

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Claire Carpenter for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing presented on May 2, 2008.

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Abstract approved:

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These stories follow the lives of women in a variety of roles—housewife, deli employee, artist, bird keeper, and sitter for the elderly—and at different stages of life. In “Beneath this Roof,” a young housewife’s life is rocked by a visit from an old friend who has changed in unexpected ways. “Semantics (*n. pl.*)” follows a sixty-two-year old widow in the early stages of Alzheimer’s. Her fragile grasp on her work and her words is ultimately challenged by the appearance of a man who reminds her of her recently dead husband. In “*En Plein Air*,” a newly married artist finally finds inspiration to paint in the midst of an unhappy marriage and hostile climate. A young bird keeper in “Enclosure” butts heads with her family when trying to explain her lack of desire for a romantic relationship. And finally, in “Surrogate,” a twenty-year old sitter for an elderly man struggles with her parents’ violent murders and her complicated relationship with this gentle eighty-year old suffering from Alzheimer’s. As a collection, these stories seek to explore various themes, including the role of memory and language and what happens when both seem to fail.

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Beneath this Roof: Stories

by
Claire Carpenter

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APPROVED:

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Claire Carpenter, Author

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Beneath this Roof: Stories

Beneath this Roof

A car revved its engine in the parking lot and a woman cried out "Oh!" just below my bedroom window. I thought maybe she'd been hit by one of the low-riders always speeding around our block. But the parking lot was a hundred feet away and the woman sounded more like a girl. And that girl's "Oh!" softened into three quick peals of laughter as she faded into the apartment next door.

I must've been sleeping. I felt least guilty for napping in the early afternoon. *Mrs. Dalloumy* was tented open beside me, one of its pages bent under at the part about Sally Seton, the wild girl with French blood who cut off flower heads and floated them in bowls of water. She seemed so thrilled by life, in a way I hadn't been for some weeks now. Even the girl who for a moment stood below my bedroom window "Oh"-ing about something in the heat couldn't compare with this Sally.

I thumbed through the book for the next break so I could get up and eat lunch. It would be goat cheese and roasted bell peppers on sourdough. The day before, I'd finally gone to United alone, without Lincoln by my side. Moving through the produce section, I found a bell pepper in my hand, the red skin soft beneath my thumb. I grabbed another one, then walked the aisles, filling my basket with those ingredients that would

most closely replicate the last dish Beth and I shared in Austin. The little South American restaurant with the sun-drenched patio somehow wasn't too warm. Even the water tasted so good, like the water Lincoln and I had drunk the summer before from the wall fountains in Italy, streaming from some Etruscan mouth. But in Austin, I wasn't thinking of Lincoln. Beth sat across from me, and we talked about books, about the elegant arc of a narrative, how the beginning can be so uncertain but the ending can settle it all with just a small turn.

Beth wrote poetry fiercely then, and I loved watching her with her notebook. Everything inspired her, before Mark arrived to distract her and move her away to Montana and the cold. That was four years ago, when we were still in college and our futures still so uncertain, but now I had the taste of the sandwiches in my mind, the sweet crush of cheese and pepper. Beth had understood me, even through the haze of her sangria and the May heat.

I wondered if she was unhappy in Montana, just as I wondered about my life here in Texas, in the dry heat of the day. It often smelled of cows, rotting cows, cows caked in their own feces and mud, the two indistinguishable against the black Angus hides. One small shift and the fast wind would descend on the cattle yards east of town and muck up the stench, then drag it over Lubbock like a fetid cloud. The stench always surprised me, a shock in the fresh dry air that sent me sprinting through the house, closing any windows I'd carelessly left open. But lately, unable to move quickly, I couldn't get to the windows in time. So I'd be left here in the quiet apartment with the reek of a thousand cows, so close to their deaths everyone could smell it.

I gazed at *Mrs. Dalloony* and smoothed out her page, then lay the book back down. I pulled on linen pants and lumbered downstairs as I had that morning, still foggy from too much sleep, when Lincoln fixed me toast with strawberry jam. He'd startled when I'd appeared behind him in the kitchen. For the first time in days, we'd eaten together at the kitchen table—a quiet breakfast. I'd grown accustomed to talking at his profile, in bed or in the car or on the couch. I was always lounging, tarrying in bed because he said I needed the rest. And he might have been right, but I suspected he was only repeating the doctor's comments made before we left the hospital.

During the first few days back at home, I'd slept enough to be officially rested. The pregnancy had been hard, yes, harder than my mother's. She'd assured me that pregnancy wasn't about nausea and that labor was nothing more than pressure. Unable to leave my sickly grandmother alone in Brownsville, she couldn't be there for the labor or the days following. So when the first contractions began and Lincoln wheeled me into the hospital and I was moved to a bed in a private room, I couldn't explain to her that the pain was unbearable. And the pain kept coming until eight hours later our nurse checked for Emily Marie's heartbeat and found nothing. An hour later, she arrived, not breathing.

No books I read or websites I searched could explain it. Emily had been so close, kicking and twisting and ready for weeks. She'd waited in suspended life, but we missed her, somehow, by an hour. If only I'd agreed to have a planned C-section on her due date, she would be here. But we'd both wanted a natural birth, and I was sure I could handle it. If only we'd saved her sooner, I told Lincoln. He'd winced at the remark and squeezed my hand.

Beth had called the next day from Montana. Her soft voice trembled. I wanted her to offer to come see me. To fly south all night and be at my side the next morning to kneel beside me and stroke my hand the way she had four years ago on the patio when I told her I would never marry Lincoln. It'll be all right, she'd said as she touched my hand. She meant that I didn't need a man and she didn't either. We needed no one except maybe each other. I had liked the idea at the time. Just the two of us plowing through graduate school, complaining about teachers and forgetting to wash the dishes in the new apartment we would share.

After wrapping myself in an oversized sweatshirt, I went down to the kitchen and sighed. It was clean and bright with the afternoon sun, the dahlias Lincoln had set in the grocery cart last week still full and yellow in their vase on the counter. I had to look away. That's how I was then, always on the verge of tears.

Lincoln had left out the ingredients for my standard lunch: wheat bread for the tuna salad, an apple. The tuna and sliced tomatoes would be in the refrigerator on the top shelf. I'd craved his help in the days after the hospital. I would lie between the cotton sheets, glad that no one expected me to move. He took his planned paternity leave and spent the week reading with me in bed and fixing me meals in that quiet way of his. For the first few days, he brought me cups of sage tea to help dry up the milk that kept my breasts swelling. Each day, I waited for him to break the silence, unable to ask him how he was doing. I didn't want to know. I feared the sap of energy from saying "Emily."

During that week, he'd grown protective of me, the way I'd imagined he would be of Emily. He dismantled the study-turned-baby room and put away the shower gifts: the countless pastel onesies with phrases like "Sweet Pea" and "Sugar Baby;" the plush

stuffed animals and diaper bags; the bottles, the bibs, the crib. He packed it all up and moved everything to a rented storage unit. But I asked him to keep the ultrasound pictures, grainy but beautiful, tucked away where I wouldn't see them until I was ready. It seemed unbearable to take them out of the house.

But only a week after the hospital, I found one in my copy of *Mrs. Dalloony*. She was only ten weeks in utero. Months before, I'd slipped it between the pages as a bookmark. When the picture fell out, and I saw the tight ball of gray floating in a sea of black, I cried hard, in deep painful sobs that would've hurt Lincoln to hear. And after I cried and was back in bed, with the picture behind the last page, I was glad we hadn't asked for a 3D ultrasound in those final weeks. Then I would have had a real photograph of Emily, round and pink with skin I could almost touch.

I placed the bread Lincoln had left on the counter back in its box and set the apple to the side. I reached instead for the sourdough and unwrapped it, then retrieved the bell peppers and goat cheese, laying them out on the cutting board. I sliced and quartered two pieces of the sourdough then lined them up, open-faced to wait for the rest. The cheese, still cold, crumbled slightly against the knife's edge. I pressed each crumb with my forefinger and slipped them into my mouth, enjoying the full-bodied sweetness. With the knife, I scooped up the four squares of cheese and dropped them onto every other piece of bread. Then I quickly seeded and sliced the peppers and added them to the stack. It was beautiful, like Christmas somehow, with the red and white so stark and unexpected. I swallowed tears, then retrieved the kabob sticks from the pantry and skewered everything into two long, elegant sandwiches.

If Beth were here, I thought, she would laugh and say I was wonderful for recreating the sandwiches. She'd insist I sit down while she fixed everything, then serve it with a waitress's flair. If there wasn't enough, she'd make something else, amazing and unexpected, like a goat cheese and pepper omelet or a green salad with tuna and black beans amidst the rest. We'd laugh again, and I could hold back the tears.

The dishes didn't take long to finish. The kitchen was clean and the apartment silent. I was on my way back up the stairs, when a car backfired, and it was like the fourth of July all over again—when the firecrackers and bottle rockets had gone on for hours, a few here and there, so close as if they were in the alley. I was big-pregnant then, uncomfortable in bed, in the heat, in my skin. That night, I dreaded going to sleep with the window cracked open, listening for those loud pops that sounded like gunfire—that could've been gunfire in this neighborhood. I had wanted at least one of them to be a bullet lodged in someone or something, just to give its noise a purpose. The excitement of the police and ambulance sirens would've been more personal and real than the sirens we heard each night screaming down 34th Street from the EMS station a few blocks away. I thought about telling Lincoln this, but he was already asleep, unaware of the firecrackers until the morning when I'd tell him what he'd missed, each one loud and distinct even through my earplugs.

When I reached the bedroom, the phone rang.

"I'll be coming out Friday," Beth said. "Only a week!"

My stomach lurched, and I briefly wondered about the cheese. "So they're letting you take off? For how long?"

“Just through Sunday. I had to switch with another girl in the store. I’ll owe her. But it doesn’t matter. We’ll have two whole days.”

“And Mark? He doesn’t mind?” I dropped onto Lincoln’s side of the bed and thought how good it would feel to lie down, just for a minute.

“Stop worrying, Anna! He won’t even know I’m gone.” She laughed on the other end. She had the kind of bright voice that made everything feel larger, more important.

“It’s been so long.”

She paused, and I heard a phone ringing, voices in the background. “But it’ll be fine. You know how we are.”

I smiled into the phone, hoping she could tell.

When Lincoln and I were married three years ago, in the small church with no air conditioning, Beth sat in the fourth row with Mark looking sheepish and quiet beside her. It was the first time I’d met Mark, and I thought he had very blond hair for a man who was almost thirty. He’d worn a suit and was sweating almost as much as Lincoln. He looked happy, as everyone did when they were around Beth.

At the reception, she brought him over and introduced us. She seemed nervous, her smile shaky, which I enjoyed, if only for the moment, since I was usually the one seeking approval. Even in her moments of doubt, she was strong in a way I could never be. So when I pulled Mark into a hug and congratulated him on his lucky find, I was glad that she was noticeably relieved.

Then she leaned in and kissed me hard on the cheek. “Is he okay?” she whispered in my ear. “Of course,” I said, kissing her back. But I was eager and in a good mood, as

all brides are after the ceremony. It was my wedding day. I didn't have to grasp for attention in the presence of Beth. The attention was naturally mine. I could move on to other conversations, leave the two of them by the punch bowl, and not worry that all the focus would stay with Beth who would quickly charm everyone.

Within a year, Beth and Mark were married in Missoula, Montana. We'd almost missed the ceremony because I still wasn't sure about Mark. When Beth spoke of him, she sounded like she was in love, but she could be so patronizing, listing off his faults as if she expected me to respond in kind about Lincoln.

So a few weeks before the wedding, I asked her if she actually loved Mark. She said, "Of course," and then, "You're the one who doesn't like him, Anna. You think I still want to be single, don't you?"

"I just want you to be sure."

"Like you were with Lincoln?"

I couldn't explain how it felt to be sure about someone.

"There's more than one soul mate out there for all of us, you know that right?" she said. "But Mark is the one I found first, like you with Lincoln."

Three weeks later, I was her maid of honor. Beth commanded the ceremony in her dramatic strapless gown, nodding along with the minister and kicking her train around as she moved to the unity candle, drawing laughs from the guests. Mark laughed along with them, squeezed her hands and kissed her long at the end. He followed her to each table, to each cluster of waiting guests. He seemed happy, smiled at me when our eyes met.

I finally had to admit that he was nice. And Lincoln liked him, too, or at least said he did. But Lincoln thinks everyone's nice at first. He gives people the benefit of the doubt, gentle in a way I've never been. But he had to be prodded before he'd admit his true feelings. We struggled with this before Emily, back when I actually wanted to know how he felt even when he couldn't articulate it. I always said what I was feeling, or at least something very close to it. The truth was my aim, or at least what I thought was the truth at the time. Beth understood this.

She never questioned why I'd chosen Lincoln. When I told her we'd started dating, she joked that he was the kind of man you married because of how well the pictures would turn out. I'd laughed, enjoying the compliment. With his dark features and light blue eyes, he is, in many ways, too beautiful. That's precisely why I hadn't expected to marry him.

Some months ago, over dinner—a particularly crude attempt on my part at chicken Kiev—I'd asked Lincoln why he ever wanted me in the first place. He listed off a few predictable features, quickly, as if retrieving them from a file in his head: my smooth skin, full breasts, and a token virtue—honesty. Then I asked him again. "Because you would have me," he said tentatively.

"What kind of answer is that?"

"A real one. I wanted you and you would have me."

"Even from the beginning? Because I'm talking about the beginning here," I said, setting down my fork and knife, watching the herbed butter spread from the carved-out center of the chicken.

“You were the only woman I knew who didn’t run over me, who didn’t use my silence against me.”

I couldn’t help but smile at this. He was right. I let his silences last as long as they needed to. “But what about Beth? She wouldn’t have run over you.”

Lincoln was quiet for a moment, taking the time to chew a particularly tough piece of chicken. “I didn’t know Beth then.” He smiled and returned to his chicken. He had tried to make a joke. He’d met Beth at the same time he met me, at a house party our sophomore year. He’d approached her first and when she didn’t respond, he and I started talking. He and Beth would never have been good together.

I watched Lincoln pick at his chicken. I thought about adding to the joke, officially killing it, but I was too tired to think of something clever. I was pregnant then and didn’t know it.

I spent the next week wanting things to be perfect for Beth, but I needed Lincoln’s help. When I vacuumed the stairs, he lugged it up each step, and while I wiped down the sink, he stretched across the tub and scrubbed the tiled walls. In the early afternoons, I avoided the bedroom because it would’ve been too easy to lie down. Initially I missed the oversized down comforter, the cherry wood furniture, and the row of Gustav Klimt prints that hung on the opposite wall from the bed. But I’d grown sick of them; I had examined each facet of color, each shimmer of gold, each flash of green. On Thursday, I took them down and left the nails in the wall. Lincoln noticed, I was sure, but didn’t comment. That night in bed he held my hand and shifted me onto his shoulder, trying to comfort me because he knew so many things were wrong.

The day of Beth's arrival, I was embarrassed by my need to see her. Not only because she was going so out of her way to visit but because of the small apartment I was sure was still filled with signs of Emily, pieces we'd somehow forgotten—a pacifier left in a drawer or a bib folded in with the dish towels.

Lincoln picked her up from the airport late in the evening, and when I heard them slam the truck doors, I moved to the top of the stairs to appear gracious and put-together in my dark jeans and cream pullover. The door swung wide, and there was Beth with one bag in her hand, striding into the apartment as if it were hers.

I wanted to leap down the stairs and hug her. But all I could manage was, "It's been too long."

Her gaze shot up the stairs, and she smiled. "Anna! What are you doing out of bed?"

"Welcoming our long lost guest. You really shouldn't have come," I said, starting down.

"No, you stay there." She bounded up the steps in a moment, and we embraced. The smell of her had changed, though I couldn't name what it was before. Now, she was all wrapped up in a strange floral scent—a musky gardenia, or orchid—which seemed all wrong, too exotic. Her hair was different too, coiled in a bun with streaks of blond that appeared gray in the half-light.

"Would you like a drink?" I said just as I'd rehearsed. "Lincoln can mix you something."

"A margarita would be lovely," she said, loud enough for Lincoln to hear. "One for each of us!"

Lincoln didn't respond. I knew he was pausing in front of the liquor cabinet, deciding whether to suggest I not drink or simply let the moment pass and hope I'd have the sense not to since the doctors advised against drinking when there was danger of depression.

"We'll take them upstairs, in the sitting room," Beth called, as if he were a butler. "You do have a sitting room, right?"

I smiled and shook my head. "The living room's the best we've got."

"What about that yellow room there?" Beth said, looking past my shoulder. "I see a chair, two of them." She brushed past me and pushed the door open wide. "Yes, I'd definitely call this a sitting room."

It was the only other room on the second story. The week of the first sonogram, I'd painted it in a light wash of yellow and furnished it with a small loveseat and rocking chair. Lincoln's desk and television were replaced by the crib and changing table, but now they were back in their old places. I'd only been in it once since the hospital.

"Or maybe an office. I had no idea you were so industrious." Beth seemed to touch everything with her green eyes, taking stock. She settled into the corner of the loveseat and fingered the edge of the cushion. "What is this? Velvet?"

"Chenille. Isn't it so soft?" I said, standing at the doorway.

"Come sit, while we await our drinks."

I nodded, then stepped into the room. The color of the walls felt garish, like they were papered in lemon peel.

As I lowered myself into the rocking chair, Beth said, "Oh my," and popped up from the loveseat. "You should be sitting here. Where are my manners?"

“Back in Montana?”

She laughed and sat back down. “You’re right. I left them with Mark. He needs them more than me.”

Then there was silence. Small clinks could be heard from the kitchen. Lincoln was obviously taking his time. So I gazed at Beth; she wore a plunging brown top and a blue light scarf with the ends swept over her shoulders, showy as usual. But her face was hard and tired. And she’d put on some weight, an inevitability I hadn’t expected so soon. She’d always been what she herself called “curvaceous,” but now her waist was thicker, making her seem round rather than curvy. I felt less uncomfortable about the baby weight still heavy around my hips.

I wanted to ask what Montana had done to her, but we had two more days together, and I wasn’t going to be the one to spoil things. “How is the poetry coming along?” I said.

Beth sighed and seemed to relax. “Same as always.”

“Meaning that you write late every night?”

“Sure.”

“Does Mark mind?”

“He usually sleeps on the sofa in our sitting room. When we bought the house, I’d liked that room because I could do all of my writing there. But Mark’s appropriated most of it, the sofa mostly.”

I said I was sorry.

“Don’t be. I don’t mind the snoring, but he feels guilty about it. It’s actually kind of soothing, rather rhythmic, but he still insists on sleeping in the other room.”

“Seriously?”

She nodded. “It’s not that big a deal. We both sleep more soundly when we aren’t kicking each other.”

“No, about snoring being ‘soothing.’ You used to curse snorers and noise in general. Remember how you swore you’d never be with someone who snored?”

She laughed. “I was ridiculous. I know I only said that because back then—what, four years ago?—I was looking for any reason not to marry. Snoring is an easy characteristic to mark.”

Lincoln approached the doorway with a glass in each hand. Beth half-rose to take hers. “Thank you kindly, dear Lincoln.” She took a sip and made a loud *ah* sound. “No wonder Anna keeps you around.”

With a polite smile, he turned from her and glanced at me. He looked confused. I wanted to kiss him but that felt too personal to do right in front of Beth. I suddenly wondered what he and Beth had talked about during the ride back from the airport. Had they just sat in silence? Had they talked about me?

He set my glass on the side table and touched my knee. “I’ll be downstairs.”

I waited for him to descend out of earshot and then said, “What’s all this, Beth? Where are you?”

The ring of salt had smeared across her lips. She swallowed loudly then laughed again. “What’re you talking about? I’m right here, devouring this delicious margarita. Where did Lincoln learn how to make one like this? He should’ve displayed this particular talent when I first met him. He would’ve come off a lot better, I can tell you that much.”

“Stop it. This isn’t you.”

"What? Just a little joke. Are you upset I've changed?"

I didn't know what to say. Of course I was. She seemed to be stalling.

"Or are you trying to avoid why I'm here?" Beth looked at me with almost violent bluntness.

"I'm not avoiding it," I said in a small voice. "I don't have to talk about it, do I?"

"We don't ever have to talk about it as far as I'm concerned," she said coolly.

"But it's why I came, not to be questioned about who I am."

I searched for anger in her voice and found none.

"I should go to bed." I stood from the rocking chair, ignoring Beth's gaze.

"Good. I think we're all a little tired," she said, rising as well.

"That's not what I said."

Beth looked startled and touched my hand. "I just meant I think things will be better in the morning." She smiled and squeezed my hand just like she had back in Austin. She should've done that at the very beginning. "I'm still here."

I nodded and squeezed back. "Lincoln, I'm ready," I called out and then turned to Beth. "He still insists on helping me to bed, so I just go with it. Sometimes he even rubs my feet."

"Send him to my room when he's done." She winked and pulled at her scarf as I walked into our bedroom.

I almost went back to ask her to stop making jokes, to be herself, to leave Lincoln out of it, or to hug her hard, ask her if we could start the evening over. But Beth stepped into the bathroom, shut the door, and I heard the sudden crash of water in the bathtub. Lincoln was climbing the stairs, so I moved to the bed. I wondered if she'd use

the bubble bath I'd left out that morning. Ten minutes later, after Lincoln kissed both of my eyelids and then my mouth, the water was still straining through the pipes.

When I felt fingers on my cheek, my eyes were closed but I could tell it was still dark. I smelled something musky and floral, and the crispness of soap. I opened my eyes, and all at once, Beth was there beside the bed, crouching so she was eye-level with me, her palm soft and clammy against my warm skin. I swallowed and touched her hand on my cheek. I was thoroughly awake.

"Is something wrong?" I whispered, pulling out my earplugs. Lincoln breathed heavily over the trill of crickets outside.

"Insomnia. Nothing new."

I'd forgotten that Beth was an inconstant sleeper. One night in Austin, she'd woken up, left the apartment, and walked down to Sixth Street for several hours, wandering the bars and taking advantage of free drinks and group shots ordered by other college kids. In the morning, she'd told me about a young guy who'd tried to yank down her pajama pants when she squeezed past him in the bar. She'd demanded his drink, kissed him, then left. I'd asked her why she didn't wake me, why she didn't take me along. She only said, "I could never wake you with no reason." At the time I thought she was being considerate, but now, I wasn't so sure.

"What time is it?"

"A little after one." Withdrawing her hand from my cheek, she said, "Let's go get another margarita."

I swung my legs over the side of the bed and felt for my slippers with my socked feet. Beth stood to my left, a dark shape in the meager moonlight, almost touching me. I was still wondering why she'd woken me when Lincoln rolled over. I watched him over my shoulder. His eyelids fluttered open then he was on his right elbow, blinking hard.

"Honey, what's wrong? Are you feeling sick?" he said thickly.

"I'm fine."

He pushed himself up against the headboard. The bed sheet fell from his body; he looked naked with no shirt on. I wondered if Beth was thinking the same thing. He flicked on the bedside light, then jerked back when he noticed Beth standing at the foot of the bed. "What're you doing here?"

I was surprised then embarrassed by the harshness in his voice.

"We're just going downstairs for some drinks," Beth said casually.

"Did you wake Anna up?"

"It's fine," I said. "I'm fine. I want to go with her." I reached back and patted his hand.

"She needs her rest," Lincoln said, still staring at Beth. "How could you wake her up? How could you come into our bedroom?"

"I'm sorry," she said, lowering her voice, but she seemed unfazed by his anger.

"The door was open, and I only meant to wake Anna, and I only meant to talk for a little while, like we did in college. Guess I made a mistake."

She turned to go when I said, "Beth, wait. Lincoln, I can go have a drink if I want. I don't need your permission."

He gazed at me, then glanced away, as if I'd slapped him. He was acting like Beth had hurt us somehow by waking me up.

"I'll be back in bed soon."

He turned off the light and slid back under the covers. "Have a good time."

Blind in the darkness, I waited a moment for my eyes to adjust and then felt my way to the door. Beth was already gone.

In the kitchen, she mixed the drinks while I watched from the table. She wore emerald green silk pajamas with embroidery along the cuffs, and with each movement, the silk played about her wrists and danced around her ankles.

"I think I make a meaner margarita than Lincoln," she said, handing me a martini glass rimmed with coarse salt. Her eyes glowed a clear bright green above her pajamas, like marbles.

I smiled and we clinked glasses. Beth swallowed half of hers in one gulp, but I only took a small sip. It tasted harsh, more tequila than mix.

"Did you need to talk about something?" I asked.

"Nothing in particular." She smiled and licked up a clump of salt sliding down her glass. "I'm glad I made the trip. Looks like you need a little excitement."

I nodded.

"And I'm sorry about earlier. You know how I get nervous and start saying things to fill the silence."

"What's there to be nervous about?"

“Nervous isn’t the right word. But you know what I mean. I want this weekend to be perfect for you,” she said, tonguing the salt from the corners of her mouth. “But I just can’t seem to help ruining it.”

“You haven’t ruined anything.”

She didn’t look convinced but smiled anyway, her eyes still bright.

“Beth,” I said, looking down at my glass. “Do you think we’re still friends?”

“Of course. I was being stupid.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Well, if we aren’t friends, then what are we?” Beth laughed as she always did when I couldn’t, when it would’ve taken an energy I couldn’t summon. Hers was carefree, the kind of laugh I imagined Sally Seton had, the kind I was sure Clarissa Dalloway fell in love with.

I reached out and touched her hand, still soft but now cold from the drink. “I love what we are.”

“I do, too,” she said.

“Does Mark appreciate you?”

“Yes, I think he does. As much as anyone can appreciate someone else.”

I thought about this, about Lincoln. He still appreciated me, but in a different way, a way I could only describe as grateful. When I’d discovered I was pregnant, he’d hugged me hard, his hands trembling against my back. He’d first suggested the name Emily Marie and once we agreed on it, he would address my belly as Emily, even leaving notes to her, ones I’d pasted into the baby book.

"Want another one?" Beth asked, only grabbing her glass. As she stood to head for the liquor cabinet, she slipped her hand away from mine.

"Beth, do you love Mark?"

She stopped and gazed at me. Her eyes shone that same too-clear green in the kitchen light, as pale as the margaritas.

I imagined that I looked small and pathetic in my grey cotton nightgown. It was the most comfortable thing I could find after the hospital, but if I'd had more energy, I would've shopped for a new one before Beth arrived. Even so, I could never pull off silk pajamas.

"Anna, what're you asking me?"

I was asking if Montana made her lonely, if she didn't love Mark, if leaving Austin was her biggest mistake. But to ask was unfathomable because I knew what she would say: "You have Lincoln and I have Mark." She would know that wasn't the right answer. She would think that I was only emotional from losing Emily. That I wasn't stable, wasn't myself. And then she would fix another drink and wait for another moment when it would be okay for her to laugh again.

"I just want to know if you're happy," I said.

"Why, aren't you?" she asked, turning back to the tequila and margarita mix.

Her back still to me, I could make out the drawstring waistband of her pants, where the smooth ribbon had been pulled too tight against her hips, producing a bulge of skin that pressed into her silk top. She'd never underestimated her voluptuousness.

"I'm happy with you," I said.

She didn't drop the tequila or the shaker with a resounding clatter onto the countertop. She didn't sigh or inhale sharply. She just stood there, her streaked hair now tangled and loose across her shoulders. I knew that when she did face me again, she would be smiling with her mouth closed, the open shaker in her right hand, suddenly self-conscious in her silk pajamas. I wished I could hear Lincoln's footsteps heavy on the stairs, on his way down to help me back into bed.

When she turned around, her gaze met mine and she smiled as I knew she would, only with her lips parted so I could see her front teeth. She set down her drink, then moved to my side of the table and wrapped me into a hug, lacing her arms across my back and chest, clasping her hands on my left shoulder. Her musk was almost overpowering, as if she'd rubbed against something marked by an exotic animal. The scent's headiness made me close my eyes, and I relaxed into her body.

"I'm glad you're happy with me," Beth said, kissing the top of my head.

"You are?" I asked, looking up into her face, her nose only inches from mine. As she exhaled, I could feel her breath on my cheek.

"Of course, I am, Anna." She squeezed me and then I kissed her, soft as if kissing a bruise. She pressed back for a moment, then released me. She cleared her throat, then picked up her drink and took a swig, spilling a little down her chin. It dribbled down her neck until she caught it with her finger.

I waited for what she would say next, the salt and tang of her margarita on my lips. She was still right there, touching my arm with her silk, slippery and fine.

"After all," she said, catching my gaze and holding it, "what're friends for?"

I swallowed and closed my eyes again. I ached for her to move away from me and tried to block out her scent still clinging to me. But she hovered there by my right arm; I could feel her. "So you love Mark," I whispered.

"You know," she said, finally stepping away, moving back to her side of the table, "I think I love Mark more than I did when we first met." I opened my eyes. She lifted her arms, her sleeves falling down her forearms, and pushed back her hair, wrapping it quickly in a knot at the nape of her neck. "I think sleeping in separate rooms has actually helped. So when we come together, it's that much more special, you know?"

"No, I don't know."

"Ah, well," she sighed, then smiled, "every relationship is different." She folded her arms across her chest. "I probably should go back to bed. I can't fall asleep if I'm not at least trying, right?" She stood to go then said, "My God, is that one of her blankets?"

I followed her pointing finger to a stack of throws at the end of the couch. Margarita rose in my throat and waited there, burning.

She walked into the living room and thumbed through the stack and pulled at a tiny yellow corner. I willed her to stop, to realize what she was doing and just stop. But she kept pulling, and I couldn't look away. The soft yellow unfolded into a baby-sized square, hanging from Beth's fingers like a handkerchief.

"Lincoln," I whispered. I needed him.

"What?" She dropped it on the stack and came back to me, putting her heavy hand on my shoulder.

I folded my arms on the table then rested my forehead on them. She was there, standing next to me, pressing at me with her musk. I could see my grey nightgown

bunched on my lap and then the delicate yellow of the blanket. And Beth holding it with her sticky fingers; Beth dropping it like it didn't matter.

"Maybe I should go," she said, lifting her hand.

Her glass clinked against the sink and her footsteps receded into the living room. The stairs didn't creak and neither did the floor, even though I knew she was above me, beneath this roof.

Semantics (*n. pl.*)

Ruth waits just outside the backdoor, wearing the white apron with finger-shaped stains that prove she's been productive at the slicer. Sweat already beads in her pits, while Reggie stalls in the idling truck listening to the number three song of the week. Young people just can't be counted on. She pulls at her hairnet; it makes her feel like a cafeteria lady, one of those unfortunate old widows who think serving school kids by the hundreds is a substitute for feeding a husband.

At sixty-two she's the deli's token senior. She's only been working here two months, actually sixty-nine days, at the suggestion of her daughter. Lately, Ruth's been doing most things at Darcie's suggestion, like leaving the suburb of Deer Park for Houston.

Reggie finally rounds the truck and throws open the back. The opening steams, like a yawning mouth on a cold day. Ruth leans into the truck, presses her hand on the cool metal side. She loads her arms with the cold-hard cases of meat and says, "They look like animal parts."

"They *are* parts of animals," Reggie says, as if she can't figure out that meat comes from animals, from cows, pigs, and chickens, from the same animals that once mooed, oinked, and clucked from Darcie's toy barn.

Ruth pauses, makes sure she knows what she's saying. "What about olive loaf?"

He smirks. "Doesn't look like an animal though, does it?"

She turns away, picturing olive loaf with the little flecks of color, clearly not meat. She wonders if he knows about her condition, about the forgetfulness. But no one here knows, thank God. At least she doesn't think so. At Dr. Draper's office three months ago Darcie promised to keep the Alzheimer's to herself. "It's still so early," Darcie said.

Reggie can't know. He's probably a nice guy, she figures. He's young, just out of high school, and thinks he can treat her the way he does his own mother. He wears dreads; sometimes they're piled on top of his head like a fountain, or half-up and half-down, or in a braid. Her husband—dead eight months now—had lovely long hair, not dreaded, just straight and light brown. She makes the comparison every time, but tries not to dwell. Darcie has asked her not to *duell* on the accident, what a word.

Reggie lowers a case of bologna, and says, "What are you?"

"What kind of a question is that?"

"Slow down there. Retract the claws."

"I'm not a cat." She turns around with the meat, marches it into the blast of the cooler. When she steps back into the alley warmth, he says more kindly, "I meant, what do they call you? What's your job?"

She hates this question, but says, "Deli Associate."

"So you're the bitch."

"I'm not a female dog," she says, pushing back from the truck. "You don't have your definitions right."

He shakes his head, opens his mouth to say something, but Ruth turns so he can't say anything, her face hot. Words, words are important to her. No one else seems to understand. Reggie tosses down the last case of salami so hard that she has to fall to her knees to catch it without snapping her back. She presses her lips together. He's probably very nice to his friends, but she isn't one of them. On the other hand, maybe he's a jerk, a loser. He drives around all day. He's a meat man. Alex calls him a "queer. A meat man queer," whenever Reggie shows up late, which is often. She wonders if people besides Alex call him queer. She would never use such a word, such a new definition. Alex has his own definitions and labels and names, but doesn't know their meanings, not like Ruth.

Her mother, a Conroe librarian for over thirty years, collected dictionaries. Their favorite game involved guessing the first, second, and third (if it existed) definitions of common, underestimated words—forgive, pinch, notions. Her mother collected mostly *American Heritages* but had one *Shorter Oxford* that Ruth inherited. She tried to recreate the games with Benji, but he only chuckled and let her do the guessing. But Darcie enjoyed thumbing through the dictionary for *hole* and getting caught up on *hob* and *hogweed* and *hokum*—playing semantics. Just like she does now as a lawyer.

After Ruth fits the last of the product into the cooler, Alex asks her to do some slicing instead of moving to the counter. He's always hovering around her, changing orders, says he's keeping her on her toes, an interesting idiom. She doesn't like her toes, all too long, like thumbs. But she does like slicing, and he seems to have noticed she's good at it.

Alex has a bulldog's face: his nose is pinched in a permanent sniff, deep wrinkles down to the corners of his mouth. When he's old, he'll have meaty jowls that shake when he yells at whoever still works here. He's only in his thirties and proud of himself and this deli he bought cheap, as if he's some sort of savvy businessman instead of a man who sells thin slices of meat.

"Your daughter's here," Alex shouts. He's always shouting even when they're in the cooler, back to back, shifting around meat.

When he shouts, Ruth's in the cooler pulling out a ham spiral to slice because they're running low at the counter where Melly and Alex are assembling sandwiches for the eleven o'clock crowd, usually the new tellers who have to take the early lunch. They remind her of Reggie, young and confident. They rub it in her face with their blond ponytails, contact lenses, and clothes bought on the faith of the first paycheck. They have possibility; they have new definitions, mutable ones. Ruth wonders what they think of her, an old woman in a deli.

The deli, after the cooler, feels warm and wet, like a windless day at the beach, like Benji's funeral. But Darcie's here. Ruth sets down the ham and straightens her hairnet. And there Darcie is in front of the register, back straight, hair swept back and up. Ruth shuts her eyes for a moment and pictures Darcie as a six-year-old in a crisp new dress bought for Easter but bought too early so that she's already wearing it. White buckled shoes, touched up with polish, and white lacy socks and a long ribbon finishing off her braid. Ruth often pictures her this way, legs dangling from a deli counter stool, the one in the corner by the window. She would never tell Darcie this; Darcie already worries enough.

“Mom,” she says. She has a six-inch pastrami on rye in a paper-lined plastic basket and a sixteen-ounce soda with a lid and a straw. The shoulder seams of her business suit sag and the waist is loose. She used to be full and soft, but during law school, she slimmed into angles. Except, when she smiles, her cheeks fill out and she looks happy and young. But she doesn’t smile now, only says, “Aren’t you hungry?” as she leads the way to their usual two-seater by the door.

“It’s only eleven.” Ruth sits across from her, her fingers still tingling from the cooler. She doesn’t know what temperature they are, how to describe them, but if Darcie asks, she’ll try. “You’re here early.”

“My meeting ran late.”

“At the bank?” Ruth says, watching a teller sit down beside them.

“What?”

“The salami was late this morning.” Ruth bites her cheek for the bank comment. Darcie doesn’t work at a bank. Darcie’s never worked at a bank.

Darcie gazes past her. Ruth wants to snap Darcie into focusing on her. But all Ruth can think to say is something about Benji, and lately, when she talks about Benji, Darcie’s face turns serious, making her look even thinner, and sad. So Ruth doesn’t say what she wants to about the way Benji used to make foot-long hoagies on summer Saturdays for them to eat out in the backyard, under the fort. And how, one Saturday in particular—Darcie must’ve been five because of her bowl haircut, Ruth can remember it so clearly—they tossed a blanket over the sandy grass and huddled there, chowing down on the sandwiches, until Benji pinched some sand and tossed the grains at Darcie. And then they laughed, spilling sodas and smashing the sandwiches.

"I'll come by later to pay the bills," Darcie says.

Ruth focuses on the present, the chip in the tabletop, the looseness of Darcie's grey suit, like a bag. "Of course," she says.

"You've set them out? On the table? The stamps, too?"

"Yes." Ruth lies. Darcie likes order. It's exhausting to riffle through the mail that fills up her mailbox right around 4:30 and figure out what's a bill. Feeling the envelope for the hard plastic of a fake credit card, determining if the information is really time-sensitive, or whether she should open an envelope when there are no markings at all. Sometimes those are the bills, so inconspicuous, like secrets.

"Good. Because we need to discuss them. You've been signing up for magazines and credit cards you don't need."

Ruth shakes her head. She doesn't remember signing up for any new card, only renewing a few.

"So I need to figure out what you've done so I can call and cancel them."

Darcie's face is solemn, though Ruth knows she's trying to be helpful. But whenever Darcie is helpful, she usually treats the problem like one of her cases at work, no gentleness. "Why are you judging me?" Ruth says, trying to keep her voice soft and patient.

"Mom, I'm just laying out the facts. We need to clean up your bills, that's all. And talk to the bank."

"You were at the bank today?"

"No, were you?"

“Just the tellers.” Ruth breaks Darcie’s gaze, the flush rising. She’s done it again. Darcie doesn’t work at a bank. Darcie’s never worked at a bank. If Darcie would just let her explain, but Darcie already knows. The pamphlets from the doctor’s office explained everything—the confusion, the problems with language, the unexplainable aggression. And tonight, if Darcie finds Ruth’s mail scattered around the front door of her little studio apartment, she’ll know about the confusion, that Ruth is officially confused. She breathes in, trying to calm herself. She returns to what she knows. “I get off at four.”

“I know. I’ll be by at seven.”

“I know when you’re coming by. I know about the bills. I haven’t forgotten. I don’t forget everything, you know.” Ruth feels it rising in her, what the pamphlets call “agitation or anxiety.” But she can’t remember what time Darcie said she’d come by. Maybe she never did. But Ruth knows when Darcie gets off work. She doesn’t have to be reminded. She takes a calming breath, part of her recommended “soothing ritual,” but it doesn’t work. “You don’t understand,” Ruth says. “And neither does Alex.”

“What’s Alex been saying to you?”

“He doesn’t have to say anything.”

“Tell me what’s going on, Mom. I’m here to help.” She wipes her fingers on the napkin then folds them on the table. “Do we need a weekend away? Should I call Rose? El Paso would be nice.”

“It’s changed, I’m sure and Rose has— ” and Ruth can’t think of it. That word for the illness that takes over your body.

“A goiter. I think she said goiter.”

“You’ve talked to her? She called you?”

"A few weeks ago, remember? She called when I was at your place."

She hasn't spoken to Rose, not in awhile, at least two months. She wants to say something back, throw this fact in Darcie's face, but she's unsure. She hates not being able to rely on what she knows. And even if she knows she's right, it doesn't mean Darcie will believe her. Ruth glances over her shoulder. This time Alex is eyeballing her, she knows it's because she's wasted three dollars out here at the two-seater with her daughter. She could've sliced half the spiral by now, careful to keep her plastic gloves away from the blade and to pat her apron every so often so he knows she's working. Alex's apron is neat and clean against his khakis and black button-up, button-down. The heat rises to Ruth's cheeks, not embarrassment this time. "Did you tell him?" she says. "Did you tell Alex?"

Darcie opens her mouth then closes it, those painted pink lips. To be fair, they're not hot pink but pinker than seems appropriate, than would be appropriate for Ruth to wear in a deli, though Darcie's taken her by the make-up counters in Macy's, picked out a few tubes of lipstick and a powder that speckles the front of Ruth's shirt when she tries to use it. She's never worn make-up, not even when she dated Benji, not even at his funeral, not even when she interviewed with Alex and demonstrated that she could manipulate a deli slicer, smooth and quick.

All Darcie says is, "A weekend away would be nice. But first your finances." As if she can just ignore Ruth's question. "Don't forget," Darcie says, "I'll bring over dinner, at seven."

"You don't need to. I have dinner." Ruth holds her gaze. There could be something in the freezer.

"Do you?"

Ruth wants to go back to the question. She looks over her shoulder to confirm that Alex is, in fact, eyeballing her. But he's in the back, in the cooler, talking on the phone to his new wife, a vegetarian, though Ruth's seen her eat meat. Ruth should bring back up the question, throw it in Darcie's face. But all she can think of is dinner. *Do I have dinner?* She's not sure anymore.

The bell jingles and a young woman, even younger than Darcie, steps into the deli. "Hey, Darcie. I thought you had a business lunch."

Darcie turns to find the voice and then straightens, sets down her sandwich. "I had to cancel last-minute."

The young woman nods, glances at Ruth. "Aren't you going to introduce us?"

Ruth touches her apron, curses the hairnet itchy behind her ears.

"Of course. Jane this is Ruth. Ruth, Jane."

When Ruth half-stands to shake her hand, she sees, in Jane's other hand, a sheet of letterhead for Darcie's law office. And a scrawled list of names and sandwiches.

"Is this your mother?"

"Oh, yes. I'm sorry," Darcie says.

"It's so nice to meet you." She touches Ruth's arm. "I'm so sorry for your loss."

Darcie is watching Ruth, she can feel it. So Ruth only says, "Thank you," and leaves it at that. Doesn't bring up the accident or Galveston or Tiki Island. Even though it's unfair that Darcie talks about Benji at work and won't talk about him with her, about the way he died, how it just doesn't make sense.

"I think it's so great that Darcie got you this job. So great." Jane smiles, then glances down at her list. "Well, I better get these orders. Nice meeting you. See you back at the office."

Ruth doesn't watch Jane head for the counter because she's watching Darcie who's still sitting straight up as if she's in court. No, as if she's the guilty one on the other side of the aisle, trying to look put-together.

"Got me?" Ruth says quietly.

"Mom. You know I found this job for you." She pulls at her suit. "That I liked the food, heard good things about Alex."

"What'd you have to do to convince him to hire me?"

"Mom."

"Did he need to hire a senior to make himself look good?"

"Calm down."

"You told him, didn't you? You told him about it? Does he think I'm crazy?"

"Of course not! If you were, he wouldn't have hired you."

Ruth wishes she and Darcie were alone, somewhere less noisy. If they were back at their old home in Deer Park, Ruth could raise her voice, stalk across the living room and stare back at Darcie. "Why did he hire me?" she says as quiet and controlled as she can.

"You needed a job, Mom. You were getting so restless."

"In that horrid little studio. Who wouldn't? Moving me away from our home. Taking me away from Benji."

"Closer to me. Remember, we decided it was for the best."

"I'm not crazy. I'm not confused. Benji never thought those things about me."

"Let's not talk about Dad."

She never wants to talk about him, as if he'll hurt her if she does. She's too afraid of being sad. "Maybe I want to talk about him," Ruth says.

"Not now, not at work." Darcie's face turns serious, even though Ruth hasn't said a word about Benji's laugh or his coin collection or the accident. "You'll get all riled up. And I don't want to go through this."

"Go back to your bank."

"Mom, I don't work—"

"And clear out my accounts and sign them over to yourself. Just take it all."

"Don't be ridiculous. Just calm down." Darcie tosses the paper and the napkin and the rest of the soda past the trash flap.

"Alex knows, doesn't he?"

"No, Mom. I never told him. Why would I do that?" She kisses Ruth lightly on the cheek, avoiding the apron. "I'll be over tonight."

Ruth watches Darcie walk to her Grand Cherokee, unlock it, flip down the visor, pull on her seatbelt. And then she's gone, leaving Ruth here in the deli with Alex. She turns around and faces the deli patrons and the counter. Alex is back fixing a sandwich, has no eyes for her. Maybe he won't see her as she passes into the back to the slicer, to the ham spiral. At the slicer, with fresh gloves on, she tries to think only of the meat and the job with which she's been entrusted.

"You need to finish slicing," Alex says from the doorway.

She stands still, the still-wrapped ham in her hands. But she can feel him behind her, hovering. Maybe Darcie didn't tell him, but he knows. He must. She can feel his intimate knowledge of her, the condescension, the pity. She can think of nothing worse than Alex's pity. And now she's thinking of the way she must look from behind—the white apron strings not covering her wide bottom.

But she refuses to turn around and meet his gaze, so she imagines what he looks like there in the doorway. He's probably standing with his legs spread, his authoritative stand. She imagines his shirt is untucked, that his wife is hiding in the cooler behind the bacon. But the silence is building, so she must say something, something to make him go away. "I never started."

"Then start doing it."

"I will."

"Good. And tell your daughter to keep coming by if she's gonna buy her own sandwiches."

"She paid."

"Tell her to keep it up."

Why, Ruth thinks, because you're good friends with Darcie? Because you both think you know something? She turns on her heels to face Alex and ask him just what he thinks he knows about her. But he's not in the doorway. She can hear him out front saying, "Six-inch or foot-long?"

She sighs, turns back to the meat. Alex exhausts her, but she likes the slicer. And she likes Melly who looks like Benji's sister with her trim figure and round wide eyes, which reminds her of Benji, of the warm air blowing off the Gulf in Galveston, of the

gritty beaches brown with washed-up dirt from the Mississippi, barricades of seaweed or kelp or both. She hasn't been to the beach in ages, not since Benji's funeral. Who holds a funeral on a beach in November? Benji's family, the kind of people who can get away with such things without seeming too eccentric. And it was Galveston and cold and the park didn't mind the business.

Ruth didn't have to ask Darcie to take the week off from work. When Benji's family—his sister and two brothers—offered to handle the funeral, Ruth just nodded at Darcie who said into the phone, "Thank you. Whatever you can do." She helped Ruth pick out a black dress at the Galleria Macy's, and black gloves and a black hat she had to pin into Ruth's hair to keep it on in all that Galveston wind. Darcie held Ruth's sweaty hand as they walked the wooden bridge over a grassy sand dune between the parking lot and the rows of white chairs facing the surf. Ruth leaned into Darcie, and Darcie gently stroked her back. And when Benji's family asked if Ruth would stay in the Deer Park house, Darcie didn't explain that Ruth would be moving up to Houston, though she must've known already. And Ruth silently thanked her for that, too.

Ruth unwraps the spiral and fits the flat side against the blade. It fits perfectly, like a peg into a hole. It's reassuring. She can't mess it up. The brown skin gleams and is that strange smooth through her plastic glove. As she pushes the slicer back and forth, the sixteenth-of-an-inch slivers piling up on the wax paper, she thinks hard about Darcie, repeating what was decided: She'll be by at seven, she'll be by at seven. Ruth won't make dinner. She'll remember that Darcie's bringing dinner. Ruth could make hot dogs, though, boil two weenies and fold white bread around them. It could work, if Darcie forgets. The irony would be perfect, but Ruth wouldn't say anything, only smile.

Alex leans around the corner. "You almost done?"

She stiffens, thinks of her bottom and those apron strings, but says, "I've only just started."

"How much so far?" he says, shuffling up beside her. He eyes the slicer with his dog eyes.

"Enough for a few sandwiches."

"I need you to take over the register. No sandwich prep, just the till. You can do it?" He picks up the pile of ham.

He's always making her change in midstream, switch horses in mid-stride. She just wants to keep slicing. Maybe it's a test to see just how far gone she is. Ruth nods and says, "Of course."

"You sure?"

"She's done it before," Melly says from the doorway. She grins at Ruth, lifting her apron over her head. She's trying to be sweet, Ruth knows. Trying to show solidarity. Gentle with Ruth because she reminds Melly of her grandmother. But Ruth ducks her gaze. Melly knows, too. Yes, she must. Ruth pulls at her hairnet and knows what Melly must think of her. Like her grandmother.

Pulling off her plastic gloves, Ruth follows Alex out to the front where a line of people stare up at the chalkboard menus above the counter. Their eyes drop to Ruth and Alex. He points her to the register and she moves to the whining computer. "Remember to ask if they want to add a drink and a side," Alex is saying into her ear, so close she hears the spit against his lips. "Don't forget the sides—potato salad, fruit salad, coleslaw, chips."

"I haven't forgotten."

Alex pats her shoulder, then shifts back to the sandwich-making line, leaving her with the register and a young woman with a baby on her hip.

Ruth punches in the turkey melt on white, adds on a fruit salad, a large drink. The young woman smiles at Ruth. Ruth smiles at the baby—chubby like Darcie before she discovered no carbs, then only good carbs, then only protein, or fruit, or vegetables, or nothing. She clings to each diet like a definition, just like she clings to her job—a job of discerning the meanings of convoluted sentences and inscrutable people.

The five dollar bill is crisp and smooth between her fingers. The till pops open against her stomach. She pulls the two quarters, nickel, and three pennies into her palm and drops them into the young mother's hand. She could be good at this, too.

For a few summers long ago, Ruth would send little Darcie to a neighbor's and drive over to the hardware store to watch the register. These were usually Saturdays when Benji was short-handed. She mostly just sat on a cracked vinyl stool, sucking on a root beer Dum Dum she snatched from the free bowl by the register. When a customer walked up with baggies full of nails or a wrench set, all she had to do was type in the price on the sticker label, hit the green button, and then out would pop the till and the receipt. And Benji would wander out from the back every now and then, rest his hand on her shoulder, kiss her cheek.

"A six-inch tuna on wheat," says an older man with a thick black mustache. And all she can think is thank God Benji shaved his mustache just after Darcie was born. He looked like a child molester with that thing. Unfair, she knows. Not all mustached men are child molesters.

"Side and a drink?"

He nods at the coleslaw and just wants a plastic cup for water.

"That'll be four fifty-three."

He digs out a five, not as crisp as the young mother's, but still smooth, as if it's always lived in a wallet. She punches in five zero zero. The till pops open.

"Wait," he says, hand in his front pocket. "Let me give you the fifty-three cents."

"I've already rung it up," Ruth says. She tries not to panic. Maybe he won't find any change.

"This'll make it easier." He sets each coin down on the counter, then pushes them toward her.

This is not easier. Completely wrong word.

"Now it's nice and even," he says, smiling.

"I'd prefer not to."

"Why not? It's easy. Just give me a one back. I gave you the fifty-three cents. That's it."

"No." She shouldn't have said "no" like that but what else could she say? He's pushing those coins toward her and she can't do the math in her head.

"What?"

"How much was the original price?" she asks to buy time.

"Doesn't it say it on your screen?" He leans over the register, so she reaches out a hand and gently pushes him away. "Excuse me, lady!"

"What's going on?" Alex appears, his voice deep, managerial.

"I don't need your help," she whispers.

The mustached man explains it, not in a very fair way, but explains that he gave her fifty-three cents, "True," she adds because it is. He isn't a liar. He explains that he just wanted a simple dollar back. Simple. And then he says she pushed him.

"Is this true?" Alex looks most like a bulldog when he's being accusatory because his eyes scrunch up and he frowns extra hard instead of yelling, deepening the creases running down to his mouth.

"He wanted me to give him more money back than he gave me."

"Not true!"

"I was being careful."

"Take the change, put it in the till, and give this man his one."

Ruth does as he says, then slams the drawer shut. Her face is hot with the flush of embarrassment. She was just being careful, wasn't she? She'd been told to always err on the side of caution. She was erring. "I'm not stupid," she says. "I don't need you babying me."

"Calm down," he says then touches her arm. She wrenches it away. She's sure he'll fire her now. Just shove her out the back door and tell her to never come back. But she didn't forget anything. She was just being careful.

He straightens his shirt and clears his throat. Ruth tries to keep his gaze, not bow to shame. He's thinking about her Alzheimer's, she knows. Thinking about all that's wrong with her. The mustached man is still watching along with the rest of the customers, lined up behind the glass. "You need to go on lunch," he says loud enough that everyone can hear.

"It's not one yet."

"Either that or leave early, without pay."

"I'd rather slice," she says, reaching for the box of gloves behind her.

"I don't think that'd be very wise."

"You and Darcie both think you're so wise." The mustached man watches her, thinks he's so wise, too. "Fine," she says. "I'll need my usual."

She waits in the back until she's sure that the gawkers from earlier are in their seats, focused on their food. She knows what they're thinking about her, that she's a sad crazy woman. It's as if everyone knows about her condition, as if Alex posted a sign in the window warning everyone. And they still come anyway, to pity her. I just need to slice, she thinks, stay back here.

Melly comes back with Ruth's sandwich. Melly doesn't look mad even though she's been forced to end her own lunch early. But she's always gentle, helping Ruth carry the sliced meat to the counter, even helping Ruth unload Reggie's truck if she gets in early enough.

"I'm sorry about earlier," Melly says. She hands Ruth her sandwich.

Ruth cradles the basket against her chest, doesn't want to have to explain herself, but finds herself saying, "I was just being careful. Alex would be even madder if the till didn't reconcile."

"You're right." Melly smiles, gentle again.

Ruth wonders if it's pity, not gentleness. I should just ask her, she thinks, but she doesn't. She doesn't really want to know. Sighing, she looks down at her sandwich. She should just eat back here.

Melly turns to head back for the counter, then says, "You staying back here?"

Ruth shakes her head, holds the basket tighter, and walks out with Melly. She's focused on the same two-seater she and Darcie used. It's by the window so she can train her gaze on the people outside the deli. She imagines whispering around her, then breathes deeply and reminds herself that no one cares, except for maybe the mustached man. He sits near the counter, eyeing her as she walks by. As if she might snatch back that dollar. She focuses on the two-seater, imagines it as an island.

She's almost finished her sandwich when a man about Benji's age passes her on the way to the counter. He's tall and stoop-shouldered, his salt-and-pepper hair wispy. He has small eyes and a round nose, the kind of nose old men usually have. Noses and ears keep growing as you get older, she once read.

If she were to call out, "Benji!" would the man turn? Of course, he wouldn't be Benji, but it would be a relief to call out the name and see someone turn as if answering, not in judgment or worry. She just misses him. Losing him the way she did—the accident, what a word—knocked something loose, or that's the way Darcie puts it. Euphemisms don't make it any easier. Ruth doesn't think anything's loose and has told Darcie as much. But Darcie just says, "Were you forgetting stuff before Dad died?" And then Ruth lies. She's sixty-two. Of course she forgets things. Like all those times she forgot to turn off the oven after dinner and halfway through her wedge of banana cream pie, she'd stand for more Cool Whip and turn it off on her way to the freezer, as if she were just fiddling with the knob. Or the time she was at the corner of 14th and Center and couldn't remember whether to turn right or left to get back home. But then she remembered, of course. She always remembered, before Benji died.

The non-Benji's cowboy boots click in a slow plodding way. At the counter, he orders a foot-long ham on honey wheat with "pickles, a few onions, those green peppers, oil and vinegar, and a coleslaw." Melly stacks it all swiftly, she's so young. Then she sets it and the coleslaw in a paper-lined basket.

Ruth chews down the last of her turkey as he plods to a booth just behind her. She still wants to call out Benji's name. But she takes a sip from the water, unpins her hairnet, then stands. His booth smells of vinegar. He has a mouthful of meat, the soda in his right hand, ready to wash it all down. He's eating her ham. "That ham is fresh," she says.

He looks up and takes her in with those small brown eyes. "Sure is."

"I sliced it only moments ago."

He nods, then takes another bite and glances away. He's the only one here who didn't see Alex humiliate her. Just thinks I'm on my lunch break, which I am. She smiles at him for that.

"So what've you been doing today?" she asks. She doesn't sit across from him, though she wants to.

He coughs on the big bite, swallows. "Doctor's appointment over at St. Joseph's."

"I had Darcie there."

He nods again.

"You remind me of my dead husband." She blushes, but keeps herself from clapping a hand over her mouth.

He swallows, studies the basket. "I'm sorry."

"He had long light brown hair, like a hippie," she says, trying to explain his connection to Benji. "He shaved the mustache long ago, thank God." She glances over her shoulder at the mustached man in his booth, hunched over the *Chronicle*.

"Sounds like a good man," he says, poking at his coleslaw.

Thank God this man is nice. No ring on his left hand. Maybe he's like her, widowed and alone. "Benji sure was."

"Benji?" He searches her face. "Benji. What's the last name?"

"Benjamin Louis Sherwood." Saying his full name feels good.

"He worked the hardware store in Deer Park, at 14th and Luella?"

She nods. She knew this man was special. She swallows, then says, "He ran it, managed it."

"Benji," he says thoughtfully. "Didn't he die in that car accident on the Galveston Causeway?" He makes a noise as if he's exhaling and clearing his throat. "So unexpected."

"It wasn't an accident."

"Really?"

"No evidence of a wreck," she says, dropping to the seat across from him. "No damage to speak of. They found him washed up on Tiki Island, carried there by high tide, they think. Died of drowning, they say. Lungs filled with water. No heart attack, no trauma. They labeled it an accident," she says, "but it doesn't make sense. Why was he going to Galveston? It was winter." Her breathing is loud, and her fingers have turned white because she's been pressing them on the table, flat-palmed. She should slow down, stop. He doesn't need to know all this.

"It's a shame not to know," he finally says around his straw.

She nods. They can agree on that. But she can't seem to stand up and walk away. "I don't think it was an accident," she says. "Accidents imply randomness, chaos, as if we have no control. Benji was in control." Her hands shake. She should sit on them, quiet them, but they fly around as she speaks, like she's making shadow puppets on Darcie's bedroom wall. "Then how could it happen? Accident just isn't right. It's the wrong word entirely. Just like queer, bitch, words like that." She pauses, waiting for him to nod, but he just sucks at his drink. "I simply can't believe it was only an accident."

"Really is a shame." He's almost whispering.

"It wasn't chance. I don't believe in—what's the word?—not fortune but the other one. Liberal." She pauses, repeats the word to herself. No, not *liberal*. She thinks hard, what is the word? There *is* a word for it. "Luck. Yes, luck. I don't believe in that." The red hot embarrassment rises again. I should've known *luck*. I do know *luck*.

He stabs at the coleslaw then shoves a big bite past his lips, a little of the dressing on his lip. He quickly wipes it away. He needs to speak, tell her he has trouble with words, too. What do they call it? Senior moment. Yes, he has to have those. He doesn't care that she forgot such an easy word as *luck*. But he keeps chewing that coleslaw.

He can still help her figure things out about Benji, really get to the bottom of this the way Darcie won't let her do. He knew Benji after all. She looks back at the counter and Alex meets her gaze, briefly. He's been watching her, but she has ten more minutes.

She wants to apologize for coming on too strong. Ask him for his help, but instead says, "Would you like to meet his daughter?"

"I really should be going." He swallows the last of the sandwich, gathers his trash.

I've scared him, she thinks. But he knew Benji, which means he knew me.

He walks his trash to the bin, and she finds she's on her feet, too. At the door, he turns to say goodbye, and steps back when he sees her right there next to him.

"Did he ever say anything about me?" she asks.

"I'm sorry," he says in that almost-whisper, "it's been almost a year."

"A year in March," she says. "Six months from now."

He touches his chin, averts his eyes. "Sure, yes. His wife and a daughter. But that's all. I'm sorry."

Bowing his head, he ducks out the door, the bronze bell tinkling as it closes. He heads north up Chimney Rock. She can follow him with her eyes through the big glass pane windows that she wipes down every other morning. He's shoved his hands in his jean pockets, as if it's cold, and doesn't look back. She wonders if he wants to look back, turn around even and come back to reminisce, but a reversal like that would be too embarrassing.

She doesn't take off her apron when she walks past the counter. When Melly asks if she's going to help out front, Ruth shakes her head. She feels bad about ruining Melly's lunch, but this is important. In the back, the slicer gleams, but she resists the urge to slice something. She needs to focus, gather her things. Darcie will be by at seven.

Ruth should've asked his name. If only he'd come by earlier, he could've met Darcie. She should've guessed his name. Benji was always talking about the guys at the store, the regulars who came in on Saturdays with the excuse of buying another Phillips head screwdriver—John, Connor, Bill. Now when she tells Darcie about this conversation tonight—after setting out the bills, the stamps—Darcie'll ask, "So what was his name?" and when Ruth has nothing to tell her, Darcie will look down at the stamps

and say, "So why did you sign-up for a Visa when you already have a Mastercard?" And Ruth won't be able to answer that one either.

"I need you out front," Alex says from the doorway. He's always appearing in doorways, like a mother with a wooden spoon.

"I've got to go." She wants to go on to say "and I won't be back in the morning," but of course, Darcie will make sure that she does come back, to wash the big windows. Benji never made her feel like a maid. He would've hated seeing her with a squeegee, water dribbling down her arm.

"Your shift isn't over until— "

"—four. I know." Ruth tosses her purse over her shoulder, marvels at her level-headedness, then marches to the backdoor past Alex who stands stock-still, like a plaster statue sold at plant nurseries, next to the bird baths. Then she pushes open the door and steps out into the warmed stink of gasoline. The alley's pitted concrete glares with sunlight. She almost expects to see Reggie pull up in his truck then step down and hurl an insult and some meat at her. But the alley is empty.

Her old Honda is parked on the side street, behind Alex's 4Runner. She lives only six blocks away in that cramped little studio but prefers not to make the sweaty walk and arrive at work smelling stale. She presses the A/C button then twirls the fan knob to 5. The air is hot at first, like the wind off the Bay, exactly like the wind off the Bay in August, when just the movement of air is refreshing. Benji embraced the heat; he was made for Texas. Not like Ruth, who hates the sweat that wets her bra, turns white shirts yellow in the pits.

Shifting into first, she pulls up to the stop sign and waits for the Beechnut traffic to slow with the rhythm of the lights. Beechnut. She smiles, didn't even have to look at the sign. He's probably still walking north, maybe waiting at the Bellaire light. It's only been two minutes at the most. Probably couldn't find a close parking spot.

She should invite him over for dinner tonight. Benji would've enjoyed that. He was always inviting people over, giving her only an hour or so notice to thaw an extra pound of ground beef, send Darcie to the store for more potatoes. She craved that crackle of anticipation as he burst through the door and introduced them to Mary or Justin or a family of three. Soon he'd be laughing, the kind that makes other people laugh without meaning to. After the visitors left, Ruth's cheeks would ache, and Benji would chuckle and say the exercise was good for her.

She scans for the salt-and-pepper hair, but sees no one at that light or at the corner of Clarewood, except three small boys and a girl who looks too young to be their mother. She almost rolls down her window to listen for his cowboy boots clicking on the pavement, but it's far too hot.

Maybe he's already driving back to Deer Park. She hasn't been back since Darcie moved her up here, not even to see their old house. It was sold to a couple with a skinny baby and an enormous black SUV. But Ruth remembers more vividly the day she and Benji bought the house. The realtor was yapping too much, like a nervous dog. But they'd ignored her and started imagining where their few pieces of furniture would go—the sofa in the corner by the sliding glass door; the bed next to the closet, no, across. They didn't have to say anything to each other about the extra bedroom because the walls were already bordered with blue and green ducks.

She can drive by and check on the magnolia Benji dug into the ground that first spring, on her way to the hardware store, where she'll probably find him, then bring him back for dinner, introduce him finally to Benji's daughter. Then Darcie will believe her and she'll have to see that Ruth isn't the only one cares about what happened. When Darcie sees him, will she cry then? Maybe then she'll let Ruth hold her, let her shoulders fall? Ruth makes a sharp u-turn, catches the red light, and tries to remember the way to the south loop.

When the light turns green, she looks both ways, and sees down Claremont, a flash of salt-and-pepper. She wrenches the car over one lane and then scoots in behind the last valid parking meter space. The curb is red, but she'll only be there for a minute, maybe five. She can give him a ride to his car.

When she rounds the corner, he's already at the next intersection, so she inhales deeply then runs. Her body slaps into itself, heaves up and down. She hasn't run, really run, since playing tag with Darcie.

"Benji!"

The man turns and squints at her from his fat face.

She heaves and leans over, hands on her knees, gazing straight across at a pair of soiled tan flip flops crammed with wide hairy toes.

"Sorry? Who's Benji?"

Her muscles go slack, and she moans. She wants to cry but that would only increase her humiliation. She said his name. How could she have called *this* man Benji? She must push herself back up, regain some dignity. But she drops to the pavement, her haunches hitting hard. "He's dead."

"Sure he is," he says, backing away. "Crazy." He checks the street then crosses it.

Ruth closes her eyes and lets the first sob rise up her throat. If Darcie saw her sitting here like this, she'd shake her shoulders and tell her to sit up, everything will be okay, that she just needs some rest in a cool place. She might even take Ruth back to her own apartment and make some lemonade, not too much lemon. But Darcie's at work, and Benji's dead. It's really best Darcie doesn't find out. Then she'd think Ruth needs to be evaluated again by that neurologist, maybe start taking that Aricept. And then she'd tell Alex and then Ruth might lose her job. Can't lose my job, she thinks. Even though just thinking about Alex makes her blush, makes her feel foolish the way she did as a little girl, when she knew the adults understood more than they let on. Wouldn't explain the joke to her. Not until she was older.

"Hey lady," a voice says from behind. "You okay?"

Her eyes snap open, she blinks hard then cranes to see the oldest of the young boys she saw earlier peering at her. His black tee hangs to his knees, scuffed over-sized sneakers crowd the fingers of her right hand. He holds a hand over his eyes, holding her gaze. She pulls in her arms and hugs them to her chest. The other two boys stand just behind him; the girl who must be their mother looks at the street.

"Let's go, Andre," the girl says. "You're scaring her."

"Hello, lady?" He steps forward, pulls one of his hands from his pocket and extends it. "Need help?"

"No, I most certainly do not." With a deep bend of her elbows and arch of her back, she hoists herself up.

"You sure?"

“Andre, now.” The girl grabs his arm and tugs him backward.

Ruth gazes at the young boy, wishes she could say something reassuring. But she finds no words. He’s back by the girl now. As she moves, she feels a sharp grittiness on her bottom, like the surface of sandpaper, but doesn’t brush it away. She doesn’t press down her hair or catch the bobby pin dangling against her neck. She begins to walk, back towards Chimney Rock. He must be on his way back to Deer Park. She can cool down in the car, pull open her sleeves and let the A/C blow down them, like Benji always did on the way home from the beach. She can bring him home to Darcie, a gift.

Ruth swings open the driver’s side door and a passing truck honks at her. She almost stumbles but throws herself forward onto the seat. Closes the door quick. She’s got enough gas for Deer Park, maybe. She’s got a Mastercard. She can make it back. But if she doesn’t, if she misses dinner with Darcie, she’ll be in trouble. Trouble with my own daughter, she thinks.

Ruth doesn’t have a watch but she knows it’s getting on and who knows how long it’ll take her to find him. What if he’s not at the hardware store? What if he’s waiting for her back at the deli? Returned to talk it all over with her? No, he wouldn’t do that. Or he might. She bites her lip, won’t let herself cry again. Not again, not even alone in the car. Crying is not a good sign. The pamphlets didn’t say so but Ruth knows.

She should be wearing a watch but lately she hates the way it rubs and pinches around her wrist, like a rubber band catching all the little hairs. It could be four or five o’clock. Yes, it’s probably five, almost rush hour. It’ll take forever to get across town, fight her way on to the Loop. But she left early today. Maybe it’s only one, maybe two. Two at the very latest.

She shifts into first, looks over her shoulder twice to check for trucks, big and little ones. Then eases back into traffic. Just a quick trip over to Deer Park, just to see him, see the house. She smiles, grins wide. Smiling is a good sign, the best there is. She will drive there, let the traffic carry her across town as if she's riding a big wave. Darcie will be jealous she missed a trip back. Darcie. She'll be at seven. Ruth swallows. Seven. So soon. But if she had him with her.

She hits the brakes. Another horn, loud and just behind her. She punches the gas and shoots forward into a green light, thank God. At least she thinks it was green. She missed the street sign. Was that Bissonnet or Jessamine? She just needs to pull back over, red curb or no and think. Focus on the goal: bringing him to Darcie. But all she can see are hot dogs wrapped in white bread. She has hot dogs, somewhere.

Yes, she will go home. She'll arrange the mail into tidy stacks by day, no, by type. Wash the dishes in the sink, smooth down the sofa slipcover, and watch out the window for Darcie's Jeep Cherokee to pull up, however long it might be. That's the safest thing.

She hits the Bissonnet intersection. She hasn't missed it, thank God. She's in the right lane, but maybe she should be in the left. Which way? Which way back to the studio? Because the light's green, she takes a left, but this doesn't seem right. She should pull over and wait. I'll remember, she thinks. I always remember.

En Plein Air

Pockets of dust swirl high into the air, kicked up from the dry cotton fields skirting Lubbock. It's almost two, and the wind hasn't stopped since morning. The breakfast and lunch dishes drip-dry in the rack by the sink, and Becky's favorite soaps are already over.

From the blue armchair by the bay window, she has a fair view of the surrounding few houses with their puckered green lawns. Clusters of leaves from the sycamores and the cottonwood in the front yard scatter across the yellow grass with each gust. They're the size of small pancakes, their undersides exposed like overturned lily pads, a too-delicate green. A plastic bag flutters in the cottonwood's branches. They grow on trees here, like mistletoe. The sky deepens into that fiery red which means a dark rest of the day.

She folds her hands in her lap and closes her eyes. Once again, she's done with all of her chores too soon and now must wait the four hours until Paul comes through the garage door with red dirt in his blond hair. She must be productive or else he'll tease her through dinner and until bedtime. She's supposed to be working on her painting; at least that's what she and Paul decided on back in December, after she graduated with a degree

in art and they moved from Dallas to Lubbock to be near his family. The plan was for her to teach high school while Paul started the job his father lined up at the bank. But it's May, and Becky has no prospects for the fall. After she lamented about this three weeks ago, Paul began saying over dinner, "Then you should have plenty of time to paint, right?" and "Good thing you have the whole attic to work in," and more recently, "Maybe you can even make some money."

So every morning after breakfast and sometimes again before Paul comes home, Becky plants herself on the stool in her makeshift studio. It's a converted attic with two small dormer windows, just enough light to make painting possible. The window panes need to be cleaned, but she's wiped away the cobwebs and clumps of dust before and they just reappear. She breaks the cycle by leaving the sticky dust in its place. Two easels take up most of this studio space, one for a work-in-progress, whose oil paints she tries to keep wet enough for touch-ups; the other for a new piece, which lately means simply a place for her to gesso a canvas and wait.

Wind howls through the front yard, making that eerie ghost sound Becky still hasn't gotten used to. These storms feel like one of the plagues, each bit of dust like a locust. And the dryness, so complete that her hands feel like onion skin if she doesn't lotion them morning and evening.

She pushes herself out of the chair and unties the apron she forgot to take off. The toile print feels domestic, as if she lives in black-and-white with a casserole always warming in the oven. So she only wears it when it suits her, which is usually in the mornings as she washes the breakfast dishes. After hanging it in the pantry, Becky climbs the steep built-in stairs to the attic. These steps hide behind a door that appears to lead

nowhere except maybe a coat closet or an oddly placed half bath. Becky imagines that if they were to have a child, a wrought-iron twin bed would eventually replace the easels and a dresser the mixing table. She wouldn't have as much time to paint then anyway. Paul was probably right when he said they should wait. Still so new, married just over a year.

She strides across the attic floor then hunches and crawls into the left dormer window. The seat is an unfinished piece of wood but somehow, the space is comfortable— like when she hid in the old hollow maple as a little girl back in Garland. When a thunderstorm blew in, she would run through the thumping rain to the grove behind her parents' house and wait for the rain to find its way into the tree, where the scrape and rub of crumbling tree felt good because it held her perfectly snug, a castle in the woods.

She pulls one leg up under the other and closes her eyes. She imagines that the pattering of leaves and litter is rain, sheets of it against the window. It does rain here and probably will rain later in the dark for a loud five minutes, and she'll wake to find the windows polka-dotted orange. And they'll stay that way until the wind scrubs them clean. When she opens her eyes, the sky looks like a struggling sunset. The dust has stratified into stripes of red-orange and white, the white stripes placeholders for the rich blues and purples that will arrive in a few hours—so strange, so unlike East Texas.

She moves to the gessoed canvas, which gleams an eggshell white except for a thin layer of dust on the top edge. Things turn dirty so quickly here. One swipe of her forefinger and the red dust is gone. She pushes up her sleeves, then slips on the denim

painting apron, hard from dried oils. She will paint the sky as it is this instant, a sort of *en plein air* exercise. Only inside, what with all the dirt.

She sets out raw sienna, golden ochre, zinc white, and light yellow and lines them up, darkest to lightest. They look right together. A little of the ochre with sienna will give her that dark lightness hovering over the horizon, and the light yellow and white can be the voids of real color in the sky. Null and void. Voided checks. Empty or canceled or out of date. This seems right, too. The sky will be changed in an instant—out of date and empty of dirt and clouds.

With two careful pulls, Becky moves the easel closer to the window then drags over a stool and perches there, paintbrush in hand, the mixing palette on the window seat, and the sky out the window, already changing as the wind sweeps across the scene like the invisible line of an Etch-A-Sketch. She lays in a broad swath of ochre-raw sienna, the bottom of which will serve as the horizon line. It looks right but needs to be thinner, more cloud-like. She stands to go for the turpentine when she realizes, no, the colors need to be thick and bold. After all, if she is going to do this *en plein air*, she must take her cues from the Impressionists.

She returns to the canvas with several painting knives, but in her right hand she grips the trowel-shaped one which she quickly plunges into the slab of mixed paint on the palette. With the same broad stroke as before, Becky applies the paint, first with firm pressure, leaving a thin layer across the width of the canvas. Now *this* feels right. She smiles then glances at the glass clock across the room. She has twenty minutes before Paul returns. He will call her away to dinner and then after loading the dishwasher, she won't be able to return to painting. When he's in the house, the studio feels isolated,

lonely. So she'll stay in the living room, rereading the Comics while he watches primetime television.

Becky quickly applies the paint in stripes that are clean but not too perfect while catching glimpses of the sky as it darkens into late afternoon, dirt still furiously mixing with clouds. She needs to capture the billowy flatness of things. Her palette becomes a mess of brown. Into the middle of it, she squeezes out a dab of white. She will make the outlines of bushy clouds, superficial and bright over the horizontal ones spread out before her, laid in carefully with the tip of her small diamond-shaped knife. The bold stripes were only part of the underpainting to give the skyscape an anchor of reality. Now comes the truth.

"Honey, when's dinner?" says a voice from the staircase.

Becky catches her breath and stills the knife. She hadn't heard Paul drive up, open the attic door, or climb the stairs.

"I don't know. Soon?" She didn't mean for this to be a question, but she can't even remember what she's planned. Was it chicken cacciatore or is that for Friday? "I've just been busy up here, painting." No, baked potatoes.

"I can see that. Would you mind turning around?"

She hadn't realized she wasn't facing him. Knife still in hand, Becky turns and smiles. Paul looks small on the steps, and through the railing's balusters like a child behind the bars of a crib. "It's coming along well. I'm really pleased with it. I should be done soon. Just a few more touches."

"But it's already 5:30," he says, his voice tight.

"I know. Just a little bit more and then I'll be down." She turns the knife between her fingers. It feels awkward in her hand, white paint clinging to metal. "You can start preheating the oven if you like, and scrub the potatoes."

"I wouldn't know how to do it right. And you know how you like things done right."

Becky turns back to the canvas and focuses on keeping her voice light. "Well then I'll be down in five minutes."

Paul plods down the stairs and closes the door loudly behind him. She looks at the painting, at the ochre, umber, white. It all seems so small. The sky outside deepens into sunset, the blues and purples she'd predicted creeping into the mix. Should she add them to show what time does to wind and clouds?

Paul is probably pulling off his tie, stepping out of his slacks. When he walks into the kitchen, he won't find her at the sink, vegetable brush in hand instead of a painting knife. And then he'll look up at the ceiling and hear her feet against the wood floor. She can see him there, head rocked back like he's searching the sky for an airplane, for the wife he thought he'd married. But he's changed, too. Maybe it's just being in Lubbock, surrounded by his family. Maybe this is what he was like before leaving for college, just what he's like when he's home. If only they'd stayed in Dallas.

She leaves the knife on the palette to pull out another canvas. It hasn't been gessoed, so the paint will have to sit on it raw. She covers the canvas in the messy rusty color of the palette. She should let it dry a little before putting in the muddy cobalt and violet. But instead, she squeezes out the colors and presses them onto the canvas. The messiness suits the sky.

SportsCenter is coming up through the floor, tinny music and rapid-fire voices. She really should at least start the oven preheating, throw the potatoes in, and buy herself another hour. But he's wanted her to paint and now she is. For the first time in months, she feels inspired. She doesn't have to force herself to paint the tulip she saw in Maxey Park or another French rooster for her mother-in-law's kitchen. She can paint the actual Lubbock sky, the same vast sky she hates for making her feel like she lives in a snow globe where, with just the gentlest shake, dirt swirls and forces itself into her eyes, and always the light so intense, as if the globe were left under a spotlight.

He's probably sitting in front of the television, the *Avalanche Journal* folded on his lap, his left ankle on his right knee. He'll wait until she comes down, as long as is necessary to prove that he doesn't need her to come down. Becky grins, imagining Paul this way.

She steps back from the canvas. It really is muddy; the blues and purples so dark they make no impact. She scrapes them away, goes back to the white, to the way the sky was an hour ago, desperate for a sunset. And she'll stay as long as it takes. Paul knows there are two frozen dinners stacked next to the ice trays. Two frozen dinners she bought back in March for just such a night, when she hoped her painting would steal her away from the kitchen. And there should be bananas and at least two honeycrisp apples in the bowl next to the sink. And iced tea she brewed for her lunch, when the wind slapped a cottonwood leaf against the kitchen window and made her almost drop the pitcher. She watched it for almost a minute, caught there as if pressed between two panes, holding the pitcher with both hands, Luzianne tea bags rising to the top. And then the phone rang, her mother calling to ask about the weather.

"It's raining here," her mother said. Becky could hear the clattering in the background. Her mother must've been out on the back porch. "The rain gauge already shows an inch. I wish you could see it."

Becky leaves the painting, still so incomplete, and descends the creaky stairs and steps into the hallway. Paul is standing a few feet away in his undershirt and jeans. "I can scrub the potatoes if you need me to," he says quietly.

His face is soft now, no anger or frustration. Back in Dallas, she would've kissed him, recognizing that he was upset with himself, thinking he'd ruined the evening. She would've returned with him to the kitchen, smiled and laughed it off while he stood with her at the sink, drying the potatoes after she rinsed them. That's how they would've solved this, and it's not his fault that it's not working this time.

She doesn't know what to say, just needs to get to the shower. So she looks away and hurries to the bathroom. She shuts the door, pulls back the shower curtain, then turns on the hot water. Sitting there on the toilet lid, eyes closed, she can still see the sky, thick with red.

Over the white noise of the water Paul gently says, "Want me to join you?"

The water is loud enough she can pretend she can't hear him. She runs her fingers under the faucet every few moments, waiting for the spreading heat. When she feels it, she turns on the shower. Slipping out of her clothes, she keeps her eyes closed, listening to the steady patter of water on tile, porcelain, plastic. And then she steps into the tub and stands under the shower like rain.

Enclosure

Late autumn at the Houston Zoo is quiet. Devoted regulars, school field trips, and stray tourists wander the vast zoo, finding themselves in a jungle of orangutans and baboons or somehow underground and gazing up at napping lions. Eva welcomes the cool mornings that stay cool into the afternoon. She can spend all day in and out of the bird enclosures, checking on the toucans, the cuckoos, and the curassows without sweating. Through the windows at the back of the enclosures, she watches families parade by, oohing at the hornbills, the parrots, and the kingfishers.

Tomorrow, the fourth Thursday of November, Eva will be driving up to her parents' house for the family's Thanksgiving lunch. She spends today making sure her birds are ready for the holiday, taking her time during the feeding at the beginning of her shift and returning to them all again before the day's end.

She checks on Sam, the male toucan, in his own long wire cage in the open-air Pheasant Run, and says, "Have a good Thanksgiving." He cocks his head, focusing on her with one black eye, then croaks. In September the female, Keely, started picking on him, so Eva moved him out of the display to give her a chance to lay eggs in the fiberglass tree, in case that was the source of her bad attitude. But two months have

passed and no eggs, and he's still here in the back of the run with the other off-display birds. Sam blinks at her once more and then moves his gaze past her.

In all of the enclosures, she repeats this ritual begun five years ago when she was hired as a full-time bird keeper, fresh from the University of Houston with an M.S. She was so eager to work for the zoo, hoping to find someone else who was eager, too. Someone who would share her fondness of birds over the more popular large mammals or the newly introduced koalas. But the nine male bird keepers either wore wedding rings or avoided close conversation—the hermits, she began calling them, the bachelor biologists who considered it a privilege to survive on the meager pay.

In the docents, she encountered only undergraduates and still even younger boys who appeared over the summers, the sons and nephews of administrators who enjoyed the creepiness of the reptile and amphibian house where she would finally discover them during the middle of the shift, shirking their duties in the bird gardens. They repeatedly tried to scare her with a python or a boa, never tiring of the sexual way a sudden forked tongue near her skin caused Eva to tense up and suppress a scream. The children on the other side of the glass would bolt from the building if she screamed, already nervous in front of the glass-walled cages. The young boy docents knew this, knew they were breaking the rules.

Eva says goodbye to the turacos and then retreats to the bird building to wash her hands and gather her things. Mark, another bird keeper who has a special fondness for the African birds, splashes his face with water at the work sink. He is tall, over six-feet, and wears a full blond beard which almost blends with his fair skin. The beard makes it hard for Eva to determine his age, but she guesses he must be mid-thirties. His green

Houston Zoo cap is soiled around the edges and is now darker than the green polo shirt he wears with his khaki shorts.

When he started working a year ago, Eva was drawn to his lankiness. But that first week, he brought by a woman he introduced as his friend, a brunette who followed him around the workroom, touching everything he touched, while he pointed out moments of his daily routine. She would stop by sometimes as a surprise and wander around the workroom or out by the nursery until he finished his shift. She didn't seem to see Eva.

"Heading home?" Mark asks over his shoulder.

"Yeah. I need to bake the pie I promised for tomorrow."

"What kind?"

"Apple."

He turns off the water and shakes out his hands. "Mmm. The best." He breaks into a grin and looks up at the ceiling. Eva briefly looks, too. "My mom makes *the* best apple pie. Mmmmm."

"Will you get some of it tomorrow?"

"Oh, yes. Dinner with the family, as usual." He dries his hands and then combs his beard with his fingers. She often wants to smile when he does it—the grooming so much like preening, but she doesn't dare smile. He would notice and then ask her why and then something like flirting would inevitably begin.

This time, though, Eva does grin since she has nothing more to say; she's never had anything more to say beyond these niceties. She wonders if he still has the girlfriend. Eva remembers that day in September, a windy day when she had to keep retying her hair because strands of it were dipping into the water dishes. Mark had been out at Flight 24,

talking to Grover, the giant blue macaw who prefers him over all the other keepers. The girlfriend's hair whipped around her neck, and she kept spitting it out as she waited at the back gate with her arms crossed, her car idling on the other side of the chain-link fence. Eva wondered if this would be the last day she'd see her, and it was.

"I guess I'll see you Friday," Mark says. "In at eight?"

"As usual."

He grins again and then disappears around the corner where their lockers line the walls.

She's relieved to be alone in the kitchen, surrounded by humming refrigerators and shelves bursting with white binders with labels like "Rhinoceros Hornbills Diet Conformance 2000-2003." She feels a tightness in her chest, the same kind she hears described in relation to heart attacks.

She isn't a hypochondriac, but is aware of her body's smallest signals and shifts. She's almost as aware of it as she is her of emotions. She can identify a handful of them at any given moment. If only someone would ask, she would describe in elegant undertones the way her ears burn for only a few seconds when she's angry; the pinpricks at the back of her throat that are sharp enough she can recall them hours after the initial shame; and the instant knot in her stomach, the knot of fear. And more, much more, a whole parade of emotions that march through her body, clamoring for attention.

She has identified this tightness as some sort of panic manifested in the muscles just under her breasts, brief like a fist squeezed hard and then released. The heavy metal door that opens into the back of the bird area creaks as Mark pushes it open, then sighs

as it swings closed. But what has she got to panic about? Nothing, surely, in relation to Mark. She has stopped looking for a relationship.

Until she turned twenty-five, Eva waited for a man and love, anxiously, wondering if it would arrive with the next load of groceries or on the next park bench or the next day at work. But one morning four years ago, she was at the Pheasant Run's work table, stacking the cafeteria trays that the birds had picked clean when Tom, one of the hermits, pushed through the gate and said, "Hey, Eva." She found she couldn't turn to face him, and when he started helping her, she couldn't smile as a way to thank him. She realized that for weeks, she hadn't been smiling at the men. Before then, even with the hermits, she'd smiled easily whenever they entered a room or said her name. This realization frightened her, made her wonder what had changed.

Recently, she's noticed that her mother has started watching her with the look of a mother concerned about lesbianism and fewer grandchildren. Eva has gotten used to her questions and has learned to tuck into her center. She uses the polite tone she's perfected at the zoo with inquisitive children, especially the ones who ask the wrong questions or the right ones over and over.

After washing her hands, she retrieves her jacket and satchel from her locker and exits through the same door Mark used. The door opens onto a patchy grassed area between Flight 24 and the nursery. The brood hens bob and flutter under the sycamore, scratching the pebbles for the seed that the kitchen keeper tossed out in handfuls. The birds in the open, ten-foot-high cages in Flight 24 alternately call, to her, to each other. Their calls are unnaturally paired—a cuckoo with a macaw with a prairie chicken with a

raven, and in the distance, a pigeon and a red-crowned crane. She briefly closes her eyes and smiles at the wonderful strangeness. This feels like enough, most of the time.

She lifts her leg over the low-hung chain with the sign ZOO PERSONNEL ONLY and steps onto the path where tropical plants tumble around the edges of the exotic bird enclosures. Most of the enclosures look empty, the birds having retreated to their night perches, away from the noise and light. A small boy in a jean jacket peeks between the plants while his mother digs through a large shoulder bag. "Aha, here's the Cheerios," the mother says as Eva continues around the corner toward the sea lion pool.

Each day, she is confronted with families, with matches well-made and with the products of those matches. She is confronted with teenagers on dates, over-dressed for the zoo and holding hands, only breaking to furtively wipe their sweaty palms on their thighs as if dusting away tree pollen. Families surround her, and in the interactive education center, sometimes touch the skin around her wrists or across her knuckles as they reach for a sugar glider whose eyes bulge even when Eva isn't squeezing it; or a boa constrictor she has to keep loosening as it lazily coils itself around her. She receives touch all day, but only accidental or animal. And though she believes it's enough, when she stopped worrying about looking for men and relationships, she knew she would be giving up the possibility for real touch.

A large wooden clock with green and yellow hands announces that the sea lions will be performing again at 3:30. A small group of adults and children are already waiting, some lolling on benches and others looking down into the aqua pool. Eva often stops to watch the trainer guide the sea lions in and out of the water, but today, she just wants to get home.

The macaws in the vast cage to her left are subdued at the moment, only a handful calling out for attention. As she passes by the gift shop, Eva realizes, in one of those sudden moments of clarity, that she promised to bring not one, but two apple pies, one extra for her father who is away on business in Paris and won't be home until Sunday. When her mother suggested the extra pie, Eva agreed that it would make his leftover turkey sandwiches seem more Thanksgiving-like. So she'll have to stop by Albertson's on her way home and stand in the long line with two pounds of Granny Smith apples and a refrigerated double pie crust. And a man sent to the store by the ladies in the kitchen will probably stand behind her in the express lane, try to make chit-chat and then touch her hand as he reaches for the bar to separate their groceries. More thoughtless touch.

The next morning, Eva balances the two pies along her right arm as she walks up the paved path to the front door of her parents' home. Only the pansies have changed since her childhood, a new mix of colors each year. Her brother is already here, his coupe parked in front of the closed garage. Josie will be arriving soon with Charles and the two children.

Eva hasn't seen them since Ben was born six months ago in Dallas. Her mother drove up two days before the due date so that she could be there when Josie went into labor. Eva's father was in London and would call later and listen to Ben's cries on speaker phone. Her mother called just as she was leaving the zoo, sitting in steamy traffic on MacGregor. "How fortuitous," her mother said. "If you hurry, you can be here in time for the birth. She's moving along quite nicely. Get John and hurry!" And then she hung

up, leaving Eva at a traffic light, wishing she didn't have to drive the four hours with her younger brother. His sense of humor has always exhausted her. She still feared being backed into a corner while John twisted words to tease her, always going just a little too far, pushing it beyond funny. That day, she would have to stay witty throughout the whole exchange, ready to parry with something equally as clever.

But it wasn't until they were in the waiting area, minutes after the birth, that the trouble started. John and Eva were settling into floral print armchairs when their mother, eyes wet and cheeks flushed, flitted up to them. "It's a beautiful baby boy. Benjamin Braddock Campbell. Doesn't he sound like a little general?" John snorted, and Eva tittered, holding a hand to her mouth, but her mother dashed back through the double doors, calling over her shoulder that Josie would be moving to a private room "any minute now."

John flipped open his cell phone to play something that looked like Tetris. Eva pulled the April issue of *Audubon* from her bag.

"It's okay to be bitter, you know," he said, not looking up from his game.

"And how exactly am I bitter?"

"So you admit it, Em?" He glanced at her, and she kept her face as blank as possible, gripping the magazine. How could he bring this up now? Using the nickname he started when he was baby—saying "Em, Em, Em" instead of Eva because he couldn't say "v"—felt especially antagonistic, as if she weren't Eva.

"Well," he continued, "you're over thirty without kids."

"Astute observation."

"And you're bitter."

"You're hilarious."

"Come on, my dear Em, admit it."

From the corner of her eye, she watched him turn in his seat. His mouth was a blur, but she imagined it as a seed-eater's beak, short and yellow.

"You can't be bitter about something you don't want. I'm not jealous."

"Of course you are," he said and then quickly added: "You're jealous of the feeling that goes with making babies, starting a family, the whole thing."

Through the swinging doors in front of them, Josie appeared in a wheelchair, flanked by her mother, Charles, and his mother. John snapped his phone shut, Eva dropped the magazine as they rose to greet Josie.

"You don't make sense, John," Eva said quietly. "What do you know anyway?"

"Hey, non-pregnant lady," John called out. "Where's the little general?"

Josie frowned at him and said, "Benjamin is in the nursery, where he should be."

Her parents' house smells like their family reunions. A tray of deviled eggs, sweet potatoes and stuffing, a green bean casserole, and baking sheets of Hawaiian rolls must be warming in the oven and on the stovetop, waiting to be transferred in shifts to the dining room table with its two leaves already added.

"Good! You're here early," her mother says, rushing out from the kitchen. Her checked apron is sprinkled with flour and chocolate and what looks like cream of mushroom soup. "You can stick the pies on the buffet and then help me set the table." She kisses Eva on the cheek and then is gone again.

John calls out, "Hey, Em, want to help me fry the turkey out back?"

Always the nickname with John, as if they're still children. Eva leaves her pies in the dining room then enters the warm kitchen where John leans over a metal pot that looks like an industrial-sized coffee maker. His heavy brown hair falls across his forehead, and at twenty-six, he still looks charmingly like a ruffled teenager.

He must know she won't want to help him. He's frying a bird, a turkey, *Melagris gallopavo*. Though not a vegetarian like many of the women at work, she's been avoiding the open freezer cases at the grocery store where the frozen, hard, puckered baby pink carcasses are stacked. She knows they're domesticated turkeys, bred to be killed, but she thinks of Victor, the old ocellated turkey on the Pheasant Run, iridescent green and blue and coppery, like a gangly peacock. The bare skin on his head is green, not pink, not puckered, not frozen and hard.

"Why can't we just have a normal turkey?" her mother says, glaring at the fryer as if it can feel her resentment. "What's the matter with basting?"

"If John wants to do some of the cooking, I think we should let him," Eva says. "He's helping. Let's bask in the glory of it."

Her mother laughs, which was Eva's goal. With her father gone for the holiday, Eva's mother flutters around nervously, unable to settle. She can't understand why his company had to send him to France for the holiday, "where," she says, "they don't even know about Thanksgiving." But since her father was laid off two years ago, he hasn't been willing to risk saying no at this new job. He's told Eva that he enjoys the trips but that her mother tires of the descriptions—the sparkling *bateaux mouches* and the surprising smoothness of the London Eye—that she wants memories of her own.

John rolls his eyes, closes the turkey fryer, and asks again if Eva will help him.

"She's helping *me* set the table," her mother says. Eva is thankful for her insistence. "Why don't you wait for Charles? He'll help you set it up right."

"I know how to set it up, Mom."

"But he'll know how to do it safely. Just wait. They'll be here any minute."

"I'll get the peanut oil heating. Charles can drop in the turkey." John lifts the empty fryer and hauls it outside.

"He better not burn the house down," her mother says to Eva who knows that it's only because Charles is a firefighter that her mother has allowed the turkey to be fried in the first place. In the refrigerator, a small chicken is thawing, just in case.

Eva lays out the gold placemats and folds the red napkins three times before tucking them under the forks. The crystal tumblers follow, except where Carly, Josie's two-year old, will sit with a sippy cup. Eva watches her mother fidget, twirling her wedding band around her finger like a worry ring. She mentions the new placemats, then the sale on rolls at Albertson's, and the way the cashier let the jar of apple sauce push into the bread on the belt, and how the sacker started using plastic instead of paper bags, and how North Eldridge was clogged even on Tuesday. She wanders into the kitchen, still talking. Her mother never rambles, not like this. She returns with four wine glasses dangling from her fingers, and asks Eva to set them out.

"Since when do we drink wine?" Eva asks.

"He brings it home sometimes, you know, the European thing." Her mother nods and avoids Eva's eyes. Her mother's thin lips lift into a kind of smile. The lipstick, the color of garnets, bleeds into the wrinkles at the edges of her lips, the way the red

smudge at the tip of Sam's bill seeps into the lime green of the rest, as if the toucan had been dipped into a pot of paint.

Eva still wonders about the wine, so she follows her mother into the kitchen to ask more—what kind, how much. She hears the front door slam against the wall and Carly yelling out, "Nanna, Nanna!" and suddenly Josie is in the kitchen, embracing Eva, smelling of spiced pumpkin.

"I haven't seen you in *forever!*" Josie says, holding Eva at arm's length, surveying her thin white sweater, jean skirt, and black tights. "You look so cute!" And then she's hugging Eva again. "So good to see you!"

"You, too," Eva says, pulling back as subtly as she can from Josie's voice high-pitched with excitement. "How was the drive?"

"Good, good." Josie turns to hug John, who has already started the turkey, and begins asking questions—"Got a girlfriend yet?" "Why not?" "How's work?"—until Charles appears with Ben in his arms. The striped button-down Charles wears looks too tight around his neck, even with the collar open. He usually looks uncomfortable to Eva. Though she's never seen him in his uniform, she imagines him in head-to-toe yellow, sooty from a fire, ruddy cheeks under red eyes, the helmet askew. The uniform gives him so much more heft. In plainclothes, he looks odd, like he's playing dress-up. Eva still expects him to smell smoky, but when he leans in for a side hug, all she smells is stale formula.

John immediately enlists his help with the frying, so Charles hands off Ben to Eva's mother, and they disappear into the backyard.

Her mother grins with Ben on her hip and Carly at her heels. "Well, look at all of us!" she says.

Eva actually does look, but what she sees is the slight bump below Josie's waist, leftover from her pregnancy. She also wears a skirt, without tights, showing off the long, lean legs she's always maintained no matter how her weight fluctuates. Her face is flushed and bright like their mother's, and she's cropped her blond hair just below the chin. Eva's breath catches as she feels the fist squeeze and release under her breastbone. She touches the thin skin below her collarbone, but the tightness is gone. She laughs because Josie and her mother are laughing. Carly cackles and claps her hands.

"Why don't we color while we wait for the turkey?" And her mother is off to the kitchen table with Carly, leaving Eva and Josie standing shoulder-to-shoulder in that awkward place between the kitchen and the dining room.

"So how's work?" Josie asks. But she's already looking around Eva's head for a glimpse of Ben, her neck arching like Rita's used to.

Her fifth week at the zoo, Eva arrived just before seven and grabbed a pail of peanuts and a mesh bag of crickets from the workroom. The August morning was already hot, so she wrapped up her hair, rolled up her sleeves, and hoped the fans on Pheasant Run were working again. She tossed a small handful of peanuts and four crickets into each of the enclosures, part of the routine she was taught to provide the birds with a quick shot of protein and a chance to exercise their hunting instincts. Eva paused long enough to see the flash of a wing, then moved on. But in the red-crowned crane enclosure, Rita wasn't waiting at the fence, ducking and flapping her wings, calling with

flutelike clearness. When Eva called her name, Rita didn't bluster out from the bamboo along the fence or from behind the maple.

Eva found her in the bamboo stand, the stalks bending beneath her weight, head dangling from her long neck, the dab of red on her crown like a wound. Eva screamed and then stopped herself. Tom stumbled to the back of the enclosure and helped stretch out Rita. He brushed Eva's back and then her arm but recoiled when Eva shifted, as if he'd been caught.

Rita had swallowed a Texas mountain laurel seed. Someone over in Hoof Run planted the tree in the zebra enclosure years before for its pretty wisteria-like blooms. It was probably a blue jay who cracked the pod, swallowed the seed, then perched on the maple that shades the small pond, and left the poisonous seed behind in its droppings. The laurel never should've been there. Eva actually cried the next morning when she repeated the routine, which surprised her just as the scream had.

When she told Mark the story four years later, he said he remembered the newspaper headline because the crane was so rare. He remembered wondering why the zoo hadn't uprooted the tree. "But I guess they can't protect the birds, not really," he said. "We can't even control their diet."

"A month ago, I watched a kid throw a Snickers wrapper at a parrot, the vulturine," Eva said. "When I asked him what he thought he was doing, he said, 'Feeding it.'"

Mark laughed. They were in the break room, sitting at the end of the long conference table. He'd cocked his chair so that it leaned against the lockers along the wall. It was the first time she'd heard him laugh. She wondered if she should tell the story

about the condoms on the duck pond's island, how she thought teenagers were breaking in and doing it among the sedges where the egrets roost on the bald cypresses. But that seemed too personal.

John stands with the carving knife and fork and leans into the turkey, slicing through the crispy skin. The clear juices spill down the sides, smelling of pepper. Everyone else watches, transfixed. No one mentions the bird and Eva, or that Eva is looking away at Charles, who sits in the corner next to Ben in the high chair and Carly in a booster seat.

"Isn't Dad supposed to call later?" Eva asks over the sudden clattering of silverware against china.

"After lunch," her mother says. "He's in a dinner meeting, I think."

"He'll probably call in the middle of the Cowboys game," John says.

"They'll probably be losing anyway," Charles adds as he scoops mashed peas into Ben's mouth. Ben looks like a baby bird, soft and downy in his fleece one-piece.

"How's work going, Em?" her mother asks, sinking a slotted spoon into the green bean casserole. Her mother knows nothing of her work, but she tries with questions that always come back, somehow, to meeting someone. Eva has learned to just go with it, to please her mother.

"Good. The research we've been doing on the Attwater's prairie chickens is going great. We hope to have double the eggs and hatch rate this spring. You remember the chicks you saw last year? When I took you and Dad through the nursery?"

Her mother nods, but it's clear that she doesn't quite remember.

"Anyway, it's very exciting."

"Keep us updated." She smiles, then says, "How's Mark?"

Her mother returns to Mark in every conversation about the zoo. Having met him almost a year ago on one of the many behind-the-scenes tours Eva has given her parents, her mother clings to the name and to the small details about him that she has miraculously recorded. If Eva's father were here, he would be glaring at his wife. He's always been Eva's advocate, understanding more than everyone else.

"I have no idea. He does his job, then leaves. That's all I know."

"Surely you've gotten to know him, talked on breaks, in the cages?"

"Enclosures. And, no, mother, I haven't." Eva sips the wine. "Oh wait. He likes apple pies, and apparently, his mother makes *the* best apple pies."

"Oh, well then he might love yours. Yours are wonderful!"

Eva imagines John exchanging grins with Josie.

"I'll be sure to bring him one." Eva smiles, then returns to her food, hoping this concession, though obviously a lie, will satisfy her mother, who bites her bottom lip. She opens her mouth, then says, "Very good. I'm sure he'll enjoy it."

The rest of her family has been sitting mutely during this discussion. She feels more odd than ever. Like a strange specimen only on display at major holidays. She looks at John across the table with his mussed hair and polo shirt over a solid long-sleeved shirt. He doesn't look strange and he's single. "Now didn't I tell you a fried one is better than basted?" he laughs.

And Josie sits here with her family portrait already composed at twenty-four. She has everything Eva used to want. In fact, she found it at twenty. Eva can't imagine being

married so young and trussed with two small children, so needy. Josie didn't even finish college. When Eva started graduate school, she thought of it as her last hope, the last place to find someone. Back then, she was still the girl who'd dreamed of a husband and babies. She'd been the one who eagerly babysat the neighborhood children. Back then, Josie never expressed an interest in kids. She has evolved into a mother, gathering wisdom at an alarming pace.

Eva watches her mother's eyes move from child to child, noticing the empty chair she's pushed to the wall that holds the napkins and extra basket of rolls. Eva realizes that her mother is trying not to inject extra drama into the situation. But the worry is in the roving eyes that linger too long on Eva, in the tight smile she uses even when Josie mentions her plan for more children or describes Charles's lead role in the fire rescue at the house on Kingston; in the pile of extra rolls and extra turkey and extra casseroles.

Josie passes Eva the tray of Hawaiian rolls, now on its second round. "So," Josie says around a mouthful of stuffing, "what's everyone thankful for?"

Eva hates this part of Thanksgiving. It always seems to devolve into platitudes and false thanks. Who's actually going to announce: "Well, I'm thankful for all the sex I've been having" or "I'm thankful Mom stopped calling me every evening to ask about my day."

"I'll start." Josie clears her throat; as the youngest, she tends toward melodrama. "I'm thankful for my family."

Here we go, Eva thinks, closing her eyes. Josie talks of Ben and Carly, who is already two, talking and calling her Aun'eva, as if her aunthood were part of her name. Josie is always eager to share the miracles of family, the daily surprises and delights her

children bring. Her arms soar and dive around her. Her words blur in Eva's ears, and she looks at no one, like she's giving a speech. "... And Leah our babysitter who has been so helpful these past few months, and all the rain we've been having, and again, of course, for my great family."

She beams at them all, then looks right at Eva, who feels a flicker of awe, for Josie's profound, if hectic, belief in what she is.

Eva looks at Josie for a moment then begins. "Well, I'm thankful for my job at the zoo. For an affordable apartment in Montrose." She pauses, wondering if she should just say what she's thinking, put it out there, see what everyone does. "And that I'm not married."

She quickly scoops up marshmallowy sweet potatoes and shoves them in her mouth. Her mother stiffens and John chuckles. She glances over to Charles, but he's still lost in the corner, distracted by Carly and her overturned juice cup. Josie gapes at her.

The silence is punctuated by Ben's soft crows. Charles turns back to face the table, a smear of creamed turkey across his knuckles, and flashes a vacant smile. Eva thinks of the kids' table at family reunions and imagines Charles's knees hitting the low table, smelling not of smoke but of creamed turkey and apple juice. He quickly references Josie's long list and adds that "he couldn't be happier." Josie is looking hard at Eva. But the burden continues around the table. Carly mumbles something about her stuffed animal T-Bear and clouds. John gives the Sunday school answers of family, God, and his job.

Her mother waits until she has thoroughly chewed a mouthful of turkey. After swallowing, she gazes out at the table, her lips pursed tight. "I'm thankful all of my

children are here for the first time since little Ben's birthday." She smiles at the high chair where Ben chews on his fist. "That your father has a job that provides. That John's work is going well." He snorts, as if his real estate job is, in fact, not going well. "That Josie and Charles are so happy. And that Eva, here," she pats Eva's hand, "is doing well."

Her hand lingers; Eva knows she's not imagining it. Everyone except Charles is looking at her.

"Em, what exactly did you mean earlier?" Josie asks, setting down her fork as if it might get in the way of her talking.

Eva takes her time chewing the sweet potatoes, staring at her plate and the absence of turkey. She shouldn't have said it. She should've just let the moment pass. Too much time spent around John. Everything was easier when her family thought she was the pathetic one, the one who couldn't get a date.

"Please don't call me Em."

John chuckles.

"I'm just glad I'm not married," Eva continues, "that I'm independent, on my own." She holds Josie's gaze for a moment before returning to the sweet potatoes. She can't decide whether Josie's hurt or just confused or both and wonders whether a fight is about to start.

"But marriage is wonderful." Josie glances back at Charles. Ben is now on his lap, squirming and reaching for Charles's plate, spoon, napkin. Charles nods. Ben drops the spoon.

"I'm sure it is," Eva says.

Josie stares at her, waiting for more, but when it doesn't come, she picks up her fork and says, "Well, I'm happy I'm married. You'll understand one day. It's not too late."

"I know I'm thirty-one. And there's nothing to be late for. I don't want a husband, I don't want kids. Why are you pushing this?"

"You brought it up."

"You know, I've been a little busy getting a Masters and working, stuff like that."

Josie winces.

"Which I find to be pretty satisfying. I don't need anything else to complete me."

"Every single woman says they don't want a family when they're alone. Even I didn't always want children." She sets her fork back down. "But you'll see. It'll all change when you find someone."

"But I'm not looking."

"Girls," her mother says softly, "do you really need to do this here, now? It's Thanksgiving."

"No, I think we should finish this." Eva turns in her chair to face Josie who smiles at the prospect of a fight she's sure she'll win. Eva feels a rush of elation and the adrenaline that comes with an argument. They haven't fought since the morning of Josie's wedding four years ago, when Eva said, "Glad everything's worked out so perfectly for you," under her breath.

"Of course, you're not *looking* for anyone, Eva. Just because you're not going out on dates doesn't mean you're not available. It's a state of mind, a subconscious thing. You really *do* want a husband. You're just in denial." She pauses then starts again, her voice louder. "How can you not want a family or at least just a husband? It makes no sense."

Logical arguments begin to mount inside Eva, arguments involving single people she's heard of who are single by choice. But Josie will dismiss them as aberrations, as having nothing to do with Eva, or herself, normal people. This argument seems unwinnable and is making her feel like even more of a spectacle. So she remains silent for a long pause, then says, "I love my job. I'm happy on my own."

"You mean 'alone'."

Eva leans her elbows on the table and holds the wineglass with both hands. She could say, "Since when did being independent become synonymous with loneliness?" but it wouldn't matter. She swirls the wine, but she must not take a drink or everyone will think she's lost.

Eva's mother clears the table while Josie serves pie. Charles and John take theirs to the living room. Josie seems comfortable pretending the argument didn't happen, so when she asks Eva what kind of pie she wants, there is, impressively, no anger or presumption in her voice. And when Eva refuses Josie's pumpkin, Eva doesn't have to worry about Josie getting snippy.

She expected to feel empowered after the confrontation, energized by the act of articulating her position for her family, after God knows how many months of whispers and speculation. But a flicker of tightness in her chest only reminds her that she feels flat, deflated.

In the living room, two tote bags of toys have been spilled out onto the rug. Charles reclines with Ben curled on his chest. Carly sets a pink tiara with a crest of feathers on her head and holds a toy drumstick and rattle. She explains to the room that

they are magic wands, and then Carly marches around the living room tapping everything with them. The others are too lethargic to be bothered. After the first quarter, the Cowboys are down by ten, so Josie switches it to the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. An hour later, Carly is whining, and she starts plucking the feathers from her tiara one by one; tufts of pink trail around the room.

"Nap time in five minutes," Josie announces.

A high-pitched whine of "No" makes Eva cover her ears; a countdown begins. Charles ticks off the minutes as they pass, while Carly scrambles around the living room, piling on a scarf, purple velour cape, plastic bangles, and two pairs of slippers. She throws herself into her mother's lap, and when Josie doesn't agree that it's a good time for a walk, Carly throws herself into Eva's. Ignoring the disapproving look from Josie, Eva laughs and rubs the soft velour draped across Carly's back in thick folds. Eva can't help but think of the way Rita bobbed and promenaded when she wanted Eva's attention.

"Okay, nap time, Carly." Josie scoops her up. She casts one last desperate look at the lounging adults, then asks quietly, "Aun'eva?"

"Sure, she can come with us," Josie says.

Eva almost demurs, but Carly is smiling at her, her chin hitched over Josie's shoulder. Eva pushes herself off the floor and smiles back before Carly disappears around the corner. She follows them up the stairs to her old bedroom that her parents recently converted into the grandchildren's room because of its lovely window seat where her mother hopes they will one day curl up and read books together. Eva waits in the doorway while Josie pulls back the comforter and lays Carly under it. Josie begins "Jesus Loves the Little Children," which Eva hasn't sung since Sunday school.

Carly looks over at Eva, squints her eyes, then points. "Sing!"

She swallows and joins in, finding the words as they come, trying to keep pace with Josie who is already on the second round. Carly's humming along, holding some notes longer than others, flitting her gaze between Josie and Eva.

At the close of the third round, Carly folds her arms over her chest and frowns.

"Have fun sleeping," Eva says, backing out of the room so Josie can wrap things up. Eva pauses just outside the door, hearing Josie's soft murmurs, then clips down the stairs.

Her mother stands at the entrance to the kitchen, talking loudly into the phone.

"Lunch was great. We have plenty of leftovers for you, though."

Waving Eva over, her mother mouths, "He wants to talk to you."

Eva smiles. She'd hoped he would. As much as she didn't mind not having him here for Thanksgiving lunch, she could've used his support. Over a year ago, she finally told him how she had decided to stop looking. Since then, he's been her subtle advocate, steering conversations away from questions about Mark, about anyone. He could've helped her soften the blow.

"Yes, she's right here." Her mother hands the phone to Eva and says, "There's that awful two-second delay."

"Hi, Dad. How's Paris?"

The pause and then, "It beats Houston."

"Not a fair contest."

He laughs. She walks back toward the bathroom, leaving her mother standing by the kitchen table, stacking placemats.

"So what'd I miss?"

"Just an attack on my singlehood."

"Oh no. Josie?"

"And everyone else. It finally happened."

"Did you explain yourself? Your choice?"

"I tried." She pauses but he doesn't say anything. "They make me doubt myself. I feel selfish."

"What's the matter with selfishness if the alternative is something that makes you miserable? Self-preservation is perfectly legitimate."

"But what if I just *think* it will make me miserable? What if Josie's right?"

"Why're you letting this get to you? Is something wrong at work? How are the Attwater's?"

"Work is great. Life is too, until this stupid lunch. And everyone's calling me Em again. I just feel trapped in this house. Come home!"

"I'll be there soon." He pauses to listen through the delay, then says, "We can talk about this more when I get back, maybe over pie Sunday night? This call's expensive."

Another pause. "Can you put your mother back on?"

She returns the phone to her mother who's still standing by the kitchen table. A few minutes later, she calls Eva back into the kitchen. Her mother's lipstick has been wiped away, leaving her face blank and milky. She stands by the oven, her apron wadded at her feet. The stovetop has been wiped clean, all the casserole dishes, pans, and baking sheets towel-dried and put away, like Thanksgiving never happened.

"The turkey was actually juicy," her mother says. "You should've tried it."

Eva nods. "How was Dad?"

"I have no idea." Her mother turns and wipes her dry hands on a dish towel, then touches her bottom lip. "Didn't get to talk much."

"He'll be back on Sunday."

"Only three days. He said they ordered turkey, *dinde*, at *La Petite Ferme*, and cheese potatoes. No sweet potatoes, though." Her mother gazes at her hands. Eva wonders if she's noticing the blue veins under her thin skin or the small knick from the sharp edge of a can.

"I know you're lonely without him," Eva says.

"Yes, but I'll be fine. Just the holiday." Her mother smiles, then clears her throat. "Are you doing okay? I'm sorry about lunch. Josie should've left well enough alone."

Eva nods then closes her eyes. She just wants this day to end. If only she could walk out, climb into her car, and drive back to the zoo, to her birds. But her mother reaches out and touches Eva's arm, so she lifts her head and sighs. "Do you want me to be like her—husband and kids?"

"Of course not."

"Are you proud of me?"

"Eva, of course I am. You've done so much. You both have." She rests her hands on Eva's shoulders. "I just want you to be happy."

"Just because I don't bound around like Josie doesn't mean I'm not."

Her mother nods, pats Eva's shoulder. "Of course."

A dull ache pulses at her temples, like a brief headache. She expects the tightness again. But she isn't feeling panic. She could call it confusion, but that's too simple.

Emotions rarely occur alone. She retreats to the living room where John is now stretched out on the couch, and Charles with his sleeves rolled up is still cradling Ben. Josie has changed the channel to a cooking show where an Italian woman is chopping up oregano and crushing garlic. Eva settles into an empty rocking chair and enjoys the quiet.

Then Josie says, "How's Dad?"

"Good. I'm glad I got to talk to him."

She expects the argument to start again, for Josie to turn and say, "How can you not want to be me?" But Josie watches the woman pulse everything in a food processor. Eva feels like she should apologize. She never should've made that jab about her Masters.

She thinks of her mother, turning her wedding ring, of her apple pie and imagines her father eating it when he returns on Sunday, with two scoops of vanilla ice cream and a slice of Josie's pumpkin pie. He will mix it all together as he tries to load a spoonful of all three at once. She hears him telling her to follow her instincts, and she thinks of birds' impulse to nest, even if they never lay eggs. She thinks of birds' almost invisible births, eggs that suddenly appear in nests. She thinks of Keely, how she never laid an egg with or without Sam. And she's afraid that will be her, is her.

*

The zoo is quiet the next morning when Eva arrives an hour before opening. But today will be uncommonly busy since admission is free. Hopefully Mark won't be in today. Perhaps he will have overindulged on his mother's pie and will have to stay home. After hearing her mother talk about him again, she's embarrassed to have to see him, as if he'll know what her mother has said.

But when she pushes open the workroom door, Mark says, "How was your Thanksgiving?" He's standing with his palms flat on the work table so that his shoulders are at his ears. He looks like he's shrugging and when he smiles, he looks almost playful.

"Good. And yours?"

"The apple pie was amazing as always. How'd yours turn out?"

"Just fine."

"Any left?"

"A few slices."

"Bring them in, if you want, and I'll bring in the slices I have of my mother's. We can have a taste-testing competition."

Eva nods. She left the extra slices at her parents' house, which means they've probably already been devoured by Charles and John. And of course, she can't touch the pie for her father. But she's glad she will have nothing to bring in tomorrow. She's sure Mark won't bring his slices anyway. If he did, she can't imagine them standing at the work table, leaning over pie.

"And I'll bring the homemade whipped cream, too. God, it's incredible." He smiles and combs his beard with his fingers. "Okay, I've got to stop talking about it and get these birds some food of their own." He loads bags of prepared food from the refrigerator into his arms. From the back, when all she can see is the strap of his baseball cap, the wrinkled collar of his polo shirt, and the brown wallet in his back pocket, she wants to touch him, just barely. But she finds herself seeing Charles in his fire suit, smelling of formula and creamed turkey. Charles in the corner, Josie laughing.

When she tells her mother that Mark wanted some of her pie but that she isn't

bringing him any, she will only be doing so to be cruel in that way that daughters are with mothers; to prove that she doesn't want Mark; to watch her mother shake her head, once more, in disbelief as if that will finally clinch it.

Mark drops the bags of food on the work table and sets out the trays. "Am I in your way?" he asks. "I don't mind waiting."

"Oh, it's fine. I'll go check on the birds."

"Taking any crickets?"

She shakes her head and walks back out into the cool morning, into the yard where the brood hens wander. The Attwater's prairie chickens are scuffling in their enclosures to her left. She passes Tom and another hermit, acknowledging them with a nod. Breathing in, she almost shuts her eyes. She just wants to be with the birds, surrounded by their noisy peace. She pushes open the Pheasant Run gate then stands by the work table, palms flat on the scuffed wood, closes her eyes and hears her birds—the bluster of wings, claws clicking against wooden perches, the macaws chattering in the distance. She stays there with her eyes closed as long as she can. But she should return for the crickets, should've brought them in the first place.

When she pushes back into the workroom, Mark's trays are lined up and filled with chunks of melon and the seed mix. He looks up, grins, and says, "Back for crickets?"

She smiles. "I don't know why I didn't take them earlier." She heads for the cricket cages at the other end of the room.

"Sometimes it's nice to be alone with the birds."

Eva turns, though she's not sure why she's surprised. He loves birds, too.

"Exactly," she says. "Some days I just want to sit in the middle of Pheasant Run and listen."

"That's what I used to do in the woods on my grandfather's farm. So peaceful."

The trays clack as he stacks them, and Eva keeps her back to him, slowly filling her bag with small handfuls of crickets.

"You know," he says, "I need to run back home at lunch anyway, so I could bring back the pie for dessert."

She keeps filling and again tries to see them standing side-by-side, no, across the table from each other, eating pie with plastic forks. She feels the tightness but this time in her stomach, the knot of fear. "I left my extra slices at my parents'."

"Then we can just have mine. And that whipped topping. I'm telling you, it's amazing."

When she turns back around, he's smiling. She smiles, too. But she tries to stay focused on the birds. Closing her bag, she moves toward the work table for the pail of peanuts. And when she goes to open the door, he says, "Could you hold that for me?"

"Of course." She stretches flat against the door while he pushes the cart through. She holds her breath, notices, but doesn't exhale. And as he passes by, he touches her right arm, just below the elbow. His fingers are soft, his palm calloused as she knew it would be. She exhales, the knot tightening. And then he lifts his hand, puts it on the cart. "Thanks," he says, pushing the cart out into the yard. "And I'll see you back here at eleven forty-five for pie?"

"Yes," she finds herself saying.

“Good. And you can just bring your pie tomorrow. Two days of pie makes more sense anyway.” He chuckles. She laughs, too, as he rounds the corner toward Flight 24, whistling to the birds.

Surrogate

This will be Molly's one hundred and twelfth time to ride the bus. She keeps note of such things in her fabric-covered notebook. On pages 23 to 27, she makes little hash marks next to a pencil drawing of a long, skinny bus. This morning, most people are crouching under the bus shelters, waiting for the sudden shock of rain to pass. It doesn't rain as often as Molly would like. The sudden humidity is surprising and makes her hair feel thick against her neck. No one but Molly has an umbrella, and a few people—a man with an unlikely fedora and a young girl in a hoodie—are standing in the rain, letting themselves be soaked by fat drops.

Her notebook out, she thumbs through pages 52 to 124 where she is working out a story and a series of poems. They need revising, constant tending; like a bonsai, they're never perfect. Actually, one of the poems is about a bonsai. A haiku she wrote three hundred and one days ago after seeing a bonsai at Lubbock's Spring Festival.

*Flowering cherry
full buds of cotton candy,
what balanced leaning.*

Mr. Winston, the man she is going to see right now, has heard this haiku and her story about her sister Janice one hundred and ten times. Janice is six years older than

Molly, but at twenty-nine, she seems much older, especially since their parents died two years ago. So Molly fudges her age in the story, sometimes describing Janice as a forty- or even fifty-year old. Molly was too nervous to read the story aloud on the first visit—she'd never shared her work with anyone but her father—but reading together is now one of their favorite activities.

Janice got her the job through a friend who places people as sitters, matching them up with specific clients, mostly the elderly. When Mr. Winston's regular sitter left for an internship overseas, Janice offered Molly as a replacement. Her friend was grateful, and the job gave Molly a reason to leave the apartment and something to think about instead of their parents.

According to the nurse who stops by every other day, Mr. Winston's Alzheimer's is advancing rapidly. "I keep expecting him to just completely forget me," says his nurse, Alma. Alma the Nurse is what Molly writes in her notebook.

She's probably forty, if her hair is any indication: a warm brown with red highlights she must lay in herself with a small cup of dye and a toothbrush because they're uneven, almost jagged. Her mouth is wide, like Julia Roberts', with big horse teeth like Julia's, too. She wears almost no makeup and a delicate gold locket Molly wants to peek inside of. But Alma the Nurse would never permit such a thing. When she arrives at Mr. Winston's, she pulls out a list—shower, make bed, take pills—and asks Molly to leave. They try to keep alternating schedules to stay out of each other's way. Molly's glad Alma likes this arrangement, that she doesn't have to see Alma more than is necessary.

The Line 8 bus pulls into the station two minutes before 8:00. The bus driver, an older man with a full salt-and-pepper beard, is Mr. Pete to the regulars. He says, "Good

morning” as Molly mounts the two grooved steps into the bus and takes her seat on the fourth row. The worn fabric-covered seats are striped red and black on a background of worn gray. The walls and the metal floor and the pull cords are also gray. The bus seems to blend with the ashen clouds that hang overhead, looking out of place against the still-pale blue sky. It is this confusion of winter that she likes more than the unbearable, unflagging, unbroken hot skies of summer.

The air brakes release and with a productive series of lurches, the bus eases out onto Broadway and makes a wide right turn. Out the rain-spattered window, the gutters rage with new streams and form lakes in intersections since the streets are the drainage system. The buildings of the spare Lubbock downtown jut up and sprawl out in shades of brown, red, and tan.

Molly focuses her eyes to see her own reflection in the glass window, contrasted against the passing landscape. Her shoulder-length brown hair is frizzy from the humidity. She hasn’t brushed it yet today, but Mr. Winston won’t notice. The paleness of her skin is lost in the reflection, and her eyes are smudges with a glint of light. She sees herself as translucent, hollow, and almost invisible; this must be how they used to film ghosts, with reflections in the half light.

Despite the bumpiness, she pulls out her notebook and stares at the words, flipping between stories, poems, and the haiku. Molly is already imagining how the morning will go, how she will read her story to Mr. Winston for the one hundred and eleventh time. She will linger over the section on Janice and her boyfriend Randy—tall and angular, all elbows and ears—because Mr. Winston enjoys romance. He admitted to her some time ago that he used to read his wife’s Harlequin novels when he found them

under her pillow or in a stack of books. “And did you want to be handsome and throbbing, Mr. Winston?” Molly had asked him in the light bantering tone she often uses with him. He always winked at her, and she would look away.

When reading the story, she sometimes adds new details about her life with Janice, about their two-bedroom apartment with the new brown carpet and faux tile in the U-shaped kitchen and cramped bathroom; about the wide living room that holds her one bookcase and Janice’s stacks of CDs and records of classical music that are always playing as if they live in an elevator; about how two years ago, Janice sacrificed her extra room for Molly who didn’t want to live alone, not after her parents’ deaths. That’s what she calls it now with Mr. Winston—deaths, not murders. If she uses the right word, he’ll ask her to explain again and she just can’t.

Mr. Winston never seems to notice the additions. She could probably add that she and Janice live in New Mexico and that she flies over every other morning to be with him, and he would nod along amiably, bobbing his thin face, shaking his scruffy jowls with the scatter of white and gray stubble, new since Alma the Nurse’s last visit. He would tap his long fingers on his knees in time with nothing in particular, content in his own mind and in the world Molly creates for him. She loves his tapping and fears the day when he will stop without even realizing it, lost in another world far from her.

“Approaching 23rd and Hartford,” announces the woman’s mechanical voice, oddly friendly in its misplaced inflections: Hart-FORD. Two more stops to go. The bell sounds and there is the shuffled exchange of wet and dry air. A woman in a blue college sweatshirt and artfully ripped jeans slings her backpack onto one shoulder, strides past Molly, leaving a bloom of perfume, musky sweet, in her wake, then steps down into the

rain. She could be any one of the girls who sat around Molly in clumps in the survey courses two years ago, when the progression from Restoration to Romanticism seemed like it would always matter.

“Approaching 23rd and Knoxville.” Molly pulls the cord, but Mr. Pete is already listing the bus to the right. Notebook placed safely in her bag, she exits through the folded-open door and gives him the customary, “Thanks.” He smiles at her in the oversized rearview mirror, and out into the gathering rain Molly steps. She pushes open her navy blue umbrella and rests it over her right shoulder like the chimney sweeps in *Mary Poppins*.

Mr. Winston’s first-floor apartment faces the parking lot and the university hospital’s three towers beyond. An ambulance speeds by, its revolving blare reminding everyone where they live. The sound still makes her think of Janice walking out of her parents’ house in her work clothes, her hands over her mouth and nose. Molly pulls out her keys and then knocks twice on the olive green door before sliding the key into the lock and easing the door open.

A wedge of fluorescent light floods the dreariness outside until Molly is fully inside with the door shut. As usual, every light is on, even the closet light, glowing under the closed door.

“Mr. Winston?” Molly sets her bag down on the round kitchen table and shuts off the coffee maker.

“Did you bring the cookies?” Mr. Winston asks, stepping into the hallway from his bedroom.

She is the only one who brings him cookies, and his frequent questions about them have become something of a sign that she will be herself today. Some days, he is confused and calls her Alma or Tabitha or some other female name unearthed from his deep pockets of memory. Molly only corrects him if he calls her Alma.

Twenty feet away, Mr. Winston leans against the doorjamb in his brown Sans-o-belt slacks and flannel shirt with the fold-down, buttoned breast pockets. His house shoes are brown as well; he is a vision in forest tones. He dresses for her, Molly is sure. And he is surprisingly varied in his wardrobe choices. She wonders if Alma sometimes lays out the next day's outfit for him on the trunk at the foot of his bed.

"No cookies this time. The Girl Scouts weren't outside United." Molly motions to his recliner and seats herself on the brown-and-orange tweed couch opposite. "But I'll try again next time." It isn't Girl Scout cookie season, but there's no reason to tell him.

"Thin Mints. God, those Thin Mints." He eases himself into his mottled orange recliner with the sewn-on arm covers and the lace antimacassar, then smooths down his limp gray hair with his right hand. He only showers when Alma is here to help him.

"Don't they come by the apartments? They have to know that old people are suckers for cookies and little girls." Janice would call her a flirt if she could see her now, but Molly doesn't care.

He grins at her, then clears his throat and stares into the mid-distance. "Alma says I'm forgetting things again. Again, goddamn it."

"What does Alma know?"

"Everything." He laughs, so she laughs with him. "She thinks just because she can take my goddamn blood pressure, she knows what I know and don't know."

Molly sets one of the crocheted pillows on her lap and catches a stray thread between her fingers. "So, what did you forget?"

Will he again say, "I don't remember" and then chuckle?

"Oh, something about toothpaste and coffee." He pauses. "Not the two together, of course."

"Of course not. Did it have something to do with leaving the coffee maker on after you drank it all?"

He rubs his thighs with his palms. "Who cares? Why are we talking about coffee when we could be drinking it?"

Molly stands and retrieves two ceramic mugs from the cabinet. The coffee in the pot is scalding since it has been on for who knows how many hours, so she adds an ice cube to both cups. Two cubes of sugar in his and three in hers, she returns to the living room and hands him his prize.

"So what are we to do today?" he says.

Molly laughs, extra loud with an extra wide smile, and says, "How about some poetry?"

Molly's own father was from Michigan, a funny word Molly used to let roll around her mouth and then spit out at the dinner table or during prayer at church. After repeated outbursts, he pulled out the M encyclopedia and showed Molly, who was still blind to words, a map of Michigan where he was born and lived for only eight years.

He told her it was an Algonquin word meaning "big lake," and from then on, Molly was armed with two fantastic words to throw out into the air like big balloons filled

with too much helium: "Michigan! Algonquin!" They rose and bounced around their ranch-style home, into the kitchen where her mother always seemed to be hovering, and into Janice's room where, invariably, she was reading. Her father laughed. Four years old was too young for such words.

But he loved words, too, and later told her that he would've studied them for a living if counseling hadn't presented itself as a more lucrative option just before he applied to graduate school. He would've resisted the word "lucrative" but in the same instant, would've realized its truth. All of it was legitimized by the fact that counseling sessions relied on language and words and intriguing shades of meaning. He would come home from a full day of sessions and sit down at the dinner table, strumming his fingers along the edge of the placemat, waiting until their mother had settled everything onto the table and ushered Janice and Molly to their seats. After the brief prayer, with everyone's full attention, he'd announce the strings of words his patients had built that day.

He kept his patients' names anonymous, of course, but Molly soon came to know them by their words, by their laments over a spouse's "insanity for socks" or "passivity in the throes of my anger." In addition to his session notes, he kept a journal in which he documented such phrases and words, the same notebook in which he marked his own turns of phrase and his daughters' startling leaps in language. Molly now keeps this journal under her bed and looks at it several times a week, flipping it open to a random page, trying to guess what it will say before she reads her father's careful script. Every time, she sees him smiling at her, always open-mouthed like he might laugh in the next moment. So she keeps reading to keep the images coming—of him kissing her mother on

the cheek while she washes the dishes; laughing over a game of Monopoly; carefully reading her newest story in the armchair by the window.

Janice generally ignores Molly's obsession with the notebooks with their curious markings, saying they are part of a natural way of dealing with grief. She's told Molly this before, once when Janice and Randy startled Molly who had one of the notebooks spread open on her lap, reviewing her story and the haiku. Molly snapped the notebook shut. "You don't have to hide it," Janice said, glancing at Randy. "It's normal, under the circumstances."

At times, Molly is willing to admit that Janice is a good sister. Her slight build and exceptional height make her seem old and mature to Molly. And because she seems old, her presence is comforting. Janice tries not to treat her like a child, but like all big sisters who have jobs and a boyfriend and an apartment they let their little sisters live in, Janice sometimes slips into judgment. Charity, Molly once called it. But Janice plays the generous hostess who would've housed any displaced twenty-year old who'd just lost her parents, as if she herself is impervious to the pain and confusion. Maybe she is. Molly has considered this, that Janice has something Molly lacks, something that allows her to remain resilient in the face of death. Molly hasn't seen her cry about it, not since the funeral. But Janice wasn't living with them when it happened. Maybe that's the secret.

On her first visit, Mr. Winston asked Molly about her family after sharing the long story about his own—an estranged son; a daughter who lives in Chicago with two granddaughters and a man he never cares to meet; and his wife who died just after his daughter was born some fifty years before and whose hair is only shades of black in the

grey pictures around the apartment. He can't remember its exact color but guesses it was something like umber because he remembers hearing the word and thinking of her.

Then he asked about her parents, and when she couldn't bring herself to answer, he looked mildly away. "Sometimes family means pain, at least to talk about," he said.

"How have you gotten so comfortable talking about your wife, about Faye?" That day, Molly was sitting where she is today, across from him on the tweed couch. She shifted uncomfortably when saying his wife's name.

"Well, you eventually get asked so many goddamned questions that you might as well start talking just to make everyone shut up." He pulled at his nose with his thumb and forefinger. "And then it gets to be natural. I can't imagine not talking about Faye." He paused. "Though sometimes talking about her makes me realize how little I remember."

"I'm sorry."

"I mean how little I knew about her in the first place. We were really only together for five years. My memory isn't as good as an elephant's." He chuckled, still in a reverie. Molly couldn't understand how he could be so self-aware and not depressed. "And now, it's shot like a squirrel shot by a shotgun."

She laughed quietly with her mouth shut and averted her eyes. That comparison was still surprising.

By the fifth visit, when Mr. Winston asked once more about her family, Molly felt compelled to share, even wanted to share, to try saying the words out loud. She hoped to God he would remember the next time.

She hadn't told anyone about her family because everyone she knew already knew. She'd avoided situations where she would have to explain the absence of parents, and Janice provided much of her desired insulation.

Molly took a deep breath and said the words: "My parents are dead."

Mr. Winston didn't speak, only gazed at her, just as her father would've done in his sessions.

"It was a break-in, two years ago. It was around ten in the morning. The doors were locked, but the glass sliding door in the back had a bad lock." Molly paused. Was she giving too much detail? Mr. Winston didn't ask how they died. Why should she tell him? But a long silence was growing again.

She explained that her parents were home that morning because her dad's early appointment had been canceled. His practice was over on Ohio and 3rd, right next to the United. And her mother had no showings or meetings with clients. She'd just sold a house the day before, or at least earlier that week. At dinner, she'd been excited that her clients had finally accepted the third counteroffer. So she came home when Molly's father told her about the cancellation. Molly had been at a review for a midterm, American history.

"I always loved American history," Mr. Winston said. "Though I suppose it was much shorter for my generation." He smiled then met Molly's eyes, inviting her to smile with him. Maybe she could stop and retreat into his obliviousness. But then he said, "Keep going"

"Two men broke in and shot them."

"Dear God."

Molly closed her eyes. She'd come home three hours later to police cars, yellow tape, sawhorses. The sun and sky were blinding, so through her sunglasses, she watched Janice run from the house, her hands over her mouth and nose. She wore black pants and a blue button-down, Molly remembers that clearly. She walked Molly into the living room—a purplish circle in the carpet beside a dining room chair and coils of rope, another circle on the couch cushion. Janice walked her back out, explaining that they had already been taken away, that it was for the best. Molly shouldn't see them.

Exactly what happened before and after that moment is something she takes other people's words for, namely Janice who remembers everything or nothing, depending on the conversation. Her parents are still there in Molly's memory, like two statues whose features have weathered into indistinctness, scrubbed blank.

"I'm so sorry, dear Molly." Mr. Winston had risen uncharacteristically from his recliner and stepped forward to touch her hand. "It's so hard to see someone who's passed on. When I saw Faye after she died, she was in the hospital bed, sick from anemia and bleeding. My daughter was only a day old. Now no such thing would've happened. Now she would be here." He squeezed Molly's hand, and returned to his recliner.

Two weeks later, Mr. Winston asked about her family again, so she repeated simply that her parents were dead, hoping it would suffice, that maybe it would ignite some part of his brain and illumine his mind with memory. It didn't, but Mr. Winston declined to pry and instead said in his simple way: "Deaths are tragedies. Tragedy, such an awful word."

When they were younger, Molly and Janice would read together. They shared a room with two twin beds they pushed together most nights. They stuffed the crack with elephants, teddy bears, and pillows. Molly would wedge herself into Janice, under her arm or against her shoulder, while she read from one of her school readers or the book of fairy tales Molly always chose.

Molly couldn't follow most of what Janice read, so she latched on to images—a spotted dog leaning over a bright red fire hydrant; sticky waves of porridge flowing through a village; a gleaming red sausage for a nose. She was only four or five, so she followed along with her eyes, hoping Janice would notice.

When Janice started eighth grade, she got to stay up until 9:30, a full hour past Molly. One night, after she brushed her teeth and pulled on her nightgown, Molly pushed their beds together. Then she walked out into the living room where Janice sat on the couch and said, "Could we read together?" But Janice leaned further over her own book, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and pretended not to hear. Molly didn't ask again and instead let her father read to her from *Little House on the Prairie*.

This morning, after Molly has read Mr. Winston her story and added a part about Randy's collection of vintage records, she helps him to the bathroom.

"Goddamn coffee runs through me like spittle through a whistle." He barely holds onto her arm with his smoothly calloused fingertips, slightly resentful of needing any help at all.

Moving from Molly's arm to the doorjamb, he turns and asks, "Can you spit, for distance I mean? I used to be able to spit a solid ten feet on a windless day. My parents'

side yard was perfect for contests. The spit stuck right to the dust, making a little spot of mud. I usually won.”

He disappears into the already lit bathroom, and Molly returns to the living room to gather their twice-filled and twice-drained coffee mugs and tuck them into the dishwasher. She runs it for him twice a week, and even then, it’s half-empty.

The picture of Faye that Molly likes best hangs between the pantry and the refrigerator in a black metal frame. It exists in three other places throughout the apartment. In it, Faye is young, eighteen at the oldest. She has thick waves of dark hair just touching her shoulders, and her eyes are light, almost clear in the earth tones of the photograph, like clouds reflected in ice. They must be blue of the lightest kind. A darker blue is echoed in the photographs of their daughter, a brunette as well; the granddaughters are just as beautiful.

Two photographs of his granddaughters and daughter hang on either side of the window with the off-white pull shades. Someone has tried to make the living room feel homey, but the end result is reminiscent of a nursing home where no one brings more than a few relics because they won’t be staying long.

Mr. Winston opens the bathroom door and shuffles out onto the hallway carpet. Molly turns to see him standing beside his recliner. As he gazes at her, all his muscles relax into wrinkles. His eyes are engaged, but his gaze passes through her, and it is this simultaneous relaxation and intensity that shows he does not know she is Molly.

This sudden change in perception still startles her even though she knows his diagnosis and has skimmed books on its symptoms. She expects this confusion every time she opens his apartment door, but when she ceases being Molly and becomes

someone else after seeing him moments before, it's disconcerting. As if when Mr. Winston disappears into the bathroom or the closet or his bedroom, he's performing a magic trick unbeknownst to her, and when he returns, she's changed into someone else.

"Who am I, Mr. Winston?"

"I know who you are."

His smile is fantastic; the magic is in his cheeks as they rise to small mounds under his eyes, still bright and cataract-free. It's something intangible, an excitement of a kind her visits don't normally engender.

"You're Faye and I'm Eddie. Your Eddie." He's still smiling, and she can't help but smile, too. She isn't often in the presence of such love of the kind that radiates from Mr. Winston, joining the waves of consuming light permeating the apartment.

"I don't mind being your Faye today, Mr. Winston. But you'll have to do the talking."

"That'll be nice for a change," he says and then settles into his recliner.

But he doesn't talk much when she is someone else. Instead, he gazes and watches as if her every move is revelatory. As if he must consume every part of her while she is there with him. Some part of him must know such encounters are fleeting, that whoever she is at that moment won't stay for long. That's why it's odd he doesn't ask her questions or give detailed, urgent reports of everything that's happened since they last saw each other. But then, these memories of women are associated with no time in the past. They just are.

At first, she is self-conscious under his beaming stares, not sure whether to meet them or to spend an inordinate amount of time in the bathroom, hoping by the time she

emerges, she'll be herself again. But she sits with him quietly until the silence is unbearable.

"Read one of your novels to me," Mr. Winston says, each word drawn-out and distinct.

"Do you mean my story? I don't write novels."

"One of your romances."

"I don't have any, Mr. Winston. Eddie."

He smiles again and wags his finger at her. "I know you've got them somewhere. Under your pillow or in your bag. Don't be embarrassed."

"I'll go look in the bedroom."

His bed is unmade and the soft impression of his head is still shadowed and deep on the pillow. She sits on the trunk at the foot of the bed and rests her head in her hands. She has only one hour left before she fixes his lunch, rinses his dishes, starts the dishwasher, and then rides the bus back to Janice's. Will she be able to fill it with reading from her notebook, a surrogate romance novel? Can she endure his gaze, his longing? Can she be Faye for the rest of the morning? Or will he realize she is Molly when she returns to living room, the magic trick finally over?

When Molly sits back down on the couch, Mr. Winston asks, "Where are the children?"

Molly closes her eyes. She doesn't like ignoring him. Faye wouldn't have ignored him.

"At work. With their families. I'm not exactly sure."

"I miss them."

"I know."

"Are they coming to visit? For Christmas?"

"I don't know."

The front door swings open. For a split second, she thinks it might be the wind, the terrible never-ceasing Lubbock wind. But instead she sees a white bulk with a crest of brown and red.

"You're still here?" Alma says, slamming the door behind her. The locket swings from her neck, and for an instant, Molly wonders again what's inside.

"I've got about an hour left." Molly clears her throat and glances at Mr. Winston. He's still gazing straight at her.

"Well, I don't mind taking over."

"I need to fix his lunch."

"Are my hands broken? I've made a thousand ham and cheese sandwiches for my kids. Thousands."

"Right."

"Let me wash up and then you can head out."

Molly nods. Alma pushes back her waves of cruelly highlighted hair and grins at Molly and Mr. Winston without making eye contact. She shuts the bathroom door behind her, and then it's silent again. Maybe there's a picture of Alma's mother inside the locket, or a dead child, or a lock of her hair before she started dying it. Molly stays seated with her hands clasped in her lap. Alma's here so she can leave. She should get up and try to catch the earlier bus.

"Faye," he whispers.

She stares at her hands then says, "Yes."

"I love you."

"I know." She swallows. He's waiting for her to say it back, but she stays silent.

He rises from his recliner, just as he did when she told him about her parents, and shuffles forward. He stands above her in front of her closed legs, then rests his right hand on her shoulder, bracing himself against her. The third button on his flannel shirt is eye-level with her. Then he leans down and kisses her forehead. His lips are papery but not dry. Thin, like tissue paper and warm. She keeps herself still, her head facing forward, hands in her lap. Then he kisses her nose as her father used to do at bedtime. He would kiss both eyes, the tip of her nose and then her mouth, all in a few seconds. And then he was at her door, pulling it almost shut so that a sliver of light stretched across her comforter, then he whispered "Good night, I love you" and disappeared into the bright hall.

His lips linger on her nose. She would have to tilt her face up for him to kiss her lips. She can't do it. She can't look up into Mr. Winston's, into Eddie's face.

"Faye," he whispers again.

She inhales the bitter sweetness of his aftershave and the false floral scent of dryer sheets. His left hand is on her cheek. His fingertips are smooth and hard; one of his nails catches her skin. But he doesn't lift her head.

Water runs in the bathroom. He kisses the top of her head and leans hard on her shoulder as he pushes himself back up to his full height.

"Mr. Winston," Alma says. She strides across the carpet and lunges for his arm as if he were about to fall onto Molly. "What're you doing?"

Molly expects Alma to be asking her this, but instead Alma is staring down Mr. Winston who still smiles, bemused. He doesn't answer but allows himself to be led back to his recliner.

"Is he confused?" Alma asks, frowning over her shoulder at Molly. "What was he doing?"

"Nothing."

"Molly, come on now. Who did he think you were?" Her locket glints in all of the light. Its thin chain is almost invisible against her white smock.

"Does it matter?"

Alma stares at Molly as if this will give her some answers, as if Molly is one of her children who can be intimidated. But Molly is still watching Mr. Winston who's tapping his thighs with his fingers, smiling to himself. If he says "Faye" again, Molly will explain everything. If he just says it, everyone will understand. But he stays silent, looking up at them both. It's impossible to tell if he recognizes them.

"Were you Faye?"

"No."

Alma squints at Molly and then says, "You should probably go now. He clearly needs his rest. I'll fix him a sandwich, don't worry."

She nods and stands. Her bag is somewhere, on the kitchen table. She grabs it, then turns around and says, "What's in your locket?"

Alma doesn't even look up from Mr. Winston, whose face Molly can't see because Alma is leaning over him, smoothing down his breast pockets. "None of your business."

“Right,” Molly says.

The bus is muggy. She smiles at the afternoon driver, a wiry man she has never seen before. She takes her seat on the fourth row and gazes out the window. The rain clouds have receded to reveal the sun again, white hot overhead in a field of blue. It will probably rain again later this afternoon.

Molly lives for these storms, for the dark mass of thunderheads in the West and the fierce gale rushing ahead like a warning. On such evenings, she watches from the fenced patio with her notebook, wrapped in her mother’s blue shawl, the cream fringe whipping around her in the wind. The lightning threads the clouds and touches down in instants she can’t perceive. In her notebook, she marks the lightning bolts she does see, sometimes counting over fifty in a single evening. Hopefully she’ll be able to spend the evening on the patio, and Janice will go away with Randy for however long it takes so Molly doesn’t have to explain who she was today.

But when Janice steps into the apartment, her purse thuds on the counter and the oven clicks as she sets it to preheat. Molly is stretched on the couch, her ankles crossed and hooked over the upholstered arm. Her journal still sits in her bag. She’s resisted pulling it out all afternoon to write about Mr. Winston, something she’s never done.

“So how was your day?” Janice says, blocked by a wall of cabinets. Molly can only hear the refrigerator door opening and then sucking to a close, a pot clattering on the element. One of Brahms’ symphonies plays softly from the kitchen stereo, again.

“All right.”

“Give me more than that or I’ll have to start droning about taking messages on yellow forms and hunting down a new toner cartridge for the copier.” The lightness in her voice means that it wasn’t too bad of a day, but still, Molly should let her vent.

But she can’t resist saying, “He thought I was his wife.”

Janice steps around the corner, spatula in hand, her shirt sleeves rolled up. “At least you’re *not* his wife. I’ve heard of wives waking to husbands who don’t know who they are anymore. Can you imagine your own husband not knowing you? I mean, if that happened to Randy—”

“You’re not married.” Molly briefly looks away. She shouldn’t have said that.

“That’s not the point,” Janice says, returning to the stove.

But now Molly can’t stop. Janice just doesn’t understand. “It’s your entire point. I’m lucky because I’m not Mr. Winston’s wife, and that’s why it’s not sad he doesn’t always know who I am.”

“But you know what I mean.” Janice reappears with the spatula, waving it like a baton, heedless of the cream sauce sliding down the handle. “It’s sadder if it’s someone you love. I mean, someone you’re yoked to. Watching someone you love forget who you are.”

“But he thinks I’m his wife. He thinks I’m Faye.” Molly pauses. “He said he loved me.”

“You mean Faye.”

“It just happened. I was just her,” she says quietly.

Janice looks down at her polished black shoes.

Molly can see Mr. Winston in his orange recliner, gazing and smiling at her, as clear as the images she gets of her father when she reads from his notebook. Molly closes her eyes and let's the image fill her. "He was so happy. It was like a gift."

"But he thought you were Faye."

Molly opens her eyes. "Yes, Janice, he thought I was Faye." She pushes herself up on her elbows. "And I liked it."

"How can you say that?"

"He's eighty years old, Janice, with Alzheimer's. He's perfectly safe. I feel safe with him."

Janice's eyes glisten and she looks away. Molly wonders if she's crying, so she sits up, ready to go to her, ask her what's wrong.

"I miss him too, them," Janice says, turning back to Molly, eyes still glistening.

Molly stands from the couch, ready to hug Janice, for her to cry. But a muffled knock at the door makes Janice turn. Molly can tell the door opens because she hears crickets. "Hi babe," Randy says.

"You're early." Janice's voice lowers. "Oh I'm fine. Just making dinner."

When Randy rounds the corner, Molly is still standing in front of the couch. "Hey there," he says. Janice stops just behind him. "How's life?"

"Great, actually. I had a wonderful day with Mr. Winston." Molly looks to Janice who smiles softly.

"You know, I'll have to meet this Mr. Winston some day."

Molly nods then grabs her bag. "I'll be outside." She steps through the patio door into coolness and the pulse of crickets. To the west, the sky glows a pale pink, bright

against the heavy clouds. To the north, a sheet of rain slices along the horizon. All she needs is her mother's shawl. She turns to go back in for it, but Janice stands at the open door, backlit and dark, the shawl folded over her arm.

"Did you still want dinner?" Janice asks, handing her the shawl.

"Thank you." Molly wants to hug Janice, pull her in tight, but she hasn't hugged her in so long. So she finds Janice's hand, squeezes it.

Janice smiles again, that same small smile. "I'll call you when it's ready." When she moves to close the door, Molly says, "Why don't you stay with me and watch the sky?"

She pauses. "But dinner."

"Ask Randy to finish it."

Janice looks over her shoulder, like she might open the door and give Randy the instructions. But instead she takes the shawl and drapes it across their shoulders, wrapping an arm around Molly in a hug. A lightning bolt cleaves the sky and the first heavy drops start to fall.