. “Are you real? Where’s Mom?” she asked.

Lowry heard the rough exhale and looked over Sal’s shoulder: Vi leaned in the doorway. “What do you mean, Kiddo?” he said, scared.

“You’re back, so where is she? Is she here, too?”

“No, Sweetheart,” Vi said. She walked slowly toward them. “I’m so sorry. Your mom really is gone. She really died.”

“I’m sorry, too,” he said.

Sal pulled further from his arms, clouding over with doubt. “Are you sure?” She glanced between Lowry and Vi, but without meeting either of their eyes. She looked lost. He noticed how she looked like Misha. Her manner was different. But there was something, still: in the small nose and trembling lip, in the curve of her cheek.

Vi waited, silently, as Sal made several efforts to gather herself. She bobbed between sock feet, one hand a fist. “But how are you, like... *here*, anyway?” she asked finally.

“It’s a long, long, *long* story,” said Lowry, under Vi’s furious gaze. While his mouth said the words, he believed them. “But I missed you two, and I wanted to see you again.”

Sal let go of him and stood up. She paced back a step, taking him in critically. “But you were *dead*.”

“Sure seemed that way,” he said, trying for lightness. Vi shot him a look.

“You’re real,” Sal said, accusingly. He couldn’t tell if she was asking him or telling him. “You were *dead!*” Her voice was rising. “You were *dead*, you were both dead!” she shouted.

Lowry felt the power drain from his body. Vi put an arm around Sal's shoulders. "You're soaked," she murmured. "Why aren't you at Ernesto's? Did something happen? What happened?"

"I got my *fucking* period!" Sal shouted, and then accidentally caught his eye with a look of abject horror before she ran out of the room.

But he had come back for Will.

## October 1998 – December 1999

### 1

Will was under Lowry's skin. Always under his skin. The heat of Will, the muscle and ease of Will. Will Cherryman and Lowry had been in high school together. Will graduated a year earlier, in '97. Will was the popular one, the soccer star, track star, dewy, with a long, smooth neck. In school, they spoke exactly twice.

But Misha was responsible for their knowing each other again. They met—Lowry and Misha met—in the Half Price Books dumpster in the fall of '98. Over that summer, Lowry had left Vi's house in Irondale and moved to Seattle: to an attic on Pine, cooking vegan meals for six and obeying a chore wheel drawn on the back of a PBR box. He worked part-time in a diner kitchen by the Market, a job that first scared him with its sheer sensory overload. But there was a body language to it, the perilous waltz of the fry baskets. He peeled into the street after work, stinking and alive. Loving the sky, the pier under a melt of moon. The fall air—his first fall out of high school—was full of fragrant rot.

He dilly-dallied home. He went where he pleased. The city was a honeycomb, a million stacked chambers of dark and light, all trickling sweetness. Opening.

Misha was three years older, but at first Lowry didn't know it. And he didn't know how steely she was. He misjudged her. She looked so little, young, soft. A sparrow's wing of asymmetrical bangs hid half her forehead and one black-lined eye. Her pale face was weighed down by piercings: lip, septum, cheeks. Lowry himself was small; she was small even to him. Brown was her favorite color. She trailed earth-toned knitwear: crocheted cashmere tam-o-shanters, leg warmers, engulfing sweaters and scarves and fingerless gloves.

“Find anything good?” Was the first thing Misha said to him. Her voice was surprisingly low. Lowry was already in the dumpster, near midnight, after work, wallowing in a sea of books. She scabbled her way over the edge and landed next to him. He showed her—some Shakespeare, taken mostly for the embossed bindings, a DIY woodworking book, Anaïs Nin. “Nice,” she said, palming the copy of *Henry and June*.

The dumpster was books only and it smelled like books. It was a comforting place, one of his favorites. Lowry had even slept there once, popping up in the morning bizarrely rested, cradled by the insulating layer beneath him, gazing up at two crows in a delectable sky. He had thought: my life is perfect.

But the feeling hadn’t lasted; it couldn’t. He wanted something. It was the thing inside life you couldn’t put your finger on, and he was hungry for it; he always had been. Someone might have called it God. To Lowry, even as a kid, it was like staring down the dark, velvet throat of your own heart.

Sometimes the world sharpened, his senses so acute he felt the thing rise up to meet him. They touched; and even as a kid he felt nostalgic for his life while living it. The smell of woodsmoke in Vi’s yard, the perfectly rank smell of rotting eelgrass and clamshells down at Irondale Beach, the creek mouth. He felt the thing most in fall, as the air thinned and death—not his own, especially, but in general—grew near.

So, inevitably, it was fall when Misha toppled practically on top of him in the book dumpster. Later, Lowry would forget their small talk and jump forward half an hour to the moment she pressed him to the dumpster’s grooved side, his jean jacket and shirt riding up so the cold metal slashed across his back like heat.

Her little hands bruised his biceps, and she mashed their mouths together with a naked determination that astounded him. His fingers hovered around her slim, sweated shoulders, spine, waist, hips, hardly daring to touch. She pulled back, winded and smiling.

“Oh, here, hang on,” she said; she seized the copy of *Henry and June* again, while Lowry thumbed his mouth secretly, in awe. “Let me find you my favorite part. *And not knowing what else to say I spread on the bench between us the wine-colored handkerchief she wanted, my coral earrings, my turquoise ring, which Hugo had given me and which it hurt me to give, but it was blood I wanted to lay before June's beauty and before June's incredible humility.*”

He waited, looking over her head at the streetlight, and just breathed.

## 2

She seemed so from the city, so *of* it, that it startled him to learn she wasn't. She was from St. Paul. “I came out here on the Hi-Line last summer,” she said. Seattle had absorbed her quickly. She worked at two cavelike coffee shops, a mile apart. She fed him day-old bagels and bricks of stale banana bread, magicked from her deep coat pockets.

“What's the Hi-Line?” asked Lowry, and then she taught him about trains. Which freight yards you could catch out of, to where. Which cars were rideable—grainers, mostly; boxcars if open; well cars sometimes; tankers no. Once, she said, she had found an unlocked auto-rack, the holy grail, and crossed two states reclining in the passenger's seat of a brand-new BMW, strapped down within the train car's dappled, trembling dark.

He was moldable. In her hands, he was the soft one. Their first date after the dumpster was at the Union Pacific yard by SeaTac, on a wintery November day. They rode a grainer to Portland and back, fumbling with each other in the cramped dark of the foxhole, Lowry's back

again pressed against cold steel. The thundering of the train forbade speech. He could feel the shake through Misha's lips. Their teeth knocked. Wind roared past the mouth of the foxhole and his hands were numb.

"Let's do this again in summer," he said.

"It's better in summer," Misha agreed. "In some ways."

And he had a sudden bright sense of her, the way she gulped the cold, the way the winter made her powerful, thirsty for action: she rode the shining blade of that thing he was always chasing.

But then there was Will. Though they had already known each other, it was Misha who finally brought Will Cherryman into Lowry's life.

It was December 1998. Lowry still lived with the vegans on Pine Street, but now he spent most nights with Misha, her hexagonal ground-floor studio with its stained ceiling and cupped oak floor. It was here their fumbling finally became sex, the first sex of Lowry's life. A truth he didn't admit to her, but knew she knew. He let her body absorb him the way her house did. Imprinting, changing even his smell. The bedclothes were always churned up. There were spent tea leaves in the single aluminum sink. She sang along to Modest Mouse in the half light. The curtains, with an archaic brocade bird pattern, gathered dust. Everything became her, was made of her, and when he cautiously invited her to his mother's house for the holidays, her eagerness surprised him.

"Your mom is like, an old dyke, right? Of course I want to meet her. She sounds so rad."

"She's cool," he said, shyly. He had never explained that Vi wasn't, *really*, his mom.

They drove back to Irondale in Lowry's Jetta, which had lost half its interior paneling. Misha cranked the heat and put her sock feet on the dash. A weak sun dazzled her cheeks and forehead and she beamed.

### 3

It wasn't a cold winter, just infinitely clammy and damp. The twiggy woods behind Vi's house gleamed with rain or dew; mist crawled up off the creek. Blood-bright rosehips trembled on a branch. The lawn was half muck. Vi heard the Jetta from blocks away and walked into the yard to meet them. It all went just as well as he'd hoped.

"Oh my God, your mom *is* so fucking rad!" Misha said on the first night, breathless from jogging up the stairs to bed. She had stayed up late washing dishes and talking to Vi; her hands were still wet from dishwater, her cheeks flushed. She thrust a wet hand under the hem of Lowry's T-shirt, patting his belly. "I mean, you said she was cool, but I didn't think she was, like, *cool*. You know? My parents—God. Fuck. You don't—I can't even."

Lowry liked watching Misha follow Vi around the house, admiring, chattering. Moved by her excitement, Vi bought a little tree at Hadlock Hardware and unwrapped the few battered dough ornaments and god's-eyes Lowry had made as a kid. She was going through a social phase—it came and went for her—and asked if they wanted to come to a solstice potluck at Geoff and Diane Cherryman's house in Port Townsend, eight miles up the road.

"The *Cherrymans*?" Lowry said.

"Well, I guess you were never really friends with Will. But Diane and I have been talking quite a bit about salmon habitat restoration in the creek, so she's invited me. You're both welcome, of course, but you don't have to come."

Misha was still flushed with admiration for Vi, eager to please. She said it sounded fun. “Who’s Will?” she asked Lowry. “Why aren’t you friends?”

“We’re not *not* friends,” Lowry said. “We just went to high school together, is all. And, like, never really hung out. He’s older. We were in different scenes.”

“Even in your teeny tiny high school, you had different scenes?”

“You’d be surprised.”

Because Misha wanted to go to the potluck, they went. Misha helped Vi make a crab salad while Lowry hovered, avoiding the sinking thought of Will. It built pressure in his gullet, or behind his eyes.

#### 4

Vi drove, and Lowry told Misha to ride shotgun. Vi indulged her with a scenic detour, cruising through downtown just for fun.

Misha loved everything about Port Townsend: the quaint shops on Water Street, where the ferry came in, and the windswept Victorians high on the chalk-brown bluff. In the port and boatyard, the rigging on forests of bare masts sang like windchimes. As they turned toward North Beach, the road was walled with wild rose and blackberry, thorny and drenched and spotted with mildew. Even this seemed lovely to Misha, in mythic contrast to the brightness of the Cherryman house. The Cherrymans lived in a big, meticulously kept Craftsman one block off the beach. From the porch, Lowry could see rooms crowded with people and food. Lamps gleamed in the corners. Of course this is Will’s parents’ house, he thought. It was inevitable: sturdy, holy and bright.

Vi, Misha, and Lowry entered amid shouting and stomping; already the party was too loud, too much. Lowry sought Misha, but her eyes were darting into the crowd, bright brown and full of hope, sometimes pausing worshipfully on Vi. He wanted to bolt. They shed their coats. He noticed Claire and Sara Cherryman, Will's freckled little sisters, fraternal twins whose social status was preordained by their hotness, weaving ferociously through the crowd.

Somehow he was the one holding their crab salad. The delicate, creamy sea-smell of crab and mayonnaise and Misha's earnestly minced celery engulfed him as Vi said warmly, "Will! Happy Solstice." Lowry knew Will had stayed in town since graduation, on track for partnership in his father's high-end contracting business. He guessed Will had heard nothing about him.

"What's up?" said Will. He used this casual warmth with everyone.

"Oh, hey," said Lowry.

"Hi! I'm Misha," said Misha happily. She flashed her row of little white kitten teeth under the septum ring, reaching out so easily to touch Will's hand.

As Vi moved further in to find her salmon restoration people, Lowry watched Misha and Will talking, with dawning awe. Misha just took for granted they would be friends, as Will nodded and laughed along, making it true—they were bantering somehow about baseball in the Twin Cities, a thing he didn't know Misha even thought about—and then Will looked straight at Lowry and asked a question, and that thing knifed through again, that longing someone else would have called God.

"I'm gonna go put this down," Lowry said, and he raised the crab salad to chest level, letting it steer him to the tables.

The room was filled with people their parents' age, in clean wool work shirts and flannels. Some women wore the eclectic, small-town artsy gear that had embarrassed Lowry the

moment he moved away, hand-felted vests or patchworked smocks. A former teacher death-gripped his arm.

“Well, look who it is!”

“Oh—hi,” he said, mired in a dim loathing. Where was Misha? A sliver of her flashed through the forest of sleeves.

“So *tell* me.” It was Ms. Donna, tenth-grade history. White hair under a black beret, arms mobile and sinister as a puppet’s. “How *was* your first year out of the nest? You’re down in Portland, now, was it?”

“Oh, no. Just Seattle. It’s been...it’s good.”

The room seemed more than square, somehow. Pentagonal? He tried to count the sides but they kept flexing, shaking off his gaze. Misha’s face flashed through again. She was still with Will. Ms. Donna told Lowry just to call her Donna. Boxed in, corrected, he lost the thread.

“Frankly, I always said, honorifics in *this* town? People, come on. This is the P-N-W! But, you know, some folks drag in their old customs, don’t they, and they stay attached. Your mother—”

Misha conjured herself out of the thicket, burped discretely into Lowry’s ear and said, “I’m starving.” She beamed upon Ms. Donna as Lowry quickly detached himself, his arm bruised from the grip. Elder Cherrymans were eating already. Lowry and Misha loaded paper plates with carved lamb, cheese dip, tabouleh, and tiny cherry tarts, and filled their paper cups with wine.

“Where should we sit?” said Misha with her hands full.

“Wanna go eat in the orchid house?” Will said suddenly. He was beside her, warm and easy as an old friend.

“The what?”

“It’s my mom’s. She, like, collects them. It’s like a greenhouse, it’s nice in there.”

“Oh, *sweet!* C’mon,” said Misha as Lowry hesitated. Will and his twin sisters were the only people at the party near their age; the twins had peeled off already, in their own world, and so it seemed inevitable that Will—that *even* Will—would see Lowry and Misha as natural allies. Anything was better than a wilderness of Donnas. And still—and yet—Lowry watched the back of Will’s neck over a flannel collar as they left the room, the ginger ducktail of his hair coming to a *V* against the skin.

Will led them through French doors into the damp cold, across a patio splashed with brothy light. The glass panels of the orchid house looked opalescent. Inside was glorious with steam, and the fragrance of warm dirt.

“Well, uh, here we are at the kids’ table,” Will said, laughing. They sat on crates and boxes, their plates on their knees.

“Oh my *God*,” said Misha happily. “This smells amazing. It’s like we’re in the jungle.”

Lowry just ate, listening to them talk.

“We should have grabbed more wine. My mom has some secret bottles.”

“You know what *I* would do in here if I lived here? Smoke some weed.”

“Oh shit, why, can you smell it?”

“What? No! It’s just—it’s the obvious—”

“No way! Dude, you did, I have no idea how, but you fuckin’ smelled it. My little joint stash.”

“Fuck *off*, are you serious? I mean, like, yes, I did, of course, I have the nose of a connoisseur. I’m like a truffle pig!”

“A *truffle pig*,” Will was shaking his head delightedly.

Misha flashed Lowry a joyful glance. “That means you have to share,” she said to Will.

“Of course! Of course. You’re my guests. I wouldn’t dream of anything else. Lowry, man, you smoke?”

The direct question shook Lowry from his reverie. “Uh, yeah,” he said.

“I *knew* coming to this party was a good idea,” Misha said, triumphantly. “Okay. All right. Here’s our agenda: we have dinner, we smoke one of Will’s top-secret joints, and then we have dessert. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Will said swiftly. He looked over Misha’s head, maybe by accident, right into Lowry’s face.

## 5

They hotboxed the orchid house, talking about Y2K.

A kid named Denis Navarre had joined them; he was seventeen, in mechanic’s coveralls, with a long face Lowry half-remembered. Misha had questioned him merrily and learned that Denis was hanging drywall for Geoff Cherryman over Christmas break.

“Nah, but I don’t think anything’s really going to happen,” said Denis, pushing hair out of his eyes with the heel of his hand.

“Dude, I don’t know,” said Misha. “Isn’t, like, the entire financial system going to crash?”

“Nah.”

“Yuh-huh. Our bank accounts are just going to zero out. Zero, zero, zero. All zeros. *Beeeeep.*”

Denis sneaked a flat bottle of Wild Irish Rose from his coverall pocket. The red gem of the joint arced through a block of dark air. Only the crown of Will's head was visible, gilded by light off the patio. Lowry heard the kiss of his mouth around wet paper. Will passed it to him; their thumbs and forefingers touched.

"It would feel fucking good, though, right?" Will said.

"What would?"

"If it all just zeroes out, dude. If it all—"

"*Beeeeep.*"

"Misha!"

"I'm zeroing, I'm the computer saying farewell. *Beeeeeeep!*"

"Misha, come on! Sheesh, I'm having like, a—I'm having a *moment* here. I'm introspecting."

Will elbowed Lowry gently with Denis's bottle, and he sipped. It was harsh but very sweet. On the other side, Misha crept her damp little hand into his. If I could only see some part of Will's face, he thought. I'm not asking for much. Just some eyelid. Cheek.

"Yeah, it would feel great," Lowry said.

It was winter solstice, the longest night of the year.

## 6

Vi drove them home, cuddled in the back seat like children. Lowry knew they both reeked of weed and felt Vi knowing it, but didn't care. They brushed their teeth messily, and then Misha pressed close to Lowry in his childhood bed. The tip of her nose was puppyish, cold on his cheek.

“You weren’t even friends before? You and Will? He’s so cool.”

“I know he’s cool.”

“Come on. You know what I mean.”

“Nah.”

“But now you are,” she said. “Friends.”

“I guess.”

He was so close to that thing. That thing he wanted. He ran his hands down her body and she was already there, her clothes peeling off as if by thought. She smelled like weed and that expensive tropical dirt. Her cold, hard palms kissed Lowry’s spine and his thighs, and then he flew away from her as he always did, he left their bodies coupling on the bed, Misha riding him slowly with both hands on his chest and the quilt around her shoulders like a cape.

The body did not betray him. Even drunk, or high, his dick obediently stayed hard. When he came, Lowry felt the pleasure at a great remove but was still thankful for it, the way it stilled his arms and legs, at least for now.

“You could do anything in the world you want,” she was whispering to him. Again, he had lost the thread. She brought his hand between her damp thighs. Giving up on speech, he returned as earnestly as possible to their bodies, feeling her contours, the soft parts and firm parts, slippery under his fingers. “You could do anything,” she panted, guiding his hand, steering the pressure until she came, and he didn’t feel like such a shitty boyfriend after all.

He was always relieved after sex, like he had walked a gauntlet and survived. Each time, he feared he couldn’t—the way he disappeared, just flew away from her at the crucial moment, not even into something else but just a void, a maw of outer space. The simple bigness of the world swallowed him.

But he always made it. It bothered Lowry that his dick could manage so well without him. It shouldn't be possible, but it was.

“What was that thing you read me, that one time?” he asked Misha, into her hair.

“What-what?”

“That thing you read. Like in the dumpster, when I met you.”

“Oh. Was it Anaïs Nin?”

“I think so, yeah.”

She quoted smoothly, “*But it was blood I wanted to lay before June's beauty and before June's incredible humility.*”

“There was more,” said Lowry. “Wasn't there more?” She was asleep.

## 7

They had all forgotten the big bowl from the crab salad. Vi remembered after breakfast. Misha was sketching some fruit, listening to a rerun of *This American Life*.

“I'll run into town and grab it,” Lowry said.

It had frozen overnight. The muck of the driveway was seized in sugary ridges. Sun fell through the smeared windshield of the Jetta, and the spiderweb crack on the passengers' side blazed from within. The second day of winter.

Lowry drove up 19, into town, with the radio off. The world was so cold, bright, still, that it could barely hold him to it. The firs and alders at the roadside didn't stir, not one millimeter.

Will was clattering around out front of his parents' house in sweats and muck boots and a puffy North Face jacket, doing something with a hose. “Hey, man,” he said cheerfully. Lowry

explained about the bowl. “I was about to go in and eat some leftovers,” Will said. “You want some?”

“Yeah, sure,” said Lowry, though he had just eaten. He was not hungry and yet he wanted everything. That thing he had been reaching for, that sense of it, had risen again up to the surface of life. He was afraid to disturb its skin.

Inside the Cherrymans’ house, too, it was very still. The parents were out. The pretty sisters hunched over a puzzle in the living room and barely looked up. Will piled food out of the refrigerator: cold lamb creamy with fat, a half-loaf of braided challah, dark chocolate pie, a bowl of hand-whipped cream, each cold granule distinct. Will said, “My mom likes to do it up for the solstice party. More than Christmas, kind of. It’s like, her big thing.” He set a gallon of milk on the counter.

Watching Will eat made Lowry infinitely hungry. He watched Will separate a piece of lamb, still pink inside, from its hollow bone, his thumb slick with fat. Lowry pressed the pillowy sweet bread into his mouth. They cut slices of pie, spooned the stiff cream onto them, and ate with their hands. Will poured him a glass of milk. Lowry had never drunk milk like this in his life—Vi didn’t like milk and never bought it—but it was velvet cold and absolute, packing all that food down his throat and into his body, brazenly coating his mouth. They didn’t even bother microwaving. They ate everything cold, without talking.

“Hey, thanks, man,” Lowry said as he finally took possession of Vi’s salad bowl, which a Cherryman had washed and dried last night.

“How long you guys up here?” Will asked him.

“Just a couple days.”

“Not till New Year’s?”

“Nah, I don’t think so. We both have to get back and pick up some shifts. Why, is something happening?”

“I might have a little party thing,” Will said. “My folks’ll be out of town, so. Just like, a little beach bonfire type thing. Just low key.”

Lowry’s gut felt distended. A towhee brayed outside in the still trees. Will seemed to vibrate with light and energy, his thick ginger hair and sandy jawline, the smooth Adam’s apple that rose in the shaft of his throat.

## 8

And of course Misha wanted to go. He knew she would.

Despite their whole world in Seattle, the bloom of graffiti on concrete, the ivied brick, the neon scuzz of the coffee shops and bars where Misha worked or lounged, despite the infinity of strangers and their rough bright details and their language, and the all-night diners and the house shows and the hot exhale of the buses like tired animals, everything that Lowry loved about the city, Misha had fallen in love with Lowry’s childhood home.

The Pine Street vegans were planning a New Year’s punk show, which Lowry knew would be objectively cooler than any little bonfire type thing Will Cherryman dreamed up. But he knew, if he told her, that Misha would want to go to Will’s. He told her, and she did.

Two of his roommates spent New Year’s Eve morning filling piñatas chaotically with tootsie rolls, condoms, poppers, ketchup packets, action figures, loose glitter. They couldn’t believe Lowry would miss it. By afternoon, a quiet mayhem lay over the city: goths in their finery on Broadway, plans for rogue fireworks on the lake.

But Misha didn't care. "I'm, like, already over it," she said, tossing her packed messenger bag in the Jetta. She got in the passenger's seat and put the heat on high, holding her hands to the noisy vent as if to a bonfire. "It's just been so nice getting out, you know?"

He had half hoped his boss wouldn't give him the night off, but some other misanthrope wanted the shift. Even that had been easy. The city released them.

They stopped by Vi's first, for dinner. It was just days since their last visit, but Misha was giddy all over again. Lowry sensed that, since the solstice party, Vi had begun to pivot back toward one of her solitary phases. Even in his most checked-out teenaged years he could feel this in her just as it began: the delicate forward edge of her sometime social life beginning to curl, singe, retreat. Later it would be more obvious. She stopped calling her friends. She ate deconstructed meals at home—peanut butter on a spoon between bites of bread. She napped like a bear. It was cyclic. Not lunar, exactly, but tremoring up through Vi's body from the earth's own core.

She was getting that way now. Slow-eyed. Lowry could see it. He watched her strive to keep up with Misha's chatter. Misha asked if Vi had New Year's Eve plans, looking shocked to hear she didn't. But Lowry had known. And Lowry knew it relieved her when he got Misha out the door, finally, back in the car toward town, swinging by Safeway on the way to Will's for cheap champagne.

"It's just, like, her deal," he explained, as the Jetta gobbled up minutes of black highway. "I never bug her about it. She'll switch over again, so. It doesn't last."

"That's, like, something, though, right?"

"What do you mean, something?"

"Just—depression, or bipolar or something?"

“I don’t know. I guess. I don’t think she’s even really unhappy, though, when it happens. It just happens.”

“How do you know? Do you talk about it?”

They pulled into the Safeway lot, the lit store blazing out at them like a ship. They left the car. Cold air slid down the back of Lowry’s neck. He felt unusually sensitive. “We don’t talk about it too much, exactly. I just know.”

“I’m partly asking because, like—these things can be hereditary.”

“We’re not really related, though,” he said.

“What?”

“By blood. I mean, obviously, she’s my *mom*. But she’s not my biological mom.”

They passed through the big automatic doors, the store within senseless and bright. Misha reached for him, many gestures in one—fierce, pinching, tender. “What? *Lowry!* You never said! I thought your dad was just—I don’t know what I thought.”

“You don’t tell me your family stuff, either.” It was true. In the two months they’d known each other, they had avoided the topic. “But anyway, my biological parents died. Uh—of AIDS. Back when we lived in New York. They died like six months apart. Vi was a family friend at the time, she took care of me while they were sick and then she adopted me.”

Misha was staring at him. “Don’t worry,” he said quickly. “I don’t have it.”

She blinked. “What?”

“HIV. I’m not positive. I mean, I was already born when they got it and everything. And I’ve—”

“Oh, yeah. No. I wasn’t thinking of that.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. You’re just a lot more like me than I thought.”

“Your parents aren’t dead, though,” he pointed out. “Right?” Suddenly everything seemed perilous, unstrung. Open.

“Oh, no. Yeah, no. They’re not.”

He hung back while Misha, who was old enough, got the booze. They went to Will’s with two bottles of André and a plastic tray of mini cupcakes, frosted purple and black, which Misha impulse-bought in a jumble of joy and sorrow.

## 9

The Cherryman house was a block from the beach. Lowry had noticed this passively at the solstice party, just one more detail of Will’s charmed life. Now he could really appreciate it. Will’s friends, and his sisters’ friends, athletes and cool kids Lowry had rarely spoken to, moved on a sandy footpath between two poles of light: the Cherrymans’ kitchen, and a beach bonfire spitting a pillar of sparks.

They first peered in the kitchen, looking for Will. But it was just Brandon Murphy and Matt Bagdasarian, back from college and swigging vodka, who scorched Lowry with their nonplussed looks. He backed out the door, Misha behind him. “Do you know those guys?” she said.

“Sort of. No. Not really.” He wiped a drop of cold dew from his nostril, wondering why they had come. The full reality hit him. That charmed night of the solstice was a fluke. Nobody here was his friend. Kids whose names he’d known since high school, middle school, even childhood, who all moved easily in some layer of being that Lowry could not reach. Life gelled around his limbs as they swam by.

By high school, he had mostly been alone. Aaron Amundsen, the only friend he trusted, moved to Eugene freshman year. Masking his loneliness, Lowry joined a crew that played Magic: The Gathering in the library during breaks, not because he cared. He tongued the bruise of Aaron's absence—wrote letters, called, then nothing—and still sometimes pressed an ache, deep in himself, that lit up Aaron's pencil-brown, fine hair and freckled face. But that faded. Months slid by. He got lanky and skinny. He felt like he was waiting.

His first clear memory of Will was tenth grade. He overheard Brandon Murphy saying his, saying Lowry's name, to which Will responded with an economical snort and the word *faggy*. Then Lowry could feel Will's presence anywhere, in any room, not looking; Will always burning a hole in the side of his head. Will passed in the cafeteria, he looked, their eyes caught, and Lowry thought: not the noun but the adjective, which might, mostly likely did, apply to any move he made. *Faggy*. This, too, he wore like a little bruise, spotlight in the mind.

But am I? He could have posed this to Vi—if anyone knew, she would. But he couldn't stand the thought of telling her, the righteous rage it would pull from her depths, the crusade she would go on to avenge him. The further he got in his teens, the more, instead, he disappeared from Vi, fearing she would see him, pierce him, at a time when it was best to be seen by no one. He bought a trench coat at Goodwill. Wore his hair long. Expanded his Magic decks. Turned in. Even now: the casual friendliness of the vegans, the glad feeling of Seattle nights, and Misha herself, were a thin skin over the void.

She tugged his hand, still holding those cupcakes. The bottles of André bulged symmetrically in her two coat pockets. "Come on! I bet Will's down at the beach!" It was hard to see who was standing by the fire. Silhouettes, the flare of a face, flushed cheeks. Misha led the

way, really believing they had entered some loved part of Lowry's past. "This is so *cute*," she said. "I can't believe you all used to do this. It's like you grew up inside a picture book."

Denis, in the same coveralls, gazed at the flames with knuckles shielding his mouth.

"Oh, *hey*, Denis!" Misha broke into a trot, the necks of the bottles wiggling. Then Will appeared, looking alien with hair crushed under a beanie, in his puffer jacket. It made his proportions seem off: small head, cartoon shoulders, large, hungry lips. Tiny lights sparkled in each of his eyes.

## 10

Will and Misha hugged, as figures at the fire solidified with glances, names, from some pelagic zone of memory. Will's sisters' friends were still in high school. The rest had graduated. Travis Fanning, a wrestler who sold prescription drugs; Anya Lewis, metallic as ever, her pale hair almost silver. Seb Jost-Richardson, everyone's favorite hippie, pulling peach rings from his cargo pants to much applause. He'd brought a cousin from Olympia, a kid with bigger hair but the same lantern-jawed face. Four soccer girls, two of them named Lauren, milled like heelers. Their speech bounced off Lowry, past him and around him. He picked delicately through it, trying to get out of range. Then Will side-hugged him, taking him aback. He sensed the firm torso somewhere, under layers of down. Half Lowry's face, by the bonfire, was hot, the other half shined with cold that had whooshed miles over the strait. You could hear the water more than see it. A faint line of surf.

"Hey! Glad you could make it, man," Will said.

Lowry's planned exit, through a gap in the Laurens, melted away. I am here, he realized, for the duration. But the kinder Will was to him, the more his unease gathered, little particles of doubt flocking like bugs under a light.

Misha chattered on, revealing a bottle of André. Will said, "Oh, no, no, we'll save that till midnight," handing out beers. Lowry took one. "Glad you could make it, man." Were those words really for him? He checked his phone. It was 10:18. "Thanks."

Beside him, Denis was on repeat with another bottle of Wild Irish Rose. "New flavor," he said, answering Lowry's thought. "This one is green apple." He offered it, grotesque. Misha passed the cupcakes. Lowry ate one bite, oils coating his tongue. One Lauren, confusingly, complimented his jacket. Matt, Brandon, and their pet bottle of vodka had teleported from the house. Will introducing them with unnecessary vigor. "Hey, you remember Lowry, man? And his girlfriend, Misha." Half the cupcake stared up from his palm, ruined.

"Yo, what's up," said Brandon, addressing Lowry directly for the first time in memory. The blurred, appraising glance flicked to Misha, who was ready.

"You guys wanna play Never Have I Ever?" she said, and Lowry watched the miracle in real time: surprise, capitulation, friendship. Just like that.

Misha made it all possible. He knew. What he felt for her was unwieldy and vast. The bay and the liquid night poured into each other, back and forth in a grand clockwork. Then Lowry felt the landmass behind him, the sand bluffs, the lurk of the glacial moraine.

Misha said, "Okay. Never have I ever...Never have I ever—hooked up with an ex."

Everyone yelled and Bandon took a drink. "Come on, man," he said to no one in particular.

Misha perked up, her teeth flashing. “Oh-ho, I see how it is! Everyone knows something you did? Okay, then, spill.”

“Nah, dude,” said Matt, apparently in solidarity. But Brandon leaned toward Misha with conspiratorial relief. Lowry imagined his handsome asshole face swinging open on a hinge. “Okay, last year, this girl named Kelly, right? So what happened is—” How did she *do* this? She squeezed Brandon’s arm in encouragement. Will cracked up, shaking his head.

Lowry tossed the cupcake over his shoulder. Denis saw him do it. “That’s good luck,” he said, toasting. God bless Denis, Lowry thought. “Never have I ever kissed a dude,” Brandon said, and all the girls drank.

“That’s cheating!” said Anya, touching her hot silver hair. “What are you, twelve?”

“What? What? You’re trying to play dirty? You’re trying to play dirty? Never have I ever...” he mouthed some words at her.

“Oh, okay, *fuck* you!”

The Laurens dragged driftwood logs to the fire, from the interstellar blank of the beach.

## 11

Claire Cherryman doled out sparklers at 11:58 and they counted down. Matt and Brandon lit a fountain. Misha pulled both bottles from her pockets, shouting “Mary Poppins to the rescue!” and handed one to Sara Cherryman and they popped them at the same time and everyone screamed.

Lowry was drunk and Misha drunker, her skin like satin. A perfect bubble of spirit hovered between them. He saw their future selves move through it. Burns on his wrists from handling the fry baskets, sensitive in the heat. Will’s face hovered huge and pale, then zoomed

away. Near or far, Lowry felt him constantly. No matter where Will moved, into the firelight or out of it, down toward the tideline or away. It was like having a new ear, an extra organ tuned only Will's location. From across the fire, Will burned into the side of Lowry's head.

Misha gripped his wrist. "*Ouch.*" Will rolled a joint. Sparks rose. Denis passed him the heinous green apple wine. It was easy. Everyone just stood around, getting fucked up and saying whatever, and for the first time in his life there was nothing hard about it.

"Are you good to drive?" Misha asked him.

Lowry swayed, feeling everything misfire. "Uhhh, no."

"Are you guys leaving?" said Will.

"No, no," said Lowry quickly. "No."

"Because you guys can stay here if you need. The couch pulls out. My folks are gone all weekend. Just saying."

"*Will,*" said Misha blissfully. "The perfect host! Oh-wait-oh-wait—do you think we should *swim?*"

"For sure, definitely," said Denis. Whatever the plan, he was always in.

Claire Cherryman chanted, "Polar bear club, polar bear club!" stripping to her underwear. Misha gripped Lowry's arm for balance and wrenched off her shoes. "Some people," Will said, watching them go.

The night revolved. New gaps between clouds yawned glittering black, then felted shut. The swimmers ran back, thrilled and screaming, wearing blankets as capes; Misha's bare belly and thighs shone and dripped in the firelight. Matt rocked back on his butt in the cold sand. Will's sisters went to bed, someone drove Brandon home. Seb and Anya dematerialized, perhaps together. The cousin vanished, the Laurens scattered like imps to the wind. Lowry's head felt like

it could blow away. Will dumped water on the fire and they hiked through fibrous beach grass toward the house, which was hot inside, where Misha fell asleep promptly on the couch and Denis curled in a leather chair, one hand under his cheek. Will, Lowry, and Matt Bagdasarian sat in the kitchen, now the glowing molten core of the dark street. They tried playing Connect Four, a game Matt claimed his grandfather had invented.

“I call bullshit,” Will said.

“No, no, I’m serious. I am *dead* serious.”

“I call bullshit, because, fuckin’—how long have we known each other? I’m making coffee. Anyway, this game is terrible. This game is, like, not even good.”

They drank black coffee out of Will’s parents’ local stoneware mugs, and smoked one more joint on the porch. It had become frosty. The wet leaves coating the street had grown a glittering fur. Matt Bagdasarian had restless brown eyes. He was thin and argumentative, famously a Republican but cool about it. He had been a state champion pole vaulter. Now a business major at OSU.

“No, really, I consider myself—”

“For fuck’s sake, Matt.”

“Will, shut up. I consider myself *fiscally conservative*. And here’s the thing—”

“Matt, don’t tell us the thing,” said Lowry, amazing himself.

“Dude, look. Economic theory bears me out on this. Economic theory—”

Will said, “He’s always been this way. Insufferable.”

“Fuckin’ get back to me when *you* have a coherent economic standpoint you can defend with evidence-based evidence.”

“Lowry, man, are you hearing this?”

“So, Lowry, your girlfriend?” Matt said, making a perfectly lucid pivot. “She’s cool. How long you been together?”

“A few months,” he said, exaggerating.

“Where’d you meet her?”

The dumpster was too weird, and also private. “Like...at a party.”

“All right, all right. Cool, cool, cool, cool,” Matt said, his eyes boring into nothing.

“Lowry, no offense, man, but you’re doing better than I would have thought. You’re dating this hot chick, living in the city. Makin’ the cash. Playing in a band. It’s not bad, right?” He drummed his hard fingers on his knees. Lowry watched. The band part had come from nowhere and it wasn’t true, but he let Matt ramble. “No offense, but I would have pictured you still, like, living in your mom’s basement or something. Not that we ever knew each other well, I mean. But, you know, some people you just sort of, you glance at them and you have this *feeling*. You just *feel* this, like...this aura. Psychic sludge. You know what I’m saying?”

“I, uh—”

Will said, “Matt, you asshole, shut the fuck up.”

“The point is, you proved me wrong,” Matt said, ignoring him. “The point is, I stand fucking corrected.” He tipped his face to the starry sky, narrating. “He’s cool! The boy turned out cool! Who knew.”

Lowry glanced across the jacketed angles of Matt’s torso, seeking Will. How unreal, he thought, that Will should be his ally in this moment. But Will’s face, when he found it, was naked with terrible feeling. A jolt ran through Lowry, feet to spine to the crown of his head. Matt and Brandon thriving in college; Lowry, at least, apparently, doing *something* right. He hadn’t

thought it. The one left behind, the one who still pathetically lived with his parents, the failure, was Will.

“Matt, go home, man,” Will said.

“The perfect New Year’s party! Fuckin’ could not have been better. Lowry, don’t you agree?”

“Yeah, it was great,” Lowry said, automatically.

“Will Cherryman. The boy, the man, the legend. He gives us everything. And what do we give him in return?”

“Just go the fuck home.”

Matt winked obscurely at no one. “We gotta do something to make poor Will’s life tolerable. We don’t want our baby Will to suffer.” He squeezed Will’s hot red cheek. “What a sight, what a glorious night,” he said, more nonsensical by the moment.

“Go *now*,” Will said. He tensed without getting up.

“Can he drive?” said Lowry, despite himself.

“I don’t know, *can* I?”

Will said, “He’s fucking with you, his folks live like one block away. He’ll walk.”

“Okay! Okay, I’m not one to wear out my welcome. Hasta mañana, douchebags.”

They sat in silence, watching him leave. The sky puking stars upon stars.

The sweet wine glugged in Lowry’s veins. To change the subject he said, “We should have gone swimming, too.” He thought of Misha inside, a wing of her hair still damp. He imagined her body, humid, prickling from salt.

Will didn’t answer, for so long he seemed asleep. Then he said suddenly, “We could.”

“What, go back down there?”

“Are you tired?”

“No, you?”

“Dude, let’s do it,” Will said. He seemed relieved and enlivened. Lowry followed him without speaking. They jogged back down to the beach. Where the fire had been was a pulsing cluster of coals, a velvet orange eye in the sand.

They had recovered from Matt and his nonsense. Something had been revealed, but Lowry didn’t hang onto it, he didn’t want to. Will was unhappy; he was stuck; he was a loser who lived with his parents. None of that tracked, so the mind rejected it. The mind alighted briefly, then looked away.

He waited to see what Will would do. Will stripped to his boxers, kept the boxers on. Lowry did the same, as cold air sheared him into a sliver of himself. “We doing this or what?” Lowry could barely see him. Pale column of neck, back, shins.

They ran toward the water together—Will, the track star, outstripping him even here—and it was so cold it didn’t even feel cold. It felt like fire. It was painful to run through, Lowry up to his knees—Will ploughing ahead with the milky glitter of phosphorescence all around him, moving like a comet as he heaved his body under the gentle break. Lowry recoiled from the pain of it but he, too, flung himself down, bellyflopping, suddenly into a pain even worse than cold. He couldn’t breathe at all—cold clamping his diaphragm—and he rolled. He had hit not water but a hard surface. He was falling, choking, the water was just waist deep but he couldn’t stand, couldn’t breathe.

He was trying to call for Will. His voice didn’t work. His skin burned, everything strobed. A wave hit him in the face and he choked on it, bitter, so cold it was warm. “Help!” he yelled finally. He began raggedly coughing.

“Hey! You okay, man?”

There was a hard form near him. Then he got it. Lowry had flopped onto a sharp, submerged boulder. His whole front, ribs, stomach, were scraped and bruised, in pain yet losing feeling. “I can’t—I can’t—” he gasped. He almost wept, unable to stand and claw his way out.

It was only waist deep. Harmless. Will’s arms lifted him, and Will half-carried him to the beach.

“What the fuck, man? You all right? You’re freaking me out, what happened?”

“Hit a rock,” Lowry panted. “Fell—on a rock—I can’t—I couldn’t breathe—I was—” and in shame, he started to cry. Will wrapped him in a towel. “Run! Run, come on, run to get warm!” He did, jogging in tight, scared circles, bruising his feet on rocks.

“You can run okay?” Will said, gathering their clothes.

“I don’t know, I—”

“Let’s just go in, let’s get inside.” And they trotted up the path, to the sleeping house. “Okay, *Shhhh!*” Will hurried him into the bathroom, to a hot shower they both stood under, still in their boxers, Lowry shaking, glad his tears could not be distinctly seen.

What they could see, in the light, were his ribs and stomach: scraped up, barnacle-cut, red and bleeding. “Shit, you okay, man?” Will kept whispering.

Lowry couldn’t look at him. “I should go home,” he said. He couldn’t explain his fear—abject, total, in water hardly waist-deep. He had felt his own death coming, he had seen it. His breath stopping, a terror that could not be measured.

“You still cold? Fuck. You better not get hypothermia, dude,” Will said. He turned off the water and again wrapped Lowry in a towel. “I was a Cub Scout, I learned all about this shit. Come on.” He was so earnest, Lowry almost laughed.

In his room, Will produced clean, dry boxers and T-shirts for both of them. They turned away from each other while changing. Now a seal had broken on his shame, Lowry was still half-crying, begging. "I should go home."

"Nah, dude," Will said. "Misha's so passed out, let's not wake her up." He turned the wall thermostat on high. "Just crash here. Get in. Come on." They climbed into Will's bed under a pile of blankets.

Will turned off the light. After a minute, he said, "I can still hear you shaking, man. Like, your teeth."

"Didn't you get cold, too?"

"Nah. I don't know. Adrenaline. I thought you were, like, dying or something."

"Sorry. I felt like I was."

"Do you think it was that fucked up-weed from Denis? That fucking Baja weed or whatever? Maybe we were both just, like, tripping. Do you feel high?"

"No. Yeah. I don't know." Lowry laughed weakly. "Guess what?"

"What?"

"It's 1999."

"Just one more year," Will said.

"Till what?"

"You know fuckin' what. All the zeros. *Beeeeep*."

Lowry could feel Will's body near him. Will's thigh an inch from his, a hard column of heat. He rolled his left leg in its socket so their leg hairs brushed, like the antennae of two insects, without touching skin to skin. Watching the ceiling, he felt Will's head flop over on the pillow, to face him.

“You still shaking,” Will whispered.

“I don’t know why. Sorry.”

Their thighs finally touched. A palm on his arm. Lowry shifted and, already abject in his shame, already ruined by it, pulled himself in. His face was tight against Will’s throat. He could feel the pulse on his lip.

## 12

One year later, on the eve of Y2K, Misha told Lowry she was pregnant.

He heard her but it didn’t compute. You’re what?

This time they were in Seattle, at a friend’s party on Olive. It had poured all day but cleared up near midnight, so everyone streamed onto the roof of the apartment complex, puddle-hopping on tar, to count it down. Misha had nursed a solo cup of Martinelli’s, but Lowry was drunk. You’re what? He peeked over the edge, straight down, and vertigo made him swoon. In the garden below, the Japanese maples shook their wet coats in the wind like dogs.

“Do you think we could do it?” She said.

“Do what?”

“Have this baby. Have this baby together.”

“Do you want to?”

“Yeah. I think I do.”

Lowry pressed his chest with his palms. The bright, rain-rinsed night reorganized around him. Every detail swelled: droplets, windows, sound. Misha’s nose and cheek in profile. He had wanted something to happen, and here it was.

The countdown cut off his answer, but it would be yes. The city encircled them—cranes alight on the skyline, the downtown towers, ships nestled at port. *Three...Two...One...* —and Lowry half-waited for it all to go dark, although he didn't think it would; he knew the world would keep grinding them all forward without pause. It had been too much to hope for. But he had hoped, a little.

## August 2000 – August 2001

### 1

When Vi adopted Lowry, a skinny seven-year-old orphan with hair like Prince Valiant, she had been sure she'd do right by him. He'd go to college if he wanted to, she thought. He would be healthy, loved, secure. But how to square this with the gaunt teen in his trench coat, the way he'd shred his cuticles in his teeth? By fourteen, she was losing him. And now—well, what? What could she do?

Vi had sung a song to Lowry's mother, Joan, at Joan's hospice bed, because the song already had Joan's name in it.

*Oh, my Joanie, don't you know that the stars are swingin' slow*

*And the sea is rolling easy as it did so long ago...*

She had sung it into Joan's hair. She had paced miles on the white hex tiles of her tiny Chelsea apartment that winter, 1987, her windows lined with plastic against bitter cold. "I'll take care of your boy," she had told Joan. She wondered if she had failed.

*Oh my Lowry, don't you know...* Vi had sung it to him, too, changing the name. For all the good it did.

She had taken Joan and Artie's boy from Chelsea as far across the continent as she could. To this place of generous green, with trees columnar in mist and a beach where he could run like a healthy puppy. A safe, small school in a safe, small town that wasn't in such throes of death. A living to make. She'd rounded up a few CUNY classes to a degree in landscape architecture and gotten away with it, mapping gardens on graph paper for credulous, wealthy Seattleites. Thickets of iris and hellebore you could comb your fingers through like hair. Meanwhile, Lowry's precise

little face looked just like both of them. Joan in white silk, Artie so beautiful and lithe it would stop your heart. They had both been sick. Vi had watched the bulk of their bodies melt down to nothing under the skin. Artie went first. Joan in her typical way hung on and on. She'd had *a year to live* but kept living, until the final pneumonia that death-rattled up her lungs from some deep, wet, secret place.

In Lowry's teens, Vi saw the thistledown of new hair that softened his lip and jaw; she saw a well of something under his flecked, brown eyes. She didn't ask, but wondered if they felt restless for the same reasons. Vi's restlessness was goaded by the rural landscape. Everything on the Olympic Peninsula was squeaky clean or else dirty with good, clean dirt. What Vi missed wasn't dirt but *grime*, the humanness of it: the dead-bug hum of old neon and the monstrous breath of the train. She missed it and she avoided it; meeting her clients in Seattle, she steered carefully around the leather dykes on Broadway, the tremor of the life she could have lived. Drove home with her folder of pencil drawings in the front seat. Sand gardens, water features in shapes suggesting bodily organs. Bamboo windbreaks. In Irondale she walked the beach, the caked seaweed at the tideline reeking as it dried. She felt life telescoping down.

On a desperate night, Vi undressed and reached deep in her closet. She pulled out her old leather jacket, which she'd stopped wearing since the move: black, thick, zippered. It was cold, and heavy like a body, and she slid it over her bare skin and sat in bed, knees pulled into her belly. She hugged herself in the gentle creak of the leather, smelling it as it warmed, a flash of cold where the zipper bit her sternum until that warmed, too. Finally she lay down, still in the jacket, and tugged the quilt up. The wind souged and was still, and everything was still. Nothing was out there.

## 2

So Vi watched: the slow-motion trainwreck of nineteen-year-old Lowry becoming a father.

She drove down to Providence Hospital, where Misha had an emergency C-section that left her with forty grand in debt. Lowry's hair was penumbral and his breath stank. His eyes were fragile and red. Vi waited through the operation in a hard plastic chair outside Misha's room. Her hip twinged, a new discomfort just beginning to reveal itself. She'd picked up sandwiches and bland, salty soup cups from the cafeteria. Her boy had brought a child into the world. It was August eleventh. Dawn. Crows flew past the hospital window.

Vi could feel the ligaments of her successful self-employment wearing thin. It had been happening since Lowry left home. He was always a quiet kid, but in his absence, silence waterlogged the house. She got up in it, moved in it. She didn't play the radio. She blew off a deadline, watching it loom on the horizon, then arrive, then dwindle and move through like weather. A client fired her. Sometimes it was comforting to lose what you were scared to lose. Joan had called it *living close to the ground*.

She had never been good at saving. She had bought the Irondale house with the money Joan left, and at the best of times she worked less than she could have. The textures of the City never left her, and now they expanded, vibrating, to fill the breach. Skin on tile, the soft hot waves at Riis. Living was porous. You felt time move through. She felt Artie's world, back when he was dragging her and Joan and the rest of them through a string of Upper West Side brownstones chasing patrons of one kind or another, skinny with life instead of death, extolling everything, peacocking around, in love. The pleated fabrics, carpets, stained silver dinnerware, long windows letting in historic silver light. She remembered his dabbing perfume on each

hollow part of himself like a spell. Descending with Artie, with everyone, to reenter their squalid everyday life. The canyon streets. A slice of air, sky before rain or in rain.

Landscape design was a good job, a job she had made for herself and stuck to. A flexible schedule, good pay, plenty of time off. She had managed single motherhood in a stalwart way that people found impressive. Now she knew Lowry would need her more than he ever had. It was the worst time to fall apart.

And yet the world yawned. Little holes opened up in everything, like lace. Look into any one of them and you fall in. You don't check your voicemail. You let a half-finished sketch sit untouched on the table all week, collecting coffee rings. You hold your fear in your own hands and think, what's life even made of? And then you wait hours in the maternity ward hallway because your kid has had a kid, and you're scared to go home and check your answering machine, but somehow, this, *this*—this you can do.

Vi held the red-faced baby. If I was scared before, it was nothing. Oh my Lowry, thought Vi. What have you done. The baby, Joan and Artie's grandchild, would not stop screaming in her arms.

### 3

That August, the city was flaming green; the parks breathed, saturated with oxygen. The still water in the reservoirs was flecked with microns of pollen.

They named the kid Selene, after the Greek moon goddess, then called her Sally for short, then Sal. Each reduction of her name a new defeat. Those first months, it seemed like Sal never slept. She ate badly, wouldn't latch for days. She had a delicate stomach, always dribbling spitup in what felt like a rebuke. Her body taut, twisting, fought the weight of her head. Her little back

arched; her face crumpled with unsoothed fury. She got cradle cap, then lice. They all got lice. Misha's Manx cat, Pearl, prowled and cried, and woke up Sal and Sal cried. Lowry cried, too, from futile exhaustion, as he drove the Jetta to Volunteer Park and walked Sal around in circles in a sling, in and out of the botanical garden where the air smelled rich, like Will's mother's orchid house.

Misha moved slowly; she ached and bled. Her nipples were raw, their slumlord wouldn't fix the washing machine, an odor of diapers and sour milk and trash hung low in every room. Vi came to watch the baby so they could sleep, but there was little sleeping in the apartment; it was just too small. For the first time, Lowry saw Misha ashamed in Vi's presence: Vi's big, practical frame, her plaid, her gait stiffening a little, begging to be of help.

Vi balanced her folder of landscape designs on the dashboard as she hauled their rotten clothes to Wash World. She braked and the papers flew everywhere. She let them be. She bought disposable diapers from Costco, and spent days with Sal while Lowry went back to his bar-cook job in Belltown. Misha picked up the occasional six-hour café shift, pumping before she took the 7 down Broadway. She worked through back spasms that took her away her breath. She'd been tossing the hospital bills unread. Neighbors complained to their landlord about Sal's crying. When Misha called again about the washer, he said, "Count your blessings."

They had lost track of Will. He'd called once while Misha was pregnant, and the Cherryman family had sent a giftwrapped box of soft cotton onesies and little beanie hats. But Lowry and Misha couldn't think of reaching him. Their bodies and minds were attenuated.

They had all touched something together, Lowry thought, on those half-imaginary nights: Smoking in the orchid house, or at Will's bonfire under sparks like bees. But the aftermath of the fire, the next day, had been the beginning of nothing, as Lowry woke up hungover and alone in

Will's bed. He had found everyone eating cereal, watching TV in the living room at noon, and found Will wouldn't look at him. And then the year chewed past and the century switched over with hardly a ripple, the fortress of the global banking system did not falter, and whatever they had touched was lost now in the undertow of Sal. As was much of Lowry's most loved memory, the one he hoarded: himself still shuddering in Will's arms, his mouth on the pulse of Will's miraculous throat. His mind still reached often for this memory, running along its worn track; but he was now so scoured out that the strongest part became the worst part: his abject fear and pain in the cold water.

#### 4

It was near-impossible for either of them to read, but Misha still carried books around, placing them through the house like little life rafts. Sometimes she opened one with the hand that wasn't holding Sal, and her fingers grazed the type even as her eyes stayed unfocused. Before Sal, she had mainly read political nonfiction and philosophy, but once, in the book dumpster where Misha and Lowry met, she had found a motherlode of water-damaged books that all seemed to hail from one weirdo's basement: *Cryptozoology A-Z*; *Houdini: The Unchained Story*; *Great Hoaxes of the 20th Century*. There were dozens of these books and she'd taken them home in backpacks-full, unable to resist. *The Loch Ness Mystery and Beyond*. *Art Thefts, Bank Robberies, & the Heists of Our Time*. *The Lindbergh Kidnapping Revealed*. *Hunting the Abominable Snowman*. *Amazing Parlor Magic for Beginners*. *The Real Bonnie and Clyde*.

"Can't you just *see* this guy?" she had asked Lowry, while he laughed at her. "I can totally see him. I love him. He's like, deep, deep left-field, fake-moon-landing type of shit, but

he's also very practical, you know what I mean? He can memorize license plates. He lives in a total fantasy world but he can pull a live bird out of your ear, which *I* certainly can't do."

"Poor guy," said Lowry.

"Right? It's tough out there if you need to change reality. Like, he probably wants to be a ghost hunter or a private eye, but he works in insurance, and he wears a little beret on the weekends and plays keyboard in a cover band."

"I've got him," Lowry said. "I see him."

"Round glasses. Right? Like, little white goatee."

"But what do you think happened? He's just moving on?"

"I don't know, maybe he made it big. Maybe he stole some jewels or talked a celebrity into paying him a lot of money for psychic healing."

"Or he died."

"No," she said, positively. "I am not entertaining that idea. He's too much like me."

"He is," said Lowry, seeing it. He kissed her. He loved her most like this.

"He is. So we just *have* to make it. Him and me, both."

"And me," Lowry had said, his hands on her waist. "I have to make it, too."

But she had never actually read the books till now. And *reading* was a stretch; she palmed them, flipping for pictures, her chin to the dome of Sal's ragged scalp.

The cocky, brainy absurdities all soothed her. The blurred photo of an unknown biped from the Dyatlov Pass. Murph the Surf pouting in sunglasses, before he stole the Star of India. How to cut a lady in half, onstage. Sal yelled and puked and Misha's breasts and back ached; the toaster oven kept throwing the breaker, turning the lights off when she toasted a bagel. Lowry thought the Jetta needed a new starter, and he was out front helplessly hitting something under

the hood with a wrench. Misha gazed into Houdini's eyes. She felt the heat of his sheer, unhinged willpower, with Sal briefly, finally sleeping in wan winter light.

## 5

With the baby always demanding her body, Misha no longer wished to be touched. "It's like even my skin doesn't belong to me," she said, and Lowry lifted his hand off.

He was relieved, in a way: the dangerous gauntlet of sex releasing him into an afterlife. But he wished they could still hold each other. They lay a foot apart on the bed; both expected to hear Sal wailing any minute from Vi's arms in the other room. Lowry felt lonely and lost. He had been having dreams—shallow, delirious, fragmented—that the earth was flat as a table and tilted slowly, tipping him into the void. Awake, he could never finish a thought, but his half-thoughts were lavish. He saw them living in a palace, waited on by servants and finally at peace. Rich gems flashing with watery light. Velvet. Quiet, walled gardens with orange trees. These things would shimmer past as he napped sitting up in the driver's seat of the failing Jetta, having ferried Sal around for an hour to make her sleep, knowing carrying her inside would set her off again. He would wake up to turn the car on and run the heat, in the cruel red eye of the digital clock at five a.m. And from that underworld, as night spilled out forever past the car's metal skin, Lowry dreamed: of smooth, clear lakes, or the deep rustling breasts of swans. Pure clarity and peace. Sal always woke him up by crying. He carried her into the apartment under a gray dawn, the sky like wet paper. Each day was getting shorter. How will we survive this, he thought.

But for now she was quiet, in the kitchen with Vi. Lowry and Misha lay flat on their backs on the quilt. He kept his hands to himself.

“Do you dream about other places?” he asked. A cruel, cold wind rushed off the lake, seeping in their single-paned windows. Misha had peeled her shirt up to spread salve on her nipples.

“I don’t dream.”

“Or just think about them.”

“Okay, a white sand beach,” she said. “Like, *hot* white sand. So hot it kind of burns you to lay there, and the water is that toothpaste-blue that looks fake, and maybe there’s, like, dolphins.”

“Dolphins, definitely.” If they couldn’t touch, at least there was this.

“Barbados,” she said. “Let’s steal a Rembrandt or something. And get the fuck out.”

## 6

Misha’s hospital bill went to collections. The fridge seeped puddles over the bowed wood floor. The Jetta was touch-and-go. Vi helped them physically, but she was working less these days, and had no money to spare. Back home, the county was hounding her for an out-of-code septic system. In a February northeaster, a cedar blew down on her roof. Misha hadn’t spoken to her own parents in five years. They didn’t know Sal existed.

Then Misha fainted at work. Somehow she had the presence of mind to place the steel pitcher of hot, steamed milk on the counter, and then the world strobed and was gone. The water forced through a neglected shot of espresso ran rich brown, golden-brown, then clear. The customer yelled for help.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” said Misha when she woke in a hospital room. “They want to keep billing me for this shit or what?”

Lowry was by the bed with Sal in a sling. “Don’t worry about it,” he said. “We don’t have anything they can take. What can they do?”

“Garnish our firstborn,” she slurred, as Sal reached for her and started wailing. “I feel like dog shit. What’s all these tubes?”

“You’re having a blood transfusion,” Lowry said, trying to be calm. The nurse rattled back in with a steel cart. “It’s called—”

“Severe postpartum anemia,” said the nurse, fiddling with the array. “You’re doing just fine. We’re going to keep you here for the next 48 hours to monitor your hemoglobin, and then we’ll discuss your long-term recovery plan. Nothing to worry about now.” Her harried gaze flickered to Lowry, Sal’s face crumpling as she flew into an abject rage. “Does your baby need anything?” she said, pointedly.

“I’ll just go walk her around,” Lowry murmured. He took Sal out of the building, pacing circles in the small, sad patch of grass where dew soaked his sneakers, so she they could both cry with some dignity.

Lowry had called his boss to say he couldn’t come in that night, not for the first time, and finally got fired. Before Misha was discharged, the landlord raised their rent. Vi was in her kitchen in Irondale, staring down an estimate for roof repair, when the phone rang.

“Oh, Lowry,” she said. “You all come back and stay with me. I’ve got the space. We’ll be okay. Come back. Come home.” They both acted like this was not inevitable, like they hadn’t always known it was coming. The family contracting suddenly with Sal as gravity, or as the unavoidable particle that they all formed around, like the grit in an oyster.

Most of their possessions fit in the Jetta and the rest they left, juddering over the Tacoma Narrows Bridge. Vi didn’t exactly have the space; the house she’d bought in ’89, with the money

Joan left, was modest even then. Lowry, Misha, and Sal in her crib all packed into Lowry's childhood room at the top of the stairs.

That first night, after feeding Sal in the wee hours, Misha nestled up against him. She squeezed his ribs from behind and her touch smote him to the bone; not sexually but in a deeper way. He had never been so aware of her blood before, not even when Sal was born straight from the incision, like a god. Now Lowry pictured the particles: red blood cells, iron, platelets. It was crowded in there. He could almost feel it: her skin vibrating.

"Babe," she mumbled, immediately dreaming again. "You need anything?"

Lowry couldn't think what she was offering. A blanket, water, enough affection for him to suck the marrow out of until spring? She clung on his back, slow and tight as a sloth. He was the little spoon.

"Nah, I'm good. You need anything?"

"Money," she said in her sleep.

## 7

Will looked older; his face had filled out, and he had a well-groomed ginger beard. He'd moved out of his parents' house, to the top floor of a big, renovated Victorian just off Lawrence Street. They could see the roiled inlet from his kitchen window. There were whitecaps.

He was jovial, as if the time and space that had intervened meant nothing. He bearhugged them both and offered his finger to Sal, who grabbed it in an uncharacteristic moment of social grace.

"Well, shit," he said. "Will you look at that. You two made a baby."

Misha's iron supplements weren't working as fast as they'd hoped, but in Will's presence she came alive. Her little teeth flashed and an ease, something Lowry had forgotten, suddenly animated her. She was gushing, laughing.

"Wow, incredible place!" she said. "Look at you, living up here all fancy. Oh, hey, look, you can even see the ferry from here! See that, Sal? We can see the ferry boat. Lowry, look!"

Will's place had a bachelor feel, but it was prosperous. He opened IPAs with a hand-forged bar tool mounted to an exposed vertical beam. "Oh my God, *Will!* How are your sisters? How's Denis?" Misha said.

"My sisters? Graduating. Sara's on track to be valedictorian and she is completely obnoxious about it, you should see her. Even my mom told her to tone it down. You look good, you both look really good, I can't believe—"

"And Denis," Misha repeated eagerly. "How's Denis?"

"Denis? Yeah, he's great, he's working at that auto shop now, the one on Fredericks? But that's always kind of been his thing, you know. He's like, the great Car Whisperer."

"Oh, thank God. Something's wrong with our—or, like, a thousand things. Who knows. Denis. We should call him soon! We should all hang out, wouldn't that be so fun? Is he still, like, a sweet stoner baby?"

"Always sweet, always very stoned," Will said. "Also, he's like, trying to farm rabbits. Or, not *farm*, exactly, but something. He has about five. You would love it. You guys want a snack?" He opened the fridge theatrically and gazed into its depth. "What's mine is yours."

"Oooh, Will, is that *brie*? Can we make a cheese plate?"

"Perfect."

A little buzzed, Lowry excused himself to pee and then gazed around Will's bathroom, held in a cloud of balsamy aftershave. The sink and tile gleamed. Maybe he cleaned for us, Lowry thought, knowing it wasn't true; Will was just clean.

Will was now part-owner of Cherryman & Co. The logo shone from the doors of the new F250 at the curb. He wore fresh Carhartts from the Quimper Merc. Clean, steel-toed boots. On his way back, Lowry snuck a glance toward the bedroom: bed boyishly half-made, the nightstand with a drawer that must hold condoms. He pictured Will bringing women home, and the women he'd bring: pink-cheeked organic farmers, tall-ship sailors. Or singer-songwriters wearing silver rings. Lowry burned, desiring Will's life. We're a wreck, he thought. It was easy to imagine Will doing everything right—and someday the marriage, the healthy, easy children. One boy and one girl, who would sleep through the night.

In the kitchen, Will and Misha had fanned out brie and Manchego on a board with crackers. Misha tugged Lowry close, and again her touch smote him, this time like heat. Barbados, he thought. Sal was peaceful on the floor, gumming an empty bottle. Misha laughed joyously against his cheek. She said, "I was just telling Will—I think it's really so good we're back."

"You were missed. You were both missed," Will said, raising his beer.

Lowry sought Will's eyes, but they slid away from him. His gaze caught instead on wet lips around the bottle. The subtle rise of Will's chest, the weave of his shirt that Lowry suddenly wished, with an animal surety, to press against his face.

Sal, on the floor, was unusually serene. He glanced down reflexively to see if anything was wrong, but she just gummed the empty beer bottle, patting tiles with one hand. Lowry's love

for her felt sharp as a cramp. Knowing better, he reached to pick her up, but the bottle spun from her grip and smashed on the corner of the fridge. Shocked, Sal began to bawl.

He saw the visible shift in Misha's face and body. At the sound of Sal's crying, exhaustion veiled her. "Oh, no, Will, I'm so sorry," Misha said. "It's pretty much naptime, so there's really no fixing her. We should head out." She reached for the broken glass, but Will shooed her away.

"You sure? She can nap here."

"No, she can't," Misha said. "You have no idea what a *highly particular* little gremlin this is. *Aren't we?*" she said, as Sal grabbed for her breasts with both hands.

Apologizing to Will, they drove home. *Sorry. Sorry, sorry, sorry.* Lowry couldn't stop himself from saying it. Will would have lived their lives differently, better. All of them knew.

## 8

The ten minutes back to Irondale felt like a descent. Down 19, up 7th where Doug first stood heavily around Vi's little house, blotting out light. A friend had fixed the tree damage on the roof, but the yard was frowsy with small branches. Lowry parked the Jetta by the fence. Vi's clutter suddenly stood out: the sagging porch with its old chest freezer, buckets and tires in the yard.

"I'm sorry," he said, this time to Misha. "I don't know what I was thinking. I should have let her be." He turned the car off and they sat, too beat to open the doors. She didn't answer. Lowry felt an incredible pressure, bearing down through the bright gray sky onto the bubble of the windshield. They were a thousand feet under something. The only sound was Sal's nursing. Misha shut her eyes.

“Must be nice,” he said. “A house that clean.”

She switched Sal to the other breast with a hard sigh. “Yeah, well. It’ll be nice for *us* when we hire a live-in maid. A personal assistant. An *au pair*.” He looked over. Her face glimmered with the joke. He breathed.

“A butler,” Lowry said, and finally Misha laughed.

“A *butler!* God. What do they even *do*? No, no. All we really need is a chef.”

“Okay, okay,” he said. “Next week. We’ll start interviewing some prospects. After we rob that bank.”

“We actually *could* rob a bank.”

“Yeah, sure,” he said.

“No, I’m kind of serious. At least, like, a *little* bit serious. You know that one book, the one—*The Greatest Heists in History?*”

“What?” he said. “You’re getting ideas?”

“Yeah, I mean...It’s been hard not to have ideas. I know you’re with me.” She was almost whispering. “I think if we planned well enough, we could literally pull something off. Just once. Get a couple hundred grand and be set for life.”

“For life? Nah. Are we sending this kid to college?”

“Okay, maybe not for *life*, but for a while.”

“Fine,” he said, still mostly joking. “You win. Let’s rob a bank.”

But a thread tightened in the air between them. He could sense her leaning back against it, this new pressure. Her eyes were vivid, testing his resolve. Houdini handcuffed in the river, fighting for his life.

## 9

Two things saved them that spring. One was planning the imaginary bank robbery. What one would need, what one would wear, risk factors, odds of success. The other, surprisingly, was Will.

A week after their first reunion, Will brought some Pabst, a parcheesi board, and Denis Navarre to Vi's house. Lowry felt mystified; did he just pity them? But Misha lit up again. "Oh my God, *Denis!*" she shouted, billowing over the room in her huge sweater with Sal, stunned into temporary silence, on one hip. Denis, who Lowry had thought little about since they last saw him, seemed firmer and more definite. He instantly started doing an Italian accent for Sal, which seemed to have its precedent in some inside joke that everyone but Lowry remembered.

"Chef's-ah kiss-ah!" said Denis, smooching his fingers into the air. Then, in his regular voice, he asked to hold the baby.

"Be my guest," said Misha. "No guarantees, though. She might flip out."

In the background, Will greeted Vi sincerely, like the good neighbor he was; his mom's creek restoration project was still cooking along, and Vi pitched in when she could. The world had kept going on around them, Lowry realized. Sal had halted life only for them.

Will offered Vi a beer, then opened it for her as she dug chips and salsa from the cramped pantry under the stairs. Misha blew dust out of their temperamental CD player and put on the Kinks. Lowry caught himself standing, useless, in the middle of the room, hands at his sides, just staring. Life had kept going on, and now—astounding—it had come back for them.

Even as he didn't dare look Will long in the face, Lowry felt his body begin, just the littlest bit, to relax. But when Denis said, "Uh-oh," in his Italian voice and then his regular voice, and Lowry heard Sal's whining pitch up toward a scream, he grabbed her before Misha could.

Lowry inserted Sal's body laboriously into the sling—fighting him, her spine arched backward, like a seahorse—then walked her up and down 7th in the gathering dusk. The neighbors knew this routine by now, so no one bothered him. The days were getting longer. Red currants bloomed. Sal wound herself down, finally, and Lowry paused in the darkening yard, looking through the kitchen window at the four of them in yellow light, around the game on the table.

They were arrayed like the subjects of a painting, each face almost coarse in its specificity. The burls on Will's fisherman sweater were haloed with loose filaments of wool. Denis's eyes were beautiful—he'd never noticed this—long-lashed, large, and dark, flickering up toward Misha and down to the hand twiddling the tab of a beer. Vi was pink-cheeked with pleasure, a rare sight. Misha, at the center of it all, was speaking, her arms splayed in extravagant gestures. And then back to Will, to the sweater, yes, and the bare, freckled wrists, the hands, and finally up to where ginger hairs sparkled on Will's nape. To the tight, muscled jaw. To the face, which Lowry could observe for once in privacy, without risk that their glance might meet.

It startled him, still. Will Cherryman becoming their friend.

Lowry tapped the glass and Misha looked up. He gestured to the sleeping baby. Misha nodded and mouthed "*Shhhhh*," quieting the group with her spread arms, like a conductor. At her nod, Denis turned down the music. Lowry snuck in the door, smuggled Sal upstairs to her crib, and switched on the baby monitor. He didn't think this would work—it rarely did—but Sal, incredibly, stayed sleeping. At the table, he stood with one hand on Misha's back.

"Who's winning?" They still talked softly, each minute of Sal's sleep a gift.

"Your mom's kicking all our asses," Misha said.

"Then I'm on her team," said Lowry. Have we made it, he wondered. Very carefully—lifting, not scraping—he pulled up a chair.

## 10

Will being their friend became normal, which meant Lowry could see him, speak to him, without the constant memory of that New Year's Eve. The memory rose and fell, but Will *now*—capable, affable, and unbothered—often took its place. They hadn't kissed. That witching-hour intimacy had not gone so far. Just the pressure of their clothed torsos. Their skin, face-to-neck. Best—worst—their groins, also clothed, unspeakable; Lowry's helpless erection. The weight of Will's leg, hot and furry, over his, and then one cool and naked crescent of Will's foot.

Will's lips, now, were the thing Lowry looked at least.

He needed a job. He avoided telling Will this directly, but Misha did—and, anyway, it was obvious. Their fragile little family barely had a foothold here. They stocked up at the Tri-Area Food Bank, but even gas money was a stretch. The medical bills they couldn't think of. Misha became a part-time checker at the co-op, hauling home bruised fruit and expired yoghurt like the spoils of war. Lowry had applied for several line-cook positions in Port Townsend, each with a sinking heart. He was grateful and miserable no one had called him yet. His cheeks flared a little when Will finally asked.

“You, uh, have any experience framing, or hanging drywall?”

“You know I don't,” Lowry said, almost petulantly.

“You speak any Spanish?”

“Um, yeah, I mean, sort of. Why?” He had once had an aptitude for language, though he hadn't needed it since high school.

Cherryman & Co. was remodeling a duplex downtown, right off Water Street: Will running the jobsite while Geoff, his father, managed things at the office. “Well, uh, I'm mostly

working with this Mexican guy, Fonso? He's fast as shit and, like, really cool, but we're having a slight bit of a communication issue. You want to come in part-time, kind of as a go-between? We could use extra hands anyway. The work's not complicated, man, really, I'm sure he can show you how. I can do twenty an hour." Misha's job paid half that.

They still weren't sleeping. None of them: not Lowry, Misha, Sal, or even Vi. Vi had settled them into Lowry's childhood room, upstairs, which shared a wall with her own. It was the only option; in the downstairs office, a water stain under the leaking window frame bloomed black mold. "If we could just get this cleaned up," Misha said, wincing with guilt, but they all knew it was beyond them; the brokenness of the little house breathing with its own weather. Still not sleeping, they moved from one chamber of delirium to the next.

Lowry said yes. Of course. Misha said, Thank *God*.

Will let Lowry choose his schedule. He managed to drop Misha at the co-op on his way to work and picked her up on the way back, Vi minding Sal. Or, Lowry worked while Misha stayed at home. He felt guilty and released.

Fonso was about thirty, with the best teeth Lowry had ever seen and a wry, dry little laugh. When not working, he was a sketcher, a fidgeter—Lowry caught him drawing anime girls with big, soft poufs of hair, in pencil on drywall scrap. He shaded their bare thighs tenderly, adding tall socks and wiggles of implied color, in grayscale, on their little cheeks. He folded candy bar wrappers into perfect quadrants. He had an engineering degree from the University of Guadalajara.

Fonso taught Lowry the work that he, Lowry, would never be good at: slicing and hanging drywall, then the process of mudding, taping, sanding, priming, in an almost ritual sequence. On nice days they kept the door cracked with a bucket of screws, as fresh winds from

the inlet rippled over the building's Tyvek sheath. KPTZ on the radio, blues and swing. It was May, the weather heating up. Lowry wore cutoffs and button-downs to work. His cheeks felt hot as incandescent filaments, breeze combing his leg hair, drywall powder snowing his socks.

He walked with Fonso to Seaport Coffee on their lunch break, where they each bought an Americano with room. They ate packed sandwiches from home on the little downtown beach. The first few days, Lowry had offered to buy Fonso a coffee, but Fonso always turned him down.

On the crescent of dog-trampled gravel, Jellyfish washed up, glimmered till they dried in the seaweed mat, then gently stank. The biggest were wide as dinner plates, a murky red-orange like marmalade or clotted blood. The paper mill belched its fart cloud in the distance, against black trees.

Lowry wasn't that much better at Spanish than Will was, and Fonso seemed to understand the job perfectly. The issue that Lowry had supposedly been hired to solve remained unclear.

“¿*Casado?*” Fonso asked him.

“*Sí,*” Lowry said, not technically true. But Sal's existence had made him feel more married than formalities could have. “¿*Y tú?*”

“*Yo no, todavía no.*” Fonso wasn't married; He was looking for a bride. He clicked his tongue ambiguously, his eyes tracing a regatta on the bay. Lowry wished he could tell Fonso what a meticulously tender husband he would be, though Lowry didn't know him and could have been wrong.

“¿*Hijos?*”

“*Sí, uno.* I mean, *una.*”

“¿*Hembra?*”

“Sorry, *no entiendo?*”

“¿Niña?”

“Oh, yeah,” Lowry said. Girl. “Sí.”

“*Mucha suerte*,” observed Fonso, of Lowry’s life. It was true, he thought, while feeling nothing but exhaustion. A lucky life: his wife, so-called, his baby girl, around them Will’s inexplicable friendship, keeping things intact.

“*Mucha suerte*,” he agreed. “I mean, *suerte*.”

He often picked up Fonso in the Jetta, from the single-wide where he lived with two other men, behind the QFC. On days that Lowry dropped Misha at the co-op, the two overlapped briefly in the car: five minutes in which Misha had Fonso sparkling in a way Lowry had never otherwise seen. He glanced in the rearview at Fonso’s denim knees, his angular hands and gleaming, spade-shaped nails. He wondered if Fonso had ever touched a man, or wanted to. He felt the gulf between them—this, certainly, was something Lowry would never know.

Misha had left that door technically open—way back when they moved in together, holding his face in her hands. “Maybe we’ll be interested in seeing other people,” she had said, with the frankness Lowry loved and feared. “And if we are, maybe it’s okay.”

He nodded, not meaning it; thankfully, this had never come up since. As he watched Misha flirting with the world, he felt an awe just short of jealousy, and a jealousy more *of* Misha (to have her ease!) than of whoever bathed in her light.

“Are we talking about, like, an open relationship?” he had said. “I’m not sure I can really do that.”

He meant he wished he could be like her, but he wasn’t. He was locked in this awkward self. Strapped in, making bad conversation no one really wanted, himself least of all. It astounded him that Misha (in the book dumpster, maybe those unreal circumstances explained it)

had found him, underneath all that. Who else could? It wasn't that Lowry couldn't imagine wanting someone else, at least sometimes. It was that he couldn't imagine anyone else wanting him. Amazing it had happened even once.

“Well, also, I mean,” she had said. “I mean, if I might like, to, like—make out with a girl sometime. Would that freak you out?” It didn't, exactly. But he froze, knowing the corollary.

“You're quiet,” she said. “A lot of guys just think that's hot.”

“It is,” he said reflexively, his mind jumbling. She ran cool fingers down the groove of his spine.

“I mean, do you ever think about that? For you?”

“Other girls?”

“No, like—being with a man?” Her hand sensed his tension and stopped moving.

“I don't know,” he said.

If he did think of it, his mind blurred. He imagined cruising a park at night, based off nothing he knew firsthand, just the casual, impossible stories his old roommate Tycho, at Pine Street, had told in the kitchen on some mornings-after. A mass of bodies in the dark, he thought, recoiling. Or: what? Himself getting picked up in some bar—he couldn't trace that image to its end. Or: Will.

“Well, if you ever wanted to find out,” she said, “You know we could talk about it.”

But no. Not Will. And, anyway, they didn't. They had a life-devouring baby and moved to the country together instead.

Lowry knew part of what Misha loved about Vi was her archetypal queerness—Vi had been through it, seen it. She *was* it. She had organized with ACT UP in New York! She knew

people who had actually *been* at Stonewall. Lowry didn't think of this often; that world was what had swallowed his parents up. He didn't tell Misha to ignore it, but he wished he could.

In Sal's early infancy, before they left Seattle, when Misha didn't want to be touched, Lowry was mostly too tired to feel sexual, but sometimes, unexpectedly, desire plumbed him: hard and true as a blade, and not for her or anything he would name. He jerked off in a fantasy world without images. Not picturing faces, bodies, or actions, he came with a gasp at something unfathomable.

He did try, once. Once on a warm, wet night, the October after Sal's birth. The pending chill of winter had lifted, temporarily, and Vi was visiting again, helping out. Lowry had been running errands in the Jetta when a gleaming calm set in and he felt bewitched. Anything might happen. The hands on the wheel seemed like not his own. It was a Thursday. He parked outside a bar called Pony and walked in and ordered a Budweiser. He kept his field of vision very small, just the dewy neck of the bottle, the swatch of sticky bartop, his knees, his unfamiliar hands. Before looking up, he felt the dimple of gravity, the ripple as someone entered his orbit. An oldish, blondish man, lanky and not necessarily handsome, who said with such supreme gentleness that Lowry never forgot it, "May I buy the next round?" And—could it have *really* been that easy? Just drink a drink and wait as the world comes at you with its desire, a living human body rank with hopefulness and breath and sweat and want? *Really*, just like that?

But you'd have to let it. Lowry felt everything converge, the formless powers trundling from the dark, trees silhouetted black against a field, this man, his body, Will—and the lurch of need and shock expelled him from his chair with a mumbled "No, thanks," out the door. In the car he masturbated in a scared crescendo, then wiped his hands on some napkins and threw them brazenly out the window, and the yellow light from a Sunoco across the street diffused over the

scratched windshield as Lowry, who hadn't slept in days, in weeks, rocked back and forth and cried like his own baby.

Later, he took himself in hand. Bi was no big deal. Something a mother like his half-expected, and had, in her way, led him to expect as well. But it was that weight, the weight of Vi's history, that he floundered beneath. He felt like *faggy* had not just labeled him but birthed him, a conduit between Lowry and the geologic pressure of Vi's world, that sprang him from its loins and then expected some kind of heroism.

Now, when he thought of Misha, his girlfriend, *wife*, their child, he felt triumph and a clean relief. He had tricked fate, gotten away.

## 11

They fell into a game-night routine, the four of them, in whispers to avoid waking Sal if she miraculously slept. Vi joined in for the early rounds, then went to bed. Later in the night, they'd smoke a joint on the bowed front deck, under a prickle of stars. Denis tried, verbally, to teach Will how to change his shifter bushings, while Lowry's mind melted in non-comprehension. Or they played a round of Fuck, Marry, Kill. "Okay, okay," said Misha. "Keanu Reeves, Jake Gyllenhaal, Frodo Baggins."

"*Frodo Baggins*? No, you mean, like, what's-his-face," Will said.

Denis said, "For sure I'd marry Keanu."

"Denis," Will said somberly. "I'm killing Keanu. Sorry, man."

"You're murdering my husband, just like that?"

Or Misha floated the bank heist, as a joke. It was always a joke, unless Lowry and Misha were alone.

“What part would you do?” she asked them all. “Like, what would your bank-robber job be?”

“Getaway driver,” Denis said instantly. He was always first to answer, no matter the question. “I’d get a fast-ass car and be out of there so quick.”

Misha said, “I think I’d be the person that really does the deed. Like, goes up and gets the money. What would *you* be?” she asked Will.

“Oh, I don’t know,” he said.

“I bet you’re the guy covering my back, shouting, like, *All you motherfuckers get down on the floor* or whatever.”

“No, no,” Will said, hands up. “I can’t even picture it. I’m not how you think.”

“That would be me,” Lowry found himself saying, surprising everyone.

“You? No!”

“I *could*,” he said.

“I see it, man, I see it,” Denis said, smoothing him out.

Every conversation looped back on itself, forever. “*Frodo Baggins*. Of course we’re murdering him, he’s not even real.”

“Will! You can only kill one of them. You don’t think he’d be like, a little bit good at sex?”

Or they explored together, the four of them. They thrashed down to Chimacum Creek and back, through ferns and blooming rhododendrons. They bought clamming licenses at the hardware store. Denis drove them to Quilcene Bay in the ’85 turbo diesel he’d rebuilt, humming to the pitch of the engine as he switched gears. With a garden fork, they scraped up buckets of fat little steamer clams from stony beach. Will cooked wild nettles with butter, and the clams with

garlic, cream, and chardonnay. With Sal in her car seat, they drove up Snow Creek Road for chanterelles, shining orange on the leaf litter.

Lowry and Misha slept a little. Never enough. But some.

They survived the summer. Sal turned one.

But Misha's debt collectors found them. Paper bills piled up, and the agency found Vi's phone number. Once a week, someone threatened to garnish Misha's wages. Symptoms of her anemia returned. She got faint at work. "What the fuck do they want me to *do*?" she said. "Go back to the doctor so they can own my whole fucking life?" She never said this in front of Will. Instinct, for both of them. They kept their best selves for him.

## 12

Lowry didn't want to see it, but as Misha sank, he thrived.

His job was inarguably the better one; his body was stronger. It was sensible for him to take more hours with Will and Fonso, while Vi and Misha coped with the kid and the breaking, molding house. Coming home to Irondale suffocated him; pulling out of the driveway every morning, in the Jetta that Denis now singlehandedly kept alive, restored oxygen to his lungs. There was no longer pretense that Will needed Lowry for his Spanish; they all moved to a second job uptown, around the corner from Will's own apartment, seamlessly.

Lowry let his work hours expand, and then his after-work hours as he walked with Will and Fonso to the Uptown Pub for a drink. When he finally came home, Vi's house sucked in around him in all dimensions; he smelled stale food, compost, laundry, and the moldy, airless corners, a stench that soaked into everything they owned, and into their skin. He smelled it on Sal. In Misha's tousled hair.

It was Thursday. Fonso had left early for church choir practice. Will and Lowry were at the bar alone. The room was hot; Lowry touched his sweating bottle, then his cheek. “I don’t want to go yet,” he said, half to himself.

Will smile wryly. “No?”

“Long story,” Lowry said, but was it? He just didn’t want to explain.

“No worries, man. It’s still early. One more drink at my place?” Lowry quailed, on the brink. But they were used to each other now. He’d been looking Will in the eye for months. The lips, still sometimes dangerous, curled. “Come on. It’s just a block away.”

Dark had just fallen and the cool night refreshed them. Lowry followed Will up the stairs to his apartment door; inside, the curtains were all flung wide. The scattered lights of town winked in at them between the bulk of trees. Will moved easily, opening beers from the fridge as Lowry wavered in the no-man’s land between table and couch.

Couch. Will sat, he followed. He brushed a sleeve past his nose, furtive, wondering if the stink of Vi’s house was still on him, but he smelled nothing.

Will was watching. “Sorry,” Lowry said, for no reason at all. Will moved his bottle to his lips, then down. He inhaled sharply, almost starting a word.

“What?”

“You remember that one time we—” he said, and stopped. Lowry felt some vertigo as Will actually flushed, the deep grain of his throat turning scarlet.

“That we what.” He relished the pressure in Will’s face, trying to make him say it.

“Oh, just kid shit, I don’t know. That New Year’s? I don’t know how much you even remember. We were pretty wasted.”

“I think—”

Pause.

“What?”

“I think I remember everything,” Lowry said, slowly.

“You know what I’m talking about?”

“Yeah. I know.”

“You ever, like, think about it?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Do you?”

They held each other’s gaze perilously. The strong, hoppy beer had dried his tongue. Then, finally, it happened. With great deliberation, Will put down his bottle and gathered Lowry in his arms. Beard rough on Lowry’s face, taut lips and the wet interior of his mouth all there, immediate, total. It was happening. Unthinkable but true.

Mouths separating, they laughed nervously, not talking anymore. Will’s hand touched him stomach. Slid under his shirt as, amazed, Lowry let himself mimic the touch. The hot skin of Will’s torso, dip and taper of muscles running from his hip crest toward his groin. They stripped each other and Lowry let himself be lost in it, finally, his face kissing its way down from Will’s chest to his stomach, to where all the shining ginger hairs on Will’s thighs and belly directed Lowry’s lips toward Will’s cock.

He was shaking. He tried touching Will the way he, Lowry, would want to be touched. He dared look up and found Will watching, smiting him. The simple intimacy of Will’s face was blinding to the mind.

Will’s penis was salty and musty, like but unlike his own. Will made a sound, in pleasure or discomfort, Lowry couldn’t tell, and he suddenly felt helpless; anything he tried to do, he’d do it wrong. Ashamed, he kissed his way up Will’s belly. He wanted to bury his face and be

comforted. Not looking down, he reached again for Will's penis, found Will's hand already there, and was ashamed that he'd failed. He burrowed against the throat, exactly he had that first time: under Will's chin, not meeting his eyes. Small sounds rumbled in Will's throat until he came.

Then Will reached for him but Lowry's own dick had gone soft, somehow, though he felt woozy from desire. His body was cold without clothes. A couch cushion gouged his back. "If you ever wanted to," Misha said. But like this?

"Should you go home?" Will asked him.

"I don't want to go," he whispered. "I want to wake up here with you."

"Go home, Lowry," Will said, very gently. "Go home to your wife."

She's not my wife, he wanted to say. But of course she was.

In silence again, they dressed. Will had to walk Lowry down to let him out. They paused at the doorway. The smell of the inlet—seaweed, creosote—came over the wind.

"Am I coming to work tomorrow?" Lowry said.

"You're on the schedule."

He wanted to kiss Will on the mouth. Neither one of them moved. Lost in space, Lowry backed off the porch and turned just in time to catch himself at the stairs. He heard the door click shut. On the sidewalk, he faced the blank front of the house.

### 13

Friday, the next day, and all the following week, poor Lowry burned.

Every grain of his night with Will was frightening, pure as sugar. He didn't want to think of it. He couldn't stop.

At the jobsite, where Will never arrived, Lowry and Fonso laid a tongue-in-groove floor while barely speaking. Not rare for them, but Lowry's body flashed hot-cold, hot-cold, so often he thought Fonso had to notice. His skin sending distress signals. He jammed their nail gun somehow and couldn't un-jam it. Fonso patiently disassembled the mechanism. "Okay?" he said, with one glance that ran through Lowry like a hot knife.

"*Lo siento*," Lowry said. This was all he had said for days. It kept brimming up out of him, unplanned. He couldn't stop apologizing. And what did those words mean, anyway? *Lo siento. I feel it.*

One week after their night together, Will came to work again. His manner was utterly normal. He called Fonso and Lowry both *man*. He wore a flannel and jeans; they didn't touch; he smelled like clean laundry. Will had plenty to say about the insulation on the project, and the bathroom tiles, and the kitchen built-ins. As Lowry watched and listened, he imagined hurtling backward within himself, growing smaller and smaller, somehow, behind his own face.

Home again, Lowry felt the high nervous energy of the week fall suddenly away. He was wrecked. His eyes would barely stay open. Minding Sal while Misha stretched and bathed, he was gobsmacked. He stared at the baby, at her serious, fat little face. She seemed to know something. She was learning to talk. He loved her with his whole heart.